



CLIMATE CHANGE CONFLICT AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF

SUMMARY

Climate change is not just an environmental issue; it is a risk multiplier for conflict and a threat to Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB).

While the connection between climate change and FoRB is not fully recognized, it is crucial to understand how these factors intersect and drive violence, and that solutions can address both climate and FoRB challenges simultaneously. This policy brief emphasizes the urgent need for policy makers to integrate thinking on climate change and FoRB in strategy development. By doing so, we can address the root causes of conflict and foster resilience in vulnerable communities.



I've long felt that Climate Change and the abuse of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) constitute the two greatest threats to human flourishing and harmonious communities today. But it's only more recently that I've begun to be aware of their essential interconnectedness. At an international level it is only nation states with a broad concern for the common good, beyond their own self-interest, that will prioritize both – because both persecution and climate change put the common good at threat. However the links are deeper and more complex, as this important policy briefing amply demonstrates. And not only are the problems related, but the solutions, unsurprisingly, are too. The examples given here are truly inspirational. We should not be surprised, as this policy brief shows, that these solutions are grassroots, civil society led. But let us hope and pray that policy makers pay attention. There are real solutions to these interrelated problems, but they need to be delivered at scale - and urgently.

Bishop Philip Mounstephen, author of [The Truro Report](#) and Bishop of Winchester.



The intersection of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and climate change is often overlooked by national governments and international organizations, despite the potential for cultural and religious diversity to aid in developing sustainable solutions. FoRB and climate protection are interdependent: climate change disrupts sacred connections with the Earth, particularly for indigenous peoples, infringing on their religious freedoms, while FoRB violations weaken community resilience against climate change. Vulnerable groups, including religious and ethnic minorities, face increased discrimination and marginalization due to climate change, limiting their access to essential services and opportunities. Furthermore, these groups often experience inequities in disaster response

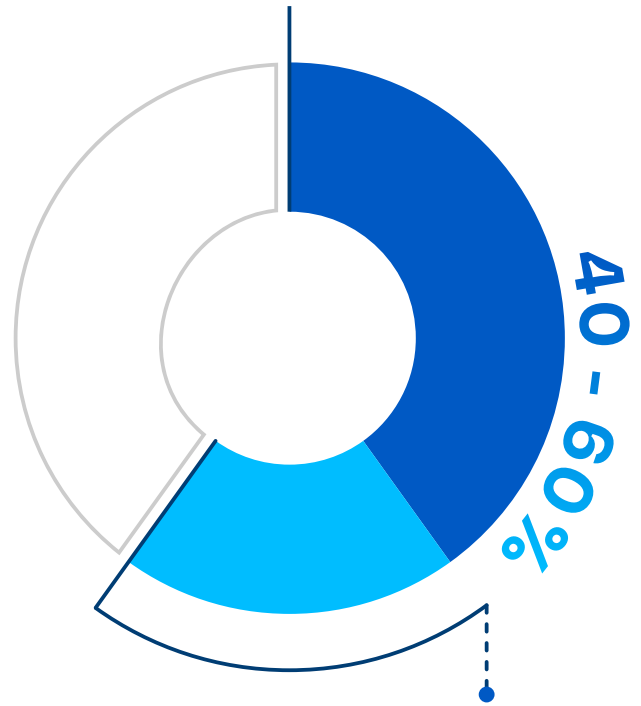
and relief where minorities are often the last to receive aid. This policy brief highlights the critical need for complementary climate and Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) programming to achieve sustainable outcomes for communities, particularly in conflict zones. Donors, policymakers, and civil society organizations should actively work to integrate these sectors, recognizing that breaking down silos and adopting complementary approaches can significantly mitigate risks.

Iyad Abumoghli, Founder and Director of the [United Nations Environment Programme Faith for Earth Coalition](#)



Climate change is increasingly recognised as a [risk multiplier for atrocities](#) and a driver of conflict, particularly in fragile contexts, where 40-60% of civil wars in the past 60 years are estimated to have been triggered by conflicts over natural resources. The impact of climate change - both direct and indirect - on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), however, has not yet been clearly articulated. Rather than recognizing their intersectionality, these two issues are siloed, and sometimes even seen as competing explanations for a conflict's root causes. As a result, practitioners and policy makers lose out on valuable opportunities to combat both climate change and FoRB violations simultaneously.

Climate change and FoRB are linked, both as challenges, and in terms of solutions. Governments and international agencies building mitigation and adaptation plans to deal with climate change need to ensure they are [both conflict and religion sensitive](#) - to ensure that the benefits and costs of adaptation don't exacerbate existing religious or ethnic conflicts. Religious leaders are increasingly focusing on our shared concern for the Earth through interfaith action on climate change, contributing at community, national and international levels to social cohesion. Policy makers therefore need to take an integrated approach to climate change and FoRB for all by investing both in sensitive adaptation and mitigation, and interfaith action on climate change at the community level, to build on the potential for win-win solutions.



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Since 1982, [Search for Common Ground](#) (Search) has worked to transform the way the world deals with conflict: away from adversarial approaches and toward cooperative solutions. In addition to over two decades of religious engagement in peacebuilding, we increasingly work with communities to build a shared resilience in the face of climate change. This policy brief

draws on Search and our partners' expertise on these interlinked issues. It begins by highlighting the interlinkages between FoRB and climate change before illustrating how integrated program design can yield positive outcomes for both. It concludes with recommendations for policy makers and practitioners on how to engage at the intersection of these two issues.

CLIMATE, CONFLICT, ATROCITIES AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF THE LINKAGES

Climate change, armed conflict and atrocities are interlinked and reinforcing. Climate change has contributed significantly to armed conflict risk over the last century and the influence will likely increase dramatically. It acts as a stress multiplier and, in fragile contexts, leads to increased conflict over access to natural resources and migration, in turn raising the risk for atrocities.

A [G7 report](#) has stated that climate change, through interaction with other pressures and contextual factors, can create seven “compound risks” of conflict: local resource competition, livelihood security and migration, extreme weather events and disasters, volatile food prices and provision, transboundary water management, sea-level rise and coastal degradation and unintended effects of climate change. Indeed, climate and weather extremes are increasingly [driving](#)

[displacement](#) in Africa, Asia, North America and Central and South America. In turn, conflict fuels further displacement, leading to [major protection concerns](#) for vulnerable groups, and increasing the [risk of atrocities](#). Climate change, environmental degradation, and overexploitation intensify the scarcity of natural resources such as fertile land or water, minerals, and oil in the Global South. In already fragile contexts, these shortages can lead to violent conflict.

Conflicts over land and resources can aggravate deep divisions linked to identity, including religious identity.

Violent conflicts between farmers and pastoralists over contested land have [increased](#) in regions such as the Sahel and Great Lakes in recent years. The experience of resource-based conflict in Nigeria is inseparable from the experiences of previous conflicts in the country, some of which have been explicitly religious. While the resource pressures that have led to conflicts between

farmers and pastoralists are not based in religion, these conflicts are influenced by the unaddressed trauma of explicit religious division and violence in the country, compounded by a rapid increase in misinformation and hate speech online. Criminality, and impunity due to governance failures have led to rampant crime, [violence](#), and atrocities being committed based on

religious identity. Search for Common Ground has long focused attention on the issue of [farmer-herder conflict](#) in the Sahel region, and on the need to prevent atrocities and protect freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria, where religiously motivated violence has been in part triggered by predominantly Muslim Fulani herders moving South due to increasing desertification, into predominantly farmer Christian areas, of multiple ethnicities. In contexts like Nigeria,

[donor investment in climate mitigation and adaptation has sometimes inadvertently reinforced divisions](#); and religious interventions have negated or ignored the environmental contributors to the conflict. There is an imperative need to address both climate and religious persecution through integrated programming to address the multiple causes of violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt, as part of a broader holistic response to the country's overlapping crises.

Climate change poses a direct threat to the traditional existence of some religious communities.

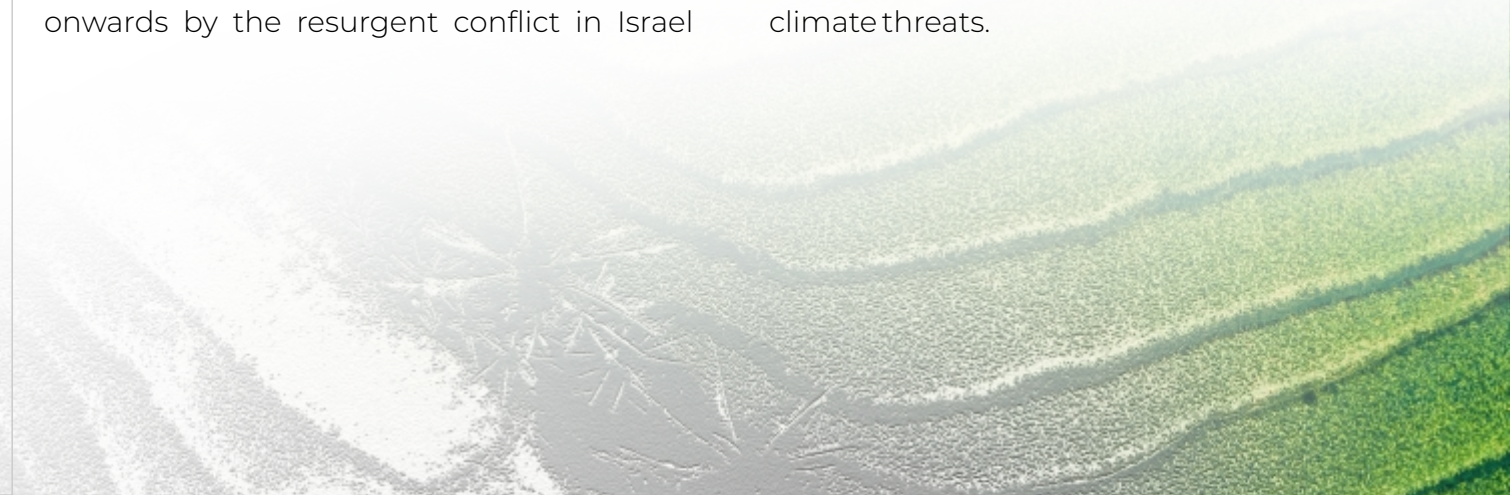
For example, the [Mandaeans in Iraq](#) practice their religion alongside the banks of the Euphrates and Tigris, rivers which are now at risk of drying up due to climate change. Meanwhile, Native American tribes in the United States who view the Colorado River as sacred are having to adapt their beliefs and rituals as the [river dries up](#). A recent report from [Amnesty International](#) also highlights how in Cambodia “the degradation of the forest alienated [the indigenous Kuy com-

munity] people from their spiritual beliefs and practices because the forested landscape is such an integral part of their cosmology.” Traditional and indigenous religions are often deeply grounded in their environment and yet, even as their traditional lands and livelihoods are threatened, their voices are rarely heard in climate adaptation and policy making at national or international levels.

The impact of climate change must be seen alongside, and recognised as one contributory factor, to the growing global threat to the right to peacefully express one's religious faith and identity.

The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 18 of the UDHR) is under severe threat in 61 countries around the world. A recent [report](#) from the US Institute of Peace found that religious hostilities have grown steadily over the past few decades. Even before the huge [spikes in Islamophobia and antisemitism](#) triggered from 7 October 2023 onwards by the resurgent conflict in Israel

and Palestine, Aid to the Church in Need's 2023 [report](#) found that intense persecution has become more acute and concentrated. Recent research has shown how women and girls are particularly at risk of [gender specific religious persecution](#) in fragile and conflict affected settings, including situations where displacement is triggered by conflict and climate threats.



The breakdown of trust prevents communities from working together to seek shared climate mitigation and adaptation solutions,

particularly where religion has been overstated as the main cause of a conflict, or where trust has broken down completely through cycles of violence. Rebuilding trust is key to communities acting together to adapt to and mitigate the impact of climate change, at local community levels and in national policy making. Search for Common Ground recognises that [building trust, respect and mutuality](#) is key to securing progress on Freedom of Religion and Belief, and is equally

critical to the development of fair and equitable solutions to the climate crisis for all communities.

Climate change and religious intolerance and persecution, then, are not easy to disentangle as drivers of conflict and violence. At the same time, this interlinkage provides an opportunity for action - one which practitioners at local level around the world are already starting to seize.

FINDING THE SOLUTIONS



Many faith communities recognise a [shared religious imperative to care for the Earth](#), and this can be a strong foundation for joint climate action.

Pope Francis made a profound impact with [Laudato Si](#), and many other faiths and faith leaders have issued profound calls to action on climate change, including most recently the launch of [Al Mizan](#). Young people, including young people of faith, are leading [faith based initiatives for climate change](#) around the world. Globally, climate change

and environmental degradation impact people of all faiths, and faiths share both common concerns, and common ground, in their commitment to protecting the Earth. This recognition of the shared religious imperative to care for the Earth is embedded in the UN structures, in the [UNEP Faith for Earth initiative](#).



Interfaith responses to climate change increases social cohesion and stability in communities.

For example, in West Bengal in India, where [religious persecution and violence](#) have been increasing, [Go Dharmic](#) is working across religious divides to help restore the Sundarbans, West Bengal's wetland forests. Jhuma Sarkar, from Pakhiralay Village in the Sundarbans, explained the crisis: "We can no longer work on the land because the river dam breaks and floods. We have become helpless." With Go Dharmic's support, women from Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and traditional

backgrounds have come together to plant two million mangroves in the Sundarbans. The Dharma Forest initiative seeks to combat the climate crisis through planting of mangroves, recognising the crucial role of these wetlands in ecosystem health. The planting of the Dharma Forest is led by disadvantaged women, which empowers them, fosters skills development, and uplifts their families, while nurturing female leadership.

Whereas in other contexts, climate threats have led to increased religious tension, in the Sunderbans, partly through the work of Go Dharmic, there is a strong shared respect for the forest, which enables people to come together and work and live in harmony alongside each other. Debabrata Mondal, Project Coordinator for the Dharma Forest,

said “We have Muslim women involved who run our plantation nursery, and recently, 20 women from the Christian community joined the work. Women of all religious backgrounds regard the Sundarbans as sacred land, and we have a shared respect for the forest, which provides everything we all need to live, so this is what we are working to preserve together.”



photo credit: [Go Dharmic](#)



Shared values around environmental protection and caring for the land help people come together across religious divides, reduce prejudice, and increase community resilience.

[Eco Bhinneka](#), hosted by one of the most respected NGOs in Indonesia, [Muhhamadiyah](#) is part of the Dutch-funded [Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action](#) (JISRA), an international partnership of 50 civil society organizations in seven countries implementing a five-year programme (2021-2025) to build Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB). Eco Bhinneka brings together religious communities across Indonesia to tackle their environmental concerns and promote climate change awareness, as a means to also address [rising discrimination against minorities and political instrumentalization of religion](#). Through workshops, training, and community actions, it engages youth and women from diverse backgrounds to build interfaith collaboration in combating the climate crisis and environmental degradation.

Eco Bhinneka is successfully fostering interfaith unity through environmental conservation. For instance, Eco Bhinneka Banyuwangi organized a river visit involving youth from various faiths at Kali Baru, Siliragung, on National Waste Awareness Day 2024. During the activity, the Youth Community of Eco Bhinneka Blambangan (AMONG) transformed plastic waste from the river into eco bricks. The Hindu Chairman of AMONG, Mahatma Adi spoke about the participation of 32 youths from diverse religious backgrounds on the day. “Let our young people be today’s heroes for the environment. The environmental approach is the space for the inter-faith youth to communicate and to work together”. Zahrotul Janah, a young Muslim woman leader from Merdeka Sampah PWNA East Java, and Secretary of the AMONG community, invited young women to be

actively involved in the environmental action. “Never before would I have imagined that there would be an effort to maintain tolerance with environmental conservation actions. Eco

Bhinneka brings fresh air for young people across religions to connect with each other” Zahrotal said.



photo credit: [Eco Bhinneka](#)



youths from diverse religious backgrounds on this event



Joint responses to environmental destruction and FoRB violations can be hugely beneficial to minority religious communities.

In Kenya, the destruction of the Kaya Forests has negatively impacted the freedom of worship of the Mijikenda community, while also endangering the environment and ecosystem of the area. Historically, the Kaya worshippers follow traditional African religions, which has led to tension with neighboring Christian and Muslim communities. Moreover, the Kaya forest has been subjected to illegal deforestation and land grabbing by other communities, jeopardizing Kaya traditions and their ancestral places of worship. The prejudice and misunderstanding experienced by the Kaya have isolated them from public discussions with local authorities and other communities, making it difficult for them to exercise their agency and power to preserve their environment and practice their beliefs freely.

In 2023, Kaya elders from Kwale county sought assistance from Search for Common Ground, facilitated by the JISRA program, to facilitate dialogue among stakeholders regarding the protection of their sacred sites. The meeting, held at a Kaya sacred shrine, dispelled superstitions and fears surrounding the forest and allowed other communities to observe Kaya traditions. Attendees included religious figures, neighboring community leaders, and government officials at local and national levels, discussing collective forest preservation efforts. The successful event empowered Kaya elders to independently host interfaith and inter-community activities, establishing them as indispensable figures in public discourse. These activities also emphasized Kaya sacred grounds as neutral spaces for dialogue, underscoring their importance for all communities.



Pastor John Kariukit commented:

The meeting has really broadened my understanding of the Kaya practices and reduced the misconceptions that were previously present. These are definitely good steps respecting and unifying our communities



Salimu Mwasalabu - Secretary of Kaya Diani Kwale also commented

Never had we thought that one day our Kaya forests could be a venue to hold discussions of its protection and ensuring there is inclusion and unity with other religions and the community. Seeing different key stakeholders especially the pastors and Muslim leaders here right now is a great testimony towards building tolerance in matters of religion.

photo credit: [Search for Common Ground Kenya](#)

By creating space to understand Kaya religious practices and how they were linked to the forest, the project improved tolerance and understanding from the wider com-

munity of Kaya religious practices, as well as building joint action to preserve the forest around their sacred sites.



Trust built through interfaith collaboration on shared environmental concerns builds interreligious resilience, and relationships that can withstand both climate shocks and the polarizing forces of wider conflict.

For example, the Middle East region has long suffered drought and environmental problems. Those issues are exacerbated by the constant conflict and tensions in the region. The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies found that collaboration on environmental concerns affecting the entire region enabled them to foster cooperation among communities entrenched in long standing conflicts. The institute was initially created in 1996 and has since launched several collaborative programs and research

projects through its many research facilities. AIES has brought together nearly 1,800 Palestinian, Jordanian, Israeli, and international students and served as a neutral ground for those many students to grow and learn together. The Arava Institute has built trust across different nationalities and faiths, essential for cross community and cross border work on climate resilience, enabling respect and mutual trust between people, despite the broader conflicts in the region.



photo credit:
[The Arava Institute
 for Environmental
 Studies](https://www.arava-institute.org/)

Reflecting in Fathom Journal on the work of the Arava Institute since 7 October 2023, its Director Tareq Abu Hame said:



To build a robust partnership you have to rely on the foundation of trust, and this is what we try to do at the Arava Institute, to build peace using environmental cooperation ... and I'm very proud to say that since October 7th we did not lose a single partner, we did not lose the engagement of our alumni, and we are still in daily communication with our Palestinian partners in Gaza and in the West Bank. The partnerships are built on very strong foundations, which is that we know that we need to work together to deal with the consequences of climate change on the region.



Eliza Mayo, Deputy Director at Arava added that since 7 October 2023:

We're all feeling a lot of the trauma, on a personal level, on a community level. We had students studying with us, Israelis, Palestinians and Internationals studying together, when the attacks happened on October 7th, and most of them stayed, and the few of them that had to leave for various reasons returned, because that community (being part of the Arava program) for them, made more sense than being anywhere else.



photo credit:
<https://fathomjournal.org/>
<https://fathomjournal.org/peace-building-special-issue-interview-arava-institute-for-environmental-studies/>

Barak Talmor, Co-Director of the Alumni Network in an interview for this briefing paper, spoke of how the Arava Institute Alumni have responded since 7 October 2023



We've been supporting initiatives of our alumni, including for example, a project called messages of solidarity, which is something a group of three alumni started on Whatsapp, Telegram, Instagram and TikTok, sharing messages of solidarity between Israelis and Palestinians. Their groups now have more than 10,000 followers between them and the Arava Institute has been helping to support them with content, networking and funding a translator to translate content into Arabic and Hebrew.



At the international level, interfaith action on climate change through [UNEP Faith for Earth Coalition](#) is bringing forward the voices of indigenous communities and building greater respect both between and for religions, and the role they collectively play in tackling climate change.

The work of UNEP Faith for Earth Coalition both builds effective faith based advocacy on climate, and supports the inclusion of faith voices, including from religious minorities,

into UN climate policy making. As Iyad Abumoghli, Founder and Director of the UNEP Faith for Earth Coalition, in an interview for this policy brief explained:



Interfaith collaboration at COP 28 Summit last year brought together 180 people, 30 to 40 religious leaders at the highest level, together, not just demanding the International Community do something, but showing the commonality of their own commitment. Interdependence and interconnectedness are related to ideas of stewardship in Christianity or khalifa in Islam, it's a common value across religions. So, from those common values we are telling the world there is so much that brings religions together, more than what can divide them. Interfaith collaboration is not just part of the multilateral system but an important implementation mechanism for multilateral action. As faith actors we are saying that we have both the shared values and traditional knowledge that is key to the implementation of sustainable development. Indigenous peoples manage 80% of endangered resources but they are not heard in the decision-making, so it is important for the interfaith community to bring that out, so the multilateral system learns from centuries long practices with which people have lived in harmony within the Earth's resources.



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Faith for Earth of UNEP has amplified the voices of minority and indigenous religions at COP meetings by providing a platform for their representation, building their capacity for effective climate advocacy, and facilitating interfaith networks that include these groups. By supporting community-led initiatives, emphasizing the sacredness of nature, and promoting research on their environmental practices, Faith for Earth ensures that the unique perspectives and contributions of minority and indigenous religious communities are integrated into global climate discussions, fostering a more inclusive approach to climate action.



photo credit: [Go Dharmic](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS TO DONORS, POLICY MAKERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS:

1

Involving religious actors in climate initiatives at the local and global level

including through capacity-building, to empower religious actors and communities to connect their faith based commitment to the Earth to shared advocacy and building effective local solutions. Empowering faith-based advocacy for faith- and minorities-sensitive climate mitigation and adaptation policies and practices, as well as support for interfaith work at the community level, is crucial. On a larger scale, religious networks can be further leveraged to carry the voice of religious actors in climate initiatives at the global level.

2

Ensuring in policy making that focus on one aspect of a conflict does not inadvertently downplay or exacerbate other root drivers.

When discussing and analyzing the role of natural resources, climate, and religion as contributory factors and drivers of conflict, policy makers and diplomats need to present them in a nuanced manner which highlights their importance, without creating or feeding a narrative that denies or overshadows other key dimensions of conflict.

3

Increasing funding opportunities for programmatic work where climate change and FoRB are addressed simultaneously

through coalition building partnerships that prioritize both issues, and establishing incentive mechanisms that encourage private sector investment as well as international cooperation. Fund allocation and distribution should be devised to enable interfaith leadership on climate action at every level.

4

Integrate religious and conflict sensitivity in climate programming & climate sensitivity in FoRB programming

through cross-sector collaboration between religious institutions and environmental organizations. In addition, participatory decision-making involving actors from both sectors is further needed. Programming should follow a harmonized and comprehensive approach between both sectors alert to the risk of and mitigating potential for creating further conflict.

5

Carry out further research on the interconnections between climate change, conflict and FoRB

with a particular emphasis on interdisciplinary research, investment in longitudinal studies that track the impact of climate change on religious communities over time, and collaborative research partnerships. This should allow for the development of a clear and coordinated technical approach to tackling all three issues more effectively.

CONCLUSION

FoRB, climate issues & conflict are interconnected and these intersections need to be recognised, and mobilized where possible to enable effective action on all three issues simultaneously. The shared religious imperative to care for the Earth can be leveraged as a point of convergence for religious actors in situations where trust has broken down, including through the impacts of climate change on natural resources, and needs to be rebuilt. People of faith have

demonstrated, both at local and international levels, their willingness to work together for climate action. This joint work builds trust, which in turn creates mutual respect, and an enabling environment for FoRB and climate action to flourish. Establishing this foundation of trust among religious communities, and between them and their governments, is ultimately the basis for both effective climate action and securing the right to FoRB for all.

Search for Common Ground, June 2024



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photo credit: [Eco Bhinneka](#)



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