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Environmental Responsibility as a Civilizational Trust in Islamic Thought: An Islamic Ethical Critique of Sustainable Development

BOUDAOUD SOUHILA*
Laboratory of Sustainable Development Engineering, University Responsibility and Social Integration" IDDRUIS", Mohamed Ben Ahmed University of Oran 2, (Algeria)
Boudaoud.souhila.algeria@gmail.com

FERHAOUI MUSTAPHA
Laboratory of Sustainable Development Engineering, University Responsibility and Social Integration" IDDRUIS", Mohamed Ben Ahmed University of Oran 2, (Algeria)
Mustapha.ferhaoui@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This article examines how Islamic thought constructs environmental responsibility as a civilizational trust and evaluates the implications for contemporary sustainability governance. Employing a qualitative, normative, and interpretive methodology, the study analyzes Qur'anic concepts (khalīfah, amānah, mīzān, ʿadl, fasād, ḥisāb) and classical juristic principles (maṣlaḥah, ḍarar, moderation) to develop an integrated ethical framework. The analysis reveals that Islamic environmental ethics establishes responsibility as a theological obligation rather than discretionary corporate preference, challenges the separation of facts from values, and provides criteria for assessing corporate conduct beyond compliance and disclosure. The study concludes that ESG and CSR frameworks require substantive moral foundations—truthfulness, justice, prevention of harm, and accountability—to avoid reductionism. Islamic thought offers sustainable development a deeper account of why ecological limits, justice, and intergenerational responsibility must govern economic power.

Keywords: Environmental Responsibility; Sustainability; Islamic Ethics; Stewardship (Khalīfah); Moral Accountability.

* **Corresponding author.**

1. Introduction

Environmental degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, and the depletion of natural resources have exposed the limitations of development models that treat economic growth as the primary measure of progress. These problems are not only technical or managerial. They also concern the moral purposes of economic activity, the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, the duties owed to future generations, and the assumptions through which human beings understand nature. Sustainable development therefore requires more than improved technologies, reporting systems, or regulatory instruments; it requires a conception of responsibility capable of explaining why environmental protection is morally binding.

In contemporary policy and business discourse, sustainability is commonly operationalized through governance, disclosure, risk management, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) assessment. These instruments have contributed to transparency and have encouraged firms to recognize environmental risks. Nevertheless, recent scholarship shows that ESG remains affected by divergent definitions, inconsistent measurement practices, the use of different data providers, and unresolved questions concerning the social and governance dimensions of corporate performance.[1] The literature on ESG has consequently moved beyond asking whether firms disclose sustainability information to examining who defines the relevant indicators, how performance is measured, and whether quantification can adequately represent responsibility.[2] Similar concerns arise in relation to CSR, particularly when voluntary commitments become instruments of reputation management or selective disclosure rather than evidence of substantive ecological transformation.[3]

Against this background, scholars have increasingly examined the relationship between sustainability governance, religion, and moral worldviews. Recent research on religion and sustainability suggests that faith communities possess cultural, institutional, and material resources that may support environmental action, while also warning that religious organizations do not automatically become innovative environmental actors and may sometimes follow rather than lead wider societal change.[4] Work on climate

[1] Alice Martiny, Jonathan Taglialatela, Francesco Testa, and Fabio Iraldo, "Determinants of Environmental Social and Governance (ESG) Performance: A Systematic Literature Review," pp. 1-3.
[2] Spenser Robinson and Michael G. McIntosh, "A Literature Review of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) in Commercial Real Estate", pp. 54–67.
[3] Mathieu Gomes, Sylvain Marsat, Jonathan Peillex, and Guillaume Pijourlet, "Does Religiosity Influence Corporate Greenwashing Behavior?", pp. 1-4.
[4] Jens Koehrsen, Ann-Lea Buzzi, and Adam Hearn, "Are Religious Organizations Becoming Green? Faith Communities' Role in Advancing Environmental Sustainability in Switzerland,", pp. 657–674.

governance likewise argues that religious perspectives have been insufficiently integrated into policy debates, despite the capacity of faith-based organizations to mobilize shared values, support adaptation, and participate in partnerships for urban climate action.[5] Empirical studies have further shown that religious norms can influence corporate environmental behavior: religion has been associated with lower firm pollution in some institutional contexts,[6] and religious adherence has been found to reduce corporate greenwashing through social-norm and risk-aversion mechanisms.[7] These studies are important because they demonstrate that religion can shape organizational conduct, yet they do not by themselves provide a systematic account of the theological, epistemological, and civilizational principles that define environmental responsibility in Islamic thought. *:*

Regarding Islamic environmental ethics, classical and modern discussions have highlighted the Qur'anic and Prophetic foundations of stewardship, trust, balance, moderation, justice, and the prevention of harm. Recent work emphasizes that Islamic environmental ethics is not limited to a general appeal for conservation but includes conceptual and practical resources for environmental justice and sustainable development.[8] Other recent studies connect Islamic environmental thought with climate responsibility and argue that concepts such as khilāfah and mīzān can provide a moral language for ecological action.[9] At the same time, the wider literature often concentrates on one of three dimensions: the interpretation of scriptural principles, the formulation of Islamic legal rules concerning environmental protection, or the environmental behavior of individuals and communities. These contributions have established the relevance of Islam to ecological ethics, but the relationship between Islamic moral concepts and the legitimacy, power, and accountability of modern corporations remains comparatively underdeveloped.

The present article addresses this unresolved problem. Its specific research gap lies in the absence of an integrated analysis that brings together four dimensions: Qur'anic environmental concepts; the epistemological assumptions underlying the human–nature relationship; the civilizational and institutional experience of Islamic societies; and the moral status of corporations as collective economic actors. Existing studies have discussed stewardship, trust, balance, and non-harm, while other studies have examined

[5] Christopher D. Ives and Christopher Baker, "Engaging Faith for a Sustainable Urban Future,", pp. 1-3.
[6] Jianpei Li, Shaoxuan Zhai, and Xi Li, "Religion and Enterprise Pollution Behavior: Evidence from China", pp. 1-6.
[7] Gomes, Marsat, Peillex, and Pijourlet, op. cit, pp. 1-4.
[8] Muhammad Yaseen Gada, *Islam and Environmental Ethics*.
[9] Naseeruddin Mahar and Jawed Ahmed, "Climate Change and Environmental Ethics in Islam: A Global Responsibility Analyzing Islamic Teachings on Stewardship (Khilāfah) and Sustainability," pp. 92–101.

ESG measurement, CSR disclosure, greenwashing, or the role of religion in environmental behavior. What remains insufficiently explored is how these strands can be connected into a coherent Islamic conception of corporate environmental responsibility that evaluates not only measurable outcomes but also intention, legitimacy, justice, moderation, and accountability before Allah. This article advances existing scholarship by treating environmental responsibility as a civilizational trust rather than as an external compliance obligation, and by using Islamic concepts to critically reassess the moral and epistemological limits of contemporary sustainability governance.

Environmental responsibility refers here to the duties governing human and institutional use of the natural world, including the obligation to prevent harm and preserve ecological balance. Civilizational trust translates the idea that environmental duties are not merely private virtues but responsibilities embedded in the organization of economic life, law, institutions, and collective power. Islamic thought refers to the interconnected resources of the Qur'an, Prophetic guidance, Islamic jurisprudence, moral theology, and the intellectual heritage of Muslim civilization. Sustainable development is used in its contemporary institutional sense, namely the attempt to reconcile economic and social development with environmental protection and intergenerational responsibility. The article does not reject sustainable development, CSR, or ESG as practical instruments; rather, it asks whether such instruments possess a sufficient moral foundation and how they may be reassessed through an Islamic ethical and epistemological framework.

The article therefore asks the following central question: How does Islamic thought construct environmental responsibility as a civilizational trust, and what implications does this construction have for evaluating contemporary sustainability governance and corporate environmental responsibility? It advances three related propositions. First, the Qur'anic concepts of khalīfah, amānah, mīzān, iṣlāḥ, fasād, and ḥisāb establish environmental responsibility as a moral and theological obligation rather than a discretionary corporate preference. Second, Islamic epistemology challenges the separation of environmental facts from moral values by understanding knowledge, human agency, and economic activity within a unified order of truth, justice, and accountability. Third, the principles of maṣlaḥah, ḍarar, moderation, and public welfare provide a basis for viewing corporations as collective moral actors whose legitimacy cannot be determined solely by legal status, profitability, disclosure, or ESG performance.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, normative, and interpretive design. This approach is appropriate because the research question concerns the meanings, normative implications, and internal relationships of ethical concepts rather than the measurement of a causal effect or the evaluation of a particular policy. The Qur'anic material is selected according to four criteria: first, direct reference to human stewardship or succession on earth; second, explicit reference to balance, measure, corruption, harm, or restoration; third, relevance to the regulation of consumption and economic conduct; and fourth, interpretive usefulness for relating theological principles to environmental responsibility. On this basis, the analysis focuses principally on passages associated with khalīfah, amānah, mīzān, fasād, iṣlāḥ, isrāf, and the prohibition of harm, including Qur'an 2:30, 7:31, 7:56, 30:41, 55:7–9, and 57:7.[10] These verses are not treated as isolated environmental statements; they are read as parts of a broader moral vocabulary concerning creation, human agency, justice, and accountability.

The selection of classical scholars follows a complementary criterion. The study considers scholars whose works provide either a direct ethical-juridical principle relevant to environmental conduct or a broader account of law, public welfare, knowledge, and moral agency. Al-Shāṭibī[11] is used for the maqāṣid-oriented relationship between law, welfare, and human action; al-Ghazālī[12] and Ibn Taymiyyah[13] are used for principles of moderation, public benefit, and the prevention of harm; and classical juristic reasoning is examined for its relevance to collective responsibility. Modern Islamic thinkers, especially Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas[14], are included because they address the spiritual and epistemological dimensions of the modern ecological crisis. The purpose is not to claim that these scholars developed a modern theory of corporate environmental responsibility, but to reconstruct principles that can be critically applied to the contemporary corporate context.

Textual interpretation proceeds through four stages. First, the relevant Arabic concepts are identified and examined in their immediate Qur'anic or juridical context. Second, recurring ethical meanings are grouped thematically under stewardship, trust, balance, justice, non-harm, moderation, and accountability. Third, these themes are interpreted in relation to the distinction between instrumental and moral rationality, while avoiding the projection of modern corporate categories directly onto premodern

[10] Qur'an 2:30, 7:31, 7:56, 30:41, 55:7–9, and 57:7.
[11] Al-Shāṭibī, Abū Isḥāq, *Al-Muwāfaqāt fī Uṣūl al-Sharīʿah*.
[12] Al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*
[13] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, Vol. 29, n.p.; https://www.hasbunallaah.com/majmoo-al-fatawa-ibn-taymiyyah/
[14] Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*.

texts. Fourth, the reconstructed principles are compared critically with contemporary sustainability governance, ESG, and CSR. This procedure combines close conceptual reading with contextual interpretation and normative comparison. It also recognizes the limits of the study: it does not claim to offer a statistical test of corporate behavior, a complete history of Islamic environmental practice, or a single uncontested Islamic position.

The article makes three principal contributions. The first is conceptual: it organizes key Qur'anic and Islamic ethical concepts into an integrated account of environmental responsibility as trust, balance, and accountability. The second is epistemological and critical: it explains why measurement, disclosure, and compliance, although useful, cannot by themselves exhaust the meaning of responsibility, particularly where environmental harm is cumulative, indirect, or legally tolerated. The third is institutional and applied: it extends Islamic environmental ethics to the problem of corporations as collective moral actors and identifies principles—public welfare, prevention of harm, moderation, intention, and ecological justice—that may guide a more ethically grounded form of sustainability governance. In this respect, the study complements recent empirical research on religious influence over corporate conduct without reducing Islamic ethics to a behavioral variable or a reputational instrument.[15]

The significance of the study is therefore both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to the dialogue among Islamic ethics, environmental philosophy, climate ethics, and sustainability governance by showing that religious traditions are not merely sources of individual motivation but also frameworks for evaluating institutions and economic power. Practically, it offers a normative basis for reassessing corporate environmental policies in contexts where Muslim ethical and religious commitments are socially influential. The argument is not that Islamic principles should replace scientific knowledge, public regulation, or ESG tools. Rather, it is that these instruments should be situated within a richer moral framework in which environmental limits, justice, intergenerational responsibility, and accountability are treated as substantive obligations.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework by examining sustainability, responsibility, Qur'anic concepts, collective moral agency, and Islamic epistemology. Section 3 interprets environmental responsibility as a civilizational duty and discusses nature as trust, ethical limits on economic activity, the moral status of corporations, and relevant institutions of classical Islamic civilization. Section 4 examines the implications for corporate environmental

[15] Ives and Baker, op.cit. pp. 1-3; Gomes, Marsat, Peillex, and Pijourlet, op.cit, pp. 1-4.

responsibility, including the transition from compliance to moral responsibility, ethical limits on corporate power, and the limits of contemporary ESG and CSR frameworks. Section 4 concludes the paper.

2 .Theoretical Framework: Sustainability and Responsibility in Islamic Thought

2.1. Literature Review: Islamic Environmental Ethics, Sustainability Governance, and Corporate Responsibility

The literature relevant to this study develops across four partially connected conversations. The first examines Islamic environmental ethics through Qur'anic concepts such as khalīfah (stewardship or vicegerency), amānah (trust), mīzān (balance), ʿadl (justice), and the prohibition of fasād (corruption or disorder). The second studies sustainability governance as a field involving states, corporations, civil-society organizations, communities, and non-state moral actors. The third evaluates CSR and ESG as institutional mechanisms for organizing corporate responsibility. The fourth addresses the role of religion in climate ethics and sustainability. The present article brings these conversations together, while recognizing that they do not all make the same claims about nature, human agency, or institutional responsibility.

Early modern Islamic environmental scholarship, particularly the work of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, interpreted the ecological crisis as a spiritual and epistemological crisis. On this view, the reduction of nature to an object of economic use is connected to the desacralization of knowledge and the separation of science from metaphysics.[16] Fazlun Khalid and other Muslim environmental thinkers developed a more practical vocabulary around stewardship, moderation, conservation, and the moral limits of consumption.[17] These approaches established a valuable foundation: environmental protection is not an optional policy preference but part of a religiously grounded account of human responsibility.

Recent scholarship has expanded and also complicated this foundation. Muhammad Yaseen Gada's recent treatment of Islamic environmental ethics presents Islamic culture and civilization as containing both conceptual and operational resources for environmental justice and sustainable development.[18] A related line of work seeks to recover environmental and economic traditions in the Islamic world, thereby showing

[16] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1968.
[17] Fazlun M. Khalid, "Islam and the Environment," pp. 332-339.
[18] Muhammad Yaseen Gada, *Islam and Environmental Ethics*.

that ecological responsibility can be embodied in institutions rather than confined to individual piety.[19] The 2025 bibliometric study by Husamah and colleagues similarly indicates that research on Islam and sustainability has grown substantially, but that the literature remains uneven: Islamic finance and general sustainability themes are prominent, whereas deeper theological concepts and empirical environmental practices remain less systematically connected.[20] This finding is important for the present study because it suggests that the field has expanded in quantity without fully resolving the relationship between Islamic moral concepts, institutional governance, and measurable environmental outcomes.

The literature also contains significant internal disagreement. One interpretation treats khalīfah primarily as a mandate for responsible human stewardship. This interpretation is normatively powerful because it establishes duties of care, restraint, and accountability. Yet it may remain anthropocentric if nature is valued only because human beings are responsible for managing it. Another interpretation emphasizes the intrinsic spiritual significance of creation and regards the natural world as a field of divine signs rather than a collection of resources. Nasr's metaphysical approach is the clearest example of this position. Its strength is that it questions the modern assumption that nature has value only when converted into human welfare; its limitation is that its highly metaphysical language may be difficult to translate into public regulation or corporate decision-making.

A third interpretation is legal and institutional. It emphasizes maṣlaḥah (public welfare), ḍarar (harm), ḥimā (protected land), waqf (endowment), water rights, and the regulation of common resources. Its contribution is practical: it shows how ethical principles can be embodied in rules and institutions. Its limitation is that a legal framework may protect resources without fully addressing the spiritual and epistemological assumptions that generate excessive consumption. A fourth, increasingly critical interpretation argues that Islamic ecotheology has too often remained ethical and apologetic, presenting Islam as already possessing the solution to the ecological crisis without sufficiently examining contested interpretations, theological anthropology, power, colonial history, and the Anthropocene. Sevcan Öztürk argues that current Islamic ecotheology frequently defines the human being through functional responsibility while lacking a sufficiently developed account of

[19] Muhammad Yaseen Gada, "Book Review: Recovering Environmental and Economic Traditions in the Islamic World," pp. 123–143.
[20] Husamah, Abdulkadir Rahardjanto, Tutut Indria Permana, and Nurdiyah Lestari, "Islam and Sustainability Issues, How Far Has the Relationship Progressed? A Bibliometric Analysis," pp. 1-5.

humanity's ontological status within creation.[21] This critique does not invalidate Islamic environmental ethics; rather, it demands that the field become more self-critical and comparative.

These disagreements are mirrored in the wider religion-and-sustainability literature. Religion may provide moral motivation, social networks, local legitimacy, and institutional capacity, but religious organizations do not automatically become effective environmental actors. They may support sustainability, remain passive, or even reinforce established economic and political interests.[22] Ives and Baker therefore argue for a framework of religious–civic partnership rather than assuming that faith communities are inherently environmentally progressive.[23] Empirical research provides a similarly qualified picture. Li, Zhai, and Li find that religious institutions can be associated with lower enterprise pollution in particular Chinese contexts, especially where formal institutions are weak.[24] Gomes and colleagues find that religiosity is associated with less corporate greenwashing in a U.S. sample, but explain the relationship through social norms and risk aversion rather than through a specifically Islamic theology.[25] These studies demonstrate that religious norms may affect organizational conduct; they do not establish that religious identity alone produces environmental responsibility.

The sustainability-governance literature further cautions against treating values as a substitute for institutions. Contemporary governance depends on regulation, monitoring, disclosure, stakeholder participation, scientific expertise, and accountability mechanisms. ESG and CSR can make corporate impacts more visible, but they also face inconsistent definitions, divergent rating methodologies, incomplete social and governance measures, and the risk that disclosure will become detached from substantive change.[26] A critical Islamic perspective should therefore avoid two symmetrical errors: it should not dismiss ESG and CSR as inherently secular and useless, and it should not accept their indicators as a complete account of moral responsibility. The more defensible position is that such instruments can provide information and procedural accountability but require a prior ethical framework that establishes what counts as harm, justice, sufficiency, and legitimate economic activity.

[21] Sevcan Öztürk, "Islamic Ecotheology and the Anthropocene Challenge: Ethical Limits and Theological Possibilities," pp. 375–396.
[22] Jens Koehrsen, Ann-Lea Buzzi, and Adam Hearn, op.cit, pp. 657–674.
[23] Christopher D. Ives and Christopher Baker, op.cit, pp. 1-3.
[24] Jianpei Li, Shaoxuan Zhai, and Xi Li, op.cit, pp. 1-6.
[25] Mathieu Gomes, Sylvain Marsat, Jonathan Peillex, and Guillaume Pijourlet, op.cit, pp. 1-4.
[26] Spenser Robinson and Michael G. McIntosh, op.cit, pp. 54–67.

The research gap addressed in this article is consequently specific. Previous scholarship has interpreted Islamic environmental principles, recovered historical institutions, examined religion's influence on environmental conduct, and criticized the limitations of ESG and CSR. What remains insufficiently developed is a comparative framework that connects these contributions to the relationship between environmental responsibility and sustainable development at the level of collective economic power. In particular, the literature rarely explains how Islamic concepts can evaluate corporate environmental claims, distinguish substantive responsibility from symbolic disclosure, and relate ecological limits to the social and economic objectives of sustainable development. This article fills that gap by interpreting environmental responsibility as a civilizational trust and by placing Islamic ethics in critical dialogue with sustainability governance rather than presenting it as a self-contained or uncontested alternative.

2.2. Sustainability Beyond Instrumental Rationality

Sustainable development is commonly understood as an effort to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In institutional practice, however, sustainability is often translated into indicators of efficiency, risk management, long-term financial value, emissions reduction, supply-chain control, and reporting. These tools are necessary, but they can turn sustainability into a managerial language in which the environment is protected primarily when degradation creates a measurable risk to firms, investors, consumers, or state capacity.

Islamic thought offers a different starting point. Environmental protection is not justified only by its contribution to long-term economic utility. The created order has moral significance because it is neither random nor spiritually empty. The Qur'anic language of mīzān presents balance as a principle of creation and as a norm limiting human action.[27][28] The Qur'anic condemnation of fasād links social and environmental disorder to human conduct rather than treating ecological damage as an external accident.[29][30] This does not mean that Islamic ethics rejects calculation, science, or efficient administration. It means that efficiency is subordinate to justice, and that measurable performance cannot by itself determine whether an action is legitimate.

This distinction is especially important for sustainable development. The three familiar dimensions of sustainable development—economic prosperity, social well-being, and environmental protection—are often presented as co-equal objectives that

[27] Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (1996), *Religion and the Order of Nature*, pp. 191-192.
[28] Fazlun M. Khalid, op.cit, pp. 332-339.
[29] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, op.cit. pp, 191-193.
[30] Muhammad Yaseen Gada, *Islam and Environmental Ethics*.

can be balanced through technical policy. Islamic thought adds a normative question: are the ends being pursued themselves just, and are the means compatible with the limits of creation? Economic growth that increases aggregate wealth while displacing pollution onto poor communities, exhausting water reserves, or imposing risks on future generations may satisfy a narrow development metric while violating amānah and ʿadl. Sustainability therefore requires not only intergenerational calculation but also a moral account of sufficiency, distribution, and responsibility.

2.3. Qur'anic Concepts Underpinning Environmental Responsibility

The concept of khalīfah is central but should not be interpreted as a license for domination. Human vicegerency denotes delegated authority, which is limited by the purposes and conditions of the trust. The human being is therefore neither the absolute owner of nature nor a passive element without agency. The ethical task is to exercise power within divine limits, preserve balance, and prevent harm.

Amānah deepens this account by framing responsibility as a trust that precedes legal enforcement. It includes duties toward other people, non-human life, shared resources, and future generations. A corporation that legally discharges pollution but knowingly transfers risks to a community may satisfy a narrow rule while violating the broader meaning of trust. The relevant question is not only whether the activity is permitted but also whether the actor has exercised power faithfully and avoided foreseeable injury.

Mīzān, ʿadl, and moderation establish the limits of excess. The Qur'an's warning against excess in consumption and its command not to disturb the balance indicate that environmental responsibility is connected to the regulation of desire and production.[31][32] Isrāf is not simply waste in the technical sense; it is a moral pattern in which consumption exceeds legitimate need and treats abundance as an unlimited entitlement. In corporate practice, this principle raises questions about planned obsolescence, excessive extraction, wasteful supply chains, and business models dependent on permanently increasing consumption.

Fasād names the contrary condition. It includes corruption, disorder, and the deterioration of the conditions that make human and ecological life possible. The Qur'an's association of visible corruption on land and sea with human action provides a strong basis for interpreting environmental degradation as a moral and institutional problem.[33][34] The concept should nevertheless be used carefully. It does not authorize

[31] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, op.cit, 191-194.
[32] Muhammad Yaseen Gada, op.cit pp. 123-124.
[33] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, op.cit. 191-194.
[34] Husamah, Abdulkadir Rahardjanto, Tutut Indria Permana, and Nurdiyah Lestari, op.cit, pp. 1-5.

every critic to label any development project sinful without evidence. A responsible interpretation requires attention to causation, scale, necessity, distributive effects, reversibility, and the availability of less harmful alternatives.

2.4. Responsibility, Accountability, and Collective Moral Agency

Classical Islamic law did not theorize the modern corporation in its current legal form, but it developed principles relevant to collective economic activity. Maṣlaḥah requires attention to public welfare; ḍarar prohibits the infliction of harm; and ḥisāb requires accountability for conduct. These principles can be extended to corporations only through a transparent act of contemporary reasoning. The article does not claim that classical jurists directly anticipated multinational corporations. It argues instead that their principles provide criteria for judging institutions whose decisions affect persons beyond the immediate decision-makers.

Corporate moral agency should therefore be understood as distributed rather than purely individual. Directors, managers, investors, employees, auditors, regulators, and consumers occupy different positions of responsibility. A corporation cannot discharge its obligations by assigning environmental concerns to a compliance department while its central business model continues to generate foreseeable harm. Islamic ethics directs attention to intention, but intention is not a substitute for consequences. A firm cannot claim good intention while ignoring measurable pollution, nor can it claim moral legitimacy merely because a harmful activity is formally legal.

2.5. Islamic Epistemology and the Limits of Modern Sustainability Paradigms

Islamic epistemology challenges the rigid separation of fact and value without rejecting empirical knowledge. Revelation, reason, observation, and experience can cooperate within a unified search for truth and justice. The ethical significance of knowledge lies in its proper use. Al-Attas describes the modern crisis partly as a crisis of knowledge and adab, while Nasr interprets ecological degradation as a symptom of the loss of a sacred understanding of nature.[35][36] These arguments are valuable, but they should not be treated as the only legitimate Islamic interpretation. A metaphysical critique must be connected to institutions, law, political economy, and the material distribution of environmental harms.

This is where the critical contribution of Öztürk is important. If Islamic environmental discourse speaks only of human responsibility without examining the

[35] Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, op.cit.
[36] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, op.cit. 191-194.

meaning of the human being, it risks reproducing the anthropocentrism that it seeks to correct.[37][38] Conversely, if it speaks only of sacred nature without specifying mechanisms of accountability, it may remain rhetorically compelling but institutionally weak. The present study adopts a middle position: it preserves the theological depth of trust and creation while translating those principles into questions of corporate power, evidence, governance, and sustainable development.

2.6. Translation, Interpretation, and Use of Sources

Unless otherwise indicated, the English renderings of Qur'anic concepts and verses in this article are the author's translations or close paraphrases from the Arabic text. Qur'anic references are therefore cited by sūrah and verse rather than by page number. When the article discusses Western scholarship published in English, it relies on the authors' original English texts; the discussion is paraphrased in English and is not presented as a quotation from a translated edition. Where a direct quotation is required, it will be reproduced from the original English-language publication and identified as such. Arabic technical terms are transliterated consistently, with the English meaning supplied at first use. This distinction is important because an author's translation of a Qur'anic or Arabic expression is an interpretive act, whereas paraphrasing an English-language Western source is a summary of the original text rather than a translation from another language.

2.7. Implications for ESG, CSR, and Sustainable Development

The Islamic critique of ESG and CSR is not a rejection of disclosure, stakeholder engagement, environmental management, or corporate accountability. It is a critique of reductionism. ESG systems can improve the availability of information, but the existence of a score does not prove that a company has prevented harm. CSR programs can finance community projects, but charitable activity does not compensate automatically for pollution, unsafe labor, excessive extraction, or misleading environmental claims.

Recent regulatory examples make this limitation concrete. In 2023, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission found that a Deutsche Bank subsidiary had made materially misleading statements about the controls used to incorporate ESG factors into investment research and recommendations. The firm had marketed itself as a leader in ESG and advertised that ESG was in its "DNA," yet the SEC found that it had not adequately implemented certain provisions of the policy it had represented to clients and

[37] Sevcan Öztürk, op.cit, pp. 375–396.
[38] Jens Koehrsen, Ann-Lea Buzzi, and Adam Hearn, op.cit, pp. 657–674.

investors. The firm agreed to pay a $19 million penalty for the ESG misstatements matter.[39] The example does not prove that ESG is inherently deceptive; it demonstrates that ESG language can become disconnected from organizational practice when claims are not supported by effective internal controls.

A second example concerns Vale, a mining company whose dam collapsed in Brazil in 2019, killing 270 people. In remarks on ESG enforcement, the SEC stated that Vale had represented in filings, sustainability reports, and ESG webinars that the dam was safe and stable, while allegedly concealing warning signs and manipulating safety audits. Vale agreed to pay more than $55 million to settle the SEC's charges.[40] The Islamic relevance of this example is direct. A public statement of safety cannot satisfy amānah if the institution conceals evidence of danger; a favorable ESG narrative cannot excuse fasād when the underlying activity creates grave and foreseeable harm.

The Federal Trade Commission's Green Guides provide a further illustration of the problem of environmental marketing. The Guides warn that companies must substantiate environmental claims and account for how consumers are likely to interpret claims such as "green," "renewable," "recyclable," or "carbon offset."[41] The need for such guidance shows that the market does not reliably distinguish genuine environmental performance from persuasive language. From an Islamic perspective, misleading environmental marketing implicates ṣidq (truthfulness), amānah, and the prohibition of deception. It also reveals why intention and disclosure must be joined to verifiable effects: an advertisement can be technically careful while still directing consumers toward an unjustly favorable understanding of a product's environmental impact.

These examples support a qualified reformulation of corporate sustainability. First, ESG indicators should be treated as evidence rather than as moral verdicts. Second, companies should disclose negative as well as positive environmental information, including indirect and supply-chain impacts. Third, governance should include mechanisms for affected communities and future generations, not only investors. Fourth, sustainability claims should be tested against the principles of necessity, proportionality, prevention of harm, and public welfare. Finally, corporate legitimacy should depend on whether the organization's core activities are compatible with

[39]U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, Deutsche Bank Subsidiary DWS to Pay $25 Million, https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2023-194 (Last accessed: August 28, 2026).
[40] Jianpei Li et al., op. cit., pp. 1–8.
[41]U.S.Federal Trade Commission, Environmentally Friendly Products: FTC's Green Guides, https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/topics/truth-advertising/green-guides (Last accessed: August 28, 2026).

environmental limits, rather than on whether it has created an attractive CSR program around an otherwise harmful business model.

3. Environmental Responsibility as a Civilizational Duty

Environmental responsibility in Islamic thought is not limited to personal virtue. It concerns the organization of collective life and therefore includes law, markets, administration, technology, education, and the institutions through which resources are distributed. The adjective "civilizational" is used here in a precise sense: environmental responsibility must be embedded in the purposes and structures of social life rather than added as a public-relations supplement to economic activity.

3.1. Nature as a Moral and Spiritual Trust

Nature has moral significance in Islamic thought because creation is a sign of divine wisdom and order. This does not require treating nature as a person or denying the legitimate human use of resources. It requires rejecting the idea that usefulness exhausts value. The natural world can be used, but use is bounded by trust, moderation, justice, and non-harm.

This framework also avoids an uncritical romanticization of the past. Classical Muslim societies experienced conflict, inequality, resource depletion, and environmental pressures. Their institutions should not be presented as perfect models for contemporary governance. Their importance lies in the principles they embodied and the questions they raise: who controls common resources, who bears environmental costs, how are vulnerable communities protected, and what limits are placed on private power? Contemporary Islamic environmental ethics becomes stronger when they learn from these institutions without claiming that historical practice was uniformly sustainable.

3.2. Economic Activity and Ethical Limits

Islamic civilization recognized trade, agriculture, manufacturing, and wealth creation as legitimate parts of social life, but economic activity was not treated as morally independent. The prohibition of harm limits otherwise permissible conduct, while maṣlaḥah requires decision-makers to consider the welfare of the wider community. In this sense, sustainable development can be accepted as a useful policy objective when it is interpreted as development within ecological and moral limits rather than development at any cost.

The relationship between environmental responsibility and sustainable development is therefore complementary but critical. Sustainable development contributes a language

of intergenerational responsibility, institutional planning, and social coordination. Islamic ethics contributes a substantive account of why limits bind, why future generations matter, why vulnerable communities deserve protection, and why economic success cannot legitimate fasād. The Islamic contribution is not to replace the Sustainable Development Goals or environmental science, but to provide criteria for evaluating whether development is just, necessary, proportionate, and consistent with the trust of creation.

3.3. Corporations as Collective Actors

Modern corporations possess legal personality, financial resources, technological capacity, and political influence on a scale unknown to classical jurists. These features make them collective actors with distinctive responsibilities. Corporate decisions can alter watersheds, labor conditions, food systems, atmospheric emissions, and the distribution of environmental risk. Their moral evaluation must therefore consider not only the conduct of individual executives but also institutional design, incentives, ownership, supply chains, and the effects of aggregated decisions.

An Islamic framework would assess corporations through at least five questions. First, does the activity serve a genuine public need or merely stimulate unnecessary consumption? Second, does it preserve or damage mīzān? Third, does it distribute benefits and harms justly? Fourth, does it disclose material risks truthfully? Fifth, does it provide remedy when harm occurs? These questions connect theology to governance without pretending that Qur'anic concepts are ready-made technical standards. They require interpretation, evidence, and institutional translation.

3.4. Institutions of Environmental Responsibility in Islamic Civilization

Historical Islamic institutions demonstrate that environmental responsibility can be civilizational when ethical principles are embodied in administration. The ḥimā system protected designated areas from unrestricted use and regulated grazing, water, and communal resources. Its contemporary relevance is not that every ḥimā rule can simply be copied, but that ecological protection can be organized as a public responsibility rather than left entirely to private ownership or market incentives.

Waqf institutions likewise supported public goods over time. Endowments could finance water infrastructure, agricultural land, gardens, schools, roads, and charitable services. Their value for contemporary sustainability lies in the principle of intergenerational stewardship: assets are managed so that benefits extend beyond the immediate donor or generation.[42] This principle can inform modern forms of green

[42] Fazlun M. Khalid, op.cit, pp. 332-339.

endowment, community energy, watershed protection, and social investment, although such applications require contemporary legal and financial safeguards.

Water governance provides another illustration. Islamic jurists developed rules concerning access, priority, waste, neighborhood rights, and the prevention of injury. These rules reveal that resource governance is inseparable from justice. They also show why environmental ethics cannot be reduced to individual consumption choices. Water scarcity is a question of institutions, infrastructure, public authority, and distributive fairness.

Agriculture and urban planning similarly involved practical knowledge of land, soil, irrigation, shade, ventilation, and public health. Andrew Watson's study of agricultural innovation in the early Islamic world demonstrates the importance of irrigation and crop knowledge in the development of Muslim societies.[43] Such achievements should not be converted into a simplistic claim that classical Islamic civilization was environmentally sustainable by modern standards. They should instead be read as evidence that technical knowledge and ethical governance can operate together.

3.5. Civilizational Duty and the Contemporary Sustainability Agenda

A civilizational approach changes the meaning of sustainability in three ways. First, it shifts responsibility from isolated consumers to institutions that organize production and consumption. Second, it links environmental protection to justice, public welfare, and accountability rather than treating it as a separate technical sector. Third, it recognizes that moral traditions can contribute to sustainability governance without being romanticized or treated as beyond criticism.

The article's central claim is therefore neither that Islamic thought offers a complete substitute for contemporary sustainability governance nor that ESG and CSR are without value. The claim is that a sustainable development model becomes ethically incomplete when it measures environmental performance without asking whether the underlying economic order respects balance, limits, truthfulness, and the rights of affected communities. Islamic thought contributes a civilizational vocabulary through which corporations, states, and communities can be judged not merely by compliance or reputation but by their fidelity to the trust of creation.

4. Implications for Corporate Environmental Responsibility

An important implication of the Islamic civilizational paradigm outlined above concerns the definition and practice of corporate environmental responsibility. Rather than treating sustainability as an external constraint imposed on economic actors, the Islamic tradition places environmental responsibility at the center of moral and economic life. This approach requires corporations to be evaluated according to a morally justified conception of responsibility, not merely according to compliance, disclosure, or reputation.

[43] Andrew M. Watson, *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World*.

Within an Islamic worldview, the legitimacy of corporations as collective economic entities derives not only from their legal status or economic efficiency but also from their adherence to moral and social purposes. Environmental responsibility is therefore not an optional addition to corporate activity; it is one of its constitutive requirements.

4.1. From Compliance to Moral Responsibility

Contemporary models of corporate environmental responsibility rely heavily on compliance, disclosure, auditing, and stakeholder demands. These mechanisms can reduce environmental harm, but their functional character limits their ethical reach. In many cases, responsibility is framed in terms of risk minimization, economic rationality, investor protection, or reputation management rather than as an intrinsic moral obligation.[44]

By contrast, Islamic responsibility is connected to accountability before Allah (ḥisāb). Corporate activity must be evaluated not only by its outcomes but also by its intentions, methods, and conformity with principles such as justice (ʿadl), balance (mīzān), moderation, and the prevention of harm (ḍarar).[45] This does not make external enforcement unnecessary. Rather, it places regulation within a broader ethical framework. Compliance becomes a minimum threshold, not the complete meaning of responsibility.

A corporation may comply with a legal emissions limit and still act irresponsibly if it knowingly transfers environmental risks to vulnerable communities, conceals material information, or pursues unnecessary production that causes foreseeable harm. Ethical validity therefore depends on whether corporate practices preserve ecological balance, protect affected persons, and prevent corruption (fasād), not simply on whether they satisfy formal rules.

4.2. Ethical Limits on Corporate Power and Environmental Exploitation

The first implication of the Islamic framework is that corporations are subject to intrinsic ethical limits. The Qur'anic emphasis on balance and its condemnation of corruption establish that economic power cannot be exercised without regard for ecological and social consequences.[46] The legal-ethical principle of "no harm and no reciprocal harm" (lā ḍarar wa-lā ḍirār) extends responsibility beyond individual transactions to collective, environmental, and intergenerational harms. Corporate

[44] Archie B. Carroll, The Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility, pp. 39–48; David Vogel, The Market for Virtue: The Potential and Limits of Corporate Social Responsibility, pp. 163, 173.
[45] Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*.; Abū Isḥāq al-Shāṭibī, *Al-Muwāfaqāt fī Uṣūl al-Sharīʿah*.
[46] The Qur'an, 99:7–8; 7:56.

profitability cannot therefore justify ecological damage merely because the activity is legal or economically advantageous.

A second implication concerns the assumption that unlimited corporate growth is an inherent good. Islam recognizes the legitimacy of productive economic activity but commands moderation (wasaṭiyyah) and condemns excess (isrāf).[47] This does not require the rejection of markets or innovation. It requires corporations to distinguish genuine social need from the artificial stimulation of unnecessary consumption. Policies concerning resource extraction, product design, planned obsolescence, energy use, and waste should therefore be assessed in light of necessity, proportionality, and long-term public welfare.

4.3. Toward an Islamic Civilizational Model of Corporate Responsibility

The implications of Islamic thought concern not only how firms operate but also how the economic order is designed. Corporate environmental responsibility should be integrated into a civilizational framework in which ethics, economy, law, and ecology operate within a coherent normative system.

Corporations can be understood as institutional bearers of amānah, or trust, because they control resources and make decisions whose effects extend beyond their immediate owners. Their responsibilities therefore include the protection of ecological systems, the advancement of communal welfare, truthful disclosure, and the provision of remedy when harm occurs.[48] Environmental responsibility is consequently a form of khilāfah: it is an exercise of delegated authority subject to moral limits, not an unrestricted right of exploitation.

This civilizational approach does not reject contemporary sustainability practices. It reorients them. Reporting, auditing, environmental management, and stakeholder engagement remain useful, but they should serve substantive moral purposes rather than becoming substitutes for them. The central question is whether corporate power is being exercised faithfully and justly, not whether the organization has produced a persuasive sustainability narrative.

4.4. Limits of Contemporary ESG and CSR Frameworks from an Islamic Perspective

ESG and CSR frameworks have contributed to the development of sustainability governance by encouraging corporations to disclose environmental and social information, consider governance risks, and respond to stakeholder concerns. Their usefulness should be acknowledged. Nevertheless, they have important limitations when treated as complete accounts of corporate responsibility.

First, ESG ratings and CSR reporting can reduce responsibility to quantification, disclosure, and benchmarking. Different rating agencies may use different definitions,

[47] The Qur'an, 6:141; 17:27.
[48] Fazlun M. Khalid, op.cit, p. 338.

data sources, and weighting systems, which can produce inconsistent assessments of the same corporation.[49] A high score may therefore indicate the presence of reporting systems without proving that the corporation has avoided substantial harm. From an Islamic perspective, measurement is evidence but not a moral verdict. Responsibility requires an account of truthfulness, intention, justice, and accountability that cannot be exhausted by an indicator.

Second, ESG and CSR can separate the public image of a corporation from its core business model. A company may sponsor environmental projects or publish a substantial CSR report while continuing to rely on practices that generate pollution, unsafe labor conditions, excessive extraction, or misleading advertising. Philanthropy cannot automatically compensate for preventable harm. Under the principles of amānah and ṣidq (truthfulness), positive initiatives should not be used to conceal material negative effects.

Third, ESG systems may normalize environmental damage by treating it as acceptable whenever it falls within a selected threshold. Islamic principles do not imply that every environmental impact is avoidable, but they require a serious assessment of necessity, proportionality, alternatives, affected communities, and cumulative consequences. The prohibition of fasād means that harm cannot be made ethically invisible merely because it has been converted into a number.[50]

Fourth, CSR is often voluntary. Voluntary commitments can encourage innovation, but they may also remain symbolic when they are not supported by effective monitoring, stakeholder participation, legal accountability, and access to remedy. The concern is not that voluntary action has no value; it is that voluntary action alone cannot guarantee justice where corporations possess greater information and power than affected communities.[51]

The critique can be illustrated through concrete cases. In 2023, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission found that a Deutsche Bank subsidiary had made materially misleading statements about the controls used to incorporate ESG factors into investment research and recommendations. The firm had marketed itself as an ESG leader and stated that ESG was in its "DNA," but the SEC found that certain provisions of its ESG integration policy had not been adequately implemented. The firm agreed to

[49] Michael Power, *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification*, pp. 4–15.
[50] The Qur'an, 99:7–8.
[51] Archie B. Carroll, op. cit., pp. 39–48.

pay a $19 million penalty in the ESG misstatements matter.[52] From an Islamic perspective, the case illustrates the difference between an institutional claim and the faithful implementation of a trust: public language about responsibility has no moral value if it is not supported by truthful procedures and actual practice.

A second example concerns Vale, a Brazilian mining company. In 2019, a dam collapse killed 270 people. According to the SEC's account of its enforcement action, Vale had represented in filings, sustainability reports, and ESG webinars that the dam was safe and stable, while allegedly concealing warning signs and manipulating safety audits. Vale agreed to pay more than $55 million to settle the SEC's charges.[53] The case illustrates why ESG disclosure cannot be separated from the underlying duty to prevent harm. A safety statement that conceals material risk violates the ethical requirements of amānah and ṣidq, even if the company maintains formal reporting systems.

Environmental marketing provides another practical illustration. The Federal Trade Commission's Green Guides warn marketers that environmental claims must be substantiated and that companies must consider how consumers are likely to interpret claims such as "green," "renewable," "recyclable," and "carbon offset."[54] The existence of such guidance demonstrates that environmental language can be used persuasively without accurately describing a product's full ecological impact. In Islamic ethical terms, misleading environmental marketing is not merely a technical communications problem; it concerns deception, unjust enrichment, and the breach of trust between the seller, the consumer, and the wider community.

These cases do not establish that ESG or CSR is inherently deceptive. They demonstrate instead that the instruments require substantive ethical foundations and effective verification. From an Islamic perspective, ESG and CSR should therefore be reassessed through five principles: truthful disclosure, prevention of harm, protection of public welfare, moderation in resource use, and accountability for both direct and indirect consequences. ESG indicators can support this process, but they cannot replace it.

The present critique is consequently constructive rather than dismissive. ESG and CSR can provide practical tools for information, coordination, and oversight. Their weakness arises when they are treated as morally self-sufficient, when disclosure is

[52] U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, Deutsche Bank Subsidiary DWS to Pay $25 Million, https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2023-194 (Last accessed: August 28, 2026).
53 Gurbir S. Grewal, Remarks at Ohio State Law Journal Symposium 2024, https://www.sec.gov/newsroom/speeches-statements/grewal-ohs-022324 (Last accessed: August 28, 2026).
54U.S. Federal Trade Commission, Green Guides: Environmentally Friendly Products, https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/topics/truth-advertising/green-guides (Last accessed: August 28, 2026).

separated from performance, or when corporate reputation substitutes for remedy. An Islamic civilizational framework seeks to reconnect these instruments with stewardship, trust, justice, and transcendent accountability.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that environmental responsibility in Islamic thought is more than a managerial response to ecological risk. It is a moral and civilizational trust (amānah) grounded in the Qur'anic concepts of stewardship (khalīfah), balance (mīzān), justice (ʿadl), moderation, prevention of harm (ḍarar), and accountability (ḥisāb). These concepts establish that nature is not merely an instrument of economic production and that environmental harm is not ethically acceptable simply because it is legal, profitable, or recorded within an ESG framework.

The analysis has also shown that Islamic thought can contribute to sustainable development without rejecting science, regulation, ESG, or CSR. Sustainable development supplies important tools for intergenerational planning, environmental management, and social coordination. Islamic ethics strengthens these tools by asking whether development is necessary, just, proportionate, truthful, and compatible with ecological limits. The article therefore proposes complementarity rather than simple replacement: contemporary governance instruments should be evaluated and reoriented within a moral framework that connects environmental performance to public welfare and accountability.

The argument has practical implications for organizations:

First, corporate boards should adopt an environmental trust policy that treats ecological protection as a core fiduciary and ethical responsibility, not as a separate public-relations activity. Such a policy should require disclosure of material environmental risks, supply-chain impacts, cumulative harms, and effects on vulnerable communities.

Second, organizations should establish independent sustainability and ethics committees with authority to review major projects, assess alternatives, consult affected communities, and suspend activities that create disproportionate or preventable harm.

Third, external assurance and grievance mechanisms should be strengthened so that employees, consumers, and communities can challenge misleading claims and seek remedy.

The Islamic framework can also be translated into operational indicators. Organizations may measure: (1) reduction in emissions, water use, waste, and ecological damage; (2) the proportion of environmental risks disclosed with independently verified data; (3) the number and seriousness of unresolved community grievances; (4) the extent to which projects protect public welfare and avoid disproportionate effects on vulnerable groups; (5) the integration of moderation and resource-efficiency targets into production and procurement; and (6) the effectiveness of remediation when harm occurs. These indicators do not replace ESG metrics; they give them an ethical direction by connecting measurable outcomes to amānah, mīzān, ʿadl, and ḍarar.

At the policy level, governments and regulators should require substantive environmental disclosure, cumulative-impact assessment, community participation, independent verification, and effective penalties for greenwashing or concealed harm. Islamic financial and charitable institutions can support these objectives through green waqf, responsible investment, environmental endowments, and financing conditions tied to verified ecological performance. Religious and educational institutions can contribute by developing environmental literacy and public accountability rather than limiting environmental ethics to personal behavior.

The study does not claim that classical Islamic sources provide a ready-made corporate governance code or a single uncontested Islamic position. Its contribution is to reconstruct an ethical vocabulary capable of guiding contemporary institutional reasoning. Environmental responsibility becomes most effective when moral purpose, legal regulation, scientific knowledge, and organizational accountability work together. In this sense, Islamic thought offers sustainable development not a substitute for practical governance, but a deeper account of why ecological limits, justice, truthful disclosure, and responsibility to future generations must govern economic power.

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