ANALYTICAL ESSAY

Global Hierarchies and Unequal Pressures in the Report-Making of Truth Commissions

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In this analytical essay, we situate truth commissions as relevant sites for International Relations (IR) research, in particular on professional communities and knowledge hierarchies. With an empirical focus on report-making, we argue that there is a need to rethink and revise established professional community concepts. While these concepts stress professional communities' detachment from mundane pressures, we suggest a "pressure lens" to better grasp the key dynamics of expert knowledge production. Based on in-depth interpretive research on three truth commissions—in Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Tunisia—we set out to identify key dynamics in the report-making of truth commissions that contribute to the gap between high expectations and sobering realities regarding truth commissions as "victim-centred" policy instruments. Understanding the dynamics at play requires us to pay attention to unequal pressures—such as time and funding pressures, powerholder interference, and demands voiced by victims and survivors—that bear on the work of experts and professionals who produce truth commission reports. We argue that these pressures and, crucially, the ways in which they tend to play out under conditions of coloniality, are expressions of global hierarchies that shape professional report-making work.

En este ensayo analítico, situamos a las comisiones de la verdad como lugares relevantes para la investigación en el campo de Relaciones Internacionales (RRII), en particular en lo referente a las comunidades profesionales y a las jerarquías de conocimiento. Argumentamos, con un enfoque empírico en la elaboración de informes, que es necesario repensar y revisar los conceptos establecidos por parte de la comunidad profesional. Si bien estos conceptos enfatizan el desapego por parte de las comunidades profesionales hacia las presiones mundanas, sugerimos una "lente de presión" para poder comprender mejor las dinámicas clave de la producción de conocimiento experto. Partimos de la base de una investigación interpretativa en profundidad sobre tres comisiones de la verdad (en Sierra Leona, Kenia y Túnez), con el propósito de identificar aquellas dinámicas clave en la elaboración de informes de las comisiones de la verdad que

contribuyen a la brecha existente entre las altas expectativas y las realidades aleccionadoras con respecto a la concepción de las comisiones de la verdad como instrumentos políticos "centrados en las víctimas". Para poder comprender las dinámicas en juego, es necesario que prestemos atención a las presiones desiguales (tales como las presiones en materia de tiempo y financiamiento, la interferencia de los poderosos y las demandas expresadas por víctimas y supervivientes), las cuales afectan al trabajo de los expertos y profesionales que producen los informes de las comisiones de la verdad. Argumentamos que estas presiones y, lo que es más importante, las formas en que tienden a desarrollarse en condiciones de colonialidad, son una expresión de las jerarquías globales que dan forma al trabajo profesional de elaboración de informes

Dans cette analyse, nous resituons les commissions de la vérité comme des sites pertinents de recherche en relations internationales (RI), et plus particulièrement s'agissant des communautés professionnelles et des hiérarchies de connaissances. Sur le plan empirique, nous nous concentrons sur la création de rapports et affirmons qu'il existe un besoin de repenser et de réviser les concepts établis sur les communautés professionnelles. Bien que ces concepts mettent l'accent sur le détachement des communautés professionnelles vis-à-vis des pressions mondiales, nous proposons un ≪ angle de pression ≫ pour mieux comprendre les dynamiques clés de la production de connaissances expertes. En nous fondant sur des travaux de recherche interprétative approfondie sur trois commissions de la vérité (en Sierra Leone, au Kenya et en Tunisie), nous nous proposons d'identifier les dynamiques clés de la création de rapports des commissions de la vérité qui contribuent à l'écart entre des attentes élevées et des réalités dégrisantes concernant les commissions de la vérité, des instruments politiques ≪ centrés sur la victime ≫. Pour comprendre les dynamiques intrinsèques, nous devons nous intéresser à l'inégalité des pressions qui pèsent sur le travail des experts et des professionnels qui produisent les rapports de la commission de la vérité. Par exemple, les pressions du temps et du financement, l'interférence des détenteurs du pouvoir et les demandes des victimes et des survivants. Nous affirmons que ces pressions et, plus important encore, les façons dont elles s'expriment souvent dans des conditions de colonialité, révèlent les hiérarchies mondiales qui façonnent le travail professionnel de création de rapports.

Keywords: Pressure, Hierarchies, Truth Commissions
Palabras clave: presión, jerarquías, comisiones de la verdad
Mots clés: pression, hiérarchies, commission de la vérité

Introduction

It has been more than 25 years since the transnationally influential South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) held its first hearings in 1996 (Hayner 2011, 27). Since then, interest in truth commissions has not declined. If anything, it is on the rise and possibly even expanding beyond the now "classical" application of truth commissions as a transitional justice (TJ) instrument following intra-state violence and human rights violations. The International Centre for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), the leading international NGO in the field, recently published a paper on the war in Ukraine outlining the need for something like a truth commission to provide a victim-centered complement to national and international criminal proceedings (Muddell and Roccatello 2023). There are also astonishing developments at sub-national levels. In the United States alone, an estimated 40–50 truth commissions[1] have been established at the state, city, or community level across the country

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[1]Personal conversation MS with TJ practitioner, New York, March 2022.

in recent years, most of them focusing on racial violence and injustice (Posthumus and Zvobgo 2021, 512).

Yet enthusiasm for truth commissions exists alongside pronounced criticism—also of TJ as a field of practice and scholarship more broadly. In addition to truth commissions, TJ includes measures such as international and national criminal trials, legal and institutional reforms, and reparation programs. Most pertinent criticism has emerged from the field itself where recent debates have focused on the role of transnational expertise and professionalism. There is much concern over the dominance of technical knowledge versus context-specific or "local"[2] knowledge regarding the power of transnational experts and professionals vis-à-vis "local" people (cf. Lundy and McGovern 2008; Madlingozi 2010; Sharp 2019; Kochanski 2020; Menzel 2020a; Jones 2021) Relatedly, critical scholars, practitioners, and activists have pointed out that even nominally "victim-centred" TJ instruments such as truth commissions do not adequately center victims and survivors of human rights violations. It is worth noting that there are no clear standards for how an adequate centering of victims and survivors would look like. Yet a wealth of case studies has demonstrated that those who become categorized (cf. Renner 2015), and sometimes self-identify as victims and survivors are often disappointed by institutions and processes that fail to meaningfully include their voices and demands and do not mirror their priorities.[3] There is usually no space that would allow victims and survivors to speak on their own terms and frequently voiced demands for tangible assistance remain without consequences (Shaw 2007; Madlingozi 2010; De Waardt and Weber 2019; Menzel 2021). As Briony Jones notes,

> "[I]t is worth bearing in mind that research which surveys victims' preferences consistently finds that they are more likely to prioritise present economic needs than the kinds of interventions that absorb transitional justice budgets and energy" (Jones 2021, 172).

Jones' cautionary note fully applies in the context of truth commissions, where the most pronounced official priority is usually the production of a final report. However, most truth commission reports are not widely read, least of all by victims and survivors (Menzel 2020b, 596),[4] and they often recommend reforms and programs that lack political support or remain too piecemeal to meaningfully improve their living conditions (Lynch 2018, Chapter 9; Menzel 2021, 423–7). There are also no indications that truth commission reports facilitate transformations that would benefit society at large.[5] Yet expectations of transformative effects linger and often feature prominently in TJ scholarship, in policy documents, and among practitioners and activists who favor truth commissions (cf. Sriram 2017, 61).

In this analytical essay, we set out to identify key dynamics in the report-making of truth commissions that contribute to the gap between high expectations and sobering realities. In doing this, we connect interest in understanding what happens in truth commissions to broader International Relations (IR) debates and research fields around knowledge production and the role of professional communities. We ask:: how does it come about that truth commissions as declaredly victim-centered bodies produce final reports that do not reflect victims' and survivors' priorities? And what can we learn from truth commissions as sites of expert knowledge production in global politics? We approach these questions by moving beyond diag-

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[2]The label "local" is widely used in research on TJ and interventions more broadly, despite having been aptly criticized for its lack of analytical value and othering of intervened societies, see especially Sabaratnam (2017, 38–47). We agree with this criticism and only use "local" in scare quotes to indicate that we employ a commonly used term that we do not endorse.

[3]See Berry and Lake (2021) for a similar finding on postwar recovery efforts and gender justice.

[4]There are some exceptions, such as "Nunca más," the final report of the Argentinian truth commission.

[5]We also know of no existing study that would substantiate such broader societal effects, see also Ben-Josef Hirsch, MacKenzie, and Sesay (2012).

noses of failure and demands for adjusted policies. Instead, understanding the dynamics at play requires us to pay attention to unequal pressures—such as time and funding pressures, powerholder interference, and demands voiced by victims and survivors—that bear on the work of experts and professionals[6] who produce truth commission reports. We argue that these pressures and, crucially, the ways in which they tend to play out under conditions of coloniality, are not mere errors of design that would require technical fixes. Rather, they are expressions of global hierarchies that influence professional report-making work.

A Brief Note on Method

We develop our argument based on original materials collected through field research—including interviews, (participant) observations, and archival documents—on report-making in three "post-South African"[7] truth commissions on the African continent: the Sierra Leone TRC (Sierra Leone TRC, 2002–2004), the Kenya Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission (Kenya TJRC, 2009–2013), and Tunisia's Truth and Dignity Commission (Tunisia TDC, 2014–2018). In the course of our separate research processes, we discussed findings on the three commissions and realized that they spoke to our shared interest in better understanding the politics and structures shaping report-making in truth commissions. This means that we did not set out with a comparative case study design—rather, we have been "casing" (Soss 2018) our studies as instances of report-making under pressure. While researching different geographical locations and focusing on a variety of issues, we share an epistemological commitment to relational research that critically questions power dynamics (Krystalli and Schulz 2022, 2–3) and avoids reifying actors and structures in analysis (Salehi 2023, 234). Our data collection, interpretive analysis, and collaboration are described in detail in a supplementary file uploaded to ScholarOne (Data Collection and Interpretive Analysis).

Outline

This essay is structured in three parts. Part one prepares the ground: it situates truth commissions as relevant sites for IR research; provides historical background on the emergence of TJ expertise and professionalism and the transnational proliferation of truth commissions; and establishes connections with broader IR debates and research fields, especially regarding professional communities (e.g., Haas 1992; Adler 2005; Cross 2013; Bicchi 2022) and knowledge hierarchies in international peacebuilding and development (e.g., Autesserre 2014, chap. 2; Sabaratnam 2017; Bonacker 2021; Martín de Almagro 2021, 135–9). We argue that it makes sense to understand truth commissions as internationalized sites where professional communities engage in policy-oriented knowledge production.

Part two further adds to and complicates this understanding of truth commissions by highlighting that they do not operate in a depoliticized power vacuum (e.g., Kochanski 2020; Salehi 2022b). As Carvajalino und Davidović (2023, 4) point out, TJ projects in general are characterized by a "major disconnect between the promises [. . .] and the delivery, symbolized by a pull toward hierarchically organized practices [. . .]." In particular, the work of truth commissions is structured by knowledge hierarchies that privilege people and knowledge associated with Western education, objective science, and established policy priorities (Quijano 2007, 169–70)—which already goes a long way in helping us understand the marginalization of victims' and survivors' voices and demands. But this is not the whole story yet. Experts and

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[6]By "experts" we mean people who develop and impart expertise; "professionals" learn, adhere to, and apply expertise. There is of course overlap between these groups. Both are directly involved in the work of truth commissions.

[7]Gabrielle Lynch coined this term to describe truth commissions modeled after the South African TRC since late 1990 (Lynch 2018, 93).

professionals are also under pressure(s). Even though existing knowledge hierarchies work in their favor, they are often prevented from practicing report-making according to the professional standards they hold dear.

In order to get at these dynamics, we first provide an overview of the different types of experts and professionals who contributed to report-making in the three commissions we studied. This included people who joined as already prominent TJ experts and others who were new to the field and learned on the job. We also detail how the work of these different actors was organized and which concrete activities they engaged in. These descriptions set the stage for our conceptual work toward identifying different types of pressures that shaped and, according to their own estimations, often derailed experts' and professionals' report-making work—despite their favorable epistemic positions: time and funding pressures, powerholder interference, and grassroots voices and demands. Conceptually, we regard these pressures as emanating from intersecting global hierarchies "through which actors are organized into vertical relations of super- and subordination" (Zarakol 2017, 1). We call these hierarchies "global" (rather than international) because they permeate relationships at numerous levels, between states but also within societies and in transnational encounters. Among them, knowledge hierarchies are just one important structure. They intersect with resource and leverage hierarchies, all of which play out under conditions of a "coloniality of power" (Quijano 2007) that "generates, formalises and naturalises forms of political indifference towards non-Western subjects" (Sabaratnam 2017, 137)—particularly if they are ordinary people without significant resources or leverage, which is usually the case for victims and survivors in truth commissions. Finally, we summarize our conceptual work in a simplified systematization providing an overview of what a focus on pressures can add to the literature on report-making and knowledge production in IR.

Part three provides empirical substance for our conceptual work. Here, we draw on extensive materials from our field research to illustrate the unequal impacts of time and funding pressures, powerholder interference, and grassroots voices and demands on report-making work in the Sierra Leone TRC, the Kenya TJRC, and Tunisia's TDC. We close with a conclusion, in which we summarise our findings and briefly reflect on policy relevance and possible future directions of research.

Truth Commissions as Internationalized Sites of Knowledge Production

In August of 2004, after consultations with renowned TJ experts (Ancelovici and Jensen 2013, 303–4; Rowen 2017, 38–9), the United Nations (UN) secretary-general delivered a report to the Security Council detailing the importance of rule of law promotion and TJ in conflict and post-conflict societies. The report presents truth commissions as domestic institutions, which require support from international partners.

> Truth commissions are official, temporary, non-judicial factfinding bodies that investigate a pattern of abuses of human rights or humanitarian law committed over a number of years. These bodies take a victim-centred approach and conclude their work with a final report of findings of fact and recommendations. [...] *[M]any such commissions will require strong international support to function, as well as respect by international partners for their operational independence* (UN Security Council 2004, 17; emphasis added).

Their appearance in a report for the UN Security Council and the mentioned support needed from international partners clearly position truth commissions as relevant topics for the discipline of IR—but there is still more to them. While it is often not formally incorrect to characterize truth commissions as domestic institutions (depending on the respective set-up), it vastly misrepresents the phenomenon at hand. Rather, post-South African truth commissions since the early 2000s have

been "internationalized" in the sense described by Klaus Schlichte in his work on state bureaucracies in aid-dependent countries. Schlichte depicts an "internationalization of rule" that has transformed what aid-dependent states can(not) do and how they go about it—in areas ranging from legal and security reforms to economic and finance policies. According to Schlichte, internationalization manifests,

> [...] in the flows of development aid; in the position of expatriates in running organizations, often even state offices; and in the technology of administration that revolves around a project machinery with its endless flow of calls, applications, reports, and renewals (Schlichte 2017, 113).

Similar features have been common across post-South African commissions, many of which operated in the context of broader donor-funded peacebuilding and development interventions (Lundy and McGovern 2008). At the same time, there are certainly differences in the degree of internationalization as exemplified by the three commissions we focus on in this essay. The Sierra Leone TRC was run as a project by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Geneva and managed by the national office of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Sierra Leone (Menzel 2020b, 597),[8] whereas the commissions in Kenya and Tunisia were directed and managed domestically. All three also received financial and "technical" support—the latter usually meaning professional training and expert consultants—from external donors. External support was extensive in the case of the Tunisia TDC (Salehi 2022a, 103ff), comparatively meager in the case of the Kenya TJRC (Lynch 2018, 103; Slye 2018, 172–5), and somewhere in between in the case of the Sierra Leone TRC (Mahoney and Sooka 2015, 39).

But how exactly are these commissions also "post-South African"? When did transnational expertise on truth commissions evolve and become influential? How important is report-making as a specific form of knowledge production in and for post-South African commissions? And what kind of professional standards have emerged? In the following subsection, we provide answers to these questions in the context of a short historical background on the rise and spread of truth commissions as internationalized sites of knowledge production. Then, in the next step, we establish connections with IR debates and research fields that become relevant to the study of truth commissions once we understand them as internationalized sites of knowledge production.

A Very Short History of Truth Commissions

Although the South African TRC (1996–2003) is often highlighted as a milestone in the development or even the emergence of TJ as an established field of scholarship and practice (Ancelovici and Jensen 2013, 302–4; Rowen 2017, 32–6), it was certainly not the first truth commission—not by far (cf. Hayner 2011). Among the earliest widely discussed cases were several commissions in Latin America, most notably Argentina's National Commission on the Disappeared (1983–1984). Argentina loomed large in discussions among "human rights activists, lawyers and legal scholars, policymakers, journalists, donors, and comparative politics experts" (Arthur 2009, 324) from different parts of the world, who began to develop expertise on the need for justice in times of transitions to democracy in the 1980s. Their activities were supported by the Ford Foundation, which sponsored several conferences and the setting up of new organizations in the 1980s and 1990s. Among these new organizations was the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in South Africa managed by the lawyer-activist Paul van Zyl. Just to provide an example of the kind of continuities that are typical for the TJ field: Van Zyl also served as Executive Secretary of the South African TRC in 1995 and later became Vice-President

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[8]Archival document, Project Document SIL/AH/01/24 Rev. A.

of the ICTJ, the most important TJ NGO, which was founded with Ford Foundation funding in 2001 (Ancelovici and Jensen 2013, 300; Rowen 2017, 32–7). By the early 2000s, donor interest in what was now widely referred to as *transitional justice* [9] had surged. Even just looking at funding by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in the areas of "human rights" and "legal and judicial development" for countries deemed developing and/or transitional, "one can see an increase from less than US$500,000 in 1988 to a staggering US$581million in 2002" (Oomen 2005, 890–1).

It is worth taking a moment to consider intellectual and political currents in the 1980s and 1990s that facilitated the emergence of truth commissions and TJ more broadly as a transnational field of expertise and professional practice. This was a time of significant decline for Marxism, Third-Worldism, dependency theory, and any notion that involved redistributive measures to redress colonialism and its legacies. Human rights, with a pronounced emphasis on civil and political rights, emerged as the most important new justice paradigm (Arthur 2009, 340–2; Moyn 2019, chapter 6; Whyte 2019, chapter 5). With this new paradigm came the imperative that the Global South should hold accountable its own abusive leaders—rather than placing blame on outside actors and structural forces (Moyn 2019, 160; Whyte 2019, 206–9). Truth commissions became regarded as instruments to help countries know their violent past, avoid recurrence and put themselves on a path toward peace, reconciliation, and liberal democracy (Pankhurst 1999; Arthur 2009, 356).

The South African TRC became the formative case. Strikingly, it did not problematize settler colonialism or structural racism but conceived of apartheid as a "crime against humanity"—not as a crime against racialized peoples (Mamdani 2002, 42). It put particular emphasis on effecting repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation through public speaking in televised and widely followed hearings, which featured both victims' and, though less often, perpetrators' testimonies (Chapman and Ball 2002, 24; Lynch 2018, 127). In its efforts to overcome societal divisions, the TRC valued "impartiality." The commission made deliberate efforts to identify "white, Asian, and colored people" (Chapman and Ball 2002, 39) to provide public hearing testimonies alongside black Africans, and it produced a historical narrative presented in the final report that depicted violence committed by those who struggled against apartheid on par with violence by those who sought to uphold it (Chapman and Ball 2002, 34). This had the disconcerting effect of suggesting that "not only most victims, but also most perpetrators, were black people" (Mamdani 2002, 36). Contrary to current perceptions of the South African TRC as anti-racist among some TJ activists in the United States,[10] the commission was actually taking a deliberately "balanced" stance, which effectively distracted attention from the oppressive structures of colonialism and racism in South Africa.

While transnational human rights experts and activists harshly criticized Christian notions of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the South African approach (Ancelovici and Jensen 2013, 302–4), the TRC's commitment to a particular version of "balance" met less criticism. Its presumed potential for overcoming deep societal divisions impressed scholars, activists, and policy-makers concerned with countries "in transition" and rendered it plausible to see the South African TRC as a model for future commissions. This appearance also lent credibility and prestige to those in leadership positions at the South African TRC, many of whom became affiliated with the ICTJ (Rowen 2017, 32–40) and went on to train new generations of experts and shape subsequent commissions in other countries. Very often, such experts have been brought in by donors with the intention of professionalizing a respective post-South African truth commission, mostly as expert consultants, but

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[9]The first usage of the term is documented for the early 1990s (Arthur 2009, 329).

[10]See e.g., how the South African TRC is invoked as a model for addressing racial injustice by the Grassroots Law Project in the United States, <https://www.tjrc.org/?source=glp-website>, accessed August 29, 2023.

sometimes even as "international" commissioners. An example of the latter is Yasmin Sooka, a South African human rights lawyer who was a commissioner in the South African TRC and later joined the Sierra Leone TRC as an expatriate commissioner (Mahoney and Sooka 2015; Menzel 2020a, 311).

By the mid-2000s, the ICTJ was promoting a version of the South African model that had been stripped of its contentious religious elements. "Reconciliation" had been reinvented as taking into account victims' voices and (re)building trust and trustworthy institutions (Ancelovici and Jensen 2013, 303–4). Influential experts presented the work of truth commissions as a form of context-sensitive knowledge production—usually involving large-scale statement-taking and public hearings—that should inform the devising of tailored policies for post-conflict/transitional societies. While the actual South African TRC had put much emphasis on public hearings as "a stage for people to share their personal or narrative truths" (Lynch 2018, 127), the model suggests that statement-taking and hearings should also, and perhaps even mainly, serve as data gathering for a commission's final report.[11] As Paul van Zyl put it in 2005,

> The development of a post-conflict peacebuilding strategy must be based on a rigorous examination of the causes, nature and effect of the prior conflict. Truth commissions are often well-placed to undertake this form of examination […] (Van Zyl 2005, 215–6).

This notion brought along a set of professional standards for the report-making work of post-South African truth commissions, which has become common sense in the TJ community—despite its inherent tensions and contradictions..[12] According to this common sense, a "good" report is one that is based on detailed investigations of the violent past, including victims' and survivors' voices,[13] *and* that presents policy recommendations for structural change in line with existing expertise in fields such as TJ, human rights, peacebuilding, and their specialized subfields. Given that TJ works within different time horizons and should be both backward- and forward-looking, these elements are not contradictory as such. The tension here is that it is not necessarily likely that empirical analyses, let alone victims' and survivors' voices and demands, support such preformed policy recommendations (see also Menzel 2020a, 316–7).[14] And yet, policy recommendations are expected to match empirical findings to make the report coherent.[15] Other professional standards pertain to objectivity, at a minimum meaning the absence of undue influence from parties interested in distorting the work of the commission. Perhaps most obviously, a "good" report should also be in line with the commissions' mandate, which defines specific events and time periods to be covered by investigations as well as types of violations or victim groups requiring special attention.

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[11]Even in the context of the South African TRC, those professionals mainly involved in report-making already saw the final report as the commission's main output and were unhappy with time pressures, organizational failures, and lack of expertise in dealing with data (Chapman and Ball 2002).

[12]As far as we know, there is no handbook or toolbox that explicitly spells out these report-making standards. Good places to find them are accounts written by former commissioners, commission staff, and influential TJ experts, in which they assess truth commissions and their report-making work (see e.g., Chapman and Ball 2002; Hayner 2011; Mahoney and Sooka 2015; Slye 2018) as well as interviews and conversations like the ones we conducted in our empirical research (see supplementary file titled "Data Collection and Interpretive Analysis").

[13]For example, Ronald Slye (2018), former commissioner of the Kenya TJRC, claims that, "the report included the voices of *wananchi*," Swahili for "ordinary people" (Slye 2018, 17). He highlights this as one of the TJRC's greatest achievements.

[14]This is one reason why report chapters are often written without close consideration of collected statements and testimonies. For the TDC report, Mouelhi (2020), problematizes that testimonies appear "without any sort of commentary," therefore also not providing analyses that could lead to recommendations.

[15]For example, a TJ professional emphasized the lack of coherence in Tunisia's TDC report: "You don't know where the TDC report wants to go" and specifically with regard to reparation decisions: "There is no coherence, no basis, just random lists." Phone interview MS, May 2020.

Making Connections: Professional Communities and Knowledge Production

Most scholarship on truth commissions has treated them as phenomena *sui generis*—as if they were a unique type of organization or, at least, as if not much could be gained by viewing truth commissions through concepts or questions usually applied to other types of organizations (see e.g., Hayner 2011; Rowen 2017; Zvobgo 2020). Based on our empirical findings (which we present in parts two and three of this essay), we propose a different approach according to which much of what happens in truth commissions is comparable with dynamics in other settings where experts and professionals engage in policy-oriented report-making work, e.g., in areas such as international peacebuilding and development. By approaching truth commissions in this way, we can connect our research with available IR scholarship on professional communities and knowledge production. Making such connections allows us to identify useful ways of thinking about truth commissions and to scrutinize and contribute to broader debates and concepts.

Professional Report-Making Communities

IR scholars have long been interested in professional communities and the roles they play for the promotion of cooperation, rationality, and progress in international(ized) policy-making. A key concept is that of the "epistemic community" (Adler and Haas 1992; Haas 1992), which was originally developed as a tool for analyzing policy coordination among states, i.e., situations in which states come to agree on a particular policy or set of policies. The concept has also been used by some TJ scholars (most explicitly by Ben-Josef Hirsch 2007) to analyze the transnational proliferation of truth commissions pushed by a network of experts activists, most of whom had some association with the ICTJ. An epistemic community, as famously defined by Peter Haas in the early 1990s, is a "network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge" (Haas 1992, 3). Such communities gain influence in times of uncertainty when decision-makers turn to experts for orientation. At the same time, epistemic communities can also alert decision-makers and the wider public to new or previously unacknowledged problems or to technical solutions they can provide (Haas 1992, 15; Béland and Howlett 2016). This latter scenario matches Ben-Josef Hirsch's account of the "transitional justice epistemic community," which packaged and promoted truth commissions as "a significant tool for social reconstruction as well as an invaluable instrument for conflict resolution" (Ben-Josef Hirsch 2007, 189).

Equally important is the "communities of practice" concept, which originates from management theory and describes "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger 2011, 1). A prominent IR adaption was developed by Emmanuel Adler, who depicts "communities of practice" as drivers of change within and across national borders, spreading (background) knowledge and shared practices and thus creating "intersubjective social structures within which meaning is fixed, learning takes place, and practices evolve" (Adler 2005, 15). To the best of our knowledge, TJ scholars have so far not made use of this concept—yet a TJ professional suggested it in an interview as an adequate way of thinking about the TJ community across different country contexts and projects.[16] This interview partner counted themselves as part of a "community of practice" of professionals who work on TJ in various governmental and non-governmental organizations and institutions and who have similar knowledge and understanding about how things should be done. They also described how crucial the ICTJ has been for the development of this community of practice, given that many professionals spend a formative period

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[16]Interview MS, Washington DC, May 2019.

of their career at the organization before moving on to other employers. According to them, this is how members of the TJ community of practice were on the same page regarding the passion they shared and their understanding of "how to do things." In addition, they remained in contact on how to improve policy and practice.

Based on our research, we propose that the collective of people who come together in the context of a truth commission and become committed to producing a "good" report can also be understood as a community that values and practices professionalism and seeks to produce policy-relevant knowledge. Not everyone employed to work in a truth commission automatically belongs to this community. Belonging requires a passion for doing the work, a willingness to learn (and teach), and a commitment to the overall cause. Moreover, the report-making community is less fixed than the TJ communities described by Ben-Josef Hirsch and the above-mentioned interview partner. It constantly reconfigures and usually dissolves after the submission of a report. Yet former members can remain or newly become part of the broader TJ community and meet again in new TJ projects in other places. This relative fleetingness of the report-making community is no reason to regard it as less of a community while it lasts and struggles toward producing a "good" report.[17]

However, our findings also suggest that IR's professional community concepts lack attention to the broader structures in which these communities operate and their impact on the communities' work and output. For example, Haas postulates that professional socialization and shared commitments enable epistemic communities to operate above mundane pressures. According to Haas, they "offset or outweigh the pressures for them [members of epistemic communities] to offer alternative advice which is more consistent with the preexisting political interests or preferences of high-level policymakers or which might further their individual careers." (Haas 1992, 20). And even though Adler states that communities of practice "are neither necessarily about good practices nor about socially deplorable practices," he still identifies them as the world's best chance for achieving what he calls "bounded progress": a movement away from domination, poverty, violence, atrocities, and war (Adler 2019, 5). Here again, this quality arises because communities of practice are imagined as operating somehow outside of mundane hierarchies and pressures, only within the practice they establish, learn, and develop. There has already been some tentative criticism of these ideas accompanied by calls for more attention to the contexts in which communities work (Cross 2013, 148). As we will show in more detail in parts two and three of this essay, our findings support such criticism and further complicate the picture by pointing toward unequal pressures that shape the work of report-making communities. A focus on pressures can help us see how nested logics of hierarchies (Zarakol 2017, 3) play out.

Knowledge Hierarchies in Report-Making Work
Knowledge production in the form of report-making has recently gained attention in IR as a key governance technique in fields such as human rights, peacebuilding, statebuilding, and development (cf. de Waal 2003; Stepputat 2012; Bueger 2015; Bonacker 2021; Martín de Almagro 2021; Lesch 2023). This is part of the latest manifestation of a sustained IR interest in international(ized) knowledge production (cf. Haas 1990; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Adler-Nissen 2014; Bueger 2015). Although truth commissions have not yet received much attention in this context (see, however, Chapman and Ball 2002; Menzel 2020a), we find that it makes sense to study report-making in truth commissions as an insightful example of report-making in international(ized) organizations more generally: experts and professionals working in or in the context of truth commissions see report-making as a

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[17]For a similar point on communities in a different field, see Bicchi (2022, 40).

key priority; their focus on report-making structures how survivors and other "local" target groups are invited and allowed to give their inputs; and donors and domestic governments funding truth commissions usually regard final reports as their most important output and indicator of "success."

Report-making comprises more than just *report writing*. In line with recent studies (Menzel 2020a; Bonacker 2021; Martín de Almagro 2021), we subsume under report-making all those activities and procedures that lead up to and converge into reports. These include, for example, all forms of data collection, research/investigation, and analysis. For the concrete example of truth commissions, data collection usually involves such activities as file collection, forensic investigations, statement taking, invited submissions, and hearings. Report-making also entails (at least some) data analysis, efforts at sorting and piecing data together, rounds of drafting, commenting, and editing, and decision-making on what eventually makes it into the report and what does not. To put it more abstractly, while different authors use different terms, recent scholarship on report-making shares an emphasis on processes of assembling, some form of adaptation (e.g., translation or repackaging), and constitutive effects (e.g., representation or claiming).

A major theme in recent scholarship has been a focus on how reports produce the objects of international(ized) government: such as populations not yet deemed fit for independence under the UN Trusteeship System (Bonacker 2021, 14–5); or "local" people whose documented "vulnerability" renders them a fitting target for peacebuilding projects (Martín de Almagro 2021, 7–8). The point is that such objects do not exist per se but come into being through report-making. Moreover, reports present definitions of such objects and matching policies as neutral and fact-based rather than as political and partisan (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 21; Bonacker 2021, 14). They create an "'apolitical illusion' of technocratic logics" (Salehi 2022b, 51), which is achieved through the normalized marginalization of voices that might otherwise challenge hegemonic priorities and policy narratives (cf. Stepputat 2012; Menzel 2020a, 307–10). This illusion is brought about not by complete erasure but through selection and repackaging. As Martín de Almagro explains with regard to peacebuilding projects in Liberia,

> It is not that situated, experiential knowledge is not included. Liberian women's voices are "heard" […] but their knowledge is "curated" and integrated in the form of "success stories" inasmuch as they reinforce and do not contradict knowledge produced by the expert (Martín de Almagro 2021, 5).

Such practices are indicative of knowledge hierarchies (Autessere 2014, 74–87) that do not simply exist but have a colonial history and continue to ascribe agency, mastery, and rationality to actors associated with Western education and science (Quijano 2007; Sabaratnam 2017; Bhambra 2022, 80). One key effect of these knowledge hierarchies is that the above-described practices are rarely regarded as problematic outside of either discussions among directly affected people or certain academic circles. In general, it is widely held as normal and even necessary that it is (expatriate) experts' and professionals' knowledge that counts for report-making—as it is this knowledge that is expected to prove relevant and useful for policy-making.

We encountered similar dynamics in our research on the three truth commissions (and documented in scholarly work on other commissions, see especially Mandlingozi 2010), and we agree that knowledge hierarchies go a long way in helping us understand the marginalization of victims' and survivors' voices and demands—in our three cases and beyond. However, we also find that there is still more to the story and that there are different relevant types of hierarchies that contribute to the specific shapes and degrees of marginalization we encountered. We delve into this in the following parts of this essay.

Report-Making under Pressure

If we recapitulate the connections to broader IR debates and scholarship established in the previous part of this analytical essay, we receive a picture of report-making in truth commissions, in which experts and professionals clearly come out on top: IR's professional community concepts suggest that their work remains untouched by worldly pressures (political meddling, etc.); and work on knowledge production in international peacebuilding and development has highlighted knowledge hierarchies that privilege expertise and professionalism associated with Western education and science. From all of this, one might expect that experts and professionals can conduct report-making according to their preferences and ideals. In this second part of our essay, we describe how such a picture does not match the realities we encountered in our research on the three truth commissions—in Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Tunisia. We found that experts and professionals worked under constant, if highly unequal pressures, some of which had a great impact on their work. Knowledge hierarchies and epistemic privileges do not disappear once we count on these pressures but become part of a more complex web of relations, in which committed experts and professionals often surrender to pressures from donors and domestic powerholders but largely prevail over victims' and survivors' voices and demands.

Our focus in this second part is more on conceptual work than empirical illustration, but we do need to provide some illustrations in order to prepare our arguments. This is why, in the first step, we introduce different aspects of report-making in the three commissions we researched and describe which types of experts and professionals were involved. Then, in a second step, we identify the unequal pressures that bore on their work.

The Making of Truth Commission Reports

TJ scholarship is largely silent on the inner workings of truth commissions. The only group of professionals that has received some systematic scholarly attention are the commissioners (Lanegran 2015). However, our research clearly shows that report-making in the Sierra Leone TRC, the Kenya TJRC and the Tunisia TDC involved much wider assemblies of people. We even came across committed experts and professionals who worked on the reports despite not having so much as a formal consultancy contract with the respective commission. They got involved and were welcomed because they wanted to help and contributed valued expertise and skills.[18] At the same time, not everyone who works for or in the context of a truth commission is part of the report-making community in the narrow sense of actually believing in and being committed to the cause (i.e., delivering a "good" report). In our cases, there were also people involved who cared little what the outcome was, just wanted to have a job, or even meddled with or disturbed report-making in exchange for bribes or promises of future career options elsewhere.

A key activity in the context of report-making is data collection. In our three cases, this activity was mainly carried out by locally recruited and briefly trained statement takers. Their work was directed, overseen, and complemented by investigators and researchers who, in turn, were directed by a head of unit or research director and sometimes by an interested/committed commissioner. There was not always a clear distinction between the work of investigators and researchers. In the Sierra Leone TRC, for example, two separate units for investigation and research were eventually combined for pragmatic reasons (time and funding pressures) (Sierra Leone TRC 2004a, 104), even though their members had different profiles. Researchers were mostly people with an academic background and some writing experience, while

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[18]This is not to say that career considerations played no role for them. It seems fair to say that committed experts and professionals generally expect that earnest commitment will pay off and increase career chances in the TJ field.

the investigators were graduate students with less writing experience plus "one or two former police detectives."[19] The Tunisia TDC even had a "mapping department" where staff members produced a tabular presentation and a narrative report from publicly available sources on important topics and incidents as an instrument for probing the plausibility of individual statements (Salehi 2022b, 188).[20] External consultants, including data scientists,[21] also contributed to data collection and management (Sierra Leone TRC 2004a, 178; Lynch 2018, 171). Finally, commissioners questioned witnesses who were often themselves victims/survivors in public hearings in order to obtain information from them. Hearings were usually recorded and transcribed. In Tunisia, victims could decide whether they wanted their closed hearings recorded in video, audio, or not at all.[22]

When it came to analysis and writing, almost all of the above-named groups were involved in drafting, presenting, discussing, and revising report chapters. In the Kenya TJRC in particular, an important instrument was workshops and writing retreats. The director of research organized mandatory retreats to hotels in tourist areas away from everyday troubles and powerholder interferences in Nairobi to get people to focus on finishing their writing tasks.[23] In all three commissions, written inputs underwent revision and rewriting by committed professionals, some of whom had contracts with the commission until the end of the mandate period or could afford to stay involved, e.g., due to employment in an NGO or international organization. Moreover, and again in all three commissions, external consultants who had not been part of earlier data gathering and research processes wrote and revised parts of the reports.[24]

Within the three commissions, we found different degrees of internationalization regarding the make up of commissioners, staff, and consultants. The Sierra Leone TRC and the Kenya TJRC had a mixed board of commissioners, including national commissioners and expatriate commissioners. The latter were selected by OHCHR for the Sierra Leone TRC and by the African Union's (AU) Panel of Eminent African Personalities for the Kenya TJRC (Lanegran 2015, 54). The rationale for including expatriate commissioners was to insert expertise and ensure independence, assuming that domestic power holders would find it harder to intimidate or bribe expatriates (Slye 2018, 59–60). However, there were no expatriate commissioners in Tunisia, and it seems more generally that their inclusion is no longer common practice in more recent truth commissions.[25] We also found varying degrees of internationalization regarding commission staff. In Sierra Leone, the situation was much like in international peacebuilding projects more generally: expatriates, many of them hailing from other African countries, held leadership positions and directed "local" staff (Autesserre 2014, 84).[26] By contrast, both the Kenya TJRC and the Tunisia TDC were almost exclusively staffed with nationals. Regarding consultants, they were a mixed crowd in all three commissions, including nationals and expatriates from various parts of the world. It is important to note that the distinction between domestic and international consultants does not necessarily correspond with institutional affiliations. For example, ICTJ country offices in Kenya and Tunisia were headed by and mostly staffed with nationals, but expatriate ICTJ

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[19]Skype interview AM with a former expatriate staff member at the Sierra Leone TRC, January 2018.

[20]Personal observation MS at TDC and interviews with staff, Tunis, September 2016.

[21]Both the Sierra Leone TRC and the Kenya TJRC received assistance from data scientists. In Tunisia, statisticians were hired very late in the process, according to one truth commissioner. Phone interview MS, December 2020.

[22]Personal observation, explanation, and demonstration MS received by staff at TDC's *annexe* building, Tunis, September 2016.

[23]Skype interview AM with a former expatriate consultant to the Kenya TJRC, May 2018.

[24]See also Lynch (2018, 172) for the Kenya TJRC.

[25]For an exception see the Central African Republic's Truth Commission, which started work in 2021.

[26]The situation was very much in line with Séverine Autesserre's finding that peacebuilding professionals in the Global South have much better career chances once they leave their own countries and "go abroad and become expatriates" (Autesserre 2014, 84).

experts (e.g., from the New York headquarters) also came in regularly (especially in Tunisia) and stayed for varying amounts of time. This means that ICTJ consultants to both commissions included nationals and expatriates; the situation was different in Sierra Leone where ICTJ had no country office.

<div align="center">Unequal Pressures, Professional Defensiveness, and Global Hierarchies</div>

The professional report-making work described in the previous section did not take place in a power vacuum—and neither were knowledge hierarchies privileging expertise and professionalism associated with Western education and science the only pertinent power relation shaping report-making. In this section, we now develop an abstract conceptual description of truth commission report-making under pressure, which is based on empirical materials to be presented in more detail in part 3 of this essay. As a starting point for the conceptual description, it is helpful to briefly hark back to IR's established professional community concepts for contrast.

To recall, the epistemic community (Haas 1992) and communities of practice (Adler 2005) concepts emphasize learning and progress as key dynamics characterizing the work done by and within professional communities. They are made possible by an imagined detachment from the world, including its hierarchies and pressures, which we take issue with in this essay. This is not to say that we found no learning no progress at all in the report-making we studied. There was certainly learning in the sense of individual professionalization, which took place when community members with less work experience and/or exposure to TJ expertise learned "how to do the job" from more experienced and exposed members and came to know and value established standards. There has also been progress of sorts where selected professional experiences were turned into "lessons learned" and became available to inform and improve TJ practice and policies (e.g., Mahoney and Sooka 2015; Slye 2018). However, it is important to note that neither individual professionalization nor improved expertise necessarily lead to changes that would make a positive impact on the lives of victims and survivors or on target societies at large, even though they are often assumed to have such effects. But the gap between ever-improving TJ expertise and practice, and prevalent disappointment among nominal beneficiaries, casts considerable doubt on this assumption. Also, while truth commissions often undertake impressive investigative work, at least in some areas, hardly any development of new or specifically tailored policies takes place.

Moreover, by studying report-making in the Sierra Leone TRC, the Kenya TJRC, and the Tunisia TDC, we encountered other dynamics that carried more weight than learning. Very often, committed experts and professionals did not engage in the kind of deeply context-sensitive knowledge production that truth commissions are, supposedly, "well-placed to undertake" (Van Zyl 2005, 215–6). Instead, they were busy defending against pressures that threatened to disturb the making of "good" reports—to the extent that it was these pressures plus experts' and professionals' struggles to defend professional report-making against these pressures that shaped report-making work. Pertinent pressures came from different directions and took different forms. We identified three types of pressures that were prevalent in all three cases: time and funding pressures, powerholder interferences, and victims' and survivors' voices and demands.

These different pressures were not equally obvious in our three cases. In interviews and their own *ex-post* writings (e.g., Mahoney and Sooka 2015, 39; Slye 2018, 172–5), committed experts and professionals prominently problematize time and funding pressures from donors and national governments that hampered or even obstructed their professional work. The same is also true for powerholder interferences, such as threats or bribes coming from or being attributed to domestic politicians with an interest in blocking or corrupting report-making work. By contrast, there is mostly silence on pressures resulting from victims' and survivors' involve-

ment with the commissions. These pressures only become analytically noticeable once we consider report-making work left undone, actions not taken, and findings erased.

The varying visibility of these different types of pressures reflects their unequal impact on report-making across the three commissions. While committed experts and professionals pushed back against, and yet regularly bowed to time and funding pressures and often lost out against powerholder interferences, they were mostly successful in keeping victims and survivors from significantly influencing their operations. The latter had no forceful means at their disposal to impose their priorities upon committed experts and professionals in the context of the commissions. Professional TJ standards demanded that their voices had to be collected and, to some extent, even considered, and committed experts and professionals strove to honor these standards. Yet their commitment faltered and usually ended when and where victims' and survivors' voices and demands clashed with competing professional standards. They also usually failed to defend victims' and survivors' voices and demands against time and funding pressures and powerholder interferences.

It makes sense to think of these pressures and the professional defensiveness they provoke as expressions of intersecting global hierarchies, which render some outcomes much more likely than others. Knowledge hierarchies privileging experts and professionals often do not override resource and leverage hierarchies. And while it is often not clear how exactly funding pressures and domestic powerholder interference are going to play out, their dynamics strongly tend to work against the interests of ordinary people, especially if they are "non-Western subjects" (Sabaratnam 2017, 137). This is because colonial legacies—such as specific notions about humanity and deservingness (e.g., Shilliam 2018), the global distribution of wealth and power (e.g., Koram 2022), and established patterns wherein international domination enables domestic domination and despotic rule (Getachew 2019, 35, 83)—provide the overall hierarchical context for the interplay of these pressures.

Our main conceptual argument is that pressures emanating from intersecting global hierarchies (and their background conditions) leave their marks on professional report-making work. Moreover, this does not necessarily change even when the majority of experts and professionals conducting the report-making are nonwhite and hail from the Global South—or when pressures are exerted by domestic actors. We follow Sabaratnam in not assuming that their presence disqualifies "intervention [in our case internationalized truth commissions] as a setting in which colonial or racist relations might obtain [. . .]—as if any institution of colonial governance was established only by whites" (Sabaratnam 2017, 31). Rather, our interviews and conversations suggest that domestic elites indeed assert their interests—sometimes making use of the internationalized structures, and sometimes in conflict with them—and that non-white experts and professionals channel global hierarchies even while they themselves struggle with them. For example, a Tunisian TJ professional expressed frustration that they "can't be experts here," implying that their expertise was not valued in their own country, since "all the experts come from New York."[27]

To conclude, figure 1 provides a brief summary of our conceptual argument in contrast to IR's established professional community concepts. We termed the kind of communities we encountered "communities of pressure": they are under pressure and react to pressures and the resultant dynamics shape their professional work. While our argument emerged from interpretive work on report-making in internationalized truth commissions, the figure offers a more abstract summary so that it can be harnessed for analyses beyond these specific contexts.

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[27]Interview MS, Tunis, August 2016.

	EPISTEMIC COMMUNITIES	COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE	COMMUNITIES OF PRESSURE
FORMATION	Professional socialization	Professional socialization	Professional socialization
GLOBAL HIERARCHIES	Untouched	Untouched	Complicit
WORK LOGIC	Learning + Progress	Learning + Progress	Defensiveness
OUTCOME INFLUENCED BY	Expertise-based authority	Professional Practice	Pressures channelling global hierarchies

Figure 1. Authors' illustration

Unequal Pressures at the Sierra Leone TRC, Kenya TJRC, and Tunisia TDC

This third part of our analytical essay illustrates some of the findings behind our argument that unequal pressures emanating from intersecting global hierarchies plus professional defensiveness aimed at safeguarding against these pressures shaped report-making at the Sierra Leone TRC, Kenya TJRC, and Tunisia TDC. We focus on three—sometimes overlapping or intertwined—sets of pressures against which committed experts and professionals set out to defend the making of "good" reports. The first two, time and funding pressures and domestic power holder interferences, have in common that they had direct impacts on final reports. Yet victims' and survivors' voices and demands had little effect. They remained largely under the control of experts and professionals and sometimes directly fell prey to power-holder interferences. To set the scene, we begin with brief overviews of the historical and political contexts for each commission.

Three Truth Commissions in Context

The Sierra Leone TRC (2002–2004) was established by an act of parliament and run as a donor-funded project by OHCHR in Geneva (Menzel 2020b, 597) after the end of an 11-year civil war (1991–2002), which also included interventions by external actors ranging from hired mercenary outfits to regional and UN peacekeeping missions (Keen 2005). The commission's mandate was to investigate the history and legacies of the war and provide recommendations on, "among other things, [. . .] measures to be taken for the rehabilitation of victims of human rights violations" (Sierra Leone TRC 2004a, 24). It received much less than expected funding from a number of donors, mainly from the United States and the United Kingdom. At least in part, this funding gap resulted from a shift in donor attention to a different TJ instrument. Sierra Leone's president at the time, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, made a formal request to the UN Security Council to establish a hybrid national-international criminal court that eventually absorbed multiple times the funding originally earmarked for the TRC. The Special Court for Sierra Leone was mandated to prosecute those bearing "the greatest responsibility" for war crimes and crimes against humanity (Jalloh 2011, 413–8). Moreover, the TRC received no financial and little political support from the Sierra Leone government. Key figures, including President Kabbah himself, were not at all eager to see their own wartime roles investigated. The Special Court never investigated Kabbah, even though this was highly implausible given that he had already been in office during the war (Jalloh 2011, 425–6; Mahoney and Sooka 2015, 43–6).

The idea for the Kenya TJRC (2009–2013) was introduced in 2008, in the context of a dialogue and reconciliation process initiated and overseen by the AU. Follow-

ing contested elections in December 2007, post-election violence had left thousands of Kenyans raped, maimed, or dead, and displaced several hundred thousand. The TJRC was mandated to investigate gross human rights violations, including this recent post-election violence, as well as so-called "historical injustices" since independence, also including economic crimes (Lynch 2018, 160–70; Songa 2018, 15–28; Slye 2018, 49–63). The commission began its work under a coalition government whose leaders were themselves implicated in crimes and injustices under the commission's mandate. It had to rely on a tight budget granted by this government, which—at times and not always with a clear agenda—tried to control the commission's work (Slye 2018, 172–5). The TJRC received hardly any external funding and only eventually some so-called technical support, i.e., consultants (Bosire and Lynch 2014, 275; Slye 2018, 172–5). It seems that external donors shied away from a commission that was at the same time tainted by political interferences and out of favor with the Kenyan government. The situation did not improve after a new course of elections in 2012/3. In May 2013, the TJRC handed over its final report to a new Kenyan president, Uhuru Kenyatta, who himself was one of six individuals indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes related to the 2007/08 post-election violence (Songa 2018, 15–28; Slye 2018, chapter 6).

In Tunisia, a participatory TJ law-making process started with international support shortly after the ouster of long-term dictator Ben Ali in early 2011, the first dictator toppled during the so-called Arab Spring. The resultant TJ law, revised and passed by the National Constituent Assembly,[28] provided for the establishment of the TDC (2014–2018). It was mandated to deal with almost 60 years of repressive rule, human rights violations, economic crimes, and socio-economic marginalization. The TDC received its core budget from the Tunisian state (Truth and Dignity Commission 2019, 43), yet selected sub-projects and activities were funded by international donors. The commission had a (relatively generous) initial mandate of 4 years with the option of a 1-year extension provided for in the law. However, this extension was not granted in full.[29] Political support for the TDC waned after the 2014 elections, shortly after the commission started its work. Moreover, the commission was plagued by internal quarrels and related defections from the very beginning, and conflicts intensified over time. Both dynamics, in combination with a lack of transparency and allegations of corruption and embezzlement, contributed to a poor reputation of the TDC within Tunisian society.[30]

Time and Funding Pressures

Scarcity of time and funding—and sometimes also strange cases of oversupply—posed tremendous difficulties for all three commissions. They prompted committed experts and professionals to defend professional report-making against overly tight budgets, unrealistic deadlines, and the distorting effects of misallocation. These pressures and the resultant professional defensiveness significantly shaped report-making work in all three commissions.

Professionals at OHCHR in Geneva and the Sierra Leone TRC initially put much effort into lobbying donor governments for contributions to the TRC budget—without much success.[31] The exact number is hard to find but, in total, the commission probably received only half, possibly two-thirds of its originally envisioned

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[28]An unofficial English translation of the Organic Law on Establishing and Organizing Transitional Justice is available here: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/TN/TransitionalJusticeTunisia.pdf, accessed August 31, 2023.

[29]Although its operational period was cut short, the TDC claims to have received the full extension in the final report, see Truth and Dignity Commission (2019, 34).

[30]Video interview MS with Tunisian TJ professional, June 2020.

[31]See archival documents, "Email to OHCHR High Commissioner," May 17, 2002; "Letter to Kabbah," September 12, 2002.

budget of $9.9 million (Sierra Leone TRC 2004a, 60; Mahoney and Sooka 2015, 39). By comparison, the South African TRC had a budget of $18 million and the Sierra Leone Special Court's overall budget amounted to $250 million (Mahoney and Sooka 2015, 39).

One of the many issues resulting from a comparatively small and then again significantly reduced budget was that the Sierra Leone TRC did not have its own resources to hire experts (Mahoney and Sooka 2015, 41). Committed professionals at the TRC tried to make up for this by requesting external technical assistance, for example, in the area of gender expertise. The TRC's interim secretariat approached the United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM) early on in the process, in September 2002, and requested a qualified consultant to provide gender training for the commissioners and staff.[32] However, the first training only took place in April 2003.[33] At this point, the TRC had already finalized its large-scale statement-taking process: provisionally trained statement-takers had collected more than seven thousand statements throughout Sierra Leone and from Sierra Leonean refugees in neighbouring countries (Sierra Leone TRC 2004a, 92–5). There had been no time to stall these activities, as the commission was operating under an extremely tight schedule. UNIFEM expressed concerns that, given the lack of proper gender training before the statement-taking phase, "a large part of the data [from statements] used for the TRC work may not adequately cover gender-specific violations and abuses of women."[34] Professional staff at the TRC acknowledged these shortcomings but nonetheless decided to use the collected statements, especially for statistical analyses (Sierra Leone TRC 2004b). Moreover, the two UNIFEM-commissioned consultants, both of them lawyers with experience in international criminal proceedings on sexual violence, still made a significant impact. They provided training in preparation of the TRC's hearings phase, met with Sierra Leonean women's groups to prepare written inputs, and defined key priorities for and contributed to the report chapter on "Women and the Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone" (Menzel 2020a, 314–6).[35]

Among our three cases, the Kenya TJRC stands out insofar as it hardly received any funding from bi- and multilateral donors. Several interview partners and former expatriate TJRC commissioner Ronald Slye (2018) gave reasons why donors shied away from the TJRC. In his book about his time at the Kenya TJRC, Slye—a law professor at Seattle University—recalls how a diplomat explained to him that the TJRC should be "a Kenyan-driven process, not a donor-driven process" (Slye 2018, 173). Yet Kenyan interview partners found this line of argument unpersuasive. One former staff member argued that major donors chose not to support the TJRC for fear of antagonizing the Kenyan government as it was too important a partner in the "war on terror" and in managing refugee crises in Eastern Africa.[36] Moreover, a scandal that emerged around the TJRC's chairperson (described in the section on powerholder interference below) rendered the TJRC even less attractive to donors.

While there was no donor funding for the commission's budget, some donors did supply consultants and the latter played a major role in report-making. One former expatriate consultant to the TJRC explained in an interview that the TJRC's director of research had no choice but to rely on external consultants to meet report-making deadlines set by the Kenyan parliament. The same interview partner detailed how consultants revised chapters without knowledge of the collected data, working solely based on professional writing skills and knowledge of what "such reports" should look like. According to them, other people at the commission with better knowledge

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[32]See archival documents, "Interoffice Memorandum UNIFEM," September 17, 2002; and "Request for UNIFEM Assistance," October 7, 2002.

[33]See archival document, "UNIFEM and the Sierra Leone TRC," April 9–11, 2003, Freetown.

[34]See archival document, "UNIFEM Comments on the TRC Statement Format," March 11, 2003.

[35]See archival document, "Terms of Reference," March 10, 2003.

[36]Interview AM, Nairobi, March 2018.

of the data and more exposure to victims and survivors simply did not have the writing skills, and report writing was taking too long. This former consultant also acknowledged that relying on consultants in this way had grave consequences as it further contributed to disconnecting the report from data that had been collected (often directly from victims and survivors):

> Even if it's a great consultant, what are they [consultants] going to do? In a way, they have no background on the stories. You bring someone in for two, three weeks and then you [the consultants] write a chapter in the final report.[37]

Although the Tunisian TDC was well-resourced by comparison, in its early years, it received considerably less money for its general budget than requested from the government (Truth and Dignity Commission 2019, 6). Truth-commission members and staff also complained that the budget came late and delayed crucial preparations, such as hiring staff and renting offices. They perceived these delays as politically-motivated and aimed at hindering their work.[38] While the general budget came from the Tunisian government, international donors provided ample funding for specific projects associated with the TDC or paid for consultants.[39] This led to the paradox situation that funding pressures worked through both, scarcity (regarding the general budget) and oversupply for specific purposes pushed by donors who "needed to present [the TDC] as a success."[40]

According to several interview partners, report-writing at the Tunisian TDC was a messy endeavor.[41] Time pressure was one reason for this as the mandate was cut short and the TDC was forced to hectically wrap up its work (Mouelhi 2020). Those committed to producing a "good" report struggled to deal with time pressure by trying to convince less-committed commission members (who either did not take the task seriously or were seeking control over the report for non-professional reasons) that they needed to start writing early on and shift work units to the task.[42] In this context, UN agencies, in particular, were criticized for exerting pressure through *continued* funding under extreme time pressure to make sure that the commission brought its work to a perceivably successful ending in the form of a final report. They "provided money, but not oversight"[43] and even kept funding the TDC when many committed professionals regarded it as "failing," while allegedly later trying to suppress expert criticism of the report.[44] Interview partners criticized that this donor's priority to get the report done at all costs and under time pressure negatively affected the professional quality of the report, especially its recommendations, which turned out "very weak both in process and content."[45] They were described as "rubbish," "not interesting," "copy-pasted," and not resulting from a "process to get to them."[46] Interview partners complained that they were not based on statistics[47] or disaggregated data,[48] and altogether not reflective of victims' and survivors' experiences and demands.

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[37]Skype interview AM, May 2018. See also Lynch 2018, 170–173.

[38]Personal interviews with truth-commission members and staff, Tunis, March 2015.

[39]Personal conversation MS with TJ professional, NYC, March 2022.

[40]Video interview MS with TJ professional, June 2020.

[41]Several phone/video interviews MS with TJ professionals, May–December 2020.

[42]Phone interviews MS with two TJ professionals, both May 2020.

[43]Phone interview MS with TJ professional, May 2020.

[44]Phone interview MS with TJ professional, May 2020.

[45]Phone interview MS with TJ professional, May 2020.

[46]Phone interview MS with TJ professional, May 2020.

[47]Phone interview MS with truth commissioner, December 2020.

[48]Phone interview MS with TJ professional, May 2020.

Powerholder Interferences

Interferences by domestic elites were also present across the three commissions. They were probably least prevalent at the Sierra Leone TRC—although the picture might look different had AM interviewed national commissioners (which they did not for reasons explained in the supplementary file uploaded to ScholarOne). Based on the materials available, it is clear that there was at least one instance at the Sierra Leone TRC when expatriate staff and national commissioners experienced domestic political pressures differently.

On 5 August 2003, the TRC was scheduled to interview President Kabbah during a thematic hearing on "reconciliation" over which a conflict broke out between expatriate staff and commissioners on the one side, and national commissioners on the other. The point of contention was whether or not the president should be asked "embarrassing questions." A former expatriate senior staff member recalled,

> The commissioners asked us not to ask him embarrassing questions and we did anyhow. So that created a lot of discussion between the commissioners and especially myself, I think. I went on a holiday and I came back and they had dismissed my staff and everything but I got them back in the end. [...] Yeah, there were a lot of tensions. [...] When I say the commissioners, it was the national commissioners ... because they were all of the same political party as the president.[49]

Shortly before the hearing, expatriate staff had circulated emails with questions regarding, among other things, the president's contracting of private military companies during the war.[50] It is possible that these questions were asked during the hearing (as implied in the above-quoted interview)—but there is no mention of them, let alone answers to them in the description of the hearing in the final report (Sierra Leone TRC 2004c, 484–5).

Former Kenya TJRC staff members, by contrast, mentioned powerholder interferences in nearly every interview or conversation. Many had experienced intimidation (e.g., being followed) and relayed that they had constantly switched phones and SIM cards in order to avoid surveillance.[51] In addition to such "smaller" everyday incidents, there were also two instances of powerholder interference that attracted attention beyond the circle of those working at, or in the broader context of the commission. The first is the case of the TJRC chairperson, Ambassador Bethuel Kiplagat, who was himself implicated in the planning of the 1984 Wagalla massacre, which the commission was mandated to investigate. Yet Kiplagat refused to resign when this became apparent (Slye 2018, chapter 3). His refusal cost the commission dearly. The TJRC's deputy chairperson, prominent Kenyan human rights lawyer Betty Murungi, resigned in protest of Kiplagat's decision and the commission lost the support of Kenyan human rights NGOs, which otherwise might have contributed their expertise and connections. Also, the scandal probably contributed to donors' unwillingness to consider co-funding the commission (Bosire and Lynch 2014, 269–76; Songa 2018, 29–30). It remains uncertain whether the Kenyan government deliberately placed Kiplagat at the TJRC to disturb its operations—or whether it merely refrained from pushing for Kiplagat's resignation once his disturbing influences became apparent (Lanegran 2015, 66–70).

The second instance—a case of tampering with the report before its (non) publication—is more straightforward. Before the TJRC's final report was handed over to President Kenyatta in May 2013, it seems that some national commissioners were bribed or threatened into making changes to the chapter on "Land and Conflict" (Kenya TJRC 2013, chapter 2). The purpose was to erase testimonies about land grabbing by members of the Kenyatta family. Three expatriate commissioners

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[49] Skype interview AM, February 2018.
[50] See archival document, Email "More Questions for the President," dated August 3, 2003.
[51] Several interviews AM in Nairobi and via Skype.

reacted quickly and wrote a dissent. However, the dissent was left out of the version of the final report that was officially handed over to the president. Moreover, even the publication of this manipulated report was sabotaged. The final report—now including the original version of the chapter and the dissent—was only ever made available to the public on a Seattle University homepage by former commissioner Ronald Slye.[52]

For Tunisia, two instances of tampering with the report were repeatedly pointed out in interviews: the "disappearance" of the chapter on women and sexual violence, and the alteration of the report after it had been published online.

An entire chapter on sexual and gender-based violence was allegedly erased from the final TDC report without any explanation. One interview partner, a woman who gave testimony at the public hearings, complained: "Sexual violence and assault is not covered in the final report as we wanted it to be. [. . .] It is a contradiction to let women talk about their experiences in public hearings and then not to give them their rights."[53] The removal of the chapter would mean that women who testified were denied official recognition of harm suffered and consequently potential reparations. According to one commissioner, this "ignited embers: the victims told us that we had used them at the public hearings."[54] Interview partners provided two explanations for the removal of the chapter that are not mutually exclusive: "infighting" within the commission and political pressure.

Regarding the latter, several interview partners also pointed out that the report was altered several times after it had been published on the TDC's website in March 2019, before it was published in the country's official gazette more than a year later. They all hold the TDC's president, Sihem Ben Sedrine, responsible for the alterations. Allegedly, she "changed, falsified, deleted, and added things"[55] in response to "shifting politics in parliament."[56] Ben Sedrine rejects these accusations and in turn, classifies other commissioners as being corrupted by politics.[57] Another interview partner mentioned that they were expecting court cases to be filed against the report, not only, but also because of such interferences.[58]

Victims' and Survivors' Voices and Demands

We have so far illustrated pressures that had obvious effects on report-making, not least because committed experts and professionals defended against political interferences and tried to navigate tight timelines and lacking resources. Now we turn to victims' and survivors' voices and demands, which put pressure on committed experts and professionals but remained tightly under their control.

We begin again with the Sierra Leone TRC: speaking to former staff and analyzing documents from the TRC archive, it became clear that staff members had been well exposed to victims' and survivors' desperate demands for material help. Whenever staff and commissioners encountered ordinary Sierra Leoneans, especially during the statement-taking process[59] and public hearings,[60] the latter used the opportunity to ask for money, housing, and medical care—despite intense efforts on the side of the commission to manage expectations and explain that this was not part of the TRC mandate.[61] Some victim groups openly framed their cooperation with

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[52]See https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/tjrc/, accessed August 31, 2023.

[53]Phone interview MS with civil society representative, September 2020.

[54]Phone interview MS with truth commissioner, December 2020.

[55]Phone interview MS with truth commissioner, December 2020.

[56]Phone interview MS with TJ professional, May 2020.

[57]Personal interview MS, November 2023.

[58]Phone interview MS with TJ professional, June 2020.

[59]See archival document, "Review Form for Statement Takers," undated.

[60]See archival document, "Report on the Follow-Up on the Witnesses," undated, page 3.

[61]Expectation management already became a key issue early on in the commission's operations, see archival document, "Reparations by Investigative Consultant," dated August 1, 2002.

the TRC in terms of an expected exchange: they would offer their stories and, in return, they expected the TRC to help them.[62]

Facing victims' and survivors' disappointment over the absence of material help was a distressing experience. As one former senior expatriate staff member explained,

> This was something that I don't know whether it would have been possible to manage it. Because many people expected help from the commission and had to go home empty handed. […] That was one of the most frustrating parts.[63]

TRC staff often referred people to humanitarian NGOs but knew that this was a drop in the ocean—at best.[64] Following TRC hearings in Sierra Leone's Bo District, another senior expatriate staff member argued that the commission needed to think about ways to provide "interim reparations." He suggested lobbying the Sierra Leone government to undertake a census of the most vulnerable victims to generate data that could be used to get help to them as soon as possible.[65] Some staff members pursued this idea for a short time and then dropped it due to lack of funding.[66] Then, as time and funding pressures increased with the end of the hearings phase, committed staff members pushed their colleagues to focus all energies on report writing. Even outreach activities that had been planned with Sierra Leonean civil society organizations were dropped.[67]

What is most striking, however, is that the report contains no chapter dedicated to ordinary Sierra Leoneans' expectations and disappointments with the TRC. There is no hint of evidence that anyone in the context of the commission ever advocated for such a chapter—despite everyday experiences of unmet expectations, demands, and disappointments. Committed experts and professionals would have likely regarded such a chapter as unprofessional. They also clearly expected that delivering as professional a report as possible would benefit victims and survivors in the medium or possibly even short term. Unfortunately, this was not the case. The TRC-recommended reparations program did not materialize until many years after the TRC completed its work. When it came, it reached only a fraction of those in need and delivered only meager benefits (Menzel 2021, 423–5).

The Kenya TJRC as well provided recommendations for a reparations program, yet no such program has materialized so far (Lynch 2018, chapter 9; Menzel 2021, 425–7). Rather, what is sometimes emphasized as the TJRC's most impressive achievement is that it collected over 40.000 statements from all parts of the country. According to the plan, these were supposed to form "the main source of information for the TJRC on gross human rights violations suffered [. . .] during the mandate period."[68] Former commissioner Slye emphasizes that no other truth commission to that date has managed to collect such an impressive number of statements (Slye 2018, 8). He also concedes that the quality of the statements was often poor. They did not provide enough details but were still "useful for our quantitative purposes" (Slye 2018, 79). By contrast, interviews conducted with former senior staff members, a former TJRC consultant, and a Kenyan human rights professional who had closely followed the work of the commission all suggest that the commission never systematically analyzed the 40,000 statements, neither qualitatively nor quantitatively: "It was not easy and sometimes even conceivable for us to plot through all the statements."[69]

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[62] See archival document, "War Wounded Welfare Association," dated September 2, 2002; see also "War Affected Amputee Association," undated.

[63] Skype Interview AM, February 2018.

[64] See archival document, "Evaluation of Hearings in Bo," May 5, 2003, paragraph 8.

[65] See archival document, "Evaluation of Hearings in Bo," May 5, 2003, paragraph 9.

[66] See archival document, "LRU Reparations work plan," undated.

[67] See archival document, "Email: Re: Time Frame. . .," dated October 29, 2003.

[68] TJRC document provided by Ronald Slye, "October 2010 Briefing Kit," page 4, accessed August 20, 2023 https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/tjrc-operational/4.

This dismissal of the statements was not only due to time and funding pressures. It was also a professional decision. According to the above-listed interview partners (and corroborated by findings described in Lynch 2018, 171), a consulting data scientist had despaired after screening the statements and discovering their sheer mass and poor quality. Following this, "a decision was made not to rely on such an unreliable dataset (Interview, Nairobi, 15 September 2013)" (Lynch 2018, 171). While some TJRC researchers and investigators still used selected statements and cited them in the report, most statements were never considered. This was likely a sensible decision in many professional regards. But it also means that thousands of survivors told their painful stories in vain. It is worth remembering from the sub-chapter on time and funding pressures that the Sierra Leone TRC decided against dismissing its statements despite UNIFEM's quality concerns. We see here that deciding about what to do with collected voices often lies within the discretion of experts and professionals.

The Tunisian TDC initially put emphasis on the issue of women and sexual violence and made efforts to reach women, including in rural areas, to have their cases on record with the commission. There was also a public hearing dedicated to the topic of sexual violence, where women shared their experiences. However, even though it had been promised that the commission would consider women's cases despite their inevitably limited documentation, some truth commissioners later changed course. They demanded more evidence—a message they communicated inadequately, via social media, to an audience that often did not have internet access. This also meant that women's files did not feed into the report.[70] In a similar vein, statement takers allegedly received orders from the TDC president not to register sexual violence in the computer application used in closed hearings, "they should just open questions for torture."[71] This meant that sexual violence would be logged as torture and victims' and survivors' experiences would be distorted—also with the potential consequence that they were to receive less reparations than they would have been entitled to had their grievance been logged correctly. One Tunisian TJ professional assessed this approach as the right decision as it would enable future legal cases since there would be no statute of limitation for torture claims. Thus, we can also see here the discretion experts and professionals have in treating collected statements.[72]

As described above, in addition to these earlier obstructions, the exclusion of victims' and survivors' voices and demands was later exacerbated by the "disappearance" of the chapter on women and sexual violence from the final TDC report.

Conclusion

In our analytical essay, we have positioned truth commissions as relevant sites for IR research and concept development, in particular on professional knowledge production and global hierarchies, and offered an analytical framework to inspire and guide future research. Concluding, we focus on two aspects to highlight our key contributions and point out promising directions for future research: (1) the added value of a pressure lens for studying professional communities in IR; and (2) truth commissions as report-making institutions that make global hierarchies legible. The second aspect extends to truth commissions beyond the Global South.

First, in our conceptual work, we have shown how a focus on pressures can enrich our understanding of professional communities in IR (see figure 1). While established concepts perceive these communities as working outside of and untouched by global hierarchies, a pressure lens helps to illuminate professional communities'

[69]Interview AM with a former senior staff member in Nairobi, March 2018.
[70]Phone interview MS with truth commissioner, December 2020.
[71]Phone interview MS with truth commissioner, December 2020.
[72]Personal conversation MS, Tunisia, October 2023

complicity in the (re)production of global hierarchies. Unequal pressures emanating from unequal access to material and immaterial resources as well as political power express and channel global hierarchies. To push this further, future research could investigate situations in which key players within professional communities reflect on their embeddedness in global hierarchies and develop strategies for becoming less complicit. Such research could focus on when and how opportunities for reflection arise, how far they go, and whether or not learnings are actually put into practice. Moreover, just as our framework can guide research on "communities of pressure" in various fields in IR, it can also facilitate analyses of the different forces that shape report-making in other types of organizations. This, in turn, may foster an understanding of report-making that moves beyond seeing it as a "rational" governing technique. Report-making tends to be a messy process that reflects not only knowledge but also resource and leverage hierarchies.

Second, we have provided detailed empirical analyses of report-making under pressure in three truth commissions in Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Tunisia. Available reporting and our own preliminary research suggest that understanding report-making through a pressure lens will also be helpful for research on truth commissions in the Global North. For example, while seeing fact-finding, holding hearings, and producing a final report with recommendations as its central tasks, the Iowa City TRC in the United States, established in 2020 and dealing with racial injustice, is equally subject to intersecting and unequal pressures. As in the other cases discussed in this article, the commission struggles with fulfilling their mandate with limited time and resources, local powerholder interferences, and questions of how to properly represent racialized constituencies when their voices are pushed aside.[73] Here as well, we see the workings of global hierarchies under conditions of coloniality of power—which do not necessarily require that a commission is either internationalized or located in the Global South. Rather, coloniality lies in the way power favors those associated with already privileged positions and generates indifference toward racialized populations. Thus, leverage is employed to deny voice and worth to those without privilege—even if they should be the nominal beneficiaries of policy interventions, such as truth commissions.

Acknowledgements

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[73]Personal observations MS, online, March 2022 and https://eu.press-citizen.com/story/news/2022/07/13/mohamed-traore-step-down-iowa-city-truth-reconciliation-commission-chair-stay-commission-amel-ali/10015073002/, accessed April 4, 2024.

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