

GREENING TAKES ROOT

By Rebecca Katumba and W. Akute

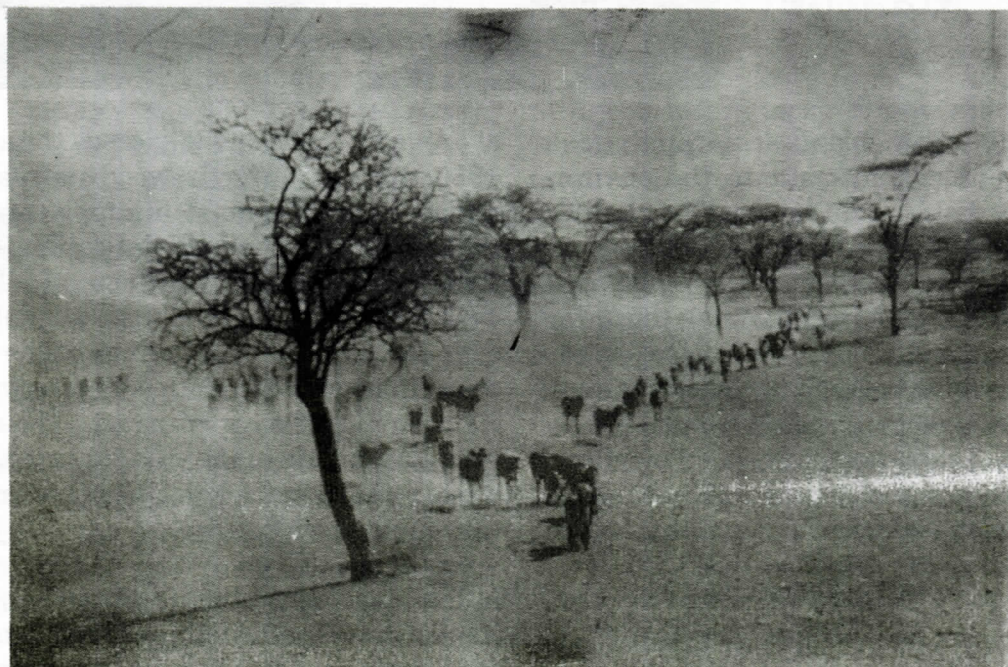
Nairobi, Kenya - When Wanjiri Wang'endo was a child, trees were taken for granted. Not so any more. Now trees are something the 68-year-old Wanjiri treasures. She dedicates much of her life to plants, nursing seedlings and nurturing trees in her neighborhood. Once the small shoots sprout their first two leaves, she carefully uproots them and plants them in a field nearby. Wanjiri has already grown 70 trees from seedlings and says she will continue doing so until she dies.

Like thousands of other Kenyan women today, Wanjiri belongs to the Green Belt Movement, a community-based tree-planting campaign, which was started over a decade ago by a woman who could not bear to see the desertification of her nation. It was in 1977, that Kenya's first woman professor was moved

enough to abandon her prestigious job as head of the department of anatomy at the University of Nairobi, and launch the campaign. Initiating a simple tree-planting drive, the spirited Wangari Maathai spurred her fellow Kenyans to sit up and take note of the increasing barrenness around them.

"Since women use wood fuel for cooking and they also till the land, my focus was and still is on women," says Wangari. "We work together to conserve what is remaining of our environment."

The movement is now one of the most successful women's environmental projects in Kenya, with a membership of about 50,000 owning 1,500 tree nurseries. "We green beltters are humble people," Wangari remarks. "Many have no money and are semi-literate but we have man-



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Wangari
Maathai



Photo: ILO

aged to come together and achieve our goals because of our commitment to the environment." Indeed, the group can boast of planting about seven million seedlings in 22 districts, and plans to cover the remaining 21 districts within the next five years. Although the Movement's headquarters is still a humble operation, it has involved over 600 women's groups, each of which has set up green belts with at least 1,000 trees. The women have also mobilized churches, schools and households in their efforts to halt deforestation.

Still, the task in Kenya, as elsewhere throughout the continent, is daunting. The quantity of firewood needed to satisfy Kenya's population

of around 17 million far exceeds the supply. In 1985, the demand for firewood had reached 24.5 million tonnes against a supply of just 19.1 million tonnes. And official estimates project that by the year 2000 the demand will spiral to 47.1 million tonnes while the availability will dwindle to 16.5 million tonnes. "The impact of environmental degradation hits our women and children most," says Wangari. "They are the ones who remain in the villages struggling with it while the men flock to cities in search of jobs they may never find."

In this Movement which is primarily made up of women directly affected by the problem, experts are largely kept out of the programme because,

as Wangari explains, "they have the tendency to work for the people rather than allow them to work for themselves." When organizations employ experts, she argues, "It does not encourage people to be masters of their own destiny. It disarms them, making them dependent, and at times apathetic." By contrast, the participatory approach makes women grow trees not just for the sake of trees, but because they want to.

The Green Belters plant and cultivate the seedlings, care for the trees and generate a source of income for themselves. Seedlings grown in nurseries are sold to the Movement and redistributed free to women for planting in fields on condition that they care for them under the supervision of a ranger.

The Movement pays for every tree that survives beyond the second month of replanting, and the price varies according to the type of tree. Women are advised to grow fruit trees to provide that extra bit of nourishment for their families. They are also encouraged to green any piece of land that they find lying idle - along roads, farm boundaries and market places.

But it has hardly been easy sailing for the Green Belt Movement and as Wangari can vouch, being an activist in Kenya has never been a simple task. Her struggles to protect the environment have, more often than not, landed her right in the middle of raging controversies. Towards the end of 1989, for instance, when she opposed the siting of the 60-80 storeyed *Kenya Times* complex in Uhuru Park, the only green belt left in the center of Nairobi, she sparked off furious debate. But the battle was hardly unique, says Wangari, as environmentalists all over the world have similar confrontations with politicians. "But what I was not prepared for," she adds, "were the personal attacks, insults, ridicule and victimization that were to follow."

Still, never one to give up, she took it as a lesson, thrilled that "the debate did not have any adverse effect on the Movement's activities. In fact, it boosted it and more people became environmentally conscious."

It also made Wangari keenly aware of the fact that leaders in the country need to be educated on environmental issues and that in Kenya, as elsewhere in the world, the government must integrate environment in its development plans. "Environment is yet to be taken with the seriousness it deserves. People must appreciate the linkages between environment, politics and the economy of a country," she says over and over again.

When Wangari was awarded an honorary doctorate of law by Williams College in Massachusetts, USA, for her role in environmental conservation, she saw it as yet another step towards a recognition of the environment.

Recognition for Wangari, meanwhile, has come from several other quarters as well. But what pleases Wangari as much as the international acclaim that has come her way, is the progress of the Green Belters in Kenya. The group soon hopes to construct its headquarters in Nairobi, with a training center where people from all over the continent can be educated on environmental issues.

The Green Belt Movement has already received a number of requests from other African countries for training their people, but, as Wangari explains, "We cannot train people at the moment because we do not have a permanent base."

Still, the future looks bright and she is convinced that the women are on the right track, as most of the goals they set in 1977 have been achieved. "They recognize the need to have a good and sound environment which they can bequeath to their children," she says. And if that knowledge is ingrained indelibly, that's half the battle won. But what's more, if, like Wanjiri, Kenyan women no longer need to walk long distances for firewood, because they now have enough around them even some to spare, that is an even surer sign of success.

Source: *The Power to Change: Women in the Third World Redefine Their Environment*, the Women's Feature Service, 1992. Published by Kali for Women, A36 Gulmohar Park, New Delhi 110 049, India.