

The Triumph of the Commons

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Now is a time for solutions, where communities recognize their shared destinies and develop relationships that allow them to address regional challenges. This requires new ways of thinking and acting, however. This article proposes a paradigm shift that makes thriving, healthy, and just communities not only possible, but necessary.

In contrast, let us first consider the alternative. In 1968, Garrett Hardin warned the world of the risks of the “Tragedy of the Commons,” wherein individuals seeking to maximize their own personal benefits and minimize their costs could lead a community to expand beyond its shared carrying capacity and thus contribute to its own demise. The ethos of rampant individual rights and limited responsibilities creates a false assumption that one’s personal choices have little impact on others. It is easy to imagine that our small actions do not matter and that simple choices, for the sake of convenience, are insignificant. Such individual actions add up, however. In fact, in the case of consumption, each resource used or disposed of can add up quite quickly in our shared commons, such as parks, grazing lands, beaches, fisheries, our neighborhoods, and in the atmosphere, overall.

Recognizing that our individual actions matter is paramount for addressing our current social and environmental problems. Whether we are discussing democracy or hunger, pollution or environmental injustice, we need to consider the manifest and latent costs and consequences of our actions. From dropping a piece of litter or purchasing a bottle of water to planting a garden or simply voting, everything adds up, both the negatives and the positives. Rather than assuming that no one will notice our small actions (or lack thereof), whether for personal gain or for the benefit of others, it is essential to claim and explore the compound impact of each individual action on the collective whole.

In doing so, it is actually possible to invert the tragic phenomenon of spiraling down into negative feedback loops and create a positive spiral up into a “Triumph of the Commons” (Smith 2005; van Vugt 2009). The potential for this “Triumph” rests in individuals expanding their view of their place in the world and seeing not only the synergies of their actions but also their relationships to others, thereby reframing the rationality of making choices that benefit themselves through the benefit of the whole, of which they are obviously a part. Recognizing the roles that we play in our communities, understanding the accumulative effect of our choices, and claiming the reality that healthy and sustainable communities have vital benefits for the individual are essential to nurturing ourselves and the commons.

Yet, how would one define and claim a “commons”? Who or what would be included in this shared space? If one recognizes the interdependence of eco-systems, certainly the community becomes quite large and complex. If one includes the interests and rights of future generations, people would need to significantly expand the variables included in their cost-benefit analyses when making choices. The rich creation and sharing of knowledge, resources, and cultures place even greater dimensions within the equations. Such changes would likely require a dramatic paradigm shift.

Such a shift could honor the individual but also embrace the larger collective. For example, imagine what the United States would be like if it had a Bill of Responsibilities, in addition to its Bill of Rights. What responsibilities would be included? How would we reframe our choices to recognize the consequences of our actions on others? And, how would we address the inevitable resistance?

It is in the bridge of the commons that we find our unity. This is a model and reality that serve the Regional Centers of Expertise (RCE) well. Through the United Nations University-Institute for Advanced Studies (UNU-IAS), RCEs are encouraged to foster collaboration, support outreach, nurture transformative education and research, and set examples of participatory governance which engage individuals and communities to increase their collective impact through education for sustainable development.

When one combines such practices with a paradigm shift that transforms the implied logic of the "Tragedy of the Commons," the potential for massive cultural and structural change is possible. Indeed, one can envision the many steps needed to fuel the spiraling up of positive individual and collective actions. Educating ourselves about the world, making more conscious choices in the products we consume, getting to know our neighbors, volunteering in our communities, supporting local businesses, and finding joy in nature are all places to start. Through such a process, together, I have faith that we can achieve a "Triumph of the Commons."

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