



POST
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TRANSFORMATIVE ACTIONS. CONVERGENCE #41

EARTH RESTORED: JOINING HANDS WITH FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS TO IMPLEMENT THE KMGBF



Panel discussion on faith and nature during COP15 in Montreal. © Faiths for Biodiversity



“WHEN WE SPEAK OF ENVIRONMENT, WHAT WE REALLY MEAN IS A RELATIONSHIP EXISTING BETWEEN NATURE AND THE SOCIETY WHICH LIVES IN IT. WE ARE PART OF NATURE, INCLUDED IN IT AND THUS IN CONSTANT INTERACTION WITH IT... WE ARE FACED NOT WITH TWO SEPARATE CRISES, ONE ENVIRONMENTAL AND THE OTHER SOCIAL, BUT RATHER WITH ONE COMPLEX CRISIS WHICH IS BOTH SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL.”

- Pope Francis's encyclical letter, *Laudato Si* (2015)¹

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Religion and spirituality are deeply grounded in care for the natural world and have led to some of the most enduring social movements in history. They are natural partners in implementing the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF). When engaged appropriately, they have the potential to significantly accelerate us towards a nature-positive world.

Religious and spiritual traditions draw much inspiration from the natural world². Their teachings on nature include how the world was created, the importance of caring for the environment, the respective roles of humans and wildlife, and how to ensure human-nature relationships are in balance and mutually beneficial.

Within the context of the recently adopted KMGBF and the whole-of-society approach, religious and spiritual groups are, because of their sizeable reach and influence, an important and natural constituency to engage in order to achieve a nature-positive world and catalyse the implementation of the KMGBF.

Known more commonly as faith-based organisations (FBOs) or, these groups can play a positive role by promoting the protection and restoration of biodiversity as a value proposition, and fostering a sense of shared responsibility and collective action for the well-being of people and the planet.

While FBOs are important stakeholders for environmental care, they – like all other stakeholder groups – have historical and present-day shortcomings. Understanding the wide variety of FBOs, their histories and the fact that some were involved in harmful colonisation activities is essential. This is particularly important when partnering FBOs with Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs).



Woman in a field of flowers with a Christian bracelet. ©Hester Qiang, Unsplash.

1. LIVING IN THE WORLD

Transcendence and other worldviews

Faith traditions have a variety of worldviews which help them understand the essence of reality, the existence of a possible supernatural deity or deities, the universe, the purpose of life, social teachings and the role of nature. Worldviews can vary significantly between traditions, and even within specific traditions. The differences and the range of these worldviews also can sometimes be aligned with contemporary understandings of the world but also differ significantly. These worldviews are derived from a number of sources as sacred books, ancestral teachings, or influential teachers and saints. The practices of faith groups can also be informed by local teachers, customs, culture and traditions. Faith groups can also sometimes be intertwined with IPLCs. It is important to understand these worldviews when engaging with such groups, as they provide crucial insights into how they shape the personal and societal behaviours of their followers.

Social teachings rooted in values

Social teachings for these groups are rooted in values that inform how and why to engage with other members of the faith, those outside the faith, the world at large, and the natural world. This applied theology ensues when faith groups look beyond their religious services and put their sacred teachings into action for the betterment of all beings. Justice and care for the vulnerable are often a key motivator for action. These groups are compelled to act in order to rectify historical wrongs and injustices committed against peoples and communities. Intergenerational equity can be a sacred act, as can caring for the poor, vulnerable and marginalised. Similarly, stewardship, care and interconnectedness with the world are common ways faiths understand their relationship and duty of care to nature.

The sacred role of nature

The sacredness and divinity of nature can be found across faith traditions, with each having particular nuances and perspectives on what makes nature sacred. Faith groups may see nature as a sacred gift to be nurtured and cared for. Some will respect nature, believing it has been created by God, whereas others will see nature as God. Nature also features in various ways within faith traditions. Many stories and traditions will feature the natural world, including mountains, deserts, rivers, trees and wildlife. It is for these reasons that FBOs are natural partners in the implementation of the KMGBF.

2. FAITHS WORKING WITH NATURE: VALIDATING THE GBF

Centuries of faith in action

Around the world, FBOs, spiritual communities and indigenous groups are initiating and participating in myriad efforts to address the climate crisis, biodiversity loss and the pollution of our soil, air and water. And this is not new. For centuries, spiritual devotees and religious followers have been creatively and strategically making efforts to safeguard the living system that sustains us all, while standing up to those who wish to destroy nature. In 1730 in the north of India, more than 300 members of the Bishnoi community (who follow the spiritual principles taught by Guru Jambheshwar⁴) hugged trees, sacrificing their own lives, in an effort to protect the Kherjali trees⁵. More recently, in the 1980s, Buddhist monks sought to protect forests in Thailand by ordaining trees⁶.

By the mid-1990s, religious scholars and scientists were collaborating in academic spaces⁷, giving greater visibility to the worrying state of carbon emissions and ecological tipping

points. They also called on religious leaders and faith communities to look to the ancient texts and living teachings within their respective traditions as the impetus to engage.

Numerous collaborative efforts began to lead to organised action between faith groups, civil society and local communities, such as Interfaith Power & Light⁸ and GreenFaith.⁹ In addition to reducing carbon, many spiritual teachers began to stress humanity's interdependence with all life as part of a fragile living system. In anticipation of the UN Paris Climate Conference, followers of a number of the world's religions put forth declarations on climate change, including Buddhists¹⁰, Hindus¹¹, Muslims¹². Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*¹³ was also published at that time.

FBOs manage 8% of Earth's habitable land surface, 5% of all commercial forests, 50% of schools worldwide, and 10% of the world's total financial institutions¹⁴. This indicates the decisive influence FBOs and their followers can exert when acting according to their values. Today, many faith actors leverage their power as voters and shareholders to demand changes from the oil, mining and banking CEOs as well as government leaders who prioritise private wealth over public health. A recent example is the interfaith group Australian Religious Response to Climate Change¹⁵, which, in partnership with other groups, has committed to a just transition to cleaner energy and successfully stopped the country's biggest banks from funding a 1 billion dollar coal mining expansion proposal¹⁶. There is also the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative¹⁷, which supports religious leaders and spiritual communities to protect rainforests, and those living in them, around the world.

“WE GRIEVE THE EXCESSIVE USE OF NATURAL RESOURCES THAT DISRUPTS THE BALANCE OF ECOSYSTEMS AND ACKNOWLEDGE OUR SHORTCOMINGS IN ALIGNING OUR ACTIONS WITH THE VALUES AND TENETS OF OUR TRADITIONS. YET WE ALSO RECOGNISE THE IMMENSE POWER OF FAITH TO BRING ABOUT RADICAL POSITIVE CHANGE BY IMPARTING HOPE AND SUMMONING THE COURAGE NECESSARY FOR BILLIONS TO RESPOND TO THE CHALLENGES AND CRISES BEFORE US”

- Faith Biodiversity Call to Action, 2020

Integration, collaboration & honouring: trends and lessons for the way forward

Although FBOs and spiritual communities have continued to advocate for a space at the table, it is only recently that their aggregate potential has been taken seriously. A number of emerging trends provide opportunities for increased engagement and collaboration with FBOs.

1. A first emerging trend is **integration**. As many of the SDGs suggest, working to restore Earth and taking good care of one another are related. Integrally so. Consider the more than 1000 'Church Forests,' established by Ethiopian Orthodox Churches whose short stone walls protect the ring of trees and wildlife around the buildings. Once heavily forested, Ethiopia's land has been overtaken by agriculture and cattle grazing. Forest ecologists and church priests are working together to provide education on the importance of biodiversity alongside efforts to grow and secure food¹⁸. Customised by each ecosystem and replicated widely, this sort of integrated approach not only increases community awareness and eco-literacy, but also shapes public opinion and influences policy-making processes. Faith leaders can help make the KMGBF more accessible by showing where it

1 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html
 2 Read the essay: The Movement of Religion and Ecology: Emerging Field and Dynamic Force, Yale University.
 3 See Post2020 project's video on Target 22 – The Whole-of-Society Participation
 4 Guru Jambheshwar - Wikipedia
 5 Kherjali massacre - Wikipedia
 6 To Protect the Environment, Buddhist Monks Are Ordaining Trees | Sojourners
 7 See: Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology
 8 Interfaith Power and Light | Faith in action for a safe climate
 9 Find out more about the GreenFaith movement
 10 See: Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, 2015: The Time to Act is Now – A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change
 11 See: UNFCCC, 2015, Hindu Declaration on Climate Change
 12 See: UNEP: Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth
 13 See: The Holy See, 2015, Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si*
 14 See: Faith Invest, 2017, Zug Guidelines to Faith-consistent Investing
 15 Find out more about ARCC
 16 See: “What went wrong here?” Big banks refuse coal king \$1b debt refinancing, Sydney Morning Herald.
 17 Find out more about the interfaith Rainforest Initiative
 18 See the incredible 'church forests' of Ethiopia



Token in nature Ubud, Indonesia. ©Bernard Hermanton Unsplash

aligns with values and respective faith traditions and teachings. Greater and continued education efforts by faith leaders and organisations are needed to expand this form of advocacy.

2. Another important lesson is the trend toward **interreligious collaboration**, which illustrates a convergence of views among faiths. Consider the Arizona Faith Network¹⁹, which organised local houses of worship during times of extreme heat, to serve as rotating ‘cooling centres’ for those without power or air conditioning. Or in Malawi, where Muslims, Christians and indigenous groups joined to plant tens of thousands of trees along the Lilongwe River to establish wind breaks, reduce erosion, improve soil health and heal a deforested landscape²⁰. The United Religions Initiative²¹ works to put a growing number of such grassroots efforts in communication with one another to increase their reach. A few examples across the network include modelling regenerative lifestyles at an eco-village outside Amman, Jordan; improving soil health and food security and establishing income for women using a grove of mango trees in Kolkata, India; creating greater coastline resiliency through mangrove restoration in Philippines, and teaching eco-literacy to children in Cambodia. Such collaborative efforts illustrate work not only among diverse faiths, but also with those oppressed by the dominant system (i.e. youth, women, indigenous peoples, etc.). Community engagement of this sort can lead to larger-scale conservation initiatives, faster progress towards the KMGBF targets, and increased compliance with regulations and at the same time reduce conflict over land and resource use.

3. A final trend seems to be honouring the rights of nature and our place within it. As more localised efforts turn to restoring degraded ecosystems or establishing community-based resilience, faith and local groups are seeking collaboration with indigenous neighbours, whose relationship with nature has always been reciprocal. As faith groups better acknowledge the deep connections we have to specific landscapes and ecosystems, indigenous practices urge us to see Nature’s teachings as supremely wise and trustworthy. Consider the Xingu Seeds

Network²² in Brazil, where the Xingu people are sharing, with local farmers, their planting technique called ‘muvuca’, which restores and protects 120 different species of plants per hectare of forest. In just a few seasons, the group has planted enough seeds to yield more than 1.8 million trees, which will increase food production and improve water quality. When ecosystems are restored, it also nearly always means carbon has been or will be sequestered as an additional benefit.

These trends are facilitating opportunities for FBOs to partner with other stakeholders to contribute to the growing global response to the nature crisis and identify pathways for ongoing KMGBF implementation.

3. FAITH ALIGNMENT WITH THE KMGBF GOALS AND TARGETS

FBOs engaging in KMGBF adoption and implementation

Faith groups were mobilised in an unprecedented way leading up to the Convention on Biological Diversity COP 15 (December 2022). Convened by the Faiths for Biodiversity coalition¹, regular online briefings and training sessions were conducted, along with targeted outreach to FBOs to encourage and support their participation in the COP 15. They developed a set of key messages and recommendations for a world living in harmony with nature, aligning with and supporting many of the key demands from other caucus groups, including IPLCs and the Women’s, Youth, and NGO caucuses. The multifaith coalition key messages were endorsed by 55 faith groups spanning almost every single major faith tradition.

As we now look ahead to the prompt implementation of the GBF, the table below provides example pathways for selected targets of the framework, bearing in mind that successful collaborations depend on local contexts, the engagement of faith groups, and the commitment of decision-makers to work together toward biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.

19 Find out more about the Heat Relief Initiative – Arizona Faith Network
 20 Find out more about the Wildlife and Natural Resources Conservation and Rehabilitation Trust
 21 uri.org
 22 Xingu Seeds Network: harvesting native forest seeds - Partnerships for Forests
 23 Faiths for Biodiversity
 24 See the ‘Multi-Faith Response to the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework’

Watch Project’s GBF video:
 Target 1
 Target 2
 Target 3
 Target 10
 Target 12
 Target 16
 Target 18
 Target 22

KMGBF targets	Example pathways for engaging with FBOs in KMGBF implementation
Awareness-raising and education	
Target 21: Data, information & Knowledge	Support faith groups via educational materials and training programmes. Faith groups can organise workshops, seminars and community events to raise awareness on biodiversity and the need for its protection.
Conservation & restoration of ecosystems	
Target 2: Restoration of degraded ecosystems	Engage with faith communities in reforestation and habitat restoration on lands owned or managed by religious institutions. Mobilise volunteers for tree planting and restoration activities.
Target 3: Protected areas and OECMs	Collaborate with faith groups to designate sacred natural areas as protected sites or OECMs. Develop co-management agreements and governance mechanisms that involve faith leaders.
Sustainable land & resources management	
Target 1: Land and sea use changes	Collaborate with faith groups to incorporate their traditional ecological knowledge and spiritual values into land-use planning and management processes, with respect for IPLCs’ rights.
Target 7: Pollution reduction	Organise with faith communities clean-up drives for natural areas, water bodies, and urban spaces. Reiterate the environmental care already present in religious teachings and practices.
Target 10: Sustainable management of productive areas	Engage faith leaders to promote agroecological practices and sustainable fishing methods aligned with religious teachings. Establish community gardens on religious properties to model sustainable farming.
Target 12: Biodiversity-inclusive Urban Planning	Work with faith leaders to incorporate biodiversity considerations into urban development plans, the restoration of urban green spaces and the integration of natural elements into built environments.
Sustainable consumption & production	
Target 16: Sustainable Consumption	Collaborate with FBOs to educate communities about sustainable consumption habits. Launch campaigns on food waste reduction, mindful consumer choices, energy consumption, and ethical investment practices.
Local knowledge and community engagement	
Target 22: IPLCs’ Inclusion	Work with faith leaders to advocate for IPLCs’ rights in biodiversity decision-making. Organise training sessions that promote effective engagement and participation.
Engagement of faith leaders	
Target 18: Incentive harmful for Biodiversity	Work with faith leaders to identify harmful incentives and subsidies. Collaborate with governments and civil society to reform them and redirect funds toward biodiversity initiatives.
Target 9: Increasing Financial Resources	Engage faith communities in advocating for increased funding for biodiversity. Collaborate on fundraising events, awareness campaigns, and initiatives that promote private sector investment.



Picture 1:
Tibetan monk in contact with nature.
©Komang Gita Krishna Murti on
Unsplash

Picture 2:
Women meditating while contemplating
the leaves of a tree. ©Hasan Almasi
on Unsplash

25 <https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/letters/thich-nhat-hanhs-statement-on-climate-change-for-unfccc>

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4. MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Many FBOs' achievements in these fields is the result of successful partnerships. Same will be true with the implementation of the KMGBF. As we look ahead, the following recommendations are presented to foster deeper partnerships with FBOs to help strengthen their activism, advocacy and action.

Partnership at key political moments

Faith groups are active partners across the UN system and in the implementation of the SDGs. They are present at major UN moments and gatherings, including the UNGA, UNFCCC COPs, CBD COPs and the UN Environment Assembly. Partnering with them during these moments by including faith speakers in sessions, cohosting side events, and coholding press conferences and other gatherings will bring visibility to their efforts and highlight the importance of their engagement and contributions.

FBO contributions to developing and revising National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs)

In 2024, all parties will have to describe a set of national targets that they will pursue for GBF implementation. The country NBSAPs. must contribute substantively to the implementation of the KMGBF and should be developed in consultation with civil society organisations.

FBOs will thus enjoy a once-in-a-decade opportunity to influence their drafting and encourage governments to considerably step-up their conservation and sustainable development efforts, ultimately contributing to a more equitable net-zero and nature-positive world. and significantly helping achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

“THIS BEAUTIFUL, BOUNTEOUS, LIFE-GIVING PLANET WE CALL EARTH HAS GIVEN BIRTH TO ALL OF US, AND ALL OF US CARRIES HER WITHIN EVERY CELL OF OUR BODY... WHEN YOU REALISE EARTH IS MORE THAN SIMPLY YOUR ENVIRONMENT, YOU’LL BE MOVED TO PROTECT HER IN THE SAME WAY AS YOU WOULD YOURSELF... IF WE CAN DEVELOP A DEEP RELATIONSHIP WITH EARTH, WE’LL HAVE ENOUGH LOVE, STRENGTH AND AWAKENING TO CHANGE OUR WAY OF LIFE.”

-Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist Master, Statement on Climate Change for the United Nations (2014)²

CBD COP 16 Engagement

A handful of FBOs attended CBD COP14 in 2018. Their number increased to more than 30 at the CBD COP15 in 2022. Much of this was possible due to the support of institutional donors and conservation organisations. This growth and momentum will continue to increase as we move towards CBD COP16 in

2024. Working with the Faiths for Biodiversity coalition will be an important way to engage this growing constituency as they develop their advocacy priorities and reach out to additional FBOs to engage in the process.

Development of faith-specific resources and capacity building

There is a need for ongoing education and capacity building for FBOs in relation to the KMGBF. Briefings, training and institutional funding are required to ensure FBOs stay up to date with the latest developments in the implementation of the KMGBF. This will help them develop advocacy priorities, ensure their work is aligned with the broader CBD advocacy landscape, and be active participants in CBD advocacy and negotiations. The Faiths for Biodiversity coalition is well placed to play this role.

Tracking of faith engagement with the KMGBF

As faith groups increase their work in protecting and restoring biodiversity, a mechanism to effectively monitor and track their activities will be needed. Such a tool will enable identification of gaps and opportunities, foster collaboration and encourage engagement from new Parties.

As the triple environmental crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution becomes more acute, faithful followers and spiritual practitioners from around the world are recognising the even deeper implications of the scriptures and sacred teachings that provide structure, comfort and meaning throughout the cycle of life. In short, they understand that Humanity does not exist to dominate, rise above or 'escape' nature, but rather to understand itself more deeply within nature.

As participants in the implementation of the KMGBF, FBOs will be applying their respective theologies in tune with approaches that integrate people within ecosystems. To do so, they will collaboratively share ancient and new practices together and honour interrelatedness as the source of revelation and strength it has always been.



**TRANSFORMATIVE
CBD COP15_KUNMING/MONTREAL 2022
ACTIONS.**
TOGETHER
FOR NATURE
& PEOPLE.

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