The Climate for Human Rights

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Climate change is the defining challenge of the 21st century. The United States government is currently ignoring the problem, but wishful thinking alone will not keep global mean temperature rise below 2°C. This Article proposes a way forward. It advises environmental decision-makers to use human rights norms to guide them as they make decisions under United States law. By reframing their discretion through a human rights lens, decision-makers can use their existing authority to respond to the super-wicked problem of climate change.

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I. INTRODUCTION

"[N]o matter how well-informed you are, you are surely not alarmed enough."1

Human impacts on the globe have become so omnipresent that the term “Anthropocene” is no longer an esoteric debate among scientists.2 The proposition that we have entered a new geologic era—one dominated by human activities, rather than geological forces—has become conventional wisdom.3 The many unsustainable practices4 that make up the Anthropocene threaten our ability to “preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on earth is adapted.”5 Nowhere is the Anthropocene more

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2 See Jan Zalasiewicz et al., The New World of the Anthropocene, 44 ENVTL. SCI. TECH. 2228, 2228 (2010); Paul J. Crutzen, Geology of Mankind, 415 NATURE 23, 23 (2002).
3 Zalasiewicz et al., supra note 2, at 2228.
visible than when considering the rapid pace of human-induced climate change. In September 2016, the Scripps Institute announced that global atmospheric carbon dioxide levels crossed the 400 ppm line permanently (or at least for “the indefinite future”). Indeed, we have known for nearly two decades that “it is not a question of whether the Earth’s climate will change, but rather when, where, and by how much.”

Life in a 400 ppm world will be very different from how humans have experienced the Earth throughout our 200,000 year history. We are already seeing glimmers of what that new world will be like. During a recent heatwave, Arizona residents took to social media with photos of eggs, cookies, and meat cooking in the sun; and

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6 See INTERGOVERNMENTAL PANEL ON CLIMATE CHANGE, CLIMATE CHANGE 2014: SYNTHESIS REPORT 5 (Rajendra K. Pachauri et al. eds., 2015) [hereinafter IPCC].


9 Most paleoanthropologists date the emergence of Homo sapiens to roughly 200,000 years ago under the “out-of-Africa” theory. JOHN L. BRADSHAW, HUMAN EVOLUTION: A NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE 185 (2003). Behaviorally modern humans, however, have a shorter history—roughly 60,000 years. Paul Mellars, Why Did Modern Human Populations Disperse from Africa ca. 60,000 Years Ago? A New Model, 103 PROC. NAT’L ACAD. SCI. 9381, 9381 (2006).

planes were grounded because it was “too hot to fly.”11 Around the world, glaciers are retreating at a rate “without precedent,”12 and the Antarctic ice shelves are disintegrating.13 In coastal zones, “sunny day flooding” is on the rise,14 and many coastal cities will be inundated within the next twenty years.15 Biodiversity is teetering on the


precipice of mass extinctions.\textsuperscript{16} Fifteen of the sixteen warmest years on record have occurred since 2001.\textsuperscript{17} The last time the world experienced a month with below average temperatures was February 1985.\textsuperscript{18}

Scientists have conclusively documented the anthropogenic origins of climate change.\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) characterized the scientific evidence as “unequivocal.”\textsuperscript{20} It seems like the message is finally getting through. Global CO\textsubscript{2} emissions recently stabilized after years of growth,\textsuperscript{21} and in the 2015 Paris Agreement, the largest carbon emitters, including the United States, China, India, and the European Union, all collectively endorsed the goal of keeping warming as close to 1.5ºC as possible.\textsuperscript{22} Advances in sustainable energy make a technology-driven de-carbonization of the world economy increasingly possible.\textsuperscript{23} A low carbon future is potentially within our grasp.\textsuperscript{24} Yet, we

\textsuperscript{16} See Chris D. Thomas et al., Extinction Risk from Climate Change, 427 NATURE 145, 145 (2004) (predicting that under mid-range climate-warming scenarios, 15–37% of species will be committed to extinction by 2050).


\textsuperscript{18} NASA, GLOBAL Land-Ocean Temperature Index in 0.01 Degrees Celsius, https://data.giss.nasa.gov/gistemp/tabledata_v3/GLB.Ts+dSST.txt (last visited Jan. 6, 2018) (1880-present). Anyone under the age of 32 (as of this writing) has never lived through a single month with below average global temperatures.

\textsuperscript{19} IPCC, supra note 6, at 4–5.

\textsuperscript{20} Id. at 2.


\textsuperscript{23} Johan Rockström et al., A Roadmap for Rapid Decarbonization, 355 SCI. 1269, 1269, 1271 (2017).

\textsuperscript{24} Id.
are rapidly approaching a tipping point for major, irreversible climate changes. The time for urgent action is now.

So, naturally, the new President of the United States decided to withdraw from the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement and to vocally promote the use of coal and other fossil fuels. Climate deniers and oil executives head key federal agencies in the Trump Administration, making it unlikely that there will be climate progress on

26 Id. (identifying six critical milestones to reach by 2020, including: zero emissions transport, renewable electricity generation, large-scale land restoration, infrastructure decarbonization, and massive investment in climate action).
30 Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was CEO of ExxonMobil until December 2016. In that role, he was accused of misleading shareholders about the costs of climate change. Memorandum of Law in Opposition to Exxon’s Motion to Quash and in Support of the Office of the Attorney General’s Cross-Motion to Compel
the federal level. Despite the United States’ intransigence, the rest of the world continues moving forward. The G-19 (the G-20 minus the United States) very publicly recommitted itself to the Paris Agreement. Domestically, states, cities, and private actors have begun stepping forward to advance carbon reduction initiatives, even without national leadership.

Unfortunately, our existing legal frameworks make it difficult for even climate-conscious decision-makers to “see” climate change at 6–7, People of the State of N.Y. v. PricewaterhouseCoopers, LLP, 52 N.Y.S.3d 626 (2017) (No. 17-168).


32 G20 Leaders’ Declaration, Shaping an Interconnected World, G20 Germany 2017: Hamburg 10 (July 7–8, 2017). https://www.g20.org/gipfeldokumente/G20-leaders-declaration.pdf (announcing that “[w]e take note of the decision of the United States of America to withdraw from the Paris Agreement . . . . The leaders of the other G20 members state that the Paris Agreement is irreversible.”).

when approving projects, or making critical infrastructure, agricultural, and land use decisions.\textsuperscript{34} For example, the National Environmental Policy Act\textsuperscript{35} requires federal agencies to consider “cumulative impacts,”\textsuperscript{36} including “indirect” environmental impacts that are “reasonably foreseeable.”\textsuperscript{37} Yet, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission does not consider the climate impacts of exported natural gas when approving new natural gas exporting facilities because a separate agency, the Department of Energy, actually issues the export approvals for the natural gas.\textsuperscript{38} The structure of the law, in this case the division of responsibilities between two interrelated federal agencies, renders invisible what should be clear—the inherent relationship between a facility designed to increase carbon-intensive fuel exports and the to-be-expected increases in natural gas production in order to supply that export facility with the natural gas it will export. This is just one small example\textsuperscript{39} of how environmental decision-making remains stuck in old, illogical cubbyholes, and the fragmented legal frameworks that support them, even as we transgress multiple planetary boundaries.\textsuperscript{40} This Article suggests how hu-

\textsuperscript{34} For a description of how variables become simplified and abstracted, and therefore “legible” to the state, see JAMES C. SCOTT, SEEING LIKE A STATE: HOW CERTAIN SCHEMES TO IMPROVE THE HUMAN CONDITION HAVE FAILED 25–39 (1998).


\textsuperscript{36} 40 C.F.R. § 1508.7 (2011).

\textsuperscript{37} 40 C.F.R. § 1508.8(b) (2011).

\textsuperscript{38} See EarthReports, Inc., v. FERC, 828 F.3d 949, 952 (D.C. Cir. 2016); see also Sierra Club v. FERC (Freeport), 827 F.3d 36, 47 (D.C. Cir. 2016); Sierra Club v. FERC (Sabine Pass), 827 F.3d 59, 62–63 (D.C. Cir. 2016).


\textsuperscript{40} The concept of planetary boundaries emerged from interdisciplinary research at the Stockholm Resilience Center. See Johan Rockström et al., Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity, 14 ECOLOGY & SOC’Y 32, 37–38 fig.4 (2009), http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol14/iss2/art32/ [hereinafter Planetary Boundaries] (identifying nine planetary boundaries: biodiversity loss, climate change, chemical pollution, stratospheric ozone, atmospheric aerosol loading, ocean acidification, global phosphorus and nitrogen cycles, freshwater use, and land use change). In 2015, this same team of researchers reported that nearly half of those boundaries had been crossed. Will Steffen et al.,
human rights norms might help re-frame legal decision-making to better integrate climate change and the entwined destiny of human beings and Planet Earth.

II. WICKED PROBLEMS, SUPER-WICKED PROBLEMS, AND CLIMATE CHANGE

At the 1992 Rio Convention, the global community committed itself to “stabiliz[ing] [] greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.” Yet, a quarter of a century later, we are nowhere near achieving that goal. Climate change is a classic example of what has come to be known as a “wicked” problem. The term, coined by design theorist Horst Rittel, distinguishes a certain kind of problem from the “tame” or “benign” problems typically found in engineering or science. “Tame problems” have “relatively well-defined and stable problem statement[s, as well as] a definite stopping point” at which the problem has been answered. Solutions can then be tested against an objective standard and accepted or rejected accordingly. That is not to say that tame problems are simple; they can be extremely complex and challenging. But tame problems are amenable to the ordinary tools of analysis and verification.


43 Horst W. J. Rittel & Melvin M. Webber, Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning, 4 POL’Y SCI. 155, 160–61 (1973) (explaining that “wicked” in this context does not mean “ethically deplorable” but “tricky” or “vicious (like a circle).”).

44 Tom Ritchey, Wicked Problems: Modelling Social Messes with Morphological Analysis, 2 ACTA MORPHOLOGICA GENERALIS 1, 2 (2013).

45 See Joseph C. Bentley, From Wicked to Tame and Vice Versa, CHALLENGE TAMING WICKED PROBS. (June 2, 2017), http://tamingwickedproblems.com/from-wicked-to-tame-and-vice-versa/.

46 See id.; Ritchey, supra note 44, at 2.
For wicked problems, by contrast, there is rarely agreement about how the problem should be stated, let alone how it should be resolved. Instead, wicked problems involve indeterminate problem-positions, a plurality of perspectives held by multiple stakeholders, and a range of possible solutions, which rely on elusive political judgments about how to best characterize the problem. Indeed, it has been said that “every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.”

Climate change exhibits all of the attributes of a wicked problem. First, our understanding of how human activities impact the global climate system is constantly evolving, and new information is continually forcing revisions to the definition of the problem itself. Second, the climate problem is multi-causal: it not only involves the current activities of billions of people across the globe as they engage in multiple forms of contributory conduct, but also the historical conduct of a much smaller subsection of that population stretching back for well over a century. Third, climate change involves complex and unpredictable interactions between geophysical, political, social and economic systems, and involves those systems on global, regional, national, and local levels. Finally, climate change has more than one possible solution, with the appropriateness of any given solution hinging largely on the perspective of the

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47 See Ritchey, supra note 44, at 2.
48 See Rittel & Webber, supra note 43, at 160–63.
50 But not that the problem exists. In 1999, the head of the IPCC was already cautioning “it is not a question of whether the Earth’s climate will change, but rather when, where and by how much.” Watson, supra note 8.
51 Calculating shares of responsibility is an uncertain process, but there is no question that the OECD are responsible for the lions share whether measured per capita or overall. See H. Damon Matthews et al., National Contributions to Observed Global Warming, 9 ENVTL. RES. LETTERS 1, 5, 5 tbl.2 (2014), http://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/9/1/014010/meta (noting that the United States alone accounts for roughly 15%, the top seven countries 63%, and the top twenty countries 82% of observed warming); Michal den Ezen et al., Analyzing Countries’ Contribution to Climate Change: Scientific and Policy-Related Choices, 8 ENVTL. SCI. & POL. 614, 614, 633 tbl.4, 634–35 (2005).
decision-maker. For example, debates over adoption to climate change versus mitigation of climate change are expressed through tussles over whether we should prioritize reducing carbon emissions, promoting and protecting carbon sinks, managing retreating from vulnerable lands, or developing geoengineering technologies. These debates reveal more about the preferences and values of those advocating for each approach than about the inherent superiority of one tactic or another. These debates highlight how the repercussions that flow from adopting any particular solution tend to create other problems, often other wicked problems, forcing a continual re-evaluation of the parameters to be used in decision-making about climate change. In short, wicked problems challenge the


55 See Miyuki Hino et al., Managed Retreat as a Response to Natural Hazard Risk, 7 NATURE CLIMATE CHANGE 364, 364 (2017).


57 See e.g., Megan Darby, Activists Row Over Bioenergy Role in Meeting 1.5°C Climate Target, CLIMATE HOME NEWS (May 20, 2016, 9:40 AM), http://www.climatechangenews.com/2016/05/20/activists-row-over-bioenergy-role-in-meeting-1-5c-climate-target/.

58 Rittel & Webber, supra note 43, at 159.
core institutions of a society. They are never really solved; “at best they are re-solved—over and over again.”

However, as Yale Forestry Professor Ben Cashore pointed out, climate change is more than a wicked problem; it is what he calls “super-wicked.”

Cashore identifies a set of additional confounding factors that distinguish super-wicked problems from wicked ones. First, for super-wicked problems, time is running out. Second, those who cause the problem are also those seeking to provide a solution. Third, the central authority needed to address a super-wicked problem is weak or non-existent. And finally, discounting techniques discourage even inexpensive present-day investments to avoid long-term impacts, thereby pushing responses far into the future. Sadly, climate change meets all these criteria.

A. Time is Running Out

The window for action to avert a climate catastrophe is closing rapidly. Many consider the Paris Agreement goal of keeping warming below 1.5°C to be already out of reach. In adopting 1.5°C as its goal, the Paris Agreement took a step beyond what had been

59 Id. at 159–60.
61 Overcoming the Tragedy of Super Wicked Problems, supra note 60, at 127.
62 Id.
63 Id. at 127–28.
64 Id. at 128–29.
65 Time Window for Action to Limit Climate Change is Closing Rapidly, SCL DAILY: SCL NEWS (Sept. 1, 2016), https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/09/160901125440.htm (reporting on an address by Professor Niklas Höhne, Special Professor of Mitigation of Greenhouse Gases at Wageningen University).
66 See Joeri Rogelj et al., Paris Agreement Climate Proposals Need a Boost to Keep Warming Well Below 2°C, 534 NATURE 631, 631 (2016); Megan Darby, Scientists: Window for Avoiding 1.5C Global Warming ‘Closed’, CLIMATE HOME NEWS (June 29, 2016, 6:00 PM), http://www.climatechangenews.com/2016/06/29/scientists-window-for-avoiding-1-5c-global-warming-closed/.
the most frequently mentioned climate goal—keeping warming below 2ºC.67 Two degrees Celsius had been widely adopted as a climate goal, not because it made sense from a perspective of keeping climate change within manageable bounds, but because it seemed achievable. A more honest assessment views this target for “success” as in fact the threshold for catastrophe.68 And yet, we will be lucky if we can achieve 2ºC.69 The IPCC’s business-as-usual-trajectory projects 2.6ºC to 4.8ºC by 2100,70 which would spell disaster.

B. Global Political Paralysis

We have decades of data, providing ever-increasing levels of certainty about the scope and scale of the climate disaster, yet so few of the necessary choices have been made. The reason for this paralysis stems from Cashore’s second and third super-wicked factors71—the lack of governmental structure and the conundrum that those who are creating the problem must solve.

Even the Paris Agreement, the focus of so much political debate, does little to solve these core problems. The Paris Agreement is, after all, composed entirely of voluntarily-adopted “nationally determined contributions.”72 Each country decided for itself how ambitious it would be.73 As a result, those “nationally determined contributions” have more to do with short-term pragmatic domestic concern than with the actual reductions necessary to avert a climate catastrophe.74 For example, the United States’ nationally determined

67 See Rogelj et al., supra note 66, at 631.
70 Some researchers project even higher temperature rises of 4.78ºC to 7.36ºC. Tobias Friedrich et al., Nonlinear Climate Sensitivity and Its Implications for Future Greenhouse Warming, SCI. ADVANCES, Nov. 9, 2016, at 1, 3, 9.
72 Adoption of the Paris Agreement, supra note 22, at art. 4.
73 Id. at art. 4.
74 Id.; see also Rogelj et al., supra note 66, at 631. See generally Iñigo González-Ricoy & Axel Gossseries, Designing Institutions for Future Generations: An Introduction, in INSTITUTIONS FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS 3, 4 (Iñigo González-
contribution was to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 26% to 28% below 2005 levels by 2025. The Presidential Climate Action Project identified as necessary a much more ambitious target—reducing United States’ emissions by 80% by 2050. While the United States’ Paris commitment could have been a first step toward reaching that more ambitious target, independent analysis of the United States’ submissions concluded that the country’s likelihood of reaching that goal under existing law was small. And that was before the 2016 election placed a climate-denier at the helm.

Even if the United States, and the other 146 states that submitted nationally determined contributions, succeeded in meeting those targets, best estimates are that the resulting emissions would put us on target for 2.6 to 3.1°C of warming. Moreover, since each country self-assesses its own success in meeting its nationally-determined contributions under the Paris Agreement, there is no enforcement mechanism, aside from the requirement of transparency. The Paris Agreement may have been a good start, but it is at most only a beginning. And now, of course, the future of the Paris Agreement is unclear.

C. Irrational Discounting

By adopting the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the international community set its sights
on preventing “dangerous anthropogenic” climate change. In Article 3(3), the UNFCCC directed the Parties to “take precautionary measures to anticipate, prevent or minimize the causes of climate change and mitigate its adverse effects.” It then tried to bridge the gap between pure cost-justified regulation and pure precaution by adding that

[w]here there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing such measures, taking into account that policies and measures to deal with climate change should be cost-effective so as to ensure global benefits at the lowest possible cost.

Irrational discounting, Cashore’s fourth super-wicked factor, has hollowed out this language.

Discounting is a core concept in benefit-cost analysis. Ever since President Reagan issued Executive Order 12,291, benefit-cost analysis has been gaining ascendancy in administrative decision-making and today it is the predominant administrative decision-making tool in the United States. In theory, benefit-cost analysis gives decision-makers a consistent metric for making choices.

81 UNFCCC, supra note 41, at art. II.
82 Id. at art. III(3).
83 Id.
86 Section 2(b) of this Executive Order provides: “[r]egulatory action shall not be undertaken unless the potential benefits to society for the regulation outweigh the potential costs to society.” Exec. Order No. 12,291, 46 Fed. Reg. 13193, § 2(b) (Feb. 19, 1981).
87 The current version of this requirement, in Section 1(b)(6) of Executive Order 12,866 first issued by President Clinton, shifted the baseline a bit by instructing that “[e]ach agency shall assess both the costs and the benefits of the intended regulation and, recognizing that some costs and benefits are difficult to quantify, propose or adopt a regulation only upon a reasoned determination that the benefits of the intended regulation justify its costs.” Exec. Order No. 12,866, 58 Fed. Reg. 51735, § 1(b)(6) (Oct. 4, 1993).
By converting all costs and benefits of a proposed action into monetary values, regulators purport to assess the economic efficiency of the action.\(^89\) However, in the context of climate change, the metric offered by benefit-cost analysis is woefully inadequate. First, attempts to measure the costs of climate change generally only capture a small portion of the impacts\(^90\)—those costs that directly impact economic production, or create non-market impacts that can be expressed in monetary terms. But, this is a vastly incomplete representation of the “costs” flowing from climate change.\(^91\)

Decision-makers can assign a value to human lives lost (always a controversial, value-laden task), but what about the disruption to communities?\(^92\) How exactly does one put a value on Tuvalu?\(^93\) Moreover, the impacts of climate change are so wide-ranging and so potentially catastrophic that it borders on the absurd to reduce them to some number presuming to approximate market value. What cost should be assigned to the spread of disease associated with climate change? Lost wages, medical costs, and price-per-capita for mortality capture only the narrowest slice of what that will really cost a society. Nor can sea-level rise, hurricane intensification,\(^94\) ocean

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90. See Nordhaus, supra note 85, at 692.
91. See id.
93. Indeed, the very notion of a price begs another question—should that price be the amount we would be willing to pay to maintain Tuvalu, or the compensation we would demand for its elimination? (And of course, the notion of which “we” would make that choice is highly problematic.) The wide discrepancy between the values that people are willing to pay to achieve or prevent an outcome as opposed to what level of compensation they would demand to accept that same outcome highlights the core indeterminacy at the heart of this kind of an analysis. See generally Jack L. Knetsch & J. A. Sinden, Willingness to Pay and Compensation Demanded: Experimental Evidence of an Unexpected Disparity in Measure of Value, 99 Q.J. Econ. 507 (1984) (noting the wide discrepancy between compensation demanded and willingness to pay); Richard Thaler, Towards a Positive Theory of Consumer Choice, 1 J. Econ. Behav. & Org. 39, 39–40 (1980).
94. Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, for example, caused over $100 billion in damage, in addition to loss of over 1,800 lives. Hurricane Katrina Statistics
acidification, and loss of biodiversity, which are among the most damaging aspects of climate change, be translated into a conventional marketplace analysis.

These profound caveats and uncertainties have not prevented economists from attempting to identify the social cost of carbon—a figure translating the future consequences flowing from climate change into present monetary values. There are three different, widely-used models for estimating the monetized damages from climate change. The models begin to diverge at 1.5°C change to global mean temperature, and the gaps between the models increase dramatically as changes to global mean temperature become more catastrophic. The divergence between these models adds yet another layer of uncertainty.


The United States government decided that value was $37 per ton of carbon emitted in 2015. Howard Shelanski, Refining Estimates of the Social Cost of Carbon, WHITE HOUSE: PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: BLOG (Nov. 1, 2013, 4:02 PM), https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2013/11/01/refining-estimates-social-cost-carbon. However, depending on the discount rate, the span of possible values ranged from $12 to $123, an increase from three years earlier when the estimate range had been between $7 and $81. INTERAGENCY GRP. ON SOC. COST OF GREENHOUSE GASES, U.S. GOV’T, TECHNICAL SUPPORT DOCUMENT: TECHNICAL UPDATE OF THE SOCIAL COST OF CARBON FOR REGULATORY IMPACT ANALYSIS UNDER EXECUTIVE ORDER 12866, at 5 fig.ES-1 (2013).


Id. at 173–74.
Second, climate change “stretch[es] social and natural relations of cause, effect and responsibility” in new ways.98 Most of the benefits of climate regulation accrue in the future, often the distant future, and contributory actions date back to the 18th Century. The costs, by contrast, are incurred today, and in the near-future. Policy-makers conducting a benefit-cost analysis thus rely on discounting to convert the dollar value of those future benefits into their present value.99 The implicit value judgments associated with discounting100 add yet another layer of uncertainty to this calculation.101 Simply by using different discount rates for those future dollars, policy-makers can reach widely divergent conclusions justifying diametrically opposed regulatory choices. A high discount rate means that those future benefits have little present value,102 and expending resources...
today to accrue climate benefits in the future will appear unjustifi-

able. By contrast, employing a lower discount rate leads to a con-

clusion that “prompt and strong action” to prevent climate change is “clearly warranted.” The discount rate becomes outcome deter-

minative. The central difference turns on how much to value the fu-

ture—and future generations.

Recognizing that climate change is a super-wicked problem with these four attributes is a first step toward developing responses. The essence of a super-wicked problem is that it defies ordinary solutions rooted in the ordinary institutions of society. Climate change certainly qualifies. And, as if that were not enough of a challenge, there is an additional complicating factor: the overwhelming majority of the conduct that has gotten us to this point has been entirely

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104 NICHOLAS STERN, THE STERN REVIEW: THE ECONOMICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE 671 (2007). The Stern Review estimated that the costs and risks associated with not taking action to combat climate change “will be equivalent to losing at least 5% of global GDP each year, now and forever. If a wider range of risks and impacts is taken into account, the estimates of damage could rise to 20% of GDP or more.” Id. at xv. Presenting the Stern Review, then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair asserted “[w]ithout radical international measures to reduce carbon emissions within the next 10–15 years, there is compelling evidence to suggest we might lose the chance to control temperature rises.” Nigel Williams, Costing Climate Change, 16 CURRENT BIOLOGY R971, R971–72 (2006).


106 See generally Overcoming the Tragedy of Super Wicked Problems, supra note 60.
legal.\textsuperscript{107} Thus, responding to a super-wicked problem like climate change requires rethinking the social institution of law—specifically the balance that law strikes between individual and group rights, between current and future interests, and between economic and environmental priorities. That is where human rights come in.

### III. HUMAN RIGHTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

If ordinary people are asked to fill in the blank in this sentence: “Climate change is the greatest ________ challenge that human society faces in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century,” they might offer a range of different responses. Maybe the answer would be that climate change is the greatest \textit{technical} challenge human society faces. Or, maybe that climate change poses the greatest \textit{social} challenge, the greatest \textit{political} challenge, or the greatest \textit{economic} challenge. All of those answers may be true. But, climate change is also the greatest \textit{human rights} challenge of the twenty-first century because a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is integral to the full enjoyment of human rights,\textsuperscript{108} and climate change “has clear and immediate implications for the full enjoyment of human rights.”\textsuperscript{109}

Climate change has impacted or will impact a wide range of human rights by undercutting the rights to life, health, food, and water. For citizens of small island states, climate change will affect the right to self-determination and the right to culture. The preamble to the Paris Agreement recognized this relationship:

> Acknowledging that climate change is a common concern of humankind, Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous

\textsuperscript{107} For a discussion on this point, see generally Rebecca Bratspies, \textit{Claimed Not Granted: Finding a Human Right to a Healthy Environment}, 26 TRANSNAT’L L. \& CONTEMP. PROBS. 263 (2017).


\textsuperscript{109} Male’ Declaration on the Human Dimension of Global Climate Change 2 (Nov. 14, 2007), http://www.ciel.org/Publications/Male_Declaration_Nov07.pdf.
peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity . . .\textsuperscript{110}

This language, which marked the first time that an international climate treaty mentioned human rights, was the culmination of a multi-year advocacy project to “include” human rights in the climate agreement.\textsuperscript{111} The Paris Agreement thus took a much heralded step beyond the Cancun Agreement, which had called on Parties to “fully respect human rights” in all climate change matters.\textsuperscript{112} The Paris Agreement also built on the Human Rights Council’s conclusions that “climate change poses an immediate and far-reaching threat to people and communities around the world”\textsuperscript{113} and that climate change has implications for the full enjoyment of human rights.\textsuperscript{114} But, it is not just that climate change poses a threat to human rights. Because climate change is a super-wicked problem, human rights

\textsuperscript{110} Adoption of the Paris Agreement, supra note 22, at 21.


\textsuperscript{113} Human Rights Council Res. 7/23, at 1 (Mar. 28, 2008).

can also be part of the solution—offering a theoretical framework to move law and policy forward in responding to climate change.\(^\text{115}\)

IV. Why Human Rights?

In the twenty-first century, human rights are almost reflexively considered to be *jus cogens*.\(^\text{116}\) They “enjoy a prima facie, presumptive inviolability, and will often ‘trump’\(^\text{117}\) other public goods.”\(^\text{118}\) Human rights, after all, exist and bind states, regardless of state law to the contrary. Their entire purpose is to define a core of rights that are not dependent on favorable state laws.\(^\text{119}\) Moreover, while human rights flow to individuals\(^\text{120}\) (and sometimes groups), the state obligations involved are both horizontal and vertical, meaning that

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\(^\text{115}\) *See* Human Rights Council Res. 10/4, at 2 (Mar. 25, 2009) (“[H]uman rights obligations and commitments have the potential to inform and strengthen international and national policymaking in the area of climate change . . . .”).


\(^\text{117}\) No pun intended.


\(^\text{120}\) G.A. Res. 217 (III) A, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Preamble (Dec. 10, 1948) (“inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world . . . .”).
states owe these *erga omnes* duties not only to persons within their control, but also to other states.\(^{121}\)

As such, human rights offer a means for navigating the nether-regions of law—those areas where labels like “legal” and “illegal” fail to capture the full ramifications of social choices. With regards to climate change, a human rights framing can be a way to break out of the path dependencies created by routine regulatory decisions that “lock in” carbon emissions.\(^{122}\) Indeed, what gives human rights their power in this context is this ability to cut through business-as-usual decision-making under existing domestic law. The *jus cogens* and *erga omnes* nature of human rights creates this power—providing both the lever and the metaphorical “place to stand” that Archimedes sought in order to move the world.\(^{123}\) It is because of this ability to infuse ordinary, routine decision-making with new values that human rights have been called “law’s best response to profound, unthinkable, far-reaching moral transgression.”\(^{124}\) This characterization has particular resonance in the climate context because the planetary boundary we humans are most rapidly transgressing is the climate boundary.\(^{125}\)

By helping frame responses targeting the super-wicked aspects of climate change identified above, human rights can provide that world-moving “place to stand.” First, the urgency of human rights allows legal systems to respond in a rapid timeframe,\(^{126}\) creating the capability of responding to the “time is running out” aspect of the climate crisis. Second, because of the urgency and universality associated with human rights, recognizing climate change as a human

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\(^{125}\) See generally Planetary Boundaries, supra note 40, at 32–33, 38–41.

rights problem can reduce the clamor from competing economic and social interests, allowing policymakers to focus on responding to climate threats. Moreover, because human rights squarely reject the notion that national boundaries have salience with respect to questions of justice, a human rights framing responds both to the lack of governing political authority aspect of the climate crisis and to the discounting problems highlighted above.

Among the key advantages to invoking human rights in the context of climate change is that a human rights framing may make the problems more tractable (or if you prefer, less wicked). First, articulating the problems of climate change in the language of human rights allows policymakers to break out of the legal and technical lock-ins created by past decisions. In other words, human rights can create the space necessary for legal decision-makers to reinterpret domestic law to meet climate challenges. Second, to the extent that human rights are justiciable in international tribunals, new legal arenas allow citizens to assert their rights in a fashion that can reframe the problem of climate change, and to raise arguments and considerations not possible in the domestic context. Human rights can thus spur action from those at opposite ends of the climate change conundrum; policy-makers have space to rethink their mission and an empowered citizenry has a venue to raise new questions. These two advantages can feed into each other, creating a new relationship between regulators and the citizenry they serve that in turn makes possible a rethinking of social order more generally.

A. Breaking Domestic Boundaries

This first advantage of human rights framing is its potentially-transformative impact on those charged with making key regulatory decisions with climate impacts. When decision-makers view themselves as human rights actors, their self-conception of their duties

127 See e.g., Debra Satz, Equality of What Among Whom? Thoughts on Cosmopolitanism, Statism, and Nationalism, 41 NOMOS 67, 74 (1999) (espousing this vision of human rights).

and obligations necessarily shifts.\textsuperscript{129} For example, as noted above, in approving natural gas and oil pipelines, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) has routinely refused to consider climate change impacts from the natural gas transported by the pipeline, on the rationale that “there is no standard methodology for quantifying the downstream environmental effects of greenhouse gas emissions that result from a pipeline project.”\textsuperscript{130} The FERC maintained this position even when contracts for the sale of that gas are already in place\textsuperscript{131} and emissions can be predicted with great specificity.

By statute, the FERC is tasked with making decisions in the public’s interest.\textsuperscript{132} In interpreting this public interest mandate, the agency has “wide discretion to balance competing equities.”\textsuperscript{133} Were the FERC to view itself as a human rights decision-maker, using that discretion would entail acknowledging the inextricably entwined relationship between energy production, carbon emissions, climate change, and the enjoyment of human rights.

Recognizing these connections would, in turn, mean that during the pipeline approval process, FERC would take seriously NEPA’s direction that all federal agencies shall “recognize the worldwide

\textsuperscript{129} I have elsewhere written about how this might work. See generally Rebecca M. Bratspies, \textit{Human Rights and Environmental Regulation}, 19 N.Y.U. ENVTL. L.J. 225 (2012).

\textsuperscript{130} Brief for the Respondent at 22, \textit{Freeport}, 827 F.3d 36 (D.C. Cir. 2016) (Nos. 16-1329).


\textsuperscript{132} See e.g., 16 U.S.C. § 824(a) (2005) (“[i]t is declared that the business of transmitting and selling electric energy for ultimate distribution to the public is affected with a public interest, and that Federal regulation . . . is necessary in the public interest . . . .”); \textit{id.} at § 824b(b) (“[t]he Commission may grant any application for an order under this section . . . upon such terms and conditions as it finds necessary or appropriate to secure the maintenance of adequate service and the coordination in the public interest of facilities subject to the jurisdiction of the Commission.”); \textit{id.} at § 824o(d)(2) (“[t]he Commission may approve, by rule or order, a proposed reliability standard or modification to a reliability standard if it determines that the standard is just, reasonable, not unduly discriminatory or preferential, and in the public interest.”).

\textsuperscript{133} Columbia Gas Transmission Co. v. FERC, 750 F.2d 105, 112 (D.C. Cir. 1984).
and long-range character of environmental problems . . . ”134 Moreover, such an approach would breathe new life into the regulatory obligation that the FERC consider cumulative impacts135 of any proposed pipeline projects136 by directing agency attention to the cumulative impacts of carbon emissions from pipeline related activities on the human rights inter alia to life, water, and family. Thus, such an approach would help the FERC appreciate that its regulatory mandate is potentially much broader than its current interpretations allow. Against the backdrop of the relationship between human rights and climate change, the agency’s consideration of a pipeline’s impact “when added to [] past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions”137 would necessarily include consideration of the emissions associated with increased extraction of the natural gas that the pipeline is designed to transport and the transportation of that gas, as well as the consumption of that gas with its attendant carbon emissions.

A human rights-oriented decision-making process would also create a space to consider the environmental justice issues associated with siting and building pipelines—a social issue within the purview of the agency. As an independent federal agency, the FERC is not bound by Executive Order 12,898,138 which directs regulatory agencies to consider environmental justice and ensure that their environmental activities do not exclude or discriminate against persons or populations “because of their race, color, or national origin. “139

135 The Council on Environmental Quality has defined cumulative impacts as “the impact on the environment which results from the incremental impact of the action [being studied] when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions . . . Cumulative impacts can result from individually minor but collectively significant actions taking place over a period of time.” 40 C.F.R. § 1508.7 (2012).
136 See, e.g., 1 OFFICE OF ENERGY PROJECTS, FED. ENERGY REG. COMM’N, GUIDANCE MANUAL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT PREPARATION 4-3 (2017) (identifying this inquiry as a “key principle” of the environmental assessment process).
137 40 C.F.R. § 1508.7.
138 City of Tacoma, Wash., 89 F.E.R.C. 61,275, 61,800 n. 8 (1999), 1999 FERC LEXIS 2617 (noting that the executive order applies, by its terms, only to executive agencies, and excludes independent agencies like the FERC).
Currently, the FERC has blinded itself to environmental justice concerns associated with pipeline siting.\textsuperscript{140} For example, the FERC recently defended its refusal to consider disproportionate impacts of a proposed pipeline, even after acknowledging that nearly 84% of the proposed pipeline would be located near environmental justice communities.\textsuperscript{141} To justify this refusal, the FERC relied on census tract data, even though census tracts are often too large to paint an accurate portrait of which communities live in actual proximity to the pipeline.\textsuperscript{142} The dangers of relying on census tract data in this context are well known. Indeed, the EPA’s Environmental Justice Guidance specifically cautions that census tract information needs to be buttressed with more granular information because “pockets of minority or low-income communities, including those that may be experiencing disproportionately high and adverse effects, may be missed in a traditional census tract-based analysis.”\textsuperscript{143}

Were the agency to view itself as a human rights decision-maker, the FERC would view protecting minority and indigenous populations as integral to its functioning. Such an approach would reorient and broaden the agency’s consideration of pipeline impacts on those communities. Rather than directing that the socioeconomic impacts of a facility be considered “using administrative boundaries [(i.e. census data)],”\textsuperscript{144} an approach that unquestionably misses

\textsuperscript{140} By contrast, the Department of Energy has identified environmental justice as a priority. \textit{See} U.S. DEP’T OF ENERGY, DOE/LM-1460, \textsc{Environmental Justice Strategy} 5 (2008) (identifying as a goal the “[e]nhanc[ement] [of] procedures to detect and mitigate potential disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of the Department’s programs, policies, and activities and to promote nondiscrimination among various population segments.”).

\textsuperscript{141} Brief for Respondent, \textit{supra} note 130, at 51.

\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Id.}; ENVTL. PROT. AGENCY, \textsc{Final Guidance for Incorporating Environmental Justice Concerns Into EPA’s NEPA Compliance Analysis} § 2.1.1 (Apr. 1998).

\textsuperscript{143} ENVTL. PROT. AGENCY, \textit{supra} note 142, at § 2.1.1 (pointing out “the possibility of distortion of population breakdowns” and urging that “[i]n addition to identifying the proportion of the population of individual census tracts that are composed of minority individuals, analysts should attempt to identify whether high concentration ‘pockets’ of minority populations are evidenced in specific geographic areas.”).

\textsuperscript{144} OFFICE OF ENERGY PROJECTS, \textit{supra} note 136, at 4-9.
many environmental justice concerns, the agency would find ways to obtain a more fine-grained description of the specific community impacted. Such an approach would illuminate rather than obscure the impacts on minority and indigenous communities. For example, regarding the controversial Keystone and Dakota Access Pipelines, the FERC would have viewed itself as bound by the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to ensure prior informed consent before crossing sacred Sioux ancestral lands. And, a regulator acting as a human rights decision-maker would use the authority to regulate in the public’s interest to take the steps necessary to ameliorate undue burdens on those communities.

Finally, adopting a human rights approach would transform how the agency approached public participation in its decision-making. Among the advantages of a human rights approach to participation in environmental decision-making are increases in transparency, proactive efforts to facilitate participation by the poorest and most marginalized groups, democratized agenda-setting and priority-setting, and the potential that decision-making will create new understandings of community, and identify new possibilities for social justice.

For example, the right of access to information and the right of access to courts to remedy violations of human rights have become well-established as components of the right of participation in international law. Viewing agency obligations through a human rights lens would incorporate international-law thinking on these topics into statutes like the Administrative Procedures Act, the Freedom

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147 See id. at art. 19.
148 For example, by making information about and proposed actions accessible (including minority languages and formats for persons with disabilities).
149 5 U.S.C. § 553(c) (2012) (“After notice required by this section, the agency shall give interested persons an opportunity to participate in the rule making through submission of written data, views, or arguments with or without opportunity for oral presentation.”) (emphasis added).
of Information Act,\textsuperscript{150} the National Environmental Policy Act,\textsuperscript{151} and the Energy Policy Act\textsuperscript{152} to name only a few. These statutes require that agencies ensure reasonable and adequate opportunities for public engagement with environmental decision-making. Were the agencies staffed with administrators who viewed themselves as human rights decision-makers, their sense of what constitutes “reasonable” and “adequate” opportunities to participate would be much more capacious.

B. \textit{Reframing the Problem}

The second advantage of human rights framing is that it offers an alternative forum—thereby creating a space for examining questions that are obscured by the structures of domestic law.\textsuperscript{153}

As Gerald Torres points out, using international tribunals to challenge national legal processes can facilitate a normative critique of how power is exercised domestically.\textsuperscript{154} The very act of translating a domestic legal decision into international law often reframes the issues in a fashion that highlights previously hidden aspects of the problem at issue;\textsuperscript{155} or, to use the language of anthropology, it makes the question legible to the State.\textsuperscript{156} Once these questions have become legible, new forms of advocacy become possible.\textsuperscript{157} From its very inception, the international community recognized this transformative potential as part of the “progressive[]. . . . realization of [] rights.”\textsuperscript{158} The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights explained:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{150} Agencies shall ensure the public has \textit{adequate access} to government information. 5 U.S.C. § 552 (2012).
  \item \textsuperscript{151} Agencies shall ensure that environmental information is \textit{made available to the public} before decisions. 42 U.S.C. § 4321(b) (2012).
  \item \textsuperscript{152} Agency shall afford interested persons a \textit{reasonable opportunity} to present their views. 42 U.S.C. § 16421a(b)(4) (2012).
  \item \textsuperscript{154} See id.
  \item \textsuperscript{155} See id. at 145–47.
  \item \textsuperscript{156} Cf. SCOTT, supra note 34, at 25–39 (discussing the unification and simplification of local, rural forms of measurement so that such usage would be legible to the state).
  \item \textsuperscript{157} See Torres, supra note 153, at 146–47.
  \item \textsuperscript{158} \textit{E.g.}, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art. 2, Dec. 16, 1966, 993 U.N.T.S. 3.
\end{itemize}
the fact that realization over time, or in other words progressively, is foreseen under the Covenant should not be misinterpreted as depriving the obligation of all meaningful content . . . [Progressive realization] imposes an obligation to move as expeditiously and effectively as possible towards that goal.\footnote{International Human Rights Instruments, Compilation of General Comments and General Recommendations Adopted by Human Rights Treaty Bodies, U.N. Doc. HRI/GEN/1/Rev.9 (Vol. I), at 9 (May 27, 2008).}

The plight of Mossville, Louisiana is an example on point. The citizens of Mossville have spent decades seeking relief from the disproportionate pollution loads their town has been burdened with, which amounts to racial discrimination.\footnote{See Second Amended Petition and Petitioner’s Observations on the Government’s Reply Concerning the U.S. Government’s Failure to Protect the Human Rights of the Residents of Mossville, Louisiana, United States of America, Mossville Environmental Action Now et al., Inter-Am. Comm’n H.R. (Petition No. P-242-05), 1–9 (June 23, 2008), http://www.ehumanrights.org/docs/Mossville_Amended_Petition_and_Observations_on_US_2008.pdf [hereinafter Mossville Environmental Action Now et al.].} The facts are compelling. Mossville is located in Calcasieu Parish, which is roughly 1,094 square miles and home to approximately 74,000 households.\footnote{Id. at 1; Demographics, CALCASIU PARISH, http://www.cppj.net/government/demographics (last visited Jan. 7, 2018); Current Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana Population, Demographics and Stats in 2016, 2017, SUBURBAN STATS, https://suburbanstats.org/population/louisiana/how-many-people-live-in-calcasieu-parish (last visited Jan 7, 2018).} Mossville is a tiny dot in the Parish—encompassing just five square miles and 342 households.\footnote{Mossville Environmental Action Now et al., supra note 160, at 1.} Yet, tiny Mossville is home to fourteen industrial facilities that release millions of pounds of toxic chemicals each year.\footnote{Id. at 2. The Mossville based companies required to report toxic releases to the EPA include: Air Liquide; Arch Chemical; Biolab; Certainteed; Conoco Lake Charles Refinery; Entergy Roy S. Nelson Power Plant; Georgia Gulf; Tesseract Kerley Chemicals; Lyondell Chemical; Olin; PPG Industries; Sasol; Tetra Chemicals. Id. at 2–3 n.5–6.} Mossville’s residents are predominantly African-American, and the town has been in existence since the late 1700s.\footnote{Id. at 1.}
By contrast, the Parish overall is about 70% white. While the Parish overall has a healthy environment, Mossville does not. The air and water in Mossville are affected by the disproportionate industrial sitings, and the health consequences for the residents of Mossville have been severe.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was intended to correct the scourge of racial discrimination. To that end, Title VI prohibits government funding of racially discriminatory activities. Section 601 of Title VI requires the federal government to ensure that federal funds are not used to discriminate against people on the basis of race, color, or national origin. Section 602 requires federal agencies to promulgate regulations designed to implement Section 601. The EPA duly promulgated regulations. Most federal agencies, including the EPA, have adopted such regulations under their Section 602 authority.

During the nearly thirty-five years since the Civil Rights Act was passed, it has become clear that racial minorities in the United States are burdened by a disproportionate share of environmental risks.

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166 Id. at 5.
168 Civil Rights Act § 601 (codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. § 2000d (2012)) (providing that “[n]o person shall . . . , on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”).
Study after study documents the same result. Even studies that control for urbanization and socioeconomics document that the racial composition of a community is the best predictor for proximity to polluting facilities like hazardous waste facilities. The plight of Mossville is only one example of how seriously this kind of racially-disparate treatment can harm a community. Unfortunately, Mossville is also an example of a glaring blind spot in United States domestic law—one that leaves the residents of Mossville without a remedy.

At first blush, Mossville seems like exactly the kind of discriminatory situation that the Civil Rights Act was intended to remedy. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court has limited the “majestic sweep” of the Act in a fashion that eviscerates the Act’s promised protections for environmental justice claimants. First, in both Village of Arlington Heights v. Metropolitan Housing Developmental Corp. and Washington v. Davis, the Supreme Court limited the reach of the Fourteenth Amendment solely to acts of intentional discrimination. Then, in Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, the Supreme Court ruled that Title VI reaches only conduct that would violate the Fourteenth Amendment.

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172 See generally Lavelle & Coyle, supra note 171.
173 See generally id.
Thus, a plaintiff asserting a civil rights violation under Section 601 must prove intentional discrimination; a showing of discriminatory effect or impact is not enough.\(^{180}\) Unfortunately, that has meant that the Civil Rights Act cannot help the citizens of Mossville.\(^{181}\) Even though multiple studies have demonstrated that minority communities in general, and Mossville residents in particular, are exposed to significantly more environmental pollution than are their white counterparts, it is next to impossible to prove that the siting of any particular facility was driven by the intent to discriminate.\(^{182}\) Absent explicit evidence of a racially-discriminatory motive, even siting decisions that are “insensitive and illogical,” will fail to satisfy this extremely stringent standard.\(^{183}\) As a result, United States courts faced with environmental justice claims have repeatedly found that “the Equal Protection Clause does not impose an affirmative duty to equalize the impact of official decisions on different racial groups.”\(^ {184}\)

Regulations promulgated under Section 602 have been rendered similarly toothless. In *Guardians Association v. Civil Service Commission of N.Y.C.*,\(^ {185}\) the Supreme Court held that while Section 601 requires proof of discriminatory intent, agencies may validly adopt regulations implementing Title VI that also prohibit discriminatory effects. However, in *Alexander v. Sandoval*,\(^ {186}\) the Supreme Court blunted the impact of Section 602 by concluding that there was no private right of action to enforce regulations promulgated under that Section.\(^ {187}\) Thus, communities like Mossville have no remedy under United States law.\(^ {188}\)


\(^{182}\) See id. at 8, 26; see, e.g., Bean, 482 F. Supp. at 677, 679–80. See generally Lavelle & Coyle, *supra* note 171.

\(^{183}\) Bean, 482 F. Supp. at 681.


\(^{185}\) 463 U.S. 582, 587 (1983).

\(^{186}\) 532 U.S. 275, 293 (2001).

\(^{187}\) Id. (holding that “[n]either as originally enacted nor as later amended does Title VI display an intent to create a freestanding private right of action to enforce regulations promulgated under § 602. We therefore hold that no such right of action exists.”).

Reframing their complaint in the language of human rights offered Mossville residents a path forward. Where United States domestic law could not see Mossville’s complaint, human rights law is more encompassing because it recognizes the interwoven nature of human rights and the environment. Indeed, it has become a well-accepted principle of international law that full enjoyment of human rights depends on protection against environmental harms. To that end, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination included environmental racism as a state policy and practice that violates fundamental human rights. And, by encompassing state actions that have the effect of preventing equal enjoyment of fundamental human rights, this vision of equality goes well beyond the narrow United States Supreme Court equal protection jurisprudence.

By bringing a claim before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Mossville plaintiffs were finally able to argue that there was a problem with the very structure of United States law. It was only by leaving the jurisdiction of the United States Supreme Court that Mossville’s residents could argue that the Court’s Title VI jurisprudence created an untenable legal standard. In *Mossville Environmental Action Now v. United States*, Mossville’s citizens could finally assert that the domestic law interpretation of equality that denied them the opportunity to raise their claims in the United States was itself a human rights violation—depriving them of equality before the law. The Mossville plaintiffs also had the opportunity to raise their substantive claims about the

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192 *Id.* (identifying “the rights to freedom, equality and adequate access to basic needs such as clean water, food, shelter, energy, health and social care” as rights potentially violated by environmental racism).
195 *Id.* at 15–18.
harm to health and welfare from the operations of the fourteen facilities located in their community.\textsuperscript{196} By agreeing to hear the case, the Inter-American Commission created the possibility of a new consideration within the United States of how its domestic law falls short of international human rights standards.\textsuperscript{197}

This kind of space for legal argument will be invaluable in the climate context. The Inuit Petition is a good example of the legal changes that can come from access to an international tribunal to raise a human rights claim.\textsuperscript{198} The Inuit Petition marked a definitive moment in the legal conversation about the relationship between human rights and climate change.\textsuperscript{199} The Petition alleged that the United States’ carbon emissions (and lack of a climate change policy) violated Inuit rights to culture, property, health, life, food, and family.\textsuperscript{200}

By any conventional legal standard, the Inuit surely “lost”—their petition was dismissed as nonjusticiable, with the Commission

\textsuperscript{196} Id. at 2.

\textsuperscript{197}\textsuperscript{ } Mossville Environmental Action Now v. United States, Inter-Am. Comm’n on H.R., Report No. 43/10 ¶¶ 42–43 (2010) (finding that Mossville Plaintiffs have a cause of action under the American Declaration on the Rights of Man for, \textit{inter alia}, violation of their right to equality before the law).


\textsuperscript{199} For a discussion of the centrality of this petition, see Hari M. Osofsky, \textit{A Right to Frozen Water? The Institutional Spaces for Supranational Climate Change Petitions, in PROGRESS IN INTERNATIONAL LAW} 749, 761–63 (Russell A. Miller & Rebecca M. Bratspies eds., 2008); Bratspies, \textit{supra} note 107, at 76–77.

\textsuperscript{200} The Petition alleged multiple violations of the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man including: the right to life (Art. I), the right to residence and movement (Art. VIII), the right to the inviolability of the home (IX), the right to the preservation of health and to well-being (Art. XI), the right to the benefits of culture (Art. XIII), and the right to work and to fair remuneration (Art. XIV). See generally Watt-Cloutier, \textit{supra} note 198; American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, \textit{adopted} May 2, 1948, by the Ninth International Conference of American States, Bogota, Colombia, \textit{reprinted in} \textbf{BASIC DOCUMENTS PERTAINING TO HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE INTER-AM. SYSTEM} 17, OEA/Ser.L.V/II.82, doc.6 rev.1 (1992).
concluding that “the information provided does not enable us to determine whether the alleged facts would tend to characterize a violation of rights protected by the American Declaration.” Yet in terms of taming the super-wicked problem of climate change, the Inuit Petition was a critical first step. It not only forced the question of climate change onto the Commission’s agenda, but also prompted the Commission toward action. The Inuit Petition was dismissed in November 2006; however, by March 2007, the Commission had convened a hearing to explore the links between human rights and climate change. The Inuit Petitioners were invited to provide testimony at that hearing. During the 2015 run up to the Paris Agreement, the Commission “recognized that the realization of the right to life, and to physical security and integrity is necessarily related to and in some ways dependent upon one’s physical environment.” By providing both the lever and the proverbial place to stand, the Inuit Petition used access to the international legal tribunal to move the world. As such, the Petition underscores the vital connection between political mobilization and human-rights centered strategies.


204 Osofsky, supra note 202, at 273.


206 Watt-Cloutier, supra note 198, at 74.

207 See Osofsky, supra note 202, at 282.
V. CONCLUSION

Climate change is truly a super-wicked problem that challenges human society on all fronts—it stretches legal and political institutions beyond their current boundaries even as it simultaneously erodes the bio-geophysical underpinnings upon which those institutions rest. If we are to succeed in keeping the effects of anthropogenic greenhouse gases within parameters amenable to human existence, we will need new ways to conceptualize our human-created legal and social institutions. Invoking human rights can help. Thinking about climate change in human rights terms offers a relatively new, cross-cutting way to restructure critical institutions—one which transcends national boundaries, empowers ordinary citizens, and reorients bureaucratic decision-making.

This kind of an approach views law and rights as elements of struggle that must “be politicized before they are legalized.” Human rights does this by reframing environmental disputes and redirecting attention away from experts, from technical specifications, and from legal categories. Instead, human rights focuses attention on ordinary people and on questions of equality and fundamental justice. As such, human rights can move marginalized groups and issues to the center. It is this potential for reframing that gives the narrative of human rights so much power. Human rights are one of the few legal theories capable of taming some of the super-wicked institutional challenges posed by climate change, and thus creating a “place to stand” from which to confront climate change’s bio-geophysical challenges.

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208 Boaventura de Sousa Santos and & César A. Rodríguez-Garavito, Law, Politics and the Subaltern in Counter-Hegemonic Globalization, in LAW AND GLOBALIZATION FROM BELOW: TOWARDS A COSMOPOLITAN LEGALITY 1, 16 (Boaventura de Sousa Santos and & César A. Rodríguez-Garavito eds., 2005).