PUBLIC GOOD

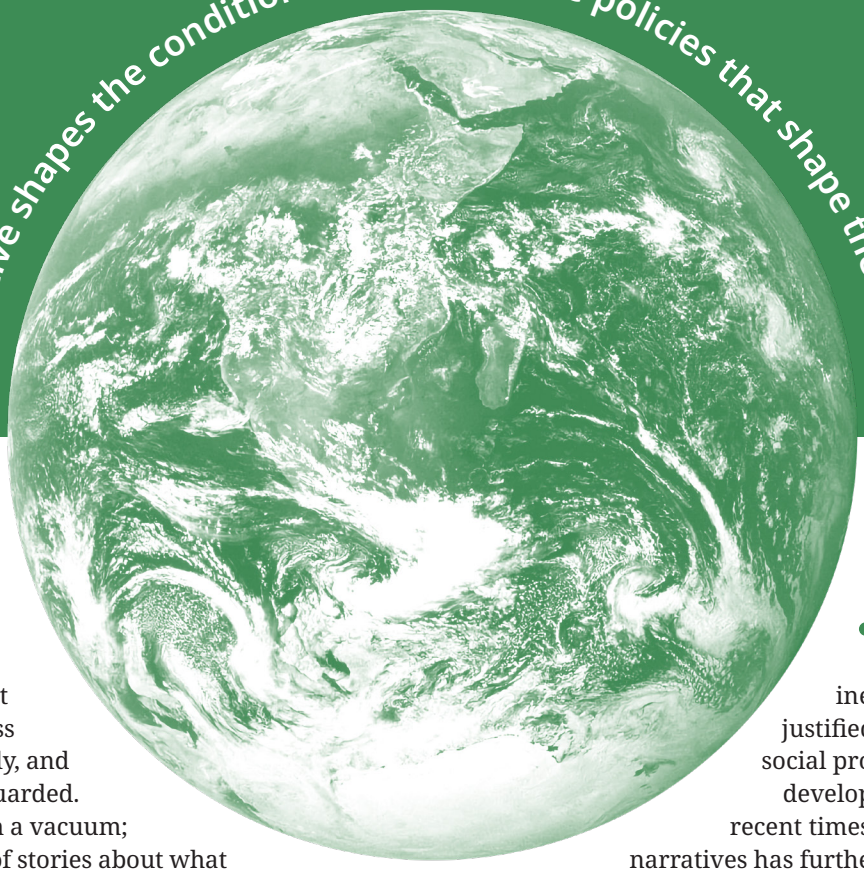
GLOBAL COOPERATION INSTITUTE

Building a winning narrative to bring the world together

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Find the full report here

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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**.

About Global Cooperation Institute

The Global Cooperation Institute works with partners to create modern approaches to global cooperation in the 21st century, combining the *latest evidence* with *compelling narratives* and *practical solutions*. At the heart of all our work are three words: mutuality, dignity and sustainability.

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About the PUBLIC GOOD narrative project

Led by the Global Cooperation Institute, this work brings together the best data and evidence with the perspectives of experts and communicators from around the world to build effective narrative frames and resource allies.