South Cotabato—“We make choices, and our choices make us.” These were the words of Cecile Diel, member of the Sangguniang Panlalawigan of South Cotabato in her privilege speech on July 2, a week after the Sanggunian rejected coal mining at Barangay Ned in Lake Sebu. The choice to leave Lake Sebu’s lignite coal—the dirtiest of its kind—in the ground is one of many wins in the largely local climate action front panning around the world.

While the Sanggunian chose to demonstrate this strong political will based on an existing provincial environment code prohibiting open pit mining, those who voted against coal extraction also noted the destructive nature of coal mining on the culture and livelihoods of the T’boli Manobo people, on the health of those living in southern Cotabato, and on the earth’s climate in general.

I join many in South Cotabato and beyond in recognizing the votes that ensured the people of Ned and of South Cotabato a sustainable future, one not based on destructive coal. Their names deserve a special mention in the history of the province: Cecile Diel, Ester Marin Catorce, Ellen Grace Subere Albios, Romulo Solivio, Vicente Yunco Jr. and Romeo Tamayo.

South Cotabato is home to the dreamweavers—the T’boli women from Lake Sebu who, in their dreams, are visited by the goddess Fu Dalu who instructs them on the patterns to weave on their looms. The fabric they produce from red and black-dyed abaca fibers, called T’nalak, is of intricate patterns and is world-renowned.

Just like our dreamweavers, the six members of the Sanggunian who decided against coal mining are dreamers and weavers of a South Cotabato that is pro-environment, pro-people, pro-culture and pro-future. They recognize that the benefits of coal mining to local revenues and jobs are minimal compared to its expensive cost to the environment, to T’boli culture, and to human and planetary health. In the words of Diel: “There are other development pathways for South Cotabato.”

Diel is right. If coal mining in Lake Sebu was allowed, the province would have been locked in a carbon-intensive economy that, in the long term, could easily undermine the capacity of its people and communities to be resilient in the age of climate change. With the future of energy now transitioning toward more sustainable energy systems, coal is a resource better left on the ground. Insisting on a future based on coal is a losing proposition.

A sustainable energy-based development is, indeed, possible for the province. South Cotabato could be packaged as a renewable energy corridor. Its many streams and rivers offer opportunities for tapping hydropower, using nonintrusive technologies such as run-of-river micro-hydro. Its mountain ranges, from the foothills of Mount Matutum to Roxas Range,
possible sites for offshore wind energy. Solar power is also waiting to be tapped using the existing roofs of buildings.

These are energy technologies and systems that rely not on dirty coal or fossil fuel, but on environmentally sustainable, benign and perpetually available elements—wind, water and sunlight. This is the clean, healthy future the people of South Cotabato are collectively dreaming about, and weaving into their lives, in their decision to forego coal.

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