

[ISLAM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A REVIEW OF BEDIÜZZAMAN SAİD NURSI'S PHILOSOPHY]

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Abstract

Islam, the most sustainable environmental friendly religion, suggests a development model appropriate for humankind in all the times. On the one hand, this suggestion is based on the Holy Qur'an and Sunnah—the ultimate guidelines for humankind. On the other hand, this suggestion is derived from the principles of ecological balance, justice, rights and human welfare. Islamic worldview ensures a sustainable development worldview not just suitable for existing generations but all the generations coming future and preserve the integrity, rights and beauty of other natural elements. Destruction has been forbidden in Islam whereas the fulfillment of basic needs of all the creations is ensured in nature. In the 1987 Report of World Commission on Environment and Development (usually known as Brundtland Commission Report) sustainable development is defined in relation to the “need”. It notes about sustainable development, “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need” (Brundtland, 1987: 24). What is “need” in Islam? Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, an influential Muslim thinker in 1870s, has illustrated the complex relation of development, need and responsibility to the environment with great spiritual power. His outstanding analysis of interconnectedness in nature and its relation to the Divine Authority unveils a holistic-spiritualistic approach of development. The paper aims to analyze the Islamic approach to the sustainable development. In this connection, the term “need” has been explained in the light of the Holy Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam). Finally, it examines and applies Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's thought to the environment and development.

Keywords: Ecological balance, Environment, Islam, Islamic worldview, Need, Sustainable development.

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INTRODUCTION

Islam is a complete code of life chosen by *Allah* the Almighty Creator for Mankind. Since the beginning to end of the universe these rules, principles and guidelines to be followed. People who want to be successful this life and life after life this is the only code of life for them. Whatever crisis human beings face in this world and hereafter there is an effective solution here. Currently, we are facing COVID-19 pandemic globally. Millions of people have affected, numerous died, the world is still locked down. Worldwide universities, schools, airlines, industries, trade centers are closed. Why is this pandemic? What is the root cause of this global crisis? Recent environmental researches showed that this pandemic is just an outbreak of global ecological crisis. The coronavirus, responsible for COVID-19 disease, is first identified in a wet market in Wuhan, China where wild animals such as bat, baby crocodiles, snakes, beavers and pangolins were sold among others. Eco-destructive lifestyles, environmental pollution and unsustainable development are great concern for environmentalists. Sustainable development is a development model set forth by the UN. Nation states are advised to achieve the sustainable development goals as for their common good. What is Islamic principle of development? How Islamic worldview could contribute to sustainable development and even more? An influential contemporary Islamic thinker, Bediüzzaman Saïd Nursi, has commented on these issues in his landmark work *Risale-i Nur*. The paper addresses concept of sustainable development, Islamic viewpoint regarding this and reviews Nursi's philosophy on the environment and development.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development is a recent concept developed by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development. This is an initiative where the interrelationships between human beings, natural resources, environment and developments are considered and the best possible model has been proposed. It is also a guideline for common interest of global citizens to protect environment, reduce pollution, ensure rights and justice and facing the future challenges collectively. Sustainable development model recognizes the common crisis of humanity and focuses on poverty alleviation, food security, housing and availability of fresh water along with others. Several commissions have been formed by the UN since the last decades. The most influential among these is the Gro Harlem Brundtland Commission, Oslo, 20 March 1987.

In the final report of Brundtland Commission "Our Common Future, From One Earth to One World" the key global challenges are identified, policy directions are formulated, international cooperation and institutional reforms are suggested, and a call for action for a better world is urged. The Brundtland Commission notes, "Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987: 24). For alleviating poverty we need development, yet development itself is creating poverty ecologically. Uses of technology and social organizations have reverse impact on ecology though we may not survive without these. So, there are considerable limitations and challenges in the idea of sustainable development. The Commission admits these limitations and further notes,

The concept of sustainable development does imply limits - not absolute limits but

limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. But technology and social organization can be both managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth. The Commission believes that widespread poverty is no longer inevitable. Poverty is not only an evil in itself, but sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to fulfill their aspirations for a better life. A world in which poverty is endemic will always be prone to ecological and other catastrophes. (Brundtland, 1987: 24—25).

It is clear from these statements that UN approach to sustainable development is need-based. Alleviating poverty through development at the same time maintain a healthy ecological balance is the fundamental goal of sustainable development.

ISLAMIC WORLDVIEW AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Improvement or development in Islam is encouraged provided that there is no harm for any member of natural community either human or non-human. Mankind is a special creation of Almighty *Allah* because they are blessed with the knowledge of revelation. They are qualified to preserve the words of *Allah Subhanahu Ta'ala* in their soul. The spiritual knowledge is the foundation of all kinds of knowledge such as scientific, technological, social, political, economical, philosophical and so forth. Human kind was ignorant, the Most Merciful Creator *Allah* has bestowed His mercy by giving knowledge (*'Ilm*) to them. He has also rewarded us by giving wisdom (*Hikmah*). The higher level of *Hikmah* is exalted to the prophets. The general people has given the capacity to realize, think, judge, act by a kind of *Hikmah* received by continuous practice of *Shariah* and maintaining pure *Ibadah*. For development, *Ilm* is a requirement. For sustainable development, a kind of *hikmah* is necessary.

The difference between development and sustainable development can be demarcated by the term “need”. In the case of development, we are more concerned with the need of humans whereas in the case of sustainable development we are concerned with humans as well as the needs of other elements. All biotic and abiotic creations have some needs. The mountains, seas, waterfalls have some needs. For example, waterfalls have a need to flow without any obstacle otherwise they will lost their spontaneity. Likewise, butterflies, bees, birds have some needs. For example, butterflies have a need of flowers otherwise they will lost their uniqueness. Bees do not have a meaningful life without collecting honey from flowers. Flora and Faunas do not have any flourishing without oceans, seas, rivers, ponds and so forth.

In the Holy *Qur'an*, *Allah* the Almighty says:

“But seek, with that (wealth) which Allah has bestowed on you, the home of the Hereafter, and forget not your portion of lawful enjoyment in this world; and do good as Allah has been good to you, and seek not mischief in the land. Verily, Allah likes not the *Mufsidun* (those who commit great crimes and sins, oppressors, tyrants, mischief-makers, corrupts)”.

(al-Qur'an, *Qasas*, 28:77)

Islam takes seriously the needs of all elements in nature. Almighty *Allah* has given us a

system by which all these needs are fulfilled perfectly. He has established a balance in every sphere of life and the Earth. This balance is unique, sometimes visible sometimes invisible. One of the concepts of justice is balance. A fair balance is maintained in nature by mutual coexistence. Lack of good governance imbalances everything from development to security and rights. Islamic concept of sustainable development is based on fair balance, fulfillment of justice and securement of rights of both biotic and abiotic creatures. In Islamic concept of sustainable development the term “need” seems to play a vital role.

In the Holy *Qur'an*, *Allah* the Almighty says:

And to Allah belong the east and the west, so wherever you turn (yourselves or your faces) there is the Face of Allah (and He is High above, over His Throne). Surely! Allah is All-Sufficient for His creatures' needs, All-Knowing.
(al-Qur'an, al-Baqarah, 2:115)

In the Holy *Qur'an*, *Allah* the Almighty also says,

O Children of Adam! Take your adornment (by wearing your clean clothes), while praying and going round (the *Tawaf* of) the *Ka'bah*, and eat and drink but waste not by extravagance, certainly He (Allah) likes not *Al-Musrifun* (those who waste by extravagance).
(al-Qur'an al-A'raf, 7:31)

An example of Islamic worldview and sustainable development could be understood in the teachings of our beloved Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (*sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam*),

Narrated An-Nu'man bin Bashir (R): The Prophet (SAW) said, "The example of the person abiding by Allah's Orders and Restrictions in comparison to those who violate them is like the example of those persons who drew lots for their seats in a ship. Some of them got seats in the upper part, and the others in the lower. When the latter needed water, they had to go up to bring water (and that troubled the others), so they said, 'Let us make a hole in our share of the ship (and get water) saving those who are above us from trouble. So, if the people in the upper part left the others do what they had intended, all of them would be perished, but if they prevented them (from doing so), both parties would be saved."

(Sahih Al-Bukhari Book 47 Hadith 2493)

THE TERM “NEED” IN ISLAM

All creatures in this universe have some needs. These needs are very diverse, unique and sometimes unlimited. For example, a tree needs soil, water, sunlight and also a sound ecosystem to survive. There might be some other needs unknown to us. Human beings are special due to their capacity of holding and realizing *Allah's* words and act accordingly by following the way

of Rasullullah (*sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam*). As human beings are special their needs are also special, unique and diverse. For instance, they have physical needs, social needs, political needs, economic needs, technological needs, philosophical needs, moral and ethical needs, community needs, spiritual needs and so forth. Among these, the most important for them is spiritual needs. *Allah* the Almighty Creator has mentioned about His creations' needs in several verses in the Holy *Qur'an*. Many of these verses ended with "Surely! Allah is All-Sufficient for His creatures' needs, All-Knowing" (*Surah 2 Ayat 115, 247, 261, 268, Surah 3 Ayat 73, Surah 5 Ayat 54, Surah 24 Ayat 32*) .

It is very clear that only *Allah* the Almighty Creator has complete knowledge of His creatures' needs be it biotic, abiotic, galaxy, milky way, rivers, mountains, plants, trees and so forth. Only a few of them is partially known and numerous of them are unknown to human beings. For sustainable development, it is necessary for human beings to know their own needs as well as the needs of non-human community members. Without a firm connection to the Creator how they could be aware and getting fulfilled with their own and others' needs?

Contemporary Muslim thinker Said Nursi has observed the spiritual need of human beings with great emphasis. He rightly comments,

Man is helpless and exposed to numerous misfortunes. He is indigent, and his needs are numerous. He is weak, and the burden of life is most heavy. If he does not rely on the Omnipotent One of Glory, place his trust in Him and confidently submit to Him, his conscience will always be troubled. Fruitless torments, pains and regrets will suffocate him and intoxicate him, or turn him into a beast. (Nursi, 2016: 116)

BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI'S PHILOSOPHY ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

Bediüzzaman Saïd Nursi (1877—1960) is regarded as one of the most influential Islamic thinkers in contemporary period. Noted environmental philosopher Professor İbrahim Özdemir has commented on Nursi in the following way,

He devoted his life to the revival of the traditional Islamic understanding of the universe and its moral implications for modern society. Therefore, he prepared a new university model for the Ottoman society and later for modern Turkey.

(Özdemir, 2016)

He further reflects on Nursi's unique global acceptance and importance in present-time and writes,

Today, Said Nursi's groundbreaking quality is almost universally acknowledged, and he is seen as a mujaddid (renovator) cleric and a man of action. Very few scholars have enjoyed such widespread acceptability across the Muslim world. Even about 60 years after his death, the "majority of religious scholars"—to borrow his phrase—exhibit a consensus on the correctness and depth of his ideas.

(Özdemir, 2016)

In Nursi's concept of development, "need" plays a vital role. "Need" is considered necessary and an essential force for development in his thought. Murtala Bala Umar et al. while describing Nursi's view on development notes,

The central point that Nursi emphasized is that human effort to acquire or put in place to satisfy human need promote the ability of an economy to grow. Nursi clearly highlight the need is a force that lead to establishment of industries and civilization and thus, an economy achieves industrial development through human needs. (Umar, 2015)

Nursi has perceived natural environment in the light of ecological science, spirituality and Divine art. His idea is epistemological, ontological and axiological in this regard. It is epistemological since the environment surrounding us is so systematic, organized, complex and perfectly functioning. It is ontological since the environment is an art of Almighty *Allah*, sign of His eternal beauty, reflection of His power and majesty. Nursi's thought is axiological since it explores the ethical and moral principles mentioned in the Holy *Qur'an*. Said Nursi has maintained that we should perceive the environment from a comprehensive perspective where a unique blend of science, arts, morality and most importantly spirituality is present. The environment is not merely a source of instrumental supply.

According to Nursi, no development is possible without spiritual understanding of nature and continuous connection to *Allah*. The environment which is visible to us is a very minor part of the whole and the numerous mechanism related to it is also only a few. There are millions of mechanism in the invisible parts of the environment. The Creator *Allah* has made a balance and maintain it through various ways in nature. Development will be sustainable only if we can understand and realize this interconnectedness and act accordingly the order of *Allah* and the ways of our beloved prophet Muhammadur Rasullullah (*sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam*). Sükran Vahide comments on Nursi's idea of harmony and balance as follows,

In another place Bediuzzaman says that "the perfect order and balanced harmony" that are the result of unity have "transformed the universe into a miraculous book so full of meaning that each of its letters expresses the meanings of a hundred lines, and each of its lines the meanings of a hundred pages, and each of its pages the meanings of a hundred chapters, and each of its chapters the meanings of a hundred books. Moreover, all its chapters, pages, lines, words, and letters look to each other and allude to each other " (Vahide, 2014)

Nursi mentions that noting in this universe is ordinary because *Allah* the Almighty has created everything to fulfill a purpose. All the elements in nature are valuable and extraordinary as he writes in the *Risale-i Nur*, The Thirteen Word.

If you want to compare the results yielded by the wisdom of the All-Wise Qur'an and of the sciences of philosophy, and their instruction and teaching and the

degrees in their knowledge, then listen carefully to the following words:

With its acute expositions, the Qur'an of Miraculous Exposition rends the veil of familiarity and the habitual cast over all the beings in the universe, which are known as ordinary things but are all extraordinary and miracles of Divine power, and reveals those astonishing wonders to conscious beings. It attracts their gazes and opens up before their minds an inexhaustible treasury of knowledge (Nursi, 2008)

Nursi observes this universe as a palace which is decorated with precious elements by the Almighty Creator *Allah* Who then set forth the Divine Principles to function all harmoniously. In the *Risale-i Nur*, The Thirty-Third Word, he writes,

The Peerless Creator, Who is named with a thousand and one sacred Names such as All-Glorious Maker, All-Wise Sovereign, All-Just Arbiter, willed the creation of the palace of the universe and tree of the cosmos, which forms the macrocosm. He set the foundations of the palace, the tree, in six days through the principles of wisdom and laws of His pre-eternal knowledge. Then He divided and formed it into the higher and lower levels and branches through the principles of Divine Determining and Decree. Next, He adorned everything, each world, in an appropriate manner, like the heavens with the stars and the earth with flowers...Then from every apartment, every level, every world, every realm of being, every individual, from everything, He opened up windows which would show Himself, that is, make known His existence and unity. He left a telephone in every heart (Nursi 2008).

ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES AND NURSI'S APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Islamic principles of sustainable development are founded on ecological wisdom. These are need-based principles and *Allah* the Almighty is All-Sufficient for His creatures' needs. There are some clear guidelines for sustainable development in the Holy *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* of Rasullullah (*sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam*).

In the Holy *Qur'an*, *Allah* the Almighty says,

Allah, it is He Who has made for you the earth as a dwelling place and the sky as a canopy, and has given you shape and made your shapes good (looking) and has provided you with good things. That is Allah, your Lord: so Blessed is Allah, the Lord of the '*Alamin* (mankind, jinn and all that exists).

(al-Qur'an, Ghafir, 40:64)

And do not do mischief on the earth, after it has been set in order, and invoke Him with fear and hope. Surely, Allah's Mercy is (ever) near unto the good-doers.

(al-Qur'an, al-A'raf, 7:56)

Evil (sins and disobedience to Allah) has appeared on land and sea because of what the hands of men have earned (by oppression and evil deeds), that He (Allah) may make them taste a part of that which they have done, in order that they may return (by repenting to Allah, and begging His Pardon).

(al-Qur'an, al-Rum 30:41)

Realizing the Islamic principles of sustainable development, Nursi identifies three important principles of sustainable development: the principle of shared property, the principle of unity, and the principle of mutual participation or co-operation. He writes in the *Risale-i Nur*, The Thirty-First Flash,

Just the same are mutual participation in the goods of the hereafter through the mystery of sincerity, and co-operation through the mystery of brotherhood, and joint enterprise through the mystery of unity: the total obtained by those joint acts, and all the light, enters the book of good deeds of each person taking part. This is a fact and has been witnessed by the people of reality. It is required also by the breadth of divine mercy and munificence. (Nursi 2008)

Nursi's holistic idea has been reflected in Muhammad Widus Sempo and Norullisza Khosim's analysis, "Hence, Said Nursi viewed all beings, from the stars to the ants, as interrelated and connected like the links of a chain, so when one link is harmed, the whole system is harmed". (Sempo and Khosim, 2020)

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE IN ISLAM

Islam suggested a cautious lifestyle in every cases. Sustainable development is not beyond this. The following verses should be regarded as a precautionary principle for mankind:

"Verily, I will mislead them, and surely, I will arouse in them false desires; and certainly, I will order them to slit the ears of cattle, and indeed I will order them to change the nature created by Allah." And whoever takes *Shaitan* (Satan) as a *Wali* (protector or helper) instead of Allah, has surely, suffered a manifest loss.

(al-Qur'an, an-Nisa, 4:119)

Who has made the earth a resting place for you, and the sky as a canopy, and sent down water (rain) from the sky and brought forth therewith fruits as a provision for you. Then do not set up rivals unto Allah (in worship) while you know (that He Alone has the right to be worshipped).

(al-Qur'an, al-Baqarah, 2:22)

The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein, glorify Him and there is

not a thing but glorifies His Praise. But you understand not their glorification. Truly, He is Ever Forbearing, Oft-Forgiving.

(al-Qur'an, al-Isra', 17:44)

We will not be misguided if we remember our Creator *Allah* the Almighty as our only protector and helper and lead our life in the ways of our beloved prophet Muhammadur Rasullullah (*sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam*). In the *Khutbatu l-Widā'* or the Last *Khutbah* of Rasullullah (*sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam*) he assures us.

O People! No Prophet or apostle will come after me and no new faith will be born. Reason well, therefore O People! and understand words that I convey to you. I leave behind me two things, the Quran and the Sunnah and if you follow these you will never go astray.

CONCLUSION

Development or modification is a continuous process which can vividly be observed in nature. Some modifications are natural and necessary. Human beings are not directly responsible for these. However, some modifications are intentional and human beings are directly responsible for them. Islamic worldview is modern, sustainable, safe and secure for all creatures. The basic principle of sustainable development is based on "need" and in our contemporary epistemology it is only science which defines our "needs". Spirituality has no place here. Islamic conception of sustainable development is also "need" based, it is scientific as well as spiritual which can define our "needs" more appropriately. If we want sustainable development we must have a sound connection to the Almighty Creator *Allah* as only He knows the needs of His creatures. We should follow His orders given in the Holy *Qur'an*. We should not act in our own ways rather we should act in the ways of our beloved prophet Muhammadur Rasullullah (*sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam*). Notable contemporary Muslim thinker Bediuzzaman Said Nursi has rightly observed that a blend of science and spirituality is a requirement for our development.

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