

SESSION REPORT

Climate Pro Bono Collaborations: Lessons Learned and the Paths Forward

Moderator: Rebekah Farrell, Head of Policy and Strategy, Australian Pro Bono Centre

Speakers: Jess Thomas (Taylor Wessing), Stephanie Demetry (Green Pro Bono), Margarida Ravara (Environmental Defenders Law Center)

Date / Location: November 13, 2025 PILnet Global Forum, Rome.

Overview

NGOs can drive meaningful impact, for the environment and for communities, but these cooperations are not without challenges. The session explored examples of successes, challenges, and practical strategies for collaborative legal action addressing the climate crisis.

Nearly a full house (approximately 60 participants) attended, reflecting growing interest in climate-focused pro bono initiatives.

Moderator Rebekah Farrell opened with a summary of a landmark Australian case, where an alliance of lawyers and NGOs sought to determine whether the government has a duty of care to prevent climate harm. The Federal Court of Australia dismissed the claim, noting national climate targets are a matter of policy rather than enforceable duty. The case, however, demonstrated the potential of strategic, coordinated pro bono collaboration to mobilize expertise and public attention. This example served as a jumping off point to explore the myriad ways pro bono lawyers can collaborate with climate defenders and local communities, and to think about success beyond just the narrow definition of a positive outcome in court.



KEY THEMES

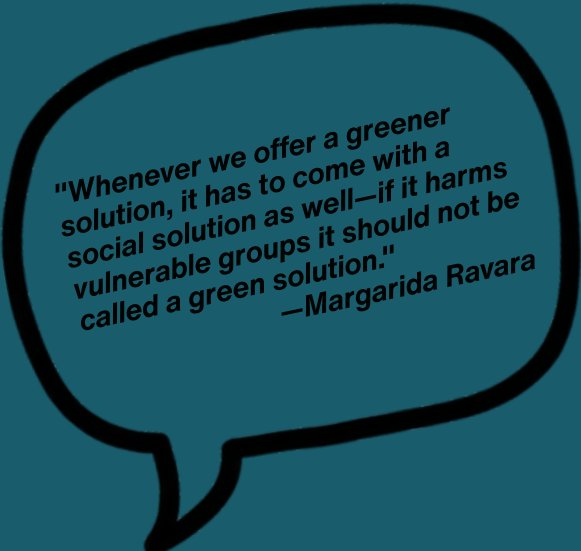
CHALLENGES IN PRO BONO WORK

- Regulatory pressures limiting NGOs' actions and legal strategies
- Conflicts of interest for law firms balancing pro bono commitments with commercial clients
- Pressure and threats against environmental defenders, particularly in vulnerable communities

BUILDING TRUST & EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIONS

Trust between NGOs and pro bono lawyers is critical. Margarida Ravara described how the Environmental Defenders Law Center (EDLC) acts as a bridge between lawyers and communities, ensuring:

- Clear expectations and mutual understanding
- Well-defined project scope and boundaries
- Legal strategies that respect community needs and rights



*"Whenever we offer a greener solution, it has to come with a social solution as well—if it harms vulnerable groups it should not be called a green solution."
—Margarida Ravara*

NAVIGATING CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Jess Thomas emphasized that law firms operate as for-profit entities, requiring careful conflict management. However, while litigation can be viewed as risky, law firms contribute beyond litigation by providing:

- Organizational support and operational guidance for NGOs
- Employment advice, real estate, or commercial agreements
- Research or technical support for green tech projects
- Participation in specialized working groups

PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO CLIMATE PRO BONO

- Leveraging firm expertise in research, drafting, and organizational support
- Engaging senior partners to align pro bono projects with firm strategy and ESG goals
- Utilizing networks and waiting lists to match urgent requests with capable lawyers
- Cross-border collaborations

Noteable Takeaways:

- Coordinated pro bono collaboration can have significant impact even if legal success is limited.
- Conflicts of interest can be navigated through careful scoping, alternative forms of support, and networked approaches.
- NGOs act as vital bridges to communities, ensuring interventions respect local needs and social justice principles.
- Transparency, expectation-setting, and strategic engagement with senior lawyers are essential for sustainable, effective climate pro bono work.
- A growing ecosystem of lawyers, firms, and NGOs is committed to climate justice, demonstrating practical and ethical frameworks for engagement.

Conclusion

The session underscored the importance of collaboration between law firms and NGOs to address climate challenges. Coordinated pro bono work builds capacity, strengthens community trust, and fosters innovative solutions integrating environmental and social considerations. This report provides a roadmap for donors, law firms, and NGOs aiming to maximize the impact of climate-focused pro bono initiatives.