

Dutch gov't to help craft Manila Bay dev't plan

By CZERIZA VALENCIA

The government, with financial and technical assistance from the Netherlands, is crafting within the next 30 months a master plan for addressing environmental and social woes in the Manila Bay area and coming up with means to unlock its economic potential.

The National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) signed yesterday a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the creation of the Manila Bay Sustainable Development Master Plan, which would serve as a comprehensive framework for sustainable development of the entire Manila Bay area that extends to neighboring provinces of the city of Manila.

The completed master plan would guide future decision on programs and projects to be undertaken within the bay area such as coastal protection works, solid waste and water resources management, transport, and reclamation activities.

Among the key goals in the

master plan would be restoring the water quality in the bay suitable for fishing, swimming and recreation, and can support marine life.

It will cost P325 million to complete the master plan, P250 million of which would be shouldered by the government with the Netherlands government contributing P75 million for the engagement of services of Dutch experts. The Dutch government would be providing assistance for the project through its Directorate of Public Works and Water Management.

The agreement was signed between Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Ernesto Pernia and Netherlands Ambassador to the Philippines Marion Derckx at the NEDA head office.

With most of their land area at sea level or below, the Dutch have become known for their integrated and innovative solutions in coastal management that mimic natural systems. Their expertise extends to areas like land reclamation, construction of ports, flood management,

early warning systems, climate change adaptation, water recycling and other water-related issues.

"Water is an important part of our history and culture and it is a connecting force in our lives. Whenever there have been floods, the Dutch have banded together in building water infrastructure which have shaped our environment," said Derckx.

"We are fortunate to have the Dutch with us in this endeavor. Their extensive knowledge and experience in implementing programs and projects that protect vulnerable coastal zones are unparalleled," said Pernia.

The preliminary activities for the master planning exercise started in 2015 when the Philippine government requested the Netherlands government to dispatch a group of disaster risk reduction experts to Manila to conduct a scoping mission aimed at identifying and assessing the current situation in the Manila Bay area and recommend measures for its sustainable development.

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Pernia noted that Manila Bay was a prime gateway to the Philippines during pre-colonial times, allowing trade and industry to flourish in Manila and surrounding areas. Over the decades, rapid industrialization, urbanization the impacts of global climate changes have resulted in the deterioration of water quality and its environs.

"The project will try to bring back the old glory of the Manila Bay to the extent possible," he said.

NEDA Undersecretary Rolando Tungpalan said the master plan would also provide for means of managing the proliferation of informal settlements along Manila Bay.

"It will depend on our consultants but in principle, in-city (management) will be maximized. The trend now is mixed development wherein you bring informal settlers better living conditions alongside economic activities," he said.

Alongside improvements in the environmental and social conditions in the bay area, Tungpalan said the master planning would also determine areas that need a boost in infrastructure.

"So hopefully the output of this exercise will give us a plan that will not only look at coastal defense for storm surges but would also look at various infrastructure centers and environmental component that would sustain Manila Bay development," he said.

Tungpalan said numerous opportunities for the private sector are expected to

open up alongside the improvement of environmental conditions in the Manila Bay area particularly in property development and transport.

"It's enormous because there is real property potential along the Manila Bay. There is also a plan to revive the ferry service along Pasig River that also drains to the Manila Bay," he said.

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), in October last year, urged the government to initiate a project for the rehabilitation of the Pasig River, citing numerous socioeconomic benefits such as alleviating floods in Metro Manila, rise in the prices of properties built along the banks, and provision of alternative modes of transportation.

AIIB alternate director for the Philippines Rolly Macasaet said the rehabilitation of the river is among the game-changing projects the bank would be willing to fund if it is initiated by the Philippine government.

Pernia said the crafting of the master plan for the development of the Manila Bay area is in line with a provision in the Philippine Development Plan that recognizes the crucial importance of the environment and natural resources in the country's development.