

## Sustainability from Islamic perspective

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We know that moderation (*wasatiyyah*) is a major Islamic principle and way of life by the clear affirmation of the Quran. In an address to the Muslim community, the Quran conveys God Almighty's vision of this Ummah as a community of the middle path (*ummatan wasatan*) to make moderation, therefore as a guide and conduct of their earthy life (*al-Baqarah*, 2:143).

Moderation has not only much to say about the personal conduct of individuals and the community's collective ethos, but also on the use of the earth's resources and care for its natural environment. The substance of this teaching is elsewhere endorsed in the Quran where the text speaks of balance (*al-mizan*) in the creation of this earth and the terrestrial universe, all of which have been created in a state of grand natural equilibrium, "so weigh all things fairly and do not disturb the (God-ordained) balance." (*al-Rahman*, 55:7).

Three other concepts of relevance to sustainability conveyed in the Quran, are firstly, humankind's assignment as the trustees and vicegerents (*Khalifah*) of God on earth to act as bearers of a mission and responsibility to establish a just socio-economic order therein (*al-Baqarah*, 2:30). The utilisation of earth's natural resources such as land, water, air, fire (energy), forests, and oceans are considered the right and joint property of the people. Since humankind is God's vicegerent on earth, they should take every precaution to ensure the rights and interests of its other inhabitants, including the animals and birds, are fulfilled, not only of this but also of future generations.

The second and still related concept is that of 'building the earth' (*i'mar al-ard*), also known as '*umran*', or building of a humane civilisation on earth, which has been expounded in much detail by Muslim scholars, notably the Andalusian scholar, 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406 CE) and others. Justice and being good to others (*al-'adl wa'l- ihsan*), which are essential to a humane civilisation, envisage not only the general wellbeing of the present but also of the future generation.

The third aspect of relevance to sustainability in the Quran is the avoidance of prodigality (*Israf*, *al-A'raf*, 7:31) and extravagance (*al-tabdhir*, *al-Isra'*, 17-27). The two are basically synonymous, yet a technical distinction has been drawn between them. *Israf* signifies prodigality and wasteful use of what is otherwise permissible, such as one who consumes food in excess, or uses water wastefully, even for purposes of cleanliness and ablution.

*Tabdhir* on the other hand is spending on that which is unlawful in the first place, such as the purchase of drugs and gambling tools. With regard to the former, the text says that "God does not love the prodigals — *al-musrifun*," and in reference to the latter, that they are the "the devils' brethren," both of which expressions signify primarily moral and behavioural aspects of human conduct, but can be the subject of legal action if they amount to manifest harm (*darar*).

The lawful government is then authorised, under the concept of public interest (*maslahah*), and just policy (*siyasaḥ ‘adilah*) to impose restrictions on that which may be permissible, and also to elevate to a prohibition what is reprehensible (*makruh*) in the shariah. The Islamic legal maxim-cum-hadith that ‘harm may not be inflicted nor reciprocated [in the name of] Islam would in principle authorise the individual and the community to take legal action against persons and organisations, even states, that are guilty of environmental damage and destruction.

The Prophet of Islam has added his voice to say with regard, for instance, to greening the earth that “anyone who plants a tree, no human nor any of God’s creatures will eat from it without it being reckoned as charity from him.”

In another widely quoted hadith, the Prophet has said that even if one hour remained before the final hour and one has a palm-shoot in his hand, he should plant it.

In yet another hadith report, Abu Barzah once asked the Prophet: “Teach me something so that I may derive benefit from it.”

He said, “Remove the trash away from the walkways of the Muslims.”

Muslim leaders, such as the first caliph Abu Baker, advised their troops that when engaged in war with the enemy forces, they must not chop down trees nor destroy agriculture, nor kill an animal, unless it be for essential human needs.

In another hadith, the Prophet has also said that anyone who “kills a sparrow in vain, God Almighty will take him to task for it in the Day of Judgment.”

Islamic teachings are also emphatic on cleanliness in both personal hygiene and the enhancement of beauty. With regard to the former, the Quran says that “God loves those who insist on cleanliness — *al-mutatahhirin* (*al-Baqarah*, 2:222), and the latter is the subject of a renowned hadith, which declares succinctly that “cleanliness is one half of the faith”.

One can elaborate further, but even from what has been said, it is clear that sustainability, moderation, and cleanliness are entrenched in Islamic teachings and are integral to the faith of the believers. Rich and resourceful as these sources are, yet many aspects of these teachings are being neglected in the personal behaviour, speech and lifestyles of Muslims generally, to which Malaysia is also not an exception.

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