

Headline: When communities uphold climate justice

Byline: Lea B. Guerrero

Published Date: 04:10 AM December 15, 2019

Section: opinion

Word Count: 4581

Content:

More than four years ago, 18 individuals — mostly farmers, fisherfolk, workers and concerned Filipino citizens who bear the brunt of the impacts of climate change — and 14 Filipino nonprofit environmental and human rights organizations filed a petition before the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) to investigate the responsibility of 47 investor-owned fossil fuel and cement companies (collectively called the “Carbon Majors”) for human rights violations or threats stemming from climate change impacts. Last Monday morning, at the COP 25 in Madrid (evening in Manila), the CHR announced the contents of its report.

The findings are a historic victory for communities at the front lines of the climate emergency, as well for everyone who will be at the receiving end of climate impacts and the generations to come who will inherit what we will leave.

This is the first time that a constitutionally mandated body anywhere in the world has officially declared that 1) climate change constitutes an emergency situation that demands urgent action; 2) carbon major companies played a clear role in anthropogenic climate change and its impacts; and 3) they could be found legally and morally liable for human rights violations arising from climate change.

In its groundbreaking investigation, the CHR additionally found that relevant criminal intent may exist to hold companies accountable under civil and criminal laws, in light of certain circumstances involving obstruction, willful obfuscation and climate denial.

The CHR concluded that people affected by climate change and whose human rights have been dramatically harmed must have access to remedies and access to justice. Simply put, big polluters and other corporations have the responsibility to protect human rights and to act without further delay as we face the climate emergency. Business as usual is no longer acceptable.

Communities have been at the center of this petition from the very beginning. In the course of the hearings of the petition, we heard many stories from across the country of people who have lost their children, parents, brothers, sisters, friends and neighbors to ever fiercer typhoons and tropical cyclones, the fear of which continues to steal their peace of mind long after their loved ones have been laid to rest.

In one of the hearings, we heard from a rice farmer who told us, “Nag-uulyanin na ang panahon (the weather is getting senile).” The changing weather was seeing farming families going without enough to eat, dragged deeper into poverty and debt to regenerate their fields after typhoons, only to worry about the drought that may come later. For many Filipinos, these hardships are a tragedy brought on by cruel destiny, and we have no choice but to cope.

A narrative that has proven to be particularly pervasive is that everyone is responsible for climate change—and that no one, therefore, can be held accountable. But this petition, and the CHR announcement and impending resolution, is changing all that. When before communities perceived weather disasters as acts of fate, now there is a deeper understanding that they have the means and the power to hold governments and corporations accountable for the impacts they are experiencing. There is a growing understanding that responsibilities and obligations must be attributed to those who have contributed the most to the climate crisis, and justice must be served

to those who have been impacted.

In the words of a Bataan community leader and one of the petitioners, Veronica Cabe: “I believe that governments and corporations have the choice to choose people over profit, and businesses have a right to do business, but—us—we also have the right to live.”

This decision marks a victory for the global movement for climate justice, and we believe it will create a momentum for even more wins for climate-impacted communities. The influence of the CHR decision will reach beyond the Philippines and will likely be a precedent for further legal actions demanding fossil fuel companies to put people and the planet over profit. It is an outcome that can reach every single human being alive or yet to be born. More and more people must rise up against carbon major companies to reclaim their rights. When communities and people uphold climate justice, the whole world wins. This landmark moment is only the beginning.

* * *

Lea B. Guerrero is country director of Greenpeace Philippines.

Subscribe to our daily newsletter

By providing an email address. I agree to the Terms of Use and acknowledge that I have read the Privacy Policy.