

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

**Inaugural Wangari Maathai Lecture**

**Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, London 27 March 2013**

**'Wangari's Inspiration on Courageous Leadership and Climate Justice'**

**Mary Robinson, President, Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice**

**I am honoured to be invited by the Green Belt Movement and the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew to give the inaugural Wangari Maathai lecture, as part of this wonderful time of celebration of her life's work.**

**The word 'inspiration' attaches easily to Wangari. She inspired me, as she did all who engaged in the Green Belt Movement and countless others. She inspired in particular because of her personal courage and commitment, and her practical way of doing. She puts it simply in her memoir "Unbowed: One Woman's Story":**

***'I didn't sit down and ask myself, "Now let me see; what shall I do?" It just came to me: "Why not plant trees?" The trees***

*would provide a supply of wood that would enable women to cook nutritious foods. They would also have wood for fencing and fodders for cattle and goats. The trees would offer shade for humans and animals, protect watersheds and bind the soil, and if they were fruit trees, provide food. They would also heal the land by bringing back birds and small animals and regenerate the vitality of the earth. This is how the Green Belt Movement began.'*

**The movement grew rapidly, and Wangari refined her thinking by linking it to the global women's movement and the Nairobi Women's Conference in 1985. As the movement began to have more impact in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa, Wangari encountered serious resistance from the Kenyan Government:**

*“I knew that we could not live with a political system that killed creativity, nurtured corruption, and produced people who were afraid of their own leaders. It would be only a matter of time before the government and I came into further conflict.”*

**and she endured much personal suffering and vilification:**

*“During those challenging years, we would be led down further roads of violence and fear, and all of us – including me – would have to draw upon our deepest reserves of hope, conviction, and faith to keep going and never give up on freedom.”*

**By the time I met and got to know her, Wangari Maathai was a familiar figure at UN Conferences, having linked issues of environment, equality, human rights and peace. The first things that struck me about her were her brilliant smile, her spirituality and her indomitable spirit. On several occasions she would be asked to speak on a UN panel, and told she had five minutes. With the broadest smile, and in her passionate voice, Wangari ignored this advice and told the representatives of governments what they needed to hear, and at some length! Even when she served as a Minister in government herself, she never lost her passion for environmental justice and peace, nationally and globally.**

**Like millions of others I was delighted when she was honoured as a Nobel Laureate for Peace in 2004. In honouring Wangari Maathai, the Nobel Committee was, as Wangari herself put it:**

*“...sending a number of messages. The prize wasn’t only a call for the environment to be at the center of work for peace; it was also an acknowledgement for the African people in general, for the struggles they face every day. It was a demonstration of how important the environment and natural resources are in making sure we survive; and it was a message of hope for the continent.*

*It was also saying to African women, in particular, that women can make an impact, although their ideas and actions are often dismissed. In addition, it was a recognition of the many citizens around the world who had been working on a set of similar issues – the environment, human rights, democracy, women’s rights, and peace-building – and had not perhaps seen the connections between them. I was honoured to be the symbol for that collective.”*

**Years after her death Wangari remains – and will continue to be – that symbol for those of us lucky enough to have known her personally, and for millions of others. The Green Belt Movement has gone from strength to strength, with its main office in Kenya but with satellite offices in the US, and here in London for Europe. Wangari’s daughter, Wanjira, is a Vice Chair of Green Belt Movement Kenya and a powerful advocate in her own right, as I have witnessed on several occasions.**

**When I became aware, through work I was doing with colleagues in various African countries on rights to health and decent work, on issues of women, peace and security and corporate responsibility, that there was a huge injustice being brought about by climate change, I was deeply influenced by Wangari. I came to the issue of climate change not as a scientist or environmentalist, but from a human rights and justice perspective. I realised that severe weather shocks were already undermining poor livelihoods in vulnerable countries, and were negatively affecting rights to food, safe water, and health. I concluded that this posed one of the greatest human rights**

**threats, had a huge injustice dimension, and needed to be highlighted by taking a climate justice approach.**

**To me a climate justice approach had to be a values led, people centred approach, which highlighted the injustice of climate change but which had to be practical about solutions – as Wangari had been. She was very supportive of the establishment of the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice, but when I asked her to serve on our International Advisory Council, she told me privately of her illness which was quite advanced.**

**One of the first public meetings on climate justice of my foundation was organised together with the Green Belt Movement at the Climate Conference in Cancun, Mexico in December 2010. We focused on the gender dimensions of climate change and the need for women’s leadership. Sadly Wangari was not well enough to be with us. She sent a wonderful video message affirming the importance of a people centred approach to climate change side by side with her own leadership on peace, resource management and good governance. She welcomed the emphasis**

**on showing that the negative impacts of climate change are felt differently by women and men at local level, as women still have to provide food for their families. Wangari strongly endorsed the need to develop women's leadership on climate change.**

**How I wish I could get Wangari's advice on our current challenge, the Climate Justice Dialogue which my foundation has just initiated with the World Resources Institute in Washington DC. We realised that it would not be possible to secure the new climate agreement which governments agreed to negotiate by 2015 in COP17 in Durban, and re-iterated at the climate conference in Doha last December, without increasing the political will and urgency for such an agreement. But how to achieve this? Wangari would have been brimming with ideas about how to motivate civil society in African countries.**

**Essentially what is needed is an awareness in countries - and in civil society globally – of the urgency of taking steps to keep the world on course to stay less than 2°Celsius above pre industrial**

**standards. The Climate Justice Dialogue will convene different groups to help mobilise them, and drive a significant increase in ambition and effective application of the principle of equity, so that countries will be willing to negotiate a new climate agreement which is fair and ambitious.**

**For example, next month there will be a number of opportunities to convene and create awareness of the problems of more vulnerable communities and the need to address the injustice of climate change. In early April, Chile with the support of WRI and my foundation is convening a dialogue of countries in the region on how to bring equity into a new climate agreement. In mid-April the Irish Government and my foundation are co-hosting an EU Presidency conference on *Hunger – Nutrition – Climate Justice* which will bring almost a hundred representatives of grassroots communities who have good projects on food security, and who will bring their learning to the politicians and policy makers from EU countries and others who will attend the conference. Those with power will listen to those who know what the problems are on the ground and what the sustainable**



**solutions are. Later in April, a colleague and I will attend the 7<sup>th</sup> Conference on Community-Based Adaptation in Bangladesh, looking at ways to adapt to climate change which involve communities and provide examples of good practice. This, too, is an area where the Green Belt Movement has given leadership. All of these, and similar events will inform the Climate Justice Dialogue, and be incorporated into a Flagship Report in 2014, timed to coincide with the 5<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report of the IPCC. We would be pleased to benefit from some of the good practices and examples from the Green Belt Movements for this Flagship Report.**

**In addition, my foundation is seeking to be a thought leader on access to energy for the very poorest. Despite the UN Year of Sustainable Energy for All, there is a real concern about reaching the very poorest. The figures are quite dramatic: 1.3 billion people – 1 in 5 globally – lack the electricity to light their homes or conduct business. Twice that number – nearly 40% of the**

**world's population – cook on wood, coal, charcoal, animal waste and suffer severe health risks. A recent report in the Lancet estimates that the number of global deaths from indoor air pollution from cooking is about 4 million, double previous estimates. These figures are completely unacceptable in the twenty first century, and mean that we need to target sustainable forms of energy to those who currently have none.**

**The problem is how to bring the availability of existing clean cookstoves and solar lights to scale, and to ensure that we really tackle the numbers involved. Last year my foundation brought together experts in energy provision with experts on social protection systems in Mexico, Brazil and India. This meeting resulted in a series of recommendations that social protection systems could be one way of increasing quite significantly delivery of sustainable forms of clean energy at scale. We are encouraging the World Bank to pilot some of these ideas, and again it would be good to link with the Green Belt Movement to encourage other ways of bringing clean energy to scale in developing countries. As I keep repeating, this is a matter of justice and basic human**

**rights. To the extent that the lifestyles based on fossil fuel enjoyed in industrialised parts of the world are undermining deep poverty in more poor vulnerable countries, there is a need to scale up our response in positive ways. This is something that Wangari would have been a great champion of, and I hope we can link with the work of the Wangari Institute and others in the initiative wPower launched by then Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton in January 2013.**

**Following that very first meeting in Cancun for women's groups on gender and climate change, organised in partnership with the Green Belt Movement, my foundation continued a strong focus on the gender aspects and the need for women's leadership on climate change. I know that Wangari would have been proud of our breakthrough at the last climate conference, in what Christiana Figueres has called 'The Doha Miracle'.**

**At the previous climate conference in Durban, South Africa, in December 2011, a group of women leaders on climate change, which my Foundation supports, decided it was time to increase**

**the participation of women at all levels, as a step towards gender equality. During 2012, my foundation planned our strategy carefully with different partners. We had women leaders in different regions who undertook to support a new draft decision.**

**A very obvious gender imbalance existed in various UNFCCC bodies, with women's representation as low as 10% in some instances. Working with various supportive parties, most notably the Government of Finland – who got the European Union to support – members of the Troika+ of Women Leaders on Gender and Climate Change and UN Women, work got underway to strengthen an earlier decision and put gender firmly on the agenda at COP 18.**

**After much discussion at the conference in Doha and remarkable support from countries large and small across the world, a new decision was agreed that will strengthen women's representation and participation in future climate meetings, an important step towards achieving gender equality. The decision will have far reaching consequences for the participation of women in the**

**UNFCCC and more fundamentally on how the UNFCCC conducts its business into the future. There is no doubt that the empowerment of women will have a long term positive impact on both the decisions being taken and the process by which they are reached. The significance of this decision is clear, governments need to have more women in their delegations, more women in key negotiating roles and more women members on the bodies of the Convention.**

**In addition, the decision adds “gender and climate change” as a standing item on the agenda of sessions of the COP. It also calls for the Secretariat to organise a workshop on gender balance in the UNFCCC process, gender-sensitive climate policy and capacity building activities at the next climate conference in Warsaw in November. One thing is certain – Gender is now firmly on the Agenda of the UNFCCC and Wangari must have a beautiful smile looking down from her white cloud!**

**I want to conclude with a vivid memory I have of taking part in a panel together with Wangari, addressing a large gathering of Christian youth in Germany a few years ago. We had all spoken, and there was a lively sense from the young people of wanting to continue the meeting. I sensed that Wangari was bursting to sing, so I suggested to the moderator that perhaps he should invite her to give us a song. Immediately she strolled out into the centre of the stage with a broad smile and began to sing a Christian hymn that had the young people rising to their feet and joining with her. One song led to another, and sometimes only she knew the words, but it was clear that this had really touched the young people and they clapped her to the echo. Standing there with her on the platform she evoked lines from Robert Frost:**

***‘The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.’***

**Sadly, Wangari was called to sleep too soon. But her inspiration and her legacy live on in the Green Belt Movement, and in the**

**many like me who have been supported and encouraged in our work by her leadership and her spirit. May she continue to inspire millions more and encourage the political will for change that was at the heart of her mission.**