

# How Clean Is My River?

By Lina Sagral Reyes

MALAYBALAY CITY—There was a time when every Saturday, the dusty road by the Sawaga river was picture postcard perfect. Many a passerby would stop to observe as multicoloured clothes flapped gently in the wind, hanging half-dry on the many clotheslines strung along the road.

In the shallow parts of the river shaded by a canopy of trees, women could be seen doing their laundry amidst huge boulders. The chatter of the women as they beat the dirt out of clothes with a *palo-palo* (flat piece of wood), or spread them on flat stones to bleach under the sun, was louder than the blare of the radio tuned to a popular soap opera.

Like all waterways in the world, the Sawaga River played a crucial role in the progress of the newly-chartered city of Malaybalay, the capital of Bukidnon Province in southern Philippines' Mindanao island. Cutting through 14 of the city's 24 barangays, the river provided water, food, transportation and irrigation to the settlements located on its banks.

However, there came a time when this Saturday afternoon beauty became tarnished. Fewer women came to do their washing here, though tap water is still hardly accessible in the area.

Pollution was driving the women away.

Says Herculano Ranolo, Malaybalay planning and development officer, "The number of people settled on the riverbank has increased considerably. Most of them are immigrants or

refugees displaced by the civil war raging in nearby provinces. As the population grows, so does pollution."

The city's 21 hog and poultry farms are the biggest source of pollution, dumping their wastes in the Sawaga river. The phosphates contained in these wastes encourage algal blooms which in turn, influence the quality of the water and lessen the biodiversity of the river's flora and fauna.

Run-offs from farms, emptied into the river, have added residues of toxic pesticides and fertilizers to the water. These accumulate in the fish and plants which people harvest for food. Households without toilets also use the river as a convenient garbage dump. The Sawaga soon became a dump and sewer.

Interestingly, as the river slowly degraded, the women who had used it as an important resource also noted an alarming rise of criminal incidence. In at least eight of the 14 riverside barangays, more than a hundred cases of harassment and abuse were reported by women and children in a span of six months last year.

In addition, according to Edna Sacayle, a member of the Gender and Development (GAD) Team at the City Hall, there were also 28 cases of drowning, eight murders and three rape cases during this period. A group of academics and government workers who attended a seminar on gender and development in Cagayan de Oro City also took note of the fact that the Sawaga River had become a haven for criminals.

Confronting these problems, the Malaybalay planning and development office designed a programme, known as the SAFE Sawaga River Project, to tackle the issue on two fronts: restoring and preserving the river's health, and making it safe for women and children.

Over the last six months, the Malaybalay GAD Team, with technical assistance and funding from the Local Government Support Programme, has conducted participatory workshops and seminars on the relationship between the environment, sustainable development and gender equity.

More than a hundred women and men from the riverside villages, the academe, government agencies and non-governmental organisations working with communities along the Sawaga, have attended these educational and consciousness-raising sessions.

Meanwhile, a committee that was tasked to study the problem has recommended the banning of agricultural businesses within 500 metres of the riverbank, employing a lifeguard in swimming areas, drafting a zoning plan for river use and organising more educational seminars on combating gender-related violence.

Today, even though the Sawaga is still murky in many places and some pollutants are still visible in its waters, there are some positive signs as well: women have started returning to the river every Saturday with their washing. As a safety precaution they come in groups but at least they have managed to overcome their fears and the crime rate in the neighbourhood has dropped. It is a small beginning, but it may well lead to better things in the near future.

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