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Eulogy. Wangari Maathai

Action for Africa and the Earth

21. Recognize that the conditions in which people live... influence their health and quality of life, and that poverty, uneven distribution of wealth, lack of education, rapid urbanization and population ageing, and the economic, social, gender, political, behavioural and environmental determinants of health, are among the contributing factors to the rising incidence and prevalence of non-communicable diseases.

UN High-Level Meeting on NCDs. Political Declaration, Clause 21

Wangari Matthai, who died in late September, will continue to speak to us. She was the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the most deserving winner since Albert Schweitzer. She has in her vision, work and legacy shown that health, well-being, and disorders and diseases of all types, have environmental determinants, as do food and nutrition security, and sustainable livelihoods.

Environmental factors are not only forces of nature. What happens in nature is greatly affected by human activity, which includes the despoilation of natural resources such as trees. Her struggle and her triumph have exposed social, economic and political determinants as well. As an intellectual, an academic, and a politician, she knew that the original basic causes of malnutrition, famine and starvation in Africa, are the plunder of much of the continent and its people and treasure by the slave traders and

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then the European Great Powers. This, as she has also emphasised, has been followed by an equally outrageous hollowing out of human and natural capital by the recent and current 'soft colonialism' now controlled by the new great powers. These now take the form not so much of nation states, as the new equivalents of the West and East India Companies: global political, financial, commercial and trade organisations whose purposes include the further exploitation of Asia, Latin America – and Africa.

The Earth needs more trees

The future of the human species, and of all creatures that on earth do dwell, and of the biosphere, depends on the health and welfare of trees. This is also true of water and soil and air, all of which are inter-related with one another – and with trees. Everybody who is interested in the environment from an ecological point of view knows this.

It is also well-known that at current rates, the degradation and destruction of natural resources will before very long make the planet unfit for human and most other habitation. Take trees. Once upon a time much of Earth's land surface was covered with jungles and forests. Not now. Currently, thanks to investigations done by NASA, it is reckoned that the ratio of humans to trees is about 1 to 60 – 7 billion humans, 400 billion trees. That may feel reassuring. But the best estimate is that trees are being cut down now at the rate of 4 billion a year. Without replacement, and given a human population that remains steady at 10 billion between 2050 and 2100, this would project a ratio of 1 to 24 in 2050, and 1 to 4 in 2100, within the lifetime of some people who are now small children. In the second half of this century much of the land that is now fertile would be saline, blown away, fallen into rivers and seas, arid, or desert.

Such a scenario would involve a collapse of human population, so to that extent it is unreal. It also does not take into account replacement of trees. Some estimates are that now, about half of all the trees that are cut down, are replaced. This would delay the last tree on earth being cut down in around 2200, or six human generations from now. Thus the imperative need is to plant – and nurture – more trees than are cut down.

Modern nutrition originated in the laboratory. For Wangari Maathai and all who work with the Green Belt Movement in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa, the nutrition and the nourishment and nurturing of now and the future, begins in the countryside. Around two-thirds of the people of Africa are subsistence farmers, and a majority of them are women. Wangari Maathai believed that their futures and those of their families, should not be living in misery in cities. It should be living in dignity in the country, with food and nutrition security gained mainly by success in local and political struggle.

As shown above, the final Political Declaration agreed in September at the UN High-Level Meeting to prevent and control chronic diseases, refers to the environmental as well as the economic and social determinants of health and well-being, and also to

their political and gender determinants. This insight is not new, and over the years. Association members have done a lot to develop it. Wangari Maathai has made this conceptual framework real. Her work is exemplary. It now must multiply. Her monument needs to be all around us, in far greater number, variety, glory and splendour. For the survival of living things among which are us humans, what's needed maybe above all else, is more jungles, forests, woods, trees, and all that live in and by them and are nourished by them.

The editors

Wangari as African champion

Big sister, you will always empower us



Wangari Maathai's life, work, courage and testimony, has vast meaning for the teaching and practice of public health nutrition, in Africa and worldwide

Ruth Oniang'o writes:

What a loss! Kenya has lost its ambassador number one. Women have lost their most emphatic champion. Africa has lost a voice. The world has lost its champion. Yet it is also true that she fought the good fight and she won it. People like Wangari (as we fondly call her in Kenya) come only once in a lifetime.

The picture above embodies who she really was. I can only imagine what was going on through her head as she sat there on this great ancient indigenous tree, with a smile on her face, looking so much at peace. Her love for trees drove her to fight to save the environment, to fight for the most vulnerable in our society, to fight injustices, to fight for democratic space. This she did, taking on strong governments and powerful men.

I came close to her during my own time in the 10th Kenyan parliament in 2003, and enjoyed associating with her, listening to her words of wisdom. I would stay on in the evening if she walked in, to listen to her eloquence. After she received her Nobel Prize in 2004, the women in the 10th Parliament asked that Wangari should be made a Minister *at Large* of Kenya, a position that could allow her to go as she wished to promote our country. We felt she had more than earned that position.

The world appreciated Wangari before we did in Kenya, and gave her awards which we only read about in the newspapers, and many we did not even get to know of. Wangari had a vision about the environment and paid dearly for her efforts to protect trees and forests, especially in Kenya.

Without Wangari, Kenya's forests would now be all but gone. Because of Wangari's persistence Kenyans, including schoolchildren, understand now why we should not just cut trees, and why forests are vital for humanity's very survival. She just was unique. With her around, whenever an issue came up of injustice, we knew Wangari would be there fighting for us.

Her legacy lives

We are mourning her, and we feel a big loss already. But what a legacy this lady has left! She will never be forgotten. Wangari shed tears over killing of trees, Wangari was there with mothers of political prisoners (ready to undress), Wangari was there to stop a whole strong, feared government from mutilating the environment, Wangari fought relentlessly for justice and for what she believed to be right.

Also there was a humble, tenderhearted, caring Wangari. That great smile says it all. Her passion to save the environment gave her the energy to do it all. What she did not achieve in life will now be achieved in her death. She connected destruction of the environment with increasing hunger and poverty and with physical insecurity in Africa.

She connected it with corruption and bad governance, and with increasing intolerance between human beings. Her passion for these issues spread all over the world. By the time she died, Kenyans had started to appreciate what she had been fighting for all these years. Wangari was not the downtrodden Kenyan woman that she fought to see liberated. She had overcome that to become a true world leader, in a league she has opened up for all women of Kenya. Our new constitution, now in its second year of implementation, is all about people's rights and has given Kenyan women exceptional democratic space. We shall always be indebted to Wangari for this.

To celebrate Wangari's life, let us each plant a tree this year, and another next year, and always, and name them after her, and make sure we take care of them. I bet they will grow to be as tenacious as their namesake.

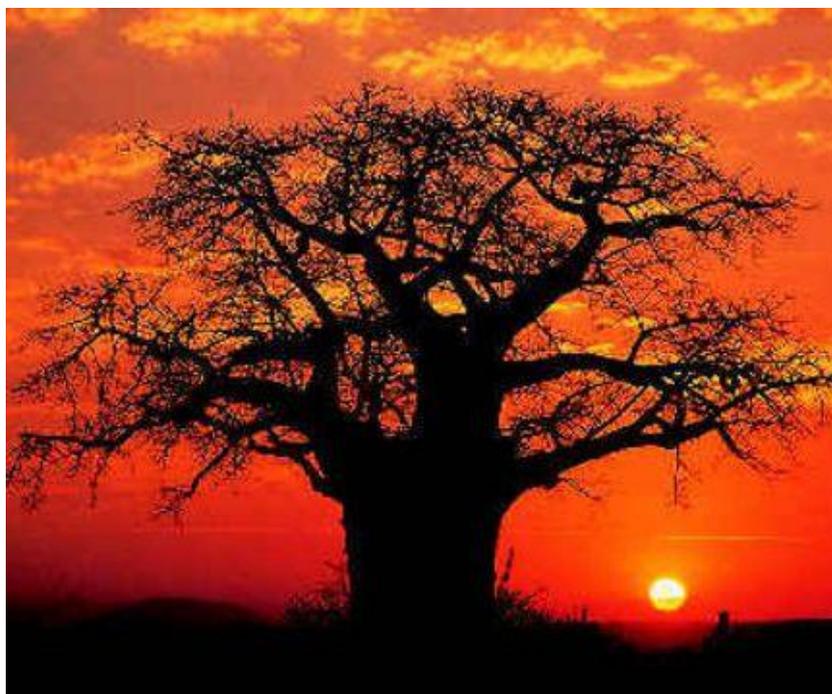
Let me acknowledge the humility of our Government that has decided to give Wangari a state funeral, and to declare two days of national mourning. This is recognition befitting a national hero. Even as the rest of the world mourns and celebrates her life, we Kenyans need to be at the forefront. For this moment, I am very proud to be a Kenyan. We thank Wangari for making us also stand tall. Wangari did it all for us, and her spirit will do even more for humanity as we all strive to live to her legacy.

Ruth Oniang'o is an Association founder member

She is founder-editor of the African Journal of Food, Agriculture, Nutrition and Development

Wangari as planter of trees of peace

Creation of a world that is good to live in



The baobab, which stores water, is one of very many species of native tree Africa that have sustained populations since Homo sapiens emerged in Africa

Colin Tudge writes:

Wangari Maathai began the Green Belt Movement in 1977 – partly, as she said in her Nobel acceptance speech [which is below, at the end of these eulogies] ‘responding to needs identified by rural women, namely lack of firewood, clean drinking water, balanced diets, shelter and income’. The people in this world whose opinions really count are those

who are closest to the action and in Africa, as Professor Maathai pointed out, ‘Women are the primary caretakers’.

From the outlet the movement focused on planting trees, to supply the things that once were taken for granted but in the last half-century, in Wangari Maathai’s lifetime, have gone missing. But the psychology is vital too, as all managers everywhere recognise, for ‘tree planting is simple and guarantees successful results within a reasonable amount of time’.

Since 1977 the women (primarily) of Kenya’s Green Belt Movement have planted no fewer than 30 million trees. The trees do indeed ‘provide fuel, food, shelter and income to support their children’s education and household needs’: everything that was hoped of them. More than that though, they have made the whole environment more agreeable. Kenyan people, women in particular, must still walk many miles carrying water and provisions. Whether you walk in burning sun or in shade, makes all the difference, not only to the individual’s comfort, but to social life. The women in treeless places had to some extent lost the habit of standing and talking. It was just too hard. Now they do it again. The temper of the whole society is improved. In the same way, Plato and Aristotle both taught their pupils in groves of trees around Athens. Mood is everything.

Creating a world good to live in

As Wangari Maathai explained, the Green Belt Movement uses peace trees to reconcile disputing communities. ‘The elders of the Kikuyu carried a staff from the *thigi* tree that, when placed between two disputing sides, caused them to stop fighting and seek reconciliation’. This tradition is widespread in Africa. Other societies worldwide, not least in North America, mediate discussions through ‘talking sticks’. Only those with the stick in hand may talk, and when they do, everybody else must listen.

The Green Belt Movement is not alone. There have been and are comparable initiatives everywhere in the world, not least in India. But it encapsulates everything that seems to matter most. It is a people’s movement. It deals with realities – ‘real’ realities: those of day-to-day life, of human beings and other living creatures. All the abstractions – the need to create agrarian economies, rooted in biological reality and a true concern for human well-being – are put into practice. What is happening in Kenya could be re-enacted in a thousand different forms, all over the world: people themselves creating a world that is good to live in. The contrast with the grand schemes that are now imposed *de haute en bas* – ‘top down’ – in the name of ‘progress’, is absolute.

Trees are at the heart of things. How could it be otherwise? The human lineage began in trees. We have left our first ancestors far behind but we are creatures of the forest still.

This is the concluding passage of Colin Tudge’s The Secret Life of Trees (Penguin, 2005)
It can be obtained from www.colintudge.com.

Wangari as visionary of a better world
The power of small acts of ordinary people



Encouraging and empowering women of Kenya to sustain their livelihoods, outside the headquarters of the Green Belt Movement in Nairobi, in 2004.

Olivia Yambi writes:

The last time I interacted with Wangari Maathai was when she was invited to address the Kenya UN Country Team meeting held at the Mount Kenya Safari Club in January 2010. A key theme under discussion was Disaster Risk Reduction. It was only fitting that Professor Maathai should be the main speaker on the subject at this meeting. Yes, she spoke about trees and conserving the environment, but as would have been expected she reminded us of the struggles to have democratic space.

Her death came at a time when Kenya was facing a devastating drought with 3.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. It serves again to remind us of how prescient she was with her message of empowering communities, especially women, to build their resilience in the face of environmental disasters by the simple act of planting trees. As we move forward with renewed commitment to disaster risk reduction, even more critical in the face of climate change, we should remember her message that small acts by ordinary people can become a movement that has the potential to preserve and transform our environment and livelihoods and make a better world for our children. Without this, the right to nutrition will not be realised.

Olivia Yambi is head of UNICEF in Kenya

Wangari as direct action campaigner

Planting trees is dangerous



When Senator Obama came to visit in 2006. His Kenyan father, and Wangari Maathai, won travelling awards at the same time, to universities in the USA

Stuart Jeffries writes:

One day Wangari Maathai went out with some friends into Nairobi to plant a tree. This was not unusual, given that she has been responsible for planting 30 million trees in Kenya in the past three decades. But on that day, 8 January 1999, as she raised her hoe to dig a hole for the sapling, she and her friends were attacked by 200 guards armed with machetes, whips, bows and arrows, and swords. ‘When the blow came’, she writes in her autobiography *Unbowed*, ‘I felt not so much pain as surprise, even though from the beginning the thugs clearly wanted to hurt or even kill us’.

Her face still warm with blood from a deep head wound, she reported the attack to some local police officers and offered to take them to the scene so her assailants could be arrested. They insisted instead that she sign a formal complaint. Bloodied but defiant, Maathai took a finger, dipped it in her blood and signed the complaint with an X. Nobody was arrested, and no wonder: that evening she saw TV footage suggesting that the police might have colluded with her attackers.

This was not the first or last time she would be attacked for planting trees. Maathai has been beaten frequently, often by riot police, and jailed repeatedly. She was

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described as 'that mad woman' by former Kenyan president Daniel arap Moi, who said she had no moral authority to speak on environmental or any other political matters because she was a divorcee (the fact that he too was divorced did not seem to matter). Once a Kenyan MP from the ruling Kanu party even suggested that she should be forcibly circumcised. Yet no one has succeeded in frightening her away from her chosen course: 'It is wonderful when you don't have the fear, and a lot of the time I don't' she says. 'I focus on what needs to be done instead'.

Why was tree planting so dangerous? The main reason was that it flew in the face of then president Moi's policy of development for Kenya. When Maathai received her head wound, she had been leading a protest against the planned development of Nairobi's only remaining forest. 'They wanted to take public land that was there for the common good and give it to friends and political supporters to build expensive houses and golf courses', she says. By that time she had become a veteran at successfully opposing such luxury developments. In 1989 she had campaigned against the construction by Moi's business associates of a 60-storey skyscraper in the middle of Uhuru Park, one of Nairobi's few remaining green lungs. 'It would have been like building over Hyde Park', Maathai says. That project foundered in the face of the opposition generated by her campaign.

Later, when Moi had to cancel the plans to build on Karura Forest, he said he couldn't understand why people would object to a development that would be an example of Nairobi striding forward into the future.

Original life in rural Kenya

But Wangari Maathai's life struggle has been against such deforestation in her country. She was born in 1940 in a village called Ithi in the central highlands, about which she writes nostalgically. 'We lived in a land abundant with shrubs, creepers, ferns and trees ... Because rain fell regularly and reliably, clean drinking water was everywhere. There were large, well-watered fields of maize, beans, wheat and vegetables. Hunger was virtually unknown'.

Little of Kenya is like that now. The colonial era and mismanagement since independence have, she says, given rise to poverty, hunger, soil erosion, even political corruption. Today only 2 per cent of the country's indigenous forest remains. In 1977, she founded the Green Belt Movement, a grassroots organisation made up mostly of poor women from rural areas. Her aim was to help these women by paying them (initially from her own funds, but later with grants, the largest from the UN) to plant trees in their villages; for Maathai, conservation and feminism have always been closely allied. Those 30 million trees have been planted by an estimated 100,000 women in Kenya, and Maathai has become known as the 'tree woman' whose green activism has become a model around the world.

When the British came

Given her belief that ‘without the British, we would not have had the corruption and greed that accompanied the first 30 years of independence’, it's disarming that Wangari Maathai manages to smile so much during this interview with a British journalist in a smart hotel in the capital of the former colonial power. British rule not only created Kenya from 42 ethnic groups, but initiated the devastation of the landscape and worsened the position of women in Kenya, she says. ‘When the British arrived [shortly after the 1885 Congress of Berlin that carved up the continent between European powers], they started cutting down indigenous forests and replacing them with monocultural forests, such as pines and eucalyptus trees, which were quick growing and so would supply material for telephone poles and housing’. This led to soil erosion and destroyed natural habitats.

Then there was the colonial administration's eroding of the position of Kenyan women. ‘When the British came they introduced the concept of title deeds for land, which they insisted be in the name of the head of the household. That was always the man’, explains Maathai. ‘That undermined the traditional setting whereby land belongs to the family. This reform stopped women having legal right to the land’. British rule also meant that arable land was used increasingly for cash crops (tea, coffee, sugar cane) rather than subsistence farming. ‘When the cash came in, it went into a bank account held by the man, even though it was women and children who did the work in the fields. Women were completely disenfranchised’. That is a prime reason why the struggle of the Green Belt Movement was closely connected with improving the lot of rural women.

Unlike many of the women for whom she campaigned, Maathai was lucky. She was educated at St Cecilia's in the regional centre of Nyeri, a boarding school run by a Catholic mission. In 1960 she was one of hundreds of Kenyans sent to study at colleges in the US as part of the ‘Kennedy airlift’ of Africans to US tertiary education. She earned her first degree in biology from Mount St Scholastica College in Kansas and a masters in biological sciences from the University of Pittsburgh. ‘The time I was there coincided with Martin Luther King's campaigning. When it became clear Kenya was going to become independent, King's words were resonant for me: Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!’.

She returned to Nairobi filled with hopes, but was brought down with a bump. The job she had been offered in the department of zoology at the University of Nairobi was withdrawn. ‘I began to see that I was being mistreated as a woman’, she says. She got a job in a different university department, but soon found herself campaigning against discriminatory terms of service that meant women academics received less pay than men, and were denied pensions and medical insurance for children.

The first doctorate

Maathai became the first East African woman to hold a doctorate (one section of *Unbowed* begins, divertingly: 'In 1971, I completed my PhD on the development and differentiation of gonads in bovines'). But such was the sexism she encountered at university in Kenya and from Moi's political allies that she was unable quietly to continue her academic work. 'That has been the tragedy of my life and that of many other well-trained African women', she says. 'We have not been able to do what we trained to do. I had to take part in the struggle rather than do academic work'. Yet, she says, she realised her encounters with discrimination 'were luxuries by comparison with the immiseration of poor, rural women. And I knew that healing the environment was central to my country's future health'.

Maathai got a reputation for being a strong, and for some troublesome, woman. In 1977, her husband, a former politician, instituted divorce proceedings. In court he is reported to have said that he wanted a divorce because she was 'too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn and too hard to control'.

When Obama came to visit

Moi's rule came to an end in 2002 when an election swept a multi-party coalition to power. One of the new MPs was Maathai, who was elected with 98 per cent of the votes cast. 'I got into politics because I wanted to show that we don't need to be thieves. There must be another way of doing politics in my country'. From 2003 to 2005, she served as assistant environmental minister, but found the budget for environmental action 'peanuts'. By comparison with the security budget, 'it is nothing. But the Kenyan army has not fought for decades! What we have done is hold seminars for the army and demonstrated to them that the land they are supposed to be protecting is disappearing under their feet'. They have now started planting trees, she says, starting in their own barracks.

And they are not the only recent converts to tree planting. Rarely does a visiting dignitary miss the chance to be photographed with Maathai planting a tree. US senator Barack Obama, whose father was Kenyan, has been among the latest.

Maathai says her hopes for her country are growing. 'I have seen rivers that were brown with silt become clean-flowing again ... The job is hardly over, but it no longer seems impossible'.

*This article by Stuart Jeffries was published in The Guardian in early 1997.
It also appeared on our home page last month.*

Wangari as far-sighted environmentalist

'We need water, we need those forests'



Being confronted by and confronting hired armed guards, as she arrives to plant trees in the Karuwa forest, 1999. She was beaten up on several occasions

Joseph Kabiru writes:

I grew up in the Mau forest, the largest indigenous forest in east Africa. The Molo river ran from my home village of Moto, and its waters feed Lake Victoria. The 'shamba' system, a colonial inheritance, allowed poor families like mine to cultivate food crops in forest areas, in return for which they had to plant and care for trees.

In theory, it allowed landless communities to grow food while conserving the forests. For my family, it meant ready access to food crops, firewood and clean water. But Wangari Maathai was bitterly opposed to the shamba system. She argued that allowing food production within the forest was slowly damaging the centuries-old eco-system, no matter how many new trees were planted.

In a 2005 interview, she explained her opposition to me: 'We owe it to ourselves and to the next generation to conserve the environment so that we can bequeath our children a sustainable world that benefits all'.

In 1977, when she founded the Green Belt Movement, the concepts of environmental sustainability and eco-system protection were barely recognised around the world, let alone in rural Kenya. But as time went on her warnings proved to be accurate. The Mau forest began to shrink, and many of the rivers that flowed from it, including the Molo, dried up.

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But she persevered. And hers was a campaign always rooted in the real world, recognising the dilemma facing poor communities with their own basic needs. She had an amazing ability to connect complex environmental issues with their impact on ordinary lives, enabling her to persuade rather than force people to join her movement.

She worked with rural communities to increase their access to land, firewood and clean water outside the forest regions, and launched the 'Enough is enough' campaign, which showed the Kenyan authorities how agriculture and tourism around Kenya's lakes and valleys would be damaged if the rivers from the Mau forest continued drying up.

When I interviewed her about job losses in the timber industry, as the government finally began to introduce tighter controls on logging, she said: 'I know there is pain when sawmills close and people lose jobs, but we have to make a choice. We need water and we need these forests'.

Speaking truth to power

She was a fearless opponent of corruption, a thorn in the side of the male-dominated Kenyan authorities – 'that woman', they used to call her – and was never afraid to speak the truth to the most powerful world leaders when they dragged their feet on climate change.

In my current job at the aid agency Cafod, I already see her true legacy: ordinary men and women in rural communities around the world, from Cambodia to Brazil, who take her as their inspiration when standing up against the logging companies, exposing collusion and corruption by the authorities, and protecting their forest heritage for future generations.

Personally, my lasting memory of Wangari Maathai will be her hearty laughter even as she articulated complex environmental issues, and her fierce determination to save the forest where I grew up. She was determined to save our lives in a way my family did not initially understand, but which she eventually persuaded us to demand.

She was my heroine, a global inspiration, and a true Kenyan warrior.

Joseph Kabiru works in Nairobi for the Catholic Agency for Overseas development (Cafod). This tribute appeared in The Guardian on 26 September.

Nobel Peace Prize speech
A life completed



Giving her Nobel speech: 'Responding to needs identified by rural women: lack of firewood, clean drinking water, balanced diets, shelter and income'

Here are extracts from the speech made in Oslo by Wangari Maathai seven years ago, on 10 December 2004, in acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize.

As the first African woman to receive this prize, I accept it on behalf of the people of Kenya and Africa, and indeed the world. I am especially mindful of women and the girl child. I hope it will encourage them to raise their voices and take more space for leadership. I know the honour also gives a deep sense of pride to our men, both old and young. As a mother, I appreciate the inspiration this brings to the youth, and urge them to use it to pursue their dreams.

Although this prize comes to me, it acknowledges the work of countless individuals and groups across the globe. They work quietly and often without recognition to protect the environment, promote democracy, defend human rights and ensure equality between women and men. By so doing, they plant seeds of peace. I know they, too, are proud today. To all who feel represented by this prize, I say: use it to advance your mission and meet the high expectations the world will place on us.

This honour is also for my family, friends, partners and supporters throughout the world. All of them helped shape the vision and sustain our work, which was often accomplished under hostile conditions. I am also grateful to the people of Kenya - who remained stubbornly hopeful that democracy could be realised and their

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environment managed sustainably. Because of this support, I am here today to accept this great honour.

My fellow Africans, as we embrace this recognition, let us use it to intensify our commitment to our people, to reduce conflicts and poverty and thereby improve their quality of life. Let us embrace democratic governance, protect human rights and protect our environment. I am confident that we shall rise to the occasion. I have always believed that solutions to most of our problems must come from us.

In this year's prize, the Norwegian Nobel Committee has placed the critical issue of environment and its linkage to democracy and peace before the world. For their visionary action, I am profoundly grateful. Recognising that sustainable development, democracy and peace are indivisible, is an idea whose time has come. Our work over the past 30 years has always appreciated and engaged these linkages.

My inspiration partly comes from my childhood experiences and observations of Nature in rural Kenya. It has been influenced and nurtured by the formal education I was privileged to receive in Kenya, the United States and Germany. As I was growing up, I witnessed forests being cleared and replaced by commercial plantations, which destroyed local biodiversity and the capacity of the forests to conserve water.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The basic needs of rural women

In 1977, when we started the Green Belt Movement, I was partly responding to needs identified by rural women, namely lack of firewood, clean drinking water, balanced diets, shelter and income. Throughout Africa, women are the primary caretakers, holding significant responsibility for tilling the land and feeding their families. As a result, they are often the first to become aware of environmental damage as resources become scarce and incapable of sustaining their families.

The women we worked with, said that unlike in the past, they were unable to meet their basic needs. This was due to the degradation of their immediate environment as well as the introduction of commercial farming, which replaced the growing of household food crops. But international trade controlled the price of the exports from these small-scale farmers, and a reasonable and just income could not be guaranteed. I came to understand that when the environment is destroyed, plundered or mismanaged, we undermine our quality of life and that of future generations.

Tree planting became a natural choice to address some of the initial basic needs identified by women. Also, tree planting is simple, attainable and guarantees quick, successful results within a reasonable amount time. This sustains interest and commitment.

So, together, we have planted over 30 million trees that provide fuel, food, shelter, and income to support their children's education and household needs. The activity also creates employment and improves soils and watersheds. Through their involvement, women gain some degree of power over their lives, especially their social and economic position and relevance in the family. This work continues.

Solutions begin in the community

Initially, the work was difficult because historically our people have been persuaded to believe that because they are poor, they lack not only capital, but also knowledge and skills to address their challenges. Instead they are conditioned to believe that solutions to their problems must come from 'outside'. Further, women did not realise that meeting their needs depended on their environment being healthy and well managed. They were also unaware that a degraded environment leads to a scramble for scarce resources and may culminate in poverty and even conflict. They were also unaware of the injustices of international economic arrangements.

In order to assist communities to understand these linkages, we developed a citizen education program, during which people identify their problems, the causes and possible solutions. They then make connections between their own personal actions and the problems they witness in the environment and in society. They learn that our world is confronted with a litany of woes: corruption, violence against women and children, disruption and breakdown of families, and disintegration of cultures and communities. They also identify the abuse of drugs and chemical substances, especially among young people. There are also devastating diseases that are defying cures or occurring in epidemic proportions. Of particular concern are HIV/AIDS, malaria, and diseases associated with malnutrition.

On the environment front, they are exposed to many human activities that are devastating to the environment and societies. These include widespread destruction of ecosystems, especially through deforestation, climatic instability, and contamination in the soils and waters that all contribute to excruciating poverty.

In the process, the participants discover that they must be part of the solutions. They realise their hidden potential and are empowered to overcome inertia and take action. They come to recognise that they are the primary custodians and beneficiaries of the environment that sustains them.

Entire communities also come to understand that while it is necessary to hold their governments accountable, it is equally important that in their own relationships with each other, they exemplify the leadership values they wish to see in their own leaders, namely justice, integrity and trust.

Trees for peace

Initially the Green Belt Movement's tree planting activities did not address issues of democracy and peace. But it soon became clear that responsible governance of the environment was impossible without democratic space. Therefore the tree became a symbol for the democratic struggle in Kenya. Citizens were mobilised to challenge widespread abuses of power, corruption and environmental mismanagement. In Nairobi's Uhuru Park, at Freedom Corner, and in many parts of the country, trees of peace were planted to demand the release of prisoners of conscience and a peaceful transition to democracy. Through the Green Belt Movement, thousands of ordinary citizens were mobilised and empowered to take action and effect change. They learned to overcome fear and a sense of helplessness and moved to defend democratic rights.

In time, the tree became a symbol for peace and conflict resolution, especially during ethnic conflicts in Kenya when the Green Belt Movement used peace trees to reconcile disputing communities. During the re-writing of the Kenyan constitution, similar trees of peace were planted in many parts of the country to promote a culture of peace. Using trees as a symbol of peace is in keeping with a widespread African tradition. For example, the elders of the Kikuyu carried a staff from the *thigi* tree that, when placed between two disputing sides, caused them to stop fighting and seek reconciliation. Many communities in Africa have these traditions.

Such practices are part of an extensive cultural heritage, which contributes both to the conservation of habitats and to cultures of peace. With the destruction of these cultures and the introduction of new values, local biodiversity is no longer valued or protected and as a result, it is quickly degraded and disappears. For this reason, the Green Belt Movement explores the concept of cultural biodiversity, especially with respect to indigenous seeds and medicinal plants.

As we progressively understood the causes of environmental degradation, we saw the need for good governance. Indeed, the state of any county's environment is a reflection of the kind of governance in place, and without good governance there can be no peace. Many countries, which have poor governance systems, are also likely to have conflicts and poor laws protecting the environment.

In 2002, the courage, resilience, patience and commitment of members of the Green Belt Movement, other civil society organisations, and the Kenyan public, culminated in the peaceful transition to a democratic government and laid the foundation for a more stable society.

It is 30 years since we started this work. Activities that devastate the environment and societies continue unabated. Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a

shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own – indeed, to embrace the whole creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder. This will happen if we see the need to revive our sense of belonging to a larger family of life, with which we have shared our evolutionary process.

In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other. That time is now.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee has challenged the world to broaden the understanding of peace: there can be no peace without equitable development; and there can be no development without sustainable management of the environment in a democratic and peaceful space. This shift is an idea whose time has come.

I call on leaders, especially from Africa, to expand democratic space and build fair and just societies that allow the creativity and energy of their citizens to flourish. Those of us who have been privileged to receive education, skills, and experiences and even power must be role models for the next generation of leadership.

Dynamic culture

Culture plays a central role in the political, economic and social life of communities. Indeed, culture may be the missing link in the development of Africa. Culture is dynamic and evolves over time, consciously discarding retrogressive traditions, like female genital mutilation, and embracing aspects that are good and useful. Africans, especially, should re-discover positive aspects of their culture. In accepting them, they would give themselves a sense of belonging, identity and self-confidence.

There is also need to galvanise civil society and grassroots movements to catalyse change. I call upon governments to recognise the role of these social movements in building a critical mass of responsible citizens, who help maintain checks and balances in society. On their part, civil society should embrace not only their rights but also their responsibilities.

Further, industry and global institutions must appreciate that ensuring economic justice, equity and ecological integrity are of greater value than profits at any cost. The extreme global inequities and prevailing consumption patterns continue at the expense of the environment and peaceful co-existence. The choice is ours.

I would like to call on young people to commit themselves to activities that contribute toward achieving their long-term dreams. They have the energy and

creativity to shape a sustainable future. To the young people I say, you are a gift to your communities and indeed the world. You are our hope and our future.

The holistic approach to development, as exemplified by the Green Belt Movement, could be embraced and replicated in more parts of Africa and beyond. It is for this reason that I have established the Wangari Maathai Foundation to ensure the continuation and expansion of these activities. Although a lot has been achieved, much remains to be done.

As I conclude, I reflect on my childhood experience when I would visit a stream next to our home to fetch water for my mother. I would drink water straight from the stream. Playing among the arrowroot leaves I tried in vain to pick up the strands of frogs' eggs, believing they were beads. But every time I put my little fingers under them they would break. Later, I saw thousands of tadpoles: black, energetic, and wriggling through the clear water against the background of the brown earth. This is the world I inherited from my parents.

Today, over 50 years later, the stream has dried up, women walk long distances for water, which is not always clean, and children will never know what they have lost. The challenge is to restore the home of the tadpoles and give back to our children a world of beauty and wonder.

Acknowledgement and request

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