

Event Report



The Philippines at the Heart of Planetary Health

EIAS event

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Abstract

On 4 December 2019, the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) hosted the event ‘The Philippines at the Heart of Planetary Health’. The panel brought European and Filipino experts together to discuss the climate-health nexus, embedded in the concept of ‘Planetary Health’ and how the EU and ASEAN can cooperate to fight climate change and improve human health. The discussion focused on the relevance of the Planetary Health concept both globally and locally, specifically looking at how communities and local health systems in the Philippines cope with climate change and related health needs. As for the operationalisation of this concept, limitations and potential improvements were identified. EU-ASEAN cooperation in the fight against climate change was also discussed.

On 4 December 2019, the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) hosted the event 'The Philippines at the Heart of Planetary Health'. The panel discussion, moderated by EIAS Programme Director Lin Goethals, brought European and Filipino experts together to discuss the climate-health nexus embedded in the concept of 'Planetary Health'. As Ms Goethals stressed, with world leaders discussing the next steps to tackle climate change at the COP25 in Madrid, the panel's focus on the inextricable link between human and environmental health had an excellent timing.

The discussion was launched with a word of welcome by H.E. Mr Eduardo José de Vega, Ambassador of the Mission of the Philippines to the EU. He addressed the devastating impact of climate change on the environment and the potential effects climate alterations are likely to bring about – not just for economic development, but also and more importantly for human health. Ambassador de Vega stressed how the issue of climate change and the natural calamities resulting from it are particularly affecting archipelagic states. These are in danger of being wiped out by rising sea levels and natural or man-made disasters, which are becoming increasingly frequent and devastating. He pointed out that the Government of the Philippines is determined to become a major player in the global fight against climate change and that it has identified the EU as an important partner, sharing similar commitments and goals in this fight.

This sentiment was echoed by Ms Goethals, who stressed the centrality of the environment in the EU strategy, its growing importance in its external relations and in its partnership with Southeast Asian countries in particular. Ms Goethals then gave the floor to Dr Renzo Guinto, Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp, Belgium, recent Doctor of Public Health graduate at Harvard University and Chief Planetary Doctor of PH Lab in the Philippines.

Dr Guinto started his presentation by discussing some philosophical considerations behind medical work. The fields of medicine and healthcare have reportedly become increasingly reductionist in nature, framing themselves as tools designated to achieve an outcome, that of human health. This way, these sectors have been secluded from interacting with other fields which are fundamental to the achievement and the preservation of health. Looking back at the very foundation of medicine, Dr Guinto pointed out that, in today's world, Hippocrates' instruction to physicians to 'do no harm to patients' expands beyond the tangible, human

patient to encompass the planet. Consequently, Dr Guinto highlighted the need for a greater centrality of the concept of Planetary Health, where health and environment are inextricably linked: a healthy planet is the necessary precondition for humans to live healthy lives.

Dr Guinto then moved the discussion to why the concept of Planetary Health matters and how it applies globally. Building on the World Health Organization (WHO)'s definition of health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity', he argued for a redefinition of the concept of health and its role in society. First, he aligned with the statement from the University of Oslo Commission on Global Governance for Health, stressing that by 'adopting a broader view of health as a precondition, outcome and indicator of a sustainable society, Planetary Health should become a universal value, a shared social and political objective for all'. It is important to understand how health – in its human, public and planetary dimensions – is not confined to the health sector but is rather the prerequisite as well as the outcome of the action of a wide number of sectors and societal aspects. Health is, for instance, deeply connected to the environmental and energy sector, as well as to behavioural factors within society. Talking numbers, 50% of a person's health is created by social and environmental factors, whereas medical care contributes to only 20% of health outcomes. Second and consequently, there is the necessity to move away from the anthropocentric view of health that has characterised Public Health so far, putting our societal and economic models at the service of the health of both the people and the planet. Dr Guinto noted that, although Public Health has added 25 to 30 years in life expectancy, it has done so at the expense of the planet, without considering how hampering the environment would have in turn had greater consequences on people's health. In the last decades, many of the biggest challenges to human health have resulted from anthropogenic factors – i.e. have been human driven, with social, political and economic determinants such as pollution, migration, technological advances, consumption and production patterns having a substantial environmental and health-related impact. Looking at the future, Dr Guinto pointed out that climate change is the biggest threat to human health of the 21st century. If not addressed, WHO estimates calculate for instance that climate change will result in 250,000 deaths per year and will reverse 50 years of efforts in addressing global under-nutrition. Climate change and human health are in fact related on many levels. Climate-induced effects on human health can be the direct result of climate disasters as well

as their indirect outcome. Environmental calamities and alterations in regular climate patterns will worsen the incidence of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), with cardiovascular and nutritional pathologies, along with mental health and cancer, at the forefront. Globally, the climate-health nexus is also inherently connected to the issue of climate justice: the health impacts of climate change are and will be unfairly distributed, affecting Africa, Asia and the Pacific in particular, and putting under further stress vulnerable communities, healthcare systems and economies. While no single group of people is immune to Climate change, the developing world will be affected the most in a climate unstable future. An underestimation of the pace at which climate change is spiralling will impact many lives.

Dr Guinto continued his presentation shifting from a global picture to a focus on the Philippines, described as a 'Planetary Health hotspot' which has the potential to become a leader in planetary health transformation and climate resilience. This archipelagic country is not just known for its biodiversity, but also for being often affected by extreme natural events, such as an increasing number of typhoons and a sea level rise five times faster than in the rest of the world. In order to address these pressing issues, the Philippines has become a world leader in climate policy, an early adopter of climate and health agendas and is currently formulating sophisticated disaster risk reduction and management strategies. Although acknowledging these substantial progresses, Dr Guinto also stressed that implementation remains the major issue in the country. A second central problem comes into play when considering that the Filipino government alone cannot tackle the issue of climate change and its health impacts: often international organisations focus on statistics and forget that communities are already facing the effects of climate change in their real lives.

In order to capture the often unheard voices of the communities and make their reality to the broader public more accessible, Dr Guinto transformed the research he undertook for his Doctoral dissertation into short films, which were screened during the event. The films focus on how communities are coping, surviving and adapting their local health systems to the new health needs resulting from climate change. Rather than an enemy, climate change is depicted as a potential ally which provides the opportunity of improving society at a local, national and global level. The films also advocate for the need to re-establish the connection

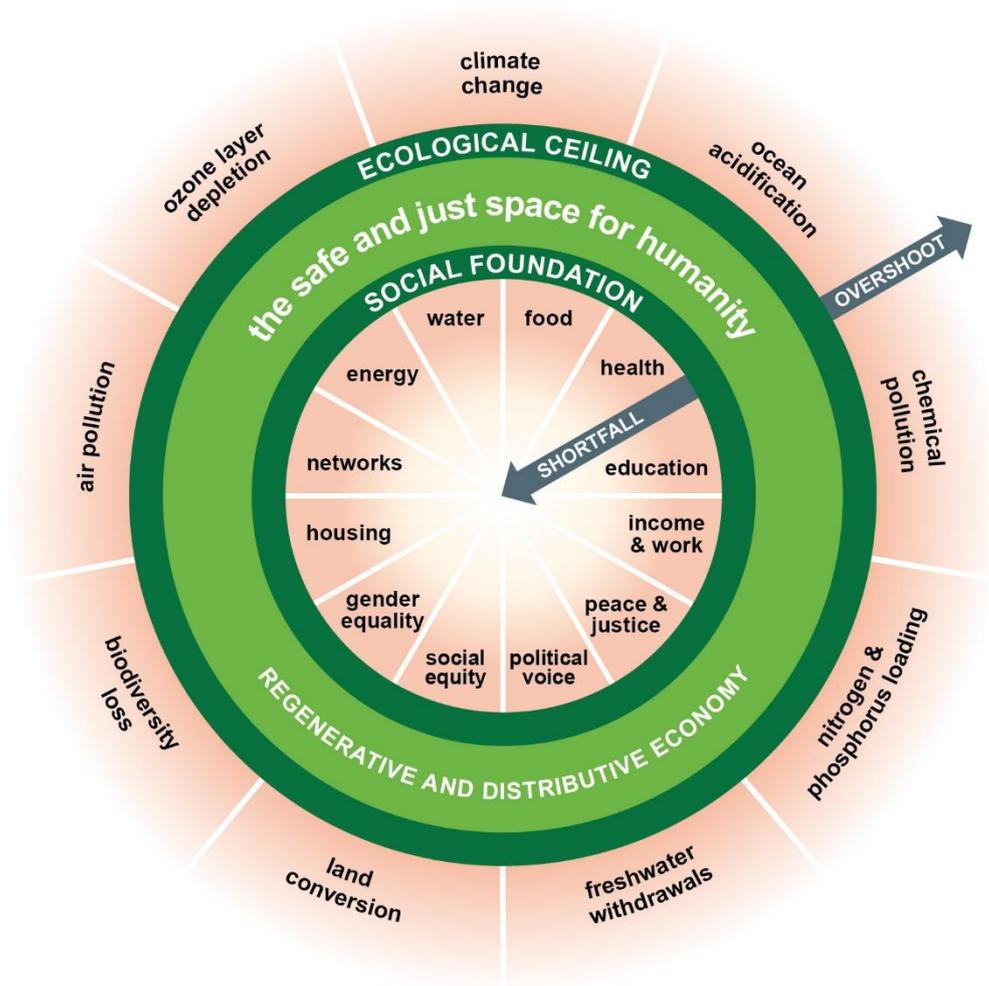
between people and earth, an aspect that can be found across many indigenous cultures around the world. The films can be accessed [here](#) and [here](#).

Accentuating the limitations to the adaptability capacity of the Philippines, Dr Guinto identified three main challenges to the operationalisation of the concept of Planetary Health and to its interdisciplinary nature. The first challenge has to do with imagination, i.e. the difficulty in conceptualising how changes in the stratosphere are going to affect coastal communities, and how people on the other side of the world are already being affected. The second challenge is connected to the fields of research and information. He claimed that, in order to counter what he depicts as a status of knowledge failure, there is the necessity of a more cross-disciplinary approach to Planetary Health, addressing the fragmentation within academia. The third and final challenge lies in the global governance structure, which has led to implementation failures. The way governments and economies are designed is not compatible with the nature of the environmental challenge and, consequently they are not ready to respond to and anticipate the challenges emanated from it. Taking the example of people displaced by environmental disasters, Dr Guinto pointed out that, to date, there is no global governance mechanism able to protect and ensure that the rights and the health of these people are respected. At the local level, in order to create a 'Climate Smart' health sector, he found that the main objective should be that of strengthening not just health sector's capacity, but also the leadership and social capital within it. He found that a fundamental role is also played by social cohesion within communities, a factor essential in stimulating the ability to innovate, experiment and implement solutions.

In his concluding remarks, Dr Guinto stressed the overarching necessity of a new approach that brings health at the centre of all policies and decision-making processes. Such a goal can be attained only if a cross-sectoral dialogue and commitment is undertaken, with the shared objective of improving Planetary Health. He provided two examples of how Planetary Health can only be achieved through a transdisciplinary approach. He first mentioned the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), stressing how health-related objectives are embedded in each of the goals – to the point that the SDGs have been depicted by some academics as the 'language of Planetary Health'. The second example was the concept of [Doughnut Economy](#), introduced by Kate Raworth in 2012 as a sustainable economic framework that measures economic development in relation to its respect for planet and social boundaries. In order to achieve

Planetary Health, the Doughnut Economy framework can help bringing economic, environmental and social considerations together in measuring development processes. This way, progress would no longer be based on GDP growth but also on environmental, societal and health costs and figures.

Figure 1: By DoughnutEconomics - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=75695171>



The final speaker, EIAS Senior Associate Walter Kennes moved the discussion to EU-ASEAN interregional climate-related cooperation, echoing Ambassador de Vega in remarking that the EU and ASEAN are natural partners who share common interests and strategies in addressing climate change and its related effects. He noted that EU-ASEAN cooperation on climate issues has been exceeding the goals initially set. With regards to trade, for instance, the initial goal of having 20% climate-related investments in EU-ASEAN commercial exchanges has been

surpassed, with climate-related trade reaching the 30% of the total. These figures, along with the regular and fruitful inter-regional political dialogue on environmental issues, show that the EU and ASEAN are equally involved and committed to tackle climate change. Mr Kennes mentioned several projects to which the EU is currently contributing, both in ASEAN member states – such as Vietnam and the Philippines – and at a regional and sub-regional level – such as in the Mekong region. These projects are aimed at protecting and restoring ecosystems, as well as at enhancing regional mechanisms of humanitarian assistance, disaster management and emergency response, building on regional capacity already at hand. He also pointed out that another field where there is room for greater EU-ASEAN cooperation in addressing climate-related damages is that of insurance mechanisms. The advantage of such mechanisms, that are currently in place in Europe, is that of automatically triggering the resources and releasing the funds to provide financial assistance and repayment for loss to those hit by natural disasters.

The panel ended with a Q&A session, during which the audience raised questions about the health-pollution nexus and on how to take tangible steps forward in improving global mechanisms addressing Planetary Health. The panellists claimed that, in order for climate action to be successful, a better governance system focused on prevention is needed. Effective global governance for Planetary Health should consider the needs of the future generations, embrace a long-term approach and include health considerations and professionals in climate negotiations. Climate action is to be seen as a planetary vaccine, requiring tangible solutions, effective global governance mechanisms and heightened intersectoral dialogue.

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