

Headline: Future-proofing the Philippines

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Published Date: 04:25 AM July 10, 2020

Section: opinion

Word Count: 4344

Content:

A picture making the rounds in the internet shows a diver about to be devoured from below by a shark, jaws wide open, labeled “COVID-19.” Directly under it is a bigger shark labeled “The Upcoming Economic Crisis,” poised to eat the first shark and its prey. Underneath them all is a huge shark, similarly with jaws wide open, poised to take them all in. That giant shark is labeled “Climate Change.”

That picture aptly captures the warning made by the Brain Trust Inc. (BTI) white paper that I featured last week (“People and planet in peril,” 7/3/20), where I focused on the five challenges its writers identified to be underlying today’s problems: Carbon, Celsius, Contagion, Congestion, and Consumption. Its authors show that the contagion currently gripping the world is intricately linked to the other four Cs that cause and aggravate climate change—now widely seen to be the single biggest existential threat to humanity. Hence, we must find our way out of this contagion fully cognizant of the larger threat that we all confront over the long term.

The group offers a three-fold strategy for moving forward: systematize, scale, and shift. To systematize means that the Recovery Plan to chart our way out of this crisis must be deliberately designed as a foundation for long-term sustainability, and not just a patchwork of quick fixes that could lead us to a state worse than prior to the pandemic. Reduction of climate change vulnerability must be systematically integrated in the recovery agenda and in overall governance. For example, the infrastructure program must prioritize public investments that create employment in agriculture, fisheries, and ecosystem services, thereby enhancing our food and environmental security.

To systematize also means sustainable development planning based on ecosystems, rather than administrative boundaries. Local government units (LGUs) must thus set up mechanisms for inter-LGU collaboration, already done by progressive municipalities in Mindanao. Target initiatives could include investing in environmental formations like coral reefs, sea grass meadows, watersheds, mangroves, and others that provide critical ecosystem services supporting primary production activities.

To scale is not to maximize growth, but limit it so that we tap living resources to within their ability to renew and replenish, thus maintaining the stability and health of the ecological foundations of their sustainability. The concept is already well known in the context of fishing: Overfishing ultimately hurts those dependent on it for a living. The approach applies to farming as well: We must keep farming activity to within the capacity of soils to replenish their natural fertility and moisture content, and redesign farming techniques to better conserve the agricultural natural resource base. In short, ecology, not the pull of market prices, should determine the scale by which we farm a crop, with importation properly balanced with domestic farm production to prevent demand side pressures from leading us to breach our ecological limits.

Sea level rise is a climate change-related phenomenon that is proceeding more rapidly than scientists earlier anticipated, and threatens large areas of economically productive lands at or near the coasts. The shift strategy is thus a key forward-looking imperative to “future-proof” the Philippines in an emerging age of warmer and higher seas, drier and hotter lands, and rising vulnerability of our islands to a climate crisis.

We need to look further up to higher lands for economic production activities, facilities, and settlements. We also need to look further out to our resource-rich seas for wider sustainable wealth creation activities. We are, after all, an archipelagic country whose maritime area far exceeds its land base. It's time to apply science and technology toward building up greener uplands and bluer seas—a “blue-green” economy that would color our “new normal.”

At the end, the BTI experts warn that the COVID-19 crisis is a mere foretaste of the wider threat we all face, and has shown humanity that the risks we face can come much sooner than we think. The time to act is now.

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