

GLOBAL PUBLIC GOODS AND THE GLOBAL COMMONS: OPPOSITE OR
COMPLEMENTARY PERSPECTIVES FOR POLICY-MAKERS?

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The notions of “global public goods” and the “global commons” are both in vogue to articulate many of the most pressing policy challenges of the 21st century. These terms are often used interchangeably to describe, or justify, a range of objects and activities such as security, education, scientific research, infrastructure, environmental goods, financial stability, tax compliance, public spaces, healthcare systems, social services, pensions or cultural objects.

What is in a name, policymakers may ask? Does it matter if we refer to environmental action as a fight against a global public bad like deforestation, the promotion of a global public good like clean water, or the protection of a global common like the Arctic? There may be good reasons for interchangeable usage of these terms. After all, most goods in the real world combine characteristics of public, common or private types of goods. But global public goods and the global commons are also distinguished from each other as analytical frameworks and as rhetorical devices. Using one term rather than the other does not follow as a matter of course. Indeed, important political choices about which institutions, actors and policies are to serve these goods are at stake in using either notion. This piece offers a short overview of the three main points of distinction between global public goods and global commons. The aim is to contribute to the precision with which these notions can be invoked for policy purposes. What are these marks of distinction and how shall we appreciate them?

Marks of distinction

The standard criterion by which public goods and the commons are distinguished is **subtractability** or rivalry in consumption. According to this analysis, both types of goods share difficult exclusion as a core characteristic. But if the enjoyment of a commons (e.g. a fishery) diminishes consumption opportunities for other users or consumers, usage of a public good (e.g. a street light) does not subtract consumption units left to others. The great advantage of this economic approach is analytical clarity. Following its lead, we can make the overall claim that global public goods (e.g. security from transnational terror or a stable financial system) suffer from underproduction whereas global commons (e.g. the atmosphere or natural resources) suffer from overconsumption. Yet if we do not restrict the commons to natural bounties, they can also suffer from underproduction (e.g. a communal irrigation system). Further, this economic analysis in terms of subtractability can also be charged with being too essentialist. It assumes that goods are public or common because they possess certain inherent properties, like subtractability. The approach therefore identifies objects as *being* public or common independently before the political contestation by which they *become*, so to speak, public or common. This shortcoming renders the approach somewhat antiquated. This is evident, for instance, in the rise of the knowledge and digital commons. Knowledge and ideas can be shared and created as commons, even if their usage is not subtractable like a natural common.

The second mark of distinction between public goods and the commons is their relationship with regimes of **property**. Public goods, from this perspective, perpetuate the logic of appropriation and enclosure that informs our economic system. There is little difference if this acquisitive spirit is manifested by private actors or public authorities. The commons, by contrast, denote a sphere of inappropriability in which shared usage replaces exclusionary

ownership. This mark of distinction is indebted to legal scholarship and environmental studies in which the commons refer to those objects, like the Arctic or deep sea bed, which should not be subject to sovereignty claims and appropriation attempts by states. On this account, the commons should be pitted against both the (inter)governmental provision of public goods and against privatization and marketization trends. Indeed, the notion of the commons has now become the slogan of many activists and Marxist scholars who seek to move beyond the opposition between public and private. They advocate radical democratic practices of 'commoning' that cannot be captured by states and markets. Among officials of international organizations like the UN or OECD there is not always awareness of this ideological opposition between public goods and the commons. When they integrate the notion of global public goods into their official terminology, the 'natural' global commons are often identified with these goods. As a critical note, we can say that even if the shift from ownership to usage merits further reflection, there is no guarantee that the absence of property titles can achieve the goals of a more inclusive, sustainable and equal world. For instance, those who favor the introduction of a market of cap and trade argue that exactly the opposite is necessary to achieve the good of a cleaner environment.

A third mark of distinction between public goods and the commons is articulated in terms of compulsory versus voluntary forms of **association**. The emphasis here is that the provision of public goods relies on unchosen association in a state and (inter)governmental compulsion. By contrast, the commons are first and foremost provided through voluntary networks and associations. This perspective recovers fundamental normative problems in the provision of goods, most importantly whether it enhances our freedom and equality as citizens. In particular, the justification of public goods provision by government has to deal with claims that states should be neutral about which goods to value. By contrast, the voluntary practices of 'commoning' turn the dreams of many radical democrats into reality. But instead of regarding public and common goods as opposed to each other, this perspective also allows them to be seen as interdependent. Indeed, their alliance can be crucial to counter undesirable instances of privatization. For instance, goods such as research and knowledge are best achieved by using both compulsory instruments of government (e.g. taxation) and the voluntary cooperation of scholars (e.g. open access platforms). From this perspective, the combination of public and common elements helps to counter the oligarchic tendencies of the academic publishing industry.

Two points of attention for policy makers

No doubt policy makers, as much as scholars working within or across academic disciplines, do not always find sufficient reason to distinguish clearly between global public goods and the global commons. But as this policy brief has pointed out, there are important ways in which to distinguish them for both analytical and political purposes. Two final points of attention deserve to be stressed in conclusion. *First*, it is clear that usage of either term involves important political questions and does not follow as a matter of technical definition. Policy makers should be aware that either term offers different political perspectives on cooperation in the 21st century. *Second*, it is crucial to see how these marks of distinction overlap with each other

without suggesting necessary connections between them. For instance, many have affirmed a necessary connection between degrees of excludability and subtractability, on one hand, and different property regimes, on the other. But this connection is not necessary but, again, the result of political choices. By the same token, there is no inevitable link between a property regime and a successful mode of governance premised on voluntary or compulsory association. In short, it is up to us how we promote global goods – whether we choose to call them public, common or both.