



Poor water, sanitation cost Philippine economy P431 billion

By Louise Maureen Simeon – September 23, 2021

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MANILA, Philippines — The local economy is losing some P431 billion over poor water and sanitation in the country, derailing human and economic development.

In a UNICEF Philippines webinar on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), state-run think tank Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) said stunting among Filipino children remains and has barely improved over the past decades.

PIDS senior research fellow Valerie Gilbert Ulep said health care costs and productivity losses due to poor WASH are estimated at P431 billion.

The biggest is on poor hand washing at P203 billion, followed by unimproved water sources at P196 billion. Unimproved facility is also estimated to cost some P32 billion.

“There are huge economic costs of these risk factors that we need to avert,” Ulep said.

Unfortunately, the poor state of water and sanitation in the country is severely impacting stunting, or being too short for one’s age among children, and such is a marker of chronic malnutrition.

The World Bank earlier said stunting or the prolonged nutritional deficiency among infants and young children in the Philippines remains a pressing issue and is considered as a silent pandemic in the country.

“Stunting is a curse as the impact of that reverberates through the lifespan of a child. When a child is constantly exposed to different stresses, it assaults the physical body of a child,” Ulep said.

It also leads to cognitive impairment, poor school performance, and reduced adult stature.

Ulep said stunting in the country is at 29 percent, which means that almost a third of Filipino children are stunted. He said there have been almost no improvement in the prevalence of stunting in the Philippines.

The country’s stunting rate at 29 percent is also higher than the average of 27.3 percent for lower-middle income economies. At the current rate, the Philippines is close to that of Cambodia, Bangladesh, Laos and India. It fared worse, however, than in Myanmar, Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand.

“Stunting rates barely improved in the Philippines in recent decades and remained relatively stagnant. For one, Vietnam and China have seen a six to seven percent decline in stunting while the Philippines only saw one percent,” Ulep said.

The World Bank previously warned that if stunting would not be addressed, this would affect the overall economy of the country as undernourished children are more likely to have poor health and shorter lifespan, reducing the ability to accumulate social and economic gains for their families.

There is also a decreased lifelong income earning potential and labor force productivity in both the short and long terms. It also leads to higher health care costs and social safety net expenses – largely borne by the public sector – and less effective investments in education.