

Headline: There are bigger battles outside the Paris Agreement

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We write with regard to the resurgence of debate on President Rodrigo Duterte's ambivalence over the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, as it comes in a time when deeper public discourse and action on the climate crisis is urgently needed.

World leaders will gather at the United Nations "COP22" climate talks once again to attempt to concretize the Paris Agreement's agreed common actions on mitigating carbon emissions that induce climate change, adapting communities to worsening climate impacts, and ensuring financing, technology transfer, capacity building, and loss and damage mechanisms.

COP22's commencement fittingly coincides with the Philippines' commemoration of the third anniversary of Super Typhoon Yolanda (international name Haiyan). World leaders should be reminded that some 16 million people were severely affected by Yolanda's powerful winds, floods and storm surges across the Philippines, and that these impacted communities are still struggling to recover three years later—a preview of what future climate norms are in store for us if climate disruption is left unfettered.

An alarming evidence of this was the findings of current Social Welfare Secretary Judy Taguiwalo that at least 200,000 Yolanda survivors have yet to receive emergency shelter assistance from the state because of discrimination by local politics during the Aquino administration.

Meanwhile, the specter of 'disaster capitalism' continues to haunt Yolanda survivors. Initial findings of an environmental investigation mission held by the Center for Environmental Concerns and scientist group AGHAM regarding the proposed P7.9-billion Leyte Tide Embankment Project revealed how the biggest post-Yolanda mega-infrastructure solution actually threatens the livelihood and environment of some 10,000 residents across the east coast of Leyte.

Unfortunately, there is still a yawning gap between the abject plight of Yolanda survivors and other frontline communities and the reality of the Paris Agreement.

The 'flexible' carbon mitigation mechanism of National Determined Contributions that makes contribution to emission cuts voluntary allows for the watering down of the historic and current responsibility of big polluter countries like the United States and China. Pressure is unjustly put on low carbon economies of developing countries when there should be none in the first place.

There are no concrete commitments and mechanisms that will ensure adequate and unconditional support for climate vulnerable countries. Even more marginalized was the proposed mechanism for 'Loss and Damage' that sought to facilitate compensation from industrialized nations to vulnerable nations that are already suffering climate impacts.

Transnational corporations and financial institutions, meanwhile, are given free rein to promote multi-billion dollar false climate solutions such as mega hydro, clean coal, and nuclear power plants, timber plantations, carbon credits, and other projects that displace communities and degrade the environment.

These are just the tip of the iceberg. It is hard not to cast a shadow of doubt over the Paris Agreement and the uphill battle to step up the pact's ambition in the upcoming COP22. It is actually commendable how President Duterte asserts our people's right to develop as the foundation of his argument, a right of vulnerable and poor nations that is given only tokenisms in the agreement.

The climate talks, however, are still a legitimate venue to advance the concrete needs and aspirations of our people. President Duterte can take a leaf from the book of Bolivian President Evo Morales, who called out global capitalism as the root of the climate and environmental crises in his plenary speech at COP21 last year, or from Pope Francis who also called for system change with his encyclical "Laudato Sii."

At COP22, Duterte can take up the cudgels for the Filipino people struggling for climate justice, from the Lumad, Igorot, and other indigenous peoples resisting big coal and metallic mines to the Yolanda survivors that will march once again on 'ground zero' come November 8 to assert their demands for resilient homes and livelihoods.

These are the bigger battles outside the Paris Agreement that need to be fought, as these are the ones winning the struggle against the global system that perpetuates climate injustice. Let these stories of struggles in the frontlines be at the core of the climate talks.

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