

Keynote Speech of Senator Loren Legarda

The Green Scene: An Environment Action Forum

San Beda College Mendiola | 5 August 2016

“The day would not be too far when all else would be lost not only for the present generation, but also for those to come – generations which stand to inherit nothing but parched earth incapable of sustaining life.”¹

I have just quoted the Philippine Supreme Court in its landmark decision 23 years ago that upheld the concept of inter-generational responsibility – the responsibility of every generation to ensure that succeeding generations will continue to enjoy a balanced and healthful ecology.

Today, those lines are prophetic. But in a few decades years from now, this message could easily pass as a fact.

It is thus important for you, the youth of today, to discuss issues such as sustainable economic development and climate resilience because they will define your own future.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), global temperature has risen 0.85 degrees Celsius since 1880 and each of the last three decades, from 1983 to 2012, has been successively warmer at the Earth’s surface than any preceding decade since 1850.²

Last April, 175 countries, including the Philippines, formally signed the Paris Agreement on Climate Change at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The Agreement was the result of the climate negotiations in Paris culminating last December. It seeks to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius, and possibly not more than 1.5 degrees Celsius. According to The Earth Institute’s Director Jeffrey Sachs, we need to decarbonize if we are to achieve this goal. Coal-fired power plants emit 1,100 grams of carbon dioxide for every kilowatt-hour produced. If we want to limit global warming to two degrees Celsius, there should only be about

¹ Supreme Court En Banc Decision, *Oposa vs. Factoran*, G.R. No. 101083 July 30, 1993.

² IPCC Fifth Assessment Report (AR5)

50 grams per kilowatt-hour by mid-century.³

He adds that under a business-as-usual scenario, global temperatures could increase to about 4 to 6 degrees Celsius.

The World Bank projects a grim scenario if global temperatures would get warmer by four degrees Celsius. Coastal cities will be inundated. Dry regions will become drier, while wet regions will be wetter. There will be extreme heat waves, water scarcity, stronger tropical cyclones, and biodiversity loss.⁴

The IPCC has suggested that a 1.5 to 2.5 degrees Celsius increase in global mean temperatures from pre-industrial levels threatens extinction of 20-30 percent of all species.⁵

Climate change is the greatest humanitarian challenge of our time. The phenomenon is so complex and overreaching in its impacts that we should now begin calling it the 'climate crisis.'

This climate crisis affects food, water, settlement, jobs, livelihood, human welfare, safety and security, poverty reduction, economic growth, and, consequently, our overall pursuit of sustainable development.

Aside from the intensified periods of El Niño that we experienced in the past months, climate change has also caused other extreme weather events such as more frequent and stronger typhoons like Ondoy and Pepeng in 2009, which inundated almost the whole of Metro Manila; typhoon Pablo in 2012, which killed more than a thousand people in Mindanao; and supertyphoon Yolanda in 2013, which claimed more than 6,000 lives and caused massive destruction.

³ "Economist Jeffrey Sachs rallies against coal at ADB meeting", InterAksyon.com August 4, 2015

⁴ **Turn Down the Heat: Why a 4°C Warmer World Must be Avoided.** A Report for the World Bank by the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and Climate Analytics, November 2012.

⁵ IPCC 4th Assessment Report (AR4)

The World Bank projects that under a 2°C scenario, there will be a 20% decline in water availability for many regions and 15-20% decrease in crop yield.

Moreover, with warming of up to 2°C, sea-level rise is projected to be around 70 centimeters. Sea level rise, floods that damage fish farms, and the increased acidification of the oceans by 2050 could reduce farmed fish yield by 90%.

What has brought about the state we are in today?

The IPCC points to human activity as the main cause of global warming. Human activity released 545 gigatons of carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, from 1750 to 2011. Of the carbon dioxide emitted, two-thirds was due to the burning of fossil fuels with one-third caused by deforestation and land-use change. In the last decade however, 90 percent of the rise in carbon dioxide levels was due to burning of fossil fuels.

We must realize that we are living in a world with finite resources and yet generations have lived over the centuries like there is no tomorrow.

Our natural environment has been compromised. Our biological diversity has been significantly reduced and the general health of our environment is conceded to the greed of some. We cannot keep a blind eye to this.

Our ecosystems have been altered more rapidly in the name of development; but the poor have remained poor and their numbers are increasing notwithstanding the emergence of megacities and the increasing "GDPs" of nations.

The irony here is that, the things we want to gain and develop through the use of ecosystem services, are the very same things we lose due to exploitation and unsustainable use of our natural resources.

We have passed numerous laws not just to demand accountability for environmental issues but also to provide impetus to incorporate environmental concerns into planning and policy making. The United Nations has lauded our laws on climate change adaptation and disaster risk

reduction as among the “best in the world.” However, the UN also noted that the challenge is to translate national policies, plans and programs into local action with measurable gains.

Effective enforcement emanates from everyone’s understanding and appreciation of responsibility and accountability.

Protecting our environment is not the duty of the government alone. Young as you are, I believe that you are the most active partners in challenging development norms, politics, governance and leadership.

Fundamentally, leaders must re-think development – the kind of development that transcends traditional economic yardsticks such as GDP; and the kind founded on sustainability and socio-economic progress, ecosystems protection, and good governance.

We need to progressively decrease our dependence on fossil fuels, especially coal, and shift to renewable energy. We need a paradigm shift from an extractive and consumptive economics to sustainable development. We should veer away from the throwaway culture and aim for a zero waste, low-carbon economy.

Each of us should have a personal reflection on what we can do to contribute to protecting the planet. We can no longer delay action. You are the future of this country. You are the frontliners in the overall action towards climate action and resilience.

In closing, I wish to impart this message: Climate change is now in our midst and it imparts to us the lesson that we do not own the planet, but are mere stewards of its resources.

Each of us has opportunities to make a difference for our future. We must take hold of the opportunity to responsibly manage our environment and lead the way towards resilient and sustainable development.

Thank you.