

PH banks urged to divest coal investments

- by [Philippine Environews](#)
- March 2, 2020

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By John Leo Algo

Church leaders and civil society groups urged last week Philippine financial institutions to divest themselves of coal-related investments and instead consider renewable energy projects.

“Kita mismo, na mga ga-deposito sa mga banko, hambalun gid naton sila na we don’t want na ang aton gina deposito sa ila, gamiton para mag pondo sa sini nga mga kalihukan kay maathag man ang gina batian bisan pa nga iba ang naga-denial ba.” [We ourselves, the depositors, must communicate to them that we don’t want what we deposit to them to be used for these kinds of activities since the message is clear, even if other parties involved are in denial],” said Bishop Gerardo Alminaza of the Diocese of San Carlos City in Negros Occidental.

Alminaza expressed support for the directive of President Rodrigo Duterte to “fast-track” the development of renewable energy resources and reduce dependency on coal. He highlighted that commitment of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) and his diocese to divest its resources from coal.

“Pakonsenya bala naton nga may kabahig kita nga kita, ang aton kwarta, gamiton para sa kakaingad sang atung isig-ka tao” [We must put it to their conscience that we have a responsibility, that our money must be used for the betterment of everyone], he added.

The groups made the call during the launch of the Church-CSO Empowerment for Environmental Sustainability (ECO-CONVERGENCE), a gathering of faith-based organizations and environmental advocates from all over the Visayas island group and from national organizations. It was hosted by San Carlos, known as one of the greenest cities in the Philippines and hosting facilities including a 45-MW solar plant by San Carlos Solar Energy and biomass and bio-ethanol power plants.



Environment advocates launched the “Withdraw from Coal” campaign during the Visayas-Wide Church-CSO Empowerment for Environmental Sustainability (ECO-CONVERGENCE) Summit in San Carlos, Negros Occidental.

Experts previously declared 1.5°C of global warming as a point of no return for the climate crisis, and that the world has only a decade to reduce its coal usage by 78 percent to prevent catastrophic impacts.

The long-term security of the Visayas region has been threatened by climate change impacts in recent years. Food security has been threatened by extreme weather events, from heavy rains and flooding to long-term droughts. Parts of the region are still rehabilitating from the impacts of super-typhoon Yolanda, which killed around 6300 persons and displaced thousands of people.

Despite this situation, coal operations continued to expand in areas such as Cebu and Iloilo, some of which were funded by two of the country’s biggest banks, Bank of the Philippine Islands and Banco De Oro. They collectively accounted for more than 54 percent of financing for coal expansion projects from 2017 to 2019. Neither BPI nor BDO responded to requests for comments as of this writing.

Impact of coal on communities

Alminaza stated his opposition to more coal-fired power plants built in Visayas and called “clean coal” as a lie. Asserting that Negros must continue to thrive as a renewable energy hub in Asia, he said “*so amo na ang atong pang lantawan kay di naton luyag nga ipanubli sa mga kabataan naton sa urihi ang isa ka palibot nga guba na kag hindi na livable*” [that is what we need to look into because it is not our wish for our children to inherit from us an environment that is broken and unlivable].

Aside from greenhouse gas emissions, burning fossil fuels also produces air pollution that causes adverse health impacts on nearby communities. A [report](#) released by Greenpeace Philippines earlier this month revealed that said pollution costs the Philippines up to 1.9% GDP loss and 27,000 premature deaths every year. Rodrigo Montemayor, a resident of Toledo, Cebu, shared the struggles of his community in dealing with the impacts of the nearby Toledo Power Corporation-owned coal plant, which was funded by banks such as BPI and Metrobank. He stated that despite persistent smog and smoke being inhaled by the residents, the local government refuses to address the impacts on the community.

“Ako gipanguta ang mayor, “unsa man atoang solusyon ana Mayor?” Ang tubag niya “sa kumpanya mangutana unsay solusyon.” Maayo ba ng tubaga?” [So I asked the mayor, “so what is our solution, mayor?”. His answer was “go ask the company responsible for a solution.” Do you think that’s an appropriate answer to say?], he said.

Montemayor added that the locals have been manipulated by the local government into being silent on this issue, making it difficult to create local initiatives to address the air pollution caused by the facility. He hopes that the case of his community would inspire others to resist coal expansion into their areas.

Alminaza echoed this sentiment, arguing that financing energy production must consider the moral implications as much as economic factors.

“Makahatag trabaho, makapa-eskwela pero wala nagapamangkot diin halin ang gina-pakaon mo? Diin gahil ang gina pa-eskwela mo? Sa maayo bala nga pamaagi?” [There is money that provides jobs, provides education, but no one ever asks where the money that feeds your loved ones comes from? Where does the money that you use to provide education come from? Was it attained through good means?], he said.

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