

Moving beyond zero-sum thinking

How a global public goods lens can support the world in addressing shared global challenges



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“The natural effect of commerce is to lead to peace,” wrote Montesquieu, a French thinker of the Enlightenment. He went on to explain why “Two nations that trade with each other become reciprocally dependent; if one has an interest in buying, the other has an interest in selling, and all unions are founded on mutual needs.”⁴³ This reasoning encapsulates the notion of what became known as ‘doux commerce’, or, later in political science and international relations, ‘interdependence theory’: closer economic interactions between countries prevent, or at least mitigate, the risks of those countries going to war.

The hypothesis that economic interdependence prevents war has been shown several times not to be valid, perhaps most tragically with World War I, which led to the collapse of what has been described as the first era of economic globalization.⁴⁴ But even if economic interaction cannot inoculate countries from going to war, the opposite situation – in which countries have no economic links – is certainly more damaging.

One way of shedding light on the question is to ask not just what economic interaction does to the relationship between states but also how it affects how people relate to each other. Several academic disciplines suggest that when people interact with each other in markets it tends to make them more prosocial and to have a more universalist disposition.⁴⁵ But maybe it is the other way around: people with such dispositions trade with each other more. A recent carefully conducted empirical study provides convincing evidence that the causality runs from market integration to universalist dispositions: there seems to be something to the ‘doux commerce’ idea after all.⁴⁶

But how far does the universalist disposition extend? To everyone in a community? In a country? In a region? To the entire world? It turns out that people hold different views on these questions: some are more parochial (meaning they care about people socially close to them but not those that are distant), while others have a more universalist disposition (they value the welfare of others even if they are far away).⁴⁷ How do we deal with this diversity when so many of the challenges that we confront today are global in nature and require collective action by all countries in the world?

One possibility, explored in the 2023/24 Human Development Report, is to identify challenges that

require global collective action using a lens of global public goods provision.⁴⁸ Global public goods are not zero-sum, meaning that they benefit all countries – it is hard to exclude any country from their benefits. Examples include the eradication of smallpox and reversing the thinning of the ozone layer. Countries will compete on many things, particularly those that are zero-sum, but a global public goods lens allows for the identification of those that are not. It asks what needs to be put in place for countries to come together to provide these global public goods.

Sometimes cooperation is required, but much can be achieved with simpler agreements to coordinate. Coordination involves agreeing on things such as which side of the road to drive on. It does not matter which side is chosen, but once it is chosen nobody has an incentive to deviate and start driving on the other side. Many international arrangements that successfully provide global public goods (like standards for air travel or international communications) have these characteristics. One challenge going forward is to find ways of reshaping how international challenges are seen, so that we move beyond viewing all global challenges as zero-sum⁴⁹ when many are actually about providing global public goods. And, once we get there, we can see if incentives can be put in place to turn cooperation challenges into coordination problems – which countries seem to find much easier to agree upon.⁵⁰

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