The multifaceted conflicts of civil action on climate feature both legal successes and difficult applications

Since 2015, civil society has diversified its repertoire of actions and radicalized its positions, multiplying conflicts and leading to contested major infrastructure projects being abandoned (Notre Dame des Landes, Yasuni...).

Shareholder activism is on the increase, but shareholder-supported resolutions are less likely to win the confidence of general assembly meetings than those tabled by the company’s board.

Use of legal proceedings to challenge a government policy or a company strategy has a high success rate in the courts. On a case-by-case basis, the effectiveness of the implementation of decisions has yet to be assessed.

The increasingly frequent use of law or legislation to confer rights on nature, ecosystems or animals is gaining in popularity.

### KEY FIGURES

**Double-edged conflicts for the most vulnerable**

- **649 conflicts observed** from 1997 to 2019 on fossil energy projects (371) and low-carbon projects (278) (Temper et al., 2020).
- **15% of contested projects** have been cancelled, suspended, or seen investment withdrawn (ibid.).
- **10% of conflicts** have led to the assassination of an activist (ibid.), in particular among indigenous communities. 1,910 ecological activists were killed between 2012 and 2023 (Global Witness, 2023).

**Shareholder activism pushes corporate ambitions**

- **182 resolutions on climate** filed by shareholders at corporate AGMs in 2023 (Ademe, French SIF, 2023).
- **17.4% average approval** of shareholder resolutions at AGMs in 2023, compared to 90% average approval for “Say on climate” board resolutions (ibid.).
- **31% of shareholder resolutions** are withdrawn following an agreement with the company, with the formulation of an emissions or offset target, or a transition plan (ibid.).

**Rise in legal action since 2015**

- **2,341 climate litigation cases** observed from 1986 to 2023; 2/3 were filed 2015 onwards. 9 cases in 10 were pursued by NGOs last year, mostly in the Global North (LSE, 2023).
- **55% of decisions** made were favourable to the climate (ibid.).
- **457 “ecological jurisprudence” initiatives** listed in 44 countries in 2022 (since 1969); +130% compared to 2015 (198). 75% aim to grant rights of nature to an ecosystem or animals (Kauffman, 2023).
- **70% of ecological jurisprudence initiatives** are adopted; only 16% are rejected (ibid.).

### CASE STUDIES

- **GEORGIA** • Gender-sensitive energy cooperatives in rural areas (2022)
- **ULAANBAATAR** • An ecosystem for the thermal insulation of precarious housing (2021)
- **PARIS GOOD FASHION** • Making Paris the capital of sustainable fashion (2021)

### TRENDS

- Rights of nature as a bastion against the destruction of natural ecosystems (2022)
- “Yes, in my backyard!” Under pressure, international competition for strategic minerals required for the energy transition intensifies (2021)
- Community forestry in Central Africa: Still a fragile sustainable forest management model (2021)

### FURTHER READING
From legal action to civil disobedience: the multifaceted conflicts of climate governance are reshaping the action of civil society

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The signature of the Paris Agreement in 2015 opened a new phase in climate governance, less centred on negotiations between the Parties and more focused on a call for action and performance from those responsible for its implementation. The proliferation of climate governance spaces outside institutional United Nations spheres, coupled with a new repertoire of civil society contention have led to a more “conflictual” relationship between activists and decision-makers. The trend is illustrated through three movements observed since 2015: the politicization of climate activism through civil disobedience, a growing demand for corporate accountability, and collective action through legal disputes.

Civil disobedience, an assertive politicization of the fight against climate change

The increasing attention paid to non-state action on climate since the signature of the Paris Agreement has “opened new struggle fronts and shifted [climate movements] away from the UN process as the only avenue for mobilization”\(^1\). Climate activism has undergone two major changes due to this shift over the last seven years. On the one hand, the repertoire of contention has moved beyond “expert” science-based forms that tend to inspire and influence public action through institutional avenues (lobbying, advocacy, etc.). In adopting strategies of civil disobedience and mass mobilization, climate movements have reshaped environmental action, while remaining firmly rooted in the fertile breeding ground of political and social struggle. These new forms of action mark the second change: an increasing politicization of some militant environmentalist viewpoints, tying up with feminist, antiracist and anti-capitalist narratives or with grassroots struggles against infrastructure plans or power installations.

In late 2018, the emergence of the public figure Greta Thunberg saw the start of a wave of “climate strikes” initiated by youth organizations like Fridays for Future and Youth for Climate. These demonstrations proliferated throughout the world, with no local protest base, and with the aim of calling out public powers and inciting...
them to take action. The highpoint came in 2019, when up to 250,000 demonstrators gathered in New York, and 2,500 events were identified in 117 countries in September. These mass mobilizations had an immediate negative impact on the stock prices of the biggest emitting companies in Europe, and saw a spike in web searches on climate change. These exceptionally large, fairly conventional mobilizations have become a matter of course at international meetings: 100,000 people descended into the streets of Glasgow in the lead up to COP26.

The increasing use of non-violent civil disobedience has opened up more conflictual forms of expression to put pressure on actors. The creation of Extinction Rebellion (XR) in October 2018 in the United Kingdom, which spread to 87 countries through 1,022 local groups, has drawn the biggest numbers and media attention, and inspired the creation of other movements. In 2020, 1,000 scientists gathered under the banner of Scientist Rebellion to make a new call for civil disobedience. Established tools of ecological and social struggles like destruction of property, blockades and sabotage, have gradually been mobilized for the climate, taking new spectacular forms or borrowed from former social movements: soup thrown on Van Gogh paintings by Just Stop Oil in October 2022, happenings at sports events (like Wimbledon and the Tour de France), blockades at the headquarters of companies attending their general assemblies, etc. These actions mainly target fossil energy companies. Every year since 2015, Ende Gelände for example organizes a blockade at coal mines in Germany, rallying militants throughout Europe; in October 2016, five members of the group Climate Direct Action, aka the “Valve turners”, simultaneously shut five pipelines in the USA. After four years of existence, XR UK nevertheless decided to put “public disruption” into the background and instead “prioritise attendance over arrest and relationships over roadblocks”.

With what outcome? In July 2023, the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice platform listed 3,900 cases of past and present environmental conflicts since 1975. Out of 649 conflicts related to fossil energy infrastructures (371) and low-carbon installations (278) identified from 1997 to 2019 in 106 countries, 104 (16%) were either cancelled, suspended, or subject to an investment withdrawal. Projects for oil and gas infrastructures and mines are more resilient to opposition because they depend on fixed, localized resources. However, coal and nuclear power plant projects are more frequently cancelled and suspended because they can be moved elsewhere. Controversial solar and wind power projects are more likely to be suspended than cancelled. Rural inhabitants (involved in 71% of cases) and indigenous peoples (58%) are overrepresented in these conflicts, while only 5% of projects are considered to be urban (FIGURE 1).

FIGURE 1
MOST FREQUENTLY MOBILIZED ACTORS BY TYPE OF CONFLICT
Source: Temper et al., 2020
Since 2015, opponents to energy and mining projects have made significant victories. After a decade of opposition, Joe Biden blocked the permit granted to the Keystone XL pipeline in June 2021. In January 2022, the Serbian government finally revoked Rio Tinto group’s operating licence to open one of the world’s biggest lithium mines in the Jadar River Valley. Plans to develop lithium mines by Savannah Resources in Portugal, in a region classed as part of the World Agricultural Heritage, or Thacker Pass in the United States, have also met with local opposition, at a time when nations are looking for ways to reduce their dependence on imports of strategic metals for the transition (lithium, nickel, cobalt, rare earths, etc.). The trend clashes with the mineral sovereignty policies of economies implementing the energy transition (cf. INDUTRY TRENDS). In France, the scrapping of the airport project at Notre-Dame-des-Landes in 2018, after more than 45 years of legal battles and ten years of occupation of the land by activists, marked a decisive turning point in the history of local struggles in the country, inspiring by new movements such as the Soulèvements de la terre (Earth uprisings).

One-third of the 649 energy conflicts mentioned above have led to a repressive response or a form of criminalization, and 10% of the cases studied ended up with the assassination of an activist. According to the authors, oppositions against fossil and renewable energy projects are similarly intense. According to the NGO Global Witness, 1,910 environmental activists were killed from 2012 to 2023, with a peak in 2020 (227 deaths). The victims included journalists, park rangers, and members of indigenous communities, with the vast majority of the murders taking place in the Global South, and half in Latin America. Brazil, Colombia, the Philippines, Mexico and Honduras are the countries most at risk (FIGURE 2). Thirty-six percent of victims recorded in 2022 were from indigenous communities residing in low-income countries.

Companies are now the target of anti-corporate activism... and shareholder activism

The Paris Agreement shifted the climate action regime towards a “pledge and review” style of governance: ambitious, global targets are set (pledge) to which the signatory Parties voluntarily contribute through regularly reviewed, flexible commitments (review). Consequently, the latitude given to actors to contribute to global targets has generated high expectations from the private sector. This new pressure on corporate commitment comes from both outside and inside organizations. The main objective pursued by “anti-corporate” activism, which comes from the outside, is to attack companies’ value, by proposing alternative valuations, for example looking at environmental damage or the violation of human rights caused by economic activity. “Name and shame” is a particularly widespread practice. The comic “Fossil of the Day” ceremonies organized by the Climate Action Network at the COP, or the ratings of banks connected to fossil fuel industries produced by Reclaim Finance participate, to different extents, in putting pressure on actors by exposing their poor or insufficient environmental performances to the general public. The expected impact is not necessarily to shift the company’s strategy itself, but rather...
to create media attention and public awareness, and influence legislation, according to sociologist Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier. While some studies have analysed the impacts and motivations of name and shame against states, few analyses provide proof of how efficient this strategy is against companies.

FIGURE 3
AVERAGE APPROVAL RATES OF SHAREHOLDER RESOLUTIONS FOR THE CLIMATE IN 2023, BY COUNTRY
Source: Ademe, French SIF, 2023

Unlike “name and shame” practices, shareholder advocacy aims to maintain a company’s value by influencing its decisions from the inside, maintaining shareholder dialogue throughout the year and proposing resolutions at general assemblies. No known source has reported an aggregated analysis of global trends but in 2023, Ademe and the French Sustainable Investment Forum started to gather and analyse the statistics. Of the 182 shareholder resolutions related to the climate recorded in the world in 2023, the average approval rate was 17.4%, with only one resolution adopted, by Coterra Energy. Approval rates vary from one country to another (FIGURE 3). In contrast, the number of “Say on Climate” resolutions made by corporate managements, which dropped from 48 in 2022 to 23 in 2023, obtained an average approval rate of 89.9% globally.

Most shareholder resolutions are filed in the United States and Japan. In 2023, 193 shareholder resolutions on the environment were put to the vote at the AGMs of the 3,000 biggest US companies (Russell 3000 index), an increase since 2022 (172). Of these resolutions, the vast majority (138) related to the company’s climate policy: 80 concerned the reduction of GHG emissions, of which 23 called for Scope 3 reporting and/or objectives; 60 environmental resolutions were withdrawn following agreement with the company, and 89 were put to the vote; only 2 obtained a majority.

A low level of favourable votes is not necessarily a sign that a resolution has failed; on the contrary, companies increasingly tend to seek prior agreement with shareholders to avoid a vote at the AGM. Of the 256 shareholder resolutions on climate identified by Ceres in 2023, 79 were withdrawn after an agreement was reached with the company. In 55% of cases, these agreements related to the formulation of an emissions target or of a transition plan, offsets, or a combination of the above.

Climate-related litigation sees success in court but limited application

Collective action by civil society began to make greater use of the law and climate litigation starting from 2015. Of the 2,341 climate lawsuits recorded in the Sabin Center Climate Change Litigation Database from 1986 to May 2023, almost two-thirds (1,557) were opened after 2015. Undeniably, the signature of the Paris Agreement has had an accelerating effect (FIGURE 4). The large majority of these lawsuits are filed in the Global North, increasingly by NGOs (90% in the twelve months leading up to June 2022). Historically, governments (national and sub-national) have been the main target. However, since 2021, lawsuits increasingly involve companies.

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a Ademe, the French Sustainable Investment Forum and Freshfields work with data from the Shareholder Service (ISS).
b A network of businesses and investors founded in 1989 following the Exxon-Valdez oil spill in order to improve their practices.
More and more of these lawsuits are “strategic” in nature, according to Grantham Institute authors. In other words, they are seen by the plaintiffs “as a tool to influence policy outcomes and/or to change corporate and societal behaviour”, beyond the case of the defendant. They are therefore generally accompanied by large-scale advocacy campaigns by an NGO, individual, member of parliament, or political party, to bring out a key message: e.g. the accelerated phase-out of fossil fuels in a lawsuit against an oil company. This is the case for almost 80% of litigation brought against companies between 2015 and 2022. The last two years saw a diversification of sectors targeted by legal proceedings, due to the numerous lawsuits aimed at making companies accountable for their climate commitments. In Europe, the “duty of care” was retained by the International Court of Justice in The Hague which, referred to by seven NGOs, judged Shell’s GHG reduction strategy to be insufficient and ordered the company to reduce its emissions by 45% by 2030.

Ultimately, almost 55% of the 549 intermediate or final court decisions have ruled in favour of the climate (FIGURE 5). Nevertheless, the symbolic and media scope of decisions is often greater than their actual legal scope. Among the emblematic cases of recent years, State of the Netherlands vs. Urgenda Foundation created a symbolic precedent when in December 2019 the Supreme Court of the Netherlands ruled illegal the Netherlands state’s lack of ambition to reach its 2020 emissions reduction targets. Although it did not force the state to take measures to reach its target, the decision put genuine pressure on the government at the point of presenting its integrated national energy and climate plan for 2021-2030 to the European Commission. In France, since October 2020, when the government was condemned for its climate inaction following an initiative by the town of Grande-Synthe, it is obliged by the Council of State, the highest civil jurisdiction, to regularly produce appropriate measures.

Among the adverse rulings for plaintiffs, the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom overruled a tribunal decision judging the construction of a third runway at Heathrow airport (London) illegal because it did not respect the Paris Agreement, arguing that the ratification of the agreement did not bind the government in this case. In the United States, the lawsuit filed by the State of New York against ExxonMobil alleging misstatements and omissions made to investors on its knowledge of climate change impacts led to a defeat for the prosecution. In February and July 2023, two cases made against TotalEnergies for failing its duty of care were dismissed, since the
prosecuting NGO coalition had avoided the negotiation phase prior to legal action. In addition, only a small number of legal proceedings “non-aligned on climate” have been launched since 2015 (16) with a view to contesting the application scope of a law, obtaining compensation for stranded assets due to political decisions, or dissuading actors committed to the climate from pursuing their efforts. For example, in November 2022, the lawsuit by Uniper and RWE claiming compensation from the Dutch government for stranded assets due to the scheduled phase-out of coal-fired electricity power stations was finally dismissed.27

Another study by the Grantham Institute examined the impact of complaints or legal decisions against a company on its market value, by examining 108 cases related to the climate from 2005 to 2021. Although the companies’ value had diminished in modest proportions (between 0.4 and 1.5%), the authors esteemed that it was a sign that the companies were just as exposed to the risk of litigation as to the risks of transition and physical risks.28

Some plaintiffs go so far as to seek legal recognition for a causal link between a company’s activities and its impact on climate change. In 2022, fishermen on the island of Pulau Pari in Indonesia – which is threatened by rising sea levels – launched legal proceedings against the cement manufacturers Lafarge and Holcim. Considering that these companies were responsible for 0.42% of historical global emissions,29 the accusers, supported by the NGO Swiss Church Aid HEKS/EPER, claimed compensation of about €3,500 each – the equivalent of 0.42% of the anticipated costs of redeveloping the damaged areas and adapting the island to higher sea levels – and new emissions reduction targets for the shorter term.30 Similarly, for the first time in the history of climate litigation, in May 2022, German judges travelled abroad, to Peru, to evaluate the responsibility of RWE in the shrinking of the glacier lake Palcacocha, whose volume has been divided by 34 in 50 years. The instigator of the complaint was a mountain guide, who is claiming $20,000 to cover part of the costs of preventing damage from a potentially devastating outburst flood.31
This increasing recourse to legal measures for climate action has also been fuelled by “ecological jurisprudence”, a trend that attempts to use legal means to shield natural entities and ecosystems from anthropocentric utilitarianism, at the same time as recognizing the human right to a healthy environment. In January 2023, the Eco Jurisprudence Monitor platform listed 457 initiatives of this type engaged in 44 countries around the world (FIGURE 6).32 The movement has grown since the early 2000s and even more so since the Paris Agreement: only 198 initiatives were listed in 2015 (+130%). These initiatives are relatively successful, with an adoption rate of 70%, and only 16% rejections (the others are pending or quashed).

Ecological jurisprudence covers two major types of action: those based on rights (74%), and those based on responsibility (26%). Rights-based initiatives aim at recognition of legal personhood, human attributes (in particular for animal rights) or relational dependencies between natural entities that justify moral, legal protection. Responsibility-based approaches draw from indigenous knowledge to obtain recognition of a responsibility for care, or scientific knowledge to justify the maintenance of an ecosystem’s ecological functions and preserve it from damage (e.g. via recognition of the crime of ecocide). Ecological jurisprudence is based on a wide range of legal provisions, dominated by court decisions (28%) and local legislation (25%) (FIGURE 7).

Eighty percent of initiatives are concentrated on the American continent, with strong geographic polarisations: 82% of initiatives appealing to local law took place in the USA, while 69% of court decisions made in Latin America were in Ecuador. The inclusion of the rights of nature in the Ecuadorian constitution in 2008 has therefore had an impact. In March 2023, a regional court for example revoked the permits granted to two companies to open a sulphur mine in the Intag Valley in the heart of the Tropical Andes, the world’s biggest biodiversity “hotspot”, judging that they had violated constitutional law that requires consulting communities.33 In August, 5.2 million Ecuadorian citizens taking part in a referendum launched by popular initiative rejected the exploitation of oil fields located in the Yasuni National Park, after ten years of legal battles led by environmental activists and indigenous peoples.

Yet implementation often proves a sticking point once the legal decision is made. In Colombia, the legal personhood granted to the Colombian Amazon by the Supreme Court in 2019 resulting in an order to the state to take the necessary steps to reduce deforestation has not yet borne fruit.35 In the United States, the application of local laws granting rights to natural entities is contingent on the two-party political system and its divisions.
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