

Pioneering elders plant the seeds of our future.

Wangari Maathai was a ground-breaking thinker, a pioneer in making clear the links between human rights, environment and governance.

A Kenyan-born environmental and political activist, Wangari was a woman of many firsts! She was the first female scholar in East and Central Africa to be awarded a Doctorate, and the first female professor in Kenya. Her commitment to sustainable development, democracy and peace was widely celebrated when in 2004, she became the first environmentalist, and the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

On accepting the award, Professor Maathai responded: “I believe the Nobel committee was sending a message that protecting and restoring the environment contributes to peace; it is peace work. I always felt that our work was not simply about planting trees. It was about inspiring people to take charge of their environment, the system that governed them, their lives, and their future.”

In 1977, Professor Wangari Maathai, a champion of community-based tree planting, founded a non-profit organisation aimed at empowering communities, particularly women, to conserve the environment and improve livelihoods. The organisation, the Green Belt Movement (GBM) was established in response to the call from rural Kenyan women that their streams were drying up, their food supply was less secure, and they had to walk further and further to get firewood for fuel and fencing. Tree planting was identified as a simple, accessible action that could, in a relatively short amount of time, meet some of the women’s initial needs.

Through her work with women in the Green Belt Movement, Professor Maathai states: “I came to understand that when the environment is destroyed, plundered or mismanaged, we undermine our quality of life and that of future generations.” The GBM supported women to work together to grow seedlings and plant trees to bind the soil, store rainwater, provide food and firewood. Today, the Green Belt Movement has planted more than 51 million trees and inspired the United Nations to launch a campaign that led to the planting of 11 billion trees worldwide. To date, more than 30,000 women have been trained in forestry, food processing, bee-keeping, and other trades that help them earn income while preserving their lands and resources.

In 2010 in partnership with the University of Nairobi, Professor Maathai founded the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies. She maintained her position as Chair of the Board of the Green Belt Movement until her death in 2011. The Movement and the institute continue to uphold Wangari’s vision of community development work that encompasses the arenas of environmental conservation, democracy, community empowerment and conflict resolution.

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Professor Maathai’s life work is testament to the contributions she made to thinking about ecology, development, gender, and African cultures and religions. In addition to her many honorary Doctorates and multiple awards she wrote and published four books: *The Green Belt Movement*; *Unbowed: A Memoir*; *The Challenge for Africa*; and *Replenishing the Earth*. She was also the subject of a documentary film, [Taking Root: the Vision of Wangari Maathai](#) (Marlboro Productions, 2008).

In her Nobel speech, Professor Wangari Maathai acknowledged that although she was the one receiving the prize, the prize really acknowledges the work of countless individuals and groups across the globe who 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, she argues ... “they plant seeds of peace.”

We are delighted to be honouring the legacy of this African hero and all those who have and continue to heed her call to “embrace democratic governance, protect human rights and protect our environment.”

To find out more about Professor Maathai and the Green Belt Movement visit:
<http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/>



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