

Headline: Day after

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Published Date: 02:07 AM November 09, 2013

Section: opinion

Word Count: 5767

Content:

The lady wept. "It is not about us. We'll be out of here in two or three decades." But lack of an agreement on climate change was "condemning future generations before they're even born. 'If it were inevitable, then so be it,' she added. But we have a choice, to change the future we are going to give our children."

Meet Christiana Figueres of Costa Rica. She's executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. BBC interviewed her on the turtle-paced negotiations, stitched together in Durban in 2011. The target is a new treaty that must be signed by 2015. It will come into force in 2020.

Filipino delegate Naderev Saño wept at the Durban meeting. Climate gone out of whack lashed the Philippines. Temperatures were rising, and so were sea levels. Once typhoon-free areas were hit by serial storms. Come to an agreement—for our kids, he pleaded.

We'll know what havoc Supertyphoon "Yolanda" inflicted the day after. That will underscore the toll that global climate change is inflicting. Read the World Bank report, "Getting a Grip on Climate Change in the Philippines."

This country is the third most vulnerable in the world to extreme weather events, be they heat waves or earthquakes (like the one that savaged Bohol and Cebu in October). Typhoons lash the country's northern and eastern parts yearly. But in the last three years, storms slammed Mindanao, which used to get typhoons every 17 years or so. Now floods rampage through Central Luzon and southern Mindanao.

These cut into cultivatable land, erode productivity, and ratchet insecurity, the World Bank said. In a 4°C warmer world, coral bleaching and reef degradation will accelerate in the next 10-20 years, severely damaging fisheries and tourism. That's within our children's lifetime.

Rising sea levels are altering topography, University of the Philippines Chancellor Rex Victor Cruz warned. The Philippines can lose 90,000 to 140,000 hectares of land if sea levels rise by one meter, as projected by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

The urban poor in informal settlements are most vulnerable. Population growth jacks up the pressure. There are an estimated 96.7 million Filipinos now, from 19 million in 1940. And 27 out of every 100 huddle below the poverty line, despite claims by Jinggoy, Bong, Johnny, Bongbong and Co. that their pork barrel helped.

"We will be hit," writes Jose Ma. Lorenzo Tan of World Wildlife Fund in "Coming To Grips With a Climate-Defined Future." The Philippines sits well within ground zero. "As individuals, and as a nation, what options do we have?"

Climate change impacts are not uniform but site-specific. Baguio faces challenges different from Cebu, Davao or Iloilo. And indirect impacts include shifts in the range of infectious diseases to stress on resources as people flee "from areas of high risk, toward zones of refuge." Responses should, therefore, be site-specific and holistic. And they should be bottom-up, not top-down. "Silo

thinking will make matters worse, given the human footprint that aggravates climate

vulnerability.”

Threat multipliers include unplanned urbanization. “All cities do not face the same mix of vulnerabilities. This is not a level playing field. It is a slope.” The question is not whether to develop, but how.

All new public and private investments and retrofits need to be evaluated through a bifocal climate lens. Mitigation looks at shrinking the carbon footprint. Adaptation considers management of risk. “Both need to be done.” Business-as-usual technology or formulas suffer from short-term utility.

The 1976 Philippine Water Code is outdated. Cities along Manila Bay’s coastline, Cebu and other places are sinking due to overextraction of groundwater. This increases flood risk. “And yet, the virtually unregulated use of deep wells continues to be tolerated.”

Quit drilling artesian wells, the Department of Public Services urged Cebu last August. The city’s 1,345 wells are an undercount. Parched residents dug up to over 5,000 wells. Most were hand pumps sans permits. Salt irreversibly taints many urban aquifers. Wells in mountain barangays are “not sustainable.” Once pumped dry, they’ll be difficult to replenish.

We do not have a land use law, Tan noted. Land use planning is often done to show compliance, rather than build competitiveness. Change is imperative and basics come first, including food security, health, and sustainable land use.

“Cities need to act in alliance, beyond their boundaries. Companies must think beyond their fences, and consider the viability or vulnerability of their value chains, communities and catchments where they operate. The challenge covers the way we grow our crops, and manage our watersheds. No city can live without food and water. A growing nation must learn how to produce more, with less. Existing political boundaries will no longer suffice. The ecosystem is our new management envelope.

“Companies and organizations should run through a risk assessment and review the vulnerability of each operation. That is key to your continued viability. Are you in control? Start with the needs, then consider the wants. It is not difficult to do, if you call a spade a spade.”

Climate Change Commissioner Lucille

Sering has her work cut out. The Aquino administration upped the P1-billion people’s survival fund to P12 billion this year. That will enhance geohazard maps and early-warning systems, and scale up the nation’s “eco-town framework” on building sustainable towns.

Partnership with people remains the key even as more storms threaten the day after.

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