Islamic Perspectives on Sustainable Development

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Economic progress in the twentieth century has been spectacular by common statistical standards. Along with this enviable record have come two important realizations: the immense material wealth has not made people happier than they were before,[1] and it has resulted in a gradual depletion and, in some cases, an outright destruction of scarce ecological and other resources. This has forced many social scientists to rethink the necessity—even the desirability—of indiscriminate economic progress. No other single topic of discussion seems to manifest these concerns more than that of sustainable development.

This paper looks at sustainable development from an Islamic perspective. Its theoretical arguments proceed as follows: Islam means peace and harmony and, therefore, the Islamic way of life entails living in peace and harmony. An active promotion of the harmonization of indi-vidual, social, and ecological interests would ensure sustainable development. The discussion is then framed in the context of the ordained role of human beings as God's trustees. Under this arrangement, God is the real owner of all resources, and humanity is allowed to use them to its

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[1]As Abramovitz (1979) aptly puts it, "Now, a quarter century later, two things are abundantly clear. First, by all the usual measures, the growth that was sought was, in fact, achieved—indeed achieved in unexpected, unprecedented, and overflowing degree. It appears in broad measures of real national product per head, and it appears in the narrowest measures of consumption per head. In the developed countries, at least, the growth was widely shared by all income classes. So we have had it, and had it in great measure. But, second, the expected sense of heightened satisfaction, reflecting an appreciation of social gains and of bettered individual lives, is much less clear. Instead, the talk is all of 'disenchantment' with growth." See Easterlin (1974) and Scitovsky (1964, 1976).

advantage as long as this trust is not violated. The paper concludes that in a truly Islamic society, sustainable development is a logical outcome of a normal life and that there is thus no need for a separate strategy of sustainable development. The rest of the paper deals with the concept of sustainable development and highlights its multifaceted nature, explains the endogeneity of sustainable development in Islam, examines the Islamic characterization of the role of human beings and shows how such a role conforms to the requirements of sustainable development, and ends with some concluding remarks.

What Constitutes Sustainable Development?

For a long time, the issue of economic development was an exclusive domain of the sphere of positivist ideology within the field of economics. In fact, economic development and economic growth were treated as synonymous, which usually meant an increase in some measure of national income and/or concomitant increase in the standard of living. The subsequent development of the so-called Basic Needs Approach to economic development represented a significant advance in positivist thinking,[2] for it shifted the emphasis from income growth to the delivery of goods and services to specified groups of people in society. Thus, for the first time, people became relevant to this paradigm. After this advance, there were numerous attempts to construct composite indices that sought to improve the concept and meaning of economic development (i.e., Morris 1979; United Nations 1970; and Adelman and Morris 1967).

Even with this shifting emphasis, the positivist approach to development remained entirely economic. For the most part, the pursuit of self-interest was relied upon not only for the achievement of individual well-being but also of social well-being. Adam Smith's invisible hand was there to see to that. Broader ecological questions were either downplayed or treated as peripheral. As the less-than-perfect record of mainstream economics in this regard has been a topic of much discourse, there is no need to go into details.

As a result, many scholars took exception to the positivist approach to development. The discussion began to revolve around such concepts as "authentic" and "sustainable" development. Literature on the normative approach to development is quite extensive (Goulet 1988) and its review

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[2]The Brundtland Report (WCED 1987) defined sustainable development as follows: "In essence, sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations."

is beyond the scope of this paper. However, its two most important, but not mutually exclusive, relevant features are the following. First, the fact that development is a value-laden issue is now being recognized more than ever before. According to Denis Goulet (1971):

> Development is above all a question of values. It involves human attitudes and preferences, self-defined goals, and criteria for determining what are tolerable costs to be borne in the course of change. These are far more important than better resource allocation, upgraded skills, or the rationalization of administrative procedures.

Second, it is being recognized that development is a multifaceted concept. Goulet (ibid.) expresses it the best when he says:

> This total concept of development can perhaps best be expressed as the "human ascent"—the ascent of all men in their integral humanity, including the economic, biological, psychological, social, cultural, ideological, spiritual, mystical, and transcendental dimensions.

That normative approach to development has many more dimensions than just the economic is abundantly clear from Goulet's observations. For the sake of brevity, however, we will limit our discussion to three main dimensions: economic, social, and ecological. Of course, the core requirement for any development has to be an improvement in the economic conditions of individuals in a given society. In this sense, the positivist approach to development forms an integral part of the normative approach. But a broader dimension is that of social justice. Since we all prefer to live in a society, our sense of well-being is influenced by the way others live in that same society. Similarly, other people's well-being is influenced by our own way of life. This interdependence of our well-being is a type of externality that cannot be ignored if a society is to achieve meaningful development. While the interdependence in welfare has been widely recognized (Veblen 1934; Duesenberry 1949; Arrow 1951; Bergson 1954; Scitovsky 1954; Hirsch 1976; Easterlin 1980; and Frank 1985), its analysis has been largely outside the purview of the positivist approach.

Finally, our actions both as consumers and producers have ecological implications. The overarching emphasis on attaining efficiency in resource allocation within the positivist framework has led to unprecedented levels of pollution and ecological disaster. Such externalities are usually treated

as peripheral in mainstream economics. And yet our well-being, even our existence, is inextricably embedded in the quality of the ecological conditions within which we live. The second law of thermodynamics, commonly known as the law of entropy, presents a compelling argument for the need to include ecological considerations in any meaningful development (Georgescu-Roegen 1975, 1977).

The Endogeneity of Sustainable Development in Islam

Before we embark upon a detailed analysis of a sustainable development from an Islamic perspective, it is important to point out several things. First, the ultimate objective and meaning of life for a true Muslim is his/her salvation.[3] Furthermore, every action of a true Muslim bestows benefits upon the individual both in this life and in the hereafter. Second, Islam does not provide a specific theory or subscribe to a specific system, in the sense of a bounded class of models and paradigms, in either an economic or a political sense. Although one does not find a formal Islamic theory of sustainable development, its absence in current literature on Islamic economics does not mean that such a theory cannot be built. The Qur'anic principles of sustainable development provide us with the premise for constructing such a theory.[4]

The following Islamic precept, in particular, seems to provide the necessary building blocks for a formal model. As Islam means peace and harmony, an Islamic way of life implies living in peace and harmony. One can think of three different but not mutually exclusive aspects of living in peace and harmony[5]: to live in peace and harmony with oneself, with fellow beings, and with everything else that God has created (animate and inanimate). Living in peace and harmony in the first sense amounts to what Maslow would term the personal aspect of self-

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[3]Explaining this, Goulet (1980) says that "high indices of suicide in 'developed' countries have often blinded observers to the truth that material sufficiency, or abundance, may be less essential—even for survival—than is the presence of meaning. In order to survive one must want to survive, but how can one want to survive unless life has a meaning? Accordingly, having a meaningful existence may well be the most basic of human needs."

[4]See Choudhury and Ansari (forthcoming) for a detailed discussion of one such model.

[5]The distinction between *ḥaqq Allāh* (duties to God) and *ḥaqq al 'ibād* (duties to others) is of special significance here. All activities of a Muslim are geared either toward the fulfillment of duties and obligations due directly to God or toward the fulfillment of duties and obligations due to oneself, fellow human beings, and other creatures.

actualization, by which is meant fostering one's well-being by satisfying all spiritual and material needs. In the second sense, it means fulfilling the equity and social justice needs. Once again, the satisfaction of spiritual needs would follow automatically. This may be regarded as the social aspect of self-actualization. Finally, living in peace and harmony also means using all available resources in ways that are economically efficient and ecologically sound. This constitutes the ecological aspect of self-actualization, which also fulfills the individual's spiritual needs.

Let us examine how Islam deals with various aspects of sustainable development. Islam elevates earning a living through hard work to an act of worship. A Muslim can adopt any occupation that does not transgress the Shari'ah (the Islamic legal code). This means two things: a) affairs must be conducted honestly (i.e., cheating and fraud are prohibited, as are such practices as adulteration, hoarding, speculation, false advertising, bribery, and charging or paying interest, and b) certain professions, among them gambling, prostitution, the manufacture and sale of drugs and alcoholic beverages, pornography, and the manufacture and sale of statues, are prohibited. These activities are considered harmful to others and, therefore, against the well-being of society at large. As a general rule, a transaction is forbidden if it means gain for one individual but loss for another. Thus, mutual consent alone is not enough for a permissible transaction: it must also be socially optimal.

The acquisition and accumulation of wealth is permitted if it is pursued through lawful means, if the individual meets all of the attendant obligations (i.e., paying zakat and such voluntary taxes as *ṣadaqah* and *kharaj*), and if it does not distract one from the remembrance of God. The effort to acquire wealth is regarded as beneficial for both the individual and society. For this reason, the Prophet is reported to have said: "A thankful rich man is better in the eyes of God than a discontented poor person." It is instructive to note that 'Abd al Raḥmān ibn 'Awf, one of the richest and most generous of the Companions, was one of the ten people informed by the Prophet that they would reside in paradise.

Where does Islam stand on the issue of social justice? Islam considers pursuit of mutual interest as an important means of achieving social justice. Mutual interest is attained by exchange, according to the regulations of the Shari'ah, between partners. As long as these tenets are observed, individuals seeking to improve their economic condition are seen as promoting social justice while promoting mutual interest. However, Islam recognizes the possibility that wealth may be distributed unequally within a society, for all individuals are not created alike in terms of mental and

physical capabilities: some are more gifted than others,[6] and individuals suffer misfortunes that deprive them of their due share of material possessions. For these reasons, some individuals need help and assistance.

The principle of mutual interest is used in such cases to establish social optimality in the distribution of resources and wealth. Zakat and *ṣadaqah* (voluntary charity) are part of an effective social apparatus to ensure distributive equity and social justice. The act of giving is so important that generosity and charity have been declared a trade without a loss. That Islam views social justice as vital is evident from the fact that it repeatedly urges Muslims not to seek salvation through self-alienation or monastic life, as this would entail one's withdrawal from the active promotion of society's well-being.[7]

Islam also recognizes the interdependent nature of individual welfare. Such feelings as avarice, envy, and jealousy influence our sense of well-being in important ways.[8] Human aspirations know no bounds, and so Islam emphasizes self-discipline. As no craving is ever satisfied, and so eventually a source of dissatisfaction, Islam urges moderation.

The Islamic Characterization of Human Beings and the Ecology

That Islam does not offer a formal model for the enhancement of personal well-being and promotion of distributive equity and social justice should be clear from the preceding discussion. Islam also does not offer a uniquely formal model for the enhancement of well-being in the ecological sense. Instead, it presents principles that can be used for the

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[6]For example, the Qur'an (4:32) states: "And covet not the thing in which Allah hath made some of you excel others ... (Envy not one another) but ask Allah for His bounty." The Prophet is reported to have said: "When one of you looks at someone who is superior to him in property or appearance, he should look at someone who is inferior to him" (Mannan 1986).

[7]While discussing the economic thought of al Ghazālī, Ghazanfar and Islahi (1990) state: "Further, he identifies as part of one's calling three reasons why one must pursue economic activities: (1) self-sufficiency, (2) the well-being of one's family, and (3) assisting others in need. Anything less would be religiously blameworthy."

[8]Ansari (1991) has shown the interdependent nature of welfare by formulating a simple but elegant relative welfare function. He defines one's welfare as a function of a ratio of the actual to the desired level of consumption, where the desired level of consumption is a function of changing human aspirations. Human aspirations, in turn, are influenced by such feelings as avarice and envy. It is thought that al Ghazālī discussed a similar Islamic social welfare function. As Ghazanfar and Islahi (1990) state: "An overriding theme throughout his works is the concept of 'maṣlaḥah,' or social welfare or utility (common good), a concept which encompasses all human affairs, economic and others, and which establishes close links between the individual and society."

development of appropriate models. Thus, sustainable development, in the sense of maintaining ecological balance, also needs to be understood within this implicit but potentially formal framework. Islam is a monotheistic religion that has a holistic view of the world. In Islam, the true ownership of all resources resides with God. Sharing this ownership with anybody would be sharing God, which would amount to associating others with God (*shirk*). Humanity is God's supreme creation, and its role is to serve as God's vicegerent (*khalīfah*). While superior human intelligence means power and control over all other things on earth, this power is not absolute, for we cannot violate the basic premise of this trusteeship while using it to our advantage.[9] Since the environment and ecology are part of God's creation, their misuse may be interpreted in two ways: as a transgression of the absolute authority of God and as harming both the violator and the person who is injured. Thus, any misuse of the environment that involves waste and destruction is a sinful act in both senses.

Conclusion

This paper has examined sustainable development from the Islamic perspective. It argued that since Islam offers a complete code of life, it covers all aspects of human life both in this life and in the hereafter. While Islam does not offer any unique body of theory on sustainable development, it presents powerful principles for its realization. The principles necessary for ensuring sustainable development are grounded in the interactions between individuals and groups. In that sense, sustainable development has to be understood primarily as a microphenomenon.

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[9]Whether or not we have been using available resources to our advantage, even this is questionable (i.e., the pursuit of material gains outside Islamic Shari'ah does not confer a genuine sense of well-being). But our failure to act as a trustee is quite serious. Our role as trustee has been undermined by the reckless use of our superior skill and intelligence to further our material gains.

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