

The Philippines, Climate Change, and the Paris Agreement

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By Antonio G. M. La Viña, Margarita Alexandra Reyes and Elirozz Carlie Labaria

According to Philippine Atmospheric Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA), within the next 30 years, all areas of the Philippines will be warmer by around two degrees Celsius, with our already scorching temperatures even higher during the summer months. The dry days will be dryer and will exceed 35 degrees Celsius, but rainy days will receive more rainfall during the monsoon seasons, at least in Luzon and Visayas. Mindanao, on the other hand, will receive less and less rainfall as decades progress.

EXTREME WEATHER

The Philippines has already recently been at the mercy of catastrophic natural disasters, the most fatal of which was Typhoon Haiyan, but more extreme weather events are likely to affect the country over the coming years as well. We were identified in the the 2016 Global Climate Risk Index as one of the nations most affected by extreme weather events in the period 1995 to 2014, and we ranked first in 2013 when Typhoon Haiyan inflicted more than 6,000 deaths and over \$13 billion in losses. Over the coming years, we will very likely continue to experience cyclones with stronger maximum sustained winds, especially during an El Niño event.

These extreme weather events have a social impact—risk reduction and management measures have to be put into place to minimize the damage from extreme flooding, prolonged and intensified droughts, more powerful typhoons, and intense storm surges. Without these measures, these disasters will wreak havoc on human settlements, damage public infrastructure, and exert even more pressure on food production and health systems. And of course, the people who will bear the brunt of this will be the urban poor and coastal communities, the people who are not only the most exposed to these disasters but are also the most socially and economically vulnerable.

The impacts of climate change aren't just limited to natural disasters. Public health is another arena that will be directly affected by climate change. In an already hot country that is projected to get warmer, the rising heat stress can aggravate existing cardiovascular and pulmonary conditions in people, especially the elderly. Changes in the frequency and amount of rainfall increase the risk of the spread of water-based and vector-borne diseases. And the increased health risks add pressure to the provision of health and medical services in the country.

Agriculture, too, could be severely affected by temperature and rainfall changes by resulting in crop sterility, flooding damages to crops, and potential outbreaks of pests and diseases in plants and animals. In the marine sector, reef degradation from coral bleaching and fish migration affects harvest. If left unmitigated, decrease in crop production and fisheries yield will ultimately increase food prices, threaten food security in the country, and exacerbate poverty in the rural areas.



Land Transformation Filipino farmers tend their plants on a dried-up portion of Laguna Lake turned into a ricefield with a backdrop of Manila skyline in Taguig City, south of Manila, Philippines (EPA/FRANCIS R. MALASIG)

MINING AND CLIMATE CHANGE

A topic that is currently the subject of much discussion is mining, an issue that is not generally thought of in relation to climate change. Currently a highly debated topic, it has been generally discussed in terms of its impact on environmental degradation.

But mining should be taken into account when it comes to the discussion of climate change, because it has a huge influence on the vulnerability of our forest landscapes. If not responsibly managed with strict environment safeguards, the negative impacts from mining operations—among which are forest destruction, toxic contamination of soil and water resources, and air pollution—reduces the capacity of the environment and people to adapt to the impacts of climate change. Extreme weather events like typhoons and heavy flooding that might hit will likely increase the risk of disasters in mining sites. We have experienced one too many of these mining disasters and should be alerted that climate change will only make things worse if the mining sector does not step up on its responsibility toward the protection of the environment.

Given the nature of climate change and the catastrophic impacts the Philippines (and the rest of the world) will experience because of it, it is imperative to work toward curbing climate change. The Paris Agreement, recently ratified by the President and concurred in by the Senate, is an ambitious and historic step in this direction. The Philippines played a key role in the creation of the Agreement.

The Paris Agreement enshrines several elements that are extremely important for the Philippines. First of all, the Agreement relies not on mandated emission caps for each country, but Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC). NDCs are emission reduction goals set by the countries themselves, and include implementation time frames, scope and coverage, methodological approaches, and explanations of how the NDC is fair and ambitious in light of national circumstances.

WHAT THE PARIS AGREEMENT MEANS FOR THE PHILIPPINES

The Philippines set for itself the rather ambitious goal of 70 percent emission reduction, but meeting this goal is contingent on support from developed countries. Submitting an NDC goal of this level signaled that the Philippines, while acknowledging that we are not responsible for climate change in a significant way as developed countries are, is willing and ready to do its fair share in the international effort to curb climate change.

Relatedly, another element of the Paris Agreement that is relevant for the Philippines is the inclusion of “climate justice” in the Preamble of the Agreement, a revolutionary term that is included for the first time in a legally binding, multilateral document. Including “climate justice” in the Agreement means acknowledging that the burden of climate change is not distributed equally, and that those who are least responsible for climate change will bear the brunt of the impact—a point that is extremely important for the Philippines, one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, the Paris Agreement included a reference to a temperature goal of 1.5 degrees Celsius, a more ambitious goal than the usually referenced target of two degrees Celsius. The difference between a rise in temperature of 1.5 degrees and two degrees could spell the difference between death and survival for climate-vulnerable countries.

What does this all mean for the Philippines? Many have been understandably concerned by the 70 percent emission reduction figure, a goal that seems to be regarded as either unattainable or a barrier to our economic development.

But understanding the way the Paris Agreement operates and its incorporation of “climate justice” is the first step toward grasping how doing climate actions, much of these actions contingent on the support of developed countries, can actually bolster our development, especially in light of the various catastrophic impacts we will experience due to climate change.

Taking action to curb climate change is an urgent undertaking for the Philippines. The ratification of the Paris Agreement by the Senate signals that our government understands this, and that we are ready to do the work necessary for our survival.

Tony La Viña is the executive director of Manila Observatory and a professor at the Ateneo School of Government and the University of the Philippines College of Law. Margarita Alexandra Reyes and Elirozz Carlie Labaria are members of the climate change team of the Ateneo School of Government. All of the authors were civil society advisers to the Philippine Delegation to the Paris climate change conference in 2015.