

REVIEW ARTICLE

From Islamic values to sustainable practice: Rethinking leadership in Islamic educational institutions

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Received:	Revised 1:	Accepted:	Published:
22 June 2026	23 September 2026	28 September 2026	3 October 2026

ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study examines how sustainability, particularly in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is conceptualized and institutionalized within Islamic educational institutions.

Method – Using a systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA framework, this study analyzes 36 scholarly studies selected through a structured screening process. Four additional foundational sources were used only for theoretical and contextual interpretation and were not counted in the PRISMA synthesis.

Findings – The findings reveal that sustainability is not achieved through isolated initiatives but emerges from the integration of three key dimensions: educational leadership, Islamic ethical values, and institutional practices. Educational leadership encompassing transformational, distributed, instructional, and relational approaches functions as the primary driver of institutional change. Islamic ethical values, particularly *amanah*, *shura*, and *khilafah*, provide the normative foundation that guides and legitimizes sustainability-oriented actions. These dimensions are operationalized through institutional mechanisms, including curriculum integration, sustainable campus practices, community engagement, and capacity building. The study further proposes a conceptual framework that explains the dynamic interaction between leadership, values, and institutional practices in producing sustainability outcomes aligned with SDGs, such as educational quality, environmental responsibility, and social inclusion.

Implication – The findings also highlight the importance of contextual enablers, including governance, resources, stakeholder engagement, and technological readiness, in shaping the effectiveness of sustainability implementation. The novelty of this study lies in integrating leadership models, Islamic ethical values, institutional mechanisms, and contextual enablers within a single mechanism-based framework, rather than treating these dimensions as separate strands of analysis. However, the evidence base remains limited by contextual concentration and methodological constraints. Future research is recommended to empirically test the proposed framework across diverse settings using longitudinal and mixed-method approaches.

Keywords – Educational leadership; Islamic education; Islamic values; SDGs; sustainability.

How to cite:

Husnayain, M. F., Bahri, S., Andayani, E., & Hanim, S. A. (2026). From Islamic values to sustainable practice: Rethinking leadership in Islamic educational institutions. *Indonesian Journal of Educational Management and Leadership*, 4(2). 381-394. <https://doi.org/10.51214/ijemal.v4i2.2072>

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic educational institutions, including madrasas, pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), and Islamic schools, continue to occupy a formative role in moral formation, cultural reproduction, and human-capital development across Muslim societies. These institutions are not merely transmitters of religious knowledge; they are embedded social organizations that mediate community norms, local governance, and social capital. Yet the accelerating pressures of technological change, environmental crises, and widening inequality subject these institutions to new functional expectations: they are now asked to contribute demonstrably to national and global sustainability agendas while retaining religious legitimacy and pedagogical distinctiveness ([Desmaniar et al., 2022](#); [Wajid, 2025](#)). This dual demand responsiveness to global norms and fidelity to local religious frameworks creates a practical and theoretical tension that current scholarship has only begun to unpack.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and SDG 4 in particular, reframe education as an instrument of inclusive and transformative change, positioning schools and universities as strategic actors in societal transitions ([Elamin, 2025](#); [Wajid, 2025](#)). Recent empirical work shows that educational institutions can advance sustainability through curricular innovation, campus practices, and community engagement; however, the effectiveness and scalability of such initiatives vary widely ([Gayatri et al., 2023](#); [Rosliani et al., 2025](#)). In Islamic education contexts, promising models such as eco-pesantren and ESD-infused curricula illustrate how religious ethics and local wisdom can be mobilized to foster pro-environmental behavior and community participation ([Bintang Kejora et al., 2025](#); [Hermawansyah, 2025](#)). These findings confirm potential convergence between Islamic normative resources and SDG aims, but they also expose uneven institutionalization: many programs remain pilot-level, episodic, or dependent on charismatic individuals rather than embedded in governance structures ([Rosliani et al., 2025](#); [Sarhindi, 2026](#)).

This unevenness points directly to leadership and governance as the linchpin of sustainable institutional transformation. Contemporary educational leadership scholarship suggests that translating policy aims into sustained organizational change depends less on isolated programs than on leadership that cultivates shared vision, builds professional capacity, and aligns structures and incentives. [Fullan \(2020\)](#) emphasizes moral purpose and change leadership; [Leithwood et al. \(2020\)](#) highlight collective leadership and system-level capacity; and [Hallinger \(2018\)](#) demonstrates the importance of context in translating leadership into school improvement ([Fullan, 2020](#); [Hallinger, 2018](#); [Leithwood et al., 2020](#)). Translating these insights to Islamic education raises two analytic questions: which leadership models are compatible with Islamic normative frames, and how do such models operate within the resource and governance constraints typical of madrasas and pesantren?

Critically, existing studies on Islamic education and sustainability tend to focus on descriptive reports of initiatives or on normative arguments about compatibility with

Islamic ethics (Desmaniar et al., 2022; Husna & Adrian, 2025). Fewer studies systematically examine leadership processes decision-making, capacity development, and policy alignment that convert episodic projects into institutional practice. Where leadership is discussed, it is often treated as a background variable rather than as an explicated mechanism linking SDG objectives to institutional outcomes. This gap leaves practitioners with limited guidance on how to embed sustainability into curricula, assessment, campus operations, and community engagement in ways that can withstand leadership turnover, resource constraints, and competing curricular priorities (Abdullah et al., 2026; Hermawansyah, 2025).

Against this backdrop, the present study positions educational leadership as the central analytic lens for understanding how Islamic educational institutions can institutionalize SDG-oriented practices. Rather than cataloguing individual initiatives, the review maps transformational, distributed/collective, instructional, and values-based leadership onto the governance, cultural, and resource realities of Islamic education. It therefore seeks to identify the organizational mechanisms through which leadership can convert sustainability aspirations into durable curricular, operational, and community practices while remaining grounded in Islamic ethical vocabularies such as amanah, khilafah, and shura (Abdullah et al., 2026; Bintang Kejora et al., 2025; Rosliani et al., 2025).

The novelty of this study lies in integrating four elements that are commonly examined separately educational leadership, Islamic ethical values, institutional mechanisms, and contextual enablers into a single explanatory framework for SDG institutionalization. In this framework, leadership operates as the catalyst for change, Islamic values provide normative direction and legitimacy, institutional mechanisms translate those commitments into organizational routines, and governance, resources, stakeholder engagement, and technological readiness condition the continuity of implementation. This mechanism-based synthesis extends descriptive accounts by specifying how sustainability becomes embedded in Islamic educational institutions and by generating a framework that can be empirically tested in future research.

METHOD

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) combined with a conceptual framework approach to examine the role of educational leadership in institutionalizing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within Islamic educational institutions. The SLR followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency and methodological rigor.

The literature search was conducted using Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for publications from 2016 to 2026. Search strings combined terms such as "educational leadership," "Islamic education," "SDGs," and "education for sustainable development," with Boolean combinations adapted to each database. The PRISMA-screened corpus was distinguished from supporting theory: four foundational/contextual sources (Fullan, 2020; Hallinger, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020; Tikly, 2019) were used only to

interpret the findings and were not counted among the 36 studies included in the qualitative synthesis.

A total of 156 records were identified, consisting of 142 records from database searches and 14 records from additional sources. After removing 38 duplicates, 118 records were screened based on titles and abstracts. Of these, 66 records were excluded because they were not aligned with the Islamic education context, SDG/ESD focus, or leadership-related scope. The remaining 52 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, and 16 studies were excluded due to limited relevance, insufficient academic rigor, or weak theoretical contribution. Ultimately, 36 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis.

Eligibility was determined by relevance to the intersecting domains of educational leadership or institutional governance, Islamic education or faith-informed institutional contexts, and sustainability, SDGs, or education for sustainable development. Studies were retained when they directly addressed at least two of these domains or provided transferable evidence on a leadership or sustainability mechanism explicitly used in the synthesis. Only scholarly publications with sufficient methodological or theoretical clarity were included. Screening was conducted in two stages: title and abstract screening followed by full-text assessment.

Data extraction used a structured matrix recording author and year, context, study focus, methodology, key findings, and relevance to the proposed framework (Appendix Table 1). Thematic synthesis involved coding recurring patterns and grouping them into three analytical domains: leadership models, Islamic ethical values, and mechanisms of SDG integration. Contextual enablers including governance, resources, stakeholder engagement, and technological readiness were coded across themes rather than treated as a mutually exclusive category.

Based on the synthesis, a conceptual framework was developed to explain the relationships between leadership, Islamic values, and sustainability practices. This approach enables the study to move beyond descriptive analysis by providing a structured theoretical explanation of how SDGs can be institutionalized in Islamic educational settings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

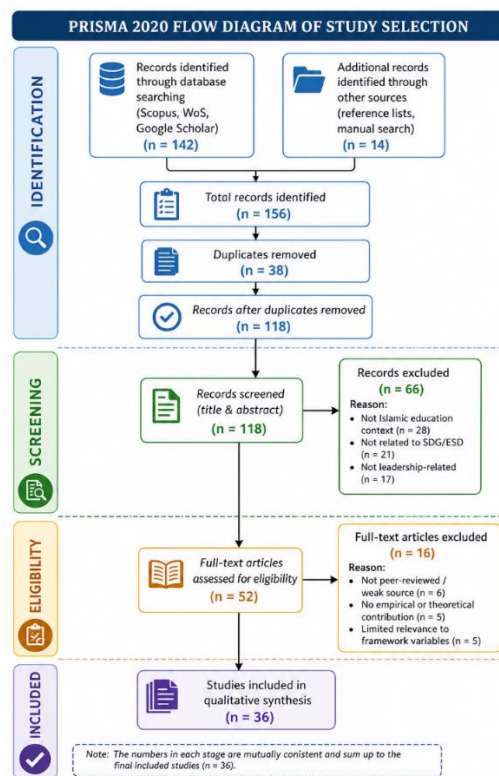
The study selection process followed the PRISMA framework (Figure 1). A total of 156 records were identified, including 142 from database searches and 14 from additional sources. After removing 38 duplicates, 118 records were screened, resulting in the exclusion of 66 studies. The remaining 52 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, leading to the exclusion of 16 studies due to limited relevance or insufficient academic rigor.

Ultimately, 36 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis. The PRISMA synthesis corpus spans 2020-2026; earlier foundational sources were used only as theoretical or contextual anchors and were not counted in the PRISMA total. The included

studies show a strong concentration in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, while also drawing on evidence from other educational and institutional contexts relevant to the proposed framework.

The findings presented in this section are derived from the systematic analysis of 36 selected studies, following the PRISMA-guided review process described in the methodology. Using the structured extraction matrix and thematic synthesis, the reviewed studies were categorized into three major themes: (1) leadership models, (2) Islamic ethical values, and (3) mechanisms of SDG integration. Approximately 64% of the studies address leadership, about 47% address sustainability/SDG-related issues, and about 33% explicitly integrate both dimensions. Because thematic coding was non-mutually exclusive, individual studies could contribute to more than one theme. This pattern provides the empirical basis for the discussion and development of the proposed conceptual framework.

Figure 1.
PRISMA Framework



Discussion

Leadership Models as Drivers of Sustainable Institutional Change

The findings of this systematic review, based on the analysis of 36 selected studies, consistently position educational leadership as the primary driver of SDG-oriented transformation in Islamic educational institutions. This is evident from the thematic distribution identified in the results, where 23 studies ($\approx 64\%$) focus on leadership, indicating its dominance within the literature (E-sor & Ishaque, 2025; Lubguban Jr. & Bayot, 2025; Sappayani, 2025).

Among the identified models, transformational leadership emerges as the most prominent, appearing in the majority of studies. This dominance suggests that leadership oriented toward vision-building, stakeholder motivation, and innovation is central to institutional change (Kausar et al., 2025; Sugito, 2025). These findings are consistent with established theoretical perspectives emphasizing the importance of moral purpose and strategic direction in educational transformation (Fullan, 2020). Empirical evidence further confirms that transformational leadership enhances institutional performance by strengthening vision alignment, stakeholder engagement, and innovation capacity (Buchori et al., 2024; Etomes et al., 2025; Suratman et al., 2025).

However, the findings also reveal a critical limitation. Evidence from the reviewed studies indicates that leadership alone is insufficient to ensure sustainability outcomes. While Islamic leadership contributes to ethical and learning environments, it does not directly translate into measurable sustainability outcomes without supporting institutional systems such as curriculum integration and governance structures (Abdullah et al., 2026; Rosliani et al., 2025). This highlights a structural gap between leadership intent and institutional realization.

To address this limitation, the literature increasingly emphasizes distributed leadership, identified across a substantial portion of the reviewed studies, as a complementary approach. Distributed leadership promotes shared responsibility, participatory decision-making, and collaborative problem-solving, thereby enhancing institutional resilience (Zhang et al., 2025). This finding is consistent with theoretical perspectives suggesting that collective leadership improves institutional adaptability and long-term sustainability (Leithwood et al., 2020).

In addition, instructional and values-based leadership plays a critical role in aligning curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional goals with sustainability principles. Within Islamic educational contexts, this alignment is particularly significant, as educational practices must simultaneously respond to global sustainability challenges and remain grounded in religious values. Emerging perspectives such as caring and relational leadership further strengthen this dynamic by fostering supportive academic environments and enhancing institutional culture (Walid et al., 2025). These findings indicate that leadership should be conceptualized as a multi-dimensional and systemic construct, where transformational, distributed, instructional, and relational approaches interact to drive sustainable institutional change.

Islamic Ethical Values as Normative Foundations

The second major theme emerging from the analysis is the role of Islamic ethical values as the normative foundation of sustainability-oriented leadership. Across the reviewed studies, core values such as amanah (trust and responsibility), shura (consultation), and khilafah (stewardship) are consistently identified as guiding principles (Hanif et al., 2025; Khaeroni et al., 2025).

The principle of amanah reinforces accountability and ethical responsibility, aligning closely with sustainability principles such as transparency and responsible governance

(Khaeroni et al., 2025). Similarly, shura promotes participatory governance, which enhances stakeholder engagement and collective ownership of sustainability initiatives (Hanif et al., 2025; Sarhindi, 2026). Meanwhile, khilafah provides a theological foundation for environmental sustainability by framing humans as stewards of the earth, which is operationalized in eco-Islamic education practices and sustainability-oriented institutional programs (D. Irawan et al., 2024; Megasari et al., 2025).

These findings are further reinforced by interdisciplinary research demonstrating that Islamic ethical frameworks align strongly with sustainability principles, particularly in promoting justice (adl), balance (mizan), and environmental responsibility (Husna & Adrian, 2025; Moge et al., 2025). However, the analysis also reveals a significant gap. Several studies indicate that Islamic ethical values are often articulated at the conceptual level but are not consistently translated into institutional practices or measurable outcomes (Abdullah et al., 2026). This suggests that values alone are insufficient unless operationalized through leadership practices and institutional mechanisms. Therefore, Islamic values should be understood as a normative layer within a broader institutional system, where their effectiveness depends on how they are embedded into governance, curriculum, and organizational routines.

Mechanisms of SDG Integration in Institutional Practices

The synthesis identifies four primary mechanisms through which leadership and ethical values are translated into institutional practices: curriculum integration, sustainable campus management, community engagement, and capacity building. Among these, curriculum integration emerges as the most consistently supported mechanism, as evidenced by multiple systematic reviews and empirical studies (Peng et al., 2024; Thoriq & Mahmudah, 2023). Integrating SDG-related themes into teaching materials, learning activities, and assessment systems significantly enhances students' sustainability competencies and institutional relevance (Abdullah et al., 2026). Related research also shows that curriculum transformation and ICT-supported blended learning can function as institutional vehicles for embedding broader social and sustainability goals in educational practice (Gayatri et al., 2023; Listrianti & Mundiri, 2020). Additionally, pedagogical approaches such as STEM-based sustainability education further strengthen critical thinking and problem-solving skills in addressing real-world sustainability challenges (AlAli et al., 2023; Luthfia, 2025).

However, the literature consistently shows that curriculum integration alone is insufficient. Sustainability becomes institutionalized only when supported by broader organizational practices. Evidence from eco-pesantren and environmentally oriented institutions demonstrates that sustainability is embedded through curriculum, institutional culture, campus management, ecological practices, and local-wisdom-based participation (Bintang Kejora et al., 2025; Ferdinan et al., 2026; Hermawansyah, 2025; B. Irawan, 2022). Community engagement further extends the impact of sustainability initiatives. The reviewed studies show that partnerships with local communities, government agencies, and civil society organizations enhance institutional relevance and scalability (Efendi et al., 2026; Lubguban Jr. & Bauyot, 2025; Wajid, 2025). These findings emphasize that

sustainability is more effective when embedded within broader social and governance systems.

Capacity building and institutional learning are identified as critical enabling mechanisms. Leadership that invests in professional development, digital readiness, and organizational learning creates a supportive environment for continuous improvement (Agus R. & Muslim, 2026; Ferianto et al., 2025). Without such investments, sustainability initiatives tend to remain fragmented and dependent on individual actors. At a broader institutional level, evidence on religion and social capital also shows that moral norms become more consequential when they are connected to civic engagement and administrative pathways (Sumi et al., 2025). Sustainability is therefore achieved through the interaction of multiple institutional mechanisms rather than a single intervention.

Conceptual Framework

This study advances a conceptual framework that explains the institutionalization of sustainability within Islamic educational settings as a relational and multi-layered process. Rather than viewing sustainability as the outcome of discrete interventions, the framework conceptualizes it as the product of continuous interaction among leadership practices, ethical value systems, and institutional mechanisms.

At its core, educational leadership is positioned as the primary catalyst of institutional transformation. The synthesis of the reviewed studies indicates that leadership not only determines strategic direction but also shapes organizational culture, governance orientation, and the capacity for innovation. Importantly, leadership is understood as a composite construct, encompassing transformational, distributed, instructional, and relational dimensions. These dimensions operate in a complementary manner, enabling institutions to initiate change, distribute agency across organizational actors, align pedagogical processes, and sustain collective commitment over time (Etomes et al., 2025; Sugito, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025).

The framework further posits that the influence of leadership is normatively conditioned by Islamic ethical values, which function as an interpretive and legitimizing foundation. Principles such as amanah, shura, and khilafah provide a moral architecture through which institutional priorities are defined and enacted. In this sense, ethical values do not merely accompany leadership; rather, they mediate and orient leadership practices, ensuring that institutional transformation remains anchored in accountability, participatory governance, and stewardship (Hanif et al., 2025; Khaeroni et al., 2025; Moge et al., 2025). This mediation is critical in aligning sustainability initiatives with both religious commitments and broader societal expectations.

The translation of leadership and values into practice occurs through a set of institutional mechanisms that operationalize sustainability within everyday organizational processes. The literature consistently identifies four interrelated domains: curriculum integration, environmentally oriented campus management, community engagement, and capacity building. These mechanisms collectively function as the institutional infrastructure of sustainability, enabling the embedding of sustainability principles into teaching and

learning processes, organizational routines, and external engagement strategies (Abdullah et al., 2026; Efendi et al., 2026; Peng et al., 2024). Their effectiveness, however, depends not only on their presence but on the degree to which they are coherently aligned with leadership priorities and ethical commitments.

Sustainability, within this framework, is conceptualized as an emergent outcome rather than a predetermined endpoint. It is reflected in improvements in educational quality, environmental responsibility, and social inclusion, which correspond to broader global development agendas. These outcomes are not produced linearly but arise from sustained alignment between leadership orientation, ethical grounding, and institutional practice.

The framework also recognizes the role of contextual conditions in shaping institutional trajectories. Factors such as governance structures, resource capacity, stakeholder engagement, and technological readiness function as enabling or constraining conditions that influence the depth and continuity of sustainability implementation (Tikly, 2019; Wajid, 2025). As such, sustainability is not solely an internal institutional process but is contingent upon the broader ecosystem within which institutions operate.

The framework conceptualizes sustainability in Islamic educational institutions as a dynamic and contextually embedded process, in which leadership, values, and institutional mechanisms are mutually constitutive. The central proposition advanced in this study is that leadership practices grounded in Islamic ethical values enable the coherent integration of sustainability-oriented mechanisms, thereby facilitating the institutionalization of SDG-aligned outcomes.

Figure 2
Conceptual Framework



CONCLUSION

This study examines how sustainability is institutionalized within Islamic educational institutions through a systematic review of 36 studies. The findings indicate that sustainability emerges from the integration of educational leadership, Islamic ethical values, and institutional practices, rather than from isolated initiatives. Educational leadership functions as the primary driver of transformation, while Islamic values such as amanah, shura, and khilafah provide the normative foundation that guides and legitimizes sustainability-oriented actions. These elements are operationalized through key institutional mechanisms, including curriculum integration, sustainable campus practices, community engagement, and capacity building. Sustainability outcomes such as educational quality, environmental responsibility, and social inclusion are thus understood as systemic and emergent.

The principal conceptual contribution and explicit novelty of this review is the integrated framework that connects educational leadership, Islamic ethical values, institutional mechanisms, and contextual enablers in explaining how SDG-oriented practices become institutionalized within Islamic education. Rather than treating leadership, values, and sustainability practices as independent themes, the framework specifies their functional relationship: leadership catalyzes change, Islamic values orient and legitimize decisions, institutional mechanisms embed commitments into routine practice, and contextual conditions shape the continuity and effectiveness of implementation. However, the study is limited by the concentration of evidence in specific contexts and the predominance of cross-sectional designs. Future research should empirically test the proposed framework using longitudinal and mixed-method approaches across diverse Islamic educational settings.

DECLARATIONS

Author Contributions

Husnayain, M.F., Conceptualization, methodology, writing-original draft, and visualization; **Bahri, S.**, Supervision, validation, and writing-review and editing; **Andayani, E.**, Formal analysis, data curation, and writing-review and editing; **Hanim, S.A.**, validation, project administration, and final manuscript checking.

Funding Statement

This research received no external funding.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration of AI Use

AI-assisted tools were used only to assist manuscript formatting and language clarity under author supervision. The authors remain responsible for the content, analysis, interpretation, and final manuscript.

Additional Information

Not applicable.

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