

Headline: Empower youth to act on climate change

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When I came to think of my life in those days, considering my youth then, I am surprised how I stood it all,” Gregoria “Oriang” de Jesus, the nation’s ultimate Lakambini and Katipunera, wrote in her autobiography.

Oriang was no stranger to hardships in her youth, but she had no fear of facing danger. She learned “how to ride, to shoot a rifle, and to manipulate other weapons” and she “accompanied soldiers in the battle, impelled” by the desire “to see unfurled the flag of an independent Philippines.”

Youth today do not have to do as Oriang did in her time, but the struggle for a better tomorrow remains especially the fight for freedom from fear, from fossil fuels that make our economy fragile in the long run, and freedom from a climate-vulnerable future. It’s time we provide our youth with the right tools and political space in which they can participate and help lead our people away from dangerous uncertainty.

Even if we limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, science tells us climate change will still impose terrible pain and suffering particularly among vulnerable nations. Unabated warming will increase changes in the intensity and frequency of heat waves, heavy rainfall, and droughts. Slow onset events such as rising seas threaten small islands, coastal communities, and cities, as the annual sea level increase in the Philippines reflects a rise four times the global average.

On top of everything, the COVID-19 pandemic, persistent power sector problems, and the global fuel crises continue to endanger the lives of Filipinos. It’s clear we need all hands on deck—especially young hands steering the wheel. Children and youth certainly want to learn about issues, but they also demand to be heard.

Climate change is a complex issue that affects all facets of development. Disasters are but one of the subsets of climate change. In its latest adaptation report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change cited anticipated impacts in the Philippines, including supercharged typhoons, reduced productivity in agriculture and fisheries, heightened public health risks, and increased climate-induced migration and displacement, with children and youth among the most vulnerable.

The climate crisis deepens inequalities across generations, particularly when impacts take away what matters most to young people—homes, food, water, education, health, and family income. Helping children and youth better understand their setting, while providing them with skills they need to intervene effectively, will require tremendous effort. A good start: embed climate change in our educational system. By introducing climate science and action concepts early, we provide them tools they can consider as they encounter more and more leadership opportunities.

Empowering children and youth will require an environment centered on sustainable and resilient practices. Apart from pressing problems plaguing the Philippine power sector, electricity operations in the country are heavily disrupted in emergency situations. The disruptions are worse for small islands and off-grid communities. With the country’s vast renewable energy potential, it is high time the youth become more involved in understanding, utilizing, and deploying more indigenous renewable sources of power.

Another opportunity is in the area of mobility, which is severely constrained during emergencies because of road blockages and fuel shortages. Delivering responsive, cost-effective, and resilient modes of movement is critical to vulnerable populations, especially children and youth. The pandemic shines a powerful spotlight on the important role played by bicycles when public transportation is restricted. More people need to be aware of community responders who, using bicycles, helped save lives in the immediate aftermath of Super typhoon Haiyan. For sure, young Filipinos are leading the mobility revolution today through their leadership in bicycle counts and their demand for safe multi-modal transport.

Children and youth are central to climate action. They need unfettered access to scientific knowledge as well as greater opportunities in using insights they've gained in developing more responsive policies. They should not be limited by conventional approaches set by the government in the development planning process. Instead, children and youth should be provided more opportunities to test and carry out innovative ways to participate.

Ira Dominique Guerrero is the communications coordinator of the Manila-based climate and energy policy group Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities. A development communicator by practice, she has professional experience in the fields of climate change, energy, sustainability, health, and nutrition.

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