

Protecting Environmental Rights in the Age of Climate Crisis: Toward a Rights-Based Framework for Sustainable Governance

¹Abdul Kholiq, ²Vera Arida, ³Tiwuk Herawati, ⁴Mieke Anggraeni Dewi, ⁵Sunarto

¹Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Semarang, ²Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya,
³Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, ^{4,5}Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Semarang

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: June, 2026

Revised: June, 2026

Accepted: June, 2026

Available Online: June 30, 2026

Keywords:

Environmental Rights;
Climate Crisis; Sustainable
Governance; Climate
Justice; Rights-Based
Approach.

DOI: -

ABSTRACT

The climate crisis poses serious threats to environmental sustainability and human well-being in Indonesia, including floods, droughts, forest fires, sea-level rise, biodiversity loss, and ecosystem degradation. These impacts endanger environmental rights, which are protected under international law and the Indonesian Constitution. This study analyzes the legal protection of environmental rights in Indonesia amid the climate crisis and formulates a rights-based framework for sustainable governance. Using normative legal research with statutory, conceptual, and comparative approaches, this study examines constitutional provisions, environmental laws, climate regulations, international agreements, legal doctrines, scholarly literature, and policy documents. The findings show that Indonesia has established a substantial legal framework for environmental protection and climate governance. However, its implementation remains constrained by regulatory fragmentation, weak enforcement, limited public participation, poor institutional coordination, and environmental justice issues affecting vulnerable communities. The study argues that climate change directly undermines environmental rights by limiting access to essential resources and increasing social vulnerability. Therefore, a rights-based governance framework grounded in participation, transparency, accountability, equality, access to justice, and intergenerational equity is needed. Strengthening environmental rights through this approach is essential to achieving effective climate governance, environmental justice, and long-term sustainability in Indonesia.

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A. INTRODUCTION

Climate change has emerged as one of the most pressing global challenges of the twenty-first century, threatening environmental sustainability, human welfare, economic stability, and social justice. Rising global temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, sea-level rise, biodiversity loss, and increasingly frequent extreme weather events have significantly affected both natural ecosystems and human societies. Beyond being an environmental issue, climate change is increasingly recognized as a human rights issue because its impacts undermine fundamental rights, including the rights to life, health, food, water, housing, development, and a healthy environment. Consequently, the relationship between environmental protection and human rights has become a central concern in contemporary legal and governance discourse.

Indonesia is particularly vulnerable to climate change due to its geographical characteristics as an archipelagic state with extensive coastal areas. The country faces numerous climate-related challenges, including coastal flooding, sea-level rise, forest and peatland fires, prolonged droughts, water scarcity, ecosystem degradation, and biodiversity loss. These impacts disproportionately affect vulnerable communities, particularly indigenous peoples, small-scale farmers, fishers, and coastal residents, whose livelihoods depend heavily on natural resources (Ananingati, 2025; Ergiarti, 2025). Although the Indonesian Constitution and the Environmental Protection and Management Act recognize the right to a healthy environment as part of fundamental human rights (Karoma, Hikamullah, Rizqi, Adha, & Kamil, 2025; Sumartini, Susilawati, Cristiana, & Dewi, 2025), implementation remains constrained by weak law enforcement, environmental degradation, and insufficient integration of environmental and human rights protections (Ergiarti, 2025; Qurbani, Satriawan, & Fathi, 2025). These challenges highlight the urgent need for governance reforms that strengthen environmental justice, public participation, and legal accountability (Ergiarti, 2025; Sumartini et al., 2025).

The concept of environmental rights has gained increasing prominence within both international and national legal systems. Environmental rights refer to the entitlement of individuals and communities to live in a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment and are closely linked to the broader framework of human rights. International instruments such as the Stockholm Declaration, Rio Declaration, Paris Agreement, and resolutions of the United Nations Human Rights Council have emphasized the interdependence between environmental protection and human rights. This relationship was further reinforced in 2022 when the United Nations General Assembly formally recognized the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a universal human right, strengthening the global consensus on the legal significance of environmental rights and the necessity of integrating environmental protection with human rights governance.

Within the Indonesian legal system, environmental rights have received strong constitutional recognition through Article 28H paragraph (1) and Article 33 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution, as well as Law Number 32 of 2009 concerning Environmental Protection and Management. These provisions guarantee the right to a good and healthy environment and establish principles of sustainability within national development. However, environmental degradation caused by deforestation, mining, industrial pollution, land conversion, and unsustainable resource exploitation continues to undermine the realization of these rights, highlighting a persistent gap between legal guarantees and practical implementation (Sumartini et al., 2025; Susanto, Baralaska, & Jaelani, 2024).

The climate crisis has further intensified environmental and social vulnerabilities across Indonesia. Many communities continue to face obstacles in accessing environmental information, participating in decision-making processes, and obtaining legal remedies for environmental harm. Weak law enforcement, inadequate inter-agency coordination, conflicts between economic and environmental interests, and limited public participation have hindered effective environmental governance (Dwiani, Oktapiani, Awaliyah, & Az-Zahra, 2025; Ergiarti, 2025; Susanto et al., 2024). As climate-related risks increase, conventional

governance approaches that focus primarily on technical compliance and resource management are increasingly viewed as insufficient to address broader concerns related to human rights, social justice, and vulnerable populations.

In response to these challenges, a rights-based approach to environmental governance has gained increasing attention. By integrating principles such as participation, accountability, transparency, equality, non-discrimination, access to justice, and empowerment, this approach seeks to ensure that environmental policies respect, protect, and fulfill fundamental human rights (Ergiarti, 2025). It is also closely linked to climate justice, which recognizes that vulnerable groups—including indigenous peoples, low-income households, women, children, and rural communities—often bear the greatest impacts of environmental degradation and climate change despite contributing the least to its causes. Therefore, strengthening rights-based governance is essential for achieving environmental sustainability, social equity, and effective climate governance in Indonesia (Ergiarti, 2025).

The adoption of a rights-based framework is increasingly relevant to Indonesia's commitments under the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Integrating environmental rights into climate governance can strengthen policy coherence, improve institutional accountability, and enhance public trust in environmental decision-making. Despite extensive scholarship on environmental law, climate governance, and human rights, limited attention has been given to their integration within the context of Indonesia's climate crisis. Accordingly, this study analyzes the legal protection of environmental rights in Indonesia, identifies challenges affecting their implementation, and proposes a rights-based framework for sustainable governance. Ultimately, strengthening environmental rights is essential not only for environmental protection but also for safeguarding human dignity, promoting social justice, and ensuring sustainable development for present and future generations.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental Rights as Human Rights

The concept of environmental rights has evolved into an integral part of the human rights framework, recognizing the right of individuals and communities to live in a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. This development was initiated through the Stockholm Declaration (1972) and strengthened by the Rio Declaration (1992), culminating in the recognition by the United Nations General Assembly in 2022 of the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a universal human right, reflecting the close relationship between environmental protection, human dignity, and social justice (Limon, 2022). In Indonesia, environmental rights are constitutionally guaranteed through Article 28H of the 1945 Constitution, reinforcing their status as legally enforceable rights (Dwiani et al., 2025; Sumartini et al., 2025). However, challenges such as weak law enforcement, environmental degradation, ineffective sanctions, limited public participation, and the criminalization of environmental defenders continue to hinder their realization (Dwiani et al., 2025; Sumartini et al., 2025). Therefore, strengthening environmental courts, enhancing public awareness, and developing supportive regulations are essential to ensuring more effective protection and enforcement of environmental rights (Dwiani et al., 2025; Shokhikhah, 2025).

Climate Change and Environmental Justice

Climate change has become one of the most significant threats to environmental rights, affecting ecosystems, public health, food security, water availability, livelihoods, and social welfare, particularly among vulnerable communities. The concept of climate justice has therefore emerged as an important framework for addressing the unequal distribution of climate impacts, recognizing that coastal, rural, and indigenous communities often experience the most severe consequences despite contributing the least to greenhouse gas emissions (Ananingati, 2025; Ergiarti, 2025). Grounded in the principles of distributive, procedural, and recognition justice, climate justice emphasizes fairness, participation, accountability, and

respect for marginalized groups. However, existing legal frameworks in Indonesia remain fragmented and often fail to adequately protect vulnerable populations or ensure equitable access to climate adaptation resources (Puspitasari & Arumbinang, 2025). Consequently, there is a growing need for a rights-based climate governance framework that prioritizes community participation, incorporates indigenous knowledge, strengthens environmental justice, and addresses structural barriers to resource access and decision-making (Arifin, Rodiyah, & Wulansarie, 2023; Prasetya, 2025; Puspitasari & Arumbinang, 2025). Such an approach can enhance the protection of environmental rights while promoting socially equitable and sustainable development in Indonesia.

Sustainable Governance and Environmental Governance Theory

Sustainable governance, rooted in the concept of sustainable development introduced by the Brundtland Report, refers to institutional arrangements, policies, and decision-making processes that balance environmental sustainability, economic prosperity, and social well-being through principles such as transparency, accountability, participation, effectiveness, equity, and sustainability. Environmental governance involves various actors, including governments, judicial institutions, private sectors, civil society organizations, local communities, and international organizations, and has evolved through approaches such as command-and-control, collaborative governance, and adaptive governance. In Indonesia, sustainable governance has become a central objective of environmental and climate policy; however, its implementation continues to face challenges related to weak law enforcement, conflicts of interest, inadequate supervision, institutional limitations, fragmented regulatory frameworks, and limited public participation (Iskandar, Pratiwi, Budiman, Saedi, & Santoso, 2025; Mohammad, Sutjahjo, Effendi, Sitanggang, & Sasongko, 2025; Supardiono, 2025). Therefore, strengthening sustainable governance requires greater transparency, accountability, community involvement, and the integration of human rights principles into environmental decision-making to achieve more inclusive, effective, and sustainable environmental outcomes (Iskandar et al., 2025; Sitorus & Sinaga, 2024).

Rights-Based Approach to Environmental Governance

The rights-based approach (RBA), originating from international human rights law and development studies, integrates human rights principles into policy design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation by recognizing individuals as rights holders and governments as duty bearers. Built on the principles of participation, accountability, transparency, non-discrimination, equality, and empowerment, RBA seeks to ensure that governance processes are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs of affected communities (Greiber, 2009; Kazanskaia, 2025). In environmental and climate governance, this approach shifts the focus from environmental management alone toward the protection of human well-being, dignity, and social justice, ensuring that adaptation and mitigation measures respect, protect, and fulfill human rights obligations. In Indonesia, constitutional recognition of environmental rights provides a strong legal foundation for implementing RBA, particularly in protecting vulnerable groups, including indigenous peoples and marginalized communities, from the disproportionate impacts of environmental degradation and climate change (Ananingati, 2025). By incorporating participation, accountability, transparency, equality, and environmental justice into governance systems, RBA can strengthen environmental governance and improve the effectiveness and fairness of climate policies (Ananingati, 2025).

Conceptual Framework

This study is based on the premise that environmental rights are fundamental human rights that require effective legal and governance protection, particularly in the context of the climate crisis, which exacerbates environmental degradation, social vulnerability, and inequality. While existing environmental governance frameworks often emphasize regulatory compliance and resource management, they frequently fail to adequately address human rights concerns. Therefore, this study adopts a rights-based approach that

integrates environmental rights, climate justice, sustainable governance, and human rights obligations through principles such as participation, accountability, transparency, equality, access to justice, and environmental sustainability. Based on this framework, the study analyzes the protection of environmental rights within Indonesia's legal system, identifies key challenges arising from the climate crisis, and proposes a rights-based model of sustainable governance that aligns environmental protection with constitutional and human rights principles.

C. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a normative legal research method with a descriptive-analytical approach to examine the protection of environmental rights in Indonesia amid the climate crisis and to formulate a rights-based framework for sustainable governance. Normative legal research focuses on the analysis of legal norms, principles, statutory regulations, legal doctrines, and international legal instruments related to environmental protection, human rights, climate change, and sustainable development. To achieve the research objectives, the study applies three legal approaches: the statutory approach, the conceptual approach, and the comparative approach, enabling a comprehensive examination of the legal foundations and theoretical dimensions of environmental rights protection.

The study utilizes primary, secondary, and tertiary legal materials. Primary legal materials include the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, Law Number 32 of 2009 concerning Environmental Protection and Management, Law Number 39 of 1999 concerning Human Rights, Law Number 16 of 2016 concerning the Ratification of the Paris Agreement, relevant environmental and climate-related regulations, and international legal instruments. Secondary legal materials consist of academic books, journal articles, research reports, policy documents, and publications from international organizations, while tertiary legal materials include legal dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference sources. All legal materials were collected through a systematic library research process to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant legal and scholarly sources.

The collected legal materials were analyzed using qualitative legal analysis through the identification of legal norms, systematic interpretation of statutory provisions, evaluation of legal coherence, and normative assessment based on the principles of environmental rights, climate justice, sustainable governance, and human rights-based approaches. The findings were subsequently used to formulate legal recommendations aimed at strengthening environmental rights protection through more participatory, transparent, accountable, and equitable governance mechanisms. The validity of the study was ensured through the use of authoritative legal sources and systematic legal reasoning, while reliability was maintained through consistent application of legal interpretation methods and cross-referencing among national and international legal sources.

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Constitutional Foundations of Environmental Rights in Indonesia

The protection of environmental rights in Indonesia is firmly grounded in the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, which elevates environmental protection from a policy objective to a constitutionally guaranteed right. Article 28H paragraph (1) guarantees every person the right to live in physical and spiritual prosperity and to enjoy a good and healthy environment, thereby placing environmental quality within the broader framework of human rights and recognizing its importance for human well-being, dignity, and quality of life. This constitutional guarantee is consistent with international human rights standards and reflects the growing recognition that environmental protection is an essential component of fundamental rights (Dwiani et al., 2025).

In addition, Article 33 paragraph (4) establishes sustainability and environmental awareness as fundamental principles of national economic development, requiring economic activities and public policies to consider environmental protection and long-term sustainability (Suryawati, 2021). Together, Articles 28H and 33 form the constitutional foundation of environmental constitutionalism, a concept that incorporates environmental values, principles, and rights into constitutional law, thereby strengthening legal protection and enhancing governmental accountability in environmental governance. Through this framework, environmental protection is not merely an administrative responsibility but a constitutional obligation that guides legislative, executive, and judicial actions.

Despite these constitutional guarantees, significant challenges remain in realizing environmental rights in practice. Weak law enforcement, poor inter-agency coordination, ineffective sanctions, and conflicts between economic development objectives and environmental protection continue to undermine environmental governance (Dwiani et al., 2025; Susanto et al., 2024). Moreover, recent legislative developments, including the Job Creation Law, have been criticized for prioritizing investment and economic growth over environmental sustainability, potentially weakening existing environmental safeguards (Satriawan, Qurbani, & Fathi, 2025). Therefore, strengthening legal frameworks, improving institutional capacity, enhancing public participation, and promoting environmental awareness are essential to ensuring the effective implementation of constitutional environmental rights and achieving sustainable development in Indonesia (Suryawati, 2021; Susanto et al., 2024).

Legal Framework Governing Environmental Rights and Climate Governance

Indonesia has developed an extensive legal framework for environmental protection and climate change governance through Law Number 32 of 2009 concerning Environmental Protection and Management, which explicitly recognizes environmental rights and establishes key governance principles, including sustainability, precaution, accountability, participation, local wisdom, and environmental justice. Article 65 guarantees the right of every person to a good and healthy environment while promoting public participation in environmental management and decision-making processes. In addition, Indonesia has strengthened its climate commitments through the ratification of the Paris Agreement under Law Number 16 of 2016, reflecting its efforts to balance environmental sustainability, economic development, and international climate obligations.

A significant contribution of Law Number 32 of 2009 is its incorporation of environmental democracy, which emphasizes access to environmental information, public participation, and access to justice in environmental matters. These procedural rights strengthen environmental governance by enabling citizens to monitor governmental actions and defend their environmental interests. Indonesia's climate governance framework is further supported by various policy instruments, including the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), climate adaptation strategies, low-carbon development plans, carbon trading regulations, and forestry and land-use policies aimed at reducing emissions and enhancing climate resilience.

Despite the existence of a substantial legal and policy framework, significant challenges remain regarding implementation. Environmental law enforcement is often inconsistent due to limited supervision, weak institutional capacity, and low compliance among both corporate and community actors (Iskandar et al., 2025; Kesek, 2025). Furthermore, fragmented authority among government agencies frequently leads to policy overlap and ineffective implementation of climate initiatives, including carbon taxation and carbon trading mechanisms (Romulus, 2025). Conflicts between economic development and environmental protection also persist, as infrastructure expansion, mining, industrial development, and land conversion projects often receive greater political support than environmental conservation efforts, thereby hindering the effective realization of environmental rights and sustainable development goals in Indonesia (Susanto et al., 2024; Tanjung, Andini, Meisandi, Dongoran, & Syamsiah, 2025).

Climate Crisis as a Threat to Environmental Rights

The climate crisis represents one of the most significant contemporary threats to environmental rights in Indonesia. Due to its geographical characteristics as an archipelagic state, Indonesia is highly vulnerable to climate-related impacts such as sea-level rise, flooding, droughts, forest and peatland fires, biodiversity loss, and ecosystem degradation. These environmental changes not only threaten ecological sustainability but also disrupt livelihoods, food security, public health, water availability, housing, and economic opportunities, thereby undermining the enjoyment of constitutionally protected rights. As a result, environmental protection can no longer be viewed solely as an ecological concern but must also be understood as a matter of human rights protection.

The impacts of climate change are particularly severe for vulnerable populations, including indigenous peoples, coastal communities, women, children, elderly persons, and low-income households, who often possess limited adaptive capacity and face greater exposure to environmental risks (Ananingati, 2025; Ergiarti, 2025). Despite facing disproportionate climate-related burdens, these groups frequently lack adequate legal protection because existing regulations remain fragmented and do not fully incorporate principles of environmental justice (Puspitasari & Arumbinang, 2025). Furthermore, the Indonesian legal system has yet to effectively integrate environmental law and human rights protections, resulting in gaps between normative commitments and practical implementation, particularly in ensuring equitable access to climate adaptation resources and participation in environmental decision-making processes (Ananingati, 2025; Prasetya, 2025; Puspitasari & Arumbinang, 2025).

These conditions highlight the growing importance of climate justice as a guiding principle for environmental governance. Climate justice emphasizes that environmental burdens should not be disproportionately imposed on marginalized populations and that climate policies must promote both environmental sustainability and social equity. Accordingly, a rights-based national climate policy is needed to ensure inclusive and participatory governance, while proposals such as a unified Climate Resilience and Social Protection Law may strengthen the integration of social protection and climate adaptation measures (Ergiarti, 2025; Pelengkahu, 2025). In the Indonesian context, environmental rights cannot be effectively protected without addressing climate change; therefore, climate governance should be regarded as an essential component of environmental rights protection rather than a separate policy domain.

Challenges in Protecting Environmental Rights During the Climate Crisis

Despite significant legal developments, the effective protection of environmental rights in Indonesia continues to face several challenges, including regulatory fragmentation, weak law enforcement, limited public participation, environmental justice concerns, and institutional coordination problems. Overlapping authorities among government agencies often create legal uncertainty and reduce accountability, while inconsistent enforcement, limited institutional capacity, corruption risks, and economic pressures weaken the implementation of environmental regulations. In addition, many communities still face barriers to accessing environmental information and participating meaningfully in decision-making processes, while vulnerable groups frequently bear disproportionate environmental and climate-related burdens without adequate legal protection.

To address these challenges, a rights-based framework for sustainable governance is needed. Such an approach recognizes individuals and communities as rights holders and governments as duty bearers, while incorporating the principles of participation, transparency, accountability, equality, non-discrimination, access to justice, and intergenerational equity. By strengthening public involvement, improving access to information, enhancing institutional accountability, ensuring fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, and protecting the rights of both present and future generations, a rights-based framework can support more effective, equitable, and sustainable environmental and climate governance in Indonesia.

Proposed Model of Rights-Based Sustainable Governance in Indonesia

A rights-based framework for sustainable governance in Indonesia should integrate three interconnected dimensions: environmental rights, climate justice, and sustainable governance. Environmental rights must serve as the normative foundation of governance, ensuring that constitutional and statutory protections guide environmental decision-making. At the same time, climate justice principles should promote the equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens while safeguarding vulnerable populations from disproportionate climate impacts. Sustainable governance principles, including transparency, participation, accountability, coordination, and long-term environmental stewardship, are essential for supporting effective and inclusive environmental management.

The integration of these dimensions creates a governance model capable of addressing environmental degradation, climate vulnerability, and social inequality simultaneously, while aligning with Indonesia's constitutional commitments, international obligations, and sustainable development goals. As the climate crisis intensifies, traditional regulatory approaches alone are no longer sufficient. Effective environmental governance must place human dignity, justice, participation, and accountability at the center of decision-making. Through the adoption of a rights-based framework for sustainable governance, Indonesia can strengthen environmental protection, enhance climate resilience, and ensure that sustainable development benefits both present and future generations.

E. CONCLUSION

The climate crisis has transformed environmental protection from a purely ecological concern into a fundamental human rights issue. In Indonesia, climate-related impacts such as floods, droughts, forest and peatland fires, sea-level rise, and ecosystem degradation threaten the realization of environmental rights and other fundamental rights, including the rights to life, health, food, water, housing, and sustainable livelihoods. Although Indonesia has established a relatively comprehensive legal framework through constitutional provisions, particularly Articles 28H(1) and 33(4) of the 1945 Constitution, Law Number 32 of 2009 concerning Environmental Protection and Management, and various climate-related regulations and international commitments, significant challenges remain, including regulatory fragmentation, weak law enforcement, limited public participation, inadequate institutional coordination, and persistent environmental inequalities. These challenges are further exacerbated by the disproportionate impacts of climate change on vulnerable groups, highlighting the importance of environmental justice within climate governance. Therefore, traditional governance approaches are insufficient to address the complex human rights dimensions of the climate crisis, making it necessary to adopt a rights-based framework for sustainable governance that integrates participation, transparency, accountability, equality, access to justice, and intergenerational equity. Such an approach can strengthen environmental protection, promote social justice, enhance climate resilience, and ensure that sustainable development is pursued in accordance with constitutional values and the interests of present and future generations.

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