

Women and water

By Ernesto M. Ordoñez

MARCH IS WOMEN'S MONTH. TODAY, we turn our attention to the important role women play in the issue of water.

Last week, we wrote about how the water crisis has reached global proportions. Also last week, the global warming film by former US Vice President Alan Gore, "The Inconvenient Truth," won an Academy Award for best documentary. In that film, the important role of water in the world's

now precarious future was highlighted. If wars are fought because of oil, wars may well be fought over scarce water in the future.

A World Health Organization (WHO) study showed that for every dollar spent on water, more than \$7 (including work time and health care savings) would be returned. But if agriculture, which uses 70 percent of water supply, does not play an important role in helping address the water crisis, these returns would be minimized.

We wish to show that if women do not play an active role, there will be water projects where all of the expected returns will disappear and the investment totally wasted.

Global picture

The phenomenon of water projects failing because of women's non-involvement is documented worldwide.

In a study commissioned by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (Jica) on "Gender Issues in Water and Sanitation Projects in Mali," it stated: "Management of the wells was handed over to male community leaders without consulting women in the planning of the new resource or its continued management... The systems and equipment set up were impractical for women... As a result, at peak times, women dismantled the equipment and went back to their old ways of collecting water. Moreover, the men who were involved

as care takers, failed to adequately fulfill their roles since water and sanitation were seen as a woman's domain."

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has documented several similar cases in various countries. Its conclusion in its excellent guide to water management (<http://www.adb.org>) was "Women and men differ in their roles, needs and perceptions regarding water supply and sanitation. Failure to consider these differences can cause

poor performance or even suspension of their projects."

COMMENTARY

A holistic approach

There have been projects that have taken too much of an opposite view by involving only women in certain water management aspects. A United Nations Development Program team monitored a project in Mindanao which attempted to have women-farmers monitor soil loss from the use of water. Its finding: "The attempts did not succeed. An analysis conducted in the project reveals that women were more interested in health issues than soil loss, and therefore were reluctant to participate in the monitoring process."

The answer then is to include both women and men in every stage of the planning, implementation and monitoring process. World Bank Discussion Series No. 37 documents the success of this approach in a Philippine communal irrigation project. This included recruitment of female community organizers, ensuring women as well as men participation in water user associations, and supporting women in taking up leadership roles. The results were as follow: "The project exceeded its targets for increased paddy fields. Women's involvement made payment of fees more consistent, since it was the women who, in this context, controlled the family finances."

Philippine situation

In the National Rural Women's Congress (an Alyansa Agrikultura member) annual meeting I attended,

200 rural women leaders from across the country agreed that there was an urgent need for women's involvement in water projects.

Agnes Balota, currently with the DILG-GTZ Water Program, summarized the Congress' conclusion: "Women, as the primary collectors of water, are currently not recognized stakeholders in water supply projects. Government water supply and sanitation programs either target existing organizations in the community where female participation is typically marginalized, or organized water users' associations that seldom recognize the key role women play in household water management. Increased women's participation in such projects, with appropriate capability building activities, is one way to ensure the sustainability of the operation of the water system. This is because women are the usual users of such facilities."

Thankfully, the project Balota now coordinates, "The Water Supply Sector Road Map" led by the Neda and the National Water Resources Board, is helping address this issue. You may call Balota at 02-9271875.

Conclusion

With all the documented information available to us, it is imperative that women's participation in all aspects addressing the water crisis should be implemented and institutionalized. Prior to the next National Mutisectoral Water Conference, it is recommended that the two sectors of agriculture and women, which have not been given sufficient importance, conduct separate focused meetings in preparation for this conference. It is hoped that during this Women's Month of March, the crucial link between women and water will be institutionalized and used in all future water management projects.

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