From Conflict to Communities: Fields' Reshuffles and the Emergence of Communities of Practice in Humanitarian Logistics

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Initiatives by agents in a favorable contingency can reshuffle transnational areas of practice and show how fields shape communities of practice (CoPs). The article examines how CoPs emerge and develop and why this happens in some areas and not others. It also explores whether CoPs should be situated within conflictual theories of the international, like field theory. The article argues that CoPs emerge through four stages, whereby (i) the initiative that resourceful agents take at the critical juncture of different fields of practice is followed by (ii) a power reshuffle in the fields concerned due to other organizations recognizing what those agents can offer. The result is (iii) the selective consolidation of common practices only in those fields where organizations engage in collective learning and share the same taken-for-granted. Upon meeting these conditions, (iv) the CoP can resist the competition from other organizations in its field and endure. Empirically, the article examines the case of a CoP that emerged in Dubai from the world's largest humanitarian free zone and as part of the field of humanitarian logistics. Ultimately, CoPs are an ordering principle of international relations that does not contradict—but exists within—the tenets of field theory.

Las iniciativas de los agentes en una contingencia favorable pueden reorganizar las áreas de práctica transnacionales y mostrar cómo los campos dan forma a las comunidades de práctica (CoP, por sus siglas en inglés). El artículo estudia cómo surgen y se desarrollan las CoP, y por qué esto sucede en algunas áreas y no en otras. También estudiamos si las CoP deben situarse dentro de las teorías conflictivas de lo internacional, como la teoría de campos. El artículo argumenta que las CoP emergen a través de cuatro etapas, en las que (i) la iniciativa que los agentes con recursos toman en la coyuntura crítica de diferentes campos de práctica es seguida por (ii) una reorganización del poder en los campos en cuestión, debido a que otras organizaciones reconocen lo que esos agentes pueden ofrecer. El resultado es (iii) la consolidación selectiva de prácticas comunes solo en aquellos campos en los que las organizaciones se involucran en el aprendizaje colectivo y comparten lo que se da por sentado. Al cumplir con estas condiciones, (iv) la CoP puede resistir la competencia de otras organizaciones en su campo y perdurar en el tiempo. De manera empírica, el artículo estudia el caso de una CoP que surgió en Dubái a partir de la zona franca humanitaria más grande del mundo y como parte del campo de la logística humanitaria. En última instancia, las CoP son un principio ordenador de las relaciones internacionales, que no contradice los principios de la teoría de campos, sino que existe dentro de ellos.

Les initiatives d'agents lors d'un hasard favorable peuvent remanier les domaines de pratiques transnationaux et montrent comment les champs façonnent les communautés de pratiques (CDP). L'article s'intéresse à l'émergence et au développement des CDP, et aux raisons qui expliquent qu'ils concernent plutôt certains domaines que d'autres. Par ailleurs, il examine si les CDP devraient appartenir aux théories conflictuelles de l'international, comme la théorie des champs. L'article affirme que les CDP apparaissent en suivant quatre étapes. D'abord, (i) l'initiative prise par des agents ingénieux lors de moments critiques dans différents champs de pratique est suivie par (ii) un remaniement du pouvoir dans les champs concernés après que d'autres organisations ont reconnu ce que ces agents avaient à offrir. En résulte (iii) une consolidation sélective des pratiques communes dans les seuls champs où les organisations pratiquent l'apprentissage collectif et tiennent pour acquises les mêmes choses. Une fois ces conditions satisfaites, (iv) la CDP peut résister à la compétition d'autres organisations dans son champ et survivre. Sur le plan empirique, l'article examine le cas d'une CDP apparue à Dubaï, dans la plus grande zone libre humanitaire au monde et dans le cadre du champ de la logistique humanitaire. Finalement, les CDP correspondent à un principe d'organisation des relations internationales qui ne contredit pas les principes de la théorie des champs, mais existe en son sein.

Introduction

During several hot summer days in 2016 and 2017, I started interviewing humanitarians in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) about their experience of working with Emirati partners when addressing emergencies in the Middle East. The reasons for coming to Dubai were obvious to them: they were all taking advantage of this logistics hotspot. Their interactions with Emirati authorities were more complicated in other areas, like refugee protection, private fundraising, or resource mobilization.

Political scientists typically focus on the controversial and contested, but there is much to learn from what is self-evident and undisputed. In International Relations (IR), the taken-for-granted is the distinctive focus of practice scholars interested in communities of practice (CoPs). These are domains of knowledge like the logistics savoir-faire of humanitarians I met in Dubai and who worked in the International Humanitarian City (IHC), recently rebranded as Dubai Humanitarian. The IHC was the world's largest logistics hub and one of the country's free zones, where

taxes and onshore governmental regulations were all, or in part, bracketed. By the end of 2022, the IHC counted seventy-seven member organizations, which were as diverse as United Nations (UN) humanitarian agencies, international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) headquartered in Middle Eastern or Western countries, and businesses. The IHC Authority ("Authority"), a public institution with judicial personality and representative of the government of Dubai, managed the IHC and assessed membership applications.[1]

Using the IHC space between 2003 and 2022 as a case, I ask how a CoP emerges and develops and to what extent this is a selective process, where CoPs develop in some areas of practice but not in others. Communities are not normally expected to develop in a harsh environment. Therefore, I also ask to what extent CoPs establish themselves through fundamentally communitarian dynamics or if they should be framed by conflictual perspectives. To answer these questions, I combine theoretical insights from (communitarian) practices (e.g., Adler, Bremberg, and Sondarjee 2024, 9) and field theory (e.g., Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 25). I answer their respective calls to uncover conflict among communities and cooperation and change within fields. Inspired by Abrahamsen and Williams's (2011) embryonal and Bourdieu-inspired conceptualization of CoP and fields, I see CoPs developing inside fields of practice.

I make two arguments. Firstly, the establishment of a CoP follows a four-stage process. First, when delivered at a critical time, the initiative of an agent, like the Authority, has the potential to stand out in social spaces, like those of humanitarian organizations working in emergencies worldwide. Second, the initiative gets recognized by other agents in the social spaces concerned, provoking a reshuffle in their relations. The move of humanitarians to Dubai strengthened the Authority's position in humanitarian spaces. Third comes the consolidation of these agents' common practice and the realization of a CoP through collective learning and shared taken-for-granted. However, this is not the case for all spaces previously reshuffled. The IHC grew into a CoP in humanitarian logistics but was less successful in mobilizing financial resources to fund emergencies worldwide. Fourth, a CoP can endure insofar as it can resist challenges, especially those originating in its environment. As the IHC remained the place to be for its members, the CoP persisted, and the Authority could continue offsetting its competitors.

Secondly, field mechanisms frame these four steps of CoP emergence. CoPs ought to be studied as part of international social spaces or fields whose boundaries, like in any field, are a matter of empirical investigation (see Bourdieu 1993, 72). The CoP in the IHC was certainly a bundle of aligned practices of different humanitarian organizations, but it remained connected to surrounding fields of humanitarian response, especially humanitarian logistics. The expansion of the free zone since 2003 and its sustained role as a hub in more recent years reveal the conflictual dynamics in which the CoP operated.

By making these two interlocking arguments, this article contributes to mounting literature on CoPs, as shown by a recent special issue (see Adler, Bremberg, and Sondarjee 2024). More specifically, I propose a way to conceptualize how the common practices of a community emerge, how CoPs establish themselves selectively, and how the communitarian spirit of CoPs does not contradict the conflictual

paradigm of field theory. How CoPs function and operate is not a black-and-white process but goes through hurdles and internal and external contestation. Empirically, the article shows how humanitarian actors from supposedly different horizons are, in fact, intimately bound together. The article examines the case of the IHC, which is unique in practice research. I answer calls in CoP scholarship to engage with non-Western cases, and I join the few (e.g., Bueger 2013; Glas and Balogun 2020; Tieku and Yakohene 2024) who have done the same to demonstrate that concepts like CoPs (and fields) help "understand fundamental aspects of social ordering" in all contexts of world politics (Adler, Bremberg, and Sondarjee 2024, 9; see Bueger, Hofius, and Edwards 2024, 5).

Within and around Communities of Practice

CoPs are "domains of knowledge that constitute communities of engaging practitioners bound by an interest in learning and performing shared practices" (Adler, Bremberg, and Sondarjee 2024, 2). In IR, Adler (2005, 2019) pioneered the study of CoPs, which should be distinguished from their subset communities (Bremberg, Sonnsjö, and Mobjörk 2019, 626; Adler, Bremberg, and Sondarjee 2024, 4; Glas and Martel 2024, 3). These are epistemic communities, which capture how power relates to scientific knowledge to inform policymaking, and security communities, shaped by the practice of peace in solving interstate disputes (Adler 2008; Pouliot 2008). CoPs may overlap with formal institutions (Adler 2008; Bicchi 2021) but capture weakly institutionalized configurations of practices across spatial scales (Bueger 2013; Banerjee and MacKay 2020; Graeger 2024; Tieku and Yakohene 2024; see also Cox 2005, 537), like in the IHC, where practitioners from different organizations formed a community.

Agent and structure at once, CoPs are the *social fabric of relations in action* (Adler, Bremberg, and Sondarjee 2024, 2, emphasis in original) and the "vehicle" for their practitioners' knowledge and practices (Adler 2019, 20, 112). In a CoP, practitioners share "mutual engagement," a "joint enterprise" and a "repertoire of communal resources" (Wenger 1998, 73; see Zwolski 2016, 394; Bueger and Gadinger 2018, 53–4; Adler 2019, 20; Hofius 2023, 132–42; Bueger, Hofius, and Edwards 2024, 4). These practices are enabled by and, in turn, reproduce practitioners' shared background knowledge or the "intersubjective knowledge embedded in practices" and "the subjective representations of intersubjectivity—mainly dispositions and expectations" (Adler 2019, 20). A CoP develops and its practices diffuse when "learning takes place and meaning is negotiated" between practitioners (Adler 2008, 196). Therefore, a CoP needs more than the enlargement of membership and geographical space to grow. CoP growth is a process of social change where collective learning enables cognitive evolution because knowledge aligns participants' conceptual categories and behaviors (Adler 2019).

There are gaps in debates about CoPs, which I will fill with fields. These offer a stronger (but compatible) baseline framework to explain the overall structures of society (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 8). There are different approaches to fields (see Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 23–31), but Bourdieu's is ubiquitous in IR. In his theory (see Bourdieu 1993, 72), fields are structured spaces of positions resulting from the relative power positions that agents—individuals and organizations—occupy in them. Each field is organized around specific stakes and is hierarchical because organizations struggle with one another over recog-

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[1]Formally, the IHC was a free zone with licensed members, administered by the Authority as an arm of Dubai's leadership. In this paper, I also understand the IHC as the *space* where one CoP of organizations in humanitarian logistics developed and where the Authority is a member on a par with other organizations.

nized forms of capital in that space to gain prominence. Power may take different forms—political, social, linguistic, economic or material—but counts in a field only when it becomes "symbolic capital" or recognized power. Agents join a field with a specific set of dispositions acquired in their past, which enables them to perceive the stakes of that field. Dispositions can be intimate to agents and "the way these agents are," but more often, they result from agents internalizing structures to which they were confronted in past times. The dynamic between dispositions and positions produces the practices or patterns of meaningful behavior, which are how any social agent moves in a social space and can, in turn, change dispositions and positions.

Often, fields' hierarchy is presented as incompatible with CoPs (see Martin-Mazé 2017; Adler 2019, 109–17). Other times, overlaps between CoP and fields are either not unpacked (see Williams 2007; Abrahamsen and Williams 2011; Pouliot in Martin-Mazé 2017, 206) or are sidelined to foreground the joint enterprise of CoP and "the quality of interaction and sources of coherence within orders" (Bueger, Hofius, and Edwards 2024, 3, 11; see Banerjee and MacKay 2020, 280; Sondarjee 2023, 329–30; Glas and Martel 2024, 3). Instead, in this article, I show that field theory sheds light on at least three aspects of CoPs: their environment, emergence, and relationship to conflict.

First, existing research explores how CoPs participate in the organization of world politics and what is outside and around them (Bueger, Hofius, and Edwards 2024, 4; see also Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). An order organized around CoPs is relational because it emphasizes social learning and meaning-making (see Adler 2019, 142–51; Bicchi 2021, 12; Adler, Bremberg, and Sondarjee 2024, 3–4; Glas and Martel 2024, 3), and relations and processes are its basic units (see McCourt 2016, 478–9). Relations produce effects only when enacted in practice and vice versa (McCourt 2016, 479). Thus, an order organized around CoPs must be enacted through practices or socially meaningful and organized patterns of action (Pouliot 2016, 49; Drieschova and Brueger 2022, 7; see Bueger and Gadinger 2018). Practices may form "landscapes," "constellations," "collections," or "fields" (see Sondarjee 2023, 329). But, in its theory of cognitive evolution, Adler sees CoPs as a "configuration" of practices, each constituting an order as part of an "environment" or broad "world ordering" (Adler 2019, 2–3, 26). Here, CoPs are what "makes the social order possible in world politics" (Adler, Bremberg, and Sondarjee 2024, 2), and their environment is the space for their interactions (Bueger, Hofius, and Edwards 2024), for what happens at the boundaries of CoPs themselves (Sondarjee 2020; Glas and Martel 2024; see Wenger 1998, 103, 126), or for communities of CoPs (Nicolini 2012; Hofius 2023). Ultimately, these perspectives portray the environment more as a residual space between communities than a proper relational space existing around *and* through CoPs. Wenger's (2010, 189) "market of knowledge," where practices organized into CoPs compete, comes close to conceptualizing a relational space in ways resembling field dynamics instead.

A world order organized around fields also combines relationalism and practices but is better equipped to capture the power differentials that necessarily feature through CoPs environment and that cluster around issue-areas. Fields' practices are organized vertically and hierarchically, and, within that, communitarian practices (Pouliot 2008; Abrahamsen and Williams 2011) and collective action (Fligstein and McAdam 2012) are admitted. Fligstein and McAdam (2012, 59) argue that interfield relations abide by the same relational and hierarchical principles governing fields inter-

nally. Liu (2021) presented a typology of interactions between fields, which can overlap (Pouliot 2016, 265; Lesch and Loh 2022), be nested (Steinmetz 2016), or include subfields. However, the exact process through which fields breed communities is still unclear and should avoid oscillations between the two (Martin-Mazé 2017, 208–9).

Second, CoP literature unpacks how CoPs evolve and "spread" through collective learning (Adler 2008, 195; see Banerjee and MacKay 2020, 279; Bicchi 2021, 13). Research on how CoPs emerge or where their common practices come from is less widespread. Bicchi (2024) divides it into two approaches. One foregrounds the relations between CoPs and their preexisting founding practices in cases where practices align in response to a practical problem (see Banerjee and McKay 2020; Bueger 2013). Here, CoPs are free from the boundaries of formal institutions and are not reified as "things" (see also Nicolini 2012, 92). The other approach prioritizes CoPs relations with institutions, which explains why scholarship on "CoP formation" would usually draw a direct link with formal institutions (see review by Bueger, Hofius, and Edwards 2024, 5). This line of CoP research is more common and follows, in turn, two streams. From a knowledge management perspective, the relation is usually top-down and prescriptive, whereby institutions create and cultivate CoPs (Bicchi 2024, 6–8). Alternatively, IR approaches conceive the relations between CoPs and institutions as bottom-up (Bicchi 2024, 4–6). CoPs emerge spontaneously or autonomously and then influence or "do" institutions, whose primary added value would be to provide venues and incentives to CoPs (Bremberg 2015, 687; see Schulte, Andresen, and Koller 2020).

My framework in four steps bridges the perspectives reviewed by Bicchi to explain CoP emergence. First, it holds that patterned actions emerge as agents respond to a change in their environment or field reshuffle. Second, institutions as agents can be creative (see Bicchi 2024), set a CoP in motion, and remain a "primus inter pares" afterward, including as providers of venues (see Wenger n.d.). However, this does not mean they act top-down, retain full control of the CoP (see Vitelli 2017), or cultivate a CoP as Bicchi intends it. Instead, third, institutions can activate CoPs only within the space of relations and practices they try to brave, and, by becoming themselves members of the CoP, they would later evolve and change. Presenting CoPs as enmeshed with the practical quest of international actors to stay afloat is my contribution to the call for putting power in world politics at the forefront of CoPs (see Marshall and Rollinson 2004; Zwolski 2016; Adler, Bremberg, and Sondarjee 2024, 9) and for capturing CoPs that "traverse formal organisations" (Bueger, Hofius, and Edwards 2024, 11).

Third, I shed light on the conflictual character of CoPs and how it relates to cooperation within CoPs and their survival. Across the social sciences, communities are imbued with conflict (see Collins 2010; Zuern and de Wilde 2016). Wenger and Lave recognized this in their original conceptualization of CoPs (Hofius 2023, 55), but academic and managerial perspectives have largely depicted communities as harmonious (Nicolini 2012, 89; Schulte, Andresen, and Koller 2020, 155). Only more recently, contestation has been reintroduced as a defining feature for CoPs (see Adler 2019, 114; Bremberg, Sonnsjö, and Mobjörk 2019, 626). They may be shaped by continuous contestation internally (Martel and Glas 2022), at the boundaries with other CoPs (Glas and Martel 2024), or both, and by means of internal and external forces (Sondarjee 2024). Overall, these perspectives explain *how* members enact practices, but without threatening the community as such (see Hofius 2023,

8). Following recent norm contestation literature (see especially Wiener 2018), these analyses emphasize that CoP practices are intertwined with the norms of their background knowledge, since every practice is an appropriate course of action for whoever enacts it (see Adler 2019, 24). CoP members would then be in conflict over their prevailing norms, on which depends recognition of competence or epistemic power and thus their status among other members (see Sondarjee 2024, 4).

However, conflict does not stop at the boundaries between CoPs and may challenge CoP background knowledge. In this article, it is the conflict forging the fields where various CoPs may operate that decides *whether* a CoP can exist and develop (for example, IHC humanitarian logistics) or not (for example, resource mobilization in Dubai). Not everything is conflictual in a field (Steinmetz 2016, 114) since agents share a "belief in the importance of what the field is about" (Sending 2015, 22) as if they were normatively bound to that social space (see Lesch and Loh 2022, 3). Only then, in my view, do some agents share a subset of more cooperative and epistemic norms that would become the background knowledge of their CoP. However, field conflict is less about norms and epistemic power specifically than about domination through the cumulation of symbolic capital (Sending 2015, 23). Power in fields may stem from knowledge and other resources (e.g., material, linguistic) but requires the legitimacy and recognition brought by symbolic power to turn into capital and count in its field. Conflict over symbolic capital is key to changes that start in the field (Martin-Mazé 2017) and then trickle down to CoPs. It provokes reshuffles within fields that can lead to practice alignment or misalignment (Bremberg 2015; Bicchi 2024), to new CoPs, or to the end of old ones. That struggle for symbolic power continues beyond the creation of a CoP, which other agents in the field may challenge or break. The stakes are higher in a field understanding of conflict because it is at the origin of CoPs emergence and their survival.

Finally, I address scholarship on humanitarian logistics, the UAE, and the Middle East. Humanitarian logistics is:

> [...] the process of planning, implementing, and controlling the efficient, cost-effective flow and storage of goods and materials as well as related information from the point of origin to the point of consumption for the purpose of alleviating the suffering of vulnerable people. The function encompasses a range of activities, including preparedness, planning, procurement, transport, warehousing, tracking and tracing, customs and clearance (Thomas and Kopczak in Ziadah 2019, 1688).

The vast literature on humanitarian aid has employed field theory (e.g., Krause 2014) but has only recently been interested more specifically in humanitarian logistics (Ziadah 2019, 1685; see Jenss and Schuetze 2021). The paper shows that combining fields and CoPs offers convincing explanations of how humanitarians from different horizons—UN, INGOs, (Gulf) states and the private sector—merge in this area of practice. It also leverages a case in the UAE to understand the emergence of CoPs elsewhere instead of seeing the country as the usual exception in IR (Hanieh 2018; Khalili 2021). My analysis goes beyond the burgeoning literature on Emirati assertive foreign policy. There may be linkages between military, security, and aid strategies, like shown by Young (2023) or Ziadah (2017, 2018, 2019), who authored rare close analyses of the IHC. This may also be one of the soft power tools Dubai uses to raise its international profile, including vis-à-vis the Emirate

of Abu Dhabi (see Koch 2021). Nonetheless, genuine cooperation between humanitarian actors in the IHC exists and is only partially driven by Dubai.

Four Stages for the Emergence of CoPs within Fields

Field theory offers an integrated social theory of the international (Fligstein and McAdam 2012; see also Banerjee and MacKay 2020). CoPs may connect "large-sale configurations" to "their respective small-scale interaction orders" (Hofius 2023, 76; see also Bicchi 2021, 35; Glas and Martel 2024, 3), but that is because they depend on the broader structures of their fields (see Marshall and Rollinson 2004). Against the accusations that fields are about immobile "power stratification and hierarchy" and social reproduction (Adler 2019, 112), their connection to CoP shows that fields do change. Change stems from the relation between different fields (see Liu 2021) and from their internal struggle for capital (see Martin-Mazé 2017) that generates CoPs. Presenting CoPs in this light is a demonstration that CoPs also change and should not be reified (see Nicolini 2012, 89; Hofius 2023, 7) since they are permanently subject to relations and practices that leave their boundaries blurred.

Bourdieu did not write on CoPs as we intend them today, but his conceptualization of fields extends to them, as proposed by Abrahamsen and Williams (2011). In their work on South Africa, they discuss how the evolution in the relations and practices between public and private security actors in the global security field manifested in the creation of bounded and local communities of (security) practice. However, they do not unpack the steps of the process. Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014) recognize how agents wield influence in a specific context through steps in the conflictual work of practices, but they overlooked how that process may also engender collective learning. As this article shows, foregrounding conflict is ideal for conceptualizing and contextualizing the origin, change, and failures of CoPs, which are zones of like-mindedness and collective learning where not all members are equal. These zones are as genuine as allowed by the contestations and hierarchies in each field and are sustained by a background knowledge that normatively bounds agents to cooperate about specific aspects of the field's stakes.

I identify four stages for the emergence of CoPs. First, one or more agents transfer to a field of practice dispositions and resources cumulated in other fields. Sustained by a logic of practice, they are after symbolic capital and implement initiatives without necessarily following a defined strategy (see Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 894–5). The field is populated by other agents who struggle to stay afloat or get their own way and who, at that point in time, can perceive the resources the first agents have to offer. This scenario is not agent-centric but works like a critical juncture where contingency heightens a certain agency and can instigate a new course of events (see Capoccia 2016; Pouliot 2021). It also resonates with Bourdieu's (1990, 55; 1993, 72–3) propositions that agents must be disposed toward the stakes of a field to be willing to participate in it while maintaining some creative leeway. The capital of these agents transfers across fields but takes on a new value every time, since "[p]ower dynamics are contingent on the specific relationships in which they are taking place" (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 892). With the opening of the IHC in 2003, the government of Dubai, embodied by the Authority, started actively participating in the field of humanitarian logistics (and of resource mobilization) by offering services of interest to humanitarians caught in a Middle East in crisis.

Second, the field's configuration of capital begins to change as it reacts to the initiative of the new agents. Their resources gain recognition, are activated as symbolic capital, and reshuffle the field (see Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 893). The first few years of the IHC show that the resources put forward by the Authority started gaining considerable recognition. They incentivized humanitarian organizations headquartered internationally to relocate their logistics operations to Dubai progressively. Like when a stone is thrown into the water and circles form and expand, the Authority's initiative reshuffled, at least to an extent, the field of humanitarian logistics and resource mobilization. These movements engendered by Dubai's initiative in the fields of humanitarian response will continue to adjust but will align as a CoP only in the next stage.

Contextual field factors sustain CoPs, but their emergence is also a matter of practices and negotiations among their members. In the third stage, agents embark on a collective learning process until displaying features typical of a CoP. By 2022, organizations in the IHC shared a mutual engagement because, through intense exchanges and spatial proximity, they now agreed on the meaning of their joint activities; a repertoire of common resources, or the tools, artifacts and routines that become part of the CoP practice and a joint enterprise as they collectively negotiated responses to given situations and agreed on what mattered or what actions required adjustment (Wenger 1998, 73–84). The alignment of their practices also signaled that members had developed the common sense or background knowledge that sustains collective learning. Therefore, background knowledge had been produced and reproduced through interaction and disposed organizations toward making sense of reality in similar ways. Importantly, the emergence of CoPs is selective because not all organizations reach this third stage (see Bicchi 2024, 4). The enterprise of members that had moved to Dubai for fundraising or pure profit making remained dependent on (conflictual) relations with Gulf agents in their field but external to the CoP. They might have remained formal IHC members but failed to become a CoP.

Fourth, I will examine the conditions of CoPs endurance. To persist, CoP members must pursue meaningful interactions, and whatever agent initiated the move must continue investing in the process. CoPs, which are themselves born out of field struggles, can tolerate levels of internal conflict. Internal conflict may help CoPs to evolve but does not fundamentally undo them and their background knowledge as external pressures and conflict from the surrounding field might do. In other words, some conflict mechanisms in the field allowed a CoP to emerge and endure, while others challenged it. I will show how, once established, a CoP may empower some of its agents in the field, which, in turn, mobilizes competing organizations in the same space. To borrow from Adler:

> […] when communities of practice expand across institutional and national boundaries, their own intersubjective knowledge and identity help structure an ever-larger share of people's intentional acts at the regional or global level (Adler 2005, 14).

Empirically, as CoP members settled with the IHC as their go-to location, Dubai's symbolic power strengthened in the field of humanitarian logistics. That neighboring countries, in a regional race for leadership and profit, started rivaling Dubai by inviting IHC members to relocate shows that Dubai had consolidated its field position. However, the background knowledge of CoP members in the IHC was too solid to be dissolved by these attempts.

Methodology

For six months between 2016 and 2017, and in parallel to my research on the IHC, I was in the UAE to provide communication and research services to one organization interested in humanitarian responses. During those months, I regularly visited the IHC for other purposes than my direct academic research. I could meet the staff from various IHC member organizations over coffee in the hall or the corridors of the office compound. Not only could I get a good sense of which organizations were actively working in the space. But I also observed the contrasting dynamism between the office compound—quiet and, at times, empty—and the warehouse space—a platform for regular international humanitarian operations.

These types of observations helped inform questions for thirty semi-directed interviews that I later conducted with staff from all IHC members' categories (the Authority, UN agencies, INGOs, and private sector) either in the office compound or at the warehouses compound. Twenty-two of these interviews are directly used in the article and were conducted in 2017, 2018, and 2022. From interviews, I interpret participants' interpretations of their practices (see Sondarjee 2024). This is a legitimate method in CoP and field scholarship, especially when ethnographic observations are not available (Pouliot 2013; Bueger and Gadinger 2018, 149–51; Adler, Bremberg, and Sondarjee 2024, 7). Interviews are more than just talking about practices, since "representation and performance are two sides of the same 'practice coin'" and discourses are practices that stand on "tacit knowledge that underlies their production and reception" (Hofius 2023, 110). In the analysis, I started by interpreting the refrain repeated by all interviewees on the advantages of operating from Dubai as like-mindedness, which oriented me toward CoP literature. I then coded the interviews' transcript for CoP key features as described by Wenger (1998). This retroductive process successfully showed that a CoP was at play (although not for all interviewees) and what its challenges might be. I used other data—primary documents, press material, and some quantitative data—to corroborate interviews and to reconstruct the origins of that CoP as part of a field. I extracted background knowledge from that initial CoP refrain. Background knowledge is usually tacitly shared by members as "the way things are done" but can be articulated in words when challenged or questioned (see Stein 2011), as I did when asking participants why they worked from Dubai. Participants further articulated this knowledge as they discussed potential challenges to their CoP, which resonates with research on how crisis situations allow researchers to tap into background knowledge (Hofius 2023).

CoP scholars may disagree that organizations (and not individuals) can be agents that learn and not just "venues" where practices are institutionalized by CoP members (Adler 2005, 19). However, current relational approaches are comfortable with the idea that organizations may be agents of practices (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008; Go and Krause 2016, 12). In my interviews, the individual and the organization often overlapped because organizations in the IHC had one, or just a few, staff or because participants, who usually talked to me in their personal capacity, spoke as if they were de facto representing their organization. Moreover, it would be impractical in the space of this article to distinguish between practices among individuals and practices

among organizations, considering that the IHC had seventy-seven formal member organizations.

I choose the CoP in the IHC as my case because my thick and longitudinal empirical analysis enables theory development. By tracking the origins of a CoP back to the initiative of an agent in the contingency of a field, I could connect approaches on CoPs and fields. Thus, I picked up from where Abrahamsen and Williams left their Bourdieusian take on fields and CoP, unleashing the potential of "field" theory in transnational settings even further (Go and Krause 2016, 11). Showing what it takes for a CoP to fail served to strengthen my approach. I show new relations between the macro or even transnational level and the micro and situated level, with applicability beyond the Gulf and logistics. Finally, examining how common practices evolve across four stages in the space of one article requires a case that is not as large as other CoPs, like the Atlantic security community (see Adler 2008, 197).

Stage 1: The Initiative of an Agent at a Critical Juncture

Humanitarian logistics is a field where those directly impacted by a crisis (host governments, communities, and local or regional aid agencies) and international actors (donor countries, UN agencies, INGOs, and logistics companies) confront one another over how logistics should be executed (Kovács and Spens 2007, 108). It is distinct from other humanitarian fields, like resource mobilization where public and private actors compete for donor funding to support the recipients of their programs. Logistics and fundraising are the tasks of staff based in separate departments, who may barely know or see one another (Interviewee 1, 2022) or work from different cities.[2] One interviewee from the World Health Organization (WHO) insisted that warehouses had their own reason to exist:

> This is not an office … I want to insist on this…it is a WHO warehouse. We are a warehouse and all the activities and facilities are under the warehouse facility […] For us [WHO], the warehouse was the core [of the reason for being in Dubai]. We are here because we want the warehouse (Interviewee 2, 2017).

Humanitarian logistics expanded from 2000. After approaching several governments, the UN Secretariat chose the facilities donated by the Italian government in Brindisi as its global humanitarian depot and designated the World Food Programme (WFP) as the entity in charge, at the expense of other agencies (UNGA 1997, 1999a). The depot in Brindisi is the first of the hubs of the UN Humanitarian Response Depot ("UN Depot"), where WFP and adhering partners (e.g., NGOs, UN agencies, and governments) retain buffer stocks of relief items ready in case of emergencies. In 2004, the weak response to the Asian tsunami convinced governments and aid agencies to invest more in logistics, and, in 2005, the UN established a Logistics Cluster led again by WFP to foster coordination (Altay and Labonte 2011, 89). Humanitarian logistics is conflictive because it may perpetuate imperial dynamics against recipients (Ziadah 2019; Solitander and Meriläinen 2022) or entice international actors in a competition around funds, procurement contracts, and the set-up of the logistics architecture. For instance, UN Depot has wrestled to mobilize sustainable funding or to negotiate with governments about the condi-

tions for new hubs (WFP 2014). Agencies like the UN Development Programme or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were a challenge to UN Depot because they managed their logistics autonomously and from Copenhagen (Inomata 2008).

The early 2000s also worked like a critical juncture favoring Dubai. On the one hand, the field was conducive to changes. First, the stakes of humanitarian logistics were now recognized across borders, and its architecture was being defined while the UN Depot looked for new hubs. Second, the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the Middle East upheaval that followed made humanitarian funding needs skyrocket. They also created a vacuum in the nascent field, specifically regarding which country could offer the best logistics support in that region. In 2001, WFP, specifically, sought safer locations for its staff:

> WFP Fast IT and telecom intervention team's stock was based in Islamabad and then with the war in Afghanistan, security and whatever […] Dubai was selected as a temporary safe haven (Interviewee 3, 2018).

At the time, Dubai stood out in the region for the "ease of doing business" (Interviewee 4, 2017), the port facilities at Jebel Ali—the largest manmade port in the world and a free zone—and technological advancements (ECOSOC 2000). The United States had already shipped humanitarian supplies from Dubai (UNSC 1994), and two separate branches of the royal family had established small humanitarian compounds, which the IHC will later incorporate (Interviewee 5, 2017).

On the other hand, Dubai operated heavily in the regional transport economy. For instance, in 2000, Dubai Port International had acquired the management of Djibouti Port (see UNCTAD 2002). Dubai's success rested largely on a business model built on free zones at home, or industry-specific bounded areas where taxes and onshore governmental regulations are all, or in part, bracketed. The UAE was also the stronghold of the US military in the Middle East and, in those years, Dubai was the place where Taliban and Iranian officials had come for talks (see UNGA 1999b). The ambitions and positions that Dubai had gained in the business logistics and foreign policy fields made it gradually sensible toward the specific stakes of humanitarian logistics because recognition and success in one area was bound to boost the others (Ziadah 2019; Elkahlout and Milton 2023, 12). For example, there is a business incentive in hosting international organizations at home (Ivanova 2021, 136). Humanitarian logistics operations were also not as politically intrusive as other UN operations. Thus, it is unsurprising that when emergencies intensified in Iraq and WFP needed to expand its telecommunication unit, Fast IT and Telecommunications Emergency and Support Team (FITTEST), the government of Dubai gained interest in WFP work. This is the recollection of a WFP senior staff who met with the Ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed, during a mission in the UAE in 2003:

> We were told that Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid would like to meet us […] very little he knew about WFP but then we started talking […] he became very interested in that it's not about feeding people, but helping people stand again on their feet, like building assets, restoring livelihood […] and he said, whatever you need we would like to be part of this (Interviewee 3, 2018).

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[2]For example, MSF created an autonomous logistics unit (MSF Logistique) and UNICEF Supply Division is managed from Copenhagen but public and private partnerships from New York and Geneva.

Table 1. Organizations recipients of humanitarian funds for logistics, sorted by type
(years 2003–2022)

Organization type	Amount (USD)
Multilateral organizations	3,839,338,500
— *UN agencies*	*2,966,398,243*
Other	496,679,605
Red Cross/Red Crescent Organizations	357,340,858
— *International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement*	*354,449,124*
— *Red Cross/Red Crescent National Societies*	*2,891,734*
Not specified	245,980,402
NGOs	242,307,290
— *International NGOs*	*221,228,085*
Private organizations	56,970,161
— *International private organizations*	*54,255,213*
Governments	49,897,170
Total	5,288,513,986

Source: https://fts.unocha.org (accessed July 7, 2023).

Yet, Dubai could have hardly become a permanent hub had it not been for the initiative of its leadership. The creative leeway of the Dubai government as a new agent that was about to enter humanitarian logistics showed later in 2003, when Sheikh Mohammed created the IHC as a free zone by transferring into the new field a business model trained in other sectors, like business logistics (Interviewee 6, 2017). In the 2012 IHC law, Dubai will explicitly state that the objective of the IHC was to "create a conducive environment to support the humanitarian services" and "enhance [its] position (…) as a centre for humanitarian emergencies" (Ruler of Dubai 2012). Dubai maintained close control of the IHC by appointing the leadership. The Authority also judged the applications of new members and their finances and monitored their activities. For example, they could fundraise only in partnership with an Emirati organization and were forbidden to offer any humanitarian assistance to people in the UAE.

At the same time, through the Authority, Dubai also granted some of its resources or types of capital to the new field as an "entry fee" that would stimulate the interest of other humanitarian agents (Bourdieu 1993, 74). First, the Authority leveraged its political capital by providing a clear legal framework to facilitate the establishment of two main categories of organizations (IHC 2018, 7–8). One included nongovernmental, governmental, and nonprofit humanitarian organizations that operated internationally, like UN agencies and international or Emirati NGOs. Emirati onshore rules made the establishment of UN offices in the UAE otherwise complicated or nearly impossible for INGOs. The other category included commercial or for-profit entities specialized in relief items and logistics services. Second, the Authority used its economic capital to offer the UN free spaces and services in a stable country, despite a region in turmoil. Finally, the Authority leveraged its cultural capital by offering a space where members could utilize Dubai's logistics expertise and facilities. More generally, Dubai was a hub for Arab and in-

ternational media, and its expatriate and donor community was the most diverse and dynamic in the UAE (Interviewee 7, 2017), if not the entire Gulf region. The physical proximity of the members in the space could be attractive for commercial companies trying to approach nonprofit members as potential clients, for small NGOs to learn more from experienced UN organizations about humanitarian logistics, and for all members to coordinate emergency preparedness and response, including through joint cargo flights.

The new IHC regulations also tapped into the field of resource mobilization. For Dubai, attracting international organizations to work in the UAE was an opportunity to showcase that it was a trustworthy partner. Thus, the Authority also promised to support humanitarian organizations with onshore fundraising—a highly restricted sector in the UAE, especially in the post-2001 anti-terrorist climate. This could be of interest to international aid agencies, which, in the early 2000s, had already started diversifying their funding sources and planned to solicit rich Gulf countries, whose public and private donors were notoriously generous but had traditionally only funded national charities. Also, the Authority promised to offer the UN offices free of charge like nowhere else in neighboring countries.

Stage 2: Fields' Reshuffle

The advantages offered by the Authority equaled its potential to attract key humanitarian organizations as members in the IHC. These advantages initiated a reshuffle of fields, especially humanitarian logistics, where the Authority's offer was the strongest. Of all those who were partaking in humanitarian logistics between 2003 and 2022, UN agencies as a group were the largest recipient of logistics funding globally (56 percent of the total; Table 1). The International Red Cross and Red Crescent came second (about 7 percent of the total). As these key logistics organizations started recognizing the IHC and reorganized themselves accordingly, the

Table 2. Selected organizations in the IHC, sorted by field

Logistics field		
Humanitarian organizations (UN)	FITTEST (WFP), UN Depot (WFP), Global Vehicle Leasing Programme (WFP), UNHCR, UNICEF, WHO	
Humanitarian organizations (non-UN)	The Authority, MSF Logistique, IFRC, UAE Red Crescent, US Aid	*Will grow into a CoP*
Commercial companies	Alpinter, Intertrade, DHL, Kuehne + Nagel	
Resource mobilization field		
Humanitarian organizations (UN)	WFP, UNCHR, UNICEF, Office for the coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Food and Agriculture Organization, UN Development Programme, UN Department of Security and Safety, UN Fund for Populations	
Humanitarian organizations (non-UN)	International Committee of the Red Cross, MSF, SOS Children Villages, Fred Hollows Foundation, Red Pencil, Yalla Give	*Will fail as a CoP*

Source: author's compilation.

potential created by the Authority realized itself and turned into symbolic capital.

WFP was among the first organizations to join the IHC (Khaleej Times 2003), eventually becoming FITTEST's definitive headquarter. Rapidly, the IHC became a good candidate (Interviewee 8, 2022) to join the UN Depot network of hubs alongside Brindisi and, later, Accra, Panama City, Kuala Lumpur, and Las Palmas. By 2017, 60 percent of all UN Depot transports originated from the Dubai hub (WFP UAE 2018, 2). By 2006, UNHCR had moved its largest global stockpile of humanitarian supplies (e.g., tents, blankets, prefabricated warehouses) to the IHC, followed by one of the three hubs for its Global Fleet (UNHCR 2018). The shipment volume handled in 2006 was 3,056 m², serving two countries, and increased to 72,982 m², serving thirty-seven countries in 2014 (UAE UNCT 2016). In 2004, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) opened in Dubai one of only a handful of hubs supervised by the Supply Division headquartered in Copenhagen (UNICEF 2004). In 2016, the Authority "offered" (Interviewee 2, 2017) WHO some warehouses precisely when WHO facilities for Yemen in Djibouti needed to relocate. In 2018, this became WHO Global Logistics Hub or, the largest WHO repository of prepositioned health supply and equipment. In comparison, UN representational (or political) centers for the Gulf or MENA region were much more scattered (Abu Dhabi for UNHCR, Riyadh for UNICEF, or Cairo for WHO).

Following in the UN's footsteps, large nonprofit international organizations established or intensified their presence in the IHC warehouses. The International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Logistique, or US Aid moved stockpiles into the IHC. In addition, a handful of commercial companies became formal IHC members, either to market their humanitarian reliefs to UN and INGOs, like Intertrade and Alpinter, or to offer logistics services, like Kuehne + Nagel or DHL.

As with its beginning, the expansion of the IHC had to do with the conflictive state of the field, which was exacerbated after the Arab Spring in 2011. On the one hand, organizations needed to rethink the spaces from where to organize humanitarian operations due to emergencies escalating in Syria and Yemen. On the other, attracting international organizations by granting unique conditions in the IHC or seeking international recognition as a humanitarian logistics champion[3] reflected Dubai's competition in external policy and business. As a key channel of humanitarian aid to Yemen, Dubai could reinforce UAE control over strategic ports in that country when these were also of interest to Saudi Arabia (see Ziadah 2019). Similarly, the UAE had sealed important military or food security deals with countries along the Horn of Africa and the shores of the Red Sea —like Sudan, Ethiopia, or Egypt—that were also large aid recipients. Logistics humanitarian assistance could help win hearts and minds in these countries, which were the strategic targets of others, from Qatar and Saudi Arabia to Oman and China (Ziadah 2017; Young 2023).

In the crisis context of the 2000s and 2010s, the IHC continued attracting UN and INGOs to the office compound where resource mobilization could be handled. WFP and UNHCR private sector partnerships for the Middle East and UNHCR global Philanthropy Unit started to be overseen from Dubai. The IHC became the only place in the Gulf where INGOs could open an office through a process-based, standardized and transparent legal framework and a license to fundraise instead of relying on personal support and favors from a local benefactor (Interviewee 6, 2017). The choice of the IHC as the best place to administer work in the Gulf could result from a "feasibility study" where INGOs compared the IHC to other locations in the region (Interviewee 9, 2017). Sometimes, regional human resources or relations with Arabic media could be successfully administered from the IHC (Interviewee 10, 2022). The capital of the Authority and field reshuffles beyond the space of the IHC reached the second stage of CoP emergence in this second domain of humanitarian work, but not to the extent of leading later to a CoP like in logistics. Table 2 shows the leading organizations operating in the IHC space sorted by field, but only those in logistics will turn into a CoP.

Stage 3: The Selective Consolidation of CoPs

By December 2022, the IHC stored 90.5 percent of the relief items distributed from Dubai, Brindisi, and Panama (Humanitarian Logistics Databank n.d.). It was the human-

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[3]For example, in 2016, the warehouse of the IHC staged the launch of a high-profile report on aid funding with UN Secretary General Ban ki-Moon present. In the words of an interviewee, "you can be in the media every day" thanks to humanitarian logistics (Interviewee 5, 2017).

Table 3. Evolutions in the IHC space

Year	2003	2011	2018	2022
Total number of formal IHC members	4[i]	46	81	77
— *Humanitarian organizations (UN)*		*8*	*8*	*10*
— *Humanitarian organizations (non-UN)*		*23*	*55*	*49*
— *Commercial companies*		*15*	*18*	*18*
IHC warehouse surface (in sqm)	30,000	105,000	127,000	140,000

Sources: dubaihumanitarian.ae (accessed June 3, 2023).
[i]A breakdown by category of organization is not available for this year.

itarian depot with the world's largest covered storage (UN Depot n.d.), whose warehouses had significantly expanded in time (Table 3). Dubai, as well as WFP, UNHCR, UNICEF, WHO, and also IFRC and MSF Logistique, employed the IHC as a key hub, especially for emergencies in the Middle East and East Africa. Admittedly, the number of formal members of the free zone had plateaued, if not decreased, after 2018 (Table 3), but this was due to the warehouses' inability to store more items. Organizations in the resource mobilization camp were also coming and going. Field mechanisms and the Authority's initiative started the IHC expansion, and the Authority continued providing the infrastructure for the IHC to last. However, it is through practice that organizations working in the warehouses (including the Authority) could learn collectively, recognize each other's competence, and become "full member[s] and knowledgeable and skilled practitioner[s] within [the] community" (Bueger and Gadinger 2018, 52). This also meant that they came to share background knowledge and, eventually, show the mutual engagement, common resources, and a joint enterprise typical of a CoP.

First, as they engaged with one another, these organizations clarified the nature of their common contribution to international humanitarian assistance. A long-term UN-HCR supply chain staff recalled that, until 2011, the Authority and the UN "were not so close [nor] were working together on emergencies" as the Authority was "only providing premises […] but over time [it] started understanding [the UN] core functions" and providing "life-saving support" to the UN (Interviewee 11, 2022). For instance, the Authority developed systems to help commercial companies and nonprofit members gain faster and smoother access to governmental services and "have the government literally with them" (Interviewee 11, 2022; see also Interviewee 12, 2022; Interviewee 13, 2022). This support would be offered consistently by the Authority team, which—as explained by one commercial member—was available to assess projects proposed by members, such as installing solar panels on the warehouses (Interviewee 13, 2022). A WFP staff explained that the word "logistics" summarized what WFP did in Dubai and that a lot of what the Authority did "is exactly what we do" and "we played a major role in helping them as well" (Interviewee 4, 2017). In 2016, Haya, the Ruler's wife and Chairperson of the Authority, personally called Giuseppe Saba to be the IHC CEO, a position he occupied beyond 2022. Saba—former UN Depot chief and an "encyclopaedia" (Interviewee 14, 2022) of humanitarian logistics, including in the eyes of INGOs in Dubai—was not interested in "doing UAE politics" as previous CEOs. Instead, he made it his mission to upscale IHC logistics operations, building on what he had learned in the WFP (Interviewee 5, 2017). Collective learning included

all categories of members. An INGO volunteer explained that they would not know much about "supply chain, procurement, what is the need on the ground, and how to coordinate an intervention" if "we were not an IHC member," but like this "we were exposed to it" (Interviewee 14, 2022).

Second, common tools, especially IHC facilities, were an anchor to this mutual engagement. Membership and operations would not have grown if, in 2011, the Authority had not moved the free zone to a bigger plot of land closer to airport and sea infrastructures. Since then, the free zone has included one compound of warehouses, showrooms, an open yard, and, a few miles away, one office compound. Members had been submitting requests for an upgrade of these facilities, and plans for a relocation were ongoing (Interviewee 12, 2022; Interviewee 15, 2022). Space was assigned to individual members, but during regular evaluation plans of the compound, the Authority could ask members to share spaces where needed (Interviewee 11, 2022). Members also shared skills and equipment. WHO, IFRC, and UAE Red Crescent could lend one another staff or a force lift for a day, and if "a flight has additional space [the Authority] will make it available to all partners so that we can equally distribute the space on an aircraft and everyone can respond" (Interviewee 12, 2022). UN agencies could solicit DHL expertise for an evaluation in-kind of their warehouses (Interviewee 16, 2022).

Third, members joined forces for the fastest and most efficient humanitarian response possible. When I commented that a DHL person in the warehouse was wearing a blue UNICEF T-shirt, one interviewee responded, "the speed is the ultimate goal of humanitarian distribution, no matter if it's a yellow, blue or green T-shirt" (Interviewee 13, 2022). During the COVID-19 response, for example, the Authority increased WHO warehouses because the demand for the agency's medical equipment skyrocketed. As space was limited in the IHC, UN agencies reached out to their IHC commercial partners for support. Kuehne + Nagel offered storage space in its commercial facility, while DHL sent one of its employees for a secondment in UNICEF, which needed additional expertise to manage vaccine provisions (Interviewee 13, 2022; Interviewee 17, 2022). In parallel, the Authority negotiated more free space and transport for the UN with Dubai-based organizations outside the IHC, like Dubai Ports or Emirates SkyCargo (Dubai Ports World 2021), which opened a special airbridge to India for the urgent transport of medical items from the IHC (Emirates 2021). Beyond the COVID-19 crisis, the Authority would be ready to take calls 24/7 to support members preparing for an emergency and provide free emergency flights. Dubai Ruler donated many of these flights and "would never refuse a flight to the IHC CEO" (Interviewee 15, 2022). For instance: "he gave four

flights to Mozambique, four times up and down. A 747 takes 600 cubic meters of relief items. That is a lot of stuff!" (Interviewee 14, 2022).

The alignment of practices and collective learning in the IHC was sustained by members' shared background knowledge. This was the taken-for-granted that Dubai—specifically, the IHC space—was the "place to be" or the natural location for humanitarian logistics, especially for the Middle East and East Africa. Some interviewees said this explicitly: "Dubai made their conditions right to attract those agencies (…) and it feels natural [for them] to invite […] the big boys who are managing huge supplies" (Interviewee 18, 2017), or "if we have to follow the trend, I think we have to be here" (Interviewee 11, 2022). However, background knowledge could also be interpreted from how all my interviewees, as in a refrain, would justify the reasons for operating from the IHC: its strategic location in the middle of the time zones and close to the hottest humanitarian crises of their time; its warehouses as free or inexpensive for its members; its access to advanced logistics facilities and expertise in Dubai and frequent free cargo flights offered by the Ruler of Dubai through the Authority. As put by one interviewee:

> The environment – besides the government's contribution – is central. It is in the middle of the time zones, with a logistics network which is very developed and a relatively stable basis, because here it is also a basis, it is not a little operational centre, it is a global basis for FITTEST (Interviewee 19, 2018).

These reasons also used to be repeated by CoP members in their communications to the press and at meetings.

Conversely, a CoP failed in the field of resource mobilization. INGOs could struggle to pay their membership or close their offices due to unsuccessful fundraising strategies (Interviewee 15, 2022). For example, in 2018, Save the Children left the IHC, and, in 2019, MSF drastically reduced its fundraising operations.[4] In other cases, INGOs were too small, and the staff often worked from home because the IHC was far from their work meetings in central Dubai (Interviewee 20, 2022). UNICEF had only started to seriously explore partnerships with private donors from Dubai around 2018 (Interviewee 1, 2022). The Authority had been listening to some of these members' needs and improved its administrative support for fundraising (Interviewee 4, 2017). However, the success of fundraising depended less on the Authority and more on donors outside the IHC, who were either unreliable funders or far more inclined to fund local charities. Many organizations applied for an IHC membership with the wrong perception as they "know the region badly (…) and see the Gulf a bit like El Dorado, which does not correspond to the reality" (Interviewee 19, 2018). These members also targeted the same pool of donors and competed with one another for the same resources instead of truly partaking in a joint enterprise. The unimpressive achievements in the field of resource mobilization signaled the Authority's limited power of attraction in this area of work, where organizations, including potential funders outside the free zone, were not that eager to recognize each other's values and preferences. This also further demonstrates how logistics and resource mobilization belonged within separate fields of practice in humanitarian response.

Stage 4: The Endurance of a CoP

The fourth stage concerns the implications of CoP emergence on the field position of the organizations initiating the movement and the endurance of the CoP itself. Once in place, a community is not immune from internal or external tensions. It would be a mistake to buy the Authority's rhetoric, which routinely celebrates the IHC as "the largest humanitarian hub" with "world-class facilities."

Internal tensions in the IHC did exist. Members might disagree on the management of routine interactions but without fundamentally questioning the utility of being in Dubai. More than one interviewee, including in the Authority, complained about the poor state of the warehouses' cooling infrastructure, entrance doors, and truck loading system, or limited space. Aware of these problems, the Authority was considering moving the warehouses into new premises. Some members lamented that Dubai's in-kind contributions should go further and cover more warehouse management or local transportation costs in the UAE, especially when these costs and the living expenses of international expatriates were profiting the local economy. Finally, when the IHC was subject to media coverage, some member organizations could feel pressured to overpromote it.[5]

Yet, the organizational movements and changes in the field's equilibria of power that empowered Dubai also instigated threatening contestation against the IHC. These tensions originated outside the community, from those who were equally eager to turn into humanitarian logistics hubs. Competitors included Abu Dhabi in the UAE, which had developed new humanitarian facilities as part of its COVID-19 response and, to an extent, rivaled and doubled some of the work in the IHC during the pandemic (Interviewee 1, 2022). Oman (see Ziadah 2017) or Qatar, which had been planning a "UN House" (Interviewee 15, 2022), also competed with Dubai. However, the main competition came from Saudi Arabia, which intended to surpass the UAE (and Dubai) by offering logistics support to humanitarians through its King Salman Centre for Humanitarian Relief (Hanieh 2018; Ziadah 2018; Economist Intelligence Unit 2023). Besides Saudi Arabia, IHC members I interviewed measured the advantages of the IHC against other hubs, like Copenhagen (for the quality of its facilities), China (where numerous relief supplies are produced), or Uganda and Senegal (for their proximity to emergencies on the African continent) (Interviewee 8, 2022; Interviewee 14, 2022; Interviewee 16, 2022; Interviewee 21, 2022; Interviewee 22, 2022).

That my interviewees mentioned these alternative locations shows how other agents can increase their attractiveness and symbolic power in humanitarian logistics, much like Dubai did in the early 2000s. Thus, external challenges to the taken-for-granted beneath the CoP and Dubai's key positions in humanitarian logistics were at the horizon. As Pouliot (2008, 282) wrote, CoPs "never simply happen to be there: they necessarily are the result of past struggles among agents to define reality." The IHC required regular maintenance through enlargements and upgrades of a free zone that was, after all, on Emirati soil and also required the continuous engagement of its members.

Ultimately, the attractiveness exercised by alternative hubs had yet to reach momentum as the IHC showed resilience. For example, when Princess Haya fled Dubai and divorced the Ruler in 2019, Saba's position was not jeopardized because his expertise as a logistician outweighed the

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[4]This information on MSF is based on the author's email correspondence in 2019 with MSF in Paris, which oversees operations in the UAE.

[5]The entire paragraph draws from interviews with Interviewee 8, 2022; Interviewee 12, 2022; Interviewee 15, 2022, and Interviewee 16, 2022.

personal relation of trust that he had with her (Interviewee 1, 2022; Interviewee 14, 2022; Interviewee 15, 2022). Further, the number of shipments and countries served from the IHC increased between 2021 and 2022 after the start of the war in Ukraine (IHC 2023). This shows that hubs closer to the crisis might have been activated without jeopardizing the Dubai hub. Crucially, no logistics operations had moved from the UAE to Saudi Arabia, and the refrain about the advantages of Dubai continued to appear in interviews conducted in 2022. Quotes from UN staff and a commercial company show how their background knowledge about Dubai remained unchanged:

> I cannot say that Dubai will remain forever the best hub, it can change in terms of operational context. But then if you look at it, why would you not use the best place given and that is why we expanded in Dubai and not in other locations (Interviewee 11, 2022).

> Other opportunities would pop up in the region [but] if you have been well established you can do the same thing here at the same price, why would you go there (Interviewee 21, 2022).

In summary, the sources of capital leveraged by Dubai and that had attracted humanitarians in the first place gained symbolic power in the field from the process of CoP emergence, as outlined in steps 1 to 3. The economic, political, and cultural capital that Saudis had subsequently put together—for example, legal frameworks, smooth border checks, and spaces—was insufficient thus far to provoke another reshuffle of the humanitarian logistics field. In a way, the dispositions shared by CoP members as taken-for-granted irradiated the field around the CoP and kept alternatives at a distance.

Conclusions

The article examined how conflict breeds cooperation in international relations. I set out to enhance the potential of CoPs to explain empirical realities—including those at the margins of IR, like humanitarian logistics and the Gulf region—by developing a framework where CoPs exist within the tenets of field theory. Thus, I contested that CoPs are self-sustaining: their practices originate outside them, and the relationship with their respective environments has much to say about how CoPs thrive or fail. The article contributes to debates on CoPs by conceptualizing their environment more coherently and explaining where CoPs come from and how conflict is pervasive in them.

I asked, first, what process leads to the emergence and development of CoPs and what makes some areas of practice more conducive to their development than other areas. Second, I asked whether CoPs stand by a communitarian spirit only or whether they are fundamentally sustained by conflictual dynamics. Following Bourdieu's sociological toolbox, I was inspired by how Abrahamsen and Williams (2011) connected movements of capital in the global security field to the emergence of a community of practice in South Africa. To develop their embryonic framework, I chose a case that I could examine through rich empirical data that I collected between 2017 and 2022.

My first argument is that CoPs emerge and develop through a four-stage process. First, in the favorable contingency of a field, one initiative showcases the potential in material, political, or cultural capital of the agents respon-

sible for it. Dubai's decision to open a free zone, administered by the Authority, at a time when the humanitarian sector was in turmoil, could be interesting for humanitarians in the fields of logistics or resource mobilization. Second is a reshuffle of the fields concerned, whereby organizations value the initiative and entrust the agents behind it with symbolic power. In the early 2000s, humanitarian organizations moved progressively to the free zone upon recognizing what the Authority had to offer. Third is the consolidation of common practices intended as meaningful patterns of actions, but not in all the fields of practice initially mobilized. Only organizations in humanitarian logistics learned from one another and started sharing background knowledge leading to their mutual engagement, common tools, and joint enterprise. Fourth, I showed that CoPs with solid common practices and shared background knowledge, can endure the challenges from other organizations in the field. Accordingly, the CoP in the IHC was well-positioned to push back against challenges that had originated in its neighborhood. The rebranding of the IHC as "Dubai Humanitarian" in 2024 may be interpreted as an attempt by the Authority to make Dubai shine in the now crowded field of humanitarian logistics. The stages above lead to my second argument. The emergence and endurance of communitarian experiences like those I observed in Dubai depend on the dynamics of a broader field of activity, where organizations stand in conflict and competition with one another.

The paper has some broader implications. It points to how initiatives developed by local or smaller actors can reshuffle broad areas of practice when developed at a critical juncture. Once established, CoPs offer a pathway for genuine collaborations between the organizations involved. Because cooperation in the form of CoPs is rooted in collective learning and common take-for-granted, it has a high chance of enduring, including against external sources of tension. Crucially, the article elevates the importance of non-Western cases to generate frameworks of wide applicability. The four stages that the article identified can help interpret the emergence of existing CoPs in different spheres of activity and inspire the creation of new ones.

List of Interviewees

Interviewee 1. 2022. Interview with UNICEF, online.
Interviewee 2. 2017. Interview with WHO, Dubai.
Interviewee 3. 2018. Interview with WFP, Dubai.
Interviewee 4. 2017. Interview with WFP, Dubai.
Interviewee 5. 2017. Interview with the Authority, Dubai.
Interviewee 6. 2017. Interview with Save the Children, Dubai.
Interviewee 7. 2017. Interview with UNHCR, Dubai.
Interviewee 8. 2022. Interview with UN Depot, Dubai.
Interviewee 9. 2017. Interview with SOS Children Villages, Dubai.
Interviewee 10. 2022. Interview with Fred Hollows Foundation, online.
Interviewee 11. 2022. Interview with UNHCR, online.
Interviewee 12. 2022. Interview with WHO, online.
Interviewee 13. 2022. Interview with commercial company 1 in the IHC, Dubai.
Interviewee 14. 2022. Interview with Lions, Dubai.
Interviewee 15. 2022. Interview with the Authority, Dubai.
Interviewee 16. 2022. Interview with commercial company 2 in the IHC, Dubai.
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