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Dr. Glen Martin Green of the University of San Carlos argues, in a paper that he will present at the Kahayag Forum in Cebu City in August, that in order to mitigate the impact of climate change, people need to change not only their lifestyle but also development efforts on the part of government leaders and the private sector. He says, for example, that large reclamation efforts are undesirable because 1) these are a threat to ecosystems, and 2) rising waters in the future will mean that investing in these types of development is unsound.

What is alarming is the unsustainable way of life in highly urbanized cities, insofar as expensive land acquisition means that investors will prefer vertical or high-rise structures. These types of structures require massive air-conditioning, which means a huge demand for power. Right now, what is appalling, according to Green, is that many people think that we derive most of our energy needs from the sun, when in truth we get it from burning fossil fuels.

Burning fossil fuels, as climate scientists have revealed, is the biggest contributor to the greenhouse effect. Scientists have known since the 1980s that carbon emissions will bring great trouble in the future, but Green says that too little, too late, has been done by governments in terms of the world's overdependence on fossil fuels.

In a conversation that I had with him, I told the scientist that locally, the problem really is that science is predominantly absent in the manner by which our policymakers and government officials make decisions, which necessitate an understanding of the adverse impact of climate change. I told him that politicians are not scientists, and that there are huge economic interests that are at stake.

For instance, decisions with respect to the construction of coal-fired power plants in the country are firstly determined on the basis of the energy needs of the economy. Without power plants, our politicians will say, there will be no electricity for factories and big malls. Without factories and malls, there will be no jobs available to the people. The argument is that Third World societies like the Philippines are deemed in the moral higher ground insofar as poor countries need cheap coal. It is a quandary, according to Green, because in the end, these underdeveloped countries will suffer the most in terms of climate-change impact because of the lack of infrastructure and better policy.

Pope Francis' encyclical "Laudato Si" underscores the fact that the most vulnerable sectors of society are heavily affected by the devastating impact of climate change. The ethical aspect of the encyclical, which is anchored on the notion of environmental stewardship, also points to the fact that the unsustainable lifestyles of the rich are exploitative and, ergo, unjust. But the subtitle of the Pope's encyclical, "On care for our common home," also tells us that climate change is the moral responsibility of all, rich and poor alike.

The "tragedy of the commons," which is a term first used by Garret Hardin, portrays how the self-interest of the rich and even the interests of some of our leaders in the Third World may have depleted the earth's resources. The quandary that Green talks about simply reveals to us that while the dominant ways of the First World may have caused so much damage to the environment since the Industrial Revolution, Third World societies also need to act in order to mitigate the ills brought about by rising temperatures.

So, what can we do? While it is important that developed economies commit to and comply with their emission limits, the Philippines must also do its part by bridging science and political leadership. What this means ultimately is that our policies should now begin to consider the environment as a priority in terms of planning with regard to the country's energy requirements. Moreover, local governments down to the barangay can do their share by building bike lanes and encouraging people—most especially students—to use bicycles in going to school. In addition, green classrooms should be built in order to minimize the reliance on electricity.

What Philippine leaders are doing right now is a post-factum approach. In a paper published in the Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics, I argued, reflecting on Typhoon "Yolanda," that climate leadership and management in the Philippines seem to be more focused on rescue and rehabilitation efforts, and that not much has been done in terms of addressing the root cause of the problem. Of course, some local government units can be lauded for their good practice in terms of disaster risk reduction and management. But the real leadership challenge is not only how to replicate these practices in the other parts of the country, but also to highlight the importance of totally changing the way we do things, in order to create sustainable and resilient communities.

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