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Rethinking democracy in global network governance: norm polysemy, pluralism, and agonistic engagement

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Abstract

This article examines the democratic potential of global network governance. It critiques conventional legitimacy frameworks that focus on the institutional qualities of governance networks for evading deeper ethical questions about how to deal with diversity as a fundamental condition of global life. Drawing on contestation theory, English School pluralism, and radical democratic theory, I argue that democratic network governance thrives by embracing diverse norm interpretations and fostering agonistic engagement among its members. I illustrate how this idea can guide a critical analysis of global governance networks through a case study of humanitarian governance in Southeast Asia. I assess to what extent diverse humanitarian actors have been able to assert and practise their own interpretations of humanitarian norms, how they relate to the fact that others advance competing understandings, and whether the boundaries for legitimate norm enactments are drawn on legitimate grounds. By highlighting the ethical significance of these dynamics from a pluralist standpoint, the study offers a novel way of thinking about democracy in a world that is characterised by complex policy problems, diffuse authority, and vocal demands for recognition by an increasingly diverse array of actors.

Keywords: network governance; norms; pluralism; agonism; humanitarian action; Southeast Asia

Introduction

Networks have long been recognised as a central feature of contemporary global governance.[1] Their emergence is said to reflect broader trends in the organisation of society toward more decentralised structures of authority, which enable flexible and dynamic forms of interaction and thus provide a means to manage increasingly

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[1]Kahler 2009; Slaughter 2005.

complex societal problems.[2] Global network governance is commonly defined as a way of organising interactions between interdependent actors that aims at providing transboundary common goods and relies on diffuse, rather than centralised, authority.[3] Such forms of governance have, for example, formed around environmental protection, the operation of the internet, and the management of natural hazards. They can involve governments, sub-national authorities, international organisations, civil-society organisations, transnational businesses, expert bodies, and individuals.

The rise of global network governance has attracted considerable scholarly attention in International Relations (IR) research. However, even though it is clear that it has wide-ranging implications for how we think about democracy beyond the nation-state, most works have focused on unpacking how networks affect the organization of world politics and the management of global governance problems. Insofar as the normative import of global network governance is addressed, it is almost exclusively reduced to questions of input and output legitimacy, that is, the inclusiveness and transparency of their decision-making and the quality of the policies they produce.[4] These analyses have significantly enhanced our understanding and critical judgment of decision-making processes and the performance of global network governance. However, by limiting normative inquiry to questions of institutional design, they sidestep more fundamental ethical questions about the practice of governing through networks.

To broaden the debate about how global network governance affects the prospects for democracy beyond the nation-state, this article adopts a view of democracy that is rooted in pluralist ethics, that is, theories and practices of protecting and promoting diversity in social life.[5] It argues that a normative interrogation of networks from this standpoint ultimately needs to rest on a thorough empirical understanding of the ways in which actors relate to one another through the network, in particular as they construct, interpret, and enact the norms that guide the network. Since norms are the 'legitimating elements of global governance'[6], understanding them is of crucial significance for an examination of ethical questions in world politics, yet – as critical constructivist scholars have pointed out – they evade straightforward analysis.[7] Even though norms are supposed to provide actors with stable expectations about appropriate behaviour and a sense of purpose to their practices, they inevitably give rise to competing interpretations by various actors.[8]

This *polysemy* of norms is becoming all the more visible and politically significant as the epistemological foundations of the so-called liberal international order are challenged in what Amitav Acharya calls a 'multiplex' world.[9] Practical questions with deep ethical implications arise, which input/output perspectives are ill-equipped to address: How do actors assert their interpretations of norms, and how do they relate to others with competing interpretations? Who gets to decide which norm meanings are valid and authoritative? If norms clash, which one should be given primacy?

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[2]Castells 2010; Mayntz 1993.
[3]Ansell et al. 2012.
[4]Eilstrup-Sangiovani 2017.
[5]Arendt 1958.
[6]Wiener 2014.
[7]Acharya 2018a; Wiener 2018.
[8]Lantis and Wunderlich 2018.
[9]Acharya 2017.

To develop answers to these questions, I put three strands of literature in a focused conversation: norm contestation scholarship, English School pluralism, and radical democratic theory. While previous works have already drawn some connections between these approaches, this article integrates insights from them into a coherent framework that accounts for the democratic potential of network governance: From norm contestation scholarship, it takes the idea that norm meanings are never fixed, as actors imbue them with competing meanings-in-use, and a sensitivity for the normative implications of these processes. These thoughts are then situated in pluralist writing by English School scholars, who provide a macro-level account of diversity as an ordering principle and allow me to reframe global governance as a site where the co-existence of actors with incommensurable identities and worldviews is negotiated. Finally, from radical democratic theory, I mobilise the notion of agonism to reject institutional solutions to polysemy and instead direct the normative evaluation of global governance networks toward the *ethos* through which their actors relate to the fact that others interpret and enact norms in different ways.

Based on these considerations, I argue that global network governance can deal with norm polysemy in a way that supports democracy beyond the nation-state *insofar as* it enables agonistic engagement around norm polysemy. Compared with hierarchical and formal forms of governance, such as international organisations, networks have a higher tolerance for situational and pragmatic norm enactment, thus allowing actors from various backgrounds to maintain their distinctive interpretations of a norm's meaning even as they engage in joint practices.[10] Because of this, their members can cultivate an ethos that orients action around a common purpose while resisting both a hegemonic imposition of norm meanings and the artificial construction of consensus through deliberation. Focusing on this potential, and the degree to which it is realised in concrete cases provides direction for the normative judgment of global network governance that looks past institutional fixes for the 'problem' of diversity and instead grapples with deeper ethical questions about the value of that diversity for global politics.

The article illustrates these arguments through a case study of humanitarian governance in Southeast Asia. Previously characterised by hierarchical structures dominated by international aid organisations, this field has over the last two decades taken on increasingly networked features. Through an empirical analysis of meaning-making processes in this network. I show how the transition to a network form of governance has enabled contestation around the main norms – particularly the so-called 'humanitarian principles' – guiding the governance of humanitarian emergencies in the region, and evaluate to what extent the network actors have cultivated an agonistic ethos that enables joint action despite persisting differences over the standing and meanings of these norms.

The article is structured in the following way: After a brief overview of the literature on network governance in IR, I present the ambiguity of norm meanings as a foundational feature of global network governance that raises important ethical questions. I then develop the argument that this plurality is normatively desirable from a radical democratic point of view, a position that is theoretically supported through an engagement with contestation theory and pluralist theories in IR and political theory. I illustrate how these thoughts can guide a critical assessment of

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[10]Cf. Bevir and Rhodes 2006; Sørensen 2005, 350–51.

global network governance through an account of how norm meaning is enacted in humanitarian governance in Southeast Asia. The Conclusion summarises the argument and discusses its broader theoretical implications.

Literature

The literature on network governance has its origins in organisational sociology and policy research of the 1980s and 1990s, where scholars identified networks as a form of social organisation that was qualitatively different from both hierarchies and markets.[11] IR researchers soon realised that the concept helped make sense of important developments in the conduct of international politics after the end of the Cold War.[12] As such, the study of global network governance in International Relations is part of a broader recognition in the field that patterns of transboundary governance have undergone a significant change both through a decentralisation of authority – captured in concepts such as fragmented, polycentric, complex, or multistakeholder governance[13] – and a pluralisation of underlying conceptions of order – as examined in studies on cooperation among autocratic regimes[14] or scholarship on the crisis of the so-called liberal international order.[15]

Network approaches provide one way of analytically describing these developments that focuses on the way in which interactions between autonomous actors are organised. An influential definition was provided by Eva Sørensen and Jacob Torfing, who describe networks as 'a relatively stable horizontal articulation of interdependent, but operationally autonomous actors who interact through negotiations that involve bargaining, deliberation and intense power struggles, which take place within a relatively institutionalized framework of contingently articulated rules, norms, knowledge and social imaginaries, that is self-regulating within limits set by external agencies and which contribute to the production of public purpose in the broad sense of visions, ideas, plans, and regulations.'[16]

Global network governance, then, emerges where such configurations transcend state boundaries. They usually involve a variety of state and non-state actors on different scales and are less formalised and hierarchical than international organisations.[17] Network actors are interdependent but 'formally independent.'[18] Importantly, the study of global network governance is mainly concerned with networks as *structures* for coordinated action, which contrasts with research on networks as *agents* in their own right, as in the literature on advocacy networks as norm

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[11]Mayntz 1993; Powell 1990.

[12]Slaughter 2005; Reinicke 1997.

[13]Alter and Raustiala 2018; Biermann et al. 2009; Gadinger and Scholte 2023; Gleckman 2018; Malcolm 2008. For an overview of this literature, see Kim 2020.

[14]Obydenkova and Libman 2019.

[15]Acharya 2018b; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021.

[16]Sørensen and Torfing 2005, 197.

[17]Barnett et al. 2022.

[18]Eilstrup-Sangiovani 2017. Network governance shares some characteristics with the notion of regime complexity. However, whereas regime complexity is a condition resulting from the overlap of different regulatory structures, networks are usually understood as relatively discrete governance mechanisms which do not require institutionalisation.

entrepreneurs.[19] It also differs from 'network analysis,' an approach that uses various metrics to analyse the properties and effects of different governance configurations in international politics.[20]

The bulk of research on global network governance has an empirical–analytical focus, with its ethical implications being a background concern at best. Insofar as systematic normative analyses are conducted, they usually revolve around input and output (or procedural and performance) legitimacy.[21] Interestingly, the existing literature remains ambivalent on both counts. Regarding input legitimacy, some authors have argued that their deliberative qualities make networks more inclusive than traditional inter-state politics as they increase access to decision-making by a diverse set of actors, including civil society representatives.[22] On the other hand, some contributions have raised concerns about a lack of accountability and transparency[23] and problematised the privileged access global governance networks provide to powerful state actors, especially from the Global North.[24]

Regarding output legitimacy, networks are said to have advantages in efficiency and effectiveness over conventional forms of governance due to their ability to combine different kinds of resources and knowledge, rapid flows of communication, and a high level of flexibility. This may give them certain advantages over other modes of governance when it comes to fostering democratic norms and practices.[25] However, they may also have shortcomings such as high transaction costs, weak enforcement capacities, vulnerability to disruptions, and a tendency toward biased processing of information, which can weaken their ability to create and protect democratic spaces and values.[26]

These ambivalent assessments are mostly based on normative standards derived from liberal-institutionalist thinking about democracy in the context of the nation-state.[27] They examine the institutional features of network governance with a view to their inclusiveness, responsiveness, and ability to produce public goods in an effective and fair manner.[28] Such enquiries often lead to calls for democratising global network governance by providing institutional channels for enhanced civil society participation in decision-making and improving accountability.[29] While these are important interventions, limiting the normative inquiry of global network governance to possibilities for *institutional* democratisation is unsatisfactory for several reasons.

First, the norms and rules of a network have no definitive effect independent of the practices of meaning-making through which the networks' agents bring them to life. Therefore, the question what makes networks desirable cannot be solved from an externalist standpoint that takes the meanings and effects of these norms and rules for granted. How governing through networks unfolds in practice must form an equally important part of the normative assessment.

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[19]Keck and Sikkink 1998.
[20]Hafner-Burton et al. 2009; Kim 2020.
[21]Börzel and Panke 2007; Slaughter and Zaring 2006.
[22]Thérien and Pouliot 2006; Skogstad 2003.
[23]Florini 2000; Slaughter 2005.
[24]Martinez-Diaz and Woods 2009; Murdie 2014.
[25]Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009.
[26]Ansell et al. 2012; Murdie 2014; Reinicke and Deng 2000.
[27]Cf. Sørensen and Torfing 2005.
[28]Klijn and Skelcher 2007, 596–98; Tallberg et al. 2018.
[29]Held 1995; Malcolm 2008; Scholte 2011.

Second, there is the problem of the Western-centric nature of dominant standards of democratic governing. If we only considered global governance mechanisms as legitimate if their participants live up to the formal standards of representation derived from liberal political thought, this would privilege actors from parts of the world that follow this model, while restricting the ability of those who live in illiberal states to hold them accountable because their political representatives are considered illegitimate.[30] An example is membership in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which is conditional on the fulfilment of liberal democratic criteria even though the organisation's work affects the lives of people living in states that do not fulfil them.

Third, network governance is not *supposed* to work according to liberal democratic standards in the first place. As critical scholars of network governance in a domestic context have demonstrated, it relies on a distinct 'ethics of government,' that is, a theory of political authority containing assumptions and goals that describe and justify networked forms of rule.[31] Rather than grounding its legitimacy in institutional structures and processes, network governance is predicated on its purpose of delivering public goods and solving complex problems. Whereas the liberal democratic quality of governance within the nation-state ultimately hinges on how it relates to the individual citizen, global network governance must recognise claims for representation by a variety of actors – individuals, ethnic, faith- and class-based groups, and states – in ever-changing constellations.[32] Measuring network governance against the yardstick of liberal democratic frameworks, which require the idea of an already constituted political community as the basis of any policy-making, misses the point that network ethics constructs its referent in an essentially fluid way.

Overall, existing normative discussions tend to essentialise the form and function of governance institutions and define who can make claims for recognition and representation in them from an externalist position that is often biased toward Western political models. There is, of course, scholarship that engages with the normativity of governance institutions from critical, interpretivist and pluralist standpoints, such as Acharya's 'multiplex' approach, feminist approaches, or the literature on legitimation in global governance, which have enhanced our understanding of the varying sources actors mobilise to assert and contest the legitimacy of governance mechanisms.[33] However, these works usually do not consider the particular practices of governing in networks, which follow a different logic than in other forms of governance.

These limitations direct a normative inquiry of global network governance to Mark Bevir and R. A. W. Rhodes' postfoundationalist approach.[34] In contrast to scholarship that focuses on seemingly fixed network properties, their analyses hone in on the way in which actors bring the rules and procedures of networks to life by imbuing them with meaning. This approach chimes well with relational approaches to IR, which teach us that institutional structures do not have fixed social consequences independent from their enactment in the practices through which agents

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[30]Buchanan and Keohane 2006; Malcolm 2008, 282–3.
[31]Bang and Esmark 2009.
[32]MacDonald and MacDonald 2020; Reus-Smit 2021.
[33]Acharya 2017; Rai and Waylen 2008; Tallberg et al. 2018.
[34]Bevir and Rhodes 2006.

encounter each other.[35] Going beyond Bevir and Rhodes' more analytical focus, though, I centre the *normative*, rather than analytical, implications of these questions by examining the network's 'ethos' – the moral culture that infuses interactions between its members and informs how they relate to the claims made by other groups in the network.

Relationality in networks and the 'problem' of norm ambiguity

The insight that processes of meaning-making and relations between network actors are of crucial importance for the democratic qualities of governance mechanisms drawss attention to the central role of norms in global network governance. Norms give expression to and legitimise the common purpose toward which actors' partici-pation in the network is directed, such as transnational justice or environmental sustainability.[36] By orienting and motivating governance activities in this way, norms also shape the relations between governance actors in the network. They (ideally) cultivate a sense of cooperation, reciprocity, trust, and mutual respect.[37] This sets network governance apart from hierarchical and market forms of governance, where norms do not guide interaction by expressing a common purpose but by establishing relations of obedience and regulating competition, respectively.[38]

Most scholarship suggests that a common understanding of the underlying norms is necessary for networks to function properly.[39] This assumption creates a problem because norms are essentially polysemous: Because of the inherent ambiguity of language and actors' different interpretive backgrounds, norm meanings cannot be asserted in a definitive way.[40] While norm polysemy affects all governance mechan-isms, different institutional designs offer varying opportunities to handle it: Hier-archical governance mechanisms can rely on processes such as codification and adjudication to establish what counts as a valid interpretation of a norm.[41] Accord-ingly, Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore count 'the fixing of meanings' as a core dimension of international organisations.[42] Networks, by contrast, lack the centra-lised authority that would be necessary to suppress contestation around the meanings of norms.

In grappling with this issue, scholars frequently suggest that communicative processes can foster consensus around norms.[43] This assumption is connected to Habermasian ideals, which is why accounts of (global) network governance often feature calls for strengthening its deliberative features.[44] They rely on the idea of a global public sphere that offers a shared social context in which 'stable and shared' meanings can be constructed by network actors.[45] However, by postulating that such

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[35]Qin 2018.
[36]Ansell et al. 2012; Keck and Sikkink 1998.
[37]Podolny and Page 1998, 60–1.
[38]Mayntz 1993, 12.
[39]Powell 1990, 326.
[40]Wiener 2014.
[41]Linsenmaier et al. 2021.
[42]Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 32–3.
[43]Eilstrup-Sangiovani 2017, 693; Thérien and Pouliot 2006, 62.
[44]Börzel and Panke 2007; Skogstad 2003.
[45]Keck and Sikkink 1998, 14–5.

a common interpretive background exists, these approaches fall back on the cosmopolitanist solution of universalizing a Western liberal conception of world politics, a fallacy problematised in critical scholarship on global democracy and the so-called liberal international order.[46]

As an alternative to 'solving the problem' of norm polysemy through deliberation against an elusive common interpretive horizon, I suggest it is more productive to reconsider whether dissensus on norm meanings is indeed problematic in the first place.[47] According to Henrik Bang and Anders Esmark, '[o]ne can agree to be co-responsible for solving common policy concerns and at the same time explicitly reject being socialised and integrated into the same common normative framework or comprehensive doctrine for guiding politics.'[48] This is especially true for networks. In contrast to international organisations, whose bureaucratic structures rely on obedience and control to ensure cohesion and therefore discourage ambiguity, they can leave norm polysemy in play because their main integrative force is a common *telos*, a feeling of shared fate and purpose that motivates joint action. In such a situation, each network actor is allowed to retain its own interpretation of network norms as long as its allegiance to the *telos* can be assured. To be sure, international organisations often contain informal processes of meaning-making, and insofar have a certain capacity for tolerating polysemy as well. The distinction is one of degree, especially as many international institutions are organized in a hybrid way that combines informal and formal, horizontal and hierarchical forms of organization.[49] But by and large, and especially when it comes to norms that relate to identities, roles, and relations among their members, international organisations must ultimately value norm clarity and specificity over ambiguity if they want to retain their character as organisations.[50] By comparison, due to their loosely coupled nature, networks can leave such questions open to a larger extent. To judge the implications of this potential for the democratic qualities of global network governance, the following two sections develop an approach for the ethical interrogation of meaning-making processes around network norms.

Norm polysemy as a desirable feature of governance

Norms research in IR has identified a variety of ways in which polysemy can be productive, for example, by enhancing norm robustness, enabling diffusion, or bolstering the legitimacy of normative orders.[51] Against this background, the ability of networks to leave polysemy in play appears as a potential benefit, rather than a problem. However, the argument I wish to make is not merely that the factual ambiguity of norms makes network governance a particularly *apposite* way of dealing with the sociological fact of difference in global politics. There is also a more fundamental normative case to be made for considering the acceptance of norm polysemy as a *desirable* feature of global network governance. Anne-Marie Slaughter has provided an instructive early pointer in this direction by suggesting that cross-

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[46]Acharya 2017; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021; MacDonald and MacDonald 2020; Wojczewski 2018.
[47]Fougère and Solitander 2020.
[48]Bang and Esmark 2009, 30; see also Sørensen and Torfing 2007, 244.
[49]Slaughter and Zaring 2006, 215.
[50]Park 2006, 354–5.
[51]Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2020; Krook and True 2012.

border governmental networks should be organised according to the principle of legitimate difference, which is based on 'the premise that 'difference' per se reflects a desirable diversity of ideas about how to order an economy or society.' Accordingly, it rejects attempts to 'try to stitch together or cover over differences concerning fundamental values.'[52]

Slaughter's ideas align with Antje Wiener's contestation approach, which explicitly connects the analytical investigation of meaning-making practices around norms with an ethical stance that resists the deliberative longing for consensus. Scholarship by Wiener and those following in her footsteps has provided essential theoretical reference points for combining the empirical study of norm conflict with a discussion of its normative import, most importantly by revealing and evaluating unequal access to meaning-making practices.[53] Particularly instructive is its engagement with agonistic political theory, to which I will return below. Conceptually and empirically, however, the normative strand of the contestation approach has mostly focused on problems surrounding formal global governance institutions. Accordingly, it tends to address struggles at the inside/outside boundary of governance mechanisms, between meaning-making in formal institutions and contestation from those affected by these decisions.[54] Contestation scholars' normative agenda, then, is usually to craft (real or 'virtual') mechanisms for stakeholder inclusion in institutional norm meaning-making processes.[55]

These ideas have provided valuable insights into how the legitimacy of such institutions can be increased by engineering contestation from marginal stakeholders toward consensus, thus 'taming'[56] norm conflicts.[57] Yet, I would argue that norm polysemy presents itself in a slightly different form in global network governance, which contestation research mostly overlooks.[58] Here, the boundaries between inside and outside, between the governing and the governed, are blurred by default, as notions such as 'multistakeholder governance' attest. Since norm polysemy manifests *among* the various network actors, it cannot be tamed by grafting deliberative processes onto the institutions that would bridge the in- and outside. In any case, the loosely coupled, informal, and self-regulating nature of networks renders the idea of orchestrating contestation through rational institutional design less plausible than in the case of formal institutions. Thus, while 'who actually has access to contestation and who ought to have access'[59] are important questions, when analysing network governance it seems equally crucial to consider how those with access relate to one another when they inevitably disagree on norm meanings.

It appears promising, therefore, to draw on the insights of the contestation approach but mobilise additional resources to formulate an ethics of democratic global network governance. Pluralist theorising on international society in the

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[52]Slaughter 2005, 248–9.

[53]Wiener calls this the "bifocal approach" to norms; see 2018, 31.

[54]Wilkens and Datchoua-Tirvaudey 2022,

[55]Wiener 2017; 2018, 9; Zimmermann 2017.

[56]Wiener 2014, 14.

[57]Havercroft and Duvall 2017, 160.

[58]Insofar as networks appear in Wiener's writings, they mostly do so as coalitions or interaction channels through which agents attempt to influence the institutional centres of governing, not as governance mechanisms in their own right. Wiener 2018, 68–9.

[59]Ibid., 18.

English School (ES) of IR is a promising candidate in this respect. Similar to contestation theory, the ES is interested in practices of meaning-making. However, its focus is more on the macro-level ordering effects of these practices as being constitutive of international society. Not least due to this fact, the ES is arguably more explicit and consequential than contestation theory in seeing institutionalised governance mechanisms as artefacts that are secondary in normative importance to the *telos* guiding the practices.[60] When it comes to normative evaluation, the ES falls into a solidarist and a pluralist camp. While solidarists trace and embrace the development of global normative standards in fields such as human rights or environmental stewardship,[61] pluralists contend that the ultimate goal of international society should be to enable and protect the co-existence of communities of practice built on incommensurable values and identities.

Earlier formulations of ES pluralism[62] have rightfully been criticised for their tendency to relegate the problem of difference to the territorial container of the state.[63] However, recent reformulations have redressed the original territorial bias and provided a more nuanced account of ES pluralism, one that is grounded in the acknowledgment that diversity operates in a variety of registers, between and within different types of communities of practice.[64] Because this complex pluralism is a constitutive condition of international politics, a thick consensus around legitimate institutions or general normative standards must remain elusive. Instead, pluralists such as Dennis R. Schmidt and John Williams envision international society as a fabric of open-ended and essentially conflictual political interactions guided by the mutual recognition that the other's agency rests on divergent but equally valid premises.[65] On this note, ES pluralists echo critical scholars' admonition that attempts to excise difference from social interactions by imposing cosmopolitan normative frameworks necessarily imply a moment of domination and violence.[66]

What makes this conception of pluralism especially appealing with regard to global network governance is that the recognition of difference (e.g., disagreements over norm meanings) does not preclude a joint political project. On the contrary, the difference is constitutive of the political space within which actors acquire the subjectivity that makes meaningful interaction possible in the first place.[67] Accordingly, Christian Reus-Smit understands diversity as a 'governance imperative,' an existential condition that demands societal organisation.[68] It is easy to recognise a familiarity between this ontological position and accounts of network governance as a relational, open-ended practice that is oriented by a sense of common purpose. The pluralist vantage point thus allows us to see global network governance as being attuned to the 'deep pluralism'[69] of contemporary international society, in which cultural differences compound with high interdependence and diffuse authority.

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[60]Bull 1977; Navari 2011.
[61]Wheeler 2000.
[62]Bull 1977; Jackson 2000.
[63]Hurrell 2007, 294; Inayatullah and Blaney 2004, 5–6.
[64]Reus-Smit 2017; 2021; Schmidt 2016; Williams 2005; 2015.
[65]Schmidt 2016, 287–88; Williams 2015, 26.
[66]Inayatullah and Blaney 2004, 11.
[67]Williams 2015, 33.
[68]Reus-Smit 2017, 873.
[69]Buzan 2023.

But what is it about network governance that accounts for this affinity? To address this question, the following section turns to writers who have developed radical versions of pluralism in political theory.

Toward an agonistic ethics of democracy in global network governance

The political theories of William E. Connolly, Chantal Mouffe, and James Tully emerge out of different intellectual projects, but they are united in their concern with difference as a fundamental condition of human existence and their criticism of legalistic and proceduralistic ideas about political legitimacy.[70] Their writings on issues such as identity, recognition, and democracy in various ways consider how people relate to each other as occupants of a shared political space. This section reconstructs these common concerns and enlists the authors in the project of formulating an ethics of global network governance, but it also highlights differences, following Connolly and Tully more closely in some aspects and Mouffe in others.

Crucially, in their search for just democratic politics, all three authors are critical of approaches focused on formal institutional designs. Connolly rejects the notion of consensus and common identity as a necessary condition for legitimate politics and argues that rigid institutional frameworks limit the enactment of differences by negotiating them under the banner of presumably fixed identities.[71] Mouffe agrees that the communities involved in democratic projects should not be demarcated through the construction of an essentialising common identity but through their engagement in a shared political space.[72] Tully, meanwhile, does acknowledge efforts to democratise governance institutions in cosmopolitan projects and participatory institutions[73] but is equally sceptical about the prospects of accommodating diversity in institutionalised forms, not least because an analysis of formal rules provides insufficient guidance on what happens in practice.[74] At many points in his writings, he points to the diverse, situational, and negotiated enactments of normative concepts that are necessary to make sense of essentially indeterminate rules.[75] These relational practices are oriented around the *telos* of organising the public good, without presupposing any definitive understanding of what that good is.[76]

The yardstick of legitimacy against which these theories hold global network governance is thus not to be found in the degree of inclusiveness of institutional frameworks, as in deliberative democratic theory and some contestation approaches.[77] Rather than focusing on how shared norms and rules organise political power, Tully asks whether the practices through which actors enact them foster *agonistic* engagement, which is characterised by respect for difference and a 'tolerance of ambiguity.'[78] For him, norms gain their legitimacy not just in actors' ability to explicitly contest and

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[70]Connolly 1995; 2002; 2005; Mouffe 2000; 2013; Tully 1995; 2008a; 2008b.
[71]Connolly 2005, 9.
[72]Mouffe 2000, 95–7; 2013, 56–7.
[73]Tully 2008a, 157–8; 2014, 76.
[74]Tully 1995, 2008a, 138–9.
[75]Tully 2007, 2008b, 269–70, 286–7; 2014, 54–8.
[76]Tully 2014, 64; 2008b, 293.
[77]Wolff and Zimmermann 2016, 529–30.
[78]Connolly 2002, 166; 2005, 4.

change them, but also in actors' mutual acceptance of the fact that they are differentially enacted in practice.[79] Agonistic politics happens where the hegemonic closure of meanings is resisted and different actors 'interpret and practice norm-following in a variety of different ways, yet all can be seen […] to be acting in accord with the norms of integration they share with others.'[80] Similarly, Connolly reflects on the *ethos*,[81] or moral sensitivity, with which agents relate to each other on the political plane. A pluralist ethos affirms different identities and values as a natural part of social life. To let such a spirit flourish, political programs should be pursued in loose 'assemblages' enabling 'intersection and collaboration between multiple, interdependent constituencies,' rather than unified institutional structures.[82] In Mouffe's words, agonism implies that actors adhere to ethico-political principles even as they 'disagree concerning the meaning and implementation of those principles, and such a disagreement is not one that could be resolved through deliberation.'[83]

What are the possibilities of such an agonistic ethos in global network governance? Although the three authors have primarily developed their thinking against the foil of democracy in a domestic context, they also reflected on the transboundary dimensions of politics in a globalised world. Yet Mouffe is quick to discard the idea that a pluralist ethos of 'conflictual consensus' could form beyond nation-states due to a lack of a transnational social fabric, a move that curiously reaffirmed the domestic-international divide other critical scholars had spent decades deconstructing.[84] To be sure, her reservations are not easily dismissed. Agonistic approaches have often faced the criticism that the kind of mutual respect and trust that is necessary to tolerate differences cannot be presupposed in politics in general,[85] and it is intuitive that chances it would form should be particularly slim in the thin veneer of sociality on which global governance unfolds.

Connolly and Tully, on the other hand, do not share Mouffe's principled pessimism regarding agonistic politics beyond the nation-state and assume a stance that is closer to ES pluralism's idea that sociality and joint political projects are possible despite conditions of value diversity and diffuse authority. Connolly has alluded to the possible 'pluralisation of democratic energies, alliances, and spaces of action *through and above* the territorial democratic state.'[86] Although his thinking on this matter focuses on the potential of transboundary social movements to disturb hegemonic state-centric policies, rather than the act of governing itself, it is easy to recognise an affinity of his ideas to the non-hierarchical organisation of politics in global networks.[87] Tully's stance is ambivalent, encapsulated in his distinction between civil and civic networks. Civil networks institutionalise liberal cosmopolitan ideas and are therefore bound to perpetuate imperialistic relations between the Global North and South through indirect mechanisms of control.[88] Civic networks,

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[79]Tully 2007, 72.
[80]Ibid., 75; see also 2008b.
[81]Connolly 1995, xviii; 2005, 48, 64.
[82]Connolly 1995, xx.
[83]Mouffe 2000, 102.
[84]Mouffe 2013, 23.
[85]Honig and Stears 2014, 144.
[86]Connolly 1995, 160, my emphasis; see also Connolly 2002, 218.
[87]Bleiker 2008.
[88]Ibid., 175–85.

by contrast, are places where disparate democratic practices are negotiated into a joint project that fosters continuous engagement despite, or precisely because of, a lack of agreement on any final political order.[89] Overall, Tully contends that 'the network mode of organisation has the flexibility and potential to be organised […] democratically,'[90] but whether they can realise this potential depends on the kinds of practices that infuse the network. Networks that embody an agonistic ethos serve as an important vehicle for resistance against what he sees as the imperialistic tendency of global governance to fix normative meanings through a variety of institutionalised mechanisms.

Fusing these ideas with the above discussion of norm ambiguity makes it possible to deepen normative debates about global network governance beyond input and output considerations: While pluralist democratic theory frames the question of what makes network governance democratic through the ethics of agonism, ES theory embeds it in an understanding of the changing social configuration of international society, and contestation theory offers an analytical apparatus that focuses its investigation on norm meanings-in-use. Naturally, the approaches do not align on all accounts. For example, critics of contestation theory have argued that it has an instrumental understanding of contestation as a means to establish – albeit imper-manent – agreement between stakeholders for the sake of legitimising and stabilising governance institutions, which contravenes the affirmation of the inherently con-flictive nature of politics in a more radical reading of agonistic theory.[91] Likewise, the affiliation of contestation approaches with global constitutionalism – an intellectual project that examines the possibility of enhanced institutionalisation on a global level – sits uneasy with the emphasis on thin sociality and minimal standards for coex-istence in English School pluralism.[92] Finally, whereas the ES tends to focus its inquiry of pluralism on macro-political orders, the other two approaches are acutely interested in political dynamics on the micro- or meso-level, which leads to divergent methodological approaches to ambiguity.[93] The point here is not to argue for a seamless integration of the three strands of theorising, but to put them into a conversation in a way that allows positing concrete criteria for a normative evaluation of global network governance.[94]

On this account, global network governance can be considered democratic insofar as it cultivates agonistic engagement by accommodating divergent norm interpret-ations of network actors, rather than trying to fix the meaning of norms through codification, adjudication, or deliberative mechanisms. Membership in the network must be conditional on the ability and willingness of actors to contribute to the network's goals on their own terms, rather than pre-defined formal status criteria.[95] Not all global governance networks will meet this standard, not least because networks are infused with informal power effects despite their nominally horizontal structure. A network in which a certain actor occupies a central position provides that

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[89]Tully 2008a, 158, 239–42; 2008b, 186–94.
[90]Tully 2008b, 304.
[91]See, for example, Havercroft and Duvall 2017; Wolff and Zimmermann 2016.
[92]Buzan 2004.
[93]Navari 2009.
[94]This approach of using conceptualisations of agonism for the normative assessment of governance mechanisms is similar to Westphal (2019).
[95]Cf. Sørensen and Torfing 2007, 244–5.

actor with asymmetric advantages over others, which can be used to exert epistemological power in discourses over norms.[96] Especially where exclusions are undergirded by structures of domination such as class, race, and gender, they impede the formation of an agonistic ethos, which is why network asymmetries need to be critically interrogated.[97]

That said, most pluralist theorists would agree that eradicating power relations altogether is an unrealistic aspiration.[98] The task is rather to channel them into productive, democratic forms, and on this account network forms of governance hold unique potential due to the lack of a central authority that would provide sanctioned norm interpretations and because they depend on continued communication between actors that maintain their independence but are engaged in a common political project. These properties allow actors to develop the kind of 'tolerance of ambiguity'[99] that the authors discussed above see as a core feature of an agonistic ethos.

The normative imperative arising from these thoughts, then, is to resist the temptation in global network governance to develop mechanisms for fostering consensus around its core norms, which from a pluralistic standpoint would enable global hegemony. Keeping norms indeterminate harnesses agency by increasing the scope for different stakeholders to negotiate what is a legitimate contribution to the network's purpose in concrete situations, rather than stifling such creativity. While dialogue remains important, its goal should not be to eradicate polysemy but to encourage critical introspection and create the kind of awareness for difference needed for agonistic engagement to emerge.

Three caveats regarding the normative claims of the article are in order here: First, opposing the imposition of norm meanings does not entail relativism. Many of the authors discussed above have reflected on the limits of inclusion in pluralist political projects. Where exactly to draw the lines is a difficult task, compounded by pluralism's reluctance to articulate definitive substantial parameters for political action. However, Connolly's discussion of fundamentalism is useful in that it asserts that agonistic tolerance does not extend to actors who seek to universalise their conceptions of identities and values.[100] Tully sees a commitment to non-violence as an essential and non-negotiable feature of democratic citizenship.[101] In a similar vein, pluralist ES authors such as Schmidt and Williams argue that norm meanings must not be advanced in bad faith and/or as seemingly incontestable truths that restrict the interpretations of others, deny them moral standing, or legitimate repressive violence against them.[102]

Second, while normative consensus is elusive, its performative enactment – in other words, pretending that such a consensus existed – certainly has a productive political potential as it can mobilise solidarity and buy-in by different actors. For example, Helen Yanacopoulos has shown that rallying members around a common framing of debt relief as a matter of economic justice has been a powerful instrument

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[96]Kahler 2009, 13.
[97]Tully 2008b, 296–97.
[98]Mouffe 2000.
[99]Connolly 2005, 4.
[100]Connolly 1995, 193–8; 2005, 42–3.
[101]Tully 2008b, 294–5.
[102]Schmidt 2016, 288–9; Williams 2005, 32–3, 67.

for transnational activist networks.[103] Of course, such a fictitious consensus does not resolve differences but merely makes them temporarily invisible.[104] Eventually, the members of such a coalition will still interpret the network's core norms differently in practice, so agonistic tolerance must be established among them.[105]

Third, considering the ethical potential of global network governance is not the same as proposing that all global governance should be organised in a networked fashion. Although conventional evaluations of output legitimacy have their limitations, questions of effectiveness are clearly relevant to our thinking about global governance. Existing research suggests that some issues are less amenable to being governed through networks than others due to the nature of prevailing actor configurations, the functional qualities of the problem to be governed, the time horizons against which it is governed, and the accessibility of relevant information.[106] Nuclear security would be an extreme example of a field whose organisation through hierarchical institutions has merit. In other cases, networks might only function under a 'shadow of hierarchy'[107] or require orchestration by more formal, authoritative organisations.[108] The theorisation advanced here is first and foremost an encouragement to think through how network governance can work in a desirable fashion where it already exists. After all, even Connolly saw his radically pluralist conception of non-territorial and decentred democracy as a supplement, rather than an alternative, to more traditional forms.[109]

Summing up, the framework for thinking about democracy in global network governance developed here draws out common concerns between contestation theory, ES pluralism, and radical democratic theory, but also mobilises comparative advantages. Contestation literature provides an analytical language for understanding and empirically tracing processes of meaning-making in network governance, but focuses on institutional structures of governance and does not have a fully developed account of the macro-level normative orders in which these processes are embedded. ES pluralism provides such an account by conceptualising diversity as an ordering principle of international society and demonstrates the possibility of negotiating co-existence without relying on overbearing institutional frameworks. However, the ES remains vague on the moral sensitivity that such an ethical vision requires of those engaged in concrete governance endeavours. Here, radical democratic scholars provide a solution. While lacking a theory of international society of its own, its notion of an agonistic ethos directs the normative inquiry of global governance networks toward the way in which the frictions that emerge as different actors interpret and enact norms in diverging ways are handled in the network, calling for tolerance and endorsement of ambiguity rather than attempts to eradicate it.

Case study

Based on the above considerations, this section illustrates how an empirical understanding of norm meaning-making can inform our normative evaluation of

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[103]Yanacopoulos 2009.
[104]Mouffe 2000, 19.
[105]Yanacopoulos 2009, 74–5.
[106]Eilstrup-Sangiovani 2009.
[107]Héritier and Lehmkuhl 2008.
[108]Abbott and Snidal 2009.
[109]Connolly 1995, xix; 2002, 218.

democracy in global network governance. It does so by means of a case study of humanitarian governance in Southeast Asia, understood as the mechanisms through which emergencies resulting from natural hazards, political conflict, and communicable diseases are addressed in this region. In its current configuration, the network is usually thought to comprise authorities (such as various national and sub-national agencies involved in disaster management) of regional states, global and regional intergovernmental organizations including coordination bodies such as the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs or the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management as well as sectoral agencies such as the World Food Programme, globally active humanitarian NGOs like the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies or Plan International, civil society and faith-based organizations such as Muhammadiyah in Indonesia or the Bangkok-based World Fellowship of Buddhists, small-scale community-based aid initiatives, as well as private actors such as corporate foundations or companies such as DHL or Maersk, who often provide logistical support to large relief operations. Through a large variety of mostly loose partnership arrangements, these actors cooperate in different constellations both on concrete relief operations and broader governance activities such as knowledge-sharing, monitoring, disaster preparedness, and so on.[110]

In contrast to the externalist way in which global network governance is conventionally evaluated, I examine the processes of meaning-making that form around the network's central norms, the so-called humanitarian principles, with a focus on how their polysemy is negotiated.[111] Drawing on public communication by network actors and those striving for inclusion in it, as well as secondary literature, the case study reconstructs contestation around what kinds of behaviour are deemed legitimate, when and to whom they apply, and the higher-order beliefs through which the norms are justified.[112] An analysis of the institutional features of the network informs this undertaking, but only in their function as 'opportunity structures' that influence how meaning-making unfolds, not as primary markers of the normative value of network governance.[113]

The main purpose of the case study is to show how sensitivity to their agonistic potential can guide our evaluation of network governance in practice. Zooming in on debates around civil–military relations, faith-based aid, and humanitarian resistance, the analysis is purposefully focused on political dynamics that have opened spaces for norm contestation in settings previously defined by a putative consensus on humanitarian governance as a 'neutral' sphere, which effectively cemented Western dominance. At the same time, it highlights and critically examines the boundaries of acceptability that the network's meaning-making practices delineate. For this reason, it also looks at actors who advance claims for inclusion in the network but whose norm interpretations are deemed outside of the acceptable by other network actors, an approach that resonates with Wiener's approach of placing stakeholders in a 'virtual multilogue.'[114]

Looking at the case of humanitarian governance in Southeast Asia is instructive for three reasons. First, humanitarian governance in Southeast Asia has over the last

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[110]Caballero-Anthony et al. 2021.
[111]Cf. Tully 2008a, 26–31.
[112]Cf. Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2020.
[113]Wiener 2018, 56–8, see also Tully 2014, 77–8.
[114]Wiener 2018, 9.

two decades undergone significant changes from a hierarchical architecture dominated by United Nations (UN) mechanisms to networked forms of organisation. Since the mid-2000s, regional states have gradually ramped up national capacities in disaster relief. They are also pooling their capacities and coordinate relief efforts within the main regional organisation, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).[115] In addition, governmental agencies and intergovernmental organisations are increasingly partnering with civil-society, faith-based, and private sector initiatives based on a range of coordination mechanisms, without subsuming these collaborations under a singular institutional structure.[116] Humanitarian action in the region has thus come to take on strong network features. While asymmetries do persist and the UN agencies continue to play an important role, the interactions in which they take part rely predominantly on interdependence, decentralised communication, and coordination instead of formal authority relations and binding decision-making.[117]

Second, humanitarian practice has traditionally been inhospitable to an agonistic ethos not just because of its structural organisation but also because of the substance of its foundational norms. As we will see, core humanitarian norms such as neutrality have discouraged contestation because they are not just regulative frames but constitutive of the very identities of humanitarian agents as a-political, altruistic caretakers. This allows me to demonstrate that the institutional flexibility that a networked policy field entails is an enabling but not a sufficient factor for agonistic engagement to emerge. While it makes an endorsement of norm polysemy less problematic than in highly codified realms of governance (such as transnational finance or criminal justice), those trying to assert alternative norm interpretations may face more subtle but equally stubborn obstacles.

Finally, in theoretical terms, analyses of humanitarian governance have mostly been undergirded by 'solidarist' conceptions rooted in universalist ethics.[118] Re-envisioning this field from a pluralist standpoint therefore allows a high-contrast view that throws the contours of an agonistic approach into sharp relief. In particular, it helps understand norm polysemy not as a defect of humanitarian governance that heralds fragmentation but as a constitutive condition that holds democratic potential.

Increasing contestation of humanitarian principles

Collective efforts in addressing humanitarian emergencies in Southeast Asia have long been guided by a set of core norms that have their origins in the 'humanitarian principles' formulated by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the 1960s. The ICRC itself defines them as follows:

- **Humanity** – the imperative 'to prevent and alleviate suffering wherever it may be found';
- **Impartiality** – a commitment to help individuals 'guided solely by their needs' and independent from their 'nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions';

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[115]Coe and Spandler 2022.
[116]Caballero-Anthony et al. 2021, 1.
[117]Ibid.
[118]Wheeler 2000.

- **Neutrality** – the refusal of humanitarian actors to 'take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature';
- **Independence** – the aspiration that humanitarian organisations should always 'maintain their autonomy.'[119]

By and large, these principles and the IFRC's interpretation of them were a sacrosanct foundation for humanitarian governance in Southeast Asia as long as Western humanitarian organisations retained their hegemonic position. But the diffusion of authority accompanying the transition to more networked forms of humanitarian governance has meant that an increasing number of actors can assert their own ideas regarding these normative foundations of humanitarian action, reflecting the ES' idea of deep pluralism as an emerging condition of international society. As a consequence, the 'often 'taken for granted' idea that humanitarianism is understood the same way in all societies,' which had been reinforced by the notion of humanitarianism as an a-political practice, has been undermined.[120]

Three examples illustrate these challenges. The first concerns the use of military capacities in disaster relief. With the rise of networked humanitarian governance in the region, cooperation on disaster management between militaries has been ramped up in the ASEAN Militaries Ready Group, through which defence ministries have coordinated logistical support in the delivery of aid, for example after Cyclone Mocha hit Myanmar in 2023.[121] Even though guidelines for disaster management agreed by ASEAN defence ministers mention the humanitarian principles and they are routinely referred to in UN-led dialogues on the use of military assets for humanitarian purposes, the governments have emphasised that they do not consider them to apply to their militaries.[122] Other documents that set out norms and rules for civil–military engagement in the region either omit the principle of independence from their list of principles[123] or promote alternative formulations that diverge from conventional interpretations, such as the notion that 'Assisting States […] shall avoid creating long-term dependence on foreign military assets by the Affected State's population and civilian humanitarian organisations.'[124] ASEAN also departs from the ICRC's formulations by noting that neutrality does not prevent actors from engaging in hostilities 'in self-defence.'[125]

These deviations are logical, as military actors cannot claim autonomy in the same way as civilian humanitarian actors do and may more readily be deployed in contexts of armed conflict. But unsurprisingly, they have been met with scepticism. Many civilian humanitarian actors in the region consider the use of military capacities as compromising their understanding of the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, especially in conflict-settings.[126] In the words of a Filipino scholar and former aid professional, for the military, engaging in supposedly neutral activities

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[119]ICRC 2015, 3–5.
[120]Hirono and O'Hagan 2012, 3; see also Yeophantong 2020, 76.
[121]AHA Centre 2023.
[122]ASEAN 2020, 2; OCHA 2014, 10.
[123]ASEAN Regional Forum 2010, 13.
[124]ASEAN 2017, 30.
[125]ASEAN Regional Forum 2010, 13.
[126]ASEAN-IPR 2017, 14; Caballero-Anthony et al. 2021, 4.

such as disaster relief 'will always include an 'enemy neutralizing' component.'[127] Of particular concern for some practitioners is that military actors' ambivalences on humanitarian principles exacerbate the vulnerabilities of women and girls in post-disaster situations, as it did after Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.[128]

Second, the meaning of the principles is also contested by non-state actors, in particular faith-based organisations (FBOs). Many in the humanitarian community used to see religion as a challenge to the putatively objective nature of aid, which is why the legitimacy of Islamic aid organisations was often questioned.[129] But as regional humanitarian governance is taking on more networked features, many international FBOs such as Islamic Relief as well as national ones such as Muhammadiyah and MER-C in Indonesia now engage regularly in coordinated relief efforts, for example after Typhoon Haiyan struck the Philippines in 2013. While many of these organisations have endorsed the humanitarian principles, they enact them in distinct ways that are inspired by Islamic faith and indigenous cultural concepts, thus challenging their secular foundations.[130]

For example, the notions of *zakat* and *sadaqah* (obligatory and voluntary charity) in Islamic doctrine can be seen as guiding Muhammadiyah's interpretation of humanitarian principles.[131] Some norm interpretations and enactments derived from these foundations open up tensions with secular Western interpretations of neutrality and impartiality. Certain interpretations of *zakat* locate potential recipients of aid exclusively within the *umma*, the community of fellow Muslims. Although this is contested among Islamic scholars, the majority of international humanitarian aid from Indonesia does indeed go to Muslim communities.[132] Where non-Muslims are included, a potential issue emerges from the conflation of aid with proselytizing activities by some FBOs following the notion of *da'wah*, or informing about and inviting non-Muslims to Islam.[133] In addition, because the recognition of humanitarian principles by Muslim FBOs is often tied to notions of social justice, as in the case of Islamic Relief, some actors reject the idea that neutrality must imply treating oppressors and victims alike.[134] An important reference document for the work of Muslim FBOs, the Charter of the Work of Goodness, refers instead to 'positive neutrality,' which entails an obligation to 'bear true witness against any observed violation of the rights of creatures; it shall not remain silent before such abuse for the sake of neutrality.'[135]

Finally, in what may be the clearest example of (re-)politicizing the discourse around humanitarian principles, established notions of neutrality have been contested by cross-border aid providers. The primary example is medical professionals, community-based organisations and ethnic armed organisations who organise humanitarian assistance to people in Myanmar from neighbouring regions in Thailand. In the aftermath of the military coup in 2021, these actors and their

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[127]Mesina 2017, 398.
[128]Valerio 2014, 145–55.
[129]Salek 2016, 346.
[130]Bush 2015, 45–6; Petersen 2015.
[131]O'Hagan and Hirono 2014, 418.
[132]Marzuki and Tiola 2021, 334–5.
[133]Salek 2016, 358.
[134]Islamic Relief Indonesia n.d.; Mohamed and Ofteringer 2016, 378.
[135]Cordoba Foundation of Geneva 2011.

advocates have increasingly challenged what they see as a 'fetishized' understanding of neutrality by conventional humanitarian actors, which has translated to a reliance on host-consent even in areas of violent conflict.[136] In 2022, spokespersons for grassroots initiatives protested against UN cooperation with the junta in an open letter to the UN Secretary-General, arguing that this practice 'breaches the [...] humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality [and] independence.'[137] In the same vein, a local staff worker for an international non-governmental organisation argued that silence on political matters would be interpreted as a pro-junta stance by the population.[138]

Despite this emphatic criticism of neutrality, the contestation is more about the norm's application than its validity[139] – critics are not saying that neutrality per se is an objectionable idea but that its purpose is rendered ad absurdum in the contexts of asymmetric armed conflicts such as the one unfolding in Myanmar. The reasons are both ethical, in the sense that taking a stance against the oppressive regime is necessary, and practical, as mainstream humanitarian organisations' reliance on junta approval has seriously restricted access to affected communities and enabled the weaponisation of aid against civilians. As argued by one of the signatories of the open letter and founder of Progressive Voice Myanmar, Khin Ohmar, 'Myanmar's humanitarian needs are overwhelming, but they cannot be met by engaging with the same perpetrators of the grave human rights abuses that relief aid intends to address.'[140] Hnin Thet Hmu Khin, a humanitarian activist advocating for cross-border aid, criticised the humanitarian sector's self-portrayal as a-political as counterproductive: 'Even though we talk a lot about humanitarians not being involved in politics, at this point, politics is important to get access.'[141] Therefore, she and others engage in 'humanitarian resistance,' which deliberately takes sides against systemic injustice and violence.[142]

Emergence and limits of agonistic engagement

The initial reaction of established actors to these dynamics was a concern about misinterpretations and non-compliance with humanitarian principles.[143] Yet attempts to suture the differences have proven ineffective. Years of dialogue processes among humanitarian stakeholders, mostly orchestrated by Western organisations, have failed to foster consensus around the principles. As Pichamon Yeophantong's study of 'cultures of humanitarianism' in Southeast Asia pointedly concludes, 'ambiguity persists.'[144] From the point of view of conventional literature on network governance, with its emphasis on common understandings as a basis for joint action, that would seem problematic as norm polysemy could 'presage

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[136]Ohmar 2021.

[137]Letter to the UN Secretary-General 2022.

[138]Fishbein 2021.

[139]On this distinction, see Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2020.

[140]Kamal and Benowitz 2022.

[141]Fishbein 2021.

[142]Slim 2022.

[143]O'Hagan and Hirono 2014, 410.

[144]Yeophantong 2020, 75.

fragmentation' of the international humanitarian order.[145] However, empirical evidence shows that many emerging actors have continuously engaged in cooperation based on a recognition of humanitarian principles even though they maintain their own interpretations of them.[146] In line with agonistic politics, what matters is not individual agents' normative stances nor the cultural sources they draw on to justify them, but how they relate to those who approach humanitarian action from a different canvas of morality.[147]

Accordingly, despite ASEAN defence ministers' reservations about the humanitarian principles, they have resolved that their militaries 'shall understand and respect these principles when conducting [humanitarian assistance and disaster relief] operations'[148]. ASEAN's guidelines acknowledge that '[e]ach actor has its own objectives, agenda and operating procedures' and, consequently, 'managing expectations […] is critical' for the success of humanitarian governance.[149] While they omit independence from the list of humanitarian principles, they acknowledge the desire of non-governmental humanitarian agencies to establish a high degree of autonomy from state actors.[150] This ambiguous position is indicative of an ethos of agonistic engagement. Conversely, despite lingering scepticism by many civil society organisations, '[t]here is a general understanding that the military is well-placed to aid during quick onset disasters arising from natural disasters' among members of the regional humanitarian network.[151]

As Williams argues, divergence in the transcendental grounding of political action is a particularly hard test of pluralist tolerance because it involves foundational knowledge claims about 'how the world is' and 'how the world should be.'[152] What about the differences over the principles between Western secular and local FBOs, then? Although mutual suspicions persist, they have found an arrangement that is pragmatic both in the sense that it has emerged from concrete interactive practices and that it puts ideological differences aside for the sake of functional cooperation. *Da'wah* continues to play a role for some FBOs but is limited to aspects that do not affect cooperation in the network, such as maintaining a post-disaster presence and disseminating information about Islam to communities. This compartmentalisation enables an enactment of traditional aid practices that are considered compatible with the principles of neutrality and impartiality.[153] Among Indonesian FBOs, a new interpretation of *zakat* rules has emerged that allows funds to be distributed to non-Muslim recipients as long as they are not hostile to Islam.[154] Even as their foreign humanitarian aid continues to flow mostly to causes that express Muslim solidarity, such as the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, there is a conscious effort to make sure these activities also reach beneficiaries of other faiths.[155]

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[145]O'Hagan and Hirono 2014, 412.
[146]Cf. Linton 2019.
[147]Connolly 1995, xxv.
[148]ASEAN 2020, 2.
[149]ASEAN Regional Forum 2010, 14.
[150]Ibid., 17.
[151]Caballero-Anthony et al. 2021, 4; see also Bollettino and Manzanero 2022.
[152]Williams 2015, 48.
[153]Bush 2015, 45.
[154]Marzuki and Tiola 2021, 335.
[155]Ibid., 336.

According to a representative, Muhammadiyah has been keen to commit to the humanitarian principles because doing so renders partnerships with other network actors more effective.[156] This ties in with Islamic scholars involved in the regional humanitarian network, who argue that the commitment to a common cause helps look past differences over the foundations of cooperation with secular organisations.[157] And indeed, ICRC representatives have gradually come to acknowledge that humanitarian practices inspired by local religious traditions are legitimate enactments of the principles and welcomed the contributions of FBOs.[158] These dynamics clearly reveal how interdependence between network actors can incentivise tolerance for norm polysemy and respect for the agency of others. While Islamic aid organisations desire access to funding from Western donors, Western actors in turn benefit from the legitimacy they gain by partnering up with local FBOs.[159] Rigidly sticking to one's own interpretation of the normative foundations of joint action is not conducive to cooperation under these circumstances.

As theorised in the preceding sections of this article, the networked nature of humanitarian governance in the region has created conditions under which coordinated action oriented around a common purpose – providing aid to those affected by emergencies – became possible despite the prevailing competing interpretations of its normative foundations. Two factors have contributed to this development. First, while the dialogue processes mentioned above may have failed to eliminate differences around norm interpretations among network actors, their interdependencies and repeated interactions helped them develop mutual trust, respect, and 'diversity awareness,'[160] leading to an acceptance of different norm interpretations as equally valid. Recognizing family resemblances between Western and local concepts allows the different actors to cooperate within the network under the banner of principled humanitarian action even though they draw on different higher-order principles to justify them.[161] Under these conditions, governance has become possible in the absence of authoritative norm interpretations by central actors such as UN OCHA because all members of the network know the others' participation to be oriented toward the same *telos.*

Second, the agonistic ethos has been fostered by an emerging norm of 'localisation' in humanitarian action, which formed in recognition of the significant role of affected communities, and those in close proximity to them, as crucial humanitarian actors.[162] Localisation seeks to empower these actors while upholding the idea of humanitarian cooperation across scales and sectors. More than an operational norm guiding the devolution of responsibilities and resources to local actors (for which it arguably lacks the specificity), it may more accurately be read as a meta-governance norm that expresses and protects an agonistic ethos: In demanding respect for the agency of peripheral actors, it also demands increased tolerance for enactments of

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[156]Bush 2015, 46.
[157]Latief 2017, 54.
[158]ASEAN-IPR 2017, 49.
[159]Bush 2015, 45–6.
[160]Tully 2014, 37.
[161]ASEAN-IPR 2017, 13–4.
[162]Slim 2021.

humanitarian principles that do not accord with the understandings of Western-led organisations.[163]

This is not to say that unequal power relations have disappeared from the field. Even though the dependency of donors on local legitimacy and knowledge may incentivise them to see contextualised practices as beneficial, their role in distributing funding can easily lead them to circumscribe the scope of legitimate norm interpretations in line with their preferences. Local implementing organisations may feel pressured to accept these definitions to ensure access to funding.[164]

Indeed, a critical analysis reveals some dynamics that raise difficult questions about the limits of agonistic tolerance. As noted earlier, the challenge here is not to enable limitless contestation, but to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate exclusions. Two possible grounds for legitimate exclusion can be identified: first, an inability or unwillingness to contribute to the network's *telos*, and second, an interpretation of norms that effectively violates the moral standing of others or justifies repressive violence *and* raises this interpretation to an immutable and incontestable truth. Judged against these criteria, the fact that civilian actors have at times refused to collaborate with the Philippine Armed Forces seems justifiable given convincing arguments that in particularly sensitive contexts, such involvement would put other network members at risk and complicate access to affected populations, thus undermining the network's overarching purpose.[165]

Other ways in which the realm of possible norm interpretations and enactments is limited seem more problematic, especially the refusal by powerful international organisations to fund and collaborate with cross-border aid providers who challenge 'fetishized' notions of neutrality.[166] The question of whether cross-border aid providers contribute to the network's *telos* can clearly be answered in the affirmative. In fact, humanitarian experts have praised their ability to access vulnerable people that are out of reach to other actors.[167] On the second criterion, although more research into the motivations for humanitarian resistance in concrete instances would be needed for a definitive assessment, there is nothing to suggest that the contestation of the humanitarian principles aims to legitimate violence. While it does imply delegitimating the junta, it does so on the basis of an emancipatory rather than fundamentalist agenda. Consequently, excluding these more political humanitarians is irreconcilable with an agonistic ethos, and it appears appropriate to criticise the insistence by the UN and other major international organisations on an orthodox interpretation of neutrality as a move that is primarily aimed at upholding existing power relations and thus contravenes the network's own commitment to localisation.[168] Simultaneously, the unjustified nature of the exclusion also lifts the obligation on the part of the humanitarian resistance actors to engage agonistically with powerful actors. Consequently, their continued cross-border relief efforts should

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[163]On the emergence of meta-governance norms in reaction to polysemy, see Holzscheiter et al. 2016. The more general argument that contestation induces change in normative structures is also made, among others, in Acharya 2018a; Krook and True 2012, Wiener 2014.

[164]Petersen 2015.

[165]Bolletino and Manzanero 2022, 18.

[166]Quadrini 2024.

[167]Kamal and Benowitz 2022.

[168]Kamal 2023, 8–9.

be regarded as being legitimate even though their norm enactments are disavowed by the network.

Conclusion

This article offers a novel approach to the normative interrogation of global network governance that goes beyond judging their institutional qualities against external normative standards. Drawing on pluralist ethics, it locates the democratic potential of such mechanisms in their ability to cultivate an agonistic ethos, in which actors' divergent understandings and enactments of the network's norms are accepted rather than negotiated away through codification, deliberation, and adjudication. Since global networks are unlikely to realise this potential fully, a normative appraisal needs to be rooted in an empirical analysis of the processes through which different actors assert, contest, and enact the norms that guide the governance activities of a given network.

The result of these considerations is not a call to organise all of global politics through networks, but an argument about how global network governance could, under certain conditions, contribute to organising global politics in ways that embraces the diversity of human life, rather than trying to govern it away. Such thinking is desirable in any circumstances, but it becomes especially acute at the current historical juncture. If Western liberal hegemony really is giving way to a 'multiplex' world order in which diverse worldviews and value systems compete and coexist, the possibility of acting jointly toward common goals in a spirit of inclusivity and mutual respect is both a moral imperative and political necessity.[169]

To be sure, no network tolerates differences without limits, and this raises difficult questions. The mere fact of exclusion cannot be a principled argument against networks – as Mouffe affirms, exclusion per se is not anti-democratic but a condition for any kind of politics.[170] However not all exclusions can be defended on grounds of political and ethical prudence, especially if they serve to reinforce existing power relations. Critical approaches to norm contestation rightfully problematise differential access to processes of norm meaning-making based on global structural hierarchies. What is required, then, is making these boundaries visible and therefore a matter of debate.

Rather than providing final answers, this debate needs to be guided by the spirit of 'critical responsiveness,' which requires a continual readiness to question one's own assumptions and ethical stance.[171] As the case study of Southeast Asian humanitarian governance demonstrates, this process also implies an obligation – for both researchers and practitioners inhabiting powerful network nodes – to listen to voices who contest dominant norms from the outside.[172] Existing scholarship provides little guidance on mechanisms through which this could be achieved, and more systematic research is needed on how an agonistic ethos can be cultivated under the particular challenging conditions of deep pluralism in international society.[173] With that said, based on the empirical evidence from this and other studies, it would seem that open-

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[169]Acharya 2017.
[170]Mouffe 2000, 20; 2013, 14.
[171]Connolly 1995.
[172]Cf. Fougére and Solitander 2020.
[173]Buzan 2023.

ended dialogue processes, in which the agenda is determined by those on the margins and trust-building rather than consensus-building and policy-making is the main goal, could be a particularly apt way to foster such attitudes.[174]

While the primary focus of the article was to develop a framework for thinking about democracy in global network governance, it also holds lessons for the three theoretical approaches it enlists in this exercise. For contestation theory, it engenders a suggestion to consider more strongly informal contexts for, and solutions to, norm polysemy. In fact, global network governance may be a place where the normative ideals of the approach can be more easily accommodated than in the institutional settings that have hitherto formed contestation scholars' main empirical focus. For ES pluralists, the article encourages further theorizing about the micro-social foundations for the macro-social structures they envision. What kind of practices does an international society need to foster for pluralist tolerance to emerge? For agonistic theory, finally, the study intervenes on the side of those who argue that agonism is in fact possible beyond the confines of the nation-state, while at the same time broadening the scope of potential sites for it beyond transnational social movements and toward global network governance. It also highlights that determining the limits of agonistic respect is a highly contextual task that will involve different considerations depending on the scale and configuration in which politics unfold and the issues that are at stake. Given that today's complex challenges require more trans-boundary action than ever even as political cleavages appear to be widening and deepening, more research is urgently needed to work out how network governance in different settings can embrace and harness diversity, while also working against structural injustices and attempts to capture governance mechanisms for fundamentalist purposes.

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[174]Westphal 2019, 202.

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