

[HTSL#78]

Environmental Sustainability Through Genetically Modified Foods – An Islamic Ethical Perspective

Naeema Halim^{1*}, Nur Jannah Hassan²

¹Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM),

²Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, Jln Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur

*Corresponding author's e-mail: naeemahaleem@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Genetically Modified (GM) Foods have created a strong divide between pro-GM scientists and food purists. This, followed by the regulations imposed on this technology, has prevented it from reaching the consumer acceptability level to the maximum. Lately, its proponents have been touting it as a practical solution in alleviating world hunger, while balancing the other SDGs related to food and environmental sustainability. Although the Qur'an does not explicitly mention "sustainability", it is replete with verses that allude towards the concept. Since there exists no related example of GM Foods in the classical texts, the meanings of *kulu* and *ṭayyib* regarding ethical food production need to be explored further. This includes analysing their effects on the environment, considering the concepts of stewardship (*khilafah*) and balance (*mizan*). GM foods can be a viable solution to the "Feed the World" problem, but they should be analysed beyond the traditional binary lens of *halal* and *haram*. Muslims, while adopting such technologies, must not neglect their responsibility towards the holistic well-being of society and the environment.

Keywords: GM foods; *Kulu*; *Toyyib*; Sustainability

1 Introduction

Food systems hold power to realise the vision of a better world' said António Guterres, UN Secretary-General during his speech at the first Food Systems Summit, 2021. Genetically Modified Foods have created a strong divide between pro-GM scientists (who believe the technology has the potential to mitigate all food related challenges faced by the world today) and food purists (who are more concerned about the adverse consequences that GM foods will induce in the form of long-term health issues.) To address the issue of global food insecurity and the role that GM foods can play in tackling this challenge, the meanings of Qur'anic terms "*kulu*" and "*ṭayyib*" with regards to ethical food production and consumption need to be explored further. This includes analysing the whole food chain and its effects on the environment, considering the Qur'anic concepts of stewardship (*khilafah*) and balance (*mizan*). Against this background, this article will examine the role of GM foods in achieving environmental sustainability and the diverse ethical discourse surrounding the issue. How can faith play an effective role in removing hunger from this planet, while balancing the other



SDG goals related to environmental and humanitarian sustainability? Will GM foods succeed in removing hunger, while balancing the other SDGs related to food and environmental sustainability? How to include the spiritual dimension of human life as an integral part of the 17 SDGs and to analyse these new technologies through this gauge of spirituality?

2 Methods

As outlined above, these research questions are complex and multidimensional in nature. In order to do justice to these questions, this study will heavily depend on interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches that come at an interplay of various fields. From outside the Islamic tradition, the study will primarily depend on agriculture, economics, psychology, and environmental and consumption ethics. As for the disciplines rooted in the Islamic tradition, the thesis will focus on three main scholarly disciplines, namely theology, philosophy, and jurisprudence.

3 Results and Discussion

The role of faith-based organizations (FBOs) has taken a centre stage in recent years both at an institutional and government level and between all stake holders involved in public discourses related to sustainable development. *Laudato Si'* - an encyclical of Pope Francis also raises this important issue of our responsibility as stewards of God to safeguard the planet earth [1]. Karam digs deeper to find the rationale behind this newly found nexus between religion and development. She argues that FBOs have the potential to change harmful discourse, when they justify it through engagement with religious texts, resulting in a shift in community attitudes [2]. Although genetically modified foods are considered safe and sustainable by an overwhelming majority of scientists and the World Health Organization, only about one-third of consumers share that view. One reason for this divide is the impact of a strong ethical discourse concerning its implications led by its critics (environmentalists, independent scientists, consumers, etc.) often decrying it as "unnatural" or "Frankenfood," powerful enough to put doubts in the mind of the end-user, even though a 2016 review of a published research found no convincing evidence for adverse health or environmental effects of GM foods [3]. The ethical discourse around GM foods entails various moral challenges related to the multi-disciplinary fields both within and outside Food Ethics. Is every *halal* *toyyib*? Is every *halal* moral? To understand this subtle difference between the two terms, the meaning of "*toyyib*" in the present context with regards to food production and consumption needs to be qualified further. Al Ghazali in his book on "The manners of Eating" highlights the value and sanctity of each and every morsel that is consumed, thus serving as an excellent guide to understand the true spirit of food in our lives and how to protect ourselves from undue indulgence in food and its repercussions on our body, mind and soul. Talking about *Sufi* manners and practices with regards to food ethics and consumption, Ibn al Arabi warns us to be cautious about our diet and also avoid animal fat as it will strengthen animality and

overpower spirituality, which is in contrast to the practices of the prophet, his favourite food being *tharīd*, a meat broth served with bread [4].

4 Conclusions

It is concluded that the connotation of *kulu* be expanded from mere physical eating to cultivation, production, and consumption of foods—i.e., from seeds to farm and plate. GM foods can be a viable solution to the "Feed the World" problem, but they should be analysed beyond the binary lens of *ḥalal* and *ḥaram*, and their acceptability must be based on the consideration of the five *maqāṣid* and the priority principles related to *maṣlaḥah* and *mafsadah*. Muslims, while adopting such technologies, must not neglect their responsibility towards the well-being of society and the environment.

References

1. Francis, P. Encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* of the holy father Francis on care for our common home, Vatican Press 2015, 12
2. Hoffman. Eating and fasting for God in Sufi tradition. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 1995, 465-484.
3. Karam, A. Report: Religions and sustainable development - from overlooking to commodifying faiths? 2019, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.
4. Rochester University . Retrieved November 2022, from <https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/genetically-modified-food-consumer-attitudes-science-382922/>