# A bridge too far—and frail

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The unexpected damage on the asphalt pavement of the Panguil Bay Bridge might as well parallel the crumbling trust people have in the integrity of government infrastructure projects and the officials and agencies behind them.

Seen to boost tourism and drive economic growth in Northern Mindanao as it connects Lanao del Norte and Misamis Occidental provinces, the 3.17-kilometer Panguil Bay Bridge was opened to the public only on Sept. 27 this year, at a cost of P8.026 billion.

While project director Teresita V. Bauzon of the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) has traced the bridge’s damage to the influx of heavy trucks and the incessant rains in the area, the case is just the latest among government infrastructure that have given way or proved ineffective against the onslaught of recent typhoons. Less than a week after Supertyphoon “Pepito” hit, 37 areas in the country are still flooded, while 90 roads and 40 bridges remain unpassable, with the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management putting infrastructure damage at P2,712,898,584.96.

## Billions in flood control projects

For sure, the severity of the climate crisis was a factor for the calamitous floods, but such aftermath of recent typhoons has also raised a crucial question that relevant government agencies have yet to answer: Whatever happened to the billions of pesos allotted for flood control projects?

Senate President Francis Escudero previously noted that some P255 billion had been set aside for the DPWH’s flood control projects in the P5.768-trillion national budget for 2024, with the Bicol region getting P31.9 billion of the agency’s allocation. Yet, Bicol was one of the hardest hit areas with nine towns “fully submerged” in floodwaters, President Marcos himself noted.

Overall, the national government has been pouring more funds into infrastructure, with the budget department clocking the figure as almost 12 percent more from January to September this year, from the P1.021 trillion recorded in the same period last year. For 2025, the proposed budget for flood control is P303 billion.

But such largesse is hardly reassuring.

## Corruption, payoffs

According to the think tank Reid Foundation, corruption eats up to 35 percent of a construction firm’s budget for infrastructure projects to pay off government officials and employees and prevent them from causing any further delays. Citing confidential interviews with industry players, the think tank said companies sometimes have to compromise aspects of the construction—like the quality and quantity of raw materials—to be able to accommodate the additional cost, keep the projects moving, and maintain a net income margin of 8 to 15 percent.

With the wide leeway given the local governments for government projects, other factors have undermined the structural integrity of infrastructure, among them piecemeal and uncoordinated efforts, shady subcontracting, and extortionate deals with favored contractors.

Needless to say, such anomalies have led to disastrous consequences, not least of them inflated project costs, unnecessary delays, shoddy construction, substandard materials used, and haphazard execution. The lives lost, farmlands submerged by unstoppable floods, and damage to property and livelihood are incalculable.

With critical eyes cast its way, government has been quick to recommend oversight solutions to prevent another Panguil Bay Bridge incident, among them restricting vehicles over the 30-ton design capacity from using the bridge. Already, DPWH regional offices are looking into operationalizing weighing facilities at both ends of the bridge.

## Hefty penalties, blacklisting

Aside from obligating contractors to repair—at their own expense—damaged infrastructure, the DPWH can impose hefty penalties or even rescind the contracts and blacklist construction companies behind substandard infrastructure. Satellites can meanwhile facilitate geo-tagging to make it difficult for contractors to cheat on reporting project status. In Baguio City, Mayor Benjamin Magalong has said that at least 13 contractors have been terminated and blacklisted this year due to work slippage. The city, too, conducts the final inspection before payment is delivered, with projects that fail the inspection redone to correct deficiencies.

For its part, Congress must scrutinize the strategic use of funds for infrastructure before approving any budget increase, making sure that mechanisms for monitoring standards and compliance are put in place. With the Philippines among the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, particular attention should be given project design as well to adapt to the expected severity of forthcoming weather disturbances.

It’s time to make the government fully accountable for defective infrastructure funded by billions of taxpayer money. Unless government agencies redeem their history of neglect and corruption, lives, property, and livelihood would perennially and tragically be flushed down the drain.