

Food sustainability in times of crises a deductive study from the Holy Qur'ān, chapter 12 (Yūsuf/Joseph)

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Abstract: This article explores the concept of food sustainability in times of crisis, drawing insights from the Qur'ānic narrative of Joseph. It delves into Joseph's comprehensive plan, outlining its key principles, implementation strategies, and the positive outcomes it achieved for Egypt and neighbouring regions. The research seeks to present Joseph's plan as a model for addressing food crises, his plan for food sustainability during the seven years crisis that Egypt went through as a result of the famine. It examines the foundational principles that guided his strategy, the steps taken to implement it, and the ultimate results. The research concludes with several key findings: Food sustainability in times of crises requires a carefully designed policy centred on strategic stockpiling. On the other hand, successful implementation hinges on a deep understanding of the plan's components and a steadfast commitment to its execution.

Keywords: Food security, Sustainability, Crises, Joseph.

1. Introduction

Food security is a fundamental requirement for a comfortable life, and it has been a longstanding concern for peoples and nations throughout history. Indeed, man succession on Earth is inextricably linked to reliable food security. Given that Allāh has ordained both prosperity and hardship for man, ensuring food security during crises has been a paramount concern for nations and peoples, as the rise and progress of any nation are contingent upon its ability to provide food for its people.

The chapter titled 'Joseph' in the Holy Qur'ān presents a detailed narrative of the life and trials of Prophet Joseph. Within this inspiring chapter lies the valuable issue of sustainability of food security during crises. Joseph's strategic plan for food sustainability to address the seven lean years that afflicted Egypt serves as a model for effective crisis management. This article seeks to examine the key components of Joseph's plan, the strategies he employed to implement it, and the far-reaching consequences of his actions on the societies of that time.

The importance of this article stems from the significance of food sustainability, i.e., 'continuous food supply' (الزبيدي/Al-Zabīdī, 1422H), as the assurance of a continuous and reliable food supply is a fundamental human need. Recognizing this, Islamic law permits the consumption of typically forbidden foods in times of extreme necessity. This reflects the understanding that survival takes precedence in dire circumstances; Allāh, the Almighty, says, "But whoever is forced [by necessity], neither desiring [it] nor transgressing [its limit], there is no sin upon him" (Al-Qur'ān 2:173).

Crisis: refers to a period of hardship, famine, and abarren year (الزبيدي/Al-Zabīdī, 1422H).

Therefore, food sustainability in times of crises refers to 'the consistent availability and provision of food resources in times of hardship and famine.'

The Qur'ānic narrative of Joseph provides a comprehensive example of sustainable practices during times of crisis. This will be explored in detail in this article.

2. Circumstances of Ancient Egypt

2.1. Life in Egypt

Egypt experienced a period of unprecedented prosperity and food security, characterized by fertile lands, palm groves, lush gardens, and other food security components. This era of abundance stood in stark contrast to the subsequent period of hardship and divine retribution that befell Pharaoh and his people, as described by Allāh, the Almighty, “How much they left behind of gardens and spring * And crops and noble site * And comfort wherein they were amused * Thus. And We caused to inherit it another people” (Al-Qur’ān 44:25-28).

This description underscores the significance of gardens and orchards as key contributors to a prosperous life and a sustainable food supply (ابن قتيبة/Ibn Qutaybah, 1978).

Springs: Water, a vital resource for the sustenance of civilizations, was abundant in Egypt, thanks to its numerous springs that nourished its lush gardens (الطبري/Al-Ṭabarī, n.d.).

Implantations: Plural of plant/plantation, i.e., what grows from the earth (الراغب/Al-Rāghib, 1412H).

2.2. Circumstances of the Egyptian People

Allāh described the Egyptians with the word ‘fākihīn’ (“فاكهيّن”) (Al-Qur’ān 44:27). This word is read in two different ways in the Qur’ān: ‘fākihīn’ (“فاكهيّن”) and ‘fakihīn’ (“فكهيّن”) (ابن الجزي/Ibn Al-Jazrī, n.d.). ‘fākihīn’ (“فاكهيّن”) means living comfortably and enjoying life, while ‘fakihīn’ (“فكهيّن”) means wicked and arrogant (الطبري/Al-Ṭabarī, n.d.).

The two interpretations of this word are not contradictory but rather complementary. It means that the Egyptians’ enjoyment of life and luxury, made possible by their abundant resources and advanced civilization, ultimately led to arrogance and ingratitude. This parallel can be drawn with the story of the people of Saba’ as described in the Holy Qur’ān, chapter of Saba’.

Hence, Allāh, the Almighty, told Moses and his companions, “I will show you the home of the defiantly disobedient” (Al-Qur’ān 7:145). Early interpreters interpreted this as referring to Egypt, i.e., ‘I will show you the home of Pharaoh and his corrupt people’ (الطبري/Al-Ṭabarī, n.d.).

The Qur’ānic description does not disparage Egypt itself but rather condemns the wicked and arrogant people who inhabited it. While this specific reference occurs in the context of Moses’ time, which is a later time than the time of Joseph, it provides insight into Egypt’s original state and its historical reliance on springs and agriculture as the foundations of water security and food sustainability.

While the Qur’ān doesn’t explicitly describe Egypt’s condition prior to Joseph’s time, it can be inferred that it was a highly favourable environment at that time for human life. This inference is supported by Egypt’s remarkable civilization, the remnants of which are still visible today.

3. The Beginning of Food Crisis in Egypt

3.1. Joseph’s Relocation to Egypt

Joseph was moved from the land of Canaan and sold into slavery in Egypt by a merchant named Mālīk Ibn Dhikr. He was purchased by al-‘Aziz, Potiphar, who was Pharaoh’s Chief Guard of Treasuries (الثعلبي/Al-Tha‘labī, 1436H). This position, often referred to as ‘the Governor of the King’s Treasuries’ in historical and interpretive texts, is comparable to the modern-day role of ‘Minister of Finance.’

Joseph’s fortunes took a turn, leading to his imprisonment. While incarcerated, a significant event transpired that is worth examining, especially considering its relationship to Egypt’s food situation at the time. Allāh says, “And there entered the prison with him two young men. One of them said, ‘Indeed, I have seen myself [in a dream] pressing wine.’ The other said, ‘Indeed, I have seen myself carrying upon my head [some] bread, from which the birds were eating. Inform us of its interpretation; indeed, we see you to be of those who do good’” (Al-Qur’ān 12:36).

The two youths imprisoned alongside Joseph were the king's baker, responsible for his food, and the king's cupbearer, who tended to his drink. The king's anger and subsequent imprisonment of these men were prompted by a reported incident (الثعلبي/Al-Tha'alabī, 1436H).

The king's luxurious lifestyle was so extensive that he delegated his daily affairs to others, including his drink, bread, and food preparation. This practice suggests that luxury was prevalent even in ancient times, a byproduct of Egypt's ability to ensure food security.

3.2. *The Fame of Joseph*

Joseph accurately interpreted the dreams of the two men, which later unfolded precisely as he had predicted: "O two companions of prison, as for one of you, he will give drink to his master of wine; but as for the other, he will be crucified, and the birds will eat from his head. The matter has been decreed about which you both inquire" (Al-Qur'ān 12:41).

Joseph's interpretation of the dreams foretold the baker's conviction and the cupbearer's exoneration, which subsequently came to pass. Both men were granted a three-day grace period to witness the fulfilment of Joseph's prophecy (البغوي/Al-Baghawī, 1417H). Joseph's innate ability to interpret dreams and his unwavering confidence in his predictions led him to instruct the cupbearer to remind the king, upon his release, of the unjustly imprisoned innocent man (Joseph).

Joseph's accurate interpretation came to pass, and Allāh, the Exalted, decreed that the cupbearer would be released and the baker would be crucified. However, upon his release from prison, the cupbearer forgot Joseph's advice.

3.3. *The King's Dream*

Several years later, the king had a strange and frightening dream that deeply disturbed him. He summoned his courtiers and priests, recounting the dream and urging them to interpret its meaning. He asked them, "Indeed, I see seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean ones, and seven green heads of grain and others dry. O you assembly, interpret my dream for me if you can interpret dreams" (Al-Qur'ān 12:43). The priests, lacking the knowledge of dream interpretation, responded to the king, saying, "[It is but] a mixture of false dreams, and we are not learned in the interpretation of dreams" (Al-Qur'ān 12:44).

At this moment, the king's cupbearer remembered his story in the prison, how Joseph had interpreted his dream, and how accurate that interpretation had been. He intervened at this crucial moment, saying to the king, "I will inform you of its interpretation, so send me forth" (Al-Qur'ān 12:45), meaning, 'Send me to the prison where Joseph is.' So, the king sent the cupbearer to the prison, where he relayed the story to Joseph. Without hesitation, Joseph interpreted the king's dream for him.

4. **Joseph's Plan for Food Sustainability**

4.1. *Interpretation of the King's Dream*

As mentioned above, in the details of the king's dream, seven lean, weak cows were seen consuming seven fat cows. Additionally, he observed seven green heads of grain and seven dry heads of grain.

Upon hearing the king's dream, Joseph immediately interpreted its meaning. He warned them of an impending severe food crisis, predicting the end of years of prosperity and the onset of a period of hardship. He explained that the fat cows and the green heads of grain symbolize seven years of food abundance, while the lean cows and the dry heads of grain represent seven years of drought (البغوي/Al-Baghawī, 1417H).

Joseph's warning of a grave crisis was indeed a serious warning. The seven years of prosperity had ended, and the predicted years of drought, famine, hardship, and distress had arrived. If the state failed to implement a proactive policy to address this crisis, the consequences could be devastating, including widespread famine, mass deaths, and even the collapse of the entire state. Therefore, it was imperative for Egypt to prepare for this impending challenge.

4.2. *Components of Food Security*

The components of food security during Joseph's time were based on several factors:

4.2.1. *Livestock*

Livestock varies across regions, but in this story, Egypt's reliance on cattle is evident; therefore, cows were used as a symbol in the king's dream. Fat cows provided meat and dairy products; thus, symbolized food security, and their reproduction symbolized sustainability. Perhaps few other animals could fully replace the cow in this regard. That is why Islamic law permits the sacrifice of a cow on behalf of seven people (مسلم/Muslim, 1955).

4.2.2. *Crops*

Allāh, the Exalted, mentioned that the Egyptians were living in security due to their abundant crops, particularly grains. The ears of grain in the dream represented wheat which is a staple food and a crucial component of food security in modern countries. Joseph used the symbol of dry ears of grain to foreshadow the famine that would afflict the land. When he saw seven ears of grain, he interpreted them as representing seven years.

These crops were not known or widespread in some other regions. Prophet Muḥammad informed us that the people of Makkah during the time of Abraham – Joseph's great grandfather – did not have grains. Instead, their livelihood was based on meat and water. So, Abraham prayed for Allāh to bless the people of Makkah with meat and water, and he did not pray for a blessing on grain. Prophet Muḥammad said: "There was no grain for them at that time, and if there had been, he would have prayed for a blessing upon it" (البخاري/Al-Bukhārī, 1993).

It goes without saying that livestock and crops necessarily require water source.

4.2.3. *Water*

Allāh, the Exalted, described Egypt as having springs, and He always associates gardens with springs. He says about Pharaoh and his people, "So We removed them from gardens and springs. * And treasures and honourable station" (Al-Qur'ān 26:57-58), meaning, Allāh expelled Pharaoh and his people from gardens, springs of water, and treasures of gold and silver (الطبري/Al-Ṭabarī, n.d.).

Without water, there is no life; Allāh, the Almighty, says: "Do the disbelievers not realize that the heavens and earth were 'once' one mass then We split them apart? And We created from water every living thing" (Al-Qur'ān 21:30). This verse highlights the connection between food sustainability and water. Commentators agree that "split apart" refers to the splitting of the sky with rain, followed by the splitting of the earth with plants (الطبري/Al-Ṭabarī, n.d.).

So, had it not been for the springs and rivers, Egypt would not have achieved its level of food security which led them to immense wealth, described in the Noble Qur'ān as "treasures" and "a noble station". It was this very food sustainability that enabled the Egyptians to enjoy a life of luxury.

This highlights the fact that food sustainability is a crucial source of financial income, and is clear evidence for it.

4.3. *Joseph's Plan for Food Sustainability in Drought Years*

The King of Egypt was impressed by Joseph's interpretation of the dream, leading him to favour Joseph, bring him close, and appoint him as the new 'Al-'Aziz' in Egypt. Joseph, thus, became responsible for Egypt's storehouses, making him the person in charge of food security and managing the upcoming crisis.

Joseph devised a plan to overcome the seven lean years. It involved continued agriculture, diligent efforts to maximize the utilization of agricultural land, and the creation of a strategic grain reserve during times of abundance to sustain people's lives later in times of hardship. Joseph said: "You will plant for seven years consecutively; and what you harvest leave in its spikes, except a little from which you will eat" (Al-Qur'ān 12:47).

Joseph's plan was based on several things:

First: Continuous production, i.e., continuing agricultural production and increasing production capacity to the highest levels. This is what is meant by his saying “da’ban” (دَابًّا or ‘consecutively’), i.e., ‘with diligence’ (البغوي/Al-Baghawī, 1417H).

Second: Strategic Reserve, one of the most important components of food sustainability in times of crises. Joseph called for storing agricultural production by keeping the grain in its spikes, as it would resist spoilage (البغوي/Al-Baghawī, 1417H). This is what the interpreters call ‘Storing food’ (الطبري/Al-Ṭabarī, n.d.).

Joseph’s strategy to address the impending food crisis was centred on ‘storing food.’ He warned people of the upcoming years of hardship and emphasized the importance of saving food for survival during those times, stating, “Then there will come after that seven hard years which will consume all that you have stored except a little of what you save” (Al-Qur’ān 12:48), meaning a small portion of what you preserve and store (الطبري/Al-Ṭabarī, n.d.). This included plant seeds (البغوي/Al-Baghawī, 1417H), ensuring the continuation of food lineages. Joseph can be considered the pioneer of establishing a ‘seed bank’ policy.

Third: Frugal economy. The economic conditions of a country can fluctuate over time, necessitating the implementation of frugal measures and rationalized consumption to preserve national gains. Joseph implemented this rationing policy, stating, “except a little from which you will eat” (Al-Qur’ān 12:47). He used “a little” rather than ‘except what you eat,’ indicating that he intended only the amount they needed for sustenance (الحاكمي/Al-Ḥākimī, 1443H).

By implementing these steps, Joseph prepared for the impending crisis, which would consume everything. He warned the people of Egypt about the severity of this crisis, saying, “seven difficult [years] which will consume what you saved for them” (Al-Qur’ān 12:48).

Joseph rigorously implemented this plan while anticipating the year of relief, which he described as, “Then will come after that a year in which the people will be given rain and in which they will press [olives and grapes]” (Al-Qur’ān 12:49). So, they began to sow and store for seven years; then the seven harsh years arrived. The severity of the crisis was due to drought. When the sky became barren, the crops withered and the livestock perished.

Then will come after that a year in which the people will be given rain and in which they will press [olives and grapes].

5. Management and Result

5.1. Management

When the king asked for Joseph, brought him close and honoured him, Joseph said to him, “Make me overseer of the storehouses of the land. Indeed, I am a trustworthy keeper and knowledgeable” (Al-Qur’ān 12:55). In essence, he requested to be entrusted with the management of Egypt’s affairs, particularly during the years of abundance and the subsequent hardship. He justified this request with two compelling reasons:

The first: that he is a trustworthy keeper, meaning he will safeguard what is entrusted to him in the storehouses, possessing expertise in accounting and other relevant matters.

The second: that he is knowledgeable, meaning he understands how to manage resources effectively and how to lead and command people.

The most important quality a crisis manager should possess is trustworthiness: being an upright guardian of the state’s resources. This must be coupled with knowledge, for integrity without knowledge cannot formulate effective plans or achieve results. Conversely, knowledge without integrity can erode the state’s foundations. Joseph’s exceptional combination of these two qualities enabled him to successfully navigate the food crisis from its inception to its resolution.

Indeed, Joseph’s outstanding management of the crisis is evident in his strategic approach to food distribution. He ensured that each individual received only the necessary amount, avoiding excess to preserve vital reserves. This rationalization policy was crucial in safeguarding the nation’s resources. That is why when Joseph’s brothers arrived, he asked them to go back and bring their paternal brother,

Benjamin. Thus, his brothers tried to persuade their father, Jacob, by suggesting, “And obtain an increase of a camel’s load; that is an easy measurement” (Al-Qur’ān 12:65).

5.2. Result

Joseph’s sustainable food plan successfully overcame the crisis and ensured the nation’s safety. There were no famines, and the state’s foundations remained unshaken. This is evidenced by two things:

First, people’s prosperity is often measured by their ability to afford luxuries like wine. The people of Egypt were pressing grapes to make wine for drinking, a sign of abundance that would have been unthinkable in times of scarcity. Joseph said, “Then will come after that a year in which the people will be given rain and in which they will press [olives and grapes]” (Al-Qur’ān 12:49). His use of the word “press” refers to the process of extracting oil from olives and juice from grapes (الطيري/Al-Ṭabarī, n.d.).

Second, the influx of people from other lands due to Egypt’s prosperity under Joseph’s leadership. The Qur’ān informs us that Joseph’s brothers, who were not Egyptians but inhabitants of Canaan (Palestine), came to Egypt to trade with him (مقاتل/Muqātil, 1423H).

Joseph honoured his brothers upon their arrival to Egypt. What was destined for them happened, as they, eventually, returned to him complaining of need and saying, “O ‘Azeez, adversity has touched us and our family, and we have come with goods poor in quality, but give us full measure and be charitable to us. Indeed, Allāh rewards the charitable” (Al-Qur’ān 12:88). Joseph’s plan for sustainable food security during crises was so successful that its fame extended beyond the borders of Egypt. Even his brothers came seeking his favour when they heard about it. This is sufficient proof of the soundness of his plan and the excellence of his administration.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Main Results

1. A nation at time of food crisis needs a robust food sustainability plan and a knowledgeable, trustworthy administration.
2. The first pillar of Joseph’s food sustainability plan in times of crises was continuous production.
3. Joseph’s food sustainability plan in times of crises was based on food storage.
4. Joseph established one of the world’s earliest seed banks by preserving agricultural crop seeds in their husks.
5. Strategic agricultural sustainability plans during crises require effective management characterized by integrity and knowledge.

6.2. Recommendations

1. It is recommended that universities and research centres incorporate Joseph’s food sustainability plan into their curriculum, as outlined in this research.
2. Researchers are called to explore Qur’ān and Sunnah for potential solutions to contemporary crises.

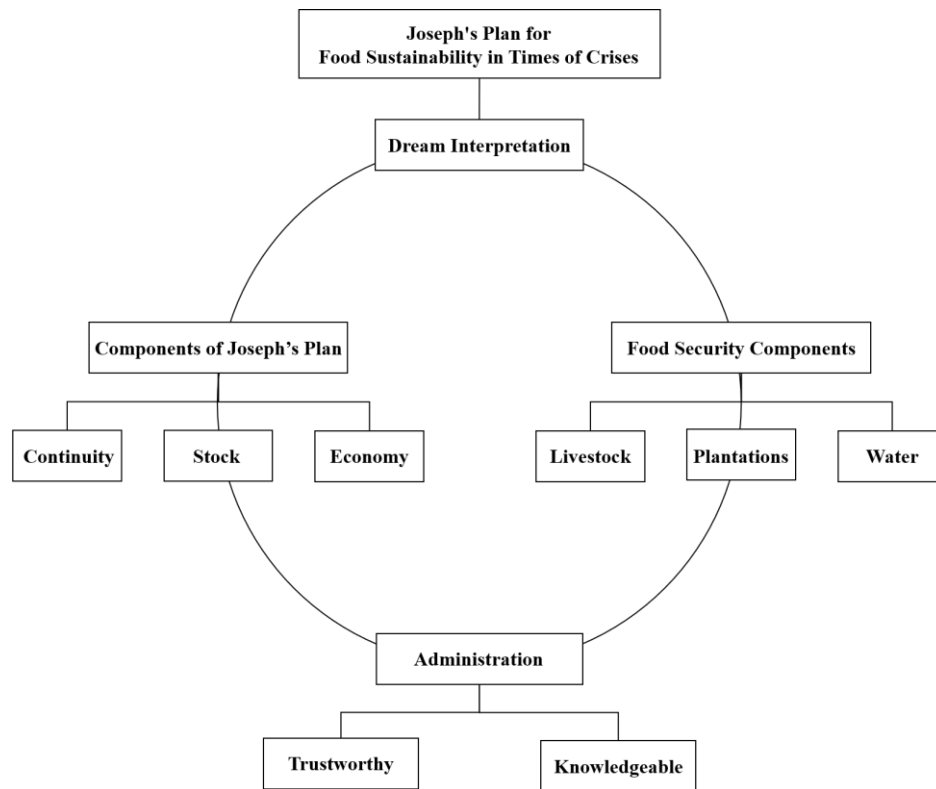


Figure 1.

Note: *Recognitions:

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