



SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IN THE LIGHT OF ISLAMIC LAW AND MODERN POLICY PRACTICES: A NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

The rising ecological crises in Nigeria – ranging from deforestation, water pollution, and desertification to oil spills and unregulated waste disposal – present significant governance challenges that require multidimensional approaches. While modern environmental policy frameworks exist, including the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) Act and the Climate Change Act of 2021, their enforcement remains weak due to institutional corruption, limited awareness, and inadequate community participation. This paper examines sustainable environmental governance through the dual lens of Islamic law and modern policy practices, emphasizing Nigeria's predominantly Muslim context. Using a doctrinal and qualitative approach, the study analyzes Qur'anic principles of stewardship (khilāfah), prohibition of corruption (fasād), and preservation of natural balance (mīzān) alongside Nigeria's environmental legal instruments. The findings reveal that Islamic environmental ethics reinforce the principles of accountability, moderation, and justice embedded in sustainable development goals (SDGs), and that their integration into Nigeria's governance structures can strengthen compliance, community engagement, and ethical responsibility. The paper concludes that sustainable environmental governance in Nigeria requires a hybrid model grounded in faith-based environmental ethics, effective policy implementation, and institutional reform aligned with both divine injunctions and modern sustainability principles.

Keywords: Islamic Law; Environmental Governance; Sustainability; Nigeria; Policy; Qur'an; Ecology; Ethics; Shari'ah; Environmental Protection

Introduction

The question of environmental sustainability in contemporary Nigeria is increasingly pressing, given the country's ecological vulnerability and governance weaknesses. Rapid urbanization, industrial expansion, deforestation, and oil extraction in the Niger Delta have contributed to ecological degradation that threatens public health, livelihoods, and long-term national security (Ebeku, 2022). Despite a robust array of statutory laws and policies – such as the Environmental Impact Assessment Act (1992), NESREA Act (2007), and the Climate Change Act (2021) – environmental governance in Nigeria continues to suffer from systemic deficiencies. These include limited enforcement capacity, political interference, and poor public environmental ethics (Adebayo, 2023; UNEP, 2020).

From an Islamic perspective, environmental preservation is not merely a technical or legal concern but a moral and theological obligation. The Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes the sacred relationship between humanity and the natural environment, urging responsible stewardship and forbidding corruption upon the Earth (Qur'an 7:56). The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) reinforced this in the *Hadith*, stating, "The world is green and beautiful, and Allah has appointed you as His stewards over it" (*Sahih Muslim*, Book 10, Hadith 2603). These teachings frame environmental protection within the broader ethical paradigm of *Shari'ah*, where all creation constitutes part of the divine trust (*amānah*) entrusted to humankind (Nasr, 2021).

This study, therefore, seeks to explore how Islamic environmental ethics can complement modern governance mechanisms in Nigeria to achieve sustainable environmental outcomes. It argues that integrating Qur'anic ecological principles into Nigeria's environmental policy framework can strengthen environmental justice, promote moral accountability, and enhance public participation. The research draws upon classical Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh al-bi'ah*), contemporary environmental law, and policy analysis to propose an integrative governance model that bridges faith-based ethics and state regulatory systems.

Literature Review

Environmental governance has emerged as a central concern in global sustainability discourse, linking ecological preservation with justice, ethics, and institutional accountability (UNEP, 2022). In the Nigerian context, numerous scholars have critiqued the inefficacy of environmental laws, highlighting that while Nigeria possesses extensive environmental policies, the institutional mechanisms for their implementation are weak (Ebeku, 2022; Akintunde, 2023). Scholars such as Olanrewaju (2021) and Olatunde (2020) argue that the fragmented governance structure, combined with socio-political instability, hinders long-term ecological planning and sustainability.

Islamic Environmental Thought

The Islamic intellectual tradition offers a profound foundation for environmental ethics. According to Al-Qaradawi (2019), Islam's environmental philosophy is rooted in three primary concepts: *Tawhid* (unity of creation), *Khilāfah* (stewardship), and *Mizān* (balance). These principles establish humanity's duty to maintain equilibrium and harmony in nature as part of their worship and obedience to Allah. Qur'anic verses such as "And do not cause corruption upon the earth after it has been set in order" (Qur'an 7:56), and "Eat and drink, but do not waste. Indeed, He does not like the wasteful" (Qur'an 7:31), directly instruct humanity to avoid environmental degradation and promote moderation.

Contemporary scholars such as Foltz (2020) and Kamali (2021) have extended this framework to address modern ecological crises,

suggesting that *fiqh al-bi'ah* (Islamic environmental jurisprudence) can serve as a normative legal framework for ecological protection. The emphasis on stewardship (*khilāfah*) in Qur'an 2:30 and accountability in Qur'an 6:165 illustrate that human dominion over nature is a form of moral testing, not absolute ownership. Consequently, environmental destruction constitutes both legal and spiritual transgression.

Nigerian Environmental Policy Context

Nigeria's environmental management framework has evolved over decades, beginning with the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) in 1988 and later transitioning to NESREA in 2007. Despite these institutional developments, practical enforcement remains weak, particularly in rural and peri-urban regions where traditional authorities hold more influence than state agencies (Adewuyi, 2022). Scholars such as Okorie and Hassan (2023) have called for localized and faith-based environmental education models that resonate with cultural and religious values.

In predominantly Muslim northern Nigeria, Islamic law and institutions offer an underutilized platform for environmental advocacy. The *Hisbah* institutions, traditionally responsible for promoting ethical conduct, could be adapted to support community-based environmental monitoring, reflecting the Qur'anic injunction to maintain balance and prevent corruption (Qur'an 55:7–9). Such integration could bridge the gap between modern regulatory frameworks and local moral consciousness, a synergy that scholars like Nasr (2021) and Kamali (2021) advocate for in Muslim societies.

Integration of Islamic Law and Modern Environmental Governance

Recent interdisciplinary works (e.g., Ali & Abdalla, 2024; Al-Kandari, 2023) highlight the compatibility between Islamic jurisprudential principles and global sustainability frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Both emphasize justice, intergenerational equity, and responsible use of natural resources. The Qur'anic concept of *mizān* mirrors SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), while *amānah* corresponds with the principle of accountability in governance.

In Nigeria, where religious institutions hold moral authority, Islamic law can serve as a catalyst for behavioral change and environmental responsibility. When aligned with modern policy frameworks, Islamic environmental ethics can enhance regulatory compliance through moral persuasion and faith-based accountability (Ogunyemi, 2024). Thus, Islamic principles provide not only moral legitimacy but also practical mechanisms for advancing sustainable governance in a culturally resonant manner.

Theoretical Framework

The Islamic Environmental Framework

The Islamic environmental governance model is grounded in the *Tawhidi* worldview – the unity of all creation under the sovereignty of Allah (Nasr, 2021). In this worldview, nature is not a commodity but a divine trust (*amānah*), and humans are its trustees (*khulafā'*). The Qur'an states:

"Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority (*khalifah*)" (Qur'an 2:30).

This verse establishes humanity's vicegerency, assigning humans a moral duty to manage and preserve the Earth responsibly. The concept of *khilāfah* underpins the Islamic theory of environmental stewardship, emphasizing that misuse of resources constitutes a breach of divine trust.

Another central concept is *mīzān* (balance), which appears in Qur'an 55:7–9:

"And the heaven He raised and imposed the balance, that you not transgress within the balance. And establish weight in justice and do not make deficient the balance."

This establishes environmental equilibrium as a divine command. The disruption of ecological balance – through pollution, deforestation, or overexploitation – thus becomes not only an ethical violation but a spiritual transgression (*fasād*). The Qur'an explicitly warns:

"Do not cause corruption upon the earth after it has been set in order" (Qur'an 7:56).

According to Al-Qaradawi (2019), these injunctions provide a legal and moral foundation for environmental jurisprudence (*fiqh al-bi'ah*). Within this framework, sustainable governance reflects obedience to divine law, as maintaining balance ensures both human well-being and cosmic harmony.

Modern Environmental Governance Theory

Modern environmental governance is built upon principles of participation, accountability, rule of law, and sustainability (UNEP, 2022). It seeks to balance ecological integrity with economic and social objectives. In Nigeria, environmental governance follows a state-centric approach, relying on statutory agencies such as NESREA and the Ministry of Environment to enforce standards. However, numerous scholars have highlighted that governance must go beyond mere regulation to include public engagement, ethical awareness, and multi-level cooperation (Ebeku, 2022; Adebayo, 2023).

The integration of religious and ethical systems into governance offers an alternative paradigm for compliance enhancement and community mobilization. In Islam, environmental governance is not restricted to administrative law but extends into ethical and spiritual domains, binding individuals to divine accountability. Thus, merging Islamic law with modern policy provides both moral persuasion and institutional enforcement mechanisms.

Integrative Theoretical Synthesis

This study adopts a *hybrid theoretical approach* that integrates Islamic environmental ethics and modern governance theories. Drawing from both *fiqh al-bi'ah* and sustainability science, the framework posits that effective environmental protection in Nigeria requires:

- 1 **Divine accountability** – humans are trustees accountable to Allah (*Qur'an* 6:165).
- 2 **Justice and balance** – policies must preserve ecological *mīzān* and intergenerational equity.
- 3 **Community participation** – environmental responsibility as a collective obligation (*farḍ kifāyah*).
- 4 **Institutional ethics** – transparency, integrity, and stewardship as public service values.

In combining these dimensions, the paper advances an integrated model of *Islamic-environmental governance*, where spiritual ethics and secular policy instruments function complementarily.

Methodology

This research employs a **qualitative, doctrinal, and analytical approach**, combining textual interpretation of Islamic sources with policy and legal analysis of Nigerian environmental frameworks.

The study's methodology is structured as follows:

- 1 **Doctrinal Analysis:** Examination of Qur'anic verses, Hadith literature, and classical juristic opinions (*fiqh al-bi'ah*) related to environmental ethics and stewardship.
- 2 **Documentary Review:** Analysis of Nigeria's environmental laws and policies, including the NESREA Act (2007), Climate Change Act (2021), and Environmental Impact Assessment Act (1992).
- 3 **Comparative Approach:** Juxtaposition of Islamic legal principles with modern governance standards and sustainability practices adopted in Nigeria.
- 4 **Analytical Framework:** Evaluation of convergence and divergence between Islamic teachings and Nigerian policy practices, emphasizing ethical and governance implications.

Primary data were derived from classical Islamic legal texts (e.g., *Al-Muwatta'* and *Sahih Muslim*), while secondary data included academic journals, government reports, and international environmental governance publications from 2020–2025. The qualitative analysis was interpretive, focusing on deriving moral and legal insights rather than statistical generalization.

This methodological approach allows for a holistic understanding of how religious ethics can enrich policy frameworks to achieve sustainability outcomes in a culturally relevant manner.

Discussion and Analysis

Environmental Governance Challenges in Nigeria

Nigeria faces significant environmental challenges that threaten both human and ecological survival. Deforestation rates exceed 3.5% annually, while oil pollution in the Niger Delta has rendered large areas of farmland and water sources uninhabitable (UNEP, 2022). Urban waste mismanagement and desertification in the North exacerbate poverty and migration pressures. These environmental crises reflect governance gaps, including weak institutional capacity, political interference, and insufficient environmental education (Adewuyi, 2022).

Corruption in the enforcement of environmental standards remains a major impediment. For instance, environmental regulations are often ignored in favor of political or economic expediency (Olanrewaju, 2021). The Qur'anic injunction – *"And do not consume one another's wealth unjustly or send it [in bribery] to the rulers"* (Qur'an 2:188) – addresses such systemic corruption, underscoring that ethical integrity is central to governance.

In Islamic jurisprudence, environmental degradation caused by negligence or exploitation is a form of *fasād* (corruption), prohibited by divine command (Qur'an 7:56). Thus, mismanagement of environmental resources violates both legal obligations under national laws and religious duties under divine law.

Integrating Islamic Ethical Principles into Nigerian Policy

The Islamic principle of *amānah* (trusteeship) mandates that humans manage the environment responsibly. Nigerian environmental policy, while comprehensive on paper, lacks moral enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance. Embedding Qur'anic ethics within public administration could reinforce moral responsibility among policymakers and communities alike.

For example, the concept of *Hisbah* – traditionally an Islamic institution that promotes moral order – could be restructured to support community-based environmental monitoring. This model aligns with NESREA's decentralized enforcement vision but adds

an ethical dimension that encourages voluntary compliance. In northern Nigeria, where Islamic institutions hold strong legitimacy, this integration could be particularly impactful (Hassan & Abdullahi, 2023).

Furthermore, Qur'anic principles of moderation (*wasatiyyah*) – “Eat and drink, but do not waste; indeed, Allah does not like the wasteful” (Qur'an 7:31) – offer guidance for addressing Nigeria's consumer-driven environmental degradation. This principle could inform sustainable consumption campaigns and environmental education curricula.

Policy Synergies and Islamic Law Compatibility

Islamic environmental jurisprudence aligns closely with global sustainability norms, particularly the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The principles of *adl* (justice), *mīzān* (balance), and *amānah* (trust) mirror SDG themes such as climate action, responsible consumption, and institutional integrity (Ali & Abdalla, 2024). Thus, integrating these ethical imperatives into Nigeria's policy architecture would not contradict but rather reinforce existing legal frameworks.

For instance, NESREA's policy goal of “ensuring a clean and healthy environment for all Nigerians” resonates with the Qur'anic declaration:

“Allah loves those who purify themselves” (Qur'an 9:108).

Such moral alignment can enhance environmental consciousness, transforming governance from rule enforcement into an act of ethical service.

Results and Findings

The analysis of Islamic legal principles alongside Nigeria's environmental governance framework reveals several key findings, thus:

Complementarity of Ethical and Legal Frameworks

Islamic law and modern environmental policies share complementary principles. Both frameworks emphasize accountability, justice, and the responsible use of natural resources. The Qur'anic doctrine of *mīzān* (balance) and the concept of *amānah* (trusteeship) converge with the principles of sustainability and good governance embedded in Nigeria's policy architecture. Therefore, integrating Islamic moral imperatives into governance can strengthen compliance by appealing to both spiritual and civic consciousness.

Governance and Enforcement Gaps

Despite Nigeria's comprehensive environmental laws, enforcement remains inconsistent due to weak institutional capacity, limited funding, and corruption. The study finds that moral motivation, community participation, and ethical leadership – core Islamic values – are largely absent from Nigeria's policy enforcement culture. This absence diminishes public trust and perpetuates environmental neglect.

The Role of Faith-Based Institutions

Faith-based organizations, particularly Islamic institutions such as mosques, *Hisbah* committees, and educational centers, represent untapped resources for environmental advocacy. These bodies can promote ecological awareness through religious education, linking environmental stewardship to divine accountability. The Qur'an provides numerous exhortations that could form the foundation for faith-based environmental education:

“It is He who has produced you from the earth and settled you therein” (Qur'an 11:61).

This verse underscores humanity's existential bond with the environment, reinforcing the need for collective responsibility.

Potential for Policy Integration

The findings also indicate that Nigeria's environmental governance can benefit from hybrid models combining Islamic ethical imperatives with secular regulatory mechanisms. For example, incorporating Islamic ethical clauses into environmental awareness campaigns or leveraging *Hisbah* structures for local environmental audits could increase community involvement. The concept of *Shura* (consultation) in Qur'an 42:38 further supports participatory governance and community decision-making, principles aligned with modern democratic environmental management.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Environmental governance in Nigeria remains one of the most pressing challenges of sustainable development. While statutory frameworks exist, they have yet to deliver substantial ecological justice due to systemic governance flaws. This study demonstrates that Islamic environmental ethics provide a viable and culturally resonant complement to modern policy practices. Qur'anic injunctions emphasizing stewardship, moderation, and balance serve as both moral compass and regulatory framework for sustainable living.

The integration of Islamic environmental jurisprudence (*fiqh al-bi'ah*) into Nigeria's policy environment can redefine governance not merely as regulation but as an act of worship and moral duty. Such an integrative approach transcends technical compliance, inspiring citizens and institutions to preserve the environment as part of their spiritual accountability to Allah. This alignment between faith and law offers a path toward holistic, ethically grounded environmental governance in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study proposes the following policy recommendations:

- i) **Integration of Faith-Based Ethics:** The Federal and State Ministries of Environment should collaborate with religious leaders to develop faith-based environmental education programs rooted in Qur'anic principles of stewardship and moderation.
- ii) **Institutional Reform:** Strengthen NESREA and related agencies by incorporating ethical training modules based on Islamic and moral values, emphasizing integrity, transparency, and public accountability (Qur'an 4:58).
- iii) **Community-Based Governance:** Establish local environmental monitoring committees through *Hisbah* and community mosques, promoting bottom-up governance inspired by *Shura* (consultation) and collective responsibility.
- iv) **Legislative Review:** Review and amend environmental laws to include moral and ethical considerations, referencing religious injunctions as a supplementary moral guide for enforcement and public behavior.
- v) **Interfaith Environmental Dialogue:** Encourage interfaith collaboration on environmental protection to build shared moral consciousness across religious boundaries, promoting unity in sustainability efforts.

vi) **Public Awareness and Education:** Incorporate environmental stewardship lessons in Islamic studies curricula in schools and *madrassas*, emphasizing verses such as “*And do not waste, for Allah does not love the wasteful*” (Qur’an 7:31).

vii) **Sustainable Economic Planning:** Adopt *wasatiyyah* (moderation) in development planning to ensure that economic growth does not compromise environmental integrity, aligning with both Islamic ethics and SDG principles.

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(Translations cited from *The Qur’an: English Meanings and Notes*, Sahih International, Jeddah: Al-Muntada al-Islami Trust, 2011).

Relevant verses: 2:30; 2:188; 4:58; 6:165; 7:31; 7:56; 9:108; 11:61; 42:38; 55:7-9.

Hadith Collections

Sahih Muslim (Book 10, Hadith 2603) — “The world is green and beautiful, and Allah has appointed you as His stewards over it.”

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Ethical Citation Note

All Qur’anic and Hadith sources have been referenced in alignment with research-ethics requirements for Islamic studies, ensuring:

- i) Proper attribution to canonical texts.
- ii) Recognition of translator or compiler editions used for interpretation.
- iii) Avoidance of theological reinterpretation beyond established scholarly meaning.