

MONOWARA GANI, MUSLIM CHARITIES FORUM, MONDAY OCTOBER 30, 2017



A Muslim perspective on environment and sustainable development

I'm not going to talk about the what and the how as that will be talked about later – Muslim perspective.

1. The first thing to appreciate in order to understand the Muslim perspective on environment and sustainable development is that Islam is not just a 'religion' – Islam is a comprehensive worldview based on the principles, ethics and laws derived from the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet (peace and blessings upon him).

This comprehensive set of principles, ethics and laws guides and regulates every aspect of the life of a Muslim and of his/her relationship not only with the Creator, but also with the creation - in other words, with society and the environment.

2. An essential element of this worldview is that God, or Allah as we say in Arabic created:

i) humankind as vicegerents/stewards/custodians (*khalifas*) of the earth; and secondly life as a 'test' for humankind to fulfil their responsibility as vicegerents.

The Quran says in various different verses: And this tells about the custodianship

And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, "Indeed, I will make upon the earth **a successive custodianship** [*khalifatan*]" (...) (Q2:30)

[He] who created death and life **to test you** [as to] which of you is best in deed—and He is the Exalted in Might, the Forgiving. (Q67:2)

Muslims are therefore expected to strive to fulfil their role as stewards by adopting behaviours that can develop society and the environment within the framework outlined by Islamic law and ethics. So what does Islam say about developing society sustainably?

3. **With regards to society**, Islam prioritises the protection of the dignity conferred by God to all humankind (*karamah*)¹ and the promotion of justice (*'adl*), fairness (*qist*),

¹ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, 'Human Dignity in Islam', 2007, <http://www.iais.org.my/e/index.php/publications-sp-1447159098/articles/item/36-human-dignity-in-islam.html>.

moderation (*wasatiyyah*), and excellent conduct (*ihsan*). Excellent quality is *ihsan* and in this place [LaSalle Haus] you can see *ihsan* in every detail.

God says in the Qu'ran

And We have certainly **honoured** [*karramna*] the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference. (Q17:70) .

THIS VERSE FOCUSES ON THE HONOUR GIVEN TO HUMANKIND

O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm **in justice** [*bil-qisti*], witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents or relatives. Whether one is rich or poor, God is more worthy of both. So follow your personal inclination, lest you not **be just** [*ta' dilu*]. (Q4:135)

LOOKING AT JUSTICE REGARDLESS OF WHO YOU ARE

And thus we have made you **a just** [/**middle/justly balanced**] [*wasatan*] community that you will be witnesses over the people and the Messenger will be a witness over you. (Q2:143)

AND FINALLY ANOTHER VERSE: Indeed, Allah orders **justice** [*'adl*] and **good conduct** [*ihsan*] [AGAIN THAT QUALITY] and giving to relatives and forbids immorality and bad conduct and oppression. (16:90)

In light of these principles, Islam prohibits any activity or policy deemed to be leading to *zulm* (injustice, inequity, unfairness, oppression).² Therefore, IF MUSLIMS ARE TO ENGAGE IN sustainable development they must remember those things that Islam prohibits. For example Islam prohibits:

First all types of exploitative transactions

Secondly all types of unfair business practices;

Thirdly all types of violation of human dignity—such as unfair compensation, unsafe working environment, discriminatory practices.³

In Shariah you are not allowed to do harm. Islam says what a Muslim cannot do but not what a Muslim can do – this allows for expansion through the ages. EG Bitcoin it doesn't say what you do but you do not do anything that harms, exploits, is unfair.

² Barom, 'An Analysis of Social Responsibility Dimension in Islamic Investment Funds', 72.

³ Barom, 'An Analysis of Social Responsibility Dimension in Islamic Investment Funds', 97.

4. Concerning the environment, Islam promotes the preservation of the earth's natural resources, which are considered as bounties and favours from God (*ni'maat*) to be utilised with moderation for the benefit of humankind, within the boundaries of the divinely-ordained balance (or the *mizan*).⁴ The Quran say refers to these bounties:

And if you should count the **favours** [*ni'mata*] of Allah, you could not count them. Indeed, God is Forgiving and Merciful. (Q16:18)⁵

THE FAVOURS ARE FOR ALL BUT WITH CAVEATS.

And the heaven He raised and imposed **the balance** [*al-mizana*]. That you not transgress within **the balance** [*al-mizani*]. And establish weight **in justice** [*bil-qisti*] and do not make deficient **the balance** [*al-mizana*]. (Q55:7-9)⁶

In light of these concepts, human beings as vicegerents (*khalifas*) have the duty to preserve the divinely-ordained harmony in the natural world. This implies that any activity leading to extravagance (*israf*) or personal, societal or environmental corruption and decay (*fasad*) must also be avoided. From this perspective, Islam prohibits:

i) all types of activities/products considered immoral, harmful, or corrupting for individuals or for society; ii) all forms of excessive exploitation and destruction of the natural environment.⁷

5. In addition, these foundational principles are supplemented by what are known as the *maqasid al-shari'a* (the 'higher goals and purposes,' 'objectives' of *shari'a*).⁸

Through the centuries, a number of *maqasid* have been deduced, directly or indirectly, from the Quran and the prophetic example. Overall, there is a general consensus on the framework originally proposed by the prominent 12th century scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111) who stated:

The very objective of the Sharī'ah is to promote the well-being of the people, which lies in safeguarding their faith (dīn), their self (nafs), their intellect ('aql), their posterity (nasl), and their wealth (māl). Whatever ensures the safeguard of

⁴ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, 'Islam and Sustainable Development', *Islam and Civilisational Renewal (ICR)* 7, no. 1 (2016): 9; 12.

⁵ Verses appearing immediately earlier (5-17) describe many of the blessings of Allah in the natural world, such as: rain and drinkable water; vegetation, crops and fruits; mountains, natural roads and landmarks; rivers and seas; animals that can be used for food or other useful purposes.

⁶ And the earth—We have spread it and cast therein firmly set mountains and caused to grow therein [something] of every **well-balanced** [*mawzunin*] thing. (15:19)

⁷ Ibid.; Kamali, 'Islam and Sustainable Development', 9.

⁸ Barom, 'An Analysis of Social Responsibility Dimension in Islamic Investment Funds', 62–70.

these five serves public interest and is desirable, and whatever hurts them is against public interest and its removal is desirable.⁹

6. Notably, scholars emphasise that the protection of these five primary components should also be accompanied by their enrichment through the active promotion of positive benefits in these areas.

7. Furthermore, scholars classify *maqasid* into three hierarchical levels of *daruriyyat* (essential necessities), *hajiyyat* (complemetiaries) and *tahsiniyyat* (embellishments, desirabilities).¹⁰

8. Therefore, the *maqasid* approach offers a framework for understanding the Muslim perspective on sustainable development in light of its combination of:

- i) a multi (five-) dimensional approach to development, which takes in consideration not only material wellbeing (self and wealth) but also spiritual, intellectual and emotional aspects of life (faith, intellect, and posterity);
- ii) a two-tiered approach consisting of both protection and a promotion of the *maqasid*);
- iii) a progressive nature that aims to achieve development through the three hierarchical levels of necessities, complementaries, and desirabilities.¹¹

Human beings are stewards of the earth. Any activity leading to extravagance or personal decay or façade must also be avoided.

Conclusions

To conclude, I hope I was able through this short presentation to give you an idea of why Islam takes environmental and sustainable development seriously - not because of the current frenzy around these ideas; but because of its very own worldview and value-system.

Indeed, the Muslim perspective on environment and sustainable development question consciences at their very core.

On the one hand, Islam teaches that coherence and determination about environmental and sustainable development requires fundamental reflection about the meaning, the objectives and the means of socio-economic activity.

⁹ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Al-Mustasfā* (Cairo: al Maktabah al- Tijariyyah al-Kubra, 1937). Quoted in Muhammad Umer Chapra, *The Islamic Vision of Development in the Light of Maqasid Al-Shariah* (IIIT, 2008), 4.

¹⁰ Lamido, 'Maqasid al-Shari'ah as a Framework for Economic Development Theorization', 32.

¹¹ Lamido, 'Maqasid al-Shari'ah as a Framework for Economic Development Theorization', 37–40.

On the one hand, Islam also teaches that actors claiming to take environmental and sustainable development seriously cannot merely adopt the ethical garb of ‘social and environmental responsibility’ as an exercise in marketing while profiting from, legitimising or helping to maintain policies or actions that undermine the dignity of human beings or the environment.

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Monowara Gani runs the Muslim Charities Forum (MCF) which is an umbrella organization representing Muslim INGOS based in the UK with a combined income of over £150 million. MCF was set up in 2007 and works on 5 key areas including advocacy, training, governance, research and development, and partnership/coordination. Before joining MCF, she was Executive Director of MADE [Muslim Action for Development & Environment]. While there she set up the Global Education Programme and the Change Makers [Campaigning & Activism] Programme which involved developing resources and thought leadership on sustainability, environment and trade from an Islamic perspective. The programme was directly taught to over 5,000 Muslim students who previously were not engaged or exposed to these topics. Previously she was the Director of a national supplementary education organisation working with Education Authorities and mainstream Schools. She is a qualified NLP Life Coach, has a degree in Microbiology from the University of Nottingham and lives in the Midlands with her husband. (UK)