



G20 Interfaith Forum 2024

Policy Brief: Faith Action in Response to Climate Change

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Summary, Call to Action

Climate change is an existential threat to our planetary future, with millions of people already suffering from extreme climate events triggered, or accentuated, by human activities (particularly the emission of greenhouse gases caused by fossil fuel use). The G20 should be a leader in championing the climate change policies urgently needed. Faith communities can be important collaborators in building public support and motivating individual and collective action to address the climate catastrophe that is unfolding.

G20 leadership in the energy transition.

Governments should facilitate (with incentives, where necessary) the transition to renewable sources of energy for all properties and industries. Governments should adopt low-cost, high-impact policies ranging from upgrading the thermal efficiency of buildings to withdrawing subsidies from, and investments in, companies that exploit fossil fuels and/or engage in other activities with high carbon impacts. Religious institutions should support and pursue analogous policies.

Public information campaigns.

Public information campaigns can be a useful tool in raising climate change awareness and support for policies. These campaigns can also be used to encourage collaboration on projects between government, the private sector, civil society, and faith communities. Faith communities can cooperate with other organizations, increasing their available resources and outreach.

Transformation of businesses and the private sector.

Governments should facilitate (and regulate, where necessary) the transformation of businesses and the private sector from profit-maximisers towards social, environmental, and financial responsibility. Sectors hard hit by the transformation may need assistance to help them adapt without having to bear a disproportionately large share of the associated burden.

Support action at the community level.

Many actions to mitigate and adapt to climate change are most impactful when undertaken locally. This can often be accomplished via local government and community structures, enabling change to be led and driven by communities that are informed by their knowledge of the local area. The G20 should empower local action for community transformation to reduce vulnerability to climate shocks, build local resilience, and transform energy and transport systems to meet local needs. Religions and indigenous communities are often embedded within local communities and are therefore well placed to play a strategic role in this process.

Targeting specific groups.

Governments should be sensitive to the needs of specific groups who are likely to be most adversely impacted by climate change. According to the United [Nations](#), women are disproportionately

impacted by extreme events due to climate change. Therefore, the needs of women deserve special attention, and faith communities can assist. The elderly and disabled have special vulnerabilities. Another important target group is young people, where it is never too early to build awareness of the climate challenge and possible ways forward to overcome their potential climate anxiety. Young people can be involved in practical actions in solidarity to those who are suffering. Faith perspectives can also help these young people to adopt climate-friendly alternatives and more moderate lifestyles, to resist the temptations of a materialistic society, to reduce their carbon footprint, and to prepare for careers in the more responsible and sustainable society that is emerging.

Introduction

The climate change crisis is accelerating, with extreme weather events, droughts and floods, heat waves and fires already impacting millions, especially the poorest and most vulnerable. Despite decades of scientific reports, climate conferences, agreements, and commitments to halt greenhouse gas emissions and reverse climate change, emissions are still rising. At the same time, oil and gas companies are expanding exploration and production while generating significant profits. Climate change denial is also more prevalent and there is an increase of both extreme poverty and extreme wealth leading to social instability. Economies continue to prioritise short term profit maximisation over long term welfare and sustainability. These are symptoms of moral and ethical failings.

Climate change is also driving other crises. Reports highlight that food insecurity and the rise of hunger -- if not threats of mass starvation -- are also resulting from droughts, floods, heatwaves, changes in rainfall patterns, and other causes of crop failuresⁱ, which are predicted to accelerate rapidly in coming years. The [migration](#) crisis is also worsening because of climate impacts, both directly by making it impossible for people to continue living where they have always been, and indirectly by contributing to social unrest and violence.

Challenges

After three centuries of building a global economy on the foundation of fossil fuels and greenhouse gas emissions, there needs to be a rapid transition to other more renewable energy sources. This transformation requires changes in infrastructure, transportation systems, industrial processes, and consumption patterns. Beyond eliminating greenhouse gas emissions of fossil carbon, action is also needed to protect and restore the natural carbon sequestration capacities of the planet. Steps should include halting the destruction of tropical rainforests and other carbon sinks; and restoring 30% of natural ecosystems and their services. Industrial agriculture is a significant source of carbon emissions while unsustainably eroding soils and overusing water resources, requiring a major transformation to regenerative agriculture that ensures long-term food securityⁱⁱ.

As the UN Secretary-General reported to the Security Council on 14 February 2023, rising seas from climate change could have “unthinkable” consequences to communities, with profound implications for security, international law, human rights, migration of entire populations, and competition for fresh water. Low-lying communities – and entire countries – could disappear. This presents an acute danger for 900 million people living in coastal zonesⁱⁱⁱ.

Scientists have reported that multiple eco-crises could trigger 'systemic collapse'. The five most significant risks of climate change are: (i) overheating of the atmosphere; (ii) extreme weather events from hurricanes to heatwaves; (iii) the decline of life-sustaining ecosystems; (iv) food insecurity; and (v) dwindling stores of fresh water. These risks are interconnected and could have a profound impact leading to global systemic collapse^{iv}.

Climate change is not an isolated phenomenon unrelated to other human concerns. The planet is integrated, with physical, chemical, and biological dimensions that maintain an environment suitable for life within which human civilisation has developed. Today, with globalised human impacts, this complex system must be managed at a global level to avoid serious consequences^v. For example, a recent study has shown that the extreme heatwaves associated with climate change have the potential to cause the greatest financial collapse we have ever experienced in the next few decades, spreading through global supply chains around the world^{vi}.

The UN Secretary-General, in reporting to the General Assembly on priorities for 2023, warned about “*a confluence of challenges unlike any other in our lifetimes. Wars grind on. The climate crisis burns on. Extreme wealth and extreme poverty rage on. The gulf between the haves and have nots is cleaving societies, countries, and our wider world. Epic geopolitical divisions are undermining global solidarity and trust. This path is a dead end.*” He called the short-term thinking “deeply irresponsible”, “immoral” and “self-defeating”^{vii}.

The Global Response Thus Far

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has been following the science of our changing climate for decades. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) signed in 1992 will be holding its 29th Conference of the Parties (COP) in late 2024 in Baku, Azerbaijan. The Paris Climate Conference (COP15) in 2015 adopted an Action Plan on Climate Change, identifying 1.5°C of global warming as the limit beyond which irreversible changes were likely, with governments promising voluntary national commitments to respect this target. However, the fossil fuel industry and other vested interests have strongly resisted any change in their business plans, and greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise rapidly. Planetary heating is regularly setting new records close to or even above that target. We know what to do, but there is a structural failure in implementation.

There are already many positive options available to address the climate crisis directly, as well as its impacts on food supplies, water, human security, biodiversity and all the other dimensions of what has become a crisis of civilisation. The technical solutions using renewable energy are known and affordable. The essential transitions towards a more just and sustainable society are clearly defined and offer a vision of a far better future^{viii}. The missing pieces are political will and a lack of wider public support. This is where faith communities are well placed to make a difference. They are inherently concerned with justice and equity. They share visions of a higher human purpose than just acquiring wealth and power. They encourage trustworthiness, altruism, moderate lifestyles, and humility. They address the essentials of human motivation. These are fundamental to respond to the climate catastrophe now unfolding.

The Justice Dimension

A recent paper expands on the justice dimensions of crossing global warming limits^{ix}. This is a critically important advance as it addresses the concerns of many developing countries and disadvantaged groups about what should be done and by whom, in order to return to the safe limit of a rise of less than 1.5°C as agreed in 2015.

Three injustices have been stark for many years, sharpened by climate change. First and most obviously, the poorest communities are far more vulnerable to climate impacts than wealthier ones. Indigenous communities are on the frontline and have worldviews and local knowledge offering solutions to the climate emergency, so there can be no climate justice without recognising their rights. This is amplified by two further injustices: those same poorer communities have contributed least to the drivers of climate change, and in the process, their fair share of the global carbon budget

has been appropriated by wealthier communities. Consequently, poorer communities have seen their available pathways to development curtailed^x.

The new work lays out a further injustice. While the scientific study reinforces the identification of 1.5°C as a 'safe limit' for warming, millions of people are already vulnerable to climate-related hazards, and some countries face inevitable drowning by sea level rise from historic emissions. This suggests that a 'just' limit has already been crossed in the last decade, with unjust exposure of hundreds of millions of people already at 1°C warming^{xi}. Global greenhouse gas emissions must peak before 2025 to limit warming below 1.5°C. It is looking increasingly likely that the peak will be significantly later.

For climate justice, urgent action is needed to address economic challenges such as loss and damage from climate impacts so severe they cannot be adapted to, and other economic resources needed to address climate mitigation and adaptation, especially in the poorest countries and most fragile communities. The focus is on the victims who contributed the least to climate change and lack the resources to recover unaided. Climate change, as well as our collective efforts to adapt to and mitigate it, will exacerbate inequity should we fail to ensure a just transition^{xii}.

Reform of Global Governance

Our failure to fulfill the many commitments to address climate change and avoid a climate catastrophe can be traced to the lack of adequate global governance for global problems beyond the capacity of any one nation to address. The United Nations is founded on the principle of national sovereignty, and nations have consistently resisted any attempts to limit what they can do at home, even if this damages common global interest. Only the UN Security Council can adopt binding decisions, and it is often paralysed by the veto. All other resolutions are voluntary, generally by consensus, meaning the lowest common denominator, and there is no possibility of enforcement. Countries are free to withdraw from agreements, or to simply ignore the decisions taken. Furthermore, the multilateral system between governments does not extend to non-state actors like multinational corporations, often wealthier and more powerful than many governments.

Climate change, as a typically global problem, can only be tackled effectively with enhanced global governance that considers the needs and challenges of indigenous and local communities. These governance methods should be founded on the processes and methodologies enshrined in United Nations commitments, such as Free, Prior, and Informed Consent, and respect for the rights and dignity of impacted, fragile, and displaced peoples. The Climate Governance Commission has recently made a series of recommendations, including near-term and medium-term proposals for strengthening global environmental governance^{xiii}, and has commissioned work on a Global Environment Agency able to legislate to protect global boundaries^{xiv} that has received the support of the UN High Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism^{xv}. There is no mention of the environment in the UN Charter, which today should become the fourth pillar of the UN alongside peace and security, economic and social development, and human rights^{xvi}.

Climate change is an urgent and universal issue, so it should be the first topic where governments finally accept binding global legislation in the common interest of human survival. This should be a priority for the G20. The faith communities could do much to build public support for this step forward.

Religious Responses

Beyond interfaith calls to action^{xvii} and declarations within each faith community, religions and faith communities can collaborate and respond to climate change at multiple levels. Globally, faith communities can join in efforts to create institutions for more effective governance of the global system in all its environmental dimensions, to return to and remain within safe limits of global warming. Here, the G20 has an important role to play in supporting the necessary transition in the economic systems and global governance. Nationally, faith communities can resist the forces of xenophobia, racism, fear, and hatred that are on the rise, and cultivate greater love, altruism, and solidarity in the increasingly diverse populations of every country. Unity is an essential requirement for collective action. Locally, there is a great need for a stronger sense of community solidarity to address the impacts of climate change in the surrounding environment, reducing vulnerability and developing greater resilience in the face of the changes already underway. Even a global driver, like climate change, is experienced through its local impacts, where community or faith-based visions and readings of the local reality will determine how best to respond.

Looking Ahead: Recommendations

The faith response to climate change can include the following:

- (1) Since actions speak louder than words, *religious institutions should set an example* in turning to renewable sources of energy for all properties, upgrading the thermal efficiency of buildings, and withdrawing investments in fossil fuel companies and other activities with high carbon impact.
- (2) *There are many opportunities for interfaith collaboration in information campaigns* on climate awareness, collaborative projects on climate action, and showing how science and religion are complementary in addressing the climate challenge.
- (3) Many other organizations working to address climate change would welcome *the cooperation of faith communities* in increasing their available resources and outreach.
- (4) Faith communities and other civil society organizations have an important role in *holding governments and decision-makers accountable* for their failures in implementing climate change commitments.
- (5) Faith communities can be a powerful voice in *supporting the transformation of businesses and the corporate sector* towards social, environmental, and financial responsibility for their climate impacts, beyond just profit.
- (6) At the local level, where religions are often significant institutions, they can *work for community transformation to climate-friendly alternatives* and more moderate lifestyles.
- (7) Since women are frequently more heavily impacted by extreme events due to climate change, faith communities can *emphasise the important roles that women play in climate action* and support their involvement.
- (8) Another important target group is *children and youth*, where it is never too early to build awareness of the climate challenge and potential ways forward to overcome their potential climate anxiety^{xviii}. Youth can undertake practical actions in solidarity to those who are suffering. Faith perspectives can also help them to resist the temptations of a consumer society, to reduce their carbon footprint, and to prepare for careers in the more responsible and sustainable society that is emerging.

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