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The impact of climate change has worsened significantly over the past decade and the window to take action is closing fast, the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released last Feb. 28 said. Unless greenhouse gas emissions are cut drastically, it warned, future generations will find themselves facing more extreme climate events.

Experts have been warning since 1990 that human activities were causing harm to the environment, but IPCC's latest report from Working Group II said the effects of climate change are already worse than expected — disrupting ecosystems and affecting the lives of billions of people globally. In more visual terms, this means that sea level rise is displacing people in vulnerable areas, droughts and heat waves are drying up forests and agricultural lands, and more severe storms are killing people and destroying property.

The report addresses the near-term (up to 2040), mid-term (2041-2060), and the long-term (2081-2100), and while the latter two milestones are still two decades away, IPCC noted that children who were born in 2020 will be 20 years old in 2040 and 80 years old in 2100. Depending on future warming levels and location, the report said, 48-76 percent of the global population will be exposed to deadly heat stress by end of the century from about 30 percent today. The Paris agreement adopted in December 2015 aims to limit global warming to below 2 degrees Celsius, preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels.

"With ongoing global warming, today's children in South and Southeast Asia will witness increased losses in coastal settlements and infrastructure due to flooding caused by unavoidable sea level rise, with very high losses in East Asian cities," IPCC said. By mid-century, it said, more than a billion people living in low-lying coastal cities and settlements globally will be at risk from coastal-specific climate hazards. This will force affected communities to move to higher ground, and in turn will "increase competition for land and the probability of conflict and forced relocation."

Here in the Philippines, the most recent reminder of climate change impact is Supertyphoon "Odette" in December that affected 10.8 million people across 11 regions, killed 405 people, and destroyed P13.3 billion worth of agriculture. But aside from the damage to lives and property that these figures indicate, the disaster has further heightened the gap between the rich and poor, the Youth Advocates for Climate Action Philippines (Yacap) reported in January. "...[P]roduct prices spiked after the supertyphoon ... The poorer communities bear the brunt of the damage caused by climate change and are the least able to recover from it. We witness here that the most unequal phase of a disaster is the road to recovery," Yacap said.

Odette left a trail of utter destruction from Surigao in Mindanao to Palawan in Luzon — not only known for their tourist spots but are also agricultural lands and fishing grounds. In Southern Leyte, thousands of farmers saw their livelihood wiped out after Odette destroyed 7 million coconut trees. In Dinagat Islands northeast of Surigao del Norte, houses were leveled to the ground and even the capitol building was destroyed. A month after the typhoon, residents were still living in tents including Governor Arlene "Kaka" Bag-ao. Accessibility made it doubly difficult for relief and rehabilitation efforts to reach the islands hit by the typhoon, worsening the situation on the ground with COVID-19 remaining a threat. Residents of the affected areas have described the ordeal as

“delubyo” (deluge).

IPCC warned that such disasters will become more commonplace if the temperature exceeds 2 degrees Celsius — as it is, it noted, keeping the warming level at less than 1.5 degrees Celsius is already challenging. “Climate change impacts are increasingly being felt in all regions of the world with growing challenges for water availability, food production and the livelihoods of millions of people... But science is also clear: with immediate action now, drastic impacts can still be prevented.”

Despite the urgency of the situation, however, young environment advocates said the issue of climate change is barely talked about particularly in the national debates ahead of the May elections. “The lack of attention to this topic proves how it is not a priority to the Philippine government and not attractive for voters to include the politicians’ names on their ballot,” Yacap said. It added that the government should invest in prevention and preparedness such as the restoration and preservation of mangrove forests, sea grass, coral reefs, and watershed ecosystems that will help fight storm surge and floods, capture carbon, and mitigate destruction of the planet.

IPCC said its report is to provide knowledge and understanding about climate risks and that these must be factored into each decision and planning. The rest will be up to the stakeholders: “The choices we make in the next decade will determine our future.”

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