

Headline: Carbon mitigation or climate catastrophe

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Last September, the United Nations reflected the growing anxieties of the world by sponsoring the leaders' summit on climate change, the central issue of human survival in the 21st century.

Days from now, we will know if the UN's anxieties have been taken to heart by delegates to the 20th annual session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 20) in Lima, Peru. They will continue the negotiations toward a new global climate agreement that, hopefully, will be approved in the COP 21 in December 2015 in Paris, entering into force by 2020.

The negotiations will focus on creating a path that would diminish the emissions gap, the gap between reduction pledges and the necessary emission cuts to maintain global warming below 2 degrees Centigrade, the tipping point which the scientific community believes would trigger an irreversible slide toward climate catastrophe.

Today, there is absolutely no scientific reservation about this horrifying trajectory. Over the past five years, scientific understanding of climate change impacts and their causes has significantly advanced. And the scale of the problem is such that a solution is possible only if nations and societies declare, in effect, a total war against the first cause of climate change: carbon dioxide emissions.

The Philippines is not a significant emitter. But as the world's third most vulnerable nation to powerful weather anomalies and natural disasters, the Philippines has a survival stake in the outcome of the Lima conference.

The fact is that human civilization is in a deadly and suicidal race between mitigation and catastrophe. Global temperature is overheating. And if this overheating is not abated soon enough, many of our country's island and coastal communities could perish.

For the first time in history, human beings today are breathing air that contains 400 parts per million (ppm) of carbon emissions. This unprecedented concentration of carbon has been building up since the early 20th century. The result is that we are experiencing an average temperature rise of 0.8 degrees C in global air and sea surface temperatures, with about two-thirds of the increase occurring since 1980.

As the temperature rises, there will be even more alarming climate impacts. This is why the frequency and intensity of natural disasters across the globe are increasing, along with their costs in terms of human life loss, property destruction, and economic disruption.

There are massive hidden costs, too.

Nations must contend with a number of risks—pollution-caused ailments, fuel insecurity, food scarcity, and geopolitical tensions and conflicts over natural resources. Already, China and our neighboring Asean countries are staking conflicting claims over atolls and reefs in the Pacific Ocean because of their vast potentials in oil, gas and minerals.

To avoid climate catastrophe, the bottom line is that humans must stop polluting the environment. And this means that we must increasingly turn to clean and renewable sources of energy.

As a historical fact, coal and oil have fueled much of human progress over the last two centuries. But today, coal and oil lie at the heart of the modern world's environmental predicament. Carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuel use are the largest driver of global warming, with coal as the greatest single component to this warming.

Carbon merchants maintain that coal remains the cheapest energy source in the market. However, once the externalities of coal are factored in—such as the costs of pollution and healthcare—the price of coal would be extremely high and uneconomic.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) estimates that there is some \$400 billion in subsidies devoted to coal and fossil fuels. This is a staggering amount of subsidies, and they not only distort the market but also impose powerful barriers—economic, political and psychological—that undermine the development of clean, alternate sources of energy.

These barriers and the myth of cheap coal continue to discourage the accelerated development of renewable energy. We must therefore help shape the policy instruments to overcome these barriers. And we should be transparent and candid about the terrible burdens that coal imposes on our environment and the health of our people.

In the long sweep of human history, individual men and women, moved only by a liberating vision, ignited civil movements that played a decisive role in social and political transformation. They succeeded in their crusades because, in the end, it was the moral and right thing to do.

Today, our generation is called upon to advance another great crusade—one that involves a life-and-death struggle to preserve the only habitat humans have ever known.

The crucial question is: Are we too late to mitigate global warming?

Rapid carbon cuts are the only way to stop the severe impact of climate change. All adaptation strategies in the world cannot prevent global warming. Rajendra Pachauri, chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, believes that we have very limited time, perhaps a few decades, to transition to a low-carbon growth path.

Lima is therefore a pivotal turning point: If there is no successful negotiation in Lima, there will be no agreement in Paris next year. This means that “the door to [holding temperatures to 2°C of warming] will be closed forever,” in the vivid words of IEA chief economist Fatih Birol.

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Heherson T. Alvarez chaired the Senate committee on environment for 10 years. Now a commissioner of the Climate Change Commission, he organized the 1st Climate Change Conference in Asia in which 32 ministers and three heads of government took part in February 1995 in Manila, before the 1st COP in Berlin in December 1995.