

Keyword: global-warming

Headline: Metro Manila on borrowed time

Byline: Philippine Daily Inquirer

Published Date: 05:16 AM May 26, 2019

Section: opinion

Word Count: 740

Content:

A new study by a group of ice scientists has revealed even more dire news for the environment: the earth is sinking further as sea levels continue to rise.

In a worst-case scenario of unchecked emissions growth and global warming of 5°C, the sea level rise (SLR) can be by as much as 2 meters by 2100. This will be devastating for archipelagos like the Philippines, where 62 percent of the population lives in coastal zones.

The report, released last week and published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, said the projected rise of sea level “could result in land loss of 1.79 million square kilometers, including critical regions of food production, and displacement of up to 187 million people.” It further warned: “[A] SLR of this magnitude would clearly have profound consequences for humanity.”

In the Philippines, 65 million of the 105 million estimated population live in coastal communities, putting them on the front lines of disaster. The country has already seen the devastating effects of strong typhoons like “Ondoy” in 2009 and “Yolanda” in 2013 that wiped out shoreline communities and killed thousands.

Not only that: Metro Manila, the country’s dense, sprawling center of government and business, is sinking by around 10 centimeters per year. The most likely culprit of the subsidence — or the sinking of the Earth’s surface due to geologic or man-induced causes — is groundwater pumping.

“Since the city has an average elevation of around 5 meters, it seems to be living on borrowed time,” said a 2018 case study of eight cities by Christian Aid. The study, “Sinking Cities, Rising Seas,” noted that subsidence not only increases the absolute risk of floods, but also the areas affected, with high tides penetrating further inland and floods taking longer to recede.

Metro Manila is already groaning under the weight of its 13 million population and has witnessed unchecked urbanization over the decades — developments that have only compounded the effects of global warming, said the study.

Neighboring countries are in the same boat.

Indonesia, the world’s largest archipelago, recently announced plans to build a new capital city because Jakarta, its current capital, is sinking. A BBC report has tagged Jakarta as the fastest-sinking city in the world, with almost half of its area now below sea level. Experts say that by 2050, 95 percent of North Jakarta will be submerged.

Closer to home, a report published in this paper last week noted that subsidence has been observed in the coastal town of Bulakan, Bulacan. Bulacan, just like neighboring Pampanga, has sunk between 4 and 6 centimeters (1.5 and 2.4 inches) annually since 2003. Experts have identified the main cause, again, as the excessive extraction of groundwater, often through unregulated wells for homes, factories and farms.

The sinking has caused water from Manila Bay to pour inland and displace thousands. Communities in the affected areas have been forced to adopt band-aid solutions such as raising street levels or building elevated houses, but experts warn that the phenomenon would only get worse.

These environmental issues merited scant to zero mention by the major candidates during the recent elections, despite the urgent implications for the country's main political and economic hub and the enormous costs it would take to either save Metro Manila or, like Jakarta, relocate the capital to a safer place. Is this problem, in fact, even on the radar of the Duterte administration?

Reports about a number of massive reclamation projects on Manila Bay have been met with warnings by scientists and other experts that these projects could further degrade the environment and worsen subsidence and flooding around the area. So it's quite a relief that newly elected Manila Mayor Isko Moreno has announced that such reclamations will not be a priority of his administration.

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.

But more attention to Metro Manila's ultimate fate needs to happen, especially on the national level. The alerts and warnings from the scientific community are there, but where are the studies and blueprints that should map out the government's preparations and mitigating measures for what awaits the metropolis? Are there such studies in the first place? Or is the country's capital destined to drown eventually — not only from natural causes, but also from the neglect and obliviousness of its inhabitants?