

Headline: Science for climate's sake

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DURBAN, South Africa — What does a closed-door meeting of some of the world's top climate scientists held in this city on Jan. 21-25 have to do with the future of the Philippines, indeed of the entire planet?

More than 250 climate scientists from over 60 countries descended on this coastal city last month to start working on the climate impacts and adaptation aspects of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report (AR6). The IPCC is the United Nations' body tasked to assess the scientific findings related to climate change.

Because of the extreme complexity surrounding the causes of and solutions to climate change, sound science is essential in arriving at a consensus on how to slow it and how we can adapt to it. The main responsibility of the IPCC is to periodically assess and synthesize the findings of scientific literature so that they become useful to policy-makers around the world. IPCC authors, mostly active scientists, are mandated to make sense of what the most up-to-date science is saying about the effect of climate change, and how we can respond better.

The partnership of the IPCC and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is one of the most successful collaborations between scientists and decision-makers in the international arena. Among its notable achievements, the IPCC's first assessment report led to the formation of the UNFCCC in 1992, while its second assessment report became the basis of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997.

Its most recent report was instrumental in the crafting of the Paris Agreement in 2015. In recognition of its global impact, the IPCC was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007, together with former US vice president Al Gore.

The painstaking process that began in Durban will culminate in 2022 with the release of the IPCC AR6 adaptation report, which is typically accompanied by wall-to-wall coverage by the world's media. By then, we will know better how the planet is being affected by climate change and how we can respond better. The report will be a crucial reference for the first global stocktake in 2023 under the Paris Agreement.

As one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change, the Philippines must have the capability to make sense of how we can be affected by a warming planet. Such knowledge should guide the development of sound adaptation policies and options. Sadly, our science community lags far behind those of advanced economies, and even those of our Asean neighbors.

The Department of Science and Technology is correctly aiming to have at least 380 researchers, scientists and engineers per million Filipinos just to meet Unesco standards. This aspiration deserves the support of all sectors of our society, not least the executive and legislative branches of our government.

The Durban meeting has set in motion a process that will pave the way for a more nuanced understanding of what's wrong with our climate. More importantly, the IPCC report will provide a clearer roadmap of how we can better adapt to global warming.

However, if the science community and policymakers in the Philippines do not get its act together, such global recommendations will have little effect on the most vulnerable Filipinos.

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