International human rights bodies and climate litigation: Don't look up?

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Abstract
This article systematically analyses complaints concerning climate change before international human rights bodies. Since 2005, these bodies have been increasingly asked to hear complaints related to climate change but have granted claims of climate applicants only on one occasion. This article therefore considers the inherent limitations of international human rights bodies for the pursuit of climate objectives, as well as avenues to overcome the hurdles facing climate applicants. Based on the evidence we examined, we conclude making some predictions on the role that international human rights bodies might play in future climate litigation.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Climate change is set to affect the enjoyment of virtually all human rights.1 At the same time, climate change response measures—especially those constraining access to and use of natural resources—may themselves hinder the enjoyment of several human rights.2 The preamble of the Paris Agreement recognizes this state of affairs, specifying that parties ‘should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights’.3

International human rights treaty bodies and the mandate holders of special procedures created under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) have progressively articulated the implications of States’ human rights obligations concerning climate change.4 Most crucially for the present purposes, international human rights bodies have increasingly been asked to hear complaints concerning climate change and its impacts.5 This phenomenon is part of a consolidated trend, whereby international human rights bodies have granted remedies to those suffering from human rights violations resulting from environmental harms,6 based on the law of State responsibility.7 So, although human rights treaties are not designed to protect the environment—and only some expressly guarantee a right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment—in practice, the unique supranational remedies they provide are commonly used as a means to bridge the compliance and accountability gaps in environmental governance.8 Even when international human rights bodies do not have the power to award remedies, their practice has influenced domestic courts, contributing to setting


6See the review of practice in R Luporini and A Kodiveri, ‘The Increasing Role of Human Rights Bodies in Climate Litigation’ (British Academy 2021); Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL), ‘States’ Human Rights Obligations in the Context of Climate Change: Guidance Provided by the UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies’ (CIEL 2022).


8D Shelton, Remedies in International Human Rights Law (Oxford University Press 2015) 2.


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the contours of States’ obligations in this area. In recent years, this trend has started to become apparent also with regard to climate change. Since 2005, international human rights bodies have increasingly heard complaints related to climate change. So far, however, claims of climate applicants have been granted only on one occasion. This is in spite of the fact that international climate litigation has largely—though not exclusively—taken place before international human rights bodies.

This article provides the first systematic scholarly analysis of complaints concerning climate change filed with international human rights bodies. The objective is to detect the specific role played by these bodies in climate litigation. Our investigation relies on analytical categories that are widely deployed within the literature on climate litigation to determine who has brought cases, against whom and where, when and with what outcomes. Recent works have applied these analytical categories, with a view to understanding the role played by human rights law and remedies in climate litigation. We therefore build and expand on this literature, with the aim to identify the specificities of complaints brought before international human rights bodies vis-à-vis other climate litigation.

Section 2 defines the scope of our investigation, identifying the data we analysed and the main trends in climate complaints before international human rights bodies. Section 3 considers the stumbling blocks that have hindered applicants’ perspectives so far and how they may be overcome. Section 4 concludes, taking stock of and making some predictions on the role that international human rights bodies might play in future climate litigation.

2 | MAIN TRENDS IN CLIMATE COMPLAINTS BEFORE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS BODIES

We analysed the practice collected in the two most comprehensive databases of lawsuits raising questions of law or fact regarding climate change—namely those curated by the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Colombia Law School and by the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at the London School of Economics (LSE). Admittedly, the way these databases aggregate data is problematic, as both mix lawsuits where climate concerns are ‘central’—that is that focus specifically on climate change law and policy—with lawsuits where climate change concerns are merely ‘peripheral’—that is that mention climate change concerns but largely focus on other matters. Furthermore, these databases mix complaints before judicial, quasi-judicial bodies and non-judicial bodies. Despite these limitations, the data reported in these databases is an essential starting point to analyse the phenomenon of climate litigation in its various manifestations. This section considers: the type of complaints made before international human rights bodies, their geographical and chronological distribution, the type of actors and defendants, and the type of climate action sought and the human rights obligations invoked by the applicants.

2.1 | The type of complaint

As of 30 September 2022, the Grantham Research Institute and Sabin Center databases reported 18 complaints before judicial, quasi-judicial and non-judicial international human rights bodies, in which climate change played a central role (see Appendix A). We excluded from the scope of our analysis the complaints where climate change was merely peripheral.

Ten complaints listed in Appendix A were filed with a judicial body—namely the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) five were lodged with a quasi-judicial body—two with the UN Human Rights Committee (HRComm), one with the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and two with the Inter-American
Commission on Human Rights (IACtHR)\(^{21}\); and three were lodged with non-judicial bodies—namely various Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council (HRC).\(^{20}\)

International human rights bodies have established three main procedures to consider complaints over human rights violations: individual communications, State-to-State complaints and inquiries.

**Individual communications** can be brought before judicial, quasi-judicial or non-judicial bodies alike. As we explain in greater detail in Section 3, individual communications procedures typically require applicants to demonstrate that they are ‘victims’ of a human rights violation. Most international human treaty bodies are quasi-judicial in nature and are endowed with limited enforcement powers. Individual communications may be made only against State parties that have made a declaration accepting the competence of a given international human rights body.\(^{21}\) Instead, non-judicial bodies may prompt State authorities to take action but do not have any enforcement powers.

Only three judicial human rights bodies exist globally: the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) and the African Court of Human Rights. As the names suggest, these bodies are international tribunals, which are endowed with the unique prerogative to receive complaints from individuals and groups—as opposed to States only. As international tribunals, these bodies enjoy some enforcement powers and operate according to procedures that are judicial in nature. The ECtHR is the only court that is automatically empowered to scrutinize compliance for all State parties.\(^{22}\) Instead, access to the African and Inter-American courts requires the ratification of a separate protocol or the issuing of an ad hoc declaration and only some States have made these.\(^{23}\) International human rights tribunals may also issue advisory opinions concerning the interpretation of the provisions of the related treaties. Only recently, a specific request for an advisory opinion concerning climate change was filed with the IACtHR.\(^{24}\)

Complaints concerning human rights violations can also be brought by means of State-to-State complaints. These complaint procedures, too, may be judicial or quasi-judicial in nature but can only be implemented under some human rights treaties and only under specific conditions.\(^{25}\) As we have explained in greater detail elsewhere,\(^{26}\) inter-State complaints provide some advantages vis-à-vis individual communications, as an applicant State does not have to claim to be a ‘victim’ or justify a special interest in the subject matter of the complaint.\(^{27}\) Instead, inter-State complaints may cover broad allegations, concerning for example an administrative practice or ‘the mere existence of a law which introduces, directs or authorises measures incompatible with the rights and freedoms guaranteed.’\(^{28}\) However, even when inter-State complaints are possible, States rarely make use of them. To date, no inter-State complaint on climate change has been made, but the possibility to instigate one has been the subject of some scholarly speculation.\(^{29}\)

Finally, some human rights bodies may initiate inquiries on their own initiative if they receive reliable information containing well-founded indications of serious or systematic human rights violations.\(^{30}\) Inquiries may only be conducted with respect to States that have recognized the competence of the relevant body. Given the confidential nature of inquiries, it is not possible to exclude that some concerning climate change may be underway at the time of writing.

\(^{17}\)Petition Seeking Relief from Violations Resulting from Global Warming Caused by Acts and Omissions of the United States, Petition No P-N-1413-05 (IACtHR, 16 November 2006) (Inuit); Petition Seeking Relief from Violations of the Rights of Arctic Athabaskan Peoples Resulting from Rapid Arctic Warming and Melting Caused by Emissions of Black Carbon by Canada (IACtHR, 23 April 2013) (Athabaskan).

\(^{20}\)Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Addressing Climate-Forced Displacement, AL USA 16/20 (15 January 2020); Violations of Human Rights by Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH) and China due to Coal Fired plants in BiH, AL BIH 2/2021 and AL CHN 2/2021 (17 March 2021); Environmental Justice Australia v Australia (25 October 2021).

\(^{21}\)This requirement is provided for the following bodies: UN HRC; Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination; Committee against Torture; Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women; Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (adopted 6 October 1999, entered into force 22 December 2000) 2131 UNTS 83 art 8; Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (adopted 13 December 2006, entered into force 20500394, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/reel.12491 by University Of Stirling, Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License)}
2.2 Geographical and chronological distribution

The complaints listed in Appendix A have predominantly been brought by applicants based in the Global North. Thirty-seven complaints are ‘transnational’ in nature, with some or all applicants residing outside of the territory of the State where the alleged human rights violations have taken place. The first complaint listed in Appendix A was filed in 2005, but the vast majority was lodged after 2015. This geographical and chronological distribution aligns with general trends in climate litigation, with the number of cases rising significantly following the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015. Most of the complaints listed in Appendix A remain pending at the time of writing.

2.3 Applicants and defendants

The complaints listed in Annex I have been brought exclusively against States. This is no surprise, given that States are the only possible defendants before international human rights bodies. The applicants are largely individuals and groups, with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) acting as applicants alongside individuals in eight instances.

With only one exception, all complaints in Appendix A have been brought by representatives of what various international human rights bodies have described as particularly ‘vulnerable groups’—such as children, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, older persons, and women. All applicants based their complaints on their alleged special vulnerability to climate impacts. Eight complaints were brought by children and young adults; five include representatives of indigenous peoples; the remainder of the complaints was brought by a group of elderly women, an asylum seeker, and an individual suffering from a rare disease.

International human rights bodies enable multiple applicants from different countries to simultaneously complain about human rights violations carried out by multiple States. At least in theory, this unique feature of international human rights bodies is an advantage for climate applicants, and so far, seven climate complaints have been brought against States other than the one where the applicants reside.

2.4 The type of climate action

Most climate complaints listed in Appendix A may be described as ‘systemic mitigation litigation’—that is, lawsuits challenging the overall efforts of the respondent States to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, as opposed to individual projects or measures. This litigation is relatively frequent before national courts, especially in the Global North. A smaller number of complaints listed in Appendix A challenge specific projects and activities, such as oil and gas exploration, coal-fired power plants and factory farming.

Adaptation is explicitly mentioned in six complaints but never as the only type of climate action sought. For example, some applicants have demanded that respondent States implement adaptation plans alongside mitigation activities. Others have asked that States be ordered to commit financial resources to emergency measures and/or to adapt to climate change. Some, however, ask for remedies that are specific to the applicant personally or to a group. For example, in Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Addressing Climate-Forced Displacement, the applicants asked for the recognition of their rights to land and to be consulted in the related decision-making processes, as well as funding to undertake land restoration.
2.5 | Human rights arguments and States’ obligations

Although most rights-based climate lawsuits combine human rights with other legal arguments, the complaints listed in Annex I only rely on human rights. This is to be expected, given that human rights bodies can only scrutinize State parties’ compliance with obligations enshrined in international human rights treaties.

Like other rights-based climate litigation, the complaints listed in Appendix A broadly rely on States’ human rights obligations concerning substantive rights—both civil and political and cultural, economic and social rights—and the related State duties to adopt preventative and/or remedial measures.

Virtually all complaints listed in Appendix A invoke the right to life, arguing that States must adopt measures to pre-empt the life-threatening impacts of climate change. Similarly, several complaints invoke the right to respect for private and family life, home, and correspondence, arguing that States have a positive duty to prevent harms associated with climate change. Two complaints rely on these same rights but point to States’ negative duty to refrain from authorizing harmful activities.

Other substantive rights—like those to health, food and water, or the right to a healthy environment—are invoked only to a more limited extent. Complaints brought by indigenous peoples typically rely on the right to culture and to communal property. Children and young applicants have instead invoked the right not to be discriminated vis-à-vis older generations, since they will be disproportionately burdened by the impacts of climate change.

Six complaints listed in Appendix A invoke procedural obligations associated with the rights to a fair trial or to an effective remedy. The invocation of these rights is typical of complaints that are initiated after the applicants have exhausted domestic remedies. In two instances, however, the applicants have relied on these rights without having exhausted domestic remedies.

Like other rights-based climate litigation, the complaints listed in Appendix A increasingly refer to international climate change law obligations alongside human rights obligations. Early complaints mentioned the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. More recent ones refer to the Paris Agreement and the temperature goal enshrined in it. Some applicants have argued that international climate treaties and the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change provide the ‘common ground’ to adjudicate climate complaints. In at least two complaints, reliance on international climate change law obligations is coupled with scrutiny of the defendant State’s nationally determined contribution submitted under the Paris Agreement.

2.6 | Comparing trends

As we noted from the outset, the number of complaints lodged with international human rights bodies to date is rather small and only allows for tentative conclusions on trends in this area of climate change litigation practice.

The analysis carried out in this section shows that, by and large, complaints before international human rights bodies are a recent phenomenon and only consist of individual communications before judicial, quasi-judicial or non-judicial bodies. Notwithstanding the potential for inter-State complaints, this avenue is yet to be explored, whereas the first request for an advisory opinion on climate change has just been lodged.

Like other rights-based litigation, the complaints listed in Appendix A largely originate from applicants in the Global North and broadly seek to prompt States to adopt more ambitious mitigation action. Most complaints hinge on the State’s positive duty to adopt climate change mitigation measures and, to a lesser extent, on the negative duty to refrain from authorizing harmful activities. At least in principle, international human rights bodies potentially provide a unique avenue for individual applicants from different countries to simultaneously complain about human rights violations carried out by multiple States. This strategy has been pursued in a few complaints but is yet to deliver successful outcomes.

Although complaints listed in Appendix A rely only on obligations enshrined in international human rights treaties, references to international climate change law are increasingly frequent. It is going be interesting to monitor whether references to international climate change law will result in increased scrutiny of States’ nationally determined contributions, long-term low greenhouse gas emission development strategies and national adaptation plans submitted under the Paris Agreement.
3 | CONSTRAINTS TO CLIMATE LITIGATION BEFORE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS BODIES

This section considers the specific constraints that have emerged in the four decisions of climate complaints delivered by international human rights bodies to date—namely Inuit, Sacchi, Teitiota and Billy.

In Inuit, indigenous peoples and one NGO filed a complaint with the IACommHR against the United States. They lamented that the defendant State had breached their rights to life, residence and movement, culture, property, health, physical integrity and security, as a result of the impacts of climate change. Their complaint was dismissed, but the Commission did not elaborate on the reasons for its decision. Instead, it merely stated that the information provided did not enable it to determine whether the alleged facts would tend to characterize a violation of rights protected by the American Declaration [of the Rights and Duties of Man].

In Sacchi, a group of children from multiple countries filed a complaint before the CRC against multiple States. They claimed that the defendant States had breached their rights to life, health, culture and best interest of the child, as a result of failure to adopt adequate measures for climate change mitigation. This complaint was dismissed on admissibility grounds.

In Teitiota, one asylum seeker lodged a complaint with the UN HRComm against New Zealand. He alleged violations of his right to life, as a result of climate change-induced displacement due to New Zealand’s refusal to grant him asylum. His complaint was rejected on the merits.

Finally, in Billy, a group of indigenous peoples lodged a complaint with the UN HRComm against Australia. They alleged violations of the rights to culture, privacy, family and home, and life, as a result of Australia’s failure to take adequate measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Their complaint was granted, making however specific reference only to the lack of ‘timely adequate’ action concerning climate change adaptation.

These decisions provide crucial evidence of the factors that have hindered the perspectives of climate applicants. We identify three main constraints: the lack of exhaustion of domestic remedies, jurisdiction and victimhood. We examine each of these constraints in turn, providing examples of how they may be addressed in pending complaints.

3.1 | Exhaustion of domestic remedies

Before filing a complaint with an international human rights body, applicants generally must have exhausted the remedies available at the national level. However, an exception may apply, when the available domestic remedies are unreasonably time-consuming or ineffective. Nine climate complaints listed in Appendix A rely on this exception. So far, the exemption from the exhaustion of domestic remedies was granted only in Billy.

In Sacchi, the applicants argued that exhausting domestic remedies in all respondents’ States would be unreasonably burdensome and unlikely to bring effective relief. They justified their position, pointing to States’ immunity from foreign judicial proceedings, as well as the non-justiciability of some of the activities challenged in their complaint, such as diplomatic relations. The CRC was unpersuaded by this line of argumentation. It noted that the applicants had not even attempted to initiate domestic proceedings in the respondent States, whereas the latter were able to show that remedies were at least in principle available. The Committee found that applicants had failed to provide convincing reasons why they did not pursue domestic remedies, other than generally expressing doubts about their prospects of success. The Committee therefore concluded that the complaint was inadmissible, due to failure to exhaust domestic remedies.

The applicants in Billy had also not exhausted domestic remedies. However, they were able to show that Australian courts had previously ruled on the absence of a ‘duty of care’ by public authorities in environmental matters. For its part, the respondent State failed to point to the domestic remedies available to the applicants. The UN HRComm decided that, due to a lack of clarity on the remedies available to the applicants, the question of the exhaustion of domestic remedies could not be dissociated from an examination of the merits of the complaint.

It remains to be seen whether this line of argumentation will succeed in pending cases. As noted above, in Billy, there were evident...
flaws in the respondent State’s line of defence. The complaint was also structurally different from other pending complaints, as it targeted only one respondent State, on whose territory the alleged human rights violation had been committed. Instead, the applicants in a few pending complaints target multiple States, claiming that they cannot seek remedies in each respondent State. These applicants typically argue that seeking domestic remedies in each respondent State would be unreasonable and that a decision by an international human rights body would be much more effective, in terms of time and reach.91

3.2 Jurisdiction

Rules concerning individual communications typically specify that treaty monitoring bodies can receive complaints only from individuals ‘within the jurisdiction of a state party’.92 Jurisdiction is a serious obstacle to ‘transnational’ complaints, in which the applicant is not in the territory or under the control of the State where the alleged human rights violation has taken place.

For example, in Sacchi, applicants from 12 countries lodged a complaint against five States. This complaint may therefore be broken down into a ‘bundle’ of 56 individual transnational complaints.93 Transnational complaints such as this need to establish whether the defendant States exercise some form of jurisdiction over the applicants. In recent years, international human rights bodies have progressively developed the extraterritorial reach of States’ human rights obligations,94 with a specific environmental dimension.95 An advisory opinion by the IACtHR argues that, when transboundary environmental harm affects the enjoyment of human rights, the persons whose rights have been violated may be regarded as falling under the jurisdiction of a State ‘if there is a causal link between the event that originated in its territory and the human rights of people outside its territory’.96 According to the IACtHR, the conditions for establishing jurisdiction are that the State exercises effective control over the dangerous activities causing the harm and that the harm is foreseeable.97

The CRC applied the IACtHR’s reasoning on jurisdiction in Sacchi. The respondent States had argued that the applicants had failed to meet the jurisdictional requirement. The Committee rejected this argument and established that the alleged human rights abuses fell within the jurisdiction of the respondent States. First, it noted that scientific evidence attests that greenhouse gas emissions originating in the respondent States contribute to climate change and that the adverse effects thereof have implications on the enjoyment of human rights by individuals ‘both within as well as beyond the territory of the state party’.98 Second, the Committee reasoned that, due to their ability to regulate emitting activities and enforce legislation, the respondent States had ‘effective control’ over the source of the harm.99 Third, the Committee established that, under the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, every State is responsible for its own share of greenhouse gas emissions, as the collective nature of the problem does not impede the responsibility of individual States to arise ‘from the harm that the emissions originating within its territory may cause to children, whatever their location’.100 Finally, the Committee noted that the transboundary harm was foreseeable, due to the scientific evidence on climate change impacts and the fact that the respondent states had signed international treaties on climate change.101 Although this line of reasoning aligns the Committee with similar views expressed in domestic court judgements delivered in strategic climate litigation,102 Sacchi was dismissed as inadmissible, due to the lack of exhaustion of domestic remedies.

It remains to be seen how the matter of extraterritorial jurisdiction will be addressed in pending transnational complaints. In Duarte Agostinho the applicants claim that, by contributing to climate change, each of the respondent States exercises significant control over the applicants, whereas Portugal is not in a position to protect these alone.103 According to the applicants, these circumstances generate an exceptional situation, which entails that they fall within the jurisdiction of all the 33 respondent States.104 The applicants referred to the IACHR’s advisory opinion mentioned above, pursuant to which extraterritorial jurisdiction can be established when the State exercises effective control over the activities that caused the harm.105 The ECtHR is yet to pronounce itself on this matter. In the past the court has held that States’ jurisdiction is ‘primarily territorial’,106 but it has recognized exceptions when a State had ‘effective control’ over foreign territory or the specific person in question.107

91See, for example Duarte Agostinho (n 16) para 32.
92See, for example International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171 art 2(1); Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3 art 2(1); and CRC Optional Protocol (n 25) art 5.
93See, for example Gradio and M Mantovani, ‘No Kidding!’ Mapping Youth-Led Climate Change Litigation across the North–South Divide’ (Völkerrechtsblog, 23 March 2022).
94See, for example Sergio Euben Lopez Burgos v Uruguay, Communication no R12/52, UN Doc. A/36/40 (29 July 1981) para 12; Advisory Opinion OC-23/17 (n 15).
96Advisory Opinion OC-23/17 (In 15) 101.
97Ibid.
98Sacchi decision (n 18) para 10.9 (emphasis added).
99Ibid.
100Ibid para 10.10 (emphasis added).
101Ibid para 10.11.
102See the review of case law in Maxwell et al (n 49) 39, where the authors single out the following cases as examples of ‘strategic climate litigation’: Urgenda Foundation v The State of the Netherlands (2015) District Court ECLI:NL:RBBA:2015:7196; VZW Klimaatschap v Kingdom of Belgium & Others (2023) Court of First Instance of Brussels, No. 2015/5485/A; Neudauer and Others v Germany (2021) German Federal Constitutional Court 1 BvR 2656/18, 1 BvR 78/20, 1 BvR 288/20, 1 BvR 96/20, 1 BvR 78/20; Notre Affaire à Tous and Others v France (2021) Administrative Court of Paris No. 1,904,967, 1,904,968, 1,904,972, 1,904,976/4; Mathur et al v Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Ontario (2020) Ontario Superior Court CV-19-00631627; La Rosa v Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada (2020) Federal Court of Canada (2020) FC 1008; Backsen and Others v Germany (2019) Administrative Court Berlin VG 10 K 412.18; Environnement JEJesse v Canada (2019) Superior Court of Quebec No 500–06–2009455-183.
103Duarte Agostinho (n 16) Annex, para 21.
104Ibid Annex, para 22.
106Bankovic and others v Belgium and others App No 52207/99 (ECtHR, 12 December 2001) paras 59–61.
107See, for example Cyprus v Turkey App No 25781/94 (ECtHR, 10 May 2001); Òcalan v Turkey App No 59450/00 (ECtHR, 4 July 2006); Al-Skeini and others v the United Kingdom App No 55721/07, (ECtHR, 7 July 2011); Hirsi Jamaa and others v Italy App No 27765/09, (ECtHR, 23 February 2012); Jaloud v the Netherlands App No 47708/08 (ECtHR, 20 November 2014).
extraterritorial jurisdiction in Duarte Agostinho and similar climate complaints would arguably require a ‘subtle but important shift’ in the jurisprudence of the Court.

3.3 | Victimhood

Individual applicants before international human rights bodies must prove that they are victims of a violation of the rights enshrined in the relevant treaty. Thus, to satisfy the victim requirement, applicants must prove a direct link between the act or omission of the respondent State and the violation of their human rights. The violation must either be real, personal and significant or there must be a direct and immediate risk thereof. Although generally, this is a requirement for all individual communication procedures, the strictness with which it is enforced varies from one system to another. However, no actio popularis is admissible before international human rights bodies. At the admissibility stage, the victimhood hurdle was prima facie cleared in Teitiota, Sacchi and Billy.

In Teitiota, the UN HRC decided that the applicant’s complaint did not concern ‘a hypothetical future harm, but a real predicament’ and that ‘the risk of a violation of the right to life had been sufficiently substantiated’. In Sacchi, the CRC considered that young people are ‘particularly impacted by the effects of climate change, both in terms of the manner in which they experience such effects as well as the potential of climate change to affect them throughout their lifetime’. In Billy, the UN HRC found that the applicants had provided sufficient information on the ways in which they had personally been affected by the impacts of climate change.

However, human rights bodies typically need to ascertain whether the applicants have satisfied the victimhood requirement also at the merits stage. In Teitiota, the UN HRC rejected the complaint because it was not satisfied that the applicant would have been personally affected by a serious individualized risk, should he be sent back to Kiribati. The Committee reasoned that only in ‘extreme cases’ can it find a violation of the non-refoulement obligation stemming from the right to life based on a situation of ‘a serious and generalized risk’ in the country of origin. In the view of the Committee, the general situation in Kiribati did not qualify as an extreme case, as the country could, with the assistance of the international community, ‘take affirmative measures to protect and, where necessary, relocate its population’.

The Committee expressed a similar view in Billy. It found that Australia had failed to comply with its positive obligation to adopt ‘timely adequate’ adaptation measures to protect the applicants’ home, private and family life and their collective ability to maintain a traditional way of life and to transmit their customs and culture to future generations. However, the Committee did not find a violation of the right to life, as the applicants had not demonstrated a concrete and reasonably foreseeable risk to which their life would be exposed or shown the effects that climate change had already had on their health. As in Teitiota, the Committee emphasized that, in the 10–15 year period in which the islands would allegedly become uninhabitable, Australia could undertake preventative measures and, if necessary, relocate the applicants. The Committee did not pronounce itself on the alleged human rights violations associated with the state’s failure to mitigate climate change. Its refusal to engage with this subject matter has left open questions over the role of States’ human rights obligations concerning climate change mitigation.

It remains to be seen how the victimhood requirement will be interpreted in pending climate complaints. According to the ECtHR’s consolidated jurisprudence, a ‘sufficiently direct link’ has to be established between the applicant and the alleged violation of one or more rights enshrined in the Convention. The Court has considerably relaxed its stance on this matter over the years, especially in its so-called environmental case law. Even so, victimhood is likely to remain a considerable hurdle and climate applicants before the ECtHR has gone to great lengths to emphasize its specific vulnerability to climate impacts. For example, in Klimasenioren, some of the applicants alleged that they were directly and personally affected, because they suffer from serious illnesses that worsen as the temperature rises, such as asthma. The applicants have furthermore argued that they should not be denied victim status merely because a general public interest aligns with their particular interests, as ‘climate change measures can never benefit certain population groups exclusively’.

4 | INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS BODIES AND CLIMATE LITIGATION: WORTH LOOKING UP?

Climate litigation is on the rise globally, and this article has shown that climate change-related complaints before international human rights
bodies are following this tendency. Our systematic analysis of the 18 complaints listed in Appendix A identified early trends and peculiarities in this growing body of practice. Through these complaints, individuals and groups from all over the world have formulated grievances over human rights violations associated with climate change. In principle, these complaints provide avenues to enforce States’ international obligations and put pressure on States to make good on the pledges they made under international climate treaties. In practice, however, these complaints must overcome significant hurdles. Some have already been rejected on the basis of considerations related to lack of exhaustion of domestic remedies, jurisdiction, or compliance with victimhood requirements.

Recently, Billy became the first decision of an international human rights body granting the claims of climate applicants, at least in part. The decision was narrowly construed on the basis of the rights to culture and home, private and family life and only recognized human rights violations resulting from the State’s failure to undertake ‘timely adequate’ measures to ensure climate change adaptation. Human rights bodies have long argued that adaptation measures are a clear example of the action that states must take to comply with their human rights obligations. The decision, however, has left unaddressed questions over States’ human rights obligations concerning climate change mitigation, neither confirming nor disproving the reading of these obligations provided in some strategic domestic climate litigation.

This state of affairs makes it difficult to assess the role played by international human rights bodies in climate litigation. Other authors have pointed out that, even when they are dismissed, rejected or pending, complaints before international human rights bodies have already had some impact. Arguably, these complaints have put a ‘human face on climate change’ and pioneered a combination of scientific evidence, legal argumentation and testimonies that has been replicated by climate litigants all over the world. This judicial dialogue and cross-fertilization are evident in Sacchi, where, as noted above, the CRC applied the IACtHR’s interpretation of extraterritorial jurisdiction. This trend has also become manifest in domestic adjudication. In 2021, the Italian Court of Cassation cited Teitiota, asserting that national judges should consider environmental or climate degradation that may put at risk the personal dignity of asylum seekers in the country of origin.

The future impacts of complaints before international human rights bodies are equally difficult to predict. More complaints based on procedural obligations might be filed in the future, with international human rights bodies performing a more decisive role in the enforcement of extant climate laws and commitments, akin to that which they already perform in other areas of environmental governance.

Also be used for inter-State complaints. Although so far this possibility has been the subject of scholarly speculation alone, the ripening momentum for an advisory opinion on climate change discussed in this special issue may pave the way to inter-State complaints concerning climate change before international human rights bodies.

The former UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment, John Knox, cautioned about the dangers associated with ‘treating climate change as a series of individual transboundary harms, rather than as a global threat to human rights’. Indeed, one should not lose sight of the fact that, even with favourable outcomes, the remedies that international human rights bodies can provide to the manifold challenges of climate change are limited. Clearly, these bodies are ill-equipped to determine the climate policy of States or to order their proper enforcement. However imperfect, international human rights bodies provide a tool to scrutinize the implementation of States’ nationally determined contributions, long-term low greenhouse gas emission development strategies and national adaptation plans submitted under the Paris Agreement. They can deliver—and have already issued some—guidance, which can be used in domestic judicial proceedings. In sum, the practice reviewed in this article confirms that international human rights bodies can help bridge the accountability gap plaguing global climate governance. To break this impasse, it definitely seems worth it to keep looking up.

Although the article is the result of a joint research effort, Annalisa Savaresi was the lead author of Sections 1, 2.1, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6 and 4, whereas Riccardo Luporini was the lead author of Sections 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3 and Appendix A.

**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the databases curated by the Sabin Centre for Climate Change Law at Colombia Law School [http://climatecasechart.com/] and by the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at the London School of Economics [http://www.climate-laws.org].

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123See, for example A/HRC/31/52 (n 1) paras 68–70; and A/74/161 (n 1) paras 84–86.
125 Jodoin et al (n 75).
126 See L. v Italian Ministry of the Interior and Attorney General at the Court of Appeal of Ancona, Corte di Cassazione (Sez. II Civile) No 5022, Judgement of 24 February 2021.

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129 Savaresi and Auz (n 10); Savaresi (n 13); Luporini and Kodiveri (n 6).
## APPENDIX A


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (year)</th>
<th>Human rights body</th>
<th>Exhaustion of domestic remedies</th>
<th>Type of applicant and defendant</th>
<th>Type of climate action</th>
<th>Human rights used as legal basis</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inuit (2005) IACommHR</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Applicant: a group of indigenous peoples and one NGO&lt;br&gt;Defendant: State other than the applicants’ State of residence</td>
<td>Mitigation and adaptation</td>
<td>Rights to life, residence and movement, culture, property, health, physical integrity and security</td>
<td>Dismissed (admissibility)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athabaskan (2013) IACommHR</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Applicant: a group of indigenous peoples and four individuals&lt;br&gt;Defendant: State of the applicants but some applicants not resident in that State</td>
<td>Mitigation and adaptation</td>
<td>Rights to culture, property, means of subsistence, health</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teitiota (2015) UN HRC</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Applicant: one individual&lt;br&gt;Defendant: only the State of residence of the applicant</td>
<td>Climate change-induced displacement</td>
<td>Right to life</td>
<td>Dismissed (merits)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacchi (2019) UN CRC</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Applicant: 16 children from 12 States&lt;br&gt;Defendant: State of the applicants as well as other States</td>
<td>Mitigation</td>
<td>Children's rights to life, health, culture and best interest of the child</td>
<td>Dismissed (admissibility)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy (2019) UN HRC</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Applicant: a group of eight indigenous peoples&lt;br&gt;Defendant: State of the applicants</td>
<td>Mitigation and adaptation</td>
<td>Rights to culture, privacy, family and home, life</td>
<td>Granted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duarte Agostinho (2020) ECtHR</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Applicant: four children and two young adults&lt;br&gt;Defendant: State of the applicants as well as other States</td>
<td>Mitigation</td>
<td>Rights to life, private and family life and prohibition of discrimination</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights of Indigenous People in Addressing Climate-Forced Displacement (2020) 10 Special Procedures of the UN HRC</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Applicant: one NGO&lt;br&gt;Defendant: State of the applicant</td>
<td>Adaptation and loss and damage</td>
<td>Rights to life, self-determination, culture, food, water, adequate standard of living, health and not to be discriminated</td>
<td>Pending (Communication sent to the US; reply pending)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klima-seniorinnen (2021) ECHR</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Applicant: one NGO and four individuals&lt;br&gt;Defendant: State of the applicants</td>
<td>Mitigation</td>
<td>Rights to life, private and family life, fair trial and effective remedy</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mülner (2021) ECHR</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Applicant: 1 individual&lt;br&gt;Defendant: State of the applicant</td>
<td>Mitigation</td>
<td>Rights to private and family life, life, fair trial and effective remedy</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenpeace Nordic (2021) ECHR</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Applicant: two NGOs and six young individuals&lt;br&gt;Defendant: State of the applicants</td>
<td>Mitigation (oil and gas licences)</td>
<td>Rights to life, private and family life, effective remedy and prohibition of discrimination</td>
<td>Pending</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name (year)</td>
<td>Human rights body</td>
<td>Exhaustion of domestic remedies</td>
<td>Type of applicant and defendant</td>
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<td>11. Carême (2021)</td>
<td>ECtHR</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Applicant: one individual</td>
<td>Defendant: State of the applicant</td>
<td>Mitigation</td>
<td>Rights to private and family life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Uricchio (2021)</td>
<td>ECtHR</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Applicant: one young individual</td>
<td>Defendant: State of the applicants as well as other States</td>
<td>Mitigation</td>
<td>Rights to life, private and family life, effective remedy and prohibition of discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. De Conto (2021)</td>
<td>ECtHR</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Applicant: one young individual</td>
<td>Defendant: State of the applicants as well as other States</td>
<td>Mitigation</td>
<td>Rights to life, private and family life, effective remedy and prohibition of discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Environmental Justice Australia (2021)</td>
<td>UN HRC Special Procedures</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Applicant: one NGO and five young individuals</td>
<td>Defendant: State of the applicants</td>
<td>Mitigation</td>
<td>Children's rights, indigenous peoples' rights, right to a healthy environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Violations of Human Rights by Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH) and China due to Coal Fired Plants (2021)</td>
<td>UN HRC Special Procedures</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Applicant: NGOs</td>
<td>Defendant: the State where the alleged human rights violations occurred and the State that has control over the source of the alleged harm</td>
<td>Mitigation (emissions from specific coal-fired power plants)</td>
<td>Rights to life, liberty and security, right to adequate standard of living, right to health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Soubeste (2022)</td>
<td>ECtHR</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Applicant: five young European citizens</td>
<td>Defendant: State of the applicants as well as other States</td>
<td>Mitigation</td>
<td>Right to life, right to be free of inhuman or degrading treatment, right to respect for their private and family life and prohibition of discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Humane Being (2022)</td>
<td>ECtHR</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Applicant: NGO and individuals</td>
<td>Defendant: State of the applicants</td>
<td>Mitigation (from factory farming)</td>
<td>Right to life, right to be free of inhuman or degrading treatment, right to respect for their private and family life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Plan B (2022)</td>
<td>ECtHR</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Applicant: NGO and four individuals (three of which are young)</td>
<td>Defendant: State of the applicants</td>
<td>Mitigation, adaptation, climate finance and loss and damage</td>
<td>Right to life, right to respect for their private and family life, right to be free of inhuman or degrading treatment and prohibition of discrimination, right to a fair trial, right to an effective remedy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Riccardo Luporini** is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in International Law at the Sant’Anna School of Advanced Studies, where he obtained his PhD with a thesis investigating the intersections between climate change, disasters and human rights under international law. He is currently serving as course tutor and key faculty member of the Jean Monnet Module on ‘European and International Human Rights Standards in Disaster Settings’. Riccardo is also a national rapporteur for Italy at the global climate litigation database of the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia University. Previously, he served as Assistant to the Special Rapporteur on the topic ‘Protection of Persons in the Event of Disasters’ at the 68th session of the UN International Law Commission, worked as a Blue Book Trainee at DG ECHO, European Commission and was a Visiting PhD Fellow at the Centre for International Law and Governance (CILG) and the Copenhagen Center for Disaster Research (COPE), University of Copenhagen.

**Annalisa Savaresi** is Associate Professor of International Environmental Law at the Center for Climate Change, Energy and Environmental Law, University of Eastern Finland, where she serves as Director for the Joint Nordic Master Programme in Environmental Law. She furthermore holds a senior research fellowship at the University of Stirling, UK, and visiting professorships at the University of Bologna (Italy) and La Sabana (Colombia). Annalisa has 20 years’ experience working with international and nongovernmental organizations. Her list of publications includes over 50 peer-reviewed articles and contributions to highly regarded collections. Her work has been cited widely, including by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Annalisa currently is Director for Europe of the Global Network on Human Rights and the Environment, associate editor of the Review of European, Comparative and International Law and member of the IUCN World Commission on Environmental Law. She has given evidence to the UK, the EU and Scottish Parliaments.