WHEN LIVES ARE AT STAKE: MANAGING TEMPORAL COMPLEXITY WITH A STRATEGY PROCESS REPERTOIRE

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ABSTRACT

Humanitarian organizations assisting victims of armed conflict face fragmented and potentially conflicting temporal demands on strategy-making. Annual donor funding requires detailed planning, unpredictable outbreaks of war and violence demand quick and flexible decisions, and long-term societal challenges must be addressed over the next decades. Few studies have examined how organizations can achieve temporal fit in such temporally complex environments without accepting internal fragmentation or decoupling from certain temporal demands. We draw on a longitudinal case study of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), a humanitarian organization with the mandate to aid victims of armed conflict, to explore this gap. We find that the ICRC has developed a repertoire of multiple distinct strategy processes tailored to the fragmented temporal demands. These processes include emergency responses, strategic planning, and long-term strategizing. Although each strategy process retained its distinctiveness, their loose coupling ensured a sufficient alignment of resource allocation in pursuit of the organization's humanitarian mandate. Strong shared principles and an episodic activation of strategy processes helped to manage the inherent complexity of loose coupling. Thus, strategy process repertoires may form a capability supporting strategic decision-making in temporally complex environments. Our study contributes to strategy process research by introducing loose coupling as a mechanism for integrating multiple strategy processes with different temporalities, complementing previous studies on strategy processes as a tightly coupled structural context. Furthermore, we advance theorizing on ambitemporality by analyzing how the loose coupling of internal temporal structures may help organizations cope with temporal complexity.

Keywords: Strategy process research, temporal complexity, entrainment, single case study, humanitarian organizations.

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INTRODUCTION

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is a humanitarian organization with the mandate to aid people suffering from armed conflicts, natural catastrophes, famines, and other disasters. The ICRC's protection, prevention, and assistance activities are financed by donor states that expect detailed strategic planning to ensure the transparent and efficient use of their annual contributions. However, new armed conflicts may break out at any time, forcing the ICRC to rapidly decide how to strategically reallocate resources to assist victims who have been injured, imprisoned, or fleeing violence within a country and across borders. In addition to these medium- and short-term demands on strategy-making, humanitarian organizations must find answers to the challenges of the coming decades, such as an increasing number of stakeholders that doubt the effectiveness and relevance of their activities, as well as protracted armed conflicts. How can the strategy process of an organization such as the ICRC integrate such fragmented and potentially conflicting temporal demands?

A temporal fit between an organization's internal temporal structures and environmental demands leads to better organizational performance (Ancona and Chong 1996, Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. 2008, Popli et al. 2017). Therefore, organizations entrain to environmental demands; that is, they synchronize internal temporal structures to pacers from the external environment (Ancona et al. 2001b, Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. 2008). For instance, synchronizing the pace of internal technology development processes with the technological rhythms of a dynamic market environment enhances organizational performance (Brown and Eisenhardt 1997, Dibrell et al. 2015). Likewise, organizations entrain their strategy processes to temporal demands of their environments (Orlikowski and Yates 2002, Kaplan and Orlikowski 2013). When the temporal demands of the environment change—for example through increased dynamism (Grant 2003)—the design of strategy processes must adapt to the new demands to maintain temporal fit (Ocasio and Joseph 2008, Joseph and Ocasio 2012), for example through adaptations to decision speed (Baum and Wally 2003) and planning horizons (Das 1987, 1991).

However, an increasing number of organizations faces a temporally complex environment (Reinecke and Ansari 2015, Schmitt and Klarner 2015, Kunisch et al. 2021). We define temporal complexity

as the coexistence of fragmented and potentially conflicting temporal demands from different stakeholders on an organization (Garud et al. 2013, Zietsma et al. 2018, Bansal et al. 2022). Prior studies have focused on temporal complexity caused by dualistic temporal tensions (Blagoev et al. 2023), such as short term versus long term (Slawinski and Bansal 2015), predictable versus unpredictable events (Patriotta and Gruber 2015, Geiger et al. 2021), and clock time versus process time (Reinecke and Ansari 2015). Temporal complexity complicates the synchronization of internal temporal structures with the environment; thus, it may cause conflict and confusion (Ancona et al. 2001b, Kaplan and Orlikowski 2013, Kunisch et al. 2021) with negative performance implications (Zietsma et al. 2018). To cope with the negative consequences of temporal complexity, some organizations prioritize certain temporal demands over others (Blagoev and Schreyögg 2019, Geiger et al. 2021). Alternatively, organizations may develop a tolerance for the coexistence of fragmented temporal demands (Reinecke and Ansari 2015, Slawinski and Bansal 2015) by accepting intra-organizational fragmentation—for example, in the form of a hybrid organization (Reinecke and Ansari 2015, Ramus et al. 2021).

The special case of a humanitarian organization such as the ICRC challenges the assumptions of prior work on temporal complexity. First, humanitarian organizations face *multiple* temporal demands, including time horizons ranging from short-term emergencies to long-term grand challenges, unpredictable and recurring events, and issues of high and low urgency. Furthermore, the ICRC has an exclusively humanitarian mandate that would be compromised by the ambiguous purpose, multiple goals, or diffuse power structures that often characterize organizations facing complex temporal environmental demands (e.g., Denis et al. 2007, Ramus et al. 2021). Effectively coping with temporal complexity is critical for humanitarian organizations to fulfill their missions under extreme conditions of violence and dependence on their stakeholders (Mithani 2020, Shen et al. 2020). Therefore, we ask: *How can humanitarian organizations integrate fragmented and potentially conflicting temporal demands in their strategy processes?* Exploring how humanitarian organizations cope with temporal complexity could contribute to enhancing our limited understanding of entrainment in temporally complex environments (Reinecke and

Ansari 2015, Bansal et al. 2022, Blagoev and Schreyögg 2024), as well as the temporal dynamics of strategy processes (Burgelman et al. 2018, 2021).

Our research draws on an in-depth, longitudinal case study of the strategy-making processes of the ICRC. Our findings show that a repertoire of loosely coupled strategy processes, which are distinctive yet responsive (Weick 1976, Orton and Weick 1990), enabled the ICRC to navigate its temporally complex environment. The ICRC synchronized distinct strategy processes to short-, medium-, and long-term demands, such as rapid deployment to respond to the outbreak of violence or strategic planning adapted to annual donor requirements. To mitigate the potential misalignments that may arise from (re)allocating the organization's limited resources using multiple strategy processes, we observed a loose coupling between the ICRC's strategy processes. This entailed immediate boundary setting for short-term processes, enabling rapid crisis responses that consider the organization's resource constraints, and indirect guidance from long-term processes, allowing a flexible implementation of strategic priorities without cascading them hierarchically. A strong mandate and shared principles, such as the ICRC's "untouchables" neutrality, impartiality, and independence, helped to mitigate the internal complexity caused by the loose coupling of multiple strategy processes. Furthermore, the use of the distinct strategy processes occurred episodically, following pacers from the temporally complex environment.

The main contribution of our study is to demonstrate how strategy process repertoires support strategy formation in temporally complex environments. Thus, we extend the research on strategy processes (Burgelman et al. 2018) by identifying loose coupling (Weick 1976, Orton and Weick 1990) as a mechanism to combine multiple strategy processes with different temporalities. The concept of a loosely coupled strategy process repertoire with its focus on the flexible integration of strategy processes complements work on tightly coupled strategy processes (Ocasio and Joseph 2008, Joseph and Ocasio 2012) and uncoupled strategy-making (Denis et al. 2001). Furthermore, we suggest that the dynamic use of strategy processes through episodic activation (Hendry and Seidl 2003, Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008) may reduce the complexity inherent in contexts with multiple strategy processes (Schreyögg and Sydow 2010, Schneider et al. 2017). We propose that strategy process repertoires may serve as a latent capability to support strategic

decision-making in temporally complex environments (Wolf and Floyd 2017). We also contribute to the research on ambitemporality in strategic management (Kunisch et al. 2017, Blagoev and Schreyögg 2024) by exploring the effective choice and integration of multiple temporal structures .

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Entrainment and temporal complexity

Entrainment refers to the synchronization of an internal temporal structure to pacers from the external environment or dominant internal activities (Ancona and Chong 1996, Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. 2008, Shipp and Richardson 2021). In our study, we focus on organizational entrainment to environmental demands—induced for example by technological changes, competitive actions, natural disasters, or reporting deadlines (Ancona et al. 2001b).[1] Central to the concept of entrainment is that managers may strategically create or adjust internal temporal structures, such as schedules, milestones, and deadlines, to synchronize them with pacers from the environment, such as annual trade fairs, competitors' product introductions, M&As, or reporting dates (Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. 2008). Organizations entrain by coupling internal temporal structures with the phases and tempo of the environment (Geiger et al. 2021, Shipp and Richardson 2021). The entrainment of phase refers to "when" internal processes follow external pacers, for example early, on time, or late, whereas the entrainment of tempo refers to "how fast" internal processes follow external rhythms (Ancona and Chong 1996, Schmitt and Klarner 2015). Entrainment is a strategic choice (Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. 2008) and becomes deeply embedded in the cognition, affect, and behavior of an organizations' decision-makers (Shipp and Richardson 2021).

Entrainment leads to increased organizational performance when temporal fit is achieved (Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. 2008), that is, when an organization's internal temporal structures synchronize with external temporal demands (Ben-Menahem et al. 2013, Klarner and Raisch 2013). The impact of temporal fit on organizational performance has been demonstrated in situations in which there is a change in environmental

[1] As opposed to entrainment to internal pacers (e.g., Hopp and Greene 2018).

demands. For instance, Indian automotive firms that accelerated their internal processes in line with the increased pace of the competitive environment, triggered by deregulation, outperformed their competitors (Popli et al. 2017). Firms that proactively launch product development processes succeed when confronted with faster-paced industry dynamism (Brown and Eisenhardt 1997, Dibrell et al. 2015).

However, fragmented or conflicting temporal demands present challenges to entrainment (Ancona et al. 2001b, McCarthy et al. 2010). The presence of "multiple temporal rhythms and experiences" (Garud et al. 2013: 795) in the environment leads to temporal complexity when members of an organization have to navigate these divergent demands in their pursuit of a joint objective or mission (Reinecke and Ansari 2015). In entrainment theory, organizations have generally been conceptualized as embedding singular temporal structures synchronized with one type of temporal demand (Dille et al. 2023). Therefore, entraining to a temporally complex environment is likely to cause temporal misfits (Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. 2008), that is, internal conflict and confusion or a failure to align with environmental demands (Ancona et al. 2001b, Kunisch et al. 2021). For instance, Zietsma et al. (2018)'s study showed that Canadian cleantech entrepreneurs failed due to the temporal complexity caused by conflicting environmental demands from different stakeholders, namely entrepreneurial innovation, bureaucratic regulators, and large incumbent firms. Therefore, recent studies have begun to explore how organizations can entrain to more than one type of environmental demand.

Ambitemporality

Ambitemporality is the ability to "entrain to multiple temporal environments and respond to their constituents" (Reinecke and Ansari 2015: 640). Ambitemporality enables an organization to avoid breakdowns when environmental demands are not aligned with its internal temporal structures (Kaplan and Orlikowski 2013), as well as to integrate different temporal demands (Slawinski and Bansal 2015, Wang et al. 2019). Pioneering studies have explored how individuals, teams, and organizations can achieve ambitemporality through a combination of non-entrainment to temporal demands and the development of multiple temporal structures (Blagoev and Schreyögg 2024).

The first stream of research has found that organizations may avoid conflicts arising from temporal complexity through non-entrainment to certain environmental demands (Shipp and Richardson 2021, Dille et al. 2023)—for example, by temporarily excluding partners from a collaborative project (Hilbolling et al. 2022). Similar results have been obtained for the entrainment of teams and individuals within the context of temporal complexity. Geiger et al. (2021) analyzed how firefighters draw on rhythms developed during training to remove themselves from certain temporal demands of unpredictable firefighting operations. Non-entrainment to specific environmental demands has also been shown to occur when consultants entrain with client demands instead of societal norms (Blagoev and Schreyögg 2019).

A second stream of research on ambitemporality has studied how organizations can develop tolerance for multiple temporalities. These studies have focused on how organizations can avoid internal breakdowns and accept the simultaneous presence of conflicting temporal demands. For instance, Reinecke and Ansari (2015) found that to reconcile temporal demands originating from organizational members with different cultural backgrounds, tolerance for the existence of different temporal structures and their interdependencies is paramount to avoid conflict. Slawinski and Bansal (2015) showed that some organizations can integrate short- and long-term demands for sustainability in strategic decision-making through diverse information sources, stakeholder engagement, and a broad search for strategic options.

Tolerating multiple temporal demands may entail the presence of multiple temporal structures (Blagoev and Schreyögg 2024), as empirical research on temporal complexity in the setting of interorganizational collaboration has shown (Hilbolling et al. 2022, Jarvenpaa and Välikangas 2022, Dille et al. 2023). To describe more than one temporal structure, this research stream has drawn on the concept of a repertoire (Orlikowski and Yates 2002, Jarvenpaa and Välikangas 2022), which is a set of multiple distinct and interacting structures that guide organizational action (Orlikowski and Yates 1994). For example, studying an interorganizational network, Jarvenpaa and Välikangas (2022) found the team used sprints, events, and serendipitous temporal structures to structure their collaboration. Thus, they developed a tolerance for conflicting temporal demands that helped them avoid breakdowns in the context of innovation.

However, even if prior research indicates that multiple temporal structures might help to cope with temporal complexity, we lack an understanding of how multiple temporal structures could be integrated in the context of one organization's strategy formation (Reinecke and Ansari 2015, Kunisch et al. 2017, Kunisch et al. 2021). Such integration is necessary to pursue an organization's mission and strategic objectives. Therefore, our focus is on how organizations' strategy processes may cope with temporally complex environments.

Strategy processes and temporal complexity

Designing effective strategy processes is an important task for managers, who must formulate and implement strategic decisions to cope with diverse strategic issues in the environment (Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst 2006, Wolf and Floyd 2017, Burgelman et al. 2018). We define strategy processes as the procedures and administrative systems (Chakravarthy and Doz 1992, Jarzabkowski 2008) that managers establish to facilitate the formulation and implementation of strategic decisions (Vaara and Whittington 2012, Wolf and Floyd 2017). Decisions are strategic when they address issues that are interdependent "across contemporaneous decisions, across the decisions of other economic actors, and across time" (Leiblein et al. 2018: 558). Strategy processes, as procedures and administrative systems, are part of the "process of strategy formation that results in realized strategy" of the organization (Burgelman et al. 2018: 541), in combination with the, emergent or unrealized strategies that form outside the established strategy processes (Mirabeau et al. 2018).

Researchers have become interested in the temporality of strategy processes (Burgelman et al. 2018, 2021). The temporal structuring of strategy processes (Orlikowski and Yates 2002, Kaplan and Orlikowski 2013, Bansal et al. 2022) helps organize the actors and sequences involved in strategic decision-making over time (Van de Ven 1992, Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst 2006, Langley et al. 2013). An emblematic example is strategic planning, where firms establish a "*periodic* process that provides a structured approach to strategy formulation, implementation, and control" (Wolf and Floyd 2017: 1758, emphasis added) with an average time horizon of three to five years (Das 1987). In addition to periodic strategic planning, strategic

decision-making might also occur episodically (Hendry and Seidl 2003), such as in meetings with a defined beginning and end (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008), which are triggered, for example, by externally induced strategic issues (Burgelman et al. 2018).

Many organizations establish a strategy process with tightly coupled linkages across hierarchical levels and functions to structure both strategic decision-making (Grant 2003, Ocasio and Joseph 2008, Joseph and Ocasio 2012) and implementation (Weiser et al. 2020). For example, Joseph and Ocasio (2012) demonstrate how General Electric's channels to "control, allocate and monitor organizational attention and resources" (p. 635) ensured coordination through tight coupling between strategic functions. A tightly and simultaneously coupled organizational architecture, the authors argued, leads to coordinated adaptation to strategic issues from the environment.

Strategy processes are instrumental in achieving temporal fit (Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. 2008) and overall strategic fit (Siggelkow 2002) between an organization and its environment. Thus, temporal complexity is likely to particularly affect strategy processes because they fulfill an integrative function by "developing a common view of organizational goals" (Ketokivi and Castaner 2004: 338) across all environmental demands. When environmental demands become more dynamic, fast-paced strategy processes are required for success (Eisenhardt 1989, Baum and Wally 2003), which requires the addition of new decision-making processes that complement strategic planning and are tightly coupled to ensure effective adaptation (Grant 2003, Ocasio and Joseph 2008). At the same time, tight coupling might lead to a less accurate reflection of a fragmented environment in strategy-making (Weick 1976). For example, Slawinski and Bansal (2015) show in the context of the shale oil industry that quantitative planning, tightly coupled to existing strategy processes, led exclusive entrainment to short-term demands, whereas the addition of qualitative planning tools fostered the integration of short- and long-term demands for sustainability.

The presence divergent and potentially conflicting temporal demands from different stakeholders (Garud et al. 2013, Zietsma et al. 2018) may be reflected in an organization's identity (Schultz and Hernes 2020, Schultz 2022). Therefore, many organizations that face temporal complexity are internally

fragmented, as demonstrate examples from hybrid organizations that tolerate multiple temporalities in different parts of the organization (Reinecke and Ansari 2015, Ramus et al. 2021, Hilbolling et al. 2022). However, an excessive increasing in internal fragmentation to cope with temporal complexity (Schneider et al. 2017) may lead to a dilution of organizational identity and efficiency (Schreyögg and Sydow 2010). Against the background of increasingly complex environments that present temporal demands from long-term grand challenges and short-term crises, in addition to traditional business challenges, we must study new ways for organizations to avoid intra-organizational fragmentation and cope with this type of complexity (Blagoev et al. 2023). The extreme case of a humanitarian organization may provide interesting insights into this issue.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHOD

Case setting and context

We conducted a longitudinal qualitative case study of an international humanitarian organization. The ICRC is a particularly revelatory case to study strategy processes (Siggelkow 2007), as situations of armed conflict impose urgent short-term demands on organizations (Shen et al. 2020), combined with pressure for planning and control from donors. A single case study is ideally suited for exploring how strategy processes cope with rare and extreme temporal complexity (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007).

The ICRC is an international humanitarian organization established through the first Geneva Convention in 1863 to provide humanitarian relief to victims of violence. The ICRC has a permanent mandate under international humanitarian law to undertake humanitarian activities during armed conflicts. The ICRC pursues this mission through four fields of activity: (1) the protection of wounded or imprisoned soldiers and civilians, (2) assistance to affected populations through services such as healthcare and nutrition, (3) prevention of war crimes by promoting international humanitarian law, and (4) cooperation with affiliated Red Cross federations and other humanitarian organizations. The ICRC operates in virtually every area of conflict worldwide because its neutrality enables negotiations with all involved parties,

including non-state armed groups, to provide humanitarian assistance. The humanitarian impact of the ICRC's work is highly recognized, and it has received three Nobel Peace Prizes.

Responding to emergencies to alleviate human suffering is the core activity of the ICRC. For most of its history, the ICRC has intervened ad hoc in emergencies, such as both World Wars, but it has begun to evolve toward a permanent and professionalized humanitarian organization since the 1980s. The past strongly influences the culture of the ICRC, which thrives during emergencies. However, the ICRC observed that nowadays, "decades-old conflicts remain with no end in sight, and newer conflicts gradually morph into protracted crises, characterized by long-term societal challenges, high levels of violence, poverty and economic underdevelopment, and failures of governance" (ICRC annual report 2022: 549). Owing to these long-term challenges, the temporal complexity of the ICRC's environment has increased.

The ICRC is organized mainly by its five geographic areas of operation, differentiated into more than 100 country-level organizational units (called delegations in respondent terms).[2] The ICRC is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, led by a Director General who is appointed by the organization's supervisory board, the Assembly. The Assembly, represented by its President, is responsible for overseeing the organization and approving its financial statements. In 2022, the ICRC employed roughly 20,000 staff members worldwide, of which approximately 1,000 were based at its headquarters and the rest were in the field of operation.

The ICRC's operations are financed by donors, with over 90% of its funding coming from donor states. The basis of financing is an annual appeal made by the ICRC to its donors, which states the expected amount of funding required for the coming period, broken down by region and area of activity. When emergencies in a country or region require a significant increase in resources, the ICRC can mobilize additional funds from donor states, often by organizing donor conferences. In 2022, the ICRC received CHF 2.45 billion to fund its field operations and headquarters, below its actual expenditures of CHF 2.78 billion.

[2] In most countries, there is also a national Red Cross federation in addition to the ICRC's delegation. However, these federations are not subordinate to the ICRC and are outside the scope of our case study.

The ICRC's largest mandate in 2022 was Ukraine, with expenditures of CHF 381 million, followed by Afghanistan (CHF 190 million) and Syria (CHF 179 million).

Data collection

Our longitudinal case study was based on an extensive database of primary and archival data. Our understanding of the organization is rooted in a long-term collaboration between the authors' institution and the ICRC, which was launched in 2016. We were fortunate to be granted open access to the organization by the Director General. More than a dozen researchers from different disciplines have worked together in loosely coupled workstreams on different topics, such as organizational culture, identity, and staff diversity. We have led the research stream on strategic management. All workstreams adopted a qualitative research approach, conducted more than 100 interviews, and participated in meetings with governing bodies.

As our research focused on strategy processes, we gathered data through interviews, informal interactions, and archival data. (1) We conducted 43 interviews with 31 individuals, focusing on strategy processes. We purposefully selected informants from all hierarchical levels involved in strategy-making, from members of delegations in the field to the President. Most of the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In four instances where we did not obtain permission to record, we took notes during and immediately after the interviews to ensure that all authors were present. During the first phase of the interviews, the questions were open-ended, focusing on strategic decision-making in normal and emergency situations. We aimed to understand how strategic decisions are made, who is involved, and which tools and management systems are used. In the second phase, we focused on confirming and extending our interpretations from the initial interviews and specifically inquired about the multiplicity of strategy processes. During the interviews, we created vignettes of strategic decision-making for specific issues and later discussed emerging insights from our conceptual model.

(2) We were able to interact informally with members of the ICRC throughout the collaboration, for instance, during visits to the headquarters. Based on the trustful relations we established, we invited managers of the ICRC to discuss teaching cases or give presentations to our students, allowing us to learn

more about the organization and its strategy. Furthermore, we regularly cross-checked and confirmed our emerging findings with the top and middle managers of the ICRC through short follow-up calls or via email—for instance, by sharing some of our figures, tables, and draft versions of the manuscript.

(3) We collected extensive public and internal archival materials focusing on both current strategy processes and historical documents, returning to the origin of each strategy process. The ICRC is highly transparent about its strategy and operations (for instance, it publishes very detailed annual reports). Furthermore, we received access to confidential information such as policy procedures, process handbooks, and quantitative data on emergency interventions, which helped us develop a comprehensive view of the codified strategy processes.

(4) We leveraged our longitudinal access to the ICRC, which was not limited to strategy process research. Discussions with other researchers who studied the ICRC helped us triangulate our findings with data on culture, values, and other insights into the organization. We confronted other researchers with our initial findings about the strategy process, confirmed and discussed interpretations, and selectively read interview transcripts from other researchers that were pointed out to us as containing relevant adjacent information. Table 1 provides a complete overview of the data sources and their uses in the analysis.

Insert Table 1 about here

Analytical approach

Our data analysis was based on longitudinal qualitative research to study the evolution of single firms and their environments (e.g., Burgelman 1991, Danneels 2011). We studied the ICRC as a complex social system with the objective of building theory through a combination of grounded theorizing and historical methods (Burgelman 2011). Hence, we focus on how strategy processes are enacted over time and embedded in an organization's temporally complex environment (Van de Ven 1992, Langley et al. 2013, Cloutier and Langley 2020). Initially, we explored strategic management at the ICRC but soon perceived the unique nature of the ICRC's strategy process. Hence, "the phenomenon of interest and its preliminary delimitation […] already emerged during the first interviews and data-coding activities" (Burgelman 2011:

593). From this point onwards, we followed a structured data analysis procedure on the issue of strategy processes. Our analysis proceeded through multiple iterations.

First, we compiled a thick description (Yin 2013) of the ICRC's strategy processes. This helped us develop an overall understanding of the key themes and perceptions about strategy-making, consistent with other qualitative studies on strategy processes (e.g., Sorsa and Vaara 2020). What triggered our interest was that the informants mentioned "multiple" strategy processes. Initially, participants underscored a distinction between "normal" and "emergency" decision-making processes. However, upon further inquiry, they felt that this rough distinction did not accurately reflect how strategic decisions were made. Therefore, we created extensive data tables to summarize the ICRC's strategy processes. Through this deeper engagement with the data, we began to uncover more distinct strategy processes, such as the distinction between annual strategic planning and the multi-year institutional strategy. In another example, we were told that there was not "one" emergency process but two distinct processes. We asked multiple informants whether these strategy processes were distinct (as opposed to part of another process) and strategic (as opposed to operational). We excluded processes mentioned by a few informants, such as incident management or risk management, because of their operational nature. Based on this overview of strategy processes (see Table 2), we asked informants to elaborate on how they were used in specific situations, such as the development of the institutional strategy in 2018, the famine in Somalia in 2017, and the protracted crisis in South Sudan. We triangulated these situations from multiple perspectives, such as those of delegation heads and headquarters. Finally, we traced the historical origins of the strategy processes (Vaara and Lamberg 2016) through a study of archival documents and interviews with experienced ICRC staff members. While we focused our analysis on how the ICRC coped with the current level of temporal complexity, the historical analysis showed how its strategy processes evolved in a changing environment. We observed that new environmental demands were the main reason for establishing new strategy processes. Through these analyses, we created substantive grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in the form of tables and maps explaining decision-making in our specific case.

Second, we focused on developing a better understanding of the interplay between different strategy processes. Through interviews during the second phase, we identified how the ICRC aligned its distinct strategy processes. We first created a map to visually display the interactions (Langley 1999) between the different strategy processes using the respondents' terms. While we initially expected to display a tightly coupled architecture of strategy-making (e.g., Joseph and Ocasio 2012), we noticed that the strategy processes of the ICRC were loosely coupled; thereafter, we started referring to the sum of the ICRC's strategy processes as a repertoire. To enhance our initial understanding of how the ICRC used this repertoire, we developed a data structure using open coding (Gioia et al. 2012). At this stage, we presented the participants, particularly the top-level managers, with a preliminary manuscript describing our observations and conducted discussions with them to refine, validate, and check the plausibility of our results. In doing so, we introduced a new sensitizing concept (Weick 1976) to the ICRC, as the repertoire of strategy processes was not explicitly acknowledged prior to our research project.

Third, we focused on the sources and implications of the ICRC's repertoire of strategy processes. After multiple iterations, benefiting from the comments of our editor and reviewers, we found it extremely helpful to examine the multiplicity of strategy processes from a temporal perspective (Kunisch et al. 2017). Particularly, the concept of temporal complexity (Garud et al. 2013) corresponds to the multiple temporal demands faced by the ICRC. Consequently, we engaged with the literature on temporality in strategic management and analyzed the temporal structures of the distinct strategy processes established by the ICRC to entrain to complex temporal demands. We confronted multiple informants with this interpretation to ensure that we did not impose this theoretical angle on the dataset. However, our discussions confirmed that the notion of temporal complexity corresponded to the ICRC informants' experiences. Thus, we revisited the entire dataset to identify *how* the ICRC copes with its temporally complex environment. We engaged in focused coding of our data, not as completely neutral researchers, but as knowledgeable agents iterating between informant codes and theoretical themes (Gioia et al. 2012, Thornberg and Charmaz 2014). This coding process led us to identify three main themes in our findings: embracing the multiplicity of strategy processes, loose coupling, and episodic activation. Through repeated iterations, we refined our

understanding of these emerging themes and engaged in additional data collection and coding until we reached an empirically and theoretically grounded stage of stability (Grodal et al. 2021). The result was a conceptual framework that explains "how the complex system hangs together, and its operative logic" (Burgelman 2011: 598).

FINDINGS

Our findings reveal how a repertoire of loosely coupled strategy processes helped the ICRC navigate its temporally complex environment. The ICRC draws on multiple distinct strategy processes to (re)allocate its limited resources (including capital, human resources, logistics, and managerial attention), with each process tailored to the demands of short-, medium-, and long-term issues. The distinct strategy processes were only loosely coupled through immediate boundary setting and indirect guidance, and episodically activated by selected pacers from the environment, leading to their dynamic use in the fulfilment of the organization's mandate. Figure 1 presents an overview of the data structure underlying the three aggregate themes of our analysis.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

Embracing multiplicity of distinct strategy processes

Our analysis revealed that the ICRC embraced the presence of multiple distinct strategy processes to cope with the temporal complexity of its environment. Synchronizing strategy processes to the time horizons of ongoing field operations, emergencies, and long-term strategic issues helped to effectively address these fragmented temporal demands. However, misalignments between strategy processes tailored to divergent temporal demands sometimes caused conflict and confusion within the organization.

Complexity of temporal demands. The ICRC has an exclusively humanitarian mandate based on international humanitarian law to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflicts (cf. Mission Statement of the ICRC). By the nature of this mandate, ICRC staff operates in an environment with high temporal complexity caused by fragmented and potentially conflicting temporal demands on strategy-making. We illustrate these temporal demands in the next sections.

Medium-term issues. Operating in situations of armed conflict with unpredictable dynamics of violence and suffering is considered "normal" for the ICRC. One typical example is the ICRC's delegation operating in Somalia, which has 15 million inhabitants and is one of the world's poorest nations. Somalia has been in a nearly constant state of war since the early 1990s; the resulting harm has been amplified by extreme weather events such as droughts and floods. In 2015 and 2016, the country was affected by an armed conflict between government forces and the Islamist group al-Shabab, recurring fights between rival clans, and conflicts in the two semi-autonomous regions of Puntland and Somaliland. This state of civil war entailed the arrest of thousands of people and widespread insecurity among the civilian population, causing internal displacement and movement across borders.

In this extreme situation, humanitarian aid from the ICRC and other organizations was the only way for many Somalis to survive. In 2016, the ICRC distributed food and other household items to nearly 400,000 people, provided medical treatment through 12 hospitals, and drilled wells to improve water access and sanitation. It enabled hundreds of thousands of calls to relatives to help restore family links. The ICRC delegates visited 50 detention centers and provided healthcare to more than 500 malnourished detainees. Furthermore, the ICRC engaged in preventing war crime by promoting international humanitarian law through educational sessions with army officers and community leaders. This portfolio of protection, assistance, and prevention activities is typical of the ICRC's large delegations, such as those in Afghanistan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Donor states provide financial resources, either through funds at the discretion of the ICRC or earmarked for specific delegations.

Short-term issues. Although the ICRC operates in situations of war and violence, it also faces "unprecedented situations," that informants defined as "crises" (cf. internal documents, '19). These are "extraordinary needs of the Institution's beneficiaries [caused by] natural catastrophes or from the fallout of armed conflict […] which, cannot be covered under the present planning provisions and implementation capacities" (cf. internal documents, '19). Such crises require extremely rapid and professional responses to alleviate human suffering, even if the situation in the field is fluid and constantly evolving.

An example is the drought that occurred in Somalia in early 2017. That year, seasonal rains remained absent, causing the deaths of crops and livestock. The UN projected 2.9 million Somalis would be at risk of famine within weeks. To address these extraordinary needs, the ICRC acted rapidly to support more than 500,000 people with food and 1.4 million people with assistance for water and economic security (cf. annual reports). To implement this massive increase in early 2017—up from a target population for food assistance of 60,000 people in 2016—the delegation had to take "big strategic decisions that have impact on operations, human resources and finances" (Delegation Head, '19).

Crises also occur when tensions in a relatively stable country rapidly escalate into warfare, often within days. An example of this is the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, in which violent protests in the country's capital escalated into wars between government forces and armed groups. When the hostilities began, the ICRC had only a small office in the nation's capital, with one international member and a handful of local staff members. Within days, the ICRC established a full-scale emergency operation from scratch to provide healthcare for the wounded and support the civilian population with necessities such as hygiene items and blankets. It opened regional offices in six cities and deployed dozens of international staff members with experience in armed conflict. This helped the ICRC scale up its rapid response to the crisis, benefitting tens of thousands of women, children, detainees, and other beneficiaries.

Long-term issues. Beyond immediate assistance during armed conflicts, the ICRC must adapt to megatrends that could affect the long-term viability of the organization. First, the growth of humanitarian needs, combined with increasing donor demands, required long-term strategies to improve the ICRC's capacity to provide humanitarian aid. The ICRC and other humanitarian organizations faced an erosion of multilateral solidarity and scarcer foreign aid budgets, which posed a risk to the ICRC's funding, which relied on a few large donor states. Due to "pressure from their own constituencies [like] parliament and public opinion" (Head of Finance and Administration, '17), donor states increased their demands regarding impact measurement, compliance, and documentation. Not following these requirements could jeopardize the ICRC's ability to attract funding, as the Head of Finance and Administration illustrated using the example of the UK's increased requirements:

> "The UK, [a donor state,] started to do a company assessment. […] There you have [categories such as] efficiency, compliance, or organizational capacity, and then your position. And they say, 'OK, you are here—you are worth investing, you are here—you are worth de-investing.'" ('17)

Hence, the ICRC had to develop strategies to demonstrate its impact and professionalism in an increasingly transparent and demanding stakeholder environment.

Second, protracted conflicts became increasingly common, driven by factors such as climate change, population growth, ethnic tensions, urbanization, and economic polarization. The ICRC found it difficult to end its emergency assistance for victims of armed conflicts, as hostilities subsided, re-emerged, and fragmented over a long period. The ICRC's director of operations observed in 2022 that, "the average duration of […] our 10 largest operations is 36 years." Addressing protracted conflicts posed fundamentally different challenges for humanitarian aid, requiring long-term solutions rather than emergency assistance. Returning to the example of Somalia, the ICRC's assistance through food packages or water trucking alleviated short-term harm but did not effectively address the challenges of prolonged displacement, disruptions to health services, or lack of access to food and clean water. Humanitarian aid in protracted conflicts would require multi-year projects that are system-transforming, such as installing permanent water systems. In regions without armed conflict, such projects are in the domain of the World Bank or national development agencies, such as USAID. However, even these agencies acknowledge that the "ICRC is one of the few organisations able to reach communities in combat zones" (cf. DEZA, Swiss development agency, '16), creating the need for the ICRC to engage in such projects in countries such as Somalia, South Sudan, and the Congo.

Multiplicity of strategy processes. The time horizons of these strategic issues were not contradictory *per se*, but entailed fundamentally different and potentially conflicting demands for strategy processes. We found that the ICRC's top management established multiple distinct strategy processes to effectively address this temporally complex environment. Each strategy process was synchronized with a specific temporal demand. Table 2 presents a snapshot of the different strategy processes observed in the ICRC in 2022.

Insert Table 2 about here

In response to *medium-term issues*, the ICRC established an *annual strategic planning process*. The main objective of the strategic planning process was to secure and allocate resources for ICRC activities in both its delegations and headquarters. The ICRC's nature as an international organization demanded a high level of transparency and formalization of strategic planning.

We use the example of the Somalia delegation's planning for 2017 to illustrate this formalized planning process. The delegation started the strategic planning process on the assessment of the population's needs and their capacity to respond, which is why the planning process was perceived as "very bottom-up" (multiple informants). The delegations' planning process was structured using a template from the headquarters, communicated in August 2016, which had predefined sections, such as context, situation assessment, problem definition, and target population assessment. This template conformed to the demands of donors by specifying for each delegation the categories of information collected about internal and external indicators. Based on the orientations and instructions from headquarters, the delegation head explained that he gathered his team and launched the planning process at delegation level, defining country-level priorities and target populations, such as "we have planned for 2017 to support 150'000 people in Somalia […] with assistance" ('17). The delegation's plans were discussed during the annual planning meeting in Geneva in late September, where all global delegation heads presented their plans and discussed them with internal stakeholders—particularly, with the directorate and functional experts from the competence centers, which include forensics, health, and water. After the submission of the final strategic plan by each delegation in the form of a 30–40-page document, the ICRC headquarters aggregated the delegation-level plans to devise an annual appeal to donors. This aggregated annual appeal for the entire ICRC was publicly presented in early December and formed the basis for negotiations with donor states.

Despite the formalization of this annual process, the delegations had significant flexibility to re-allocate resources during implementation, as the regional director head explained:

> "There is a budget line every year to respond to emergencies. What are the typical emergencies in Somalia? Draught, health emergencies, Cholera outbreak, conflict-related displacement, shelter materials and all that. […] You never know exactly what the emergencies are" ('17)

Formalized annual planning was established in 1998 in response to increasing reporting requirements from donor states and was accompanied by the introduction of enterprise resource-planning software (cf. annual reports 1997–1999). A former delegation head of Somalia explained:

> "When I was in Somalia for the first time, at the beginning of the nineties, you just did the accounting in the evening on a little notepad and then sent that [to headquarters]. That was easy; there were no questions about compliance, due process, due diligence, or risk management. Today, that's all part of our job." ('20)

With increasing demand for impact measurement from donor states, the formalization of the strategic planning process has expanded over the years, as the Head of People Management described:

> "During non-crisis [situations], we try to have a structured process of 'you get your documents two weeks in advance, and all decisions are recorded.' It's quite formal. A more formal recording of decisions than I've seen in places I've worked in before." ('17)

The increasing formalization of strategic planning ensured that the ICRC met the demands of donor states, as stated by the Head of Organizational Development:

> "[Our strategic planning process] is designed [...] to be able to mobilize the corresponding funds from the donors. That is our primary intention. We have decentralized organizational units and we have to provide the money for them." ('20)

To address *short-term issues*, the ICRC has established strategy processes that are effective under extreme time pressure and urgency. In crisis situations, the speed of decision-making is of utmost strategic importance for victims and the ICRC staff, as the regional director for the Middle East explained:

> "[We] need to make fast decisions. Very often, 'strategic' is about taking the right decision quickly. [We] don't have the luxury of time and spending endless hours weighing up pros and cons." ('17)

Therefore, these processes were deliberately structured by top-down, military-style decision-making (cf. ICRC crisis manual, '19). Short-term processes are strategically important because they require the definition of a response to the radically changing strategic environment of a delegation, with interdependencies on the strategic plans of other delegations. The strategic decisions taken during these processes often led to a long-term reprioritization of the portfolio of delegations. The ICRC used two distinct strategy processes to address short-term emergencies: budget extension and rapid deployment (respondent terms).

A *budget extension process* supports the rapid decision-making of delegations confronted with extraordinary needs of victims beyond the scope of its annual strategic plans. The budget extension intended to give the delegation significant flexibility to respond to the crisis with a "no regrets" approach, which places "important emphasis on the speed of deployment over the full picture of possible consequences of the emerging events" (internal documents, '19). A typical example is a budget extension implemented to address the famine in Somalia. Alerted by tracking malnutrition indicators, the delegation head informed the directorate that a strategic response would be required to address the massive increase in humanitarian needs. He assessed the situation with his team, particularly the staff in the local ICRC offices in various cities, to understand the needs of the affected population, the anticipated responses of other aid organizations, and "the capacity [of the ICRC to deliver] in terms of contact, in terms of access, in terms of security" (Delegation Head, '23). Within a few days, the Somali delegation summarized its proposed plan of action in a budget extension appeal sent to the directorate. The delegation explained the magnitude of this strategic shift: "Those are big decisions […], for instance 21 extra million in our budget and re-shaping the team, adding extra personnel and re-organizing the way we function." ('17) For instance, the rotations of the ICRC planes between different African countries had to be reorganized to provide logistics to Somalia, a change in premises in two cities was necessary, and additional local staff had to be hired. The budget extension document summarized such actions and their implications for the annual plan, for example through a refined problem statement and new target populations. The delegation head explained:

> "It's a two- or three-pager with a description of the new emergency, what happened exactly, and then the very raw details of the budget that [we planned to] do." ('24)

On this basis, the directorate decided within a few days to approve the implementation of the proposed response and increase the delegation's budget by more than 30%. While the Somali delegation ramped up its activities, a lightly edited budget extension appeal document was published to donors by the ICRC's donor relations team, raising public awareness of the famine. This helped garner informal funding commitments from donor states that were officially signed at a donor conference. The ICRC covered all urgent expenditures with a strategic reserve.

The ICRC uses a *rapid deployment process* to cope with crises in regions where it has little or no presence. Rapid deployments resemble budget extensions in terms of speed and a "no regrets" approach to decision-making. However, instead of the delegation team, a "crisis cell" (respondent terms) is established in the headquarters to make all strategic decisions; this cell comprises members of the directorate, the delegation, and functional experts. The aim is to "speed up strategic decision-making. To this end, hierarchies become very flat to mobilize human resources and logistics" (Director of Operations, '20). Formalized procedures define who is be informed and who makes strategic decisions regarding the crisis response. To establish the delegation in Ukraine in 2014, the Director of Operations described that there were "meetings every day for at least two weeks. We were in the 'emergency room' every day making decisions, [such as] deploying staff to the field of operations, etc." (Director of Operations, '20). To rapidly mobilize personnel for the crisis in Ukraine, the ICRC sent designated staff who worked in regular roles in diverse delegations and functions but were trained to relocate to a new location in less than 48 hours.

Short-term strategy processes cause time pressure and urgency for the members of the ICRC. However, strategy-making in emergency situations is at the heart of the ICRC, as the Director General explained ('17):

"As an organization, we love the emergency mode."

The President of the ICRC summarized the value of these two short-term strategy processes tailored to short-term issues.

> "[The] personnel, people, and work processes are aligned and strong in emergency [situations]. [We created] rapid deployment and budget extension [processes] to intervene quickly […]. We have so many management instructions and processes in the organization that if the moon were to fall down to earth, our people would still know what to do." ('20)

To respond to the *long-term issues* faced by the organization, the ICRC established a periodical *institutional strategy process*. Formulating an institutional strategy helped determine the long-term priorities of organizational development and served as a communication tool to highlight these priorities to donor states, ICRC staff, and the public. Thus, it responded to a changing macro-environment characterized by increasing

competition among humanitarian organizations for scarce resources, as the Head of Organizational Development described:

> "[Institutional] strategy development in our organization has strong marketing and positioning potential to mobilize donors' funds." ('20)

The first institutional strategy was developed in 2007 exclusively by the directorate. It was a three-page document with the intention to "better present our profile" and ensure "that we influence the humanitarian discussion," as the former President explained ('24). A major long-term orientation defined by this strategy was to explicitly acknowledge the ICRC's role in responding to natural catastrophes in areas of conflict.

Since then, the involvement of other stakeholders in the development of the institutional strategy has increased. The process of developing the 2019–2024 institutional strategy involved numerous consultations with ICRC staff and the General Assembly. These consultations were a response to criticism regarding the development of prior institutional strategies, which were deemed excessively shaped by the directorate. The chief of staff described the ICRC's consensus orientation:

> "I don't see any one director ever being able to—outside [of emergency] operations—impose an objective without it being negotiated with [the delegations]. So, I think the model [to develop the institutional strategy] is still very much consensus-oriented and seeks to bring people in." ('17)

The result of the strategy process used to define the 2019–2024 institutional strategy was the creation of five strategic orientations, summarized in a 28-page document. The consensus-orientated process resulted in broad strategic qualitative objectives, or as the Chief of Staff formulated: "The ICRC mandate is translated in the strategy." ('21)

Complementing the institutional strategy, the *regional strategy* processes (e.g., an Africa strategy) and *functional strategy* processes of the different corporate competence centers (e.g., HR, forensics, or health) served to define the priorities for their respective geographical areas and domains of expertise. The content of the regional strategies was inspired by the institutional strategy, "but […] their integration with the broader institutional strategy depends very much on each region. To be more specific, if you consider the Near and Middle East, you have real unity; we have only nine delegations, and the dynamics are more or less the same. […] But when you take a region like Africa, or Europe and Central Asia, it's another story"

(Head of internal audit, ‘21). Further, “the development of functional strategy occurs through a de-coupled process with a de-coupled calendar from the institutional strategy,” as the head of organizational development described (‘20). To coordinate, professionalize, and standardize fields of expertise across ICRC, the competence centers developed strategies independently, with timeframes ranging from three to five years, not synchronized with the period of the institutional strategy.

A relatively new process for making long-term strategic decisions in the ICRC were *multi-year projects*. In the early 2010s, delegations from countries such as Somalia, South Sudan, and Afghanistan began experimenting with new solutions to protracted humanitarian crises using the flexibility of their annual planning. Driven by victims’ needs, many delegations started to “very creatively” (respondent’s terms) define long-term projects enabled through access to new financing sources. Multi-year projects became a priority of the institutional strategy for 2019–2024. A former delegation head described how consultations for the institutional strategy process helped make this new strategic priority more explicit.

> “So, a colleague in Afghanistan [during a workshop] said to me ‘You know, we have been in Afghanistan for 35 years and we have conducted a planning process 35 times; isn’t it time for us to think differently?’ […] What I took from that was that we are an emergency relief organization, but we operate in some places for many, many years, so it is irresponsible of us not to factor in the longer-term perspective. This gave birth to a strategic orientation [in the institutional strategy].” (‘20)

However, the systems supporting annual strategic planning were ill-equipped to allocate and manage resources for multi-year projects for several reasons. First, these multi-year projects required access to new financing sources outside the traditional donor states targeted by the annual appeal, based on the strategic planning process. A senior advisor described this as follows:

> “It’s not that we are not supposed to do [multi-year projects]. We are happy to do them, but the question remains as to whether they are funded by emergency money [from donor states]. They should be funded by development money because that’s a kind of [long-term] development.” (‘20)

Second, the annual strategic planning for delegations was not equipped to manage multi-year financial planning, as outlined by the Director of Operations:

> “When we have a project—for example, in the east of the Congo, where we are trying to develop the water system in [the town of] Goma [...] That’s a ten-year project. About 40 million. However, we still have to break this down one year at a time. And that’s laborious; it’s not possible [in our system]. This is especially true when we also have Development Actors, Private Sector, Blended

> Financing, and all these new instruments. We would have to do project planning and that is not possible within our system. Therefore, we must create Excel tables outside our system." ('20)

Third, the annual planning process focused on delegations, whereas initiating and managing multi-year projects with cross-functional competencies and diverse partners meant working in self-contained projects. Using the example of the Congo, the Director of Operations described this as follows:

> "We can't [send development agencies] the 150 page [annual strategic planning document] and say, 'Look at pages 13, 27 to 31, and then 80 to 85.' We have to say, 'This is the Goma project [in Congo]. This is what we are about, this is what we want to achieve. This is how much it costs and so on and so forth.' This is a self-contained project that we have to be able to discuss with external stakeholders." ('20)

Therefore, a task force at the ICRC headquarters began designing a strategy process to manage multi-year projects in 2017. The ICRC's President illustrated the contingent relationship between new temporal demands and internal strategy processes, using an example of how protracted conflicts require defining strategy processes tailored for multi-year projects:

> "Long-term intractable problems lead to a change in what you interpret and define as humanitarian work. […] Donors are demanding an increasing number of system transformations […] which is very closely linked to the longer-termism of all our internal processes […]. So, there's an external dimension to this issue [of strategy processes]." ('20)

Embracing the distinctiveness of strategy processes. We observed that the ICRC managers and staff explicitly embraced the multiplicity of strategy processes tailored to specific temporal demands. The ICRC President illustrated this succinctly, referring to the uniqueness of the ICRC and its broad mandate:

> "The surprising diversity [of our strategy processes], in my opinion, is genetically determined. It is neither intentional nor unintentional; it is inherent in the organization and its mandate. It originates from the [ICRC's] unique position at the beginning of the humanitarian sector […] in the 19th century. [The ICRC] was never established as one organization among many. It was conceptualized as *the* [emphasis added] humanitarian sector. […] [The processes' diversity] is intrinsically linked to [the ICRC's] self-perception and mandate. And that is my explanation for why we have so many strategy processes." ('20)

As this quote illustrates, the multiplicity of processes has gradually increased over the last few decades to cope with fragmented temporal demands (see Table 2). However, formal documents have acknowledged the multiplicity of these processes. For example, ICRC policies make explicit distinction between short-term processes, using the term "emergency mode," and periodical strategy processes. Furthermore, the ICRC created explicit instructions as to who is responsible for the different periodical strategy processes,

such as annual planning and the institutional strategy, functional strategies, and regional strategies. The Chief of Staff stated the following:

> "[We have a] doctrine [that] gives the definition of what's [a functional strategy], what's [a] institutional strategy, [and] what's a policy, and that defines at which level of the organization these documents should be approved or validated. […] For instance, we have a health strategy that will be validated at the level of the directorate […] to fit within the [institutional] strategy." ('21)

The characteristics of the distinct strategy processes remained relatively stable over time. The Director of Operations assessed the short-term processes as follows:

> "Budget extension and rapid deployment will not change much. We will continue to improve them and regularly conduct lessons learned, but these templates are very solid." ('20)

Annual planning was an annual "ritual" within the organization, "deeply embedded in the culture and operations of ICRC" (Audit findings by the Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs, 2017: 15).

Recurring misalignments. While each of the ICRC's strategy processes is tailored to the specific temporal demands of the different time horizons, they all (re-)allocate the ICRC's limited resources (including financial, personnel, and logistics resources), as well as the attention of key decision-makers. These interdependencies give rise to recurring misalignments within the organization. One source of misalignment is that short-term strategy processes affecting one country or region are interdependent with annual strategic planning at the headquarter level. Short-term strategy processes lead to the prioritization of certain delegations in the geographical portfolio of the ICRC, as the President explained:

> "Budget extensions and rapid deployments have strategic significance—[…] because we often stay in those areas—and thus [these strategy processes] are essential drivers for prioritizing regional [delegations]." ('20)

Even though there is a level of organizational slack in the form of strategic financial reserves and the option to request additional donor funding, short-term strategy processes defer resources initially committed to other delegations, be it in terms of finances, personnel, or logistics. Intertemporal misalignments may occur because the decisions taken during emergency strategy processes must be compatible with the medium-term strategic planning processes after the emergency has subsided. The ICRC must make resource commitments to emergency situations within days; however, securing additional commitments from donor states may take

weeks or months. Hence, in emergency situations, the ICRC is "spending money without already having it" (respondent terms).

Furthermore, the interdependencies between short- and medium-term strategy processes constrain the flexibility to re-allocate resources during emergencies because decisions must be coordinated and eventually integrated into the formalized structure of strategic planning. This may lead to the perceived bureaucratization of emergency processes, as a delegation head complained:

> "And the main hurdle for me to deliver aid in [an African country] is not security; it's internal. […] The processes that slow us down, decisions that take months, services that don't work as they should. […] Al-Shabab, war, all this violence, insecurity... yes, it's there! However, we know how to deal with it." ('17)

The annual definition of target populations in the strategic planning process may hamper the adaptability and flexibility of resource re-allocation in the field of operations. One ICRC staff member explained:

> "When [the strategic plan has] already stated that you are going to do a, b, c, d, and [then] we do a workshop somewhere, and we notice that [victims and affected people have different priorities]. And you come back to the delegation [with suggestions] and they say: 'Oh, my [plan] is saying a, b, c, d.' This is already set, and so I cannot take into account whatever is being said [in the field as part of] the targeted responses." ('19)

Misalignments may also arise between longer-term strategy processes and medium-term strategic planning. The implementation of long-term strategic orientations for the entire organization depends on the re-allocation of resources via the annual planning process, which is driven by the delegations. However, the strategic planning process, tailored to attract annual donor commitments, is ill-suited to translate longer-term priorities into yearly objectives, as a member of the internal audit team explained:

> "We are putting in place new [long-term] ambitions, but without changing all that goes with it. I mean, the [strategic planning] process, for example, is a yearly exercise that we do. However, the institutional strategy covers four years. It's all a bit of a disconnect." ('21)

In addition to these intertemporal misalignments that may cause conflict, the presence of multiple strategy processes sometimes led to confusion when ICRC staff were unaware of all the processes or when they experienced an overlap between strategy processes. A top manager of the ICRC stated:

> "I keep asking: 'What is the hierarchy of the different strategies we have?' Nobody here has a clear answer to that." ('20)

Even an internal assessment from the early 2000s noted "a certain confusion regarding […] the various documents that determine how the ICRC operates." We will now discuss how the ICRC coupled the distinct strategy processes to cope with such misalignments.

Loose coupling to align strategy processes

To align the distinct strategy processes, we observed immediate boundary setting and indirect guidance as two forms of loose coupling at the ICRC. A shared mandate and principles supported the alignment of the ICRC's strategy processes even in the absence of continuous and direct coupling. We mapped these connections in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Immediate boundary setting. We found that immediate boundary setting through event-driven, direct communication aligned short-term strategy processes with longer-term processes. Immediate boundary setting occurred during the first days or weeks of an emergency, when the person in charge of the short-term process communicated with relevant stakeholders regarding the constraints imposed by long-term processes. Defining the boundary parameters enabled an alignment within the ICRC regarding the necessity and merits of short-term processes that engage resources that the ICRC has not yet secured from donors. Furthermore, it helped define the level of discretion for the people in charge of short-term processes to re-allocate the ICRC's resources, such as personnel and logistics resources, and divert them from the annual plans of activities not affected by the crisis.

An example of budget extensions illustrates how immediate boundary setting ensures an alignment between short-term processes and annual planning. As soon as an emergency—such as the Somalian famine—became imminent, the delegation had a formal duty to directly alert the regional director and HQ, as the ICRC's guidelines state:

> "Any field entity or HQ department facing an event with a present or prospective disruptive potential, has the duty to alert in the fastest mean. Through established standard operating procedures, each level passes it on both upwards, whilst at the same time, takes the urgent emergency/rescue measures that the situation implies. Any alerted member of the direction notifies his/her peers of the situation." (internal documents, '19)

The delegation head of Somalia described how he used direct communication channels to rapidly test whether a budget extension to address the drought in 2017 would qualify to significantly alter the resource allocation defined in the annual plan:

> "If I want my decision [to propose a budget extension] to go through, I must ensure that those in the headquarters support that decision. So, I also prepared that decision in the headquarters by talking to them […] and testing how they feel about it." ('17)

The regional directorate acted as a middleman between the headquarters in Geneva—who had an overview of the long-term political situation in the donor states—and the delegation in the field.

The regional directorate and headquarters, in collaboration with the affected delegations, define the boundary parameters for short-term processes and avoid misalignments between delegations' strategic plans and the ICRC headquarters. For example, around the same time, the Somalia delegation was responding to the famine, the delegation in Yemen faced a new emergency of strategic relevance. In 2017, intensified hostilities led to a sharp deterioration in the humanitarian situation in the Yemen; indiscriminate attacks were reported on healthcare facilities and civilian property, while millions of civilians struggled to access basic services and goods. Despite the ramp-up of activities in Somalia, the regional director assessed the ICRC's capacity to conduct a budget extension in Yemen as sufficient.

> "I gave the signal to the delegation to work on a budget extension. Increasing our budget and operating staff in Yemen was necessary to respond to growing needs. So, that was the strategic decision, based on political negotiations and our assessment of growing humanitarian needs in Yemen." ('17)

Through direct communications, which increase the speed of the reaction, the Yemeni delegation was able to start its response, even if the formal process was not completed, as the director explained:

> "So, [the budget extension] is now being formalized. It has been discussed with [the Director of Operations] and his team. Now, we [the delegation and the regional directorate] have a proposal and know that they [at the headquarters] are comfortable with it. We are submitting this today, actually. They will give us feedback and I am confident that it will be a green light. This decision will circulate by mail to members of the directorate, who will most probably also validate this approach. And then it will be submitted for decision at the level of the president and the assembly. This is interesting about the ICRC: this is the formal process, but we had to engage resources on the ground—the conflict was not waiting. For instance, we had to send two surgical teams. So, we had to already overspend on our current budget." ('17)

As this example shows, a delegation affected by an emergency can pursue a response when it gets confirmation that the ICRC has "entered into the formal decision-making process, to spend such an amount

of money—which we don't have yet," as a regional director stated ('17). Knowledge of the boundary parameters through direct communication following an emergency ensures alignment, given interdependencies with other delegations and the intertemporal resource constraints.

Through this coupling, the delegation head in Somalia considered the constraints imposed by the situation in Yemen in the definition of the emergency response, thus ensuring alignment regarding the ICRC's limited resources:

> "You must be aware of the limitations of the institution, not only your delegation but also the institution as a whole. [I knew:] 'No. We cannot ask for five water engineers because there is a crisis in Yemen now, and they are all in [Yemen].'" ('24)

After the immediate definition of the boundary parameters, however, the delegation had significant liberties to respond to the emergency based on its capabilities. As the Delegation Head stated:

> "The limitation there is mostly our capacity to deliver. How many human resources I have and logistics, as logistics is very complicated […] I cannot get enough helicopters or trucks to do that in this area." ('24)

Immediate boundary setting also occurs for rapid deployments. Instead of communication between the delegation and headquarters, boundary conditions are discussed among the ICRC's top management team, as explained by the Director General:

> "[The Director of Operations will say:] 'There is an emergency. I want to spend more.' And I [as the Director General] will have to give him the green light before deciding [whether to extend the budget]. I will also ask [for] the green light—because of checks and balances—from the President. […] All our structure is organized in a way that allows us to engage money without having it. This makes us extremely powerful." ('17)

The rapid deployment guidelines formulate this as follows:

> "The [boundary of a rapid deployment] has to be formulated in terms of strategic objectives and overarching constraints to be respected, for instance, concerning foreseen budget, timeframe or the coordination stance with external stakeholders." ('19)

Indirect guidance. We identified indirect guidance through communication of priorities and informal influencing activities as the mechanism to align long-term strategy processes with short- and mid-term ones. Long-term strategy processes thus created a "contextualization" and a "framework" (respondent terms) for short- and medium-term strategy processes, rather than directly setting and cascading explicit goals to short-term processes. As a prime example, the ICRC's institutional strategy guided the annual planning process

indirectly by convincing the ICRC staff of the importance of long-term strategic priorities. The head of Finance and Administration explained the following:

> "The [institutional strategy] process was and is still meant *not* to create decisions. The […] process is to create adhesion, internal ownership, internal understanding, internal adherence to the idea, and consensus […] The decision is not what is important. It's the way you go and the fact that you can gather agreement from everyone." (emphasis added, '17)

This indirect guidance led to a high level of heterogeneity in the degree of coupling between the delegations' annual planning and the institutional strategy. Some delegations explicitly used the institutional strategy as a reference document to help define their annual plans, as explained by the head of a delegation in Africa:

> "I really used it as a compass for the objectives in the context I was in. It was very useful. […] The [institutional] strategy was really key–our compass. And I also did a lot to make sure that all the colleagues from my deputy up to the driver in the field office were aware of the strategy because I saw that it was very important." ('21)

However, using the institutional strategy as a document to guide the annual planning of delegations is not mandatory. Many other delegation heads we interviewed did not use the institutional strategy in their delegation's decision-making. Many delegation heads acknowledged the difficulty of inferring concrete guidance from the institutional strategy, as this quote illustrates:

> "It remains very difficult to use to make the link between the outcomes of our activities, our operations in one context with the objectives and the orientations of the [institutional] strategy." ('21)

To help create this link, the ICRC's Directorate used informal influencing activities to align strategic planning with the institutional strategy, using the few in-person meetings of the directorate and delegation heads. A former delegation head described her experiences during such a meeting:

> "When [the President and Director] stand up and talk to all [delegation heads] they say things like 'We need you to do this in the future.' And I, as a head of delegation, sit there and am like, 'yeah, sure—not sure what you mean, but sure.'" ('20)

To avoid misalignments when the delegations' annual strategic plans do not reflect long-term institutional priorities, the level of coupling between institutional strategy and annual strategic planning has been reinforced in the last decade. In 2015, the ICRC Directorate instructed the regional directors to develop regional strategies directly linked to the priorities of the institutional strategy. The aim was to create a more

concrete and more tangible strategic context for the delegations. A member of management summarized the following points:

> "The only thing that is directly synchronized with the corporate strategy are the regional strategies. [This is] because the regional strategies … should create the contextualization between the corporate strategy and the individual delegations. They should be the link." ('20)

A further example of reinforced indirect guidance of the institutional strategy was the designation of senior managers in the organization to become "orientation leads" (respondent term) for the institutional strategy. This was a role in addition to their regular positions, with the task to promote a specific strategic objective. However, this position was purely symbolic, and no decision authority or resources were allocated to orientation leads. A member of the internal audit team explained as follows:

> "An orientation lead is basically a reporter, someone who is going to consolidate the feedback on the implementation of the orientation; he is in charge of—and someone who is supposed to loosely drive—the process. The role of these orientation leads remains very light and very vague. They are not portfolio managers." ('21)

The task of the orientation leads was to promote the allocation of resources to specific long-term priorities in the delegation's annual plans. However, even if this entailed "assigning a score for achieving a strategic orientation" in the delegations' annual plans, an internal auditor explained: "This is done manually. And then there is no monitoring at all." ('22)

As these examples show, the President and Directorate attempted to reinforce the indirect guidance of the institutional strategy, while retaining a level of looseness, as these quotes illustrate:

> "Our institutional strategy is formulated in a relatively open way, even though it is now much more binding than in previous versions. The pillars of the institutional strategy now provide more concrete guidance, and […] we have a clear expectation that [the institutional strategy] constitutes the highest level of strategy-making. Strategy-making at lower levels must occur within the framework of the corporate strategy." (President, '20)

> "We have [strategic planning] at the lower-level, delegation by delegation. […] The question is, once we agree on how success will look [in the future], will we be able to guide those [planning] processes to see more tangible objectives reflected in the regional strategic frameworks and in the [strategic planning of the delegations] that will feed back into the [institutional] strategy? But again, we need to retain the flexibility for delegations to innovate, create, and identify new things. But at least we can guide in a more rigorous way based on where we want to be in 2024, based on this strategy." (Director General, '21)

Similar to the institutional strategy, functional strategies indirectly guided the delegation's annual planning. An example is the ICRC's forensics function, which defined a multi-year strategy to support governments

during the migration crisis in the Mediterranean from 2017 onwards. For example, to identify the victims of a migration ship that had been discovered a few months earlier with more than 800 deaths, the ICRC's knowledge in tracing missing persons, as well as its presence in the origin countries of many migrants, such as Mali and Senegal, could be of invaluable help. The Director in charge described the challenges of integrating such a functional strategy into the annual plans of delegations as follows:

> "But what has happened […] is that we don't have enough resources in [the delegations in] Africa to implement the [migration strategy]. And I'm constantly bombarded by my colleagues [at the headquarters] who think we finally have to make progress in Africa. However, in the budget discussions last year […], the African region had to make cost cuts and what was dropped were forensic resources—because that wasn't the priority [for the delegations]. […] And I'm trying to tell the delegation in Mali: 'don't worry; if you need a million, I'll find the million for you.' And then they say, 'It's still in *my* annual plan.'" (emphasis added, 17)

As these examples illustrate, the indirect guidance by long-term strategy processes helped align the annual plans of the delegations while also providing a flexibility, as a member of management summarized:

> "I would say that 70 or 80% of our decisions are probably very much field-driven in a decentralized way, but within a framework […] that has to create these areas of freedom." ('20)

Shared mandate and principles. The actions of the ICRC are based on its mandate and seven principles, of which three are fundamental principles, the so-called "untouchables:" neutrality, impartiality, and independence. These principles have been at the core of the ICRC's legitimacy and identity since its foundation almost 160 years ago (Kapila 2015). Strict adherence to these principles allows the ICRC to operate in virtually every area of conflict around the globe because it can negotiate with all involved parties, even non-state armed groups, to provide humanitarian assistance. The mandate and principles also provide a powerful mechanism to ensure the alignment of the ICRC's distinct strategy processes because they facilitate immediate boundary setting and indirect guidance and ensure that decisions in each strategy process are fundamentally compatible.

The example of protracted crises illustrates how mandate and principles facilitate alignment between institutional strategy, annual planning, and multi-year projects. Addressing protracted crises through multi-year projects was fundamentally compatible with the mandate to "protect and assist the victims of armed conflict" and the principle of humanity. Communicating multi-year projects as a long-term

priority in the institutional strategy was compatible with the realized strategic plans of many delegations that "were increasingly engaged in long-term projects and activities" (Director of Operations, '20) to fulfill the mandate of humanitarian aid. However, the ICRC's principles of neutrality and independence were incompatible with the demands of many non-traditional donors for multi-year projects, who were used to working in relatively peaceful environments. For example, to maintain neutrality in situations of armed conflict, the ICRC does not allow external parties to define the target populations or the nature of activities. A regional director explained:

> "At the ICRC, we will not shape our programs according to what the donors tell us what to do. And this is the independence of the ICRC. Because behind donors, you have governments and behind governments, you have political agendas." ('17)

Synchronizing multi-year projects exclusively with the demands of donors for multi-year projects would thus conflict with the ability of the ICRC to allocate resources through annual planning and emergency processes. A regional director elaborated using the example of Somalia:

> "It is so critical for the principles of neutrality and impartiality to be well understood and perceived. […] In the context of Somali operation, we must be able to act on both sides of the frontlines. Which means that we must be able to act on the side of Al-Shabab and we must be able to act on the side of the government. And that is important in a famine situation." ('17)

Adherence to these principles, such as neutrality, is so deeply engrained in the ICRC that its staff are engaged in a form of peer control. When the President accepted a board role at the World Economic Forum to facilitate access to new donors for multi-year projects, it was seen as a breach of neutrality by some staff members. The perceived dilution of the fundamental principle of neutrality was met by an outcry from the ICRC staff, in the form of public criticism. Strict adherence to the ICRC's principles limited the widespread adoption and growth of multi-year projects, as some external agencies refused to accept the ICRC's strict neutrality and independence. However, maintaining these principles across all strategy processes ensured an alignment between the strategic decisions for multi-year projects and the activities defined in the annual strategic planning and during emergencies.

Shared principles also facilitated loose coupling through immediate boundary settings as they foster trust necessary to delegate decision-making authority. The Director General described how a high level of trust helped delegate tasks among the management team by setting broad boundary parameters:

> "Who has the authority to make decisions? I'm always assessing that, and I stay rather transparent with my leaders around me. […] We are also able to have this discussion [about authority] as a private discussion. Where I would say, ok, could you make this decision for me because it would give me a bit more freedom. And having enough confidence to be able to discuss that—it comes when we talk about difficult things such as hostage-taking, which is very difficult. Or political situations where we are a bit squeezed or where we decide, well, one of us will just jump in. For example, when you need to trust another." ('17)

The conviction to follow mandate and principles is deeply engrained in the ICRC's culture, which was constantly visible during our interviews and has also been demonstrated in other research on the ICRC (e.g., Brühwiler et al. 2019). An example is a quote from the Head of People Management:

> "I had worked in the private sector for five years before joining the Red Cross. What stands out is the kind of people we attract to the ICRC. [Take the example of our] staff engagement survey. There are always incredibly high scores on 'I am dedicated and believe in the place, that I work in.' Dedication to the work always receives top marks. And […] that impacts how we […] make decisions." ('17)

A high level of trust is established through common experiences in extreme situations that create bonds between decision-makers. Even though the ICRC is a large organization, employees in the field form strong relationships with each other, as this quote from an Internal Auditor shows:

> "The ICRC is a small world. You always find the same people." ('21)

Episodic activation of strategy processes

The ICRC managers and staff dynamically used multiple strategy processes to address the strategic issues arising in the environment. Triggered by temporal pacers, strategy processes episodically structured strategic decision-making. Thus, the strategy processes were not perceived as omnipresent structures; rather, the ICRC staff switched from their regular tasks to strategizing activities.

Entraining to selected pacers. When a strategic issue arose, the affected delegations, competence centers, or the ICRC headquarters decided whether to activate a strategy process and which strategy process was appropriate, given the nature of the strategic issue. Which strategy process to activate—and when—was a strategically relevant decision, as it predefined key elements of the future course of action (for

instance, in terms of who was taking charge, the speed of decision-making, the participants, and the use of strategic frameworks). Hence, merely activating a strategy process had an influence on resource allocation, although the outcome of the strategy process was not yet determined.

The pace of the annual strategic planning cycle followed a periodic rhythm, constrained by external donor deadlines that were translated into internal deadlines for the delegations. The pacer to launch the institutional strategy process also had a periodic rhythm. However, the ICRC assessed whether the established periodic pacers remained relevant in triggering strategy processes, as illustrated by the example of the quadrennial institutional strategy. In 2021, the ICRC prolonged its institutional strategy cycle—which initially had a time horizon from 2019 to 2022—by two years, to 2024. This joint decision of the Assembly and Directorate arose from the recognition that the long-term trends in the environment did not rise to the level of a new strategic issue. The priorities of the institutional strategy remained relevant even after the end of the traditional four-year period, as the President described:

> "We try to keep an eye on these strategy processes. At the moment, there is an ongoing discussion on whether we should extend the whole strategy by one or two years. Simply in terms of time—because we think we are right in terms of content, but temporally, we have been too ambitious. [...] Instead of starting a corporate strategy exercise now and setting completely new parameters." ('20)

Similarly, the pacers for initiating functional strategy processes were assessed regularly. For example, the functional strategy process of the water and habitat team was launched after an impulse by the internal audit team (internal documents, '21).

Selecting pacers that triggered the start of short-term strategy processes followed an assessment of external events. When an emergency occurs, a three-question checklist with items such as "Is the ICRC confronted with extraordinary needs of the affected people, which go beyond its capacity to respond?" (internal documents, '19) was used to determine whether emergency strategy processes should be launched or whether the delegation could cope with the situation within the flexibility of its annual strategic plan. The ICRC has established hard criteria for what constitutes a pacer that triggers a short-term strategy process. Each delegation, in coordination with the global head of operations, can adjust its budget by up to 10% to react to unforeseen changes in the humanitarian environment. When an emergency required resources that

exceeded this inherent flexibility, it was considered a strategically relevant pacer and required the launch of an emergency process. The ICRC Directorate, President, and delegation jointly assessed the strategic significance of each armed conflict and decided whether to activate a budget extension or rapid deployment process. Both the nature of the environmental demand and the capacity to respond factored into the decision on which strategy process to launch. A delegation head illustrated the discussion whether to start an emergency process as follows:

> "Very often, the budget extension is an arbitration between a [headquarters] push to do more—because there are more needs and more funds—and, at the same time, a push back from the field. [The delegation sometimes says,] 'We don't have the capacity to absorb [these funds] unless we change drastically the structure of the delegation. We don't have the political approval of the [local] authorities to become much bigger. […] We already have gaps in [staffing] existing teams. We can't do a budget extension when we cannot staff it.' So, this is the balance between these two visions." ('22)

Therefore, not all external pacers lead to the launch of short-term strategy processes, as was the case with the humanitarian crisis in Israel in 2014, as a delegation head described:

> "Sometimes it's a very intense [negotiation] process. Because, of course, the delegation has a tendency to be more conservative. I experienced that myself when I was in Israel. And we had suddenly a big military operation in Gaza. And the headquarters told us, 'Do a budget extension, […] you have to scale up immediately.' And we told our headquarters, 'No way. The Israeli authorities are not going to let us scale up that easily. We can't absorb these [additional resources].'" ('22)

This illustrates how external pacers, such as humanitarian crises, are assessed and deliberately selected according to their strategic relevance.

Switching. Upon triggering a strategy process, members of the ICRC switched from their day-to-day tasks to strategizing. For example, short-term strategy processes punctuate the regular operations of the ICRC so that, for an episode of time, strategizing activities overtake other activities for an entire organizational unit, such as a delegation or headquarters. When conducting a budget extension, for instance, an entire delegation "switches into emergency mode" (respondent terms used in multiple interviews). This implies that for a few weeks or months, all of a delegation's efforts are focused on defining and implementing the appropriate response to an armed conflict. For the delegation, the start of a budget extension meant a complete departure from regular work, as a regional director explained:

> "When you take the decision to, say, you are moving away from your business as usual to an emergency response mode, it means everything else changes. You shift your priorities, you give additional resources, you increase your donor engagement for additional resources, and you increase your stakeholder engagement because the situation is attracting media attention, the attention of donors, and the attention of the other partners with which we work. […] And therefore, you needed to change your mode of operation." ('17)

A delegation head elaborated on how such a switch changed decision-making processes in the field:

> "Then, at some stage, you need to decide, okay, the scale of the emergency is such that we need to put aside the existing rules and put the organization in emergency mode, bypassing a number of rules [of our ongoing operations]." ('23)

A comparable switch into emergency mode occurs at the headquarters level when a rapid deployment process is activated. This process addresses emergency situations in countries where the ICRC only has a marginal presence and low capacity to respond. The Director of Operations elaborated on the following:

> "[When] we move into a rapid deployment, there is nobody who asks any questions. Here, we align ourselves very quickly. It is clear for everybody that now the [decisions will be made top-down]. We also agree that some decisions may have to be corrected afterwards because there is no time to go into lengthy discussions on whether this is a strategic priority or up to professional standards. Then we just do it. And then, it's really very top-down." ('17)

Because of the intensity and time pressure, switching to a rapid deployment process is only possible on a temporary basis, as the director of operations explained:

> "[The rapid deployment] absorbs resources, it's very intense. So, people really have to drop everything they are doing and work. They don't just come for an hour to the task force. Then, they have to do things 24 hours. If we were to be all the time in task force, I think people would be dead after six months. Especially if we have several task forces at the same time. Therefore, it's an instrument that we use when there is really no time." ('17)

Switching from day-to-day operations to short-term strategy processes is a frequent occurrence, as a deputy regional director explained:

> "The ICRC delegates, the ICRC managers […], they constantly switch. Even [entire] delegations go through these phases." ('17)

The members of large delegations often have significant experience with switching between strategy processes with different temporalities. The Delegation Head of South Sudan, a delegation that from 2007 to 2020 experienced four years with budget extensions, explained:

> "We are very much used to navigating between the rather longer-term approach and addressing emergencies. Sometimes, the scale of the emergency is such that you must stop all rest and put all of your focus on the emergency. […] This is normally part of our DNA to be able to respond to [such] emergencies." ('23)

This experience of staff with switching, i.e., working with more than one type of strategy process, is critical to effectively launch short-term strategy processes. In delegations where staff members have less experience, the launch of a short-term process may be accompanied by a change of the Delegation Head. The Director General explained as follows:

> "We do have delegations that are more diplomatic, so they are less operational. They always have difficulties switching when it, you know, [things] hit the fan. It always takes them a bit more time to [realize that this] requires a different strategy. […] Whereas an operational delegation, for good reason, lives in an environment that is very flexible, they will integrate change with a certain easiness in their strategy. They will have no problem moving from crisis to long-term [strategy processes]." ('20)

Budget extensions are implemented within a specific time frame, usually lasting a few months. Subsequently, the affected staff members switch back to day-to-day operations. As a manager and former Delegation Head stated:

> "[The end of an episode] could be the case if the level of violence decreases […] for instance, [in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in] Nagorno Karabakh, it lasted only a few weeks, and it was more or less back to normal. […] The idea is that we […] do a search [for new strategic responses] at the beginning, we readapt, and then we have to again adopt a more or less normal way of working." ('23)

At the end of a short-term process, the ICRC assesses whether the emergency is over or whether the next annual plan must contain a higher resource allocation or a fundamentally changed activity portfolio.

However, emergency processes are not the only instances in which the ICRC staff switches. The annual strategic planning is structured by few calendar-driven episodes, with a crucial date being the five days each year reserved for an "annual planning meeting" in the headquarters, which involves middle- and top managers. Similarly, there are dedicated events and workshops for institutional strategy development in the form of consultations with different internal and external stakeholders, which happen the year before the new institutional strategy is announced. It is more difficult for the ICRC staff to switch effectively switch when it comes to the strategic planning and long-term institutional strategy process. Further, switching back to day-to-day operations after such episodes constitutes a challenge for long-term strategy processes, as the Chief of Staff described:

> "Okay the strategy was drafted. It's good. Tick the box and we go back to a kind of business-as-usual way of working and we lose the strategy as a compass." ('21)

Creating common grammar. Awareness of multiple strategy processes is critical to switch effectively when a strategy process is triggered. Knowledge of the distinct strategy processes helped the ICRC staff effectively define and implement strategic decisions, as the Director General explained:

> "[Our strategy processes], this is not just grammar, but it's also specific lessons learned that you can apply to your different management moments. [However, it is] also about adapting the different elements [of the strategy processes]. […] You know exactly what questions you should ask yourself. [It is] not a stupid checklist. But [you have to think] really strategically." ('20)

The ICRC's directorate ensures the awareness and understanding of the different strategy processes with a common "grammar" (respondent term). Most strategy processes have monikers well known inside the ICRC, such as "PfR" for strategic planning or "emergency mode." The Director General explained:

> "It's, for me, one of the critical issues that we must have a common grammar in the organization. It can't just be the leadership that knows how to play with [these strategy processes]. This means that the people in the organization, at least those who have responsibility, need to be aware of which [strategy processes] we are in." ('20)

Knowledge of strategy processes is collectively shared knowledge in the organization but with different levels of awareness depending on the employee's position. For instance, field staff members are generally aware of the strategic planning process and budget extensions. Through this common grammar, short-term processes unite and mobilize all members of a delegation, as illustrated by a delegation head:

> "It's stressful and it's intense. [However] when wars happen, all HR problems vanish. No one complains anymore about the color of the carpet, no one complains anymore whether the air conditioning works or not. That's the best time to work. Everybody's up to the job and that's it." ('24)

However, other strategy processes, such as rapid deployment or functional strategies, were only widely known to the staff at headquarters. Short-term processes and strategic planning were well-known and engrained in the organization, while the Director General perceived that knowledge of the long-term strategy processes became increasingly known and accepted:

> "I think one of our contributions was to crystallize these kind[s] of questions in our planning, in our strategy, in our grammar—and I would even say in our ritual—without losing the ability to be fast when necessary. And that's the dilemma in which we operate." ('20)

Personnel development is critical for maintaining knowledge of multiple strategy processes with different temporalities. This particularly concerned strategy processes that were only infrequently triggered by environmental pacers. For example, to maintain and extend knowledge about rapid deployments, the ICRC designated some of its staff members as experts, as explained by a former delegation head:

> "We have people that are tagged as members available for rapid deployment. So, they are in their own delegation or in their own positions. However, we expect them to be able to be available on short notice […] to be able to support the delegation." ('22)

This "standing team" (respondent term) received regular training, and its members were required to demonstrate a wide range of skills, such as experience in multiple foreign countries. Depending on the crisis, the task force at the headquarters level could activate members of this team within 48 hours.

Being able to enact multiple strategy processes, from emergency processes to strategic planning and institutional strategies, is difficult. Delegation heads, in particular, required specific skills to operate in different strategy processes. The President elaborated on this as follows:

> "There are delegation heads who can only do emergencies. And there are those who are really innovative, who sense where the long-term issues are and promote [development projects to solve protracted crises]. […] There are some excellent people who have internalized all of this and who can play both pianos. And that's actually a bit of a challenge because that's where the strategic question actually becomes a question of personnel deployment, recruitment, training, and sensitization." ('20)

Creating a common grammar to foster knowledge and understanding of the strategy processes was critical for ensuring effective synchronization with different temporal demands.

DISCUSSION

Achieving ambitemporality through loosely coupled strategy process repertoires

By studying strategy processes in the extreme case of an international humanitarian organization, we extend theory on how organizations "juggle different temporalities" (Reinecke and Ansari 2015: 641) and achieve temporal fit (Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. 2008). Our main contribution is to elaborate on how strategy process repertoires may help organizations navigate a temporally complex environment. Strategy process repertoires enable the management of multiple strategy processes that respond to different temporal demands through loose coupling. Following prior conceptualizations of loose coupling, we define loose coupling in the

context of strategy processes as the presence of multiple distinctive strategy processes that retain a level of responsiveness (Weick 1976, Orton and Weick 1990). The distinctiveness of multiple processes distinguishes strategy process repertoires from a single strategy process, e.g. in one business unit of a diversified corporation (Wolf and Floyd 2017). Yet, this distinctiveness is not accompanied by an equally higher level of responsiveness, as would be the case for tightly coupled strategy processes in corporations (e.g., Grant 2003, Joseph and Ocasio 2012). Strategy process repertoires also differ from the emergent decision-making without or outside distinctive strategy processes, for example in public organizations (Mintzberg and McHugh 1985), educational institutions (Weick 1976, Jarzabkowski and Fenton 2006), and hospitals (Denis et al. 2001). Rather, organizations such as the ICRC may deliberately and actively manage a loosely coupled portfolio of multiple distinct strategy processes. The strength of coupling lies on a continuum from uncoupled to tightly coupled (Weick 1976), but in the context of strategy processes, thresholds for certain types of coupling can be identified, for example through comparative analyses. Table 3 presents an overview of how strategy process repertoires extend prior research on strategy processes.

Insert Table 3 about here

We suggest that, in temporally complex environments, it might be effective to consciously choose a loose coupling of internal processes to retain the necessary strategic adaptability to the environment (Orton and Weick 1990). The use of a strategy process repertoire and its continuous adaptation to an evolving humanitarian environment helped the ICRC achieve a high level of ambitemporality (Reinecke and Ansari 2015), that is, temporal fit and synchronization with fragmented and potentially conflicting temporal demands. We graphically represent the three core elements and their interplay in Figure 3 and elaborate on this in the following subsections.

Insert Figure 3 about here.

Embracing the multiplicity of strategy processes. A strategy process repertoire reflects a temporally complex environment through a requisite variety (Ashby 1956) of strategy processes, each synchronized to specific temporal demands. A higher the fragmentation of temporal demands requires more strategy processes in the repertoire, as shown by the addition of new strategy processes at the ICRC in response to

more long-term demands. Embracing a multiplicity of distinct strategy processes, each tailored to the specificities of a temporal demand, allowed the ICRC to synchronize effectively with multiple temporal demands, including (but not limited to) short and long time-horizons, predictable and unpredictable events, and event-driven and recurring issues. Even though we could not observe a counterfactual, our analysis suggests that extensions or adaptations of one tightly coupled strategy process would not have been sufficient to appropriately address fragmented temporal demands. We observed that the requisite number of strategy processes depends not only on environmental complexity, but also on internal characteristics. To achieve a synchronization between the environment *and* the organization (Ancona and Chong 1996), some strategy processes respond to similar temporal pacers from the environment but affect different areas of the organization (or "time zones," cf. Ancona et al. 2001b). For example, the ICRC has two strategies for addressing emergency armed conflicts. One mainly affects the delegation and the other mainly affects the headquarters, depending on whether there is sufficient personnel capacity to respond in the delegation.

Loose coupling. The alignment of distinct strategy processes in the repertoire occurs through loose coupling (Weick 1976, Orton and Weick 1990). Loose coupling refers to systems whose "elements are connected, but are not fully determined by the elements with which they are linked" (Danneels 2003: 560). Loose coupling describes relationships that are flexible and indeterminate, yet constrained and interdependent (Beekun and Glick 2001). Loose coupling ensured sufficient alignment of resource allocation while maintaining the distinctiveness of each strategy process. In the case of the ICRC, we observed responsiveness between strategy processes that corresponds to theorizations of loose coupling as sudden—as opposed to continuous—and indirect—as opposed to direct (Weick 1982). Immediate boundary setting aligned short-term- and long-term processes through event-triggered personal interactions between strategic decision-makers. Indirect guidance linked long-term processes with mid- and short-term processes through the communication of priorities and informal influencing activities. However, loose coupling entails potential pathologies (Lutz 1982, Orton and Weick 1990), such as organizational fragmentation, unclear hierarchies, and inefficiency. We observed that at the ICRC, a strong mandate and shared principles helped to better manage the internal complexity that comes from a loosely coupled strategy process repertoire that

helps to address temporal complexity (Schneider et al. 2017). Our analysis suggests that tight coupling between distinct strategy processes, such as short-term processes with command-style decision-making and long-term processes with consensual decision-making, could have led to significant internal conflict. Tight coupling could also have resulted in the excessive entrainment of the ICRC to a single temporal demand (Slawinski and Bansal 2015), thus damaging the ICRC's relationship with certain stakeholders. Thus, loose coupling helped strike a balance between responsiveness to fragmented temporal demands and the internal complexity caused by aligning multiple strategy processes.

Episodic activation. Following deliberately selected pacers, organizational actors episodically activate and deactivate strategy processes from the repertoire to respond to issues from the environment (Hendry and Seidl 2003, Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008). In the example of the ICRC, work on a delegation's annual strategic plan might be disrupted by an outbreak of violence, upon which its members use short-term strategy processes to define a strategic response to the emergency. Subsequently, the delegation returns to operational work in the "new normal." Thus, strategy processes are latently present in the repertoire, while their dynamic use through episodic activation and deactivation reduces the complexity and confusion caused by the simultaneous presence of multiple strategy processes. The episodic activation of strategy processes at the ICRC, which respondents called "switching," was facilitated by a common grammar that reduced the complexity of the multiplicity of strategy processes for the individuals in the organization. The strategic nature of the issues and the deliberate choice of pacers make the episodic activation of a strategy process not a routinized behavior independent of the situation, as is the case when firefighters respond to an emergency (Geiger et al. 2021). Rather, it is an effort to consciously synchronize strategy formation with the demands of the environment (Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. 2008) through situated strategy-making supported by an appropriate strategy process in a loosely coupled alignment with other strategy processes.

The term "repertoire" has been used in fields other than strategy process research. Research on managerial practices has defined it as a "set of organizing structures" (cf. Orlikowski and Yates 1994, Seidel and O'Mahony 2014) for the behavior of a person, team, or organization. Following this conception, we define a strategy process repertoire as a set of strategy processes that influence the overall strategy formation

process of an organization. For the ICRC, the impetus to create a strategy process repertoire was a temporally complex environment. In contrast to prior studies that have identified the repertoires of temporal structures (Hilbolling et al. 2022, Jarvenpaa and Välikangas 2022), we show how organizations can integrate these temporal structures in alignment with their environment and overarching mission. Furthermore, our conceptualization differs from prior studies that view repertoires as implicit or habitual, as the ICRC explicitly acknowledged the multiplicity of strategy processes and consciously reflected their appropriateness and use. While we do not argue that the creation of all strategy processes in the repertoire was fully deliberate, the development and management of the strategy process repertoire served as a lever for strategists to shape the structural context of strategy formation, in addition to changing the design of a single strategy process. This managerial lever focuses on the portfolio of strategy processes, the effects of their coupling, and their appropriateness given changing environmental conditions (Reeves et al. 2012). This conceptualization could contribute to research on strategy processes and temporality.

Contribution to temporality of strategy processes

Studying strategy processes in the extreme case of a humanitarian organization can help us better understand how organizations may cope with temporally complex environments. An increasing number of organizations face a temporally complex environment that includes grand challenges (Eisenhardt et al. 2016, George et al. 2016) and crises (Mithani 2020, Kunisch et al. 2021) in addition to the challenges of day-to-day operations. However, we still lack a detailed understanding of the temporal dynamics in strategy work (Burgelman et al. 2018, 2021). Against this background, our study makes two contributions regarding (1) how loose coupling may support the presence of multiple strategy processes with different temporalities and (2) how episodic activation may reduce the complexity of managing multiple strategy processes.

(1) Our main contribution is to identify how loose coupling (Orton and Weick 1990) may help organizations accommodate and integrate distinct strategy processes. Prior research has shown that combining multiple types of strategy processes, such as command and consensual decision-making, may improve performance in complex environments, as a combination of processes can overcome the limitations inherent in each individual process (Hart and Banbury 1994). For example, combining quantitative and

qualitative planning helped shale oil firms recognize both short- and long-term temporalities (Slawinski and Bansal 2015). We suggest that establishing a requisite variety (Ashby 1956) of distinct strategy processes helps to synchronize effectively to fragmented temporal demands, hereby extending research that has studied adaptations to an organization's strategy process (Grant 2003, Joseph and Ocasio 2012).

We propose loose coupling as one potential solution to the puzzle of how managers can combine distinct strategy processes, some of which foster flexibility and responsiveness while others stress control and coordination (Reinecke and Ansari 2015). Introducing an alignment of strategy processes through loose coupling (Weick 1982) complements prior studies on the tight coupling of strategy processes between distinct structural units through direct and formal communication channels (Grant 2003, Ocasio and Joseph 2008, Joseph and Ocasio 2012). Loose coupling draws attention to occasional, indirect, and informal connections between strategy processes. Loose coupling may help to avoid conflicting or ambiguous allocations of the organization's limited resources, while also maintaining the distinctiveness of multiple strategy processes synchronized with temporally complex demands. To mitigate the internal complexity caused by multiple strategy processes aligned only through immediate boundary-setting and indirect guidance, the ICRC relied on a shared mission and values. However, we cannot establish from our study that these mechanisms are universal or exhaustive, and suggest that further studies should examine the mechanisms of loose coupling in the context of strategy formation.

The concept of loose coupling might be generalized to strategy process characteristics other than temporality (Hart 1992, Hart and Banbury 1994, Dess et al. 1997), such as top-down and bottom-up strategy processes (Grant 2003), centralized and decentralized strategy processes (Andersen 2004), and open and closed strategy processes (Hautz et al. 2017). We propose that organizations may deliberately and effectively use loose coupling in the design of strategy processes. Strategy processes in organizations with loosely coupled internal processes are usually portrayed as characterized by contestation, diffuse power structures, and ambiguous objectives (Mintzberg and McHugh 1985, Battilana and Dorado 2010, Sorsa and Vaara 2020). Thus, many for-profit corporations strive for a tight coupling of their strategy process(es) to better implement their strategies (Weiser et al. 2020) and avoid the internal inefficiencies that might arise

from loose coupling (Lutz 1982, Orton and Weick 1990). However, our study suggests that through strong purposes and principles (e.g., Gartenberg et al. 2019, Gulati 2022), organizations may be able to more loosely couple their strategy processes to respond to temporally heterogeneous demands, such as by combining long-term sustainability targets alongside medium-term strategic plans (Slawinski and Bansal 2015, Hengst et al. 2020). However, given the very strong values and mission of humanitarian organizations, loose coupling must be generalized with caution to other types of organizations and issues.

(2) Furthermore, our model contributes to the understanding of an episodic use of strategy processes. In strategy practice research, episodes have been conceptualized as a sequence of events (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008) that suspend and replace everyday structures for a certain period (Hendry and Seidl 2003). We propose that strategy processes may be episodically activated by pacers from the environment, while the sequence and duration of an episode follow the temporal structure of the activated strategy process. In the ongoing process of strategy formation (Burgelman et al. 2018), activating a strategy process from the strategy process repertoire helps temporally structure decision-making processes to respond to external strategic issues. We introduce the idea that an organization can draw on multiple strategic processes to structure an episode.

The structural context, constituted by the administrative procedures and systems of the strategy process (Chakravarthy and Doz 1992, Joseph and Ocasio 2012) is usually viewed as constraining strategy formation (Burgelman 1983b, 1983a). We propose that a structural context in the form of a strategy process repertoire can enable strategic action (Jarzabkowski 2008) even in an environment with temporally complex demands. When strategists agree on a strategy process repertoire for interpreting and responding to particular environmental demands, they can reach a consensus on the course of action by drawing on established temporal structures during strategic episodes (Seidel and O'Mahony 2014). In this sense, strategy processes may constitute a latent capability, where the dynamic use of strategy processes shapes strategic decision-making over time (Mintzberg 1978).

The use of a loosely coupled strategy process repertoire entails internal complexity that helps to cope with the temporal complexity of the environment (Schneider et al. 2017). Episodic activation alleviates

some of the arising complexity by reducing the number of strategy processes that are active at any moment, thereby helping organizations avoid breakdowns (Schreyögg and Sydow 2010). For instance, by creating a common grammar for multiple strategy processes, the ICRC could align temporal schemata at the individual level with temporal structures at the strategic level (Shipp and Richardson 2021). Through awareness of the latent strategy processes in the repertoire, individuals could modify their behavior following an external pacer and engage in strategy-making episodically, for example, to respond to an emergency or create annual plans. In this sense, the concept of a strategy process repertoire views strategy processes not as an omnipresent context but as latently present temporal structures that can be episodically activated. Thus, a strategy process repertoire can synchronize an organization with multiple pacers from the environment, with the potential to differentiate the organization from its competitors (Hart and Banbury 1994, Bingham et al. 2007, Wolf and Floyd 2017).

Contribution to research on temporality

Our study distinguishes itself from prior literature on temporality by analyzing how the temporal structure of *one* organizational activity—in our case, strategy formation—can cope with temporal complexity. Thus, our study extends findings from research that considers the entrainment of multiple activities, such as competitive, technological, and product processes (McCarthy et al. 2010). The contributions of our unique case of the strategy processes of a humanitarian organization may generalize to research on ambitemporality beyond the strategy process domain. We propose a conceptual language of how organizations can cope with temporal complexity that draws attention to the *integration* of multiple temporal structures, extending theorizing on ambitemporality that highlight non-entrainment and differentiation of temporal structures (Blagoev and Schreyögg 2024).

Our study contributes to complexifying theories on how organizations cope with fragmented temporal demands (e.g., Reinecke and Ansari 2015). In contrast to prior research that describes how organizations may tolerate multiple temporal structures to avoid breakdowns (Reinecke and Ansari 2015, Jarvenpaa and Välikangas 2022), we found that organizations may deliberately use repertoires of temporal structures to establish temporal fit (Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. 2008). Using the lens of a repertoire, not as a

description of practice bundles (Orlikowski and Yates 1994, Seidel and O'Mahony 2014) but as a managerial tool, could inform future research on the management of temporal complexity. Analyzing these repertoires—for instance, in terms of the number of processes and the tightness/looseness of their coupling—might help devise a novel conceptual language that aids to move beyond dualisms and embrace multiple temporal dimensions (Blagoev et al. 2023).

While prior studies on entrainment examined the degree and nature of synchronization with environmental demands (Ancona and Chong 1996, Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. 2008), we analyze the temporal structures inside an organization (Orlikowski and Yates 2002, Kaplan and Orlikowski 2013) that enable this synchronization. Our observation of a strategy process repertoire contrasts with prior studies on entrainment that view organizations as tightly coupled, "monolithic" (Dille et al. 2023: 868) entities. Ancona et al. (2001b: 659) asked "how many cycles can act as external pacers before the internal cycles of the firm overwhelm us with their speed and complexity." Our findings suggest the design of internal structures, in particular the capability to integrate multiple temporal structures, is critical in determining the level of temporal complexity an organization can address.

Therefore, we draw attention to the integration of multiple temporal structures that may reduce the intra-organizational fragmentation caused by temporal complexity. We elaborate on how an organization can align divergent temporal structures (Ancona et al. 2001a) through mechanisms of loose coupling (Weick 1982, Orton and Weick 1990), facilitated by a normative foundation such as a strong mission and shared principles. In our conceptualization, the different temporal structures, or "time zones" (Ancona et al. 2001b: 525), are not isomorphic with structurally differentiated organizational units. Therefore, intra-organizational dimensions, such as structure, culture, power, or mission, are not fragmented despite the divergent and potentially conflicting temporal demands of the environment. The presence of multiple temporal structures may enable an organization to manage complex temporal demands on strategy formation when their loose coupling creates a buffer to maintain one mission and identity (Schultz and Hernes 2020, Schultz 2022). In summary, we take the first step in linking entrainment theory to organizational design, as our study suggests

that an organization's ability to integrate multiple temporal structures through loose coupling enables it to entrain multiple temporal demands without excessive internal conflict (Kaplan and Orlikowski 2013).

Implications for practice

We consider there to be tremendous value in looking outside the business context to find answers to today's challenges relating to strategy-making (Tsui 2013) and hope that the case of the ICRC may inspire other organizations. Humanitarian organizations are often confronted with a logic of professionalization, implying that they need to adopt best practices from for-profit corporations. However, as many corporations face increasingly complex environments that include grand challenges, crises, and business issues, the strategy processes that non-profit organizations, such as the ICRC, have developed to cope with temporal complexity can serve as inspiration for businesses (also see Stone and Brush 1996). Although we cannot generalize from a single case in an extreme context, we can derive speculative claims to further investigate how our insights can be adapted to for-profit corporations.

Following the example of the ICRC, organizations could complement established periodic planning processes with strategy processes suited for unexpected crises or grand challenges. However, a multiplicity of strategy processes must be accompanied by adequate coupling mechanisms that allow each strategy process to maintain its temporal specificity while also avoiding inefficiencies, confusion, and conflicts that may arise when using multiple strategy processes. Maintaining a loose coupling of strategy processes was a challenge for the ICRC, given the constant comparisons to tightly coupled strategy processes in the private sector (e.g., Joseph and Ocasio 2012). In one of our discussions, in which we pointed out the differences with corporate strategy processes, the head of the ICRC's internal audit team reflected:

> "In a nutshell, we fully agree with you that there is a very loose coupling between the institutional strategy and the other strategic processes […] at the ICRC. And I found it fascinating to see in your working paper the big question about whether the institutional strategy is at the top of the hierarchy or if we should consider it as one process among others. My working assumption at the beginning was that it should be at the top of the hierarchy. And, like in the corporate sector, the institutional strategy should be guiding the whole organization in one direction. But the reality [of the ICRC] is much more complex than that and quite different. In reality, coupling is very loose, and probably loose for good reasons."

The coupling of distinct strategy processes, be it loose or tight, is rarely a stable solution, because the effectiveness of the coupling changes with the evolving environment. In our study of the ICRC, the benefits of reflecting complex temporal demands with a multiplicity of loosely coupled processes outweighed the internal misalignments arising from loose coupling. In a less temporally complex environment, the right balance may shift in favor of tighter coupling. Therefore, we do not suggest normatively that organizations should follow the loose coupling of the ICRC. However, we believe that any organization can use the concept of a strategy process repertoire to reflect on the appropriate portfolio of strategy processes and their adequate coupling levels in the face of increasing temporal complexity.

Limitations and future research

We caution that the limitations of our case study of a single humanitarian organization need to be considered when interpreting and generalizing our findings (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007, Siggelkow 2007). Our insights are derived from the particular context of humanitarian organizations operating in armed conflicts. Due to the broad nature of its mandate and high stakeholder dependence, the ICRC must reactively entrain to demands in its environment and can rarely shape its environment proactively (as opposed to many for-profit organizations, e.g., Brown and Eisenhardt 1997). Furthermore, we focused our analysis on formalized strategy processes, which may lead to an underrepresentation of the role of informal strategy processes such as organizational micropolitics. Finally, our analysis presents a cross-sectional view of the ICRC's strategy process repertoire. However, as the historical evidence in our case shows, the strategy processes repertoire evolved over time, and we could not present a full historical analysis within the scope of this study.

It would be interesting to explore whether strategy process repertoires may also emerge for non-temporal complexity, such as addressing divergent demands from different stakeholder groups, geographies, technologies, or societal events (Denis et al. 2007, Sorsa and Vaara 2020), or when divergent strategies must co-exist in an organization (e.g., Hengst et al. 2020). We encourage further exploration of how the loose coupling of internal processes (Weick 1976, Orton and Weick 1990) may support the integration of fragmented environmental demands. It would be interesting to explore the role of a strong shared purpose that might substitute for the tight coupling of traditional strategy processes (Joseph and Ocasio 2012, Wolf

and Floyd 2017) and prevent organizational fragmentation (Battilana and Dorado 2010, Pache and Santos 2010). Furthermore, it would be interesting to analyze whether organizations can develop a strategy process repertoire in anticipation of environmental demands or only through experience with real events.

We propose that a strategy process repertoire may serve as an analytical and conceptual tool that can provide information about an organization's strategy-making processes and underlying temporal structures that help organize strategy-making (Reeves et al. 2012). In light of new external challenges, using the concept of a strategy process repertoire could help organizations critically question whether their strategy process is sufficiently differentiated to cope with the complexity of their environment, even if they currently employ only one strategy process. However, when generalizing the insights of this unique case, organizations must consider the tension field of the positive and negative consequences of a strategy process repertoire. On the one hand, it may enable effective responses tailored to different types of strategic issues, support agility through loose coupling, and complement a powerful mission that guides strategy making throughout the organization. On the other hand, it may result in ambiguity for strategy practitioners, unclear interfaces between strategy processes, and structural complexity.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1: Data structure

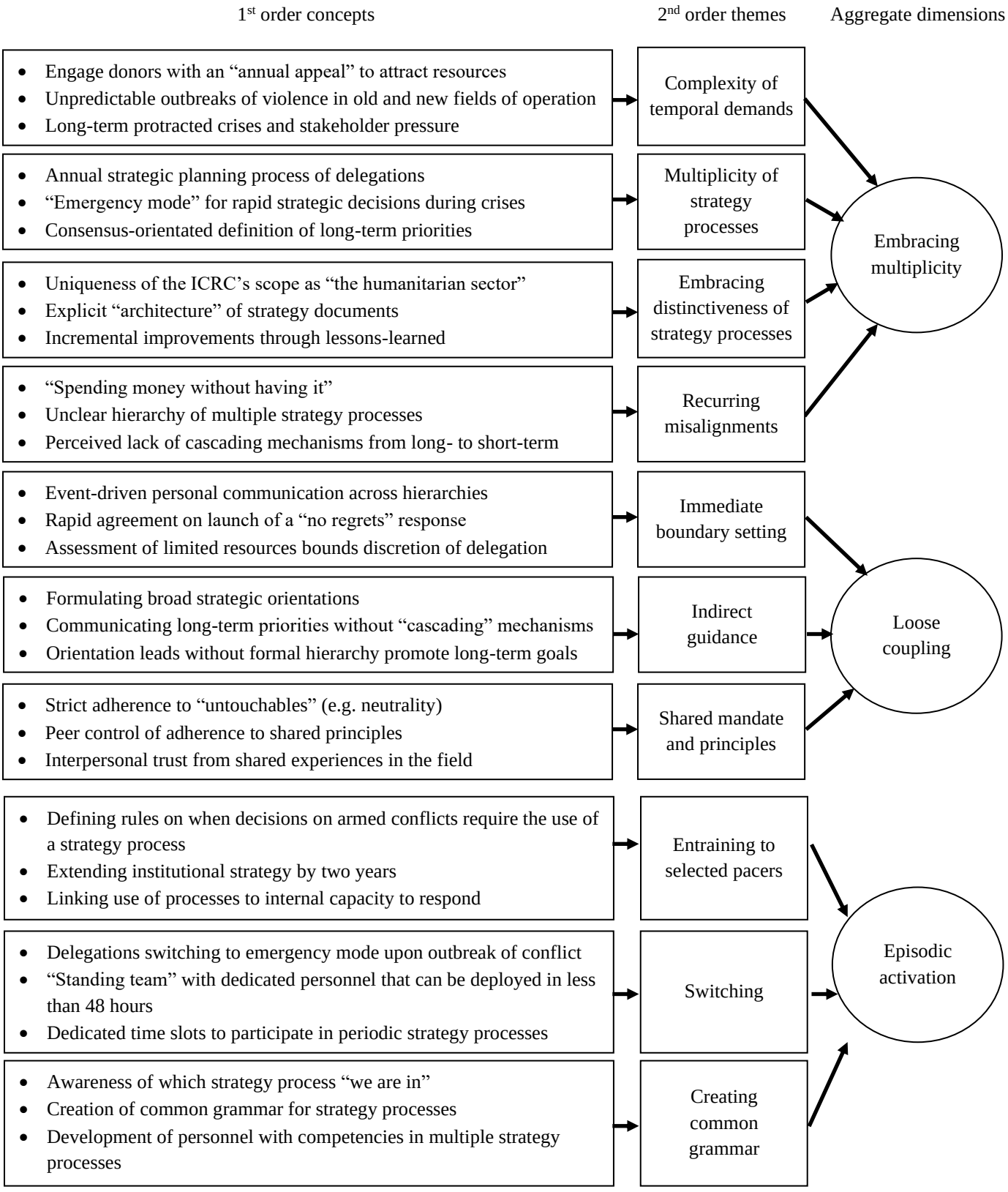

Figure 2: Mapping of loosely coupled strategy processes at the ICRC.

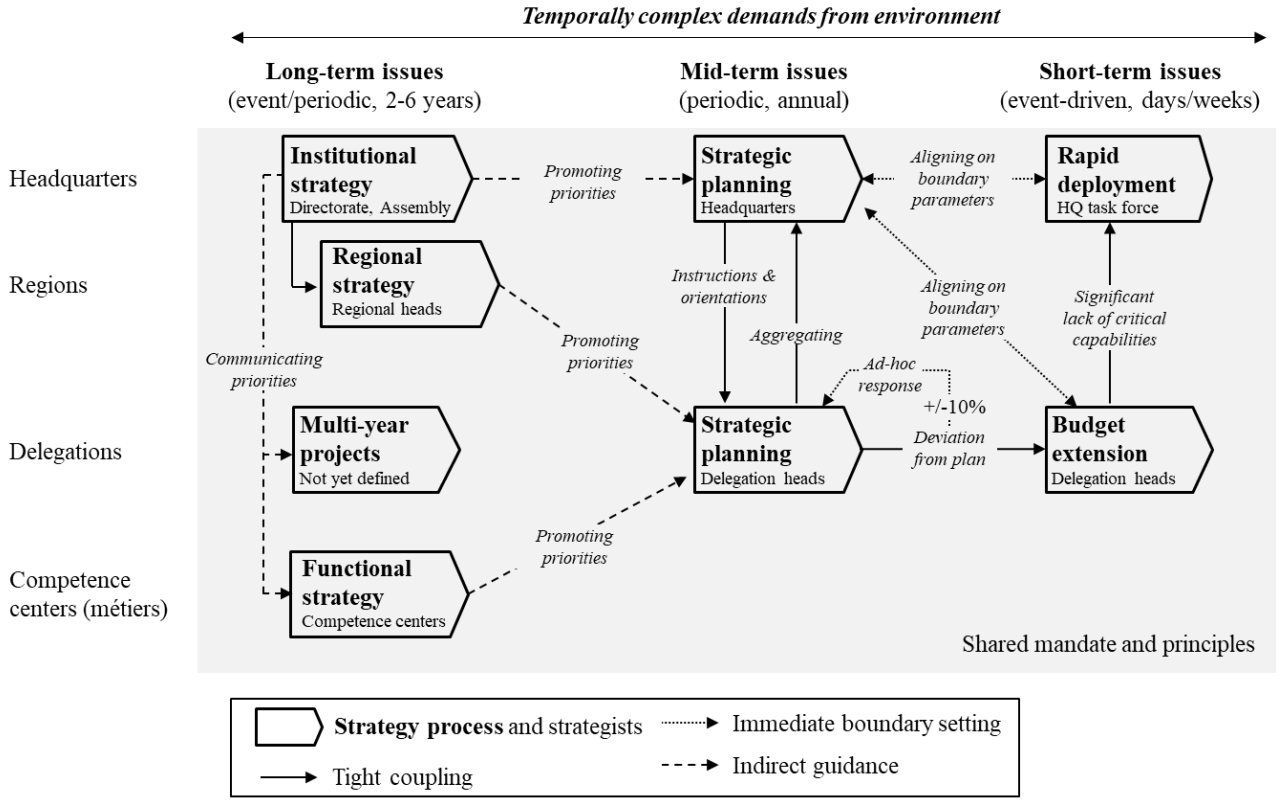

Figure 3: A model of strategy process repertoires in a temporally complex environment.

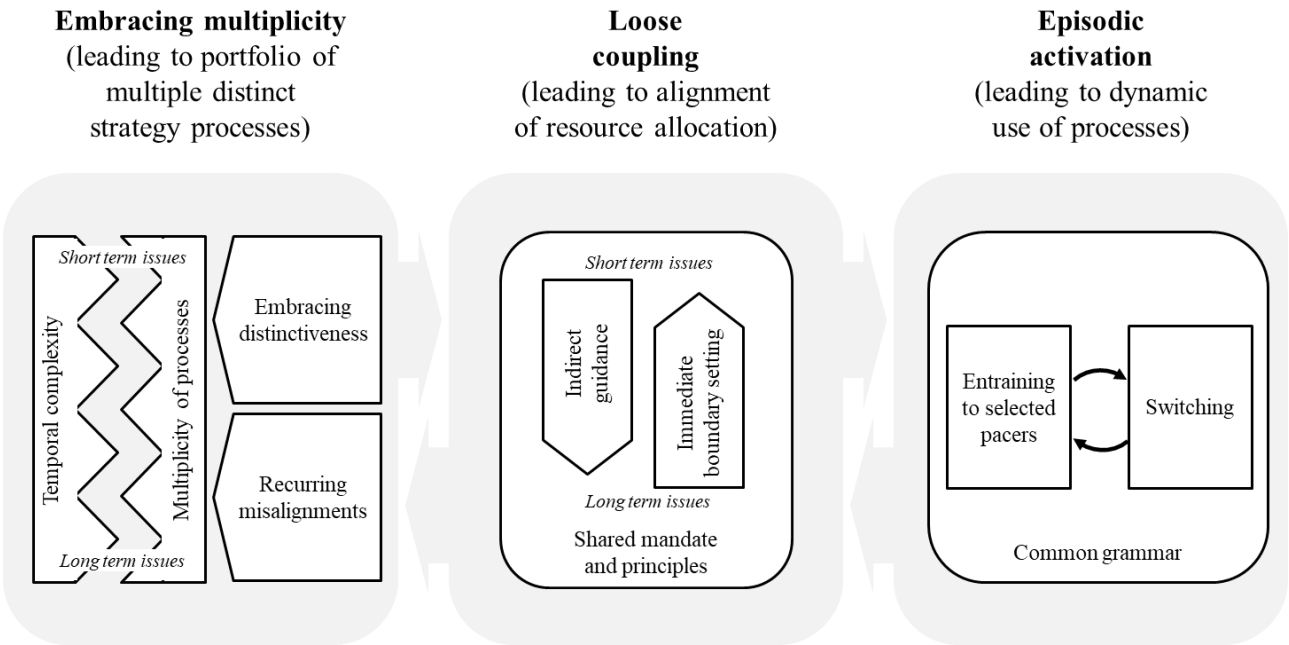

Table 1: Data sources.

Data collection	**Phase 1 (2017-2018)**	**Phase 2 (2019-2022)**	**Phase 3 (2022-2024)**
Objective	Understanding the processes of strategy formation at the ICRC	Creating substantive grounded theory by analyzing multiplicity of strategy processes and their integration	Deriving a theoretically grounded process model of strategy processes under temporal complexity
Analytical tools	Thick description of strategy-making, understanding external challenges and mission/values	Creating data tables and graphs on strategy processes, vignettes on strategic decision-making in critical incidents	Focused coding of all data, iterating between theory and data, visualizing relationships between themes, iterating
Primary data sources	13 interviews of about 1 hour each. 12 individuals interviewed, thereof 2 directorate members, 5 middle managers at the headquarters, and 5 delegation heads and regional directors.	30 interviews of 45 to 90 minutes each. 19 individuals interviewed, thereof the president and a former President, 4 directorate members, 9 middle managers in the headquarters, 5 delegation heads and regional directors. Follow-ups through short calls, emails, and informal interactions, based on graphs and (parts of) the manuscript we sent to informants.	
Secondary data sources	<u>Publicly available data:</u> • Corporate strategy documents for the last 4 cycles (from 2007 to 2022) • Annual report sections on strategy making (governance, processes, and financing) over the last 25 years • Appeals documents to donors over the last 10 years • Publicly available audits of the ICRC's management systems by donor states • Public reporting (by news organizations and NGOs) on examples used by our informants.		<u>Internal data:</u> • Internal policy document on strategy making, describing nature and content of policy documents, and involving organizational actors • Detailed documentation of strategic planning activities, e.g., annual maps of strategic budgeting process with meetings and interactions between business units • Internal "frameworks" (respondent term), checklists and guidelines for emergency decision making • Quantitative statistics on frequency and size of emergency processes (budget extensions and rapid deployments)
Contextual data (not focused on strategy process)	>100 interviews focused on diverse research topics by a dozen researchers, on various topics including understanding of the organization in general, the ethical dimension of humanitarian work, employee diversity, and Swiss identity.	ICRC representatives invited to executive education courses and talks at the authors' institution. Multiple student consulting projects for the ICRC overseen by one of the authors. Visits to ICRC museums in Geneva and Heiden by the authors.	

Table 2: Strategy processes of the ICRC and their temporal structure.

	Short-term		***Mid-term***	***Long-term***			
Strategy process	**Rapid deployment**	**Budget extension**	**Strategic planning**	**Institutional strategy**	**Regional strategy**	**Functional strategy**	**Multi-year projects**
Time horizon of decisions	Immediate, with repercussions for next year(s)	Immediate, with repercussions for next year(s)	Calendar year	4 to 6 years	Matches corporate strategy	3 to 5 years	2 to 10 years
Decision speed	Days to weeks	Days to weeks	3 to 6 months	1.5 years	Depends on region	Depends on region	Several months
Pacer	Emergency armed conflict	Emergency armed conflict	Periodic appeal for donors	Periodic priority setting	Periodic, matches corp. strategy	Periodic priority setting	Opportunities for collaboration
Frequency	Average: 3 small p.a., 1 large / 4 years	Average: 2–5 times a year	Annual	Every 4 years (extended to 6 years in 2022)	Every 4 years	Varied, usually 3, 4, or 5 years	n.a. (currently five projects)
Strategic relevance	Create a new delegation	Reprioritize resource allocation	Ensure funding of ongoing operations	Define the long-term strategic orientation	Define regional strategic direction	Develop specialized competencies	Enter new segment of humanitarian aid
Involved strategists	Executive directorate, rapid deployment team, and HQ task force	Delegation head, directorate approves and manages donor engagement	Delegation heads, iterations with executive directorate	Executive directorate, president and Assembly, input from delegations	Regional heads, in collaboration with executive directorate and delegation heads	Competence center heads, approval of doctrines by the Assembly	Project responsible and working group at HQ level, partnering organizations
Decision-making style	Top-down, military-style (“no regrets”)	Top-down, military-style (“no regrets”)	Bottom-up rational planning	Consensus-orientated, symbolic	Rational planning, consensual	Rational planning	Guided evolution of initiative portfolio
Formalization of decision-making	Detailed instructions and SOPs (e.g., who is consulted and informed)	Short template with key emergency issues (3-4-page document)	Detailed instructions (e.g., 30-40-page template for delegations, annual timeline)	Level of formalization differs, defined by a HQ team upon start of process	Depends on regional director (no standardized requirements)	Depends on function (no standardized requirements)	Depends on project (no standardized requirements)
Established	Early 2000s, codified process since 2007	2000, relatively unchanged since 2005	1998/1999	Since 2007	Since 2015	Depends on competence center	Internal work at HQ level started in 2017

Table 3: Strategy process repertoires compared to other types of strategy formation.

Distinctiveness of strategy processes	*Tight*	**Coupling of strategy processes**	*Loose*
High	**Corporate strategy process** Tightly coupled and hierarchically stratified strategy processes (e.g., large and diversified corporations such as GE, oil majors)		**Strategy process repertoire** Portfolio of loosely coupled strategy processes (e.g., ICRC)
Low	**Strategic planning** Singular strategy process (e.g., business unit strategy process)		**Emergent strategy-making** Strategy-making loosely coupled to organizational structure and environment (e.g., garbage can, adhocracy, visionary, grassroots)