

## **THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN HUMAN CIVILISATION: AN INTROSPECTIVE VIEW<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract.** This article argues that, even though the issue of development has a profound and far-reaching impact on human lives, sustainable development, which considers human lives for today and tomorrow has a positive impact on human development. The principal goal of this paper is to critically examine the potential role of sustainable development, a concept rooted in the eighteenth-century idea of "natural balance" or natural equilibrium in developing a human civilisation. Not unexpectedly, such a lofty, global objective has raised questions in the minds of experts used to dealing with developmental issues in a usual, compartmentalised manner. While there has been some reflection as to what constitutes sustainable development, the same cannot be said for a sustainable society. Yet sustainability is critical for all nations today and the gradual implementation of measures for sustainable development strongly reinforces the quest for a sustainable society and for the development of human civilisation.

**Keywords and phrases:** sustainable development, human civilisation, environment, nature

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 1987, the United Nation Commissions of Environment and Development concluded that, unless sustainable development becomes a global initiative, human civilisation and survival could be jeopardised in the future. The following year, the Norwegian Prime Minister called for the world to consider a new holistic approach in which economic development is pursued in tandem with the protection and preservation of the environment. This innovative proposition asserts that our actions need to be in harmony with our ecosystem.

This paper aims to critically examine the role of sustainable development, a concept that is originated from the eighteenth-century idea of "natural balance" or natural equilibrium, in developing human civilisation. Although there has been some reflection on the idea of sustainable development, the same cannot be said for a sustainable society. The gradual introduction of measures to promote sustainable development strongly reinforces the quest for sustainable society and

the development of human civilisation. It should be noted that this paper is not an empirical study. Thus, no field work has been done. A discussion of secondary literature and historical documentation will serve as the basis for this inquiry.

It is simply impossible to understand the connections between economics and environmental problems without studying the history of sustainable development. Knowledge of the past can provide a better understanding of the present. As Karl Marx once wrote,

The traditions of dead generations weigh like a nightmare upon the living. We and the society around us are the products of the past, whether we want to be or not. Because the past is always with us, weighing us down so to speak, circumscribing our choices, we must either work within the constraints it imposes (which require understanding) or at least be fully aware of them if we seek to chart a new path, free of the old shackles.<sup>2</sup>

Countries rise and fall, societies disintegrate, and eco-systems are irreparably damaged by unsustainable activities. Similar to an individual who is lost without his memories, civilisation needs its collective memory, which takes the form of history. In his book, *Collapse*, Jared Diamond (2005) lists several reasons for societies collapse. Easter Island for example, collapsed entirely due to environmental damage. According to Diamond, this island gives the best historical example of an isolated societal collapse. The Polynesians of Pitcairn Island experienced a similar tragedy due to severe environmental damage and the loss of trading partners.<sup>3</sup> Diamond further noted that the Anasazi people of the South-western United States witnessed the collapse of their society because of environmental damage and climate change, just as the fall of the Maya civilisation of Mesoamerica was rooted in cataclysmic environmental change and hostile neighbours. He opines,

A historical perspective can help us, because ours is not the first society to face environment challenges. Many past societies collapsed partly from their failure to solve problems similar to those we face today – especially problems of deforestation, water management, topsoil loss and climate change. The long list of victims includes the Anasazi in the US Southwest, Maya, Easter Islanders, Greenland Norse, Mycenaen Greeks and the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent, the Indus Valley, Great Zimbabwe and Angkor Watt. The outcomes ranged from "just" a collapse of society, to the deaths of most people, to (in some case) everyone ending up dead.<sup>4</sup> (Diamond 2002, 18)

Climate changes and warfare often added pressure on civilisations already weakened by environmental disasters. People grew more arrogant as they continued to deny the destructive potential of nature. In virtually every case, however, people contributed to their own downfall by over-exploiting their environment for short-term gains while ignoring the long-term consequences.

British historian, Arnold J. Toynbee's theory of the collapse of civilisation asserts that the collapse of civilisations is caused by the decay of society: when they lose their moral fibre and the cultural elite turns parasitic, exploiting the masses and creating an internal and external proletariat, as he boldly states that "civilisation dies from suicide, not by murder,"<sup>5</sup> especially when the society fails to meet the challenges of its times. Ancient civilisations, such as that of Mesopotamia and Egypt, were established because of the technological improvements in agriculture, allowing people to live in the same place for longer periods of time. Success and specialisation in agriculture and the ability to fulfil the society's basic alimentary needs allowed other sectors of society to focus on art, religion and architecture. According to the Maslovian theory, this extension of focus is known as self-actualisation of needs. This process leads to the development of cities, labour specialisation and class systems. However, limited land availability and increasing population sizes led to heightened pressure to intensify food production. This condition grew worse as the lack of rain during the growing season caused droughts and crop failure. Thus, water storage and irrigation were necessary. The rapid evaporation of moisture from the soil, caused by high temperatures and high water tables led to the concentration of salts on the soil surface. Indeed, this is a classic example of an unsustainable agricultural system. This ancient agricultural civilisation chose short-term food production practices that caused environmental degradation, like the salinisation or erosion of farmlands from irrigation systems.

The pattern of short-sighted treatment of the environment continues in most other cradles of civilisation. A particularly illustrative example is that of the Indus River Valley of India. In China, massive deforestation added to catastrophic erosion of the soils. Silt accumulated from the erosion clogged Chinese rivers, causing frequent flooding of the river valleys, resulting in massive destruction and loss of life. Just as in China, the Persians, Greeks,<sup>6</sup> Romans, Vikings in Greenland, Mayans in Central America, Native Americans in the Southwest and Polynesians on Pacific islands all damaged their environment to some degree. We might say that the necessity of sustainable development is actually a human need as far as development is concerned.

## **WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?**

Sustainable development is a program to combat unbalanced development patterns rooted in the mismanagement of resources. These problems associated with short-sighted use of resources can cause environmental catastrophe, not to mention socio-structural and qualitative problems. Another tenet of "sustainable development" is the idea that environment and development are inter-related and inter-dependent. This mutual relationship necessitates the adoption of an integrated approach by the different levels of national governments and international institutions. Sustainable development is different in that it takes humans and nature into account without isolating the two, as conventional development commonly does.<sup>7</sup> Sustainable development requires a reconsideration of the link between humankind and nature. It also stresses the importance of a holistic approach for a better quality of life in the process of developing human civilisation.

The current absence of sustainable development in Islamic, Christian and Buddhist literature and economics does not mean that it cannot be implemented. In Islam for example, the Quranic principles provide us with a strong premise for constructing such a theory. Islam offers complete codes of life which cover all aspects of this life and in the afterlife. Even though Islam does not offer any theory specifically on sustainable development, it does present powerful principles for its realisation. The essential principles for ensuring sustainable development are found in the relations between individuals and groups. In that sense, sustainable development has to be understood primarily as a micro-phenomenon.

The debate on the definition of sustainable development has never been resolved since it was first coined in the Brundtland Commission Report (1987). The Report defines sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."<sup>8</sup> What we conserve for future generations should be at least the same as that which our ancestor left for. By taking this approach, our descendants have sufficient natural resources to continue developing. Sustainable development emphasises the civil relationship between humans and nature as well as this relationship among people in general. Although it may take on different meanings in different cultures, and for people of diverse backgrounds and interests, there is another fundamental consideration regarding "sustainable development". It is the idea that the environment and development are inter-related and inter-dependent. We cannot escape from the basic necessity of survival on our planet that Jared Diamond described as "bathed by the same ocean and compete the same global pie of shrinking resources."<sup>9</sup> Men, regardless of race, origin, or life strata, have come forward to play their part in preserving

the quality of the planet's most basic finite resources of land, water and air. There is a new sense of urgency to solve today's environmental problems, especially when we know how the natural resources of the past have diminished.

Civilisation demands that people take responsibility for respecting and living in harmony with nature, instead of dominating it. Both man and nature should develop in a coordinated manner. To build a civilisation, humans cannot live above and outside nature, but should be included in it to promote ecological and biological balance. In short, to ensure survival, humans must live respectfully from nature and not take it as a slave. Indeed, this approach is especially important in this era of globalisation,<sup>10</sup> in which more serious problems, including environmental destruction, reduction of biological and cultural diversity, poverty, unemployment and a significant gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots," are emerging. For this reason, we must analyse and consider the relationship among human beings as well as that between man and nature. The concept of symbiosis or cooperation, rather than competition, should be practiced.

Sustainable development literacy which includes environmental literacy promotes and awareness and knowledge of the environment, can serve as the bases for action in all human development strategies such as economic growth, social development and environmental protection. It is particularly important that such awareness be implanted in the minds of people from all walks of life, not just the young generation. In effect, sustainable development literacy can ensure the perpetuation of society in economic, ecological, social and cultural terms. This is achieved with full respect for the rights of other species to prosper on the planet. Moreover, it takes into account biological and cultural diversity. As a crux of human civilisation, sustainable society is the outcome of two major factors: humanity and nature. The human factor entails a wide area of human resource development, including the capacity to improve technological skills, social and human capital, and also the capacity to create man-made capital. However, technological innovation without considering its consequences is equivalent to the murder of nature. The human factors encompass the impact of human development on nature, particularly the environment, through the human roles of producer and consumer.

The strategies of sustainable development are multifaceted, taking into account the economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental factors that affect human welfare. Sustainable development is divided into three important areas of discussion: social, economic, and environmental aspects.<sup>11</sup> These themes constitute the framework of development essential for the promotion of the welfare of current and future generations.

At the international level, several declarations on the environment have been implemented by United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to ensure environmentally-friendly development. The Rio de Janeiro Declaration (1993) and the Kyoto Protocol (1997) are among the latest declarations signed by Malaysia. Malaysia even has its own plan of action, known as the Langkawi Declaration, to ensure that development adheres to the standards of environmental responsibility.<sup>12</sup>

## **HOW MAN AND NATURE AND LIVE PEACEFULLY**

In his book, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1968) bemoans the destruction of the sacred and spiritual vision of nature at the hands of the modern world and in the name of growth and development.<sup>13</sup> According to him, the consequences of the ecological crisis have arrived, but few see the consequences or speak of an ecological crisis. This crisis is imminent, as is the modern man's search for peace in human society.<sup>14</sup> For all civilisation, the ecological crisis is the major concern. As we are all aware that our global community is composed of a multitude of civilisation and we need to honour and celebrate cultural pluralism. Thus, the solution for the global ecological crisis is to turn to the intellectual and spiritual resources of the world's religious traditions for guidance.

Much of the content of prevalent social codes of ethics is biologically and psychologically sound, and it is true to the real needs and conditions of human beings and their environment. This connection is observed by J. R. Engel and J. G. Engel who claim that:

Awareness of the fact that one cannot use with impunity the different categories of beings, animal, plants and natural elements simply as one wishes, according to one's (mere) economic needs. On the contrary, one must take into account the nature of each being and its mutual connection to an ordered system, which is precisely the cosmos.<sup>15</sup> (Engel and Engel 1990, 114)

Before we continue our discussion on sustainability, it is important to understand the basic principle of ecology, the branch of biology that investigates living relationships. Ecological issues are steeped in the moral and ethical consciousness of a culture. Ecology is, in fact, part and parcel of any religious worldview. However, "as long as the attitude toward nature and the whole natural environment is one based on aggression and war. Perhaps not all realise that in order to gain this peace with the spiritual order. To be peace with the Earth one

must be at peace with Heaven". (Seyyed Hossein 1968, 13–14) the possibility of peace in human society is in vain. This is because the root of the cause is the spiritual dimension of things. The spiritual causes that lie at the centre of both humanity and nature are fundamental ones.<sup>16</sup> The principle of equity and co-existence is not only applicable among human being, but also among all living things.

Seyyed Hossein (1968) further postulates that the lack of acceptance of the spiritual dimension of the ecological crisis will soon lead to the destruction of the environment. In reality, this is rooted in an externalisation of the destitution humanity's inner soul. The actions of man are responsible for this ecological crisis.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the most important contribution to the global discourse on the environmental issue is the restoration of a spiritual vision of nature. To be happy with nature is to accept its norms and its rhythms rather than to dominate it.

If we study the twelve environmental problems,<sup>18</sup> or the catastrophic natural events, such as the destruction of natural habitats (mainly through deforestation), reduction of wild foods, loss of biodiversity, erosion of soil, depletion of natural photosynthetic resources, introduction by humans of toxins and alien species, artificially-induced climate change, and finally, overpopulation, are actually triggered by human behaviour.<sup>19</sup> If we scrutinise the factors historically linked to the collapse of past societies, it is clear that the inability of man to live harmoniously and respectfully with the basic law of the Mother Nature is to blame.<sup>20</sup> The eight main factors contributing to societal collapse are the following: deforestation and habitat destruction; soil problems, such as erosion; salinisation and soil fertility losses; water management problems; overhunting and overfishing; introduction of foreign species; human overpopulation; and increased per-capita impact of humans on the environment. Diamond (2002) added that another four new factors may contribute to the weakening and collapse of present and future societies: human-induced climate change; build-up of toxic chemicals in the environment; energy shortages; and full human utilisation of the Earth's photosynthetic capacity.

## **SUSTAINABLE AND HUMAN CIVILISATION DEVELOPMENTS**

According to Alvin Toffler (1991), there were three big transitions in the human history. The first, the agricultural revolution, was the transition from hunting and gathering societies to the agrarian societies. The second was brought about by the industrial revolution. Finally, the third transition, the revolution of communication, promoted the information society leads us to the social, cultural and political change.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to realise that, in order for sustainable development to work well and ensure the development of human civilisation, it requires shifts of paradigms in the following fields:

### **Individual-Centered to God-Centered**

A shift from individual-centred development to development that emphasises the harmonious relationships of the individual with society, nature and God is required. Development must focus on the multifarious relationships of man. In this context, the concept of human rights needs to be assessed. There is the need to reintroduce the concept of man in a holistic framework addressing his relationships with other men, society, nature and the Creator. Sustainable development demands dealing correctly not only with the relationship between humans and nature, but also with the relationship among various social aspects. In this context, spiritual values and the pursuit of social well-being at a high level of development take precedence. Spiritual principles — that is, a new universal set of values for development — are important to reduce the crisis between human beings and their environment. By "crisis," we mean an fundamental imbalance man's relationship with the natural world which has surrounded and nourished human beings for as long as they have lived on this earth. We have to accept the fact that as human beings, we cannot live independently of the natural world. All elements of nature around must coexist with one another. There is an intimate relationship among the various elements of nature, such as air, water, soil, and forest.

### **Balancing between Material and Spiritual Needs**

The one-dimensional view of man's need for material goods, namely the tendency to prefer more rather than less, should be substituted by a multi-dimensional view concerned with balancing material and spiritual needs. According to Furusawa, there are two general approaches in dealing with sustainability: (i) identifying a material quantity consistent with sustainable use, and (ii) the equity approach which emphasises socio-economic, political and ethical justice.<sup>22</sup> The former approach contains two fundamental conditions. First, resources can easily be recycled and second, environmental pollution with unsafe materials must be minimised and strictly controlled.<sup>23</sup> The latter approach has been developed mainly in response to the Brundtland Report titled, "Our common future."<sup>24</sup> Sustainable development was explained as:

A process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are all in harmony and



enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations. (Brundtland Report 1987, 6)

The kind of human respect for nature that underlies most religious values is not sentimental, but rather intellectual and spiritual in nature. Respect is intellectual in nature because it is based on and sustained by an objective knowledge not only of nature and the delicate ecological balance and unity, but also of the metaphysical nexus between all things and God.

Religious values in the spiritual dimension can provide guidance for sustainable living, as the essence of religion is not only about God and rituals, but also about a relationship with the environment. Religion is important for people's personal development, as it provides a manual of how human beings should conduct themselves on the shared planet. Additionally, it gives values and meaning to their lives. The fundamental teaching of most religions in the world is to engender goodness among people in this world.

Arguably, religion can educate people to cultivate a love of learning along with the academic skills to continue learning for life. In this vein, religious teaching is not antithetical to "worldly education." Holistic education is, therefore, important in supporting the formation of a noble character that can achieve spiritual goals through the pursuit of knowledge and service to the community and society. Holistic education not only cultivates behaviour that reflects religious morals and values, but also helps foster an open spirit of inquiry in which faith and reason lead toward higher knowledge, sound individual choices, and responsible citizenship.<sup>25</sup> These principles revolve around the teaching that human beings have been given the responsibility to manage with respect and integrity the lives on earth, both for them and for the other creatures. It can be assumed that, to educate people holistically is to let people know, understand, and practice their beliefs. With regard to environmental literacy and the quest for sustainable development, religion teaches us to respect the interdependence of all things and the equality of all species in sustaining their lives on earth.

As put in the Bahai text, "No matter how far the material world advances, it cannot establish the happiness of mankind. Only when material and spiritual civilisation are linked and coordinated will happiness be assured, for in material civilisation good and evil advance together and maintain the same pace".<sup>26</sup>

The religious traditions of India are rich and various, offering diverse theological and practical perspectives on the human condition. The Vedic traditions of Hinduism offer imagery that attests to the power of the natural world. Scholars of the Vedas have identified various texts and rituals that extol the earth (*bhu*), the atmosphere (*Bhuvah*), and sky (*sva*), as well as the goddess associated with the

earth (*Prthvi*), and the gods associated with water (*Ap*), fire and heat (*Agni*) and wind (*Vayu*). Hinduism is also concerned with the relationship between humanity and the environment. In Bhagavad Gita (3:12), this connection is highlighted: "For, so sustained by sacrifice, the god will give you the food of your desire. Those who enjoy their gift, yet give nothing, is a thief and no more or less." Trees also have to be treated with consideration because they are the most important type of plant, and they have an *atman* or soul. As Mahabrata says: "If there is but one tree of flowers and fruit within a village, that place is worthy of your respect."

The concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence and respect for life) postulates that a Hindu cannot cause harm to any creature. In observation of this principle, many Hindus are vegetarian. In India, to cite another example, Hindus play very active roles in monitoring government schemes that might damage the environment, such as the construction of large-scale dams, which run the risk of causing serious flooding leading to the destruction of precious land and animal life. In Hindu religious teachings, people are expected to protect the universe because it is a divine creation, and it must be honoured in all its aspects, plants, animals, mountains and rivers along with all other earthly forms.

Undoubtedly, humanity and nature are inseparable. All objects in the universe are permeated by the same spiritual power. The human race, though at the top of the evolutionary pyramid at present, cannot be seen as something apart from earth. It follows that people should not use their position to dominate lesser forms of life. Instead, they evolved out of these very forms which are integrally linked to them. Nature is sacred and the divine is expressed through all its forms. A reverence for life is an essential principle of *ahimsa* (non-violence).

Shinto, meaning "the way of the deities", is Japan's dominant religion. However, many Shinto deities in Japan incorporate Buddhist attributes. Such as the ideas of Buddhism explored above, Shinto attitudes toward nature are relevant to the problem of environmental preservation. The Buddhist environmental movement recommends that the traditional emphasis on individual moral and spiritual transformation be applied more forcefully to combat the structures of oppression, exploitation, and environmental degradation. Buddhism focuses on the practice of awareness and a lifestyle of simplicity.

In the extradition, the term "anthrop cosmic," refers to the great triad of heaven (a guiding force), earth (nature) and humans. This is the central idea of Confucian thought, as it is expressed in the classical texts as well as in neo-Confucianism, which arose in the eleventh century. Another important teaching in Confucianism is "organic holism," which is centred on viewing the universe as unified, interconnected and interpenetrating. Everything interacts and affects everything

else, which is why the notion of microcosm is so important in Chinese cosmology. We can see this interconnectedness in five elements: seasons, directions, colours, purposes and even virtues. In Confucian cosmology, the person is seen in relation to others and not as an isolated individual. Confucianism emphasises the common good, which is critical for developing environmental ethics. Self-interest and altruism for a common cause are not mutually exclusive, and responsibilities rather than rights are stressed. Such a communitarian value system is indispensable for fostering sustainable communities.

Islam also stresses that God has not created anything in vain, or without wisdom, value and purpose. As the chosen leaders on earth, people have a mandate to build civilisation and are likewise held responsible for the protection of environment. No doubt there are integral links between these two dimensions of man and nature. All people are duty-bound to take care of the environment in which they live and to make every possible effort to achieve sustainable development for the well-being of humanity, including future generations. Indeed, the Quran clearly states that to kill one person is to slay humanity more generally. On this matter, Allah says:

Whoever killed a human being, except as a punishment for murder or wicked crimes, should be looked upon as though he had killed all mankind; and whoever saved a human life should be regarded as though he had saved all mankind. (al-Maidah: 32)

The act of disrupting environmental harmony, which can result in the loss of human lives, can therefore be seen as a punishable crime, or a metaphor for killing.

Human beings have been given the responsibility to manage life on earth, both for themselves and for all creatures that inhabit the earth. In a way, human beings are in charge of the world, and of everything which God has created in it. Thus, it is vital for the security and survival of the human species to maintain the code found in nature and in the laws that govern life on earth. This code defines the environment as a sacred 'gift' given by God. Therefore individuals and communities are all invested with this responsibility: they need to protect and preserve all its natural resources, including air, climate, water, seas, flora, and fauna. They must also refrain from any activity that causes pollution or damage to the eco-system or disturbance of the fragile balance between man and nature.

If we view nature as a reality that also possesses spiritual significance, then our sense of responsibility toward nature must be conceived in broader and more fundamental terms. Any act of negligence on the part of human beings represents

a danger to and prejudice against other beings. All this is to ensure that we can grow in harmony with nature. Thus, we have to accept its norms and its rhythms rather than seeking to dominate, overcome or overwhelm it. Nature should not be judged according to human's utility nor should such earthly human production be made the measure of all things. Humans should accept and follow the nature of things and not seek to disturb nature by artificial means.

The future sustainability of humankind and civilisation rests very much on sources of values and the translation of those values into realisable goals. We believe that when spiritual issues become central to development, then sustainable human civilisation will have been achieved, and the policies and programme can truly reflect the experience and conditions of the planet's inhabitants. In other words, this can only happen when the spiritual dimension becomes a focus.

### **A Long Term Approach**

The time constraints in policy making, with its emphasis on the short term, must also accommodate long-term considerations. Taking this into account, the concepts of equity and development should not be limited to the current generation. On the contrary, they must also consider future generations, acknowledging that the fate of our predecessors lies in our hands. In the context of sustainable development, environmental economists must develop the idea of resource and environmental auditing and accounting. These are important in assuring that resources are properly valued and that environmental degradation is taken into consideration when evaluating development performance.<sup>27</sup>

No doubt, we need a new approach because, in the long term, the most important tactic is enduring change in human attitudes, so that they are compatible with a sustainable lifestyle. A harmonious relationship between humans and nature requires a fundamental transformation of lifestyles. Needless to say, the environment is greatly influenced by every aspect of life, such as human behaviour, society, economics, and politics, not to mention national and international affairs and development. For sustainable development to take place, economists, ecologists and politicians must work together, just as the names of their disciplines stem from the same Greek root word, *oikos*, meaning home or household. *Logos* means "the study of", and "nomics" signifies "management". Therefore, ecology is the study of the home, and economics is the management of the home.<sup>28</sup> The first thing that we need to understand is that we must accept the earth (and on a larger scale the cosmos), which includes the sun for example, as our real home. We need to cultivate moral and ethical responsibilities of human beings towards nature, particularly the environment. A deep transformation of our understanding of nature and the human state, and the nature of our

relationship with God and the natural environment is necessary. This implies a radical change in our worldview. Being ethical and respectful towards nature should guide development strategies. Sustainability is within us: we must have knowledge and awareness in order to live peacefully and ecologically. People, organisation and societies need to be inspired in order to apply this concept.

## CONCLUSION

Sustainable development is a demanding concept. The preoccupation for an eco-friendly development process and sustainable lifestyle must remain deep and enduring, on all levels of society, international, regional, national and local. It is imperative that all of us put our minds and our hearts into the process of designing the desired new sustainable society. Only this kind of society will provide the high quality of life dependant on our sustainable and ethical relationship with the environment. The prosperity enjoyed by human beings is a result of harmonious relations between mankind and nature. As Lao Tse (604–531 BC) explains, "human beings should learn from the Earth, the Earth should learn from the Sky, the Sky should learn from Tao, Tao should learn from Nature."

The best place to start with is at home. With proper religious guidance from parents, children can help uphold moral and ethical responsibilities. A mother can educate children on how to maintain a responsible relationship with the environment. Therefore, we can initiate a vital step toward protecting their future by cultivating in the children's heart the desire to treasure nature and protect the Earth. We are aware that the environment is a complex entity. Thus, the ethics should also reflect complex aesthetical, religious, scientific, economic and political considerations. Albert Einstein (1879–1955) points out, "The harmony of natural law reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection."

There should be an increased consciousness and awareness among all walks of life over the welfare and fate of the earth. They would insist, as the old African saying goes, that "the world was not bequeathed to us by our parents but rather entrusted to us by our children." Human development, which is based on noble religious values, such as responsibility towards and development of the environment in a well-planned manner, must be stressed. The development of science and technology that is based on the teachings of religious and cultural values must be inculcated at all levels of society. Research on and monitoring of the environment must be conducted continuously so that the development undertaken does not pose high risks to our living environment. Environmental

research should seek to harmonise the lives of human beings with the natural environment in addition to making continuous efforts to progress and develop society. Peace is impossible among men unless there is peace and harmony with nature, and in order to achieve this, harmony and equilibrium between man and nature must be established. This harmony and equilibrium is what sustainable development is all about.

Religious awareness and guidance are important because they teach the values of protection and development of the environment and natural resources. From our present situation, we can deduce that a lot of environmental degradation is due to people's ignorance of what their Creator requires of them. We need to have policies and rules ensuring the good condition of the environment. These concepts are all present religious teachings. The only thing we need is an awareness of them, so that we do justice towards the environment. The value of conservation, for example, which emphasises respect for the interdependence of all things, will enable us to live in harmony.

The clarification and implementation of sustainable development is a continuing process. Unless all key players and elements in all sectors of society are united in harmonious partnership, the blue print for a better world will remain dormant.<sup>29</sup> We need to have a sense of responsibility towards the earth and all its contents. Furthermore, the preservation of religious and moral values can hold families and societies together and discourage extremism or discrimination on grounds of race, religion or culture. It is believed that knowledge without values produces materialism, exploitation and destruction. Values, either moral or religious, without reason will lead to fanaticism. Thus, holistic education can serve to bring together both knowledge and values. The core of a better understanding and an appreciation of sustainable development is rooted in a proper education, which is proven to provide the means to build the knowledge, skills, values and behaviour necessary for individuals, communities and nations to generate a sustainable future.

The life of mankind invokes not only inter-human relations, but also relations between human beings and the environment. The prosperity enjoyed by human beings is a result of harmonious relations between mankind and nature. In order to ensure a sustainable human civilisation, people need to have a set of rules, norms, values, habits, reflexes, codes and matrices, which can be considered civilisational competence. As the 28th US President, Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) noted, "The sum of the whole matter is that this civilisation cannot survive materially unless it is redeemed spiritually." Although the most common explanation for the collapse of civilisation is attributed to natural disasters, like epidemic, drought, and earthquake, one has to bear in mind that human choice is a major part of it. The collapse of ancient civilisations, for example, illustrates the

combined effects of environmental damage, population growth, unsustainable agriculture, climate change and warfare. Although we do not have very definite or conclusive understandings of the collapse of certain civilisations, the three main factors mentioned above undoubtedly played a pivotal role. More important is to understand that whenever a harmonious relationship between human and environment is lacking, problems will arise. The rise and fall of ancient civilisations provides a textbook example of human evolution. By understanding that societies are integrated systems, providing the basic needs of water, food and shelter, we can see how failure in one area affects the rest and how this can even lead to the collapse of civilisations. Understanding what happened 2000 years ago could help minimise the repetition of old mistake and thus avoid further damage to nature. Even though one might regard this as an introspective paper, it posits a new perspective through the concept of sustainable development. This concept can teach us how to prolong civilisation, even if it cannot live forever.

## NOTES

1. This is an amended version of the paper presented at the conference on civilisation competences and sustainable development, 13–14 June 2008, in accordance with the framework of the research project of Warsaw University and the Norwegian and EEA Financial Mechanism in Faculty of Economics Sciences, University of Warsaw, Poland.
2. See Daniel Egan, et al. for more details on a historical perspective of sustainable development.
3. Pitcairn Island and Henderson Island vanished because they depended on the Polynesian society of Mangareva Island for vital imports. That society collapsed from deforestation.
4. Jared Diamond, "Lessons from Lost Worlds," *TIME* (2002).
5. Arnold Toynbee describes the rise and fall of 23 civilisations in human history in his work, *A Study of History*.
6. In Greece, overgrazing caused severe soil erosion, mostly during the seventh century BC. This led to the widespread planting of olive trees, which were the only trees that had roots strong enough to penetrate the limestone rock underlying the badly eroded land. Rapid deforestation in Italy resulted in soil erosion so severe that numerous ports in estuaries became filled with silt from the eroded hillside soil.
7. The mode of traditional development was founded on the view that "man is the master of nature" and "nature is the slave for man".
8. United Nation, *The Brundtland Commission Report* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
9. Diamond, *Lessons from Lost Worlds*, 18.

10. According to Diamond, a society today can't collapse without affecting societies far away. Because of globalization, the risk that we are facing today is not just a local tragedy but a worldwide one.
11. These three aspects, when translated into actions and empirical analysis, basically relate to the conservation of nature, reduction of poverty and elimination of social injustice and moral deficiency. See Omar Osman, Salfarina Abdul Gapor and Zainal Abidin, 2005, p. 52.
12. The Langkawi Declaration on the Environment 1989 was issued on the 21 October 1989 during the tenth Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). The declaration covers a wide range of topics related to the environment and the responsibility for past neglect in managing the natural environment and resources.
13. Normally the crisis happens as a result of modern technology and its applications driven not just by need but also greed, and also by artificial needs over the globe where the balance has been destroyed.
14. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern* (Kuala Lumpur: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1968), 13.
15. J. R. Engel and J. G. Engel, *Ethics Environment and Development: Global Challenge and International Response*, Chapter 1 (London: Belhaven Press, 1990).
16. Osman Bakar, *Environmental Wisdom for Planet Earth: The Islamic Perspective* (Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, UM, 2007).
17. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 3.
18. Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (England: Penguin Books, 2005), 6–10.
19. Hans Van Ginkel, during the International Conference on "Environment, Peace and the Dialogue among Civilizations and Cultures" in Tehran from 9–10 May 2005. He underlined that environment and human security problems are complex and that solutions to these problems must also be complex.
20. Diamond, *Collapse*, 233.
21. Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 23.
22. Koyu Furusawa, *A Consideration on Sustainable Development and Civilization* (1989), 133–136.
23. Ibid.
24. United Nation, *The Brundtland Commission Report*.
25. Holistic education as a tool for sustainable development has been discussed in "The Importance of Religious Teaching in Promoting Education for Sustainable Development: Islam in Focus," *Islamic Quarterly*, 53 no. 1 (2009): 69.



26. Abdul al-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Baha'i Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1982), 10.
27. Annuar Maaruf, "Sustainable Development: The Malaysian Perspective", *IKD Journal*, (1995): 36–47.
28. Azizan Baharuddin, "Environment and Development: Ethical and Educational Considerations", *IKD Journal* (1995): 199–228. After all, it is the gap in economic prosperity related to energy consumption on a global scale. The difference of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions per capita of each country is clearly connected with the society's class structure.
29. This idea comes from Razali Ismail, former Malaysian Ambassador to the UN. He was also the chairman of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development. For more, see his article, "Sustainable Development: A Global Overview" in *IKD Journal*, 16–19.

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