



# The Role of Religions, Values, Ethics, and Spiritual Responsibility in Environmental Governance and Achieving the Sustainable Development Agenda

## *Policy and Practice Note*

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### Abstract

The Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 is the only viable framework that exists today providing a plan of action to tackle the complexity of development issues we are facing. One essential element in implementing this agenda is Goal 17, related to partnerships and the role of the whole of society in achieving these goals. Sustainable development is defined as the intersection of economic, social, and environmental sustainability. However, the fourth component of culture and traditional knowledge, while presumably integrated in all goals, has not been fully integrated, presenting a missed opportunity to enhance and strengthen the implementation and achievement of the sustainable development agenda. Religious values and belief systems are considered crucial elements of this cultural approach. Faith values and practices complement the scientific and technological approaches in dealing with the unprecedented environmental challenges of our time. This is especially important due to the commonality of religious values in living in harmony with nature. If seriously considered, adopting religious values leads to a change in individual behaviors and institutional policies that are crucial to reducing our environmental footprint and tackling the triple planetary crisis.

## Keywords

religion – ethics – values – behavior – environment – governance

### 1 Introduction

The 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report states that global greenhouse gas emissions will peak before 2025 with the adopted scenarios of limiting warming to 1.5°C and should be reduced by 43% by 2030 (IPCC 2022). The Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) warns that species extinction rates are accelerating and that assessments expect one million species to be threatened with extinction (IPBES 2019). Likewise, air pollution, according to the World Bank, is the leading environmental risk to health and cost an estimated USD 8.1 trillion in 2019 (The World Bank, 2016). Climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution have been identified by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as the triple planetary crisis facing humanity (UNEP 2020).

The combination of these environmental problems with the already felt impacts of Covid-19 and the recent and protracted conflicts around the world that are causing economic and social downfall, as well as threatening the food security of many nations, especially vulnerable ones, are unprecedented challenges and, in order to address them, a different approach and a complete paradigm shift are needed. While technology and science have provided much-needed advances in development and offered important solutions, they are not enough, and new ways should be considered and employed to complete a transformational shift toward resolving such challenges.

The IPCC report of 2022 goes further in saying that we need to adopt the right policies and put the appropriate measures in place to enable changes to our lifestyles and behavior. The Stockholm Declaration of 1972 also refers to the essential role of spiritual growth that should be a result of the appropriate relationship between humans and the environment (Stockholm 1972). The same argument was made in the Stockholm+50 Conference in 2022 that ethics and spiritual connections should be adopted as alternatives to a new relationship between humans and the environment (Abumoghli 2022).

### 2 The Ethical Approach

UNEP is the leading environmental authority within the UN system and sets the global agenda on identified environmental issues through its UN Environment

Assembly (UNEA) as its intergovernmental governing council composed of 193 countries and a variety of stakeholders as observers which include civil society, youth groups, women's organizations, Indigenous Peoples, farmers, businesses, academia, workers and trade unions, and local authorities. The UN Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development defines sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations 2015). Sustainable development is the intersection of economic, social, and environmental stabilities. Religious groups and Indigenous Peoples, including their cultures and traditional knowledge, comprise the fourth component of sustainable development, namely culture. They are considered important contributors to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals as they enhance and strengthen the implementation and achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Although 80% of the global population consider themselves as religious and/or spiritual, religious groups are often neglected in policy making (Pew Research Centre 2012). They act as observers whose contributions are too often ignored, given the importance of their potential impact.

In 2017, UNEP established its Faith for Earth Initiative to enhance the engagement of faith actors in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and in addressing environmental challenges. UNEA is convened every two years to decide on and adopt resolutions that address the priorities for the international community. During the fifth session of UNEA held in 2022, 14 resolutions were adopted, with the landmark one related to ending plastic pollution and forging an international legally binding agreement by 2024 (UNEP 2022). The same UNEA, in its previous session, adopted the Mid-Term Strategy for UNEP identifying the triple planetary crisis as the environmental issues of focus over the next four years. The mid-term strategy has also identified working with religious institutions as an important approach to increase the role of civil society in contributing to addressing these environmental challenges.

Climate change, as has been felt by poor and rich countries alike, is not only an environmental issue, but also a socioeconomic and security issue threatening all nations, but certainly in different ways and different severities based on their adaptation readiness and capacity. It is the poorest nations, and the most marginalized sectors of society, including children, women, indigenous, religious, and ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities, that pay the highest price of the many impacts of climate change. The injustice of these environmental issues is that while the world wastes 30–40% of its food, one person in nine goes hungry (World Food Program USA 2022). Likewise, while women and children walk long distances to fetch unclean water for their families, the transportation sector contributes approximately one quarter of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (UNEP, n.d.).

The environmental challenges we are facing today are the result of reckless and environmentally unsustainable development paradigms that we, humanity, have adopted since the Industrial Revolution, particularly in industrialized nations. Recent studies and reports refer to these challenges as the age of the Anthropocene, which is characterized by humans contributing the most to global changes (Conceição 2020). Exponential population growth, unlimited extractive industry, urbanization, overfishing, industrial pollution, and many others have been some of the main reasons for climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. However, these are the obvious reasons at the surface of things, but there are other underlying mechanisms that are often not acknowledged, not understood, and not accounted for. Other mechanisms include the crisis of greed, apathy, and indifference in attitudes of institutions and individuals leading to overconsumption and production. These include the finance sector and industry, which are driven by narratives of unlimited growth and capitalism shaping public opinion and belief. Such paradigms often juxtapose religious beliefs which promote living in harmony with nature. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals means integrating the environment into all the 17 goals, as it is the basis of all life on Planet Earth. As such, none of the goals can fully be achieved without a healthy environment. Therefore, it is crucial to integrate ethical and value-based approaches to achieving them. A proactive paradigm associated with a new social contract between people and with nature. Religious values, beliefs, teachings, and indigenous knowledge, along with international standards of ethics, provide such a much-needed alternative paradigm to change people's attitudes and behaviors toward sustainably managing nature and natural resources. The current unsustainable development paradigm has led to the creation of unsustainable practices and attitudes for most people. Individuals who see improvements in their income tend to consume more and increase their environmental footprint (Hui-Ting Chang 2016). This disregards the ethical attitude in considering the limited capacity of Earth as our only planet and only source for natural resources. While the population is growing and many countries are experiencing economic progress, it is necessary to adopt a paradigm in which the resources of Planet Earth are not being depleted and sustainable development is made possible.

While industrial revolutions over the past 200 years have contributed to mechanization as well as connectivity through the internet and cyberspace, the revolution we need now is a transformational ethical revolution putting things back into the perspective of humans not being the superiors over all other living and non-living things. This requires integrating religious values and environmental ethics into global and local environmental governance systems. Religions and Indigenous Peoples' practices bring the cultural diversity that is important to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

### 3 Religion and Science

The power of science and scientific evidence can hardly be debated. This is especially true in the light of all the technological advancements and facilities that are available to scientists to assess, measure, and predict to a high level of precision. While some may see science and religion as two opposites on a spectrum, they, in fact, share many values and ideas. For instance, many theologians and scientists have written about “their awe and wonder at the history of the universe and of life on this planet, explaining that they see no conflict between their faith in God and the evidence of evolution” (National Academies, 2022). Indeed, it is science that is telling us what we are facing and where we are heading if we continue our trajectory of the same environmental behavior toward nature. Science too has provided the much-needed technological advancement to provide solutions to some development challenges. Religions and spiritual beliefs have, for centuries, taught to live and enjoy not only spiritual fulfilment, but also a healthy and prosperous life that humans need to live in harmony with nature. The five major faith groups – Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism – share values such as the connectedness between human, the natural world, and the divine (Climate Outreach 2016). Such values bring forth a feeling of shared responsibility for Planet Earth and its inhabitants. It is also important to consider the knowledge of religious groups and Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous and local knowledge is defined by UNESCO (n.d.) as the understandings, skills, and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings. Such knowledge can supply much needed insight into how to manage natural resources and places, given that Indigenous communities have long lived harmoniously in and with nature and have a crucial understanding of it. Virtually all religions share a care and a responsibility for the planet. This was shown, for instance, when several faith leaders from different traditions and spiritual backgrounds signed the Multifaith Statement of the 23rd Conference of the Parties (COP23). This statement confirms that “For thousands of years, [their] traditions have taught [them] to care for Earth,” and that the current environmental challenges also need to be addressed by faith groups (Living the Change, 2022). This represents a common understanding between scientists and religious leaders, scientific reports and sacred scripts, use of technology and religious practices about the severity of the triple planetary crisis and the need to act now. Certainly, there are areas where some misunderstanding exists between the two, but on environmental issues, there is almost complete agreement that human behavior is leading to environmental degradation and that it is our moral responsibility to live in harmony with nature.

Existing scientific solutions, especially those that are nature-based, are certainly necessary to tackle increasing carbon emissions and unsustainable extraction of resources. The use of solar power, wind energy, carbon capture and storage systems, and many others has been providing some hope for those without access to energy, or to replace fossil-fuel-based energy with clean and nature-based ones. So do religious and indigenous teachings and practices as they are leading by example in promoting sustainable lifestyles and sharing their insight and hope with their followers, shaping their attitudes toward more sustainable practices. The amalgamation of both religious teachings and science can provide a comprehensive approach to achieving sustainable development. On the one hand, people's behavior and consumption practices will be informed and influenced by an ethically value-based approach. On the other hand, science can provide the evidence as well as the technological advancement as alternative systems to environmentally destructive ones (National Academies; Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Policy too plays an important role in environmental governance. The science/policy interface is our only option to ensure that national, regional, and global environmental issues are dealt with in a scientifically evidenced way (UNEP 2022). The Faith for Earth Initiative of UNEP when established in 2017 had the principal goal of engaging faith leaders and faith actors in policy dialogue with decision makers. When the initiative started, only two faith-based organizations were members of UNEP's accredited organizations. Currently, faith-based organizations represent more than 10% of all accredited organizations. Religious leaders and representatives of religious institutions have been making major contributions to the policy dialogue at the UN Environment Assembly (UNEP 2022a). The faith community has been coming together in many, if not all, international conventions and raising their voices, such as the most recent UN Environment Assemblies, COP26 and COP 27. Some of the faith-based organizations present include the Parliament of World's Religions, the World Council of Churches, Brahma Kumaris, and Bhumi Global. In many of these conventions and international meetings, the faith and interfaith communities submitted statements reflecting their call to action on climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, while at the same time committing to act in their own institutions (UNEP 2022b).

Another aspect is that religious institutions have been leading on is the divestment from fossil fuels and the greening of their own assets. There are many initiatives encouraging houses of worship to become more sustainable. In England, for instance, the Eco Church Award awards churches that have achieved sustainability in the five areas of Worship and Teaching, Management of Church Buildings, Management of Church Land, Community and Global Engagement, and Lifestyle (Eco Church Award 2020). Another organization

focusing on faith assets is Faith Invest, empowering faith groups to invest in line with their beliefs and values (FaithInvest 2019). The aim is to “support the rapidly developing movement of faiths actively using their investments to create a better world – for people and planet” (FaithInvest 2019). Additionally, there are reports and initiatives proposing ideas on how to reduce and store emissions on faith-owned land, promoting strategies like tree-planting and peat restoration like the *Church Land and the Climate Crisis: A Call to Action* report by Operation Noah and Bright Now. Faith institutions are the fourth-largest economic power with investments in all sectors (UNEP 2018). With hundreds of millions of houses of worship and more than 50% of schools owned by faith institutions, this is an important field for such institutions to lead the way in demonstrating that faith values work for the people and the planet. The convincing and convening powers of religions can influence the behavior of their members and lead to more sustainable practices. These powers are unmatched, even by the largest international organizations coming together. As faith followers generally strongly believe what their holy books say and instruct, sacred scriptures represent the power of convincing that is met with very little objection by religious followers. In spite of varying authority over the interpretation of sacred scripts in different religious traditions, the vast majority of religions and religious understandings exhibit a power of spiritual value that plays an important role not only in bringing peace among people, but also in social inclusion, as all religions call for serving everybody without distinction of marginalization.

#### 4 A Common Value System

When calling for a common value system of religions, drawing not only from the five major faith groups but also smaller faith-based organizations and Indigenous communities, this does not mean preferring one over the other, or coming up with a new religious doctrine that encompasses all religions. It simply means consolidating the diversity in religious values and drawing beautiful linkages to explain the common approaches. Teachings of the different religions, put together, provide cohesion and comprehensiveness as well as linkages to contemporary environmental issues related to these values. The reimagining of the human/environment paper on religion and development by Abumoghli (2022) calls for the establishment of a universal ethical approach that is extracted from the different religions, as different religions address the same issues and express them in different ways but leading to the same results. For example, the concept of stewardship that is reflected in the Abrahamic religions is reflected in Buddhism and Hinduism as the Dharma, which demonstrates the responsibility of people and their duty of

care. Another example, Ahimsa in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, represents the concept of non-violence that agrees with compassion in Abraham religions. A third example is the concept of the middle way in Buddhism that resonates with the concept of Wasateyyah in Islam.

Change is necessary not only for individuals but also for institutions, corporations, and businesses. Having such knowledge of the common values in religions would make it easy for practitioners to connect environmental issues and religious values and to guide our consumption and production patterns. Many religions provide specific instructions on what to eat, what to drink, and how to dress. This is particularly important in moving toward a plant-based diet that reduces impacts on lands and contributes to fighting climate change.

Some religious leaders have been pioneering in drawing linkages between their religions and the environment. For example, the encyclical *Laudato si'* of Pope Francis published in 2015 goes into detail about the Christian approach to integral ecology, providing an institutional approach to the relationship between humans and their environment (The Holy See 2015). Similarly, *Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth* is a document being prepared by Muslim scholars deriving from the Quran and the practices of prophet Mohammad on how Muslims should deal with the environment and based on which Islamic principles (Al-Mizan, unpublished). The two religions are followed by almost 50 per cent of humanity, so such institutional efforts should aid in explaining, based on religious values, the relationship between the sacred scripts and contemporary environmental issues. Both documents make excellent references to scientific evidence and international reports making the linkages clear. If such an institutional approach were to be followed by other major religions, this would be an important step to explaining the spiritual connection between humans and nature. For faith groups like Hinduism and Buddhism which are organized and structured in a different, less hierarchical way, there are many scholars and schools of thought that, like in Abrahamic religions, concentrate their attention on the connection of spiritual and environmental issues.

Interfaith collaboration is essential in advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Even though coming from differing traditions, many faith groups have a common aim to protect the natural environment and combat the triple planetary crisis. By coming together and joining their efforts in achieving the 2030 Agenda, different faith groups can be much more effective and successful in protecting their common home. Interfaith and intra-faith collaboration is part of the much-needed multilateral approach to solving the complexity of issues that we are facing and that we are leaving behind to future generations. There are already many interfaith/intra-faith organizations focusing on environmental challenges such as PARD (Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development), the Parliament



of World's Religions, The United Religions Initiative, The Religions for Peace, and GreenFaith. Through interfaith collaboration, the faith-based groups can exchange knowledge, improve their capacity, engage in action for environmental sustainability, and be more effective in their responses to the world's current environmental challenges by working together. At the Stockholm+50 conference held in June 2022, 240 faith organizations came together and endorsed an interfaith statement calling upon governments and other stakeholders to adopt an alternative paradigm that respects the spiritual value of nature as well as the natural capital (UNEP 2022b). This will require providing the appropriate conducive environment and suitable platform for religious actors to come together. The Faith for Earth Coalition of UNEP is a good example where policy meets religion and the combination is showing dividends, such as the interfaith statement at Stockholm and the others as contributions to the UN Environment Assembly and other international fora.

## 5 Conclusions

Religions, beliefs, and ethical systems are key components in driving a transformational shift in people's behavior toward living in harmony with nature. Religions, which have existed for centuries, have solid value systems that when implemented to complement policies, scientific evidence, and technology will provide the needed impetus to accelerate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, but will also create a sustainable spiritually energized generation that is driven by values and ethics. Change in behaviors and policies should happen at both the individual and institutional level and religions must come together to provide a consolidated ethical approach to facing climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

### Disclaimer

The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations Environment Programme.

### Issue and Editors

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