DISCUSSION PAPER: LAND AND WATER JUSTICE
The Earth was created as a home for all living creatures. None can survive let alone thrive without healthy ecosystems that provide clean air and water, support healthy soil formation, and a resilient and diverse community of life. Land should be "a gift for all, not a commodity for a few".¹ But access to land and water resources is increasingly unequal. Communal land and water assets are being privatised, the number of corrupt land grabs is growing and people are being dispossessed and denied access to these resources, which they need for survival and livelihoods.

Pressure on these vital resources is set to grow and we have a moral responsibility to care of our commons. We need a justice approach to issues of land and water that embodies equitable, inclusive and restorative decision making on the allocation and management of resources.

Only 24% of people in sub-Saharan Africa access safe drinking water\(^2\) Deforestation rates 30 times higher than planting rates in some areas\(^3\) There have been 450 corrupt land grabs in sub-Saharan Africa since 2000\(^4\)

**Faith perspectives on land and water justice**

Land and water rights, responsibilities and rituals are interwoven in sacred texts and embedded in the history of all faith traditions. In Genesis 2:15, God called on the human community to “till and keep” the earth. But in Jeremiah 2:27, the Jewish prophet declared “I brought you into a fertile land to enjoy its fruits and every good thing in it. But when you entered my land you defiled it and made loathsome the home I gave you.” We have failed to honour the call to be custodians of this gift. Land, “an integral part of the whole constellation,”\(^5\) is core to African cultural heritage. In Islam, land and water are meant for the benefit of all the community. In Judeo-Christian traditions, land is a gift from God. As stewards, people are forbidden to strip the earth of its fertility. Land should not become a commodity for profit that excludes the poor, and labour should express human dignity.\(^6\) Critical for survival, water plays a central role in the practices of all faith traditions. It features in Buddhist funeral ceremonies and Hindus believe in the cleansing power and sanctity of all water, especially rivers. Islamic law has clear-cut rules about the sharing of scarce water\(^7\) and clean drinking water is linked to the mystery of the Bible’s theme of Christian mission.\(^8\)

**Questions to consider from a faith perspective**

- Does your faith have a position on land and water justice? If not, is there a responsibility or need to formulate one?
- What is your faith doing about land and water justice? What should or could you be doing?
- What current practices does your faith community support that highlights land and water justice? (Including aspects such as water conservation efforts.)
- What would encourage and support people in your faith community to advocate for land and water justice?

**Background to the land and water justice issue**


Land and water justice encompasses issues of equitable access, distribution and the sharing of benefits derived from them. It also involves balancing human needs with long-term ecological sustainability. Only 24% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa has access to safe water for drinking and sanitation. Only 28% have basic sanitation facilities that are not shared with other households.\(^9\) Without access, the risk of poor health and malnutrition increases exponentially.\(^10\) While water justice encompasses issues of access, it also focuses on the consequences of deprivation. Women and youth frequently travel great distances to collect water, often forgoing education, which affects their own and future generation’s prospects.\(^11\) Urban informal settlement dwellers with no water infrastructure are unfairly burdened by the exorbitant cost of buying water,\(^12\) often 10 to 20 times the normal price.\(^13\) Water injustice plays out at different levels. The building of water infrastructure such as dams for example can divert water from existing users, not only destabilising livelihoods but also causing catastrophic ecological impacts.\(^14\) Water justice is therefore linked to much “broader issues of democracy, citizenship and development”,\(^15\) as is land justice.

Privatisation of land and land-grabbing in recent decades affects members of rural communities, regardless of gender or age. The corrupt large-scale acquisition of African agricultural land has escalated since the 2007/08 global food crisis. More than 70% of global land-grabbing takes place in sub-Saharan Africa.\(^16\) There have been more than 450 documented and corrupt land grabs in the region since 2000 to acquire more than 9 million hectares.\(^17\) Traditional authorities are increasingly also selling communal land to private interests.\(^18\) This blocks access to land and control over production for future generations, as well as immediately creating a class of “landless workers” who migrate to urban informal settlements in the hope of finding other livelihoods. Land justice is about enabling fair distribution of land and about ensuring that rural communities, particularly smallholder farmers, retain access to and control of natural resources and their way of life.\(^19\) In many cases, this land holds spiritual and cultural significance for them and is central to their identities. Land justice also involves the need to adopt and strengthen sustainable agricultural production methods. The continent’s growing human population, deforestation, more extreme and frequent droughts and unpredictable heavy rainfall are exacerbating


soil degradation.\textsuperscript{20} Deforestation impacts rural communities significantly. People rely on access to wood for energy and building material and for the food and medicines that forests provide.\textsuperscript{21} The rising cost and erratic supply of energy in poor urban settlements combined with the increasing value of charcoal as a forest “cash crop” is another driver of deforestation. In many countries, a combination of complex interlinking factors has resulted in a significant loss of topsoil, estimated to be as much as 50 tons of soil per hectare each year in some areas.\textsuperscript{22} The United Nations Environment Programme estimates that more than a quarter of the continent is losing its ability to support agricultural production.\textsuperscript{23}

We need to ensure the fair and ethical governance of these resources, and that indigenous communities, women and youth, and the marginalised and rural poor, in particular, have guaranteed access to land, water and other natural resources.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{20} Food and Agriculture Organization. n.d. \textit{The magnitude of the problem.} www.fao.org/3/x5318e/x5318e02.htm.
\textsuperscript{21} Food and Agriculture Organization. n.d. \textit{The magnitude of the problem.} www.fao.org/3/x5318e/x5318e02.htm.
\textsuperscript{22} Food and Agriculture Organization. n.d. \textit{The magnitude of the problem.} www.fao.org/3/x5318e/x5318e02.htm.
\textsuperscript{23} Food and Agriculture Organization. n.d. \textit{The magnitude of the problem.} www.fao.org/3/x5318e/x5318e02.htm.
\textsuperscript{24} American Jewish World Service. n.d. \textit{Land, water and climate justice.} ajws.org/what-we-do/land-and-water-rights/.
\end{flushright}