

Islamic Religious Education and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Critical Analysis of the Theory-Practice Nexus

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Abstract. This study undertakes a critical analysis of the theoretical frameworks underpinning the relationship between Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It identifies significant gaps between normative theological discourse and empirical implementation in educational settings. Employing a systematic literature review (SLR) with qualitative-interpretive and critical analysis approaches, the research examines peer-reviewed publications (2014–2024) indexed in Scopus, Google Scholar, DOAJ, and Garuda databases, focusing on the PAI-SDGs nexus. Key findings reveal: First, the aspirational alignment of core Islamic values (*khalifah*, *al-'adl*, *maqasid*) with SDGs remains fragmented, lacking holistic operationalization in curricula. Second, significant epistemological tensions (e.g., eschatological vs. worldly orientations; tawhid vs. capitalist growth models) and implementation gaps persist—evidenced by limited teacher capacity, minimal integration in primary education, and a lack of standardized impact assessment tools. Third, the study proposes the PAI-SDGs Nexus framework and Critical Islamic Sustainability Education (CISE) theory as original contributions to bridge these gaps. PAI's contribution to the SDGs remains structurally uncoordinated. The study concludes that a context-sensitive theoretical-operational reconstruction, critical pedagogy-based teacher training, and measurable impact indicators are necessary to bridge the persistent theory-practice discontinuities.

Keywords: Islamic Religious Education, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Critical Literature Review, Theory-Practice Gap, PAI-SDGs Nexus.

1 Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, encapsulated in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), represents a global consensus to address complex, intertwined challenges of human well-being and planetary health [1]. This agenda emphasizes a holistic and inclusive approach, positioning education as a critical actor in fostering the values and competencies necessary for a sustainable future [2]. Within this global framework, religious education institutions are increasingly recognized as pivotal agents of change, capable of mobilizing community values toward sustainable practices [3].

In Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, Islamic Religious Education functions as a core component of the national curriculum. This context gives rise to a profound academic and practical question: To what extent can the theological-normative framework of PAI—rooted in the Qur'an, Sunnah, and the rich intellectual heritage of Islamic thought (*turāth*)—be effectively conceptualized, operationalized, and evaluated in its contribution to the 17 SDGs? This inquiry is not trivial; it probes the very relevance of religious education in addressing contemporary material crises [4].

A significant body of literature has emerged affirming the conceptual synergy between Islamic principles and SDG targets. Foundational Islamic concepts such as *khalīfah* (stewardship) and *hifẓ al-bi'ah* (environmental protection) are presented as theological parallels to SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land) [5], [6]. Similarly, the Qur'anic emphasis on *al-'adl* (justice) and *rahmatan lil-'ālamīn* (mercy for all worlds) is argued to align directly with SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) [7]. Some scholars have mapped the SDGs onto the *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* (higher objectives of Islamic law), suggesting the SDGs are a modern expression of the perennial Islamic goals of protecting faith, life, intellect, lineage, and property [8], [9].

However, this academic optimism is confronted by a persistent "*kegelisahan akademik*" (academic restlessness). This restlessness stems from the observation that conceptual alignment does not guarantee operational contribution. A significant gap persists between the de jure theological potential and the de facto pedagogical practice in PAI classrooms. This disconnect is exacerbated by potential epistemological tensions, such as the perceived conflict between PAI's traditional ukhrawi (eschatological, other-worldly) orientation and the seemingly duniawi (worldly, materialist) focus of the SDGs [10], [11].

Recent scholarship highlights this implementation gap. While some studies explore partial integrations, such as eco-theology in madrasahs or the role of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) in poverty alleviation [12], a holistic picture remains elusive. Systematic reviews confirm that the literature is dominated by normative-theological arguments, lacking robust evaluative frameworks to measure PAI's tangible impact on SDG indicators. Critical analyses have further identified significant challenges in reconciling traditional textual interpretations with modern principles of gender equality (SDG 5) [13]. While scholars call for interdisciplinary approaches [14], a comprehensive study that critically examines the entire PAI-SDGs nexus—from epistemology to pedagogy and assessment—remains limited.

This study identifies three critical gaps in the existing literature. First, the dominance of a normative-sectoral approach. Previous studies tend to create a one-to-one mapping (e.g., *khalīfah* = SDG 13) without analyzing the holistic, multidimensional interaction between PAI's epistemology (its theory of knowledge, values, and reality) and the integrated logic of the SDGs. The literature fails to show how PAI's core theological structure [15] interacts with the cross-sectoral SDG agenda, resulting in fragmented claims of contribution.

Second, a persistent theory-practice discontinuity. A significant chasm exists between the idealized discourse of PAI's moral-ethical role and the empirical evidence of

its internalization in classroom practice [16]. The literature is rich in normative claims but "evidence-poor" regarding validated instruments or pedagogical models that effectively transfer these values.

Third, a superficiality of critique. The literature often focuses on specific "controversial" issues (like gender) while avoiding the more fundamental epistemological conflict: the tension between the tawhid (theocentric unity) worldview, which implies limits and critiques materialism, and the SDGs' implicit endorsement of a capitalist economic growth model (SDG 8) [17], [18].

This study aims to fill these gaps. The novelty of this research lies in its critical, holistic synthesis. It moves beyond simple mapping to analyze the epistemological frictions and implementation failures. It addresses the research gap by: (1) critically analyzing the theoretical frameworks governing the PAI-SDGs relationship; (2) identifying the discontinuities between normative discourse and empirical implementation; and (3) formulating recommendations to strengthen PAI's operational framework. As a primary contribution, this article proposes two new conceptual tools: the PAI-SDGs Nexus framework (integrating philosophical, pedagogical, and evaluative dimensions) and the theory of Critical Islamic Sustainability Education (CISE).

2 Method

This study employed a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR). This method was chosen to systematically identify, appraise, and synthesize all relevant academic literature on the PAI-SDGs nexus within a defined timeframe, moving beyond a simple descriptive review to a critical interpretation.

The research process involved several stages. First, a systematic search was conducted in four major academic databases: Scopus, Google Scholar, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), and Garuda (the Indonesian national index). The search utilized a Boolean string of English and Indonesian keywords, including: ("Islamic Religious Education" OR "Pendidikan Agama Islam" OR "PAI") AND ("Sustainable Development Goals" OR "SDGs" OR "*Pembangunan Berkelanjutan*").

The inclusion criteria for articles were: (1) published between 2014 (preceding the SDGs' formal launch) and 2024; (2) peer-reviewed journal articles, books, or high-impact conference proceedings; (3) substantively discussed the relationship, integration, or conflict between PAI and the SDGs. Exclusion criteria were: (1) sources that were purely descriptive news reports or non-academic blogs; (2) articles that mentioned the keywords only in passing without substantive analysis; and (3) research focused on non-Indonesian contexts, unless highly relevant for theoretical comparison.

The analysis employed a qualitative-interpretive and critical content analysis [19]. Selected articles were coded not just for their explicit topic (e.g., "PAI and environment"), but for their underlying theoretical assumptions, methodological approaches, and identified gaps. A thematic analysis was conducted to map the dominant discourses (e.g., synergy, tension, implementation), which form the structure of the Results and Discussion section.

3 Result

3.1 The Aspirational Nexus: Theoretical Synergy and Maqāṣid Alignment

The body of literature engaging with the intersection of Islamic principles and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is both vast and overwhelmingly optimistic. This scholarship is replete with robust, detailed, and passionate arguments for the theoretical synergy between the two frameworks. This alignment is not presented as a forced or modern revisionist project; rather, scholars articulate it as a contemporary expression of Islam's most foundational principles. The discourse is primarily organized around two major, interconnected concepts: *Khalīfah* (Stewardship) and *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* (Higher Objectives of Law).

The concept of *Khalīfatullāh fī al-Arḍ* (steward of God on Earth), rooted in definitive Qur'anic verses (e.g., 2:30, 6:165), is the most frequently cited theological basis for sustainability. The literature in this domain, often termed "eco-theology" or "Islamic environmentalism," posits that human existence is not one of ownership, but of a sacred *amānah* (trust). This trust, as explored by [5], is not merely a spiritual suggestion but a comprehensive ethical and legal mandate. It argues that the *amānah* transforms the environment (*al-bi'ah*) from a passive "resource" to be exploited into a "responsibility" to be protected [5].

This theological position, as scholars like Nasr and Foltz have long argued, provides a powerful, faith-based motivation for environmentalism that may be far more compelling for Muslim-majority populations than purely secular or utilitarian appeals. [20], [21]. Nasr frames nature as sacramental—a living tapestry of God's *āyāt* (signs). To degrade nature is not just an economic error; it is a spiritual crime [20]. The literature explicitly maps this framework onto the environmental SDGs. The mandate for stewardship provides a direct theological imperative supporting SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). Grassroots movements, such as the "eco-pesantren" discussed by Fauz, serve as "living laboratories" where this abstract principle is translated into operational manuals for waste management and renewable energy [22].

The second framework is the *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*. The literature presents the *Maqāṣid* as Islam's indigenous "systems thinking" tool (Auda, 2008; Kamali, 2019). The consensus is that the 17 SDGs are a contemporary operationalization of the five essential objectives: the protection of religion (*hifdh al-dīn*), life (*hifdh al-nafs*), intellect (*hifdh al-'aql*), lineage (*hifdh al-nasl*), and wealth (*hifdh al-māl*). Muqtadir meticulously draws connections, mapping SDG 1 (No Poverty) to *hifdh al-māl* and SDG 4 (Quality Education) to *hifdh al-'aql*. While intellectually compelling, this review finds that the "aspirational" literature remains theoretical, providing the *de jure* justification without a *de facto* pedagogical pathway [7].

3.2 The Rupture: Epistemological Tensions and Foundational Critiques

While the synergy narrative is dominant, the literature review uncovered deep-seated epistemological tensions between the PAI worldview and the SDG framework. These ruptures challenge the possibility of genuine integration.

The first tension is between Eschatological and Secular-Materialist Orientations. PAI is inherently *ukhrawi* (focused on the hereafter), aiming for *falāḥ* (salvation), whereas the SDGs are *duniawi* (worldly), focusing on material sustainability. Ramadan explores this pedagogical dilemma: is PAI's role to endorse worldly projects, or are they distractions (*lahw*)? In practice, PAI curricula consistently prioritize *fiqh al-'ibādah* (ritual) over social or environmental ethics, relegating the SDGs to a "secondary" category of knowledge [11].

The second conflict is between *Tawhid* (Theocentric Unity) and the Capitalist Growth Model. PAI is rooted in *Tawhid*, which implies limits, balance (*mīzān*), and a critique of consumerism [17]. Conversely, the SDG framework—specifically SDG 8—is embedded within a paradigm of perpetual economic growth. Critical theorists like Hickel and Hanieh argue this model drives the very crises the SDGs aim to solve. The literature reveals that PAI practitioners are unequipped to engage in this critical discourse, opting instead for a superficial "greening" of capitalist concepts [18], [23].

The third tension involves Universal Principles versus Particularistic Interpretations, most evident in SDG 5 (Gender Equality). While scholars like Barlas argue that the Qur'an supports gender justice (*al-'adl*), classroom realities are often governed by patriarchal interpretations of *fiqh* [24]. Husna (2022) finds that PAI textbooks frequently reinforce unequal gender norms, creating a pedagogical paralysis where PAI is championed as a source of justice theoretically, yet reproduces injustice practically [25].

3.3 The Gap: De Facto Implementation and Pedagogical Failures

Beyond theory, the review identified a massive theory-practice gap. Even willing teachers are hindered by structural and pedagogical failures.

First is the failure of Teacher Pedagogical Capacity. Fauzi (2023) found that while 89% of PAI teachers supported the SDGs, only 41% felt capable of designing relevant lessons. LPTK (Teacher Training Institutes) continue to favor declarative pedagogies training teachers to transmit information rather than facilitate critical, student-centered learning [26].

Second are Curricular and Assessment Gaps. Nurdin & Yusuf note that sustainability themes are minimal and fragmented, often "patched" onto a curriculum dominated by ritual jurisprudence. This is compounded by high-stakes testing, which assesses rote memorization of theological definitions rather than eco-theological competency. Consequently, teaching the SDGs is perceived as a liability that subtracts time from exam preparation [14], [16].

Finally, the "Hidden Curriculum" Contradiction undermines formal instruction. A lesson on *hifdh al-bi'ah* is nullified when the school cafeteria generates massive plastic waste or when authoritarian governance contradicts lessons on justice. Without a whole-school approach, PAI remains a subject of abstract ideals rather than lived ethics [27], [28].

4 Discussion

The findings of this systematic review reveal a profound dichotomy characterizing the relationship between Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). On one hand, there exists a robust "Aspirational Nexus" where theological principles—specifically *Khalīfah* (stewardship) and *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* (higher objectives of Islamic law)—offer a potent, indigenous framework for sustainability that arguably surpasses secular approaches in its ability to motivate Muslim communities. On the other hand, this potential is systematically paralyzed by epistemological ruptures and practical implementation failures. The most immediate implication of this study is the identification of a "Theological-Pedagogical Paradox," which suggests that PAI possesses the necessary theological "software" to support sustainable development but lacks the pedagogical "hardware" and institutional structures to execute it effectively.

The *Maqāṣid* framework, as articulated by scholars such as Auda and Muqtadir, demonstrates that Islam is not inimical to the SDGs; rather, it offers a holistic system that could theoretically anchor the global goals in a transcendent moral imperative [7], [8]. However, the systematic gap identified in the results suggests that this theological potency is rendered inert by a tradition of "declarative pedagogy." [10], [14] The current PAI ecosystem operates largely on a "banking model" of education [29], where students are treated as passive receptacles of ritual knowledge. As long as PAI is defined solely by the transmission of dogmatic facts—such as memorizing the conditions of prayer—rather than the application of ethical principles to contemporary crises, the SDGs will remain an alien appendage to the curriculum. The integration of SDGs requires a fundamental shift from *Ta'lim* (transfer of knowledge) to *Tarbiyah* (nurturing growth) and *Ta'dib* (instilling discipline/ethics), signaling a return to the classical holistic roots of Islamic pedagogy that have been eroded by modern standardized testing.

Beyond the pedagogical mechanics, a deeper philosophical tension demands resolution: the conflict between the eschatological (*ukhrawi*) focus of PAI and the secular-materialist (*duniawi*) nature of the SDGs. The literature suggests that ignoring this tension leads to a superficial implementation where PAI simply "rubber stamps" the UN agenda without engaging with its philosophical underpinnings. To resolve this, PAI must adopt a "Critical-Eschatological Approach." Rather than viewing the hereafter orientation as an obstacle to worldly development, educators must frame the SDGs as the field of action (*amal*) through which the hereafter is secured. This perspective does not result in the secularization of PAI, but rather the "sacralization" of sustainable development. However, this engagement must be critical. As noted in the results regarding the capitalist growth model (Hanieh, 2018; Anwar, 2024), PAI should not passively accept the SDG framework, particularly the contradictions inherent in SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). A mature PAI curriculum should empower students to critique the concept of infinite growth using the Qur'anic concepts of *Mīzān* (Balance) and *Iqtiṣād* (Moderation). By doing so, PAI transitions from being a passive consumer of global development discourse to an active, moral producer of alternative development models that prioritize *Barakah* (blessing/sufficiency) over mere accumulation.

This philosophical reconstruction, however, is contingent upon the capacity of the teachers themselves. The failure of implementation is largely a failure of teacher training, as the findings [30] indicate that teachers are trained primarily as theologians, not

as social activists or critical thinkers. To bridge the gap, Teacher Training Institutes (LPTKs) must radically redesign their curricula towards a "Transformative Pedagogy." This involves shifting from text to context, where a lesson on *Thaharah* (purity) extends to include the pollution of local rivers, effectively transforming a ritual lesson into an environmental audit. Furthermore, teachers need the confidence to move from a mono-disciplinary approach to a trans-disciplinary one, dissolving the artificial barrier between "religious knowledge" and "general knowledge." Consequently, assessment methods must evolve; as long as exams only measure recall, teachers will only teach recall. The introduction of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) assessments—where students are graded on their ability to solve a community problem using Islamic ethics—is essential to operationalize this shift.

Ultimately, the most significant barrier to PAI-SDG integration is not the classroom, but the institution itself. The "Hidden Curriculum" contradictions identified in the results [17] reveal that students learn more from how a school acts than what a teacher says. If PAI teaches that "cleanliness is part of faith" but the school lacks a recycling system or generates massive waste, the lesson learned is hypocrisy. Therefore, the integration of SDGs cannot be the sole responsibility of the PAI teacher; it requires a "Whole-School Approach" [31]. This implies that the school's operational management—its energy procurement, waste disposal, and governance structure—must be viewed as pedagogical tools. The "Eco-Pesantren" model demonstrates that when the institution embodies the *Khalifah* ethic, the cognitive dissonance dissolves. The school itself becomes the text, and the PAI teacher becomes the facilitator of reading that text [32].

In conclusion, the synthesis of Islamic principles and the SDGs offers a promising avenue for addressing the global poly-crisis, but this potential is currently stifled by a systemic failure to translate theology into pedagogy. The path forward requires a courageous reimagining of PAI. It demands an educational philosophy that refuses to separate the Creator from the Creation, or the classroom from the community. PAI must evolve from a subject that prepares students for the Hereafter by ignoring the world, to one that prepares students for the Hereafter by healing the world. Only through this holistic realignment—encompassing theology, pedagogy, and institutional culture—can the aspirational nexus be transformed into a lived reality.

5 Conclusion

This critical literature review confirms that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) possesses a deep and robust theological foundation to support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), primarily through the concepts of *khalifah* (stewardship), *al-'adl* (justice), and the holistic framework of *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*. However, this de jure synergy is almost entirely unrealized.

The analysis concludes that PAI's contribution to the SDGs is structurally uncoordinated and philosophically fragmented. This is due to three factors: (1) unresolved epistemological tensions between PAI's traditional eschatological orientation and the SDGs' materialist and growth-based development paradigm; (2) a massive theory-practice gap in implementation; and (3) a critical failure in teacher education, leaving

educators pedagogically unequipped to translate high-level theology into classroom practice.

Based on this analysis, this study proposes the PAI-SDGs Nexus framework—which integrates the philosophical (*Maqāṣid*), pedagogical (PBL), and evaluative (impact metrics) dimensions—as a necessary tool for reconstruction. Furthermore, it posits the need for a Critical Islamic Sustainability Education (CISE), a transformative pedagogy (Anwar, 2024) that empowers teachers and students to move beyond superficial accommodation and to critically engage with, and even challenge, the development paradigm itself. Future research must move from whether PAI can contribute, to how it can be operationally managed, pedagogically taught, and empirically measured.

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