



Climate Emergency Declaration and How Countries Respond

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Abstract

Declarations of climate emergency have arisen as a worldwide reaction to the intensifying peril of climate change, signifying an increasing political and legal acknowledgment of the climate issue. Following the initial statement by the Darebin local government in Australia in 2016, several governments globally have enacted analogous declarations to underscore the imperative of climate action. This study investigates the responses of national and international legal systems to climate emergency declarations and evaluates the various strategies employed by states in combating climate change. This research use qualitative methods, including case study and comparative methodologies, to assess legal developments, climate litigation, and policy implementation in multiple nations. The results indicate that climate emergency declarations, while frequently symbolic, are progressively impacting judicial review, public accountability, and environmental governance. Significant climate litigation cases, including Urgenda Foundation v. State of the Netherlands, Juliana v. United States, and Leghari v. Federation of Pakistan, exemplify the increasing influence of courts in pressuring governments and corporations to meet climate responsibilities. Moreover, international legal frameworks like the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC establish significant normative bases for national climate policies. The study indicates notable disparities in state responses, with wealthy nations typically exhibiting superior institutional and financial capabilities for executing climate policy, whereas poor nations often encounter political, economic, and infrastructural constraints. Ultimately, climate emergency declarations serve as both political statements and mechanisms that can promote enhanced legal accountability, policy reform, and international collaboration in addressing the global climate problem.

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Introduction

The term "climate emergency" denotes the severity and urgency of the climate change crisis, with numerous countries and governments releasing formal statements, supported by various scientists. (Ripple et al., 2020) and with the declaration of a climate emergency is an expanding worldwide initiative by governments, recognizing this unparalleled threat and pledging to take immediate action to mitigate its effects. This declaration signifies that it is not only symbolic; rather, governments globally recognize the genuine threat of a climate disaster and the necessity for swift policy reforms to avert further harm (McCarthy & Sánchez, 2019). The initial issuance of this declaration originated from the local government in Darebin, Melbourne, Australia, in December 2016 (*History of Climate Emergency Action by Councils*, 2020). Since then, over 2,000 local governments across various countries have adopted similar emergency declarations. This declaration signifies a paradigm shift in the perception of the climate crisis, which is now regarded not merely as an environmental or economic issue but as a pressing legal governance challenge (CEDAMIA (Climate Emergency Declaration and Mobilisation in Action) Data Sheet, 2015). Consequently, nations are increasingly held accountable by their citizens, not only for their inaction regarding the escalating climate issues but also for the adequacy and legality of their responses in accordance with existing national and international law.

Through this proclamation, the state seeks to enhance public awareness and promote social and economic transformation while prioritizing climate action across all governmental tier (Ripple et al., 2020). Following this statement, the climate emergency continued to evolve, exemplified by Pope Francis's proclamation of a climate emergency in June 2019 (Harvey & Ambrose, 2019). Despite the emergence of declarations since 2016, numerous nations and governments, when issuing climate emergency declarations as a moral and political commitment, frequently fail to accompany them with fully binding policies and regulations. According to Scriven, such declarations often serve merely as instruments of political legitimacy rather than legally binding policies, resulting in inconsistent implementation at the national level. Consequently, what should function as a mechanism to compel nations to address the climate emergency becomes ineffectual (Scriven, 2025).

It is essential to comprehend the gravity of climate change, central to this declaration (Hulme, 2019), which also emphasizes the scientific consensus regarding its primary cause human activity and the consequent effects on ecosystems, weather patterns, and global societies (Pasquini et al., 2023). Such statements are frequently accompanied by commitments to mitigate carbon emissions, transition to renewable energy sources, save natural carbon sinks, and enhance resilience to climate disruption (Crimmins et al., 2023). Implementing this declaration necessitates a comprehensive strategy and encompasses multiple sectors, including agriculture, transportation, energy, and urban development, illustrating an integrated approach to sustainability.

The declaration underscores disparities in responses among nations, with affluent countries possessing robust institutional and fiscal capacity to implement their climate emergency declarations, but developing countries face challenges in achieving similar outcomes. Scriven's analysis underscores that European nations have effectively integrated the declaration into their environmental legal systems and executed requisite steps, whereas developing countries frequently encounter obstacles during the planning phases, rendering the declarations ostensibly ineffective. The approaches of these nations are characterized by an emphasis on adaptation strategies, including enhancing infrastructure resilience to the growing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. Moreover, for specific nations, the declaration provides a platform to involve local communities in targeted regions in the participatory

planning process, with the objective of guaranteeing that all policies enacted by the country concerning the declaration are fair and inclusive, considering the unequal effects of climate change on marginalized populations (Crimmins et al., 2023). These many interpretations illustrate the distinct qualities of each nation and signify a widespread acknowledgment of the issue, as well as varying approaches to tackle the issues posed by climate change.

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative legal research methodology, incorporating case study and comparative techniques to examine climate emergency declarations and state responses to climate change governance. The qualitative approach was chosen due to the study's emphasis on comprehending legal interpretations, policy advancements, and governmental reactions concerning climate emergency declarations across various jurisdictions. The case study method was employed to analyze several significant climate litigation issues and legal advancements at national and worldwide levels. Cases including *Urgenda Foundation v. State of the Netherlands*, *Juliana v. United States*, *Leghari v. Federation of Pakistan*, and *Milieudefensie et al. v. Royal Dutch Shell* were examined to ascertain judicial interpretations of governmental responsibilities concerning climate change mitigation and environmental protection. The research examined international legal mechanisms, such as the Paris Agreement and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), to assess the influence of international law on domestic climate policies.

Additionally, a comparison methodology was employed to analyze the responses of various countries to climate emergency declarations. The comparison encompassed both developed and developing nations, including the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, India, Nepal, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and the Philippines. The analysis concentrated on policy execution, institutional capability, climate adaptation measures, and legislative advancements pertaining to climate governance. This research utilized primary and secondary legal sources as its legal resources. Primary legal materials comprised international treaties, conventions, judicial rulings, and national regulations pertaining to climate change and environmental governance. Secondary legal documents included academic journals, books, legal papers, reports, and other scholarly works pertinent to climate emergency declarations and climate justice. Data were studied both descriptively and systematically to discern legal patterns, similarities, disparities, and problems in state responses to climate emergencies.

Results and Discussions

The declaration has generated various legal responses from various corners of the world, both internationally and nationally, and although the declaration of a climate emergency is often seen as merely symbolic, it can have profound legal implications because with this declaration, the government opens itself to stricter oversight and firmer accountability, which sets the stage for legal evaluation of their climate actions and policies in facing the climate emergency (Howarth et al., 2021). This declaration also indicates that it has instigated various forms of litigation, compelling the government to synchronize emission targets with the provisions of the Paris Agreement or the constitutional rights of its inhabitants (Setzer & Higham, 2022). This declaration necessitates that state jurisdictions incorporate climate considerations into all facets of policymaking, thereby influencing existing legislative and regulatory frameworks, with potential implications for judicial interpretations of commitments to mitigate carbon emissions and safeguard ecosystems (Toolan et al., 2022). Courts globally are increasingly tasked with adjudicating accountability disputes related to governmental compliance with the objectives specified in their declarations. Thus, climate emergency declarations not only signify the

gravity of the crisis but also activate legal and judicial mechanisms that compel governments to undertake definitive climate action and may influence the future legal framework in these matters (Howarth et al., 2021).

In recent years, some prominent climate justice trials have garnered global attention, highlighting the increasing involvement of the judiciary in tackling the climate catastrophe (Lee, 2025). A significant case regarding the climate emergency is *Urgenda Foundation v. State of the Netherlands*, wherein the Dutch Supreme Court mandated the government to decrease greenhouse gas emissions by a minimum of 25% by the conclusion of 2020 relative to 1990 levels (Mason, 2024). This established a global precedent affirming that insufficient climate action constitutes a breach of a state's human rights obligations, inspiring analogous legal actions worldwide (Anderson, 2024), with the *Juliana v. United States* case serving as another notable example (Winkelmann et al., 2019). The *Juliana* case is noteworthy as it was initiated by a cohort of young plaintiffs who claimed that the United States federal government has inadequately responded to severe climate change and has directly infringed upon their constitutional rights to life, liberty, and property. The Ninth Circuit Court dismissed the complaint in 2020, highlighting the difficulty of litigating climate claims, especially with legal standing and the separation of powers. Other significant cases in the same jurisdiction include *Leghari v. Federation of Pakistan* (Samuel, 2023), *Leghari v. Federation of Pakistan*, and the recent pivotal decision in *Milieudefensie et al. v. Royal Dutch Shell* (Maxwell et al., 2021), wherein a Dutch court mandated that the oil conglomerate Shell reduce its carbon emissions by 45% by 2030. Over 100 lawsuits have been filed against the government for its inadequate response to the climate emergency declaration (Savaresi & Setzer, 2021). These cases illustrate an escalating trend in climate litigation and underscore the essential role of courts in pressuring governments and corporations to undertake more significant action on climate change.

The proposal of a climate emergency declaration may catalyze a more vigorous enforcement of climate justice, as international law and agreements significantly influence national strategies regarding climate justice, particularly for nations encountering challenges in addressing regional climate emergencies. An illustrative instance of international law that can assist is the Paris Agreement, a landmark accord for climate justice, ratified by nearly all nations in 2015. This agreement, alongside others, demonstrates the evolution of international law in recognizing procedural environmental rights, such as access to information and public participation in addressing climate emergencies. It underscores the increasing significance of environmental courts and tribunals globally (Scriven, 2025). Additionally, several other legal frameworks within the UN, related to the Paris Agreement, exist, notably the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), which serves as the principal legal framework in international climate law (Bodansky, 2016).

Numerous instances exist where national legislation has reacted to this declaration. While it may appear symbolic, various national legal frameworks have commenced a gradual adaptation to this declaration via procedural and legislative measures, particularly in the domains of rights, healthcare systems, and urban planning. One form of integration of the declaration into the national legal framework is in India where Bhuyan and other authors show how the national legal framework in India integrates their climate-resilient health strategy after COP28 (UN Climate Change Conferences) and uses national air quality standards to align with the climate goals in this conference (Bhuyan et al., 2025) and there is also a journal from Gocer which emphasizes the response from Australia and with a primary focus on the city of Sydney where policies on urban planning and national law interact to enforce this climate emergency declaration to be stricter (Gocer et al., 2024) and besides in Australia there is also a form of adaptation in other countries namely in Japan with Kawasaki and other authors conducting an

analysis of Japan's emergency law regime during the covid-19 outbreak and how this emergency law has implications for environmental emergencies and in their book they also reveal gaps in the enforcement of this climate emergency declaration (Kawasaki et al., 2025).

The proclamation of a climate emergency by numerous nations exemplifies significant, though varied, reactions to a progressively apparent peril, specifically global climate change. The escalating threat necessitates a thorough analysis of the diverse solutions employed by countries globally. Countries have implemented diverse measures to address this proclamation, reflecting varying degrees of urgency and commitment. This urgency is determined by factors like socio-economic conditions, the political landscape, and vulnerability to climate impacts (Hurlbert, 2021)(Awuni et al., 2023). Several nations have incorporated climate action and the declaration of a climate emergency into their national policies by establishing ambitious emission reduction targets and initiating a transition to renewable energy sources. Nevertheless, numerous countries prioritize adaptation strategies to mitigate the direct effects of climate change, including increasing sea levels and extreme weather phenomena (Sailor et al., 2016). National-level initiatives frequently emphasize human reactions to climate signals, with the response to the climate emergency declaration encompassing various dimensions, including policy modifications, technological advancements to mitigate the emergency, and, equally significant, shifts in public awareness and behavior.

Policies in different countries responding to this declaration typically seek to alleviate climate change, frequently incorporating measures such as carbon pricing, enhanced regulations on industrial emissions, and increased incentives for the advancement of renewable energy (Albayrak & Bostanci, 2018). Adapting to severe climate change necessitates diverse strategies, which may include investing in innovations or infrastructure resilient to extreme climate effects, cultivating drought-resistant crops, and establishing early warning systems to address the rising frequency of natural disasters. Numerous nations have acknowledged the significance of international collaboration and engagement in global accords and measures to combat climate change, which is equally vital in the context of this declaration (Nalau et al., 2015). The United Kingdom was among the first countries to declare a climate emergency in 2019, subsequently followed by several European nations, including Ireland, Portugal, and France, with Canada making a similar statement in 2021 (Galvez, 2021).

The nature of official responses to the declaration of a climate emergency varies, both at the local government level and at the national level, as evidenced by the declarations made by the country itself. One manifestation of this response is found in Indal's journal, wherein he and other authors investigated and analyzed the reactions of Local Government Units (LGUs) in the Philippines, particularly in the province of Basilan. The authors analyzed the local government's response following the climate emergency declaration and highlighted challenges in enforcement stemming from resource constraints and regional conflicts (Indal & Arriola, 2024). In the journal, Gocer and other writers conducted a case study in Sydney on how local governments may implement climate mitigation strategies. Although Australia has not declared a national climate emergency, the city of Sydney has implemented significant climate mitigation plans (Gocer et al., 2024). In nations that have not issued climate declarations, Delhi, India, mirrors Sydney's approach; despite the absence of a formal climate emergency declaration by the country, Indian cities like Delhi have leveraged the health and pollution crises to emulate a climate emergency level consistent with the global climate framework (Bhuyan et al., 2025).

Various countries, like Rwanda and Ethiopia, have also implemented alternative tactics. Despite belonging to the same group as Australia and India, these two countries persist in addressing climate change by emphasizing a health-oriented strategic approach. This method identifies these two nations as instances of countries who, despite not declaring a climate emergency, have incorporated this

declaration into policies concerning health and climate (Ogunseitan, 2024). Certain journal authors are unreserved in their criticism of a nation, as exemplified by a publication by Shrestha and colleagues that evaluated the equity dimension of Nepal's climate plan. Their publication indicates that while the country exhibits heightened sensitivity to climate impacts, it lacks an effective response to alleviate these effects, which is perceived as inadequate (Khanal et al., 2024). In response from the final country, two journals pertinent to this declaration are those by Brett et al. and Panades and Yuguero. Brett's paper elucidates an alternative framework for the accountability of this declaration, particularly concerning the policy formulation for Indigenous peoples in Canada and Latin America (Brett & Hill (Lyons), 2024). In Panadés' paper, he delineates how bioethics committees in nations such as Chile and Spain can function as policy agents in response to the climate-induced health crisis these countries encounter (Panadés & Yuguero, 2024).

Conclusion

The declaration of a climate emergency by various countries was initially a symbolic step, but over time, more and more countries have taken strategic steps at various levels of government to acknowledge the increasingly real threat posed by climate change. Since the declaration, governments around the world have made similar declarations, demonstrating a growing global political and social consensus on the severity of the climate crisis. However, the impacts of these declarations also vary within countries. Countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and Ireland have issued national-level climate emergency declarations, with associated legislative and policy changes such as zero-carbon commitments, legally binding emissions targets, and the development of green investment frameworks. These responses illustrate how climate emergency declarations can be a key driver for serious policymaking if supported by political will and institutional capacity. However, if we look at the responses of countries such as Nepal, the Philippines, and Ethiopia, their declarations have often been limited by political instability, lack of resources, and competing development priorities. In such situations declarations are often adopted at the local government level with implementation hampered by various factors such as inadequate financial and technical resources.

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