

Headline: Silver linings around climate change

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THE SOUTHWEST monsoon season or habagat is upon us.

Starting July up to September, weather systems such as thunderstorms, intertropical convergence zones, low pressure areas, tropical cyclones and habagat will become more prevalent and they are likely to bring heavy rainfall to many places of the country, according to the weather bureau Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration or Pagasa.

Filipinos call this period the rainy or typhoon season. But unknown to many of them, the “behavior” of our habagat and even of our amihan (the northeast monsoon associated with our dry season) has changed.

An American scientist, Kevin Trenberth, has an explanation for this: “The climate is changing: we have a new normal. The environment in which all weather events occur is not what it used to be. All storms, without exception, are different. Even if most of them look just like the ones we used to have, they are not the same.”

Carbon dioxide is acting on the climate like a performance-enhancing drug. All that extra energy in the atmosphere increases the likelihood and intensity of weather events, making storms, as well as droughts and wildfires, far more destructive.

In the Philippines, this “new normal” has become a vicious mix of casualty and devastation, and it has been shown time and again that poor Filipinos, even with government warnings and assistance, are simply of no match to the increasingly severe impacts of heavier rains, stronger typhoons, warmer summers and extreme weather events it spawns.

Last year, based on government reports collected by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, an estimated three million Filipinos were displaced by natural disasters. Unaccounted here are the grief and agony of losing loved ones, of losing a limb or one’s mind, not to mention of losing hard-earned property, including the losses resulting from “slow-acting, gradual” climate change impacts—losses that are beyond words and numbers but clearly warn of the dire implications of climate change, especially on the human rights of the poor and marginalized.

But as they say, every cloud has a silver lining.

More communities and people’s organizations are now demanding cuts in carbon emissions and support for adaptation programs from those who are historically responsible for the climate crisis. And they are gaining ground. Initiatives for climate accountability have also been tried in recent years, and victories from these struggles are providing rays of hope and encouragement.

In June this year, a Dutch district court ordered the Netherlands government to make deeper carbon emissions cuts based on the “human rights arguments” of a nonprofit group called Urgenda—definitely a first in history.

A few days later, eight American teenagers won a case in Washington. The victory forced the state to consider science-based emissions regulations. The teens were worried about wildfires,

disappearing beaches, a longer mosquito season and allergies, and such climate change impacts on their generation.

Other climate liability cases are in the offing.

In Belgium, the Klimaatzaak campaign has gathered 9,000 signatures from citizens who will in effect stand as coplaintiffs in a case calling for a 40-percent cut in greenhouse gas emissions from the 1990 levels by 2020.

In Germany, a case has been filed against the energy firm RWE, one of the European Union's top carbon emitters, by Saul Luciano Lliuya, a Peruvian farmer who lives in the flood path of a glacial lake whose banks are on the verge of collapsing as greenhouse gases heat up the climate. Lliuya is asking RWE to pay 20,000 euros for work to protect the valley, an amount that represents 0.47 percent of the estimated project cost based on RWE's 0.47-percent share of global emissions between 1751 and 2010. Although the claim was rejected in May by RWE, which denies responsibility for the risks facing the farmer, the latter's lawyer is said to be "taking steps to assess the prospects of success" of the lawsuit against RWE.

Here in the Philippines, Greenpeace Southeast Asia is soliciting support for a petition that it will file in the Commission on Human Rights. The petition calls for an investigation into the responsibility of Chevron, Shell and big oil, coal and gas producers—found to be the biggest contributors of carbon emissions—for climate change impacts that resulted in or threatened with what could be deemed in effect human rights violations.

Inspired by this initiative, community leaders from Pacific island states, which suffered greatly from Cyclone "Pam's" deadly wrath last March, also vowed to bring a similar case to the appropriate tribunals. In a symbolic gesture of solidarity, these "Pacific Warriors," along with Filipino climate advocates Naderev "Yeb" Saño and Mayor Emilia Villacarillo of Dolores, Samar, and Greenpeace Southeast Asia representatives signed a People's Declaration for Climate Justice.

Indeed, human rights bodies and courts are now being asked to contribute to addressing a problem that affects everyone, by holding the big corporate carbon polluters accountable for their harmful business operations, or by calling governments and regulators to undertake more meaningful actions in response to the rising tide of climate change.

It would be a historic development if the Philippines—where monsoon seasons have been altered by climate change, and where casualty and damage from weather-related disasters have become persistent—could set climate accountability precedent.

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