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The Philippines cut a sharp profile in the climate change negotiations which began in the French capital of Paris on Monday—drawing attention to the fate of people suffering from the already serious effects of global warming, offering to share the lessons the Philippines has learned and is learning from its experience with natural disasters, leading an important meeting of a growing alliance of climate-vulnerable countries. Not least, the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), which President Aquino chaired, officially adopted the Manila-Paris Declaration.

The declaration, backed by the full support of the forum's 20 current members, seeks to strengthen the new climate treaty being negotiated in Paris by lowering the temperature ceiling from 2 degrees Celsius to 1.5 degrees Celsius, and by integrating human rights and climate justice provisions.

The forum includes countries like the Philippines and Bangladesh in Asia, Kenya and Tanzania in Africa, and Costa Rica and Santa Lucia in the Americas, and together represent hundreds of millions of people at increasingly serious risk posed by the adverse consequences of climate change. The "High-Level Meeting" of the CVF (the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, under whose auspices the climate negotiations are being conducted, has specific terminology classifying the various meetings) was only the third since the forum was formed, and one of only six high-profile side events on the first day of the 21st Conference of Parties or COP21. As chair, Mr. Aquino gave a keynote speech which did, in fact, strike the key notes.

Two passages from his speech, in particular, sum up the context of climate vulnerability and the corresponding demand for climate justice.

After noting that the CVF members already "experience climate change in the starkest possible terms," President Aquino proceeded to present an even bleaker future.

"But building back better has become less and less of a guarantee, given that the new normal might still be replaced by an even newer normal if we fail to act in concert. Positive national development trajectories, especially of emerging economies such as the Philippines', can be broken due to the disruption caused by disaster. After all, what if we could channel the resources used for building back better towards other development interventions?"

If countries like the Philippines already lose about 2 to 2.5 percent of their GDP to calamities, what would a future where global surface temperature would have risen to 2 degrees above pre-industrial era levels (currently it is around 0.8 degrees) be like, for developing economies?

Many of the greenhouse gasses trapping the heat were produced since the mid-19th century by the economies commonly described as developed; even though China, officially still classified as a developing economy, has already become the world's biggest emitter of carbon dioxide, the mostly Western members of the rich-countries club have the burden of history on them; they've produced most of the greenhouse gasses.

Thus, the vulnerable countries' demand for climate justice.

“By some estimates,” President Aquino said, “annual losses amount to at least 2.5 percent of GDP for us in the CVF—this, despite the fact that we collectively contribute less than 2 percent of current greenhouse gas emissions. We have all echoed the call for global solidarity in responding to climate change. Our gathering today, and the hard work that our representatives have been doing since the Climate Vulnerable Forum came into being, highlights an essential pillar of the solidarity we are pursuing: Fairness and equitability are not mere catchwords for the vulnerable; they form the very foundations of a truly global climate response.”

We think the Philippines recognizes, together with other members of the CVF, that the Paris talks need to conclude with a treaty that is universal (unlike the Kyoto Protocol, it will have to apply to both developed and developing economies) and legally binding (the provisions must be enforceable). That is the priority. Getting all the parties to agree would be made more palatable, not more difficult, if the needs of the vulnerable, facing the increasingly likely prospect of the “newer normal,” are fairly and equitably integrated into the text.

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