

Disaster-induced Slum Evictions and Exclusionary Urban Imaginaries of Resilience in Metro Manila

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In this paper, I discuss the “instrument-effects” (Ferguson, 1994) of Metro Manila’s disaster risk reduction and management program (DRRM) and consider the revanchist aspects of building resilience in deeply unequal cities. I look at the experience of Pasig City, one of the 17 local governments of Metro Manila which is widely held to be a model for DRRM practice but has evicted 6,171 informal settler families (ISFs) living along waterways between July 2011 and February 2016, to argue that DRRM performs a delicate political task. It serves as a powerful recourse and a politically expedient tool to assist the city’s urban resilience and development goals while simultaneously addressing its slum problem. Slum dwellers are evicted from urban centers in the capital region and expelled to the suburbs under the pretext of a compelling regime that insists on its benevolence and relies on its urgency to accomplish the fragile task of removing more than 60,000 ISFs residing along Metro Manila’s waterways.

Drawing on critical discourse analysis of key informant interviews, policy documents, and government data, I demonstrate that the notion of evictions as necessary “neutral”, “technical”, and “apolitical” acts of governance (Ferguson, 1994) is mobilized toward the displacement of undesirable bodies and abject geographies from the city. I show that hegemonic understandings of risk and resilience—of what constitutes risk and what counts as resilience, of which risks are pertinent and which resiliences are deficient, and of who is at risk and who is resilient—are necessarily classed in order to construct the slum as the object of intervention and insulate the propertied and the more ‘valuable’ public from the exigencies of DRRM, particularly the linear, template responses deployed against the poor. I devote significant attention to ‘danger zones’, a key concept at the heart of disaster-induced evictions, to explain how defining some of the most essential categories of DRRM facilitates its revanchist aims. The term danger zones, as used in Philippine DRRM policy, was formulated not in reference to hazard maps, risk assessments, or other technologies of disaster risk management, but to a law specifying the territories of homelessness and urban informality as ‘danger areas’ and governing the eviction and demolition of the encroachments and “illegal environments” of the poor (Ghertner 2010: 1). Defining danger zones in terms of aesthetics, poverty, and informality meant that only poor, informal spaces are evicted, while elite enclaves and middle class spaces in high-risk flood areas remain unthreatened.

I conclude by arguing that the perception of slums as obstructions to disaster resilience ultimately explains why evictions are the cornerstone of Metro Manila’s DRRM program and why the slum-dwelling poor are essentially excluded from urban imaginaries of resilience.

Bibliography

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Paper presented at the RC21 International Conference on “The transgressive city: Comparative perspectives on governance and the possibilities of everyday life in the emerging global city” Mexico City, 21-23 July 2016.

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