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Having gone through seven weeks of lockdown, we now look forward to a new normal by the middle of May, when the government is widely expected to lift the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ). As the countdown begins, we grapple with the sort of reality that awaits us at the other side of the COVID-19 infection curve, once the flattening of the curve is achieved over time.

In the Philippines, ECQ — our restrictive version of the lockdown imposed by countries hit hard by this pandemic — has left over 57 million Luzon residents marooned in their homes since March 17. Will lifting the ECQ stop the economic hemorrhage, ushering in a modified form of normalcy?

Like the rest of humanity, the country's ship of state is sailing in uncharted waters.

But this multifaceted crisis has already rearranged society's priorities and changed our lives. None of the financial gurus could dare claim that the global polity, along with much of the structures and systems that have lorded over us since Bretton Woods through the present global order, would remain on an even keel in the post-pandemic period. The future is not assured.

COVID-19 is primarily a global public health emergency that has since metastasized into an economic and labor market shock, affecting both demand and supply that foreshadows a crippling global recession.

Sustainability and climate change. As we prepare for the new normal in the post-lockdown but COVID-19-plagued era, now is the time for a paradigm shift in how we view ourselves, our society, and the biophysical environment.

From a society peopled by self-interested individuals whose measure of success is wealth creation, we should see the world as an interconnected global village where one's interest affects the other, with the health of one person now becoming the concern of all. At the center of this relational equilibrium is the ethical and moral responsibility of humans to protect the biosphere by living sustainably.

What sort of development model could best serve as our north star in restarting the stalled economy? Since this pandemic has already turned our lives upside down, we might as well start on a clean slate.

This paradigm shift treats the planet as front and center of the new normal. We should restore our heavily-degraded biophysical environment, starting with reforestation, a halt to land conversions, the protection of marine and wildlife habitats, and an end to reliance on single-use plastics.

But the elephant in the room is, of course, the man-made catastrophe called climate change largely blamed on our carbon emissions. Why perpetuate the same energy-intensive economic system that has built a consumerist society but has likewise precipitated the wanton abuse of the environment and brought us to the environmental precipice?

Climate change exacerbates preexisting risks in our environment. Pandemics are added stressors, disrupting supply chains and livelihoods, and endangering people's health, safety, and food security.

Shift to renewables. Now is the time to ramp up the development of renewable energy sources to capitalize on the sudden gains we have had from less air pollution, with cars off the roads and industries shut down during the ECQ.

The science behind the benefits of solar, wind, hydroelectric, geothermal, and biomass energy is sound. These resources are readily available, cheaper to produce in the long term, and less polluting—if not actually having net zero emissions—than fossil fuels.

Sadly, coal-fired power plants remain to be a fixture in the Philippines' energy mix, with coal's share to reach 50 percent in 2030. We can reverse course now and chart a greener path by investing heavily in renewables.

Since the shift to renewables is costly, the government is in the best position to lead the way by bankrolling, for instance, the initial rollout of startups in solar power working in underserved and unserved rural areas, to attract more players. Companies going green should get government incentives as well.

We should also treat work-from-home arrangements, teleconferencing, and online transactions as new features of the new normal to further reduce carbon emissions.

Sustainable development must be front and center of our paradigm shift, if we are to thrive in the new normal.

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