

COMMENTARY

The future of PH energy

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SYDNEY, Australia—The future of energy is now committed to an age of sustainable energy, ushered in by rapid transitions to renewable energy systems coupled with large-scale harvesting of energy efficiency potentials. The Philippines should fit into this imagined future if we don't want to be left behind. President Duterte should therefore encourage and adopt a reflective mindset to drive the country toward this direction.

Mr. Duterte promised quality life for all Filipinos, envisaging an industrialized Philippines. One of the important things about being a relatively poor and trailing, but hopeful, country like the Philippines is that we are provided with a bird's eye view of what we want to emulate—and, more importantly, what we want to skip.

Mr. Duterte's gaze on China could well bring about this vision.

China currently leads the global effort to transition toward sustainable energy—replacing coal-fired power plants with cleaner energy, at a faster pace. The results are far-reaching: reduced air pollution and reduced emissions. The ongoing Chinese energy transition would only make today's cheap coal-fired power plants stranded assets in the near term.

If Mr. Duterte is serious in speeding up Philippine development, he can apply a leapfrog mentality that would totally skip coal-based development, and emulate China in its energy transition.

A sustainable energy future offers development and climate dividends for present and future generations of Filipinos. Development dividends include domestic energy security, which is key in Philippine socioeconomic development; climate dividends are made through reductions in climate-changing greenhouse gases, minimizing future impacts in an already-climate-disrupted Philippines.

A low-carbon development pathway powered by sustainable energy is technically and economically possible. A Stanford University study envisages a 100-percent renewable-energy-powered world from combined water, wind and sunshine energy systems. This research includes a vision for a sustainable energy future for the Philippines, suggesting that we can tap our renewable resources using existing technologies, which continue to reduce in price, while creating new jobs and reducing air pollution.

Key in our sustainable energy leapfrog is the creation of a regulatory and investment climate that would support rapid deployment of sustainable energy technologies, especially for small and medium-size enterprises, cooperatives, and ordinary Filipino households. This means: providing investment security through schemes such as feed-in tariffs; reducing lengthy permit and license processes; designing innovative financing mechanisms; and strengthening capacity. We also need to revisit systems and institutional arrangements that discourage the participation of small players in energy production. It's time to open up the energy market for more players, not just for big, established energy corporations.

Mr. Duterte could gaze at Germany, a well-recognized country in terms of sustainable energy. Germany's feed-in tariffs guaranteed prices for 20 years, critically providing investment security especially for smaller investors such as cooperatives. It has also prioritized these little guys' power over those of energy corporations.

These are not prescriptions but encouragements. Our ability to gaze at others, to make sense of how they did it, and to imagine how to replicate them are vital, but our ability to create an alternative path is far more important. The forces of the market and the physics of the climate system are strongly pointing to this path: a sustainable, low-carbon development pathway wholly powered by sustainable energy. This transition offers new opportunities for all Filipinos. We should not miss it.

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