

Combating climate change and promoting human rights through Associativism

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Abstract: Preserving nature and promoting human rights emerge as pressing challenges in contemporary society. Companies, as prominent economic agents, play a crucial role in building a more equitable and environmentally sustainable world. In this context, associativism stands out as a crucial tool, enabling companies to collaborate jointly with local communities and non-governmental organisations in the creation of projects and initiatives beneficial to all. In the realm of climate change, fossil fuels stand out as the primary emitters of greenhouse gases. Associativism emerges as a valuable tool in addressing climate change, through this collaborative approach, companies can cooperate with local communities and non-governmental organisations in designing projects and initiatives aimed at reducing dependence on fossil fuels and driving the transition to a low-carbon economy. This article investigates how companies, through associativism, can take effective measures for environmental preservation and the prevention of human rights violations in the context of climate change. The research was conducted through literature review and document analysis. The results obtained suggest that sustainable development practices adopted by companies committed to promoting the rights of nature and humans have the potential to reduce the environmental impact of business operations, promote social well-being, and strengthen collaboration between companies, local communities, and civil society organisations. Companies incorporating associational practices to drive sustainability are more likely to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined in the UN's 2030 Agenda.

Key words: climate change, sustainable development, environmental rights, human rights, companies, associativism, fossil fuels, subsidies

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1. Introduction

The preservation of nature and the promotion of human rights have been recurring and prominent topics in recent years due to the rising global warming indices, causing harm to both people and the environment. Rönésans Holding (2023) understands that companies, as influential economic agents, play a crucial role in building a more sustainable and just world.

According to the United Nations (UN, 2024), in the context of climate change, fossil fuels are by far the largest contributors to global climate change, accounting for over 75% of global greenhouse gas emissions and almost 90% of all carbon dioxide emissions.

Subsidies granted to fossil fuels have the effect of driving the consumption of these fuels, resulting in increased greenhouse gas emissions. As indicated in a report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2023), these subsidies reached a record of \$7 trillion.

As highlighted by the Carbon Majors Report, a recent survey reveals that a group of just 100 companies is responsible for over 70% of global greenhouse gas emissions since 1988. In this context, The Guardian (2017) conducted a survey of notable companies such as ExxonMobil, Shell, BP, and Chevron, identifying them as part of this group, belonging to investors with the most significant emissions during the mentioned period.

Associativism refers to the process where individuals or groups come together to form associations with shared goals or interests. These associations often play a crucial role in social, economic, and political spheres by promoting cooperation, mutual support, and collective action. Associativism is vital for building social capital and enhancing democratic engagement by fostering a sense of community and shared purpose among its members (International Labour Organization, 2014).

Given the significant impact of companies on global emissions, Associativism can be an important tool in combating climate change. Through associativism, companies can work together with local communities and non-governmental organisations to develop projects and initiatives that reduce dependence on fossil fuels and promote the transition to a low-carbon economy.

The main objective of this research is to analyse how companies, through associativism, can take positive measures for environmental preservation and the prevention of human rights violations. This article will analyse how the companies ExxonMobil, Shell, BP and Chevron have implemented measures for nature preservation and what measures can be adopted by other companies.

The research methodology included a comprehensive literature review and document analysis. Key sources encompassed reports from the International Labour Office (ILO), the United Nations (UN), and the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). This approach identified essential themes and practices, providing a solid foundation for understanding the relationship between associativism and climate change. Document analysis, on the other hand, was carried out using internal documents of the companies, including sustainability reports, policies, and manuals.

2. Climate Change and Associativism

Climate change stands as one of the greatest threats to human rights today. The United Nations (UN, 2024) has defined that the effects of climate change, such as intense droughts, water scarcity, severe wildfires, rising sea levels, floods, polar ice melting, catastrophic storms, and biodiversity loss, among other impacts, are affecting the lives of millions of people worldwide. These effects are violating fundamental rights such as the right to life, health, housing, food, and water.

The World Commission on Environment and Development - WCED (1987, p. 2-3) understands that the rights of nature encompass all living beings, ensuring them the right to life, integrity, diversity, and regeneration. These rights reflect the interdependence between humans and nature, recognizing it as a living entity with inherent rights, not merely a source of resources.

The concept of sustainable development emphasises that nations should formulate development strategies with an eye on environmental protection. The Brundtland Report (UN, 1987) also underscores the need for development that satisfies current needs without hindering future generations' ability to meet their own.

The precautionary principle argues that scientific uncertainty shouldn't delay actions to prevent environmental harm. The polluter-pays principle requires states to enforce laws to prevent and remedy business-caused environmental damage. These principles have significantly influenced international environmental protection documents and national legislation, as seen in the 1992 Agenda 21 (UN, 1992).

Agenda 21 tackles major environmental issues and suggests measures for short, medium, and long-term solutions, with the overarching goal of achieving sustainable development.

More recently, the UN has formulated the 17 SDG goals (UN, 2024), which are to be achieved by 2030. This document integrates the economic, environmental, and social dimensions, placing all states and individuals

with a common objective in the protection of the environment for present and future generations. Specifically, ODS 13 focuses on urgent action against climate change. ODS 7 promotes accessible and clean energy. Furthermore, ODS 11 aims to make cities more sustainable and resilient. Finally, ODS 12 encourages responsible consumption and production, thereby reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

All those steps were important to the UN in 2022, through the United Nations General Assembly, to indicate that a healthy environment is a human right. These international scenarios establish international standards to protect the environment for the present and future generations.

Although international documents are primarily directed at states it is crucial to recognize the significant role that associativism plays in protecting human rights and environmental law.

Associativism and sustainable development are interconnected concepts that focus on fostering collaborative efforts and long-term environmental, social, and economic. Associativism is the practice of forming and participating in voluntary associations organised to promote common interests, strengthen community bonds, and advocate for collective rights and interests (Warren, 2001, p. 7).

As a form of social organisation, associativism enables individuals with common interests to unite and advocate for their rights and interests. It involves forming and participating in civic associations and groups that foster social bonds and community engagement (Putnam, 1995, p. 67).

The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), in its report "Our Common Future" (1987, p. 16), defines sustainable development as development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It aims to reconcile economic growth, social development, and environmental preservation.

In the context of sustainable development, associativism can be a powerful tool for companies to promote the rights of nature and human rights. Associativism can help companies advocate for human rights, promote sustainable development, and respond to climate change.

With 2.6 million cooperatives, over 1 billion members, and a turnover of 3 trillion USD (Dave Grace & Associates, 2014, p.2), the global cooperative movement is the world's largest organisation. Companies serve a threefold purpose: economically, they create jobs and income; socially, they offer protection and promote equality and social justice; and democratically, they enhance communities and politics (International Labour Office, 2014).

Companies adopting associativism practices to promote sustainability can minimise the environmental impact of their operations, foster social well-being, and strengthen collaboration between companies, local communities, and civil society organisations. These sustainable development practices contribute to a fairer and more sustainable world.

Corporate responsibility stems from the necessity to mitigate and prevent the impacts generated by business activities. However, the active participation of states and civil society is crucial in responding to economic activities conducted within their territories (Ramasastry, 2015, p. 241)

Considering the “Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights”, elaborated by John Ruggie (2008) in the document “Protect, Respect and Remedy”, companies have the responsibility to protect human rights as the states has the obligation to protect their citizens.

As emphasised by Silvia and Pamplona (2016, p. 10), the Guiding Principles, especially the second pillar, confer on companies the responsibility for respecting human rights, including the rights of nature, in all their operations. Thus, these principles offer a set of guidelines for companies seeking to adopt good practices for human rights, which emphasises the importance of corporations disclosing their efforts to protect human and environmental rights. Companies must implement measures to prevent and remedy any potential damage their business activities may cause to society.

The crucial role of associative organisations in advocating for human rights in the face of climate change is evident. These organisations play a vital role in promoting climate justice, ensuring the participation of the most vulnerable communities in decision-making processes, and securing access to resources for adapting to the effects of climate change.

Promoting these rights is challenging but represents an opportunity to build a more sustainable and just world. Thus, the rights of nature comprise a set of principles and norms that recognize nature as a subject of rights.

3. Case Studies: Experiences in Associativism

A study reveals that 57 major producers of oil, gas, coal, and cement are responsible for 80% of global fossil CO₂ emissions since the 2016 Paris climate agreement. This group, consisting of state-controlled corporations and multinational companies, are identified as key drivers of the climate crisis by the Carbon Majors Database. Among them, ExxonMobil is the largest investor-owned emitter, contributing 1.4% of the global total, with Shell, BP, Chevron, and Total Energies each contributing at least 1% (Guardian, “100 fossil fuel companies and investors responsible for 71% of global emissions, says CDP study”, 2024).

In an effort to mitigate and reduce climate change impacts, these companies are leveraging associativism to engage with local communities and non-governmental organisations, developing collaborative projects and initiatives. This approach promotes responsible business practices and sustainable development through partnerships with various stakeholders.

ExxonMobil (“Advancing Climate Solutions Executive Summary”, 2024) collaborates with communities, governments, and local stakeholders to support local needs, promote economic growth, and improve social conditions. It supports these efforts by addressing strategic local priorities globally, focusing on combating malaria, promoting STEM education, and supporting women’s economic empowerment.

BP (“Who we are”, 2024) and the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF, “About EDF”, 2024) announced a strategic three-year commitment to advance technologies and practices aimed at reducing methane emissions in the global oil and gas supply chain. This agreement enables joint projects to test emerging technologies and strategies for better methane management. By partnering with universities and experts, BP has shown that this initiative can significantly reduce methane emissions, benefiting the entire oil and gas industry.

Shell (“Managing our impacts”, 2024) operates near communities and prioritises managing its impact on people through international standards and internal benchmarks. In-house experts engage with communities, manage resettlement impacts, and protect cultural heritage. Shell supports Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), an UN-endorsed principle involving open dialogue and good-faith negotiations with Indigenous Peoples. In Peru, Shell funds the “Living Forests Forever” REDD+ project, operated by the NGO Aider, to conserve Amazonian forests and strengthen local businesses, improving the quality of life for Indigenous Peoples (Shell, “Indigenous Peoples”, 2024).

Chevron (“Environment, Social, and Governance from A–Z”, 2024) engages stakeholders to manage risks and impacts across the business lifecycle, identifying trends, opportunities, and key issues affecting local communities. Chevron collaborates with governments, industry peers, academia, environmental NGOs, and local communities to manage biodiversity and develop environmental solutions and standards. In 2021, Chevron Australia launched an initiative to support nature-based climate solutions, restoring 10 wetlands across Australia to mitigate floods, provide ecosystem services, improve water quality, support native wildlife, and contribute to blue carbon research (Chevron, “Getting Results the Right Way: 2021 Corporate Sustainability Report”, 2021).

These examples demonstrate that associativism can engage communities and organisations to mitigate and reduce the impacts

of climate change. Such practices reduce the environmental impact of business activities, promote social well-being, and strengthen partnerships between companies, local communities, and civil society organisations.

4. Conclusion

The preservation of nature and the promotion of human rights are critical challenges in contemporary society, especially in light of the rising global warming indices and their detrimental impacts on both people and the environment. Companies, as prominent economic agents, have a crucial role in fostering a more equitable and environmentally sustainable world. Associativism, defined as the practice of forming and participating in voluntary associations to promote common interests and advocate for collective rights, emerges as a vital tool in this context.

The research highlights the significant contribution of fossil fuels to global greenhouse gas emissions, with major producers like ExxonMobil, Shell, BP, Chevron, and Total Energies being key drivers of the climate crisis. Despite global commitments to reduce emissions, these companies have continued to increase their output, underscoring the need for collective action through associativism to address climate change effectively.

Through the examination of case studies, the article illustrates how companies can adopt associational practices to mitigate environmental impacts and promote human rights. ExxonMobil collaborates with communities and stakeholders to support local needs and promote economic growth. BP's partnership with the Environmental Defense Fund to reduce methane emissions and Shell's efforts to manage its impact on local communities through rigorous impact assessments and support for Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) exemplify responsible business practices.

Chevron's long-standing collaboration with conservation volunteers in Australia and its initiatives to restore wetlands and support nature-based climate solutions further demonstrate the potential of associativism in driving sustainable development. These initiatives strengthen partnerships between companies, local communities, and civil society organisations.

Moreover, the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights provide a framework for companies to adopt responsible practices. These principles, especially the second pillar emphasise the corporate responsibility to respect human rights, including the rights of nature, in all their operations. Companies are encouraged to implement measures to prevent and remedy any potential damage their activities may cause, thus ensuring transparency and accountability in their efforts to protect human and environmental rights.

In conclusion, associativism is a powerful approach for companies to engage effectively with communities and organisations, mitigating the impacts of climate change and promoting human rights. By adopting sustainable development practices companies can contribute to building a fairer and more sustainable world, outlined in the UN's 2030 Agenda. The integration of associativism into corporate strategies, guided by the UN's principles, is essential for achieving long-term environmental preservation, social justice, and economic growth.

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