

Prepared Remarks by Sec. Emmanuel M. De Guzman
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For the event *Slow Onset Impacts, Fast Action*

Horsaal Room, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik/German Development Institute
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Congratulations first to the speakers, notably my *kababayan*, Dr. Denise Margaret Matias, who spoke for the German Development Institute; to my colleague in CVF, the honorable Kare Debassu of Ethiopia's Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change and the current Chair of the 48-strong Climate Vulnerable Forum; to our very own Lourdes Tibig, an IPCC author and a leading voice of the Climate Change Commission's National Panel of Technical Experts, and Mr. Tadesse Kenea of the German Research Center for Geosciences.

I also want to express my appreciation to the organisers of this event. Thanks go first to our gracious host, the German Development Institute or D.I.E., and also to our partner, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation or BMZ. Big thanks as well to the Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

My good friends and colleagues, you have all done a great job in ensuring the critical issue of slow onset climate events gains deserved focus, especially the role of the academe in making the most comprehensive scientific assessments on the impacts of climate change that can guide policymakers like myself.

The effects of slow onset events are particularly dire for vulnerable developing countries. The suffering is particularly intense when climate change worsens already difficult conditions in terms of food security, and the management of agriculture, fisheries and ecosystems.

This is why I support the approaches presented by some of the speakers are critical.

As two of our speakers, Ms Matias and Ms Tibig, wrote in a collaborative piece published today in major Philippine media,

“Governments must fulfill their commitment to act on climate change on all fronts, even as they continue to ramp up disaster risk reduction and mitigation efforts. They must address loss and damage associated with climate impacts, which are related not just to extreme weather events or rapid onset events but also slow onset events (SOEs).”

Slow onset events pose more dangerous and pervasive threats to lives, livelihoods and the environment. As defined by the 2010 climate agreements in Cancun, these include “sea level rise, increasing temperatures, ocean acidification, glacial retreat and related impacts, salinization, land and forest degradation, loss of biodiversity, and desertification.”

It includes changes in hydrology, which translates to less rainfall here, more rainfall there, that over time and steadily threaten agricultural economies with collapse. In my own country, we tend to neglect slow onset events just because of the magnitude of impacts that rapid, episodic events have wrought on our country, such as severe typhoons. Slow onset events may not have the immediacy of extreme weather events or the visual drama of calamities. But they represent impacts that actually threaten the future viability of our country's economy.

Tibig and Matias correctly note "Most of the currently published research on SOEs have been conducted in and focused on North America, Europe, and Australasia. In Asia, only a handful of countries such as Japan, China, India, and Malaysia have done extensive research on SOEs that include attribution and confounding factors."

This is worrisome.

As Tibig and Matias observe, "The lack of data reflects the dearth of investments in the research and development work of state universities and colleges nationwide. Several confounding factors such as land use change and overexploitation of natural resources also make it difficult to attribute many of the local findings to climate change."

Clearly we must do better. Government needs to ensure that policies reflect on the ground realities while spurring and integrating social science research with output from the natural sciences. Equally important, if not more critical, we need to ramp up moves that establish a more structured interface between climate scientists and development economists.

Focused on slow onset climate events, we need to look long-term while carrying out evidence-based interventions today. We need to grapple with climate change over several planning cycles, lasting way over a decade, because short-term strategies confronting climate change are inadequate and unacceptable.

Even as we elevate the need for economic and social government agencies to rapidly embed climate-sensitive lens to their work, ultimately it is the development lens that will matter in terms of measuring the effectivity of the climate change response.

This is true in the local and national levels. Collaboration is key and it must trigger quality policy debates that can produce meaningful, longer term workplans, particularly those that address the risks of slow onset events head on. As Tibig and Matias counsel, it is not just policies we will require but "pathways for climate finance" that can "better reach locality-led science-backed initiatives."

Colleagues, the culture of data gathering is central to the effort. In an archipelagic country like the Philippines, it will be quite difficult to offer effective policy interventions if we fail to estimate and establish localised climate change impacts. Local state universities, whose work is in particular proximity to farming and fishing communities,

need to work closely with national climate scientists who have access to broader climate data. Together, such a collaboration needs to offer a national research agenda that informs and even challenges development strategies our economic agencies are tasked to formulate. The climate crisis requires us to question business-as-usual thinking every step of the way.

Certainly, planning on all levels must be driven by climate science, but also steered by the recognition that we cannot afford to know perfectly the impacts coming our way before we act. We need development planning to aggressively acquire and consolidate the best available scientific studies in order to make sound, though imperfect, projections that can stimulate debate among government's policymakers.

Infrastructure, supply chains, urban services, logistics, food supply – everything needs to become more resilient. This means nothing less than the country's development plan need to be revisited and subjected to the findings of climate science at the national and local level. This is because before we can establish precise policies, we need to put in place strategic policy directions that can frame our effort. Most importantly, it signals to the world, particularly the development partners of vulnerable countries -- countries that are far more responsible for climate change – and domestic agencies managing the country's national budget, where and how climate finance needs to be mobilised and deployed, in what form and to whom. Obviously, we need to pay attention to mechanisms that will enable local governments to access urgently needed finance, including academic and scientific institutions that can guide them in their work.

This is all easier said than done. But we owe it to young people today to give it our best effort.

This matter is very close to my heart. I worked previously with the World Meteorological Organisation or WMO, and as past chair of the CVF I had the great fortune of having led the CVF in helping establish what is now the global benchmark for ambition, the 1.5 degrees Celsius temperature threshold in Article 2 of the Paris Agreement.

I still remember the huddle I had with the chiefs of WMO, deep into the night in the middle of COP 21. It was a cold night and a thousand rumors were floating about, many worrying but untrue, and some which turned out later to be quite real. It was a difficult time and the Philippine delegation was facing serious decisions. The pressure to compromise the most basic principles was massive. And the question that night was fundamental: compromise, yes, certainly, but at what price? Where do we draw the line?

My huddle with WMO produced singular clarity to the sense of purpose of CVF, because WMO colleagues were emphatic: contrary to rumors, it is technically and scientifically possible to keep to 1.5. The problem is not science but politics. And so we stuck to our guns and told everyone – no compromise – without 1.5 prominently guiding Paris, vulnerable countries would walk away.

The rest, as they say, is history.

For vulnerable countries, it is actually 1.5 that gave birth to Paris, because without this long-term temperature threshold goal, Paris would have been like many other agreements – a global accord bereft of ambition, oblivious to transformational opportunities and also blind to consequences.

Do take note – to vulnerable countries, 1.5 is no paradise. We will still face serious crises, and harm will befall too many families nonetheless. In a 2 degree world, we stand to lose 99% of our coral reefs. In a 1.5 degree world, we lose only 70%. The loss remains gargantuan, but with chances of recovery under a 1.5 scenario, whereas with 2 degrees, there there is virtually no space for recovery.

This is the reason the Philippines intends to work closely with and support the Fiji presidency of COP23 to help advance negotiations on loss and damage, adaptation and finance. We expect the Warsaw International Mechanism, which was established just over two weeks after Haiyan struck the Philippines, to make progress even as financial institutions and other stakeholders put together plans that can dramatically reduce the pain of slow onset climate events.

In a way, I posit that what really defines vulnerable countries today is not climate change per se but inaction. It is the outcome of human conceit that believes the world can live on the largesse of nature without any payback. It is a painful lesson, and unfortunately, those who bear the least responsibility for the climate crisis are also the ones who have had to bear the most pain.

This is the reason why we continue to insist on 1.5 as a north star to the international – and national – negotiations taking place in the face of climate change. Because 1.5 provides an opportunity to promote enhanced climate action. It highlights the fact that we can achieve 1.5 with the same tools that we already have, except that we need to move faster, act more, and take action earlier together. Always together. To protect through the extension of solidarity and effective policies the most vulnerable among us, but also to take advantage of this crisis to transform our own economies into resilience, sustainable engines of development. With far greater urgency, we need to increase the bankability of enterprises and programs that hasten the transition to decarbonised development, by de-risking investments and increasing incentives that pull in global liquidity towards clean energy and resilient infrastructure initiatives.

Amidst this crisis, we need to act so future generations can thrive and develop in happiness and free of fear, because our children and their children deserve nothing less.

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