

# Amplifying the Brundtland Commission's Pillars of Sustainable Development based on Surah 7 verses 85 in the Quran

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## Abstract

*In the current challenging world that human being is facing due to the rapid development, sustainable approach in everyday living is a must. After more than 40 years of striving towards sustainable development, the world still continues to face challenges which are getting from bad to worse. At this juncture human being would need to stop and ponder, are the pillars of sustainable development upheld sufficient to make the improvement to this world? Using a qualitative method and content analysis technique, the paper aims to evaluate the relevance of Brundtland Commission's three pillars of sustainability which comprises of the economic, environment and social pillars based on Surah 7 verses 85 in the Quran. The findings reveal an improvisation of the Brundtland Commission's pillars of sustainable development. The pillars should inter-relate between the 'measurement of human needs' which comprise of both social and economy with the 'ecological balance' framed by the 'principles from the Quran' as vital framework towards achieving a sustainable living environment. The impact of this findings are crucial to decision makers of the built environment including the policy makers and professionals involved.*

**Keywords:** *pillars of sustainable development, Brundtland Commission, Quran, social, economy, environment*

## Introduction

The sustainable issue was first discussed at international arena in 1972 during the United Nations Conference on Human Environment held in Stockholm (United Nations Website). It was held to find solution to the frustration and inadequacy of the world community to address vital global issues especially after the industrial revolution era. However, the term 'sustainable development' was not yet established then.

The term 'sustainable development' was recognised in 1992 during the Rio de Janeiro United Nations Conference on environment and development. Conference in Rio was a follow through from the Brundtland Commission (1987) report on *Our Common Future*. The well-known definition of sustainable development in the Brundtland Commission report is "*development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs*". Discussion realised that both development and environment should be managed together in a beneficial way rather than in isolation (www.sd-commission.org.uk). These efforts focused on three tying pillars which are the interrelationship between the social, economic and environment (Hopwood et.al, 2005 ).

Deliverables of Rio was later evaluated in the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg Summit in 2002. The key outcomes from the summit were the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, a political declaration and range of partnership initiatives (WSS2, 2002). Major commitments from this summit was on sustainable consumption and production, energy, water and sanitation which relate to the environment pillars of sustainability. These efforts

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includes the Kyoto Protocol commitment (O'Neill B.C and Oppenheimer, M , 2002) which started in 2008 (that saw countries committed to reduce their greenhouse emission through an improved agriculture practices to increase production yet reduce the emissions, the use of bioenergy and reforestation which also give concentration on the environment pillar of sustainability. Continuous effort on sustainable development but yet the problems are getting worse.

### **Problem statement**

In 2015, UNICEF released the seventeen (17) Sustainable Development Goals targeted to be achieved by 2030. However, Zakri (2018) and Ramos et al. (2018) reviewed that the performance of all countries in the world towards achieving the goals by 2030 is far reached. The slowest progress is on the environmental goals.

According to World Population Review 2018.com, countries such as South Korea which has the fastest internet connection, super high technology and has one of the best health and education system in the world is disturbingly ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> highest suicidal rate in the world. Japan which is known for its high technology and fast growing economy is also in the top 20 highest suicidal rate in the world. Why is this happening? It is time for us to ponder what actually defines sustainable development? With the current instability of humanity, are the three pillars of focused laid for sustainable development from the Brundtland Commission sufficient? This paper aims to revisit the pillars of sustainable development by the Brundtland Commission 1987 based on the book of Allah which is the Quran.

### **Literature Review: The Quran and Role Of Human Being on the Earth**

The Quran also known as the *Furqan* (criterion between right and wrong). Al-Quran is the holy book, is believed by the Muslims to be a guidance for all mankind, believed to be the word from Allah- the Almighty Creator who taught the Quran segments by segments through the angel, Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W more than 1400 years ago. It is believed to be the ultimate source of knowledge for all mankind. The Muslim believe the application of the Quran by the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W (*Sunnah*) are the main actions that human being should emulate.

The Al-Quran comprises of 114 Chapter/Surah and 6236 verses. In Surah Ar-Rahman 55, verses 1-2, Allah mentioned:

*The Most Merciful. Taught the Quran*

It is Allah who taught the Quran and gave the understanding to those who wants to learn. In Surah Yusuf 12, verse 111, Allah affirms that this book contained the explanation of this world and the creation within. It confirmed the books before it which include the *Zabur*, *Torahs* and *Injil*. And there are lessons to learn from the stories presented in the Quran for us to take action in the present and the future.

There was certainly in their stories a lesson for those of understanding. Never was the Qur'an a narration invented, but a confirmation of what was before it and a detailed explanation of all things and guidance and mercy for a people who believe-Surah Yusuf 12: 111

In Surah Hud 11 verses 1, Allah affirms

Alif, Lam, Ra. [This is] a Book whose verses are perfected and then presented in detail from [one who is] Wise and Acquainted.

This means that The Quran itself is very detail and it must have the explanation of everything including '*sustainable development*'. In the Quran Surah Al Baqarah 2: verses 30, Allah mentioned

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that He created human being to be the *khalifah* in this world and surely Allah guide them on how to take care of this world sustainably.

The word '*khalifah*' in Oxford Islamic Studies is translated as (1) *Deputy or steward; sometimes translated as vicegerent. According to the teachings of Islam, each individual is a khalifah to God. Muslims in particular must strive to adhere to and advance God's will by establishing a society that reflects human dignity and justice. Accordingly, human beings have been given the necessary intelligence, strength, and divine guidance through the Quran to benefit humanity. Prophet Adam was the first appointed khalifah. (2) Successor;*

A human being who is a *khalifah* will take the responsibility to take care of this earth and the creation within with the guidance of Allah through the Quran. If human being does not take care of this world based on the guidance by Allah, he may end up as how the angel predict in Surah Al-Baqarah 2:30- *who causes corruption and sheds blood.*

And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, "Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority." They said, "Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?" Allah said, "Indeed, I know that which you do not know." - al-Baqarah 2: 30

To prevent corruptions and sheds of blood Allah stated in the following verse Surah Al Baqarah: 31 He has taught human being what he needed to know to be the *khalifah* in this world:

And He taught Adam the names - all of them. Then He showed them to the angels and said, "Inform Me of the names of these, if you are truthful." al-Baqarah: 31

In the world nowadays, there is so much corruptions and bloodshed with wars and suppressions happening at almost all corners of the world (Fearon, 2004; Kaldor, 2010). Based on the Quran in Surah Ar-Rum 30, verse 41, this is an evidence that human being did not take the role as the *khalifah* as how Allah had created him and he have not learnt what Allah have taught him (*the names - all of them*) through the Quran on how to be the successor of the earth.

Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by [reason of] what the hands of people have earned so He may let them taste part of [the consequence of] what they have done that perhaps they will return [to righteousness]. Al-Rum 30:41

With the corruptions that is happening in this world, it is therefore very important at this juncture for human being to return to the righteousness with the guidance from Allah through the Quran. In Surah Al-Furqan 29: verses 49, Allah mentioned;

Rather, the Qur'an is distinct verses [preserved] within the breasts of those who have been given knowledge. And none reject Our verses except the wrongdoers.

The Quran is a '*distinct verses*' (وَايَاتٍ بَيِّنَاتٍ), the word '*distinct*' is synonyms to 'obvious', 'clear', 'precise' (Oxford dictionary). Something that is 'obvious' and 'clear' cannot just rest as words, it has to be translated by action. The Quran is not just a reference for recitation but it is a reference for action to be taken by the *those who has been given knowledge* as *khalifah* in his role to take care of this earth.

A few studies have discussed sustainable development based on the values mentioned in the Quran and one of the commendable writings are such of Odeh (2012) whom highlighted the conceptual framework for natural resource management that comprises of *adl* (Justice on governance), *ihsan* (excellence), *Arham* (Social Capital), *Fasad* (Integrity without corruption).

However, this paper will focus on the larger framework which is the pillars of sustainable development itself that is specifically contained in Surah Al-`A'raf 7 Verses 85.

### Methodology

The method employed is qualitative in nature using the content analysis technique. Using the well-known definition of 'sustainable development' from the Brundtland Commission as the basis of framework to search on the origins of words and coding the categories in the content of the Quran which derived to Surah 7: verses 85. The analysis compared the keywords and interpretation of the underlying context (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) based on the current sustainable issues of the world.

### Results

The Quran is belief by the Muslims to be the reference that is relevance through time. It has been the reference during the Prophet Muhammad and is still relevant till now when much of the scientific studies about the message in the Quran was only proven within the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Bilal Ahmad et al., 2011). Therefore, each verses is not only meant to be the guidance during Prophet's time but also the guidance to the contemporary situation now and in the future. Based on the content analysis of the Quran, Surah 7: verse 85 bears the explanation of sustainable development related to the definition by the Brundtland Commission but amplify it further in a more wholistic manner. Surah Al-Araaf 7: 85,

And to [the people of] Madyan [We sent] their brother Shu'ayb. He said, "O my people, worship Allah ; you have no deity other than Him. There has come to you clear evidence from your Lord. So fulfill the measure and weight and do not deprive people of their due and cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation. That is better for you, if you should be believers.

The verse above defines the pillars of 'sustainable development' 1400 years earlier than the one derived in Brundtland Commission 1987. Based on this *verse*, the Brundtland Commission 1987 has all principles required to achieve sustainable development except it does not has the most important one which is to *Worship Allah*.

Based on the verse (7:85), the pillars of 'sustainable development' can be redefined:

Pillar one : is to *worship Allah...There has come to you clear evidence from your Lord*  
Pillar two : is to *fulfill the measure and weight that do not deprive people of their due.*  
Pillar three : *cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation*

*Pillar One: To worship Allah; you have no deity other than Him. There has come to you clear evidence from your Lord*

To worship Allah means to abide to Allah's rule and practice it. Allah's rules lie in His book - the Quran. This is because all of His other creation is following the rule of Allah and fulfilling their role as how they are created. In Surah 21 verse 33, the sun and the moon followed their orbit which gave the earth the night and day. In Surah 13 verses 13, even the thunder exalts [Allah] with praise of Him from fear to Allah's instruction. Further, Allah gave parable in Surah 59 verse 21 that *'If We had sent down this Qur'an upon a mountain, you would have seen it humbled and coming apart from fear of Allah. And these examples We present to the people that perhaps they will give thought'*. Allah reminded human being to take his role seriously as the *successor* on earth guided by the Quran so that his action does not bring destruction to the ecosystem of the world. Allah has given example with the life of the ants and bees in the Quran on how human being can

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refer to nature as example to manage the earth. Allah guide us, the principles of working together while each ant or bee have their own specific role to contribute in achieving a sustainable community living environment.

Mawlay Idris understood the role as *khalifah* and in building the city of Fez, having sketched the ground-plan of the city and before construction got underway, he recited the following prayer:

“O my Lord! You know that I do not intend by building this city to gain pride or to 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 Qur’an and the guidance of Your Prophet to be upheld in it, as long as this world exists. Almighty, help its dwellers to do righteousness and guide them to fulfill that. Almighty, prevent them from the evil of their enemies, bestow Your bounties upon them and protect them from the sword of evil. You are able to do all things. (Moustapha 1986)

Allah guide human being in every aspect of life through His words in the Quran. For example, in Surah 16 verses 10, Allah highlighted about water management *‘It is He who sends down rain from the sky; from it is drink and from it is foliage in which you pasture [animals]*. Allah guides that the rain sends down from the sky has three main purposes which are for human, for the foliage and to pasture animals and it should reach them directly.

Contrarily to the verse 16:10, from the rain to the river, human built dams. Almost 50,000 dams in this world to retain water for water supply and hydro electric supply and resulted many trees/foilage and animals died along the construction of these dams. With the dam system, human has to pay for water supply whereas Allah says in Surah 16: verses10 water is the right of every human being. After many years, only human realized that the constructions of dams are very destructive to the world ecosystem (Oorchot et.al, 2018). Rivers and its habitats are suffering due to the reduced water level at the rivers. In the end, it affects the fisherman and people living along the river and the amount of water that goes to the sea is also reduced. The action taken by human had brought destruction when what they did is against the instruction of Allah in Quran. Recently, many developed countries realized this and are demolishing their dams.

Without the dams there are alternatives on the production of electricity through hydro dams, in the Quran Allah guided in Surah 36 verse 80 *[It is] He who made for you from the green tree, fire, and then from it you ignite*. Allah guides that it is from green trees that fire or fuel(electricity) can be produced. It requires human being to plant more trees instead of destructing them. A research in Indonesia and Malaysia (Ng, 2010) recently proven that acidic green trees can produce electricity. Many research has been done on the production of biodiesel from palm oil and electricity from biogas. Many of these can be the alternative for the destructive hydro-electric dams. Studies by Christian et.al, (1994) suggested that having energy tree plantations to replace agricultural croplands would give little or no negative impact to the overall avian and animals diversity.

As *khalifah* of this earth, human being should worship Allah by referring to Allah’s guidance in the Quran and see the evidence in the nature and what has been done successfully previously for them to decide what is the best solution for development without destructing the ecosystem of the world.

*Pillar 2: To fulfill the measure and weight that do not deprive people of their due.*

Allah reminded the *khalifah* to *full fill the measure and weight* meaning there should not be any lack nor excessiveness and waste in fulfilling the human needs. Based on Surah 2 verses 240, the basic human needs and rights include food, clothing and shelter. Studies have shown there is clear correlation between hunger with low social behavior which may lead to low education and crime (Murphy. et al. 1998). When human being are deprive of these basic needs there will be consequences in crime where people will strive anything for survival. Murphy et. al. (1998) also highlighted the strong correlation between hunger and low-income families which informs that

in full filling these basic needs it is directly related to the root of the problem which is the economy.

Allah ask us to *measure and weight* so that it create balance in this world. Does the current economic systems create balance or imbalance towards people's life? As simple as the current bank interest system, the amount of money borrowed and the amount needed to be paid is imbalance and create tremendous burden on those who borrowed money. Allah stressed in the Quran in Surah Al-Baqarah 2 verses 276 and Allah used the word '*Allah destroys interest and gives increase for charities. And Allah does not like every sinning disbeliever*'. In Oxford Dictionary 'destroy' means '*end the existence of something*'. This mean the interest banking system should be revisited and replaced totally with a system that promote charity. This is because the Quran already warned human being on danger of interest and its consequences in the ecosystem of human life will be severed if the interest system continuously allowed to be practiced.

The practice of charity system in the economy can be seen during the Uthmaniyah Empire. The Istanbul city was built on charity system known as the *waqf* system. The developments of the *Kulliye* Complexes are based on *waqf*. The *Kulliye* complexes comprises of public facilities such as the masjid, the school, the public kitchen, the caravanserai, the hospital and the public bath. These complexes fulfilled the basic need of human being and those in need are welcome without pay. It created a caring and responsible community towards each other especially the needy. It also promotes sustainable economic development and help to alleviate poverty (Mochammad 2014; Masoud 2015).

The Prophet Muhammad also left an evidence of measure and weight in sustainable development when he built Masjid Nabawi. The *masjid* was built using available surrounding resources that is of palm tree, a renewal material which reduced energy on the transportation of building materials due to it close distance. The building was form based on its function - *form follows function* and of no wastage. And the function meets the demands and needs of the surrounding people with its space for prayers, administration, education, area for the traveller to rest and finally a space for recreation. And the masjid is well link to the market and residential area to full fill the need of the people without creating imbalance to the environment.

However, in the contemporary situation, countries that is known as the cradle for Islam that is Saudi Arabia is recorded by the International Energy Agency as having the energy consumption higher than the GDP and has quite a low level of investment in renewable energy. Pakistan and Malaysia is also a Muslim majority country, pride being an Islamic country also ranked very low in the sustainability measures related to social and environmental aspects. Where have we gone wrong and make us ponder, are the so called Islamic countries currently really worshipping Allah based on the Quran, has we given a thorough measure and weight in our actions or are we not when the result of our practice is contrary from the teaching of the Quran?

Bruntland Commission 1987 highlighted that social and economy are two different pillars interrelated to one another but based on Surah 7 verses 85 both 'social' and 'economy' pillars come under one pillar which is the 'measurement of human needs'.

### 3. Pillar 3: *Cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation*

The next important aspect to achieve sustainable development based on Surah 7: verses 85 is the sensitivity towards the need of the natural ecosystem. Naturally, the ecosystem that Allah created reform or replenish itself from time to time. Allah reminded us not to *cause corruption upon earth after its reformation*, in other words human should not interrupt this replenishing process of the earth. Thus, human being need to be aware and educated about how the ecosystem works so that this process is not interrupted. This would mean a big part on achieving sustainable development is to revisit the education system to include the understanding about ecosystem and our responsibilities towards it. This knowledge is crucial to be instilled in every human being so that our action do not break the chain of this ecosystem that humans are part of. Development that human do on earth should be contributing to the balance of this ecological network (Figure 1).

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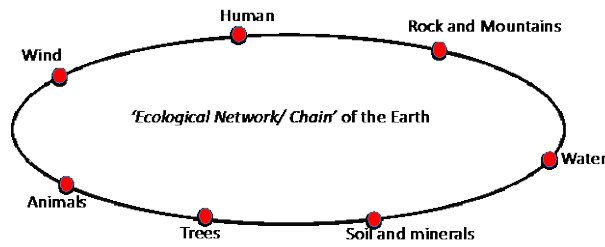


Figure 1: Example of the ecological network

Each creation of God has a role to play to create a balance ecosystem. For all other creation the role for them to play on this earth is 'in built' within them by the Almighty and they continuously perform their role day in day out without fail following the rule of Allah. Trees will know the exact time when to go through the photosynthesis process. The tiger only take the necessary food it needed. Cloud will know when to release the rainfall and the exact amount to release to the earth. As for human being the 'role' for them to play in the ecosystem is written in the Quran. In Surah 45 verse 20 Allah highlighted: *This [Qur'an] is enlightenment for mankind and guidance and mercy for a people who are certain [in faith].*

Only by referring to the Quran, human being would know the exact role to play within the ecosystem and within the same rule with the other creation. It is when the human being do not refer to the Quran they will not know how to perform the role correctly. Therefore, if too many humans do not refer to the Quran as guidance in performing their role on this earth, it will have a negative effect and will soon affect the chain of the whole ecosystem (Figure 2). When one part of this chain is damage, the rest of the creation within the ecosystem becomes imbalance. Allah clearly mentioned in Surah Ar-Rum 30, verse 41 as mentioned earlier.

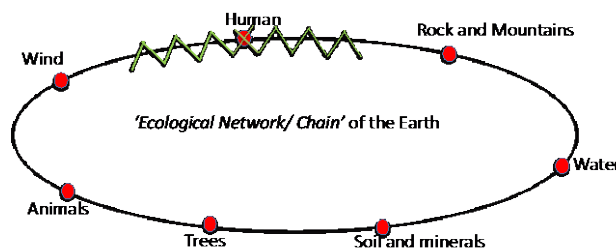


Figure 2: The damage to the ecosystem contributed by the humans

A clear example was when Thailand promoted the agriculture-based economy in 1960s. According to Mittelman (2013) though with the commercialization plan Thailand's economic grew 10% per year, one of the fastest in the world, it ends up with a tremendous toll on the farmers and the health of the watershed. With the high demand from the export to overseas market, more forest are cleared for farming, the application of pesticides and chemical were high which were destructive to the soil. When the soil is not fertile, the rivers were not flowing, the farming cannot be done. Many farmers are out job which later affects the family economy that lead to the increase of social problems in the area. The devastating situation was reverse when they decided to amend the root cause by planting back the forest. An effort which combine Agro-forestry, in which the trees and crops are planted interspersed within the same field, imitating the natural structure of the forest. With the return of the forest, the rivers start to flow, the soil becomes fertile, farmers gain back their income which returns the family's harmony. This explains the significance of not interrupting the reformation of the natural ecosystem and abiding

to the rule already laid within the ecosystem and how the social condition is directly affected by the environmental degradation due to economy.

## 6.0 Discussion- Redefining the Pillars of ‘Sustainable Development’

The difference of the sustainable development pillars by the Brundtland Commission 1987 with the Surah 7 verse 85 is the additional pillar – *to Worship Allah based on the principles based on the Quran*. To achieve sustainable development, each pillar need to be interrelated with each other. Social and economic aspect are co-related with each other because the effects of economy will directly give an impact to the social condition. Based on Surah 7: Verses 85 both social and economy falls under one pillar that is under ‘the measurement of human needs’ (Figure 4), instead of two separate pillars previously (Figure 3). Fulfilling the human needs, will have to be guided by the principles in the Quran so that it will not create imbalance to the whole ecosystem (Figure 4).

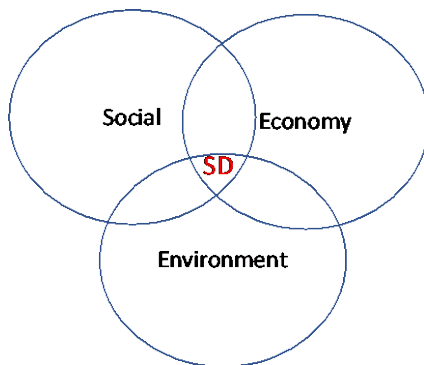


Figure 3 Sustainable Development pillars based on Brundtland Commission  
Note: SD- Sustainable Development

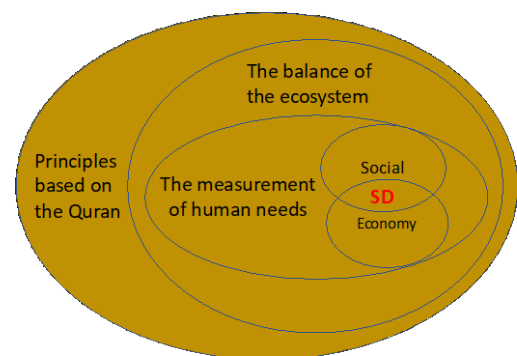


Figure 4 Sustainable development based on Surah 7: Verses 85  
Note: SD- Sustainable Development

## 7.0 Conclusion

The Brundtland commission has underlined three important pillars for sustainable development which is the social, economy and environment. However, it is clear that for more that 40 years the effort to achieve it has not been successful yet is going from bad to worse. The situation will not be able to be corrected if the human being continues the same path that it has gone for the past 40 years based on the three pillars with the definition of “*development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs*”. When by far, The Creator has mentioned 1400 years ago, that as human being created by Him, the only way to govern this world is by His rule and principles which are in the Quran. This paper suggests the pillars of sustainable development by Brundtland Commission be amplified by including ‘*The principles based on the Quran*’ as the umbrella to all development. With a revision on the definition of sustainable development as “*development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs within the balance of ecosystem based on the principles of the Quran*’. The definition is hope to guide future development to continuously refer to the Quran as a guide in every aspect of decision that will impact human being and the environment.



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