

Editorial

# Special Issue “Faith and Sustainable Development: Exploring Practice, Progress and Challenges among Faith Communities and Institutions”: Foreword by the President of Ireland

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While the concept of sustainable development has a history of more than 50 years now, with origins dating back to the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, it would take the publication of the influential 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, or the ‘Brundtland Report’ as it is commonly known (named after its chairperson, the then-prime minister of Norway) before the term’s use became more widespread [1]. The subsequent 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Earth Summit, elevated the idiom further so that its usage became more ubiquitous in everyday and policy language.

The Brundtland Report made a seminal contribution to the ecological discourse. As well as providing the modern three-pillared definition of sustainability, it also grounded the concept of sustainable development in intergenerational terms:

“Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [1].

The 1992 United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, at which I was present as part of the team making a documentary entitled ‘Seven Days to Save the World’, was a milestone and a moment of hope, created as a response to emerging crises. The belief and hope was that UN member states could cooperate together internationally on development issues relating to sustainability, as such issues, being global in impact, were too big for individual member states to tackle in isolation.

More than thirty years after Rio, it is abundantly clear that we have a long distance to travel on the road to sustainable development, despite some progress. Rio was useful in mainstreaming and capturing sustainability concepts, yet it is so disheartening that so many of the agreements made in Rio have not been realised—agreements regarding such fundamental issues as tackling poverty and environmental degradation. While much has occurred since then, especially at the EU and international United Nations levels, including annual UN Conferences on climate change and the UN 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals, we now find ourselves on the precipice of catastrophic climate change, ecosystem collapse and runaway biodiversity loss.

Delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals is now a first-order moral issue for the survival of all those who inhabit this vulnerable planet. Achieving sustainable development must be seen for the period 2030 as something that carries obligations and duties in every region.

This universal approach is a recognition that, in a globalised world, problems and their solutions can only be defined, understood and faced at the global level. However, the fundamental challenge remains, at the institutional, diplomatic and democratic levels, that elected governments are responsible for an ever-decreasing portion of the global, regulated economic space.



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The importance of the participation of all of us, as global citizens, playing our part in tackling climate change and its consequences, and ensuring sustainable development going forward, is manifestly clear. It requires those at all levels of society, including those with influence—such as governments, the community and voluntary sectors, businesses, farmers, civil society and faith-based groups—to come together under one common banner to ensure that the practical ‘doing’ of sustainable development is mainstreamed across society, and with urgency.

Faith-based groups have the potential to be a powerful conduit for achieving buy-in to sustainable development, ensuring that it becomes the only form of development across our world. It is estimated that over 80 percent of the global population are adherents, to varying degrees, of a faith tradition. Given the scale, reach and importance of religion and religious institutions, engagement with, and by people in, faith communities and institutions is vital for the prospects of sustainable development both now and in the future when population growth is likely to be highest in countries with high levels of faith adherents.

In my travels around Ireland and across the globe, I have witnessed so many examples of the vital contribution that faith-based organisations can make to the common good—be it in areas of poverty mitigation, hunger alleviation, peacebuilding, or education. I suggest that the extension of their reach into sustainable development is one that has the power to be transformative and emancipatory for the people most impacted by climate change and its consequences, as well as the shocking loss of biodiversity which we now sadly already experience.

Let us not forget that the greatest human and economic impact of climate change is being borne most acutely in those countries least responsible for climate change, least responsible for the carbon emissions threatening their existence. What a profound injustice this constitutes; one that must be rectified.

What we need to support and facilitate in Africa and in other poorer regions is a model of sustainable development that creates employment, develops indigenous industry, builds green infrastructure, incorporates local wisdom, and addresses the acute needs of the people, all within the context of what are now urgent climate change demands. This is ambitious, but with the tools available to us through modern technology, we have the capacity to enable such a model to emerge, always remembering that Africa has a history and will have a future appropriately designed by Africans.

Across all the religions of the world and across all the beacons and all the human rights statements, the word ‘dignity’ often occurs. This is about seeing in the other person, not just yourself, but a person of immense uniqueness that is entitled to respect. I suggest that it is through this prism of dignity that faith-based organisations can advocate for the adoption of sustainable development practices and policies.

May I commend the editors of and contributors to the journal *Sustainability* for this Special Issue and thank Sr. Nora MacNamara both for her pioneering work in the field of sustainability, food security and development issues, as well as for the invitation to contribute this foreword.

In focusing on the importance of exploring practice, progress and challenges among faith communities and institutions, this Special Issue provides much-needed research and analysis on how this important source of climate leadership can be harnessed. It is enabling the voices of those involved in such work to be heard. This is vitally important.

The Special Issue, in focusing on “making sustainable development happen” at grass-roots levels, allows for perspectives from, and on, the major world faiths, exploring how challenges have been conceptualised and addressed, in addition to case studies of faith-based sustainability initiatives in practice.

For all the distressing and shocking scandals that we have witnessed in recent years, not least in Ireland, surrounding the Catholic and other Christian Churches, as institutions involved in helping make development happen, such institutions have done much good and have the potential to do more. Hope has been invested in the potential of religious institutions as a channel for, and exemplar of, sustainable development practices and values.

Recent Papal Encyclicals have been useful and insightful. In June 2015, the Papal Encyclical *Laudato Si* on humanity and the Earth was published, the first encyclical on climate action, environment and sustainable development from a pope (Pope Francis). It introduces the concept of 'Integral Ecology', defined as a synthesis of ecological ethics with Catholic Social Teaching on the just economy, dignity of individuals, social solidarity, subsidiarity and the common good. The Encyclical, in calling for new processes of dialogue across sectors, faiths, frontiers and disciplines, advocates for a radical rethinking of policy priorities and values.

The experience of faith institutions and communities in translating theological and moral commitments to sustainable development into action is now a topic we must examine with urgency; one on which I am so glad this Special Issue focuses. The challenges of maintaining effective institutions and personnel at grassroots levels is perhaps the greatest challenge we face, and the question as to how effectively faith organisations can rally people around sustainable development must be an overriding issue to be addressed.

As President of Ireland, I very much support this Special Issue of *Sustainability*. It is my great hope that the contents of the papers contained herein will assist in making sustainable development happen at grassroots levels across the world so that we can cooperate together, people of faith and of none, to ensure a just, inclusive and sustainable future for all on our fragile planet.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Reference

1. World Commission on Environment and Development. *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 1987.

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