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Studying the International Crisis Group

Berit Bliesemann de Guevara

[8,898 words]

This special issue studies the International Crisis Group (ICG), one of the most notable and widely referenced producers of knowledge about conflict areas used extensively by policy-makers, the media and academics. The authors take different theoretical and methodological approaches to make sense of this hard-to-ignore conflict expert, exploring the ICG's daily operations and role in international politics. This introduction sets the scene by offering a critical exploration of the organisation and its approach to the construction of political knowledge. It analyses the ICG's position in the conflict-related knowledge market and the sources of its expert authority. The article then discusses the organisation's roles – from mediation to instrumentalisation – in the 'battlefield of ideas' in conflict and intervention contexts and its possibilities for impact on policy framings and outcomes. It shows that studies of the ICG need to 'unpack' the organisation in order to account for it as both a highly successful international expert brand and a very heterogeneous actor in specific contexts/at specific times.

Keywords: International Crisis Group (ICG); political knowledge; expert authority; conflict; intervention; crisis; advocacy; symbolic capital

Introduction

This issue of *Third World Quarterly* is dedicated to the study of one of the most notable and widely referenced producers of knowledge about conflict areas used extensively by policy-makers, the media and academics: the *International Crisis Group* (ICG). Policy-relevant 'conflict knowledge' is produced and distributed by many actors. These include state ministries and (intelligence) agencies, international organisations' lessons learnt units, branch offices and field missions, fact-finding missions, contracted consultants, NGOs working in conflict areas, and traditional and new media, to name just some of the more prominent ones. While being just one voice in this mixed choir of conflict-related knowledge producers, the

ICG is without question one that has very influential listeners. Founded in 1995 as ‘an independent organisation that would serve as the world’s eyes and ears on the ground in countries in conflict while pressing for immediate action’¹, the ICG is a paramount example of a highly visible, vocal, hard-to-ignore conflict expert.

In a 2013 global think tank ranking, the ICG is sixth among top think tanks in Western Europe,² and tenth among non-US think tanks worldwide, with the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (no. 3) and the International Institute for Strategic Studies (no. 4) being the only war-related think tanks ahead of it.³ In the combined list of US and non-US top think tanks, the ICG ranks sixteenth, now additionally outranked by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (no. 3) and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (no. 15).⁴

The ICG describes itself on its website as ‘an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation committed to preventing and resolving deadly conflict’. Currently, it is ‘covering some 70 areas of actual or potential conflict (through analysts operating from regional or field bases, or consultants)’⁵. In addition to its Brussels headquarters, ‘the organisation has offices or representation in 34 locations: Abuja, Bangkok, Beijing, Beirut, Bishkek, Bogotá, Bujumbura, Cairo, Dakar, Damascus, Dubai, Gaza, Guatemala City, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jakarta, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Kabul, Kathmandu, London, Moscow, Nairobi, New York, Port-au-Prince, Pristina, Rabat, Sanaa, Sarajevo, Seoul, Tbilisi, Tripoli, Tunis and Washington DC’ – with Brussels, New York, Washington, London, Moscow and Beijing serving as advocacy offices. In total, the ICG employs ‘[s]ome 130 permanent staff worldwide, from 53 nationalities speaking 50 languages’.⁶ ICG reports and briefings are known to be timely, detailed and useful, and their generally good reputation among the policy community is based on their perceived accuracy, insight and objectivity.⁷ ICG reports claim, and are perceived, to represent ‘authentic’ knowledge about conflicts (cf. Bøås in this issue). Or as the ICG words it on its website, the organisation plays a key role by ‘[p]roviding objective analysis and detailed actor mapping unobtainable elsewhere on developments regarding conflict, mass violence and terrorism’.

The ICG aims at exerting influence on agenda setting, policy-making and policy implementation in post-/conflict areas. It does so not only by providing policy-makers with information in the form of detailed analyses and early warning alerts and publishing widely through traditional and electronic media. Importantly, the organisation lobbies more directly for certain agendas and policies. According to its website, it ‘[c]onducts some 5,000 advocacy meetings with policymakers and other decision-makers’ per year.⁸ In the eyes of

peers and experts, the ICG's advocacy efforts seem to pay off: the think tank report ranks the ICG eighth for best advocacy campaign.⁹ The ICG attributes its influence on policy-makers to 'key roles being played by senior staff highly experienced in government and by an active Board of Trustees'¹⁰, whose composition of former high-level statespersons and other influential personalities resembles a 'who's who of influential power brokers' in international politics, as a 2005 Time Asia article described it.

The ICG's more general information dissemination strategies and media lobbying campaigns aim at raising awareness about emerging wars, on-going conflicts and areas forgotten by the 'international community'. Especially in cases where the ICG has been among the first vocal experts reporting on a conflict, it is highly plausible that the organisation has had some influence on how these conflicts have been labelled and framed (see Simons and Bøås in this issue). The ICG claims on its website that every year it '[p]ublishes around 90 reports and briefings, containing between them some 800 separate policy recommendations', with '[o]ver 159,000 people subscribing online to receive reports' and 132,000 receiving the monthly *CrisisWatch* bulletin; it '[a]uthors more than 200 opinion pieces in major international newspapers, with nearly half in languages other than English'; and it '[g]arners more than 5,000 media mentions in print and electronic media'. The organization is also present on Facebook (nearly 40,000 'likes' in March 2014) and Twitter (over 70,000 followers). Overall, the ICG's media efforts are judged by peers and experts as quite successful: among all global think tanks it is ranked twelfth for 'best use of social networks', fourteenth for 'best external relations/public engagement programme', fifteenth for 'best use of the media (print or electronic)', and twenty-third for 'best use of the Internet'.¹¹

In view of its presence in and possible influence on policy circles, media and academia, it is surprising that the ICG has not gained more attention as an object of study.¹² Apart from the selected information that the ICG itself provides about its organisational development and political role, we know little about how the organisation works. This pertains, first, to its daily operations: How is information gathered and interpreted? Who takes part and decides in the process from report drafting to final product to policy recommendations? And which quality controls exist? Second, we also know very little about the ICG's role in international politics, about its 'impact' on political perceptions, processes and outcomes: How did the organisation establish (the perception of) itself as a central 'conflict expert' in the field of conflict-related policy knowledge? In how far has ICG-produced knowledge shaped the perceptions of conflicts and legitimate solutions? Which

formal and informal relations exist between ICG experts, local stakeholders and international decision-makers? And what role has the organisation (or its representatives) played in conflicts and peacebuilding processes?

The fact that we have only few answers to these questions to date and that academics using ICG reports have not even asked them in the first place,¹³ hints at a lack of critical engagement with this central actor in the field of conflict-related knowledge production and policy-making. Aiming to fill this void, the contributions in this issue are first attempts at answering questions and opening up routes for further study.

The ICG and the construction of ‘conflict knowledge’

Politically relevant knowledge is understood here as socially constructed in power struggles between actors resorting to specific technologies and bound together through the structures of the policy field. Politics can thus not be seen as having one specific ‘reality’; rather, ‘[t]he reality of politics is a politics with “realities”’.¹⁴ From this perspective, (the construction of) knowledge is both object and resource of political power struggles.

Political struggles over the construction of reality can be observed, on the one hand, with regard to *descriptive-ontological knowledge* about how the world is, was or will be.¹⁵ *Knowledge about the past* interprets bygone political events and experiences and constructs causal relationships with the present. In the context of this study, this rather persistent form of knowledge concerns, for example, how international policy-makers interpret a conflict area’s colonial past and its meaning for the current situation. The ICG ventured into this type of knowledge in 2005 by announcing a new type of publication, the ‘background report’, whose function would be ‘scene-setting reports, not focused on detailed recommendations though often indicating preferred directions, 10-50 pages as the subject matter demands’. However, not many of these reports have been produced since. The general lack of historical and socio-economic context analysis is one major critique of the ICG’s work by the wider academic community and many of the authors in this special issue (see especially contributions by Bøås, Grigat, Hochmüller and Müller, and Koddenbrock).

Knowledge about the future revolves around practices like simulations, prognoses, risk analyses and probability measurements regarding politically relevant events in the future and how they are related to present action. The most obvious example in the present context is early warning mechanisms, which assess situations of latent or acute conflict based on

qualitative and/or quantitative models of data collection¹⁶ and analysis and make predictions about potential deterioration, stagnation or improvement. The ICG provides such knowledge through its *CrisisWatch* bulletin, a monthly publication giving brief estimations of conflict situations, alerting to ‘conflict risk’, pointing out ‘conflict resolution opportunities’, and labelling conflict situations as ‘improved’ or ‘deteriorated’ (see Kosmatopoulos and Simons in this issue). ‘Conflict risk alerts’ are a second way in which future-related appraisals of political events are delivered, highlighting stirred-up political situations that might lapse into more widespread violent conflict. Both *CrisisWatch* and risk alerts are condensed forms of conflict evaluation and offer little or no space for detailed analysis – a problem indeed acknowledged by some ICG staff:

In fact, this format is, in my experience, not favorably looked upon by researchers ‘in the field’, as they give much more value to the detailed, more qualified and less rigid perspectives offered in ICG’s full length reports. For that reason, and when I was researcher [...], I barely worked on these *CrisisWatch* reports and merely had a glance at them after they were prepared by someone browsing the media in Brussels to make sure there wasn’t anything evidently incorrect.¹⁷

Future research should assess how policy-makers and journalists, at which these early warning products are aimed, make use of and perceive these brief tendency indicators – i.e. whether they are seen merely as ‘press clippings’ from a non-profit information provider or whether the (perceived) authority of the authoring organisation attaches specific value or meaning to these products, and if so, with which effects (see further Kosmatopoulos in this issue).¹⁸

Knowledge about the present, finally, includes all statements about functional or causal relationships, causal determinisms, necessity constructions, interests and expertise revolving around a current political issue. How a current situation – in this case, in a violent conflict or post-conflict space – is interpreted, determines the repertoire of legitimate action and ‘solutions’¹⁹. While established knowledge about causal relationships, determinisms and necessity constructions tends to lead to closure and thus the reduction of alternatives for political action, new interpretations, not least through highly regarded expert knowledge, can open up space for differing policy options.²⁰ ICG reports and briefings as well as op-eds and other media pieces authored by ICG representatives are mostly concerned with this sort of

knowledge, analysing and giving policy recommendations about immediate political situations to which their reporting attaches some urgency (see Simons in this issue).

The other main instrument and object of knowledge constructions in political struggles apart from ontological knowledge is *normative-practical knowledge*, which determines what actors want to do (wishes, interests, passions, preferences etc.), must do (imperatives, duties, stringent necessities etc.), or should do (norms, conventions, traditions, moral or ethical considerations etc.).²¹ When it comes to the policy recommendations in ICG reports, normative-practical knowledge is used to derive prescriptions for concrete political action from the conflict analysis. Especially where the connection between a report's analysis and its policy recommendations is not straightforward, a possible explanation is that (implicit) normative-practical knowledge trumped descriptive-ontological interpretation.

Indeed, it is an oft-heard complaint among academics that ICG policy recommendations seem 'decoupled' from the analytical parts of the reports: while analyses account for political paradoxes and dilemmas, the recommendations are rather complexity reducing and formulaic. Grigat (in this issue), for instance, shows that in the case of Indonesia 'the ICG mantra-like recommends measures to reform the security sector, notably the police', no matter which issue it has been reporting about over the last 15 years. Drawing on Foucaultian notions of power/knowledge, Grigat's explanation for this finding is that

ICG reporting fulfils a function that transcends the immediate contribution to preventing and resolving violent conflicts. ICG publications essentially aim at discursively disciplining their audience through practices and procedures characteristic of liberal governance into this specific form of social action and corresponding mind-sets, thus perpetuating liberalism as the global "regime of power".

In this interpretation of ICG reporting as education, the normative dimension of knowledge production clearly outweighs other dimensions. Another explanation for disconnects between analysis and policy recommendations lies in the interest of think tanks to secure access to and influence on policy-makers, which can only be achieved through information and policy advice that is 'useful' in the eyes of the users. As Fisher (in this issue) shows in the case of Uganda, the urge to have 'impact' may well trump conclusions derived from previous analysis, if this helps finding a sympathetic ear among, and access to, policy-

makers (cf. also Koddenbrock on the DR Congo, and Bliesemann de Guevara for a more general discussion, both in this issue).

Nullmeier and Rüb have suggested understanding the struggles over these different forms of knowledge in the construction of political realities in terms of sectoral ‘knowledge markets’, in which different suppliers of knowledge compete with each other, sometimes forming oligopolies, sometimes even creating a knowledge monopoly.²² From such a market perspective, politically relevant knowledge production is seen not as ‘problem-oriented’ but as ‘success-oriented’: knowledge ‘must be “marketable”, that is, it must be able to compete with other knowledge stocks. The design, marketing strategies, the knowledge management and the emotionality related to the product knowledge play an important role in this.’²³ Knowledge entrepreneurs are strategic actors in knowledge markets who stand out due to their success in acquiring a prominent, influential position. From the ICG’s (self-)description above it can be derived that the organisation has managed to establish itself as such a knowledge entrepreneur in the market of conflict/violence-related knowledge. One central question is how it has succeeded to do so.

Constructing ‘expert authority’: conflict-related knowledge production as social field

The idea of knowledge markets resembles Bourdieu’s social fields, where actors in different social positions and disposing of different sorts and amounts of capital struggle for influence according to the field’s specific rules of the game.²⁴ Capital in Bourdieu’s sense is not only economic or monetary in form; it can also be social (e.g. connections, networks), cultural (e.g. education, titles) or symbolic (specifically value-laden forms of the economic, social or cultural capital). Being seen as knowledge entrepreneur, that is, as a leading knowledge provider in a specific knowledge market, is a manifestation of symbolic capital. The currency value and exchange rates of the capital in a social field depend on its specific rules, and while it is not impossible for actors to change them in the long run, the normal situation is that both access to and accession within a field are very much determined by existing rules.

The ICG’s self-description hints at the capital forms with the highest value in the field of conflict-related knowledge production: social and, to a lesser extent, cultural capital. While the organisation’s funding base is arguably not negligible with an ‘annual budget for 2012-2013 [of] \$20.6 million’ according to its website, it is small when compared, for instance, to the research budgets of western governments’ ministries and agencies. For instance, the

British development agency ‘DfID’s Research and Evidence Division spends just under 10% of its total research expenditure on governance, conflict and social development, and for 2014/15 this is projected to be around £29 million’.²⁵ It is thus not the amount of economic capital through which the ICG gains its position in the field of conflict knowledge, although money is arguably a necessary condition for its activities and fundraising thus a constant factor in its daily operations and public relations.

Critics have argued that it is not the amount but the sources of the ICG’s funding which have opened western policy-makers’ doors for its advocacy, while at the same time (possibly) compromising the ICG’s political independence.²⁶ The organisation’s funding ‘comes from governments (49%), institutional foundations (20%), and individual and corporate donors (31%)’, but as the ICG stresses on its website, ‘mostly in the welcome form of core funding (over 70%) rather than being earmarked for specific programs’. The governmental donors exclusively comprise development agencies and ministries of foreign affairs of OECD countries. The list of corporate private sector donors includes big multinationals, business consultancies, legal advisors and investment managers, and among the foundations making donations are well-known names such as Carnegie Corporation, George Soros’s Open Society Foundations and Rockefeller Brothers Fund.²⁷ Being a western think tank aiming at a western/international policy audience, the funding structure may not come as a surprise, however, and the ICG has countered the critique of possible donor influences by pointing to the diversity of funding sources and attached interests among western donors, which at least contradicts the idea of simple, straightforward connections between donors and reporting.²⁸

The most outstanding form of capital valued in the field of conflict-related knowledge production, however, is social capital – both with regard to contacts ‘on the ground’ in post-/conflict spaces, which are necessary to gather information, as well as regarding high-level contacts in the ‘highest echelons’ of decision-making, which ensure the possibility of influence and impact. In the ICG’s narrative, this is what differentiates the organisation from standard western think tanks, which lack the permanent field presence that forms a cornerstone of the ‘ICG methodology’. Or as a former field-based ICG analyst puts it, stressing the importance of field presence in terms of symbolic capital:

ICG presents itself as unlike “armchair” think tanks in DC and other Western capitals by way of its presence in “the field”. [...] [T]his needs to be emphasized as it leads (policy) audiences to attribute (rightly or wrongly) much more authority to ICG’s

reports than to others'. This way ICG's reports can be viewed as a tool in (western) foreign policy bureaucracies' internal debates and competition over conflicting policy views.²⁹

Permanent field presence is also claimed to make the ICG superior to reporting by traditional media outlets, which lack the means to deploy/contract journalists in crisis areas all over the world and especially to cover conflicts over an extended period of time.³⁰

With regard to high-level political contacts, the ICG profits from its staff's previous and/or subsequent jobs. The analysis of 74 LinkedIn profiles of former and current ICG staff revealed that 33 individuals working for the ICG had also worked for at least one other NGO, 16 for an international organisation (predominantly UN bodies, but also NATO and OSCE), 16 in the private sector, 14 in the media sector, and 12 for state institutions and agencies.³¹ The job profiles suggest ICG staff's membership in broader professional networks of the western/international policy community that can be activated if needed. The other main channel of contacts is the ICG's already mentioned Board of Trustees, comprising a number of prominent former statespersons.

In addition to, or despite of, its heavy reliance on its social capital, the ICG is also eager to stress its organisational 'independence' and the 'objectivity' of its reports. This is where the importance of cultural capital comes into the picture. Although emphasizing its own advocacy capacity, the organization distances itself from other advocacy organisations, especially explicitly norm-based NGOs like Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International.³² The ICG furthermore stresses the 'expert' character of its staff and the 'research' character of their field activities, thus making use of the cultural capital that dominates the field of academia. Unsurprisingly, ICG analysts usually have a university education. In addition, 22 out of the 74 ICG staff whose LinkedIn profiles were analysed for this research have also held professional positions in academia in the course of their career. At the same time, however, the ICG makes clear that its field-based research and analysis is better than that of academics, by being a 'unique combination of field-based analysis, practical policy prescriptions and high-level advocacy', the latter two aspects of which are often lacking in politics-related academic knowledge production.³³

Some have argued that the sole concentration on human action and interaction in a social field is too narrow to fully explain its dynamics, and that technologies – in this case the ICG's different report formats – may also gain a sort of actor quality. In this sense, Kosmatopoulos (in this issue) argues with regard to the 'crisis report' that, in order to explore

‘the dialectics of enchantment of crisis experts’, it is necessary to look ‘at the world of experts through the lens of techno-politics’, because technologies and sovereign actors ‘stand in dialectic and intertwined relationship with each other, through which one might influence the other rather than having a unilateral direction of causality that emanates from humans and ends in their non-human products’. Through such technologies – for instance, the ‘size, scale and sentinel’ of the crisis report –, the ‘report presents itself as an assemblage of a series of technical characteristics that help to shrink the world at large and make it fit into the model format of the crisis expert’, an effect on knowledge production that also needs to be accounted for.

That the ICG is currently ranked among the world’s top think tanks is not, however, predominantly a reflection of its ‘real’ success in ‘working to prevent conflict worldwide’ or some sort of ‘objective usefulness’ of its reports to western/international policy circles. Rather, it testifies to the organisation’s success in accumulating symbolic capital – above all expert authority – that differentiates it from similar organisations and elevates it in the perception of peers, policy-makers and public. Its field presence is a crucial aspect of the ICG’s practices and image in this respect, as it makes the organisation stand out among its ‘armchair’ competitors.

The other major contribution to the ICG’s symbolic value charging is its Board of Trustees. Although the role of most board members can hardly be called active,³⁴ the impressive list of names and functions as such already lends importance to the organisation: the board comprises ‘two former prime ministers, two former presidents, eight former foreign ministers, one former European Commissioner, one Nobel Peace Prize winner and many other leaders from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media’³⁵. The board is predominantly (yet not exclusively) a male affair, with only one quarter female members. The age distribution further contributes to the impression of a ‘council of wise old men’,³⁶ with the majority of members between 61-70 years old, followed by the 71-80 and 51-60 years brackets. At the time of analysis, the youngest member was 43, the oldest, ICG co-founder George Soros, 82. The board is also a ‘club of the wealthy’: 28 members come from high-income OECD countries and only nine, seven and two members from high middle-income, low middle-income and low-income countries respectively.³⁷ Taken together, the board symbolises international power and influence, lending weight to the ICG’s work.³⁸

While not part of the everyday workings, at times the role of the board can be more active and influential, as a former ICG researcher describes:

For one, the board members' interference and say in the reports is not even and clear-cut, and in many cases does not materialize at all. Yet with regards to reports involving topics of high western policy concern [...], there *is* such interference. The [country] report – to which I contributed – is a good (but exaggerated) example; its original draft argued against [a specific policy], after which the Board disagreed so strongly that the report was watered down, while inviting the reader to derive his/her own policy conclusions.³⁹

Reports without (or with only vague) policy recommendations for international action hint at strong disagreements among, and interference of, board members; tracing such reports may allow some insight into the internal power relationships between and among the organisation's staff and its directorate.⁴⁰

In addition to its field presence and its Board of Trustees, many ICG actions – from the type, amount and frequency of its information products and advocacy campaigns to the countries and political events covered and policy recommendations given – can be read as attempts to maintain or enhance its symbolic capital/expert authority. For instance, Hochmüller and Müller (in this issue) argue that the ICG's decision to cover the 'drug war' in Mexico can be explained by the organisation's need to position itself in the international competition over policy knowledge.

As shown, employing Bourdieu's field theory can help mapping the social field of conflict-related knowledge production and explain the accumulation of symbolic capital among a western (policy) audience.

Between mediation and instrumentalisation: conflict experts in the 'battlefield of ideas'

A central question with regard to conflict-related knowledge production concerns the role of violence. The economic language of 'knowledge markets', employed to describe competition over legitimate problem interpretations, resembles the debates of the late 1990s about wars as 'markets of violence'. Early promoters of the concept defined a market of violence as a conflict dominated by economic motives and material profits, contributing to the complexity-reducing view of modern civil wars as driven by 'greed and grievance' (cf. Bøås in this issue for a critique). The general observation, however, that violent actors are also economic players was also taken up by more nuanced works, which stressed the *political causes* of

violent conflict, while at the same time highlighting the role of *economic* factors in conflict *dynamics*. The literature specifically highlighted the ambiguous role of international actors such as humanitarian aid agencies, which while trying to alleviate the needs of populations in war zones simultaneously became part of violent actors' economic, war-prolonging calculations.⁴¹

Analogously, it can be argued that knowledge experts are far from being the objective, outside observers with insider contacts that their self-description would want us believe. The ICG describes its field presence in terms, which imply the possibility of an independent outsider position for analysts looking at clearly identifiable problems:

Our analysts are based in or near many of the world's trouble spots, where there is concern about the possible outbreak of conflict, its escalation or recurrence. Their main task is to find out what is happening and why. They identify the underlying political, social and economic factors creating conditions for conflict, as well as the more immediate causes of tension. They find the people who matter and discover what or who influences them.⁴²

From the perspective of ICG field analysts, the process of information gathering and report writing is more complicated, however, as they get entangled with their object of study: they become part of the political process, i.e. the battle of ideas organised around storylines that help actors with a wide range of interests to form discourse coalitions and establish a dominant reading of an event.⁴³ A former field analyst describes how important her role of information gathering and report writing was for actors in a specific peace process and how she became both the target of other actors' versions of the story and a mediator between different stories:

In the process, [...] I was accused of being close to people on the whole spectrum – from the [ethnic] rebels to the president of [the country], the whole spectrum of positions. [...] They instrumentalise. But at the same time they keep talking to me, because [...] all the people appreciate the fact that I am faithful to it [...]. You know, they got used to me, they got used to having a coffee or tea [...], they got used to me hanging out in or close to the negotiation room. They knew also that I had access to the other side, to all sides, so every party would talk to me [...], it was in their interest also to talk to me. [...] What they would do when an ICG report came out was to look at the report itself and then see whether their names were quoted and in what way they

were quoted. [...] And one of them said to me one time, it was an officer from the army, he said, “You know, so many times when I was at the officers’ mess, I was talking to colleagues and I was saying how we need another report from [her] because we are really lost right now”.⁴⁴

For this analyst, the positive aspects of being an active part of the knowledge production process on the ground clearly outweigh the negative sides of being part of political power struggles about framings of conflict and peace. Accordingly, she comes to a positive assessment of her overall role in the conflict space:

It was very gratifying, very gratifying to be part of something that at the end of the day went somewhere. [...]. I had a small role in it [...]. My reports made sense to [the people], they projected a certain analysis – right or wrong – of a process that for them was confusing [...]. They themselves were transforming, this country was transforming; they could not always understand what their own politicians had decided to do. And they were all really scared [due to the violent history of the country and the violence in neighbouring countries]. From that point of view, just to see how this process of talking and discussing and negotiating – and then the circulation of information to which I contributed – how it demystified some of these issues and at the end of the day helped create an atmosphere that was more conducive to political settlement, I witnessed it and it was an incredible experience [...].⁴⁵

There is no reason to doubt that experts’ work can have positive effects on peace processes, although a detailed study would be needed to reconstruct in how far this specific analyst contributed to the peace process by reducing informational uncertainty and co-writing a shared story.

The general perspective on knowledge as political power struggles introduced above, however, suggests that there is also another, less harmonious dimension to expert knowledge production. If struggles over knowledge determine which actors, claims and supporting narratives are seen as legitimate, then determining the process of knowledge production is likely to become the strategic goal of different actors involved. In the case of post-/conflict spaces⁴⁶, this may include the definition of what is seen as legitimate violence – be it in the form of blaming, scapegoating or victimising certain actors, or be it by providing arguments for/against an external (military) intervention (cf. Bøås, Fisher and Koddenbrock in this issue). Knowledge production can thus have severe consequences for the balance of power

between groups of actors: rather than being a market, it can become a ‘battlefield of ideas’ (Kostić in this issue), which may ultimately involve the threat or use of violence. And indeed, the analyst cited above received death threats, hinting at the importance that others attached to her role as knowledge producer (cf. also Grigat in this issue).

These observations raise important questions regarding the role of informants and ‘stakeholders’ in a post-/conflict space, who may well intend to steer or manipulate the process of knowledge production in their favour or for their purposes. Kostić (in this issue) points to the crucial role that knowledge experts’ belonging to socio-political actor networks plays in this regard. His analysis of ICG reporting in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that

the ICG’s work in the early 2000s in BiH was seemingly part of a broader knowledge production flex-network united by a common effort of promoting the position of the US Department of State. It seems to have consisted of US military and intelligence representatives [...], US diplomats [...], and ICG Balkans director James Lyons. Combining access to privileged micro-level information, analysis and internal policy debates among internationals allowed the ICG-linked *flexians* to cut through the international bureaucracy and connect different levels of international policy-making.

Kostić stresses the crucial necessity to account for the involvement of think tank experts in wider informal networks of collaboration and loyalty beyond their own organisation. These ‘flex networks’ may encompass international organisations, governments, academia and the media, who use experts’ services in a way that is reminiscent of the ‘revolving door’ effect: the movement of personnel between politics and economy, which may be questionable depending on whether and how it is regulated by formal as well as informal rules, norms and institutions. Contacts and shifting roles allow for insider information and a position in which the expert can be instrumental in streamlining policies in favour of certain allies.

Viewed in this way, the ICG staff’s contacts not only constitute the basis for the organisation’s political lobbying through access to policy-makers, but they actually represent a major power source for certain individuals to play a central part in the ‘battlefield of ideas’. This renders the ICG’s own image as ‘independent organisation’ and coherent actor an illusion. It also means that its role and influence in a specific context may well change over time, based on the shifting composition of staff and their networks. Finally, it shows the

necessity to account for the many roles the reports and representatives of the organisation may play in different settings.

Behind the logo: unpacking the ICG

As the discussion has shown, there is an urgent need to ‘unpack’ the ICG and analyse its workings and role on a micro- rather than a macro-level. The ICG is not a homogenous actor, and the question of how it produces its organisational brand, while at the same time being extremely heterogeneous in its role in specific contexts and at specific times, is but one of the puzzles that needs to be addressed.

The heterogeneity of its role in specific cases can be attributed, first, to the fact that its working contexts differ quite considerably, explaining why ICG reports evoke a loud echo in some cases while withering unheard in others. In Indonesia, for example, the ICG is highly visible through its advocacy work and national media coverage; however, the group is rather a sound provider of argumentative support for human rights activists, whereas Indonesian policy-making seems to reflect its analysis and recommendations to a negligible degree.⁴⁷ In West Africa, by contrast, ICG reports are not only widely read, but also carry the largest clout as compared to other knowledge producers. Next to policy-makers, academics read ICG analyses with considerable interest and make extensive use of them, even though at times they disagree with content, conclusions or recommendations.⁴⁸ In the DR Congo, too, the ICG plays an important role alongside the United Nations Group of Experts, which publishes intelligence reports bi-annually. Asked about which sources of information they often refer to, Western UN or NGO staff unanimously referred to the ICG as the most or second-most important source.⁴⁹ In Mexico, the ICG is a relative ‘newcomer’ among transnational NGOs working on (in)security problems. However, already during its first year, it was successful in interviewing politicians from all major parties of the highly factionalized and conflictive Mexican party landscape and had a visible presence in leading national newspapers and magazines. Its relevance is likely to increase with the opening of its Mexico City field office.⁵⁰ In Uganda, ICG reports have paid only limited attention to the on-going war against Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army in recent years. An advocacy-driven offshoot of the ICG, however, the *Enough* Project, has rapidly become a major source of influence over Washington policy-makers and played a role in persuading the Obama administration to

dispatch 100 US military advisers to central Africa to assist regional forces in hunting down Kony.⁵¹

A second dimension that needs unpacking concerns the relationship (and unquestioned dichotomy) between ‘the local’ and ‘the global’ in ICG expert knowledge production. By tendency, contributions in this issue focussing on report content come to the conclusion that ICG reporting plugs into, or is shaped by, dominant global discourses. Indeed, some of its reports cannot be explained but by an attempt to ride a wave, e.g. a short report series about Islam in Germany, France and the UK, which plugged into the ‘islamist threat’ discourse accompanying the global war on terrorism (cf. Kosmatopoulos in this issue).⁵² Such reports may be trial and error processes but also show the organisation’s high flexibility in adopting new themes – and letting them go if they do not evoke much resonance. Who takes the initiative in choosing a reporting topic or who engages in advocacy work within the ICG is not necessarily a matter of hierarchy or clear-cut roles, but depends on the conflict at hand and the individuals involved. As a former ICG analyst remembers regarding the role of ICG advocacy offices in western capitals:

I – and many of my colleagues with ICG at the time – didn’t take [ICG’s advocacy managers based in Western capitals that ‘matter’] very seriously unless a report that was supposed to be publicized was primarily directed at Western policy audiences. When that was not the case, I simply embarked on my own ad hoc ‘advocacy’ policy directed at local audiences, in [the country] and the region as a whole, by approaching my network of contacts, writing in the local [language] press and sending around ICG reports.⁵³

Third, as the contributions by Kostić, Fisher and Koddenbrock (in this issue) show, local power constellations (e.g. among the intervening agencies in Bosnia) or local agency (e.g. of the Ugandan and Congolese governments) should not be underestimated and need unpacking, too. An analytical focus on experts’ social networks and recipient countries’ governments and other national actors may, in some cases, well lead to other conclusions than a critical content analysis of ICG texts and their embedding into global discourses would allow. An important research task is thus to combine formal/informal network analysis with content analysis of expert reports and broader argumentative analysis around certain policy issues in order to understand the different dimensions of the process of knowledge production and the possible variety of messages and audiences.

Finally, analyses need to unpack shifts in the ICG's workings and influence over time. The most obvious shifts are those that can be traced back to personnel changes in the ICG Presidency, most notably the change from Gareth Evans (2000-2009) to Louise Arbour (2009-present). Not only the broad strategic focus has shifted since human rights expert Arbour took over; ICG staff also speak of a noticeable shift in internal leadership style.⁵⁴ Evans, former Australian Foreign Minister and co-chair of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, which coined the Responsibility to Protect concept, is described as a micro-manager involved in internal discussion from the early stages of reports. Louise Arbour, by contrast, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Justice of the Canadian Supreme Court and Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, is known to be less hands-on and more consultative, involving senior advisors at the Brussels office in final decisions. The idea of informal networks of knowledge experts and other relevant actors discussed above furthermore hints at a possible role that changes of personnel may play for the ICG's field presence, as different staff members can be part of different networks, thus either enforcing or weakening the overall role played by the ICG in each case.

Overstating impact? The ICG and global politics

A final important question concerns the possible and actual impact of conflict knowledge producers on policy processes. The ICG claims that,

Over the past eighteen years, Crisis Group's reports and the advocacy associated with them have had a significant direct impact on conflict prevention, management and resolution across the world. Crisis Group has been visible and effective in assisting policymakers determine how best to handle terrorism, nuclear proliferation, impunity for international crimes, trafficking in arms and drugs and other problems associated with fragile or conflict-prone states. Increasingly, high-level interlocutors tell Crisis Group that its work in support of international peace and security has become indispensable.⁵⁵

From the perspectives of knowledge production as competitive marketplace of ideas and contested social field, this 'impact statement' is not surprising. Stressing an

organisation's effectiveness and impact is a crucial form of marketing, positively affecting donor contributions and future potentials of being heard as 'expert', and 'having impact' and being endorsed for it by people with names and titles is yet another component contributing to symbolic capital. The impact statements in the ICG's annual reports have to be read accordingly. In these reports, the organisation summarises its main activities in different countries and reflects on the impact they had on policy-makers and stakeholders. In the 2006 annual report, for example, the ICG's impact on events in Kosovo were summarised as:

In January, Crisis Group launched a fresh advocacy campaign focusing on resolving Kosovo's final status, releasing a major report, *Kosovo: Toward Final Status*. U.S. officials engaged with Crisis Group on alternative policy options, and statements by the Contact Group and the EU in April, ruling out partition and union with any other state, lifted text directly from the report's recommendations. [...] The report had a tangible galvanising effect on the final status debate, with Belgrade reacting by recalibrating its position on the issue. The Contact Group's settlement parameters essentially reflect long-argued Crisis Group positions. [...] ⁵⁶

While it is not possible to say without further research whether the causal relations between ICG reporting and policy processes claimed here are correct, the way the group's 'impact' is presented leaves many questions unanswered. Apart from the broad consensus in the social sciences that impact measurement is among the most daunting, if not impossible tasks, owing to the complex nature of social interactions and their direct/indirect, intended/unintended repercussions and effects, the impact narrative above lacks evidence for some claims. That an idea was 'long-argued' by the ICG does not necessarily imply a causal relationship. Likewise, the text does not solve the 'hen and egg' problem attached to ideas and conflict reporting: while ICG reports diffuse certain ideas through reporting, the ideas themselves are gathered through talking to those involved in a fluid process – leaving the question of 'who invented them' open for interpretation. To some extent, the ICG has acknowledged this problem by regularly stating in its annual reports:

Measuring the progress of an organisation such as ICG [...] is inevitably an inexact science. Quantitative measures provide some sense of the level of activity of the organisation, and of others' response, but have their limitations. Qualitative judgements are necessarily subjective: it is difficult for anyone to establish a close

causal relationship between any given argument and outcome, particularly if the desired outcome is for something – here, conflict – not to happen.⁵⁷

It might be due to the missing links in the causal chains constructed in earlier impact statements that recent reports seem to be formulated more carefully, now only claiming that the ICG may determine through its reports and advocacy what policy-makers talk about, rather than claiming credit for the practical outcomes of these debates. In terms of influencing what policy-makers talk about, the ICG attributes its influence not least to sound and convincing arguments:

All too often the missing ingredient is the “political will” to take the necessary action. Crisis Group’s task is not to lament its absence but to work out how to mobilise it. That means persuading policy-makers directly or through others who influence them, not least the media. That in turn means having the right arguments: moral, political, legal and financial. And it means having the ability to effectively deploy those arguments, with people of the right credibility and capacity.⁵⁸

The emphasis on ‘the right arguments’, however, is as compelling as it is misleading. As policy analysts of the ‘argumentative turn’ have shown, arguments do not derive from facts or static positions; it is the argumentative interaction which forms discursive positions and discourse coalitions among a number of different actors who cluster around inter-subjectively constructed and agreed, but rather vague storylines.⁵⁹ This means that while the ICG can show that policy-makers and other actors pick up its reports, the organisation cannot influence how and for what ends the information, arguments and recommendations are used – a usage that might be quite contrary to the ICG’s intentions. Focusing on the EU’s use of expert knowledge, Boswell has shown, for instance, that expert knowledge can have three main functions. Next to the instrumental role of providing policy-makers with ‘facts’, it may serve two symbolic purposes:

The first of these is a *legitimizing* function. By being seen to draw on expert knowledge, an organization can enhance its legitimacy and bolster its claim to resources or jurisdiction over particular policy areas. In this sense knowledge can endow organizations with “epistemic authority”. The second is a *substantiating* function. Expert knowledge can lend authority to particular policy positions, helping to substantiate organizational preferences in cases of political contestation.⁶⁰

Waldman's findings from a study of the use of statebuilding research by British policy-makers based in Afghanistan, Nepal and Sierra Leone confirm these functions. The interviewed policy-makers stated that they often use research selectively to justify certain programmes (substantiating function) and as 'ammunition' in struggles within their own organisation or with other intervention agencies, as research 'can add weight, credibility and persuasiveness to support a line on a specific issue' (legitimacy function).⁶¹

Studies should therefore also focus on the ways in which ICG expert knowledge is taken up and transformed by its recipients to fit their purposes. As the contributions to this issue show, the possibilities for impact range widely from negligible to instrumental, depending on the respective context – and this can only be analysed through in-depth case studies. What seems clear, however, is that it would be misleading to sweepingly take the ICG's self-description of its important role in international policy-making at face value and overestimate its influence.

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Notes

¹ ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 10.

² McGann, *2013 Global Go To*, 47. For the ranking methodology see *Ibid.*, 11-16.

³ *Ibid.*, 27. Transparency International (no. 5) and Amnesty International (no. 7) may also count as ICG competitors in some respects; cf. *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴ *Ibid.* 30.

⁵ For the following statistics see ICG, *About*. The numbers on the ICG website are contradictory; elsewhere it

talks about ‘over 50 conflict and potential conflict situations’.

⁶ For a list of staff see <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/about/staff.aspx>.

⁷ A former UN assistant secretary-general and special adviser named three main information sources for staff in the UN Departments of Political Affairs and Peacekeeping Operations: international press clippings, UN mission reports, and ICG (plus other INGO) reports (interview, New York, March 2012). WikiLeaks cables suggest that ICG reports are widely read by US embassies. Cf. also endorsements by policy-makers: ICG, *About*.

⁸ WikiLeaks cables confirm that meetings between US embassies and ICG representatives take place frequently.

⁹ McGann, *2013 Global Go To*, 72. For campaigns cf. also ICG, *Fifteen Years*, passim.

¹⁰ For a list of Board of Trustee members see <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/about/board.aspx>.

¹¹ McGann, *2013 Global Go To*, 91, 95, 97, 98.

¹² Some academics have dedicated article sections to in-depth discussions of ICG reports, e.g. Heathershaw, ‘Tajikistan’; Lemay-Hebert, ‘The “Empty-Shell”’. Hofmann analyses the ICG rather superficially as example of learning in international society; Hofmann, *Learning*.

¹³ I have to plea guilty: in my book on statebuilding in Bosnia, I thankfully relied on twelve ICG reports and further seven reports from its strongest competitor in the Balkans at the time, the European Stability Initiative (ESI), without exploring how the reports’ information had been gathered and processed.

¹⁴ Rüb, ‘Wissenspolitologie’, 345.

¹⁵ The following discussion of different forms of knowledge is based on the categories set out by Rüb, ‘Wissenspolitologie’, 348-349.

¹⁶ E.g. FIRST3.0, a database run by SIPRI, to which the ICG contributes (<http://first.sipri.org>).

¹⁷ Email correspondence, former ICG field analyst, March 2014.

¹⁸ Cf. ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 30: ‘one of the organisation’s most valued products’.

¹⁹ Stone, *Policy Paradox*, 269-378.

²⁰ Rüb, ‘Wissenspolitologie’, 349.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 350.

²² Nullmeier and Rüb, *Die Transformation*; Rüb, ‘Wissenspolitologie’.

²³ Rüb, ‘Wissenspolitologie’, 350 (translation BBdG).

²⁴ Bourdieu, *Practical reason*; Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation*.

²⁵ Waldman, ‘The Use of Statebuilding Research’, endnote 2.

²⁶ Oberg, ‘Who Pays the Piper?’; Bliesemann de Guevara, *Gebrauchshinweise beachten!*, 5.

²⁷ Cf. ICG, *Financial Statements*; ‘Who Supports Crisis Group?’: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/support/who-supports-crisisgroup.aspx>.

²⁸ Interviews, ICG senior staff and founder, New York/Washington DC, March 2012. The founding member recalled, however, that in the early years the dependence on few donors (especially George Soros) was much higher and their influence on where to take the organisation geographically and strategically crucial.

²⁹ Email correspondence, March 2014.

³⁰ Interview, senior ICG staff, New York, March 2012.

³¹ These numbers can only be approximations, of course: not all staff are represented on LinkedIn, and of those who are we only know the career information they have chosen to make public. The profiles differ accordingly,

from very detailed CVs to profiles, which only display a minimum presence in the social network.

³² This distinction is not clear-cut in recent practice, however; in the case of Sri Lanka, the ICG has been involved in a vocal post-conflict campaign to bring to light the Sri Lankan government's war crimes (see ICG, *War Crimes in Sri Lanka*). This rather new involvement in human rights issues, possibly due to president Arbour's handwriting, was judged as positive by a senior ICG staff, while rejected as 'not ICG's business' by one of the organisation's founders (interviews, New York and Washington DC, March 2012).

³³ Waldman, 'The Use of Statebuilding Research'. Practitioners generally perceive even research projects and centres aiming explicitly at producing policy-relevant research as 'not useful enough'.

³⁴ Interviews and email correspondence with various (former) ICG staff, March 2012/March 2014.

³⁵ ICG, *About*.

³⁶ Cf. the 'king' archetype of leadership in Steyrer, 'Charisma'.

³⁷ Categories based on World Bank classification available from its website.

³⁸ The Board's symbolic capital also seems to work within the ICG among staff, cf. ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 8.

³⁹ Email correspondence, March 2014.

⁴⁰ Middle East in general, Iraq specifically; cf. ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 25, 27.

⁴¹ Elwert, 'Gewaltmärkte'; Ruffin and Jean, *Economie*.

⁴² ICG, *Annual Report 2013*, 5.

⁴³ Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse*, 42-72.

⁴⁴ Interview, former ICG field analyst, March 2012.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Heathershaw and Lambach, 'Introduction'.

⁴⁷ Grigat's assessment; see also her contribution in this issue.

⁴⁸ Bøås's assessment; see also his contribution in this issue.

⁴⁹ Koddenbrock's assessment; see also his contribution in this issue.

⁵⁰ Hochmüller and Müller's assessment; see also their contribution in this issue.

⁵¹ Fisher's assessment; see also his contribution in this issue.

⁵² E.g. ICG, *Islam*.

⁵³ Email correspondence, former ICG analyst, March 2014. He added, 'Having said this, one ICG officer once told me that ICG reports receive the largest Internet hits in Langley, Virginia.'

⁵⁴ Interviews, ICG staff, New York/Washington DC, March 2012; ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 23, 43.

⁵⁵ ICG, *About*.

⁵⁶ ICG, *Annual Report 2006*, 21.

⁵⁷ ICG, *Annual Report 2004*, 26.

⁵⁸ ICG, *Annual Report 2013*, 5.

⁵⁹ Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse*, 42-72.

⁶⁰ Boswell, 'The political functions of expert knowledge', 472.

⁶¹ Waldman, 'The Use of Statebuilding Research', 5.

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