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## Guest Editors' Introduction

### Reframing Disaster Justice: Conceptual Provocations, Practical Insights, and Research Directions

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# Guest Editors' Introduction

REDENTO B. RECIO, KAIRA ZOE ALBURO-CAÑETE,  
AND PAMELA GLORIA CAJILIG

## Reframing Disaster Justice Conceptual Provocations, Practical Insights, and Research Directions

As we articulated in the introduction to the first installment of this two-part special issue, our aim is to offer a space that provokes a reflection and articulation of disaster justice praxis to generate conceptual, empirical, and practical insights across various Philippine contexts. In this second installment, we present several thematic threads emerging from the three research articles and the reflective conversations with disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) practitioners. These themes include (1) enriching disaster justice praxis and tackling issues around “justice gaps”; (2) interrogating initiatives to “shift the power” and localize DRRM interventions; and (3) revisiting the role of academia in promoting disaster justice and charting research directions. Besides reaffirming the ethical, political, and cultural imperatives of disaster governance, the intricate weave of these analytical strands reveals the importance of broadening the conceptual horizon of disaster justice to foreground the emotional, epistemological, and intersectional dimensions of “justice gaps” in various disaster contexts.

**KEYWORDS: DISASTER JUSTICE • CARE • PLACE-BASED KNOWLEDGES • EMPATHY • LOCALIZATION**

**D**rawing on archival research, ethnographic accounts, and reflective practical insights, we have curated three research articles and three interviews with practitioners who have been engaged in various forms and processes of disaster-related interventions. Rather than presenting separate summaries of each article and transcript, we explain below three analytical threads emerging from both the academic essays and the reflective conversations: (1) enriching disaster justice praxis and tackling issues around “justice gaps”; (2) interrogating initiatives to “shift the power” and localize disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) interventions; and (3) revisiting the role of the academe in promoting disaster justice and charting research directions.

### **Enriching Disaster Justice Praxis, Tackling Justice Gaps**

The three research articles in this collection show how expanding the conceptual horizon and enriching the substance of the disaster justice lens can offer ethical and practical ways to articulate and address “justice gaps” (Finger 2014) in DRRM interventions. Davida Finger (2014) defines justice gap as the difference between the level of assistance available and the level that is necessary to meet the (civil legal) needs of low-income groups. In this special issue, we wish to broaden this framing of “justice gap” by encompassing as well the ethical, moral, political, and epistemological imperatives of delivering or undertaking inclusive, equitable, and responsive disaster interventions. Along this line, the three articles, as well as the practitioner interviews, foreground how conventional justice framings need to go beyond abstract principles of “fairness” and “equality” and their procedural and legalistic connotations. This second installment of the special issue enriches disaster justice praxis through an attunement to: (1) practices of care that create the conditions for maintaining communities, nature, and the environment, especially in contexts of disasters; (2) place-based knowledges (including the embodied knowledge of practitioners working in the DRRM space in the Philippines) that provide alternative understandings of disaster risks and how to respond to oft rigid and disempowering technical framings; and (3) how empathy and listening can be powerful tools that can bridge these “justice gaps” and enable disaster governance that is inclusive, accountable, empowering, and care-full.

In her article “Feminization of Responsibility in Community Recovery: Rethinking Disaster Justice through the Lens of Care,” Kaira Zoe Alburo-Cañete eloquently shows how adopting a care framework can generate a gendered conception of disaster justice, one that attends to the everyday, embodied, emotional, and intersectional aspects of women’s experiences of living with risk and surviving or overcoming calamities. Embracing a feminist care lens in examining what she calls the “feminization of responsibility” in post-disaster settings, Alburo-Cañete foregrounds two key arguments: (1) When care is contained as a responsibility of specific individuals or a sector of society (i.e., women), unjust power relations are sustained rather than transformed; and more broadly, (2) when care is not adopted as a social and institutional practice, there is a tendency to privilege “expertise” and techno-managerial approaches in disaster management decisions. A narrow definition of care in disaster settings therefore results in masking and depoliticizing inequality in post-disaster contexts, which, in turn, exacerbates structural injustices that underpin disastrous events and protract disaster recovery processes.

This privileging of “expert” knowledge and techno-managerial approaches is also a central theme in Liberty Pascua de Rivera’s “Knowledges Integration in Philippine Policies for Disaster and Climate Change Management: A Critical Policy Analysis” and Regina Macalandag’s “Invoking ‘Indigenous Circumstances’ in Disaster Governance: Implications for Disaster Justice.” De Rivera offers cognitive justice as a useful analytical prism in examining the presence, nature, and form of place-based or indigenous knowledges in Philippine disaster management policies. For De Rivera, recognizing cognitive justice as a key dimension of disaster justice is a political act of insisting on dialogue and plurality to articulate and lend voice to local and traditional knowledge systems against a singular and hegemonic knowledge. Her analysis of the “grammar” of key DRRM and climate change-related policies and guidelines reveals that the standardization of and heavy reliance on technocentric, scientific notions of knowledge are compounded by the delegitimization of alternative indigenous knowledge claims. This epistemic bias in state policymaking, De Rivera contends, may alienate local communities and entrench environmental and cultural injustice.

Macalandag also troubles the epistemological bias that underpins the culturally insensitive and empathy-deficient “safety” rhetoric against Badjao communities in Bohol and Nueva Ecija. She deploys the notion of

“empathic recognition” as an analytical frame to thresh out the oft vague and shaky narrative of political recognition of certain groups of people in society that also excludes and marginalizes them and, at times, renders them invisible. In the call for just disaster governance, Macalandag demonstrates that using empathy as a prism does not only enable a questioning of one’s epistemic positionality but also reveals an ethical-affective problem in how indigenous people are positioned as less worthy of attention and care and are thus negligible. Here, it is important to note the changing living conditions of the Badjao, from sea-based nomadic peoples elusive of the state’s watch and control, to their current placement as (semi)sedentary identities standing under the state’s closer and constant gaze. A lack of understanding of this shift has resulted in state ambivalence and structural violence against these urban Badjao communities. This detachment from the realities experienced by these communities is evident in how the state defines “risk” and “safety” from a techno-managerial vista. Without considering the Badjao community’s own perception of risk and safety, Macalandag cautions that their experience of resettlement could leave them more vulnerable and constantly living in a hostile, exclusionary, semisedentary environment.

Our conversations with three practitioners—Loreine de la Cruz, Minerva Gonzales, and Pamela Combinido—have also centered pragmatic insights that resonate with the foregoing tensions in epistemic and policy approaches. These practitioners have worked on different DRRM initiatives in various roles, such as nongovernment organization (NGO) staff, development consultants, evaluation specialists, and humanitarian workers.

In reflecting on the practical implications of the disaster justice lens for DRRM work, De la Cruz points out that embedding justice in the analysis of and responses to disasters helps foreground issues of equity and rights. In her words, “While there is a tendency to think that disasters are ‘equalizers’ in a sense that they don’t discriminate against who they affect, but their impact is different. They tend to affect more those who are vulnerable and marginalized” (95). Such centering of equity and rights perspective helps shift the focus of inquiry and intervention from the technocentric solutions for disaster risk reduction (DRR) to the social, political, and economic conditions that enable disaster risk creation (Bankoff and Hilhorst 2022; Cajilig 2017, 2024). Gonzales also underscores this inherent relationship between the wider sociopolitical contexts and the disaster vulnerability, as well as capacity, of marginalized communities. Gonzales links the uneven

vulnerability to the elite democratic character of the country's political structure, which also pervades DRRM processes and responses. In this regard De la Cruz raises an important concern over how communities are often seen as “lacking capacities.” When “capacity building” is done, the perspectives of external stakeholders (e.g., donor agencies, humanitarian groups) often define which types of capacities need to be built or enhanced.

To remedy this usual externally driven approach to capacity building, Combinido echoes Macalandag's call to practice empathy and listening as integral dimensions of disaster justice praxis. For Combinido (114),

justice does not only imply equality but it's also about empathy and listening. That is an important lesson for humanitarian agencies: really listening to their needs and what is appropriate for communities. Because even though they are delivering life-saving aid, not listening can cause deep resentment within communities and break the social bond that is really important in the face of collective crisis.

Empathy and listening are also essential to understanding the virtuous and vicious sides of care work in post-disaster contexts. Care can be nurturing, but it can also be oppressive (Alburo-Cañete 2021; Browne et al. 2021). Acknowledging this contradictory nature of care has implications for disaster justice. As Alburo-Cañete contends, disaster interventions that fail to empathize with, listen to, and read the workings of power in women's care-based practices can entrench and reproduce gendered inequalities.

### **“Shifting the Power,” Localizing DRRM Interventions**

Over the past few years, the slogan “shifting the power” has become a buzzword within the field of humanitarian action, where there is a growing advocacy for localization, “shifting” power and resources from international humanitarian organizations to national or local actors. In particular, localization is seen as a crucial step to produce responsive and context-relevant DRRM interventions. In her reflection on over a decade of involvement in disaster initiatives, De la Cruz insists on the importance of recognizing that people's organizations and communities have assets and agency that they can mobilize in negotiating with various stakeholders. This recognition also requires attending to place-based knowledges, which, as De Rivera has noted, are often silenced and rendered inferior to “science” in the grammar of policies. De

Rivera's article presents an encouraging account of good local DRR practices in the municipality of San Francisco in Camotes Island, Cebu Province. In this town the extraordinary collective story of survival is attributed to the *purok* system, an endogenous social organization structure with indigenous roots, developed and fine-tuned within San Francisco. The purok system, De Rivera narrates, plays an important role in keeping the community informed and organized in responding to disasters, including Super Typhoon Yolanda. This kind of endogenous local system resonates with Combinido's finding in their study, which says that the reason local practices work is because they build on long-standing traditions, such as the San Francisco purok system, that enable more effective preparatory measures.

In the context of uneven capacities, resources, and opportunities available to many communities and local governments, localization can also be a very challenging process. Gonzales's observation on the preparation of local climate change adaptation and DRRM plans is very instructive in this regard. She notes that some local governments that find it hard to produce plans based on national government-prescribed formats simply make "copy-paste" plans—documents that are copied from the plans of other more "capacitated" or well-resourced local government units (LGUs). This practice results in what can be called "compliance-oriented" local planning, in which local governments put together and submit plans in order to comply with the documents required by national government agencies. One obvious effect of this trend is that submitted plans ignore local contexts and do not respond to specific conditions and DRR issues on the ground.

Besides these local and localization initiatives, two examples of community-based practices that were implemented by NGOs are worth mentioning here. First, the NGO Center for Disaster Preparedness has been implementing a scheme that contrasts with the government's compliance-oriented planning. It has done away with the practice of requiring their partner communities to comply with prescribed templates, which allows their grassroots partners to submit proposals in their own language. Second, some NGOs and community groups have been initiating "community philanthropy," an alternative resource mobilization model (e.g., cooperatives, social enterprises, participatory grant making, etc.) where people are in control of priorities, resources, and other decisions affecting them. For De la Cruz, this model recognizes the assets and capacities of communities and helps challenge power imbalances that normally exist between donors and their partner communities. To an extent, this scheme is similar to Gonzales's account of how another development

NGO, Tambuyog Development Center, established savings and loans groups, enabling fishers to develop a mutual savings and lending system that is crucial during emergency situations.

Initiatives to “shift the power” and promote localization also need a more contextualized and responsive approach to account for potential adverse impacts on intended development partners, such as women and indigenous groups. This point is evident in Alburo-Cañete’s and Macalandag’s articles. Alburo-Cañete illustrates how the government’s attempts to “empower” women through instilling values of “responsible” self-management of their resettlement community can, on the one hand, evoke a sense of purpose (and pride) in taking on leadership roles in homeowners’ associations. But, on the other hand, many women also found the requirement of community “participation” cumbersome, as modes of participation often reinforced culturally ascribed productive and reproductive obligations at home and in their neighborhood. In her compelling account of a multisectoral dialogue on the planned resettlement of Totolan Badjao community in Bohol, Macalandag demonstrates how the state has enlisted the Sama-Badjao Management Council, a sectoral group established to represent and advance the interest of Badjao communities, to justify empathy-deficient government regulations. This act is a state maneuver to enjoin the Badjao community to participate within the prevailing, culturally homogenizing order: Bring them in, find them a place, lend them opportunities, “empower” them, and invite them to participate in this mainstream process. Arguably, this strategy to engender participation among the Badjao can be construed as assimilation rather than inclusion. When linked to the broader question of cultural invasion (Shaw et al. 2009) and entrenched social inequality, efforts to “assimilate” enact a form of structural violence through the systematic silencing and erasure of indigenous knowledges and ways of life.

## **Revisiting the Role of Academe, Charting Research Directions**

We have thus far summarized new conceptual ideas and existing practices and approaches that seek to enrich disaster justice praxis in the Philippines. Informed by these constructs and pragmatic insights, how then can we deepen the pot of disaster justice research? What new research agendas are worth exploring? We end below with some ideas on the role of the academe in practice-oriented engagements and knowledge production processes to advance disaster justice.



With respect to promoting disaster justice-relevant practices, individual scholars and universities can assist local governments in DRRM planning and monitoring and the evaluation of DRRM-related plans. Disaster justice researchers and academics can engage with local governments, NGOs, and community groups in documenting and examining how DRRM resources are allocated or spent. Findings can help DRRM practitioners, grassroots leaders, activists, and policymakers determine how and to what extent the intended impacts and outcomes have been achieved in a particular setting and who actually benefited from the completed DRRM projects. Also, the LGUs can collaborate with academic institutions that, as Gonzales has suggested, can help them put together project proposals to access financial support through the People's Survival Fund.<sup>1</sup>

Our interviews with DRRM practitioners and the diverse articles of this special issue provide insight into the ways in which disaster justice issues materialize through the everyday discourses and practices of decision-makers and managers, humanitarians, and disaster-affected communities. The various contributions to this special issue also raise important questions that signpost pathways toward disaster management practices that lead to disaster justice:

- How do disaster-affected communities define disaster justice? How might their conceptions align with or diverge from definitions by powerful institutions like the state?
- How and to what extent might past or ongoing locally led actions have advanced disaster justice praxis?
- As most studies on disaster governance focus on “traditional” actors involved in disaster response and management, how and to what extent do other actors, such as private institutions, facilitate or hinder disaster justice praxis in the country?
- What (new) methodologies can be applied to explore and make visible initiatives that support pursuits for disaster justice? What methodologies can help further unpack “justice gaps”?

As the contours of disaster-related challenges rapidly evolve and put dominant assumptions about DRRM under critical scrutiny, we hope the questions above can inspire new research projects, learning-teaching pedagogies, and university–community–government–industry collaborations around disaster justice across different parts of the Philippines—and beyond.

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- 1 The People's Survival Fund was created by Republic Act 10174 as a means to finance local climate change adaptation and resilience-building projects.

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