

Headline: Think global, act local

Byline: Ernesto M. Ordoñez

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The global climate talks in Poland just ended last week. With water crisis at the center of climate change, we must act local so that our people can take advantage of the global findings.

Acting local means addressing the water crisis in the Philippines, where 73 die from water-related causes. Given global change, this is bound to worsen unless we act immediately and strategically. We must therefore focus on key strategic areas with the most impact on our people.

Today, the globally accepted strategy in addressing national water problems uses integrated water resources management through the water basin strategy, which also takes care of the basin's critical watersheds.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources has identified eight of more than 400 water basins to prioritize. For each basin, there is a master plan (often supported with foreign aid and international expertise) and a multisectoral management council composed of local government units (LGUs), government agencies and civil society. This has leaders from the local government agencies, private business sector and civil society. However, not much has been achieved because of poor implementation. This is because there is an average of less than P1 million given for the council's work. This means no full-time staff, no equipment and very little operating expenses. We recently interviewed Cagayan River Basin Management Council cochair Archbishop Tony Ledesma about the council's effectiveness if its annual budget was increased from less than P1 million to P8 million, for five full-time personnel, needed capital equipment and operating expenses. He says the council's effectiveness could easily hit 8 on a scale of 10 from the current 4 points. We subsequently interviewed Basin's executive director, Hilly Roa-Quiaoit, an awardee of both TOWNS (Ten Outstanding Women in Nation Service) and Tofil (The Outstanding Filipinos). She agreed with Ledesma, whom she has worked with on basin management for the last eight years. She gave three examples why the additional budget would more than double the council's effectiveness.

First, she said: "The basin's master plan can then be properly implemented. We do not have full-time technical staff to come up with five-year strategic activities. We assigned different tasks among the six technical working groups (TWGs), and finalize the support budget allocations from the different member government agencies. So the master plan is mostly just on paper!"

Second, she said the council could be effectively operational by activating the project management office and TWGs: "For the past eight years, we can only work on urgent issues that can be resolved in a multistakeholders platform. The council should be the overarching management body to oversee and ensure the alignment of the plans of each LGU and NGA to address environmental protection and conservation."

Third, she cited the need for the missing follow-up work to ensure plan implementation. She gave this example: "The council has ongoing proposed ordinances in ensuring water security in Cagayan de Oro City and four municipalities. All four draft ordinances are being lobbied now, but we cannot move fast because of lack of administrative technical staff. We therefore cannot provide the necessary data evidences and infographics to convince the councilors, which we want to do before the upcoming 2019 elections."

As we think about Global climate change, we act locally, immediately and strategically. The P156-million budget increase for effective critical river basin management is only 0.6 percent of the recently exposed alleged P75-billion infrastructure insertion supposedly for climate change. It is more important that the successful river basin approach favored and practiced all over the world should now be seriously funded during the congressional budget deliberations resuming on Jan. 15 next year.

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

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