

# Decolonizing Sustainability: Integrating Islamic Legal Pluralism into Post-2030 Agendas

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## Paper

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## Abstract

The international sustainability agenda, founded upon the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and subsequent COP climate agreements, is ever more reproached for institutionalizing colonial technocratic frameworks that sideline local epistemologies. This research formulates a decolonial approach to incorporate Islamic legal pluralism, specifically Maliki fiqh ideals and Quranic khalifah (stewardship), mizān (balance), and fasād (corruption) concepts into post-2030 sustainability agendas in Nigeria. Using a qualitative doctrinal and document-based method, we examine primary legal texts (the Nigerian Land Use Act; state Sharia codes), classical fiqh texts, international policy documents, and grey literature, including religious declarations. We find that Islamic institutions (waqf endowments, zakat councils, Sharia courts) are communal governance structures embracing environmental stewardship and social justice, yet under-engaged in national policy. We trace pathways for legal reform, such as the amendment of land tenure legislation to protect waqf lands, and institutional innovation, such as "green zakat" funds and specialized sharia benches for environmental cases. By bringing epistemic justice and cultural legitimacy to the fore, our model carries theoretical as well as practical implications: it enriches decolonial sustainability studies through an Islamic environmental jurisprudence lens and suggests actionable models for harmonizing Nigeria's plural legal heritage with global sustainability ambitions. Comparative studies in other Muslim-majority contexts are welcome.

**Keywords:** Decolonial Sustainability; Islamic Legal Pluralism; Nigeria; Post-2030 Agenda; Sustainability Governance.



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## 1. Introduction

The global sustainability agenda[1] And the United Nations 2030 Agenda and related COP climate agreements are nurtured on development paradigms permeated with Western and colonial hegemony and technocratic epistemologies.[2] They base themselves on universal objectives (poverty eradication, climate change mitigation) and technology, and devote less attention to differential power histories or alternative epistemologies. Scholars cite the statement that hegemonic technocratic discourse "has a tradition of colonial and epistemic domination of the West," legitimizing expert knowledge in ways, and Indigenous or religious derivative epistemologies.[3] For example, Okoliko and David (2021) assume Western hegemonic climate policy fails to value its vulnerability and coloniality greatly, overlooking localized knowledge systems that would empower sustainable development more.[4] UN SDGs critics warn that these global goals, rhetoric-laden as they open development to so many economic priorities, will face the same fate as the MDGs, enshrining neoliberal and technocratic policy that petrifies agency and justice for former-colonial societies.[5] Thus, increasing awareness is that the global sustainability agenda is burdened with colonial remnants: it tends to shift Western indicators of progress, discounting contexts of local culture, and sustaining uneven power structures (e.g., richer industrialized nations deciding agendas and poorer ones feeling the impact of climate change's consequences).

These concerns are urgent in postcolonial Africa. While African governments have adopted the SDGs and begun regional agendas (e.g., the African Union's Agenda 2063 and national development plans),<sup>[6]</sup> Literature registers persistent disconnections between these agendas and grounded realities. African scholars note that Western education and elite institutions under colonialism have marginalized Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) through formal education and policymaking processes.<sup>[7]</sup> For example, Mandikonza (2019) and colleagues illustrate how colonial and neocolonial processes favor Western science over vernacular ecological knowledge, even though such knowledge is central to resilience to climate risks (droughts, floods, desertification) that disproportionately affect Africa.<sup>[8]</sup> UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development agenda<sup>[9]</sup> Recognizes the necessity of integrating plural knowledge systems, yet consequential epistemic pluralism is difficult to locate in practice. Empirical studies of African situations find that development programs rush to exploit some "useful" elements of Indigenous knowledge without granting it parity, thereby reinforcing a neocolonial relation contrary to genuine sustainability.<sup>[10]</sup>

In Nigeria, the largest African state and postcolonial modernity in microcosm, those same challenges are irrevocably bound up with religious and legal pluralism. Nigeria's constitution upholds three parallel legal traditions: secular (English) common law, customary law, and Islamic law (Sharia). Islamic law has gained official legal recognition since 1999, in parallel with secular legislation.<sup>[11]</sup> Sharia courts today judge personal and a variety of criminal matters among Muslims, and Islamic understanding of law informs much community custom, especially in the predominantly Muslim north (where Sharia has broad popular support).<sup>[12]</sup> This pluralism is an irreversible fact that makes Nigerian notions of justice, property, and ethics both Islamic-influenced and secular. But nearly all Nigerian (and world) climate policy and sustainability rules remain couched in secular language, with no consideration given to the promise that religious law and ethics may offer solutions alternative to those of the secular world.

We propose that Islamic legal pluralism in Nigeria, and especially as conceived in more Muslim northern Nigeria, represents an odd and untested logic of sustainability. Islamic law (fiqh) has benevolent principles of environmental stewardship in the Quran and the Prophet's tradition: human as khalīfah (trustee or steward) on earth, moderation (mīzān) and restraint in cultivating natural resources, and avoidance of fasād (corruption and wastage) in water and land. The Qur'an, as envisioned by one Islamic scholar, reveals environmental degradation as a physical and moral emergency, summoning people to hayātu ṭayyibah (good life) of "living lightly on Earth" and maintaining the Creator's balance.<sup>[13]</sup> In practice, waqf (religious endowment) practices and community rights to resources under Sharia can be leveraged toward sustainable land and water management. For example, legal writers have pointed out that Nigeria's lack of dedicated waqf legislation and the Land Use Act declaring the state to be the owner of all land does not permit the Islamic doctrine of irrevocably dedicating land to charitable or environmental purposes. This gap in the law undermines public trust and hinders the development potential of waqf as a suitable development tool (schools, healthcare, irrigation, etc.) aligned with Islamic objectives. Alternatively, Maliki fiqh (the dominant Sunni school in northern Nigeria) prioritizes the common good (maṣlaḥah) of land property and water rights, and envisions a juridical basis for conservation yet to be so widely employed by policy-makers.<sup>[14]</sup>

Several Nigerian Muslim scholars have begun articulating an "Islamic approach" to the environment through mosques and sermons. Mustapha Bello's work on Lagos, for example, finds a sharp difference between government agencies approaching pollution as a technical problem and religious pulpits (minbar, khuṭbah) that frame environmental degradation as a sin against divine moral order. This is a general trend: in general, religious leaders will approach safeguarding the environment as a moral obligation, while secular institutions focus on engineering solutions with a gap in between in terms of approach.<sup>[15]</sup> Similarly, Aliyu Salisu Barau (2010) proposes a "Shariah-compliant land use model" based on Mecca's sacred geography, in which ecological and social values rather than commercial land values inform urban planning. These examples refer to the unique sustainability rationale in Islamic legal and ethical philosophy a rationale based on spiritual values, common good, and harmony with nature which mainstream development discourse has not considered.<sup>[16]</sup>

Various models and programs have sought to integrate religion (e.g., Islam) into sustainability initiatives. Religiously centered declarations and groups have appeared more globally. Muslim clerics and scholars worldwide signed the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change in 2015, which advocated for phasing out fossil fuels and putting action on an Islamic priority. The UNEP has also identified other Islamic values, such as *khalīfah*, *mīzān*, and *fitrah*, as stewardship's moral pillars.[17] The Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) and its legacy have organized interfaith climate networks (e.g., "Green Pilgrimage") with mosques globally. Locally, the Ummah for Earth Coalition (founded in 2020) now brings together dozens of Muslim groups and communities around the world to mobilize faith-based climate action, emphasizing that "as a faith-based coalition... we believe we are guardians of this Earth and have the wisdom and capability to make the right choices." [18] Interfaith coalitions and NGOs (KAICIID, WCC, CODE) in Nigeria have launched food security, climate resilience, and sustainable development dialogues and religious leaders' trainings, acknowledging that people are more likely to have greater trust in clergy than government leaders. Some delegations at COP sessions have included "green imams" or produced faith-based appeals.[19] There is also a scholarship: for example, a systematic review recognizes synergies between *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* (Islamic law's higher aims) and the SDGs and concludes that both pursue integrated human development. These frameworks elicit the potential of religious values to influence conservation and equality.[20]

However, all of these practices are limited when viewed through decolonial and justice lenses. The majority of religious practices remain embedded within worldwide frameworks that mute local voices. For instance, religious declarations are authored by elite intellectuals or international panels and can fail to be implemented in practice at the grassroots level. Projects funded by outside agencies (even interfaith-sounding ones) tend to impose predetermined agendas rather than allowing communities to frame sustainability in their terms. This is an issue of epistemic justice: whose knowledge counts? If Islamic environmental ethics is a mere rhetorical add-on to Western science, rather than a source of independent principles and practices, then richer knowledge is displaced. In Nigeria, for example, the secular Land Use Act can overcome Islamic *waqf* law. Symbolizing a legal hierarchy inherited from the colonial era.[21] Another issue is cultural legitimacy: top-down initiated programs of sustainability may clash with local norms (gender roles, community tenure over land, religious property conceptions) and thus cannot reach the majority population. Most polls suggest that faith communities are keen to participate, but lack explicit frameworks that resonate with their values. Finally, postcolonial justice remains an issue: as one global assessment warns, very few climate funds reach the poorest communities. If religious climate action becomes a donor-driven response, it will be in the same asymmetrical fashion.[22] For example, during COP28, the Global Center on Adaptation highlighted that without a realignment of power and resources to local actors like religious groups, general climate goals will not be attained.[23]

In the Nigerian case, prevailing sustainability models have not paid sufficient attention to Islamic jurisprudence. The SDGs and Nigeria's strategy mention faith communities merely as a beneficiary group, rather than as jurisprudential providers of wisdom. Even the available literature on religion and development in Nigeria remains scant on addressing how Sharia institutions or Islamic scholars might engage with environmental governance. Even research on "religion and sustainable development in Nigeria" is more likely to touch on pluralism in the abstract than in the legal definition. The absence suggests the need for a new paradigm that takes Islamic legal pluralism as both a value source and an on-the-ground practical reality.

This article tries to fill that gap by outlining a decolonial framework for integrating post-2030 era sustainability discourse and governance, and Islamic legal pluralism. Islamic law (particularly Maliki fiqh and relevant Quranic principles) and examples from the northern region of Nigeria shall be utilized to determine principles to complement or reshape global sustainability goals. Instead of considering Islamic law as an external overlay, the approach here starts with the original traditions, looking, for instance, at the potential inclusion of *mā laysa bi-mālihī* (the sharing of communal benefits) and *hijr* (the ban on private appropriation of communal resources) within the context of sustainable management of resources. By doing so, we attempt to establish epistemic justice (valuing

Islamic knowledge systems equally to secular science) and cultural legitimacy (drawing upon norms widely shared among local societies).

The research contribution is intellectual by crossing disciplines. We introduce a new Islamic environmental jurisprudence lens into sustainability research to supplement the predominantly secular field of decolonial thought. It is derived by linking Islamic studies, legal scholarship, climate policy governance scholarship of recent history, and the SDGs. To the best of our knowledge, objective scholarly research has not previously brought Nigeria's environmental sustainability and legal pluralism together in a postcolonial country. Correspondingly, we answer the recent calls for more comparative studies in the context of climate change and Islam. For instance, Koehrsen et al. (2021)[24] Point out that "knowledge about Muslim climate activism in other world regions is fragmented" and that various methodologies need to be explored further. With the West African Islamic perspective, our study offers a fresh geographical and epistemological perspective. The proposed model will emphasize alternative developmental indicators (e.g., social welfare, environmental sustainability) and governance paradigms (e.g., those incorporating waqf endowments, Zakat funds, and Sharia courts in the decision-making process of resource allocation) that are both normatively and scientifically pertinent to the policymaking process. Lastly, the introduction offers the background and justification for the decolonization of sustainability through Islamic legal pluralism, the way forward to a detailed exploration of the framework, and its potential application in Nigeria's sustainability agenda beyond the year 2030.

Taking into account the aforementioned challenges, this research intends to reframe the use of the Qur'anic laws of Islam as proper pillars of sustainable postcolonial governance in Nigeria. The research examines the applicability of *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* (higher goals of law) and ecological terminology, including *khalīfah* (steward), *mīzān* (balance), and *fasād* (corruption), among others. The research will address the following question: How can Islamic legal pluralism decolonize Nigeria's sustainability governance beyond 2030? The challenge is tackled by this research adopting three goals: (1) critically assaying the relevance of technocratic-Western models of sustainability in postcolonial African nations, (2) doctrinal resources of Islam on sustainable stewardship of the environment, and (3) outlining how the incorporation of Islam in the framework of sustainability policies in Nigeria can provide a decolonial or postcolonial strategy.

## 2. Methods

The research adopts a qualitative doctrinal approach as its key methodology. The doctrinal or black letter approach of research is an appropriate framework through which the use of proper, rigorous analyses of sources of law, be it statutes, judgments, or traditional fiqh texts, is outlined. According to Pradeep (2019),[25] doctrinal research involves identifying a problem within law, bringing together all the concerned law materials, as well as using logical reasoning in explaining how precepts evolve or make sense.[26] The research appropriately adopts this methodology since it seeks to explain how precepts from Islam can offer their contribution to sustainability governance without carrying out field research. As a framework, two lenses can be used in the interpretation of meaning. Turning first to normative Legal Hermeneutics, this practice applies the principles of *uṣūl al-fiqh* to the founding texts of traditional Islam's laws, the Qur'ān, Hadith, or Mālikī school of jurisprudence in finding an equivalency of concepts like *khalīfah* (stewardship), *mīzān* (balance), or *maṣlaḥah* (public welfare). The hermeneutics of tradition correlates the context of religio-legal discourse by connecting traditional Islam with modern discourse. Second, the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) will complement the analytic method of this research. The use of the CDA analytic method enables the investigation of documents of global sustainability discourse, more specifically, SDG agenda documents or COP agreements, as discourse-shaped documents that could potentially consist of documents of epistemic hierarchy reproduction. The use of CDA's discourse as expressions of 'power relations in language' will make it possible to disclose the discourse of non-Western visions of marginalization, including the Islamic norm-building discourse.

The first lens uses document analysis. This entails an examination of the scanned documents. The documents can come from hard copy documentation or scanned documents from digital form. The second lens uses document analysis. The requirement entails the use of the Read–Evaluate–Analyze–Distill framework. The framework is employed in the application of concepts. Each of these approaches, in combination, impacts the design of an overall non-interventionist approach, which involves the role of doctrinal scholarship as the ground, the role of hermeneutics as the norm, and the role of CDA as the critical or decolonial interpreter. This ensures that this research remains grounded in terms of legal rationality. Limitations: Being secondary source-driven research, this research faces limitations in that it relies on literature documents, interpretations, and analyses. Though this framework makes it possible to follow theoretical explanations and doctrinal developments, it could be limited in defining an orientation of local developments concerning the judiciary's position. However, this framework could be extended by an empirical research design that could be validated on location or by comparative research.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Islamic Principles of Environmental Stewardship

The Quran holds human beings accountable as *khalifah* (trustees or stewards) of the Earth. The Quran itself identifies humans as "*Khalifa' al-Ard*," or "successors on Earth" (Q. 6:165; Q. 2:30),<sup>[27]</sup> Entrusted with the wise use of God's resources. Stewardship (*istikhlaf*) is a conditional trust (*amana*), which means humans can use God's resources, but they will be reminded not to squander or destroy them.<sup>[28]</sup> The Quran says, "Indeed, the wasteful will be (considered as) brethren of the devils" (Q. 17:27), while the Prophet Muhammad always reminded Muslims of *i'tidal* (measures of moderation in every kind of consumption). The preservation of the environment, therefore, becomes an act of piety within Islam. This ethic is coupled with the concept of *mizān* (balance). The Quran states, "We have spread the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and made everything grow therein in due balance" (Q. 55:7–9). The cosmos is thus a system of balanced motion, and humanity's agency must conform to this. The concept of *tawhīd* (unity), on the other hand, implies that all derived entities are part of an orderly system created by God, together comprising entities of inherent value as an expression of God's will. Hence, derangement of natural order by deforestation, pollution, or over-extraction of resources can be considered improper use of the Earth by many jurists.<sup>[29]</sup>

The first one is *fasād fī al-ard* (corruption on earth), which refers to a broader concept of both social and ecological issues. Classical Mālikī jurists considered *fasād* as acts that can be harmful to communal welfare or natural resources. Although there seems to be no uniform punishment by all schools of law, there is consensus (*ijmā'*) amongst jurists on the opposition of intention-driven ecological destruction as it violates the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, most specifically the goals of protecting life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*), property (*ḥifẓ al-māl*), or lineage (*ḥifẓ al-nasl*).<sup>[30]</sup> Therefore, interrupting the natural order (e.g., by excessive mining or forest cutting) is deemed contrary to God's will. Ecological stewardship, in short, is being constructed as a moral imperative in religion.

As al-Shāṭibī (d. 790 AH) aptly clarifies, the *maqāṣid* merely create the ethics of law. This serves as guidance amongst jurists in establishing benefit (*jalb al-maṣlaḥah*) or warding off harmful acts (*dar' al-mafṣadah*).<sup>[31]</sup> Later jurists like Jasser Auda (2008) continue to develop this. Hence, *Khalīfah*, *mizān*, and *Fasād* correlate the *sharī'ah* ethic of justice (*'adl*) and public interest (*maṣlaḥah*).<sup>[32]</sup>

The *sharī'ah* aims for a harmonious human environment. Note that this ethic joins the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (UN SDGs), in which Qur'anic teachings on avoiding waste of resources, planning sustainable use, or conserving life find resonance with UN SDG Target 2 (Zero Hunger), UN SDG Target 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), or others.<sup>[33]</sup> Hence, its relevance in Nigeria after 2030, as an internally grounded *sharī'ah* tradition in an environmentally sustainable pursuit.<sup>[34]</sup>



**Table 1.** Comparative Alignment Between the UN SDGs and Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah Principles

UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)	Corresponding Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah Principle	Islamic Environmental Implications
SDG 1 – No Poverty / SDG 2 – Zero Hunger	Ḥifẓ al-nafs (protection of life) & Ḥifẓ al-māl (protection of wealth)	Zakat and waqf mechanisms promote economic justice and social welfare.
SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation	Ḥifẓ al-nafs (protection of life)	Preservation of water sources and prohibition of fasād fī al-arḍ (corruption on earth).
SDG 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production	Ḥifẓ al-bi'ah (protection of the environment) under mīzān (balance)	Promotes moderation and prohibition of waste (isrāf).
SDG 13 – Climate Action	Ḥifẓ al-nafs & Ḥifẓ al-dīn (protection of faith)	Stewardship (khalīfah) over the earth is a religious duty.
SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions	Ḥifẓ al-ʿadl (justice) & Ḥifẓ al-ʿaql (reason)	Encourages equitable governance through ethical, faith-based institutions.

**Source:** Author's doctrinal synthesis of UN SDGs and classical Islamic jurisprudence (Maliki school).

### 3.2 Community-Centered Governance in Islamic Law

#### 3.2.1 Classical Juristic Foundations

Islam's tradition of jurisprudence holds that natural resources are communal trusts, not individual domains. The most prominent jurists of the Mālikī school of law in "Al-Mudawwana Al-Kubra" by Sahnun, as well as Ibn Rushd's "Bidayat Al-Mujtahid," identified domains referred to by "mā laysa bi Mālhihi" or "not owned by anyone" as assets of public usufruct.<sup>[35]</sup> The precolonial state of Northern Nigeria was no different, as it was represented by "waqf" endowments conferred upon Emirs or local chieftains as trustees on behalf of the community.<sup>[36]</sup> The application of this principle made this allocated piece of land non-transferable on the precepts of ḥajr jurisprudence, protecting.

Historically, waqf institutions financed public infrastructure such as aqueducts, irrigation canals, and schools without burdening the state. Classical jurists defined waqf as a ta'bīd al-manfa'ah, the perpetual dedication of property for divine purposes.<sup>[37]</sup> This legal instrument embodies both environmental and social stewardship. As UN-Habitat's Islamic Land Principles (2015) notes, waqf functions analogously to modern land trusts by preserving assets for long-term community use, though driven by spiritual accountability rather than contractual obligation.

The practice of zakāt also institutionalizes the provision of communal welfare. The literature of the Mālikī school of law, represented by al-Muwāfaqāt of al-Šāṭibī, recognizes the role of zakāt as an instrument of raf' al-ḥaraj (removal of hardship) as well as an instrument of ḡalā al-qist (balancing of the scales of justice). The ethic of fiqh al-bi'ah (Environmental Jurisprudence or Environmental law), which represents a relatively modern field of specialization, was founded on the traditionally stipulated principles of ḥifẓ al-nafs (protection of life), ḥifẓ al-māl (protection of property), or ḥifẓ al-nasl (or ḥifẓ and progeny (ḥifẓ al-nasl)). Hence, allocating zakāt toward environmental purposes such as access to water or soil restoration aligns with the classical juristic rationale of removing harm (daf' al-ḍarar) and securing benefit (jalb al-maṣlaḥah).<sup>[38]</sup>

#### 3.2.2 Contemporary Policy Applications

The application of these values in modern Nigeria will thus ensure the development of innovative approaches related to sustainable practices. The newly formed boards of the waqfs can thus supervise reforestation programs, wells for drinking, or solar-powered irrigation. The national Zakāt authorities can also dedicate funds from the

overall Zakāt payment for ecological programs such as restoring degraded lands or recycling of waste materials through the 'Green Zakāt' heading.[39] Although there is little precedent available in the latest literature on modern fiqh al-bi'ah, some OIC member thinkers endorse ecological funding allocations on 'maṣlaḥah mursalah' or public interest. The combination of both wāqf and zakāt concepts outlines an ideologically sound framework. The framework of wāqf and zakāt ensures the institutionalization of concepts of justice (ʿadl) or welfare (ma ṣ la ḥa ḥah), which is achieved through participation.[40] However, in this framework, legitimacy, efficiency, or ownership in the governance of sustainability can potentially increase by providing religious trusts with the formal recognition of environmental resources and entrusting wakīl (trustees) by granting them local environmental resources. The best possible expression of the concept of this aspect of the Islamic concept of legal pluralism of this issue of environmental policies can be found in its application. The powers of governing can potentially move from global technocracies that can be found in international institutions.[41]

### 3.3 Legal Pluralism in Nigeria: Sharia and State Law

Nigeria's heterogeneous pattern of law offers both opportunities and challenges in implementing concepts of Islamic sustainability. There was the introduction of non-Islamic laws by adopting Western laws after the colonial period. The history of the matter reveals that British colonialists did away with most of Islam's laws by focusing on "land tenure law as the first element of Islam's law that was destroyed by the colonial government. The legislative framework was created to provide an arena where the confiscation of Muslims' land was permissible." Even after gaining Nigeria's statehood, its laws progressively became more Secular, except in matters of Personal Status regulated by Sharia[42] The Land Use Act (LUA) of 1978 is one of the pieces of legislation that shows this shift. The Act entrusted all the land in each state of the federation into the hands of the state's governors, which is held 'in trust' on behalf of the people. While this legislation intended to make all land centrally controlled, it still recognized some degree of religio-customary rights. Before its introduction, native tenures of land administration dominated large parts of the lands in Northern Nigeria. Group rights existed among communities. The LUA does not recognize this variation. Instead, it centralized control of all land in the hands of the state. It was feared that this led state authorities to allocate or sell this communal land without consultation with the communities, thus undermining religio-traditional trusteeship.

The fact that Sharia courts coexist with secular courts makes this complex system even more intricate. In the northern states of Nigeria, Sharia law is valid in matters of marriage, succession, as well as some civil contracts, while national laws apply concerning criminal law. This dualistic legal system was enshrined by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Sections 6, 275-279), which provides national-level Sharia appeal to state-level courts. Their powers, nevertheless, remain restricted.[43] The appeals of decisions from Shari'ah courts, regardless of civil matters, can be appealed to state courts of appeal as well as the Supreme Court, despite the lack of expert Muslims on the Supreme Court. There have been reports that, despite the provision that requires judges on appellate courts to be "learned in Islamic law," most judges on appellate courts merely have rudimentary knowledge of Fiqh. For this reason, "Sharia concepts of waqf protected by law or concepts of collective trusteeship often receive inadequate treatment by judges."

The resulting conflicts of law directly affect the governance of the environment. For example, a state or local community can give the status of a forest reserve or well as a waqf, while the state's lands office could allocate logging or water use rights. The opposite can occur with corporations that allocate development rights according to national law, which could violate unregistered easements or communal grazing rights. Conflicts of this kind demonstrate how shared governance leads to governance gaps. The state's judiciary could be unfamiliar with Sharia laws concerning the environment. Meeting these challenges requires harmonization by means of legislative or institutional transformation. The legislative transformation could encompass changes to the Land Use Act that will ensure the communal/waqf lands are not alienated, while institutional transformation could consist of the development of dedicated Sharia courts with the

powers to hear disputes involving the environment. These reforms will not only ensure that religion is incorporated into the Nigerian legal framework but will also consider the plural heritage of Nigeria as a baseline for proper resource use.<sup>[44]</sup>

### 3.4 Cultural Legitimacy and Epistemic Justice in Sustainability Agendas

The policies of sustainability become more legitimate by becoming grounded in indigenous values. Environmental governance in Northern Nigeria can incur significant cultural costs if it is not attuned to indigenous practices. For Muslims, the landscape is more than natural geography. The earth itself becomes a matter of ethics in Islam. The groves, the banks of the rivers, the grazing lands become responsibilities inherited, not resources. If this is displaced or subsumed by modern vocabularies of technoscience or by secular values, it generates a sense of disconnection, which can be communicated by policy discourse framed in an ethic of Islam.<sup>[45]</sup> The trend of sustainability discourse to date has historically been founded on Western rationalism, marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems, including religious epistemologies. However, there is an existing tradition of ecological knowledge found in Islam derived from Qur'anic interpretations of proportion or measure (*mīzān*) or trusteeship (*khilāfah*), which continues into juristic doctrines on communal trusteeship (*ḥajr*, *waqf*). Local agricultural customs, such as farming cycles guided by lunar and prayer calendars, embody ecological intuitions adapted to the rhythms of their environment. These practices, while sometimes dismissed as premodern or unscientific, illustrate how Islamic epistemologies internalize sustainability principles. Integrating these modes of knowledge is therefore not an act of cultural accommodation alone but one of epistemic justice, recognizing diverse ways of understanding the human–nature relationship as credible and valuable.

This concept of epistemic justice applies on an international level. The latest international platforms on climate issues incorporate the role of religion. The participation of religious belief systems in international environmental meetings represents a recognition of the fact that non-science approaches can integrate with scientific knowledge. For Nigeria, this continues to offer both potential dangers and opportunities. The engagement of ulama experts on an environmental level can provide the kind of legitimacy that does not always come from strictly technocratic efforts.<sup>[46]</sup> Environmental responsibility can then become an act of devotion. However, it is important to make a clear distinction between the prescription of theology and sociological observation. From a theological standpoint, Islam prescribes environmental care as an act of piety and appreciation. However, sociologically, how effectively the ideals of sustainable policies can be achieved by institutionalizing or culturally embedding this appreciation is what matters. While motivation from religion sets the intellectual vocabulary, the issue of sustainable policies requires a broad framework of inclusion.<sup>[47]</sup> Coming to the issue of sustainability in Nigeria, this could only be possible if there is an epistemic deconstruction of the existing technocratic hierarchy of Western knowledge, which recognizes the local wisdoms of Islam, or other religious backgrounds of the region, on an equal level as Western technological knowledge of the environment.<sup>[48]</sup> From this standpoint, not only can the agendas of sustainability become culturally legitimate, socially embedded, and morally coherent on the global level by fulfilling their responsibility to their own history, heritage, and diversity of faiths, traditions, or belief systems, but they will also encompass their responsibility to themselves.

### 3.5 Potential Applications: Islamic Institutions in Resource Governance

Thematic findings can provide insight into the application. Several opportunities involving the use of Islamic institutions in resource management stand out:

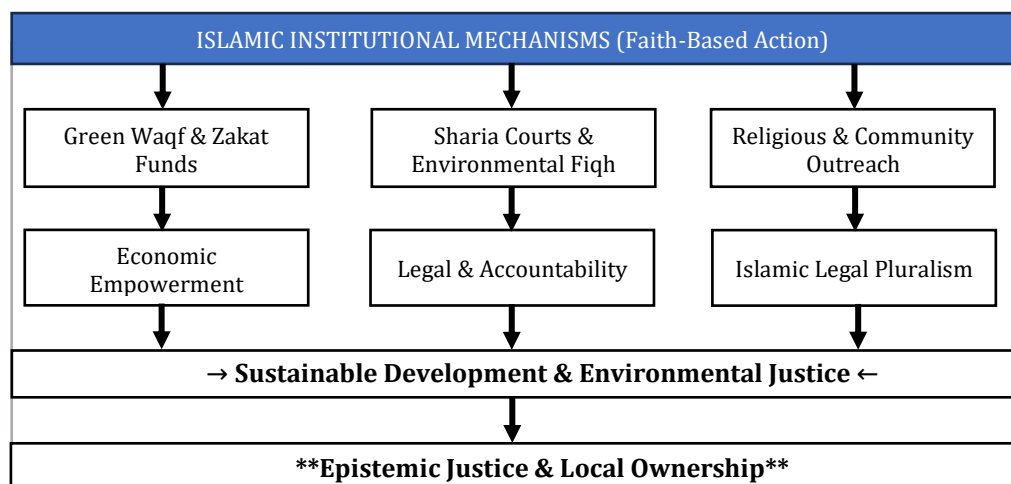
- 1) Green Waqf Endowments: Use existing waqf trusts for green funds. States or emirates, or Mosques, can allocate portions of their existing lands as 'waqf' dedicated to reforestation or watershed protection. "The traditional waqf projects encompassed urban waterworks or park maintenance 'for public benefit or preservation of the environment.' The proposed "bayt al-mal or public treasury" fund could offer small loans in environment-focused grassroots small funds supported by profits from crops of the local communities. Through green charity spending, "The Green Waqf mobilizes Islamic charity expenditure on sustainability issues".<sup>[49]</sup>



- 2) **Sharia Courts and Councils:** Engage the use of Sharia courts in implementing environmental laws in line with the principle of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* or *maṣlaḥah*. For instance, offenders of illegal logging can be considered offenders in line with *fasād fī al-arḍ*. Environmental issues can also gain clearer recognition among judiciary institutions by raising the level of judges' knowledge of *shin jin'est* or setting up trial divisions concerning the environment in the Sharia courts. As was aptly stated by appellate judge Yunus Yakasai in Nigeria's appellate level, there is a requirement for more judges on the appellate level "learned in Islamic law."<sup>[50]</sup>
- 3) **Zakat and Public Funds:** Charity can be channeled into environment-focused development initiatives. The government's zakat agency can finance projects like solar wells, organic farming, or toilet facilities, aligning with the Hadith that planting a tree or establishing a well can be considered true charity (*ṣadaqah jāriyah*). The inclusion of such projects as valid zakat causes will tap into endless private resources in favor of public interests, hence supporting both eradicating poverty (goal SDG 1) as well as improving environmental integrity.
- 4) **Religious Community Mobilization:** Engage the participation of the Islamic civil society or religious leaders in the efforts of promoting environmental ethics. The imāms or madrasah teachers can use this issue in their speeches or teachings by posing it as an act of worship. Environmental events can be headed by *lajnahs* of ladies or Qur'anic schools. *Hisbah* can be an existing entity used as an educational environmental surveillance unit. The existing *hisbah* authorities can focus on awareness rather than on punishment. Environmental awareness can be promoted using Nigeria's Interfaith Council on Environment or international equivalents of this entity, like the Muslim Council of Elders.
- 5) **Islamic Finance Instruments:** Design and Develop Shari'ah-compliant products to finance sustainability. Islamic microfinance (risk-sharing, interest-free lending) can fund eco-entrepreneurs, while *takaful* (mutual insurance) can mitigate climate risks for rural communities. Nigeria's *sukūk* market could issue Green *Sukūk* bonds, following Indonesia's successful precedent (Ministry of Finance 2023), to fund renewable-energy or waste-management projects. These tools conform doctrinally to Islamic principles of communal welfare while expanding fiscal innovation.

All these applications rely on existing social institutions within Islam, as opposed to imposing an additional framework. Each of them shows the possibility of turning the boards of *waqfs*, the Sharia courts, the councils of zakat, or the religious organizations into tools for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. Thus, they perform epistemic justice by inscribing the moral values of local Muslim culture into policy design. As it is becoming more common in the global climate agenda that 'religious and spiritual communities are key allies,' the solution to the problem in Nigeria consists of using its moral leadership of Islam as a driving force of environmental integrity, fully compatible with its longest tradition of pluralism.

**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework: Islamic Institutions for Sustainable Resource Governance

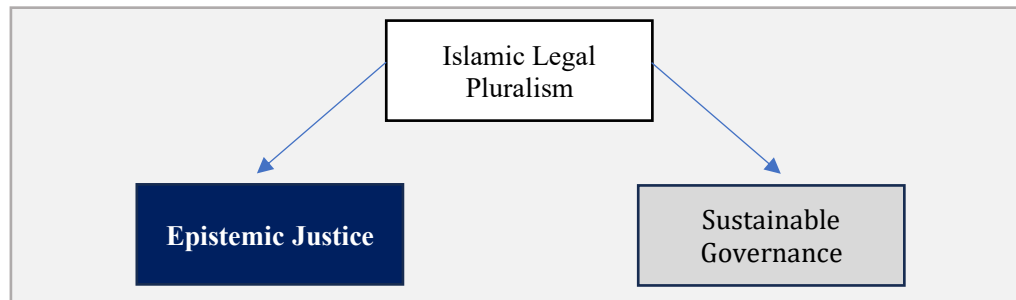


Source: author analysis (2025).

Figure 1. shows how Qur'anic ethics can be measured in terms of faith-based institutional tools of waqf, zakat, Sharia law courts, and community mobilization efforts that ensure sustainable developments through economic empowerment, Sharia law, and ethics. The development of epistemic justice regarding local ownership of environmental governance.

### 3.6 Theoretical Contribution to Decolonial and Environmental Scholarship and Policy Implications

**Figure 2.** Conceptual Link Between Islamic Legal Pluralism, Epistemic Justice, and Sustainable Governance



**Source:** Author's conceptual synthesis (2025).

This analysis advances theory by transgressing disciplinary interfaces. It advances Islamic legal studies by systematically applying *maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah* to contemporary sustainability questions, an area that previously had been addressed in scattered literature. It further advances the science of sustainability by providing a concrete example of knowledge pluriversalism: constructing policy frameworks from non-Western scholarship. Such a strategy aligns with decolonial criticism that demands transcending "epistemic subordination" of the Global South.<sup>[51]</sup> By revealing that Islamic law always upholds environmental standards, the research illustrates how previously excluded systems of knowledge can re-form international agendas.

Geographically, the emphasis on Nigeria completes a gap. The majority of the previous studies of Islam and the environment are on South Asia or the Middle East. In this case, Maliki/Hausa-Fulani conditions yield alternative institutional legacies (e.g., customary councils of Hausa,<sup>[52]</sup> The institution of emir, West African waqf practices. This indicates that Islamic ecological thinking is not uniform: sustainability may be articulated in various Islamic cultural idioms. The comparative context (Islamic West Africa v., e.g., Arab Gulf) is an intellectual contribution in itself, and offers hints of future cross-regional research.

Lastly, the research helps environmental justice scholarship by applying epistemic justice. It demonstrates that the realization of SDGs (and more) is not only about technical solutions but also about sharing knowledge inclusively. By offering real-life instances of actual real-world solutions institutionalized (reformed Land Acts, improved Sharia courts, green waqf), the paper bridged analysis and application. Overall, it provides an example of religious-legal traditions being brought into environmental governance lawfully and aiding theory and policy.<sup>[53]</sup>

The current research provides specific guidelines on how the sustainability governance system of the State of Nigeria could be reformed by means of implementing Islamic Legal Pluralism. The first measure could be improving the state's Land Use Act of 1978 by including the designation of "waqf" and "communal lands" as protected public trusts.<sup>[54]</sup> The second measure would be establishing "Sharia Environmental Courts" within state-level courts, which could then hear environmental disputes from experts on environmental "fiqh." The third step could focus on supporting "green Sadaqah" or "waqf" funds. The fourth step could include training modules on "Environmental Fiqh" that could help ensure legal as well as religious authorities comply with sustainability values. The fifth step could focus on coordinating religious advisory boards with the environment departments.

#### 4. Conclusion

The research, a paradigm of sustainability on a genuinely decolonial foundation from an Islamic perspective, began with Islam, rather than borrowing from imported models. The Research uses a qualitative doctrinal-hermeneutical methodology of the Mālikī school of jurisprudence, known as *fiqh* or *Sharf'ah* law in Nigeria. It is possible to implement the ethic of sustainability found in Islam's concept of *khalifah* (stewardship), *mīzān* (balance), or *maṣlahah* (public interest), which can then be applied meaningfully into an environmental framework. The research promotes the frontier of jurisprudence on sustainability by locating the role of Islam not as an exception but as an epistemic discourse. From this perspective, the research promotes the development of decolonial theory by asserting that sustainable development ought to incorporate local epistemics from cultural or spiritual paradigms. The research provides an avenue through which the Sustainable Development Goals after the year 2030 in Nigeria can be achieved through multi-pillar governance approaches. This ensures a democratic approach to environmental epistemics by reclaiming a common set of ethics that sustains ecological integrity. However, even though the conceptual framework outlined in this discussion is theoretically sound, it remains doctrinal. The next level of research will thus need to focus on testing the framework's efficacy or applicability from an empirical or field level, looking into how Islamic ethics on the environment play out in practice among Nigerians. This could be achieved by testing how the application of *waqf* on conservation or the use of *zakāt* on green initiatives or pursuing faith-based agendas can be practically translated into sustainable outcomes.

Finally, then, the concept of decolonizing sustainability by way of Islamic legal pluralism does not mean a dismissal of other knowledge sources but finding its place in an 'epistemic ecology'. It means that a balance of resilience and justice in environmental governance can be reached only by an engagement of global scientific knowledge with local indigenous knowledge sources, including those of faith. Through an Islamically framed focus, this research proposes a shift in sustainability discourse that will give renewed meaning and legitimacy to environmental law and policy in Nigeria, among other countries.

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