

# Common Goods and Sustainable Development

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## Abstract

Common good is a solution that has little meaning in the modern economy. Historical experience shows that, in the past, it has significantly contributed to the stability and development of many local communities. However, it can still be useful. The purpose of this article is to compare the benefits of the common good with the objectives of sustainable development. The common good can be evaluated in two ways, as a product or process. The first of these ways is based on an analysis of the characteristics of the good, and the other one on the processes supporting its creation. Product approach is more common in economic theory, but a process analysis of the common good is more adequate to indicate its significant advantages in the context of sustainable development. The results obtained indicate that the described solution can be successfully applied in the framework of the concept of sustainable development. In most cases, this is due to the integration of the social and economic needs of society. In some cases, environmental aspects can also cause a lot of benefits. The article was written based on critical analysis of available literature.

*Keywords: Commons, common pool resources, sustainable development*

## 1. Introduction

In economics, the common good is a product or service in case of which it is not possible to exclude someone from the consumption, but at the same time, its use is characterised by competitiveness. This means that everyone has the right to use the good, but in case of its use by one person this right is limited in case of others. In this article, this approach has been referred to as the product approach. One of the most often quoted examples of the common good is a common pasture, which may be used by all members of a community, but when one of them will allow their animals to graze there, others have no possibility of grazing their animals any longer, due to the lack of space.

Historically, especially in agrarian economies, the common good was widely applied. Along with the industrial revolution and dissemination of proprietary rights, the popularity of this solution started declining. An additional factor reducing the interest in the common good was the mechanisation of agriculture, which resulted in a decrease in the demand for labour force and a need to perform many works jointly.

As opposed to the product approach to the common good, I identify the process approach which emphasises the way of organising processes accompanying the creation of this good. I define the common good in the process context as such a product, service or knowledge, which are created on the initiative of a community by means of bottom-up processes, not imposed by institutions representing the state (regardless of the level). The essence of the process approach is to highlight bottom-up decisions accompanying management of a specific resource. In this way, we may identify three forms of supervision: direct (related to private goods), public (resulting from the power of the

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state or its authorities) and social (resulting from bottom-up management processes). This is a fundamental element distinguishing modern common goods from other goods. In recent years, we may observe an increase in the interest in the common good, both in the theory of economics and in business practice. The objective of this paper is to indicate the possibilities of using the common good in implementing the concept of sustainable development. For this reason, the benefits resulting from processes accompanying the creation of the common good have been compared to the assumptions of the concept of sustainable development.

The text is based on a critical analysis of the available literature.

## 2. Outline of the Evolution in the Approach to the Common Good in the Theory of Economics

As noted above, there are two approaches to explaining the essence of the common good – product approach and process approach. The distinction between the goods, also referred to as common resources, in terms of their properties is a basis of the product approach. Such a method of analysing the goods is deeply rooted in the history and results from business practice dating back at least to the middle ages and from the foundations of classical economics. In the literature, it is indicated that the product approach has already been noticed by Aristotle, who claimed that this is “the good proper to and attainable only by the community, yet individually shared” (Dupré, 1993, p. 687).

As the industrial revolution progressed, property rights developed and the role of economics in the economy increased, the importance of the common goods was declining. The typical common goods, such as the right to harvest wood in the forests of a feudal lord, common use of pastures or fisheries as well as social regulation of water management policies were losing their importance (cf. Wall, 2014; Weston & Bollier, 2013), even if before, for hundreds of years, those solutions had been one of the foundations of the sustainability of local communities.

In the theory of economics, a culmination finishing the common good was an article by G. Hardin (1968) entitled *Tragedy of the Commons*. The author indicated in it, on an example of a common pasture, that the human pursuit of maximising profits and an inclination for fraud must lead to the overexploitation of the common good, and, consequently, to its depletion and even steppe-formation. Hardin assumed that handing the good over to private persons would better secure long-term access to the good. Similar arguments have appeared even before (Gordon, 1954; Lloyd, 1833), but were not so popular.

On a basis of the claims by Hardin, in the theory of economics the validity of the existence of common goods has been started being negated. However, regardless of the trends occurring in the mainstream of economics<sup>1</sup>, few scientists still dealt with that

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<sup>1</sup> The mainstream of economics is a term which became common at the end of the 20th century (Colander, 2000). It is assumed that its basis is Neoclassical economics, supplemented with the issues of the Keynesian school (Stankiewicz, 1998). In particular, we should mention the *homo oeconomicus* paradigm and the leading role of the market. Often, the mainstream is characterised by a set of assumptions, i.e. the economy can be described by economic laws, is made up of independent individuals, is stable, rational and efficient, is

issue. Among them, we should mention: J.H. Dales (1968), C.W. Clark (1980), P.S. Dasgupta i G.M. Heal (1980), K. Rexroth (1974), Ch. Hill (1984), P.J. Proudhon (1994), Ch. Fourier (1996), D. Lummis (1997), J.H. Mitchel (1998), and in particular E. Ostrom (1990).

As a result of the information revolution, which has taken place since the 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the emergence of new opportunities for cooperation, *inter alia*, via the Internet), we may observe a slow Renaissance of the common goods. The culmination of this trend was the fact that in 2009 E. Ostrom was awarded with the Swedish National Bank's Prize i.e. the Nobel Prize in Economics. It must be stressed, however, that this increased interest in the common goods is not versatile. Still, the foundation of the economy are private goods, possibly supplemented by public goods.

The increased interest also stems from a change in the approach to the common good. Currently, it is not characterised by the properties of goods, but by the way in which the good is organised, i.e. by the process approach. The change results from the difficulties in the practical distinction between public goods and common goods, as well as, partially, between private goods, club goods and common goods. In turn, the process approach indicating the essence of bottom-up processes accompanying the creation or management of the common good, enables the precise distinction between the goods. In particular, this applies to new kinds of goods related to the activity on the Internet, mainly the knowledge which is increasingly often shared on the *creative commons* basis.

The process approach also refutes the arguments by G. Hardin used against the common good. His thinking was based solely on the operation of market rights, while the essence of the process approach is, *inter alia*, the existence of control institutions exercising supervision of the regularity of access to good. Without such institutions, we are dealing with a resource available to all, and not with the common good. The problem of misinterpretation by Hardin was already highlighted by A. Roberts (1979), however, it was just the reasoning by E. Ostrom (1990) which led to the rehabilitation of the common goods in the theory of economics. However, this does not mean their widespread acceptance by the theorists of this science.

The process approach also resolves the often discussed problem of proprietary rights. It is believed that nowadays it is of secondary importance, as the common goods may be both private and public (e.g. municipal property, state property or open access property) (Fenney, Berkes, McCay, & Acheson, 1990). Consequently, D. Bollier (2013) indicates that the proprietary right may be only a criterion of distinction between the common good and the public good. This interpretation is no longer valid due to the growing group of private public goods, i.e. goods generated by private entities to satisfy the public needs and under supervision of the state, for example, prison service.

The above brief considerations indicate that the process approach to the common good is currently the most adequate way of its description. Regardless of the change in the approach, it must be assumed that in the economy the common good will be a complementary, rather than a basic, solution. This means that, contrary to the ideas such as economy for the common good (Felber, 2010) in the foreseeable future, the basis for

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gender-neutral, economic risk may be managed by means of statistics, economic growth can continue forever, is always good and will make us happy (Orrell, 2010).

the economy will be the individually managed private goods. However, in reasonable cases (not necessarily very rare) the creation of the common goods based on the process approach may bring additional benefits, of which we should remember.

### **3. Sustainable Development – Basic Assumptions**

Sustainable development “is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987). The essence of this concept is thus ensuring the long term development. In practice, it comes down to two basic problems (WCED, 1987):

- „the concept of ‘needs’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs.”

The consequence of the concept of sustainable development defined in this way is a need to maintain the balance of relations between the economic sphere and the social and environmental spheres. This balance means that actions taken in one of these areas should take into account the effects induced in the others. Such a holistic approach to development is not an end in itself, it is only the way to ensure the sustainability of development.

The biggest challenge in implementing sustainable development is to transform the economy based on the idea of profit maximising into the one taking into account non-economic aspects of development, which in economics are referred to as externalities. There are several concepts of change in the approach to economics which allow to implement sustainable development in the economic sphere. A comprehensive proposal called the economy of sustainable development was presented by H. Rogall (2009). Sustainability in economics was described in a much simpler and more transparent manner by H. Daly (1990) who created three principles of ecological economics, stating that:

- the use of renewable resources should not exceed the capacity of their regeneration,
- the use of non-renewable resources should not exceed the speed of capital expansion by their renewable substitutes,
- emission of waste should not exceed the natural capacity of the environment in terms of absorbing harmful substances.

Based on these principles, recently the concept of economics of enough has been created (Coyle, 2012; Dietz & O’Neil, 2013) stressing a need to reduce the consumption and to focus only on satisfying the real, not artificially created, needs. Unfortunately, all these approaches are characterised by a common limitation, i.e. they do not take into account one of the basic human needs i.e. the need to stand out. The easiest way to demonstrate our superiority is to compare our wealth with the wealth of other people. This attitude leads to the excessive consumption, exploitation of the environment and increased inequalities. None of the economic concepts of sustainability indicates how humans could satisfy their need to compare with others based on the non-property (not related

to the economy) values<sup>2</sup>. A method to overcome this issue is the concept of green growth pushed by the United Nations Environmental Programme, UNEP. However it is far from being perfect. In addition, in the eyes of many economists, it is not considered sustainable but only a half-measure leading to the sustainability, however, is characterised by a greater probability of implementation.

The result of difficulties with a simple translation of the assumptions of sustainable development into the economic language is a need to seek such solutions within the existing mainstreams of economics, which would make it possible to follow towards the sustainability and to make a gradual change in the human attitude to the consumption, growth and profit maximisation. One of these solutions may be the common good.

#### 4. Common Good in the Context of Sustainability

The assessment of the ability to use the common good for implementing sustainable development should be limited to the process approach only. The product approach does not allow to assess the goods in the context of sustainable development. The sustainability criteria, for example, assessing the good using the Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) may be applied to all types of the goods, thus, it is not possible to use them to indicate the differences between the common goods, and, for example, private or public goods. Products belonging to each of these groups may be classified both as sustainable and as not sustainable. Belonging to one of the groups does not determine the attitude towards the sustainability. On the other hand, the process approach, focused on stressing the importance of processes accompanying the creation of the good, allows to indicate certain characteristics that may be relevant in the context of sustainable development. In the literature, there is no consensus regarding the convergence of relations between the common good and the idea of sustainable development. We can find there statements indicating many common features of both concepts (Wall, 2014), and their differences (Jamka, 2014).

Below, there are the considerations related to the assessment of the common good in the context of the basic economic aspects of sustainable development, namely:

- long term approach,
- attitude towards the consumption and profit maximisation,
- holistic approach, i.e. the integration of economic, social and environmental elements
- externalities.

The above-mentioned issues are interrelated, as a result of which, some arguments give the answer to several of them.

As defined by the Brundtland Commission, the starting point is the long term approach, i.e., the ability to use for a long time the resources providing access to the good. Historical experience shows that the sustainability is one of the fundamental values in case of traditional common goods based on the environmental resources. The examples of common pastures, fisheries or water reservoirs and irrigation channels are an effective

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<sup>2</sup> Naturally, many considerations of sustainable development contain the issues of changing the value and description of wealth, but irrespective of their logic, there are no firm social grounds for changing this paradigm.

solution providing the resource availability not only during the periods of abundance but also of scarcity (cf. Ostrom, 1990). The fair distribution of the available resources result from bottom-up institutional solutions monitoring the accuracy of distribution in such a way so as to ensure the most equal possible access to the resource for all community members entitled to use the common good. In practice, access to the resource was regulated in such a way so as to ensure, in the long term (in the next season) its restoration capacity. Such measures enabled not only the long-term possibility of using the common good, but also were crucial for the sustainability and development of local communities, as they ensured the safety of equal access regardless of the property diversity.

Contemporarily, the range of resources which can be used to create the common good has been extended. In sustainable development, an emphasis is put on environmental issues, as it is them on which the survival of human civilisation is dependent. In the concept of the common good, the environmental resources are also referred to as basic resources, although this is more due to their historical importance, rather than priority treatment. On a par with them, other elements are considered, which results from the psychological foundations of economics of the common good. Consequently, capital (resources) is divided into three groups: tangible (referring to physical objects), human (specifying the characteristics, properties of individuals) and social (related to relations among people). Such a wide formulation may also be seen in sustainable development, though intangible resources are often marginalised. The triad of basic types of governance (economic, social and environmental) being a focus of sustainable development is a reason for which, in addition to material resources and environmental processes, of importance are also social relations (intangible phenomena). This may be evidenced by, *inter alia*, a postulate to isolate a separate group i.e. cultural governance from social capital and to make it more important (Thorsby, 2010). Consequently, it may be concluded that the differences in perceiving the resources are inconsiderable and both these concepts are similar.

The above general considerations on sustainable development show that the consumption, and particularly its reasonable reduction<sup>3</sup>, is of vital importance for implementing this concept. As already mentioned, an important feature of sustainable development is a need to reduce the consumption. There is even a separate concept of the sustainable consumption, i.e. the one which should be carried out simultaneously in four key dimensions: ecological, social, psychological and temporal (cf. Kielczewski, 2004). As the psychological dimension we should understand the situation, where the level of material consumption does not lead to deprivation of the psychological needs, such as: good relations with other people, free time, good family ties and the quality of the natural environment. In turn, the temporal dimension relates to a need to provide that future generations with possibilities to meet their needs similar to those which are

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<sup>3</sup> By the reasonable reduction, I mean the reduction in the excessive consumption e.g. fashion-related, i.e. not leading to a growth in utility from the point of view of humans. As an example, we may take the marketing of new series of the same model of a car which differ only in terms of small decorations and not of technical parameters. The reduction in the consumption does not apply to the first-level needs, such as a need to eat or have shelter. The consumption aimed at providing a decent life should even grow, so as to meet the needs of the poor in accordance with the declarations contained in the Brundtland Report.

available now.

In case of the common good, the issue of the consumption is of secondary importance. Acting for the sustainability of environmental resources entails a need to use them in a way guaranteeing the sustainability of access, and thus preventing overexploitation. It is difficult, however, to determine whether such an approach to the consumption may be regarded as similar to the sustainable approach, we may only conclude that it is not contradictory. It seems that with a high degree of generalisation, the statement about the convergence of views on the consumption may be assumed as true, within the framework of these two concepts.

The focus on the sustainability and related partial approval for reducing the consumption make us believe that both concepts deviate from the Neoclassical assumption concerning profit maximisation. This action, however, is not an objective of these concepts, but a side effect of implementing the priorities. In addition, this change is substantiated in a slightly different manner. What is stressed within the framework of sustainable development is a need to focus on development at the expense of growth. Of importance is to take care of externalities which are not valued in the economic calculation and are relevant to at least one of three basic types of governance. In this way, intangible values, resulting from the environmental and social aspects, are also taken into account. In economics, such a change is known as the transition from the economic optimum to the social optimum.

Within the framework of the common good, the lack of interest in maximising profits results from the overriding value of safety in the community of users of the good. In this way, we can also talk about the pursuit of the social optimum, however, it seems that it is understood in a much narrower way than in case of the concept of sustainable development.

Implementing the concept of sustainable development comes down to a need to perceive problems in a holistic manner, i.e., to pay simultaneous attention to economic, social and environmental consequences of the actions taken. Formally, this approach is not visible within the framework of the theory of the common good. In practice, in many cases, we may find its implementation. Using the example of the common pasture, we may indicate that the members of the local community holding this pasture voluntarily choose to limit their own material benefits to the benefit of taking account of social needs (ensuring the sustainability and safety of community development) and environmental needs – the exploitation of the pasture may not exceed its regeneration capacity. As a result, they manage the available resource in a sustainable way. Similar relations may be indicated in case of joint fisheries, when the fishermen will be able to independently monitor the accuracy of allocating appropriate water bodies (provided on a rotation basis), at the expense of potential benefits which they could achieve by occupying, on a priority basis, the best places. However, monitoring of catches leads to more sustainable management of marine resources and to ensuring the stability of income for all fishermen entitled to use the common good.

Externalities are the last fundamental issue determining the relation between the common good and sustainable development. In general, economic theories describing sustainable development indicate the need for the greatest possible internalisation of externalities. In particular, this applies to negative effects causing costs in the natural

environment. External benefits (positive effects) should also be valued, so as to stress additional values that people receive as a result of the sustainable use of goods and resources. The internalisation of externalities is very difficult due to the lack of direct tools for their valuation. In turn, indirect solutions are often burdened with numerous defects preventing the precise definition of the value of an externality<sup>4</sup>. In the context of sustainable development, the internalisation of externalities is necessary to obtain a complete picture of the effects caused by certain activities. In accordance with the aforementioned holistic approach, this picture must take into account not only economic, but also social and environmental impacts of decisions made.

In the theory of common goods, common externalities are not analysed almost at all. The only effect not valued in monetary terms, which is important from the point of view of the common goods, is the safety of persistence and development of communities. In practice, this is limited to providing eligible persons with fair access to the common good in a way enabling the permanent, long-term use of this good. The value of the safety understood in this way is not, however, valued, and thus it is not internalised from the point of view of economics and the economy.

In practice, common goods to a much larger extent contribute to creating positive externalities than, for example, private goods. This applies mainly to the social aspects, for example, the creation of knowledge in the group, strengthening the relations among members of the group, mutual assistance and increasing interpersonal contacts, greater propensity to constructive action, the need to negotiate and reach a compromise, which also translates to other relations within a community. We may mention even more similar externalities arising from the common good. They result from a necessity of cooperation both at the stage of creating the common good and later control of its proper use. The identification of such positive externalities is possible only in case of the process approach to the common good when bottom-up institutions related to common goods are analysed.

Social externalities may occur regardless of the scale of the impact of the common good, i.e. they may be both local and global. Even in case of the Internet goods, when the subject of cooperation is to create knowledge, a side effect is an increase in social trust.

Sometimes, positive externalities are observed in case of natural resources. Usually, this applies only to traditionally understood common goods associated with such sectors as agriculture, forestry or fishing. These externalities usually are limited to the above-mentioned sustainability of the use of existing renewable resources and ensuring their regeneration capacity. Nowadays, their importance is much smaller than in the past, but they are worth being remembered in the context of ensuring the sustainability of the functioning of local communities, especially those settled in areas remote from other population centres and with difficult climate conditions. In case of such groups, the common good can be crucial for survival.

The above short characteristics of the common goods related to the main assumptions of sustainable development does not exhaust the subject, but allows to conclude that their use is reasonable (in appropriate circumstances) so as to implement the concept of sustainable development. In addition to the above issues, we can also identify a number

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<sup>4</sup> More on externalities cf. (Prandecki, Gajos, & Buks, 2015).



of other common features of both concepts, however, their importance is secondary, therefore, they have not been included herein. These features may be, *inter alia*, negation of the Neoclassical approach to the economy, recognition of the essential role of institutions in the economy, or an increasing need to treat some resources on a planetary basis.<sup>5</sup>

In this regards, we may indicate that the destruction of the ozone layer, or excessive emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, are typical examples of the tragedy of the common resources that are not properly monitored or managed, and thus they are not common goods. The creation of a bottom-up system to control and reduce emissions of harmful factors would allow to solve global environmental problems in the same way as the medieval communities solved the problems resulting from a need to regulate access to common pastures. At the global level, management of such goods is much more difficult, but possible through appropriate international agreements, in which the role of the units is taken over by the states. However, still we may notice the same benefits, i.e. firstly, the solution of the basic problem and secondly, as an externality, the increased tendency to solve problems in a peaceful cooperative manner. The only difference between the pasture and global environmental problems is the level of risk. Depletion of the pasture or unfair access to it resulted in social costs visible in the medium term, usually within one year. In contrasts, the effects of global environmental changes are felt in a much longer period, which results in a time lag between the cause and effect and, consequently, the apparent loss (or rather, intentional ignoring in the national and international policy) of the causal connection and the lack of taking actions adequate to the needs.

## 5. Conclusions

The application of the process approach, i.e. defining the common good as a bottom-up, collective, stakeholder community-based process of manufacturing the product, service or expertise, results in a possibility of distinguishing the common goods from other goods, i.e. public, private, and club ones. In particular, such a distinction is important in case of public goods and common goods, since these two categories are often confused with each other.

The process approach also allows to assess the benefits from the common goods in the context of the concept of sustainable development. This assessment is more extensive than a typical economic analysis as it allows to see externalities accompanying the process of creating and then using the common good. Usually, they are benefits which, at the modern level of knowledge, may not be calculated as monetary values. Their inclusion into the economic calculation would often make the common good be a more rational solution than the private or public good. However, this requires a change in the perception of the economy, i.e. deviation from searching for the economic optimum economic based on searching for the most favourable revenue/cost ratio in favour of the social optimum based on the quality of life and the implementation of the needs relevant from the point of view of the community.

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<sup>5</sup> More on the need to have a planetary viewpoint on the economy cf. (Grubb, 2014; Prandecki, 2014).

The common good is a solution aimed at achieving the social optimum measured at the level of a community to which the use of this good applies. The community may be either local (e.g. residents of one village) or may consist of members scattered all over the world (in case of the global common goods).

In particular, the added value of the common good is visible in the context of sustainable development. The presented considerations lead to a conclusion that the common good is based on the principle of sustainability, which forces the holistic approach i.e. the one taking into account both economic as well as social and environmental aspects of this good. An externality of this approach is increased development of social relations within the group, which is forced by a need to make joint decisions on matters relevant to the sustainability of using common resources and fair distribution of access to these resources.

In general, it should be concluded that the theory of common goods, to a small, simply negligible, extent, refers to the basic principles of sustainable development, which results in a sort of indifferent attitude towards the common good among the supporters of sustainable development. Such an approach is inadequate since, in practice, the common good often results not only in the integration of the economic and social aspects of sustainable development, but also in combining them with the environmental aspects. Such an approach is not a result of top-down conceptual assumptions, but the effect of implementing the specific needs. For this reason, we must consider the common good a practical tool of implementing sustainable development.

However, it must be stressed that the application of the common good is not popular, and in the foreseeable future we should not expect that it will become a dominant solution. Nevertheless, it should be used in situations where cooperation can bring greater benefits (economic, social and environmental) than individual corporate governance (public or private).

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