



# Sustainable Development in a Muslim Context

Muhammad Nouh

Dr. Mohammad Nouh Ali Ma'abdeh Alqadi (Jordan) is currently at the Islamic Sciences International University as Faculty member. He has also taught at Al-Balqa Applied University, Al-Balqa Jordan and at Al Albayt university Amman. He served the Jordan Civil Defence of Jordan, Amman / Jordan as Mufti of the civil defense (1991-1999). He is a Friday preacher and an Arbitrator in the Jordanian courts. He received his Ph.D. and Master's degree from the University of Jordan in Amman.

In the Name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

## Sustainable Development: Definition

Sustainable development may be defined, from an Islamic perspective, as a multi-dimensional process that seeks to strike a balance between economic and social development on one side, and the environment on the other. It seeks for humans to use resources in the best possible way, accounting for the environment upon which those resources rely.

From an Islamic point of view, human beings are God Almighty's representatives on the planet Earth, and they are entitled to benefit from its resources without selfishly monopolizing them. Human beings must seek to develop this planet in accordance with the provisions of the Holy Quran and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad "Sunnah", with the stipulation that current needs must be met without jeopardizing the rights of future generations.

Development is reported in Qur'an under the expression "Architecture and Construction", God says: "It is He Who hath produced you from the earth and settled you therein" (Surah HUD, verse 61) in this verse indicates the necessity of building

land. And also our Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) said: "if the Final Day comes upon you while you were planting a seed, then continue on planting it."

## The Makings of Sustainable Development

### First: Honoring Human beings

Islam's vision of sustainable development pays special attention to human beings, as they are the ones who both bring about development and are the first to benefit from its returns. Human beings are part of this universe; made of earth clay; full of sophisticated spirituality that makes them similar to angels. These two elements - body and spirit - are integrated into one holistic creature. The relationship between the two elements can be explained from different perspectives as follows:

- God honoured human beings and favored them over many other creatures. In the Quran, God Almighty says, "We have honoured the sons of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure; and conferred on them special favours, above a great part of our creation" (Surat Al Isra, Verse 70).
- Humans are not only consumers, but also producers for themselves and others.

Furthermore, Islam instructs us to perfect any work we undertake.

- God Almighty endowed human beings with many seen and unseen strengths to build the earth and promote life on it.

God Almighty made all other creatures and blessings in the universe (e.g., water, air, animals, plants, inanimate creatures, the earth, sun, moon, night, day, etc.) accessible to human beings. God says, "Do ye not see that Allah has subjected to your (use) all things in the heavens and on earth, and has made his bounties flow to you in exceeding measure, (both) seen and unseen?" (Surat Luqman, verse 20). That means that human beings are entitled to utilize and search for these resources to build their own lives and the universe, in accordance with God's instructions. The proper management of these resources entails:

- Maintaining an overall balance with the surrounding environment;
- Ensuring the survival of all species; and
- Using only the amount needed, avoiding waste and the depletion of resources.

### **Second: Comprehensiveness of the Environment**

Comprehensiveness is related to a vision according to which the environment is one integrated entity, and the components of the environment are interchangeably connected in a system where the existence of every creature – living or inanimate – relies upon these components. The whole entity relies on the parts and, similarly, the parts rely on the whole entity for survival. Many verses in the Quran that talk about the unity of the universe indicate this relationship. When God Almighty talks about the universe, he does so by referring to its large components (i.e., the earth, heaven, and water) which, according to modern ecology, comprise a massive ecosystem known as the biosphere. In addition, many verses in the Quran associate earth with heaven, whereas others refer to what is between them. This shows that the Quran talks about comprehensiveness, which was

only discovered by scientists in recent years after concluding that Earth and its surroundings comprise an integrated and indivisible environmental system.

God Almighty says in the Quran, "in the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and the day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which Allah Sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds which they Trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth;- (Here) indeed are Signs for a people that are wise." (Surat Al Baqara, Verse 164)

Whereas environment is considered comprehensive and holistic from Islam's perspective, all humanity must be concerned with it, and all Muslims must strive to both develop it and protect it from harm and corruption, in accordance with Islamic ethics.

### **Third: Balance**

Land, sea, air, forests, the arctic, the desert, the mountains, etc., are different types of environmental systems which together form one integrated environmental system comprising the planet Earth, including its atmosphere, waters, continents, and the plants, animals and human beings which exist in its air, land, and water.

This comprehensive environment balance has been affected by the practices of human beings, their detachment from it, and their desire to control it. Humans have made major changes to the environment, which have resulted in widespread problems in the oceans, on the continents, and at various levels of the atmosphere. Due to human beings' selfish attitude towards the environment, the balance, coordination and harmony of the universe have all been negatively affected. In the Quran God Almighty says, "Mischievous has appeared on land and sea because of (the meed) that the hands of men have earned".

God Almighty detests corruption of all kinds, including environmental corruption, which includes environmental disorder, damage, and lack of coordination. This may be the result of pollution, excessive and irrational exploitation of resources, and invasion of natural settings. Corruption can also be the result of unplanned changes made by human beings to the integrated system which ensures life within the environment.

#### **Fourth: Limited Resources**

The Holy Quran makes reference in several verses to limited resources. For example:

“And there is not a thing but its (sources and) treasures (inexhaustible) are with Us; but We only send down thereof in due and ascertainable measures” (Surat Al Hijr, ‘the Stoneland’, verse 21)

“And We send down water from the sky according to (due) measure, and We cause it to soak in the soil; and We certainly are able to drain it off (with ease).” (Surat Al Mumenoun ‘the Believers’, Verse 18).

“He set on the (earth), mountains standing firm, high above it, and bestowed blessings on the earth, and measure therein all things to give them nourishment in due proportion, in four Days, in accordance with (the needs of) those who seek (Sustenance).” (Surat Fusselat ‘signs spelled out’, verse 10)

All of the above verses explain the fact that human beings must handle resources wisely, and that no matter how rich and immense these resources seem, they are, nevertheless, limited and must be handled rationally.

#### **Fifth: Environmental Protection**

The Holy Quran calls for protecting the environment. In several verses in the Quran, human beings are ordered to do so. Violation of this order is considered a sin. God Almighty says, “And Allah loveth not those who do mischief” (Surat Al Ma’eda ‘The Table’, verse 64), “But waste not by excess: for Allah loveth not the wasters” (Surat Al An’am, ‘the Cattle’,

verse 141), “and do no mischief on the earth after it has been set in order: that will be best for you, if ye have Faith” (Surat Al A’raf, ‘the Heights’, verse 85). God orders human beings to avoid doing mischief and wasting, because they cause destruction of the environment.

When God endowed humans with the Earth’s bounties, he gave them the right to benefit from them. This right obligates the beneficiaries to preserve the source of the benefits that they obtain so that current and future generations can benefit as well. God Almighty says, “And the earth, moreover, hath He extended (to a wide expanse); He draweth out there from its moisture and its pasture; And the mountains hath He firmly fixed;- For use and convenience to you and your cattle.” (Surat Al Nazi’at, verses 30-33). Just as human beings have the right to benefit from the earth’s resources, they must also be aware that there are others who share this right with them, such as animals. In this verse, God indicates the right of animals, which highlights Islam’s supremacy and class. God Almighty says, “There is not an animal (that lives) on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms part of) communities like you. Nothing have we omitted from the Book, and they (all) shall be gathered to their Lord in the end.” (Surat The Cattle, verse 38).

This means that all living creatures have the right to benefit from the Earth’s resources. However, this right would not be accessible to all unless humans ensure that these benefits are passed on to future generations too. Accordingly, humans must make a greater effort to protect and preserve the sources of these benefits.

The right to benefit from the environment’s resources is bound by a specific timeline. God Almighty says, “On earth will be your dwelling-place and your means of livelihood - for a time.” (Surat Al Baqara, verse 36). This specific timeframe obligates human beings to adopt a disciplined behavior in handling natural resources, since they are not

the property of the current generation alone, but also future ones. Therefore, resources must be preserved and protected from pollution, waste, and exploitation in order to pass it on in good shape to the next generation.

## General Rules for Protecting the Environment from Harm

Islamic jurisprudence includes many rules that serve as the foundation of many regulations and laws concerning sustainable development. For example:

- “Do no harm”: This means that a human being may not cause harm to himself or to others. And he may not sustain harm as a result of the acts of others. Each person is entitled to use water for drinking and personal purposes, but may not pollute or waste it. Each environmental right has a corresponding environmental duty.
- “Warding off evil takes precedence over bringing benefits”: If an act that a person intends to do brings benefits but could also cause major harm to others, such an act is forbidden in Islam. For example, if a state dumps chemical waste in oceans, it gains benefits, but causes harm to sea life and humans. Therefore, such an act is forbidden.
- “Sustaining personal harm to ward off public harm”: the damage resulting from avoiding the frequent use of pesticides and relying on biological rather than chemical resistance is much less than the damage inflicted on many creatures as a result of polluting the soil with chemicals, adversely affecting human beings and animals as well as killing micro-organisms in the soil that are needed for its fertility.
- “Harm shall be removed”: The causes of harm must be removed. When ships dump waste in the sea, they pollute and destroy sea life and disturb the environment balance.

The entity causing harm must take all necessary measures to remove the adverse effects of its acts, because they destroy the earth. God pledged to severely torture those who do mischief on earth. This warning causes people to control their acts and bear responsibility for them.

## Conclusion

In view of the above, we may conclude that:

1. Islam considers preserving the universe, developing its resources, and protecting it to be part of the religion and not merely an optional matter. Each Muslim must monitor his own behavior even if no one else is watching.
2. The Holy Quran and the Sunnah are two fundamental sources of rules and laws. They contain provisions on how to best handle the environment and ensure sustainable development.
3. Muslim scholars formulated several rules that teach Muslims how to handle interests that could harm the environment.
4. Despite the many rules that show how to preserve sustainable development, the lack of media attention and public awareness of them mean that they are rarely applied in the Islamic World.
5. The application of the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah ensures sustainable development, not only for Muslims, but also for the world, on a just basis.
6. Competent lecturers in the field of sustainable development can explain to the public from different countries and religions and convince them that sustainable development

in all its aspects is a form of worship whereby people can get closer to God. Also, Muslim scholars can be given the opportunity to play a role in this regard by providing them with the financial and technological means to instigate an information revolution in the world, given the fact that one-fifth of the world's population is Muslim.

The values that lead to sustainable development in accordance with Islamic Sharia are namely, respecting and honoring humans, maintaining environment balance, and developing plans to sustain environmental resources for the longest amount of time possible.

7. People responsible for sustainable development may offer Muslim scholars and preachers financial, technological, and logistic support to enable them to carry out programmes that support sustainable development in the Islamic world and inform the public of its benefits and importance.
8. The goals of sustainable development are related to, and in line with, the goals of Islam, which calls for avoiding waste, monopoly, and corruption, and promotes reform and rationalization of natural resources.
9. Islam communicates through Quran and Sunnah with Muslims to achieve sustainable development. These provisions may not be ignored or violated by Muslims; they are sacred and observed by all Muslims.