Islamic Perspectives
on SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Editors

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CHAPTER 7

Muslim Civil Society Organisations' Engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals in India: Challenges and Opportunities

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INTRODUCTION

Civil Society Tradition in Islam

Muslims have a rich and strong tradition of civil society activism. This is grounded in Islamic theology which sees the main goal of development as the creation of an environment that enables people to enjoy spiritual, moral and socio-economic well-being in this world and success in the Hereafter. In such a state, people are deemed to have attained "*falah*". Zakaria Seddiki (pers. Comm, 2014) and other Islamic scholars have expounded the view that the route to achieving *falah* is through *tazkiyyah* (purification, self-assessment). They draw this conclusion from verses in the Holy Qur'an, such as:

> "Gardens of Eternity beneath which rivers flow such is the reward of those who purify themselves [of evil]"   (*TaHa*, 20:76)

> "Those will prosper who purify themselves"   (*al-A'laa,* 87:14)

Mosques, as places of worship, as well as avenues for seeking education and purification also became the main hub for civic engagement through a large part of Islamic history. In the Caliphate periods, the mosque became a powerful institution where seeking knowledge, promoting dialogue between groups and communities and delivering governance and justice became important roles that it delivered for the community. Thus its functions in public life in many ways reflect the work of modern day civil society groups and institutions.

A study commissioned by Islamic Relief on the Islamic position on advocacy (Karmani, unpublished) reiterates that Islam teaches justice and fair dealing for all humanity, overcoming oppression especially of the weak and vulnerable, and empowering the disenfranchised through redistribution of resources to those in need by those who are wealthy and privileged. It adds that Islam enjoins the protection of comprehensive human rights and the rights of creation granted by Allah SWT.

Muslims are enjoined to fight injustice to the best of their ability as in the following reported saying of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW):

> "When any of you sees anything that is disapproved (of by Allah), let him change it with his hand. If he is not able to do so, then let him change it with his tongue. And if he is not able to do so, then let him change it with his heart, though that is the least of faith." (Narrated by Muslim).

Islam strongly supports humanitarianism. Jamal Krafess (2005) explains that for a Muslim, humanitarian action is a "way of receiving help from heaven, of erasing sins, escaping punishment, thanking God for his mercies and of meriting Paradise". Hence Islamic faith "motivates, channels, and intensifies the emotional and obligatory aspects of charity".

Monetary charity is highly 'systematised' in Islamic law to the extent that annual charity (*Zakah*) is one of the five obligatory pillars of the religion. Islamic endowments (*Awqaf*) have been a prominent source of funding for Muslim charities and provision of services, including hospitals, schools, mosques and universities; as the wealthy use this mechanism to support their causes. In addition to providing resources to various institutions and social service facilities, one of the most noticeable contributions of *Awqaf* was to promote alternative and independent voices which may not necessarily reflect the position of the state, thus helping to hold the rulers to account (Cizakca, 1998).The great endowments traditionally represented much of the wealth and influence of civil society in the Muslim world.

With the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate and the colonisation of Muslim lands, the new regimes imposed harsh regulatory conditions that eventually emasculated the vibrant tradition of civil society activity in the Muslim world. Until recently, where there are attempts in some countries to revive the tradition, post-colonial governments have continued to suppress

and shrink the space for Muslim Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to operate. However the long absence has taken its toll and a substantial majority of existing Muslim Civil Society Organisations have weak capacity and are therefore unable to be the effective force their fore runners were.

Agenda 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals and Muslim Civil Society Organisations

In September 2015 Heads of State and Government agreed to set the world on a path towards sustainable development through the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2014). This agenda includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which set out quantitative objectives across the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development – all to be achieved by 2030. The goals provide a framework for shared action "for people, planet and prosperity," to be implemented by "all countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership."

As articulated in the 2030 Agenda, "never before have world leaders pledged common action and endeavour across such a broad and universal policy agenda."(United Nations Department of Economic Social Affairs, 2015). 169 targets accompany the 17 goals and set out quantitative and qualitative objectives for the next 15 years. These targets are "global in nature and universally applicable, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities." (World Bank Group, 2016). A set of indicators and a monitoring framework will also accompany the goals.

In developing Agenda 2030, the United Nations (UN) facilitated extensive consultations on 11 key issues and 50 national and regional dialogues took place around the globe. Civil Society Organisations were strongly engaged and brought the voices of their constituents to the table. However the Muslim voice and Muslim development actors were not visible in these consultations. Nor were they active during the negotiation sessions at the UN. It is clear that Muslim faith-based actors are disconnected from such global frameworks to the disadvantage of the communities they serve.

In addition, it is becoming manifest that such global discussions can be enriched by insights from Islamic values, teachings, traditions and

institutions. This was demonstrated when a group of Muslim organisations spear-headed the drafting and launch of an Islamic Declaration on Climate Change (Islamic Relief Worldwide, 2015) in the lead up to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change's 22nd Meeting (COP22) at which the Paris Climate Agreement was adopted. The Declaration was highly welcomed and warmly received by multiple stakeholders.

This led the authors to ask the question why Muslim Civil Society Organisations are not engaging effectively with these global frameworks. In attempting to provide an answer, we have taken an example of India. Although Muslims are a minority in the country, India houses the second largest Muslim population in the world. It also has the largest number of *madrassahs* (Muslim religious schools) which are funded with *zakat* and other forms of Muslim charity. Moreover, at their peak, India contained the world's largest number of assets donated as Islamic endowments (*Awqaf*).

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This chapter is a sub-set of a wider global study that has the ultimate aim of establishing a platform for Muslim CSOs to share experience, knowledge and expertise so that they can meaningfully participate and bring their unique perspectives to the local, national and global arena where sustainable development policy and practice are at play. The purposes of this survey were to:

1. Understand the current levels of knowledge about Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, and capacity to engage, within Muslim CSOs in India.

2. Inform the development of a national and global Muslim CSO network to be known as the Muslim Platform for Sustainable Development (MPSD).

The specific objectives were:

1. To assess the level of knowledge of Muslim CSOs in India and their engagement with the SDGs and Agenda 2030.

2. To identify how Muslim CSOs in India perceive their current capacities for engagement with SDGs and Agenda 2030.

3. To determine the key areas that Muslim CSOs in India require support to engage more effectively with the SDGs and Agenda 2030.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The survey was designed by the Islamic Relief Academy as part of a global project to identify the capacity building needs of Muslim CSOs and create a shared platform for engaging with the United Nation's programme on sustainable development through Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. The global questionnaire was adapted to suit the Indian context and a survey was conducted jointly with Islamic Relief India. Its purpose was to identify current interest, knowledge and capacities of Muslim CSOs and their work relating to the SDGs and Agenda 2030. The methods, data collection and data analysis strategy are described below.

Survey Population and Sample

Although there are many Muslim CSOs in India, they constitute a small fraction of the vibrant CSOs sector in the country. In this study we define Muslim CSOs in India as those whose work is inspired by or based on the Islamic faith. They will correspond to the category of faith-based or faith-inspired organisations. The researchers did not have a reliable estimate of the total number of Muslim CSOs in India but there were strong indications that many of them do not operate at national level. Therefore we took a deliberate strategy to include CSOs that are active at national level as well as those that operate only at sub-national/ local levels.

The survey was conducted within a one-week period. In order to get a reasonable level of response within the deadline, Islamic Relief India followed the initial distribution with an email reminder and phone call to organisations that were yet to respond close to the deadline.

Survey Design

The questionnaire was designed online in English using Survey Monkey and had a total of 30 evaluative questions. The questions were structured in the following sections:

1. Description of the organisation and its level of development.

2. The organisation's interest and awareness on the SDGs and Agenda 2030.

3. The types and level of involvement with the SDGs and Agenda 2030.

4. The challenges the organisation faces with respect to engagement with the SDGs and Agenda 2030.

5. Opportunities for engagement with the SDGs and Agenda 2030.

Respondents were asked to complete all relevant questions and in some, they were given the opportunity to choose more than one option. A logic question was used to target questions at CSOs whose coverage was national and those that operate at sub-national/local levels.

Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to dissemination to CSOs, the survey was trialled within Islamic Relief Academy, Islamic Relief Worldwide and Islamic Relief India. Adjustments were made as a result of the trial. The online link was sent by Islamic Relief India to 31 Muslim CSOs on 9 November 2016 with a deadline for response of 17 November 2016.

At the end of the survey period, 21 CSOs had responded. In preparation for the analysis, responses were cleaned, whereby incomplete and duplicate responses were deleted. Incomplete responses were identified as those that only answered the identity questions (Description of the organisation and its level of development) and not the evaluation questions. Duplicate responses were those from the same organisation although sent from different devices. Survey Monkey does not allow duplicate responses from the same computer. Five respondents were excluded from the analysis for either incomplete or duplicate responses.

Data Analysis

The inbuilt functionality in Survey Monkey was used to create simple representations of the data. Filters, comparisons and charts were applied to examine the data and categorise the findings according to type of organisation and geographical coverage. Data from the survey was also extracted to Microsoft Excel to enable more detailed interrogation.

The responding organisations were divided into two categories. The first category consisted of Muslim CSOs that operate mainly at the national level. These include national organisations, national networks/ platforms of CSOs and national branches of international organisations. The second category of sub-national Muslim CSOs is made up of those that primarily operate at local and regional levels in the country. The results of the survey were analysed by assessing the combined responses to individual questions by all respondents and also by each of the two categories respectively. The assessment of responses to each question begins by introducing a question, which is followed by a summary of the respondents' replies, representative quotations and conclusions. Where relevant, summaries of respondents' replies are supported by tabulated representations.

Limitations and Strengths

The main limitations of the method employed in this study were as follows:

1. The survey period of one week was very short and this has a bearing on the distribution and number of responses achieved.

2. Data was only gathered online meaning that CSOs with limited or no access to internet were excluded.

3. The distribution depended on the networks of Islamic Relief India and therefore CSOs that were not on the radar of this organisation might have been omitted from the sample.

4. Although the survey was limited to one response per computer by placing a cookie on the responding individual's browser, this did not totally eliminate duplicate responses from some organisations where the open survey link was forwarded to others within the organisation who completed the survey on separate computers.

On the other hand, the methodology has the following advantages:

1. The ability to collect and analyse data remotely within a very short time frame.

2. It showed the relationships between quantifiable data quite easily.

3.   The self-administered questionnaire eliminated interviewer bias.

RESULTS

Respondents were asked to indicate their geographical coverage from the following options:

- National networks and national organisations
- National branches of international organisations
- Sub-national CSOs that operate at a local levels
- Local CSOs

For the purposes of this analysis, the first two types of organisations were categorised as "National CSOs" and the last two types of organisations were categorised as "Local CSOs". The number of respondents that was categorised as "National" was 6 while 9 CSOs fell into the "Local" category. The comparison functionality of Survey Monkey was used to compare data for the two types of organisations. The original data was then used to analyse data from the combined responses of both types of organisations.

Description of the Organisation and Its Level of Development

Table 7.1 outlines the main areas of work of the CSOs surveyed. It shows that this overlaps with many Sustainable Development Goals. Water, Sanitation and Health (WASH) is the sector that receives the most attention from both national and local Muslim CSOs. Next in line for local CSOs is education while for national CSOs, it is food security and nutrition. In terms of their activities, national CSOs appear to focus more on community awareness and mobilisation as well as training while local CSOs' focus is more on implementation of field projects and community awareness and mobilisation.

Table 7.1 Main thematic areas and strategic focus of CSOs surveyed

		Percentage responses		
		National	Local	Combined
Q1. Main thematic area in which your organisation is working				
A	Food security and nutrition	20	11	16
B	Water, Sanitation &Health	20	26	23
C	Gender	10	15	12
D	Environment	13	7	11
E	Conflict Transformation	3	0	2
F	Microfinance and Social Entrepreneurship	13	7	11
G	Disaster Response	13	7	11
H	Education	7	26	16
Q2. Main activities in which your organisation is engaged (you can choose more than one option)				
A	Field projects implementation	21	31	26
B	Community awareness and mobilisation	29	27	28
C	Policy influence	17	12	14
D	Research	8	12	10
E	Training	25	19	22

The Organisations' Interest and Awareness of the SDGs and Agenda 2030

The findings of the survey, in Table 7.2, reveal that 100% of the Muslim CSOs that responded have an interest in obtaining information about SDGs. It also shows that 50 – 60% of them currently use other CSOs as their main source of information on this issue. They also identified a strong need for more information to enable them to participate actively. 71% of national CSO respondents, compared to 22% of local CSO respondents, indicated a need for more CSOs networking to share information.

| | | Percentage responses | | |
		National	Local	Combined
Q1. Are you interested in and following the debate on SDG policy and practice?				
A	Not interested at all and not following the debate	0	0	0
B	Some interest and following the international debate at least on the internet	17	22	20
C	Interested and have some knowledge of the issues through different sources	50	33	40
D	Interested , proactively seek information and actively promote and generate information on SDGs	33	44	40
Q2. If you are interested, please indicate type of organisation that you source information from (you can choose more than one option)				
A	CSO networks	50	60	54
B	Government	21	10	17
C	United Nations	29	30	29
Q3. Do you need more information to participate more actively in the debate on SDG policy and implementation?				
A	No needs identified as yet	0	11	6
B	More information on current debates	29	44	38
C	More information and more CSOs networking	71	22	44
D	Information available and CSOs organised but lack of multi-stakeholder support	0	22	13

The Types and Level of Involvement with the SDGs and Agenda 2030

Muslim CSOs responses to the survey show a high level of awareness of on-going policy debates on the SDGs but little participation in them. It can be seen in Table 7.3 that 100% of national Muslim CSOs are aware of these

debates but not really participating in them while the corresponding figure for local CSOs is 67%. However 11% of local CSOs are not aware of the debates at all. However even Muslim CSOs that are aware of the debates and the opportunities to engage with them are rarely invited to the table. The table shows that only 9% of our respondents are actively engaging with national structures of SDGs in India. None of them is seriously involved in SDG monitoring.

Table 7.3 The forms and levels of engagement with the SDGs

		Percentage responses		
		National	**Local**	**Combined**
Q1. How much are you involved in policy debates on SDGs				
A	No awareness of SDG policy debates	0	11	6
B	Awareness of SDG policy debates but not really participating in them	100	67	81
C	Awareness of SDG policy debates and some degree of participation in developing CSO arguments	0	22	13
D	Fully aware of SDG policy debates, opportunities to engage and participate actively in CSO advocacy	0	0	0
Q2. To what extent do you participate in the activities of your national SDG structures?				
A	No awareness of opportunities or ability to participate in Agenda 2030	36	0	17
B	Awareness of opportunities to engage but rarely invited	55	78	30
C	Actively participating in national SDG structures and events	9	22	9
D	Proactively engaging with national SDG structures and events related to SDGs at regional level	0	0	0

Q3. How much are you involved in SDG discussions at international level?				
A	No awareness of opportunities and no ability to influence	43	11	25
B	Aware of opportunities but rarely invited	43	78	63
C	Fully aware of opportunities and often active in international policy discussions	14	11	13
D	Proactively identify opportunities for international policy influence and undertake evidence based advocacy	0	0	0
Q4. Is your organisation involved in monitoring related to SDGs?				
A	Few or any actions	71	56	63
B	Track discussions and reports on monitoring SDGs	29	33	31
C	Collaborate in data collection for monitoring SDGs	0	11	6
D	Generate, analyse and disseminate data on SDGs monitoring	0	0	0

The Challenges the Organisation Faces with Respect to Engagement with the SDGs and Agenda 2030

The challenges facing Muslim CSOs in engaging with global processes at both national and international levels are two-fold. The first group consists of factors that are internal to the individual CSO while the second group relate to the external environment in which they operate. As Table 4 shows both national and local CSOs prioritise internal factors over the external ones. This is the case regardless of whether they seek to engage with the SDGs at national or international levels.

Table 7.4 shows that 70% of Muslim CSOs with national coverage planning involvement with the Agenda 2030 within India view their impediments to be internal. Similarly 67% of local CSOs give the same response. However whereas national CSOs implicate financial constraints

as the main factor, local CSOs believe that the main issue is related to staffing, demands on time and technical expertise.

The prioritisation of internal over external factors is mirrored in the responses concerning involvement at the international level with the same split of about 70:30 for internal: external constraints for both groups of CSOs. In this case, though, national CSOs gave the financial and human resources equal weight while local CSOs maintained the emphasis on human resources as their main limiting factor.

Responses received on Question 3 indicate none of the respondents can communicate messages with a clear strategy and in a strong and convincing manner. Competence in this area is a prerequisite for successful advocacy and policy influence and its absence is a serious draw back for policy engagement by Muslim CSOs.

Similarly the use of evidence confers a strong advantage in engaging with global goals such as the SDGs which tend to be quite technical. The fact that 71% of national Muslim CSOs and 66% of local Muslim CSOs responded that they have rarely or never used verified evidence in their strategies to influence policy and implementation will impact on their effectiveness in engaging with the SDGs.

Table 7.4 Challenges Muslim CSOs face with respect to engagement with SDGs

		Percentage responses		
		National	Local	Combined
Q1. Which are the main factors, internal or external, that constrain your involvement in SDG policy discussions at **national** level? (you can choose more than one option)				
A	Internal: staff/ time/ technical constraints	20	42	32
B	Internal: financial constraints	50	25	36
C	External: no enabling environment/ political context	20	25	23
D	External: no information sources or research centres available for networking	10	8	9

*Q2. Which are the main factors, internal or external, that constrain your involvement in SDG policy discussions at **international** level? (you can choose more than one option)*				
A	Internal: staff/ time/ technical constraints	36	38	38
B	Internal: financial constraints	36	31	33
C	External: no enabling environment/ political context	18	8	13
D	External: no information sources or research centres available for networking	9	23	17
Q3. Are you able to articulate and communicate strong and convincing messages related to the SDGs?				
A	Not able at all	0	11	6
B	Can articulate some messages but not really communicating them	43	67	56
C	Can articulate and communicate some messages but with no clear strategy	57	22	38
D	Can articulate and communicate messages with clear strategy and in a strong and convincing manner	0	0	0
Q4. To what extent are you able to integrate verified evidence into your strategies to influence policy and implementation?				
A	Not at all	14	33	25
B	Rarely use verified evidence	57	33	44
C	Have some mechanism in use to collect and verify evidence which is sometimes used to influence policy	14	33	25
D	Have knowledge systems in place to build evidence and its verified evidence is presented to policy makers and used by them	14	0	6

Although CSOs gave priority to internal as opposed to external challenges in their responses in Table 7.4, they still highlighted the

importance of external challenges where the absence of an enabling environment was seen as a major factor in working within India by about 25% of respondents of both categories of Muslim CSOs. The responses show that enabling environment was less of a problem for international work. The policy space for these CSOs working in India is also shown in Table 7.5 where none of the national Muslim CSOs and only 11% of the local Muslim CSOs responded that the country's policies do not provide for regular institutionalised dialogue in which their views are taken into account.

It is noteworthy that 86% of national Muslim CSOs and 56% of local Muslim CSOs do not belong to any network dealing with the SDGs. This highlights the need for the establishment of such platforms that are relevant to their needs. Further, the responses reveal the weak capacity of Muslim CSOs to form meaningful and mutually beneficial partnerships and alliances with other organisations.

Table 7.5 Additional challenges facing Muslim CSOs in engaging with the SDGs

		Percentage responses		
		National	**Local**	**Combined**
Q1. Do you think that policies in your country facilitate regular and institutionalised dialogue on SDGs with CSOs including Muslim CSOs?				
A	Not at all	29	22	25
B	Institutionalised dialogue is seldom and always consultative	14	44	31
C	Some dialogue takes place but consultative and non-binding with some presence of CSOs	57	22	38
D	Regular institutionalised dialogue takes place and CSO views taken into account	0	11	6
Q2. Are you a member of any CSOs platform dealing with the implementation of the SDGs?				
A	No membership of any CSOs network on the SDGs	86	56	69

B	Member of a network but not actively participating in its activities	0	22	13
C	Member of a network and actively participating in working groups dealing with the SDGs	14	22	19
D	Proactive in a network and leading some of its initiatives on SDGs	0	0	0
Q3. Do you have partnerships or alliances with a range of stakeholders?				
A	No partnerships or alliances with a range of stakeholders on SDGs	57	22	38
B	Early stages of building relationships and collaborating with other stakeholders	14	33	25
C	Some key relationships with a few relevant stakeholders but action around common goals is short term	29	44	38
D	Strong relationships with a variety of stakeholders anchored on stable long-term collaboration	0	0	0

Opportunities for Engagement with the SDGs and Agenda 2030

Table 7.6 presents the responses on the self-perceived ability to motivate and mobilise community members to action. Only a few respondents reported some difficulty in motivating their members to action. All national Muslim CSOs that responded stated that they can mobilise from a core group to a broad range of community members into action. In the case of local Muslim CSOs, 77% reported the same. This ability is critical to the achievement of a broad and complex agenda such as the SDGs and the potential role of these organisations is increasingly being recognised by other stakeholders. Some of these stakeholders are showing a willingness to work with Muslim CSOs.

Table 7.6 Ability to mobilise constituents

		Percentage responses		
		National	**Local**	**Combined**
Q. Are you able to motivate and mobilise your organisation's constituents?				
A	Organisation has difficulty motivating members to action.	0	22	13
B	Organisation has ability to motivate a small core group of community members to action	29	33	31
C	Organisation has ability to motivate a segment of community members to action	29	22	25
D	Organisation has ability to motivate a broad range of community members into action	43	22	31

CONCLUSION

In aspiring to the representation of Islamic perspectives and Muslim communities in all discussions relating to the policy and implementation of the SDGs in India, this survey shows that there is a gap in knowledge, resources and capacity within Muslim CSOs. This could be filled by establishing a platform to collect, collate and disseminate information and facilitate cross organisational cooperation in constructing a distinct Muslim understanding of and approach to Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Efforts are needed at national and local levels to build the knowledge and capacity of the Muslim faith-based and faith-inspired development sector to understand the language and content of the new targets, and to engage and benefit from the partnerships and cooperation that will be needed with other CSOs, Government, bi-lateral and multi-lateral donors and the private sector over the next 15 years.

There is an urgent need for action to grasp the opportunity of building an inclusive society with faith and faith based institutions driving inspired and illuminating discourse and action. Agenda 2030 offers a framework, goals and targets for sustainable development interventions.

How these are interpreted and implemented can be a reflection of local communities' values and strengths.

We suggest that the goals of such a platform could include:

1. Unification of policy positions and advocating an Islamic perspective.

2. Networking used to enable organisations to collaborate more effectively and share experience and best practice.

3. Making use of existing resources that members of the platform have acquired including standards and accountability mechanisms.

4. Collaboration for capacity building.

5. Harmonise the experiences of members in order to seek financial resources.

6. Harness evidence and research.

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