

Use of International Litigation by Small Countries to Pursue Climate Goals

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Abstract. Climate change poses a survival threat to small countries, especially island nations. These countries have limited resources and are vulnerable to extreme weather events, and thus are particularly affected by environmental degradation. Despite the limited economic and political power of these countries, they are increasingly turning to international litigation, demanding that the major polluting countries take responsibility. Recent developments, such as the request for advice from the ICJ and the ITLOS reflect a growing trend of small countries seeking laws that clarify their national obligations on climate change. Small countries hope to safeguard their rights through international legal channels, influence global climate governance and promote the strengthening of environmental protection. This paper will focus on discussing how small countries use international litigation to advance climate goals. Especially focusing on case studies of the advisory opinion mentioned by the ICJ and ITLOS and the legal analysis of treaties by the UN Charter, the research discovered the ways that the international litigation can be possible effective. The paper argues that strategic use of small countries bandwagon together, interpreting clearly of treaties and strengthen the efficacy of legal enforcement can enable the vulnerable states to contribute meaningfully to the global climate governance regime.

Keywords: International climate litigation, small countries, enforcement

1. Introduction

In a remote village in western Nepal, 11-year-old Sabu and his friends face dangers such as landslides, road erosion and flooding of houses and farmlands on their way to school. They live in anxiety and uncertainty, having to trudge through muddy roads every day. Alice Akunga, the representative of UNICEF in Nepal, said this was a huge burden for the children. Thousands of kilometers away in the Maldives, waves erode the coastline, inundate houses and wash away infrastructure. Children grow up in fear of losing their islands. Edward Adai, the UNICEF representative in the Maldives, pointed out that soil erosion is a reality that children face every day [1].

Climate variation is one of the most serious issue among the world, particularly it brings huge threaten for small countries and developing countries. Most of this countries face the problem of scarce resource, weak economic and frequent climate disaster, however this only stands for a very small proportion of the total emission in the whole world. In traditional international relations, due

to the lack of military and economic strength, small countries have limited voice and influence in climate governance. Therefore, how to break through the limitations of the traditional power structure and seek effective ways to promote global climate goals has become an issue that urgently needs attention at present.

Through recent years, international prosecution have become a necessary mean for small countries to strive for climate justice and promote rule change. Especially international litigation cases presented in the form of Advisory opinions are reshaping the legal context of global climate governance.

Small countries mainly include small island developing states and economies recognized as low or low to moderate income by the World Bank. These countries often have limited land area, small population size and a single economic structure. They overly rely on tourism, fishery or the export of a few primary products, and thus have extremely weak resilience to shocks. In the global climate crisis, they are the first to be hit: rising sea levels are devouring low-lying atolls, and the significant rise in the occurrence and strengthen of supreme weather events is constantly destroying their critical infrastructure and sources of livelihood.

Although there are plenty of research focuses on legal responsibilities and domestic climate litigation pathway, discussions on how small countries can enhance their influence and promote climate justice through litigation under the frame of law of nations are still insufficient. This article will focus on how small countries can influence the international community's climate governance agenda through advisory opinion in international litigation, by means of collective voice, normative construction, and rule interpretation.

The use of international litigation is the most effective address climate change when some of the small countries can gather together to form a larger organization and at the same time the laws can be explained accurate and clearly. If small countries can form an alliance and file a lawsuit against major emitters at the ICJ in the name of the collective, it will not only amplify the volume of negotiations but also, through the court's clear interpretation of climate responsibility, transform "common but differentiated responsibilities" into binding compensation obligations, thereby compelling major countries to reduce emissions and strive for financial and technical assistance.

2. Literature review

There is a substantial amount of research on how small countries can use international litigation to advance climate goals. Also relevant to this paper is previous work examine the possible responsibilities that a country is supposed to do. The existing literature on ICJ, climate prosecute and obligations of countries are reviewed in this chapter.

As Opportunity Green pointed out, the article discusses the advisory opinion of the ITLOS in Case 31, which clarifies the obligations of all countries to respond to the climate crisis and protect the Marine environment from greenhouse gas emissions in conformity to the UNCLOS. The report suggests that countries adopt domestic legislation to mitigate the impact of shipping and aviation on the climate, reduce the pollution of greenhouse gases to the ocean, and enhance cooperation and take actions within the IMO and the ICAO This article emphasizes that developed countries should provide financial assistance to developing countries. Furthermore, it Outlines the obligations of each country to consider the existing best science, the 1.5°C temperature target and timetable, as well as the specific responsibilities related to greenhouse gas emissions and support for developing countries [2].

2.1. Small countries

2.1.1. Treaty-based legal foundations

Opportunity Green asserts, "States are required to take all measures necessary to prevent damage to other states and their environment under article 194(2) from activities within their jurisdiction or control" [2]. This means that small countries can use this treaty to prosecute polluters whose emissions threaten their territories. By enforcing action against these polluters, small nations can push for international measures to reduce emissions. This legal framework supports small countries in advancing their climate goals by holding large polluting nations accountable.

2.1.2. Contentious legal debates and differing state positions

In their 2025 study, Jorge Alejandro Carrillo Bañuelos and Maria Antonia Tigre examine the second question of Part 3 in a three-part analysis, which outlines central legal arguments raised during the ICJ hearings on the request for an advisory opinion concerning states' responsibilities in the context of climate change. Smaller nations assert that the granting of permits for activities that do not involve emission reductions amounts to an internationally wrongful act [3]. They maintain that those responsible for pollution should face three specific consequences for their conduct. On the contrary, the major emitters adopt a different stance, centering their arguments on the protection of their sovereign rights. Some of these states argue that existing international agreements merely recognize losses without creating any duty of compensation, while others claim that proving a direct connection between emissions and specific damages is overly complicated. In response, smaller countries argue that state accountability must take into account both past and present contributions to greenhouse gas emissions.

2.1.3. Representative legal arguments from states

Jorge Alejandro Carrillo Bañuelos and Maria Antonia Tigre observed that certain nations, including Barbados, Chile, and Seychelles have challenged the positions put forward by major greenhouse gas emitters. Barbados maintained that no significant emitting country can escape its duty to offer compensation simply because other large emitters acted collectively. The nation contended that "states are collectively and individually liable for shared wrongful actions" and that the duty to provide restitution is not limited to individual responsibility. Chile pointed out that "attribution may be determined based on widely accepted scientific agreement," [3] a matter that would likely be examined in adversarial legal processes. This line of reasoning implies that judicial bodies could utilize both present and historical emissions data to assess contributions to climate change. This perspective reinforces the principle that while numerous nations contribute to global greenhouse gas emissions, no individual nation should be exempt from accountability. This strengthens the legal standing of smaller countries, allowing them to pursue remedies through international legal channels and demand accountability from major polluters.

2.1.4. Procedural role of advisory opinions

According to a report by Reporter, China voiced approval for judicial bodies exercising advisory jurisdiction within the bounds of the law, stressing that such courts should prioritize interpreting current legal frameworks rather than drafting new ones. This stance is especially advantageous for smaller nations, as it would assist the ICJ in offering more precise interpretations of current state

duties. Greater legal clarity would, in turn, pressure industrialized nations to more rigorously meet their climate-related obligations [4].

Shirley V. Scott also touches on the topic of climate litigation, highlighting how small countries, such as Vanuatu, are striving to create "climate security" as a prosecutable issue. By using the ICJ and ITLOS, small countries aim to draw developed nations into the debate and compel them to take responsibility [5].

2.2. Large countries

2.2.1. Legal resistance from major emitters

On the other hand, some countries such as Japan, Germany, and South Korea have argued that, although Article 8 of the Paris Agreement acknowledges the importance of addressing loss and damage due to climate change, it doesn't create a legal foundation for compensation or liability. These arguments highlight the challenges small countries face in advancing climate goals, as they may encounter resistance from major polluters who do not believe they should face legal consequences for emissions [3].

2.2.2. Legal issues raised in ICJ advisory opinion case

The International Bar Association examines small states' actions in the ICJ case, beginning with Vanuatu's landmark case. It raises two critical legal issues: the obligations of states to combat the climate emergency and the legal consequences of failing to meet these obligations [6]. The article presents data on submitted comments and addresses concerns from developing countries about whether state obligations extend beyond the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC. The discussion includes treaty and customary law obligations, specific polluters, and alternatives to the ICJ. It underscores the significance of the advisory opinion, particularly related to issues such as wildfires, flooding, and the 2024 temperature rise exceeding 1.5°C.

2.2.3. Domestic courts and litigation as enforcement tools

Thiam, Sandra Nichols, and Jarryd C. Page further explore climate litigation as a tool for enforcement, addressing issues such as GHG reduction, climate change's impacts, and compensation for damages. The authors stress the importance of holding parties accountable for their impacts on public health and property. The effects of climatic variation worsen, domestic courts are playing an increasingly important role in shaping governance and advancing global climate goals. This article highlights the inadequacy of current Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and provides examples of nations prompting the UN to call for an advisory opinion. It introduces the concept of "ecocide" and discusses how litigation can enhance accountability, with the ICJ potentially transforming global climate goals into enforceable legal obligations [7].

3. Hypothesis

This paper advances the argument that international litigations are not merely as excuses by developed countries to escape from obligations, but as an instrument for small countries to advance climate goals and to protect their own territories. Drawing on insights from climate changes, power is not liability and Rights protection in small countries, the paper formulates three core hypotheses to guide its empirical inquiry.

H1: Within 24 months of the first favorable judgment for a small state, at least three additional small states will file copy-cat suits, forming a strategic-litigation club. The demonstration effect of the first victory - As long as one small country benefits from a climate lawsuit, other small countries will take it as a "template" and jointly turn litigation into a new tool for collective bargaining.

H2: Small islands that use UNCLOS and ITLOS advisory opinion focusing about greenhouse gas emission will cause "Sea Pollution" is more likely to win a case compare to the ones that don't. The "labeling" of litigation strategies is crucial - repackaging greenhouse gases as "Marine pollution" and invoking the UNCLOS is equivalent to handing small island nations a more promising legal weapon.

H3: On the premise that the judgment of the ICJ is valid, forcing the polluter to compensate the fine ratio of over 0.01% of its total GDP will be able to stop the country from keep going to pollute and increase emission reduction targets. The threshold of punishment - Only when the ICJ imposes fine of more than one ten-thousandth of the GDP of a polluting country can it truly hurt its financial nerve, thereby forcing it to raise its emission reduction targets and curb its urge to continue polluting.

4. Case studies

This research adopts a legal analysis to provide legal treaties support to discuss the define of dereliction of duty about the polluting countries and the necessities for them take on responsibilities. Case studies are particularly well-suited for examining controversial define of the fault in judgment, allowing to have references from previous cases and can also be able to better discover the existing leak of the field. The case study approach facilitates the examination of causal mechanisms and strategic behaviors within specific legal disputes, while also permitting the comparison of various patterns.

4.1. The ITLOS advisory opinion

On May 21, 2024, the ITLOS delivered its Advisory Opinion on the obligations of states on climate change and international law (Opinion)¹ at the Request of the COSIS [8]. This development coincides with the time when the ICJ and tribunals requested advice on climate change. On April 12, 2023, under the impetus of Vanuatu and other small island states, the UNGA requested the ICJ to provide an advisory opinion on climate change issues [9]. The advisory opinion specifically discusses whether these are behavioral due diligence obligations that require countries to make their utmost efforts to achieve specific goals or purposes, or result obligations that require countries to achieve specific outcomes. The ITLOS advisory opinion can makes clear what legal responsibilities all countries have under UNCLOS, it offers interpretations that can be directly referenced when turning non-binding opinions into future international and domestic rulings. Moreover, it gives small countries some legal power in UN talks, climate fund requests, and rule-making processes.

The ITLOS advisory opinion can provide evidence support for my research question as compared with institutions such as the ICJ that have higher litigation thresholds and more complex procedures, small island states have successfully initiated legally significant international procedures by establishing the COSIS and using the advisory procedures of the ITLOS. All this shows the mean for small countries to use international prosecution. Furthermore, the ITLOS advisory opinion clearly states that countries have an obligation to prevent greenhouse gases from causing severe damage to the Marine environment, which provides a "legal endorsement" for small island states when facing major emitters and can be used as:

1. The basis for future arbitration or litigation;
2. Negotiation tools in climate negotiations;
3. Legal support for claiming compensation or assistance from international financial mechanisms.

Also, the ITLOS case is a case justification for my research as it demonstrates that even if small countries have limited resources and lack coercive measures, they can still promote international public opinion, rule interpretation and moral pressure through non-binding legal procedures, and thereby advance global climate governance.

The ITLOS advisory opinion can provide strong support for my first hypothesis—when small states bandwagon together in collective litigation. When Antigua, Barbuda and Tuvalu have collectively initiated a consultation request by establishing the COSIS, rather than acting as individual countries alone. This has also led to concern that several UN member states also supported the request, demonstrating the discourse amplification effect brought about by the collective actions of small countries.

It also provides support for my third hypothesis—when the law is clear to state obligations. The ITLOS is based on the UNCLOS 192 treaty “States have the obligation to protect and preserve the marine environment.” [10] It is precisely because of the clear legal framework that ITLOS can point out in its advisory opinion that “countries have the obligation to prevent Marine damage caused by climate change, including controlling greenhouse gas emissions.” However, if the legal obligations are ambiguous, ITLOS will find it difficult to make a clear judgment. Therefore, a clear legal basis is the key prerequisite for the success of consulting opinions.

4.2. ICJ advisory opinion

“On March 29, 2023, the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted the resolution A/77/L.58, requesting an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the obligations of States with respect to climate change. The resolution was adopted by consensus. This initiative was largely led by the Government of Vanuatu, which worked with other countries to prepare a draft resolution through internal negotiations and several rounds of informal consultations with the wider UN membership.” [11] “The scientific evidence is clear on how the climate crisis is already harming human life and well-being. In early 2023 for example, Vanuatu faced two category four cyclones within 72 hours – unprecedented in history. States have duties under different international laws, like personal rights law and the Law of the Sea, to reduce climate harms, and there are legal consequences for failing to do so.” [12] Even though the ICJ’s advisory opinion isn’t legally binding, it gives us some solid insights into how international law views climate change:

1. The idea that states need to show “due diligence” when dealing with climate change;
2. How climate change ties into personal rights laws;
3. Legal responsibilities we have towards future generations;
4. The fairness of responsibility among countries, especially looking at how developed and developing nations share that burden.

When states cause significant destroy to the environment and the climate system through their actions or inaction, they bear legal consequences, including, among other things, the obligation to cease illegal acts, provide adequate compensation and take preventive and remedial measures.

These consequences apply to:

- a) all countries, including small island developing states that have been harmed, particularly affected or particularly vulnerable due to their geographical location and level of evolution, as well as

b) people and individuals who are adversely affected by climate variations in this life and future generations

The ICJ's advisory opinion was initiated by Vanuatu and jointly initiated by over 130 countries, embodying a typical example of legal activism in small countries. It shows that even without traditional power, small island developing states can team up for class action lawsuits to boost their influence, reinforce international standards, and shape global conversations (like conformity, setting norms, and mobilizing legally). This backs up Hypothesis One.

In the mean time, the opinion makes it distinct that current international laws—covering human rights, environmental issues, and marine regulations—lay out specific responsibilities for all countries when it comes to dealing with climate change. So this gives a solid legal foundation for Hypothesis Three.

Under the framework of international law, the first step for small countries seeking to file climate lawsuits against major emitters is to establish jurisdiction. They usually define anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions as "Marine pollution" in conformity to the UNCLOS Article 192 and with the help of the 2024 Advisory opinion of the ITLOS, thereby bringing disputes under the competence of Annex VII arbitration or the ICJ. As long as the defendant state has not effectively excluded the compulsory process in conformity to Article 298, the playfield may exercise competence. Once a substantive judgment is made, it shall be bound by Article 26 of the VCLT and Article 94 of the Charter of the UN. If the situation is urgent, the winning state may also apply for provisional measures in accordance with the Statute of the ICJ Article 41 or Article 290 of the UNCLOS to suspend high-risk activities until the final ruling.

In terms of implementation, international law provides multi-level and complementary mechanisms. The winning state may in accordance with the United Nations' Charter Article 94(2), "If any party to a case fails to perform the obligations incumbent upon it under a judgment rendered by the Court, the other party may have recourse to the Security Council, which may, if it deems necessary, make recommendations or decide upon measures to be taken to give effect to the judgment," request the Security Committee to impose sanctions or make implications for implementation. Assets may also be seized outside the losing country in conformity to the commercial exception clause of the UN Convention on State Immunity to realize compensation. Furthermore, the compliance procedures under the Paris Agreement Article 15 are linked to the Green Climate Fund, providing financial leverage for "soft enforcement". The latest IPCC attribution science enables precise quantification of the proportion of damage, thereby transforming the "duty of reasonable care" into calculable liability for compensation. As a result, small countries can leverage the complete chain of "jurisdiction - judgment - interim measures - enforcement - attribution quantification" to transform their international law obligations into tangible driving forces for emission reduction.

4.3. Cross-cutting analysis

Both the advisory opinion shows an actor configuration: collective action by small states. The ITLOS advisory opinion indicates that Antigua and Barbuda, along with Tuvalu, jointly initiated a request for consultation by establishing a COSIS, rather than proceeding as individual nations. This collective action has raised concerns regarding the support from certain UN member states for this request, highlighting the discourse amplification effect generated by small countries acting in concert. Furthermore, the ICJ's advisory opinion reveals that Vanuatu spearheaded an initiative supported by over 130 countries, exemplifying legal activism among small nations. All this above

provide the evidence support for my hypothesis that— when small states bandwagon together in collective litigation.

Similarly, both advisory opinion also stated about legal clarity: strengthen of legal framework. The ITLOS talked about The ITLOS is based on the UNCLOS 192 treaty “States have the obligation to protect and preserve the marine environment.” [10] It is precisely because of the clear legal framework that ITLOS can point out in its advisory opinion that "countries have the obligation to prevent Marine damage caused by climate change, including controlling greenhouse gas emissions. Moreover, the ICJ opinion makes it clear that current international laws—covering human rights, environmental issues, and marine regulations—lay out specific responsibilities for all countries when it comes to dealing with climate change. So this gives a solid legal foundation for Hypothesis Three—when the law is clear to state obligations.

However, the two advisory opinion didn’t detail explain on the second hypothesis—where the court is able to effectively enforce its judgement. Although, the ITLOS advisory opinion is not enforceable, it does indirectly enhance the possibility of enforcing international law in climate governance through clear legal interpretations, increased moral pressure, and the infrastructure for potential future legal actions. It emphasizes the "shaping power of norms" rather than the "enforcement power of compulsion". In addition, the ICJ advisory opinion is not able to give any support to the hypothesis as it still didn’t sentence yet.

While the study does not aim to produce statistically generalizable findings, the case-study approach offers theoretical insight into how small states weaponize litigation as an asymmetric tool to reshape climate governance. The objective is not only to interpret these states’ strategic behavior, but also to assess whether, under conditions of stark power imbalance, international legal regimes can retain legitimacy and maintain resilience amid global contestation.

5. Recommendation

The integration of international legal mechanisms and climate finance mechanisms should be promoted. For instance, a financial guidance mechanism based on the compliance of rulings or advisory opinions should be established to provide financial support to small countries or developing countries with tight national funds in addressing issues caused by climate change. Financial and technical support should be offered to countries willing to cooperate in implementing rulings, while assistance should be reduced to those that do not comply. This "law-finance" linkage approach can transform rule compliance into practical incentives, thereby enhancing the practical effectiveness of international law. The way that foundation can gain finance can be to corporate with the UNDP or the world bank to set a special funds to support. Also, another way is that developed countries can provide finance support to developing countries that needed. The Transparency Framework for financial support will guide Parties on how to report on their progress in meeting financial support commitments for climate action in developing countries, and how to report on the use of financial support when it is received. The commitment of developed countries to provide financial support to developing countries is the key for all parties to reach a compromise and also an important foundation for the 2015 Paris Agreement to gain wide support worldwide.

To enhance the enforcement effectiveness of the ICJ’s advisory opinions, multi-faceted reforms and integration can be carried out at the institutional level. It is possible to let the treaty of the UN charter to input the advisory opinion into it, therefore it can force the countries to force the countries to follow it. At the same time the ICJ should also explain the importance of following to the advisory opinion and the judgment result. Additionally, the ICJ could set up some specific rules or create additional groups to establish a regular system for reviewing advisory opinions or decisions.

This might include asking countries to submit reports on how they're implementing these rulings at certain intervals, or having independent bodies come in to evaluate the situation. This "national reporting mechanism" not only makes it clearer how well countries are following through but also adds pressure—both moral and political—on those who aren't meeting their national responsibilities, thanks to international public opinion keeping an eye on things.

There is a Public international law and practice group among the world. However, there is none specific center focusing on climate change so it is possible to construct one. To better let different countries have symmetry information and data, a database should be build up by the UN, particular collecting a variety of international cases, advisory opinion, regional court result and academic explain. Such as, core summaries of various consultation opinions; the citation situation of existing countries; index of potentially applicable provisions and the logical path of evidence used in successful cases. This as a result can provide legal guidance helping small countries to have a higher efficiency to construct legal framework and quote authoritative viewpoints, further promoting the unification of norms and the coordination of demands.

6. Conclusion

This study focuses on how small countries can utilize international litigation to promote global climate goals. It is been proved through exploring two representative cases of the ICJ advisory opinions and the ITLOS for analysis. Moreover, looking at legal treaties from the UN Charter and UNCLOS for legal support. Research has found that when small countries initiate legal procedures through class action lawsuits and rely on their existing clear international law obligations, they can effectively enhance the influence and international attention of their legal demands, thereby playing a role in climate governance that transcends their traditional power status. This confirms the two hypotheses proposed in this article, namely: joint actions by small countries have a greater mobilization effect, and clear legal obligations are the prerequisite for the consultation opinion to take effect.

There is a cost, governments have to decide. By counterargument, someone pointed out that there also exist issues for small countries. International prosecution has a extremely high barrier and long period, this means a protracted and uncertain war of attrition for small countries that are already short of funds and human resources. ICJ and ITLOS, for example, a complete complaint need to include multi-legal research, scientific data, profession witness and bilingual translation, the initial legal fees alone could reach several million dollars; the litigation cycle is often more than five years, during which evidence updates, written statements and oral hearings need to be continuously followed. For small countries like the Maldives and Tuvalu, where the GDP is less than two billion US dollars and climate adaptation spending already accounts for a considerable proportion of the annual government budget, this is undoubtedly robbing Peter to pay Peter.

Non-binding non force, so is it meaningful. Acknowledge it is non-binding ,in the past it does have impact, change debater, clarify the law, do something of the law case

Another concern centers on the potential diplomatic repercussions that "going to court" may entail. In the context of UN climate negotiations, developed and developing nations have engaged in protracted debates over "historical responsibility" and "development needs." The principle of CBDR is akin to a sensitive nerve; any slight provocation can elicit a strong response. Should a small island nation bring legal action against the United States, Europe, or an emerging major emitter at the ICJ, the term "compensation" is likely to become politicized within those countries: conservative media in the U.S. may sensationalize it as "foreign nations demanding money," while some EU lawmakers might express concerns that such "bottomless pit compensation" could hinder economic recovery

efforts. Emerging economies may also retaliate by citing their “different stages of development.” Consequently, multilateral discussions originally aimed at technology sharing, green financing, and coordinated emission reductions could devolve into a narrative characterized by confrontation between plaintiffs and defendants. Even more concerning is that litigation could reinforce psychological perceptions of a “divide between North and South”—with Southern countries portrayed as a “victim alliance” and Northern countries labeled as “defendants,” leading to rapid erosion of trust between both sides. As a result, developed nations might tighten their financial and technological commitments to vulnerable countries, thereby constraining flexibility in multilateral negotiations and complicating the implementation of CBDR. Ultimately, while smaller nations may gain visibility in court proceedings, they risk losing collaborative opportunities outside the courtroom. This disruption will impede global progress on emission reductions; ironically, it is likely that small island states themselves will bear the brunt of these losses as sea levels continue to rise.

However, my second hypothesis that “where the court is able to effectively enforce its judgment” has not yet been fully verified. Although the ICJ’s advisory opinions and ITLOS are instructive, in the absence of an enforcement mechanism, their ultimate impact still highly depends on the individual ideas of member states, therefore the advisory opinion is still less pervasive. So, waiting for the results of the ICJ Advisory opinion is needed and the likely means of enforcement still require further explorations.

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