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# Will Water Resources Management Win the Water War?

At first glance, water doesn't seem a serious problem in the Philippines with its rivers, lakes and oceans. But at the rate the country's population is growing, the country's water resources shall have reached a critical stage by 2025 or earlier, if no water resources program management is in place.

According to the Water Resource Management Policy Forum, the country now has the highest total water withdrawals in Southeast Asia. This is a very dangerous development.

If water use habits remain unchanged, the Forum foresees Central Luzon as having a water shortage program even before 2025. There will be queues leading to water delivery trucks and the rice farms will start experiencing prolonged drought. This scenario will repeat itself in Central Visayas.

The Forum was organized recently by the Philippines Institute for Development Study (PIDS), an attached agency of the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), and the Philippine Council for Agriculture, Forestry and Natural Resources Research and Development (PCARRD).

## A Worrisome Scenario

In a study on water balance of the country's river basins, about 17 of the 20 major river basins will experience water shortage even before 2025, especially if no water resource management program is drawn up soon.

All major cities of the country, the Forum notes, will need additional surface water sources by 2025. Statistics from the National Water Resources Board (NWRB) show that Metro Manila, Metro Cebu and Baguio City have problems on their water balances.

Metro Manila is expected to have a projected water demand of 1,898 million cubic meters (mcm) in 2010. Of this demand, the Metropolitan Manila Waterworks and Sewerage System (MWSS) will be able to supply only 80 percent.

*Maasin watershed in Iloilo*

In Metro Cebu, water demand is placed at 234,000 mcm daily, but the water district can only supply 45 percent.

In Baguio, the water supply system has deteriorated over the years. The Forum notes that, on the average, 80 percent of the city's total number of service connections get water following a four-hour, thrice-a-week schedule. No water could reach the elevated areas of the city, particularly along Session Road and the densely populated Quirino Hill.

The Forum thus proposes to win this war against water scarcity by focusing efforts on the supply and demand sides of water management.

## Is Water Management the Answer?

Water scarcity exists in certain areas due to limitations in water availability, depletion of groundwater resources, degradation of freshwater sources, and the increasing cost of new water source development.

Studies on the Asia-Pacific region's natural resources contend that water shortages will become a major constraint in the socioeconomic development of the individual countries unless equitable and efficient water allocation policies are put into place.

One way of doing this would be to treat water as an economic good in order to allow markets to allocate water for competing uses while recognizing the role of the government in protecting the interests of vulnerable groups in society, especially the poor.

A "watershed-based water resources model" has thus been proposed, thereby identifying the watershed as a socioeconomic and political unit for planning and implementing resource management activities.

A successful example of this approach cited by the Forum is that of the Maasin Watershed in Iloilo province. This watershed is managed to provide water to more than 500,000 residents of Iloilo City and about 2,000 more households in the area covered. It also provides irrigation to 2,900 hectares of farmlands in the island.

Through strong partnerships among the local government units, community-based peoples' groups, and the civil society, the Maasin Watershed project was able to prolong the capability of the watershed to generate water for long-term use of the people in the island.

Today, several bills have been filed in Congress calling for a comprehensive water resources management program in the country, citing the successful Maasin Watershed program.

In fact, the Philippine Clean Water Act that seeks to address the pollution of water systems all over the country has recently been passed and its implementing guidelines is likely to include provisions for the implementing of a watershed approach to the management of water systems ● ***By Edwin P. Daiwey***

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