

Headline: Not much time left

Byline: Philippine Daily Inquirer

Published Date: 05:26 AM October 11, 2018

Section: opinion

Word Count: 4666

Content:

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released this week its most alarming report yet on climate change. It said that damage to the planet would be irreparable should the world fail to keep global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius within the next 12 years.

One of the key messages of the report, written by more than 90

scientists, is that the world has already warmed 1°C from preindustrial levels, and is already seeing the consequences.

Limiting human-caused warming to even just a half-degree Celsius, it emphasized, will leave the planet's weather, health and ecosystems in much better shape.

The Philippines was among the 195 countries that signed the landmark Paris Agreement, which commits to keep the global temperature rise this century well below 2°C from preindustrial levels, and pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5°C.

A 2°C increase is projected to lead to catastrophic and irreversible changes that could make the world less habitable.

These effects include boiling-hot climates, rising sea levels, and extreme weather disturbances such as super typhoons and hurricanes — even stronger than what's been seen so far — that could leave millions of people homeless and even stateless, wiping out ecosystems, affecting agricultural production, spurring food shortages and inundating low-lying countries.

To accomplish the highly challenging 1.5°C goal, scientists said drastic measures have to be taken. Governments and businesses need to adopt policies that would shift operations and livelihoods to clean energy, to cut down on greenhouse gas emissions.

Individuals must pursue lifestyle changes such as eating less meat (livestock emits huge quantities of methane), moving to a smaller dwelling to effect minimal use of resources, using more sustainable products, walking or taking public transport instead of driving, and carpooling.

But what does this mean for a developing country like the Philippines, where about 22 million people are impoverished and an estimated 44 percent of the urban population are slum dwellers?

In addition, more than half of the population, or 62 percent, live in coastal zones, exposing them to natural calamities such as the average 20 typhoons that enter the country every year.

This year, some 17 tropical cyclones have already hit, with Typhoon "Ompong" in September affecting more than 270,000 people in 30 provinces and damaging about P17 billion worth of crops.

The country also continues to lose its rich biodiversity and is considered one of the world's "most threatened hotspots," according to the 2017 assessment report by the Climate Change Commission (CCC), an agency under Malacañang.

Key drivers of biodiversity loss include land conversion, deforestation due to logging, mining and pollution. The tragic effects of unregulated mining and quarrying were recently seen in Benguet and Cebu, with at least 90 deaths from landslides.

Climate change expert Rosa Perez, one of the IPCC report's authors, warned that the Philippines could see the extinction of hundreds of endemic species and 99 percent of coral reefs, food shortages and extreme weather disturbances in the future.

IPCC scientists said that while time is running out to avert the severest consequences of global warming, it can still be done "within the laws of physics and chemistry," and with the political will of governments.

The Duterte administration has earmarked about P1 billion under the national climate fund to "help local communities build resiliency," but there appears to be little monitoring of how these funds are being used.

On the other hand, it cut next year's proposed travel budget for the CCC to P2.8 million from this year's P18.7 million, restricting the opportunity for many Filipino scientists to interact with and learn from their international colleagues, at precisely this crucible period when the Philippines needs all the help and expertise it can get.

President Duterte's justification?

"We cannot be going to conventions every now and (then)... We are not as rich as France, Great Britain where you can send a delegation."

If Malacañang thinks participating in international climate conventions is costly and unnecessary, the country should see it funnel the budget instead—in fact, allot more — to building the capacity of the most vulnerable Filipinos, such as farmers, fisherfolk, the urban poor and indigenous peoples, who will be the most affected by climate disruption.

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Taking action on this can no longer be delayed.