

Headline: The new roadblock to prosperity

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The rising incidence of climate-related natural disasters will be a key concern at the milestone United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in June. The recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change links more intense rainfall and more extreme temperatures worldwide with carbon emissions and manmade climate change. This scientific evidence warns us that it is no longer enough for affected countries to mop up after a flood; all the world's economies together must turn off the tap.

The incidence of extreme climate and weather events has been rising sharply in recent decades throughout the world. The Philippines, and indeed much of Asia, have been especially hard hit with the loss of many lives and extensive damage. Climate science is careful not to attribute a particular extreme event to rising carbon emissions and related increase in temperatures. But the accumulating evidence does point to more extreme precipitation, even if the averages do not show much change.

In the Philippines and other countries in the region prone to natural disasters, there is progress in developing early warning systems and improving disaster response. But overall damage is still aggravated by rising populations in areas prone to disasters, as well as by deforestation and other environmental degradation.

Meanwhile, carbon emissions continue to rise at alarming rates and temperatures break records. This new climate reality means that the efforts to adapt to disasters will not be effective unless countries shift to a low carbon path. There is also a premium on timely action, in that climate mitigation today will be far less costly than the impact tomorrow. But amid a global economic slump, climate action remains a low priority for policymakers.

What will it take to turn this situation around?

First, we must recognize that climate impacts are an immediate concern, not just one in the distant future. The annual temperature in the Philippines has risen by 0.65 °C over the past 50 years. There is also an increasing trend in the frequency of extreme daily rainfall. Over Luzon, for example, more frequent rainfall of greater than 350 millimeters was recorded in the 2000s compared to 275 in the 1960s and 1970s. Devastating floods in Australia, Pakistan, the Philippines and Thailand, wildfires in Russia, and droughts in China and the United States show the gravity of the situation. The public is beginning to take note.

In Australia, inundation maps predicting the effects on low-lying areas of a rise in sea level between 0.5 and 1.1 meters by 2100 have created awareness. In the Philippines, the Geosciences and Mines Bureau's geo-hazard mapping program is identifying communities at risk from the landslides and flash floods so often triggered by seasonal typhoons and storms.

Second, politicians need to realize that climate response is in an economy's own interest. The local benefits of shifting to a low carbon path include reduced energy costs through efficiency gains in buildings and manufacturing, and reduced air pollution from cleaner power plants. In the United States, the country with the highest emissions per person, smarter buildings can save an estimated \$20 billion in annual energy costs. China, the country with the largest annual greenhouse gas emissions, envisages renewable energy generation accounting for over 15 percent of total energy

consumption by 2020.

Third, policymakers need to see that action on climate change can help sustain economic growth. Steps to addressing rising sea levels that threaten coastlines, protecting urban areas from flooding, and preventing declining farm yields due to changing trends are essential to containing climate costs. Last year's deadly floods are estimated to have cost Thailand's economy \$46 billion. In the United States, there were more than 14 climate- and weather-related disasters in 2011, each costing more than \$1 billion. While the annual frequency of tropical cyclones in the Philippines does not show a notable change in trends, the extent of damage and number of casualties are rising. And these are increasingly coming from tropical cyclones of lower intensity but much heavier rains.

To meet these challenges, political leaders and their economic managers need to be more aware of the vital link between climate-change response and economic success—and start investing in mitigation as well as adaptation.

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