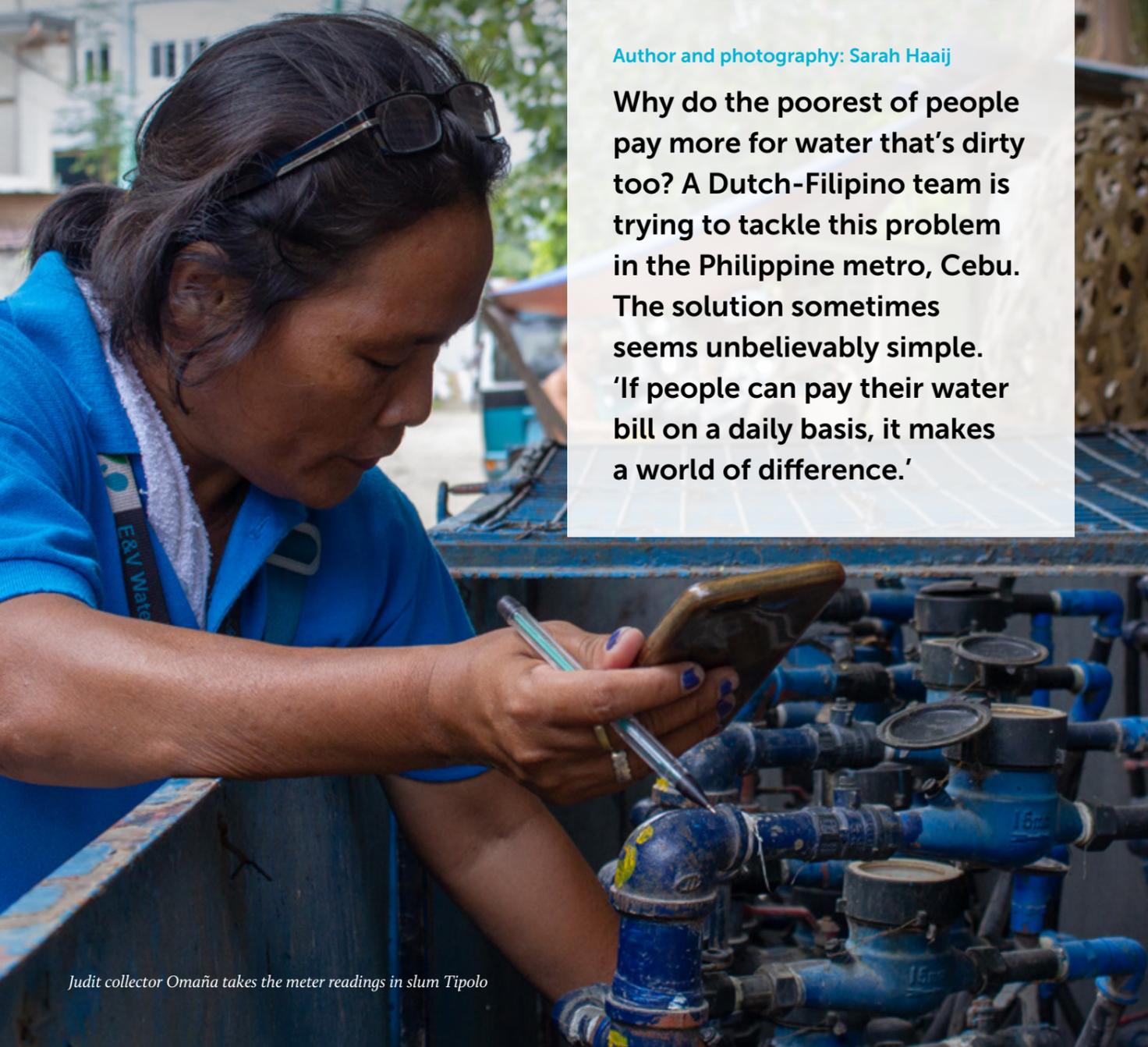


# 'By connecting people to the water, you make them part of society'

Author and photography: Sarah Haaij

**Why do the poorest of people pay more for water that's dirty too? A Dutch-Filipino team is trying to tackle this problem in the Philippine metro, Cebu. The solution sometimes seems unbelievably simple. 'If people can pay their water bill on a daily basis, it makes a world of difference.'**



Judit collector Omaña takes the meter readings in slum Tipolo



MCWD employees are studying the new water pipeline plan in Alaska

'Ajo, ajoooo', Judit Omaña's voice sounds through the slums of Tipolo. Her greeting is answered just as cheerfully, with a laugh or a wave. 'Today, it is just 27 pesos (0.45 cent, ed.)', says Omaña, while she shows Suset Garcia her water bill for the past two days. Garcia looks satisfied. Normally, she doesn't like people who want money from her, but for Omaña she's happy to make an exception. Since Omaña walks through the neighborhood with her water meter app every day, Garcia has water on tap at home. 'I used to buy my water at the village pump', says the mother of three. 'But I spent a lot more energy and money on that.'

Since being connected to the water supply system, Garcia is charged 1 peso (1.5 cents) for 20 liters of water. 'That's three times less than before!', she calculates, while looking around satisfied. Tipolo may be known as an illegal poor district of the city of Cebu, but according to Garcia, that doesn't mean it must be allowed to fall apart. Her well-kept garden filled with flowers stands out like a small oasis between the waste lying around, and the shacks of her neighbors. 'I water the plants with our dish-washing and bath water.' Not a drop of something as precious as water is lost in Tipolo.

Once the account is paid, Omaña continues on her way across the narrow gangways connecting Tipolo's houses. In this district of the Philippine metro, Cebu, life is lived outside. And in this life, it is all about water. Washing, brushing teeth, showering and cooking; It continues all day long, and preferably on the pavement in front of the makeshift homes. All the while, the little ones walk back and forth with big buckets to supply their mothers with enough water.

'Sometimes there were days when we couldn't drink a drop, but happily my children will never have to go through that again', says Lenita Dejito while breastfeeding her youngest. Dejito and her family of nine children have no official address, but for the last three years they do have a connection to the water system. 'And that makes our lives so much easier.' Omaña shows today's water usage account on the water meter-app is 30 pesos (50 cents). Dejito has to sigh. Her husband earns about 8 euro per day working as a mechanic. 'So that's a lot of money for us', she says. But we don't have a choice. 'The children need clean water.' She has been grateful for some time that her account can be paid daily. She agrees saving up for a monthly account would not be all that easy. 'There are always so many reasons why the money is gone.'

Omaña is glad the Dejito family drink the water too. She knows not everyone dares to do that. People are used to buying it in bottles or barrels, they don't trust the tap system yet. 'But they can just as well. We check the quality every month.'

**Before Omaña started as collector**, doing her rounds through the neighborhood for the social enterprise Eau et Vie, she, just like her neighbours from Tipolo, was already up at four a.m. to be on time at the village pump. But the water that was pumped up by a commercial company, tasted salty and the buckets were heavy. Now Omaña still gets up early, but for a different reason. As fixed collector, she must take all the meter readings in the morning. Then she goes on her rounds, going from door to door to collect the water bill. And because people can pay their account daily, more and more Tipoli's can afford a connection on the network.

'It may seem like something small', Omaña says as she pauses in the shade of a canopy. 'But for us it makes a world of difference.'

**Despite the convenience** of tap water, it remains a challenge to sign up new customers. In an illegal area like Tipolo, people are used to minding their own business. 'Neighbors just don't believe we lay the pipes', says Omaña. 'And that you will only have to pay for your connection and the water. 'Yet that is exactly what we are doing, confirms Chloé Frotin, project leader at Eau et Vie in the Philippines, a French NGO. 'We provide water in those areas where the municipality's water network doesn't reach.'

Eau et Vie does this by setting up local social enterprises to take care of the water supply. In Cebu, this is Tubig Pag-Asa (Water for hope, in Taglog), run by Filipinos, who buy the water from the city water company and distributes this through its own constructed network through informal areas like Tipolo. The clients do however pay for the water. People start with a daily account, then go on to a two-day and weekly account; until they can pay the monthly water bill. The idea is to create the habit to set aside money for water.

'When we started everyone said: 'forget it. These people are never going to pay! They are too poor and too unreliable for that', Chloé Frotin recalls. 'But we actually wanted to prove that these residents can be regular customers too. If you anticipate their living environment. That they belong to the city. And we did it!' Certainly, says

Frotin, since they are part of a Dutch funded public-private partnerships; the Sustainable and Resilient Pro-Poor Water Supply Project.

**At the Offices of** the city of Cebu's water company, the Metro Cebu Water District (MCWD), there is a workplace set up for Briton Patrick Egan. Egan works for the Dutch Vitens Evides International (VEI) and is the project leader of the public-private partnership formed between VEI and the MCDW, Eau et Vie and the Dutch and Philippine Red Cross. Egan's desk is adorned with a laptop and a large water bottle with the sticker 'I drink MCDW water!'. It is characteristic of the enthusiasm the water engineer has for this project. 'It's a fantastic project,' he says directly upon entry. 'At relatively little money (€7.2 million, ed.) we have a great impact on people's lives.'

No losing time on smalltalk, he introduces his water-colleagues at MCWD. Why are the poorest of the poor in the city not connected to the water supply system, and how do we change that? That is the question this team has worked on since 2015; and that's what Egan wants to talk about. The Eau et Vie project with collector Omaña is just one part of the partnership. Another solution the Philippine water company and VEI experiments with, is offering the connection

## Water supply system

How do you connect 80,000 poor residents of a Philippine metropolis on the city's water supply system? The Sustainable and Resilient Pro-Poor Water Supply project in Cebu is a public-private partnership (PPP) dealing with this question. By cutting the water bill and the fixed connection charges into bits, clean water becomes affordable for the poorest inhabitants too.

The partnership consists of Vitens Evides International (VEI), Metro Cebu Water District (MCWD), RVO Nederland, the Dutch and Philippine Red Cross and the French NGO Eau et Vie, and has 7.2 million euros available. More than half of that budget, EUR 4 million, comes from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and implementation partner RVO; a development grant from the Sustainable Water Fund (FDW). Metro Cebu Water District itself made 2.2 million

available; VEI 750,000 euro and the Red Cross 300 thousand euros.

The PPP has three new financing forms to facilitate access to water:

- 10,000 households in poor areas of the city are given the option to pay off their water-connection charge of €82 in twelve installments. The PPP also finances 50% of the new water pipes installed by Cebu City for this purpose.

- Through additional funding, 4,000 of the poorest families will receive a 60 percent subsidy on the connection fees.

- Via Eau et Vie, 2,500 families in illegal slums are given the chance to pay their water bill on a daily basis.

The Red Cross partners also raise awareness in the vulnerable communities about water, sanitation and hygiene.

fee on installment. That happens in the poor yet 'official' districts of Cebu, where people have an address. Many families are not able to pay the 82 euro connection charge at once, but spread over twelve months, they might just manage it.

According to Egan, the big win of this project lies in the fact that a semi-public institution like the MCDW extends the possibilities to connect the poor on the water network. Being poor is expensive. 'Just imagine, people now pay up to 5000 pesos (83 euros) per month to the water truck or for bottled water.' So much more than when they would be connected to the network. 'And besides,' he adds delicately, 'this is better, cheaper and safer.'

The partnership hopes to thus connect 15 thousand families to MCWD's water system. To facilitate this, quite a few kilometers of new pipeline are constructed towards the poor fringes of the city. Like the district of Alaska, where people live in shacks on stilts, or Inayawan – a neighborhood on top of the largest garbage dump of Cebu.

**Due to rising sea levels**, the coastal city of Cebu slowly sinks away and the ground water becomes saltier. Some residents seek their salvation on the water, like the district of Alaska. In huts of braided mats on long poles, life happens high above sea level. The overriding smell of stagnant sewage, dried fish and soapy water among the stilt houses doesn't seem to affect anyone, but not having any running water, does seem to bother the residents though. In Alaska, people do however have an address and a water supply point at the edge of their area, but almost no one has water coming from the tap. The 82 euro connection charge constitutes the biggest hurdle.

When Grisilda Cortez heard you may now pay the connection in instalments, she responded right away. A silver tap gleams before her house, and there are five blue water barrels filled to the brim with water. What does she need all that water for? Cortez smiles. As one of the few people with a connection, she sells tap water to her neighbors per litre. Thus, she earns two euros a day. 'If I can earn a bit somewhere, I grab the chance' she says, 'that's how we live here.' Besides her water business, Cortez also has a sari-sari shop, a shop selling cigarettes and sweets, and an old computer that neighbours may use per hour. 'My husband sells dried fish. In the morning, we never know how much money there will be that evening.' Cortez admits it is not always easy to pay the monthly bill, (MCWD doesn't offer a day option as with the Eau et Vie microfinancing, ed.)

However, she still prefers to buy her drinking water bottled. With a wry face, she looks down to where her water pipe bores his way through a thick layer of waste gunk. She is afraid the dirt will contaminate her water. 'Can't that water company do something about that too?'. But that water company takes care of the pipes, the connection point – the new customers will have to maintain the piece of pipe to their houses themselves.

**When Egan started the project three years ago** in the Philippines, he did not know that the biggest challenge would be the connection itself. 'I thought: we will lay the pipes and people will be hugging us with joy. But this is not how it works.'

The Filipino communities where the partnership works, are very old. All this time, the residents have organised the water in their own way. 'We are there to bring the importance of clean and safe water to life', says Marianne Baltazar of the Philippine Red Cross. As a PPP partner, Baltazar and her colleagues work on the so-called 'soft'

side of water in these areas: the information.

There is a presentation in a small neighborhood commission in the unofficial suburb Labogon on water use, washing hands, toilets and waste disposal. Red Cross-volunteers from the area lead the brainstorm session. 'Who has a solution to our waste problem?', volunteer Gina asks the gathered local residents, a cheerful mix of newborn babies, young mothers and village elders.

Baltazar wants to get the message through that water is so much more than a tap. 'We want people to personally discover that water is a closed cycle. That if you dump waste behind your house, or use the bushes as your toilet, you will also pollute your drinking water.'

**That water is more** than just a tap, the inhabitants of poor districts in Cebu often encounter themselves. Right after brand new blue pipes snaked through Tipolo, an infamous slum fire devastated the nearby neighbourhood. It was all gone: pipes, connections, everything. The 52-year-old Marie Jone Kelong-Kelong still remembers it well. 'It was so scary,' she says with hunched shoulders. That's why Kelong-Kelong is now a member of the new voluntary firefighting team. She displays her fire-fighting set proudly; a long fire extinguishing hose, a water pump, buckets. All made available through the partnership. Should a fire break out now, she knows what to do. 'I have already put one out, a few houses away.' Kelong-Kelong points towards the still visible soot spots. In a long chain, she and her neighbors pass on buckets full of water. 'Previously, I didn't know what to do, but after the training I'm no longer afraid. My mind remains clear. I grab my fire hose and I rush towards it.'

**In ten years' time there will be a well-flowing water project that I can proudly show to my daughter**

**The Eau et Vie water network** in Tipolo has since been restored. Marie Jone's voluntary fire brigade team guards the neighborhood. But that doesn't protect an illegal settlement like Tipolo against other threats; the Government can for instance always force an illegal area to relocate. The question arises whether this approach is sustainable. Should you be investing in permanent water systems in a slum? Yes, is the resolute reply of those involved, people in an informal area also have a right to water. 'Access to water saves people time and money,' says Egan. 'People remain healthier and they can work better. All things helping them to move forward.'

'We always do our homework very meticulously,' says Frotin (Eau et Vie) on a bench in the main square of Tipolo. 'We will only enter a district if we are quite sure there are no relocation plans.' They would actually prefer to change those plans, because when you link



The Red Cross in Cebu for a wash-awareness session



Lenita Dejito and her 9 children now have water from the tap

people to the water, you make them part of your society. 'We show the Government there are people living here with the same human rights as everyone else.'

That the poorest of the poor also have to pay for their water is an essential part of this vision. If people pay for a service, it generates ownership and responsibility. The water experts know, just putting something down for free, and then departing, makes no sense. The decayed toilet-block of Tipolo, once donated by a well-meaning NGO, is the sad proof of that.

Thanks to the partnership, 600 households are since connected on the Cebu-water network. When the water pipes are all in place at the end of next year, that number will increase to 10 thousand. It will still be a while, but for Egan that doesn't matter.

'Everything we do in this project, is based on the thought: what about ten years from now, what will our investment look like then?' Without awaiting a response, Egan elaborates on his question: 'I'll tell you: in ten years' time, there will be a properly running water project that I can show to my daughter with pride.' ●