

Headline: Unprecedented changes in climate

Byline: Rodel D. Lasco

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The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recently released the first part of the three-installment series of its latest assessment of the earth's climate. As usual, the world's media had wall-to-wall coverage of the event. The findings of the world's foremost climate scientists are a blend of the expected sprinkled with bits of surprises.

The Working Group 1 (WG1) report validated its earlier conclusion that human activities are definitely causing global warming beyond what may be expected from purely natural drivers (attention, skeptics). Since the 1850s, the planet has warmed by about one degree Celsius, primarily because of fossil fuel emissions. What is a surprise is that the latest research has revealed that the rate of warming is unprecedented in the last centuries and even the past 2,000 years. The impacts are happening all around us, from massive flooding, record heat waves, and intense storms.

In the future, continued warming will trigger even worse impacts such as increases in the frequency and intensity of hot extremes and heavy precipitation, drought, and intense tropical cyclones. Sea level will continue to rise, with the report estimating a rise of up to a meter by 2100, which could breach 15 meters by 2300.

The report also affirms that it is better to keep warming within two degrees Celsius and preferably up to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Expectedly, this can only be attained by massive cuts in greenhouse gas emissions in the near term to achieve net zero emission. The WG1 report states that aside from carbon dioxide, the world should also reduce its methane emissions. Quite disturbingly, ocean and land carbon sinks are expected to be less effective at slowing the accumulation of CO₂ in the atmosphere in the future.

One disappointment in reading such global reports is that they are short of both regional and country-specific coverage. That is why we must have our climate assessment reports. The Philippines has begun doing this since 2016 through the Philippine Climate Change Assessment reports, which are currently in its second cycle.

What does the IPCC WG1 report mean for our country? We are reminded that we must not neglect the looming prospect of a warming planet despite the pandemic. As we try to cope with and win over the COVID-19 virus, our strategies and programs must also seek to build climate resilience.

Watch out for the next two installments of the IPCC trilogy featuring adaptation to and mitigation of climate change, which are coming soon in the first quarter of next year.

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Dr. Rodel D. Lasco is an academician of the National Academy of Science and Technology of the Philippines. He is the executive director of The OML Center, a foundation devoted to discovering climate change adaptation solutions (<https://www.omlopezcenter.org/>).

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