



WIKI n°6: Global Public Goods

Definition and classification of global public goods

Global public goods are defined as "the sum of all goods accessible to all states, which do not necessarily have an individual incentive to produce them²²". This concept aims to rethink the regulation of global action by extending the notion of a collective good to the international level.

This idea stems from the observation that within a context of globalization, many environmental, health, educational, or cultural goods can only be considered public at the international level. Challenges such as air pollution or pandemics, for instance, cannot be resolved unilaterally.

This definition underscores the universality of global public goods. Moreover, it highlights the added complexity they present compared to "national" public goods—specifically, the necessity for interstate coordination. In the absence of a supranational authority with the legitimacy to act globally, the central question becomes: how can these global public goods be produced and managed?

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) categorizes global public goods into three main types:²³

- **Natural global public goods:** These encompass oceans, the ozone layer, climate stability, outer space, and biodiversity.
- **Human-made global public goods:** These include scientific knowledge and the international legal system.
- **Global public goods arising from global policies:** These encompass maintaining peace, combating terrorism, ensuring financial stability, and promoting public health.

²² C. Kindleberger, "International public goods without international government", *American Economic Review*, n° 76, 1, 1986. A partir de : Senat.fr "[Mondialisation : une chance pour l'environnement ?](#)" Rapport d'information n°233 (2003-2004), déposé le 3 mars 2004

²³ <https://www.globalshift.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/BIENSP1.pdf>

Moreover, the 2023-2024 Human Development Report highlighted three categories of these global public goods²⁴, determined by how countries' contributions should be aggregated or consolidated for them to be adequately provided:

- Additive public goods (summation): Provision results from the sum of all actors' efforts. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions, for example, requires collective action by all nations. Cooperation yields better results than independent actions focused solely on self-interest.
- Best-shot public goods: Production relies on the efforts of the most advanced nations. This raises questions about accessibility for states or populations excluded due to resource appropriation or insufficient demand.
- Weakest-link public goods: contribution level is determined by the least capable country. Controlling communicable diseases, for example, remains a global challenge as long as the country with the weakest healthcare system cannot address the issue. The adage, "No one is safe until everyone is safe," is particularly relevant here. Other examples include combating terrorism and regulating tax havens.

To illustrate, the global response to the Covid-19 pandemic mobilized all three types of global public goods: "best-shot," exemplified by sequencing the SARS-CoV-2 genome and developing vaccines; "additive", involving the mobilization of resources to enhance capacities in less-equipped nations; and "weakest-link", by addressing virus's spread.

Scope and importance of global public goods

Global public goods do not only concern a select group of countries; their effects extend beyond trading blocs or nations with similar levels of wealth. They impact a broad spectrum of the world's population and raise considerations for future generations. These common goods, often referred to as the "common heritage of humanity," encompass resources and areas of shared interest among human beings—such as scientific discoveries, culture, and architectural achievements—that constitute assets to be preserved for the benefit of all.

For decades, terms like "common goods," "common heritage," and "global public goods" have highlighted critical global issues crucial to sustaining and enhancing human life: these issues include the environment, water, health, biodiversity, security²⁵, climate, international security, economic stability, culture, the metric system²⁶. Their benefits are both "non-exclusive" and "non-rival"²⁷.

²⁴ <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2023-24overviewfr.pdf>

²⁵ Bruno Boidin, David Hiez et Sandrine Rousseau, *Biens communs, biens publics mondiaux et propriété. Introduction au dossier ; Développement durable et territoires Économie, géographie, politique, droit, sociologie*. Dossier 10 | 2008 Biens communs et propriété, *developpementdurable-5153* (1).pdf

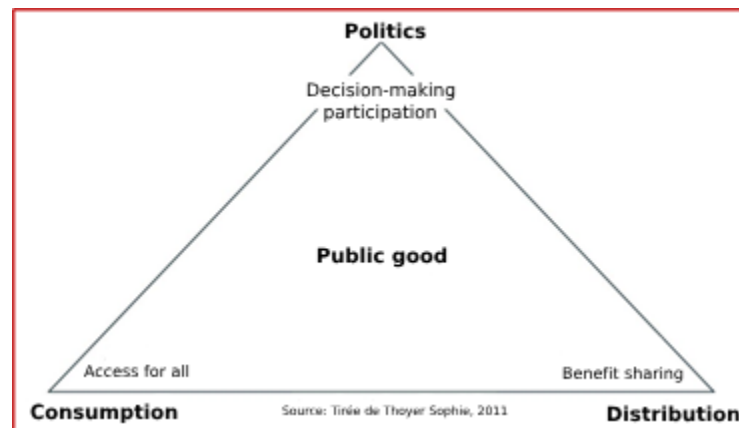
²⁶ Moya Chin « Que sont les biens publics mondiaux ? Les institutions mondiales doivent se coordonner pour protéger ces biens dont nous profitons tous », ABC de l'économie ; FINANCES & DÉVELOPPEMENT | (FMI) Décembre 2021, p. 62.

²⁷ Stiglitz, J.E. (1999). Knowledge As A Global Public Good. In Inge Kaul, Isabelle Grunberg, Marc Stern, *Global Public Goods*, Oxford University Press, New York. [Online](#).

Governance of Global Public Goods

Global public goods exhibit a threefold public character:²⁸

- Public in consumption: They must be accessible to all.
- Public in participation: All stakeholders must participate in the political process.
- Public in benefit distribution: Everyone must be able to benefit from them.



The underlying principle is that the "public nature" of a good is not inherent but determined through socio-political decisions. Declaring certain goods as public necessitates establishing frameworks for their identification, consumption, and distribution.

Thus, “essential goods and services that fall under UN fundamental rights (such as access to water, energy, primary education, and basic healthcare) could be designated global public goods and, as such, require collective financing and international wealth redistribution”²⁹ and facilitate the renewal of global governance in numerous areas, particularly in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

From a governance perspective, the most effective approach to providing global public goods involves building multi-stakeholder partnerships that bridge the gap between normative rules, stakeholder participation, and resource allocation. These voluntary associations tend to focus on resolving a set of shared problems.

Furthermore, consensus-building, inclusive participation, and knowledge sharing have emerged as preferred management techniques, specifically designed to foster experimentation, inclusivity, and stakeholder review. The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS,

²⁸ Thoyer, S. (2011). La montée en puissance de la notion de bien public mondial. *L'Encyclopédie du développement durable*, (135), 26.

²⁹ Thoyer sophie (2011)

Tuberculosis and Malaria are frequently cited as successful examples of multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Advantages of Global Public Goods

The concept of global public goods recognizes that, in a globalized world, humanity's challenges have fundamentally evolved, becoming increasingly interconnected. It highlights the shared nature of contemporary issues, such as water resources, climate stability, and the diverse functions of forests.

For global actors seeking legitimacy, this concept provides a rationale for their existence and expanding roles. International organizations, for example, position themselves as key organizers in the provision and protection of global public goods.

Limitations and political challenges

By focusing on technical solutions, the emphasis on global public goods risks depoliticizing global governance, potentially neglecting the substantial disagreements, value conflicts, and power dynamics inherent in any decision-making process, whether global or local, aimed at serving the common good.

For example, disagreements may arise as to whether a particular element constitutes a global public good or a "global public bad," thus raising the question of whether international law should promote or prohibit it. Consequently, the very act of identifying global public goods is not devoid of political connotations.