COP 30 Presidency Roadmap on Halting and Reversing Deforestation and Forest Degradation by 2030

Inputs from the World Council of Churches

Forests serve as the lungs of the planet and are among the most effective natural systems for carbon sequestration. By capturing and storing carbon dioxide (CO_2) within plant biomass and soils, forests play a fundamental role in regulating the global carbon cycle.

Over the past century, anthropogenic emissions have significantly increased the concentration of CO_2 in the atmosphere. Throughout this period, the combined absorptive capacity of forests and oceans has mitigated the extent of global temperature rise, preventing more severe climatic disruptions. Despite a longstanding scientific consensus on the need for emission reductions, global responses have been delayed. Consequently, the international community now faces the dual challenge of reducing current greenhouse gas emissions while simultaneously enhancing carbon removal from the atmosphere.

Land use, encompassing forestry and agriculture, accounts for approximately 25 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Although fossil fuels remain the dominant source and must be addressed with priority, the significance of land use in achieving climate goals cannot be overlooked. Effective climate mitigation requires integrated strategies that encompass both emission reduction and sustainable land management.

Forests are therefore indispensable in mitigating climate change impacts. The highest carbon retention is achieved within old-growth and primary forests, which store vast amounts of carbon and sustain critical biodiversity. These forest ecosystems, however, are increasingly rare, particularly in regions dominated by industrial forestry. Indigenous peoples and local communities often inhabit these areas, serving as principal stewards of forest ecosystems. Their traditional knowledge and sustainable practices play a crucial role in forest conservation, yet their lands and livelihoods are frequently threatened by industrial exploitation and unsustainable extraction.

Sustainable forest management – especially when grounded in long-term stewardship and local participation – offers a viable alternative to extractive models. These approaches balance economic, social, and environmental objectives, ensuring that forest resources contribute to both climate stability and community resilience.

Programmes such as REDD+ ("Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation") have shown mixed results. But where REDD+ projects have combined forest protection with sustainable farming as well as secured Indigenous and community land rights, deforestation rates have been lower and emission reduction goals were more often met. Agroforestry and Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR) protect the soil, increase biodiversity, store carbon, and provide reliable food for growing populations.

To achieve the global temperature targets of 1.5°C to 2°C established under the Paris Agreement, it is imperative to preserve and enhance the carbon stocks held within forest ecosystems. Primary and old-growth forests must be strictly protected, and all forestry practices must conform to principles of sustainability, regeneration, and intergenerational responsibility.

The prevailing extractive forestry systems cannot be sustained without undermining ecological stability, marginalising Indigenous populations, and accelerating biodiversity loss. A transition toward sustainable, inclusive, and climate-resilient forest governance is therefore essential for meeting both environmental and social objectives in the decades ahead.

To safeguard the forests as well as indigenous and local communities, an important but often overlooked prerequisite is an ethical grounding and worldview of land and life. Such an understanding is often rooted in faith and religious and spiritual beliefs. If monetary and instant returns are given the highest value, there is no ground for protection. But if a good life together and a stable ecosystem are the goals, the incentives for action, and the possibilities for protection are much higher. Therefore, faith traditions and indigenous wisdom and narratives must play a crucial part in protecting forests and the ecosystems.

Moreover, churches and other faith-based communities are among the biggest landowners in the world, second only to governments. Collectively they own about 510 million hectares of land, representing 8 percent of habitable land and, and approximately 5 percent of commercial forests. This provides critical opportunities not only to demonstrate but also to replicate restorative practices.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) and its member churches are actively engaged in caring for forests in a variety of ways:

- The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, launched in June 2017, with the WCC as one of its founding organisations. Since then, this initiative has mobilised local faith communities alongside Indigenous peoples across three continents to protect rainforests. It demonstrates how different religious traditions can come together around a shared goal of safeguarding creation.

- The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church is well known for the forests surrounding its churches. In a landscape where deforestation has been widespread, these sacred and centuries old forests stand as powerful examples of how a faith-based understanding of creation can support environmental protection. By preserving and revering the forests around churches as sacred, local ecosystems are sustained and protected.

- The Anglican Communion initiated the Communion Forest in 2019. This initiative builds on and is inspired by the extensive environmental work already taking place across the Communion. Its aim is to significantly expand tree-planting and ecosystem conservation, protection, and restoration efforts worldwide, while deepening care for creation within the life of the Church and its members.