

# People and Planet: Faith in the 2030 Agenda

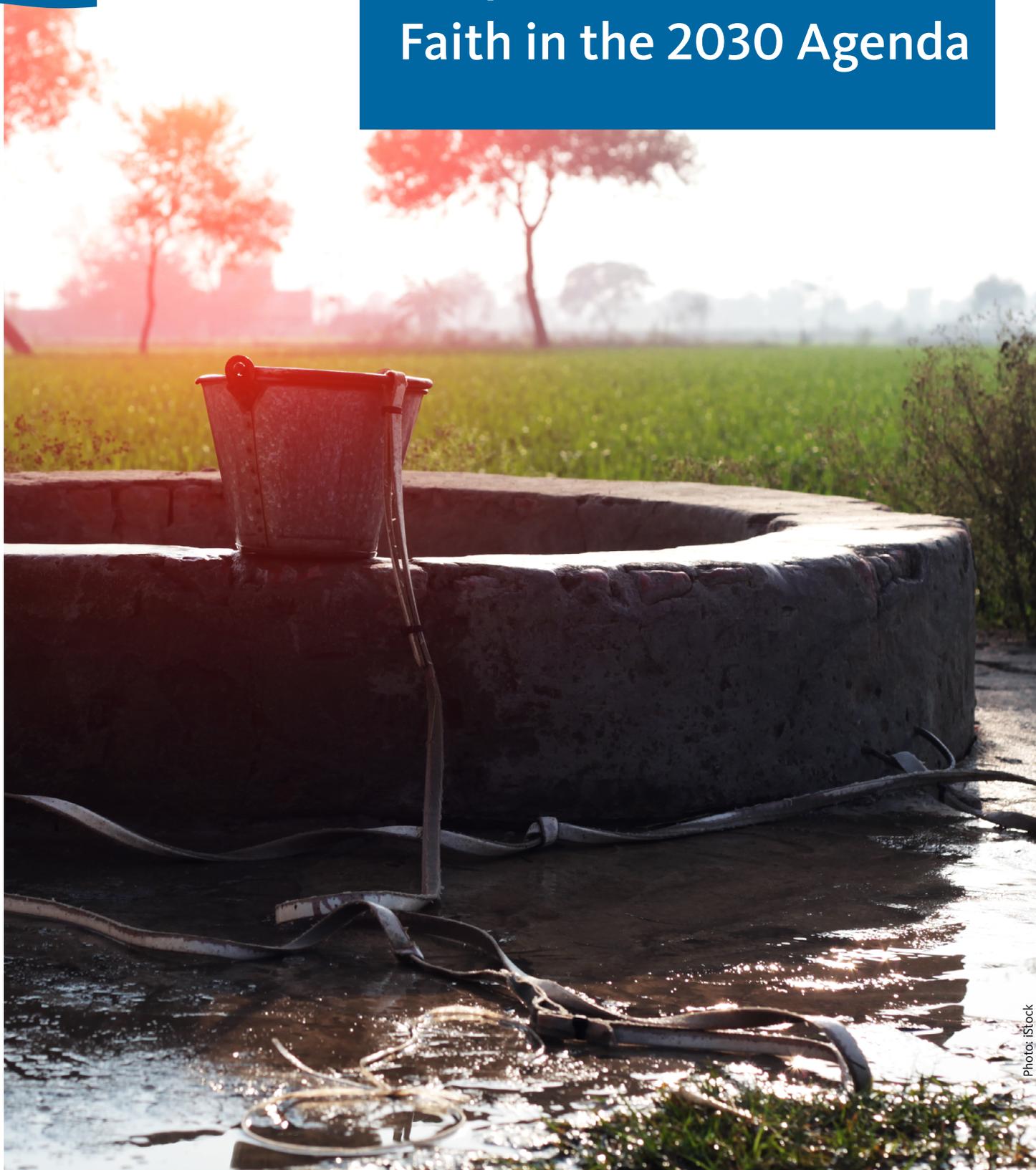


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FAITH FOR EARTH



# Ten years to transform our world

In March 2020, Sida, UNEP, SIWI, and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency convened actors from around the world in a digital, flight-free conference entitled *People and Planet: Faith in the 2030 Agenda*. The event sought to elevate and enrich partnerships towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a focus on strengthening linkages and collaborations with faith-based and indigenous knowledge, networks, and resources. This policy brief discusses the role of faith communities in environmental action and highlights the ways forward as direct results of the discussions of the themes of this important event.

The Earth's clock is ticking, and alarm bells are ringing as we enter the United Nations declared 'Decade of Action' to achieve the Global Goals. The UN Decade of Action calls for accelerating sustainable solutions to all the world's biggest challenges. 'We are not on track!' continues to be the overarching message from current assessments (UN, 2019). To reach the SDGs, there is an urgent need for an 'all hands on deck' approach to ensure inclusive, resilient, and innovative joint action.

Faith and spirituality are foundational sources and drivers of behaviour; shaping and inspiring individual and community worldviews, priorities, daily rituals, and community structures – including the relationship to and value of natural resources. Faith-based development partners and indigenous communities are essential partners in the SDG Agenda and are, in many cases, leading the way.

Faith leaders have, in their capacity as moral duty bearers, a responsibility to promote, respect, and protect biodiversity and our planet. Due to their social and moral influence, faith leaders impact thinking, foster dialogue, and influence priorities for members of their communities. Faith leaders serve as an important conduit of communication for social change and transformation because they have more access to personal spheres than most outside actors.

Faith actors and indigenous groups are also uniquely positioned to mobilize and increase awareness of the necessity to protect our biodiversity. Their unique global and local networks reach into the most remote corners of the world and the deeper spiritual considerations, which they address, are a key dimension of peoples' lives.

Supporting and facilitating inclusive partnerships and joint actions across the entire development community, including faith and spiritual community partners, is essential to ensuring long-lasting and sustainable outcomes. Furthermore, understanding and framing of the SDG Agenda through values, to which faith-based and indigenous communities are carefully attuned, encourages entry and engagement from across communities. Forming this connection is crucial to build the sustainable environment and society the SDG Agenda calls on us all to achieve.

## **People and Planet, 2020:**

The conference gathered approximately 200 participants from all over the globe. It assembled people digitally and physically in six learning hubs in four different time zones in the following cities and countries: Amman (Jordan), Härnösand (Sweden), Jakarta (Indonesia), Nairobi (Kenya), Pretoria (South Africa), Sarajevo (Bosnia-Herzegovina).

### **The event had four core guiding principles:**

- Co-creation
- Systems thinking
- Sense of urgency in the Decade of Action
- Normative dialogue

The event was digital as well as flight-free as part of hosting climate conscious learning. In order to enable more actors from the Global South to participate, the whole event was live-streamed and accessible online, thus also facilitating full implementation, even in the midst of restrictions put in place as an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## From urgency to delivery

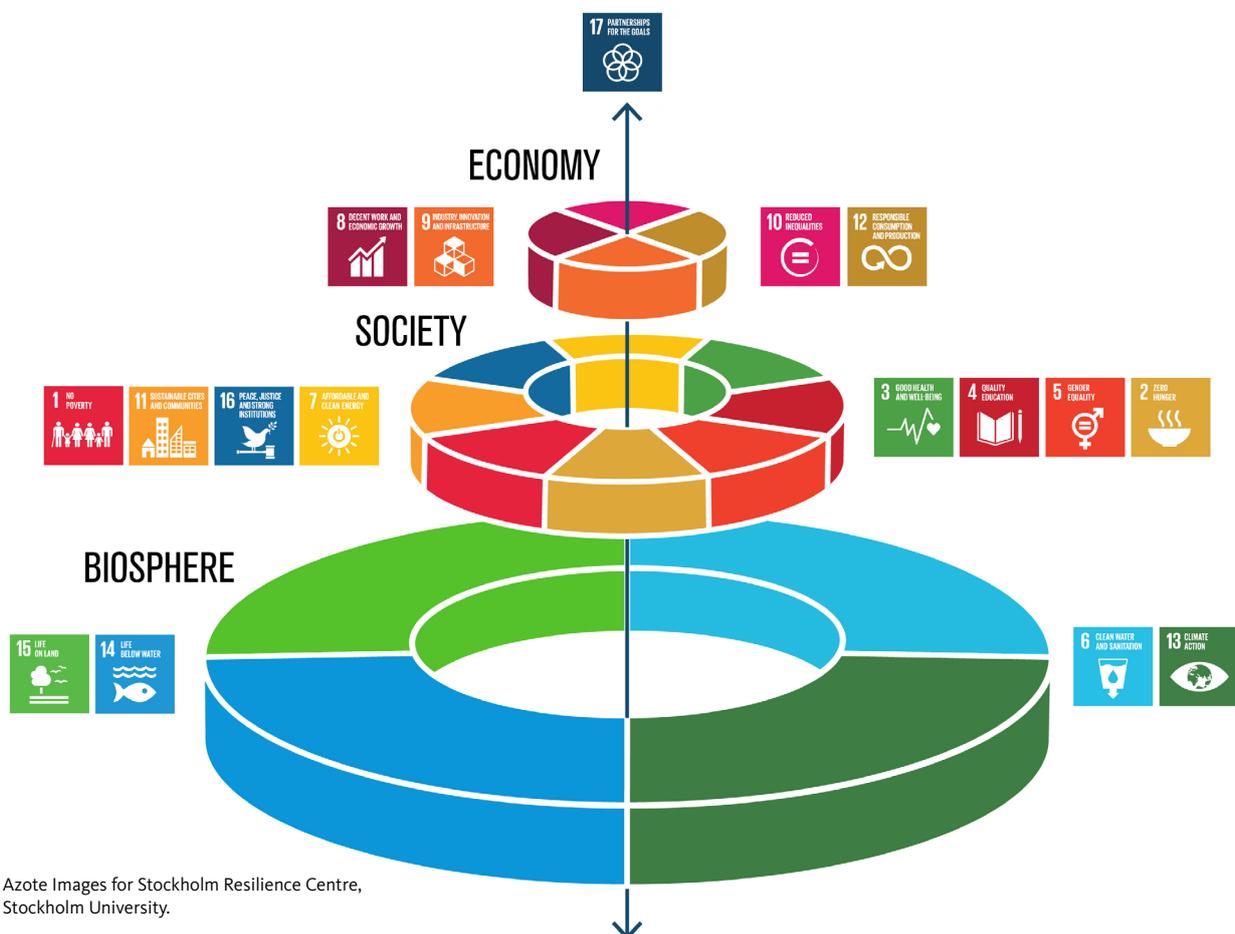
Environmental sustainability is a prerequisite for poverty alleviation, democratic development, an equitable society, and sustainable economic development. Indeed, the environment-focused SDGs can be seen as a foundation to the entire SDG Agenda (SRI, 2016). The global community has set clear common goals in the 2030 Agenda, and we are now in the decade of delivery. Nevertheless, assessments show that we are far from reaching our goals. SDG 6, for example, seeks to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; yet today an estimated 785 million people still lack access to a basic drinking water service and a majority of the world's population lack safe sanitation (UN, 2019). Two billion people live in countries experiencing high water stress, and about 4 billion people experience severe water scarcity at least one month a year (ibid.).

SDG 15 aims to protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation as well as biodiversity loss. Targets are unlikely to be met, however, as land degradation continues, biodiversity loss advances at an alarming rate, invasive species insidiously flourish, and illicit poaching and trafficking of wildlife continue to thwart efforts to protect and restore vital ecosystems and species (UN Economic and Social Council, 2019) A global transformation is needed which requires everyone's participation.

## Holistic approaches and the role of culture and spiritual capital

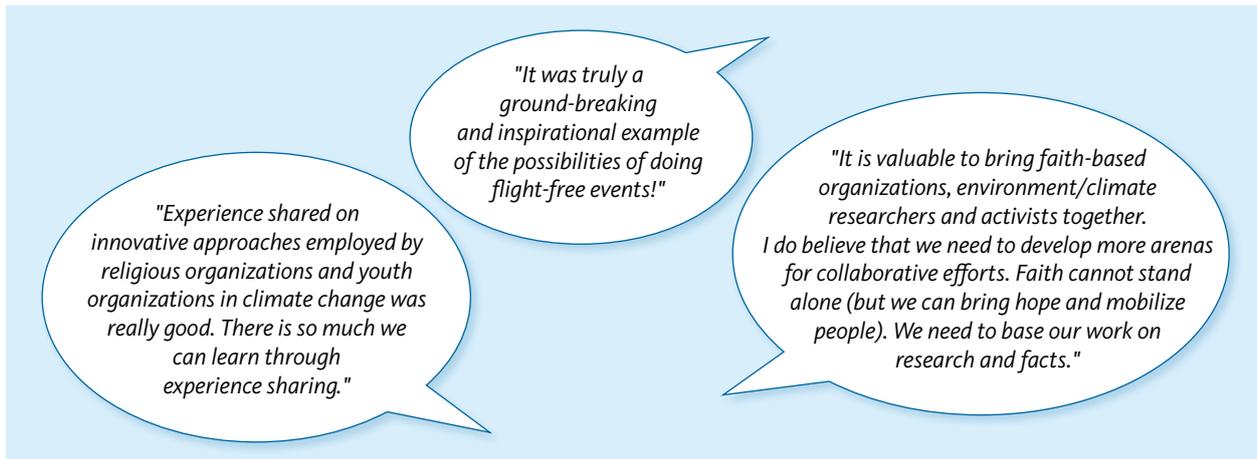
Natural resources are not only essential for our societies from an economic point of view, but also for social, cultural, and environmental purposes. Addressing cultural and spiritual dimensions in achieving the SDGs is to understand different values and to meet people where they are whilst being sensitive to their priorities. This allows moving from an instrumental approach to creating a common agenda together, with focus on shared priorities and shared long-term action.

In many countries, spiritual beliefs and faith are main drivers for cultural values, social inclusion, and environmental political engagement. Understanding multidimensional poverty also includes understanding the role of faith. Beyond conceptions about what is moral or spiritual, religion is also related to all other aspects of life including consumption patterns and sustainable lifestyles. Tackling the climate and larger ecological crisis demands deep-seated changes in the way we consume and produce. What is needed, therefore, is a deepening of the normative dialogue to address matters of greed and exploitation and to bring in messages of transformation and hope. It is necessary for faith communities to step up to this challenge to live sustainably and to promote life-giving agriculture and forestry, climate friendly energy solutions, and sustainable consumption.



Azote Images for Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University.

## People and Planet Global Perspectives



*"Experience shared on innovative approaches employed by religious organizations and youth organizations in climate change was really good. There is so much we can learn through experience sharing."*

*"It was truly a ground-breaking and inspirational example of the possibilities of doing flight-free events!"*

*"It is valuable to bring faith-based organizations, environment/climate researchers and activists together. I do believe that we need to develop more arenas for collaborative efforts. Faith cannot stand alone (but we can bring hope and mobilize people). We need to base our work on research and facts."*

Spiritual values drive individual behaviours (UNEP, 2019) for more than 80% of the people living on earth. Furthermore, about 8% of all habitable land is managed globally by faith-based organizations and about 5% of all commercial forests (Palmer & Moss, 2017). About 50% of schools are owned globally by faith-based actors (UNICEF, 2012), hence integration of approaches addressing sustainable and resilient use of natural resources is vital.

Likewise, indigenous peoples comprise around 5% of the global population and occupy, own, or manage an estimated 20% to 25% of the Earth's land surface (UN-DESA, 2019). Indigenous groups and local communities are custodians of many of the world's most fragile and important ecosystems. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report on climate change and land use (2019) shows that lands governed by indigenous peoples have a lower rate of deforestation, implying that knowledge and customs that rely on cultural and spiritual practices can contribute to both mitigation of and adaptation to climate change and other pressing environmental challenges.

When addressing the transformation of social norms, it is critical to recognize the diversity within faith actors and indigenous groups and not seek to essentialize, over-simplify, or categorize. This is especially the case as religion embodies layers of potentials and risks – whether as ritual, institution, social movement or service provider. In order to grasp the practical embodiment of faith, one needs to pay attention to faith leadership and the nature of power relationships within a faith community.

### From symbolic action to coordinated implementation

Change can happen at several different levels: at an individual level with human behavioural change, change through mobilization of groups of people, and at an

institutional level. The Faith for Earth programme of the United Nations Environment Programme is one such initiative inspiring change on multiple levels through partnerships.

The Faith for Earth programme is a global interfaith initiative aiming at introducing the cultural, spiritual, and ethical dimensions of sustainable development into the means of implementation of the SDGs, especially those related to climate change, life under water and life above land. Faith for Earth has three main goals including: 1) inspiring environmental action by faith leaders and their institutions, 2) green faith-based investments and assets as part of financing for sustainable development, and 3) providing knowledge resources between the scientific-based evidence and religious teachings and sacred scripts. When integrated into the normative work and decision support system of the global environmental governance, these faith-value systems present an important tool for an ethical and transformative approach to finding long-lasting environmental solutions.

In 2019 alone, more than 45 faith-based organizations were accredited to the United Nations Environment Assembly and engaged in the Faith for Earth Dialogue during UNEA4 which has inspired other UN organizations to follow suit and engage with faith communities. During its capacity development workshops, Faith for Earth, working with local, regional, and global faith leaders, has been able to prioritize areas, propose joint interfaith projects, and create working groups to address issues such as education, youth, and ecosystems. Working with major and minor religions, Faith for Earth has raised awareness of tens of thousands of local faith's followers on environmental stewardship and duty of care. This has inspired the creation of environmental ministries at churches and engaged faith-managed schools and clubs in tree planting, water stream clean-ups, and sustainable tourism.

## Recommendations and ways forward

Based on the global and regional dialogues facilitated by the People and Planet Conference, the following recommendations and ways forward were identified by the contributing actors:

- We are all challenged to be self-reflective and question our own ways of thinking. Building systematically updated knowledge and ensuring a self-reflective view around the pros and cons of engagements must be a constant and deeply contextualized process. There is no one size fits all approach.
- The status quo is inflicting an enormous cost on people and planet – global as well as local partnerships are needed to achieve the SDGs. The time is now to build trust. A common standpoint is central for fruitful partnerships.
- Inclusion of faith actors is part of a broader cultural sensitivity in all development processes and outcomes, but faith actors alone are not a ‘magic bullet’ solution.
- Inclusive participation is an essential principle of the SDG Agenda. Further efforts are needed to ensure participation of faith and spiritual champions and communities at all levels, with an emphasis on the engagement of young people.
- Contextual analysis with and inclusion of faith actors and indigenous peoples’ groups should be considered a general issue for all actors within environmental/ climate processes of change.
- Leverage the unique ability of religious institutions to mobilize social networks in addition to a distinct moral standing.
- Fostering, leveraging, and coordinating existing multi-faith spaces is vital to information exchange and cross-sector networking.
- Lack of financial resources for new, innovative partnership platforms remains a major challenge.
- To enable a green transformation, one key component is to develop new, innovative partnerships between secular and faith actors in order to build common ground for collective action regarding the protection of planetary boundaries.



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## This publication was a joint undertaking of the following partners:

### SIWI's Swedish Water House Water and Faith Cluster Group:

The Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI) seeks to strengthen water governance for a just, prosperous, and sustainable future. SIWI's Swedish Water House Cluster Groups are networks that gather actors around a specific issue. The Cluster Groups serve as a platform, connecting experts and practitioners from government, agencies, academic institutions, civil society, and the private sector. The aim is to build bridges between disciplines and stakeholders, bringing together research, development, policy, and decision making. The groups may also follow, participate, and engage in relevant international processes, to further raise awareness, and strengthen implementation. Since 2016 the Swedish Water House has hosted a Water and Faith Cluster Group bringing together faith-based and secular partners around SDG 6 (water and sanitation).

**For more information please visit:**

<https://swedishwaterhouse.se/en/cluster-groups/water-and-faith/> or [www.siwi.org](http://www.siwi.org).

### The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) Faith for Earth Initiative:

Faith for Earth was launched in 2017 after UNEP adopted a global strategy to engage with faith-based organizations for the implementation of the SDGs. The Initiative has conducted capacity building workshops and engaged with different religions and congregations to enhance policy dialogue and local action. Faith for Earth is engaging with more than 3,000 faith leaders across religions and regions and is working with intergovernmental organizations such as the African Union, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and the European Union to integrate institutional strategies to engage faith leaders in environmental action. The Faith for Earth Coalition (under establishment) will have four pillars including the Council of Eminent Faith Leaders, the Council of Young Faith Leaders, the Network of the Executives of Faith-Based Organizations, and the Science and Faith Scholar Consortium. This Coalition ensures the adoption of inter-faith collaborative leadership and action on the environment engaging all levels from local to global.

**For more information please visit:**

<https://www.unenvironment.org/about-un-environment/faith-earth-initiative>.

### The Swedish International Development Agency (Sida):

Sida is the Swedish government's agency for development cooperation. Sida strives to reduce world poverty by allocating resources and knowledge and by facilitating partnerships with the goal of making a difference for people in Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America. To achieve this, Sida collaborates closely with actors from civil society and universities as well as with the public and private sectors and the UN system.

Sida Partnership Forum is a capacity development centre for Sida's strategic partners working in international development cooperation and their field staff, i.e. personnel from government agencies, civil society organizations, and UN bodies, as well as the private sector. Sida Partnership Forum designs and implements capacity-building activities with collaborative partners; trainings, seminars, and arenas, with the purpose of strengthening Swedish development actors and their global partners on issues, methods, and themes linked to international development cooperation.

**For more information please visit:**

<https://www.sida.se>.

### The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (Naturvårdsverket):

The Swedish EPA is a public agency in Sweden that is responsible for environmental issues. The Agency carries out assignments on behalf of the Swedish Government relating to the environment in Sweden, the EU, and internationally. Among its global initiatives, Swedish EPA coordinates a Sida-funded partnership for an environmentally sustainable One UN in collaboration with UNEP and Sustainable UN.

The aim of the programme is to contribute towards a sustainable management of natural resources and ecosystem services in participating transition and development countries. The programme wants to strengthen institutional capacities of government agencies as well as the UN system. This will benefit all human beings, and particularly the least well-off, who are often more dependent on natural resources and ecosystem services for their living.

**For more information please visit:**

<http://www.swedishepa.se>.

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### Authors

This report has been authored by: Elizabeth A. Yaari, Senior Programme Manager, SIWI; Kristina Johansson, Programme Officer, SIWI; Dr. Josephine Sundqvist, Programme Manager Specialist, Sida; Dr. Iyad Abu Moghli, Director, Faith for Earth Initiative, UNEP; and Bengt Littorin, Naturvårdsverket.

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