

Headline: PH joins the climate change fight

Byline: Rodel D. Lasco

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On April 15, 2021, the Philippines formally joined the global effort to reduce greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere. As part of its commitment to the Paris Agreement, the country submitted its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), which contains its quantitative target on mitigating GHGs. In essence, the government commits to reducing its GHG emissions by a whopping 75 percent (relative to the baseline scenario) in the next 10 years.

Such grand ambitions may seem unbelievable to the casual observer. But as is typical, the details reveal a more down-to-earth goal. Of the 75-percent reduction, only 2.71 percent is unconditional, which are those to be funded by local resources. In other words, this portion is almost certain to happen, barring any significant shift in policy or economic performance. The rest (72.29 percent) is conditioned on new financial support coming from other countries as part of the Paris Agreement. Without this external support, this component is dead in the water.

How significant is the 75 percent reduction of our future emissions? In the overall scheme of things, not much, considering that our annual emissions are less than half a percent of global emissions. On the other hand, our NDC sends a powerful message that we are ready to do our share, no matter its scale. Such a commitment signals our unity with the rest of the global community to fight the scourge of global warming.

Can we expect an influx of external funding and support to help us meet the 72 percent of conditional commitment? I will not hold my breath. Climate finance is one of the most contentious issues in climate change negotiations, and estimating its value is full of ambiguity (see, for example, the paper of Weikmans and Roberts, 2019). One thing is certain, the actual flow of funds from developed countries to poor, vulnerable countries is still a trickle relative to what is needed.

At the same time, the NDC is more than just GHG mitigation. The document also commits the country to “undertake adaptation measures across but not limited to, the sectors of agriculture, forestry, coastal and marine ecosystems and biodiversity, health, and human security, to preempt, reduce and address residual loss and damage.” Given our country’s vulnerability to climate-related hazards, we can do no less.

Our modest commitments must be viewed in juxtaposition with renewed international efforts to address climate change. On April 22-23, the US president convened a climate summit with 40 heads of state in attendance to trumpet his country’s intention to take its place among the world’s nations in arresting rising air temperatures. Toward the end of this year, the UK government will host UNFCCC COP-26, the centerpiece of which is the discussion and hopefully finalization of the so-called Paris Rulebook, which will govern the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

The Philippines’ NDC is a small but significant step toward confronting the challenge of climate change. That piece of (virtual) paper is a testament to our resolve to join the global community in keeping our planet livable.

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Dr. Rodel Lasco is a member of the National Academy of Science and Technology (NAST) 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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