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Byline: Rufa Cagoco-Guiam

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On Dec. 10, 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly as Resolution 217 A in Paris. The UDHR is considered a milestone in the history of human rights and a global standard of achievements “for all peoples and nations.” It outlines several fundamental human rights to be universally protected and honored by all country members of the United Nations.

But this year, it passed by almost uneventfully, seemingly overtaken by horrendous events in different parts of the world, especially in Gaza, where massive violations of human rights have taken place daily since Oct. 7.

It pains me to think that the global community of nations has become immobilized watching unspeakable manifestations of impunity of one spoiled brat of a state carrying out inhumane acts of carnage on fellow human beings—many of whom are its citizens. Even the United Nations General Assembly’s overwhelming vote toward a ceasefire was unheeded, despite several new incidents of Israeli hostages and a French government employee being killed by Israeli bombardment.

Here at home, last Dec. 15, I was asked to contribute to a day-long celebration of International Human Rights Day through an online presentation on the intersections of climate change and human rights. The Mindanao Climate Justice Resource Facility invited me to talk about this theme of the interlinkages between climate change weather events and human rights.

Many would raise their eyebrows either in cynicism or confusion to consider this rather unusual intersection—and I have encountered several of these questions whenever I am asked to talk about my current research on climate change, conflict, gender, and social exclusion.

The issue of these emerging and highly palpable intersections of climate change and levels of inequality especially on gender and inter-ethnic relations were highlighted at the recently concluded Conference of Parties (COP28) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Dubai. This was through a whole-day series of broadcasts featuring several thought leaders, social and climate activists, researchers and think tank representatives in different parts of the world, both from the Global South (Asia and the Pacific), and promoters of innovative futuristic strategies and platforms for mitigating climate change effects from the more progressive parts of the world.

This is a clear recognition that we can no longer isolate the issues of social injustice that become even more blatant during episodes of climate change-related weather events. The environments around us, our ecosystems where we are an integral part of, have changed immensely and rather speedily due to intense human interventions, through tampering with natural processes in the guise of development programs.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR), in one of its 2030 Agenda, has laid out this provision on promoting a human rights-based approach to climate action. It exhorts all member states of the UN to take “ambitious adaptation and mitigation measures that are inclusive and respectful of communities affected by climate change.”

In its four-pronged agenda, the OHCHR outlined the following for a safe global future: 1) a safe and stable climate; 2) healthy ecosystems; 3) a non-toxic environment, and 4) justice and inclusion. A safe and stable climate is key to our survival as human beings and is also crucial to the enjoyment of everyone's human rights to a healthy environment. Ecosystems can be healthy if not tampered beyond natural processes, so homeostasis or balance is maintained. Our environment at present especially our air and water has become contaminated with toxic substances, especially non-visible particulate matter that comes from emissions of toxic fossil fuel fumes. The last one urges member countries to practice justice and inclusion in their decision-making processes, especially in implementing development programs.

It might be impossible for us as ordinary citizens to hold the Israeli government under Netanyahu accountable for its massive violations of human rights in its war on Gaza.

But we can start working to advocate for development that will respect the rights to life, health, peace, and security of all peoples in our country, especially the impoverished and already marginalized indigenous peoples.

This is one way of promoting a human rights-based approach to any development project. It is also a step toward a more sustainable, resilient, and environmentally friendly development regime, a legacy we can hand over to the next generation.

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