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Headline: Coronavirus and climate change require bold and urgent action

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We are living in a time that the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19), as declared by the World Health Organization (WHO), is a pandemic.

Wuhan city in China's Hubei province, where Covid-19 was first detected, was the first to declare a city lockdown. Aside from Wuhan, China also locked down 15 more cities and quarantined at least 20 provinces.

Following China, Italy, El Salvador, New Zealand, Poland, Ireland and Denmark have implemented national lockdowns. With 165 countries already affected, we expect more countries to declare lockdowns.

A day after WHO declared Covid-19 as a pandemic, the Philippines placed the country's premiere region — Metro Manila — under "community quarantine." An "enhanced community quarantine" took effect on Tuesday. A number of provinces, cities and municipalities followed suit.

The Johns Hopkins University Center for Systems Science and Engineering reported that, as of Mar. 18, 2020, there were 197,140 confirmed Covid-19 cases with 7,916 deaths. Over 41 percent (81,738) of these cases have recovered.

While Covid-19 is now a public health emergency, climate change — considered the greatest development issue humanity faces today — has already reached its tipping point.

Climate change is striking harder and more rapidly than many expected, according to the World Economic Forum. The last five years (2015-2019) were the warmest on record, and natural disasters are becoming more intense and more frequent. Last year, we witnessed unprecedented weather — heat and cold waves, heavy rainfall and floods, tropical cyclones, severe storms, drought and wildfires — throughout the world. Global temperatures are on track to increase by at least 3 degrees Celsius toward the end of the century — twice what climate experts have warned is the limit to avoid the most severe economic, social and environmental consequences.

The year 2019 was the year of "climate emergency" declarations. A rapidly changing climate drove hundreds of governments — national and local — around the world to declare states of emergency. Today, about 800 million people live in places that have declared climate emergency — in fact, one in ten people on the planet.

Science is unequivocal on both — Covid-19 and climate change. WHO "are deeply concerned by the alarming levels of spread and severity" of Covid-19, just recently, more than 11,000 scientists jointly declared that Earth is "clearly and unequivocally" facing a climate emergency.

Both emergencies have "alarming levels of inaction" among governments and peoples.

Climate change increases risk to human health

WHO considers climate change “to be the greatest threat to global health in the 21st century.”

We are aware that there are climate-related events that already pose risks to society through impacts on health. However, there are no scientific studies yet that directly link climate change to Covid-19.

Climate-related impacts on health include heat-related illness and death; injury and loss of life associated with severe storms and flooding; occurrences of vector-borne and water-borne diseases; exacerbation of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases through air pollution; and stress and mental trauma from displacement as well as loss of livelihoods and property.

The World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Risks Report considered infectious diseases, like Covid-19, as one of the top 10 risks in terms of impact over the next 10 years.

The paper — “How urban characteristics affect vulnerability to heat and cold: a multi-country analysis” — published in the International Journal of Epidemiology last year, revealed that, in 2018 alone, 220 million vulnerable people over the age of 65 experienced more heat wave exposure breaking the previous record set in 2015 by 11 million.

On Covid-19, China's data reported that deaths have been concentrated among older adults who have weaker immune systems and have a higher rate of chronic illness. Over 26.4 percent of people aged 60 or older who were diagnosed died. However, people of all ages with chronic medical conditions are also at higher risk.

While the government have started addressing Covid-19 threats, we cannot wink our eyes on climate emergency. Even if the government beats Covid-19 the soonest they could, we are already out of time and we know perfectly well that climate change will cause more catastrophic scenarios.

“Act as if your house is on fire,” exclaimed Greta Thunberg. Professor Graham Medley advised, “act as if you're infected and don't want to pass it on — not as if you're trying to avoid being infected.”

As in climate change, PH is also vulnerable to Covid-19

Undoubtedly, the Philippines is one of the most, if not the most, vulnerable countries to the impacts of climate change. Almost in all reports — Germanwatch's Global Climate Risk Index 2020, World Risk Index 2019, Global Peace Index 2019, and Global Report on Internal Displacement 2019 — the Philippines have been identified and ranked either as the top or one of the top 10.

The Philippines was identified as one of the most vulnerable countries to Covid-19 due to its exposure to China and, at the same time, the least well-placed to address Covid-19 impacts, according to the study titled “Economic vulnerabilities to health pandemics: which countries are most vulnerable to the impact of coronavirus” published by the Overseas Development Institute in February 2020.

As of Wednesday (Mar. 18, 2020), we have 187 confirmed cases with 14 deaths. In an analysis shared by two professors of the Asian Institute of Management, it was stated, “if dynamics does not change or improve, the Philippines could reach around 26,000 cases by end-March.”

Globally, over 86 percent (171,065 out of 197,140) of reported cases came from 19 wealthy countries out of the top 20. Except for China, Iran, South Korea, the United States, Japan and Malaysia, all the top 14 countries are in Europe that is now considered “the epicenter of the pandemic.”

These governments and their health systems — though some may struggle — have the capacity both in government resources and infrastructure to respond to Covid-19. Likewise, their citizens can access and afford the best health care possible.

As in climate change, Covid-19 is also an “equity issue.”

Developing nations like the Philippines are the vulnerables. The economic stress and impact on our government and our people would likely be higher and greater. People living in poverty and lacking health insurance or secured employment cannot afford to be sick or miss work, otherwise, there will be no food to put on the table for the family or allowance to send children to school. The “enhanced community quarantine” added to these challenges.

In this moment of crisis, we have to act boldly and with urgency to beat Covid-19 and address the climate emergency. We are all in this together and we must win both battles.

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