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THE death and damage caused by Tropical Storm "Paeng" bring attention to unresolved problems in the Philippines, particularly deforestation. In fact, reports of tragic losses from the storm seem seasonal for a country that sees a yearly average of 20 tropical cyclones. And from that figure, eight or nine cross land and do more damage.

As bad as Paeng was, many Filipinos might even brush off its impact, given that they have seen more destructive storms in the past. But the relatively lower death toll will not console the families of those who lost loved ones or those whose homes and crops were destroyed.

Worse, poor people tend to be the most vulnerable to bad weather. Their simple homes offer less safety than those in gated communities and high-rise condominiums.

Of course, the dwindling forest cover affects everyone, directly and indirectly. For instance, warnings about global warming are related to deforestation and increasingly intense weather events. Not even those in posh neighborhoods might be spared. Also, destruction of crops and livestock pushes up food prices for everyone at a time when costs are already high because of inflation.

Fortunately, the Marcos administration seems serious about mitigating climate change and crafting green policies. Plus, there also seems to be more public awareness about environmental issues.

National leaders should revisit the reasons why past and existing environmental initiatives have been inadequate. Take tree planting, for instance. Enterprises, socio-civic groups and even the government have been planting trees for decades, but the impact seems hard to appreciate. In the aftermath of storms like Paeng, benefits from that virtuous intervention is either negligible or perhaps even non-existent.

Plant native trees

There are a few things that policymakers and concerned people should consider. First, many more trees should be planted. From 2002 to 2021, the country lost 12 percent of its primary forest, about 158,000 hectares. Just over 23 percent or 7 million hectares out of the country's 30 million hectares still have forests. While forests had been growing in recent years, the area covered pales in comparison to that a century ago. In 1934, the forest cover in the Philippines was estimated at 17.8 million hectares.

Second, people should plant the right kind of trees. The wrong ones are foreign species, which can contribute to deforestation by making the soil acidic or crowding out native trees because there are no natural predators that can contain them. Besides planting indigenous trees, people should avoid monocultures, which can be wiped out by a single plant disease. Effective tree-planting programs should be like rebuilding forests, which must have a variety of trees that would sustain local wildlife.

The foreign trees that some Filipinos love may have a place in urban landscapes, like city parks and backyards. But the government should clamp down on their importation and cultivation. Also, there should be a public information campaign about the benefits of native trees, most of which are unfamiliar to Filipinos.

Third, Congress should pass a land use law, partly to define boundaries between development and conservation. Much of the forest area lost has been blamed on urban development and farm expansion. There are local land use ordinances, but they do little for forest areas that border several local government jurisdictions.

Lastly, rebuilding forests should not be limited to mountains and inland areas. Filipinos should also rehabilitate coastal areas by reviving mangrove forests. Mangroves capture more carbon dioxide than other trees. They are also more effective than concrete seawalls in protecting seaside communities from storm surges. Plus, mangroves can help revive fish stocks in areas that have been damaged by destructive fishing methods.

The interventions mentioned should not end with planting trees. Saplings often need some care and other forms of human assistance. Of course, that adds to the costs, but that can be viewed as an opportunity to generate jobs in rural areas.

With the suggestions offered here, perhaps the passing of future storms will not be followed by a sense of regret that more could have been done to prevent potential tragedies from happening.