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Doing Well By Doing Good

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Doing Well By Doing Good

Abstract

As Tom Porteous contends in *The Guardian*, "a humane nation is a safer nation"—and ultimately, a more prosperous, healthy, happy, and green one too. My recent book, *Global Good Samaritans*, explores how half a dozen disparate nations came to adopt relatively humanitarian foreign policies, and how this has benefited global governance and their own development. Let us explore the lessons of history that inspired the real (albeit uneven) contributions of countries like Sweden, Canada, and Costa Rica—and why this should inspire more states like the UK to become active human rights promoters.

Keywords

Human rights, United Kingdom foreign policy, Costa Rica, Democratic peace, Global citizenship

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Doing well by doing good

by Alison Brysk

As Tom Porteous contends in *The Guardian*, "a humane nation is a safer nation"—and ultimately, a more prosperous, healthy, happy, and green one too. My recent book, [Global Good Samaritans](#), explores how half a dozen disparate nations came to adopt relatively humanitarian foreign policies, and how this has benefited global governance and their own development. Let us explore the lessons of history that inspired the real (albeit uneven) contributions of countries like Sweden, Canada, and Costa Rica—and why this should inspire more states like the UK to become active human rights promoters.

Our safety and stability are interdependent in a world of global conflict, and the [human security](#) approach to global governance has begun to draw attention to the myriad ways we are only as free as our weakest neighbors. Today's refugee may easily become tomorrow's terrorist, and failed states are vectors for all kinds of "global commons" problems—from epidemic diseases to drug trafficking. More broadly, the [democratic peace](#) theory of international relations shows that democratic states tend not to engage in conflict with other democracies, suggesting that mediating global conflicts and promoting the rule of law abroad diminishes threats to one's own state or region. In my own study, Costa Rica protected itself from a bad neighborhood by promoting peace, and benefited economically from being an island of stability.

Beyond security interdependence, global good citizenship also pays off in long-term prosperity and quality of life. As former Amnesty International director William Schultz shows in [In Our Own Interest](#), more peaceful and democratic countries make better partners for all of us in trade, tourism, environmental cooperation, and health. Moreover, recent [research on economic development](#) shows that the existence of forced or indentured labor in a country is one of the leading determinants of poverty—and that conversely, protecting and empowering vulnerable populations may be the most effective means of poverty alleviation, with local and global benefits.

But perhaps the most important benefit from adopting a human rights-oriented foreign policy is the creation of moral, legal, and political interdependence that can deepen democracy at home. Humanitarian foreign policy turns a spotlight on the very inconsistencies and hypocrisies Porteous chronicles for his own aspiring promoter state—and in some cases, improves them. For example, Canada's strong record and legitimacy claims in peacekeeping allowed much stronger challenges and improvement of questionable practices that developed during its presence in Afghanistan than the unilateralist U.S. This is in part because humanitarian foreign policy springs from (and in turn strengthens) civil society, and helps to build transnational linkages empowering peoples relative to their governments.

Not all countries are poised to become global human rights promoters, but the global survey that begins my study shows that dozens more pass a minimum threshold of democracy, development, and security that permits a principled foreign policy. What makes the difference is vision and mobilization—leadership, cosmopolitan values, and an engaged civil society. We can all do better in the long run by being better global citizens, and greater awareness of the benefits of global goodness should inspire the citizens of all democracies to demand it.

ALISON BRYSK is Mellichamp Professor of Global Governance at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is the author of The Politics of Human Rights in Argentina (1994), From Tribal Village to Global Village (2000), Human Rights and Private Wrongs (2005), and Global Good Samaritans: Human Rights as Foreign Policy (2009). Professor Brysk has been a visiting scholar in Argentina, Ecuador, France, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, South Africa, and Japan. In 2007, she held the Fulbright Distinguished Visiting Chair in Global Governance at Canada's Centre for International Governance Innovation.