



A G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief Interfaith Action to Protect Rainforests August 2, 2024

Summary, Call to Action

The G20's broad 2024 climate policy addresses wide-ranging interconnected topics, while the summit's theme, "Building a Just World and a Sustainable Planet," reflects the centrality of environmental issues.¹ The summit offers a rare opportunity to sharpen global attention on practical action steps and responsibilities, and on tangible examples that show what can be done and how specific actions can yield positive results. Expanding global and national financial support for such actions is the top priority. The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) offers two opportunities to focus on and spur action: first, by grounding broad discussions in the national and local realities of Brazil's Amazon basin; and second, by highlighting the central but often ignored roles – actual and potential – that religious leadership, modeling of approaches, and partnerships with other actors play in addressing the climate crisis.

The 2024 G20 summit's location in Brazil shines a spotlight on the imperative of protecting rainforests as a priority for climate action. Addressing acute threats to the Amazon rainforest and its biodiversity involves both mitigation efforts (reducing emissions from deforestation) and adaptation activities, with the human and human rights imperative of increasing the resilience of communities most vulnerable to extreme weather events. In the Amazon and beyond, faith-linked communities and initiatives play pivotal roles in directing attention to the challenges and in empowering local communities to pursue sustainable solutions².

Proactive partnerships can enhance awareness and spur action. Purposeful engagement with religious communities and organizations can strengthen G20 leaders' and national governments' responses to deforestation and climate change more broadly. Emphasizing the moral imperative for action can motivate actors to transform broad ideas and aspirations into concrete steps at different levels.

IRI provides a model approach for enhancing and deepening such engagement among faith leaders, development actors, and local communities. The multi-faith platform contributes to the understanding of the importance of rainforest protection and environmental concerns more broadly across the population. Working together helps stakeholders identify common ground and address differences that can constitute obstacles. The efforts of religious actors to link specific local issues and positive examples (for example, ways to increase sustainable agricultural investments) to broader, more abstract environmental objectives can foster creation of action coalitions. Expanding the state's presence in the Amazon, with integrated public policies to combat environmental crime and drug trafficking, is vital to preventing deforestation. Mechanisms for the direct and unbureaucratic transfer of funds for the conservation and restoration of tropical forests exemplify a practical way to improve the social conditions of local populations, stimulating sustainable development and expanding the population's social and political support for protection policies of the forest and its biodiversity.

G20 and interfaith leaders can:

Collaborate to expand rainforest protection and restoration: Sharply reducing deforestation and preserving intact rainforests and restoring degraded land are essential. Interfaith advocacy can help identify ways to curtail specific deforestation activities and support proactive protection efforts.

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Promote Indigenous rights: Interfaith collaboration can support essential actions on Indigenous customary land rights, Indigenous claims to ancestral lands, community-based monitoring systems, responses to human rights violations, and the inclusion of Indigenous voices in policymaking processes.

Support information campaigns: IRI's *Amazonia Viva* film and other proactive information efforts contribute to building essential political support. Tangible efforts to address governance issues can lead to changes in the operational structure of environmental bodies, including provision of adequate budgets and personnel to implement priority measures.

Promote public and private oversight mechanisms and encourage relevant lifestyle changes: Cooperative efforts include promoting transparency on the environmental and human rights impacts of commercial industries, with independent verification mechanisms to regulate supply chains and address violations, as well as supporting initiatives to reduce consumption of meat and dairy.³

Support research and advocacy: Governments and organizations can work closely with faith actors and scientists in order to better understand the impact of deforestation on climate change and the spread of viruses.⁴

Tropical Forests have vital importance

Tropical rainforests play crucial roles in mitigating global climate change, preserving biodiversity, and supporting the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of Indigenous people. Rainforest destruction, driven by the quest for economic gain, poses an existential threat to the global climate: the process of deforestation emits billions of tons of carbon dioxide each year, and the loss of tropical tree cover reduces forests' natural capacity to absorb carbon. Indigenous populations are disproportionately affected by the destruction of land and natural resources, with significant repercussions for physical health, economic wellbeing, and human rights. Damage to some of the world's most diverse ecosystems affects global health by increasing the chances of contact between humans and virus host animals.

Challenges

Deforestation is occurring at unprecedented levels, posing an existential threat to biodiversity, Indigenous populations, and natural carbon control systems. Without drastic action, the world will not halt deforestation by 2030, a pledge made by 141 countries at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November 2021.⁵ The world lost 3.7 million hectares of primary forest in 2023; this is a 9% decrease from 2022, but it remains far below what is needed to achieve zero deforestation by 2030.⁶ Changes in government policy in Brazil and Colombia have had a positive impact, but weak governance and enforcement, inefficient land use, and the predominance of large-scale logging and agriculture industries continue to drive destruction in rainforest communities. While more than 50 countries are on track to eliminate deforestation within their borders by 2030, this progress is dwarfed by ongoing deforestation elsewhere.⁷

Shrinking forests and declining biodiversity exacerbate the effects of global climate change, contribute to unstable and extreme weather, and alter the natural landscape. Tropical tree cover is one of the planet's most effective natural carbon absorption mechanisms; rampant deforestation greatly reduces trees' ability to capture carbon. Carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuels reached a record high of 37.4 billion tonnes in 2023, a 1.1% increase from the previous year.⁸ An estimated 2.4 billion tonnes were emitted by tropical primary forest loss, an amount equal to about half the fossil fuel emissions of the U.S.⁹ Recent academic

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research has linked deforestation with decreased rainfall in rainforest regions as well as a significant rise in temperatures in places up to 100 kilometers away from the site of deforestation.¹⁰ Rising temperatures are accelerating the growth of trees but also shortening their lifespans, meaning that forests are absorbing less carbon on average than in previous years.¹¹ Tree cover loss leads to more unpredictable and extreme global weather patterns, as tree cover distributes humid air, generates rainfall, and creates a cooling effect. Amazon deforestation has also been linked to concerning temperature shifts as far away as the Tibetan Plateau and West Antarctic ice sheet.¹² Scientists predict that if losses in the Amazon reach between 20% and 25% of tree cover, the forest will dry out and transition into a savannah ecosystem, with drastic effects on local wildlife.¹³ Tropical forests in Borneo, Sumatra, and the Congo Basin could undergo similar changes.¹⁴ Furthermore, numerous studies have linked biodiversity to resistance and resilience to climate change impacts; thus, the decline in biodiversity wrought by deforestation could have more adverse effects on the long-term viability of rainforests.¹⁵

Habitat loss poses major threats to Indigenous populations, including reduced income, health risks, and declining access to food and water sources. Millions of Indigenous people around the world depend on rainforests for their livelihoods, including 2.7 million people in the Amazon alone.¹⁶ Between a fifth and a quarter of the world's land area is conserved by Indigenous peoples; deforestation and CO₂ emissions are significantly lower on these lands, and biodiversity is richer.¹⁷ Deforestation exacerbates the already disproportionate levels of discrimination these populations face in accessing education, healthcare, the labor market, and legal and political representation. Large-scale infrastructure projects such as roads, pipelines, and dams result in the loss of valuable natural resources and displacement of forest communities.¹⁸ In Brazil, mining, logging, petroleum, and hydrocarbons companies have seized Indigenous lands in the Amazon with few legal consequences.¹⁹ Indigenous activists who speak out against the commercial exploitation of their land risk violent retaliation. The NGO Global Witness reports that over 1,700 people have been killed defending the environment between 2012 and 2022, including 177 people in 2022. A third of victims are members of Indigenous communities, and half are in the Amazon rainforest. These statistics are likely an underestimate of the true human cost of efforts to protect the environment.²⁰

Climate finance arrangements provide little direct support to Indigenous communities. Despite their contributions to protecting their ancestral lands, Indigenous groups receive little direct financial support for their work; between 2011 and 2020, only 0.13% of all climate development aid flowed to these communities directly, and only 17% of funding for Indigenous climate and conservation went to projects led by Indigenous people.²¹ Much of the money allocated for Indigenous groups flows through intermediaries, such as multilateral institutions and large international NGOs.²² While global leaders pledged \$1.7 billion to reverse forest loss at COP26, only 7% went directly to Indigenous-led organizations according to a progress report issued at COP27.²³ In response, Indigenous groups have taken matters into their own hands by launching mechanisms to provide direct funding to Indigenous and local communities' projects that protect and preserve the natural environment, manage natural resources, and combat climate change more broadly. These funds include Shandia (a project of the Global Alliance for Territorial Communities), the Mesoamerican Territorial Fund (a project of the Mesoamerican Alliance of Peoples and Forests), and the Nusantara Fund (focused on Indonesia).²⁴

Declining biodiversity and increasing urbanization on cleared land are linked to the spread of emerging infectious diseases (EIDs). Deforestation is arguably the main factor driving the emergence of new pathogens that puts the world at risk for another pandemic.²⁵ Forest loss eliminates natural barriers between human and animal populations while also decreasing biodiversity, which enables common virus host animals such as bats and rodents to flourish.²⁶ Commercial activities such as logging, mining, and construction also accelerate the decline in biodiversity, which in turn enables common virus host animals such as bats and rodents to flourish.²⁷ Urbanization in previously pristine forest areas further heightens the

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risk of transmission as the proximity between wild animals and humans shrinks. Considering the significant social costs resulting from emerging viral zoonoses, ambitious deforestation prevention measures have proven to be highly cost-effective and offer “substantial co-benefits”.

The Global Response Thus Far

Since the 1990s, world leaders have acknowledged the need to address deforestation in numerous multinational agreements and initiatives, including the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Regular international meetings of the Conference of the Parties (COP) focus multisectoral attention on climate issues, including deforestation. This section reviews current legal, financial, and economic interventions by governments and NGOs that address deforestation.

International climate resolutions acknowledge the value of protecting tropical rainforests, but their issuing bodies face an uphill battle in meeting their goals. Rainforests have been an increasingly high-profile issue in global climate change policy. At COP27 in 2022, representatives of 26 countries launched the Forest & Climate Leaders’ Partnership (FCLP), an initiative focused on reducing forest loss, boosting sustainable development, and ensuring accountability for country pledges.²⁸ While deforestation was not a major focus of COP28 in 2023, the final document reiterated a commitment to halting deforestation by 2030.²⁹ In August 2023, the eight member nations of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization gathered in Brazil but fell short of forming a unified strategy for ending deforestation, leaving individual member nations to pursue their own domestic policies.³⁰

Results-based financing is a promising strategy to reduce carbon emissions and promote sustainable development in rainforest countries. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)’s Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) offers financial incentives to developing countries that reduce carbon emissions from deforestation and invest in sustainable development methods. The UN-REDD Programme assists national governments and Indigenous communities to meet the criteria for REDD+ payments.³¹ The Green Climate Fund, established in 2010 by the UNFCCC, likewise contributes to sustainable financing by supporting greenhouse gas emissions and climate resilience projects in developing countries, with USD \$58.7 billion in approved projects as of July 2024.³² Despite these and other efforts, however, experts warn that climate funding is woefully inadequate; a 2020 report by The Nature Conservancy found that there was a \$700 billion gap per year between available financing and what is needed to reverse biodiversity and nature loss by 2030.³³

Consumers and governments can pressure companies to abandon ecologically harmful agricultural methods. Recent measures, such as the EU’s 2019 ban on subsidies for biofuels derived from palm oil and a 2023 “due diligence” requirement to ensure products sold in the EU are not linked to deforestation, have the potential to shift global industry away from unsustainable land use.³⁴ In particular, [Regulation 2023/1115](#) on Deforestation enshrined several obligations for operators, traders or authorized representatives placing relevant products on the market to thoroughly prove that they are “deforestation free”, produced lawfully, and “covered by a due diligence statement.” Member States shall ensure that such obligations are fulfilled and may provide needed assistance, guidance or information to relevant undertakings, as well as report on the regulation’s implementation. In addition, the recently adopted [Directive \(EU\) 2024/1760](#) on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence, which imposes obligations for “large” companies operating within the EU to prevent and address actual and potential adverse impacts on human rights and the environment that may occur in their chains of activities, under threat of liability sanctions. These adverse environmental impacts include biodiversity loss. Consumers and environmental activists have also put pressure on the Brazilian beef industry to stop sourcing cattle from newly deforested land; however, supply chains remain opaque and commitments by agricultural

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companies to prioritize sustainability are difficult to enforce. If implemented on a large scale, a dietary shift away from meat and dairy could reduce demand for land in rainforest regions and enable natural vegetation to gradually reclaim degraded land.³⁵

Religious Responses

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

Interfaith coalitions are actively engaged in preserving intact rainforests, advocating against deforestation, and promoting Indigenous people's rights. The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI), launched in 2017, brings together religious authorities, Indigenous leaders, government officials, climate scientists, and representatives of NGOs to address deforestation in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia. IRI workshops and trainings for religious, interfaith, and Indigenous leaders support efforts that protect natural resources and human rights in each country. IRI also works with policymakers to incorporate anti-deforestation measures in national development strategies and provides resources to faith communities on how they can contribute to forest restoration projects.³⁶ Representatives from IRI countries recently attended the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization summit in August 2023 and COP28 in November, where they called on governments to prioritize action on preserving forests, protecting Indigenous communities, and combatting environmental crime.³⁷

Other interfaith coalitions addressing deforestation and climate change on a global level include GreenFaith, Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI), and the United Religions Initiative (URI's) Environmental Network.³⁸

Secular-religious partnerships help bring religious voices into policy discussions and encourage sustainable, community-based action among faith communities. Since the late 1990s, the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology has been the premier database on religious engagement on the environment, publishing books, articles, and newsletters on initiatives led by the world's different religious traditions.³⁹ The International Network for Conservation and Religion (INCR) serves as a digital hub for faith-linked conservation initiatives through which participating religious communities and organizations can exchange knowledge and build partnerships.⁴⁰ The World Wildlife Fund's (WWF) Sacred Earth program partners with religious leaders and institutions to help shape sustainable decision-making in their communities.⁴¹ Since 2017, the UNEP's Faith for Earth Initiative has worked with faith-linked organizations to strengthen environmental advocacy and ecological sustainability.⁴² In 2022, UNEP partnered with WWF and Trillion Trees in publishing a guide for faith communities to implement tree-growing initiatives and restore the natural environment in their communities.⁴³ The World Resources Institute's Faith and Sustainability initiative, founded in 2021, connects faith-linked organizations, governments, academic institutions, and private sector groups to collaborate on climate action and advocacy projects.⁴⁴

Religious leaders and groups play important roles in drawing attention to deforestation and in encouraging their communities to take action. Nine years after the encyclical *Laudato Si'* was published, Pope Francis continues to prioritize environmental protection and Indigenous rights. In October 2023, he released "Laudate Deum," an apostolic exhortation calling for more urgent, concerted action in a world experiencing climate crisis.⁴⁵ Pope Francis has also focused on the issue of tropical rainforests: the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian Region, held in October 2019 in Rome, was the first Roman Catholic synod to address the threat of deforestation to Indigenous communities; more than 20,000 Indigenous people took part in assemblies and discussions organized by the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM) before the synod, and Indigenous spokespeople gave personal testimonies to church leaders

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during the synod.⁴⁶ The following year, Pope Francis released *Querida Amazonia*, an apostolic exhortation calling on world leaders, companies, and citizens to protect the Amazon and respect its Indigenous communities.⁴⁷

Global religious leaders have stressed the need to address climate change within their communities. Bartholomew I, ecumenical patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, is known as the “Green Patriarch” for his longstanding support of environmental causes.⁴⁸ In 2017, he issued a joint statement with Pope Francis calling on Christians to address climate change in their own lives, and he regularly calls upon politicians and people of faith to protect the environment.⁴⁹

Leaders of other faiths have likewise lent their voices to advocate for climate action. Following the publication of *Laudato Si'*, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist leaders issued statements affirming their commitment to drawing upon their faiths' resources to mitigate the effects of climate change and promote ecologically sustainable lifestyles.⁵⁰ The Dalai Lama has also repeatedly urged world leaders to act on climate change, recently stating that “Buddha would be green.”⁵¹ In Indonesia, the local Council of Ulama issued fatwas in 2014 and 2016, calling on Muslims to protect endangered species and refrain from clearing forests for commercial gain.⁵² Moreover, numerous faith-linked groups focus on climate change, including the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, Dayenu, EcoSikh, Hindu Climate Action, and Dharma Action Network for Climate Engagement.⁵³ COP28 hosted the first-ever Faith Pavilion, a space for religious leaders and organizations to showcase their climate-linked work and engage with country delegates and other attendees.⁵⁴

Looking Ahead: Recommendations

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

- 1) *Build on contributions of religious leadership on rainforest issues and strengthen religious-secular collaborations.* Building on the strengths of faith communities can enhance policy and programs led by organizations like the UN and WWF.
- 2) *Regulate and restrict commercial access to forests.* The preservation of intact rainforests, an essential step in containing the climate impact of deforestation, requires urgent action. Religious actors can support G20 leaders in moratoriums on deforestation, with special emphasis on preserving carbon-rich peatlands and mangrove forests.
- 3) *Bolster accountability in global supply chains.* Greater transparency on the environmental and human rights impact of commercial industries needs cross sector support. Independent third- party verification mechanisms to regulate company supply chains and address potential violations offer promise.
- 4) *Support sustainable alternatives to the agriculture and logging industries.* With commercial farming responsible for around 80 % of deforestation in tropical countries, new approaches within the agriculture industry are essential in halting the rate of destruction.⁵⁵ Religious actors can support measures like phasing out subsidies linked to deforestation and favoring industries that do not rely on clearing forests or draining peat swamps.
- 5) *Support land restoration efforts.* Rehabilitating degraded ecosystems is essential to recouping losses from deforestation. G20 rainforest countries should support regulations and financial incentives for forest rehabilitation efforts.

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6) *Protect Indigenous rights.* Recognizing and defending Indigenous forest communities' claims to their ancestral lands helps create a buffer against encroaching industry and promotes traditional agricultural practices that mitigate the impact of climate change. G20 rainforest countries should uphold customary land rights, recognize Indigenous claims to unsecured lands, and reform conservation policies in order to ease Indigenous groups' access to the forest. Special priority should be given to communities whose land and resources have been stolen or degraded by government authorities, commercial industries, or land traffickers. Governments should assist in establishing community-based monitoring systems to report disputes with companies, conflicts over land, and human rights violations, and provide legal assistance to Indigenous communities challenging illegal deforestation practices. G20 leaders and religious authorities can further support these efforts by speaking out against the illegal seizure of land and attacks on environmental activists.

7) *Amplify Indigenous voices in environmental policy discussions at the local, national, and global levels.* G20 leaders should assure that national governments and international partners listen to the expertise and concerns of Indigenous communities directly affected by deforestation. Rainforest nations should seek out Indigenous perspectives in formulating national development plans; one way of doing so is to include permanent seats for Indigenous representatives in regional and national legislatures. G20 leaders should support appropriate allocations of multilateral funds for forest conservation, such as the UNFCCC's Green Climate Fund, and funding for Indigenous communities to promote traditional conservation practices.

8) *Reduce dependence on meat and dairy and eliminate food loss and waste.* If implemented on a global scale, diet and lifestyle changes could lower demand for new agricultural land and stem rates of deforestation. Measures that discourage food loss in supply chains and food waste among consumers can help reduce unnecessary destruction of additional forest. G20 leaders should support initiatives in their countries that cut down on meat and dairy consumption, with a particular emphasis on beef.

9) *Ensure that post-COVID economic recovery plans preserve and expand protections on land use, biodiversity, and Indigenous peoples' rights.* Given vast needs to stimulate economic activity following COVID-19 emergencies, there is a risk that economic recovery plans will rescind measures to protect rainforests. G20 leaders should promote policies that maintain and strengthen regulations on land use, wildlife trade, and Indigenous access to land. G20 governments can integrate environmental protections in existing policies by including biodiversity and conservation spending targets, promoting jobs in relevant sectors, and providing economic incentives for businesses that implement ecologically beneficial practices.

10) *Support research into links between habitat destruction and the emergence of infectious disease.* G20 countries should recognize deforestation as a public health threat and fund research efforts to better understand the impact of deforestation on the spread of disease. Rainforest countries should act quickly to promote land protection efforts that reduce the risk of disease transmission from wild animals to humans.

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

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