

For a society to be sustainable, the combination of population and capital and technology would need to be configured so that the material living standard is adequate and secure for everyone and fairly distributed (Meadows et al, 2004). Hear again these words, *without compromising the ability of future generations* Such a society, with a sustainable ecological footprint, would be vastly different from the one in which most people now live.

WHY A SOCIETY MAKES MISTAKES

Before the Agricultural Revolution, land was more or less public, or at least territorial as far as tribes and nomadic groups were concerned. Once rooted in place, private property and public domain became meaningful realities.

Do you remember the story that Prof. Garret Hardin (1968) called “The tragedy of the commons” when describing the problem of population? Picture a pasture that is open to all and that each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the commons. As rational beings each herdsman seeks to maximize his own gain. On the plus side is the fact that he receives the proceeds of selling an additional animal. On the negative side are the effects of overgrazing and pollution, however, they are shared by all the herdsmen. Each herdsman concludes that the only sensible course is to add another animal to his herd, then another, and another. Every rational herdsman reaches the same conclusion.

Therein lies the tragedy! Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit – in a world that is, itself, limited. The tragedy of the commons reappears with pollution and the disposal of wastes into “the commons”.

A failure of group decision making is that no one says “Stop it!” Prof. Diamond (2004) suggests a hierarchy of 4 decision points that affect actions, reactions, and implementation.

1. Does a group anticipate a problem? Often there is no prior relevant experience of such problems.
2. Does a group fail to recognize a problem when it has arrived? Some problems develop so slowly they are nearly imperceptible (like the leaching of soil nutrients, the loss of one more tree, the addition of one more kg of contaminant).
3. Even when a problem is recognized does a group try to solve the problem? All too often not, because of what’s called rational behavior on the part of the group. This is the story of ‘the tragedy of the commons’. It is especially frequent when a decision making elite can insulate itself from