

Headline: Need for coherent climate agenda

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Today is World Environment Day.

Let us take a moment to remember the coral reefs, mangroves, and other marine life that perished in the recent oil spill off Oriental Mindoro; the damaged environments and numerous deaths due to irresponsible mining; the environmental and land defenders who have been killed in their line of duty; the lives, crops, and infrastructures that are lost every time the country is hit by a calamity.

There will be more casualties and damage in the form of human lives, property, and natural resources if the Philippine government fails to address with more urgency the risks posed by these man-made and climate-related disasters. The World Bank (WB) estimates that the effects of climate change will reduce the country's GDP by as much as 13.6 percent by 2040.

This year's focus for World Environment Day is plastic pollution, a major environmental issue globally. WB describes the situation in the Philippines — the third largest contributor to marine plastics — as "staggering" due to an insufficient waste management system exacerbated by a high dependence on single-use plastics.

The Philippines generates 2.7 million tons of plastic waste annually and because it lacks an efficient recycling system, it also loses around \$890 million to unrecycled products. Last year's passage of Republic Act No. 11898 or the Extended Producer Responsibility Act, which places the responsibility of waste reduction, recovery, and recycling of plastics on the producers, is meant to address this problem and, by 2028, companies are expected to recover 80 percent of their plastic products. But only if the law is implemented efficiently and strictly.

The country's plastic problem extends to microplastics that worsen air quality. A recent study confirmed for the first time that suspended atmospheric microplastics — tiny plastic particles measuring less than five millimeters in diameter — contribute to Metro Manila's air pollution with polyester as the most prevalent.

Then there are the fumes coming from vehicular emissions as well as the burning of fossil fuels such as coal and oil, with the lack of access of more than half of the population to clean fuels and technology for their domestic needs such as cooking only exacerbating the problem. But this should not be blamed on the poor — big industries and businesses contribute more to the pollution that they dump on the environment with impunity, and should be made to take responsibility.

Studies have warned that if plastic pollution is not curbed, the number of plastics in the ocean may even surpass the fish population by 2050. This outcome is certainly alarming for a country surrounded by bodies of water and is dependent on its marine resources for exports and food.

An estimated 20 percent of the country's plastic waste finds its way to the ocean and ends up destroying marine life, eaten by fishes and other marine animals, or choking them to a slow death. The microplastics that these animals ingest can also find their way to our tables through the food that we eat. Call it the life cycle of plastic — or worse, karma for inhabitants of a planet that have failed in their responsibility to take care of their environment.

President Marcos talked about this responsibility in his first State of the Nation Address (Sona) last year: “We all have the responsibility to preserve this Earth, for we are but custodians, and we will pass on this great treasure to future generations.”

The then-newly installed president talked about alleviating the country’s vulnerability and building the capacity for resiliency through disaster-proof planning. He also made two important points: the country’s excellent environmental laws (“But we have to guarantee that these laws are properly enforced”) and corporate responsibility (“Companies who exploit our natural resources must follow the law”).

Over the past year, however, the Marcos administration has been criticized for its doublespeak (for example, advocating for renewable energy but approving the renewal of a fossil gas project) and the lack of a coherent, holistic climate change agenda. In his Sona next month, the President should present an overall government climate change strategy — after all, this issue is not just under the purview of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources but concerns other agencies as well.

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This time, he must speak with clarity and present a timeline on what the government intends to do to fulfill its commitment to the Paris Climate Change Agreement and to the Filipino people, because as he said so himself: “If we cannot mitigate climate change, all our plans for the economy, all our plans for our future, will be for naught.”