



**EMBASSY OF KENYA
To Ethiopia and Djibouti
&
Permanent Mission to the African Union,
Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the
United Nations Commission for Africa**

**STATEMENT ON THE OCCASION OF THE
WANGARI MEMORIAL TREE PLANTING
CEREMONY**

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**Your Excellencies,
Dear Friends
Colleagues,**

I wish to thank you most sincerely for heeding our call – to commemorate a great daughter of Kenya and leader of the world. Prof. Wangari Muta Maathai.

On 25 September 2011, Wangari Maathai bid farewell to the mortal world after battling with one of the growing challenges of our times, cancer.

Prof Maathai is an inigma, difficult to aulogise. Given her complex wholesome, I could not detail Wangari exhaustively. I am sure each of you have experienced in different ways. My remarks are therefore Wangare through my own eyes and experiences of her.

Prof. Maathai is a pathbreaker in many ways and that is why her imprint is visible everywhere: in her rural home in Nyeri, her country Kenya, her region- East and Central Africa, the African contient, and indeed the whole world. This is evidenced by the many calls and inquiries we are receiving about this untimely demise from everywhere. I want at this point to thank everyone that has send messages of sympathy and condolences to her family, friends and Kenya. The death of Prof Mathai is truelly a great loss to the all of us.

This premier Kenyan environmentalist was the first African woman to win the coveted Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. Significantly the nobel committee has found, for the first time, in her profound work a link between the way human being manage the environment and sustainable peace. Today we know that the survival of the human race depends on this nexus.

Sometimes described as the "Tree Lady," the 71-year-old was at the forefront of empowering rural women through her Green Belt Movement to plant trees to save the planet. Today, as we commemorate her the only way I know how, the entire of Kenya is on a greening match – planting indigenous trees. Awakened to her message to save mother earth. It is a message that is fast becoming a way of life in Kenya as we aim and commit, within our constitution, to increase our forest cover to 10%.

Those that met, and had the opportunity and pleasure of working with Prof Maathai will testify to her human touch. Her faith in the youth and the patience with which she mentored us, with reinforced values, underscoring the dignity of the person and the necessary to strike the balance between human activity and nature is unsurpassed. She believed and advocated for reproduction – of knowledge, of ideas, of fundamental values. All these profound ideas were espoused with the simplicity of a great professor.

As a person, Prof Maathai struck anyone she came into contact with instantaneously with her composure and self assurance; a radiating smile that reassured her companions young and old; a strong believe in the power of reproduction to guarantee the future. Her sharp and direct manner, on any matter no matter its sensitivity, the context and the risks involved, left everyone in awe.

Prof Maathar was a first in many spaces:

- a) The 1st Eastern African woman to attain a PHD in anatomy in 1971
- b) The 1st President of the AU Economic, Social and Cultural Council.
- c) A goodwill ambassador for an initiative aimed at protecting the Congo basin forest ecosystem

d) First African woman to receive the Nobel prize for "her contribution to [sustainable development](#), democracy and peace."

Politically, she is a leading political activist who dedicated her life to democratic reforms and respect for human rights in general and women's rights in particular. Yet, although she was first, she was able to carry people along with her.

These attributed are captured in the hundreds of quotes that have been put together by various authors and that are all accessible through the various communication outlets.

I have picked a few of these quotes that i find inspiring for me to share with this gathering.

On mentoring and encourage youth participation

1. It is very important for young people not to be afraid of engaging in areas that are not common to the youth. Get involved in local activities, get involved in local initiatives, be involved in leadership positions because you can't learn unless you are involved. And if you make mistakes that is alright too because we all make mistakes and we learn from those mistakes. You gain confidence from learning, failing and rising again."

On values of each ones participation

2. We're constantly being bombarded by problems that we face and sometimes we can get completely overwhelmed. [But] we should always feel like a hummingbird. I may feel insignificant, but I don't want to be like the other animals watching the planet go down the drain. I'll be a hummingbird, I'll do the best I can.

On the imperative for a paradigm shift to deal with climate change

3. 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 of creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder. Recognizing that sustainable development, democracy and peace are indivisible is an idea whose time has come.

On the link between life and environment

4. It's really amazing. You plant a seed; it germinates and looking so fragile, and within a very short time it becomes a huge tree. It gives you shade and if it's a fruit tree it gives you fruit... to build and transforms lives... We want to see many Africans planting trees. There is absolutely no excuse to stop desertification because this is something that is doable and cheap.
5. The environment and the economy are really both two sides of the same coin. You cannot sustain the economy if you don't take care of the environment because we know that the resources that we use whether it is oil, energy, land ... all of these are the basis in which development happens. And development is what we say generates a good economy and puts money in our pockets. If we cannot sustain the environment, we can't not sustain ourselves."

On grounding the understanding of society on peoples ways of life

6. In trying to explain this linkage, I was inspired by a traditional African tool that has three legs and a basin to sit on. To me the three legs represent three critical pillars of just and stable societies. The first leg stands for democratic space, where rights are respected, whether they are human rights, women's rights, children's rights, or environmental rights. The second represents sustainable and

equitable management and resources. And the third stands for cultures of peace that are deliberately cultivated within communities and nations. The basin, or seat, represents society and its prospects for development. Unless all three legs are in place, supporting the seat, no society can thrive. Neither can its citizens develop their skills and creativity. When one leg is missing, the seat is unstable; when two legs are missing, it is impossible to keep any state alive; and when no legs are available, the state is as good as a failed state. No development can take place in such a state either. Instead, conflict ensues.

Prof Wangari Muta Mathaai is legend and legends do not die, they provide the compass to navigate society. Today we commemorate this legend the way she would most prefer. In her interview after winning the noble price, one journalist posed, 'now prof Mathai, what next?' her answer, "trees, trees, trees, plant more trees!" She marked every turn in her life with planting of trees. When she was appointed chair of the National Council of the Women of Kenya, she planted trees, when she was named a noble winner, she planted a tree, when she protested for the preservation of the environment, she planted trees, when she visited an institution, she planted trees.

Now as we bid her fare thy well, I want to invite you to join me and my staff to do what she would have done if she had a chance, plant trees. Karibuni!