

# IFN ISLAMIC SUSTAINABLE INVESTING THOUGHT LEADERSHIP REPORT



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## Sustainability: The future of Islamic finance

The call for finance to be a force for good has become more urgent than ever, and the Islamic finance industry is heeding that call. Despite practitioners often being quick to point out the similarities between it and the sustainable finance movement, Islamic sustainable finance remains but a drop in the multitrillion-dollar ethical finance industry. Industry leaders, however, believe we are moving in the right direction, and with the right steps, the industry could deliver more meaningful impact through Shariah instruments with a sustainable core. VINEETA TAN dives deeper.

### Slow and steady

Don't let the abbreviations confuse you. Be it ESG [environmental, social and governance], SRI [socially responsible investing] or impact investing, these terms are parked under the wider sustainable finance umbrella and are often used interchangeably albeit with delicate differences. ESG may be a jargon first coined in 2005 but the concept dates back earlier with SRI taking off in the 1960s. Within the Islamic finance sector, however, these concepts are a relatively new phenomenon, with Islamic ESG or Islamic sustainable finance gaining more momentum over the last half a decade or so.

Take green bonds as an example. The first climate awareness bond, or green bond, was issued by European Investment Bank back in 2007. The landmark EUR600 million (US\$678.27 million) offering triggered a domino effect which led to an ESG finance market that is worth over a trillion dollars and growing exponentially. The Islamic finance industry, however, trailed behind and only issued its first green Sukuk 10 years later in 2017. From then until July 2020, only 17 green Sukuk issuances have entered the market, and are mostly concentrated in Malaysia and Indonesia.

According to Bashar Al Nattoor, the global head of Islamic finance at Fitch Ratings, about US\$5.5 billion

were raised through sustainability-linked Sukuk in 2020; this figure has been superseded in the first three quarters of 2021 alone, with almost US\$7 billion already raised.

"If I look at how much was issued since 2017, it is less than US\$20 billion, which is small compared to the size of the global Sukuk market which is around US\$800 billion currently. So, in terms of actual size, the sustainable Sukuk market is still tiny," Bashar explained, adding that over 10% of Fitch's US\$130 billion rated Sukuk outstanding has some elements of sustainable, transition and green, indicating that this theme is more apparent within the dollar space. Malaysia is an exception, with corporates driving the Islamic sustainable agenda in the local currency market.

The growth may be slow, but market practitioners take this as a sign in the right direction.

"Sustainability has always been at the heart of Islamic finance. But I think perhaps in the past we didn't bring it to the fore as much as we're doing now. And one of the reasons that we're doing it now is because in the conventional markets, sustainability, ESG financing has grown enormously in the last 15 years or so, and increasingly so in the last five years. So that depth of funding liquidity that's



Bashar



available in the conventional sustainable markets is something that Islamic finance is becoming increasingly aware of and tapping into. The combination of liquidity plus the fundamental purpose of Islamic finance have come together in the last three or four years," observes Farmida Bi, Norton Rose Fulbright's chair for the Middle East, Europe and Asia and the firm's European head of Islamic finance.

### That depth of funding liquidity that's available in the conventional sustainable markets is something that Islamic finance is becoming increasingly aware of and tapping into

The Islamic and sustainable convergence is indeed gaining serious momentum, evident by the numbers.

"I think over the last 12 months, there's been a lot of discussion and the good news is that the discussion has basically crossed into almost every aspect of Islamic finance. Everybody is now talking about [Islamic sustainable finance], which is a good start," Dr Scott Levy, CEO of Bedford Row Capital, opined.

There is indeed a lot of talk, backed by meaningful measures, at the top of the industry and at government levels, with the likes of Malaysia, Indonesia, and several administrations in the Middle East putting together policies and incentives to spur the sector. Malaysia introduced its SRI Sukuk Framework in 2014, Indonesia launched its Green Bond

and Green Sukuk Framework in 2017, and the UAE this year released its 10-year sustainable finance framework which features Islamic instruments while Oman is developing an ESG finance framework as well.

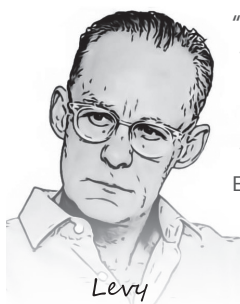
However, there is still a lot of work to be done, not only at policy level, but also at issuer level as we move from a mindset of maximizing profits to a mindset of profit with purpose.

#### Costly compliance

There is a cost to compliance, and this cannot be underestimated.



Farmida



Levy

"In addition to complying with Shariah principles, you also have to comply with green bond principles and there are increasing layers of regulatory frameworks that are being built around Islamic sustainable finance," Farmida explained, adding that tapping the ESG market generally means having to get an ESG rating as well. "All of those are substantial obligations that you have to comply with, compared to going out into the market and issuing a conventional bond. So in order to jump through all of those different hoops, it has to be worthwhile."

### There is a cost to compliance, and this cannot be underestimated

Disclosure is a central challenge Islamic financial institutions face in fully embracing the sustainability agenda. Perhaps the lack of Islamic







financial institutions committing to globally-recognized frameworks such as the UN Principles of Responsible Investment and the UN's Principles of Responsible Banking, which require regular detailed reporting of one's sustainability efforts and impact, is an indication of the severity of this challenge. To date, only a handful of entities have adopted these principles.

"The commercial necessity of doing so isn't quite clear enough," Dr Levy highlighted. "If [issuers] can tap into the markets the way they have always done and take a very conservative and traditional approach, why do they need to do this? And there isn't yet a commercial imperative in the same way there is on the conventional side to put the effort into the reporting that's required."

Professor Kevin Haines, Bedford Row Capital's head of social policy, echoes his colleague's sentiments: "There is an issue at the moment for Islamic finance about talking the kinds of language that is increasingly acceptable to investors. Investors are now expecting issuers to be conversant with these various regulatory frameworks and to be providing the data that investors need to demonstrate their compliance under these regulatory frameworks. This is early days but it is important for Islamic issuers to get conversant with these regulatory frameworks."

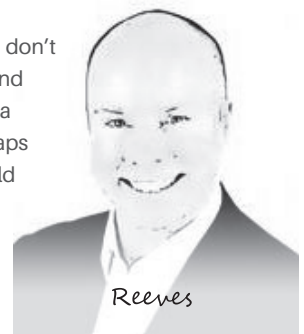
### Making it worthwhile

The reality is: it is not easy to use finance for good without risking greenwashing. And it is costly too. These merely compound the concerns conventional issuers have with Shariah finance, which is already perceived as more complicated and expensive. This leads us to ask: is the payoff justified?

Market practitioners believe so, albeit the fact that it may take a while to realize such gains.

"(In general) getting a real yield that is actually positive is a challenge, and if you're an Islamic

investor, then you have further restrictions. You don't have the entire universe available to invest in and so finding something that is going to generate a yield is one thing, finding something that perhaps can generate a positive inflation built in the yield is another. Islamic attributes attached is even more of a challenge and of course increasingly, Islamic investors also want sustainability, they're not different from everybody else. Having a sustainable Islamic investment I think is an incredibly positive and virtuous thing and I think in some respects they it could potentially lead this and certainly the opportunity is there," noted Craig Reeves, the founder of Prestige Funds.



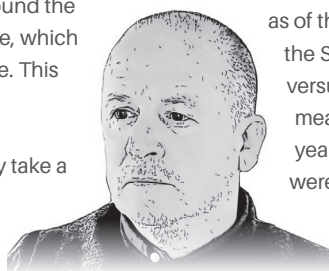
Reeves

When we compare the performance of conventional and Islamic indices, it does look like conventional edges ahead of its Islamic counterpart. The conventional S&P Global 1200 has modestly outperformed the S&P Global 1200 ESG Shariah. However, according to Michael Orzano, the senior director of global equity indices at S&P Dow Jones Indices, over the longer term, the ESG jurisprudence have led to outperformance and also some reduction in volatility.



Orzano

"If we look at the trailing 10 years as of the 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021, the S&P Global 1200 Shariah gained an annualized 14.7% versus 13.1% for the conventional index, which is a pretty meaningful outperformance of over 1.5% per annum over 10 years. Interestingly on the volatility side, standard deviations were a little bit lower for the ESG SRI Index as well, which is interesting as it is a much narrower index," Orzano elaborated, adding: "Long-term outperformance was almost fully driven by the Shariah screens and the



Haines



ESG side of it didn't really have a large contribution because by design, the S&P ESG Index is constructed in an industry neutral basis so that it tends to closely track the conventional parent benchmark."

The ability to reach a wider investor base is often the driving reason to turn to Islamic sustainable finance. Beyond that, the trend toward doing good for the planet and people also attracts Islamic finance institutions to capitalize on this swelling demand.

### Private capital really is vital and this presents a considerable opportunity for the Islamic capital markets to mobilize funding and is also a very unique opportunity for Islamic finance

"In Europe, you will see green issuances resulting in savings of at least up to 10 basis points as compared to normal issuances. But in the case of Asia, including Malaysia, generally the difference is very marginal," Chung Chee Leong, CEO of Cagamas, Malaysia's national mortgage corporation and the country's largest debt issuer, shared. "In our case, we managed to get two basis points (in savings) for our 2020 issuance. With increased awareness, we will probably see in the future, potentially some savings issuing sustainability Sukuk as compared to regular Islamic offerings." Cagamas in 2020 priced a combined issuance of its inaugural ASEAN Sustainability SRI Sukuk and Islamic medium-term notes totaling RM450 million (US\$106.08 million). Proceeds from the SRI

paper was used to specifically fund the purchase of eligible Islamic financing for affordable housing.

### Urgent needs, attractive opportunities

For the most part, Islamic sustainable finance is here to stay, especially as the pandemic has created an urgent need for funding to recover.

"There is now a much greater focus on how to build back better as we come out of COVID. Many of the people who have been impacted the most by the coronavirus are in Muslim-majority countries and I think when those countries are looking at how they can rebuild that infrastructure, whether that's health, education, employment, there has been in Europe a very big focus on social bond issuances to try and ameliorate the effect of the pandemic. And



those are structures and capital flows that these Muslim-majority countries can also tap into as the world generally tries to support development post-pandemic," noted Farmida.

The Islamic Finance Council UK expects US\$30-50 billion in capital for green and sustainability Sukuk up to 2025.

"It has been suggested that we need about US\$7 trillion in infrastructure investment annually and between US\$1.5 trillion to US\$4 trillion every year for energy transition to meet the Paris [Agreement] targets; and with the commitments of the Glasgow Climate Pact, I'm sure







those numbers will then be increased and there aren't sufficient public funds to satisfy this. So, private capital really is vital and this presents a considerable opportunity for the Islamic capital markets to mobilize funding and is also a very unique opportunity for Islamic finance," according to Jennifer Schwalbenberg, the chief governance officer for the DDCAP Group.

**The starting point is to understand and be aware of what the conventional [space] is doing, then look at your industry, see where you can capitalize on the things that you already have and then develop the things that you like**

COP 26 [UN Climate Change Conference 2021], contentious as it may have been, nonetheless pushed various nations toward some serious climate commitments.

"The UAE was the first in the Middle East to announce their net zero ambition followed by Saudi Arabia and you must acknowledge that it's not easy for these countries. For these countries, which are some of the largest oil-producing countries in the world, to go next zero, they have to invest much more and they have to make much more effort as compared to other countries," said Khurram Hilal, CEO of group Islamic banking at Standard Chartered Bank.

This year's UN Climate Change Conference saw the formation of the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero, a global coalition of 450 institutions from 45 countries committed to accelerating the

decarbonization of the world economy and reaching net zero emissions by 2050. These institutions are not only augmenting their internal policies but also revising their investing and lending criteria for projects focusing on achieving net zero, signaling deep capital flows into the sustainable finance sector.

### Turning words into action

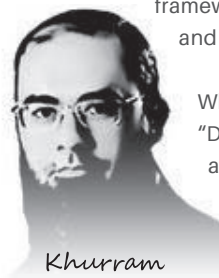
So how do we, as an industry, capture these Islamic sustainable opportunities? As Schwalbenberg observed: "We had two weeks of moving intentions and wonderful announcements [at COP 26] but now we need to put that into reality and make it happen. It's no longer about goals and aspirations. It really needs to be about action. And with this, I think there really is a key role in the Islamic finance agenda for green finance, but also transition finance."

Bashar concurs. "I think the starting point is to understand and be aware of what the conventional [space] is doing, then look at your industry, see where you can capitalize on the things that you already have and then develop the things that you like. First is to build awareness, then realization of putting strategies and regulations and frameworks to improve that and then installing that in the system and having an ecosystem and incentivize issuers."

When it comes to regulations and policies, Dr Scott's advice is: "Don't be afraid of regulation – that's the first step. Look internally at your internal processes, have a brief read of the UN SDGs and understand where you fit into the things that the world is talking about at the moment."

At the heart of this movement is the importance of nurturing the right people to drive this change.

"We need to think about how do we get staff in Islamic banks to be equipped with the right knowledge? How do we create a future-ready workforce? We need our training and our learning institutions to focus



Khurram



in this area because this is the future of finance. They need to help develop the next generation of Islamic bankers who understand the dynamics of sustainable finance, who understand climate change, net zero carbon footprint, social finance and inclusion. They need to be fully up to speed with these concepts and not just knowing them, but also owning these concepts and also championing [them]," Khurram strongly believes.

### Leveraging tech

And just as the Islamic finance industry is using technology to advance their cause, technology should also be leveraged in our journey of Islamic sustainability.

"Technology can definitely play a significant role in achieving environmental and social goals. We have instances of application of blockchain technology and Islamic social finance, such as the use of digital identities for monitoring the end-use of the contents of funds, as well as the preservation or development and proper use of Waqf or Islamic endowments for achieving various societal goals. Most of such goals find a place in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)," according to Mohammed Alim, CEO-designate of IBF Net Group.

IBF Net is currently working on miniaturizing the Islamic economy, with a focus on Islamic social and sustainable finance using blockchain technology, and has launched several projects to this end. One of the projects is the Confluence platform which seeks to measure the impact of projects from the standpoint of Shariah and the UN SDGs.



"The platform combines the performance of the given projects against these metrics using an algorithm and produces a score or a classification scheme. This score reflects the impact of the projects using the lens of Shariah objectives, as well as the SDGs as perceived by the stakeholders. Given the availability of tools for measurement of environmental and social impact, for example carbon footprint, our platform identifies and adopts a suitable method for measurement and conversion of such impact into social cryptos. In this case, products can earn or liquidate such cryptos, which represent both types of impact acting at an exchange to alter their risk return impact profile in the market," Mohammed explained.

### Moving forward

The notions of sustainability and ethics are not new in Islamic finance, although it is only in recent years that the industry is focused on harnessing and delivering sustainable impact in a more formal and structured manner. To many, this is the future of Islamic finance.

"This trend is a growth trend and I think this has already been cemented in the past three years; even at the height of COVID-19, we saw this segment growing, and I think this will continue in the short to medium term at least. If the government's strategies and milestones and objectives are really pursued in a very dedicated way, we could see more transformation of this segment, even in the long term, where it becomes a significant part of the industry," Bashar opined.

The push is also seen from the demand side, encouraging the supply side.







"We're definitely seeing a high level of demand from clients around the world for both ESG and for Islamic indices. Both of these are big areas of focus for us as an index provider. There have been significant inflows into ESG index products, including ETFs [exchange-traded funds] around the world over the past year, and we've also started to see Islamic ETFs in the US and Canada really gather momentum," Orzano shared. "I think the investment community is really just starting to think about combining broad-based ESG and Shariah investing together. I think we're likely to see a lot of new product development in the space over the next few years."

Schwalbenberg concurred: "I think as the strength of this agenda in the market increases, and that momentum builds, we will see the different institutions increasing their offerings and their options to the market. And it will be organic because as the sustainable finance sector grows and the products and services and practices become more prevalent, institutions will become more cognizant of this and they will realize they will miss opportunities and be at a disadvantage if they don't participate. Islamic sustainable finance will be recognized as the new normal and commitment will follow."

Corporates and Islamic issuers are already lining up their ducks.

"We see a lot of our traditional energy clients setting up new projects in a sustainable and renewable way and we are expecting a number of projects that were conventionally financed now being refinanced in a sustainable way going forward. So as a firm, we are expecting to do a lot more sustainable finance, certainly in the conventional markets, but

hopefully much more in the Islamic markets as well," Farmida shared. It is learned that Cagamas and Standard Chartered are each preparing to introduce new products. Chung, CEO of Cagamas, revealed that the firm is looking to issue green Sukuk while Standard Chartered is working on expanding its Islamic green mortgage offering, Islamic social finance tools and Islamic ESG wealth management services, and is building on creating sustainability solutions for the wider Halal market including Islamic sustainable supply chain instruments.

**As the multitrillion-dollar Halal industry continues to grow in its own space and globalize, I think it is important that they harness the socially responsible funding mechanism**

"I think it's a great opportunity for growth that and we have this great upside in front of us," Khurram explained. "As the multitrillion-dollar Halal industry continues to grow in its own space and globalize, I think it is important that they harness the socially responsible funding mechanism, mechanisms of Islamic finance and strive to give holistic Halal solutions to faith-conscious clients."

"We need more innovation, we need more solutions in this space. This is an open field for all banks, all partners to come in and play their role." ☺





# Sustainable Islamic supply chain: Going the extra mile in supporting the Halal trade ecosystem

By Bilal Parvaiz  
Executive Director, Islamic Business  
& Head Products, Standard Chartered  
Saadiq



Authored by



**The Halal industry is witnessing an exponential growth with various projections stating the Halal economy as a multitrillion dollar opportunity.**

As the Halal industry continues to globalize, it should harness the socially responsible funding mechanisms of Islamic finance and strive to produce goods and services which are Halal Tayyab. By capitalizing on the synergies between the two industries, there is an opportunity to foster a truly sustainable Halal economy — an economy in which the sum of its parts is not only Shariah compliant but also placed in a divine order.

The supply of Halal goods and services is dependent on a robust Halal ecosystem, with the primary criteria being Halal compliant. The credibility and trust around the Halal certification are of utmost importance; with Malaysia taking the lead in terms of the development of a world-class Halal ecosystem via Halal Development Corporation under the Ministry of International Trade and Industry. This

achievement by Malaysia not only provides a greater sense of credibility but also offers a holistic ecosystem of facilitations supplementing the growth of the Halal industry and offers a degree of standardization, hence ensuring consumer trust and confidence.

Standard Chartered Saadiq, as a leading international Islamic network spanning across Asia, Africa and the Middle East, launched the Halal360 proposition in 2020. With an aim to connect Halal trade corridors and ensuring businesses across geographies are able to leverage our unparalleled Islamic network, the Islamic supply chain solutions are a key enabler of this strategic intent.

This unique proposition, based on a fully digital, straight-through processing model, brings about the following benefits:

- Supports suppliers across various geographies
- Provides a digital platform with straight-through processing
- Eliminates physical documentation and allows for integration to various enterprise resource planning platforms
- Complies with environmental, social and governance (ESG) criteria whereby the bank and buyer can work with suppliers on improving ESG practices, moving toward a net-zero target achievement, and;
- Provides preferential treatment for SME vendors, hence creating economic sustainability and uplifting participation.

The adoption of ESG and increased awareness equally apply on Halal businesses, which have a natural advantage by being more ethically





aligned and adopting practices around purification and cleanliness. The long-term sustainability of any business is not just dependent on the financial indicators but how well ESG practices are embedded into the corporate objectives and implemented into the standard operating model and the ecosystem. Building a sustainable and resilient supply chain is no longer optional. Instead, it is necessary and a vital part of creating a business model that enables a company and its ecosystem to thrive in the long term.

### Case study

#### *Malaysia Airports: A sustainable supplier finance solution*


- Malaysia Airports Holdings (MAHB) is one of the largest airport operator groups in the world in terms of the number of passengers handled, managing 39 airports across Malaysia as well as an international airport in Turkey.
- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns, MAHB was keen to set up a supplier finance program which enables its vendors to enjoy immediate liquidity at competitive pricing, ensuring economic sustainability for the suppliers during the pandemic.
- Standard Chartered Saadiq, as the sole mandated arranger of the program, has structured a Shariah compliant solution that meets MAHB's requirement of enabling access to finance for the SME suppliers. This aligns with MAHB's commitment to support its suppliers.
- Under the program, the SME suppliers enjoy preferential treatment over non-SME suppliers.
- **Digital** — The supply chain solution fully provides an end-to-end digital experience which is based on a straight-through-processing

model with no physical documentation or manual processing involved.

- **Sustainability** — Preferential treatment to SME suppliers under the program is based on their **SME classification, advocating positive impact** on smaller suppliers. Eligible SMEs are assessed based on International Finance Corporation criteria.
- **Shariah compliance** — The supplier finance demonstrates the depth of Standard Chartered's Islamic finance innovation and solution capabilities, delivering a seamless digital experience meeting MAHB requirements.

As a leader in trade finance, Standard Chartered continues to support its clients in their digitization and sustainability journey, as well as simplifying their trade processes, and delivering a seamless end-to-end financing experience.

This innovative sustainable supplier finance solution allows MAHB's vendors access to quick liquidity at preferential financing rates while helping MAHB optimize its cash flow.

The solution promotes best practices in sustainability across MAHB's ecosystem. It also reflects their commitment to support SME suppliers throughout challenging economic conditions while leveraging digital capabilities to deliver a straight-through process and a seamless client experience. 



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# Islamic social finance leading to Sadaqah Bangladesh account as a case study

By Ali Allawala,  
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Authored by



## Background

There is a strong overlap between Islamic finance and the principles of environmental, social and governance (ESG) which we see today. For example, a key pillar of Islamic finance is being a good steward to society, the economy and the environment through the prevention of harm and attainment of benefits. There is an underlying sense of social justice by supporting activities that benefit society. As a result, Islamic finance does not invest in companies that deal with gambling, alcohol, weapons, tobacco, etc, due to their potential negative impact on the community.

There is also a strong drive toward the equitable distribution of wealth by putting money to productive purposes related to real underlying assets in the economy where risks and rewards are shared. The objective behind this is to promote job creation, financial inclusion and greater well-being.

Hence, adhering to the values of Islamic social finance, Standard Chartered Bank in Bangladesh has launched a deposit account for its clients with the underlying objective of supporting the local communities.

## Identifying the opportunity

Through research, we have found that socially-inclusive finance is appealing to clients looking for ethical solutions. In Bangladesh, we saw an opportunity to develop sustainable products through which clients can directly participate in the social development of their communities. The current practice is comprised of generating donations which are collected and distributed mostly through informal channels. Also, clients face challenges in identifying the segments that are truly in need of such donations.

## Developing the product

How about having a savings account which helps customers contribute toward society? This question led to the birth of the **Saadiq Sadaqah**

**Account.** It is a Shariah compliant deposit account based on the principles of Mudarabah (profit-sharing). This account is designed to support the philanthropic objectives of Sadaqah (charity) leading to the sustainable development of society.

Through the Saadiq Sadaqah Account, clients can donate the profit earned on the account to the charity of their choice. We support various causes, such as female well-being, education for underprivileged children, climate change and healthcare, which lead to the sustainable development of society. Clients can select the charity of their choice at the time of account opening and thereafter the profit earned on the Saadiq Sadaqah Account will go to the pre-assigned charity's bank account automatically.

## Charities and the social impact

The following charities were shortlisted for the customers to select where they would like the profit earned on their account to be donated to:

- Jaago: Education for underprivileged students, awareness-generating programs on climate
- Underprivileged Children's Educational Programme: Skill development for women
- Friendship: Women and child health, sustainable economic development (artisan employment), climate action
- Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed: Rehabilitation and support for the disabled, and
- PFDA: Skill development in autistic children.

The benefits arising from the Sadaqah savings account are also in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pertaining to SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 3 (good health and well-being) and SDG 4 (quality education). This provides an efficient avenue for banks and clients to contribute toward the well-being of society through supporting children education, developing skills for women, rehabilitating the incapacitated and helping local artisans.

Therefore, we can say that the Saadiq Sadaqah account is not just a Shariah compliant account, but it also meets the intended objectives of Shariah (Maqasid Shariah) which are much broader and aims to be a good steward to society, the economy and the environment. (F)

