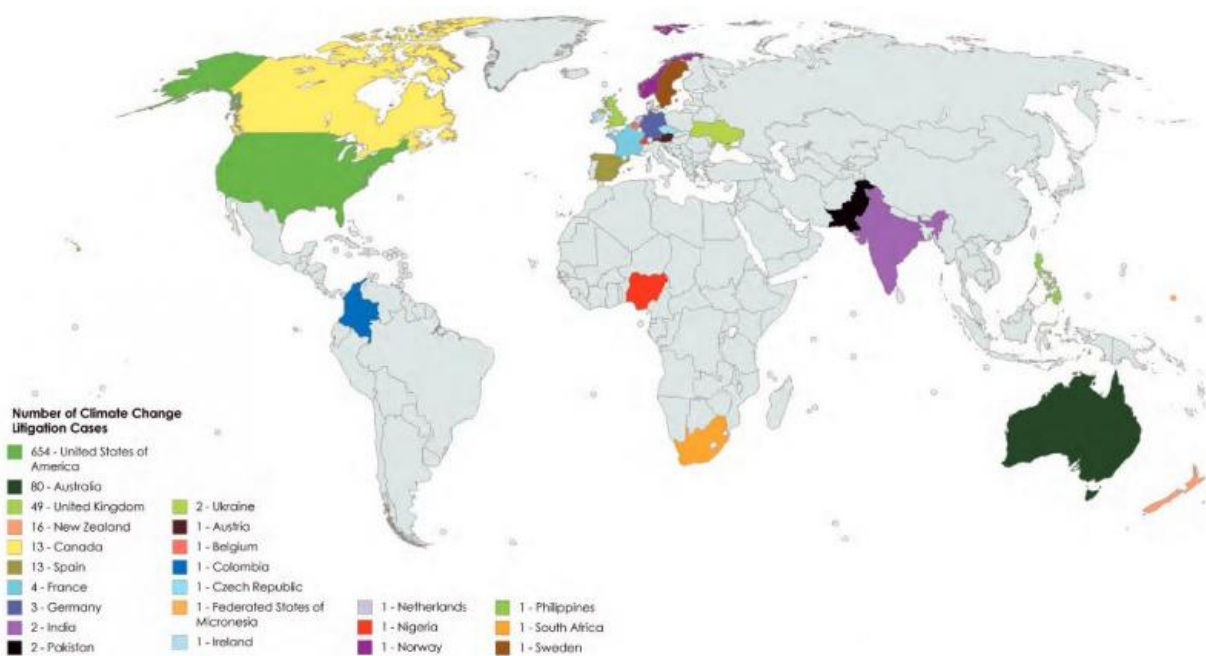


# Climate change litigation growing rapidly, says global study

May 25 2017



Researchers identified hundreds of climate change-related lawsuits filed in 24 countries, many of them seeking to hold governments accountable for existing climate-related legal commitments. Map is from their report

A new global study has found that the number of lawsuits involving climate change has tripled since 2014, with the United States leading the way. Researchers identified 654 U.S. lawsuits—three times more than the rest of the world combined. Many of the suits, which are usually filed by individuals or nongovernmental organizations, seek to hold

governments accountable for existing climate-related legal commitments. The study was done by the United Nations Environment Program and Columbia University's Sabin Center for Climate Change Law.

Around 177 countries recognize the right of citizens to a clean and healthy environment, and courts are increasingly being asked to define the implications of this right in relation to [climate](#) change.

"Judicial decisions around the world show that many courts have the authority, and the willingness, to hold governments to account for climate change," said Michael Burger, executive director of the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law. Burger said that in the United States, litigation has been "absolutely essential" to advancing solutions to climate change, from the first, successful, lawsuit demanding the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regulate [greenhouse gas emissions](#), to a recent lawsuit claiming that citizens have a constitutional right to a [stable climate](#) system. "Similar litigation all over the world will continue to push governments and corporations to address the most pressing environmental challenge of our times," he said.

"The science can stand up in a court of law, and governments need to make sure their responses to the problem do too," said Erik Solheim, head of UN Environment. As litigation has grown, it has addressed a widening scope of activities, ranging from coastal development and infrastructure planning to resource extraction. The scope of individual suits is also growing in ambition, says the report.



A new report predicts a surge of climate-related litigation in developing countries. Here, a farm family navigates high tide near their home in southern Bangladesh, where rising seas are invading land. Credit: Kevin Krajick/Earth Institute

Some suits outside the United States have already had results. Among other things, the report describes how, in September 2015, a Pakistani lawyer's case against the government for failure to carry out the National Climate Change Policy of 2012 resulted in the [government](#) designating action points within several ministries, and the creation of a commission to monitor progress.

The report predicts that more litigation will originate in developing countries, where people are expected to suffer many of the worst effects of shifting climate. The report also predicts more human-rights cases filed by "climate refugees," coming as a direct result of climate-driven migration, resettlement and disaster recovery. By 2050 climate change could, according to some estimates, displace up to 1 billion people. That number could soar higher later in the century if global warming is not kept under 2 degrees Celsius, relative to pre-industrial levels, say some.

International organizations including the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees have already acknowledged the need to address the plights of people displaced by changing climate. But there is yet no international agreement on the rights of such displaced persons, nor on the obligations of countries to respect them.

Technology will not suffice to address coming problems, say the authors; laws and policies must be part of any strategy. They say that because of the Paris Agreement, plaintiffs can now argue in some jurisdictions that their governments' political statements must be backed up by concrete measures to mitigate [climate change](#).

**More information:** The Status of Climate Change Litigation: A Global Review: [columbiaclimatelaw.com/files/2 ... vt-CC-Litigation.pdf](https://columbiaclimatelaw.com/files/2017-05-vt-CC-Litigation.pdf)

*This story is republished courtesy of Earth Institute, Columbia University:*  
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Provided by State of the Planet

Citation: Climate change litigation growing rapidly, says global study (2017, May 25) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-05-climate-litigation-rapidly-global.html>

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