

Multi-Faith Action Group on Pollution Concept Note - 27 July 2021

Background

Acknowledging that the world is facing a triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, a new relationship between people and the planet needs to be forged. The third crisis – pollution and waste – requires a move to **sustainable consumption and production practices** which will also benefit climate, nature, and biodiversity.¹

Pollution takes different forms (air, marine, and land-based) but poses a general threat given that the nature, location or quantity of these substances generate undesirable environmental effects.² These adverse effects are likely to be felt disproportionately by marginalized communities and some segments of the population such as people with lower social-economic status or minorities, reinforcing their vulnerability.

Purpose

The purpose of this Action Group is to facilitate a global interfaith response to the Pollution crisis with the aim of engaging the faith community in addressing pollution issues, mobilising the power and influence of faith leaders and communities particularly at a grassroots level, identifying critical challenges and providing a **forum for the exchange of knowledge and learning globally, regionally and locally**.

Cognisant that ‘Pollution’ and the ‘Pollution crises’ present a complex and wide range of topics and challenges, the Working Group will focus on the priority areas established via a mapping exercise, identifying the critical areas for impact by the faith community with pollution and the waste crises, bringing together a rich and diverse network of faith actors that offer **scalable and practical solutions** closer to the global community.

UNEP’s Global Response to Pollution

At the third session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-3), the world’s Ministers of the Environment formulated their commitment to working towards a pollution-free planet for the health and well-being of our people and the environment ([Ministerial declaration of the UNEA-3](#)). An [Implementation Plan ‘Towards a Pollution-Free Planet’](#) was developed as a follow-up and adopted at the UNEA-4 in March 2019 through [Resolution 4/21](#).

In parallel to this, meaningful campaigns were carried out such as the [Clean Seas Campaign](#), a platform through which UNEP is connecting and rallying a wide range of stakeholders (individuals, civil society groups, industries, governments) *“for catalysing change and transforming habits, practices, standards and policies around the globe to dramatically reduce marine litter and its negative impacts”*. Following [resolution 2/11](#) to further investigate the environmental, health and social impacts of plastic, a report was recently published which identifies [‘Environmental Justice Impacts of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution’](#) and calls for the recognition of communities affected as well as their involvement in local decision making.

¹ Letter from the Executive Director, UNEP in 2020

² Definitions and Concepts: Background Note (UNEP) September 2016

Underlining that food waste was a massive global issue with adverse humanitarian, environmental and financial implications, UNEP in 2016 in partnership with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) launched the '[Think, Eat and Save](#)' Campaign. Fitting in the [Sustainable Food Systems Programme](#) of the 10 Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production (10YFP), this initiative seeks to raise global concern and catalyse actions on reducing food waste and saving natural resources.

In 2018 in partnership with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, UNEP launched the [Global Commitment to the New Plastics Economy](#) to tackle the issue of single-use plastics and promote circular economy. The same year, coming on the heels of a new report from the World Health Organization (WHO) warning about the rising and persisting air pollution all over the world, the [Breathe Life challenge](#) was initiated, calling up citizens to reduce their contribution and to engage in individual actions.

Lately, in 2019, an [Interfaith World Environment Day celebration](#) was organized in Nairobi reaffirming the role of FBOs at the global, regional, and local levels in addressing climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

Under the [India Norway Marine Pollution Initiative](#), UNEP seeks to study the aspects of plastic waste management and marine litter in India. UNEP is also working in the cities of Agra, Haridwar, Prayagraj and Patna along the Ganga basin under the [CounterMEASURE II project](#) to address the sources and leakages of plastic waste from these riparian cities.

Faith action towards tackling pollution

Mobilising partnerships is crucial in order to implement the 2030 Agenda and ensure the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Faith-based communities in particular provide institutional access and outreach to grassroots communities with the power to mobilize and share experiences and learning with faith networks beyond the local level, and are underpinned by a moral and ethical duty that informs a deep commitment to serving vulnerable and marginalised make them key stakeholders in addressing current environmental challenges. Supporting such partnerships will enable *“inclusive, green and transformative development through adopting lifestyles and behavioural changes that are informed by faith-based and spiritual values”*.³

A growing number of faith-based actors have mobilised around environmental issues. While an exhaustive list will not be presented in this Note, the following highlighted activities/project demonstrates responses to the pollution crisis, developed and/or managed by faith institutions.

The [Hope Cathedral](#), a sustainable project by the Church of Norway that was launched on World Environment Day 2021, is one illustrative case of interfaith engagement in tackling pollution and waste challenges. This social, economic and environmentally sustainable initiative began in 2018 consists of a *“cathedral with a wooden construction inspired by traditional Norwegian stave churches and blocks made out of plastic found in the sea”*,⁴ stressing one of the greatest environmental challenges of our time: marine pollution.

³ Faith for Earth Coalition Brochure, August 2020, <https://faithfornature.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Brochure-Faith-for-Earth-24-August-2020.pdf>

⁴ Official website, 'The vision of Hope Cathedral': <https://www.hopecathedral.no/the-vision>

Numerous other faith contributions can serve as great examples such as the call of Hindu communities to restore the individual's link with the society and the environment, in respect of nature and sacred ecological symbols.⁵

In 2019, as Eid Al-Fitr celebration coincided with the World Environment Day, the Islamic Relief called on supporters to commit to [#beatairpollution](#). Building on the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change, the organization promoted a wide range of actions in favour of sustainable energy alternatives and climate friendly policies.

In Birmingham, the '[Brum Breathes](#)' Campaign engages with faith communities, relying on diverse religious perspectives on the importance of protecting the natural world and its inhabitants to encourage faith believers to take measures and reduce their ecological footprint.

Tearfund's advocacy campaign, the '[Rubbish Campaign](#)' launched in May 2019 is a demonstration that faith-inspired advocacy and resulting global mobilization of networks to tackle pollution, can influence waste polluters to rethink corporate strategies. Targeting world's biggest plastic polluters, the campaign calls big companies like CocaCola, Nestle, PepsiCo, Unilever, and others to take responsibility for their plastic waste, demonstrating its effect on low-income households and economies. More than 50,000 actions were carried out, and petitioners also pledged to cut their own single-used plastic.

Objectives of the Multi-faith group on Pollution

Considering the **great potential of faith-based communities** mobilising and inspiring grassroots actors for the purpose of behavioural change based on moral principles of faith and tradition,⁶ and recognising the underlining urgency for social transformative change and changes in consumption and production patterns, the Multi-faith Action Group for Pollution action serves four main interlaced objectives in relation to pollution and waste:

1. **Coordinate actions** tackling pollution and waste issues among FBOs;
2. Identify **good faith-based practices**, promoting knowledge sharing and exchanging experiences;
3. Mobilize engagements in **policy making and advocacy** by faith groups; and
4. Encourage **interfaith campaigns**.

Membership

UNEP's Faith for Earth Initiative will be partnering with a diverse group of Faith-based Organisations (FBOs), including The Anglican Consultative Council; Tearfund; Plastic Bank; UNEP MGCY (Faith & Environment Working Group); IFEES/EcoIslam; Islamic Help as the core and founding members of the working group, while membership for the specific Task Teams established out of the priority areas will be open to other interested faith groups who are committed to the objectives and purpose of this Working Group.

⁵ '[Pollution of Hinduism](#)', written with reports by Kazimuddin Ahmed in Varanasi and Vrindavan, Suverchala Kashyap in Vadodara and Samir Kumar Sinha in Patna, *Down to Earth*, February 2000

⁶ <https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment/faith-earth-initiative/strategy>

- The Anglican Consultative Council; Jack Palmer-White, <jack.palmer-white@anglicancommunion.org>
- Green Anglicans; Rev. Rachel Mash, <rmash@mweb.co.za>
- Tearfund; Lucy Tanner, <lucy.tanner@tearfund.org>; Joanne Green, <joanne.green@tearfund.org>
- UNEP MGCY; Shantanu Mandal, <shantanu.mandal@unmgcy.org>
- Plastic Bank; Peter Nitschke, <peter@plasticbank.com>
- IFEES/EcoIslam; Mark Bryant, <mark.bryant@ifees.org.uk>
- Islamic Help; Saba Yasin, <sabayasin@islamichelp.org.uk>