

# Sustainable Development: Islamic Perspectives and Implementation

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## Abstract

While humankind's well-being is the major goal of most forms of development, it is now universally acknowledged that it cannot be at the expense of exhausting the earth's natural resources. The unconditional utilisation of these resources will not only affect the sustainability of current industrial development but also leave future generations with lesser resources for their own development. This concern has given rise to the concept of sustainable development. Many countries have committed themselves to the implementation of sustainable development goals. The Climate Change Conference in Egypt in November 2022 prompted me to consider the approaches of Muslim environmentalists and select Muslim states that have factored in sustainable development issues. My research findings indicate that while some Muslim environmentalists work within the framework of the standard definitions of sustainable development, others suggest alternative definitions based on primary Islamic texts. They also refer to several institutions in early Muslim history to demonstrate that many sustainable development principles are found in Islamic teachings. This article presents the Islamic approach to sustainable development by Muslim environmentalists and identifies Muslim states that have adopted Islam-specific charters; these are in addition to United Nations resolutions on sustainable development. It concludes with recommendations by Muslim environmentalists on the implementation of sustainable development goals.

**Key Words:** Islamic perspective, environment, sustainable development, responsibility, charters.

## 1. Introduction

The term environment (or nature) is referred to in the Qur'ān as *khalq* (literally, creation). For decades, environmentalists such as Fazlun Khalid and Seyyed Hossein Nasr have been expressing concerns about environmental degradation

which is defined as “the deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources such as air, water and soil; the destruction of ecosystems; habitat destruction; the extinction of wildlife; and pollution” (“Causes, Effects and Solutions to Environmental Degradation”).

Environmental degradation is attributed to a number of factors, though environmentalists differ to some extent about its causes and consequences. I have summed up the causes and consequences which are listed in diverse publications, including *Tread Lightly on Earth: Religion, the Environment and the Human Future*, on environmental degradation as follows:

**Causes:** industrialisation, urbanisation, wars and conflicts, overpopulation, land disturbance, pollution, landfills, ruinous agricultural practices, environmental pollution.

**Consequences:** land degradation, pollution (land, water, air, noise), high rates of morbidity and mortality, famine and food insecurity, climate change, ozone layer depletion, biodiversity loss, infrastructure decay, population displacement, poverty, impact on human health, atmospheric changes, scarcity of natural resources, natural calamities (“Causes, Effects and Solutions to Environmental Degradation”).

Afsan Redwan in his book *When the Earth Speaks against is: Environmental Ethics in Islam* contends that humankind can only survive on earth in the foreseeable future if it commits itself to the principles of sustainable development. The primary concern of sustainable development in a nutshell is to “meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (“Sustainability – the United Nations”).

During the 1920s, 1960s, and 1970s several scholars and environmentalists expressed concerns about the depletion of natural resources and warned about its consequences. In 1972, with the creation of the United Nations Environment and Development Programme (UNEP), the Stockholm Environmental Summit was held to discuss what came to be known as “sustainable development” (“United Nations Conference on the Human Environment”).

In 1983, the World Commission on Environment and Development (also known as the *Brundtland Commission*) which was formed by the United Nations, issued the Brundtland Report aimed at helping “direct the nations

of the world towards the goal of sustainable development”. The key concepts contained in the Report are economic growth, environmental protection, and social equality (Brundtland Report, 1987).

At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) - also known as the Earth Summit - in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, member states signed Agenda 21 which outlined global strategies for cleaning up the environment and encouraging environmentally sound development (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development). The Johannesburg 2002 Sustainable Development Summit affirmed the need for global action to protect the environment and fight poverty. As compared to Rio, there was greater concern with social and economic issues and stronger emphasis on local, as opposed to global, issues in Johannesburg in 2002 (Von Schirnding, 2005).

In 2012, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) or Rio+ 20 focused on two themes in the context of sustainable development: green economy and institutional frameworks. The United Nations issued a Sustainable Development Goals Report in 2020 which covers goals related to poverty, health, education, gender, water, land, employment, consumption, climate, peace, justice, etc. (Sustainable Development Goals Report).

The major topics covered at the Climate Change Conference held in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt in November 2022 included adapting to climate change, loss, and damage, and keeping hope for 1.5%. It identified four main objectives: mitigation, adaptation, finance, and collaboration (COP 27 UN Climate Change Conference). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nations in 2015:

envision a secure world free of poverty and hunger, with full and productive employment, access to quality education and universal health coverage, the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, and an end to environmental degradation (2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development).

Among those at the forefront of the current drive for conservation of natural environmental resources, delete in addition to environmentalists are political parties and non-governmental organisations. The latter include organisations such as World Wildlife Fund (now known as World Wide Fund for Nature), Greenpeace, and Friends of Earth (History of the environmental movement).

This study falls within the scope of environmental ethics, which refers to the ethical relationship between human beings and the natural environment. It relates not only to the needs of those living today, but also to future generations, and the rights of other living creatures that inhabit the Earth. The Qur'an refers to human beings as *khalifah* (vicegerent) which is interpreted to mean that human beings are entrusted with the stewardship of Allah's creation and thus bear a responsibility (*amānah*) to protect the environment.

The primary objective of this study is to elucidate the Islamic perspective of stewardship in relation to sustainable development with reference to how Muslim environmentalists draw upon Islamic texts, theological interpretations, and scholarly discourse within the Islamic tradition. The research employs a qualitative analysis approach to elucidate how environmental responsibility is recognised as a central virtue within the Islamic faith.

## 2. Literature Review

According to Seyyed Hossain Nasr (2007a:23-24), Arabic, Persian, Swahili, and Bengali literature contain a vast wealth of material on the Muslim view of the relationship between human beings and the natural environment. Numerous works of Islamic philosophy promote an Islamic philosophy of nature. Sufism in particular contains the "most profound expression of an Islamic metaphysics and theology of nature" The reasons for the decline in Muslim scholarship relating to the environment in the early modern period will not be elucidated here.

More recently, a growing number of Muslim environmentalists have been campaigning for or promoting sustainable development goals through their publications and participation in sustainable development initiatives. A collection of articles on environment and ecology in Islam includes topics relating to climate change, environmental protection, ecology, nature, sustainable development, and so on (Environment & Ecology in Islam).

Fazlun Khalid, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Mawil Izzi Dien, Mustafa Abu Sway and Othman Llewellyn are recognised as the leading Muslim environmentalists today.

Khalid at the time this was written was recognised as one of 15 leading eco-theologians globally. He is also currently the most prolific writer on sustainable development issues from an Islamic perspective. His publications include

“Ecology, Sustainability & Future Generations: An Islamic Perspective”, “Environmentalism is intrinsic to Islam”, “Faith, Nature and the climate crisis”, “Exploring Environmental Ethic in Islam – Insights from the Qur’ān and the Practice of Prophet Muhammad” and “Islam and the Environment, Theory and Practice”.

In his diverse, numerous publications, Khalid discusses how modernity imposes itself on the world and its disruptive impact on traditional societies causing an imbalance in the earth’s natural ecosystems. He suggests an alternative mode of existence which is contrary to the Cartesian worldview of humanity’s dominion over the rest of creation, which acknowledges the capacity of human beings to act as guardians and protectors of God’s creation by understanding their relationship with the divine order. Khalid argues that the world’s adoption of a consumer culture impacts negatively on the biosphere, which leads to the dilution and destruction of traditional values and marginalisation of religions. He explains how the environmentalism found in Islamic teachings detail how humans relate to the natural world and the benefits that accrue from ecological conservation. Khalid asserts that the shift in humankind’s perception of itself in relation to the natural order is the result of adopting a secular worldview.

Khalid (2002:332-339) expresses regret over the disruption of the nexus between humanity and nature and details this in his book *Islam and the Environment: Social Economic Dimension of Global Environmental Change*. He states:

As what we now understand by modernity has advanced, as the secular ethic progressively seeped into the Muslim psyche and as industrial development, economic indicators and consumerism became the governing parameters of society, there has been a corresponding erosion of the Muslim perception of the holistic [worldview] and a withering of its understanding of the sacred nexus between the human community and the rest of the natural order.

According to Khalid (Ibid):

traditional and indigenous communities lived in a manner that was integral to nature and in the absence of scripture the natural world itself was the text. Eastern traditions also had a close affinity with nature, and it was looked upon as a gift from the Creator by all three Abrahamic faiths. All spiritual traditions teach us mindfulness, caring and sharing.

The Qur'an tells us that a stable, harmonious environment is the result of the natural world obeying the laws of creation to remain in balance (*mizān*). This applies to all of creation including the human in its newborn state (Khalid, 2017:3).

We are required to care for and manage Earth in a way that conforms to God's intention in creation: it should be used for our benefit without causing damage to the other inhabitants of planet Earth who are communities like ourselves. The relationship we have over the natural world is not a right to do as we please but a responsibility which carries with it the burden of accountability. The discharge of our responsibilities should be tempered by justice and kindness with the intention always to do good (ibid, 2017:10).

Nasr's books focus specifically on nature. They include "Human and Nature, the Spiritual Crisis of Modern Humans", "Religion and the Order of Nature", *Man and Nature*, and "God is Absolute Reality and All Creation His Tajallī (Theophany)". In *Man and Nature* Nasr (1990:96) contends that:

the gradual secularisation of the cosmos which took place in the West and especially the rationalism and humanism of the Renaissance which made possible the Scientific Revolution and the creation of science whose functions, according to Francis Bacon (one of its leading proponents) was 'to gain power over nature, dominate her and force her to reveal her secrets not for the glory of God but for the sake of gaining worldly power and wealth'.

Nasr believes that religion can promote sustainable development by emphasising its doctrine about the world of nature - apart from ethics - since religion may provide an understanding of the roots of the environmental crisis.

In Sway's view, Muslim states will take due cognisance of the sustainable development agenda only if it is backed by Islamic legislation. This is the gist of his argument in his seminal publication, *Towards an Islamic Jurisprudence of the Environment*.

Dien's publications include *Islam and the Environment -Theory and Practice* and *The Environmental Dimensions of Islam*. In the former, he focuses on the causes of environmental degradation in the Middle East which he attributes to industrial policies which do not recognise spiritual or ethical values as commercially significant. This has led to "a severe cultural rupture that has alienated the human inhabitants from the earth that supports them" (1997:18:1).

An interesting dimension introduced by several Muslim writers, including Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, is that environmental resources in Islam are considered divine property belonging not only to human but also non-human creatures including animals, plants, earth, seas, and the cosmos (Izzi Dien, 1997:48). Izzi Dien (1997) deals with the Islamic theology of environmentalism and Islamic ethics and the use of *Shari'ah* in legislation, international efforts to curb pollution and biodiversity loss. He argues that "the conservation of the natural environment in Islam is both an ethical and religious imperative which should be backed by legislation and effective enforcement of an environmental law."

Othman Abd-ar-Rahman Llewellyn's publications include "The basis for a discipline of Islamic Environmental Law" and "Islamic Environmental Ethics". Llewellyn (1998:41, 44) contends that environmental law needs more than legal rulings and precedents and ideal statements of general principle. It requires creative, practical, and detailed application of these precedents and principles to specific environmental, socioeconomic, and technological problems. He is hopeful that in view of the rapid increase in environmental awareness and the strong environmental concerns of many Muslim thinkers, that the discipline of Islamic environmental law will soon be recognised.

As noted above, both Khalid and Nasr focus on the severance of the relationship between human beings and nature and its consequences, and the imperative for an ethical approach to environmentalism based on Islamic principles. This is in contrast to the common approach that humans are superior over all other forms of life on earth and that all of nature is created for the unconditional use of humans. Sway, Dien and Othman Abd-ar-Rahman Llewellyn similarly emphasise the importance of legislation to effectively attain sustainable development goals.

The primary reason for non-implementation of sustainable development goals, according to the views expressed above, is that the policies of Muslim states are underpinned by material or secular values with a central focus on consumerism, which often excludes the ethical and spiritual dimensions that Islam provides.

### **3. Methods**

Sources related to sustainable development, in particular United Nations resolutions and those offering an Islamic perspective, were identified and the relevant information extracted. This information was analysed using the qualitative content analysis method. The data in the literature was sorted, the contents were categorised according to themes determined by the keywords and phrases used in the texts, and the information synthesised. This research technique provided new insights into the phenomenon of sustainable development from the perspectives of Muslim scholars who are cited below.

### **4. Definitions**

There are many definitions of sustainable development. I will list only two of the most common ones, followed by the Islamic-specific definitions to indicate points of convergence as well as divergence among them. Muslim environmentalists could be classified into two groups, one falling within the general sustainable development framework and the other within an Islamic-specific framework, which some writers refer to as the “Islamic ecological paradigm”, with its focus on the compatibility between sustainable development principles and Islamic teachings.

The following are among the more popular definitions of sustainable development:

- ...a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with future as well as present needs. (Sustainable Development – where has it all started?).
- development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundlandt Report, 1987).

As stated above, the key features of sustainable development that were originally identified were economic growth, environmental protection, and social equality. The Rio Summit declared that sustainable development should become a priority item on the agenda of the international community and recommended that national strategies be designed and developed to address economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainable development (Mensah, 2019: 5:7).

The definition of sustainable development was extended to include and balance economic, social, and environmental concerns (Aburounia and Sexton, 2022). The aim was to guarantee a better quality of life for everyone now, and for generations to come, with the understanding that this aim can only be achieved by meeting a number of goals, including awareness of environmental protection and careful use of natural resources (5 Objectives of Sustainable Development).

Zubair Hasan believes that the notion of sustainable development which seeks to create a balance between economy, environment, and society marks a significant shift in emphasis from growth to social justice and implies more than a mere conservation of natural resources, and hence should be supported. A “sustainable” rate of growth implies that the pace of development should be reduced. This would contribute to a conservation of natural resources and reduce environmental degradation. Equity implies a more even spread of resources and concomitantly a reduction in consumerism (Hasan, 2006:8).

Mahbub Ul-Haq, who pioneered the human development Revolution and developed the human development index, proposed that the basic objective of human development is to “create an enabling environment for people to live long, healthy and creative lives, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living” (cited in Baru, 1998:2275). He also provided the world with a statistical measure to quantify the indicators of economic growth with human development.

Abdur-Razzaq Lubis (2010) argues that humankind’s rights over nature are rights of sustainable use - of usufruct - based on moderation, balance, and conservation so that future generations have similar and equal rights. Nature’s rights over humankind include the rights to protection from misuse, degradation, and destruction. Greed, affluence, extravagance, and waste are considered a tyranny against nature and a transgression of those rights.

Having presented a summary of the general discourses on sustainable development by the first category of Muslim environmentalists above, I will now turn to the Islam-specific definitions by Muslim environmentalists of the second category. Though they remain a rather small minority, their works, in particular the works of, Dien, and Khalid, are acknowledged within the global discourse on sustainable development.

The essential difference between this category of Muslim environmentalists and the previous category is that though the former concur with the causes and consequences of environmental degradation as well as with the general principles of sustainable development, unlike the first category they cite Islamic texts as evidence that these principles are in line with Islamic beliefs. In their writings, while all refer to the Qur'an and the *Hadith* (Prophetic traditions), several also include *shari'ah*-based norms deduced from Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), with their main goal being to develop a field of Islamic eco-ethics that includes both theology and law. The following maxims and texts are commonly cited in their publications on environmental degradation:

“There is to be no harm and no reciprocation of harm” (*al-Qawā'id al-Fiqhiyyah* 2013:51) this is a *hadith*; “Eat and drink, but waste not by excess; ‘He’ loves not the excessive” (Qur'an, 25:2., 7:31); “And do not follow the bidding of the excessive, who cause corruption in the earth and do not work good” (Qur'an, 25:2., 26:151-152); “And do not cause corruption in the earth, when it has been set in order” (Qur'an, 25:2., 7:56); “Do not waste water even if you are on a running river”<sup>1</sup>; “Do not harm women, children and the infirm, do not harm animals, destroy crops or cut down trees”<sup>2</sup>; “Commit no excess therein, lest My wrath should justly descend on you.” (Qur'an, 20:81). Even in times of war, Muslim leaders advised their troops not to chop down trees, destroy agriculture, or kill animals (Abumoghli, 2022). These texts, in sum, instruct humans not to waste natural resources, not to destroy plants, and not to harm animals.

Othman `Abd al-Rahman believes that appropriate rules for controlling environmental degradation can be classified under the “no injury” principle in *shari'ah* (see Chowdury, 6[5]:281). Based on his understanding, the texts above fall into this category. However, Zubair Hasan (2006:10) refutes the claim that concern for the environment follows automatically from the maxim

1 This *hadith* is reported in Musnad Ahmad. Daily Hadith online. December 13, 2022. <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2013/08/19/conserves-water-flowing-stream/>

2 This *hadith* is cited in Mālik's Muwaṭṭa (see Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad. <https://sunnah.com>).

“receive no injury, inflict no injury” as well as the claim that there are many verses in the Qur’ān relating to the avoidance of causing harm to the natural and environmental resources. Hasan considers these claims to be irrelevant and believes that the relevant verses are “intended presumably more to regulate relations between man and man rather than between them and the environment”. While Hasan presents a compelling argument, the merits of his contention will not be debated here. The central focus of this article is to determine the response to sustainable development by Muslim environmentalists and Muslim states.

Abdul Habeeb Ansari, Parveen Jamal, and Omar Oseri refer to another maxim, *Ṣadd Al-Dharā’i*, or the idea of blocking the lawful means to an unlawful or harmful end in relation to sustainable development. Its objective is to forestall deeds or policies, which if pursued might lead to impermissible conduct or lead to unlawful or harmful acts on the people, the environment, and the whole of biodiversity:

Ansari, et.al. (2012:616) view it as “a useful tool to prevent all causes of environmental degradation, because of abuse and over exploitation, whether direct (pollution and hunting, particularly hunting endangered species) or indirect (deforestation and increasing the levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases)”.

Muslim environmentalists often cite the following texts to indicate that the preservation of natural resources, which benefits both humans and animals, is not only required but earns rewards for the benefactor:

“Whosoever brings dead land to life, for him is a reward in it, and whatever any creature seeking food eats of it shall be reckoned as charity from him” (Abumoghli, 2022); “If a Muslim plants a tree or sows seeds and then a human, bird, or animal eats from it, it shall be regarded as charity from him”;<sup>3</sup> “If anyone plants a tree, no human nor any of the creatures of Allah will eat from it without it being reckoned as charity from him”;<sup>4</sup> “Whoever plants a tree and looks after it with care, until it matures and becomes productive, will be rewarded in the Hereafter”;<sup>5</sup> “Even if the Resurrection were established upon one of you while he has in his hand a sapling, let him plant it”.<sup>6</sup>

3 This *ḥadīth* appears in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (see Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad).

4 This *ḥadīth* appears in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (see Daily Hadith online <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/>).

5 This *ḥadīth* appears in Musnad Aḥmad (see Daily Hadith Online), <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2012/11/24/plant-tree-ressurrection/>

6 Ibid. This *ḥadīth* appears in Riyaḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn (see Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad).

Though trees are mentioned specifically in these reports, it may be inferred that any measure which contributes to the attainment of benefits by humans and animals from nature conservation is to be encouraged and promoted. This naturally includes treating animals well, and protecting land, water, and air from pollution.

The Prophet of Islam is reported to have stated “Whoever is merciful, even to a sparrow, Allah will be merciful to him on the Day of Judgment” (*Hadith* 4, SUNNAH.Com, n.d.)

Moegamad Riedwaan Gallant (2009:292), in his doctoral thesis, lists the following sustainable development principles that are to be found in Islamic texts:

- caring for the environment
- avoiding wastefulness
- promoting agriculture
- conserving water
- avoiding pollution of the atmosphere
- caring for animals
- avoiding environmental pollution
- governing with justice
- promoting peace and reconciliation
- alleviating poverty
- engaging in industry, trade and commerce
- educating and disseminating information

Approaching sustainable development from a religious perspective is no longer frowned upon. Scholars from the field of religious studies have been contributing to the discourse on sustainable development on the basis that religions in general have “transformational potentials to facilitate transitions toward more environmentally sustainable societies and to address climate change” (Koehrsen, 2021:2).

According to Carolyn Egri (2023:410).

Fundamental to the industrial-materialist-scientific worldview has been the exorcism of a nature that is organic, living, and spiritual. Instead, nature is regarded and treated as a machine in the service

of humankind. In this mechanistic hierarchical worldview, both persons and nonhuman nature are objectified and valued only in utilitarian instrumental terms (as inputs or consumers of production) rather than for any intrinsic or spiritual values.

A basic internet search reveals a plethora of topics relating to the relationship between religion/spirituality and sustainable development.

Some writers have coined the term “ecothology” to refer to environmentalism in which religion provides guidance and motivation to work on environmental causes.

One of the more intriguing contextualizations of theology emerging in the contemporary period is the sub-field of ecothology. Insofar as generalization is possible with respect to those in the ecothological movement, it is fair to say that these individuals seek to respond authentically to what may be the key contextual problem of our time—the ecological crisis (Mohamed, 2012).

Mohammad Hashim Kamali (2010:16) declares that “the Islamic tradition possesses an ethics and a metaphysics of nature, rooted in the revelation and Divine law, which concern the duties and responsibilities of man towards the non-human realms of the created order”.

According to Christopher Weeramantry, because international law ignored teachings of the world’s major religions, it “deprived itself of an important source of strength and inspiration” (cited in Nalla, 2011:2[4]:749-752). Interestingly, he also states that:

[Any] modern legal system seeking to conserve earth resources, protect the environment, and safeguard the human future would benefit from the wealth of principles, concepts and procedures to be found in Islamic teachings. The range of this knowledge and its practical usefulness in the environmental field are little known, even to many Muslims, and even more so to non-Muslims. Indeed, it is little known even in the academic world (Ibid).

For Parvez Manzoor, “nature and ethics are, as a matter of fact, at the very core of the Quranic *Weltanschauung*. To infuse the natural world with transcendent (revealed) ethics is the main purpose of man according to the Qur’ān 25:2”

(cited in Özdemir, 2003:6). Manzoor argues that “environmental ethic is the logical outcome of a Quranic understanding of nature and man. The Quranic value system has the necessary elements for developing and constructing an environmental ethic” (ibid, 21).

The approaches by the scholars cited above treat nature as sacred and endows it with intrinsic rights that must be respected by human beings. Adopting such an approach could contribute significantly to arresting the degradation of the environment.

As mentioned earlier, Muslim contributions to the discourse on sustainable development are by no means substantial. Several reasons could account for Muslims’ general lack of enthusiasm. The ongoing economic challenges in some Muslim-majority countries have led to the prioritisation of economic development and poverty reduction over climate change mitigation (Koerhsen, 2021:17). Another reason is that environmentalism is suspected by many to be a Western conspiracy to weaken Muslim-majority countries in terms of their economic development and population size (ibid).

In order to allay such concerns, Richard Foltz makes a distinction between Muslim and Islamic environmentalism. The former, he says, draws its inspiration from a variety of sources and not only religious sources, whereas the latter is “demonstrably enjoined by the textual sources of Islam”. Muslim environmentalism refers to activities that reflect the Western notion of what constitutes environmental education and protection (cited in Yazid, 2008:10).

Roger Timm offers the following explanation:

Because of secularization of their societies, the leaders of Muslim nations may be alienated from their religious roots, and the support in the Islamic worldview for caring for the natural environment may have little power to overcome the lure of Western technology and its frequently negative effects on the environment (cited in Vasi, 2008:69).

Ziauddin Sardar (1988) states that the economy and technology are not to blame for the poor environmental track record in Muslim-majority countries. In his view the lack of environmental concern is due to the clear gap between theory and practice.

According to Ba Kader et al.:

protection, conservation and development of the environment and natural resources is a mandatory religious duty to which every Muslim should be committed... The primary duty of the ruler and his assistants is to do their best to realize the interests of individuals for the betterment of life and society as a whole. This also includes protection, conservation and development of the environment and natural resources (cited in Koehrsen, 2021:7).

While Khalid finds parallels between the three pillars of sustainable development (environmental protection, social equity and economic viability) and Islamic institutions, he proposes the addition of two pillars - the spiritual and the political. These, in his view, in combination with the three pillars cited above, define the externalities of the Islamic system (cited in Gallant, 2009:347).

Ahmadi (2016:3) concurs with Khalid that for Muslim environmentalists the need to include spiritual development is axiomatic since in the Islamic tradition the material and spiritual aspects of life are complementary.

The approaches of Muslim environmentalists can be summed up as considering the earth as sacred, formulating an ethical understanding of our relationship with the natural world, and discovering what it is that an Islamic approach to this subject can do to both improve our understanding of the current malaise and provide some answers as to how we can create a model of well-being without having to subvert our own existence.

A brief survey of writings on sustainable development from an Islamic perspective reveals that the notions of equity, *ʿadl* (social justice) (Qurʾān, 25:2,18:90), *shūrā* (public participation) (Qurʾān, 42:38), *khilāfah* (vicegerency) (Qurʾān, 2:30), *amānah* (trust) (Qurʾān, 33:72), and *ummatan wasaṭan* (moderate nation) (Qurʾān, 33:72) are considered the cornerstones of sustainable development (Ab Rahman, 2018:9(4):987). Viewed from this perspective, human beings as God's vicegerents, while benefiting from creation, are entrusted with the responsibility of caring for the environment and, through a process of consultation, ensure that there is equitable access to natural resources which are to be used moderately.

Several writers including Junaid Qadir and Asad Zaman emphasise the

importance of equity – both intergenerational and intra-generational - which in their view should be considered as a sine qua non of sustainable development. They refer to various forms of charity, i.e., *zakāh*, *ṣadaqah*, *awqāf*, etc. as instruments for establishing a just and equitable social order. In terms of actively redistributing wealth and obstructing long-term accumulation of wealth, Islam proposes a number of interventions such as inheritance (Asad, 2018:10).

Odeh Rashed Al-Jayyousi et al. (2022:13) propose “moral-led sustainability models” of sustainable development. According to them, such models offer a universal perspective of cross-cultural learning and consciousness and highlight the spiritual nature of the universe where “everything is alive, intelligent, and articulate”. This model is articulated within the Islamic worldview based on core Islamic principles, i.e., oneness of the creator, humans as God’s trustees, and harmony and balance in creation. The human mandate is to serve as guardians and trustees (*shāhid*) to fulfil the divine trusteeship (*amānah*), protect all forms of life (*ihsān*), achieve justice and equity (*mizān*), respect all communities of life, and secure the balance and natural state (*fitrah*) of the universe.

Sway (1998) argues that the protection of the environment should be regarded as one of the major aims of the *shari’ah* “because its destruction will prevent man from fulfilling his mandate as vicegerent”. He proposes that in addition to the major aims (*Maqāsid*) of the *shari’ah* agreed upon by Muslim scholars, viz protection of religion, life, mind, offspring, and property, the protection of the environment should be considered as a major aim of the *shari’ah*. He believes that this aim is implicit in the original five aims of the *shari’ah*. If the degradation of the environment is unchecked, he reasons, there will ultimately be no life, no property, and no religion. So, in a sense the environment could be considered as encompassing the aims of the *shari’ah*.

There are a number of Islamic-specific definitions of sustainable development articulated by Muslim scholars including Mehri Ahmadi, Mai Abumoghli, Muzammal Hussain, Nor Hazila Ismail, Fazlun Khalid, Sohaib Mukhtar, Ahmed Hammou and Hussein Amery. However, this discussion will focus on just three definitions which capture the essence of the Islamic approach to sustainable development.

Khalid, who prefers “sustainable living” as an alternative term, contends that deep in the matrices of the *shari’ah* there exist institutions that can effectively deal with problems relating to sustainable development, trade, and environmental protection. He points to the system of *awqāf* (charitable trusts) that have served Muslims so well over the centuries by providing schools, hospitals, and relief to the poor (cited in Gallant, 2009:348).

Ismail (2017:267) defines sustainability as encompassing “sustained learning and wisdom, commitment to their [Muslims’] societal role of the people, the responsibility of their religious and civic institutions, and the degree to which their faith and spirituality are sustainably practiced in society”.

Hammou (2015:3) believes that faith-based environmental activism would restore nature’s sacredness. The only way to prevent human destruction of the environment is to view nature, with all of its fauna and flora, as having inherent value. To mitigate the over-exploitation of natural resources and save the environment, first there needs to be a change in the core attitude of people towards nature, which is the most responsible driver of such actions.

According to the scholars cited above, the principles of sustainable development are contained in Islamic texts and its goals can be achieved if people begin to treat nature as sacred. Muslims are expected to protect the environment and use natural resources in a sustainable manner. In Islam, as in other contexts, the relationship between human beings and the natural world is portrayed as mutually complementary; humankind cannot exist without the natural world.

Khalid (2002) states that Muslims cannot absolve themselves from their environmental obligations, even during times of war. Early Muslims lived their lives according to the understanding that nature, with all of its elements, is the shared property of all creatures. People are to use its resources only in a usufruct manner, without damaging, destroying or wasting what is in their trust because the real owner of things is their Creator, Allah (Hammou, 2005:19).

Amery says that as trustees of the planet Earth, no one generation has the right to pollute the planet or consume its natural resources in a manner that leaves for posterity a polluted planet or one seriously denuded of its resources (cited in Nalla, 2011:2[4]:749-752).

Amery is of the view that although the word *fasād* (corruption, dissension) is used in the Qur'ān (30:41) in the context of land and sea, it can be assumed to encompass all other components of the ecosystem because the Qur'ān states that Allah is the creator of everything (Qur'ān, 25:2), and the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them and what is beneath the ground all belong to Allah (cited in Gallant, 2009:295). Islamic teachings, which command Muslims to avoid and prevent *fasād*, encompass exploitation or degradation of environmental resources. The other meanings of *fasād* include taking something unjustifiably and unfairly or spoiling or degrading (natural) resources (Ibid, 2009:295).

Muslim environmentalists are well aware that the adoption of sustainable development principles does not guarantee their implementation. Precisely for this reason, several have proposed that its principles should be reinforced by laws. In their study entitled “Environmental Protection in Islam”, Abubakr Ahmad Bagader et al. suggest that sustainable development should be given legal sanction by adopting the following maxims:

Damage shall be eliminated to the extent possible.

The averting of harm takes precedence over acquisition of benefits.

Exigency does not cancel the rights of others.

Dire necessity renders prohibited things possible.

The author of an act is held responsible even if his act is not intentional.

Every necessity shall be assessed according to its value.

Damage shall not be eliminated by means of similar damage (cited in Gallant, 2009:345-347).

The charters by Muslim environmentalists and adopted by several Muslim states which are listed below contain Islamic principles which have been interpreted in the context of sustainable development.

## 5. Subjugation of Nature

The Qur'ān, in describing the relationship between humans and nature, affirms that the world has been created for the benefit of humankind. Cited below are several verses relating to *taskhīr* (the subjugation of nature to humankind):

Do you not see that He subdued to you all what is on the earth?  
(22:65).

And He it is Who has subjected the sea (to you) that you eat thereof—fresh tender meat (fish) and you bring forth out of it ornaments to wear. And you see the ships ploughing through it that you may seek (thus) of His bounty (by transporting the goods from place to place and that you may be grateful) (16: 14).

Do they not see how among the things Our Hands have made we have created for them...[of] which they are masters? We have subjected these to them that they may ride on some and eat the flesh of others and they draw other benefits and diverse drinks from them. Will they not give thanks? (Qur’ān, 36:71).

These verses affirm the subjugation of natural elements to humankind, including the sea, rivers, rain, the sun and moon, night and day, fruits, and so on. Unfortunately, these verses have often been misconstrued as permitting humans unfettered use of natural resources which results in their manipulation and exploitation with dire consequences. These sorts of misconceptions which arise from the verse: “Whatever is in the heavens and on earth belongs to Allah” (Qur’ān, 2:284), is refuted by the arguments contained in the following three verses:

“Human beings have accepted trusteeship of the earth” (Qur’ān, 33:72).

“Resources are not inexhaustible” (Qur’ān, 16:96).

“Resources have to be shared with other life forms” (Qur’ān, 7:73; 26:155).

These verses give us a clear indication that the use of natural resources is not unconditional. Khalid challenges these misconceptions and directs Muslim states to take into consideration the following legislative principles in relation to sustainable development:

Allah is the sole owner of the earth and everything in it.

People hold land on usufruct – that is, for its utility value only.

There is a restricted right to public property.

Abuse of rights is prohibited and penalized.

There are rights to the benefits derived from natural resources held in common.

Scarce resource utilization is controlled.

The common welfare is protected.

Benefits are protected and detriments are either reduced or eliminated (Khalid, 2010:4[11]-6).

To sum up, creation is for the benefit of human beings who are guardians of resources and not the actual owners, they have a responsibility to protect natural resources, should avoid waste, and exercise moderation in the utilisation of natural resources.

## 6. The Institution of *Hisbah*, *Harīm* and *Himā*.

One of the most distinctive qualities of Muslim society is the promotion of good and eschewing of evil: “ye are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah” (3:110). For this reason, several institutions were established by the first Islamic state under Muhammad. The head of this office or agency was an educated jurist (*muhtasib*) who was familiar with *shari’ah* rules. His role is described below.

The institution of *hisbah*, is the idea of promoting or ordering what is right and forbidding what is wrong. This plays a very significant role in promoting ethical values among Muslim communities of all generations. Though *hisbah* covers all types of activities, this discussion focuses on the aspects of *hisbah* which relate specifically to sustainable development goals.

*Hisbah*, according to Abdul Karim Zaidan (cited in Ibrahim, 2015:185) is:

an action that commands the application of a good deed if the situation warrants it and the abstinence of a misdeed if such a misdeed is forthcoming”.

According to some scholars, the implementation of *hisbah* as an institution is “under (the purview of a body or a particular institution)” (Ibid) .

The “person who oversees” refers to the ruler or leader whose task it is to appoint a person who is capable of executing the functions of *hisbah*. The roles of *hisbah* include to regulate, maintain, and monitor the general well-being of the Muslim community’s political, social, economic, environmental, and individual activities.

According to Huda Abdul Ghafur Amin (2010:187, 227), *ḥisbah* throughout much of the history of Islam played a role in ensuring the preservation of the environment. She divides the roles of *ḥisbah* for environmental conservation into aspects of economy, health, community, and environment beautification. In addition, she argues, it contributed to the protection and management of the environment from elements that could cause pollution and damage to the air, water, nutrition, medicine, noise, waste, and the development of deserts. With the emergence of the modern nation-states, the *ḥisbah* system was abandoned.

Llewellyn (1998:20-21) refers to two other institutions. One is the *ḥarīm*, which is an “inviolable zone within which developments are prohibited or restricted to prevent the impairment of utilities and natural resources”. Historically, the *ḥarīm* was managed by the people who lived in the settlement, provided for their needs, and was used and developed in a manner most conducive to their welfare.

Within *ḥarīm* zones, development is prohibited or restricted to protect natural resources from impairment and damages. Under this system, water sources and public utilities such as roads should have inviolable zones “resembling easement to prevent their impairment, to facilitate their use and maintenance, and to preclude nuisances and hazards” (Bagader et al., 1994). As explained by Haq, these zones are also for the purpose of protecting Muslim interests by making them the property of the Muslim community (2001) and not of the exclusive few, powerful, and wealthy individuals.

The other institution developed during the first Islamic state was the *ḥimā* which Llewellyn describes as “all unowned wildlands that are protected from settlement, farming, and normal grazing, wood cutting, and the like, and are reserved for purposes pertaining to the public good”. The *ḥimā* has been interpreted by some contemporary writers as an instrument of conservation. Historically, most *ḥimā* have combined conservation and sustainable production. *Ḥimā* have now been abandoned, and their number has plummeted to a few dozen (Llewellyn, 1998:20-21).

For the common good, states generally have both the right and obligation to establish public reserves as conservation zones. These protected zones should be in the most strategic, appropriate locations as to provide the optimum wildlife protection and biodiversity maintenance, forestation, woodland

preservation, and watershed conservation and management (Ibid, 29-32). Activities such as hunting, farming, grazing, or woodcutting within these zones may be prohibited or restricted.

The responsibilities of protecting and conserving the environment fell under the jurisdiction of the *muhtasib* office. The role of the *muhtasib* was determined by the institution he served. The *muhtasib* role relating to the three institutions is summarised above. To maintain the comfort and smoothness of public facilities, the *muhtasib* had to ensure that public facilities such as clean water supply, markets, public buildings, mosques and so on were always in good condition and workable. The *muhtasib* had the right to seek financial assistance from the treasury for improving all the public facilities. In the absence of any funding, the *muhtasib* could raise funds from public donations with approval from the government (Jaafir, 2021:22(1):28, 33).

The *muhtasib* was responsible for the inspection of markets, roads, buildings, watercourses, reserves (*himā*), and so forth. Among his duties were the supervision and enforcement of regulations and standards pertaining to safety, hygiene, and cleanliness; the removal and disposal of wastes and pollutants; the prevention and elimination of hazards and nuisances; the protection of reserves from violation and trespass; and the prevention of abuse and ill treatment of animals. He was also responsible for assessing damages and imposing fines and other penalties (Bagader et al., 1994).

The *hisbab*, *harim*, and *himā* are presented by Muslim environmentalists as examples of institutions that historically prevented environmental degradation and protected the environment. Some environmentalists propose the revival of these institutions which they believe will provide an impetus to sustainable development.

The development of such systems is evidence of Islam's possession of strong environmental principles and ecological ethics. These *shari'ah* guided environmental measures were designed to help protect the greater good and support humankind's ecological vicegerency on earth (Saniotis, 2011). Considering these valuable Islamic environmental ethics and principles described above, it is unfortunate that Muslim majority countries today are so often in violation of Islam's ethos and practices relating to the natural environment.

## 7. Muslim Charters on Sustainable Development

A number of sustainable development charters have been drafted by Muslim scholars and several Muslim countries have adopted declarations on sustainable development. Following is a summary of three of these declarations: The Arab Ministerial Declaration on Sustainable Development, which was adopted by the Arab environment ministers at their meeting in Cairo in October 2001<sup>7</sup> is also referred to as the “Sustainable Development Initiative in the Arab Region”. This initiative aims at addressing the challenges faced by Arab countries to achieve sustainable development. It also commits the countries to implement Agenda 21, the Millennium Declaration Goals, and the outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. The Islamic Declaration on Sustainable Development adopted in Jeddah in 2002 was the outcome of the First Islamic Conference of the Environment Ministers in 2002. It focused inter alia on human responsibility to the environment, rights pertaining to the environment, constraints on sustainable development, and Islamic perspective on sustainable development. The Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change was issued in 2015 after the International Islamic Climate Change Symposium.

The adoption of these charters, in addition to hosting of conferences and meetings to discuss relevant issues relating to sustainable development, give a clear indication that Muslim states acknowledge the importance of sustainable development. The critical question is to what extent are Muslim-majority states implementing the resolutions on sustainable development adopted by the UN-sponsored conferences and summits on sustainable development, and/or as contained in the Muslim-specific charters on which they are signatories.

## 8. Performance of Muslim-Majority Countries

Muslim-majority countries are contributing to environmental degradation under the following headings: pollution of the atmosphere, land degradation, pollution of oceans, coasts, rivers, destruction of biodiversity, deforestation, and hazardous waste disposal (Gallant, 196ff.). Erhun Kula (2001:28:1) notes that many Muslim-majority states, which claim to rule according to the *shari'ah*, are guilty of appalling cases of environmental abuse, over-indulgent lifestyles, and waste.

7 The League of Arab States adopted a comprehensive regional approach to Sustainable Development, committed themselves to implement Agenda 21 and implement the objectives included in the Millennium Declaration. [see Gallant, 347-348

Although Aliyu Salisu Barau (221:3) claims that “the overall output of Muslim states to the global net environmental pollution is extremely infinitesimal,” the reality is that Muslim-majority countries states fare poorly with regard to sustainable development.

Nonetheless, there are positive signs. Several Muslim-majority countries states which have signed international agreements on sustainable development have started to implement green economy strategies including, reforestation, recycling, energy efficiency measures, installation of solar panels, and construction of low-carbon eco-mosques. Albania, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan are examples of countries that have made renewable energy an important indicator of their environmental foreign policy. In addition, Muslim leaders and organisations have undertaken public campaigning activities, including issuing public statements and advocating for climate change policy among governments (Koehrsen, 2021:4). Other initiatives include educational programmes, workshops, and publishing information guides and newsletters.

A “Muslim Seven Year Action Plan” (M7YAP) was endorsed by more than fifty religious scholars from across the Muslim world as early as July 2009 in Istanbul. It was supported by the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO), Fatih University in Istanbul and representatives of Ministries of Environment and Awqaf in Muslim-majority countries including Kuwait, Bahrain, Morocco, Indonesia, Senegal, and Turkey. Agreement was reached by the delegates to establish an umbrella organisation, Muslim Association for Climate Change Action (MACCA) to manage and implement a seven-year climate change plan (The Muslim Seven Year Action Plan, 2009:1).

## 9. Proposed Solutions

Several solutions have been suggested by Muslim environmentalists to arrest environmental degradation. Mensah (2022) sums up these in the following words:

While not assuming a definitive posture, sustainability of society can be said to depend on the availability of proper health systems, peace and respect for human rights, decent work, gender equality, quality education and rule of law. Sustainability of economy, on the other hand, depends on adoption of appropriate

production, distribution and consumption while sustainability of the environment is driven by proper physical planning and land use as well as conservation of ecology or biodiversity.

Kamali suggests the following measures that individuals, communities, and countries should adopt to promote sustainable development:

- Ethical teaching and spiritual wisdom in defence of the natural environment should be backed by legislation and effective enforcement measures.
- Mass media, civil society institutions, welfare bodies, and parents should all play a role, side by side with governments, in alerting the public on instances of environmental abuse and the need to curb them through persuasive measures and education.
- Scientific and technical knowledge of environmental care should continually be improved and developed through safer methods and monitoring.
- Ecologically sustainable development and planning should espouse and nurture suitable restraints and take into consideration inherent proclivities of various localities and climes.
- Economic development and city-planning should always include analysis of environmental impacts and be designed so as to minimise damage.
- At the national level, environmental care, awareness of its pollutants and protective measures should be introduced in public schools at an early stage, to be pursued by suitable educational programmes in industrial centres, farms and factories (Kamali, 2010b:278-279).

According to Kamali (2010a:17), governments are authorised by the *shari'ah* :

to take necessary measures for elimination of manifest damage to public interest, seek indemnity and impose deterrent punitive sanctions on individuals, organisations, national and multinational companies and governments... to impose moratoria on activities, projects and enterprises they consider will result in real damage to the environment such that would exceed their possible benefits under the legal maxim that 'averting of harm takes precedence over the acquisition of benefit'.

The *shari'ah* doctrine of *darār* (not causing harm) and its allied legal maxims merit recognition by governments to hold the guilty parties liable for their violations. Kamali ([b], 278-279) suggests that in their effort to prevent further damage to the natural environment, government authorities may impose the doctrine of *siyāsah shari'yyah*,<sup>8</sup> which imposes moratoria and emission limits on producers and users of coal and fossil fuel, as well as licensing requirements, to ensure environmentally friendly construction planning in urban areas.

Llewellyn (1998:34-35.) believes that strict and systematic enforcements of the *ḥisbah* institution and the duties of the *muḥtasib* could assist the “development of Islamic municipalities and countries that is in line with the environmental conservation”. He also suggests that every settlement should have a *ḥarīm* which should be managed by the people of the settlement to provide for their needs, such as foraging, firewood, and the like, and to facilitate the use and development of such lands in the manner most conducive to the inhabitants' welfare.

Salman Ahmed Shaikh and Abdul Ghafar Ismail (2017:5) advise that:

there are many programmes that could be funded by *Zakāt* such as providing education for the poor, the establishment of schools, vocational training and rehabilitation for *Zakāt* recipients to make them more productive, establishment of agriculture and cottage industries, provision of fixed asset and equipment to small business projects, provision of working capital, building of low-cost housing and providing medical treatment and health care.

There are other solutions proposed by various Muslim environmentalists, but the three environmentalists mentioned above capture the essence of other contributions. In their summation, the acquisition of the requisite knowledge, creating awareness of sustainable development through education and appropriate planning are key to the success in attaining sustainable development goals.

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8 This term is used to denote broad doctrine of Islamic public law that authorises the ruler to determine the best manner in which *shari'ah* can be administered.

## 10. Conclusion

While the number of Muslim environmentalists is paltry by international standards and the implementation of sustainable development goals by Muslim states is far from satisfactory, there are reasons to be optimistic.

Muslim environmentalists have been promoting sustainable development goals through active campaigns and publications. Several Muslim environmental organisations have emerged in the past few decades, the best known among them being the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES), founded in 1994 by Fazlun Khalid, which provides information and regularly publishes articles on sustainable development issues. Others include Wisdom in Nature, Islamic Network for the Environment, Islamic Environmental Club, Muslim Association for Climate Change, DC Green Muslims, and African Muslim Environment Network.

It is encouraging to note that in a survey conducted among Muslims in the United Kingdom in 2018, over 75% of respondents said they considered sustainable development to be a significant issue (Redwan, 2018). I have no doubt that the same survey conducted among other Muslim minority communities will produce similar results.

Publications on sustainable development from an Islamic perspective are receiving serious attention, as can be deduced from the fact that they are cited by environmentalists in their publications. There are a number of initiatives by Muslim educators to teach learners about sustainable development. One example is the Islamic eco-school in California which teaches children ecological values and attachment through active practices (e.g., gardening, tending animals, etc.) (Koehrsen, 2021:8). It is hoped that more Muslim schools will follow suit.

The “Islamic Principles for the Conservation of the Natural Environment”, compiled by scholars from Jeddah University in Saudi Arabia, whose environmental policy is founded on Islamic principles, has become a basis for the development of policies in several Muslim-majority states. A number of Muslim-majority states have signed international agreements, and a few states have started to implement green economy strategies including Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Indonesia.

Publications on sustainable development from the perspective of different religious traditions have gained traction. Even though the theological and philosophical bases of these responses are different, they are unified by a common concern for our planet. As Rkiouak (2016:5) states:

cultural diversity is important to developing a sustainable society because, while no single culture may epitomize ideal environmental, social or political values, each may contain pieces of wisdom that together can produce a sustainable society.

Dialogues among various religious traditions relating to sustainable development have become quite common. This development, it is hoped, will lead to increased harmony among diverse faith traditions and between humans and the environment, which is considered one of the goals of sustainable development.

Finally, the approach by Muslim environmentalists to sustainable development detailed above substantiates the hypothesis that it falls within the framework of Muslim environmental ethics.

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