# Reliable power for island-provinces

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With crippling and interminable blackouts lasting for as long as 22 hours in some areas, the island-province of Siquijor in Central Visayas last week rightfully declared a state of calamity. The measure unanimously approved by the Siquijor Provincial Board will allow the provincial government to activate funds for the urgent requisition of additional energy sources. This is to make up for the sudden drop in supply caused by the breakdown of the power generation units operated by Siquijor Island Power Corp. (Sipcor), the island’s sole power provider.

“Sobra na! (It’s just too much) What I want is to have a standby generator,” a furious Siquijor Gov. Jake Vincent Villa said, describing the bleak daily situation as “unbearable.” According to the resolution, the outage of Sipcor units led to a critical shortfall of about 2.2 megawatts out of the daily demand of 9.4 megawatts, leading to rotating power interruptions.

In some areas, electricity has been available for only two to five hours since May 13, severely hampering the delivery of basic public services and dealing a heavy blow to the local economy.

Thus the additional power supply—initially via power barges from Palawan—cannot come soon enough to bring immediate relief to the people across the island who are suffering from the adverse impact of the widespread and prolonged power interruptions on their water, transport, communication, education, and even health-care services.

## Hospitality sector

This is on top of the wave of cancellation of hotel and resort reservations, reversing some of the hard fought gains of the fledgling hospitality sector of Siquijor, which has been gaining ground as a tourist destination for local and foreign travelers yearning to commune with nature and enjoy a much-needed break from the frenetic city life.

Arthur Chan of the Siquijor Chamber of Commerce and Industry shared that the almost monthlong power outages have caused mass booking cancellations, demands for refunds and increased costs and inconvenience for the local resorts and commercial establishments, almost all of which are micro to small and medium enterprises on whom a good part of the population depends for their livelihood.

Sipcor, which has a 20-year power supply agreement with local distributor Province of Siquijor Electric Cooperative Inc. (Prosielco) may be too late the hero. Still, having one of its units back in operation, adding 7,550 kilowatts to the plant’s operating capacity is welcome news, along with the commitment to deploy a generator to close the supply gap.

## Lone power plant

Siquijor’s situation is indeed grave but hardly unique as other island-provinces in the country that are not connected to the grid and have to rely on a single supplier have had their bouts with agonizingly long power interruptions that have held back their economic growth. Last February, for example, residents of the island-province of Masbate also had to endure prolonged and frequent power outages because of technical issues with the island’s lone power plant, that eventually led to its total shutdown for a number of days.

Then last year, the burgeoning tourist destination of Siargao also had to suffer extended power interruptions because the line transmitting electricity to the island was cut, causing massive inconvenience and leaving a stain on the reputation of the area as a top tourist destination.

These situations are indeed dire but will nevertheless continue to repeat themselves unless long-term fixes are put in place. These include more rigorous exercise of oversight functions of the Department of Energy (DOE) and the National Electrification Administration to ensure that the electric cooperatives, power distributors, transmission company, and power generators are performing as they should, and penalties should be imposed on those that are negligent.

## No longer a luxury

The local distributors, for example, should regularly update their power development plan so they will know beforehand if demand in their area will rise given increased economic activity and population growth. In the case of Siquijor, for example, the DOE’s investigation showed that the debilitating power crisis was caused by a “combination of technical, operational and regulatory issues” preventing Sipcor from deploying its full generating capacity to meet local demand.”

Thus, the DOE underscored the “urgent need” for coordinated and sustained action, the same action that must be exercised across all island-provinces that are especially vulnerable to technical issues affecting the power plants and the transmission lines since they are not connected to the regional or national grid.

After all, electricity in this day and age when most everything is plugged in, having access to affordable and reliable electricity is no longer a luxury, but a basic necessity that the government and the private sector must be able to consistently deliver to the people.