

OPINION

Aiming for Earth-friendly development

By KIYOTAKA AKASAKA

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PARIS — This is a season of renewed hope and concern for the fate of the Earth's climates. Five thousand delegates from government and civil society gathered last week at the 10th Conference of the Parties to the Climate Convention in Buenos Aires, only weeks after Russia ratified the Kyoto Protocol.

The protocol — long suspected of being moribund — will enter into force in mid-February. Although it marks only a small step toward curbing the increase in atmospheric greenhouse gases, it is a giant leap if the situation of only a few weeks ago is considered.

Recent weeks have also seen some very disturbing findings in the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment report, commissioned by the Arctic Council. The Arctic region has experienced dramatic warming over the past 50 years, with winter temperatures increasing by as much as 3 to 4 C.

Over the past 30 years, the Arctic has lost almost a million square kilometers of sea ice, an area larger than Norway, Sweden and Denmark combined. Complete loss of summer sea ice is projected before the end of this century, which will make it difficult for polar bears to survive as a species.

But this is not just about polar bears. Indigenous peoples and livelihoods are already severely affected by rising temperatures and sea levels, as are human settlements and economic infrastructure from thawing permafrost. These serious impacts are not decades into the future — they are being felt now. And they are being felt not just in remote islands halfway around the world, but also in some of the world's richest countries.

We need to continue the complex and painstakingly slow process of negotiating international commitments to reduce greenhouse emissions, but that process



alone will not be enough. We also need to actively mainstream climate change and its impact into our sectoral policies, development projects and international aid portfolios.

Recent work by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development shows, for example, that a very significant percentage of the official aid flows to developing countries is flowing toward sectors that are vulnerable to climate change. Yet development aid programs, as well as national development and sectoral plans, typically pay little or no attention to the effects of climate change.

How then should we promote development that can withstand the anticipated impacts of climate change while helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions? Numerous examples of climate-change related impacts are already evident in many regions of the world — from glacier retreat in Nepal, Peru and Switzerland to anomalous heat waves in France

and increasing sea-level and salt-water encroachment in Kiribati, Bangladesh and the United States.

Decisions that bear upon the vulnerability of societies to such impacts will be made by national and local governments, international donors, the private sector, local communities and individuals — not just by international negotiators at forums like the meeting in Buenos Aires.

There are many examples of collaboration among these various groups. In Kiribati, for instance, a major effort involving the national government, international donors and local communities is under way to mainstream adaptation to climate change at all levels of decision-making.

In Senegal and Uruguay, collaboration between government agencies and farmers has led to agricultural practices that significantly improve the removal of greenhouse emissions from the atmosphere through carbon sequestration.

Dialogue between climate-change and development communities has come a long way. What started with relatively polarized “climate-centric” views on one hand, and “why bother” questions on the other, is now evolving into a constructive exchange about how to integrate climate considerations into development efforts.

To complement the ongoing multilateral climate-change negotiations, the climate change and development communities must find common ground at the operational level. When bridges are built, land-use and zoning regulations negotiated, or poverty-alleviation plans implemented, the climate-change impact and development aspect must be actively considered. When this kind of “mainstreaming” takes place, the day-to-day decisions taken by economic actors will become more responsive to the threat of climate change — an outcome we are all working to achieve.

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