

Keyword: global-warming

Headline: Why is 1.5 degrees so important?

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Published Date: 05:04 AM October 21, 2018

Section: opinion

Word Count: 608

Content:

Ondoy, Yolanda, Pablo, and Ompong. The names are seared in the collective memory of our nation because of the chaos and misery these typhoons heaped upon us. They are some of the most destructive natural forces ever experienced by our people. Climate change is creeping up on us with devastating consequences.

The Paris Agreement aims to limit “global average temperature to well below 2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels.” At the urging of vulnerable countries like the Philippines, the Paris Agreement further aims to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 C above preindustrial levels. But will it really make a difference to reduce global warming from 2 C degrees to 1.5 C?

This is what the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) attempts to answer in the special report on Global Warming of 1.5 C released on Oct. 8, 2018. Among its significant findings is that humans have already caused 1 C of warming since the industrial revolution. That means, we are a mere 0.5 C away from breaching 1.5 C.

The IPCC anticipates that the risks, impacts and exposure will be significantly lower with 0.5 C less warming, enabling greater opportunities for adaptation. For example, tropical cyclones will likely have heavier rainfall at 2 C global warming, which means greater risk of flooding, landslides and storm surges.

While there is no specific study yet on what a 1.5 C world means for the Philippines, previous studies show that a warming planet will result in a reduction in yield of rice and corn. Future increases in sea level could affect coastal communities, which make up about 60 percent of the Philippine population.

The IPCC report highlights the need to take drastic cuts in global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions so that the planet will not warm beyond 1.5 C. This means reducing emissions primarily from fossil fuels, such as the use of gasoline and coal for energy generation, industries and transport. The conservation of existing forests and expansion of tree cover are also needed.

Sadly, most projections show that, at the current rate at which the world is emitting GHGs, there is little chance to attain the 1.5 C target.

The Philippines, though a low-emitting GHG country, is already one of the most climatically vulnerable countries in the world. In one year alone (2016), tropical cyclones affected around 5.8 million Filipinos and inflicted about P33 billion worth of damage.

With global temperatures likely going above 1.5 C as early as the 2030s, we need to prepare by increasing the adaptive capacity of our people. Enhancing our resilience to climate-related risks is even more urgent now. Our government can review its current laws and policies on energy, disaster risk reduction and climate change in light of the special report.

The private sector must also invest in climate resilience and sustainable business models. The scientific community should innovate to equip our people and decision-makers on how to cope with

climate change.

So, to answer the question plainly: 0.5 C does matter a lot. If we fail to act as one global community, 1.5 C will not just be a number. A warmer climate will usher in an even more unprecedented level of catastrophe, beyond Ondoy, Yolanda, Pablo, and Ompong.

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