



the INTERFAITH RAINFOREST INITIATIVE

Exploring with a gender lens

 Religions *for* Peace



ABOUT THE WORLD FAITHS DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE

The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) is a not-for-profit organization working at the intersection of religion and global development. Housed within the Berkley Center in Washington, D.C., WFDD documents the work of faith inspired organizations and explores the importance of religious ideas and actors in development contexts. WFDD supports dialogue between religious and development communities and promotes innovative partnerships, at national and international levels, with the goal of contributing to positive and inclusive development outcomes.

ABOUT RELIGIONS FOR PEACE

Religions for Peace is the world's oldest, largest, and most representative multi-religious movement, advancing common action among the world's religious and faith communities. *Religions for Peace* works through representative, multi-religious platforms (Interreligious Councils), and their Women of Faith and Interfaith Youth Networks, in over 92 countries and 6 regions. For over 50 years, *Religions for Peace* has been convening to catalyze and promote multi-religious and multistakeholder collaboration and action for the common good.

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Disclaimer: All the views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the individual Authors. None of the opinions, views or content shared in this publication necessarily reflects official policies, positions or missions, of any of the organising institutions, Boards, or territories.

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WHY *the* REVIEW?

Protecting tropical rainforests is a critical part of efforts to address global climate change. These systems, aptly termed the “lungs of the earth,” face multiple and complex threats. Responses need collaborative efforts among widely different communities. Though rarely seen as central actors, religious communities can and do play important roles. Forest protection has tended historically to be seen as a rather male-dominated activity and responsibility, though women indeed are affected by deforestation and have distinctive insights and parts to play in protection. The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) stands out as a broad and creative approach that engages religious actors in comprehensive protection efforts. *Religions for Peace*, the largest global multifaith movement advancing multireligious cooperation and service for the common good, for over 50 years, advances IRI as one of its key mobilization efforts to nurture a sustainable environment. In that context, *Religions for Peace* and the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) explored the manner and extent that both latent and manifest gender roles are reflected in the approach to IRI and its management. By probing this often-neglected dimension of partnership and action, the aim is to gain insights and develop ideas to better face the challenges involved in protecting threatened rainforests.

Three regions stand out for their vast rainforests: the Amazon, Congo Basin, and Southeast Asia – all of which face significant and complex threats. Deforestation, fueled by industries such as logging, ranching, and mining, as well as small-scale agriculture, claims millions of hectares of primary forest every year. While local context varies across these regions,

rainforest communities face common perils, including encroaching industry, violence and intimidation toward Indigenous peoples and forest defenders. The problems are well known but among obstacles on the paths to protection, insufficient political will from governments has special importance.

Many faith communities today are emerging as leading advocates for bold action on climate issues, including protection of rainforests and related biodiversity. Approaches are linked to complicated religious histories in rainforest regions; several sanctioned colonial conquest and exploitation of native populations. Faith-inspired efforts to combat deforestation highlight several moral imperatives, ranging from the broad need to protect the natural environment and Indigenous communities to linking moral teachings to concrete action. IRI stands out for its efforts to reverse rainforest destruction and build more sustainable and just approaches to forests and the communities that live there. IRI's approach is framed around creative partnerships, connecting religious representatives, civil society groups, government and business leaders, and Indigenous communities.

While there is a growing awareness that women's voices need to be heard as part of rainforest protection efforts, this issue still tends to be shunted to the margins of practical debates. Recent academic and grey literature highlights the work of Indigenous women in rainforest activism, forest conservation, and the need to build on their specific knowledge. Research tends to be qualitative and grounded in case studies, meaning that there are few statistics on women's and girl's representation in activism and leadership circles. Yet studies of rainforest communities drawn from multiple continents highlights women's roles in promoting positive traditional cultural, religious, and spiritual beliefs that emphasize coexistence with nature and respect for the forest. These assets, however, are often overlooked and excluded from decision-making processes. The hierarchical nature of gender roles in many religious and Indigenous communities as well as in the secular forest sectors are part of the explanation. Even where women participate and hold leadership positions, serious engagement on gender aspects of deforestation and Indigenous rights can be marginalized.

This paper presents a *Religions for Peace*/WFDD joint exploration of these neglected or marginalized aspects of IRI. The analysis is based specifically on the IRI experience, but looking through a "gender equality lens" suggests broader challenges for work on today's climate crisis with its global and local dimensions. The paper draws on an analysis of IRI documents, newsletters, blog posts, and videos, as well as interviews with IRI and *Religions for Peace* leadership and collaborators and women faith leaders and activists working on environmental issues more broadly. The research should be seen as preliminary and partial; it draws mainly on English, French, and Spanish materials, though other languages (Bahasa Indonesian and numerous Indigenous languages) are the daily reality where IRI is active.

The paper briefly reviews IRI's organizational history, the status of rainforests in the five countries where IRI works, and current activities of each country program. The second part summarizes IRI's focus across its country programs, identifying trends and emerging

differences. The third section focuses on issues of gender as they relate to IRI's work and to rainforest activism more broadly. A final section discusses possible pathways forward, with suggestions both for IRI and for belief-inspired action on rainforests and Indigenous issues. A parallel literature review explores broader issues of scholarship and operational investigation of gender issues in the environment field, "Women and Interfaith Action to Protect Global Rainforests: What's known and what is not?"

The review highlights IRI's positive efforts to engage women, to take into account growing knowledge about feminine dimensions of rainforest challenges and protection and, through its participatory ethos, to engage women in its local, community work. Five proposals offer the potential to build on these foundations:

- Engaging with and identifying more ways to bolster women's groups;
- Expanding on community-based approaches with a strong lens on gender dimensions and hearing women's voices;
- Elevating women leaders in IRI and supporting such measures in broader rainforest protection efforts;
- Active telling of women's stories; and
- Embedding and integration of gender dimensions within IRI's framing objectives.

IRI (INTERFAITH RAINFOREST INITIATIVE): HISTORY *and* PRESENT

Launched in 2017, IRI operates in five countries, through over 80 local chapters. IRI shares a common vision, but its national, regional, and local activities vary depending on the situation on the ground. The political, cultural and societal climate, the existing landscape of activism, and the nature of the challenges facing rainforests and Indigenous communities, shape how IRI operates.

IRI's Formation

IRI was formed with the support of governments, multinational governance bodies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), notably Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI), the Rainforest Foundation Norway (RFN), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *Religions for Peace*, the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University, GreenFaith, the Parliament of the World's Religions, REIL Network, and the World Council of Churches have been important partners from the outset.¹ Planning processes have involved consultations with Indigenous communities, in part to build on existing efforts on rainforests.² IRI launched country programs in Colombia (December 2018), Peru (December 2018), Brazil, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (December 2019), and Indonesia (February 2020).

Religious obligations and action potential are central to IRI's ethos and operations and a central goal is to encourage the active engagement of religious communities. At a global level, IRI provides resources for individuals and communities seeking to address deforestation and related issues on the ground. IRI resource guides (June 2020) for religious communities frame the need to protect rainforests and Indigenous rights as a moral and

1 Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, "New Hope for World's Tropical Forests as Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Daoist Leaders Join Indigenous Forest Guardians to Launch Global Effort to End Deforestation," June 19, 2017, https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/s/iri_press_release.pdf.

2 "Briefing and Consultation at the COICA Assembly," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, June 18, 2018, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2018/06/18/briefing-and-consultation-at-the-coica-assembly/>.

spiritual duty; the guides, available on the IRI website, offer reflections from faith leaders on the religious imperative to protect nature.³ An IRI primer highlights the importance of rainforest restoration.⁴

Table 1: Summary of Tropical Rainforests

	Brazil	Colombia	DRC	Indonesia	Peru
Land area (sq. km)⁵	8.4 million	1.1 million	2.3 million	1.9 million	1.3 million
Tree cover (hectares)⁶	445 million (2020)	77.5 million (2020)	163 million (2020)	153 million (2020)	77.8 million (2020)
Humid primary forest (hectares)⁷	315 million (2021)	53 million (2021)	99.2 million (2021)	83.9 million (2021)	66.8 million (2021)
Percentage loss in tree cover, 2000 to 2020 (hectares)⁸	-5.9%	-2.2%	-3.6%	-2.6%	-0.97%
Population, 2021⁹	214 million	51.3 million	92.4 million	276 million	33.4 million
Estimated Indigenous population	900,000(2010) ¹⁰	1.9 million (2018) ¹¹	700,000 – 2 million (n.d.) ¹²	50 – 70 million (n.d.) ¹³	4 – 5 million (2007) ¹⁴
Population growth rate, 2021¹⁵	0.7%	0.7%	3.1%	1.0%	1.2%
IRI founded	January 2019	November 2018	December 2019	February 2020	December 2018
IRI chapters	2	36	31	3	12
IRI advisory council seats held by women	5 out of 15 (33%)	3 out of 13 (23%)	1 out of 20 (5%)	1 out of 15 (7%)	4 out of 20 (20%)

3 “Resource Guide on Rainforest Protection for Religious Communities Launch,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, June 5, 2020, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2020/06/05/resource-guide-on-rainforest-protection-for-religious-communities-launch/>.

4 “IRI Launches New Issue Primer on Forest Restoration as Contribution to UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, June 11, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/06/11/iri-launches-new-issue-primer-on-forest-restoration-as-contribution-to-un-decade-on-ecosystem-restoration/>.

5 “World Bank Open Data,” World Bank, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/>.

6 “Forest Monitoring, Land Use & Deforestation Trends,” Global Forest Watch, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/>.

7 “Forest Monitoring, Land Use & Deforestation Trends,” Global Forest Watch, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/>.

8 “Forest Monitoring, Land Use & Deforestation Trends,” Global Forest Watch, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/>.

9 “World Bank Open Data,” World Bank, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/>.

10 “Brazil,” International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://iwgia.org/en/brazil.html>.

11 “Colombia,” International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://iwgia.org/en/colombia.html>.

12 “Democratic Republic of Congo,” International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://iwgia.org/en/democratic-republic-of-congo.html>.

13 “Indonesia,” International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.iwgia.org/en/indonesia.html>.

14 “Peru,” Rainforest Foundation US, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://rainforestfoundation.org/our-work/where-we-work/peru/>;
“Peru,” International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://iwgia.org/en/peru.html>.

15 “World Bank Open Data,” World Bank, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/>.

Definition of Terms

Primary forest refers to forests that remain in their original condition, untouched by human activity. This is the most biologically diverse kind of forest.¹⁶

Secondary forest is forest that has been disturbed in some way, whether by natural or unnatural means. This includes forest degraded by human activity or new forest growing on the site of previously destroyed forest.¹⁷

IRI Country Programs: Context & History

Brazil

With nearly two-thirds of the Amazon rainforest located in Brazil, public discourse on deforestation often revolves around Brazil.¹⁸ Since the 1970s, between 17 and 20% of the Brazilian Amazon has been destroyed; 12% of the country's tree cover was lost between 2001 and 2021 alone.¹⁹ Deforestation is primarily driven by global demand for beef and soy, which require large swaths of land to cultivate.²⁰ The situation worsened significantly under the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2023), who significantly scaled back environmental regulations and protection of Indigenous lands, granted amnesty to those engaging in illegal deforestation, and incited hostility against scientists, environmental activists, and Indigenous representatives who spoke out against the destruction of the Amazon.²¹ This climate of impunity emboldened commercial interests at the expense of the natural environment and forest communities; illegal logging, mining, and poaching on Indigenous lands were up 137% in 2020 compared to 2018.²² In 2021 alone, there were over 300

16 "Types of Rainforests," Mongabay.com, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://rainforests.mongabay.com/0103.htm>.

17 "Types of Rainforests," Mongabay.com, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://rainforests.mongabay.com/0103.htm>.

18 "Brazil and the Amazon Forest," Greenpeace, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/issues/brazil-and-the-amazon-forest/>.

19 "Brazil Deforestation Rates & Statistics," Global Forest Watch, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/BRA/>; Diana Roy, "Deforestation of Brazil's Amazon Has Reached a Record High. What's Being Done?," Council on Foreign Relations, August 24, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/deforestation-brazils-amazon-has-reached-record-high-whats-being-done>.

20 Diana Roy, "Deforestation of Brazil's Amazon Has Reached a Record High. What's Being Done?," Council on Foreign Relations, August 24, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/deforestation-brazils-amazon-has-reached-record-high-whats-being-done>.

21 Diana Roy, "Deforestation of Brazil's Amazon Has Reached a Record High. What's Being Done?," Council on Foreign Relations, August 24, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/deforestation-brazils-amazon-has-reached-record-high-whats-being-done>; "Amazon Deforestation in Brazil Booms in August," Mongabay News, September 9, 2022, <https://news.mongabay.com/2022/09/amazon-deforestation-in-brazil-booms-in-august/>.

22 "Brazil: Indigenous Rights Under Serious Threat," Human Rights Watch, August 9, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/09/brazil-indigenous-rights-under-serious-threat>.

recorded cases of illegal incursions into Indigenous territories.²³ The situation grew so dire that Indigenous activists petitioned the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate Bolsonaro for crimes against humanity and genocide.²⁴

While Brazil's constitution recognizes Indigenous peoples' rights to their traditional lands and prohibits the incursion of commercial interests without prior consent from Indigenous leadership, the reality has been much bleaker on the ground, especially under the Bolsonaro presidency.²⁵ The country's Indigenous affairs agency (FUNAI) was effectively dismantled under Bolsonaro, with a severely downgraded budget and new senior leadership that intimidated and prosecuted Indigenous leaders, human rights lawyers, and even its own employees.²⁶ One of FUNAI's primary responsibilities is demarcating territories to which Indigenous communities have collective legal rights; however, under Bolsonaro, FUNAI ceased doing this work despite pending applications regarding some 240 territories.²⁷ At the same time, many FUNAI agents fear for their lives, believing the agency no longer cares about their safety; the murder of FUNAI agent Bruno Pereira alongside British journalist Dom Phillips in June 2022 confirmed many agents' worse fears.²⁸

The overall situation has changed since Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was inaugurated as President of Brazil in January, 2023. Lula has declared that he wants to turn Brazil, one of the world's top food producers, into a green superpower. In his first decisions as president, he restored the authority of the government's environmental protection agency Ibama to combat illegal deforestation and revoked a measure that encouraged illegal mining on protected Indigenous lands. The billion-dollar Amazon Fund (Norway and Germany) for sustainability projects was unblocked.

There is a long history of religious engagement on issues for the Amazon, notably by the Catholic Church. This has provided a foundation for the IRI program in Brazil. A substantial interfaith and NGO and indigenous peoples meeting on January 29, 2019 in Brasilia can be considered the official starting date of the IRI program there; it took place shortly after the election of Bolsonaro as president.

23 Diana Roy, "Deforestation of Brazil's Amazon Has Reached a Record High. What's Being Done?," Council on Foreign Relations, August 24, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/deforestation-brazils-amazon-has-reached-record-high-whats-being-done>.

24 Diana Roy, "Deforestation of Brazil's Amazon Has Reached a Record High. What's Being Done?," Council on Foreign Relations, August 24, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/deforestation-brazils-amazon-has-reached-record-high-whats-being-done>.

25 "Brazil," International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://iwgia.org/en/brazil.html>.

26 "Brazil," International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://iwgia.org/en/brazil.html>; "Brazil: Indigenous Rights Under Serious Threat," Human Rights Watch, August 9, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/09/brazil-indigenous-rights-under-serious-threat>.

27 "Brazil: Indigenous Rights Under Serious Threat," Human Rights Watch, August 9, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/09/brazil-indigenous-rights-under-serious-threat>.

28 "Brazil: Indigenous Rights Under Serious Threat," Human Rights Watch, August 9, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/09/brazil-indigenous-rights-under-serious-threat>.

Colombia

Colombia is the world's second most biodiverse country, with half of its total land area covered by forest, (the Amazon rainforest accounts for 10% of Colombia's territory).²⁹ During the decades-long civil conflict, the country experienced low rates of deforestation due to strict oversight of rainforest areas controlled by FARC guerrillas. Ironically, following the peace deal brokered in 2016, the rainforest has faced record deforestation and exploitation by less organized rebel groups that encourage cattle ranching, coca cultivation, logging, palm oil production, and gold mining in order to generate revenue. Between 2001 and 2021, Colombia lost nearly 5 million hectares (49,300 million square kilometers) of tree cover, including 1.8 million hectares (17,900 million square kilometers) of humid primary forest. This represented a 6% loss of total tree cover since 2000.³⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic and government lockdowns have done little to stem the tide of destruction.³¹ Effective law enforcement is weak, coupled with widespread corruption in government.³² The 2022 election of Gustavo Petro, who campaigned on a platform of protecting Colombia's forests, brought new hope; however, the impact of the national government's efforts on forests hinges on local enforcement, and the influence of the private sector on local elections may pose a barrier to the implementation of new national policies.³³

After centuries of dispossession, Colombia's Indigenous communities began receiving government recognition of ancestral land claims in the 1980s. Today, the majority of the Colombian Amazon is managed by Indigenous communities, and more than half of this land has been recognized as *resguardos indigenas*, areas belonging to native peoples. These areas are the most biodiverse in Colombia.³⁴

29 Martina Igini, "Deforestation in Colombia: An Intricate Story of Conflict and Power," Earth.org, April 28, 2022, <https://earth.org/deforestation-in-colombia/>; "A Broken Canopy: Deforestation and Conflict in Colombia," International Crisis Group, November 4, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/091-broken-canopy-deforestation-and-conflict-colombia>; Rhett A. Butler, "The Top 10 Most Biodiverse Countries," Mongabay News, May 21, 2016, <https://news.mongabay.com/2016/05/top-10-biodiverse-countries/>.

30 "Colombia Deforestation Rates & Statistics," Global Forest Watch, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/COL/>.

31 Martina Igini, "Deforestation in Colombia: An Intricate Story of Conflict and Power," Earth.org, April 28, 2022, <https://earth.org/deforestation-in-colombia/>; "Colombia Deforestation Rates & Statistics," Global Forest Watch, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/COL/>.

32 Martina Igini, "Deforestation in Colombia: An Intricate Story of Conflict and Power," Earth.org, April 28, 2022, <https://earth.org/deforestation-in-colombia/>.

33 Robin Harding et al, "Why Colombia's New Leader Will Have Trouble Preserving Country's Forests," Washington Post, July 12, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/07/13/colombia-petro-corruption-local-mayors-environment-infrastructure/>.

34 "Indigenous Rights in Colombia," World Wildlife Fund, accessed December 14, 2022, https://wwf.panda.org/discover/knowledge_hub/where_we_work/amazon/about_the_amazon/people_amazon/indigenous_colombia.cfm.

Launched in November 2018, IRI Colombia was the first of IRI's five country programs to be established.³⁵ Today, there are 36 local IRI chapters across Colombia, particularly in areas experiencing the highest levels of deforestation. IRI Colombia has enjoyed considerable success in working with local religious leaders and associations, including the Roman Catholic Church, Evangelical Confederation of Colombia, and Interreligious Council, which represents other Protestants, Muslims, Hindus, etc. Despite lagging efforts around the globe, IRI Colombia's goal is zero deforestation by 2030.³⁶

Democratic Republic of the Congo

The DRC is home to nearly two-thirds of the Congo Basin, the world's largest second largest tropical rainforest.³⁷ It has one of the world's highest deforestation rates, losing 1.25 million hectares of tree cover in 2021 alone.³⁸ Between 2001 and 2021, DRC lost 17 million hectares of tree cover, more than a third of which was humid primary forest.³⁹

Unlike the Amazon, where large industries are responsible for the majority of environmental destruction, DRC's deforestation is fueled primarily by smallholder agriculture and charcoal production.⁴⁰ Without access to electricity, the vast majority of citizens rely on charcoal for energy, and many also depend on the forest for their food and livelihoods, a situation exacerbated by shortages in food imports and aid.⁴¹ Demand for "green"

35 "IRI Colombia Country Program Launch Event," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, November 21, 2018, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2018/11/21/iri-colombia-country-program-launch-event/>.

36 Blanca Lucía Echeverry, in conversation with Katherine Marshall, October 5, 2022.

37 Victoria Schneider, "Poor Governance Fuels 'Horrible Dynamic' of Deforestation in DRC," Mongabay News, December 21, 2020, <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/12/poor-governance-fuels-horrible-dynamic-of-deforestation-in-drc/>; "Congo Rainforest and Basin," World Wildlife Fund, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/places/congo-basin>.

38 Democratic Republic of the Congo Deforestation Rates & Statistics," Global Forest Watch, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/COD/>; Ed Ram, "In 10 Years, We Might Not Have Forests: DRC Struggles to Halt Charcoal Trade," The Guardian, July 20, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jul/20/in-10-years-we-might-not-have-forests-drc-struggles-to-halt-charcoal-trade-a-photo-essay>.

39 Democratic Republic of the Congo Deforestation Rates & Statistics," Global Forest Watch, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/COD/>.

40 Ed Ram, "In 10 Years, We Might Not Have Forests: DRC Struggles to Halt Charcoal Trade," The Guardian, July 20, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jul/20/in-10-years-we-might-not-have-forests-drc-struggles-to-halt-charcoal-trade-a-photo-essay>.

41 Victoria Schneider, "Poor Governance Fuels 'Horrible Dynamic' of Deforestation in DRC," Mongabay News, December 21, 2020, <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/12/poor-governance-fuels-horrible-dynamic-of-deforestation-in-drc/>; Ed Ram, "In 10 Years, We Might Not Have Forests: DRC Struggles to Halt Charcoal Trade," The Guardian, July 20, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jul/20/in-10-years-we-might-not-have-forests-drc-struggles-to-halt-charcoal-trade-a-photo-essay>.

technology, such as solar panels and electric vehicles and thus DRC's rich mineral resources, encourages extractive industries.⁴²

DRC has many environmental regulations on the books, but political will to enforce them is weak. With a long history of war and ongoing civil conflict in the northeastern regions of Ituri and Kivu, DRC faces poor economic development, political instability, and rampant corruption; politicians with financial stakes in the charcoal industry have very little incentive to support environmental reforms.⁴³ There is no current national plan to fight deforestation, although there are positive developments, including a 2016 forest law that grants local communities the right to secure legal titles to their lands.⁴⁴

For most of its history, the DRC has not recognized the rights of its approximately 1 million Indigenous pygmy peoples, many of whom have been coerced to leave their ancestral lands and have resorted to cutting down trees for charcoal and subsistence farming to survive.⁴⁵ Indigenous communities are vulnerable to violent and coercive militia groups that patrol remote areas and direct illegal mining operations.⁴⁶ A 2022 law recognizing the land rights of Indigenous peoples points to a more hopeful future; if properly enforced, the law will enable Indigenous communities to legally acquire and manage their ancestral lands.⁴⁷

IRI DRC was founded in December 2019.

Indonesia

Indonesia stands out for recent successes in curbing deforestation. Despite two decades of significant habitat destruction – a loss of 28.6 million hectares of tree cover between 2001

42 Victoria Schneider, "Poor Governance Fuels 'Horrible Dynamic' of Deforestation in DRC," Mongabay News, December 21, 2020, <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/12/poor-governance-fuels-horrible-dynamic-of-deforestation-in-drc/>.

43 Victoria Schneider, "Poor Governance Fuels 'Horrible Dynamic' of Deforestation in DRC," Mongabay News, December 21, 2020, <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/12/poor-governance-fuels-horrible-dynamic-of-deforestation-in-drc/>; Ed Ram, "In 10 Years, We Might Not Have Forests: DRC Struggles to Halt Charcoal Trade," The Guardian, July 20, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jul/20/in-10-years-we-might-not-have-forests-drc-struggles-to-halt-charcoal-trade-a-photo-essay>.

44 Victoria Schneider, "Poor Governance Fuels 'Horrible Dynamic' of Deforestation in DRC," Mongabay News, December 21, 2020, <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/12/poor-governance-fuels-horrible-dynamic-of-deforestation-in-drc/>.

45 Ed Ram, "In 10 Years, We Might Not Have Forests: DRC Struggles to Halt Charcoal Trade," The Guardian, July 20, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jul/20/in-10-years-we-might-not-have-forests-drc-struggles-to-halt-charcoal-trade-a-photo-essay>; Victoria Schneider, "Poor Governance Fuels 'Horrible Dynamic' of Deforestation in DRC," Mongabay News, December 21, 2020, <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/12/poor-governance-fuels-horrible-dynamic-of-deforestation-in-drc/>.

46 Ed Ram, "In 10 Years, We Might Not Have Forests: DRC Struggles to Halt Charcoal Trade," The Guardian, July 20, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jul/20/in-10-years-we-might-not-have-forests-drc-struggles-to-halt-charcoal-trade-a-photo-essay>.

47 "New Legislation to Protect the Rights of the Indigenous Pygmy Peoples in the DRC," IUCN, August 5, 2022, <https://www.iucn.org/story/202208/new-legislation-protect-rights-indigenous-pygmy-peoples-drc>.

and 2021, including nearly 10 million hectares of humid primary forest – deforestation rates have dropped significantly since 2017.⁴⁸ These changes are thanks in large part to moratoriums on clearing primary forests and peatlands and on licensing new palm oil plantations, as well as increased enforcement of environmental laws.⁴⁹ The acceleration of the post-COVID global economy, however, could mean that this progress loses ground or is even reversed; the expiration of the moratorium on palm oil plantation licenses in September 2021 means there are fewer barriers to commercial interests.⁵⁰

Indonesia is home to 50-70 million Indigenous people, many of whom face eviction, intimidation, and violence.⁵¹ Though the Indonesian government has adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, there has been no concerted government effort to protect these communities. This is partly because the Indonesian government does not fully recognize Indigenous communities, claiming instead that almost all Indonesians are Indigenous and that no ethnic group should receive special treatment.⁵²

Indonesia boasts numerous examples of faith leaders and groups advocating for forest protections. The country's Ulama Council issued fatwas in 2014 and 2016 that called on Muslims to protect endangered species and refrain from clearing forests for commercial gain.⁵³ 'Aisyiyah, an Indonesian women's organization, promotes environmental education and reforestation, supporting the concept of an "eco-Jihad" to support environmental causes.⁵⁴

IRI Indonesia was the last of IRI's five country programs to launch, in February 2020.⁵⁵

48 "Indonesia Deforestation Rates & Statistics," Global Forest Watch, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/IDN/>.

49 "Indonesia Deforestation Rates & Statistics," Global Forest Watch, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/IDN/>; Hans Nicholas Jong, "Deforestation in Indonesia Hits Record Low, but Experts Fear a Rebound," Mongabay News, March 9, 2021, <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/03/2021-deforestation-in-indonesia-hits-record-low-but-experts-fear-a-rebound/>.

50 "Indonesia to Use 'Existing Laws' as Palm Oil Moratorium Expires," Reuters, September 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/indonesia-use-existing-laws-palm-oil-moratorium-expires-2021-09-22/>.

51 Fidelis Eka Satriastanti, "After 75 Years of Independence, Indigenous Peoples in Indonesia Still Struggling for Equality," The Conversation, August 14, 2020, <http://theconversation.com/after-75-years-of-independence-indigenous-peoples-in-indonesia-still-struggling-for-equality-143186>.

52 "Indonesia," International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.iwgia.org/en/indonesia.html>.

53 "Working as One: How Indonesia Came Together for Its Peatlands and Forests," UNEP, June 4, 2019, <http://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/working-one-how-indonesia-came-together-its-peatlands-and-forests>; "Indonesian clerics issue fatwa to protect endangered species," World Wildlife Fund, March 9, 2014, https://wwf.panda.org/wwf_news/?233995/Indonesian-Muslim-Council-Issues-Fatwa-to-Protect-Threatened-Animals.

54 Harry Jacques, "Eco-Friendly Eid - the Indonesian Women on a Mission to Plant Trees," Reuters, May 13, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/indonesia-environment-women-idUSL8N2MY3YH>.

55 "IRI Country Program Launched in Indonesia," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, February 1, 2020, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2020/02/01/iri-country-program-launched-in-indonesia/>.

Peru

Nearly 60% of Peru is covered in forest; it is the ninth most biodiverse country in the world.⁵⁶ Like its neighbors in Latin America, it has become increasingly vulnerable to deforestation in recent years. Peru lost 3.6 million hectares of tree cover between 2001 and 2021, a 4.6% total decrease since 2000.⁵⁷ Some 80% of land affected by deforestation is the result of illegal activity.⁵⁸ Recent infrastructure projects have worsened the problem by making once-remote regions accessible to commercial interests such as small-scale agriculture, logging, gold mining, oil and gas drilling, and palm oil plantations.⁵⁹

Peru is home to 5 million Indigenous people, with at least 20 Indigenous tribes living in voluntary isolation in the Amazon. Nearly a quarter of the Peruvian Amazon legally belongs to Indigenous communities; while deforestation is outlawed in these areas, illegal activity is not uncommon, and forest defenders, many of them Indigenous, frequently contend with threats and violence.⁶⁰

IRI Peru launched in December 2018, and it currently has 12 local chapters located in regional and provincial capitals.⁶¹

56 “Peru,” Rainforest Foundation US, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://rainforestfoundation.org/our-work/where-we-work/peru/>.

57 “Peru Deforestation Rates & Statistics,” Global Forest Watch, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/PER>.

58 “Deforestation in Peru,” World Wildlife Fund, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/magazine/issues/fall-2015/articles/deforestation-in-peru>.

59 “Deforestation in Peru,” World Wildlife Fund, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/magazine/issues/fall-2015/articles/deforestation-in-peru>; “Peru,” Rainforest Foundation US, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://rainforestfoundation.org/our-work/where-we-work/peru/>.

60 “Peru,” Rainforest Foundation US, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://rainforestfoundation.org/our-work/where-we-work/peru/>.

61 “IRI Peru Country Program Launch Event,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 14, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2018/12/05/iri-peru-country-program-launch-event/>; Laura Vargas, in conversation with Katherine Marshall, August 26, 2022.

IRI'S WORK *and* FOCUS

What has been most surprising and gratifying in my work with IRI is how quickly and naturally religious leaders – at local, national and global levels – have understood and embraced the tropical forest and Indigenous peoples' rights agendas as being aligned with their own missions. They see IRI's concerns to be integrally related to their own concerns for the sanctity of life, human rights, and environmental justice. These are issues that most faiths have been willing to come together to address around a shared table.

—Charles Ian McNeill.⁶²

IRI's Work: Key Areas

IRI's work on the local, national, and international levels reflects its commitment to engaging religious groups, governments, civil society, businesses, and Indigenous communities in protecting tropical rainforests. While the specifics of IRI's on-the-ground presence varies across its five country programs, there are patterns in the types of work each chapter does.

Working with Governments and Shaping Policy

IRI works with policymakers and government organizations to shape national and international policy almost everywhere it is active.

IRI **Colombia** influences government policy on numerous fronts. On the national level, IRI Colombia met with President Gustavo Petro, and worked with the national government in putting together its 2022-2026 national development plan.⁶³ High-profile campaigns include a bill to criminalize deforestation and illegal land seizures, and to ratify the Escazú Agreement, which grants the public access to information about environmental indicators

62 Charles Ian McNeill, "The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative: A Case Study of Religious Literacy". The Interfaith Observer, Spring 2022. <https://www.theinterfaithobserver.org/journal-articles/2022/12/3/the-interfaith-rainforest-initiative-a-case-study-of-religious-literacy>

63 "IRI Colombia Participates in Meeting with the New National Government," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, July 11, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/07/11/iri-colombia-participates-in-meeting-with-the-new-national-government/>; "IRI Colombia Continues Working to Impact the National Development Plan, 2022-2026," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, September 2, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/09/02/iri-colombia-continues-working-to-impact-the-national-development-plan-2022-2026/>.

in the country and help foster public participation in decision-making. The latter campaign was successful, culminating in Colombia's ratification of the Agreement in July 2022.⁶⁴ On the local level, IRI Colombia has formed "parliamentary fronts" that work with members of municipal councils on rainforest issues.⁶⁵ IRI Colombia has established citizen oversight bodies in each of its 36 chapters, designed to ensure that local and regional governments are fulfilling their commitments on rainforest-related policy.⁶⁶ IRI Colombia has participated in the United Nations High Level Political Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals.⁶⁷

IRI **Peru** has met with politicians and political candidates from the local to the national level, including Presidents Francisco Sagasti and Pedro Castillo, to discuss rainforest protections and the welfare of Indigenous groups.⁶⁸ During the 2021 national electoral cycle, IRI Peru hosted forums with political candidates to discuss their positions on these issues; following the election, they briefed incoming officeholders about existing and proposed policies on rainforests.⁶⁹ IRI Peru has also helped secure a decree from the Ministry of Justice to protect rainforest defenders and has lobbied for a law that recognizes the rights of nature, ecosystems, and species.⁷⁰ In July 2022, IRI Peru established the Parliamentary

64 "IRI Colombia Advocacy Leads to Approval of Landmark Bill in Congress Criminalizing Deforestation," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, April 6, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/04/06/iri-colombia-advocacy-leads-to-approval-of-landmark-bill-in-congress-criminalizing-deforestation/>; "Advocacy on Escazú Agreement in Colombia – 'A Duty to the Common House,'" Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, September 5, 2020, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2020/09/05/advocacy-on-escazu-agreement-in-colombia-a-duty-to-the-common-house/>

65 "IRI Colombia Leads Formation of 'Parliamentary Fronts,'" Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, March 1, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/03/01/iri-colombia-leads-formation-of-parliamentary-fronts/>.

66 "IRI Colombia Prepares to Set up Citizen Oversight Bodies in 36 Local Chapters across the Amazon," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, February 28, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/02/28/iri-colombia-prepares-to-set-up-citizen-oversight-bodies-in-36-local-chapters-across-the-amazon/>.

67 "IRI Colombia Presents the 'Escucha La Amazonia' Alliance during UN High-Level Political Forum," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, July 11, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/07/11/iri-colombia-presents-the-escucha-la-amazonia-alliance-during-un-high-level-political-forum/>.

68 "IRI Peru Briefs the President of the Republic on Their Work and the Moral Responsibility to Protect Rainforests," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, January 12, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/01/12/iri-peru-briefs-the-president-of-the-republic-on-their-work-and-the-moral-responsibility-to-protect-rainforests/>; "IRI Peru Meets with New President, Pushes Forests Agenda," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, January 31, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/01/31/iri-peru-meets-with-new-president-pushes-forests-agenda/>.

69 "IRI Peru Continues Electoral Dialogues on Forests with Presidential and Congressional Candidates," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, April 30, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/04/30/iri-peru-continues-electoral-dialogues-on-forests-with-presidential-and-congressional-candidates/>; "IRI Peru Establishes Parliamentary Block with New Members of Congress Committed to Advancing Policies That Protect the Amazon," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, May 12, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/05/12/iri-peru-establishes-parliamentary-block-with-new-members-of-congress-committed-to-advancing-policies-that-protect-the-amazon/>.

70 "IRI Peru Secures Supreme Decree from Government, Issues High-Level Declaration to Strengthen Protections for Indigenous Peoples and Environmental Defenders," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, May 14, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/05/14/iri-peru-secures-supreme-decree-from-government-issues-high-level-declaration-to-strengthen-protections-for-indigenous-peoples-and-environmental-defenders/>; "IRI Peru Advocacy Leads to Approval of Law on Rights of Nature in Congressional Commission," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, April 9, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/04/09/iri-peru-advocacy-leads-to-approval-of-law-on-rights-of-nature-in-congressional-commission/>.

Group for a Sustainable Amazon, which works with the national government to promote a sustainable political agenda for the Peruvian rainforest.⁷¹

In the **DRC**, IRI drew on the input and support of the country's top religious leaders in lobbying for a historic law recognizing the rights of the country's Indigenous Pygmy people; the law was passed in April 2021.⁷² IRI DRC also consulted with government officials in drafting DRC's Nationally Determined Contribution to COP26 in 2021.⁷³

In contrast to the other IRI country programs, IRI Brazil and IRI Indonesia have kept a relatively low profile in political matters. In **Brazil**, this reflects strained relations between environmentalist organizations and the Bolsonaro administration. Despite this, IRI Brazil has engaged with the government in several instances, including a March 2022 meeting with the environmental secretaries of Brazil's nine Amazon states.⁷⁴ IRI Brazil spoke out in the lead-up to the October 2022 election, publishing an open letter calling on local, regional, and national candidates to pledge their commitment to protecting the Amazon and its Indigenous communities.⁷⁵

Engaging Religious and Indigenous Leaders and Communities

IRI runs regular programming with religious, interfaith, and Indigenous leaders and organizations across the countries in which it is active. IRI international has issued resource guides educating faith communities on deforestation and recommending action steps.⁷⁶

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- 71 "IRI Peru Formally Installs Parliamentary Group for a Sustainable Amazonia," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, July 22, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/07/22/iri-peru-formally-installs-parliamentary-group-for-a-sustainable-amazonia>.
- 72 "IRI DRC Delivers Statement by Country's Religious Leaders Calling for Ratification of New Law on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, September 11, 2020, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2020/09/11/iri-drc-delivers-statement-by-countrys-religious-leaders-calling-for-ratification-of-new-law-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples/>; "IRI DRC Advocacy Contributes to Historic Adoption of Law Protecting Rights of Pygmy Communities," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, April 9, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/04/09/iri-drc-advocacy-contributes-to-historic-adoption-of-law-protecting-rights-of-pygmy-communities/>.
- 73 "IRI DRC Provides Input into Country's NDC Roadmap," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, July 4, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/07/04/iri-drc-provides-input-into-countrys-ndc-roadmap/>; "IRI DRC Contributes to Workshop, Study on Strengthening Commitments to Forests in DRC's National Determined Contribution (NDC)," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, September 1, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/09/01/iri-drc-contributes-to-workshop-study-on-strengthening-commitments-to-forests-in-drcs-national-determined-contribution-ndc/>.
- 74 "IRI Brazil Briefs Secretaries of Environment from 9 Brazilian Amazon States," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, March 31, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/03/31/iri-brazil-briefs-secretaries-of-environment-from-9-brazilian-amazon-states/>.
- 75 "IRI Brazil Issues Powerful Open Letter to Candidates for Office at National, State Levels Calling for Protection of the Amazon and Its Guardians," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, September 10, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/09/10/iri-brazil-issues-powerful-open-letter-to-candidates-for-office-at-national-state-levels-calling-for-protection-of-the-amazon-and-its-guardians/>.
- 76 "Resource Guide," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/resource-guides/>.

IRI's series of faith toolkits provides reflections, talking points, and prayers and meditations on themes of nature and conservation; the toolkit is available for the Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian (Catholic and Protestant), Evangelical, Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish traditions.⁷⁷

IRI builds on this foundation with country-specific programming. In **Colombia**, IRI has hosted individual meetings with religious organizations, such as the Evangelical Confederation of Colombia (Cedecol), as well as national gatherings of religious leaders, Indigenous representatives, and civil society groups.⁷⁸ In April 2021, IRI Colombia published a pastoral guide with prayers, meditations, and workshop ideas to help religious leaders incorporate environmental topics into their teachings.⁷⁹ IRI Colombia has also hosted trainings for religious and local leaders on the science of climate change, equipping them with the information they need to educate others in their communities.⁸⁰

In **Brazil**, IRI has conducted trainings for religious and Indigenous leaders, young people, and NGOs to educate and mobilize participants on rainforest protection, biodiversity issues, and the science of climate change.⁸¹ IRI Brazil has held a nationwide meeting of religious leaders to discuss steps to halt deforestation and violence against Indigenous peoples.⁸²

IRI **DRC** held workshops with senior religious leaders and representatives from faith-linked organizations; participants formulated an appeal to the Congolese government to strengthen its forest protections ahead of COP27.⁸³ IRI DRC met with government ministers to discuss concerns and suggestions for a national agenda on forests.⁸⁴

77 "Faith Toolkits," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/faith-toolkits/>.

78

79 "IRI Colombia Releases Comprehensive Pastoral Guide on Earth Day," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, April 22, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/04/22/iri-colombia-releases-comprehensive-pastoral-guide-on-earth-day/>.

80 Blanca Lucía Echeverry, in conversation with Katherine Marshall, October 5, 2022.

81 "IRI Brazil Conducts Training for Leaders in the Amazon," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, June 3, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/06/03/iri-brazil-conducts-training-for-leaders-in-the-amazon/>; "IRI Brazil Conducts Series of Trainings for Religious Leaders at CEMADEN (Monitoring and Natural Disaster Alert Center) and INPE (Space Research Institute) on Forests and Climate Change," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, September 1, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/09/01/iri-brazil-conducts-series-of-trainings-for-religious-leaders-at-cemaden-monitoring-and-natural-disaster-alert-center-and-inpe-space-research-institute-on-forests-and-climate-change/>.

82 "IRI Brazil Holds Major Mobilization around Amazon Day," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, September 10, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/09/10/iri-brazil-holds-major-mobilization-around-amazon-day/>.

83 "IRI DRC Holds 2-Day Workshop with Country's Religious Leaders, Produces Powerful Statement to COP27 Ministers on the Need for Stronger Efforts to Protect and Restore Forests," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, October 2, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/10/02/iri-drc-holds-2-day-workshop-with-countrys-religious-leaders-produces-powerful-statement-to-cop27-ministers-on-the-need-for-stronger-efforts-to-protect-and-restore-forests/>.

84 "IRI DRC Presents Recommendations to Ministers Gathered at COP27 Preparatory Meeting, Call for Greater Ambition on Forest Protection – Interfaith Rainforest Initiative," October 3, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/10/03/iri-drc-presents-recommendations-to-ministers-gathered-at-cop27-preparatory-meeting-call-for-greater-ambition-on-forest-protection>.

IRI **Indonesia** has convened trainings for Indonesia's religious councils and has compiled a book of resources on religious teachings linked to the environment, released in early 2021.⁸⁵

Educating the Public

In addition to influencing policy and working with religious communities, IRI works to educate all sectors of society on issues related to rainforest and climate, whether through public awareness campaigns, training sessions, and larger conferences bringing together different groups, including religious leaders, civil society actors, activists, academics, journalists, and ordinary citizens.

IRI **Colombia** has partnered with the National Organisation of the Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon and REPAM Colombia to develop a virtual, university-certified training program on climate-related topics affecting the region, including deforestation and the impact of extractive industries.⁸⁶ IRI Colombia ran national campaigns in 2021 and 2022 to raise awareness on rainforest destruction and mobilize individuals, communities, and political candidates to commit to protecting rainforests and Indigenous peoples.⁸⁷ Radio spots throughout the country educate the broader public on its mission and actions.⁸⁸

In February 2021, IRI **Peru** launched the Pact for the Amazon, a year-long campaign that brought together more than 100 institutions to raise public awareness on deforestation and elicit political support for protecting rainforests and Indigenous populations.⁸⁹ Prior to the Peruvian presidential election, IRI Peru ran a public outreach campaign to educate the

85 "Training of Trainers Delivered in IRI Indonesia for Leaders from the Country's Religious Councils," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, November 30, 2020, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2020/11/30/training-of-trainers-delivered-in-iri-indonesia-for-leaders-from-the-countrys-religious-councils/>; "IRI Indonesia Resource Guides and Religious Teaching Books," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 30, 2020, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2020/12/30/iri-indonesia-resource-guides-and-religious-teaching-books/>.

86 "Training Alliance between IRI Colombia, REPAM Colombia and OPIAC," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, September 22, 2020, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2020/09/22/training-alliance-between-iri-colombia-repam-colombia-and-opiac/>.

87 "IRI Colombia Launches Campaign to Promote UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, June 3, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/06/03/iri-colombia-launches-campaign-to-promote-un-decade-on-ecosystem-restoration/>; "IRI Colombia Launches New Campaign, Eschucha La Amazonia," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, January 31, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/01/31/iri-colombia-launches-new-campaign-eschucha-la-amazonia/>.

88 "IRI Colombia Continues Far-Reaching Communications Campaign to Grow Awareness on the Importance of Tropical Forests," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, August 5, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/08/05/iri-colombia-continues-far-reaching-communications-campaign-to-grow-awareness-on-the-importance-of-tropical-forests/>; "IRI Colombia Organizes Radio Spots on Deforestation," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, June 2, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/06/02/iri-colombia-organizes-radio-spots-on-deforestation/>.

89 Laura Vargas, in conversation with Katherine Marshall, August 26, 2022.

public on national and regional issues at stake at the ballot.⁹⁰ IRI Peru has led workshops for journalists on covering climate change, deforestation, Indigenous rights, and the work of the IRI.⁹¹

IRI **DRC** has held workshops with youth of different faiths to introduce them to the work of IRI and raise awareness on the challenges facing the rainforest and its inhabitants.⁹²

In **Indonesia**, IRI held a nationwide “paperless campaign” to draw attention to the link between paper use and deforestation and to encourage universities and other academic institutions to reduce their use of paper.⁹³ It convened discussions with business leaders to discuss sustainable business practices, partnered with radio broadcasters to amplify its message across the country, and hosted numerous mangrove tree planting events to raise awareness of the importance of mangrove forests.⁹⁴

IRI **Brazil** has been taking on an increasingly public profile. Following the murder of Indigenous activist Bruno Pereira and journalist Dom Phillips in June 2022, an open letter to the Brazilian government called for the swift punishment of those responsible and for greater legislation to protect rainforest defenders; the letter was signed by numerous prominent religious leaders from Brazil.⁹⁵

90 “IRI Peru Makes Media Push on Forest Protection around the Presidential Election,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, March 20, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/03/20/iri-peru-makes-media-push-on-forest-protection-around-the-presidential-election/>.

91 “IRI Peru Holds Course for Journalists on the Protection of Forests and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, October 30, 2020, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2020/10/30/iri-peru-holds-course-for-journalists-on-the-protection-of-forests-and-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples/>.

92 “IRI DRC Youth Organize Awareness Sessions for Faith Communities,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, June 25, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/06/25/iri-drc-youth-organize-awareness-sessions-for-faith-communities/>.

93 “IRI Indonesia Delivers Paperless and Love Forest Campaigns,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, March 17, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/03/17/iri-indonesia-delivers-paperless-and-love-forest-campaigns/>.

94 “IRI Indonesia Hosts Roundtable on Ethical Business with Industry Leaders,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, April 12, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/04/12/iri-indonesia-hosts-roundtable-on-ethical-business-with-industry-leaders/>; “IRI Indonesia Meets with Muhammadiyah’s TV Network to Amplify Its Messaging on Forests,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, May 27, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/05/27/iri-indonesia-meets-with-muhammadiyahs-tv-network-to-amplify-its-messaging-on-forests/>; “IRI Indonesia Holds Tree Planting and Lecture on Forests with Hindu Community,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, April 22, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/04/22/iri-indonesia-holds-tree-planting-and-lecture-on-forests-with-hindu-community/>.

95 “IRI Brazil sends an open letter to Brazilian authorities after the murder of the indigenous activist Bruno Pereira and the journalist Dom Phillips,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, June 18, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2022/06/18/iri-brazil-sends-an-open-letter-to-brazilian-authorities-after-the-murder-of-the-indigenous-activist-bruno-pereira-and-the-journalist-dom-phillips/>.

IRI country programs regularly run training and capacity building workshops in their local chapters, bringing together participants from religious communities, Indigenous groups, social and cultural institutions, civil society groups and NGOs, and municipal governments.⁹⁶

Themes of IRI's Work

IRI's areas of advocacy and methods of outreach overlap across regions. Common themes emerge in how the five country programs conceptualize their work. The following insights are drawn from a close reading of the country declarations of four IRI countries – Colombia, Peru, Indonesia, and the DRC – that can be found on IRI's website. (The country declaration for Brazil is not available online.)

Respect for Nature: IRI sees itself as having a moral commitment to the natural world; country declarations describe nature as sacred, not merely a commodity for economic gain.⁹⁷ Humans, in turn, are understood to be the guardians of nature rather than simply consumers of its resources.⁹⁸ IRI invokes religious language: protecting rainforests is part of a broader moral order that “respects the integrity of God’s creation.”⁹⁹ Moreover, there is a sense that human beings have committed a sin against nature by not acting according to these ideas, and that they therefore must reconcile with the natural world and rectify past wrongs under the “critical gaze of God.”¹⁰⁰

Political Action: Political action on rainforests is a primary focus of IRI. Country declarations call on public officials to promote policies that protect nature and foster human development.¹⁰¹ IRI countries have signaled their willingness to work with government officials in developing and implementing national policies and development plans on matters concerning forests. Special attention is given to laws governing industries that contribute to deforestation, including agriculture, mining, hydrocarbons, and infrastructure;

96 “IRI Colombia Delivers Trainings and 2021 Action Plans with All 36 Local Chapter,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, March 19, 2021, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2021/03/19/iri-colombia-delivers-trainings-and-2021-action-plans-with-all-36-local-chapters/>; “IRI Peru Holds Training of Trainers Course and a National Encounter with Local Chapter Representatives,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 30, 2020, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/2020/12/30/iri-peru-holds-training-of-trainers-course-and-a-national-encounter-with-local-chapter-representatives/>.

97 “Declaration of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.; “Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Peru Launch Event: Declaration,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 5, 2018; “Declaration of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.

98 “Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Declaration,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 5, 2019.

99 “Declaration: Interfaith and Indigenous Communities for Indonesia Forests,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, January 31, 2020.

100 “Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Declaration,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 5, 2019.

101 “Declaration of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.

IRI programs call on each of their country's governments to regulate these sectors for the benefit of rainforests and Indigenous communities.¹⁰² At the same time, IRI countries call on national governments and international organizations to honor existing commitments on environmental protection and climate change.¹⁰³

Indigenous Communities: Indigenous communities are a central focus of IRI in all five country programs. Country declarations share a common commitment to work closely with Indigenous representatives, collaborating and acting in solidarity wherever possible.¹⁰⁴ In concrete terms, this means strengthening the capacity of Indigenous organizations and using IRI's platform to promote Indigenous voices in national and international forums.¹⁰⁵ IRI recognizes the value of Indigenous knowledge and expertise with regards to the forest and expresses genuine desire to learn from these communities and to educate others about Indigenous history, culture, and knowledge.¹⁰⁶ Appreciating the wisdom of Indigenous communities goes hand-in-hand with promoting their autonomy and self-determination in their ancestral territories.¹⁰⁷ Indigenous communities are thus a primary focus of IRI's political activism. Country declarations commit to lobbying politicians and government officials on matters affecting Indigenous communities, calling on them to recognize the legal status of Indigenous people, respect self-governance and autonomy on ancestral lands, stop issuing permits to Indigenous lands to third parties, ensure the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous communities on measures affecting them, and provide restitution for communities and individuals who have lost land and experienced human rights violations.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, IRI calls on governments to respect the rights of groups living in voluntary isolation and to enforce laws protecting against incursion by outsiders.¹⁰⁹ IRI urges governments to dialogue with Indigenous communities and include more Indigenous representatives in the policymaking process.¹¹⁰

102 "Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Declaration," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 5, 2019.

103 "Declaration: Interfaith and Indigenous Communities for Indonesia Forests," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, January 31, 2020.

104 "Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Peru Launch Event: Declaration," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 5, 2018.; "Declaration: Interfaith and Indigenous Communities for Indonesia Forests," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, January 31, 2020.

105 "Declaration of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.

106 "Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Declaration," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 5, 2019.; "Declaration of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.

107 "Declaration of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.

108 "Declaration: Interfaith and Indigenous Communities for Indonesia Forests," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, January 31, 2020.

109 "Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Peru Launch Event: Declaration," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 5, 2018.

110 "Declaration: Interfaith and Indigenous Communities for Indonesia Forests," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, January 31, 2020.; "Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Peru Launch Event: Declaration," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 5, 2018.; "Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Declaration," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 5, 2019.

Engaging Faith Communities: IRI's focus on mobilizing faith groups is reflected in country declarations, all of which address local and global religious leaders and faith communities.¹¹¹ There is a recognition of the moral authority of faith actors, and a call for them to draw on their traditions in denouncing habitat destruction, human rights violations, and wasteful consumerism.¹¹² They emphasize educating faith communities about deforestation, climate change, Indigenous rights, and shared responsibility to act.¹¹³

A Sustainable Economy: A sustainable economy lies at the heart of IRI's vision. Almost all country declarations acknowledge the harmful impact of the extractive industries, which dates back to the colonial era in some places.¹¹⁴ To reduce industry-linked environmental destruction, IRI calls on the private sector to take steps to restore and protect rainforests, respect the rights of local communities, and divest from businesses that benefit from deforestation.¹¹⁵ IRI also urges governments to regulate commercial activities in rainforests and cease granting concessions that contribute to deforestation, pollution, and other forms of environmental destruction.¹¹⁶ Yet IRI's vision for the economy goes beyond simply mitigating the destructive impact of industry: IRI is also dedicated to building new economic practices focused around the common good and *buen vivir*.¹¹⁷

Local to Global Action: The different IRI country programs share a commitment to engaging on the local, national, and international levels. They emphasize anchoring the program's efforts in local communities; both IRI Colombia and Peru invoke the Indigenous concept of *sumak kawsay* (also known as *buen vivir*, "good life"), a community-centered approach that emphasizes harmony between humans and nature, as a model for their work and a concept they can promote globally.¹¹⁸ At the same time, there is an emphasis on addressing broader issues playing out on the national and global stages.¹¹⁹ IRI countries recognize their responsibility to amplify local voices in these global forums whenever possible.¹²⁰

111 "Declaration of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.

112 "Declaration: Interfaith and Indigenous Communities for Indonesia Forests," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, January 31, 2020.

113 "Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Peru Launch Event: Declaration," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 5, 2018.

114 "Declaration of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.

115 "Declaration: Interfaith and Indigenous Communities for Indonesia Forests," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, January 31, 2020.

116 "Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Peru Launch Event: Declaration," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 5, 2018.

117 "Declaration of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.; "Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Peru Launch Event: Declaration," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 5, 2018.

118 "Declaration of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.; "Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Peru Launch Event: Declaration," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 5, 2018.

119 "Declaration: Interfaith and Indigenous Communities for Indonesia Forests," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, January 31, 2020.

120 "Declaration of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.

Gender: Gender is not a primary focus of IRI’s country declarations, but it is explicitly mentioned in two declarations. IRI DRC commits to the “promotion of gender and the involvement...in the management of our forest,”¹²¹ while IRI Colombia pledges to “highlight the role of women” in its work.¹²²

WHERE DOES GENDER FIT? CURRENT STRATEGIES *and* PATHWAYS FORWARD

Women’s significant perspectives on rainforests and Indigenous matters are well-documented. Women tend to rely more on rainforest resources than men, notably for food, firewood, and medicine for their families. Women are thus often more familiar with the threats facing these forests and the toll of ongoing destruction. They understand both the scope and the stakes of rainforest protection in ways that men may not.¹²³

Despite women’s notable presence in rainforest activism, gender dimensions are often overlooked or engaged with on a superficial level. **In rainforest communities around the world, a broad generalization is that women’s voices are not heard as they should be, given the vital roles they play and the insights their experience and wisdom can offer.**¹²⁴

121 “Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Declaration,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 5, 2019.

122 “Declaration of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.

123 Laura Vargas, in conversation with Katherine Marshall, August 26, 2022.; Sister Lucero Guillén Cornejo, in conversation with Katherine Marshall, September 26, 2022.

124 Laura Vargas, in conversation with Katherine Marshall, August 26, 2022.

Listening to women’s perspectives is an invaluable first step in addressing gender-based inequalities in representation and leadership on rainforest issues and in formulating a gender-sensitive response.¹²⁵ A real commitment to women’s voices means including them in decision-making processes. This section examines IRI’s engagement with gender issues in its work, identifying progress as well as gaps and suggesting possible strategies for a gender-sensitive approach.

A Strategy on Gender?

IRI representatives and partners commonly acknowledge the importance of addressing gender equality in their work, but **IRI lacks a unified vision and strategy on gender.** There is no official statement on the actual or potential role of women within the IRI, and gender is rarely mentioned in IRI’s newsletters, blog posts, or publications. The only official IRI documents where gender is mentioned are the country declarations for Colombia and the DRC.¹²⁶ The former pledges to “highlight the role of women in the care of life in all its forms,”¹²⁷ while the latter cites the need for “the promotion of gender.”¹²⁸

The relative silence on women and gender in official IRI materials does not necessarily mean that women’s perspectives aren’t being taken into account. A representative from IRI Colombia observed that elevating women’s voices is a growing area of focus on the ground, but that the COVID-19 pandemic seriously stalled efforts to address the issue in IRI programming.¹²⁹ Others argue that gender has always been at the heart of IRI’s work because women frequently drive rainforest activism in their communities and actively participate in the religious, political, Indigenous, and civil society groups with which IRI engages.¹³⁰ Evidence on the ground bears this out: IRI Colombia reports that women attend many local gatherings, and that numerous communities are home to highly organized and effective local women’s organizations that partner with IRI.¹³¹

Just because women actively participate in local activism, however, may not mean that their perspectives are always considered or that they have a seat at the decision-making table. Conversely, having women in decision making fora, does not automatically translate into taking on board gender specific needs and interests. Influence on the local level does not necessarily translate to having a voice in regional, national, and international forums.

125 Blanca Lucía Echeverry, in conversation with Katherine Marshall, October 5, 2022.

126 “Declaration of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.

127 “Declaration of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.

128 “Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Declaration,” Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, December 5, 2019.

129 Blanca Lucía Echeverry, in conversation with Katherine Marshall, October 5, 2022.

130 Gunnar Stålsett, conversation with Katherine Marshall, March 29, 2022.

131 Blanca Lucía Echeverry, in conversation with Katherine Marshall, October 5, 2022.

Leadership in religious and Indigenous communities tends to be heavily male-dominated, and while IRI seeks to include overlooked voices in its discussions, the organization refrains from instructing these communities on how to run themselves. Indeed, this kind of approach could quickly turn problematic and jeopardize strategic relationships cultivated over years. **IRI needs to strike a balance between promoting inclusion, ensuring specific needs of women are addressed, and cultivating strong connections with religious and Indigenous communities mobilizing for rainforest action.**

Women play prominent roles in the leadership of several IRI country programs. Both IRI Colombia and IRI Peru have women serving as national coordinators (Blanca Lucía Echeverry and Laura Vargas, respectively).¹³² Women also play prominent roles in the leadership of local IRI chapters in many countries, though exact numbers are difficult to gauge. In Colombia, for example, women make up a significant proportion of the regional planning council that brings together representatives from each of IRI Colombia's 36 local chapters. IRI Colombia prioritizes the inclusion of women, including rural women, in its gatherings and trainings, often providing them with a budget to cover travel expenses.¹³³

PATHWAYS FORWARD *for* GREATER INCLUSION

While IRI engages on gender in several ways, these dimensions could be strengthened; some gaps are already being addressed, while others require action.

Engaging and Bolstering Women's and Youth Organizations: Organized and influential women's organizations are doing important activist work at the grassroots level; many such groups have cultivated longstanding relationships with decision-making bodies and built a trusted reputation within their communities. Some of these groups are religious in nature, such as Catholic orders of women religious, women's groups affiliated

132 "Colombia," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/colombia/>; "Peru," Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/peru/>.

133 Blanca Lucía Echeverry, in conversation with Katherine Marshall, October 5, 2022.

with a specific church or mosque, and interfaith community groups. IRI country programs and local chapters would benefit from engaging more purposefully with such groups; IRI can collaborate on existing projects, help these groups grow their networks, and amplify members' voices in national and international forums to that IRI has access to. At the same time, IRI should take concrete steps to engage with youth organizations in order to empower girls and young women to take action on rainforest issues. Partnering with women's and youth groups demonstrates IRI's emphasis on learning from local activists rather than leaning towards top-down approaches; following a true spirit of localization can help grow trust and participation in IRI activities.

Expanding Community-based Approaches: IRI's focus on engaging with local communities offers potential to include more women in decision-making. Rather than introducing explicit gender objectives at the local level, which can cause tensions and potentially destabilize existing collaborative relationships, a wiser strategy could be to focus on expanding community participation on the whole, as women are already engaging on the grassroots level in many places. Insisting that women are brought into decision-making processes is not only beneficial, but natural to all without appearing divisive or top-down. Drawing on insights about the feminine dimensions shared among Indigenous communities, active and constructive approaches to protection are emerging in widely different communities.¹³⁴

Elevating Women and Girls in IRI and Beyond: IRI is in a strong position to promote the participation of women and girls in leadership in the communities in which it works. It also has opportunities to elevate female voices within its own ranks. Several women hold leadership positions in IRI, including as country coordinators in Colombia and Peru, and many women participate on the local level. While these are noteworthy achievements, IRI country program advisory councils still skew heavily towards men. (The proportion of seats held by women varies by country; IRI Brazil has the highest female representation on its advisory council at 33%, compared to only 5% and 7% in IRI DRC and IRI Indonesia, respectively.) While many members of these advisory councils are religious leaders and therefore traditionally male, there are nevertheless opportunities to include more women figures on the local and national levels. One method would be to broaden the understanding of religious representatives beyond traditional faith leaders to include laypeople, and to include secular women leaders working on rainforest issues. Another pathway forward is to develop programming aimed at encouraging girl children and young women to get involved in rainforest conservation efforts, as this will prepare the next generation of women leaders.

Telling women's stories: IRI and *Religions for Peace* can build on the fascinating people and their stories that are part of the rainforest challenges, both globally and locally.

134 A discussion with Grandmother Tardif, October, 2022. <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/interviews/a-discussion-with-grand-mother-marie-josee-rankin-tardif-president-of-kina8at-together>

Highlighting women's roles, the complex challenges they confront, and creative solutions can enrich and enhance IRI's action. Such measures can include written and video interviews with leaders and films that bring stories to life.

Working Within IRI's Mandate: Emphasizing greater inclusion and empowerment of women in IRI's activities and structures can enrich programs and enhance their impact. This can best be accomplished by working deliberately within the framework of IRI's mandate. Gender inclusive approaches need to be deeply integrated, not treated as a sideline or separate issue. Most religious and Indigenous communities that partner with IRI are led by men; even in those cases where women are in leadership positions, gender-related change within these communities may come slowly. IRI's emphasis on listening to these communities and building a movement from the grassroots means that it is not in a position to impose outside ideas about gender on these communities, but rather provides an opportunity for genuine exchange and growth in understanding over time. IRI's primary focus is protecting rainforests and their communities; gender equality and inclusivity must be approached strategically, with IRI's overall mission in mind.

