



POLICY BRIEF

# THE ROLE OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND SPIRITUAL ETHICS IN GLOBAL **ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE**

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# Introduction

**THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC** has brought home the reality of pan-global challenges, and the need for paradigmatic shifts to address them. As the world copes with the pandemic, governments and citizens are recognizing that the impact of human activities on our environment are quickly becoming increasingly unsustainable. If our production and consumption patterns do not change drastically, widespread ecosystem collapse and further biodiversity loss could be the result. The climate crisis continues to be the greatest existential threat to humanity and will exacerbate challenges of poverty, food security, water supplies, natural disaster resilience and peace.

We cannot afford to be complacent and hope that science and technology alone will solve these pressing problems. Instead, transitioning to a more sustainable future requires a new environmental governance system and the engagement of the full spectrum of so-

ciety and the employment of innovative approaches that protect the natural environment based on behavioural and ethical changes in environmental governance. The stewardship role of leaders of religious and indigenous communities is a valuable resource in building such an innovative model.

Statistical studies highlight how far and in what ways religious affiliations impact environmental behaviour and consumption, both on an individual and on a national scale. Research demonstrates that religious affiliation has implications for whether people see climatic change as human-caused, or related to forces beyond human control; consumption patterns, and thereby use of natural resources and emissions of greenhouse gases; and willingness to take actions to abate environmental degradation.<sup>1</sup> This study also found that religious affiliation relates to greenhouse gas emissions, energy use and gross domes-

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<sup>1</sup> [https://brill.com/view/journals/jrd/7/2/article-p238\\_5.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/jrd/7/2/article-p238_5.xml)

tic product on a global scale. Countries with more emissions and greater GDP tend to be less religious, have less population growth and to be better prepared for environmental challenges. Conversely, countries with a greater proportion of religiously affiliated tend to have younger populations, higher environmental risks, lower GDP and lower preparedness levels.

Recognizing that, according to some estimates, faith-based organizations (FBOs) are the fourth largest economic power on earth and are important actors in sustainable development, they have a role in global advocacy, investing in clean energy, behavioral change towards sustainable development, and being role models in greening houses of worship. In short, the role of FBOs should be strengthened in global environmental governance.

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## Highlighting priority challenges presented by climate change

**HUMAN ACTIVITY** has altered virtually every corner of our planet, from land to ocean, and as a consequence, has impacted human health.

The world cannot afford delays in key environment related decision-making and investment. Therefore, the international community should consider the environmental dimensions as part of the global response to the pandemic.

### // **IMPACT OF HUMAN ACTIVITY ON BIODIVERSITY SYSTEMS:**

According to the Intergovernmental Panel for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) report, three-quarters of the land-based environment and about 66% of the marine environment have been significantly altered by human actions.

More than a third of the world's land surface and nearly 75% of freshwater resources are now devoted to crop or livestock production.

**// SCARCITY OF RESOURCES:**

Water scarcity could displace 700 million people by 2030.<sup>ii</sup>

**// RISING CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS:**

The impacts of climate change are already becoming visible across the planet, with increasing trends. These impacts are most visible in developing countries, where people depend more heavily on their natural environment for livelihoods, but urban areas in Europe, where 4 out of 5 Europeans now live, are increasingly exposed to heat waves, flooding or rising sea levels, but are often ill-equipped for adapting to climate change. There has been an increase in heat-related deaths. January 2020 was the hottest month of January ever recorded. One million species may be pushed to extinction in the next few years and air pollution kills millions of people every year.

**// ASSOCIATED IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND HABITAT DESTRUCTION:**

Seventy-five percent of all emerging infectious diseases in humans cross from animals. As habitats are destroyed, the projection is that more pandemic-like events will occur. The

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long-term threats of climate change and ecosystem and biodiversity loss also result from the destruction of nature.

**// COVID-19:**

Despite the current challenge of COVID19, the prevailing climate, biodiversity and chemicals crises have not disappeared.

The world is not on track to achieve the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda as well as the internationally agreed environmental goals by 2050

Responding to the impact of the Pandemic is a

<sup>ii</sup> <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/>

global concern and has become strategically at the center of attention of national governments, inter-governmental organizations and the international community alike.

The pandemic has added more strain to the already existing global challenges of climate change, inequalities, global economic crisis, ecosystem destruction, pollution and all the areas of the sustainable development goals that made the SDGs a top priority agenda. We are five years into the implementation of the global agenda, but we are still lagging behind.

### // INEQUALITY OF IMPACT:

The causes and impacts of climate change and environmental destruction tend to be unjustly distributed. Just 100 companies are responsible for 71% of global emissions. At the same time, the poor and other vulnerable groups who contribute the least to climate change

are the ones who suffer the most from climate change and its consequences. Although habitat loss and natural destruction tend to be less severe or avoided in areas held or managed by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, the impacts of rainforest destruction tend to be most severely felt by these communities.

### // WEAKENING MULTILATERALISM:

Multilateral environmental negotiations have witnessed major setbacks in 2019. The year unfolded amid rising nationalism and weakening multilateralism. Japan left the International Whaling Commission. The US officially confirmed its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. The UN Environment Assembly in 2019 could not agree to start discussions on how to govern solar geoengineering and carbon dioxide removal technologies. COP 25 also failed to issue a clear call for climate ambition. The UN Climate Action Summit was also disappointing on the climate ambition front.



**Only 23%**

of the 93 environment-related SDG indicators are on track to meet the targets if current trends continue.



**For 68%**

of them, there is not enough data to assess progress and for 9% there is no progress toward achieving the target.



**Also, more than 30%**

of the environment related SDGs indicators still do not have an agreed methodology.

# The Way Forward: Towards an Integrated Model of Global Environmental Governance

**GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE** includes organizations, policy instruments, financing mechanisms, rules, procedures and norms that regulate the processes of global environmental protection. The environmental governance system we have today reflects both the successes and failures since the global environmental movement started in the early 70s.

**The question then is:  
how can we rebuild  
global environmental  
governance and  
make a difference to  
the environment and  
climate change?**

We live in an interconnected world. A drought or flood in one part of the world can disrupt supply chains or move commodity markets in another with serious implications for the poor and the vulnerable like women and youth.

We need to keep emphasizing the importance of maintaining and promoting coherence, integration and coordination at all levels of environmental governance. This includes collective responses to international crises—including pandemics like COVID-19; and support to the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Given that the climate crisis is rooted in a complex web of economic, social and cultural factors, as well as belief systems, social attitudes and perceptions, it is worth considering how ethics impact our ability to address it. The unsustainable socio-economic systems, and consumption and production patterns that dominate

much of the world today, reflect social attitudes. To make global human activity more sustainable, therefore, requires a return to the values, beliefs and ethics that drive human beings and their relationship with the natural environment.

For many people, these values and ethics will be inspired largely by their faith. Despite the great diversity of religions and beliefs, virtually all share a common ethic based on harmony with nature and an obligation to preserve it from destruction. Therefore, in this time of unprecedented global environmental degradation, a new environmental ethic based on

universally shared values is required, one that places a greater value on nature and connects to spiritual beliefs.

A collective environmental ethic does not mean homogenising the diverse perspectives religions offer. Rather it entails embracing diversity and creating a common notion of a moral duty to protect the environment that can serve to bridge religious divides whilst incorporating the expertise, knowledge and practices that different faiths provide. The aim should be that humans learn to live in harmony with nature and with one another.

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## An Ethics and Values-Based Approach

**THE 2030 AGENDA** is a people-centered agenda and acknowledges that a healthy planet is an essential requirement for sustainable development.

The integrated approach requires coherent policy frameworks, good governance and law enforcement at all levels from global to local levels,

It also requires effective means of implementation, including finance, capacity-building, environmentally sound technologies and developing partnerships.

Young people across the globe are not only fighting the dynamics of environmental injustice but organizing and leading the way to a new reality. Civil society, as well as the private

sector and faith actors, have also taken more active roles as stakeholders have created a political space for their input on environmental, human rights, business, and other organizations in decision-making processes.

Of note is the Faith for Nature Global Conference organised by UNEP and its partners in October 2020, focusing on the role of ethics and spiritual values as a means to solve environmental challenges. The resulting "Our Sacred Commitment" Declaration is aimed to be submitted by member states to the UN Environment Assembly in February 2022 to be adopted as the first UN resolution integrating ethics, values and spiritual beliefs as means to enhance the implementation of the SDGs.

The spiritual as well as the wealth powers of faith -based organizations can be an indispensable power in the implementation of nature-based solutions given the extensive land and resources under their control and the educational leverage they have. The influential outreach, credibility and connection with faith followers are the most essential resources that can lead to behavioural change in believers.

Lifestyles identify how we live — a set of behaviours, choices, and habits shaped by social, economic, and political spheres of life. Targeting a change in lifestyles is an ultimate long-term solution to achieve planetary health and global sustainability. Many of the world's religions contain teachings regarding care of the Earth, wise use of natural resources, working for the common good, social justice, and well-being for all which speak to the four dimensions of sustainable development (environmental, social, economic, and cultural sustainability).

Every sector and social group in the world shares a responsibility to contribute towards a greener, more sustainable future, and religious organisations are no exception. FBOs must look at how they can accelerate and scale-up these contributions, as well as reducing practices that harm the environment.

**// Faith leaders can be the champions of climate justice, but also lead efforts by divesting from environmentally harming investments towards impact investment.**

**// Intergovernmental organizations, such as the Organization of Islamic cooperation, the European Union, the African Union and others, must adopt strategies for integrating spiritual and ethical values in their decision-making system and programmes.**

We need a new economic model that puts the people and the planet at the core of focus. Faith-based investment institutions are no exception.

The stimulus and rescue packages post COVID19 must target cleaner industries, such as renewable energy providers, sustainable modes of transport, and carbon-neutral businesses.



## THERE ARE SOME STRATEGIC APPROACHES OF CONNECTING FAITH AND CONSERVATION, INCLUDING:



**1 - Education and awareness** of the linkages between religious values and environmental stewardship.



**2 -** Through their aid work, provide **sustainable and nature-based solutions** to socio-economic challenges, such as cooking stoves, etc.



**3 - Engage in ecosystems' restoration** through existing programmes such as the Great Green Wall, and the Great lakes and rivers programmes.



**4 - Interfaith collaboration** to fight illegal trade in wildlife as God's creations.



**5 -** Establish Religious botanical gardens to **protect biodiversity** and contribute to sustainable biodiversity economy. And



**6 -** National governments should adopt practical strategies to **engage faith actors in conservation** as an important implementation arm for the SDGs

# Looking Ahead: Recommendations

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## Recommendations for the inclusion of FBOs in environmental governance:

**1.** Interfaith collaboration to form a **global platform “Faith for Earth Coalition”** to bring the common understanding of religions towards our spiritual and moral responsibility toward earth.

**2.** **Leverage the unique ability** of religious institutions to mobilize social networks in addition to a distinct moral standing.

**3.** **Inter and Intra-Faith collaboration** on building the **capacity and knowledge of faith leaders** at all levels to understand the ethical, moral and spiritual responsibility towards earth.

**4.** Governments embrace religious and cultural diversity, knowledge and sustainable practices as important contributions in building back a better future.

**5.** **Religious scholars to continue engaging with scientists in building guidance** for sustainable development that addresses the moral, ethical, spiritual, and practical responses needed to adopt nature-based solutions to environmental

## Recommendations for an environmentally just recovery from COVID-19

**1. Strengthen Knowledge, information and awareness** by Educating front-line decision makers on how to deal with **COVID-19 medical waste**, with a strong focus on resource efficiency and circularity in the production process.

**2. Promote transformational change for nature and people:** Improve science and policy options to better understand and respond to zoonotic threats and design risk and response programme to improve countries' ability to reduce zoonotic threats through approaches that take impacts on nature into consideration.

**3. Investing to build back better:** Promoting investments in climate friendly and nature-based actions to stimulate economic regrowth, create employment opportunities, and increase resilience to a recurrent zoonotic threat is of a paramount importance.