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Global Public Goods: Critique of a UN Discourse



David Long and Frances Woolley

The concept of global public goods has been advanced as a way of understanding certain transborder and global problems and the need for a coordinated international response. It has been used to describe everything from global environment, international financial stability, and market efficiency, to health, knowledge, peace and security, and humanitarian rights. Using an internal critique, this article finds that the concept is poorly defined, avoids analytical problems by resorting to abstraction, and masks the incoherence of its two central characteristics. The conclusion is that even if the concept of global public goods is effective rhetorically, precise definition and conceptual disaggregation are required to advance analysis of global issues. **KEYWORDS:** public goods, externalities, international public policy.

In the last several years, academics and policymakers have turned to the concept of global public goods as, to use former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's words, "the missing term in the equation" for understanding and addressing a number of international problems. Though the shift of focus as a result of September 11, 2001, has negatively impacted the prominence of the global public goods literature—for instance, work on humanitarian intervention or human security—the concept continues to be an important one in certain policy, official, and academic circles. While the basic notion of public goods is borrowed from the public economics literature, in the broader policy community, global public goods have come to encompass everything from the global environment, international financial stability, and market efficiency, to health, knowledge, peace and security, and human rights.

The concept of public goods has been used in international relations scholarship for some time. The term *global public goods* itself goes back at least to the early 1990s.¹ But the most recent wave of interest was generated in the context of the UN's Millennium Development Goals as a way of understanding certain transborder problems and the need for a coordinated international response. The global public goods concept has been promoted most particularly by researchers associated with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank.² Kofi Annan claimed that to secure peace, greater well-being, social justice, and environmental sustainability, collective action is a prerequisite since "no country can achieve

these global public goods on its own, and neither can the global marketplace.”³ It was the conceptual key to the World Bank’s rebranding of itself as the “Knowledge Bank.” And for the Research Department at UNDP, the concept was the fulcrum of a project to reinvent the case for international development assistance and the rationale for a fundamental rethinking of the working of the global political and economic system.

Unfortunately, the concept of global public goods is poorly defined, and in this article we argue that it is better understood as a rhetorical device than as an analytical tool.⁴ The attempt to apply the concept of public goods at the international level draws on a wide range of literatures to modify and widen the economic definition, but as a result, explanatory power is compromised. Furthermore, the attempted manipulation of the concept ignores its fundamental incoherence, its mixing together of the distinct concepts of nonrivalness and nonexcludability.

We use here an internal discursive critique, examining the logic at the heart of the concept rather than considering in detail its theoretical or practical applications. We first outline the concepts of public goods and global public goods. In the two substantive sections of the article, we address the problems of abstraction and incoherence. We suggest that researchers and policymakers should eschew the rhetorical attractiveness of this ill-defined concept and instead examine the political economy of exclusion, rivalry, and public provision as they pertain to international cooperation and global issues.

What Are Global Public Goods?

The idea of global public goods builds on the well-established economic concept of *public goods*.⁵ Public goods are nonrival in that they can be, as Inge Kaul, Isabelle Grunberg, and Marc A. Stern put it, “consumed by many without becoming depleted,”⁶ or it costs nothing to have another person use the good. Public goods are also nonexcludable: “no one can be barred from consuming the good.”⁷ Thus, public goods are contrasted with “private” goods, which are excludable and rival. For example, when I have a private good, like a sandwich, I can prevent others from eating it (it is excludable). If someone else has a sandwich, it does not benefit me; I must get my own sandwich (it is rival).

But what sorts of goods are nonexcludable and nonrival? The exemplars in the public economics literature are traffic lights and the lighthouse, the latter of which graces the cover of the first UNDP *Global Public Goods* volume, published in 1999. Once a lighthouse is constructed and operational, any shipping in the area of it can benefit from the warning light it provides (it is nonexcludable), and any ships that do benefit do not compromise the access of ships coming afterward to the same benefits of warning

(it is nonrival)—although the historical accuracy of this paradigmatic example has been questioned.⁸

Technology determines whether or not goods are nonrival and nonexcludable. Recent developments in information technology have made music, books, movies, this article—anything that can be downloaded over the Internet—virtually nonrival. When exclusion is possible, as for some academic journals, users may pay a high price to access these nonrival goods. Yet the diffusion of and ready access to copying technology is seriously compromising the ability of producers to exclude consumers—as the controversy over peer-to-peer file sharing programs and the royalties owed to musicians and other artists attests. At the same time, new technologies are making exclusion possible where it was not before—for example, for roads (the London congestion charge) and genetic information (“terminator genes” in biotechnology).

For economists, the coincidence of both absolute nonexcludability and nonrivalry is what makes up pure public goods. But, as Alan Prest argued thirty-five years ago, “goods exhibiting both of the relevant characteristics—non-rivalness in consumption and non-excludability—are likely to be few in number.”⁹ Also acknowledging that pure global public goods are rare, Kaul and associates shift their focus to what they call impure public goods. These are goods that are either nonrival, but to some extent excludable, or nonexcludable, but somewhat rival. *Public goods* is then used as an umbrella term for any good, service, condition, or outcome that is either nonexcludable or nonrival or both. “Common pool” resources—that is, resources that are nonexcludable but rival (such as fisheries), so-called public bads or “externalities” (pollution), and “club goods,” which are nonrival up to a point but excludable (a swimming pool)—are discussed under the rubric of public goods.¹⁰

In the economics literature, public goods are significant because they lead to market failures and so justify the government’s role in addressing that failure. Many important social activities have public goods characteristics, such as national defense, fire prevention, roads and other communications systems, and disease prevention. Nonexcludability means that the supplier of a public good runs the risk that people will use the good without paying.¹¹ This is the phenomenon of free riding and suggests that public goods will tend to be overexploited or underproduced, there being little rationale for private producers to produce something whose price will tend to zero. Furthermore, as Larry Summers has argued with regard to knowledge, it “will be under-produced if people cannot exclude others from the benefits and it will be under-produced even if they can because, if they can, they will exclude people from the benefits and then people will not be able to take full advantage of the benefits.”¹²

While nonexcludability leads to overexploitation, nonrivalry may be characterized by underuse. If a good is nonrival, and consumption of the provided good or services is costless to the producer, any exclusion of consumers will be inefficient, since the marginal benefit consumers enjoy exceeds the marginal cost producers incur. Yet there are typically fixed costs associated with producing a nonrival good, which can become a barrier to entry for others. The economic context may be one where existing firms have market power and use that power to restrict supply and raise prices. This is especially the case in the software and pharmaceutical industries, where research and development costs may be very large.

One of the principal insights of the global public goods literature is that growing international interdependence as a result of technological change, economic openness, and multilateral cooperation means a “growing number of national public goods have gone global.”¹³ Public goods vary according to the geographic area to which they apply. For instance, lighthouses and traffic signals are local public goods—that is, they apply to a specific geographic area. Defense is a national public good in that it defends a particular nation against attack. Kaul, Grunberg, and Stern define global public goods as ones that are “quasi universal in terms of countries (covering more than one group of countries), people (accruing to several, preferably all, population groups), and generations (extending to both current and future generations, or at least meeting the needs of current generations without foreclosing development options for future generations).”¹⁴

They argue that many erstwhile national public goods, such as financial stability, have become genuinely global public goods due to technological and policy changes commonly described through the rubric of globalization.¹⁵

There is no firm consensus as to the list of global public goods, though the books by Kaul et al. list health, education and knowledge, peace and security, the environment, and a stable and open international economic order.¹⁶ Though some global public goods are new, others, such as “the atmosphere, the geostationary orbit, the electromagnetic spectrum, and the high seas,” predate human activity.¹⁷ The global public goods concept unifies a diverse collection of topics, suggesting a common collective action problem and large potential benefits to international cooperation.

In general, public goods beyond and across national borders suffer from problems of provision like all public goods but also involve the added complexity of the collective action problem among nation-states that have no central governing agency among or above them. Kaul and colleagues classify the various types of global public goods into global natural commons, such as the high seas and the atmosphere; global human-made commons, such as global networks, international regimes and knowledge; and global policy outcomes and conditions, such as peace and financial stability. The

problems of supply differ for each of these: first, overuse; second, underuse; and third, undersupply.¹⁸

Abstraction

The first problem with global public goods concerns what they are. Health, knowledge, environment—these have more than importance to human life in common. The items on this rather grand list are all, as Kaul and colleagues note, abstractions, “more conditions than concrete things. Their provision is thus difficult to monitor or verify.”¹⁹ However, the technical difficulty of verification is hardly the most serious problem with the concept. In theory building and concept development, some measure of abstraction is a necessary part of explanation, through simplification and generalization, though it can also result in methodological problems, including difficulties with operationalization.²⁰ The persistent abstraction of global public goods is more serious because it serves to avoid complexity and real-world issues.²¹ Ultimately, the abstraction of global public goods hides theoretical frailty and provides ideological cover.

Pure public goods are rare; but those that are identified tend to be abstractions. Why? Abstraction does not flow from some intrinsic quality or characteristic of the public goods. Rather, abstraction produces public goods by definition. Abstraction entails something less tangible. But because it is less tangible and more conceptual, it is less likely to be rival or excludable. Abstractions make public goods because abstractions are not exhaustible. For example, everyone can have *health* without others necessarily suffering. But not everyone can enjoy the concrete reality of *health care*. We wait (or pay) for surgeries precisely *because* health care is rival (a surgeon cannot operate on two people simultaneously) and excludable (a hospital can choose whom to admit). In the abstract, knowledge benefits everyone; yet patents exclude, as do educational institutions.²² In all cases, the global public goods are hardly tangible or manipulable; or as soon as they are, they lose precisely the public goods character that is supposed to set them apart. The few global public goods examples that are concrete, such as the ozone layer, the electromagnetic spectrum, and orbital space, are impure public goods with distinctly rival aspects. For example, a geostationary orbit, which can be taken by anyone with the resources to put a satellite into space, is more like a fishery—a common pool resource that can be depleted—than a pure public good.²³

A reliance on abstraction is the reason for the curious and rather strained comparisons of “national defense and pizza” or “financial stability and airplanes” in the public goods literature, where the public good is abstract and private good concrete.²⁴ The more abstract the conceptualization, the more

public goods are evident; the more concrete, the more the private character of goods comes to the fore. Moreover, the abstract concepts are deliberately chosen. National defense is an abstraction associated with a specific government department and area of public policy. It is abstract enough to seem nonrival and nonexcludable, yet concrete enough to be tangible for understanding and amenable to public policy intervention, largely because of that identification with a government department. Yet this conflates the abstract concept of defense with the particular military policies, personnel, and materiel of national governments—two things that are hardly identical.

As well as being abstract, global public goods, such as the global financial system, international peace, and environmental sustainability, are usually systemic factors, whether these are conditions or outcomes. But a systemic factor is a public good by definition. For instance, international financial stability is a global public good only because and insofar as it applies to the whole international system. By virtue of being a system-level factor or characteristic, that factor must be nonrival and nonexcludable within that system. But this is a question of self-definition, not analysis.

That this is simply stipulation is not the only difficulty, however. In attaching global public goods not just to the international financial system, but also to the *stability* of that system, a normative commitment is made to maintain this particular system, whether it is global capitalism, the economic hegemony of the United States, or whatever arrangement one might prefer. The conservative normative element of such an argument, with its preference for order, is reminiscent of Hedley Bull's discussion of international order in *Anarchical Society*.²⁵

Kaul and associates do not see the abstractness of global public goods as a problem. They call the more abstract conditions and outcomes, such as peace and financial stability, final global public goods. The more concrete mechanisms, services, and goods that lead to these final goods, such as international regimes or peacekeeping missions, are labeled intermediate global public goods.²⁶ By this sleight of hand, the collective provision of private goods or local public goods is labeled a global public good. The global significance of these intermediate global public goods, which are in fact generally club goods or local public goods at best, inheres in the association with the higher-order, more abstract concern. And as one tries to be more specific, the more private the goods become: financial stability is a global public good, trade regimes are club goods, forms of free trade and implementation of trade rules favor some more than others; peace is a global public good, peacekeeping missions are national or regional public goods, peace and order will be preferred by those in power over the rebellious ethnic minority, and so on.

This and other problems with abstraction are evident in the example of defense as a public good. Defense seems to be a public good, nonexcludable

and nonrival; everyone in a nation is in principle defended by their national military from attack by foreign powers. But this abstract conception is beside the point. When an attack occurs and active defense and practical action are required, because military resources are scarce, they will be deployed to defend some and not others. Here defense is different from a public good such as a firework display, which all can witness if they choose but which provides greater benefits to those who enjoy colorful explosions and fewer to those who do not like loud bangs. National defense is not a pure public good, because some people are excluded from it—for example, those living in undefended areas.

The public goods literature also tends to assume that military expenditure is for national defense. Yet the military establishment in some states is a threat to the human security of their own populations. Analyses of conflict find the explanation of wartime military expenditures in conflicts over resources (Sudan, Congo, or Iraq) or in ethnic or ideological conflicts (Rwanda, Bosnia, or Iraq). From the perspective of the international community, a protracted civil war, waged about and through control of the country's diamond resources, is not a public good.

In peacetime, the military resources of a country act as passive defense or, better said, a deterrent to future attack. Thus, strictly speaking, deterrence, not defense, is the public good. But the problem with this line of argument is that it is nearly impossible to determine whether deterrence works, as the national security threats that are averted by deterrence efforts are unobservable. We observe incidents only when deterrence fails. By contrast, active defense is measurable but also excludable and rival.²⁷

Taking a global viewpoint, however, national defense looks more like a local public good or a private good of the nation concerned. Ruben Mendez has argued that peace and security are the global public goods rather than defense.²⁸ If international peace and security are considered the global public goods, it is not clear to what extent national military spending actually achieves or is even directed toward the global public good. The security dilemma means that military expenditures by one nation may reduce the security of its neighbor. The confrontation of militaries is a source or at least an indication of global insecurity rather than security.

Furthermore, it is hardly a compelling argument to say that military spending is the only or best way of achieving peace and security. There are diplomatic, political, economic, and other means. And peacetime defense spending is determined by more than simply peace and security imperatives. Public spending on the military is generally the result of a complex process and frequently involves pork-barreling elements such as the use of military bases as a job creation strategy or the location of bases in the home districts of influential legislators. As with much government spending and policy priorities, this is hardly the stuff of public goods.

Alternatively, military spending on peacekeeping and other peace support missions could be considered a contribution to a global public good, as Mendez claims. Yet peace support operations—their occurrence, makeup, mandate, location—have been shaped by the self-interested motivations of troop-contributing countries and the UN Security Council, especially the Permanent Five, which decide on such operations (or regional organizations where those have had the jurisdiction and political will and capacity to act). Thus, the distinction between war-fighting and peacekeeping militaries and the different contributions to public goods can be difficult to make.

Such theoretical problems are compounded by the ideological effect of abstraction.²⁹ The use of abstract terms works to obfuscate private and public goods and legitimates certain private goods while delegitimizing others. With respect to peace, abstraction works ideologically because it obfuscates power and distributional issues at the heart of concrete situations in world politics and the global economy. Charles Kindleberger, for example, gives the exploitation and domination of powerful interests a free ride when he asserts that there are “occasions when the world suffers from the underproduction of the public good of stability, not because of greedy vested interests and domination or exploitation, but because of the principle of the free rider.”³⁰ If we follow Kindleberger, we accept the vested interests of the powerful, because, as we know from reading E. H. Carr, the interests of the powerful are synonymous with the interests of the system as a whole. Instead, we should ask if international peace and economic stability really are global public goods, then whose peace is being stabilized, and on whose terms? Is this peace under the hegemony of the United States or with high levels of military spending? Is it peace with justice and without structural as well as overt violence? Kaul et al. would like to address such issues in their notion of global public goods, but to do so they must go through intellectual gymnastics, twisting the meaning of *access* and of *public* in order to bring distributional issues to the fore.³¹

Incoherence

While advocates have adopted and modified public goods for international affairs, they have neglected a basic incoherence at the heart of the concept. The idea of public goods confounds two concepts—nonrivalry and nonexcludability—that are analytically and practically distinct; it is not a single concept but rather two distinct notions. This is a problem because nonexcludability and nonrivalry are only loosely related. Whereas private goods are, in theory and in practice, both rival and excludable,³² the same is not true of the superficially opposite concept, public goods; although public goods are theoretically both nonrival and nonexcludable, in practice many goods are either nonrival but excludable, or nonexcludable but rival.

A pure concept that does not appear in practice very often need not, however, be irrelevant. According to scholars as diverse as Milton Friedman and Kenneth Waltz, pure analytical concepts aid understanding because they focus on significant causes and eliminate sundry “noise.” In economics, perfect competition, or in physics, frictionless motion, are pure forms (or ideal types) rarely if ever reached, yet the concepts aid understanding and explanation.³³

Unfortunately, the global public goods concept is not pure in this way: not only are nonrival and nonexcludable characteristics theoretically distinct, they appear separately in practice, and the policy implications that follow from each are different. This is why global public goods seem to suffer such a bewildering range of deficiencies; those that Kaul et al. identify include undersupply, oversupply, underprovision, and underutilization.³⁴ The lack of coherence in this range of problems follows from an incoherent core concept.

The contrasting issues of environment and knowledge illustrate this point. With respect to the environment, the problem of overexploitation of common pool resources occurs because, although these resources are nonexcludable, they are rival; if they were not, further consumption would be costless. It is precisely because we cannot endlessly trawl for fish, cannot keep sending more and more satellites into (geostationary) orbit, and so on, that we need policy analysis and action. Given the character of the policy problem in terms of the rivalry of consumption, combining analysis under the same heading as factors that are nonrival is simply confusing.

Meanwhile, the international controversy over patents and intellectual property, highlighted in the dispute over the inclusion of Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) in the World Trade Organization (WTO), exists because knowledge is excludable. If it were not, the “ownership” of seeds or genetic sequencing information would be open to all rather than fought over by biotechnology multinationals, development groups, or indigenous and other activists. Especially in the developing world, one can see the introduction of genetically modified seeds as a way of privatizing the commons. What was once open to all is now restricted, a circumstance exacerbated by the creation of so-called terminator seeds.³⁵ Here again, even if the knowledge is nonrival, the importance of the issue is a consequence of the development of excludability and thus of privatization. To mix this up with factors that are nonexcludable is to court confusion.

While conflating nonrival and nonexcludable elements is an error, considering the issues separately has benefits. To begin with, there are well-developed literatures in each instance. An “externality” is a general term that refers to any situation where the actions of one agent affect others in ways that are not transmitted through market prices, pollution being a classic example. The advantage of externality theory is that it can apply to any

nonexcludable good, whether rival or nonrival,³⁶ including the global environmental and other common pool resources. Consequently, externality theory is more general: as Kaul and associates note in passing, a pure public good can be seen as just a special type of externality.³⁷ Indeed, it could be argued that it is in the understanding of cross-border externalities, such as pollution, resources depletion, and health, that the UNDP global public goods collections do their most useful economic policy work.³⁸

Likewise, substantial insights into the economics of nonrival goods can be gained from the analysis of clubs, the theory of natural monopoly, or the economics of information. Club goods can, together with the economics of information, explain the benefits and coordination problems likely to arise from the establishment of international regimes for trade. A natural monopoly occurs in industries where there are large initial or fixed costs but low marginal costs. As a result, an established firm will have lower costs and be able to dominate the market, eliminating competition, reducing supply, and raising prices. Natural monopoly explains the concerns at the heart of, for example, debates of intellectual property. The substantial initial research and development expenditures in industries such as software or pharmaceuticals are a significant barrier to entry—and this barrier allows manufacturers to charge prices substantially higher than the production costs. Recognizing the monopolistic nature of certain intellectual property rules allows us to recognize the real risk that nonrival but excludable knowledge will be underused, and a few powerful firms and states that control this knowledge can appropriate a portion of the benefits that flow from it.

We might try to avoid the difficulties with conflation by considering only pure public goods. The problem is that the specific nature of pure public goods as a core concept renders them marginal at best. It might be interesting to have a theory for the special subset of nonexcludable goods that happen to be nonrival also, but surely there are too few such goods to justify giving it a major place in our analysis, unless we are looking for a theory of lighthouses and their international parallels. Kaul and colleagues do indeed note in passing that a pure public good can be seen as just a special type of externality. Yet they proceed to develop the umbrella concept rather than examine the specific analytical issues at stake.

The global response to the prospect of avian flu illustrates a number of the problems with public goods and advantages of other analytical frameworks. As a communicable disease, avian flu is to some degree nonexcludable. It is also nonrival; or, rather better, there are certain network externalities, meaning that the more people that “consume” the virus, the more likely any individual person will be to consume it, too. But the global public good of health involves the treatment of the virus or the prevention of illness. Treatment with, for example, nursing care or medications such as Tamiflu, and prevention through immunization, requires the development

of knowledge and the provision of medicines, both of which are excludable and the latter of which is rival. These are distinct problems, with distinct policy implications and solutions. Leaving aside the bizarreness of the ideas of a virus as a commodity and an avian flu epidemic as a “good,” setting health within a global public goods framework blurs rather than sharpens analysis.

Conclusion: Analytical Deficiencies, Rhetorical Gains

While the prominence of the concept of global public goods seems to have faded somewhat since 9/11, it has remained current and popular in academic and policy circles despite the analytical deficiencies we have identified. But the erstwhile fashion for global public goods has more to do with persuasion than explanation. From a rhetorical point of view, conflation, abstraction, and incoherence are positively advantageous, because they bring together loosely related ideas and rally people with different understandings of an abstract concept to a common cause. It is the basis of rallying cries like this from Kaul et al.: “At the end of the day, common concerns bind all people. Everyone wants to participate in a fair, stable global market economy. Everyone seeks an end to diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. Everyone hopes to benefit from nature. And everyone desires peace. Such issues also bind nations.”³⁹

But such banalities belong in a political manifesto, not a piece of analytical research. UN declarations and goals are ideals not very different from political manifestos. As such, they are necessarily rhetoric—as are international instruments and treaties. So our critique is as important for the implementers at the national level—that is, government policymakers—as it is for UN representatives.⁴⁰ Still, the poverty of the global public goods concept is revealed by the range of issues encompassed, which resemble the incoherent wish lists that the UN has been trotting out in various forms for decades.

A good deal of the attraction of global public goods lies in the not-so-innocent term itself. *Public goods* has a positive connotation while *common pool resources* or *natural monopoly* are less attractive-sounding ideas. In addition, the association of global public goods with economic theory is of importance. Kaul and her colleagues have increasingly and overtly left the original economic analysis behind, supplementing the idea with concepts and theory from sociology, political science, and other disciplines. But the economic concept is nevertheless still deployed as a signifier or as a persuasive technique, an example of what Donald McCloskey called economic rhetoric.⁴¹

Robert Cox suggested that theory is always for someone and for some purpose.⁴² The public goods concept works for some economists as an economic rationale for government, though this can lead to anything from a defense of the role of government per se to an advocacy of a particular lim-

ited set of government functions.⁴³ For officials and researchers associated with UN agencies, as Malloch Brown has suggested, “the concept of global public goods—or bads—tells us that we are not facing myriad problems and that disparate crises are not erupting for different reasons in nearly every sphere. Rather, we are facing just one major challenge: how to re-think and reorient public policymaking to catch up with today’s new realities of interdependence and globalization.”⁴⁴ The concept gives a simple rationale for the activities of those associated with UN agencies and lends a sense of cohesion to the set of diverse issues they face and the policies and coordination that will be required to address those issues. But it is terminology modified to fit the exigencies of international public policy rather than explanatory theory.

Global public goods may provide intellectual succor to confused, overwhelmed, and besieged public policy practitioners and analysts. For some researchers and officials in the international policy community, it appears to supply anew a justification for the existence and activities of the UN and the international policy community more generally. It frames a question and even suggests an answer with regard to issues in international public policy that the UN or one of its agencies is looking for—a rationale for UN and/or international NGO involvement, coordination, control, or direction in a host of public policy domains. For Kaul, this means international policy innovation, including the participation of stakeholders beyond simply the United Nations.⁴⁵ But we should not be deceived: this is a “UN-plus” framework—the United Nations conceived as a preeminent actor in the world of global public goods, as overseer or coordinator, if not provider.

Unfortunately, the answer is too simple: the analysis provided in the public goods literature can at best identify a collective action problem; it does not supply a solution. We know that markets can fail when goods are nonrival or nonexcludable, and this creates a possible niche for government or, as Kaul suggests, the public; but governments (or the public) are made up of agents with their own interests, sometimes selfish ones. Governments (or the public), like anyone else, are confronted with information problems and free-riding tendencies that have to be overcome in order to succeed where the market fails. The rationale for government intervention or public control or oversight assumes rather than demonstrates that this will succeed where markets fail. The public, and the governments elected by them, can be myopic, self-interested, and imperfectly informed, as much as they can be far-sighted, altruistic, and well informed. And this is all the more true for global public goods in the complex and loosely regulated environment of international affairs. The really interesting and important questions are how governments or civil society can overcome the lack of knowledge about both the costs and benefits of producing global public goods, transcend free-riding tendencies, and provide goods that citizens value.

In sum, the global public goods concept is not an analytical panacea. It is conceptually incoherent and overly abstract. There are already existing economic theories of externalities and natural monopolies that are more powerful explanations of the specific situations that the global public goods literature generalizes about. It would be better to advance the specific analysis of nonexcludable and nonrival goods in the international system without the distraction of the rhetorically attractive, but practically marginal, example of global public goods. 🌐

Notes

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1. See, for instance, Todd Sandler, "Tropical Deforestation: Markets and Market Failures," *Land Economics* 69 3 (1993), and Jeffrey Frieden's review of Reuben Mendez's book *International Public Finance*, in *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 4 (1993).

2. For a discussion of the development of the concept, especially the influence of UNDP, see Maurizio Carbone, "Supporting or Resisting Global Public Goods? The Policy Dimension of a Contested Concept," *Global Governance* 13 (2007): 181–184. Global public goods are the focus of numerous websites promoted by, among others, the UNDP, as well as an International Task Force addressing the concept. Primary examples of the websites advocating for the concept of global public goods include www.undp.org/globalpublicgoods/, www.globalpublicgoods.org/, www.gpgnet.net/, and www.gpgtaskforce.org/. "Global public goods" is an extremely popular concept, however; a Web search produced 202,000 results. For an example of work published by the World Bank, see Marco Feroni, *Reforming Foreign Aid: The Role of International Public Goods* (World Bank, 2000); Marco Feroni and Ashoka Mody, eds., *International Public Goods: Incentives, Measurement, and Financing* (Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, for the World Bank, 2002). See also Helmut Reisen, Marcelo Soto, and Thomas Weithöner, "Financing Global And Regional Public Goods Through ODA: Analysis And Evidence from The OECD Creditor Reporting System," OECD Development Centre Working Paper No. 232, January 2004, available at www.oecd.org/dataoecd/47/13/24482500.pdf; Eduardo Viola, "Free Trade and the Global Environment as International Public Goods," in Chris Chuung, ed., *Globalisation and the Environment: Perspectives from OECD and Dynamic Non-member Economies* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1998).

3. At www.undp.org/globalpublicgoods/

4. The rhetorical nature of global public goods has also been explored by Jean Coussy, "The Adventures of a Concept: Is Neo-classical Theory Suitable for Defining Global Public Goods?" *Review of International Political Economy* 12, no. 1 (2005): 177–194.

5. Most point to Paul Samuelson, "A Pure Theory of Public Expenditures," *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 36, no. 4 (1954), though Inge Kaul, Isabelle Grunberg, and Marc A. Stern, eds., *Global Public Goods: International Cooperation in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. xxiii, suggest that the idea of public goods has been around since the origins of modern economic thought.
6. Kaul, Grunberg, and Stern, *Global Public Goods*, p. xx.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Ronald H. Coase "The Lighthouse in Economics," *Journal of Law and Economics* 17, no. 2 (1974).
9. Alan R. Prest, *Public Finance in Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), p. 66.
10. Kaul, Grunberg, and Stern, *Global Public Goods*, pp. xx, 4.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7. For a discussion of different contexts in which this is a problem, with specific production technologies and cost functions, see Marc Bilodeau and Al Slivinski, "Toilet Cleaning and Department Chairing: Volunteering a Public Service," *Journal of Public Economics* 56, no. 2 (1996).
12. Lawrence H. Summers, "Knowledge as a Global Public Good," presentation at the Harvard University Weatherhead Center conference "International Public Goods for Economic Development," 7 September 2005, available at www.president.harvard.edu/speeches/2005/0907_weatherhead.html.
13. Inge Kaul, Pedro Conceição, Katell Le Gouveln, and Ronald U. Mendoza, eds., *Providing Global Public Goods: Managing Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, for the United Nations Development Programme, 2003), p. 96.
14. Kaul, Grunberg, and Stern, *Global Public Goods*, p. 3
15. *Ibid.*, pp. xxi, 2–3.
16. Joseph E. Stiglitz, "Knowledge as a Global Public Good," in Kaul, Grunberg, and Stern, *Global Public Goods*, p. 310, argues that global public goods include international economic stability, international security, international environment, international humanitarian assistance, and knowledge. Kaul, Grunberg, and Stern, *Global Public Goods*, p. 44, list the ten global public goods noted in the UN Secretary General's *Road Map* report on implementation of the UN Millennium Declaration. The European Commission lists environment, health, knowledge, peace and security, and governance, in European Commission, "What Are Global Public Goods?" at <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/wssd/publicgoods.pdf>. *The Economist* mentions international law and law enforcement, a stable global financial system, an open trading system, health, peace, and environmental stability.
17. Kaul, Conceição, Le Gouveln, and Mendoza, *Providing Global Public Goods*, p. 95.
18. Kaul, Grunberg, and Stern, *Global Public Goods*, p. 454; see also *ibid.*, p. 100.
19. Kaul, Conceição, Le Gouveln, and Mendoza, *Providing Global Public Goods*, p. 15.
20. For a discussion, especially with respect to the obscurities of the production function for these so-called goods, see David Long, "Public Goods in International Affairs: The Use and Abuse of an Economic Concept," manuscript, 2007.
21. Francisco Sagasti and Keith Bezanson, "Global Public Goods: Opportunities and Threats," *The ACP-EU Courier*, no. 202 (2004), available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/development/body/publications/courier/courier202/pdf/en_15_ni.pdf. Sagasti and Bezanson suggest that global public goods is a fuzzy concept encompassing a "growing number of disparate ideas." They argue that "extrapolation of

the rather precise concept of 'public good' from economics to broader social contexts . . . requires considerable conceptual stretching," which has rendered the term all but meaningless. See also Carbone, "Supporting or Resisting Global Public Goods?" p. 185, and Coussy, "The Adventures of a Concept," p. 190.

22. Stiglitz, "Knowledge as a Global Public Good."

23. For a discussion, see, for example, Yola Georgiadou and Richard Groot, "Capacity Building for Geo-information Provision: A Public Goods Perspective" (2002), from the Geospatial Research Portal at www.gisdevelopment.net/proceedings/gisdeco/sessions/Georgb.htm.

24. Harvey Rosen, Beverly George Dahlby, Roger Smith, and Paul Boothe, *Public Finance in Canada* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill-Ryerson, 1999), p. 52; Inge Kaul and Katell Le Gouveln, "Institutional Options for Producing Global Public Goods," in Kaul et al., *Providing Global Public Goods*, p. 371.

25. Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

26. Kaul, Grunberg, and Stern, *Global Public Goods*, p. 13.

27. To see an example of the problems with costing deterrence, see the crude calculations in Frank Harvey, "The International Politics of National Missile Defense: A Response to the Critics," *International Journal* 55, no. 4 (2000).

28. Ruben P. Mendez, "Peace as a Global Public Good," in Kaul, Grunberg, and Stern, *Global Public Goods*, p. 388; though for some this is an outcome rather than a good as such: see Marina Fe B. Durano, "Understanding Global Public Goods and Differentiating them from Publicly Provided Goods" (2001), www.dawn.org.fj/global/unconferences/ffd/ffddocs/globalgoods.doc, p. 4. For the argument against defense as a global public good, see Mendez, "Peace as a Global Public Good," p. 384. For a discussion in the context of research and development spending on defense, see David Gold, "Does Military R&D Generate International Public Goods?" paper presented at the American Economic Association meetings, New York, January 1999, available at www.eaar.org/Articles/gold.pdf.

29. See also David Moore, "The Second Age of the Third World: From Primitive Accumulation to Global Public Goods?" *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (February 2004): 102, who argues that "GPG is ideologically unmoored."

30. Charles Kindleberger, *The International Economic Order: Essays on Financial Crisis and International Public Goods* (Brighton, UK: Wheatsheaf, 1988), p. 189. See also Michel Camdessus, "International Financial and Monetary Stability: A Global Public Good?" remarks at the IMF research conference "Key Issues in Reform of the International Monetary and Financial System," Washington, DC, 28 May 1999, available at www.imf.org/external/np/speeches/1999/052899.htm. Camdessus begins an argument that the monetary and financial system is a global public good and ends with the argument that the open and liberalized system overseen by the Bretton Woods institutions is the public good.

31. See Kaul et al., *Providing Global Public Goods*, pp. 21–36. For a critical view, see Long, "Public Goods in International Affairs."

32. Richard A. Musgrave, Peggy B. Musgrave, and Richard M. Bird, *Public Finance in Theory and Practice* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1987).

33. Rosen et al., *Public Finance in Canada*; K. N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

34. See Kaul et al., *Providing Global Public Goods*, p. 26. And it is also why different authors emphasize different elements. Compare the emphasis on non-excludability in Bruno S. Frey, *International Political Economics* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1984), p. 123, with that on nonrivalry in Kindleberger, *The International Economic Order*, p. 186. While Richard A. Musgrave and Peggy B. Musgrave,

“Prologue,” in Kaul et al., *Providing Global Public Goods*, pp. xii, xiii, emphasize nonrivalry in the preface to the second *Global Public Goods* volume, the editors continue to emphasize both elements with a preference for what they call non-exclusiveness.

35. See the comments by Vandana Shiva in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 21 March 2006.

36. See Richard W. Tresh, *Public Finance: A Normative Theory*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Academic Press, 2002), for a treatment of public goods as externalities.

37. Kaul, Grunberg, and Stern, *Global Public Goods*, pp. 5, 458.

38. We owe this suggestion to a referee.

39. Kaul et al., *Providing Global Public Goods*, p. 53.

40. We owe this insight to an anonymous reviewer.

41. Donald N. McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). Of course, importing economic concepts and analysis into the study and policy prescription for international relations is hardly novel. Kindleberger, *The International Economic Order*, p. 123, suggests that some view the concept as an example of economic imperialism, but this is hardly a unique or clear-cut example.

42. Robert Cox, “States, Social Forces and World Order,” *Millennium Journal of International Studies* 10, no. 2 (1981).

43. Standard public economics texts feature public goods, along with externalities, as part of the discussion of the economic basis of government intervention in the economy, since governments address the resulting market failures. Public goods are presented alongside other rationales for government activities (for example, Rosen et al., *Public Finance in Canada*; Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Economics of the Public Sector* (New York: Norton, 1986); and John Leach, *A Course in Public Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

44. Mark Malloch Brown, “Foreword,” in Kaul et al., *Providing Global Public Goods*, p. xvi.

45. Kaul et al., *Providing Global Public Goods*, pp. 30–36.