

# Raising awareness for water security and sanitation

By **Stephanie Tumamos** | FEBRUARY 12, 2017



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Story by Stephanie Tumamos / *Special to the BusinessMirror*

Over 15 million people in the Philippines have no access to clean and safe water.

Beyond this, the water supply for Filipinos is seen to be lesser in the coming years, as climate change and overconsumption have greatly affected the country's water resources.

“We feel like we have a lot of source of water, so we take it for granted,” Elisea G. Gozun, Climate Resiliency team leader of the USAID Be Secure Project, said in an interview with the BusinessMirror at the sidelines of the Media Forum on Water Security and Climate Change at a hotel in Makati City.

“Well, we don’t have a lot [of water],” said Gozun, a former environment secretary.

The Security for Resilient Economic Growth and Stability (Be Secure) Project is an initiative of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It works with various stakeholders at the national level and in six areas around the country to improve water security and resilience to climate change.

According to Gozun, in a study by the World Bank on the *Philippine Environment Monitor* in 2000, “the findings show that we [the Philippines] are second to the lowest on per-capita availability [of water]”.

The urgency to take on water security to the next level of awareness of the Filipino people is a fact, she said. “Until when will we have water?”

This led Gozun to tackle a more important issue concerning water security—the effects of climate change. “We can’t have water security, unless we consider the climate hazards,” Gozun said. “You can’t plan on water, you can’t manage it effectively, unless you think about the climate impacts,” she added.

Bringing the case of the Philippines, Gozun said the country has different climates in each parts of the country. But “the good news is that Pag-asa [Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration] has downscaled the international assessment of the International Protocol for Climate Change on weather and climate in the Philippines on the provincial level,” she said.

Water security for Gozun is simple. “It’s not even rocket science!” she said. The problem with the Filipinos, she said, is that the people forgot the old ways of storing rainwater for other use, like using it for watering plants in the household.

The new system has changed the Filipinos, she said, they forgot how to store and manage rainwater and save it for dry days.

“When we’re planning on water, we forget to include how we will deal with rainwater. It can actually be on our roof or on the runoff surface,” she said.

“Instead of experiencing flood, you can have rainwater storage.”

Another issue the USAID Be Secure project is addressing is water sanitation. Ramon Alikpala, senior technical adviser of Be Secure Project, said Filipinos have misconceptions on water sanitation.

“Very few communities have septage treatment, and there are only a few communities that have access to proper sewerage in the country,” said Alikpala in an interview with the BusinessMirror at the sidelines of the media forum. He added that, in other cases, houses and establishments have pipes but with no treatment plant. “That’s the biggest problem, and that’s one of the biggest pollution factors,” he said.

The Be Secure project also wants Filipinos to understand that in order to have a constant supply of safe water, one must also pay for the water he or she discharges.

“The [people’s] mind-set has to be changed,” Alikpala said. “People are willing to pay for water coming out of their pipes, but they don’t understand why they have to pay for water they’re throwing away.”

Without water and proper sanitation, the effects on health and even on food supply will be greatly affected, he said. Eighty-five percent of water is used by agriculture in the country, and the rest is used in industrial, commercial and households.

If there is water shortage, the agriculture sector, the farmers will suffer the most. “Our law requires providing and prioritizing consumption over anything else and that means, our farmers will have to suffer and our food security will be at stake,” Gozun said.

“We ask you to make people understand, [become] aware and learn what the solutions are,” she said. “Water security and sanitation must be a way of life, as we cannot survive without of water,” she added.

Everything and everyone relies on clean and safe water. If the Filipinos would learn the issues being raised by the Be Secure project, more Filipinos will have better access to water and it wouldn't be long for the Philippines to realize its long-term vision of access to safe, adequate and sustainable water supply for all by the year 2025 as set by the National Economic and Development Authority in its 2010 Philippine Water Supply Roadmap, Gozun and Alikpala said.

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