Refugee Protection as a Public Good: What Benefits Do States Derive?

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While a growing number of refugees is in need of humanitarian protection, most states are reluctant to admit them. For more than two decades, scholars have thought to understand this intricate challenge of international governance through the prism of collective action theory and the concept of refugee protection as an international public good. However, the specific benefits that states gain from refugee protection and that are assumed to constitute the public good remain surprisingly vague and under-specified. In this Reflection, we make three contributions to address this issue. First, we take stock of the literature and assess the evolution of the collective action theory in asylum governance. Second, we identify and conceptualize legitimacy, security, reputation, and development as four types of benefits that states derive from refugee protection. Third, we discuss the limitations of the dominant rational-choice approach and contend that the nature of refugee protection in the international realm is the product of international and domestic politics based on the contestation of interests and norms. These insights result in a series of recommendations for future research of refugee protection as a collective action problem.

While a growing number of forced migrants are in need of humanitarian protection, most states seek to minimize their intake of refugees. Scholars and policymakers alike have called for international responsibility-sharing to tackle the matter regarding a persistent lack of an effective institutionalization of international cooperation on refugee protection (e.g., Betts 2003; Hathaway and Neve 1997; Thielemann and Dewan 2006). In an effort to help steer the debate, normative scholarship has sought to identify what states owe refugees and one another in the realm of asylum

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governance (Gibney 2015; Milazzo 2023; Owen 2020). A different approach has consisted of analyzing the practice of responsibility-sharing, whereby scholars have mostly relied on *collective action theory* and the related concept of refugee protection as an international *public good* (for an overview, see Thielemann 2020). The underlying assumption is that refugee protection provides collective benefits to all states, while the costs of provision fall on the states that choose to admit refugees and offer humanitarian protection. Consequently, states have the incentive to free ride on others' protection efforts instead of making their own contributions, which results in the underprovision of refugee protection. The protection of refugees thus constitutes a collective action problem among states.

This perspective emerged from the insights that the provisional burden of the collective good is distributed very asymmetrically across receiving countries, individual countries run the risk of becoming overburdened, and only international cooperation in the form of responsibility-sharing can ensure the effective protection of the world's refugees (see Fonteyne 1978; Inder 2017). In an effort to conceptualize this collective action problem, Suhrke (1998) first characterized refugee protection as a global public good. This contribution has inspired a growing literature and advanced our understanding of the nature of refugee protection. At the same time, scholars have shown an increasingly broad interest in the study of refugees in international relations from different theoretical angles such

as realism, liberal institutionalism, constructivism, or critical theory (see Betts and Loescher 2011). In this context, the public-good approach gained its prominence as a theory to explain how states cooperate under conditions of international interdependence.

Nevertheless, the conceptualization of refugee protection as a collective action problem remains vague and under specified. In particular, studies rarely explain the type and nature of the benefits that states derive from refugee protection, which leaves the matter up to interpretation. Moreover, due to its roots in economics, the public good model mainly conceives of the benefits as objective and aligned with states' rational interests, neglecting the important ways in which norms and politics shape how states perceive them. For these reasons, the current conceptual and theoretical approaches to refugee protection as a public good are limited in their capacity to explain the large variation in countries' responsibility-sharing behavior. They also fail to explain the divergence between the predictions of the formal model and the observed practice of refugee governance. Understanding the precise nature of refugee protection is thus crucial for grasping the dynamics of asylum governance, designing effective policies, and establishing international cooperation.

This Reflection article makes three contributions to our understanding of the nature of refugee protection. First, we provide a comprehensive review of the literature on the public-good model of refugee protection and identify four distinct periods in its evolution. Second, we systematize the benefits that states derive from refugee protection and assess their properties from a collective action perspective and in light of existing empirical research. Third, we discuss the nature of the (public) good and argue that refugee protection cannot be conceived of as such solely on the basis of objective state interests, but importantly by virtue of being a product of a particular societal context and the forces of political contestation. We conclude by drawing implications for the future study and practice of asylum governance.

Collective Action in Refugee Governance

The concept of refugee protection is strongly embedded into the modern state system. Refugees are commonly defined as individuals whose own state does not guarantee their human rights and personal safety and who are therefore forced to cross international borders to seek protection in a safe country. International humanitarian and refugee law provides the legal basis for granting protection to those in need. Nevertheless, the decision to grant protection to refugees remains in the hands of states, as controlling international migration is a core state power and is thus considered a prerogative of sovereign nation states (Dauvergne 2004).

Refugee movements pose a continuous challenge to the international state system. While the global refugee regime has established refugee protection as a legal obligation, no effective rules determine which state is responsible for any given asylum request. The calls for responsibility-sharing are as old as international asylum governance itself, but the conceptual understanding of refugee protection as a problem in international relations has only developed over the past twenty-five years. This is unsurprising: as most literature on migration policy has focused on national policies and on the role domestic politics plays in shaping the latter (for an overview, see Boswell 2007 and Hampshire 2013); meanwhile, governance beyond nation states has attracted much less attention (see Lahav and Lavenex 2013). In order to understand the evolution of the literature that analyzes refugee protection as a collective action problem in international relations, we distinguish four phases in its development: its (1) early pioneers; (2) foundational model; (3) critical evolution; and (4) the empirical turn.

Early Pioneers: Why Responsibility-Sharing?

For a long time, refugee governance failed to attract much scholarly attention. Legal scholars were the first to consider refugee protection an issue of international governance (see e.g., Fonteyne 1978; Grahl-Madsen 1980). Scholars have been calling for international responsibility-sharing[1] to ensure the functioning of global refugee governance since as early as the 1951 Refugee Convention (see Noll 1997). Carlin (1982) feared that the enormous costs of large-scale refugee resettlement might undermine receiving countries' capacity and willingness to admit refugees. Accordingly, the main argument in favor of responsibility-sharing revolves around the concern that states may defy the principle of non-refoulement, i.e., that no person shall be returned to a country in which they are in danger of persecution, if they face the risk of being overburdened by large-scale refugee arrivals (Fonteyne 1978; Grahl-Madsen 1980; Noll 1997). International responsibility-sharing, the argument goes, ensures effective refugee protection because it preserves protection norms and reception capacities. States' continuous failure to establish effective responsibility-sharing motivated scholars to design potential mechanisms that stipulate precise legal criteria for the allocation of state responsibilities (e.g., Grahl-Madsen 1982; Hathaway and Neve 1997) and to propose a market for trading refugee quotas among states (Schuck 1997).

Around the same time, IR scholars started to pay attention to refugee governance and the role of refugees in interstate relations (e.g., Loescher and Monahan 1989; Weiner 1992). This literature adopted the perspective that states follow their national interests in asylum governance, primarily seeking to avert security risks posed by refugees (see Teitelbaum 1984). This approach led scholars to borrow insights from the cooperation dynamics in defense policy and to apply them to international refugee governance (e.g., Archaya and Dewitt 1997; Weiner 1992). The two

policy areas are plagued by similar challenges: all states benefit from the stability achieved through collective defense and refugee protection, but each state seeks to minimize their own costs of contributing to the collective good. In sum, legal scholars laid important conceptual groundwork for the study of refugee governance and IR scholars further developed the theory of how states behave in this policy field.

The Foundational Model: Refugee Protection as a Global Public Good

Conceptualizing refugee protection as a *collective action problem* that requires responsibility-sharing among states has significantly advanced our understanding of international asylum governance. The CAP framework describes a situation in which potential joint benefits from cooperation, such as public goods, do not materialize because of conflicting individual interests (see Olson 1965; Olson and Zeckhauser 1966). While the early contributions to the literature on refugee protection alluded to some basic form of collective action, the most comprehensive treatment of the phenomenon as a public good appeared in the seminal article by Astrid Suhrke (1998). The latter theorized that refugee protection provides benefits to the international community of states that are public in nature, i.e., these benefits are non-excludable and non-rivalrous. Suhrke (1998) argued that refugee protection helps ensure public order and international stability, which benefit all states, regardless of their individual contributions. Nevertheless, the provisional costs are borne by the states that do admit refugees. Consequently, the underprovision of refugee protection can be understood as a failure of collective action, which results from states' incentive to free ride on the contributions of other states. We identify this idea of refugee protection as a *global public good* as the *foundational model* because it defines the principles and concepts necessary for modeling refugee governance in terms of collective action and states' strategic interactions. The model constitutes an important innovation that has facilitated further theoretical advancements (e.g., Betts 2003; Thielemann 2003), the application of formal modeling to states' responsibility-sharing behavior in asylum governance (e.g., Lutz, Kaufmann, and Stünzi 2020; Zeager, Ericson, and Williams 2013), and a number of empirical studies of states' responsibility-sharing behavior (see the overview on the empirical turn below).

The Critical Evolution: Debating Publicness and Globalness

The foundational model galvanized subsequent research to identify the public good properties of refugee protection. Thereby, scholars proceeded to critically assess the assumptions that the benefits of refugee protection are public and global. Most prominently, Betts (2003) questioned the idea that refugee protection is a pure public good and argued that protecting refugees also offers private (i.e., state-specific) benefits, such as international prestige and national security. Accordingly, he concluded that refugee protection should be understood as a "joint product" or an "impure public good"—one that provides multiple benefits which differ in their degree of publicness. Other scholars have used this idea to explain why some countries contribute to international responsibility-sharing more than others (e.g., Fujibayashi 2022; Roper and Barria 2010; Thielemann 2003). The conceptualization of refugee protection as a "joint product model" constitutes an important evolution of the foundational model and has become the new standard for the analysis of refugee governance.

Subsequent scholarship has built upon the joint product model to also include refugees. While both the foundational and the joint-product model focus exclusively on states, Lutz et al. (2020) argue that refugees are crucial actors whose agency shapes the good of refugee protection. Refugees gain significant (private) benefits from humanitarian protection because it allows them to build a new life in a safe country. Hence, we need to account for the strategic behavior of both states and refugees if we are to fully understand the outcomes of collective action in refugee governance.

The second public good assumption—globalness—has also been subjected to critical examination. Refugee protection is a global public good inasmuch as its positive and negative externalities affect all countries around the world (Sandler 2006). In light of this, Betts (2009) has proposed that refugee protection should be understood as a regional public good, because the scope of its externalities is strongly related to states' geographical distance to refugees' countries of origin. The costs and benefits that arise from one country's provision of refugee protection, or lack thereof, most significantly affect its neighbors, rather than states further away, and are therefore geographically confined. Other scholars have used similar reasoning to argue in favor of refugee protection as a European public good: European countries' deep functional interdependence as members of the European single market with open internal borders makes refugee protection beneficial to all member states, all the more so when collective action failures pose a risk to the integrity of the core EU institutions (e.g., Caballero-Vélez and Pachocka 2021; Lutz et al. 2020; Milazzo 2023). The shared institutional setting of internal free movement and external border controls as well as the collective benefits from the existence and stability of EU institutions give the provision of refugee protection a distinctly European dimension. Furthermore, the EU sees itself as a normative power premised upon the values of peace, democracy, rule of law, and human rights. Therefore, protecting refugee rights is particularly important to the legitimacy of EU institutions, which lends additional support to the idea of a European public good.

These different evolutions of the foundational model do not reject the idea that refugee protection has the

properties of a public good. Instead, they maintain that its main benefits are of public and private nature and geographically confined rather than global. As a result, we now have a more nuanced understanding of the characteristics of refugee protection in international governance and of the scope of these properties.

The Empirical Turn: Responsibility-Sharing Dynamics in Practice

For a long time, the literature focused on conceptual and theoretical contributions and used select cases mainly to illustrate its arguments. Only recently have scholars turned to more systematic empirical studies to test the nature of refugee protection in international governance. Analyzing states' responsibility-sharing behavior allows us to assess the costs and benefits that refugees impose on them and examine the games they play in international asylum governance. Roper and Barria (2010) investigate states' contributions to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and find that they are consistent with an impure public good, which offers some private benefits, rather than the concept of a pure public good. Thielemann and Armstrong (2013) analyze the European Schengen and Dublin regimes and conclude that they produce both collective and state-specific benefits. The 2015 European refugee crisis spurred a number of studies on the responsibility-sharing dynamics in European asylum policy, which highlighted that the benefits from a common European approach are asymmetrically distributed across member states (see Biermann et al. 2019; Trauner 2016). More specifically, Fujibayashi (2022) shows that the states that received more Syrian refugees contributed more financial resources to support Syrians living in refugee camps in the crisis region, which suggests that their prospective private benefits have motivated their contributions to refugee protection. Finally, the 2022 Ukrainian refugee crisis spurred a much more generous response by the European countries. Scholars have attributed this outcome to both country-specific domestic interests and collective security benefits (see Caballero-Vélez 2023). These studies conclude that refugee governance constitutes a collective action problem centered around an impure public good because states' responsibility-sharing behavior is meaningfully affected by private benefits that vary significantly across countries.

Assessing the Nature of Refugee Protection

Since its inception, scholars have debated to what extent refugee protection constitutes a *global public good.*[2] Based on Suhrke's (1998) foundational model and the literature that has built on it, we identify the benefits that states derive from refugee protection and assess these benefits in terms of the model's constituent dimensions: publicness

and globalness.[3] The degree of *publicness* determines to what extent refugee protection constitutes a pure public good. The joint fulfillment of non-rivalry (i.e., one state benefitting from the good does not prevent other states from also benefiting) and non-excludability (i.e., a state cannot be prevented from enjoying the good) is a necessary condition for the good to be public. The degree of *globalness* determines to what extent refugee protection constitutes a global (public) good. Any public good produces positive externalities whose scope determines who is affected by them. Accordingly, the geographical scope of benefits allows us to classify public goods as either national, regional, or global goods (Sandler 2006).[4] Since we are assessing refugee protection from the perspective of states (the providers and beneficiaries of refugee protection), international externalities are a necessary condition for a good to be public in this context. In sum, a public good can have different degrees of publicness and globalness, and only when its benefits are purely private and, hence, national does the good lack a public nature.

When we speak of refugee protection, we understand an effective regime of granting humanitarian protection to forced migrants by states who act as responsible international actors without shirking their protection responsibilities. This good of international governance can provide various benefits to states. The following sections draw from the existing literature on the subject to systematize these benefits into four distinct types: legitimacy, security, reputation, and development (see table 1).[5] We proceed to conceptualize these benefit types in more detail and evaluate their publicness and globalness building upon theoretical and empirical literature.

Legitimacy

Protecting refugees helps uphold the liberal rule-based international order. The existence of refugees poses a fundamental challenge to sovereignty, especially in terms of states' compliance with human rights norms and their interest in operating within a tidy system of sovereign states (Skran 1995, 70-71). Human rights, including refugee rights, are embedded into liberal institutions and protected by international law. This system combines states' right to sovereign self-governance with their duty to protect individual human rights within their own jurisdictions. Human rights violations undermine this liberal order and protecting refugees therefore becomes a condition for the legitimacy of states (Bauböck 2019; Song 2019).

Consequently, states have the collective responsibility to restore the damaged protection of human rights because it is the main source of their own legitimacy (Carens 2013, 196). Furthermore, Coen (2017) has argued that countries have the specific obligation to protect those refugees whose displacement results from their past policy choices. Factoring in states' culpability (in addition to their capacity)

Table 1
The four types of benefits that states derive from refugee protection

Type of Benefit	Publicness Extent of rivalry & excludability	Globalness Extent of geographical scope
Legitimacy	public	global
Security	mostly public	mostly regional
Reputation	private	national
Development	mostly private	mostly national

may bolster the legitimacy of the global refugee regime. Refugee protection thus functions as a "legitimacy repair mechanism" (Owen 2016; 2020) or a "legitimacy correction mechanism" (Brock 2020) in the international state system—it restores both refugees' status and standing as citizens in the international community and the legitimacy of global governance (Coen 2017). If states fail to protect refugees, they risk the unraveling of the same international human rights norms that undergird the liberal international order of sovereign states. Hence, refugee protection is the fulfillment of moral and legal obligations, and it provides states with tangible legitimacy benefits.

Legitimacy is a system-level benefit that is not rivalrous in consumption and does not allow states to exclude others from benefiting from it without undermining the system itself. We may therefore conclude that legitimacy is a public benefit. The benefit affects the whole international state system—all states that form part of the rules-based international order and that share the liberal norms whose legitimacy is bolstered by refugee protection.[6] Legitimacy benefits are thus global in scope.

Security

The literature also commonly refers to another type of benefit from refugee protection—security benefits (e.g., De Places and Deffains 2003; Suhrke 1998). While refugees experience insecurity and thus are individuals *at risk*, states often consider them to pose *a risk* to their security (Gray and Franck 2019). The underlying assumption is that refugee arrivals may undermine the sovereign control of state borders and help spread the conflicts that they flee from to other countries. More generally, they may also overburden and destabilize receiving countries. Many also fear that the irregular arrival of asylum-seekers increases the likelihood of terrorist attacks, a claim that has found mixed empirical evidence (Helbling and Meierrieks 2022). Existing findings suggest that hosting refugees is associated with a higher likelihood of civil conflict (Böhmelt, Bove, and Gleditsch 2019) and of right-wing terrorism (Koopmans and Olzak 2004). A functioning international protection regime provides security benefits to the extent that it helps contain these risks.

One risk that countries are concerned about is the uncontrolled movements of refugees. States seek to ensure their security by controlling their sovereign borders and monitoring cross-border movements. Thus, losing control over the entry and presence of refugees threatens to undermine their authority and challenge their ability to identify and prevent security threats. A special case is the European Union, where internal border control between member states has been abolished and whose integrity depends on the effective control of the external borders and a coordinated response to refugee movements (Noll 2000; Trauner 2016). States' efforts to deter or divert refugees toward other countries often pushes refugees into irregularity and the hands of people smugglers, which raises insecurity and control loss (Czaika and Hobolth 2016). Furthermore, if refugees do not receive protection in their country of arrival or are forcibly moved to third countries, they are likely to embark on onward (secondary) movements leading to negative externalities, such as insecurity at state borders and tensions with neighboring countries (Legomsky 2003, 588; Thielemann 2020, 170). Consequently, an effective system of refugee protection that allows for a regular and controlled access of people seeking protection can mitigate all of these security risks.

Destabilization through conflicts and social tensions in receiving countries presents another security risk. In the absence of responsibility-sharing, refugees' self-allocation to host countries tends to be strongly asymmetric. This unequal distribution threatens to overburden some states' institutional capacity to provide humanitarian protection and undermine the stability and functioning of state institutions. Macedonia (Barutciski and Suhrke 2001) and Tanzania (Milner 2000) are cases in point. Moreover, if the native population perceives that the arrival of refugees is uncontrolled and unfairly distributed, inflows are likely to face greater political opposition and stir social tensions (Solodoch 2021, 2023). The collective provision of refugee protection through responsibility-sharing is meant to prevent overburdening and eases the risks that refugee arrivals pose to the public order and political stability.

We generally consider security to be non-rivalrous because its benefits do not diminish as more countries get to enjoy them. Likewise, it is not excludable because

regional security and stability automatically affects every state in a specific region. However, security risks are a mixed basket: their scope is strongly contingent on geography and international interdependence, which may lead to tangible private security benefits. Country-specific security risks can arise from closeness to refugee-creating conflicts, areas of instability or busy migration routes, or from interdependence with sending and transit countries based on historical, political, or cultural links (e.g., Thielemann and Dewan 2006).[7] Consequently, the benefits of an effective refugee protection regime can become exclusive to one country to the degree that the security risks only affect that country. As refugees typically have to cross into a neighboring country, states that share borders with refugee-creating countries face the greatest security risks. Since conflicts and migration routes tend to be regional in nature, security benefits are international in scope but mostly confined to specific regions.

Reputation

A third type of benefit consists of the utility that states derive from admitting refugees in terms of their own reputation and prestige (De Places and Deffains 2003; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).[8] Thereby, states benefit from an image of an actor that respects international humanitarian law and protects human rights. States strive to maintain a favorable self-image and a positive reputation, and negative international publicity is one means through which the international community and domestic civil society can pressure them into compliance (Kim 2019; Salehyan 2001, 4). Recognition as a humanitarian actor can help a state to ensure a good standing in the international community and to improve its status. This reputational benefit might be particularly large for countries in bad standing due to their dire record with human rights or on international solidarity, and countries whose external relations are strained due to their past (foreign) policy choices that have contributed to humanitarian crises. For instance, autocratic countries with generous asylum policies, such as Uganda and Zambia (Natter 2024, 692), and the United States with its interventionist foreign policy (Coen 2017) have accrued significant reputational benefits. Scholars have also attributed post-war Germany's liberal asylum policies to the country's responsibility for past war atrocities and its willingness to regain a good international reputation (Zotti 2021, 233). Acting as leaders in refugee protection helps countries send the signal that they are influential and responsible actors on the international stage.

The propaganda value that refugees fleeing the East for the West during the Cold War created for Western democracies is another version of reputation benefits. Admitting such refugees served as a welcome demonstration of liberalism's moral and ideological superiority over communism

(Loescher 1994). In the United States, a common equation was "refugee equals European anti-communist" (Bon Tempo 2008, 59). The liberal admission of refugees provided leverage in Western countries' ideological competition with the Soviet bloc by discrediting communist regimes and highlighting their poor treatment of their own citizens (Loescher 1994; Newland 1996; Teitelbaum 1984). Similar benefits are conceivable in other forms of systemic rivalries between states. Recent studies provide evidence for this claim—states are more likely to admit refugees who come from a rival state (Abdelaaty 2021a; Chu 2020; Jackson and Atkinson 2019). Therefore, countries also derive reputational benefits from embarrassing enemy regimes (Micinski and Lindey 2022).

States accrue reputational benefits by providing refugee protection. The benefits are then both rival and excludable, so they are purely private in nature and of national scope.

Development

States also benefit from the contributions made to their societies and economies by the refugees whom they admit. These contributions have received little attention in the literature on the nature of refugee protection. Typically, this literature considers refugee protection a costly effort and refugees a burden on the receiving country. This perception has been challenged and refugees are increasingly viewed as agents of development (e.g., Betts, Bloom, and Omata 2012; Dick 2003). Empirical evidence shows that refugees have the potential to contribute to their host countries in various beneficial ways. While refugees are often dependent on government support upon their arrival, they also bring resources with them and tend to contribute to their receiving countries' economies and societies over the long term (see D'Albis, Boubtane, and Coulibaly 2018; Taylor et al. 2016; Zhou, Grossman, and Ge 2023). Refugees add to the workforce, helping receiving countries to address labor shortages, and provide a welcomed demographic boost. The large-scale resettlement programs after the Second World War were partially motivated by the desire to bring foreign workers to address domestic labor needs (Suhrke 1998, 404). Evidence suggests that countries favor those refugees in the admission process who signal a higher labor market potential (Neuwirth 1988; Shaffer et al. 2020). Moreover, refugee admission can also provide states with secondary development benefits if international donors send humanitarian assistance, allowing receiving countries to become "refugee rentier states" (Norman 2020; Tsourapas 2019). These economic contributions thus constitute a welcomed benefit for states, although utilitarian motivations for refugee admission are rarely expressed publicly. Some of the development effects of refugee protection also spread beyond host countries' borders: refugees have been found

to promote international trade and investment (Bahar, Parsons, and Vézine 2022) and increase remittances, which support the development of their countries of origin (Vargas-Silva 2017). However, the extent to which host countries can seize development opportunities likely depends on their domestic state capacity and the availability of international assistance (Jacobsen 2002). We can thus conclude that development benefits are private because they are both rival and excludable. They mainly accrue to receiving states, with some limited international spill-over effects that stem from increased transnational economic activities.

From Benefits to the (Public) Good

Refugee protection has the qualities of a global public good inasmuch as it provides (non-excludable and non-rivalrous) collective benefits of global scope. The preceding discussion demonstrates that the four different types of benefits vary significantly in terms of their publicness and globalness: while legitimacy most clearly is a global public good, security is a regional public good, and both reputation and development come closest to being private national goods (see Figure 1).[9] While the benefits of legitimacy and security stem from containing the collective risks of protection failure and preserve the status quo, the benefits of reputation and development arise from seizing opportunities to extract private benefits and enhance the status quo.

However, all types of benefits share several important characteristics. First, the empirical evidence on these benefits suggests that not all countries benefit from refugee protection to the same extent. Rather, their asymmetric exposure to refugee movements and countries' different political and economic circumstances generate large variations across them. The countries that derive the greatest benefits from refugee protection are those exposed to

Figure 1.
Benefits of refugee protection by publicness and globalnes

refugee movements due to their geography (security risks), liberal democracies whose legitimacy and reputation rest most strongly on liberal human rights norms (legitimacy risks), countries with a bad standing in the international community (reputation opportunities), and countries with strong domestic capacity and acceptance of refugee admission (development opportunities). More generally, the extent of these risks and opportunities increases with the scale of protection needs (cf. Thielemann 2020, 171).

Second, each benefit can occur on its own but they can also combine to produce common outcomes. In particular, the reputation and security benefits can evolve into legitimacy and development benefits. In the first case, reputational benefits may be shared with ideological allies in a context of system rivalry and thereby increase the legitimacy of the broader political order. The positive reputation derived from refugee admission may also allow countries to convince international donors to support their initiatives, and thereby turn into development benefits. In the case of security benefits, upholding stability and human security also bolsters the overall legitimacy of the political order and may prevent uncontrolled refugee movements and human rights violations from generating a development disadvantage.

Discussion: The Political Nature of What Is Good for the Public

Having conceptualized the types of benefits that states may gain from refugee protection, we now turn to a discussion of how the nature of the public good is determined in governance practice. The concept of refugee protection as a public good is largely premised on rational choice assumptions, which expect states to employ fact-based cost-benefit calculations and instrumental rationality when they make their policy choices (see Chalmers 2000; Thielemann and Armstrong 2013, 157). This narrow understanding of public goods has often failed to account for states' actual contributions to refugee protection (e.g., Thielemann and Dewan 2006; Zaun and Ripoll Servent 2023). The rational choice model of the public good thus seems unable to fully explain the nature of refugee protection in international governance. At the same time, the broader literature on asylum policies generates important insights into how states form their preferences on refugee protection. We build on this literature and discuss two lines of criticism of the standard public good model, which reflect the political nature of refugee protection in international relations.

The first critique is that the rational-choice model of refugee protection neglects the important role that norms and identities play in shaping states' understanding of the public good. In this view, states may only follow their objective self-interest as long as and to the extent that established norms that qualify certain behaviors as inappropriate are not violated (March and Olsen 1989). This
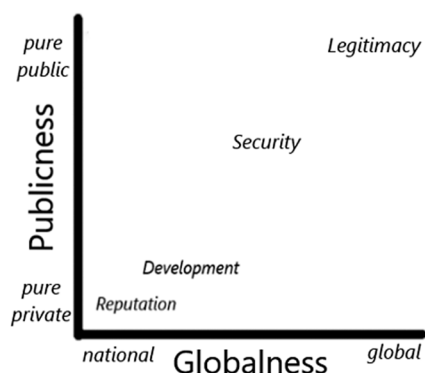
implies that "arguments for government provision of public goods require fundamental moral judgments in addition to the usual economic considerations about the relative efficacy of markets and governments in supplying them" (Anomaly 2015, 109). In particular, the decision to admit refugees touches on fundamental moral questions, such as what we owe strangers, and on state and societal values and self-image (see Haddad 2008; Stern 2014). Although this normative perspective has not been prominent in the literature on collective action in asylum governance, we do find some earlier references. For example, Thielemann (2003, 254-255) argued that states' motivations in refugee responsibility-sharing are shaped by their socio-cultural contexts and that institutionalized norms condition actors' interpretations of reality and the way in which they set priorities. The wider literature on refugee protection has long acknowledged that cultural, historical, and religious factors shape the meaning of being a refugee and the connotations of asylum more generally (Harrell-Bond 1995; Jacobsen 1996, 668-669). More specifically, the commitment to refugee protection reaffirms the values of freedom, human rights, and justice that undergird liberal states' legitimacy (Hurrell 2011; Nantermoz 2020, 258). A case in point are the Nordic democracies that have institutionalized particularly strong norms of humanitarianism and international solidarity, which creates public demands to support refugee protection. In a broader empirical comparison, Thielemann (2003) demonstrates that states are more willing to receive refugees the stronger their general commitment to norms of physical protection and distributive justice. This empirical evidence suggests that states do not only consider their rational interests but also take into account established norms and adopted identities that determine what they conceive as "appropriate." In conclusion, the recognition of refugee protection as a public good in international relations depends on the extent to which states' behavior is driven by norms and identities that consider refugee protection a desirable collective good.

The second critique of the rational choice assumptions is that just like norms, states' interests are also socially constructed. In this view, the way states perceive themselves and their interests is not fixed but constructed through discourses and narratives (Campbell 1992; Katzenstein 1996), and public goods are established through collective agreement and recognition within society or the broader international community (Roberts 2019). Accordingly, states' interest in the protection of refugees is formed in specific political and cultural contexts based on inter-subjective norms and culturally established meanings (Betts 2003, 287). In other words, states' values and identities shape how refugee protection is conceived as a political problem and in which way and to what extent providing it serves the states' interests (Orchard 2014, 10-11). A concrete example is the construction of refugees

as an existential threat to the nation state as a political technique to draw social boundaries and foster social cohesion (Haddad 2008). Previous research has shown a long history of discourses linking refugees with danger (Nyers 1998; Massari 2021). A large body of literature suggests that the public commonly perceives immigrants as a security threat, regardless of the objective risk they pose (Ajzenman, Domínguez, and Undurrago 2021; Ceobanu 2011). Therefore, it is not surprising that states also adopt a security lens in their perceptions of refugees (see Hammerstadt 2014; Huysmans 2000), whereby they construct refugees as a security threat, particularly in the form of terrorists, intruders, or illegal immigrants abusing the asylum system (e.g., Léonard and Kaunert 2022). Such threat perceptions are contingent on the historical and social context of refugee movements, as the episodes of the Cold War (Loescher 1994) and the 2015 European refugee crisis (Ripoll Servent 2019) illustrate. While an ethno-nationalist identity of the receiving state facilitates refugees' "othering" and their construction as a threat (Poynting and Briskman 2020), the existence of a special relationship with a refugee group based on countries' common historical and cultural ties facilitates perceptions of refugees as victims of oppression who deserve solidarity (e.g., Bjånesøy 2019). These perspectives are further shaped by bureaucratic choices, such as whether refugee protection is assigned to security forces or the social welfare authorities due to their different understandings of the policy problem, their institutional logic, and their vested interests (Jacobsen 1996, 660-661). These findings suggest that unlike in the rational choice model, state interests in refugee protection are not static but subject to change and a matter of perceived costs and benefits, rather than an objective calculation. In conclusion, the nature of refugee protection as a good in international relations is socially constructed and depends on how state interests are interpreted.

Both lines of criticism of the rational choice conceptualization of the public good model emphasize the importance of states' perceptions and preferences being formed within a certain socio-cultural context, rather than rationally derived from an objective cost-benefit calculation. What norms states adopt in their understanding of refugee protection and how states interpret their interests depends on the international and domestic political constellations in place (Orchard 2014, 7; Thielemann 2003, 255). To understand these constellations, we can draw on the wider literature on states' responses to refugees, which has identified various political factors that help us grasp the political nature of refugee protection as a public good.

At the international level, states engage with one another in a context of strong interest and power asymmetries on the one hand, and within the (contested and challenged) normative framework of the international refugee regime on the other hand (see Betts and Loescher

2011). As a result of large-scale refugee movements, refugee protection has become increasingly viewed as a "high politics" issue and has thus come to play an important role in international relations. The international politics of refugee protection takes place in the context of the global refugee regime, which is based on the 1951 Geneva Convention. The latter established the right to seek asylum and the norm of responsibility-sharing among states. This refugee regime is endogenously contested as it rests on an unstable equilibrium between the individual rights of refugees and the states' sovereignty over territorial admission (Lavenex 2024). The UNHCR and the wider donor community provide support and press countries to provide humanitarian protection to people in need. The international refugee regime shapes states' perceptions of their national interests by defining the nature of the policy problem and the parameters of the policy solutions (Skran 1995). Nevertheless, the humanitarian norm of refugee protection has increasingly been challenged by many states, who have sought to limit their responsibilities toward refugees by externalizing the control and protection of refugees to third countries (FitzGerald 2019). This deterrence paradigm and the universality of the protection norm remain contested, and both the specific definition of a "refugee" and states' protection duties remain subject to controversial debates at the international level (Börzel and Zürn 2021; Sigona 2018). Moreover, the distributive norm of responsibility-sharing on the other hand is not well institutionalized. It is implemented by ad hoc negotiations during refugee emergencies to address asymmetric protection duties and to help prevent the most exposed countries from becoming overburdened (Thielemann and Dewan 2006). Thereby, states' cooperative behavior is characterized by a collective action problem (see the discussion above), which leads to strategic interactions that resemble a prisoner's dilemma (Noll 1997; Lutz, Kaufmann, and Stünzi 2020), a Suasion (Rambo) game (Biermann et al. 2019; Zaun 2018), a common pool problem (De Places and Deffains 2003), or a form of strategic coercion in which countries can leverage the hosting of refugees to extract revenues from international actors (Greenhill 2010; Tsourapas 2019). The complex interdependencies motivate states to engage in migration diplomacy based on their different identities within the international refugee system and to reach their political objectives through interstate bargaining (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Milner 2009). In sum, the contestation of refugee protection in international politics combines large structural asymmetries and a regime whose norms are contested and re-interpreted.

At the domestic level, the issues of refugee protection and immigration, more broadly, have been politicized in many countries along a deepening political divide between communitarians and cosmopolitans (de Wilde et al. 2019; van der Brug et al. 2015). Thereby, the international norm of refugee protection is interpreted and contested in domestic contexts, creating local meanings and interpretations of what it means to be a refugee (Coen 2022). The political contestation of refugee protection is thus primarily a socio-cultural conflict based on contrasting values and differing identities. Due to its polarizing nature, this domestic political divide often looms larger than the divide between countries (see Oana and Kriesi 2021). While most citizens in Western democracies have been found to support the liberal constitutional provision of a right to seek asylum, they are strongly divided on the deservingness of asylum seekers and the perceived consequences of refugee admission for society (Abdelaaty and Steele 2022; Bjånesøy 2019; Jeannet, Heidland, and Ruhs 2021). This divide is also present in public debates, which draw depictions of refugees as a threat to the nation or a burden to society (Ajzenman, Domínguez, and Undurrago 2021; Ceobanu 2011; Massari 2021; Nyers 1998), but also present images of refugees as victims of violence and oppression who deserve solidarity and humanitarian protection (Welfens 2023). Since the 1990s, Western democracies have experienced a wave of securitization, which has constructed refugees as a threatening homogeneous collective—a discourse that often takes precedence over concerns about refugees' security (Innes 2010). These different conceptions of what it means to be a refugee are employed in civil society discourses, party politics, and government policy-making in order to convince the public that refugee protection does (not) serve the national interest. They (re)shape the domestic political conflict, particularly when refugee protection becomes a salient political issue (Gessler and Hunger 2022; Mader and Schoen 2019; Mudde 2022). This tends to happen in democratic systems, where political parties use the issue of refugee protection to compete in elections and governments are under political pressure to address citizens' concerns and demands from civil society in order to maintain the public's support and safeguard their public image. Thereby, it is mostly right-wing nativist parties that politicize asylum policy as a wedge issue for electoral gains, whereas civil society organizations advocate for refugee rights. Nevertheless, the issue of granting asylum also pits conflicting domestic interests against one another in autocratic systems, where political leaders have more leeway to implement their preferred policy because they face fewer electoral and institutional constraints (Natter 2018; Abdelaaty 2021b).

Finally, domestic politics on refugee protection is not isolated from international developments, but is strongly shaped by the geo-political environment in which it takes place. While political sympathies for refugees declined in Western countries in the aftermath of the Cold War (Schultz, Lutz, and Simon 2021), the Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to more positive public attitudes toward refugees in European countries (Moise, Dennison, and

Kriesi 2024). These prominent cases show that political ideology and ethnic affinity determine which refugees' admission is perceived to provide reputational benefits and which to constitute an existential threat to the nation. Domestic politics continually (re-)interprets the concept of refugees and shapes the way in which people perceive the good's provisional costs and benefits. Different refugee emergencies and domestic political conditions lead to the renegotiation of the scope and character of the public good and thus, of the extent to which refugee protection is perceived as (a collective) good for the host country.

This argument implies that the public good does not exist in an original form solely determined by a particular interest structure. Instead, the idea of refugee protection is shaped by a particular socio-political environment and results from a process of preference formation and policy negotiation based on the pluralist competition of norms and interests, and their interpretation in the refugee context. Therefore, the nature of refugee protection as a good in international governance is the product of a process of political contestation about what is good (or bad) for society. Ultimately, societies disagree about what is in their best public interest. Understanding these disagreements and the way they shape states' preferences is essential if we want to make sense of the nature of the public good and of states' strategic behavior when it comes to providing the good.

Conclusions

The existence of refugees challenges states in intricate ways. Providing humanitarian protection requires collective efforts by the international community and the costs and benefits of refugee admission, or lack thereof, are distributed among states. This collective action perspective led Suhrke (1998) to develop the influential model of refugee protection as a global public good. We show that this model has inspired a fruitful research agenda, which has contributed to a significant evolution in the conceptualization of refugee protection. More specifically, scholars have relaxed the assumptions of the original model in favor of an impure public good of regional scope. While the literature on responsibility-sharing has adopted the public good theory as its common framework and theoretical reference, the underlying conceptual understanding of what makes refugee protection a public good is often surprisingly unsubstantiated.

We address this omission by identifying four types of benefits that states can derive from refugee protection— legitimacy, security, reputation, and development—and by showing that their nature varies from fully public to fully private. We also discuss the two main critiques of the public good model—its failure to account for norms, and the constructed nature of state interests. We conclude that

the nature of refugee protection is subject to continual political contestation in international relations and domestic politics.

We can use these insights to draw a series of implications for the nature of refugee protection in international governance and to develop recommendations for future research on a conceptual, theoretical, and empirical level. First, we have shown that states' provision of humanitarian protection is associated with various kinds of benefits. Therefore, refugee protection is a multi-dimensional good, and subsequently a joint product of benefits with different degrees of publicness. Moreover, refugee protection should be seen as an intermediate (public) good because it has proven instrumental to states' legitimacy, security, reputation, and development. Existing research typically builds on untested assumptions about collective benefits and individual costs. However, the interpretation of states' cooperative behavior in refugee protection should be based on careful conceptual work. Scholars should always specify the nature of the (public) good when applying collective action theory to asylum governance.

Second, we have argued that the way in which states respond to refugee emergencies follows international socialization and norm diffusion as well as a domestic political process of preference formation, and not just efficiency concerns based on an objective calculation of costs and benefits. We should therefore conceive of refugee protection as a (public) good that is neither predetermined nor fixed but rather varies across contexts and evolves over time. A political understanding of how states perceive the benefits of refugee protection more accurately explains asylum governance because it accounts for dynamics that a rational choice perspective based on the assumption of given and stable preferences may fail to detect. It is important to acknowledge that liberal states are often torn between the conflicting imperatives of human rights and representative democracy (cf. Hollifield 2004). In the political discourse, the legitimacy benefits compete with the contention that refugees undermine national sovereignty and national identity, the reputation benefits compete with the argument that countries are too lenient towards (and, therefore, too attractive to) unjustified asylum claims, the security benefits compete with the portrayal of refugees as a threat to the receiving country, and, finally, the development benefits compete with the idea that refugees place a burden on the receiving society. Factoring political contestation into our understanding of how the character and scope of the public good of refugee protection are established allows us to develop a more realistic theoretical perspective of how states carry out their strategic calculus regarding refugees.

Third, the conceptualization of refugee protection as a public good and the theory of states' preference formation allow us to identify the strategic game states play in international asylum governance and to assess their

likelihood of sharing protection responsibilities. The costs and benefits of protecting refugees are crucial to states' strategic behavior. We have shown that both vary significantly across contexts. This two-fold asymmetry is at the heart of states' strategic actions in asylum governance. We recommend a three-fold empirical approach to future endeavors seeking to incorporate this insight and to shed more light on why and when states contribute to refugee protection. First, we should study states' revealed preferences based on their discretionary contributions to refugee protection (e.g., support for refugee protection outside their territories). Second, we should measure the scope of the externalities of providing—or failing to provide—refugee protection to better understand the consequences of states' strategic choices. Third, we should study how political processes define states' conception of their national interests in the provision of refugee protection.

Overall, collective action theory has proven to be a valuable analytical tool for the study of asylum governance, as it focuses our attention on how refugees create international interdependencies, and on the strategic interactions and cooperative behaviors that result from them. Furthermore, the notion of a public good raises important questions about the nature of the production and consumption of refugee protection, as well as its overall desirability by states. At the same time, one should also be aware of its limitations. The classic theory assumes rational interests based on collective benefits and individual costs. These assumptions prove problematic in many contexts because refugee admission does not necessarily place a burden on the receiving country and its collective benefits are normatively loaded and politically contested. The logic of collective action has advanced the field by shedding light on the nature of the good of refugee protection in global governance. Future studies should conceptually clarify the public good model, critically assess its assumptions, and empirically evaluate objective externalities and cost-benefit perceptions.

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Notes

1 The first policy debates and preceding academic scholarship employ the term "burden-sharing," because it had been established in the collective action literature. However, more recently, scholars have tended to prefer the synonymous term "responsibility-sharing" because it avoids the normative connotation of refugees placing a burden on receiving countries. Accordingly, we use "responsibility-sharing" throughout.

2 Note that inspired by the public good model, scholars have also considered other good types to characterize refugee protection. For example, refugee protection is an individual private good from the perspective of refugees (Thielemann 2020, 170), refugee protection within the European Union has been categorized as a common pool resource (Chand and Markowski 2019; De Places and Deffains 2003), and the common European asylum policy has been classified as a club good (Hollifield and Faruk 2001).

3 We assume the benefits of a good's provision and the costs of its non-provision to be equivalent. Refugee governance seeks to simultaneously provide a public good and prevent a common bad.

4 In addition, every benefit that states derive from a good has a temporal dimension that ranges from immediate realization to development over time. We confine our discussion to the spatial dimension because it determines which actors are affected and to what extent and is therefore more consequential for the nature of the good.

5 Previous attempts at categorizing the benefits of refugee protection have only distinguished between security benefits and altruistic benefits (see Betts 2003; De Places and Deffains 2003).

6 Note that under certain circumstances, illiberal regimes might find it beneficial to weaponize refugee movements and undermine liberal norms in order to extract resources or political concessions from Western liberal democracies (Greenhill 2010).

7 A particular case of country-specific security risks is the use of refugee movements as a weapon of hybrid warfare to undermine a country's security (Greenhill 2010).

8 The reputation benefit has also been called altruistic benefit (see De Places and Deffains 2003, 348)

9 While normative scholars like Carens and Owen stress the resemblance of refugee protection to a global public good, empirical scholars like Betts and Thielemann tend to highlight its private benefits and to favor the joint-product model.

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