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International law as fuel for climate litigation

Sandrine Maljean-Dubois

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**International law as fuel for
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Sandrine Maljean-Dubois

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Sumário

CRÔNICAS.....	14
CRÓNICA REVISIÓN DE LAUDOS ARBITRALES DE INVERSIÓN 2020: 2º ENCUENTRO ANUAL (SANTIAGO DE CHILE, 07-08/06/2021).....	16
Ivette Esis Villarroel e Andrés Delgado Casteleiro	
AS MEDIDAS CAUTELARES DA CORTE INTERNACIONAL DE JUSTIÇA NA CASO ENTRE UCRÂNIA E FEDERAÇÃO RUSSA.....	32
Lucas Carlos Lima	
THE CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN LEGAL ACADEMICS (PANEL DISCUSSION).....	39
Eshan Dauhoo	
DOSSIÊ.....	41
EDITORIAL BJIL: INTERNATIONAL LAW AS FUEL FOR CLIMATE CHANGE LITIGATION	43
Sandrine Maljean-Dubois	
THE JURISDICTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE IN CASES OF TERRITORIAL DAMAGE CAUSED TO STATES BY CLIMATE CHANGE	46
Cristiane Derani e Patricia Grazziotin Noschang	
LITIGÂNCIA CLIMÁTICA E LICENCIAMENTO AMBIENTAL: CONSIDERAÇÃO DA VARIÁVEL CLIMÁTICA À LUZ DOS TRATADOS INTERNACIONAIS SOBRE O CLIMA.....	61
Danielle de Andrade Moreira, Carolina de Figueiredo Garrido e Maria Eduarda Segovia Barbosa Neves	
CAMBIO CLIMÁTICO Y ACCESO A LA INFORMACIÓN Y PARTICIPACIÓN AMBIENTAL	80
Gonzalo Aguilar Cavallo, Cristian Contreras Rojas e Jairo Enrique Lucero Pantoja	
VIDAS EM MOVIMENTO: OS SISTEMAS DE PROTEÇÃO DOS DIREITOS HUMANOS COMO ESPAÇOS DE JUSTIÇA PARA OS MIGRANTES CLIMÁTICOS.....	104
Fernanda de Salles Cavedon-Capdeville e Diogo Andreola Serraglio	

EMERGÊNCIA CLIMÁTICA E DIREITOS HUMANOS: O CASO DO FUNDO CLIMA NO BRASIL E AS OBRIGAÇÕES DE DIREITO INTERNACIONAL.....	126
Gabrielle Albuquerque, Gabrielle Tabares Fagundez e Roger Fabre	
PERSPECTIVAS DA LITIGÂNCIA CLIMÁTICA EM FACE DE EMPRESAS: O CASO MILIEUDEFENSIE ET AL. VS. ROYAL DUTCH SHELL.....	145
Julia Stefanello Pires e Danielle Anne Pamplona	
THE EFFORTS TO RESPOND TO CLIMATE CHANGE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS) FROM THE HARDEST-AFFECTED COUNTRIES: VIETNAM CASE ANALYSIS.....	164
Yen Thi Hong Nguyen e Dung Phuong Nguyen	
CONSTITUCIONALISMO CLIMÁTICO COMO FUNDAMENTO TRANSNACIONAL AOS LITÍGIOS CLIMÁTICOS	192
Délton Winter de Carvalho	
ARTIGOS SOBRE OUTROS TEMAS	205
A AGENDA 2030: O COMPROMISSO DO BRASIL COM A PROTEÇÃO DO PATRIMÔNIO CULTURAL E O COMBATE AO TRÁFICO ILÍCITO DE BENS CULTURAIS	207
Gilmara Benevides C. S. Damasceno	
BIOECONOMY AND THE NAGOYA PROTOCOL.....	223
Danielle Mendes Thame Denny	
THE INCLUSION OF THE DIGITAL SEQUENCE INFORMATION (DSI) IN THE SCOPE OF THE NAGOYA PROTOCOL AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.....	241
Aírton Guilherme Berger Filho e Bruna Gomes Maia	
POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SMART CITIES AND THE HUMAN RIGHTS: FROM CORPORATIVE TECHNO-CRACY TO SENSIBILITY	258
Norberto Milton Paiva Knebel, Mateus de Oliveira Fornasier e Gustavo Silveira Borges	
OS IMPACTOS ECONÔMICOS POSITIVOS DA MIGRAÇÃO NA EUROPA: A OPORTUNIDADE QUE NÃO PODE SER PERDIDA	275
Norberto Milton Paiva Knebel, Mateus de Oliveira Fornasier e Gustavo Silveira Borges	

EL DERECHO HUMANO A LA IDENTIDAD CULTURAL DE LOS MIGRANTES, FUENTES INTERNACIONALES Y RECEPCIÓN EN CHILE.....289

Glorimar Leon Silva e Juan Jorge Faundes Peñafiel

O MONITORAMENTO E FISCALIZAÇÃO DO CUMPRIMENTO DAS SENTENÇAS DA CORTE INTERAMERICANA DE DIREITOS HUMANOS E A RELAÇÃO HETERÁRQUICA ENTRE O DIREITO INTERNACIONAL E O DIREITO BRASILEIRO 319

Thiago Carvalho Borges

APPLICATION OF ARTICLE 5 OF THE ECHR TO THE DETENTION OF A PERSON WHO HAS COMMITTED A CRIMINAL OFFENSE.....336

Vitalii A. Zavhorodnii, Oksana Orel, Galyna Muliar, Olga I. Kotlyar e Volodymyr Zarosylo

O BANCO MUNDIAL FRENTE AO CONSTITUCIONALISMO TRANSFORMADOR LATINO-AMERICANO: PANORAMA GERAL E PASSOS CONCRETOS354

Armin Von Bogdandy e Ebert Franz

SUPREMA CORTE DOS ESTADOS UNIDOS: LIÇÕES DO ANO JUDICIÁRIO DE 2019-2020 E UMA BREVE HOMENAGEM A RUTH BADER GINSBURGH380

João Carlos Souto e Patrícia Perrone Campos Mello

REVISÃO JUDICIAL ABUSIVA E A ATUAÇÃO DO SUPREMO TRIBUNAL FEDERAL NAS ADPFs ENTRE MARÇO DE 2020 E FEVEREIRO DE 2021.....400

Carina Barbosa Gouvêa e Pedro H. Villas Bôas Castelo Branco

O PRINCÍPIO DAS NACIONALIDADES NO BANCO DE PROVAS DA CIÊNCIA DO DIREITO INTERNACIONAL BRASILEIRA: CONFRONTOS ACERCA DA TEORIA DE PASQUALE STANISLAO MANCINI NO NOVO CONTINENTE 421

Arno Dal Ri Junior

Editorial BJIL: International law as fuel for climate change litigation*

Sandrine Maljean-Dubois**

As dramatically shown by the last IPCC Working Group III report,¹ climate change is a serious and urgent global threat that calls for profound changes in our societies. It constitutes a challenge for our legal systems, revealing their inadequacy to deal with such a vital issue. Climate change exemplifies and accelerates changes in the ways in which the law is made and applied in a globalised context. For all these reasons, climate change undoubtedly constitutes a good “laboratory” for governance, seeing as it requires permanent interaction between States, international organisations, non-state actors, businesses, experts, and citizens. In order to be powerful, these forces must push in the same direction and thus, at the very least, coordinate their actions through vertical and horizontal interactions.²

From this point of view, the slowness and lack of ambition of climate policies have led, in recent years, to the development of climate litigation. Almost 2,400 climate-related lawsuits have been tried or are pending, and this number is still growing.³ Various States in the North and South have already been ruled against by national courts because of the inadequacy of their action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and litigation is multiplying throughout the world. Legal action has also been brought by towns, cities, NGOs, groups of citizens (American children from Our Children’s Trust, Swiss senior women, a law student from New-Zealand...) against major corporations whose activities are allegedly causing global warming. Globalised and transnational, these proceedings in some respects break down national borders.⁴ Faced with what is perceived as a failure on the part of public authorities and companies, the law is increasingly relied on and used as a “weapon” to serve various objectives: to encourage public authorities or companies to take stronger measures to mitigate climate change, to implement more ambitious policies, to obtain compensation for damage suffered, to stop a project that emits large quantities of greenhouse gas, etc.

Here, the international climate regime is likely to make a contribution the magnitude of which was somewhat unexpected. Indeed, the Paris Agreement, which was adopted on 12 December 2015 and quickly entered into force, and which now counts 193 Parties, is a relatively flexible treaty, leaving a very wide discretion to States as to its implementation. However, the way it was designed, and even though its provisions have no or little direct effect, the Agreement increases the pressure on States, including, and perhaps most importantly, at the domestic level. Little by little, we see how the Paris Agreement, thanks to the involvement of civil society, has provided fuel

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¹ IPCC, Summary for Policymakers, IPCC AR6 WG III, SPM-1, Working Group III Contribution to the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) (last accessed on 7 April 2022).

² Mireille Delmas-Marty, *Aux quatre vents du monde*, Seuil, Paris, 2016, p.120.

³ See the Sabin Center Climate Change Litigation databases <http://climatecasechart.com/climate-change-litigation/> (last accessed on 7 April 2022).

⁴ See for instance Roxana Baldrich, “Litigating for climate justice,” *Ecologist*, 12 October 2021.

for climate litigation in a decisive manner and offered national courts the opportunity to position themselves as key players in climate governance. However, the Paris agreement and international climate law are not the only tools being mobilised. The rules of the international climate regime are combined both with general rules (such as customary obligations of due diligence) and with other specific rules. The combination of international climate law rules and international human rights law rules is, for instance, increasingly – and successfully – invoked. Human rights courts and treaty bodies such as the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child or the European Court of Human Rights are also asked to read the States’ obligations regarding the protection of human rights in the light of their climate obligations. An interstate dispute may even arise tomorrow before the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea or the International Court of Justice. Although not all cases are successful, and even if, in climate trials, international law is rarely applied directly, claimants and judges often show great creativity. The IPCC recognizes that, with a large number of cases in some developed countries, and with a much smaller number in some developing countries, it has, in some cases, influenced the outcome and ambition of climate governance.⁵ Without addressing all aspects of this widespread phenomenon, this special issue of the Brazilian Journal of International Law offers a timely overview of the wide range of cases, from the emblematic ones to the less well-known, and of the diversity of courts and tribunals’ contributions all over the world.

⁵ IPCC, Summary for Policymakers, IPCC AR6 WG III, SPM-1, Working Group III Contribution to the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) (last accessed on 7 April 2022).

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