

Keyword: climate-change

Headline: Ramp up construction of more power plants

Byline: None

Published Date: July 5, 2021

Section: opinion

Word Count: 645

Content:

THE authorities need to accelerate construction of new power plants to arrest and reverse the slide of the country's energy security. That is a key takeaway from the recent business forum on renewable energy, organized by this newspaper.

That event featured Monalisa Dimalanta, former chairman of the National Renewable Energy Board. She reported energy self-sufficiency has been declining for more than a decade. In 2008, energy self-sufficiency was at 67.09 percent, and that by 2019, it fell to 46.85 percent.

The growing insecurity may be partially explained by the diminishing share of renewables in the country's energy mix. Again, the data was supplied by Dimalanta. In 2008, renewable sources of energy such as wind, solar and biomass accounted for 33.9 percent of total energy generated in the country.

The government aims to achieve at least 35 percent of renewable energy share by 2030 and improve to 50 percent by 2040. But like self-sufficiency, the share of renewables has been moving in the wrong direction, falling to 20.8 percent of the total energy output by 2019.

The data suggests the Philippines is increasingly dependent on coal and other fossil fuels to operate its power plants. Not only are these fuels harmful to the environment because of the greenhouse gases they emit, but they also have to be imported.

Renewable sources of energy, of course, are not only locally sourced, but some forms such as wind and sunlight are practically everywhere. Even though the authorities have continued to develop green energy in the country, the pace of building fossil fuel plants has been faster, mainly because the fuels they use are cheaper, especially coal.

One might counter wind, water and sunlight are free, but ignoring the fact building machines to harness their power remains relatively expensive. Also, people should realize building and operating them is not without environmental costs.

For instance, solar farms occupy land that can be used for farming and compete with food security. Also, constructing hydroelectric power plants requires displacing people and flooding vast areas that are also habitat for wildlife, including endangered species. The point is every option has opportunity costs, which should always be considered when crafting policies.

In fairness to the government, the incumbent officials seem to be cognizant of the issues. In late 2020, the Department of Energy issued a moratorium on constructing new coal power plants. And earlier, the department diversified the energy mix to include nuclear power, which is, of course, desirable for some because they do not emit harmful gases and can be easily scaled.

As mentioned in a previous editorial, however, the government needs to harmonize its policies. Often different departments and agencies work against each other, naturally resulting in delays and creating red tape, which in turn opens the door to corruption.

To simplify the bottom line: the government needs to get its act together. But in fairness, that may be easier said than done.

Fueling growth

The country needs affordable and reliable energy supply if it is to realize its development objectives. Not a few have complained that electricity is expensive in the Philippines. Again, that could be addressed by having more supply to meet existing and future demand.

Another issue is unreliable supply. Only recently, consumers in the capital region and adjacent provinces suffered power interruptions, which has become a seasonal problem. And of course, power outages occur daily in many rural areas.

Again, the situation described underscores the need to address energy security by building power plants more rapidly. Granted, this is not a panacea. There are other issues to resolve, including better maintenance of existing plants to ensure efficiency, protection of watersheds to optimize hydroelectric dams and even promoting conservation among consumers.

It is, as they say, complicated. But given the worsening energy security, the priority should be ramping up construction of more power plants, preferably those that run on renewables.