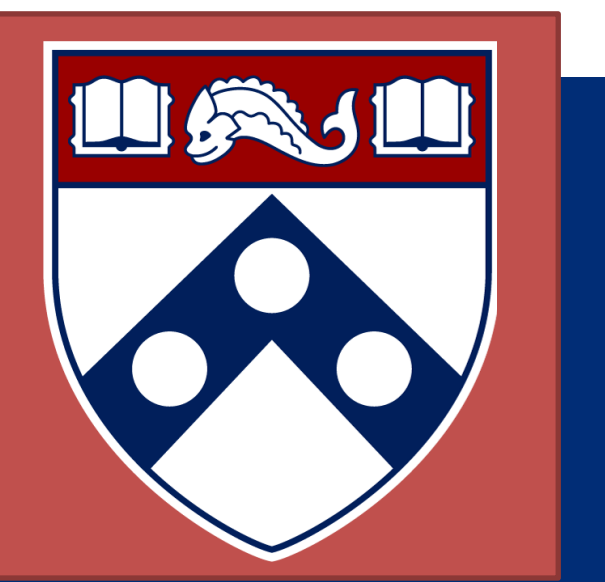


Rights of Nature and International Norm Contestation in United Nations General Debate Speeches



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Abstract

Rights of Nature (RoN), an emerging legal paradigm that attributes legal rights to natural entities like rivers and mountains, seeks to upend Anthropocentric ideas of property and intrinsic value. The effects of its potential disruption of traditional rights attribution and environmental protection norms has been a growing body of research in both social science and legal fields; however, calls for more research about the RoN's ability to proliferate are still common.

Based on an interdisciplinary approach combining constructivist theories of norm contestation and dominant principles of environmental law, I aimed to measure RoN-related norm diffusion on the global stage as a potential signal for future institutionalization. For this purpose, I conducted an extensive discourse analysis combining top-down, dictionary-based approaches and few-shot text classification using the GPT 3.5-turbo model on the United Nations General Debate Corpus (UNGDC), which includes all general debate speeches from 1946 to 2023. In doing so, I visualized trends and correlations between countries and their references to environmental norms and validated them against previous works in norm contestation and diffusion. Most importantly, I argue that those who have referenced ecocentric and biocentric norms on the international stage are predominantly those who have already taken or will take domestic action to implement them.

Background

- Constructivist theories of international relations argue that international norms, or shared expectations about how to behave, guide state behavior and can develop and institutionalize.
- Norms** also play a large part in environmental international law, especially in its **reliance on soft law**, a type of law which uses political pressure as an enforcement mechanism rather than traditional legal systems.
- RoN *challenges* current **environmental soft law's dominant Anthropocentric** environmental protection norms by arguing for a legal system where natural entities can be represented as rights-bearing.
- Existing work by Kauffman and Martin (2018) suggests that RoN norm construction and institutionalization differ in scope and strength between specific countries and is *multidirectional*.
- Further exploration into RoN norm differences can be done through discourse analysis of the United Nations, a valuable stage for norm validity discourse given its relative convenience (de Havenon 2022).

Methodology

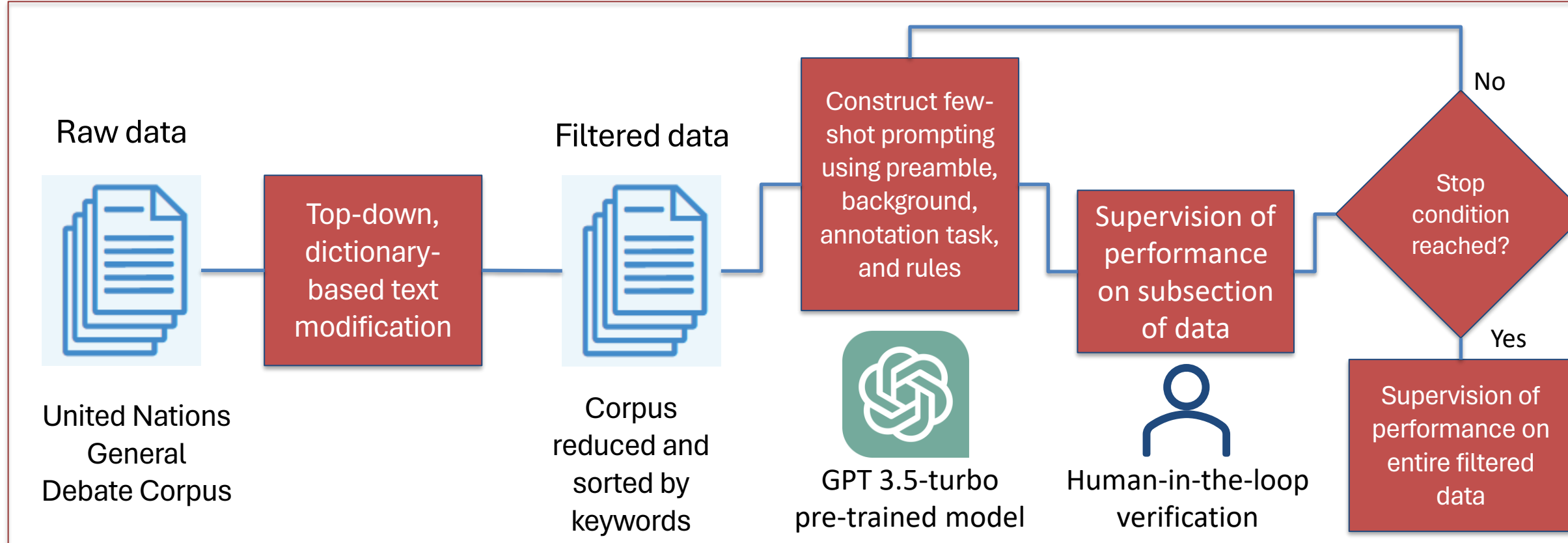


Figure 1. Flow chart demonstrating the reduction of the UNGDC Corpus with keywords, then using a Human-in-the-loop system to modify a few-shot prompting technique (Savelka et al. 2023) until no mistakes are made when identifying RoN references in a three-year subsection.

Details, Data, and Analysis

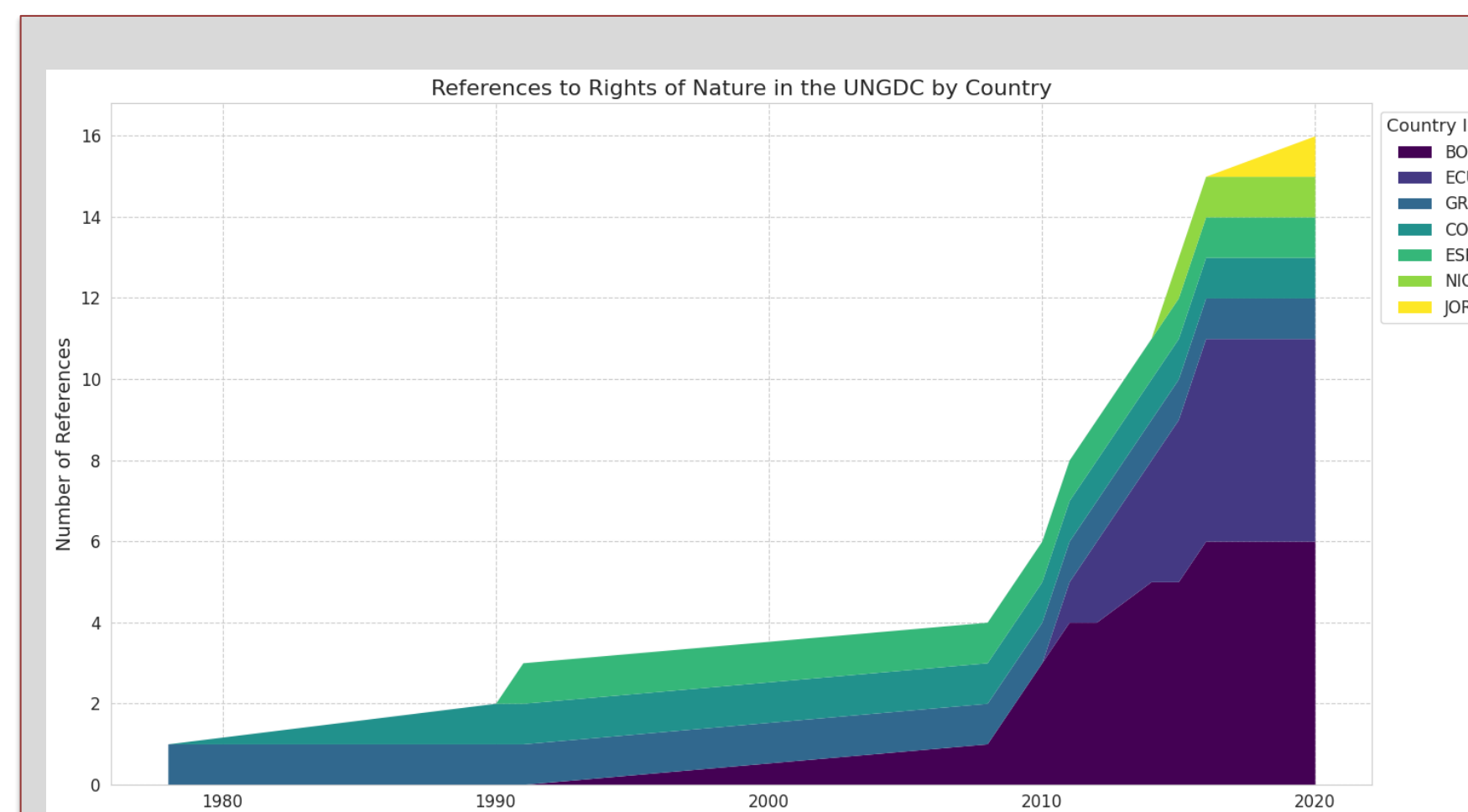


Figure 2. An area chart representing the cumulative references to rights of nature in the UNGDC. There are 16 total references from seven countries, with two countries mentioning RoN more than once (Bolivia and Ecuador, at six and five respectively).

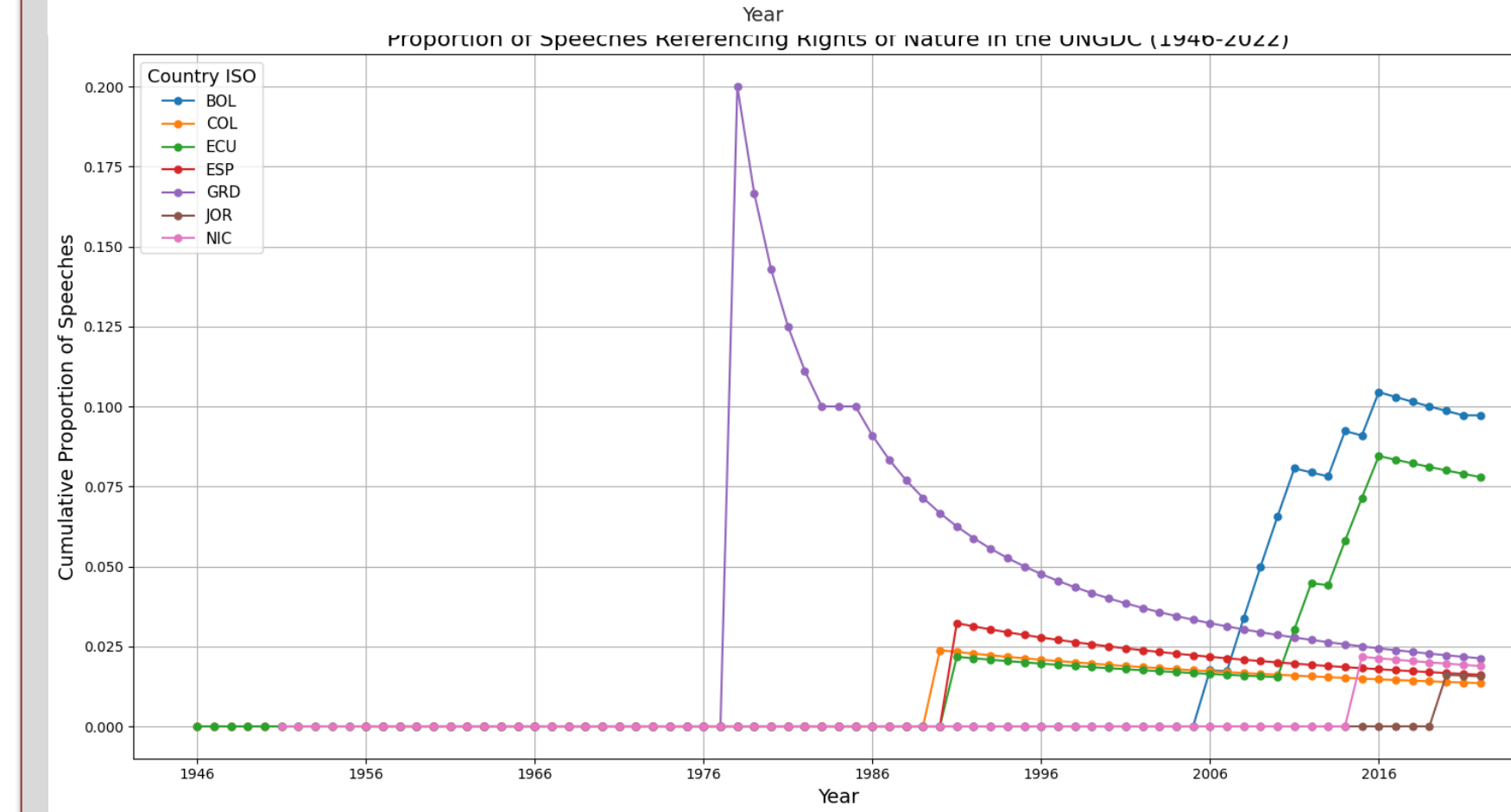


Figure 3. A line chart visualizing the proportion of references to RoN to the number of speeches made by a country.

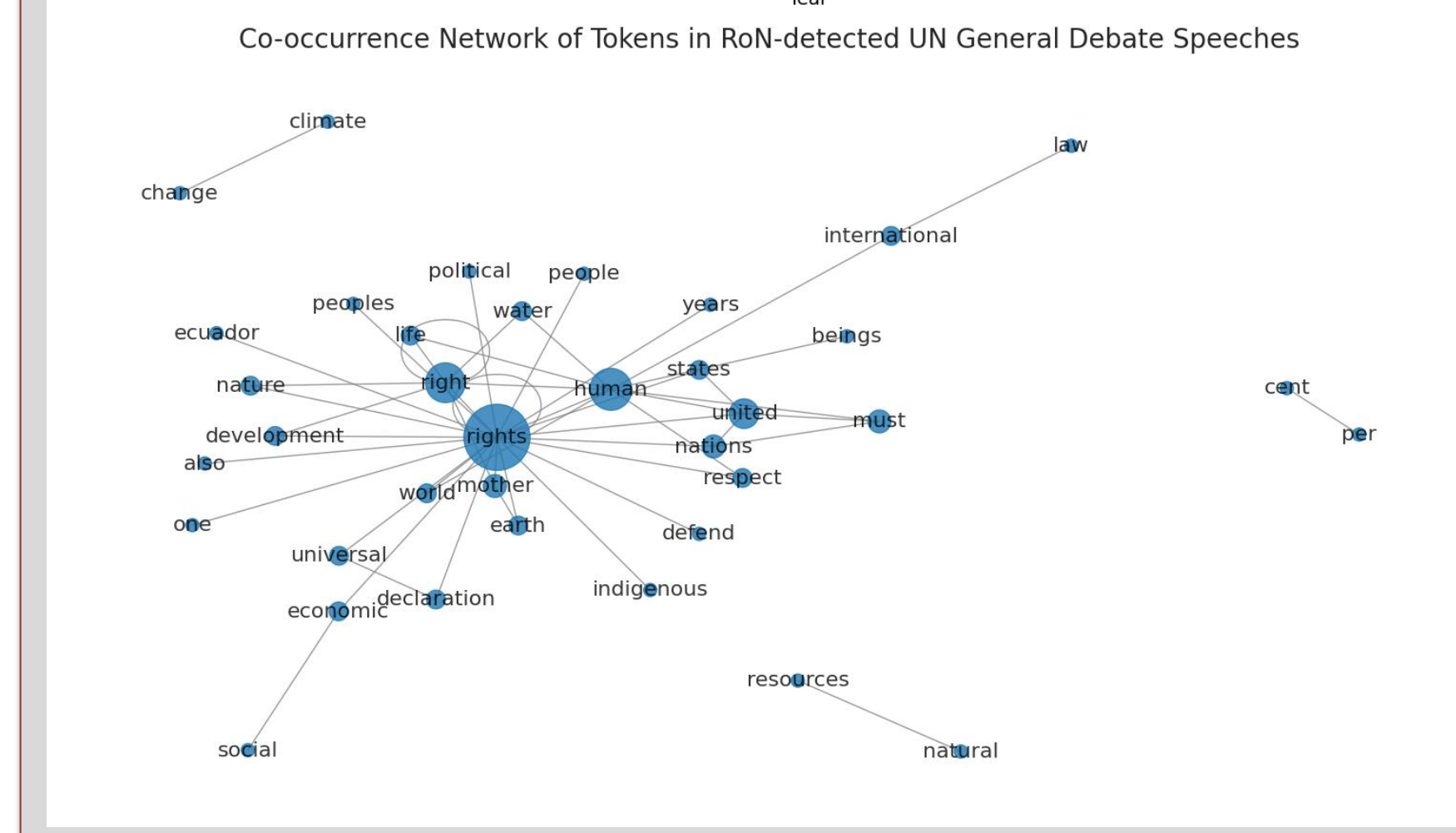


Figure 4. A co-occurrence network of the full speeches which contained references to RoN with a window size of 5 and displaying only the top 50 strongest connections.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined international environmental discourse through the UNGDC, a massive corpus of text from all member states, to find signals and patterns in RoN norm construction and contestation.

Key findings include:

- Of seven countries that mentioned RoN, five are situated in Latin America.
- Only two countries mentioned RoN more than once: Bolivia and Ecuador. Unsurprisingly, these countries have institutionalized RoN norms; however, they do so differently, and this reflects in how they refer to natural entities and what rights they are given.
- Of the three references to rights of nature detected before the 21st century, two references (from Spain and Colombia) implied that nature should share a relationship to mankind akin to the relationship of the state and the individual in the context of human rights, a year apart each other.
- There was no one dominant idea of which part of nature is rights-bearing or what rights they were entitled to.

While many of these countries are geographic neighbors (a basic determinant for norm diffusion) (Voigt 2023), both their presentation and formalization of RoN norms vary greatly. These findings support Kauffman and Martin's theory of 'rival models' of RoN that diffuse internationally and have influence in multiple directions. Finally, five out of seven (~71%) of the countries that referenced RoN at least once have implemented RoN at the national level in their legal systems. This implies that those who have mentioned RoN in international discourse are likely to take action to support the paradigm.

Further Work and Recommendations

The methodology of the project ran into cost and time constraints and could be improved in future works in many ways, including:

- Using Named Entity Recognition to figure out exactly what type of entity is being attributed rights.
- Increasing the subsection of data that was used until the stop condition was reached

Future work should investigate other emerging environmental terms, such as urban ecology, in international discourse. The thesis also provides valuable insight into the possibilities of using machine learning, specifically pre-trained models, for environmental studies.

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