

Headline: COP26 one of our last chances for change

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In terms of the climate crisis, the ending spells doom — unless we move fast enough to change it.

The UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow, United Kingdom, is crucial for all countries, especially for a climate change-vulnerable nation like the Philippines. The Global Climate Risk Index 2021 published by international NGO Germanwatch looked into data on extreme weather events from 2000 to 2019 and found that the Philippines was ranked fourth among countries most vulnerable to climate change.

There are encouraging signs: China announced it would halt construction of new coal power plants overseas. President Xi Jinping's declaration is a crucial step toward a future that is coal-free. China must follow through by being explicit about when this new policy takes effect.

For the Philippines, the Department of Energy issued a moratorium on new coal power plants back in October 2020. However, a July 2021 study from the Center for Energy, Ecology, and Development said that proponents of 10 coal projects are still in the process of obtaining permits, while six proposed projects were allowed to continue.

Funding for 3 percent of coal power development projects in the country comes from China. The government must halt these projects for good, phase out coal, and hasten the policy shift to accelerating investments in renewables.

The Philippines has large amounts of potential capacity in geothermal, wind, solar, ocean, and biomass energy, which can generate jobs and boost the economy amid the pandemic. We can transition to a sustainable future by improving energy storage, grid flexibility, and energy efficiency, while taking a holistic and integrated approach to transforming our systems.

Our nationally determined contribution (NDC) submitted to the UN indicates a 75 percent emission reduction target from 2020 to 2030. However, only 2.71 percent of the target is "unconditional," meaning the government will aim to achieve this without external funding support. Almost the entire target, or 72.29 percent, is "conditional," which requires additional support to achieve it.

If we are truly serious in saving ourselves from a grim ending, the government needs to make the entire target "unconditional" to show its commitment to addressing the climate emergency. And if funding support is a barrier to unconditionality, then our government delegates should seek to secure the necessary funding to put the NDC implementation right on track with the target. The fate of livelihoods, ecosystems, and millions of Filipinos are at stake. It behooves the government to bear greater "unconditional" responsibility than a mere 2.71 percent.

A new mindset must also take root: Sectors of society from the government to businesses, to the academe and individuals, whether in urban or rural spheres, must be united in putting nature first. Nature-based solutions should become integrated in our social, economic, and political lives. Conservation International captures the idea clearly: "Nature doesn't need people. People need nature."

The conference halfway around the world attended by high-level delegates might seem distant or “malayo sa bituka” for Filipinos in far-flung marginalized communities. Still, it will determine how climate change will affect our food security, livelihood, energy production, biodiversity, health, and survival.

Our delegates, led by Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez III as Climate Change Commission chairman designate, carry the fate of 109 million Filipinos on their shoulders, and they shouldn’t forget the millions who have died and suffered from climate change-driven natural disasters in recent history. The three strongest typhoons that made landfall in history are all in the Philippines: Supertyphoon “Yolanda” (2013), and Typhoons “Ferdie” (2016), and “Rolly” (2020).

The COP26 presents an opportunity—one of the few remaining—for nations to act on climate change before it causes irreversible damage to life on Earth. There is only one path all countries must take—the path to save the world and ourselves by changing the ending.

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