

AFRICAN FAITH COMMITMENTS FOR A LIVING PLANET

Launched at the All Africa Conference of Churches, Nairobi, Kenya, at a celebration organised by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), 18 September 2012

BACKGROUND

The Alliance of Religions and Conservation was founded by HRH Prince Philip in 1995. ARC is a secular body helping the world's major religions develop environmental programmes based on their own core teachings, beliefs and practices. It also helps secular environment groups work with the faiths to protect the natural world.

Since 1995, ARC's work with the world's 11 major faiths on environment programmes has brought partnership with diverse groups from WWF International, Conservation International, the World Bank, the Norwegian Government and the United Nations Development Programme UNDP.

In December 2007 ARC, supported by the UNDP, launched a new programme to work with the faiths to tackle climate change and environmental issues. The faiths were asked to consider how they could develop Long-Term Commitments for a Living Planet which would shape the behaviour and outlook of the faithful for generations to come.

At a meeting in November 2009 in Windsor Castle, hosted by HRH The Duke of Edinburgh and the Secretary General of the United Nations, His Excellency Ban Ki-moon, leaders from nine of the world's major faiths – Baha'ism, Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Shintoism and Sikhism – committed to long-term practical action to save the environment.

This was the first major, internationally co-ordinated commitment by the religions to the environment and delivered scores of practical initiatives, from pioneering solar power for India's Sikh gurdwaras which feed 30 million people every day to the greening of religious buildings and eco tourism policies for pilgrimages – still the world's biggest travel events.

LONG-TERM COMMITMENTS IN AFRICA

UN Assistant Secretary-General, Olav Kjørven, described it as "potentially the biggest civil society movement on climate change in history" and "the biggest mobilisation of people and communities that we have ever seen on this issue." With this came a new recognition that faith leaders have a crucial role to play in protecting our planet.

Nowhere is this more true than in Africa – where more than 90% of the Continent's population describe themselves as either Christian or Muslim. For example, out of a population of 819 million people in sub-Saharan Africa, 470 million are Christian and 234 million are Muslim. Moreover, faith leaders are figures of huge influence and trust, often trusted where politicians, governments and military leaders are not. They are key to the challenge of changing perceptions and behaviour if there is to be a co-ordinated response to protecting our planet.

Post the Windsor Celebration ARC formed a partnership with the British Council to work with religious leaders in Sub-Saharan Africa. Two meetings in Africa followed in 2010 – one in Abuja, Nigeria, and

one in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where Muslim and Christian faith leaders committed to taking long-term action on the environment. At a further meeting in London, the four key Nigerian faith leaders who between them represent around 100 million Muslims and Christians, committed themselves and their followers to make practical protection of the environment a priority.

In March 2011, supported by the World Bank, USAID and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Norway, ARC hosted some 30 Christian and Muslim leaders from Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe at a workshop in Nairobi to explore drawing up long-term plans for action on the environment. Two key Hindu observers also participated: Hindus have active national organisations in 26 African countries.

They were joined by technical experts in sustainable land management and tree planting including USAID, ICRAF (World Agroforestry Centre), UNEP's Billion Trees Campaign, the World Bank and the International Small Group and Tree Planting Programme. As a result, more than 25 new long-term plans have been developed from Muslim and Christian faith groups and one Hindu group (the National Hindu Council of Africa).

COMMITMENTS FOR A LIVING PLANET

The plans outline action on the environment that faith groups commit to taking over the next seven years. They include each faith's theological mandate to take action and focus on agriculture practice, sustainable use of land and water and education on the environment in faith schools – emphasising simple, sustainable land and water management practices.

This programme has been supported by the World Bank as part of its TerrAfrica partnership. TerrAfrica involves 20 sub-Saharan countries and is led by the African Union's New Partnership for Africa's Development Planning and Coordinating Agency (NPCA). It's a partnership that aims to address land degradation in sub-Saharan Africa. It focuses on sustainable land management – on areas such as agroforestry, water harvesting and erosion control. Its members include the World Bank, the European Commission, UNDP and UNEP.

Already the governments of Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Rwanda and Tanzania have or are preparing Sustainable Land Management Investment Frameworks for their country.

Civil society groups such as faith groups are encouraged to be part of that framework or plan. As faith groups make up the largest group of civil society, this initiative is one way of allowing their voice on the environment to be heard.

DRAWING UP THE PLANS

Facilitating faith groups in sub-Saharan Africa to find their voice on issues such as tree planting or agroforestry or sustainable agriculture has been the task of the last 18 months. Since our meeting in Nairobi in 2011, the faith groups involved have been drawing up their long-term plans – consulting extensively with their local structures, from women's groups to youth groups to their faith hierarchy. Each faith group received a small amount of development money from ARC to make this happen.

For example, the Methodist Church of Kenya brought together their core leadership, including all of their Bishops, in a three-day meeting and drew up the first ever environmental policy for their Church. Called 'Stewardship of God's Earth', this commits Methodists in Kenya to be "good stewards of God's creation by following sustainable practices in the conservation and use of resources in the Church and at home and in helping develop more sustainable lifestyles".

The Council of Protestant Churches in Rwanda used its development money to bring together all the leaders of their 19 member Churches and four associated local Christian organisations to draw up the first ever Theological Charter on the Environment. Each parish will now have to sign up to this charter, endorsed by all their faith leaders. It reminds Christians in Rwanda that it is the environment that makes human beings' existence possible and that anyone who destroys the environment destroys themselves.

"We commit to mobilise Christians from CPR member Churches to value more the land, to protect and manage it in a proper manner because we human beings were created out of the land, the soil; we live on it, get our livelihood from it and will return to the land as we depart from our present day existence."(Genesis 2.7; 3.19) – Theological Charter on the Environment

For its part, the Kenyan Episcopal Conference has published a Pastoral letter to all Catholics in Kenya – to be read in all churches throughout the country – supporting its long-term plan. It says "faith commitment to a living planet is a Catholic commitment to the care of God's creation". It commits to launching a new Catholic Environment Day with each Catholic in Kenya planting at least one tree. There are more than nine million Catholics in Kenya – making up a third of the population.

In the Muslim community of Uganda, consultations were held with the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council, the Uganda Muslim Women Association, the National Mosque Committee, the Director of Sharia and the National Mosque Chief Imam to come up with a long term plan. This plan was launched to Uganda's six million Muslims in the third annual Greening Friday initiative in mosques throughout the country in July 2012.

WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT DISTINCTIVE?

Faith is what makes this project distinctive. In all cases faith has been the starting point for action in caring for the environment. Take tree planting. For many Muslim groups the first stage has been to point out that the Prophet Mohammed attached great importance to planting trees and protecting existing ones.

But planting trees is also Sadaqah Jariyah – a form of charity that provides everlasting rewards for as long as people benefit from your good deeds. In other words, a person who plants trees will keep on accumulating rewards even after death. And not just for planting the tree; he or she will be rewarded if any human or animal eats any of the produce of the tree and continue being rewarded as long as fruit is being produced and the tree lives – in this life and in the next.

"Whoever plants a tree, reward will be recorded for him so long as it produces fruit"

– Majma' al-Zawaid, v.480

And so, for example, tree growing clubs will be set up at every branch of the Uganda Muslim Youth Assembly and tree seedlings will be distributed to eight major cemeteries in Kano city in Nigeria.

Over the last 12 months ARC has sponsored training in 'Farming God's Way' for Christian faith leaders in Kenya. This is a form of sustainable agriculture that is based on conservation farming principles but is rooted in Biblical teachings. Leaders explored the idea that God was the first farmer and calls on His followers to care for the land faithfully. Increased yields from simple, effective sustainable agriculture methods have been demonstrated – and enthused participants to share such knowledge with their farmers.

And farming is at the heart of all the faith plans. For example, many of Ethiopia's 500,000 Orthodox Christian clergy are farmers themselves. They're close to their people and to the land – and want to make their 3,000 monasteries not just spiritual centres but monastic communities that act as pioneers for the introduction of environmental conservation and carbon trading and become centres of demonstration and learning for improved agricultural practices, sustainable land management techniques and innovations such as the introduction of biogas digesters and solar energy. In a country where 85% of people make their living from the land, and with a Church membership of 43.5 million, that could have a huge impact. This is civil society ready to act.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Women are at the forefront of many of the plans. In Africa, women are often the farmers and the bread earners while also expected to carry prime responsibility for raising the family. Faith structures reflect this – women's organisations and groups such as the Mothers' Union, the Catholic Women

Association, the Muslim Women Association, the Woman's Guild or the Christian Women Fellowship are central to the life of faith groups and have been key to designing many of the plans.

Several major plans have emerged where women have set up nurseries to provide seedlings for tree planting in schools, women's groups and in parishes. In Tanzania, for example, ARC has supported the piloting of four such nurseries over the last 18 months in the Northern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Women not only gain new skills in nursery management and agroforestry, but are able to earn money to put food on the table and send their children to school. The aim is to establish a women-led tree nursery in every parish in the Diocese. In June of this year, the President of Tanzania, Dr Jakaya Kikwete, initiated his country's Environment Day by coming to one of the nurseries to plant a tree.

In Uganda, members of the Mothers' Union in the Anglican Church of Uganda's Bunyoro Kitara Diocese have just taken up this idea with ARC support and are setting up nursery beds. Muslim women in the Gomba District in central Uganda have been planting fruit and ficus trees around their homes, gardens and mosques, practising agroforestry and installing energy saving stoves in a project they would like to see extended to other mosques and women's groups in the country.

EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Children are also a key feature of the plans. Educating them has always been the backbone of the faiths' activities in Africa and expanding teaching on the environment plays a big part in many of the long-term plans. That's why we are working with the Kenya Organization for Environmental Education to develop a toolkit for use in faith schools.

A workshop in Kenya in March 2012 brought together representatives of our faith partners to start the development of the "education for sustainable development" toolkit for faith primary schools, integrating religious wisdom and environmental education. To be launched initially in Kenya, we hope this toolkit will be adapted and used throughout the region. This initiative not only aims to teach children what their faith says about caring for trees or water or the land but also to demonstrate practical ways of rain water harvesting, growing vegetables or setting up a woodlot through demonstration plots at their schools or in their eco-clubs.

The long-term plan from the Qadiriyyah Movement in Nigeria has taken the involvement of children one step further. The Qadiriyyah Movement has an estimated 15 million followers in Nigeria and is the country's largest Islamic tradition. It proposes the setting up of Green Grocery Kiosks on the streets of Kano as official retail outlets where the organic fruit and vegetables grown by its children in school orchards will be sold.

Already in Qadiriyyah schools each child from reception upwards is given two seedlings to grow – one at home and one at the school orchard. Half of their graduation marks come from how well they look after their trees. There is now a scheme that means each school child is given school marks for picking up 100 discarded plastic water bags each week from the streets of Kano. The children collect these polythene bags as part of a street cleaning programme and they are recycled for use in the school's tree nursery programme, and used to hold seedlings.

FAITH IN ACTION

These are exciting plans. Many are ambitious and will require outside funding and partnership to get them off the ground. Others will happen because the faith groups who have drawn them up are convinced that this is the right thing for them to do. Symbolic signs of change should be seen quickly.

In Hindu temples, community centres, supermarkets and shops owned by Hindus in Kenya you should soon see 'Bhumi bags' – durable cloth bags being promoted through the Hindu long-term plan. Bhumi is the Hindu name of Mother Earth. Hindus will also soon have initiatives on environmental protection circulated through SMS on their mobile phones.

Muslims in Nigeria will hear stories and discussions about the environment on their local radio stations, including quotes from Islamic scriptures on the environment, food, water, sustainable lifestyles and conservation. Muslims in Uganda will be given tree seedlings to plant in an annual 'Green Friday' Day in mosques throughout the country.

Evangelical Lutherans in Tanzania have pledged to introduce burials which don't use wooden coffins or graves constructed by cement, bricks and mortar. Lutheran and Anglican confirmation candidates in Tanzania and Uganda must now plant a tree in order to be confirmed – likewise, other religious rituals, from marriage to baptism, will be marked with tree planting.

For the first time, mosques in Ethiopia will be engaged in a drive to promote environmental protection – with selected mosques becoming eco mosques – planting trees and establishing woodlots in order to become self sufficient in their wood supply. Each mosque will have its own tree planting club running training workshops and annual Tree Days.

There will be tree planting on a grand scale. Each mosque in Ethiopia – there are 40,000 of them – is set to plant 5,000 trees over two to three years. In Uganda, the Muslim Green Top Tree planting project aims to distribute, help plant and grow 2.5 million seedlings for fruit and agroforestry; the Council of Protestant Churches in Rwanda has committed to planting one million trees a year; Christians from the Northern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania commit to planting 8.5 million trees as community forests in the Mount Kilimanjaro region; five million trees are to be planted at church and community levels in the Anglican Bunyoro Kitara Diocese in Uganda; and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Ghana, along with the interfaith body, Relbonet, is mobilising people in 10,000 Christian and Muslim congregations to plant seven million trees over seven years.

A NEW WAY OF LIVING

Much of the work of the past 18 months has been supported by the World Bank. The encouragement and commitment of the World Bank in supporting this initiative and its continuing support has been crucial. We now look forward to its help in finding partners for these initiatives. We are helping to link up faith groups with their government's strategy and programmes on sustainable land management through World Bank contacts among others.

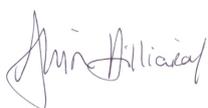
Practical projects from the establishment of women's nurseries to the installation of biogas digesters in nunneries in Ethiopia have been supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Norway whose enthusiasm and support has been vital for the success of this programme. Likewise Africa Biodiversity Collaborative Group (ABCG), through USAID, has helped make this meeting in Nairobi possible.

The All Africa Conference of Churches have been our host and supporter for both of our meetings in Nairobi and we are grateful for its support, generous hospitality and guiding wisdom.

We know that wonderful things will grow from these long-term plans. We at ARC have been inspired and humbled by the commitment, imagination and leadership shown by the 25 faith groups involved in this process. And by the fact that all the faith groups are making time for celebration in their plans – celebration to delight in the beauty and wonder of the world around them – despite the serious environmental problems their followers experience day by day.

Catholic leaders have called this a "moment of grace" – a chance to move towards a different future. The Orthodox Christian Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew, put it another way, calling this our "Kairos moment": a moment where extraordinary things can happen – where we can act and offer a new vision of a new way of living.

These long-term plans are part of that vision.



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