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## Faith-Based Environmentalism: Sahal Mahfudz and the Ecological Transformation of *Pesantren*

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### Abstract

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia, as part of civil society, have played a significant role in addressing various contemporary social issues, including environmental challenges. While several studies have explored *pesantren* engagement with ecological issues, the environmental thought of Sahal Mahfudz, particularly its connection to his concept of *fiqh sosial* and Islamic eco-theology remains underexplored. This study aims to examine the sociological ideas of Sahal Mahfudz in responding to environmental challenges through the institution of *pesantren*. This study employs a qualitative method with a literature review approach, collecting data from Sahal Mahfudz's works related to environmental issues, as well as secondary data from various scholarly literature, articles, and other media sources. Data analysis was conducted using thematic and interpretive analysis techniques. The findings reveal that Sahal Mahfudz integrates Islamic theological principles, such as *khalifah* (stewardship) and *ibadatullah* (worship) with social responsibility, positioning *pesantren* as transformative agents for ecological preservation through tradition, dialogue, and community-based action. The implications of this study highlight the importance of strengthening *pesantren* capacity to foster ecological consciousness and practices, and suggest that *fiqh sosial* can be further developed into an interdisciplinary framework bridging theology, sociology, and environmental studies.

**Keywords:** Islamic Civil Society; Eco-Theology; Social Transformation; Sahal Mahfudz; *Pesantren*

*Pesantren di Indonesia sebagai bagian dari civil society telah berperan dalam menghadapi berbagai isu sosial kontemporer, termasuk masalah lingkungan hidup. Meskipun sejumlah studi telah membahas keterlibatan pesantren dalam isu-isu ekologi, pemikiran Sahal Mahfudz mengenai lingkungan, terutama keterkaitannya dengan konsep fiqh sosial dan praktik ekoteologi Islam, masih jarang dieksplorasi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji ide-ide sosiologis Sahal Mahfudz dalam merespons tantangan lingkungan melalui peran pesantren. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi pustaka, data dikumpulkan dari karya-karya Sahal Mahfudz yang berkaitan dengan lingkungan hidup, serta data sekunder dari berbagai literatur ilmiah, artikel, dan media lainnya. Teknik analisis data menggunakan analisis tematik dan interpretif. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Sahal Mahfudz mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai teologis Islam, seperti konsep khalifah dan ibadatullah dengan tanggung jawab sosial, membentuk pesantren sebagai agen transformasi ekologi berbasis tradisi, dialog, dan aksi komunitas. Implikasi penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya memperkuat kapasitas pesantren dalam membangun kesadaran dan praksis ekologis, serta mendorong pengembangan fiqh sosial sebagai kerangka interdisipliner yang menghubungkan teologi, sosiologi, dan studi lingkungan.*

## A. INTRODUCTION

Various stakeholders including scientists, politicians, international organizations, religious leaders, and civil society have sought solutions to environmental degradation and climate change for years. Today, the world faces a shared crisis: global warming, air pollution, deforestation, ecological destruction, and climate change. These are scientific or political problems and moral and ethical challenges for the global community in caring for the planet (Glaab and Fuchs 2018). Addressing these issues requires technical solutions and ethical and spiritual approaches that resonate across all layers of society. In this context, the role of Faith-Based Actors (FBAs) as part of civil society becomes more pronounced. Religion can serve as a moral foundation for global sustainability, bridging the gap between science and action, and introducing ethical discussions that promote sustainable practices (Glaab and Fuchs 2018). This includes the role of Islamic boarding schools, or *pesantren*, in Indonesia.

As *pesantren* increasingly engage with environmental issues, PPIM-UIN Jakarta has mapped their historical involvement across three distinct phases. The first is the formative phase (1970s–1980s), marked by participatory approaches focused on rural socio-economic challenges outside the *pesantren*. The second is the activist phase (1990–2006), during which *pesantren* began engaging in conservation movements with an external orientation. The third is the programmatic phase (2008–present), characterized by more diverse eco-friendly practices addressing both socio-economic and ecological issues, and increasingly paying attention to internal environmental challenges within the *pesantren* (PPIM UIN Jakarta 2025).

Several studies have examined the role of *pesantren* in environmental issues from theoretical and practical perspectives. These include research on *kiai* and Islamic scholars issuing environmental fatwas (Sobirin and

Khasanah 2023; Mangunjaya and Praharawati 2019), the integration of religious and environmental understanding within *pesantren* (Syukri et al. 2024; Miswar S 2023), the simple, non-consumerist lifestyle of *pesantren* communities (Fikri and Colombijn 2021), environmental education and curriculum development (As'ad and Hakim 2022; Mangunjaya et al. 2008), and the lived experiences of eco-friendly *pesantren* as actors of 'Green Islam' in Indonesia (PPIM UIN Jakarta 2025; Purnomo et al. 2024). However, most of these studies do not explicitly explore the ideas of key *pesantren* figures, particularly K.H. Sahal Mahfudz, in addressing ecological challenges. Moreover, the relationship between his concept of *fiqh sosial* (Islamic social jurisprudence), Islamic eco-theology, and environmentally conscious practices in *pesantren* remains underexplored. Filling this gap is crucial to strengthening both the conceptual foundation and practical role of *pesantren* in advancing environmental sustainability.

As part of civil society, *pesantren* have long addressed contemporary social issues, extending beyond purely religious matters. They are likewise expected to be responsive and adaptive in the environmental domain. Notably, Sahal Mahfudz—a prominent Islamic scholar—has contributed significantly to this discourse since the 1990.

This study explicitly aims to explore the sociological ideas of K.H. Sahal Mahfudz in addressing environmental issues, particularly through the institution of *pesantren*. His thoughts are significant not only in the theoretical realm but also in practical terms, especially regarding the social contributions of *pesantren* in responding to and managing environmental challenges. Therefore, this research seeks to strengthen the position of *pesantren* as agents of change not only in preserving religious traditions but also in engaging with ecological concerns

## B. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research method using a literature review approach. It focuses on exploring the sociological and ecological ideas of K.H. Sahal Mahfudz, particularly within the context of *pesantren* and Islamic environmental thought. The primary data consists of Mahfudz's original writings compiled in *Nuansa Fiqh Sosial* (Mahfudh 2011). Secondary data includes a wide range of literature—scholarly articles, books, videos, and images—to his perspectives on *pesantren* and environmental issues.

To collect the data, the researcher systematically searched for and selected key texts in which K.H. Sahal Mahfudz discusses themes related to ecology, the environment, and the role of *pesantren*. This process involved identifying and categorizing relevant materials to build a coherent understanding of his environmental discourse. Both primary and secondary sources were evaluated to ensure conceptual depth and contextual richness.

For data analysis, this study adopts a thematic analysis strategy. The discussion is organized around three main thematic categories: (1) Sahal Mahfudz's environmental thought, (2) his view of *pesantren* as socio-religious institutions, and (3) the integration of *pesantren* and ecological issues within the framework of *fiqh sosial*. An interpretive content analysis uncovered underlying themes, values, and principles within the texts. The interpretive approach enabled the researcher to link Mahfudz's ideas with broader discourses in Islamic eco-theology and sustainability practices within *pesantren* communities.

## C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 1. *Biography of Sahal Mahfudz*

Sahal Mahfudz was a prominent Islamic scholar from Pati, Central Java, born on February 16, 1933. His full name was Muhammad Ahmad Sahal bin Mahfudz bin Abdus Salam al-Hajini. He was the third son of Mahfudz bin Abdussalam and Badi'ah. Sahal began his religious education at his father's *pesantren* in Kajen, later continuing his studies at various *pesantren* across Java. In 1943, he enrolled at Madrasah Ibtida'iyah Kajen, and by 1950, he pursued further education at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Mathali'ul Falah in Kajen. During the same period, he also took courses in general subjects such as philosophy, English, administration, psychology, and constitutional studies (Aizid 2024).

In 1953, Sahal studied at the Bendo Islamic Boarding School in Pare, Kediri, under the guidance of *Kiai* Muhajir. In 1957, he continued his studies at the Sarang *pesantren* in Rembang with *Kiai* Zubair. He later traveled to Mecca in 1960, studying under the renowned scholar Sheikh Yasin al-Fadani (Mukaffa 2017).

After completing his studies, Sahal began teaching at the Maslakul Huda *pesantren* in Pati in 1963. Prior to that, between 1958 and 1961, he also taught at the Sarang *pesantren* in Rembang. In 1970, he started lecturing in the specialized fiqh program in Kajen. His academic career continued at several institutions: the Faculty of Tarbiyah at Uncok Pati (1974–1976), the Faculty of Sharia at IAIN Walisongo (1982–1985), and as rector of the Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic Institute (INISNU) in Jepara (1989). In addition to teaching, Sahal contributed to various publications, including AULA Magazine (1988–1990) and as a regular columnist for Suara Merdeka newspaper in Semarang (1991) (Aizid 2024).

Beyond his role as an educator and *pesantren* leader, Sahal was active in numerous religious and social organizations, such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). His leadership roles included serving as Secretary of the NU Party Branch in Pati (1967–1975), Deputy Chair of the Ma'arif Education Institute in Pati (1968–1975), Deputy Chair of the Rabitha Maahid Islamiyah in Central Java (1977–1978), Secretary of the NU Executive Board in Central Java (1980–1982), Head of the NU Central Java Regional Board (1982–1985), Rais Syuriyah of the NU Executive Board (1984–1989), Supreme Leader (Rais 'Aam) of the NU Executive Board (1999–2014), and Chairperson of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI, 2000–2014) (Aizid 2024).

Sahal Mahfudz authored several important works, including *Thariqat al-Hushul ila Ghayat al-Usul* (Surabaya: Diantarna, 2000), *Pesantren Mencari Makna* (Jakarta: Pustaka Ciganjur, 1999), *Al-Bayan al-Mulamma'an Alfdz al-Lumd* (Semarang: Thoha Putra, 1999), *Telaah Fiqh Sosial: Dialog dengan KH. MA. Sahal Mahfudh* (Semarang: Suara Merdeka, 1997), *Nuansa Fiqh sosial* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1994), *Ensiklopedi Ijma'* (co-translated with Mustofa Bisri from *Mausu'ah al-Ijma'*) (Jakarta: Pustaka Firdaus, 1987), *Al-Tsamarah al-Hajainiyah* (1961), *Luma' al-Hikmah ila Musalsalat al-Muhimmat* (textbook for Maslakul Huda *pesantren*), and *Al-Faraid al-Ajibah* (Maslakul Huda textbook, 1959) (Fuaidi 2015).

In recognition of his contributions, particularly in Islamic jurisprudence, Sahal received several prestigious awards, including the World Peace Figure Award (1984), Manggala Kencana Class I (1985–1986), the Bintang Maha Putra Utama (2000), and National Unity Figure Award (2002). On June 18, 2004, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University (UIN) Jakarta awarded him an honorary doctorate (Doctor Honoris Causa) in recognition of his work in developing Islamic legal thought and empowering *pesantren* and civil society. His honorary lecture was titled *Fiqh sosial: An Effort to Develop the Qauli and Manhaji Schools of Thought*.

Sahal Mahfudz passed away on Friday, January 24, 2014, at 01:05 AM at his residence in the Maslakul Huda Pesantren complex in Kajen, Pati, Central Java. He was buried in the Syekh Mutamakkin cemetery complex in Kajen, Pati (Habiburrahman 2024).

## ***2. Ecological Thought in Sahal Mahfudz's Fiqh sosial***

Nearly all social problems in society are closely linked to population issues. In Nuansa Fiqh Sosial, Sahal Mahfudz highlights how rapid population growth and uneven distribution can trigger imbalances in education, health, economy, employment, security, religion, and social cohesion. These demographic problems may further lead to structural poverty and environmental degradation. Sahal argues that population growth should be accompanied by the development of human resources and the wise use of natural resources (Mahfudh 2011). Technological and economic progress, and population growth, have long-term negative impacts on environmental quality (Lau et al. 2024).

This aligns with the work of Maureen Cropper and Charles Griffiths, who argue that population growth is strongly correlated with environmental degradation. The increasing population places pressure on natural resources and contributes to deforestation, pollution, and ecological decline. Environmental degradation tends to worsen in low-income countries, while high-income countries may reduce environmental harm through technological improvements and better resource management (Cropper and Griffiths 1994). Sahal emphasizes that poverty is deeply intertwined with environmental issues; when population growth is not matched by human development, it limits individual freedoms and ecological sustainability (Mahfudh 2011).

To address these challenges, Sahal calls for a deeper understanding of nature's place in human life. Humans are granted freedom to study, manage, and utilize nature, but they must do so within the bounds of

moderation without excess or exploitation. Environmental use should reflect the principles of *maslahah* (public interest), *muamalah* (social transaction), and *mu'asyarah* (harmonious coexistence) in sustainable ways (Mahfudh 2011). He draws on Qur'anic guidance, such as Surah Hud verse 6, which affirms that God provides for all living beings and commands humans to develop the earth not destroy it. Sahal states this is a moral imperative, not a license for destruction.

Developing the earth through sustainable practices is part of humanity's *khalifah* (stewards) duty. Humans are not only servants of God but also His representatives on earth, with responsibilities both vertically to God and horizontally to fellow humans and the environment. Sahal identifies two core responsibilities mentioned in the Qur'an: *imaratul ardhi* (earth stewardship) and *ibadatullah* (worship). Stewardship involves sustainable care and governance of the earth, ensuring that natural resources benefit future generations. Conversely, worship includes both *ibadah qashirah* (personal worship) and *ibadah muta'addiyah* (socially-oriented worship). Thus, environmental sustainability becomes a form of religious devotion (Mahfudh 2011).

In his essay *Moral dan Etika Pembangunan*, Sahal explains that humans are equipped with three fundamental capacities: intellect, desire, and emotion. The challenge lies in how well humans can balance these faculties and use them to fulfill their duties on earth. Culture, environment, and religious teachings all shape the use of these capacities. Environmental degradation, Sahal notes, often results from human excess and greed. Mohamad and Ismail (2023) argue that nature was created in perfect form by God, and thus, any damage is not due to inherent flaws in creation but to human exploitation and imbalance.

By properly exercising their intellectual, physical, and emotional faculties, humans can fulfill their role as *khalifah* through sustainable development. Sahal classifies environmental issues into physical and non-



physical domains. From a non-physical perspective, Islam forbids corruption and environmental harm. In *Dakwah untuk Kaum Dhu'afa*, Sahal observes that Muslims are often undergoing a value shift—from Islamic moral values to economic pragmatism—without considering the moral consequences. From a physical lens, Islam teaches that nature should be used wisely, with an eye toward conservation. Resources must not be wasted, but their use must be balanced with preservation (Mahfudh 2011).

Sustainable development must aim to improve the quality of life. This commitment reflects a sense of accountability—to God, to the state, and to society. Both duties of *imaratul ardhi* and *ibadatullah* are interconnected and inseparable. Together, they contribute to the Islamic goal of *sa'adatuddarain*, or well-being in both this life and the hereafter (Mahfudh 2011). Islam categorizes human needs into *dharuriyyat* (primary needs) and *hajiyyat* (secondary needs). While difficult to quantify, both serve individual, communal, and spiritual interests. Worldly and spiritual needs are not mutually exclusive; spiritual fulfillment requires material means (Mahfudh 2011). Sahal also stresses two essential human strengths in reaching life's purpose: *quwwah nadzhariyyah* (intellectual capacity) and *quwwah 'amaliyah* (practical ability)—both crucial in fulfilling divine obligations.

However, despite being entrusted as stewards, humans remain the primary agents of environmental destruction. Andrew E. Dessler (2012) notes that natural factors such as continental drift and solar radiation play only minor roles in climate change; anthropogenic activities, especially greenhouse gas emissions, are far more significant. Many Muslim-majority developing countries prioritize economic growth and national security over environmental protection. Hojjat Salimi Turkamani argues that these nations, shaped by colonial legacies, often retain exploitative approaches to natural resources. A national survey by PPIM UIN Jakarta in Indonesia reveals that environmental issues rank low among public concerns. While

crime, health, and corruption dominate public discourse, climate change and pollution are ranked seventh and eighth respectively (PPIM UIN Jakarta 2024). Although *khalifah* is frequently cited, it often remains normative and lacks practical implementation or accountability mechanisms.

Sahal offers two key solutions. The first is education. Islamic law (sharia) is deeply connected to social issues because it governs not only human relationships with God but also with each other and nature. Holistic Islamic education includes the elements of *iman* (faith), *Islam* (practice), and *ihsan* (ethics/spirituality). This integrated approach promotes spiritual and physical well-being, at the individual and communal levels (Mahfudh 2011).

Three reasons explain why education is essential in addressing environmental degradation and climate change. First, education is universal and influences behaviors, values, and norms. Environmental education, particularly in schools, has the potential to reach youth at critical stages of development. Second, the scale and reach of the educational system allow for testing and implementing sustainable solutions. Third, education's interdisciplinary nature makes it uniquely suited to address complex socio-ecological challenges (Leal Filho et al. 2023). This applies especially to institutions like *pesantren*, where students live under continuous guidance. Their immersive environment makes *pesantren* ideal candidates to act as agents of environmental stewardship.

However, education in Indonesia has not yet become an effective vehicle for environmental awareness. Several factors contribute to this, including low public participation, limited understanding among educators, weak governmental policy, poor infrastructure, budget constraints, and weak institutional coordination (Kospa 2021). These challenges further hinder educational institutions from playing a significant role in environmental preservation.

The second solution Sahal proposes is rooted in Islam. This tradition offers ethical and humanitarian values that align with sustainable development. Jose Casanova suggests that religion has not been privatized in the public sphere; rather, it continues to act as a powerful force in society (Glaab and Fuchs 2018). This opens space for Islam to serve as a source of personal morality and a transformative force in environmental policy and sustainability discourse.

In the social dimension, Islam governs human relationships vertically with God, horizontally with others, and harmoniously with nature. Its principle of *muamalah* offers a normative critique of both capitalism and socialism. This manifests through *mu'asyarah*, which guides interaction within social structures (Mahfudh 2011). However, Sahal argues that Islam must not remain at the level of abstract norms. Religious leaders, especially in *pesantren*, should actively engage in environmental issues, ensuring that the values of balance and harmony are preached and practiced.

### ***3. Pesantren as Environmental Actors***

Since their inception, *pesantren* have played a vital role in serving society—not only education but also in social, economic, and other domains. As deeply rooted Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, *pesantren* hold great potential as agents of change in addressing environmental issues. As institutions that serve as centers of moral and character development, *pesantren* are well-positioned to promote environmental preservation and ecological awareness among *santri* and the surrounding community. Beyond religious instruction, *pesantren* also can integrate environmental education into their curricula, while modeling environmentally conscious practices in daily life. An approach grounded

in Islamic values can effectively convey the moral responsibility of safeguarding nature as a divine trust.

*a. The Dual Role of Pesantren in Ecological Issues*

According to Sahal Mahfudz, *pesantren* hold a dual role. In addition to serving as religious educational institutions that cultivate knowledge and reasoning as sources of Islamic values, *pesantren* also mobilize communities to pursue both mental and physical development while contributing to environmental stewardship. Sahal proposes two approaches that *pesantren* can adopt in this regard: the project-based approach and the motivational approach. The motivational approach is rooted in the traditional *pesantren* educational model. When implemented systematically, this approach can generate widespread benefits. By involving *pesantren* in environmental education, students and communities can understand the impact of ecological issues on both worldly life and the hereafter and actively contribute to sustainable development (Mahfudh 2014).

Through this dual role and the approaches suggested by Sahal Mahfudz, *pesantren* possess significant potential to become key actors in environmental development. This idea offers a crucial foundation for understanding how *pesantren* can operate as centers of religious education and socio-religious institutions capable of fostering transformation within society. Therefore, it is essential to further examine the role of *pesantren* through these two primary dimensions: as educational institutions and as socio-religious actors.

*b. Integrating Islamic Values with Ecological Awareness in Pesantren*

As the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, *pesantren* not only preserve a rich intellectual heritage but also exhibit a social adaptability that enables them to respond to contemporary

challenges, including the ecological crisis. In this context, *pesantren* hold great potential as spaces for transforming ecological awareness—at the level of discourse, actors, and institutional frameworks.

One important element in this transformation is the role of classical Islamic texts or *kitab kuning*. *Pesantren* often refer to these texts to address diverse issues. According to Sahal Mahfudz, this reliance tends to create a legalistic approach to religion. As religious leaders, *pesantren* ulama serves as community reference points for legitimizing actions, particularly concerning innovation or contemporary relevance (Mahfudh 2011). These scholars are generally fiqh-oriented, interpreting social realities in binary terms—halal or haram, right or wrong—based on Islamic jurisprudence. In environmental matters, their role involves offering religious legal justifications, although many have not yet devoted significant attention to this issue.

Sahal notes this gap in his essay *Dakwah untuk Kaum Dhu'afa*:

“So far, Islamic study circles seem to have avoided such issues, remaining focused on moral and ethical matters. However, I don’t blame the *ulama*. Often, miscommunication between scholars and authorities leads to this oversight. Environmental concerns are rarely brought to the attention of the *ulama*. When scholars appear indifferent, it is often due to lack of information. If they were aware, they would participate willingly. This is why communication and dissemination of environmental issues must be strengthened.” (Sahal 1994)

In recent years, *ulama* has become more engaged in environmental matters. Research has documented seven fatwas issued by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) on environmental concerns (Mangunjaya and Praharawati 2019), recommendations to involve *pesantren* scholars in climate advocacy (Mangunjaya et al. 2008), as well as detailed guides and religious rulings on ecology and climate (Mufid 2020; Sobirin and Khasanah 2023). Scholars also identify *pesantren* as models of ‘Green Islam’ (Fikri and Colombijn 2021).

Martin van Bruinessen (2012) describes the teaching of *kitab kuning* in *pesantren* as a 'great tradition', transmitted through generations of *kiai* to students (*santri*) with strict adherence to intellectual lineage (*sanad*). These texts shape theological knowledge and the worldview of the *pesantren* community. Drawing from Berger and Luckmann's theory of knowledge, the *pesantren*'s epistemic culture reflects a dialectic process of externalization and internalization: texts express the values and norms of prior generations, while students repeatedly study, memorize, internalize, and practice these teachings in everyday life (Berger & Luckmann 1966). This process renders *Kitab Kuning* not just a religious reference, but a source of worldview that shapes a practical and discursive consciousness responsive to social issues such as environmental crises.

Sahal argues that these texts should serve as a foundational tool for addressing ritual and social matters. Interpretation of *kitab kuning* must evolve through contextual *munazharah* (deliberative debate), especially in events like *bahtsul masail*. By integrating interdisciplinary perspectives, *pesantren* can make their classical texts speak to contemporary global challenges. This approach counters critiques of *kitab kuning* as static or inflexible (Van Bruinessen 2012).

*Santri*, too, plays a vital role as an agent of social change. Sahal describes students as individuals with two key dimensions: personal and social. On the individual level, *pesantren* aims to cultivate students who are both spiritually devout (*akram*) and socially competent (*shalih*) (Mahfudh 2011). This includes equipping them with environmental knowledge, such as water and energy conservation and waste management.

On the social level, *santri* are expected to fulfill their duties as *khalifatullah* on Earth. Recalling the dual human responsibilities – *imaratul ardhi* (earth stewardship) and *ibadatullah* (worship) – Sahal sees *pesantren* as responsible for preserving this mission. In this view, caring for the Earth and managing its resources wisely are integral to human happiness in both

worlds. Giddens' structuration theory reinforces this perspective: *santri* are not passive recipients but active agents shaped by—and shaping—the *pesantren* structure (Chatterjee et al. 2019).

In addition, *pesantren* must develop knowledge systems that meet the demands of the modern era without abandoning religious foundations. Moral detachment from economic growth has fueled individualism and consumerism in a rapidly changing society. In response, *pesantren* must engage critically with these dynamics—reproducing, modifying, or even resisting them as needed.

*Pesantren*-based higher education institutions, particularly, are expected to align Islamic sciences with contemporary challenges. This requires integrating cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains, so students not only master Islamic knowledge but also embody and apply it. Abdullah (2015) noted, interdisciplinary integration is necessary to equip students with the skills and sensitivity to respond to social and environmental change.

Safradji (2019) identifies three strategies for *pesantren* universities to stay relevant: first, integrating cognitive, affective, and psychomotor approaches to develop not just intellectual understanding but also practical environmental engagement; second, incorporating rational, ethical, and transcendental dimensions in education to promote both logical and spiritual responsibility; third, embracing interdisciplinary Islamic studies to address complex ecological problems. These strategies enable *pesantren* to transmit knowledge and function as social change agents that promote ecological consciousness.

Lastly, universities can research environmental issues, such as Islamic environmental ethics, *pesantren*-based waste and water management, renewable energy trials, and community outreach on sustainability. Through these initiatives, *pesantren* contribute meaningfully to environmental preservation while remaining rooted in Islamic values.

c. *Pesantren as Socio-Religious Institutions*

In addition to their role as educational institutions, *pesantren* also function as socio-religious institutions. Since their establishment, *pesantren* have been closely engaged with the daily lives of surrounding communities. Over time, their role has extended beyond religious instruction (*tafaqquh fiddin*) to include developing of students' practical skills and efforts to improve the livelihoods of local communities (Asrol, Hesthria, & Rizki 2023).

In several of his writings, Sahal Mahfudz discusses the relationship between *pesantren* and surrounding communities. From the beginning, *pesantren* have been in continuous dialogue with their environments. Their strong standing within society prevents them from remaining isolated or exclusive. Sahal likens their foundational philosophy to the idea of a marketplace, where various actors interact and co-create shared space. This reflects the dynamic and ongoing dialogue between *pesantren* and the social world around them (Mahfudh 2011). As educational institutions, *pesantren* foster dialectical relationships with society based on Islamic values, tolerance, mutual respect, and learning. Through processes of social transformation, *pesantren* evolve as integrated institutions with significant influence on their local communities (Subakri and Mangkachi 2021).

The *kiai* shapes the growth and the development of *pesantren* as moral leaders and role models for both students and the community. Each *kiai* brings a unique social-historical background, including life experience, social and cultural knowledge, education, and interpersonal networks. These factors dynamically shape each *pesantren*'s engagement with its environment and contribute to the evolution of social knowledge (Yusuf & Taufiq 2020). Using Anthony Giddens' theory of structure and agency, both the *kiai* and the *pesantren* can be viewed as social agents—actors who make conscious choices and possess the capacity to respond to their social



surroundings (Chatterjee et al. 2019). They actively make decisions, exert influence, and bring about change.

For example, in many rural areas, communities near *pesantren* face complex challenges, such as low incomes, limited access to education, and barriers to basic rights—especially when facing powerful institutions like the state. While such conditions are often normalized, they still demand attention. This is where the role of *pesantren* leaders becomes critical, as they offer moral and practical support to address these issues (Mahfudh 2011). This illustrates how *pesantren* serve symbolic religious functions and operate as structural alternatives in the face of state absence.

In the environmental context, this role has been exemplified by Annuqoyyah Islamic Boarding School in Sumenep, Madura. The school succeeded in significantly improving groundwater access in arid lands through reforestation. Within two years, students and local community members planted 500 turi trees, 500 kapok trees, 1,500 Lamtoro Gung Trees, and 200 acacia trees across household yards in Guluk-Guluk Village (Malik and Nafi' 2019). Here, students acted as conscious environmental agents, engaging in ecological preservation as both an act of worship (*ibadah*) and social responsibility (*hablun min al-'alam*) (Usia 2023). These actions reflect both practical and discursive environmental awareness: the former seen in tangible activities like tree planting, and the latter in the students' understanding that environmental care is integral to Islamic teaching.

As socio-religious institutions, *pesantren* have increasingly embraced environmental advocacy through programs such as *Pesantren Hijau* (Green *Pesantren*). These initiatives have been implemented by government bodies—such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Environment—and civil society organizations like NU and Muhammadiyah. In 2008, the Ministry of Religious Affairs launched the *eco-pesantren* program, while the Ministry of Environment issued specific guidelines for implementation. These include:

1. Raising awareness that Islamic teachings provide essential guidance for environmentally responsible behavior;
2. Practicing these teachings in daily activities;
3. Integrating environmental topics into religious forums and learning spaces;
4. Creating clean, healthy, and organized *pesantren* environments;
5. Empowering *pesantren* communities to enhance environmental quality based on the Qur'an and Sunnah;
6. Promoting economic, social, and ecological activities with added value; and
7. Establishing *pesantren* as environmentally conscious centers of excellence (Ministry of Environment 2008). In parallel, NU's environmental program promotes *Pesantren Hijau*, while Muhammadiyah has developed the *Green Pesantren* initiative.

Sahal draws inspiration from Soedjatmoko's reflections on the social role of religious education. He notes:

"1) *Pesantren* can adapt to social changes because their vision, orientation, and programs are directed toward uplifting surrounding communities. Their concern for social issues enables them to guide community development in social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions—offering real solutions rather than simply issuing halal-haram judgments. 2) *Pesantren* function as social laboratories, facilitating grassroots groups in areas such as small-scale commerce, artisan work, nutrition, water use, health, learning, and women's productivity" (Mahfudh 2011).

The first step in addressing environmental challenges is educating students and local communities about environmental problems and their impacts on health, economics, and sustainability (Mahfudh 2011). *Pesantren* can incorporate environmental education into their curricula, embedding early awareness about ecological responsibility. Through a religious lens, they can promote shared understanding grounded in Islamic values and

motivate communities to care for the earth as a divine mandate. This collective vision empowers *pesantren* to independently develop localized environmental solutions—such as tree planting, waste management, and renewable energy—based on their available resources.

As part of civil society, *pesantren* thus operate as centers of Islamic education as catalysts for sustainable environmental change. They serve not merely as religious institutions, but also as dynamic social agents—capable of addressing ecological crises by mobilizing religious values, community strength, and structural awareness.

#### **4. Challenges in Implementing the Thought of Sahal Mahfudz**

Sahal Mahfudz's vision of positioning *pesantren* as environmental agents reflects a forward-thinking framework that combines the theological responsibility of humankind as stewards (*khalifah*) of the earth with the act of worship to God. He emphasized that environmental preservation is not merely a social obligation but an essential component of Islamic teachings. However, implementing this vision frequently encounters structural and cultural barriers that are far from simple. For this reason, a deeper analysis is needed to identify the gaps in environmental practices and propose concrete steps to enhance the role of *pesantren* as drivers of ecological transformation. *Fiqh Sosial* has become an influential reference for Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) communities in approaching environmental issues (Ma'rufah 2024).

An assessment of the practical implementation of Sahal's ideas requires an examination of the diverse challenges *pesantren* face as socio-religious institutions shaped by evolving social, political, and economic dynamics. NU, a major Islamic organization overseeing numerous *pesantren* across Indonesia, launched the *Pesantren Hijau* (Green *Pesantren*) program. Initially, seven *pesantren* were selected as pilot projects (Majalah Risalah NU, 2023). However, after a few training rounds, the program stalled and

failed to expand beyond its initial scope. Beyond sustainability challenges, the program also depended on collaboration with Bank Mega, highlighting funding limitations and overreliance on external partners as significant obstacles to long-term success (Ma'rufah 2024).

Additional barriers include the inability of many *pesantren* to fully integrate environmental values into their educational systems and daily activities, limited resources, low levels of ecological literacy, and a lack of institutional policies that support environmental engagement. These factors significantly hinder the implementation of Sahal Mahfudz's vision of *pesantren* as responsive agents to ecological concerns—both as centers of education and as socio-religious institutions.

In response to these challenges, several strategic pathways may be considered. One potential strategy involves strengthening the role of religious organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah as mediators between *pesantren* and other key stakeholders, including the government and the private sector to foster collaborative environmental initiatives. These could include solar panel installations, training in waste management, reforestation efforts around *pesantren*, improving poor sanitation systems, and empowering surrounding communities to participate in environmental protection efforts.

Regarding financial constraints, collaborations with third parties may serve as an initial stepping stone, followed by the development of circular economic practices within *pesantren*, such as generating revenue through waste management enterprises. To overcome knowledge gaps in ecological awareness, *pesantren* can partner with academic institutions, government agencies, or environmental experts to gain relevant insights and skills.

In this way, Sahal Mahfudz's ecological framework need not remain purely normative—it can be translated into practice. By openly addressing these challenges, *pesantren* can gradually move from normative

discourse to concrete social praxis, which is in line with the spirit of *Fiqh sosial* envisioned by Sahal Mahfudz. This transformation ensures that *pesantren* do not merely teach values of environmental stewardship but actively embody them as agents of sustainable social change.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

This study has highlighted Sahal Mahfudz's sociological ideas on environmental responsibility, particularly his vision of *pesantren* as transformative agents in ecological preservation. His thought integrates Islamic theological foundations—such as *khalifah* (stewardship) and *ibadatullah* (worship)—with social responsibility, positioning environmental care as both a spiritual obligation and a civic duty. Through his framework of *Fiqh sosial*, Sahal offers a nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness between religious values, community empowerment, and environmental sustainability. Sociologically, his ideas reflect a model of agency rooted in Islamic ethics that challenges the structural limitations of state institutions and dominant economic systems. *Pesantren* In this context, *pesantren* are envisioned not only as educational centers but as living communities capable of fostering practical ecological awareness through tradition, dialogue, and grassroots action.

Based on these findings, we can reflect on the significant role that religious institutions play in cultivating sustainability practices and ecological consciousness at the grassroots level. Rather than viewing environmental degradation solely through scientific or policy frameworks, this study emphasizes the cultural and moral agency of actors like *pesantren*, who translate faith-based teachings into concrete environmental action. The transformation of religious knowledge into ecological habitus demonstrates how contextualized religious discourse can serve as a powerful catalyst for behavioral change. It also suggests that sustainable ecological practices in

Muslim societies thrive best when grounded in tradition, driven by local leadership, and supported through holistic education.

These findings carry important implications for both environmental policy and religious pedagogy. First, stakeholders—from government institutions to civil society and religious organizations—should prioritize collaborative capacity-building programs that enable *pesantren* to implement green initiatives. Second, Islamic education should evolve to incorporate environmental values as ethical imperatives and actionable knowledge. Lastly, future research should continue to explore how Sahal Mahfudz's *Fiqh Sosial* can be developed into an interdisciplinary framework that bridges theology, sociology, and environmental studies. In doing so, we pave the way for a grounded, tradition-informed, yet progressive model of Islamic environmentalism.

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