

Headline: Dirty energy

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THE PHILIPPINES is among the developing countries hardest hit by the effects of climate change, effects that include the terrible weather disturbances from which it is still trying mightily to recover. Of the carbon dioxide emissions that contribute to climate change, those generated by burning coal make up one-third. Coal energy is thus “the single biggest threat to our climate,” according to the global environmental watchdog Greenpeace. Why then is the Philippine government so hospitable to the idea of coal plants as a source of energy?

The province of Quezon, already the site of two coal plants in Pagbilao and Mauban, is set to host a third in Atimonan. But the townsfolk are unhappy with the prospect, especially because the original plan involved, not coal, but liquefied natural gas. Local Church leaders have led a procession to protest the plant.

READ: Quezon townsfolk cry: Enough of coal power plants

Batangas bids fair to be another battleground, with the clergy leading the local folk in protesting the construction of a coal plant in Barangay Pinamucan Ibaba. And to think that in 2011, Batangas City was among the recipients of the International Awards for Livable Communities, for its efforts in pushing renewable energy.

READ: Batangas priests lead fight vs coal-fired power plant

Another cause of controversy and conflict is the coal plant being built in Narra, Palawan, against the protests of the local communities. Former Puerto Princesa mayor Edward Hagedorn has called for “a concerted civil-society and national-government action” to stop the construction of the plant in a place known all over the world for its natural treasures. “A typical coal-fired plant like the one planned ... will release 3.5 million tons of carbon dioxide in Palawan every year,” Hagedorn has warned. “The forest cover of Palawan is not enough to absorb it.”

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Surely, the local communities where the plants are being or will be built understand best of all the possible effects that “dirty energy” may have on them, now and in the future. To beef up the protest actions, the Catholic Church has joined the “One Million Against Coal Campaign,” with the goal of gathering over one million signatures to resist coal mines and plants. Said Fr. Edwin Gariguez, head of Caritas Philippines’ National Secretariat for Social Action, in a statement: “In the guise of providing a more efficient energy source, higher tax revenue and so-called greater development, the state and multinational coal companies are opening another door for the Philippines to become a major contributor to climate change.”

Big business is behind some of the coal projects that the Department of Environment and Natural Resources has approved. The Philippines does not lack in laws providing for the protection of the environment—Clean Air Act, Biofuels Act, among others—but danger comes in many forms. According to Bayan Muna Rep. Neri Colmenares, for example, Joint Resolution No. 21 approved by the House in December 2014 allows national agencies and local government units to suspend environmental laws in the course of addressing the predicted energy crisis. But as the Philippine

Movement for Climate Justice has correctly pointed out, the Renewable Energy Law of 2008 and the Climate Change Law of 2009 clearly stand against the continued building of coal plants.

Greenpeace has a clear and simple explanation as to why it is important to resist the building of coal plants: "Apart from climate change, coal also causes irreparable damage to the environment, people's health and communities around the world. While the coal industry itself isn't paying for the damage it causes, the world at large is." Even that industrial behemoth China is cutting back on dirty energy: While its power system is still heavily based on coal, it is "putting more money into green sources of electric power" and is "spending more on green energy than any other country."

Sen. Loren Legarda, chair of the Senate committee on climate change, is thus correct to wonder why the Philippine government continues to approve coal-plant projects (21 in the past five years) when it is actively raising the effects of climate change in global forums.

"The Philippines is contradicting itself when it says it wants a strong agreement in climate change yet is allowing the proliferation of new coal power plants," says Legarda. "Effectively, by such proliferation we are contributing to our own destruction and we lose the high moral ground as we call on other parties to reduce emissions."

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