

Headline: PH a case study on Earth's fate

Byline: Heherson T. Alvarez

Published Date: 01:14 AM February 19, 2014

Section: opinion

Word Count: 4037

Content:

After Super Typhoon "Yolanda/Haiyan" last November, we face even more dangerous impacts of climate change in the years ahead as the heating of the planet Earth increases and our needs for energy, water and food escalate. With an expanding population of almost 99 million, the Philippines is the 12th most populous country in the world.

An archipelago of 7,100 islands with narrow land masses fragmented by extensive river systems and a coastline longer than that of the continental United States, the Philippines is indeed the world's third most vulnerable to the havoc wrought by global warming and climate change.

Our capacity for not only sustainability but also immediate survival as a community is imperiled. In this "horse race" between mitigation and adaptation, even if the world temperature is abated below the "point of no return" but not soon enough, our country and many island-communities can perish.

The Philippines is endowed with all alternative sources of energy. We are the second largest user of geothermal power. We are a tropical country with abundant sunshine and biomass, crisscrossed by many rivers and surrounded by oceans. We have access to potentially abundant and powerful water energy sources.

There are technology barriers to accessing these resources, which amount to financial barriers. But these barriers can be overcome with a creative determined policy on our transition toward a sustainable path of clean energy and development.

But the greatest of all barriers—that posed by fossil fuels—is almost insurmountable, as it must be for nearly all countries of the world.

Coal- and petroleum-based energy remains the cheapest in the market without the destructive externalities inputted into their cost. Policy planners take these carbon energy systems as the cheap and easy pathway toward growth and development.

Coal-fired power plants, which operate across Asia, are the largest single source of carbon emissions. These plants, which account for more than 36 percent of carbon emissions currently in the Philippines, are projected to grow to 86 percent in 2030—16 years from now—which would mean reducing alternative energy from 60 percent to a mere 14 percent of our total energy mix. Expanding coal use in the Philippines, and in many other parts of the world, will be very costly in terms of environmental ruin, reduction of water supply, and impairment of the food system.

Many policymakers have taken the facile notion that fossil fuels lead to the easiest pathway to development. We all know that this is a falsehood. Coal and fossil fuels are heavily subsidized and, once the externalities of pollution and climate change costs are factored in, are the most costly, nay, even destructive to our living Earth.

The economic fallacy about coal is a formidable economic, political and psychological barrier that blocks the accelerated development of renewable energy. We must shape the policy instruments to overcome this formidable barrier. We should be transparent and candid about this great burden of fossil fuel and its terrible externalities, and manage to reduce it so that rationally it may have its

minimum use for our fuel mix.

In summary, our goal of a low-carbon world can be achieved only through sustained efforts, with appropriate incentives, and with determined policy changes that move governments toward low-carbon strategies in power generation.

The Philippines is only a case study on the fate of the Earth.

If we can summon the imagination and the will to diminish or entirely dismantle these barriers—especially the fossil-fuel barrier—the transition to a cleaner, healthier future with abundant and safe energy will be achieved. The Earth will not burn beyond 2 degrees Centigrade and will flourish and endure into eternity.

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.

Heherson T. Alvarez, a former senator, is a commissioner of the Philippine Climate Change Commission.