# Go for clean alternatives to coal | Inquirer Opinion

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The government has finally started moving to eventually close all coal mines and electricity plants that run using their output, which has long been globally considered a major source of environmental harm. This is especially important considering that the Philippines ranked first on the 2023 World Risk Index list of countries susceptible to extreme weather events.

At the sidelines of the Philippine Energy Transition Dialogue 2025 in Manila last week, Michael Sinocruz, director for energy policy and planning at the Department of Energy, announced that the DOE is exploring the possibility of stopping the operations of all coal mines and coal-fed power plants across the country. He added that the DOE has teamed up with the United Nations Office for Project Services “to study the impact if we’re going to close down our coal mines and coal power plants.”

The study will cover the potential implications on workers and livelihood activities in the host communities and will likewise include alternatives to cushion the impact on the local economy and the energy sector. A crucial part of the study, according to Sinocruz, is how much money or funding the government will need to address the possible displacement of workers and the economic damage to the community. Once the study is completed, he said the DOE will consult with coal miners to ensure that the right alternatives are being considered. “So based on this study, we can have, or probably recommend policies for consideration of the [DOE] or by the national government,” the official said.

## Most concrete step

This is by far the most concrete step taken by the Philippines to address the coal sector. Despite mounting calls over the years to phase out coal from the country’s energy mix, the government has done too little to do so. In October 2020, for instance, then Energy Secretary Alfonso Cusi announced that the government had decided on a moratorium on coal projects.

When the details of the plan were issued three months later, Cusi’s announcement was described by environment groups as “underwhelming” because the ban covered only new applications and not existing ones.

Data from the International Energy Agency showed that coal accounts for 30.4 percent of the country’s energy mix, the second biggest after oil at 31.6 percent. Renewable energy such as wind, solar and other sources contributed 32.4 percent and natural gas, 4.2 percent. It is in generating electricity that coal plays a big role, accounting for a little over 60 percent of the country’s total. It is followed by natural gas at 16 percent; geothermal, 9.3 percent; hydro, 9 percent, and biofuels, 1.2 percent.

## Solar farms

Since the study on a total phaseout of coal will possibly take a few years, the government need not wait for its results to start finding alternative energy sources, two of which, namely solar and nuclear, are showing great promise in other countries and can help the country meet its international obligation of raising the share of renewables in the power mix to 35 percent by 2030 and 50 percent by 2040 from a little over 20 percent today.

A particularly interesting trend is the conversion of closed coal mines into solar farms. Global Energy Monitor, which analyzes data essential to building a sustainable energy future, says “coal-to-solar transition offers a rare chance to repair the environmental hazards and eyesores of open pits” and generate thousands of jobs in the solar industry.

International industry reports indicate that China is currently ahead in coal-to-solar projects, with 90 such conversions with a capacity of 14 gigawatts in operation and 46 more in the pipeline. Another country being mentioned is Greece. The Philippines can coordinate with these countries to see and hopefully adopt the policies and requirements in their conversion program.

## Clearer pathway

Going nuclear also provides a clearer pathway to achieving self-sufficiency in electricity generation. President Marcos Jr. has announced that his administration is fully supporting nuclear energy as a key player in the electricity sector and meeting the needs of a growing economy. It is targeting a nuclear contribution of 1,200 megawatts of electricity by 2032 and 2,400 MW by 2050.

The public’s opposition to nuclear power is understandable given the country’s experience with the corruption-tainted Bataan nuclear plant, which has never produced electricity since its completion in 1984 due to safety concerns despite the government spending more than $2 billion. However, nuclear technology has advanced so much that it has become much safer and its adoption by other countries has been growing at a fast pace.

It may take years for the DOE-commissioned study on a total coal phaseout to be completed. However, the government must not wait for its results and now ramp up efforts on adopting other clean energy sources that can replace coal, particularly solar and nuclear.