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Headline: Looming water crisis needs audacious plan

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HOPEFULLY, the recent rainfall mitigates the water shortage that Filipinos were warned to brace for later this year because of the El Niño weather phenomenon. But even with the best possible outcome, bolder moves are needed to break the cycle of seasonal water shortages and avert a future catastrophe.

The government has a good grasp of the problem and has taken many initiatives to address it. Earlier, for instance, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. himself acknowledged there was already a water crisis as he announced the creation of the Water Resources Management Office. It will coordinate the water policies and programs of various government departments.

Mr. Marcos is also looking to implement old laws meant to ensure the security of the water supply. In a recent video message, he said the authorities were looking to capture and store rainwater in "large impounding facilities."

Those should have been built under Republic Act 6716, which was enacted in 1989. That law mandates the Department of Public Works and Highways to build rainwater collectors and water wells and rehabilitate similar facilities in every barangay (village) across the country. At least now, the Marcos administration is looking to implement that law.

The government is also continuing projects started by the Duterte administration, particularly the controversial Kaliwa Dam project in Rizal province. Once completed in 2026, the dam is expected to supply 600 million liters of potable water to Metro Manila residents.

For now, the aging Angat Dam supplies the bulk of Metro Manila's drinking water supply, along with groundwater in the metropolis. But with the water level in Angat running low, the authorities will be reducing supplies to utility firms servicing households and to farmers who also rely on that dam for irrigation. As President Marcos pointed out, Filipinos rely too much on aquifers, and more needs to be done to protect and maximize surface water resources.

The awareness of the problem and initiatives taken by the authorities are all welcome. But given the gravity of the situation, President Marcos should do something audacious to mobilize the country into action.

Laguna Lake

The government should look more closely at Laguna de Bay. Plans to ensure adequate drinking water supply, at least for Metro Manila and adjacent provinces, should include rehabilitating that lake.

As many people know, Laguna de Bay is one of the largest freshwater lakes in Asia. It can hold around 3.2 billion cubic meters of water. The lake has a total area of 352 square kilometers and an average depth of about 2.8 meters. As those characteristics suggest, Laguna de Bay is a humongous and naturally-made water impounding resource.

Manila Water Co. already taps the lake to supply households in its concession area. But Laguna de Bay might be better appreciated if the water was not so murky because of soil erosion and pollution. Worse, the lake area may be shrinking if reports of unauthorized reclamation are true.

Rehabilitating Laguna de Bay should not only be a national priority but also a matter of self-preservation for those in Metro Manila and surrounding areas. Of course, the Philippines has many lakes, but none as vital to the seat of government.

The Marcos administration should take a page, so to speak, from Rodrigo Duterte. The former president closed Boracay Island for six months in 2018 for a massive cleanup effort.

Admittedly, cleaning up Laguna de Bay will be more challenging because of its size, and the coordination needed to address the complex issues will be difficult. For instance, past attempts to stop illegal reclamation were stymied in court. Also, major investments are needed to build more sewerage treatment plants to handle the effluent from residential areas, informal settlers, and industries located around the lake's 220-kilometer shoreline.

Moreover, the authorities need to improve the holding capacity of the lake. They should revisit the need to dredge the lake to improve its average depth. The Arroyo government tried that. But its successor canceled the project and did not introduce an alternative.

Rehabilitating Laguna de Bay will require massive resources and, more importantly, political resolve. Hopefully, President Marcos will take up this challenge.