

Sisters for the Environment

Integrating Voices from the Margins



International Union of Superiors General (UISG)
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International Union of Superiors General (UISG)

*By Sister Patricia Murray
Executive Secretary, UISG*

Sisters for the Environment: Integrating Voices from the Margins is a statement of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG).

UISG is a membership organisation for the leaders of Catholic women's congregations, representing over 600,000 Catholic Sisters worldwide. Numbering over 1,900 Superiors General (or congregational leaders), with Generalates (or headquarters) in 97 countries, the UISG network is estimated to be one of the largest providers of direct community support in areas including health, hunger relief, and care for children. Alongside its core mission of training, supporting and connecting members, UISG acts as an umbrella organisation for Sisters engaged in tackling some of the world's most pressing development challenges.¹

As Sisters, we are convinced of the need for an integral, integrative and inclusive approach to realising the United Nations 2030 Agenda and the Laudato Si' Goals.

Integral: we are holistic in tackling social and environmental issues, advocating from a vision that is both human and spiritual as we seek sustainable solutions.

Integrative: we build bridges to bring people together, focusing on our shared humanity as we journey towards a safe, just and peaceful future for all.

Inclusive: we leave no one behind, knowing that the world's most marginalised communities can teach us all the resilience required to confront the challenges of our time.

As our leaders increasingly acknowledge the need for global development solutions rooted in justice, and not just charity, we believe it is vital to recognise that millions of people still face significant obstacles in affirming their right to participation. As Sisters, we build our mission on evidence from our work on the ground, inspired by our reflection on the Gospel message, the Church's social teaching, and the leadership of Pope Francis.

Catholic Sisters and their allies are at the forefront of a movement to shape global conversations around the needs of our most vulnerable communities. In this spirit, UISG issues the following statement.

¹ <https://www.uisg.org/en/>

Partnerships for the environment

Following the publication of Pope Francis's encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* in 2015,² the Catholic movement for environmental advocacy has gathered momentum year on year, matching the mounting urgency of the world's climate and biodiversity crises.

I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all. – Laudato Si' 14

As the future of our planet hangs in the balance, we know that achieving the tipping point for change requires all people of goodwill to collaborate across borders and identities, setting aside differences to defend our common home. This statement embodies the spirit of cooperation we seek to promote, drawing on collaborations between UISG offices, partners and funders.

The essence of this statement is based on the global experience of activism and advocacy that has coalesced around UISG's environmental campaign **Sowing Hope for the Planet** since it was launched in 2018. This campaign has become a driving force within the *Laudato Si'* Movement,³ and in the promotion of the *Laudato Si'* Action Platform.⁴ **Sowing Hope for the Planet** has promoted and shared a multitude of initiatives and best practices established by Sisters and their partners in response to the Pope's encyclical letter.⁵

Further research and development has been led by **Sisters Advocating Globally**, the UISG project established in 2020 to support Sisters in channelling their exceptional grassroots engagement towards long-term, systemic change.⁶

Key partners for the development of UISG's environmental advocacy throughout 2022 have been the **Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD)**, the aid agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales,⁷ and **UNANIMA International**, a Sister-led, non-governmental organisation advocating for women and children at the United Nations in New York.⁸ In partnership with UNANIMA International, UISG co-hosted an official side event at the UN's High-level Political Forum in July, under the banner Leadership for change: a call to action from Sisters supporting vulnerable communities. Meanwhile, consultation and collaboration with CAFOD supported the development and delivery of environment-focused advocacy training to members of the **Sowing Hope** network.

Finally, our work would not be possible without support from the **Global Solidarity Fund**, a unique alliance catalysing partnerships across the development sector, the private sector and Catholic communities.⁹

2 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

3 <https://laudatosimovement.org/>

4 <https://laudatosiactionplatform.org/>

5 <https://www.sowinghopefortheplanet.org/>

6 <https://advocacy.uisg.org>

7 <https://cafod.org.uk/>

8 <https://unanima-international.org/>

9 <https://www.globalsolidarityfund.org/>

Sowing Hope for the Planet

*By Sister Sheila Kinsey
Coordinator, Sowing Hope for the Planet*

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a worldwide call to protect the planet and improve the lives of all people. The 17 SDGs were adopted by all UN members in 2015, as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.¹⁰

The Laudato Si' Goals (LSGs) were developed in response to Laudato Si', Pope Francis's encyclical – also published in 2015 – which calls for an integral ecology to save all people and our planet from the many crises we face. Measurable actions indicated under the seven LSGs include protecting environments and biodiversity, guaranteeing access to clean water for all, safeguarding vulnerable communities, investing ethically, embracing sustainable lifestyles, promoting ecological education and spirituality, and emphasising community participation.¹¹

The Sustainable Development Goals and Laudato Si' Goals are mutually supportive, both in spirit and in practice. They are both calls to repair the damage that has been done to our societies and our planet, to heal the systems that have perpetrated this damage, and to transition towards a more just and sustainable future that preserves precious resources for future generations.

Since 2018, members of Sowing Hope for the Planet have been doing tremendous work towards the realisation of the SDGs and LSGs.

Catholic Sisters have been involved in campaigns on climate action and land use. They have divested from fossil fuels and invested in renewable energy systems, encouraging others to do the same; reduced their plastic consumption, and particularly their dependence on single-use plastics; promoted legislation to protect the environment; and led campaigns against harmful economic and environmental practices in the mining industry.

Sowing Hope members have worked with land-preservation groups to preserve native seeds, mitigate damages from extractivism, plant trees for reforestation, raise goats for ecosystem repair, grow community gardens, and protect public lands and indigenous land rights.

With a particular focus on water-related issues, Sowing Hope networks have promoted access to clean water, raised awareness of water pollution and scarcity, advocated for regulations to protect freshwater sources, secured wells and pipelines for communities with limited access to drinking water, and worked on projects to clean the world's oceans.

Our mission continues. Religious women and their allies take renewed strength from the encouragement and leadership of Pope Francis, and from the openness of partners – both religious and secular – to receiving the ideas of Laudato Si'.

¹⁰ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

¹¹ <https://www.laudatosi.org/laudato-si/laudato-si-goals/>

Sustainable Development Goals and *Laudato Si'*



Sustainable Development Goal 13: Climate action Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts¹²

The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all. At the global level, it is a complex system linked to many of the essential conditions for human life. – Laudato Si' 23



Sustainable Development Goal 14: Life below Water Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development¹³

The growing problem of marine waste and the protection of the open seas represent particular challenges. What is needed is an agreement on systems of governance for the whole range of so-called "global commons". - Laudato Si' 174



Sustainable Development Goal 15: Life on land Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss¹⁴

Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost for ever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right. – Laudato Si' 33



Sustainable Development Goal 17: Partnerships for the planet Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development¹⁵

We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalisation of indifference. – Laudato Si' 52

¹² <https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/13-climate-action/>

¹³ <https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/14-life-below-water/>

¹⁴ <https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/15-life-on-land/>

¹⁵ <https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/17-partnerships-for-the-goals/>

Key moments in 2022

In July 2022, the United Nations convened a High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development with a mandate to assess progress against five of the Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 14, Life below water, Goal 15, Life on land, and Goal 17, Partnerships for the goals.¹⁶

On July 7th, **Sisters of UISG and UNANIMA International convened an official side event under the banner *Leadership for change: a call to action from Sisters supporting vulnerable communities***. The dialogue included powerful testimonies on the efforts of Sisters and the communities they serve to respond to the climate and biodiversity crises. Sisters described not only the challenges experienced on a daily basis, but also the solutions pioneered locally that can inform global action and advocacy.

The ministerial declaration issued after the Forum echoed both themes raised by the Sisters: the insufficient progress made and urgency needed to meet environmental SDGs, and the importance of listening to affected communities in developing sustainable solutions.¹⁷ This statement is informed by our participation in the Forum and by the insights shared in the ministerial declaration.

On September 1st 2022, Pope Francis launched this year's Season of Creation – "a special time for all Christians to pray and work together to care for our common home" – with a message that identifies the upcoming COP27 on climate change (November) and COP15 on biodiversity (December) as vital opportunities to engage with the Laudato Si' Goals.¹⁸

Regarding COP27, the Pope said: "The effort to achieve the Paris goal of limiting temperature increase to 1.5°C is quite demanding [...]. This means **"converting" models of consumption and production, as well as lifestyles, in a way more respectful of creation and the integral human development of all peoples, present and future**, a development grounded in responsibility, prudence/precaution, solidarity, concern for the poor and for future generations. Underlying all this, there is need for a covenant between human beings and the environment, which, for us believers, is a mirror reflecting "the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying." The transition brought about by this conversion cannot neglect the demands of justice, especially for those workers who are most affected by the impact of climate change."

Pope Francis went on to say: "For its part, the COP15 summit on biodiversity, to be held in Canada in December, will offer to the goodwill of governments **a significant opportunity to adopt a new multilateral agreement to halt the destruction of ecosystems and the extinction of species**. [...] In order to halt the further collapse of biodiversity, our God-given "network of life", let us pray and urge nations to reach agreement on four key principles: 1. to construct a clear ethical basis for the changes needed to save biodiversity; 2. to combat the loss of biodiversity, to support conservation and cooperation, and to satisfy people's needs in a sustainable way; 3. to promote global solidarity in light of the fact that biodiversity is a global common good demanding a shared commitment; and 4. to give priority to people in situations of vulnerability, including those most affected by the loss of biodiversity, such as indigenous peoples, the elderly and the young."

¹⁶ <https://hlpf.un.org/2022>

¹⁷ <https://hlpf.un.org/2022/outcome>

¹⁸ <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2022/07/21/220721c.html>



Sisters for the Environment

Integrating Voices from the Margins

Sisters for the Environment: Integrating Voices from the Margins is a statement of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) intended to reflect and clarify the response of Catholic Sisters to the environmental challenges of our time.

On one hand, this statement addresses the urgency of the current moment, identifying COP27 on climate change and COP15 on biodiversity as crucial opportunities to turn the tide of destruction that is ravaging our Earth. On the other hand, it expresses a deep-rooted, faith-driven vision for ecological conversion that has inspired the mission of Sisters for many decades and continues to do so every day, all around the world.

The publication of this statement aims to create a platform to outline principles and orientations for a more sustainable future, based on the learnings that Catholic Sisters have acquired through their exceptional engagement with grassroots communities. As a pillar of UISG's environmental advocacy, this statement will stimulate action that is decentralised and diversified through the involvement of religious and non-religious groups, men and women, younger and older people, governmental agencies and inter-governmental bodies, international organisations and private companies.

We call on the global development community to engage with Catholic Sisters in promoting and realising integral environmental solutions, to ensure a safe and thriving future for all people and our planet.

Integrate responses to climate change and biodiversity loss

1. Integrate responses to climate change and biodiversity loss, recognising the interconnected nature of ecological challenges, and in particular the cascading impact of adaptations to climate change on biodiversity and the exploitation of natural resources.

In practice, this means:

- i.** While embracing the Sustainable Development Goals as a framework for monitoring and evaluation, acknowledging that environmental action cannot be siloed, and that a nuanced, interdisciplinary approach is vital to safeguard the future of our planet.
- ii.** Addressing climate change and loss of biodiversity with an integrated vision to protect environments and ecosystems, ensuring that climate adaptations do not depend on polluting or harmful mining practices, for example, or on land development that destroys the habitat of endangered species.
- iii.** Acting immediately to halt biodiversity collapse – ensuring that at least half the Earth and its oceans become protected areas by 2030 – as well as restore ravaged ecosystems and reduce global dependence on fossil fuels.
- iv.** Achieving global consensus on a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty,¹⁹ and concluding a new agreement on a United Nations Global Biodiversity Framework.²⁰

In assessing the environmental impact of any project, concern is usually shown for its effects on soil, water and air, yet few careful studies are made of its impact on biodiversity, as if the loss of species or animals and plant groups were of little importance. [...] Alternatives exist which at least lessen the impact of these projects, like the creation of biological corridors, but few countries demonstrate such concern and foresight. – Laudato Si' 35

¹⁹ <https://fossilfuel treaty.org/>

²⁰ <https://www.cbd.int/conferences/2021-2022>

Integrate care for people and our planet

2. Integrate care for people and our planet, rejecting the anthropocentric vision that underpins habits of destructive consumption, and recognising the inextricable link between our environment and ourselves.

In practice, this means:

- i.** When taking action for the Earth, ensuring that the dignity and rights of communities affected by climate change and biodiversity collapse are prioritised over national or private considerations of profit and economic expansion.
- ii.** Urgently redressing global inequality through an integrated loss and damage framework which explicitly ties climate adaptation to social justice, recognising the ecological debt owed by the Global North to countries bearing the brunt of an environmental breakdown that they haven't caused.
- iii.** Promoting equitable access to resources for ecological adaptations to increase agricultural resilience and sustain food security, protect access to clean water, and respond to predicted sea-level rise and coastal erosion in human-settled areas.
- iv.** Ensuring secure livelihoods and just compensation for workers in fossil fuel industries, and other unsustainable sectors of the global economy, impacted by the transition to ecological alternatives.

We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature. – Laudato Si' 139

Integrate vulnerability from the margins

3. Integrate vulnerability from the margins in leadership and decision-making, ensuring the voices of those most affected by environmental breakdown are at the centre of global conversations on resilience and recovery.

In practice, this means:

- i.** Acknowledging that vulnerability can be a strength, and that embedding the willingness to be vulnerable as a core value of responsible leadership can help us to find collaborative solutions for the shared future of humankind.
- ii.** Hearing and heeding the voices of those affected by environmental breakdown, both in recognition of their human dignity and as a pragmatic approach to learning from their resilience.
- iii.** Furthermore, integrating the vulnerable as key players within our institutional frameworks, ensuring that voices from the margins are featured centrally in the global dialogue for change, and not confined to advocating from the outside.
- iv.** Therefore, focusing environmental solutions on the needs of marginalised groups including women and girls, displaced and homeless people, children and the elderly, indigenous communities and other ethnic minorities.
- v.** In particular, incorporating suggestions from indigenous communities to halt or modify projects on or near indigenous land, and ensuring their expertise is included in efforts to mitigate climate change and biodiversity collapse.
- vi.** Recognising that women religious are uniquely placed to advocate for and with the communities they serve, and have a role to play both in bringing local voices into global conversations and in ensuring that global commitments are implemented locally.

In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters. – Laudato Si' 158

Testimony: Philippines



Sister Anne Carbon Missionary Sisters of Saint Columban

Working with the Subaanen indigenous people in the southern Philippines, I encountered a culture that is pure, sustainable and deeply connected with nature.

The Subaanen use natural fertilisers and plant their crops once a year, believing their lands need to rest. But when settlers arrived, most Subaanen sold their lands. Now, settlers use chemicals and sow their crops two or three times a year. Governments have deforested the area and illegal logging has stripped its biodiversity. In the rainy season, soil erosion destroys plantations, causing crop scarcity, hunger and infant deaths.

Since the 1990s, Sisters have advocated for and with the Subaanen on mining. Working with a local health centre as a nurse, I vaccinated children across dozens of villages, talking to people about their connection with the land and the intrusion of foreign mining companies. By the time those companies came to visit with government representatives, we had gathered thousands of signatures to stop them.

Roads, schools and electricity were promised. But **people had seen the real consequences of mining, having visited areas where land was stripped bare, water was contaminated, rivers had dried up and communities suffered from cyanide poisoning.**

Of course, the mining companies changed their names and bribed people to campaign for them. But we continued to stand united: for 15 years we protested, picketed, lobbied, sent letters, signed petitions, went on hunger strikes, and even travelled to the headquarters of the Rio Tinto Group, in London.

When a woman was appointed head of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, she found the law failed to protect indigenous people and the environment. She implemented new standards, and mining applications were halted. But recently she died, and the President has now lifted the moratorium on mining, which is a worry and a challenge.

In my experience, education and networking are vital to successful advocacy. **Heeding the Pope's call to respond to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor, we must unite to advocate for the future of our only planet.**

Testimony: India



Sister Jyotisha Kannamkal Sisters of Notre Dame

Sister Jyotisha considers herself a seeker and a searcher on life's journey. In her 30s, she was a teacher in the schools of the Sisters of Notre Dame, in rural areas of northern India. While teaching catechism to sixth grade students, she was challenged by the leadership of Moses in Exodus to ask: who will teach the children who have no access to school?

In those days, hardly any children in the area went to school, and especially not girls from the most marginalised communities. So Sister Jyotisha left her role in institutional teaching and became a social activist, mobilising communities to educate their children, and particularly their girls. Working with the communities, and especially with the mothers, gave her a lot of joy and fulfilment, although initially it was tough.

Sister Jyotisha says: "The experience of working with women and girls from deprived communities helped me to grow in spirituality. The simple lifestyle of these women and their families is my inspiration to remain positive in the midst of life's trials and troubles."

However, her journey was not over. "I am disturbed again now, in my 60s, by the impact of the ecological crisis on the poor. The last two or three years of drought and flood have left poorer communities with no means to meet their basic needs. **My inner voice is urging me to fully commit to advocacy for integral ecology:** the Pope's encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* and the work of UISG, of which my congregation is a member, have given me new hope.

In my province, we have a Positivity Bank for Mother Earth, which every month records positive actions taken for Mother Earth by different communities. Prominent actions include **growing kitchen gardens, planting trees, farming organically, conserving water, saving electricity by installing LED bulbs, using solar energy, meditating in nature, differentiating waste, reducing food waste, composting, recycling, rejecting single-use plastic, and educating children through the Green School movement.** I see these as small drops of grace in the vast ocean of our care for creation."

Testimony: Democratic Republic of the Congo



Sœur Nathalie Kangaji Sœurs de Notre Dame Chanoinesses de Saint Augustin

In 2008, I initiated the foundation of a legal and judicial aid centre in Kolwezi, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This is a local organisation working for the promotion and protection of human rights, whose mission is to provide assistance to the poor and to victims of violence or abuse. Since 2013, we have been working in the natural resources sector, and particularly on mining issues: **core activities include environmental protection, climate change mitigation, defending the rights of local communities, and promoting good governance in the mining industry.**

Kolwezi is a mining town with a 60% reserve of cobalt, which is one of the strategic materials for tomorrow's sustainable energy production. In addition, the Congo is rich in a variety of other minerals, which are exploited for the benefit of industrialised countries through large firms, often in a context of non-compliance, corruption, or a similar lack of standards.

We are witnessing systematic plundering and uncontrolled exploitation, with no visible development benefits. Many local communities are victims of forced relocation – often illegal – and pay a heavy price for the growth of extractive projects in the region. Water, air and soil pollution accompany extractive activities: these impacts are dynamic over time, often latent or invisible, and can compromise the lives of future generations.

We help local communities to set up and consolidate participatory governance committees, so they can form pressure groups for environmental protection and good governance. We train them to use all legal mechanisms available to apply pressure on issues related to the misuse of natural resources and the breach of their human rights.

Advocacy – the process of influencing decision-makers at local, national and international levels with the aim of changing policies – is an important mechanism of our engagement. Working in synergy with others is an opportunity for us to make our voices heard at the highest level: for example, we work with local organisations in the same sector, but also with international organisations in Europe and elsewhere.

We are committed to taking action to promote the transparent and responsible management of mining resources. **We advocate for an economy that is pro-human, pro-dignity, pro-poor, and environmentally sound. Courageous commitments are needed, because environmental protection is an essential condition of sustainable development and a better life for all people.**

Testimony: United States of America



Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

We are currently advocating for the FOREST Act, a bill before the US Congress that would ban the importation of goods sourced through illegal deforestation. More than 60 faith groups – most of them congregations of Catholic women religious – have signed a letter expressing the conviction that we have a moral imperative to protect forests and support indigenous peoples struggling to protect their land.

We are advocating for the reform of a mining law from 1872, to cover the issue of mining for minerals required for a clean energy transition. Realising the Sustainable Development Goals 14, Life under water, and 15, Life on land, will require attention to the harms of extractivism, particularly considering the threat of expanded mining operations to meet the needs for minerals critical to this transition, e.g. for electric vehicles, solar panels, battery storage, and so on.

A member of the Justice Team of the Sisters of Mercy chairs an interfaith coalition which seeks to address the harms of extractive industries to terrestrial ecosystems, in the US and around the world. In coalition with secular partners, we are calling for mandatory clean-ups of abandoned mining sites, for meaningful consultation with indigenous communities and others impacted by proposed mining projects, and for federal agencies to be granted the authority to reject mining proposals on environmentally or culturally sensitive land. **We are also calling for support for a circular economy, in which minerals and materials are reused and recycled to minimise the need for new mining.**

Our Justice Team is participating in a campaign to pressure Congress to allocate more funding to supporting low-income countries with climate change mitigation and adaptation. Governments need to make clear plans to minimise the degradation of terrestrial ecosystems, and the proliferation of “sacrifice zones” where mining is allowed to flourish at the expense of vulnerable communities. Proposals to expand mining underneath oceans and seas also need to be carefully considered in order to mitigate potential harm to sensitive underwater ecosystems, allowing for outright bans where mitigation is not possible.

Testimony: Brazil



Irmã Iraci de Fátima Cirino dos Santos Irmãs de São José

As a *Laudato Si'* animator and a member of the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation movement, I am committed to a cooperative fishing project inspired by **SDG 14, Life under water**. This project is focused on the preservation of marine species and particularly of the *Tursiops gephyreus* dolphin, which is recognised as endangered here in Brazil.

Participation in this cause for the defence of our dolphins requires reading, learning and reflection as an integral part of our advocacy. It also demands a coordinated effort to create new partnerships in line with **SDG 17, Partnerships for the goals**.

I am also committed to projects inspired by **SDG 15, Life on land**, focusing for example on the cultivation of community gardens. I work with a group that listens to and accompanies rural communities affected by the rampant use of pesticides, which intoxicate agricultural products intended for direct human consumption. Currently, I am also in the process of forming a network to advocate on public policies regarding healthy food production and the conservation of native seeds.

To summarise my message for national governments, regional leaders and the international development community, I would say that **urgent environmental policies are needed to fight growing hunger and spiralling poverty**.

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Sisters for the Environment

By virtue of our unique dignity and our gift of intelligence, we are called to respect creation and its inherent laws. - Laudato Si' 69
