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EU civilian crisis management and organisational learning¹

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Abstract: Commentators and policy-makers stress the need to learn the lessons of EU civilian crisis management. Yet despite numerous case studies mission performance, we know little about the EU's overall capacity for such learning. The first part of this article outlines a theoretical framework for analysing organisational learning in the context of peace operations. It recommends focusing on administrative reform and conceptual development in Brussels, and lists various factors that are expected to facilitate or inhibit organisational learning cycles. On this basis, second part presents a historical survey of the EU's learning efforts in civilian crisis management. Despite a dynamic expansion of mission tasks as well as corresponding review processes, organisational learning has remained haphazard and limited to capacity expansion or mission support requirements. Only over the last two years did the EU invest in more formalised lessons-learning processes, which led to improved information gathering across missions and created more space for conceptual discussions on mission objectives. Yet at the time of writing, this increased institutional momentum for learning could not overcome fundamental political constraints on more ambitious reforms of EU peace operations.

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, international interventions to respond to security crises and failed states have proliferated. Following the dynamic expansion of UN peace operations over the 1990s, the European Union doted itself with a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP)

¹ The article builds on the GPPi research project "Learning in EU peace operations?" that has been supported by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, and has received further funding from the European Union Seventh Framework Programme under grant agreement n°218105 (EUSECON). The author would like to thank Thorsten Benner for valuable comments and Anna Halonen for research assistance.

around the turn of the millennium to export stability.² Since then, the growth of civilian crisis management missions – as the EU calls its civilian interventions to establish stability and promote the Rule of Law in crisis spots – can generally be regarded as a success (Chivvis 2010), which matched the EU's ambition to take on new security challenges in a comprehensive manner (Council 2003a). Seventeen out of a total of twenty-five ESDP missions have been of a civilian nature, while two more included both civilian and military components. This growing importance of civilian crisis management missions also reflects in the EU's budget. Operating costs have multiplied by the factor ten over the last decade (starting from €30m to slightly over €300 for the operating year 2013).³ As such figures pale in comparison to other EU aid programmes,⁴ civilian peace operations missions could be considered as a particularly effective investment when compared to the costs of violent conflict (Bozzoli et al. 2010) that they are supposed to contain.

Nevertheless, both commentators (Grevi et al. 2009, Korski and Gowan 2009, Sandawi and Pirrozi 2009, Khol 2010, Oksamytna 2011, Keohane 2011) and EU policy-makers (Council 2009c, Council 2011a) have repeatedly underlined the need to 'learn lessons' to improve the effectiveness and future prospects of the EU's activities in this issue area. The UN (Benner et al. 2011) as well as some European member states⁵ already invested in such learning processes, which adds pressure to demonstrate the continued value and professionalism of EU civilian crisis management missions. But although one can draw on a proliferating number of

² In 2010 the ESDP has been relabelled into the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The article dominantly uses the old denomination, however, as the main period of investigation falls before that name change.

³ The operating costs of EU civilian missions are directly charged to the EU budget, even though member states continue to pay the personnel costs for seconded staff. In contrast, EU military missions are financed by a mechanism (ATHENA) whereby participating member states directly share and bear all operating costs (e.g. for military equipment). For an extended discussion, see Grevi et al. (2009).

⁴ EU development aid alone accounts for approximately €2,5bn per year, while a similar amount is spent on specific assistance programmes to the EU's neighbourhood.

⁵ See, for instance, Germany (<http://www.zif-berlin.org/>) and Finland (<http://www.intermin.fi>)

case studies on field missions (e.g. Asseburg et al. 2009), we still lack analytical frameworks and detailed empirical data to assess whether the civilian components of the ESDP could actually undertake systematic review and learning efforts to improve its long-term performance

To address these deficits, the first part of the paper analyses whether the ambiguous and interdisciplinary notion of organisational learning (Argote 2011) can be usefully applied to EU civilian crisis management operations. After reviewing a number of basic assumptions about organisational learning, it is argued that peace operations present high barriers to, but nevertheless require consistent effort for, learning. To facilitate the identification of learning processes, the paper suggest focusing on formal administrative reform and conceptual development at the headquarter level. A short list of factors that are expected to facilitate or inhibit organisational learning cycles completes the heuristic analytical framework.

The second empirical part of the paper surveys a decade of organisational and conceptual development in EU civilian crisis management. It is shown that the EU repeatedly drew on experience of other international organisations, analysed its operational experience and generated a considerable number of conceptual and programmatic documents that reflect a growing organisational knowledge base. But complete learning cycles have been limited to technical support issues, and remained strongly conditioned by high-level political dynamics. It took till 2009 for the EU to invest in more formalised lessons-learning processes for its civilian crisis management operations. While the impact of these administrative reforms remains open at the time of writing, the paper suggests that fundamental resource constraints and political fragmentation are likely to remain the dominant concern. In conclusion, organisational learning in international organisations remains tightly linked to political

negotiations and needs to be considered over long time periods. Further comparative research on learning in international organisations could explore whether increasingly structured lessons-learned processes are worthwhile investments.

2. Organisational learning and complex crisis and peace operations

Faced with an ever more complex and unpredictable range of crisis management tasks, public administrations are under increasing pressure to fashion themselves as highly responsive, flexible and learning organisations (Deverell 2010). Increasing financial and human resource constraints further underline the need to continuously improve operations and effectiveness of public organisations. However, the official discourse on the need to “learn lessons” contrasts with a stagnation of analytical concepts and theoretical insights on learning in political settings (Dunlop and Radaelli 2010, Zito and Schout 2009). After the last wave of seminal studies dates during the 1980s and early 1990s (Argyris, 1982, Sabatier, 1988), political scientists mostly remained within established research agendas on the role of advocacy coalitions or epistemic communities. These studies helped to explain wider political change due to ideational factors and international networks among scientists or professionals, but did not shed much light on the internal workings of public administrations (Benner 2011).

Meanwhile, in management studies generated large amounts of research on organisational learning (Rashman et al. 2009). These studies generally emphasise the need for dynamic organisational adaptation and learning to cope with market competition and vastly increased information flows in the context of globalisation (Easterby-Smith and Prieto 2008). Some of these pressures equally apply to bureaucratic organisations and reflected in a broad

momentum for public administration reform that drew inspiration from business practices (the so-called New Public Management). Frey (2008) similarly suggests that international organisations be conceived of as competitive actors in an increasingly crowded field of global governance.

These parallels justify the application of the notion of organisational learning to (international) public administrations, which can no longer be considered as monolithic and inert bureaucracies. Nevertheless, public administrations need to fulfil a different range of tasks and manage more contradictory values or stakeholders than business firms. Thus, recommendations from management and business studies may not be applicable, which, in practice, resulted in a very mixed record of New Public Management reforms (Pollitt et al. 2007). This also reflects in the fragmented state of research on organisational learning in public settings (Moynihan and Landuyt 2009). Research deficits are particularly acute when looking at international organisations (Siebenhuener 2008), and at the intersection between public administration and crisis management activities (Deverell, 2010).

In short, one needs to stake out carefully how the notion of organisational learning could be applied in different areas of public administration. A universally valid theoretical model of organisational behaviour (and success) across the public and private sector is doomed to failure, while further differentiation is necessary for different thematic issue areas. With these limitations in mind, the following section should provide a heuristic analytical framework for the studying the EU's organisational learning capacity in the area of civilian crisis management missions.⁶ This framework can be defined in relation to three main dichotomies that separate – and often generate confusion – in existing studies on organisational learning:

⁶ A more fundamental theoretical contribution to the study of organisational learning in public settings would require a comparative research design that compares learning processes in different international organisations

first, between individual and organisational learning; second, between formal (structural) and informal (cultural) learning; and third, between single-loop and double-loop learning.

To take them in turn: While individual learning is ultimately underpins collective learning processes, organisational learning is understood as a process that reaches beyond individual office-holders. Thus, organisational learning can be understood as changes in codified forms of knowledge, routines and operating procedures that individuals are expected to comply with. If learning is understood as a fully-fledged organisational process, it entails more than knowledge reception and “mental changes”. New information needs to be transformed into shared understandings, and “lessons” have to be reliably disseminated and implemented across the organisation. Argote (2011) correspondingly notes that a majority of works on organisational learning have accentuated ‘later’ stages of information retention and dissemination, whereas knowledge generation or ‘primary’ learning is not necessarily a distinct organisational phenomenon. Therefore, a complete organisational learning cycle typically includes several stages, starting from proactive information collection, over codification and internal advocacy, to dissemination and training.

This leads to the second distinction between formal and informal learning. From a non-reductionist perspective, organisations are constituted by both formal rules and more informal culture. However, the distinction between culture and structure is at best a useful analytical abstraction that quickly becomes blurred in empirical research (Moynihan and Landuyt, 2009). In the context of research on EU foreign and security policy, most analysts have focused on informal learning and socialisation dynamics against the background of formal institutional structures and networks in Brussels. This varying goes under the concepts of Europeanisation (Vanhoonacker and Jacobs 2010), Brusselisation (Breuer 2010), epistemic

communities (Cross 2011), communities of practice (Bicchi 2011) or (shared) governmentality (Merlingen 2011). The overall thrust of these arguments is that participation of national experts and officials in common institutions and wider governance networks leads to a (slow) convergence process in terms of perceptions or preferences that sustain the continued development of the ESDP/CSDP.

As important as these insights are, convergence processes among decision-makers should not be equated with more ‘functional’ learning, i.e. the deliberate review of experience or acquisition of external knowledge in order to change organisational routines and improve task performance. The popular metaphor of ‘learning by doing’ (d’Urso 2008) is particularly prone to generate confusion in this regard. Although the notion can apply to performance-oriented organisational learning, it can also be understood as ‘learning the ropes’, i.e. learning of pre-established routines and socialisation by individual officials. The prevalent focus on informal learning dynamics also throws up the problem of how to interpret widely-shared ‘stories’ that are often equated with ‘lessons’ (e.g. as in ‘the lessons of history’). Although this can also constitute an interesting research field in its own right (which has also been explored in many studies on company culture), it cannot easily be squared with questions about output performance or efficiency. In large bureaucratic organisations it is particularly important to pay attention to more formal rules or processes, which structure work outputs across multiple hierarchical levels.

In short, informal mechanisms, networks and cultures clearly play an important role and cannot be separated from formal EU policy-making in security and defence matters. Thus, the following empirical investigation of learning dynamics will also touch upon the role of ‘practical experience’ of mission staff and their contact with institutions in Brussels.

However, it will also be argued that more formal processes for knowledge generation, capture and transmissions are critical for organisational learning in the EU context, as information can be lost over various levels. In addition, this preference for formal learning offers some methodological advantages when covering long periods and issue areas that are not readily accessible. That is, changes in officially endorsed concepts and bureaucratic routines can be compiled and analysed by outside researchers (and eventually historians), whereas informal changes in organisational practices typically require first-hand accounts and more narrow time frames for adequate documentation. These considerations motivate the following empirical study that aims to provide a solid assessment, but not definitive account, of organisational learning processes in EU civilian crisis management over the last decade.⁷

The third criterion that characterises organisational learning studies concerns the distinction between single-loop and double-loop learning (Argyris 1982). Single-loop learning is typically understood as a simple adjustment of organisational processes to improve task performance, whereas double-loop learning denotes a ‘deeper’ engagement with organisational objectives or values.⁸ This could suggest that only ‘double-loop’ learning is genuinely puzzling, whereas single-loop adaptation processes are unremarkable. Yet this approach (which can be exemplified in studies on business transformations) can be misleading. Incremental learning is no small feat, can be critical for long-term performance and requires considerable organisational resources (Salge and Vera 2011). In the case of in EU foreign and security policy, Smith (forthcoming) distinguishes three possible outcomes of learning, namely alterations in institutional rules, responsibilities and resources. While a superficial reading would suggest that rule and resource changes are case of single-loop

⁷ For a related argument to look at formal ‘institutional learning’ processes in EU military missions, see Smith (forthcoming).

⁸ More recently, the notion of ‘triple loop learning’, i.e. learning to learn, has been added to the mix, but remains problematic (Tosey 2011).

learning and adaptation, whereas changes in political responsibilities constitute double-loop learning about, this need not be the case. In fact, the expansion of EU competences has often been driven by incremental and un-reflected mission creep, whereas minor budgetary questions could give rise to substantial political confrontations.

So instead of pitting single-loop versus double-loop learning, one should pay more attention to the specific issue area that is subject of learning, even if this comes at the price of theoretical parsimony.⁹ This is especially important for international peace and crisis management operations, which present particularly high obstacles to knowledge use. This paper will only list the three most important ones. First, peace missions are usually launched over short time periods and operate in unstable theatres, so that planning and operational management cannot easily be standardised (see also below). Second, ever since the end of the Cold War international interventions typically go beyond ceasefire monitoring and aim to effect substantive institutional and social reform in weak post-conflict states, which often generates unpredictable dynamics. Third, the participation of personnel from different states and the complexity of stakeholders and management institutions at the international level generate high demands for operational and political coordination. In short, peace operations could be seen as especially “wicked problems” (Weber and Khademian, 2008), as they are inherently complicated - i.e. involving a large number of diverse actors or stakeholders that need to cooperate across borders -, and highly complex - i.e. operating in turbulent environments when small changes to mission objectives or political relations with the host society can lead to unpredictable long-term outcomes

⁹ For instance, Dunlop and Raedelli (2010) develop a very extensive typology of different kinds of learning processes, depending on the tractability of knowledge and the level of control of learning participants.

What does this mean for the prospects of learning? Many practitioners maintain that such complex operations are best handled with maximal flexibility. Senior leaders should use considerable political discretion and flexibility during decision-making and set-up, followed by extensive operational autonomy by mission personnel and leadership on the ground. In this perspective, peacekeeping is a practical art rather than a science. During operations, the best that can be hoped for is intensive and repeated “learning by doing” (D'Urso, 2008), whereby qualified mission staff pick up on local dynamics and improvise with the available resources on the ground. Between missions and at the strategic level, networks and intensive communication between practitioners (communities of practice) may help to sustain and foster a common professional outlook and adequate flow of information.

In contrast, critical analysts have pointed to the inability of intervening actors to overcome ideological preconceptions and to reconcile the competing interests of stakeholders and subjects of peace operations (Autesserre, 2010). Even well-meaning and qualified international staff cannot readily slot into distinct cultural contexts and find suitable conflict solutions, while they are tied to donors back home and have to operate with pre-established policy programs. Furthermore, the general shortage of human and financial resources or the lacking ‘staying power’ of international actors generally turn peace operations into exercises of “organised hypocrisy” (Lipson, 2007), which pit high-sounding ambitions for peace or state building against the reality on the ground. In this context, official proclamations to learn lessons cannot resolve the most important problems, but could rather serve a smoke-screen and sustain the legitimacy of international interventions. If previous experiences were analysed honestly, outside powers should realise that the proposed reform objectives or recipes for peace building are impossible to implement, while increasingly professionalized networks of intervening actors seek to defend their own (financial or political) interests.

In response to the traditional and radical critique, this paper aims for a pragmatic middle ground. Due to the complexity of peace operations, policy-makers and officials cannot rely on rigid templates and ‘lessons’ prior to deployment and need to retain a high degree of flexibility for different operational contexts and changing political dynamics (as traditionalists argue). Yet this does not mean that organisational learning is useless or positively dangerous in the case of peace operations. Even though the heydays of humanitarian interventionism seem to be over, international missions continue to operate, while several new ones are bound to be launched over the coming years. And although some of the hardest political problems are unlikely to be resolved via organisational learning, this does not hold for certain repetitive or routine aspects of international crisis management, such as planning, support and programming. Such seemingly mundane (single-loop) issues – the ‘nuts and bolts’ - can lead to serious failures and urgently need to be addressed.

In sum, this paper takes the pragmatic position that organisational learning is a collective process that is based on active knowledge acquisition with the aim to improve organisational performance. ‘Successful’ instances of organisational learning furthermore require considerable political engagement and other resource investments to move from knowledge acquisition to knowledge codification, diffusion and implementation across different organisational levels. Formal organisational changes (institutions, resources, concepts) provide the basis for assessing the learning processes in large-scale bureaucracies and over longer time periods. Subsequent studies could complement this by analysing informal processes of knowledge diffusion (e.g. tracing shared stories and myths). Last but not least, expectations of organisational learning should be tempered in the case of (civilian) peace operations, which pose particularly high demands and operate under tight external constraints.

Against this background, studies on administrative reform or organisational learning suggest that the following factors need to be considered as intervening variables. These factors reflect the different (idealised) stages of organisational learning, starting from 1) knowledge acquisition, 2) codification and transmission, 3) organisational reform, and 4) long-term implementation.¹⁰

Facilitators:

1. An extra-organisational knowledge base and/or established professional community, and which can be absorbed by the learning organisation (e.g. Bierly et al. 2010) or is mediated via ‘boundary-spanning’ actors (e.g. Adebahr 2009)
2. Internal organisational structures, resources and processes to actively collect and codify knowledge (e.g. Benner et al. 2011)
3. Engagement by senior officials or political leaders to promote knowledge-based organisational change (e.g. Hartley and Rashman 2010)
4. processes and incentives to disseminate new information and rules, including across internal organisational boundaries (e.g. Dawes et al. 2009)

Obstacles:

1. entrenched organisational routines and cultural ‘filters’ that hamper the reception of new information (e.g. Adebahr 2009)

¹⁰ This list is not intended to be exhaustive and could benefit from further testing across systematically varied empirical case studies. Moreover, for the purposes of this paper these factors therefore cannot be ranked into necessary and sufficient conditions for organisational learning.

2. organisational fragmentation (between levels and compartments (vertical/horizontal)) that obstruct the transmission and dissemination of knowledge (e.g. Becker 2001)
3. bureaucratic resistance (e.g. due to budgetary conflict) to coordination in the context of boundary-spanning problems (e.g. Stengel and Weller 2010)
4. high diversity and turnover of staff, which can undermine organisational memory and performance (e.g. Hausknecht and Trevor 2011)

The next section argues that learning in EU civilian crisis management occasionally benefited from a combination of facilitating factors - such as a lack of contrasting routines or an pre-existing knowledge base -, but predominantly faced high barriers, such as fluctuating political support for completing organisational learning processes.

3. The formation of a conceptual basis and evolution of management processes for civilian crisis management

The following analysis is mainly based on a large number of primary EU documents, supplemented by interviews with EU officials and national experts in the area of civilian crisis management.¹¹ The period of investigation can be divided into several phases. In 2001, EU officials borrowed concepts from other international organisations or the military, which should make up for their lack of experience with civilian crisis management. By 2004, the first operational experiences in the Western Balkans quickly led to reform proposals with regard to mission planning, staffing, financing and procurement. However, over the following two years civilian crisis missions proliferated at a rapid pace while bureaucratic turf wars

¹¹ Unfortunately, all of these interviews were only granted under the condition of speaking off-the-record.

escalated, which led to growing gap between the operational practice and slow reform developments at the headquarter level. Only by 2007 a number of convergent political developments cleared the way for institutional change and better funding for review and learning activities in EU civilian crisis management. The three largest member states agreed on new institutional headquarter in Brussels, while officials proposed a more formalised lessons-learning process. In 2009 this led to annual Lessons-Learned reports that went beyond immediate operational challenges and sought to ensure a more reliable completion of organisational cycles. Yet so far, political context seems to remain the dominant conditioning factor for these efforts.

3.1. The set-up of civilian ESDP and learning from others (2000-2002)

When the European Security and Defence Policy emerged in the late 1990s, the EU was ready and eager to engage with the growing trend for “nation-building” that had begun with end of the Cold War. Specifically, the UN and OSCE engagements after the violent break-up of Yugoslavia served as the crucial point of reference (Council of the EU 2000). Following these examples for international civilian administrations, a mere handful of officials and international experts drew on the externally available knowledge and developed a first wave of planning documents for related EU civilian mission (Council of the EU 2002a, Council of the EU 2002b, Council of the EU 2002c).

However, copying the conceptual writings of the UN or the OSCE made little contribution towards addressing fundamental operational and political challenges of external interventions. Such concerns quickly came to dominate discussions among senior leadership. For instance, a

EU concept for Rule of Law promotion in third countries (Council of the EU 2002d) was neither discussed nor endorsed by the EU Council of Ministers, while basic management tasks, such command structures (Council of the EU 2001a) and mobilising the necessary personnel and equipment for staffing the first EU police mission in Bosnia (Council of the EU 2001b) led to intensive haggling between the member states. In addition, the creation of a legal framework for ensuring the diplomatic immunity of mission staff – i.e. mechanisms for blame-avoidance and for ensuring that external staff would find mission participation sufficiently attractive – was prioritised by senior policy-makers (Council of the EU 2001c). This comparatively short-term and defensive thinking that focused on operational demands led to severe problems when the EUPM actually began to deploy, as mission staff had no clear sense of their objectives and struggled to fit into the crowded scene of international organisations in the Western Balkans (Penksa 2006).

3.2. The Bosnian experience and the strengths and limits of learning by doing (2003-4)

The first substantive input to address these basic deficits came from the much more sizable EU military staff that preceded the establishment of EU civilian crisis management (compare van Hoonacker 2010). Drawing on long-standing templates from national military forces (as mainly developed in NATO), the military staff developed a unitary format and terminology for mission planning and definition of objectives (Council of the EU 2003b). This illustrated how organisational learning and borrowing from an available external knowledge base could work both across different international organisations and EU-internal functional boundaries. However, civilian administrators were also quick to point out that standard military approaches assumed strictly separated crisis management phases, which failed to reflect the

more long-term ambitions of civilian interventions. So already at this early stage there were voices that highlighted the need for fully experience-based and flexible approaches in civilian peace operations, rather than relying on off-the-shelf models (see above discussion on the ‘traditionalist’ approach).

Soon after, mission staff of EUPM completed their first internal reviews (Council of the EU 2003c, Council of the EU 2003d). These reports set out a number of recommendations for improving the financing and recruitment process for missions, and highlighted the need for more ‘programmatic planning’ that could resolve the lack of direction in the early phase of EUPM. Taken together, this showed that early practitioners of EU civilian crisis management were quite free to voice their concerns and capable to condense them in a relatively codified form that could potentially be transmitted across different hierarchical levels in the EU. In other words, one could not speak of a stifling bureaucratic setting that did not allow for innovation and open discussion.

Nevertheless, the first mission review reports hardly moved beyond very general recommendations, particularly with regard to inherent objectives of missions (programmatic planning). This shaped the first response of the political level to such critical feedback from the field level, namely to expand the human resource base for civilian crisis management in Brussels (Council of the EU 2003e). A new directorate general for civilian crisis management was founded within the Secretariat to the Council of Ministers. Among this new directorate, at least one position should focus on ‘lessons learned/best practice’.

This administrative built-up provided an important step, but could not be treated as a completed instance of organisational learning. Driven by the desire to demonstrate the

operational capacity and reality of the relatively new ESDP, the EU launched another police mission in Macedonia, EUPOL PROXIMA, within a few months. This time-pressure meant that early insights from EUPM Bosnia, such as the need for going beyond deployment to programmatic mission planning, could not be acted upon. As a result, the first year of PROXIMA was widely perceived to be ineffective and caused in-depth review processes at the field level (Ioannides 2008).

This experience of PROXIMA also brought out ambiguous implications of flexibility of field operations. On the one hand, the leadership of PROXIMA could stimulate substantive revisions of its operations. At this early stage in EU civilian crisis management, political decision-makers had not even formally created a clear chain of command to the headquarter level. On the other hand, this created the danger that lessons would not be captured in Brussels and implemented for future EU engagements.

The multi-dimensional and overloaded nature of the EU policy-making process accentuated this danger. At the time of PROXIMA's internal crisis (early 2004), senior EU officials had to accommodate a new set of participants to EU foreign policy from Central and Eastern Europe (Juncos and Pomorska 2006). In civilian crisis management this soon led to a new mission. Estonia successfully lobbied for a new Rule of Law mission in Georgia, which reflected the ambition of the Baltic States to play a part in the transformation of the former Communist block. Even though the mission was not necessitated by an urgent crisis, the planning process was extremely short and tightly constrained by a shortage of judicial experts (Council of the EU 2004a).

In short, the first operational years of EU civilian crisis management were characterised by experimentation or improvisation to cope with the rapid expansion of missions. While the political level was mostly interested in raising the EU's international profile by sheer presence in different areas of operations, operators and officials were quite free to investigate and formulate the limitations of the first missions. Yet critical review documents or innovations at the field level could not attract sufficient attention while operational responsibilities outstripped management capacities in Brussels (compare Ioannides 2010, 39). This meant that the learning cycle broke down between problem identification and wider organisational change.

3.3. Proliferation of missions and institutional obstacles to knowledge dissemination (2005-6)

Towards the end of 2004, decision-makers took note of these growing deficits and agreed on two action plans to improve civilian crisis management capacities (European Council 2004, Council of the EU 2004b). But already a few months later, the proliferation of EU civilian crisis missions proceeded at an even higher pace. In absence of a major political failure, senior leaders ignored critical feedback the operational level as minor disturbances, and were happy to raise the international profile of the European Security and Defence Policy beyond the Western Balkans. Thus, the EU became active in the Democratic Republic Congo, the Indonesian province Aceh, the Palestinian authorities and Iraq.¹²

¹²This paper cannot go into the reasons for launching these missions. In some cases, the EU was impelled by political pressures from the US or the UN, whereas in other the cases the leadership of particular states or even individual persons (Javier Solana, Martti Ahtisaari) were critical (Kurowska 2009).

Although each of these missions consisted of no more a few dozen participants, operational constraints and risks in faraway locations could no longer be downplayed. The administrative apparatus in Brussels responded with internal discussions on how to streamline and professionalize its management processes (Council of the EU 2006a, Council of the EU 2006b). Vivid anecdotes (critical to informal learning dynamics) made the round in Brussels. For instance, the Aceh mission was organised and financed so poorly that mission members initially had to pay for their deployment with their own credit cards and were operating in a post-civil war environment without any means for physical protection.

The downside was that that conceptual questions and debates over the long-term objectives of civilian crisis management continued to be sidelined. For instance, the EU followed wider trends in the international peacekeeping community and drafted a concept for so-called Security Sector Reform (SSR) (Council of the EU 2005a). But whether SSR was indeed a useful idea and how it could influence the practice of civilian crisis management was not substantially discussed among senior officials and political leaders. A constructive debate was furthermore blocked by internal bureaucratic conflict between the Council of Ministers and the European Commission (Derks and More 2009). The Commission had previously established its own SSR programmes and generally resisted the growth of civilian crisis management activities under the EU's Foreign and Security Policy (the EU's "Second Pillar"), as it potentially undermined the Commission's external profile via different financial aid and assistance instruments.

The gulf between dealing with urgent demands for new missions – no matter how small and symbolic - and long-term reflection and learning processes emerged most clearly in the context of the so-called EU Civilian Headline Goal. Shadowing military templates for

capacity development, EU member states launched a structured process for scenario building and human resource development in civilian crisis management. One could expect that this would serve as a focal point for learning and ideational advocacy at the strategic level. A series of workshops of EU officials and national experts drew in a wide range of information and expertise. The result was an agreement on more detailed mission requirements and the need to develop corresponding short-falls in training and deployment procedures across EU institutions and member states (Council of the EU 2005b). Yet precisely this wide-ranging consultation brought out the fundamental structural obstacles to consistent reform and learning across the multiple layers and complex governance networks in EU foreign and security policy.

Aside from states that were traditionally committed to civilian crisis management anyhow (i.e. mainly Northern states), the Civilian Headline discussions did not lead to new national plans for training and deployment processes for seconded mission personnel (Korski and Gowan 2009). This meant that civilian missions continued to rely on national officials with very different qualifications and who stayed in the field for relatively short time periods (usually six months) – i.e. they would leave just when they may have mastered basic skills. Even a pilot project for modular and integrated “civilian response teams”, which was another outgrowth of the Civilian Headline discussions and received political support from Northern EU member states, was not fully implemented (Council of the EU 2007a), even if this reflected ‘best practice’ in other international organisations and should not go beyond hundred experts on standby.

In sum, the proliferation of ESDP missions led to sustained discussions on how to professionalize and streamline standard operating procedures and support processes for

civilian crisis management. However, the positive momentum for adaptation and reform on the basis of growing mission experiences came at the price of neglecting the strategic objectives. Simultaneously, bureaucratic turf wars between the Council of Ministers and the European Commission frustrated cases where the inherent content and programme of civilian missions could become the subject of discussion. Last but not least, the Civilian Headline Goal, which mostly focused on operational aspects of training and deployment, illustrated that expert networks alone were insufficient to make a difference across the EU multilevel political system.

3.4. Building the infrastructure and process for regular organisational learning (2007-9)

In early 2007 the head to the EU Aceh mission commissioned a concluding report (Council of the EU 2007b). The report raised again the problems of planning and deployment and urged the creation of more integrated headquarter structures in Brussels. While after action reviews and missions reports had been a regular feature of EU civilian crisis management, this report attracted an unprecedented amount of interest. This was both due to the increasingly receptive climate outlined above and the fact that Feith had been a highly respected official in Brussels and a close associate of Javier Solana, the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy. This underlines the importance of personal leadership for intra-organisational advocacy to achieve learning and reform.

At the same time, a new level of mission requirements added to the pressure for the reform. The dangerous police mission in Afghanistan and the impending launch of the biggest ever EU police and justice mission in Kosovo (EULEX KOSOVO), which was complicated by

complex political and practical negotiations with the UN as well as local actors (Dijkstra 2011), preoccupied senior leadership. This coincided with the six-monthly rotating EU presidency of Germany, which had a particularly strong interest in both Kosovo – as many refugees had come to Germany – and Afghanistan, where a previous national police mission had become too costly and risky (Zehetner 2007). To support the transformation of the German police mission into a full EU mission, national experts designed an informal planning system for improving planning and logistics, the so-called “traffic lights paper”.

Soon after, changes at the strategic and institutional level followed. First, an agreement was concluded to allow more flexible funding mechanisms for missions (Council of the EU 2007b), which took on the recurrent criticisms of extensive delays in procurement and planning processes. Previously, the financing of civilian crisis management missions via the EU budget initially led to a strict application of Union procedures for tendering and accounting, which proved far too slow and rigid for quick decision-making and the fragile local environment in post-Conflict states.

Secondly, the German Presidency oversaw the creation of the so-called Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC) within the Council Secretariat, which approximately tripled the number of administrative staff in Brussels for the operational management of civilian missions. Such a headquarter capacity had been debated ever since 2006 and could built on a rudimentary civil-military planning cell that had been established in the EU military staff (Hynek 2011), but could not be realised earlier during an long-standing political debate between France and the UK over the trajectory the ESDP – essentially, the UK hoped to avoid the creation of further capacities in Brussels due its traditional support for NATO, while France aimed for the creation of a strong military headquarter and considered the further

development civilian crisis management as a diversion. The German compromise consisted in convincing the UK of the low-profile nature of the CPCC, whereas France could be satisfied with the quasi-military structures of the CPCC, which could serve as a building block for the future creation of an integrated civil-military headquarter.

As a result, the CPCC would establish a formal chain of command over existing civilian operations, which could be compared to military structures, but also insert more civilian instruments for mission management. Following wider trends, the new regular oversight functions were conceived on the basis of models from New Public Management (such as regular “business plans”, “management reviews” and formalised audit procedures).

Decreasing flexibility and formalising reporting structures constrained open-ended discussions on mission deficits. On a positive note, however, it decreased the risk of information loss due to staff turnover or shortage of attention in Brussels. Already a few months before, the EU Military Staff established a formal Lessons-learned process in emulation of NATO practice Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (Council of the EU 2007c). In particular, this concerned the use of software tool and an IT knowledge management structure for a consistent capture and follow-up process of “lessons”.

Eventually, these increasingly formalised management processes led to discussions on how to develop a more ‘consistent’ architecture for lesson learning in civilian crisis management (Council of the European Union 2008a). At an informal level, officials in the Council Secretariat had sought to bypass the new formal reporting lines to the CPCC and sent out more thematic questionnaires and checklists to missions. This could be considered as a rare case when bureaucratic turf wars promoted rather than inhibiting learning processes. Soon after, this developed in a fully-fledged conceptual document that set out the advantages of a

formalised knowledge-management and lessons-learning processes (Council of the European Union 2008b). The ambition was to “introduce a culture of continuous improvement of practice reflecting the high political ambition of ESDP...while at the same time maintaining a light and flexible structure” (ibid, p.2).

The initiative consisted of three important components. First, it proposed to institute best practice units across all missions. These units could not only dedicate more attention to analysis, but also be utilised as channels for dissemination. Second, administrators in Brussels should draw up more thematic than mission-specific reports, which should facilitate the implementation of new recommendations at the strategic level. Third, it envisaged the creation of IT structures for knowledge management, the designation of “action officers” for particular lessons, an increasing linkage to training efforts and the promotion of communities of practice.

In light of the theoretical factors that are expected to promote organisational learning, these investments in different aspects and stages of the organisational learning cycle could only be welcomed. However, due to renewed political bargaining between the largest EU member states (over the staffing of the CPCC and the implications of the impending ratifications of the Lisbon Treaty) it took another year before Sweden – a traditional supporter of purely civilian operations (Lee-Ohlsson 2009) – would follow up on the suggestions for improved lessons-learning during its six-monthly EU Presidency.

As a first step, leading officials that worked on the Civilian Headline Goal created a new website that listed all ESDP-related conceptual documents and available training programmes to streamline training and recruitment processes (the so-called GOALKEEPER and

GOVERNOR system). These IT-based structures for improved knowledge and resource management drew inspiration from existing practice in the UN and in some European states (ZIF 2009) and underlined the move from general conceptual inspiration, as in the early phase of ESDP, to detailed attention to the ‘nuts and bolts’ of operational practice. On this basis, the Council (2009a) renewed their pledge to modernise their deployment systems and to meet the growing shortfalls of personnel in civilian missions.

Moreover, the Swedish Presidency invited members of EULEX Kosovo and other external experts to revise the EU’s concept for police advisory missions (Council of the European Union 2009b). This represented the first instance in EU civilian crisis management experience, when conceptual rather than operational guidance documents were reviewed and significantly extended in light of substantial field experience. The revised concept included a new system for benchmarking and programmatic planning that had been developing over the years in Western Balkan missions. A handful of staff that had participated in the internal reform process of EUPOL PROXIMA and then transferred to the EU mission in Kosovo had independently drawn up this system. At the strategic level, this example speaks of a growing interest to decrease the distance between headquarters and field level operations, which is critical to ensure adequate information flows and capture of experience.

The Swedish Presidency concluded with a first ‘annual lessons learned report’, which sought to enact the recommendations for a more structured lessons-learned process (Council of the EU 2009c). The report prioritised six points, namely 1) strategic political planning 2) improved mission support 3) revision of conceptual documents 4) pursuit of ‘horizontal lessons’ such as gender and human rights promotion 5) the insertion of lessons-learning sections in all periodic mission reports and 6) the creation of IT structures for lesson storage.

This comprehensive list of factors shows that the drafters of the report within the Council Secretariat remained sensitive to critical information, which accumulated since the first days of civilian crisis missions. This sensitivity should not be taken for granted, as the growing operational experience of ESDP actors could also have led to the attitude that a glaring mission failure had been avoided and that rigorous critique were not necessary. So even though the first lessons learned report defended the achievements and dynamic growth of EU civilian crisis management, the lessons learned report reflected almost issues and critiques that had been raised by external analysts (with the exception of radical viewpoints that question the possibility of successful and legitimate external interventions (see first part)). The document also transcended the division between single- and double-loop learning, as the importance of better mission objectives and overlapping EU political strategies was highlighted along various operational obstacles to mission deployment. In addition, it included aspects of ‘triple-loop’ learning, i.e. the creation of structures that improve the likelihood of (but do not determine) successful organisational learning, such as dedicated IT systems.

3.5. Stagnation during a period of institutional transformation (2010 onwards)

One could assume that by 2010, EU civilian crisis management would enter a period of fruition and increasingly successful learning. The expansion of manpower via the CPCC and the more structured review and reporting process led to an increasingly coherent body of information, while the annual lessons-learned report should also attract sufficient attention among senior political actors to promote further organisational reform. However, due to

further political constraints and underlying resource conflicts, a genuine breakthrough and completion of new learning cycles was not forthcoming.

In Brussels, the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) proved more difficult and cumbersome than initially expected. Even though the creation of an integrated Civil-Military Planning Directorate, which should integrate civilian and military officials in the Council Secretariat, had already been decided in 2008 (under the French Presidency), its precise organisational form, location within the new EEAS, and staffing balance was open to question. Civilian officials largely worried about losing weight and expertise in the context of an 'integrated' chain of command that would put military experts on top (Hynek 2011). Moreover, repeated rounds of organisational reform and reshuffling, which started with the creation of the CPCC in 2008, ran the risk of disrupting organisational memory and of accelerating the high turn-over of seconded experts for civilian crisis management. This was accentuated by the leadership of the new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Baroness Ashton. Whereas the first incumbent, Javier Solana, had personally advanced the ESDP (Kurowska 2009), Baroness Ashton was faced with an increasingly complex and challenging array of responsibilities due to her simultaneously (double-hatted) position as Vice-President of the European Commission. Aside from the political debate on her profile and qualifications (e.g. EUobserver 2011), this resulted in a loss of focus on, and high-level advocacy for, the reforms of EU external missions and its supporting institutional and conceptual apparatus. Last but not least, the global financial crisis - and the resulting resurgence of discourses on divergent national interests of EU member states - contributed to a widely-shared perception of stagnation in the EU's foreign policy ambitions.

Thus, it did not come as a surprise that the second annual lessons learned report by late 2010 (Council 2010) was to repeat the need to move from problem identification to more reliable and consistent implementation of lessons. While it noted an improvement in training and deployment mechanisms for civilian crisis management in some EU member states (where national training and deployment plans were gradually put into place as demanded), the lack of integrated political strategies and further conceptual revision or development remained as acute as ever. Sheer numbers of deployed personnel were also consistently falling short of political commitments. And further as well as rigorous learning cycles remained hampered by a lack of frameworks and processes for impact-oriented and long-term assessment of missions – i.e. their effect on host societies –, whereas previous mission reporting mostly focused on EU-internal processes for mission management.

This lack of political impact of the annual report led to its disappearance in 2011, when administrators reverted to lower level reform processes with regard to training plans for deployed personnel or for incremental capacity building (Council 2011b). Another less sensitive area for reform concerned the interaction between EU and UN peace operations (Council 2011c), as improvements in interorganisational cooperation procedures did not impinge directly on EU-internal structures and commitments for civilian crisis management.

At the time of writing, it therefore seems that organisational learning processes have hit a political impasse. Whereas initial steps of the organisational learning cycle, such as knowledge acquisition and dissemination have been tackled increasingly successfully and led to partial reforms in the EU's structures and processes for civilian crisis management, it is now increasingly down to political leadership to mobilise more resources and momentum for implementing more challenging 'lessons', such as the need for more integrated political

strategies or to narrow the persistent ‘deployment gap’ in civilian operations. It may be the case that new space for internal learning and reform will arise, when the EEAS has settled as an institutional structure and mid-level leadership could develop the necessary expertise and authority for more ambitious reforms.

4. Conclusions

This survey of learning processes over the previous decade demonstrated that the EU has been reasonably adept to handle the dynamics growth of operational demands and challenges in its international crisis management. One can point to numerous instances whereby the EU managed to address a number of logistical and technical problems in the planning and launch of missions. This was achieved by ad hoc processes that were driven by personal networks of the first wave of practitioners, the intermittent support of different member states as EU presidencies and leading figures in the Council Secretariat.

However, the information generating and review process has, for a long time, been overly driven by urgent operational pressures from a proliferating number of missions. Forward-looking scenario building and thematic reviews have not attracted sufficient political advocacy and interest. Whereas various contextual factors, such as external knowledge networks or turf wars, have played varying inhibiting and facilitating roles at different points in time, sustained political leadership is certainly critical to conclude more demanding reform processes in EU civilian crisis management. With increasing experience of the new EEAS and its leadership personnel, this may be forthcoming and needs to be tracked by further research. The persistent danger of a mission failure and increasing resource constraints on EU civilian

crisis management certainly merit a continued engagement with the official discourse on lesson learning.

On a theoretical level, the case study of EU civilian crisis management demonstrated both the utility of an organisational learning perspective to complex international organisations and problem areas. The heuristic analytical framework that emphasised formal organisational processes and various contextual factors that condition learning processes provided a useful orientation for the complexity of the case study. Furthermore, the empirical analysis underlines the benefits of a long-term approach to organizational learning. While the empirical discussion had to paint a broad-brush picture of a decade of political and administrative developments, such a time-frame is arguably necessary to assess transformation processes in international organizations. Detailed studies of single crises and organizational learning (failures) can provide further theoretical insights, but run the risk of losing long-term political and bureaucratic developments out of sight. The long term view on EU civilian crisis management may raise new questions about the use and necessity of centralization and hierarchical control to avoid information loss over highly diverse theatres of operation.

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