

Published on GEOG 30N: Environment and Society in a Changing World (<https://www.e-education.psu.edu/geog30>)

[Home](#) > [Course Outline](#) > [Module 4 - Individual and Collective Action](#) > The Collective Action Problem

The Collective Action Problem

Two concepts from ethics that we did not touch on in Module 3 are altruism (selflessness) and selfishness. Perhaps we should be altruistic and make personal sacrifices to help others. But, for better or worse, people often are at least somewhat selfish. Collective action problems arise when people are selfish and thus fail to achieve successful collective actions.

A **collective action problem** is a scenario in which there is conflict between the individual interest and the group interest. In the scenario, each individual in the group faces a choice to either be selfish or cooperate. It is always in the individual's best interest to act selfishly, regardless of what the other individuals do. However, if all individuals act selfishly, then they all get worse outcomes than if they all cooperate. In other words, it is in the individual's interest to act selfishly, but it is in the group's interest to have everyone cooperate. This is the conflict between the individual interest and the group interest.

The Prisoner's Dilemma

The simplest collective action problem is known as the prisoner's dilemma. In this scenario, there are two individuals suspected of committing a crime together. The police do not have sufficient evidence to convict them and the prosecutors speak to each suspect separately, trying to get each to confess and implicate the other in the crime in exchange for a reduced prison sentence. Here, confessing is acting selfishly, and remaining silent (not confessing) is cooperating. The collective action problem is for the two suspects to cooperate with each other to reduce their sentences. It is in the prisoners' individual interest to confess, but it is in their group interest to stay silent.

The prisoner's dilemma can be seen in the following diagram. Alice and Bob are the two suspects. The numbers (1, 2, 3, 4) are the years in prison that they would serve.

	The Prisoner's Dilemma	
	Alice Cooperates (remain silent)	Alice Acts Selfishly (confess)
Bob Cooperates (remain silent)	A:2; B:2	A:1; B:4
Bob Acts Selfishly (confess)	A:4; B:1	A:3; B:3

As you can see from the diagram, the prisoner's dilemma is a collective action problem. Note that the prisoner's dilemma requires that the suspects be selfish because they will be better off no matter what the action of the other. If they cared just as much about each other's prison sentence as they do about their own, then they would always cooperate, regardless of what the other did. This is always the case with collective action: altruists do not have collective action problems.

Environmental Collective Action Problems

Collective action problems are widespread throughout environmental issues. Usually, they involve scenarios in which individuals want to act selfishly in a way that would harm the environment, but groups would benefit from environmental protection. Here are some examples:

- Individuals often want to do things that emit a lot of greenhouse gases, but society overall may be better off with less climate change.
- Individuals often want to drive cars so as to get around faster, but driving causes more air pollution that harms the whole group. Additionally, driving can cause traffic jams, whereas public transit avoids traffic jams. The car/transit decision is often a collective action problem for travel time: each individual travels faster by driving regardless of what other individuals do, but the group will overall travel faster if everyone takes transit than if everyone drives.
- Individuals often want to consume scarce natural resources, but society overall may be better off if everyone avoids using a lot of these resources.

This last example is known as the tragedy of the commons. The tragedy of the commons has an important connection to sustainability and is worth considering in greater detail.

Source URL: <https://www.e-education.psu.edu/geog30/node/342>