

Headline: PH's voice in the climate catastrophe

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The Philippines should be alarmed that the scientific evidence on the urgency to reverse global warming is at loggerheads with the reality on the ground of a growing danger to economic growth and people's wellbeing. CO2 emissions, the main source of global warming, have been rising in the top emitting countries—China, the United States, India. To add to this disturbing trend, Brazil, under its new president Jair Bolsonaro, is burning the Amazon, turning the rainforest into a carbon source rather than keeping it as a carbon sink.

Being on the frontline of climate change, The Philippines must convey its grave concern about these developments to the international community and relevant world bodies, from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the International Monetary Fund/World Bank to the G-7 and G-20 meetings.

Brazil's Bolsonaro was elected, much like Donald Trump in the United States, on the false premise that reckless "deregulation" of the environment would boost economic growth. But the evidence is that depleting natural capital like forests in Brazil has only hurt long-term growth and wellbeing. In the past half century, there was no pickup of growth in the country from illegal logging and forest fires. In fact, it was the reverse; periods of low deforestation coincided with relatively strong growth, especially in agriculture.

Remote sensing shows a sharp spike in deforestation since Bolsonaro took office in January 2019. Local temperatures are rising fast above global trends, producing longer dry seasons over the southern Amazon and widespread droughts and floods. Brazil's National Centre for Monitoring and Early Warning of Natural Disasters warns of a tipping point beyond which the rainforest ecosystem could collapse.

Brazilians and the global community, including the Philippines, must clamor for an urgent change in the Bolsonaro government's direction—for Brazil's and the world's sake. Worldwide, carbon emissions hit 415 parts per million in May this year and is continuing to boost global temperatures. At the current rate of emissions, the catastrophic threshold of 450 ppm of atmospheric carbon would be breached in less than 15 years. The Philippines, like the rest of Southeast Asia, has been experiencing hotter temperatures and rising sea levels, which are then intensifying storms and floods.

Faced with these odds, it is vital for the Philippines to invest heavily in climate adaptation that adjusts economies to the changes caused by global warming. Japan, the Netherlands and Singapore are leaders in building defenses against rising sea levels. True, the per capita incomes of these nations are 13 times higher than the Philippines', but, sadly, climate change does not differentiate between countries' incomes. If anything, the poorer nations end up paying a higher price for it in death and destruction.

But the Philippines is still not doing enough to boost its coastal defenses and building resilience. The priority for spending on disaster management must rise vastly, perhaps threefold. It is urgent to build resilience in agriculture, fisheries and health, and stem mass migrations that climate change may trigger.

However, adaptation without mitigation, or the need to decarbonize economies, will not keep pace with runaway climate change. All countries, but especially the biggest emitters—China, United States and India—need to switch from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. The sliver of good news is that solar photovoltaics and wind energy, both noncarbon sources, have become mainstream options worldwide. The average cost of these two renewable power sources is now in the range of the cost of fossil fuels.

Even so, fossil fuels still account for more than two-thirds of global energy needs. The world is not on track to meet the Paris targets. One reason is that renewable energy in transport, residential use and industrial processes remains very low. Policy frameworks to support renewables and energy efficiency in industry and in buildings are patchy. Also, energy-related carbon dioxide is rising because of increased fossil fuel consumption, encouraged by government subsidies for this energy source. Worldwide, these subsidies increased by one-third in 2018, to \$400 billion globally.

Perversely, coal plant capacity is set to expand in South and Southeast Asia, which together account for half of the world's planned coal power expansion. India, Vietnam and Indonesia make for a combined over 30 percent. Bangladesh and Pakistan plan to increase coal-based capacity threefold, while the Philippines wants to double capacity.

Continued rise in carbon emissions worldwide is propelling a dangerous increase in global temperatures that are hurting economies and people's wellbeing. And Brazil, with its new policy of active deforestation, is aggravating the situation by turning the Amazon from a potential carbon sink to a major carbon emitter—a path it must rethink for its own economic interests. Economies, including the United States, China, India, Japan and the European Union, need to switch radically from fossil fuel to renewable energy sources.

It is in the Philippines' interest to be a powerful voice for these changes in the global arena.

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