

Keyword: climate-change

Headline: Climate (in)justice (2)

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Published Date: 04:15 AM May 02, 2023

Section: opinion

Word Count: 707

Content:

Many problems associated with the rapacious exploitation of natural resources have had adverse effects not only on the environment but, more importantly, on marginalized and impoverished peoples. Several studies on climate fragility risks that I have already cited in my previous columns have pointed out that climate change, or extreme weather events like drought and flooding, have shown to be “threat multipliers” (Ruttinger, 2017), as they exacerbate the vulnerabilities of already fragile communities in terms of weak security and inadequate livelihoods. These populations are among the least capable of bouncing back quickly after storms, earthquakes, and other calamities strike. Consequently, because of their lack of capacity to recover after such climate change phenomena, members of these communities are among the first fatalities and for whom massive external humanitarian assistance is required.

Among pastoralists in the African continent that experience long droughts, community members become agitated due to the lack of food and water, making them easy targets for recruitment to cattle rustling gangs and other groups that use violence to earn some money for their families. This also found resonance in the exploratory study I took part in where we asked how climate change phenomena have pushed impoverished communities in some rural areas in the Ligawasan wetlands in the heart of the two Maguindanao provinces to resort to some criminal activities, as I have written before.

The adverse consequences of environmental degradation—deforestation, mining, drilling for natural gas, land conversion to monocrop plantations, or any kind of disturbance on the earth’s finite resources—have caused the overall warming of our planet, oceans, and seas. All these actions leading to environmental degradation have been made possible largely because of avaricious capitalistic interests rationalizing these as part of human development.

Such development has been unkind to already impoverished people. Long dry seasons have made poor families move to places where they have access to water, both for subsistence and for their overall health and well-being. Many of them die due to dehydration, as what happened to more than 40,000 people who died largely to the debilitating effects of a prolonged dry season in Somalia just recently.

Ironically, the victims of the drought in Somalia were not those who caused the rapid desertification of their lands. But the impoverished among them suffered first. The drought’s death toll did not include the owners of capitalist business companies and their government enablers.

This is an example of how climate change can be a source of injustice for the world’s poor, marginalized, and largely excluded populations.

In the devastating Lake Maughan-Mount Parker tragedy in 1995, a local politician was hauled into court because he and his group were allegedly behind the drilling of the mountain that caused Mount Parker to collapse. The mountain’s collapse inundated Lake Maughan that sat on top of it, causing the flooding of the low-lying communities in three provinces: South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, and Maguindanao, including the city of Cotabato. The majority of those who died were poor and largely marginalized, economically and politically.

After more than 20 years, the victims of such a tragic climate-related incident have not received reparations to pay for the loss of lives of their family members. And it is not clear whether the local politician has indeed been convicted for this case.

Last Oct. 29, 2022, more than 60 people, mainly from the indigenous group, the Teduray, were buried alive near Mount Minandar, in a barangay in Datu Odin Sinsuat municipality in Maguindanao del Norte. This happened after floodwaters and stones carried by the flood submerged their houses at the foot of Mount Minandar in the aftermath of Typhoon “Paeng” (international name: Nalgae) last year. Like Mount Parker, Mount Minandar has been heavily drilled for gravel and deforested over time, not by the indigenous communities, but by businessmen and women who are also local political leaders.

The long-term human exploitation of Mount Minandar’s resources exacerbated the vulnerability of the Teduray, who had largely been socially and politically excluded in their province. Their deaths are the consequences of injustice, via an extreme climate event like flooding.

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