

Religion's role in Development, Ecology and Climate change: An Islamic perspective

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*“O children of Adam! ... eat and drink: but waste not by excess for God loves not the wasters.”
(Quran 7:31)*

*“If any Muslim plants a tree or sows a field, and a human, bird or animal eats from it, it shall be reckoned as charity from him.”
(Saheeh Al-Bukhari,)¹*

Role of Islam in Development

1. Islam as a positive force for Development

We are aware that the concept of 'development' lacks a universally accepted definition: *“Human development is about creating an environment in which people can develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives in accord with their needs and interests”²*. Currently, leading development experts emphasise the importance of broadening the meaning of the concept of development: *“It would be true development, if human, social, spiritual and cultural values were at the heart of international exchange and they would have an impact on both partners.”³* Islamic sacred texts are full of ideas that can be considered as an Islamic conception of development. For example, the Quran and Sunna⁴ encourage Muslims to develop economically and socially (Tanmiyah), spiritually and morally (Tazkiyah, Tarbiyah). The Quran describes development as being both material and spiritual development. Explaining to me how he defines development, a director of one Saudi transnational Islamic NGO in East Africa and leading cleric expressed his views as follows: *“our primary objective is to help the poor, the needy, orphans and provide education to young Muslims. Development for us is not only economic growth, but also spiritual development. Our motivation is based on Allah's teaching*

¹ The most authentic hadith Book in Sunni Islam.

² UNDP website: United Nations Development Programme, website at <http://hdr.undp.org/hd/>

³ Marja-Liisa Swants, what is development, in the book: perspectives to global social development edited by Mikko Perkiö, p.35

⁴ Sunna is the living habits and sayings of prophet Mohammed

5:32”(Interview, : M.Irshad, Wamy⁵ regional director, Nairobi 23.7.2009). The Quranic verse Mr. Irshad is referring states: “Whoever saved a life, it would be if he saved the life of all mankind”. Islam accepts material development in the framework of religion. However, the Quran calls for eternal spiritual development, because it will help prevent the material development from deviation. “Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world. But the good righteous deeds, that last, are better with your Lord for rewards and better in respect of hope”(Quran 18:46)

Different sources of Islamic ethics (Quran, Hadith, Ijma and Qijas⁶) are full of ideas that can be considered as promoting social and economic development. These sources encourage Sadaqa (voluntary charity) to help the orphans, elderly, widows, poor and all those who are in need. For example, the Quran encourages Sadaqa to the orphans and the poor: “See the one who denies the religion, then such is the man who repulses the orphan with harshness and does not help feed the poor” (Quran 107:1-3). Hadith literatures also emphasis the importance of helping the needy, the orphans and it has been narrated that Prophet Mohammed said: “The best house among the believers is the one in which an orphan is treated well and the worst house among the believers is the one in which an orphan is mistreated” (Sunnah ibn Majah⁷).

Development policy-makers and practitioners could also use Islamic sacred texts in their awareness campaign (directed to the Muslims) to alleviate poverty through the following guiding principles from Islamic sacred texts:

A) Annual Zakat (compulsory charity giving). Zakat is the third pillar of Islam and Quran emphasizes its importance as an obligation for every Muslim who has wealth for one lunar year to pay 2,5% on the total quantity. Zakat is usually calculated on what a Muslim possesses in money, animals, and commercial commodities, gold or silver. For example, Islamic NGOs collect the Zakat from wealthy Muslims around the world and distribute it to categories of people mentioned in the Quran: 9:60 including *Masakin* (people who lack basic necessity such as food, shelter, clothing and medical treatment), *Fuqara* (poor with no sufficient for their basic needs), Zakat collectors (Islamic NGOs can pay the salary of their staff who collect the Zakat), debtors, travellers and freeing captives.

⁵ World Assembly of Muslim Youth

⁶ For non Muslim readers: Muslims belief the Quran to be the direct words of God; Hadith is the tradition and practices of Prophet Mohammed recorded in the Hadith literatures; Ijma: consensus of Muslim scholars when a legal ruling can not be found in the Quran or Hadith; Qijas: is using analogy and reasoning when a legal ruling is not been addressed in all previous three sources.

⁷ Sunnan ibn Majah is one of the most influential Sunni Hadith collections which contain about 4000 sayings of Prophet Mohammed.

- B) Zakat al Fitr⁸.** According to the Sunna (living habits and sayings of Prophet Mohammed) Zakat al-Fitr's main objective is to narrow the gap between rich and poor and to contribute positively in the circulation of wealth within the society. Zakat al-Fitr is *Wajib*(compulsory) on every able Muslim to pay the amount required by the *Sunna*⁹. Islamic sacred texts emphasise the importance role this charity plays for socio-economic development.¹⁰ Is it possible to use this Islamic value for poverty reduction strategies, to build real bonds of solidarity within the world community?
- C) Waqf¹¹** Hadith literatures encourage Muslims to donate property with meaning of perpetuity such as land and buildings. Waqf charity must be given on a permanent basis and it is impossible for the founder to reclaim it. Waqf properties can play a positive role in philanthropic activities and reduction of poverty and human sufferings.
- D) Sadaqa** in Islamic literature is a wide concept used to cover various types of charitable giving. There are various verses encouraging Muslims to give charity: "*the believers ... are steadfast in prayers, and in whose wealth there is a right acknowledged, for the poor and the destitute. (Qur'an 70:22-24)*". The following texts from the Quran demand Muslims to be generous in giving Sadaqa to eradicate poverty: (Quran 30:39, 32:15-19, 2:261, 33:35,2:271, 274).

2. Islam as a negative force for Development

In the aftermath of the recent terrorist attacks by Al Qaida and other Islamic extremist groups, Islam became almost synonymous with conflict, violence and threat to the Western societies¹². Many people in the West regard Islam as a religion incompatible to meet requirement for sustainable socio-economic development such as democracy, religious freedom, good governance, human rights and secularism¹³. Early development theories generally ignored the role of religion and assumed that it is a matter of private life, or saw it as blocking social, economic and political development¹⁴. Critics regard conservative beliefs of some Muslims as hindrance to socio-economic

⁸ an obligatory charity paid to the poor at the end of Ramadan

⁹ The suggested amount for Zakat ul Fitr is 6 euro for each member of the family

¹⁰ Sahih Bukhari - Arabic/English, vol. 2, p. 339, no. 579, Sahih Muslim - English transl. vol. 2, p. 469, no. 2155.

¹¹ Waqf in Islamic sacred texts refers to holding certain property and preserving it for the benefit of certain philanthropy activities and objectives, e.g land and buildings.

¹² JEMS (2005) Special Issue: Governing Islam in Western Europe: Essays on Governance of Religious Diversity. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 33(6).

¹³ Vöcking, Hans. (1999) Background discussion paper. Religion and the Integration of Immigrants. Community relations. Directorate of Social and Economic Affairs: Council of Europe Publishing, 9-22

¹⁴ Severine Deneulin&Masooda Bano(2009) Religion in Development: Rewriting the Secular Script. Zed Books

development in areas such as women empowerment, reproductive health and HIV/AIDS, tolerance to other beliefs and cultures, inheritance, gender roles, marriage and divorce, right of movement and travel for women, dress codes, women and politics¹⁵. These criticisms are shared by some who were interviewed during a preparatory phase of field work. One senior civil servant in Garissa, Kenya put his critics about Islamic ideas and development in this way: *"In Mirath(inheritance), Islam give women only half of that of a man, enforce some conditions on woman's employment, she cannot initiate a divorce, prohibits women from undertaking journey without close-male relative and force her to wear Hijab(headscarf). Some Islamic NGOs are only interested in spreading such values and concentrate on Dawa(proselytizing)"*. These views which regard Islamic values as hindrance to development are based on the argument that Islamic sacred texts sanction a social and economic inequality between man and woman. For example, they refer to the verses from the Quran such as *"Allah command you regarding your children, for the male a share equivalent to that of two females. [Quran 4:11]"*. Critics also argue that Islamic ideas are obstacle to development in areas such as the right of women to job opportunities, education and contraceptive methods providing her protection against sexually transmissible infections (STIs). Islam, for them play a negative role in health-seeking behaviors. One respondent in Mandera, Kenya, a nurse in public health facility explained *"Islamic NGOs in their health projects are spreading ideas against the use of condom or even its distribution in north eastern province believing that the distribution encourages Muslims to commit Zina(sexual intercourse outside marriage). Condoms can be preventive methods of the spread of sexually transmitted diseases"*.

It is now apparent that Islam is a growing force in public life in worldwide and debate is brewing over the issue of the role of radical Islam in development¹⁶. For example, there are widespread concerns in the horn of Africa over the roles that transnational Islamic charities play after the wake of 1998 al-Qaida attack on the U.S Embassy in Nairobi and the 2002 terrorist attack on an Israeli-owned tourist resort in Mombasa¹⁷. After these terrorist attacks, Islam faced allegations that its core values are spreading radicalism and are obstacle to socio-economic development. For example, after the bomb attack in Nairobi in 1998, Kenyan government shut down offices of some transnational Islamic NGO for reasons that they were funding terrorism and were a threat to the peace and development in Kenya¹⁸. Some transnational Islamic NGOs in Africa have been accused as politicizing their development activities. One leading local politician in Puntland, Somalia,

¹⁵ Abdalla Ali Duh (2009) Rethinking Islam and Development: Field work report. Unpublished.

¹⁶ Stephen Ellis and Gerrier ter Haar (2004) Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa, London: C. Hurst and Company.

¹⁷ Alex, de Waal (2004) Islamism and Its Enemies in the Horn of Africa, Indiana University Press

¹⁸ Abdalla Ali Duh (2009) Rethinking Islam and Development: Field work report. Unpublished

explained his concerns: *“Some of these NGOs may provide funds to Al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam¹⁹ and other extremist groups in Somalia; some are just operatives of some Wahabi extremist organizations from Oil rich Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates”*.

Islamic NGOs have been criticized and regarded as a negative force for change due to concerns of accountability and transparency in their development activities. According to some local informants interviewed, many Islamic NGOs lack a professional or financial account of their development activities to other stakeholders. A local religious leader in Bosaaso, Somalia said: *“We have doubts concerning the use of the money they bring to help Somalis, the way some of their projects and Dawaa (proselytizing work) activities are performed”*.

3. Role of Islam in Ecology and Climate Change

There are Quranic verses that make connection between nature and God. The Quranic words of **Ayat**(signs) means both nature and God’s words. A true believer according to the Quran should maintain and respect the sacredness of nature which contains signs of God: *“In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of night and day, and the ships which run upon the sea with that which is of use to people, and the water which God sends down from the sky, thereby reviving the earth after its death, and dispersing all kinds of beasts therein, and the ordinance of the winds, are signs for people who have sense” (Quran 2 164)*. There are 759 verses in the Quran reflecting on the importance of ecology and nature. These Quranic verses could be considered as an Islamic perspectives on environment. In several places, the Quran mentions that Muslims must look after the environment and not to damage it: *“There is not a moving creature on earth, or a bird that flies with its wings, but they are communities like you (humans). We have neglected nothing in the Book; then unto their Lord they shall (all) be gathered.” Qur’n 6:38*. The Quran reminds Muslims to regard nature as the property of God and gift from him. Therefore, according to the Quran, a true believer must promote from a personal level preservation of natural resource including water, seas, air, climate etc, and refrain from acts that damage the eco-system: *“O children of Adam! ... eat and drink: but waste not by excess for God loveth not the wasters. Quran 7:31”*

Islamic concept of **Khilafa**²⁰ explains humanity’s relationship to environment. The Quran emphasizes in several places that what is on earth and in the heavens are properties of God and

¹⁹ Al-Shabab means youth. The group describes itself as following Salafi form of Islam and they are engaged in a guerrilla war against the Transitional Federal Government and African Union Mission in Somalia. Currently, Al-Shabab control most of the southern Somalia including part of the capital. Hizbul Islam is also Islamist group claiming to be following Salafi form of Islam. They are also fighting against the internationally recognized Transitional Federal Government in Somalia

humanity role is to use carefully. *“It is He who has made you [His] agents inheritors of the earth: He has raised you in ranks some above others: that He may try you in the gifts He has given you: for your Lord is quick in punishment: yet He is indeed Oft-Forgiving Most Merciful.”* (Quran 6 165)

Islamic concept of **Tawheed**²¹ is relevant to be used as a positive force for Ecology and Climate change in the sense that unity of creation in Islamic sacred texts confirms the oneness of God; and of the interdependence of humanity and nature. Nature in this sense is sacred and part of God’s creation that must be cared and respected. In Islam, there are strong spiritual dimensions associated with nature: *“To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is God as a Disposer of affairs.”* (Quran 4: 171)

Islamic ethics are full of ideas that protect essential elements of environment from destruction and wastage and elaborate strategies for environmental conservation and pollution-prevention. The concept of **Al-Israf** (wastefulness) is a wider concept in Islam which points to God as the entity behind the diversity of nature and that humans must not waste that natural produce. There is a famous Hadith²² which prophet Muhammed asked his companion not to waste water during his *wudu*²³. The companion asked the prophet if water could be wasted, if the reason is for holy purpose such as wudu? Muhammed answered that it is Haram²⁴ even if you are near a flowing river. Unnecessary wealth and production is not encouraged in the Quran because that will demand resource use. How relevant is the concept of Al-Israf in Ecology and climate change problem?

The term balance has gained popularity in the environmental movement and climate change problem. In Islamic sacred texts, there is similar concept called **Al-Mizan** which is mentioned in the Quran in several places: *“The sun and the moon follow courses (exactly) computed; And the herbs and the trees both (alike) bow in adoration. And the firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the Balance (of Justice); in order that ye may not transgress (due) balance. So establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance. (Qur.an 55:5-9)* Some Muslim scholars argued that this and other similar Quranic verses show that God created everything with due connection and concern to other creation and there must be balance between what we take and give in relation to our environment. The Quranic term **qadar** carries the direct meaning of the environmental balance explaining that all processes of creation and growth follows the principle of balance *“Verily all things We have created in proportion*

²⁰ stewardship

²¹ Unity of Creation

²² Sayings and deeds of Prophet Muhammed

²³ the ritual of ablution for the preparation of prayers

²⁴ prohibited

and measure.” (Quran 54:59) Similar terms has been used in the Quran to refer to environmental balance **Mouzun** “*And the earth We have spread out, set therein mountains firm and immovable and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance. And We have provided therein means of sustenance for you and for those whose sustenance you are not responsible*” (Quran 15: 19-20.) Through concepts of Al-Mizan, qadar and Mouzun, the Quran is teaching Muslims that there exists environmental balance in the universe. Therefore, Islamic understanding of balance is based on two arguments: you should not use or demand more resources than the natural ecosystem can provide, and it is Haram(prohibited) to discharge waste products into the system than the system is capable of recycling it. Is it possible that the Islamic idea of *Al-Mizan* can be used as an ethical dimension for climate change? Suppose 1.5 billion Muslims around the world followed these instructions?

In the Hadith literature, there are some instruments for nature conservation such as *Harim, Hima and Hisba*. Hima means area of land which is protected, guided and preserved for special purposes. Harim in Islam means natural resources such as water that human must protect and use commonly. According to Harim concept, natural resources like water are not property for a particular person. Hisbah is an Islamic administrative system supervising human behaviors and ordering good and prohibiting evil (preserving natural resources is good character).

Destruction, abuse, over exploitation, and pollution of natural resources are all acts that are punishable in **Yamul al-Qiyammah**²⁵ and Islamic sacred texts made it clear **that each creature performs both social function as well as religious function**²⁶. “*And He has made the ships to be of service unto you, that they may sail the sea by His command, and the rivers He has made of service unto you. And He has made the sun and the moon, constant in their courses, to be of service unto you, and He has made of service unto you the night and day. And He gives you all you seek of Him: If you would count the bounty of God, you could never reckon it.*” (Quran 14:32-34). In similar verses in the Quran, Muslims are demanded to share the earth and its resource with livestock and wildlife.

All sources of Islamic ethics emphasis the vital function of water as basis and origin of life “*We made from water every living thing...*” (Quran 21:30). In several places in the Quran, the importance of the air we breath and role of the winds in pollination has been discussed “*And we send the fertilizing winds...*” (Quran 15:22). Also, the land and soil are important for the perpetuation of human and other creatures’ lives. The Quran states “*And the earth He has established for living creatures.*” (Quran 55:10).

²⁵ Day of judgment

²⁶ Natural environment performs religious function in the sense that nature is evidence of its creator s presence, and social function in the service of man and other created beings.

Do Islamic sacred texts permit population control? The first main argument is that the real problem in climate change is not shortage in provisions. Provisions are bestowed by God, and He is sustainer. Quranic verses emphasize that God will provide for creatures and there are enough resources on earth for creatures of Allah. Amongst Muslims, overpopulation is not the real problem in Ecology and climate change- it is overexploitation of natural resources through unsustainable hunting, fishing etc. The Quran states “*Kill not your children because of poverty - We provide sustenance for you and for them ...*” (Quran 6:151). Use of modern contraceptive methods and family planning are not same as controlling population growth. In Islamic sacred texts, it has been narrated that prophet Muhammed allowed a primitive form of contraceptive methods-withdrawal or the pull-out method and contemporary Muslim scholars extended this Islamic primitive form by analogy, to permit modern contraceptive methods with three conditions: consent of both husband and wife; method must not cause sterility; and no permanent harm of the body.

Concluding Remarks

Islam, like any other religion, is a double-edged sword: It can be used both as positive force for development in areas such as wealth creation, education and health, peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Islam can also be used as a negative force for development²⁷. My main objective from this short presentation was to share with the participants of the conference some Islamic perspectives on development, Ecology and Climate change. If real development involves spiritual development, and interest of the people concerned, can we ignore religious value in our development interventions? Islamic perspectives on Ecology and Climate change are based on key concepts such as **Ayat, Khilafa, Tawheed, Israf, Mizan, Mouzun and Qadar**. Are these concepts relevant in the environmental movement and climate change problem?

²⁷ Legitimizing violence, human rights abuses in the name of Islam

