

Defining Human Needs, Between Islamic Thought and Capitalist Thought

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(Translated)

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The concept of human needs and their classification are fundamental issues that have preoccupied contemporary economic thought, especially in light of the widening gap between the extreme wealth enjoyed by a minority of humanity, and the abject poverty suffered by the majority of the world's population. International statistics reveal a bleak picture. One billion people live in extreme hunger, 1.5 billion are deprived of basic healthcare, and another billion lack access to safe drinking water, while 76% of the world's population owns only 20% of global income. These facts expose the failure of the contemporary capitalist system to address the most basic human needs, despite the tremendous industrial and scientific progress and the vast resources our planet is abundant with.

From this, extensive efforts have emerged to define and classify human needs, so that the development strategies can be based on a clear foundation. Some of these efforts have come from international institutions, others from regional research centers, and some Western institutes have sought to formulate their own classifications. However, these efforts, as we shall see, remain confined to the materialistic and individualistic vision that characterizes capitalist thought.

Capitalism's Classifications of Needs:

The first of these classifications is that which was presented by the International Labor Office in its report on employment, growth, and basic needs. It considered human needs to be divided into two categories. Firstly, consumption needs specific to the family, such as adequate food, shelter, clothing, furniture, and household appliances. Secondly, general needs, including safe drinking water, sanitation, public transportation, and health and education services. This vision represents a practical approach, but it does not go beyond the framework of direct material consumption.

The Center for Industrial Development for Arab Countries distinguished between material needs, including food, clothing, housing, transportation, education, and health, and non-material needs that can be met through social and political reorganization, such as basic freedoms and the role of the individual in society. What is new here is the inclusion of education and health among material needs, contrary to what is common in development literature, which previously considered them non-material needs.

The German Development Institute, meanwhile, divided needs into personal consumption needs, such as food, housing, clothing and household appliances, and general services, such as health, education, water, sanitation, and transportation. What is striking is that these classifications, despite their differences in detail, revolve around the same basic principle. It is a focus on the material and consumerist dimension, with attempts to introduce some moral or societal needs.

The Problem with Capitalist Thought

The major problem with these approaches is that they suffer from a disordered prioritization. While everyone acknowledges that food, water, and health are essential for human survival, the practical reality of capitalist systems places profit as the primary priority, leading to the well-being of a wealthy few taking precedence over the lives of millions of poor people. Added to this is the disconnect between the individual and society; individual freedoms are presented as basic needs, while the collective aspect that preserves social cohesion and ensures fair distribution of resources, is ignored.

This disorder explains the failure of development plans adopted by the United Nations and international institutions to eradicate poverty, despite decades of slogans such as “sustainable development” and “Sustainable Development Goals.” The current result is that the wealth of 1% of the world’s population is equal to the wealth of the rest of humanity combined, while the number of hungry people increases year after year.

The Islamic Conception of Needs

In contrast, Islam has developed a comprehensive approach to defining and prioritizing human needs, based on the belief that human beings are honored creatures, accountable to Allah (swt), not merely consumers. Shariah jurists (fuqaha) formulated this vision within what is known as the objectives of Islamic law (maqasid al-Shariah), dividing needs into three categories:

1- Necessities (ad-darooriyaat): These are those without which humans cannot live, and also include the preservation of religion, life, reason, offspring, and wealth. These requirements include the provision of food, drink, clothing, housing, security, health, education, and justice.

2- Needs (al-haajaat): These are those things people require to alleviate hardship and facilitate their lives, such as means of transportation, tools for work, and administrative organization.

3- Improvements or luxuries: These are those things that beautify life, and raise its level of well-being, without extravagance, such as adornment and permissible luxury.

This Islamic vision is not limited to the material aspect, but rather encompasses the spiritual, moral, and humanitarian aspects, making it more comprehensive and balanced.

Furthermore, its arrangement is based on a clear foundation. It begins with what sustains life and preserves the objectives of Islamic Shariah Law, then with what alleviates hardship, and finally with what achieves well-being.

The Shariah Solution to the Global Crisis

Islam does not stop at the boundaries of theory. Instead, Islam links the solution to practical mechanisms within the system of government, and the economy. Zakat, charity, endowments, and the baytul maal are all tools to ensure the satisfaction of the needs of every individual. Furthermore, the Islamic state is Islamically responsible for the guardianship of the people’s affairs. The Messenger of Allah (saw) said, «الإمام راعٍ ومسؤولٌ عن رعيته» **“The Imam is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock”** (Bukhari and Muslim).

However, the absence of this unifying political entity, the Khilafah, has left the Ummah floundering in man-made systems that replicate the failures of the West. Had the Islamic state truly been established, it would have reordered priorities in accordance with Shariah of Allah (swt), directed wealth to satisfy the basic needs of the people, not to the pockets of giant multinational corporations, and achieved solidarity among members of society based on aqeedah, not narrow self-interest.

Conclusion

Historical experience has proven that the Capitalist thought, no matter how embellished with slogans, is incapable of doing justice to humanity or achieving justice. Islam, on the other hand, has presented, centuries ago, a comprehensive approach that cares for human beings, body and soul, as individuals and as a community. The Ummah today has no choice but to return to this approach by establishing its Shariah political entity: the Second Khilafah Rashidah (Rightly-Guided Caliphate) on the Method of Prophethood. This Khilafah implements the Shariah of Allah (swt), preserves its objectives, and guarantees that every human being’s basic needs are met, under the auspices of Islamic justice and mercy.