

**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ISLAMIC ETHICS:  
A PRIMER ON THE CONCEPTUAL LINKAGES<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the conceptual linkages between the notion of sustainable development and Islamic ethics in order to argue that (a) Islam offers a broad-based moral agenda for sustainable development; and (b) the issue deserves to be explored extensively in face of the present crises of development and environmental degradation. It has been suggested that the rudimentary features of the mainstream analyses of sustainable development are well in conformity with the Islamic ethical principles. These principles can provide a useful foundation and platform for any interested institution or state to launch programmes and policies towards conservation and betterment of the surrounding environment and the resources therein.

**Introduction**

Debates and discussions about sustainable development have moved centre stage in the recent years. Such global phenomena as widespread environmental degradation, unsustainable pattern of resource use, inequitable distribution of resources and the dire state of Third World poverty have posed a poignant question and challenge regarding the direction and philosophy of development discourses in our time. In the process of exploring possible answers and solutions to the challenge, the concept of sustainable development achieved increased attention and gained renewed momentum, especially during the early 1990s. What has remained less explored, however, is the fact that the universal religion of Islam offers some of basic code of ethics<sup>2</sup> and moral principles which are closely in line with the manifestations and characteristics of the concept of sustainable development, as advocated by its major protagonists (see the next section). My humble purpose in this brief article is to shed light on the conceptual linkages between the idea of sustainable development and Islamic ethics in order to argue that (a) Islam offers a broad-based

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<sup>2</sup> In following Izzi Dien (1992:25), ethics is defined here as “a state, *hay’a*, that resides in our souls. All voluntary actions, be they good or bad, beautiful or ugly, are based upon it . . . . The continuation of good

moral agenda for sustainable development; and (b) the issue deserves to be explored extensively in face of the present crises of development and environmental degradation.

### **The Concept of Sustainable Development**

Despite its widespread usage and popularity, the concept of sustainable development defies a universal definition and consensus regarding its connotation. However, it is possible to trace and draw the basic characteristic features from an analysis of the most frequently used explanations of the concept. Some major definitions of the sustainable development are as follows (mainly based on Elliott 1996:3-5):

[Sustainable development is] development which meets of the present with out compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED 1987).

The sustainable society is one that lives within the self perpetuating limits of its environment. That society ... recognizes the limits of growth ... and looks for alternative ways of growing (Coomer 1979).

The term “sustainable development” suggests that the lessons of ecology can and should be applied to economic processes. (Redclift 1987)

The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED 1987) has identified, following an extensive review of global environmental status and strategies, the following necessary conditions for the pursuit of sustainable development:

- An appropriate political system which encourages popular participation in policies and decisions;
- A production system which acknowledges a liability and responsibility to reserve the ecological base for development;
- A technological (as well as international) system which ensures sustainable patterns for commerce;
- An economic system which is committed to bring harmony in development interventions;
- An administrative system which is flexible enough to acknowledge and accommodate amendment and corrections in light of the changing situation and actions.

Along the same vein, Tolba (1987) argues that sustainable development encompasses, among other things, the obligation of helping the most impoverished section of the community; the idea of self reliant and cost

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upbringing usually leads this *hay'a* to the love of good and the hatred of evil. This is known as *kuluq hasan* or good ethics”.

effective development; the notion of people-centred developmental actions; the rights of health, food, clean water, shelter and appropriate technologies for the citizens. Elliott (1996) too, feels that sustainable development essentially concerns the mitigation of wasteful resource use patterns and the encouragement of efficient exploitation of the resource base. She writes:

All forms of economic and social activity make demands on the resource base whether agricultural production, industrial production or human settlements. If such activities are to be supported in the future, there is a need to ensure that the resources such as fuels, water or soils, are used with the greatest efficiency, that the by products of these activities such as waste and pollution are kept to a minimum that irreparable damage to the environment is not done (Elliott 1996:14)

From the preceding discussion, one can identify the following rudimentary features of the concept of sustainable development:

- Prudent and efficient use of limited resources;
- An effort to evaluate the performance of development practices over the history and to accommodate historical lessons in setting future policies and action;
- Least disturbance and/or interference with the natural balance and harmony in the resource base;
- Citizen participation in political management;
- Sustainable pattern of trade and commerce;
- A careful understanding and assessment of (the limits) growth and technological development;
- Spirit of help and cooperation among the communities.

### **Islamic Ethical Principles related to Sustainable Development**

In light of the above rudimentary features of sustainable development, this section attempts to show that these characteristic features are in conformity with and are reinforced by the Islamic ethical principles, as codified in the Holy Quran and the tradition (*Sunnah*) of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.

#### ***Shunning wasteful resource management practices***

As Masri (1992:8) astutely notes “the ecological problems we are facing today arise from the fact that we have started using very scarce resources wastefully and in such a way that we are not giving nature a chance to reproduce the things we are taking out of it”. Islam maintains that God is the absolute creator and sustainer of the universe and the resources within. All elements of nature and the associated resource

base are therefore common property of all the creatures. There are frequent warnings in the Islamic literature against wasteful practices of resource use:

Nay, We let them and their forebears enjoy the good things of life, until they outlive their prosperity. Can they not see that We visit the land under their control and gradually curtail its boundaries all around them. Is it, then, they who will prevail? (Holy Quran 21:44)

Eat and drink, but waste not by indulging in excesses; surely, God does not approve of the intemperate. (Holy Quran 7:31)

Surely the earth belongs to God, and He bequeaths it to such of His servants as He pleases (Holy Quran 7:129)

### ***Self-assessment and regulation by learning from human history***

Islam underscores the need for continuous evaluation of our past activities and performance, and to correct our behaviour and courses for future action accordingly. Wasteful and iniquitous practices must be forsaken to win God's love and mercy. The Holy Quran (6:6), for example, commands in no ambiguous terms:

Do they not learn a lesson from the chronicles of history; and see they not how many a nation we have made extinct in the past? They were people whom We had established on earth even with more power and prosperity than we have established you. We had showered on them both the celestial bliss and the earthly affluence. Yet, when they became iniquitous, we toppled them down and raise new civilisations in their wake.

### ***Maintaining a balance and proportion in thoughts, actions and resource use***

God has created the universe in perfect order and balance. "Everything on earth, in space and in time is interwoven in to a beautiful and extremely intricate and complicated balance of nature" (Masri 1992:7). Man has introduced corruption in this orderly mosaic through his reckless interventions, propelled mainly by greed and selfish ends. God brings our attention repeatedly to this fact:

Don't you see that it is God who has created the heavens and the earth, not without a plan and purpose? He can, if He so wills, remove you and put in your place a new people. (Holy Quran 14:19-20)

Verily all things We have created in proportion and measure (Holy Quran 54:59).

There are some people whose views on worldly life may sound convincing to you, ... while in fact they are the most contentious kind of adversaries. No sooner do they come to power, after leaving you, than they hasten to go about the earth spreading corruption and destroying the flora and fauna. God does not approve of corruption; and when they are told to fear God, their vanity takes the better of them. Such people end up with a life in hell—what a miserable end! (Holy Quran 2:204-206).

God bestowed His blessing on the earth and measured therein sustenance in due proportion ... in accordance with the needs of those who seek. (Holy Quran 41:10)

The sun and the moon rotate in ordered orbits, the plants and the trees, too, do obeisance. The firmament--He raised it high, and set the balance of everything, so that you may not upset the balance. Keep the balance with equity, and fall not short I it. (Holy Quran 55:3-9).

Corruption has appeared over land and water on account of what man's hands have wrought (Holy Quran 30:41).

It is He Who created the heavens and the earth, according to a plan and with a purpose ... (Holy Quran 6:73).

Have they never cast a glance at the firmament above? How We have set it up and decked it out! And how there are no rifts in it. An the earth—We have spread it out like a carpet; have cast on it firm mountains and caused it to grow, in pairs, all kinds of palatable vegetation—All these merits deep reflection and reminiscence by every penitent votary (Holy Quran 50:6-8).

Islam advocates, as Llewellyn (1984, as cited in Akhtar 1996:59) notes, that “environmental disruption of any kind must be avoided for two reasons. First, it is an ethical command of *Shariah* (Islamic jurisprudence and law) and second, it is essential for protecting the public interest and universal common good of all mankind”.

### ***Ensuring popular participation and accountability in governance and administration***

The Islamic mode of governance revolves around two cardinal institutions: administration based on citizen consultation and counsel; and enforcement of individual responsibility and accountability. The public administrators are commanded to consult with the concerned citizen in state affairs and polices through the

institutions of *Shura* or advisory council (for some interesting discussion on these issues, see Taymiya 1985, Al-Anani 1990 and Al-Buraey 1985). The following Quaranic verses may be noted:

... O mankind! Be careful of your duty toward God in Whom you claim [your rights] of one another, and towards the wombs [that bore your]. Lo! God hath been a Watcher over you (Holy Quran 4:1).

Oh, but man is a telling witness against himself, Although he tender his excuses (Holy Quran 75:14).

O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you, in the sight of God, is the best in conduct [pious, righteous] ... (Holy Quran XLIX:13)

... So pardon them and ask forgiveness for them and consult with them upon the conduct of affairs ... (Holy Quran 3:159)

... And those who answer the call of their Lord and establish worship, and whose affairs are a matter of counsel, and who spend of what We have bestowed on them. (Holy Quran XLII:38)

### ***Establishing equity and justice in economy and commerce***

In addition to prohibiting wasteful resource use practices, Islam sets some ethical guidelines for regulating commercial and economic dealings of the community with the ultimate end of establishing a just and equitable socio-economy. These include providing right weights and measures in business dealings, checking business frauds, shunning the practice of hoarding, showing lenience to debtors, practising charity, and avoiding usury and illicit gain (see Taymiya 1985 and Ahmad 1979 for details).

Woe to the niggardly who exact full measure from other people, but give short measure and weight themselves (Holy Quran 83:1).

... weigh with the true balance and do not deprive people of their due. Do not go about causing mischief (Holy Quran 26:182).

... Deal not unjustly and you shall not be dealt with unjustly (Holy Quran 2:279).

... But God hath permitted trade and forbidden *riba* [interest] ... (Holy Quran 2:275).

Take charity from their wealth to purify them and make them grow (Holy Quran 9:103).

And in their wealth the beggars and the needy have a right (Holy Quran 51:19).

If the debtor is in a difficulty, grant him time till it is easy for him to repay but if ye remit it by way of charity, that is best for you, if ye only knew. (Holy Quran 2:280).

Know that your wealth and children are a test (Holy Quran 8:28).

... Deal justly, that is nearer to your duty (Holy Quran 5:8).

### ***Securing purification plus growth or Tazkiyah***

Islam suggests that man should strive towards performing *Tazkiyah* in his relationship with God, with fellow human beings, with the natural environment, with society and the state. The principle of *Tazkiyah* envisages growth of the Islamic economy and polity within the limits set by God, and in line with the spirit of purification, mutual respect and sacredness.

### ***Conserving and developing resources as service to humanity and fellow creatures***

God, in His infinite mercy, has created the earth's resources for the service of His creatures and servants. Man has been assigned the greatest honour of being God's vicegerent on earth and the steward over the resources. In gratitude, Islam advocates, man should strive towards conserving and protecting the resources and provisions, not only for himself but also for his fellow creatures. Let us consider the following:

God who created the heavens and the earth and sent down rain from the sky and with it brought out fruit for your provision. He has put ships in your service sailing through the sea by His command; and likewise He has put rivers in your service. He has put the sun and the moon in their orbits to be of service to you; and He made the night and day in your service. (Holy Quran 14:32-33).

Surely, those who believe and do righteous deeds are the best of creation (Holy Quran 98:6).

The world is green and beautiful and God has appointed you as His stewards over it. He sees how you acquit yourselves (saying of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, in Muslim)

All creatures are God's dependants and the most beloved to God, among them, is he who does good to God's dependents. (saying of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, in Kashf al Khafa quoted in Izzi Dien 1992:29).

Whoever plants a tree and looks after it with care, until it matures and becomes productive, will be rewarded in the Hereafter (saying of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, in Bukhari and Muslim).

If anyone plants a tree or sows a field and men, beasts, or birds eat from it, he should consider it a charity on his part (saying of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, in Musnad-e-Ahmad).

In [the service of] every living being there is a reward (saying of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, in Bukhari)

A good deed done to a beast is as good to a human being; while an act of cruelty to a beast is as bad as an act of cruelty to a human being (saying of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, in Mishkat al Masabih, quoted in Masri 1992:18).

Indeed, as Akhtar (1996:68) rightly notes, "fellow-feeling is a distinctive feature of Islamic life having vital bearing on the maintenance of environmental balance. [It] is an integral part of Islamic brotherhood".

## **Epilogue**

I have attempted to argue in this article that the rudimentary features of the mainstream analyses of sustainable development are well in conformity with the Islamic ethical principles. In fact, Islam offers a broad-based moral agenda for sustainable development. These principles can provide a useful foundation and platform for any interested institution or state to launch programmes and policies towards conservation and betterment of the surrounding environment and the resources therein. It is, however, a pity that the conceptual and operational bases of Islamic perspective of sustainable development and environmental conservation have only been marginally explored so far, especially in context of the current environmental crises which loom large over the developing countries. Considering our role as the vicegerent of God on earth and our superior status among His creation, it is logically expected of us (and also the urgent need of the time) that we explore God's guidance, blessings and teaching in solving our problems and in seeking our way forward. God has frequently reminded and assured us of His blessings and favours:

Verily we have honoured the children of Adam. We carry them on the land and the sea, and have made provision of good things for them, and have preferred them above many of those whom we created with a marked preferment (Holy Quran 17:70).

Your Lord says: `Call Me, and I shall answer ... (Holy Quran40:60)

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