

Wangari Maathai

The “Tree Mother” of Africa and Her Green Belt Movement



Vision and Motivation

By the early 1970's, Wangari Muta Maathai, a Kenyan woman, had witnessed a myriad of overarching and negative effects of the Kenyan government's deforestation efforts. By converting forests into land for agricultural and residential uses, the government deforestation program only worsened Kenya's environmental decline, leading to severe droughts, soil erosion, and the natural conversion of farmland into arid desert-like soil. These changes deprived countless communities of the resources they needed to survive. Kenyan women, whose traditional role has always been to find firewood and water, were greatly affected by the destruction of these natural resources. As a result, Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement, a grassroots environmental non-governmental organization, on Earth Day in 1977. With the founding of the Green Belt Movement, Maathai launched a life-long campaign to put a stop to Kenya's environmental catastrophe and its attendant infringement on the right of all people to live healthy and sustainable lives.¹

Goals and Objectives

Maathai's goal at first was simply to preserve the environment, but she also sought to bring hope and empowerment to women, providing them with the confidence they would need to fight back against violations of their ways of life and their natural environments. In the movement's early stages, Maathai encouraged farmers, 70% of whom are women, to plant “greenbelts”, or lines of trees, to fight soil erosion and help restore natural resources. Her approach was simple: start by planting a few trees, and the change will gradually spread. In her own words, “Women who start to plant trees on

their farms influence their neighbors. Their neighbors eventually become involved. Now, we see the government reacting.”²

The Green Belt Movement’s work has not been limited to tree planting alone; it has also been working to empower women within Kenya. Working in cooperation with the National Council of Women of Kenya, Maathai’s group has provided services to Kenyan women and villages that include lessons on family planning, nutrition, and leadership skills. The Green Belt Movement has educated thousands of low-income women about forestry and created nearly 3,000 jobs.³

Leadership

Wangari Muta Maathai, the leader of the Green Belt Movement, was born in Kenya in 1940. Although her parents were farmers, Maathai received a full elementary and secondary education in Kenya, a rare accomplishment for most women at the time. Maathai went on to study biology in the United States and Germany, eventually becoming the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctoral degree. Maathai first became acquainted with Kenya’s environmental issues during her time as the chairperson of the National Council of Women. Both rural and urban women came to Maathai with stories of their struggles to combat the negative effects of climate change.⁴ In response, Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement, which in turn enabled women to storm to the frontlines of Kenya’s environmental struggle.



Her work inspired women to view environmental health as an inalienable human right, rather than a privilege that could be denied. Maathai quickly gained the affection of women across Africa, giving rise to her nickname as the "Tree Mother of Africa". In December 2002, Maathai was elected to Kenya’s Parliament with a stunning 98%

majority of the vote. Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki then appointed Maathai as Assistant Minister for the Environment. Two years later she was awarded a 2004 Nobel Peace Prize “for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace.”⁵

Civic Environment

Since gaining independence from Great Britain in 1963, Kenya has been plagued with political oppression. After President Daniel arap Moi took office in 1978, he consolidated power by bolstering his own ethnic group, the Kalenjin, while diminishing the political power of the Kikuyu ethnic group of which Maathai is a member. Since then, the Kikuyu have been accused of undermining the government through political activism, and have been victims of police brutality on many an occasion. Until the electoral success of the National Rainbow Coalition, an opposition movement, in 2002, the Kenyan government had been known for its use of political repression, state patronage, media control, dubious electoral procedures, and sponsorship of ethnic violence against the Kikuyu. Even after a successful democratic government change over, 21st century Kenya is still marred by electoral fraud, ethnic violence, and corruption.⁶

Maathai faced many of Kenya’s civic problems as she embarked on political activism. In 1989, alongside a small group of women, she staged a peaceful protest against the demolition of Nairobi's Uhuru Park. Developers had planned to replace the park with a 62-story business complex that would include luxury housing units, a new headquarters for the country’s ruling party, and a life-size statue of President arap Moi.⁷ Maathai and her supporters stood in solidarity against the demolition, sustaining severe injuries from police brutality. Yet the women refused to be silenced, instead taking their voices to court, where they argued that the park belonged to the people, and as such, privatization of the park was unjust. They lost the case but won the battle; the funders of the Uhuru Park demolition project pulled out their investment in response to the public outcry.⁸

Having antagonized the Kenyan president through her opposition to the Uhuru Park demolition, Maathai was repeatedly imprisoned, attacked, and targeted for assassination by the government. Because of the danger Maathai faced from the oppressive arap Moi regime, she received international attention and support that enabled her to withstand the regime's harassment. An Amnesty International letter-writing campaign helped secure Maathai's release from prison in 1991.⁹ Facing a hostile political climate in 1993, Maathai spent weeks in hiding; however, her elevated international profile again paid off when members of the international political community, such as Mikhail Gorbachev, pressured the Kenyan government to release her.¹⁰

Message and Audience

While the Green Belt Movement's message, stressing the urgency of improving environmental conditions in Kenya, was singular, Maathai hoped to disseminate that message to a variety of audiences. Within Kenya's borders, the Green Belt Movement targeted both the



Kenyan government and its people. As is evident in the Uhuru Park protests, Maathai wanted the government to understand how valuable and important the Kenyan environment is for its people. At the same time, the Kenyan people needed to understand that concept as well, so Maathai created tree-planting programs that offered incentives to Kenyans for successfully improving the environment. The Green Belt Movement paid women for each tree planted that lived past three months, providing not only a sustainable incentive, but also a constant stream of income for the women who needed it most.

Outreach Activities

In 1986, the Green Belt Movement established a Pan-African Green Belt Network, hoping to spread its approach to environmental conservation and community building across the continent. By 1997, the Movement was operating in 30 African countries as well as the United States, providing income for over 80,000 people.¹¹

Since Kenya's violent elections in December 2007, the Green Belt Movement has further expanded its horizon to include community development work. Launching its "Peace Tent Initiative," the movement hopes to facilitate reconciliation between ethnic groups that have clashed in the past.¹²

Encompassing the arenas of environmental conservation, democracy, women's empowerment, community development, and conflict resolution, the Green Belt Movement has spread across the world, emerging in the United States, United Kingdom, West India, Japan and South America.¹³ The Green Belt Movement has now planted more than 30 million trees across Kenya, and is helping to facilitate the planting of trees elsewhere.¹⁴ By mobilizing rural, poverty-stricken women and men in developing nations, Wangari Muta Maathai has started a movement which has altered the face of the planet and given a sense of hope and empowerment to people worldwide.

Learn More

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¹⁴ Ibid.