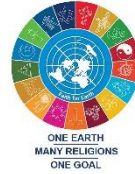




FAITH FOR EARTH



United Nations Environment Programme

Faith for Earth Initiative

**A Strategy for Engagement
The Role of Faith Leaders and Faith-Based Organisations
in the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030)**



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Introduction

It is well recognized that to achieve the global Agenda 2030 it is essential to engage and partner with all stakeholders and adopt untapped innovative approaches. The role of civil society and non-government organizations has been crucial over the last couple of decades in mobilizing action by the public as well as in forming policies that serve societies. Over the past few years, the involvement of the full spectrum of such organizations has started to improve by the increased participation of those organizations based on faith, values, culture and indigenous knowledge. Many environmental faith-based organizations have been actively involved at a global, regional and local levels in protecting, conserving, and restoring land resources. With control over 8% of habitable land, and 5% of commercial forests,¹ the potential of Faith-Based Organizations for aggregate global and regional impact is immense.

UNEP's Faith for Earth Initiative seeks to harness a largely untapped potential of Faith Leaders and their communities, and Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs), who represent approximately 80% of the people living on earth,² in addressing climate change and promoting environmental stewardship. This includes leadership of the [Interfaith Rainforest Initiative](#), a program of Faith for Earth, and an international alliance working globally and in five countries that together contain 70% of the world's remaining tropical forests (Brazil, Colombia, DRC, Indonesia and Peru) to bring the mobilizing power and political influence of religious leaders to bear on efforts to protect and restore tropical forests.

By propagating the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (UN Decade) to faith communities, that share a common objective to strengthen environmental ethics within their own faith communities, the ambitious goal stated in the UN Decade in promoting ecosystem restoration at an immense scale of dozens of millions of hectares becomes more attainable- particularly looking at FBO landholdings. Faith communities can also intervene politically in powerful ways to induce governments at all levels to prioritize and invest in ecosystem restoration. Implementing spiritual teachings from scripture, prominent religious figures, and other sources of spiritual and religious practices by faith communities will also have an enormous impact on forests, agricultural lands, species, and other ecosystems.

The UN Decade highlights three main goals that seek to inspire a new ecological, economic and social trajectory:

- Enhance global, regional, national and local commitments and actions to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems;
- Increase our understanding of the multiple benefits of successful ecosystem restoration; and
- Apply this knowledge in our education systems and within all public and private sector decision-making.

In achieving the above, the Decade seeks to support Life Below Water (SDG 14) and Life on Land (SDG 15) by enhancing the quality and area of habitats for wildlife. These habitat improvements will in turn help societies mitigate and adapt to climate change (SDG 13), improve the health of societies in rural and urban environments (SDGs 3, 11), and increase the supplies of clean water (SDG 6) and sustainable food (SDG 2, 12). Investments in restoration that adhere to principles of gender equality and restorative justice will also provide and improve work opportunities and income streams (SDGs 1, 5, 8, 10, 16); and cross-sectoral collaboration, learning and innovation on the use of ecosystem goods and services (SDGs 4,

¹ http://www.arcworld.org/downloads/ZUG_Guidelines_to_FCI_2017.pdf

² Pew Research Center (2012), *The Global Religious Landscape - A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Major Religious Groups as of 2010*. Washington: Pew Research Center.

7, 9, 17). All of these effects will assist countries in resolving conflicts over natural resources and reduce the need for communities to migrate as a result of such conflicts. Lastly, and strongly aligned with 2030 Agenda, realizing the human rights of all people, including for example the local communities and indigenous peoples living in many of the ecosystems requiring conservation and restoration, will be central to all activities of the UN Decade. The Emissions Gap Report 2020 places significant importance in reforestation efforts as a major long-term sectoral transformation activity to reach net-zero Green House Gas Emissions (GHG) globally by implementing policies to conserve and restore land carbon stocks and protect natural ecosystems.

Spiritual beliefs, indigenous traditions and religions are main drivers for cultural values, social inclusion, political engagement, and economic prosperity. By utilizing the dynamics of these beliefs at the local level and including the role of faith actors is crucial for sustainable development. Faith communities have a longstanding reputation in society providing socio-economic services to local communities in the areas of welfare, education, health, and disaster relief particularly for the poor and marginalised. Values and faith-based lifestyles and behaviours have demonstrated that sustainable local impact at all levels of society can be achieved. In some countries, strong synergy is demonstrated between political and religious leadership.

In its recent Special Report on Climate Change and Land, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recognizes the importance of securing community land for climate change, and recent research shows that indigenous and community lands are a globally important carbon sink, holding at least 22% of the carbon stored in tropical and subtropical forests and at least 17% of the total carbon (including soil carbon) stored in forests. There is considerable potential for more carbon to be stored through ecosystem restoration on degraded indigenous and community lands if they were secured, better protected and restored. A primary focus of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in each pilot country is on building powerful partnerships between indigenous leaders and religious leaders to protect these land rights and therefore to contribute significantly to the goals of the UN Decade.

The avenues for faith actors to contribute to the attainment of the UN Decade focuses on ten key areas. Motivated by spiritual values and driven by an ethical responsibility to mitigate human impact on the environment, several barriers stated in the UN Decade can be overcome by the social and political influences of faith communities around the world. Forests can deliver 30% of the climate solution needed by 2030 but receive less than 3% of all climate funding³, making the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative a particularly great example for restoration efforts. Adopting an integrated approach of religious and cultural values in the implementation of the UN Decade to ensure inclusive green and transformative development is critical for greater environmental stewardship, attainment of the SDGs, and 2030 Agenda.

Key Areas for FBOs Engagement by the Faith for Earth Initiative and Partners

Barriers Identified in the Implementation of the UN Decade

The overarching vision for the UN Decade is the health and wellbeing of all life on Earth and that of future generations, where the upcoming decade is characterised by an increase in the areas of healthy ecosystems, reduction of ecosystem loss, and an end to fragmentation and

³ <https://www.unep.org/resources/publication/financing-sustainable-land-use-people-and-planet>; https://www.panda.org/wwf_news/press_releases/?329190/Forests-food-and-land-can-deliver-30-of-solutions-needed-to-tackle-climate-crisis-by-2030

degradation of healthy ecosystems. Similarly, Faith for Earth strives to promote a balance in all spheres of life by encouraging, empowering and engaging with Faith-Based Organizations as partners, at all levels, toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and fulfilling Agenda 2030 based on the common understanding of world's religions of the duty of care of nature.

The UN Decade identifies six primary barriers to catalysing a global movement that promotes and implements large-scale restoration, namely;

1. Limited awareness across societies, globally, of the considerable negative effects that ecosystem degradation is having on the well-being and livelihoods of billions of people, the costs of this degradation, and the profound societal benefits that would accrue with major investments in ecosystem restoration;
2. Despite the economic benefits that restoration investments would bring societies, the pressure on decision-makers in public and private sector to invest in long-term ecosystem restoration initiatives is relatively small compared with the pressures to invest in other sectors like health care, manufacturing, education and defense;
3. Relative scarcity of legislations, policies, regulations, tax incentives and subsidies that incentivize a shift in investments towards large scale restoration and production systems, value chains and infrastructure that do not degrade ecosystems;
4. Limited technical knowledge and capacity of national governments, local governments, local NGOs and private companies to design and implement large-scale restoration initiatives;
5. Relatively small amount of finance that societies are making available for investing in large scale restoration because of the perceived and/or real risks involved in such investments; and
6. Limited investment into long-term research, including social as well as natural sciences, that focusses on innovation to improve restoration protocols through time.

Annex 1 of the UN Decade Strategy expands on the secondary barriers which include local ecological, economic and social factors within specific landscapes to global geopolitical factors and economic forces influencing governments and inter-governmental organisations. These barriers were identified through a collaborative effort of all the stakeholders.

Pathways Identified in the UN Decade to Address the Six Primary Barriers and the Role of Faith Communities

Three main pathways seek to address the six primary barriers:

Pathway I seek to generate the peer-driven, participatory global movement that focus on upscaling restoration. Faith organisations present a foundation upon which local, regional and global networks and initiatives are linked - a common spiritual and cultural perspective towards life, generally. By uplifting the role of environmental ethics within pre-existing religious frameworks, a new approach - or motivation - towards ecosystem restoration may be achieved, thereby, increasing the intent of societies worldwide to identify and restore degraded landscapes.

For example, *Laudato Si'* (Praise be to you)⁴ “on care for our common home” gave life to The Living Chapel,⁵ a call to inspire the public irrespective of religious denomination to reconnect with nature by providing intercultural and interfaith collaboration to restore “our common home”

⁴ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

⁵ <https://livingchapel.com/>

through the creation of Laudato Si' Gardens and Living Sacred Spaces. The Gardens seek to equip the public with the ability to participate in the conservation of rare and endangered fruit and plant species and restoration of the earth using scientifically-sound premises.

Faith for Earth endeavours to build upon, and amplify the implementation of the Guidelines on Green Houses of Worship⁶ in partnership with organisations like The Living Chapel tackling a fraction of the estimated 30% of all related greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions emitted as a result of faith institutions.⁷ Through this example, the economic and cultural value of biodiversity protection and ecosystem restoration rests with the house of worship and faith leaders showing their respective communities the value of green spaces particularly in urban settings, demonstrating the effect of mini-forests on societal well-being, inspiring a spiritually-led intervention for halting, preventing and reversing degradation. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church⁸ endeavors to create a natural symbol of heaven on Earth providing every creature a habitat, widely characterized by their lush forests that surround the Church in 35,000 locations. Efforts as such, driven by approximately 36 million of the Ethiopian Orthodox community living in Ethiopia,⁹ has the potential to mainstream reforestation efforts into the national budget and form part of a resilient climate change strategy, including Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC),¹⁰ on a massive scale.

At the same time, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is managing country programs in Brazil, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Indonesia and Peru to bring moral urgency and faith-based leadership to the protection and restoration of tropical forests. The initiative can serve as a powerful platform for mobilizing commitment and advocacy around forests and ecosystem restoration.

By strengthening an interfaith network, peer-to-peer learning on best practices for different ecosystems will strengthen the research, policy and practice of ecosystem restoration by faith communities worldwide.

Pathway II seeks to foster political will from heads of state, government ministers, directors of government departments, parliamentarians, business leaders and landowners to support the global movement and champion restoration in their respective countries. In this way, and building on the momentum of the global movement developed in Pathway I, political will for ecosystem restoration will be fostered.

Such collaboration is essential to implement multi-jurisdictional initiatives like the Great Green Wall Initiative (GGWI), an African-led initiative spanning 20 countries across Africa aiming to restore degraded landscape in the Sahel. The Wall seeks to cover 8,000 km of land, characterized as the largest living structure on the planet.¹¹

One of the primary objectives of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is to mobilize religious leaders and faith communities to advocate for governments at local, sub-national and national levels to adopt, fulfill or expand upon their commitments to protect and restore tropical forests. The initiative provides a unique avenue for mobilizing new political will around the restoration agenda.

⁶ <https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/publication/guidelines-green-houses-worship>

⁷ <https://livingchapel.com/design/green-walls/>

⁸ <https://www.nature.com/immersive/d41586-019-00275-x/index.html>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethiopian_Orthodox_Tewahedo_Church

¹⁰ <https://ndcpartnership.org/countries-map/country?iso=ETH>; <https://www.ndcs.undp.org/content/ndc-support-programme/en/home/our-work/geographic/africa/Ethiopia.html>

¹¹ <https://www.unccd.int/actions/great-green-wall-initiative>

Pathway III seeks to catalyse research and development that generates the technical capacity that is needed to restore ecosystems at scale, focusing on the best available methods for designing, implementing, monitoring and sustaining ecosystem restoration to institutions involved in ecosystem restoration. The potential that faith leaders and faith institutions can bring to the global reforestation and conservation effort is tremendous. The role of science, indigenous knowledge and traditional practices are critical for building resilient ecosystems. It is vital to identify and build on pre-existing global campaigns like: Global Campaign for Nature,¹² to gather bold ideas for decisive action, particularly of Indigenous and Local Communities, to conserve 30% of the planet in a natural state by 2030; the Bonn Challenge¹³; and others. The Faith for Earth Coalition will be another such institution seeking to engage four Coalition Councils for greater multi-stakeholder and intergenerational partnerships at local, regional and global levels: the Council of Eminent Leaders; the Youth Council; the Network of Chief Executive Officers; and the Faith-Science Consortium.

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is another example committed to bringing the latest science, research and data on rainforests, climate and the rights of indigenous peoples to religious leaders and networks in a format they can digest and apply in their respective spheres of teaching, outreach and influence. Already the initiative has published [a library of fact sheets, issue primers, faith toolkits and resources guides](#) for religious leaders and faith communities on the protection and restoration of forests. The initiative can continue to serve as a platform of education and awareness raising for restoration, globally and in Brazil, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Indonesia and Peru.

Ten Actions for Ecosystem Restoration Envisioned by the UN Decade

In order to build a generation of restoration, the UN Decade encompasses a wide continuum of activities that contribute to protecting intact ecosystems and repairing degraded ecosystems. The UN Decade calls upon partners to work on ten actions aimed at preventing, halting and reversing the degradation of ecosystems worldwide.

i. To empower a global movement

The UN Decade seeks to develop a global movement of organizations and individuals that collaborate to catalyze ecosystem restoration by self-organizing and self-orchestrating activities. From a faith perspective, for example, Sikh groups around the world have united towards the Million Tree Project¹⁴ to plant 1 million trees in 1,820 locations including Australia, Kenya, US, UK and India. The project honours the 550th birthday of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, and inculcate the prayer that “Air is the teacher, water is the father, earth is the mother” in everyday life, particularly in the younger generations.¹⁵

In the inverse, the UN Decade may be an opportunity to revive dormant or forgotten reforestation initiatives around the world. In Poland, the Bialowieza Forest, a natural forest of the European Plain¹⁶ and UNESCO World Heritage Site, is at risk of increased timber harvesting and bark beetle outbreaks. In April 2018, the Court of Justice of the European

¹² <https://www.campaignfornature.org/>

¹³ <https://www.bonnchallenge.org/about>

¹⁴ <https://www.livinglandsandwaters.org/what-we-do/our-projects/milliontrees-project.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/05/sikhs-sikhism-guru-nanak-550-anniversary-tree-planting>

¹⁶ <http://www.ilovebialowieza.com/>

Union (CJEU) found that the order that intensified logging in the Forest was against European Law.¹⁷ Organisations including UNESCO, WWF, ClientEarth¹⁸ raised awareness about illegal logging in the Forest and are strategically placed to harness the momentum of the UN Decade. Faith communities are already connected through their shared spiritual and cultural beliefs. Harnessing this connection for a large-scale restoration effort, drawing from the pre-existing importance placed on the environment, is crucial in achieving the type of global impact that the UN Decade envisions, and attainable with the support from faith leaders and FBOs. For example, 87% of Poland's population identify themselves as Roman Catholic;¹⁹ in identifying a potential to galvanise the efforts of the Catholic Church in collaboration with environmental groups, and certainly any other interested religious group, a unique avenue to influence political will in favour of protection of the Forest presents a renewed sense of hope. The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is mobilizing a global movement of religious leaders with a focus on forests which can be leveraged for the restoration agenda and the UN Decade.

ii. Finance restoration on the ground; and iii. Setting the incentives

The UN Decade highlights the cost associated with restoration, particularly the size of initial investment to achieve the envisioned results, calling on international lenders, development agencies and private businesses to support this global initiative. Further, investing in sustainable investments with long-term ecological benefits over practices that are less sustainable but with greater financial gain are key to a healthier ecosystem.

FBOs own trillions of dollars that can be used to finance restoration efforts around the globe. They own 8% of habitable land and 5% of commercial forests. The significant land holdings can be used to drive reforestation projects to curate carbon sinks in urban as well as rural settings. Divesture from fossil fuels, impact investing, and forest restoration, are some areas that are gaining traction by FBOs worldwide. The United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative (UNEP FI) is one such institution that seeks to engage the global financial sector to mobilise private sector finance for sustainable finance and development.²⁰

FaithInvest,²¹ for example, is a not-for profit membership organization for religious groups and faith-based institutional investors aimed at growing the scale and impact of faith-consistent, values-driven investing worldwide. The Economy of Francesco is a call by young people to imbue the economic system with justice, inclusivity, sustainability, and advocate for stewardship of common goals at the centre of government and learning institutions agendas, being part of the movement to shape a more sustainable future.²²

iv. Celebrate leadership

Political and religious leaders have recognised and contributed to an environmental ethic

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