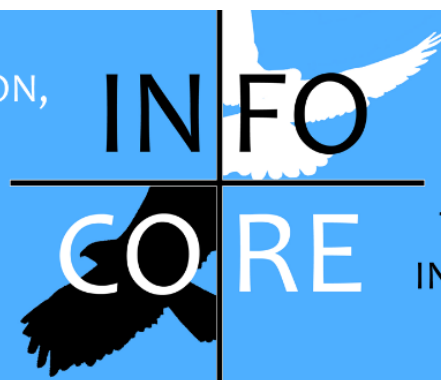


(IN)FORMING CONFLICT PREVENTION,
RESPONSE AND RESOLUTION:



THE ROLE OF MEDIA
IN VIOLENT CONFLICT



WP4: NGOS, MEDIA AND CONFLICT METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

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NGOs, MEDIA AND CONFLICT

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

(EXECUTIVE SUMMARY)

We examine in this work package the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as sources of media coverage of conflict, their role as media-like actors and their contribution to open source intelligence for better decision-making about conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution. The paper proceeds as follows: First, we present key definitions and NGO typologies that will help us to structure our empirical work, including the selection of particular NGOs, case selection and the interview design. Second, we review the literature on NGOs and set out our preliminary assumption. We acknowledge that NGOs are not just principled actors with benign influence, but are also self-interested and resource-bounded actors with considerable material and reputational limitations that can negatively affect their work around, on, and in conflict. However, there are a number of good reasons to expect that - for better or worse - they play an (increasingly) important role in shaping evidential beliefs, frames and agendas for action pervading conflict discourses amongst various actors and citizens: Since the end of the Cold War, more and more resourceful NGOs have emerged at local and transnational level, some with substantial and long-standing expertise on the ground, some with increasingly professional and sophisticated approaches to advocacy and external communication. They furthermore benefit from access to cheaper and more powerful ICT, including access to information that used to be the privilege of states. At the same time, many Western media organisations have cut back on their resources for coverage of conflict in quantity and quality, whilst Western governments have cut-back on diplomatic services. Moreover, NGOs may be less affected by an erosion of credibility and legitimacy affecting official sources and indeed quality news media, giving them greater impact for their viewpoints, issues and agendas among local and mass publics in particular, but also among political actors.

Following on from this conceptual and theoretical part, the paper formulates three basic lines of inquiry and a number of guiding assumptions related to these. We then develop a detailed methodological approach to select the potentially most influential NGOs, making sure that we have a balance between locally and transnationally operating actors as well as those with different organizational objectives and activity profiles relating to conflict. We then explain how we will gather and triangulate different kinds of data: this includes a questionnaire for NGO staff, but also questions for political actors and journalists, the use of content-analytical tools to trace NGO impact on media coverage, and finally, material required to assess conflict-related open-source intelligence, including measures of conflict intensity and specific cases of opportunities missed and taken for conflict prevention and peace-building.

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NGOs, MEDIA AND CONFLICT (WP4)¹

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

This paper builds on the conceptual and theoretical work presented in the first INFOCORE working paper on WP4. In this conceptual paper we presented an ontological definition and as well as a typology of NGO activity profiles. We conceptualised NGOs not just as principled actors with benign influence on conflict prevention and peace-building, but also as self-interested and resource-bounded actors that can under some condition negatively affect these objectives. Drawing on secondary literature and empirical research of the authors, we highlighted a number of technological, economic and organisational changes that have affected conventional media organisation's foreign affairs coverage and NGOs research and communication capacities. We formulated the expectation that NGOs - for better or worse - are playing an increasingly important role in shaping conflict discourses amongst various actors and citizens. Following on from this conceptual and theoretical part, the conceptual paper formulates three basic lines of inquiries concerning NGOs as sources of media coverage, as media-like actors and as intelligence providers. We explained how these three lines of inquiry intersect with the overall project's analytical dimensions of evidential beliefs, frames and agendas for action.

In the present paper, we set out WP4's methodological framework to present our research guiding assumptions for these three lines of inquiry and operationalise them for empirical research, including the basic research design and the methods used for inquiry. Confronted with the diversity of theoretical accounts, but also of empirical contexts, we decide to rely on an explorative mixed-methods approach. We develop a detailed methodological approach to select, gather and triangulate different kinds of material, including interviews with NGO staff, but also political actors and journalists, the use of content-analytical tools to trace NGO impact, and conflict-related data and analysis, including conflict intensity and in-case cases of opportunities missed and taken. WP4's data collection methods rely on close collaboration with other INFOCORE work packages, including WP1 (journalistic production), WP2 (political media strategies), WP3 (media & publics), as well as the media discourse analysis conducted by the INFOCORE Content Analysis Working Group.

Our general research design will be based on the selection of most-likely cases, looking out for the best available evidence of NGO influence across all three lines of inquiry². This approach is appropriate especially for exploratory types of research that mainly aim at the building and specification of theoretical findings and less at the testing of already established causal mechanisms. If the initial theoretical

¹ This paper has benefited from research assistance by Radostina Schivatcheva, which is gratefully acknowledged. The authors can be contacted via christoph.meyer@kcl.ac.uk and eric.sangar@kcl.ac.uk

² Of course, the category of influence needs specification when talking about concrete mechanisms. Given the exploratory nature of this research that intends to explore NGO media influence in different dimensions, we cannot from the outset specify "hard" indicators for influence that would possibly exclude some potentially relevant organizations. However, as part of the content-analytical part of our research, we will produce "hard data" based on quantifiable indicators to measure and compare the influence of specific NGOs on media discourses.

assumptions “failed even in a most-likely case, this evidence would provide strong support for the expectation that it would fail even more clearly in less hospitable circumstances.” (Odell, 2001, p. 166)

In the following sections, we will detail, first, which criteria we will establish to select specific NGOs. Second, we will sketch the design and approach of interviews as well as the selection of interviewees. Third, we will formulate some guidelines on how we will assess NGOs’ changing role through content-analytic methods. Finally, we present the specific methodology developed for assessing the performance of NGOs as intelligence providers.

Criteria for selection of NGO cases

As a general guideline, we aim at selecting NGOs that are plausibly the most relevant actors in the respective conflict and countries contexts for each line of inquiry. The resulting selection strategy is two-fold.

On the one hand, we select *ex ante* four international NGOs (INGOs) that are, across specific conflict settings, commonly quoted in the IR literature as examples of influential actors in the area of conflict analysis and resolution, across the boundaries of specific conflicts and countries. These include *The International Crisis Group* (ICG), *Human Rights Watch* (HRW), *Amnesty International* (AI), and the *International Committee of the Red Cross* (ICRC), organizations that all conduct major activities for all the conflict cases examined by INFOCORE. Through interviews that will cover all three lines of inquiry, we expect to be able to produce comparative insights and thus find about the influence of context factors such as conflict structure, organizational cultures, local media settings, access to media reporting, and the direct interaction with non-journalistic target audiences. We will use these INGOs also to conduct a comparative assessment of performance in the provision of open source intelligence across conflicts.

On the other hand, in order to provide a more holistic perspective on the role of NGOs in conflict discourses than the one that is dominating in the literature, we intend to take into account also locally rooted NGOs that might use different strategies of media engagement that is more tailored to non-Western audiences. These additional NGOs will have to be selected by the individual country and conflict leaders, who possess the necessary expertise to make such choices and have already established lists with possibly relevant NGO actors within the conflict and country profiles. In some contexts, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, the practice of some NGO actors may not fully adhere to our ontological definition: this may be the case, for example, when NGOs are commonly perceived to pursue a “particularist” agenda, such as openly taking side in the struggle between political actors or working exclusively with one party to the conflict. If conflict leaders consider such actors as having a decisive impact of media discourse, they can be included in the interviewing sample as long as those NGOs at least have the legal status of non-profit, government-independent civil society organizations.

However, we provide the following three selection criteria that should provide common guidelines to conflict and country leaders:

- 1) The most general selection criterion concerns the preferred *zone of geographical focus*. Overall, we would like to cover both transnational NGOs whose activist focus is on several countries and local NGOs that work on one specific country or conflict only. The category ‘local NGOs’ thus also includes Western-based NGOs that focus on one specific country or conflict only.
- 2) The second criterion concerns the already discussed differentiation between *activity profiles*³. Essentially, we would like to cover NGOs that have strong ‘*thinking*’ (*research and analysis*) and/or ‘*talking*’ (*advocacy*) profiles. NGOs with strong “thinking” profiles would typically include organizations that produce regular reports and other forms of analytical products that may even be used in academic research. Such NGOs typically engage in media-like activities especially at the policy level. NGOs with strong ‘talking profiles’ would include organizations that promote their cause typically by influencing local or Western publics as an essential part of their activist strategy, for example through close cooperation with established media, or through the conduct of transnational mobilisation campaigns. We expect NGOs that focus purely on ‘*doing*’ (such as the provision of emergency relief) as less influential in the construction of political media discourses on conflict; however, these NGOs could be relevant as sources of open source intelligence for decision-makers, or in some areas for grass root activities, such as the building of inter-community trust and dialogue or the reintegration of former combatants. Insofar as such NGOs, especially with specific local requirements that involves considerable ‘thinking’ and ‘talking’ activities (for example the localization and negotiation of safe modes of transport for aid delivery), they should be selected for the interview sample.
- 3) The third criterion refers to an NGO’s *programme objectives*. Goodhand (2006, pp. 16-17) has developed a typology that differentiates between NGOs according to different types of objectives. Based on this, we would like to select NGOs that pursue two types of objectives. First, NGOs working ‘around conflict’: these are primarily interested in promoting causes related to human development, not necessarily overcoming armed conflict itself. These are nevertheless relevant to peace efforts because they aim at promoting social progress that is plausibly linked to conflict prevention, for instance through gender promotion, education for underprivileged or media capacity-building. Second, NGOs working “in conflict”: these seek to address immediate, local grievances, such as the need for vital needs, shelter or the protection of human rights. Third, NGOs working ‘on conflict’: those seek to address the political causes of conflict by supporting human rights advocacy, conflict analysis and conflict management. While these criteria may appear vague, they can be distinguished through a look at NGOs’ mission statements: NGOs working ‘around conflict’ would focus on improving underlying economic, social or political structures in a conflict zone, without trying to address

³ For a more detailed discussion of NGO activity profiles, see the conceptual part of our methodological framework.

the conduct of the conflict itself. NGOs working ‘in conflict’ would have a focus on rapid deployment in cases of conflict emergencies. NGOs working ‘on conflict’ would typically aim at addressing the underlying causes of conflicts themselves, through activities of information, analysis, mediation, or transformation.

The following table provides an overview of a possible conceptual distinction of NGO profiles:

		‘around conflict’	–	‘in conflict’	–	‘on conflict’
		Development		Relief		Human Rights
						Conflict/Peace
‘Doing’ ‘Talking’ ‘Thinking’	Capacity-building					
	Direct Intervention					
	Issue & Policy Advocacy					
	Research & Service					

Source: based on Goodband (2006), with added ‘thinking’ row

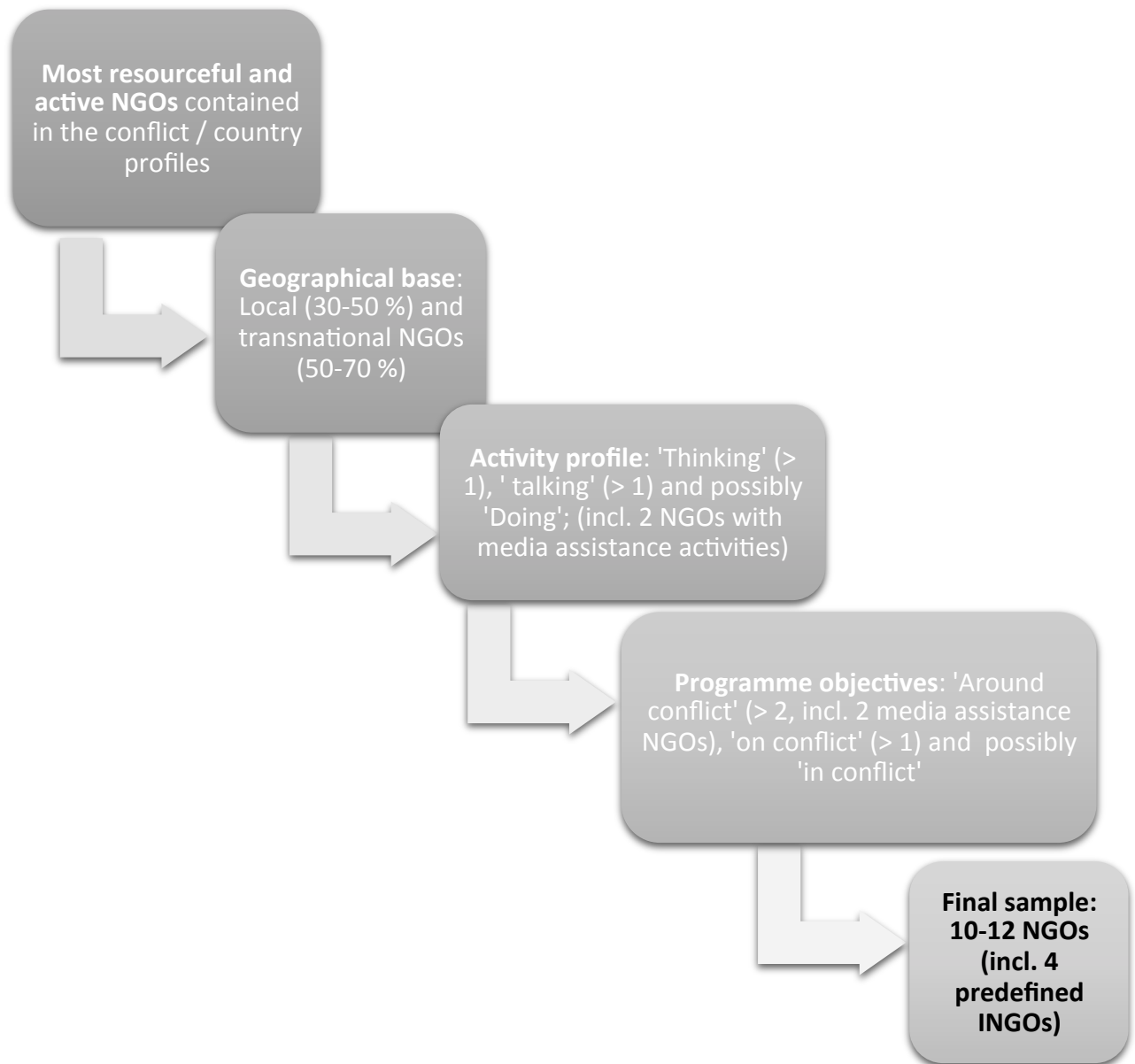
The selection along the three presented criteria should happen hierarchically; that is, all selected NGOs should fit within in at least one of the two categories described for the three levels of selection. We also aim at having at least one ‘talking’ and one ‘thinking’ NGO per country / conflict. Furthermore, two of the examined NGOs should be selected as representative media assistance providers⁴: In each country or conflict, two media assistance NGOs will be selected by the respective conflict or country leads. These should be the ones with the highest operational budgets (spent locally), that have been locally active for the longest time, and that represent a diverse range of media assistance programmes.

Among the NGOs that fulfil these criteria, we would like to retain those that have the biggest budget and have the widest volume of activities.. Thus, we aim at having a final sample of at least 10 to 12 NGOs per country and conflict (including the 4 pre-selected INGOs and at least 2 NGOs engaging in media assistance). A higher number would substantially increase the number of interviews, which would not be feasible given the limited time and financial resources of this project. A lower number would make it difficult to cover all relevant research dimensions of the project given the diversity of NGOs and their relevance as news sources, media-hybrids or alternatives and intelligence providers. It might also make it

⁴ The role of media assistance activities is covered by WP 7 (Media & Publics). To the extent that NGOs are often important providers of media assistance, WP4 will conduct research on this type of actors on behalf of WP7. A specific interview questionnaire for this type of actors will be developed by WP7 leaders.

difficult to theorise about the role of mid-sized local NGOs, whose analysis may provide valuable insights that have been largely overlooked by the existing literature.

The basic design of the selection process required by the individual country and conflict leaders looks as follows:



How do we intend to conduct our empirical research based on the resulting sample on analysis? Acknowledging the fact that our three lines of inquiry will require individual methodological approaches, we will pursue a mixed-methods approach, based on three essential methodologies: semi-structured qualitative interviewing, media content analysis, and intelligence analysis.

Interview design

Our approach to interviewing bears similarity with the approaches chosen by WP1 and WP2. We choose a semi-structured interview design that will help to collect both essential factual data and individual ‘stories’ which should help us to better understand and interpret the complex evolving influence of NGOs in terms of evidential beliefs, frames, and agendas for action.

For each NGO that is part of the final sample, we seek to interview at least two representatives, who can nevertheless be questioned in a joint interview. One interviewee should be part of the organizational leadership (for local NGOs) or a leader of the team responsible for the respective country or conflict (for large transnational NGOs). The second interviewee should be part of the team that is responsible for public relations, including institutionalised relationships with established media or decision-making bodies. For all transnational NGOs, interviews for conflict cases should be conducted with representatives of field offices; at least for the preselected INGOs, we will conduct interviews as well at the organizational headquarters. Overall, we aim at producing at least 12 interviews per INFOCORE conflict or country.

A preliminary overview of the interview distribution looks as follows:

Area	Conflict / Country	Number of Interviews
Middle East	Israel / Palestine	12
Middle East	Syria	12
Western Balkans	Macedonia	12
Western Balkans	Kosovo	12
Great Lakes of Africa	DRC	12
Great Lakes of Africa	Burundi	12
Europe	France	12
Europe	UK	15
Europe	Germany	12
Europe	EU institutions / Brussels	12
Total Number of Interviews		123

The practical conduct of the interviews should largely correspond with guidelines that are already established in social sciences (Weiss, 1994; Wildavsky, 1989, pp. 57-101). The questionnaire should be designed in a way to enable sensitivity to unforeseeable empirical factors, reduce the occurrence of social desirability, and produce a minimum of factual evidence that allow for cross-case comparison. Thus, we decided to use a design starting with large ‘grand tour questions’, followed by specific ‘example questions’ (for these two categories, see Leech, 2002), and ending with very specific factual questions. Additionally, we are including questions in the other workpackages, for instance, on whether NGOs are being used as sources (WP1) and a question on which NGOs are being seen as particularly reliable.

As for the other work packages, all interviewees will be asked to give their written or oral approval to an ‘informed consent’ form. The interviews will be recorded (unless refused by the interviewee) before being transcribed in their original language and processed by a qualitative coding software. All records and transcripts will be kept strictly confidential. The original recordings will be stored on the LMU server, which meets all of the EU standards for data protection. All interview quotes which are published will be attributed anonymously, unless explicitly authorised by the interviewee through written or oral consent.

Capture NGO impact on media discourse through content analysis

Measuring the actual impact of NGO media strategies is a difficult task. We are planning to use content analysis tools in order to systematically produce quantitative data on the dynamics of NGOs impact on media coverage of armed conflict. In close cooperation with the content analysis working group, we intend to explore the feasibility of two potential approaches:

Dictionary approach

The content analysis working group will include a range of local and international NGOs names into their analytical dictionary which should enable a quantitative automatic reference analysis within the INFOCORE corpus. This should reveal which NGOs are frequently quoted by the media within and across contexts of specific conflicts. A sub-sample that includes the major INGOs explored in the interview section might potentially be used for a more complex analysis, looking for co-occurrences pointing to references to their communication products (using generic keywords such as ‘press declarations’, ‘website statements’, ‘press visits’, ‘reports’ etc.). This might help to detect patterns of NGO communication practices within and across conflicts and to reveal, in combination with the annotation of the journalistic practice work packages, the importance of NGOs in the emergence of evidential claims in media discourses.

Fingerprint approach

One of our guiding assumptions is that some NGOs have acquired the status of media-like actors. In line with this, we intend to explore to what extent key publications of major INGOs have been incorporated – with or without explicit acknowledgment – in other documents published by official institutions or ‘traditional’ media. To do this, we might select a small number of key publications related to the INFOCORE conflicts authored by the pre-selected INGOs. We intend to provide these documents to the content analysis working group with the aim of conducting two types of analysis. First, we would like to search for occurrence of references to the document titles in the INFOCORE media corpus. Second, we would like to detect, within the INFOCORE corpus but possibly also in document archives of Western governments and international organizations, possible ‘copy-paste’ uses of clearly identifiable extracts from the selected NGO documents. This analytical approach may help to reveal more “hidden” influences of NGO advocacy efforts on mainstream media discourses because NGO publications may

have been used even though they are explicitly quoted (which may be a widespread practice, especially in the production of short news stories). This last technique will be an experimental approach, and we will closely work with the content analysis experts to come up with a suitable methodological solution.

Analysing the performance of NGO Intelligence

Depending on available time and resources, we aim at exploring three complementary methodological approaches to the analysis of NGO intelligence.

1) Consumer-driven

According to this perspective, good intelligence is what ‘clients’ or ‘consumers’ consider to be good. Measuring the relevance of intelligence products will not be possible without conducting interviews or surveys with the users, consumers or recipients of such products such as officials, politicians, or military leaders. At the same time, one has to be cautious in taking such judgements at face value or a sufficient source of evidence for several reasons: performance perceptions may simply be inaccurate or distorted by other issues affecting the reputation and credibility of particular organisations such as their track-record in other activity fields, their political affiliation or indeed the personal credibility of individuals leading the organisation or delivering the message. Moreover, NGOs do not normally just target on ‘client’, but rather aim to build relationships to and influence quite different types of actors depending on their mission objective. Published reports by their nature go out to very diverse audiences, so what may appear highly relevant to one type of actor may not be relevant to another.

2) Theory-grounded

This approach would draw on theories of political and cognitive psychology, organisational sociology, intelligence studies and foreign policy analysis to compile a number of insights about how organisations learn and how individuals or groups of individuals arrive at better judgments by optimising the process of intelligence production. The problem in relying on such theories is partly that they generate a wide-range of prescriptions that are partly contradictory and partly too numerous to follow them all. They are also mostly based on studies of failure rather than success and thus tend to focus on avoiding errors rather than identifying key criteria for success. More fundamentally, many of the prescriptions are based on case studies involving the United States and their security concerns, raising questions about how applicable the lessons learnt are for non-security issues, other types of states and indeed atypical organisation such as NGOs. These theories are nevertheless useful to guide some of the questioning about which factors may matter most and to steer comparison among different types of actors.

3) Comparative-inductive

Here the approach would be to focus on the relative performance of actors vis-à-vis semi-objective ex-post benchmarks such as the typical lead-time needed for the deployment of certain preventive measures

for a given conflict scenario. Another way of establishing benchmarks is to rely on the results of widely accepted fact-finding missions (produced by impartial actors, such as the UN or local truth commissions), academic synthesis reports and authoritative databases of conflict intensity to establish what has happened on the ground and why this has been the case. However, having these benchmarks does not necessarily imply that intelligence products can be expected to realistically forecast such events or report them accurately immediately after their occurrence. Furthermore, performance is highly dependent on case properties and related challenges: some empirical, gradually evolving conflict dynamics can be easier foreseen than others, apparently more spontaneous or ‘chaotic’ ones⁵. This might partly be overcome by comparing relative performance of NGOs within as well as across cases. Studying the ‘best performers’ and the ‘worst performers’ within and across actor types might help to identify key factors of ‘good practice’, feed into the second approach and correct distortions in reputation surveys produced under the first approach.

Given that this field of research is still new, we propose a combination of all three approaches to mitigate the drawbacks of each approach and enable cross-case theorising. We will remain sensitive to any differences emerging in the measurement of performance and thus allow different users more opportunities to reach their own conclusions of what matters to them most. Furthermore, we want to focus on both cases of (relative) success and failure with regard to peaceful conflict resolution and human rights protection within violent conflict. Building on this discussion of performance criteria, we propose to implement the empirical research in the following way for the selected NGOs.

We intend to focus on the following three empirical criteria for intelligence effectiveness:

- Timeliness
- Accuracy
- Relevance

This multi-perspective research programme would rely on the following potential sources of evidence:

- 1) Databases, expert judgment and secondary literature to establish benchmarks for conflict intensity
- 2) identification of two key episodes of successful and unsuccessful conflict prevention/mitigation and the most relevant local and international actors involved
- 3) automatic content analysis to establish the timing of NGOs communications containing conflict analysis
- 4) interviews with NGOs actors to probe the background to their intelligence production in specific cases and the conditions affecting it (see relevant questions above).
- 5) and finally, interviews with different clients and users of NGOs products to measure in particular questions of relevance (see relevant questions above).

⁵ Examples for these differing dynamics could be retrieved from the rebellions in Arab states: While the moment of the initial outbreak of insurgency movements was hardly foreseeable, the violent escalation and polarisation of the conflicts followed fundamental patterns that can be seen in other insurgency conflicts as well, including the Vietnam War or the Algerian War.

These data gathering activities do not require additional interviews to be conducted and should be compatible with research required for the overall project objectives. By triangulating collected data, comparing NGOs performance and probing deeper in the interviews, we will be able to ascertain evidence-based prescriptions for different users of intelligence, especially regarding which organisations can be considered the most accurate, timely and relevant, and what factors are relevant when selecting material for useful open-source intelligence. Furthermore, we can provide NGOs with feedback on their relative performance as knowledge providers and offer advice on how to improve their performance in each of the three dimensions by learning about best practices and common errors.

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