

When Women's Power is Wisely Used in Negros

by Romana de los Reyes

Tired of the pressures of urban life, I decided to quit working in 1997. I ended my more than 20-year career with one of Ateneo de Manila University's social science research institutes which I headed for a decade. Going home to my birthplace, where life would be definitely less stressful, was the most attractive choice. But as soon as I came home, I learned about a coal-fired power plant that was to be built just some three kilometres away from my home in Bago, Negros Occidental.



Campaigner Romana de los Reyes, now a doting grandmother to Jacob Carl.

The coal plant was proposed by a consortium of three power firms—Ogden Energy, now known as Covanta Energy (United States), ABB Energy Ventures (Sweden and Switzerland) and Edison Global (a Filipino firm based in Hong Kong).

I did not know anything about power plants before I came home. But I knew the disease that blackens the lungs of coal miners. I also knew that coal power plants are not good for human health and the environment. Indeed, my subsequent research revealed that coal plants release a combination of toxic metals and compounds such as mercury, lead, cadmium, and hexavalent chromium that are deadly to human health. They emit sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide that cause respiratory problems.

Ultimately, they release greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide) that are responsible for global warming. Moreover, the pollution that is generated from coal handling and storage and waste discharges has adverse impacts on freshwater sources and marine resources.

In organising the Negros campaign against the proposed coal power plant, I drew much of my resources from my formal education

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in anthropology, knowledge of Philippine social organisation and my work experience. My work at Ateneo was concentrated on local, self-organised communities that were able to manage natural resource systems. We also assisted government bureaucracies in supporting and strengthening these common-pool resource organisations.

Combining these for organising meant reaching out not only to the poor but also to the rich, not only to the men but also to the women, not only to the people’s organisations but also to government officials. It meant extending our hands to all churches, civic organisations, professional groups and other stakeholders — all towards the goal of obtaining broad participation in the opposition to the coal power plant.

In the five years that we organised and mobilised, the location of the proposed coal power plant was changed three times. With the strong opposition in Bago City, the plant was moved to Silay City, where the proponents also faced an equally staunch opposition. It once more moved to Pulupandan, where the proponents finally accepted their defeat.

A large factor of my full involvement in the five year campaign can be attributed to the independence of my only son and my financial security. I had some savings to live on. But my leadership in the campaign heavily relied on the strengths, talent, and skills of

the other women leaders.

The opposition campaign in Bago lasted for only five months. Crucial in this struggle was the support of a woman with means. Lelen Tabora had just built her house in her beachfront property, beside the proposed coal plant site as she also sought a more relaxed life than that in Metro Manila. In Bago and later in Pulupandan, she provided substantial financial support and poured her creativity especially in fashioning campaign materials such as t-shirts, posters, pins, flaglets, hand outs and information kits.

Lelen also brought in the mayor’s wife, who eventually obtained the support of her husband and other officials for the campaigners. The mayor enabled us to hold information campaigns in half of the city’s villages in two months time. Thus when the city and the Catholic church organised a protest rally in January 1998, about 20,000 people joined, rendering the proponents of the coal power plant with no choice but to leave Bago.

The campaign in Silay took only two months, thanks to the efficiency of two women leaders, Emily Jison and Erlinda Ledesma.

Coming from the elite families of the city, these women immediately organised and mobilised with the Catholic church-based organisations. They also managed to sign up volunteers who conducted a village level information campaign and joined the lobbying activities with the city officials. In March 1998, the city council issued a resolution that rejected the proposed coal power plant.



On the other hand, the people's struggle in Pulpupandan went on for almost five years, 1998 to 2003, given the mayor's support for the proposed coal power plant that would be constructed in his family's property. However, the opposition movement called the People of Pulpupandan Against the Coal-Fired Power Plant (PPAC), which was led by Ella Jacildo, foiled the mayor's plans.

The unity and strength of the opposition were displayed during the protest rallies. In 1998, three rallies were held, bringing together more than 10,000 town residents, youths and groups at the town plaza. Three protest rallies were also organised in 1999. In April a caravan of 41 vehicles traveled all the way from Pulpupandan to Bacolod City. In May 2001, a symbolic occupation by

about 500 people of the project's proposed site was done to emphasise the people's continuing rejection of the project.

While the Pulpupandan campaign focused on the opposition to the coal plant, each day of the campaign was in fact a battle against the corruption of democratic governance. The

town mayor became intolerant of any opposition, utilizing even the power of the police to suppress it.

Thus, when the information dissemination on the project started, youths who put up posters expressing opposition to the coal plant were collared by the police and their posters taken. The mayor also made veiled threats that the students would lose their monthly allowances if the coal plant would not be built. Grade school teachers were also warned not to join rallies against the coal plant lest they be sanctioned.

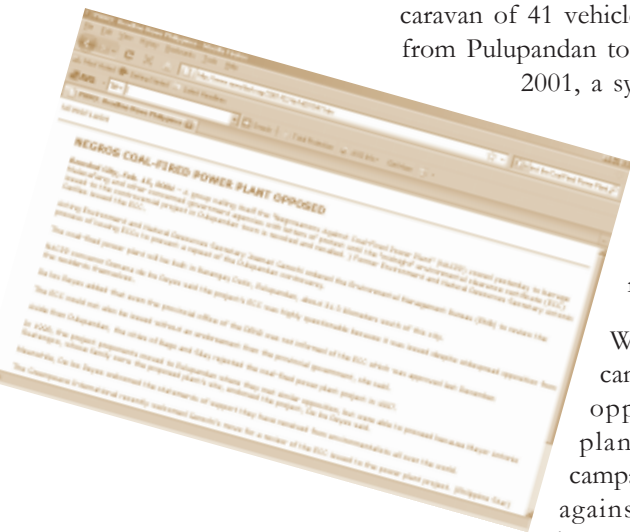
The coal plant proponents also resorted to dispensing favours—actions that smacked of bribery. They “wined and dined” the village officials at the capital city and beach resorts. These expeditions emboldened the village leaders to pressure their constituencies to say “yes” to the coal plant. The proponents also brought village, town, and provincial officials to a study tour of local coal plants but such trips meant staying in a coal plant site for less than two hours because most of the time was spent for leisure activities.

Government elected and appointed officials and private individuals whom the proponents deemed critical for the realisation of the project were given the prized gift—a trip outside the country ostensibly to visit coal plants, with some of them even allowed to bring family members. However, the trip was really a sightseeing excursion as those who joined it could not provide data on the results of their coal plant visits when they returned to the country.

To gain social acceptability for their coal plant project, the proponents provided cash or in kind donations for various village and town activities and projects including *fiesta* celebrations, sports events, beautification projects, feeding programmes for children, and activities of sectoral groups such as the youth, elderly, and women.

At one point, the companies found a patron at the House of Congress, with the hope that he would hasten the construction and operations of the coal power plant through his various “connections” in the bureaucracy. Indeed, this patron pressured the Philippine Ports Authority to give clearance to the coal plant's proposed port facility for handling coal deliveries.

The media and the academe were not spared as the proponent was desperate in discrediting the opposition. Scientists were called to argue for the benefits of the proposed coal plant. But many opposition



Traces of the Battle Not So Long Ago. Archived news reports that suggest the momentum that the campaign against coal-fired power plant gained and sustained.

leaders also had the know-how that challenged the technical experts, hence further strengthening the campaign.

The climax in the series of the fraudulent activities for the Pulupandan coal plant was the granting of its Environmental Compliance Certificate (ECC) in 2000. An ECC is issued by the Philippine Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) when it clears industrial companies operations from any potential harm that it might cause to the environment. The ECC was recalled in 2001, after the opposition filed a motion that questioned its validity. Throughout the legal battle, we were consistently present in the court proceedings, closely working with the Office of the Solicitor General, that represented DENR. In 2003, a DENR Internal Review Committee confirmed that the ECC was indeed granted outside the normal process.

Even early on in the campaign, the opposition leaders spread the campaign to the provincial, national and international levels.

linkages with international groups and non-government organisations to bring our campaign to the international community.

It is important to note that our group consciously decided not to formally solicit funds from international donors so as to avoid any controversies. However, we welcomed international environmentalists who provided for their own needs whenever they joined our activities.

Not having funds forced us to give from our own funds, hence we have a stake at the campaign—we own it. Even the tricycle driver owned it because he gave P5 to P20 for every rally.

The financial support of rich families in the proposed coal plant sites contributed to the persistence of the campaign against the coal plant. But the time, effort and financial donations of ordinary people, particularly those in Pulupandan, also propped and stretched the campaign over the years.

The leadership of women further encouraged the firm stand of the people against the coal plant. Proceeding from a hunch that the coal power plant proponents would settle in Pulupandan, I steered the organisational meeting of the town's opposition groups, yielding the selection of women leaders. I was guided by the social organisation literature that indicate that women leaders are more enduring and by a personal belief that women leaders could not be invited by the coal plant proponents to a drinking session where minds are changed.

Indeed, the women leaders provided a steady presence all throughout the Pulupandan campaign. In fact, it could be said that women, more than men, led the campaign in Pulupandan. Consider these: the PPAC coordinator was a woman, members of PPAC's education task forces were women, PPAC's village coordinators were mostly women. The NACP convenor was a woman while its core group was composed of women.

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So that people from other towns and cities in the province would be formally involved in the campaign, I convened the Negrosanons against the Coal-Fired Power Plant (NACP). I wrote letters to various government agencies and legislators and sent articles and commentaries to national dailies. I also spearheaded the establishment of



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Rediscovering Ancient Power and Pride. Bago celebrates the Babaylan festival. The babaylans were highly respected women who were healers, agriculturists, artists, mediums and leaders, among many others. They were banished with the Spanish colonial period.

Photo from Province of Negros Occidental

It should be noted, too, that while ordinary women—farmers, fish vendors, housewives, *manicuristas*—took on leadership roles, many of the women leaders were professionals—chemical engineers, civil engineers, biologists, social scientists, teachers, and other professionals. These professionals also led the education task forces that went from one village to another to inform the residents about the adverse impacts of the coal plant and the status of the project.

One victory of the anti-coal campaign is the designation of the island of Negros as a model for renewable energy development and utilisation under the 2003 Renewable Energy Policy Framework of the Philippine Department of Energy. Under this framework, no new fossil fuel plants can be built in the island. Though not quite a legal document, the framework became the basis for overturning a proposed 15-megawatt diesel plant in 2004 in Bacolod City.

Several renewable projects have been proposed in Negros since. To date, three have been realised—the biomass plants of the First Farmers' Milling Co. in Silay City and of the

San Carlos Bioenergy Inc. in San Carlos City. Both produce power for their own use but will also sell excess energy into the grid. The Northern Negros Geothermal Project in Bago has been rehabilitated and expanded to produce the expected 49 megawatts capacity. The other renewable projects have not pushed through on schedule.

The proposed wind farms in Pulpandan, San Carlos City, and Don Salvador Benedicto have yet to find investors. The optimisation of the Palinpinon geothermal and construction of the Dauin geothermal have been delayed. And the Victorias biomass project has been shelved.

The slow realisation of the renewable energy projects has undermined the victory of the Negros campaign. As no new major power plant has been completed in Negros and the rest of the Visayas up to this year, the Visayas grid expects a lack of supply by next year (2010). The needed supply will now be met by coal plants that are being built in Naga, Cebu (200 megawatts); Toledo, Cebu (246 megawatts), and Iloilo City (164 megawatts).

It is ironic that while Negros managed to stop the coal plant, 600 megawatts that will be available for the Visayas beginning next year will all come from coal plants. ■

Romana de los Reyes's community work has included explaining the Philippine Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process and procedure to several groups in Negros Occidental that are targeted by development projects. She has also assisted farmer and community groups to be informed and be prepared to transact and negotiate with the National Irrigation Administration (NIA), or resist an NIA irrigation project or a component of such project. Soon after she settled in Bago, she has become a passionate gardener. She does not only tend ornamental plants, she has also been raising a variety of vegetables and root crops for home consumption.