

Headline: Winning the war vs climate change

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The battle against climate change will be won or lost in Asia and the Pacific and nowhere is this more evident than in the Philippines.”

Thus said Asian Development Bank (ADB) president Masatsugu Asakawa last week upon unveiling a six-year, \$10-billion climate financing program which the country will be able to access to support programs that will help it meet its climate action commitments made a few years ago.

No truer words have been spoken. The Philippines is at the forefront of the fight against climate change in a region where its effects are most pronounced and where millions of lives are affected daily, and thousands lost every so often to the devastating upheavals in weather patterns.

In theory, ADB’s program will support low-carbon transport, renewable energy, the development of carbon markets, flood management, resilient coastal development, food security and adaptive health, and social protection. The lender will also help mobilize additional climate finance from the private sector, cofinancing partners, and other sources.

In practice, the challenge is much more intractable, as Philippine policymakers face a multitude of obstacles in their fight against climate change, not least of which is the fact that doing the right thing in this arena is often an expensive undertaking.

Take the case of the local power sector which is still dominated by coal as the primary fuel for the country’s largest producers of electricity.

It is easy to call for all power generation companies to shift to coal, and issuing statements to this effect even more so. But shifting to renewable energy costs money—money that will ultimately be charged to consumers directly or indirectly via taxes if the preferred mode of support is government subsidies.

Even the Department of Energy which recently called for power firms to “voluntarily” shift away from cheap coal as a fuel for power plants conceded that it is wary of further burdening consumers—still struggling with the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and high inflation—with the “transition costs” associated with renewable energy, whether it be solar, wind, or other forms of power.

Another example is the Philippines’ transportation sector where thousands of jeepney drivers and operators have been opposing government plans to modernize their vehicles from current diesel-burning units that spew black smoke into the atmosphere into more efficient models that run on cleaner fuel, including vehicles powered by electric motors.

Their complaint is primarily one of cost, and yes, their complaint is valid. But equally valid (if not more so) is the need to protect the environment by shifting to greener modes of transportation and lessening dependence on fossil fuels. The private sector must work in this direction.

Power and transportation are but two of many examples where this debate is being played out in full force, with both sides having compelling arguments.

But perhaps the better way of framing the debate is identifying which valid arguments are oriented toward short-term concerns and which are meant to address long-term ones. And in all cases, arguments in favor of short-term benefits to be derived from the status quo must give way to long-term gains that can be won by committing to climate-oriented reforms.

The challenge is for all leaders in the public and private sectors to sell the idea to the broader public—all the way to the individual consumer—that saving the planet and securing our collective future is an expensive undertaking whose tab we must all pick up.

In this regard, policymakers must take their cue from Environment Secretary Ma. Antonio Yulo-Loyzaga—who led the Philippine delegation to the COP28—for her science- and evidence-based approach to the country’s environmental challenges, and eschewing the dogmatic mindset used in the past.

If this war against climate change is to be won, it will be won by level-headed leaders who speak in measured voices to bring all stakeholders to a point of consensus, instead of ideologues who embrace tightly the truths of only one side to the exclusion of other equally important truths of all other stakeholders.

Now that funds are being made available to finance climate change action and mitigation, the government must focus these resources on clear programs that will have the most short- or long-term impacts and which would make a difference in the lives of the most vulnerable.

No less than the ADB has noted that the Philippines was ranked fourth in the Global Climate Risk Index in terms of vulnerability to extreme weather from 2000 to 2019. In all likelihood, it will only get worse in the future. Thus, time is of the essence.

To protect the Philippines from climate change and to save our planet from catastrophe, total buy-in from everyone is needed. Selling this idea to the people is the goal that our leaders—from President Marcos, all the way down to the humblest barangay captain—must commit to.

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