

Understanding Public Opposition to Development Projects:
The Mt. Apo Case

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Abstract

The paper discusses how conflict resolution processes can achieve positive results wherein the opposition may become a partner in development rather than just a party to a conflict which must be overcome. The case of the Mt. Apo Geothermal Project, which is considered as one of the most controversial development projects in the Philippines, is used to illustrate this relationship.

1.0 Introduction:

Conflict is part of existence. To live within a society would require encounters with its other members, institutions, mechanisms and systems wherein people may not always see or need things in the same way. Inevitably, some form of tension or conflict arises from the incompatibility of actual or desired responses between two or more social entities - be they individuals, groups or larger organizations (Raven and Kruglanski in Worchel and Lundgren, 1991:5).

The development of large-scale power projects is one such venue for conflict - it often being marred with controversy anchored on a variety of environmental issues and concerns. Some people may want it, others may oppose it, while others may plainly be indifferent to its fate. These differences consequently make the resolution of conflict a difficult task as the search for its fair and lasting settlement is oftentimes elusive.

Bacow et al. (1983:6) made an interesting observation on the occurrence of these types of conflict:

"Public conflict over larger development projects seem to have become the rule rather than the exception. No matter what the developer proposes to build ...someone will oppose it. No matter how safe the proposed facility looks to its developer and government officials, someone will oppose it. No matter how badly society's general well being depends on a development, someone will oppose it."

This however, does not intend, in any way, to depict the opposition in a bad role. The refusal of the people to collaborate or support a project should not always be taken to mean as an intentional move to paralyze development. According to Koontz and Heinz (1990:285), conflicts, while generally seen as being dysfunctional, may also be beneficial as it may cause an issue to be presented in a different perspective. Worchel and Lundgren (1991:17) further write that conflict can be very useful as it causes one to break away from the trap of taking things for granted and induces one to go through the process of testing and assessing decisions taken. The differing views of the opposition, if justified, may therefore possibly lead project policies away from pursuing intervention which do not fit into the local context and, as a result, eventually contribute to the general success of the project (Drijver, 1990:4).

This paper reflects on the environmental conflict evolving from the Mt. Apo geothermal project of the PNOC-Energy Development Corporation in Kidapawan, North Cotabato - focusing on the understanding the behavior of opposition groups involved and searching for a positive interpretation on their role in the conflict.

2.0 Important Events:

The PNOC-Energy Development Corporation made its initial geoscientific studies of the Mt. Apo in 1983. In 1987, after finding encouraging results, it secured a permit to explore the national park from the DENR-National Environmental Protection Agency (later renamed to the DENR-Environmental Management Bureau). It was able to drill two exploratory wells until the early part of 1988, both of which confirmed the commercial presence of geothermal resource. Work proceeded smoothly and no friction whatsoever was experienced in its dealings with the residents in the local community. The PNOC-EDC was also received favorably by the barangay and municipal officials. The PNOC-EDC then prepared and submitted its application to pursue the development of the area.

The Pastoral letter of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) encouraging the members of the Church to engage in the protection of the environment was read during the Church sermons nationwide in April 1988. By July of the same year, an open letter opposing the Mt. Apo geothermal project was released. It was signed by individuals from the media, academe, NGOs and the Church. It charged the PNOC-EDC with various legal, environmental, cultural, economic and social transgressions.

PNOC responded by calling for meetings wherein it presented the geothermal project to representatives of

multi-sectoral groups from Kidapawan. This was continued through to **1989** and at specifically targeted audiences in the academe, the Kidapawan diocese, the local tribes and **NGOs** which later affiliated with the Task Force Sandawa. From one of these consultations with the opposition tribal groups, the PNOC-EDC was able to confirm that those who are opposing the project are from outside the project and park area. Many are traced to have come from distant towns and provinces. In **1990**, the PNOC-EDC renewed their information campaign within and around the project area. It also sought consultations with the Regional Development Councils and the Executive Cabinet of the Office of the President.

Meanwhile, loose opposition groups have managed to organize itself and establish a network which allowed it to reach out for support from nearby towns and provinces, to the capital city of Manila, as well as, from overseas. It had mobilized resources to enable a team of opposition leaders, including tribal leaders, to travel to the capital city for representations with the members of Congress, appearances on television talk shows and university symposia. They were also able to gain wide media exposure through significant and frequent placements of their criticisms on the Mt. Apo geothermal project in major national and local newspapers. The only local radio station in Kidapawan was also soon identified to sympathize with the opposition. A local and international letter brigade was also mobilized calling for the end of the Mt. Apo project.

The PNOC-EDC **was** on the receiving end of negative media materials, letters appealing for the suspension of the project, as well as summons to attend Senate and Congress hearings called to investigate the allegations of the opposition. It was kept occupied with validating and clarifying most of the issues raised against it.

The PNOC-EDC submitted its revised ten (10)-volume Mt. Apo Environmental Impact Statement in January **1991**, using scoping guidelines **as** its reference on minimum information requirements. Two public hearings were held in Kidapawan - in February and May **1991**. By June, the DENR already announced its intention to approve the project subject to several conditions to be negotiated with the project developer.

The Environmental Clearance Certificate (ECC) was finally issued to the PNOC-EDC on January 14, 1992. The opposition brought the case twice to the Supreme Court, which eventually rejected their appeal to stop the project.

The PNOC-EDC has since resumed exploration work in the Mt. Apo as **of** March **1992**.

3.0 Discussion:

The Mt. Apo case is a clear demonstration that the identification of a potential home for a project, in this case - a site selected based on technical parameters - is not an assurance of its feasibility. The preceding section shows how opposition groups can be effective in derailing the plans of a project developer. The PNOC-EDC which had originally planned to start project development **activities** in 1989 was only able to resume its work in 1992 - after a delay of almost four (4) years. It should be noted, at this point however, that the Mt. Apo project, in spite of a vocal opposition, can also claim to have a strong mass of support.

The characterization of opposition groups have already been tackled in several literature. Some of these will be presented here as they may explain the behavior of opposition groups to the Mt. Apo geothermal project. Parameters selected for this discussion are as follows: motivation, organization, attitude and strategies.

Motivation: Various causes may trigger the involvement of a community in a conflict with a project developer. The case of the Mt. Apo reveals various motivations by the different interest groups involved - i.e. tribal groups, local residents, environmentalists, the Church, media and politicians.

One cause may be the treatment of environmental amenity as part of the rights of citizenship (Weale, 1991:14). Environmental amenity is generally described by Weale as those conditions, either natural, social, economic etc., which sustain an accepted standard of living. Should it therefore be challenged by any threat, the people also take it as their public responsibility to defend it. The composition of environmental amenity may vary between communities and even within communities themselves. As such, a project may therefore face one or more items of concern.

A demonstration of this difference in motivation in the Mt. Apo case is the concern of local rural residents over project impacts on their livelihood versus the urban environmentalist group's concern about the Philippine eagle. The opposition may therefore present to the project developer a host of reasons, which are not necessarily related to each other nor of equal significance, to discontinue the project.

Organization: There is no one definition of the organization of the opposition as they are mostly temporary in nature, i.e. established to exist only until the project is stopped. The opposition's umbrella organization's name, Task Force Sandawa, suggests this impermanent life.

Carpenter (1991:314) describes the structure of some of these interest groups as loose coalition of ad hoc or membership organizations. They mostly start with improvised groups and its growth depends on the progress of their crusade. A few items found common among the organization of several opposition groups are:

1. Individuals and groups opposing the project are not limited to the locality.

A development project may not have boundaries to its social environment. While it may initially think that its immediate neighbors are the only community they should be accountable to, outside groups could find ways to claim that the project will indirectly affect them, thereby creating an extended community. Bacow et. al.'s (1983:7) studies reveal that opposition parties are not necessarily local residents or those who are direct neighbors of the project. Nearby towns and communities who may absorb some of the costs, whether real or imaginary, like traffic, pollution, population increase and noise are likely to get themselves involved in stopping the project.

This is particularly true for the Mt. Apo which is a national park and an ASEAN heritage. The project found a supportive host community but an almost hostile opposition individuals and groups from distant towns and provinces.

2. Unrelated opposition individuals and groups can organize easily.

A common objective of stopping the project easily pulls together concerned individuals and groups to band together, as in the formation of the umbrella group Task Force Sandawa for the Mt. Apo project. It may not matter if they are not well acquainted with each other or have different reasons for opposing the project. They are able to pool resources together to intensify their position against the project.

3. Opposition groups have access to wider audiences.

Most local opposition groups do not find themselves alone and helpless. They are often able to attach themselves to national **"pro-environmental"** organizations which are in the position to facilitate the definition of views and mobilize public opinion. Opposition groups whose interests coincide with those taken by these advocacy groups therefore earn additional support for their cause. The PNOC-EDC has in fact, received letters from different countries supporting the cause of the opposition.

What is clear here is that a singular project developer with the single purpose of building a project may be faced not only with multiple issues but multiple adversaries as well.

Attitude: The initial perception of opposition groups towards the project developer is normally one of suspicion. The former doubt the motives of the latter and continue to do so throughout much of their encounters. It would seem that most of what the project developer will provide by way of information and commitment will always be subject to scrutiny. Any delays, hesitation, inconsistencies and unappreciation in their attendance to the needs of the opposition are also taken to confirm that they cannot be trusted (Bacow, et al., 1983:8).

Strategy: Time is very important to the project developer and the opponents. The latter use all possible opportunities to slow down, delay or to stop the project. One of the more powerful tools often used as a delaying tactic is to extend the informational and procedural requirement which the project developers need to satisfy. Data and arguments submitted by the latter are questioned and subjected to demands for more information (Bacow et al., 1983:8). This observation is further supported by the studies of McGillicuddy et al., (1991:147) which find that complainants are more competitive than respondents by making more demands and posing more issues than needed to be solved.

This can be seen in the Mt. Apo wherein in spite of an agreed EIS scoping guideline, the opposition continued to demand for more information, even after the Mt. Apo EIS has been submitted by the PNOC-EDC to the DENR.

4.0 Conclusion:

The Mt. Apo geothermal project can be said to have passed through the longest and most rigid procedures in Philippine environmental history. The PNOC-EDC attended to both legal, as well as many additional, documentations and procedures required by various government agencies and publics, including opposition groups, for a thorough evaluation of the Mt. Apo geothermal project. To date, the PNOC-EDC continues to address public queries and expectations long after securing the environmental permit.

Although the decision to approve the project goes against the very essence of the opposition's existence, the manner by which the environmental permit was granted to the project reflects a worthwhile involvement on their part.

The fruits of their efforts can be seen to have several significant marks, not only in the permitting process, but also in the geothermal development program of the PNOC-EDC.

It is to the credit of the opposition groups that public participation in the decision-making process was massively utilized to maximize information dissemination and formation of opinions. The opposition's network of organizations also widened the audience - from local to regional to national and even international - which must be addressed by both the PNOC-EDC and the government's environmental agency. Their persistence in raising various environmental, economic, social, cultural and legal concerns on the project also tested the patience and credibility of the PNOC scientists in proving the company's sincere intention to have the project serve the common good. To wit, the environmental permit issued to the Mt. Apo project carried two (2) requirements which the PNOC-EDC has already complied with and are considered "firsts" in geothermal development in the Philippines. These include the zero-waste disposal scheme, and the provision of an environmental and tribal welfare guaranty fund for the Mt. Apo project both of which required PNOC-EDC to sacrifice valuable time and money. Given these conditions, we believe that other developers may find it difficult to consider operating the project.

Unlike the hostile and polarized atmosphere which prevailed over the PNOC-EDC and the oppositors during the early stage of the conflict, recent occasions for communication and interaction between both parties have been conducted in a friendlier spirit. The change is critical to building a solid foundation for compromise tools which may bring about a more peaceful approach to evaluating development projects. At present, both parties actively contribute to the **DENR** in developing more relevant environmental policies and procedures, including the EIS, as well as activating a multi-sectoral management group which will specifically attend to the continuous review of concerns raised on the Mt. Apo project. There may be more occasions for the parties to meet which will serve as the venue wherein faith in each other may be developed, however slowly it may take. Without necessarily changing their original stands, the exchange of views on matters of common concern may hopefully become less laden with conflict.

The paper does not end with a formula for the successful resolution of environmental conflicts. It hopes instead, that with the analysis of the opposition, illustrated with an actual case, it may help project developers involved in conflict situations to understand, find options and manage each experience at the least cost, if not with greater degree of success. Conflict resolution can be seen as a learning process for all parties involved - that through their own actions, people can reduce the cost of conflict.

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