

WASH away stunting

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In a UNICEF Philippines webinar on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), state-run think tank Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) revealed that 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, derailing human and economic development.

The biggest loss 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.

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 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.

Furthermore, the country's stunting rate of 29 percent is 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; and fares worse than in Myanmar, Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand.

The WB previously warned that if stunting is not 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. It also leads to higher health care costs and social safety net expenses as well as less effective investments in education. These are costs that are largely borne by the public sector.

The argument being made that any improvements made to WASH infrastructure in the country can have cumulative effects that go beyond merely better health, hygiene and sanitation has been ignored for too long. If we don't want to allow the stunted physical, social and economic growth of too many Filipinos to continue, a commitment to invest in and upgrade the state of WASH in the country has to be made.*