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# **Islamic Relief Environment Policy**

Islamic Relief is dedicated to alleviating the poverty and suffering of the world's poorest people.

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*“Mischief has appeared on the land and sea because of (the greed) that the hands of man have earned” (Ar-Rum/ The Romans [30] 41)*

## Introduction

Many poor people in developing countries live in ecologically vulnerable environments. This affects both their livelihoods and their safety. As their farm lands erode, deserts advance and forests disappear, they are finding it increasingly difficult to ensure a sufficient and sustainable income. As increasing numbers of people are forced to live in precarious locations such as steep hills, slums and unstable coastal areas continues to rise, natural hazards such as earthquakes and hurricanes are increasingly likely to cost lives.

Poverty accelerates environmental destruction, as survival often requires an overexploitation of natural surroundings. Relatively infertile land is quickly depleted and prone to erosion. The quest for survival leads to levels of hunting, fishing, grazing, and wood-gathering that surpass the environment’s carrying capacity. It is difficult to escape from this downward spiral, in which poverty and environmental destruction reinforce each other.

Climate change is exacerbating this situation. It is likely to annihilate the poverty reduction gains of the recent past, and may render the Millennium Development Goals unachievable. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, 182 million people could die of diseases directly attributable to climate change by the end of the century.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the world, many millions more are facing increased suffering and lower life expectancy as a consequence of climate-induced floods, famine, drought and conflict. The number of weather-related disasters a year – including droughts, windstorms and floods – has more than doubled since 1996.<sup>2</sup>

- Overall [...] the health effects of a rapidly changing climate are likely to be overwhelmingly negative, particularly in the poorest communities, which have contributed least to greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>3</sup>
- Air pollution causes respiratory infections, heart disease, and lung cancer. This causes an annual 2 million premature deaths around the world.<sup>4</sup>
- Changes in water quantity and quality due to climate change are expected to affect food availability, stability, access and utilisation. This is expected to lead to decreased food security and increased vulnerability of poor rural farmers, especially in the arid and semi-arid tropics and Asian and African mega-deltas.<sup>5</sup>
- The number of people affected by disasters increased from 740 million in the 1970s to 2 billion in the 1990s. Virtually all victims live in developing countries.<sup>6</sup>
- In the course of the last three decades, land area stricken by serious drought more than doubled.<sup>7</sup> Wars and civil strife over increasingly scarce resources, such as water and fertile land, are becoming increasingly frequent.

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<sup>1</sup> WHO guidance on the health impacts of air pollutants, [www.who.int/phe/health\\_topics/outdoorair/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/phe/health_topics/outdoorair/en/index.html)

<sup>2</sup> World Disasters Report 2005, IFRC

<sup>3</sup> Climate and Health fact sheet, World Health Organisation,

<http://www.who.int/globalchange/news/fsclimandhealth/en/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> WHO guidance on the health impacts of air pollutants, [www.who.int/phe/health\\_topics/outdoorair/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/phe/health_topics/outdoorair/en/index.html)

<sup>5</sup> Climate Change and Water, IPCC Technical Paper VI, June 2008, <http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/technical-papers/ccw/chapter7.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Financial Initiative of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), [www.unepfi.org](http://www.unepfi.org)

<sup>7</sup> Drought’s Growing Reach: NCAR Study Points to Global Warming as Key Factor, US National Center for Atmospheric Research, NCAR, 10 January 2005; [www.ucar.edu/news/releases/2005/drought\\_research.shtml](http://www.ucar.edu/news/releases/2005/drought_research.shtml)

- By 2020, between 75 and 250 million people in Africa will be exposed to an increase in water-related stress due to climate change.<sup>8</sup> By 2025, more than 3 billion people could be affected by serious water shortages.<sup>9</sup>
- The UN expects 50 million environmental refugees by 2010,<sup>10</sup> and 150 million environmental refugees by 2050.<sup>11</sup>

Compromising the environment for the benefit of short term development means a transfer of poverty and suffering from one generation to all subsequent generations. The reality of climate change requires adaptation, but adaptation alone will not be sufficient to cope with all the ever-increasing effects of climate change.<sup>12</sup>

## Environment and poverty

Almost a quarter of all illnesses in developing countries are related to the environment. Environmental damage aggravates poverty as it depletes natural resources on which poor people in particular depend. Rapid deforestation and the depletion or even extinction of species deprive people of valuable products such as firewood, food and medicinal substances (often necessitated to pay off international debts, see IR debt policy). The health of millions of people is affected by polluted drinking water, sanitation that is insufficiently hygienic because of water shortages, and air pollution. Although economic growth in developing countries is crucial for poverty reduction, it can also easily contribute to further damage to the environment, especially under the current international trade system (see IR trade policy).

Biodiversity benefits people through more than just its contribution to material welfare and livelihoods. Biodiversity contributes to security, resilience (to climate variability and market fluctuations as they are less dependent on one or a few products and dependent on selling for living, they live off what they have in nature), social relations (damage to ecosystems, highly valued for their aesthetic, recreational, or spiritual values can damage social relations, both by reducing the bonding value of shared experience as well as by causing resentment toward groups that profit from their damage), health, and freedom of choices and actions (less resources, less opportunities)<sup>13</sup>. The reduction of the world's biodiversity has been more rapid in the past 50 years than at any time in human history. The Millennium Assessment<sup>14</sup> predicts that the dynamics that cause biodiversity loss continue unabated, and may well increase in intensity,

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<sup>8</sup> International Governmental Panel on Climate Change, 6 April 2007, [www.ipcc.ch/SPM6avr07.pdf](http://www.ipcc.ch/SPM6avr07.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Development Beyond Aid, Hilary Benn, Secretary of State for International Development, 5<sup>th</sup> White Paper Speech, Chatham House/BOND, 23 February 2006, [www.dfid.gov.uk/news/files/Speeches/wp2006-speeches/beyond-aid230206.asp](http://www.dfid.gov.uk/news/files/Speeches/wp2006-speeches/beyond-aid230206.asp)

<sup>10</sup> 50m environmental refugees by end of decade, UN warns, 12 October 2005, The Guardian; [www.guardian.co.uk/climatechange/story/0,,1589898,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/climatechange/story/0,,1589898,00.html)

<sup>11</sup> The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which advises the world's governments under the auspices of the UN, estimates this, due mainly to the effects of coastal flooding, shoreline erosion and agricultural disruption. See Living Space for Environmental Refugees, <http://www.liser.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> International Governmental Panel on Climate Change, 6 April 2007, [www.ipcc.ch/SPM6avr07.pdf](http://www.ipcc.ch/SPM6avr07.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> For example, local fishers depend on mangroves as breeding grounds for local fish populations. Loss of mangroves translates to a loss in control over the local fish stock and a livelihood they have been pursuing for many generations and that they value. Another example is high-diversity agricultural systems. These systems normally produce less cash than monoculture cash crops, but farmers have some control over their entitlements because of spreading risk through diversity. High diversity of genotypes, populations, species, functional types, and spatial patches decreases the negative effects of pests and pathogens on crops and keeps open possibilities for agrarian communities to develop crops suited to future environmental challenges and to increase their resilience to climate variability and market fluctuations

<sup>14</sup> Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005. Ecosystems and Human Well-being: Biodiversity Synthesis. World Resources Institute, Washington, DC, [www.millenniumassessment.org/documents/CbdSynthesisFinal.pdf](http://www.millenniumassessment.org/documents/CbdSynthesisFinal.pdf)

meaning the foundation that people live on also continues to erode unabated risking more and more to poverty.

In the last century, some people have benefited from the conversion of natural ecosystems to human-dominated ecosystems and from the exploitation of biodiversity. However, these gains have been achieved at growing costs in the form of losses in biodiversity, degradation of many ecosystem services, and the exacerbation of poverty for the majority of the world's population.

The impact of climate change, and of more direct man-made environmental destruction such as unsustainable logging and unregulated dumping, falls disproportionately upon developing countries. Within these countries, the poor are affected most severely, as they tend to live in ecologically vulnerable environments. They are the ones who tend to depend on rain fed agriculture, and thus the ones most affected by variations in precipitation levels and an increased frequency of extreme weather conditions. As rain fall drops, farm lands are eroded, deserts advance and forests disappear, with each new generation finding it harder to ensure a livelihood. This exacerbates inequities in health status and access to adequate food, clean water and other resources.<sup>15</sup>

In turn, their poverty accelerates environmental destruction, as their survival requires an overexploitation of their natural surroundings. Their relatively infertile land is farmed too intensively, and soil erosion accelerates as a consequence. In their quest for survival, the poor are often forced into practices that surpass the environment's carrying capacity such as overhunting, overfishing, overgrazing, and wood-gathering. This downward spiral, in which poverty and environmental destruction reinforce each other, is difficult to escape. Climate change consolidates the link. It is likely to annihilate the poverty reduction gains of the recent past, and renders the millennium and other development goals unachievable.

The principle of intergenerational equity ('neighbours in time') requires that all members of each generation of human beings inherit a natural and cultural patrimony from past generations, both as beneficiaries and as custodians under the duty to pass on this heritage to future generations. This right is inseparably coupled with the obligation to use this heritage in such a manner that it can be passed on to future generations in no worse condition than it was received. Saving people now at the expense of future generations is not solving the problem.

## Environment and Islam

There are five major aims (*maqasid*) of the Shariah<sup>16</sup>: protection of religion ('*deen*'), life ('*nafs*'), mind ('*aql*'), offspring ('*nasl*'), and property ('*ma'al*'). Ultimately, environmental degradation will end the opportunity to live, to own property, to beget offspring, and to be religious (how?).<sup>17</sup> Environmental protection is thus necessary in order to achieve the aims of the Shariah. This is illustrated by some 750 verses in the Qur'an that exhort believers to reflect on nature, to study the relationship between living organisms and their environment, to make the

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<sup>15</sup> Third Assessment Report (TAR) 'Climate Change 2001', [www.ipcc.ch/activity/tar.htm](http://www.ipcc.ch/activity/tar.htm)

<sup>16</sup> Shariah literally means a 'clear path'. It is the path that man, in Islam, must walk as he toils and strives to reach his Creator. It is the yearning deep within to seek the Lord and the Master that the Shariah translates into steps, concrete and specific, on the pathways of life.

<sup>17</sup> Practically, *Shariah* has clear instructions such as *harim* (preserved natural environments) and *hima* (protected land for grazing purposes) which can be applied for nature conservation within the Islamic law.

best use of reason and to maintain the balance and proportion God has built into the Creation.<sup>18</sup> In brief, the Islamic view on the environmental balance is illustrated by the following guiding principles:

### **1) *Tawheed (Unity of Creation):***

“Say: He is Allah the One and Only; Allah the Eternal Absolute; He begets not nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him.” (Al-Baqarah/ The Cow [112] 1-4). Tawheed of Lordship in Arabic means '*Rububiyah*' - it is derived from the root word of 'Rabb' which means The Owner, In charge of every affair, Creator. So, Tawheed of Rububiyah means testification that Allah is the Creator of all creation, the One Who gives them death and life. Not looking after the rest of Creation is thus neglecting part of what we ourselves as humans form part of.

The Qur'an has several other verses referring to the oneness of Creation; that we are but a small part of this creation by God Almighty: “Surely the creation of the heavens and the earth is greater than the creation of man; but most people know not” (Q [40] 57).

The world is not ours to abuse. Generations after us have as many rights (and duties) as we do. Tawheed is the fundamental confirmation of the oneness of the Creator; of the unity of all creation; and of the interdependence of the natural order of which humanity is an intrinsic part.

### **2) *Humanity's relation to God:***

“Allah's guidance is the [only] guidance and we have been directed to submit ourselves to the Lord of the worlds. To establish regular prayers and to fear Allah; for it is to Him that we shall be gathered together. It is He who created the heavens and the earth in true [proportions]; the day He says “Be” Behold! It is. His Word is the truth. His will be the dominion the day the trumpet will be blown. He knows the Unseen as well as that which is open. For He is the Wise well acquainted [with all things]. (Al-Anam/ The Livestock [6] 71-3) On the Day of Judgment we will be held accountable for how we have absolved ourselves of duties put on us by Allah, which includes taking care of the environment. Not looking after the environment will affect our record on Day of Judgment negatively.

### **3) *To Allah belongs the earth and the heavens:***

“To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs.” (An-Nisa/ The Women [4] 171);

“To Him belongs all that dwells or lurks in the night and the day. For He is the One Who hears and knows all things.” (Al-Anam/ The Livestock [6] 13);

“To Him belongs what is in the heavens and on earth and all between them and all beneath the soil.” (Ta-Ha/ Ta-Ha [20] 6);

“To Him belong all [creatures] in the heavens and on earth: even those who are in His [very] Presence are not too proud to serve Him nor are they [ever] weary [of His service].” (Al-Anbiya/ The Prophets [21] 19)

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<sup>18</sup> Based on article by Dr. Hasan Zillur Rahim, Ecology in Islam: Protection of the Web of Life a Duty for Muslims, Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, October 1991, Page 65; [www.wrmea.com/backissues/1091/9110065.htm](http://www.wrmea.com/backissues/1091/9110065.htm)

As is obvious from the above sample verses, Allah makes it clear that what is in the earth (and the heavens) is not ours. If it is not ours, then it is not our right to choose to destroy it. Especially in 'developed' countries we are destroying parts of Creation by living beyond the environmental capacity (e.g. if everyone lives like the average person in the UK, we would need three planets to sustain this lifestyle), thus going into 'ecological debt', a debt on Allah's Creation which we will be asked to pay on Day of Judgment, unless we look after the environment as caretaker, not owner.

#### **4) Humanity and Khalifa (Guardian of Creation):**

"It is He who has made you [His] agents inheritors of the earth: He has raised you in ranks some above others: that He may *try* you in the gifts He has given you: for your Lord is quick in punishment: yet He is indeed Oft-Forgiving Most Merciful." (Al-Anam/ The Livestock [6] 165)

It is impermissible in Islam to abuse one's rights as *khalifa*, because the notion of acting in "good faith" underpins Islamic law. The planet was inherited by all humankind and all its posterity from generation to generation. No one generation has the right to pollute the planet or consume its natural resources in a manner that leaves for posterity a planet that is denuded of its resources or polluted.

#### **5) Mizaan (Balance):**

"[Allah] Most Gracious! It is He Who has taught the Qur'an. He has created man: He has taught him speech [and Intelligence]. The sun and the moon follow courses [exactly] computed; And the herbs and the trees - both [alike] bow in adoration. And the firmament has He raised high and He has set up the balance [of Justice] In order that ye may not transgress [due] balance. So establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance. It is He Who has spread out the earth for [His] creatures: Therein is fruit and date-palms producing spathes [enclosing dates]: Also corn with [its] leaves and stalk for fodder and sweet-smelling plants. Then which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny? (Ar-Rahman/ The Merciful [55] 1-13). When using resources that Allah has created (e.g. biodiversity) we should bear in mind the 'carrying capacity' of an area, the use that a resource can handle and replenish, bearing in mind that those after us have just as much right to resources as we do, so we should ensure balanced use throughout our lives.

#### **6) Justice:**

"Whoever recommends and helps a good cause becomes a partner therein: and whoever recommends and helps an evil cause shares in its burden: and Allah has power over all things." (An-Nisa/ The Women [4] 85). This concept of justice encompasses intergenerational justice. When faced with challenges (e.g. our beneficiaries are getting poorer due to desertification) it is important to know the source. Dealing only with the symptoms (such as distributing new seeds after reserves were lost in a drought), means we will continue dealing with them for a very long time. But if we get to the bottom, we can deal with the cause and support our beneficiaries in a more lasting and sustainable way.

#### **7) Use but do not abuse:**

"O children of Adam! ... eat and drink: but waste not by excess for Allah loves not the wasters." (Al-Araf/ The Heights [7] 31)

The earth's resources land, water, air, minerals, forests are available for our use, but these gifts come from God with certain ethical restraints imposed on them. We may use them to meet our needs, but only in a way that does not upset ecological balance and that does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

**8) *Fitra (natural state):***

“So set your face steadily and truly to the Faith: [Establish] Allah's handiwork according to the pattern on which He has made mankind: no change [let there be] in the work [wrought] by Allah: that is the standard Religion: but most among mankind understand not.” (Ar-Rum/ The Romans [30] 30). The natural state is to live in harmony with our surroundings, not to overexploit it as is often the case. At the other, repairing the natural state is not a question about saving trees, but a question of equity and justice.

**9) *Amanah (trust):***

“We offered the trust unto the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it and man assumed it. He is a tyrant and fool.” (Al-Ahzab/ The Clans [33] 72).

Within this contract, the bestower of the trust (Allah SWT) is giving a responsibility to the trustee (humanity). In other words, the guardian of the trust has a high degree of freedom and accompanying responsibility in its use (or misuse). If humanity did not have the power to either use or misuse this trust given to it by God, then the whole idea of offering the trust, in the first place, would be futile: “there is no trust if the trustee has no power, and the trust implies that the giver of the trust believes and expects that the trustee would use it according to the wishes of the creator of the trust, and not otherwise.”<sup>19</sup> The consequence of violating the trust is attested in the Qur'an by the frequent recounting of the histories of the people of Ad and Thamud.<sup>20</sup> The implications of these stories for contemporary times are grave, and clear.

## **Islamic Relief's Environment Policy**

Islamic Relief is inspired by the teachings of Islam in all of its work. Islam's environmental worldview is a holistic one. It assumes a fundamental link and interdependency between all natural elements and bases its teachings on the premise that if humanity abuses or exhausts one element, the natural world as a whole will suffer direct consequences. Ultimately, none of the five major aims (*maqasid*) of the Shariah (protection of religion, life, mind, offspring and property) can be sustained if the world's environment – God's Creation - does not allow for survival.

Islamic Relief recognises that poverty and environmental degradation need to be tackled simultaneously to achieve long-term alleviation of the suffering of the world's poorest people and to be true to the Muslim faith. Although Islamic Relief will not by itself be able to solve global environmental issues, it does have a duty to do what it can, and recognises that, through its programmes and through its organisational behaviour, much can be achieved.

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<sup>19</sup> Ali, A.Y. The Holy Qur'an; Text, Translation and Commentary. Maryland; Amana Corporation. 1989. pg. 1080

<sup>20</sup> Both were powerful tribes in their respective times and lands - Ad were “endowed abundantly with power” and Thamud were “settled firmly on earth” - but they arrogantly abused the power given to them by Allah, and were destroyed by an environmental cataclysm.

Islamic Relief is a humanitarian relief and development organisation. The vast majority of its income is dedicated to helping poor people escape poverty and suffering through relief and sustainable development programmes. The organisation's efforts to increase awareness and to avoid environmental degradation in general and reduce its carbon emissions in particular, reinforce this core purpose.

Islamic Relief believes that humankind has the responsibility to maintain the balance and proportion that God has built into the Creation. Islamic Relief also believes that much suffering is being caused by disruption of that balance and proportion.

Islamic Relief believes that a rich biological heritage, a stable climate and clean water are as important to communities as their material needs. Furthermore, Islamic Relief believes that environmental conservation, socio-economic development, and even relief activities go hand in hand in all but the most extreme of circumstances.

Islamic Relief will not be able to single-handedly change the world's economic system and modes of production. However, Islamic Relief *will* be able to ensure that its own actions and programmes do not place more than a minimum additional burden on the environment. In addition, Islamic Relief may, in some cases, be able to restore the environmental balance and proportion. In the past years, a number of the Islamic Relief Field Partners have shown that it is possible to take into account consciously the longer term sustainability of our interventions, and have already developed replicable examples of projects that reverse environmental degradation.

This will be made possible by:

- Making its staff more environmentally aware and its office operations more environmentally conscious. Starting at the Islamic Relief Worldwide and then expanding to Partner Organisations and Implementing Partners, Islamic Relief will adopt a range of feasible and affordable measures which will reduce Islamic Relief's ecological footprint *and* save Islamic Relief donors' money. These measures include behavioural changes (e.g., switching off equipment, utilising alternatives to air travel); system development (e.g. separating garbage, recharging cartridges); and environmentally conscious procurement (including office procurement and procurement for field operations and of relief items).
- Introducing environmental impact assessments as a meaningful and standard component of Islamic Relief's project preparation process and include environmental impact in evaluations.
- Initiating and expanding projects that create sustainable livelihoods through conservation and environmental regeneration.

Islamic Relief aims to be conscious of its 'ecological footprint' and to minimise any negative effects that may arise from its work. As an organisation that is conscious of its duty to Allah's Creation, Islamic Relief should be in the position to play a leadership role within the wider Muslim community by 2010, and more generally a leadership voice by 2015 (deadline for MDGs).

In the longer term, to contribute to the Islamic Relief's vision of creating a caring world where the basic requirements of people in need are fulfilled, Islamic Relief's organisational aims evolve to accommodate the rapid changes that today's world is undergoing. In view of the

poverty and suffering that environmental degradation is causing, and will cause in the future, Islamic Relief's mission and organisational aims will be reviewed, to incorporate: 1) the imperative to minimise negative consequences of Islamic Relief's work on the environment; 2) the commitment to reverse, where possible, environmental degradation; and 3) the commitment to enhance communities' ability to cope with environmental change.

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