

Headline: Will a water crisis come after the Taal eruption?

Byline: Ernesto M. Ordoñez

Published Date: 05:28 AM January 24, 2020

Section: business

Word Count: 4359

Content:

Because of climate change, a water crisis will follow our volcano crisis. Climate change is the cause of what we are seeing today. On the same day that Taal erupted, 23 other volcanoes did so globally. The water crisis is also happening around the world. Wars are now being fought over scarce water. I ended my role as secretary general of the joint legislature-executive-private sector steering committee for the Water Roadmap and Summit on the Water Day Summit on March 22, 2019. I was glad that 90 percent of our recommendations were approved in a speech that day from the Office of the President delivered by Cabinet Secretary Karlo Nograles.

These recommendations were submitted by the committee members from the legislature (Senate and House of Representatives), the executive branch (primarily DENR, DA, DILG, DPWH, NEDA and Cabinet secretary), and the private sector (Agri-Fisheries Alliance and the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry). Private sector contributions came from cluster coordinators such as former Environment Secretary Elisea Gozun, Agriculture Secretary William Dar, Dondi Alikpala, and Chris Ilagan.

Effectively managing the secretariat was director Bill David of the National Water Resource Board. Coordinating the seven water volumes, each signed by a University of the Philippines Los Baños dean (with input from seven presummits held nationwide on different water aspects) was chair Patricia Sanchez of the UPLB Interdisciplinary Studies Center for Water.

Nograles started his speech with a line from Joni Mitchell's song: "Don't it always have to go that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone." He then said that we have taken water for granted, even though water is more precious than food and electricity. Three committee recommendations were made substantial parts of President Duterte's direction:

- The President will submit proposed legislation for an apex water body with an accompanying water regulatory organization. This will solve the main problem of little coordination among the 32 government water-related agencies. In the meantime, an executive order will provide better coordination. It has already been approved by the Cabinet's economic cluster and would soon become an executive order.

- Water harvesting will be implemented for government structures and new establishments of the private sector (e.g. subdivisions). In addition, water collection and encatchment systems, as well as household rainwater harvesting, will be carried out. This will address our dismal 4 percent rain harvesting rate, compared to India's 60 percent in many areas.

- Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) will finally be implemented to address the problem of uncoordinated water initiatives. IWRM is used very successfully by many countries using public-private sector River Basin Management Councils. Unfortunately, even for 2020, the councils for our 18 strategic major river basins will get an average of less than P2 million each. With a bigger budget, they can mobilize the billions in the budgets of government agencies in their areas for the currently missing integrated approach.

The steering committee stopped its work because the executive order on water management was announced to be signed in a few days. Unfortunately, this has not happened.

While some improvement has been seen, it is far from enough to effectively address our water crisis. Legislation is being discussed, but will take time. Urgent action is needed that can be provided by the executive order on water that has long been delayed.

Today, there are more than 55 people who die daily from water-related causes, 12 million without access to clean water, 300 out of 1,500 municipalities waterless, 5.7 million denuded forest hectares, 300,000 lost mangroves, and water that is not saved and even used carelessly. Climate change makes things worse with more droughts and floods. Decisive action must immediately be taken. Otherwise, the volcano crisis will be followed by a more wide-spread water crisis.

The author is Agriwatch chair, former Secretary of Presidential Programs and Projects and former undersecretary of Agriculture and Trade and Industry. Contact him via [email protected]

Subscribe to our daily newsletter

By providing an email address. I agree to the Terms of Use and acknowledge that I have read the Privacy Policy.