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BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE: INGOS' HANDLING OF CONFLICT RISK IN SOUTH
SUDAN

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Abstract

What do international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) do before and during the escalation of conflicts? The academic literature primarily focuses on these organisations' behaviour during an evident crisis rather than on how they anticipate the escalation of conflicts, assess the situation in which they find themselves, and decide on strategies to cope with the possibility of upcoming violence. Such lopsided focus persists despite calls for INGOs to become more proactive in managing their programmes and their staff members' safety. Mindful of this imbalance, the present study provides a causal explanation of how decision-makers in INGOs anticipate and react to the risk of low-level violence escalating into full-blown conflicts.

This thesis aims to explain these actors' behaviour by presenting it as a two-step process involving how INGOs conduct risk assessments and how they turn these assessments into decisions. The study performs a structured, focused comparison of seven INGOs operating in South Sudan before the so-called Juba Clashes of 7 July 2016. Based on an analytical framework of INGO decision-making stemming from political risk analysis, organisational decision-making theory and conflict studies literature, the study reconstructs decision-making via process-tracing combined with mixed methods of data collection.

Keywords: INGOs, conflict, political risk, South Sudan, humanitarianism, crisis decision-making

Riassunto

Il comportamento delle organizzazioni non governative internazionali (ONGI) prima della escalata di un conflitto è una questione ancora sottostimata. Gran parte dell'attenzione è focalizzata sul comportamento di queste organizzazioni quando una crisi è già evidente, piuttosto che sul modo in cui queste agenzie anticipano le escalate di violenza e decidono cosa dovrebbero fare. Consapevole di questo divario, il presente studio spiega come i responsabili delle decisioni delle ONGI anticipano e reagiscono al rischio di intensificazione di un conflitto.

Questa tesi cerca di spiegare il comportamento di questi attori come un processo in due fasi, che coinvolge il modo in cui le organizzazioni conducono le valutazioni di rischio e come le trasformano in decisioni. Per fare ciò, conduce sette casi di studio con ONGI che erano operative nel Sudan del Sud prima dell'inizio della rinascita della guerra civile nel 7 Luglio 2016, ricostruendo il processo decisionale attraverso una metodologia di tracciamento dei processi.

Parole chiave: OING, Conflitti, Rischio politico, Sud Sudan, Umanitarismo e Processo decisionale.

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1. Introduction

Before the end of the Cold War, humanitarian action occupied the margins of conflicts and was an activity of generally minor consequence to belligerents. Aid agencies were accepted or tolerated as beneficial, or were at least treated as non-threatening (Collinson, Elhawary 2012, 5). Increasingly, however, aid agencies have been working where the bulk of the fighting happens. Under this novel paradigm, dangers to these agencies' work and their workers' well-being have been on the rise, both due to active, intentional targeting and as collateral damage of warfare (Donini et al. 2008). Consequently, aid actors are, more than ever, facing difficult decisions – decisions that involve a trade-off between self-preservation and aid provision.

For instance, as of early June 2018, after a period of relative tranquillity in the Yemeni Civil War, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia announced their intention to launch an offensive to recapture the port city of Hodeidah, in Yemen, from occupying Houthi forces (Stocker 2018). For fear of being caught in the crossfire, the United Nations (UN) and several international aid groups began evacuating staff and assets days before the offensive began. In contrast, despite the potential dangers to its security, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), an international non-governmental organisation (INGO), declared that it would not stop its operations, refusing to abandon some six thousand people to whom it was providing aid (Liberman, Chadwick 2018).

In a similar episode, the city of Kunduz, in northern Afghanistan, had been taken by the Taliban during an offensive on 22 September 2015 (Calamur 2015). Days later, the Afghan Armed Forces, supported by NATO, began to prepare a counterattack to retake the city. In anticipation of potential heavy fighting, the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan and several other INGOs evacuated all of their expatriated staff on 27 September 2015 – something Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) and others refused to do (Mahr 2015, 2). A massive ground offensive began on 30 September 2015, resulting in weeks of heavy fighting. In one of the incidents during this offensive, a US airstrike hit a hospital operated

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by MSF, resulting in the deaths of 37 people, including 19 MSF staff members (MSF 2015).

Both of these stories have a shared theme and a common decision underlies their climaxes. In both cases, organisations had a choice: when faced with the risk of escalating violence, should they stand their ground and try to deliver aid, or should they act preventively to avoid danger before it is too late?

INGOs often operate in places where security is delicate, because working where help is needed most is the essence of their work (Laaksonen 2018, 12). As not-for-profit entities whose overriding goal is to help people advance a particular cause, these transnational actors accept risky undertakings in politically unstable areas because these are also the places where assistance is usually most needed (Beamon, Balcik 2008, 11).

Operating under fragile security conditions means that INGOs are more often than not managing threats to their operations. In the most extreme cases, there is always the risk that the security situation will deteriorate to such a point that it may no longer be safe, or acceptable, for staff to remain (Bickley 2010, 181). Facing such levels of insecurity, INGOs must deliberate on their willingness and ability to continue their activities.

It does not help INGOs that violence against aid staff has increased in recent years, or that international humanitarian law (IHL), which extends protection from violence to all medical and aid personnel, is often disregarded by warring parties. In the table below, one can see that the number of violent incidents involving INGOs and the number of victims from these organisations has surpassed triple digits in every year of the last decade (AWSD 2021).
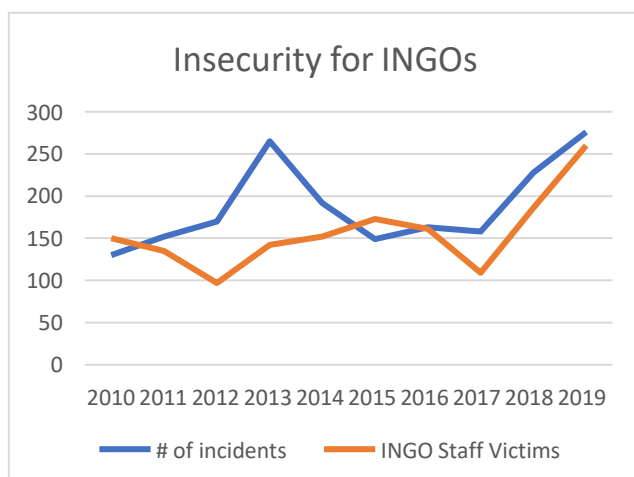
Figure 1:1: Number of security incidents involving INGOs and number of staff members involved from 2010 to 2019. Data from Aid Worker Security Database. Graphics: Author

The intentional targeting of INGOs is a serious concern. In many instances, parties to a conflict consider INGOs, especially if they are Western-based, to be non-neutral extensions of the diplomacy practised by their donor governments (Collinson, Elhawary 2012, 10). In other cases, INGOs are targets simply because they appear rich to local observers. In testimony, one MSF staff member working in the Democratic Republic of Congo noted, 'The perception from armed groups is often that organisations like MSF are rich: you have money, you have big cars, and you help people. You can be an easy target for that reason' (MSF 2003, 1)[1]. This perception turns aid organisations into tempting targets for political violence. In addition to intentional targeting, INGOs also face the same incidental security risks that plague locals, such as common robberies, safety incidents, unsanitary conditions and psychological stresses. In face of such insecurity against aid workers, international organisations like the UN have sponsored awareness campaigns to reinforce the need to protect those delivering aid.

Figure 1:2: UN campaign advertising World Humanitarian Day 2017. Photo by: Mackenzie Knowles-Cousin. License: CC.

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[1] From an article titled 'Evacuation in the face of need is never easy', published by the MSF. Neither the author of the article nor the quoted staff member were identified. Text available at: https://www.msf.org/drc-staff-interview-evacuation-face-need-never-easy

Nonetheless, it is exactly where security is most fragile that the assistance of INGOs is most needed, so there are still incentives to stay and deliver aid even when circumstances are dire. In the face of this trade-off between avoiding security risks and helping people, INGOs must make a crucial decision: Should they stay and continue their aid operations or leave and avoid higher security risks?

1.1. The Trade-Off: Helping Others or Protecting Self?

For INGOs, this is a critical dilemma. On the one hand, to stay means that more people receive aid and life-saving assistance, but INGOs' staff, assets and reputation are put in jeopardy. On the other hand, avoiding risks means more suffering by the local population, even if aid workers' security is preserved. Therefore, the choice between avoiding danger and remaining despite it strikes a delicate balance between help and safety, and it is vital to understand how INGOs make this decision. Neither choice is optimal. This tension is perfectly illustrated in the anonymised testimony of one MSF operations manager, quoted saying, 'I am somewhat worried that by elevating our duty of care obligations[2] to a level that may meet liability standards in home societies, we risk fundamentally sabotaging our operational mission' (Edwards, Neuman 2016, 28).

Decisions to avoid risks—such as putting staff on hibernation or relocating/evacuating staff altogether—should not be taken lightly, as the consequences can be grave and far-reaching. In many instances, aid organisations may be the sole providers of many essential services to the local community while also serving as protectors. One anecdotal illustration of this dependence is the testimony of a South Sudanese mother quoted by Care International, saying, 'We do not want the humanitarian workers who have come to help us to run away because of war. If we see them leave, we know the

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[2] The legal concept of *duty of care* refers to an organisation's obligations to safeguard the well-being of their employees and take steps to mitigate foreseeable workplace dangers. For employees working overseas, this responsibility is even more stringent (Claus, 2010).

situation is really bad. When they are here with us, it is a form of security. Who will treat us when they are gone'? (Mukabane 2016, 1). Because local populations sometimes depend so much on aid organisations, for those organisations to leave an area where violence is imminent would also mean abandoning locals when help is most needed.

It is also hard to return after leaving (ECHO 2004, 24). Closing operations in a country ordinarily means terminating employment bonds with staff, which means that organisations would have to hire new staff if they were to re-enter an area they have left. Quite often, the organisation also loses part of its property, as it is common to witness looting or theft of an INGO's assets after it evacuates. Furthermore, INGOs leaving the field means that other aid organisations operating in the same area would have to fill the void left by those that left, thus increasing the burden on those organisations that decided to stay. Some agencies try to find a middle ground by temporarily transferring risks to local partners through a remote management strategy[3]. However, it is well documented that for an agency to shift back to having a physical presence in a risky area is a complicated matter because organisational resistance to returning to the field increases as an aid agency leaves (Stoddard, Harmer, Renouf 2010, 22)[4].

On the flip side, INGOs have never been under this much scrutiny concerning their duty of care[5]. The benchmark for INGOs' obligation to protect their staff has risen significantly over the past decade, and what was once considered good enough would certainly not be considered adequate today (JaNISS 2018, 11). Until recently, aid organisations had seldom experienced

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[3] Remote management was defined by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) as 'an adaptation to insecurity, the practice of withdrawing international (or other at-risk staff) while transferring increased programming responsibilities to local staff or local partner organizations' (Donini, Maxwell 2013, 386).

[4] The authors attribute this increasing organisational resistance against returning to potentially outdated or skewed perceptions of no-go areas, cost pressures of a protection-oriented security culture and bureaucratic inertia.

[5] The legal concept of duty of care presumes that organisations 'are responsible for their employees' well-being and must take practical steps to mitigate foreseeable workplace dangers' – a responsibility that takes on additional implications when the employees are working overseas (Claus, 2010).

serious litigation due to negligence in staff security matters. Most incidents were quietly settled out of court between families and the organisations.

However, cases like Dennis v Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) have set a precedent for a new era in which aid organisations are as liable as any other company or organisation to fulfil their duty of care toward staff members. In this particular case, a Canadian contractor working for the NRC was kidnapped at a refugee camp in Kenya. He was later released with a knee injury. Following the incident, the contractor sued the NRC for economic and non-economic damages and won, with two Norwegian courts ruling that the NRC had acted with gross negligence concerning staff safety and security (Oslo District Court 2015, 11). In a specific part of the ruling, the court found a causal relationship between the NRC's risk management practices and how the organisation failed to prevent the incident from happening (Laaksonen 2008, 37).

Despite the clear importance of this fraught trade-off between self-preservation and assistance delivery, there is still little understanding of which factors ultimately sway an INGO's security decisions. Unfortunately, INGO decision-making, in general, remains a 'black box' (Heyse 2011, 6). To enhance our understanding of the research problem presented above, this dissertation compares risk analysis and decision-making across different INGOs. It focuses on interpreting the cues for escalation, identifying the risks, and deciding on strategies to cope with such risks. In sum, it seeks to answer the following research question: *How do decision-makers in INGOs anticipate and react to the risk of low-level violence escalating into full-blown conflicts?*

1.2. Pre-Escalation, Risk Analysis and Decisions: A Novel Framework

This research focuses on what organisations do before the escalation of a conflict becomes obvious, including at the very beginning of a crisis. This timeframe is crucial for two reasons. The first is that this is the best time for organisations to take adequate actions to fulfil their duty of care towards their workers (Fisher 2017). By taking timely action, INGOs can avoid the so-called

'frog-in-boiling-water syndrome'[6], thus protecting their workers before it is too late to save them (Van Brabant 2000, 51). It becomes too late when heightened violence – coupled with road, airport and river closures – may render relocation or evacuation inadvisable or impossible (Bickley 2003, 34).

The second reason the timeframe is so critical relates to the effectiveness of disaster response. The nature of aid work puts INGOs at the forefront of conflict prevention and early action, for they possess comparative advantages in the management of information about upcoming conflicts (Reyes 2007). Sometimes, INGOs are the only sources of information from which the international community can learn about a situation where international links are intermittent at best, or almost non-existent. INGOs are often the first to notice increasing tensions in potential conflict areas because of their physical presence and constant interaction with local actors; they thus play a vital role in sounding the alarm for potential threats to international peace and security (Bakker 2001). Furthermore, anticipating the danger of conflict escalation also means that INGOs can plan to scale up operations before disaster strikes and be ready to assist as many people as possible.

This thesis adopts a framework that considers the origin of escalation events, encompassing structural causes and triggers that lead to peaks of violence (Gleditsch 2002, 85). In other words, it focuses on the story behind the escalation of conflicts, which is made up of a succession of relevant and observable political events. Therefore, it is imperative to understand how decision-makers make themselves aware of this process of escalation.

To understand this phenomenon, it is important to first pay attention to how different INGOs conduct risk assessments and identify how much risk they attribute to the possibility of escalating conflicts. The focus on risk assessments is justified because every INGO in the field conducts assessments of the threats it is most likely to confront (Dworken 2000, 1). In an examination of more than 20 INGO security manuals, Rowley et al. (2013, 14) found that all organisations

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[6] The metaphor refers to the situation in which a frog feels the water heating up gradually but does not jump out before the water has begun to boil – by which point it is too late for the frog to save itself.

involved in the study cited the importance of conducting security assessments as the cornerstone of organisational security.. However, these risk assessments may vary widely depending on the system put into place by INGOs, especially regarding the choice of risk indicators and the collection of information carried out by each organisation.

Because risk assessments are only as good as the information that is factored into them, this work pays special attention to the indicators used by INGOs as cues to conflict risk and to the sources from which they obtain information on these indicators. On the one hand, the selection of indicators affects howdifferent INGOs will also have different perceptions regarding the possibility ofescalation in a conflict (Van Brabant 2001, 54). On the other hand, the source ofinformation tells us whether some INGOs have access to crucial information thatothers do not. It is commonly believed that organisations with access to grassroots information – that is, information gathered through interaction with local actors – may have an edge in detecting increasing tensions (Bakker 2001, 7).

However, to focus solely on understanding how INGOs conduct risk assessments would be like finishing only half of a puzzle. It is also necessary to understand how INGOs turn risk assessments into decisions. To explain the decisions of INGOs, this research focuses on three crucial elements. The first is how INGOs determine the amount of risk they are willing and able to accept; this is also known as the 'threshold of acceptable risk'. The second is the impact of standard operating procedures (SOPs), which are pre-established rules that guide these organisations' day-to-day activities. The third is the interaction between staff at different levels within the same INGOs.

Regarding the threshold of acceptable risk, organisations working in the same location often make different security-related decisions because they have different perspectives on what is acceptable in terms of risk (Bickley 2010, 181). Based on a review of security manuals and academic literature, this work considers four main elements that influence how much risk INGOs are willing to accept: 1) the mandate of an organisation; 2) the influence of donors; 3) prior

experience of staff; and 4) dependence on other actors. These elements are discussed in further detail in Section 2.3.

The inclusion of the impact of SOPs on decision-making is justified by the argument that decision-makers may not always resort to the cost-benefit calculus that compares assessed risk levels against the threshold of acceptable risk-taking. Instead, they may resort to following pre-established rules to make decisions by matching the current situation they face with expected behaviour prescribed by their organisations (Beerli, Weissman 2016, 77). Therefore, it is vital to examine the existence of these SOPs and the influence they may exert on final decisions.

The reason for including the third element – interactions between people at different organisational levels within one INGO – is two-fold. The first reason is that the security decisions may take place at different levels, depending on the organisation's nature (ACT 2011, 44). The second is that a staff member's interest in avoiding an area where conflict escalation is imminent depends on the organisational level to which a staff member belongs. Roth (2015, 92) has shown that field workers are likelier to have a more risk-taking attitude, as many of them understand that high risks are part of their jobs. Moreover, some are willing or even eager to take risks, including physical ones, because of their personality. On the other hand, the staff at headquarters may be under pressure from their superiors or from donors to maintain or even restrict operations in situations when it is not clear whether risks are acceptable (Metcalfe, Martin, Pantuliano 2011).

Considering all these elements, this work chooses to represent INGOs' actions as an iterative two-step process. The first step, called the 'anticipation mechanism', includes the activities by INGOs during their risk assessments. This first mechanism intends to capture how INGOs arrive at their conclusions regarding the likelihood of conflict escalation. The second step, called the 'decision mechanism', includes the elements related to how risk assessments are turned into decisions by INGOs. This distinction between the two steps is found in the general agreement that decisions involve two different activities in which decision-makers must engage: (1) information gathering and (2) information use.

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Anticipation Mechanism → Decision Mechanism → Security Strategy
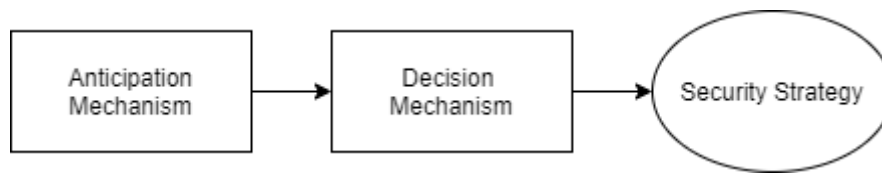
Figure 1:3: Summary of the two-step process proposed by the present research

1.3. Research Design

To test the conceptual model, this thesis resorts to a structured, focused comparison of seven INGOs present in South Sudan before its civil war reignited on 7 July 2016. The conflict, fought mainly between the government of South Sudan, ruled by the South Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), and the South Sudanese People's Liberation Movement-In Opposition (SPLM-IO), is archetypical of the idea of conflicts as processes of escalation and de-escalation as mentioned in the previous section. The conflict first started in December 2013, de-escalated as a peace agreement was signed on 17 August 2015, only to re-escalate in July 2016 as government and rebel forces clashed in Juba, the capital of South Sudan (Martell 2019).

This study uses process tracing methodology for within-case analysis. In practice, this means that INGOs' decision-making processes are reconstructed throughout the timeframe specified above, as the researcher unearths evidence on how the dependent variable – whether or not an organisation engaged in avoidance strategy – was produced (King, Keohane, Verba 1994, 227). The goal is to verify whether the process predicted by this research matched what organisations did in real life.

Comparison between the seven cases, conversely, relies on the method of structured, focused comparison. In this method, the idea of 'focus' refers to a specific class of events to be investigated. In the present study, the focus is the decision-making process of INGOs that were present in South Sudan during the run-up to the escalation of South Sudan's civil war on 7 July 2016. The structure,

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in turn, concerns the use of a theory-informed conceptual model as a benchmark for comparison across cases.

Data collection includes two types of primary sources: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Interviews include three groups of different subject types. Initially, the researcher interviewed academics with prior experience researching INGOs' security management practices. The next group of subjects consisted of people working at organisations whose work is related to INGOs, such as the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, NGO Alliances, security risk companies, and the South Sudan NGO Forum. These subjects provide a great deal of contextual knowledge on INGOs' general behaviour in South Sudan and serve as 'gate-keepers', meaning that they are instrumental in granting the researcher access to INGO staff via referral. The third and final group of subjects comprised staff from selected INGOs. Interviews with these subjects provide detailed accounts of how organisations went through the steps theorised in our conceptual model. For each INGO, at least two members were included, covering field-based and headquarters personnel. Document analysis, in turn, relies on material provided or referred to by staff at selected INGOs at the request of the researcher, as well as documents published in public databases from the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and the South Sudan NGO Forum. The document analysis intends to complement the information gathered during interviews and to buttress the findings of this study.

1.4. Justification, Aims and Implications for Future Research

Few issues in recent years have seized the attention of the humanitarian aid community more than the growing insecurity problem. In the last three decades, there has been a surge in the number of INGOs across the world as well as a shift in how these organisations operate in conflict settings. In the context of 'new wars', battles are no longer waged primarily between regular armed forces (Kaldor 1999) but rather by varying combinations of networks of state and non-state actors, regular armed forces, private security contractors, mercenaries,

jihadists, warlords, and paramilitaries. In this scenario, where command and control structures of warring parties are looser, providing a humanitarian space[7] for aid agencies becomes a far more complicated task.

In contrast to aid delivery during Cold War conflicts, INGOs today no longer restrict their operations to the periphery of conflicts while waiting for a ceasefire so they can carry out their activities. INGOs now find themselves operating in areas where conflicts are imminent or ongoing (Patey 2003, 3). This new *modus operandi* also means a newer, greater risk for aid agencies. Around the world, humanitarian workers are being targeted as never before (Bickley 2010, 1). From January 1997 to December 2016, one aid worker became a victim of violence every 40 hours (Rahimi 2018, 37). Today, the problem faced by aid agencies is not *whether* another violent episode will threaten their operations, but *when*.

In response to this new paradigm and to high-profile incidents such as those against MSF hospitals in Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria, scholarly research has generated a number of articles, white papers, and books on humanitarian insecurity (Guidero 2020, 19). Most of this research revolves around external threats while neglecting the internal mechanisms that humanitarian organisations employ to mitigate security incidents. For that reason, unfortunately, there is currently little focus on the internal processes of risk management, so that our understanding of INGOs' decision-making processes is still far from comprehensive (Campbell et al. 2018, 7). INGOs can be very different from one another, which can have important implications for how they make security-related decisions (Guidero 2020, 3). They may have difference donors and funding structures, different mandates, different decision-making structures, and different sets of internal rules; to name a few.

Despite normative calls for INGOs to be more proactive and act ahead of hostilities, very little work has been done to learn how they behave in the run-up to escalation. Projects such as Humanitarian Outcome's Secure Access in

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[7] 'Humanitarian space' refers to an operational environment that allows humanitarian actors to provide assistance and services according to humanitarian principles and in line with international humanitarian law (Overseas Development Institute 2010, 2).

Volatile Environments (SAVE) have helped provide empirical evidence to determine the effect of violence against INGO workers on the quality and quantity of assistance (Stoddard 2016, 51). However, so far, no work has sought to explain how the prospect of violence affects INGOs' presence. Much like the research problem faced by the SAVE project, nothing more than anecdotal evidence is available; thus, there is no systematic effort to explain how INGOs anticipate and react to the prospect of spikes in violence.

Situated at the intersection between international relations, conflict studies, and organisational decision-making, this study's findings may be of multidisciplinary benefit as well. The originality of the present research lies in the fact that existing scholarship on international relations has failed to explain how different INGOs react to and anticipate the possibility of escalating violence in areas where they operate. This is in spite of despite INGOs having every interest in securing themselves against potential damage arising from the escalation of conflicts.

Concerning conflict studies, this study could help provide a better understanding of the challenges faced by actors seeking to navigate the pre-escalation stage of a conflict. Unfortunately, the current literature focuses excessively on the features of conflict and post-conflict settings. Regrettably, such focus risks losing track of significant political and social events that make up conflicts, which are the structural conditions and triggers that lead to conflict escalation. By drawing more attention to the pre-escalation stage, this work fosters a more comprehensive understanding of how conflicts come about as well as the main cues to conflict escalation.

Concerning literature on early warning, this research's findings may shed light on the untapped potential to use INGOs' behaviours as both proxies of conflict risk and as key informants of early warning systems. Regarding political risk analysis, this work provides an excellent opportunity for fostering adaptation of theories in this field to the world of international aid delivery. In the current state of the art of political risk analysis, most studies still focus on models built for transnational enterprises, which, according to Barton et al. (2008 10), emphasise a very narrow set of mostly economic indicators. Consequently,

these models can be blindsided by other relevant indicators of conflict risk for which they fail to account. Thus, the findings on the indicators and sources used by INGOs in conflict settings may help scholars in this field to broaden and refine their theories.

Moreover, this thesis fits within the heated debate over the securitisation of aid (Pahlman 2015, 49). For quite some time since the advent of modern humanitarian aid, humanitarians were enabled to work in acutely violent places by a combination of myths about courage, character and adventure, associated with negotiations at the foundation of prudent risk management (Neuman, Weissman 2016, 17). More recently, however, the balance between intrepid action and the prioritisation of staff safety has tipped in favour of the latter. As a result, the securitisation of aid has become a major defining factor in the operating environment of aid agencies. The main focus of attention is on the assumed heightening of security risks to humanitarian and other aid workers and assets resulting from their association with political and military elements of international interventions (Collinson, Duffield 2013, 20). Hopefully, this research's findings will inform this debate by providing a better understanding of the underlying reasons for why INGOs may choose between more risk-tolerant or risk-averse approaches to their operations. It may also help inform decision-makers in INGOs of shortcomings in their attempts to read and adapt to future conflict, thus enabling them to adjust their expectations and improve their risk-mitigating strategies.

The aims of this study are four-fold:

1. To describe how different INGOs assess the likelihood of conflict in areas where they operate;

2. To explain the conditions and trade-offs that apply to different INGOs while reacting to the prospect of political instability;

3. To evince the main drivers of their decisions and the trade-offs that these decision-makers face while choosing between security strategies;

4. To contribute to several bodies of literature, including international relations, conflict studies, organisational decision-making, and political risk.

1.5. Outline of Chapters

The remainder of this monograph consists of six chapters. Chapter 2 reviews concepts relevant to how INGOs assess risk and make decisions, culminating in a conceptual framework that will serve as the backdrop against which INGOs' behaviours are compared. Chapter 3 outlines the research design adopted for this research; there the reader can find a detailed explanation of how data was collected and analysed during this study. Chapter 4 provides an update on the conceptual model after considering insights gathered from interviews with academics. Chapter 5 provides an overview of the South Sudanese conflict – the political and security context faced by INGOs – as well as a description of the NGO community in that country and the presentation of the seven case studies analysed by this research. Chapter 6 describes and analyses the data collected during interviews with INGO staff and staff at related organisations, as well as during document analysis. Lastly, Chapter 7 concludes this monograph with a summary of key findings and a reflection on this thesis's contributions and implications for future research.

2. Conflicts on the Making, High-Stakes Decision-Making

The purpose of this monograph is to explain how decision-makers in INGOs anticipate and react to the risk of low-level conflicts escalating into full-blown conflicts. In other words, the puzzle is to explain different reactions, by different organisations, to the same political risk event.

The present chapter aims to identify what elements should be taken into account to explain this phenomenon and elaborate a conceptual model. This chapter incorporates scattered contributions on conflict studies, political risk analysis and organisational decision-making to tailor a model that is useful for the present research.

The first section of this chapter is devoted to how escalations come into being and the challenges the decision-makers face when dealing with surges of violence that have yet to materialise (2.1). The second section discusses the options available to INGOs in the face of potential conflicts (2.2). In the third section, the reader finds a discussion on how INGOs develop and maintain an understanding of the situation in which they find themselves and assess the likelihood of having their operations disrupted by the potential escalation of conflicts (2.3). The fourth section discusses the factors that influence the level of risk that INGOs are willing to take (2.4). The fifth section examines how standard operating procedures might affect the decisions of INGOs (2.5). The sixth section makes a case for studying decision-making across levels within an organisation, highlighting how interests and risk perceptions of staff at different levels within an organisation might differ (2.6). Lastly, the seventh section presents the conceptual model that summarises this chapter's ideas and provides a short conclusion (2.7).

2.1. Pre-Escalation: The Story Behind Peaks of Violence

Armed conflicts do not just come out of the blue. They require a back story tracing far back before violence peaks. While no two crises are alike, there will

generally be some warning that the situation is deteriorating and the prospect of violence becomes apparent. Contemporary civil wars tend to have an intermittent quality, dying down for some years before coming to life again. Conflicts may simmer for years at low intensity, then erupt or re-erupt into full-scale civil war (Hironaka 2009, 150). With that in mind, it makes more sense to look at wars as processes rather than one-shot independent events (Florea 2012, 84).

2.1.1. Stages of a conflict: War as a Process

Understanding wars as processes is not a new idea. In 1832, Clausewitz already hinted at this notion with his famous aphorism that war is the continuation of politics by other means (Clausewitz 1989, 19). It is the description of this process that has evolved over the years. To facilitate the understanding of war as a process, it has become common to describe conflicts as passing through a series of phases (Brahm 2003). Unfortunately, scholars still cannot seem to agree on how many phases there should be or what names should be assigned to each of them. Indeed, this controversy is exacerbated by the fact that, in real life, divisions between different phases of conflict are seldom clear-cut, so that most models to explain these various phases are somewhat idealised (Rothschild 2003). Nonetheless, characterising conflicts in different phases is a worthwhile effort both in academic and policy circles. By recognising the different dynamics occurring at each stage of a conflict, one can analyse how strategies and tactics for participants and interveners differ depending on the conflict phase.

To exemplify the differences existent between authors regarding the phases that constitute conflicts, provide two examples. The first is the four-phase division from Sriram and Wermester (2003), who proposed to divide conflicts into a potential conflict Phase; a gestation phase; a triggering and escalation phase; and, a post-conflict phase. The table in the next page summarises how they identified these phases.

Phases	Characteristics
Potential conflict Phase	• Violence at a low level of intensity • Elites start mobilising collective discontent but without catalysing it into organised groups.
Gestation Phase	• Contended issues and conflicting groups are more defined • Polarisation between groups increases, violence is more likely, and small-scale incidents can occur
Triggering and Escalation Phase	• Start of mass violence • Inter-elite ties break down, and social interactions focus on organised violence as political exchanges fade.
Post-Conflict Phase	• De-escalation of violence • Preventive interventions aim at re-establishing peaceful ties and communication channels between the conflicting groups to avoid a new round of violence

Table 2-1: Author's summary of Sriram and Wermester conflict phases (2003)

In contrast, Herman Kahn (1965, 185) devised phases around a hypothetical ladder of escalation with no less than 16 rungs, as shown in the figure below.

16	*Aftermath*
15	*Some Kind of "All Out War"*
14	*Complete Evacuation*
13	*Limited Non-Local War*
12	*Controlled Local War*
11	*Spectacular Show of Force*
10	*Super-Ready Status*
9	*Limited Evacuation*
8	*Intense Crisis*

7	*Limited Military Confrontation*
6	*Acts of Violence*
5	*Modest Mobilization*
4	*Show of Force*
3	Political Diplomatic and Economic Gestures
2	*Crisis*
1	*Subcrisis disagreement*

Table 2-2: Author's summary of Kahn 16 stage ladder (1965, 185)

Thus, if there is no agreed way of categorising phases of conflicts, how can this work define what it means with pre-escalation?

Perhaps the best effort was that of scholars who tried to work with the notion of latency (Brahm 2003; Bartos, Wehr 2002). In their definition, the latent stage would be a time of non-violence in which background conditions for the occurrence of conflict are already present, but barring a trigger, conflict does not go off. There is writing on the wall, but no conflict. Much like a barrel of oil or a powder keg, a spark is needed to be ignite full-blown conflicts: a triggering event. This trigger, which can also be called an accelerator (Schmidt 1998), is an integral part of pre-escalation. This notion, however, fails to account for the escalation of low-level conflicts escalating into a full-blown war, as latency for this authors implies a lack of violence altogether. A more appropriate starting point towards a comprehensive definition is to work from the very notion of escalation and then work backwards in time. Since the term pre-escalation entails a period that precedes escalation per se, it makes sense first to define what escalation means. The term escalation first appeared in Western strategic literature in the 1950s, apparently in Britain (Freedman 1981, 210). Since then, it has become a somewhat big word in academic and policy circles, particularly during the Cold War. Although it was sometimes used with slightly different meanings, Morgan et al. (2008, 13) argue that there is a large consensus that escalation could be defined along the lines of an increase in the intensity or scope

of conflict that crosses certain thresholds that inaugurate a new, more violent, phase of a conflict.

There are three different processes through which escalations may come into being. The first is a change from an incipient to a full-blown crisis. The second is a change from a non-violent to a violent crisis. The third is a change from no or low violence to severe violence. Considering the chronology of escalation, one could equate pre-escalation to the first state of affairs in each of the three processes outlined above, where violence has not yet risen to reach the level to be considered a full-blown conflict.

In hindsight, it is not hard to spot where escalation takes place in most crises. Seconds after looking at the following graphics on the number of conflict events in Mali and Lybia, one can surely spot the timing of escalation of each of these crises.
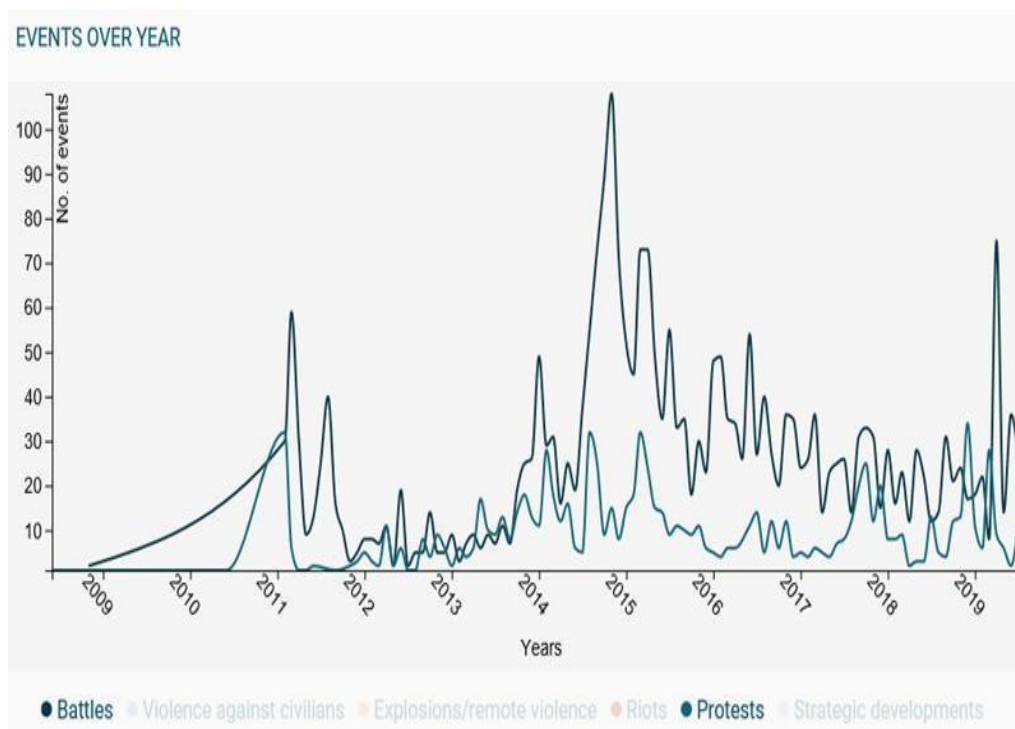
Figure 2:1: Number of battle and protest events in Mali. 2010 to 2019. Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). Graphics generated using ACLED's Dashboard on 10 December, 2018
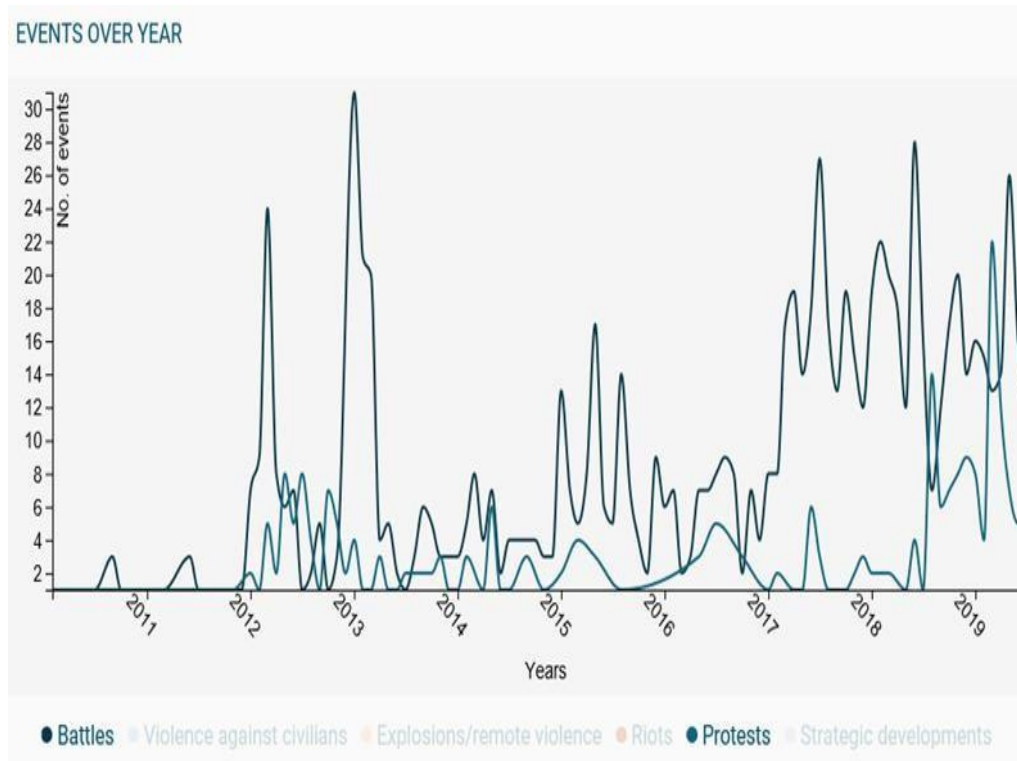
Figure 2:2 Number of battle and protest events in Libya from 2008 to 2019. Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). Graphics generated using ACLED's Dashboard on 10 December, 2018)

In both cases, the moment of escalation is easily identifiable. There is a substantial spike in terms of violence in particular points of each graphic that coincide with the time these crises are considered to have escalated. In the first graphic, violence reaches peaks in late 2011 and early 2013. These moments coincide with the beginning of clashes against the Touareg group Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad in the first moment and the beginning of the French-led international intervention in the second. In the second graphic, the rise in conflict events at the beginning of 2011 corresponds to when protests against then-president Muammar Gaddafi turned violent, and violence peaked until the formation of the National Transition Council. In both cases, it is noticeable that a certain degree of tension was already in place. What the events mentioned above did was changing the characteristics of the conflict, both qualitatively and quantitatively. That is why one can consider them as the triggers for escalation in each case.

However, the problem investigated by this thesis is not identifying these escalation points in hindsight, but how INGOs act to anticipate escalation while

still in the pre-escalation stage of a conflict. A fully developed conflict poses a straightforward challenge: once a crisis becomes manifest, crisis managers must take measures to deal with its consequences. However, dealing with conflicts that have not yet escalated requires a different approach, as decision-makers have to rely on warning signs that a crisis is imminent to take action regarding consequences that are still in the future (Boin 2009, 30).

2.1.2. Features of the Pre-Escalation Stage

Now that the concept of pre-escalation is clear, it is imperative to identify the challenges presented by this phase of crises. The importance of focusing on these fundamental characteristics of the pre-escalation stage is in line with the observations made by Slater and Simmons (2010, 886) that political scientists cannot answer the biggest 'why' questions without careful attention to the question of 'when'. The existence of a pre-escalation setting is no mere background condition for explaining the behaviour of INGOs. On the contrary, it directly affects how these organisations will perceive the context they operate and their decision-making modes.

When explaining the causes of a given conflict, one must look at the key determinants that led a particular situation to reach its breaking point. Theoretical and empirical research on the determinants of conflict is well developed and probably represents the largest share of existing civil conflict literature (Fearon, Laitin 2003; Collier, Hoeffler, Soderbom 2004; Hegre and Sambanis 2006). However, there is little work on how organisations, including INGOs, keep themselves aware of these determinants.

When trying to make sense of a complex environment, organisations are often at risk of missing warning signs. For instance, a report produced by Cosgrave and Baker (2002) over CARE International's operations in Afghanistan revealed that there was little preparedness for sudden-onset crises like the post 9/11 situation either by the Country Office or on the Regional Management Unit levels. Not only were there no evacuation, relocation, regrouping plans, but neither were there contingency plans for programming in

the face of such a crisis. As a result, the organisation had to mobilise reactively to cope with rising risks to its staff and programme in that country. In other words, the organisation was unable to pick up warning signs about a possible conflict escalation in Afghanistan and thus fail to act in anticipation of it. Other organisations, however, performed better in picking up those signals, as Oliker et al. (2004, 66) report that days after the 9/11 attacks, a major evacuation of UN and NGO staff began in the country, in anticipation of the retaliatory military by the US. By the start of Operation Enduring Freedom on 7 October 2001, which effectively initiated significant US military engagement in the country, most of the international community was already off-the-field.

The biggest question then becomes, why were some organisations able to pick up cues to conflict escalation in Afghanistan while others, like CARE, missed them. The answer lies in the challenges posed by the pre-escalation setting.

Three characteristics make pre-escalation setting hard to navigate. The first of these characteristics is uncertainty. Uncertainty is a ubiquitous feature of armed conflict and will always be the norm in emergencies (Kalra et al. 2014). The notion of uncertainty has been part of conflict studies for centuries, as epitomised by Clausewitz depiction of the 'fog of war', a term he used to refer to inherent uncertainties that exist in theatres of war due to limited information about one's capability and intent. Uncertainty itself may be necessary for the onset of wars, given that one of the fundamental explanations for why bargaining might break down into war is incomplete information on the side of at least one of the participants.

In conflict settings, high levels of uncertainty are typical for two reasons. Firstly, relevant information about a given crisis is usually scarce, and sources that decision-makers find are often unreliable (Danielsson, Ohlsson 1999). Secondly, although there are some indications of which factors heighten the risk of war, our knowledge about this phenomenon's deep causes is still incomplete and controversial (Barton, Hippel 2008, 11).

It is because of uncertainty that it is so hard to anticipate slow-onset crises, which refer to instances where protracted ethnic, economic and social tension

are simmering for a while, a certain degree of violence is already in place, but suddenly it evolves into an all-out emergency (OCHA 2011, 4). Although violence may seem expected for observers, the start of a phase of heightened violence may catch several stakeholders by surprise, as the mentioned lack of reliable information, if much is known at all, allied with the lack of knowledge over what are the catalysts of each crisis, cloud organisation's ability to anticipate the timing of escalation.

A second important characteristic of pre-escalation settings is complexity (Cederman & Weidmann, 2017). Conflicts typically encompass an unwieldy set of actors interacting in surprising and, by definition, rule-breaking ways. This notion is captured by the concept of creeping crises, which refer to cases where warnings are given but in unrecognisable patterns that prevent decision-makers from clearly seeing the looming crisis (Bernstein 2011). Even though actors would ideally prefer to digest every piece of information about a conflict, they are still bound by their ability to make sense of everything they see.

Uncertainty and complexity, thus, pose different but complementary challenges for decision-makers. The former is rooted in missing information. The latter has its roots in the complexity of the environment that the decision-makers have to face and the limits to human cognitive nature. Organizational decision theories can yield insights into how organizations arrive at decisions under various circumstances but do not adequately account for complexity and uncertainty, which influences the quality of decision making (Higgens and Freedman 2013; Snowden and Kurtz 2003). In such environments, causal relationships are not readily apparent. Decisions are not always based on maximizing utility or avoiding loss, and actors might not act with intention, making the 'right' decision difficult.

The third characteristic that permeates pre-escalation settings is time pressure. Organisations cannot precisely know the day and time when conflict is going to occur, if ever. The problem derived from this situation is that every action taken by an organisation at the moment leading up to an increase in violence may be its last chance to act before the powder keg explodes. Waiting too long for a decision may have catastrophic consequences for INGOs. For

decision-makers, the sense of time pressure means that decisions need to be made faster, with less time for gathering and deliberating over conflict risk information (White, Turoff 2010, 30).

In sum, in pre-escalation settings, INGOs find themselves in a situation of high uncertainty and complexity in which an increase in the intensity or scope of a specific conflict is imminent. The following section will address the strategies available to these INGOs to cope with the risk of escalation.

2.2. Security Strategies

The term nongovernmental organisation (NGO) refers to not-for profit private entities with a social purpose. Their overarching goal is to advance a social cause (Moore 2000; Baruch, Ramalho 2006), while satisfying donors' desires to contribute to the cause that the organization embodies (Oster 1995, 139-143). The adjective 'international' in INGOs defines a subgroup of NGOs that have a transboundary operational presence, meaning that they have invested resources, employed staff and built infrastructure for setting up operations in a country other than their home-country.

While operating interntionaly, INGOs often set up operations in places where security is delicate and needs of local populations are greatest. Consequently, operating under fragile security conditions means that INGOs are more often than not managing threats to their operations, and have to devise strategies to cope with risks associated with their activities.

In the introduction to this monograph, the tension between self-preservation and aid delivery was presented as the main trade-off faced by INGOs when deciding whether it is worth operating in an area at risk of heightened violence. As argued, avoiding security risks favours the preservation of staff members' assets and well-being but might result in the suspension of aid delivery to locals in need. Conversely, the decision to continue operating means that aid delivery does not stop, but staff and assets might be put in harm's way. The present section situates these two options, henceforth called avoidance and stay, within the array of different security strategies from which INGOs can choose.

The most common reference to the possible security strategies that an INGO choose from is the so-called security triangle. Made famous by the Good Practice Review 8 (GPR 8), produced by the Humanitarian Practice Network, the triangle is made up of the following ideal strategies (Van Brabant 2010, 55):

o Acceptance: INGOs seek to reduce threats by convincing local actors to accept their presence via constant negotiations.

o Protection: INGOs implement measures to physically protect their staff and assets (e.g. building fortified compounds).

o Deterrence: INGOs seek to reduce threats by posing a counter-threat (e.g. hiring private security)

These strategies are generally considered the cornerstone of security (Martin 1999, 4), especially for NGOs. Traditionally, INGOs relied primarily upon acceptance as a more or less taken-for-granted strategy. If acceptance failed, INGOs would discontinue their operations. Over time, however, protection and deterrence strategies have become more common.

However, Schneiker (2015, 37) and others (Childs 2013; Schafer, Murphy 2011) argue that some organisations have reshaped the security triangle into a rectangle to include a fourth strategy: avoidance. In this case, organisations either do not engage in or withdraw from an area or a whole country because of the high level of insecurity. This is not a new strategy, having existed, albeit implicitly sometimes, ever since the Without Borders movement in the 1970s. The avoidance strategy can also encompass choices such as relocations, evacuations hibernation and remote management (Van Brabant 2010, 6).

To be more precise on the strategies that can be considered avoidance, one could refer to the Security Terminology Project (Dick 2010, 15). Per this project, three avoidance strategies can be discerned:

o Evacuation: the withdrawal of staff across an international border when the maximum level of acceptable risk has been surpassed, usually because of imminent danger to operations. Evacuation also involves program suspension.

o   Relocation: the physical withdrawal of staff and possibly assets from one area where conditions are insecure to a safer area within the same country.

o   Hibernation: staying in a relatively secure structure and location while keeping a low profile amid a danger zone because relocation/evacuation is not possible and program operations cannot continue.

As it will be argued in more detail during the operationalisation of these strategies in the next chapter, it is typically not hard to determine whether an INGO has decided between an avoidance or a stay strategy. On the stay strategy, an INGO's presence in a country is usually a very public matter, as INGOs seek visibility for their work in order to appeal to financial backers. Regarding the avoidance strategy, an INGO's decision to leave a country is a highly public act, which has a significant bearing on an agency's image within a community or country. Because of its impact, such decisions are usually accompanied by press releases that make organisations' choices more or less obvious (Muggah, Berman 2000, 3).

2.3. Same Event, Different Readings: Conflict Risk Assessments.

The previous section made the case that the pre-escalation stage of a conflict contains hints regarding the possibility of escalation. Which begs the question of how do INGOs maintain awareness of the environment around them and assess the likelihood of possible conflict escalations? In answering this question, one could look into the challenges faced by INGOs while assessing risks and explore how different perceptions of risk might lead to different decisions. To explain how these risk assessments come about, this section resorts to contributions from the political risk analysis (PRA) literature and evidence provided by INGOs' security manuals.

2.3.1.   Political risk analysis and why risk perceptions are bound to differ.

PRA is mostly a product of globalisation and increasing transnational activities. It started to materialise roughly from the 1960s when multinational companies from the developed world expanded their operations in the developing world with unprecedented speed (Jarvis, Griffiths 2007, 5). Such expansion and the need to better understand the challenges of politically volatile countries fostered the development of studies and practices on how these multinational organisations would continue their operations despite the risks they faced, guiding their investment decisions. To realise how the influence of PRA has grown in recent decades, one has only to look at the proliferation of firms and agencies devoted to this activity, such as Business Environment Risk Intelligence, Control Risks, Eurasia Group, Oxford Analytica, and many others.

The contributions from PRA started reaching INGOs and international organisations in the mid-1990s. For these organisations, attention to political risk was due to increased relief operations and the number of humanitarian personnel working amid conflicts. For example, the World Food Programme's staff increased tenfold (from approximately 1,500 to 11,400 permanent employees) between 1995 and 2014, and MSF's national and international staff grew from 12,000 in 1998 to 36,500 in 2014 (Neuman, Weissman 2016, 16). Also, the location of aid organisations *vis-a-vis* conflict changed after the end of the Cold War, with more organisations working at the very centre of conflicts rather than at its margins (Patey 2003, 3; Laaksonen 2018, 12). In the face of these developments, a new approach to risk and security was required.

The adoption and development of risk management frameworks in the aid sector and the creation of specific posts for managing risk within INGOs was a move encouraged by Western donors and was indicative of the growing professionalism of their sector (Neuman, Weissman 2016, 23). A token of the growing acceptance of these risk management frameworks by the aid sector is the seminal Stay and Deliver report produced by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), a document that calls INGOs to become enable their work in challenging environments by promoting risk frameworks (Egeland et al. 2011, 3).

The growing implementation of these risk frameworks accompanies a fundamental paradigmatic shift in humanitarian affairs, as aid organisations become more focused on 'how to stay in' instead of 'when to leave' high-risk environments (Egeland et al. 2011, 7).

Judging by a review of INGOs' security manuals, risk assessment seems to occupy a central position in how they manage security. For instance, Care International's Personal and Security Handbook clearly warns its affiliates to "Know the risks! Only then can you make informed decisions about which safety and security measures to adopt" (Bickley 2014, 10). Similarly, the Guidebook for NGO Standards for Safety and Security produced by JaNISS, a Japanese NGO alliance, states that risk assessments are essential for NGOs to pursue their missions (JaNISS 2018, 10).

However, this section's central argument is that even when confronted with the same political risk event, different INGOs will have different readings of the political events that lead to an escalation of a conflict and will attribute different probabilities to the prospects of escalation of a conflict. This is due to two elements that distinguish risk assessments between INGOs: which indicators they use as cues to the risk of escalation and the source of information on these indicators.

2.3.2. Selection of Indicators

Given that risk assessments can be only as good as the information that goes into them, this work pays special attention to the indicators used by INGOs as cues to conflict risk. The reason is simple: INGOs that select different risk indicators will also have different perceptions regarding the possibility of escalation in a conflict. Thus, determining when to evacuate can be complicated by agencies having different interpretations of the same security situation (Van Brabant 2010, 54)

Indicators can be identified as predictors, precursor events or other telling signals used to anticipate events (Schmid 1997:50). However, measuring risks is not a straightforward matter. The selection of indicators across different

organisations is bound to differ because of how the concept of risk can be characterised. Like many other social sciences concepts, political risks have loosely defined lines (Cartwright 2011, 2). For instance, if an organisation wants to assess how serious ethnic tensions are in a given country, what indicators should it select? The lack of one definitive answer to such a question demonstrates why risk assessments from different organisations will invariably yield different results, as indicators for the same concept, conflict risk, vary significantly.

One of the reasons for such massive variation in indicators is that a theory is often absent or not explicit for models used to analyse risks. Variables sometimes seem to be chosen because they are hot issues or come readily to decision-makers' minds (Howell 2014, 309). To illustrate how different INGOs select indicators to the same level, one could simply look at the two figures juxtaposed below, extracted from security manuals from CARE International and Save the Children, respectively.

Security Risks Categories	Indicators
Minimal (Blue)	• No security events
Low (Green)	• Minor insignificant and isolated incidents, curfews, riots • No immediate threats in agency project areas and capital
Medium (Yellow)	• Tension and minor incidents at checkpoints • Minor clashes between armed groups without civilian casualties • NGOs affected accidentally but no injuries on staff • Serious but isolated attacks on civilians (mine explosion) • Suicide bombings in agency project areas • Few aerial bombings outside agency project areas
High (Orange)	• Escalation of armed conflict in agency project areas • Major clashes between armed groups with civilian casualties • Communal violence affecting civilians directly • Serious but isolated attacks on civilians in capital (suicide bombs) • Aerial bombings in agency project areas
Extreme (Red)	• Breakdown in law and order • Repeated attacks on civilians and vital installations in capital • Deliberate, repeated attacks on NGO staff • Full scale armed conflict in most districts

Level	General indicators
Level 1 (Normal)	• Secure situation within the country/area. • No outward signs of significant social disruption or instability. • Crime is within normal limits and a functioning system of justice is in place. • Free and unrestricted movement of staff at all times. • No observable threat to Save the Children staff. • Programme activities continuing as normal.
Level 2 (Tense)	• Significant political, economic and social unrest is present. • High crime, ineffective police and/or justice systems. • Local animosity/hostility towards UN and NGOs, but not directed at Save the Children staff. • Some restrictions on movement of staff in certain locations. • Programme activities carrying on as normal but with a need for extra care and diligence.
Level 3 (Insecure)	• Substantial deterioration in the security situation. • General lawlessness, incidents of rioting or looting reported. • Emergency or martial law declared. • Organised anti-government or terrorist groups threatening government stability. • Assassinations of prominent leaders/politicians. • Terrorist activities or other violence indicates foreigners are being targeted. • Localised incidents of fighting between specific groups, or as a result of military activity. • Staff movement and presence in particular areas, or at particular times, is restricted. • Programme activities restricted.
Level 4 (Dangerous)	• Widespread civil unrest and indiscriminate violence. • Fighting or military actions close to area of operations. • Credible threat against NGOs or towards Save the Children staff. • Staff relocated from particular areas, and possible further relocation of staff. • All staff movements restricted. • Programme activities restricted to essential 'life saving' activities or suspended.
Level 5 (Untenable)	• Fighting or military actions in the immediate vicinity of Save the Children's offices and residences. • Security deteriorated to such an extent that it is considered unsafe, or impossible, to relocate/evacuate from the area/country. • Staff waiting for an opportunity to relocate/evacuate. • No movement of staff at any time unless as part of a relocation/evacuation. • Programme activities suspended.

Figure 2:4: Security Risk Classifications used at CARE Iinternational. Source: Bickley (2010, 49)

Figure 2:3: Security Risk Classification and indicators used by Save the Children (2011, 80)

Both organisations represent risks on a scale containing five different levels. However, what each organisation selects as indicators for each level differs significantly.

Considering these differences, our conceptual model must include selecting indicators as an essential part of risk assessments. These indicators are crucial for understanding why different INGOs might give different interpretations to the same environment.

2.3.3. Gathering Information

It is essential to know what INGOs use as indicators to risk. However, it is also important to know where they get information about these indicators. The importance of investigating the source of an organisation's information about risk is based on the fact that some INGOs might have access to information that others do not. Differences in information sources matter, as the context of insecurity makes it harder for most actors to collect reliable data on relevant risks (Carle, Chkam 2006, 28).

This preoccupation with getting access to reliable information is a concern of all INGOs. For instance, in an introduction to risk assessments, the author of the International Committee of the Red Cross's security guidelines states that "Information is a fundamental element of security. Using reliable internal information, the ICRC can anticipate events and react appropriately as situations evolve or when dangers arise during field trips" (Dind 1999, 3).

This monograph distinguishes indirect and direct sources of information regarding risks. This choice is justified by the common belief that organisations with access to grassroots information—that is, direct information gathered through interaction with local actors— have an edge in detecting increasing tensions (Bakker 2001, 7). Therefore, it is important that the source of information used by an INGO should be part of our conceptual model. Doing so will allow us to investigate whether different access to information influences INGOs' perceptions regarding emerging threats.

2.4. The threshold of acceptable risk: How much risk to accept

When deciding on the continuation of operations, INGOs are in general agreement that the benefits of the organization's activities should always outweigh the level of risk to its staff, assets and reputation (Rowley et al. 2013, 6). INGOs, therefore, compare how much risk they believe to be facing with a measure of how much risk they are willing and able to accept. In sum, they perform a cost-benefit analysis that can be summarised in the figure below.
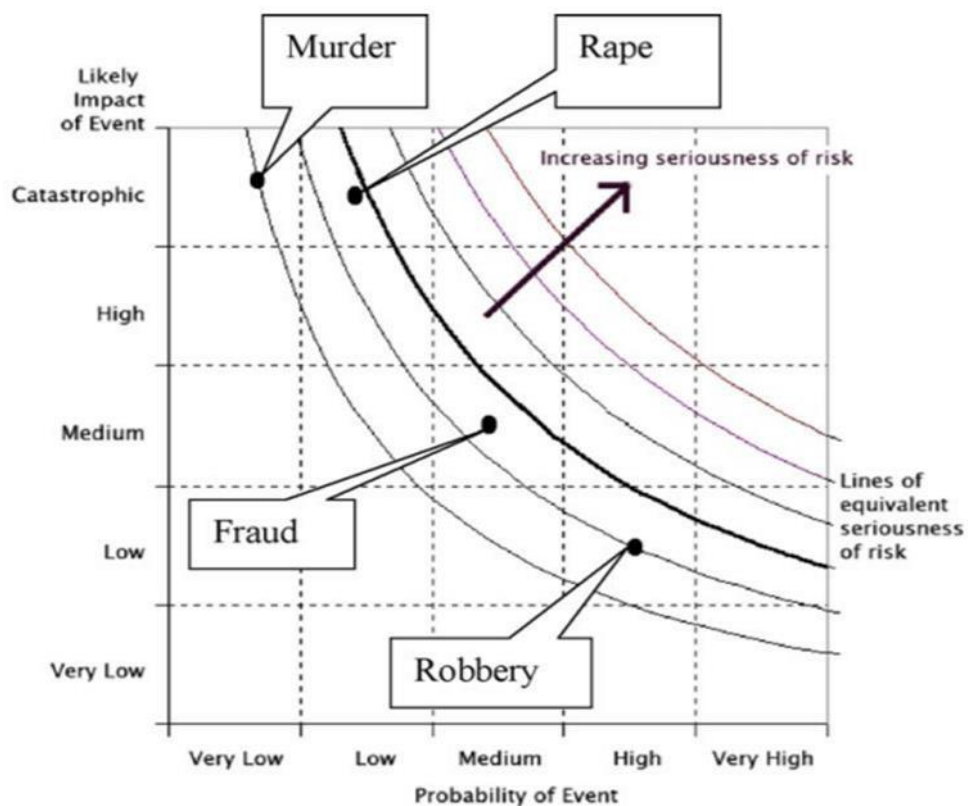
Figure 2:5: Illustration of a generic organisation's risk threshold (Rowley et al. 2013, 18)

The curved lines represent the thresholds of risk, which is how much risk an organisation is willing and able to accept (Van Brabant 2000. Pag. 76). By analysing this threshold of acceptable risk, the intent is to include rational elements in the model, enabling us to estimate whether an INGO risk appetite would be lower or higher. This is similar to the intent behind Graham Alisson's rational model, in which "rational choice consists simply of selecting that alternative whose consequences ranks highest in the decision maker's payoff

function; value-maximizing choice within special constraints" (Bendor 1992, 304)

The importance of including an analysis on the threshold of acceptable risk is also justified by recent research from Guidero (2020, 19), which indicates that most international aid agencies have clearly defined risk thresholds defined by the organizations. Being so, this section identifies and discusses four elements that influence the threshold of acceptable risk for INGOs: Their mandate, prior experience with conflicts, the influence of donors, and their dependence on other actors to stay operational.

2.4.1. Mandate

How much risk INGOs accept depends on what they want to achieve in their activities. In order words, risks are only acceptable if the benefits of continuing operations outweigh security threats (Dind 1998, 434). In this thesis, I resort to the differentiation between humanitarian and development mandates. According to Metcalfe et al. (2011, 6), humanitarian and development INGOs have different approaches to risk, with the latter often assumed or expected to have a more cautious stance towards programmatic and institutional risks.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), humanitarian organisations are those whose mandate is related to responding to emergencies, focusing their assistance on short-term aid delivered in response to a particular event (Byman et al. 2000, 64). In turn, the mandate of development organisations is focused on long-term projects aimed at providing recipients with the means to over systematic social, economic and political problems.

Kingston et al. (2010, 4) note that INGOs with development mandates are usually not equipped to deal with operational security deterioration. Since their activities are not essentially life-saving, more often than not, staff will not have access to proper training nor infrastructure to deal with high levels of risk. Conversely, humanitarian organisations and their staff are prepared for severe insecurity even before deployment. Moreover, for humanitarian INGOs, staying

in high-risk areas usually attracts positive donor and media attention, which encourages them to stay. In short, if the intended mission of an INGO is neither lifesaving nor aimed at addressing acute suffering, it is more likely that such an INGO might choose a avoidance strategy.

2.4.2. Influence of Donors

In the past three decades, the number of INGOs worldwide has grown at an impressive pace, as aid has "become a big business" (Smillie, Minear 2004, 33). In this context, an aid marketplace was formed, with INGOs becoming vendors of goods and services much like a for-profit organisation. To survive, INGOs seek to align their interest with that of donors, aiming to attract more funds.

In general, it is argued that the more aid agencies depend on states, the less freedom they have in their decisions on security (Barnett 2009, 625) since private and public stakeholders have significantly different reasons for supporting an INGO. Individual private donations are generally linked to a desire to genuinely help others, thus pushing INGOs to become more risk-taking, especially in very publicised emergencies. Conversely, government donations are usually deemed to be associated with political motives. Thus, INGOs reliant on government funding struggle to appropriately manage risk around potential war settings, as this would require that donors—and ultimately their taxpaying public—accept some level of compromise when delivering aid during a conflict (Stoddard et al. 2010, 8).

2.4.3. Prior Experience with Conflict

In the literature on decision-making, a common assertion regarding decisions under high uncertainty conditions is that organisations are more likely to rely on more experienced staff members to make decisions (Neuman, Weissman 2016, 14). In these situations, experienced decision-makers do not make decisions by choosing between a variety of options. Instead, they use their

experience to narrow down their options according to what they have already been through. This process generally involves a comparison to prior known scenarios, applying the feedback from previous experiences into a new context (Lipshitz et al. 2001, 20).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the presence of experienced staff can increase the likelihood of an organisation choosing a stay strategy. To this phenomenon, two different explanations are available. The first is that experienced officers are less prone to knee-jerk reactions than their less-experienced counterparts (Weigand, Anderson 2019, 511). Thus, when faced with a risky situation, they are more likely to find a way to stay and deliver than panic and push for an evacuation. The second explanation is that having survived prior experiences in risk environments, experienced staff members tend to become emboldened and downplay risks as they arise (FaST2007, 137).

Evidence of this relationship between experience and increased risk-taking can be found in a follow-up study to the Stay and Deliver report, named Presence and Proximity. In this study, Jackson and Zyck (2013) find that NGOs whose ranks were filled with more experienced professionals were more likely to stay and deliver. The opposite holds, too: organisations with less experienced individuals were often more hesitant to stay in risky areas. Therefore,it is reasonable to expect that INGOs whose staffers are experienced in dealing with armed conflicts to have a higher risk threshold than those that do not.

2.4.4. Dependence on Others: Organizational infrastructure

The behaviour of other actors in the field will also significantly impact the behaviour of INGOs, especially when organisations make decisions while relying on the collaboration of others to stay operational. INGOs must consider how their relationship with other relevant actors may impact their capacity to operate in hazardous environments. The impact of dependence is straightforward: The more dependent an organisation is on other actors to continue its operations, the less likely it is to choose a stay strategy. The lack of

means to continue operations on their own would force INGOs to leave the field as soon as those supporting them leave as well.

During the literature review, two main actors upon which INGOs usually depend were identified: the United Nations (and its peacekeeping apparatus) and conflicting local parties. In the UN's case, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence of INGOs suspending operations as soon as the UN decided to leave. For instance, in an MSF report aptly entitled Where is Everyone, an MSF staffer referring to the escalation of the conflict in Yemen said that:

> "INGOs, for the most part, had evacuated because their contingency plans stated that they would if the UN decided that the security situation was too unsafe to remain. This was based on the fact that most INGOs did not have their security management capacity, particularly in terms of logistics." (Cunningham 2016, 7.)

Because the UN is recognised as usually a very risk-averse actor, organisations that rely on its support to stay operational will likely be less prone to choose a stay strategy. For instance, in a study on the humanitarian presence in Afghanistan produced one month after the U.S surge against the Taliban, Donini (2009), noted that a common trend in that country was that:

> "The UN would withdraw its international staff for long periods at the slightest incident (as when a provincial governor allegedly threw a coffee pot in the direction of a UN staff member). Yet Afghanistan was far safer for UN staff under the Taliban than at any time since the fall of the Taliban." (Donini 2009, 8)

In the case of reliance on local warring parties, dependence is linked to INGOs almost always having to negotiate their access with local actors. This

dependence is linked to the idea of 'humanitarian space' which is an agency's ability to operate freely and meet humanitarian needs.

Dependence on other actors works as a proxy of an organisation's infrastructure. Like the MSF and ICRC, some INGOs, commonly considered to own a significant infrastructure for the provision of its services, are deemed to possess a better chance to stay and deliver. This is precisely what happened in Yemen during the beginning of its Civil War in 2015, as the MSF and the ICRC were the only INGOs still present in the country after fighting broke out (Cunningham 2016, 8). According to one programme director from CARE International, although INGOs are left to make their own decision about whether to stay or go, the reliance on the UN to fly out of the country means sometimes they do not have a choice but to leave when the UN leaves (Ap Lieberman, Chadwick 2018). In this case, the reliance of INGOs on the UN for logistical matters forces INGOs into being more risk-averse than they would if they had logistical independence. Therefore, when INGOs have means of their own to account for their security in hazardous environments, it is less likely that they would feel the need to leave areas of potential conflict.

2.5. By the Book: Standard Operating Procedures

In the previous section, I mentioned the general agreement that INGOs should decide the continuation of their operations based on a cost-benefit calculus between the level of risk assessed by an organisation and its threshold of acceptable risk. However, the literature on decision-making signals another possibility: decisions might result not from this cost-benefit analysis but from decision-makers following pre-established rules of their organisation.

To understand this phenomenon, one could refer to Alisson's organisational behaviour model. Based on the works of March and Simon, Alisson constructed a model with the assumption that, when faced with a crisis, government leaders would not look at the crisis as a whole but break it down and assign it according to pre-established organizational lines (Allison, Zelikow 1999, 144) In this model, decisions were not the outcome of cost-benefit calculus of different

courses of action, instead of being the product of decision-makers trying to apply pre-established rules to find an adequate response.

Another theory that has reinforced the importance of studying SOPs is the Rule System theory. According to this theory, power within an organisation becomes formalized in the decision-making process, as organizations have an institutionalized way of establishing authoritative relationships, managing conflicts, and routinizing behaviour (Burns, Flam 1987; Zhou 1997). Such institutionalising effort from organisation aims to make individual decision-makers as replaceable as possible, providing a predictable and reliable behaviour for organisations to deal with their routine problems.

As is the case for many INGOs, big organisations often rely on the use of standard operating procedures (SOPs). SOPs are pre-established procedures drafted by organisations to orientate staff behaviour during particular situations (Beerli, Weissman 2016, 77). In other words, SOPs are rules that stipulate what people ought to do when faced with an event, deploying a logic of if this/then that. The decisions prescribed by SOPs can range from what to do in the routine day-to-day to how to manage an evacuation, report a critical incident and deal with specific threats.

The evidence on the use of SOPs during decisions about the continuation of projects can be found in several INGO security manuals. For example, Save the Children's safety handbook for aid workers clearly, addresses the need for the establishment of SOPs for evacuation state that:

> "It is important that all staff clearly understand the circumstances in which a relocation or evacuation from a particular site would be considered and the decision-making process. The plan should clearly define:
> • Relationship between the withdrawal of staff and the security levels and indicators for that location.
> • Who takes the decision to suspend activities, or relocate or evacuate staff. • Who co-ordinates the process. • How the decision is taken in the event of absence or loss of

communication or a sudden emergency." (Save the Children 2010, 40)

ACT, a Dutch INGO, also poses similar requirements to its members, noting that each of its national divisions should devise context-specific plans that describe: decision-making process; what would trigger the withdrawal of staff; security levels and associated procedures; evacuation routes; communication procedures; administrative procedures; essential emergency supplies; and checklists (ACT 2011, 77). Aware of the possible influence of these pre-established rules and knowing that INGOs often establish SOPs to guide evacuations, this element should be included in the conceptual model.

2.6. It depends on where you work: Field-HQ Interplay

The previous two sections explained the influence of the threshold of acceptable risk and SOPs on INGOs' decision-making. However, there is a recurrent explanation that needs an introduction: The interplay between staff at different levels of an INGO during security decisions. The central argument of this explanation is simple: willingness to stay or leave depends on where you work. This work distinguishes between three different organisational levels of an INGO.

- The headquarters-level: where decision-makers are located at the main seat of an organisation (e.g ICRC: Geneva);

- The national-level: where decision-makers are at the main office in the country where the INGO is operating (usually located in national capitals);

- The field-level: where staff members are stationed at subnational offices or local detachments.

Such an analysis of decision-making through the optics of inter-level interactions within INGOs is inspired by the governmental politics model, in which "multiple players with different policy preferences struggle, compete, and bargain over the substance and conduct of policy" (Allison 1971, 258)

In the case of INGOs, it is argued that risks are more likely to be downplayed by workers at the field level than those working at the national offices or HQ of an organisation. Roth (2015, 23) argues that field workers tend to refrain from strictly following security protocols, as some understand aid work as 'edgework'. This means that some field workers not only accept risks but desire them. Hillhorst et al. (2016, 44) even reported that a program manager of a medium-sized religious NGO said that some of his fellow aid workers in the field consider the security guidelines formulated by the NGO's staff at headquarters to be 'nuts' because they seek dangerous and risky situations to work.

Besides having different readings of risk, the interests of staff members at different levels are not always aligned, resulting in competition among different departments or employees for influence on decisions (Sogge, Zadek 1996, 76). On the one hand, HQ decision-makers are deemed to be more prone to restrict operations due to pressure of donors or superiors or simply because they lack a fuller understanding of the field's risk, taking a more cautious attitude. (Metcalfe, Martin, Pantuliano 2011). On the other hand, field workers will be more inclined to push for the continuation of operations, either because they deem risks as acceptable for the mission they are carrying out or because their jobs might be at stake if the INGO decides to end its operations. This turns the interplay across levels of an INGO into a political process. Thus, even in aid agencies that have formulated and adopted rules and procedures for how to work in dangerous environments, there might still be opposition to security risk management among staff (Fairbanks 2017), resulting, for example, in situations in which staff members do not follow the organizational security policies.

For different organizations, the decision is taken on different levels. While some humanitarian INGOs have centralised security management by creating separate security departments at their headquarters, that is not the case for all INGOs. Some INGOs are structured as organisational 'families', with an international branch that oversees various country branches with high degrees of independence. For instance, Care International's national divisions, such as Care UK and Care France, function as almost entirely independent organisations.

Another example of this decentralised approach comes from the MSF. Many sections of this organisation do not have a separate security structure but follow a decentralised approach in which security is every job's responsibility (Schneiker 2015, 51).

Considering the differences above in risk perceptions and interests of field and HQ staffers, it is reasonable to expect that organisations with more decentralised decision-making modes might be more likely to choose a stay strategy. In this scenario, the interests of field workers, who are considered most risk-taking, have more weight, so that they might have a better chance of influencing the outcome of decision-making.

2.7. *The Conceptual Model*

Summing up the previous sections, I have discussed the contours and characteristics of pre-escalation settings, explained what an avoidance and a stay strategy mean, argued about why INGOs are bound to have different risk assessments regarding the same event and examined the main elements influencing how INGOs turn such risk assessments into decisions. Considering all relevant concepts presented thus far, the present section formulates a conceptual model. Following the chronology of the process investigated, the general conceptual model consists of a two-step process. In the first step, INGOs will analyse the context in which they operate and produce risk assessments. In the second step, they will use these risk assessments to decide which security strategy (avoidance or stay) is the most suitable, considering the circumstances. The two steps are summarised in the two arrow diagrams (2-7 and 2-8) in the following page:
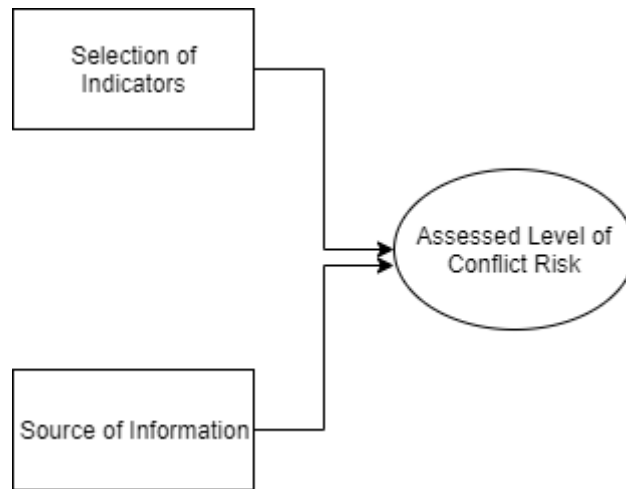
Figure 2:6: Arrow diagram representing the anticipation mechanism of the conceptual model
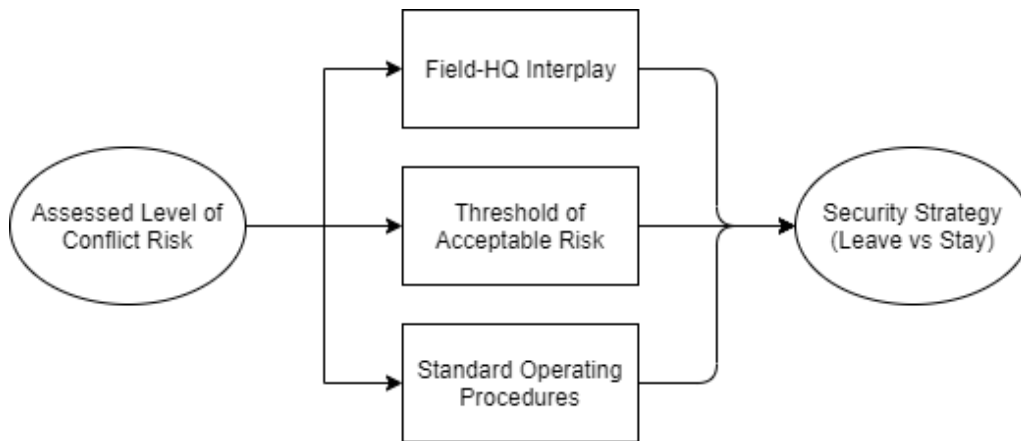
Figure 2:7: Arrow diagram representing the decision mechanism of the conceptual model

Two critical remarks regarding the conceptual model are in order. The first is the iterative nature of this process. Even though this research's interest is knowing what strategy was chosen by an INGO by the time that escalation started, thus ending the pre-escalation stage, the process of risk analysis and decision-making is repeated multiple time during the pre-escalation stage. This is because INGOs will re-evaluate their assessments and decisions in light of new relevant information. The second remark refers to the nature of causality. The process described above involves complex causation, meaning the outcome variable— whether an INGO chooses an avoidance or a stay strategy—results from several different possible combinations of independent and intervening variables (Braumoeller, 2003. Pag. 210). Therefore, it is hard to state which

variables will have more substantial explanatory power in each concrete case, as there any many possible combinations to the variables present in the model.

It would be beyond reason to expect that this framework captures every detail of how these organisations anticipate and react to the risk of civil war. Nevertheless, it provides a good approximation without overcomplicating an already complex phenomenon. In the next chapter, I will present the research design chosen to test this model.

3. Designing Research on Risk and Decisions

In the previous chapter, the factors that help us explain how INGOs anticipate and react to risk were examined. This effort culminated in the conceptual model of section 2.7. The current chapter aims to outline the steps taken during this research for testing the aforementioned conceptual model. Doing so justifies the methodology chosen for this study and provides clarity for those who would like to replicate this research in the future.

This chapter has four sections. The first section refers to the features of the structured, focused comparison and process tracing methods, explaining why combining these two methods of data analysis is a good fit for this research (3.1). The second section presents the operationalisation of the concepts included in the conceptual model (3.2). The third section concerns the choice of data collection methods and addresses issues related to research data management (3.3). Lastly, the fourth section briefly discusses validity, reliability, and generalisation issues related to this study's findings (3.4).

3.1. Combining process tracing and structured, focused comparison

To analyse the phenomenon in question—how INGOs react to the possibility of escalating conflicts— the present research proposes a combination of two data analysis methods: process-tracing and structured, focused comparison. The goal of combining both methods is to achieve findings that are both generalisable and detailed.

3.1.1. Case studies and the method of focused, structured comparison.

The research strategy chosen for this research involved comparing the decision-making process of seven different INGOs. While one could learn a lot about the process described above by investigating a single case, this analysis's conclusions could hardly be extrapolated to other cases without creating problems. This is because it would be hard to ensure that a single case-study

results were not idiosyncratic. Therefore, the intent behind the comparison of these seven cases is to allow generalisation.

For such a comparison, I employed the method of structured, focused comparison. This method plays out in three steps (George, Bennett 2009, 61). The first step is the identification of a class of events to be investigated. This class of events is called the 'focus' of the comparison. In the case of this thesis, I have compared the decision-making process of INGOs that were present in South Sudan during the run-up to the escalation of South Sudan's civil war on 7 July 2016. In other words, the focus is on how different INGOs anticipated and reacted to the risk of escalating violence in that country and in relation to one specific escalation point.

To have a clear focus, it is vital to have a well-defined timeframe. In this research, the timeframe of pre-escalation has its starting point at the signing of the Peace Agreement on 17 August 2015, which officially ended the first phase of the country's civil war, and its endpoint at the beginning of large-scale fighting between the government and rebels on 7 July 2016. The timeline below highlights these two events within the eight-year history of South Sudan.
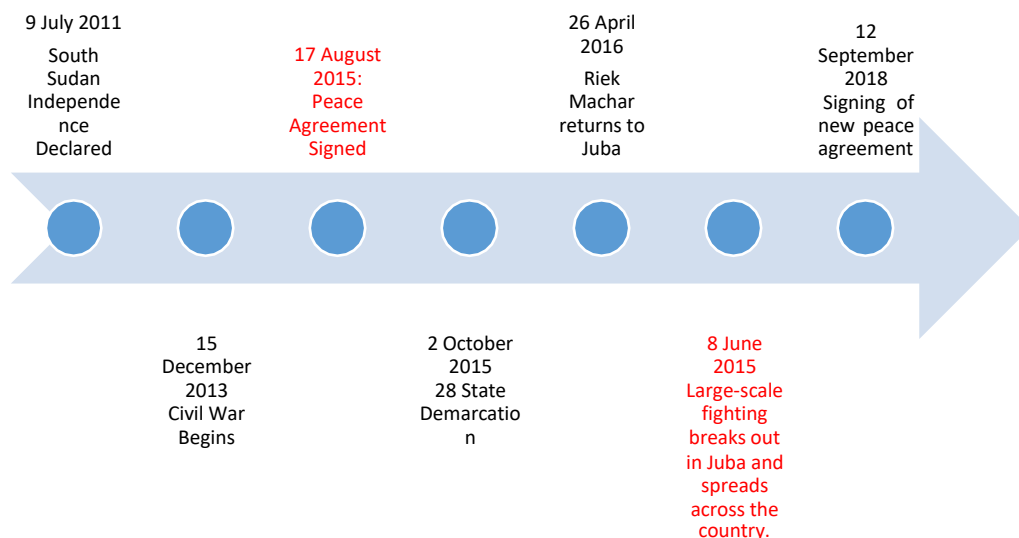
Figure 3:1: Summary timeline of South Sudanese history, with the start and end point of this research's temporal scope highlight in red.

The justification for using this particular escalation point, rather than the other major escalation point of this conflict—the beginning of the first phase of the civil war on 15 December 2013—is three-fold: The importance of this second escalation point in terms of aid workers affected; the massive presence of INGOs and the declining presence of INGOs in the country before escalation; and availability of data.

On the importance of this event for discussions over aid worker safety, it is essential to note that, much due to renewed violence, INGO staff casualties in South Sudan ranked first among all countries in 2016, with more than double the number of runner-up Afghanistan, per Aid Worker Security Database (2019). It is also noteworthy that South Sudan remained in that position for two consecutive years. Table 3 below shows how the country compared to other countries ranked top-five in that same criterion.

INGO Staff Casualties Country/ Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
South Sudan	0	8	21	35	18	31	52	46	55
Afghanistan	57	51	56	81	54	27	25	15	17
Syria	0	1	21	45	27	11	24	31	47
DR Congo	7	7	1	7	7	8	13	3	22
Somalia	8	18	17	19	9	13	12	7	8

Table 3-1: Number of Casualties among INGO staff in South Sudan, Afghanistan, Syria, DR Congo and Somalia. Source: Aid Worker Security Database

The second reason for choosing this particular escalation point—the massive presence of INGOs in the country and the downward trend in the presence of INGOs during the run-up to escalation—presents two opportunities of which I could take advantage. In the period above, the significant presence of INGOs means that there is a significant population of nearly one hundred different INGOs from which to select our case studies. The second opportunity is to explain the puzzling fact that nowhere in the literature I could find a

reasonable explanation for explaining why 42.5 per cent of INGOs present in the country six months before the July escalation were no longer present when violence broke out.

The third and last reasons for choosing this particular escalation point is the availability of data. This refers to the fact that information on INGO presence before 2014 was largely unavailable. For instance, the South Sudan NGO Forum started compiling data on INGO presence only after 2015[8], while the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) started compiling data only in March 2014.[9] Gathering information on INGO presence before 15 December 2013 would require a time-consuming surveying effort beyond the scope of the present study.

Now that the focus has been established, the second step for carrying out a structured, focused comparison is to define a research objective to guide the comparison. In this study, the goal is to compare how INGOs anticipate and react to the risk of escalation of conflicts in areas where they operate.

The third step is to employ a single conceptual model as a benchmark for comparison across cases. Applying a standard conceptual model is what forms the 'structure' of this method. The conceptual model used in this study is the one presented at the end of the previous chapter. After these three steps are taken, the researcher must formulate a data collection strategy that ensures the acquisition of comparable data across cases (George, Bennett 2009, 69). In the case of this study, this data collection strategy includes document Analysis and interviews, explained in further detail in section 3.3.

3.1.2. Case Selection

In this study, the chosen strategy for case selection was that of typical cases. This strategy consists of choosing cases that are "representative of a population

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[8] To access operational presence reports from the South Sudan NGO forum, see:
https://southsudanngoforum.org/3w-nngo/#2015
[9]   To   access   data   from   OCHA:
https://reliefweb.int/updates?primary_country=8657&source=1503&search=title:%223W%22

of cases as defined by the primary inference" (Gerring, 2007: 96). To choose representative cases, the researcher should maximise the number of shared features between the sample size and the universe of cases. This strategy is considered to be the most applicable to theory-centric variants of process tracing, as in the case of this research.

To identify typical cases, King, Keohane and Verba (1994, 34) recommend that researchers should first learn about the population of a given phenomenon before they engage in selecting cases. This can even be in the form of descriptive research, where the scholar gains enough knowledge about the cases to be able to make informed choices about whether cases are typical or not. Such descriptive effort is made in chapter 5 of the present monograph, where an overview of the INGO community in South Sudan is presented. All INGOs selected for this study share a series of common traits, such as being operationally present in South Sudan during the research timeframe, being members of the South Sudan NGO Forum, and employing both national and expatriate staff members.

Moreover, as stated previously in this study, the objective of this research is to explain how different INGOs faced with the same macro-political risk event-- the possibility of conflict escalation-- decide on different strategies to react to such risk. To explain these differences in outcome, it is important to account for the variation of the outcome variable—a stay or avoidance strategy. Thus, the selection of cases was made in relation to the variance in selected strategy—whether the INGO engaged in a avoidance or a stay strategy-- and by the kind of mission the INGO was carrying out—humanitarian or development. The table below presents the distribution of cases.

	Humanitarian	Development
Avoidance	2 Cases	1 Case
Stay	2 Cases	2 Cases

Table 3-2: Distribution of cases in relation to mandate and chosen strategy.

Initially, this research would include eight different INGOs. Due to the COVID-2019 pandemic, however, it was impossible to interview respondents for the second case of development INGOs with an avoidance strategy. Consequently, seven cases were studied in this research.

3.1.3. Process Tracing

The within-case analysis relied on process tracing (PT), which allows researchers to explain how a set of initial conditions is translated into outcomes. This method follows a pattern matching logic, meaning that researchers predict patterns based on theory and then try to observe whether these predicted patterns hold in real-life cases (Kamp-Alons 2010, 46).

Predicted patterns are made up of 'causal mechanisms', which are theoretical elements linking causes and outcomes (Beach 2016, 3). Each causal mechanism is made up of one activity or set of activities that are carried out by the units of analysis, which Beach (2016, 6) calls entities. In the figure below, one can see how a process is structured in process tracing analysis. The simple template illustrates a two-part causal mechanism with the effects of initial conditions 'X' being translated into outcomes 'Y' passing through each part of the mechanism.
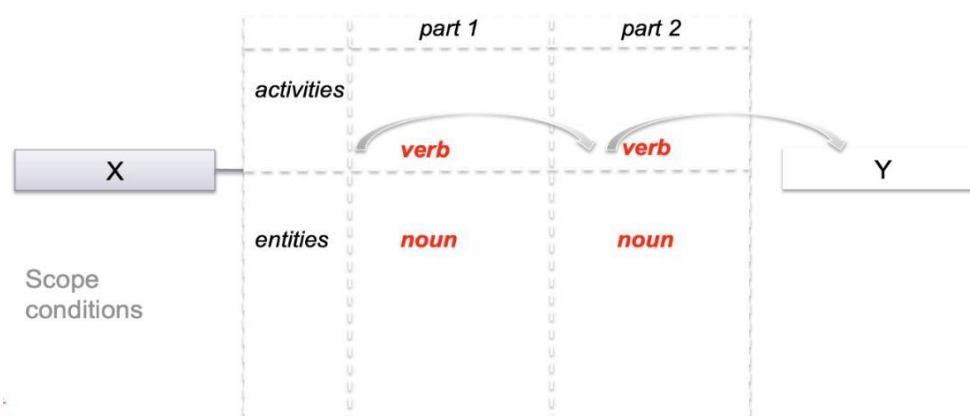
Figure 3:2: Template of the functioning of a two-part causal mechanism. Source (Beach 2016, 6)

According to George and McKeown (1985, 27), process-tracing is a valuable method for studying organisational decision-making. This usefulness lies in the reconstruction decision-making processes over time, looking at an organisation's perception of a situation and the elements that influenced its decisions. Given that this research aims to compare how different INGOs anticipate and react to the risk of conflicts, that is, exploring how they translate a set of initial conditions into action, this methodology fits perfectly within the purpose of this thesis.

Process-tracing comes in three different flavours for three different purposes (CDI, 2015). The first of these variants is Theory-Testing, which denotes the verification in real-life situations of casual mechanisms believe to be existent because of a given theoretical model. In order to carried out this variant of process-tracing we should a priori: Know the cause and the outcome of a given process; Know that there is a casual link between the two; and have a good hunch of why this causality exists. The second type, Explaining Outcome, is a case-centric variant that aims to produce a detailed explanation for a particular historical outcome. Differently from the first variant, Explaining Outcome does not have a generalizing intention to its conclusions. Lastly, the Theory-Building variant relates to an inductive method that, its purest form, starts with empirical material and uses a structured analysis of this material to build a plausible hypothetical causal mechanism whereby a cause (or set of causes) is linked with an outcome that can be present in multiple cases, meaning that it can be generalized beyond the single case. In effect, it involves using empirical material to answer the question 'how did we get here?'.

To be clear, the variant of process tracing chosen for this research is that of Theory-Building. As seen in the last chapter, there is a lack of a proper theory in existing literature to explain the phenomenon of interest here, so that there is little sense in proposing a theory-testing study. Nor would it make sense to opt for Explaining Outcome process tracing, given that this modality falls short of our need of generalizable mechanisms.

This method usually plays out in three steps: 1) Theorizations about causal mechanisms; 2) development and analysis of the observable empirical

manifestations of theorized mechanisms; 3) and use of comparative methods to enable generalizations of findings from single case studies to other causally similar cases (Beach & Pedersen, 2013. P19). The last part is necessary since process tracing inferences are a priori valid only within-cases, so that it need subsidiary comparative methods to find patterns across cases that can be generalizable, which explains why this study will run a cross-case study.

In this exercise, the actual behaviour of INGOs selected by this research will be compared to the patterns predicted by the model, which will serve as a benchmark. The behaviour of these INGOs is reconstructed through a detailed description of what each relevant actor does in each step of the process (Mahoney 2010, 125). Even though the focus of PT is analysing the trajectories of change and causation, the lack of adequate description would mean that the researcher would also fail to present and analyse events of a causal chain. That is why a good deal of attention must be paid to sequence, that is, how events unfolded over time. Mindful of the importance of such a sequence, the following subsection describes the causal mechanisms of this study and the sequence of analysed events.

Causal mechanisms in this study

In the present research, the initial conditions faced by INGOs during pre-escalation settings represent the starting point of the analysis. To identify pre-escalation in practice, it is necessary to first identify escalation points and then work back to verify the period in which full-blown violence was still latent. In the case of South Sudan, identifying where escalation happened was reasonably straightforward, as most scholars and practitioners agree that the episodes of July 2016 represented an apparent resumption of hostilities in relation to that country's civil war. It can be noted in the graphic below that violence levels remained relatively low for more than a year before July 2016 before suddenly spiking up again. In the next chapter, when presenting a background for the South Sudanese conflicts, the details of the underlying tensions that led to the conflict will become more evident.
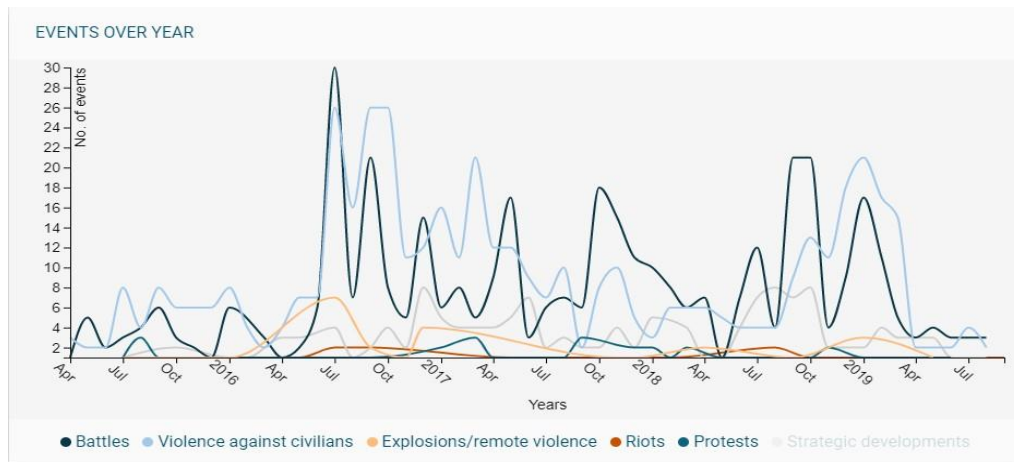
Figure 3:3: Number of Events for Battles, Violence against Civilians, Explosions and Remote Violence, Riots and Protests. Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). Graphics Generated by ACLED

Considering the eleven-month timeframe between the peace deal in August 2015 and the re-escalation of the South Sudanese conflict in July 2016, the goal is to understand how INGOs pick up cues to the possibility of that particular escalation of violence, assessed the possibility that the South Sudanese conflict could reignite, and acted upon this assessments. Based on the previous chapter's conceptual model, two causal mechanisms can be identified:

1. An Anticipation Mechanism, through which INGOs transform cues to the risk of civil conflicts into risk assessments. The functioning of this mechanism corresponds to Step 1 of the conceptual model.

2. A Decision Mechanism, where an INGO turns risk assessments into decisions. Step 2 of the conceptual model explains how this second mechanism works.

Using Beach's example from figure 3-2 as a standard, the diagram below summarises the process traced by this research.

- Scope Conditions (X)
  - Initial Conditions presented by Pre-Escalation Settings

- Risk Analysis Mechanism
  - Entities: INGOs
  - Activity: Gather information and Select indicators to arrive at a certain Level of Conflict Risk Assesed

- Decision Mechanism
  - Entities: INGOs
  - Activity: Transform risk assessments into decisions. This mechanisms involves the formulation of a threshold of acceptable risk-- based on the INGO's mandate, donor influence, prior experience with conflicts and dependence on others actors-- the use if, applicable, of relevant pre-established rules and the interplay between staff from different organisational levels.

- Outcome (Y)
  - Security Strategy (Avoidance/ Stay)

Figure 3:4: Author's Summary Diagram representing the two-step process theorised by the present work.

Concerning the Anticipation Mechanism, the assumption is that there must be a point in time when an organisation assesses the risks it is facing and makes prognostics on whether a decision is necessary. This assumption is grounded on the understanding that the moment of information use, must be preceded by a moment of information gathering. Information will never be complete, and decision-makers may not even process all the information in their possession. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that decisions will always be based on prior contextual knowledge and risk assessments; even these are carried out subconsciously (Silver 2012, 39). To confirm the existence and the influence of the Anticipation Mechanism, data collection must yield insights regarding the amount of risk that INGOs believe to be facing and the two activities that INGOs must carry out during this assessment: The *selection of indicators* by organisations and the *source of information* about potential risks.

Regarding the Decision Mechanism, this work assumes that the risk assessed in the first mechanism must be turned into a decision by the organisation. This assumption is rooted in the notion that risk assessments in isolation do not implicate decisions on their own, so there must be a moment where INGOs will convert their risk assessments into decisions. According to

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the conceptual model, it is necessary to look for three manifestations of the Decision Mechanism: The formation of a threshold of acceptable risk, the use of SOPs, and the interplay between staff from different levels within the INGO. Regarding the formation of the threshold of acceptable risk, we must uncover evidence about how an INGO's mandate, influence from donors, prior experience of staff members and dependence on other actors influenced how much risk the INGO was willing and able to accept. Regarding the influence of SOPs it is imperative to study whether pre-established rules were used for triggering relevant decisions regarding the avoidance of risks. On the interplay between staff at different levels of an INGO, it is necessary to investigate how differences in hierarchical rigidness and structure influenced one INGOs' strategy preference over another.

3.2. Operationalisation

Before data could be collected and analysed, the central concepts of this study must be operationalised. Operationalisation refers to the establishment of procedures for observing and attaching values to variables. Through these procedures, one can move from the abstract to the empirical level, as the researcher specifies what each variable entails and how to observe them in the real world. Thus, this section provides definitions and an outline of the data collection method used for each variable. It starts with variables from Step 1 of the model, followed by those from Step 2.

3.2.1. Variables from Step 1

Step 1 of our conceptual model aims to explain how INGOs get from the initial conditions posed by pre-escalations settings to the level of conflict risk assessed' variable. There were two main elements of interest for this variable: 1) How risky INGOs deemed the situation in South Sudan between 17 August 2015 and 8 July 2016 to be; 2) and how this risk perception evolved over time. With that in mind, and considering the timeframe above, level of conflict risk assessed

refers to *the probability and impact that INGOs attributed to the risk of conflict escalation in South Sudan*. There are two possibilities for collecting data for this variable: situation reports and interviews.

In the former's case, data collection is a straightforward matter, as information about the level of conflict risk assessed can be extracted directly reports. Furthermore, analysis of different situations reports over time also captures the evolution in assessed risk. To make matters even more manageable, some INGOs even provide numerical risk rating in areas where they operate, linking rating to relevant indicators. One example of this is provided by Care International, which requires national affiliates to represent risks a scale ranging from 1 (Minimal Risks) to 4 (Extreme Risks).

Figure 3:5: Care International's risk classification scale. Extracted from Care (2010, 40).

In the case of interviews, unveiling data for this variable required asking participants directly about the risk perceptions of INGOs and how this perception evolved over time. According to Ganzach et al. (2008, 319), posing direct questions is the most accurate way of collecting data for risk perceptions, so we could expect answers to be reliable indicators of how risky INGOs considered the situation in South Sudan to be.

According to our conceptual model, the level of conflict risk assessed by an organisation depends on the source of information and selection of indicators variables. The source of information is defined as *the influence of information source on INGO's risk assessment*. With this variable, we should be able to identify: 1) the types of source used by INGOs to collect information on risks, and 2) how collecting information from these types of sources affects risk assessments. Organisations can gather information on a particular conflict directly from the field where they operate by interacting with local stakeholders

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or getting this intelligence from other sources. If the organisation collects information from local communities, local government officials, dissent groups or other local stakeholders, it is considered as a direct source. In contrast, if the information factored in the organisation's risk assessments comes from other aid organisations, media outlets, consultancy firms, it is considered indirect. To collect data on this variable, interviews were a reliable method for data collection, as it was possible to ask staff members to provide first-hand data on the subject.

The selection of indicators variable is defined as *the set of indicators of conflict risk used by INGOs to conduct their risk assessments.* This variable intends to identify the events or relevant information that INGOs use as cues to conflict risk. Given that these indicators are highly contextual, it would be unwise to use pre-existing categories of indicators to classify what INGOs considered as the most important cues to conflict. Instead, this work opts to work inductively, inferring these categories from collected data.

The collection of data for this variable was done through interviews, with participants being asked to elaborate on the kinds of events or information to which INGOs would pay attention while trying to make sense of the situation in South Sudan. In light of their responses, I have coded the events or information listed by interviewees into the five indicator groups according to concepts included in each group.

The table in the next page summarises the operationalisation of the variables from the anticipation mechanism:

Concept	Definition	Data Collection
Level of Conflict Risk Assessed	The probability and impact that an INGO attributes to a potential conflict.	Document Analysis: situation reports Interviews: Questions about the INGOs risk perception of conflict risk in South Sudan and the evolution of this perception over time.

Gathering Information	The influence of information source over risk assessments of INGOs	Interviews: Questions about sources, reliability, data-sharing and impact on risk assessments.
Selection of indicators	The set of indicators of conflict risk used by INGOs to conduct their risk assessments	Interviews: Questions about events or relevant information factored in risk assessments.

Table 3-3: Author's summary of operationalisation for variables from the Anticipation Mechanism

3.2.2. Variables from Step 2

The goal of the Decision-Mechanism, or Step 2, is to explain how an INGO turns risks assessment into security decisions. These security decisions, which can be defined as the *kind of action taken by an INGO in response to conflict risk*, can take two values: *avoidance* or *stay*. As such, a strategy is labelled '*avoidance*' if the organisation chooses to put staff into hibernation or decides for the evacuation or relocation of these people before escalation takes place. In opposition, '*stay'* strategies will be those that do not qualify as *avoidance.*

Luckily, uncovering the value of this variable is relatively straightforward for two reasons. The first is that an INGO decision to leave a country is a highly publicised matter, as such a decision is usually accompanied by press releases[10] that make the choices of organisations more or less obvious (Berman 2000, 3). The second is that there are reputable sources that keep track of aid organisations' presence, such as the OCHA, which releases regular updates known as 3Ws (Who does, What and Where). Therefore, this work resorted to these documents the establish whether INGOs chose an avoidance or stay strategy.

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[10] For examples of such announcements, one could refer to the following press releases.
Press release from the MSF regarding evacuation in Northern Syria ahead of a Turkish Offensive: https://www.msf.org/northeast-syria-msf-forced-evacuate-staff-due-extreme-volatility-region
Press Release from World Vision ahead of hostilities in Rwanda: https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/eastern-congo-world-vision-staff-evacuate- rwanda-rebels-advance

Referring back to the conceptual model, it is necessary to operationalise the two intervening variables of Step 2. Beginning with the threshold of acceptable risk, this variable refers to the *level of risk an organisation is willing and able to endure during its operations.* This is usually indicated by an event or set of events that would force an INGO to halt its operations and leave a country. Determining values for this variable beforehand can be somewhat problematic, as the yardstick for determining an organisation's threshold of acceptable risk can vary greatly. To unearth data on this variable, the researcher study used interviews to nudge respondents into addressing their organisations' general risk attitude and any redlines established by the organisations that could trigger an avoidance strategy. According to Van Brabant (2010, 85), setting triggers for withdrawal before the situation becomes critical is considered good practice among aid organisation, so it was reasonable to expect respondents would have helpful knowledge to share on this matter.

One of the factors determining the threshold of acceptable risk is an INGO's mandate, which is defined as *the kind of activities carried out by the INGO.* Starting with the mandate variable, the intent is to establish the motivation for the organisation to operate under risk. This work divides INGOs with development and humanitarian mandates, and data on this variable was collected directly from INGOs' mission statements.

Development mandates focus on long-term projects to deliver assistance to developing countries to overcome systematic social, economic and political problems. Mission statements of development INGOs usually refer to terms such as poverty, social inequality, and infrastructure. Thus, the presence of these terms can be used to categorise an INGO as being of the development kind. In contrast, a humanitarian mandate focuses on the immediate relief of local populations following an emergency. As such, humanitarian mandates usually refer to terms such as disaster-response, relief, distress and protection.

An excellent example of a development mandate can be found in Oxfam's mission statement, which states that "Our purpose is to help create lasting solutions to the injustice of poverty. We are part of a global movement for change, empowering people to create a future that is secure, just, and free from

poverty." (OXFAM, 1999). Conversely, the Charter of the Doctors without Borders is a good example of a document presenting a humanitarian mission. References to a humanitarian mandate can be found in excerpts such as "Our mission is to provide lifesaving medical care to those most in need." or "MSF provides assistance to populations in distress, to victims of natural or man-made disasters, and to victims of armed conflict." (MSF 1991, 4)

The donor influence variable is defined as the *pressure exerted by donors on an INGO's decision.* The intent is to look at how the attitude of donors of INGOs regarding risks affects an INGO's decision to stay or leave. Since this information is often not found in documents, interviews were the best method for collecting data on this variable. Therefore, I strived to stimulate responses that addressed the main donors for each organisation and their attitude towards risk.

As for the prior experience of staff members variable, this concept is defined as the *influence of prior experience of staff members on the threshold of acceptable risk of an organisation..* For this variable, interviews were chosen as the appropriate method for data collection. Questions followed a similar approach to the OCHA's Presence & Proximity report (Jackson, Zyck 2016, 33). In that study, researchers first asked respondents to assess how strong the presence of experienced officials was within the ranks of organisations and then asked to evaluate how these officials' presence (or lack thereof) influenced INGO decisions about risk.

With the dependence on others actors variable, we refer to the *degree of dependence of an INGO from services by other actors*. To uncover data for this variable, respondents were first inquired over the existence of such dependence. In case of an affirmative answer, they were asked to point out in which issues was the organisation dependent on others. In case of a negative answer, they were asked to elaborate on the in-house capabilities if their organisations. Lastly, they were asked to describe how this dependence, or lack thereof, affected how their organisation managed security matters.

Concerning the Influence of SOPs, this variable aims to capture *the presence of pre-established rules regarding decisions on the continuation/termination of*

projects and the extent to which decision-makers followed these rules. Data collection for this variable relied both on document analysis and interviews. Through document analysis, I reviewed and coded relevant documents containing SOPs, identifying the rules set out by INGOs to guide their decisions to stay or leave an area. The extent that these SOPs were relevant for decisions was a matter left for interviews, during which respondents were inquired over the observance, or disregard, for SOPs. To determine whether SOPs had significant influence, I adopted an approach similar to Heyse's (2006, 217). Thus, SOPs were considered influential if interviewees provided evidence that decisions were justified in relation to the organisation's pre-established rules.

Lastly, the 'Field-HQ Interplay'. This variable is defined as the *kind of relationship existing between field and HQ workers during the decision-making process*. To obtain data on this variable, this work resorted to both document analysis and interview questions. During document analysis, I have searched for internal policies that assigned responsibilities to different staff members. During interviews, I urged respondents to tell their version of the story over how decision-making unfolded in their organisations before escalation took place.

Concluding, the table below summarises the operationalisation for the variables from the decision mechanism:

Concept	Definition	Data Collection
Risk Management Strategy	The action taken by INGOs in response to the risk of conflict escalation. Whether they stay or leave before escalation takes place.	Document Analysis: Press releases, UN OCHA and Interaction documents reporting INGO operational presence.
The threshold of Acceptable Risk	The level of risk that an organisation is willing and able to endure during its operations.	-Document Analysis: Internal Policy documents, including security manuals and standard operating procedures containing any

		red lines determined by the INGO.
		Interviews: Respondents were asked to address any red lines imposed by their organisations.
Mandate	The kind of activities carried out by the INGO.	-Document Analysis: Review of mission statements, reports and other documents outlining activities carried out by the organisation.
Donor Influence	The pressure exerted by donors on INGO decisions.	-Interviews: Respondents were asked about the risk attitude of donors and their influence on decision-making.
Prior experience of Staff	The influence of staff with prior experience with conflict escalation over the decisions of an INGOs	Interviews: Respondent were asked about the presence of staff with prior experience with conflicts and how they influenced decision-making.
Dependence on other actors	The extent to which INGOs relied on other actors for the provision of food, electricity and physical security.	Interviews: Respondents were asked to describe the reliance of their organisation on other actors and prompted to describe how this influenced decision-making.
Influence of SOPs	The influent exerted by SOPs on the final decisions of INGOs	Interviews: Respondents were asked about the existence and influence of pre-established rule on the decision-making process of the organisation.
		Document Analysis: Review of SOPs, whenever available,

		and documents that referenced them.
Field-HQ Interplay	Kind of relationship existing between field and HQ workers during the decision-making process	Interviews: Respondent were inquired about the kind of rapport established between staff from different organisational levels and the influence of this relationship on decision-making. Document Analysis: Internal Policy and security manuals assigning responsibility for decisions.

Table 3-4: Summary of operationalisation for variables from the Decision Mechanism

3.3. Data Collection and Data Management

In the last section, we defined what we are looking for with each variable of the conceptual model and set out the methods used to collect data on them. As noted, two different methods of data collection were used: interviews and document analysis[11]. This section explains these data collection methods in more detail and address issues of research data management.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with three different types of respondents. First, academics who have experience studying INGOs' security management were interviewed to understand better whether the conceptual model built in this monograph was sound and to gain contextual knowledge.

The second group of subjects was people working at organisations whose work is related to INGOs, such as the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, NGO Alliances, security risk companies, and the South Sudan NGO Forum. These subjects provided a great deal of contextual

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[11] A similar approach was put into place by Amanda Guidero (2020, 2). She considered data was collected from NGO Security professionals from 13 medium and large NGOs and two NGO consortia. Data was triangulated via content analysis of humanitarian security manuals.

knowledge on the general behaviour of INGOs in South Sudan. Also, they served as 'gatekeepers, which means that they assisted me in the process of getting access to selected INGOs.

The third and last group of subjects involved staff from selected INGOs. These interviews provide detailed accounts of how organisations went through the steps theorised in our conceptual model. This interview approach was phenomenological, insofar as it intended to provide a detailed examination of the participant's personal experience, perceptions and account of an event that they lived, as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself (Smith, Osborn 2007, 1). During these interviews, I talked to twenty-four people divided across the seven selected organisations. For each INGO, I have included staff from three different organisational levels (Field, national and HQ levels). In selecting staff for interviews, the degree of direct participation in the decisions of INGOs was considered.

Interview Format

All interviews in this research followed a semi-structured format. In this format, the interview structure is based on an interview guide that consists of a flexible script covering all parts of the conceptual model. Unlike fully-structure interviews, the guide is not a list of questions to be crossed out in a given order but an instrument that allows the researcher to collect data for all variables while still maintaining the flow of a normal conversation with subjects.

Semi-structured interviews also encourage interviewees to speak about a topic with minimum prompting from the interviewer as possible. This minimum intervention allows researchers to get as close as possible to what the participant thinks about the issue without leading the responses with too many questions. Furthermore, it is noted that semi-structured interviews have the edge over more rigid kinds when it comes to nudging interviewees into disclosing sensitive information on the specific decisions of their organisations (Brannen 2007).

Except for interviewees within short travel distance, most interviews were conducted via Skype, a free and secure[12] voice over internet protocol (VoIP) software. This choice is particularly suitable for when participants are geographically dispersed or in areas where access is difficult due to security reasons, as was the case for this study. Using Skype also allowed for more flexibility in schedule and ensured that interviewees could withdraw at any time during the interview.

Interview Guides

Interview guides should include two main types of question: grand tour questions and prompts (Harrell, Bradley 2009, 36). Grand tour questions, as the name suggests, involve asking respondents to give a verbal tour of something they know well (Spradley 1979, 7). The goal is to get participants talking in a focused way. To achieve focus, interviewers set parameters, such as a time period, a topic or an event, so that respondents can give more specific responses. It is common for researchers to resort to funnelling, which entails moving from general questions to more specific ones according to participants' answers. Therefore, interviewers usually start with questions with fairly open parameters, with the expectation that the respondent will cover as much of a given subject by themselves. If responses are tangential or insufficient, interviewers should move to more specific questions (Harrell, Bradley 2009, 50)

This is when prompts come into play. Prompts are follow-up questions that can serve two different objectives (Spradley 1979, 9). One objective is to get people talking whenever the initial question's answer is insufficient, thus eliciting more specific responses. The other objective is to put participants back on track if they start going off-topic.

I produced three different interview guides, one for academics, another for staff working at related organisations and, finally, one for interviews with staff

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[12] Since January 2018, Microsoft has been offering end-to-end encryption in Skype conversations. End-to-end encryption is the most efficient way to secure conversations over the internet, since only those taking part of the conversation hold the keys for decryption, regardless where the software's server is located.

from INGOs (these can be found in Annexes 1, 2 and 3, respectively). This differentiation was necessary because of the nature of the questions asked to each type of respondent and the objective of these interviews. Interviews with academics contained questions that were much broader than the rest, as they referred to general perceptions about INGOs' behaviour. Interviews with staff at the related organisation were narrower, as respondents were asked about what they have seen INGOs do. Lastly, interviews with INGO staff were even more specific, as they were asked to give a detailed account of a phenomenon that they experienced directly.

Pilot Interviews

To ensure that interviews fulfilled their objective of uncovering relevant data for the conceptual model, pilot interviews were conducted. The idea was to check for any practical issues that might prevent interviews from yielding valuable data, including problems in wording, the order of questions, interviews techniques, coding or data analysis (Mason 2004, 17).

Data Analysis: Interviews

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. For Skype interviews, I have used iFree Skype Recorder; a free software records audio from Skype conversation. Recordings made by this software were stored directly on the researcher's computer and were accessible only with the use of a personal password. At no point were these recordings stored or transmitted via external servers. Transcriptions were made manually and uploaded to Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software.

Therein, data were coded according to the operationalisation found insection 3.2. Codes referring to the conceptual model variables were attached to fragments of the interview in which the respondent provided relevant data. Such a coding scheme is useful for comparing data from different interviews, as one can confront what was said by each respondent about a particular variable (Scott 2000, 28).

Document Analysis

Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which the researcher interprets documents to give voice and meaning around an assessment topic (Bowen 2009). When used in conjunction with interviews, documents are a useful way of verifying whether respondents' information finds written corroboration, thus boosting the credibility of findings and reducing biases (O'Leary 2014). Additionally, documents may also contain supplementary data such as background information or even contain information that interviewees might have forgotten (Bowen 2009, 4)

In this research, I analysed documents containing clues regarding how organisations responded to the risk of potential conflict escalation in South Sudan. Consulted documents included, but were not restricted to, mission statements, policy papers, reports, security manuals, press releases and minutes of meetings related to the decision we are analysing in this research—whether INGOs should have stayed or left. Some documents are publicly accessible. Others were provided by participants of interviews upon request of the researcher. Similarly to interviews, these documents were uploaded to Atlas.ti for analysis and coded using the previous section's operationalisation. Using the same codes, I was able to integrate data gathered by the two different methods (Bowen 2009, 32).

Research Data Management

This subsection summarises how data was collected and treated. In particular, it addresses questions of data processing, sensitiveness and confidentiality. The internal guidelines at Radboud University informed the choices made herein.[13]

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[13] University policy for storage and management of research data. (Executive Board decision dated 25-11-2013) Found at: https://www.ru.nl/publish/pages/868512/rdm_policy.pdf.

While processing data I opted for keeping the names and positions of interviewees confidential. This choice was made to protect the identity of interviewees and their organisations and ensure that these interviewees could disclose sensitive information without fear of sanctions. Instead of referring to organisations and people by their real names, I chose to process data via pseudonymisation so that personal data could no longer be attributed to a specific data subject without the use of additional information. Therefore, interviewees were referred to only by an assigned number and the hierarchical level within an organisation. INGOs are identified only by number and the ID of their organisations (in case of interviews with INGO staff)

Data Storage During and After the Research.

In line with Radboud University's policy[14], while research is ongoing, data was stored in a personal partition of Radboud University's campus network. Backups were stored in Surfdrive, a secure cloud service for Dutch higher education institutions. According to university policy, these alternatives are the best storage medium for sensitive and critical data. Only the researcher, his supervisors, and the manuscript committee members, who evaluated the thesis, had access to files stored therein.

For scientific integrity purposes[15], raw data from interviews and private documents provided by participants were stored in a secure server of Radboud University after completing this research. Private documents, raw data from interviews and files with critical information INGO staff are stored for ten years, being deleted after such period.

Informed Consent

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[14]   Radboud   Guidelines   for   Storing   and   Sharing   Data.   Found   at:
https://www.ru.nl/rdm/processing-data/storing-sharing-data/
[15]Radboud   Universities   Notes   on   Storage   for   Scientific   Integrity: Found   at:
https://www.radboudnet.nl/onderzoek/onderzoek-visie-beleid-
kwaliteit/onderzoeksbeleid/research-data-management/centraal-beleid/

Following the provisions in Article 6 of the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), all interviewees have given their informed consent to use interview data.[16] Interviewees have been informed about:

1) the purpose of this study; 2) why they were chosen for participating in it; 3) and how information, including their data, would be treated in this research. In possession of this information, they explicitly agreed to the terms of their participation by signing a consent form sent via email before interviews took place. Due to differences in terms of data sensitiveness, I have produced two different Informed Consent Forms, one for interviews with academics and staff at related organisations and another for interviews with INGO staff. These forms, found in Annex 4 and Annex 5, include the following information:

- The name and contact of the researcher;
- A brief description of the research and the purpose of the interview;
- The research procedures, including a description of the interview protocol;
- Notes on the risk of disclosing sensitive information, mentioning factors that might have influenced the willingness of respondents to participate;
- Data processing: How I chose to process data from the interview;
- The recipients of the personal data: Who would have access to the content of the interview and personal details of the respondent;
- The retention period for the personal data and where data would be stored;
- The right to withdraw consent: inform a data subject that he or she can withdraw consent for processing personal data at any time;
- The name and contact details of Radboud University's Data Protection Officer;

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[16] Further information about the requirements for Informed Consent can be found at: https://www.ru.nl/rdm/collecting-data/informed-consent-ethics-committees/

3.4. Validity, Reliability and Generalisation

Knowing that every research design has its pitfalls, this last section addresses potential issues of validity, reliability and generalisation of the methods proposed in this chapter. Starting with validity, one of my the primary concerns while devising this methodology was to minimise as much as possible the risk of unobserved variable jeopardising measurements during this study. While I am under no illusion that the conceptual model can capture every intricacy of decision-making processes, I argue that the detailed knowledge enabled by process-tracing analysis can significantly reduce the risk of missing out on important theoretical elements.

On reliability, the difficulty for other researchers to gain access to the same people and same organisations included in this research, the subjectivity of the answers provided by these data collection methods, plus the fact that the interviews of this study are not entirely structured, pose some challenges. For instance, other researchers might not be able to replicate this research with the same sample. Furthermore, even if they could, respondents might give different answers or refrain from disclosing as much sensitive information, depending on how different researchers conduct interviews. Nevertheless, the combination of different accounts by experts and INGO staff, coupled with triangulation using document analysis, helps mitigate these problems, since different data analysis phases are designed to support and refine the data gathered by our research design.

Lastly, regarding generalisation and external validity, I rely on the structure and focused comparison across our cases to generalise the process-tracing findings. At the very least, conclusions might extend to other cases belonging to the same class of events, namely, all INGOs facing the need to make decisions before the escalation of a conflict. I also argue that by running seven cases, I was able to create a sample that is sufficiently representative (Rohlfing 2012, 67) of a larger population.

Concluding, this chapter was aimed at providing clarity and transparency on the research design chosen for this doctoral thesis, allowing for a frank

Chapter 3

appraisal of its methods and replication. With this methodology, this project aims to respond to our research question by providing a rich account of our casesand identifying the underlying mechanisms behind INGOs' decisions in the faceof imminent armed conflict.

With these findings in mind, it is now imperative to consider the limitations of this research and the conceptual model. The kind of test produced by this dissertation can be better described by Collier's notion of a straw-in-the wind test (Collier 2011, 825). Straw in the wind tests provide helpful information that may favour or call into question a given hypothesis, but such tests are not decisive by themselves. They provide neither a necessary nor a sufficient criterion for establishing a hypothesis or, correspondingly, for rejecting it.

4. Validating the Conceptual Model

The research design presented in the previous chapter included a round of data collection that consists of interviews with relevant academic experts. This undertaking aims to use these interviews to validate the propositions and calibrate the expectations of the conceptual model built in chapter 2. In total, seven academics with prior experience working with INGO security management, all from different universities and research institutes, were consulted. These interviews combined for more than seven hours of original primary data.

In this chapter, the reader finds the main lessons learned from interviews with academic experts, which are used to adjust the conceptual model's expectations before I continue to analyze the case studies. The structure of this chapter follows that of the process theorised by this monograph. Thus, the first section (4.1) addresses the variables included in the Anticipation Mechanism, and the second section (4.2) addresses the variables from the Decision Mechanism. The third and last section (4.3) summarises the findings from this stage of data collection and updates the propositions from the conceptual model, which is tested against evidence from selected INGOs in Chapter 6 of this monograph.

4.1. Risk Assessments and INGOs

First, we ponder the insights provided by experts on elements of the Anticipation Mechanism. As mentioned before, this mechanism considers how INGOs transform cues to conflict risk into risk assessments.

To investigate the relevance of these mechanisms and the variables it contains, interviewees were asked to describe how INGOs, in their experience, made themselves aware of risks surrounding them. Whenever needed, they were also probed into addressing the sources and indicators used by INGOs.

Source of Information

Regarding the *source of information* variable, it was proposed that we should investigate the kind of source used by INGOs to collect information on risks and how collecting information from that source affects INGOs' risk assessments.

During interviews, five different sources were mentioned: local staff members, local communities, the UN, the government, and NGO consortia or networks. Interviewees constantly stressed the need for relying on as many sources as possible. As one interviewee stated, triangulation was "the only way not to be held hostage of one potentially flawed piece of intelligence" (Expert Interview #1).

Another insight regarding this variable was that richer INGOs would be better positioned to collect information from a wider array of sources. For this, two reasons were given. The first is that richer, larger INGOs are more capable of building a specialised service for monitoring risks, including setting up security departments and paying for better security professionals. As one respondent noted, it depends on

> "how much money they have to spend on it. And then it depends on whether they have in house staff who is tasked with monitoring." (Academic Expert 2)

Furthermore, the second reason is that, more often than not, richer organisations are also those with a wider geographical reach. In other words, these organisations can afford to go to places where others do not. Therefore, these richer INGOs would have more access to grassroots information simply because they would have access to more people in more places.

Regarding the impact of the choice of sources, these interviews seemed to confirm the perception that direct sources, such as local communities and government sources, were more reliable than indirect ones. However, one caveat on the use of direct sources was also raised. INGOs are, by and large, worried

about being seen using government or opposition sources because it could raise questions on the impartiality and neutrality of INGOs. As one interviewee noted,

> "As far as I was told, this is something that organisations try to limit or at least try not to make public because if they want, they do not want to be associated with governmental institutions, so they shy away from publicly admitting that they received information from the government, the military or a secret service." (Academic Expert 7)

Selection of Indicators

With the *selection of indicators* variable, the intent is to identify the events or relevant information that INGOs use as cues to conflict risk. Invariably, interviewees pointed out the context-driven nature of the selection of indicators. In other words, there is no way to identify a set of universal indicators that INGOs could use to track the evolution of security risks. Unlike economic forecasting, for instance, there is no such thing as standard indicators. As expected by the model, this lack of unified indicators, in turn, leaves much space for each INGO to define what it considers as cues to risk in each context where it operates. As one interviewee put it:

> "What might be sort of an indicator for an escalation in one conflict might not be in another right. So I think that really depends. I mean, if roadblocks or armed attacks are sort of normal in one area, then something like this happen might not be judged as a clue that escalation is coming. Whereas in another context where these things never happen, that might be considered an escalation. (Academic Expert 1)

Instead, INGOs would pay much more attention to changes in the frequency of relevant events. In other words, INGOs focus on what is rare or uncommon. As seen in the quote above, if a security incident happens too often, it might not be as good an indicator of risk as other rarer events.

Another important insight on this variable considered the formation of collective truths. According to interviewees, what constitutes an indicator of risk also depends on the importance that decision-makers collectively attribute to it. What decision-makers might see as risk indicators is

> "based a lot on the current conversations they have with others. What conversations they hear at coordination meetings, private drinks in the evening, all of that. […] It is a consensus finding of what the situation is. (Academic Expert 6)

Therefore, decision-makers are, based on these testimonies, always trying to find the meaning given to particular events by others. One incident that might initially not draw as much attention as a risk indicator might suddenly become an important one as other relevant actors start attributing relevance to it.

4.2. From Risk to Decision

This subsection now turns to the opinions of academic experts on the elements included in the Decision-Mechanism. As previously argued, this mechanism tries to explain how risk assessments turn into decisions and evince the critical drivers of these decisions.

The threshold of acceptable risk

The first of these elements is the threshold of acceptable risk. In the conceptual model, four variables were included for explaining one INGO's willingness to take on more or fewer risks: *Mandate; Influence of Donors; Prior Experience of Staff; and Dependence on Other Actors.*

Concerning mandates, the conceptual model postulated that INGOs with development mandates would be less inclined to risk than their humanitarian counterparts. Generally, that was an opinion shared by all interviewees, both in terms of relevance and direction of causality. Furthermore, it was also pointed out that not only does the mandate dictate the mission followed by an INGO, but also inform what kind of staff members should be found in its ranks. On the profile of staff, one interviewee argued that

> "If you are in development, if your background is in development, you are likely to have a much less love to just naturally be much more risk-averse and less emergency-centred naturally. So, you know, it's not just to your mandate, but the kind of staff and profile of the staff you employ. That shapes how decisions are taken and, you know, risk and security thresholds and so on." (Academic Expert 6)

The relevance of this variable notwithstanding, some interviewees noted that this distinction might be less relevant than initially predicted by the conceptual model because many organisations do not have very clear-cut mandates.

> A lot of big organisations have a double mandate, right? If you look at organisations such as Oxfam or others, they do development assistance and humanitarian assistance. So it is difficult to say, for those organisations, what kind of impact mandates might have. But for those where it's easier to make a difference, I would at least assume that the development assistance ones that they because of their sort of, let's say, tradition are maybe more likely to leave a dangerous environment. (Academic Expert 1)

Moreover, the existence of multi-mandated organisations could also suggest that some INGOs might choose to simply adapt their mandates in response to an increase in security risks instead of opting for an *avoidance* strategy. This possibility had not been included in the conceptual model.

Concerning *donor influence,* academics interviewed by this study were divided. While five interviewees acknowledged the relevance of the competition for funds and the risk-averse nature of government donors predicted by the conceptual model, others were somewhat sceptical. Two interviewees downplayed the potential influence of donors on security decisions taken by INGOs. One of them argued that multi-year funding contracts sealed by many INGOs with donors organisations end up freeing these INGOs from having to worry about specific security decisions affecting their financial survival. Another noted that while competition for funds between INGOs might play a significant role in deciding whether or not to start operations in a risky area, the same might not be true for security decisions taken once that presence has been established. When deciding between the safety of the organisation and the well-being of beneficiaries, donor relations suddenly become less important.

Lastly, the most frequently mentioned variable was the experience of decision-makers. This was the only variable mentioned by all interviewees without any need for probing. One interviewee was very emphatic in stating that security decisions are always

> "Dependent on the people who make the decisions. If there were other people to make the same decision, the decision outcome very well might be different." (Academic Expert 3)

Besides confirming the relevance of this variable, interviewees also agreed in unison on the proposition that the more experience a decision-maker has in the country in which they are currently stations, the more likely they are to take risks.

> The closer you are to the decisions, you're likely to be affected by what we call danger, habituation, where you just become accustomed to the level of risk that exists in a particular country. (Academic Expert 2)

This definition is broader than what was theorised by the conceptual model, as the experience is not only related to having been through dangerous situations before, but to the contextual understanding of the challenges posed by each country. With that in mind, one should expect to observe more risk-taking stances being taken by organisations whose decision-makers have more experience working in the country where the INGO is operating.

SOPs

In general, interviewees acknowledged that SOPs are important elements included in the decision-making process of INGOs. However, the influence of these pre-established rules in terms of triggering security decisions was seriously questioned. The perception was that SOPs, no matter how comprehensive and widespread in one INGO or another, would end up serving more as a roadmap than as a trigger of security decisions. SOPs, therefore,

> "Probably would guide some of the discussions, but they may not be the final arbiter of the decisions" (Academic Expert 7)

It was also pointed out that staff members with prior experience with security management, especially in military circles, would be more inclined to follow and base their decisions on SOPs. One interviewee argued that

> "if people are have some experience in security management, they deal with it in a more professional

way, they are more likely to follow all the protocols and procedures than those who are not really experienced in it. (Academic Expert 4)

But later conceded that

"whether this affects the decision on whether to leave the country or region or not, I don't know" (Academic Expert 4)

Field-HQ Interplay

Lastly, we turn to the *Field-HQ Interplay*, a variable designed to capture the influence that different interests between staff in different levels of the same organisation could have on decisions. Three important lessons can be drawn from data on this variable garnered during the interviews with academic experts. The first is the confirmation that people farther away from the field, especially at the HQ level, are expected to have a more risk-averse stance when compared to those working in insecure environments.

"My impression from the interviews that I did during my research was that the organization's at the headquarters level or people at the management level sitting at the headquarters, they are more inclined to pull out an organisation than the ones who are actually working on the ground" (Academic Expert 1)

The second lesson relates to the predominance of the national level over others regarding security decisions. In their experience, the final authority on security decisions is someone located at the capital of the country where the INGO is operating, usually the country director (CD).

> "Most organisations, I think, do devolve those kinds of decisions, at least to their national level, sort of the head, as opposed to headquarters." (Academic Expert 4)

The last lesson has to do with the likelihood of observing acts of defiance from field staff concerning decisions taken by the organisation. According to two academics that addressed this issue, obedience is directly related to respect and coordination between field staffers and those making decisions.

> "So if the risk analyst gets on really well with the head of office, then the head of office will always listen to what this person has to say if there's a personal animosity between them, then this information may get ignored" (Academic Expert 4)

> "Whether one follows the decision taken by a head of mission or a country director, it's also about a level of respect. (Academic Expert 6)

4.3. Conclusion and Revised Expectations

During the round of interviews with academics, it was not possible to unequivocally affirm or refute the validity of any of the two theorised mechanisms or the variables included therein. These interviews, however, were instrumental for gauging expectations on the kind of effect that each variable of the conceptual model would have.

Experts indeed confirmed the relevance of both variables—source of information and selection of indicators on the first causal mechanism. Regarding the source of information variable, experts pointed out that richer organisations will be better positioned to collect grassroots information on conflicts because of their geographical reach. This could, in turn, translate into a better capacity for picking up cues to conflict risk, thus enabling them to anticipate conflict

escalation better. However, on the selection of indicators variable, the proposition that indicators are highly contextual by nature means that it would be hard to infer *a priori* what kind of indicator will turn out to be most important. Because of that, the collection and analysis of data should be done inductively. This means that indicators should be inferred directly from data collected during interviews and document analysis. The labels for each indicator are, therefore, attributed by the researcher after the collection of data.

The expert interviews indicate that prior experience with conflict will probably be the most relevant variable of this mechanism regarding the second causal mechanism. Coupled with the insight into the national level's pre-eminence in INGO decision-making, the CD's figure will likely be central to explaining INGO decisions. But it should be noticed that this variable's meaning is now different from what was previously theorised by the conceptual model, as interviews suggested that experience in the country where the INGO is operating would be more relevant than possessing experience with dangerous situations in general. In terms of INGOs' mandate, while experts agreed on this variable's relevance, the caveat on multi-mandated organisations means that thiscould end up being less relevant than previously envisaged by the model. Concerning the donor influence variables, the lack of agreement over thisvariable's relevance means that interviews with academic experts were not enough to recalibrate the expectations of the conceptual model.

The influence of SOPs was questioned. The general agreement between interviewees was that, even though previously established rules might serve as a helpful benchmark for discussions amongst staff members, no respondent seemed to believe that these rules would be sufficient cause for triggering *stay/avoidance* decisions. Whether the influence of SOPs was as limited as suggested by these experts will be further explored in the discussion of the case studies in section 6.2.3.

Lastly, respondents confirmed the proposition that staff members farther away from the field, especially at the HQ level, would be expected to be more risk-averse.

5. Sitting on a Powder Keg: INGOs in South Sudan

To test the conceptual model of Chapter 2, seven INGOs were chosen as case studies. However, before diving into the detailed analysis of strategies selected by each INGO in relation to the risk of conflict escalation in South Sudan, it is crucial to explain the context in which these organisations were operating. Therefore, this chapter begins with a description of the South Sudanese conflict and the challenges faced by INGOs working in that context.

This chapter is divided into three sections. Section 5.1 presents a background of the conflict in South Sudan and details the events that led to the escalation of violence on 7 July 2016. The next section (5.2) deals with the dangers faced by INGOs while working in that country and provides an analysis of the presence of INGOs in South Sudan during the timeframe of the research. Lastly, Section 5.3 describes the seven organisations chosen for this study and their decisions during the run-up and at the beginning of the crisis in July 2016.

5.1. Background to the South Sudanese Conflict

The history of the youngest country in the world has been anything but peaceful. Until 1956, the territory of what is now Sudan and South Sudan was ruled by an Anglo-Egyptian colonial administration (Johnson 2016, 5). Thus, the northern and southern territories were ruled as separate entities under joint international sovereignty. As early as 1955, still months before independence, fighting had already begun between the north and the south, as the Christian and tribal south rebelled over the lack of regional autonomy and lack of representation vis-à-vis the Muslim Arab north. This rebellion became known as the First Sudanese Civil War, or Anyany Rebellion – named after the rebel alliance (Johnson 2016, 17). The conflict lasted from 1955 to 1972, culminating in the signing of the Addis Ababa Agreements on 7 February 1972 (Bass 2012, 127)

Figure 5:1: Map Highlighting Focus Country. Source: Open Street Map. Country Layer and Highlights added by the researcher.

The agreement failed to resolve grievances between the government in the north and the rebels in the south. As a result, the rebels in southern Sudan never truly demobilised (Martell 2019, 137). On the contrary, separatists in the south reorganised to form the South Sudan Liberation Movement (SPLM) in the early 1980s, later becoming the ruling party in the South. The fragile peace lasted

until mid-1983, when Sudanese President Nimeiri took two decisive steps to violate the Addis Ababa Agreements. The first was to design a new constitution based partly on Islamic law. The second was to unilaterally divide the south into three provinces (Abdelgabar 2014, 2).

The demise of the Addis Ababa deal led to the outbreak of the Second Sudanese Civil War. During the 1990s, the government in Khartoum made repeated advances on the south but failed to strike a decisive military blow (Kuyok 2015, 60). With a stalemate reached and after significant international

pressure, the SPLM and the Sudanese government signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement on 9 January 2005, ending the civil war, creating the Southern Sudan Autonomous Region and promising the holding of a referendum for independence in 2011. The referendum was held between 9 and 15 January 2011 and the South Sudanese population voted overwhelmingly (more than 99 per cent) in favour of independence from Khartoum (Martell 2019, 78).

Independence from Sudan came into effect on 9 July 2011. Since then, however, South Sudan has had one of the highest levels of political violence in Africa (ACLED 2016, 2). From the outset, the task of ruling the country was the responsibility of a troubled power-sharing government. This is because the SPLM and its armed branch – the South Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) – was not a cohesive movement, but rather an amalgamation of ethnic groups and tribes. The executive power, embodied by President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar, represented the two most prominent ethnic groups in South Sudan, the Dinka and the Nuer, respectively. For almost two years, an inefficient government, coupled with low-intensity internal conflict and border friction with its northern neighbour, Sudan, prevented the country from embarking on a path to stability (Le Riche 2013). The box below presents an overview of the two principal warring factions in South Sudan.

Box 1: The two major warring factions in South Sudan are not cohesive movements. Rather, they can be understood as umbrella groups comprising a constellation of smaller armed militia whose loyalty lies not with the leaders of the government and opposition—Salva Kirr and Riek Machar, respectively. Instead alignment is based mostly across ethnic line and on pragmatic territorial interests, as these smaller groups try to consolidate their power in their home regions. In South Sudan, the situation is less like an asymmetric battle between a government and a militia and more like war between equally lawless belligerents, growing more chaotic and fracturing as the parties continue to clash (AWSD 2017, 9)

Distribution of ethnic groups

Source: Dr M Izady/www.Gulf2000.Columbia.edu
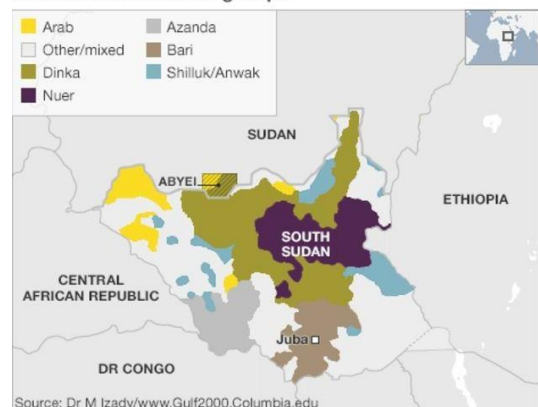
The government even had to confront other, more minor rebellions across the country. Nevertheless, the SPLM was able to assert its control over South Sudan as long as the two main ethnic groups remained committed to the power-sharing arrangement (Blackings 2018, 6). That is why the possibility of a full-blown civil war only began to take on a more definite shape when President Kiir sacked Machar as VP following accusations of a coup plot. The rupture between the two prominent leaders led to the first significant fraction in the ruling South Sudanese People's Movement (SPLM), with the creation of the SPLM-In Opposition in July 2013 (SPLM-IO). Following internal negotiations, Machar did return to his post after a few weeks. Tensions, however, did not wane. Ultimately, friction between the two sides exploded into civil war when Machar was removed from his post a second time on 15 December 2013 (Tisdall 2013).

What followed was an all-out war engulfing most of the country, particularly the northern areas, where the opposition had a more substantial presence. So grave was the suffering of the South Sudanese that the wartime food crisis gripping the country was declared by the UN Security Council to be the worst in the entire world (UNSC 2014, 4). Around four million South Sudanese were affected, amounting to approximately one-third of the country's population. The UN Interagency Standing Committee (ISC) designated South Sudan as a 'Level 3' humanitarian emergency (Schopp 2017, 10). At that time, only Syria received the same label.

In the 20 months between December 2013 and July 2015, several ceasefires were agreed upon, only to be broken in a matter of days. It took significant pressure from the international community, coupled with the threat of sanctions by the UN Security Council, to broker a peace deal (Maihack, Reuss 2019, 2). With the conflict in apparent stalemate and both main warring parties weakened by the protracted conflict, diplomatic efforts ultimately resulted in the signing of the *Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS)*[17] on 17 August 2015, ending the first phase of the conflict. The deal

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[17] Find the full text of the agreement at: http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/documents/IGAD-Compromise-Agreement-Aug-2015.pdf

included forming a Transitional Government of National Unity, with a six-month deadline for its implementation and a permanent ceasefire. It also included transitional security arrangements seeking the demobilisation of warring parties and creating a unified security force (IGAD 2015, 6).

5.1.1.   The Run-Up to the July 2016 Escalation

The ARCSS did not result in a perfect peace, but the conflict certainly de-escalated after the deal came into effect in October 2015. According to the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring Mechanism in South Sudan (CTSAMM), the body responsible for monitoring the cessation of hostilities, serious violence between the parties to the ARCSS declined significantly, even though isolated incidents still occurred (CTSAMM 2015, 18). Members of the CTSAMM noted that most of the violence between August 2015 and July 2016 was not perpetrated by those involved in the peace agreement, but rather by smaller factions spread across South Sudan, reflecting the fact that Kiir and Machar did not exercise total control over forces on either side (International Crisis Group 2016).

Despite the reduction in violence, the implementation of the peace deal was always slow and imperfect. One of its most pressing pendencies was the return of Machar to the country and his reinstation as Vice President, which did not happen right away. Alleging security concerns, the former VP did not return to Juba for another eight months, holding up the implementation of the Agreement. It also did not help the preservation of this fragile peace that, contrary to the terms of the peace deal, President Kiir decided by decree to demarcate 28 new states to replace the ten existing ones (Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan 2019, 11). The decision displeased opposition members, who saw this measure as an attempt by the president to benefit his ethnic group, the Dinka, by increasing their control in oil-rich provinces (Martell 2018, 79). To add insult to injury, another decree on 14 January 2016 brought the number of states up to 32,

disrupting the intended state-level power-sharing arrangements of the peace agreement then in effect (Pritchard, Verjee 2021).

As mentioned, Machar eventually returned to Juba, together with loyal forces, on 26 April 2016, to take up his position as First Vice President in the Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU). With political leaders returned to the capital and violence reduced to the lowest level in nearly three years (prompting the ISC to downgrade South Sudan from its Level 3 designation in May 2015), it appeared that South Sudan was taking great strides towards conflict resolution (Schopp 2017, 13). However, forces on the two sides did not let go of their distrust overnight, such that the presence of government and oppositions forces in the capital cast a dark and ominous cloud over Juba (ACLED, 2017).

In May and June, the implementation of the agreement stalled at the same time that the government started backtracking on the demilitarisation of Juba. A secondary agreement to the peace deal had prescribed caps on the number of government and opposition forces permitted inside the city. Ultimately, however, government forces exceeded the cap to vastly outnumber and outgun SPLM/A-IO troops, with the Human Rights Watch, an advocacy INGO, reporting that as of early July 2016, some 10,000 to 12,000 SPLA soldiers were estimated to be in Juba, many of them hiding in residential areas dressed as civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2016). In comparison, the SPLM/A-IO troops had slightly more than 1,500 men (Agence France-Presse 2016). As of June 2016, the Crisis Group's Crisis Watch system had already reported the rise in tensions, noting that 'No progress on deal implementation as government and rebel SPLA-IO prepare for a return to war' (International Crisis Group, 2016).

As the fifth anniversary of South Sudan's independence drew near, hopes of peace were dashed on 7 July 2016, when fighting broke out between forces loyal to Kiir and Machar at the same time that the two were meeting at J1, the presidential palace in Juba (Martell 2018, 248). To this day, it is still unclear who fired first, but in the following four days, the capital was engulfed in violence (CIVIC 2016, 15).

To illustrate the magnitude of violence during the clashes, the table below compares political violence incidents between the June 2016 and July 2016.

	June 2016	July 2016
Battles	6	30
Violence Against Civilians	7	26
Riots	0	2
Protests	0	1
Explosions/Remote Violence	0	7

Table 5-1: Comparison in violent incidents, protests and violence in June and July 2016. Source: ACLED (2019)

5.1.2. Escalation Unfolds

By the morning of 7 July 2016, the potential for an explosion of violence was palpable. Fearing an escalation, many organisations still in the country closed their offices early so that staff could go home at lunchtime (CIVIC 2016, 19). Likewise, personnel from the UN's peacekeeping mission in South Sudan – the UNMISS – issued a broadcast stating that, due to security concerns, its staff would be allowed to leave at 3 p.m. In the early evening of that day, intense fighting erupted between Kiir and Machar's forces. For many observers, it was clear that the conflict was escalating. According to one South Sudanese NGO worker working at a Protection of Civilians site:

> 'This was bigger than the [December] 2013 fighting. In 2013, there was killing. This time, it was real fighting' (CIVIC 2016, 37).

Conservative estimates counted at least 150 people killed when the two sides clashed during the first day.

The following day was reportedly quieter, but full-scale hostilities broke out again on 10 and 11 July 2016, with much of the fighting close to UN facilities in Jebel and the UN base in Tongping, at the outskirts of the capital, where many internally displaced people were being sheltered. Several experts in Juba said

that, although the initial fighting did not appear to be pre-planned, the government and military used the incidents of 7 July as a pretext for launching a full assault on the opposition in Juba in the hopes of delivering a fatal blow, and that the temporary halt in hostilities on 9 July 2016 was used to prepare government forces for a final push to drive the opposition out of the capital (CIVIC 2016, 22).

After that, the conflict escalated and quickly spread to other areas in South Sudan, as the government engaged in hot pursuit of oppositions members believed to be fleeing the country to neighbouring Uganda and DR Congo (Martell 2019, 253). Within a few days, Juba returned to an uneasy peace, but the rest of the country did not. Fighting continued in the greater Upper Nile region, Western Bahr el-Ghazal State, and spread out to southern areas previously spared from the worst of the war, including greater Equatoria. By the end of 2016, nearly 1.9 million citizens were internally displaced, including 200,000 people taking shelter at UNMISS bases. More than 300,000 refugees had fled to Uganda alone since the resumption of large-scale violence in July, contributing to a total of almost 1.5 million South Sudanese refugees in neighbouring countries. In December, the World Food Programme (WFP) estimated that 3.6 million people were in immediate need of food assistance, partly due to the conflict (WFP 2017, 3).

The conflict continued to escalate until reaching its apex in the third quarter of 2017 (ACLED 2017, 2). The graphic below illustrates the increase in the scale of the South Sudanese conflict following the July 2016 escalation:
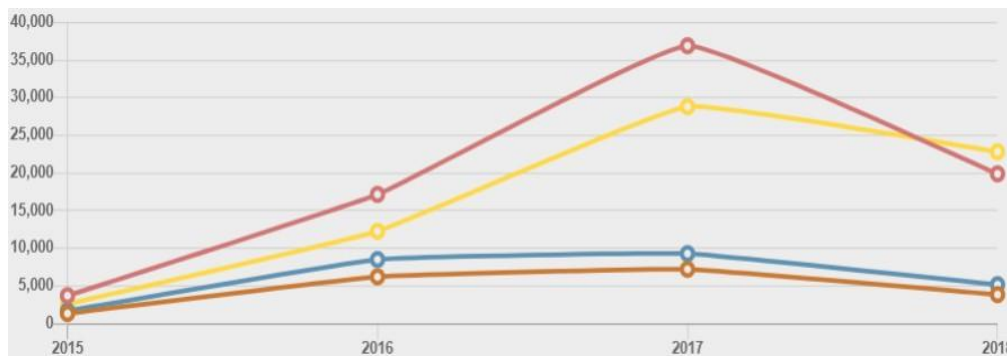
Figure 5:2: Yearly figures for casualties related to battles, violence against civilians, remote violence and riots in South Sudan. Source: ACLED. Graphics generated by author using ACLED's dashboard

The war entered a new stalemate as government forces also began to fracture as a result of a feud between President Kiir and General Paul Malong, the country's foremost military leader and a Dinka from a different tribe. Moreover, by March 2018, nine opposition groups had formed a new coalition, the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA), to collectively negotiate a new peace deal with the government (Gebremichael et al. 2018, 17). Coupled with intense international pressure from the UN and the US, these events led to the signing of the *Revitalised Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan* (Martell 2019, 260). As of this monograph's writing, the agreement is still in place, and a new transitional government was formed on 22 February 2020 (UN News 2020). The timeline of events described in this chapter is summarised below:

Having described the South Sudanese conflict, we can now explore the impact of this war on the INGO community.
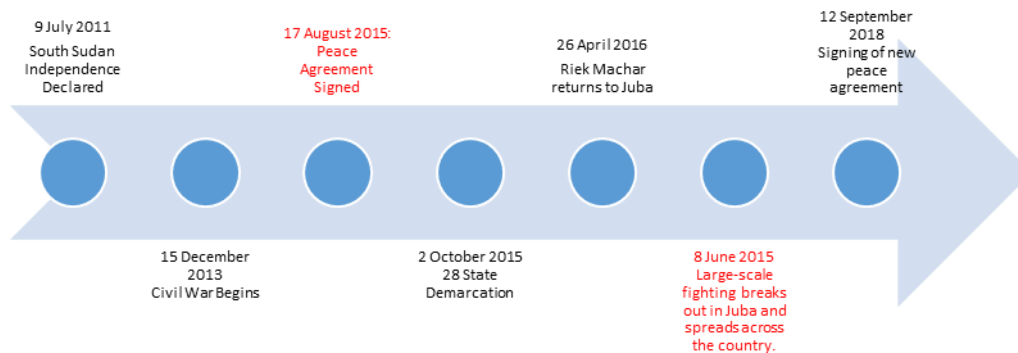
Figure 5:3: Summary timeline of South Sudanese history, with the start and end points of this research's temporal scope highlight in red.

5.2. *Presence of INGOs in South Sudan and Challenges to Aid Delivery*

Before presenting the seven selected INGOs, let us first consider the INGO community as a whole and the challenges faced by these organisations. Even

before the conflict reignited, South Sudan was already one of the most dangerous places an aid worker could be sent (Stoddard, Harmer, Czwarno 2017, 6). However, renewed violence starting in July 2016 took safety concerns to unprecedented levels. With 52 INGO staff casualties in 2016, the highest in South Sudanese history, South Sudan was the country with the most such incidents globally, per Aid Worker Security Database. In comparison, the country with the second-most casualties, Afghanistan, had fewer than half the number of INGO workers killed: 25 (ACLED 2020). The table below compares the number of INGO staff members killed in the five most dangerous countries for aid workers.
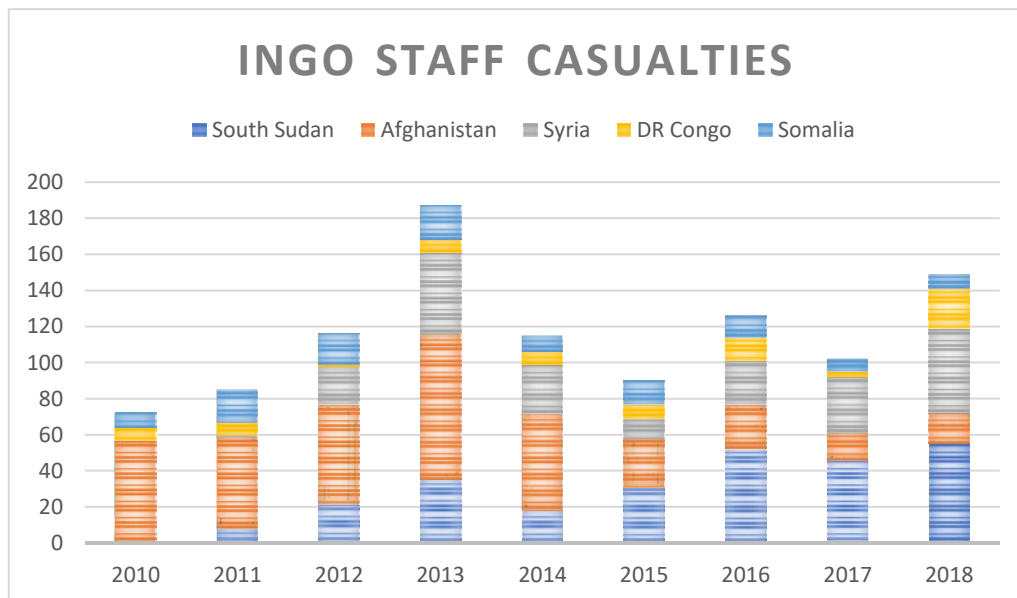
Figure 5:4: INGO staff casualties by country per year. 2010–2018. Stacked column format. Source: Aid Worker Security Database

Moreover, the impact of the escalation that followed the Juba Clashes can be notably seen in Figure 5-5 in the next page. The number of INGO workers affected by incidents in South Sudan had been stable since the signing of the ARCSS on 21 August 2015, before spiking again in July 2016.
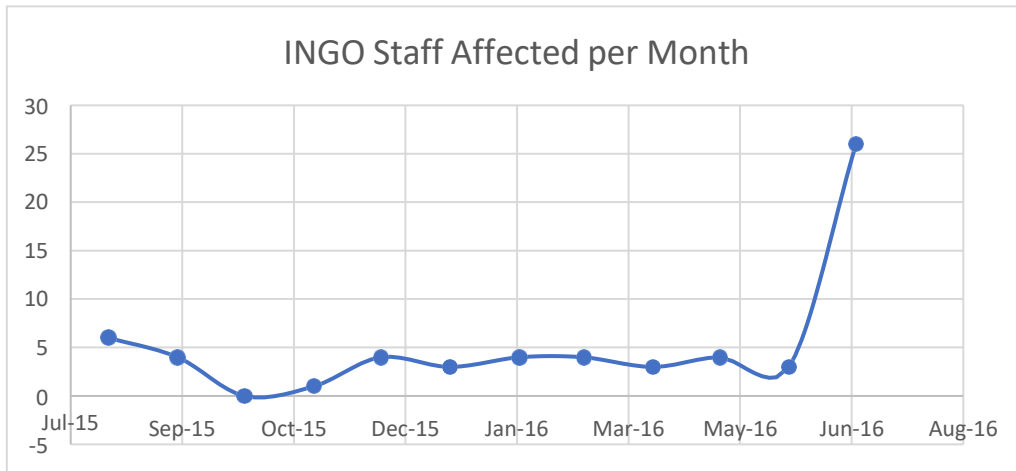
Figure 5:5: INGO staff members affected per month. Source: Aid Worker Security Database. Graphics made by the reseacher

Apart from casualties, the overall frequency of 'humanitarian access incidents', the general term for when aid workers are prevented from doing their jobs, tells us an equally bad story. The graphic below, from OCHA's Access Snapshot of December 2016, shows that the number of access incidents continued at very high levels even after the signing of the August 2015 peace agreement.
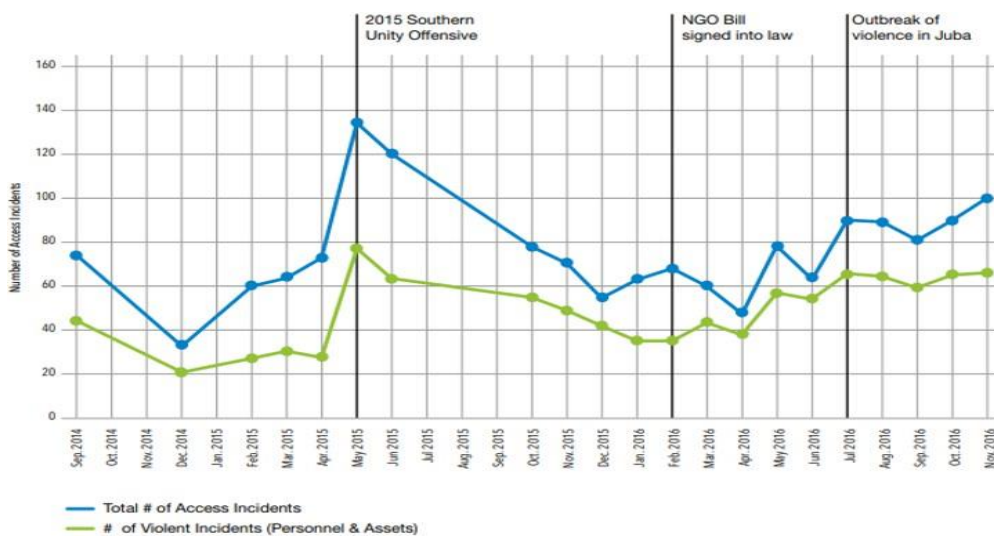
Figure 5:6: Timeline of access incidents between September 2014 and November 2016. Source: UN OCHA's Access Snapshot from December 2016.

Between January and November 2016, aid organisations reported a total of 831 humanitarian access incidents (OCHA 2017, 4). These incidents include assaults, ambushes and armed attacks on aid workers. In the vast majority of cases, no one was held accountable.

The gravity of violence against aid workers during the 2016 escalation of the South Sudanese Civil War was epitomised by the so-called 'Terrain incident' of 11 July 2016. During this episode, government forces consisting of between 80 and 100 soldiers stormed the Terrain Hotel where several INGO workers were based. The attack resulted in the assassination of a journalist of Nuer ethnicity and the physical assault and rape of many foreign aid workers. One US contractor victim of the attack said that 'If somebody had told me how bad it was going to be on Wednesday [6 July], I would have been out of there' (Grant2016, 40).

It is against this backdrop of severe insecurity that, as mentioned in Chapter 3, we observe that INGOs' presence in South Sudan had been decreasing since the signing of the ARCSS, with an accelerated decrease starting at the beginning of 2016. This tendency is show in the chart below:
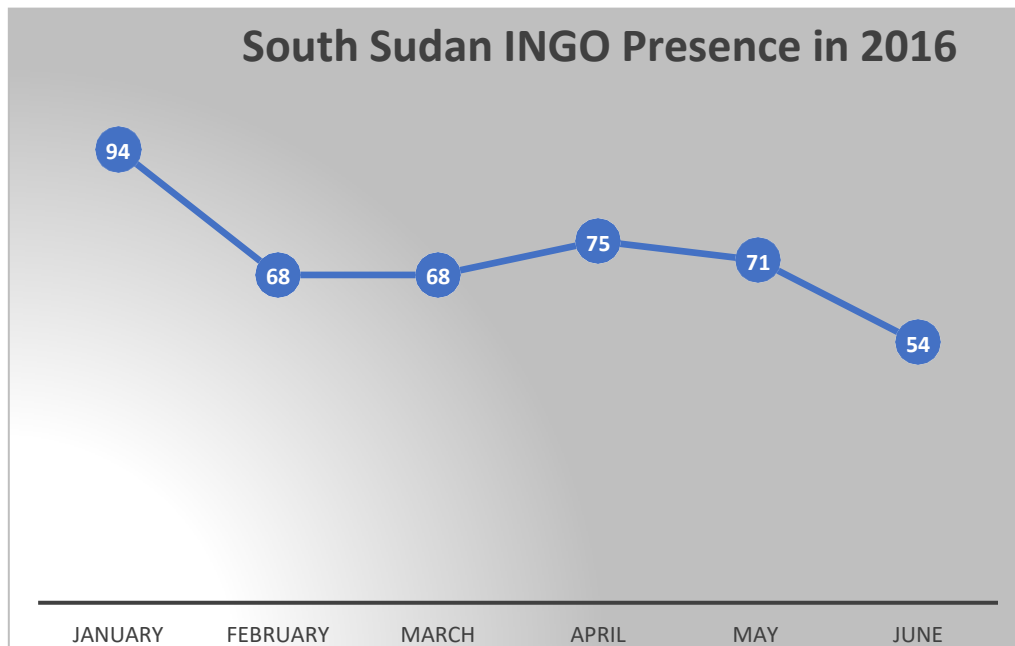
Figure 5:7: Graphic showing the evolution of INGO presence in South Sudan in 2016. Data was compiled by the OCHA on the 25th day of each month. Source: UNOCHA 3W Reports available on Reliefweb and Humanitarian Outcomes

Compiling data from UN OCHA 3W (Who, What, Where) maps, I found that the number of INGOs with operational presence in the country decreased from 96 on 25 January 2016 to 54 on 25 June 2016. Thus, two weeks before the conflict escalated, the country had 43.75 per cent fewer INGOs than five months before. OCHA's data does not reveal where these organisations moved to, nor why.

A similar picture can be found by analysing InterAction's NGO Aid Map. As the chart below shows, the number of InterAction-associated organisations working in South Sudan dropped from 33 on 1 January to 22 in July 2016.
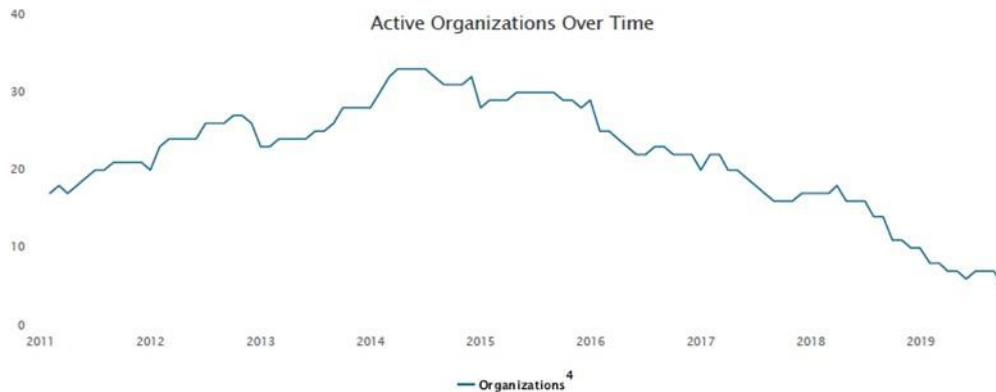
Figure 5:8: Number of InterAction-affiliated INGOs working in South Sudan between January 2011 and December 2019. Source: InterAction's NGO Aid Map

Also worrying is the fact that this declining presence in the lead-up to July 2016 took place despite a reported 'desire not to evacuate' among humanitarian groups (Harmer, 2016). Reportedly, the exit of INGOs and UN agencies by December 2013, the first significant point of escalation of the South Sudanese civil conflict, was more intense than the exodus of 2016 because 'there was no strong awareness of an impending conflict' (Parker 2016).

One last factor worth highlighting is the Juba-centric nature of INGO presence in South Sudan (Moro et al. 2020, 172). Due to the lack of infrastructure in the rest of the country, aid in South Sudan is almost entirely coordinated and delivered from the capital. More than just a hub, Juba is home to over 80 per cent

of all INGO staff members and almost all expatriates. I could not find a single INGO whose office was not in the city and whose country director did not dwell there. In the map below, one can visualise the location of many INGO offices in the city.

The intense concentration of aid agencies and their workers in the capital had not created many problems before July 2016. This is because fighting usually occurred in other parts of the country where SLPA-IO had control (CIVIC 2016, 3). The capital had been firmly in government hands for the whole duration of the first phase of the Civil War, but that scenario changed when Machar re-entered the city with his forces in April 2016. When the clashes came, INGO facilities and staff members found themselves close to where most of the heavy fighting would take place.
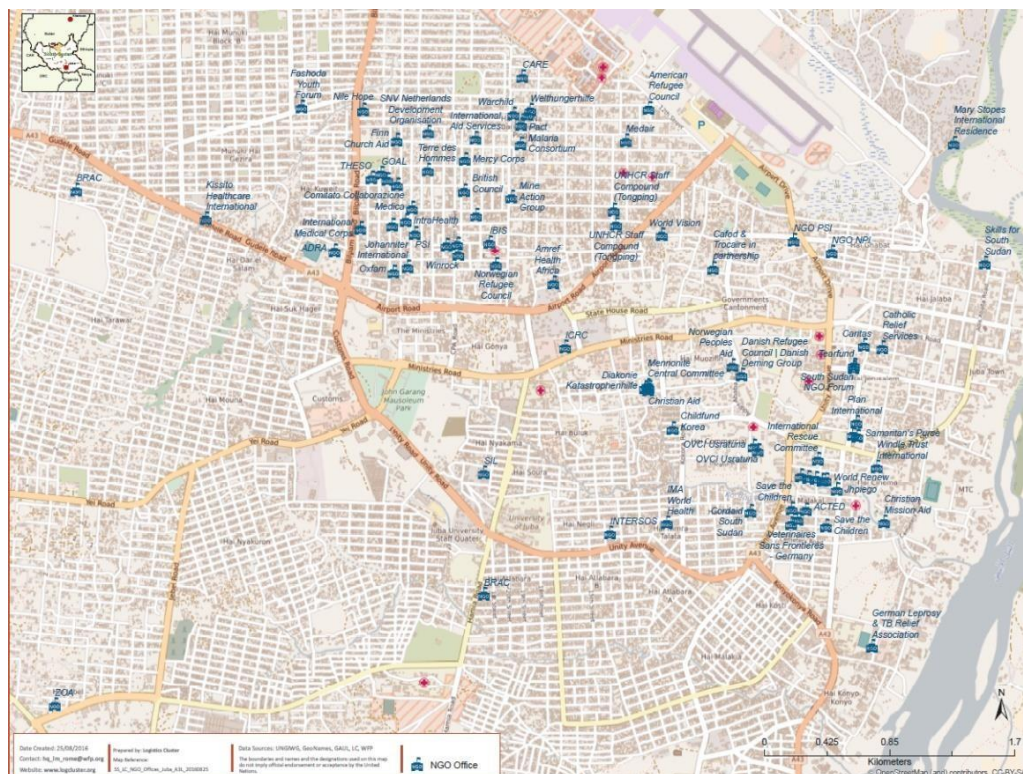
Figure 5:9: Major NGO offices in Juba as of 25 August 2016. Source: UN Logistics Cluster

A fight in Juba did indeed create a logistical nightmare, as supplies that would typically flow out of Juba were trapped in the city and were even targeted for looting. Worsening the situation for INGOs and recipients of aid, the fighting took place during the rainy seasons, when the country's poorly maintained and

unpaved roads became impassable, which also complicated the evacuation of not only INGO staffers but also civilians (UN OCHA 2017, 4).

Having provided the context in which INGOs were working and presented the challenges they faced in South Sudan, this chapter proceeds with examining the decisions taken by seven INGOs chosen from a comparative multiple case study.

5.3. One Problem, Many Decisions: Presenting Case Studies

Of the many INGOs present in that period, seven were selected for a more in-depth look. This subsection describes the decisions taken by these organisations, paving the way for the analysis of those decisions in the next chapter. I collected data on three organisations that have chosen strategies that can be characterised as 'avoidance' (decided to hibernate, relocate or evacuate staff ahead of the escalation of the conflict) and four organisations that selected other strategies, which will be referred to as 'stay'. Given the condition of anonymity granted to interviewees to ensure that they would be comfortable disclosing sensitive information, the description of the decisions below is made in such a way as to reduce interviewees' risk of identification. Organisations that decided on an avoidance strategy are pseudonymised as *AV1* to *AV3*, whereas those that pursued a *stay* strategy are henceforth referred to as *ST1* to *ST4*.

AV1, an organisation with a broad programme in South Sudan, had their staff in hibernation in the run-up to the fighting. This was reportedly a precaution taken in relation to the anniversary of South Sudan's independence. This was confirmed by the organisation's annual report, released months later (Internal Document 1, *AV1*), and by interviews with local staffers. In one such interview, the security officer from these organisations revealed that

> 'In the lead up to July clashes, all of our staff were hibernating in their homes. On top of that, we had measures in place for our staff at field sites, which was pretty much the same. We put our staff on notice so

> that they would report any concerning signs
> immediately to management so that we could act on
> this information and make informed decisions'
> (Interview 13, *AV1*).

In the wake of the fighting in Juba, staff remained in hibernation as the organisation monitored the country's escalation of violence. Seeing that violence had not been contained, the organisation decided to pull out all non-essential staff from South Sudan.

AV2 is an advocacy organisation with 15 total staff members in South Sudan, of which only six were expatriates. In the week leading up to the fighting in Juba, all operations were suspended, and all staff members in the country were ordered to stay home and prepare for a possible evacuation. Before that, the organisation was working with progressively shorter curfews.

> 'Were following information coming from the
> NGO Forum that there was a directive from the UK
> embassy directive telling to go home take fuelled cars
> with them so that they were able to drive out of the
> country when the when the airport would close'
> (Internal Document 1, *AV2*)

According to plan, after the escalation started, all but one international staff member were evacuated to Kenya overland, where they remained for three months before returning to Juba.

AV3, a development organisation with one of the largest programmes in South Sudan, had closed their Juba office ahead of the eruption of violence. According to the organisation's security manager, in preparation for a possible spike in violence, the organisation proceeded to adopt

> 'first a whole lockdown of activities, and then
> hibernation, and then assistance and evacuation'
> (Interview 9, *AV3*).

The whole process started on 5 July 2016, with the lockdown, and proceeded until total evacuation two weeks later. After that, activities were handed over to South Sudanese staff members and partner organisations, with the organisations controlling activities from Nairobi, Kenya. Expatriate staff began returning to South Sudan only at the beginning of September 2016.

ST1 is a humanitarian organisation with around 200 staff members working in the country, of whom around 10 per cent were international. In the weeks leading up to the Juba Clashes, there had been no significant changes to staff routine, nor was there an implementation of new protective measures. The only significant change came on 8 July 2016, just hours before the fighting in Juba began. In reaction to the altercation at the presidential palace the day before, the organisation had all their staff members in Juba and field sites sent home during the afternoon. In an internal review conducted by the organisation in the wake of the Juba Clashes, the country director (CD) was quoted saying

> 'After the gunfire exchange on Thursday, the city of Juba was tense. You could feel it in the air. As a precaution on Friday, I closed the office early so staff could collect any extra supplies and hunker down in the safety of their homes. It turned out to be a good decision because the fighting resumed Friday night and escalated quickly' (Interview 10, *ST1*).

With the airport shut down, the organisation decided to keep staff in hibernation until further notice. When the airport reopened on 13 July 2013, the organisation started to evacuate non-essential staff on chartered flights.

ST2 is a faith-based development INGO with a relatively small programme. It had six expatriate staff members and two dozen local workers carrying out their activities.

During the run-up to the fighting in Juba, the organisation had not taken any significant avoidance measures. When the conflict broke out in the streets of the capital, the organisation was in a business-as-usual situation. Staff members

were carrying out their activities with no substantive changes to their routine. Many of them were at the organisation's office in Juba. Testimonies from all three *ST2* respondents confirmed that the fighting in Juba had caught them off guard. During an interview, the organisation's acting CD revealed that

'When the bullets start hitting my fence and my gate, we were in the office and was taken by surprise. I did not see this coming. My Local people had seen it coming an hour before. And to my utter misery, they [local staffers] saw that I was engaged I was talking to somebody, and the deal was, I have an open-door policy unless it's closed. And if my door is closed, it doesn't open because I have a confidential talk. So they did not dare open it' (Interview 11, *ST2*).

This information was confirmed by a logistics officer (Interview 12, *ST2*) who said he was still on the streets of Juba when the fighting broke out and had to run back to the INGO's Juba office for safety.

Once the scale of the fighting had become clear, staff in Juba remained hunkered down in their homes or hotel rooms until evacuation arrangements were made together with headquarters. In the south of the country, a team of South Sudanese working near the border with Uganda, fearing the spread of the fighting, crossed the border trying to find safe haven in the neighbouringcountry. Over the course of the following week, the expatriate staff was pulled out of the country on three different flights arranged with other organisations between 12 and 14 July 2016.

Although the organisation's Juba office remained closed for several months after the escalation of the conflict, activities continued to be carried out by partner organisations, given the severity of local suffering. In an internal report, one staff member was quoted saying:

> 'Though we don't demand from people that they work while grenades explode, this does not mean that all our partner organizations stopped operating. That is hardly possible when you know what's at stake.

> The Juba office was closed 'until further notice' and also our programs – food and agricultureprograms, healthcare and emergency relief – I had temporarily suspended' (Private Document 2, *ST2*).

ST3, a medical INGO, reportedly worked with little to no change in their routine operations until the fighting began in Juba. The only reported change to staff routine in the weeks leading up to the Juba Clashes was that the CD ordered that all staff members should make stocks of food, water and fuel. Only after fighting had already escalated did staff go into lockdown on 10 July 2016, remaining in that state for one week before the organisation scaled up again with the formation of a disaster response team in Juba. Only four out of more than 30 staff members were deemed unessential and evacuated from the country.

ST4 is a faith-oriented organisation undertaking both development and humanitarian activities in South Sudan. In the run-up to 7 July 2016, staff members continued to work as usual in Juba and at field sites around the country. On 8 June 2016, staff members were ordered to remain locked down at the organisation's national office in Juba until the fighting had passed. Staff members even reported that at one point, there was active combat in front of their compound. After escalation had taken place, and even as fighting subsided temporarily on 10 June, the organisation decided not to evacuate their staff members from the country, fearing that an evacuation would be riskier than remaining.

> 'We decided it was safer not to evacuate because the window of opportunity was too small' (Interview 19, *ST4*).

In testimony to an internal review of the INGO, one staff member told interviewers that

> 'There are a number of us in the office compound. We cannot go anywhere as the streets are in lockdown. Our building sits in a walled compound and is fairly safe. We have supplies to keep us going' (Internal Document 1, *ST4*).

The table below summarises the decisions taken by the seven selected INGOs.

Having described the decisions taken by the INGOs selected as case studies and considering the context faced by these actors in South Sudan, we can now move on to explore these decisions in light of the conceptual framework built in Chapter 2.

Org	Mandate	Avoidance/ Stay	Summary of Decision
AV1	Hum	Avoidance	All offices were closed and staff hibernated ahead of clashes; subsequent evacuation.
AV2	Hum	Avoidance	All offices closed; staff had taken fuelled cars home. Evacuation after fighting died down.
AV3	Dev	Avoidance	Offices closed one week before the fighting. Lockdown, evacuation and return months later.
ST1	Hum	Stay	Organisation operated with no significant changes until the start of the Juba clashes. Subsequent lockdown followed by evacuation.
ST2	Dev	Stay	No significant changes to operations. Lockdown and decision not to evacuate.

| *ST3* | Hum | Stay | Stocking of fuel and food. Lockdown. Resumption of Activities |
| *ST4* | Hum/Dev | Stay | Closure of offices on the morning of 8 July 2016. Evacuation of international staff. Return after one week. |

Table 5-2: Summary table of organisations and their decisions

6. Inside INGO Decisions

The previous chapter included an overview of the South Sudanese Civil Conflict, a discussion on the challenges it poses to INGOs' work, and, lastly, a description of the decisions taken by seven INGOs selected as case studies by this research. In the present chapter, the aim is to explain why each INGO decided on an *avoidance* or a *stay* strategy. Later, the conclusions of this chapter will be used to readjust the conceptual model proposed by this research.

Mindful of this monograph's theorising effort, the explanation is based upon the conceptual model built in Chapter 2. Thus, the first section herein (6.1) will address the anticipation mechanism and its variables – the selection of indicators, the source of information, and the assessed level of conflict risk. In the following section (6.2), the reader finds an analysis of selected INGOs' decision-making processes. That section begins with the identification of key decision-makers and the analysis of the Field-HQ Interplay variable. It then considers data on variables affecting INGOs' thresholds of acceptable risk – namely, the Influence of Donors, Dependence on Other Actors, and Prior Experience of Decision- Makers and Mandates – and the influence of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Lastly, this chapter ends with a discussion on how the findings of the case studies reflect on the conceptual model (6.3).

6.1. *Anticipation Mechanism: The Evolution of Conflict Risk in the Eyes of INGOs*

The purpose of including the anticipation mechanism in the process described by the conceptual model of Chapter 2 was to explain how different INGOs maintain awareness of the risks affecting their operations. As proposed by this mechanism, two variables explain the differences between INGOs' assessments. The first variable included in this mechanism is the selection of indicators. The core proposition concerning this variable is that INGOs focusing on different cues to risk will pick up different signs regarding the possibility of escalation.

The second is the source of information used by the INGO. In particular, the central proposition regarding this variable is that INGOs that rely on more direct information will be better positioned to pick up on cues to conflict escalation than those that depend more on indirect information. Thus, this section presents the findings from document analysis and interviews concerning these two variables.
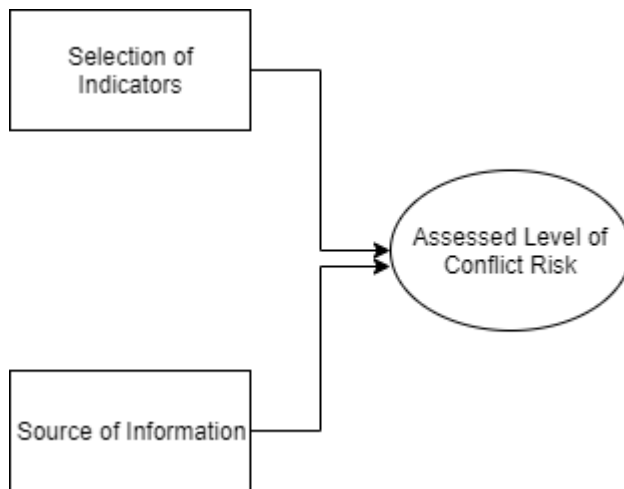
Figure 6:1: Arrow diagram representing the anticipation mechanism of the conceptual model

6.1.1. Indicators

Chapter 2 discussed the possibility that differences in risk assessments between INGOs may be due to variation in the indicators used as proxies of conflict risk. In other words, INGOs may interpret the same situation differently because they are paying attention to different things (Dind 1999, 3).

In terms of document analysis, the researcher had access to security manuals from six of the seven selected INGOs. These manuals, however, provided little guidance about which indicators INGOs should use. The justification given by these documents is that indicators are highly contextual, which is something that had already been anticipated during interviews with expert academics in Section 4.1.1. Indicators should, therefore, be chosen on a case-by-case basis by staff

members in every country where these INGOs operate. According to one of these manuals:

> 'These events or "indicators" may vary from area to area and are identified during the assessment process. Indicators should be developed to monitor disease epidemic outbreaks, crime, political instability, anti-NGO sentiment and other threats of concern to the Country Office. All staff should be made aware of the indicators. Then, observation during the daily routine is usually sufficient to detect any changes' (Security Manual, *AV3*).

In light of this lack of guidance from security manuals, the primary sources of data for this variable were interviews and risk registers provided by INGO staff members and the NGO Forum, of which every selected INGO was a member.[18] In the case of organisations selected for this research, data revealed five leading indicators: 1) the progress of the peace process; 2) high-profile security incidents; 3) impediments to access; 4) criminality; and 5) requisition of supplies.

Progress of Peace Process

The most commonly cited indicator regarding the possibility of a breakdown of South Sudan's fragile peace was how much progress had been made in the implementation of the ARCSS, the peace agreement signed in August 2015. This is understandable, as implementing a peace arrangement can be regarded as a direct indicator of the likelihood that a peace deal will hold. If progress is slow, that could indicate high levels of mistrust between warring actors. Conversely, if implementation is proceeding according to plan, actors could regard progress as a sign of decreasing tensions and grievances.

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[18] Risk registers are tools used by organisations to classify and assess the likelihood and impact of risks, as well as to provide risk mitigation strategies to cope with them.

When asked to tell their own stories regarding the evolution of risk perception inside their INGOs, almost all interviewees referred to two episodes that they considered to be the main tipping points in the implementation of the peace deal: President Kiir's unilateral division of the country into 28 states and Machar's return to Juba (only 3 out of 24 interviewees did not mention these two episodes).

Regarding the new demarcation decreed by Kiir, one INGO staff member confided that he believed, at the time, that even this move could have dashed any prospect of the peace deal holding.

> 'The next shocking thing that happened was the decision of the government to unilaterally reorganise the administration of the country. Full disclosure, I was at a party having drinks, but I was sufficiently disturbed by it, and I quickly sobered up, got to my office, looked further into it and sent around an emergency text message to people just say that this was coming. And this is the thing that could trigger a complete breakdown of the agreement. I was a little bit bearish because that didn't ultimately happen. But, nonetheless, I think, you know, looking at it from a long perspective, that was the thing, which was the indication that this isn't going to work' (Interview 10, *ST1*).

The allegedly unlawful demarcation notwithstanding, perhaps the most noteworthy tipping point regarding the implementation of the peace deal – and widely reported by INGO staff members to have set the stage for the resumption of violence – was Machar's return to Juba. Although this perspective may seem counterintuitive, as the return of the opposition leader was supposedly an advance in the peace deal, those evaluating risk inside INGOs had a different viewpoint. Juba had been relatively safe during the conflict, given that the capital was firmly in the hands of government forces. Machar's return to Juba, however,

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changed this outlook for the worse because it placed the two opposition factions in close proximity. Moreover, the numerical superiority of government forces over their opposition counterparts meant that a sort of escalation dominance[19] was occurring. As mentioned in Section 5.1, government forces garrisoned in the city were six to eight times larger than opposition forces. In other words, thenew situation presented the government with an opportunity to deal a decisive blow to the opposition. As described by one CD,

> 'The solution to bring Machar back into Juba and to allow him to come with some kind of contingent of bodyguards, essentially as troops loyal to him, meant that the situation has actually gotten dramatically more dangerous in the period leading up to summer 2016. Instead of having one badly controlled and underpaid army in the capital, you suddenly had two. […] I think it was fairly obvious that those guys were never going to get along now that you had stationed combat-ready troops within one very small city. So yeah, I think there was a kind of rise in awareness that it wasn't going to hold' (Interview 5, *AV2*).

Furthermore, the capacity of UNMISS to prevent confrontation, despite the presence of 13,000 peacekeepers in the country, was seriously questioned. The freedom of movement for peacekeepers had been so limited by the government that most of the force was confined to the protection of civilian sites (Interview 13, *ST2*). Therefore, after Machar arrived in Juba, INGOs reported that an altercation between the two sides became more a question of 'when' rather than 'if'. That situation seems to be confirmed by accounts of members of the Joint

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[19] Escalation dominance, a term first introduced by Herman Kahn in 1965 during the context of the Cold War, can be defined as a condition in which a combatant has the ability to escalate a conflict in ways that will be disadvantageous or costly to the adversary, while the adversary cannot do the same in return, either because it has no escalation options or because the available options would not improve the adversary's situation.

Mission Analysis Centre from UNMISS. On 23 June 2016, one of its members even went on to declare that

> 'The progress I had expected has not materialised. If anything, the Parties are further apart. There appears to be a stalemate that now threatens the implementation of the entire Agreement' (JMAC 2016, 2).

High-Profile Security Incidents

Taking into account the fragility of peace and the faults in the implementation of the peace deal, another indicator commonly monitored by INGOs was the occurrence of high-profile security incidents that might spark the explosion of the delicate security situation. There was an understanding amongst INGO staff members that a trigger would be necessary to revert the situation to one of full-scale violence. As one CD put it:

> 'Things were looking very tense, and it's been three years, but there has to be a trigger. So despite the fact that you see all the signs and everything, there was the need for a trigger if the situation was to descend back into war' (Interview 18, *ST3*).

Reportedly, INGOs noticed that the kind of incidents that could initiate a return to violence did indeed start happening, especially in late June and early July 2016. Some of the incidents reported by INGO staff during interviews include:

- Riek Machar's convoy being fired upon at a checkpoint
- The assassination of a senior SPLM-IO official who was having tea in a market
- An attempted murder against the head of UNESCO

- Shootings against US and Danish Embassy convoys
- A restrained stand-off between government and opposition forces at a checkpoint in the outskirts of Juba

Impediments to Access

Another commonly monitored indicator was the number of incidents related to impediments to humanitarian and development aid delivery. INGOs used this indicator to assess how likely these organisations were to reach their beneficiaries, thus affecting their programmes' effectiveness (Private Document 2, *AV3*; Interview 1, *ST2*). However, this indicator was also used as a proxy of instability because there was an established pattern in South Sudan wherein blockades would precede spikes in violence, denials of access and other events that obstructed aid workers from delivering services (Interview 3, *ST2*).

When prompted to elaborate on his opinion as to why access impediments were a useful indicator of risk, a logistics officer from one of the selected INGOs told me that, despite the decrease in violence between warring parties, access incidents were

> 'a very good indicator that the level of instability never really fell off that much from when the agreement was signed. It just sort of stuck around at that level' (Interview 2, *AV1*).

Crime

Criminality, including both violent and petty crimes, was used by INGOs as an indication of how active armed groups were.

> 'If you got a couple of robberies, then it's indicating that there's a group active there and that group could be local youth. It could be government soldiers. It could be opposition soldiers. It could be

> local militia groups. It could be anyone, but NGOs are a very obvious target for violence' (Interview 7, *AV2*).

As noted by one INGO focal point at the NGO Forum, risk register and scenario-building exercises always placed considerable emphasis on such events, especially in the lead-up to the fighting in Juba. In fact, criminality levels surpassed the redlines established by INGOs themselves during these exercises.

> 'I remember that during the months leading up to the crisis in Juba, there was mounting crime, including an increase of carjackings taking place around that time. And so, I remember we went through one session with the security guys from the NGOs on filling out this risk register and trying to determine what the red lines were, and went through the process. […] Later, when we looked back at the redlines we set out, I noticed that all of them had been crossed' (Interview 2, SSNGO Forum).

Requisition of Supplies

Another indicator that had not been considered when developing the conceptual framework of this research was the requisitioning of supplies by local armed groups. Although this was not the case in the capital, it was reportedly common at field sites that, in the lead-up to significant fighting events, local authorities or local groups might ask for fuel or food. Apparently, this was an indication that armed groups were gearing up for new campaigns. In more isolated regions, where local groups' acceptance was crucial for INGO operations, organisations often had closer relations with local communities. These communities, in turn, were always warned in advance of large fighting events. According to one INGO security manager,

> 'People knew they made very few surprise attacks in the context of government and opposition soldiers,

rarely would anybody sneak up and surprise the other'
(Interview 10, *AV2*).

Consequently, INGOs that had a close rapport with these communities were in a good position to pick up signs that forces were mobilising.

6.1.2. Source of Information

The other key element included in the anticipation mechanism is the source of information used by INGOs to collect intelligence on conflict risk. Again, security manuals/guidelines were not so helpful, so interviews played a large role in unearthing data on this variable. During interviews, I was able to identifysix sources commonly used by INGOs: 1) staff members; 2) diplomatic circles; 3) the NGO Forum; 4) other NGOs; 5) the UN Department of Safety and Security; and 6) external safety advisory firms. The first two can be considered direct sources, as they are collected without any external mediation, whereas the latter four can be considered indirect sources. This section also addresses issues regarding the quality and reliability of the above-mentioned sources in the eyes of INGO staff members – an issue that was regularly brought up by INGO staff during interviews but had not been included in the conceptual model.

Staff Members

INGOs reportedly collected substantial amounts of data from their staff members, both local and expatriate, mainly through direct observation or rumours. Most organisations considered this to be their primary source of information regarding risks (Interview 2, *AV1*; Interview 21, *ST4*). All staff members – not only those directly working in security management – were tasked with maintaining a heightened awareness of their surroundings. This request was seen as an embodiment of the mantra, 'risk management is everyone's job'.

In this process of collection of intelligence, security managers and security focal points were particularly important, since they were responsible for centralising information on risks and digesting it so that the relevant decision-maker (usually the CD) could make more informed decisions. They were also responsible for maintaining and managing a wide array of contacts from which they would seek to collect intelligence.

Local staff members, particularly drivers and those working in logistics, were seen as good potential sources because of their constant contacts or even family and friendship ties with local actors (Interview 13, *ST1*). There is, nonetheless, a critical caveat regarding local staff members that must be noted. It was pointed out during interviews that, in general, there was significant concern regarding the inclusion of local staff members in the security management decision-making process. There was a common concern that locals were more vulnerable to extortion and/or intimidation from local groups and could therefore be cajoled into withholding valuable information on thesegroups' activities. It was not a matter of mistrusting locals' capacity to keep secrets or provide reliable information, but rather a fear that family members might be used to extort security information or feed false information into risk assessments (Interview 17, *ST2*).

There was also a concern that local workers would be more inclined to withhold information on risks, fearing that the INGO would leave the country or scale down operations should their perception of risk increase. One CD confided that when it comes to collecting information from local workers, it is crucial to give them space to talk as well as assurance that their jobs are not at stake.

> 'With national staff, we have to be very careful. One of the top I could give to other CDs tips is that national staff in these contexts depend so much on jobs. Yeah, there are no, there's no job abundance there. So the moment the security situation becomes tense, there's the likelihood that the international organisations will evacuate or suspend operations,

which means their jobs are at risk. So they will not report to protect their jobs' (Interview 17, *ST2*).

Diplomatic Circles

Another direct source of information about conflict risk reported by two out of seven selected INGOs (*AV1* and *AV2*) was the resort to contacts among the diplomatic community and warring parties (SPLM and SPLM-IO). According to respondents, such sources would provide valuable and timely information on political developments in the country, especially related to the implementation – or lack thereof – of the peace agreement. One INGO interviewee described this as information known to people in 'high places' (Interview 22, *ST4*).

INGOs that resorted to such sources reported that disagreements between leading political figures became known much more quickly through such channels. These exchanges between INGOs, diplomats and warring groups were usually informal and little publicised to avoid risking the INGO's image as a neutral and impartial actor. For instance, two weeks before the start of the fighting in Juba, one organisation reportedly received information through diplomatic contacts that behind-the-scenes negotiations for the allocation of government positions between the SPLA and SPLA-IO were creating serious tensions. Opposition members were dissatisfied with the numbers of posts assigned to them and were threatening to obstruct the agreement's implementation. This information was then used by the INGO decision-makers as a basis for the establishment of earlier curfew times for staff members and kick-started preparations for hibernation (Interviews 2 and 3, *AV1*).

Information Sharing Through the NGO Forum

Regarding information sharing mechanisms, the NGO Forum was perhaps the most useful instrument for INGOs to collaborate with other INGOs, firstly because findings indicate that all selected INGOs – and virtually every INGO

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present in South Sudan – was part of the Forum. Secondly, the Forum would centralise information sharing and provide members with a compilation of what had been shared, making it easier and more time-efficient for INGOs to get hold of crucial information through the Forum's security focal point. Thirdly, there were informal mechanisms such as WhatsApp and Skype groups through which INGOs as well as national NGOs would collaborate. Such mechanisms were particularly crucial as the crisis in Juba started to develop on 7 July 2016. One interviewee at the NGO Forum disclosed that as the first shots were fired and NGOs started to react, one Skype group including security managers and focal points from many organisations became essentially

'a live-feed from the crisis, with notifications popping up every two minutes. It was overwhelming' (Interview 2, South Sudan NGO Forum).

Informal Sharing With Other INGOs and National NGOs

The informal exchange of information between INGOs was also quite common outside the scope of the NGO Forum. The practice would naturally develop from friendship ties between counterparts at different INGOs. Interviews revealed that the NGO community in South Sudan in general, and in Juba in particular, was very tightly knit, as staff members – especially internationals – would frequently go to the same social venues. This relationship was significant when trying to confirm rumours so that staff members from one INGO would call their colleagues from another INGO to inquire whether they had received similar information from a different source, to buttress the reliability of the intelligence in hand (Interview 3, *AV1*).

Also, CDs were reportedly very much interested in, and aware of, what other organisations were doing. At one point, one of these CDs admitted that

> 'For one country director, other country directors are your best friends and your best support' (Interview 1, *ST1*).

Several respondents considered such an exchange of information and interest in knowing what other organisations are doing to be a potential source of a cascading effect, meaning that some organisations could orient their behaviour according to what other organisations are doing, instead of making their own risk assessments.

UNOCHA and UNDSS

Respondents commonly cited two UN offices as sources: UNOCHA and the Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS).

OCHA was deemed helpful for collecting information on access incident indicators, as this office was tasked with negotiating aid access directly with local actors on behalf of INGOs. They would, therefore, provide relevant intelligence on roadblocks, checkpoints and other access-related matters that were useful for the assessments of INGOs. They did not, however, provide information on security incidents.

That task was left to the DSS, which also served an advisory function to UNMISS. This office would provide INGOs with regular updates on security incidents that could be accessed through a dedicated section of their website or newsletters sent to CDs as well as security focal points and officers. However, INGO staff members were very critical about the lack of analysis in the publications provided by the UNDSS. One CD, referring to the usefulness of UNDSS information, said

> 'You get these regular releases, I think weekly, from the DSS with updates on security. In my opinion, there were not helpful either, because their reporting

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was basically a description of incidents without any deeper analysis' (Interview 1, *ST1*).

There was also criticism regarding the depth in which incidents were reported by the UNDSS. Two different interviewees at the South Sudan NGO Forum told me about an anecdotal episode of a meeting between a security officer from the Forum and another officer from the UNDSS. In the meeting, the Forum officer allegedly came to the room with 30-plus pages of incident reports and analyses about security incidents during June 2016. His UNDSS counterpart came in with one sheet of paper.

External Safety Advisory Firms

Three out of seven selected INGOs (*AV2, ST2, ST3*) also received information through subscriptions to private firms providing intelligence and security services for INGOs. These service providers encompass security and travel risk advisory firms – such as Control Risks, Threat Intelligence, and AKE International – and non-profit advisory agencies like the International NGO Safety Organisation. The three INGOs received daily updates and regular analysis from these firms, which relied on a network of informants in the country. Except for one non-profit service devised for INGOs, these subscriptions were all provided by European or US-based political risk firms, who also provided ratings and advice on travel, security and political risks. However, these services were considered secondary sources, usually containing information that, for INGOs, was redundant.

Quality and Reliability

An incidental finding from this research that the conceptual model had not previously covered is the quality and reliability of data in South Sudan. Much like in academic research, there was an intense preoccupation with triangulating

information among selected INGOs. Because information in South Sudan can often take shape as gossip before being confirmed as a fact, those analysing risk within INGOs must consider the quality and reliability of the information they possess.

> 'There's so much talk here. There are so many rumours in this country flying, you know, at any point. It's really difficult to know what you can trust, what information you can trust, and what information you cannot' (Interview 2, *AV1*).

Data revealed two crucial conclusions on the reliability and quality of data collected by selected INGOs. The first is that individual INGOs tackle this problem in wildly divergent manners, with larger organisations deploying more structured means of assessing quality and reliability. In contrast, analysts at smaller organisations would usually rely on repetition of a single piece of information by many of their peers – i.e. when rumours regarding conflict risk are constantly mentioned by other analysts – as well as gut feeling.

Regarding the different approaches taken by INGOs, interviewees were asked how they could distinguish between good and bad information. The responses indicated an apparent discrepancy between the approaches of larger and smaller INGOs. On the one hand, *AV2* and *ST1*, which were larger organisations with more sophisticated security systems, used grading systems for sources, ranking them in order of reliability and adjusting them as they proved to be more or less reliable. On the other hand, in most organisations, which have fewer resources at their disposal, assessments of quality and reliability is something of an art form (Interview 8, *AV3*). In the latter approach, analysts usually resorted to a formula that involves blending information from as many different sources as possible and then trying to make sense of this information by taking into account contextual information.

The second conclusion is that there seems to be a process of construction of collective truths among INGOs. This became apparent from three concurring

accounts (Interviews 8, 10 and 17) which revealed that it was a common practice between INGO staffers, particularly security officers, to circulate rumours they had heard, not only to other INGOs, but among the NGO community in general. The purpose of circulating these rumours was to provide the chance for people at other organisations to weigh in. In most cases, hearsay would be either debunked due to others pushing back against it, or it would be confirmed, as it incentivised the whole community to investigate whether the rumour was true and unearth evidence on its veracity. In other words, it would be the case of a community cooperating in search of a shared understanding of one fact that merited further investigation.

6.1.3. Assessments

This section proceeds to look into evidence of how much risk each selected INGO believed itself to be facing. In other words, we are looking at the assessed level of conflict risk that each organisation considered when making its decisions.

Respondents from *AV1*, which was already in hibernation one week before the start of the altercation in Juba, all confirmed that the organisation had identified the anniversary of the South Sudanese independence on 7 July 2016 as a high-probability, high-impact risk for the organisation.

In the words of *AV1*'s security officer,

> 'It was no surprise to us. Now normally, on an event like that, which has big national significance to the people on all sides. You can anticipate that something is going to happen. (…) What I was most concerned about is that such an event could be seized upon by one or two of the young groups to take some military action' (Interview 3, *AV1*).

According to the then-acting CD of this organisation (Interview 2, *AV1*), since June, the organisation had been implementing a stricter restriction on staff movement in reaction to what they saw as precise indicators of security deterioration. This information was corroborated by a private document in which curfew decisions were justified as 'a preventive measure so our ability to deliver is guaranteed in case of adverse events arising' (Private Document 1, *AV1*). In particular, the CD mentioned the murder of the UNESCO director in South Sudan as one of the major incidents that prompted *AV1* to stay on high levels of readiness. Other reasons cited for assessing such levels of risk, found in private documents from the organisation, included the fear of collateral damage and having staff trapped in inaccessible areas:

> 'While INGOs are currently not a direct target of the conflict in South Sudan, there is a possibility of being caught in cross-fire or shelling, especially when operating in or near the frontline of the conflict in Upper Nile state. Furthermore, risks and threats are extremely varied in the South Sudan context, and the operating environments are remote and sometimes inaccessible' (Private Document 3, *AV1*).

The evolution of risk in the eyes of *AV2* was starkly different. Interviewees reported (Interviews 4 and 5, *AV2*) that even though the security situation was never comfortable in South Sudan, the organisation did not report an incremental uptick in security risk during the months leading up to the Juba Clashes. The only significant change in assessed risk came with the directive from the UK embassy, which ordered embassy staff to remain in lockdown in preparation for potential fighting. It was only after the directive that the organisation decided to increase its assessment on South Sudan to 'critical', the highest classification in their risk register (Private Document 4).

AV3 staff members, on the other hand, reported that after the signing of the peace agreement on 21 August 2015, conflict risk never really decreased. The reason for this assessment was described by their security manager:

> 'Neither the government nor the opposition had ever decided in favour of peace. It was just not in their main interest' (Interview 7, *AV3*).

Instead, the level of conflict risk, according to this organisation, remained at the highest level in their classification for the whole duration of the timeframe of this research. Maintaining classification and crisis readiness at the highest level also impacted the operations of *AV3* in other areas of the country, prompting the organisation to carry out a few preventive relocations on a smaller scale during the first months of 2016 (Interview 8, *AV3*). The number of such relocations was not disclosed.

Regarding *ST1*, the respondents reported that the organisation had changed its classification of risk for its operations in South Sudan from 'medium' to 'high' risk after a contained crisis in Leer Province in February 2016 (Interviews 10 and 11, *ST1*).[20] However, the classification was changed back to 'medium-high' risk in April as a response to lower levels of battle-related incidents, especially in the Equatoria region. Up until 7 July, with the altercation at the presidential palace, no significant reassessment had been made, which was reflected in the lack of changes to staff routine and lack of implementation of new protective measures, as reported in Section 5.4. A very similar progression happened with *ST2*, with their CD affirming that he and staff members were taken entirely by surprise when the fighting began to spread across the capital (Interview 11, *ST2*).

The only organisation deciding on a *stay* strategy that reported significant changes in risks assessments in the run-up to the escalation in Juba was *ST3*. Despite the lack of a risk classification to illustrate their change in risk

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[20] The researcher was unable to obtain the risk register in which this decision was documented.

perception, private documents and interviews confirmed that the organisation was nevertheless increasingly worried about the prospect of violence. In a situation report from three weeks before the fighting, the staff from ST3 were requested to 'make arrangement to make stocks of essential supplies' in light of what they considered to be an 'apparent deterioration of an already fragile political stability in South Sudan' (Private Document 10, *ST3*). To further illustrate this perception, as of February, *ST3* had already been noticing a tense state of dangerous proximity between rival forces in northern parts of the country:

> 'There are armed groups especially SPLA soldiers in Malakal Town. The areas surrounding Malakal town, especially on the West of River Nile, isinhabited by SPLA-IO. This scenario is a recipe for armed conflict and insecurity' (Private Document 2, *ST3*).

Lastly, *ST4* began implementing a system of monthly security risk assessments starting in September 2015. However, these risk assessments were of a very localised nature, seldom linked to the overarching political and security context of the country at the macro level. This is because such assessments were aimed at assisting the deployment of mobile teams across the country (Internal Document 2, *ST4*). Therefore, very little document data was available from this organisation. Nevertheless, its logistics officer (Interview 18, *ST4*) confirmed that the organisation had not changed its macro risk perception during the months leading up to violence in Juba because there was a belief that their reactive capacity, as well as their in-house Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT), would be enough to ensure that staff would be safe, should conflict escalation arise.

6.2. Decision Mechanism: Turning Assessments Into Decisions

Hitherto, this chapter focused on the risk assessments carried out by selected INGOs in South Sudan, investigating the differences in indicators and sources used by each. Henceforth, it focuses on the decision mechanism through which INGOs transform risk assessments into actual decisions. According to the conceptual model from Chapter 2, three main variables come into play in this mechanism. These are summarised by the arrow diagram below.
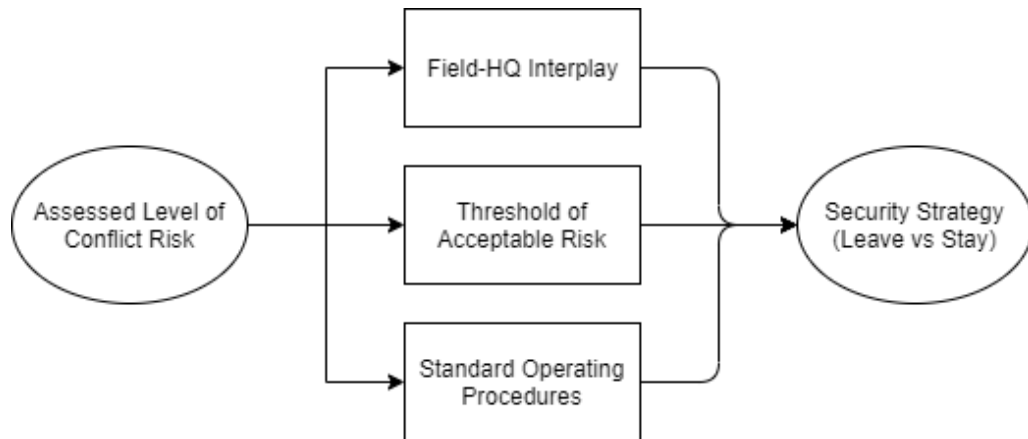
Figure 6:2: Arrow diagram representing the decision mechanism of the conceptual model

The remainder of this chapter is subdivided into three subsections. The first subsection addresses the Field-HQ Interplay variable. It identifies the main decision-makers involved in the seven selected INGOs and analyses how these different actors interacted. The second subsection addresses the variables that compose the threshold of acceptable risk. It will look into how the mandate, donor influence, dependence on others, and prior experience of staff affected INGOs' willingness to take on more or fewer risks. The last subsection refers to the influence of standard operating procedures.

6.2.1. Field-HQ Interplay

The inclusion of this variable was intended to capture how potential disagreements between people at different levels of the same organisation may affect the organisation's likelihood to choose between an avoidance or a stay

strategy. According to the model, organisations with more decentralised decision-making modes would be more likely to choose a *stay* strategy. In this scenario, the interests of field workers, who are considered most risk-taking, have more weight, so that they may have a better chance of influencing the outcome of decision-making.

To collect data on this variable, it was first necessary to find those responsible for making these decisions and to identify where they were positioned within the INGO's organisational structure. Decision-makers could belong to the headquarters level (at the main seat of an organisation), to the national level (the main office in the country where the INGO is operating), or to the field level (at subnational offices or detachments). In all but one of the selected organisations, the final word on security decisions always rested with the CD, which is an INGO's highest authority on the national level (Juba Office). There was, therefore, an absolute pre-eminence of national-level decision-making over field and headquarters. This was confirmed by all INGO staff interviewees and security manuals reviewed by this study, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

> 'Notwithstanding the identification of a security focal point, the Country Director holds primary responsibility for security management in-country and follows the normal chain of command within ######' (*AV3*, Private Document 2).

> 'In accordance with the #### Security Protocol, Country Directors, and Associate Country Directors of the managing affiliate are responsible for leading and managing evacuation, relocation and hibernation activities' (Private Document 1, *ST1*).

The only exception to this rule was *ST2*, in which the CD had the final word only until the start of the crisis. Once the crisis started, a crisis committee was

formed at the headquarters level in *ST2*'s home country, which then took over the reins. Upon confiding this information to me, the CD of this organisation elaborated that he found it somewhat curious that this procedure was so starkly different from the approach adopted by other organisations.

> 'Now that's why I have the feeling that we need to rethink local decision making because, as I said, the chair of the crisis management team in the [HQ country] is now suddenly taking all over. And when I mentioned this to the military attaché, for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, because they asked me to debrief, he mentioned that, in the military, decision-making during crises goes in the opposite direction. I asked him, and said, sir, please come with me to my head office because I've got to tell that to the CEO. He doesn't want to let matters out of his hands' (Interview 6, *ST2*).

This exception notwithstanding, CDs held the final word in all seven organisations, at least until the fighting in Juba had started. They were, therefore, the primary decision-makers. For that reason, I was very fortunate to arrange interviews with all seven CDs of the selected organisations. Despite having the final say in security matters, CDs did receive relevant inputs from other individuals within their organisations.

Other Relevant Actors

Most notably among the other relevant actors, the security officers (sometimes labelled as 'security managers' or 'security focal point') always played a prominent role in assisting CDs in making security decisions. This is to be expected, given that these were staff members explicitly tasked with centralising security information at the national level. Operating at the national

level, the security officer would collect information from as many as possible of the sources listed in Section 5.1.2 and provide risk assessments and advice to CDs. Often, they would attend regular NGO Forum meetings with other designated security officers and serve as the central touch-point for security matters with other organisations.

In larger organisations, such as INGOs 1, 3 and 7 – with more than 100 staff members in South Sudan – the principal security officer was aided by a team of other analysts. These were small departments, usually with three or four staff members. However, in the other four smaller organisations, security managers were basically 'one-man security departments' (Interviews 17, ST2, and 23, ST4). In some cases, they were even just part-time security managers:

> '[…] country office must identify a "security focal point". In many cases the focal point will be the Country Director, and in most cases, the focal point will have other job responsibilities' (Security Manual, *ST4*).

Even though these security officers were not the primary decision-makers, their opinions were nevertheless highly valued by CDs. These security officers were remarkably close to CDs, often serving as a CD's 'right hand', so to speak.

> 'So I rely a lot on the wisdom of the national staff. And I clearly remember myself talking to (name of security officer omitted, and then I asking him days before the fight in Juba. How are things looking out there? Is there anything we should do? Are our guys feeling safe?' (Interview 14, *ST3*).

One security officer would later confide that this relationship was due to a feeling of shared responsibility (Interview 15, *ST3*). It was assumed that CDs were overwhelmed with the management of other, non-security-related matters

of the organisation. Even though they might understand what is going on in the country, CDs need someone who can provide timely information about increasing risks.

Besides the security officers, larger organisations with staff members spread out across field sites (namely, *AV1*, *AV3* and *ST4*) also reported consulting field officers to ask for their input. Nonetheless, these consultations were seen as purely advisory (Interview 2, *AV1*; Interview 20, *ST4*).

No Defiance

One of the main factors that led to the inclusion of a variable to account for INGO staff members' relationships at different levels was the anecdotal evidence, from other countries, of the existence of 'rogue officers'. (Felix da Costa 2013, 12). During this study, however, no such cases of defiance were identified. At least to the best of knowledge of those involved in this study. Even after being prompted, participants confirmed that they did not know of any such episodes happening within their organisations or others operating in South Sudan. One interviewee went even further by saying that episodes of undiscipline are only possible when leadership from the CD is exceptionally feeble (Interview 4, *AV2*).

This is not to say that disagreements were non-existent. For instance, one logistics officer from *AV1* was very emphatic in reporting that he and other staff members had repeatedly urged the CD and the security focal point to take a more cautious approach in the run-up to the conflict.

> 'In the weeks leading up to the fighting in Juba, we noticed that other NGOs were getting ready for something bad. They were stocking up supplies, establishing new curfews and sending staff home earlier every single day. We expressed our concern to our manager' (Interview 13, *ST2*).

The officer, however, acknowledged that staff members, even if not entirely on board, agreed to follow the CD's orders.

The same applies to the relationship with headquarters. This research found no evidence that CDs were acting against orders from upper levels of hierarchy. Quite the contrary, national INGO offices in South Sudan and their CDs were relatively free to make whatever decisions they saw fit. The only exception, as mentioned, was *ST2*, whose headquarters office ended up taking over. In other organisations, headquarters could still be called upon for consultation, but decisions were always made at the national level. For instance, the security officer of *AV3* confided that

> 'When it came to closing down bases, then we went (headquarters location omitted) to get it confirmed. Then we cooperate, and we can make that decision quickly. We established Skype connect workshops are one, so we can make that decision within minutes' (Interview 7, *AV3*).

In light of what was evinced in this section, it is reasonable to affirm that, with one exception, the relationship between different organisational levels within the seven selected INGOs was characterised by three elements: pre-eminence of the national level, centralisation around the CD, and little to no dissent between different organisational levels. With almost all organisations following this pattern, it is unlikely that this variable – the interplay between field and HQ staff members – had a significant effect on the selection of *avoidance* or *stay* strategies.

6.2.2. The Threshold of Acceptable Risk

Now that we have identified the key decision-makers of selected organisations, we proceed to analyse the factors behind their willingness to take on more or less risk. In other words, this section is devoted to the analysis of the

threshold of acceptable risk variable and the four variables that influence it, as shown by the arrow diagram below.
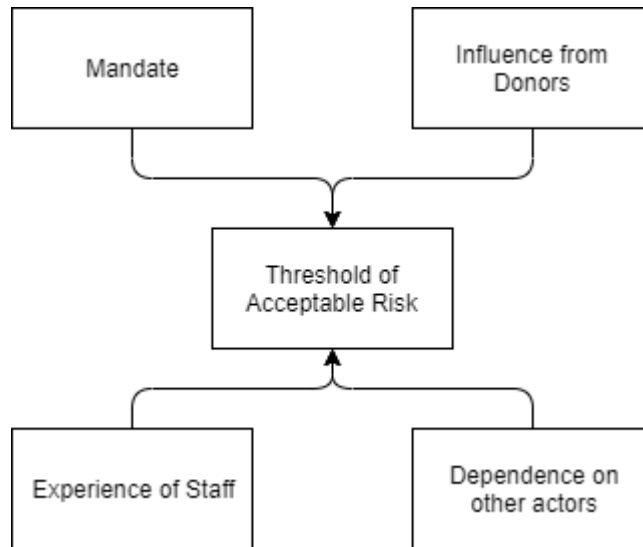
Figure 6:3: Spin-off arrow diagram representing the formation of the threshold of acceptable risk.

This section is organised into four subsections that refer to the four variables included in the conceptual framework: donor influence, dependence on other actors, prior experience of staff members and mandates.

Donors: Influential in General, but Not in Particular

In Chapter 2, when we considered the influence of donors on INGOs decisions, two key patterns were predicted. The first pattern was that INGOs that are funded mainly through private funds, rather than by donor states, would have more freedom in selecting their security strategies. This is because private money would come with fewer strings attached, whereas states' funds are more prone to being influenced by political motivations (Barnett 2009, 625). The second expected pattern was that competition for funds would motivate INGOsto keep programmes running in order to secure more funding (Smillie, Minear 2004, 8).

Considering the first predicted pattern, it is critical to identify the key financial backers of the INGOs selected as case studies. Two sources made this task reasonably straightforward. The first was UN OCHA's Financial Tracking Service, which included donor information for all INGOs included in this study as well as many others. The second source consisted of financial reports produced by the seven selected INGOs themselves.

In South Sudan, funds come primarily from national governments like those of the US and the UK, as well as from multilateral donor organisations, such as the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department (ECHO). That was also true for all seven organisations investigated here. As seen in the table below, private donations represented a very small percentage (2.1%) of all donations made to INGOs working in South Sudan through 2016.

Source Organisation	Funding in US$	% of response plan/appeal funding
The United States of America, Government of	500,575,822	42.1%
The United Kingdom, Government of	146,563,554	12.3%
European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department	122,652,689	10.3%
Germany, Government of	76,813,253	6.5%
Canada, Government of	42,074,005	3.5%
World Food Programme	39,824,803	3.4%
Not specified	26,974,195	2.3%
South Sudan Humanitarian Fund	25,423,501	2.1%
Private (individuals & organisations)	24,947,904	2.1%
Japan, Government of	22,581,464	1.9%
Norway, Government of	22,476,402	1.9%
The Netherlands, Government of	21,205,282	1.8%

Table 6-1: Twelve largest donors for projects in South Sudan in 2016. Source: UNOCHA's Financial Tracking Service. Accessed on 18 January 2020

Following this finding, it would be reasonable to expect that governmental donor agencies might try to use their weight to sway INGOs' security decisions. However, data from interviews with INGO staff revealed that such influence, at least in the case of South Sudan, was negligible.

There was a general acknowledgement that donor organisations are increasingly requesting more stringent security management in INGOs, which corresponds with the prevailing academic consensus that aid is becoming securitised (Collinson, Duffield 2013, 20). This trend was exemplified by the testimonies of two security managers who revealed that

'Increasingly, donors are expecting to see security plans and risk mitigation plans in proposals. So certainly US donors like USAID or European funders like ECHO, they often expect to see evidence of security management planning and to a bigger extent' (Interview 6, *AV2*).

'They (donor agencies) do try to influence duty of care, especially defining a very rigorous system of pushing duty of care away from them and into the organisation working on the ground to make sure that we follow your standards especially being a UK organisation' Interview 23, *ST4*).

This pressure reportedly led INGOs to develop more sophisticated security guidelines (including more comprehensive SOPs) and fostered the hiring of professional security personnel, particularly ex-military, to serve as security officers. However, in terms of pressure applied regarding specific decisions, respondents were adamant that donor organisations at no point tried to use their influence to push INGOs into taking more or less protective measures:

'[B]ut in answer to your question, no, I don't think that donors were, you know, forcing NGOs to take any sort of steps that NGOs were not freely able to do and decide upon themselves' (Interview 23 *ST4*).

'So a lot of that information was not demanded by a donor as such. It was understood that, because there is less procedure there is more we can do' (Interview 15 *ST2*).

The way funding for INGOs working in South Sudan was structured also probably played a role. I came to learn that most INGOs in the country receive funding either from strategic partnership fundings or through pooled funding. In the first instance, INGOs receive funds not attached to specific projects, usually from donor agencies from their national governments. That was the case of *AV2*.

'#### at that stage was actually receiving strategic partnership funding, which means that ### as an organisation was getting substantial funding from the #### government, which came with little strings attached. So it wasn't very specific project funding with which we now are dealing with' (Interview 4, *AV2*).

Receiving funds from long-term contracts that did not specify which projects money should be spent on meant that this organisation had more room to manoeuvre.

In the second instance, funds from donor organisations were put into a single pot managed by OCHA and distributed to aid actors through long-term contracts. Consequently, INGOs were not bound by any specific demands on their projects in order to receive funds. That was the case of *ST2* (Interview 16). This second possibility, however, paved the way for a struggle for funds from this single pot.

The second pattern predicted by this donor variable – that the competition for funds could incentivise INGOs to take on more risk – was also not confirmed. The reason for that, as pointed out by an OCHA officer in South Sudan, is that

> 'There is a limited willingness by donors to give directly to national NGOs' (Interview 3, *AV3*).

Furthermore, official figures from UN OCHA's Financial Tracking Service reveal that local NGOs in South Sudan directly receive only 0.3 per cent of all funds tracked by OCHA in 2016.[21] The discrepancy regarding funds received through the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund is not as large, but it is still significant, with INGOs receiving a total of $30,037,493.64 against $9,927,222.32 for local NGOs.

Consequently, even when funding was in decline, as shown in the figure below, the unwillingness by donors to donate directly to local organisations meant that INGOs would still receive funds from OCHA-managed funds and then spend those funds in partnership with local actors.
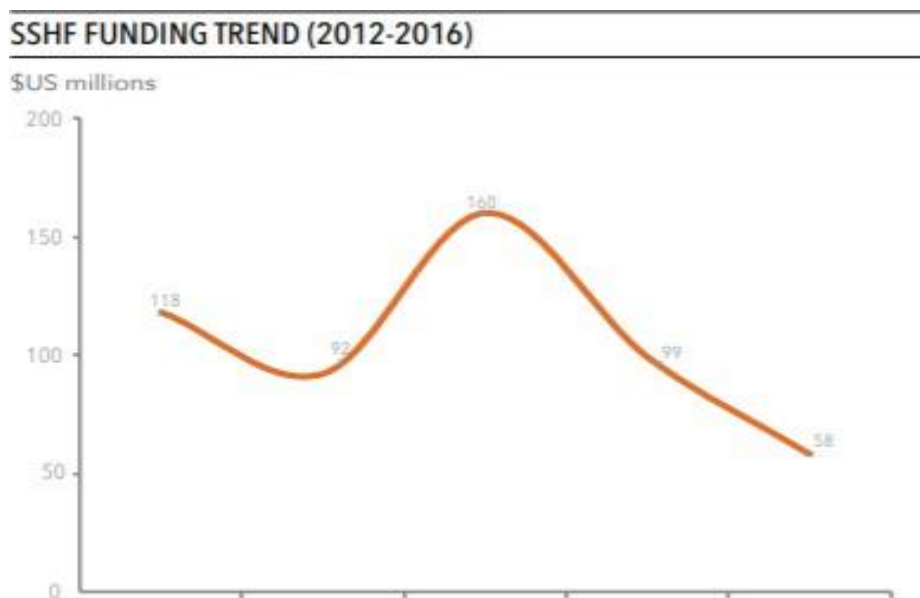

Figure 6:4: Total funding for the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund. Annual figures from 2012 to 2017. Source: UN OCHA (2017, 34)

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[21] All UN OCHA tracked figures can be accessed through: fts.unocha.org

Thus, even if they had withdrawn from the country, INGOs would still be the recipients of international funding, and they would continue to coordinate assistance with local actors who had no other choice but to stay.

Independence From Other Actors: Not Much of a Choice

According to the conceptual model, larger and richer organisations, capable of operating with greater independence, would be more prone to take on more risks. However, data from case studies showed that independence from other actors in South Sudan is not only an option, but a necessity of the highest order. On the one hand, the UN and its peacekeeping mission were primarily seen as unreliable actors. On the other hand, depending on local warring parties for anything was regarded as an almost suicidal move.

Regarding the UN, interviews revealed a complicated relationship between INGOs and the UN during the run-up to July 2016. All INGO staff members who addressed the support from the UN in general, and UNMISS in particular, were very critical of the level of support they received. One INGO security manager was very emphatic in saying

> 'It must be said, to be very honest with you, that over the course of those few days before the fighting in Juba, the UN was doing very, very, very little to protect anybody other than themselves' (Interview 4, *AV2*).

This was corroborated by testimony of a former NGO Forum employee:

> 'In that regard, I say: You cannot rely on the UN, and I think this is what I got from 2016, an NGO cannot, categorically, cannot rely on UN you to support them or help them' (SSNGOF, interview 2).

Likewise, an investigation carried out by the Centre for Civilians in Conflict found that

> 'UNMISS indicated that "other priorities" that were "unlikely or not likely to receive Force Protection" in the context of a crisis include the "movement of ambulances with critically wounded IDPs and essential medical staff and supplies"; "extraction by UNMISS and UNDSS of UN and NGO staff"; "presence by UNMISS in or near concentrations of IDPs outside the POCs"; "[p]resence by UNMISS on critical roads and junctions leading to … UN concentration points and evacuation routes"; and "presence at the airport to protect staff leaving and arriving' (CIVIC 2016, 74).

UNMISS was supposed to be an integrated mission in which military personnel working for the mission and the aid actors working on the ground would work symbiotically. UNMISS and INGOs would reinforce each other's effectiveness. The former would protect civilians and enable aid actors' work. In turn, the latter would improve the lives of the local population, which would, it was hoped, lead to a decrease in violence. Just months before the conflict re-escalated, the UN had published the Saving Lives Together Framework (2015), an initiative intended to foster cooperation between the UN and INGOs.

Interestingly, this lack of support was never mentioned in the INGOs' documents, suggesting the possibility that INGOs were not keen on publicly voicing their discontent towards the UN's limited reliability. However, the bottom line is that the seven selected INGOs, and probably many others, did not rely on the UN for their security because that was not even an option. This finding seems to contradict the conceptual model's prediction that larger and richer organisations would be less reliant on others for security and thus better-equipped to deal with security risks head-on.

Nevertheless, data from the seven case studies revealed that larger organisations are usually less inclined to take risks and more inclined to take

more protective action towards their staff members. Of the three largest organisations selected for this study (*AV1, AV3* and *ST4*), only *ST4* chose not to put staff into hibernation before the Juba Clashes.

During interviews, three reasons were given to justify why larger organisations were less inclined to take risks than their smaller counterparts. The first was staff exposure to security threats. Having more staff members in the country meant, for decision-makers, a higher potential death toll. The more people on one's watch, the greater the chance that an employee may be caught in a crossfire or even purposefully targeted during an escalation of violence. The second reason is visibility. Larger organisations, whose names are more easily recognisable by perpetrators of violence, were considered to be at greater risk of being targeted. With that in mind, such INGOs would tread more cautiously. This consideration is illustrated by the testimony of the security officer from *AV1*, who said that

> 'One of the things I learned throughout the years is that it is okay to take these sort of preventive measure in preparation for undesirable events. Even if you are not completely sure which you never are. If something bad does not happen, you just go back to work. But if it does happen, you were prepared' (Interview 3, *AV1*).

The third reason is mobility. The logistical challenge of moving people, resources and properties to a new location in response to conflict escalation was less burdensome for smaller organisations. It is easier to move a handful of staff members in and out of conflict zones than to move hundreds.

> 'It's a logistical matter. Smaller organisations, though with less resources, are capable of being more nimble. So even though they might seem most vulnerable, their size actually plays in their favour, since they are able to mobilise in shorter timeframes' (Interview 8, *AV2*).

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One South Sudanese security officer who worked for both *AV3*, which sent staff home a week before the clashes, and *ST3*, which kept working until the start of the fight, addressed the difference in mobility between the two organisations he worked for:

> 'I changed organisations right after the fighting in Juba, because it was clear that *AV3* was not coming back to the field soon. I got a call from *ST3*, to work in an emergency response team for Juba. They restarted operations in less than a week after the clashes' (Interview 15, *AV3* and *ST2*).

Indeed, *AV3*, larger and richer, had scaled down operations and had kept staff away from the country for nearly three months before bringing staff members back and initiating a response plan to deliver aid to those affected by the new escalation of the conflict.

Thus, even though an INGO's size and wealth did not influence their degree of independence from other actors, it did impact their risk threshold, with larger organisations tending to take more cautious stances.

Experience: How Much and What kind

When addressing the importance of including prior experience of decision-makers as a variable in Section 2.3, the present work proposed that existing literature suggested that the more experience decision-makers had with dangerous situations, the more likely they would be to take riskier stances. In Chapter 4, this expectation was confirmed and expanded upon as academic experts pointed out that experience also refers to one's experience in the country one is currently operating – that is, contextual experience. According to the academic experts, contextual experience is more important than experience with security risks in general.

On the one hand, INGO staff members indeed emphasised that experience in general played a large role in decision-making within their organisations. This was a view shared by INGO staff members and was also confirmed by interviews with staff at the NGO Forum:

> 'So I think personal experience is one of the most one of the most primary determinants of how people would experience or be willing to, you know, tolerate risk' (Interview 12, *ST3*).

On the other hand, data revealed two conclusions that diverge from what was predicted by the conceptual model. The first is that the relationship between risk perception and experience can be better represented as a bell-shaped curve. The second is that the type of prior experience matters as much as the amount of experience.

The possibility of a bell-shaped curve derived from an interview conducted before the case interviews with one NGO Forum security officer. This respondent argued that the effect of prior experience on risk-taking

> 'is a bit of a bell curve. The most inexperienced people are the ones who say "God will save me". And then there are the ones who have been here so long that they think they are invincible – myself included. I am on one side of the bell curve. I feel too complacent and confident' (Interview 1, ECHO).

The explanation given by this security officer was straightforward. Newly arrived staff members with little knowledge of South Sudan would arrive in the country with high hopes and a willingness to take on any kind of risk to get the job done. In other words, under-experienced staff members were the archetypical humanitarian daredevils. As they experienced the daily dangers faced by aid workers, however, they would grow increasingly worried by risk until they

reached a point where risks become a 'new normal', and they would again become less risk-averse. The graphic below represents the bell-shaped curve derived from this explanation:
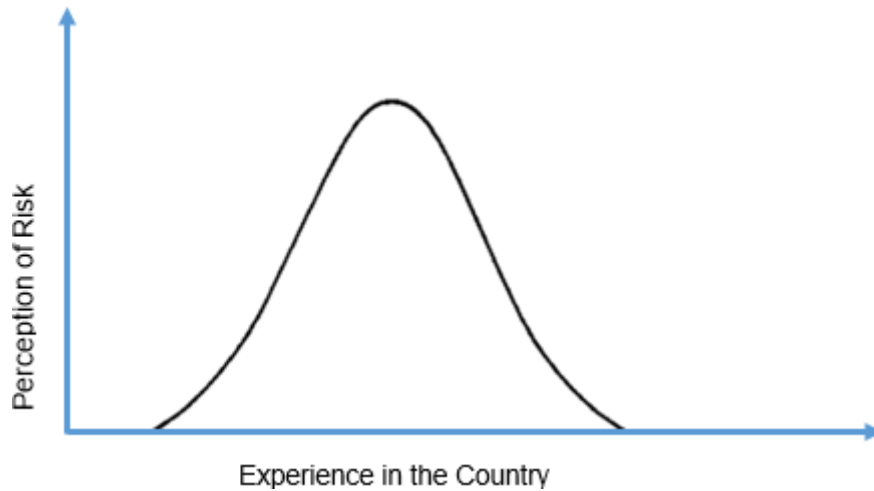

Figure 6:5: Author's illustration of the relationship between experience of staff members in a country and perceptions of risk.

The security officer's proposition proved to be correct for most case organisations. There was a high turnover of expatriate staff in the country at the field level – something that other researchers, such as Felix da Costa (2012, 18), had also recognised years before. However, when it came down to the CDs, who were the main decision-makers, all but one of the seven CDs interviewed had at least six months of experience in South Sudan. Considering that none of these CDs was South Sudanese, knowing how long these CDs had been in the country would be helpful in measuring experience. The table below shows how long CDs had been in South Sudan when the Juba Clashes happened:

Org ID	Experience of CD in South Sudan
AV1	18 Months
AV2	22 Months
AV3	11 Months
ST1	38 Months
ST2	2 Months

ST3	10 Months
ST4	26 Months

Table 6-2: Experience of Country Directors in South Sudan by July 2016

Although the sample used in this research is not very large, among the four INGOs that did not engage in avoidance strategies, two of their CDs had the least experienceout of all seven, and two had the most experience. Even with only seven INGOs,it would be unwise dismiss these numbers as a mere coincidence.

The other lesson learned from studying INGO staff members' experience was that the kind of experience held by staff members also mattered. Specifically, it mattered whether the prior experience was gained through previous work with humanitarian programming or more security-related activities. Although all CDs and most programme officers had prior experience with humanitarian or development projects, the same did not necessarily apply to security managers. Two of the five security officers I interviewed had some military background. More importantly, both of these officers hailed from organisations that had chosen *avoidance* strategies (*AV1* and *AV2*). This is an important detail since, as mentioned, security officers usually had a very close rapport with CDs. It is hardly a coincidence that the two organisations that sent staff home earlier had officers with experience in the military.

However, it should be noted that military-type background among security officers was seen as a concern by some organisations. The CD of *ST3*, which did not choose an avoidance strategy, confided that

> 'My experience is that hiring ex-military personnel is not successful in itself. They are very good at personal protection. So when I say is notsuccessful, I say in terms of contextual analysis, and understanding of all the factors that drive risks. In my experience, and this is my opinion, military personnel is not a good idea. You need somebody who understands programming, who understands the

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landscape, and preferably understands what is, you know, the social fabric. You don't even have to be from that country' (Interview 2, *ST2*).

Mandate

The last variable to be considered regarding the threshold of acceptable risk is the influence of mandates. Mandates are the kind of activities that organisations are authorised to carry out during their operations. This work resorted to the division between *development* and *humanitarian* mandates. The former refers to mandates that focus on long-term projects to deliver assistance to developing countries to overcome systematic social, economic and political problems. The latter refers to mandates aimed at the immediate relief of local populations following an emergency.

For the classification of these organisations as development or humanitarian organisations, I relied on the classification made by the South Sudan NGO Forum[22], of which all selected INGOs are members. The table below shows the classification of the seven INGOs of this study.

Organisation ID	Mandate
AV1	Humanitarian
AV2	Humanitarian
AV3	Development
ST1	Humanitarian
ST2	Development
ST3	Humanitarian
ST4	Development and Humanitarian

Table 6-3: Organisations by mandate

The expectation of the conceptual model was that humanitarian and development INGOs should have different approaches to risk, with the latter

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[22] https://www.southsudanpeaceportal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/12469.pdf

expected to have a more cautious stance towards security risks. The table above, however, would appear to indicate that this proposition was wrong, given that, of three selected INGOs with development mandates, two decided in favour of a stay strategy.

However, interviews and document analysis indicated that the intriguing result may not necessarily mean that development and humanitarian organisations are similarly risk-averse or risk-prone. Instead, it was pointed out multiple times that the notion of mandates *per se* is too broad. INGOs focus much more on the notion of what activities are feasible than on overarching notions of an ideal mission. In other words, decision-makers worried more about which activities in their portfolio could still be carried out even in the midst of conflict than whether their organisation was labelled as humanitarian or development, or even multi-mandated.

By and large, however, other INGO staff members did not refer to the idea of mandates as a driver of decisions. According to one logistics officer from *ST2*, INGOs

> 'do keep in mind that there is a greater goal. But when it comes to making operational decisions, it is all about what we are able to do in concrete terms. For instance, it is not whether our goal is to save lives, but whether it is actually possible to make medical equipment and staff reach those in need. If there is no way of doing it because there's a roadblock, active fighting or even unpassable terrain, then we just stay back because there is nothing we can do' (Interview 13, *ST2*).

Such a pragmatic view of staying and delivering becomes even clearer when looking at project proposals during the run-up to July 2016. For instance, *AV3* justified the feasibility of a project in a remote part of northern South Sudan because passenger flights could still be regularly operated from a landing strip to which the organisation had been granted access (Private Document 1, *AV2*).

Also, logisticians were constantly aware of the Juba-centric nature of aid delivery in the country, as mentioned in Section 5.2. According to the logistics officer from ST3,

> 'The capital played a very big role because all support in terms of supplies, or financial support, including administrative support would be processed from Juba and delivered to the field locations in those areas' (Interview 2, ST3).

For that reason, operations across the country could be suspended not only because the country as a whole would go into turmoil, but also because links between the capital and field areas had been severed. The same officer also quoted a famous aphorism attributed to General Omar Bradley, who reportedly said: 'Amateurs talk strategy. Professionals talk logistics.'

The only decision-maker who truly stressed the idea of a mandate as an important factor was the CD from *ST3*, who said that

> 'Some things are non-compromising, non-negotiable, not even a discussion. I always told my teams, in South Sudan, in Iraq, or even now in Afghanistan, that our mandate is humanitarian' (Interview 15, *ST3*).

6.3. SOPs: Useful, But Not the Answer

Concerning the influence of SOPs, this variable aims to capture *the presence of pre-established rules regarding decisions on the continuation/termination of projects and the extent to which these rules were followed by the decision-maker.* Data collection for this variable relied on both document analysis and interviews. Through document analysis, the researcher reviewed and coded relevant documents containing SOPs, identifying the rules set out by INGOs to guide

their decisions to stay or leave an area. The extent to which these SOPs were relevant for decisions was a matter left for interviews, during which respondents were questioned about the observance of, or disregard for, SOPs.

This chapter ends with an analysis of the role played by SOPs in the decisions taken by INGOs. In Chapter 2, the inclusion of SOPs in the conceptual framework was justified because the literature on organisational decision-making indicates that decisions may result not from a cost-benefit analysis but from decision-makers following the pre-established rules of their organisations. As proposed by Beerli and Weissman (2016, 77), these SOPs are expected to play an important role, especially in larger organisations where these rules are expected to have a homogenising effect on the behaviour of staff members. After all, SOPs stipulate what people ought to do when faced with an event, deploying a logic of *if this/then that*.

Indeed, if one were to look solely at security manuals and other INGO guidelines, it would be reasonable to infer that SOPs were the most critical determinant of decisions. All seven selected INGOs had SOPs in place with guidelines on when and how to activate an evacuation, relocation or hibernation. Furthermore, in the eyes of most interviewees, these rules were deemed extremely useful. The CD of *ST4* confessed that

> 'In my experience, and it's good to have very, very clear SOPs. Because, yeah, there's of course, also a moment of stress and tension. So, you know, it can be easy for things to be forgotten. Who should be called, how you lock down a base, who goes where, what kind of convoy, those kinds of things. When a convoy has been formed, who needs to be radioed? What do you do about local staff, for example, a whole series of decisions that you shouldn't need to have to make. So having that planned in advance is quite useful' (Interview 16, *ST2*).

However, the same CD also cautioned against treating these rules as a panacea:

> 'But of course you have in the past be understanding that each situation is unique' (Interview 16, *ST2*).

In general, interviewees were very conscious of the trade-off between the rigidity of following SOPs to the letter, on one end of the continuum, and having improvisation taking over completely at the other end. There was a genuine concern at the prospect of excessive rules that could lead decision-makers to ignore each crisis's uniqueness and restrict nimbleness in INGOs. Perhaps the best illustration of this concern was the testimony of one security manager from *AV3,* who said that

> 'In this sort of incident like that in South Sudan in crystallises, nothing goes exactly according to plan. So sometimes, because there is less procedures there is more we can do' (Interview 1, *AV3*).

The testimonies heard from INGO staff members were mostly analogous to an aphorism often attributed to former US President Dwight Eisenhower: "Plans are nothing, planning is everything'. For indeed, it seemed to be the case that SOPs were instrumental in creating an awareness of safety rules among staff members. As mentioned in 5.3.3, there was high turnover among staff members at the field level, such that SOPs were useful in easing the lives of those who were new to the country, providing a failsafe to which they could resort in times of trouble.

However, when it came to influencing CDs' decisions for or against the hibernation, relocation or evacuation of staff members, the impact of SOPs seemed to be significantly diminished. In none of the seven selected INGOs did

this research find any evidence that any pre-established rules triggered decisions. As the CD of *ST4* put it:

> 'Despite having all those guidelines at your disposal, decision-making ultimately comes down to people. So yes, SOPs were useful in providing sort of an aide-memoir sort of help to us. But I would not say any CD would risk taking a major security decision because of what is written on a piece of paper' (Interview 3, *ST4*).

Another CD told me that much of what was included in SOPs was quite self-evident and repetitive, such that SOPs contained directives that were trivial in the eyes of decision-makers. As one security officer put it:

> 'If I look at the evacuation documents as they stand, I think half of the issues in there was redundant or not really necessary' (Interview 4, *AV3*).

He then acknowledged that the main purpose of SOPs was not to guide decisions *per se*. Instead,

> '[t]he main purpose is to get staff to process the exercise and train for it and participate in it. By doing that and getting the right people in into the response mechanism. And that is key, because then you can deal with anything that comes up as a critical incident' (Interview 4, *AV3*).

In order words, SOPs were good and useful insofar as they served to get staff, including decision-makers themselves, acquainted with the procedures that should be followed once relocation, hibernation or evacuation processes had been activated. However, the activation of these processes, and even deviations

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to what is written in the SOPs, were always left to the discretion of decision-makers.

6.4. Reflecting Upon the Conceptual Model

The purpose of the present research was, first and foremost, to produce a novel conceptual model that would explain how INGOs anticipate and react to the possibility of escalating conflicts in areas where they operate. With that goal in mind, it is high time to reflect on how the results expected by the model are reflected, or not, by empirical evidence. Overall, the model proved to be helpful in identifying essential differences in how different INGOs react to the possibility of escalating violence.

Starting with the anticipation mechanism, in terms of risk assessments, data showed that INGOs indeed resort to many different sources while analysing obstacles to their operations. In the case of the seven selected INGOs, it was possible to identify six such sources:

1. Staff members
2. Diplomatic circles
3. the NGO Forum
4. Other NGOs
5. UNOCHA and UNDSS
6. External service providers

Regarding these sources, the conceptual model originally suggested that organisations using direct sources would perform better while tracking changes in conflict risk. Of the five sources listed above, two can be considered *direct:* staff members and diplomatic circles. For the former, given that all INGOs reportedly resorted to information from their staff members, it would be hard to attribute any variation on the level of conflict assessed to the use of this variable. However, the latter – diplomatic circles – was mentioned by only two INGOs included in this study, *AV1* and *AV2*, two organisations that engaged in

avoidance strategies. Although their assessments followed different trends, with *AV1* apparently recognising a rise in conflict risk earlier than *AV2*, it may not be a coincidence that two organisations that reportedly resorted to information from diplomatic circles also engaged in the same kind of strategy.

Data also revealed differences in the choice of indicators used by INGOs during risk assessments. In this study, five such sources were identified:

1. The progress of the peace process
2. High-profile security incidents
3. Impediments to access
4. Criminality
5. Requisition of supplies

Interviewees confirmed that these indicators were of a context-driven nature, which corresponds with what academic experts suggested in Section 4.1. In general, respondents from all seven INGOs seemed very well versed in the events related to the implementation of peace in South Sudan. Thus, it is unlikely that variations in the assessed level of conflict risk were due to INGOs failing to account for these indicators. Other indicators, however, showed more potential for explaining such differences, such as the requisition of supplies, impediments to access and criminality.

When considering the relationship between different organisational levels during the seven selected INGOs' decision-making processes, we found that, in all selected INGOs, the CDs were considered the most crucial decision-maker inside these organisations. This evidence shows that there is a strong pre-eminence at the national level during the decision-making process. Considering other levels, it was found that, except for one organisation, there was very little interference from headquarters staff during the decision-making process. We also found no evidence of rogue actions among field staff members. Given the lack of variation in the field-HQ relationship pattern, despite differences in size

and decision-making structure, it seemed that this variable had little explanatory power.

Regarding the threshold of acceptable risk from selected INGOs, this research presented strong evidence that the causal relationship between decision-makers' prior experience and risk-taking can be described as a bell-shaped curve. Moreover, we also found that decision-makers with predominantly humanitarian backgrounds tend to be more prone to taking risks than those with military/security backgrounds.

Concerning the effects of INGOs' dependence on other actors, this research found that INGOs working in South Sudan operate in a mostly independent fashion, thus weakening the explanatory power of this variable. However, during this investigation, we also found that smaller INGOs were less prone to avoidance, as their mobility and nimbleness presented them with incentives to stay and deliver.

We also found that the effect of donor influence on INGOs' specific decisions was negligible for two reasons. The first is that most INGOs in the country received funds from long-term contracts that did not specify on which projects money should be spent. The second reason is that the unwillingness of donors to transfer funds directly to national NGOs meant that even if INGOs were to engage in avoidance strategies, they would still be the recipients of international funding, as they would coordinate assistance with local actors that have no other choice but to stay.

In relation to mandates' effects, the expectation that development INGOs would have presented a more cautious stance towards security risks seemed to fail the test. This conclusion, nonetheless, should not be overstated, as interviews also suggested that this deviation may be less important than it appears. Data suggested that decision-makers seldom make decisions by looking at overarching mandates *per se,* instead focusing on what concrete activitiesINGOs can still carry out even if risks rise significantly.

Lastly, we considered the importance of standard operating procedures. The usefulness of SOPs for guiding relocation, hibernation or evacuation procedures, notwithstanding their influence on the actual decision to engage in an *avoidance*

strategy, seems to be very limited. This was supported by the absence of evidence, in all selected INGOs, that decisions were triggered or guided by pre-established rules.

The following table summarises the findings of the present chapter for each of the variables included in the conceptual model.

Summary table of findings

for each variable

Variable	Key Finding
Selection of Indicators	Organisations indeed relied on multiple and diverse indicators of risk, with progress of the peace process being by far the most commonly cited indicator.
Source of Information	Direct sources: Staff members and diplomatic circles. Indirect sources: NGO Forum, other INGOs, UN offices and external security services.
Field-HQ Interplay	Pre-eminence of national level (CD) during decision-making process. Little interference from HQ. No cases of rogue officers.
Donor Influence	Effect on decisions was negligible. Donors are pushing for more security, but do not interfere in specific decisions.
Independence From other Actors	All INGOs were mostly independent of other actors. Smaller organisations are more prone to risk-taking.
Prior Experience	Effect of experience→risk threshold resembles a bell-shaped curve. Staff with military background less likely to take risks than those with humanitarian backgrounds.
Mandate	The effect on decisions was negligible. Interviews revealed that the mandate in itself was never a factor in decisions. Instead, more practical matters, such as the feasibility of projects, played a larger role.
SOPs	The effect on decisions was negligible. SOPs were not used to guide decisions, but were useful to guide actions after a

	decision regarding avoidance vs. stay strategies had been taken.

Table 6-4: Summary of findings by variable.

7.   Conclusions

INGOs today no longer work at the margins of conflict. Rather, they work in areas where security is fragile and the escalation of political violence is an ever-present possibility. INGOs and their staff members are under constant pressure to deliver what is often life-saving aid to their beneficiaries while also contending with the threat of active or incidental targeting during their operations. Often, when security seems to deteriorate, INGOs must deliberate whether it is worth the risk to continue their work.

The ultimate ethical dilemma facing any humanitarian organisation is to decide how far to go and at what point the risks have become so great as to necessitate limiting or withholding assistance. If INGOs leave or suspend operations, they may be in a better position to protect their staff and assets, but beneficiaries could be left without crucial, even life-saving, assistance. Conversely, staying operational means that people continue to receive help, but INGO property and workers are now in harm's way. Granted, INGOs are under more scrutiny than ever regarding their duty of care, which has led to claims that today's humanitarian mindset has become overly conservative, risk-averse and cost-obsessed (Castellanarnau, Stoianova 2018, 7). However, the need for their help around the world has also never been so high. Today, two billion people are affected by fragile societies, conflict or violence, which only increases the importance of international aid delivery (World Bank 2010). Unfortunately, our current understanding of the internal processes of INGOs' risk management and decision-making, in general – and how they decide whether to stay or leave an area that seems on the verge of mayhem, in particular – is still very limited (Campbell et al. 2018, 7).

Mindful of this knowledge gap, the present study was guided by the following research question: *How do decision-makers in INGOs anticipate and react to the risk of conflict escalation in the areas where they operate?* To answer this research question, a novel conceptual model was presented. Combining elements from conflict studies, political risk analysis, and

organisational decision-making, this model sought to explain why, before the clear escalation of conflicts, some INGOs choose *avoidance* strategies, including relocations, evacuations, and hibernation staff – while others INGOs choose *stay* strategies. This research addressed both risk assessments and critical factors behind INGO decision-making within seven INGOs operating in South Sudan to explain this variance. The analysis is based on a conceptual model envisaginga two-step process with two causal mechanisms.

To investigate the occurrence of these causal mechanisms, two different methods of data analysis were used. For within-case analysis, the research deployed process tracing, which entails the reconstruction of decision-making processes. For between-case analysis, the method of choice was that of a structured, focused comparison of seven cases. Data collection included two types of primary sources: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Interviews included three different kinds of subjects: academic experts, people working at organisations whose work is related to that of INGOs, and INGO staff members working for one of the seven cases

7.1. Original Model and Adjustments

This thesis's original conceptual model includes two main causal mechanisms: the anticipation mechanism and the decision mechanism.

The anticipation mechanism (arrow diagram on the next page) aims to explain how different INGOs maintain awareness of the risks affecting their operations. Two main variables would explain differences in assessments between INGOs. The first variable included in this mechanism is the selection of indicators. The core proposition concerning this variable is that INGOs focusing on different cues to risk would pick up different signs indicating the possibility of escalation. The second is the source of information used by the INGO. In particular, the central proposition regarding this variable was that INGOs that relied on more direct information would be better positioned to pick up cues to conflict escalation than those that depended more on indirect information.
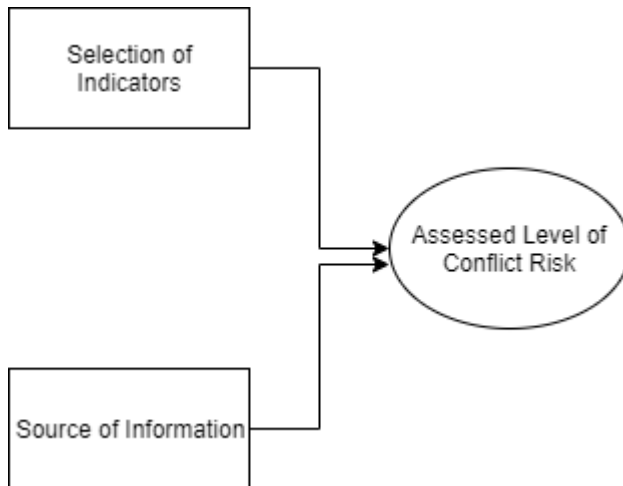
Figure 7:1: Arrow diagram representing the anticipation mechanism of the conceptual model

The purpose of the second causal mechanism (arrow diagram below) is to explain how INGOs transformed risk assessments into decisions. This mechanism involves the formulation of a threshold of acceptable risk – based on the INGO's mandate, donor influence, prior experience with conflicts and dependence on other actors – the use, if applicable, of relevant pre-established rules, and the interplay between staff at different organisational levels.
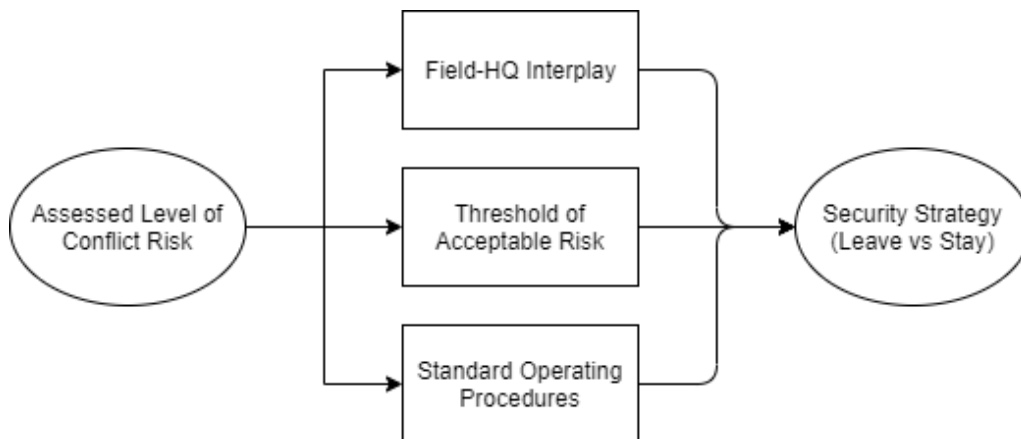

Figure 7:2: Arrow diagram representing the decision mechanism of the conceptual model

To evaluate the external and internal validity of the conceptual model, an initial appraisal by academic experts with experience researching INGO security management was carried out. Although these interviews did not unequivocally affirm or refute the validity of the two theorised mechanisms or the variables

included therein, they were instrumental in adjusting expectations for the effect that each variable of the conceptual model would have.

On the first causal mechanism (anticipation), expert respondents consulted by this study confirm the relevance of both variables: source of information and selection of indicators. Regarding the former, they suggested that larger, richer INGOs would be better equipped to collect grassroots information on conflicts because of the geographical reach of such organisations. This could, in turn, translate into a better capacity for picking up cues to conflict risk, thereby enabling them to better anticipate conflict escalation. On the latter variable, it was suggested by experts that risk indicators are highly contextual by nature. Consequently, this contextual nature makes it near impossible to infer *a priori* what kind of indicator will turn out to be most important in each country or region in which an INGO is operating.

On the second causal mechanism (decision), starting with the threshold of acceptable risk, the experts pointed out that 'prior experience' includes prior experience in general as well as experience in the country where aid is being provided (i.e. contextual experience). Moreover, according to the experts, contextual experience will better explain which decisions will be taken than general experience. The conceptual model was adjusted to reflect this new insight.

Regarding the relationship between staff at different levels within an INGO, academic experts emphasised that, in their experience, the national level (the country office of where the INGO is operating) is usually pre-eminent in the INGO decision-making process, so the figure of the CDs would likely be central in explaining INGO decisions. Additionally, experts also confirmed the proposition that staff members farther away from the field, especially at the HQ level, would be expected to be more risk-averse.

In terms of the mandate of INGOs, although experts agreed on the relevance of this variable, the caveat on multi-mandated organisations means that this variable could ultimately prove less relevant than previously envisaged by the model. Concerning the donor influence variable, the lack of expert consensus regarding this variable's relevance meant that no adjustments were made. The

experts' lack of consensus reflects the general disagreement regarding this variable within the literature as a whole. As a result, the present research seizes the opportunity to help fill this gap with evidence collected during case studies.

The influence of SOPs was severely questioned. The general agreement between academic experts was that, even though previously established rules may serve as a useful standard for discussions amongst staff members, no respondent believed that these rules would be a sufficient condition for triggering *stay/avoidance* decisions.

7.2.Discussion of Results

After the appraisal from expert academics and subsequent adjustments, the model was test during seven case studies including INGOs that were present in South Sudan in the months leading up to the escalation of the South Sudanese civil war in 7 July 2016. Overall, the model proves helpful in identifying essential differences in how different INGOs react to the possibility of escalating violence. This section addresses the key findings of each of the variablesincluded in the conceptual model.

Starting with the anticipation mechanism, in terms of risk assessments, data showed that INGOs indeed resort to many different sources while analysing obstacles to their operations. In the case of the seven selected INGOs, it was possible to identify six such sources:

1. Staff members
2. Diplomatic circles
3. the NGO Forum
4. Other NGOs
5. UNOCHA and UNDSS
6. External service providers

Regarding these sources, the conceptual model originally suggested that organisations using direct sources would perform better while tracking changes

in conflict risk. Of the five sources listed above, two can be considered direct: staff members and diplomatic circles. For the former, given that all INGOs reportedly resorted to information from their staff members, it would be hard to attribute any variation on the level of conflict assessed to the use of this variable. However, the latter – diplomatic circles – was mentioned by only two INGOs included in this study, both of which engaged in avoidance strategies.

Data also revealed differences in the choice of indicators used by INGOs during risk assessments. In this study, five such sources were identified:

1. The progress of the peace process
2. High-profile security incidents
3. Impediments to access
4. Criminality
5. Requisition of supplies

Interviewees confirmed that these indicators were of a context-driven nature, which corresponds with what academic experts suggested in Section 4.1. In general, respondents from all seven INGOs seemed very well versed in the events related to the implementation of peace in South Sudan. Thus, it is unlikely that variations in the assessed level of conflict risk were due to INGOs failing to account for these indicators. Other indicators, however, showed more potential for explaining such differences, such as the requisition of supplies, impediments to access and criminality.

When considering the relationships between different organisational levels during the decision-making processes of the seven selected INGOs, we found that in all selected INGOs, the CD was considered to be the most crucial decision-maker inside these organisations. This finding confirms the adjustment suggested by interviews with academics, namely, that the national level (host state) would be central to the decision-making process of INGOs. Considering other levels, it was found that, except for one organisation, there was very little interference from headquarters staff during the decision-making process. There was also no evidence of rogue actions among field staff members. Therefore,

despite differences between INGOs, the interaction between staff at different levels was very similar across cases, suggesting that this variable may have had little influence on the decision of INGOs to engage in avoidance or stay strategies.

Regarding the threshold of acceptable risk among the selected INGOs, this research presents strong evidence that the causal relationship between decision-makers' (i.e. CDs) length of prior experience in South Sudan (i.e. contextual experience) and risk-taking can be described as a bell-shaped curve. In other words, INGOs that presented a stay strategy were those led by CDs with the least – or most – experience in South Sudan. On the one hand, the risk-taking attitude of newly arrived CDs was justified by high hopes and a willingness to take on any kind of risk to get the job done, which guided them toward choosing a stay strategy. On the other hand, CDs in the opposite situation (those who had been in the country longer) had usually undergone a sort of danger habituation, which also led them toward a stay strategy. This contradicts the initial proposition of the model, namely, that more experience was always directly proportional to risk-taking due to risk habituation (i.e. the more experienced the CD, the more risk-taking they would be). The finding was also closer to academic experts' suggestion that contextual experience, rather than general experience with dangerous situations, is more relevant in establishing the threshold of acceptable risk.

Moreover, data also suggested that decision-makers with predominantly humanitarian backgrounds tend to be more prone to taking risks than those with military/security backgrounds. This aspect had not been included in the original model, nor was it mentioned during interviews with academic experts. Instead, this finding was a result of the process-tracing methodology used by this study. However, since this finding was incidental and found during the study – with no time to check this finding with the organisations that had already been studied – this proposition could not be included in the final model. Further research is needed to investigate the impact of humanitarian/security backgrounds on risk-taking.

Concerning the theorised effects of INGOs' dependence on other actors, this research found that INGOs working in South Sudan operate in a mostly independent fashion, thus weakening the explanatory power of this variable. The initial hypothesis was that larger and richer organisations would be less dependent on other actors to stay operational, thus increasing their willingness to stay. Independence, therefore, would serve as a proxy to the size of an INGO. During this investigation, however, data suggested that smaller INGOs were less prone to avoidance, as their mobility and nimbleness presented them with incentives to stay and deliver.

Data also suggests that the effect of donor influence on INGOs' specific decisions is negligible for two reasons. The first is that most INGOs in the country received funds from long-term contracts that did not make demands on INGOs as to how the funds should be spent. The second reason is that the unwillingness of donors to transfer funds directly to national NGOs meant that even if INGOs were to engage in avoidance strategies, they would still be the recipients of international funding, as they would coordinate assistance with local actors, which had no other choice but to stay.

In relation to mandates' effects, the expectation that development INGOs should have presented a more cautious stance towards security risks seemed to fail the test. This conclusion, nonetheless, should not be overstated, as interviews also suggested that this deviation might be less important than it seems. Data suggested that decision-makers seldom make decisions by looking at overarching mandates *per se,* instead of focusing on what concrete activities INGOs can still carry out even if risks rise significantly. Consequently, this variable is included in the final model despite not wielding strong relevance for the seven case-studies.

Lastly, regarding standard operating procedures (SOPs), this research found that these pre-established rules were considered useful for guiding specific processes taking place *once* a decision to stay or to avoid risks had been taken. However, their influence on the actual decision to engage in an avoidance strategy appeared very limited. This was supported by the absence of evidence, in all selected INGO cases, indicating that decisions were triggered by pre-

established rules. This finding contrasted with what had been proposed by the conceptual model, and consequently, the SOP variable was excluded from the final model.

Final Model

After considering the findings of this research, it is now possible to incorporate these findings into a final model that is the end-product of this undertaking.

The structure of the final model is similar to that theorised in chapter 2, insofar as it maintains a division between the two steps of the process traced by this study: the anticipation and the decision mechanisms. As explained previously, such division is based on a broad academic consensus that decision-making is comprised of two primary activities: information gathering and information use. The summary arrow diagram for the final conceptual model can be seen below:
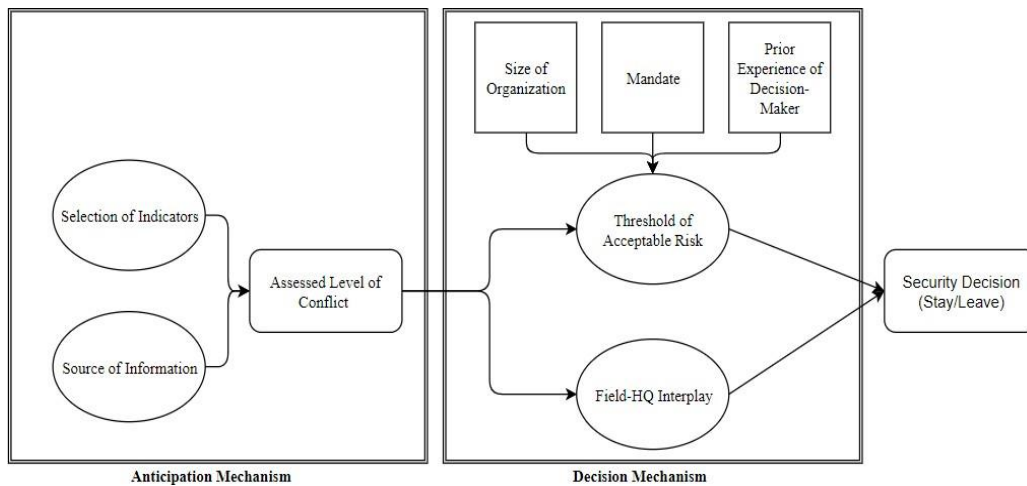

Figure 7:3: Arrow Diagram representing the final conceputal model for this research.

In terms of variables included, only two previously predicted variables were scrapped from the final conceptual model for this thesis: 1) The influence of donor, and 2) SOPs. In both cases, variables were not included in favour of

parsimony, since case studies revealed that they had negligible to no effect on the ultimate decision made by INGOs.

There were also significant changes made to two variables whose meaning and labelling was altered as a result from the findings presented in the previous subsection: Prior experience of decision-maker and organisation size. Regarding the former, findings reveal a central role played by CDs within an INGO's decision-making processes, so that the experience deal with by this variable refers to this particular actor. Additionally, since findings reinforce the idea, proposed previously by experts, that contextual experience (i.e. experience in the country of operations) is more relevant than experience with risk in general, the variable now focuses on measuring this particular kind of experience. On the organization size, findings uncovered evidence of an inversely-proportional correlation between size and risk-taking. This is because, smaller organisations are less exposed, less visible and more nimble than their bigger counterparts. Conversely, evidence of dependence on other organisations was lacking because, in the case studies conducted in this study, INGOs operated largely independent from other actors. Given that the first of these two propositions has shown more promise during this study, a decision was taken to alter the meaning of this variable to measure the effects of the size of the organisation directly, instead of indirectly, as in the case of depence on other actors.

Limitations, Validity and Generalisation

Having consolidated the final conceptual mode, it is now imperative to consider the limitations of this research and the conceptual model. The kind of test produced by this dissertation can be better described by Collier's notion of a *straw-in-the-wind* test (Collier 2011, 825). Straw-in-the-wind tests provide useful information that may either favour or call into question a given hypothesis, but such tests are not decisive by themselves. They provide neither a necessary nor a sufficient criterion for establishing a hypothesis nor, correspondingly, for rejecting it.

As seen in the previous section, the findings of this research seem to reinforce the relevance of variables such as prior experience, whereas the explanatory power of other variables, such as mandate, are called into question. That does not mean, however, that the relevance of these variables has been decisively confirmed or disproved. In qualifying this research's findings, this limitation should be borne in mind.

One of the primary concerns while devising this study was to minimise the risk that variables not included in the model might affect its findings. In other words, the research design should ensure internal validity. Indeed, employing a process-tracing methodology meant that the research permitted making observations that could have escaped a more rigid method. This goal was successfully achieved, as a new understanding for prior experience and donor influence variables was reached based on information unearthed by process tracing.

The external validity of this research – that is, generalising the findings of this research to the whole INGO community in South Sudan, particularly, and in the world, in general – needs to be addressed. It must be noted that the universe of INGOs present in South Sudan was at least six times larger than the sample size of the cross-case study conducted here. Nevertheless, I argue that the seven case studies presented here are representative of the larger INGO community in South Sudan, as the sample contains organisations of significantly different sizes, mandates and origins. At the very least, this research's conclusions could be extended to other cases belonging to the same class of events, namely, all INGOs facing the possibility of escalation in South Sudan before the Juba Clashes of 2016.

Generalisations to other contexts and countries is a task that would merit a greater effort jointly with other scholars, as will be explained in further detail in the next section. Nevertheless, it should be noted that all seven organisations chosen for this research operated in various other states on different continents, so the model could readily be applied to these other operations as well. Indeed, the variables and causal mechanisms specified in the model were designed to be generally applicable to other actors and contexts.

7.3.Future Research Agenda, Scientific Relevance and Policy Implications

Future Research

By investigating seven case studies of INGOs present in South Sudan, this dissertation sought to shed light on how INGOs anticipate and react to the possibility of escalating violence in areas where they operate.

The escalation point chosen for this research is emblematic from the standpoint of aid worker security and the number of organisations involved (Harmer, Czwarno 2017). Nevertheless, further generalisation of this research's findings requires further research, as South Sudan is a particularly challenging and idiosyncratic context. To extend our knowledge of how INGOs react to conflict risk, it would be of tremendous value if future researchers were to apply this study's framework to other complex emergencies similar to the situation in South Sudan. Examples such as Syria (2011–present), Yemen (2015–present) and Libya (2011–present) spring to mind. Unfortunately, as civil conflicts are likely to remain a phenomenon of world politics for years to come, understanding how aid actors can learn to improve their risk assessments and decision-making processes will be crucial in boosting the efficiency of their operations as well as safeguarding the safety of aid workers.

Future research on this model's applications to other relevant actors, such as transnational corporations, international organisations and international organisations, would also be of great value. Even though these organisations may be guided by motives that are different from the causes advanced by INGOs,many elements could easily be extrapolated to other actors, such as sources of information, selection of indicators, and experience of decision-makers. For instance, decision-makers at several multinational energy and extractivist companies, much like their INGO counterparts, also must deal with challenges related to picking up cues to conflict escalation, even if they may not have access to the same sources or use the same indicators that INGOs do. Therefore, this

research's findings could be used to create new risk frameworks tailored for the specific needs of such companies or to evaluate and improve existing ones.

Lastly, this research yielded incidental findings that merit further appraisal by other researchers. The first is the finding that contextual experience, i.e. experience in the country where the INGO is operating, is more important than general risk-management experience. The second is the suggestion that decision-makers with predominantly humanitarian backgrounds tend to be more prone to taking risks than those with military/security backgrounds. The third is the relationship between the structure of funding and an INGO's propensity for taking risks, specially regarding long-term strategic partnerships and pooled funds, which might encourage INGOs into taking more risk without fearing lost of funding.

Scientific Relevance

The conceptual model devised for this monograph combined elements from many different bodies of literature, including political risk analysis, international relations, crisis management, conflict studies and organisational decision-making, to propose a theory that was tailored specifically for the needs of international aid actors in conflict situations. However, the model also yields results that can be used to improve theories in the above-mentioned areas of study.

This work contributes to a better understanding of the phenomenon of transnationalism within the field of international relations. Over the past decades, especially after the end of the Cold War, the number of actors operating across national borders has expanded rapidly. For instance, the number of INGOs and transnational companies have nearly doubled in the 15-year span between 1990 and 2005, as shown in the graphic in the next page (Turner 2010, 82).
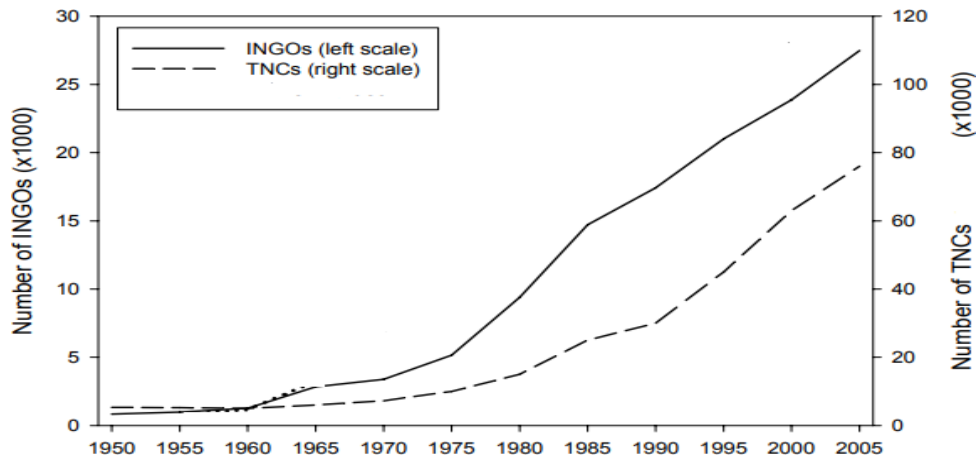
Figure 7:4: Number of INGOs and transnational companies worldwide from 1950 to 2005 (Turner 2010, 82).

INGOs are present in virtually every conflict, domestic or international, around the world. Because of the reach and scope of these organisations, much attention has been paid to the challenges posed to humanitarian workers by security conditions in conflict zones. The increasing involvement of INGOs in conflict management in various areas of the world and the persistent attacks and casualties that affect their work have made the issue more and more important (Irrera 2019, 574).

There is a need for further and deeper research on how INGOs are reacting and adapting to the current changes in security and conflict (Irrera 2019, 573). This work contributes to closing this gap by explaining how INGOs anticipate and react to the risk of conflict escalation in areas where they operate. It also provides evidence for scholars who wish to explore whether INGOs are becoming firm-like. It has become common for scholars to refer to a "marketization" of aid, in which organisations from the third sector start emulating the behaviour of corporations in their business practices (Cooley, Ron 2002, 6). Thus, the conceptual model created in this thesis might be used to compare decision-making practices across businesses and INGOs.

Concerning crisis management, INGOs have become an increasingly important force to deal with international public crises and have played an essential role in modern society due to the advantages of organisational

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mechanisms and profession knowledge (Yanni 2012, 222). As of 2018, such organisations received over US$ 4.0 billion in direct donations, with 94% of this sum going to INGOs (Urquhart, Tuchel 2018, 11). Jointly with international organisations, their agencies, and national governments, INGOs are tasked with intervening to contain and prevent conflict, alleviate suffering, and address underlying sources of violence. However, challenges faced by INGOs in conflict zones remain an under-researched and undervalued issue (Irrera 2019, 584). More particularly, the effects of the prospect of violence on INGO decision-making constitute an issue for which the literature on crisis management had no answer – a gap that the conceptual model of the present work sought to address.

In relation to conflict studies, this study may provide a better understanding of the challenges faced by actors seeking to navigate the pre-escalation stage of a conflict. As argued in Chapter 2, the literature currently focuses excessively on the features of conflict and post-conflict settings (Chadefaux 2017, 13). Unfortunately, such a focus risks losing sight of important political and social events that make up conflicts; these are the structural conditions and triggers that lead to conflict escalation. By paying more attention to the pre-escalation stage, this work fosters a more comprehensive understanding of how conflicts come about and the main cues of conflict escalation.

Concerning the literature on early warning, this research's findings shed light on the untapped potential for using the behaviour of INGOs both as proxies of conflict risk and as key informants of early warning systems (Barton, Von Kippel 2013, 10). As mentioned in the introduction to this research, there is very little work on how INGOs behave in the run-up to escalation. Projects such as Humanitarian Outcome's Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) have helped provide empirical evidence to determine the effect of violence against INGO workers on the quality and quantity of assistance (Stoddard 2016, 51). However, no work has sought to explain how the *prospect* of violence affects the presence of INGOs.

This is an unfortunate gap, as NGOs are an integral part of many early warning systems. As noted by Bakker (2011, 9), although a growing number of studies pay attention to the activities of non-governmental organisations in

conflict areas, their part in signalling and reporting potentially dangerous situations and developments is still not very clear. The findings of this research should therefore afford us a better appraisal of how INGOs perform in picking up cues to risk and will help us identify areas in which their performance could improve. For instance, INGOs might use the findings of this research to adjust their risk assessment models to add new sources and indicators that had not previously been included. They might also consider more flexible mandates or different experience requirements for CDs.

Regarding political risk analysis, this work provides a good opportunity for fostering adaptation of theories in this field to the world of international aid delivery. In the current state of the art of political risk analysis, most studies still focus on models built for transnational enterprises, which, according to Barton et al. (2008, 10) still emphasise a very narrow set of mainly economic indicators. Consequently, these models can be blindsided by relevant indicators of conflict risk for which they fail to account. Thus, the findings on the indicators and sources used by INGOs in conflict settings may aid scholars in this field to broaden and refine their theories.

Lastly, this work contributes to the literature on organisational decision-making both by covering an understudied type of organisation and by incorporating contributions from different approaches within the literature of organisational decision-making to create a conceptual model. As noted by Heyse (2011, 43), very little is known about NGO decision-making, which remains a 'black box' to this day. Despite their public importance, the private affairs of INGOs have been relatively neglected by scholars. Moreover, by analysing decisions through the prism of three different independent variables – the threshold of acceptable risk, the influence of SOPs and the relationship between different levels of one organisation – this monograph sought to cover competing explanations of a single phenomenon. Hopefully, this research's findings will allow for a comparison of the drawbacks and advantages of employing each of these explanations and encourage other researchers to follow similar complementary approaches that encompass both rational and behavioural explanations to INGO security management practices.

Policy Implications

The present research has potential policy implications for at least three different kinds of subjects: INGOs, donor organisations and agencies working in the coordination of aid delivery.

For INGOs and aid workers, the findings of this study may help to inform decision-makers of their shortcomings in their attempts to read and adapt to future conflict, thereby enabling them to adjust their expectations and improve their risk-mitigating strategies. In fact, during the course of interviews, many participants from INGOs, particularly CDs, expressed their interest in reading and circulating the findings of the present research. Such expressions of interest seem to confirm that this research was indeed investigating an under-researched issue whose value is apparent to many in the field. It may also encourage these organisations to produce or commission studies on how their own decision-makers act when faced with crucial security decisions.

Donor agencies may also benefit from a better understanding of the untapped potential for improving risk management and security decision-making within INGOs. Because major donor agencies can encourage best practices in decision-making, this research's findings may assist in adapting their requirements regarding security management. It may also help them create better funding schemes that reward better, more responsible security management practices that manage to balance the needs of beneficiaries with safeguarding aid workers' safety.

For agencies coordinating aid efforts, such as the UN OCHA, UNDSS, and NGO *fora* or *consortia*, it is hoped that this research may kick-start a new conversation between INGOs and encourage them to be more open about their risk-management practices and pitfalls while dealing with security risks. Admittedly, security decisions are commonly regarded as a taboo amongst the aid community, for fear that their reputation may be tarnished by exposing their own missteps. However, the lack of open self-criticism discourages the debate for new ideas that may help INGOs better cope with security risks.

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Appendices

Annex 1: Interview Guide for Interviews with Academics

Theme	Questions and Prompts
Overview of Interviewee	1. **Introduction of Research Topic** 2. Could you tell me about your experience researching INGOs? (Grand tour question to make respondent talk about their research experience) 3. Would you please describe how INGOs assess and handle the risk that fragile security contexts might escalate into large-scale violence in areas wherethey operate? (Grand tour question to nudgerespondent into addressing the two mechanisms predicted by the conceptual model). 4. More specifically, could you tell me what you know about how INGOs managed their security in South Sudan before the civil war re-escalation of July 2016? (Grand tour question to gather data about South Sudan, if they have it) 5. **Introduction of the themes to come next.**
Risk Analysis (Anticipation Mechanism)	6. How does the way an organisation obtains information about security risks impact its risk assessments? (Variable: Gathering Information) • How does access to grassroots information affect risk assessments? • Are direct sources more reliable than indirect ones? 7. In your opinion, to which events or kinds of relevant information do INGOs attach more weight while

	evaluating risks? Why? (Variable: Selection of Indicators) 8. Do INGOs with different mandates consider different? cues to conflict of risk? What determines the type of information they value the most? (Variable: Selection of Indicators)
Decision-Making Mechanism	9. After assessing the risk that a conflict might escalate, what factors would you say are most important in determining which strategy the organisation adopts to cope with such a threat?(Grand tour question on what the Decision Mechanism entails)
The threshold of Acceptable Risk	10. When reacting to a possible spike in violence, what motivates an INGO into taking more or fewer risks? (Grand tour question on what constitutes the threshold). 11. Is there a significant difference between INGOs with different mandates when it comes to their threshold of acceptable risk? (Variable: Mandate) 12. To what extent does the dependence on other actors for security and supplies affect an INGO's decision to stay in or leave a country? (Variable: Dependence on other actors) 13. To what extent and in what ways does the presence of staff with prior experience with escalation affect decisions of INGOs to stay or leave a country? (Variable: Prior Experience with Conflict) 14. How can donors influence the amount of risk that INGOs are willing and able to take? (Variable: Donor Influence)

	• Do donors try to influence INGOs' threshold of acceptable risk? • Do INGOs take into account and anticipate possible pressure from donors to act in either a more or less risky manner?
Influence of SOPs	15. To what extent do previously established rules, such as Standard Operating Procedures, influence how INGOs react to risks?
Field-HQ Interplay	16. In what ways do staff from different organisational levels interact during the process of deciding whether an organisation should remain or leave a country facing the risk of civil conflict? (Variable: Field-HQ Interplay)
Closing Remarks and Request for Referral	17. If possible, could you refer me to any databases or documents that can help me better understand how INGOs take decisions regarding continuation and termination of projects in potential conflict areas? 18. Is there anyone you recommend I should talk to? Would you be willing to serve as a go-between? Thank you so much for your time

Annex 2: Interview Guide for Interviews with Staff at Related Organisations.

Theme	Questions and Prompts
Overview of Interviewee	1. **Introduction of Research Topic** 2. Could you tell me about your position at (name of organisation) and your experience working with INGOs? (Identification and Grand Tour Question to

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	get the respondent to talk about the relevance of his experience) 3. In your experience, how INGOs assess and handle the risk that fragile security contexts might escalate into large-scale violence in areas where they operate? (Grand tour question to nudge respondent into addressing the two mechanisms predicted by the conceptual model). 4. More specifically, during the run-up to the escalation of violence that took place in South Sudan in July 2016, how did INGOs working alongside your organisation perceived and reacted to the possibility of renewed violence? (Grand tour question to gather information about South Sudan) **5. Introduction of the themes to come next.**
Risk Analysis (Anticipation Mechanism)	6. How does the way an organisation obtain information about security risks impact their risk assessments? (Variable: Gathering Information) · How does access to grassroots information affect risk assessments? Are direct sources more reliable than indirect ones? 7. In your experience, which factors INGOs attach more weight while evaluating risks? Why? (Variable: Selection of Indicators) 8. Do different kinds of INGOs consider different cues to conflict risk? What determines the type of information they will value the most? (Variable: Selection of Indicators)
Decision-Making Mechanism	9. After assessing the risk that a conflict might escalate, what factors would you say are most important in determining which strategy the

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	organisation will take to cope with such a threat? (Grand tour question on what the decision-mechanism entails)
The threshold of Acceptable Risk	10. When reacting to a possible spike in violence, what motivates an INGO into taking more or fewer risks? (Grand tour question on what constitutes the threshold). 11. Is there a significant difference between thethreshold of INGOs with different mandates? (Variable: Mandate) 12. How much does the dependence from other actors for security and supplies affect what organisations can ultimately do? (Variable: Dependence on other actors) 13. How much and in what ways does the presence of staff with prior experience with escalation affect decisions of INGOs to stay or leave a country? (Variable: Prior Experience with Conflict) 14. How can donors influence the amount of risk that INGOs are willing and able to take? (Variable: Donor Influence) • Do they try to influence? To INGOs take into account and anticipate it?
Influence of SOPs	15. How much of a role do previously established rules, such as Standard Operating Procedures, influence how INGOs react to risks?
Field-HQ Interplay	16. In your experience, how people from different organisational levels interact while during the process of deciding whether an organisation should remain or leave a country facing the risk of civil conflict? (Variable: Field-HQ Interplay)

Closing Remarks and Request for Referral	17. If possible, could you refer me to any databases or documents that can help me better understand how INGOs take decisions regarding continuation and termination of projects in potential conflict areas? 18. Is there anyone you recommend I should talk to? Would you be willing to serve as a go-between? Thank you so much for your time

Annex 3: Interview Guide for Interviews withy INGO Staff

Theme	**Questions and Prompts**
Overview of Interviewee	1. Confirm information about interviewee, such as current position and position during the timeframe of the research. E.g. Am I correct that between January and July 2016 you were working as (position) for organisation X? 2. Could you tell me about your career in [Organisation Name]? (Grand tour question to get respondent talking about his experience) 3. Could you talk me through your organisation's operations in South Sudan? (Grand tour question to get general information on INGO activities) 4. (If necessary, confirm the following information for accuracy) • What was the organisation doing in the country between August 2015 and July 2016? • What were its main activities? • In which areas was it operating?
Risk Analysis	5. Before the clashes between SPLM and SPLM-IO forces in Juba on 07/07/2016 and before the

(Anticipation Mechanism)	fighting intensified across the country, what was the perception within your organisation regarding a possible new escalation of South Sudan's civil war? (Focused grand tour question on risk perceptions of the organisation) • To what extent and how did this perception change over time, particularly after the signing of the ARCSS on the 17 of August 2015? 6. Where did your organisation obtain contextual information about events in South Sudan? (Variable: Gathering Data) • Which kinds of source did it rely upon? • Did your organisation have access and capabilities to gather information locally in the place where it operated? • Did the organisation obtain its intelligence from other INGOs? • In your opinion, how did the way your organisation collected data about South Sudan affect how it understood the operational context where it was inserted? 7. During risk assessments in South Sudan, to which kinds of events or substantive information would the organisation pay attention when trying to make sense of the political situation in that country? (Variable: Selection of Indicators)
Decision-Making Mechanism	8. How did the perceived/expected prospect of conflict influence what the organisation was doing in that country? (Grand tour question on how risk perceptions influenced decision-making)

The threshold of Acceptable Risk	9. Could you tell me about the attitude of your organisation towards the perceived risks it faced in that context? (Grand tour on the threshold of acceptable risk of the INGO) • Did the organisation employ/formulate any red lines that could force it to suspend operations? • To what lengths was the organisation willing to go in order to continu its operations in South Sudan? What factors pushed towards continue/abort? (is maybe Q 10) 10. What were the most important factors that the organisation had to account for when deciding whether it should stay in South Sudan or continue its operations? (Grand tour question of key factors affecting the threshold) 11. What was the primary objective of your organisation in South Sudan? (Variable: Mandate) 12. Did your organization experience any pressure from donors to either stay or leave? (Variable: Donor Influence) • If so, what was their attitude concerning the risk of conflict in that country? 13. Did the organisation rely on the security apparatus or supplies of others to continue operating in that environment. E.g UN, Government, paramilitary groups. (Variable: Dependence on others) • If so, to what extent did such dependence influence the decision whether you could stay or needed to leave? 14. Who were the people involved in the decision-making process for deciding whether the

	organisation should stay in or leave South Sudan? (Grand Tour • Did these people have prior experience in dealing with escalating conflicts? (Variable: Prior Experience with Conflicts. Dimension: Presence) • How did the experience of these officers (Or lack thereof) affect the decisions of the organisation? (Variable: Prior Experience with Conflicts. Dimension: Influence)
Influence of SOPs	15. Did staff follow any routine protocols or standard operating procedures to guide its decision to stay or leave? • If so, what did it entail? How did these rules influence the decision ultimately taken by the organisation?
Field-HQ Interplay	16. What were the perceptions of staff at different levels within your organisation about what the organisation ought to do in that context? • Were HQ, regional and local staff aligned about what the organisation should do? Or were there any significant disagreements within the organisation? If so, how did such disagreements affect the decision taken by your organisation?
Closing Remarks and Request for Referral	17. Could you refer me to any colleagues inside or outside of your organisation that you believe may help me better understand how INGOs take decisions when faced with the risk of civil conflicts in areas where they operate? Would you be willing to serve as a go-between? 18. Could you grant me access to any documents regarding your organisation's operations in South

| | Sudan? These documents will be treated as confidential and will serve only to help me better understand the decision-making in your organisation. These documents will not be cited directly or indirectly without the express consent of the organisation. |
| | Thank you so much for your time |

List of Acronyms

3W: Who does, What and Where
ACLED: Armed Conflict Location Event and Data Project.
ARCSS: Agreement on Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan
AWSD: Aid Worker Security Database
CM: Causal Mechanism
CTSAMM: Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring Mechanism in South Sudan (CTSAMM)
ECHO: European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation
IASC: Interagency Standing Committee
IGAD: Intergovernmental Authority on Development
INGO: International Non-Governmental Organisation
IO: International Organisation
NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation
PRA: Political Risk Analysis
PT: Process-Tracing
SAVE: Secure Access in Volatile Environments
SPLA: Sudanese People's Liberation Army
SPLA-IO: Sudanese People's Liberation Army in Opposition
UN: United Nations
UNMISS: United Nations Mission in South Sudan
UNOCHA: United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
VP: Vice-President
WFP: World Food Programme
NRC: Norwegian Refugee Council
MSF: Medecins Sans Frontieres
SOPs: Standard Operating Procedures
US: United States
HQ: Headquarters
ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross
SAVE: Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE)
GPR8: Good Practice Review #8
OECD: Organisation Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SPLM: Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SPLM-IO: Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In Opposition

Acknowledgements

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Curriculum Vitae

Darlí Magioni Junior was born in Vitória (Brazil) on the 8th of June 1992. His academic journey started in Brasília, where he attended and completed the Bachelor's Programme in International Relations at Universidade de Brasília between 2010 and 2014. In 2015, he moved to London to attend his Master's Degree in International Peace and Security, graduating with merit in January 2017. He then went on to undertake a dual PhD Programme co-sponsored by the Università di Bologna and Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen. In his professional experiences, Darlí has worked for the Brazilian Ministry of External Relations, AKE International and Raddingtion Group.