

Headline: Making the polluters pay

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As we commemorate the day when the strongest typhoon ever to hit land in recorded history claimed thousands of lives and devastated coastal communities in the Philippines, it is important to reflect on what future awaits a country considered among the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

“Yolanda/Haiyan” was not the first supertyphoon to hit the country, and considering the latest scientific projections from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, it looks like it will not be the last.

The abnormally strong typhoons and weather extremes in the last 10 years are an inconvenient reminder that we have entered the period of consequences, and that unless major and drastic cuts in global carbon emissions are imposed, vulnerable countries like the Philippines are in for bigger shocks.

Our recent bouts with freakish weather have brought to the fore the fragility and brittleness of our public and political institutions. Despite the Philippines’ long and difficult experience of coping with typhoons, and despite recent investments in disaster mitigation and response, our government agencies are failing to cope with the grim changes in environmental conditions. That it took almost a year to develop and approve the reconstruction and rehabilitation plan for Tacloban City and other devastated areas is proof that our institutions continue to struggle to adapt to the new normal. To this day, a great number of those who were displaced by Yolanda still live in bunkhouses and temporary shelters, and others have decided to rebuild in storm surge hazard areas.

President Aquino cited the need to do it right and build back better as a justification for the long time it took for the government to complete its P170-billion rehabilitation and reconstruction plan. Yet, all it took was a single episode of extreme weather to wipe out decades of planning and investments in poverty alleviation, food production, infrastructure, livelihoods and social services.

In this light, there are important questions that need to be asked. How far can the government go to cope with an out-of-control climate system? How long should Filipino taxpayers foot the bill for this unjust victimization of our people, while those entities mainly and historically responsible for the climate crisis remain unperturbed and unencumbered, and continue to expand their profit margins at the expense of the climate, and of humans and other species whose survival depends on the critical life support functions that the ecosystem provides?

The time has come to make these polluters pay. The companies that have benefited the most from the unmitigated discharge of carbon emissions into the atmosphere must be held accountable for their role in the climate crisis. They must be held liable for the immense and untold damage being caused by global warming impacts especially on the weak and vulnerable.

Recent research conducted by scientist Richard Heede has estimated for the first time the extent to which 90 named entities—the largest multinational and state-owned producers of crude oil, natural gas, coal and cement since 1854—have contributed the largest cumulative global carbon and methane emissions. These 90 entities are responsible for an estimated 914 billion tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (GtCO₂e) of cumulative world emissions of industrial CO₂ and methane between 1854 and 2010, or about 63 percent of estimated global industrial emissions of these greenhouse

gases.

The largest five investor-owned companies alone contributed 12.5 percent of the global historic emissions through 2010. (Heede, R. 2013. Carbon Majors: Accounting for carbon and methane emissions 1854-2010. Methods and Results Report. p.29.)

The Heede study has opened the door to establishing the direct link between the activities of major carbon emitters and their role in climate change, approaching the same level of significance as the link between tobacco and lung cancer.

Moreover, given the painful lack of progress that has attended international treaty negotiations on climate change to date, we must look at the influential role being played by these polluters alongside their host governments in obfuscating the issues, in weakening political commitments, and in hindering the implementation of required solutions that will help mitigate and avert catastrophe.

In other words, adapting to the rapidly changing climate does not only mean preparing for the worst but also questioning and eroding the social license of the fossil fuel industry, whose activities have brought us to the brink of this ecological precipice.

For the world to effectively transition to a low-carbon pathway, we must begin to fracture the seeming invincibility of these polluters and expose the insidious and often immoral suasion they have on those governments that continue to oppose responsible climate action.

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