

Headline: High cost of cheap coal

Byline: Philippine Daily Inquirer

Published Date: 02:40 AM March 24, 2016

Section: opinion

Word Count: 4686

Content:

He can't even stop his own country from producing greenhouse gases, and now he's bullying us to stop using coal as a source of energy? That was how presidential candidate Rodrigo Duterte twitted former US vice president Al Gore, who was in the country earlier to talk about climate change and global warming.

Gore had called on the Philippines to use other sources of renewable energy instead of coal-fired power plants as these burn greenhouse gases and stoke climate change, the effects of which are aberrations in weather patterns that unleash ultradestructive typhoons like "Yolanda."

"But the country contributes so little greenhouse gases compared to developed countries that are the biggest offenders," Duterte protested when reminded at the second presidential debate of the country's commitment to cut its carbon emissions by 70 percent by 2030.

According to former energy secretary Jericho Petilla, 23 new coal-fired power plants will have been established in the country by 2020; two new 300-megawatt plants will open in Davao City in 2016 and 2017—plans that Duterte fully supports. The coal-fired plants are necessary to meet the nation's growing energy needs, President Aquino said in January. And yet, just a month earlier in Paris, he forcefully spoke out for the Philippines and other developing nations as highly vulnerable to rising sea waters as a result of global warming!

Local officials fearful of public outrage over expected power outages due to limited energy supply often turn to coal as a convenient alternative. After all, it is cheap, easy to transport and easy to burn. It is by far cheaper than nuclear, natural gas or oil, is relatively stable and immune from fluctuating prices because of political embargoes, and provides jobs that involve its removal from the earth, its transport, conversion to fuel, and disposal.

And yet there are hidden costs that make coal the most exorbitantly priced energy source. For one, it is devastatingly dirty and leaves a black patina on everything it touches. The prolonged inhalation of coal dust also causes black lung disease, or pneumoconiosis, which is characterized by long-term coughing and shortness of breath. In 2013, the disease killed 25,000 workers, according to the UK medical journal Lancet.

Mining, transporting, storing and burning coal are as messy and fraught with danger as well, as deep mines expose coal workers to intolerably filthy and hazardous conditions, including high temperatures and the threat of explosions.

Open cast mining, now the source of much of the world's coal, rips away topsoil and gobbles water, and thus contributes to the "desertification" of land. Digging out coal ruins forest lands and animal habitats, and harms biodiversity and existing ecosystems. Burning coal produces harmful byproducts and gas emissions such as sulfur dioxide, carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxide that pollute the environment.

Although widely available at present, coal deposits are a nonrenewable and limited resource; future generations can't rely on it alone.

With other countries taking heed of the risks and environmental costs of coal and weaning themselves away from it, why does the Philippines insist on using it as a preferred energy source? (At 27 percent in 2005, coal has the highest contribution to the power generation mix in the country.) The choice is even more puzzling given that the country is the world's second largest producer of geothermal energy, behind Indonesia. It also has other largely untapped renewable sources of energy: solar (freely available), wind and hydropower.

Expectedly, business leaders and entrepreneurs might balk at the initial capital outlay these power investments will entail, but over the long term, these will pay off in terms of a more stable power supply and clean energy.

And why should initial costs be a problem? Shouldn't the government subsidize the development of alternative energy sources? It should provide incentives to encourage entrepreneurs to go into power generation using sustainable and clean sources, as in tax breaks, tariff-free importation of machinery, entry of foreign technical personnel, even the recovery of operating expenses—incentives that, per the Department of Energy website, are already being given to energy producers under the current coal operating contract system.

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Indeed, how can we talk of economic growth when we keep a tight and parsimonious grip on funds that could develop renewable power sources to oil the cogs and wheels of industry and keep them going?