

Water crisis in Ph: Scarcity amid abundance

By PAUL ICAMINA

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Sixteen million Filipinos don't have access to safe drinking water and Filipino slum dwellers are paying more for their water than what Londoners pay for theirs.

According to Agnes Rola, a professor at the Institute for Governance and Rural Development, University of the Philippines Los Banos (UPLB), only a small portion of the renewable water supply is tapped: just 12 percent or 400 cubic meters per person out of 3,360 cubic meters renewable water resources.

Rola said statistics tend to suggest that water scarcity – and the need for conservation – is not a pressing issue but noted that “several facts quickly dispel this notion.”

First, per capita water availability has been declining in recent years caused by increased water demand due to economic and population growth. On the other hand, the degradation of forest watersheds means less water.

“The data on aggregate availability are illusory in that they indicate the average supply per capita per year without regard to the distribution of available supply,” Rola said. “True availability is contingent on time, place, quality and cost. The Philippines, like all other Asian developing countries, has regions and times of year in which water for specific uses is scarce.”

In fact, water deficits are reported in the Cagayan Valley, Central Luzon, Southern Luzon and Central Visayas.

“Water is a basic human right,” Rola said in a policy paper for the National Academy of Science and Technology. “Yet many, especially the poor, have limited access to it, even if annual available resources far exceed total withdrawals.”

In rural Philippines, water is almost free such that water is not properly used by farmers who are not charged the full cost of irrigation systems.

Rola said a higher irrigation price may induce farmers to demand less water and leave the land fallow.

“Despite the relative abundance of water in the Philippines, 16 million Filipinos in 432 municipalities do not have access to safe drinking water,” Rola said, citing a United Nations Development Program report. The price of water in urban areas seems prohibitively high, she said, noting this is especially true among slum dwellers.