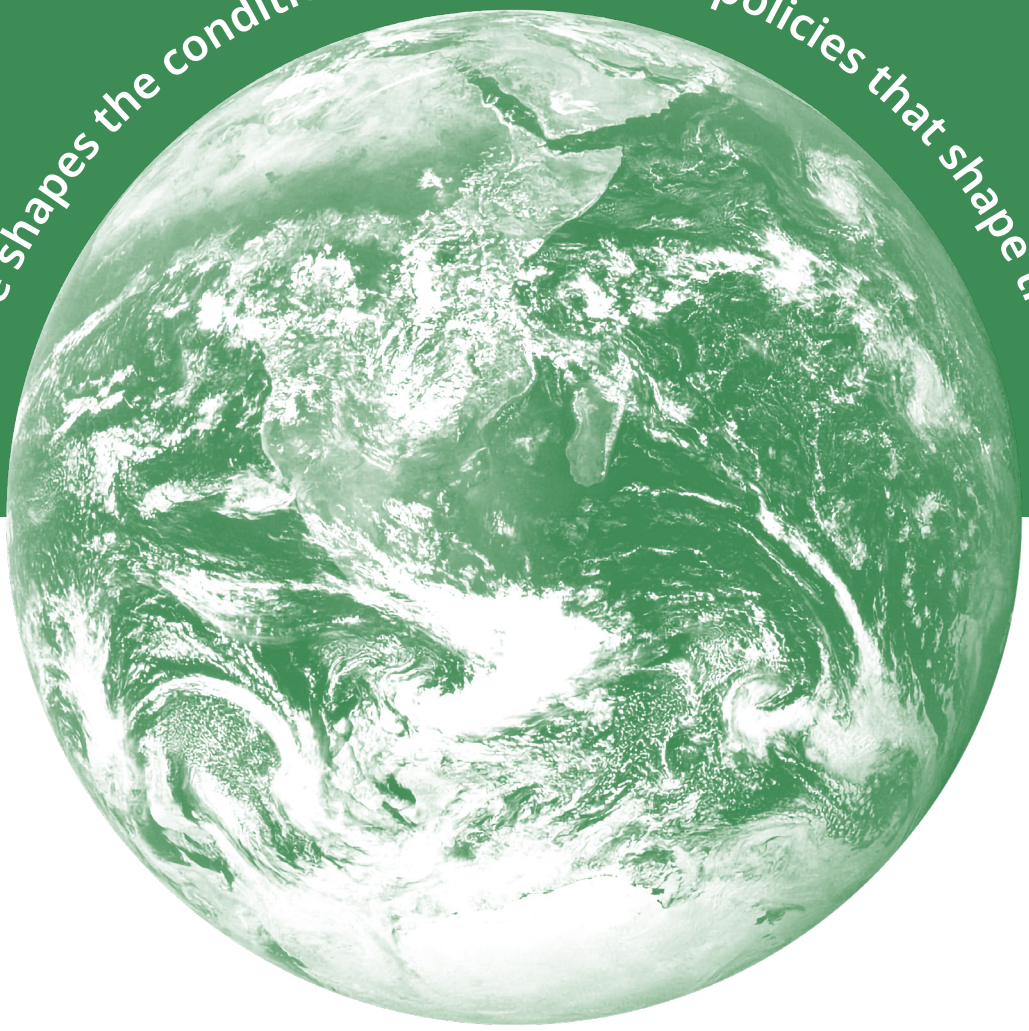
PUBLIC GOOD

Building a winning narrative to bring the world together

September 2025



Jonathan Glennie
& Ben Phillips

GLOBAL
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GLOBAL COOPERATION INSTITUTE

About Global Cooperation Institute

The Global Cooperation Institute is a thinktank based in Bogotá, Colombia, which works with partners to craft modern approaches to global cooperation in the 21st century, combining the best evidence with visionary theory to build compelling narratives and practical solutions. We help build groundbreaking new ideas, including Global Public Investment (GPI) and Circular Cooperation, based on mutual interest and ensuring human dignity and planetary sustainability. Our work is guided by three core values: the humility to learn, the courage to challenge, and the hope to inspire others.

Visit our webpage: **www.globalcooperation.institute**

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Abstract

This report sets out the case for a renewed narrative of the public good as the foundation for ambitious policy in an age of interdependence. It identifies three dominant but harmful stories – entropy, private takeover, and "just look after our own" – which narrow horizons, weaken public purpose, and fuel division. In response, it proposes a new narrative anchored in mutual interest, proven effectiveness, and political winnability. Drawing on global consultations, it shows how such a narrative can expand fiscal space, legitimise investment, and revitalise cooperation across borders, providing leaders and publics alike with the confidence to act boldly together.

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We are grateful for the spirit of collaboration that has carried this work forward. The breadth of engagement – from Latin America to Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America – demonstrates the global appetite for a renewed story of the public good. We look forward to continuing to build it together.

1. Executive summary

Advocates rightly devote great attention to policy. Policy assures that all families can eat, access healthcare, and live safely, and that nature can be safeguarded. Yet policies never land in a vacuum; they emerge in a world of stories about what is possible, desirable, and fair. As Antonio Gramsci observed, political struggle unfolds on the terrain of "common sense", hegemonic narratives that define the limits of the imaginable.

Narratives function as enabling constraints: they license some options while rendering others inconceivable. History shows how decisive this is.

- The ascendancy of narratives of collective provision from 1945 to the 1970s enabled massive expansions in literacy, reductions in child mortality, and the spread of public health systems. They enabled international aid and cooperation and the building of multilateral institutions including the UN and the development banks.

- Later, the dominance of narratives of market inevitability from the 1980s justified austerity, hollowing out social protection and constraining development strategies. In more recent times, the rise of exclusionary narratives has further undermined solidarity, nationally and globally.

Scholars like Thandika Mkandawire critiqued neoliberalism not only for dismantling developmental states across Africa, but notably for propagating a narrative of inevitability, in which austerity and privatization were packaged as realism rather than ideology.

To lose the battle of narrative is to lose, repeatedly, in the arena of policy. To win it is to enable a virtuous spiral in which strong narratives open space for strong policies, and effective policies reinforce belief in the story that made them possible.

This report brings together the thinking of experts across the world on what a powerful and effective narrative could look like, that we call **PUBLIC GOOD**.

A world of opportunity, blocked by narrative constraints

We live at a time of extraordinary opportunity. A shockingly good possible future lies within reach. History shows that when government policy is driven by public purpose, and kept on track by public pressure, it is extraordinarily successful. It shows too that the greatest advances are forged not in moments of calm but in times of crisis. Meanwhile, technological advances mean humanity now has greater productive capacity than ever before. If directed toward collective ends, these tools can enable universal provision of health, education, energy, and connectivity at unprecedented scale.

A growing group of leaders in academia, think tanks, and governments are identifying policies to strengthen the public realm, including advancing credible proposals for a renewed system of international public finance. And they are backed by the public. Opinion data across regions shows enduring support for public provision of essential services and for international cooperation to address shared challenges. Civil society movements are building popular

campaigns on tax justice, debt relief, and universal services, bringing questions of fairness and ownership into mainstream debate.

But despite such positive possibilities, harmful stories dominate, shaping the global conversation and constraining policy ambition. To change course, we need to recognize, disrupt and replace the narratives which now hold sway. In this paper we label them entropy, private takeover, and "just look after our own".

Entropy

The **entropy** narrative declares (sorrowfully) that public action needs to shrink, treating debt and fiscal scarcity as inevitable, almost natural, rather than political choices. It frames austerity as realism, dismissing ambition as naïve. The result is a "do less with less" mindset: declining public finance, deepening debt crises, hollowed services, and minimal humanitarian provision. By normalising retreat, it creates a spiral of despair. This narrative is evident in IMF austerity frameworks, aid cuts in Europe and subsidy removals in Latin America and Africa.

Private takeover

The **private takeover** narrative says markets drive progress and philanthropy fills gaps (something we term "fill-anthropy"), recasting the state as residual. It offers "progress without politics" but in practice deepens inequality, entrenches unaccountability, and prioritises profit over public need. Finance becomes skewed toward de-risking investors, services are commodified. From costly partnerships in South Africa to unequal private provision in India, to global vaccine inequities under COVAX, the result is the erosion of public purpose, democratic legitimacy and collective action itself.

"Just look after our own"

The **"just look after our own"** narrative demands that governments focus on excluding those defined as part of out-groups. Domestically, this fuels divisive politics against minorities; internationally, it drives retreat from cooperation and solidarity. Fiscal pressures, inequality, and disillusionment create fertile ground for this story, which in turn drives policies which exacerbate these very pressures. Instead of shared investment in national progress and global stability, resources are ringfenced, borders hardened. The result is shrinking horizons and weakened capacity to tackle common challenges – harming everyone, including those called "our own".

Building the PUBLIC GOOD narrative

Taken together, entropy, private takeover and "just look after our own" narratives create a triple bind. Left unchallenged, they risk normalising an age of permanent austerity and outsourcing, just as ecological and social interdependence make collective investment a necessity. Without a counter-narrative, policy ambition will collapse under the weight of these harmful stories.

The solution is the building of a renewed narrative of **PUBLIC GOOD** that recognizes the scale of shared challenges, affirms the indispensability of public investment, and restores confidence that cooperation can deliver. To succeed, it will need to resonate across political divides and national boundaries as a story that is both principled and practical, anchored in shared values and shared understandings across diverse contexts.

*The **PUBLIC GOOD** is in our interest*

In today's politics, narratives cannot rest solely on "doing the right thing"; they need to show how ethics and interests align. Cooperation is smart as well as right: investment in food security, climate resilience, and health systems prevents crises that spill across borders. As Mariana Mazzucato has argued, mission-oriented public investment is not only about correcting market failures but about shaping and creating markets to deliver collective goals. Similarly, José Antonio Ocampo emphasises that international cooperation and counter-cyclical public spending are economically indispensable. Isolationism is unjust *and* impractical; shared investment delivers dignity, safety, and prosperity for all.

*The **PUBLIC GOOD** makes a difference*

A corrosive myth today is that the public sector "doesn't deliver." This story undermines trust and fuels retreat from collective solutions. The truth is the opposite: public investment transforms lives. Brazil's Bolsa Família lifted millions from poverty; Rwanda's school system doubled enrolment; EU cohesion funds modernised infrastructure. These results are visible: clean water, reliable hospitals, functioning schools. Highlighting tangible outcomes, shows that public systems do work. When citizens see delivery, hope is restored and ambitious public investment becomes the political mainstream.

*The **PUBLIC GOOD** is winnable*

Despair drains political will. Progress comes when crises are reframed as opportunities. The African Continental Free Trade Area embodies integration despite turbulence. The creation of the Loss and Damage Fund at COP27, driven largely by Global South mobilisation, demonstrates that new compacts are possible even in fractured geopolitics. The adoption of a global Pandemic Treaty likewise signals recognition that preparedness for future health crises requires binding forms of cooperation. Hopeful narratives don't deny how hard things are, they emphasise agency and remind us that determined publics can rebuild from rubble. With hope, bold change feels – and becomes – achievable.

Policy consequences of the PUBLIC GOOD narrative

Narratives are not abstract. They determine what governments and publics believe is possible, and desirable. By shifting assumptions, the new narrative would enable new policy choices.

- On **tax**, it would normalise stronger international cooperation on curbing avoidance, taxing digital giants, and introducing wealth or windfall levies to fund public goods.
- On **debt**, it would reinforce calls for fair restructuring mechanisms and the expansion of concessional finance, reframing relief not as indulgence but as investment in stability.
- On **innovation**, it would back models where public financing steers research and development toward health, green technologies, and social priorities, ensuring public returns on public investment.
- On **regulation**, it would legitimise tighter oversight of finance, carbon, and digital markets to align private activity with collective goals.
- On **public services**, it would defend renewed investment in universal systems of health, education, and social protection as both economically prudent and morally indispensable.

In each area, the **PUBLIC GOOD** narrative supplies the political permission structure to turn technical policy solutions into actionable consensus. By legitimising investment over scarcity, a renewed **PUBLIC GOOD** narrative will help expand fiscal space and position public leadership to guide private actors. And it will strengthen multilateralism, as cooperation is framed as mutual insurance, not charity.

Reopening space for public purpose is not only opportune; it is existential. With determination, advocates can help societies choose a path that brings the world together.

A shockingly positive future is within reach.

We now need to enable it with a renewed narrative of the **PUBLIC GOOD**.

2. Introduction

Narrative shapes the conditions that shape the policies that shape the world

Debates about international cooperation often focus on institutions, reforms, or technical solutions. These matter, but they are never sufficient. Every institutional design, every fiscal rule, every reform agenda is carried into the world on the back of a story about what is possible, what is desirable, and what is fair. As Antonio Gramsci taught, political struggle takes place on the terrain of "common sense": not just brute force or legal obligation, but the shared assumptions that structure the imagination of whole societies.[1]

Narratives matter because they are the bridge between ideas and action. They shape how publics perceive risk, how leaders justify decisions, and how institutions define legitimacy. In economics, Amartya Sen highlighted that development is not simply about growth but about expanding freedoms – yet such freedoms only become politically viable when narrated in ways that capture collective aspirations.[2] Margaret Somers shows that people reason through stories rather than statistics[3]; George Lakoff argues that values and metaphors, not data alone, anchor public support.[4] In political science, Deborah Stone demonstrates that policy debates hinge on causal stories – who is responsible, what is scarce, and what is possible.[5] And Elinor Ostrom's seminal research reveals that cooperative institutions thrive when societies can imagine cooperation as feasible.[6] In short: policy without narrative is policy without oxygen.

Writers in the Global South have long emphasised this. In Latin America, Paulo Freire[7] and Enrique Dussel[8] insisted that liberation required not just redistribution of resources but also liberation of the imagination i.e. counter-stories that dismantled hierarchies of domination. In Africa, Thandika Mkandawire warned against the "monotasking" of states under structural adjustment, but also against the narrative that made such narrowing seem inevitable.[9] Achille Mbembe[10] and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o[11] remind us that colonial rule operated through the imposition of stories – of inferiority, dependency, and tutelage. Decolonisation was, therefore, as much an act of narrative rupture as of political independence.

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[1] Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
[2] Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
[3] Somers, Margaret R. (1994). "The narrative constitution of identity: A relational and network approach." *Theory and Society*, 23(5), 605–649.
[4] Lakoff, G. (2004) Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate. White River Junction: Chelsea Green.
[5] Stone, D. (2012) Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making. New York: W.W. Norton.
[6] Ostrom, E. (1990) Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[7] Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
[8] Dussel, E. (1996). The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.
[9] Mkandawire, T. (2001) 'Thinking about Developmental States in Africa', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 25(3), pp. 289–313.
[10] Mbembe, A. (2001) *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
[11] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature. London: James Currey.

History makes this point vivid. After 1945, a narrative of interdependence and shared security created political space for welfare states and for multilateralism. In Asia and Africa, independence movements coupled demands for sovereignty with stories of collective renewal – of nations capable of dignity and self-determination. In Latin America, the narrative of *desarrollo con justicia* (development with justice) underpinned ambitious social reforms, later eroded by the rise of market orthodoxy. From the 1980s, the neoliberal ascendancy was not just a technical project; it triumphed by convincing publics and elites alike that markets were efficient, states were bloated, and austerity was "realism." By the time structural adjustment swept across Africa and Latin America, the narrative of inevitability had done much of the work even before reforms were enacted.

What these episodes illustrate is that narrative sets the boundaries within which policy is imagined, debated, and ultimately enacted. When the story told is one of collective provision, societies invest in education, health, and public goods; literacy rises, mortality falls, and horizons expand. When the story told is one of fiscal scarcity and market inevitability, the result is retrenchment, hollowed-out services, and political resignation.

To put it differently: policy can only ever be as ambitious as the story that makes it legible and legitimate. Narratives are the scaffolding that either limits or extends what leaders dare to propose and what publics are willing to support. Without new narratives, even the best-designed reforms will struggle to survive. With them, ideas that once seemed unrealistic can rapidly become common sense.

The narrative challenge today

The world today is in narrative danger. In the Global North, stagnant wages, housing crises, and political polarisation feed hostility to international commitments, while "my-country first" rhetoric reframes solidarity as weakness. In the Global South, crushing debt service and fiscal constraints sap ambition and weaken trust in multilateral promises, even as demand for cooperative solutions grows. As ecological and financial shocks multiply, publics who feel insecure are more likely to turn inward than to support ambitious collective projects.

But across the world, alternative stories can be heard bubbling up – stories that highlight mutual interest, shared responsibility, and the indispensability of public investment. From youth climate coalitions that link local survival to global justice, to feminist networks that narrate equality as both moral and practical, to regional initiatives that explicitly embed reciprocity into cooperation design. Nourishing these stories, building a narrative that can unleash the wave of policies needed to bring the world together, is a key challenge of our time.

As multilateral endeavour struggles to keep its head above water, and as division is the dominant reality in national politics, the stakes could not be clearer. Without a renewed narrative, policy ambition will collapse under the weight of shrinking stories. With one, we can enable a virtuous spiral in which hope and solidarity reinforce effective public action. The contest now is not only over budgets and institutions, but over imagination: whether publics and leaders can be convinced that collective investment is possible and winnable.

Purpose of this report

Narrative is a precondition of policy, but today's dominant narratives risk locking us into permanent austerity, outsourcing, and retreat, precisely when interdependence makes collective investment indispensable. The purpose of this report is therefore threefold. First, to show why narrative is as important as policy in shaping the future of global cooperation. Second, to situate today's debate in its geopolitical context, at a moment when multilateralism is fraying and inward-looking politics are on the rise. Third, to propose elements of a new narrative that can unlock policy space, restore legitimacy, and mobilise broad coalitions.

3. A world of opportunity, blocked by narrative constraints

A shockingly good future is possible…

The old world is vanishing before our eyes, and the new one is being born. It is also a moment of extraordinary possibility. A shockingly good possible future is within reach, precisely because the future of global cooperation and financing is contested. As history shows, the greatest advances are forged in times of crisis. Post-1945 reconstruction and decolonisation created a wave of public institutions and international norms that supported decades of progress.

Today the landscape may feel strewn with rubble – at least figuratively, if not, as in 1945, literally. It is clear that international finance, cooperation, and norms have been weakened. The public realm itself – our shared sense of being "a public" – is under strain. Yet amid this rubble are unmistakable green shoots. The hold neoliberal discourse has had over decision makers for decades is demonstrably weakened. Public opinion data shows enduring support for cooperation: in a 2024 Pew survey, over 70% of people across 19 countries agreed that global challenges like pandemics and climate change require stronger international action.[12] Afrobarometer data consistently finds majorities in African countries supporting public investment in health and education, even under fiscal pressure.[13] In Europe, Eurobarometer polling shows that more than two-thirds of citizens want stronger EU action on climate and inequality.[14]

Civil society movements are building campaigns on tax justice, debt relief, and universal services, bringing questions of fairness and ownership into mainstream debate. In 2023, more than 130 countries at the UN backed negotiations on a global tax convention, a milestone unthinkable only a decade ago.[15] Policy experts in academia, think tanks, and governments are advancing credible proposals for a renewed system of international public finance. And governments across continents are experimenting – however unevenly – with policies that put public purpose back at the centre.

The evidence is clear that when government policy is driven by public purpose, and kept on track by public pressure, it is extraordinarily successful. Global literacy has risen from 56% in 1950 to over 86% today[16], and child mortality has fallen from 93 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to under 38 in 2023[17]. These transformations show that public investment works, especially when tied to social mobilisation and accountability. The potential of what humanity

[12] Pew Research Center (2024). Global Attitudes Survey: Support for International Cooperation. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.Link: https://www.pewresearch.org/topic/international-affairs/

[13] Afrobarometer (2023). Round 9 Survey Data. Accra: Afrobarometer.Link: https://www.afrobarometer.org/feature/annual-report-2023/

[14] European Commission (2023). Eurobarometer 99.1: Public Opinion in the European Union. Brussels: EC. Link: https://www.pubaffairsbruxelles.eu/eu-institution-news/eurobarometer-majority-of-europeans-consider-that-the-green-transition-should-go-faster/

[15] United Nations General Assembly (2023). Resolution 78/230: Promotion of Inclusive and Effective International Tax Cooperation. New York: UN. Link: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4032838?v=%5B%22%5B%27pdf%27%5D%22%5D

[16] UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2023). Global Education Monitoring Report. Paris: UNESCO. Link: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000385723

[17] United Nations Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (IGME) (2023). Levels and Trends in Child Mortality Report. New York: UNICEF/WHO/World Bank/UN DESA. Link: https://www.childhealthtaskforce.org/resources/report/2024/united-nations-inter-agency-group-child-mortality-estimation-un-igme-report

can achieve in the decades to come is even greater. Technological advance has raised global GDP per capita nearly fourfold since 1960, and if directed toward collective ends, these tools can enable universal provision of health, education, energy, and connectivity at unprecedented scale.[18]

Those of us advocating for public purpose can win with the cards we have been dealt. The sense of possibility, especially in Global South spaces – whether governmental, academic, or civil – is palpable (in contrast to the foreboding tone often found in the worried North). But there is no certainty of success. Realising this better future depends on whether we can win the battle of narrative, embed mutuality in institutions, and mobilise the political will to act.

… but right now we are heading in the wrong direction

While opportunity is everywhere, the current trajectory is a disturbing one: deepening inequality, accelerating climate breakdown, debt distress, and the erosion of trust in institutions. The UN reports that global inequality between and within countries is once again widening after decades of partial convergence, while Oxfam estimates that the world's richest 1% captured nearly two-thirds of new wealth created since 2020.[19] Meanwhile, climate change is accelerating faster than expected, with the IPCC warning that the world is likely to breach 1.5°C within the next decade.[20] This is a moment of historic peril.

This is precisely the moment when international public finance is most needed. Climate and development goals require concessional public finance of at least US$500 billion annually by 2030 – double or triple current levels.[21] As Mariana Mazzucato[22], Jonathan Glennie[23] and others argue, public finance is not merely "gap-filling." It is catalytic and irreplaceable, directing private and philanthropic flows, steering innovation, and sustaining long-term missions that markets alone cannot deliver. For the scale of today's challenges, nothing less than a massive increase in international public finance will do. But international public finance has been hit by deep cuts to aid budgets, resources repurposed for narrow national interests, and a wholesale reorientation from public provision to private finance.

The politics of international financing have shifted sharply, marking a decisive break with the decades that followed 1945. Official Development Assistance (ODA) – long the dominant frame of global finance appears to have lost political and public legitimacy, and the "country A giving to country B" narrative on which it rested no longer commands support. Unresolved debt crises, stalled tax cooperation, and renewed austerity are tightening the fiscal chokehold, leaving many low- and middle-income countries spending more on debt service than on health or education.[24]

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[18] World Bank (2023). World Development Indicators. Washington, DC: World Bank. Link: https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators

[19] Oxfam International (2023). Survival of the Richest: How We Must Tax the Super-Rich Now to Fight Inequality. Available at: https://oxfam.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023-survival-of-the-richest-report.pdf

[20] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2023). AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023. Available at: https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle/

[21] Zedillo, E., Clarke, D., & Gallagher, K. (2022). The Global Public Finance Challenge. United Nations High-Level Expert Group on Financing for Development. Available at: https://ris.org.in/newsletter/RIS%20Latest%20Publications/2023/a-2.pdf

[22] Mazzucato, M. (2021). Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism. London: Allen Lane.

[23] Glennie, J. (2021). *The Future of Aid: Global Public Investment* (1st ed.). Routledge.

[24] World Bank / International Monetary Fund (2024). Global Sovereign Debt Roundtable Outcomes Report. Available at: https://www.imf.org/

This is not just about one leader or country. The return of President Trump to office in the USA has intensified these dynamics, but they were already underway, reinforced by the war in Ukraine and by broader patterns of geopolitical retrenchment. The UK's 2025 decision to slash its aid budget while boosting military spending was emblematic. "We are a government of pragmatists not ideologues," said Foreign Secretary David Lammy, "and we have had to balance the compassion of our internationalism with the necessity of our national security."[25] Internationalism, framed primarily through the language of compassion, has been politically boxed in – too easily cast as soft, secondary, and detached from hard-headed interests like prosperity and security. At the same time, the global context has outpaced old models that international cooperation once rested on. Emerging powers and middle-income countries no longer fit the 20th-century "recipient" image. Yet new narrative frames of cooperation have not kept pace.

Despite the possibility of a positive future, harmful stories are currently dominating. These fatalistic frames shape the global conversation and constrain policy ambition, weakening public purpose and shrinking the space for collective action. Part of their power lies in invisibility: they have become like the air we breathe or the water fish swim in. For many, they have come to feel like common sense.

To change course, we need to recognise and name the three narratives which now hold sway, so that they can be disrupted and displaced. In this paper we label them entropy, private takeover and "just look after our own".

Entropy

If the entropy narrative had a mantra, it would be: "Be grateful for small mercies. It could be worse." Its logic is that public action is destined to shrink and keep shrinking. In this telling, fiscal scarcity is not a political choice but a natural law. Debt burdens, weak tax bases, and collapsing aid flows are treated as immutable facts, not outcomes of policy or power. The result is the "do less with less" mindset.

The entropy narrative presents itself as realism. When challenged, its defenders insist they are not advancing an ideology at all, merely facing facts: "With low revenues and rising debt, with ODA collapsing, there is simply no money. We must cut our cloth accordingly." The effect is to write off ambition in domestic policy and international cooperation, relegating governments to damage control and citizens to resignation. Hope itself is treated as foolish or suspect.

The policy consequences are bleak. It would mean international public finance continuing to decline and becoming ever more transactional: debt crises deepening; tax avoidance and tax competition worsening; austerity intensifying, hollowing out public services until, in some places, they cease to function. What would remain would be a skeletal humanitarian system, stretched to provide only low-quality, minimal provision. Even large-scale crises in health or security would not prompt a reset, but rather reinforce the sense that decline is inevitable. The narrative would appear to prove itself right, again and again, in a spiral of despair.

[25] David Lammy, *Foreign Secretary article on defence spending*, UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 25 February 2025. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-article-on-defence-spending-february-2025

Examples of the harm of entropy narratives abound. The International Monetary Fund's debt sustainability analyses often embed austerity as the only "realistic" path. In Latin America, echoes of structural adjustment remain sharp: Ecuador's 2019 protests were triggered by the removal of fuel subsidies under IMF conditionality, framed as fiscal necessity.[26] In Africa, debt restructuring terms in Ghana and Zambia have restricted fiscal space so severely that long-term investment becomes unthinkable.[27] Across Europe, aid cuts have been justified as "necessary", normalising retreat. Across contexts, the same pattern holds: expectations are lowered, provision is cut, despair grows… and entropy tightens its grip.

Private takeover

The private takeover narrative paints a picture in which private profits drive progress, and private philanthropy cleans up any mess. In this frame, the state is recast as residual: its job is to create space for markets and, where gaps appear, to rely on philanthropy or corporate social responsibility to patch them. Public purpose is hollowed out, replaced by the assumption that private actors are inherently more dynamic, innovative, and efficient.

This narrative has gained traction precisely because it promises something more upbeat than entropy: progress without politics. It tells governments and citizens that they can step back, because business and billionaires will step forward. But the results are deeply skewed. In practice, private takeover tends to deepen inequality, entrench unaccountability, and redirect resources toward profit-maximising ventures rather than public needs.

The consequences for policy are profound. International finance becomes centred on "blended" instruments designed to de-risk private investors, often leaving the public sector with losses when projects fail. Public services, from education to health, are commodified, with access determined by purchasing power. Philanthropy fills some gaps but as philanthropic organisations have themselves pointed out cannot match the scale or substitute institutionally, and dependence on it undermines democratic accountability. At the Global Cooperation Institute, we call this "fill-anthropy" i.e. filling the gaps left behind by the retreat of the public realm. The private sector supplants, rather than complements, what is public responsibility, but cannot successfully replace it.

Evidence is clear across contexts. In South Africa, public–private partnerships in basic services have too often led to higher costs and limited access for low-income households.[28] In India, large-scale reliance on private provision in health and education has deepened inequalities in access and outcomes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the COVAX initiative became heavily dependent on private pharmaceutical decision-making and a model rooted in appeals to charity, leaving poorer countries at the back of the queue for vaccines, prolonging the global emergency.[29]

[26] Structural adjustment policies and austerity as IMF loan conditionality in crisis countries: Bretton Woods Project (2023). Available at: https://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/2019/07/structural-adjustment-is-dead-long-live-structural-adjustment/
[27] Jubilee Debt Campaign (2024). The Impact of Debt Restructuring on Fiscal Space in Ghana and Zambia. Available at: https://jubileedebt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Debt-restructuring-impact-Ghana-Zambia.pdf
[28] South African Institute of Race Relations. PPPs in Essential Services Report. https://irr.org.za/reports-publications
[29] Usher, Ann Danaiya, *"A beautiful idea: how COVAX has fallen short," The Lancet* 397, no. 10292 (19 June 2021).Full text available at: https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)01367-2/fulltext

The private takeover narrative presents itself as modernisation, but its deeper effect is erosion: of the public realm, of democratic legitimacy, and of the very idea that societies can act collectively in their own interests.

"Just look after our own"

The "just look after our own" narrative presents itself as common sense: governments should focus on their own citizens, especially in times of scarcity. It gains traction by appealing to real anxieties – economic stagnation, insecurity, and distrust of institutions – but it channels these fears into divisive and short-sighted politics. Domestically, this manifests in hostility toward minorities, migrants, and those deemed outsiders. Internationally, it justifies withdrawal from multilateral commitments, retreat from development cooperation, and the hardening of borders.

The conditions for this narrative are observable. Rising inequality, fragile welfare systems, and stagnant real wages are breeding resentment. Citizens struggling to meet daily needs are being told that scarce resources are being siphoned away to undeserving "others," whether immigrant communities at home or poorer nations abroad. Politicians exploit insecurities, offering protectionist promises that rarely solve underlying problems but generate powerful, exclusionary identities.

This inward turn undermines both public purpose and international solidarity. By prioritising narrow constituencies, governments shrink their capacity to invest in long-term resilience – whether climate adaptation, pandemic preparedness, or financial stability – that necessarily depend on cross-border cooperation. What is framed as a defence of "our own" ultimately leaves everyone more vulnerable. Climate disasters, viral outbreaks, and economic shocks do not respect borders. Retreat from solidarity accelerates crises, and crises in turn feed the illusion that only withdrawal can preserve security.

The "just look after our own" narrative appeals not only by driving fear, fatigue, and pessimism, but by claiming ownership of positive values like love of family and national pride. Yet its promise is hollow. By ringfencing resources and dismantling cooperation, it erodes the very capacities societies need to thrive. It shrinks political imagination to the size of national borders and pits communities against one another, leaving all less secure.

In a densely interdependent world, looking after "our own" cannot be achieved by exclusion. It requires cooperation, reciprocity, and investment in shared systems that safeguard dignity and stability for all.

History shows the devastating results of nationalisms that have promised to protect struggling citizens by scapegoating minorities and dismantling internationalism, but it is a narrative needs to be challenged in every generation.

4. Building the PUBLIC GOOD narrative

Taken together, the narratives of entropy, private takeover, and "just look after our own" create a triple bind. They tell us that ambition is futile, that responsibility lies with private actors, and that solidarity should stop at the border. The result is a politics of retreat: horizons narrowed through fatalism, the public realm hollowed out by outsourcing, and solidarity eroded by fear of the "other." Left unchallenged, these stories threaten to normalise an age of permanent austerity and fragmentation precisely when ecological and social interdependence demand bold collective investment. Without a winning counter-narrative, even the best technical proposals will falter, collapsing under the weight of shrinking frames.

The urgency is clear for a renewed narrative that recognises the scale of shared challenges, affirms the indispensability of public investment, and restores confidence that cooperation can deliver. It needs to re-legitimise public purpose, demonstrate the practicality of cooperation, and ground its authority in fairness and mutual interest. It has to be principled and pragmatic, to connect with diverse audiences, provide legitimacy for ambitious policies, and give leaders the political space to act. Crucially, it needs to be a narrative that resonates emotionally as well as technically, inspiring as well as guiding.

Intellectual traditions across the globe show what is possible. Amartya Sen reframed development as the expansion of freedoms rather than the passive receipt of aid. Wangari Maathai narrated ecological protection as women's empowerment, community solidarity, and national renewal all at once.[30] Mariana Mazzucato has re-centred the state as a mission-oriented investor shaping markets rather than merely correcting failures.[31] José Antonio Ocampo has called for reframing cooperation around justice and mutual interest instead of discretionary charity.[32] Latin America's *buen vivir* traditions, Africa's Ubuntu philosophy, and Asia's experiments with developmental states each testify to the power of narratives that uplift public purpose and collective agency. The common lesson is clear: narratives that naturalise austerity and outsourcing contract the policy space, while narratives that affirm dignity and shared responsibility expand it.

By making visible the possibility of cooperation and collective resilience, a renewed narrative can displace fatalism and substitution and re-establish the conditions under which ambitious policies become both thinkable and winnable. We call this narrative **PUBLIC GOOD**. It includes three core elements: first, showing that cooperation is in everyone's interest; second, demonstrating that public investment delivers real results; and third, restoring hope that transformative change is both can be won.

The PUBLIC GOOD is in our interest

In today's political climate, narratives that rest solely on morality or compassion struggle to hold up under pressure. Appeals to "do the right thing" can inspire, but if not combined with appeals to people's interests they are too easily caricatured as naïve or as burdensome distractions from domestic concerns. To be persuasive, a renewed public good narrative needs

[30] Maathai, W. (2004) The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience. New York: Lantern Books.
[31] Mazzucato, M. (2021). Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism. London: Allen Lane.
[32] Ocampo, J.A. (2022) *Resetting the International Monetary (Non)System*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

to show how ethics and interests align – why cooperation is not only the moral choice but the smart, strategic, and self-interested one. In a world of profound interdependence, solidarity is the condition of collective survival and prosperity.

At its core, the argument is straightforward: investments in food security, climate resilience, and health systems anywhere in the world generate stability and wellbeing everywhere. The COVID-19 pandemic offered a devastating reminder that the absence of resilient public health systems in one region can cascade globally in weeks. Similarly, climate breakdown in the Sahel contributes to food price shocks in Europe, migration pressures across the Mediterranean, and security concerns worldwide. Public investment is not merely about correcting market failures; it is about shaping and creating markets around collective goals such as pandemic preparedness, climate safety, or stability. In this sense, international public finance is a form of insurance: preventive investment reduces the probability of crises.

Security redefined

Opponents of internationalism often dominate conversations about safety by equating security with militarisation or border fortification. But the gravest risks of our time – climate breakdown, pandemics, financial contagion – are borderless. No wall, no army, no national budget can insulate a country from these threats. A renewed public good narrative must therefore reclaim the terrain of security, making clear that global cooperation is the smartest and most cost-effective form of protection.

The OECD has shown that countries with higher levels of development cooperation had greater resilience to conflict and fragility, and that preventive investments were more effective – and more legitimate – than reactive militarised responses.[33] Civil society groups, too, have consistently emphasised that disaster preparedness and risk reduction save multiples of what reactive aid or military interventions cost. Narrating international cooperation as the "first line of defence" anchors solidarity in everyday concerns about safety, security, and prosperity.

Examples abound. Investments in global health, such as the eradication of smallpox, have delivered returns measured in trillions of dollars of avoided costs. Regional mechanisms like the African Risk Capacity have demonstrated that pooled insurance against climate shocks reduces fiscal strain and provides rapid assistance to communities at risk. Narratives that connect these tangible benefits to everyday concerns – food prices, public health, job security – can disarm populist claims that cooperation is indulgent or irrelevant.

Strategic solidarity, not charity

History offers valuable lessons in how framing cooperation as mutual interest can unlock transformative change. The founders of the United Nations, scarred by global war, built the organisation not only on lofty ideals but on the recognition that lasting security depended on shared institutions. Henry Morgenthau Jr., at Bretton Woods in 1944, argued that each nation's peace and prosperity were inseparable from those of other nations. Two decades later, Lester Pearson's *Partners in Development* report made its case for investment in development based on reciprocal partnership, not charity.[34]

[33] OECD (2023), *Development Co-operation Report 2023: Debating the Aid System*, OECD Publishing, Paris. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/f6edc3c2-en

[34] Pearson, L.B. (1969) Partners in development: Report of the Commission on International Development. New York: Praeger.

Major initiatives in the Global South have drawn strength from narratives of reciprocity. Latin America's regional institutions, such as the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF), emphasise mutual benefit and solidarity as guiding principles. Africa's *Agenda 2063* embeds reciprocity and "African solutions to African problems" into its design, stressing that regional progress requires shared investment and shared responsibility.[35] These examples remind us that cooperation gains legitimacy and durability when it is framed as mutual interest rather than a concession or gift.

Today, international cooperation is being undermined because debate is dominated by "my-country first" politics that casts cooperation as expendable and redirects funds to narrow domestic deals. The result is short-termism, fragmentation, and a race to the bottom in public ambition. Narratives based solely on compassion cannot withstand this pressure; neither can attempts to ride the tiger of transactional nationalism, in which international cooperation is justified only insofar as it serves narrow national advantage. What is needed is strategic solidarity: a recognition that isolationism is not only unjust but impractical, and that shared investment delivers dignity, safety, and prosperity for all.

Public opinion data support this approach. Surveys consistently find that when international action is framed as "win–win," support rises across the political spectrum. A 2023 Black Sands analysis of G7 populations showed that "soft right" and centrist voters, often sceptical of moralistic appeals, responded positively when cooperation was described as a way to manage risks like inflation, pandemics, or migration.[36]

The point is not to drop moral claims. They mobilise faith communities and grassroots networks, and they confer legitimacy on international cooperation. The point is to reinforce the power of the moral case with a complementary argument: a more equal and cooperative world is safer and more prosperous.

Doing our bit

Another critical component of the mutual interest frame is fairness in contributions. Publics are often wary of rhetoric about "leadership," which can sound like being asked to shoulder an unfair burden. Opponents exploit this by claiming their country is being taken advantage of. Narratives that emphasise fair shares and partnership resonate far more.

A survey in Canada showed two-thirds of respondents preferred "contributing but not leading," while only one-quarter wanted Canada to "lead."[37] This reflects a broader truth: cooperation succeeds when everyone plays their part, not when one actor is cast as saviour. Complementarity, not paternalism, is the engine of effective cooperation. Narratives gain more backing when they highlight the roles of all actors, from governments to civil society to local communities, making visible the fact that international cooperation is already a collective endeavour.

[35] African Union (2015) *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want — Framework Document*. Addis Ababa: African Union Commission.
[36] Money Talks (2023), *Money Talks 2023 Dashboard*. Coordinated by Black Sands Communications. Available at: https://moneytalksresearch.org/
[37] Global Affairs Canada & EKOS Research Associates Inc. (2023). *Canadian Views on International Assistance: Tracking Study*. 3,059 Canadian adults surveyed online, January 16–February 5, 2023. Available at: https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2023/amc-gac/FR5-185-2023-1-eng.pdf

Publics opinion data shows broad support for common but differentiated responsibilities. 65% of G7 respondents in 2023 agreed that richer countries should shoulder more of the climate burden.[38] Yet "payback" or "reparations" language fared worse, suggesting that appeals to historical justice are most effective when linked to a vision of shared progress. Fairness is more successfully narrated as shared responsibility, not as unilateral obligation.

The task, then, is to build a narrative that embeds cooperation within the logic of interdependence. This means showing publics that investments abroad are not losses but gains: that resilience elsewhere means safety at home, that prosperity shared is prosperity sustained. International public finance not is not discretionary charity but the smartest, safest, shared investment to make in our shared future. It is not a burden; it is a dividend.

The PUBLIC GOOD makes a difference

One of the most corrosive myths in politics today is the belief that the public sector "does not deliver." This narrative has become a powerful tool for those who seek to delegitimise collective action and shrink the role of government. It frames public spending as wasteful, inefficient, or corrupt, while holding up private actors as inherently more dynamic and effective. The result is a steady erosion of trust in public purpose, which fuels retreat from ambitious investment and cooperation.

But the truth is the opposite: well designed and accountable public investment transforms lives. Clean water, reliable hospitals, functioning schools, resilient infrastructure – these are not abstract ideals, they are the tangible outcomes of public systems at work. When citizens see delivery, hope is restored, and ambitious public investment becomes politically mainstream. To counter the myth of non-delivery, we need to foreground stories of effectiveness, backed by independent evidence, and make visible the transformative power of the public realm.

Demonstrating effectiveness

By pooling resources and applying them to social priorities, public systems can achieve what neither markets nor philanthropy can – scale, universality, and legitimacy. Describing – and showing – their impact can inspire publics to back ambitious projects.

Credibility rests on ensuring that stories of delivery are backed by evidence. For example, rigorous impact evaluations of cash transfer programmes in Latin America and Africa have repeatedly confirmed that they improve health, education, and nutrition outcomes without fostering dependency.[39] When citizens know that investment is both monitored and effective, scepticism fades and legitimacy grows.

Ecological and social sustainability

Sustainability is not an add-on or a luxury. It is a foundation. Economic growth detached from ecological limits is implausible. As Johannes Rockström and others have shown, climate

[38] Money Talks (2023), *Money Talks 2023 Dashboard*. Coordinated by Black Sands Communications. Available at: https://moneytalksresearch.org/

[39] Bastagli, Francesca; Hagen-Zanker, Jessica; Harman, Luke; Barca, Valentina; Sturge, Georgina; Schmidt, Tanja (2016). Cash transfers: what does the evidence say? A rigorous review of programme impact and of the role of design and implementation features. London: Overseas Development Institute. Available at: https://www.odi.org/publications/10561-cash-transfers-what-does-evidence-say-rigorous-review-programme-impact-and-role-design

breakdown, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion all demonstrate that human flourishing depends on respecting planetary boundaries.[40]

Long-term prosperity is only possible if societies embed ecological resilience and social equity at the centre of their development models. Public investment, when oriented to these goals, not only makes a difference in the short term – it secures a viable future for coming generations.

The politics of delivery

Rebuilding legitimacy requires acknowledging why the "doesn't deliver" narrative has gained traction. In too many contexts, public institutions have been weakened by decades of underinvestment, austerity, and externally imposed conditionalities. Structural adjustment programmes in Africa and Latin America eroded state capacity, leaving governments less able to provide basic services and fuelling a vicious cycle of distrust. Corruption scandals and bureaucratic inefficiencies have also left publics sceptical of whether their taxes are being used well.

Acknowledging these challenges is core to effectively making the case that the answer is not to end public provision, but to mend it. Public systems work when they are accountable, adequately resourced, and designed for inclusion. Narratives need to highlight not only the successes but also the reforms that make delivery possible: transparent budgeting, citizen monitoring, participatory planning, and regional cooperation. By combining candour about challenges with evidence of progress, advocates can rebuild confidence that public institutions can deliver better and more fairly than any alternative.

The PUBLIC GOOD is winnable

Perhaps the most insidious effect of today's dominant narratives – entropy, private takeover, and "just look after our own" – is that they drain belief. If nothing can be done, or if only markets can deliver, or if solidarity stops at the border, then the political energy to attempt ambitious change evaporates. Despair is itself a political force: it narrows horizons, shrinks imagination, and undermines courage.

Today's dominant political discourse frames the crises of our era as justification for austerity, technocratic minimalism, or isolationist nationalism. But crises can also be narrated as openings: a chance to rebuild fiscal compacts, redesign institutions, and anchor cooperation in interdependence.

History shows how the hope that comes from seeing opportunity amidst crisis enables transformative change. After World War II, amid the literal rubble of conflict, governments built welfare states, the United Nations, and multilateral finance institutions. So too decolonisation across Africa and Asia was narrated as a moment for national and international renewal, enabling countries to pursue transformational public policies that despair would have foreclosed.

[40] Rockström, J. et al. (2009). *A safe operating space for humanity*. Nature, 461, 472-475. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1038/461472a

East Asia's developmental states, for instance, emerged from conditions of vulnerability but turned narratives of threat into ones of agency and rapid progress. Africa and Latin America's debt crises of the 1980s catalysed popular movements for debt relief and fairer global finance, which decades later contributed to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative and to the Jubilee movement likewise anchored in hope. Latin America's Pink Tide governments insisted that it was possible to expand universal programmes that recognised citizens as rights-holders rather than supplicants. So too, the creation of the African Continental Free Trade Area has been narrated, quite rightly, as a leap forward for integration and opportunity, even amidst global turbulence and fragmentation.

Hope as political energy

A hopeful narrative bridges from hardship to agency, without denying pain or difficulty. It reminds people that determined societies can rebuild from rubble and create something better. Without hope, entropy wins; with hope, publics and leaders can find the courage to attempt transformative change. Hope is not naïve optimism – it is political energy. As Rebecca Solnit has argued, hope is a discipline: it sustains movements and legitimises risk-taking in moments when despair would otherwise dominate.[41]

We have seen this dynamic repeatedly. The global HIV/AIDS response was transformed not by despair but by narratives of solidarity, which mobilised unprecedented resources. Climate movements today increasingly narrate action not only as sacrifice but as opportunity for jobs, justice, and renewal. Amartya Sen's conception of "development as freedom" reminds us that human progress is about not about managing weaknesses, but expanding substantive choices. Discourses that affirm dignity, not desperation, enable publics to see themselves as co-authors of a fairer international order rather than objects of policy. [42]

The stakes are high. Without hopeful narratives, publics turn inward, leaders shy away from ambition, and politics collapses into a cycle of despair and minimalism. With them, transformative shifts become possible.

[41] Solnit, R. (2004) Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities. Edinburgh: Canongate.

[42] Glennie, Jonathan. "From development to dignity: a profound challenge for international cooperation." *openDemocracy*, 3 November 2019. Available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/development-dignity-profound-challenge-international-cooperation/

5. Policy consequences of the **PUBLIC** GOOD narrative

Woven into a coherent narrative, the elements set out above can expand the political space for ambitious policy. They can provide leaders with legitimacy to act boldly, show publics that cooperation serves their interests, and counteract fatalistic or market-fundamentalist frames.

The difference between a politics of scarcity and a politics of investment is not just semantic; it determines whether societies will meet the challenges of climate change, inequality, and insecurity.

If a renewed public good narrative takes hold, several concrete consequences can follow. At national and international levels alike, it would reopen space for ambition, strengthens multilateralism, and restores dignity to cooperation. By displacing entropy, private takeover, and "just look after our own," it would replace fatalism with possibility and make bold collective action thinkable again.

On tax: legitimacy for fair contribution

A renewed public good narrative can fundamentally reframe how societies view taxation. At both national and multilateral levels, current debates are stunted by entrenched scarcity frames. Leaders warn that raising taxes will drive away capital or undermine competitiveness, presenting fiscal weakness as inevitable rather than the outcome of political choice. This fatalism reinforces the entropy story: that budgets must remain constrained, and that the public sector can only ever do less with less. Taxation is seen as grudging obligation, a legacy of a broken system.

By contrast, a public good narrative situates taxation as the foundation of resilience and collective investment. It reminds publics that every functioning hospital, school, or renewable energy project is the product of shared contributions, and that ambitious plans for the future are achievable, together. In this view, taxation is not a punishment but a precondition of prosperity, security, and dignity. The principle is simple: to sustain the systems on which all depend, everyone should contribute their fair share.

At the international level, this perspective legitimises cooperation that is otherwise difficult to advance. Efforts to secure global minimum corporate tax rates, curb base erosion and profit shifting, or tax digital giants are often attacked as infringements on the private sector or threats to sovereignty. A public good frame, however, positions such reforms not as external impositions but as collective insurance against inequality, instability, and fiscal collapse. It makes visible the benefits to ordinary citizens: when together we ensure that multinational companies or billionaires pay fair taxes, resources become available for universal healthcare, climate adaptation, and pandemic preparedness.

The evidence shows that ambitious fiscal measures become politically feasible when framed around shared security. Europe's Recovery and Resilience Facility after COVID-19 succeeded not because publics suddenly became more pro-debt, but because borrowing was narrated as

mutual protection: each member state's recovery was bound up with that of the others.[43] A similar logic can apply globally. Proposals for wealth taxes, windfall levies on excess corporate profits, or dedicated global taxes for climate and health are most persuasive when narrated as fair shares for common survival, not as transfers from "donors" to "recipients."

In a century defined by interdependence, a public good narrative can help make ambitious global tax pacts not only possible but politically winnable.

On debt: relief as investment, not indulgence

Debt politics are profoundly narrative-driven. The entropy frame presents debt distress as inevitable, demanding austerity as "realism." This legitimises cycles of painful adjustment, as seen in Ghana's 2023 domestic debt exchange, where fiscal space for social investment evaporated and the prospects for long-term development were sacrificed in the name of short-term "discipline." Similar patterns recur across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where restructuring packages often insist on fiscal retrenchment first and development second.

The "just look after our own" frame has cast debt as a moral failing by indebted countries, with consequences they should be left to endure. As David Graeber reminded us, "the history of debt is also the history of morality. To make a debt is to create a moral obligation; to cancel one is to deny it".[44] Under prevailing creditor-driven frames, restructuring is portrayed as indulgence or irresponsibility. A public good narrative turns this logic around: it is irresponsible to drive social collapse, and it is in everyone's interest to enable investment in stability and resilience.

This was the lesson of Latin America's reframing in the 1980s, when governments successfully shifted the discourse from blame to fairness and shared responsibility, opening the door to concessions that created space for renewed developmental spending. Today, African leaders are making a similar case: calling for a global sovereign debt mechanism that recognises the mutual risks of instability, capital flight, and political breakdown.

Multilateral mechanisms are crucial. The G20's Common Framework has faltered precisely because it is technocratic and creditor-driven, focused on risk management for lenders rather than resilience for societies. A public good approach would instead foreground stability and shared benefit, recognising that debt relief strengthens the capacity of states to invest in the very public goods—climate resilience, social protection, and health systems—that underpin global security.

There are already models that embody this. Latin America's CAF (Development Bank of Latin America) expanded in the 2010s by framing its lending as mutual insurance, a way for member countries to pool risks and resources rather than depend on external charity. Similarly, Africa's African Risk Capacity Group has shown how shared pools for climate shocks gain legitimacy when cast as self-protection and security, not aid. These examples demonstrate that debt and risk-sharing can be narrated as reciprocal solidarity, not dependency.

[43] Pekanov, A. (2025) Lessons Learned from the Recovery and Resilience Facility for a Future European Fiscal Capacity. Brussels: FEPS, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung & WIFO.
[44] Graeber, D. (2011) *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House.

A public good narrative could embolden replenishments of the IMF's Poverty Reduction and Growth Trust, expand support for climate-related debt swaps, or legitimise concessional financing at scale. By showing how restructuring protects all societies from systemic contagion—financial, social, and ecological—it reframes debt relief as a necessary investment in global stability.

On innovation: steering markets toward shared goals

The private takeover narrative insists that innovation comes from markets, with the state as residual fixer. The entropy narrative says that this state role can only diminish. The public good narrative flips this, showing that public leadership is indispensable for directing innovation to collective ends.

Costa Rica, once grappling with rapid deforestation, has reversed the trend, rebuilding its forests while expanding eco-tourism and renewable energy. Today, more than 98% of its electricity comes from renewable sources, demonstrating that ecological protection can go hand in hand with economic prosperity.[45]

In the Global North, publicly funded research has repeatedly created the foundations for transformative industries, from the internet to mRNA vaccines. Germany's Energiewende, however contested, has mobilised entire industries and societies around the ambition of a low-carbon transition.[46] The problem was narrative: too often, public leadership was hidden, allowing private actors to capture the credit and returns.

The "just look after our own" narrative constrains investment in innovation by defining countries as competitors. The public good narrative highlights interdependence and mutual interest, enabling collaboration. India's leadership in the International Solar Alliance illustrates how South–South cooperation can mobilise finance and technology around sustainability while also advancing national development goals.[47] Africa's Great Green Wall initiative, spanning more than 20 countries, combines ecological restoration with job creation and food security, giving communities tangible stakes in environmental renewal.[48] At the multilateral level, this lesson is critical. The WHO's R&D Blueprint and the nascent Pandemic Treaty recognise that innovation for health cannot be left to private pharmaceutical monopolies. The public good narrative legitimises pooled financing for vaccines, open-access science, and conditionalities which ensure fair pricing. Similarly, global climate funds can be narrated not as discretionary aid "from us, to them" but as mission-oriented pooled investments shaping the markets of the future for the benefit of people in every country.

[45] Climate Action Tracker. *Costa Rica - Policies & Action*. Available at: https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/costa-rica/policies-action/

[46] Clean Energy Wire, *Germany's Energiewende in brief*. Available at: https://www.cleanenergywire.org/germanys-energiewende-brief

[47] Bhattacharya, Shreya; Niranjan, Ekta; Purushothaman, Chithra (2018). *India and the International Solar Alliance.* IDSA (Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses) Backgrounder, 16 March 2018. Available at: https://www.idsa.in/system/files/backgrounder/b-india-international-solar-alliance_shreya.ekta_.chithra_160318.pdf

[48] "The Great Green Wall Implementation Status Report," UNCCD, 2020. UN Convention to Combat Desertification. Available at: https://catalogue.unccd.int/1551_GGW_Report_ENG_Final_040920.pdf

By emphasising public returns on public investment, this narrative builds legitimacy for international collaboration in science, technology, and green transitions. It makes visible the truth that innovation succeeds when it is directed toward collective goals.

On regulation: aligning markets with collective goals

Regulation, under entropy and private takeover narratives, is cast as red tape or interference. The public good narrative instead reframes it as protective infrastructure – rules that safeguard societies from systemic risk.

Examples are clear. After the 2008 financial crisis, recognition of systemic risk legitimised new financial regulations; corporations later pushed the "red tape" narrative to get some of them rolled back. In climate policy, carbon pricing and border adjustments gain traction when narrated as protection against unfair competition and ecological collapse. In the digital sector, the EU's Digital Services Act was politically viable because it was framed as defending democracy and citizens' rights. The Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol, agreed back in 2016, showed that difficult issues like phasing out hydrofluorocarbons could be tackled through international compacts when framed as shared responsibility.

At the multilateral level, the stakes are even higher. Effective oversight of global financial flows, cross-border carbon markets, and digital monopolies, depends on cooperation. The entropy narrative presents such interational cooperation as impossible; the private takeover narrative presents it as getting in the way of the market; the "just look after our own" narrative is used to justify harmful corporate practice when "our" companies are doing it; the public good narrative makes working together to ensure the rules of the road are followed is plain common sense. It legitimises tighter collective rules to align private activity with public goals – whether through the Financial Stability Board, the UNFCCC, or new digital governance compacts.

On public services: universalism, dignity, and resilience

The public good narrative directly counters the corrosive myth that "the public sector doesn't deliver" and highlights how public investment transforms lives. Universal services framed as serving everyone's interests gain broad legitimacy. Costa Rica's enduring commitment to universal healthcare, sustained even through crises, exemplifies how universal framing secures political durability. In Brazil, the Bolsa Família programme lifted more than 30 million people out of poverty, contributing to a dramatic reduction in inequality and extreme deprivation during the 2000s[49] and its relaunch is projected to benefit over 20 million households.[50] Kenya's commitment to universal health coverage aims to reach every citizen by 2030.[51] In Rwanda, sustained investment in the education sector more than doubled school enrolment rates between 2000 and 2015, creating new opportunities for an entire generation.[52] In Europe,

[49] Lindert, Kathy; Linder, Anja; Hobbs, Jason; de la Brière, Bénédicte (2007). *The Nuts and Bolts of Brazil's Bolsa Família Program: Implementing Conditional Cash Transfers in a Decentralized Context*. World Bank Social Protection Discussion Paper No. 0709. Available at: https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/972261468231296002/pdf/398530SP1709.pdf

[50] Government of Brazil (2023). Ministry of Social Development, Bolsa Família Relaunch. Brasília: MDS. Link: https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/brazil/brief/brazil-new-bolsa-familia-challenges-and-opportunities-for-2023

[51] Government of Kenya (2023). Universal Health Coverage Roadmap to 2030. Nairobi: Ministry of Health. Link: http://guidelines.health.go.ke:8000/media/Kenya_Universal_Health_Coverage_Policy_2020__2030.pdf

[52] World Bank (2018). *World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise.* Washington, DC: World Bank. Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2018

EU cohesion funds have modernised infrastructure, narrowed gaps and strengthened stability.[53]

At the international level, the same lesson holds. Global public finance for health, education, and social protection gains legitimacy when narrated as universal insurance. The creation of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria succeeded, in part, because it was framed not as charity but as a collective fight against pandemics. Similarly, replenishments of climate adaptation funds or pandemic preparedness mechanisms will be politically defensible when seen as investments in shared dignity and safety.

A public good narrative frames public services not as costs to be slashed but as the foundation of stability and prosperity. It reminds publics that cooperation delivers tangible results: clean water, reliable hospitals, functioning schools. And it insists that when these are universal – accessible to all as a matter of right – everyone's resilience is strengthened.

Public services are also central to rebuilding trust in institutions and countering divisive politics. When citizens see schools that work, hospitals that heal, and infrastructure that connects communities, they are less susceptible to the politics of resentment and exclusion. Conversely, when services fail or are outsourced, legitimacy erodes, and leaders who thrive on division gain ground. Universal provision, visible in everyday life, anchors the idea that collective investment is not abstract but a direct source of dignity and security for all, thereby reducing the appeal of "us versus them" narratives.

At the international level, universalism embodies the principle of mutual protection across borders, showing that cooperation delivers benefits that no country can secure alone. A pandemic in one nation, an energy crisis in another, or a climate disaster elsewhere quickly spills across borders, exposing the futility of retreating into narrow nationalism. International finance for public services—whether funding resilient health systems in Africa, renewable energy transitions in Asia, or education systems in fragile contexts—should be narrated as investments in shared safety. By making visible how everyone gains, the public good narrative directly undercuts the politics of division and affirms solidarity as the smarter, safer choice.

[53] Bachtler, J. & Méndez, C. (2020). *Cohesion policy: Doing more with less.* In H. Wallace, M. Pollack, C. Roederer-Rynning & A. Young (Eds.), *Policy-Making in the European Union* (8th ed.). Oxford University Press. Available at: https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/75890/1/Bachtler_Mendez_OUP_2020_Cohesion_policy_doing_more_with.pdf

6. Conclusion: a call to narrative action

Building a cross-party and cross-geography narrative

The public good cannot be advanced in a world that is fragmenting within nations and between them. Divisive politics thrives on setting groups against one another, whether by ideology, class, ethnicity, or nationality. These fractures erode the possibility of shared purpose and weaken the political foundations for collective action. If a renewed narrative is to counter this centrifugal pull, it must actively resist divisiveness. It needs to build a common story broad enough to hold together societies that are diverse in their politics and in their places in the global order.

Within nations, one of the greatest risks is that investment in the public good becomes the project of only one side of politics. Durable progress requires something different: a story that appeals across divides. This means showing that cooperation is not only about justice, but also about stability, security, and prosperity. It means presenting investment in health, climate resilience, or education as prudent management of shared risks, not as charity or indulgence. A cross-party narrative anchors the public good in common sense, not partisan doctrine. It gives leaders room to act boldly without fear that their successors will reverse course.

The same holds true between nations. A narrative that sounds like it belongs only to the North will be rejected in the South as paternalistic; one that emerges only from the South may be ignored in the North as special pleading. For cooperation to be legitimate, the story must be shared and co-developed. That requires framing public investment not as transfer but as mutual insurance: all contribute, all benefit, all decide. By making visible the interdependence of nations – where climate shocks, pandemics, or financial contagion cross borders without pause – a cross-geography narrative shows that solidarity is smart self-interest. It transforms the framing of global cooperation from a concession into a necessity.

Taken together, crossing party lines and crossing geographies is what gives a narrative resilience. It ensures that the public good is not trapped in cycles of partisanship or suspicion but instead rooted in the recognition that our wellbeing is inseparable from that of others.

Equipping leaders to use the PUBLIC GOOD narrative

Narrative does not shift on its own. Even when new stories emerge, they only take root when carried by trusted voices and reinforced through wide, repeated, consistent use. If harmful frames of entropy, private takeover, and narrow self-interest are to be displaced, leaders and organisations need to be equipped with the capacity to tell a different story. The task is not simply to craft a more compelling story, but to equip story-*tellers* across institutions and societies.

Political leaders, senior officials, civil society organisers, journalists, and cultural figures all face regular opportunities to shape debate: speeches, interviews, op-eds, summit interventions, sermons, or viral posts. Helping communicators make use of tested language, framing options, evidence-based messages, and resonant stories enables them to harness these opportunities effectively, avoiding reinforcing harmful narratives and avoiding falling short by using ineffective narratives.

The mechanics of narrative change are cumulative. A single speech may make little difference, but dozens of interventions across different platforms can begin to normalise new assumptions. Trusted messengers matter too: when figures not usually associated with progressive internationalism – business leaders, faith authorities, or centre-right politicians – argue for investment in the public good, they create both surprise and credibility. The point is not to impose a uniform script but to enable diverse actors to articulate overlapping themes: that cooperation is in our interest, that public leadership delivers, and that bold change is achievable.

For this reason, building narrative capacity should be seen as a public good in itself. Just as governments invest in statistical agencies or research institutes to provide the evidence base for policy, so too do coalitions for change need to invest in to providing the narrative base. This includes enabling tailored support and accompaniment, shared repositories of framing guidance, and spaces where leaders from different sectors and geographies can align their messaging. The aim is to create an ecosystem of voices, each adapted to its own context, reinforcing the shared core story.

Concretely, this means:

- **Equip leaders and influencers** – provide heads of state, ministers, parliamentarians, mayors, and community organisers with tailored support with framing guidance, language options, and illustrative stories that enable them to articulate public good arguments in their own contexts.

- **Support civil society and grassroots actors** – support NGOs, unions, youth groups, and faith communities in effective use of narrative, ensuring they can contest dominant frames in everyday debate as well as in global forums.

- **Engage diverse messengers** – encourage business figures, security voices, and faith leaders to use the language of mutual interest and cooperation, building cross-ideological and cross-geographical legitimacy.

- **Create shared narrative resources** – develop repositories of tested messages, visual assets, and case studies that can be adapted across geographies and political traditions.

- **Normalise through repetition** – encourage consistent use across communications, recognising that cumulative reinforcement is what transforms alternative frames into common sense.

If successful, this effort would not look like a single campaign but like a shift in common sense. The narratives would echo in presidential speeches, in local civil society campaigns, in religious sermons, and in cultural production. It would provide policymakers with political cover to make ambitious choices, while giving citizens language to demand fairness, investment, and cooperation. Resourcing narrative actors is an essential condition for change. Without it, even the most technically sound policy reforms risk being outflanked by entrenched fatalism or narrow nationalism. With it, a wave of transformative policy becomes achievable.

Narratives make history

Narrative is not spin; it is worldmaking. The dominant stories of an era determine what leaders believe possible and what publics accept as legitimate. Policy does not emerge from technical design alone – it grows, or withers, within the soil of narrative.

Today, corrosive stories of entropy, private takeover, and "just look after our own" are ascendant. They shrink horizons, weaken public purpose, and hollow out accountability, just when collective challenges – climate instability, debt distress, inequality – demand ambitious cooperation. If left unchallenged, these narratives will normalise scarcity, outsourcing, and division, eroding the very capacity of societies to act together.

But narrative space is not fixed. It can be reshaped. A renewed story of the public good – grounded in mutual interest, fairness, ecological responsibility, and demonstrated effectiveness – can expand the boundaries of the possible. It can equip governments with legitimacy, galvanise publics with hope, and re-establish cooperation as the rational, not exceptional, path.

The lesson of history is that despair narrows possibility, while hopeful narratives create it. Crises can be narrated as endings, or as beginnings. The choice is ours. If we can insist on a story that dignifies public purpose, that frames cooperation as smart security and shared prosperity, then ambition becomes not naïve but necessary.

Reopening space for the public good is no longer optional – it is existential. With determination and vision, advocates can help societies choose differently. A shockingly positive future remains within reach. What is needed now is a renewed **PUBLIC GOOD** narrative to make it winnable.

7. Bibliography

(Note: This bibliography does not include all the various reports cited in the footnotes evidencing statistics etc. Rather it is recommended reading on the subject of narratives and their relationship to policy.)

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