



Remarks

by

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Chef de Cabinet of the 68th Session of the United Nations

General Assembly

on behalf of

H.E. Mr. John W. Ashe

President of the 68th Session of the United Nations

General Assembly

Special Event to Commemorate the
Late Nobel Laureate Prof. Wangari Maathai

New York

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Ambassador Macharia Kamau,
Excellencies,
Secretary-General,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to join you today to deliver remarks on behalf of the President of the General Assembly, who unfortunately cannot be with us. At the outset, allow me to thank the Permanent Mission of Kenya for bringing us together to celebrate the life and legacy of the late Nobel Laureate Prof. Maathai.

In many ways, Wangari Maathai was a pioneer. The first East and Central African woman to earn a doctorate degree, she was also the first African woman and environmentalist to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize ten (10) years ago.

But first and foremost, she was a pioneer of sustainable development. When she founded the Green Belt Movement in the seventies, she understood the intrinsic linkages between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of development. As she witnessed the struggles of rural women to meet the basic needs of their families, she strived to respond to their concrete problems such as lack of food, fuel or shelter by planting trees. Yet, it soon became apparent that tree planting not only improved their livelihood, but also empowered them and their communities as people came to understand the importance of protecting and nurturing their environment.

Women are key partners for the Green Belt Movement and Prof. Maathai was keenly aware of their central role in development. Women invest most of their time, energy and resources in their families and communities. As the development community has finally come to recognize, it was already clear to Wangari Maathai that empowering women reaps benefits for the entire society.

Prof. Maathai was also a fervent advocate for good governance, human rights, participation and inclusiveness. She shared her message in numerous UN fora, including as a member of the Millennium Development Goals Advocacy Group, as a member of the Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament and as a UN Messenger of Peace.

Excellencies,

In a few moments, we will unveil a plaque to commemorate her life's work and vision and plant a new dogwood tree in her honor, both fitting tributes to her tremendous work and the millions of trees that have been planted by the Green Belt Movement.

Prof. Maathai's achievements are a powerful illustration of what can be accomplished when we break the silos and embrace a holistic approach to development. In her acceptance lecture of the Nobel Peace Prize, she said: [quote] "Recognizing that sustainable development, democracy and peace are indivisible is an idea whose time has come." [end quote]

As we prepare to usher in a new development paradigm for the post 2015 era, I think this time has indeed finally come. Wangari Maathai's leadership, dedication and commitment to democracy, peace, environment protection and poverty eradication will certainly remain an inspiration for many of us in our quest to create a peaceful and prosperous future for the planet and its inhabitants.

Thank you.
