# Climate justice and MDGs*

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LET'S set aside sustainable development for the moment. For it's far out in the horizon, somewhat of a dream scenario. And Philippine Agenda 21 (PA21)—supposedly the country's national sustainability plan or specific translation of the global Agenda 21—is hardly an influence on the current regime's medium-term plans anyway.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), derived from the Millennium Declaration of the Millennium Summit of 2000, promises to be more realistic. MDGs is unpacked into 8 goals, 18 targets, 48 indicators by 2015. All these can be linked to climate change, though some more directly (eg forest cover to total land area) than others (eg access to safe drinking water or prevalence of condom use).

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MDGs speaks not of goals in full (e.g., wiping out poverty on the face of the Earth) but only about goals in fractions (1/2 of this, eg poverty and hunger; and ¾ of that, eg maternal mortality), a fairly low bar for a middle-income country like the Philippines. Meeting all the targets, or even realizing all eight goals, simply means a country has achieved the basic minimum to aspire for a higher level of well-being. It means that those left behind are now included somehow and spared from extreme poverty and deprivation.

So far the Philippine government has written three MDG progress reports (2003, 2005, 2007) as part of its obligation to its citizens and to the UN, and seems very happy about how it's doing. Truth is, the country is actually falling farther behind. It's not going to meet all the targets come 2015. Where it's failing (e.g., education, health, environment) are what matter most to the poor. And where it's supposed to be doing all right (e.g., reducing extreme poverty and hunger, expansion in protected areas) the claims continue to be contested.

Climate change can compromise the realization of the MDGs. A single cataclysmic climate event can wipe out gains from years of trying to reduce poverty. Combine this with government failure and you have a recipe for disaster.

If indeed climate change is the most serious threat to sustainable development, as all parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC) seem to admit, then the concern is simply not matched by action. Decisions that truly matter to eradicating poverty and redressing global disparities, as in making trade more fair, debt relief, increased ODA, or technology transfer, are hard to come by. Where decisions have already been taken money allocated is just not enough and comes with a string of heavy conditions. In the end all the efforts hardly make a dent on the problem.

Justice is central to any discussion of climate change. In climate negotiations principles that are assumed to be guiding Agenda 21 and the MDGs, like the principle of common but differentiated responsibility and the polluters-pay principle, are routinely and stubbornly ignored by the rich and powerful. This tells us how agonizingly difficult it is to negotiate fairness in our fragile and troubled world.

Climate change spares no one, rich or poor, but the poor suffers more. Developing, or so-called Non-Annex I, countries contributed much, much less to greenhouse emissions than developed (or Annex I) countries did but they are destined to suffer much, much more. The least developed countries (LDCs), who contributed the least in pollution, will suffer the most.

There's no quick fix to climate change, obviously. And probably global warming will continue no matter what we do now because of the lag time involved. But there's something we can do about justice here and now, and just maybe, what we might have done would really impact on the process of climate stabilization.

The 'global deal' to avert catastrophe seems simple enough: the rich would have to give up so much so that the poor (and all of us) may live sustainable lives.

In 1990, the baseline year for both the climate convention and the MDGs, the UN interagency panel on climate change suggested that if we're to succeed in stabilizing the global climate system each individual then living would be entitled to only 1,500 kilograms of CO2 emission. That's the allowable carbon footprint per person, his/her rightful share of the skies, or our right to shit the environment, if you like. That time an American was already doing about 20,000 kilograms of CO2 while a poor Afghan or Zairean only about 100 or so. More, the 1,500 kg norm assumed that (1) existing forests are left alone and (2) not one more soul added to the then 5.3 billion inhabitants of this planet.

Annual global CO2 emissions increased from 23 billion metric tons in 1990 to 29 billion metric tons in 2004. Some would welcome this as a sign of prosperity, meaning an indication that economies are growing. Others see this as ominous. It brings us closer to the feared threshold of CO2 concentration in the atmosphere—450 parts per million—a threshold we are advised to respect. At the rate it's going—an increase of two parts per million per year—we're only three and a half decades away.

US carbon emissions, a quarter of the world's total, continue to rise steadily. Its per capita CO2 emission level has seen little or no reduction at all since 1990. Europe, Japan and other industrialized nations may have succeeded in cutting down but their collective achievement does not even come up to the Kyoto Protocol's minimalist benchmark, and far short of the level of deep cuts required.

None of the two assumptions worked. They were 'impossible', to begin with. Deforestation has continued, exacerbated recently by the rising demand for biofuels. Between 2000 and 2005 primary forests were lost at the rate of 6 million hectares a year. Biodiversity

declined steadily along with it. And by October 1999 world population reached 6 billion.

The lifting of some 200 million Asians out of poverty in one generation is a remarkable feat by itself. But it hardly mattered in closing the rich-poor divide, whether in China, in the Asian region or globally. Worse, it happened at great costs to the regional and local environments as well as to the global climate system.

Now, you and I can see why we are in this present mess. It's amazing how so little has changed in the global inequality picture.

What went wrong, and continues to go wrong?

We thought we had the answer in 1992—sustainable development or its translation into a global plan of action, the Agenda 21. We consider this catch-all and user-friendly concept as, fundamentally, about justice and fairness between and within nations, between women and men, between generations. In other words, global and social justice as well as payback to our degraded environment.

Agenda 21 was and is some kind of 'global deal'. So is the climate convention or the MDGs. The 'deal' concerns human survival. It's a global-sharing arrangement based on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. There's no place here for the rich and powerful setting conditions for sharing, especially ones that are burdensome and humiliating to the poor and less powerful. What each side is expected to do is but a just and fair share based on differing accountability for what happened and continues to happen.

Nobody's a beggar here. If poor peasants shifted to organic farming or if municipal fishers manage their coastal resources right, they're doing it not only for themselves but for all of us. If a poor country takes care of its biodiversity, it's doing a great service to itself and all of humanity. These efforts deserve to be compensated or reciprocated somehow through, say, carbon tax on the rich, untied ODA, unconditional debt relief, fairer trade terms, and other forms of resource transfer.

Financing adaptation to climate change alone requires huge money. Estimates quote billions. Oxfam International said that adaptation cost for developing countries alone will be at least $50 billion a year. This is on top of current ODA levels and in addition to the much smaller amount pledged for the MDGs.

Yet we know, real net transfers from the rich to the poor imply deep cuts and are possible only if the rich themselves begin to dramatically change the way they see the world, how they produce and consume things. In other words, their unsustainable lifestyle should be up for negotiation.

Little, or nothing, of the sort happened in Rio or Kyoto. And it's not happening now, or at least not in the way that would otherwise match the worldwide scare and insecurity generated by recent devastating climate events.

Adaptation may be a cop-out, so it seems to me anyway, but poor countries cannot afford to wait for a dramatic mitigation to happen. They might perish before they could get justice. With or without assistance, they have to find ways to adapt to climate change before it's too late. Anyway, they are used to coping and surviving all their life.

We now know better that extreme events, like storms, floods and droughts have devastating impacts on water resources, food security, agriculture, ecosystems, biodiversity, and human health. These events have been anticipated in Interagency Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessment reports but are now so common and happen when and where least expected.

The Third Assessment Report (2001) of IPCC stressed the urgent need for adaptation, the other aspect of climate change that's already inherent in the agency's original mandate from 1988. Note that one working group of the IPCC has been tasked specifically to look into vulnerability and adaptation.

Adaptation, as defined by IPCC (2001), refers to adjustment in ecological, social, or economic systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli and their effects or impacts. It refers to changes in processes, practices, or structures to moderate or offset potential damages or to take advantage of opportunities associated with changes in climate. Adaptation involves adjustments to decrease the vulnerability of communities and regions to climate change and variability.

The UNDP/GEF 2003 Guidebook on the Adaptation Policy Framework (APF) defines adaptation as "a process by which strategies to moderate and cope with the consequences of climate change including climate variability—are enhanced, developed, and implemented". The APF includes seven components: defining project scope; assessing current vulnerability; characterizing future risks; developing an adaptation strategy; continuing the adaptation process; engaging

stakeholders; and enhancing adaptive capacity. The APF is said to be flexible enough to allow countries to use only one or two components, or even to follow components only in part since decisions about how to use this framework will depend on the country's prior work, needs, goals, and resources.

The IPCC (2001) describes the requirements that need to be met for a country to have a high adaptive capacity: a stable and prosperous economy, a high degree of access to technology at all levels, well-delineated roles and responsibilities for implementation of adaptation strategies, systems in place for the national, regional and local dissemination of climate change and adaptation information, and an equitable distribution of access to resources.

Great! You can begin to wonder which non–Annex I countries would come up to that standard.

Growing concern for adaptation has been boosted by decisions of the Conference of the Parties (COP). The Marrakesh Accords that came out of COP-7 delineated instruments and mechanisms for supporting adaptation. This agreement included the creation of three new funds: (a) The Special Climate Change Fund under the UNFCC for supporting the "implementation of adaptation activities where sufficient information is available"; (b) the Least Developing Countries (LDCs) Fund dedicated to the preparation and implementation of national adaptation programs of action (NAPAs), which "will communicate priority activities addressing the urgent and immediate needs and concerns of the LDCs relating to adaptation to the adverse effects of climate change"; and, (c) the Adaptation Fund set up under the Kyoto Protocol and getting advice from the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) on its operations.

Although adaptation to climate change has emerged as a key policy question in negotiations on climate change we have yet to see it addressed forcefully in national policy discussions. This holds true for the MDGs in the sense that it's not yet a central consideration in national development planning generally.

Overall local development plans are still MDG-illiterate and climate-insensitive. To many local government units climate change comes across as esoteric, although they are no stranger to natural disasters. It would take a lot of dedicated efforts to build a desired level of MDG and climate awareness and get local governments to orient and align their development plans along adaptation.

That is not to say, though, that development planning at any level cannot be so sensitized. Don't be surprised if aspects of MDGs or climate change adaptation are already incorporated in development plans even if the LGUs haven't got the hang of these buzzwords. When LGUs assist farmers to construct water catchments in anticipation of El Niño or La Niña, they are doing adaptation.

Climate change is only starting to be fashionable even in NGO circles. In PRRM, people used to joke about it as 'kinda weird'. But we do programs and projects in areas like coastal resources management, watershed protection and protected areas management, new and renewable energy (NRE), system of rice intensification (SRI) and sustainable agriculture and rural development (SARD), microfinance and local economy, primary health care, community organizing, good governance. These programs are in the territory of adaptation.

The greater challenge is how to hew adaptation and MDGs into the mainstream of development planning at all levels, in different places.

Building adaptive capacity, or meeting MDG targets, is way different from growing the economy and doing development as usual. It's about delivering social and environmental justice—a necessary condition for securing our path to sustainability. ■

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