

The domestication of Article 6 of the Paris Agreement: The Generation Path of Climate Litigation Rights in China under the Carbon Reward Mechanism

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ABSTRACT

Climate change is one of the most severe challenges in the world today, and environmental public interest litigation is an important legal tool to address the challenges and involves a wide range of actors. The participation of citizens and social forces should be the key to climate and environmental governance. Article 6 of the Paris Agreement explicitly requires incentives for the public the participation of private entities in climate governance, however, this provision commonly faces the dilemma of virtualization of public participation in judicial practice in developing countries. The current "carbon credits" mechanism and carbon reward mechanism rules in China only create property rights. Although many scholars have mentioned the loss of citizens' right to sue, there are still few studies related to carbon credits. China's current "carbon credit" mechanism and carbon reward mechanism rules only establish property rights. Although numerous scholars have noted the absence of citizens' litigation rights, research focusing on carbon credits remains scarce. Consequently, prior to this study, no solution had been proposed for converting carbon credits into litigation rights within the Chinese context, and procedural rights had not been successfully derived, thereby leaving the citizens' right to climate litigation unrealized in the judicial field. The core innovation mechanism of this article lies in using the current carbon credit rules and legal technology to transform citizens' low-carbon behavior into procedural rights for climate public interest litigation, providing a technical path to solve this dilemma. It micro transforms the abstract requirements of Article 6 of the Paris Agreement into specific institutional solutions under China's "administrative led" governance framework, and also provides local judicial inspiration for similar dilemmas in southern countries around the world.

KEYWORDS

Article 6 of the Paris Agreement; Carbon credits; Environmental public interest litigation; Citizens' right to climate litigation; Procedural-rights transformation

1 Introduction

Climate change is one of the most severe global challenges of our time, and its governance effectiveness is crucial to the common destiny of humanity. The core legal framework for the international community to address this challenge, the Paris Agreement, not only designs market and non market mechanisms for countries to cooperate in implementing Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) in Article 6, but also explicitly requires in its specific provisions (Article 6.4 (b) and Article 6.8 (b)) to "incentivize and facilitate participation in the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions by public and private entities authorized by a Party" and "enhance public and private sector participation in the implementation of nationally determined contributions ." This marks an important shift in the international climate governance paradigm: while adhering to the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" of all countries, there is an unprecedented emphasis on the deep participation of non-state actors, especially public forces.

However, the implementation effect of the treaty is vastly different from the original intention at the time of signing, and noble international commitments have generally encountered difficulties in implementation in the domestic judicial field of the global South. The participation of many in the carbon credit mechanism often becomes a mere formality due to the lack of clear judicial empowerment interfaces, presenting a significant "commitment practice" gap, which is a vivid portrayal of this dilemma; In Kenya's Save Lamu case, the local community lost its lawsuit against a coal-fired power project due to limited legal standing, an outcome that underscored the profound contradictions within global climate governance.

At the same time, as a responsible major country, China has also launched distinctive local explorations in the carbon reward mechanism. The "Shanghai Carbon Reward Mechanism (Trial)" implemented in Shanghai in 2023 creatively establishes a "carbon credit" mechanism that transforms citizens' low-carbon behavior into quantifiable, tradable, and incentivized actions. However, its current rules mainly create property rights, and the "carbon credits" obtained by citizens as a result cannot yet become procedural rights "tickets" to climate public interest litigation, which makes the deep public participation expected by Article 6 of the Paris Agreement still suspended in the Chinese judicial system. Although some studies have touched upon the above issues from different perspectives, they have not systematically proposed solutions. Foreign research has mostly focused on the cooperation mechanism and implementation difficulties of Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, or the non adversarial judicial path demonstrated by the Urgenda case in the Netherlands, but lacks applicability in the Chinese context. Domestic research has clearly pointed out the public process in environmental public interest litigation. The lack of systematic rights and the preliminary exploration of the legal attributes and economic value

of carbon reward mechanism have not crossed a critical step: that is, they have not designed a legal and technical path to link citizens' specific low-carbon behaviors (carbon credits) with the procedural rights of climate public interest litigation. This research gap is precisely the starting point that this article attempts to fill.

In view of this, the core research question of this article is: How can China's current carbon credit rules be transformed through legal technology to enable citizens' low-carbon behavior to obtain procedural rights in climate public interest litigation?

To answer this question, this study will follow the following framework: Firstly, through a critical review of domestic and foreign literature, we aim to broaden our horizons and clarify the boundaries of existing research and the innovative space of this article; Secondly, using case comparison and legal doctrine analysis, demonstrate the legal basis and practical feasibility of the transformation of procedural rights; Subsequently, the core part of this article will construct a detailed "procedural rights transformation" full chain mechanism centered on the "Climate Rights-Holder Collective", and ultimately produce a recommended draft of the "Guidelines for carbon incentive-based Climate Litigation Rights Transformation" with micro operability in legislative technology. The exploration of this article not only aims to promote the localization of international legal norms and public participation in China's environmental justice, but also strives to provide a "Chinese solution" that can be used as a reference for countries in the global South facing similar challenges.

2 Review of the Current Research Status at Home and Abroad: Consensus, Limitations, and Breakthrough of this Study

The academic community has achieved rich results in the participation of climate governance. However, upon closer inspection, there is a significant imbalance between "breaking" and "standing" in existing research: although international and domestic research has revealed the implementation dilemma of Article 6 of the Paris Agreement and the lack of public litigation rights from different dimensions, they have generally failed to treat the hard wounds from "diagnosing problems" to "providing technical surgical solutions".

2.1 International Research Context: Implementation Difficulties of Article 6 of the Paris Agreement and Insights from Non Adversarial Judicial Pathways

At the international level, numerous studies have clearly revealed structural dilemmas. Scholars such as Simona Bigerna and Silvia Micheli have employed political economy models and quantitative analysis to demonstrate how "free-riding" risks and marginal cost effects in international cooperation amplify the global decarbonization costs. Their research reveals how the absence of major powers exacerbates compliance burdens and non-cooperation risks for South countries dependent on international support. While not directly addressing judicial aspects, these studies powerfully validate from a political economy perspective that the cooperative framework under Article 6 inherently suffers structural vulnerabilities in weaker jurisdictions— This fundamental weakness constitutes the root cause of implementation challenges in judicial frameworks.

At the same time, The essence of this case lies in its ingenious judicial intervention logic: On one hand, by recognizing "climate systemic risk" itself as a human rights violation, it circumvents the traditional litigation dilemma where individuals must prove direct harm. On the other hand, the court established emission reduction baselines based on scientific consensus, fulfilling judicial review responsibilities while respecting administrative policy space, demonstrating remarkable judicial restraint.

However, subsequent research has predominantly focused on praising the jurisprudence of the Urgenda case itself or treating it as an exception, with few in-depth discussions on how its "non-confrontational" core principles (such as judicial restraint and systemic risk assessment) should be integrated with the governance tradition emphasizing "administrative dominance" (such as China), and transformed into a set of universalizable and transplantable procedural rules. Its implications hold greater significance than direct operational references.

2.2 Domestic Research Context: From the Evolving Discourse on Plaintiff Eligibility to the Limitation of Rights in Carbon Reward Rules

Returning to the domestic perspective, domestic academic research is more deeply embedded in this book. In the context of local institutions, the focus is more on the construction of local environmental litigation systems and recent innovations in carbon market mechanisms. However, in the realization of citizens' procedural rights, there is also a bottleneck from "theoretical call" to "technological implementation".

In his work *The Jurisprudence of Responsibility Sharing in the Climate Community*, Xu Xiangmin proposes the concept of a "climate community," positing that "the right to development is the foundation for sharing the responsibility of building a climate community...". While his framework limits responsible entities to the state level and does not

incorporate carbon market mechanisms, it provides invaluable terminological and theoretical groundwork for this paper's subsequent development of the technical "climate rights-holder collective," thereby completing the conceptual preparation for transitioning from a "community of state responsibility" to a "community of citizen rights."

Qualified countries can and should fulfill their responsibilities for the community. The warning by UN Secretary General Guterres that the world is 'losing the race against climate change, as well as the difficulties faced in implementing the Paris Agreement, all indicate that the world is facing the issue of how to allocate responsibility. Although the concept of a climate community 'proposed in the warning limits the responsibility to the national level and does not incorporate carbon market mechanisms, it provides valuable terminology reference and theoretical guidance for the subsequent construction of a technical' Climate Rights-Holder Collective 'in this article, completing the conceptual preparation for the transformation from a national responsibility community 'to a civil rights community '.

The second area involves the imbalanced design of environmental litigation systems and theoretical deviations in public participation, where research consensus has been established. Both Zhu Jiaxing and Liu Tianyuan have pointedly observed that the current environmental public interest litigation system, aiming to prevent frivolous lawsuits, restricts plaintiff eligibility to specific government agencies and social organizations. While this measure enhances litigation capacity, it also "concomitantly results in the erosion of citizens' procedural rights." These studies accurately diagnose the core issue of "citizen right-to-litigation deficiency" and affirm the necessity of public participation. However, their solutions remain largely confined to principled calls for "expanding plaintiff eligibility," failing to propose actionable pathways that neither disrupt the existing litigation framework nor effectively link with citizens' concrete environmental actions.

The discussion ultimately returns to the limitations of carbon credit empowerment and research blind spots. For emerging carbon credit systems, academic discourse and judicial practice exhibit a pronounced tendency to "emphasize property rights while neglecting procedural safeguards." While Xu Yixiang and Liu Mingxin rightly highlight the pivotal role of carbon market development and judicial protection, their analysis fails to transcend the boundaries of property rights. In parallel, Shanghai's landmark case where carbon credit emission reductions were used for ecological damage compensation through alternative restoration – which first demonstrated the economic value of carbon credits at the judicial level and affirmed their property attributes as remediation tools – ironically exposed a shared theoretical and practical blind spot: carbon credits are currently perceived solely as instruments for fulfilling economic obligations, while the environmental stewardship and public welfare contributions they represent have not been granted the "qualifying credential" status to initiate judicial proceedings. Existing research has missed the critical opportunity to elevate property rights into procedural entitlements.

In summary, existing research has completed foundational pioneering work from various dimensions, collectively pointing to a core gap: the absence of a legal technical pathway that organically integrates international norms, citizen quantified behaviors, and local judicial procedures. Scholars have meticulously depicted carbon credits as a "currency," yet collectively overlooked their potential procedural value as "votes," thus missing the deeper public participation required by Article 6 of the Paris Agreement. None of these pioneers have provided the critical "scalpel" — a concrete solution that can micro-convert citizens' carbon credits into climate litigation rights without causing drastic disruptions

3 Exploration of China's Local Path from Citizen Carbon Credits to Procedural Rights

After clarifying the theoretical boundaries and practical difficulties, this study is committed to building a foundation rooted in Chinese legal soil. A path for the transformation of citizens' climate litigation rights that combines theoretical consistency and practical operability. This path is not intended to overturn the current system, but to creatively transform carbon credits from property rights to procedural rights within the existing regulatory framework through refined legal interpretation and mechanism innovation. The following text will systematically elaborate on this Chinese plan from three levels: the legal basis and research methods of the path, the legitimacy basis and feasibility of the transformation behavior, and the final design and legislative implementation of the entire chain mechanism.

3.1 The Comprehensive Application of Legal Principles and Diverse Research Methods The Construction of this Path is Based on a Solid Legal Foundation and is Comprehensive

Applied comparative research Empirical analysis and legal doctrine research methods. In terms of its legal foundation, firstly, Article 6 of the Paris Agreement provides authoritative guidance and driving force for public participation in carbon mechanisms at the international legal level, and its spiritual core urgently needs to be realized in domestic judicial procedures. Secondly, the evolution of environmental rights theory provides potential substantive claims for citizens to enjoy a livable climate environment and seek judicial remedies. More importantly, the litigation trust theory provides a core procedural legal bridge for this path, which enables the aggregation of dispersed "environmental positive benefits" derived from low-carbon behavior of individual citizens, and through legal procedures, entrusts the "litigation benefits"

seeking judicial relief to social organizations that comply with legal provisions, thus cleverly solving the bottleneck of plaintiff qualification within the framework of the current Environmental Protection Law and Civil Procedure Law.

In terms of research methodology, this study heavily relies on the analysis of legal doctrine Paradigm. By purposefully expanding and interpreting the concept of "social organizations" in Article 58 of the Environmental Protection Law, the environmental organizations entrusted by the "Climate Rights-Holder Collective" formed through subsequent mechanisms will be appropriately included in the scope of eligible plaintiffs expected by the legislative intent. At the same time, with the help of the green principles established in the Civil Code, the legal attributes of "carbon credits" are reinterpreted, and it is argued that they should be upgraded from the current pure property certificate to a type that combines economic value.

A composite legal object that serves as a carrier of procedural rights. This series of interpretations is not a violation of the law, but rather an activation and continuation of the inherent vitality of the existing legal order.

3.2 Multidimensional Verification of Legitimacy Foundation and Feasibility The Creation of Any Legal Path Must Withstand Legitimacy and Strict Questioning of Feasibility

The legitimacy of this path stems from three dimensions:

Legitimacy foundation: Its legitimacy is rooted in three levels. In Lun On a theoretical level, as the ultimate stakeholders in climate governance, citizens should receive deeper procedural recognition beyond economic incentives for their environmental contributions demonstrated through specific low-carbon behaviors. At the legal level, the theory of environmental rights and the principle of public participation provide inherent claims for its rights. At the functional level, the intervention of citizens and social forces can effectively compensate for the shortcomings of administrative supervision and form a diverse governance pattern for environmental governance.

Practical Necessity: The necessity stems from the fundamental disconnect between international commitments and domestic practices

Article 6 of the Paris Agreement explicitly requires incentivizing public participation, however, as demonstrated by the Save Lamu case in Kenya, developing countries are generally trapped in a "judicial dilemma" due to a lack of sophisticated legal technical interfaces. Although China's carbon reward mechanism has established the "carbon credits" as a rights certificate, it has long been confined to property attributes and has not derived procedural rights, resulting in a lack of citizens' climate litigation rights and international commitments being suspended in the Chinese judicial field.

Practical feasibility: Feasibility is supported by local judicial practices and regulatory systems. The first case of carbon incentive-based emission reduction used for alternative restoration of ecological environment damage compensation in Shanghai has confirmed the economic value and legal attributes of carbon credits at the judicial level; The "Shanghai carbon incentive-based Management Measures (Trial)" has established a preliminary model for converting citizen behavior into legally recognized rights and interests through administrative verification. In addition, Article 58 of the Environmental Protection Law, Article 58 of the Civil Procedure Law, and Article 1230 of the Civil Code jointly constitute the normative basis for the operation of the mechanism. Concurrently, the urgency of achieving China's national goals of carbon peaking by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2060 provides a powerful policy impetus for such institutional innovation.

3.3 Core Mechanism: Legal and Technical Design of the Entire Chain Operation Program

After establishing legal principles and proving feasibility, building a fully interconnected chain operation mechanism becomes the core. This study proposes a precise design with "procedural rights conversion" as the core, and its operation process is as follows:

Integral threshold triggering and community formation (rights aggregation): Citizens or collectives accumulate carbon credits through verified low-carbon behaviors. When their quota is determined by the competent department (such as the Shanghai Ecology and Environment Bureau) based on the scientific methodology established in the "Shanghai carbon incentive-based Management Measures" and reaches the preset carbon emission threshold (such as 1000kg CO₂ equivalent), an "Climate Rights-Holder Collective" (i.e., a legally-recognized group automatically formed when citizens' carbon credits collectively meet a statutory threshold, thereby gaining the procedural capacity to advocate for climate justice) is automatically created. The design of this threshold ensures that participants' behavior has significant environmental benefits and the seriousness of litigation.

Litigation proposal submission and administrative pre review (procedure initiation and filtering): The "Climate Rights-Holder Collective" immediately obtained the procedural right to submit a "Climate Public Interest Litigation Proposal" to the ecological environment regulatory department. The proposal should specify the specific infringement situation, such as: ① The construction project did not conduct a carbon emission environmental impact assessment in accordance with the law; ② The actual carbon emissions of the operating projects have continuously exceeded the standard; ③ Certified carbon sink resources are illegally destroyed, etc.

The administrative organ shall complete the examination within 30 days after receiving the proposal. This administrative pre-procedure aims to give full play to the professional and efficient advantages of administrative power, conduct preliminary screening of cases, prevent abuse of litigation and ensure the quality of litigation.

Jurisprudence Acceptance and Procuratorial Oversight (Rights Protection and Safeguard Mechanism): Upon meeting case filing requirements, environmental case leads are transferred to qualified environmental organizations registered with judicial authorities (e. g., China Environmental Protection Federation, Green Development Foundation), which formally initiate litigation in courts. This mechanism fully utilizes the institutional framework of China's Environmental Protection Law. To prevent potential dereliction of duty by qualified organizations, a prosecutorial oversight mechanism is established as a safeguard. Should the transferred organization not file a lawsuit within the 30-day period, the Climate Rights-Holder Collective is entitled to apply for intervention by the procuratorate. Following its examination, the procuratorate may, pursuant to Article 58 of the Civil Procedure Law, either supervise and compel the organization to litigate or directly bring the suit as the plaintiff of record. This mechanism ensures judicial access is maintained without obstruction.

Supporting rules (efficiency increase and risk reduction): To ensure the effective operation of this mechanism, supporting rules are indispensable. In the litigation process, the simplified rule of burden of proof should be applied: the plaintiff (environmental organization) only needs to prove the existence of elements such as illegal environmental impact assessment procedures, while the defendant bears the burden of proof for the causal relationship between carbon emissions and damage. This move stems from the reasonable extension and application of the principle of reversing the burden of proof for environmental infringement in Article 1230 of the Civil Code. At the same time, a litigation insurance pool can be established by relying on the carbon incentive-based Fund, extracting no more than 5% of the funds from the fund to bear the reasonable litigation costs incurred by the "Climate Rights-Holder Collective", completely eliminating the worries caused by the cost of rights protection.

3.4 Legislative Implementation: Draft Proposal for the Conversion of carbon incentive-based Climate Litigation Rights

To translate the aforementioned theoretical propositions into practical guidance, this study formulates the "Proposed Guidelines for the Transformation of Climate Litigation Rights under the Carbon Inclusive Mechanism" as its institutional output.

Article 1 [Community Composition and Procedure Initiation Rights] It is explicitly stated that citizens' carbon credits reaching the statutory threshold after verification is a requirement for the formation of a "Climate Rights-Holder Collective", and they are granted the right to submit a "Climate Public Interest Litigation Proposal". The carbon credit verification document serves as the proof for initiating the program, and its legal principle continues the confirmation of the legal attributes of credits in the Shanghai case, and upgrades the procedural rights.

Article 2 [Exercise of Litigation Rights] specifies in detail the 30 day review period and core review matters for administrative agencies. This deadline is set to balance administrative efficiency and procedural justice, ensuring timely and prudent handling of cases.

Article 3 [Procuratorial Supervision] clarifies the triggering conditions and procedures for procuratorial oversight. The authority for this mechanism is rooted in the public interest litigation mandate and supervisory powers granted to procuratorial organs by Article 58 of the Civil Procedure Law, thereby giving practical effect to and seamlessly integrating these existing statutory powers.

Article 4 [Burden of Proof and Litigation Fund Safeguards] systematically stipulates the simplified rules for the allocation of the burden of proof and the litigation cost support mechanism in judicial proceedings. The evidentiary rule operationalizes the principle of inverted burden of proof from Article 1230 of the Civil Code within the specific context of climate litigation. The fund safeguard, meanwhile, constitutes a creative extension of the existing incentive measures under the Shanghai Carbon Reward Management Measures (Trial), thereby reflecting the sustainability and micro-level operability embedded in the institutional design.

This guide fully demonstrates the entire process of transforming the abstract international norms of Article 6 of the Paris Agreement into concrete and feasible institutional solutions under the local "administrative led" governance framework through a series of micro legal techniques.

4 Conclusion

As the global trend toward recognizing citizens' right to climate litigation is irreversible, China, which cannot afford to remain passive, is imperative to formulate and implement a strategy that enables its citizens to legitimately and lawfully acquire this procedural right. This study takes the inherent requirements of Article 6 of the Paris Agreement and the dilemma of local judicialization as the logical starting point, systematically demonstrating the Chinese path of realizing

citizens' climate litigation rights through a carbon reward mechanism, providing an operable legal channel for citizens to substantially participate in climate governance through daily low-carbon behavior, and ensuring that citizens' climate litigation rights move from ought to be to be.

Notwithstanding the contributions outlined above, this study is not without its limitations. The research output is a "technical operation guide" rather than an informal legislative draft, which has the nature of a pilot proposal. The core is to reveal the legal and technical possibilities of the connection between carbon credit rules and litigation procedures. Even though the judicial precedent of Shanghai's carbon credit subscription for ecological restoration is used as an empirical basis, the overall concept is still in the theoretical construction stage. This proposal is only a procedural innovation and upgrade of this practice, and its actual operational effect still needs to be tested and improved through subsequent pilot practices. This research represents but a first step, with the hope of attracting more valuable 'jade' from future scholars.

For while a stream may compete for speed, its true significance lies in its enduring and far-reaching flow. In terms of theoretical deepening, there is an urgent need for interdisciplinary research on topics such as the scientific calculation model of carbon integration threshold and the specific organizational form of Climate Rights-Holder Collective; At the level of technological empowerment, the potential applications of digital technologies such as blockchain in carbon point traceability, verification, and litigation evidence fixation still require full attention from academia. With the continuous improvement of China's carbon reward mechanism, the deepening of environmental legislation and judicial reform, and the joint efforts of the theoretical and practical circles, the citizen's climate litigation right envisioned in this article. The transformation path of procedural rights will surely move from theoretical blueprint to judicial reality, marking a key milestone in the globalization of citizens' climate litigation rights with legal significance.

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