

# ENGAGING WITH FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Understanding the key role that faith-based organizations play at the global, regional and local levels, UN Environment supports the UN-wide task force on Religion and Development. UN Environment is taking the lead in establishing an innovative strategy to engage and partner with faith-based organizations to deliver on Agenda 2030. The strategy builds on the 5 principles (People living on a healthy Planet, enjoying Prosperity and Partnerships in Peaceful societies), with three overarching goals: 1) Leadership for policy impact; 2) Financing to support SDGs; and 3) Knowledge-based decision support system. The three goals will largely depend on mobilizing local communities; co-ordinating communications and advocacy; fostering south-south cooperation; engaging in faith-Environment thematic conversations and empowering UN Environment corporate engagement.

**Faith For Earth**

*UN  
Environment  
Strategy*

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## Executive Summary

The global Agenda 2030 can only be achieved by engaging and empowering stakeholders, mobilizing partnerships and engaging untapped innovative approaches. While it is widely acknowledged that the role of civil society and non-government organization is crucial, the full spectrum of such organizations has not been adequately addressed including those organizations based on faith, values, culture and indigenous knowledge. Building on the cultural diversity is significant and fulfills the fourth dimension of sustainable development as called for in Rio Summits. Traditional stakeholder's engagement strategies have been effective to a limited scale requiring new creative, inspiring and innovative actions bringing like-minded networks to support the implementation of the global Agenda at all levels.

Faith-Based Organizations (FBO) have been recognized by the UN system as key and important players in eradicating poverty, improving people's health, protecting the environment and thus achieving sustainable development. Citizens see in such organizations as being trustworthy and highly networked with dynamism that enables them to operate and achieve on the ground results where and when needed. Spiritual values for more than 80% of the people living on earth have been driving individual behaviors. In many countries, spiritual beliefs and religion are main drivers for cultural values, social inclusion, political engagement, and economic prosperity. Utilizing the dynamics of these beliefs at the local level and the role of faith actors is crucial for sustainable development. Conserving the environment has not been absent from the focus of faith-based organizations. In fact, our research revealed that more than 190 environmental faith-based organizations have been working at the global, regional and local levels in addressing climate change, energy conservation, sustainable use of biodiversity, and reforestation, among others.

For UN Environment, the integrated approach should facilitate the integration of religious and cultural values to ensure inclusive green and transformative development through adopting lifestyles that are informed by faith-based values and behaviors to achieve sustainable consumption and production. The integrated approach coupled with cultural and religious values can promote innovative nature-based solutions, respect for traditional and indigenous knowledge and cultural diversity, exercise environmental stewardship and duty of care. This coupling of environmental sustainability and duty of care can be the corner stone for a common vision that enhances the role of religion and culture in achieving sustainability. For this purpose, UN Environment is launching a global initiative to strategically engage with faith-based organizations with a mission to *“To Encourage, Empower and Engage with Faith-Based Organizations as partners, at all levels, toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and fulfilling Agenda 2030.”* To be able to do so, the organization will engage with faith-based organizations to realize an impact on local communities sustainable livelihoods based on common spiritual values. The Strategy focuses on mobilizing faith-based investments in supporting SDGs implementation while greening their assets and providing the needed knowledge for effective messages of faith leaders with decision makers and the general public. The three overarching goals of the strategy relate to 1) Leadership for policy impact; 2) Green Faith-Based Financing to achieve the SDGs; and 3) Knowledge-based decision support system. The three goals will largely depend on mobilizing local *communities*; communications and advocacy; south-south cooperation; faith-Environment thematic conventions and empowering UN Environment corporate engagement.

## Mission

*“To Encourage, Empower and Engage with Faith-Based Organizations as partners, at all levels, toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and fulfilling Agenda 2030.”*

## Vision

*“A world where everything is in balance”*

## Values: CREATION

**Communicate:** Communicate effectively to engage all stakeholders.

**Respect:** Respect all spiritual and religious beliefs.

**Empower:** Empower and engage with all stakeholders.

**Act:** Act in ways that reflect individual and communal beliefs.

**Transform:** Transform people’s behavior through their spiritual values.

**Inspire:** Inspire innovative approaches to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

**Organize:** Organize knowledge and other resources for efficient timely results.

**Network:** Network with the UN system and like-minded organizations.

## Introduction and Background

The Agenda 2030 five “P” principles of People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnerships are envisioned as an overarching strategy to mobilize global action towards sustainable development. It is widely acknowledged that partnerships are important for the implementation of the Agenda, especially by engaging and empowering all stakeholders. While it is a global Agenda, it also acknowledges and respects the diversity of capacities, policies and priorities, bringing together governments (at all levels) as partners with the private sector, civil society, the United Nations system and other actors. Partnerships are intended to mobilize creative approaches, inspire actions, create innovative financing, cultivate existing science along with indigenous knowledge, and engage like-minded networks to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the local level.

Faith-Based Organizations (FBO) have been recognized by the UN system as key players in eradicating poverty, improving people’s health, protecting the environment and thus working toward sustainable development. More than 190 environmental faith-based organizations have been addressing climate change, energy conservation, sustainable use of biodiversity, and reforestation, among others things, working at the global, regional and local levels.<sup>1</sup>

The UN Inter-agency Task Force on Religion and Development (UN IATF-FBOs) was officially established in 2010 and is composed of 19 UN organizations, including UN Environment. The main objectives of the inter-agency task force are to facilitate knowledge exchange; provide a resource pool of experiences; and strengthen partnerships with faith-based organizations. UN Environment has convened and conducted a number of important initiatives and conventions in partnership with faith-based organizations<sup>2</sup>. The last of which was organized on 30 November 2017 in Nairobi specifically to discuss this strategy.

For centuries, faith-based organizations have provided socio-economic services to local communities, especially for poor and marginalized people. In some societies, political and religious leadership is combined in both formal and informal ways. Spiritual values for more than 80% of the people living on earth have been driving individual behaviors. Citizens see in faith-based organizations as being trustworthy and highly networked organizations with dynamism that enables them to operate and achieve on the ground results where and when needed. These organizations respond to the needs as well as the values of the communities’ they serve. In so doing, they have built credibility through delivering services in the areas of welfare, education, health, and disaster relief among others. In many countries, spiritual beliefs and religious practices are interwoven with cultural values, social principles, political engagement, and economic prosperity. Understanding the dynamics of these beliefs and practices at the local level and, more generally, the role of faith actors within local communities is crucial for intentional and systematic sustainable development. Donors have been increasing their reliance on and partnership with faith-based organizations to channel much of the development aid. However, according to a research by the World

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<sup>1</sup> The list of these environmental faith-based organizations has been compiled (by UN Environment and by environmental faith-based organizations that participated in the strategy consultation meeting held in Nairobi on 20 November 2017). The list describes their focus, religious connection and objectives. However, environment is also part of other faith-based organizations with broader focus. Such organizations have also been collected.

<sup>2</sup> For UN Environment, cooperation with Faith-based Organizations dates back to 1986, when the Interfaith Partnership for the Environment (IPE) was created to initially inform North American congregations about the serious environmental problems facing life on Earth. The publication "Earth and Faith: A Book of Reflection for Action", published in 2000, highlighted the critical environmental issues confronting humankind at the beginning of a new millennium and UN efforts to address them. In June 2011, UN Environment hosted an event organized by the Southern African Faith Communities Environment Institute (SAFCEI), the All Africa Churches Conference (AACC) and the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) to discuss the position of faith groups on the environment and humanity, in particular climate change and its effects on Africa. In 2016, UN Environment, in cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Department of the Environment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, organized the 2nd Seminar on Environment, Culture and Religion – Promoting intercultural Dialogue for Sustainable Development” in Tehran, Iran.

Council of Churches<sup>3</sup>, “NGOs, including faith-based organizations, are active in more countries than many governments, and they carry more credibility with taxpayers than do government aid agencies. Indeed, some individual NGOs have country programmes with larger budgets than the government ministries to which they relate.”

The 2016 UN Environment publication on Environment, Religion and Culture in the Context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explored the role of religion and culture in the implementation of the sustainable development goals; the role of different value systems and cultural diversity as resources for conservation, climate justice action, bridging between science and other knowledge systems. Attention was given to issues of education, traditional knowledge, rights of indigenous peoples, peace building, gender, sustainability and economics, participation, and civil mobilization.

The publication describes some of the inter-linkages of religion, culture and the environment, as well as the environmental and socioeconomic dimensions of sustainable development. It uses the five critical areas in the 2030 Agenda - people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership - whose objective is to leave no one behind and to reach those furthest behind first, - in order to demonstrate the ways in which the sustainable development goals are interrelated with expressions of religion and spirituality in local communities. It concludes with a set of recommendations toward finding lasting solutions to these issues, to help free humanity from want and deprivation, while fostering human wellbeing and strengthening efforts expressing duty of care.

It is also argued that the integrated approach should facilitate the integration of religious, spiritual and cultural values to ensure inclusive green and transformative development through adopting value-faith-based lifestyles and behaviors to achieve sustainable consumption and production. Reaching to local, poorest and marginalized communities can significantly contribute to ending extreme poverty, leaving no one behind. The integrated approach coupled with cultural and religious values can promote innovative nature-based solutions, respect for traditional knowledge and cultural diversity, exercise environmental stewardship and duty of care.

It is more urgent than ever to promote creative solutions to achieving the SDGs. Coupling environmental concerns with duty of care, for example, can enhance the role of religion and culture working together to achieve sustainability. Religious practices and spiritual expressions align with many important topics of environmental ethics, including the value of the natural world; the need to stay within the planetary boundaries; the continuity between human and non-human forms of life; the moral significance of all living beings in the eyes of God and/or in the cosmic order; the ritual dependence of human life on the natural world; and the principles of justice and other moral norms that reflect our responsibility to live in balance with nature.

Maurice Strong, the first executive director of UN Environment said: “It is the responsibility of each human being today to choose between the force of darkness and the force of light. We must therefore transform our attitudes, and adopt a renewed respect for the superior laws of Divine Nature.”

### **Definition of Faith-Based Organizations**

UN Environment strategy on faith-based organizations should be in line with the UN Task Force on Religion and Development definition, which in turn is informed by more than a decade of experience among different UN organizations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Faith-based and secular humanitarian organizations by Elizabeth Ferris

<sup>4</sup> Although some UN organizations have indicated their own definition of faith-based organizations, such as UNDP, these definitions however tend to agree on the basics, while including some specific details for practical purposes.

*“Legally registered international faith-based development and humanitarian NGOs, Religious leaders, religious institutions such as Mosques, Churches and their affiliated NGOs; and independent local community entities inspired by faith principles.”<sup>5</sup>*

The Task Force supports the work of United Nations staff, towards the shared objective of learned, strategic and sustained engagement with key partners in the faith-based world, to support respective and collective efforts to realize international development goals. The objectives of the task force are:

- Provide a resource pool on partnerships with faith-based organizations for colleagues within the United Nations as well as other developmental counterparts.
- Strengthen the integration of faith-based organizations partnerships within broader civil society outreach and provide informed policy guidance upon request.

The Task Force is mandated to provide important services to the members of the task team including: serving as a convener of multilateral experience and expertise, provide a forum to consult and engage within the UN and with non-UN international partners based on diverse UN experiences, evidence and analysis; convene policy dialogues with faith-based partners, share tools, guidelines, information and other capacity building resources; share experiences, lessons, challenges and best practices learned through diverse partnerships with faith-based organizations at country, regional and global levels; support members in developing and/or ensuring clarity and consistency in outreach to/with faith-based partners; and convene regular joint UN system-wide activities and initiatives with a view to engaging faith actors in a learned and strategic manner around shared global objectives.

## Goals and Strategies

In 2008, by its resolution on the “promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace,” the UN General Assembly encouraged the promotion of dialogue among all cultures, and asked that States consider, where appropriate, initiatives that identify practical actions in all levels of society for promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue, tolerance and understanding.<sup>6</sup> In 2015, by the terms of the first text, titled “Promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace,” the UN General Assembly, among other measures, emphasized that mutual understanding and interreligious and intercultural dialogue constituted important dimensions of the dialogue among civilizations and of the culture of peace.<sup>7</sup>

With this backdrop of the importance of inter-religious cooperation, a number of UN agencies have developed some approaches to involving faith-based organizations in the implementation of their programme of work and projects. UN Environment has also been involved, to a certain extent, as part of its strategy to engage all types of stakeholders; however, the organization has been keen to develop an innovative approach to engaging with faith-based organizations that would maximize the mutual benefits in the wake of the complexity of the implementation of the 2030 global development agenda. For this purpose, this strategy outlines key areas where UN Environment believes a genuine and productive partnership would make a difference and would accelerate the implementation of the SDGs in an effective manner. Development of this strategy started with a policy paper that was discussed and approved by the Senior Management Team of UN Environment. The draft strategy document was shared with and benefited from contributions of UN Environment staff, UN Task Team on Religion and Development,

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<sup>5</sup> 2009 UNFPA Guidelines for engaging faith-based organizations as agents of change

<sup>6</sup> GA (resolution 62/90)

<sup>7</sup> Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (document A/70/L.20)

and individual faith leaders. A dedicated consultation meeting with faith-based organizations was held on 30 November 2017 in Nairobi at the margins of the UN Environment Assembly. The participants have endorsed the goals, suggested priority areas and contributed to the database of faith-based organizations as well as committed to conduct specific activities to assist in the implementation of the strategy.<sup>8</sup>

The strategy stems from the intrinsic linkages between faith concepts of stewardship and duty of care and environmental sustainability that improves the socio-economic conditions of all leaving no one behind. Linking religion and culture through environmental sustainability can significantly address climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, desertification and unsustainable land and water use, by fostering a fundamental change in attitude among people, through their own institutions and communities, and through cooperation with other cultures, including indigenous cultures whose traditional practices already embed such a relationship.

To be able to achieve the overall goals, creative partnerships must be established with faith-based organizations that are doing remarkable work through improving the lives of their local communities. This partnership can only work if it is built at all levels by engaging with religious or spiritual leaders at global as well as at local community levels. The partnership would depend on the exchange of knowledge, linking scientific findings and religious teaching for providing science-faith-based evidence, similar to the science-policy interface work, and by mobilizing the assets of faith-based organizations as drivers for transitioning to green-economy and financing for sustainable development. The strategy also aims not only to empower faith-based organizations, but also to build capacity among UN Environment staff to innovatively engage and facilitate effective partnerships staff need to understand the linkages, opportunities as well as the most effective strategic approach according to identified common grounds and priority areas that would maximize impact.

Empowering of staff for effective engagement is essential to integrate partnerships in the design of projects, initiatives and programmes at the global and regional levels. Regional offices would be the main interlocutor for reaching out to regionally and locally-based organizations, while divisions would make the linkages at the strategic level.

By empowering UN Environment staff, the organization will ensure the following:

- Divisions, Regional Offices and staff are empowered to establish effective partnerships with faith-based organizations based on common principles.
- Faith-based environmental focus is integrated into the design of the programme of work, projects and initiatives.
- Programmes and initiatives integrate into their budgets delivery by and work with faith-based organizations on mobilizing additional resources for joint implementation.

This can be achieved by the following set of activities:

1. Establish UN Environment faith-based advisory committee
2. Conduct a survey among UN Environment Divisions and Regional Offices to identify ongoing cooperation and best examples of our collaboration with faith-based organizations.
3. Establish criteria and develop staff guidelines for outreach and engagement with faith-based organizations and religious leaders highlighting opportunities and associated risks.
4. Participate and engage with the UN Task Force on religion and development.

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<sup>8</sup> The meeting minutes of the consultation meeting are available for consultation on [Wecollaborate.unep.org](http://Wecollaborate.unep.org) along with the agenda and the main strategy presentation.

5. Propose actions to better mainstream UN Environment's engagement with faith-based organizations as part of our overall effort to integrate engagement with civil society.
6. Empower staff to include faith actors in training and capacity-building initiatives.
7. Dedicate staff within UN Environment to focus and deliver on the outcomes of this global strategy for engaging with faith-based organizations. (focal points)
8. Establish innovation labs within UN environment with faith-based leaders to think and run creative approaches to strengthen partnerships with faith-based organizations.
9. Understand, and invest in, the complex interactions between religion and innovation
10. Partner with UN Staff College and UN Task Team to use their existing courses on empowering staff to engage with faith-based organizations.
11. Establish a monitoring system to capture success stories, challenges and approaches to resolve critical engagement issues.

### **GOAL 1: Strengthen Partnerships with Faith-Based Organizations' Leadership for Policy Impact**

In communities across the planet, religious leaders play an important part either in governing community affairs, or in providing socio-economic and cultural services to the needy. Faith-based organizations are increasingly taking this leadership role by structured institutional setup that allows them to mobilize, manage and deliver resources. In addition, faith-based organizations have been getting more and more engaged in public policy debates, whether on general governance issues or on services to local communities, demonstrating commitment to sustainable development and use of natural resources in fairness to humans and the environment where they live.

UN agencies and donor organizations have engaged faith-based organizations in policy dialogue on issues of justice, disaster relief, migration, and youth engagement for some time. UN Environment participated, for example, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Seminar on Religion, Environment and Culture in Tehran in April 2016. Such dialogues should capitalize on the outreach of faith-based organizations within societies around the world and should contribute to confidence building and strategies for conflict avoidance, along with more effective decision-making. Managing cultural and religious diversity can help us find long lasting solutions for the challenges we all face today.

Religious and spiritual leaders may have an enormous influence within local communities beyond what any single awareness or advocacy campaign can have. Religious leaders and faith-based organizations are present at the grassroots levels even in conflict zones or in remote communities that otherwise would be very challenging for a development agency to reach. Such leaders are part of the social fabric of these societies and may be trusted enough to talk about sensitive issues that could not be discussed by a visiting advocacy officer of a development agency.

Those local community leaders are often connected to a wider informal network of religious leaders in bigger communities or cities, where they get their resources, advice and even instructions. Tapping to this network would open avenues to reaching the most remote and marginalized communities, including some of the most important environmentally-sensitive areas, where UN Environment is involved with initiatives aimed at enhancing environmental sustainability. They therefore would be a strategic partner in meeting the overarching policy objective of the 2030 Agenda – leave no one behind.

UN Environment mission statement states: *"To provide leadership and encourage partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing, and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations."* This statement very strongly links with the mission of faith-based organizations that revolves around caring for the environment or what is widely known as

“duty of care”. To achieve its mission, UN Environment works on six thematic areas including; climate change, ecosystems, environmental governance, resource efficiency, chemicals and waste, and disasters and conflicts with a global responsibility to keep the global environment under review. Similarly, teachings and efforts of faith leaders and faith-based organizations have very much focused on climate change, ecosystems, ethical use of environmental resources, duty to morally manage environmental resources, and prevention of wasting food or water.

It is essential; therefore, to strengthen the common ground focus and identify where the role of each partner is mutually supporting the other in their quest to make a difference and bring these issues to the heart of global discussions and local action not only by governments but also by the ordinary people. UN Environment has launched a variety of programmes and initiatives at the global, regional and local levels. Initiatives like the 10 year framework on sustainable consumption and production, sustainable lifestyles, the poverty-environment initiative, the protection of marine environment, the finance initiative, and many others depend on partnerships with stakeholders for either delivery of the services, or advocacy for impact. Thus, faith-based organizations could be excellent partners when they are encouraged, empowered and engaged toward achieving common objectives.

Cultural, religious and environmental diversities are essential elements of achieving the SDGs, building on the sound stewardship of natural resources as a basic human value and a social and cultural responsibility. By focusing on common values that are based on mutual respect and integrity, partnerships between environmental leaders and faith-based organizations can be strengthened toward achieving the future we want. This will require establishing trust between UN Environment and faith-based organizations, as well as among those whose diverse beliefs embody caring for the people and for the planet. Faith based organizations could have a holistic approach such as environment and life where the quality of the environment equal the quality of life.

Local community religious and spiritual leaders should be mobilized and empowered with knowledge and resources on environmental issues as related to religious teachings. This can be achieved by creating a web of networks connecting remote communities close to environmental resources where local communities should be encouraged to use indigenous and cultural knowledge for sustainable management of environmental resources. This will require the involvement of young men and women in the local communities to start up sustainable investments at the local level.

## **Outputs**

- 1.1 A high level global “Coalition for Creation” is established to facilitate policy dialogue on environmental issues that would encourage innovative approaches to finding long-lasting solutions to environmental challenges.
- 1.2 Common ground environmental issues have been identified where faith-based organizations and UN Environment can establish strategic partnerships for a stronger impact at all levels.
- 1.3 A global compact for action by religious leaders on collaborative work on care for creation is established.
- 1.4 Faith-based organizations are strategically involved in the global debate on integrating ethical and moral religious values into the design and implementation of UN Environment global programmes and initiatives.
- 1.5 Global UN Environment initiatives involve FBO’s at global, regional and local levels.

## **Corresponding Activities:**

- 1.1.1 Identify supportive religious leaders at the global, regional and local levels, including faith leaders and communities in the North, where faith and religion is still a significant force.
- 1.1.2 Establish a network for connecting faith-based organizations leaders to build trust and identify common values.
- 1.1.3 Hold a regular global forum to facilitate policy dialogue on the margins of UN Environment Assembly. Host policy dialogues with faith-based partners on environmental issues to feed into the UN Environment Assembly leadership policy dialogue. A global symposium could be dedicated to faith-environment linkages.
- 1.1.4 Compile and share policies, incentives, and practices that respect cultural and religious diversity and the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.
- 1.1.5 Establish monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure accountability and linkages with UN Environment programme of work.
- 1.1.6 Stimulate youth engagement in interfaith and intercultural harmony activities to foster cross-cultural understanding
- 1.1.7 Hold global meetings for young religious leaders to ensure the integration of youth issues and energy into the overall global efforts.
- 1.1.8 Youth are provided with startup options for local investment in natural resources such as agroforestry, water distribution, etc.
- 1.1.9 Provide capacity building, trainings, and workshops to empower faith-based organizations' leaders connecting religious beliefs with environmental goals.
- 1.1.10 Include in UN Environment's integrated approach special provisions on engaging faith-based organizations as part of the means of implementation.
- 1.1.11 Identify local level faith-based actors and the type of their engagement.
- 1.1.12 Empower local leaders with knowledge and resources through the network of larger organizations.
- 1.1.13 Facilitate the participation of faith-based organizations from the south in global south-south expos.
- 1.1.14 Include faith-based organizations in the design and implementation mechanisms of the built and road programme.
- 1.1.15 Enhance the documentation and transfer of green economy practices among and between global, regional and local faith-based organizations.
- 1.1.16 Identify the focus of different faiths concerning environmental issues by connecting with faith leaders and reviewing literature on such issues.
- 1.1.17 Map the linkages between UN Environment sub programmes , special initiatives and projects and faith-based focused interventions.
- 1.1.18 Jointly with faith-based organizations hold global thematic UN Environment-faith connected conferences such as faith-rainforest global conference, faith-oceans global conference, Islamic botanical gardens conference, and others.
- 1.1.19 Create and implement global, regional and local programmes with faith-based organizations as strategic partners to empower, engage and deliver on the ground.
- 1.1.20 Map linkages between priority issues to faith-based organizations and faith leaders and the SDGs under the custody of UN Environment indicators' monitoring system. Provide practical interfaith examples of initiatives that address SDG target and provide a matrix of priority areas for partnership action
- 1.1.21 Serve as a convener of multi-cultural experience on environmental engagement with religious leaders among UN agencies to provide evidence and analysis.
- 1.1.22 Host policy dialogues with faith-based partners on environmental issues to feed into the UN Environment Assembly leadership policy dialogue. One UN Environment Assembly session, or a global symposium, could be dedicated to faith-environment linkages.

## GOAL 2: Green Faith-Based Organizations' Investments, Operations and Assets

Religious institutions in some parts of the world, by the nature of the services they provide at the local level, but also for their global outreach and networks, hold enormous financial assets to build schools, hospitals, infrastructure as well as distribution of humanitarian aid to support the poorest and most marginalized. These financial assets are mainly contributed by charity donors; however, faith-based organizations do own investment corporations, holdings, pension funds, private sector businesses as well as land and real estates and could have a proactive social stance, considering environmental or other social-service issues. Religious organizations are arguably the fourth largest group of investors in the world.<sup>9</sup> Faith-based investing remains a niche within the overall socially responsible investing theme, but involves the idea of using ethics to guide monetary decisions.

Religious investments may be governed by beliefs and religious laws. Islamic financial institutions, for example, ban interest on investment and use the Sharia law of finance including Mudaraba (Profit and loss sharing), Wadiah (safekeeping), Musharaka (joint venture), Murabaha (cost plus), and Ijar (leasing). The Islamic financial system places equal emphasis on the ethical, moral, social and religious dimensions, to enhance equality and fairness for the good of society as a whole. Similarly, Catholic finance system and financial activities are based on moral principles from the interpretation of Christian religious texts and from the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church (such as Catholic social teaching). While the Society of Friends (Quakers) forbids financing warfare and Jainism strictly uses the principle of “ahimsa” or non-violence to guide investments. The sums of money involved are not small: in the USA alone, religion constituted in the year 2000 around 32% of all giving amounted to \$335 billion.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the Islamic Financial Services Board (IFSB) has been able to sustain its total assets value at approximately USD1.9 trillion in 2016.<sup>11</sup> Private faith-based investments are rising, particularly in developing countries.<sup>12</sup>

Faith-based organizations have been instrumental in moving the responsible investment agenda forward, and spearheaded the movement decades ago. Some faith-based organizations have also adopted policies to encourage corporate social responsibility practices by those using their investments incorporating environmental and social services and even human-rights based programmes as in the case of Christian investors. Some faith-based organizations use what is known as socially responsible investment (SRI) or faith-consistent investment (FCI). These types of investments aim at making a positive impact on the social welfare of their followers.

With the involvement of faith-based organizations, from social and environmental perspectives, UN Environment could partner with faith-based organizations to pioneer modern forms of responsible investment. The UN Environment Finance Initiative, known as UNEP-FI, provides a global partnership platform with the global financial sector. Coupled with its strong focus on policy, the initiative could facilitate the most needed coupling of remodeling investment and the impact of financial reforms needed to achieve the SDGs involving faith-based investments. Moreover, the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) is a global initiative focused on “making nature’s values visible”. Its principal objective is to mainstream the values of biodiversity and ecosystem services into decision-making at all levels. Green economy is yet another programme of UN environment where faith-based organizations

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<sup>9</sup> From Faith to Faith Consistent Investing: Religious Institutions and their Investment Practices, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> The Economics of Morality - the Giving What We Can, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> The Islamic Financial Services Board, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Faith-Consistent Investing and the Sustainable Development Goals

could be natural partners where greening of own establishments, or investments could lead to mutual benefits.

This strategy will work with faith-based organizations and faith-based funds to strengthen the environment and sustainable development components of their activities. The social responsible investment principles will be strengthened to include principles of stewardship and duty of care for the creation. This will not only target projected investments, but also existing faith-based assets and establishments. As in the case of greening the blue and the sustainable UN programme, UN Environment will work with faith-based organizations to green their assets and practices. The Blue-Mosques initiative in the Middle East and Indonesia is a good example. Another good example is the Green Churches Network which helps Christian communities in Canada care for God's Creation from the energy efficiency of religious buildings to the prayers, through environmental campaigns.

Another focus will also be put on divesting away from environmentally unsustainable investments. “Decarbonizing” assets and make investments more climate-friendly. UNEP FI has been addressing this issue through the Portfolio Decarbonization Coalition. There is an opportunity to expand the membership of churches and other faith-based groups through a targeted campaign, particularly those involved in the divestment movement. Portfolio Decarbonization Coalition currently has 28 asset owner and asset manager members, representing over US\$3,000 billion in assets under management. Church of Sweden is one of its earliest members. Recently, the Church of England’s governing body has joint efforts to fight climate change by backing the move to divest its resources from companies involved in extracting polluting fossil fuels. This move will be supported by identifying those faith-based supported investments and provide knowledge and experiences as well as alternatives to environmentally sustainable investments.

Innovative financing mechanisms are required in order to meet the SDGs, which can be extended to include faith based finance and scaled up to contribute towards a sustainable future. Faith based organizations represent a sizeable opportunity for Socially Responsible Investment (SRI) funds and reasonable case for wider impact investment and ethical businesses. Through UNEP FI’s Positive Impact Initiative a new paradigm for engaging faith based organizations could be explored. UN Environment will not only encourage the “no harm” approach, but will also push for innovative green and sustainable investments such as promoting investments in large scale renewable energy, sustainable transport, and sustainable cities projects. The positive green responsible investment will be a key corner stone to mobilize faith-based investments.

## **Outputs**

- 2.1 Assets of faith-based organizations establishments (schools, hospitals, and worship places), investments and human resources support concrete actions using green economy principles, including but not limited to using solar panels, water conservation, food waste management, reforestation, etc.
- 2.2 Faith-based organizations financial institutions join the global network of UN Environment Finance Initiative and include in their criteria for investments principles of environmental sustainability and care for creation.
- 2.3 Faith-based organizations join the global circular economy movement.
- 2.4 New partnerships created between Faith-based organizations and major private sector companies that promote efficient use of energy and water systems, as well as other sustainable technologies.
- 2.5 Partnership with Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility and encourage streamlining the practices of Faith-based organizations to become more socially and environmentally responsible.

### **Corresponding Activities:**

- 2.1.1 Map financial institutions of Faith-based organizations in terms of size, location, type and focus.
- 2.1.2 Research financial principles of different religions and extract lessons and approaches.
- 2.1.3 Map current environmentally friendly practices already being used by Faith-based organizations such as Green Faith movement.
- 2.1.4 Encourage faith-based organizations to set an example by greening their own activities, buildings and land holdings, and help to provide technical advice for this purpose.
- 2.1.5 Identify the legal and financial challenges faced by Faith-based organizations in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals in different regions.
- 2.1.6 Identify with UNEP FI mechanisms for partnerships with faith-based investment and funds and agree on modalities for engagement.
- 2.1.7 Visit major faith-based financing institutions for partnership building.
- 2.1.8 Organize a roundtable discussion on faith-based financing systems with UNEP FI as a model.
- 2.1.9 Organize bilateral visits and study tours between Faith-based organizations institutions and other UN Environment initiatives.

### **GOAL 3: Knowledge-Based Decision Support System**

Faith-based leaders have been using scientific findings in their teachings to reach the hearts and minds of their followers. Pope Francis, reflecting on hurricanes Harvey and Irma said: "You can see the effects of climate change, and scientists have clearly said what path we have to follow", referring to a consensus by scientists that global warming is caused by human activity such as fossil fuels.

While scientists have been providing evidence of climate change, other environmental challenges such as biodiversity loss, desertification, and sand and dust severe storms have not had the attention of religious or spiritual leaders.

The daily practices of people of faith are influenced by religious teachings, spiritual values and beliefs, indigenous knowledge, and local practices. In some traditions, influencers include preachers of the churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and others who are capable of changing attitudes, practices, behaviors and opinions in relation to everyday actions. Religious and spiritual leaders are not only effective in houses of worship, but also through official education. Almost half of the world's educational institutions are owned or operated by faith organizations that usually add to the official curricula various faith-focused lessons and teaching, as well as organizing faith-based extra-curricular activities.

Faith-based organizations, however, do not have easy access to the global knowledge and scientific evidence that UN Environment could provide. While these organizations may rely on indigenous knowledge and traditional cultural practices, other knowledge that is backed by the scientific evidence is needed to strengthen the relationship between environmental stewardship and duty of care, as well as with ethical behavior and sustainable citizenship. The network of religious leaders and Faith-based organizations provide great existing communication and outreach channels that can be mobilized. To be able to do so, spiritual messaging, schools' curricula and preaching need to be informed and strengthened to represent current environmental challenges and solutions as related to religious, cultural, traditional and indigenous knowledge.

Faith followers are spread across the globe in almost all continents. Christianity, at around 2.1 billion followers, followed by Islam at the 1.6 billion followers for example can be found in any region of the world. This global coverage provides a golden opportunity to further connect faith followers and ensure interfaith understandings on common issues related to the creation, stewardship and duty of care. Furthermore, this global network would facilitate exchange of practices, experiences and lessons learnt

connecting south to south and north to south and vice versa. Already, some global Faith-based organizations are providing much of the charity work to countries of the south including building schools, hospitals and worship places.

South-south cooperation has already proven effective in enabling technology and knowledge transfer. UN Environment has been active in facilitating exchange of experiences on green economy, integrating environment into national development plans as well as the recent built and road programme of China. These mechanisms, and many others, would be the right conduits to promote south-south cooperation with faith-based organizations.

### **Outputs:**

- 3.1 Consolidate existing scientific research to support linkages between human impact and environmental issues.
- 3.2 Faith based organizations' leaders are included in select high-level thematic debates as well as contribute to faith-based international conferences and initiatives to facilitate dialogue among faith scholars and the environmental scientific community.
- 3.3 Appropriate existing knowledge platforms are identified that can be better linked to faith based organizations and to indigenous knowledge, cultural practices and science-based knowledge to strengthen religious arguments and visible evidence to demonstrate the relationship between environmental stewardship and duty of care.
- 3.4 Faith-based communication and advocacy tools and materials are prepared and disseminated.

### **Corresponding Activities:**

- 3.1.1 Develop guidance knowledge products to support linking religious teachings to practical scientific evidence using adapted language for clarity and simplicity.
- 3.1.2 Global religious leaders are empowered by the necessary knowledge to enhance multi-cultural dialogue on stewardship and duty of care.
- 3.1.3 Develop outreach in the scientific community to demonstrate the value of collaboration with faith-based organizations.
- 3.1.4 Knowledge of spiritual leaders and Faith-based organizations strengthened with practical examples of environmental challenges and solutions.
- 3.1.5 Collect and share best practices of sustainable faith-based activities including pilgrimages, conferences, schools, worship services, holy days and fasting.
- 3.1.6 Update the Earth and Faith publication, including an analysis of trends and advances in the connectivity between science and religion, trends in the greening of faith-based organizations initiatives and activities, and reporting on trends in financing from faith-based organizations and NGOs on environmental sustainability.
- 3.1.7 Identify faith-based advocacy leaders to mobilize at all levels as ambassadors of faith-environment, as well as scientists within faith traditions who can bring credibility in both science and faith.
- 3.1.8 Establish linkages with faith-based schools, and educational institutions and distant learning programmes to connect curricula and extracurricular activities to global knowledge and green lifestyle practices including encouraging nature museums, nature camps and nature outings.
- 3.1.9 Partner with the Global Universities Partnership on Environment for Sustainability (GUPES) to produce University Curricula on Faith and Environment and introduce faith-based work in its objectives.
- 3.1.10 Utilize UN environment own social media channels and website and those of faith-based organizations to reach out to millions of followers.

- 3.1.11 Develop a calendar of faith celebrations and environment events to ensure exchange of knowledge and run advocacy and awareness campaigns in partnership with faith-based organizations.
- 3.1.12 Develop guidelines of good practices for greening pilgrimage and green faith-tourism of all faiths.
- 3.1.13 Map SDG targets to religious teachings and produce infographics
- 3.1.14 Share tools, guidelines, information and other capacity building resources on outreach and engagement between UN Environment and faith-based organizations, religious leaders as well as diverse religious institutions.
- 3.1.15 Advise and support UN agencies in developing consistent advocacy materials on faith-environment linkages.
- 3.1.16 Produce movie clips on environmental issues as reflected in different faiths drawing interfaith linkages.
- 3.1.17 Voluntary services by faith followers are encouraged at the local and global levels as part of their duties towards the faith community.
- 3.1.18 South-south cooperation among and between faith-based organizations is enhanced building on environmental experiences and practices of these faith-based organizations. Faith-based organizations have a global forum during global and regional south-south expo to present and exchange their faith-environment linkages including.
- 3.1.19 South-south networks are created to strengthen interfaith alliances.

#### **POTENTIAL RISKS:**

With no doubt, discussions around faiths and religious beliefs are very critical and might generate controversy as people of beliefs have strong opinions. Other UN organizations have been working with faith-based organizations and religious leaders and have come across some challenges. One of the most important challenges is building trust around the common objectives rather than trying to push the perceived secular views of the UN. The following is a list of some of the issues that might need careful attention going forward with this strategy with associated mitigation measures:

- 1- The Agenda 2030 and the SDGs have been seen by some faith-based organizations as a global agenda to create a new world order regardless of religious beliefs. The trust issue can be bridged by agreeing with faith-based organizations on common grounds where the UN Environment meets in principle on the need to protect the creation and ensure the duty of care by all.
- 2- Some faith-based organizations are associated or have been listed by some countries as promoting violent actions towards other beliefs and have been financing terrorist activities. A careful review of such faith-based organizations should be done as part of the due diligence check process by developing clear selection criteria.
- 3- UN Environment could be perceived as focusing its partnerships on one or more faiths over the others. An adequate balance representing all major faiths should be sought in a transparent manner, along with incorporating indigenous spirituality.
- 4- Gender issues and women's involvement might be sensitive to some of the faith-based organizations. Gender mainstreaming principles should be carefully used and integrated in the partnership of such faith-based organizations to minimize potential frictions around the issue.
- 5- With the strong views of faiths, some of them seek to convert into their religion everyone else, or might stigmatize other faiths as the infidels. UN Environment should seek to partner with those open to cooperate and collaborate with other faiths based on a human rights based approach. Some basic principles for engagement should be established and made clear to all partners in a transparent manner.

- 6- The financial capacity of UN Environment to launch a viable strategic approach to engage with faith-based organizations. Initially, some seed funding should be invested in the initiatives leading to jointly mobilizing resources from faith-based organizations themselves and from other donors who subscribe to such an approach. Likewise, the financial capacity of faith-based organizations, or lack thereof, might be of concern. The financial credibility of such partners needs to be carefully reviewed or the financial capacity should be strengthened.
- 7- There might be a possibility that while working with faith-based organizations a silo approach could be used to work with different faiths independently. While it is encouraged to partner with organizations of one faith to deliver in certain regions where the majority of the people are from that faith, however, it is also critical to create a momentum for interfaith collaboration on common issues.
- 8- It might be perceived by some that engaging with faith-based organizations is merely a mechanism for delivery of projects' objectives. However, organizing global policy and collaboration dialogue fora should facilitate creativity and innovation in addressing policy issues, identifying environmental concerns at the local level, and creating a network of faith-based citizen scientists for monitoring environmental trends.

## MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

As a global initiative that involves working across divisions, regional offices and thematic areas, the initiative should be directly linked to the office of the Executive Director as part of the division of policy and programming with a clear autonomy that allows it to capture the capacity of the entire organization or reach out to different parts of the house for coordination and collaboration. Special linkages should be drawn with the civil society unit to ensure that this initiative is in sync with the overall strategy for engaging major groups and stakeholders.

The initiative will be led by a senior manager who has the capacity to coordinate efforts across the organization supported by a core team for research, advocacy and coordination purposes.

Once initial connections have been made with major faith-based organizations and religious leaders, an advisory committee should be established representing major faith-based organizations and religions to provide the overall guidance and direction.

Internally, a steering committee of a small number of managers and other staff should be established to provide advice and ensure internal coordination.

The development of this strategy has been informed by a process of consultation within UN Environment and with external influencers such as member states and faith leaders.

The strategy will be associated with a budgeted implementation plan and a resource mobilization strategy.

Annex 1 Strategic Goals of the initiative



