Saving people or saving face? Four narratives of regional humanitarian order in Southeast Asia

Kilian Spandler

School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Göteborg, Sweden

ABSTRACT
ASEAN member states have invested substantially in cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). Despite broad support for the idea of ‘localizing’ HADR governance, the rise of regional agency has in practice led to uncertainty and frictions between humanitarian stakeholders. The article makes sense of these tensions by investigating the narratives through which intra- and extraregional agents construct the role of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre). Based on the assumption that narratives are central legitimating practices when new agents enter a governance arena, it analyzes textual material produced by different humanitarian organizations that operate in Southeast Asia, as well as interviews with representatives from these organizations. Their accounts of the AHA Centre’s role can be grouped into four narratives that are bound up with competing ideas about regional humanitarian order: an affirmative one, a skeptical one, a critical one and a transformative one. The article thus rejects characterizations of regional HADR as a rationally designed ‘architecture’ and instead defines it as a deeply political arena where different conceptions of order are asserted, contested and negotiated.

KEYWORDS AHA Centre; ASEAN; disaster relief; humanitarian assistance; politics of aid; regional governance

1. Introduction
How can we make sense of the current dynamics in the governance of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) in Southeast Asia? HADR has traditionally been dominated by Western agents and global organizations (Barnett & Walker, 2015). The notion of an international humanitarian ‘architecture’ centered on United Nations (UN) mechanisms, which would...
orchestrate the relief efforts of the relevant intergovernmental and non-governmental agencies and liaise with the relevant national authorities, underscored this hierarchy (OCHA, 2013, pp. 22–24). Recently, however, states in the non-Western world are exploring alternative ways of governing HADR. Most importantly, they are increasingly cooperating regionally to foster their own agency in HADR. One of the most prominent theaters of this trend is Asia, routinely labelled the most disaster-prone region in the world (Fan & Krebs, 2014). The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has gone to great lengths to strengthen the institutional foundations of regional cooperation on HADR (Hollis, 2015, p. 25). In 2005, its member states signed a formally binding legal agreement on joint disaster management. Since 2011, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) operates on a variety of HADR tasks, ranging from disaster preparedness work to risk assessment, monitoring of disasters, the coordination of international disaster response and the delivery of relief items.

To some extent, these developments are compatible with discourses supporting the ‘localization’ of humanitarian action, which demands more ownership for state and non-state actors in close proximity to the emergencies. Many humanitarian experts have pointed to the advantages of a regional approach, both in delivering effective relief themselves and in facilitating the acceptance of external aid by governments that are protective of their sovereignty (Barbelet, 2018; El Taraboulsi, Krebs, Zyck, & Willitts-King, 2016, pp. 12–15). Accordingly, there have been attempts at coordinating interactions between new regional and established agents operating in humanitarian crises and disaster relief. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) assumes a central role in this respect. Despite the wide-ranging attempts to integrate regional agency into established conceptions of humanitarian order, however, empirical evidence shows that there is persistent uncertainty about the role of regional HADR mechanisms and their impact on regional governance, and that this has complicated the response to disasters. Evaluations of the AHA Centre’s involvement in disaster responses come to mixed conclusions, and experts are divided over the extent to which it is contributing to effective HADR in Southeast Asia (e.g., IFRC, 2019; Zyck, Fan, & Price, 2014). A regional governance ‘architecture’ with clearly defined authority relations and a functioning division of labor has remained elusive. Instead, mutual understandings about responsibilities and working procedures often only develop in concrete emergencies.

Existing accounts of Southeast Asian HADR governance have not convincingly explained these ongoing frictions. They either are rooted in rationalist International Relations (IR) theories, which suggest that functional demands and organizational logics will eventually lead to a productive division of labor
between established and emerging agents, or propose that the emergence of regional HADR follows a diffusion logic. Both perspectives assume that HADR governance is designed according to overarching functional or normative purposes, without adequately problematizing the extent to which different agents actually share a common idea of these purposes.

This article explains the ongoing frictions in humanitarian governance in Southeast Asia – i.e., the absence of commonly agreed roles and responsibilities – as a result of contested politics. It argues that regional HADR governance remains unsettled because it has an irreducibly procedural and political aspect: it is actively produced by agents who attempt to project and assert different views about regional order. In order to understand the implications of regional agency for HADR governance in Southeast Asia, we therefore need to unpack empirically how agents communicate about regional order. Analytically, the article focuses on narratives as a main type of practice through which agents represent, legitimate and contest regional order (cf. Wibben, 2011). Agents can strategically use them to project claims about their respective roles in relation to other actors, as well as ideas about legitimate agency (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013). While hegemonic agents may temporally establish their narratives as dominant interpretations of order, as used to be the case with the Western-dominated notion of a UN-centric humanitarian ‘architecture’, they can never absolutely fix it. They are likely to be challenged especially when new agents attempt to assert a subject position in a policy field (Miskimmon & O’Loughlin, 2017). I demonstrate that the field of HADR in Southeast Asia represents such a case of contested order by means of a narrative analysis of the AHA Centre’s role. Narrative analysis recognizes that agents’ perceptions and evaluations of reality are typically organized using plot structures and role constructions. A reconstruction of the narratives that shape the accounts of different stakeholders thus provides insights into their ideas about the regional humanitarian order.

Interpreting a wide range of material including interviews with policymakers and stakeholders in the region, official documents and social media posts, the article studies how different humanitarian agents construct the role of the AHA Centre through narratives. The analysis finds that the role remains suspended between four competing narratives: an affirmative one celebrating its achievement and partnership with other stakeholders, a skeptical one emphasizing its lack of capacities, a critical one challenging its normative claims and implications, and a transformative one seeing it as an instrument for member states to navigate the politics of aid.

These narratives do not just legitimate and delegitimate the AHA Centre as a regional humanitarian actor but also transport competing ideas about the legitimacy of the broadly liberal humanitarian order, putting its hitherto
hegemonic status in question. The challenges towards these ideas emerging from the new narratives do not prevent collaboration on HADR. However, actors’ diverging interests and the need to speak to audiences with diverging normative predispositions militate against a convergence around a common vision for a fixed HADR ‘architecture’.

Empirically, the article sheds light on agents’ competing perceptions of the role of regional mechanisms in HADR, and thus makes sense of the persisting tensions and dysfunctionalities in this policy field. It shows how agents strategically draw on different narratives as they navigate the complex and contradictory conditions of HADR governance. Theoretically, the article rejects accounts of regional HADR as a rationally designed regime and instead characterizes it as a deeply political arena (cf. Watson, 2019) where different conceptions of order are asserted, contested and negotiated in practice. It thus sides with Acharya’s (2018, pp. 155–185) assertion that regions are a crucial site of the development of the evolving ‘multiplex’ order, in which power is becoming more diffuse and emerging agents challenge the legitimacy of the hegemonic liberal international order. Methodologically, the article suggests narrative analysis as a useful tool for studying such dynamic authority relations.

Section 2 of this article provides a brief review of research on the role of regional mechanisms in HADR governance. I argue that the literature mostly focuses on questions of effectiveness and legitimacy that reify liberal notions of humanitarian order, while failing to problematize to what extent the politics of HADR have put the hegemonic status of this paradigm in question. Section 3 outlines a theoretical framework that builds on narrative approaches in IR to account for the relational construction of the AHA Centre’s role, and presents narrative analysis as the study’s methodological approach. Section 4 reconstructs four narratives of the AHA Centre’s role in regional HADR, and shows how their plots and role constructions invoke diverging conceptions of international order. The Conclusion draws out the implications of these findings for humanitarian action and relates them to ongoing debates about a post-liberal world.

2. Research on regional HADR mechanisms

Apart from some pioneering contributions (O’Brien, 2000), the study of regional cooperation on HADR is a young field of research. Since around 2015, researchers point out that regional HADR mechanisms – encompassing both legal cooperation agreements and implementing agencies – are changing the humanitarian landscape in different parts of the world (Cook, 2018; Ear, Cook, & Canyon, 2017; Ferris & Petz, 2013; Hollis, 2015), including in Southeast Asia (Cook, 2017; Fan & Krebs, 2014; Simm, 2018). The AHA
Centre has gained considerable attention since its establishment in 2011. Envisaged by the member states governments as the main mechanism to operationalize ASEAN’s framework for regional HADR cooperation, it provides services in a range of HADR dimensions, including risk assessment, monitoring, preparedness and response. It provides capacity-building for national agencies and assists them by providing coordination, information and communication services in active emergencies. In many cases, it also deploys its own staff for assessment and logistics on the ground, and mobilizes and distributes regional relief items from ASEAN stockpiles.

Besides mapping and describing the institutional developments, most of the studies ask to what extent the new agencies contribute to effective HADR governance. The evaluations often point to the positive potential of the mechanisms but also highlight shortcomings in the implementation of agreements (Caballero-Anthony, 2018; Hollis, 2015, pp. 140–143; Simm, 2018) and the disaster relief performance of agencies (Loh, 2016). Zyck et al. (2014, pp. 3–4) rightly point out that any appraisal of ASEAN’s potential and achievements in HADR depends on analysts’ expectations about its role. In the same vein, different theoretical assumptions have generated diverging causal explanations of the organization’s performance, with rationalist and constructivist approaches being the dominating perspectives.

Rationalist institutionalist perspectives argue that regional mechanisms follow a functional demand for transboundary problem-solving (Caballero-Anthony, 2018; Rolls & Guan, 2014). Disasters often defy national boundaries, which renders national approaches ineffective. On the other hand, global solutions for these collective action problems are slow to materialize, which is why the regional level attains particular importance (Cook, 2018, p. 361). This does not mean that regional approaches are automatically superior. Authors frequently point to deficiencies caused by inadequate institutional design (Caballero-Anthony, 2018) and formulate recommendations for addressing them, such as increased formalization and improved organization of policy-making processes (Cook, 2018, p. 361).

Rationalist approaches also point to a different problem. The emergence of regional mechanisms further adds to an already crowded field of governance (El Taraboulsi et al., 2016). Regime complexity theory suggests that, in such circumstances, measures to ensure the complementarity of approaches and avoid duplication of efforts become imperative (Caballero-Anthony, 2018; Ear et al., 2017). From this perspective, the main problem of regional HADR governance is the lingering uncertainty over authority and the division of labor between agents. These authors frequently suggest that an effective governance ‘architecture’ or ‘framework’ depends on improved coordination and exchange between different HADR agents, e.g., civilian
and military agencies or state and non-state actors (Cook, 2017, p. 359; Ear et al., 2017).

Constructivist approaches argue that regional HADR is driven by a normative logic. Hollis (2015), for example, applies world society theory to make the case that regional organizations develop HADR capacities above all to signal their compliance with a global ‘script’ of disaster risk management promoted primarily by Western international organizations. Similarly, Rum (2016) and Oishi (2016) analyze the diffusion of norms and concepts of humanitarian governance, such as human security, as drivers of regional cooperation. In this view, the poor performance of regional mechanisms usually appears as evidence of ‘decoupling’ (Hollis, 2015, p. 4) between formal commitments and operational practices. While governments outwardly accept global norms, local material or normative conditions, such as sovereignty concerns (El Taraboulsi et al., 2016; Fan & Krebs, 2014, pp. 3, 5; Hollis, 2015, p. 162; Loh, 2016), intra-regional competition and a lack of capacities or political will (Hollis, 2015, p. 141; Simm, 2018), prevent them from following through with their institutional commitments.

While existing approaches disagree whether regional governance follows a rationalist logic of consequence or a normative logic of appropriateness, both perspectives privilege a liberal script of regional governance that is based on normative ideas about the provision of public goods and the guarantee of individual rights (Börzel & Van Hülsen, 2015; Jupille, Jolliff, & Wojcik, 2013). The liberal script generally grounds HADR in an ethics of care based on fundamental and universal human rights, privileges Western authority and expertise over local ownership, and allows (selective) humanitarian intervention in circumvention of national sovereignty concerns (Barnett, 2010; Hollis, 2014b). Any frictions in regional HADR governance appear as deviations from this ideal. Rationalist perspectives usually take for granted that there exists a consensus on the fundamental purposes and principles of humanitarian action. World-society and diffusion approaches to regional HADR mostly reduce non-Western regional organizations to norm-takers (Hollis, 2015, p. 12), thus ignoring their agency and accepting the norms of the liberal script as the linchpin for effective humanitarian action. Even where constructivists emphasize local normative structures, they focus on their constraining effects as ‘unintended consequences’ (Loh, 2016) that limit effective disaster response.

Critical HADR scholars have pointed out that the notion of a coherent, monolithic liberal script or order is itself a simplifying representation that ignores internal tensions, for example between notions of a universal ethics of care and state sovereignty. From their perspective, the very notion of a ‘liberal’ order obscures the many inequalities and decidedly non-liberal practices that are produced and legitimized by HADR governance, such as
environmental degradation, economic exploitation and the restriction of human mobility (Watson, 2019, pp. 8–11). More importantly for the context of this study, however, by reifying the liberal humanitarian order we lose sight of the ongoing contestations over the legitimacy of conceptions of humanitarian order in different world regions. The most visible expression of such frictions is the surge of policy debates about the localization of HADR. A range of global initiatives and framework agreements, including the Good Humanitarian Donorship principles (2003), OCHA’s Leaving No One Behind report (2015) and the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit all reflect aspirations of bringing disaster relief and humanitarian assistance closer to the crisis-affected communities. Policy-oriented studies have explored both the transformative potential and the factual limitations of this agenda (El Taraboulsi et al., 2016). Findings show that the implementation of the localization agenda has remained slow, with power asymmetries, competition over authority and dominant agents’ concerns over ceding control being a major obstacle (Barbelet, 2018, pp. 19–20; Bennet, Foley, & Pantuliano, 2016, pp. 5–6). Such frictions also shape inter-organizational politics in Southeast Asia. In an interview, an OCHA official working on relations with ASEAN recalls their organization’s unease about the prominent role of ASEAN in the relief efforts after Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar:

There were some concerns arising with how […] ASEAN [was] positioning itself. Did what ASEAN undertook in the context of Nargis strengthen or weaken principled humanitarian action? […] And I think, you know, if we’re honest, there was a slight sense of competition: here is this new actor coming in, they may unseat us. (Interview 1)²

Although analysts have pointed out that non-Western traditions and narratives of humanitarianism provide a potential basis for a reconfiguration of the international humanitarian order (Bennet et al., 2016, pp. 19–22), the academic literature has not systematically explored how such alternative order conceptions are viewed among different humanitarian stakeholders, let alone discussed their implications for theorizing HADR governance. In particular, we lack an understanding of how conflicting ideas about the international humanitarian order reconstitute the political space in which HADR governance is carried out (Watson, 2019), and how this in turn enables and constrains regional humanitarian agency. What is needed is a perspective that puts the politics of regional HADR governance front and center.

3. (De-)legitimating the regional humanitarian order through narratives

The difficulties to integrate regional mechanisms into a HADR ‘architecture’ suggest that the emergence of regional agency does not merely raise
questions of effective coordination, but exposes fundamental frictions beneath the surface of a seeming consensus around the Western-dominated liberal humanitarian order. The following Section 3.1 presents a framework rooted in narrative theories of IR to make sense of these frictions. The framework makes it possible to problematize and empirically unpack agents’ ideas about humanitarian order, instead of taking them for granted as existing accounts do. The methodological clarifications in Section 3.2 detail how the study deploys narrative analysis for this purpose.

3.1. Theoretical framework

Southeast Asian HADR can be seen as a site of the development of what Acharya (2018) calls a ‘multiplex’ world, in which authority is becoming more diffuse and emerging agents question the legitimacy of hegemonic Western liberal ideas about international order especially on a regional scale (Schweller & Pu, 2011). As regional actors contest dominant ideas about roles and underlying norms, and assert their own authority claims, the multiperspectival and precarious nature of the very notion of order becomes apparent. Old and new agents constantly need to legitimate their own conceptions of order against those of others. Acknowledging these dynamics means shifting the analytical perspective from formal and static governance relations to the endogenous practices of ordering (cf. Bially Mattern, 2005) through which agents attempt to construct, legitimate and contest their own roles and those of others (Koot, Leisink, & Verweel, 2003; Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 60). While material resources and formal authority influence ordering processes, the latter have an irreducible communicative dimension. This aspect becomes especially important in fields like HADR, which are characterized by the absence of formal rules and procedures. Since formal-legal means of ordering, such as legislation, adjudication and policing, are unavailable in such a context, agents have to revert to other modes of asserting their competing ideas about their respective identities, privileges and responsibilities (Black, 2017).

A crucial means of constructing, legitimating and contesting conceptions of order under such conditions are narratives (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017a). In basic terms, narratives are stories that agents construct to make sense of reality (Lyotard, 1988). They are organized in the form of plots, which are temporally ordered storylines that usually unfold around the disturbance of an initial equilibrium. The disturbance causes a transitional development towards an ending at which the initial equilibrium is often, though not necessarily, restored (Herman, 2009, pp. 18–19). The second crucial element of narratives are role constructions that constitute agents’ identities and their relations among each other (Mandler, 1984; White, 2014, pp. 5–6).
Originally coined in literary theory, the concept of narrative has gained traction across the social sciences, including organization studies (e.g., Humphreys & Brown, 2002), political science (e.g., Shenhav, 2006), European Studies (e.g., Kaldor, Martin, & Selchow, 2007) and International Relations (e.g., Berenskoetter, 2014; Bially Mattern, 2005; Wibben, 2011). As these works demonstrate, the relevance of narratives for the analysis of social dynamics lies in their ability to combine descriptive, constitutive and normative elements: they ‘represent’ what seems to be going on, but also produce the reality they describe, and communicate and reproduce expectations about actor behavior, thus enabling specific practices (Wibben, 2011, p. 2).

On these theoretical foundations, IR scholars have argued that narratives are crucial for the legitimation, but also contestation and delegitimation of international order. First and foremost, their role constructions can provide or withhold varying forms of identity and agency to states, international organizations and non-state agents (Berenskoetter, 2014; Bially Mattern, 2005; Miskimmon et al., 2013, pp. 30–59). Whether collective mechanisms like the AHA Centre are consequential for regional HADR governance depends on whether the stories told about humanitarian action accord them a relevant role. Second, the narration of roles also constitutes relations among agents by placing them in configurations of hierarchy or equality, enmity or partnership etc. (Allison-Reumann, 2020). Third, the plots of narratives can explain events by interpreting them as the result of intentional agency, and thus ascribe accountability and responsibility for desired or undesired outcomes. Whether a HADR agent is characterized as driven by humanitarian or self-interested motivations will considerably affect legitimacy perceptions (Watson, 2019, p. 50).

Fourth, because of their temporal structure, they can also develop implications for the future by drawing lessons from the past from the standpoint of the present (Berenskoetter, 2014, pp. 270–274; Wehner, 2020, p. 3). Plots thus create expectations and reduce uncertainty about practices (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 68). Finally, by using metaphors and evoking emotions, narratives can give concrete experiential form to abstract moral principles, thus enabling communication about the implicit normative foundations of practice (Miskimmon et al., 2013, pp. 112–113). Vague and ambiguous concepts such as the ‘liberal international order’ thus become tangible in narratives that characterize governance agents as, e.g., underdogs mastering challenges against the odds, tragic heroes facing inevitable fate, hypocrites feigning noble intentions, or buffoons caught in delusion. Role constructions and emplotments thus legitimate or delegitimate both agents and the underlying norms of international society (Miskimmon et al., 2013, pp. 101–147).
Because of these features, narratives are ‘profoundly political’ (Wibben, 2011, p. 43). Agents can strategically use them to advance their ideas of international order – its identities, relations, practices and norms – against those of others. When emerging agents claim authority in a field of governance, as is the case with ASEAN in Southeast Asian HADR, they can project narratives conveying ideas about international order that counter those of dominant agents (Miskimmon & O’Loughlin, 2017). The result, as Miskimmon et al. (2013) put it, is ‘a political struggle, by actors seeking to achieve as great a degree of consensus around their narrative as possible’ (p. 109).

Put in the context of this study, theories of narratives suggest that (a) HADR stakeholders construct and legitimate their ideas about the role of the AHA Centre through narratives that may vary in their emplotments and role constructions, and (b) these narratives are bound up with understandings about the legitimacy of regional HADR order. Because of the strategic nature of narrative legitimation, individual agents are not necessarily committed to a single narrative. Depending on situational conditions such as who the audience of a speech act is, they can ‘tap into’ different and potentially contradicting narratives. This aspect gains particular relevance in light of ASEAN’s identity as an intergovernmental organization with a broad policy scope, which puts its evolving humanitarian agency in the context of its member states’ broader political, security, economic and social motivations. The more stakeholders draw on diverging narratives, or individual stakeholders’ accounts lack narrative consistency and coherence, the more the overall legitimating effects will be ‘unsettling’, i.e., result in multiperspectival and contested ideas about legitimate order.

3.2. Methodological approach

In line with these arguments, the empirical section of this article presents a narrative analysis of discourses on the role of the AHA Centre as the operational mechanism of regional HADR in Southeast Asia from its inception in 2011 to today. The analysis draws on a wide range of textual material and expert interviews. To keep the amount of data within a reasonable scope, it focuses on central intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations as well as some selected national authorities actively involved in HADR. Apart from the AHA Centre itself, those include the ASEAN Secretariat, OCHA, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), as well as permanent representations and embassies of two ASEAN Member States and three dialogue and development partner governments. Of course, this approach disregards voices from several other stakeholders,
especially from the non-governmental and private sector, as well as affected communities. However, the selection creates a focus on incompatibilities between those agents that wield a relatively high degree of official authority, which increases the relevance of their narrative interventions for processes of regional ordering.

As an interpretive method, narrative analysis reconstructs how meaning is organized in this material. The unit of analysis are ‘accounts’, i.e., coherent textual or verbal representations and evaluations of the AHA Centre’s activities – statements about what it is or should be, and what it does or should do – that are attributable to individual stakeholders. The coding process was developed drawing on several frameworks for narrative analysis that suggest ways to systematize their structure and content (Burke, 1969; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017b). The analysis interprets the following aspects of narratives:

- **Agents**: who is part of the story, and how are they related?
- **Agency**: what dispositions, capacities and motivations do the agents have?
- **Setting**: how does the physical and social environment shape and catalyze the story?
- **Storyline**: what are the main events or conflicts that drive the story, how do the agents act upon them, and what kinds of transformations happen?
- **Resolutions**: what kinds of end states are inscribed into the present or projected into the future?
- **Tropes**: which tools of style and narrative tradition (metaphors and slogans, irony and topoi, i.e. recurring themes) are used to construct and convey the story? Which emotions are invoked?

Upon coding the text according to these elements using Nvivo software, a story summary was drawn up for each account that provided inductively generated answers to the respective guiding questions listed above. By comparing these summaries, patterns of representation were identified, which were then synthesized into four coherent narratives. As a process of organizing meaning, this step naturally contained a subjective element. Drawing on an interpretive framework that is widely used in narrative analysis, the study initially related the story summaries to the four genres of romance, tragedy, comedy and satire, which classical narrative theory identifies as generic narrative patterns (White, 2014). Reduced to their basic structural components, romantic narratives revolve around a heroic quest of re-establishing order after an initial disturbance. Tragic ones relate the fate of protagonists who, despite their noble aspirations, fail to avoid their
inevitable downfall. Comedy is a tale of overcoming difference, and integrating conflicting positions into a harmonious order. The genre of satire, finally, denies any resolution or catharsis, and portrays all human aspiration as absurd and delusional.\(^5\)

The grouping of accounts into narratives started with an analysis of whether their core structural elements (agency, storyline and resolution) corresponded to any of the four genre patterns.\(^6\) However, the synthesis was not a unidirectional process of classifying individual accounts as belonging to any of the four genres. To avoid imposing categories derived from Western cultural history onto the narratives on Southeast Asian HADR, it took a more open, dialogical form: while relating the empirical accounts to genre structures, the interpretation incorporated elements that did not fit the established categories. This made it possible to reconstruct the four narratives as original patterns of meaning. For example, while the critical narrative of the AHA Centre resembles satire in that it alleges self-interested motives behind the lofty rhetoric of its characters, it does not necessarily declare all hopes for improvement or resolution as delusional. Based on this mix of deductive and inductive analysis, systematic summaries of the four narratives were then written up, which are presented in condensed form in the following section.

4. Four narratives

As expected, narratives are a crucial way in which stakeholders of Southeast Asian HADR governance make sense of the AHA Centre’s role. Both individual reflections and official organizational discourses display narrative elements – sometimes explicitly and reflectively so. For example, a promotional video on the fifth anniversary of the agency’s establishment features sand artist Abe Rubio, who introduces his animation like this: ‘Today, I want to share a story with all of you. A story of how this region survived from catastrophic disasters. A story of hope and struggle. A story of perseverance. A journey of collective struggle’ (AHA Centre, 2017). The AHA Centre’s Knowledge Book series, in which the agency recounts its organizational history and achievements, relies a lot on personal storytelling by former or current staff members (see for example AHA Centre, n.d.-b, pp. 69–99).

Although not explicitly prompted to do so, interviewees often reverted to represent dynamics in regional HADR governance through narratives – as opposed to, say, a mere enumeration of facts or opinions.

More than nine years after the AHA Centre became operational, there is no single grand narrative of its role in Southeast Asian HADR governance. However, the different accounts converge around four narratives with distinct representations of agency, plot elements and stylistic elements. As the
theoretical framework suggests, the level of consistency and coherence in individual accounts varies as some agents draw on elements of different narratives. While it is possible to identify certain preferences for particular narratives by different types of stakeholders, they do generally not limit themselves to a single one.

4.1. Weathering the storm: the affirmative narrative

The first narrative of the AHA Centre is mainly advanced in the agency’s public self-representations as well as in ASEAN declarations and statements of ASEAN officials. In this narrative, the development of the Centre is depicted as a heroic journey of personal and collective growth (AHA Centre, 2016a, n.d.-e). The AHA Centre’s work embodies a common will to face challenges and overcome adversity through virtue (AHA Centre, n.d.-a, p. 6). The narrative usually unfolds from the characterization of Southeast Asia as a ‘disaster-prone region’ (ASEAN, 2016a, p. 4; Interview 12). It is a setting that focuses on geographical and environmental rather than political or socio-economic conditions. Against this background, the joint experience of disruption and suffering through large-scale disasters motivated member states to strengthen their capacity to protect the well-being of their populations. One of the AHA Centre’s Knowledge Books summarizes this heroic quest to reduce human suffering:

[...] in the end, disaster management and response is primarily about preserving human life and understanding mother nature. This is the noble nature of disaster response, which is worth more than any price that must be paid to achieve it. Disaster response is a willingness to share a crisis with those who suffer, day after day, doing what can be done to reduce the impact. At its deepest essence, this is about working selflessly, with solidarity and without fanfare, providing assistance to those most in need. It is that simple, but also that difficult. (AHA Centre, n.d.-c, p. 95)

The initial and most fundamental catalyst is the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, which the AHA Centre calls a ‘Wave of Force Towards Regional Cooperation’ (AHA Centre, n.d.-e, p. 7). Other formative events include the 2008 Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and 2013 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (AHA Centre, n.d.-c, pp. 5–6). The AHA Centre’s role evolves gradually against this background. Rather than being a fully-developed character from the beginning, it starts out as a small initiative, driven mainly by a group of dedicated individuals who are characterized as passionate, dedicated and humble (Interview 11). An AHA Centre (n.d.-e, p. 29) publication recalls:

During his initial days in the office, [the first Executive Director] Mr. Said [Faisal] was the only individual working for the AHA Centre. Not quite sure where to start, he would bring his own personal laptop and flash drive,
working from a modest office of the Provisional AHA Centre in Jakarta. As a reminder of the emptiness of the office and a humble beginning of the AHA Centre that greeted Mr. Said on his first day, he remembers an Office Boy knocking on his door, enquiring if he would like a drink. Mr. Said replied that he would like a coffee, to which the boy told him that they had no coffee, let alone the cups to serve it.

Early disaster response operations appear as difficult trials, from which the AHA Centre ultimately emerged strengthened thanks to the spirit of partnership and solidarity that it has cultivated internally as well as with other stakeholders (AHA Centre, n.d.-c, pp. 21–22, n.d.-d, pp. 109–112). By drawing lessons and building its capacities, it has transformed itself into a professional organization that is able to face the forces of nature in an effective manner. The agency’s professionalism is demonstrated by emphasizing lesson-drawing, the use of technology and standardized procedures in disaster preparedness and response (e.g., AHA Centre, 2016a, n.d.-d, pp. 65–71).

The idea of heroic strength through unity that undergirds the affirmative narrative is expressed in the slogan ‘One ASEAN, One Response’, the title of a 2016 declaration by ASEAN heads of state and government on strengthening HADR cooperation, which is also used as a hashtag in the social media presence of the AHA Centre (AHA Centre, 2019). The formal and political mandates by the member states are showcased as signs of increasing trust and confidence in the AHA Centre’s work (Capili, 2017, p. 8; Interview 11). The overall plot thus has structural similarities with coming-of-age narratives and the genre of the heroic quest (White, 2014, pp. 8–9). The central topos of growth is also projected into the future, as the use of disaster scenarios for capacity-building and frequent references to ASEAN’s aspiration to become a ‘global leader’ in HADR demonstrate (e.g., AHA Centre, 2016b, pp. 5, 19; ASEAN, 2016a, pp. 10–11). ‘The AHA Centre’s thirst for improvement and shared learning is unquenchable’, as one edition of its Knowledge Books puts it (AHA Centre, n.d.-a, p. 71).

The notion of order in the affirmative narrative is largely a-political. The emphasis on professionalism and technological capacities resonates with the scientific discourse of disaster management on the global level (Hollis, 2014a, pp. 352–354). Other stakeholders like the UN agencies, the Red Cross organizations and national disaster agencies appear as partners bound by solidarity in a common struggle, and the AHA Centre’s relations with them are characterized by the desire to establish a ‘smooth interface’ ensuring compatibility and interoperability (AHA Centre, 2014, p. 7, see also Interview 13). The Centre’s unique role within this division of labor lies in its geographical proximity and ability to respond quickly, its knowledge of local contexts and its legitimacy due to cultural and ethnic affinities. A former member describes the strength of ASEAN’s emergency response and
assessment team (ERAT), which is now run by the AHA Centre, like this: ‘regionally, the folks there are acclimatised. No one is coming in that is unaware of the culture. More so now, we have members from the affected countries themselves, so they become a good point of contact, either the authorities, the villages — who’s the mayor, who’s in charge — the different hierarchy.’ (AHA Centre, n.d.-b, p. 103). One emergency responder recalls the experience of AHA Centre staff being offered food by locals in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan as proof of the positive image of ASEAN among the populations in its member states (AHA Centre, n.d.-b, p. 92).

Recurring tropes that support this idea are the political metaphors of ASEAN solidarity and a people-centered ASEAN, coupled with notions of partnership with other humanitarian stakeholders (AHA Centre, n.d.-e, pp. 41, 53; Lim, 2019, p. 3). The former Executive Director Said Faisal argues: ‘when we deploy ERAT, we don’t just deploy a person or a group of individuals. We deploy the solidarity of ASEAN. It is about delivering results and adding value framed within ASEAN solidarity. The emotional dimension is reflected in the fact that when we deploy ERAT, we are visiting family’ (AHA Centre, n.d.-b, p. 21).

The affirmative narrative thus legitimates the AHA Centre as a new central agent in the ‘architecture’ of regional HADR. By putting the well-being of the population front and center and emphasizing multi-stakeholder cooperation, it projects a vision of stronger regional HADR agency without challenging fundamental principles of hegemonic liberal order conceptions (Interviews 7, 13).

4.2. Not fit for purpose: the skeptical narrative

Countering the affirmative narrative, Western humanitarian agents are often offering skeptical accounts of the AHA Centre. The signature feature of the skeptical narrative is an emphasis on the Centre’s limitations. While not necessarily doubting the good intentions of the AHA Centre and its principals, the member state governments, this narrative describes their efforts as unsuccessful because of a lack of resources, capacities or political will (Interview 4).

Contrasting with the transformative storyline of the affirmative narrative, the skeptical one displaces full agency of the AHA Centre into a potential future. Because of a lack of funding, a restrictive mandate, divisions among governments and sovereignty concerns of affected states, its substantial contribution to regional HADR has remained marginal (Interviews 9, 10), and it fails to match the effectiveness of Western humanitarian actors, which are sometimes constructed as an idealized other (Interview 3). Even ASEAN documents occasionally point out that the AHA Centre is struggling
to live up to its aspirations (AHA Centre, 2014; ASEAN, 2016b, pp. 123–125). A high-level staff member argued that some member state governments are keen to expand their agency’s scope of activities while failing to equip it with the necessary resources (Interview 11). Some stories of personal involvement in disaster response operations by staff members also highlight the difficulties of working outside of their national contexts and question the value of regional identity. Some raise examples where their identification with ASEAN was irrelevant or even detrimental to their relief efforts (AHA Centre, n.d.-b, pp. 69–75). One emergency responder recalls that ERAT team members eventually discarded their ASEAN vests to be able to pass as locals when trying to hitch a ride to get to Tacloban airport in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan (AHA Centre, 2014, p. 93). Another problematizes the ambiguous identity of his team: ‘We also didn’t know how we will position ourselves—as ASEAN, as ERAT, as a coordinating centre, as the AHA Centre?’ (AHA Centre, 2014, p. 74).

According to the skeptical narrative, the AHA Centre’s agency is dependent on the continued capacity-building efforts of Western humanitarian patrons (IFRC, 2019, p. 20; Interviews 3, 4). To some extent, this characterization of the AHA Centre resonates with the role of a tragic hero, motivated by noble intentions but failing to overcome overwhelming challenges (White, 2014, p. 9). However, in contrast to the classical genre of tragedy, most skeptical accounts do point to the possibility of a more productive role in the future.

Several accounts draw on the case of the Rakhine/Rohingya crisis to develop the narrative. Even though ASEAN governments have realized that the organization’s credibility and legitimacy depend on its ability to contribute to a solution, the AHA Centre has failed to have a transformative impact on the crisis, let alone the underlying root causes of the conflict. The restrictions of its mandate, ASEAN’s institutional set-up and member states’ principled reluctance to discuss politically sensitive issues have prevented the AHA Centre from becoming more active in conflict-related humanitarian crises – or ‘human-induced disasters’ in ASEAN parlance – like the one unfolding in Rakhine State (Interviews 3, 9). Individual governments that are interested in a political solution are unable to bridge internal divisions and break the deadlock. This, in turn, limits its ability to cooperate with international state- and non-state actors, who take a more political approach to the crisis (Interview 1).

Even when it comes to politically less sensitive contexts like the Lombok and Sulawesi disasters in Indonesia in 2018, the AHA Centre has not lived up to its role, as shortcomings in its assessment work, information-sharing and logistical management indicate (IFRC, 2019, p. 20). According to one account, the Centre’s failures are attributable to hubris: it operated on the
false assumption that it could fulfil the demands by the affected member state on its own, without recognizing and drawing on the capacities of the broader international humanitarian system (Interview 1).

As long as the member states’ governments fail to ‘put their money where their mouth is’, it is doubtful that ASEAN can fundamentally challenge the basic dynamics of the HADR order (Interviews 1, 14). The only hope for affected people is continued reliance on the support by external actors. The skeptical narrative welcomes the idea of more regional ownership in principle, but depicts ASEAN as currently unfit for this purpose. It thus delegitimizes ASEAN’s regional mechanisms while – just like the affirmative one – reproducing liberal ideas about HADR governance, and engages in the pursuit of an effective ‘architecture’. The AHA Centre’s relevance for the regional order is measured against its ability to provide human security. Rivaling normative concepts like the ASEAN Way are acknowledged but described as limiting the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. As it falls short of the expectations of its regional principals, the UN as well as Western donors and aid agencies are portrayed as the main providers of effective HADR governance.

4.3. Humanitarianism at stake: the critical narrative

While the skeptical narrative puts the AHA Centre’s relevance in doubt, some observers from Western humanitarian actors and partner governments take a more fundamentally critical stance by questioning the intentions behind and possible implications of regional HADR mechanisms. These accounts appear directly targeting the affirmative narrative, as the AHA Centre’s heroic aura is unmasked as a performance by agents with unclear or egoistic motives. Instead of a champion of vulnerable people and an epitome of solidarity, it is characterized as an instrument of ASEAN leaders, whose hypocritical rhetoric cannot hide that they ultimately prioritize their self-interest.

The plot is not built around the prospect of some kind of resolution, but instead emphasizes continual contradictions that emerge from the politics of aid. Under conditions of population growth and climate change, the legitimacy of governments increasingly has come to depend on perceptions about their ability to respond effectively. Consequently, the AHA Centre’s creation does not follow ethical motivations but a political logic. ASEAN leaders drive HADR cooperation because it is an uncontroversial issue where scoring points among constituencies by showcasing common action is relatively easy (Interview 1). The narrative thus sees mutual assistance among ASEAN member states mainly as a symbolic exercise aimed at legitimating regimes and governments. For example, one observer interpreted
ASEAN’s aspirations to become a ‘global leader’ in disaster management as ‘branding’ (Interview 1), and others describe the handover of relief items as photo ops (Interview 9).

Any promise of improvement through joint action – e.g., after Typhoon Haiyan – is ultimately revealed as delusional, since deceit for political gain lurks behind every corner. This is especially true when it comes to disasters with a political dimension. ASEAN actors may frame these crises with a view to deflecting external interference and thus preventing effective humanitarian intervention (Interview 4). The dubious role of the AHA Centre in the Rakhine/Rohingya crisis is presented as a case in point. Since the surge in violence in August 2018, ASEAN has shown itself willing to engage in dialogue with the Myanmar government, but much less with the UN (Interview 1). While ASEAN officials adhering to the affirmative narrative present the AHA Centre as an important humanitarian manager in Rakhine State, critics maintain that the concrete material value of relief items has remained wildly inadequate and that a lack of accountability make it an unreliable partner in the crisis (Interviews 1, 4). At worst, the agency’s involvement may be counterproductive because its closeness to the government can make principled humanitarian action impossible. An official at UN OCHA imagines a scenario of increased conflict between the UN and ASEAN on the issue:

[… we can foresee a situation where the repatriation starts through a bilateral agreement between Bangladesh and Myanmar, the UN says we cannot support this because we do not think the conditions exist, and ASEAN instructs the AHA Centre to provide services of some sort or another. Now, the UN is saying the conditions don’t exist: […] there isn’t humanitarian access. We cannot therefore be independent, impartial, neutral. But the AHA Centre comes in and supports the return of those people. That puts us at odds with ASEAN. (Interview 1)

Staff members of the ICRC also mention the need to insist on the importance of the so-called humanitarian principles when interacting with ASEAN representatives (Interview 9). Whereas advocates of ASEAN’s humanitarian mechanism dub deploying local actors as an advantage due to their contextual knowledge, critics argue that it may actually be detrimental in complex conflicts if they appear as pursuing their own interests (Interview 9).

An important stylistic feature of the critical narrative is irony, which in narrative analysis is connected to the genre of satire (White, 2014, pp. 37–38). In the context of regional HADR, it exposes the alleged hypocrisy of affirmative accounts. For example, one account highlighted that ASEAN’s consensus principles and the anti-interventionist paranoia by some member states make it impossible to fulfil the declared purpose of ASEAN’s HADR mechanisms, namely ensuring effective security cooperation on all kinds of disasters (Interview 1). If ASEAN fails to manage these risks, it may not only
end up endangering affected populations but also harming its own reputation and legitimacy.

Overall, thus, the critical narrative sees ASEAN’s disposition towards prioritizing state interests over humanitarian considerations as preventing it from playing a constructive part in the regional HADR order. The importance of saving face poses an obstacle to saving people. ASEAN’s refusal to discuss the political dimension of humanitarian crises with other humanitarian actors like the UN, and to address problems and controversial issues when dealing with state actors in a crisis situation, prevent closer cooperation with established HADR actors. In some variations of this narrative, ASEAN and the AHA Centre are explicitly denied the role of a responsible humanitarian agent (Interview 1).

By questioning lofty assumptions about the purpose of regional HADR mechanisms, the critical narrative delegitimizes ASEAN as a humanitarian agent. However, it does not simply reassert a regional HADR order based on liberal norms. While some accounts betray a preference for liberal principles of humanitarian action and argue for a continued role of UN agencies in regional HADR, they usually acknowledge that Western-centric notions of order belong in the past. The rise of regional humanitarian agency is irreversible. But since this agency is ultimately about the pursuit of regime interests and the ASEAN Way reigns supreme, prospects of cooperation for the sake of human security appear bleak.

4.4. Building bridges: the transformative narrative

Finally, several actors ascribe a transformative role to the AHA Centre. This includes officials from the ASEAN member states as well as regional humanitarian professionals from a variety of organizations, including the AHA Centre itself. However, some external organizations also formulate their expectations in this way. In contrast to the affirmative narrative that dominates official communication, the transformative one is more often offered in non-public settings.

In the transformative narrative, the AHA Centre appears as a mediator between differences whose emergence fundamentally changes the nature of regional HADR. It emphasizes the complexity of regional HADR as unfolding in a setting of contradictory conditions, such as external dependence and domestic legitimacy, human security and sovereignty, global standards and ideas of localization, or differences between member states and the need for collective action (Interviews 8, 14, 15). The narrative usually starts from the negative experiences of hegemony, often epitomized by the so-called ‘Second Tsunami’, the uncontrolled influx of Western aid agencies into affected areas after the 2004 tidal wave wreaked havoc along
Indonesian coastlines (Interviews 8, 16). The trauma of the ‘Second Tsunami’ drove home the realization that a regional mechanism may not just be a way of shoring up the widely diverging capacities of ASEAN member states, but also of mediating between their interests and those of extra-regional actors (Interview 7). The motivation of member states for developing regional HADR capacities is thus seen as strategic but not malign.

While acknowledging the conflictive, political nature of HADR, the narrative also raises the prospect of reconciliation and positive change. The AHA Centre is ascribed an emancipatory role. It strengthens national disaster management capacities of the member states and decreases their dependence on external partners (Interviews 6, 11). Drawing on its contextual knowledge, it ensures that global humanitarian standards fit with local circumstances (Interview 14). While the emphasis on national approaches has initially caused resistance by established international actors (IFRC, 2019, p. 5; Interview 5), the narrative claims it to be in everyone’s interest because burden-shifting allows donors to shift their resources elsewhere (AHA Centre, n.d.-a, p. 66). ASEAN and the AHA Centre thus enter the story as enablers of national ownership, but in a way that integrates rather than exacerbates different interests and normative standards. The AHA Centre thus appears as a sort of comedic hero (White, 2014, p. 9) who manages to emancipate the region from the West not by defeating it, but by mediating between diverging perspectives on HADR in a pragmatic way.

The role ASEAN played in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, where it managed to broker a UN presence after the Myanmar government’s initial refusal to accept external aid, marks an important moment in this respect (Interviews 5, 12). By taking the lead in the international crisis response, ASEAN convinced the national authorities to accept outside interference. The symbolic aspect of ASEAN HADR is thus not something to be condemned as evidence of hypocrisy, as the critical narrative has it, but a crucial element of trust-building efforts (Interview 14). One of the Knowledge Books argues: ‘There is a symbolic political significance in any support provided during a disaster, and such a symbolic meaning may hold even more power than the physical form of the support itself’ (AHA Centre, n.d.-c, p. 20).

The importance of national authorities as the main principals and clients of the AHA Centre has even found its way into the design of the agency’s logo, in which eleven half-circles around the ASEAN emblem symbolize the ten national disaster management agencies and the ASEAN Committee for Disaster Management, which acts as the Centre’s governing board (AHA Centre, n.d.-d, p. 68). The transformative narrative describes trust and ownership by member states as a strength that complements the contribution
of external actors, which may provide capacities but often have a hard time gaining humanitarian access to affected countries, not least due to colonial legacies in the region (ASEAN, 2016a, p. 11; Interview 8). The AHA Centre also alleviates some of the dilemmas of humanitarian action in Southeast Asia, such as having to choose between respect for the ASEAN Way of consultative and consensual decision-making and the need for rapid reactions in emergencies, or between the need for raising public awareness and maintaining good relations to governments who prefer a ‘silent’ approach (AHA Centre, 2014, p. 50). As a ‘face-saving mechanism’, the Centre transforms the humanitarian landscape by allowing member states to rely on external aid without the potentially humiliating process of requesting assistance from another member state or outside forces (Interviews 12, 15).

Coordination is critical given the nature of a regional response having a political aspect and an operational side. This delicate balance between political sensitivities and the humanitarian imperative can be achieved by engaging relevant actors at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. (AHA Centre, 2018, p. 20)

The notion of a transformative resolution is evident in accounts of Indonesia’s use of the AHA Centre to manage international offers of aid after the 2018 Sulawesi earthquake and tsunami, where the agency took over the main coordination role from UN OCHA and enabled a government-led response (ASEAN, 2016a). By contrasting this assertion of national control with the 2004 experience of the ‘Second Tsunami’, the narrative highlights the progress made towards more regional ownership (IFRC, 2019, p. 12). At the same time, it notes remaining challenges, such as the need to secure financial means as well as overcoming suspicions and misgivings by other actors (AHA Centre, 2014, pp. 61–66; ASEAN, 2016a, p. 16). However, skeptical accounts of ASEAN member states’ capacities and critical interpretations of their motivations as nationalistic or egoistic are treated as misperceptions deriving from excessive expectations or as biased, hypocritical and politically motivated (Interview 16). For example, one account notes that there was ‘a real disconnect between the narrative in Indonesia and that elsewhere’ (IFRC, 2019, p. 20), as international actors failed to acknowledge the change towards national and local authority (Interview 1). These representations are seen as counterproductive because they hamper cooperation and steer external actors’ engagement with regional actors towards continued patronizing through capacity-building instead of fostering real ownership (Interview 14).

In contrast to the affirmative and tragic narratives, the transformative one challenges the hegemonic order by situating the plot in a tension between liberal and alternative normative frameworks. These are not necessarily understood as oppositional blocs (‘international’ vs. ‘regional community’). Contradictions may appear within ASEAN as well as between ASEAN
and external humanitarian agents (Interviews 5, 15). The defining feature of the narrative is the prospect of mediating the contradictory conditions through national empowerment, thus heralding a new humanitarian order that favours local ownership over ‘humanitarian imperialism’ (Interview 14). The ASEAN Vision 2025 on Disaster Management formulates a vision of ‘positioning ASEAN as a pioneer in transforming disaster management landscape in the Southeast Asian region’ (ASEAN, 2016a, p. 11). In such a new configuration, the differences that characterize the politics of humanitarian aid will not disappear, but cooperation based on comparative advantages is possible.

4.5. Summary

The AHA Centre’s role in regional HADR governance remains suspended between four competing narratives. The affirmative narrative celebrates its achievements and sees it on a heroic quest in partnership with other stakeholders. The skeptical one acknowledges its good intentions but questions its ability to make a productive contribution to regional humanitarian action. The critical perspective goes further in problematizing the idea of a regional mechanism as it challenges its normative claims and implications. By contrast, the transformative storyline sees regional HADR as an instrument for ASEAN member states to change the fundamental determinants of the politics of aid to their advantage. The four narratives overlap to some extent with the four classical genres of narrative theory. The heroic characterization of the AHA Centre in the affirmative narrative associates it with romance. The focus on the Centre’s failure to meet its well-intentioned aspirations in the skeptical narrative evokes tragedy. The critical narrative has a satirical streak in that it questions agents’ intentions, while the hopes for overcoming difference in the transformative narrative mirrors central themes of comedic tales. Despite these familiarities, the four narratives constitute original storylines that do not conform neatly to established categories.

In any case, the interest of this study is not with classificatory questions surrounding narrative structures, but with their legitimating functions and effects on regional ordering (Table 1). The four narratives do not only contain varying judgments of whether the AHA Centre is a legitimate HADR actor but also transport diverging ideas about the very legitimacy of the regional humanitarian order within which it operates. While both affirmative and skeptical narratives ultimately reproduce existing order conceptions, the critical one is sympathetic to liberal values but ambivalent about whether a liberal humanitarian order can be maintained in Southeast Asia. The transformative one, meanwhile, raises the possibility of an alternative humanitarian order with more regional ownership.
The impression of an unsettled order that this plurality of narratives creates is reinforced by how agents use them. Their strategies approximate what the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966, pp. 16–22) has called *bricolage*. The concept describes the eclectic assemblage of original individual accounts from elements of heterogenous narrative repertoires. For Southeast Asian HADR stakeholders, switching between the four narratives is a way of strategically maneuvering the complex conditions of regional governance. They need to talk to audiences with competing interests and normative dispositions and navigate asymmetric relations of dependency.

ASEAN has a unique position in this respect because its provision of humanitarian governance is embedded in a comprehensive regional framework for intergovernmental cooperation that fulfills a broad set of political, security, economic and social functions for its member states. Switching between different narratives appears as a way of straddling the different demands that emerge from this institutional context. ASEAN diplomats need to appease international humanitarian donors but at the same time ensure compatibility with the broader strategic interests of their governments, which range from affirming national sovereignty as the cornerstone of a norms-based regional order to their domestic legitimation as protectors of their citizens. By extension, the AHA Centre is bound by the member states’ mandate of enhancing national response capacities but also needs to signal openness and cooperativity towards important stakeholders because agency in a complex multi-agent governance field like HADR relies on the ability to form productive networked relations with other organizations (cf. Kapucu & Garayev, 2016). Including affirmative and transformative elements in their individual accounts allows ASEAN and AHA Centre officials to deal with the competing aims of maintaining good relations and signaling their belonging to a global humanitarian ‘community’ on the one hand, and asserting ownership and pursuing domestic self-legitimation on the other.

Western organizations, meanwhile, face different tensions. They want to demonstrate their ongoing commitment to ideas of localization, but remain reluctant to follow through by relinquishing control. Consequently, many of them pay lip service to transformational ideas but also offer skeptical or

| Table 1. (De-)legitimating functions of the four narratives. |
|------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Legitimacy of**                                         |
| **AHA Centre**                                            |
| **Legitimacy of liberal humanitarian order**              |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Affirmative narrative                                      |
| +                                                         |
| +                                                         |
| Skeptical narrative                                       |
| –                                                         |
| +                                                         |
| Critical narrative                                         |
| –                                                         |
| +/–                                                       |
| Transformative narrative                                   |
| +                                                         |
| –                                                         |
| Source: author. + indicates legitimation, – indicates delegitimation. |
critical views to justify a continued external presence in the regional humanitarian order. Drawing on different narrative repertoires can thus be a way of maintaining strategic ambiguity that allows continued engagement in spite of the frictions of a multiplex order.

5. Conclusion

This article set out to make sense of the evolving role of regional HADR mechanisms in Southeast Asia’s humanitarian order. These mechanisms do not simply add another layer of governance to existing structures. More fundamentally, their emergence puts hegemonic liberal ideas about regional humanitarian order in question and raises uncertainty over authority relations and responsibilities. Under such circumstances, it is more helpful to conceive of regional HADR governance as a relational process of ordering instead of approximating a fixed and designed ‘architecture’. The article focused on narratives as core practices through which different agents convey and legitimate their ideas about the regional humanitarian order.

The analysis demonstrates the absence of a single, grand narrative of regional governance mechanisms among humanitarian agents. Stakeholders construct the role for ASEAN’s main HADR instrument, the AHA Centre, in a multiplicity of competing ways that not only legitimate or delegitimate it as a humanitarian actor but also transport diverging ideas about the legitimacy of the liberal paradigm of HADR governance more broadly. None of these narratives is inherently more ‘true’, more representative of objective reality than the others – they are competing versions of ‘what is going on’ deployed by strategic agents (Wibben, 2011, p. 46). However, because they promote ideas about authority and representation, effectiveness and capacity, and competing international norms, they have very real consequences for regional governance.

A narrative approach thus makes it possible to problematize the traditional liberal underpinnings of HADR governance in a way that the dominant theoretical approaches have not done. Rationalist theories of regime complexity expect institutional development to follow a priori given functional demands and organizational interests within a liberal order that is largely taken for granted (cf. Gehring & Faude, 2014). Constructivist approaches see institutional identities and roles as enabled and limited by conflicting global and regional normative orders. The article instead argues that ideas about order are endogenously constructed and contested in practice as governance agents interact, and as they make sense of these interactions.

What are the implications of these arguments for HADR governance in Southeast Asia? The necessity to satisfy audiences with different interests and normative predispositions militate against a convergence of actors’ narratives around a common conception of order. Ongoing contestation
surrounding ASEAN’s role as a provider of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief prevent a clear and stable division of labor from materializing. However, this lingering ‘unsettledness’ of the regional HADR order does not prevent collective action because agents’ choices of engaging in different narratives is to a large extent strategic, and not structurally predetermined. It does mean, however, that the AHA Centre and its partners must continue to negotiate their roles in concrete emergency situations, which increases demands on rapid assessment and adaptability on the ground. This perspective helps us understand the varying roles ASEAN has played in regional post-disaster settings.

Cursory evidence from other policy fields and regions suggest that similar dynamics are likely to emerge wherever the hegemonic liberal order is challenged by regional actors. For example, in African peace and security governance, efforts to establish a system of subsidiarity between global, regional and sub-regional organizations have been of limited success. Instead, the UN and its African partner organizations promote a flexible approach that relies on the ad hoc crafting of roles in multi-actor operations (Spandler, 2020). IR researchers interested in the liberal order and its alternatives can learn a lot from paying close attention to these processes.

Notes

1. ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER).
2. A list of all interviews quoted in this paper including place, date and the professional role of the interviewees is provided in Appendix 1.
3. In the terminology suggested by Miskimmon et al. (2013, p. 7), this conceptualization connects identity narratives, which convey the history, dispositions and goals of a political agent, and system narratives which construct ideas of the world and different actors’ place in it. Their third type, issue narratives, aim at legitimating specific policies and are therefore not directly relevant for ordering practices, although accounts of successful or failed policies may of course feed into the legitimation of the AHA Centre’s role.
4. On the notion of tropes, see White (2014, pp. 30–37).
5. See King and Langston (2008) and White (2014) for detailed conceptualizations.
6. The core structural elements of the four genres are summarized in Appendix 2.
7. See for example a Tweet by the AHA Centre, May 11, 2018, https://twitter.com/ahacentre/status/994924846436921346, accessed June 11, 2020.
8. Humanitarian assistance and disaster management is mainly located in the Socio-Cultural, not the Political Security Community pillar of the organization.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the valuable research assistance provided by Miroslava Grausova and João Silva. Many colleagues have provided comments that helped me improve earlier drafts of this article. Special thanks are due to Brooke N. Coe, Anna Geis, Regina Heller, Marisa Irawan, Florian Kühn, Hanna Pfeifer, Fredrik Söderbaum, Louise Wium Moe, the colleagues at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta as well as the School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, and the two anonymous reviewers.
Funding
This work was supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG) under project number 377842675; and the German Academic Exchange Service under Stipend 57386478.

Notes on contributor
Kilian Spandler is Researcher at the School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. His work explores the legitimacy of global and regional governance, both historically and against the background of current trends like the rise of populism and the emergence of a post-Western world. He is the author of *Regional Organizations in International Society: ASEAN, the EU and the Politics of Normative Arguing*, Palgrave, 2018.

ORCID
Kilian Spandler http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1507-4988

References
Acharya, A. (2018). *The end of American world order* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Polity.
Acharya, A. (2018). *Constructing global order: Agency and change in world politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
AHA Centre. (n.d.-a). *AHA centre partnership: Building trust and confidence for greater purpose*. The AHA Centre Knowledge Series.
AHA Centre. (n.d.-b). *ASEAN emergency response and assessment team (ASEAN-ERAT): Solidarity in action*. The AHA Centre Knowledge Series.
AHA Centre. (n.d.-c). *Coordinating regional disaster emergency response: Roles and mandate of the AHA Centre*. The AHA Centre Knowledge Series.
AHA Centre. (n.d.-d). *Coordinating unity: The founding 5 Years of the AHA Centre*. The AHA Centre Knowledge Series.
AHA Centre. (n.d.-e). *Dare to dream, care to share*. The AHA Centre Knowledge Series.
AHA Centre. (2014). *Weathering the perfect storm: Lessons learnt on the ASEAN’s response to the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan*. ASEAN Secretariat.
AHA Centre. (2016a). *Five to life: Journey of partnership and progress* [Video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g50fftK2s8E.
AHA Centre. (2016b). *The AHA Centre work plan 2020*. https://ahacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/AHA-Centre-Work-Plan-2020.pdf.
AHA Centre. (2017). *Five to life – Sand animation* [Video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3KrlZhvyY.
AHA Centre. (2018). *Operationalising one ASEAN one response: Speed, scale, solidarity*. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/AHA-GDE-One-ASEAN-One-Response-FINAL-1810318-1.pdf.
AHA Centre. (2019, January 17). *Facebook post*. https://www.facebook.com/ahacentre/posts/2090737724302312.
Allison-Reumann, L. (2020). EU narratives of regionalism promotion to ASEAN: A modest turn? *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 58(4), 872–889. doi:10.1002/jcms.12997
ASEAN. (2016a). Vision 2025 on disaster management. https://www.asean.org/storage/2012/05/fa-220416_DM2025_email.pdf.

ASEAN. (2016b). AADMER work programme 2016–2020. https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/AADMER-Work-Programme-2016-2020-v1.6.pdf.

Barbelet, V. (2018). As local as possible, as international as necessary (HPG Working Paper, Vol. 1–November 2018). Humanitarian Policy Group.

Barnett, M. (2010). Introduction: The international humanitarian order. In The International Humanitarian Order (pp. 1–18). London: Routledge.

Barnett, M., & Walker, P. (2015). Regime change for humanitarian aid. Foreign Affairs, 94(4), 130–141.

Bennet, C., Foley, M., & Pantuliano, S. (2016). Time to let go: Remaking humanitarian action for the modern era. Humanitarian Policy Group.

Berenskoetter, F. (2014). Parameters of a national biography. European Journal of International Relations, 20(1), 262–288. doi:10.1177/1354066112445290

Bially Mattern, J. (2005). Ordering international politics: Identity, crisis, and representational force. London: Routledge.

Black, J. (2017). “Says who?” Liquid authority and interpretive control in transnational regulatory regimes. International Theory, 9(2), 286–310. doi:10.1017/S1752971916000294

Börzel, T. A., & Van Hüllen, V. (Eds.). (2015). Governance transfer by regional organizations: Patching together a global script. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Burke, K. (1969). A grammar of motives. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Caballero-Anthony, M. (2018). Negotiating governance on non-traditional security in Southeast Asia and beyond. New York: Columbia University Press.

Capili, A. (2017). Trust: The basis for cooperation. Liaison - A Journal of Civil-Military Disaster Management & Humanitarian Relief Collaborations, 9, 7–9.

Cook, A. D. B. (2017). Southeast Asia. In J. Ear, A. D. B. Cook, & D. V. Canyon (Eds.), Disaster response: Regional architectures (pp. 17–20). Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies.

Cook, A. D. B. (2018). Siloes, synergies and prospects for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in Southeast Asia. In A. Chong (Ed.), International security in the Asia-Pacific: Transcending ASEAN towards transitional polycentrism (pp. 357–375). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ear, J., Cook, A. D. B., & Canyon, D. V. (2017). Disaster response regional architectures: Assessing future possibilities. Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies.

El Taraboulsi, S., Krebs, H. B., Zyck, S. A., & Willitts-King, B. (2016). Regional organisations and humanitarian action: Rethinking regional engagement (HPG Report, Vol. 1–May 2016). Humanitarian Policy Group.

Fan, L., & Krebs, H. B. (2014). Regional organizations and humanitarian action: The case of ASEAN. Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper.

Ferris, E., & Petz, D. (2013). In the neighbourhood: The growing role of regional organizations in disaster risk management. The Brookings Institution.

Gehring, T., & Faude, B. (2014). A theory of emerging order within institutional complexes: How competition among regulatory international institutions leads to institutional adaptation and division of labor. The Review of International Organizations, 9(4), 471–498. doi:10.1007/s11558-014-9197-1

Herman, D. (2009). Basic elements of narrative. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Hollis, S. (2014a). Competing and complimentary discourses in global disaster risk management. Risks, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy, 5(3), 342–363.
Hollis, S. (2014b). The global standardization of regional disaster risk management. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 27(2), 319–338. doi:10.1080/09557571.2014.889085

Hollis, S. (2015). *The role of regional organizations in disaster risk management: A strategy for global resilience*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Humphreys, M., & Brown, A. D. (2002). Narratives of organizational identity and identification: A case study of hegemony and resistance. *Organization Studies*, 23(3), 421–447. doi:10.1177/0170840602233005

IFRC. (2019). *Real time evaluation Indonesia: Earthquakes and tsunami (Lombok, Sulawesi)*. 2018. https://media.ifrc.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2019/05/Indonesia-RTE_final-publish.pdf.

Jupille, J., Jolliff, B., & Wojcik, S. (2013). *Regionalism in the world polity*. Paper prepared for the ISA Annual Conference 2013.

Kaldor, M., Martin, M., & Selchow, S. (2007). Human security: A new strategic narrative for Europe. *International Affairs*, 83(2), 273–288. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2346.2007.00618.x

Kapucu, N., & Garayev, V. (2016). Structure and network performance: Horizontal and vertical networks in emergency management. *Administration & Society*, 48(8), 931–961.

King, R., & Langston, T. S. (2008). Narratives of American politics. *Perspectives on Politics*, 6(2), 235–252. doi:10.1017/S1537592708080584

Koot, W., Leisink, P., & Verweel, P. (2003). Organizational relationships in the networking age: An introduction. In W. Koot, P. Leisink, & P. Verweel (Eds.), *Organizational relationships in the networking age: The dynamics of identity formation and bonding* (pp. 1–18). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1966). *The savage mind*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Lim, J. H. (2019, April 11). *Open remarks at the ICRC-ASEAN secretariat platform on challenges and humanitarian action in ASEAN*. https://asean.org/storage/2018/01/SG-Opening-Remarks-ASEAN-ICRC-Platform-11-Apr-2019_final_SG.pdf.

Loh, D. M. H. (2016). ASEAN’s norm adherence and its unintended consequences in HADR and SAR operations. *The Pacific Review*, 29(4), 549–572. doi:10.1080/09512748.2015.1022589

Lyotard, J.-F. (1988). *Le Différend*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Mandler, J. M. (1984). *Stories, scripts, and scenes: Aspects of schema theory*. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Miskimmon, A., & O’Loughlin, B. (2017). Understanding international order and power transition: A strategic narrative approach. In A. Miskimmon, B. O’Loughlin, & L. Roselle (Eds.), *Forging the world: Strategic narratives and international relations* (pp. 276–310). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Miskimmon, A., O’Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2013). *Strategic narratives: Communication power and the new world order*. London: Routledge.

Miskimmon, A., O’Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (Eds.). (2017a). *Forging the world: Strategic narratives and international relations*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Miskimmon, A., O’Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2017b). Introduction. In A. Miskimmon, B. O’Loughlin, & L. Roselle (Eds.), *Forging the world: Strategic narratives and international relations* (pp. 1–22). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

O’Brien, D. (2000). The search for subsidiarity: The UN, African regional organizations and humanitarian action. *International Peacekeeping*, 7(3), 57–83.
OCHA. (2013). *Disaster response in Asia and the Pacific: A guide to international tools and services*. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Disaster%20Response%20in%20Asia%20Pacific_A%20Guide%20to%20Intl%20Tools%20Services.pdf.

Oishi, M. (2016). Can ASEAN cope with “human insecurity” in Southeast Asia? In search of a new ASEAN way. In P. J. Carnegie, V. T. King, & Z. Ibrahim (Eds.), *Human insecurities in Southeast Asia* (pp. 103–119). Singapore: Springer.

Rolls, M. G., & Guan, B. T. C. (2014). ASEAN’s role in the development of non-traditional regional security. In B. T. C. Guan (Ed.), *Foreign policy and security in an Asian century: Threats, strategies and policy choices* (pp. 213–234). New Jersey: World Scientific.

Rum, M. (2016). The case of regional disaster management cooperation in ASEAN: A constructivist approach to understanding how international norms travel. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 5(3), 491–514.

Schweller, R. L., & Pu, X. (2011). After unipolarity: China’s visions of international order in an era of U.S. decline. *International Security*, 36(1), 41–72. doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00044

Shenhav, S. R. (2006). Political narratives and political reality. *International Political Science Review*, 27(3), 245–262. doi:10.1177/0192512106064474

Simm, G. (2018). Disaster response in Southeast Asia: The ASEAN Agreement on disaster response and emergency management. *Asian Journal of International Law*, 8(1), 116–142. doi:10.1017/S2044251316000205

Spandler, K. (2020). UNAMID and the legitimation of global-regional peacekeeping cooperation: Partnership and friction in UN-AU relations. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 14(2), 187–203. doi:10.1080/17502977.2020.1725729

Watson, S. D. (2019). *International order and the politics of disaster*. London: Routledge.

Wehner, L. (2020). The narration of roles in foreign policy analysis. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 23(2), 359–384. doi:10.1057/s41268-018-0148-y

White, H. (2014). *Metahistory: The historical imagination in 19th-century Europe* (40th Anniversary Edition). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.

Wibben, A. T. R. (2011). *Feminist security studies: A narrative approach*. London: Routledge.

Zyck, S. A., Fan, L., & Price, C. (2014). *ASEAN and humanitarian action: Progress and potential (Roundtable report)*. Overseas Development Institute.
**Appendix 1. List of interviews quoted**

| ID | Interviewee(s)                                                                 | Place/medium and date                      |
|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Official at UN OCHA, Asia Pacific Office*                                      | Jakarta, 9 November 2018                   |
| 2  | Official at the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs                         | Jakarta, 11 November 2018                  |
| 3  | Two officials at the European Union Mission to ASEAN (one ASEAN, one non-ASEAN* nationals) | Jakarta, 12 November 2018                  |
| 4  | Official at the German Embassy*                                                | Jakarta, 15 November 2018                  |
| 5  | Official at the ASEAN Secretariat                                              | Jakarta, 21 November 2018                  |
| 6  | Former official at the ASEAN Secretariat                                       | Jakarta, 23 November 2018                  |
| 7  | Official at the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs                         | Jakarta, 26 November 2018                  |
| 8  | Official at the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs                         | Jakarta, 29 November 2018                  |
| 9  | Three staff members at the International Committee of the Red Cross           | Jakarta, 5 December 2018                   |
| 10 | Staff member at the Indonesian National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB)     | Written responses via e-mail, 10 December 2018 |
| 11 | Official at the AHA Centre                                                    | Jakarta, 11 December 2018                  |
| 12 | Official at Indonesia’s Permanent Representation to ASEAN                      | Jakarta, 11 December 2018                  |
| 13 | Official at the ASEAN Secretariat                                              | Jakarta, 14 December 2018                  |
| 14 | Former official at the AHA Centre                                              | Jakarta, 14 December 2018                  |
| 15 | Former official at the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs                  | Jakarta, 20 December 2018                  |
| 16 | Former staff member at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies* | Skype, 19 September 2019                   |

*non-ASEAN nationals

**Appendix 2. Initial interpretative guiding framework based on narrative genres**

|                         | Romance | Tragedy | Comedy | Satire                          |
|-------------------------|---------|---------|--------|---------------------------------|
| **Agency of the protagonist** | Heroic disposition | Noble aspirations | Reconciliatory disposition | Hidden ulterior motives |
| **Storyline**           | Disturbance of an order prompts protagonist to fight against oppositional forces | Protagonist faces insurmountable opposition and inevitable fate | Protagonist situated between incompatible forces/orders | Events and characters’ behavior reveal absurdity of human life |
| **Resolution**          | Reestablishment of order | Tragic failure | Differences are overcome | None (hopes for resolution are delusional) |

*Source: author, based on Burke (1969), King and Langston (2008), Miskimmon et al. (2017b) and White (2014).*