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Guest Editors' Introduction

Disaster Justice in Philippine Contexts: Revisiting Frameworks and Interrogating Practices

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Guest Editors' Introduction

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Disaster Justice in Philippine Contexts Revisiting Frameworks and Interrogating Practices

This special issue engages with the notion of disaster justice to foreground the political in the analyses of socio-environmental crises and interrogates its entanglements with economic, cultural, material, spatial, and ecological forces. The research articles and reflective essays in this collection move beyond the usual disaster-related buzzwords and interrogate three intersecting themes: grassroots agency and contestation amid uncertainty, democratic processes in post-disaster contexts, and the materiality of (in)justice and hope. The findings and insights offer conceptual provocations and urge scholars to “deepen the pot” of research on disaster justice praxis in the Philippines.

KEYWORDS: DISASTER JUSTICE • MATERIALITY OF HOPE • HOUSING • RESETTLEMENT • POSITIONALITY

The idea to put together a special issue on disaster justice was conceived in November 2020 when Typhoon Ulysses (international name Vamco) affected a number of provinces in the Philippines while most of the country was still reeling from the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic. It began with us—the three guest editors, who are also members of the Cities and Environments Research Network (CERN)—chatting with each other about our discomfort with the way some government officials and media practitioners had deployed narratives around Filipino “resilience” to mobilize support for typhoon-hit communities that were also suffering from the socioeconomic consequences of strict pandemic lockdowns. These accounts either placed the burden of resilience on individuals rather than sociopolitical systems or misconceived resilience as a “genetic” trait—for instance, “resiliency in my Filipino blood” (Panlilio 2021). In so doing, these narratives failed to articulate how broader political structures and socioeconomic inequality have compelled communities and households to bear the disproportionate impacts of disasters.

Often, these impacts are a product of the decisions and inactions by powerful political and economic forces. We recognize that the country’s civic ethos is rooted in a centuries-long experience of people and communities relying on their own collectively organized practices to deal with hazards and related problems (Bankoff 2007). Yet, our sustained conversations with each other and with other members of CERN during pandemic lockdowns convinced us of the need to foreground deeper questions about political accountability and institutional neglect alongside uneven socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Broadly, we frame disaster justice as a political and ethical claim on governance, which places a moral and legal responsibility on the state to protect and advance the rights of all its citizens, particularly the marginalized and the most vulnerable (Bankoff 2018; Douglass and Miller 2018).

In addition, during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, Rebecca Solnit (2020) wrote of the importance of hope amid crisis and emergency situations. She urged those who were in a better condition to make sense of the ravaging effects of the global catastrophe: “One of our main tasks now—especially those of us who are not sick, are not frontline workers, and are not dealing with other economic or housing difficulties—is to understand this moment, what it might require of us, and what it might make possible.” This special issue is our collective response to Solnit’s invitation to chronicle and

reflect on some critical lessons about not only the Covid-19 pandemic but also other devastating disasters as well as seemingly mundane problems that many Filipinos endure every day.

The guest editors have coordinated this special issue, but the entire initiative is part of CERN's wider goal to generate scholarly platforms that interrogate issues relevant to the Philippines. Established in 2019, the CERN is a network of Melbourne- and Manila-based Filipino postgraduate scholars, PhD researchers, lecturers, and alumni of Australian universities with research interests in the Philippines. CERN members undertake research projects that examine issues at the junctures of urban planning, development studies, disasters, climate change, informality, architecture, education, design, art, communication, and ecology, among others. For over four years now, the CERN collective¹ has been convening a discussion series in which speakers are invited to present relevant empirical findings and conceptual provocations on scholarly themes that speak broadly to the research projects of its members and other interested colleagues.

In putting together this special issue, we acknowledge our distinct epistemic positionality as Filipino scholars affiliated with Global North institutions² (Australian, American, and Dutch universities) who intend to facilitate a process of problematizing frameworks, practices, and knowledge production processes in the Philippines and their importance to the notion of disaster justice. This positionality has enabled us to be “distantly familiar”³ with both the issues faced by disaster-affected communities as well as the epistemic questions raised by the authors in this collection. As scholars who grew up and worked in the Philippines, we have experienced living through typhoons, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions, and getting involved in disaster response initiatives. At the same time, our Global North association has afforded us some access to resources, placing us at a certain position of privilege and distance in relation to everyday problems in the Philippines that are rooted in the country's broader sociopolitical realities. While we embrace a particular epistemic positionality, this special issue opens up conversations that enrich both the conceptual prisms of and empirical insights on disaster justice praxis in various Philippine contexts.

Why Disaster Justice?

Over the last decade, there has been a growing scholarly interest in disasters in the Philippines. As a country that has repeatedly ranked first in the World

Risk Index due to hazard exposure and limited capacities to withstand and overcome disaster, the Philippines has figured prominently in the global imagination as one of the world's most "disaster-prone" areas (Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft and IFHV 2023). The Philippines is exposed to several geophysical and hydrometeorological hazards due to its geographical position as an archipelago in monsoon-prone Southeast Asia and in one of the planet's most geologically active regions (CFE-DM 2018). The country's vulnerability to hazards is exacerbated by certain development trends, poorly planned urbanization, and socioeconomic insecurity, among other influences (Alcayna et al. 2016; Jha et al. 2018; Porio 2012; Warren 2016).

Much of the recent work on disasters in the Philippines—produced from a wide range of academic disciplines—has significantly contributed to our understanding of the socioeconomic, political, technical, and material dimensions of disaster experiences and governance. Among the most important insights that can be gleaned from these interdisciplinary perspectives is that disasters and their enduring impacts can no longer be framed as discrete events that occur in isolation from the historical, social, spatial, and institutional processes that shape how people experience and deal with shocks and stresses (Alvarez and Cardenas 2019; Bankoff 2003; Cajilig 2022; Luna 2001; Mangada 2016; Porio 2012). Critical scholarship further expands these ideas by highlighting how capacities and vulnerabilities intersect with existing structures of inequalities and relationships of power—therefore foregrounding justice and equity as central issues to disaster governance.

This special issue draws on the concept of disaster justice in examining how certain societal and structural factors—those that are accretive, incremental, and spectacle-deficient—shape the uneven capacities to prevent and surmount crises. Here, disaster justice is framed as a political, moral, and ethical claim on governance, recognizing that disasters always occur in political spaces (Douglass and Miller 2018). This orientation is significant to Philippine disaster contexts characterized by the intersections of deep-seated poverty, entrenched inequality, overlapping vulnerabilities, and political volatility. A disaster justice lens foregrounds the political in the analyses of socio-environmental crises and embraces its entanglements with the cultural, material, and ecological forces that contribute to so-called natural disasters.⁴ Employing a disaster justice prism, therefore, prompts us to avoid the romance and overreach of narratives around apolitical notions of resilience that entrap our imaginations in times of crises and instead focus

on the lived experiences of resilience: how resilience is every day enacted, negotiated, and contested in highly political contexts characterized by the inequitable distribution of power and resources.

In this special issue, we have put together research articles and brief essays that probe the following questions: How might existing concepts or new theoretical frames enrich the notion of disaster justice and its application to the Philippines? How might disaster justice lenses inform disaster interventions and policy frameworks? How is the notion reflected in existing practices, state policies, and grassroots initiatives? Addressing these questions demands a serious engagement with government policies and regulatory practices around disaster mitigation, response, and recovery. In particular, we have encouraged the authors to frame policy and other state instruments (e.g., land use maps, post-disaster recovery plans) not as an external factor that is confined to legal texts or rigid bureaucratic procedures but as a constitutive force that partially shapes the lifeworlds and lived experiences of communities in the sites of scholarship. Foregrounding policy issues and state-aid-society relations (cf. Hillhorst et al. 2017), as what the authors have done in this special issue, pays attention to the critical role that government policies play in governing and constructing the materiality and socio-spatial dimensions of disaster governance in the communities being studied.

This analytical approach challenges the tendency of many scholars to reproduce research that largely mobilizes fashionable concepts or policy buzzwords (e.g., “future proof,” “smart cities”), occluding the underlying ideologies or interests embedded in such appealing phrases. Often, the constant rehearsal of these trendy tropes results in what Tom Slater (2021, 4) has called “policy-driven research at the expense of research-driven policy”; by extension, these tropes encourage more (government) decision-based evidence gathering at the expense of evidence-informed decision-making. Such an approach to disaster studies also flattens the complex lived realities of those disproportionately experiencing the burden of disaster impacts. The empirically rich articles in this collection move beyond the usual disaster-related buzzwords and engage with three intersecting themes: grassroots agency and contestation amid uncertainty, democratic processes in post-disaster contexts, and the materiality of (in)justice and hope. These thematic threads—tackled in varying degrees in the special issue’s research articles and reflective essays—offer conceptual provocations and urge scholars to “deepen the pot” of research on disaster justice praxis in the Philippines.

Grassroots Agency and Contestation amid Uncertainty

In his ethnographically rich piece, Dakila Kim P. Yee interrogates the mobilization for disaster justice by survivors of Super Typhoon Yolanda, arguing that disaster justice is a potent framework for social movements that seek to engage state institutions. Yee blends a social contractarian view with a disaster justice lens in examining the confrontational relationship between People Surge (a social movement in Tacloban) and the government in the aftermath of the typhoon. By troubling the uneasy state–social movement relations, Yee demonstrates how a disaster justice lens contributes to processes of destabilizing (and instituting) the social contract between the state and citizens during disasters. In this sense his work not only enriches the disaster justice prism in the aftermath of Super Typhoon Yolanda but also advances the discourse on grassroots agency and the politics of contestation, particularly the role of social movements as critical urban planning agents (De Souza 2006) and facilitators of radical planning practices⁵ in precarious “post-disaster” contexts.

(Deepening) Democracy in Post-disaster Contexts

In the second article, Justin See addresses the question: “Is there a potential for disaster justice in climate-related resettlement?” Using mixed methods, See analyzes the prospects for disaster justice by unpacking the procedural, recognitional, and distributive justice issues in a climate resettlement project in Iloilo. See’s careful and conceptually informed examination of data derived from a survey and a series of interviews reveals the uneven opportunities and platforms for people to express their views, participate in key processes, and shape the design and outcome of resettlement projects in San Isidro, Iloilo. To an extent, his findings resonate with Nicole Curato’s (2019) argument that “multiple publics” exist, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the diversity and fragmentation of views and practices against the backdrop of a major disaster. Apart from explaining the opportunities and limits of resettlement as climate change adaptation, See has pointed out the blind spots of tokenistic participatory processes and underscored the imperatives for deepening the practice of democracy as an integral dimension of disaster justice in (climate change-related) resettlement projects.

Materiality of (In)justice and Hope

The last research article, written by Pamela Gloria Cajilig, Monica F. A. W. Santos, Simon Cervantes, and Olivia Alma G. Sicam, offers a uniquely

nanced understanding of the material expressions (and consequences) of disaster (in)justice through the notion of material registers in the context of post-disaster housing reconstruction. The authors articulate three material registers—housing as a roof overhead, housing as lifeworld, and housing as private responsibility—to show that materials are a crucial dimension of human experience (not simply containers of human life) that need to be considered in post-disaster housing reconstruction. Writing about housing reconstruction issues experienced by residents of an island community of fisherfolk in Manila Bay, Cajilig and colleagues underscore how issues around disaster accountability and the failure to integrate the situated knowledge of local residents have resulted in maladaptive state-led flood adaptation and undermined the provision of appropriate aid for housing reconstruction. Their arguments unsettle how post-disaster housing is conventionally understood and implemented by centering local perspectives on housing as comprising the residents' lifeworlds.

This special issue ends with a gallery of images and reflections from researchers with personal experiences of Yolanda and its aftermath to commemorate the super typhoon's tenth anniversary. The photos and insights capture the emerging and enduring issues faced by Yolanda-affected households and communities: forced relocation, precarious livelihoods, contested rural and urban zones, and fragile futures. Yet, some images reveal various individual and collective acts to remain hopeful, transgress unresponsive state regulations, (re)claim space,⁶ improve their living conditions, and repair their "world" so that they can live in it as well as possible. Here, hope animates and is materialized in practices that insist on living a dignified life. For instance, the picture of a woman tending to her garden against a backdrop of a mountain of garbage poignantly affirms the resident's dogged determination to survive and confront different forms of devastation and dehumanization brought on by Yolanda and the government's post-typhoon interventions. This final section also centers the positionality of the scholars involved in the special issue, drawing attention to their lived experiences and affective entanglements with the sites of scholarship, one of which happens to be the home city of one of the authors. Articulating such research reflexivity helps us locate the authors' "ethos of inquiry" (Bhan et al. 2018) to better understand how personal geographies shape the way we frame, construe, circulate, and interrogate the geographies of knowledge on disaster justice.

Notes

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- 1 Besides organizing a discussion series, CERN has also mobilized support for marginalized communities affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and some tropical storms in the Philippines. In 2020 CERN launched the Street Fund campaign, a relief drive that helped informal workers and some urban poor communities to address their health and nutrition needs during the Covid-19 lockdown. In late 2022 this humanitarian work was revived to assist some of CERN's research partner communities. This time, CERN was able to provide food, medical, and educational assistance to about 3,000 residents of an island community in Manila Bay who were severely affected by both the Covid-19 pandemic and 2022 Philippine typhoon season, including Severe Tropical Storm Paeng.
- 2 Throughout the period of working together on this project, we have moved through different institutional affiliations and personal positions: as PhD researchers, postdoctoral fellows, and lecturers based in Australia, the Philippines, and the Netherlands.
- 3 For a deeper discussion of "distanced familiarity," we encourage readers to engage with Alburo-Cañete's (2021) methodological reflections on studying disaster recovery in post-Yolanda Tacloban.
- 4 The term "natural disaster" is now discouraged (Puttick et al. 2018). Disasters are not "natural" as they occur through the interaction between hazards and sociopolitical and economic processes. This nuanced framing is especially important for disaster justice perspectives, which center the political and moral dimensions of disasters and their governance.
- 5 Gavin Shatkin (2002), for example, discusses how community organizers working for nongovernment organizations involved in urban housing issues played the role of "radical planners" who represent the interests of marginalized groups in pushing for an alternative to state-led modernist urban development.
- 6 Grassroots associations in other marginalized communities in Metro Manila and Dhaka have also undertaken similar practices to cushion the crushing impacts of Covid-19 and to navigate their exclusionary urban environment (Recio and Shafique 2022).

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