

THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY FROM THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Muslims are religiously entrusted to prosper the earth via performing their obligations as *khalifah* (vicegerent). Indeed their performance will be queried in the Day of Resurrection. Since the 80s when the concept of ‘sustainability’ was first introduced, this term had been persistently centred on the context of renewable resources and ecological capabilities to support human life. At this juncture, it is worth considering shifting the paradigm to include the Islamic point of view especially pertaining to the built environment professions. Thus, this paper is reviewing the present concept of sustainability including the positioning of its three pillars namely environment, social and economy from the Islamic perspectives.

Key words: Islam; built environment; sustainability; sustainable development; religion.

Introduction

Delving into the intrinsic meaning and the context of sustainability that it has always been associated with development in many occasions, the authors have no intention to differentiate between the term sustainability and sustainable development. For the purpose of this paper, the terms are used synonymously and interchangeably. In fact, out of the many interpretations made to the terms, the authors chose to confine the discussion of this paper to the spirit of the Brundtland’s definition of sustainability that is:

“development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland’s Report, 1987).

Islam propagates the idea of mankind as a trustee (*khalifah*) of the earth in that trust will be questioned in the Day of Resurrection (*Al-Quran, 6:165*). Being a trustee, the absolute owner of the universe is Allah the Almighty (*Al-Quran, 20:6*). This universe is created by Allah the Almighty as a gift (*Al-Quran, 45:13*), a sign of His greatness (*Al-Quran, 16:65-69*) and a place for the sustenance of life (*Al-Quran, 7:10*). The trust must be executed wisely and appropriately as ruled out by Allah the Almighty, failing which the consequences or the impact is on us (*Al-Quran, 30:41*). The two principal sources of Islam; the *Al-Quran* and the *Al-Sunnah*, tell us that the universe is created in due proportion and measurement (*Al-Quran, 54:49*) and that the resources are sufficient for human consumption as long as the world exist, if it is managed wisely. These two sources also explain to us that human beings are part of nature but are superior to the other creations (*Al-Quran, 6:38*) because they are bestowed with mental capabilities.

It is because of this specialty about human beings in Islam that the authors opined that Islam and the contemporary matters of sustainability should not be treated in isolation. There is a meeting point i.e. via religion that needs attention and deliberation. This is evident enough through literatures when many scholars believed that technical solutions have not been resulting in satisfactory outcomes in addressing environmental crisis [...]religion has been getting more recognized to define proper environmental ethics (Abedi-sarvestani, A., & Shahvali, M., 2008, p.609). Odeh, Al-Jayyousi (2009, p.41) asserted that talking about development without considering the spiritual side of people is meaningless; development must preserve the essence of our humanity. Shahrir, M.Z. (2011, p.91) commented that the definitions of sustainability are not comprehensive enough to cover the many important factors which include the spiritual and cultural dimensions of man and knowledge, meanwhile Kamaruzaman Jusoff and Siti Akmar Abu Samah (2011, p.46) claimed that a characteristic of the modern industrialized world is that it places total separation between science and religion[...]foreign to the Islamic tradition. In addition Niaz (2001) and Ansari

(1979) believed that Islam offers a broad-based moral agenda for sustainable development and the issue deserves to be explored extensively in mitigating the present crises of development and environmental degradation.

On that premise, the objective of this study is to establish the missing link between the conventional concept of sustainability with its three pillars of environment, social and economy in relation to Islamic context and its worldview. This study therefore is organized in six parts. The Introduction part emphasizes on human beings' role towards his own life and sustainability especially looking at it from the Islamic world view. Part two, three and four address the three main differences between the present concepts of sustainability with the Islamic worldview under the keywords of environment, social and economy respectively. Part five integrates the concept of sustainability and Islam. Finally part Six concludes that no matter what religion one professes, he is inevitably bound by God/Creator or Law of Nature. He is still accountable to his actions on nature and for his own survival.

2. Environmental Sustainability And Islam

Environment is the complex of physical, chemical and biotic factors that act upon an organism or an ecological community and ultimately determine its form and survival (Homer and Thomas, 1999 cited in Muinul, 2004). It encompasses natural resources like soil, flora, fauna, water, air and light that affect living organism. Islam reiterates that these natural resources have been created by Allah the Almighty with purpose (*Al-Quran*, 38:27; principally to provide sustenance to man's life on earth (*Al-Quran*, 2:60), furthermore as a testing-ground for man's morality in executing his trusteeship role. Sadly, the biosphere is now giving us many signals that it is greatly distressed; that it is struggling to cope with natural resource depletion, ozone depletion, acid rain, ecosystem loss, polluted air, land, river and ocean (Brunckhorst, 2000 cited in Muinul, 2004). In Islam, it is very clear when Allah the Almighty reminds human beings not to do evil and make mischief on earth (*Al-Quran*, 7:56) because the consequences will backfire on human being themselves. Allah says to that effect that, "mischief has appeared on land and sea because of what the hands of men have done, that Allah may give them a taste of some of their deeds, in order that they may turn back" (*Al-Quran*, 30:41). 'The taste of their deeds' is often in the form of environmental disasters and calamities.

Hence, Muslims are religiously bound to manage the environment wisely manifesting their trusteeship to Allah. In so doing, it charts an environmental ethic and morality in Islam that moulds human attitudes towards the environment. Understanding the carrying capacity of the environment and acting upon it accordingly are very important because men are equipped with mental capabilities to do it compared to the other creations. This effort is regarded as *amanah* (trust) to mankind that no other creations are prepared to undertake it (*Al-Quran*, 33:72) except human beings. The human interactions with the environment could happen in the form of social and economic activities upon which the built environment is constructed. In this respect, environment sustainability provides a space for continued social and economic activities to take place; for example activities like recreation, housing, commercial, industry, tourism, transportation etc. Obviously, this marks a difference with the conventional concept of sustainability where the environment is positioned as just one of the three pillars not as a place for human, social and economic activities to take place.

3. Social Sustainability And Islam

Human being is central to development activities. Socially, human beings are created collective in nature consisting of males and females, tribes and nations with the purpose of getting to know each other. However Islam recognizes that the best among them is the most pious to his Creator-Allah the Almighty (*Al-Quran*, 49:13). This serves as an underlying principle of the Islamic social construct that involve human relationship with the environment. According to Omar (1988, p.288) "by bestowing upon Man such benefits and authority, the Lord honoured Man above all other creatures [...] this in turn generates an obligation upon..." . In relation to the social sustainability concept, Islam develops the Muslims' personality gradually from an individual that is embodied in the teaching of *fiqh al-ibadah* (Islamic personal law) which then evolves into the family institution under the purview of *fiqh al-munakahat* (Islamic family law) and eventually that governs human economic interactions or dealings via *fiqh al-muamalat* (Islamic commercial law). Pursuant to the individual, family and communal aspects, Islam prescribes punishment for wrongdoings committed under the purview of the *fiqh al-jinayat* (Islamic criminal law). In essence this is how Islam educates its followers spiritually and in practice. The spirituality strength is through the emphasis of the six elements of faith (*iman*) that is believe in Allah, *Malaikat* (Angels), *Rasul* (Prophets), *Al-Quran*, *Qiyamat* (Hereafter) and *Qada'* and *qadar* (Divine determination). These form the pre-condition to submission of oneself to Allah through commendable practices and deeds. In terms of practice, Muslims are governed by the five tenets of Islam notably the pronouncement of *shahadah* (the Islamic pledge), the five times daily prayers, charity, fasting and pilgrimage. All in, these six tenets of faith and five tenets of Islam embodied a mould and foundation of Muslims' spirituality and practices. On top of that Islam also propagates the concept of *ihsan* (benevolence) whereby Muslims are urged to do good deeds as if Allah is looking at them. Even though he is not able to see Allah physically but Allah's existence is felt metaphysically. This relationship between man and God and man and nature can be illustrated by the two different modes i.e. The Nurturing mode and the Interventionist mode. Fig 1(a) shows the Nurturing mode where human's responsibility to God goes concurrently with human's stewardship towards nature. However Fig. 1(b) shows the Interventionist mode where relationship between human to God is distinct and his relationships to nature is solely his design. Instead of performing his role as the steward towards nature, he designed the world and consumes nature without considering religious values. Nonetheless, he would finally be held responsible and accountable to God in his dealings with nature.

Figure 1: The two views of relationships between human and nature.

Figure 1(a)

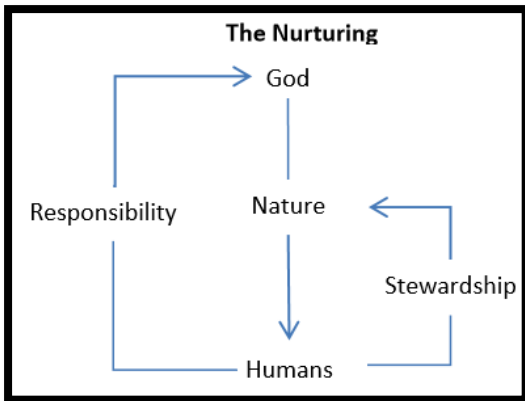
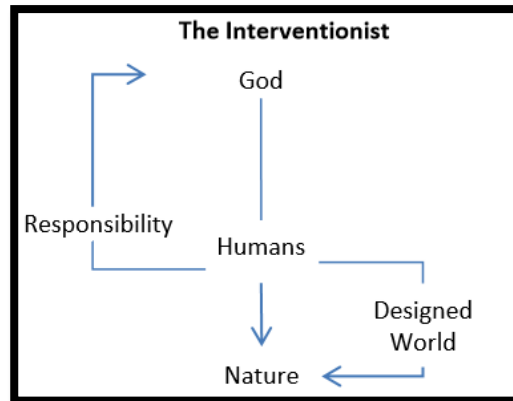


Figure 1(b)

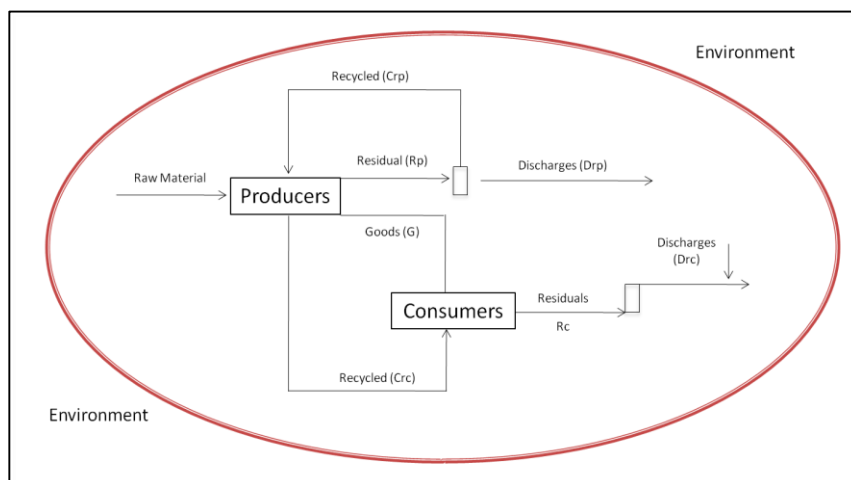


(Source: Niaz, 2008, p.614)

Economic Sustainability And Islam

Islam promotes development and growth socially and economically (*Al-Quran*, 8:53). Islam prohibits poverty as it is close to disbelief (*kufir*). Islam provides effective means for socio-economic improvement via *waqaf* (endowment) and *zakat* (alms) provisions. Indeed, these Islamic economic principles are based on sharing and caring in wealth distribution, likewise any other trading or commercial transactions in Islam. All these economic dealings and transactions among people happen in a space called city which is created out of land use planning and the built environment. In this regard, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1991, p.2) opined that the four significations of *din* that are indebtedness, submissiveness, judicious power and natural inclination are practicable possibilities only in organised societies involved in commercial life in towns and cities...". Not only space, the city environment also provide raw materials and facilitate economic activities for instance shelter, park, mode of transport etc. However, the environment may receive either positive or negative impacts depending on the human conducts. Excessive use of nature may cause ozone depletion, the melting of ice-caps, global warming, the rising of sea level and deforestation. Meanwhile social impacts can be in terms of reduction of quality of life and inequalities. At this juncture, the intricacy of these three elements namely environment, social and economy in their own capacity is undeniable. Viewing from the sustainability angle, economic development is a process of utilising natural resources at a specified level for human well-being needs. These activities ought to be governed with high morale and Islamic esteem because we are dealing with Allah's creations. Our role is just as trustees who should manage the earth upon our agreement to undertake that responsibility (*Al-Quran*, 33:72). With this in mind, it actually helps to shape our mind and gear our action towards economic sustainability. Economic sustainability also involves measurement of the economic performance that continually generate satisfaction of the spiritual and the non-material needs of the people. The relationship between the Producers and the Customers in its economic sustainability realm is as shown in Figure 2 below. According to Hasan (2006) (p.11), the fundamental balance in nature is stated by the following equation: $M = Drp + Drc$.

Figure 2: Economic Activity, Recycling And Pollution Discharge



(Source: Hasan, Z, 2006, p.11)

Concept Of Sustainability: Conventional And Islam

Present concept of sustainability is not free from critiques. Lack of consistency in its interpretation, intellectual oxymoron, incomprehensiveness and ambiguity (Odeh, 1991; Hilary, H. (n.d.); Lippert, 2004; Shaharir, 2011) are among the critiques against the concept. However, there are those who believe that one should not try to define it too rigorously. To a certain extent, the value of the term does lie in its broad vagueness. It allows people with irreconcilable positions in the environment-development debate to search for common ground without appearing to compromise their positions (Arndt, 1981 cited in Sharachchandra, 1991, p.607). Here comes the Islamic worldview to enlighten the matter since Islam lies on the very fundamental sources that is the *Al-Quran* and the *Al-Sunnah* (*Al-Quran*, 5:3 and 6:38). In this respect, Kamali's (1991, p.197) words are worth quoted when he said that it is perhaps true to say that Islamic jurisprudence exhibits greater stability and continuity of values, thought and institutions when compared to western jurisprudence. Westerners based their law on rationality, custom, judicial precedence, morality and lastly on religion. Figure 3 shows this conventional concept of sustainability involving the relationship of the three pillars i.e. social, economy and environment, in comparison with the concept of sustainability in Islamic perspectives and within its Islamic conceptual framework, as shown in Figure 4. The salient features in the Islamic perspectives are the close relationship between religious and worldly matters and that the environment is perceived in its wider context encompassing man's social wellbeing and their economic activities. Above all, human being is the determinant factor because he is assigned as the *khalifah* on earth.

Figure 3: Sustainability-three fundamental correlation (Source: Ho Chin Siong, Muhammad Zaly, 2008).

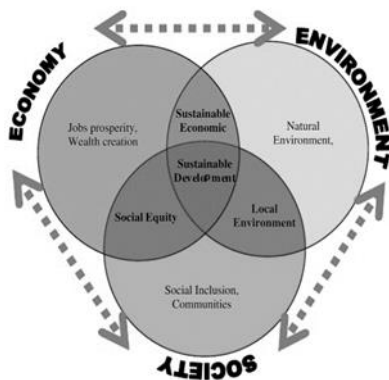
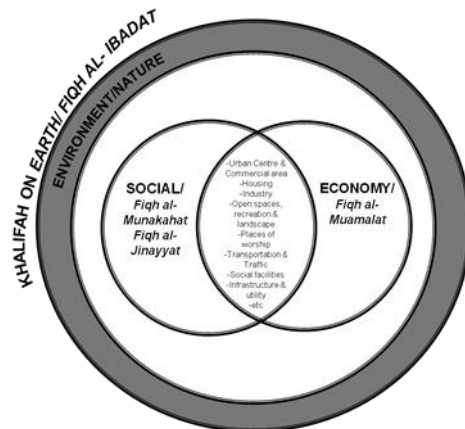


Figure 4: The conceptual framework of Islamic built environment in relation to sustainability (Azila & Alias, 2015)



Comparing the present concept of sustainability with the Islamic worldview, it can be said that the differences are:-

- ♦ Muslims are religiously bound to manage and prosper the earth under the 'contract' of vicegerency;
- ♦ Islam perceives environment or nature in the bigger context;
- ♦ Islam is a way of life to include every spectrum of human life socially, economically, politically etc.

The idea of sustainability in Islam could be further understood in the context of city planning from the prayer read by Mawlay Idris al-Azhar in the opening of Fez city in Morocco (Ahmad Farid Moustapha, 1986, p.6); "*Oh my lord, you know that I don't intend by building this city to gain pride of show off, nor do I intend hypocrisy or reputation or arrogance but I want you to be worshipped in it, your laws, limits and the principles of your Quran and the guidance of your Prophet to be upheld in it as long as the world exist*". This prayer reflects truly that sustainability could be achieved through city planning if man really upheld the teachings of Islam embodied in the *Al-Quran* and the *Al-Sunnah*. Comprehensively then, a city becomes a place where religion is practiced in every aspect of human life.

Conclusion

A review of the present concept of sustainability from the Islamic perspectives has revealed several important points such as biodiversity have inherent, ecological and utility values for humankind both as spiritual sustenance as well as material resources. Environment, social and economy shouldn't be seen as separate entities in treating the sustainability concept, rather, social and economy are part of the environment. Nature has been created in its natural order, in perfect balance, with extraordinary aesthetic beauty and human beings are members of the community of nature. Therefore as a system, there must be good interaction between man and the environment. Finally, nature is a test to mankind i.e. to what extent and in what manner man will execute his task as trustee of the earth socially and economically. Ultimately, man will be questioned on this trust in the Day of Resurrection because he is religiously bound to it. In essence, this paper had established the close relationship between religion and sustainability. Perhaps the only limitation is that not all is professing the religion. But indeed the "universal

religion” of Islam is what fulfils the liveability and sustainability for all human beings, irrespective whether one is a Muslim or not.

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