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El Chaltén, Argentina—It was an image that seemed frozen in time as was frozen in space: a sprawling blue glacier—as far as the eye can see—extending deep into the Patagonian mountains.

Then, suddenly, the sound of a crack is heard, like distant thunder—and part of the glacier comes crashing into the milky green lake beneath.

Witnessing such a spectacle as our boat approached Perito Moreno glacier—perhaps the most famous glacier in Argentina—I cannot help but think of the climate crisis and what it means for the world.

The vastness of the Southern Patagonian Ice Field (16,480 square kilometers)—of which the glacier is part—means that such loss of ice—known as “calving” in glaciology—would not in themselves signify anything as being part of a glacier’s life cycle. Some years back, it was reported that Perito Moreno itself was actually growing instead of shrinking: a phenomenon that remains not fully explained.

In any case, the reality is that, taken together, the Patagonian glaciers are melting at one of the fastest rates on the planet, significantly contributing to sea level rise. According to a 2019 study by Michael Zemp and colleagues, the world is losing 335 billion tons of ice each year, corresponding to a nearly 1-millimeter rise in sea levels annually.

In Argentina—which (as its officials in the COP27 meetings in Egypt were quick to point out) contributes to 0.7 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions—the impacts of climate change are already manifesting in the form of unstable weather patterns, increased precipitation (and risk of floods) in the north, and decreased precipitation (and risk of droughts) in the south. The country has taken steps to address its own emissions—which mainly comes from the energy sector (54 percent) and livestock farming (20.7 percent) with its over 50 million heads of cattle. However, underscoring the challenges for a country facing a severe economic crisis, it has also stressed the importance of natural gas in their transición energética—and has defended its agriculture and livestock industries amid concerns that they are leading to deforestation.

The Philippines is faced with a similar predicament. As one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change, we have already seen the devastation brought about by ever-stronger typhoons and ever-more vicious floods. And even as the country has been very active in climate leadership for decades (When I was attending a workshop at Harvard back in 2019, Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor and international mediator Prof. Lawrence Susskind cited our own Tony La Viña as an exemplar of negotiation skills), our governments have vacillated in making strong climate commitments, likewise citing our minuscule contribution to global emissions.

In the wake of COP27, John Leo Algo of Living Laudato Si’ Philippines noted: “While the nation has a right to pursue development on its own terms, it is hypocritical for the Philippines, one of the most vulnerable to the climate crisis, to keep supporting further use of the same fossil fuels that are clearly harming it in many ways.”

Even as leaders on both sides of the Pacific rightfully demand climate justice and pay obeisance to words like “climate action,” “mitigation,” and “sustainability,” will they actually take steps to protect places like Gran Chaco and Sibuyan, Yungas and Palawan, from destructive projects—and an equally destructive development paradigm?

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Amid the grandeur and sheer beauty of Patagonia, concerns around climate crisis and the environment can feel distant, and the thoughts provoked by the crashing glaciers can prove transient. Taking the bus from El Calafate to El Chaltén—the “trekking capital of Argentina”—I saw wild guanacos as they grazed on the grasslands, and only the snow-capped peaks on the background, behind which lies the Chilean part of the region, could take my eyes off such scenes. Here, in El Chaltén itself, the Andean condors circle the peaks as I trekked under the shadow of its famous monolithic peaks like Cerro Torre and Mt. Fitzroy.

But nothing lasts forever, and the timelessness of such scenes is belied by the science that shows that their foundations are unsustainable, with glaciers, guanacos, and condors alike facing the threat of disappearance. And the same can be said of the taken-for-granted comforts of our ways of life—more so for those who are already marginalized, from the Mapuche in Gran Chaco and the “lumad” in Mindanao, to the urban poor in Buenos Aires, Manila, and elsewhere.

We need a politics that acknowledges that our planet is as beautiful and as fragile as its glaciers.

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