GLOBAL PUBLIC GOODS
CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS
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CICERO AND AUGUSTINE

In his treatise De re publica (which was written in the years 54 – 51 B.C. and has unfortunately only been partially preserved), Cicero has handed down his own conclusive definition of the Roman Republic. The book was a partisan contribution to a power struggle which about ten years later ended up causing the death of the Republic as well as Cicero himself. Cicero bases the republic on two concepts: first, consensus regarding the law, iuris consensus; second, and this is a wider definition, a common utility, utilitatis communio. This is the same word we later find almost literally translated into the English commonwealth where public utility and the state become two congruent concepts. The Latin phrase res publica literally means “public affair or thing,” as opposed to res privata. The word has a triple meaning: 1) The Roman Republic seen as an executive power; 2) The Republic’s constitution; and 3) The objective behind its actions, what we today call the public or common good.

Thus, Res publica signifies both an executive power acting according to the constitution, and also its purpose, the object towards which this power’s actions are directed.

In his definition, Cicero mainly underlines that the people are the supporting force in understanding the concept. “The Republic, then, is the people’s matter. The people should not be understood as a random crowd of individuals, but rather a population united in agreement about the law and a common utility.”