

Environment & Islam



Islam encourages people to protect the earth and all life on it, and to maintain the balance in nature as created by God. We live, however, in a world of pollution, deforestation, climate change and desertification, and in this world, environmental concerns are often forgotten in favour of short-term economic benefit. Yet the problems caused by environmental degradation will not only affect future generations, they already threaten the world's population today.

The environment and faith

The Islamic environmental worldview is based on the five aims of the Islamic legal system called the Shariah. The Shariah aims to protect religion, life, mind, offspring and property. All of these are threatened by our lack of proper appreciation and protection of the environment: people are losing property due to increased hurricanes; losing life due to increased floods; losing dignity due to increased desertification and losing children due to disease.

In Islam, humans are the guardians of the earth and are entrusted to protect it for future generations. And yet right now millions of people are suffering as a result of the damage we have done to our environment. The people who are most affected by the changes to the natural environment are those who live in the world's poorest countries and who have usually contributed the least to the world's environmental problems. Their problems arise because they often rely on agriculture and natural resources that are threatened by rising temperatures and desertification. They are also amongst those most vulnerable to natural effects most acutely.

They live in houses that are easily damaged by storms and in disaster prone areas such as flood plains. They have no money to buy food if their own crops fail and cannot afford medical care if their families are injured or become ill. The number of people affected by natural disasters has increased dramatically in recent decades from 740 million in the 1970s, to 2 billion in the 1990s. Nearly all of these people lived in developing countries.

Although some areas are more prone to disasters than others, environmental degradation is making matters worse. As climate change increases the intensity and frequency of disasters, so people become less able to cope with them. They are forced to resort to survival tactics, such as cutting down forests for firewood beyond the forests' regenerating capacity, which further degrade the local environment. Unfortunately, this means when there is another disaster, it will be much, much worse.

The environment and refugees

The increase in natural disasters has also forced more people out of their homes. In many cases their homes have been destroyed by storms or cyclones. However, an increasing number of people are forced to leave their homes because the land is dry and they cannot grow enough food. These people move to try and find more fertile land or jobs to support their families.. Unfortunately, the impact of environmental degradation on many poor people will be that they are forced into deeper poverty.

A combination of drought, increased natural disasters, a rise in diseases and polluted water sources will prevent people growing enough food, making a living and being able to meet their basic needs. It is therefore not only an environmental issue to work to reverse the impact of environmental degradation and climate change; it is for Muslims a religious duty too. Combating poverty and upholding social justice are ways that faith is translated into action.

The environment and poverty

Poverty and environmental damage are closely linked. The effects of environmental damage disproportionately affect the poor, while poverty can force people to further exploit their environment.

For example, many poor countries have no choice but to sell off their natural resources to service their international debts. As natural resources are depleted, communities are forced to overexploit the resources that remain, leading to further environmental destruction. Land is over-farmed and eroded and reserves of wood or grass are used up. As reserves of natural resources such as water and pasture decrease, conflicts between individuals, communities, and even between countries will become more frequent.

People who are forced from their homes as a result of climate change are sometimes called ‘environmental refugees.’ The United Nations estimates that by 2010 there will be 50 million environmental refugees. By 2050 this will have risen to 150 million. Many will have left their homes because of a lack of resources or because of conflict over scarce resources. These people will need new homes and access to basic services such as schools, healthcare and clean water.

The environment and disease

In many of the countries most heavily affected by climate change, temperatures have already risen or will rise dramatically. In some areas, this will be coupled with less predictable rainfall – either increasing or decreasing dramatically. These changes in weather conditions bring with them the risk of a rise in diseases such as malaria. In addition, a lack of rainfall could cause severe food shortages, leading to increased rates of malnutrition. It could also force people to rely on contaminated water sources, causing an increase in waterborne diseases such as diarrhoea and cholera.

The areas where the rise in rates of disease and malnutrition will be greatest will be in those countries which lack effective healthcare systems. This may mean that more people, especially those who are vulnerable – the elderly, the young, pregnant women – will die needlessly from preventable diseases. An increase in dangerous emissions from factories and cars is continuing to pollute the air and water. This too is affecting people’s health and leading to deaths from diseases such as lung cancer.

“The creation of the heavens and the earth is far greater than the creation of mankind. But most of mankind does not know it.” (The Qur’an, chapter 40, verse 57)

FACT

Worldwide, one billion people lack access to sources of clean, safe water. Climate change could make this problem worse. Source: Wateraid

Poor communities often rely on agriculture and natural resources, such as wood or water to make a living. But fertile grazing land, forests and water sources are all being destroyed, leaving them unable to feed their

animals or grow food. This means that many people are becoming poorer and many do not have enough food to feed their families.

The environment and natural disasters

We all know that climate change is warming the earth, causing the ice caps to melt, and the deserts to increase. It is also leading to more and more deadly natural disasters such as droughts, floods and storms.

“Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising global mean sea level” United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, 2 February 2007

“Children of Adam! Wear fine clothing in every mosque and eat and drink but do not be profligate. He (Allah) does not love the profligate.” (The Qur’an, chapter 7, verse 31)

FACT

It is estimated that by 2020, between 75 and 250 million people in Africa will face water shortages as a result of climate change. Water shortages could lead to famine, mass displacement and conflict.

Source: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

The MDGs were developed by the United Nations in the year 2000 to help some of the world’s poorest people by halving chronic world poverty by 2015. Included in these were goals to reduce child mortality, to improve maternal health, and to ensure environmental sustainability. If any of these goals have any chance of being reached, then urgent action is needed now to stop our environment from being damaged further.

What is Islamic Relief doing?

Islamic Relief is a relief and development organisation and works to provide communities with access to basic services such as healthcare, education and clean water, as well as helping them move out of poverty. We also provide relief to those who have been affected by natural disasters or conflict and need emergency aid as well as help in rebuilding their lives.

However, we realise that there will be little progress in reducing levels of poverty and suffering from natural and man-made disasters, unless environmental concerns are also tackled. Although much more needs to be done, we are already working to reduce the effects of environmental degradation in some of the countries we work.

- In Mali, we have been planting trees in the desert region of Ghourma Rharous. This is an area affected by the encroaching Sahara desert which is destroying farmland. The new fruit trees help to halt the spread of the desert and also provide people with a source of food and income.
- In Balochistan, Pakistan, we are using the abundant sunshine to generate electricity. Solar panels have been provided in rural villages and are now generating electricity to power water pumps and lights in people’s homes.
- In Sudan, our staff has established a carbon offsetting scheme. This means that they plant fruit trees whenever they take a flight. The trees are planted at the homes of children sponsored by Islamic Relief, and also provide them with a source of income.
- In China, we build water harvesting cellars. This traditional method of storing water during the rainy season for use in the dry season is environmentally friendly and also provides people living in dry areas with access to safe water.

What next?

- Islamic Relief works to alleviate the poverty and suffering of the world's poorest people, and to help communities build sustainable livelihoods. However, these are compromised by environmental degradation. We will work to limit or reverse environmental degradation and to increase the capacity of communities to cope with its effects, and to better prepare for an increase in future natural disasters.
- Islamic Relief works for the poor and helps ensure their needs are met through effective lobbying, campaigning and advocacy. We will continue to ensure that those who are affected by environmental degradation have a voice through our advocacy efforts and through the work of coalitions such as 'Stop Climate Chaos.' We encourage all people to add their voice to growing numbers of people who are concerned about environmental degradation and its effects on the world's poor.

What can WE ALL do?

There IS something that we can all do: we can put into practice the 3Rs (reduce, reuse and recycle); we can increase awareness about our duty of care for the whole of Creation amongst our family and peers; we can 'green' our home, workplace, place of worship, community centre.....the opportunities are endless. If people and their governments, all do whatever they can now, then there may still be a chance of saving this planet for future generations. But it will require effort, some sacrifice and constant commitment from all of us.

"...man will have nothing but what he strives for." (The Qur'an, chapter 53, verse 39)