

## UN Environment Vision on Engagement with Faith-Based Organizations

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Mobilizing partnerships is an important means for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This can only be achieved by engaging and partnering with stakeholders from all walks of life building on **cultural diversity as a fourth dimension of sustainable development**. Because traditional stakeholder's engagement strategies have sometimes shown limited effectiveness, therefore, new, creative, inspiring and innovative actions bringing **like-minded** networks around a common goal are required.

Faith-Based Organizations have been recognized by the UN system as key and important players in eradicating poverty, improving people's health, and thus achieving sustainable development. Increasingly, they are also seen as important partners in the field of environmental protection. Many citizens see faith-based organizations and faith leaders as being trustworthy and highly connected with a dynamism and outreach that enables them to operate and achieve practical results where and when needed. For more than 80% of the people living on earth spiritual values have been **driving their behaviors** and are main pillars not only for cultural values, but also for social inclusion, political engagement, and economic prosperity.

Understanding the dynamics of these beliefs at the local level and the role of faith actors is crucial to achieve sustainable development. Conserving the environment has not been absent from the focus of faith-based organizations. In fact, **more than 135 environmental faith-based organizations have been working** at all levels in addressing climate change, energy conservation, sustainable use of biodiversity, and reforestation, among others.

The integrated approach of UN Environment should facilitate the **integration of religious and cultural values** to ensure inclusive green and transformative development through adopting value-faith-based lifestyles and behaviors. The integrated approach coupled with cultural and religious values can promote innovative nature-based solutions, respect for traditional knowledge and cultural diversity, exercise environmental stewardship and duty of care.

The **vision** of the UN Environment's engagement with faith-based organizations is "A world where all creations live in balance" and a **mission** to "Inspire, Empower and Engage Faith-Based Organizations to innovatively deliver on the 2030 Agenda." The aim is to make an impact on local communities' sustainable livelihoods based on common spiritual values.

The strategy could focus on three overarching goals of **empowering leadership, mobilizing faith-based investments and providing the faith-science evidence**. These goals will be supported by a system of knowledge management encouraging south-south cooperation and empowering its own staff. In doing so, UN Environment will embrace the following **values of CREATION: Communicate, Respect, Empower, Act, Transform, Inspire, Organize and Network**.

Our approach stems from the **intrinsic linkages between faith concepts of stewardship and duty of care and environmental sustainability** that improves the socio-economic conditions of all, leaving no one behind. Religion and culture through environmental sustainability can significantly address climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, desertification and unsustainable land and water use, by **fostering a**

**fundamental change in attitude** of the majority of people. They can do so through their own institutions and communities, and through cooperation with other cultures.

The **goals of the strategy are interlinked**; i.e. empowering and partnering with global leaders would require a solid, scientifically-based knowledge and networking on key thematic areas. Similarly, mobilizing faith-based investments would require empowered leadership for policy impact based on evidence of trusted experiences from elsewhere, North and South, alike. This paper provides a focused look at the three overarching goals; however, a more comprehensive strategy document is available to provide further details.

### **GOAL 1: Strengthen faith-based organizations Leadership for Policy Impact**

Religious leaders play an important role either in governing community's affairs, or in providing socio-economic and cultural services to the needy. Faith-based organizations have been getting more engaged in public policy debates, whether on general governance issues, or on services to local communities. Religious and spiritual leaders have an enormous powerful impact on local communities as their statements touch on the beliefs of their followers often extracting examples from sacred books. No awareness or advocacy campaigns can have such an impact or reach homes in remote communities.

To ensure a focused approach, **our aim is to engage faith leaders and their institutions to tackle issues we mutually prioritize. These issues would be ones where changes in behaviour can have successful outcomes.** Candidate areas for prioritization are pollution and food waste given the relationship to individual behaviours and the outcomes we target.

UN Environment strategic engagement will include:

- Identify, meet with and engage faith leaders (or interfaith coalitions) in policy dialogue on common issues and global, regional and local priorities capitalizing on their outreach among societies around the world.
- Contribute to ensuring that sound stewardship of natural resources is a basic human value and responsibility. The faith-rainforest programme is a case where faith leaders will be engaged in restoring and protecting rainforests. Similarly identify other global issues, possibly; pollution, food waste, and water consumption.
- Strengthen faith leadership in beating all types of pollution. Building on the decision of the Church of England, who manages investments worth £6bn, to divest from tar sands oil and thermal coal extraction, consolidate common values that ensure global cooperation on protecting the one planet.
- Establish a high level global "Coalition for the Creation" to facilitate policy dialogue on environmental issues encouraging innovative approaches to finding long-lasting solutions to environmental challenges. The coalition could be at the level of faith leaders or their high level technical advisors.
- Identify and engage Environmental faith-based organizations in working out how best to engage them in the areas prioritized for action, focusing on how best to strengthen the organization's campaigns to include the relevant leaders and the associated membership and for them to adapt these campaigns within their own groupings.

Initially, we would target areas where the organization already has campaigns (prioritizing the pollution and food waste campaigns) and determine how best to engage faith based institutions into these campaigns.

## **Goal 2: Green faith-based organizations Assets and Investments**

Religious institutions hold enormous financial assets to build schools, hospitals, and infrastructure as well as distribute cash to support the poorest and most marginalized. These financial assets are mainly contributed by charity donors; however, faith-based organizations do own investment corporations, holdings, pension funds, private sector businesses as well as land and real estates. Religious organizations are arguably the **third largest group of investors in the world**. Different religion's investments are governed by their beliefs and religious laws. Islam for instance, uses the Sharia law of finance including Mudaraba (Profit and loss sharing) where the Islamic system places equal emphasis on the ethical, moral, social and religious dimensions, to enhance equality and fairness for the good of society as a whole. Similarly, the Catholic financial activities are based on moral principles from the interpretation of Christian religious texts and from the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church (Treaty of virtues and vices). Furthermore, Jainism strictly uses the principle of "ahimsa" or non-violence in their investments. In the USA alone, religion constituted in the year 2000 around 32% of all givings amounted to \$335 billion. Private faith-based investments are rising, particularly in developing countries.

Some faith-based organizations also have adopted policies to encourage corporate social responsibility practices. Some organizations use what is known as socially responsible investment or faith-consistent investment. These types of investments aim at making a positive impact on the social welfare of their followers.

**Our aim is to see more faith based investments and assets integrating environmental considerations and investing in greener and more environmentally sustainable investments.**

- With the UN Environment Finance Initiative facilitate the most needed coupling of remodeling investment and the impact of financial reforms involving faith-based investments. This will include organizing a global roundtable conference on faith-based financing instigating a global compact and action by faith-based investors. It will then require us to work with interested organizations on how best to integrate environmental sustainability into their dialogue and decision making considerations.
- Identify and link other UN Environment value-based initiatives such as the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) and Green Economy to engage with faith-based organizations. However, harness UN Environment expertise on Energy and Sustainable Consumption and Production to adopt concrete actions to green their assets and investments (schools, hospitals, and worship places), including but not limited to using solar panels, water conservation, food waste management, reforestation, etc.

## **GOAL 3: Science-Faith-Based Evidence**

Almost all faiths have been linking scientific discoveries to the religious scripts proving that God has created all things in balance. For example, to Muslims, the discovery of other suns and planets revolving around them has been mentioned in the Quran 1500 years ago. Similarly, the Zabur of David says, "Your kingdom is a kingdom of all worlds". Faith-based leaders have been using such scientific findings in their teachings to reach the hearts and minds of their followers. Pope Francis, reflecting on hurricanes Harvey and Irma said: "You can see the effects of climate change, and scientists have clearly said what path we have to follow".

While climate change has seen much of the global debates and scientists have been providing much knowledge and evidence, other environmental challenges such as biodiversity loss, desertification, and sand and dust severe storms have not had the privilege of reaching out to the attention of religious leaders nor have connections by the scientists been made.

**Our aim is to create a broader mass of faith based institutions that have the relevant scientific information available on areas where they see questions arising or a reluctance to take action. Initially, we will prioritize the areas of focus in Goal 1 above to ensure feedback loops between this and Goal 1 (possibly pollution and food waste)**

- Work with both faith and scientific communities to draw the linkages providing faith-science-based evidence. This would require consolidating existing scientific research to support these linkages of human impact on environmental resources. Initially, we will need to prioritize areas of focus such as pollution and food waste, and later bring in other areas identified by both the faith and scientific communities.
- Establish concrete science-faith linkages to support evolution of religious thinking and scientific discovery on existing and emerging environmental issues.
- Integrate faith based leaders and their associates in select high-level thematic debates as well as contribute to faith-based international conferences and initiatives to facilitate dialogue among faith scholars and the scientific community.
- Identify the most appropriate existing knowledge platforms that can be better linked to faith based organizations, and also link them to indigenous knowledge and cultural practices and scientifically based knowledge to strengthen religious arguments and visible evidence to demonstrate the relationship between environmental stewardship and duty of care.
- Prepare and disseminate faith-based communication and advocacy tools and materials.