Management of Commons with a Proper Way

A critical review Hardin’s essay on the tragedy of commons

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Abstract—This article criticises the Hardin’s argument and proposes the other view that a community can solve their common property sustainability. Commons or resources can be useful but sometimes could be dangerous for human and its environment. The resources can be vulnerable if the human who have to manage fail. This argument is a basic of Hardin’s view. Hardin argues every people only pay attention on their needs or their private property and they do not care with other stakeholders. As a result, human always fail to manage the resources and also the Hardin’s view does not deal with the community rule. Hardin only proposes that the government rule is an appropriate way to maintain the commons. The failure of government policies and private interest is quite common in the world so this essay argues that community itself can manage the sustainable resources and reduce the tragedy of commons.

Keywords: Tragedy of common, common property, private property, state property and community property

I. INTRODUCTION

This article, which attempts to criticise Hardin’s argument will focus on the philosophy of Hardin’s argument. Garret Hardin has made an achievement in ecological studies that consumed a lot of scientists’ energy. Hardin published his essay “the tragedy of commons” in 1968[1]. Commons in Hardin’s thesis is an area where people can utilise the land because the field is freely used and nobody owns it. He looks at the case of the use of pasture space in the UK, where every herdsman just pays attention to finding opportunities for themselves. As a result, the degradation of the field has steadily increased. Therefore, the background of Hardin’s essay has occurred in rural England. Hardin who is a professed stalker of taboos already spent his life demonstrating a lot of issues, from liberalism to humanitarianism, and his books created enormous controversy and discourse among scientists. As a result, the scientists also spent their time and energy looking at Hardin’s view [1-2]. Hardin’s argument could be analysed in a critical context, particularly in dealing with beneficial issues for society and environmental problems [3-4].

Moreover, this essay will be divided into three parts. First, it will discuss Hardin’s argument what the basic reasoning and belief that Hardin used to describe land management. Second, it will try to investigate and then criticise Hardin’s argument. In this part will be explained the opponent of Hardin’s view. And in the last one, it will seek to conclude Hardin’s perspective and the other approach that can be a solution to the weakness of Hardin’s opinion.

There are some key arguments that Hardin proposes. Firstly, he argues that problems in the world which occur cannot be solved by technical solutions [1]. For instance, the question of population and a lack of food cannot be answered by producing a new wheal strain. Hardin also emphasizes that only a finite population can solve the problem of a finite world but it could not happen [1]. Therefore, we have to produce fundamental action to solve the world’s problems. Secondly, everyone has a personal interest that leads to them maximizing their own interests. He explains that in the pasture locale where the field is free and nobody is an owner, as a result every herdsman will maximise their advantage by adding more sheep into the land. If this has been done by each herdsman, the pasture field will decrease and the resource will be eroded [1]. Thirdly, he states that freedom in commons leads to ruin for all. Hardin also says that the herdsman as individuals, they are individualistic, rational and just utility-maximizing [1].

Obviously, there are several solutions that Hardin suggested [1]. First of all, ethical solution, which can assist us to understand what we can do and cannot do. In the name of conscience, people have self-eliminating control over their attitudes and activities. It can be used to eliminate human desire for exploiting resources. However, Hardin says that people cannot reduce their needs and no one can deal with this problem and everyone always fails to solve their problems [1]. Even in the community or groups, they are not able to manage their needs. For example, if the legal system of private property is suggested as a solution, it can fail again. The private property is unfair and people who have freedom always ruin the resources. Therefore, Hardin suggests a government law could be a solution to this problem [1]. It is clear that the basic assumption from Hardin is the herdsman as an individual is egocentric, less cooperative and an unsocialised-person. In relating this issue, Carter also says that it seems the individually rational choice may create an irrational outcome [5]. Besides, Hardin thinks that they can live alone and they do not need to cooperate with each other. Everyone as in Hardin’s argument is individualist and economically oriented as he concludes that herdsman make decisions independently without any communication,
community and authority rule. Moreover, his argument is an institutional-economic view that unless resources are held within a private or state property regime, it is in every herdsman's interest to maximise the use of resources [6]. As a solution, Hardin argues that commons property can belong to the state or government. Government can reduce the tragedy by using commons and also can manage the property in the name of public interest. It is namely that public property can solve the problem of land management and resources [1].

II. CRITICISMS OF HARDIN’S THOUGHT

In terms of approach, Hardin is influenced by and also learns from the Malthus paradigm. Malthus, who looks at the relation between population and the consequences of world food production, says that the world cannot produce enough food to provide for all the people around the world. This hypothesis also is reflected by Hardin’s argument on Hardin’s other essay “Living on a lifeboat” and “Lifeboat Ethics: the Case Against Helping the Poor”. Both of them describe a metaphorical story where people live in the lifeboat with limited resources and then the story reflects that only rich people can survive [7]. The metaphor is a relationship between poor countries and rich countries, between developed and under developed countries where a developed country could desert under developed countries as soon as they want to save their country. The idea that only a finite population can solve a finite world is a clear argument that has been affected by Malthus’ thought such as when he says an increasing population could not fit within the world’s carrying capacity [8].

Berkes also claims that the root of the tragedy of commons is biased towards the Darwin and Adam Smith approach where these approaches enter and are used to enter an area of resources management [9]. He argues that Hardin is overemphasising competition and underestimating cooperation in ecological relationships and that Hardin’s concept reflects the western view of how to use resources where there is always an opposition between competition and mutualism. In addition, there are criticisms that attempt to examine Hardin’s view and here I have tried to explain Hardin’s view not only to criticise it but also suggest solutions. There are several solutions that can deal with the tragedy of the commons where some scientists support private ownership, some support state property and the others support community ownership. And then, this essay wants to try to explain one by one and describe them properly.

III. THE PRIVATE OR MARKET SOLUTION

The first argument that Hardin put forward is extremely individualistic as an economic actor is just thought to look after him/her self. It is the basic argument of private property. For instance, the arguments that every herdsman will try to add one more animal to gain one more benefit and everyone just looks for their benefit are a purely economic view. Contextual evidence is used in the tragedy of commons. It happens because the stake-holders only think of short-term production where their investments are too high and long-term where as the stock is limited [10]. Therefore, this argument has been understood as a path way to occupy the common property by the private. Significantly, this is a trigger for a controversy that tried to examine Hardin’s ideas to real situations. In particular, some market actors have read Hardin's view as specifically advocating the privatisation of commonly owned-resources. As a result, the resources that have traditionally been maintained communally by the local community have been privatised.

Many common properties have changed ownership, from community to private. It is unclear whether these situations have been affected by Hardin’s argument. According to Ostrom, China and Siberia have succeeded in involving privatisation programs that change commons or state property to private [11-12]. Also in the US the number of PWCs have risen and that has created trouble for the utilization of shorelines, contributed to a disproportionate increase in accidents and injuries, and this condition led to the destruction of aquatic natural resources [11]. In addition, traditional water resource users feel jeopardized by the invasion of their space by new, faster users [11]. We should consider what rules and norms are shared by others and in many other contexts, when new users arrive through migration, so that they do not force a similar understanding of how a resource industrial plant should be used [11]. The condition, however, is different than Hardin’s assumption. Therefore, it provokes criticism. His assumption is 'bias' liberalism where people can gain benefit as much as he/she wants and then this view is affected by western contexts. The contexts that led to Hardin’s assumption does not exist in every situation. Every actor does not have the same level of capabilities and preferences that support their action to encroach on the resources and the result is different. [13]. In reality few people can own and lead the market with the same level and access because most of them are inferior, through poverty and powerlessness. For instance, only 1% of market actors occupy 70% of land available for ownership in the UK [12]. In addition, the tragedy of common by Hardin’s assumption will exist separate from non exclusion phenomena, but this could not happen in reality [13]. In fact, no one can put or act on the resources as much as he/she wants where they have to consider other actors and also codes of conduct. Overall, it seems that Hardin’s assumption encouraging a change in ownership from community to private is weak and less implementable.

IV. STATE AS A SOLUTION

Government regulation could solve the tragedy of common where government can be involved in the input and output process to bring the land usage in line with community and social needs. Hardin suggest that government can act as a public representative to create effective regulation and also tax policy [1]. This hypothesis assumes that the government is transparent and effective in allocating resources where people can receive incentive and disincentive depending on their contribution. Government should create incentive based-policy where this policy will motivate voluntary research, action and conservation to stake holders or landowners.
In other words, government policy has a social function as well that can be used to distribute the resources by balancing social cost, optimum production and sustainability of resources. There are several characteristics of Government policies, which are centralized-regulation, standardized and limited use of technology. The law is formal and has a coercion element which can enforce the rule. However, the ideal condition is quite far from the reality, with some evidence that governments are ineffective, inefficient and irresponsible because government policies usually are uniform and centralized [10, 14]. For instance, abuse of power and less use of discretion could be revealed in several ways such as corruption. Corruption makes the circumstances of both resources and the community worse. Benson, who has conducted research on the common pool utilities, says that state apparatuses are less commitment to allocating resources and then they are on law enforcement [14].

In conclusion, government can create policy to solve and reduce the tragedy of commons because the government has rights and powers to implement it. Hardin’s assumption could be true if the government policies are transparent, efficient, effective and adaptive. Nevertheless, in reality this is not always existed because many governments fail to create and implement their policies.

V. COMMUNITY AS A SOLUTION

In terms of individualistic and economic actors, Angus suggests that Hardin’s argument started with the unproven argument which is that every herdsman always wants to enlarge their herds, but even if the herdsman wanted to behave like Hardin’s assumption, he could not do it unless certain conditions existed [15]. Also, Angus said that Hardin mistreated the term of self-regulation by the communities involved [15]. In addition, self-regulation processes such as those that occur in the community can reduce the overuse of land [15]. Besides, all stake holders can create an internal rule which makes clear what, when and how to produce the best crops. By cooperating with each other they can manage to provide for the public good [10]. It seems that even if people are rational and have an economic perspective, they have to consider their belief and those of others.

In terms of cooperation, Barclay, who conducted an experiment where people played some games and models using resources, argues that cooperation and coalition in reciprocal altruism are integrated in human relations and it can lead to immense benefit and reduce costs [8]. In the other words, human behaviour responds appropriately to prevailing conditions in the social and environment. So, herdsman will use commons property in ways that lead either to overuse or sustainability depending on the circumstances. Neither Hardin’s conclusions nor management is inevitable [9]. In other words, as humankind people depend on others and need to cooperate with each other.

In term of communication, a community who uses communication effectively can create several conditions such as reaching higher benefits and developing their goals faster than communities which are less good at communication [4]. It is clear that each people in the community who wants to use the commons property should ask and communicate with each other. For example, in Indonesian society it is well-known a Hak ulayat [16]. This is a rule that every community member would follow the rule if they want to plant, seed or cultivate anything in some community area. According to this term “Hak ulayat”, the land belongs to the community but every member can utilises as much as appropriate to the community rule (Hak ulayat). As a result, the resources can be managed in sustainable ways and the community can utilise the field as well.

In terms of institutionalism, Hardin does not clear that either community or individual can create organisation and institution where this regulate the individual and community act and behaviour. Scientist argues that local institution can effectively to control, maintain and manage the resources sustain [4]. In other words, this argument has been supported by Ostrom’s opinion that institutionalism approach can be a solution of tragedy of common where the group of users makes a regulation how much, what manner and when the users can produce and use the resources. It also could be created a better setting for using commons [2]. Also, Peluso argues that broader global trends and market or government incentives for privatisation and individualization of resource access have not unilaterally transformed the common aspects of community and descent-groups claim of property rights [17]. In addition, Zerner says that the privatisation and penetration are strong; the community resistance are stronger to keep and use their resources [18]. Therefore, the Hardin’s view that marginalises cooperative values and just supports individualistic values is debatable. Communities and individual as a resources user have characteristic faiths which create people and community more aware to maintain resources with sustainable ways. Collective action can lead to successful managing resources and allocating of resources [19]. However, we should consider that community rights will be managed properly. It is to minimise anarchism on commons.

In terms of contemporary issues, many counties have been attacked serious environmental problem such as degradation of resources, deforestation, desertification and air pollution where this problem effected in their country and also the others. Because these are trans-border problems, we must create a comprehensive solution as well. In terms of common property, the belief that every people have to communicate, cooperate and support each other. It is relevant to encourage global institutions that can deal with global common issues.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Hardin’s essay is based on his experiences as a biologist that creates an argument likes each people always compete with other and then they are less cooperative each other. Secondly, the Hardin’s view is ‘bias’ western culture where individual people rights is higher than community rights, where private property always are used to provide the landowner interest and less of social function. Thirdly, this
essay also could be fit for west context where liberalism and capitalism value are more valuable than community value. Fourthly, it could reveal because of Darwin and Adam smith belief that influence Hardin preference.

The main point of Hardin’s arguments suggests some assumption. First of all, the problem in the world cannot solve with a technical solution and then every actor just pay attention with their needs and utilise maximise on resources. In addition, people are difficult to deal with either the others or their community as a result it lead to the tragedy of commons. The suggestion is either private ownership or private ownership can be a solution for the tragedy of commons. As a result, some ecologists criticise his belief and argue that the belief is not robust enough. The criticisms are such as, Hardin bias western context and it is irrelevant to explain current and under-developing countries issues; private and state ownership could not solve the tragedy of common because each paradigm has some weaknesses; communities have self-regulating and value that could be suitable to solve the tragedy of commons. In terms of contemporary issues, Hardin’s belief is difficult to explain the current issues. Many counties have been attacked serious environmental problem such as degradation of resources, deforestation, desertification and air pollution where this problem effected in their country and also the others. Because these are trans-border problems, we must create a comprehensive solution as well. In terms of common property, the belief that every people have to communicate, cooperate and support each other. It is relevant to encourage global institution that can deal with global common issues.

It is clear that Hardin’s argument has weaknesses. Even though, we should appreciate with Hardin’s argument that argument succeed to raise the tragedy on the common property issues where the issues have been discoursed for a long time. Besides, he attempts to solve and to find the best path of the problem in the world.

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