

Headline: Key role of scientists, media in preparations for looming disasters

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CLIMATE SCIENTISTS have been warning about “the risk (of) big storms and serious flooding in New York” for the past 12 years. Perhaps these warnings—together with the accurate, timely weather forecasts, climate adaptation measures in place, and efficient evacuation—prevented more deaths, despite Superstorm “Sandy” being one of the biggest hurricanes to hit the United States.

The superstorm’s death toll was less than 100. Compare that with those of our much less powerful storms—like the 2009 “Ondoy” (280 deaths) and the 2011 “Sendong” (nearly 1,500)—and the figures will tell you how much seriously and capably we have to change our ways of doing things.

With the inevitable and increasing destruction from changing climate, our government and the public should now seriously consider to depend on the important role of scientists and media.

The crucial role of the scientists in climate problems is to make accurate weather forecasts, to explain the nature and processes of climate change and related events, and to propose suitable adaptive measures. For media, it is to know first who the scientists are, so they can be effective in relaying useful information to the public. Together, scientists and media can help the government and the people to prepare in time for the coming danger and thus lessen damage to property and human life.

Kevin Trenberth (who chairs the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, for which he shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007), discussing Sandy in an article in the science magazine, explains the relations between climate change and the destructive hurricane (Scientist, 10/31/12). Knowing the different key information in these events is important in designing ways of adapting to their impacts.

In an AP report (“‘Sandy’ refuels climate change debate”, Inquirer, 11/1/12), seven distinguished climate scientists from different US institutions briefed the readers on various aspects of climate change and Sandy. Like in Trenberth’s article, useful information on climate change and adaptation measures was shared.

Our typical news report on climate-related issues often lacks evidence-based information (properly published experts or study). For example, the news report “Reclaiming land seen as measure to deal with climate change” (Inquirer, 11/1/12) mentioned a department secretary, a bureau director, an architect, a government reclamation agency, and the University of the Philippines National Institute of Geological Science (NIGS). But no scientist or properly published study was cited. It failed to mention the well-published NIGS geologist Dr. Alfredo Mahar Lagmay.

A change in doing things is long overdue for those working and reporting on natural disasters facing our country. Increasing loss of human life and damage to property from climate-related disasters call for a more determined and competent action—with the right people put in charge.

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