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United to rescue? Humanitarian role conceptions and NGO–NGO interactions in the Mediterranean Sea

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ABSTRACT

The large number of asylum seekers dying off the coast of Libya has turned the Southern Mediterranean Sea into a new humanitarian space, prompting 11 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to launch maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) operations between 2014 and 2017. These NGOs engaged in a complex web of interactions, ranging from rare instances of hostility, competition and mistrust to coordination, cooperation and integration. Drawing on role theory, I argue that organisational role conceptions are key to shaping NGO–NGO interactions. The humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence serve as action scripts that inform NGOs' role in the humanitarian space. Sea rescue NGOs have upheld different interpretations of humanitarian principles, developing supportive, neutral, or confrontational approaches vis-à-vis European governments' border control policies. By leveraging content analysis and semi-structured interviews, I show that organisations with matching role conceptions have engaged in tighter forms of cooperation; charities with divergent role conceptions, by contrast, have shown a tendency to develop mistrust and engage in more competitive interactions. These frictions inhibited NGOs from forming a united front vis-à-vis policy restrictions and criminalisation, hindering the legitimacy and viability of non-governmental sea rescue.

1. Introduction

Between 2014 and 2018, 11 NGOs conducted maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) missions off the coast of Libya, assisting almost 120,000 people in distress. While key to enhancing human security at Europe's southern maritime borders, non-governmental SAR entails severe operational, legal and ethical dilemmas. Since 2017, the Italian government has imposed restrictions on NGOs' activities, seeking to co-opt humanitarians in the fight against human smuggling. Initially praised as "angels" and "heroes", sea rescue NGOs have been increasingly criticised as a "pull factor" of irregular migration, facing a criminalisation process that culminated into the confiscation of several ships (Allsopp *et al.* 2020, Cusumano and Villa 2020). Consequently, the Mediterranean Sea has not only become a

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new humanitarian space, but also a discursive battlefield over the meaning of humanitarianism and the appropriateness of assisting irregular migrants at state borders.

Despite its relevance, non-governmental sea rescue has not yet obtained the systematic scholarly attention dedicated to humanitarian action on land. To be sure, some studies have examined the discursive frames of "border humanitarians" (Stierl 2018), their role in "repoliticising" migration governance (Cuttitta 2018, pp. 650–51), and the normative dilemmas attached to non-governmental sea rescue (Cusumano and Pattison 2018, McDowell 2020). Recent research has also critically examined the criminalisation of maritime humanitarian workers and its implications (Fekete 2018, Tazzioli 2018, Cusumano and Villa 2020, Gordon and Larsen 2020). All scholarship to date, however, has mainly focused on sea rescue NGOs' relationship with state actors. Studies dedicated to mapping and explaining the interactions between these NGOs, by contrast, remain missing.

The literature on humanitarianism at large has also dedicated sparse attention to cooperation and competition between NGOs. Existing scholarship has thoroughly examined the relationship between NGOs and state authorities (Krause 2014, Brass 2016) and the interactions between humanitarians and military personnel (Ruffa and Vennesson 2014). Recent studies have zoomed into the web of relationships taking place within the humanitarian sector, studying issues like the formation of non-profit clubs (Deloffre 2016), NGOs' relationship with their donors (Egger 2017), and organisations' varying propensity to share information on sensitive issues like their security policies (Schneiker 2020). However, no studies to date have sought to systematically explain humanitarian organisations' tendency to develop cooperative or competitive relationships.

Why do NGOs cooperate with some of their counterparts in the humanitarian field and keep some others at arm's length? By explaining the interactions between all the NGOs providing SAR off the coast of Libya between 2014 and 2018, this paper seeks to address this gap. I argue that organisational role conceptions are crucial in shaping the nature and intensity of NGO–NGO interactions, which can be operationalised along a spectrum ranging from outright hostility, competition and mistrust to coexistence, coordination, cooperation, and full integration. Specifically, organisations with matching role conceptions are likely to develop tighter, cooperative interactions; conversely, organisations with diverging role conceptions tend to engage in competitive relations ranging from hostility to mistrust. Role conceptions provide a more accurate explanation of NGO–NGO interactions at sea than competing explanations based on the political economy of the humanitarian sector, sociological institutionalism and organisations' nationality.

These findings not only provide a theoretical contribution to the study of humanitarianism and global governance, but also have timely policy implications. Coordination between humanitarian actors is key to effectively deliver humanitarian relief and especially crucial to conduct SAR in the Mediterranean. Hence, understanding the factors underlying NGOs' cooperation (or lack thereof) is key to enhancing human security at sea. Moreover, NGOs' inability to form a unified front against policy restrictions and delegitimisation attempts weakened the cohesion of the humanitarian front, facilitating the criminalisation of non-governmental sea rescue.

Multiple sources and methods are used. I investigate the interactions developed by each NGO with its counterparts through a structured, focused comparison (George and Bennett 2005, pp. 67–73) of all the organisations operating off the coast of Libya between 2014 and 2017, when maritime rescue NGOs peaked. Evidence consists of a content analysis of all NGOs' websites, mission statements and press releases, media

articles as well as personal conversations and semi-structured anonymised interviews held in Rome, Malta and during a rescue mission off the coast of Libya in which I participated in August 2016. Interviewees include spokespersons from each NGOs as well as Italian Navy and Coast Guard officers.

The article is divided as follows. The second and third section identify some competing explanations for NGO–NGO interactions, arguing that a constructivist approach based on role theory offers the most fine-grained explanation of competition and cooperation between humanitarian charities. The fourth section operationalises NGO–NGO interactions through an original typology comprising of several directly observable indicators. The fifth section presents all the non-governmental organisations operating off the Libyan coasts between 2014 and the end of 2017. The sixth and seventh sections assess the theoretical framework against the evidence provided by maritime rescue NGOs, showing that (in)compatible role conceptions explain NGO–NGO interactions much better than competing explanations. The conclusions summarise the findings of the article and flesh out their theoretical and policy implications.

2. Explaining NGO–NGO interactions

The complex web of interactions between relief NGOs has remained largely under-theorized. However, an examination of extant scholarship allows for identifying three influential approaches to the study of humanitarian action at large that are applicable to explaining relations between NGOs: the political economy of the humanitarian sector, sociological institutionalism, and the notion of NGOs' national identities. This section will present these approaches, turning each of them into a source of empirically observable expectations on NGO–NGO relations.

Political economy approaches to non-profit organisations mainly explain the behaviour of NGOs and their sometimes dysfunctional record on the grounds of humanitarian charities' material interests. Like firms in a market, humanitarian NGOs struggling to secure limited funding and public attention should inevitably develop competitive relations (Cooley and Ron 2002). Motivated primarily by organisational survival and autonomy preservation, NGOs providing the same type of services and drawing on the same pool of resources should be inevitably set to compete, especially in contexts of growing organisational density (Mitchell 2014, Bush and Hadden 2019). To reduce competition, NGOs should discourage newcomers from entering their turf, creating entry barriers into the humanitarian space. Cooperation may only exist between organisations operating in different areas, providing complementary rather than identical activities and relying on different donors to fund their work (Mitchell 2014, Bush and Hadden 2019). Accordingly, we should expect the maritime humanitarian sector – populated by several small organisations conducting the same tasks in the same area – to engage in largely competitive relations. A modicum of cooperation should only occur between NGOs providing different types of rescue services and relying on different pools of donors.

Sociological institutionalism, by contrast, suggests that competition between NGOs should be mitigated by the existence of a tight set of rules and norms. International and domestic legal codes, combined with the coordinating role played by state authorities and international organisations, create formal institutional regimes that reduce uncertainty, encourage trust, and enable or even mandate cooperation. Moreover, the

frequent exchange of information and personnel and the increasing professionalisation and bureaucratisation of the sector enables humanitarians' socialisation to the same logics of appropriateness, fostering normative isomorphism and mutual solidarity within the humanitarian community (Barnett and Weiss 2008, Barnett 2009). Hence, institutionalism suggest that sea rescue NGOs engage in broadly cooperative relations due to the coordinating role of the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) and the compliance pull of the maritime rescue norm (Aalberts and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2014, Mann 2016, Cusumano and Pattison 2018).

Recent scholarship has forcefully argued that understanding the behaviour of NGOs requires looking into organisational identity and culture. Far from sharing a single mindset, humanitarians constantly "debate about who they are and what practices are reflective of their identity" and, conversely, "who they believe they are not and the practices they deem illegitimate" (Barnett and Weiss 2008, p. 5). Scholars have increasingly examined how these different mindsets affect advocacy and humanitarian relief operations. Most notably, Stroup (2012) argues that NGOs' behaviour is mainly informed by national traditions. Drawing on this approach, we should therefore expect sea rescue NGOs to build tighter relationships when headquartered in or comprising of personnel from the same nationality.

3. Humanitarian role conceptions

Although they provide valuable insights, these three approaches do not suffice in explaining NGO–NGO interactions at sea. The explanation based on humanitarian role conceptions I develop in this section, by contrast, better accounts for interaction between sea rescue charities. The extent to which NGOs cooperate depends not only on material interests, norms, and nationality, but mainly derives from how each organisation understands its role, which in turn is primarily informed by their interpretation of humanitarian principles. Like the scripts of actors on a stage, humanitarian principles guide NGOs' behaviour in the humanitarian space, shaping the nature and intensity of their interactions. As explained below, however, NGOs have developed increasingly different interpretations of humanitarian principles. I therefore argue that likeminded organisations sharing a similar interpretation of humanitarian principles tend to develop more cooperative relations even when they conduct identical activities and rely on the same pool of donors. By contrast, organisations with very different role conceptions are likely to engage in antagonistic relationships characterised by hostility, competition or mistrust despite the absence of such material pressures and the existence of binding rules and coordination mechanisms. Matching or dissonant role conceptions serve as the most accurate explanation for competition and cooperation between maritime humanitarian NGOs.

Most scholarship to date has referred to NGOs' different mindset as organisational cultures (Stroup 2012, Krause 2014) or identities (Barnett and Weiss 2008, Schneiker 2020). In this article, I opt for the narrower notion of role conception, defined as the shared beliefs in the proper purpose of specific collective actors. By departing from role theory's assumption that actors' behaviour is informed by specific scripts, role conceptions are useful heuristic tools to make sense of regular, dyadic interactions between individuals and collective actors (Walker 2017). While constructivist international relations scholars

have mainly applied role conceptions to state foreign policy (Harnisch *et al.* 2011, Brummer and Thies 2012), this notion is especially applicable to smaller collective entities like NGOs.

Humanitarianism is a contested term that is notoriously difficult to define. Although sometimes used broadly to label all philanthropic initiatives stemming from a concern for distant others, humanitarianism is more frequently identified with the ideological movement leading to the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), still referred to by the International Court of Justice as the repository of humanitarianism and its key principles (Barnett 2009, Gordon and Donini 2016, p. 79, Sezgin and Dijkzeul 2016). The focus of humanitarian action has increasingly broadened from conflict to epidemic outbreaks, famines, and natural disasters. Maritime rescue started to be seen as a form of humanitarian action since the late 1970s Vietnamese boat people crisis, when NGOs like Cap Anamur first deployed a boat at sea to assist refugees in distress. Although Cap Anamur conducted a sea rescue operation in the Mediterranean in 2005, indictment by an Italian court caused the organisation to close its doors (Cuttitta 2018, p. 638). Initially welcomed by Italian authorities, the sea rescue NGOs operating in the Mediterranean since 2014 have also suffered growing criminalisation (Allsopp *et al.* 2020, Cusumano and Villa 2020, Tazzioli 2018). The criminalisation of solidarity at sea has exacerbated the dilemmas attached to non-governmental maritime rescue, widening NGOs' disagreement on the extent to which SAR can and should be conducted in accordance with humanitarian principles.

Seen as the guiding compass in relief operations, the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence can be conceptualised as the action scripts shaping the role that NGOs play. Since the founding of the ICRC, neutrality from interstate controversies has been seen as the best way to isolate humanitarians from politics, obtain access to people in need, and ensure the safety of aid workers in the field. Since the end of the Cold War, however, this traditional form of humanitarianism has been increasingly challenged by "new" humanitarian actors. New humanitarians have embraced a broader agenda seeking to frame the recipients of aid as entitled to a wider array of human rights rather than passive targets of Western saviours' benevolence (Slim 2015, Sezgin and Dijkzeul 2016, Adami 2019). Moreover, new humanitarians' commitment to address the root causes of humanitarian crises rather than merely alleviating suffering has prompted new humanitarians to pursue a more confrontational approach towards state actors. Ultimately, new humanitarians have prioritised human rights advocacy and solidarity with the victims over the allegedly dogmatic understanding of neutrality underlying traditional humanitarianism, criticised as "moral apathy" (Slim 2015, Gordon and Donini 2016, p. 91). The divide between traditional and new humanitarian role conceptions is acknowledged by several scholars, who have sometimes used alternative dichotomies like those between "alchemical" and "emergency humanitarianism" Barnett (2009, p. 39), "Dunantist" and "Wilsonian" organisations (Stoddard 2003, pp. 1–2), or "Dunantist" and "rights-based" NGOs (Adami 2019). As a novel form of humanitarian action that focuses on a heavily politicised issue like irregular migration, sea rescue in the Mediterranean has attracted several new humanitarian organisations combining relief with a commitment to address the root causes of migrant deaths at sea, identified in European countries' restrictive border and asylum policies. These NGOs have therefore combined SAR and open border activism (Cuttitta 2018, Mainwaring and De Bono 2020, Squire 2020).

According to critics, the development of a new humanitarian role conception has made relief increasingly vulnerable to politicisation and instrumentalisation, paving the way for the involvement of new actors in the humanitarian arena (Gordon and Donini 2016). Most notably, various far-right groups have created not-for-profit organisations and actively portrayed themselves as humanitarians (Bob 2012, Schneiker 2018). One of these groups, the far-right youth organisation Defend Europe, deployed a ship in the Mediterranean to simultaneously rescue migrants and curb irregular migration. Organisations like Defend Europe uphold a different, identitarian role conception that drastically departs from the principle of impartiality in the provision of relief, setting them apart from both traditional and new humanitarians. Although their presence at sea was limited and their humanitarian credentials questionable at best, an extreme, outlier case like Defend Europe provides additional insights into how diverging role conceptions inhibit cooperation between not-for-profit organisations. The simultaneous presence of actors upholding traditional humanitarian, new humanitarian, and identitarian roles played a key role in shaping NGO–NGO interactions at sea. To assess this argument, the next section will operationalise their interactions through an original typology.

4. NGO–NGO relations: a typology

Mapping interactions across NGOs is a complex task belying simplistic dichotomies between amity and enmity. Rather than dichotomously, the relationship between different actors could be fruitfully conceptualised on a spectrum ranging from full integration to outright hostility. Hostility reflects an unwillingness to share the humanitarian space with rival organisations and it is therefore characterised by open attempts to disrupt counterparts' work. Competition captures the struggle over material but also symbolic resources and the ensuing discursive struggle over who is the "real" humanitarian, while mistrust refers to a less pronounced wariness of counterparts' motives or professionalism. Coexistence identifies a neutral stance, describing situations when NGOs acknowledge each other's positive role in the humanitarian space and ensure a modicum of mutual information sharing and deconfliction on the field. Coordination, cooperation and integration require the existence of common goals and a willingness to work together, which may remain limited to information sharing, entail a transfer of equipment, expertise, and personnel, or escalate into a full integration of advocacy, operational planning and relief missions. Each of these types of interactions can be operationalised through specific, observable indicators, based on organisations' behaviour at the headquarters and field level as well as organisations' public and off-the-record discourse (Table 1).

As the remainder of the article will show, role conceptions provide important insights into the tightness of NGO–NGO interactions at sea. Organisations playing similar roles are more inclined to coordinate, cooperate, or join forces. By contrast, NGOs with somewhat dissonant role conceptions should develop mutual mistrust and limit their interactions to peaceful coexistence or the modicum of coordination required by operational contingencies and legal obligations. Last, organisations playing incompatible roles will not simply mistrust each other, but also engage in competitive or openly hostile forms of interaction.

Table 1. NGO–NGOs interactions.

Type of relationship	Indicators
Hostility	• Attempts to disrupt each other's work • Attempts to sabotage each other's fundraising • Attempts to denounce each other to public authorities
Competition	• Attempt to present oneself as more effective or legitimate than counterparts • Mutual criticism expressed in public
Mistrust	• Mutual criticism expressed in private and/or off the record • Unwillingness to share information
Coexistence	• Exchange of basic information in the field • Public acknowledgment of counterparts' positive role
Coordination	• Regular exchange of information in the field • Exchange of information at the directive level
Cooperation	• Regular exchange of information at field and directive levels • Exchange of personnel • Exchange of equipment • Mutual solidarity against criminalisation
Integration	• Joint statements • Joint planning • Joint operations

5. The sea as humanitarian space: maritime rescue NGOs

The large increase in casualties occurred in the Central Mediterranean corridor connecting Libya to Italy has turned Europe's southern maritime borders into a novel humanitarian space. Systematic non-governmental rescue missions started in September 2014 with the creation of the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS). In less than two years, nine other NGOs followed (Cuttitta 2018, Stierl 2018, Cusumano 2019). Since mid-2017, Italian authorities have sought to increasingly restrain NGOs' activities, asking all NGOs to sign a code of conduct whose provisions included the dispatch of Italian police officers aboard their ships. One of the non-signatory NGOs – the German youth organisation Jugend Rettet – had its boat impounded for allegedly abetting illegal immigration soon thereafter (Cusumano and Villa 2020). The criminalisation of SAR NGOs culminated in the summer of 2018, when Italy declared its ports closed to all foreign-flagged vessels (Berti 2020, McDowell 2020). Between 2014 and early 2017, however, NGOs could rely on a more permissive legal and political environment to conduct SAR, which offered comparatively fewer logistical and security challenges than most crisis scenarios on land. Thanks to its feasibility and limited costs, maritime SAR proved financially viable even for small, newly established charities (Cusumano 2019). This section briefly examines the NGOs providing SAR between 2014 and 2017.

5.1. The Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS)

The Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) was created in 2014 by the owners of a business intelligence firm, who bought and reconverted a fishing vessel. By relying on maritime security professionals including retired Maltese Navy officers and unmanned

reconnaissance drones, MOAS was the first NGO that detected and rescued migrants off the coast of Libya, disembarking them in the port indicated by Italian authorities.

Since its outset, MOAS developed a traditional humanitarian role, grounded on a strict interpretation of the principle of neutrality and a "prudent, non-confrontational attitude" towards European governments (Cuttitta 2018, p. 640). This mindset is clearly illustrated by slogans like "Save lives first. Sort out the politics later" and the organisation's mission statement, stressing that "MOAS is not a political action group […]. All MOAS does is help rescue humans who would otherwise drown" (MOAS 2016). Accordingly, MOAS developed a rescue model that maxed both their operational effectiveness and Italian authorities' support. By employing experienced security personnel like the former commander of the Armed Forces of Malta, MOAS effectively presented itself as a reliable counterpart to the Italian Coast Guard, complementing rather than overriding European maritime border control missions like Frontex operation Triton and the EU Common Security and Defence Policy mission EUNAVFOR Med Sophia (Riddervold 2018). To safeguard a good working relationship with Italian authorities, MOAS carefully complied with MRCC instructions, shared information and video footage with the Italian police, and was the first signatory of the 2017 code of conduct (Cusumano 2019).

MOAS' neutral stance did not only facilitate its relationship with Italian authorities, but also inevitably shaped its interactions with other NGOs. Initially, the Maltese charity briefly relied on the financial and operational support of the Amsterdam branch of MSF, which dispatched medical personnel onboard. This cooperation, however, was discontinued after a few months due to "diverging views" between the two organisations.[1] After MSF's withdrawal, MOAS developed a partnership with the Italian Red Cross, which stepped in as their new provider of onboard medical support throughout 2016 and 2017.

5.2. Médecins sans Frontières (MSF)

While MOAS is a small NGO established with the sole purpose of conducting SAR, MSF is an established international medical organisation a yearly budget of over a billion euros. Differences between the two NGOs are not limited to material capabilities. Since the Cold War, MSF has been a prominent voice within the new humanitarian camp, MSF's commitment to advocacy and addressing the root causes of suffering is apparent in the organisation's slogan of "*Soigner et témoigner*", or "heal and witness". The same approach is reflected in the organisation's decision to conduct SAR in the Mediterranean, seen not only as an opportunity to provide relief, but also as a platform for promoting a "radical re-think of migration policy based on the establishment of a legal and safe passage to Europe" (Cuttitta 2018, p. 644, Pallister-Wilkins 2018, Stierl 2018).

Three different European branches of MSF became involved in sea rescue. MSF Amsterdam opted for addressing their lack of seafaring skills by partnering with other organisations. After suspending their initial collaboration with MOAS, MSF Amsterdam started a partnership with *SOS-Méditerranée*. The Brussels and Barcelona branches, on the other hand, developed autonomous SAR capabilities by buying an old ship and chartering a newer vessel, used to rescue migrants and transfer them into the port designated by Italian authorities.

Although they developed independent missions, each of these MSF branches shared a common role conception that urged them to stay aloof from European authorities, whose

restrictive migration policies they held responsible for deaths at sea. MSF did not only relinquish accepting European states' funding for migration-related projects, but also refused handing over information to Frontex and the Italian police. Accordingly, its crews refrained from producing video footage that could be used as court evidence against suspect human smugglers, a behaviour they considered incompatible with the humanitarian principle of independence (Cuttitta 2018). Moreover, MSF declined signing the 2017 code of conduct, flagging the boarding of police officers on their vessels as an unacceptable violation of the principle of independence and the prohibition to carry arms in any MSF mission worldwide (Cusumano and Villa 2020). As the next sections show, MSF developed an especially close relationship with the other NGOs that shared their disapproval of European migration policies.

5.3. Sea-Watch

Unlike both MOAS and MSF, Sea-Watch initially stopped short of developing fully fledged SAR missions, limiting its operations to providing life vests, water and urgent medical support until the arrival of a bigger ship (Cusumano 2019, p. 247; Cuttitta 2018, pp. 642–643). This approach was dictated by both limited rescue capabilities, which initially consisted of a handful of volunteers aboard an old fishing trawler, and their distinctively new humanitarian role conception. Founded by activists with a background in the German left and conservation NGOs such as Greenpeace, Sea-Watch developed a more confrontational attitude vis-à-vis state authorities and a strong commitment to advocacy and whistleblowing. By simultaneously acting as a watchdog and rescuing migrants without disembarking them to a place of safety, Sea-Watch deliberately sought to both save lives and compel European governments to act (Squire 2020, Cuttitta 2018, Stierl 2018).

Effective fundraising eventually allowed Sea-Watch to purchase two larger boats and launch an aerial reconnaissance mission. Their approach to maritime rescue, however, remained based on a combination of humanitarianism and citizen activism grounded on the "politics of witnessing" (Squire 2020, p. 134). As Sea-Watch endeavoured to allow European citizens to directly witness the suffering caused by the EU's restrictive border policies, crews continued to be comprised mainly of volunteers. Alongside rescue operations at sea, Sea-Watch organised events among German citizenry. In October 2015, for instance, a dinghy retrieved in the Mediterranean was placed on the Spree River and German MPs from the nearby Bundestag were asked to board to better understand migrants' plight. Such interventions epitomise the inextricable link between political activism and humanitarian action underlying Sea-Watch's role conception (Squire 2020, Stierl 2018).

Besides directly providing SAR, Sea-Watch endeavoured to serve as a model for like-minded organisations, providing advice and operational support for other small NGOs like Jugend Rettet, Lifeboat and Mission Lifeline (Cusumano 2019).

5.4. Sea-Eye, Jugend Rettet, Lifeboat and Mission Lifeline

Sea-Watch's model was followed by other small German charities, namely Jugend Rettet, Lifeboat, and Mission Lifeline. Jugend Rettet – a young adults Berlin-based organisation

which started operations in July 2016 – also combined humanitarianism and political acti-vism, upholding a confrontational approach to European authorities and a more radical, openly political position grounded on the request for a "safe passage" to Europe. Like Sea-Watch, which advised their first operations, Jugend Rettet missions were run primarily by volunteers and funded through small individual donations (Cusumano 2019). Soon after refusing to sign the code of conduct, Jugend Rettet had to stop its activities once an Italian court charged one of its crews with abetting illegal immigration and confiscated its ship. The investigation is still ongoing at the time of writing (Cusumano and Villa 2020).

The Lifeboat project is another German NGO that started operations in 2016. Like Jugend Rettet, the Lifeboat project relied on several personnel previously volunteering for Sea-Watch, capitalising on their experience to rapidly start their rescuing operations. In protest against the tightening grip against non-governmental rescuers epitomised by the Code of Conduct and facing budgetary problems, the German charity suspended its activities in August 2017.

Mission Lifeline was the last German charity to start SAR operations in the Central Med-iterranean. They began operating in the summer of 2017 aboard a ship handed over to them by Sea-Watch. Like Sea-Watch and Jugend Rettet, Mission Lifeline drew primarily from activists with a left-wing political background. Its operations, however, were rela-tively short-lived. In the summer of 2018, after a long standoff between Italy and Malta, Valletta eventually authorised the Lifeline to disembark a group of migrants in its port. Upon entering Malta, the Lifeline was impounded, and its shipmaster prosecuted for abet-ting illegal immigration.

These NGOs all drew inspiration from the Sea-Watch model and embraced new huma-nitarian roles. The very structure of these organisations – which have relied on volunteers and activists rather than professional aid workers – explicitly challenges the separation between neutral humanitarianism and political advocacy that underlies traditional humanitarianism.

5.5. Sea-Eye and Proactiva Open Arms

Sea-Eye started operations in May 2016 from a reconverted fishing boat named after the organisation, complemented in late 2017 by a second small vessel. Like Sea-Watch, Sea-Eye decided to run mission consisting in spotting and assisting boats in distress until the arrival of a larger boat. While the operational model and even the name of Sea-Eye mirror Sea-Watch's, Sea-Eye tapped into the funding base and organisational resources of German Protestant churches rather than left-wing social movements. Consequently, it dis-played a more nuanced approach anchored on the principle of neutrality a greater pro-pensity to accept Italian authorities' request, epitomised by Sea-Eye's signature of the 2017 code of conduct.

Proactiva Open Arms was established as the not-for-profit branch of Proactiva, a firm from Barcelona providing lifeguard services on Spanish coasts. Initially operating in the Aegean, Open Arms relocated to the Central Mediterranean in June 2016. Due to the small size of its first vessel, the Spanish charity initially refrained from shuttling migrants to Italian ports, limiting its activities to assisting those in danger of drowning. As the chari-table spin-off of a maritime safety firm, Open Arms developed a traditional humanitarian role and a narrow, pragmatic approach to sea rescue that shares some similarities with

MOAS'. As stated by an interviewee, "we come from a lifeguard business, we are life-guards. We save lives, we don't do politics".[2] Accordingly, Open Arms was the third organisation that signed the code of conduct, seen as crucial to preserve a smooth collaboration with Italian authorities. Only in 2018, after their ship was impounded, did Open Arms develop a more critical stance. Consistent with a traditional humanitarian role conception, however, Open Arms maintained a collaborative approach towards Italian authorities until criminalisation attempts undermined any possibility for dialogue.

5.6. SOS-Méditerranée *and Save the Children*

A joint initiative of a French humanitarian previously working for *Medecins du Monde* and a German shipmaster, SOS-*Méditerranée* started operating in February 2016 after chartering the largest ship in the humanitarian fleet, capable of operating in all weather conditions and carrying up to 800 people. The crew consisted of a rescue team composed of SOS-*Méditerranée*'s own personnel and a medical unit provided by MSF Amsterdam. Together, the two organisations decided to refrain from accepting EU governments' donations, seen as incompatible with their mutual willingness to distance themselves from European authorities. After initially flagging the 2017 code of conduct as incompatible with humanitarian principles, SOS-*Méditerranée* eventually accepted to sign the document. They did so, however, only after Italian authorities toned down several of the code's original provision, including the caveat that police officer would not be allowed aboard without a warrant. Although it begrudgingly signed the code, SOS-*Méditerranée* displays many features of new humanitarian organisations and shared the same confrontational mindset of MSF, illustrated by their frequent criticism of European migration governance.

In September 2016, the large number of minors crossing the Mediterranean also urged Save the Children (Save) to join SAR operations in the Central Mediterranean, charting a large ship to rescue asylum seekers and disembark them in the ports indicated by the Italian MRCC. Unlike all other sea rescue charities but MSF, Save is a large INGO with an annual budget of over 2 billion US dollars. As already noted by previous scholarship, Save upholds a traditional humanitarian role conception (Stroup 2012). This finding is confirmed by the main features of their maritime rescue operations. First, Save proactively looked for government donations, including the UK Department for International Development. Second, Save closely cooperated with Italian authorities, complying with their request to hand over evidence to Italian courts. Accordingly, Save immediately signed the code of conduct. This pragmatic stance is further illustrated by Save's reliance on private security contractors from the Italian firm IMI Security Services, which provided both unarmed guards to ensure order aboard their ship and professional rescuers. Information provided by IMI contractors was used by Italian authorities to indict Jugend Rettet for abetting illegal immigration (Cusumano and Villa 2020).

5.7. Defend Europe

Defend Europe is a not-for-profit organisation created by the French, German, Austrian and Italian sections of Generation Identity, a far-right youth movement committed to protecting European identity from unregulated migration and Islamification (Schneiker 2018). Defend Europe's maritime operations started in May 2017, when some activists

sought to block an NGO ship. Building on the visibility achieved through this stunt, Defend Europe started a crowd funding campaign to conduct a more ambitious mission. Upon requests of society groups, including activists from maritime rescue NGOs, money transfer platforms like Paypal denied their services to Defend Europe. Nevertheless, identitarians managed to collect sufficient donation to charter a ship (Mulhall 2017).

At first, Defend Europe's purported goal was to directly block all humanitarian ships, but eventually settled for the more modest objective of monitoring NGOs' activities to document their alleged collusion with smugglers. Like the very NGOs it opposed, Defend Europe purportedly endeavoured to combine advocacy and SAR, seeking to both act as a watchdog for NGOs and "add a ship to the humanitarian rescuing fleet". Unlike all other civil society organisations, however, Defend Europe endeavoured to bring migrants back to Libya rather than to a place of safety in Italy, thereby seeking to combine rescuing lives with stopping the unregulated migratory flows deemed as a threat to European identity. The impact of these actions was modest at best. Identitarians failed to both provide evidence of NGOs' collusion with smugglers and assist migrants in distress. Defend Europe's advocacy, however, helped funnel many of the unfounded accusations used to criminalise NGOs by Italian authorities in mainstream public debates. In their discourses and interviews with the author, Defend Europe used humanitarian discourses as a legitimising tool, portraying themselves as the "real" humanitarians.[3] As noted by Schneiker (2018), however, far right organisations appropriating humanitarian roles promote an exclusionary, particularistic understanding of human rights that sets them drastically apart from both traditional and new humanitarians' cosmopolitan ethics. As such, the right-wing organisations that have recently ventured in the humanitarian arena like Defend Europe can be identified as having a distinct, communitarian role conception (Table 2).

6. Discussion: cooperation and competition among maritime humanitarians

As illustrated above, the maritime humanitarian space off the Libyan coast featured the presence of NGOs featuring different goals and rescue models, which have engaged in a complex web of relations at both the operational and the directive level. Leveraging the typology outlined in section two, the subsection below examines each of these forms of interaction.

6.1. Hostility and competition

Consistent with the argument that role conceptions are the best predictor of interactions between NGOs, instances of open hostility and competition can primarily be found only between organisations that played diametrically opposed roles.

As an actor with a communitarian role conception that held sea rescue NGOs guilty of facilitating irregular migration to Europe, Defend Europe sought to both delegitimise and directly disrupt and sabotage humanitarians' work. In their demonstrative action in May 2017, Defend Europe tried to stop *SOS-Méditerranée* vessel from leaving an Italian port, and later considered sabotaging NGO ships by borrowing from the repertoire of action

Table 2. Sea rescue NGOs off the coast of Libya, 2014–2017.

NGO	Vessels	Starting date	Operational model
MOAS	40 m *Phoenix*	Aug 2014	Rescue and Disembarkation
	51 m *Responder*	October 2015	
MSF	50 m *Dignity 1*	April 2015	Rescue, Disembarkation and Open Borders Advocacy
	68 m *Bourbon Argos*	May 2015	
	77 m *Prudence*	March 2017	
Sea-Watch	27 m *Sea-Watch1*	April 2015	Patrol, Rescue, and Open Borders Advocacy
	33 m *Sea-Watch2*	March 2016	
	50 m *Sea-Watch3*	October 2017	
Sea-Eye	23 m *Sea-Eye*	May 2016	Patrol and Rescue
	26 m *SeeFuchs*	June 2017	
LifeBoat Project	23 m *Minden*	June 2016	Patrol, Rescue, and Open Borders Advocacy
ProActiva	30 m *Astral*	June 2016	Patrol and Rescue
	37 m *Golfo Azzurro*	December 2016	
	37 m *Open Arms*	March 2017	
SOS-*Méditerranée*	77 m *Aquarius*	February 2016	Rescue, Disembarkation, and Open Borders Advocacy
Jugend Rettet	37 m *Iuventa*	July 2016	Patrol, Rescue and Open Borders Advocacy
Save the Children	57 m *Vos Hestia*	September 2016	Rescue and Disembarkation
Mission Lifeline	33 mt *Lifeline*	June 2017	Patrol, Rescue and Open Borders Advocacy
	20 mt *Eleonore*		
Defend Europe	37 m *C-Star*	August 2017	Patrol, Rescue, and Anti-immigration Advocacy

of environmental NGOs like Greenpeace, such as the use of fishing net against whaling ships' propellers. The harsh legal consequences of such actions, which could even amount to piracy and therefore to a crime against humanity, urged Defend Europe to opt for more modest, symbolic stunts like attaching stickers on NGO ships, waving banners, and voicing threatening messages through megaphones. Identitarian activists also sought to disrupt rallies and fundraising events organised by NGOs in Germany, and even allegedly tried to infiltrate NGO crews. Moreover, Defend Europe engaged in a vehement delegitimation campaign against humanitarian actors. By stigmatising NGOs as "useful idiots" or "accomplices of smuggler mafias", or directly framing them as "criminals" and "smugglers", Defend Europe consistently sought to debunk NGOs' altruistic motives. Identitarians claimed that by "luring Africans into the sea", the "so called humanitarian NGOs are responsible for the mass drowning of thousands in the Mediterranean", deliberately ignoring "the humanitarian collateral damage caused by their own actions" in order to "play the role of saviours" and enrich themselves through donations. In addition, Defend Europe pursued a strategy of frame-jacking (Bob 2012), appropriating NGOs' role and depicting itself as the only truly humanitarian organisation. Accordingly, the Identitarians refused any form of cooperation with NGOs, and even turned down NGOs' offer of support when their ship was left adrift due to engine malfunctioning.

For their part, other sea rescue NGOs refrained from answering Identitarians' provocations but issued several vocal condemnations of Defend Europe, repeatedly criticising it and denouncing it to Italian authorities as a fascist organisation. Even if they did not deny assistance to Defend Europe, humanitarian NGOs used the fact that Identitarians had to launch an SOS call to ridicule their seafaring credentials. Furthermore, activists from NGOs sought to disrupt Defend Europe's fundraising strategies by joining the online mobilisation campaign aimed at banning them from crowd funding platforms like PayPal and preventing the docking of the Identitarians' ship in Italian, Maltese and Tunisian ports.

6.2. Mistrust and coexistence

Outright hostility and glaring competition can only be found in the interactions between sea rescue NGOs and not-for-profit organisations with different agendas and much shakier humanitarian credentials like Defend Europe. All the charities deployed at sea with the main goal of rescuing migrants, by contrast, generally displayed constructive interactions. Some less pronounced but notable instance of mistrust between traditional and new maritime humanitarians can nevertheless be found. When interviewed by the author in 2016 and 2017, those working in new humanitarian NGOs consistently expressed reservations at their traditional counterparts, and vice-versa.

MOAS in particular was looked at with suspicion by new humanitarian organisations. The fact that the Maltese charity was the spin-off of a commercial risk management company and their reliance on former Maltese military personnel and surveillance drones led several activists to confidentially refer to MOAS as a "paramilitary organisation". MOAS' decision to share drone footage with Italian authorities was also criticised as incompatible with the principles of neutrality and impartiality. Some activists also raised the concern (which later proved unfounded) that MOAS would do anything to preserve a good working relationship with European authorities, including returning migrants to Libya. The fear that MOAS would share information with Italian authorities made Sea-Watch wary of including personnel from the Maltese charity in the WhatsApp group used by activists to exchange information. Sea-Watch activists also expressed a preference for having the migrants temporarily rescued by their ship disembarked into *SOS-Mediterranee* or MSF's larger ships rather than MOAS', because the former would purportedly provide a warmer treatment and better support services for asylum seekers.[4] MOAS was not the only target of off the record criticism. Save the Children's use of private security guards was flagged as inappropriate by several interviewees, who considered this policy especially problematic in light of the role played by these guards in the investigation against Jugend Rettet.[5] An activist from Sea-Watch also expressed reservations on the humanitarian credentials of Open Arms, seen as an easy way for a commercial firm to obtain some good publicity.[6] For their part, MOAS' personnel took issues with the "commendable, but amateurish" behaviour of small German NGOs', seen as political activists rather than trained rescuers and maritime safety professionals.[7] Mistrust increased after the issuing of 2017 code of conduct by the Italian government, signed by some NGOs but not by others.

These elements of mistrust did not hinder NGOs' smooth coexistence at sea. Although they sometimes privately expressed doubts or concerns about other organisations, no NGO called into question their counterpart's right to provide SAR and their meaningful contribution to the common cause of stopping deaths at sea. Even in private, off-the-record conversations with the author, humanitarian crew members stressed that given the magnitude of the area to be patrolled and the large number of casualties at sea, "the small ships manned by German volunteers help too", or recognised MOAS' "impressive" professionalism and technical know-how. Indeed, several interviewees stressed the "healthy division of labour" in place between large and small rescue ships.[8] Consequently, it is safe to argue that all NGOs effectively coexisted in the maritime humanitarian space, and humanitarian personnel recognised the positive role of other organisations notwithstanding disagreements.

However, mistrust inhibited close coordination at the directive level, preventing NGOs from speaking with a single voice when negotiating access to the humanitarian space with Italian authorities. When confronted with the dilemma of signing the code of conduct, maritime rescue NGOs did not negotiate a common position beforehand. As a result, MOAS, Save, Open Arms and Sea-Eye immediately signed the code, while MSF, Sea-Watch and Jugend Rettet denounced it as a violation of humanitarian principles. *SOS-Meditérrannée* initially criticised the code, but eventually decided to sign after obtaining some personal reassurance from Italian authorities. This inability to hold a common position weakened the cohesion of the maritime humanitarian community.

Growing mistrust between organisations with different role conceptions weakened mutual solidarity in the wake of the criminalisation process started in 2017, when several NGOs were accused of serving as a pull factor of migration or even colluding with human smugglers. This process culminated in August, when *Jugend Rettet* was accused of aiding and abetting illegal immigration through evidence partly provided by the security contractors working aboard Save the Children's ship. Traditional humanitarian NGOs indirectly lent some credit to these accusations, distancing themselves from the German youth organisation and likeminded charities. For instance, MOAS' founder pointed out that their "modus operandi" was very different from *Jugend Rettet*'s, noting that the German NGO under investigation "will have to explain many things" to Italian authorities (Ziniti 2017). Distrust towards *Jugend Rettet* was also voiced by other organisations' workers in chats and phone conversations acquired by investigators as court evidence and supported Italian media portrayal of German rescuers as "Berliner squat camp" (Viviano and Ziniti 2017). Besides harming Jugend Rettet and other small charities, these discourses damaged the maritime humanitarian community at large by triggering a guilt by association mechanism.

6.3. Coordination, cooperation, and integration

Regardless of their different positions, all sea rescue charities coordinated effectively when conducting SAR. This coordination was facilitated by different factors. First, NGOs are all subjected to the compliance pull of the maritime rescue norm, and thus operate within an overarching normative framework. Second, all NGOs have operated under the guidance of the Italian MRCC, which has served as an overarching authority facilitating their mutual coordination. Third, when still supportive of the role of NGOs at sea Italian authorities provided several opportunities for NGO personnel to meet, such as the Shade Med and *Una Vis* meetings organised in Rome by the Italian Navy and Coast Guard. These meetings provided avenues for information exchange and trust-building at the directive level. Several instances of operational coordination can also be found. To ensure an effective patrolling of the areas where shipwrecks were most likely to occur, NGOs regularly shared their ships' positions and routes via radio.

Although some coordination between rescue ships was ensured by international maritime regulations and Italian authorities, only organisations with similar role conceptions turned coordination at sea into a regular and systematic form of cooperation. Most notably, NGOs with matching role conceptions engaged in regular exchanges of information through private WhatsApp groups, a shared database, and meetings at the directive level. Far from raising entry barriers into the provision of rescue services, already-

established NGOs provided active guidance to like-minded organisations, encouraging them to follow their example. Most notably, Sea-Watch explicitly sought to find imitators in civil society, offering advice to NGOs wishing to follow their example. Evidence of cooperation between organisations with similar role conceptions is not solely limited to exchanges of information. Likeminded organisations frequently exchanged personnel too. For instance, activists from Jugend Rettet, Lifeboat, and Mission Lifeline frequently joined Sea-Watch crews to gain experience. Personnel from Sea-Watch also came from or transitioned to MSF. In addition, likeminded NGOs regularly exchanged equipment, ranging from life vests to ships. For instance, Sea-Watch handed over speedboat engines to Jugend Rettet, and gave its older ship to Mission Lifeline after acquiring a larger boat at a discounted price by MSF Barcelona. Cooperation is also epitomised by mutual solidarity between likeminded organisations. When the Italian government delayed the disembarkation of Sea-Eye's ship, which was forced to station offshore for several days in April 2019, MOAS organised a shipment of food and medical supplies.

NGOs with similar role conceptions also vocally condemned the criminalisation of fellow organisations. When Jugend Rettet's ship was impounded, for instance, Sea-Watch responded by campaigning in their favour, stressing that "sea rescue is not a crime" and their organisation is "solidary to all rescuers and all those rescued". On the other hand, as mentioned above, organisations upholding different roles like MOAS and Save distanced themselves from Jugend Rettet. In several cases, role conceptions affected organisations' varying propensity to unite forces and develop structured partnerships. Owing to their different roles, MSF and MOAS decided to reconsider their attempt to launch a joint mission and seek more likeminded operational partners. Accordingly, MOAS started collaborating with a traditional humanitarian actor like the Italian Red Cross, while MSF Amsterdam found in *SOS-Meditérranée* a partner that shared their commitment to open borders advocacy. While this paper focuses on the 2014–2017 timeframe, it is worth mentioning that Sea-Watch's close relationship with MSF also resulted into the launching of a joint mission in 2020. Together, the two organisations purchased an oceanographic research vessel, manned by Sea-Watch seafarers and rescuers, and MSF medical personnel. MOAS, on the other hand, announced the launching of a joint mission with Sea-Eye.

7. Role conceptions and NGO–NGO relations at sea

As anticipated in section two, matching role conceptions are conducive to mutual trust and therefore tighter forms of cooperation. By contrast, diverging or incompatible roles should trigger distrust, competition, or even open hostility.

The evidence presented above provides strong support for this claim. Although they described themselves as humanitarian actors, organisations that embraced an identitarian role conception implicitly denying the universality of basic human rights, such as Defend Europe, developed an adversarial relationship with maritime rescue charities, directly attempting to disrupt, confront, and delegitimise their activities. The smaller gap in the role conceptions of traditional and new humanitarian NGOs did not inhibit smooth coexistence and a meaningful degree of coordination in the field, but caused diffuse distrust and hindered tighter forms of collaboration at the policy level. Only fully matching role conceptions enabled systematic, fully fledged cooperation at both the operational and
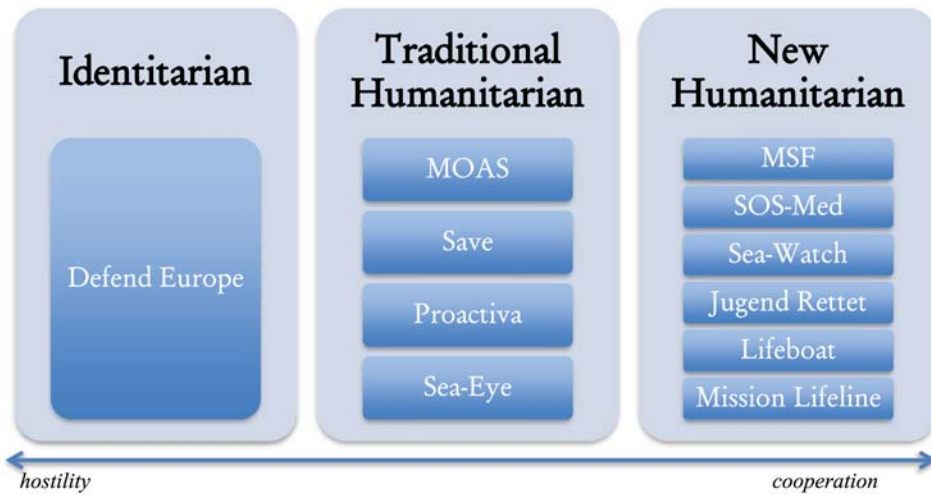
Figure 1. Maritime non-governmental actors' role conceptions.

the directive level by fostering trust among maritime activists and mutual solidarity in the wake of the criminalisation process started in 2017 (Figure 1).

7.1. Competing explanations

The diverse patchwork of NGO–NGO interactions described above cannot be accounted for by competing explanations based on the political economy of the non-governmental sector, sociological institutionalism and organisations' nationality.

A political economy approach suggests that as a humanitarian "market" characterised by low entry barriers and growing organisational density like non-governmental sea rescue should be fraught with competition (Bush and Hadden 2019, Mitchell 2014, Cooley and Ron 2002). SAR NGOs, mostly consisting of small, newly established charities providing the same services and lacking a large financial base should inevitably engage in competitive relations. Most notably, the small, German NGOs operating off the coast of Libya primarily conducted fundraising campaigns in German, drew on the same pool of German donors, and even developed similar media campaigns based on similar pictures and slogans, including "don't forget them at sea" (Sea-Watch), "Everyone in maritime emergencies deserves rescue" (Jugend Rettet), and "saving lives at sea is our duty" (Mission Lifeline). Moreover, such NGOs developed the same rescue models, using small vessels to patrol the Southern Mediterranean and assist migrants until the arrival of a larger ship. In fact, similarities between these charities were such that even interviewees from the Italian Coast Guard and Navy admitted having trouble distinguishing "the small German NGOs" from one another.[9] Contrary to what a political economy approach to sea rescue NGOs would suggest, however, most small sea rescue NGOs developed tight forms of cooperation. Far from establishing entry barriers into the maritime humanitarian space, NGOs like Sea-Watch willingly shared their expertise with newer organisations. Instead of faltering, this cooperation grew even stronger as donations shrunk: to cope with increasingly scarce resources, these NGOs stepped up their cooperation by continuing to exchange personnel and equipment.

The analogy between NGOs and firms underlying political economy approaches also suggests that NGOs developing somewhat complementary types of missions and relying on different donors should be more likely to cooperate. Accordingly, small NGOs conducting maritime patrol missions could fruitfully collaborate with organisations with larger boats transporting migrants to Europe: while the former could save fuel by relying on their larger counterparts' bigger ships, the latter could capitalise on the visibility and media engagement that bringing migrants to safety in an Italian port could provide. However, NGOs' propensity to collaborate seems dictated primarily by matching role conceptions rather than logistical complementarity. Accordingly, smaller German NGOs like Sea-Watch and Jugend Rettet collaborated tightly with one another and with likeminded charities with larger boats likes MSF and *SOS-Mèditerranée*. By contrast, their relationship with other NGOs with large ships but different role conceptions like MOAS and Save remained less developed despite logistical incentives and different funding sources. MOAS' cooperation was smoother with those smaller NGOs with a more neutral and less advocacy-oriented role conception like Sea-Eye and Open Arms. Hence, a political economy approach ultimately proves ill-suited to explain NGO–NGO interactions at sea.

An institutionalist framework, on the other hand, provides more valuable insights into NGOs' overall ability to coordinate and collaborate in the field. The fact that all NGOs had to adhere to the same maritime safety standards, operated under the coordination of the Italian MRCC, and were subjected to the same compliance pull of the maritime rescue norm mitigated potential competition and mistrust, enabling collaborative interactions at the operational level. This institutional framework eased problems of collective action and reduced miscommunication and confusion at the operational level, enabled smooth coordination across the humanitarian fleet by, for instance, preventing different NGOs to simultaneously rush to the same migrant boat in distress. Outright hostility only occurred in interactions with Defend Europe, an outlier that denounced the duty to rescue as a catalyst of illegal immigration and appropriated humanitarian discourses for instrumental, exclusionary goals. By threatening harsh legal consequences for extreme actions like sabotaging NGO ships and establishing a general duty of cooperation to ensure the safety of life at sea, however, the formal rules enshrined in the international law of the sea prevented this hostility from escalating. While it effectively captures the general tendency for humanitarian seafarers to cooperate under existing regulations and norms, this institutional regime alone cannot account for the tighter or looser degrees of mistrust or cooperation across different organisations. As noted by Stroup (2012, p. 7) NGOs are not "passive carriers of transnational norms", but purposive actors with their own identities and interests. Consequently, a fine-grained understanding of why some organisations decided to go beyond their statutory obligations to coordinate and engage in tighter interactions requires looking into the different identities of each of these NGOs.

Stroup's argument that NGOs' identity mainly derives from their national origins would suggest that being headquartered in and mainly recruiting personnel from the same country should act as a key catalyst of cooperation between sea rescue NGOs. Indeed, the tight interactions between the five different German NGOs that were deployed at sea indicate that national cultural affinities do ease trust and facilitate cooperation. However, nationality alone does not explain why some NGOs sharing the same

nationality, like Sea-Watch and Mission Lifeline, collaborated more closely than others, nor does it account for the close cooperation between organisations headquartered in different countries like MOAS and Sea-Eye, or MSF and Sea-Watch. Ultimately, the match in organisations' role explains NGO–NGO interactions in a more accurate fashion than all the competing explanations identified above.

8. Conclusions

In this article, I have sought to provide a threefold contribution to the study of maritime security, border control, and humanitarianism. First, I have added to our empirical knowledge of European maritime migration governance and the role of NGOs therein by mapping the interactions between maritime humanitarian actors. Second, I have sought to advance the study of cooperation and competition in the humanitarian sector by developing a more comprehensive typology that identifies seven distinct levels of interactions and may be fruitfully applied to humanitarian spaces on land as well. Third, I have introduced a novel explanation of NGO–NGO cooperation, showing that humanitarian role conceptions provide a more accurate and fine-grained account of interactions between NGOs than competing explanations based on the political economy of the non-governmental sector, sociological institutionalism, and organisations' nationality.

The finding that matching or diverging role conceptions are the key factor informing NGOs' tendency to engage in hostile or cooperative relations has significant theoretical and policy implications. From a theoretical standpoint, my findings concur with previous constructivist research in stressing the importance of identities and cultures in shaping the behaviour of NGOs and the cohesion of the humanitarian community, whose members often uphold competing understandings of humanitarianism. Due to the very nature of maritime rescue operations, where effective coordination is crucial to save lives, these findings have important policy implications as well. The disengagement of Italian and European military assets from the Southern Mediterranean magnified the importance of sea rescue NGOs, which became the largest provider of SAR off the Libyan coast in both 2016 and 2017. Even if they did not prevent coordination on the field, the different roles upheld by sea rescue NGOs inhibited more effective cooperation at the directive level. Different role conceptions and mutual distrust prevented NGOs from reaching a common position and speaking with a single voice when the Italian government started to restrain non-governmental sea rescue through the 2017 code of conduct. The fact that some NGOs signed the code while some others did not further strain the cohesion of the humanitarian fleet, weakening mutual solidarity when some organisations were accused of abetting illegal immigration and preventing NGOs from forming a united front vis-à-vis delegitimation campaigns. This lack of cohesion severely weakened the maritime humanitarian cause, facilitating the criminalisation strategies carried out by hostile government agencies and civil society organisations like Defend Europe.

Notes

1. Interview with MSF worker, June 2016; Interview with MOAS worker, August 2016.
2. Interview with Open Arms worker, June 2016.

3. Interview with Defend Europe activist, July 2017.
4. Interview with Sea-Watch worker, August 2017.
5. Interview with MSF worker, September 2017; interview with Sea-Watch worker, September 2017.
6. Interview with Sea-Watch worker, August 2016.
7. Interview with MOAS worker, August 2016.
8. Interview with MSF worker, June 2016; Interview with Sea-Eye worker, June 2016; interview with Open Arms worker, June 2016; interview with MOAS worker, August 2016.
9. Interview with Italian Coast Guard Officer, June 2016; Interview with Italian Navy Officer, June 2016.

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