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Coming from the environment and development sector, I have always followed the outcomes of the annual Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Initiated in 1994, the UNFCCC was formed to stabilize greenhouse gas emissions and protect the planet from their extreme climate impacts. Particular attention was accorded the 21st COP in Paris, which produced a landmark agreement that set an ambitious goal of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Public awareness on climate change and its impacts has been more pronounced in the past decade as the world has seen the brunt of extreme climate events, such as super typhoon “Yolanda” and typhoons “Ondoy” and “Sendong” in the country, and wildfires in the US, Australia, and even in Siberia.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the recently concluded COP26 in Glasgow was touted as the “world’s last best chance” for climate action. The latest science indicates that we are on a dangerous trajectory that may go beyond the 1.5 degrees Celsius target if no drastic measures are put in place to curtail carbon emissions. The major outcome from Glasgow is a call for nations to “accelerate the phaseout of unabated coal power and the phaseout of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies.” Given that almost half of the carbon emissions come from coal power plants, this is a positive commitment. However, on the issue of climate finance to support vulnerable countries, the target to commit \$100 billion per year from developed countries and major greenhouse polluters was not met.

The outcomes of COP26 were met with both optimism and disappointment. The US’ special presidential envoy for climate, John Kerry, saw the agreement as a “good deal,” while activist Greta Thunberg bluntly declared it a “failure.” In my perspective, COP26 retained its ambition but lacked urgency.

With this lack of urgency, what do we do now? This situation will not get any better; in fact, it will get increasingly worse. We cannot just rest our fate on the outcomes and commitments of countries in annual meetings and conventions. Collectively, we—the almost 8 billion inhabitants of this planet—can bridge the gap by helping protect and preserve what is left of our “natural capital.”

In the Philippines, forest and mangrove resources are just a fraction of what they used to be five decades ago. Our marine resources and corals have been degraded by coastal development and destructive fishing. Our extensive fishing grounds are overfished or at maximum capacity. Don’t be surprised that the “galunggong” you buy in the market is now imported, or wonder why we don’t have water in the tap during prolonged summers.

Our overconsumption is marked by great waste. Food production, for instance, is ironically considered the greatest threat to nature as it accounts for about 70 percent loss in biodiversity, 24 percent of total greenhouse gas emissions, and the use of 69 percent of our freshwater resources. And still we waste 33 percent of the food that is produced.

Ocean plastic pollution is another big problem. The Philippines ranks as the third biggest polluter in the world, after China and Indonesia. Plastics are considered the “new coal.” The US plastic industry alone accounts for at least 232 million tons of CO2e gas emission per year, equivalent to 116 average-size coal-fired power plants. We tend to believe recycling is the solution, but recycling also emits greenhouse gases and air pollution.

A better way than recycling is reducing consumption. As ordinary citizens, let us be conscious of our ways and waste. Every move counts; the lesser we consume, the better for the planet. Let us reduce and go back to basics. Let’s change the ending!

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