



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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The Environment In Islam

Environmental Sustainability and Islam

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Introduction

There are numerous citations from the Holy Quran and the Hadeeth about the protection of the environment and the wise utilization of natural resources. They all lead to the conviction that all elements, species, habitats and ecosystems systems are considered as part of a perfect universe created by Allah. Accordingly, respecting natural laws of nature and the all components of earth are part of the obligations of all Moslems who, by definition have "surrendered" themselves (body and soul to the Creator). The approach that I have elected to take is not to seek similarities between the teachings of Islam and modern ecological concepts, but rather to see if the concepts of sustainable development are consistent with the teachings of Islam.

Environmental sustainability is a concept coined at the Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Environment (2002) where the concept of Sustainable Development was redefined to mean that all development must stand on three pillars: economic development, social development and environmental protection. If any of the three pillars is overlooked in our development strategies and work plans, such developments can not be called sustainable development. Environmental sustainability ensures that the harmonization of the three concepts is applied by planners and developers in practice, i.e. in developing national strategies, work plans and day to day decisions on the utilization of natural resources. It is a governance system that is fair to all sectors and stakeholders, at the national levels and among nations (something that still eludes us all).

What I will try to do is to look at the three pillars of sustainable development and see if Islam does address each of them from a sustainability point of view. It is important to recognize that Islam already views the three pillars operating in concert. The universe is a dynamic structure, always in a state of flux, while maintaining a delicate and eternal balance (*الْمِيزَانَ* وَوَضَعَ رَفَعَهَا وَالسَّمَاءَ). And the heaven He has raised it high, and He has set up the Balance). This balance exists

between not only the physical components of the universe but also among the systems that govern and maintain its operation.

This is like putting Galileo, Mandelief, Mendel, Newton, Watson (plate tectonics), Einstein, Darwin and Heigel talking to each other in the same room to develop a unified picture of the dynamics of the universe. They all discovered, at different times and for different disciplines, the unifying threads that bind and control the functioning of earth systems (the universe) and its components, i.e. they saw the Mezzan. However, each had looked from limited angles, often failing to see the whole picture. I will try to demonstrate how the logic of sustainable development and the three pillars are already built into Islamic thought.

I- Social Development:

Social justice is the crucial principle in Islam. Moslems earn their position in society through their work. Moslems are commanded to build the community (Eaamar); whatever is good for the community is good for the individual. Moslems will have to have their assets disclosed annually by releasing the Zakat. While Zakat is used to fund Beit Al Mall, it is a deterrent against excessive or unlawful richness. Omar, the second Khalif introduced the principle of "from where you have acquired this (Min ain leka hatha). Social development and protection of the poor is the responsibility of the community. Beit al Mall is not only equivalent to the Ministry of Finance, it also covers the duties of social affairs ministry. It carries out the social development projects. The Moslem community operates also on the principle of Al Takaful (meeting the needs of all or equity). It also sees over exploitation/wasting of natural resources as well as acquiring more than one needs as social evils. The Hadieth on economizing on the use of water for ablution (wudua) even when a person is washing in a running river is a wonderful lesson not only on water conservation but on how not to acquire more than we need. On the other hand Islam mocks misers and those who do not give while they are capable of giving. I guess that should also apply to nations.

II- Economic Development

- Economic development is the duty of Islamic nations. The Prophet started his life in commerce. However, Islam rejects the principal of predetermined interest and replaces that with the principal of partnership in investment, the bank and the borrower/investor are on the same Mezzan.
- The Rashideen Khalifs applied a policy of Eaamar to all new nations that joined Islam. They encouraged the introduction of planting wheat in the southern parts of Iraq. The Khalifs looked at economic development as a form of Islah.
- On the community level, development of commerce, industry and agriculture are considered as indicators of development. The only controls applied is to avoid Reba, price fixing and adherence to Zakat.
- Islamic banking is a global reality.

III-Protecting the Environment

1- Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)

The basic objective of Environmental Impact Assessment is that of all development projects, which is to ensure that the development proposed has no significant damage to the environment or impacts on human health and social development that can not be mitigated. Well, in Islam the rule of all actions taken, whether on the individual or the community level is simply, not to be harmed or inflict harm " La Derrer wa la Dirrar". Following such a role would limit the impacts of development at the national level. It would also have nations avoid cross boundary effects of development.

This principal may also apply to economic policies of nations.

2- Species Protection

Since it is stated in the Quran that all creatures worship Allah, the Creator, then how do we allow ourselves to eliminate them from the ecosystem, destroy their habitats and over exploit their numbers. By mechanisms as the Hema and the moratorium during the Asher Al Horum, the sustainable exploitation of the plant and animal species may be achieved.

3- Ecosystem Recovery

Tribes in the Arabian Peninsula fought for thousands of years before Islam over grazing and water rights. By regulating the rights for grazing and water through the Hema concept, the pressure of overgrazing became less intensive. The other system for ecosystem recovery is the Ashuer Al Horum policy, where 3 months of the year are months of peace among human beings and with nature. By forbidding wars, human populations were given a chance to recover, but also plants and animals are relieved from cutting and hunting. In modern conservation policies of forests, wild life and fisheries, we can find similar logic. It is simply, "giving nature a chance" .

4- Respecting Nature

There is a Hadeeth that the Prophet pointed to the uhud Mountain in Mecca saying" This is uhud, a mountain who loves us and we love him". This a manifestation that the non-living components of our planet are also considered by Islam as part of Allah's creation and thus must be respected. In the Quran, the trusteeship was presented to the Mountains,

but they declined to carry such a task. Only Man accepted to take it (for he is an ignorant fool). Here again, the mountains are addressed as living entities. I am using this to show that Islam has a holistic look at the universe, each component has a role to play, which should be respected by man, as the custodian assigned by Allah. Other species have been chosen as titles for Surahs, e.g. the Cow, the ants, the bees.

5 - Maintaining Balance in Nature

The Holy Quran demonstrates the balance in nature by addressing the relationship between rivers and the ocean. Both systems are separated by a barrier preventing one from overtaking the other (an ecotone perhaps?). (يَبْعِيَانِ لَأَ بَرَزَخُ بَيْنَهُمَا ﴿٦٧﴾ يَلْتَقِيَانِ الْبَحْرَيْنِ مَرَجٌ) Dams can damage this balance. Countries upriver, since the last century strive to build dams for electricity and water. Huge irrigation projects have been developed in China, India, Turkey, Egypt and others, which have resulted in destroying fisheries and agriculture of the downstream countries, caused erosion of the coastline and allowed the sea to invade the rivers and damaged biodiversity and salinized the soils. The upstream countries have experienced over the years accumulation of sediments, salinization of soil and increase in diseases such as malaria. Thus at the end of the day all riparian countries lose from building traditional dams. The damage is almost irreversible.

6- Admiring the beauty and diversity of nature

(أَفَلَمْ يَنْظُرُوا إِلَى السَّمَاءِ فَوْقَهُمْ كَيْفَ بَنَيْنَاهَا وَزَيَّنَّاهَا وَمَا لَهَا مِنْ فُرُوجٍ ﴿٦٨﴾ وَالْأَرْضِ مَدَدْنَاهَا وَأَلْقَيْنَا فِيهَا رَوَاسِيَ وَأَنْبَتْنَا فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ زَوْجٍ بَهِيجٍ) [ق:6-7] .

- Have they not looked at the sky above them – how We have built it and made it beautiful and free of all faults? And the earth – We have spread it wide, and set upon it mountains firm, and caused it to bring forth plants of all beautiful kinds, thus offering an insight and a reminder unto every human being who willingly turns unto Allah.

7- Environmental Health

Islamic traditions are full of examples obligating Moslems hygiene and a cleaner environment. It starts from the simple Siwak, ablution before prayer and a whole body wash after intercourse, menstrual period or coming in contact with blood to keep our community clean and health. Moslems are obligated to keep their neighborhoods clean, even remove (sources of harm) which also include wastes from the streets.

The Outcome

By integrating integrate the above observations, we should reach the conclusion that there is one thread that it is interwoven throughout: i.e. the balance (or Mezzan) that governs the way our universe operates and which should be respected and sustained to maintain harmony in our world. This is the order in our universe, at both the micro and macro levels, that scientists and philosophers discovered. This balance also exists within us and thus should be used to curtail greed and desires that encroach upon the rights of other humans, species and natural resources. Adding to this great rule, the concept of no harm or be harmed, the objectives of sustainable development.

The Way Forward

Given the way Islam looks at development, can we also seek Islamic solutions (as done when Islamic banking was introduced) to global issues as the example of conflicts on dams? Dams harm the downstream countries as well as the upstream countries. They also upset the balance between the rivers and the sea. If the UN Commission on Dams adopts the two principals above, then the upstream countries will be able to withdraw waters without depriving the downstream countries or the fish and marine environment at the estuary.