

Headline: Climate agenda

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It took only six hours for last month's Typhoon Karding to develop into a supertyphoon — showing how storms have become unpredictable due to climate change. Those who were in its path were not exactly unprepared — previous typhoons have taught them hard lessons — but they were still caught off guard by its intensity. This situation will prevail, with even worse consequences, if the government continues to romanticize Filipino resilience instead of being accountable — and this is as worse as denying that climate change exists.

Last Oct. 5, President Marcos Jr. assured that the country's resiliency and adaptation to the new normals of climate change, which he called the world's "first truly global crisis," are on top of his administration's national agenda. This policy direction, however, will remain as mere rhetoric unless matched by tangible programs aimed at not only mitigating the impact of disasters on Filipinos, but equipping them with more knowledge and options to avoid death and damage to property. These could include livelihood initiatives that are insulated from extreme weather events, and better infrastructure in the form of public housing and permanent evacuation centers across the country.

Based on the World Risk Index 2022, the Philippines ranks as the most disaster-prone country in the world, with an index score of 46.82. Each Filipino will have their own disaster story to tell, whether they live in rural or urban areas. Sixty-two percent of the population live in coastal areas, including major cities, where they are likely to experience the full wrath of typhoons. And even those who are not in the coastal zones may be living along fault lines instead, or in areas where human activities such as logging and mining pose risks to their lives.

Ironically, in a survey conducted by Pulse Asia last month, only 9 percent of the respondents believed that "stopping the destruction and abuse of our environment" was an urgent national issue. Understandably, controlling inflation (66 percent), increasing workers' pay (44 percent), creating more jobs (35 percent), reducing poverty (34 percent), and fighting graft and corruption (22 percent) are gut issues that need urgent attention from the government, but environmental issues are part of the chain that impacts Filipinos' lives, their livelihood, and food security.

Aside from stronger typhoons, climate change is expected to bring higher sea levels and storm surges, the main cause of deaths for thousands during Supertyphoon Yolanda in 2013. These climate-related impacts will affect the farming and fishing industries, and reduce the productivity of farmers and fisherfolk impacting the availability and cost of food — which, in fact, is already happening.

Aside from the President, his predecessors have also committed to combating climate change. So have world leaders. But as Foreign Affairs pointed out in an article published in October last year, decarbonization — the central goal of climate policies — has remained unchanged despite international agreements over the last three decades. It cited three reasons why: lack of incentive to decarbonize, inadequate investment in low-carbon technologies, and the expectation that other countries will act first.

In 2009, the Philippines passed Republic Act No. 9729, or the Climate Change Act, which requires local government units (LGUs) to develop their own local climate change action plan (LCCAP). Government data show that 1,394 out of 1,700 LGUs already have LCCAPs as of 2021. This is an impressive increase from only 137 LGUs in 2015, and hopefully indicates that progress is being

made on the local front.

On the national level, however, the government must address the issue of reliance on fossil fuels to generate power and machinery for the transportation and manufacturing industries. World Bank has noted that while the country is a minor contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, it ranks in the top 25 percent among low- and middle-income countries; emissions from the energy sector are projected to quadruple by 2030, making it even more unlikely for the Philippines to meet its commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 75 percent by then.

The President vowed that his administration's climate initiatives will be "smarter, more responsible, more sustainable." He can start by seeing to it that existing environment-related laws — on forestation, mining, waste management, clean water, clean air, wildlife conservation, etc. — are properly implemented to help the country do its part for the planet. Because if there is one catastrophe that must be avoided, it is a climate policy failure.

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