

Laiban Dam: The answer to water crisis?

Contributed by Jomay Amora
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The Dumagats and Remontados are up to defend their land, life and resources as the government pushes through with the revival of Laiban Dam Project, which aims to solve the looming "water crisis" in Metro Manila.

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Once again as always, the indigenous peoples are made to sacrifice in the name of "progress".

More than 10,000 individuals and over 27,800 hectares of ancestral and peasant lands in Tanay, Rizal and General Nakar, Quezon will be affected as Arroyo administration signaled the revival of the Laiban Dam Project in Laiban, Rizal as part of its Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan (MTPDP) of 2001-2004.

The Laiban Dam Project aims to address the looming water crisis in Metro Manila and its nearby areas. The Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System (MWSS) claims that the dam will generate 1,900 million liters per day of municipal and industrial water for Metro Manila and nearby communities in Cavite.

The government managed to get the nod of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which will provide US\$1 billion for the dam construction under the build-operate-transfer scheme. The ADB had already released an initial US\$3.26 million technical assistance to MWSS in November 2003.

The 113-meter high rockfill Laiban Dam is projected to be as big as the San Roque Multipurpose Dam in San Manuel, Pangasinan, which reportedly was a factor behind flashfloods that submerged numerous towns in Pangasinan, Tarlac and other provinces last week.

Water crisis 'propaganda'

The Philippines has one of the most abundant water resources in Asia. Thus, availability of clean and potable water should never be problem, much less become a subject of crisis in the country.

But because of the long years of government neglect and incompetence, and the twisted economic policies that prioritize the interests of the profit-driven private corporations, Filipinos are denied of potable water, which has become more of a commodity rather than a vital public service.

The Arroyo administration said that the "water crisis" in Metro Manila is due to insufficient water supply. It consistently uses the water crisis propaganda to justify the reconstruction of the Laiban Dam.

But Kalikasan—Peoples' Network for the Environment (Kalikasan) chairperson Clemente Bautista argued that there is no need to build a new dam since the existing water supply is enough for Metro Manila even until 2015.

"While it is true that our water supply is decreasing due to polluted watersheds areas, soil erosion among others, our supply can still lasts even until 2015," Bautista said.

Bautista said that despite abundant water supply, around 63% of the population do not have an access to a potable water, while 47% of farmlands lack irrigation systems.

"The real problem lies in government neglect, poor economic policies and faulty water distribution and facilities. For example, more than 60% of our water supply are lost due to old and leaking pipelines alone," he said.

"The 'water crisis' can be solved if these issues are properly addressed. Building dams like Laiban Dam would likely create more economic and social problems than solve one," Bautista added.

Progress for whom?

Affected communities from villages San Andres, Kayabu, Sto. Nino, Mamuyao, Sta. Ines, Tinucan, Daraitan and Laiban assert that "genuine development should be able to provide clean and affordable potable water for both the majorities and national minorities."

Katutubong Binigkis ang Lakas para sa Adhikain ng Tribung Dumagat (Kabalata Dumagat) stressed in a petition sent to ADB that a large dam like Laiban Dam would not solve their issues of poverty. Rather, it would result to displacement

from their ancestral lands, which are their resource base and source of livelihood.

According to Mai Andin of the Task Force Against Laiban Dam, the construction of Laiban Dam would not guarantee clean, safe and affordable drinking water to Metro Manila residents, most of whom live in slum areas.

“The MWSS itself admitted that they could not guarantee a lower water rate once the dam is completed,” Andin said.

Andin said the dam project would actually serve as a water source not for Metro Manila residents but for industrial and growth areas around the Laiban Dam area.

“A dubious project like that of Laiban Dam clearly serves not the interests of the Filipino people but the interests of private corporations,” Andin added.

The ultimate answer?

Agham chairperson Giovanni Tapang said the government must review its twisted water privatization policies and acknowledge its negligence and incompetence in delivering clean, safe and affordable potable water in every Filipino household.

“We offer the government the three best solutions to solve the water crisis: junk all water privatization policies, nationalize the water industry and implement a pro-people water agenda,” Tapang said.

Kalikasan chairperson Clemente Bautista agreed by saying that privatization is the primary cause of the (water) crisis.

“Water has become more costly and inaccessible since profit-driven companies took control over our water resources. Privatization resulted to exorbitant water rates, poor services, massive retrenchment of water district workers and displacement of marginalized sectors in their communities,” Bautista said.

Tapang, meanwhile, urged the government to develop the existing water reservoirs and implement an efficient water distribution systems and facilities that do not pose adverse environmental and socio-economic impacts.

“Dams are definitely not the ‘ultimate answer’ to ‘water crisis,’” Tapang said. “The government must focus on designing an effective water servicing and technology like modern pumping stations, water distribution facilities or wastewater treatment and recycling facilities” IBON Features