

Simplicity as an Ethic of Sustainable Economics from the Perspective of KH. Abdurrahman Wahid

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Abstract: *Changes in consumption patterns—which are increasingly oriented toward the fulfillment of desires and the accumulation of material goods—present economic, social, and ecological challenges. Excessive consumption can lead to the wasteful use of resources, an increase in waste, and a weakening of social responsibility in economic activities. This study aims to analyze the concept of simplicity in Gus Dur's thought, understand simplicity as an ethic of economic behavior, and examine its relevance in fostering sustainable economic behavior. The study employs a qualitative approach using library research. Data were obtained from Gus Dur's works as primary sources, as well as books, scientific journal articles, institutional reports, and previous studies as secondary sources. Data collection was conducted through documentary analysis, while the analysis employed interpretive content analysis involving the stages of data reduction, categorization, interpretation, comparison, and synthesis. The research findings indicate that simplicity in Gus Dur's philosophy is not merely a frugal lifestyle or a restriction on possessions, but rather a moral value that emphasizes propriety, self-control, a rejection of materialism, and a focus on utility. In economic behavior, this value can serve as a guideline for distinguishing between needs and wants, controlling consumption, and considering the social and ecological impacts of economic decisions. Simplicity is relevant as an ethic of sustainable economics because it promotes consumption that is sufficient, appropriate, beneficial, and environmentally responsible. Consequently, Gus Dur's philosophy can be developed as an ethical framework for fostering economic behavior that is oriented not only toward material well-being but also toward the sustainability of life.*

Keywords: *Simplicity, Gus Dur, Economic Ethics, Sustainable Consumption, Sustainable Economy.*

INTRODUCTION

Modern economic development has increased people's ability to meet their material needs, but at the same time has given rise to new problems, such as a tendency toward excessive consumption, wasteful use of resources, and increased waste production (Pomoni et al., 2024). Consumption is essentially an integral part of economic life; in fact, household consumption expenditure is one of the key indicators for assessing public welfare. The Central Statistics Agency, through the National Socio-Economic Survey (Susenas), notes that the consumption expenditure patterns of the Indonesian people continue to be a key indicator for assessing socioeconomic conditions, including poverty, inequality, food security, and welfare (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024; BPS Indonesia, 2023). However, the issue is no longer simply how much people can consume, but rather how, for what purpose, and to what extent consumption takes place. These questions become increasingly important when excessive consumption results in ecological and social consequences that must be borne by society at large.

This phenomenon is clearly evident in the issues of food waste and resource use. In its 2024 Food Waste Index Report, UNEP estimates that in 2022 the world generated approximately 1.05 billion metric tons of food waste—about one-fifth of the food available to consumers—while at the same time 783 million people were suffering from hunger. UNEP also emphasizes that food waste is not only a moral and economic issue but is also linked to climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental pollution (UNEP, 2024). In the Indonesian context, the report notes that about 34% of the food waste identified is edible, although this figure is still indicative due to the limited nature of consistent national data (UNEP, 2024). This fact shows that the issue of sustainability is not limited to industrial production or government policy, but is also directly linked to the everyday consumption choices of individuals and households.

The issue of excessive consumption has thus become increasingly relevant to the sustainable development agenda. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12 explicitly identifies responsible consumption and production as one of the global development goals, with targets including improving the efficiency of natural resource use, reducing waste generation through prevention, reduction, reuse, and recycling, and halving per capita food waste by 2030 (Raman et al., 2024). Thus, economic sustainability cannot be understood merely as the ability to maintain economic growth over the long term, but also as the ability to manage resource use so that meeting the

needs of the present generation does not deprive future generations of their share (Anwar et al., 2023). Within this framework, simplicity is an intriguing topic to explore because it offers an approach rooted in behavioral change rather than solely in technology, regulation, or market mechanisms.

A number of studies on sustainable consumption indicate that changes in consumer behavior are a key component in addressing environmental issues. Research on sustainable consumption generally emphasizes the importance of environmental knowledge, attitudes, social norms, perceived behavioral control, and individual awareness in promoting more responsible consumption behaviors (Yaqub et al., 2024). A study of urban households in Indonesia, for example, shows that perceived behavioral control, subjective norms, and environmental knowledge are associated with zero-waste behavior, with the perception of one's ability to control one's behavior being one of the strongest factors (Amir et al., 2025). On the other hand, the sustainable consumption agenda developed by the United Nations identifies changes in consumption and production patterns as a fundamental requirement for achieving sustainable development (Nations, 2015). The literature shows that sustainable consumption has been extensively discussed from behavioral, environmental, and policy perspectives, but these approaches have not fully addressed the question of the ethical and spiritual foundations that can shape an individual's moral boundaries regarding consumption.

In the context of Indonesian Islamic thought, this idea can be understood through the teachings of KH Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur). Simplicity is one of Gus Dur's nine core values, alongside monotheism, humanity, justice, equality, liberation, brotherhood, chivalry, and local wisdom. Simplicity, as explained in Gus Dur's values, does not merely mean living in poverty or reducing material possessions, but is understood as a reasonable and proper way of life, while also serving as a form of resistance against excess, materialism, and corruption (Ahmad Yani Fathur Rohman, 2023). Gus Dur's own exemplary character is also often associated with a simple lifestyle and a commitment to serving the community, as attested by KH A. Mustofa Bisri, who described Gus Dur's simplicity as an integral part of his personality in selflessly serving the community (NU Online, 2012). Therefore, simplicity, as viewed by Gus Dur, has a broader scope than just a personal lifestyle; it can be understood as an ethic that governs human relationships with possessions, needs, fellow human beings, and social life.

Previous research on Gus Dur also indicates that studies of his ideas have largely focused on issues of pluralism, democracy, humanity, education, tolerance, and community empowerment. Rohman (2020) shows that studies of Gus Dur's intellectual legacy are largely related to Islamic moderation, democracy, humanitarian movements, and humanistic education, while the research subsequently expanded its focus to the social construction of Gus Dur's values within the Gusdurian community. (Fathur Rohman, 2020). Other research shows that Gus Dur's nine core values—including simplicity—are the crystallization of Gus Dur's thoughts, movements, and actions, which were subsequently implemented in the lives of the Gusdurian community (Nugroho, 2023). Even more recent research on Gus Dur's humanism demonstrates the strong connection between his philosophy and ethical responsibility toward humanity, justice, and diversity. However, studies that specifically frame Gus Dur's value of simplicity as an economic ethic and link it to the agenda of sustainable consumption remain relatively limited. This is where the research gap lies, which this study aims to address.

This research gap is significant because studies on sustainable economics have thus far tended to focus on two extremes. First, the structural approach, which involves policies, regulations, technology, the circular economy, and resource efficiency; second, the behavioral approach, which involves consumer awareness, green consumption, zero waste, and lifestyle changes. Both approaches are important, but they do not fully explain why someone is willing to limit their consumption when they have the economic means to buy more. This article offers a novel perspective by reinterpreting Gus Dur's simplicity as an economic ethic, rather than merely a personal trait or moral example. Simplicity is understood as a principle for distinguishing between needs and wants, curbing excessive behavior, avoiding materialism, considering the interests of others, and taking into account the impact of consumption on the sustainability of life. Through this framework, Gus Dur's ideas can be situated within a dialogue with the concepts of responsible consumption and SDG 12, which call for fundamental changes in consumption and production patterns (Sharma et al., 2024).

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to analyze the concept of simplicity in Gus Dur's thought, to frame it as an ethic of economic behavior, and to identify its relevance to the development of sustainable economic behavior. Conceptually, this study is expected to contribute to the development of economic

thought that is not solely oriented toward growth and increased consumption, but also takes into account the limits of appropriateness, social responsibility, and ecological sustainability. Simplicity is not presented as a doctrine that rejects economic progress, but rather as an ethical mechanism to ensure that economic activities remain within the bounds of necessity, humanity, justice, and sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of simplicity in consumer behavior studies is closely related to the idea of voluntary simplicity—that is, an individual's conscious choice to reduce their focus on material consumption and direct their life toward things considered more meaningful. Alexander and Ussher explain that voluntary simplicity is a response to a culture of high consumption that has implications not only for ecological issues but also for the quality of social life and individual well-being. Simplicity, from this perspective, differs from poverty because it is a conscious choice, not the result of limited economic means. Therefore, simplicity can be understood as an effort to set limits on consumption that are considered sufficient. This perspective provides an important foundation for this study to distinguish between simplicity as an economic condition and simplicity as an ethical choice in controlling consumption (Alexander & Ussher, 2012).

The development of research on voluntary simplicity subsequently intersected with research on anti-consumption and minimalism. Hüttel, Balderjahn, and Hoffmann demonstrated that reducing consumption through voluntary simplicity or collaborative forms of consumption can contribute to subjective well-being (Hüttel et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Wilson and Bellezza (2022) explain that minimalism is a lifestyle that consciously reduces material possessions and consumption by shifting the focus from the accumulation of goods to experiences and quality of life. Their findings indicate that reduced consumption is not always synonymous with a loss of well-being. Conversely, under certain circumstances, a person may actually find fulfillment in a simpler life because they are free from the pressure to constantly buy and acquire things. This literature is important for understanding simplicity not as an anti-economic stance, but as a shift in orientation from excessive consumption toward sufficiency (Wilson & Bellezza, 2022).

The relationship between reduced consumption and well-being has also received attention in research on sustainable consumption. Geiger, Fischer, and Schrader, through their study on reduced consumption, demonstrate that reduced

consumption does not automatically lower well-being; in fact, it can provide certain benefits through increased autonomy, self-control, and the quality of social relationships. These findings suggest that the assumption that “more consumption means greater well-being” should be questioned (Knez et al., 2023). Sustainable consumption can go hand in hand with subjective well-being if consumption is not viewed solely as the accumulation of material goods. In this context, simplicity can be understood as the ethic of sufficiency—that is, an orientation toward adequately meeting one’s needs without making increased consumption the primary goal of life (Guillen-Royo, 2019).

From the perspective of behavioral change, using the SHIFT framework, the researchers explain that sustainable consumption behavior is influenced by individual identity and social influences. It is also influenced by habit formation, cognitive and emotional factors, and the ability to make sustainable behaviors tangible and easy to implement (White et al., 2019). Meanwhile, Geiger et al. (2018) demonstrate that mindfulness has the potential to promote sustainable consumption through increased self-awareness, reduced materialism, and the ability to control consumption impulses. Changes in consumption patterns require shifts in consciousness, habits, identity, and values. However, such approaches generally focus on the psychological mechanisms of behavioral change, while the moral-religious dimension has not yet been a primary focus. Therefore, this study suggests that Gus Dur’s concept of simplicity can provide an additional normative dimension by situating consumption control within a framework of propriety, humanity, and social responsibility.

From the perspective of Islamic economics, economic activity cannot be separated from ethical considerations and moral responsibility. Ethics is regarded as an integral part of Islamic economics, so that economic activity is evaluated not only on the basis of efficiency and profit, but also on the basis of its consequences for human life and society (Choudhury, 2019). This is where this study comes in, by framing simplicity in Gus Dur’s thought as an economic ethic that can serve as the foundation for sustainable consumption. This research, therefore, does not merely view simplicity as a lifestyle, but as a moral value that can curb consumerism while simultaneously connecting the interests of individuals, society, and the environment.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach in the form of library research. The study aims to analyze and interpret the concept of simplicity in Gus Dur’s thought and

its relevance to the ethics of sustainable economics. The data sources for this study consist of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of Gus Dur's works, which contain his thoughts on humanity, social life, morality, justice, and the relationship between humans and material life, while secondary sources consist of books, scientific journal articles, institutional reports, and previous research relevant to the themes of simplicity, voluntary simplicity, sustainable consumption, Islamic economic ethics, and sustainable development. Sources were selected through a purposive approach based on relevance, academic credibility, and their connection to the research focus (Snyder, 2019; Zed Mestika, 2017).

Data collection was conducted through a literature review, which involved identifying, selecting, reading, and recording relevant information from various sources. The collected data was then analyzed using interpretive content analysis. The analysis was conducted in several stages: data reduction by selecting information relevant to the research focus; categorization based on the themes of simplicity, economic ethics, consumption behavior, and sustainability; and interpretation by comparing Gus Dur's ideas with the findings of previous research. Next, a synthesis was conducted to identify the connection between Gus Dur's values of simplicity and the principles of sustainable economic behavior. The validity of the argument was ensured through source triangulation, which involved comparing information from various works by Gus Dur, academic literature, and relevant institutional sources (Krippendorff, 2022; Snyder, 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Simplicity in Gus Dur's Thought

Simplicity is one of Gus Dur's nine core values, along with monotheism, humanity, justice, equality, liberation, brotherhood, chivalry, and local wisdom. Simplicity, as part of Gus Dur's value system, is not synonymous with poverty, material deprivation, or a rejection of economic progress (Barton, 2020). Simplicity is, in fact, regarded as a natural and appropriate way of life, one that consciously curbs tendencies toward excess, materialism, and corruption. Simplicity also has an ethical dimension because it relates to how a person prioritizes wealth, needs, desires, and social status in their life (Anwar et al., 2025). This interpretation is important because it shifts the meaning of simplicity from merely a personal lifestyle to a value-based approach to living life (Pambudi, 2015).

The simplicity of Gus Dur's thinking is also inseparable from his views on humanity and social life. In his conception of Islamic universalism, Gus Dur regarded ethics, morality, equality, the protection of the vulnerable, and the restriction of tyranny as part of Islam's concern for humanity. This means that a person's behavior is judged not only based on the individual benefits they receive but also based on its impact on others. If this framework is applied to simplicity, then living simply is not just a matter of "I don't buy too much," but also involves the awareness that economic resources have a social dimension. A person's excessive consumption has the potential to take away a share of resources that others—especially economically disadvantaged groups—should be able to enjoy (Usman, 2007).

Gus Dur's simplicity is best understood as self-restraint against the urge toward materialism. In the context of a consumerist society, the measure of success often shifts from "how much benefit one provides" to "how much one possesses." This shift means that consumption is no longer merely a means of fulfilling needs, but also a means of shaping social identity. At this point, Gus Dur's concept of simplicity holds critical significance because it rejects the notion of material possessions as the primary measure of human worth. This aligns with research on sustainable consumption in Indonesia, which shows that lifestyle, awareness, and beliefs are key factors in shaping the consumption choices of Gen Z and millennials (Agustina et al., 2024). Therefore, simplicity can be viewed as a form of values literacy—that is, the ability to distinguish between needs that should be met and desires that do not always have to be fulfilled.

Interestingly, this concept shows that Gus Dur's simplicity is active, not passive. Simplicity does not mean withdrawing from economic activity or viewing ownership as something bad. On the contrary, a person can still work, own property, use technology, and enjoy economic progress, but without making any of these the ultimate goal of life. In this context, it is not ownership itself that is being criticized, but rather humanity's subservience to ownership. This interpretation is consistent with Gus Dur's school of thought, which views Islam as a source of values aimed at promoting human welfare, rather than as a set of symbols detached from social reality (Zulfandika & Wulandari, 2024).

In real life, Gus Dur's modesty was reflected in his daily habits. Buya Husein Muhammad once said that at home, Gus Dur often wore nothing more than a T-shirt and a sarong. This simplicity in dress remained consistent whether he was an ordinary

religious leader or serving as president ([Republika.co.id](https://republika.co.id), 2022). When it came to food, Gus Dur was accustomed to enjoying very simple home-cooked meals, such as plain white rice eaten with just a piece of fried chicken, without any fancy side dishes ([Makhdum, NU Online Jateng, 2021](#)).

Simplicity as an Ethical Principle in Economic Behavior

When simplicity is placed in an economic context, it can be framed as an ethic that guides how a person acquires, uses, and spends resources. At the acquisition stage, simplicity requires a person to avoid a materialistic mindset that encourages any means necessary to gain profit ([Dominko & Verbič, 2022](#)). In the usage phase, simplicity teaches us to strike a balance between needs and wants ([Tosun & Sezgin, 2021](#)). Meanwhile, at the consumption stage, simplicity encourages people to consider whether an item is truly needed, how long it will be used, and what impact it has on others and the environment ([Tasya Jadidah et al., 2023](#)). Thus, simplicity serves as an ethical limit to economic rationality that pursues only individual satisfaction.

These findings can be compared with contemporary research on green consumption behavior in Indonesia. Research by [Iqbal et al \(2024\)](#) for example, the study found that subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, environmental knowledge, the influence of social media, and government support all influence green consumption behavior. These findings suggest that changing consumption behavior cannot rely solely on individual attitudes but requires a supportive social and institutional environment. Meanwhile, the results of another study show that environmental knowledge, environmental awareness, and social media use have a positive effect on Generation Z's sustainable consumption behavior ([Fadia et al., 2025](#)). When compared to those two studies, Gus Dur's perspective offers an additional dimension: an internal moral foundation. Knowledge explains what one should do; social norms influence how one acts; whereas simplicity answers the question of why one is willing to impose limits on oneself in the absence of external coercion ([Decety, 2024](#)).

Simplicity can be understood as a form of self-restraint or self-control in economics. Research on sustainable consumption has largely been based on the assumption that consumer behavior can be guided through information, environmental awareness, incentives, green marketing, or government policies. While these approaches have proven important, they still face the issue of the "intention-behavior gap"—the discrepancy between awareness of sustainability and actual behavior.

Recent research on Indonesian consumers even shows that moral obligation is one of the key factors in explaining the intention to purchase green products (Gunawan et al., 2025). These findings reinforce the argument that sustainability requires a moral dimension, not just a cognitive one. In this context, Gus Dur's simplicity can serve as a moral obligation that limits consumption—not out of fear of rules, but out of an awareness of propriety and responsibility (Wu et al., 2021).

Thus, an ethics of economics based on simplicity can be formulated into several principles. First, the principle of sufficiency, which involves meeting needs proportionally without making consumption the purpose of life. Second, the principle of desire control, which involves the ability to distinguish between needs and consumerist impulses. Third, the principle of utility, which involves using resources to generate broader benefits. Fourth, the principle of social responsibility, which involves considering the economic consequences for other groups. Fifth, the principle of sustainability, which involves considering the impact of resource use on the environment and future generations. These five principles demonstrate that simplicity is not merely a moral exhortation to “avoid waste,” but can be developed into an ethical framework for economic behavior.

The Relevance of Gus Dur's Simplicity to a Sustainable Economy

The relevance of Gus Dur's philosophy of simplicity to sustainable economics is most evident when this concept is applied to the issues of excessive consumption and limited resources. Sustainable development requires patterns of production and consumption that allow human needs to be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Dobson, 2007). SDG 12 specifically identifies responsible consumption and production as a key component of sustainable development. Therefore, sustainability requires more than just changes in production technology; it also requires a shift in how society defines what is considered a need. This is where simplicity becomes relevant, as it addresses the demand side and consumer behavior: reducing unnecessary consumption before goods are produced, used, and ultimately become waste (United Nations, 2015).

This argument gains further strength when considered in light of recent research on sustainable consumption in Indonesia. Research by Setianingrum & Candra Sari (2024) found that knowledge of green accounting and green marketing influences sustainable consumption, whereas the study by Fadia et al. (2025) identifying the role of environmental knowledge, awareness, and social media.

Research by [Iqbal et al. \(2024\)](#) It also highlights the importance of social norms, knowledge, behavioral control, social media, and government support. This research framework shows that sustainable consumption has largely been explained through external and psychological factors. Gus Dur's perspective complements this by introducing the ethical dimension of life, since sustainability requires not only consumers who are "aware" of environmental impacts, but also consumers who are able to say "enough" to the urge to consume.

From this perspective, simplicity is directly linked to the principles of the circular economy. The stronger the tendency toward excessive consumption, the more likely it is that goods will be produced, purchased, used for a short time, and then discarded ([Dwiningsih & Harahap, 2022](#)). Conversely, simplicity encourages the extended use of goods, reuse, repair, sharing, and purchasing based on need. Simplicity can also serve as the ethical foundation of the circular economy. While the circular economy seeks to extend the life cycle of materials through product design, reuse, repair, and recycling, simplicity operates at the level of human decision-making before consumption takes place: Is this item really necessary? Do I need to buy a new one? Can the old one still be used? ([Kirchherr et al., 2017](#)). In this context, a sustainable economy is not just about how waste is managed; it is also about the desire to control waste generation from the outset.

Furthermore, the relevance of Gus Dur's simplicity also lies in its ability to connect economic, social, and ecological dimensions. From an economic perspective, simplicity promotes the efficient use of income and resources. From a social perspective, it reduces the tendency to view consumption as a status symbol that can widen social gaps. From an ecological perspective, reducing unnecessary consumption has the potential to decrease the use of raw materials and energy and reduce waste production ([Anwar et al., 2026](#)). This framework is consistent with recent research that integrates moral obligations, environmental concern, and collective effectiveness in explaining sustainable consumption behavior. This means that sustainability is stronger when economic decisions are based not only on calculations of personal benefit, but also on the awareness that consumption decisions have consequences for social and ecological life ([Gunawan et al., 2025](#)).

Based on this synthesis, it can be argued that the simplicity of Gus Dur's perspective can be viewed as a preventive economic ethic. It is preventive in nature because it acts before economic and ecological problems arise in the form of waste,

consumer debt, trash, resource exploitation, or unequal access. Unlike sustainability approaches that focus only on managing the consequences of consumption, simplicity intervenes at the root of behavior by fostering awareness of the limits of our needs. In this sense, simplicity is not anti-progress, anti-consumption, or a romanticization of poverty. Simplicity is the ability to use resources in a reasonable, appropriate, and responsible manner. This interpretation aligns with Gus Dur's framework of nine values, which positions simplicity as a counter to excess, materialism, and corruption. (Ridwan, 2019).

Gus Dur's ideas can make a conceptual contribution to the discourse on sustainable economics through three layers of argumentation. First, simplicity is a life value that rejects materialism and excessive behavior. Second, this value can be reconstructed into an economic ethic that guides people to distinguish between needs and wants, control consumption, and take social interests into account. Third, this ethical framework is relevant to sustainable economics because it encourages more responsible consumption starting at the individual level. Thus, the main contribution of Gus Dur's perspective is not to offer a new economic theory, but rather to provide an ethical and humanistic foundation for changing economic behavior. Simplicity, ultimately, is not merely a way of life characterized by "having little," but a way of using what one has in a sufficient, appropriate, beneficial, and sustainable manner.

CONCLUSION

Simplicity in Gus Dur's philosophy cannot be understood merely as a frugal lifestyle or a restriction on material possessions. It is also a moral value that guides people toward a way of life that is reasonable, appropriate, and free from excess. Simplicity encompasses elements of self-control, a critique of materialism, and a focus on the welfare and interests of humanity. In the context of economic behavior, this value can serve as an ethical framework that guides individuals to distinguish between needs and wants, control consumption, and consider the social impact of every economic decision. Simplicity, therefore, does not mean rejecting economic well-being, but rather establishing a way to acquire, use, and spend resources proportionally and responsibly.

From the perspective of sustainable economics, Gus Dur's value of simplicity holds strong relevance because it can foster more conscious, responsible, and long-term consumption patterns. Simplicity can serve as an ethical foundation for reducing excessive consumption, minimizing waste, extending the useful life of goods, and

considering the social and ecological consequences of economic activities. Therefore, simplicity can be reimagined as an ethic of sustainable economics that reconciles the interests of individuals, society, and the environment. This principle can be articulated through four key orientations: sufficiency in meeting needs, appropriateness in resource use, benefit to social life, and sustainability for the environment. This perspective underscores that economic sustainability requires not only systemic and policy changes but also shifts in human values and behaviors regarding consumption management.

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