

# COAL AND RENEWABLE ENERGY REPORTING IN THE PHILIPPINES

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## Executive Summary

Southeast Asia is a fast-developing region, and its energy decisions are critical to the next decade's global effort to reduce carbon-emitting fossil fuels. Yet little is known about the specific media narratives that shape the national debates on an energy transition in each country. For stakeholders wishing to influence such narratives and increase the quality of energy reporting, lessons from the past are crucial for future success. This knowledge gap is what Climate Tracker and the Stanley Center for Peace and Security wished to fill with an analysis of energy-related media coverage in five countries across Southeast Asia. This report on the Philippines is the first in a series of reports commissioned by the Stanley Center and produced by Climate Tracker that will be copublished as part of *Fueling the Tiger Cubs: How Southeast Asia's Media Is Covering Coal's Last Frontier*, a multi-country media analysis led by young journalists from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Each of the Southeast Asian countries in our study has a unique media landscape with different challenges and opportunities for energy reporting. For the Philippines—a small archipelago with **coal contributing more than half of the total energy output**—narratives on coal and renewables are deeply influenced by a small number of **commercial media giants**. Thus, it was no surprise when we found that the vast majority of energy stories were told from a business frame.

However, important differences exist between the narrative priorities of Metro Manila-based heavyweights like *INQUIRER.net* and the *Philippines Star* and smaller outlets from the more remote Visayas islands and Mindanao. With the advent of digital media, independent news sites have begun to play a more active role, exemplified by the social news network Rappler, which began as a Facebook page and has grown into the second-largest online media platform in the country. State-owned players such as the Philippine News Agency (PNA) also contribute to the narrative,

although they no longer hold such a monopoly as they once did under dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

Two Filipino researchers, Angelica Yang and Jason Paolo Telles, examined more than 1,350 articles across eight news outlets from all the above categories. Here are their key takeaways:

- Electricity prices and power availability are major concerns of more than half of the energy stories.
- Although the Philippines is heavily reliant on coal, the narrative surrounding this fossil fuel tends to highlight its negative social impacts over economic benefits.
- Regional Mindanao and Visayas-based news outlets led the way in broadcasting communities' daily suffering around major coal plants, while mainstream sources GMA News Online (GNO) and *Philstar.com* quoted from national environmental advocates and policymakers.
- Only the Manila-based *INQUIRER* stood out for going against this trend, running a considerable number of articles with a “coal remains indispensable” framing that cited sources such as the World Coal Association. This cannot be attributed to one single reason. However, an interview with one *INQUIRER* editor suggested that the paper rarely focuses on environmental impacts when reporting on energy.
- After the 2019 power outages, which saw coal plants unable to handle peak demand, we saw a narrative shift toward renewable energy within a national energy security framing. This narrative grew off increasing concern for electricity prices.
- We were surprised that in the 20 months studied, there were three times as many renewable energy stories as there were coal stories reported.
- Although geothermal has the biggest market share of all renewable technologies in the Philippines, solar power

attracts the most media attention because it is a new technology with the **highest forecasted growth rate**.

- Manila-based commercial news outlets often frame solar as a lucrative investment for businesses and consumers.
- In Mindanao, where private solar investment is not as robust, MindaNews journalists take on critical locals-versus-government frames while discussing how government solar projects have not benefited the community as advertised. Interestingly, the environmental frame, when utilized, only receives secondary attention in most renewable energy articles.
- Compared to solar, geothermal is heavily underreported by commercial news outlets and most often receives attention from the state-owned PNA. PNA differs from other news outlets in its explicit emphasis of “development journalism,” which one correspondent describes as “articles that would help promote the programs of the government.” Geothermal development has been one such program since the late 1970s.
- From interviewing the authors of various energy articles, we found that journalists’ personal viewpoints could influence

the choice of energy frame. Some journalists, including editors, view it as their duty to advocate for a clean energy transition in the Philippines through exposing the negative impacts of coal.

- Beyond that personal aspect, regional differences determine where journalists go for tips and quotes, with Manila-based outlets relying more on press releases and business leaders, while Visayas and Mindanao outlets get alerts from community members.
- The only news outlets that feature an environment section are the independent digital platform Rappler, the government-owned PNA, and the regional *MindaNews*. All the mainstream commercial outlets examined do not have either an energy or an environment section—potentially indicating ownership interest influencing editorial decisions. Some also do not specifically assign journalists to these topics. Thus, these journalists seldom dive deeper into the long-term, science-based environmental and climate implications of various energy forms, stopping at highlighting the obvious damages caused by coal to surrounding communities.

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*While this report does not offer specific recommendations for improving clean energy media narratives in the Philippines, the research can be used to inform the development of effective interventions and actions.*

*Research for this report was carried out under the guidance of Climate Tracker, a network of 12,000+ young climate journalists around the globe. Research methods included sampling, content analysis, framing analysis, and interviews with reporters and editors, and the time frame examined was January 2019 to August 2020.*

*This report is part of a regional media analysis commissioned by the Stanley Center for Peace and Security and produced by Climate Tracker.*



## About Us

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## About Climate Tracker

Climate Tracker is the largest youth-based climate journalism project in the world. We train and competitively empower young people around the world to influence their national debates about climate change, and publish their ideas in national media. We send the most impressive young people to international conferences where they can have a direct influence on decision makers and get a hands-on experience in shaping national and international policy. [ClimateTracker.org](http://ClimateTracker.org).