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Headline: The dark side of the shift to renewables

Byline: Phoebe Dominique Adorable

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People have converged in Glasgow for COP26 to pressure leaders of the world's most toxic economies and the global business elite to commit to more ambitious pledges to reverse climate change and hasten the transition to sustainable energy.

However, amid all the hoopla, it is now certain that we are headed toward another disappointment. It is not because no new actions will be undertaken. It is because the most outstanding outcomes will reward polluters with financial safety nets while consigning the poor and those victimized by climate change to few safety nets, if at all.

Closer to home, the Philippine government is already designing plans to smoothen the transition. Akin to how the banks were saved during the Wall Street crash of 2008, the polluters will be given a soft landing, and the people will shoulder the costs of retiring coal-fired plants and transitioning to renewables amid a regulatory framework that promotes toxic-lite policies and industries.

Herein lies the rub. COP26 does not tackle the dark side of the shift to renewables. It is no secret that the demand and supply of energy have historically been a primary driver of conflict, with unintended impacts that lead to land-use conflicts, exploitation of mineral-rich areas, geopolitical rivalries, and aggravation of preexisting conflicts. The threat is real, and it lies in how renewable energy projects are built and governed.

Why is renewable energy renewing violent conflict in many places? Our history gives us the answer. In Mindanao, the Maranao see only injustice in the inadequate supply and soaring costs of electricity that they suffer despite the presence of the giant Agus-Pulangi hydroelectric complex atop their beloved Lake Lanao. In Northern Luzon, an insurgency was born and nurtured not long ago by an aggressive development strategy to build hydroelectric dams that would submerge Cordillera communities under the mighty Chico River.

This is not to say that we should advocate for continuing the status quo. On the contrary, the transition to renewables is imperative, and a well-managed and just transition that comprehensively addresses these risks is critical. New renewable energy projects have been outpacing fossil fuel power plants globally in the last decade. This presents a strong case that a transition is possible, and an opportunity is open for renewable energy to respond to the wider challenge of global warming, compounded vulnerabilities, and protracted conflicts.

However, we must insist that any transition is planned and governed in a way that prevents the wide-reaching conflict impact of grievances and inequalities. Conflict-sensitive approaches should create both top-down and bottom-up approaches that improve community participation and engagement. Such measures are likely to prevent uneven power dynamics between big companies and local communities.

Genuine models of multistakeholder processes are not new to Mindanao but, to be sure, getting different stakeholders even to begin listening to each other is not easy. Yet, in the case of Davao City, multistakeholder voices made it possible. The Davao Multi-Stakeholder Group for Energy Concerns is a success story of cooperation and engagement among energy producers, civil

society, and local governments. Their collaboration helped maximize the benefits of nonrenewable yet reliable energy to drive local economic growth and ensure welfare goods for local communities while preventing violent conflict and reducing its environmental impact.

The urgency of the climate crisis compels us to take giant strides toward a real transition and more robust engagements among stakeholders. The clean energy revolution is upon us, and as with all revolutions, it is not enough to be on the “right side,” but that it is done right.

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Phoebe Dominique Adorable and Samantha Baril coordinate multistakeholder processes involving business, women, and youth with International Alert Philippines. Both graduated from the University of the Philippines.