

COVID-19 revives focus on climate change

# From pandemics to supertyphoons, the buck stops with us humans

By: [Gil Yuzon](#) [Philippine Daily Inquirer](#) / 04:50 AM September 27, 2020

“Many of the root causes of climate change also increase the risk of pandemics.”  
(Harvard T.H. Chan/C-Change article excerpt)

Uncontrolled forest fires. Category 4 hurricanes. Flash floods. Earthquakes. Volcanic eruptions. The raging pandemic. This is our present daily fare of news from around the world.

Here’s a bit of good news for a change. Our lawmakers in Congress recently approved on second reading a bill which will create a new executive department that would exclusively focus on addressing emergencies relating to calamities and disasters.

House Bill No. 5989 (Disaster Resilience Act) establishes the Department of Disaster Resilience (DDR), which will be responsible for planning disaster risk reduction, management and response projects through a “united command system.” Events covered in its mandate are “geological phenomena such as earthquakes, volcanic activities, hydrological, oceanographic and meteorological phenomena such as tropical cyclones, floods and erosions, climate change such as El Niño or La Niña, extreme rainfall and temperature. (Source: CNN Philippines)

Headed by a secretary, presumably the new department will report directly to the President. It will replace the present alphabet-soup NDRRMC (National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council), which reports to the secretary of defense. After passing it on the third and final reading, the House will send the bill to the Senate.

## Overdue

Although this is welcome news, it has been long in coming. I also noticed that the proposed department does not appear to cover health emergencies such as local or national epidemics or global pandemics, such as the one we are presently struggling with. As I have repeatedly advocated in previous articles, what we need is a permanent agency which would replace ad hoc bodies, including the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF), which are formed only when the emergency is already upon us.

I really wish that the framers of the new law would also include health emergencies in its scope. It would be less bureaucratic, thus more efficient and economical. For example, the planned evacuation centers can also be used as quarantine or emergency

medical venues to augment overburdened hospital capacity. Also, since the new department will have regional offices, it can facilitate the distribution of relief goods and cash assistance to residents in affected local government units. It can also require up-to-date lists of beneficiaries to minimize delays in distribution, and most importantly, prevent widespread corruption such as we have experienced lately.

It is not too late to include health emergencies in the mandate of the new department. But whether this happens or not, there is little doubt that the DDR will still be called upon to be the lead agency when these health emergencies arise.

But what everyone, local and global leaders and citizens alike, need to keep in mind is that the diverse calamities increasingly plaguing the world—both natural disasters and health challenges—are the result of man’s unmitigated abuse of the environment. This has upset the delicate balance of ecological systems, leading to the occurrence of extreme climate events and the proliferation of both existing and new harmful organisms.

A BBC documentary, “Pandemics, Nature and Us—Extinction: The Facts” has concluded that humans were behind every single pandemic—swine flu, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and ebola. This is due to our bringing wildlife into our world (though the wildlife trade for food and other commercial purposes), and also our intrusion into wildlife habitats (through land use conversion, deforestation for farming and livestock raising). All these activities make it easier for viruses to transfer from animals to humans.

In the case of natural disasters and extreme weather events, we know by now that the extensive use of fossil fuels (coal, oil, natural gas) causes widespread pollution and global warming, eventually leading to climate change, which in turn drives the increasing calamities we are presently experiencing.

The bottom line: Mankind’s present tribulations are mainly of its own making. And it will get worse, unless the world as a whole heeds the latest wake-up call of the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

## New focus

Fortunately, it seems to have given new impetus and focus to the global conversation on climate change. For this we have to thank today’s young people who doggedly pursue their climate advocacy, clearly knowing it is they who will inherit tomorrow’s world.

Teen Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg continues to galvanize the world’s youth into action, lamenting the lack of prompt and decisive action by world leaders. She is

the founder of Fridays for Future movement and was Time magazine's Person of the Year in 2019. She has also recently been nominated for the second time for the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her unprecedented climate activism.

To end this piece, here's another piece of good news. Metro Manila, long known for its high level of pollution, significantly improved its air quality in recent months, starting with the strict enhanced community quarantine lockdown. According to CNN's daily air quality index (based on five color bars), Manila went up to as high as the best level, and has been consistently at the second best level as the lockdown eased.

Other major cities around the world have also improved their air quality, showing that even a temporary change in human activity, i.e., less motor vehicle usage and traffic, has a significant effect on the environment. Of course, air quality will probably deteriorate again when traffic volume gets back to its previous level.

This phenomenon could be a useful eye-opener for everyone, however, especially our leaders. For example, a significant reduction of dilapidated vehicles allowed on the road could go a long way. But it will call for the political will to put a cap on the serviceable age of registered vehicles (which other countries do); for strict smoke-belching inspection of vehicles, especially big commercial buses and trucks; and for simply limiting the number of routes granted, and of buses allowed on the main thoroughfares of the metropolis. —**CONTRIBUTED**

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