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Research Article

Corporate Philanthropy as a Form of Corporate Zakat: An Islamic Ethical Assessment of Unilever's CSR Program in Poverty Alleviation

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ABSTRACT: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) by multinational corporations is widely presented as a significant contribution to global poverty alleviation, yet its substantive alignment with Islamic ethical standards, particularly within developing economies characterized by significant or majority Muslim demographics, remains empirically understudied. This study examines whether Unilever plc's corporate philanthropic programs, as documented in verified 2024 disclosures, fulfill the criteria of Maslahah Ammah (public interest) under Islamic economic ethics, and whether they may be legitimately equated with the concept of obligatory corporate zakat. A qualitative-descriptive research design was employed, analyzing primary data from Unilever's Annual Report & Accounts 2024 (SEC Form 20-F), the Q4 & FY2024 Full Announcement, and the Unilever Sustainability Progress Report 2024. These disclosures were triangulated with third-party assessments from Greenpeace International, MSCI ESG Research, Sustainalytics, CDP, and the UK Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). Performance was evaluated against an eight-dimensional Islamic ethical matrix encompassing Tauhid (divine stewardship), Justice ('Adl, justice), Ihsan (excellence), corporate zakat, Istimrar (sustainability), La Dharar (non-harm), transparency and accountability, and scale and target accuracy. Empirical findings indicate a complex pattern of partial and contradictory fulfillment. While Unilever demonstrated notable quantitative reach in enterprise and agricultural support alongside near-universal deforestation-free sourcing, material shortfalls persist: the Living Wage Promise covered only a fraction of supplier procurement spending; massive annual production of non-recyclable flexible plastic sachets continues to impose disproportionate environmental externalities on Global South communities; and significant workforce eliminations occurred simultaneously with substantial underlying operating profits. Consequently, Unilever's voluntary CSR program cannot be equated with corporate zakat due to its discretionary, strategically motivated character and its vulnerability to downward target revision during financial pressures. The syakhshiyyah hukmiyyah (corporate legal personhood) framework necessitates an institutionally embedded, structurally obligatory, and independently audited system of corporate wealth redistribution that conventional voluntary CSR architectures are structurally incapable of providing.

Keywords: Corporate philanthropy, Maslahah Ammah, Islamic business ethics, Corporate zakat, Unilever CSR, Syakhshiyyah hukmiyyah, Sustainable development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary global discourse on corporate social responsibility (CSR) has witnessed a proliferation of philanthropic initiatives by multinational corporations, yet fundamental questions persist regarding the nature, depth, and structural sustainability of their impact on global poverty alleviation. This tension is particularly salient in the operations of Unilever plc, one of the world's largest fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) enterprises. Unilever has long positioned itself as a global model of purpose-driven business through its

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historic Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP) and its contemporary Compass and Growth Action Plan (GAP2030) strategies. Operating across more than 190 countries, with an extensive manufacturing and distribution footprint that includes Muslim-majority economies such as Indonesia and Bangladesh, as well as India—home to the world's third-largest Muslim population despite its Hindu-majority demographic—the sheer scale of Unilever’s economic activities renders its social and environmental commitments a consequential subject of rigorous academic scrutiny.

Within the framework of Islamic economic ethics, corporate social responsibility is not reducible to voluntary corporate philanthropy or discretionary public relations initiatives. Rather, the foundational axioms articulated by scholars such as Abdul Aziz (2013) ground all commercial activity within the dual moral imperatives of Tauhid the acknowledgement of divine sovereignty and stewardship (amanah) over all wealth and Keadilan ('Adl, economic justice), which demands the equitable distribution of socioeconomic benefits across society without generating countervailing harms. This normative tradition further incorporates the Qur'anic principle of Ihsan (excellence), which calls upon economic actors not merely to fulfill minimum legal or contractual obligations, but to actively pursue moral excellence in elevating human welfare. The convergence of these principles within the doctrine of Maslahah Ammah (public interest) provides a comprehensive ethical lens through which corporate conduct may be evaluated, moving far beyond the secular, shareholder-centric metrics of conventional ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) compliance frameworks (Dusuki & Abdullah, 2007; Umer Chapra, 2000).

Despite a growing body of academic literature linking maqashid al-shari’ah (the objectives of Islamic law) to modern business ethics, a significant empirical research gap persists at the intersection of systematic CSR analysis and Islamic normative evaluation for specific multinational enterprises operating in Global South Muslim communities. While previous scholarship has theoretically explored the compatibility of ESG criteria with Islamic finance, empirical evaluations grounded in contemporary, verified corporate sustainability disclosures remain remarkably scarce. Most existing studies remain either purely theoretical or rely on unverified corporate self-reporting without triangulating performance against independent third-party monitoring, environmental investigations, and formal regulatory actions.

This study addresses that scholarly gap directly by evaluating Unilever plc’s corporate philanthropic and sustainability programs, as documented in verified fiscal year 2024 disclosures, against an eight-dimensional Islamic ethical matrix derived from Maslahah Ammah. Specifically, this article seeks to answer two central research questions: (1) whether Unilever’s verified 2024 CSR initiatives satisfy the multi-dimensional criteria of Maslahah Ammah under Islamic economic ethics, and (2) whether voluntary corporate philanthropy may be legitimately equated with or substituted for the obligatory institution of corporate zakat (zakat korporasi). To maintain analytical rigor and adhere to standard structural formatting, detailed statistical findings and quantitative outcomes regarding Unilever's 2024 performance are reserved for the Results section, allowing this introduction to establish the foundational research scope, theoretical context, and academic urgency of the inquiry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Maqashid al-Shari'ah and Foundational Islamic Business Ethics

The evaluation of corporate conduct within Islamic economics is anchored in the doctrine of maqashid al-shari'ah, which posits that the ultimate objective of divine law is the protection and enhancement of human well-being through the preservation of five foundational pillars: faith (din), life (nafs), intellect ('aql), lineage (nasab), and property (mal) (Dusuki & Abdullah, 2007; Umer Chapra, 2000). In the realm of business ethics, Abdul Aziz (2013) synthesizes these objectives into foundational operational principles, establishing that commercial enterprise is inherently bound by Tauhid (unity and divine sovereignty). Under Tauhid, wealth is not absolute private property but a divine trust (amanah) bestowed upon humanity as stewards (khalifah). Consequently, the primary objective of the firm cannot be unconstrained profit maximization for shareholders; rather, commercial activity must be directed toward generating universal social good (maslahah).

Complementing Tauhid is the principle of Keadilan ('Adl, justice), which governs the equitable distribution of economic gains and mandates that business operations must not inflict structural exploitation or deprivation upon vulnerable stakeholders (mustadh'afin). In Islamic jurisprudence, justice is inseparable from the avoidance of harm. Furthermore, Islamic business ethics elevates corporate responsibility through the Qur'anic injunction of

Ihsan (excellence, Qur'an, An-Nahl: 90). While 'Adl requires fairness and the fulfillment of contractual minimums, Ihsan demands voluntary benevolence, generosity, and moral excellence that exceed statutory obligations. When applied to corporate entities, these principles converge in the overarching standard of Maslahah Ammah (public interest), requiring firms to actively promote community welfare, preserve environmental integrity, and uphold social equity.

B. Conceptual Distinction: Voluntary CSR, Corporate Philanthropy, and Corporate Zakat

A critical theoretical discourse within contemporary Islamic economics surrounds the structural relationship between conventional corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the Islamic obligation of corporate zakat (zakat korporasi). In conventional secular business theory, CSR and corporate philanthropy represent discretionary, strategic initiatives designed to enhance brand reputation, mitigate regulatory risks, and foster social license to operate. Because these initiatives are voluntary, their scope, funding, and continuation remain entirely contingent upon corporate profitability cycles and executive discretion.

In sharp contrast, Islamic jurisprudence establishes a fundamentally different institutional architecture for corporate wealth redistribution. Chairul Hadi (2016), in his foundational analysis published in AHKAM: Jurnal Ilmu Syariah, demonstrates that modern commercial corporations qualify as distinct legal entities possessing legal personhood (syakhshiyyah hukmiyyah or recht person). Drawing upon the resolutions of the First International Conference on Zakat in Kuwait, Chairul Hadi establishes that because a commercial corporation functions as a recognized legal entity capable of owning assets, incurring debts, and generating profits, it bears obligatory fiscal responsibilities analogous to natural persons. Consequently, when a commercial enterprise fulfills the legal criteria of Muslim ownership, minimum wealth threshold (nisab), full ownership, and the passage of one lunar year (haul), it is legally obligated under Islamic economic law to pay corporate zakat.

This theoretical framework is further advanced by Ahmad Badruddin (2023) in his doctoral dissertation on corporate philanthropy from a Qur’anic perspective, which formulates the comprehensive Islamic Social Enterprise (ISE) model. Badruddin demonstrates that an authentic Islamic corporate structure must integrate zakat korporasi and corporate endowment (wakaf korporasi) as non-voluntary, structural, and institutionally governed instruments of wealth redistribution. Under the ISE architecture, corporate zakat is assessed at a mandatory rate (typically 2.5% of net zakatable business assets) and distributed exclusively to legally defined beneficiary categories (mustahiq), primarily the poor and needy. Therefore, voluntary CSR and corporate philanthropy cannot be conceptualized as functional or legal substitutes for corporate zakat. While CSR represents discretionary benevolence subject to corporate budget cuts during financial downturns, corporate zakat constitutes a binding statutory obligation that is rate-based, permanent, and independent of corporate marketing strategies.

C. Theoretical Justification of the Eight-Dimensional Maslahah Ammah Evaluative Matrix

To operationalize the abstract principles of maqashid al-shari'ah and syakhshiyyah hukmiyyah for the empirical evaluation of multinational enterprises, this study establishes an eight-dimensional evaluative matrix. Each dimension is directly derived from foundational Islamic legal and ethical sources, establishing a rigorous methodology for assessing corporate sustainability disclosures:

1) Tauhid and Amanah (Divine Trust): Derived from classical maqashid axioms (Abdul Aziz, 2013; Chapra, 2000), this dimension evaluates whether corporate wealth and natural resources are managed as a sacred trust, requiring alignment between stated ethical purpose and operational reality without deceptive practices or greenwashing.

2) Keadilan ('Adl, Economic Justice): Grounded in distributive justice principles (Dusuki & Abdullah, 2007), this criterion assesses whether corporate benefits reach vulnerable stakeholders equitably and verifies that business models do not generate compensatory socio-environmental burdens on host communities.

3) Ihsan (Excellence Beyond Minimum Compliance): Derived from Qur'anic injunctions (An-Nahl: 90), this dimension evaluates whether a corporation exceeds legal statutory minimums in labor welfare, wage equity, and community investment, rather than prioritizing executive compensation and shareholder extraction over workforce dignity.

4) Corporate Zakat (Zakat Korporasi): Grounded in the syakhshiyyah hukmiyyah jurisprudence of Chairul Hadi (2016) and Badruddin (2023), this parameter examines the existence of structured, mandatory, rate-based fiscal

redistribution mechanisms governed by institutional accounting standards.

5) Istimrar (Sustainability and Temporal Consistency): Derived from the Islamic ethical doctrine of istiqamah (enduring commitment), this criterion requires that corporate social and environmental commitments remain continuous and resilient, rather than being downgraded or abandoned during periods of financial strain.

6) La Dharar (Non-Harm and Environmental Integrity): Rooted in the foundational Islamic legal maxim (qawa'id fiqhiyyah), 'la dharar wa la dirar' (no harm shall be inflicted or reciprocated; Hadith Ibn Majah, no. 2341), this dimension mandates the absolute avoidance of systemic ecological destruction, pollution, and public health degradation.

7) Transparency and Accountability (Tabligh and Amanah): Derived from Islamic governance standards requiring truthful communication, this parameter evaluates whether corporate disclosures are honest, independently verifiable, and free from material misrepresentation or omission.

8) Scale and Target Accuracy: Grounded in distributive justice imperatives, this dimension measures whether philanthropic and livelihood programs concretely and verifiably reach rightful beneficiaries (mustahiq), particularly micro-enterprises and smallholder producers in high-need regions.

D. Positioning of This Study within Prior Maqashid-CSR Scholarship

This study is positioned as a direct empirical extension of, rather than a repetition of, three strands of prior scholarship. Dusuki and Abdullah (2007) established the foundational normative claim that maqashid al-shari'ah can serve as an evaluative lens for corporate social responsibility, but their contribution remains conceptual: it does not specify how the framework should be coded against a specific firm's disclosures, nor does it triangulate maqashid-based judgments with independent, non-Islamic assessment instruments. Chairul Hadi (2016) and Badruddin (2023) establish the jurisprudential distinction between voluntary CSR and obligatory corporate zakat, but neither study tests that distinction against a contemporary multinational corporation's verified sustainability disclosures. This study differs from, and extends, both lines of work in three respects. First, it operationalizes Maslahah Ammah into eight coded dimensions with explicit a priori assessment criteria (Section III.E), rather than treating it as a general evaluative orientation. Second, it grounds the analysis in audited or regulator-verified 2024 data (SEC Form 20-F, CMA determinations) rather than corporate self-description alone, cross-checked against independent ESG rating methodologies (MSCI, Sustainalytics, CDP) whose epistemic assumptions are rooted in secular finance theory—a triangulation rarely attempted in the maqashid-CSR literature. Third, because the coding scheme in Section III.E is defined independently of Unilever's specific circumstances, it is, in principle, transferable to other multinational FMCG firms operating in Muslim-majority markets, a claim discussed further in Section V.B and revisited in Section VI.

3. METHODS

A. Research Design and Case Selection

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive, normative-empirical case study design, selected for its methodological suitability in conducting an in-depth evaluative investigation of a single major corporate actor through the normative lens of Islamic economic ethics. The research object is the corporate philanthropy and broader CSR program of Unilever plc for fiscal year 2024. The selection of Unilever as the case study subject is justified by three compelling criteria: (1) its immense global economic reach, with reported 2024 turnover reaching €60.8 billion (~USD 65.7 billion), (2) its extensive manufacturing, supply chain, and consumer footprint across Global South economies with significant or majority Muslim demographics—most notably Indonesia and Bangladesh (majority Muslim nations), alongside India, a major developing economy home to one of the world's largest Muslim populations (~200 million individuals), and (3) the public availability of detailed, standardized corporate sustainability reports that enable rigorous cross-dimensional triangulation.

B. Primary and Secondary Data Sources

Primary empirical data were extracted from Unilever's official, legally mandated corporate disclosures published for fiscal year 2024. These authoritative documents comprise: (1) the Annual Report & Accounts 2024, filed concurrently as SEC Form 20-F with the United States Securities and Exchange Commission, (2) the Q4 & Full Year 2024 Financial Results Full Announcement, released on 13 February 2025, and (3) the Unilever Sustainability Progress Report 2024. Together, these primary filings represent the most contemporaneous and verified corporate accounts of financial performance, operational restructuring, and sustainability outcomes.

Secondary data were obtained from peer-reviewed academic literature—specifically articles published in the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences (AJISS) and AHKAM: Jurnal Ilmu Syariah—alongside critical institutional evaluations, environmental monitoring studies, and formal regulatory findings. Key secondary institutions include Greenpeace International (2023), Greenpeace UK (2024), MSCI ESG Research (2024), Morningstar Sustainalytics (2024), CDP Climate Scores (2025), the UK Competition and Markets Authority (CMA, 2024), and the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF) Barcelona Case Study on the USLP (2024).

C. Methodological Justification for Third-Party Monitoring Sources

To address methodological rigor regarding the integration of specialized industry ESG monitoring platforms and civil society reports (such as KnowESG, Onestopesg, and Zuno Carbon), this study implements an explicit epistemological protocol. Third-party industry monitoring sources and civil society advocacy investigations are utilized strictly to triangulate, cross-verify, and contextualize primary corporate self-disclosures rather than substitute them. The inclusion of these secondary sources is justified by three methodological criteria: (1) their widespread citation and recognition within mainstream environmental finance and ESG compliance literature, (2) their transparency regarding data aggregation and analytical methodology, and (3) their indispensable function in identifying localized environmental externalities—such as post-consumer sachet pollution in developing nations—which aggregate, weight-based corporate self-reporting inherently obscures. By establishing a dialogical contrast between corporate self-presentation and independent third-party verification, the study avoids reliance on unverified PR narratives.

D. Coding Procedure and Investigator Triangulation

Data analysis followed a structured three-stage content analysis protocol: (1) analytical matrix construction based on the eight Maslahah Ammah dimensions, (2) systematic data extraction and assignment, wherein qualitative policy statements, financial allocations, and quantitative performance metrics from primary and secondary sources were coded into the respective ethical dimensions, and (3) comparative normative evaluation against Islamic economic standards.

The coding unit of analysis comprised specific sustainability commitments, quantitative milestone achievements, financial restructuring figures, and regulatory compliance statements within the 2024 reporting corpus. To mitigate subjective investigator bias and ensure robust coding reliability, investigator triangulation was implemented. Coding and thematic categorization were performed independently by two researchers (Anton Budiyono and Abdul Aziz). Upon completion of independent coding, inter-rater cross-checking was conducted to identify discrepancies. Divergent categorizations were resolved through collaborative re-examination of source documents and consensus mapping against foundational Islamic legal maxims, ensuring high inter-rater reliability across all eight evaluative dimensions.

E. Operational Definitions of Evaluative Categories

To ensure analytical consistency and replicability, corporate performance across the eight Maslahah Ammah dimensions was graded using eight explicitly defined operational categories:

1) Positive: Verified empirical data demonstrate that corporate sustainability targets were met or exceeded ahead of schedule, with no documented material contradictions or countervailing negative externalities in the reporting period.

2) Partial: Documented achievements exist and demonstrate meaningful reach, but performance falls quantitatively short of self-defined intermediate corporate targets, or exhibits minor operational inconsistencies between ethical rhetoric and execution.

3) Contradictory: The simultaneous existence of positive welfare achievements and verified, material socio-environmental harms within the exact same dimension, directly impacting the same beneficiary populations (exemplifying istighfal, or exploitation disguised as benevolence).

4) Violated: Documented severe environmental destruction, systematic labor deprivation, or direct infringement of foundational Islamic legal prohibitions without adequate or effective corporate mitigation mechanisms.

5) Absent: The complete absence of any formal corporate mechanism, structural policy framework, or institutional commitment addressing the specific Islamic ethical requirement.

6) Insufficient: Measurable achievement is present but falls materially and quantifiably short of the applicable standard (*e.g.*, a specific percentage-point gap against a self-defined corporate target).

7) Inconsistent: Temporal or conditional variation is documented — for example, a commitment sustained for a period but subsequently revised, delayed, or narrowed under financial or commercial pressure.

8) Questionable: Available evidence is mixed, contested between independent sources, or insufficiently independent to support a definitive rating (*e.g.*, divergent findings between rating agencies using different methodologies).

F. Epistemic Caution and Reliability Note

While investigator triangulation, standardized operational definitions, and rigorous cross-verification against independent regulatory and environmental assessments substantially mitigate subjective bias, normative ethical evaluation inherently retains an element of interpretative scholarly judgment. Consequently, the evaluative conclusions generated by this matrix represent a critical qualitative assessment grounded in Islamic legal philosophy rather than a claim of absolute positivistic objectivity.

4. RESULTS

A. Verified Quantitative Achievements in Livelihood and SME Support

Unilever's official 2024 sustainability disclosures document substantial quantitative outreach across enterprise development and agricultural livelihood enhancement programs. Within the domain of agricultural supply chains, corporate livelihood initiatives reached 80,000 smallholder farmers through income diversification, agricultural extension services, and regenerative farming support, progressing toward a formal corporate target of reaching 250,000 smallholders by 2026 (Unilever Sustainability Progress Report, 2024). In the SME development domain, Unilever's digital inclusion platforms and commercial assistance programs reached 2.58 million small and medium enterprises (SMEs) across developing economies—with significant deployment in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines—thereby successfully surpassing the original 2026 milestone of 2.5 million SMEs ahead of schedule (Unilever, 2024b).

B. Environmental Stewardship and Historical Welfare Outreach

In environmental sourcing, verified disclosures indicate that 97% of Unilever's procurement volume for key agricultural commodities (specifically palm oil, paper and board, tea, soy, and cocoa) was certified as deforestation-free by the conclusion of FY2024. Furthermore, the corporation maintained 23 active regenerative agriculture projects covering approximately 130,000 hectares of farmland, alongside 13 ecosystem protection and restoration programs encompassing roughly 425,000 hectares of natural habitat, directed toward ambitious long-term targets of one million hectares each by 2030 (Unilever, 2024b). Cumulatively across the preceding ten-year timeframe of the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP, 2010–2020), corporate health, hygiene, and handwashing programs documented outreach to 1.3 billion people globally, while zero waste to landfill was achieved and maintained across all global manufacturing facilities.

C. Financial Performance and Operational Scope

Unilever's financial disclosures in SEC Form 20-F establish that for fiscal year 2024, total corporate turnover reached €60.8 billion (~USD 65.7 billion). The firm generated an underlying operating profit of €11.2 billion and a reported operating profit of €9.4 billion. Underlying earnings per share (EPS) expanded by 14.7% to reach €2.98, marking the company's strongest rate of earnings acceleration since 2019. During FY2024, Unilever returned €5.8 billion to shareholders through formal dividend distributions and share buyback programs. Operationally, following the announced demerger of its global Ice Cream division, Unilever maintained a worldwide workforce exceeding 128,000 employees operating across more than 190 countries (Unilever Annual Report & Accounts, 2024).

D. Documented Shortfalls, Restructuring, and External Evaluations

Alongside positive quantitative outreach, verified primary filings and independent third-party assessments reveal substantial operational shortfalls and structural tensions. Under the Living Wage Promise—a flagship corporate commitment to ensure living wages for workers across the external supplier chain—Unilever reported reaching only 32% of total supplier procurement spending by end-2024. This performance represents an eighteen-percentage-point deficit against the mandated 50% target established for 2026 (Unilever Annual Report & Accounts, 2024). Concurrently, Unilever's FY2024 full announcement confirmed the execution of a major corporate productivity and restructuring program targeting €800 million in cumulative cost savings (with €200 million realized during FY2024), which directly resulted in the elimination of 7,500 predominantly office-based employment positions globally (Unilever, 2024b).

In the environmental domain, independent investigations by Greenpeace International (2023) and Greenpeace UK (2024) documented that Unilever maintained an annual production volume of approximately 53 billion single-use, non-recyclable plastic sachets—equivalent to a continuous output of roughly 1,700 sachets per second—with an estimated 6.4 billion sachets generated by the Dove brand alone. Methodologically, it is noted that this 53 billion unit figure represents an independent civil society estimation rather than an audited financial disclosure. In official corporate responses, Unilever acknowledged that hard-to-recycle flexible plastic packaging, particularly single-use sachets, represents a 'complex technical challenge with no quick fixes.' Under its updated Growth Action Plan (GAP2030) and 2024 strategic reviews, Unilever revised its environmental packaging timelines, pushing the deadline for achieving 100% reusable, recyclable, or compostable packaging from 2025 to 2030 for rigid packaging, and to 2035 for flexible packaging. The corporation cited infrastructure limitations in municipal waste management across developing markets and highlighted ongoing R&D investments in paper-based flexible materials alongside strategic partnerships for Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes (Costa, 2024; Unilever, 2024c).

Regarding regulatory compliance and sustainability ratings, the UK Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) opened a formal investigation into Unilever's environmental marketing claims in December 2023 over concerns of greenwashing. The CMA formally closed the investigation in November 2024 following verified amendments and claim revisions implemented by Unilever across its product packaging (CMA, 2024; ESG Today, 2024). In independent ESG evaluations, Morningstar Sustainalytics assessed Unilever's ESG risk score at 21.6, classifying the firm in the 'Medium Risk' category. Concurrently, MSCI ESG Research maintained an AA ('Leader') rating for Unilever in 2024, but attached an Orange Flag controversy warning regarding biodiversity and land-use externalities, while CDP awarded the company an A- score for climate change disclosures in 2024.

Table **1** summarizes the core parameters of the research design, while Table **2** presents the systematic comparative evaluation of Unilever's verified 2024 CSR performance against the eight dimensions of the Maslahah Ammah matrix.

5. DISCUSSION

A. Normative Evaluation Across the Eight Dimensions

The empirical evaluation of Unilever's verified 2024 sustainability disclosures against the Maslahah Ammah matrix reveals a profound structural tension between quantitative philanthropic reach and foundational Islamic ethical requirements. A systematic examination of each dimension illustrates why voluntary CSR cannot serve as a functional equivalent to Islamic corporate governance:

1) Tauhid and Amanah (Partial Alignment): While Unilever's decade-long commitment to the USLP and its successor GAP2030 framework reflects a substantive

Table 1: Research Design Summary

Research Design	Qualitative-descriptive; normative-empirical case study
Research Object	Unilever plc corporate philanthropy and CSR program, fiscal year 2024
Primary Data Sources	Unilever Annual Report & Accounts 2024 (SEC Form 20-F); Q4 & FY2024 Full Announcement; Unilever Sustainability Progress Report 2024
Secondary Data Sources	Peer-reviewed literature (AJISS, AHKAM); Greenpeace UK/Int. reports (2023-2024); MSCI ESG Research; Sustainalytics; CDP; UK CMA; UPF Barcelona Case Study
Analytical Framework	Eight-dimensional Maslahah Ammah matrix: Tauhid/Amanah, 'Adl, Ihsan, Corporate Zakat, Istimrar, La Dharar, Transparency & Accountability, Scale & Target Accuracy
Analytical Method	Three-stage content analysis: (1) matrix construction; (2) systematic data assignment; (3) comparative normative evaluation
Key Theorists	Abdul Aziz (2013); Dusuki & Abdullah (2007); Chairul Hadi (2016); Ahmad Badruddin (2023); Umer Chapra (2000)
Ethical Clearance	Not required; all empirical data obtained from publicly available, verified institutional disclosures and technical reports

Table 2: Comparative Analysis: Maslahah Ammah Standards vs. Unilever Csr 2024 (Corrected & Updated)

Maslahah Dimension	Islamic Normative Standard	Unilever 2024 Verified Facts & Disclosures	Assessment
Tauhid (Amanah / Divine Trust)	Wealth is a divine trust (amanah); primary business motive must align with maslahah (public good), not unconstrained profit maximization or greenwashing.	USLP and Compass purpose narratives are substantive. However, the UK CMA opened a formal greenwashing investigation in Dec 2023 into misleading environmental claims—closed in Nov 2024 after Unilever revised product claims. Multiple sustainability targets were revised downward under financial pressure in FY2024.	Partial
Justice ('Adl)	Socioeconomic benefits must reach beneficiaries (mustahiq) equitably; commercial business models must not generate countervailing environmental or social harms.	80,000 smallholder farmers and 2.58 million SMEs supported in 2024 across developing economies (Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, Philippines). Yet Greenpeace (2023) documented ~53 billion plastic sachets produced annually—inflicting severe waste externalities on the exact same vulnerable communities.	Contradictory
Ihsan (Excellence)	Corporate action must go beyond minimum legal and contractual obligations toward excellence in welfare contribution and workforce dignity (Qur'an, An-Nahl: 90).	Living Wage Promise reached only 32% of supplier procurement spending by end-2024 against a 50% target for 2026. Simultaneously, despite €11.2 billion in underlying operating profit (~€9.4B reported), Unilever eliminated 7,500 predominantly office-based positions under an €800M productivity restructuring program.	Insufficient
Corporate Zakat (Zakat Korporasi)	Obligatory, structured, rate-based fiscal wealth redistribution (2.5%) grounded in syakhshiyyah hukmiyyah (corporate legal personhood); institutionally governed and audited.	All Unilever CSR and philanthropic activity is entirely voluntary, discretionary, strategically motivated, and subject to budget revisions under financial pressure. No formal corporate zakat (zakat korporasi) or corporate waqf mechanism of any kind is established or recognized.	Absent
Istimrar (Sustainability)	Social and environmental commitments must be continuous, steadfast (istiqamah), and unconditional; not contingent upon cyclical financial profitability.	USLP operated continuously for over a decade (2010–2020), demonstrating historical temporal breadth. However, multiple environmental commitments were formally revised downward in 2024 under financial pressure, including pushing 100% recyclable/reusable plastic packaging goals from 2025 to 2030 (rigids) and 2035 (flexibles).	Inconsistent
La Dharar (No Harm)	Business operations must not inflict structural harm on society or the ecosystem; governed by the legal maxim 'la dharar wa la dirar' (no harm inflicted or reciprocated).	Greenpeace International (2023) documented annual output of ~53 billion non-recyclable plastic sachets (~1,700/sec). 28% of the packaging portfolio remains non-recyclable flexible plastic, causing severe waterway pollution in developing markets. Unilever cited technical complexity and R&D in paper alternatives, but harm continues.	Violated
Transparency & Accountability	Honest, independently verifiable reporting; corporate disclosures must not misrepresent social or environmental performance to stakeholders or consumers.	Unilever transparently discloses financial data and shortfalls (*e.g.*, 32% living wage figure, restructuring costs) via Form 20-F, GRI, and TCFD. However, CMA greenwashing investigation (opened Dec 2023, closed Nov 2024 after claim amendments) and mixed ESG risk ratings (Sustainalytics 21.6 Medium Risk vs MSCI AA) indicate contested disclosure.	Questionable
Scale & Target Accuracy	Philanthropic and economic benefits must concretely, verifiably, and accurately reach vulnerable populations (mustadh'afin), smallholder farmers, and micro-enterprises.	2.58 million SMEs reached via commercial inclusion programs (surpassing the 2026 milestone of 2.5 million ahead of schedule); 80,000 smallholder farmers supported; 21 active water stewardship programs in high-stress regions; 97% deforestation-free sourcing achieved across key commodities.	Positive

Source: Compiled and updated by authors from Unilever Annual Report & Accounts 2024 (SEC Form 20-F); Unilever Sustainability Progress Report 2024; Greenpeace International (2023); Greenpeace UK Investor Briefing (2024); UK Competition and Markets Authority (CMA, 2024); MSCI ESG Research (2024); Morningstar Sustainalytics (2024); CDP Climate Scores (2024); Chairul Hadi (2016), AHKAM: Jurnal Ilmu Syariah; Ahmad Badruddin (2023).

corporate narrative of stewardship, empirical events in 2023–2024 contest this alignment. The formal greenwashing investigation launched by the UK CMA in December 2023 demonstrates that corporate self-presentation regarding environmental sustainability was sufficiently detached from verifiable operational facts to warrant regulatory intervention. Although Unilever successfully resolved the investigation in November 2024 by revising its product marketing claims, the necessity of regulatory pressure to induce honest disclosure violates the Islamic ethical standard of amanah (divine trust). Furthermore, the downward revision of key environmental targets during FY2024 under financial market pressures indicates that ethical stewardship remains subordinate to conventional financial performance.

2) Keadilan ('Adl, Contradictory Alignment): The dimension of economic justice presents a striking operational contradiction. On one hand, Unilever's verified reach to 80,000 smallholder farmers and 2.58 million SMEs across developing nations (including Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, and the Philippines)

represents a genuine, commendable contribution to micro-economic empowerment. On the other hand, the continuous annual distribution of approximately 53 billion non-recyclable plastic sachets—documented by Greenpeace International (2023) and confirmed by ongoing waste externalities—inflicts severe environmental and public health damage upon the exact same vulnerable communities (mustadh'afin) in Global South economies. In Islamic economic ethics, this practice exemplifies istighfal (exploitation disguised as benevolence), wherein a corporation generates commercial revenue through highly polluting packaging formats, allocates a fraction of those proceeds to local livelihood programs, and presents itself as a socially responsible actor while leaving host communities to bear the catastrophic externalized costs of municipal waste and waterway clogging.

3) Ihsan (Insufficient Alignment): In Islamic business ethics, Ihsan commands moral excellence and generosity that transcend minimum statutory or contractual compliance (Qur'an, An-Nahl: 90). Unilever’s 2024 performance falls materially short of this standard in two quantifiable areas. First, the Living Wage Promise achieved only 32% coverage of supplier procurement spending against a self-mandated 2026 target of 50%, demonstrating an inability to meet intermediate corporate welfare benchmarks. Second, during a fiscal year in which Unilever generated €11.2 billion in underlying operating profit (~€9.4 billion reported operating profit) and distributed €5.8 billion to shareholders, executive management executed a restructuring program eliminating 7,500 employment positions globally to secure €800 million in cost savings. From an Islamic ethical perspective, subordinating workforce stability and human livelihood to corporate margin maximization and shareholder buybacks represents a direct repudiation of Ihsan.

4) Corporate Zakat (Complete Absence): Measured against the jurisprudence of legal personhood (syakhshiyyah hukmiyyah) established by Chairul Hadi (2016) and the Islamic Social Enterprise architecture formulated by Ahmad Badruddin (2023), Unilever’s CSR program is categorically distinct from corporate zakat. All philanthropic expenditures reported in Form 20-F remain entirely voluntary, strategically aligned with brand marketing, and legally discretionary. The firm maintains no institutionalized, rate-based (2.5% of zakatable wealth) redistribution mechanism, nor is its philanthropic spending governed by independent Islamic auditing or restricted to statutory zakat beneficiaries (mustahiq). Consequently, the empirical evidence decisively refutes the hypothesis that voluntary multinational CSR functions as a modern operational equivalent of corporate zakat.

5) Istimrar (Inconsistent Alignment): While the USLP's continuous operation across more than a decade demonstrates historical temporal consistency, recent corporate decisions reflect structural vulnerability to economic cycles. When confronted with input cost inflation and margin pressures in 2023–2024, management formally scaled back key environmental pledges, extending timelines for 100% reusable, recyclable, or compostable packaging from 2025 to 2030 (for rigids) and 2035 (for flexibles). In Islamic economic jurisprudence, istiqamah requires that moral obligations remain steadfast and unconditional; diluting social and environmental targets to accommodate short-term financial headwinds violates this continuity.

6) La Dharar (Normative Violation): The production and distribution of ~53 billion non-recyclable plastic sachets annually constitutes a severe, quantifiable violation of the foundational Islamic legal maxim 'la dharar wa la dirar' (no harm shall be inflicted or reciprocated; Hadith Ibn Majah, no. 2341). Because single-use multi-layer sachets are economically unfeasible to collect and recycle, they systematically accumulate in municipal waterways, agricultural soil, and marine ecosystems across developing economies. While Unilever Global Head of Packaging Pablo Costa (2024) publicly highlighted the complex technical challenges of sach*et al*ternatives and noted ongoing R&D investments in paper-based flexible packaging alongside Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) partnerships, from an Islamic ethical standpoint, severe environmental harm cannot be indefinitely defended or deferred on technological grounds. Under Islamic jurisprudence, the prohibition of harm takes precedence over the pursuit of commercial benefits (dar'u al-mafasid muqaddamun 'ala jalbi al-mashalih); hence, no volume of philanthropic expenditure can ethically offset systematic ecological degradation.

7) Transparency and Accountability (Questionable Alignment): Unilever demonstrates robust financial transparency by publishing comprehensive disclosures adhering to TCFD and GRI frameworks, and by candidly reporting internal deficits such as the 32% Living Wage figure. However, the necessity of a formal UK CMA greenwashing investigation to induce accurate product environmental claims, combined with divergent evaluations from independent rating agencies (Sustainalytics classifying Unilever as 21.6 Medium Risk, while MSCI maintains an AA Leader rating with biodiversity controversy warnings), indicates that

corporate transparency remains contested and subject to PR calibration.

8) Scale and Target Accuracy (Positive Alignment): Offering a counterbalance to the preceding deficits, Unilever's SME commercial inclusion program performed exceptionally well, reaching 2.58 million enterprises and surpassing its formal 2026 milestone two years ahead of schedule. Similarly, achieving 97% deforestation-free sourcing across key agricultural commodities demonstrates concrete, empirically verifiable delivery of positive outcomes to vulnerable supply-chain stakeholders.

B. Synthesis and Methodological Generalizability

To avoid over-generalization from a single-case evaluation, it must be emphasized that this analysis of Unilever plc offers a replicable methodological framework and an illustrative empirical benchmark for evaluating multinational corporations operating in Muslim-majority contexts, rather than universal empirical generalizations applicable to all global firms. The eight-dimensional Maslahah Ammah matrix operationalized in this study demonstrates that conventional secular ESG metrics—which frequently award high ratings to highly profitable enterprises despite massive externalized environmental liabilities—rest upon epistemological assumptions rooted in shareholder capitalism. By contrast, Islamic economic ethics evaluates corporate legitimacy through holistic public interest, distributive justice, and the absolute prohibition of harm, providing Islamic scholars, regulators, and civil society actors with a rigorous qualitative analytical alternative.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has empirically examined whether Unilever plc's corporate philanthropic and sustainability programs, as documented in verified fiscal year 2024 corporate disclosures, satisfy the multi-dimensional criteria of Maslahah Ammah within Islamic economic ethics, and whether they constitute a legitimate functional analogue of corporate zakat. The findings reveal a consistent pattern of partial, inconsistent, and contradictory fulfillment across the eight evaluative dimensions. Quantitatively impressive achievements—including commercial assistance to 2.58 million SMEs, livelihood support for 80,000 smallholder farmers, near-universal deforestation-free agricultural sourcing, and a corporate turnover of €60.8 billion generating €11.2 billion in underlying operating profit—coexist with severe ethical shortfalls. These shortfalls include the annual generation of approximately 53 billion non-recyclable plastic sachets that disproportionately pollute Global South waterways, the downward revision of core environmental targets under financial pressure, a Living Wage Promise covering only 32% of supplier procurement, the elimination of 7,500 jobs during a period of high profitability, and the complete absence of any institutionalized corporate zakat mechanism.

The primary theoretical contribution of this study is the empirical demonstration that voluntary, strategically motivated corporate social responsibility programs, however extensive their quantitative reach, are categorically distinct from and inferior to the Islamic institution of corporate zakat. Grounded in the jurisprudence of corporate legal personhood (syakhshiyyah hukmiyyah) articulated by Chairul Hadi (2016) and the Islamic Social Enterprise architecture formulated by Ahmad Badruddin (2023), authentic Islamic corporate governance demands an institutionally embedded, structurally obligatory, rate-based (2.5%), and independently audited system of wealth redistribution. Conventional voluntary CSR architectures are structurally incapable of fulfilling this role because they remain discretionary, subordinated to public relations strategies, and vulnerable to budget contractions during economic downturns.

A significant methodological limitation of this study is its primary reliance on desktop analysis of published corporate filings and secondary third-party monitoring reports. While triangulating corporate self-disclosures with independent assessments from Greenpeace International, the UK CMA, MSCI, and Sustainalytics provides robust critical balance, independent ground-level field verification of beneficiary welfare in host nations such as Indonesia or Bangladesh was beyond the scope of this inquiry.

These findings also carry direct policy implications. For zakat regulatory bodies and sharia standard-setters in Muslim-majority jurisdictions such as Indonesia—including the National Zakat Board (BAZNAS) and the National Sharia Board of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (DSN-MUI)—the results suggest a concrete opportunity to develop formal Islamic ESG disclosure standards, potentially building on the eight-dimensional matrix proposed here, that would allow multinational corporations to report against Maslahah Ammah criteria in a manner comparable to existing TCFD or GRI reporting. Such standards could in turn inform regulatory incentives—such as preferential procurement treatment or tax relief—for corporations that adopt structurally obligatory, independently audited zakat korporasi or wakaf korporasi mechanisms rather than purely voluntary CSR.

Future research should expand this paradigm by conducting longitudinal, comparative evaluations across multiple multinational consumer goods corporations operating within Muslim-majority economies, to test the transferability claim advanced in Sections II.D and V.B. Furthermore, empirical field research in Indonesia and Bangladesh is urgently needed to evaluate whether the outcomes reported in corporate sustainability disclosures are experienced as improvements in welfare by their intended beneficiaries.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Anton Budiyono: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Curation, Investigation, Writing Original Draft, Writing Review & Editing, Supervision. **Abdul Aziz**: Formal Analysis. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. This research received no external funding and was conducted independently by the authors using personal resources.

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