



Environment, Religion and Culture in the Context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development



A Discussion Note prepared for the Second International Seminar on Environment, Culture and Religion – Promoting Intercultural Dialogue for Sustainable Development (23 – 24 April 2016, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran)

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Foreword

In September 2015, Governments adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: a comprehensive, far-reaching and people-centered set of universal and transformative goals and targets. Governments envisage a world in which every country enjoys sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all. A world of over 9 billion people in which consumption and production patterns and use of all natural resources — from air to land, from deserts to forests, from rivers, lakes and aquifers to oceans and seas and from frozen tundra to expanding towns and cities — is sustainable. One in which democracy, good governance and the rule of law, as well as an enabling environment at national and international levels, which are essential for sustainable development, includes sustained and inclusive economic growth, social development, environmental protection and the eradication of poverty and hunger as well as respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. One in which development and the application of technology is climate-sensitive, respects biodiversity and is resilient. One in which humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other living species are protected.

Today, over 80 percent of people worldwide identify with an estimated 4,300 religious or spiritual communities and even more cultural traditions which influence how these people see and treat the world around them: what they eat and drink; when they work and have children; where they live and travel or even when they select a particular course of education and pass time. Religious values and practices are deeply entwined in the fabric of daily lives, and the leaders of churches, mosques, temples, and other religious communities play an important role in shaping attitudes, opinions, and behaviors for management and use of

the environment and natural resources and for sustainable development overall. Faith leaders, representing 24 belief traditions from around the world, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism and Shintoism, declared in Bristol in September 2015, their support in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Culture, in its manifold expressions ranging from cultural heritage to cultural and creative industries and cultural tourism, is both an enabler and a driver of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. The social cohesion and wellbeing of many cultures face common threats from, for example: urbanization and relocation, which impact traditional ways of life and livelihoods; and well-intended but misguided development initiatives, which threaten the human rights and sustainable practices. It is, therefore, so important to understand all aspects of people's cultures – not just the economics or logistics, but the beliefs and spiritual practices. Diversity must be promoted, while respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms for all. This is the spirit of the UN Decade for the rapprochement of Cultures.

There is growing recognition that traditional knowledge and customary sustainable use underpin indigenous peoples' and local communities' resilience to environmental change, including climate change, as well as contribute directly to biological and cultural diversity, and global sustainable development. Sustainable livelihoods, cultural heritage and the knowledge of indigenous peoples can be threatened for example, by action to combat biodiversity loss and climate change. Conversely, when respectful relationships

are built with indigenous peoples, their sustainable management of their resources can enhance national and global action on climate change, as well as significantly contribute to conservation, sustainable use and the equitable sharing of benefits arising from biodiversity.

This publication helps explore the nexus between environment, religion and culture, giving some examples, in order to arrive at a more comprehensive and sophisticated understanding and appreciation of how culture and religion can contribute to the protection and preservation of the natural environment. It also aims to stimulate dialogue and plant the seed for something fundamental to a successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Such a dialogue – “The Second International Seminar on Environment, Culture and Religion – Promoting intercultural Dialogue for Sustainable Development” took place in April 2016 in Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran and explored the role of religion and culture in the implementation of the sustainable development goals; the role of different value systems and cultural diversity as resources for conservation, climate justice action, bridging between science and other knowledge systems. Attention was given to issues of education, traditional knowledge, rights of indigenous peoples, peace building, gender, sustainability and economics, participation, civil mobilization. The Seminar concluded with a summary of findings among which it underlined the need for the continued dialogue on environment, culture and religion to address the implementation of the 2030 sustainable

development agenda. The Tehran Summary is included in this publication.

The publication gives a brief outline of the integrated approach and the inter-linkages of the different religions; of religion, culture and the environment; and of the environment and socioeconomic dimensions of sustainable development. It uses the five specific areas critical to success - people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership - that will guide the action plan for the 2030 agenda whose objective is to leave no one behind; reach those furthest behind first; to demonstrate that the sustainable development goals are central to all faiths and how interrelated they are. Under each specific area, a description of the issues is elaborated followed by an explanation as to how environmental sustainability can attempt to resolve the issues and how religion and culture interpret these issues, citing some examples of how some faith based bodies and non-governmental organizations have attempted to address them. It concludes with a set of recommendations on finding lasting solutions to these issues, to help free humanity from want and deprivation, and strengthen human well-being and duty of care.

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Executive summary

Critical action is needed by the international community to address urgent and increasing environmental degradation, and related challenges of social and economic unsustainability. Religion and culture can significantly address climate change, biodiversity and ecosystem loss, pollution, deforestation, desertification and unsustainable land and water use, and other urgent issues identified in a shared vision by all nations in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

“Protecting our environment is an urgent moral imperative and a sacred duty for all people of faith and people of conscience.”

– Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General.

Through integrating environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda, religious and cultural communities can also promote strong, inclusive, green, sustainable and transformative economies, based on circularity, sharing and collaboration, and alternative measures of growth and wellbeing. They can be instrumental in educating for more sustainable lifestyles and behaviours to achieve sustainable consumption and production, and in considering the impact of their actions on others. They can significantly contribute to ending extreme poverty, leaving no one behind when addressing multi-dimensional poverty and related challenges such as the rights of women, youth and minorities, and access for all to basic services. They can

promote innovative nature-based solutions, respect for traditional knowledge and cultural diversity, exercise environmental stewardship and duty of care, build an ethic of global and local citizenship, promote good governance, tolerance, and reconciliation, and build safe, inclusive and peaceful societies.

It has become more urgent than ever to promote and disseminate morals, values, behaviours and creative solutions conducive to attaining the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. This universal agenda, and the emerging understanding of the points of religious agreement in environmental ethics, can be the corner stones for a common vision that enhances the role of religion and culture in achieving sustainability. Inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue can converge on a few insights, among them that of nature as sacred, and the rights of nature, both of which are shared by most organized religions and indigenous peoples, and many natural scientists.

Among the many positive actions – large and small – are the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, and the Paris Climate Change Agreement; the actions of faith based declarations and statements, especially in relation to climate change; the actions of indigenous cultural leaders in support of greater rights and respect of cultural diversity; and the 7 million voices that engaged in vision setting in the run up to the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. These have all come together in a historic year of 2015, and provide tremendous opportunities for building a global partnership for shifting the paradigm and addressing the crucial challenges of our era, both for humanity today as well as for future generations.



It is recommended that religious and cultural leaders and organizations should actively engage in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs in their communities, on their own footprints, and in cooperation with each other. In so doing, they should leverage the considerable financial, moral and ethical influence at their disposal. Inter-faith religious scholars should continue to engage in dialogue with the scientific community to progressively evolve religious thinking and scientific discovery. Governments should firmly embrace the notion of unity in diversity, and introduce new policies, laws and financial incentives, that lay the foundation for achieving the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. Stronger

multistakeholder partnerships should be strengthened, binding the religious, cultural and secular communities for a collective effort to combine wisdom, and find lasting solutions for sustainable development. The United Nations System and in particular, the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation should continue their efforts to monitor, mentor, and motivate urgent action towards the shared vision.



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