

# Global Norms as Global Public Goods

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## Abstract

We are increasingly becoming aware of a growing need for global public goods. Yet, one category of such goods, global norms, is missing from our lists, essentially because we rely on an overly statist conception of public goods. Smith, Weber, Elster, Putnam, Williamson, Fukuyama and others have demonstrated that a society and an economy need not just enforceable contract, but also norms, predictability and trust. More recently, Robert Axelrod, Cristina Bicchieri, Samuel Bowles, Herbert Gintis, Brian Skyrms, and Edward Wilson have provided us with nuanced accounts of how norms and cooperation emerge and evolve. This growing body of scholarship should further sensitize us to the need for global norms. The web of centripetal forces pulling us together is intensifying. Our destinies are increasingly a function of what happens in other countries, and how people from other countries choose to act. If we do not have some way to nurture trust, maintain predictability, strengthen the fragile fabric of global norms and forge a global civics, we will not be able to navigate the treacherous waters of global interdependence.

## Policy Implications

- Lists of key global public goods should include the category of global norms.
- We learn and reproduce norms by discussing and debating them. The norms we need globally will have to be forged through thick debate between peers. We need multiple fora for these debates.
- Given our increasing need for global norms, opting not to tear the existing fabric of global norms through hubris and unilateralism, and instead supporting the process of developing and deepening global norms, are vital first steps.

We are increasingly becoming aware of a growing need for global public goods. It has been suggested that public goods are so important that the long history of civilization can be written as the history of provisions of various public goods. The argument therefore follows that our current world, being the most globally interdependent one, demands an ever more complex constellation of global public goods<sup>1</sup>.

Global public goods is an intriguing concept; it is an extrapolation of public goods, an idea which has been with us for much longer. Public goods are the opposite of private goods. Once available, public goods are available to all, and not just to those who produced it or paid for it. In a further counterintuitive twist, the consumption of a public good does not decrease what is left for anyone else to consume. In other words, when a loaf of bread is available for sale and I buy that loaf of bread, no one else can have that loaf. But if I live in a country with adequate national defense, the fact that I enjoy security does not diminish the security that can be enjoyed by others in the same country, whether they are taxpayers or not. After it was proposed in 1954, the notion of a public good took hold rapidly and spun an extraordinary literature and policy consciousness. As such, global public goods emerged as a pedagogically seamless and tactically fertile iteration on an already well-appreciated phenomenon.

Yet, when we move from the traditional conception of public goods to global public goods, we also encounter challenges that defy simple extrapolation. Public goods emerged out of economics, and one way that the economists thought of public goods were as market failure. Markets, which are enviably efficient in allocating resources for private goods, did not work for public

goods. Because public goods were things that everyone could and did enjoy, no single person had enough incentive to pay for optimal supply. It was concluded that public goods would ideally be provided by the state, and paid for through taxes; the optimal level of supply would be decided through societal deliberation and the political process. Along the way, public goods became a key justification for the existence of a state. The paradigm example is national defense. As it would be nonsensical to expect individual families or cities to organize or procure defense for themselves, this needed to be done on a national scale. Once provided, everyone benefitted from the security that national defense made possible, and it was logical that that national defense be paid through taxes. Globally, however, we do not have a one-world government, so how shall we organize the provision of global public goods?

The optimal manner in which we supply, finance, and monitor the provision of global public goods in the absence of one-world polity is a vital and enduring question for the growing field of global governance. The predicament of an increased need for global public goods in the absence of a world state forces us to revisit some of our conventional wisdom. If state provision of public goods is the norm, how can we explain the extraordinary proliferation and deepening of global governance schemes?<sup>2</sup> Is our conception of public good overly statist?<sup>3</sup> Should knowledge rather than defense be the paradigm case for public goods? Admittedly, defense is a potent prism through which to visualize public goods. Very few doubt that national defense is necessary: it is highly visible, it is expensive and it leaves no doubt about the need for a single provider. Yet, in an under-celebrated way, knowledge may be the quintessential public

good: knowledge advances our wellbeing. Knowledge is non-excludable; once made public, it is available to all. It is also non-rivalrous: one's advancement through knowledge does not diminish the ability of others to do the same; it may even enhance it through a demonstration effect. Yet, unlike national defense, knowledge may have multiple providers. Most recently, we have witnessed Wikipedia, EdX, Khan Academy, Udacity and the like, but humanity has a long and proud history of generous flows of knowledge, and it has not been necessary for the state to act as the sole supplier or financier. As such, knowledge may be the more appropriate paradigm for global public goods<sup>4</sup>.

Yet knowledge as global public good also calls for further scrutiny. The image that knowledge-as-public-good assertion conjures up is cheaper vaccines or better seeds. In other words, we hinge our concept of public goods on relatively uncontroversial realms of advancement. It is only when we accept that definitions of a public good—and not only the decisions about optimal levels of provision—are also partly political, that we may release ourselves from an unnecessary stranglehold and pursue other worthwhile paths. One such path may be to explore whether global norms may also be global public goods. Norms, like knowledge, involve an intrinsic claim to advance our wellbeing and to run our affairs and societies better. They manifest themselves as shared definitions of what is legitimate and what is feasible. When Jefferson wrote in 1776 that everyone is created equal and are endowed with inalienable rights, there was nothing self-evident about this audacious claim. Today, everyone agrees with Jefferson, at least in theory. For most of human history, political posts were routinely

succeeded by heirs; today, barring North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Syria, almost none are. Meritocracy has won over aristocracy.

Accepted norms about wealth creation have also evolved. David Landes once described a world divided by cultures of making and cultures of taking. Today, it is very difficult to find societies where a culture of taking prevails. While we may debate proper levels of regulation and taxation, the notion of systematic pillage and confiscation as a route to prosperity no longer exists. Swedes are often credited for establishing the first ombudsman in the 18th century.<sup>5</sup> Since then, the idea and practice of instituting similar structures have been adopted by more than 90 countries.<sup>6</sup> Once a universally accepted punishment, currently two-thirds of the countries in the world no longer use the death penalty.<sup>7</sup> It seems norms, like knowledge, have multiple and eager providers: Don Quixotes of various stripes, a panoply of churches and an assortment of INGOs. If norms are public goods, they are one public good that may not suffer from inadequate suppliers. These norm entrepreneurs enhance and accelerate a global process where latent definitions of what is legitimate and feasible are being perceived, chewed over, contested, internalized and reproduced by all of us on a daily basis. Ours has become, among others, a virtual learning community.

Entertaining the possibility of thinking about global norms as a global public good would need to proceed with defining more precisely how norms advance our wellbeing. We would also need to consider the content of those norms we are still in need of. Some have made the case for a global civics: a set of responsibilities that we take on, after due deliberation, and a corresponding set of rights

we are ready to claim by the virtue of inhabiting an increasingly interdependent world<sup>8</sup>.

So, why do we really need norms? Smith, Weber, Elster, Putnam, Williamson, Fukuyama and others have argued that enforceable contracts alone do not give us what we need to survive and prosper. Norms, social capital, trust, predictability and all kinds of other less-than-immediately-tangible phenomena are also needed. Fukuyama has demonstrated convincingly that a shared set of norms provide predictability and decrease the costs of doing business, or even being a community<sup>9</sup>. If anything is possible, even a simple transaction would require all kinds of eventualities and contingencies to be planned and prepared for. If violators and free-riders are numerous, law enforcement functions would demand prohibitively high resources. Since even the most comprehensive legal document cannot cover all eventualities, some transactions simply do not take place in low-predictability, low-trust settings, depressing welfare prospects. If on the other hand, one can operate in a high-trust, high-predictability environment, transaction costs are lowered and welfare potential is maximized.

It should be obvious that a community cannot function only through laws; it needs and very frequently has a dynamic fiber of norms and conventions. In his introduction to *Global Civics*, Kemal Dervis observes this imperative and argues that "if all behavior were to be governed strictly and only by individual self-interest and a cold-blooded calculation of benefits and costs, national communities would be very costly, if not impossible, to govern. A sense of 'civics' is part of the cement that holds a community together, that reduces the 'cost' of governing and enables the compromises that deliver the public goods."<sup>10</sup>

Others have suggested that a healthy society functions through implicit and important assurances that all will be accorded due regard and treated as bearers of dignity<sup>11</sup>. The analogy of driving in traffic has been evoked in thinking about the mental map and compass we need to navigate an increasing interdependent world: each day many of us drive at speeds above fifty miles an hour in a mass of metal extremely close to others who are doing the same thing. A slight move of the steering wheel in the wrong direction could wreak havoc, but we cruise carefree because we drive in an implicit fellowship with other drivers and have reasonable expectations about their behavior. Such fellowship with and expectations of other drivers, which serve to mitigate the theoretical risks of driving, can exist because people follow a long-established framework of laws, habits, and conventions about how to operate automobiles. If we could not count on other drivers and the pattern of the roads, we would drive slower and far more cautiously<sup>12</sup>.

Cristina Bicchieri describes norms as the grammar of a society. Like grammar in language, they are often implicit as they are formative. Norms are dynamic, and are sustained and reproduced by people who act as conditional cooperators<sup>13</sup>. People uphold norms and cooperate when they expect others to cooperate, and defect when they observe majorities defecting. Elsewhere, Robert Axelrod has explored 'how cooperation emerges in a world of egoists without central authority,' and discovered that starting out with cooperation and then reciprocating both cooperation and defection has proved to be an exceptionally resilient and successful strategy in several simulated experiments<sup>14</sup>. Others such as Edward Wilson and Brian Skyrms have set out to demonstrate the evolutionary advantages that the golden rule of

doing unto others what you wish them to do unto you, and the Kantian categorical imperative unleashed in favor pro-social behavior<sup>15</sup>.

Yet, no other phenomenon captures our proclivity towards pro-social behavior and capacity to uphold fairness than the ultimatum game. In an experiment which has been replicated in many parts of the world in the last 30 years, two people are given \$100, and one of them gets to propose a split to the other. The second person has no say in what the split should be, hence the ultimatum. The second person can either accept the split and they each get their proposed share, or s/he can reject the split in which case they both receive nothing. If one has a dim view of humanity, one may be surprised to learn that the average split is 60-40<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, we see that offers worse than 80-20 are routinely rejected by those in the second position, which is interesting and begs an explanation: why did those people in the second position not accept even one dollar, as that is better than nothing? It turns out that ours is a species that is willing to pay a price to uphold fairness and the generic ethics of reciprocity<sup>17</sup>. This feature of humanity may not find adequate place in our narratives or popular culture, but may nevertheless be indispensable to running our societies.

In addition to a popular commitment to fairness, there exists evidence of latent multilateralist proclivities in the global body politic. A recent survey by the organization World Public Opinion shows that when given the option between “our nation should consistently follow international law; it is wrong to violate international law, just as it is wrong to violate laws within a country” and “If our government thinks it is not in our nation’s interest, it should not feel obliged to abide by international laws,” 57 percent of people in 24 countries choose

compliance with international law and 35 percent choose national opting out.<sup>18</sup> It is difficult to overstate the significance of siding with compliance with international law even when one’s governments deem it to be against the national interest. The same survey also showed how people systematically underestimate to what a large extent their own multilateralist preferences are shared by their compatriots, and feel solitary in their support for international law. A total of 48 percent said that they were more supportive of consistently abiding by international law than the average citizen; 28 percent said they were less supportive. This picture reveals both the ingredients of a global civics needed to navigate our increasing global interdependence, and clues to what is needed to forge explicit global norms that would act as global public goods in our interdependent world.

The web of centripetal forces pulling us together is intensifying. Our destinies are increasingly a function of what happens in other countries, and how people in other countries choose to act. This level of interdependence means that our individual futures will not be singlehandedly authored by each of us; they will be, to a growing extent, co-authored with many others. If we do not have some way to nurture trust, maintain predictability, strengthen the fragile fabric of global norms and forge a global civics, we will fail at this critical challenge and will be unable to navigate the treacherous waters of global interdependence. Without a global civics, we fail to harness the gains from global interdependence, and surrender to widespread anomie and backlash.

To be sure, there is a formidable school of thought which denies that increasing global interdependence is a fact that requires us to revisit our conceptions of international relations. They

insist that all power is hard power, and that being loved or respected is no substitute for being feared. The great power game of nations always continues, we are forewarned, even when a higher goal or rhetoric is evoked. Superpowers are selfish, arbitrary, and dangerous nations, and they should not be embarrassed to be so and not feel constrained by international legitimacy and laws.<sup>19</sup> Cynics prefer to be unconcerned about the phenomenal challenges of climate change or the achievements of transnational normative action, such as abolishing the slave trade or establishing the International Criminal Court.<sup>20</sup> The point is not an easy and blanket indictment of cynicism. Idealists have been called cynics who have not yet been mugged by reality, and there is a significant degree of truth in this assertion. One can also argue that cynics are moderate idealists who yearn to be rescued from their excessive pessimism. The task of balancing the feasible and the ideal has never been easy, and it has certainly defied timeless prescriptive formulas. The conjecture here is that global norms matter more than cynics would have us believe, and they will matter more in the future as our interdependence accelerates. The single-mindedness of cynics ought not to blind the rest to these new trends and imperatives, as zeitgeist seems to be on the side of those who view emerging global public opinion as the second superpower<sup>21</sup>. We are fast entering a stage where no society can stay oblivious to verdicts by other societies. This time around, the invisible hand is choreographing a global peer review.

Conscience has sometimes been defined as being conscious of the gaze of others. That gaze is increasingly omnipresent<sup>22</sup>. While scholars of mainstream international relations have neglected the issue, one of the earliest questions that

animated the sociologists was about social control, and how groups of people achieve compliance with norms through informal mechanisms such as shaming and exclusion<sup>23</sup>. Future studies into international affairs will need to take the emergence of a global conscience and global norms more seriously, and will in all likelihood owe a debt of gratitude to pioneering work done by the constructivist school<sup>24</sup>.

When a group of academics recently invited participants around the world to ponder the achievements and impediments to existing global governance schemes, one key consensus was that global governance schemes are related to our appetite to cooperate across national borders, and that appetite, in turn, is a function of our comprehension regarding the effects of others' actions on us and vice versa<sup>25</sup>. A number of participants insisted that comprehension has not caught up with the underlying realities; they seek fresh and inclusive inquiry and deliberation on the extent of our interdependence, as well as the normative and rational responses to that interdependence. They are convinced that we need to shuttle more fluently between the diagnosis of our interdependence and the global governance scheme that represents our reasoned response to that diagnosis; they called for a global agora for a global civics<sup>26</sup>. Bicchieri, too, underscores the multiple ways in which communication elicits and elucidates norms<sup>27</sup>. Bowles and Gintis argue that our linguistic skills are key to our ability 'to formulate general norms, to erect social institutions, to communicate rules and what they entail in particular situations, to alert other to their violations, and to organize coalitions to punish the violators.'<sup>28</sup> We learn and reproduce norms by talking and

debating them. This is even more the case for global norms.

We do not have a global state or even a global hegemon to establish norms and conventions unilaterally. The norms we need globally will have to be forged through thick debate between peers. Because we have such a dramatic variety of predicaments and beliefs, global norms would need to be minimalist. They would need to be open to evolution. Recognizing the global public good quality of global norms is a necessary first step in this process. Opting not to tear the existing fabric of global norms through hubris and unilateralism, and instead supporting the process of developing and deepening global norms, would be an important second step.

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<sup>1</sup> *Meeting Global Challenges: The Report of the International Task Force on Global Public Goods*, Stockholm: 2006. Also "The World's Hunger for Public Goods" by Martin World, Financial Times, 24 January 2012.

<sup>2</sup> "The State of Global Governance: An Audit", *A World Connected: Globalization in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Meghnad Desai concludes in "Public Goods: A Historical Perspective" *Providing Global Public Goods*, 2003, that our theories of national public goods are statist.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Stiglitz, "Knowledge as a Global Public Good," *Global Public Goods*, Oxford UP: 1999.

<sup>5</sup> It has also been suggested that the administrative law and practices of the Ottoman Empire, where King Charles XII of Sweden spent five years in self-exile before he established the Swedish Ombudsman in 1713, was a key source of inspiration. If indeed true, this would a counter-intuitive example of norms moving from South to North. There are other examples of norms moving from South to North: Likes of Ayahuasca, Rumi, Ubuntu, yoga have provided layered references to those seeking to question Cartesian distinctions.

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<sup>6</sup> International Ombudsman Institute reports that ombudsman like structures now exist in 93 countries.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.amnesty.org/en/death-penalty/abolitionist-and-retentionist-countries>

<sup>8</sup> Balveer Arora, Murat Belge, Kemal Dervis, Nabil Fahmy, Jonathan Fanton, David Held, Andrey Kortunov, Trevor Manuel, Ricardo Lagos, Thomas Pogge, Dani Rodrik, Dingli Shen, Javier Solana, Tosun Terzioglu et al debate this issue at *Global Civics: Responsibilities and Rights in an Interdependent World*, Brookings Institution Press: 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, Free Press: 1995, p. 27-28.

<sup>10</sup> *Global Civics*, p. ix.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Waldrom, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Harvard UP: 2012.

<sup>12</sup> *Global Civics*, directed by Jian Yi, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCYCfubN2IM>

<sup>13</sup> Cristina Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms*, Cambridge UP: 2006, p. 140.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, Basic Books: 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth*, Liveright: 2012, p.245; and, Brian Skyrms, *Evolution of The Social Contract*, Cambridge UP: 1996, p. 62.

<sup>16</sup> Oosterbeek, Hessel, Sloof, Randolph, van de Kuilen, Gijs "Cultural Differences in Ultimatum Game Experiments: Evidence from a Meta-Analysis" *Experimental Economics*, v. 7, n. 2 (2004).

<sup>17</sup> There is a legitimate question whether these proclivities matter at all in the realm of cold-blooded calculations around international relations. Maybe the most promising proof that they do is the Merkel-Schellnhuber arguments that any future solution to climate change has to be based on equal right of everyone to CO2 emissions, "Merkel Leads on Climate Change," <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/merkel-leads-climate-change>.

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<sup>18</sup> World Public Opinion, "World Public Opinion on International Law and the World Court" ([www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/nov09/WPO\\_IntlLaw\\_Nov09\\_quaire.pdf](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/nov09/WPO_IntlLaw_Nov09_quaire.pdf)).

<sup>19</sup> Robert Kagan makes an unabated defense of this argument in *Dangerous Nation* (Alfred A. Knopf: 2006). Leslie Gelb in *Power Rules* (HarperCollins: 2009) concurs.

<sup>20</sup> For examples of dismissive treatment of transnational movements, see Walter Russell Mead, "The Death of Global Warming," and Walter Russell Mead, "Blowing Hot and Cold," both available in *American Interest Online*. Incidentally, not everyone is as dismissive as Mead. The National Intelligence Council has a scenario where nongovernmental organizations increase in number and strength due to the capacity of individuals and groups to affiliate with each other using the Internet, and member states of the United Nations feel compelled to allocate 20 seats at the UN General Assembly to NGOs with the same voting rights as nation-states; see National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), 91.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Schell, "The Other Superpower," *The Nation*, April 14, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Leslie Gelb attributes US not invading Cuba to the restraints of world opinion, *Power Rules*, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> To be sure, informal social control mechanisms do not always lead to benign results. Tolstoy's Anna Karenina or the widow in Kazantzakis' *Zorba The Greek* suffered gravely because of shaming and exclusion. Yet, the challenge in both cases had to do with the content of the norms, and not with the informal mechanisms of social control.

<sup>24</sup> For an early and remarkable attempt, see "Social Control in International Relations" by Charles Horton Cooley, *Publications of the American Sociological Society*, v. 12 (1917). Sandeep Gopalan argues that "emotions like shame and guilt have a role to play in influencing state behavior, and that the scholarship on international law can draw on insights from psychology and behavioral economics" in the *Michigan Law Review* (2007).

<sup>25</sup> *Global Governance Audit*, Brookings Working Paper, January 2012.

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<http://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/projects/global-audit/revitalising-agera-praxis-global-civics>

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<sup>27</sup> *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms*, p. 141-2.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *A Cooperative Species: Human Reciprocity and Its Evolution*, p. 5, Princeton UP: 2011.