

## Introduction

# Wangari Maathai, the Global Icon

In presenting the Nobel Peace Prize to Professor Wangari Muta Maathai in 2004, Ole Danbolt Mjoes, chair of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, alluded to the multidimensional nature of this remarkable woman's public career: "Peace on earth depends on our ability to secure our living environment. Maathai stands at the front of the fight to promote ecologically viable social, economic, and cultural development in Kenya and in Africa. She has taken a holistic approach to sustainable development that embraces democracy, human rights and women's rights in particular. She thinks globally and acts locally."<sup>1</sup>

For over three decades, Wangari Maathai waged a fierce battle for environmental conservation, human rights, democracy, sustainable development, gender equity, and the eradication of poverty. This activism put her on a collision course with the Kenyan government from 1978 to 2002, as the regime became increasingly authoritarian and corrupt and progressively failed to deliver basic services to the majority of the population.

For Maathai, corruption was lethal. She captured her ire toward the vice in these words:

If it is a crime to kill a million people in Rwanda in 1994, it should be a crime to steal millions of dollars from ordinary Africans, thereby causing the death [of] millions of innocent people through sustained hunger and malnutrition, lack of adequate health care, and inflationary prices which make it impossible for millions of Africans to provide their families with basic needs. Why is this type of a crime tolerated by the international community? Why is the victim to blame while the culprit goes free and lives in comfort?<sup>2</sup>

An activist most of her adult life in Kenya, Maathai paid heavily for her outspoken and at times biting criticism of the government. But at the same time, she acquired global recognition and inspired millions to commit to protecting and rejuvenating the environment by planting trees. She birthed and nurtured the Green Belt Movement (GBM), renowned for planting over 50 million trees in Kenya. For Maathai, to plant a tree was to plant hope and peace. At the time of her death in 2011, the movement had mushroomed into a multipronged organization that continued to promote a holistic approach in focusing on environmental protection, the strengthening of rural communities, and the economic empowerment of those involved in the movement; today, GBM has chapters all over the world.

Maathai had a heightened sense of urgency regarding the need to conserve the environment. She believed that it “was not a matter for tomorrow” and that “the environment is [an] everyday issue . . . the air we breathe.”

Maathai’s campaign for environmental conservation was not the first of its kind in Kenya. During the colonial period, from the mid-1920s but gathering momentum in the 1930s and throughout the 1940s, the colonial government had waged a protracted battle to curb soil erosion. Premising its approach on the colonial contempt for African husbandry and land management practices, the government introduced mandatory soil conservation measures that Africans perceived as irrational and punitive. Many viewed the reforestation, terracing, and other conservation measures as useless interventions that did not address the primary reason for the depletion of soil fertility and erosion. Peasants attributed the degradation to the overuse of land caused by a shortage of arable terrain. In the past, communities had practiced shifting cultivation to enable some of the land to lie fallow and thereby regain its fertility, but this was no longer possible during the colonial period. Despite population increases, land alienation for settler agriculture, and the freezing of boundaries, families had to share the same pieces of land, which became increasingly degraded over time.

The task of environmental conservation remains immense and urgent. The story of the hummingbird trying to put out a massive forest fire while all the other

animals stand by totally overwhelmed and powerless is a befitting analogy to Maathai's relentless effort to curb environmental degradation despite daunting political opposition, intimidation, shaming, and even physical abuse. Like Maathai, the hummingbird had its critics. Maathai captured the skepticism with which her environmental work in Kenya was received with reference to the little bird's story:

“What do you think you can do? You are too little. This fire is too big. Your wings are too little and your beak so small, you can only bring a small drop of water at a time.” But as [the other animals] continued to discourage it, it turns to them without wasting any time and tells them “*I am doing the best I can.*” And that to me is what all of us should do. We should always feel like a hummingbird.<sup>3</sup>

Maathai transformed the lives and worldviews of millions of people across socioeconomic and geographic divides, helping some of them overcome their impoverished and dejected livelihoods to become ardent conservationists empowered to improve their lot in life.

She waged a fearless struggle to protect forests and water catchment areas and encouraged sustainable and equitable utilization of all natural resources. However, her pursuit of these issues, for the public good, challenged political interest groups and elicited extensive opposition from the government. It required great courage and resilience for Maathai to resist her detractors.

Her political activism was at times considered subversive, and her confrontation with agents of the regime occasionally resulted in arrests. Yet she did not hesitate to question the status quo. More often than not, she put her life on the line as she championed various causes.

Maathai was a global environmental icon and change agent when she won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 and joined an elite group of just seventeen women who have received that award from its inception in 1901 to 2018. She was, moreover, the first of three African women to receive the prize. The others are Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of Liberia from 2006 to 2018, and Leymah Gbowee, Sirleaf's fellow Liberian who was involved in peace advocacy work among women. Maathai herself continued to advocate for the welfare of women throughout her public career.

This book explores Maathai's life within the historical, socioeconomic, and political contexts of her time. As an activist and ambassador for environmental conservation and ecological sustainability, she spurred a movement that gained a global following. Working with a local and international network of partners and supporters, she inspired and was inspired by populations far and wide. The book examines, in summary fashion, the nature, reach, and significance of Maathai's advocacy. She thought and networked globally but largely worked at the grassroots level within Kenya. Her post-Nobel Peace Prize career was dominated by external engagements on diverse international forums.

This work is also a reflection on Maathai's struggle against a regime that sought to mar the political space with undemocratic practices and the abuse of human rights. Consumed by a desire to achieve political freedom for all Kenyans, she pursued her quest for democracy and respect for human rights in multiple ways, such as demonstrating at Uhuru Park's Freedom Corner with the mothers of political prisoners and vying for political office.

Another prominent aspect of Maathai's public career was her deep concern for the welfare of the average Kenyan, or *mwananchi*.<sup>4</sup> Depending on their location, low-income Kenyans endure different challenges, but they all face poverty in common. The rural family might experience poverty as a result of diminishing harvests caused by inadequate and overutilized land, and deforestation stemming from an overdependence on firewood and a lack of reforestation can result in soil erosion due to a dearth of topsoil cover. The GBM has focused on these and other problems of the rural poor. Meanwhile, the urban poor are an expanding population with little wiggle room in their crowded cities. Maathai's struggle for Uhuru Park in Nairobi was motivated by the need to salvage a recreational space that offered the urban poor a reprieve from their overcrowded slum dwellings.

Whether as a university professor, at the helm of the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) and the GBM, in parliament, or as a UN ambassador, Wangari Maathai worked for the common good. One

woman's vision of raising community awareness about the weighty matter of protecting the environment through planting trees spawned a global movement that impacted the world's understanding of the significance of environmental conservation and sustainable development. It also emboldened a broad public of rural women and men to confront their fears, empower themselves, and transform their lives.