

Rural youth and climate change

Alongside the tragic loss of life and widespread destruction that Typhoon Haiyan wreaked upon the Philippines late last year, it also, quite literally, ripped one of the region's economic mainstays right out of the ground.

In the province of Eastern Samar, the coconut groves that local workers depend on for wages and daily labor were flattened, eliminating one of the main sources of income for workers in the area.

In the blink of an eye, the already fragile economy of a poor rural area was devastated. The coconut groves were part of a monoculture approach to agriculture that is common throughout Southeast Asia, and with the coconut groves gone, the fragility of the local economy was made all too apparent.

The result? Many young people were forced to migrate to cities to seek work, emptying communities already devastated by the superstorm. Others have been forced to turn to illegal, small scale mining, meaning that not only is unregulated, polluting resource extraction on the rise, but local water supplies are damaged.

Often, we also see an increase in child labor as a result of these shocks to families' livelihoods. Such is the vicious, destructive cycle of environmental devastation, climate change, and limited economic opportunities for young people in much of Southeast Asia.

The storm shed light on what we already knew: in areas with limited job opportunities, combined with minimal understanding about conservation and environmental sustainability, the vulnerability of the people who live there, and the environment around them, increases even further.

With severe weather in Southeast Asia increasing as a result of climate change, the international children's development organization Plan International is releasing a report titled "Green Skills for Rural Youth in Southeast Asia".

The report examines solutions to reduce destructive environmental job practices while also encouraging the development of new skills that can contribute to both economic development and environmental conservation in Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

While rapid urbanization is ongoing throughout Southeast Asia, there are still large numbers of young people living in rural areas. More than 60 percent of the working population in Asia still relies on agriculture, fisheries, and forestry for their livelihoods; the very sectors that are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

However, the report finds that these are the very sectors that also offer the most potential for the adaptation to green skills and for generating green jobs. Likewise, the report demonstrates that young people in rural areas do believe that working in an environmentally responsible way is important, but that they lack the knowledge and skills to put this into practice.

At the same time, "Green Skills for Rural Youth in Southeast Asia" finds that employers are not particularly interested in green jobs unless it makes business sense, such as through cost savings through reduced electricity or water usage. Green skills give people an understanding of working in ways that protect and conserve the environment while also respecting their own traditions and culture.

An example of how we can accomplish these goals is to work with rural training centers to provide education for young people on new agriculture techniques to assist them with adapting to a changing climate. At the same time, these skills can help to increase incomes through better access to climate forecasting, knowing what crops to plant and when, and improving irrigation techniques.

Likewise, when we talk about working with the region's young people to develop green jobs, we're not suggesting migrating to cities to work in factories building wind turbines or hybrid cars.

Instead, we're talking about local economic initiatives that encourage jobs that contribute to preserving or restoring a sustainable environment, ranging from wildlife and forestry conservation, to eco-tourism, organic farming, or water treatment engineers or solar power technicians.

"Green Skills for Rural Youth in Southeast Asia" makes it clear that we need to start the conversation among the general public, and especially among youth, employers and policymakers to gain a common understanding about what green and climate smart skills are.

By investing in green skills training, Plan is working to bridge the gap between the world of work and the environment for the 21st Century job market, here in Indonesia and across Southeast Asia.

Caroline Zastiral is the climate change specialist and John B Trew is the youth employment specialist for Plan International in Asia. The full report can be accessed at Plan International's website at plan-international.org/where-we-work/asia.