

**A G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief
Interfaith Action to Protect Rainforests
Last Updated 3 August 2021**

Summary, Call to Action

The COVID-19 crisis highlights the urgent need for G20 leaders to support and protect tropical rainforests. Destruction of these forests poses an existential threat to the global climate: deforestation results in emission of billions of tons of carbon dioxide each year, exacerbates the effects of global climate change, and threatens the livelihoods of Indigenous communities.

Faith-linked initiatives play pivotal roles in directing global attention to the challenges facing the world's rainforests and in empowering local communities to pursue sustainable solutions. Moreover, proactive partnerships between these initiatives and G20 member countries offer significant opportunity to enhance awareness and spur action. The Italian G20 presidency includes “planet” among its top three priorities, calling on governments to “lead the world towards concrete and lasting solutions” on climate change, land degradation, and biodiversity loss.¹ Key recommendations of the 2021 G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief on Rainforests include:

Protect and Restore Rainforests

Preserving intact rainforests and restoring degraded land are essential to curbing the long-term damage of deforestation. G20 members should promote measures that protect forests endangered environments rehabilitate degraded ecosystems. Leaders can also take decisive action by withdrawing support for subsidies to industries that rely on deforestation.

Promote Indigenous Rights

Indigenous populations are disproportionately affected by deforestation. G20 rainforest countries can take concrete steps to support these populations by upholding customary land rights, recognizing Indigenous claims to ancestral lands, and supporting community-based monitoring systems that report human rights violations. Furthermore, G20 leaders should ensure that Indigenous voices are included in policymaking processes at all levels.

Stronger Oversight of Industry, Promotion of Lifestyle Changes

G20 leaders should use their influence to press for greater transparency regarding the environmental and human rights impact of commercial industries. Support for independent third-party verification mechanisms to regulate company supply chains and address potential violations is one promising approach. G20 governments should endorse national initiatives to reduce consumption of meat and dairy sourced from deforested land.

Support Research and Faith-Linked Advocacy Efforts

G20 leaders should fund research to better understand the impact of deforestation on the spread of viruses; rainforest countries in particular should promote land protection efforts that reduce the risk of disease transmission from animals to humans. G20 countries and organizations such as the UN and WWF should continue to work closely with faith actors on issues of deforestation and conservation.

Introduction

Tropical rainforests play a crucial role in mitigating global climate change, preserving biodiversity, and supporting the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of Indigenous people. Destruction of these forests, primarily for economic gain, poses an existential threat to the global climate: the process of deforestation emits billions of tons of carbon dioxide each year, and the loss of tropical tree coverage reduces forests' natural capacity to absorb carbon. Moreover, Indigenous populations are disproportionately affected by the destruction of land and natural resources, with significant repercussions for physical health, economic wellbeing, and human rights. The disappearance of some of the world's most diverse ecosystems also carries ramifications for global health, increasing opportunities for contact between humans and virus host animals.

Among the local, national, and global efforts to combat deforestation, faith-linked initiatives stand out for their capacity to speak to the moral imperative of protecting the environment. Religious leaders including Pope Francis and interfaith networks such as the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) play pivotal roles in directing global attention to the challenges facing the world's rainforests and in empowering local communities to pursue sustainable solutions. By engaging with religious communities and organizations, G20 leaders and national governments can strengthen their own response to the numerous challenges posed by deforestation.

Challenges

Deforestation is occurring at unprecedented levels, posing an existential threat to biodiversity, Indigenous populations, and natural carbon control systems essential in mitigating the effects of climate change. 2020 saw a continuation in forest destruction trends from the past two decades, making it the third worst year since monitoring began in 2002.² Tropical rainforests lost 12.2 million hectares of tree cover, an increase of 12 percent compared to 2019. A third of these losses were in tropical rainforests in the Amazon, Congo, and Southeast Asia, amounting to an area the size of the Netherlands. Deforestation rates are highest in Brazil, which lost 1.7 million hectares in 2020, a 25 percent increase from 2019.³ Other heavily impacted countries include Colombia, Peru, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea. Weak governance, inefficient land use, and the predominance of large-scale logging and agriculture industries play significant roles in patterns of destruction. Yet there is also cause for hope: Indonesia and Malaysia reported decreases in deforestation in the past year, signaling the possibility of reversing current trends.⁴

Habitat loss poses major threats to Indigenous populations, including reduced income, health risks, and declining access to food and water sources. Over 400 million Indigenous people around the world depend partially or completely on rainforests for their livelihoods.⁵ Deforestation exacerbates already disproportionate levels of discrimination these populations face in accessing education, healthcare, the labor market, and legal and political representation. Large-scale infrastructure projects such as roads, pipelines, and dams result in the loss of valuable natural resources and displacement of forest communities.⁶ In Brazil, mining, logging, petroleum, and hydrocarbons companies have seized Indigenous lands in the Amazon with few

legal consequences.⁷ Indigenous communities also contend with rollbacks on land rights: most recently, the Brazilian Congress is considering a bill that would enable non-Indigenous groups to use Indigenous land without consultation or permission with Indigenous leaders.⁸ Moreover, Indigenous activists who speak out against the commercial exploitation of their land risk violent retaliation. According to Global Witness, 212 advocates for environment and land protection were murdered in 2019, 40 percent of whom belonged to Indigenous communities.⁹

Shrinking forests exacerbate the effects of global climate change, contribute to unstable and extreme weather, and may permanently alter the natural landscape. Tropical tree coverage is one of the planet's most effective natural carbon absorption mechanisms, and rampant deforestation greatly reduces trees' ability to capture carbon. Carbon dioxide levels reached record levels in 2020, comparable to climate patterns some four million years ago.¹⁰ A study released in early 2020 suggests that the Amazon may produce more carbon than it absorbs as early as the mid-2030s, with other tropical forests following suit in subsequent decades.¹¹ A loss in tropical tree coverage could result in more unpredictable and extreme global weather patterns, as tree coverage helps to distribute humid air and generate rainfall.¹² Deforestation can also lead to irreversible habitat change; scientists predict that if losses in the Amazon, currently estimated at 15 to 17 percent of total tree coverage, reach 25 percent, the forest will dry out and transition into a savannah ecosystem, with drastic effects on local wildlife.¹³ Tropical forests in Borneo, Sumatra, and the Congo Basin could undergo similar changes.¹⁴

Declining biodiversity and increasing urbanization on cleared land are linked to the spread of emerging infectious diseases (EIDs). Viruses such as SARS, Ebola, Zika, and HIV were first transmitted to humans from wild animals; As deforestation eliminates natural barriers between human and animal populations, there are increased risks of more viruses emerging. Commercial activities such as logging, mining, and construction accelerate the rate of species decline, which in turn enables common virus host animals such as bats and rodents to flourish.¹⁵ Urbanization in previously pristine forest areas further heightens the risk of transmission as proximity between wild animals and humans shrinks.

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown heighten the risk of further land degradation. While it is too early to know if COVID-19 has shifted impacted patterns of deforestation, there have been anecdotal reports of increased illegal harvesting, mining, and logging in protected areas.¹⁶ Conservation efforts have been delayed or halted due to lockdown restrictions, with many NGOs leaving their field sites.¹⁷ Furthermore, countries facing economic strain due to the pandemic may relax environmental protections and invite commercial interests so as to stimulate the economy.¹⁸

The Global Response Thus Far

Since the 1990s, world leaders have acknowledged the need to address deforestation in numerous multinational agreements and initiatives, including in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Regular international meetings since 1995, under UN auspices, of the Conference of the Parties (COP) focus multisectoral attention on climate issues including deforestation. The paragraphs below give an overview of current legal, financial, and economic interventions by governments and NGOs to address deforestation.

International climate resolutions acknowledge the value of protecting tropical rainforests, but they face an uphill battle in meeting their goals. The New York Declaration on Forests and UN Strategic Plan for Forests, adopted in 2014 and 2017, respectively, both set ambitious goals to halt deforestation by 2030; the UN Strategic Plan calls for a three percent increase (120 million hectares) in forest areas worldwide.¹⁹ Despite progress in individual nations, the overall deforestation rates are rising, threatening the achievability of these goals. Carbon emissions from deforestation further jeopardize the Paris Agreement's goal to limit the rise in global temperature in the 21st century to two degrees Celsius.²⁰

Results-based financing is a promising strategy to reduce carbon emissions and promote sustainable development in rainforest countries. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)'s Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) offers financial incentives to developing countries that reduce carbon emissions from deforestation and invest in sustainable development methods. The UN-REDD Programme assists national governments and Indigenous communities to meet the criteria for REDD+ payments.²¹ The Green Climate Fund, established in 2010 by the UNFCCC, likewise contributes to sustainable financing by supporting greenhouse gas emissions and climate resilience projects in developing countries, with over USD \$23 billion spent between 2015 and 2020.²²

Consumers and governments can play significant roles in pressuring companies to abandon ecologically harmful agricultural methods. Recent measures, such as the EU's 2019 ban on subsidies for biofuels derived from palm oil, have the potential to shift global industry away from unsustainable land use; however, they also carry the risk of increasing cultivation of less sustainable products, contributing to inefficient land use and threatening the livelihoods of farmers.²³ Consumers and environmental activists have likewise put pressure on the Brazilian beef industry to refrain from sourcing cattle from newly deforested land; however, supply chains remain opaque and commitments by agricultural companies to prioritize sustainability are difficult to enforce. If implemented on a large scale, certain lifestyle changes, such as switching to a diet that relies less heavily on meat and dairy, can help reduce demand for cleared land in the Amazon and other rainforest regions.

Post-COVID economic recovery plans in some countries address environmental concerns, but more needs to be done in order to ensure that ecosystems and wildlife are protected against commercial exploitation. While numerous governments have incorporated environmental protections in their economic stimulus and recovery plans, one study suggests that spending on activities that may harm biodiversity is greater than spending on those that are potentially beneficial. Detrimental policies include the loosening of regulations regarding land use, waste collection, air and agricultural pollution, and monitoring and reporting on environmental impacts. Furthermore, post-COVID fiscal policies that distribute loans and grants have the potential to turn back progress on environmental protections if they do not include specific conditions protecting the environment.²⁴

Religious Responses

With their ability to shape community values, religious leaders and faith-linked institutions are well positioned to influence local, national, and global action on deforestation, land protection, and Indigenous peoples' rights. This section highlights faith-linked engagement on these issues.

Interfaith coalitions are actively engaged in preserving intact rainforests, advocating against deforestation, and promoting Indigenous people's rights. The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI), launched in 2017, brings together religious authorities, Indigenous leaders, government officials, climate scientists, and representatives of NGOs to address deforestation in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia. IRI launched country programs in Colombia, Peru, and DRC in 2019 and in Indonesia in early 2020; IRI workshops and trainings for religious, interfaith, and Indigenous leaders coordinate efforts that protect natural resources and human rights in each country.²⁵ IRI works with policymakers to incorporate anti-deforestation measures in national development strategies and provides resources to faith communities on how they can contribute to forest restoration projects. During the UN Climate Week in September 2019, IRI unveiled its Faiths for Forests Declaration and Action Agenda, calling on religious groups and faith-linked organizations to mobilize, educate, and advocate for rainforest protection and climate justice.²⁶

Other interfaith coalitions addressing deforestation and climate change on a global level include GreenFaith, Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI), and the United Religions Initiative (URI's) Environmental Network.²⁷

Secular-religious partnerships help bring religious voices into policy discussions and encourage sustainable, community-based action among faith communities. Since the late 1990s, the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology has been the premier database on religious engagement on the environment, publishing books, articles, and newsletters on initiatives led by the world's different religious traditions.²⁸ The International Network for Conservation and Religion (INCR) serves as a digital hub for faith-linked conservation initiatives through which participating religious communities and organizations can exchange knowledge and build partnerships.²⁹ The World Wildlife Fund's (WWF) Sacred Earth program likewise partners with religious leaders and institutions to help shape sustainable decision-making in their communities.³⁰ Since 2017, the United Nations' Faith for Earth Initiative has worked with faith-based organizations to strengthen environmental advocacy efforts and strengthen the ecological sustainability of these organizations' investments and assets.³¹ In March 2020, Faith for Earth hosted a digital conference with over 200 participants to discuss pressing environmental issues, including deforestation.³²

Religious leaders play important roles in drawing attention to deforestation and in encouraging their communities to take action. Six years after the encyclical *Laudato Si'* was published, Pope Francis continues to prioritize environmental protection and Indigenous rights. The Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian Region, held in October 2019 in Rome, was the first Roman Catholic synod to address the threat deforestation poses to Indigenous communities; more than 20,000 Indigenous people took part in assemblies and discussions organized by the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM) before the synod, and Indigenous spokespeople gave personal testimonies to church leaders during the synod.³³ The following year, Pope Francis

released *Querida Amazonia*, an apostolic exhortation calling on world leaders, companies, and citizens to protect the Amazon and respects its Indigenous communities.³⁴

Other religious leaders have likewise stressed the need to address climate change within their communities. Bartholomew I, ecumenical patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, is known as the “Green Patriarch” for his longstanding support of environmental causes.³⁵ In 2017, he issued a joint statement with Pope Francis calling on Christians worldwide to address climate change in their own lives.³⁶ Following the publication of *Laudato Si’*, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist leaders issued statements affirming their commitment to drawing upon their faiths’ resources to mitigate the effects of climate change and promote ecologically sustainable lifestyles.³⁷ In Indonesia, the local Council of Ulama issued fatwas in 2014 and 2016, calling on Muslims to protect endangered species and refrain from clearing forests for commercial gain.³⁸

Looking Ahead: Recommendations

The following recommendations focus on the most urgent matters facing the world’s rainforests and potential courses of action. These priority steps represent a broad consensus among scientists and policy analysts. They are highlighted here because G20 members and religious authorities linked to the G20 Interfaith Forum have the potential to advance action.

- 1) *Restrict commercial access to forests.* Preserving intact rainforests is an essential step in containing the impact of deforestation on the climate. G20 countries with tropical forests need to act quickly to protect these forests rather than allocating them for commercial use. G20 leaders should encourage and support moratoriums on deforestation, with special emphasis on preserving carbon-rich peatlands and mangrove forests.
- 2) *Demand accountability in global supply chains.* G20 leaders should use their influence to push for greater transparency regarding the environmental and human rights impact of commercial industries. Support for independent third-party verification mechanisms to regulate company supply chains and address potential violations is a promising approach. G20 leaders can act against companies that do not implement zero deforestation in their supply chains through taxation and procurement and import regulations.
- 3) *Support sustainable alternatives to the agriculture and logging industries.* With commercial farming responsible for around 80 percent of deforestation in tropical countries, new approaches within the agriculture industry are essential in halting the rate of destruction.³⁹ G20 leaders should support efforts to phase out subsidies to industries that support deforestation in favor of industries that do not rely on clearing forests or draining peat swamps.
- 4) *Increase agricultural productivity on already cleared lands.* As the global population rises, the agriculture industry faces growing pressure to expand. G20 leaders should act now to support efficient use of agricultural land, such as offering financial incentives to companies that use sustainable agricultural methods and supporting research efforts to further develop these methods.

- 5) *Support land restoration efforts.* Rehabilitating degraded ecosystems is essential to recouping losses from deforestation. G20 rainforest countries should support regulations and financial incentives for forest rehabilitation efforts. Restoring carbon-rich peatlands is an especially effective method for reducing carbon emissions and boosting overall climate resilience.
- 6) *Protect Indigenous rights.* Recognizing and defending Indigenous forest communities' claims to their ancestral lands helps create a buffer against encroaching industry and promotes traditional agricultural practices that mitigate the impact of climate change. G20 rainforest countries should uphold customary land rights, recognize Indigenous claims to unsecured lands, and reform conservation policies in order to ease Indigenous groups' access to the forest. Special priority should be given to communities whose land and resources have been stolen or degraded by government authorities, commercial industries, or land traffickers. Governments should assist in establishing community-based monitoring systems to report disputes with companies, conflicts over land, and human rights violations, and provide legal assistance to Indigenous communities challenging illegal deforestation practices. G20 leaders and religious authorities can further support these efforts by speaking out against the illegal seizure of land and attacks on environmental activists.
- 7) *Amplify Indigenous voices in environmental policy discussions at the local, national, and global levels.* G20 leaders should assure that national governments and international partners listen to the expertise and concerns of Indigenous forest communities directly affected by deforestation. Rainforest nations should seek out Indigenous perspectives in formulating national development plans. G20 leaders should support appropriate allocations of multilateral funds for forest conservation, such as the UNFCCC's Green Climate Fund, and funding for Indigenous communities to promote traditional conservation practices.
- 8) *Reduce dependence on meat and dairy and eliminate food loss and waste.* If implemented on a global scale, diet and lifestyle changes could lower demand for new agricultural land and stem rates of deforestation. Measures that discourage food loss in supply chains and food waste among consumers can help reduce unnecessary destruction of additional forest. G20 leaders should support initiatives in their countries that cut down on meat and dairy consumption, with a particular emphasis on beef.
- 9) *Formulate post-COVID economic recovery plans that preserve and expand protections on land use, biodiversity, and Indigenous peoples' rights.* With the need to stimulate economic activity following the negative impacts of COVID-19, there is a risk that economic recovery plans will rescind measures to protect rainforests. G20 leaders should promote policies that maintain and strengthen regulations on land use, wildlife trade, and Indigenous access to land. Furthermore, G20 governments can integrate environmental protections into existing policies by including biodiversity and conservation spending targets into recovery plans, promoting jobs in relevant sectors, and providing economic incentives for businesses that implement ecologically beneficial practices.
- 10) *Support research into links between habitat destruction and the emergence of infectious disease.* In light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, G20 countries should fund research efforts to better understand the impact of deforestation on the spread of viruses. Rainforest

countries should act quickly to promote land protection efforts that reduce the risk of disease transmission from wild animals to humans.

11) *Recognize the contributions of religious leadership on rainforest issues and collaborate with faith communities on future initiatives.* Religious leaders and faith-linked organizations are well-positioned to represent the interests of their communities. G20 countries and organizations such as the UN and WWF should continue to work closely with faith actors on issues of deforestation and conservation, collaborating with them in policymaking discussions and project implementation.

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Research was conducted using print and online sources drawn from the scientific, governmental, and non-profit spheres; it is important to note that the research relied primarily on English language sources.

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