

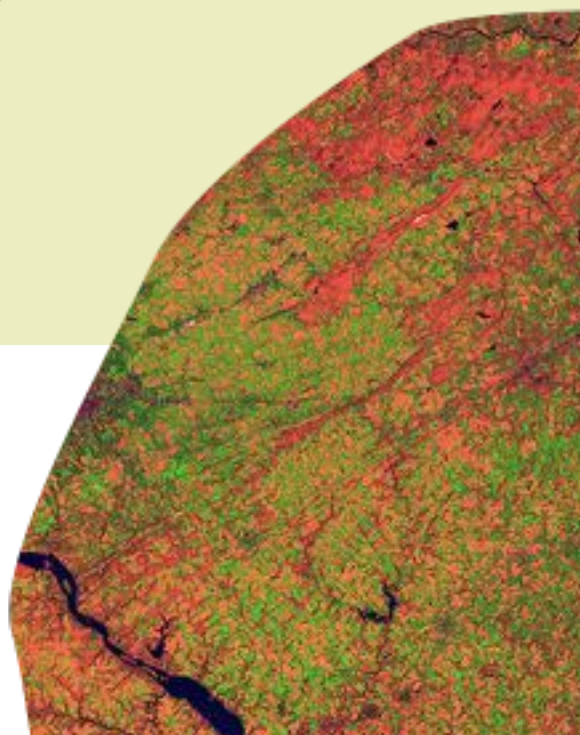
**Title:** PEOPLE SURGE & WORLDMAKING(s) IN THE MARGINS

*Author:*

**Occupy Climate  
Change (OCC!)**  
*Grassroots initiatives  
entry*



FORMAS



# **PEOPLE SURGE & WORLDMAKING(s) IN THE MARGINS<sup>1</sup>**

**Andya Paz & Seven Önder**

**Published June 2, 2025**

**Where is this grassroots initiative implemented? Who are the promoters? Who are the beneficiaries?**

People Surge is a grassroots initiative and alliance for disaster survivors in the Philippines. It primarily consists of Yolanda (international name: Haiyan) survivors and is based in Tacloban, Leyte, widely regarded as ground zero of Typhoon Yolanda in 2013. According to People Surge, the organization's name references the two historic People Power movements in the Philippines, which successfully overthrew two regimes through collective protest and mobilization. It also serves as a metaphor for the storm surge that devastated Tacloban and virtually wiped out more than 90 percent of the city when Typhoon Yolanda made landfall in November 2023.

Formed in January 2014, the initiative brought together around 12,000 people in a protest vigil held at Eastern Visayas State University in Tacloban. People Surge's campaigns focus on the demands for disaster justice, advocating for relief and rehabilitation programs that prioritize the interests of affected communities. In an article published by the Philippine Daily Inquirer (2014), a national media outlet in the Philippines, Dr. Efleda Bautista, who served as the Chairperson of People Surge, described the initiative as:

“It is an alliance of farmers and ordinary people, including people from the academe and religious organizations. Starting in Tacloban, the movement spread to other municipalities, villages, and even provinces.”

People Surge is founded on a comprehensive understanding of the interconnectedness of disasters, the environment, climate, politics, and society. It challenges disaster rehabilitation practices that prioritize profit-driven infrastructural measures, which – they argue – not only fail to adequately address the needs of affected communities but also exacerbate existing harm through the legitimization of damage. One example is the adoption of a disaster risk reduction approach that enforces a 40-meter no-dwelling-zone policy. This measure prohibits disaster survivors, particularly fishing communities, from rebuilding their homes within 40 meters of the coastline on the lands they previously inhabited, thereby displacing them in the process. It also spatially reorganizes the city by relocating members of the fishing communities to inland resettlement areas, effectively cutting off their access to their

---

## **<sup>1</sup> Authors**

Andya Paz, Department of Environmental Sciences and Policy  
Central European University

Seven Onder, More-than-human companion & independent practitioner  
Ankara, Turkey

livelihoods without providing a viable alternative for employment, as these areas are far from their primary sources of living.

To date, People Surge is no longer active, largely due to state-sanctioned repression, the widespread vilification of activism in the Philippines, and the imprisonment of dissenting voices, including activists, community journalists, and climate and environmental defenders – some of whom were part of the organization. A prominent example is the case of the Tacloban 5, where People Surge Network Spokesperson Marissa Cabaljao was arrested along with community journalist Frenchie Mae Cumpio, Mariel Domequil of the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines, Mira Legion of Bagong Alyansang Makabayan-Eastern Visayas, and Karapatan National Council member Alexander Philip Abinguna in February 2020 under the Duterte administration.

**How does this initiative engage with climate? Does it tackle mitigation, adaptation, both or other dimensions of climate change?**

People Surge engaged with climate-related issues through the lens of disaster justice, defined as “a demand for accountability from the government due to its shortcomings in protecting citizens during disasters” (cf. Bankoff 2018, from Yee, 2023, p. 468). According to Dakila Kim Yee (2023), Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of the Philippines Visayas Tacloban College specializing on urban political ecology of disaster reconstruction, disaster justice is “a concept distinct from but related to the more mainstream theories of environmental justice and climate justice” (p. 470). While climate justice centers on the historical responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions (Hickel, 2020) and the uneven impacts of climate crises across nations — emphasizing market institutions, neoliberal policies, contradictions within capitalism, and technocratic solutions shaped by the top-down nature of climate negotiations, climate agendas, and compensation frameworks that prioritize “quantifiable” losses and damages — disaster justice brings focus to the lived experiences of local communities. It “provides a distinct conceptual advantage in analyzing the dynamics of post-disaster justice demands” while capturing the specific – and immediate – necessities of local communities in disaster situations (Yee, 2023, p. 471). It sheds light on how disasters take shape on the ground and underscores the recovery programs needed to address the distinctiveness of their aftermath.

Climate change and disasters are deeply interconnected, and the projected impacts of carbon emissions - frequently framed as future crises – have already materialized as lived and tangible realities in regions like the one where People Surge originated. Filipino journalist Patricia Evangelista (2014) described Tacloban the day after Typhoon Yolanda made landfall as a:

“...city where generals picked up dead soldiers to clear the tarmac and diesel is traded for cars. There is no room for imagination or exaggeration here. All the narrative rules are broken. Every comforting truth is suspended. This is where the four horsemen of the apocalypse ride daily down the San Jose Highway and turn, galloping, into the

muck of what is left of Village 88. This is where it is normal to be asked for directions to the nearest pile of cadavers by a boy looking for his brother” (Evangelista, 2014, p. 117).

In this manner, People Surge challenged the conventional notion that situates climate crises in the future, as events yet to happen, by shedding light on the realities of disasters as they unfold on the ground and expand into individual and collective memories. Disasters accumulate, layering upon the aftermath(s) of those that came before – and the mainstream trajectory of climate conversations seems to neglect not only the persistence of ongoing catastrophes but also the continuities of climate losses and damages through time.

For this reason, the demands highlighted by People Surge address the urgent need for survival amidst recurring catastrophes. At a 2014 press conference, People Surge brought attention to persistent injustices endured by disaster survivors, particularly the deceptive claims of rehabilitation efforts and the disparity between the Philippine government’s assertions of providing shelter and livelihood support to Yolanda survivors and the inadequate housing conditions in resettlement areas. They also criticized the establishment of an economic development belt in the former residences of disaster survivors, while the government justifies their relocation inland. Known as Tacloban North, this housing project was built for fisherfolk communities and was described by residents as geographically isolated, thus compounding their struggles and the disasters of their everyday lives. People Surge contends that the Philippine government’s assertion of providing housing to Yolanda survivors contradicts the actual quality of the resettlement areas and the ongoing displacement of Yolanda survivors.

In addition, People Surge underscored several injustices stemming from the disaster, including plunder and corruption – where funds were misappropriated, failing to meet the needs and demands of the local community. Access to recovery and shelter assistance was further restricted, contingent upon survivors’ non-participation in actions critical of the government. They also pointed to the exploitation of the worsening climate crisis, with Typhoon Yolanda being used by the Aquino government to justify increased surveillance, red-tagging, and militarization of the area. This manifested as state violence justified by the premise of security in disaster recovery, which resulted in the killings of Jefferson Custodio, a member of People Surge and the Municipal Farmers Association of Carigara (MUFAC), and Rodolfo Basada, a peasant leader and People Surge member. According to a news article published by Manila Today (2014), a media organization in the Philippines, both were killed by alleged members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). Despite persistent calls from activists and human rights groups in the Philippines, this case - like many others - remains unresolved to this day.

### **What are the main objectives? What are the main values?**

On their webpage hosted on WordPress, People Surge describes their organization as a “surge of people among the ranks of disaster survivors in Eastern Visayas” who “continue to gather strength and rise to exact justice from the inept Philippine government.” Its campaign and

advocacy are grounded in the understanding of the interconnectedness between disaster, environment, climate, politics, and society. People Surge continues to advocate for a recovery and rehabilitation program centered on the requirements for a well-lived life and aspirations of the disaster survivors and broader Filipino communities, remaining at the forefront of the struggle for accountability, human rights, climate and social justice, and systemic change.

Grounded in a more immediate and tangible context, People Surge advocates for P40,000 (approximately 682 USD) in financial aid for disaster survivors as recovery assistance, particularly for residents in geographically isolated areas of Leyte province. Dr. Bautista, convenor of People Surge, emphasized the importance of monetary assistance for disaster survivors, noting that all of their belongings were destroyed by the typhoon. The figures were based on the needs of a family of 6-7 members per month. She stressed that this financial support is crucial for repairing homes, purchasing basic necessities like food, sending children to school, and, for peasant communities, buying seeds for their farms. In the long term, People Surge advocates for land redistribution to farmers, permanent housing, and sustainable livelihoods for the broader Filipino community in the face of a rapidly deteriorating climate.

Furthermore, People Surge advocates for the abolition of the no-build zone policy implemented by the Aquino regime after Typhoon Yolanda, which prohibited disaster survivors from rebuilding their homes within 40 meters of the coastline.

The local government argues that the no-build zone policy is intended to protect communities from future disasters, particularly tsunamis and storm surges. However, Dr. Bautista argues that this was introduced and enforced without sufficient consultation. It also overlooked other forms of disasters, such as landslides and flash floods, as evidenced by Typhoon Uring in 1991, which triggered landslides on the Ormoc mountain range and buried communities. As a result, the no-build zone facilitated and justified the mass eviction of disaster survivors, particularly fisherfolk in Tacloban. It led to prolonged displacement, with Yolanda survivors remaining in evacuation shelters, followed by their eventual relocation to areas far from their livelihoods. Additionally, it contributed to the exclusionary implementation of recovery and climate measures.

### **What is the timeline? Are there already visible effects?**

The People Surge movement was founded in 2014 during the presidency of Benigno Aquino Jr., whom the group accused of “criminal negligence” in response to the aftermath of Typhoon Yolanda and the subsequent rehabilitation efforts. That same year, a Philippine Daily Inquirer article covered the People Surge movement, highlighting disaster survivors who traveled to Malacañang Palace, the official residence and workplace of the Philippine president, with a list of demands for disaster recovery. The list was signed by approximately 17,000 people; however, only three were permitted to enter the Palace, where their petition was received by a clerk (Sabillo, 2014).

President Aquino criticized their decision to travel to Manila instead of tending on their livelihoods and ultimately rejected their petition for financial aid, citing insufficient funds to meet their demands. The Aquino regime's exclusionary and insensitive stance created an opportunity for Duterte to capitalize on public resentment, leading to his landslide victory and subsequent presidency. The organization remained active until around 2020, when the Duterte administration launched its political crackdown. Since then, several members have been arrested and are currently incarcerated, while others have been killed.

Despite the mishandling of disaster survivors' demands, Gawad ng Bayani Kalikasan, a biennial awards ceremony recognizing the contributions of Filipinos to environmental and social struggles, as well as the broader call for justice, acknowledged that "People Surge has been victorious in expanding the beneficiaries of the Emergency Shelter Assistance (ESA) in 2015-2016 and the Presidential Financial Assistance Program (PFA) in 2017." This turnout, in collaboration with disaster survivors from the neighboring province of Borongan, Samar, stemmed from their campaigns demanding the long-delayed disbursement of PFA to over 4,300 survivors who were denied the promised aid under the ESA by the Aquino administration. Moreover, *Gawad ng Bayani Kalikasan* noted that People Surge "took the lead in the campaign against Leyte Tide Embankment Project (LTEP), a mega infrastructure project that is purported to prevent storm surges with over 7 billion pesos worth of funding from the Department of Public Works and Highway (DPWH)." After consulting with local environmental groups in the Philippines, People Surge discovered that the construction of the LTEP would result in the destruction of 27.3 kilometers of mangrove forests along the coastline and displace hundreds of families in the process.

### **Who are the actors involved? What are their backgrounds?**

People Surge comprises a diverse range of stakeholders, including disaster survivors, activists, farmers, ordinary citizens, as well as members of academic and religious organizations. In 2018, Gawad ng Bayani ng Kalikasan, on their webpage featuring the list of organizational awardees, described People Surge as the "children of the storm, reborn from the rubble of Super Typhoon Yolanda." People Surge is a movement of survivors who transformed their status as victims of disasters into a powerful force, holding the state accountable for the damages and loss of life caused not only by the devastation but also by its inadequate – and damaging – responses to the aftermath.

Dakila Yee noted that People Surge adopted its structure from pre-existing mass organizations in the Philippines, which prioritize sectoral issues such as agrarian reform and anti-demolition struggles. The organization's chair, Dr. Efleda Bautista, is a retired principal and local civic leader who survived the magnitude of Typhoon Yolanda. She also served as a global climate ambassador during the historic People's Climate March in New York City in 2014. Organized by the People's Climate Movement, the event brought together approximately 400,000 participants to advocate for global action against climate change. Alongside Dr. Efleda is Marissa Cabaljao, the spokesperson of People Surge and a young advocate from peasant communities who represents the struggles of the peasantry amid

recurring disasters. In February 2020, she was arrested during a pre-dawn raid and charged with illegal possession of firearms – an accusation she has rejected as fabricated. As of this year, she is out on bail.

**Which limits (institutional, physical, social, etc.) does it encounter?**

With its activist background and militant orientation, People Surge stands in dialectical contrast to the state. Although the group raised critical issues concerning Typhoon Yolanda and disaster recovery programs, including the No-Build Zone policy and the Tacloban North resettlement project, its capacity to influence policy change was hindered by its *normalized* exclusion from institutional power structures. The group emphasized how both the Aquino and Duterte administrations used disaster responses, such as providing housing and conditional cash transfers, as instruments to suppress dissent and consolidate power. They argued that disaster survivors were subjected to conditions in order to access recovery resources, including a prohibition on participating in protests and mass actions. These restrictions not only silenced the communities' voices in decisions that directly impacted their lives but also stifled opportunities to challenge existing power structures through grassroots actions and alternative perspectives. Furthermore, People Surge was accused of having ties to the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), claiming they were attempting to destabilize the government. This not only delegitimized the group but also exposed them to the threat of state repression. For this, People Surge also endured harassment, alongside the deployment and use of the military in their community, which led to the killings of two members, Rodolfo Basada and Jefferson Custodio.

**Are any shortcomings or critical points visible? What other problematic issues can arise from its implementation?**

While People Surge empowered a coalition of disaster survivors and strengthened their advocacy for disaster justice, especially in the context of recurring typhoons in the Philippines and the intensifying climate crisis, it continually faces significant limitations. Despite its dialectic relationship with the Philippine government, People Surge's key objectives – such as distributing financial assistance, developing essential infrastructure in resettlement areas (including schools and hospitals), and providing alternative livelihood opportunities for disaster survivors, especially in Tacloban North – rely not only on state resources and policies that may not align with their current advocacies but also on the decision-making power of those in government positions. This is evident in the development of the Emergency Shelter Assistance (ESA) guidelines, which, in response to the People Surge campaign, reduced the P40,000 financial assistance request from disaster survivors to P30,000 – contingent upon the condition that their homes were entirely destroyed by Typhoon Yolanda. While these remunerations were tangible, People Surge inadvertently reinforced the authority of the State, as disaster survivors came to see these provisions as state-given rather than the result of collective struggle. This also inadvertently tied survivors to the terms and conditions of the State that not only constrict the recovery processes to the

often top-down state-imposed frameworks but also curtail the agency of the disaster survivors in shaping their own recovery.

Furthermore, the Philippine government's accusation that People Surge has connections to the Communist Party of the Philippines undermines their legitimacy – and in the Philippine social reality, where official narratives carry weight, it also diminishes the validity of their demands. Historically, the Philippines' Anti-Subversion Act of 1957 outlawed the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and made any affiliation with the Party a criminal offense. Enacted during the presidency of Carlos Garcia, this law was initially introduced in response to the growing influence of the *Hukbalahap* (*Hukbong Bayan Laban sa mga Hapon*), a guerrilla movement that had resisted the Japanese invasion in the Philippines. The law's enforcement later evolved in response to increasing government suspicions about its planned overthrow by the Communist Party and the threat of establishing a totalitarian regime.

Although the law was repealed in 1992 during President Fidel V. Ramos' administration, communism remains treated as a criminal activity in the Philippines. Even after decades, reading the works of Karl Marx openly and listening to The Internationale continue to attract repression. This is reflected in practices such as surveillance, the vilification of activists and individuals suspected of opposing the state, arrests, and in many cases, state-sponsored killings – experiences that members of People Surge have endured. The absence of reparative justice and the impunity embedded in this distinct reality have made the Philippines one of the five most dangerous countries in the world and the deadliest in Asia for land, environmental, and climate defenders, accounting for 68% of the recorded killings and enforced disappearances in 2023, according to Global Witness.

While People Surge denied these allegations linking them to the CPP, this accusation diverted attention from their legitimate call for justice as disaster survivors and allowed the state to portray their activism as a security threat to disaster recovery and the development of Philippine society. This also reinforced People Surge's position as an outsider in the decision-making process, thereby limiting their influence over the actions and decisions that impact their lives. Moreover, the Philippine government's portrayal of activism as a wellspring of chaos, lawlessness, and disorder not only undermined the credibility of those advocating for accountability after disasters but also facilitated the institutional denial of these demands and the repression of those who raised them.

### **How would it be potentially replicable in other settings?**

People Surge is a grassroots alliance rooted in disaster justice, a concept that is both distinct from and complementary to climate and environmental justice. Its focus on collective action, advocacy for marginalized communities, and challenge to state-led disaster responses that have caused harm can serve as an inspiration for similar movements worldwide. However, its potential for replication in other contexts depends on the functionality of the state, the disposition of those in power, and the suitability of its core principles to the socio-political,



cultural, and environmental realities of disaster-affected areas. People Surge's strength lies in its participatory orientation and the active involvement of the community in national mobilization efforts. It resonates with the core sentiment of Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*: those who have endured relentless violence have the right to respond with equal force against those who have wronged them. By organizing and empowering disaster survivors, People Surge transformed those who survived the devastation of Typhoon Yolanda from passive recipients of aid into active agents of iterative recovery and much-needed transformative change.

**Is this initiative conducive to broader changes (law, institutional arrangements, long-term sustainability or community preparedness, etc.)? If yes, which?**

Provided that the environment is not repressive, movements like People Surge can make significant contributions to disaster preparedness, long-term sustainability, and the co-production of knowledge about the tangible realities of climate crises. This can create opportunities for reforms in the decision-making processes regarding hazard mitigation and disaster recovery by incorporating the voices and perspectives of those who lived through the disasters and are directly affected by the decisions made on their behalf. In this way, involving the community not only responds to the urgent need for survival but also reveals the underlying structural dynamics where climate, disasters, and recovery take tangible shape. Drawing on a phrase from Frantz Fanon, People Surge not only contests the dysfunctionality of the state but also illuminates the structure of an environment within a perpetually colonial world(making): “direct intervention by the police and the military ensure the colonized are kept under close scrutiny and contained by rifle butts.”

All these combined invite a difficult and almost existential question: In a time of catastrophes, surrounded by the possibilities and ruins at the margins, and when the state is no longer functioning for our well-being, how do we move forward – and with whom?

#### **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Andya is a decolonial scholar and PhD candidate in Environmental Sciences and Policy at Central European University (CEU). Her work focuses on the intersection of climate crises and coloniality, particularly on ways of understanding disasters and recovery. She seeks to cultivate a space where lived experiences and situated knowledges can be articulated and advanced, not only to challenge the western hegemony — and often top-down articulation — of climate crises but also to promote an intervention grounded in the realities of those most affected. In the long run, she aims to contribute to decolonial climate justice.

Seven Önder is a more-than-human companion and independent practitioner based in Turkey. She has a keen interest in insects and a profound love for sunrises.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Evangelista, P. (2014, January). *Land of the Mourning*. Retrieved from Esquire: <https://www.headlands.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Evangelista-P-Land-of-the-Mourning-2013.pdf>
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Broadway, NY: Grove Press.
- Gawad Bayani ni Kalikasan. (2018, n.d. n.d.). *People Surge*. Retrieved from Gawad Bayani ni Kalikasan: <https://gbk.cecphils.org/people-surge/>
- Hickel, J. (2020). Quantifying national responsibility for climate breakdown: an equality-based attribution approach for carbon dioxide emissions in excess of the planetary boundary. *The Lancet Planetary Health*.
- Manila Today Staff. (2014, November 2). *Yolanda survivors hold memorial for slain organizer*. Retrieved from Manila Today: <https://manilatoday.net/yolanda-survivors-hold-memorial-for-slain-organizer/>
- People Surge. (n.d.). About People Surge. Retrieved from: <https://peoplesurgephils.wordpress.com/about/>
- Sabillo, K. A. (2014). In the know: What is People Surge? *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. Retrieved from: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/580604/in-the-know-what-is-people-surge>
- Yee, D. (2023). Demanding Disaster Justice: Social Movement Framing and Mobilization after Super Typhoon Yolanda. *Philippine Studies*, 467-93.