



Civic Activism in an Intensifying Climate Crisis

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Preface

Thomas Carothers

It would be impossible to understand the trajectory of two of the defining issues of the past half century—the global struggles for democracy and for economic justice—without a close examination of the role of civic activism. On the democracy front, engaged citizens have led the way in dozens of countries around the world in challenging repressive rulers and working to forge pluralistic, accountable political systems. On the economic front, activists of all different ages and backgrounds have fought hard in multiple regions against economic marginalization, exclusion, and inequality. The powerful rise of civic activism as a force capable of challenging powerholders has in recent years triggered a widening backlash against independent civil society, not just in authoritarian countries but in a growing number of democracies as well. Yet leaders who are angered or intimidated by the challenges they face from their own citizens have often not been able to put the lid on motivated, organized citizens seeking to protect and advance their rights and interests—as evidenced by the steady rise in large-scale anti-government protests globally during the past ten years.

Civic activism is also critical to a third defining issue of our time, one that is unfolding inexorably day by day, month by month, and year by year—the climate crisis. What progress that governments and private companies have made to date in developing measures to slow the pace of climate change is due in some substantial part to citizen activism in all its many forms, from local-level protests to international advocacy efforts. And crucially, the extent to which climate activism steps up to meet the moment will similarly determine whether climate policies advance sufficiently in the years ahead to head off the catastrophic worsening of the global ecological crisis. Yet, here too, as in the domains of democracy and economic justice, backlash against such activism has been on the rise in recent years.

This innovative, wide-reaching compilation takes stock of the present and near-term future state of climate activism. It ranges beyond the European and North American contexts to look at Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and other regions, alternating between

regional and thematic perspectives and narrower, snapshot case studies. It considers tactics and methods, with consideration of problems as well as progress. The compilation threads a useful path between unrealistic optimism and unnecessary pessimism, conveying to the reader a sense of what it will take for climate activism to meet this critical moment, leaving open the question of whether it is likely to do so.

The compilation is the work of Carnegie's Civic Research Network. Established in 2016, the network brings together engaged experts on civic activism from a wide range of countries to discuss and delineate key trends in civic activism and to produce in-depth writings illuminating them. Joining the network for this compilation are a number of climate specialists who have provided focused expertise. Richard Youngs, who has ably led the network since its inception, played a principal role in framing the questions to be addressed, leading the relevant discussions within the network, and overseeing the writing and editing process. Erin Jones was co-editor with him on this compilation.

We hope you find this compilation a useful step forward for your thinking and work on this enormously important and pressing topic.

INTRODUCTION

Is Climate Activism Meeting the Moment?

Erin Jones and Richard Youngs

As the impacts of ecological crisis become increasingly severe, activism around the world is responding. The civic dimension of the climate agenda is becoming more consequential, both as a prompt and a possible obstacle to more ambitious policies. As environmental stresses hit increasingly hard, civil society mobilization around the green transition is changing in important ways. This compilation asks how climate activism is evolving to meet this crunch moment for planetary politics.¹

There has been extensive analysis of the politics of climate change over many years. This compilation adds to such work through a very specific remit that applies a global comparative perspective to the current moment of civil society's emergent strategies and tactics and the rising backlash from both governments and citizens alike. The current juncture invites new analysis of civic activism for several reasons. In the past several years, the impacts of ecological damage and climate change have become far more severe and have consequently come to have much more tangible and far-reaching political spillover effects. Recent scientific reports have suggested that global warming is reaching dangerous tipping points: A World Meteorological Organization forecast from May 2023 predicts the key 1.5-degree Celsius temperature increase will be breached by 2027, a full quarter-century sooner than anticipated. The last two years have witnessed unprecedented floods, droughts, wildfires, and heat waves. On top of this, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had a major impact on the whole global energy context, while escalating conflicts in the Middle East threaten to disrupt the global energy supply. All these events have dramatically sharpened the politics of climate change.

Against this alarming backdrop, climate activism appears to be moving into a higher gear and becoming more extensive. While many forms of this activism have, of course, been prominent for a long time, civic action related to climate change and environmental

challenges has been expanding in scale and reach around the world.² More citizens are getting involved in climate activism, and environmental groups are adopting new strategies either to involve more citizens or to exert more direct political leverage.

Debates have also sharpened over the tactics that climate activism should adopt. New forms of civil disobedience are on the rise, as an emerging wave of climate activism is oriented around more disruptive politics. Research on climate activism has already begun to focus on the growing use of disruptive and dangerous dissent.³ Across groups orchestrating acts of sabotage and disruption, activists express frustration with having exhausted mainstream political routes to make change. Yet, at the same time, more regular and formal initiatives like climate assemblies and public consultations have spread, with many arguing that these institutionally structured forms of engagement hold greater promise to spur environmental action.

So, differences have opened between climate activists over the right balance between what might be labeled as “outsider” and “insider” citizen engagement, with important implications for democracy. We define outsider engagement as the use of disruption and sabotage to press for deep, systemic change. Insider engagement, by contrast, refers to efforts to push for change from within formal institutional channels. An increasingly crucial question is how the latest, acute phase of the ecological crisis relates both to political systems and to the balance between democracy and autocracy. Some activists appear drawn to some forms of direct action that may sit uneasily with democratic channels of influence. Others, in contrast, seek to approach environmental challenges through innovative forms of democratic renewal, bringing climate and democracy activism increasingly together.

Meanwhile, as climate commitments begin to take their economic toll, a backlash against climate policies is also gaining momentum and generating civic activism that is more critical of climate action. Movements opposing pro-environment policies have proliferated in tandem with climate activism. Particularly when energy prices increased and many countries suffered economically from ripple effects of the Ukraine invasion, vulnerable populations mobilized to push back against climate action. This type of civic backlash tends to reflect calls for a fairer and more inclusive way of distributing the costs of the societal transitions necessary to offset the worst effects of climate change. In parallel, many governments have moved against climate groups, and concerns have arisen about the growing number of attacks against climate activists—which are typically driven by land inequality, violent conflict, corruption, shrinking civic space, and a culture of corporate impunity.⁴

Equally, the geographic scope of this new wave of activism is of considerable importance. Climate activism has intensified most notably in Europe; indeed, analytic work on climate politics focuses disproportionately on European trends and experiences. A key question is whether this activism is set to become comparably strong and widespread elsewhere in the world, including in countries that are not fully democratic or even fully authoritarian. As the landscape shifts, more analysis is needed to understand these trends from a global comparative perspective.

This compilation takes stock of these vital trends in civic activism related to climate change and the wider ecological crisis around the world. It examines just how widespread climate activism is becoming and how far it is mobilizing larger numbers of citizens. It examines what new forms this activism is adopting, comparing insider and outsider tactics. It assesses the growing backlash against climate activism from both societies and governments. And it explores the extent to which climate activism's evolution is a global phenomenon and how it varies in different contexts.

The compilation includes a combination of thematic and regional chapters, punctuated by short case studies by members of the Civic Research Network. Oscar Berglund offers a typology of emerging forms of disruptive direct action favored by climate activists in Europe. Amanda Machin provides detail on some particularly evocative recent examples of direct action from different regions of the world. Claire Mellier and Graham Smith dissect how activist groups are increasingly engaging more positively with the current wave of climate assemblies. Moving to the anti-climate action side of the equation, James Patterson unpacks the dynamics of “greenlash” activism, while Javier Garate and Rachel Cox offer a sobering account of attacks against climate activists. The compilation then offers three regional studies of these various trends: one on the Middle East and North Africa, from Maha Yahya and Issam Kayssi; one on Africa, from Tinashe Gumbo; and one on Europe, from Erin Jones and Emily Hardy. Our conclusion draws out common themes and reflects on their policy and analytical implications for both the climate agenda and for democracy.



Disruptive Tactics of Climate Activism in Europe

Oscar Berglund

Climate activism has been on the rise for some time and has intensified especially in the last five years. The year 2019 is often seen as a watershed for those that follow the politics of climate change. From this point onward, there was a sharp increase in general public concern about climate change.⁵ Institutions at different levels and across the world made climate emergency declarations. Many began to feel that climate change was finally being treated as the civilizational threat that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's reports had long warned about. A wave of climate protests that started in 2018 remained strong until the pandemic restrictions in early 2020 and then regained momentum after the pandemic restrictions ended.

The number of protests, and the number of people involved in protest, overall has increased significantly from 2010 and within that overall increase, climate and environmental protests have occupied a larger share since 2018.⁶ Climate change activism also has increasingly overlapped with other kinds of progressive activism. Particularly in 2023 and 2024, many long-standing climate activists, famously including Greta Thunberg, frequently attended large anti-genocide protests, for example.⁷ One important aspect of both the global climate movement and progressive protests overall has been their tactical diversity, including traditional marches in great numbers as well as acts of civil disobedience.

This chapter examines the tactics of the contemporary climate movement. It categorizes the tactics used within the climate movement according to different functions that they fulfill and assesses the role of nonviolence and sabotage within the climate movement, as well as the rising criminalization of climate activists.⁸

Contemporary Climate Protests

Much of climate change activism is disruptive in different ways, and some groups have put disruption at the center of what they do. Most climate protests fall under one of three categories of aims: directly stopping environmental harms, seeking media attention, and delegitimizing and increasing costs for polluters and their accomplices. In practice, many protests fall into more than one of these categories, but it is useful to distinguish their different functions in this way.

Directly Stopping Destruction

Directly stopping environmental destruction is the most long-standing and global kind of climate activism. In other parts of this volume, this is termed environmental activism. But in many cases these protests serve both to protect the local environment and to stop emissions or to defend natural carbon sinks, so much of it can also be seen as climate activism. This type of protest represents conflict over the rights and uses of land between, on one hand, often a local population and, on the other, a state, a corporation, and/or another small-scale actor that has come to exploit the natural resources of an area (such as loggers or illegal miners). Because these disputes are about land, who gets to use it, and how, there is often a strong colonial element to these conflicts, whether they take place in the Global South (like the local Indigenous-led defense of the land and lagoons in Conga, Peru, against a mining corporation)⁹ or in the Global North (like the campaign against the Dakota Access Pipeline in the United States, led by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe).¹⁰

This kind of protest seeks to stop new or further extraction of resources detrimental to the local population and environment. Known as “Blockadia,” a term popularized by Naomi Klein, such protests are often led by or at least have significant involvement of the people directly affected.¹¹ These protests generally have a very physical aspect of getting in the way of the state, corporation, or small-scale actor that seeks to extract resources, such as gathering a group to stand in front of a bulldozer. But that physical aspect is often backed up by a coordinated campaign that can involve a range of actors, such as NGOs, labor unions, or political parties, and a range of tactics, such as widely publicizing the case, litigating, and putting pressure on decisionmakers. These protests are highly political; they reveal the power relations at play in the often strong links between the state and corporate actors, especially when police and military are brought in to defend the interests of the corporations against the interests of the local population.

The protests in Sainte-Soline in southern France provide a recent European example of this type of environmental activism. Protesters opposed the construction of a water reservoir that would benefit large agribusiness to the detriment of the local population, small-scale farmers, and nature and wildlife. A number of different groups participated, and they faced violent police repression.¹² Much of the work of the long-standing German group Ende Gelände

also falls into this category as they have set up camps to stop coal mines.¹³ Successful British examples of such a protest include the anti-fracking protests in the 2010s that contributed to the abandonment of fracking in the UK.¹⁴

Seeking Media Attention

The second category of climate protests has received the most attention in Europe in recent years, namely protests that have a primary or sometimes exclusive purpose of achieving media attention. These protests can take different forms. Some disrupt cultural places and events, and some disrupt the general public. The museum vandalism protests that have been frequent across Europe in the past few years fall into this category, as do the disruption of sporting events or theater performances. These protests often contain a symbolic message that has limited meaning and can sometimes be difficult to convey to a target audience. Protesters who throw food at artwork, for example, have repeatedly asked “What is worth more, art or life?”¹⁵ The activists who disrupted a *Les Misérables* performance in London used the desperate stealing of bread in the musical set during the French Revolution to ask what measures people will take if climate change leads to widespread food shortages.¹⁶ However, the symbolic message is often lost in general media reporting, with only the more sympathetic media outlets publishing statements about the symbolism. The main function of such protests is therefore to get a platform in the media, rather than to make a point about art or hunger. Although these protests appear to be the acts of a few committed individuals, these individuals are supported by larger groups and movements that also engage in other tactics, such as giving public talks and campaigning for citizens’ assemblies.

Other protests in this category aim at the general public, including many cases of blocking roads or otherwise stopping traffic. While occasionally protests do target a particular type of traffic, usually it is not important who or what is being disrupted. The people being disrupted by roadblocks often have nothing to do with decisions about restoring wetlands, banning new oil and gas licenses, or retrofitting homes (the demands of groups using these tactics). Instead, it is the ensuing media reporting that allows the protesters to articulate their demands.

Protesters acknowledge that they are causing an inconvenience. Yet the greater aim that they believe justifies the inconvenience is to highlight the climate emergency and the fact that governments and society are not doing much to address it.¹⁷ Although the protest in itself is of limited value, by capturing media attention it becomes valuable as a platform. The target audience of the protest is not the people visiting the art gallery or the show, or traveling on the road in question, but rather the general public, whom activists reach through the media. This kind of media-attention-seeking protest is successful in the sense that it does often achieve widespread media coverage. For example, Just Stop Oil protests tend to make headlines in major media outlets across the world. However, precisely which acts of disruptive protest will receive the most attention is difficult to predict.

Most of the media reporting of these protests is negative and focused on the protest tactic as opposed to the protesters' demands.¹⁸ Some groups have responded to this lack of control over the media narrative by incorporating their demand in the name of the group. This includes Insulate Britain and Dernière Rénovation (Last Renovation), two groups in the UK and France, respectively, who campaign for homes to be retrofitted to be more energy efficient. The Swedish group Återställ Våtmarker (Restore Wetlands), which campaigns for the restoration of wetlands, also uses this tactic. These naming decisions have increased media reporting and public awareness of these important climate change mitigation policies.¹⁹ However, in other cases, most of the public are unaware of the demands of the protesters. For example, opinion polling showed that, in July 2023, the vast majority of the British public knew about and had opinions about the UK group Just Stop Oil, but none of the interviewed members of the British public were able to state that Just Stop Oil's demand is to ban new licenses for oil and gas drilling in the North Sea.²⁰

Although this kind of protest often succeeds in getting media attention, it is harder to turn that attention into political wins. Media-attention-seeking protest is less explicitly political than the previous category because the targets of the protests lack political meaning. If pictures of police beating up anti-mining protesters show that the state protects corporate interests, police arresting protesters sitting in the road are broadly seen as acting in the interest of the majority of the population. The groups most connected to this kind of protest are notably unpopular: Opinion polling shows that 68 percent of the British population has unfavorable views of Just Stop Oil and only 16 percent has favorable views; similarly, in Germany, 72 percent have unfavorable views of Letzte Generation while only 19 percent have favorable views.²¹

Delegitimizing Polluters

The third category of climate protest seeks to delegitimize polluters and their accomplices, and sometimes to increase their costs. In contrast to the previous category, these protests reflect a more political analysis of climate change. As the fossil fuel industry continues to push for delays in phasing out fossil fuels, it is the most logical target for climate activists. However, climate activists understand that the fossil fuel industry is entangled with other political, economic, cultural, and social actors in a way that enables it to maintain a central role despite the widespread knowledge that fossil fuels are incompatible with mitigating climate change. Delegitimizing the fossil fuel industry and its accomplices has therefore become a central concern in the politics of addressing climate change.²²

The aim of protesting the connections between the fossil fuel industry and other societal actors is to weaken these connections. Activists sometimes disrupt fossil fuel companies directly at shareholder meetings and other events. One example was the 2023 protest in London at the site of an oil and gas conference, at which youth climate activist Greta Thunberg was arrested.²³ More commonly, though, activists focus on how other actors give credibility to fossil fuel companies. By tarnishing the public image of both fossil fuel

companies and their associates, activists hope to make collaboration with fossil fuel actors so costly that accomplices end their associations. Even when the fossil fuel industry is seemingly targeted directly, the target audience is arguably not the companies themselves. Climate activists have little faith that fossil fuel companies can become a force for good and stop fossil fuel production altogether.²⁴

Several sectors have been targeted by disruptive protests aimed at delegitimizing connections to the fossil fuel industry. Some actors, such as universities, are targeted because they are expected to be committed to science and truth and therefore uninfluenced by fossil fuel interests. Universities carry out the research that discovers what climate change is and how fossil fuels drive it. Yet many universities have close ties with fossil fuel companies. A prominent example in the UK is the University of Exeter, one of the country's top universities for climate change research, which signed a £14.7 million (\$19 million) deal with Shell in November 2022.²⁵ As a result, universities have been a key target for fossil fuel divestment campaigners.²⁶

Museums represent another institution of knowledge production that engages in greenwashing, particularly museums that deal with science and the natural world yet receive sponsorship from fossil fuel companies. A famous example is the London Science Museum, which had a climate exhibition sponsored by Shell a few years ago and now hosts an exhibition called *Energy Revolution: The Adani Green Energy Gallery*, named after a major operator of coal power stations.²⁷ The museum has been the site of several recent acts of disruptive protest to oppose and highlight this greenwashing.

Universities and museums are particularly vulnerable to allegations of greenwashing because of their fundamental commitment to knowledge, science, and the betterment of humanity. Sit-ins and occupations have been common tactics in protesting these institutions' connections with the fossil fuel industry. These types of protests tend to receive less media attention than the type of media-attention-seeking protests set out in the previous section, but optimizing general media attention is also less important for these protesters. The target audience is not necessarily the public at large but the students, visitors, and other stakeholders involved with the relevant university or museum. Repression in these cases is less likely because the institutions know that the protesters are right in principle and that most of their students, academics, staff, and visitors also agree. Indeed, many of these protests have been successful, and many institutions have moved to stop receiving funding from the fossil fuel industry.²⁸

Many large campaigns that do not necessarily have an aspect of physical disruption also fall into this category. One example includes litigation cases against fossil fuel companies.²⁹ In another instance, the group Fossil Free Books is currently carrying out a partially successful boycott campaign to get the book industry to cut ties with the asset management company Baillie Gifford until they divest from the fossil fuel industry (as well as cut ties with arms companies profiting from "Israeli apartheid, occupation and genocide").³⁰ These protests, often in the form of boycotts, are highly disruptive for their targets without direct physical disruption.

A greater challenge for climate activists is how to target fossil fuel companies' connections with financial actors. The high-profile climate activism group Extinction Rebellion has long targeted banks and financial institutions with significant fossil fuel investments. Co-founder Gail Bradbrook, for instance, smashed the windows at a Barclays bank in 2022.³¹ Extinction Rebellion's campaign Money Rebellion has singled out Barclays as the High Street bank investing most in fossil fuels.³² But much of fossil fuel companies' funding filters through financial institutions whose customers are other banks rather than the general population. Those connections are difficult for activists to challenge and even untangle, meaning that it is much harder to identify protest acts that can effectively delegitimize such connections.

Sabotage, Violence, Nonviolence, and Criminalization

The role of nonviolence, violence, and sabotage has long surrounded the climate change movement. The vast majority of contemporary climate activists are committed to nonviolent forms of protest. Extinction Rebellion was founded on the principle of nonviolence,³³ as were their various offshoot groups in the A22 Network, including the aforementioned Just Stop Oil, Dernière Rénovation, Letzte Generation, and Återställ Våtmarker. These groups are committed to civil disobedience and refer to their work as nonviolent direct action (NVDA). This commitment to nonviolence is both strategic—drawing on the belief that nonviolent resistance is more likely to succeed than violent resistance—and principled.³⁴ Extinction Rebellion has occasionally engaged in minor sabotage, such as breaking windows at banks. Acts such as spraying orange paint that can be washed off and throwing food products on paintings protected by glass can in turn be seen as a form of proto-sabotage, where it seems like objects are damaged but they are in fact not. In other words, the more prominent practitioners of disruptive climate protests do not engage in serious acts of sabotage.

There are nonetheless climate activists who are more open to the idea of sabotage. They draw on movements from previous decades—including Earth First!, anti-roads protests, and the animal liberation movement—that involved more acts of sabotage than today's climate protests do.³⁵ They may also have been partially inspired by Andreas Malm's short book *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* and perhaps the film with the same name.³⁶ For example, the UK group Tyre Extinguishers pursued a particular tactic that Malm promoted: deflating tires of random SUVs in random places. Some observers critique strict adherence to NVDA, saying that the historical record of violence in protest is not clear-cut.³⁷ Whether sabotage of objects can be seen as violence or not is also open to debate. Still, sabotage plays a much smaller role in today's climate change activism than it has in the past. That looks unlikely to change, not least because of the significant costs and risks that would be necessary on behalf of activists.

An arguably more important factor that shapes tactics and strategies in the climate movement is the increasing criminalization of climate activists. With new anti-protest laws appearing in relatively democratic countries, including Australia, the United States, and the UK, along with other forms of ramped-up repression, the conditions under which activists plan their actions are ever-changing.³⁸ Criminalization efforts are often driven by discourse

that labels activists as antidemocratic at best and ecoterrorist at worst. Yet the organized climate change movement is not even contemplating violence against people, and even sabotage is a fringe idea and practice. Importantly, the unpopularity of some climate activist groups referred to earlier has not translated to public support for criminalization. The same surveys mentioned above showed that only 33 percent of Germans and 29 percent of Britons wanted to see jail terms for nonviolent disruptive protest.³⁹ Since criminalization of climate protest is neither driven by public demand, nor by increased use of violence or sabotage, more research is needed into what the driving forces of this criminalization are.

Conclusion

Directly stopping environmental destruction is the most long-standing and global kind of climate activism. Protests that seek media attention but have little connection between the targets of the protests and the demands have become popular mainly in Europe, through groups like Just Stop Oil and Letzte Generation. These protests are less political than the other two kinds because they do not expose or attack the power structures that drive climate change. Protests that seek to delegitimize polluters take many forms, including disruption, litigation, and boycotts. They call out greenwashing and expose and challenge connections to the fossil fuel and arms industries.

Finally, the line between nonviolence and sabotage has blurred slightly, with very minor acts of sabotage now being considered violent, although government efforts to criminalize climate activists are disproportionate and not driven by the public's wishes. Criminalization of climate protests is therefore largely unnecessary and may further polarize societies and undermine democratic participation. It is important to stress that disruptive protests do not operate on their own. While they are an important part of the puzzle, such protests are and must be part of longer, sustained campaigns that involve many more people than those who are willing to take the increasing risks that come with physical disruption.



Radical Performances in Global Climate Activism

Amanda Machin

The climate activism witnessed around the world in recent years has been characterized by a rich and colorful diversity of voices, slogans, and new tactics.⁴⁰ One of the most intriguing trends has been the growing use of radical performance as a form of protest. Although only a small number of activists carry out radical performance compared to those participating in marches, such tactics generate a disproportionate amount of attention. Provocative, confrontational, and theatrical performances—which range from stripping naked in banks and supergluing skin to runways to hunger-striking and mouth-sewing—are compelling displays that can be hard to watch and yet difficult to tear one’s gaze away from. These are different from the disruptive tactics discussed in chapter 1 because of the physical toll on the performer who not only labors, but suffers, in order to demonstrate against the prevailing environmental governance regime and lack of ambitious climate policy making. These actions are not about engaging the public and politicians in an informed discussion but aim at drawing attention and shocking audiences.

These types of performative protests raise many questions for members and supporters of the larger climate movement. Should these performances be dismissed as irrational, futile, and likely only to aggravate the very people with the power to implement effective environmental and energy policies? Or are such activities a smart tactic to garner support, build awareness, and demonstrate the passion with which activists believe in their cause? Does such strength of feeling help to build a strong identity in the movement? What are the purported goals of these protests, and how likely is it that these goals are achieved?

This chapter examines various examples of radical performance as an instrument and site of protest around the world. These tactics are becoming an increasingly familiar feature of climate activism and show the importance of emotions and the body in environmental protests and social movements more generally.⁴¹ Even if it is difficult to pinpoint their impact, they cannot be dismissed as foolish pranks that only distract from rational

deliberation. While these protests are unlikely to change the minds of those who are skeptical of stringent climate policy, they mobilize and enliven the climate movement. They confront their audiences with the increasing desperation of those who seek to prevent environmental disaster while also reminding the world not to forget the vulnerability and vitality of the bodies of those who witness the consequences of climate change.

Starving, Silencing, and Stripping for the Climate

On March 15, 2024, climate activist Sonam Wangchuk announced the tenth day of his hunger strike. He tweeted, “Temperature this morning was -15°C. Some 110 people and I slept in the open in solidarity with our glaciers and fragile nature in high Himalayas and 2000 people are on fast during the day.”⁴² Camped outdoors in Ladakh (the high-altitude and northernmost territory in India located on the Tibetan plateau), wrapped in blankets to try to protect himself against the subzero temperatures, Wangchuk called on governments around the world to act against climate change, which, he stressed, was having a drastic and visible impact on the plateau. Ladakh sits at the western end of the Himalayan region, which is particularly vulnerable to rising temperatures.⁴³ Wangchuk refused food for twenty-one days, surviving only on salt and water for three weeks. His stated tactic for himself and his co-protesters was to “afflict pain on ourselves so that governments and policymakers notice our pain and act in time.”⁴⁴

Many climate activists have undertaken hunger strikes in recent years. A search of newspaper articles on hunger striking by those protesting inaction on climate change reveals a sharp increase: No articles appeared before 2009, four articles were published between 2009 and 2019, and 121 articles appeared between 2019 and 2021.⁴⁵ This indicates not only that this form of protest is being utilized by environmentalists but also that it is increasingly visible in the media and the public sphere. Since 2019, hunger strikes by climate activists have been staged in countries including Australia, Canada, India, Ireland, Israel, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and involve numerous organizations and collectives, such as the Sunrise Movement in the United States. Most recently, between March and June 2024, eight activists from an alliance of Scientists Rebellion and Last Generation called for the German government to recognize the threat of climate change and went on hunger strike in Berlin. One activist went without food for ninety-two days.⁴⁶ In 2019 the movement Extinction Rebellion even announced a synchronized global hunger strike involving activists from around the world who refused to eat for a week or more. The activists called this “a last resort tactic” after the failure of decades of more conventional forms of protest to achieve the required response.⁴⁷

Hunger striking is, however, not necessarily the most painful form of radical performance, nor the most dramatic. In 2019, Tim Hewes, a seventy-one-year-old Church of England priest who is affiliated with Christian Climate Action, stood outside the central London offices of News UK, owned by Rupert Murdoch, and, with shaking hands, sewed up his own lips with thick black thread. After wiping the blood off his chin and the sweat from

his brow, Hewes sat for two hours holding a placard with the words “Q: Murdoch—the most destructive man in the history of the planet? Discuss.”⁴⁸ In a video recorded prior to the protest Hewes called for “an acknowledgement and an honest discussion about the catastrophic impact Rupert Murdoch and News Corp have had on climate breakdown.”⁴⁹ Several years previously, in 2013, activists and locals on Padang Island in Indonesia used the same technique to protest the destruction of peat land, sewing their mouths shut to symbolize the death of social and environmental justice.⁵⁰ Even more shocking are reported cases of self-immolation by climate activists in New York in 2018 and in Washington, DC in 2022.⁵¹

Other examples of radical performances in environmental activism involve going naked. For example, two women from *Ultima Generazione* (the Italian branch of the Last Generation movement) stood topless in front of the Italian Senate in Rome in 2023 and poured mud over their heads to evoke the severe flooding in northern Italy earlier that year.⁵² Their aim was to highlight the dangers of climate change and to protest the continued use of fossil fuels. Several radical performances from Extinction Rebellion have involved naked bodies, such as activists stripping both outside London banks to protest funding fossil fuel companies and at New York fashion shows to highlight the detrimental impact of the fashion industry on the environment.⁵³ Exposing the naked body might be a provocative ploy for attention, but it resonates with the environmentalist rejection of materialistic consumption. It also demonstrates the common vulnerability of humanity as well as the determination and power of the protester. By using their naked bodies in protest, climate activists are deploying a tactic pioneered by African women. In 2015, for example, a group of elderly women in Uganda stripped naked to protest the loss of land rights.⁵⁴ Self-exposure of the African female body has been used to defy patriarchy, reject objectification, resist dominant narratives, and reclaim agency.⁵⁵

At one of their naked protests at a store in central London, members of Extinction Rebellion wore signs reading “won’t wear injustice, rather be naked” and superglued their hands to the shop window. Last Generation activists have also become notorious for supergluing themselves to roads, runways, and museum exhibits; the term “climate glue” did not appear before 2019 but now features in news articles, which mainly draw attention to the havoc it wreaks.⁵⁶ Although often climate gluing is designed to gain attention by disrupting commuters, tourists, and spectators, it also contains an element of theatrical performance. Many radical performances are disruptive, but some of them rely entirely on the spectacle of vulnerability, suffering, and labor of the body. It is this spectacle that makes these performances so compelling.

Dimensions of Radical Performance

What exactly does radical performance consist of? Four dimensions of radical performance can be identified, each of which may feature more or less prominently and has distinct implications for climate activism.

Theatricality

Embodied performances—such as hunger striking, mouth sewing, stripping naked, and supergluing parts of the body to artworks or stadiums—are spectacular events that are carefully choreographed and staged in front of an audience, utilizing a range of theatrical props and dramatic gestures. Some of these performances might also be disruptive actions (as detailed in chapter 1), but they are simultaneously theatrical performances that make the activist highly visible to an audience.⁵⁷ The theatricality of radical protests in climate activism is key to their effectiveness, allowing them to draw attention on city streets and on social media, challenge dominant narratives, and tell an alternative story through unusual, eye-catching, and shocking actions. The theatricality of performances allows activists to engage their audience and alter their preconceptions and future behavior.⁵⁸ While performances are indirect forms of action and are rarely successful in directly influencing policy, theater can be a sort of cultural intervention that aims to bring about broader social change.⁵⁹ At the same time, however, the very theatricality of these performances is also their weakness; there is a risk that the mainstream media trivializes them and does not discuss the issue of climate change in its coverage.⁶⁰

Embodiment

Supplementing verbal expressions and printed texts, these radical performances highlight the power of material bodies and corporeal actions to engage an audience.⁶¹ All the protest performances outlined in the previous section are distinct because the body of the activist moves to the center of attention, as an active agent, a disciplined instrument, and a political site of performance. They are eye-catching, sometimes dangerous and painful, physical performances in which bodies are starving or stuck or hurt or handcuffed or silent or naked. These actions allow protesters to communicate political messages without words while resisting dominant narratives and generating new ones.⁶²

Embodied protests such as hunger striking and mouth-sewing allow the participation of desperate groups in prisons and detention centers who have been deprived of political voice and struggle to be heard in the formal public sphere. By using their vulnerable bodies in political resistance, these activists exercise a form of political agency.⁶³ Yet in the case of climate activism, most of these performances are not generally undertaken by those most marginalized in society and excluded from political life. Instead they are commonly undertaken by individuals and groups who are, quite on the contrary, free citizens, commonly based in the Global North, whose political efficacy and rights are not in question. Theirs is a different type of desperation, stemming not from the sociopolitical annihilation of the individual behind bars but from the frustrating experience of witnessing the ongoing disregard for the future by political and social elites.

Emotionality

There is an important emotional dimension to embodied radical performances that generally provoke some sort of affective response in their audiences. In the past, emotions have either been dismissed as pathological or simply ignored in social movement scholarship, which has been accused of focusing on the supposedly rational motivations for activism and of assuming that activists' choice of tactics was made solely through cognitive calculations.⁶⁴ Yet researchers have become increasingly aware that emotions are present in all social actions and are a pervasive feature of social movements.⁶⁵ Fear, hope, anger, and guilt, for example, can motivate and sustain climate activism, although in different ways.⁶⁶ It can therefore be highly rational and strategic to carry out radical and embodied protests; the display and use of emotions does not render protesters irrational.⁶⁷ On the contrary, the emotionality of protest performances seems to complement rather than contradict activists' appeal to reason and science.

Emotion helps connect human beings to each other and the world around them.⁶⁸ The radical and embodied performances of climate activists help create a strong collective identity among activists.⁶⁹ Emotions also prompt movements to move; they help to mobilize activists in certain directions.⁷⁰ This type of activism is not so much about conveying ideas or convincing others but instead is about consolidating and mobilizing the climate movement. Although there is often dispute over the value of radical performances within a movement, their use can be understood as demonstrating participants' dedication to the cause. So, while a radical performance is often undertaken by an individual or a small group of activists, it forges a bond across the larger movement and helps to sustain a sense of identity, thereby fostering courage and overcoming fear.⁷¹

Antagonism

While some radical actions might aim to convince or confront their audiences, others intend to challenge and antagonize them.⁷² Just as the embodied, emotional, and theatrical performances of climate activists work to bring members of the movement together, they also work to align members against perceived others who oppose or are opposed by the movement.⁷³ Radical performances help "mark out" a "community of protesters."⁷⁴ This demarcation almost inevitably involves antagonizing those outside the community; acts of starving, sewing, and stripping for the climate politicizes global warming, challenges the mainstream, and cements a social movement, commonly constructing an "us versus them." Radical performances are unlikely to convince those who are already skeptical of their goals and may further alienate the mainstream. Still, although antagonism might be seen as problematic for climate activism because of the way it divides and alienates many, it can also be seen as an inherent feature of politics and an essential for challenging dominant discourses in climate politics.⁷⁵ Radical protests then may consolidate and fortify an "us" but with the risks that come with antagonizing or alienating a "them."

Conclusion

Radical performance is not unique to climate activism, and numerous social movements have used embodied performances to communicate messages and to enact alternative narratives.⁷⁶ What is interesting about protest performances is not so much their uniqueness as their conspicuous and expanding appearance in climate activism and, perhaps, their indication of the growing desperation in the global environmental movement. This is particularly so in the Global North, where the impact of a changing climate is likely to be less severe. Many of the activists undertaking radical performances express their frustration at the lack of change they have achieved through more traditional channels.⁷⁷ It is the manifestation of this desperation through radical, embodied performance more than anything else that helps articulate the new era of climate activism.

This desperation and frustration are often difficult to put into words, which is precisely why the body becomes a signifying instrument for climate activists. Radical performances such as hunger striking and lip sewing are certainly not straightforward mechanisms to convince climate deniers on climate change. They are, on the contrary, high-risk actions that might actually undermine the legitimacy of the climate movement and stymie the progress toward its explicit goals. In staging these kinds of performances, the danger for climate activists is that they may be easily trivialized by the media, that climate change recedes behind the spectacular performance itself, and that they further alienate and antagonize the general public. Nevertheless, while they are painful, unpredictable, and in some ways even counterproductive, this form of protest is also able to grab attention and to consolidate and animate environmental movements. As climate change activists become more and more frustrated by the apparent lack of requisite action on climate change, this kind of radical performance in the public sphere is unlikely to disappear from the public sphere.

Activism and Climate Assemblies

Claire Mellier and Graham Smith

When it was launched in October 2018, Extinction Rebellion (XR) felt different from past climate campaigns. It succeeded in mobilizing large numbers of protesters onto the streets of London (and then elsewhere in the world) with three simple demands. First, governments must tell the truth by declaring a climate and ecological emergency. Second, governments must act now to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025. And finally, governments must create and be led by the decisions of citizens' assemblies on climate and ecological justice.⁷⁸

The third demand in particular captured the imagination of many activists and the ire of others. Rather than offering detailed policy prescriptions, XR was arguing for a new democratic space within which everyday citizens would make the hard decisions about how to halt biodiversity loss and achieve net zero by 2025. Citizens' assemblies bring together a diverse body of people selected by democratic lottery to learn, deliberate, and deliver collective recommendations. With its third demand, XR managed not to take strong stands on particular policies that have traditionally divided the climate movement, while critiquing the failures of existing democratic structures and practices. XR was seeking climate and ecological renewal *and* democratic renewal.

By 2024, around 200 citizens' assemblies on climate (or climate assemblies) have taken place across the world, most of them in Western Europe and the vast majority organized by public authorities.⁷⁹ XR's activities have helped shape this wave of assemblies, but the impacts of this novel form of democratic engagement have so far fallen far short of activists' ambitions. Interest in democratic innovations such as citizens' assemblies can be found beyond Western Europe, even in less democratic or fully authoritarian settings,⁸⁰ and activists beyond Europe have integrated assemblies into their political strategies.

This chapter aims to make sense of the relationship between climate and ecological activism and the trajectory of climate assemblies. It focuses on activists and organizations that have developed constructive relationships with assemblies, recognizing that not all activists and commentators share the same enthusiasm for this democratic innovation.⁸¹ This chapter traces the different ways that the climate movement has engaged with assemblies. Assemblies commissioned by governments represent the dominant mode of thinking and practice. Climate activists have played key roles in making the case for assemblies to governments and participating in assemblies, either in governing advisory bodies or as witnesses providing evidence to assemblies.

But this standard operating model of assemblies has been challenged, with a small but growing number of climate assemblies commissioned from within civil society, independent of the state. Why the shift in strategy? To what end?

Why Are Assemblies Attractive to Some Climate Activists?

While some other climate movements such as Fridays for Future have made the case for citizens' assemblies, XR has arguably been the most influential movement actor, placing assemblies on climate and ecological justice at the core of its rhetoric and actions. In its own words,

We know the world is spinning towards catastrophe. We know it's time to act.

If we are going to avoid disaster, we will have to make difficult choices for the long term, collaboratively, in a fair way that isn't biased towards a powerful or wealthy minority. We need to modernise the political system so that it can deal with the problems of today's world, and work better for everyday people. To do that it has to include everyday people.

That's why we need a Citizens' Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice to break the deadlock and to put fairness and justice at the centre of decision-making.⁸²

A new breed of climate activists has come to believe that without rejuvenating democratic processes, any response to the climate and ecological crisis—and other interconnected crises—will fail. Established, professionalized climate organizations have failed to significantly change the balance of power within climate governance. Corporate interests that wish to sustain the carbon economy dominate, including new and established media empires. Short-term electoral cycles make it near impossible for governments to take the long-term view, even if they were interested.

The attraction of citizens' assemblies is that, in principle, none of these dynamics are at play. Democratic lottery or sortition ensures a diversity of perspectives from ordinary people, not the homogenous perspectives and interests of the political and economic elite. Lottery

obstructs powerful vested interests. The idea of such assemblies is that when ordinary people learn and deliberate together, they will come to recognize the urgency of the climate and ecological crisis and propose radical solutions.

Activism and State-Commissioned Assemblies

The most common way of thinking about climate assemblies is that they are commissioned, financed, and responded to by state institutions. There are two analytically distinct relationships between the climate movement and state-commissioned assemblies. First, climate activists lead the demand for public authorities to commission assemblies. Second, activists engage with assemblies when they are organized.

In the UK, XR has organized several high-profile demonstrations to demand assemblies. In its autumn 2019 rebellion, XR activists occupied Whitehall for over a week with banners and slogans declaring “Citizens’ Assemblies Now.” In another campaign, an XR spoof led many to believe that, on the first day of her premiership on September 7, 2022, UK prime minister Liz Truss had announced a legally binding citizens’ assembly on the cost of living and climate crisis. XR’s elaborate parody consisted of a bus, a mock government website, and press coverage, and for a few moments it had a lot of the country fooled.⁸³ One government official explained that the rumor went around the office WhatsApp like wildfire: “We knew it couldn’t be real, but it was the best we’d ever seen.”⁸⁴ The site was down within a couple of hours but had already been shared countless times on social media.

XR’s activism is one of the reasons so many local authorities and national parliaments have declared climate emergencies. In the UK, in particular, some of those local authorities followed their declarations with climate assemblies. Two national-level climate assemblies were organized. The first was the Climate Assembly UK (CAUK), commissioned by six parliamentary select committees in the UK Parliament in 2020.⁸⁵ The second was Scotland’s Climate Assembly, organized by the Scottish government in 2020–2021.⁸⁶ At the time, the conservative government was in power and ignored CAUK’s recommendations, likely in part due to its association of the idea of citizens’ assemblies with the actions of XR.⁸⁷

The Climate and Ecology Bill, authored in part by XR activists, confirmed the dominant strategy to call on the UK government to commission any assembly.⁸⁸ It recognized the sovereignty of Parliament (as any bill must under the UK constitution) but expected the government and Parliament to act on the assembly’s recommendations. Activists continued to use assemblies as a focus of their campaigning, on a couple of occasions managing to organize high-profile protests in the House of Commons itself.⁸⁹

But it has not only been XR making the case for governments to commission assemblies. In France, the idea of a climate convention emerged during the Grand Débat National, the national consultation that President Emmanuel Macron initiated in 2019.⁹⁰ Amid the Yellow Vests protests triggered by the perceived social injustices of a proposed carbon tax,

in January 2019 a related group known as the *Gilets Citoyens* suggested creating a climate assembly.⁹¹ As a result of this activism, in April of that year Macron commissioned the Citizens' Convention for the Climate, to date the highest-profile climate assembly in the world.

In Austria, climate activists made use of the parliamentary citizens' initiative process. The *Klimarat*—the Austrian Citizens' Climate Assembly—was one of the demands of the *Klimavolksbegehren*, a climate referendum campaign organization that collected over 380,000 signatures (well beyond the required threshold of 100,000 for parliamentary debate) between 2018 and 2020.⁹² In March 2021 a parliamentary resolution handed over responsibility for the organization of a climate assembly to the Ministry of Climate Action and Energy. Other assemblies across Europe have been established at least in part because of climate activism.

When public authorities have commissioned assemblies, actors within the climate movement have played various roles, in particular in governance committees and the provision of evidence to the assembly. More mainstream climate movement actors tend to take on these roles. Eva Saldaña, the director of Greenpeace Spain, recounted how she was skeptical of assemblies until she took part in the governance body for the Spanish national climate assembly.⁹³ It has generally been common for direct experience with the deliberations to turn people into active champions of the process and its proposals.⁹⁴

Despite its leadership in campaigning for climate assemblies, XR has faced frustrations engaging with state-commissioned assemblies. XR has had an ambiguous and strategically awkward relationship with the assemblies that have happened in the UK, for instance. Local activists who campaigned for assemblies have felt that what is ultimately delivered does not live up to their expectations.⁹⁵ In Scotland, where the government is much more attuned to climate and ecological concerns, XR decided to participate in the Stewarding Group of the national assembly. It helped shape the broad remit of the assembly—how Scotland should change to tackle the climate emergency in an effective and fair way—and the selection of some of the members of the Evidence Group. Just before the assembly began, it decided to withdraw its support, arguing that the governance of the assembly, its design, and its delivery model had built-in biases that prevented the process from addressing the systemic roots of the climate crisis.⁹⁶ However, even with its critique, XR Scotland was generally supportive of the report that emerged from the process and put pressure on the government to act.

Activism and Civil Society-Commissioned Assemblies

While the common practice is for climate assemblies to be organized by the state, the recent emergence of assemblies organized from within civil society is challenging that dominant way of thinking and doing. There are a range of strategies at play. All can be understood as explicit counterpowers to government inaction, but each has a different political orientation toward the state. Strikingly, this emerging practice is happening globally, not primarily in Western Europe as government-commissioned processes have been.

CSO-Commissioned Assemblies Targeting the State

Assemblies commissioned by civil society organizations (CSOs) often pursue the strategy of targeting state policies. The German Citizen’s Assembly on Climate, which took place in 2021, was the first national-level assembly to be commissioned by a coalition of CSOs, led by BürgerBegehren Klimaschutz (Citizens’ Climate Protection Initiative) and Scientists for Future.⁹⁷ The assembly’s objective was to shape party platforms in the run-up to the federal elections and to influence the governing agenda of the new coalition government.

Other climate assemblies have been commissioned from within civil society in situations where the government has not been willing to act on climate policy, including several outside Western Europe. In Central and Eastern Europe, the Polish Nationwide Citizens’ Assembly on Energy Costs was commissioned by the civil society organization Shipyard Foundation in 2022, and the recent climate assembly in the North Macedonian city of Skopje was organized in 2024 by ZIP Institute.⁹⁸ In the United States, the Washington Climate Assembly was commissioned in 2021 in Washington state by the nonprofit People’s Voice on Climate, in partnership with other civil society actors including the League of Women Voters and Indigenous tribes across the state.⁹⁹

In Maldives, three climate assemblies were commissioned in 2023 by the civil society organization Ecocare Maldives with the support of the U.S. National Democratic Institute.¹⁰⁰ The main output was the Citizen Manifesto on the Environment that aimed to influence party platforms and policy outcomes in Maldives. In Lebanon, in 2020, a pilot Citizens’ Assembly on Electricity and Energy Justice was convened in Hamra in Beirut.¹⁰¹ Motivated by the mass protests that had erupted the year before where energy equity emerged as a key demand, a group of academics, feminist activists, and independent energy consultants ran the assembly to rethink energy futures and to show how citizens could play a role in the reconstruction of energy infrastructure.

In all of these cases, the target audience was policymakers—both to influence climate policy and to demonstrate the value of climate assemblies in highly polarized political contexts and/or contexts of endemic political distrust in established political institutions. For some activists, the longer-term ambition is for governments to take on the role of commissioner; for others, it is important to keep assemblies independent of government due to widespread polarization and distrust.

CSO-Commissioned Assemblies with Broader Targets

Three European assemblies go a step further, with a broader impact strategy where the state is only one among many target actors. The People’s Assembly for Nature was commissioned by three conservation organizations in the UK in 2022–2023: the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the World Wide Fund for Nature, and the National Trust.¹⁰² These are mainstream civil society organizations that have embraced this deliberative democratic

method in recognition of the limitations of their existing advocacy and campaigning strategies. The assembly created the People’s Plan for Nature that set out twenty-six calls for action targeting not just national governments but also local governments, businesses, NGOs, individuals, and communities, as well as the commissioned charities themselves. For the three commissioning bodies, the plan is a different type of intervention into the politics of the nature crisis—a way of opening up and altering the dynamics of political space.

The Swedish Climate Assembly was organized in 2024 by a consortium of researchers led by the Stockholm Resilience Centre, an international research center on resilience and sustainability science.¹⁰³ Unlike purely academic projects, the organizers have the explicit aim for the assembly to contribute to public and political discourse on Sweden’s commitment to and action on the Paris Agreement in a context of perceived government backsliding.

A national assembly in Norway that will take place in 2025 has similar aims of catalyzing public debate and action.¹⁰⁴ In this case, the target is Norway’s growing oil and gas wealth during the climate and ecological crisis. The main political parties are committed to continuing fossil fuel extraction and are not questioning the fact that the profits of the sovereign wealth fund have increased significantly because of the war in Ukraine. These profits of extraction help to resource the generous pensions and welfare state enjoyed by Norwegians. For a coalition of humanitarian and other civil society organizations, brought together by the not-for-profit organization SoCentral, these contradictions need to be the subject of public and political debate—hence a climate assembly organized independently of the state.¹⁰⁵

CSO-Commissioned Independent Governance Structures

The Global Assembly takes social movement strategy even further.¹⁰⁶ Not only did the first iteration of the Global Assembly in 2021 connect global institutions, civil society, and grassroots communities, but also, at least some of its initiators envision the Global Assembly becoming a permanent and independent feature of global governance.¹⁰⁷ These ambitions were formalized in 2024 with the launch of the Coalition for a Global Citizens’ Assembly.¹⁰⁸ Like the CSO-commissioned assemblies in Norway, Sweden, and the UK, the primary aim is not to integrate directly with any particular institution but to be a counterpower to ensure previously absent citizens’ voices are present in global governance.

In both Sri Lanka and the UK, activists have made the case for infrastructure for permanent citizens’ assemblies that are independent of the state. In Sri Lanka, a coalition that included climate activists such as Melani Gunathilaka, co-founder of Climate Action Now Sri Lanka, was involved in the 124-day protest, commenced in March 2022, known as Aragalaya (Struggle).¹⁰⁹ Aragalaya succeeded in pushing the president to step down. One of the groups that then emerged has made the case for a people’s council that would be part of new governance structures to monitor future governments. Some (but not all) activists argue this council should be fully or partly selected by sortition. In the UK, Humanity Project is promoting the idea of an independent, permanent citizens’ assembly that links with popular assemblies (called “pops”) around the country.¹¹⁰

Roger Hallam, one of the co-founders of XR and an initiator of Humanity Project, talks of assemblies as “a revolutionary confrontation with the carbon state.” For him, the “zombie carbon state” will soon collapse as citizens’ assemblies are used by civil society to create their own alternative governance institutions. That is, to undermine rather than prop up the regime.¹¹¹ Hallam has taken a more radical position on assemblies than most in XR. Back in 2021, he was talking about citizens’ assemblies as part of a revolutionary plan to restructure democratic systems, not simply to advise governments in the way that became mainstream in XR policy.¹¹² In 2024, Hallam influenced the strategy of Just Stop Oil in the UK with the launch of Umbrella, which described itself as “a new hub to coordinate the creation of radical, nonviolent projects alongside Just Stop Oil.”¹¹³ It includes the Assemble initiative, which aims to “build a popular mass movement after the election,” with the goal of creating a House of the People to parallel the House of Commons as the first step toward permanent, legally binding citizens’ assemblies.¹¹⁴

Explaining the Shift in Strategy

Activists’ shift in thinking about climate assemblies can be explained by their push for a different kind of political power.¹¹⁵

State-commissioned assemblies can be understood as a means of opening up the previously *closed* spaces of climate governance where citizens had little or no role. Such assemblies are *invited* spaces as citizens come into a space that is to a large degree shaped by the interests of the state. While citizens have some ability to reshape agendas within assemblies and come up with progressive proposals, the state’s ability to frame the remit of assemblies and to respond to recommendations translates to a significant degree of power—visible, hidden, and invisible—in the hands of state actors. Activist-led citizens’ assemblies act as *claimed/created* spaces within civil society that promise to change these power dynamics.

In her advocacy with Humanity Project, Clare Farrell raises the lack of attention to power as the reason why citizens’ assemblies have not had enough impact:

“So, power is the missing component. No structural power [for assemblies] can mean it’s an expensive focus group. Which is why we have to get serious about a way of governing ourselves that won’t end up killing us all, people power is the power that will do that.”¹¹⁶

The limitations of agendas set by state organizers have become more apparent. In the first weekend session, members of the French Convention raised issues about the nature of economic growth, GDP, and the impact of the profit motive as blockages to the transition. These questions did not fit with the more policy-centric approach defined by the convention’s Governance Committee. Systemic issues were sidelined, including “discussion about the political economy and critical societal indicators such as GDP in connection with alternative models of development, oil and gas subsidies, the financial system, or the leverage that banks or pensions schemes have in the climate and ecological crisis.”¹¹⁷

The unwillingness of state actors to open agendas and to respond to the recommendations of assemblies in ways that tackle the systemic underpinnings of the climate and ecological crisis has increasingly encouraged climate activists to commission climate assemblies. The German assembly aimed to shift the climate agenda of political parties and the new coalition government. The assemblies in Lebanon, Maldives, North Macedonia, Poland, and Washington state aimed to impact government inaction. The assemblies in Norway, Sweden, and the UK have broader ambitions to shift public discourse and the policies and behaviors of a wider range of social and political actors. Other CSO-led projects, including the Global Assembly, Humanity Project, and the assembly proposed by Sri Lankan activists, aim to create new independent democratic infrastructure. These are all attempts by civil society to reshape the political agenda around climate using the vehicle of citizens' assemblies. This is a long way removed from the standard operating model of assemblies commissioned by governments.

This shift also complicates research efforts to make sense of strategies toward climate assemblies using traditional analytical categories developed for social movements. The insider/outsider categorization, for example, aims to make sense of strategies of influence ranging from close cooperation with government officials to protest activities. Researchers might distinguish the degree of engagement with government-commissioned assemblies in these terms, as some CSOs are willing to engage in insider strategies such as participating in governance bodies or providing evidence, whereas others remain outside the assembly, often skeptical of government motivations. But the commissioning of assemblies by CSOs themselves is highly significant in cutting across the standard insider/outsider distinction. Some CSOs use typically outsider strategies of commissioning independent assemblies to influence state action, while others focus more on either influencing other stakeholders and publics or looking to build new democratic infrastructure beyond the state.

Remaining Challenges

CSO-commissioned processes represent a significant shift in the way citizens' assemblies are conceived. They tend to be much more explicitly political interventions compared to most state-commissioned assemblies (the French Convention perhaps being one exception).¹¹⁸ CSO-commissioned assemblies, however, do not share a unified approach or philosophy. Visions range from politically reformist to radical or revolutionary. Wherever activists sit on the continuum, the challenges for civil society-organized assemblies are threefold: perceived legitimacy, resources, and impact.

First, to demonstrate integrity, civil society-organized assemblies will need to ensure robust and transparent governance.¹¹⁹ As those assemblies increase in numbers, some observers privately argue that they risk undermining the quality standards set by deliberative democracy practitioners and academics over the past few years. Others see a fundamental tension if climate assemblies are used both in formal policy settings and as an oppositional and political tool to drive political change.¹²⁰ There is a risk that the proliferation of CSO-organized climate assemblies will push decisionmakers not aligned with the activists' wider demands to dismiss all climate assemblies regardless of the context in which they occur.

Second, it is challenging to organize climate assemblies—especially when the resources of the state are not available. It is not clear yet, for example, whether the philanthropy sector shares the enthusiasm necessary to sustain the financing of CSO-commissioned assemblies, in particular where activists aim to build permanent infrastructure.

Third is the question of impact. The commissioners of the German and UK civil society assemblies have both reflected on the challenges they faced in building and sustaining an effective impact strategy for their assemblies.¹²¹ Much of their focus had been on resourcing and organizing the assembly, and follow-up did not get the attention it deserved. And unlike state-commissioned processes where the focus is typically on the bureaucratic and political responses of the commissioner, the nature of follow-up for civil society–commissioned assemblies is rarely so clear-cut.

Organizers of the Lebanese assembly have reflected on the particular challenge of applying assemblies “to postcolonial states in the Global South where states suffer severe democratic deficits and under-development” and where “state-expert hegemony” flatly rejects any role for citizens on technical and specialized issues.¹²² Designing and realizing an effective impact strategy in such politically sectarian and fragmented contexts is obviously even more challenging.

Conclusions

Different conceptions of assemblies and different political strategies are at play across the climate movement. The dominant approach is still one in which the standard operating model is state-commissioned assemblies. But the limitations of this strategy have led a growing cohort of activists to develop competing ways of thinking and acting that center civil society as the commissioning agent. Different theories of change are emerging that could significantly shift climate assembly politics and practices, but the assemblies face very real practical challenges of governance, resourcing, and creating and sustaining impact. These theories of change are embryonic, and the activists developing these strategic approaches are scattered across different parts of the globe. It is therefore difficult to make generalizations and reliable predictions about how this emerging set of assembly practices will unfold.

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Case Study: East-West Divide in European Green Movements

Paweł Marczewski

In satellite countries of the Soviet Union, heavy industrialization led to devastation of the natural environment. As a result, some dissident movements included its protection into their agenda. One example was the Polish Ecological Club, which became part of the Solidarity movement in 1980-1981.

However, after 1989, activism in Central and Eastern European countries focused predominantly on establishing parliamentary democracies, so issues of environmental protection did not become an important part of the political mainstream. For many dissidents actively engaged in rebuilding democracy in their countries, focusing on ecology was an obstacle to quick democratic transition and economic efficiency.

Green political parties came relatively late to this part of Europe. At that time, many activists believed the new, belatedly formed green parties had been licensed and arranged in a top-down manner. This perception, alongside the absence of environmental politics in the political mainstream shortly after the beginning of democratization in 1989, have contributed to certain divergences between green movements in Eastern and Western EU countries.

First, Central and Eastern European countries see fewer links between political parties and activist movements, as green parties in many instances did not evolve organically from activism.

Second, green movements consist of young people in larger part than their counterparts in the West. Activists from Extinction Rebellion or country-specific iterations of Fridays for Future are predominantly young. Instead of joining existing green parties or established environmental NGOs, they prefer to engage in direct actions or street protests, as they are quite distrustful of formal organizations.

Third, the general public views green movements with a certain degree of suspicion, as the green agenda was initially not part of the democratization package after 1989. Even when there is a clear majority in favor of protecting the natural environment, as in Poland, more abstract postulates about preventing climate change are often discarded as impositions of unclear rules dictated by distant centers of power.

In short, some of the divides noted elsewhere in this compilation remain especially deep in Central and Eastern Europe: between generations, between activists and green party cadres, and between climate and democracy activists.

Civic Activism Against Climate Action and the Challenge of Backlash

James Patterson

Although climate denial and corporate obstruction have been strong for some time, civic activism against climate policy has begun to spread in the past several years as part of a possible wider public and political backlash to the environmental agenda. Backlash refers to “an abrupt and forceful negative reaction by a significant number of actors seeking to reverse a policy,” through strong and even hostile forms of criticism and protest.¹²³ Backlash has occurred against policies seeking to phase out combustion vehicles, increase the use of heat pumps in homes, introduce low-emissions zones in cities, price carbon emissions, restore and protect natural areas, and change agricultural practices, among other environmental efforts. This is challenging climate policies and undermining momentum for climate action.

The risk of backlash grows as climate policy becomes more demanding to meet global and national climate targets.¹²⁴ Oppositional civic activism is emerging in new and consequential ways as climate policies are seen as costly, intrusive, unfair, or ideologically threatening. It has, for example, begun to target regulatory measures aimed at constraining certain economic activities and changing behaviors of citizens and businesses. This raises challenging questions about how ambitious climate action can navigate the threat of public and political backlash from oppositional civic activism.

Experiences of Backlash and the Role of Oppositional Civic Activism

Backlash is taking on different forms. Sometimes civic activism against climate policy arises first—such as from spontaneous protests or groups who mobilize their views publicly—and then politicians join in to amplify these criticisms. Other times, politicians, industry groups, or prominent media figures lead in criticizing climate policy, hoping to cultivate public discontent and oppositional civic activism. Yet in many cases, the roles of civic activists and elites (for example, political, industry, and media figures) are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The eruption of backlash against climate policy can thus occur in different ways.

Several early experiences of backlash to climate policy concerned carbon pricing, with oppositional civic activism playing a central role. Australia introduced a carbon pricing scheme in 2012, yet repealed it less than two years later following fierce criticism from politicians, industry groups, and media figures, in conjunction with heated public protests.¹²⁵ In Canada, several provincial governments challenged the constitutional validity of a federal carbon pricing scheme in 2019 and dismantled many provincial climate policies.¹²⁶ This again resulted from intense criticism from politicians, industry, and media combined with public protests. In Taiwan, a policy to phase out gasoline cars and scooters was suspended after less than two years due to heavy criticism from industry, including through a public campaign, based on perceived policy unfairness.¹²⁷ Conversely, the Yellow Vests protests in France in 2018–2019 erupted spontaneously among large swaths of civil society, initially sparked by resistance to a fuel tax increase.¹²⁸ This was a tremendous shock to climate policy makers nationally and globally, and still today it remains a landmark event in oppositional civic activism over climate policy, even though its criticisms were against not necessarily climate policy but rather the distribution of its costs.

Sometimes politicians play a more central role in pushback and backlash against climate policy. In the United States, the Donald Trump administration announced in 2017 that it would withdraw from the Paris Agreement (a move later reversed by the Joe Biden administration), and it repealed or undermined many climate and environmental policies and laws.¹²⁹ Several U.S. states have also weakened or repealed previous arrangements supporting renewable energy.¹³⁰ Here, the role of civic activism has sometimes been direct, but more often indirect and linked to wider conservative activism opposing climate policy.

At the local level, there has sometimes been strong citizen pushback against certain policies such as low emissions zones, including in London, Madrid, and Milan.¹³¹ Criticisms often focus on costs to those who rely on private vehicles for everyday personal travel and work, and are often linked to broader concerns over cost-of-living pressures. This has sometimes fed back into national-level debates over climate policy—such as in the United Kingdom, where a recent controversy over the Ultra-Low Emission Zone expansion in London became a national question indicative of political parties' stances on climate policy.¹³² However, in that case, it did not seem to spark further civic activism against climate policy. Thus, while political elites may sometimes succeed in cultivating backlash against climate policy (such as in the Australian and Canadian cases), they do not always generate this outcome (such as in the UK case).

A string of recent examples in European countries and at the European level has raised major concerns among politicians and commentators about the potential for widespread opposition and backlash to climate and environmental policies. In Germany, a proposed law to drive the uptake of heat pumps experienced strong pushback in 2023.¹³³ At the European level, a 2022 commitment to phase out combustion vehicles by 2035 was weakened in 2023 after several countries (including Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, and Poland) pushed back at a late stage to allow for exemptions for synthetic fuels.¹³⁴ Shortly afterward, an increase in European vehicle emissions standards was also delayed.¹³⁵

In wider environmental policy, a major European nature protection and restoration law faced pushback in 2023 from European Parliament politicians who threatened to derail it, as well as from subsequent civic activism in early 2024 by farmers who protested (sometimes violently) against agriculture-related regulations (in multiple European countries including Belgium, France, Germany, Poland, Portugal, and Romania).¹³⁶ The European nature restoration law was initially passed after being softened in various ways in response to such criticism, but subsequent withdrawal of support by some member states threatened its final adoption.¹³⁷ The broader farmers' protests that began in early 2024 directed anger toward European green policies and laws (on issues such as nature restoration, agricultural production, deforestation, and pollution standards), laws that were also linked to claims of low profit margins in the face of import competition.¹³⁸ Altogether, these protests led to a weakening of and uncertainty over environmental policies and fueled fear leading up to the European elections in June 2024.¹³⁹

These experiences across Europe closely resembled earlier experiences of major protests by farmers against nitrogen management measures in the Netherlands in 2019–2023, which have since led to a stalemate on how to meet legal obligations to reduce nitrogen emissions nationally.¹⁴⁰ Here, sustained civic action among farmers and broader rural communities produced a wave of political support for a new rural political party—not limited to rural voters—in nationwide provincial elections in 2023. It also seems to have inspired subsequent farmers' protests across Europe, which suggests that oppositional civic activism can spread.

Elsewhere around the world, backlash and civic activism against climate action is gaining traction but has received less attention in international news media and academic literature. Actions such as fuel riots and farmer protests against different forms of government policy are widespread, although they are often motivated by economics rather than environmental concerns. This suggests that similar eruptions could occur against climate policy, especially if policies come to be seen as worsening existing difficulties and disparities in peoples' lives. Yet, in the case of less-wealthy countries, questions over the distribution of costs of climate action—such as who finances low-carbon transitions and who should be responsible for finding solutions and making difficult changes first—apply not only internally within a society but also externally against other wealthier nations. Hence, another important trend is toward a broader pushback from Global South countries against extractivist pressures and green colonialism from wealthy countries seeking to source minerals, materials, and labor to support their green transitions. While such unease currently seems to be fragmented among the communities most affected, it is conceivable that local discontent in countries subject to adverse impacts could coalesce into a wider pushback against one-way extraction, given the expected enormous future demand for resources by wealthier countries.

Sources and Escalation of Discontent

Experiences of backlash are increasingly creating fears among proponents of climate action, linked to concerns about conservative and right-wing populist opposition more broadly. Right-wing populist political parties recently seem to be gravitating toward anti-climate positions in many places. This has been observed, for instance, in Germany, Finland, and Poland.¹⁴¹ Right-wing opposition to climate action can also influence conservative governments as the two wings either compete for voters or form shared agendas when in governing coalitions together. In the UK, conservatives sought to make climate policy a wedge issue after a long period of bipartisan support for ambitious action.¹⁴² In Sweden, commitments to climate action have been undermined in unprecedented ways by a new governing coalition tacitly involving the nationalist party Sweden Democrats.¹⁴³ More broadly, the prospects of right-wing populist parties gaining power in other countries in coming years raises questions about future climate policy ambition and threats to it.

However, the climate backlash goes well beyond right-wing populism. Right-wing populism may certainly sometimes drive oppositional civic activism, but often, oppositional civic activism is not linked to the far right—such as in the Yellow Vests case, which involved a much deeper set of grievances largely distinct from right-wing populist motivations. And, conversely, sometimes right-wing populist criticism fails to spark wider backlash in society. The resonance and escalation of discontent among citizens more broadly is crucial.

Loose citizen discontent can turn into targeted oppositional activism for several reasons. First, climate policy can be seen as too costly, demanding, or threatening to people's way of life—particularly when costs or trade-offs lack visibility, are perceived as unfair, or occur within the context of economic insecurity and inequality.¹⁴⁴ Second, discontent can emerge when people view climate policy as being out of touch with the concerns of everyday people and/or the national good. If people see climate policy as going against basic values, such as freedom, tradition, or social identity, they tend to find it deeply threatening or undesirable.¹⁴⁵ Third, frustration arises when climate policy either complicates people's everyday lives (by making work, shopping, education, or leisure more difficult) or requires unfeasible behaviors (such as reducing vehicle use without adequate public transport available or changing a home heating system without sufficient financial support).¹⁴⁶ In these kinds of situations, discontent can escalate when criticisms of climate policy resonate with people who are preconditioned in certain ways.¹⁴⁷

Yet at the same time, discontent often cannot be easily anticipated. Responding too quickly to a fear of anticipated discontent or backlash might unnecessarily reduce climate action ambition. Such preemptive action risks not only fighting the previous war but also avoiding the immediate question of how to address people's potential concerns to proactively address discontent and thereby diminish the chances of opposition finding a receptive audience. Some scholars have argued, based on public opinion surveys investigating public support for climate policy, that emerging talk of a backlash against climate and environmental policy across Europe is inaccurate.¹⁴⁸ Yet, the reality seems to be somewhere in the middle: Many

instances of actual pushback and discontent are indeed apparent, while at the same time much debate is premised on anticipated rather than real outcomes among wider publics in response to new policies. At the same time, political sensitivity to criticisms of climate and environmental policies, especially concerning costs, probably does reflect real anxieties among people, industries, and some politicians, as well as ideological differences. This creates a murky combination of genuine, latent discontent over climate and environmental policies, on the one hand, and action by political elites to stir up the climate backlash, on the other hand.

Implications for Climate Action and Pro-Climate Activism

Although often impactful when it does occur, backlash remains sporadic and difficult to explain. Nonetheless, both recent experiences of backlash as well as the fear of possible future backlash increasingly colors policymakers' thinking and debate over climate action. While oppositional civic activism against climate action is likely to continue, especially as more demanding changes are pursued toward low-carbon transitions, it is important not to immediately equate such opposition with backlash, as it may be more limited in scope and reach. Yet, it is also important not to dismiss oppositional civic activism too quickly, because it may sometimes reflect genuine concerns that need to be addressed and/or latent discontent within wider society that has potential to erupt later. Analysts and practitioners must ask: What can be done to undermine the resonance of oppositional civic activism and the potential for discontent?

Sometimes oppositional civic activism might constitute normal discontent and expressions of dissent in democratic society. Even if opposing activists' messages are disagreeable to climate action proponents, cases of oppositional activism may nonetheless fall within the realm and breadth of democratic free expression. Yet, at other times, such activism may constitute something more objectionable, especially if it contributes to undermining democratic rights and free expression of others, such as when anti-climate/environmental messages become fused with far-right efforts to undermine democratic processes or impose illiberal values (such as anti-equality). This challenges pro-climate civic activism to consider difficult questions about when, how, and to what extent to take on board concerns of oppositional civic activism, how to assess the threat of oppositional civic activism to climate action, and how to respond to competition from oppositional civic activism over climate action.

The first key issue for pro-climate activism is to engage with the evolving politics of costly policy action. Dealing with the costs of climate action has always been a central challenge. However, the politics of costly action now come to the fore in new ways when considering concrete transitions in energy production and distribution systems. These costs are likely to be central in ongoing political debates (for example, debates regarding heat pumps in Germany, nitrogen management in the Netherlands, and combustion vehicle phaseout and nature protection in the EU). Transition support and compensation is likely to be crucial, but many remaining costs cannot be simply dismissed without creating opportunities for oppositional civic activism that has the potential to resonate with wider publics.

The second, related key issue for pro-climate activism is to engage with the cultural dimensions of green transitions.¹⁴⁹ For example, this could include the changing social identities, visions, and meanings of people and communities affected by proposed climate policies, along with their self-image and value within wider society, so that they do not feel left behind or left out. This goes far beyond simply reframing climate policy and instead poses complex questions about how people make sense of change and how climate policy takes on meaning, positively or negatively. Social and cultural solidarity is needed between different groups in society who could easily become antagonists (such as between urban and nonurban communities). Scholars have begun to explore how to bridge climate action with the experiences and dispositions of groups at risk of aversion to it, such as men working in manual labor jobs who might otherwise be attracted to right-wing parties.¹⁵⁰

The third key issue for pro-climate activism is to engage with the diverse circumstances of people's lives in how climate policy is thought about and pursued. Climate policy is sometimes at risk of being seen (whether accurately or not) as treating policy recipients in homogenous ways. However, people can be affected in complex ways by climate policy, which could impose different costs or conflicts with cultures, social identities, and everyday practices. This is no doubt challenging, and perhaps in tension with the core message of the need for ambitious, sweeping, and urgent climate action. But nonetheless, a concern for the diverse circumstances of people's lives also aligns with the underlying impetus of most climate and social justice activism to create a more equitable and fairer world where diversity is respected. Doing so is important for creating more people-centered, pro-climate activism that can engage and resonate with wider publics.

The grievances expressed in the emerging backlash show that climate policy needs to become more attuned to the diverse circumstances of different people's lives. Pro-climate activism could focus on understanding and advocating for what climate policy should look like from a recipient- or user-centered perspective. This could help to reveal problems or risks in how climate policy might be received before it is implemented and provide novel ways of thinking about how to make it beneficial by standing in the shoes of different people. Pro-climate activism has not focused much on understanding how to appropriately navigate major tensions that will increasingly arise between the material construction involved in the low-carbon transition (such as building infrastructure and sourcing materials) and the inevitable environmental and societal impacts (such as whose interests are prioritized; the degree, forms, and limits of participation; impacts on property rights; and forms and locations of environmental impacts). This is an important yet complex set of challenges inherent to advancing rapid climate action, one in which pro-climate activism could play an extremely important role in helping to navigate with attention to justice and diversity from multiple angles.

Conclusion

Despite growing experiences of oppositional civic activism and backlash, the picture of climate policy progress is mixed and rapidly evolving. Major new climate policy developments that have occurred in places such as the European Union and the United States take on board lessons from previous oppositional civic activism and backlash. Yet, the potential for backlash persists, as seen in Europe, where major policy initiatives continue to be questioned and even weakened. At the same time, the fear of backlash is now itself threatening climate policy by making policymakers reluctant to develop and advocate for ambitious climate and environmental agendas. While policymakers should be cognizant of the risk of backlash and work to mitigate it, they should not make climate policy unambitious or put it on the back burner.

Thinking about oppositional civic activism and backlash only through the lens of right-wing populism can obscure policymakers' understanding of why backlash occurs and opportunities to respond to it. A central challenge is to understand why and under which conditions discontent resonates and escalates among wider publics to generate backlash. This challenges pro-climate activism to consider the concerns raised, perhaps only indirectly, by oppositional civic activism; to find ways to undermine its appeal among the broader public; and, at the same time, work toward more equitable and just climate policy. Avoiding backlash is not about watering down climate policy but about finding ways to win over more general audiences on terms that they can understand and participate in, rather than too quickly dividing stakeholders into supporters or opponents or assuming everyone will see things in the same way. While no doubt challenging, this starting point offers opportunities to rethink climate policy from a people-centered perspective, which will likely continue to be necessary given the complex and demanding changes ahead as climate policy increasingly moves from committing to doing.

Pro-climate activism is unlikely to be directly comparable to oppositional civic activism in this case. While some forms of oppositional civic activism are enduring, some are largely reactive to specific policies and not necessarily strongly tied to longer-term, organized climate denial and corporate obstruction. Oppositional civic activism linked to backlash is more ad hoc and probably more strongly linked to generalized societal polarization, political discontent, and economic and cultural anxiety than a long-term, organized, anti-climate activity. This means not only that some of it may be relatively ephemeral—erupting and dissipating—but also that it can be surprising and powerful when it does occur.

Complex, deep-seated, underlying conditions in society allow oppositional civic activism to resonate and escalate into wider backlash. Pro-climate activism should take a broader view that considers the large, moderate swath of society to try to nudge this part toward climate action rather than disengaging from difficult debate and giving an opportunity for oppositional messages to take root. While oppositional civic activism may seem to be a setback from democratic climate action, pro-climate activism should take this as a challenge to reengage and reinvent itself by reaching out proactively to those who could tilt decisively either way on the scale of support for climate action at crucial moments of policy action.

Case Study: Backlash Against Green Policies in Türkiye

Özge Zihnioğlu

Since the early 2000s, Türkiye has emphasized renewable energy as its main climate mitigation strategy. In 2005, it enacted the Renewable Energy Law. Then the 2013 introduction of the Renewable Energy Resources Support Mechanism spurred a significant increase in renewable energy projects in the decade since.¹⁵¹

However, shortly after these projects began, a backlash emerged. A coalition of local and national environmental organizations, agricultural chambers, medical chambers, and bar associations mobilized in opposition. They held protests, press conferences, and workshops; launched petition campaigns; and visited Parliament. They were supported by members of Parliament, municipalities, residents, and villagers in the areas where the projects were implemented. Civic actors filed lawsuits to require the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change to conduct environmental impact assessments when the initial decision deems such assessments unnecessary or to turn the existing positive assessments into negative ones. They also closely monitored the legal process. While opposition to geothermal energy is widespread, there is also notable resistance to wind energy and, to a lesser extent, solar energy.

Recently, more and more villagers have been resisting these efforts. In Türkiye, villagers have a long history of environmental mobilization, including opposing thermal power plants in the 1980s and resisting gold mining during the 1990s. However, their mobilization has become more frequent and coordinated in recent years, with villagers now often joining demonstrations and actions against renewable energy projects. Several factors have likely facilitated this change. The long-standing efforts of environmental organizations, such as opposing mining activities in villages, have played a crucial role, and villagers have also learned from mobilizations in neighboring villages. Seeing positive outcomes from peripheral resistance has likely had an influence. Furthermore, the mobilization of villagers has started to become more organized, with the formation of associations that make it easier to engage in legal actions. Having a legal personality also allows these groups to conduct fundraising activities, such as charity sales, to cover the costs of expensive legal processes. This organizational shift enables villagers to intervene more effectively in environmental disputes and advocate for their rights.

Researchers have argued that the backlash against renewable energy projects is driven by the threat these initiatives pose to the livelihoods and living spaces of villagers.¹⁵² Projects tend to be constructed on or near farmland and thus significantly impede agricultural production. This damage also impacts living spaces in many villages. In some cases, the state has even transferred publicly owned lands used by locals to geothermal companies.¹⁵³ Villagers who farm or live on these lands face displacement, which intensifies the fears that undergird backlash.

Finally, scholars show that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has promoted a friendly business class to maintain its dominance and has used lucrative public contracts, in particular in the energy sector, for this purpose.¹⁵⁴ As a result, villagers negatively affected by renewable energy projects perceive these initiatives not as efforts toward decarbonization but as means to create new capital for companies close to the AKP, which further fuels public distrust and backlash.¹⁵⁵

Reprisals Against Land and Environmental Defenders

Javier Garate and Rachel Cox

Land and environmental defenders are increasingly mobilizing to protect their land and the environment from elite interests and destructive projects. Their activism is often rooted in wider community opposition to government- and business-led pursuits that threaten human rights and the natural world. Many live in communities whose land, health, and livelihoods are negatively impacted by extractive industries. But their speaking out comes with increasing risk: Global Witness, a nongovernmental organization exposing human rights and environmental harms linked to the climate crisis, where the authors work, documented at least 2,106 murders of land and environmental defenders globally between 2012 and 2023.¹⁵⁶

Land and environmental defenders have been increasingly involved in activism related to climate issues.¹⁵⁷ Climate activists and land and environmental defenders, with their common goals of preserving the environment and mitigating the harms of climate change, often share opposition to broader economic and sociopolitical practices that drive destructive industries. Together, they form a powerful alliance that not only combats environmental degradation but also champions social justice, recognizing that the fight for a sustainable future is also a fight for the rights and livelihoods of marginalized communities disproportionately affected by environmental destruction and climate change.

Concern over the climate has risen over the past decade, sparking an increase in global environmental activism—and a more active, outspoken, and visible role for defenders.¹⁵⁸ The escalating climate crisis has accentuated the importance of safeguarding defenders who advocate for the protection of natural resources, ecosystems, and the rights of local communities.¹⁵⁹ The rise in attacks against land and environmental defenders is undermining efforts to address climate change.

Trends in Attacks Against Land and Environmental Defenders

Global Witness documented the murder of 196 land and environmental defenders in 2023.¹⁶⁰ The majority of these attacks occurred in Latin America, with 70 percent concentrated in four countries: Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, and Mexico. This trend has been consistently reported for over a decade.¹⁶¹

Colombia has the highest number of documented killings, with seventy-nine defenders murdered in 2023, or 40 percent of all reported cases. The high rate of attacks in communities involved in land conflicts echoes patterns of documented violence against human rights defenders and social justice leaders more generally.¹⁶² Illegal activities, such as drug trafficking and illegal mining, have deepened inequalities and intensified conflict, with communities often placed in the cross fire.¹⁶³ Widespread impunity and limited access to justice increases vulnerability to violence—particularly for Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant communities, who made up nearly 30 percent of the victims of the documented attacks in Colombia in 2023.¹⁶⁴

Similar trends have been recorded in Mexico, where over 70 percent of environmental defenders murdered in 2023 were Indigenous.¹⁶⁵ While murders continue to be among the most brutal form of reprisal against communities, another documented, chilling trend is enforced disappearances, a tactic also used in other countries.¹⁶⁶ In Mexico, the mountainous state of Michoacán is a notable hot spot for violence, with at least twenty-one land and environmental defenders forcibly disappeared or murdered there between 2012 and 2023.¹⁶⁷ Most of these attacks targeted communities caught between business ventures and criminal activities competing for the region's natural resources.¹⁶⁸

Those behind the disappearances or killings of defenders are very rarely brought to justice, often due to state failures to properly investigate or prosecute crimes. In Mexico, over 94 percent of crimes against human rights defenders are inadequately reported, and less than 1 percent are resolved.¹⁶⁹ Authorities are often accused of turning a blind eye or actively impeding investigations, and presumed “collusion between corporate and state interests” also sometimes underlies the violence defenders face. Furthermore, potential perpetrators may anticipate “impunity for threats and attacks” when there is a permissive environment.¹⁷⁰ Higinio Trinidad de la Cruz was among the victims of these attacks. A prominent anti-mining advocate and Indigenous Ayotitlán activist, Higinio had denounced one of Mexico's leading iron-mining operations—the Peña Colorada Mine—and its impact on the Ayotitlán Indigenous peoples.¹⁷¹ He reported receiving threats linked to his activism and was granted protection measures by the Mexican government before his murder.¹⁷²

Land and environmental defenders in Asia are also suffering high levels of violent repression. Between 2012 and 2023, at least 468 defenders were killed in Asia, with 64 percent of these deaths occurring in the Philippines (298). Murders were also documented in India (86), Indonesia (20), and Thailand (13).¹⁷³

Behind the Killings: Repressive Tactics and Responses

The number of defenders killed and forcibly disappeared yearly is alarming, but murder is often the last resort. States and companies employ a variety of techniques to interfere with the ability of land and environmental defenders to exercise their rights to free association, assembly, and expression.¹⁷⁴ The criminalization of activists has become a powerful trend in recent years.

Governments and other powerful political and economic actors increasingly subject environmental defenders to smear campaigns, disinformation, legal harassment, surveillance, and sexual and gender-based violence.¹⁷⁵ The range of attacks does not end in the physical space. Harassment via cyber bullying, cyber attacks, hacking, and online smearing are designed to tarnish the reputations of individuals or organizations.¹⁷⁶ Defamatory accusations—including labels such as “extremist,” “militant,” “antidevelopment,” and “terrorist”—are often followed by “arrests, imprisonment, or violence.”¹⁷⁷

Companies are increasingly initiating what are called “strategic lawsuits against public participation” (SLAPPs) to curtail and intimidate activists.¹⁷⁸ Over 400 SLAPP-like lawsuits involving business actors were documented over an eight-year period by the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre.¹⁷⁹ In Canada, Indigenous communities and climate activists have been raising concerns about another legal challenge: injunctions used to protect corporations affected by direct action blockades. For example, in December 2018, following opposition by Wet’suwet’en Indigenous communities to the construction of a pipeline without consent on their territory, the British Columbia Supreme Court granted an interim injunction preventing land defenders from disrupting the operations of TC Energy Coastal GasLink.¹⁸⁰

Around the world, governments have been managing protests with an increasingly militarized response.¹⁸¹ Military personnel, courts, and tactics are sometimes co-opted to prosecute peaceful protesters, and experts are warning of a possible “escalation of violence and tensions, human rights abuses, and increased impunity in the context of peaceful protests.”¹⁸²

In the Philippines, for instance, many suspect military involvement in the abduction of two defenders, Jhed Tamano and Jonila Castro, who were held captive for seventeen days. According to Global Witness, “both women are known for their opposition to massive land reclamation projects in Manila Bay, including the construction of the \$15 billion New Manila International Airport.”¹⁸³ Similar cases were reported in Indonesia, including the June 2024 abduction of Muhriono, a farmer from Pakel, East Java.¹⁸⁴ These incidents reflect broader efforts by powerful elites to “suppress dissent and maintain control over land and resources” and suggest that perpetrators are “targeting individuals who challenge powerful interests, particularly those linked to land rights and environmental protection.”¹⁸⁵

Online surveillance of environmental groups represents another significant concern, as it is difficult to detect and challenge legally before it occurs. Cyber crime legislation, often passed under the guise of counterterrorism, upholds the threat of sophisticated digital surveillance of defenders by states and their collaborators.¹⁸⁶ The use of such tactics to repress, intimidate, and silence land and environmental defenders and climate activists often leaves them with limited options for redress.

Climate activists have adopted various strategies against such repression and attacks. Many have used online tools in what experts call “distributed digital activism,” where a shared central goal is filtered through local movements or chapters who develop their own “messages and tactics most relevant to their local contexts.” This inclusive structure allows the participation of nearly anyone anywhere.¹⁸⁷

Activists and defenders are also turning to climate litigation. Such court cases against governments and companies often combine environmental and human rights issues.¹⁸⁸ In one illustrative example, in September 2020 six Portuguese youth brought a case to the European Court of Human Rights against thirty-three state parties. According to the Council of Europe’s Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, they argued that “forest fires caused by global warming have negatively impacted their living conditions and health, show[ing] the potential of linking climate litigation with human rights.”¹⁸⁹

Criminalizing Climate Protest

As the profile of the climate movement grows and its tactics become more impactful in challenging the centers of power, it will likely face increased repression mirroring what land and environmental defenders have been facing for decades. The environmental defenders’ movement has become adept at combining movement building with the use of legal tools and international human rights mechanisms. The climate movement could benefit from further developing similar strategies.

Nearly all European governments have imposed tighter restrictions on protests. In one example, the UK’s recent Conservative government imposed significant limits on the right to protest, prompting UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders Michel Forst to describe the situation in the country as “terrifying.”¹⁹⁰ The introduction of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act in 2022 empowered the police to curtail disruptive protests.¹⁹¹ Data from the Metropolitan Police reveal that in the past five years, more than 7,000 climate protesters have been arrested in the UK. After it was made an explicit offence in April 2023, nearly 900 people have been arrested for “slow marching.”¹⁹²

Force is becoming a more prominent response to climate protests and land and environmental defense alike. In the United States, for instance, the Indigenous Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and community activists protested the Dakota Access Pipeline, a 1,134-mile underground crude oil pipeline that directly threatened the tribe's ancient burial grounds and cultural sites, as well as the region's water. The protesters faced violent backlash from authorities in 2016 as a result of their activism.¹⁹³

Addressing Global Reprisal Trends

Defenders have managed to combine experience on the ground with technical knowledge, leveraging international tools, policies, and mechanisms to propel human rights debates into policy spaces that include governments and business. Land and environmental defenders have been integral to the success of global policies, legislation, and initiatives established to protect against environmental, climate, and human rights abuses. At the international level, governments have made some progress in addressing harms to rights and the environment, including through several UN initiative and resolutions.¹⁹⁴

Businesses are also growing more aware of the threats that defenders face, and at least thirty businesses have reported voluntary policies on protecting human rights defenders and civic freedoms.¹⁹⁵ A recently passed EU directive on corporate sustainability due diligence benefited from direct input from defenders.¹⁹⁶ The directive will be integrated into existing European frameworks such as the Lieferkettengesetz (Supply Chain Act) in Germany and the Loi de la Vigilance (Duty of Vigilance Law) in France.¹⁹⁷ It will require the private sector to undertake due diligence in cooperation with environmental defenders and allows local communities to seek legal redress against companies for environmental damages.

Long-standing efforts to establish regional binding mechanisms, including provisions on environmental defenders, have seen some success. The so-called Aarhus Convention requires governments to offer protections to environmental activists.¹⁹⁸ In the Americas, the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (also known as the Escazú Agreement) took effect in April 2021.¹⁹⁹ It is the first legally binding treaty in this region that, according to Global Witness, provides the “right to access environmental information and participate in environmental decision-making” and “requires states to prevent and investigate attacks against environmental defenders.”²⁰⁰ Inspired by this agreement, civil society organizations in African and Southeast Asian countries are working to develop similar pacts.²⁰¹

The impact of these efforts on the funding landscape is mixed, with both signs of growth and significant underresourcing. Financial support for human rights defenders increased 158 percent, from \$9.3 million in 2011 to \$24 million in 2019—pointing to growing recognition among funders of the critical role activists play in the struggle to protect and promote human rights.²⁰² However, philanthropic support remains relatively limited for communities on the front lines of human rights issues.²⁰³

One of the reasons for this underfunding is that the intersectional work undertaken by human rights defenders through climate activism tends to fall between philanthropists' funding siloes. Human rights defenders are at the forefront of movements for gender justice, LGBTQ rights, and the defense of land and the environment, among other critical human rights struggles. Yet, according to the Human Rights Funders Network, the percent of funding "earmarked for [wider rights movements that] also mentions human rights defenders" ranges between only 0.5 and 2.2 percent.²⁰⁴ While human rights funders have known about human rights defenders for years, environmental funders are not aware of their work. Furthermore, much of the climate funding landscape is focused on technical solutions to the ecological crisis, with work related to environmental justice receiving much less attention.²⁰⁵ Indeed, many risk-averse donors remain hesitant to support direct action and civil disobedience within the climate and human rights movement.²⁰⁶

Conclusion

The climate emergency cannot be effectively addressed without tackling reprisals against the people, communities, and movements opposing the erosion of their rights and the planet. As these actors mobilize against environmental damage and climate change, they have suffered increasingly severe reprisals. These reprisals are becoming more dramatic and more varied as powerful actors deploy multiple tactics against activists. Communities across the world are organizing and resisting the climate crisis: From the Ayotitlán Indigenous peoples' movements to global activists' growing climate litigation, a global reaction is mobilizing positive change but also negative consequences as reprisals increase. Climate activists and land and environmental defenders should continue learning from each other's movements and building alliances across them, which will be critical to achieving greater success in the fight to save the planet.

Case Study: The Police-Pipeline Nexus in the United States

Erin Jones

The United States is not immune to the rising tide of oppression against climate activists. Chapter 7 mentions violent clashes between protesters and law enforcement during the early phases of construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota. Similarly, an instance of police brutality at Cop City in Georgia resulted in the death of a land defender. Both of these cases are emblematic of the growing sense among climate justice activists in the United States that law enforcement and corporations are colluding to silence them.

For example, when activists led by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe organized to stop the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, the corporation developing the pipeline, Energy Transfer, hired the company TigerSwan to upgrade its security strategy. Staffed with former personnel from military special operations units and pursuing an approach informed by fighting terrorism abroad, TigerSwan saw quelling the resistance to resource exploitation as a business opportunity.²⁰⁷ The security firm profited from its heavily militarized strategy—of questionable legality—surveilling and infiltrating the Indigenous activists and environmental groups trying to protect the land.²⁰⁸

At Cop City in Atlanta, Georgia, militarized police forces similarly treated peaceful protesters as terrorists and criminals. Activists defending the Weelaunee Forest in Atlanta have been charged with domestic terrorism, despite the fact that, according to the Intercept, “none of the arrest warrants tie any of the defendants directly to any illegal acts.”²⁰⁹ Multinational corporations including Bank of America and Coca-Cola have provided funding to the Atlanta Police Foundation, which helped finance the police training facility that the Stop Cop City movement strove to halt.²¹⁰ In the United States, ties between policing and major corporate polluters run deep, with many oil and gas companies funding and sitting on the boards of police foundations.²¹¹ An investigation by the *Guardian* found that “lobbyists working for major North American oil and gas companies were key architects of anti-protest laws” that have undergirded the recent crackdown on civil disobedience across the United States.²¹²

Climate activists in the United States, like in other places, have displayed surprising resilience in the face of these mounting obstacles. But the threat of unregulated corporate pursuit of profit that incentivizes the suppression of those fighting to protect the planet remains an urgent concern. Many climate organizations in the United States have experienced financial setbacks due to funding reductions, and activists are suffering from fatigue and despair as those with vested interests in the continued dependence on fossil fuel have shifted from climate change denial to outright repression. In the context of U.S. legislative gridlock, the normalization of a high degree of political violence, and deepening polarization, the continued innovation and mobilization of U.S. climate activists should serve as yet another emblem of humanity’s immutable determination to defend nature against even the most formidable opponents.

Climate Change Activism in the Middle East and North Africa

Maha Yahya and Issam Kayssi

On December 3, 2023, a remarkable scene unfolded at the COP28 UN climate summit in the United Arab Emirates. Over one hundred protesters gathered to call for a ceasefire in Gaza—an extraordinary event in a state that enforces hard limits on freedom of expression and prohibits political parties and labor unions. Activists in Expo City Dubai held banners demanding “ceasefire” and “climate decolonization” and chanted “Free, Free Palestine.” The protesters connected climate justice to the broader struggle for human rights, arguing that the siege of Gaza and the occupation of land were forms of environmental oppression. With slogans like “no climate justice without human rights,” they emphasized that sustainable solutions cannot be achieved while current injustices persist.²¹³

A few days later at COP28, about twenty-five protesters demanded the release of pro-democracy activists by holding pictures of Ahmed Mansoor and Mohamed al-Siddiq, along with Alaa Abdel Fattah, pro-democracy activists who were imprisoned in the UAE and Egypt, respectively.²¹⁴ The public demand for the release of these political prisoners was unprecedented in the UAE. Mansoor and Siddiq were imprisoned on charges related to their activism, while Abdel Fattah has faced repeated detentions in Egypt since the 2011 uprising, detentions that Human Rights Watch has described as “arbitrary” and “highly repressive” in trials considered “gravely unjust.”²¹⁵

In both instances, as well as during protests held at COP27 in Egypt, activists utilized the momentary openings of space for global engagement to demand climate justice as well as to make broader statements about democratic governance in progressively repressive environments. Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), climate change activists face an uphill battle. Increasingly autocratic governments—worried that public expressions of discontent on any issue would lead to broader protests against the ruling elites, similar to what was witnessed in the heyday of the 2011 Arab uprisings—have severely restricted civic space and hindered activism of any sort. In this context, climate-related activists have

adopted a variety of strategies. They are leveraging global, regional, and national events to raise awareness about climate-related challenges and the link to sound governance, while also emphasizing climate justice as a fundamental human right. State responses to these forms of activism are mainly determined by the nature of the activity as well as existing restrictions around civic space and activism in the country in which they are taking place.

MENA Climate Change Trends and Government Responses

The MENA region is a climate change hotspot and faces a multitude of climate-related challenges. The World Bank estimates that due to global warming, an average of 13.5 million people (over 5 percent of the MENA region's total population) may become internal climate migrants by 2050 under a "pessimistic" scenario, where no climate-friendly development occurs in the region.²¹⁶ In Iraq, climate change has led to the destruction of vital agricultural resources, forcing rural communities to abandon their lands.²¹⁷ Morocco faces increasingly severe heat waves and prolonged droughts, resulting in water scarcity that negatively impacts agriculture and biodiversity and necessitates urgent climate resilience measures.²¹⁸ In Yemen, climate change has also exacerbated water scarcity, agricultural challenges, coastal vulnerability, health risks, and food insecurity.²¹⁹

These trends are intersecting with conflict, economic instability, social upheaval, as well as inadequate environmental institutions and legal frameworks to address the detrimental impacts of climate change. They are also exacerbating social tensions and increasing the risk of food insecurity.²²⁰ The closure of civic space by governments that employ draconian measures to repress freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly—silencing dissent through arbitrary detention, unfair trials, and harassment—is compounded by ongoing armed conflicts, discrimination against minorities, and other human rights violations.²²¹ All of this is accentuated by weakened judiciaries and an expanding sense of impunity among ruling elites.²²²

This situation hinders policy discussions on adaptive capacities and resilience to climate change at the national and regional levels. While MENA states have a general commitment to the Paris Agreement, regional mechanisms lack effective coordination and explicit implementation goals and do little to address the challenges posed by weak institutions and inadequate transparency and accountability.²²³ At the national level, most countries in the region have declared nationally determined contributions (NDCs) as part of their commitment to the Paris Agreement, but not all countries have produced national climate plans or frameworks that address the interconnections between climate change, displacement, poverty, vulnerability, and conflicts. Where national strategies are present, the implementation of those strategies varies.²²⁴ Countries in the Arab Gulf have introduced ambitious plans that seek to mitigate the impact of climate change, such as Saudi Arabia's Green Initiative, which is aligned with its Vision 2030, or the UAE's Net Zero 2050 Strategy, which has attracted substantial investments worth billions of U.S. dollars.²²⁵ Egypt's National Climate Change

Strategy 2050, which includes \$324 billion in adaptation and mitigation programs, is beset by a range of challenges including inadequate data, overlap in institutional mandates, legislative incoherence, weak enforcement mechanisms, and poor buy-in from the private sector and populace at large.²²⁶

To fulfill countries' NDCs, regional organizations, civil society groups, NGOs, and international bodies need to coordinate more effectively. Yet the prospects for such collaboration are severely constrained by the restrictions placed on civic space across much of the MENA region. After the 2011 Arab uprisings, governments in the region have regarded activism as a challenge to their authority and have sought to restrict all forms of activism, including on climate, for fear that it could snowball into broader public expressions of political and socioeconomic discontent.

In Egypt, for instance, a revised constitution and new laws over the past decade have effectively strangled civic space. The 2013 Protest Law curtails citizens' right to protest by imposing restrictions on freedom of assembly. The University Regulations Law bans politically affiliated groups on campuses, suppressing political expression. The constitution also shields military courts, allowing them to try civilians with broad discretion.²²⁷ In Tunisia, a similar story has unfolded with President Kais Saied's 2021 power grab, which undermined the country's fledgling democratic institutions by eroding checks and balances.²²⁸ Even in Lebanon, repression has intensified, with authorities violating the rights of peaceful critics, LGBTQ individuals, and refugees at a time of economic crisis, polarization, escalating regional conflict, and governmental failure to hold officials accountable for abuses or to implement necessary reforms.²²⁹ In Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, and much of the Arab Gulf, a similar story has unfolded with varied levels of restrictions on any expressions of discontent.²³⁰

This shrinking civic space applies to climate-related activism. Civil society activists throughout the MENA region have rallied to confront the socioeconomic ramifications of climate change and the lack of response from governments. But they have been met with formidable obstacles. These activists often find themselves lacking the essential resources and expertise required to effectively tackle climate change issues or the capacity to engage with their governments on needed policy change. In this complex landscape, diverse forms of climate activism often intersect with governance challenges, identity politics, and minority rights. They are also often conflated with more general environmental issues. These restrictions have driven local activists to adopt varied strategies. Their ability to affect change is directly linked to constraints on civic space, the history and maturity of civil society, and the availability of funding.

Climate Activism in MENA: Approaches and Strategies

A Long History of Activism: Climate and Sociopolitical Challenges in Lebanon and Tunisia

In some MENA countries, there is a long history of environmental activism that is linked to and even precedes today's focus on climate change. Activism around environmental challenges has often reflected broader frustrations with political systems, mismanagement of resources, and expanding socioeconomic inequities.

In contrast to other countries in the region, Lebanon has had a generally permissive political environment, active civil society, and a long history of activism on a wide range of issues.²³¹ For example, the 2015 waste management crisis that resulted in garbage accumulating in streets and alleyways across Lebanon triggered massive protests. Known as the “You Stink” movement, these demonstrations quickly became a platform for articulating discontent with Lebanon's archaic political system and rampant corruption.²³² The You Stink movement started as an online campaign by longtime democracy activists in Beirut who focused on the issue of solid waste management to expose and protest against political corruption. What began as a mobilization by a handful of activists had by August 2015 ballooned into broader anti-corruption rallies with tens of thousands of Lebanese people calling for better governance of the country and its resources.²³³ By linking environmental issues to political accountability, You Stink built on wider societal frustrations—toward state capture by the country's political elite, resource mismanagement, and corruption—and paved the way for the nationwide protests that erupted in 2019.²³⁴

Protests related to the construction of the Bisri Dam in the Shouf region similarly expanded beyond the environmental impact of the dam itself to include concerns with corruption and the mismanagement of resources. Although the Bisri Dam project sought to address water shortages in the area, experts and local community leaders criticized its environmental repercussions, such as the destruction of protected natural areas and biodiversity loss.²³⁵ Led by the Lebanon Eco Movement, founded in 2012 as a network of tens of organizations promoting a sustainable environment, the Save Bisri Valley campaign garnered national attention. Many of these organizations included individuals who have been active for decades and who sought to pool their voices and resources under this network.²³⁶

The movement brought together a range of tactics, including grassroots efforts like regular protests, sit-ins, an encampment at the Bisri Valley site to physically block construction, and a national media campaign. Activists used the internal rifts among Lebanon's political elite, especially between the Progressive Socialist Party and the Free Patriotic Movement, to turn municipalities against the project. By connecting their slogan to those of the 2019 anti-government protests, the campaign activists garnered national attention as a symbol of resistance to the status quo. The campaign succeeded in halting the dam's construction and compelling the withdrawal of more than \$244 million of World Bank funding earmarked for the project.²³⁷

In Tunisia, protests in 2018 and 2019 that were initially focused on the government's mismanagement of waste also escalated into nationwide expressions of socioeconomic discontent. Two grassroots movements, Manish Msab and Sakker el-Msab, drew national attention and ultimately made a difference. The Manish Msab campaign was initiated by cultured youth in Agareb, inspired by a mural highlighting environmental degradation, while the Sakker el-Msab campaign was organized by local youths and municipal council members following a significant landfill fire in Borj Chakir. Both campaigns employed health-centric discourse and powerful slogans to mobilize public support and draw attention to the detrimental effects of these landfills on the environment and on local communities. While both campaigns demanded the closure of the El Gonna and Borj Chakir landfills, only El Gonna landfill was successfully shut down.²³⁸

Navigating Polarized Politics: Water Scarcity Activism in Iraq and Beyond

Single-issue activism around specific environmental concerns often focuses on managing natural resources and addressing the impacts of climate change, particularly water scarcity. In Iraq, for instance, the effects of climate change, aggravated by the 2008 drought, demonstrate the urgent need for greater attention to water and biodiversity protection. Reduced river water levels are causing marshes to dry up, threatening biodiversity and traditional ways of life. Climate-induced rural-urban migration is also on the rise.²³⁹ These effects of climate change contribute to rising violence, poverty, and population growth in urban areas.²⁴⁰

To combat these issues, grassroots environmental mobilization in Iraq has focused on water scarcity in the country's southern marshes, where the preservation of historic aquatic habitats, particularly the marshes, is critical. These marshes suffered severe damage in the 1990s when the government bombed and drained them following the First Gulf War, in part to punish their inhabitants for rising up against the rule of Saddam Hussein. This drastic loss of around 90 percent of the marshland also disrupted the flow of freshwater into the Shatt al-Arab, leading to higher salinity levels. Despite some local efforts to restore the marshes after 2003, they have only partially recovered, retaining just half of their original area, and continue to be threatened by climate change, new dams, and river diversions in Iran and Türkiye. Environmental degradation in these marshes has hurt agricultural productivity, leading to significant changes in social conditions in southern Iraq, including greater rural-urban migration, widespread unemployment, and deepening poverty. This socioeconomic instability has further fueled political instability as well as the growth of informal and illicit economies.²⁴¹

Efforts to address these challenges have been led by a movement called Save the Tigris, which originally started as a campaign by the Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative.²⁴² By collaborating across borders with civil society groups and international organizations, the organizers have come to play an increasingly pivotal role in safeguarding the Tigris River Basin from the adverse effects of upstream policies. What began as a national movement has today morphed into a transnational environmental organization that advocates for

water conservation and protection of the basin. To maintain their outreach and effectiveness despite regulatory challenges, their tactics include mobilizing international support, raising awareness through public campaigns, and overcoming bureaucratic barriers by focusing on smaller, interim goals, such as forming local guardian teams and organizing Iraqi Water Week.²⁴³

Marginalized Voices: Resilience and Resistance in Morocco's Amazigh Community

Climate change questions often intersect with historically marginalized ethnic, racial, or religious communities. In Morocco, drought, desertification, and dwindling water sources and vegetation now threaten their traditional way of life for Imazighen (singular Amazigh), a group of Indigenous peoples who have traditionally led a nomadic life in the desert and oasis region of Draa-Tafilalet, which includes the High Atlas Mountains. As a result of the climate impacts on their livestock and cultural practices, many Amazigh nomads have been compelled to abandon their ancestral lands, seeking livelihoods in urban areas.

Government aid programs and infrastructure projects, like solar-powered water pumps, were insufficient to sustain the Amazigh's traditional lifestyle. Consequently, some Amazigh Moroccans have taken proactive measures, establishing independent organizations to complement government initiatives, bridging gaps in aid, and contributing to long-term planning efforts while advocating for environmental and cultural preservation for Amazigh communities. This grassroots approach reflects their resilience in the face of state policies that have historically marginalized them and inadequately addressed their needs.²⁴⁴

Activists in Draa-Tafilalet have also tried to resist land grabs and resource exploitation, advocating for equitable environmental policies that prioritize dignity, social justice, and local empowerment. One example is On The Road 96, a grassroots movement initiated by locals in 2011 in Imider. Activists organized a prolonged sit-in on Mount Alebban, lasting over eight years, to protest the diversion of water resources and pollution caused by mining activities. In September 2019, authorities abruptly dismantled the Imider camp, marking a setback in the struggle for environmental justice and community empowerment.²⁴⁵ None of the protesters' demands were met, and the core issues of water diversion and environmental damage remain unresolved. The Imider case highlighted not only the importance of grassroots persistence and visibility but also the challenges of overcoming entrenched political and economic interests and the limitations of not gaining broad political support. The community responded with disappointment but resolved to continue its struggle through alternative, peaceful protests. The movement's struggle was notably documented in the 2019 film *Amussu*, which garnered international attention and inspired similar activism in Morocco and beyond.²⁴⁶

Operating in Constrained Civic Spaces: Nonconfrontational Activism in Egypt

A significantly restricted civic space under an increasingly militarized regime in Egypt has driven civil society groups to frame their work as technical rather than political. To do so, they employ nonconfrontational strategies, primarily by operating as social enterprises or community centers that work on environmental challenges. Local groups engage the public through workshops and discussions aimed at fostering community dialogue and raising public awareness. During environmental crises, such as severe weather events, local organizations provide immediate relief and support. Additionally, some organizations work informally with government officials by contributing their expertise to the development of climate policies and strategies. This informal collaboration often takes place during key events or policy discussions, allowing civil society to impact climate action within a context marked by limited institutional continuity and fragmented efforts.²⁴⁷

This activism is driven by a diverse range of civil society organizations, including social enterprises, grassroots groups, and local NGOs. The individuals involved, typically activists, social entrepreneurs, and NGO staff, are highly networked within their circles, using these connections to navigate a closed civic space.²⁴⁸ For example, in 2015, a charity group in Alexandria provided flood relief and collaborated with municipal authorities to enhance flood management. Meanwhile a local makerspace, a community venue equipped with tools that enable individuals to physically experiment with their ideas, worked with youth groups to develop emergency lighting units to address power outages from flooding.²⁴⁹ While many groups primarily focus on immediate relief during environmental crises, by presenting themselves as technical rather than political organizations, they have, in time, managed to engage in policy discussions around climate-related issues. However, their overall impact on policy is constrained by the general fragmentation of the space for civic action and their limited resources.

Reaching Out: Activism at International Climate Conferences in MENA

Beyond national contexts, climate activists from the MENA region have sought to utilize international forums, such as UN climate change conferences, to advocate for policy change and to connect with other regional and international movements seeking climate justice. The use of COP meetings to highlight domestic issues is neither new nor unique to the region. However, for activists, it has presented a necessary opportunity to draw international attention to domestic concerns including human rights.

At both the COP27 and COP28 conferences in Egypt and Dubai, respectively, local, regional, and international climate activists lobbied for a broad range of issues including the need for industrialized nations to assume responsibility for the impacts of global warming. Demonstrators stressed the need for so-called loss-and-damage payments to address climate-related harms and emphasized the importance of adhering to the 1.5°C limit to global

warming set by the Paris Agreement. They also urged substantial reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and an end to fossil fuel extraction. These demonstrations encompassed calls for environmental justice, Indigenous rights, and the rights of marginalized groups worldwide.²⁵⁰

Activists at these conferences also used these global platforms to bring attention to human rights issues and to demand the release of political prisoners. Protesters at COP27 included environmental activists such as Friday Nbani from Nigeria, Indigenous rights activists such as Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim from Chad, and human rights advocates such as Sanaa Seif, the sister of Alaa Abdel Fattah, from Egypt. They called for industrialized nations to pay reparations for climate-related damages as well as for the release of political prisoners. By combining environmental justice with human rights, the protesters highlighted how climate activism can open avenues for broader democratic and human rights movements in the Middle East. The protesters used tactics such as marching through the UN-designated Blue Zone, which is exempt from local laws, and chanting slogans such as “free them all” and “no climate justice without human rights.”

The COP28 protests in Dubai also called for the release of political prisoners, particularly prodemocracy activists in the UAE and Egypt, and linked climate activism with broader struggles for human rights and democracy.²⁵¹ The protesters at COP28 included about twenty-five activists supported by organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.²⁵²

These protests took place despite significant restrictions on participation imposed by the organizers. During COP27 in Egypt, only select Egyptian environmental NGOs were allowed to attend, while others faced challenges obtaining visas and affordable accommodations. This strict control reflected the Egyptian government’s intent to dominate the narrative and avoid scrutiny of its human rights and environmental practices during the event.²⁵³ Human rights organizations reported restrictions on freedom of speech; some of their websites were blocked, and many had concerns about surveillance.²⁵⁴

Similar restrictions were also evident at COP28 in 2023. In Dubai, there were designated protest days; strict regulations on speech, assembly, and association; and censorship of attempts to display the names of detained activists or advocate for a ceasefire in Israel’s war on Gaza.²⁵⁵ The presence of the oil, gas, and coal industries at the summit also drove part of the activist agenda. They rallied under the banner of “climate justice,” emphasizing the need for equitable solutions that prioritize the phasing out of fossil fuels. These protests were muted in comparison to previous rallies at COP25 and COP26 (which were both held in Europe).

Smaller-Scale Climate Change Initiatives

Other forms of advocacy for policies to mitigate the impacts of climate change occur more quietly, such as through research organizations or NGOs that focus on environmental conservation and climate action. Nechfate, for example, is a platform in Morocco dedicated

to disseminating information on climate change through articles, analyses, and policy discussions, to enhance public understanding and spur action on climate-related issues.²⁵⁶ Similarly, Nature Iraq is an Iraqi NGO affiliated with international environmental bodies, focused on protecting Iraq's natural environment and cultural heritage through capacity building, research, advocacy, and community engagement.²⁵⁷

Additional, local examples of climate activism are grassroots efforts driven by passionate individuals. These are often tolerated by local governments as they both fill a gap in government service delivery and are seen as unthreatening to local elites. Initiatives include individuals who have chosen to clean up public beaches in Lebanon and Tunisia and to raise awareness about single-plastic pollution.²⁵⁸ In Morocco, individual activists lead networks with young Arabs and participate in international conferences to amplify youth voices in climate discussions.²⁵⁹ Other forms of activism include energy finance professionals advocating for sustainable electricity in Lebanon, recycling artists inspiring waste management, and researchers driving green energy initiatives.²⁶⁰ In Algeria, a university lecturer is leading a fight against a zinc mining project, which locals fear will contaminate groundwater, displace communities, and pose health hazards amid exacerbated environmental degradation and intensive resource exploitation due to climate change.²⁶¹

Conclusion

The MENA region faces complex climate-related challenges that intersect with sociopolitical and economic issues. Climate activism here often reflects broader grievances about governance, resource mismanagement, and social inequalities. Protests over environmental issues frequently serve as a platform to voice discontent with political systems and arrangements. Despite severe restrictions on civic space and repressive measures employed by governments, civil society actors continue to mobilize in diverse ways to address pressing environmental concerns.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach in MENA climate activism. Rather, it is shaped by each country's unique political, legislative, and social context. In Lebanon and Tunisia, environmental movements frame their struggles as intertwined with human rights issues, linking pollution and resource mismanagement to government failures. These movements have contributed to larger democratic protests, even though a closing civic space in Tunisia is making that more difficult. In contrast, today's activists in Egypt's severely restricted civic space operate through social enterprises and community centers, using relief efforts in the wake of natural disasters to build subtle influence in climate policy circles.

In Iraq, where the intersection between identity politics and policymaking make change even more challenging, organizations like Save the Tigris have highlighted the link between environmental degradation and state failures, advocating for water conservation and alliances with regional groups. Similarly, the historically marginalized Amazigh communities in Morocco have managed to integrate environmental concerns with broader challenges to authoritarian practices, advocating for justice, equity, and democratic governance.

In addition to these localized efforts, activists have leveraged international platforms such as COP27 and COP28 to spotlight the linkage between shrinking civic spaces, political repression, human rights, and environmental justice. Through these global forums, climate activism in the MENA region not only addresses immediate environmental concerns but also draws global attention to the importance of democratic governance for sound climate change policies.

Addressing climate-related challenges in the MENA region requires collaborative efforts among governments, communities, civil society, and international partners. Systemic barriers must be tackled, space for discussion on climate issues must be expanded, and inclusive governance must be promoted to ensure a sustainable and resilient future for all.

Case Study: Authoritarianism and Cosmetic Climate Activism in the Middle East

Youssef Cherif

While the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is a climate change hotspot, the scope of climate activism in the region remains constrained. This is due to several factors, beginning with the fact that many MENA societies are subject to dictatorship, which presents a significant challenge to the development of any form of activism. Moreover, the militaristic or heavily bureaucratic nature of MENA regimes results in the lack of prioritization of innovative policies required to address climate change. Furthermore, some of these regimes espouse conspiracy theories, preferring the hypotheses of climate change skeptics to the scientific evidence supporting the reality of the problem.

Most MENA states have developed climate strategies that may appear to engage with civil society. Some countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco, serve as exemplars in this regard. These countries have official delegations that attend major global forums related to climate change and numerous NGOs at home advocating for climate action. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are also significant actors in the climate change arena, with their initiatives for sustainable urban development and numerous climate-friendly programs.

Nevertheless, these authoritarian regimes seek to control the climate agenda rather than engage with diverse perspectives or implement the decisions of autonomous bodies. Consequently, climate activists in MENA do not enjoy the same freedoms as their counterparts in the United States and European countries, who are able to make their voices heard and impede major projects that would have negative climate impacts. For authoritarian regimes, the existence of climate activism is a way to present a Westernized, peaceful, and cooperative façade to the world. But when it comes to implementing any long-term sustainable strategies, the regimes fail. They are reluctant to educate their citizens about the dangers posed by climate change and to allow civil society to assume that responsibility. As a result, climate activism is largely superficial, and climate action does not include citizen participation. Beyond official propaganda, these regimes are not climate champions.

Lebanon and Tunisia used to represent two exceptions to this pattern. In Lebanon, the prominent anti-garbage movement You Stink has been followed by numerous other initiatives that have emerged. But the country's economic challenges and conflict with Israel have shifted many activists' focuses. In Tunisia, significant demonstrations have led to scrutiny on the extraction of phosphate, shale gas, and oil, as well as the practice of hydraulic fracturing.²⁶² Like Lebanese activists, some Tunisians have held local protests regarding waste management.²⁶³ However, the country's shift toward authoritarianism since 2021 has resulted in a notable decline in civic activism.

If regimes continue to deter citizens from social participation, which encompasses climate activism, then they will further estrange society from the adoption of climate-friendly habits. Therefore, by maintaining political constraints, the MENA regimes are becoming a liability in the global effort to combat climate change, despite their assertions to the contrary.



A New Climate Activism in Africa

Tinashe Gumbo

As the threat of climate change has grown increasingly serious over the past decade, Africa has witnessed a surge in the formation of organizations, networks, alliances, coalitions, and campaigns responding to the effects of the environmental crisis. This period has also seen African activists engaging more in regional, continental, and global discussions on climate issues, including the Africa Climate Summit and the UN climate change conferences known as COPs. Indeed, Africa's notable vulnerability to climate change effects due to its lack of capacity to adapt has been a key factor that has propelled the formation of civic organizations dedicated to climate justice.

This chapter analyzes trends in civic activism related to climate change and the broader environmental crisis in African regions, with a particular focus on civic organizations, networks, and alliances that work on climate justice. It assesses the respective activist strategies of the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance (PACJA), Africa Faith Actors Network for Climate Justice (AFAN-CJ), and Alternative Mining Indaba (AMI). The work of the PACJA demonstrates how the use of both insider and outsider strategies and tactics can bring grassroots voices into continental and international forums at the highest levels. The case of the AFAN-CJ shows how a faith-based approach can mitigate government backlash and resistance to climate justice. The emergence of the AMI illustrates the growth of innovative, deliberative approaches to environmental issues in Africa. Finally, the chapter briefly explores how activists are increasingly turning to litigation as a last resort to force governments to address climate change.

The PACJA's Organized and Disorganized African Activism

The PACJA is a consortium of over 1,000 organizations spread across fifty-one African countries that employs a blend of insider and outsider engagement strategies.²⁶⁴ With what it calls “national platforms,” the PACJA has a structural framework that allows engagement to take place at the national and subnational levels before connecting at the continental level. The bottom-up approach involves those bearing the brunt of the climate crisis and amplifies the voices of grassroots organizations making up the alliance. Furthermore, this strategy has been crucial for the PACJA to gain legitimacy from different governments. The PACJA also engages in policy and advocacy work supported by research and implements subgrants to support its members. It has a summer school to prepare young people from different countries to be radical climate justice activists who can confront their governments through formal and informal means. Finally, the PACJA focuses on strengthening networking for resilience building and adaptation to climate change impacts. With this mix of strategic approaches, the PACJA strengthens the links between more formal initiatives and grassroots efforts on climate justice across the continent.

Within its formal engagement strategies, the PACJA responds to contextual demands in collaboration with other multilateral organizations and connects with diplomats to push its agenda. In particular, the alliance works with the African Union Commission, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the African Development Bank, and the African Group of Negotiators, among other multilateral actors in Africa. The alliance has discussed its research and recommendations at various annual high-level meetings including Africa Climate Week, Africa Climate Summit, AU Summit, and COP, as well as at the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment meetings. The PACJA has worked closely with ambassadors of COP host countries, building relationships that allowed the alliance to send large numbers of its members to COP. Months ahead of COP29 in Baku, the PACJA had already involved the Azerbaijan ambassador to Kenya in the network's processes.

The alliance also uses other means, such as demonstrations on the sidelines of the official meetings, particularly when it faces obstacles to its formal participation. In 2022, during the Africa Climate Week in Gabon, the PACJA had to resort to public demonstrations after the nonstate actors' position had not been formally received. The network mobilized other delegates from faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, and others to demonstrate and deliver a position to the Gabonese minister of environment. The PACJA also demonstrates at every COP to complement the work of the African Group of Negotiators while holding side events to help convey its message. Thus, on both the national as well as the international level, the PACJA uses a hybrid strategy to advance its agenda.

The PACJA also often uses public statements and communiqués in response to exclusion from formal processes. On March 7, 2024, for instance, the PACJA mobilized other non-state actors in Africa and issued a statement raising concerns about the model of the Green Climate Fund (GCF), a UN investment fund created under the Paris Agreement to help lower-income countries finance green transitions. The PACJA opposed the financing model

in which the accessibility of the resources requires potential recipients to develop funding proposals, a technical process that becomes exclusive to the ordinary communities. The PACJA called for a transformation of the GCF to work for all countries and argued that the process should be simplified to allow ordinary people who are affected by climate change to access the fund.²⁶⁵ Prior, formal engagement meetings with the GCF Advisory Board had been held, but the board had ignored the nonstate actors' recommendations. In response, the alliance published the March 7 statement while the board met in Kigali. This experience demonstrates how formal processes at times exclude or ignore the concerns of civil society. It also shows how the PACJA mobilizes other African nonstate actors to gain legitimacy, using media to push for climate justice in both formal and informal ways.

There have been cases when the PACJA's approaches have faced resistance from other nonstate actors, such as during the 2023 Africa Climate Summit in Nairobi. The PACJA sought to engage formally, seeing the summit as an opportunity for nonstate actors to influence the process and outcome from within. However, an African counter group of nonstate actors mobilized against the PACJA's approach. The group was made up of donor partners based in Africa and other civic organizations in different countries that believed the PACJA's increased immersion in governmental processes compromised its integrity. The counter group called for a People's Summit that would deliberate on everyday people's issues and planned to mobilize citizens for massive demonstrations against the African Union's Assembly of Heads of State and Government to express displeasure about how the Africa Climate Summit had been organized. The group strongly believed that the summit's agenda had been hijacked by the West. Thus, serious discord among the nonstate actors developed. However, the PACJA and the AFAN-CJ went on to participate in the summit and convey key messages to the assembly despite the backlash from fellow nonstate actors. From the perspective of the PACJA, the fact that the alliance directly presented its position to policy-makers represented a success.

Interfaith Approaches: The Case of AFAN-CJ

Another network similar to the PACJA, the AFAN-CJ is an interfaith, multisectoral, and continental network that is hosted by the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) and coordinated by the author. Established in 2022 to ensure that faith actors become active in climate justice work in Africa, the AFAN-CJ is currently represented in thirty-eight countries with Christians and Muslims as its main actors. The network is run through a steering committee that spearheads the work at the national and regional (West, East, Central, and North Africa) levels before connecting with continental and global processes.

Governments have generally accepted the work of the AFAN-CJ because they see faith actors as nonthreatening players. The AFAN-CJ has been formally accepted by individual governments, the African Union Commission, and other critical players in climate justice discussions in Africa. The PACJA and the AFAN-CJ work on climate justice initiatives together. The faith leaders from the AFAN-CJ represent nonstate actors like PACJA members

in spaces where they have not been accepted. For instance, the AFAN-CJ presented the nonstate actors' position paper to the Heads of State and Government at the 2023 Africa Climate Summit in Nairobi. The African leaders took note of the recommendations because the messenger (faith leaders) was an acceptable one.

The network has also managed to connect African issues with global advocacy agendas. For instance, working with global ecumenical partners, the AFAN-CJ amplified African faith voices at COP27 in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt. An AFAN-CJ member, Bishop Arnold Temple, led the delivery of the faith community's position at COP27.²⁶⁶ At COP28, the AFAN-CJ also connected with other faith actors to push their issues through the Faith Pavilion. The AFAN-CJ has worked with the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, and several Muslim global institutions on climate justice and thus pacified potential backlash from governments.

Alongside its international efforts, the AFAN-CJ prioritizes locally led initiatives that promote both insider and outsider approaches to climate justice activism. National-level activism is viewed as a way of boosting continental and global advocacy. AFAN-CJ members engage policymakers in their countries about nationally determined contributions (NDCs), energy transition discussions, and adaptation programs in general. The network is guided by the principle that for Africa, adaptation remains the key target in all climate negotiations. The adopted theme for the AFAN-CJ is "the welfare of the Earth is our welfare."²⁶⁷ Approaching climate justice from this theological, spiritual, and moral perspective thus makes it difficult for the government or others to oppose their agenda. Finally, the AFAN-CJ also participates in peaceful demonstrations organized by civil society. It actively participated in such demonstrations during COP27 in Egypt and many other spaces witnessed by the author.

Alternative Mining Indaba as Climate Activism

Climate activists in southern Africa created the AMI, a platform for deliberative dialogue about mining and environmental issues in the region and, later, Africa more broadly. The AMI concept was born as a countermovement to the ongoing Mining Indaba conference that mining companies hold annually in Cape Town, South Africa.²⁶⁸ Mirroring the Mining Indaba, the AMI convenes an annual conference in Cape Town, in addition to national-level processes. In Zimbabwe, for instance, meetings called AMIs are organized by the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development, and the Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association.²⁶⁹ Communities are represented by traditional leaders, community-based organizations, local authorities, and civil society organizations. Other key stakeholders at the AMIs include parliamentarians, environmental institutions, government departments, mining companies, local authorities, and academics. The platform allows participants to deliberate policy, legal, cultural, social, and economic issues that relate to mining and the environment, particularly focusing on how host communities and their environment are affected by mining activities.

Zimbabwe, among many more countries, has embraced the platform as a progressive space that allows environmentalists and mining activists to engage policymakers. With its emphasis on deliberation, the platform facilitates conversation on environmental and mining issues and proffers policy, legislative, and programming interventions to promote sustainable mineral resource exploitation.²⁷⁰ Most importantly, it has empowered ordinary community members to engage key sectoral stakeholders on critical matters affecting them. At first, the activists used confrontational approaches, but along the way, discussion was adopted as a working model. This strategy has minimized backlash from the government.

Litigation and Repression

Two overarching trends show the new prevalence and also increasingly politicized nature of activism over environmental and climate issues across Africa. First, climate activists have increasingly resorted to litigation to force their respective governments to comply with their demands. This strategy is becoming one of the most common ones adopted by African activists in different countries. In 2021, South African climate activists sued the government over air pollution caused by the public electricity utility company Eskom and other actors, citing the country's constitutional provisions that protect citizens from air pollution. Then minister of environment Barbara Creecy acknowledged the problem but also claimed that the constitution did not require her ministry to impose stiffer rules.²⁷¹ The government argued that burning coal benefits citizens.

In Zimbabwe, villagers from Mutoko, a small town in the country's northeast, sought an order to stop the Chinese mining company Labenmon Investments from conducting illegal mining activities on their ancestral land. Led by George Makanjera and Judgmore Chibanda, the villagers successfully halted the company's operations and demanded the removal of pegs installed on their land, highlighting the community's active involvement in environmental protests against unlawful mining practices.²⁷² This is an example of a case won by the activists against big companies that had the government's support.

A second, related trend is that many repressive African governments increasingly view direct action as a threat and are responding with arrests, violence, or restrictions on freedom of assembly. Across Africa, people are increasingly frustrated with their governments' lack of action on climate change. African governments often respond defensively and struggle to implement far-reaching environmental policies due to various reasons such as lack of political will, vested interests, and resource constraints.²⁷³ In many cases, governments prioritize the interests of the private sector at the expense of those of the public. This contributes to the growing frustration among activists, pushing some activists toward bolder tactics; in turn, government bodies are responding with more draconian repression.

In 2022 eleven climate activists faced charges after protesting against the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP).²⁷⁴ They were beaten severely by the police and spent several days in jail for protesting the construction of the \$5 billion fossil fuel project backed by the

French conglomerate TotalEnergies, a Chinese national oil company, and the Ugandan and Tanzanian governments.²⁷⁵ In the case of the EACOP, local activists received technical, financial, and moral support from international organizations like GreenFaith. This kind of support boosts activists' capacity and amplifies their voices globally. GreenFaith has raised the EACOP matter in its media platforms, thereby elevating the issue beyond local efforts.²⁷⁶

The author of this chapter directly interacted with the community activists in Zimbabwe in general and Manicaland Province in particular who faced government backlash when they resisted the diamond mining that left them homeless and their environment destroyed. They received threats of arrest by the security forces as their actions were deemed to be a security breach. Further west in Zvishavane's Mhondongori community, community-based activists resisted the encroachment of the nearby Mimosa mine into their grazing land and faced a severe backlash from security forces. These activists also benefited from the support of national organizations that possess legal, technical, and financial muscles. Stories of backlash were shared during the several community meetings on mining attended by the author in Manicaland and Zvishavane between 2013 and 2022.

On May 25, 2018, the Kenyan police arrested two activists who worked for the climate activism groups Save Lamu and Lamu Youth Alliance.²⁷⁷ The activists had peacefully protested to stop the construction of a power plant due to environmental and health hazards associated with it. They were held by the police for alleged "illegal assembly," despite having issued a notification to protest per the country's laws. The planned plant was part of the long-standing regional project known as the Lamu Port–South Sudan–Ethiopia Transport Corridor project. These are just a few select examples of a wider trend where climate activism triggers more severe repression and autocratic governance.

Conclusion

The increasing radicalization of climate justice activism in Africa underscores the urgency and seriousness of the climate crisis. It reflects a growing realization that incremental changes and traditional advocacy may not be sufficient to drive meaningful action in this region. This explains the emergence of alliances, coalitions, and networks across the African continent that nonetheless still lack strong coordination. The fact that climate justice alliances are built between faith actors and other nonstate actors is a clear indication that collective efforts are key. The use of hybrid strategies and tactics (insider and outsider) has also upgraded African climate activism in the last several years. The insider approach allows access to key policymakers at national and continental levels, while outsider strategies work where official platforms are not available. Furthermore, the solidarity received from international players remains critical for the amplification of African climate justice activism. Grassroots climate justice activism has also gained currency through linkages with continental alliances that strengthen broader activism; such linkages are likely to feature prominently in the future of African climate activism.

Case Study: Climate Activism in Taiwan and East Asia

Ming-sho Ho

East Asia is an economic powerhouse home to some of the world's largest carbon emitters, including China (ranked 1), Japan (5), South Korea (9), and Taiwan (24).²⁷⁸ Although East Asians have been active in environmental causes—such as antipollution protests and antinuclear campaigns, particularly after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear accident—their focus on climate issues has been comparatively less pronounced. The Kyoto Protocol of 1997, the first international agreement aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, did inspire some regional civil society efforts to address climate change. However, when compared to Europe in particular, climate activism in East Asia generally remains rudimentary and relatively weak.

In Taiwan, vibrant environmentalism and intense political debates over energy options have not significantly extended to climate issues. Since the transition away from one-party authoritarianism in the mid-1980s, the environmental movement has been a key component of the prodemocracy campaign. Issues such as industrial expansion, nuclear waste, air pollution, land expropriation, and tidal reclamation have driven people to the streets. By comparison, protests specifically about climate issues are infrequent. For instance, when Taiwan's middle and primary school students participated in the 2019 Fridays for Future campaign, their rallies and petitions received little media attention, and follow-up actions quickly faded with the onset of the global pandemic the following year. However, climate activism has produced some notable policy outcomes in Taiwan, for example in the case of the adoption of a carbon tax.

Awareness of climate change and the willingness to bear economic costs to mitigate it are widespread in Taiwan, whereas climate denialism is virtually nonexistent. However, there remains a deep political divide, with partisan identities clashing over energy policy options. Recently, a pro-nuclear energy populism has emerged, sparking a series of confusing political disputes, despite nuclear energy accounting for only 6 percent of the country's electricity generation.²⁷⁹ Politicization of activism could hold Taiwan back from making more steady progress in decarbonization. Moreover, Taiwan's exclusion from international forums like COP due to pressure from Beijing further restricts the ability for Taiwan climate activists to scale up their efforts.

Green Parties, Greenlash, and European Climate Activism

Erin Jones and Emily Hardy

In 2024, international news on European climate politics oscillated between stories of activists throwing soup at artwork to demand more ambitious climate action and farmers driving their tractors through capitals to call for the rollback of green regulations. Alongside this civic push and pull, green parties have taken a hit at the polls, while far-right parties less friendly to climate action have surged. This chapter focuses on these dynamics taking shape in Europe, zooming out from the analysis of disruptive tactics in chapter 1 to examine how those engaging in civil disobedience relate to those pushing for climate action in more institutional formats, such as voting or serving as elected officials. It also illustrates how backlash against climate action fits into the puzzle, as both a product of and a complicating factor for efforts to make progress on the green transition.

Undergirding the resurgence of civil disobedience in European climate activism is an intensifying frustration with the perceived insufficiency of national and transnational action to mitigate climate change. Yet by early 2024, farmers' protests against environmental measures had come to dominate European politics. The troubling rise of the far right has been partially driven by communities, like farmers, that feel heavily disadvantaged by the green transition. Far-right parties have incorporated anti-climate positions into their platforms to attract support from those pushing back against regulations.

Similarly, those pushing for climate action are employing strategies and tactics both outside and inside formal democratic channels: They are acting as disruptors and saboteurs, as members of more traditional civil society organizations, and as litigants. These forms of activism often overlap, as many actors fight for climate action in the streets as well as at the ballot box and in courtrooms. However, a growing rift between grassroots organizers and green political parties has compelled both activists and politicians to rethink their approaches to what once seemed like a smooth coalition-building project. At the same time, there is a marked political and social backlash against green policies (known as greenlash) among

communities experiencing the direct effects of climate regulations. Even if Europe has led the way in climate activism, recent antiprotest legislation and judicial decisions have prompted international concern about human rights abuses against activists.

Changes in the European Climate Activism Landscape

Climate activism in Europe evolved from grassroots environmental movements in the 1960s toward more institutionalized political parties and professional organizations throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The German Green Party, for instance, was born out of several movements, including the antinuclear and antiwar movements. By the 1990s, environmentalism had become much more institutionalized, particularly in Western Europe, while emergent grassroots activism focused on climate change remained relatively fringe.

The widespread popularity of Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion (XR) beginning in 2018 marked a turning point for the European climate movement. After a summer of record-setting extreme weather, these groups galvanized a mass movement of young people (particularly young women and middle-class youth) who were upset about government failures to address the climate crisis and who, for the first time, viewed climate change as an immediate threat.²⁸⁰ A 2023 Eurobarometer survey showed that the overwhelming majority of Europeans—especially youth—were very concerned about climate change and supportive of climate action.²⁸¹ Young people worried about their future have “rallied around self-interest,” recognizing that their age group will be directly affected by climate change.²⁸² As Fridays for Future and XR grew more high-profile, a series of newly formed climate groups began to engage in civil disobedience across the continent.

Protest cells dissatisfied with the pace of government action have turned toward disruptive tactics such as blockades, vandalism, and sabotage—the range of tactics unpacked in chapter 1 of this compilation. Often employed by groups such as XR and its offshoot, Just Stop Oil; Last Generation; and Tyre Extinguishers, these tactics have attracted significant media attention. Yet disruptive forms of protest are controversial. Human blockades—for example, where activists glue themselves to roads or runways—have immobilized transport networks, but they widely lack public support, due in large part to the perception of safety risks and inconveniences they tend to cause. In Germany, a cyclist was killed during a blockade after being pinned by a cement mixer; no emergency vehicle could reach the patient.²⁸³ Although this incident is extreme and uncommon, the consequences of blockades can sour public opinion toward the climate movement at large.

The same groups conducting blockades have also targeted cultural staples. Just Stop Oil garnered a reputation for this form of direct action after two activists famously threw a can of soup at Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* and proceeded to glue themselves to the gallery wall.²⁸⁴ Beyond museums, a faction of Last Generation in Italy dyed the water of the Trevi fountain black to adumbrate the world’s dark future.²⁸⁵ These sporadic and often low-participation events have made up a decentralized activist network that is well-equipped to gain attention

and—to a degree—evade law enforcement. However, given the physical character of civil disobedience campaigns, these kinds of protests all but disappeared during the coronavirus pandemic as activists turned to online activism.²⁸⁶ While the movement regained some energy as pandemic restrictions eased, for a while it suffered notable setbacks in momentum as a result.²⁸⁷

While disruptive tactics have garnered controversy, larger civil society organizations receiving less media attention have been working to forge connections between different actors and build broad-based support. The European Climate Foundation, for instance, seeks not only to maintain pragmatism through negotiations and engagement with elected officials but also to unite political and industry insiders with activists engaging in civil disobedience.²⁸⁸ In Belgium, the Climate Coalition brought together actors across the climate movement, including so-called radical groups, and staged a protest involving over 20,000 people to demand action at COP26.²⁸⁹ More formal NGOs tend to explicitly prioritize democracy in their efforts to combat the climate crisis.

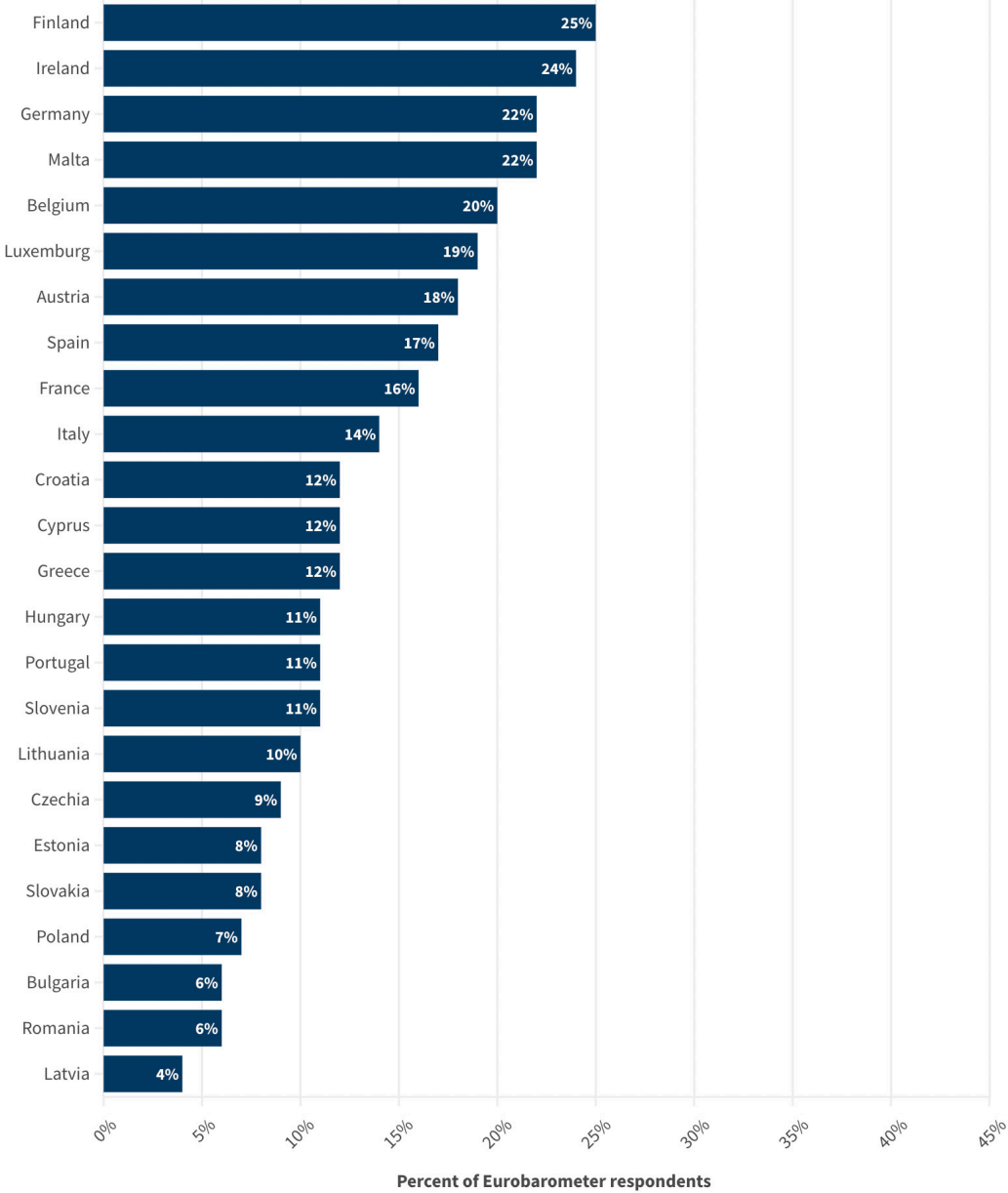
In addition to large NGOs, many other actors in the European climate movement use traditional democratic tools like petitions and mass protests to support climate action. Climate emergency declaration campaigns, for instance, petition governments to formally acknowledge the severity of the climate crisis by declaring a climate emergency and thus unlock greater executive power.²⁹⁰ Emergency declaration campaigns have been very successful: Thus far, the EU as well as eighteen national governments have declared climate emergencies.²⁹¹ Notably, many disruptive actors also engage in petitioning, mass protest, and other, less-controversial forms of activism and advocacy, in some cases even increasingly so. XR, for instance, released a statement at the end of 2022 to announce it would gravitate away from disruption and toward mass protest, citing rising criminalization as a cause.²⁹² These fluid interactions between protesters, new climate movements, and established NGOs represent an area of significant change in the European landscape in the past several years.

Finally, European climate activists have turned more toward climate litigation in recent years. In a landmark case brought before the European Court of Human Rights, four women older than eighty and a Swiss association representing them argued that government inaction on climate change placed them at an increased risk of death during heat waves.²⁹³ Remarkably, the plaintiffs won. The ruling in *Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland* (2024) established that states have a positive obligation to combat climate change. “Legal challenges are starting to become an avenue of accountability,” said the director of the Climate Governance Program at the European Climate Foundation.²⁹⁴ Although similar cases brought before domestic and international courts have been unsuccessful, the win proves that it is possible to achieve climate recourse through the judiciary.

While such trends have been observed across the continent, Europe is not monolithic. There remain significant geographic variations in concern for the climate: For example, 41 percent of Eurobarometer respondents in Sweden and 35 percent in Denmark and the Netherlands deemed climate change the most serious problem facing the world, while only 4 percent of

Figure 1. Geographic Differences in Amount of European Climate Concern

Percent of Eurobarometer respondents who said climate change is the most serious problem facing the world, by country



Source: Eurobarometer, "Citizen Support for Climate Action - European Commission," Eurobarometer, accessed June 27, 2024, https://climate.ec.europa.eu/citizens/citizen-support-climate-action_en.

respondents in Latvia and 6 percent of respondents in Bulgaria and Romania said the same.²⁹⁵ The diversity of these responses indicates that although climate change has come to dominate debate in certain policy circles, especially at the EU level and in urban centers, urgent climate concern is not shared by all EU citizens.

Nonetheless, climate activism in several forms, from disruption to advocacy and litigation, has swelled across the continent. Europe's sociopolitical environment has provided fertile ground for this movement to prosper. With a relatively free media environment in most European countries and the rise of digital technology, small numbers of activists can engage in disruptive protest and capture widespread coverage in high-profile international outlets. This form of free advertising spurs public discourse and may even motivate other activists to pursue similar stunts. Moreover, Europe's strong civil liberty protections have made the protest environment relatively safe. For many, engaging in climate activism in Europe is not life-threatening. However, protesters with certain marginalized identities are still at greater risk of persecution by law enforcement. Furthermore, some civic spaces are less open than others: In Hungary, for instance, climate activists refrain from tactics such as blocking motorways, due to concerns that the illiberal government, biased media, and conservative society would be hostile to these methods.²⁹⁶ Many climate activists across the continent have also been ringing alarm bells about a crackdown on their activities.

From the Grassroots to the Greens

In Europe's relatively democratic context, the burgeoning climate movement has been reshaping electoral politics, with important implications for the future of climate activism on the continent. While governments and grassroots activists have converged around some initiatives to address the climate crisis, the gap has widened between activists and political parties campaigning on climate action.

In 2021, the EU codified its ambitious goal of becoming the first carbon-neutral continent by 2050 in the European Green Deal. Within the Green Deal framework, the EU has engaged with climate activists by sponsoring youth discussion forums to promote deliberative democracy. For example, the current European Youth Parliament, an EU-funded body created to encourage youth participation in the democratic process, has developed a climate youth plan as well as a working group known as the Young European Multipliers for Climate Action, which presents ideas to newly elected EU parliamentarians.²⁹⁷

Beyond incorporating the voices of youth, some organizers are fighting for an expansion of the entire deliberative process through the adoption of climate assemblies—as chapter 3 in this compilation details. Climate assemblies represent a key area of collaboration between the EU, national governments, and activists, particularly in Western Europe. However, skeptics have noted the challenges of addressing the twin crises of democracy and climate through assemblies.²⁹⁸ In France, for instance, President Emmanuel Macron drew criticism for his failure to implement the recommendations of the Citizens' Climate Convention;

participants noted that only 40 percent of their provisions made the final climate bill.²⁹⁹ France is a testament to the challenges of a dual-legislative framework: When the demands of a public assembly conflict with the agenda of elected officials, the objectives of the government tend to prevail.

Conflict between politicians and protesters can also be seen in the increasingly tumultuous relationships between political parties and grassroots movements. In 2019, the popularity of green parties in Europe surged, becoming the fourth-largest bloc in the European Parliament. Green and allied parties had twenty-two representatives from Germany, twelve representatives from France, and eleven representatives from the UK.³⁰⁰ For the first time, green parties were legitimate candidates in legislative assemblies, and activists hoped that the infiltration of environmental allies into places of political power would produce change. However, initial enthusiasm waned as green parties made political concessions.³⁰¹ Uncomfortable compromises—a fundamental feature of democratic governance—left activists disenchanted with the political process.

The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 fundamentally altered the entire global energy context. As energy prices spiked and supply chain dependencies revealed themselves as weak points, the EU's clean energy transition accelerated but also reoriented around security, as exemplified by the European Commission's REPowerEU plan to phase out Russian fossil fuel imports.³⁰² Green parties struggled to defend compromises that contradicted their climate agenda in the face of new security concerns. Due to its heavy dependence on Russian energy, Germany in particular faced pressure to delink rapidly. This led the German Greens to broker a deal that permitted the high-polluting utility company RWE to raze the hamlet of Lützerath, where a broad-based climate coalition—that included Fridays for Future and Greenpeace, alongside other groups commonly deemed more radical—had been protesting for several years against the project. Symbolizing the wedge between pragmatists in the party's senior leadership and its youth and activist flanks, protesters left a scathing message for their representatives: "*Aus grün wird braun,*" or "green is becoming brown"—an allusion to the color brown's traditional association with fascists or Nazis.³⁰³

This frustration goes both ways: Pro-climate political parties across Europe have sought to distance themselves from grassroots environmentalists. Angelo Bonelli, the current spokesperson for the Europa Verde (Green Europe) party in Italy, stated that "we absolutely disagree with the actions of Ultima Generazione [Last Generation]."³⁰⁴ This sentiment was partially confirmed in a 2020 study that found that pro-climate "holders of public office are less enthusiastic about grassroots democracy."³⁰⁵ The tension between political representatives and grassroots activists is not wholly surprising given their disparate objectives. Civil disobedience cells are not responsible for passing legislation that requires majorities or compromise. Instead, they function as tools to challenge the status quo. For elected officials, blockades and vigilantism pose a direct threat to political support. If disruptive protest tactics sour public opinion and discourage the electorate from voting green, officials' jobs only become harder in the legislature. As such, elected officials may view civil disobedience strategies as obstacles to coalition building and policy production.

The June 2024 EU parliamentary election results demonstrate that faltering coalitions between climate activists and green parties give room for far-right parties to gain traction, in part due to the latter's ability to build electoral blocs with those organizing against the Green Deal. Green parties and their European Free Alliance lost twenty seats from 2019 to 2024, while the right-wing European Conservatives and Reformists gained twenty-one and the far-right Identity and Democracy gained fifteen.³⁰⁶ The two major centrist groups—the European People's Party and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats—still maintained their dominance and won a relatively similar share of seats as they did in 2019.³⁰⁷ But the fact that the Greens suffered losses amid rising tensions with climate activists, while the far-right made gains running partially on opposition to green policies, suggests that those feeling left behind by the green transition were more mobilized as voters in this election than those advocating to accelerate it.

Greenlash and Criminalization

As activists focus on the central role of capitalism in creating the climate crisis, the fossil fuel industry and right-wing parties have been forging new alliances to obstruct climate legislation.³⁰⁸ Moreover, groups like farmers that bear the brunt of pro-climate policies have been mounting a backlash against technocratic approaches to the green transition—substantiating the point made in chapter 5 that greenlash has a complex relationship with support for the far right in Europe.

Farmers' protests have proliferated across the continent to object to the kind of EU-level policymaking embodied by the Green Deal. Their demands have included not only the reversal of environmental policies, such as those regulating emissions, but also broader discontents about the rising cost of living and loose trade rules on imports, reflecting a protectionist ideology at odds with the kind of global coordination necessary to tackle climate change.³⁰⁹ Populist movements and far-right parties—that tend to advance anti-EU agendas, peddle disinformation, deepen social divides, unravel progress on climate action, and at times overtly attempt to undermine democracy—have been exploiting these grievances to attract support.³¹⁰ For instance, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, originally oriented around euroscepticism and migration, has more recently centered climate denial in its political platform. When the country's current liberal and progressive governing coalition passed legislation helping consumers purchase heat pumps, the far-right party spearheaded a countermovement that fanned the flames of public fears about the transition to renewable energy.³¹¹ The Sweden Democrats—a party with neo-Nazi roots—and the far-right Brothers of Italy also rose to power in their respective countries on platforms emphasizing opposition to elitism, globalism, and environmental regulations.³¹²

Like far-right movements, the fossil fuel industry has benefited from the public's fears and grievances fueled by the rising cost of living that the pandemic and the war in Ukraine exacerbated. The EU's shift in priority toward "strategic autonomy" following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine paradoxically provided leverage to fossil fuel corporations, who played

on concerns about energy supply dependencies to push for renewed gas exploration in Europe.³¹³ When the European Commission created the REPowerEU plan to phase out Russian energy, it set up an expert group of oil and gas company representatives to advise on the diversification of EU energy imports. Critics have argued that this group—called the EU Energy Platform Industry Advisory Group—is emblematic of the privileged position that the fossil fuel industry enjoys in EU policymaking.³¹⁴ Indeed, oil and gas companies have spent hundreds of millions of dollars lobbying to weaken green measures.³¹⁵

Climate activists have noticed the danger of coalitions between those genuinely concerned about the short-term costs of the energy transition and more nefarious, far-right actors seeking to capture political power or corporate industrial actors seeking to maximize profit. In response, some activists are resisting polarization by calling for a green transition that protects workers' rights. When tractors rolled through Brussels in February 2024, for instance, some social justice and climate activists stood in solidarity with the farmers. These just transition advocates contend that many of the farmers' demands are not mutually exclusive with climate action.³¹⁶

In general, both the European public and law enforcement have tolerated farmers' protests, even when they use the same tactics for which climate protests are vilified. As tractors have streamed in and out of European cities—creating blockades not unlike the disruptive forms of protest employed by climate activists—governments have been relatively responsive to their demands, albeit in an ad hoc manner. Following a wave of transnational farmers' protests in early 2024, for instance, the European Commission offered concessions that loosened environmental regulations.³¹⁷ This tendency has occurred despite the risk of bodily harm also caused by farmers' protests: In France, two protesters were killed by a collision during a demonstration.³¹⁸

At the same time, climate activists are experiencing an erosion of the civil liberty guarantees that have historically protected direct action protests. Governments traditionally tolerant of civic activism have begun to wage a legal war against the so-called radical flank of the climate movement. Following a wave of disruptive demonstrations, the British government in 2023 granted police new antiprotest powers that have captured the attention of international human rights organizations, who fear the punitive measures are symptomatic of democratic backsliding.³¹⁹ Under the “public nuisance” clause, peaceful protesters in the UK are being prosecuted and punished with extreme sentences, sometimes up to ten years in jail.³²⁰ Moreover, some states have implemented restrictive dissident laws that give them greater power to target protest activities. In Germany, a Munich court charged Last Generation activists with forming a criminal organization, and German police have conducted raids on their homes.³²¹ In 2022, the German Unwort campaign, which highlights popular language that threatens democratic principles and human rights, designated “climate terrorists” the bad word of the year for its role in defaming and criminalizing activists.³²² Other mass arrests and draconian punishments for nonviolent protests have occurred throughout 2023 and 2024 in France, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and elsewhere.³²³

Often, threats to climate activists have come from networks of far-right actors and capital fossil fuel interests. The criminalization of nonviolent climate protests can be understood through the lens of these coordinated attacks. Journalists and researchers have called out the Atlas Network—a global coalition of right-wing think tanks pushing for free market capitalism—for its role in driving the narrative that climate activists are terrorists.³²⁴ One think tank in this network, Policy Exchange, has argued that environmental movements may stray into terrorism.³²⁵ Policy Exchange, which has received funding from energy giants Drax, Energy UK, and ExxonMobil, proposed laws against climate activists that were subsequently adopted by the UK government. These think tanks demonstrate how alliances between the right and the fossil fuel industry have been playing a key role in the public vilification of activists. This sentiment has then been amplified by the media and ultimately followed by criminalization.³²⁶ According to XR's co-founder Clare Farrell, new protest laws across Europe are “part of a cynical assault on democracy by fossil fuel.”³²⁷ Although a variety of reasons can explain why protest restrictions arise, it is worth noting that fossil fuel and far-right actors have driven the antagonization of climate activists in particular.

Despite challenges, Europe is in a sense witnessing more plural and intense democratic debate over environmental issues. The greenlash embodied by farmers' movements may not be wholly bad for green transition or democracy. While this pushback may anger climate activists who believe there is no time to waste, the interaction of competing social needs speaks to the complexity of climate legislation: There will be winners and losers of climate change, but there will also be winners and losers of the transition. The tectonic societal shift toward clean energy thus requires careful consideration of who bears what costs. In this context, farmers' backlash can be seen as part of a robust democratic debate on the socioeconomic consequences of the green transition. To enable a just transition, farmer activists' as well as climate activists' demands will need to be taken seriously by policymakers. Incorporating their recommendations—without unravelling progress on climate action—would result in more holistic legislation that considers the needs of all European citizens in the development and implementation of climate policy.

Conclusion

Despite intensifying cries for climate action across Europe, political parties campaigning on climate action have suffered losses as strategic differences have surfaced divisions between politicians and grassroots activists. Although many green parties were themselves born out of grassroots environmental movements, their popularity and subsequent institutionalization has yielded dissonance with the current generation of grassroots activists. Meanwhile, farmers and workers from other sectors concerned that the green transition will cost them their livelihoods have been organizing mass protests. Even if unease over climate policies is present in many different pockets of European society, the rising power of the far right alongside the continued influence of fossil fuel interests poses a crucial challenge to the green transition in Europe.

A sense of urgency can be felt in the tactics of climate activists who risk arrest to draw attention to the ecological crisis. Since 2018, a rising tide of civil disobedience for climate action in Europe has captured the public eye and generated widespread frustration toward the use of disruptive tactics. Less controversially, many climate activists continue to engage in formal democratic channels to make change, including as members of organizations who prioritize coalition-building and government collaboration and as litigants in landmark court cases. Such engagement demonstrates that the European climate movement has not lost its appetite for democracy. Indeed, most organizers make democratization an explicit priority in their work.

Civil disobedience is an important tenet of democracy, and often unpopular during its time. What remains to be seen is whether such tactics can be reconciled with the kind of coalition-building necessary to bring more votes and voices into the environmentalist fold, during a global moment that challenges the authority of science and the importance of international cooperation.

Case Study: The European Green Deal

Cristina Buzasu

The European Green Deal, introduced in December 2019 by the European Commission, represents a transformative road map designed to address the pressing challenges of climate change and environmental degradation within the EU. It outlines a comprehensive strategy to make Europe the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050. The EU aims to ensure that at least 32 percent of its energy consumption comes from renewable sources by 2030, thereby reducing dependency on carbon-intensive energy resources.³²⁸ By investing in green technologies and infrastructure, the EU aims to create millions of jobs, particularly in regions that may be adversely affected by the transition away from fossil fuels. The declared aim is a "just transition" that ensures that the social impacts of transitioning to a low-carbon economy are addressed, providing support and retraining opportunities for workers in impacted industries.

Environmental activism has played a crucial role in shaping the European Green Deal. The widespread demonstrations and calls for action have created a political climate conducive to ambitious environmental policies. Activists have been instrumental in holding policymakers accountable and ensuring that climate commitments are not merely rhetorical but also backed by concrete actions. Moreover, the European Green Deal has provided a framework for activists to channel their efforts effectively. By aligning their goals with the ambitions of the deal, environmental activists have been advocating for specific policies, monitoring progress, and demanding transparency from the EU and its member states.³²⁹

On the other hand, the European Green Deal has faced significant backlash from citizens, as chapters 5 and 13 discuss. Protests against the European Green Deal have erupted in several EU countries, driven by fears of economic hardship and job losses tied to its environmental policies. Farmers, truckers, and workers from industries like coal mining and manufacturing have been particularly vocal, arguing that the deal's aggressive climate targets jeopardize their livelihoods without offering viable alternatives. In countries like the Netherlands and Poland, large demonstrations have taken place, with protesters decrying what they see as unfair regulations and insufficient government support during the transition to greener economies. The protests underscore growing public concern that the Green Deal prioritizes environmental goals over the economic well-being of ordinary citizens, fueling broader debates related to equity, justice, and practicality within the context of the EU's climate agenda. Activism around the Green Deal has intensified and become more varied and complex.



Conclusion

Erin Jones and Richard Youngs

The politics of climate change are both increasingly important and subject to sharper tensions. Climate activism has existed for a long time and has already been through several phases of development. This compilation shows that it is now entering a new phase, as it increases in scale, spreads to places from which it has previously been relatively absent, adopts different tactics, and addresses a wider range of social and political issues related to the climate crisis. Still, this emerging shift in climate activism is embryonic: far from strong enough to make a decisive difference to the climate emergency, not yet present in a fully balanced way on a global scale, and contending with a growing trend of activism and repression *against* climate action. While activism and citizen engagement on the climate emergency is highly fluid for the moment, several concluding reflections emerge from the preceding chapters.

Intensified Activism

Climate activism is becoming a far more prominent part of overall global activism as activists around the world focus on climate change as the epochal threat to the planet and humanity. The number of global protests has risen in the last decade, and within that general rise, climate protests have assumed a larger share of overall protests. Many activists are engaging in attention-capturing disruptive direct actions, at the risk of imprisonment and even their lives—reflecting the growing sense of urgency surrounding the climate crisis.

There is more urgency in such activism now than there was in previous decades as the impacts of climate change are felt in a more tangible fashion and as dire scientific prognoses begin more obviously to come to fruition. Young people in particular are stepping up as organizers, advocates, and litigants to demand action to protect their futures. The compilation's chapters show this activism is extending well beyond the generation of high-profile

individuals and organizations that have attracted much attention over the last decade. It now visibly incorporates many people who are outside the narrow circle of professionalized campaigners—and indeed, this is arguably the level at which the most significant expansion in climate activism has occurred in recent years.

Beyond the long history of Indigenous groups organizing to protect their land, more people now feel compelled to directly stop environmental destruction in a spreading form of antiextraction intervention rooted in the sense that citizens need to take climate action into their own hands, as Oscar Berglund illustrates. Subsequent chapters note that demands have also become more political: Among climate activists in general and land and environmental defenders in particular, there is a pervasive sense of systemic government failure. Insufficient action by democratic and authoritarian governments alike has sparked a major new wave of civic organizing for climate action. While some activism seeks specific, incremental change on tightly defined climate change issues, other movements more boldly frame the climate agenda as part of a quest for far-reaching political transformation and social justice.

The compilation shows that climate activism is spreading geographically too. While such activism has received most attention in Europe, it is on the rise in many other places. Tinashe Gumbo's chapter details its growth in Africa, while Maha Yahya and Issam Kayssi describe a variety of emerging activist groups and individuals in the Middle East and North Africa. There are some general global trends, like the rise of activism around the concept of climate justice and the increasing use of disruptive tactics. Across sharply contrasting regions and political regime types, there is a clear sense that governments and formal institutions have failed and need to be pushed into bolder climate action.

If Europe previously looked distinctive in the high-level profile of its climate mobilizations, it is now less so. Indeed, some of the most interesting innovations in democratic engagement are taking shape in developing regions. In autocratic states, climate activism has become an alternative vehicle for broad political frustration with regimes. Although in autocratic contexts many environmental groups have tried to remain relatively apolitical to evade repression, they have managed to push for change by framing their work as faith-based (in Africa) or technical (in the Middle East and North Africa). Activist-led deliberation is becoming especially notable outside Europe.

Despite the significance of all these trends, the compilation also suggests that a judicious sense of perspective is warranted. The short, country-focused case studies offered throughout the compilation show that in many countries there are still striking limits to the extent of climate activism. It is often argued that bottom-up citizen pressure will drive the climate agenda more than top-down government action, but the evidence presented here calls for some caution with respect to such claims. Climate activism has expanded dramatically but is not yet sufficiently strong or widespread enough to meet the crunch point in the climate crisis.

Eclectic Tactics

This rise in climate activism takes diverse forms. The chapters show a wide variety of fast-expanding activism. Oscar Berglund's chapter unpacks the different kinds of disruptive activism that have become more widespread across Europe in the last several years. Some of these are aimed at very practical objectives, while others work in more symbolic modes. Some are about awareness-raising and calling attention to the need to move faster on climate action, some are about shaming polluters, while some are aimed at specific, local objectives like defending land from encroachment.

Nonviolent direct action is on the rise across the globe, along with some moderate forms of sabotage; outright violence is less present than in other areas of activism from previous decades. Amanda Machin stresses the increasing importance of radical performances that display the growing sense of urgency and desperation in the climate movement; she details the growth of more theatrical tactics designed to shock audiences into recognizing the need for bolder climate action.

Both insider and outsider engagement has intensified. There is some division between those favoring traditional campaigning and those opting for more direct action. Several authors note that disruptive actions sometimes risk being counterproductive by turning many citizens against the climate agenda. However, in broad terms, both mainstream and disruptive strategies now have a firmly established role in the overall landscape of climate activism. They each provide distinctive functions, and often work well together in an emerging division of labor between raising attention and focusing on specific policy goals. Connections between different levels of activism are also tightening. The three regional chapters show how formal civil society coalitions are forming and shifting in nature across Africa, Europe, and the Middle East—with national-level activism often helping to amplify local community voices and plug them into decisionmaking.

The relationship between direct action and mainstream institutional engagement has become more complex and nuanced in the emerging phase of climate activism. Most of those engaging in activism do not reject institutional engagement. Direct acts of disruption may be on the rise, but so are litigation and more traditional forms of advocacy. Many of those leading nonviolent disruptive action have also been pursuing an agenda of reviving democratic institutions and processes. Claire Mellier and Graham Smith note that many civil society organizations have pushed for assemblies to be held on the climate emergency, as a more formally structured complement to spontaneous civic disobedience. This activist-led deliberation cuts across the standard insider-outsider divide within civic activism.

There are still tensions over tactics. Many activists have become more frustrated with democratic channels that they perceive have failed to advance sufficiently ambitious climate action. In turn, green parties in Europe have become more ambivalent about their links to activists associated with civil disobedience. The compilation's chapters on Africa and the Middle East show that, outside the West, climate activists are divided over how far

to engage with Western-led multilateral processes. Also, in these regions, many activists remain cautious about challenging regimes on broad political terms and uneasy with some movements' overtly confrontational tactics. Still, there are significant signs of convergence, too, for instance between climate activism and democracy activism. Across the board, a turn toward generally more participative approaches to the climate agenda is evident—one of the era's potentially most defining and consequential political changes. Many new alliances have formed between climate and democracy activism and between formal civil society organizations and local community movements. These kinds of coalitions between environmental and human rights issues, as well as those between local, national, and international voices, represent some of the most promising future opportunities for the global climate movement.

Countermobilization

A growing strand of activism questions the green transition. This includes several types of movements, from local-level community action to party-backed, well-financed campaigns. While some of this activism stems from outright denial of the climate emergency, in recent years more has taken aim at the top-down and technocratic way in which governments have implemented climate action. This greenlash has contributed to a rising focus on climate justice and the social consequences of climate transition. A spiral effect can increasingly be observed between pro- and anticlimate activism. Climate activists push policy forward, then countermobilization pushes policy back, creating a sense of stagnation on climate action that prompts climate activists into more intense rounds of direct action.

On the one hand, some of the emerging backlash activism is organic, reflects genuine citizen concerns, and is a perfectly justified part of democratic engagement. On the other hand, some of it reflects a more top-down effort by vested interests to slow the energy transition or by illiberal political leaders with separate political agendas. As James Patterson shows in his chapter, civic activism against climate policy often involves not only citizens but also politicians and corporations, who have exploited genuine fears about the costs of the green transition for political and economic ends. Illiberal actors and capitalists with monied interests in the continued dependence on fossil fuel have actively campaigned to undermine trust in climate policies, perpetuate a false image of climate activists as terrorists, and fan the flames of citizen concerns about the green transition. In response, prominent climate activists have increasingly framed their work in terms of social justice, pointing out that it is actually the lack of progress on climate action that most egregiously fuels unfairness—the world's richest 1 percent contributing more than 50 percent of global pollution.³³⁰

Crucially, illiberal actors and vested interests have increasingly underpinned the rising criminalization of climate activists. As the chapter by Javier Garate and Rachel Yasmin Cox shows, state clampdowns and attacks on land and environmental defenders have increased in reach and harshness. Climate activists around the world from Kampala to Atlanta have

faced police brutality and arrest. Repression has led to burnout, imprisonment, attacks, and in extreme cases death. At the same time, it has generated new campaigns, a wider use of litigation by activists, and a tentative convergence between environmental and rights-focused movements.

Perhaps the most dangerous risk to democracy is the growing sense that politicians and corporations are on the same side against climate activists, during a time when trust in institutions has plummeted in general. In authoritarian contexts with generally closed civic space, backlash primarily comes from overtly repressive regimes. Lack of accountability exacerbates the danger for activists and land defenders, for instance in the cases of attacks on defenders in Latin America. Even in countries with historically open civic spaces, climate activists are facing resistance from formidable state and corporate opponents who have apparently colluded to protect their own interests over those of humanity and the planet.

In more democratic contexts, backlash also comes from society, pushing back against technocratic policymaking, as was the case with farmers' protests in Europe. If Europe has in previous years seen more intense climate activism, it is also today the scene of perhaps the most intense greenlash, as detailed in Erin Jones and Emily Hardy's chapter. In Europe, the backlash is entwined with the surge of the far right, but at least some part of it reflects genuine and organic concerns about the costs of the climate transition. If greenlash is emerging as a potent force, its precise shapes and political relations are still imprecise and inconstant.

Signals to the Future

The trends in climate activism are still forming and highly changeable. The developments outlined in the preceding chapters are significant for climate action and for broader political dynamics, and yet for now they are malleable and point in directions that contrast at times. Rather than painting a fixed picture of environmental politics, the compilation points the way toward the kinds of questions that will prove important in the next phase of climate activism. Will this activism move to a still-higher pitch commensurate with the gravity of the climate emergency? Will it become more systematically determinant of overarching political trends? Will it increasingly come into conflict with other types of activism or join forces with them for more comprehensive reformist agendas? What will the balance be between climate activism and backlash activism? How can climate activism combat corporate and state use of repressive tactics? The frameworks outlined in this compilation aim to offer sharper ways of illuminating these future trends in the politics of climate change. Certainly, the days of climate change issues being a matter of technocratic solutions and opaque, elite-led international summits are gone. The climate crisis is fundamentally changing citizens' relationship with politics, and citizens' engagement with politics is profoundly reshaping the climate agenda.



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Notes

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