

Headline: In harm's way

Byline: Philippine Daily Inquirer

Published Date: 12:36 AM July 22, 2016

Section: opinion

Word Count: 4488

Content:

We hope President Duterte reconsiders his position not to honor the Paris Agreement. The historic climate pact, which binds some 200 countries to reduce carbon emissions so as to contain the rise of global temperatures below 2 degrees Celsius, was made possible in part because of the Philippines' leadership role as chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum.

To a greater extent than the high-profile members of the so-called High Ambition Coalition, the Philippines and the Climate Vulnerable Forum focused the attention of the 21st Conference of Parties meeting in Paris last December on the fate of the poor and the exposed. That helped make the case for an ambitious Paris Agreement; the old argument dividing developed economies from developing ones, embodied in the Kyoto Protocol, was subsumed under a new and much more compelling argument: Every country was at risk, and the world was running out of time.

President Duterte's argument is the old one, raised for many years by fast-growing countries like China and India. The Western world, plus Japan, had enjoyed the benefits of carbon-spewing industrialization for much longer than China and India; why should developing economies put a limit on their growth sooner than the developed economies did?

The President's recollection of his conversation with an unnamed ambassador recapitulates this argument. "[Your country] has reached the apex [of industrialization] and along the way put a lot of contaminants and emissions, and went ahead in destroying the climate," he said he told the envoy. "We have not reached the age of industrialization. We're now going into it. But you are trying to stymie [us] with an agreement that says you can only go up to here."

If China, the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, and India, the third-largest, continued to follow this old argument, there wouldn't have been a Paris Agreement. As it is, the climate pact requires a lot of additional work, but at least the conditions for lowering the rise in global temperatures are in place. What made China and India, and oil-producing countries like Saudi Arabia, sign on to the agreement is proof of the second argument: Climate change is real, and its consequences are life-threatening.

Coal-driven pollution in China, extraordinary flooding in Europe, stronger, much more dangerous storms in the Philippines. Multiply the examples, and the meaning is clear: Millions of lives are now at greater risk because the planet is warming.

Here's the truth: Regardless of what the President does, or says, the Philippines will continue to be one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change. Two of the three most devastating storms to hit the Philippines in the last five or six years wreaked havoc in once typhoon-free Mindanao. Scientists are still studying the data, but it seems likely that the trajectory of the storms emerging out of the Pacific Ocean is changing, and it is indisputable that these storms are now likely to be more powerful because of higher surface temperatures. A warmer ocean breeds stronger storms. Stronger storms put more communities at greater risk.

Did the Paris Agreement do away with the first argument altogether? No. The process the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change has followed since the debacle in Copenhagen in 2009 has respected the difference in the level of development of the various participating countries; this is why the Philippines' own submission of its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions, while ambitious, is premised on assistance from developed economies. As the Philippine delegation noted at the end of the historic conference, the developed economies' commitment of "support in finance, technology and capacity building for all adaptation and mitigation efforts" was a breakthrough.

Subscribe to our daily newsletter

By providing an email address. I agree to the Terms of Use and acknowledge that I have read the Privacy Policy.

"Industrialization can continue as planned," National Scientist Angel Alcala said the other day, "if there are provisions for sequestering the carbon dioxide produced through activities like planting more areas with forest trees, and protecting our existing tropical rainforests." Other measures exist; others will become possible precisely because of the provisions in the Paris Agreement. But the bottom line remains the same: More Filipinos are climate-vulnerable. The President shouldn't leave them in harm's way.