

-Infrastructure

No studies yet on 8 bridges

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A former official of the National Economic and Development Authority (Neda) has expressed doubts that the administration's plan to build eight bridges linking islands in the Visayas would materialize before 2022. Perry Fajardo said none of the projects had complete feasibility studies, and that it would take at most a year for the Neda Investment Coordination Committee to review any study.



(Last of two parts) “Too good to be true,” a former regional official of the National Economic and Development Authority (Neda) said of the Duterte administration's plans to build eight bridges to connect islands in the Visayas.

Perry Fajardo, an economics professor at the University of San Carlos who was an assistant director of Neda in Central Visayas, doubted if any of the bridges could rise before 2022 at the end of President Duterte's term.

None of the projects have complete feasibility studies, Fajardo said, noting that it usually takes about a year to conduct one, depending on revisions and readily available data.

Another year at the most is required for Neda's Investment Coordination Committee to review such a study, he said. This phase includes validating the project's net present value and the value to society versus cost.

Before a project is implemented, funding sources must be secured, and documents for bidding and detailed engineering plans must be prepared, among other requirements.

“That's four to five years at least, but (it may) be longer if there are problems along the way,” Fajardo said.

Some of the administration's flagship infrastructure projects had been identified and prepared by past administrations. These include the Bohol airport, the Leyte Tide Embankment and the Panguil Bay Bridge between Lanao del Norte and Misamis Oriental provinces, an alternative to the circuitous travel by land.

Fajardo raised questions about the viability of the projects. Would bridges be better than existing modes of moving people and goods if operational and investment costs were considered?

Cheaper alternative

“My other point is that a much cheaper alternative already exists that connects these different islands,” he said.

For one, the roll-on, roll-off vessels maximize the free use of the sea that separates the two points to be linked, he said. All the government needs to do is to build ports on both sides.

The length of the bridges should be manageable, too, Fajardo said.

A longer bridge becomes expensive and requires a high level of engineering works since a lot of conditions have to be considered, including the depth of the waterway and the current, and its potential impact on the marine environment, he pointed out.

“Nothing is impossible, of course, if the country concerned is very rich, but even then, the economic viability of those projects still has to be established before they are done,” Fajardo said.

He said the overtaxed public might be asked anew to make a sacrifice by paying more taxes to fund the projects.

Spurring development

But for two business leaders in the Visayas, the bridges are needed to spur domestic tourism and promote the movement of goods.

Gordon Alan Joseph, Cebu Business Club president, emphasized the necessity of interconnectivity between the regions, given the country’s weakness in supply chains and logistics.

“Improved interconnectivity will also positively impact tourism,” said Joseph, the country’s honorary consul to the Netherlands.

He said the bridges would give passengers and cargo owners a less expensive and more convenient option.

Frank Carbon, chief executive officer of Metro Bacolod Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MBCCI), welcomed the bridge projects, saying they would improve logistics.

But this would mean more than just putting up spans, Joseph and Carbon said.

Road network

Carbon suggested a road network that would connect production areas to urban growth centers, either emerging and existing, and then to the bridges, airports and seaports.

The road network would allow the movement of goods and people from the production areas to the urban center and later to outside the provinces through the bridges.

Like Carbon, Joseph raised the need to address “internal supply chain, logistics and mobility issues that also affect our attractiveness as a tourism destination: traffic management, poor public transport systems, and inadequate road systems aggravated by the increasing number of vehicles.”

He cited the case of Metro Cebu, where it usually took too long to deliver goods and move people anywhere. “We are beginning to see similar problems arise in outer towns and cities.”

Joseph stressed the need for a “seamless transport interconnection,” which he said could be achieved by close coordination between national agencies and local government units

(LGUs).

In developed countries, it is easy to go to and from airports on efficient train systems that are linked to tram, bus and taxi networks, Joseph said.

“Cargo can move quickly through a good road network that connects port areas with roads that lead to interisland bridges,” he said.

Intercity problems

But such is not the case of the Philippines, which is plagued with intercity problems, such as inadequate roads, primitive traffic light systems, poor traffic management, lack of coordination in addressing traffic issues by the concerned LGUs, poor driver discipline, damaged roads and flooding.

Joseph suggested that LGUs tap master planners who do not manipulate feasibility studies or reverse engineer these studies to justify projects of dubious value.

“These bridges will be of little value if ‘carnageddon’ exists in the interconnected cities or if they are built with weight limitations,” he said.

Carbon agreed that the LGUs should coordinate with the concerned agencies to come up with the master plan for the road network to reach the full potential of the bridges.

He cited the case of Negros Occidental, where interprovincial roads were being built, to traverse the mountain villages, to transport goods to Negros Oriental, and vice versa.

For goods to move efficiently from one island to another, the bridges should be able to carry fully loaded containers and bulk carriers, Joseph pointed out.

The bridges must also be designed to allow the unrestricted passage of ships and barges.

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Affordability

But can the country afford these projects?

Joseph is optimistic that the government can pursue these projects, as there is a need to increase government spending and to create jobs.

Secretary Michael Dino, presidential assistant in the Visayas, said the government had a lot of options for project funding—the General Appropriations Act, official development assistance, especially China’s One Belt One Road initiative and the Public-Private Partnership program.

The Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion Act also enables the government to generate revenue to fund these infrastructure projects, he added.

“I’m a very optimistic person. I don’t accept no for an answer. We will find a way. We will start in this administration,” Dino said

At least the administration has taken the first step should it fail to meet the target of finishing the projects by 2022, he said.

But the vision for the Visayas after 2022 remains clear: an interconnected region where there will be easy movement of people and cargo.

That remains to be seen.