

## People in PowerPoint Pixels

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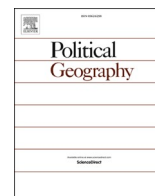
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## Full Length Article

# People in PowerPoint Pixels: Competing justice claims and scalar politics in water development planning

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## ABSTRACT

Coastal megacities all over the world face challenges related to climate adaptation, ecosystem protection and inclusive development. In response, governments develop high-level and long-term climate adaptation plans to guide coastal development. In Metro Manila, a consortium of Dutch and Philippine consultants developed the Manila Bay Sustainable Development Master Plan (MBSDMP). The planning team stressed the importance of inclusive and participatory planning, yet, the pre-set premises of the masterplan, such as the high-level and long-term planning scale and corresponding problem formulation, determined which justice claims were foregrounded in the project, disadvantaging small-scale fishing and informal settlement communities. 'Justice' is a contested concept. Hence, we deploy a critical theory and politics of expert knowledge lens to investigate how struggles over competing justice claims unfold in water development planning. The scalar politics as manifested in the MBSDMP planning process hides particular conceptions of justice while privileging others in congruence with the larger scale uneven political-economic development dynamics. We provide three examples of scale framing in the planning process that functioned to legitimize the contested displacement of informal settlements by pointing to economic development, disaster risk reduction, or environmental protection. Planning design choices involving scalar out-zooming enabled the uptake of these justice claims, while backgrounding the justice claims of negatively affected groups: namely, the urban poor and small-scale fishing communities. The case analysis provides conceptual-empirical insights relevant for coastal cities' grassroots and policy action platforms anticipating climate change impacts and strategizing their stance in the politics of climate adaptation planning.

## 1. Introduction

Manila Bay is surrounded by the fast-growing Manila Metropolitan area, the economic center of the Philippines. As is the case in many coastal megacities, rapid urbanization and industrialization have resulted in several challenges: water pollution, environmental degradation, land scarcity, and growing inequality (Asare Okyere et al., 2015; Valente & Veloso-Gomes, 2020). These challenges are exacerbated by climate risks such as stronger typhoons and sea level rise that aggravate current issues with flooding and land subsidence (Ajibade, 2019). To address these challenges and steer the development of Manila Bay into a more 'sustainable' and 'inclusive' direction, the Manila Bay Sustainable Development Masterplan (MBSDMP) was developed by a consortium of Dutch and Philippine consultants (MBSDMP, 2020). Master plans propose policy measures and present legitimizing narratives that can shape

the future of regional development as well as the distribution of risks and benefits across regions and stakeholders. Long-term and high-scale master plans can have significant justice implications as they affect the lives of millions of people living in the planning zone. Zooming out to a region as extensive as the entire Manila Bay risks losing sight of the actual people living in the places depicted in the planners' tools.

This article aims to explore the scale-sensitivity of master plans and their effect on the inclusion and exclusion of certain justice claims. To do so, we 'studied up' on the MBSDMP planning process to see how institutional actors intentionally or unintentionally limit which kind of justice claims are included in the MBSDMP (Barkan & Pulido, 2017; Ferguson, 1994). We focus specifically on the position of the urban poor and fisher communities in debates about the future of Manila Bay. Following Barnett (2017) and Young (1998), we pay attention to how competing justice claims feature and are negotiated in this specific

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context.

The study shows how the shape and scale of the MBSDMP planning forum and tools influence which justice claims are integrated or silenced in water development planning. It demonstrates how scalar politics, specifically the struggles around the employed planning scale, determine which implicit or explicit claims and theories of justice are accounted for. Such a normative-analytical approach to justice in the field of geography can help to distinguish different, hidden, and competing conceptions of justice in development planning (Przybylinski, 2022).

Concerning the practice of Dutch delta planning abroad, our research shows how institutionalized approaches to justice in the MBSDMP can constrain certain justice claims, 'at times even enabling the unjust actions that initiated struggles for justice in the first place' (Barkan & Pulido, 2017, p. 33). While the turn to 'inclusive planning' in the Manila Bay Sustainable Development Masterplan (MBSDMP) was a response to critical claims that a previous planning process in Jakarta failed to address the concerns of the most affected: small-scale fishing communities and urban poor (Bakker et al., 2017). Considering the politics of expert knowledge and power asymmetries is of crucial importance to examine and understand the practice of Dutch Delta Planning abroad, also in the Philippines (see also: Colven, 2020; Hasan et al., 2020; Menga & Swyngedouw, 2018; Minkman & Van Buuren, 2019; Shannon, 2019).

The structure of this article is as follows. Section 2 conceptually relates master planning, scalar politics, and justice claims. Section 3 presents our considerations about methodology and research positionality. Section 4 introduces the case of the Manila Bay Sustainable Development Masterplan and provides its contextual background, including the contested displacement of informal settlements. In section 5 we present an analysis of the scale-sensitivity of justice claims and three examples of scale frames encountered in the discussion about pending relocations of informal settlements. In §6 we discuss what is left out of view due to scalar political dynamics, the risks of scalar out-zooming in development planning for disadvantaged communities, and the limits of invited participatory sessions to remediate these risks.

## 2. Scalar politics and justice claims

In this section, we explain how scale and scalar politics are theorized in geography by scholars working in geographic traditions such as political ecology, historic-materialism, post-structuralism, and urban political ecology. After discussing the so-called scale debates, we delve into the connection between theorizing justice, bottom-up justice claims, and the scale-sensitivity of competing justice claims to situate the theoretical framework of this research.

### 2.1. Scalar politics in geography

Planners choose to work with certain geographic and temporal boundaries to demarcate and situate master plans. For decades, political geographers have stressed that scale is not only socially constructed, but materially and discursively produced within specific socio-economic and ecological contexts (Cohen & Bakker, 2014; Delaney & Leitner, 1997; Dupuits et al., 2020; Norman et al., 2012; Swyngedouw, 2004). In geographic analyses, different scales are not to be understood as nested and static territorial units, rather, scales are fluid, mouldable, and interconnected. Scalar politics is about the engagement within and among dynamically framed multiple connected levels (Massey, 2002). Actors can connect their struggles to higher/more centrally placed actors or issues by 'jumping scales' and 'creating larger spaces of engagement' (Cox, 1998). Scalar politics, therefore, is intrinsically connected to political-economic geographies (Harvey, 1996; Smith, 1992). At the same time, political struggles and economic changes at 'higher' geographic levels may influence the more local dependencies and interests of actors, most notably the expansion of global capitalism and the influence this has on 'local' interests, such as the job and housing

markets (Cox, 1998). A particular geographical structure of social interactions produces space, scale, and cities as 'spaces of difference' (Lefebvre, 1979). Smith would say that: "The differentiation of geographic scales establishes and is established through the geographical structure of social interactions" (Smith, 1992, p. 73). Yet, these social interactions are not ontologically given. In Smith's account of scalar politics, for instance, the patterns of capital investment and capital-labour relations are the most important shaping forces of scale (Smith, 1992, p.75). Jones et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of Smith's conception of scale in geography, but also note Smith's account did not sufficiently recognize political processes that exceed capitalism and that it fell short of conceptualizing the crucial role of the nation-state in shaping globalizing capitalism. Next, where Smith and Cox emphasized the influence of global capitalism on local dependencies and interests, Leitner and Miller (2007) and Escobar (2001) added localization strategies and attachments to specific place and culture as core notions in configuring 'scale' and scalar interactions (Jones et al., 2017).

Another branch of geography literature started to examine scale in matters of representation: scale frames are deployed by different actors as discursive practices to locate problems, causes, and solutions at particular scales, and to legitimize the exclusion of certain actors and ideas from debates (Jones et al., 2017; Kurtz, 2003; Martin & Miller, 2003). In the wake of Marston's (2005) seminal work on the role of scale in human geography, new scale debates evolved which featured post-structuralist geographers who departed from a flat ontology and conceived of scale not as an ontological category but as 'spatial imaginaries, an analytic for making sense of the world' (Cobarrubias, 2020; Jones et al., 2017).

Others (e.g. Smith) with a more historical-materialist focus feared that an overly post-structuralist focus on discourse would invisibilize or relativize the way in which asymmetric economic relations produce and are produced by scale. This concern is also reflected in urban political ecology (UPE) which stresses the crucial relationship among, on the one hand, the active production and organization of scale and scalar connections, and on the other, the uneven socioecological conditions, asymmetric power relations, and capitalist political-economic system. UPE emphasizes strategic-political acknowledgment in social movements and environmental justice studies (Boelens et al., 2016; Heynen, 2014; Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003). As Swyngedouw and Heynen (2003, p. 913) put it: "The continuous reorganization of spatial scales is an integral part of social strategies to combat and defend control over limited resources and/or a struggle for empowerment."

While duly integrating ecology and political economy, UPE received criticism for not embracing complementary theoretical perspectives such as the role of discourse, subjectivity, and environmental imaginaries in the constitution of space and scale (Gabriel, 2014, p. 39; Grove, 2009; Robbins, 2012). In response to the scale debates, Mackinnon (2010, p. 28) argues that a middle ground is possible, acknowledging that scale emerges as a result of material production and capitalist restructuring in socio-ecological systems, while also bringing in discourse and struggles over imaginaries and meaning as explanatory factors behind the continuous endeavours to produce scalar configurations (Cobarrubias, 2020; Jones et al., 2017). It matters greatly who are the ones able to define problem statements, formulate meaning and corresponding onto-epistemology, set planning boundaries, and subsequently propose solutions, indicators, and value prioritizations. Scale frames can be defined as 'the discursive practices that construct meaningful (and actionable) linkages between the scale at which a social problem is experienced and the scale(s) at which it could be politically addressed or resolved' (Kurtz, 2003, p. 89). Following Mackinnon (2010), we acknowledge the larger uneven development processes at work in a planning context, but also employ the more discursive notion of scale frames to understand how in public debate or policy discussions, actors discursively foreground some aspects of reality in order to promote a particular policy measure or moral evaluation (Van Lieshout

et al., 2011). In case of pre-set planning assumptions, these shape the justification of policy measures and tend to reproduce depoliticized biases.

## 2.2. The role of justice claims in scalar politics

Justice is a key concern for many geographers. Harvey (1973, 1996) among others, built on Young's (1990) *The Politics of Difference* to describe the uneven developmental patterns of cities. However, Przybylinski (2022) notes that philosophical justifications of normative positions are rare in geography, compared to applications of the concept of justice as a normative expression of outrage at manifest problems with the aim to steer political action. Justice claims as expressed by social movements match the bottom-up approach of many geographers and the study of how people mobilize to overcome injustice (Barkan & Pulido, 2017, p. 34). Likewise, a concern for perceived manifest injustices, such as uneven outcomes of economic development or unequal distribution of environmental goods, is the basis of Environmental Justice (EJ) movements and EJ scholarship (Schlosberg, 2007). However, as Barnett (2018) and Przybylinski (2022) observe, in the domains of, among others, environmental justice, spatial justice, and landscape justice, too often the concept of 'justice' lacks a normative-analytic foundation. Geographers risk attenuating what 'justice' means when they do not specify the "where", "when", "who", "what", and "how" of justice, for example by justifying their use of a specific conception of justice based on theory or bottom-up justice struggles (Jaggard, 2009; Przybylinski, 2022).

Specifying what is meant by 'justice' is necessary because there can be plural and competing arguments for justice, 'all of which have claims to impartiality and which nevertheless differ from – and rival – each other' (Sen, 2009, p. 12). With the lack of underlying theorization, existing epistemic injustices and the marginalization of other voices may be reinforced (Barnett, 2018). The frequently applied environmental justice framework points to different 'families' of justice claims (i.e. distribution, representation, recognition, and possibly also ecological integrity) (Schlosberg, 2007; Zwarteeven & Boelens, 2014), but competing conceptions of justice within these families are often not made explicit in geographic analysis (Barnett, 2017). Przybylinski's (2022) calls geographers to be more explicit about both the normative-analytical and normative-political understandings of justice employed. At the same time, we recognize with Przybylinski that normative claims of injustice 'need not be derived from liberal theories alone' (Przybylinski, 2022, p. 9).

We follow Barnett (2017) and Sen (2009) who argue that researchers should start from the justice claims made by people instead of only resorting to theorizing. Injustices as expressed and experienced by people on the ground should be examined and taken as point of departure for further moral reflection (Barkan & Pulido, 2017, p. 39; Sultana, 2021). This focus also avoids the gap between 'perfect justice' and the practical identification (and resolution) of injustices (Pesch, 2021; Sen, 2009) and situates protests against the dominant institutional order as articulations of an 'inner morality'; they cannot be seen as separate from particular situations (Honneth, 1982): "[T]he ideas of justice according to which social groups morally evaluate and judge a social order are more likely to be found in typical perceptions of injustice than in positively formulated principles of value" (Honneth, 1982, p. 20).

## 2.3. The scale-sensitivity of justice claims and deliberative fora

The last element that is important for our study concerns the scale-sensitivity of justice claims and the deliberative fora in which these claims can be contested. The justice claims that people express are intrinsically scale-sensitive and spatially grounded. Different actors strategically frame the problem of environmental justice at different (geographical) scales of decision-making (Kanger & Sovacool, 2022; Pulido & De Lara, 2018; Van Lieshout et al., 2017). Scale frames

influence whose problems and what moral dilemmas are foregrounded (Engels, 2021; Fraser, 2005). Moreover, "jumping" scales can be an effective strategy to make injustices disappear" (Zwarteeven & Boelens, 2014, p. 151). The boundaries we draw in space and time influence the scope of justice, the perceived relevant community boundaries for moral analysis, and how historical events and environmental concerns are included in justifying narratives. Hence, it is critical to acknowledge the scale-sensitivity of justice claims and assessments of (in)justice in environmental management.

Barnett (2018) urges geographers to focus on the people that invoke justice claims and how these justice claims are tested and justified through processes of deliberation and contestation. Society is to be understood as 'an ensemble of practices of justification' (Forst, 2017), and these practices of justification can be assessed by critical theorists. Justice claims can also be less explicit, when they are reflected in technocratic solutions presented in seemingly objective ways, while still hinting to particular value prioritizations. Hence, critical scrutiny is needed into how contestations between competing justice claims are resolved in a given society and shaped by existing power relations, inhibiting different spatial and temporal scale frames (Walker, 2009).

To sum up, planning practices are fraught with scalar politics, scale frames and competing justice claims. Justice is inherently plural and one of the roles of geographers is to critically scrutinize different spatial justice claims and to make hidden justice claims explicit. This requires more attention for the normative-analytical foundations of justice without resorting only to liberal theories about justice. In other words, the study of justice should start from the justice claims that people make and the deliberative fora in which different claims can be contested, are foreclosed, or are brought to the fore. This research is an example how attention to the normative-analytical foundations of justice, as argued for by Przybylinski's (2022), can be combined with a bottom-up approach to justice, as advocated by Barnett (2018) and Sen (2009), among others. It empirically examines how scalar political dynamics influences the process of resolving competing justice claims in the MBSDMP process. In the remainder of this article, we empirically demonstrate that not only the discursive structure of justice claims and patterns of uneven development are spatial (Fraser, 2005; Harvey, 1996; Walker, 2009), but the scale of the forum for contestation and debate can also align better with certain justice claims than with others (Weinger, 2021). The spatial boundaries that are set upon the forum designated to resolving competing justice claims influences how these justice claims are assessed. In this case, how the long-term, water-oriented and high-level planning scale of the MBSDMP influences whose justice claims are easier integrated in the planning process. Besides, the process of testing and resolving competing justice claims takes place in a context influenced by historical and economic developments, socio-ecological conditions, adjacent political arenas including parallel government planning and protests on the streets, and existing asymmetries in socio-political relations.

## 3. Research approach and methodology

Master planning is widely applied in environmental management and climate adaptation planning (Seijger et al., 2019; Woodhouse & Muller, 2017). The MBSDMP specifically fits within the larger trend of planning processes that are supported by the Dutch government and branded as 'The Dutch Delta Approach' (Minkman & Van Buuren, 2019). Earlier Dutch master planning processes in Jakarta, Bangladesh, and Vietnam have been criticized for insufficient involvement of local groups and neglecting the suitability of the Dutch planning methods in other contexts (Bakker et al., 2017; Evers et al., 2019; Minkman et al., 2018; Stravens, 2018b). In the Netherlands, public debate is ongoing about the question whether the water development projects abroad are a classic case of self-interested economic diplomacy, or a genuine approach to share knowledge and learn together to tackle challenges in urban delta's worldwide (Stravens, 2018a; Zwarteeven, 2018). As



Ferguson (1994, p. 181) once put it: “For Westerners, one of the most important forms of engagement is simply the political participation in one’s own society that is appropriate to any citizen”. As Dutch researchers, we examine the MBSDMP since it came into existence due to economic diplomacy by the Dutch embassy, was partially funded by the Dutch government, and led by a Dutch independent research institute. The MBSDMP should not be understood as a final paper product, nor only as a project with a specific timeframe, but as a process in which different actors interacted in a specific context. The theoretical relevance of studying the promotion and export of a model of planning, is that the pre-set planning design choices of the Dutch Delta Approach were also exported to the Philippines. Yet, the Netherlands is different in terms of ecological challenges, socio-economic conditions, and degree of civic freedoms to protest and criticize government policy. Moreover, the Philippine planning context contained biases, lingering scale frames and legitimizing narratives that could spill-over to the MBSDMP planning process. When a planning method is moved to a different context, it is important to understand the implications the new context has for the process of testing competing justice claims through participatory fora (Barnett, 2017, p. 69).

For this study, data was gathered during three months of ethnographic field work in the Philippines by the first author (October 2018–January 2019), hosted by a Philippine community-based disaster risk reduction NGO,<sup>1</sup> but independently funded. The premise of the field work was to study the MBSDMP planning process in terms of its participatory activities and engagement with the people living in coastal settlements in Navotas, one coastal city part of Metro Manila. We justify the focus on the barangay, the lowest level of government administration, and the controversy about displacement of informal settlements by the realization that these people are usually least influential in policy processes, while they might have most at stake. They are literally living along the waters of Manila Bay and are dependent on the bay’s ecological integrity for their livelihoods. Moreover, too often adaptation interventions work to reproduce instead of mitigate the position of disadvantaged communities (Eriksen et al., 2021). Furthermore, the consultants and Dutch government representatives raised the expectation that these groups and their interests would be included in the MBSDMP through a participatory process (Deltares et al., 2021; Nauta, 2018b; Stravens, 2018b; Zwarteveen, 2018).

Ethnographic observations were gathered both at the local level of Navotas and during the high-level MBSDMP planning events. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 interviewees. Two distinct interview guides were prepared. The first for the level of the masterplan about how participation and inclusivity were organized in this long-term planning exercise (Dutch and Philippine consultants, international and Philippine NGO employees, Philippine and Dutch government employees). The second interview guide was for inhabitants of Navotas and dealt with topics such as disaster risk reduction, other concerns they faced in their life, experiences with participation processes, experiences with relocations, and interaction with the government in general (Philippine local government employees, national fisher folk organizers, community leaders from barangay and informal settlements in Navotas and national Philippine civil society organizations). All interviews were anonymized and notes, transcripts and codes stored confidentially. Additional desk research took place until fall 2020 to follow the evolution of the planning process and triangulate findings from interviews with publicly available sources such as statements on the [www.mbsdmp.com](http://www.mbsdmp.com) website, news outlets and policy documents. The raw data and coded data formed the input for a multi-stage iterative

process through which the findings were interpreted and connected with theory about scalar politics.

#### 4. The case: the Manila bay Sustainable Development Masterplan

##### 4.1. The contested future of Manila Bay

The area around Manila Bay covers four provinces and over twenty-five million inhabitants (OIDCI et al., 2018c). Conflicting sectors present in the area are industry, the port and industrial fishing sector, small-scale fishing communities, aquaculture and fresh water agriculture farmers, wetlands and marine reserves, recreation and the tourist sector and urban settlement ranging from social housing, to informal settlements or high-value property development on (proposed) land reclamations. Rapid urbanization and growth of the Philippine capital Metro Manila has resulted in a congested and polluted mega city, with population numbers expected to double by 2040 (OIDCI et al., 2020c). After decades of internal socio-economic differentiation, also due to legacies of colonialism and imperialism, the Philippines is characterized by high inequality rates (Rodan, 2021). Increased landlessness and extreme poverty in the countryside have pushed people towards Metro Manila and beyond to overseas employment in search of a livelihood (Bankoff, 1999). Land is a scarce resource and affordable housing options are lacking (Murakami et al., 2005; Shatkin, 2017). Subsequently, people are forced to live in hazardous structures in or very near the polluted water of urban drains and Manila Bay (Purba et al., 2018). Many people living in informal settlements also wish for better living conditions, but prefer to stay near their current homes, in order to keep their livelihoods and social structures in place (Interviews 01/11/2019, 01/19/2019, community representatives). At the same time, large financial interests are involved in creating new areas for property development. The ‘clearance’ of informal settlements near the coastline often has to take place before new land reclamations can be developed (Asare Okyere et al., 2015; Borrás & Franco, 2008). Past land reclamation projects, most notably San Miguel’s Mall of Asia area, did create space for high-value property development and service sector jobs, but these were realized at the expense of the bays’ biodiversity, mangroves and fish stocks and came with the evictions of Informal Settler Families (ISF) (Purba et al., 2018); reflecting the lack of concern by project developers for ‘local’ concerns (Cox, 1998). Moreover, due to lacking waste- and water management services throughout the watershed, multiple tributaries are characterized as dead rivers. The disappearance of mangroves also contributes to increased flood risk in coastal areas (OIDCI et al., 2018b, p. 38). In response to these challenges of ecological degradation, climate risks, and urban sprawl, in 2015, per request of the Philippine government, the Dutch-funded Disaster Risk Reduction Expert Team wrote a mission report that called out the need for a new masterplan for the future of Manila Bay (Dutch Expert Team, 2015, p. 94).

##### 4.2. The Manila Bay Sustainable Development Master Plan

The MBSDMP planning process ran between January 2018 and July 2020. The MBSDMP planning team consisted of a consortium led by Deltares, a Dutch independent research institute and three Philippine consultancy companies. The MBSDMP process is the outcome of Dutch economic diplomacy work to support the Dutch water sector (Dutch Expert Team, 2015, p. 94; Hasan et al., 2019), and partly funded by the Dutch government. The majority of the funding is contributed by the commissioner: the Philippine National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) (Deltares, 2018). NEDA’s key concern were the approximately 40 (unsolicited) proposals for new land reclamations in the bay area (Interview 01/23/2019, policy officers). The MBSDMP’s planning objectives mention inclusive growth, ecosystem protection, climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and water quality

<sup>1</sup> The interviews with MBSDMP actors were arranged by the first-author independently. To be able to include the perspective of the urban poor and fisher communities on the coastline, the Philippine NGO employees who wished to remain anonymous were of great help. MSc thesis Brackel (2019) can be consulted for detailed methodological and research ethical considerations.

improvement. Participation of vulnerable communities and inclusive development were told to be guiding principles of the planning process; both during internal events about the MBSDMP's progress and through external communications on the website (Human Cities Coalition, 2017; OI DCI et al., 2020b). In our analysis we do not provide a full overview of all conflicts in the planning arena. Rather, we give primacy to the relocation controversy since this reveals a salient connection between planning scale and justice claims.

#### 4.3. Debate on relocation of informal settler families

A salient issue in the Philippine context, that we will discuss in the analysis, is the pending displacement of Informal Settler Families (ISF) (Aspinwall, 2019). Informal Settler Families (ISF) is the official Philippine government's term to address people living together in so-called informal settlements. According to a World Bank (2017a) study, one in four of Metro Manila's citizens live in informal settlements. Without aiming to reinforce the label of 'informality', we will use the term ISF as it is used in reviewed documents and policy discussions in the Philippines, and also by civil society organizations (CSOs) representing these groups. Not everyone considers themselves to be Informal Settler Families, although land rights can be unclear and these people may also be at risk of losing their houses (Interviews, 12/13/2018). Even inhabitants of two-story brick-houses can unexpectedly be presented with a claim that they are on private land, and thus illegal, or lose their rights to live in these spaces after a disaster. A respondent:

"What happens, is that the barangay is not going to force the people to leave, but in case there is a fire, a fire happens [spontaneous or intentionally started], you will lose all rights to the land. So if your house is destroyed by the fire, you cannot return. The same goes for other disasters such as floods and typhoons. You will just be relocated." (Interview, 12/13/2018, Navotas resident).

The position of ISF and small-scale fisherman regarding space for housing is slightly different but intertwined. The national CSOs for urban poor and fisherfolk have formed an alliance as they perceive their interests are tied. Not all urban poor/ISF living along the coastline are working in the fishing sector. Still, interviewees from CSOs representing the youth, elderly, women, church, red-cross, and the elementary school all stressed that the fishing sector and access to the sea was a primary source of income for many informal settlers along Navotas' coastline. The other way around, some fishers have been fishing in the area for generations, but are also labelled as 'informal settlers', thereby falsely suggesting that they would have migrated only recently to the area. Moreover, data from the World Bank Group (2017a) shows that most informal settlers already live in Metro Manila for ten to twenty years. Only 24,3% of the ISF moved less than five years ago (The World Bank Group, 2017b). This contradicts the wide held assumption in the Philippine public debate that most ISF are very recent migrants from the provinces. One fisherman, born in Navotas in 1941 and with six children that all also became fishers, regards Tangos (South) as his land, because his ancestors also lived there before him. In his perspective, the city has encroached their ancestral fishing grounds. He exclaimed: "They'll put here, Jollibee, MacDonalds, and where will we live? Heaven?" (Interview, 11/25/2018).

Relocation processes are not new, but reducing climate risk is a more recent argument used to justify relocations (Ajibade, 2019, 2022). Three types of relocation exist: on-site upgrading, in-city relocation, and off-city relocation.<sup>2</sup> According to the National Alliance of Urban Poor, most community members prefer to stay where they currently live,

<sup>2</sup> The communication officer of the National Alliance of Urban Poor stated that they advocate for on-site relocation or improvements of living conditions, close to a source of livelihood. However, during interviews, officials and consultants, only discussed the options of in-city or off-city relocation.

mostly because of the community's social cohesion and access to livelihood opportunities. When alternative housing within the city is arranged, implementation needs to secure affordable rents, be safe from flooding and with access to livelihoods, something that is often not the case especially in off-city relocation sites. A representative of another urban poor association said during the MBSDMP technical committee meeting: "We want to stay in the city, please give us space".

Regarding the informal settlements located within the 3-m hazard zone, as designated by the Philippine government, extra discussion arises. Critics say that the line of 3 meter is arbitrarily drawn. Others acknowledge that it is true that the structures built so close to the waters are not safe during typhoons and in times of sea-level rise and that living that close to the polluted water poses health risks. Nevertheless, a Philippine community-based disaster risk reduction NGO conducted comprehensive risk assessments in Navotas and showed that the people living within the 3-m hazard zone themselves consider these disaster and health risks as less important compared to the risk of not earning a livelihood and having food on the table. In another part of Navotas, people are living on a graveyard and on a landfill. From the community's 'landscape' risk perspective,<sup>3</sup> livelihood options are always the priority and point of departure, not just water management, disaster risk reduction, or public health concerns (ACCORD et al., 2012).

#### 4.4. Parallel government planning: the Manila Bay Rehabilitation Program

On December 11, 2018, while the MBSDMP planning process was ongoing, retired General and now Secretary Roy Cimatu, head of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), announced in a speech that 300.000 families were to be relocated as part of the 'Manila Bay Rehabilitation Program' (DENR, 2019; Gascon, 2018; Teves, 2018).<sup>4</sup> The measure to relocate ISF in the name of ecological rehabilitation is not new in the Philippine planning context. The 2008 Mandamus court orders issued that the Philippine government needed to protect Manila Bay under the 2004 Clean Water Act (OI DCI et al., 2018c). Social advocates argue that the Mandamus court orders have been used by local government units to justify pending ISF relocation programs in the name of 'protecting Manila bay' (Interview 12/10/2018, Philippine NGO employee). Protests have also been directed at the low quality of social housing and relocation sites (expensive, far away from livelihoods), which is officially the responsibility of the National Housing Authority. In general, rules for fair procedures and compensation are said to be not well implemented (CARE Philippines & ACCORD, 2020).

The staff of the Manila Bay Sustainable Development Master Plan (MBSDMP) was commissioned by NEDA and did not relate to the DENR Rehabilitation Program from the beginning, but had to interact with the DENR since both authorities were now focusing on 'protecting Manila Bay'. Hence, DENR was seen as a stakeholder, and in January 2019 a stronger mutual association was sought through joining each other's events and shared communications, to support the relevance and possible uptake of the MBSDMP. These events in the planning arena matter as they provide background conditions that influence how measures are implemented (Colven, 2020). Moreover, (negative) frames could spill-over to the MBSDMP consultancy plan that was developed in the same planning context.

<sup>3</sup> Literature on community based disaster risk reduction explains the need for using landscape risk approaches (ACCORD et al., 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Cimatu's speech on December 11th 2018 was witnessed first-hand by the first author. He called for the relocation of 300.000 families as the first measure of the Manila Bay Rehabilitation Program. In January 2019, the number changed in the media to 200.000 families; that is around a million people if every family consists on average of 5 members.

## 5. Connecting scale frames and justice claims in the MBSDMP

### 5.1. The planning scale of the MBSDMP

In our analysis, we discuss the three planning scale choices made for the MBSDMP that stand out: (1) high-level: the political administrative area of the MBSDMP covers four provinces, (2) long-term: the temporal level is set beyond 2040, and (3) the watershed: the ecological geographic level of the MBSDMP is the Manila Bay watershed, with a focus on the coastline. It became apparent throughout the interview process how the boundaries of the scope of the MBSDMP were continuously contested. The consultants reported that it was a challenge to retain focus in the MBSDMP outcomes and activities and stick to the pre-set planning scale: high-level and long-term planning for Manila Bay. ‘Some people keep saying you have to look at the post stamp level, others say no, look around you! That is the tension’ (Interview, 01/14/2019, consultant). For example, an association of municipalities outside the National Capital Region and a disaster risk reduction NGO stressed the importance of taking into account the upstream tributaries and thereby extend the scope of the water management plan. ‘Waste is not just coming from ISF and business settlements, I was pushing Deltares, hoping we could have a look at both the upstream and the downstream; where the waste is coming from! The larger river system.’ (Interview 01/25/2019 Philippine NGO employee). The planning scale of the MBSDMP is the product of contingent choices and was contested, as is illustrated by the previous quotes. Table 1 shows alternative levels on the geographic and temporal planning scale. In the following sections, we discuss the connection between the chosen planning scale of the MBSDMP and scale frames associated with justice claims.

### 5.2. High-level planning

The MBSDMP’s planning scale is high-level, covering four provinces and around twenty-five million people. Multiple divergent and conflicting justice claims were made in the (public) debate about relocation of informal settlements (ABS CBN, 2019; Aspinwall, 2019). Yet, the premise of the high-level planning scale matches best with utilitarian justice claims, meaning that the policy decision-making is based on the net benefits for the full aggregation of the societal collective. This way of moral reasoning legitimizes policies that sacrifice the rights and happiness of a smaller number of individuals to enhance the well-being of the majority of a given population. This logic is reflected in the following interview statement:

‘The mandate of NGOs is to put the Informal Settler Families first [prioritarianism]; that is their role. You cannot blame them for that. It is not productive though .... We need to look at the bigger picture of national development, and then the interest of ISF is just a small bit of the larger picture [utilitarianism]. Government cannot deal with each and everyone, but is there for the national, greater good.’

**Table 1**  
Examples of interconnected levels on planning scales.

Scales	Levels on the planning scale
Geographic: Political administrative	Barangay <sup>a</sup> – municipality – province – national – regional – global
Geographic: Ecological boundaries	Coastline – bay area <sup>b</sup> – watershed incl. tributaries – global water cycle
Temporal	Far-away past – past – current – near future – far future

<sup>a</sup> For this paper, the Philippine political administrative scale is taken as an example. The barangay can equate the neighborhood level, but is organized as an official political body in the Philippines.

<sup>b</sup> Manila Bay has been taken as an example. In different contexts, a different range of ecological boundaries can be presented to analyze environmental management problems.

What is good for the majority? The middle ground? Some sacrifices need to be made.’ (Interview 01/17/2019, Philippine national).

Due to the high-level planning scale, it is easier to foreground justice claims referring to the value of national (economic) development. After all, at this higher level, only the aggregated costs and benefits matter. In principle, any individual harm can be justified if the nett gains are high enough; one important driver behind the uneven capitalist development process in cities (Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003).

Justice claims focusing more on individual welfare or local stories of grievances have for that reason more difficulties to be taken-up when a high-level planning scale is used. After all, a prioritarian planning rationale, in which priority should be given to the people worst off, would require an adjustment of the plan if the plan does not benefit the most disadvantaged people. A worsening of the position of the most vulnerable could not be justified by referring to the nett gains of the project and it may require high-level planners to seriously adjust or even abandon their plan. Notably, scalar politics in combination with high-scale utilitarian lines of reasoning do not always have the same effects. Arguably, alternatives that would sustain more inclusive utilitarian or non-utilitarian conceptions of national development are imaginable, for example including the right to the city for the least affluent. However, in Philippine government documents ‘national development’ is generally portrayed to happen through (foreign) investments in infrastructure, industry and the services sector, with benefits eventually supposed to trickle down to all (NEDA, 2017; OIDCI et al., 2020c). Dominant, utilitarian justifications tend to be less explicit about ‘justice’ simply because they are the invisible markers of ‘normality’; they are often presented as criteria that are more ‘objective’ than the social justice claims of the most disadvantaged. Yet again, how high-level scale frames are interpreted and for what purposes they are employed depends upon the planning context.

### 5.3. Long-term planning: displacement in the name of future hazards

The planning team of the MBSDMP has set their timeframe at the year 2040 and refers to disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation in its planning objectives. ‘The future’ can be used rhetorically both as a reason to justify acting now in order to prevent harm to future generations (Zeiderman, 2016a), or as a way to postpone action by stressing that future impacts are uncertain and not of immediate concern. The MBSDMP upgrading informal settlements report acknowledges the dire situation in which many informal settlers currently find themselves, and presents twenty pages of numbers about ISF who cannot afford regular housing in the city (OIDCI et al., 2018a). However, the last page with policy recommendations focusses primarily on relocation from hazard zones to prevent risks from flooding and other natural disasters. Furthermore, the proposed key indicator for the policy objective upgrading informal settlements is: ‘making the legal easement – a hazard prone area – free from any settlement’ (OIDCI et al., 2018a). And the vision on the MBSDMP website reads: ‘It is then envisioned that ISF in hazard-prone areas are a thing of the past and waterways and estuaries (sic) are free of obstruction’ (MBSDMP, 2019).

The long-term scale frames climate scientists and social movements all over the world express can help to secure rights for marginalized groups and future generations. However, in this policy context, the scale frames associated with climate action functioned to legitimize contested (already pending) resettlements of ISF (Alvarez & Cardenas, 2019). It is true that with possible stronger typhoons and rising sea levels, houses constructed near bridges and the coastline are at risk. However, it is striking that alternative climate adaptation solutions, be it technical flood prevention measures, home improvements or alternative options for on-site or in-city social housing, are backgrounded in national policy communications. A Philippine consultant expressed the following narrative:



“The other day we had a meeting with DENR and presented the situational analysis. We told them that we found that 51% of the ISF are living in high-risk areas. In terms of messaging, if people live in high-risk areas, then the only solution is you need to move them out. So, moving them out should not be anchored on the fact that you want to clean the bay. You anchor it on the fact that the government has a responsibility to protect the life and livelihood of people; and therefore, they have to be relocated.” (Interview 01/23/2019, consultant)

In this way, the long-term scale frame referring to climate risks used in the MBSDMP (un)intentionally helps to legitimize the already pending displacement of ISF.

#### 5.4. Watershed planning

In line with Integrated Water Resources Management principles, the MBSDMP uses a watershed scale in order to approach ecological challenge in a holistic fashion (Barham, 2001). The MBSDMP also contains an Integrated Coastal Zone Management framework that distinguishes between habitat protection and potential reclamation areas (OIDCI et al., 2020a). The water-oriented focus of the MBSDMP resulted in the following fore/backgrounding effect with regard to the displacement controversy:

“Inclusiveness and the ISF are important, but our big task is to look at what Manila Bay needs. The people are part of the system, but Manila Bay as an ecosystem is much more. We take an integrated perspective, and of course social housing is very important, but in the end that is not what we are here for. As affordable housing is only very indirectly related to Manila Bay”. (Interview 01/14/2019, consultant).

It is not the planning scale itself, but the non-inclusive interpretation of ecological protection that backgrounds the root causes that drive people to live in polluted waterways (Bankoff, 1999; Zeiderman, 2012). Upgrading informal settlements was explicitly included as a planning objective, but this is mostly restricted to providing waste and water management services. Improving waste and water management services would be in the interest of ISF and is even contested, since the provision of public services can help to formalize informal settlements. Nevertheless, the task of providing social housing after relocations is argued to be out of scope of the MBSDMP and delegated to Local Government Units and the National Housing Authority. However, NGOs argue that existing social housing programs and compensation procedures are not well implemented (CARE Philippines & ACCORD, 2020). Hence, additional measures and funds remain necessary to guarantee basic living conditions near livelihoods for the people to be relocated. In interviews (Castelo, 2019) and through advocacy organizations, urban poor indicate that they are not helped by off-city relocation, since compensation and relocation sites provide few livelihood opportunities, and that they would rather stay in their current location to escape the risk of extreme poverty and maintain social connections. This suggests that the ISF make a different risk analysis than the consultants. The communication officer of the National Alliance of Urban Poor, stated during an interview:

“There are problems of course with [the water quality of] Manila Bay and the ISF [informal settler families]. We see that. But there is also the problem of housing. The fact that people go to outskirts of the city just to have a home, means there is something wrong in the first place. We should address that.” (Interview 01/17/2019b)

Pointing towards ecological protection or disaster risk reduction can have depoliticizing effects. The measures to reach a certain goal (improved water quality or safety from typhoons) can be presented as if there is no alternative to relocation, which subsequently (falsely) legitimizes displacement of ISF, while people with other political views would choose different measures to ‘protect the bay’. An alternative

**Table 2**  
Examples of scale frames.

Planning scale	Illustrations
<b>High-level planning</b>	
Scale	Geographic: High-level political administrative
Level	Regional/national
Scale frame	“We need to secure national economic development at cost X”
Foregrounds	Aggregated issues related to economic development
Backgrounds	Area specific issues: local issues with ecosystem degradation, pollution, or access to the bay
Justice claim	‘Most benefits for the most people’ through economic development (version of utilitarianism)
<b>Long-term planning</b>	
Scale	Temporal
Level	Long-term: Beyond 2040
Scale frame	“People need to be relocated out of hazard zones to adapt to the impacts of climate change”
Foregrounds	Long-term benefits, costs, and risks <sup>a</sup>
Backgrounds	Possibly painful short-term measures, such as relocations
Justice claim	We need to bear the negatives now to reap benefits in the future
<b>Water-oriented planning</b>	
Scale	Geographic: Ecological boundaries
Level	Manila Bay watershed
Scale frame	“We have to protect Manila Bay”
Foregrounds	Aggregated ecological concerns (water quality)
Backgrounds	Social justice concerns (social housing)
Justice claim	The need to protect nature for its intrinsic value and/or instrumental value for humans (ecosystem services framing)

<sup>a</sup> These long-term risks, costs and benefits can however be calculated and/or based upon different theories of change. Different options are imaginable such as (1) high-value property development investments trickling down versus (2) restoring biodiversity and fish-stocks for future generations to protect the wellbeing of people, future generations and ecosystems.

could be to construct safer houses for people in or very near the same location. However, the development of high-value property near the coastline is prioritized. At the end of the MBSDMP planning process, the Dutch dredging company Boskalis announced that they signed a contract for the New Manila International Airport land reclamation project (Boskalis, 2020). This suggests an eco-scalar fix, where relocations are justified on the ground of ecological restoration, while at the same time indirectly supporting the highly uneven development pathway that caused the environmental problems with pollution and congestion in the first place (Cohen & Bakker, 2014).

In sum, this section showed how long-term, high-scale and water-oriented scale frames (Table 2), helped to foreground and legitimize the relocation solution and backgrounded more inclusive policy alternatives.

## 6. Discussion: what disappears from view

Different scale frames functioned to legitimize the relocation of informal settlements in the debate about the future of Manila Bay. False legitimization can occur when something is presented to be the only possible or logical solution to a problem (the so-called TINAs, “there is no alternative”), whereas alternative or additional solutions are also imaginable. It is not that a high-level or long-term planning scale is not useful, or that the MBSDMP planning scale necessarily generates outcomes that are skewed against the interests of the most vulnerable in a society. To recall Mackinnon’s argument concerning scalar politics: “Scale itself is not necessarily the prime object of contestation between social actors, but rather an instrument for achieving desired outcomes.” (Mackinnon, 2010, p. 21). We understand the Manila Bay Sustainable Development Masterplan as a forum for the contestation of competing justice claims (Barnett, 2017), and have examined how the pre-set planning scale of the MBSDMP matches better with certain justice claims than with others (Table 2).

The previous section showed that the framing of community



boundaries and temporal scales in justice claims is fluid. For example, a fisherman stressed that his ancestors were already fishing the bays' coasts for hundreds of years, implicitly claiming to have a right to stay in the area (Interview 12/12/2018). Urban poor representatives defend the right to the city of informal settler families by stating that many already live in the city for over 30 years and have no other options (Castelo, 2019; The World Bank Group, 2017a), while other voices in the public debate frame the ISF as fortune seekers that have only recently 'flocked' to the city (Gomez, 2019).

This paper should also not be read as an argument that policy measures that are not in the interest of urban poor and small-scale fisherfolk are always impermissible, for example based upon prioritarian concerns. Rather, the point is that scalar politics can mask these political trade-offs between competing conceptions of justice such as prioritarianism and utilitarianism and reinforce existing biases against disadvantaged groups. Choosing different policy means and other interpretations of root causes can lead to different development plans. For example, the people living near the polluted waters are the ones facing most environmental health risks. However, the health of the people living at the coastline of Manila Bay is not the first concern of the plan and the scale frames discussed. A plan with a high-level and long-term planning scale focussed on public health would come up with different solutions; perhaps the plan would still involve relocation, but the timing and choice of locations would be on other terms and steered by different values. The function of analysing scalar politics is to spot dominant scale frames and their link to the uptake of justice claims and legitimizing narratives in a planning context.

### 6.1. Zooming out: justifying displacement

Assessing how competing justice claims are resolved always requires paying attention to the position of different actors in the planning context. Processes of depoliticization, distancing, commensuration, and even dehumanization can alter the (moral) weight of justice claims as put forward by marginalized groups (Anders, 1980; Duarte-Abadía et al., 2021; Flaminio, 2021). During the fieldwork, the negative stigma towards the ISF lingering in the planning context stood out. To name a few of the stereotypes assigned to ISF in the media, such as statements that they would be lazy, undisciplined, criminal or fortune seekers. These stigmas were reflected both in the tone of public debate and through side-remarks or stereotypes featuring in conversations. For instance, one interviewee referred to a recurring story that urban poor purposely and cunningly 'cash' compensation money to afterwards settle in another illegal site; while all these people seek is a place to live and provide for their families. Another interviewee talked about a biased policy measure: a local government delivered plastic bags to an informal settlement with the rationale that this would help urban poor behave in a 'cleaner' way, while not addressing the actual problem that there are no public waste management services in the area. An advocate of the National Alliance for Urban Poor said: 'The urban poor in the waterways are treated as nuisances that need to be dealt with, not as people.' (Interview 01/17/2019b).

During a meeting of the Manila Bay Coordinating Office (MBCO), the DENR secretary Cimatu announced his Manila Bay Rehabilitation Program, with as the primary measure the swift and strict relocation of 300.000 Informal Settler Families. Later that day, a PowerPoint presentation was shown with a map that depicted ISF along the coastline near Cavite, one of the coastal cities (Fig. 1). By zooming out, the thousands of people living there were reconfigured into seemingly illegal dots that obstruct development plans. The DENR relocation program is more easily justified when the faces and difficulties of the inhabitants have disappeared from view. The risk is that framing and narratives from the parallel DENR planning process spill-over to the (implementation of the) MBSDMP.

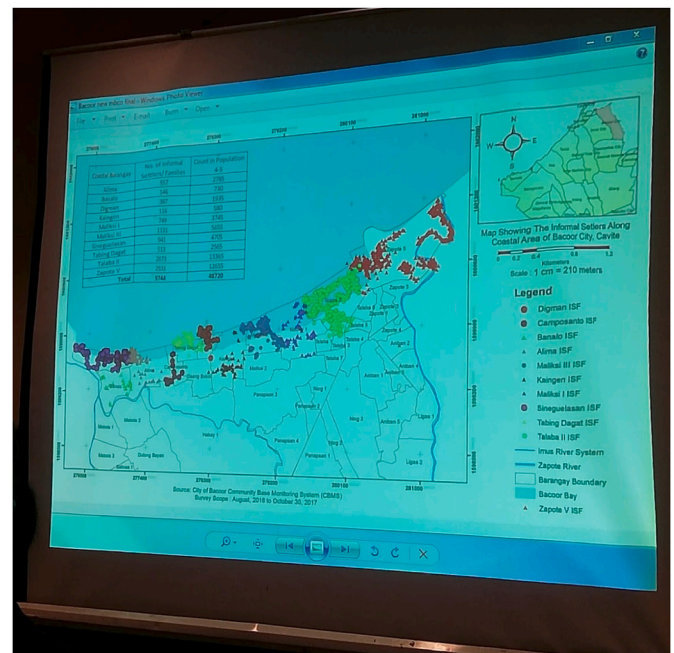


Fig. 1. PowerPoint depicting ISF in Cavite as dots during the Manila Bay Coordinating Office (MBCO) meeting, December 11, 2018. This meeting was organized by the MBCO, relevant stakeholders and adjacent government institutions were invited to the Heritage Hotel, and different stakeholders including the MBSDMP consultants presented their work. Picture shows a map made by the City of Bacoor Community Base Monitoring System.

### 6.2. Zooming in: limits to participation due to scalar politics

Participatory activities that included representatives from the urban poor and small-scale fishing communities could not sufficiently mitigate the out-zooming effects of the pre-set planning scale. Much of the general critique on invited top-down participatory settings was also reflected in the MBSDMP (Cornwall, 2008; Pugh & Richardson, 2005). For the purpose of this manuscript, we will specifically discuss the influence of scalar politics on the emancipatory potential of participation.

The MBSDMP team stressed the importance of inclusive planning and organized throughout the planning process offline and online consultation meetings, focus groups and field visits and provided information through the website (Deltares et al., 2021): all forms of top-down initiated invited participatory fora (Cohen & Uphoff, 1980). Nevertheless, questions about the MBSDMP's scope and objective were pre-set and thus restricted the agenda-setting possibilities of the focus groups.

Moreover, the high-level planning scale itself posed difficulties to the organization of participation. Allocating sufficient time and resources is critical when planning for an area with 25+ million citizens. Since the MBSDMP team was lacking these resources, and facing critiques, the team-lead called for stakeholder representative groups to form aggregated umbrella organizations. In the Netherlands, the association for Dutch municipalities (VNG) is well-established and widely acknowledged. Yet, the Philippines has a different political context and a similar institution did not (yet) exist. The consultants called for more umbrella organizations so that various organizations would work together and speak with them in one voice, that would be more efficient. However, legitimate systems of nested political representation cannot hastily be developed, at least not within the timeframe of the MBSDMP.

In November 2018, during the fieldwork, the official MBSDMP partner organizations visit took place in the city of Navotas. Over twenty attendees came to speak with representatives of the municipality, community organizations and hear the concerns of the fishing community. NGO employees from the organizing Partners for Resilience group

hoped that these eye-witness accounts would appeal to ‘human’ moral sentiments and decrease the distance between the inhabitants of Navotas, policy officers and consultants. And on an individual level, this meeting may have shifted the attitudes of some. Nevertheless, the MBSDMP premises made it difficult to integrate these eye-witness accounts into the planning process, partly due to the high-level planning scale of the MBSDMP.

Urban poor and small-scale fisherfolk, also from other cities, often express their concerns in local terms and refer to neighborhood specific issues. When discussing ways to integrate these concerns into the masterplan, consultants reported the fear that they did not want to create a ‘bias’ to certain localities; integrating local stories from Navotas may skew the plan in the direction of ‘just a few areas’ whereas the plan was supposed to address challenges in the larger Manila Bay watershed (Interview 12/06/2018). After this single afternoon visit ended, the pre-set planning objectives still required aggregated data about all four provinces and sixteen cities of Metro Manila, not just the story of a couple of fishing communities in Navotas. Time and resources were lacking to conduct in-depth research into the concerns of all stakeholders in a representative range of neighbourhoods. As a consequence, the focus group discussions organized by the MBSDMP team were unable to counter the scalar out-zooming and distancing effects.

To fit the objectives of the MBSDMP, the challenges of Manila Bay first of all needed to be commensurated and translated into aggregated data. With these data, the team could draft an overarching zoning plan to steer the development of land reclamations and habitat protection. The aggregated level of analysis and the difficulties with aggregating the position of certain stakeholder groups obstructs the uptake of insights from these actor groups more than others. Even if a consultant wanted to integrate the perspective of ISF more, the pre-set choices for methods and the planning scale limited the possibilities for these concerns and justice claims to be translated into the MBSDMP outputs. The emphasis on models, mapping and visualization tools in the planning process appeals to the mindset of economists and engineers, but did not help to create space for alternative scale frames and associated justice claims.

Framing the planning process as ‘participatory’, in fact, has led to false legitimizations of its outcomes (see also [Cooke & Kothari, 2011](#); [Cornwall, 2008](#); [Pugh, 2005](#)). Of course, instrumentally, the information from top-down initiated focus groups helps to improve the design of master plans. Moreover, the transparency provided with the MBSDMP website and subsequent openness about the planning process did improve accountability. Nevertheless, the more intrinsic call from civil society organizations to re-distribute decision-making power and be able to add their own visions for the future of Manila Bay, was left un-addressed. As we have seen in section five, the chosen planning scale legitimized not to focus on guaranteeing high-level quality social housing, one root cause of the congestion of the city, but instead place the issue of social housing outside of the MBSDMP’s aims. Groups that wanted to raise this issue during participatory fora, were less successful as the premises of the planning scale and problem statement provided little fertile ground for their uptake.

### 6.3. The Philippine planning context

As we argued before, planning tools need to be adjusted to the planning context to be able to seriously consider the plurality of justice claims. The recent Philippine president Duterte’s government was characterized by a militaristic and authoritarian style of governance, which leaves little room for press freedom and public opposition. Alternative visions of development are repressed ([Asare Okyerere et al., 2015](#)), and advocates for social justice and the environment are criminalized ([Hilterman, 2020](#); [Nauta, 2018a](#)). The Dutch government also receives criticism for how it organizes participation ([Roth et al., 2017](#)). Yet, civil rights and freedom of speech are better protected, subsequently, alternative justice claims can surface easier. This is a critical background condition to consider when assessing the suitability of the

Dutch Delta Approach to be implemented in other coastal areas.

Another limit to take into account is that government planning efforts are often not the determining factor for the development of Manila Bay. Companies such as San Miguel corporation are powerful players and present NEDA with numerous unsolicited land reclamation proposals. Besides, advocates of Philippine and Dutch civil society organizations criticize the Dutch government for on the one hand funding a ‘sustainable’ and ‘inclusive’ masterplan and on the other hand supporting Dutch land reclamation companies through economic diplomacy ([Shannon & Dulce, 2022](#)). Accordingly, the construction of the New Manila International Airport in the north of the bay, even goes against the MBSDMP coastal zoning framework that advised to protect the biodiversity in Bulacan and restore mangroves in this area that is also subject to subsidence and storms ([OIDCI et al., 2020a](#); [Van der Veen, 2021](#)). The construction of this new airport challenges the relevance and influence of the entire MBSDMP planning exercise.

Stories of planned societal transformation, territorial mega-intervention and multi-scalar masterplans, inserted in political-economic controversies trigger contestation and societal responses and are always contingent, mediated and open-ended ([Long & Van der Ploeg, 1989](#)). The chosen planning scale and associated scale frames and justice claims can have different outcomes in different places. To that respect, for future research, [Colven’s \(2020\)](#) use of Tsing’s concept of friction and ‘the awkwardness of translation’ to describe the Dutch master planning case in Jakarta, would be a useful lens to understand the multiple unintended consequences and spill-overs when Dutch master planning approaches are exported to other contexts. Future research could also more explicitly include recent developments in geographic scholarship such as abolition ecology ([Heynen, 2016](#)), climate coloniality ([Sultana, 2022](#); [Zeideman, 2016b](#)), and gendered patterns of uneven development ([Heynen, 2018](#)); as these are all relevant drivers behind the production of difference in cities. Acknowledging the influence of the historical, political and economic context of a planning process is needed to fully understand what is at stake for the people on the frontline of climate change. Critical scrutiny of discursive scale frames and their role to legitimize policy measures is important for all coastal cities drafting climate adaptation plans.

## 7. Conclusion

Scalar political analysis shows how the premises embedded in master plans (objectives, scope and associated planning scale) can shape political struggles about future developments: foregrounding or backgrounding particular groups’ interests and their explicit or implicit justice claims. In this study, we demonstrate how the design choices behind the Manila Bay Sustainable Development Master Plan planning process constrained the uptake of certain kinds of justice claims due to multiple scalar political dynamics at work. Scalar politics matter for the integration of justice claims in water development planning in four ways: (i) scale both produces and is produced by the asymmetric economic relations and socio-ecological conditions that shape uneven development patterns, (ii) the structure of a justice claim itself is spatial and scale-sensitive, (iii) when a planning process functions as a forum for testing/resolving competing justice claims, the pre-set spatial boundaries of the plan can shape which claims are more easily integrated, and (iv) the context in which the contestation takes place contains lingering scale frames and justice claims that may spill-over to the planning process.

Planners, commissioners of masterplans and scholars studying planning processes need to be aware that assessments of (in)justice in environmental management are intrinsically scale-sensitive ([Fraser, 2005](#); [Harvey, 1996](#); [Walker, 2009](#)). Justice claims and controversies that align well with the planning scale are more easily integrated into the final plan. In the case of the Manila Bay Sustainable Development Master Plan, the contested relocation of informal settlement families was justified by scale frames pointing towards either the national

economy, long-term disaster risk reduction or the environmental protection of Manila Bay. In this way, strategically or unconsciously, scale frames can (falsely) legitimize policy measures such as relocation. Simply calling for more or better participation does not resolve these issues when the implications of the pre-set planning scale and associated scalar politics are not addressed. Hence, not only the justice claims itself have a spatial structure, but the fora designed for the contestation between and testing of competing justice claims are also subject to scalar politics.

Our empirical application of Barnett's (2017) non-ideal and dialogical conception of justice shows that normative-analytical research into different conceptions of justice helps to unpack the Manila Bay controversy, can highlight the normativity of those perspectives that do not explicitly use the language of justice, and strengthens the argument to adjust (planning) methods. In this case, development planning needs to not only organize participation sessions where 'voices can be included', but also make sure that comments from grassroots groups become substantial factors and meaningful drivers in the 'projection of projects'; instead of being lost in aggregated outputs, while claims that are more easily aggregated are foregrounded due to the planning premises. Describing the debate about the MBSDMP, prioritarianism versus utilitarianism stood out as most salient competing conceptions of justice. Other salient factors to understand the controversy were naturalizing discourses such as the eco-scalar fix and legitimizing scale frames. However, multiple and distinct conceptions of justice exist that may be helpful to unpack and analyze other controversies in future research.

The strength of geographic research into justice is the focus on real-life controversies and manifest injustices, far from ideal theorizing about justice, while remaining alert to and making explicit normative-analytical distinctions and presuppositions. In this way, approaches can stay open-ended to ensure inclusivity, not restricted upfront to what researchers see as 'justice' (Barkan & Pulido, 2017), while being consciously involved as engaged and committed researchers. It thereby also opens windows to see how citizens may use justice claims in a way not theorized before.

The goal of this study was not to provide a full assessment of the Manila Bay Sustainable Development Planning process, nor of its participatory process. Rather, we focussed on the multiple entanglements between scalar politics and justice claims in water development planning. Attention to contextual analysis and interpretative methods is required to uncover if and in what way inequalities are reinforced through water development planning methods. Especially when methods are exported and employed in different contexts. All in all, this empirical research paper demonstrates the need to better integrate the scale-sensitivity of competing justice claims in water development planning.

If climate mitigation efforts fail, harsh policy measures may be called upon in the name of climate adaptation and sustainable development. Anticipating climate impacts, master plans with long-term adaptation solutions are already being designed for coastal regions all over the world. These plans should not add to the multiple ways in which people on the frontiers of climate change - and their justice claims - disappear from view.

#### Declaration of competing interest

No conflicts of interest to be reported.

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