



**A G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief
Interfaith Action to Protect Rainforests**
September 2022

Summary, Call to Action

Purposeful engagement with religious communities and organizations can strengthen G20 leaders' and national governments' responses to challenges posed by deforestation and, more broadly, climate change. Highlighting the urgent moral call for action can link broad ideas to practical steps at different levels and places. The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative models approaches and action that can enhance and deepen such engagement.

Rainforest destruction is increasing and poses an existential threat: emission of billions of tons of carbon dioxide exacerbates the effects of global climate change. The 2022 G20 agenda, presided by Indonesia, highlights the transition to sustainable energy, with emphasis on the impact of climate change on poorer nations.¹ G20 leaders consistently highlight protecting tropical rainforests as a priority, but the topic's urgency is greater following delayed action, one effect of the COVID-19 emergencies.

Faith-linked communities and initiatives play pivotal roles in directing global attention to the challenges facing the world's rainforests and empowering local communities to pursue sustainable solutions. Proactive partnerships offer significant opportunities to enhance awareness and spur action.

G20 and interfaith leaders can:

Collaborate in efforts to protect and restore rainforests: Preserving intact rainforests and restoring degraded land are essential to curbing the long-term damage of deforestation. Curtailing support for subsidies to industries that rely on deforestation is a priority.

Promote Indigenous Rights: Indigenous populations are disproportionately affected by deforestation. Support includes upholding customary land rights, recognizing Indigenous claims to ancestral lands, and supporting community-based monitoring systems that report human rights violations. Indigenous voices need to be included in policymaking processes.

Stronger oversight of industry and promoting lifestyle changes: Cooperative efforts can include transparency on environmental and human rights impacts of commercial industries, independent third-party verification mechanisms to regulate company supply chains and address potential violations, and initiatives to reduce consumption of meat and dairy.

Supporting research and advocacy to better understand the impact of deforestation on the spread of viruses should continue, working closely with faith actors on issues of deforestation and conservation.

Introduction – importance of tropical forests

Tropical rainforests play crucial roles in mitigating global climate change, preserving biodiversity, and supporting the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of Indigenous people. Rainforest destruction, driven by the quest 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 cover reduces forests' natural capacity to absorb carbon. Indigenous populations are disproportionately affected by the destruction of land and natural resources, with significant repercussions for physical health, economic wellbeing, and human rights. Damage to some of the world's most diverse ecosystems affects global health, increasing opportunities for contact between humans and virus host animals.

Among local, national, and global efforts to combat deforestation, faith-linked initiatives stand out for their capacity to underscore the moral imperative to protect 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 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. In 2021, the world lost over 11 million hectares (27.5 million acres) of tropical forest (an area the size of Cuba). This represents a slight decline from the previous year, but is consistent with 2019 numbers, thus marking a trend of destruction from the past two decades. Weak governance, inefficient land use, and the predominance of large-scale logging and agriculture industries play significant roles in these patterns of destruction. More than 40% of primary forest loss occurred in Brazil, with other significant losses recorded in Bolivia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.² In the first two months of 2022 alone, deforestation in the Amazon was more than twice the average for that timeframe in the last decade.³ While countries such as Indonesia, Gabon, and the Republic of the Congo have implemented measures that have led to a decline in deforestation, these gains are cancelled out by a surge in forest loss elsewhere. **The world is not on track for achieving a halt in deforestation by 2030, as pledged by 141 countries at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) November 2021.**⁴

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 that more viruses will emerge. 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.⁵ Urbanization in previously pristine forest areas further heightens the risk of transmission as the proximity between wild animals and humans shrinks.

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.⁶ A fifth of the world's land area is conserved by Indigenous peoples, and some 45% of the Amazon's remaining intact forest is in Indigenous territories.⁷ Deforestation and CO2 emissions are significantly lower on these lands, and biodiversity is richer.⁸ 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.⁹ In Brazil, mining, logging, petroleum, and hydrocarbons companies have seized Indigenous lands in the Amazon with few legal consequences.¹⁰ Indigenous communities also contend with rollbacks on land rights: the Brazilian Congress is considering a bill that would enable non-Indigenous groups to use Indigenous land without consultation or permission of Indigenous leaders.¹¹ Indigenous activists who speak out against the commercial exploitation of their land risk violent retaliation. Global Witness reports that 227 advocates for the environment and land protection were murdered in 2020, many of them members from Indigenous communities, a record high from when Global Witness began recording in 2012. The number is likely an underestimate of the true human cost of protecting the environment.¹²

Despite their contributions to protecting their ancestral lands, Indigenous groups receive little direct financial support in their efforts; between 2011 and 2020, only 0.13% of all climate development aid flowed to these communities directly.¹³ This is because much of the money allocated for engagement with Indigenous groups flows through intermediaries, such as multilateral institutions and large international NGOs.¹⁴ While global leaders pledged \$1.7 billion to reverse forest loss at COP26, some Indigenous leaders are doubtful they will ever see the money put to use in their own communities.¹⁵

Shrinking forests exacerbate the effects of global climate change, contribute to unstable and extreme weather, and may permanently alter the natural landscape. Tropical tree cover 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 a record high in 2021; deforestation alone released 2.5 million metric tons of greenhouse gases, an amount equivalent to the annual emissions of India.¹⁶ A study published in July 2021 found that the Amazon is emitting more carbon than it is capturing, largely due to fires; even without the fires, experts warn 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.¹⁷ Rising temperatures are accelerating the growth of trees, but also shortening their lifespans, meaning that forests are absorbing less carbon on average than in previous years; scientists warn that decisionmakers should not be too dependent on trees as the solution to rising emissions.¹⁸ Furthermore, a loss in tropical tree cover could result in more unpredictable and extreme global weather patterns, as tree cover helps to distribute humid air and generate rainfall.¹⁹ Deforestation can lead to irreversible habitat change; scientists predict that if losses in the Amazon, currently estimated at 15 to 17% of total tree cover, reach 25%, the forest will dry out and transition into a savannah ecosystem, with drastic effects on local wildlife.²⁰ Tropical forests in Borneo, Sumatra, and the Congo Basin could undergo similar changes.²¹

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown heighten the risk of further land degradation. Despite initial hopes that pandemic-related lockdowns might curtail the rate of deforestation, it has not decreased significantly.²² There have been anecdotal reports of increased illegal harvesting, mining, and logging in protected areas.²³ To make matters worse, conservation efforts have been delayed or halted due to lockdown restrictions, with many NGOs leaving their field sites.²⁴ Countries facing economic strain due to the pandemic and global economic downturn may relax environmental protections and invite commercial interests so as to stimulate the economy.²⁵

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 of the Conference of the Parties (COP) focus multisectoral attention on climate issues, including deforestation. This section reviews 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. Rainforests were a much talked-about issue among world leaders in 2021. Meetings that highlighted deforestation included the IUCN World Conservation Congress in September, the G20 in October, and the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November.²⁶ At COP26, 144 countries pledged to work together “to halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation” by 2030; the declaration’s signatory countries account for more than 90% of the world’s forests.²⁷ An important step in addressing the issue, these goals are non-binding and open to interpretation and their achievability hinges on domestic policies on forest protection. In key nations such as Brazil and Russia; changes in national politics can help or hinder goal achievement regardless of international efforts. Carbon emissions from deforestation also jeopardize the Paris Agreement’s goal to limit the rise in global temperature in the 21st century to two degrees Celsius.²⁸

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.²⁹ 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 2020.³⁰

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.³¹ 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 actions are needed 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. Post-COVID fiscal policies could turn back progress on environmental protections if they do not include specific conditions protecting the environment.³²

Religious Responses

Religious leaders and faith-linked institutions are well positioned to influence local, national, and global action on deforestation, land protection, and Indigenous peoples' rights.

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 support efforts that protect natural resources and human rights in each country; IRI also 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.³³ At COP26, IRI hosted a forum focused on faith and Indigenous perspectives on preserving forest ecosystems and reversing habitat destruction.³⁴

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.³⁵

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.³⁶ 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.³⁷ The World Wildlife Fund's (WWF) Sacred Earth program partners with religious leaders and

institutions to help shape sustainable decision-making in their communities.³⁸ Since 2017, the United Nations' Faith for Earth Initiative has worked with faith-linked organizations to strengthen environmental advocacy efforts and strengthen the ecological sustainability of these organizations' investments and assets.³⁹ In August 2022, Faith for Earth launched a youth council, comprised of 19 youth representing different religions and countries; the council aims to draw on different faith traditions to engage young people on issues of environmental sustainability, biodiversity, and climate.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

Global religious leaders have 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.⁴³ In 2017, he issued a joint statement with Pope Francis calling on Christians worldwide to address climate change in their own lives,⁴⁴ and his call to action to world leaders at the September 2021 Bologna G20 Interfaith Forum stressed the moral call to action on climate and the environment.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

Looking Ahead: Recommendations

Several priority steps represent a broad consensus among scientists and policy analysts and offer potential areas for effective action and meaningful cross sector collaboration.

- 1) *Build on contributions of religious leadership on rainforest issues looking to wider collaboration that takes into account moral voice and local knowledge.* Building on strengths of faith communities can enhance policy and programs led by organizations like the UN and WWF.
- 2) *Commercial access to forests.* Preserving intact rainforests, an essential step in containing the climate impact of deforestation, needs urgent measures and monitoring. Religious actors can support G20 leaders in moratoriums on deforestation, with special emphasis on preserving carbon-rich peatlands and mangrove forests.

- 3) *Accountability on global supply chains.* Greater transparency on the environmental and human rights impact of commercial industries needs cross sector support. Independent third-party verification mechanisms to regulate company supply chains and address potential violations offer promise including action on companies that violate them.
- 4) *Support sustainable alternatives to the agriculture and logging industries.* With commercial farming responsible for around 80 % of deforestation in tropical countries, new approaches within the agriculture industry are essential in halting the rate of destruction.⁴⁸ Religious actors can support measures like phasing out damaging subsidies and favoring industries that do not rely on clearing forests or draining peat swamps. Efficient land use in areas already cleared can slow further deforestation.
- 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) *Ensure that post-COVID economic recovery plans preserve and expand protections on land use, biodiversity, and Indigenous peoples' rights.* Given vast needs to stimulate economic activity following COVID-19 emergencies, 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. G20 governments can integrate environmental protections in existing policies by including biodiversity and conservation spending targets, 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.* 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.

Drafted by Luisa Banchoff and Katherine Marshall. Reviewed by Charles McNeill

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

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