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Celebrating the life and legacy of Wangari Maathai

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The whitewashing of the environmental movement means tremendous achievements are overlooked in the global South. Pioneering activists such as the Kenyan thinker and organiser Wangari Maathai have had a profound impact on the shape of environmentalism globally and our understanding of what can be achieved to create healthier and more sustainable livelihoods. We reflect on her legacy and why it remains so important.

*This post is a winning entry in the LSE student writing competition **Black Forgotten Heroes**, launched by the **Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa**.*

Dr Wangari Muta Maathai was a Kenyan environmental and human rights activist and, notably, a woman of many firsts. Maathai was the first woman from Central and East Africa to earn a doctorate, obtaining her PhD from the University of Nairobi in 1971, and the first black and African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize ‘for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace’ in 2004. Yet her story and her accomplishments remain virtually untold throughout the global North, despite

her activism creating significant change and a lasting impact on women's lives and the environment today.



Wangari Maathai. Photo credit: Martin Rowe. Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

Biography

Maathai was born in 1940 in Ithi, a small village in colonial Kenya. After completing her early education in the country, Maathai earned both her Bachelor's and Master's degree from American universities in the 1960s before receiving her PhD at the University of Nairobi in veterinary anatomy in 1971. After graduating, Maathai became involved in a number of humanitarian organisations, such as the Kenyan Red Cross, the Environmental Liaison Centre and the National Council of Women of Kenya.

Maathai's work led her to observe a correlation between poverty and environmental degradation, based on experiences of food security and water scarcity in rural Kenya, which inspired her to found the **Green Belt Movement** in 1977. Using tree-planting to

mobilise communities, especially women and girls, in environmental conservation, the organisation to this day incorporates into its work advocacy for democracy and political accountability. The Green Belt Movement inspired similar movements in many other African countries and continues to help combat rural hunger, desertification and water crises in over 30 countries.



*We cannot tire or give up. We owe it to the present
and future generations of all species to rise up and
walk!*



Wangari Maathai

The Kenyan Government often criticised Maathai for her outspokenness; her husband divorced her for being 'too strong-minded for a woman'. Undeterred, in addition to her work with the Green Belt Movement, Maathai continued to advocate for human rights, women's rights, peace and democracy, despite multiple arrests and threats. In 2002, Maathai was elected to the Kenyan parliament where she won 98% of the vote, serving as assistant minister for Environment and Natural Resources between 2003 and 2005. When she won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, the committee granted her rightful praise: 'Maathai stood up courageously against the former oppressive regime in Kenya ... She has served as inspiration for many in the fight for democratic rights and has especially encouraged women to better their situation'.

In her later life, Maathai continued to work with international organisations such as the United Nations and spearhead the **Billion Tree Campaign**. Maathai died of ovarian cancer in 2011 at the age of 71.



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (centre) meets with Wangari M. Maathai (right), Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and Member of the Kenyan Parliament and Paul Martin, former Prime Minister of Canada. 29/Sep/2007. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe. Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Maathai's impact and why she remains so important

Maathai's impact is arguably beyond compare, and yet it remains rarely spoken. She remains a pioneer who fought the vicious cycle of environmental destruction and poverty, nationally and internationally. Since starting the Green Belt Movement in 1977, over 51 million trees have been planted and over 30,000 women have been trained in conservation trades that help them earn a sustainable income, such as beekeeping and forestry. Moreover, the Billion Tree Campaign has seen universal success and has transformed into the Trillion Tree Campaign with ever greater ambitions, particularly needed as climate change accelerates.

The environmental movement has been particularly whitewashed; we often hear about individuals such as Greta Thunberg and Leonardo DiCaprio or groups such as Extinction Rebellion or Greenpeace, with those from the global North the face of a movement that disproportionately affects those in the global South. Maathai represents those in developing countries who have seen first-hand what climate change is doing to their communities and who are making the biggest waves to counter environmental degradation without similar kudos from the global community.

She is an inspiring example of how grassroots activism can make a real impact and instigate change internationally. There is still work to be done – climate change, democracy and the livelihoods of women and girls in rural areas all need urgent attention – but Maathai’s story teaches us that listening to those in the global South is key to finding innovative, sustainable solutions to many of today’s crises.

Maathai was a trailblazer for women in so many ways. Her admirable qualities including intellect, bravery and compassion are what led Hillary Clinton to note that her death left ‘a gaping hole among the ranks of women leaders.’ For the women and girls who know about Maathai, her accomplishments provide hope, particularly for those in Africa, that they can themselves become leaders and changemakers. Celebrating and spreading her story shows women, especially Black women, that they can occupy spaces they never thought were open to them.

*Photo: Wangari Maathai in Seattle, April 2009. Photo by Spants/WorldChanging.
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Otobong Mmah is an MSc student at LSE studying International Development and Humanitarian Emergencies with a specialism in African Development. She has an undergraduate degree in Politics and International Relations and has worked for various NGOs such as Oxfam and AIESEC. Her interests are oriented towards promoting good governance and sustainable development in West Africa.

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