

**A G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief  
Interfaith Action to Protect Rainforests  
November 4, 2020**

**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 future global climate: deforestation results in emission of billions of tons of carbon dioxide each year, exacerbates the effects of global climate change, threatens the livelihoods of indigenous communities, and contributes to the spread of animal-borne infectious diseases such as COVID-19.

G20 members and religious authorities have the potential to enhance awareness and spur action on tropical rainforests. Faith-linked initiatives 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. The key recommendations of the 2020 G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief on Rainforests are summarized below.

**Protect and Restore Rainforests**

Preserving intact rainforests and restoring degraded land are essential to curbing the long-term damage of deforestation. G20 countries should promote measures to protect forests and peatlands rather than allocate them for commercial use, and support efforts to rehabilitate degraded ecosystems. New approaches within agricultural industries are likewise essential to reverse the damage caused by deforestation. G20 leaders can take decisive action by withdrawing support for subsidies to industries that rely on deforestation.

**Promote Indigenous Rights**

Indigenous populations are disproportionately affected by tropical deforestation. G20 rainforest countries take concrete actions to uphold customary land rights and recognize indigenous claims to their ancestral lands, and support community-based monitoring systems that report human rights violations and provide legal assistance to indigenous communities. G20 leaders should ensure that indigenous voices are included in policymaking processes at all levels.

**Stronger Oversight of Industry, Promote Lifestyle Changes**

G20 leaders should use their influence to press for greater transparency for 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 act quickly to promote land protection efforts that reduce risks 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, collaborating with them in policymaking discussions and project implementation.

## ***Introduction***

The COVID-19 crisis highlights the urgent need for G20 leaders to support and protect tropical rainforests. The 2020 G20 Presidency Agenda calls on G20 leaders to “lead the international community in working toward minimizing land degradation and deforestation.”<sup>1</sup> Proactive partnerships with religious institutions offer significant opportunity to enhance awareness and spur action.

Tropical rainforests play crucial roles 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 future global climate: the process of deforestation emits billions of tons of carbon dioxide each year and makes way for carbon-emitting industries, and the loss of tropical tree coverage reduces forests’ natural capacity to absorb carbon. Indigenous populations are disproportionately affected by the destruction of land and natural resources, with significant repercussions for their physical health, economic wellbeing, and human rights. Disappearance of some of the world’s most diverse ecosystems has 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.

This brief provides an overview of the main issues that confront the world’s tropical rainforests and highlights religious engagement on the topic. Research was conducted using print and online sources drawn from the scientific, governmental, and non-profit spheres and drafts have been reviewed by different partners. The brief concludes with specific recommendations for G20 leaders at the 2020 G20 Summit in Riyadh.

## ***Challenges***

*Deforestation is occurring at a record rate, posing an existential threat to wildlife, indigenous populations, and natural carbon control systems that have been essential in mitigating the effects of climate change over the past decades.* 2019 was a record year for deforestation in tropical rainforests across the world; in the Amazon alone, close to 10,000 square kilometers of forest were cleared between August 2018 and July 2019, an increase of nearly 30 percent over the previous year.<sup>2</sup> Deforestation is not a recent problem; high rates date back several decades: 1.3 million square kilometers of forest were cut down between 1990 and 2016. Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa have been most affected, losing 10 and 12 percent of their forest area during this period, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Today, deforestation rates are highest in Brazil, 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.

*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.<sup>4</sup> Deforestation exacerbates already disproportionate levels of discrimination these populations face when accessing education, healthcare, the labor market, and legal and political representation. Loss of valuable natural resources and displacement of forest communities result from large-scale infrastructure projects such as roads, pipelines, and dams.<sup>5</sup> Under Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, mining, logging, petroleum, and hydrocarbons companies have seized indigenous lands in the Amazon with few legal consequences.<sup>6</sup> Indigenous communities also contend with rollbacks on land rights: new laws in Brazil and Indonesia make it more difficult for native populations to legally claim their ancestral lands, while the creation of conservation areas in Central America has restricted their ability to cultivate crops.<sup>7</sup> Indigenous activists who speak out against the commercial exploitation of their land risk violent retaliation. The violent murder of an indigenous leader by a group of miners in northern Brazil in July 2019 was one among more than 300 killings recorded by Brazil's Pastoral Land Commission since 2009; the majority of them go uninvestigated and unprosecuted.<sup>8</sup>

*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. Tropical rainforests absorb only two-thirds the amount they did in the 1990s. 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.<sup>9</sup> Tropical tree coverage also plays vital roles in distributing humid air and generating rainfall near in regions both near and far; consequently, a reduction in tree coverage could result in more unpredictable and extreme global weather patterns.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> Tropical forests in Borneo, Sumatra, and the Congo Basin could undergo similar changes.<sup>12</sup>

*Declining biodiversity and increasing urbanization on cleared land are linked to the spread of emerging infectious diseases (EIDs).* Viruses such as COVID-19, 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 of these 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.<sup>13</sup> Urbanization in previously pristine forest areas further heightens the risk of transmission as proximity between wild animals and humans shrinks.

### ***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 two of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): goal 13 (combatting climate change) and goal 15 (protecting ecosystems and biodiversity). 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 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, and the UN Strategic Plan calls for a three percent increase (120 million hectares) in forest areas worldwide.<sup>14</sup> Despite progress in individual nations, overall deforestation rates are rising; the rate of tree coverage loss increased 43 percent between 2014 and 2019.<sup>15</sup> This increase threatens the viability of goals set out by the UN Strategic Plan to eradicate extreme poverty among forest-dependent populations and increase protected and conserved forest areas around the world.<sup>16</sup> Carbon emissions from deforestation threaten the Paris Agreement's goal to limit the rise in global temperature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to two degrees Celsius.

*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+) program offers financial incentives to developing countries that reduce carbon emissions from deforestation and invest instead in sustainable development methods. The UN-REDD Programme assists national governments and indigenous and forest communities in rainforest countries to meet the criteria for REDD+ payments.<sup>17</sup> Through REDD+, Norway made a payment of approximately \$20 million to Indonesia in 2019 after the latter reduced deforestation rates over the previous years.<sup>18</sup> The Green Climate Fund, established in 2010 by the UNFCCC, likewise contributes to sustainable financing by supporting more than 100 greenhouse gas emissions and climate resilience projects in developing countries, with nearly USD \$10 billion pledged in 2019.<sup>19</sup>

*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.<sup>20</sup> 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.

### ***Religious Responses***

With moral authority and ability to shape community values, religious leaders and institutions are well positioned to influence local, national, and global action on deforestation, land

protection, and indigenous peoples' rights. The following paragraphs highlight faith-linked engagement on these issues.

*Interfaith coalitions are actively engaged in preserving intact rainforests, advocating against deforestation, and promoting indigenous rights.* The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI), launched in 2017 and endorsed by the Religions for Peace World Assembly in August 2019, brings leaders from major world religions together with indigenous leaders, 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.<sup>21</sup> IRI works with government officials to incorporate anti-deforestation measures in national development strategies. 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.<sup>22</sup>

IRI is one among many interfaith coalitions actively addressing deforestation and climate change on a global level; other groups include GreenFaith, Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI), and the United Religions Initiative (URI's) Environmental Network.<sup>23</sup>

*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.<sup>24</sup> The UK-based Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), founded in 1995, was among the first international organizations to work with religious leaders on environmental issues, notably through the adoption and implementation of long-term action plans for ecological sustainability. Following the closure of ARC in June 2019, a new International Network for Conservation and Religion was announced to continue the organization's work.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

*Religious leaders play important roles in framing the issue of deforestation within a broader human rights context and in encouraging their communities to take action.* Five years after the encyclical *Laudato Si'* was published, Pope Francis gives constant priority to environmental protection and indigenous rights, a message he reiterated during recent trips to Peru and Madagascar.<sup>28</sup> 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; before the synod, more than 20,000 indigenous people from the Amazon took part in assemblies and discussions organized by the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM), and representatives of indigenous communities gave personal testimonies to

church leaders during the synod. The gathering closed with a statement calling on Catholics to undergo an “ecological conversion” in order to combat environmental destruction.<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup> In 2017, he issued a joint statement with Pope Francis calling on Christians worldwide to address climate change in their own lives.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> In March 2020, more than 200 participants from six countries took part in a digital conference hosted by the UNEP Faith for Earth Initiative to discuss pressing environmental issues, including deforestation.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Looking Ahead: Recommendations***

The following recommendations directed to G20 leaders and religious authorities highlight urgent matters facing the world’s rainforests and potential courses of action. These priority steps represent a broad consensus among scientists and policy analysts and 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, such as the one introduced in Indonesia in 2011 and since made permanent. Special emphasis should be placed on preserving carbon-rich peatlands and mangrove forests, as they preserve diverse ecosystems, protect against soil erosion, and absorb large amounts of carbon.
- 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.<sup>35</sup>
- 4) 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. Costa Rica offers a successful model for other rainforest countries: after reducing

subsidies for the cattle industry in the 1980s, forest cover increased in subsequent decades and the economy diversified.

- 5) *Increase agricultural productivity on already cleared lands.* As the global population rises, the agriculture industry faces growing pressure to expand. To curb an accompanying increase in deforestation rates, G20 leaders should act now to support efficient use of agricultural land, for example offering financial incentives to companies that use sustainable agricultural methods and supporting research efforts to further develop these methods.
- 6) *Support land restoration efforts.* Rehabilitating degraded ecosystems wherever possible 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 effective method to reduce carbon emissions and boost overall climate resilience.
- 7) *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 support these efforts by speaking out against the illegal seizure of indigenous lands and attacks on environmental activists.
- 8) *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.
- 9) *Reduce dependence on meat and dairy and eliminate food loss and waste.* 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.
- 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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