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International Organisations in the Field:
Governing Mixed Migration in and through Practice

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Abstract

How can we study migration-related international organisations (IOs) and their contribution to creating global standards for governing mixed migration? While most scholarship on global migration governance conceives of international organisations as collective actors with clearly delineated boundaries and official mandates, this paper suggests reconceptualising them as open systems and turning to their inter-organisational dynamics in the field in order to understand how they impact on governing global migration beyond formal regulatory competences. The paper challenges the dominant theoretical approach to studying IOs, which centres on the concepts of authority and legitimacy, and argues that a theoretical framework that focuses on knowledge, practice and professions allows us to open the black box of IOs and to capture how IO staff on the ground, at the frontline of migration movements, govern mixed migration in and through practice. By taking frontline workers as analytical entry point, we can move from the level of formal global policy-making and implementation to the level of inter-organisational communities of practice in the field – and thus analyse informal forms of governing that rely on knowledge rather than authority. The paper concludes by way of an empirical illustration from the Aegean Sea in order to show how the theoretical shift and its methodological implications can come to empirical fruition. It exemplarily demonstrates how border and coast guards, immigration officials, humanitarian workers, asylum lawyers, doctors, social workers, psychologists and lifesavers, affiliated with IOM, UNHCR, EASO, Frontex, humanitarian NGOs and volunteer groups coordinate and compete over how to address the issue of cross-border mixed migration movements along the Eastern Mediterranean route.

Keywords

International Organisations, Global Migration Governance, Frontline Workers, Knowledge, Practice.

1. Introduction

International organisations play an increasingly important role in governing human mobility.¹ As cross-border migration has been recognised as a growing phenomenon, both in terms of scope and complexity, initiatives to address it at the global level have been burgeoning over the past decade. The Global Forum for Migration and Development (GFMD) meets annually since 2007 to multilaterally discuss national responses to migration challenges. The Global Migration Group (GMG) coordinates the expanding migration-related activities of United Nations (UN) agencies and other intergovernmental organisations (IGOs). Non-state actors collaborate in expanding coalitions and mobilise around state-led and UN-led forums and events. Regional Consultative Processes (RCPs) take place regularly in all major regions of the world and regional actors like European Union (EU) border and asylum agencies increasingly take on functions with a strong external dimension. Migration has explicitly been included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the aim of facilitating “orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people” (UN General Assembly 2015: 21) and by the end of 2018, two Global Compacts for Migration and Refugees shall be adopted.

Previously, migration had been marginalised in global governance.² In contrast to other global issues like health, environment, trade or finance, the degree of institutionalised cooperation on global migration still ranks comparatively low and only a few binding global regulations exist.³ Despite the awareness that global migration will persist, as human mobility is a central dimension of globalisation, and the growing insight that states are unable to manage it unilaterally, no encompassing legally binding covenant has been agreed upon as of yet and no formal transfer of comprehensive competences to an international organisation for migration has occurred (Castles 2004; Newland 2010; Kalm 2010b; Micinski and Weiss 2018). Since global migration touches upon the very core of state sovereignty – the control of a state territory and population – states have been reluctant to relinquish sovereignty and delegate authority in this area. It is a highly contentious policy field where normative, economic and security interests conflict and where it is difficult to establish which global public good its governance should produce (Martin and Martin 2006; Betts 2011). As a result, many scholars attest that global migration governance is under-regulated and highly fragmented (Betts, ed. 2011; Koser 2010; Newland 2010; Aleinikoff 2007).

The institutional fragmentation, however, does not imply that migration governance is a purely national matter. The attempts to globalise migration governance – beyond existing arrangements on forced migration – and to institutionalise cooperation at the global level which have been made since the turn of the millennium in order to harmonise migration policies among states and to better coordinate the activities of global actors involved in managing migration matters means that migration policy-making has been increasingly scaled-up beyond the state. Today, a plethora of public and private IOs is increasingly involved in politically shaping and implementing norms on human mobility.

¹ I would like to thank the participants of the Migration Working Group Workshop Series at the European University Institute (EUI) for their valuable feedback and discussion of the paper. I would also like to thank the participants of the EWIS workshop in Cardiff for their helpful comments on an earlier version.

² The global refugee regime constitutes an exception. However, it only addresses a limited section of the complex topic of migration. Further analytical and political issues around the refugee-migrant distinction will be discussed below when I introduce the notion of *mixed migration*.

³ For instance, the 1951 UN Refugee Convention which constitutes the legal dimension of the global refugee regime. Other central legal documents that regulate human mobility and the rights of people on the move are the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families as well as the UN Human Rights Conventions. For an extensive list of relevant legal documents, cf. <http://www.globalmigrationgroup.org/international-normative-framework> (last accessed 18/05/2018).

Against this backdrop, it is surprising that we still know little about the role of international organisations⁴ for governing human mobility (cp. Geiger and Pécoud 2014). Due to the fragmentation of the global migration governance architecture, scholars grapple with how to study the impact of global migration organisations on shaping global standards which steer cross-border mobility. A majority of the studies on global migration governance treat the lack of organisational centralisation as a problem per se. Consequently, they focus on the ideal institutional design of governing migration globally and on how to remedy the deficiencies of the current institutional set-up through political reform (Newland 2010; Betts 2011). Assuming that comprehensive formal competence is necessary for global actors to engage in designing and implementing norms and standards on migration-related issues, these authors discuss how institutional arrangements should look like in order to render global migration policy-making more effective and efficient. This paper suggests, however, to question some of the theoretical underpinnings that inform such accounts and to turn to alternative theoretical approaches that allow conceptualising the impact of international organisations on governing global migration beyond formal regulatory competences.

The question this paper intends to answer therefore is: How can we study migration-related international organisations and their contribution to creating global standards for governing mixed migration? It suggests turning to the sociology of knowledge and organisation theory instead of drawing on theories of global authority and legitimacy to conceptualise how IOs influence the governing of global migration. A different theoretical approach promises to provide the analytic tools to make IO's influence on migration governance – in spite of organisational overlaps and authority lacunas – intelligible, both on a conceptual and an empirical level. The paper argues that a theoretical framework centred on knowledge, practice and professions allows us to open the black box of IOs and to capture how IO staff in the field, at the frontline of migration movements, govern migration in and through practice. This paper thus contributes to a growing research programme on IOs in the field and the practices of IOs (Côté-Boucher et al. 2014; Infantino 2014; Bigo 2014; Fine 2017; DeBono 2018; Beerli 2018).

The paper is structured as follows: First, it will give a brief overview of the central IOs that address mixed migration at the global level to introduce the subject matter of this paper. Following this brief mapping, it will discuss the literature on IOs and global migration and challenge its rather limited conceptual and methodological instruments which are largely rooted in global governance theory. In a third step, it will argue that slight ontological shifts will allow us to see and study IOs differently. After introducing an alternative theoretical account which focuses on the professional knowledge of IO staff and their practices in the field, across organisational boundaries, it concludes by way of discussing the methodological implications that follow and providing an empirical illustration to show how the theoretical move of analytically opening up IOs can come to empirical fruition.

2. International Organisations and Global Migration Governance

Since the end of the Second World War, the number of people crossing national borders has been constantly on the rise. The Population Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) has recorded 244 million people to be a migrant in 2015, an increase of 41% since 2000 (2016: 1). Forced migration reached a peak with 65,3 million people fleeing war and persecution in 2015, an increase of 5.8 million people compared to 2014. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), an additional number of 10 million persons is estimated to be stateless (2016: 2). In short, migration and displacement have been on the rise over the past fifteen years and this trend is expected to continue (IOM and UN DESA 2012; UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon 2016).

⁴ I use the term international organisations (IOs) to designate both non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and intergovernmental organisations (IGOs).

As the number of people moving has been growing, so has the attempt to regulate cross-border mobility at the global level.⁵ While migration has long been neglected in the international political arena, it has slowly emerged as a global topic since the turn of the millennium and drastically gained in attention during the often-called migration and refugee crisis of 2015 and 2016 which put migration and displacement on the top of political agendas. In September 2016 a UN High-Level Summit addressing the Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants took place in New York in order to address migration and asylum questions in tandem and to lay the groundwork for two Global Compacts for Migration and Refugees that are currently being negotiated and to be adopted by the end of 2018.⁶ The Summit marked a turning point in the history of the UN and international migration as it, for the first time, explicitly addressed refugees and migrants jointly, thereby recognising a global reality of *mixed migration*.⁷

Academic and political observers speak of mixed migration in order to recognise the inherent interlinkages between forced and voluntary movements (UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon 2016; van der Klaauw 2010; Crisp 2009, 2008). The notion of mixed migration unravels the categorisation of people on the move into (legitimate) refugees and (illegal) migrants and acknowledges it as a rather artificial distinction that often does not pass the litmus test of contemporary empirical realities along two dimensions:⁸ First, people, who move without official authorisation and documentation, usually travel along the same routes in mixed movements. In the absence of legal migratory pathways, people often travel through irregular channels – without the required documentation and by relying on smuggling networks – and usually enter a destination country illegally. Whether someone qualifies as a refugee under the legal definition of the 1951 Convention has to be determined in an administrative procedure after that person has applied for asylum in the host country. Second, a person who leaves her country of origin, crossing international borders into other nation-states, usually has mixed motives for migrating. Experiences of violence and deprivation often interlink and force people to move. Motivations and experiences also change along the route, frequently making it hardly possible to unequivocally determine who is truly in need of international protection and who migrates voluntarily and for purely economic benefits (cp. van der Klaauw 2010: 60; Picozza 2017). Against this background, global migration organisations increasingly recognise to be dealing with mixed migration (UNHCR 2007a; Crisp 2008, 2009; van der Klaauw 2010; IOM 2015; UNHCR/ILO 2001;

⁵ The terms *mobility* and *movement* are used non-distinctively here in order to avoid the categorisation of (voluntary) migration and displacement (forced migration). They are used to describe all movements of people, irrespective of more specific characterisations that might apply. The specific research interest of this paper pertains to *border-crossing* movements, i.e. migration that occurs across state borders and therefore exhibits a global dimension as this type of movement is primarily addressed by global actors. It further pertains to *mixed migration* in particular, as such forms of irregular or undocumented migration are forms of “spontaneous migration”, Betts (2013: 75) which IOs address directly in the field (cp. below).

⁶ For the zero drafts of the two compacts, cf. https://refugeemigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/180205_gcm_zero_draft_final.pdf and <http://www.unhcr.org/Zero-Draft.pdf> (last accessed 18/05/2018).

⁷ Some scholars importantly pointed out, however, that the negotiation of two distinct compacts will further institutionalise the separation between migration and displacement, cf. for instance Carling (2018).

⁸ There is thus growing consensus that the distinction between refugees and migrants is a historical artefact or legal construction and a misleading dichotomy, cf. Long (2013); Karatani (2005). Some scholars, however, consider a differentiation between migrants and refugees to be a governance technology as such. According to this line of reasoning, distinguishing between refugees, who are framed as being in need of international protection, and migrants, who are presented as straining the admission capacity of host states and communities, serves as a legitimisation strategy for curbing migration and returning migrants to countries of origin or transit; cf. for instance Scheel and Ratfisch (2013); Koch (2013); Kalm (2010a); Geiger and Pécoud (2010). UNHCR also attempted to keep the strict delimitation between refugees and migrants intact in order to defend the particular protection mechanisms available to this group of people under international law, cf. Feller (2005). It has been accused, however, of defending the distinction in order to preserve its monopoly as global asylum agency and secure its own organisational survival Betts (2013); Long (2013).

ILO 2016). The remainder of this section will briefly map the different global actors that are involved in governing mixed migration.

The New York Summit not only laid the groundwork for the two Compacts but also meant that the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) became an UN-related organisation (UN General Assembly). Before, IOM had been an intergovernmental, project-based organisation with no formal links to the UN system. Scholars and policy-makers had long criticised the lack of a strong international organisation for migration with an independent, comprehensive and normative mandate. In fact, the absence of a strong UN migration agency has been at the heart of the critique of global migration governance as incoherent and insufficiently authoritative (Global Commission on International Migration 2005; Newland 2010). However, even with IOM being officially integrated into the UN system, the global governance of mixed migration continues to be comparably decentralised with a high number of international actors involved and no clear organisational focal point. While IOM has been the leading IGO on migration matters since the 1950s, it continues to neither dispose of a protection mandate nor its own operational budget (cf. Guild et al. 2017; Brubaker and Hall 2017). It continues to be a service-providing organisation, which means that it depends on funding that has been earmarked by its member states for the specific projects they instruct IOM to implement.⁹ Its core activities therefore still centre on logistical operations such as assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) or border governance, which are mainly direct assistance to governments rather than migrants.¹⁰ However, IOM is increasingly providing support to vulnerable migrants such as victims of trafficking or unaccompanied and separated children. Through programmes like the Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MCIC) Initiative, IOM works towards improving the “protection of migrants when the countries in which they live, work, study, transit, or travel experience a conflict or natural disaster”. IOM’s Department of Operations and Emergencies implements humanitarian assistance in post-conflict situations and other migration and refugee emergencies to assist individuals in need. Through this type of activities, IOM becomes much more of a protection-oriented agency than its formal mandate and institutional set-up would suggest and a crucial actor for the governance of mixed migratory movements.

Next to IOM, UNHCR has taken on a crucial role for governing migration as it recognised that (undocumented) migration and displacement are interrelated. While stressing that it “does not consider itself to be a migration organization” (UNHCR 2007b: 1), UNHCR takes the clear stand that patterns of human mobility have become increasingly complex and that due to the intersections between refugee and other migratory movements, UNHCR can only fulfil its mandate if it engages with global migration as well. If, traditionally, people of concern to UNHCR have been refugees and asylum-seekers only, the organisation now refers to its constituency as “people on the move” (Crisp 2009: 74). As Jeff Crisp puts it, “there was a broad consensus that the traditional UNHCR notion of ‘people who are in need of protection’ can no longer be restricted to refugees” (2008: 7; cp. van der Klaauw 2010: 61; Betts 2010b: 31, 2010a). Hence, without explicitly being authorised by its member states to extend the scope of its mandate beyond the narrowly defined area of forced migration and displacement, UNHCR incrementally adapted it out of its own volition and the concern of being side-lined by other actors. While this move has not been uncontested, as it is feared to stretch UNHCR’s organisational capacities and undermine its ability to fulfil its core task of refugee protection, UNHCR has recognised that it cannot remain static but needs to extend the scope of its concern (Crisp 2009: 73–6;

⁹ According to IOM’s Budget and Programme for 2017, the assessed contributions of member states, which will be spent on IOM’s core administrative structure, amount to 51,189,766 CHF (46,9 mio. €). The operational budget (voluntary contributions of the member states), in contrast amounts to 1,034,132,000 USD (947, 65 mio. €).

¹⁰ Most studies on IOM therefore focus on how it contributes to repressing cross-border movement rather than facilitating it. Analysing IOM through a critical lens, these Foucauldian or Gramscian scholars conceive of IOM’s governing practices as restrictive measures that bolster state power and undermine an individual right to free movement Andrijasevic and Walters (2010); Georgi (2010); Georgi and Schatral (2012); Brachet (2016); Pécoud (2010); Caillault (2012).

Betts 2013: 76–8; Hall 2013). As a consequence, UNHCR is now conceived of as a migration organisation that engages in governing global mobility (Koch 2013; Scheel and Ratfisch 2013).¹¹

Other, less central, players for the governance of mixed migration are the International Labour Organisation (ILO) or smaller intergovernmental organisations like the International Centre for Migration-Policy Development (ICMPD). ILO's main focus lies on global labour migration and the protection of migrant workers. While it also addresses regular and irregular crisis migration as well as the link between development and migration, its operational activities are limited compared to IOM and UNHCR and its overall standing within the global migration governance framework is rather marginal (Piper 2017: 378; cp. Karatani 2005: 522–36). ICMPD is an international organisation with mostly European member states that has specialised in facilitating inter-governmental dialogue and cooperation on migration issues as well as capacity-building. Its thematic work concentrates on asylum, legal migration, irregular migration and the migration-development nexus. Similar to ILO, its operational branch is restricted and its general role within the global governance of mixed migration is to assist mostly migrant-receiving states in developing and harmonising migration policies that aim at streamlining entry controls, combatting the root causes of undocumented migration and controlling irregular migratory movements.

Further UN agencies and IGOs, whose mandates partially deal with human mobility like the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the World Bank, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), UN Women or the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) also got increasingly involved in the process of collectively addressing migration at the global level. A UN forum for coordinating their activities, the Global Migration Group (GMG), has been established in 2006 to pool UN expertise and organise joint initiatives (Global Migration Group 2016). Statist collaboration mainly takes place through the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD). Again, these forums do not directly manage mixed migration movements but have a coordinative function and contribute to formal standard-setting on asylum and migration through multilateral negotiations.

Besides, these global forums triggered an increasing formation of non-governmental organisations (NGO) coalitions on mixed migration. While formal access for civil society actors is still highly restricted, networks like the Migration and Development Civil Society (MADE) Network, which formed around the GFMD civil society days, advocate for change in migration policy and practice in order to achieve the effective protection of the dignity and rights of people on the move. In a similar vein, the NGO Committee on Migration, which has consultative status with UN ECOSOC, is an NGO coalition that meets on a monthly basis in New York to advocate for all people on the move at UN level. It represents the main migration NGOs at UN meetings and events and, for instance, contributed to the preparations of the High-Level Summit on the Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants in September 2016 and now follows-up on the negotiations of the UN Global Compact for Migration. In short, NGOs increasingly advocate for the protection of all people on the move and implement humanitarian projects to protect vulnerable migrants in collaboration with intergovernmental actors or in the absence of public projects (Kalm 2010b; Piper 2015; Kneebone 2014; Rother 2009; Thouez 2003).

Finally, regional processes and actors like voluntary, government-led Regional Consultative Processes (RCPs) or the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) also play an increasingly important role in dealing with global migration matters. While RCPs are non-binding, informal and confidential processes which take place to build personal networks among government officials and to foster common understandings of what global migration is and how it needs to be dealt with, EASO and Frontex take on expanding

¹¹ Since UNHCR is in charge of negotiating the Compact for Refugees and IOM is tasked to oversee the process of negotiating the Compact for Migration, their commonalities and overlaps in the field of mixed migration might diverge again through these new responsibilities, cp. Guild and Grant (2017).

operational functions which impact beyond Europe (Marchetti 2010; Lavenex 2015, 2004).¹² For instance, Frontex is training Libyan coastguards on how to conduct search and rescue missions and intercept human smugglers and traffickers and EASO, under the EU's Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), is strengthening the asylum and reception capacity in "third countries" outside the EU (EASO 2013). These regional and inter-regional activities are largely considered as building blocks for global migration governance and, particularly in the area of irregular migration, conceived of as "either a step towards the emergence of a global approach or a facet of more or less coordinated global policies" (Düvell 2011: 2; cp. Thouez and Channac 2006).

This brief mapping demonstrates that IOs have become important entities in global migration governance. How do scholars assess these organisations and study their influence on governing the cross-border mobility of people?

3. The Legal-Formalistic Bias in Global Migration Governance Research

The dominant strand in global migration governance research focuses on IO's origination process and (ideal) institutional design (Elie 2010; Long 2013; Karatani 2005; Betts, ed. 2011, 2013; Newland 2010; Kalm 2010b). Authors who follow a liberal or rationalist-institutionalist approach usually assess the contemporary institutional landscape of migration governance and make strong assumptions about how the global migration governance architecture *ought* to look like and which functions international actors *should* perform. Most commonly, they map the institutions that have been set up at UN level, multilateral and regional discussion forums as well as non-state actors and migration-related IOs in order to establish that global migration governance exists in the first place (Martin et al. 2007; Martin and Martin 2006; Marchi 2010; Koser 2013; Klekowski von Koppenfels 2001; Klein-Solomon 2005; Kalm 2010b). They discuss the existing institutional migration infrastructure and criticise it for its lack of authority and coherence. Rather than studying IO activities empirically, they make normative claims relating to how IOs should be structured in order to be influential.

A common thread of analysis and critique in this literature is the (limited) extent of autonomy from nation-states, the dispersed organisational structure and the (low) degree of formality and obligation. Authors typically argue that while a growing number of IOs and NGOs are now addressing different aspects of global mobility, a comprehensive framework that coherently integrates the governance of the different dimensions of cross-border mobility like travel, labour migration and displacement continues to lack (Kosłowski, ed. 2011; Betts 2013). Currently, institutional competences are scattered across different organisations which leaves significant authority gaps. For instance, UNHCR has a protection mandate for refugees and asylum-seekers as guardian of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. IOM, however, does not hold similar competences for those people on the move who fall outside the legal scope of the Refugee Convention. Even after institutionalising its links with the UN, IOM continues to be a projectised organisation without a normative mandate. Other IGOs only deal with partial facets of global mobility such as labour migration programmes, remittances, border governance, human trafficking, female migrants and refugees, children on the move or the protection of human rights, including the human rights of those people who migrate. Consequently, no coherent multilateral framework and no single IGO with a clear mandate to govern all aspects of global migration exist to date.

Most scholars infer from this "organisational state of the art" that IOs' influence on governing global migration is heavily constrained. They focus on the degree of authority of these organisations

¹² Most of the research that studies the external dimension of Frontex' activities argues that these activities are part of an extra-territorialising of borders or an off-shoring of border control, where the border no longer coincides with the territorial frontier of a country or a region and its governance is being outsourced Marchetti (2010: 161); Kasparek (2010); cp. Infantino (2016).

and conclude that in the absence of comprehensive authorisation through states, IOs' capacity to impact on governing mixed migratory movements must be limited. In short, this strand of research exhibits a strong legal-formalistic bias and concentrates on official mandates, organisational overlap and formal policy-making. In this conception, IOs can either be participants in global decision-making procedures through facilitating multilateral negotiations and conferences, guardians of an international treaty or implementing agencies that realise globally agreed upon programmes and projects on the ground. It follows that as long as such conditions are not given or only partially fulfilled, IOs simply cannot do much – and as such, their practices are not really worth studying empirically. Methodologically, it follows a strong focus on institutional structures, policies and rules with organisational documents such as mandates, resolutions or inter-agency agreements as major data sources.

This conclusion is in large parts due to underlying theoretical assumptions about how governance and the organisation of collective action work in the global sphere. Global migration governance research is heavily influenced by global governance theory which, in turn, is largely built on the concept of authority and legitimacy (Rosenau 1997; Avant et al., eds. 2010; Ruggie 2004; Onuf and Klink 1989). Following this line of reasoning, to govern means to exercise authority or rather, to have a legitimate right to rule-making and implementation (Lake 2010). International actors gain such legitimate rights to rule either through delegation, i.e. authorisation through states, or through the social recognition of their expertise (epistemic authority) or particular normative standing (moral authority). In all of these conceptions states are the original actors in the international sphere and only if they agree to share their sovereignty can other actors become influential. IR' statist ontology thus in large parts explains the strong focus on IOs' formal mandates and their degree of autonomy.¹³

4. Switching the Theoretical Lens: International Organisations, Professional Networks and Communities of Practice

As the previous section has shown, most scholarship on global migration governance and migration IGOs and NGOs treats the absence of a formal legal framework and coherent organisational architecture as a problem per se. Further, most research treats migration IOs as collective actors with separate, clearly delineated organisational boundaries and analyses them in isolation (Loescher and Milner 2011; Betts 2013; Piper 2017; Georgi 2010; Kasperek and Wagner 2012; Pallister-Wilkins 2015; Hess 2010). Even studies that focus on inter-organisational dynamics, typically examine organisational competition and the effects institutional proliferation has on one particular organisation instead of looking at the entirety of the organisational complex that governs human mobility (Betts 2013). In contrast to these studies, this paper suggests to reconceptualise the fragmented institutional landscape of global migration governance as a linked institutional ecology and to study how governing practices emerge across organisational divides within communities of practice at the frontline of mixed migration movements. Through this theoretical move, I will argue, we can conceive the impact

¹³ A different strand of research, not rooted in global governance research but in critical border and security studies, challenges the formal-legal bias of liberal-institutionalist research on migration IOs. These authors shift the focus from the institutional to the discursive level and focus on how IOs shape and disseminate discourses about what global migration is and how it should be governed. More specifically, they take issue with the idea of "global migration management" and argue that it tends to depoliticise global migration politics. They largely maintain that it conceals and legitimises repressive border controls and restrictive migration policies. The main endeavour of this critical, often Foucauldian or Gramscian, scholarship is to deconstruct the (hegemonic) discourse of global migration management and to unveil the statist, protectionist rationale behind it that continues to police the movement of people with the help of global actors Geiger and Pécoud (eds. 2010), Geiger and Pécoud (2013, 2014), Pécoud (2015), Kalm (2008, 2012), Walters (2006); Andrijasevic and Walters (2010); Scheel and Ratfisch (2013); Koch (2013), Georgi (2010, 2007). While this scholarship hence studies the (discursive) practices of IOs, it still does not conceptualise how IOs contribute to setting international norms on migration because their research interest lies elsewhere.

international organisations have on migration governance beyond formal competence because it allows capturing the productivity of fragmentation and informality.

International Organisations as Open Systems

What are international organisations and how do they work? In the discipline of International Relations (IR), IOs have traditionally been conceived of as instruments of powerful states or as arenas which enable states to achieve their ends through providing information and reducing barriers to welfare improvement (Mearsheimer 1994/1995; Abbott and Snidal 1998; Koremenos et al. 2001). While constructivist theories have changed this understanding of IOs as “tools” and successfully established that they are international actors in their own right, they continue to conceive the autonomy of IOs in relation to states and anchored the notion of IOs *as international authorities* in international thought (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). The dominant reading of IOs in IR theory is thus very closely linked to the understanding of the role of IOs in global governance theory.

Organisation theory, by contrast, studies IOs *as organisations*. The “organisational turn” in IR (Ellis 2010) therefore promises novel insight into how IOs work and opens fruitful new pathways to conceptualising and empirically examining the role of IOs in global migration governance. One theoretical framework seems particularly suited for making sense of the multitude of migration-related IOs beyond fragmentation and deficiency: open systems theory. Open systems theory, as it has been introduced to IR by Leonard Seabrooke and Ole Jacob Sending (2014), provides an analytical framework for the study of international organisations and their acts as open systems of institutional ecologies and consequently does not treat fragmentation as an anomaly but rather understands IOs as *regularly* being open, overlapping and deeply embedded in social structures. This relational understanding thus allows us to analyse the diversity of migration IOs with limited mandates from a different angle and to see and study the productivity of fragmentation and informality.

Open systems theory can be located within the recent trend in IO studies to turn to organisational sociology (Brechtin and Ness 2013; Dingwerth et al., eds. 2009; Dijkzeul and Beigbeder, eds. 2003; Koch and Stetter 2013; Franke and Koch 2013; Conceição-Heldt et al., eds. 2015). Within this trend, it is now increasingly acknowledged that organisations are not as closed as long assumed in IR theory. In fact, as Steven Brechtin and Garyl Ness claim in their widely quoted article, IOs should be conceptualised as “nearly borderless” (2013: 30). Since organisations are deeply embedded in social environments, organisational boundaries are ever changing and continually becoming more porous. In this context, Brechtin and Ness observe a shift in the conceptualisation of organisations from entities to processes. Organisations, according to this line of reasoning, are in constant flux and best described not as stable actors or static structures but as *organising* as this captures the procedural and relational nature of organisations, which, in essence, are individuals who connect with others in practices of continuous information exchange (Brechtin and Ness 2013: 32).

The open systems framework draws on these basic theoretical tenets and proposes to shift IR’s traditional understanding of international organisations. It ascribes explanatory value to the *professionals* that populate the environment in which international organisations operate. It does not conceive of IOs as pre-constituted actors and abstains from maintaining the boundaries between an inside and an outside of organisations prior to empirical analysis in order to prevent their reification as actors with particular attributes. Rather than assuming fixed organisational boundaries, Seabrooke and Sending intend to explore how these borders emerge and change over time through the practices of transnational professionals (2014: 2–5). They put strong emphasis on how practices are formed and exchanged within professional networks, whereby they shift the analytical focus from the structural features of international organisations to the more encompassing processes of social interaction among transnational practitioners (Seabrooke and Sending 2014: 10). Building on the work on linked ecologies (Abbott 2005) and transnational professional communities (Fourcade 2006; Djelic and Quack 2012; Seabrooke 2014) as well as the sociology of professions more generally (Faulconbridge

and Muzio 2012; cp. Karlsrud 2013), the authors promote the idea of examining how professional actors – irrespective of their organisational memberships – coordinate and compete over how transnational issues and tasks are defined within what is described as an open system of institutional ecologies.

Essentially, this allows to “zoom in on professional interactions on emergent issues in the absence of clear organizational mandates or frameworks” (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2014: 2). As a consequence, the open notion of international organisations as linked institutional ecologies provides the conceptual tools for analysing the professional practices within and beyond organisational contexts (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2014: 4) in the complex environment of governing mixed migration. It enables us to analytically break up global collective actors and to directly study the practices of global migration, asylum and border professionals (cp. Côté-Boucher et al. 2014; Bigo 2014; Mosse, ed. 2011; Kauppi and Madsen, eds. 2013).

Moreover, extending the orchestration literature (Abbott et al. 2014), Seabrooke and Sending argue that the distinction between public and private international organisations loses relevance when read through this lens. The organisational type – IGO, NGO, state or firm – fades into the background as professionals move to the centre of analysis. The open systems approach shows how professional networks effectively cut across different IGOs and global non-state organisations (Seabrooke and Sending 2014: 9–13; cf. Seabrooke and Tsingou 2014: 7; Karlsrud 2014: 87) and therefore allows to study both intergovernmental and non-governmental migration organisations without applying the widespread public/private dichotomy prior to empirical analysis. Thereby, institutional affiliations, organisational boundaries and formal authorisation drastically lose in ontological significance and the capacity of *individual* agents within the global migration governance complex becomes analytically visible which, in turn, enables us to study how they govern mixed migratory movements through professional and practical knowledge, in the absence of a comprehensive institutional framework.¹⁴ In sum:

“The virtue of this approach is that it becomes possible to explore in more detail how professional networks cut across IOs and how learning, or transfer and adaptation of skills and best practice, is not only internal to IOs, but goes on across them as well. [...] Professional networks that cut across IOs [are highly significant] in identifying and accounting for where new practices of governance may be forged in competition between distinct groups.”

(Seabrooke and Sending 2014: 13)

Communities of Practice and Organisational Learning

The open systems of IOs framework takes the practices of global professionals as key analytical entry point and suggests studying how border and coast guards, immigration officials, humanitarian workers, asylum lawyers, doctors, social workers, psychologists and lifesavers coordinate and compete over how to address the issue of cross-border mixed migration movements. It hence enables us to analytically open up the black box of IOs and move away from a conception of IOs as collective actors or global authorities which largely produces an account of inadequacy (cp. above). However, the open system approach mostly stays at the headquarter level of IOs and focuses on organisational elites. In order to understand how IO staff govern migration not only across organisational boundaries but also across organisational levels, i.e. in the field, it is therefore useful to complement open systems theory with the communities of practice approach (Wenger 1998; Adler 2005; Nicolini 2013). Understanding IO staff not only as professionals but also as practitioners adds another theoretical

¹⁴ However, it is important to stress that IOs do not dissolve completely. Organisational structures and constraints continue to play a central role. However, they are not deterministic of IOs’ behaviour or influence. Rather, how IO staff navigate these structures is important – it is their competence that is central for understanding how organisational features play out. The ontological status of IOs is thus defined by the interactions of IO staff across organisational boundaries, in the headquarters and in the field.

dimension to the framework which is important for understanding how IOs govern migration through knowledge and practice. Linking the communities of practice approach to the open system framework provides the conceptual tools for examining *how* professionals interact on emergent issues and how this, in turn, leads to the emergence of governing practices in the absence of clear formal organisational mandates.

Approaches that can be associated with the ‘practice turn’ in IR theory privilege international practices as the central unit of analysis (Schatzki et al., eds. 2001; Adler and Pouliot, eds. 2011; Bueger and Gadinger 2015, 2014; Neumann 2002; Neumann and Sending 2010). Building on the works of social theorists, practice theorists invite us to study global governance through its manifold practices because by “focusing on what practitioners do, we [can] zoom in on the quotidian unfolding of international life and analyse the ongoing accomplishments that, put together, constitute the ‘big picture’ of world politics” (Adler and Pouliot 2011: 1). They argue that an analysis of practice at the micro-level of international relations allows us to study global politics “as it *actually occurs*” (Kustermans 2016: 2, emphasis in original). The communities of practice approach seems to be a particularly useful strand within the international practice “family” to complement the open systems of IOs framework with a definition of practice and a conceptualisation of how practices emerge through the negotiation of meaning and learning in the everyday because it is particularly interested in contexts of organising, work and professions (cp. Nicolini 2009b).

A community of practice designates a social space and a shared domain of knowledge within which practices develop and diffuse through participation and situated learning. When people interact, talk and work together over a sustained period of time, they mutually engage, develop a sense of joint enterprise and build a communal repertoire of routines, ways of doing, tools and stories (Adler 2005: 15). They collectively negotiate meaning and develop shared practical knowledge which enables them “to do their job” (Wenger 1998: 47). “Practical knowledge is a skill acquired through experience. It ensures that we know how to go on, it enables us to handle situations” (Kustermans 2016: 11). A community of practice is thus a configuration of collective practical knowledge and learning which cuts across organisational divides (Adler and Pouliot 2011: 18–9; Adler 2005: 15; Bicchi 2011: 1118). Since learning is not a phenomenon that takes place in a person’s head but a participative social process, a community of practice can be conceived as a form of self-organisation which does not correspond to organisational boundaries. “It is based on sociality among practitioners and on the sharing of practical activities” (Corradi et al. 2010: 267). Similarly, knowledge, in this understanding, is not an individual capability or possession (Cook and Seely-Brown 1999). The communities of practice approach is a

“perspective on knowing in practice which highlights the essential role of human action in knowing how to get things done in complex organizational work. The perspective suggests that knowing is not a static embedded capability, or stable disposition of actors, but rather an ongoing social accomplishment, constituted and reconstituted as actors engage the world in practice.”

(Orlikowski 2002: 249)

Significantly, communities of practice cannot be formed (Roberts 2006: 625) – they emerge from practice which is ontologically prior. As Davide Nicolini cogently puts it: “practice performs community” (Nicolini 2013: 88). Communities of practice neither have a permanent group of members nor fixed boundaries: They exist on every level of human activity and every human is a member in diverse, overlapping and fluid communities of practice (Wenger 1998: 99). Individuals enter a new community through legitimate peripheral participation and situated learning and leave it when they stop partaking in the shared practice (Lave and Wenger 1991).¹⁵

¹⁵ Yet, the very term of *community* of practice has provoked important critique as it tends to counter the core assumptions of practice theory – to start social analysis from practices and not from social collectives. It tends to de-emphasize the procedural, temporary and contingent character of practices, cp. Nicolini (2013: 92–5). Further, Foucauldian critiques of Wenger point out that while knowledge figures central in the communities of practice approach, it has not been sufficiently theorised in terms of power, Contu and Willmott (2003). They highlight the important fact that those who are

Further, a community of practice is a “locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relations, shared knowledge, and negotiation of enterprises” and as such, “holds the key to real transformation” (Wenger 1998: 85). It is a site of knowing in practice where professionals, through learning and negotiating meaning in the everyday, not only perform but collectively change and create practices (Seely-Brown and Duguid 1991: 41). It is hence a space for organisational innovation and learning. Usually located at the organisational periphery, they provide a space for spontaneously occurring experiments where new practical knowledge can emerge, which then can be translated back to the organisational core – thereby bridging the local and the global or different organisational levels (Yanow 2004).

What, then, is a practice? No unified concept of the term exists.¹⁶ One of the prevalent definitions in IR designates international practices as collective, patterned and competent performances which become socially meaningful against the background of existing understandings (Adler and Pouliot 2011: 4; Duvall and Chowdhury 2011: 338). “More precisely, practices are *socially meaningful patterns of action*, which, in being *performed more or less competently*, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify *background knowledge* and discourse in and on the material world” (Adler and Pouliot 2011: 4, emphasis added). Competence, in this sense, differs from common understandings within global governance theory where it usually denotes a mandate or formal authority. In this context, by contrast, it pertains to *practical knowledge* and describes the experiential skill or know-how of certain actors to deal with an occurrence in the material world.

Whether an action is judged as a competent performance and turns into a patterned, routinised action (i.e. a practice) needs to be assessed and recognised by the social environment in which it happens (Seely-Brown and Duguid 1991: 47; Duvall and Chowdhury 2011: 338). “What is considered ‘competent’ at any moment in time and space is a normative judgment” (Gross Stein 2011: 90) and forms part of processes of meaning-making and professional competition over issue definition as it occurs against the yardsticks of professional knowledge. A community of practice can be understood as a “locally negotiated regime of competence” (Wenger 1998: 137) within which competence is established through practice and where knowing is defined as competent participation in practice.

To put it in a nutshell, within a community of practice, professionals create new practices through collective learning, through mutually engaging in processes of negotiating meaning and competence. It is the site where *professional knowledge* gained through formal vocational training and previous experience, on the one hand, and *practical knowledge*, newly emerging through collective learning in the everyday, on the other hand, engage and establish what counts as competent performances and socially meaningful patterns of action. Practice, as such, constitutes a quotidian interaction between the practical and professional dimensions of people’s knowledge (Corradi et al. 2010: 276). The “generative dance” between their professional knowledge and their knowing in practice is the source of new governing practices (Cook and Seely-Brown 1999).¹⁷

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involved in developing and performing shared practices will not do so on entirely equal terms, Fox (2000); Roberts (2006). Consequently, it is central to notice that the term *community* of practice does not imply that learning and engaging in shared practices is a conflict-free process – in involves competition and contestation. Neither does it mean that practices occur in an institutional power vacuum. Professionals backed by powerful IOs for instance, are likely to have more leverage within the communities of practice of the linked institutional ecology of global migration governance, cp. Steffek (2013: 1000).

¹⁶ In fact, the different approaches that are being subsumed under the notion of international practice theory differ quite substantially with regard to their definition of practice and some basic theoretical assumptions. Main lines of contention are questions of change and stability as well as agency and structure. For an overview of the different strands in international practice theory, cf. Kustermans (2016), Bueger and Gadinger (2007, 2014). For an important critique, cf. Ringmar (2014). Due to space restrictions, I cannot engage in a broader discussion of international practice here but will only introduce concepts relevant to this study.

¹⁷ In this sense, I differ from Adler and Pouliot’s understanding of competence. For a general critique of Adler and Pouliot’s largely Bourdieuan understanding of practice and its strong link to (in)competence, which inhibits the possibility for change, cf. Duvall and Chowdhury (2011); Schindler and Wille (2015). Unlike Adler and Pouliot I do not assume that

In the context of mixed migration, governing practices describe the collective, patterned and competent action of regulating the officially unauthorised movement of people across an international border. Such practices emerge and change in and through practice, i.e. through the mutual engagement of professionals, who are affiliated with the different public and private global migration organisations of the linked institutional ecology of mixed migration, within local communities of practice. Working together in the everyday, these practitioners collectively learn and negotiate how to deal with people moving, crossing borders in the absence of comprehensive global rules and formal mandates. Against the background of their professional and tacit knowledge on migration, they compete over how to address this challenge in a competent manner. Since migration and its governance are highly ambiguous concepts and not clearly regulated at a legal-political level, frontline workers, as sense-making actors, have to negotiate what governing mixed migration means and involves.

Frontline workers are hence key for understanding the role of IOs in governing mixed migration (cp. also Lipsky 2010 (1980)). Working on the ground, they are immediately confronted with the phenomenon of mixed migration and, in contrast to policy-makers in Brussels, Geneva or New York, cannot stall decision-making. While they rely on mandates and use organisational budgets to navigate the complex task of managing mixed migration on the ground, they are not merely implementing agents. Given the open and ambiguous nature of governing mixed migration, they have to improvise to create effective ways of addressing mixed migration movements. Through learning-by-doing in the everyday, across organisational divides, they build the skills that allow them to do their job. They create best practices and professional standards which ultimately affect the governing of mixed migration to an important extent.

5. Studying IOs in the Field: Some Methodological Considerations and an Empirical Illustration

This theoretical shift has important methodological implications. Conceiving of migration IOs not only as collective actors or global authorities but as open system within and across which transnational migration, asylum and border professionals coordinate and compete over how to govern migration in and through practice, entails that, to empirically examine IOs and their interactions, it makes sense to “follow the actors” (Latour 2005: 12; cp. Ybema et al. 2009: 5). This means paying attention to what actors do and say and how these activities are embedded in larger arrangements instead of starting with claims about the nature of the global order or fixed assumptions about what IOs are, how they interact and what logics they follow (Bueger and Gadinger 2014: 3; Bueger 2014: 5). Accordingly, interpretive-qualitative methodologies or fieldwork-based research strategies will prove particularly fruitful. Organisational ethnography, for instance, suggests reconstructing from the practitioners’ perspectives how they perceive their role, how they go about their daily routines and how they justify their actions (cp. Côté-Boucher et al. 2014: 200). In other words, it is important to use methodologies that allow to question readers and researchers taken-for-granted beliefs on the organisational aspects under study and to observe and describe the meaning-making processes of practitioners themselves (Ybema et al. 2009: 8; Yanow 2000: 258).

On the level of methods and data, observations, interviews and document analysis are central. The fundamental strategy for fieldwork is “being there” or “hanging out” in order to get close to the

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competence means that there is a pre-existing practice which can be learned and performed correctly or incorrectly. On the contrary, I think that competence in the sense of *practical* knowledge which emerges from collective processes of learning and meaning-making in the everyday is central for the creation of new practices. I confer with Janice Gross Stein who argues that “change in practice occurs when new problems arise that challenge existing knowledge” (2011: 89). Practical knowledge must adapt when new issues arise and what counts as competent has to be re-negotiated in this process. Competence in the sense of *professional* knowledge comes into play here as it constitutes the central background knowledge or, in other words, because mutual engagement within a community of practice is rooted in professional practice. On the interplay between (professional) knowledge and (practical) knowing and how this “generative dance” is a powerful source of organisational innovation, cf. Cook and Seely-Brown (1999).

activities and everyday experiences of insiders and to observe how they interact with each other and their surroundings (MacKay and Levin 2015; Volo, Lorraine Bayard de and Schatz 2004: 267; Zahle 2012: 54). Since interviews or other forms of post hoc narrations usually yield shortened, interpreted and subject-centred accounts, participant observation is considered the primary method to access practical knowledge and to study how it emerges in the everyday (Nicolini and Monteiro 2016: 11–2; Nicolini 2009c: 1400; Moeran 2009). Participant observation also allows the researcher to make observations of herself and describe how she learned the practical knowledge which sustains a community of practitioners (Zahle 2012: 54). It provides an opportunity to collect raw data and first-hand interpretations of local organisational learning and knowledge creation processes.

However, direct access is often restricted, which makes participant observation impractical. In such cases, interviews can serve as a proxy strategy. Talking to practitioners, especially to frontline workers, is thus another fundamental tool for reconstructing knowing in practice (Yanow et al. 2012; cp. Devault and McCoy 2002: 756–61). Conversational and more formalised interviews with people who are experts in a practice due to their participation in it for an extended period of time can provide important insight into local practical knowledge if the interviewer switches from *what?* to *how?* questions and asks practitioners to relate themselves to the practices of others (Hofius 2016: 953–4; cp. also Nicolini 2009a). Importantly, since the interviewer helps the interviewee to render her tacit knowledge explicit during such conversations, they jointly re-construct meaning-making processes: They co-produce an interpretation of practices (Bueger 2014: 18).

Formal interviews with experts in organisations can also complement observations and interviews with practitioners in the field. Expert interviews can provide political and institutional context for interpretations from the field and they can be highly informative of the links between organisational levels: they can be instructive of how local knowledge from organisational peripheries gets translated to its core. The underlying assumption of expert interviews is that experts have privileged access to information and that interviewing them is a means for reconstructing their explicit expert knowledge (Pfadenhauer 2009). Further, if IO staff at headquarters have observed practice in field level operations themselves, they can also assist the researcher in the interpretation process, thereby helping to reconstruct implicit practical knowledge (Bueger 2014: 18; Littig 2009: 100).

A third strategy for fieldwork and gathering ethnographic evidence on international organisations in the field is the study of material artefacts and document analysis. Since this method does not require lengthy negotiations of access, it can prove useful in instances where access has been denied or direct observations and inquiries have been impossible. And yet, it comes at the price that websites, annual reports, briefings and further organisational texts are often idealised organisational narratives. However, while documents need to be read carefully and interpreted against the background of the researcher's own understanding of local organisational and social processes, they can be informative with regard to the larger social and institutional context of the fieldwork setting and therefore serve as supplements to participant observations and interviews (van der Waal 2009: 32, 34–35; Neyland 2008: 120–1). Handbooks and manuals, in particular, can give clues about organisational practices and the tacit knowledge that informs them (Bueger 2014: 19).

Before turning to an exemplary case study to illustrate how to conduct such interpretive-qualitative research, a brief discussion of how to select cases for such inquiries is in order. A central concern regarding the study of IOs through professional practice is the issue of “seeing” tacit knowledge: since it refers to unspoken, embodied knowledge, the main challenge of studying it is to turn it into an epistemic object (Nicolini 2009c: 1392; Zahle 2012: 51). The prime research strategy of foregrounding background knowledge is to turn to moments of crisis. They are instances in which existing practical knowledge gets challenged and needs to adapt. Participants in a practice argue about whether a new situation can be accommodated into existing practices or whether new ones need to be introduced (Bueger 2014: 14). Routine-driven activities get disrupted and new ways of doing and knowing need to be learned. Since mixed migration movements are often linked to emergency settings, it is not only more likely that learning in practice will occur in such contexts but also makes studying the underlying

social process more accessible. For the purpose of case selection, contexts of crisis thus might prove pertinent.

Let me conclude this paper with a brief illustration of how to put these theoretical and methodological shifts to work. I have conducted fieldwork on the Aegean island Chios during the migration and refugee crisis in 2016¹⁸ to study how IOs respond to mixed migration in the field and to analyse how they shape the governing of migration beyond participating in formal policy-making procedures. During the crisis along the European external border, many migration-related IOs responded to the high pace and scale of people crossing into Europe. Due to the large number of people travelling along the Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes, the European Commission adopted the European Agenda for Migration (2015) and devised the “Hotspot Approach”, following which Migration Management Support Teams, consisting of Frontex, EASO and other EU agencies, have been deployed to the hotspots in Italy and Greece.¹⁹ Next to EASO and Frontex, IOM, UNHCR, humanitarian NGOs and transnational volunteer groups started operating on the Greek islands in order to deal with the people travelling through.²⁰ However, in sum, as UNCHR and IOM (2016: 8) observed: “The international community was caught unprepared for such large numbers of people. While significant achievements have been made by many of the countries involved in terms of humanitarian assistance, the overall response has remained unstructured.” Since no comprehensive institutions for dealing with large mixed migratory flows exist and global and regional operations and policies have only been agreed upon in an ad hoc, reactive manner and on a short-term basis, no structures were in place that could have been scaled up to deal with the sudden increase in people migrating across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe and to prevent a crisis (cp. Deitelhoff and Daase 2016).

How did migration IOs react to mixed migration during the crisis? Along two illustrative quotes, I will briefly demonstrate (a) which kind of practices the governing of mixed migration involves on a substantial level and (b) which social processes lay behind the construction of these practices.

The case study of Chios in the Eastern Mediterranean shows that frontline workers draw on their professional background knowledge and intensively interact across organisational boundaries in order to manage mixed migration. For instance, frontline workers affiliated with Frontex, UNCHR, humanitarian NGOs and transnational volunteer groups developed a chain of practices to safely land and register people arriving, which they termed “the flow”. In a first step, Frontex and small search and rescue NGOs patrol the sea and the shore in order to spot migrant boats and assist them in landing safely on the beaches or in the port. In joint WhatsApp groups, they share information on boats arriving and train each other on how to search the sea for boats and how to react at landings. In this first step, coastguards and lifesavers are the dominant professional groups who compete over how to address mixed migratory movements.

When people have been disembarked, humanitarian workers and medical personnel take over. Paramedics attend to medical emergencies and teach humanitarians how to behave in cases of hypothermia. Sometimes lawyers and social workers are also present during these practices in order to make sure that people on the move with particular vulnerabilities like unaccompanied children are

¹⁸ I speak of crisis here because the situation along the Eastern Mediterranean route turned into a humanitarian crisis. Crucially, the humanitarian emergency has its roots in the missing global migration governance framework. It is thus a political or governance crisis rather than a crisis of numbers.

¹⁹ A hotspot designates both, a “section of the European external border or a region with extraordinary migratory pressure which calls for reinforced and concerted support by EU Agencies” and the facilities in the hotspot area where EU agencies and other IOs operate, European Commission (2015: 3).

²⁰ In 2015, IOM and UNCHR counted 850,000 people travelling through the Aegean islands to Europe, with up to 12,500 people per day (2016: 8). While the largest share of these people were Syrians, Iraqi and Afghani and therefore have used to have high recognition rates as refugees or *prima facie* recognition, other recorded nationalities of the people travelling through were Iranian, Pakistani, Somali, Algerian, Nigerian and others.

duly taken care of. And while organisational mandates and professional identities might conflict during these processes, different practitioners bring different knowledge to the table that proves useful to almost everyone because frontline workers often find themselves in novel, ambiguous and frustrating situations where they do not know what to do (cp. quote 1 and 2 below).

After the first reception, new arrivals are being brought to the registration site, now the hotspot. During the registration process, humanitarians provide people on the move with basic items like blankets and hygiene kits as well as food and water and inform them about the procedures and their rights. Border guards fingerprint, screen, debrief and register them. This chain of practices emerged out of daily interactions and improvisations around the scattered authority structure of global migration governance, where formal responsibilities are often unclear and much happens through “plugging the gaps” or “stepping in”. In the words of one of the frontline workers:

“Eventually, we, UNHCR and the organisations, mainly NRC and also Samaritan’s Purse managed to develop some kind of system to manage the flow of people through the registration process because the police was never involved in managing the crowds. So we kind of stepped in in something that should have been the state’s responsibility, which was the famous bracelet system: People would arrive in Tabakika, where the whole process took place, so people would be brought there straight from the beach, they would be given a group number for each group of about 50 people [marked by a bracelet in a particular colour] and then that group number was used to make sure people went through the process in a roughly chronological order. And people would go straight through the process, they would be photographed, fingerprinted, screened and get their document in one go. Tabakika was where everything, the whole registration process, was taking place on a 24-hour basis.”

(Personal Interview, Chios, April 2016)

This brief illustration of some of the practices around people arriving on Chios shows that in spite of the absence of coherent response mechanisms, IO staff on the ground had to face the reality of mixed migration movements across the border. The extensive scope of people moving constituted a non-circumventable urgency to address the challenge of mixed migration and to build a shared practical repertoire for handling the situation as it occurred.

To do so, organisational mandates and boundaries play a subordinate role. Frontline workers negotiate competence across organisational divides in their everyday interactions and collectively learn on the job. As one of the practitioners put it, when talking about working with other IOs:

“Personal relations are always very important because, I mean, we need to have different roles but, on the other hand, we just want to all facilitate a smooth process [...]. So the more you can link with other actors and other individuals, the more you share information. The more you share information, the more you share best practices and challenges and difficulties and the more you work together just to find solutions. Because you know if it doesn’t work for me, maybe it works for you, or maybe you will have an idea. So anyway, in work in general, I believe that being two to think is better than one. [...] I think it’s good that we challenge ourselves as well. I know it’s how we get better and how we can address issues in a better way. Because we know there are many things which still need to be addressed. So we are very much in a dynamic where constantly we can – I mean not that we can only improve – but there are so many things to be done that, luckily, I have the impression that we are working hands in hands among international organizations. Even though we all have different mandates, we have different core competencies – which makes sense! – but the coordination has to improve. But I think it’s always on the path. From the first day I arrived and now I can see that step by step we are going to the good direction.”

(Personal Interview, Chios, April 2016)

Given limited mandates and organisational overlaps, frontline workers built professional standards and best practices through learning-by-doing in the everyday in order to be able to take care of the migrants arriving. Through cooperation, competition and conflict in local communities of practice, frontline workers collectively make sense of what is going on and what needs to be done. Through constant interaction on an inter-personal level, they develop the practical knowledge to govern migration.

This brief empirical illustration has shown that instead of conceiving of the fragmented organisational landscape of global migration governance as a deficient architecture which lacks centralisation and authority, conceptualising the multitude of migration IOs as open systems of linked institutional ecologies, which can build local communities of practice in the field, can be very fruitful. Rather than focusing on inadequacies, the theoretical shift proposed in this paper allows us to see and study migration IOs differently and to produce new empirical insight into how migration IOs work and shape the governing of global migration.

6. Conclusion

Most scholarship on global migration governance and migration IGOs and NGOs treats the absence of a formal legal framework and coherent organisational architecture as a problem per se. While a multitude of public and private actors, who interact on various levels of policy-making and implementation, is characteristic of global governance, the strongly pronounced fragmentation of global migration governance seems to go beyond the usual degree of diffused global authority and hinders an effective global regulation of migration matters. Contrary to this conventional reading, this paper has argued that while fragmentation might have hampered the comprehensive creation of formal rules and programmes within global political arenas, migration-related IOs still contribute to shaping norms and standards on cross-border human mobility: through their practices in the field.

In the absence of formally agreed upon global policies and programmes on mixed migration, international organisations are not merely implementing agents when they operate on the ground. The professionals, who work for and across global migration organisations in the field, shape and create the practical skills and know-how necessary for dealing with mixed migratory movements against the background of their professional knowledge. The empirical reality of mixed migration movements in many places of the world, often occurring in emergency contexts, forces them to collectively negotiate and compete over how to address the challenge of large numbers of people traveling across international borders and to build the practical knowledge that enables them to do their job, to go on in the world, in the absence of clearly regulated competencies and mandates. The practical knowledge they generate, in turn, will not completely dissolve but, arguably, travels with their carriers back to the organisation's headquarters, other field operations and other organisations that person will work for.²¹ Thereby, it contributes to building cross-organisational professional standards which will become part of the background knowledge of future global migration practitioners and practitioners located in different geographical settings. Hence, practical knowledge built by global migration, asylum and border professionals at the frontline of migratory movements has a very noticeable impact on how mixed migration is governed under the current circumstances of organisational fragmentation and under-regulation.

While formal authorisation is still limited and no single IO has a comprehensive mandate to govern mixed migration, the lack of a coherent legal-institutional framework on global migration does not imply that global migration actors do not impact on how mixed migration is governed. On the contrary, the scattered authority structure of global migration governance means that migration, asylum and border practitioners have to find ways of doing things in the grey zones of formal global regulations and national immigration policies. If we conceive of migration IOs as open systems of institutional ecologies and take the practices of transnational professionals as analytical entry point, we can study how the 'generative dance' between professional knowledge and knowing in practice within communities of practice populated by global migration, asylum and border professionals creates practices that inform organisational learning and shape professional standards on managing mixed migration across organisational divides. In an open and evolving policy field like migration it is of

²¹ On this "revolving door" phenomenon, which constitute another way of spanning organisational boundaries within the linked institutional ecology of mixed migration governance, cf. Seabrooke (2014).

particular importance that we enlarge our theoretical and methodological instruments to empirically study the growing role of international organisations.

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