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Of Trees and Forest

Climate-Smart Agriculture for R.P.

MANILA, Philippines — Climate change is upon us, and the whole world is seeing its destructive impact.

The Philippines, one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change because of its numerous active volcanoes, geographic faults, and its location on the path of typhoons, has already suffered the disastrous results of climate change on lives, livelihood, and food security.

On average, more than 1,000 lives are lost to natural disasters in the country every year, with typhoons accounting for 74 percent of the fatalities, 62 percent of the total damage, and 70 percent of agricultural damage, reflecting their high annual frequency.

The country, according to the Presidential Task Force on Climate Change (PTFCC), has been experiencing temperature spikes brought about by climate change. Warming is experienced most in the northern and southern regions of the country, while Metro Manila has warmed less than most parts. The regions which have warmed the most (Northern Luzon, Mindanao) have also dried the most. Largest precipitation trends are about 10 percent during the 20th century.

The PTFCC said extreme weather events have also occurred more frequently since 1980. These were the deadly and damaging typhoons, floods, landslides, severe El Niño and La Niña events, drought, and forest fires. The adversely affected sectors include agriculture, fresh water, coastal and marine resources, and health.

The task force has identified agriculture as the sector most affected by tropical cyclones. The highest ratio of tropical cyclone damage to agricultural output was 4.21 percent in 1990, followed in 1988 by 4.05 percent. Typhoon damage rose to more than 1 percent of the Philippines' total economic output or Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1984, 1988, and 1990 (at 1.17%, the highest).

The decline in production and productivity will possibly threaten the country's food security. For several years, the Philippines had been one of the world's largest importers of rice because local production has not been able to fill domestic demand.

The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations has noted that climate change poses many threats to agriculture, including the reduction of agricultural productivity, production stability, and incomes in areas of the world that already have high levels of food insecurity and limited means of coping with adverse weather.

At 31.3 percent, agriculture is the largest component of GDP in the Philippines, yet the country lags in agricultural productivity compared with Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam. A major factor behind our low productivity is climate change. We are visited by an average of 20 cyclones a year, which take a toll on food production.

Data from the Department of Agriculture show that yearly crop losses due to typhoons averaged 618,000 tons between 2006 and 2011. Last year, six typhoons that hit the Philippines from June to October destroyed a total of 902,285 metric tons of palay or unmilled rice.

Separate estimates by the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) place damage to agriculture alone at an average of P12.4 billion annually.

This reality, which also signals a worsening situation that may escalate into a food crisis, underscores the need to help our farmers and the whole agricultural sector cope with climate change.

We cannot stop typhoons from coming, but we can adopt measures to minimize their disastrous impact, particularly on agriculture, which means food security.

I have introduced a resolution in the Senate urging the government to “devise strategies that promote modern farming methods and adopt new approaches, including the so-called climate-smart agriculture.”

The Food and Agricultural Organization defines climate-smart agriculture as an agriculture that sustainably increases productivity, resilience (adaptation), reduces/removes green house gases (mitigation) while enhancing the achievement of national food security and development goals.

Climate-smart agriculture requires better management of natural resources, such as land, water, soil, and genetic resources through practices like conservation agriculture, integrated pest management, agroforestry, and sustainable diets.

And, because agriculture is highly productive in nature, climate-smart agriculture also means giving farmers access to modern machinery like tractors and harvesters, infrastructure like silos and drying facilities, and inputs like fertilizers.

(Please send comments/feedback to mbv_secretariat@yahoo.com)

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