

Managing the Complexities of Intervention: United Nations Peace Operations as Organisational Action

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Abstract

This article assesses a major gap in the literature on UN peace operations in post-war situations, which may be described as the 'organisation of intervention'. Research has extensively pointed at the UN's failure to achieve its own objectives and operationally reach its own standards of interventions. However, there has been very little consideration of the means of the UN as a bureaucratic organisation, which manages and copes with these ambiguities and failures of intervention. This article theoretically explores the organizational conditions and processes through which UN officials manage the gaps between aims and achievements of UN peace operations as an integral part of their daily work. The goal is to develop a theoretical framework to analyse the internal organisational rules and procedures of the UN, which enable as well as affect the daily management and routine of peace operations in interaction with its environment. For this purpose, the article includes approaches of organizational sociology to understand UN peacekeeping and draws on empirical illustrations to clarify propositions for further research.

Keywords: United Nations; Peacekeeping; Post-War; Bureaucracy; International Organisation.

Introduction

Looking back, the Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) Ban Ki-Moon might have good reasons to resume two decades of peace operations with mixed feelings and judgments. On the one hand, the UN administration has emerged as the prominent agent of peace operations. Since the end of the 1990s UN peace operations in fact have been rapidly expanding in number, size, budget as well as responsibilities.¹ Moreover, the UN administration has widely been credited for creating and sustaining stability in countries emerging from turmoil

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¹ Thorsten Benner, Stephan Mergenthaler and Philipp Rotmann, *The New World of UN Peace Operations. Learning to Build Peace?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

and war.² Thus up to the present day, the UN administration is called to lead, organise and conduct multiple peace operations around the world. UN peacekeeping seems to be one of the prominent responses to violent conflict. Institutionalised as a standard procedure of global politics, it is the first choice of many states to respond to war and civil conflict – if they respond at all.

On the other hand, the UN administration constantly seems to fail according to its own objectives and the norms and values it seems to produce and impose on others. UN peace operations inherently include normative aspects of security, welfare and participation.³ A democratic state and market economy are the declared programmatic pillars of sustainable reconstruction and post-war recovery.⁴ Evaluations of UN peace operations, however, have pointed out the lack of democratic and economic sustainability.⁵ Very often, the outcome is some type of autocratic regime rather than a democratic state.⁶ This might stabilise the security situation of the country, but according to the programmatic design of peace operations it undermines the sustainability of the peace process. Debrix even goes further with his critique by stating that 'the more the UN tries, the less it achieves.' The UN reveals 'its basic (empty) formalism' even more in a time, in which it 'is primed to take the lead and direct humankind toward peace and harmony.'⁷ In conclusion, norms and values remain a 'façade', a 'logocentrism' or a 'building' to be looked at by tourists from the outside.

The critique on UN peace operations may be illustrated and widened by taking a close look at a photo (see Figure 1) published by the UN in 2009.⁸ The picture shows an Afghan woman from above in a polling booth, holding what seems to be her identity card in one hand and using the pen to put a cross on the ballot with the other. At first, this of course is a public relations error.

² James Dobbins et al., *The UN's Role in Nation-Building. From Congo to Iraq* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2005); Virginia Page Fortna, *Does peacekeeping work? Shaping Belligerents' Choices after Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Virginia Page Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Keep Peace? International Intervention and the Duration of Peace after Civil War*, *International Studies Quarterly*, 2 (2004), pp. 269-92; Michael W. Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace. United Nations Peace Operations* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006)

³ Rolf Schwarz, *Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: The Challenges of Security, Welfare and Representation*, *Security Dialogue*, 4 (2005), pp. 429-46; Keith Krause and Oliver Jütersonke, *Peace, Security and Development in Post-Conflict Environments*, *Security Dialogue*, 4 (2005), pp. 447-62

⁴ Roland Paris, *International Peacebuilding and the 'Mission Civilisatrice'*, *Review of International Studies*, 4 (2002), pp. 637-56; Marina Ottaway, *Rebuilding State Institutions in Collapsed States*, *Development and Change*, 5 (2002), pp. 1001-23; Oliver P. Richmond, *The Globalization of Responses to Conflict and the Peacebuilding Consensus*, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 2 (2004), pp. 129-50

⁵ Roland Paris, *At War's End. Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Doyle and Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace*

⁶ Christoph Zuercher, *Is More Better? Evaluating External-Led State Building After 1989*, *CDDRL Working Papers Number 54* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2006)

⁷ François Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping. The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999), p. 6

⁸ United Nations, *United Nations Peace Operations 2009. A Year in Review* (New York: Department of Public Information, United Nations, 2009), p. 61

The UN should not publish a photo of a person with her identity card just ready to vote in a polling booth in an election supported by the UN Mission in Afghanistan, which is supposed to be free and fair. However, there is more to this photo than a publication faux pas, especially because, based on the principles of democratic vote propagated by the UN, *this photo should never have been taken*. The secrecy of the ballot is one of the main principles of free and fair elections. If a UN photographer is allowed to take a picture of a person in a polling booth, it both eradicates the sense of the polling booth and undermines the principle of free and fair elections. In this case, the UN cannot even pretend to support free and fair elections as a measure for sustainable peace, revealing cracks even in the façade of UN's norms and values. Thus, formalism prevailed, as the UN helped the Afghan people conduct elections, but this UN photographer did not even care about the intimacy of the polling booth. If the UN photographer would have taken pictures of an election in his own country (United Kingdom), he would either have never thought of taking a photo from the inside of the polling booth, or in the worst case scenario this would have been prevented by security, observers or the voter herself. Thus, the question here not only is why the UN photographer was allowed to do this in an UN supported election in Afghanistan. It also raises the question why the UN photographer even thought to be permitted to do so, knowing that this undermines the intimacy of the involved voter.

Figure 1: UN Photo by Tim Page entitled 'An Afghan citizen votes in the country's presidential and provincial council elections, Herat, Afghanistan. 20 August 2009'⁹



⁹ Source: *ibid.* p. 61.

This photo is of course only an illustrative feature and provides no grounds for any general conclusions. But it points to a major gap in the literature on peace operations of the past two decades, which has predominantly been focussed on the normative and operational feasibility of peace operations. Evaluations and studies have pointed to the achievements of UN peace operations. They have also identified gaps, failures and dilemmas of peacekeeping endeavours. But they have often failed to include an analysis of the process, which emerges on the basis of foreign intervention in a post-war society, as well as the bureaucratic structures that are the basis of the UN's engagement in the highly complex process of post-war recovery. It is the UN bureaucracy that makes peacekeeping interventions work. Moreover, as UN peace operations have consequences for the country intervened, it in return also produces consequences for the UN as the organisation that intervenes. It is the organisation of intervention that gives UN officials the administrative backing to support the Afghan government to organise the elections. However, it is also the organisation of intervention that gives the photographer the opportunity and legitimacy to take a photo of an Afghan woman inside of a polling booth. In other words, it is the organisation of intervention, which copes with and manages the gap between the normative aspirations of the façade and the achievements in the field.

The purpose of this article is to theoretically explore the organisational conditions, routines and procedures, through which processes and dilemmas of UN peace operations are managed in the daily work of UN officials.¹⁰ The goal is to develop a theoretical framework of analysis of the internal organisational processes of the UN that affect the daily management and routine of peace operations in action. Thus this work neither concentrates on the programmatic measures of peacekeeping nor does it measure their success or failure. Rather this article focuses on the organisational structures which serve as the basis and boundaries of the implementation of peacekeeping. The UN is studied as a bureaucracy, which inherently includes not only formal hierarchy but also horizontal forms of authority and control. This paper argues that two basic theoretical stances drawn from organisational sociology may help to understand the organisational dilemmas of peace operations in their daily work: the first is the concept of coupling, which refers to the differing quality of lines interconnecting different segments and dimensions of organisation; the second is the organisation of communication, which refers to how information is transferred, processed and transformed to knowledge and organisational memory. Both stances are in many ways interconnected, but they also serve as distinct sets of conditions of organisational management and daily working life. This paper argues that observing the nexus between these two sets of conditions provides the analytical basis to generate an understanding of the processes and mechanisms, which bridge the inherent dilemmas and paradoxes of daily work in UN peace operations.

¹⁰ The theoretical argument is supported by empirical illustrations that are based on primary UN documents, several background discussions with former high-level UN officials and field research in the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) in New York conducted in 2010.

The UN as an International Organisation and Bureaucracy in Action

Perhaps due to its linkages to the discipline of International Relations (IR), up to this day the literature on international peace operations has very rarely opened the 'black box' of the UN as the major organisation that conducts interventions. There is not much literature on how the UN manages peace operations and on the organisational dynamics in which these post-war interventions are embedded. Within IR theory, the UN and its sub-organisations have usually been studied as international organisations that in the common line of interpretation serve as a 'structure of rules, principles, norms and decision-making procedures through which others, usually states, act'.¹¹ As the UN is not accounted to be a self-referential autonomous agency under the assumption that it would act according to the will of states, there was no need to learn about the way the UN as an organisation behaved. More recent research has started to take a closer look at the functions and behaviour of international organisations such as the UN. These approaches include publications from an IR perspective¹² as well as studies from administrative science¹³ or ethnographic and sociological approaches.¹⁴ Much of this work is based on different theories, concepts and models of organisational sociology.¹⁵ The advantage of these approaches is that it enables a differential picture of what and how the UN actually does, rather than merely focussing either on the normative framework or the functional input and outcome.

The UN includes an international framework, which consists of a set of legalised rules and norms that protect individual states (and in some cases also the rights of individuals) and are practiced by the states within the intergovernmental organs such as the Security Council and the General Assembly.¹⁶ It, however, also exists as a bureaucratic organisation, which by definition

¹¹ Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World. International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 2

¹² Ibid; Benner, Mergenthaler and Rotmann, *The New World*

¹³ Wolfgang Seibel et al., *Public Administration Meets Peacebuilding. Coordination, Learning and Leadership as Challenges to Peace Operations*, (San Francisco: 49th Annual ISA Convention, March 26-29, 2008)

¹⁴ Thorsten Bonacker et al., eds., *Interventionskultur. Zur Soziologie von Interventionsgesellschaften* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2010); Klaus Schlichte and Alex Veit, *Coupled Arenas: Why State-building is so Difficult, Working Papers Micropolitics No. 3* (Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2007); Robert A. Rubinstein, *Peacekeeping Under Fire: Culture and Intervention* (Boulder Paradigm 2008)

¹⁵ Michael Lipson, *Peacekeeping: Organized Hypocrisy?*, *European Journal of International Relations*, 1 (2007), pp. 5-34; Roland Paris, "Understanding the "Coordination Problem" in Postwar Statebuilding ", in *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding. Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations*, eds. Paris and Sisk (Abington and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 53-78; Anna Herrhausen, *Coordination in United Nations Peacebuilding - A Theory-Guided Approach, Discussion Paper SP IV 2007-301* (Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, 2007)

¹⁶ Sven Bernhard Gareis and Johannes Varwick, *Die Vereinten Nationen. Aufgaben, Instrumente und Reformen* (Opladen/Farmington Hills: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2006)

exercises authority on the basis of rules and the collection and specification of knowledge.¹⁷ Campbell rightly points out that both components are 'conceptually separate, but operationally interdependent'.¹⁸ The point here is that in order to generate an understanding of how UN officials cope with and manage the dilemmas and paradoxes in their daily action, it is essential to understand the organisational dynamics that bridge the spheres of international and bureaucratic politics. The argument of this paper is essentially based on two basic organisational spheres: coupling and communication. Both will be introduced and discussed in detail below after specifying the concept of bureaucracy used in this paper.

To discuss the UN as a bureaucratic organisation requires some specification of the term bureaucracy. One can basically follow Barnett and Finnemore, who summarise the function of bureaucratic organisations as follows:

'Bureaucracy breaks down problems into manageable and repetitive tasks that are assigned to particular offices and then coordinated under hierarchical command.'¹⁹

In the classical Weberian interpretation these processes of categorisation and specialisation of knowledge are strictly formalised and practiced in a closed hierarchy – a fact that makes Max Weber conclude that bureaucracy is the most effective and rational form of administration.²⁰ More recent accounts on bureaucratic organisations have pointed out the implications of formalism and informalism for day-to-day work processes,²¹ as well as the importance of organisational survival, which provides a framework for appropriate decision making.²² Generally the literature pays high attention on information and knowledge as a substantial part of bureaucratic organisation, as it is the basis of its power and authority and therefore vital for its action within its organisational environment. Bureaucratic solutions to complex problems generate information and knowledge that are selected, processed and saved within the organisation itself.²³ Solutions thus become rules and routines, standardised as operation procedures, institutionalised within the organisational setting and culture, reflected by and included in an organisational scheme of interpretation, identity and knowledge.²⁴

¹⁷ Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World*

¹⁸ Susanna P. Campbell, (Dis)integration, Incoherence and Complexity in UN Post-conflict Interventions, *International Peacekeeping*, 4 (2008), p. 559

¹⁹ Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World*, p. 18

²⁰ Max Weber, "Bureaucracy", in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. Gerth and Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 196-264

²¹ David Beetham, *Bureaucracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987)

²² James G. March and Herbert A. Simon, *Organizations* (New York and London: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1958)

²³ Georg Elwert, "Selbstveränderung als Programm und Tradition als Resource", in *Verborgene Potentiale. Was Unternehmen wirklich wert sind*, eds. Hentschel, Müller and Sottong (München and Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2000); Niklas Luhmann, *Organisation und Entscheidung*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006)

²⁴ James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions. The Organizational Basis of Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1989); Walter W. Powell and Pal J. DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991); Barnett and

Weick characterises daily organisational life as organised through the continuous process of connecting interaction with reasonable consequences.²⁵ Through this conduct routines emerge and are sustained on the basis and within the structural rules and resources. It is a communicative process between constituent actors who reflexively monitor routine interaction whilst reproducing their 'mutually linked role relationships'.²⁶ Organisations create (and are created as) conditions to control the reflexive reproduction of relationships and practices. These govern and control the conduct and spread of information and their influence on the day to day practices of actors, and vice versa. In other words, the role of an actor within an organisation is not only determined by prescription, but also by the way s/he performs and realises the prescription in his/her daily work. It also depends on the power and measures s/he has to fill the gap between the prescribed role and the way s/he is performing – or the way s/he is supposed to perform in relation to other actors both within the organisation and its environment. This performance may be highly dependent on the current situation; however, as moral authority and prescriptions of standards may be important for the independence and power of the organisation, the actor may be required to respond to these standards even though his/her performance may vary.

The essence of this is rather simple: organisational actors always have a dual responsibility towards the client as well as the organisation. A UN official in the field might (or even is bound to) find the tools provided by the organisation ineffective whilst considering the interest and preferences of local actors. The solution for such problems is to find a compromise, not only towards the situation and actors UN officials are confronted with in the local context of their work,²⁷ but also towards the organisational context that provides the constitutive basis of their officialdom. In practical terms, within the organisational context, this for example might mean a decrease of resources and jobs.²⁸ Thus, organisational actors in their daily work are confronted with rules, which govern their sphere of action, provide definitions of efficiency, supply paths to

Finnemore, *Rules for the World*, p. cp.2; Mary Douglas, *How Institutions think* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987)

²⁵ Karl E. Weick, *Der Prozess des Organisierens* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985)

²⁶ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 199-200

²⁷ Michael Barnett and Christoph Zuercher, "The Peacebuilder's Contract: How External Statebuilding Reinforces Weak Statehood", in *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding. Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations*, eds. Paris and Sisk (Abington and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 23-52

²⁸ In a background discussion conducted in 2010, a former Chief of Staff in a UN peacekeeping mission referred to a situation in which the demobilisation and demilitarisation of former combatants didn't work on the basis of lack of confidence by the former combatant groups. After a year, the progress report pursued an extension of the mandate with the same amount of resources without being able to show any concrete results. This was rejected by the Chief of Staff, arguing that it would not be possible to receive these resources on the basis of the progress of the programme in the responsible Intergovernmental Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ). The result was a significant reduction of resources and size of the programme, resulting both from the lack of cooperation by the clients and the inability of the organisational actors to refer to the progress of the programme according to the standards, which would allow for an extension on a similar scale.

reach the goal, and set standards of accountability. But they also have to be responsive to unintended consequences of their actions and are influenced by contingent effects and ambiguous environments. Organisational action thus routinely combines the search for predictability through reduction of uncertainty and the interdependency of a system with its environment under conditions of high complexity. This is achieved by the goal of 'satisfactory accomplishment' rather than maximising efficiency,²⁹ which itself is based on organisational rules and procedures that guide the constant and routine 'muddling through' of organisational actors.³⁰

The UN and its Peace Operations as Loosely Coupled Systems

In the course of this debate, the notion of 'loosely coupled systems', most prominently introduced by Weick,³¹ seems highly useful as a basis for understanding the organisational dynamics of the UN and its peace operations. A 'loosely coupled system' generally refers to an image which Orton and Weick call 'dialectical', as it allows research to include both closed (i.e. technical and rational) and open (i.e. environmentally interdependent) variables into an analysis of an organisation.³² In order to apply this approach to the UN and its peace operations, the main characteristics of loosely coupled systems will be clarified below in detail.

The main feature of tightly coupled elements is 'responsiveness'. Thompson points out, that organisations include a core technology, which as an idea or abstraction refers to a closed-system logic and consists of rationally tightly coupled elements or a chain of causal events.³³ The type of technology does vary. Moreover, it is not supposed to be perfect (although the organisation might seek perfection). It may even be ambiguous in itself – or especially in comparison to environmental influences.³⁴ But it does include operating standards, which technically are responsive to each other and provide actors with answers to solve specific problems, organisational stability and predictability towards environmental events and influences. Therefore, organisations protect their core technologies from exogenous influences.³⁵ On the other side, the crucial characteristic of de-coupled elements is 'distinctiveness'.³⁶

²⁹ James D. Thompson, *Organizations in Action. Social Science Bases of Administrative Theory* (New York et al.: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1967), p. 9

³⁰ March and Simon, *Organizations*; Charles E. Lindblom, The Science of "Muddling Through", *Public Administration Review*, 2 (1959), pp. 79-88

³¹ Karl E. Weick, Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1 (1976), pp. 1-19

³² J. Douglas Orton and Karl E. Weick, Loosely Coupled Systems: A Reconceptualization, *The Academy of Management Review*, 2 (1990), p. 205

³³ Thompson, *Organizations in Action*

³⁴ James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, "Organizational Choice under Ambiguity", in *Ambiguity and Choice in Organizations*, eds. March and Olsen (Bergen, Oslo and Tromsø: Universitetsforlaget, 1976), pp. 10-23

³⁵ Thompson, *Organizations in Action*, pp. 18-19

³⁶ Orton and Weick, Loosely Coupled Systems, pp. 203-5

Technology only becomes action if they are applied to a social surrounding. Thereby, organisations always face problems, for which there is no solution provided by its technologies. Organisational action thus is the translation of standard procedures to environmental circumstances of implementation. This requires a certain amount of flexibility to meet environmental uncertainty. Organisations might act highly (inter-)dependently from environmental influence, trying to create meaning and/or legitimacy for their problem solutions at an institutional level.³⁷ Internal fragmentation, competing and ambiguous technical solutions, and lack of personal overview over internal organisational complexity might require flexible managerial solutions.³⁸ In fact, the management and administration of a complex organisation is perhaps the level, in which open and closed system logics meet most clearly, as here not only the resources are acquired as input for organisational action, but also the output and feedback is controlled. The administrative process holds together multiple streams of organisational action crosscutting formal hierarchies and networks, and interlinking environmental and internal demands of efficiency and accountability.³⁹ This requires both flexibility and predictability. The main feature of a loosely coupled system thus is the connection of both distinctiveness and responsiveness.⁴⁰

The conceptual openness of the loosely coupled system approach surely is both its strength and weakness. It is an inclusive concept, which comprises various competing accounts on bureaucratic organisations.⁴¹ Its conceptual weakness is its vagueness as it tries to include much and concretises very little. The concept of loosely coupled system thus cannot stand alone as a feature, which qualifies an organisation. It rather lays the basis for a more detailed discussion on organisational structure, its creation and processes. In Orton and Weick's words, 'loose coupling may lead researchers to study structure as something that organisation do, rather than merely as something they have.'⁴² From such a perspective, the crucial feature of a loosely coupled system is not the coupling as such, but rather the quantity and quality of managerial interventions, which stretch vertical and horizontal lines of organisational control between elements and events,⁴³ make outcomes and changes mismatch the initial intention,⁴⁴ produces and reproduces rules, practices and relationships,⁴⁵ locates and transforms the selective storage

³⁷ March and Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions*, pp. 46-7; John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan, "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony", in *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, eds. Powell and DiMaggio (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 41-62

³⁸ Orton and Weick, *Loosely Coupled Systems*, pp. 206-7

³⁹ Thompson, *Organizations in Action*, p. cp. 11

⁴⁰ Orton and Weick, *Loosely Coupled Systems*, p. 205

⁴¹ For an overview see *ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 218.

⁴³ *Ibid.*; Weick, *Educational Organizations*; Thompson, *Organizations in Action*

⁴⁴ James G. March, "The Evolution of Evolution", in *Evolutionary Dynamics of Organizations*, eds. Baum and Singh (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 39-49; Nils Brunsson and Johan P. Olsen, *The Reforming Organization* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993)

⁴⁵ Giddens, *Constitution of Society*

of information and knowledge,⁴⁶ and compensates for the lack of organisational adaptation to external requirements.⁴⁷

If UN peace operations are considered as a loosely coupled system, the discussion above gives answers to the problem explored in this paper on a relatively high level of abstraction. UN peace operations are a distinct organisational entity which are founded under the umbrella of the 'UN family', supported and connected by numerous departments and sub-organisations which offer specific technology, advice and/or staff for its operation in the field. The UN mission moreover formally holds a high degree of delegated authority and autonomy to transfer these technologies into field action.⁴⁸ Beyond the UN structure, the loosely coupled systems approach however enables a broad perspective on the communicative processes, which are the foundation of day-to-day life within an organisation. These, however, are specified and organised within the setting of an organisation as interplay between formal and informal communication structures.⁴⁹ As there may be both formal and informal tight and loose couplings within every element or level of an organisation, the relationship between different communication structures have to be considered as a second major factor, which crosscuts the different forms and levels of organisational coupling as well as sets conditions for managing conceptual and practical inconsistencies and uncertainty in daily organisational life. In the following section, the different communication structures will be considered in more detail.

The Organisation of Communication

The term 'communication' refers not only to the mere transfer of information, but also to the self-referential process of creating and sustaining meaning and knowledge. It is the basis of decision-making and interaction as well as of organisational programme and action. In other words, communication is the medium of organisational reproduction, bridging gaps of achievements and action and referentially linking knowledge, practices and interactions.⁵⁰ Communications are processed vertically along the lines of hierarchical control⁵¹ as well as horizontally through coordination and social control.⁵² Both forms of organisation require two

⁴⁶ Luhmann, *Organisation und Entscheidung*

⁴⁷ Powell and DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism*; March and Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions*

⁴⁸ Campbell, (Dis)integration, Incoherence and Complexity; Paris, "Coordination Problem"; Herrhausen, *Coordination in United Nations Peacebuilding*

⁴⁹ Beetham, *Bureaucracy*, p. 19

⁵⁰ For an overview see Anna Maria Theis, *Organisationskommunikation. Theoretische Grundlagen und empirische Forschungen* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994)

⁵¹ Guy Benveniste, "Survival Inside Bureaucracy", in *Markets, Hierarchies and Networks. The Coordination of Social Life*, eds. Grahame Thompson, et al. (London, New York and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991), pp. 141-53; Beetham, *Bureaucracy*

⁵² Walter W. Powell, *Neither Market nor Hierarchy: Network Forms of Organization*, *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, 1 (1990), pp. 295-336; John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, *Knowledge and Organization: A Social-Practice Perspective*, *Organization Science*, 2 (2001), pp. 198-213; William G. Ouchi, *Markets, Bureaucracies, and Clans*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1 (1980), pp. 129-41

basic sets of competence: firstly, the authority and ability to issue directives; and secondly, the professional competence and specialised expertise in the field of action.⁵³ Both sets of competencies are a product of internal and external education and training, as personnel is chosen according to both their educational and professional experiences, which are constantly developed on the basis of the internal standards of operation. The nexus between communication processes and the different competencies constitute the level and quality of complexity of an organisation in reflection and demarcation to its environment. Luhmann terms this process an 'operational closure', through which an organisation tries to gain control over the complexity of its structure and endeavour.⁵⁴ Information and knowledge thus not only have to be processed and stored, but also adulterated and forgotten. Therefore an organisation forms a memory, located within the processes of decision making and pre-decision organisational activity.

An organisation thus organises its communications in a way that leads to and controls both memory and oblivion. What, however, does this mean for the day to day life of members of the organisation? How do they participate within these organisational processes? Where do they receive the information and knowledge they need to fulfil their tasks? Generally one may assume that organisations as well as its personnel depend on information which can be considered as 'realistic'. This is even more so the case in situations that are volatile and uncertain such as a post-war setting, in which coercive and military means may be necessary. 'Realistic information', which refers not only to the transfer of information but also its interpretation according to the situational challenges, may be the basis to save the life of the organisational personnel as well as clients and persons in the local environment it is directly involved in.⁵⁵ However, realistic information is potentially something unpleasant for the person (or organisational unit) that is reporting,⁵⁶ as it may contradict with the organisational rules and standards or on a lower scale of abstraction may also undermine the goals of persons or units at a higher hierarchical level. Thus, the organisation of communication relies on two major assets: firstly the confidence and reliability of the personnel involved to report realistic information; and secondly different channels through which this information can be processed, selected and distributed.⁵⁷

Here, organisational sociology generally refers to the differentiation between formal and informal organisation of communication structures. The former refers to the formally established bureaucratic procedures within hierarchical administrative systems. This form of organisational self-information makes transfer of information and its potential uncertainties a duty. However,

⁵³ Luhmann, *Organisation und Entscheidung*, pp. 312-3

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 315.

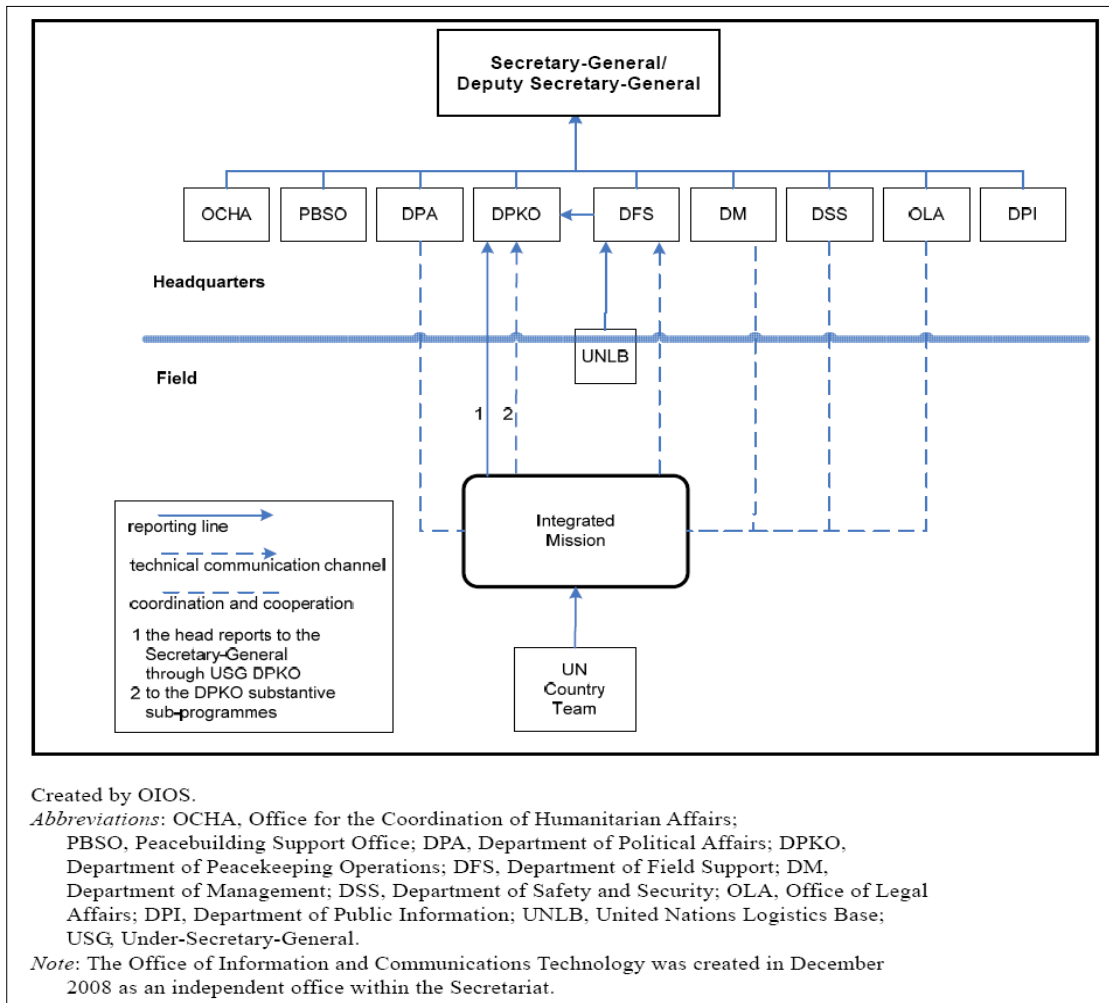
⁵⁵ Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World*, p. cp. 5

⁵⁶ Elwert, *Selbstveränderung*, p. 72

⁵⁷ Thomas Hüsken, *Der Stamm der Experten. Rhetorik und Praxis des Interkulturellen Managements in der deutschen staatlichen Entwicklungszusammenarbeit* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2006); Elwert, *Selbstveränderung*

formal communication procedures may also signify an efficient and accountable way of processing problems to the outside public. This means that the formal reporting structures might meet environmental requirements, e.g. of efficiency and accountability, rather than the demands of the functions of the organisation in action.⁵⁸ This controversy may be illustrated by a brief look at the formally fixed and regulated reporting schemes of the UN and its peace operations. Within its hierarchical system, every post, office or job formally exists within a clearly defined line of reporting. These reporting lines enable an overview of the organisation in form of an organogram, such as shown in figure 2.

Figure 2: Formal Reporting Lines between UN Mission and Headquarter⁵⁹



⁵⁸ Meyer and Rowan, Institutionalized Organizations

⁵⁹ Source: United Nations, *Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the Audit of the Secretariat's Structure for Managing and Sustaining Peacekeeping Operations*, UN Doc. A/63/837, 2009, p. 7

Figure 2 shows the broad organisational setting, in which peacekeeping missions are embedded. Next to lines of coordination with other departments which are programmatically and/or actively involved in peace operations, UN peacekeeping missions are formally embedded in a line of reporting – from the Head of Mission (HoM)⁶⁰ to the UN Secretary General (SG) through the Under-Secretary-General (USG) of the Department of Political Affairs (DPKO). This reporting line includes political and administrative responsibilities in reflection of the international mandate given by the Security Council. Thus, the HoM is the position through which formally all reports and information flows before it passes on to the headquarters.⁶¹ The reporting line here thus clarifies the hierarchical line of control rather than the practice of organisational communication. Zooming into such an organogram on a more detailed level, one can observe that every office, post or position in the UN peacekeeping bureaucracy is connected to formal reporting lines and thus embedded in this hierarchical system. An organogram thus gives an impression of formal assigned authority. However, it does not give any information about the use of communication channels assigned to the formal lines of reporting. Here, a brief illustration of the formal communication and reporting channels between UN headquarter and mission can be instructive. There are at least five types of reporting procedures:

Situation Report (SITREP): There are several variations of these SITREPs according to their frequency (there are daily, weekly and monthly that all produce certain differences of reporting) as well as their level of formality (distinction between formal and technical reporting).⁶² UN officials judge the use and value of this reporting channel differently. On the one hand, many officers in middle management of DPKO in New York perceive the SITREPs generally useful to stay informed.⁶³ On the other hand, a former SRSG acknowledged that at least the daily reporting was more a burden of duty than a productive inducement of work, based on the impression that nobody in headquarters was really interested in reading these reports.⁶⁴

Code Cable: This is not a normal bureaucratic communication instrument, but a means of diplomacy to issue politically motivated notices. As *Code Cables* are used very similarly between DPKO and Missions, they always have to be signed by the USG (DPKO) or the HoM. The

⁶⁰ In most peacekeeping missions the HoM is a Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG), who formally is on the same hierarchical level as a USG.

⁶¹ Background discussion with former Chief of Staff in a peacekeeping mission conducted in 2010.

⁶² Every section of a mission prepares a daily report, which is normally processed by the Joint Operations Centre (JOC) of the mission into a SITREP (3-4 pages), which is then cleared by the office of the HoM before it is sent to New York. At the same time, the sections also feed their 'technical reporting lines' (illustrated as dotted arrows in figure 2) to the specific sections in New York with a separate and more detailed SITREP (Interviews with UN officials in the United Nations Mission in Liberia, Monrovia, and DPKO, New York, conducted in 2010).

⁶³ Interviews with UN officials in DPKO, New York conducted in 2010.

⁶⁴ Background discussion with former SRSG conducted in 2010.

relevance and importance of this communication tool is very high, as they often include highly controversial and politically delicate information.⁶⁵

The biannual *Report of the Secretary General* to the Security Council: These reports are highly elaborated diplomatic documents. They include aspects and passages of all mission components, whereas the coordination and finalisation are tasks of the Office of Operations (OO) in DPKO. It is generally described as a highly difficult process to manage and can lead to severe conflicts between OO and a mission. It is however a highly important reporting tool, as it is the reference document of the mission towards the Security Council and thus the basis for the extension of a mission's mandate. Moreover, it is the only reference document that is publically accessible.⁶⁶

Special reports to intergovernmental organs of the UN (through the Secretary General) concerning specific issues (such as gender, child poverty, HIV): In the judgment of former high-ranking UN officials, who served in several peacekeeping missions, these reports have least importance. They would often be considered a burden of duty, drawing resources from the mission without having a significant impact on decision making, both within the UN bureaucracy and its intergovernmental organs.⁶⁷

Best practices, evaluation and knowledge management: The Peacekeeping Best Practices Section in DPKO collects and summarises reports on experiences in the field and publishes them in generalised form of best practices papers, handbooks, guidance materials or thematic issues. This communication tool seems to be of use especially for young professionals seeking advice on how to act in extreme situations. Experienced UN officials, however, perceive this standardisation of practices also as a threat for their own flexibility and autonomy and therefore consider it to be of very little relevance as a source of information and knowledge.⁶⁸

In sum, the relevance of the formally fixed channels for the day-to-day work of UN officials seems to vary greatly depending on the rank and routine of the individual. However, the information seems to be especially important to signify and reproduce the UN and its peace operations as a specific organisational hierarchy and design. Formal reporting procedures are often reference tools of the mission to the UN headquarters and the member states of the UN, thus functioning as an important basis of their persistence and recognition.

This leads to the second general form of communication structure, which is referred to as informal. In fact, one may assume that no formal communication procedure is processed without some sort of informal handling. To judge the importance or triviality of the daily code cables requires some informal knowledge about the resonance they have at headquarters. To

⁶⁵ Interviews in DPKO, New York and background discussions with former high-level UN officials conducted in 2010.

⁶⁶ Interviews in UNMIL, Monrovia and DPKO, New York conducted in 2010.

⁶⁷ Background discussions with former high-level UN officials conducted in 2010.

⁶⁸ Interviews at UNMIL, Monrovia and DPKO, New York conducted in 2010. Background discussions with former high level UN officials conducted in 2010.

know what and how information has to be included in the regular reports to the Security Council in order to be diplomatically balanced requires informal knowledge of the political demands concerning the report. Formal communication lines are effectively shortened by informal exchange of information, e.g. by asking to change a paragraph before submitting the report rather than sending it back for review. This, of course, also includes an intervention in the content of the report according to the requirement of what is supposed to be the content of reporting.

Informal communication is an important source of self-information, not only for each person involved, but also for the organisation with regard to its ability to secure its traditions and induce innovations simultaneously. Elwert characterises informal communication structures as *Gabenökonomie*, which roughly may be translated as an economy of gift exchange.⁶⁹ Information and knowledge is one type of gift as well as trust, critique, praise or share of responsibility. The exchange of gifts here is not automatically corruption (even though it may take forms of patronage or similar forms). It is a basic and normal requirement of successful day-to-day work to judge and act according to trustworthy guidance. Where formal communication makes the transfer of information and knowledge a duty, informal communication builds on mutual interpersonal confidence as the basis for understanding. As 'realistic' information is something potentially unpleasant to be reported, not only the individual but also the organisation depends on the informal exchange of information that crosscuts hierarchical levels. This secures self-information and knowledge behind the formal and programmatic organisational guidelines.

The problem with informal communication is not its existence. Many scholars have pointed to the importance of informal communication in bureaucracies regardless of (or in addition to) the formalised professionalism set up by Weber in his ideal bureaucracy model. What makes a study of informal communications difficult is the blurred border between the formal and informal. There are clear characteristics which make communication formal – i.e. hierarchy, duty, contract, protocol – as well as features which are typically informal – i.e. interpersonal contact, confidence, social control. But there is a high flow of communication that lies between these two poles. A meeting, for example, which is declared to have an informal character, may be far more formal than a chat in the corridor or during dinner – regardless of the importance or relevance of the information exchanged. A former Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG)⁷⁰ remarked that he would have met the Secretary General (SG) on every visit to New York, as well as the USG of DPKO, the relevant desk officers, and other persons relevant to the mission he is leading. As the schedule of the Secretary General is very tight, he would have 15 minutes to refer to the most relevant issues in a brief and comprehensive way. These meetings always were highly formal and decisions made here would be directly recorded and be the basis for the work of the mission in the field. On the other hand, personal contact and

⁶⁹ Elwert, *Selbstveränderung*

⁷⁰ The following is based on a background discussion with a former SRSG conducted in 2010.

confidence between the SRSG and the SG are also important points of reference and control.⁷¹ Similarly, the SRSG would have met other high-level UN officials on different issues and also in preparation for the meeting with the SG. The main purpose of these consultations was that the problems and issues which had to be managed included a huge amount of responsibility and uncertainty. The SRSG was anxious to include other persons in his decision making, especially in order to reduce his own uncertainty and share the responsibility of its possible intended and unintended consequences. To handle specific situations, it was of essential importance for him to know the right person he could ask for advice and help.⁷² This was only possible on the basis of a personal network, which had to be maintained during his visits to New York. Though this is an illustrative example of the communicative practices of a high-level UN officer who has not followed the common career path in the UN administration (as many HoMs) and thus is expected to be involved in the political sphere of the UN, it does indicate that daily working life and practices usually is a mixture of formal and informal interactions. Both forms of organisational communication are inherently necessary, to meet its two central requirements – confidence and reliability of the channels used to issue information and knowledge.

The Organisational Field of Tension and the Management of Daily Routine and Work

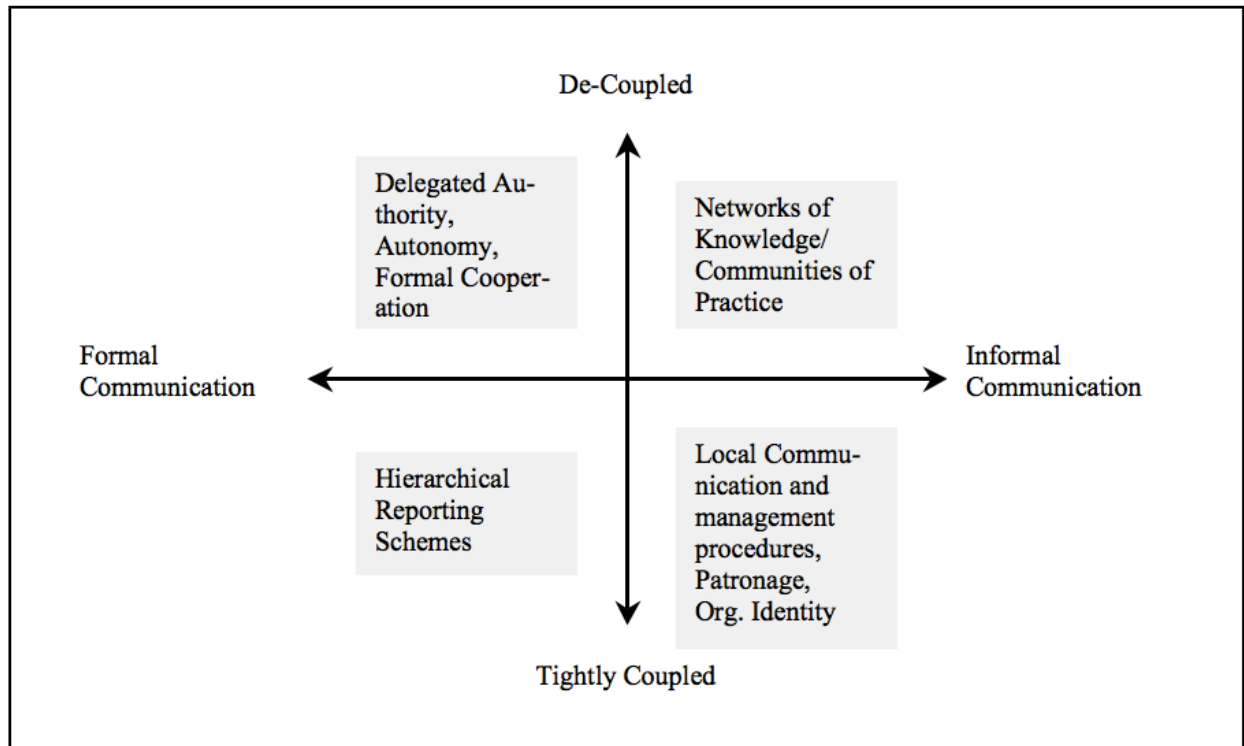
Analytically, coupling and communication can be portrayed separately. They, however, do not stand independently within an organisational framework. Taken together, the nexus between coupling and communication may be illustrated as in figure 3.

In Figure 3 both communication and coupling are illustrated as axes of a diagram forming four combined spaces. In each of these four spaces, different procedures of management can be situated according to their conditional assets. It is important to note that as the communication and coupling axis are distinct but connected processes, their nexus has to be analysed as a field of tension. Loosely coupled and formal elements of organisation therefore do not necessarily hinder the existence of informal and tightly coupled management procedures. In fact, the existence of both might be necessary factors for an organisation to propose and resume its functions under conditions of ambiguity, even though the relevance for the personal day-to-day working life might greatly vary over space and time.

⁷¹ Once the SRSG did not set a meeting with the SG and on meeting the SG in the lift, the SRSG was asked why he didn't come by and was encouraged to meet the SG every time he was in New York.

⁷² To give an example, the former SRSG here referred to an event of kidnapping. Even though the mission itself was not directly involved or affected in this event, it was constantly disturbed by UN headquarters in terms of reporting and keeping UN headquarters informed about the situation. To preserve the capacity of his team and the mission for their primary tasks, the SRSG asked the USG of the Department of Safety and Security (DSS) for advice, and he sent him a specialist for kidnapping to cope with the situation. As the specialist also took over the communication with New York, the mission could carry on with its primary work without any disturbance. The former SRSG remarked in the background discussion conducted in 2010 that this solution was only possible, because he knew and had access to the crucial responsible person.

Figure 3: The Nexus between Organisational Coupling and Communication



In the upper-left space, where de-coupling meets formal communication, management procedures can be found, which formally signify and (re-)produce distinctiveness between different units, sections and dimensions of an organisation. The clearest example for such a procedure is formal delegation of authority, which leads to a certain amount of autonomous responsibility and distinctiveness of the authorised agent or organisational unit.⁷³ As mentioned above, the UN mission in general and the HoM specifically enjoy a high degree of delegated authority. But the UN hierarchy as such is characterised by a highly complex web of delegated authorities. This is very important for the daily work of both the mission and DPKO, i.e. as no activity is undertaken without securing that all (relevant) claims of other persons or authorities are considered.⁷⁴ A second example is formal cooperation, which may take place internally (between different units of the organisation), and towards the organisational environment (together with organisations or units within the environment in which the organisation or its specific unit is locally situated). Here communication is highly restrictive, and organisations

⁷³ In its simplest sense, the agent has delegated authority to choose its policy according to the problem to be solved rather than to implement the policy given by the principal or superior. Jonathan Bendor, Amihai Glazer and Thomas Hammond, *Theories of Delegation, Annual Review of Political Science*, 4 (2001), p. 242

⁷⁴ Interviews with UN officials in DPKO, New York, and background discussions with former SRSG conducted in 2010.

carefully channel information needed for cooperation, and thus formally protect the distinctiveness of the organisations and units involved.⁷⁵ The UN and its peace operations provide many examples of such formal cooperation, e.g. the peacekeeping mission with other UN organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), bilateral government initiatives, or local government structures. A further example is the creation of the so-called Integrated Operational Teams (IOT) under the lead of the Office of Operations (DPKO) in 2007, through which the formal communication channel between the relevant divisions and units of the department should be broadened in order to raise the efficiency of cooperation whilst managing and supporting the respective missions.⁷⁶

The lower-left space of figure 3, where tight coupling meets formal communication, illustrates the formal management procedures that are designed to be highly responsive. This is especially observable in hierarchical reporting schemes, described in detail above. The UN has a set of rules and procedures that define how these reporting schemes have to be applied. There are rules of engagement, unity of command, the daily code-cables, progress reports etc. Different departments, divisions or units may also try to formally hold authorities such as personnel recruitment, procurement management to secure their power and the responsiveness of the subordinate unit. A further example is an official committee and meeting in which reports are issued and decisions taken that require the responsiveness of all the units (or sometimes also all other organisations) involved. The hierarchical management procedures set the framework for daily work and form the basis for the persistence of the organisational enterprise.

Turning to the right side of the diagram in figure 3, in the lower right space, where tight coupling meets informal communication, such management procedures are located that lead to a high degree of responsiveness, but are based on informal communication channels. This might refer to local management procedures, such as regular round table meetings in an office, or a close and trustful cooperation between the SRSG and his/her secretary or policy advisor. It might also refer to close personal links, for example between the SRSG and his fellow colleague in some departments in New York. Other examples are local personal networks, which are highly referential towards each other throughout formal hierarchies and thus set informal barriers within a formal organisational setting.⁷⁷ In its extreme version such networks may also be negatively characterised as patronage. Interestingly, this space does not only refer to local phenomena but also to general organisational identity settings. Thus, loyalty to the UN and its hierarchical and normative settings is controlled not only by hierarchical reference, but also by informal collective identity, which is referred to as being 'UN-minded'. If a colleague is perceived as not 'UN-

⁷⁵ Thompson, *Organizations in Action*; Luhmann, *Organisation und Entscheidung*

⁷⁶ Nations, *Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the Audit of the Secretariat's Structure for Managing and Sustaining Peacekeeping Operations*, Doc. A/63/837, 2009

⁷⁷ For an ethnographic study of such networks in the organisational context of the German Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) see Hüsken, *Der Stamm der Experten*

minded', s/he is considered to be disloyal, and vice versa. This may lead to formal consequences, such as the non-renewal of his/her contract.⁷⁸

Finally, the space on the upper right, where loose coupling and informal communication meet, forms the conditions for management procedures based on personal confidence and also conserves a high degree of distinctiveness. In a broad sense, this accounts for knowledge networks based on personal contacts and collective identities, which crosscut the programmatic structure of an organisation.⁷⁹ Another example are groups called 'communities of practice' in which learning and information transfer are based on an identity or social context shared by its members on the basis of their practical involvement.⁸⁰ These networks are explicitly boundary spanning, may be local or virtually global and clearly crosscut formal hierarchies. They include individuals who are not only working in different programmatic contexts within an organisation, but may also contain persons from different organisational or national backgrounds. In the context of UN peace operations, nationals might gain entry to such networks as well as employees from other international agencies operating in the country.⁸¹ Thus, in such networks or communities, shared identities and confidence (as an interpersonal norm) form grounds on which responsiveness is made possible up to a certain extent. But, on the other hand, the distinctiveness of the individual in his personal day-to-day working setting is preserved.

The diagram in figure 3 gives an impression of the organisational field of tension, in which an organisational actor routinely performs his/her daily work, a programme is implemented, a report is written or a piece of information is transferred, interpreted and processed. Actors find help and annoyances in this field of tension and they will individually set their own preferences, but they are not able to exclude the management procedures of any of the four spaces in total, as the practice of these procedures, though they are analytically distinct, always stand in relationship to the practice of the other.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore the organisational processes through which the UN and its peace operations manage and cope with complexity, processes and constant inconsistencies and dilemmas between the programmatic goals and its daily organisational action. As UN officials have a dual responsibility towards the peace process in the respective society (the client) and the UN system, its standards and values (the organisation), peace operations as organisational action means a constant and routine balancing act between

⁷⁸ Background discussion with former SRSG conducted in 2010.

⁷⁹ Hüsken gives an interesting example for such a network in the context of the German GTZ, as he describes a network of East-Germans working in Yemen and other Arab countries, who support themselves on the basis of their similar homeland background (even calling themselves 'Ossis im Orient'). Hüsken, *Der Stamm der Experten*, p. 203

⁸⁰ Brown and Duguid, *Knowledge and Organization: A Social-Practice Perspective*,

⁸¹ Schlichte and Veit, *Coupled Arenas*

political and bureaucratic demands. In order to capture this organisational action in a systematic way a framework was developed, which suggests that the procedures that manage the daily practice can be located within an organisational field of tension formed by the nexus between organisational coupling and communication. In order to be implemented, any programme or policy is transformed by the interconnected and reciprocal use of these management procedures within this field of tension. In order to receive responses within the organisational setting, any implementation is also transformed by the interconnected and reciprocal use of these management procedures within this field of tension. Thus, one may expect UN officials to constantly navigate within this field of tension throughout their scope of action and on a regular routine basis.

If one reconsiders the photography of the Afghan woman in a polling booth described at the beginning of this paper according to this theoretical framework, one may come to a critical and differentiated conclusion. The picture intrinsically is a reproduction of the implementation of the programme and not of the standard of free and fair elections. Thus, in order to take and publish the picture, the UN photographer draws his legitimacy from (and thus refers to) the organisational procedures located in the nexus between coupling and communication rather than the programme of supporting elections in Afghanistan. Similarly, as the UN organisation allows such a picture to be taken and published, one may suppose that its programme of supporting elections in Afghanistan also refers to organisational procedures situated in the nexus between coupling and communication rather than the transfer of its standards to the Afghan context in which the election programme is implemented.

Generalised and applied to the perspective of the organisational actor, who is in charge and is confronted with the internal organisational dynamics and dilemmas of peace operations, one may concretise two major propositions:

Proposition 1:

Policies and programmes of UN peace operations are reflected by UN officials according to their compliance to the procedures located within the organisational nexus between coupling and communication rather than their application to the peace process within the post-war setting they are implemented.

Proposition 2:

Daily practices of UN peace operations are reflected by UN officials according to their application to the procedures located within the organisational nexus between coupling and communication rather than their compliance with policies and programmes of UN peace operations.

These two propositions may serve as the basic structure to be tested and enhanced by empirical research. As it focuses on the organisational processes and dynamics of the daily practice of UN peace operations, it should be concerned with identification, judgement and usage of procedures of management and reference located in the nexus between

organisational coupling and communication. Such a research is promising, as it provides a deep insight into how processes and (deviant) outcomes are transferred into programmatic feedback. Moreover, it may generate an understanding on how UN officials use these methods and processes to cope with the ambiguities and uncertainties of their regular and routine work.