

**REMARKS BY WANJIRA MATHAI,
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Institute
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COMMITMENTS
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Madame Secretary, Madame Ambassador, Special Representative Balderston, distinguished guests, friends, ladies & gentlemen.

Thank you for that very kind introduction. Ambassador Verveer, I recall with great fondness and gratitude our meeting in Durban during the 17th COP in 2011.

It is wonderful to be here today to celebrate this milestone with you and on behalf of the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies and the Green Belt Movement, I thank you for the kind invitation. My mother would have loved to be here— first to underscore her friendship and support for Secretary Clinton, and to express her gratitude to Ambassadors Verveer, Kris Balderston, and Todd Stern, for your individual and collective commitments to gender equality, the environment, climate issues and to partnerships with civil society. So, may I say *Asante sana* on her behalf, too.

Professor Wangari Maathai spent half her life trying to tackle what she considered to be one of the greatest predicaments for Africa. In her book *The Challenge for Africa* she explains it by highlighting the dilemma of a woman farmer in Yaoundé, Cameroon, and through her, our collective challenge and opportunity.

My mother was in Yaoundé in her role as Goodwill Ambassador for the Congo Basin Forest Ecosystem. She stepped out from her hotel and looked up at a hillside in the distance, where she saw a woman tilling the ground along the gradient of the hill in a manner that showed no understanding of how to **conserve soil, sustain crops, or protect her livelihood over the longer-term.**

This woman was an ordinary farmer, and yet, my mother said, millions of people like her were often invisible to, or forgotten by, policy-makers nationally and internationally. My mother believed passionately that unless we could *SEE* this ordinary woman and *REACH* her, with information, ideas, appropriate technologies, and a sense of her own capacity for action, any efforts to conserve the environment, protect forests and watersheds, end poverty and practice genuinely *sustainable* development would be futile.

Ladies and gentlemen, that is why wPower is such an important and timely initiative. That is why the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace & Environmental Studies in Nairobi is committed to pioneering a bold educational path anchored in experiential learning and sharing of best practices.

Seeing and reaching the “farmers on the hillside” is the great work of our time. It is paralleled by the necessity of providing university graduates with the practical understanding of the realities of ordinary farmers —something most of them have only a theoretical awareness of. To bridge this knowledge-skills gap she conceived of the Wangari Maathai Institute, now constituted at the University of Nairobi—a place where academics could better connect with the communities they sought to transform, and ordinary men and women might learn how best to interact with the environment in a way that sustains their livelihoods and provides economic sustainability. My mother dedicated her last years to creating this platform to ensure we SEE the challenges before us and equip future leaders with the tools to take these challenges on. I know if she were here today she would probably say that wPower “get’s it”.

These efforts have global significance. Prof., as my mother was known to many, understood that although it was crucial to develop policy responses and marshal financial resources to address climate change at the international level, it was vital to reach women such as these, who were unwittingly degrading their own environments but could, along with men and young people, be agents of change.

Today, in part because of the Green Belt Movement’s own work, we understand much more completely the linkage between deforestation and energy access, about how a lack of alternatives to wood fuel for heating or cooking can drive forest destruction and increase communities’ vulnerabilities to the effects of global warming and famine. We also see how necessary it is to

engage at the grassroots as well as with a range of civil society organizations, governments, international agencies, and the private sector. Indeed, nothing is more effective than collective impact.

My mother understood that none of this could happen without partnerships, which is one of the reasons I'm so pleased to be able to be here with you today from Nairobi. Since its founding under the auspices of the National Council of Women of Kenya, the Green Belt Movement has enjoyed strong partnerships with other NGOs, schools, youth groups, religious organizations, businesses, foundations, the academy, and some less expected partners, like the Kenyan Army, and of course, a number of international institutions and members of civil society, representatives of which are here. GBM/WMI deeply appreciates these collaborations; indeed, some of you have walked with us for many years—people like Dr. Margaret Snyder, the Founding Director of UNIFEM (now UN Women) who gave GBM its first significant grant of USD 100,000. A grant that helped transform the GBM in the late 70's so it could become the organization it is today. Peg is now on the U.S. board of GBM, and I'm pleased that she and another board member, Lorna Taylor, are also here with us today.

The men and women of the Green Belt Movement form the roots that continue to nourish and anchor the Wangari Maathai Institute. The WMI will in turn strengthen and feed “the roots” with new ideas to create an ever larger and healthier canopy. This virtuous cycle will be enhanced by the wPower East Africa hub supported by the MacArthur Foundation and under the auspices of State Department's leadership on wPower.

This venture offers an exciting opportunity to develop GBM/WMI's experiential learning platform and foster best practices that will make a real difference on the ground by empowering rural women environmentally *and* economically, and training them in business, leadership, and natural resource management.

We at GBM and WMI are delighted to participate in the boundary-breaking wPower initiative and look forward to continuing our work with the State Department under the leadership of incoming Secretary, Mr. John Kerry, who with his wife, Teresa, have close ties to Africa and whose commitment to climate change issues I'd like to acknowledge.

Together, in partnership, we stand a much greater chance of realizing our common goal of a sustainable, equitable, and *green* future. In closing let me invoke the words of perhaps the most recognizable song in the English-speaking world written by John Newton – Amazing Grace. My wish for all of us is that in our commitment to this work, we will be able to say the words “I once was blind, but now I see”.

Thank you.