

Headline: Red light for a green, safe future

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Published Date: 04:02 AM November 10, 2021

Section: opinion

Word Count: 4504

Content:

As all roads lead to COP26 and The Lancet comes out with its latest 2021 report on the unabated issue of health impacts of climate change, the global health community is declaring a code red emergency within an existing public health emergency — the COVID-19 pandemic.

This double whammy poses a big burden to vulnerable and strained health systems like ours. Against the backdrop of unchecked global average temperature rise, deaths and diseases from exposure to heatwaves, food and water insecurity, extreme weather events, and even financial instability have been increasingly documented across all regions.

Unequivocally, climate change affects the health and well-being of Filipinos especially those who are vulnerable—the very young and old, the poor and underprivileged, those with limited access to health services.

Climate-sensitive diseases and deaths from heatwaves can eclipse our COVID-19 statistics any time. The issues of inequality relating to the emission of carbon and the greater suffering of certain countries from disasters can also parallel the vaccine inequity issues that have plagued the pandemic control programs of rich and poor nations.

COVID-19 and climate change represent the biggest global health issues of our era. Thus, a code red, the highest category for an emergency, should be declared now for an urgent and coordinated response to both these issues.

The health sector must lead in this main effort. It should get the highest level of political support possible, mobilize resources as widely as it could, and do its best to solicit the support of other sectors, organizations, and groups globally and locally. The following convergent code red strategies must be done as soon as possible:

As we combat the pandemic by beefing up our vaccination program to achieve herd immunity, we also need to do proactive mitigation strategies to cut down our carbon usage to keep global average temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

When we ramp up testing, expand tracing, and improve our COVID-19 treatment, we should also strengthen our adaptive capacities—that is, our preparedness to respond to any public health emergency as a result of climate change.

In the health sector, as we recover from COVID-19 and effect a sense of normalcy, we should commit altogether to establishing climate-resilient and sustainable low-carbon health systems. This is the imperative for us to make a difference in the new normal.

The following aspects of change should be considered and corresponding strategic questions answered to guide the health sector.

Social: Improved community participation toward health resilience. How can communities and individuals be educated on climate change and empowered in building health resilience?

Technological: Proliferation of technologies and innovation to support climate and disaster resilience. What technologies can be developed or used to improve climate change mitigation and adaptation and disaster risk reduction through a better understanding of health risks?

Environmental: Increased frequency and intensity of multiple health hazards caused and compounded by climate change. What strategies, policies, and measures are needed to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from these potential disasters?

Economic: Decreased fiscal space to implement climate risk management strategies in health. How do we mobilize financial and logistical resources from different sources at different levels?

Political: Improved climate and disaster risk governance that can facilitate institutionalization of relevant health programs. What systems, mechanisms, and “best practices” on leadership, coordination, communication and engagement with stakeholders and communities can be documented, disseminated, and developed into policies?

The consequences of delaying or not acting on life-saving actions under a code red situation are dire. But the twin COVID-19 and climate change emergencies present the health sector the biggest opportunity to seize the initiative and turn the situation around for the health of our people, now and for the future.

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