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Prospects And Challenges of Energy Sector Privatization: A Case Study of the National Power Corporation in an Off-Grid Philippine Province

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ABSTRACT

This study developed a transition blueprint for the potential privatization of the National Power Corporation (NPC) in Romblon, Philippines. Utilizing a convergent mixed-methods design, it integrated perceptions from NPC employees and the ROMELCO Board in non-privatized Romblon with the lived challenges faced by NPC personnel in already privatized regions of Mindoro and Tablas. Findings revealed that Romblon stakeholders perceived privatization positively in terms of accountability (WM=3.72) and its potential to attract investment for modernization (WM=3.87), but expressed uncertainty regarding consumer-level transparency and job security. Qualitative data from privatized areas highlighted significant challenges in regulatory compliance, workforce transition, and financial sustainability. The study concludes that a successful transition requires a context-sensitive approach anchored on robust stakeholder engagement, regulatory harmonization, and strong social safety nets. The resulting blueprint offers evidence-based recommendations for policymakers considering privatization or Public-Private Partnership (PPP) models for NPC in island provinces.

RESUMO

Este estudo elaborou um plano de transição para a possível privatização da National Power Corporation (NPC) em Romblon, nas Filipinas. Utilizando um delineamento de métodos mistos convergentes, a pesquisa integrou as percepções de funcionários da NPC e do conselho da ROMELCO — em Romblon, onde o serviço ainda não foi privatizado — com as experiências e desafios enfrentados pelas equipes da NPC nas regiões de Mindoro e Tablas, onde a privatização já havia ocorrido. Os resultados revelaram que as partes interessadas em Romblon viam a privatização de forma positiva no que diz respeito à prestação de contas (média ponderada = 3,72) e ao potencial de atrair investimentos para modernização (média ponderada = 3,87), mas expressaram incertezas quanto à transparência para o consumidor e à segurança no emprego. Dados qualitativos provenientes das áreas privatizadas destacaram desafios significativos relacionados à conformidade regulatória, à transição da força de trabalho e à sustentabilidade financeira. O estudo conclui que uma transição bem-sucedida exige uma abordagem sensível ao contexto, fundamentada no engajamento sólido das partes interessadas, na harmonização regulatória e em redes de proteção social robustas. O plano resultante oferece recomendações baseadas em evidências para formuladores de políticas que estejam considerando a privatização ou modelos de Parceria Público-Privada (PPP) para a NPC em províncias insulares.

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Introduction

The transition from public to private stewardship of critical infrastructure epitomizes a transformative policy trajectory within the Philippine energy landscape, propelled by the landmark Electric Power Industry Reform Act of 2001, which established the legal framework for restructuring the electric power industry, including the privatization of National Power Corporation assets, and reinforced in recent years by the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Code of the Philippines, which institutionalized contemporary rules on value-for-money, risk allocation, and the protection of public welfare in PPP arrangements (Republic Act No. 9136, 2001; Republic Act No. 11966, 2023; IRR of Republic Act No. 11966, 2024).

This reform environment has become even more significant in light of the Department of Energy's Power Development Plan 2023–2050 and the Missionary Electrification Development Plan 2024–2028, both of which explicitly frame off-grid modernization, renewable energy deployment, microgrid expansion, and calibrated private sector participation as central strategies for achieving energy security, affordability, and universal electrification in underserved island areas (Department of Energy [DOE], 2025a, 2025b).

Within this national context, the prospective privatization of the National Power Corporation (NPC) in Romblon Island emerges as a critical juncture, demanding a nuanced examination of its localized implications. Romblon represents a particularly important case because small-island and off-grid power systems are shaped not only by market design, but also by geography, subsidy dependence, logistical constraints, institutional capacity, and the lived vulnerabilities of island communities.

NPC continues to perform missionary electrification functions in areas not connected to the transmission system through its Small Power Utilities Group, and Romblon remains part of this broader missionary electrification landscape (National Power Corporation [NPC], 2025a, 2025b).

Recent scholarship on Philippine off-grid electrification further shows that many island systems remain constrained by diesel dependence, reliability challenges, and fragmented planning, while socio-political and governance dimensions remain underexamined relative to technical and economic analyses (Castro et al., 2024).

Studies situated in Romblon's own off-grid setting likewise suggest that policy discontinuities, implementation bottlenecks, and weak incentive structures can undermine otherwise viable reform and renewable energy initiatives (Bertheau et al., 2020). These conditions make Romblon a compelling site for assessing whether a shift toward private participation can genuinely improve efficiency and service delivery without weakening equity, accountability, and public-interest safeguards.

This research is conceptually anchored in a tripartite theoretical framework that illuminates the multifaceted nature of infrastructure reform. Stakeholder Theory (Freeman,

1984) provides the lens to decipher the complex web of interests and power dynamics among communities, utilities, and government agencies. This is complemented by Regulatory Theory (Baldwin et al., 2012), which frames the institutional and legal environment governing the energy sector, and Implementation Theory (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973), which anticipates the myriad challenges of translating policy design into operational reality.

These theoretical lenses are especially appropriate because contemporary evidence suggests that electricity-sector reform outcomes depend not only on efficiency incentives, but also on institutional quality, regulatory vigilance, and the social legitimacy of reform processes. While some studies associate electricity-sector privatization with improved service outcomes and positive macroeconomic effects, they also warn that reform gains are uneven and may carry distributional trade-offs (Blagrave et al., 2021).

For small and isolated island systems, recent research cautions against the wholesale transplantation of generic 1990s privatization models and instead emphasizes institutional strengthening, transparency, and safeguards against private-sector risk concentration (Nepal & Sofe, 2024).

In the Philippine setting, Escresa and Glova (2024) further demonstrate that weaker political competition is associated with poorer electric cooperative performance, underscoring the need for stronger regulatory scrutiny in utility governance. Likewise, studies on renewable energy PPPs and climate-resilient infrastructure stress that political-regulatory barriers, risk allocation, transparency, and social acceptance are decisive factors in the success of public-private infrastructure reforms (Othman & Khallaf, 2024; Casady et al., 2024).

A conspicuous scholarly gap persists, however, in empirical studies focused on geographically fragmented missionary-electrification provinces where reform options must be evaluated not in the abstract, but in relation to local institutional readiness, stakeholder perceptions, and implementation feasibility**.** This study directly addresses this lacuna by constructing a comparative, evidence-based transition blueprint.

Its central aim is to move beyond generic prescriptions and furnish policymakers with a context-sensitive framework, ensuring that any future reforms are not only regulation-compliant but also fundamentally people-centered and empirically informed by the lessons of adjacent island systems. More specifically, the study seeks to contribute a grounded transition framework for Romblon that integrates stakeholder realities, regulatory requirements, and implementation risks, thereby supporting reform decisions that are technically viable, socially responsive, and developmentally appropriate for an off-grid island province**.**

Methods

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected in Romblon to gauge stakeholder perceptions, while qualitative data were gathered from Mindoro and Tablas to understand post-privatization challenges. This design allowed for the integration of numerical trends and narrative insights to develop a comprehensive, evidence-based transition blueprint.

Participants

The study involved two groups of respondents. In Romblon, a complete enumeration of 46 stakeholders was conducted, comprising NPC employees (n=42) and ROMELCO Board of Directors members (n=4). In the already privatized regions of Mindoro and Tablas, purposive sampling was used to select higher-level NPC employees (e.g., superintendents, managers) with direct experience of the privatization process for in-depth interviews.

Table 1.

Demographic Profile of Romblon Respondents (N=46)

Profile	Group	f	%
Respondent Type	NPC Employees	42	91.3
	ROMELCO BOD	4	8.7
Age	30 years old and below	4	8.7
	31 to 50 years old	23	50.0
	52 years old and above	19	41.3
Sex	Male	46	100.0
	Female	0	0.0
Educational Attainment	College graduate	34	73.9
	MA degree holder	12	26.1
Position	Higher level	11	23.9
	Rank and file	35	76.1

Research Instrument

A structured questionnaire was used in Romblon, featuring Likert-scale items to measure perceptions on transparency, accountability, employee welfare, and investment potential. The instrument was validated by experts and pilot-tested, demonstrating excellent reliability (Cronbach's α = 0.900-0.945 for key sections). Semi-structured interview guides were used in Mindoro and Tablas to explore challenges in regulatory compliance, workforce transition, and financial sustainability. A document analysis checklist was also used to review the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRRs) of EPIRA and the PPP Code.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from Romblon were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, weighted means). Qualitative data from interviews underwent thematic analysis to identify emergent themes and patterns. Insights from both data sets were integrated to inform the development of the transition blueprint.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was maintained through anonymization, and participation was voluntary. Data were stored securely, and the research design minimized potential psychological distress.

Results

Perceived Issues Related to NPC Privatization in Romblon

Respondents in Romblon identified several issues with the proposed privatization. The most frequently cited concern was excessive private sector control (23.1%), followed by negative effects on service quality and reliability (20.5%). Concerns over inefficiency and reduced transparency were equally ranked (12.8% each).

Table 2.

Perceived Issues Related to NPC Privatization in Romblon (N=39)

Issues	f	%	Rank
Excessive private sector control limits public oversight.	9	23.1	1
Negatively affect the quality and reliability of electricity services.	8	20.5	2
May fail to improve, or even reduce, efficiency and quality.	5	12.8	3.5
May result in reduced transparency and weakened public accountability.	5	12.8	3.5
May lead to increased electricity costs for consumers in the long term.	4	10.3	4

Respondents' Perceptions of Privatization Prospects

Overall, respondents held positive perceptions regarding accountability (WM=3.72) and employee welfare (WM=3.51). Perception of transparency was also positive but lower (WM=3.23), with neutrality expressed on items related to consumer accessibility of information.

Table 3.

Perception of Privatization in Terms of Transparency, Accountability, and Employee Welfare

Dimension	Mean	Interpretation
Transparency	3.23	Positive
Accountability	3.72	Positive
Employee Rights & Welfare	3.51	Positive

Scale: 4.21-5.00 (Very Positive), 3.21-4.20 (Positive), 2.61-3.20 (Neutral), 1.81-2.60 (Negative), 1.00-1.80 (Very Negative)

Perception of Investment Attraction

Respondents were strongly optimistic about privatization's potential to attract investment for modernizing Romblon's power sector (Overall WM=3.87). The highest agreement was for the item stating privatization would help improve outdated facilities through external funding (WM=4.03).

Table 4.

Perception of Potential to Attract Investment (N=39)

Statement	Mean	Interpretation
Privatization will attract sufficient private investment for modernization.	3.72	Positive
Privatization will improve outdated facilities through external funding.	4.03	Positive
Overall Mean	3.87	Positive

Challenges from Privatized Areas (Mindoro and Tablas)

Qualitative analysis of interviews with NPC personnel in Mindoro and Tablas revealed three major challenge domains:

Regulatory Compliance**:** Overlapping mandates between EPIRA and the PPP Code caused confusion and delayed approvals.

Workforce Transition**:** Employees experienced job insecurity, resistance to change, and inadequate adjustment support.

***Financial Sustainability*:** Challenges included funding gaps, operational disruption, and increased cost of living for relocated staff.

Table 5.

Summary of Post-Privatization Challenges (Qualitative Themes)

Challenge Domain	Emergent Themes	Sample Excerpt
Regulatory Compliance	Overlapping mandates	*"Pagsunod sa magkakapatong na regulasyon..."* (Adherence to overlapping regulations)
	Permit delays	*"Kulang sa malinaw na panuntunan ang IRR..."* (The IRR does not provide clear guidelines)
Workforce Transition	Job insecurity	*"Marami ang nagpahayag ng agam-agam..."* (Many expressed apprehension)
	Employee resistance	“Mas kapansin-pansin ang pagtutol mula sa mga beterano *"(*Resistance was most pronounced among veterans*)*
Financial Sustainability	Funding gaps	*"Delays in transition fund releases..."*
	Operational disruption	*"Plant operations were affected."*

Discussion

This study provides a nuanced understanding of the prospects and challenges of privatizing the National Power Corporation (NPC) in Romblon by integrating the anticipatory perceptions of local stakeholders with the empirical realities from already privatized regions. The discussion synthesizes these findings, contextualizing them within established theoretical frameworks and existing literature to draw meaningful conclusions and implications.

Navigating Stakeholder Apprehensions and Cautious Optimism in Romblon

The identified issues in Romblon are excessive private control, service reliability risks, and transparency concerns—reflect classic anxieties associated with the transfer of public goods to private hands (Sclar, 2000; Shirley & Walsh, 2000). The foremost concern regarding excessive private sector control (23.1%) underscores a deep-seated fear of diminished public oversight. This aligns with Shleifer (1998), who noted that while privatization aims for efficiency, it often raises legitimate concerns about corporate power overshadowing public interest, particularly in essential services like electricity. The fear that privatization may negatively affect service quality and reliability (20.5%) echoes Stern and Holder's (1999) emphasis on the critical need for strong regulatory governance to prevent service degradation in privatized utilities.

Despite these concerns, the overall positive perceptions toward accountability (WM=3.72) and investment potential (WM=3.87) reveal a pragmatic, cautious optimism among Romblon's stakeholders. This suggests a recognition of the potential benefits outlined by proponents of privatization (Megginson & Netter, 2001). The strong belief that privatization will attract investment for modernization, especially through external funding and new technologies, is consistent with findings by Estrin et al. (2009) and Kikeri and Nellis (2004), who posit that private capital is a key driver for upgrading outdated infrastructure in developing economies. However, the neutral perception regarding consumer-level transparency (e.g., clarity of pricing processes, WM=3.13) serves as a critical caveat. It highlights a trust deficit that must be addressed, supporting Florini's (2007) assertion that transparency is not automatic in privatization and must be actively engineered through mechanisms like regular public disclosures and open decision-making processes to maintain stakeholder trust.

The Human Dimension: Balancing Efficiency with Employee Welfare

The positive yet cautious perception of employee rights and welfare (WM=3.51), with job security being the lowest-rated item within this dimension (WM=3.31), is perhaps the most human-centric finding. This directly reflects the global discourse on the social impact of privatization. As Parker and Kirkpatrick (2005) and Shleifer and Vishny (1994) have documented, workforce transition is a common flashpoint, often creating uncertainty and anxiety among employees. The experiences from Mindoro and Tablas, where employees reported *"agam-agam"* (apprehension) and inadequate support, validate these concerns and demonstrate that without explicit safeguards, privatization can lead to de facto casualization and eroded morale (Kessler & Bach, 2019). Therefore, the respondents' conditional optimism is well-founded; their positive perception is likely contingent on the implementation of the very protections they fear may be absent tenure security, fair grievance processes, and maintained benefits. This underscores the necessity of embedding what Boubakri et al. (2005) term "supportive transition environments" directly into the privatization or PPP agreement.

Lessons from the Field: Regulatory Chaos and Implementation Gaps

The qualitative findings from Mindoro and Tablas provide a sobering counterpoint to Romblon's optimism, revealing significant implementation gaps that align with the warnings in the literature. The challenge of **regulatory compliance**, characterized by overlapping mandates between EPIRA and the PPP Code and slow permit approvals, exemplifies the "regulatory layering" described by Gagliardi et al. (2023). This incoherence creates a fragmented implementation landscape where, as one respondent noted, agencies have *"kanya-kanyang basahan"* (their own interpretations), leading to delays and administrative bottlenecks. This finding reinforces the principle from Regulatory Theory that a well-designed policy on paper is futile without a coherent, synchronized, and practical regulatory apparatus for implementation (Baldwin et al., 2012).

The **workforce transition** challenges—job insecurity, resistance from veteran employees, and a generational divide in adaptability—are a textbook example of Implementation Theory in action. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) emphasized that the complexity of policy implementation is often underestimated. The failure to involve employees as key stakeholders in the planning process, as reported in Mindoro and Tablas, created a gap between policy intent and operational reality, leading to resistance and anxiety. This aligns with Lethbridge's (2020) observation that transitions succeed only when employees feel a sense of ownership and transparency is maintained.

Furthermore, the **financial sustainability** issues, such as delays in transition fund releases and operational disruptions, highlight a critical oversight in transitional planning. The World Bank (2020) and MDPI (2023) have warned that financial instability is typical in the initial phases of privatization if liabilities are unsettled and fund disbursement is poorly managed. The finding that resources were perceived to be *"mas pinaboran ang mga malalaking planta"* (favored for larger plants) exacerbates geographic inequities, a risk particularly acute in archipelagic nations like the Philippines (ADB, 2022). This calls for what the OECD (2022) recommends: site-specific financial strategies that ensure micro-level stability, especially in off-grid areas.

Toward a People-Centered and Regulation-Compliant Transition Blueprint

The convergence of findings from Romblon, Mindoro, and Tablas, when viewed through the lens of Stakeholder, Regulatory, and Implementation theories, points to an undeniable conclusion: the success of NPC's privatization in Romblon is not primarily a technical or financial question, but a socio-institutional one.

Stakeholder Theory is validated by the clear message that employees and local boards are not mere implementers but central actors whose perceptions and welfare can determine the success or failure of the transition. Their concerns regarding job security, transparency, and equitable service must be integral to the blueprint, not an afterthought.

Regulatory Theory is affirmed by the stark lessons from Mindoro and Tablas. A failure to harmonize the EPIRA and PPP Codes and to create clear, localized guidelines will inevitably lead to the same implementation gridlock and eroded trust experienced in other regions.

Implementation Theory explains the root of the challenges encountered. The gaps in workforce support and financial planning were not accidental but resulted from a failure to anticipate the practical, on-the-ground realities of transition management.

Therefore, the recommended transition blueprint emphasizing a multi-stakeholder council, regulatory harmonization, phased implementation, and embedded social safety nets—is not merely a list of suggestions but a necessary framework derived from empirical evidence. It advocates for a model that moves beyond the binary debate of public versus private management. Instead, it proposes a hybrid, adaptive approach akin to the balanced models suggested by Grimsey and Lewis (2004) and Yescombe (2011), where public oversight ensures accountability and equity, while private participation drives investment and efficiency.

Conclusion

The privatization of the National Power Corporation (NPC) in Romblon presents a complex duality of potential efficacy and significant operational risk. The perceived promise of modernization and enhanced efficiency must be weighed against the formidable implementation challenges documented in comparable contexts. Successfully navigating this endeavor necessitates a deeply contextual and human-centered blueprint, meticulously designed to integrate lessons from past experiences to avoid their pitfalls.

To this end, the study proposes a multi-faceted governance and implementation framework. A foundational step is the pre-emptive establishment of a Multi-Stakeholder Energy Transition Council to harmonize regulatory oversight and coordinate planning. This must be coupled with a context-sensitive transition readiness framework that prioritizes community consultation and the integration of existing renewable microgrids to preserve legacy infrastructure and ensure inclusive development. Critically, formal tripartite agreements are required to safeguard employee welfare through tenure protection and retraining, while contractual obligations must mandate equity-based investments to guarantee fair distribution of benefits. Finally, a prudent phased or pilot-based implementation strategy is recommended to test, learn, and recalibrate the model, thereby mitigating systemic risk before any island-wide rollout.

Authors Contribution

Conceptualization, Writing original draft AMW.; Data curation, and Investigation, AMW. Writing - Review & Editing, : Data Collection RMU,; Review and Edditing JMM. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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