



Collapse: big decline in population or standard of living across a large region for a long time

Collapse

Sometimes, things go wrong. Empires fall, societies collapse. In this short video, Jared Diamond, the author of *Collapse*, covers a lot of ground. From the Pacific islands and Mesoamerica to East Africa and Afghanistan, Diamond explains the causes and consequences of collapse. But collapse isn't just about the past. Are we approaching a collapse today, and what will be the role of climate change in our future? This video attempts to answer these important questions about our past and future.



00:01

*Jared Diamond, PhD,
University of California,
Los Angeles*

JARED DIAMOND: What does it mean for a society to collapse? Collapse is one of those words where you know it when it's happening, even if you don't define it. But if one wants to define collapse, I would say a big decrease in population numbers, or in standard of living over a large area for a long time. That's my working definition of societal collapse.

00:30

In my book, "Collapse," my subtitle was "How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed." The point there is that collapse is not inevitable. Yes, if a country faces environmental problems or other problems, it doesn't necessarily roll over and play dead. Instead, what counts is how a society responds. Some societies respond successfully to problems such as environmental problems. Some societies fail to respond. And therefore, when you discuss collapse, you don't just discuss the problem. You also have to discuss how the society did or did not respond to the problem.

01:07

*Text bubble: Do societies
collapse together?
An artifact: a piece of
parchment inscribed with
Mayan language symbols
and drawings; photo of
abandoned Mayan ruins*

An interesting question is whether one has had in the past larger-scale collapses, not of just one society, but of linked collapses of many societies. Yes, and I can think of, immediately, two examples.

One is what's called the classic Maya... lowland Maya collapse. The most advanced Native American society in the New World before Columbus was the Maya of the Yucatan Peninsula, and adjacent Guatemala and Honduras. The lowland Maya collapsed. Their cities became abandoned in the 800s and 900s. And this was not just a single city, but every city in the lowland Maya area was abandoned or had a drastic decrease in population with the exception of a city or cities on a lake, suggesting that the collapse had something to do with water. And probably the collapse was related to a drought. So that's a regional collapse.

02:00

*A topographic map shows
the terrain of Pitcairn
Island*

Another regional collapse is eastern Polynesia. There's that famous island, Pitcairn Island, famous because the Bounty mutineers fled there and found it uninhabited. But Pitcairn had been settled by Polynesians, along with nearby islands Henderson and Mangareva. All three collapsed. The Mangareva collapse may have triggered the Pitcairn collapse, which certainly triggered the Henderson collapse.

The Henderson islanders were on an island without big trees. They depended, for trade and for marriage partners, on Pitcairn and Mangareva. But when Mangareva declined, and then when Pitcairn was abandoned, the Henderson islanders no longer had sources of big trees. They couldn't get away themselves. They were trapped on this island where they managed to carry on for maybe a century. 50 people in isolation for a century and, eventually, they died out somehow. But, basically, they died out because Pitcairn died out because Mangareva declined. Those are two examples of linked collapses. And today, of course, what we face is the risk of world linked collapse for all world societies.

03:13

*Text bubble: How does
societal collapse affect
other societies?*

What is the impact of a societal collapse on other societies? Well, ask any American president or secretary of state in the last 40 years, "What is the impact of the collapse of Somalia or Afghanistan on the United States?" 50 years ago, American secretaries of state used to play a game in which they asked, "What country in the world is most irrelevant to United States' interest?" Such that

Photos of American soldiers in Afghanistan and Somalia

04:06

American troops are never going to get sent there. And American secretaries of state said, “Well, probably, the countries most irrelevant “to American interests are going to be “Somalia and Afghanistan, “because Afghanistan is landlocked “and Somalia is desert. “They’re desperately poor countries “far from the United States, “so they have no effect on the United States and we’ll never send troops there.” Of course, we’ve had troops constantly in Afghanistan for a decade or two, and we’ve had troops in Somalia.

This illustrates that today, in this globalized world, every country potentially affects every other country. And, therefore, you can get a collapse anywhere in the world triggered by a collapse somewhere else.

04:21

Text bubble: What is the role of environment in a collapse?

The environment has played a big role in collapses in the past. Many of the famous collapses, the Maya collapse, the Easter Island collapse, the collapse of Angkor-based empire in Southeast Asia, the disappearance of the Greenland Norse, had environmental causes— a deterioration in the environment either due to natural climate change or moreover due to people unconsciously overexploiting the environment, destroying resources of forest and fisheries on which they depended, with the result that the society undermined itself, or that if climate was changing, that the one-two punch of climate change and society actions undermined the society.

05:06

Text bubble: Are we approaching a collapse?

Photos of climate protests around the world

Are we globally approaching a moment of collapse today? Come back 30 years from now and you’ll get the answer to that question. We are facing big problems today that, if they continue, would lead us to collapse. Are we going to collapse? Well, it depends. It depends upon what people decide to do. It depends on how people vote. It depends upon people’s policies, what they do about climate change, inequality around the world, resource competition. Are we going to collapse? I’d say the chances are 49% that we will and 51% percent that we will not collapse. But come back in the year 2050, and you’ll get the answer.

05:47

Text bubble: What is new about collapse today?

I would say there is one thing that is new in the world today, and that is, for the first time in world history, we have the possibility of a global collapse of human societies. We never had that possibility before because the world wasn’t globalized. In the past, when the Maya civilization, the most advanced civilization in the New World, collapsed in the 800s and 900s, they didn’t know about it in the Inca Empire of Peru. Or it didn’t exist then. Then didn’t know about in the Andes of Peru. They probably didn’t know about it in the Valley of Mexico. They certainly didn’t know about it in Europe.

06:24

Contrasting photos from societies around the world: An image of the bustling New York Stock Exchange juxtaposed with an image of a very poor village across the world.

Today, though, with connections around the world, when one society gets in trouble, other societies around the world get in trouble. And so, what is new in the world today is the possibility of a worldwide collapse,

a possibility that we’ve never had before in the past. But it’s not inevitable. We talked before about choices, how societies choose to fail or to succeed. The world now faces a choice about whether it will fail or succeed. I hope, for the sake of my sons, that we’ll succeed.