



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
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# WANGARI MAATHAI

## AND THE GREEN BELT MOVEMENT



UNESCO Series on Women in African History





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Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

The UNESCO Series on Women in African History, produced by the Knowledge Societies Division of UNESCO's Communication and Information Sector, was conducted in the framework of the Priority Africa Intersectoral Platform, with the support of the Division for Gender Equality. This initiative was realized with the financial contribution of the Republic of Bulgaria.

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Published in 2014 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization  
7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France

© UNESCO 2014  
ISBN 978-92-3-100051-5



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# WANGARI MAATHAI

## AND THE GREEN BELT MOVEMENT

UNESCO Series on Women in African History  
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# 1 Introduction

## Spotlight on women!

The UNESCO Women in African History Series, and its corresponding website, aims to highlight a selection of key women figures in African history.

Through the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the project showcases 20 African women or women of African descent. It demonstrates that historically, women have distinguished themselves in diverse fields such as politics (Gisèle Rabesahala), diplomacy and resistance against colonization (Nzinga Mbandi), defence of women's rights (Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti) and environmental protection (Wangari Maathai).

This list of 20 women represents only a small part of the contribution of African women, known and unknown, to the history of their countries, Africa and all mankind.

Through this project and by emphasizing the education, academic careers and main achievements of these exceptional women, UNESCO seeks to highlight their legacy and calls for continued research on the role of women in African history.

Visit and share the UNESCO website on Women Figures in African History:

[www.unesco.org/womeninafrica](http://www.unesco.org/womeninafrica)



Women of the royal court in Tiébélé.  
Photograph by Rita Willaert, 2012.



Photograph by UNESCO/M. Benchelah, 2012.



Photograph by David Blumenkrantz, 2010.

## Gender equality: a global priority of UNESCO

The Organisation strives to promote gender equality and women's empowerment by integrating these principles in all its programmes, notably in education.

Education makes possible the transmission of the essential value of gender equality: it provides leverage to enforce the fundamental human rights of women and highlights their central role in all societies.

As such, the teaching of history has a crucial role to play since it enables the understanding of cultural features, and highlights the social, political, and economic conditions in the lives of women in past societies.

## The General History of Africa

This publication is part of UNESCO's General History of Africa project.

Phase I of the project was launched in 1964 and completed in 1999. It resulted in the preparation and publication of a collection of eight volumes, a main edition, and an abridged version which have been translated into thirteen languages (including three African languages). A digital version available for download can be found on the UNESCO website.

Phase II, launched in 2009 and entitled *The Pedagogical Use of the General History of Africa*, aims to develop educational content in order to encourage the teaching of African history. The *Women in African History* project has been developed within the framework of Phase II.

## 2 Biography

### Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement

Wangari Maathai (1940–2011), the first woman to obtain a PhD in East and Central Africa, was a scholar, and an environmental and human rights activist. In 1977, she founded the Green Belt Movement, a non-governmental organization, which encourages women to plant trees to combat deforestation and environmental degradation. To date, the Green Belt Movement has planted over 50 million trees.

In the face of regular opposition, she succeeded in deepening and expanding her engagement with local communities through an impressive network of regional and international alliances, which made the Green Belt Movement a model women's organization.

Increasingly aware that the environment was directly linked to issues of governance, peace and human rights, Maathai began to use her organization as a springboard in the struggle against abuses of power, such as land-grabbing or the illegal detention of political opponents.

She was eventually elected as a Member of Parliament upon Kenya's effective return to multiparty democracy in 2002, also serving as Assistant Minister in the Ministry for Environmental and Natural Resources. In 2004, she was the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.



Photograph by Martin Sotelo, 2002.



# 3 Comic strip

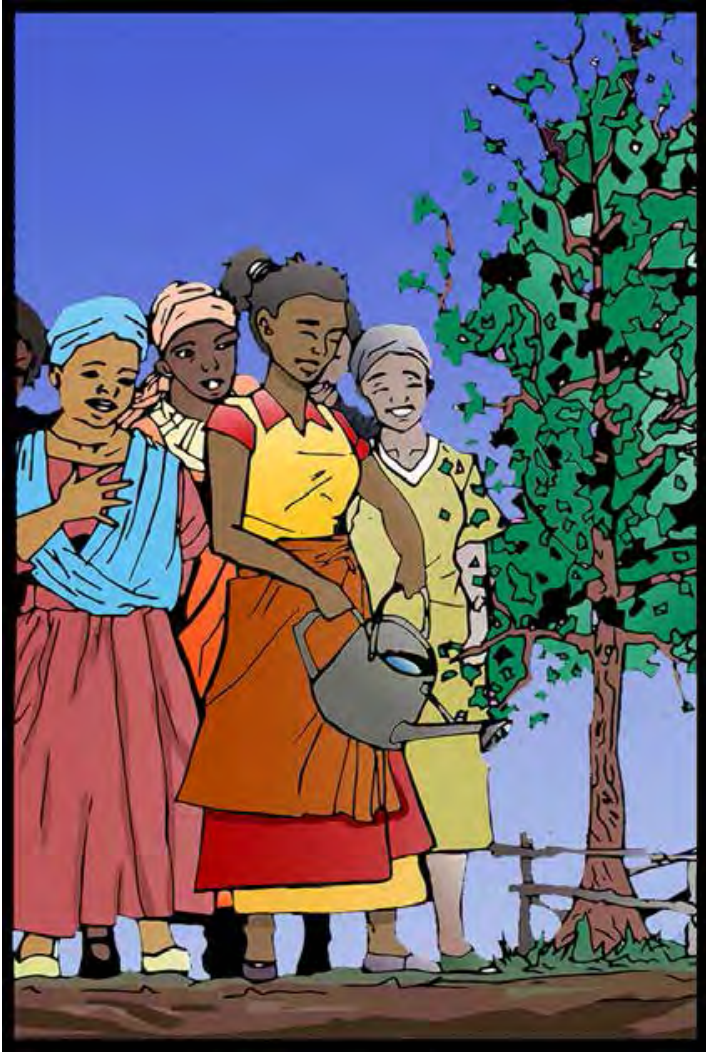
## Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement

### Foreword

The following comic strip is an interpretation of certain periods of the life of Wangari Maathai. The illustrations are based on historical and iconographic research on Wangari Maathai and the twentieth century Kenya. They do not claim to be an exact representation of the events, people, architecture, hairstyles, or clothing of the period.







## **1. The Green Belt Movement**

1977. In a modest classroom in rural Kenya, a young university professor plants the first seeds of the Green Belt Movement ...



Not so long ago, sisters, it was not like this.







*For in those days, the trees of the fields would clap their hands, as they swayed in dance to the song of the sky. And the soil was moist and true, nourished as it was by laughing rivers. Firewood was plenty, and children had abundant food to eat.*









Our forests have been chopped down, and lush greens have turned sickly yellow. Our rivers are suffocating, and the soil has slowly cracked dry, like a dead leaf. And so animals and humans alike are forced to wander further and further away from home in search of food.



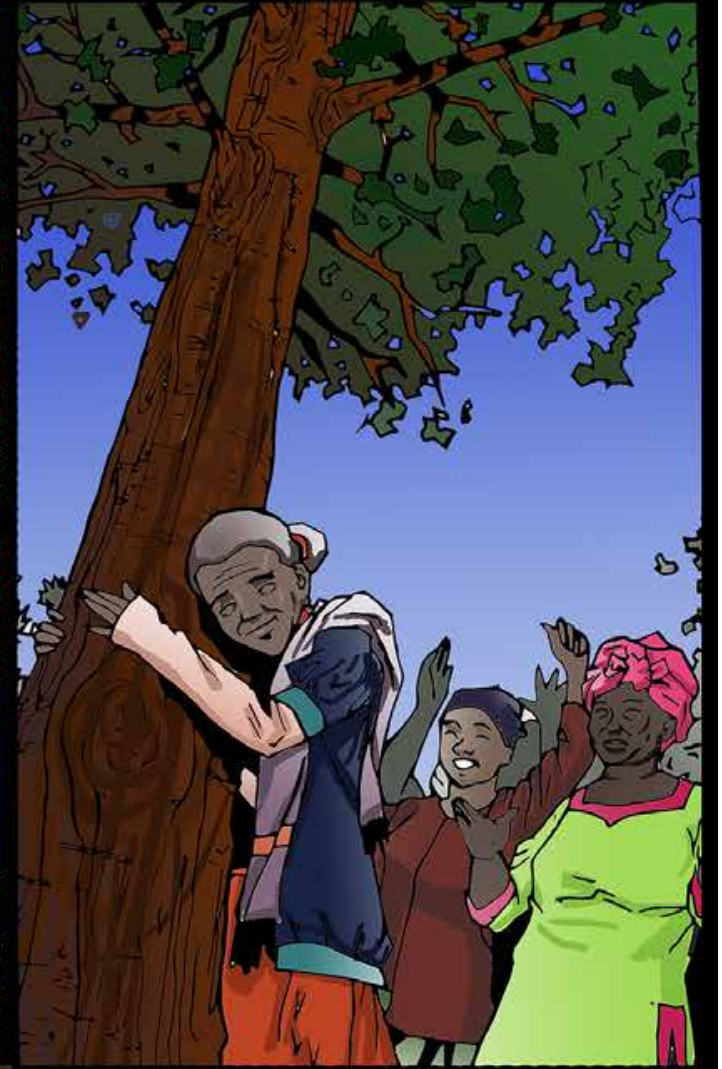


But I say no more!  
We women must take  
things into our own hands, as our  
mothers did before us. It is our land.  
We own it, and it is up to us  
to take care of it.

We can plant trees,  
wherever there is good soil. And  
though it may be slow, though it may  
be hard, these trees will rise, inch by  
inch, one by one, to stand tall over  
us and our children.

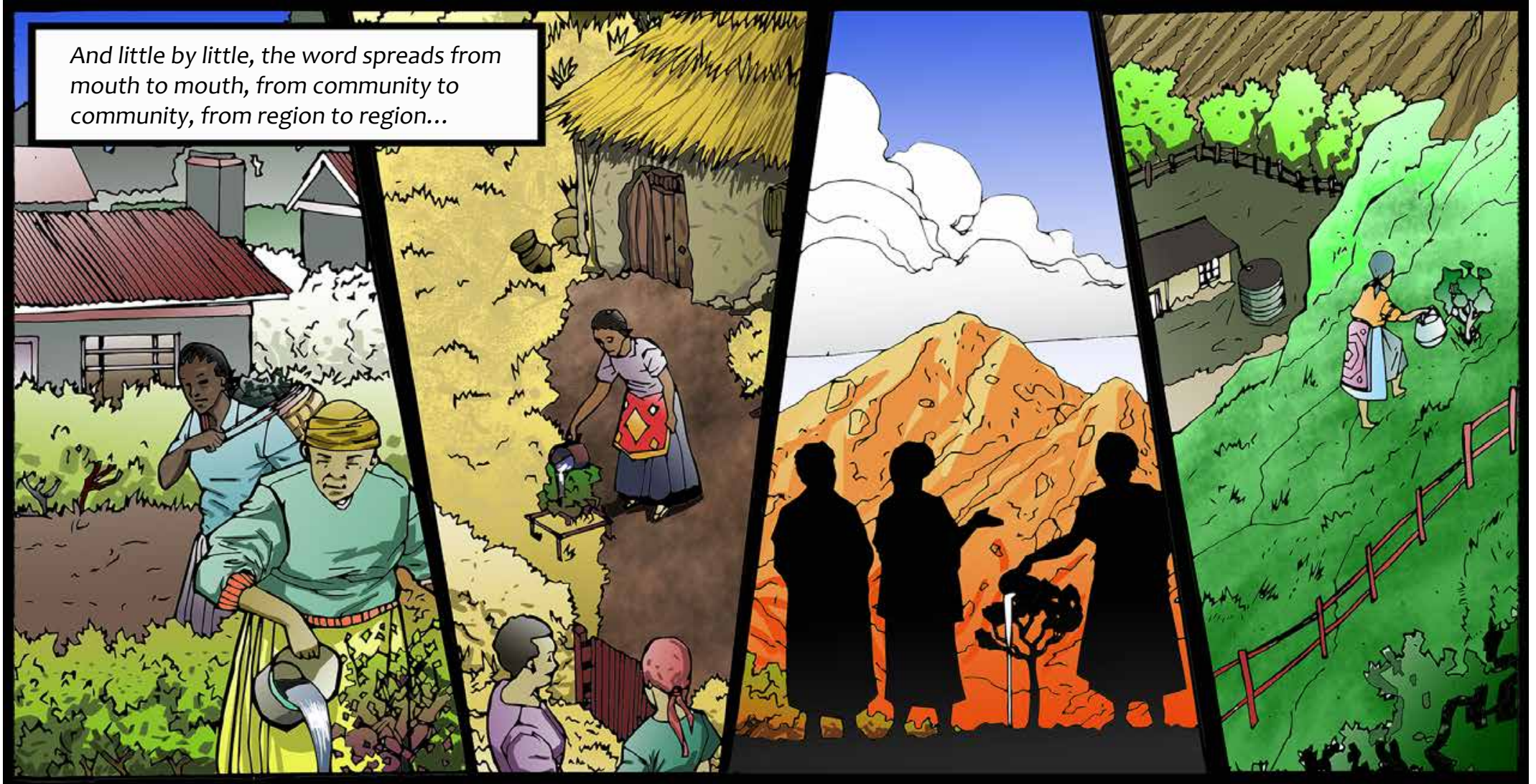


And so the women follow  
Wangari Maathai, and begin  
to plant trees.



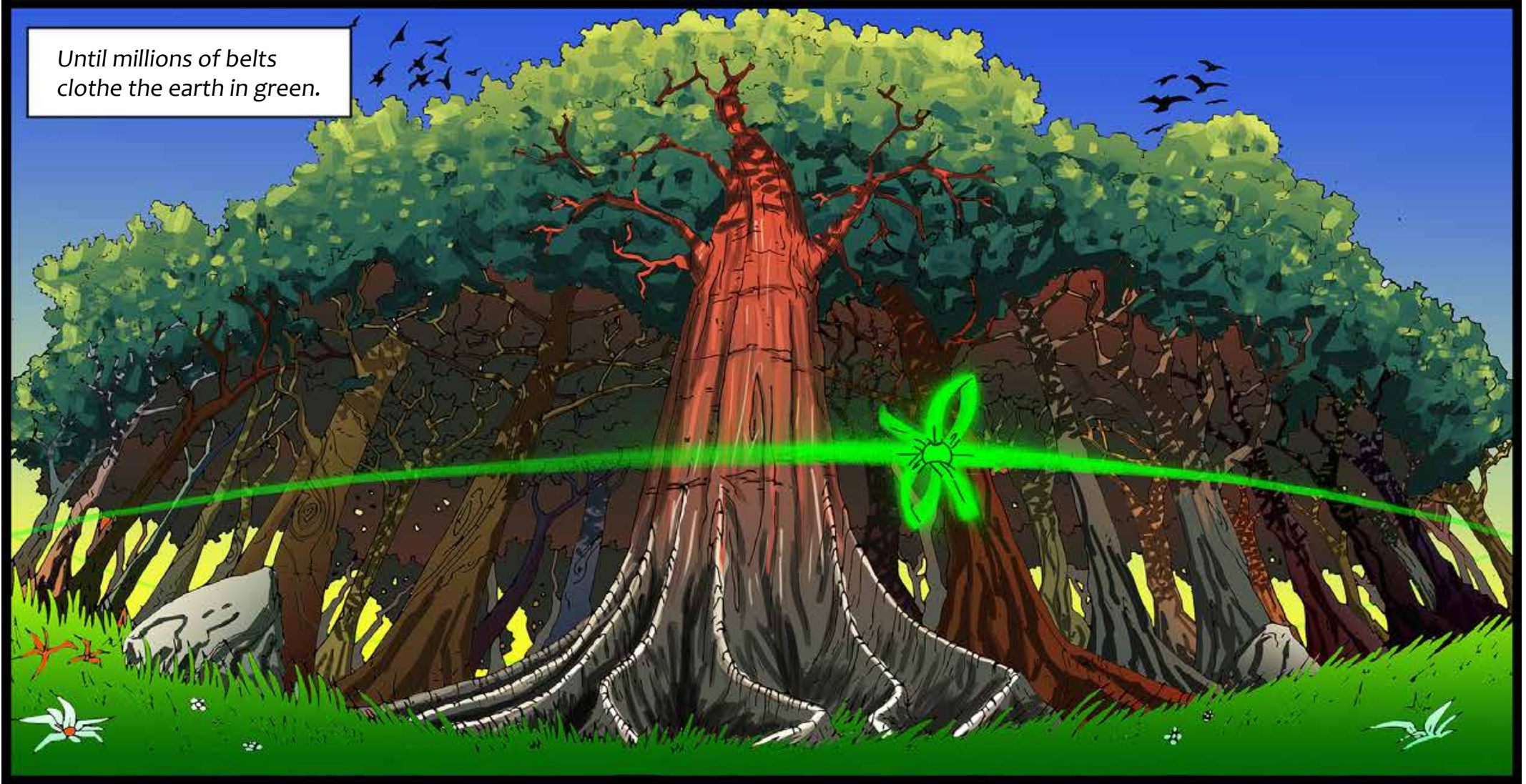


And little by little, the word spreads from mouth to mouth, from community to community, from region to region...





Until millions of belts  
clothe the earth in green.





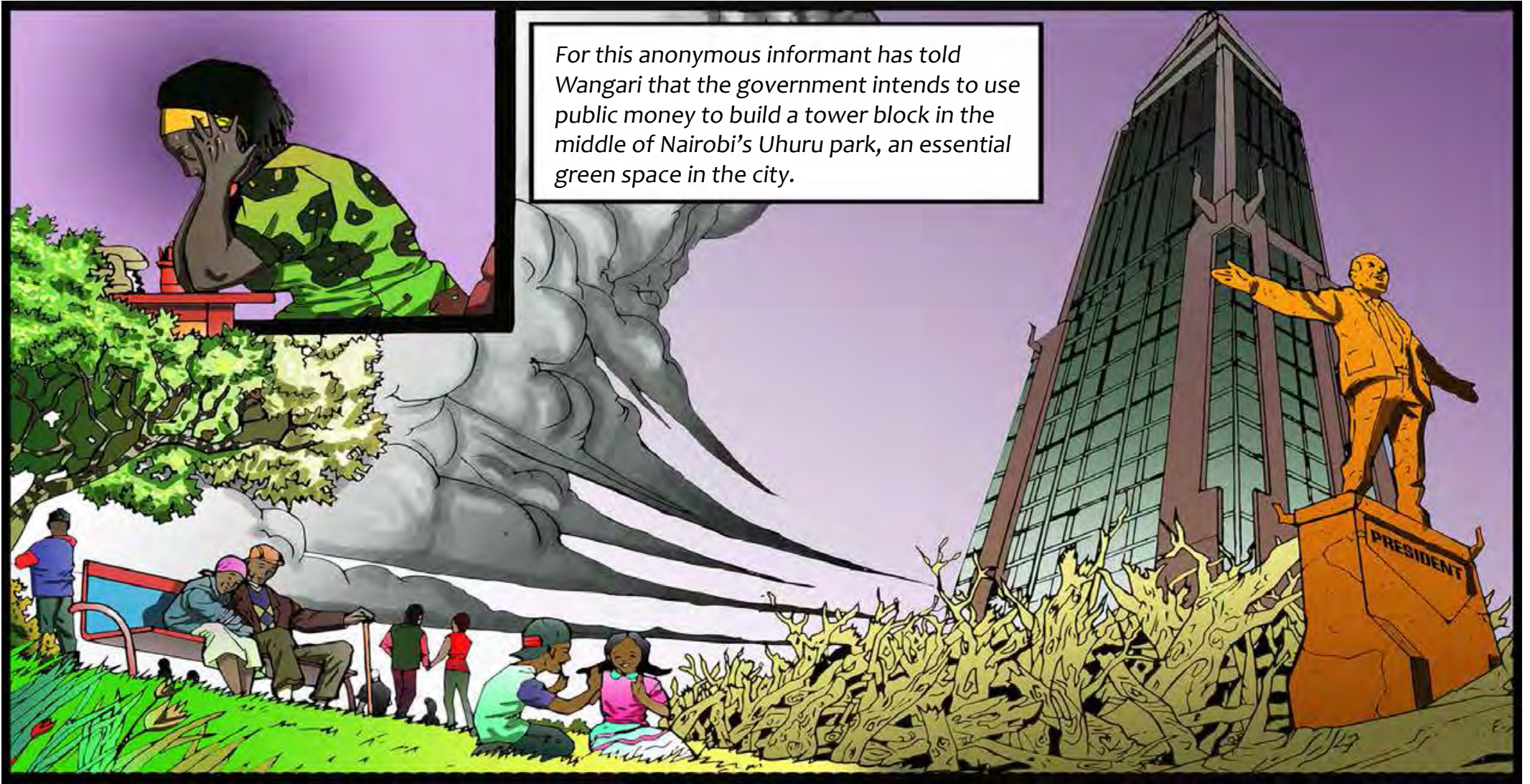
## 2. Uhuru Park







For this anonymous informant has told Wangari that the government intends to use public money to build a tower block in the middle of Nairobi's Uhuru park, an essential green space in the city.













*Determined not to allow this sale of public land to go ahead, Maathai takes up her pen and begins to send letters to governments, to the local and international press, and to institutions the world over.*





*Think of the millions of Kenyans of tomorrow, our grandchildren and great-grandchildren. May they have no cause to accuse us of standing idly by as their inheritance was auctioned off to the highest bidder. Those who have ears, let them hear: we must fight to protect Kenya's environment!*











The months and years roll by, and the women continue the fight from the confines of Wangari's own home.







Until one fine day...

The government has given in! The Green Belt women pulled it off!





But though the sun shone today, the struggle was far from over...





### ***3. Karura Forest***



A landgrab more terrible than Wangari Maathai had ever dared to imagine is afoot. For certain officials are plotting to give away publicly owned land to individuals, in return for political support. The prize? The majestic Karura Forest on the edge of Nairobi, the lung of the region, home to diverse ecosystems, and a crucial buffer against wind erosion...













The following day...

We are here to  
plant trees.

This is public land, and  
we're entitled to plant  
trees on public land!

You can't  
do that.











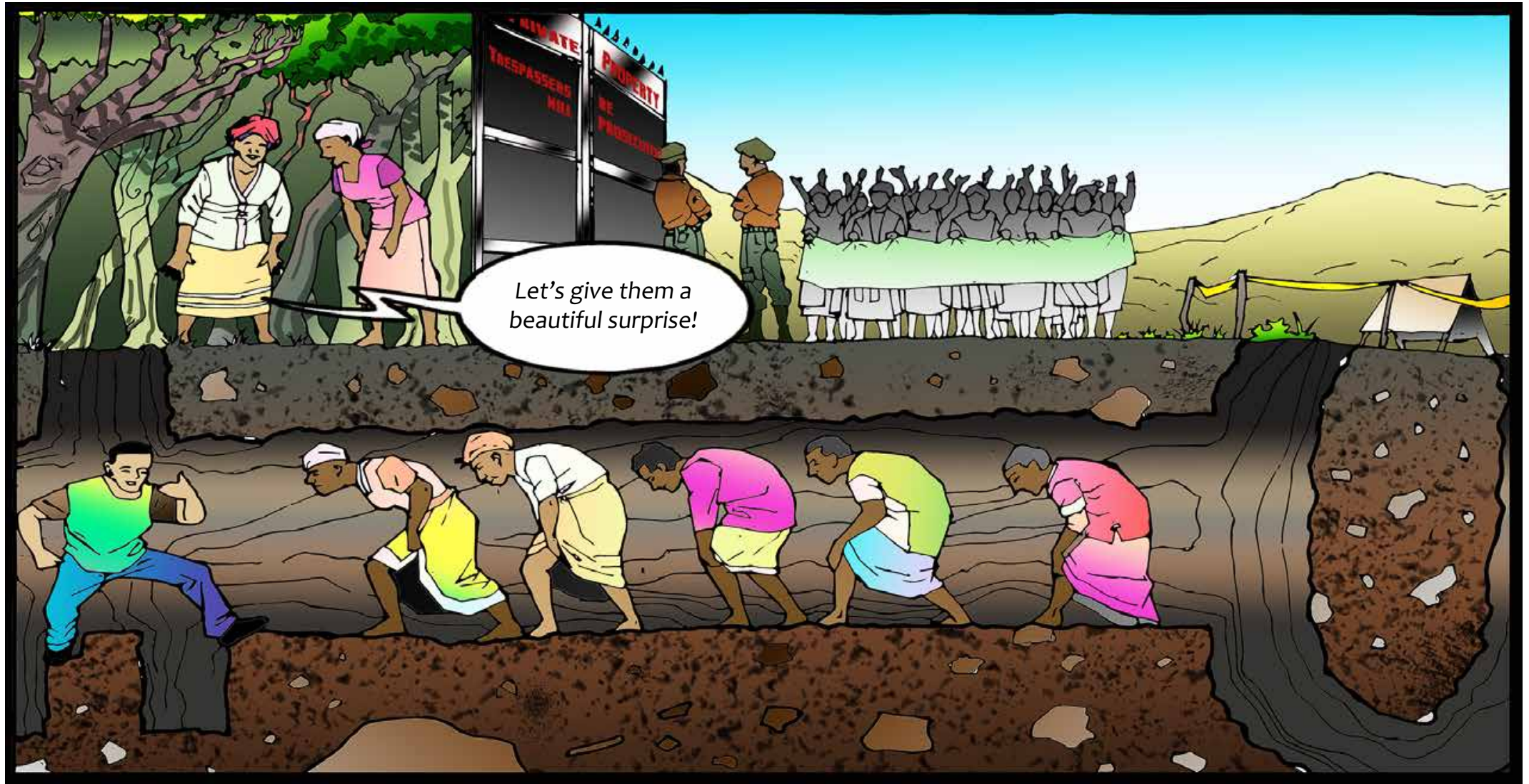
But if at first you don't succeed...

Ay! It is too high.

















People quickly got wind of what the women were doing, much to the government's dismay.

These women! It is not worth it!







As millions of trees continued to sprout from the soil under the Green Belt movement, Wangari Maathai extended her activism throughout the world...





and the world has recognized her legacy.





# 4 Pedagogical unit

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- 1.3 Women, land and freedom

### 2. The Green Belt Movement in context: women's movements in Africa

- 2.1 Women's movements and colonial heritage
- 2.2 Forging a common front
- 2.3 The Green Belt Movement, a pioneering non-governmental organization (NGO)



Suspects arrest from the Mau Mau revolt, 1952-1960.



Two women looking out over a reforested land in Kenya. Photograph by Neil Thomas/USAID, 2010.





Planting a tree by members of the Green Belt Movement (Europe). 350.org/Hannah Smith, 2010.

### 3. The legacy of Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement

3.1 The importance of trees

3.2 A holistic and inclusive approach to education

3.3 Fight Africa land grabs

3.4 Political Prisoners and resistance



Wangari Maathai receiving an honorific doctorate at the Willamette University, United States. Photograph by Thomas Patterson, 2005.

### 4. Education and awards

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4.2 Legacy

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# 1. The question of land

## 1.1 Background: settlement

In 1895, the British government consolidated its growing commercial interests and influence in East Africa by establishing the East Africa Protectorate, which later became the Kenya Colony in 1920. The white settler population, largely drawn from British war veterans, poor white immigrants from southern Africa and the waning aristocracy in Britain, was induced to migrate with offers of free land and cheap labour.

A mass expropriation of land from local peoples took place, particularly in the Central Highlands Rift Valley where the weather was temperate, the soil most fertile, and cheap labour available. Crown land<sup>1</sup> was also allocated for governmental buildings, administrative areas, and missions. This expropriation was enforced by several measures adopted by the British government:

- The creation of “native reserves”, rigid administrative units which assigned all Africans in the region to specific population groups. These groupings failed to reflect local concepts of identity, and local historical relations. Furthermore, “reserves” were quickly liable to overpopulation, forcing people to look to settlement estates for work;
- The control of local African workers’ movements within the British ruled region<sup>2</sup>;

1. Did you know? The Crown Lands Ordinance of 1902 stated that the British Crown had original title to land in the protectorate. Wheresoever Africans were deemed to have vacated or deserted land, such land would revert back to the Crown, which could sell or lease it as it deemed fit. The Crown Lands Ordinance of 1915, drafted largely in response to settler dissatisfaction at the shortness of leases granted by the colonial government, extended the length of leases to a possible 999 years, and broadened the colonial government’s powers for land-alienation. Crown lands would now include all land within the protectorate. As such, Africans were disinherited of their land, and divested of their historical land rights, becoming mere tenants with no more than temporary rights.

2. The kipande system, officially introduced in 1921, stipulated that every African male above the age of 16 had to be registered and fingerprinted. At any time, a policeman could ask to see the kipande. The system was used to prevent African workers from escaping unjust employment conditions.



Stamp of the East Africa Protectorate, 1896.





Woman farmer in Kenya. Photograph by CIAT, 2010.

- Taxation (a hut tax and a poll tax). As well as being a major source of revenue for the colonial state, taxation forced males into wage-employment on settler estates, which were thereby guaranteed cheap labour. Failure to pay tax resulted in detention;
- Forced labour; and
- Limitations on the lucrative cash crops local African populations were allowed to grow, such as coffee.

## 1.2 The human consequences

The direct human consequences for the African population were substantial, and included:

- The large-scale displacement of local populations;
- The separation of families;
- Land degradation, due to population pressure;
- Land and food shortages, due to population pressures;
- An increased workload for “reserve” women taking on the work of their husbands, often absent due to forced labour; and
- A profound feeling of displacement and loss.



## 1.3 Women, land and freedom

The Mau Mau peasant revolt (1952–1960) grew from the raft of oppressive measures implemented by the British administration in the region, particularly in the central province. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, many protests took place against the land policies of the British administration.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the colonial government itself recognized the existence of environmental degradation, but its rhetoric of ecological improvement often coexisted with continuing repressive measures. In 1948, 2,500 women in Muranga district marched in protest against forced labour in government soil-conservation programmes. These programmes represented a veiled criticism of local African farming methods, at a time when white settlers were concerned about their land tenure.

Many Kenyan women were excluded from the evolving western-type cash-economy and were generally unable to own land. They were often financially dependent on their husbands, denied access to education, unable to own land and increasingly suffered from the effects of environmental degradation aggravated by forest clearings and the radical changes in the social system.

For these women, the Mau Mau Kikuyu-language watchword, 'ithaka na wiathi', loosely translated as 'land and self-mastery', carried great resonance. Two decades later, Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement would link the struggle for land and self-mastery to the environment and women's rights.



Suspects arrest from the Mau Mau revolt (1952-1960).





Illustration from the comic strip on Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and the Abeokuta Women's Union. UNESCO/Alaba Onajin, 2013.

## 2. The Green Belt Movement in context: women's movements in Africa

### 2.1 Women's movements and the colonial heritage

There are impressive examples of political struggle by African women's organizations in the first half of the twentieth century, such as the famous revolts against taxation by the Aba women, Nigeria (1929), or the organized protests of the Abeokuta Women's Union in the late 1940s, also in Nigeria.

And yet as independence was won across the continent, many women's organizations remained bound to welfare, domestic and religious concerns. Organizations such as the Girl Guides or the Young Women's Christian Association, inherited from the wives of European colonial officials, maintained a steady distance from political issues, leaving African women with little influence over policies that directly affected them.

## 2.2 Forging a common front

Gradually, however, these women's groups would be replaced by organizations founded and run by African women in Africa, directly championing political causes. In establishing the Women's Decade (1976–1985), and in organizing major international women's conferences (Mexico City, 1975; Nairobi, 1985; Beijing, 1995), the United Nations helped to weld together the various political and economic goals that women had been voicing across the continent, and beyond.

Indeed, improvement in travel and communication technology meant that issues fundamental to women's empowerment, such as land rights, access to education, constitutional protection, financial independence, fundraising and political influence, were now being discussed between women from different regions, cultures and political backgrounds, in shared terms. There was growing solidarity, awareness and strength in numbers.



Women in the rural area Asinge, Amukura, Teso, in southern Kenya, ICRISAT, 2012.



## 2.3 The Green Belt Movement, a pioneering non-governmental organization (NGO)

As well as living and moving with these changes, the Green Belt Movement became a pioneering presence, in and beyond Africa. Under the influential, ethical leadership of Wangari Maathai, the Green Belt Movement demonstrated how an NGO could survive without stable financial backing, and even grow to exert influence. It was transparent and accountable, and courageously preserved its independence from the government. This independence was essential to its protests against abuses of state power.

Also key to the movement's success were the alliances that it was able to forge. Profiting from the tradition of strong civil society in Kenya, as well as Nairobi's importance as a regional centre for international organizations, Maathai was able to set up a dynamic network of local, regional and international groups. These included the Pan-African Green Belt Movement, Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS), and various United Nations programmes concerning development, environment, and women.



Wangari Maathai at the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference.  
Photograph by Mark Garten/United Nations, 2009.

### 3. The legacy of Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement

#### 3.1 The importance of trees

Tree-planting was the most visible aspect of the Green Belt Movement, founded by Wangari Maathai in 1977 under the aegis of the National Council of Women of Kenya. Wherever they planted trees, the women helped to bind the soil, sustain watersheds, and create windbreaks to protect against water and wind erosion, which rob the soil of its nutrients<sup>3</sup>.

Tree-planting also reduced the distance women had to walk in search of firewood. Seedlings were planted in rows of at least a thousand trees to form 'belts' that would clothe the earth in green. To date, the Green Belt Movement has planted over 50 million trees throughout Kenya. Their work continues today.



Two women looking out over a reforested land in Kenya. Photograph by Neil Thomas/USAID, 2010.

3

Did you know? When robbed of tree-cover, topsoil is more likely to be blown or washed away through wind and rain erosion. It can take up to 500 years for this layer to reform.





### 3.2 A holistic and inclusive approach to education

Wangari Maathai, a university professor, was convinced that education should not be confined to the classroom, to a specific gender, class, or to a narrow specialization. For her, holistic education meant explaining the linkages between the environment and issues such as peace, human rights and the eradication of poverty. Most importantly, it meant directly addressing and gaining the trust and confidence of those frequently excluded from formal education, notably rural women.

Maathai shared this vision by holding seminars in local communities. Green Belt seminars were unprecedented occasions for women to express their own concerns directly, and propose concrete solutions to pressing problems. They were held in local languages, using local concepts, to encourage full comprehension and participation. Without the planting of ideas, there could be no planting of trees.

### 3.3 Fight Africa land grabs

Land-grabbing is the government allocation of public land to politically well-connected private individuals, or to public or private investors (in most cases, large foreign companies), usually in complete secrecy. These transactions have potentially catastrophic consequences for the local populations, including: land seizures, the eviction of local peoples, food shortages, environmental degradation, and the disappearance of local agricultural models and of public spaces such as parks.

When Wangari Maathai discovered in 1989 that the government planned to sell off a part of Uhuru Park, in Nairobi, to build a tower block, she tirelessly mobilized public opposition to the project. Similarly, in 1998, she discovered that Karura forest, the lung of the region, buffer to the winds from the savannah off the south and home to a unique ecosystem, was to be sold off by government officials to private individuals. Upon learning this, Maathai and her partners generated a mass public outcry. In both instances, Maathai succeeded in forcing the government to abandon its plans.

### 3.4 Political prisoners and resistance

In 1992, Wangari Maathai led the “Release Political Prisoners” women’s group in a year long vigil and hunger strike, staged at “Freedom Corner” in Uhuru Park and in the crypt of the adjacent All Saints’ Cathedral. The vigil, which was punctuated by police raids and harassment, called for an end to political arrests, and generated local and international criticism of the government. The pressure they exerted culminated in 1993 with the release of all political prisoners, who counted among them sons of the “RPP” women.





## 4. Education and Awards

### 4.1 Education

On completing her school studies in Kenya, Wangari Maathai won a Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation scholarship to pursue further studies in the United States. In 1964, she earned a first degree (BSc) in Biological Sciences from Mount St. Scholastica College in Atchison, Kansas, USA. The following year she earned a Master of Science degree from the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA. In 1966, she returned to Kenya and took up a research and teaching job at the University of Nairobi. During this period she undertook doctoral studies in Veterinary Anatomy, and graduated in 1971 as the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a Ph.D.

She would go on to receive almost a dozen honorary doctoral degrees, from institutions including William's College, Massachusetts, USA (1990); Hobart and William Smith Colleges, New York, USA (1994); the University of Norway (1997); and Yale University (2004), Connecticut, USA.



Wangari Maathai receiving an honorary doctorate at the Willamette University, United States.

Photograph by Thomas Patterson, 2005.

## 4.2 Honours and distinctions

In addition to recognizing both individual and group achievement, prizes carry key benefits for non-governmental organizations:

- Money, to be re-invested in the organization;
- National and international media attention directed towards the efforts of the organization, resulting in more funding opportunities; and
- Increased moral and political legitimacy.

This applies equally to Professor Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement. Prizes awarded to Maathai include:

- Right Livelihood Award, or 'Alternative Nobel Prize' (1983): offered for 'practical and exemplary answers to the most urgent challenges facing us today'. Other laureates include the Chipko movement (India), which pioneered the hugging of trees in protest against rampant logging; Asha Hagi Elmi (Somalia), women's rights and peace activist; and Jacqueline Moudeina (Chad), a pioneer human rights lawyer.
- UNEP Global 500 Roll of Honour (1987) (awarded to the Green Belt Movement). This prize, created in 1987 as an initiative of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), is offered to people or organizations around the world to reward their accomplishments in the environmental field.



Wangari Maathai named Messenger of Peace by the United Nations in 2009. Photograph by Mark Garten/United Nations, 2009.



- The Goldman Environmental Prize (1991) – a prize honouring grassroots environmentalists.
- Nobel Peace Prize (2004). Professor Maathai was the first African woman to be awarded the prize. It was the first time that the Nobel committee had made the connection between peace, sustainable management of resources and good governance.

### 4.3 The Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies

The Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies (WMIPE) was established in 2009 in honour and recognition of Wangari Maathai's work and achievements. It builds on the legacy that Maathai left Africa and the world, through her struggles for environmental conservation, respect for diversity, good governance and integrity, transparency and accountability, and professionalism. WMIPE's postgraduate degrees follow Maathai's pioneering example in using innovative teaching and learning methods, through community-based projects, experiential learning, the use of both conventional and field laboratories, and coursework designed to cultivate ethical leadership. Wangari Maathai's holistic approach to education and the ideals she lived and fought for live on through such institutional initiatives.



Wangari Maathai receiving a prize from the Kenya National Human Rights Commission. Photograph by Demosh, 2006.

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### **Wangari Maathai, and the Green Belt Movement**

Wangari Maathai (1940–2011) was a Kenyan scholar and environmental activist. She founded the pioneering Green Belt Movement in 1977, which encourages people, particularly women, to plant trees to combat environmental degradation. Her holistic approach eventually led her to link environmental responsibility to political struggles of governance, human rights and peace. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004.

### **Women in African History**

By way of various artistic and pedagogical resources available online, this UNESCO project highlights a selection of historical female figures, from Africa and of African descent, who have distinguished themselves in the history of the continent in areas as diverse as politics (Gisèle Rabesahala), diplomacy and resistance against colonization (Nzinga Mbandi), defence of women's rights (Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti) and environmental protection (Wangari Maathai).

The selection of women figures proposed in the framework of this project is not exhaustive and represents only a small part of the contribution of African women, known and unknown, to the history of their countries, Africa and all mankind.

**For additional pedagogical resources, please visit the web site [www.unesco.org/womeninafrica](http://www.unesco.org/womeninafrica)**

**The UNESCO Project *Women in African History* was realized with the financial contribution of the Republic of Bulgaria.**



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