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Prepare against heat waves and long droughts. This was the warning of the United Nations and the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration with the El Niño phenomenon affecting more regions in the country.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that nearly half of 194,000 hectares of farms in Mindanao have been affected by the drought. And the Department of Agriculture has reported that, in fact, Region 12, particularly Maguindanao which declared a state of calamity in February, was the hardest hit by El Niño in the past three months.

The drought has caused a heavy loss in the agricultural sector. The DA reported that a total of 134,321 metric tons of crops have been damaged as of March 7, 2016, by the dry spell. This affects an estimated 12 million people, making up 33 percent of the country's labor force, with almost 70 percent of the rural community working as farmers and fishermen.

With that, this year's World Water Day (March 22), whose theme was "Water and Jobs," offered an opportune time to call attention to the plight of farmers and fisherfolk who are at risk and severely affected by the long droughts and destructive typhoons.

Spouses Ramon and Irene Batayola have three children, one in college and two in senior high school. The couple solely depend on fishing and farming as their sources of income.

"We depend on the rain. If [this drought] goes on like this, the returns from our farming and fishing [will not be enough for the family]. We need to work harder so that we can buy food and give our children money for their school needs." The Batayolas are just one of the thousands of families across the world facing the difficult choice between putting food on the table and sending their children to school.

With millions of Filipinos at risk of losing their work to climate change, it is crucial to engage all the members of the community, especially the children and the youth, to help mitigate the vulnerabilities (among these water depletion) global warming has brought upon planet Earth.

In Bantayan Island, Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) Philippines teaches children in Kabangbang Central Elementary School, through informative games, about water conservation and their roles in community-building. Children then come to know that by conserving water, they can help their parents find ways to sustain the farms during El Niño. According to area coordinator Ellery Lasala, building such awareness among children will be a good way to share information with the community, especially because children tend to be more dynamic than adults.

These activities form part of the continuing effort to promote resilience in vulnerable communities in various parts of the Visayas. IRW, an international humanitarian and development organization operating in Cebu City, partners with government in several projects that include Shelter and Livelihood Support, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene and Disaster Risk-Reduction in the municipalities of Bantayan, Madridejos, Santa Fe in Bantayan Island, Cebu; Daanbantayan in Cebu; and Kananga, Matag-ob and Villaba in Leyte.

—SANDRA JOYCE BORGUETA, communications and advocacy officer, Islamic Relief Worldwide-Philippines, Cebu City

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