

Clean-air corruption kills 10x more than war on drugs?

By Michael Makabenta Alunan
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The pervasive culture of corruption that prevents the implementation of genuine clean-air programs under the Clean Air Act is resulting in cardiovascular and respiratory diseases that are effectively killing over 60,000 Filipinos, about 10 times the 6,000 recorded deaths so far under President Duterte's aggressive campaign against illegal drugs.

Deaths, health costs are rising. Despite almost 17 years now of the Clean Air Act, emission levels have not dropped substantially and may have worsened with more vehicles on the road, sharing 93 percent of total air pollution in Metro Manila, up from over 70 percent three decades back. Moreover, deaths from cardiovascular and respiratory diseases resulting cumulatively and indirectly from air pollution have risen, while costs on health and lost economic opportunities have ballooned from \$2.2 billion in 1990 to \$2.8 billion, says a study by the [World Bank \(WB\)](#) and the [Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation \(IHME\)](#) as reported in the press.

Deaths of Filipinos caused by air pollution have, likewise, soared over a 23-year period from 38,676 in 1990 to 57,403 in 2013. Local mortality figures may be higher if we include the total of 85,000 who die from all kinds of respiratory diseases, like bronchitis, emphysema, pneumonia, asthma, etc., which are all aggravated by air pollution.

Although these deaths are directly caused by respiratory diseases, the contributory effects of emissions cannot be denied. World Bank's publication *Environment Monitor 2002* cited a University of the Philippines Institute of Public Health study, saying jeepney drivers recorded the highest in chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases at 32.5 percent and pulmonary tuberculosis at 17.5 percent. Although men were more vulnerable as they smoke more than women, the correlation with emissions is high, as streetchildren recorded the second-highest incidence.

More diseases linked to air pollution. The [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) has confirmed that even cardiovascular diseases, such as strokes and ischaemic heart disease, and lung cancer are already caused mainly by outdoor and indoor air pollution.

WHO said outdoor air pollution results in ischaemic heart disease, or 40 percent of total; stroke, another 40 percent; chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), 11 percent; lung cancer, 6 percent; and acute lower respiratory infections in children, 3 percent. Indoor air pollution induces strokes by 34 percent; ischaemic heart disease by 26 percent; COPD, 22 percent; acute lower respiratory infections in children, 12 percent; and lung cancer, 6 percent.

These new findings double previous mortality estimates, thus, premature deaths have now hit about 7 million every year as of 2014, thus confirming air pollution as the world's largest single environmental health risk.

[World Bank](#) posted a lower mortality of 5.5 million people killed in 2013, and estimated resulting health costs, foregone labor income and lost opportunities of \$225 billion. About 90 percent of the affected population are the poor from low- and middle-income countries, which have lax clean-air programs and enforcement measures.

Measuring, missing and messing up. Locally, despite almost 17 years now of the Clean Air Act, maybe 99 percent of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources's (DENR) budgets through the years were spent and limited to just measuring pollution in the air.

This is lopsided and even flawed for three reasons. For one, measuring pollution levels in ambient air does not even diagnose yet the problems and sources of pollutions, what more identifying effective solutions. Second, unlike many continental countries, which have more stagnant air, as an archipelago, we experience regular sea breeze and air turbulence that could dilute air-pollution concentrations, making ambient air measurements inaccurate, a study by expert Dr. Emman Anglo says.

More so, as most of the DENR's air-monitoring stations cannot make minute-per-minute real-time readings and have high 25-percent margins of errors, compared to the 2.5 percent for more modern technologies. Thus, they could not measure up, and often miss measuring accurately.

Third, everything has been messed up, as most equipment are allegedly not functioning. In 2003 the DENR bought 10 of these units worth \$10 million, another four units in 2006, four more in 2010, 10 units in early 2013, five more a little later, and again 17 more units in 2013. Not contented yet, again in 2013, 10 more units were bought for other regions, which did not report any performance nor were their locations publicly known. By 2015, seven more units were purchased, while 37 units more worth P370 million were for bidding in 2016. In all these transactions, Electrobyte was the sole supplier, says [Manny Galvez of Air Philippines](#) and the Coalition of Clean Air Advocates.

Anomalous “nonappearance” testings? Another problem is the pervasive practice of nonappearance emission testings, involving most of the 1,400 private emission testing centers, says CCAA, led by its Chairman Leo Olarte and President Jojo Verano and Spokesman Dr. Mike Aragon.

At P350 per emission testing and assuming all 9 million registered vehicles undergo nonappearance testing, that is a potential business or anomaly of over P3 billion.

Another source of corruption is the mismanagement of Anti-Smoke Belching Units (ASBUs) of the local government units. Some erring ASBUs conduct road apprehension with apprehension after striking protection deals with fleets, bus companies and transport groups, which realize that not being educated on how to reduce emissions, they have no choice but to maintain bribery retainer fees so they could continue plying their routes without getting apprehended for smoke-belching.

Education, not penalties, will reduce emissions. But no amount of penalties nor frequency of arrests will reduce emissions, nor will a vehicle or engine replacement under a proposed [transport modernization affecting jeepneys](#) will really reduce emissions. Section 46 of the law requires that apart from penalties, violators must undergo seminars on emission reduction.

Section 11 mandates the government to make available all the information, best practices, techniques and technological options on pollution control, thereby empowering motorists on making more intelligent choices, not only in theory but in practice. This can't be done fully as Section 15 on Air Pollution Research is not implemented and funded, despite the untapped

ballooning P8.5-billion Special Vehicle Pollution Control Fund, from 7.5 percent of the road users' tax.

It is high time the Duterte administration puts its money and political will where they will count the most. Otherwise, by tolerating corruption on programs that do not have any impact anyway, motorists will continue to “*do dirty*” the air and cause the slow but mass killings of thousands of innocent Filipinos every year.

E-mail: mikealunan@yahoo.com