‘WHEN MANY PEOPLE TOGETHER DO ONE SMALL THING …’: A READING OF WANGARI MAATHAI’S *UNBOWED: ONE WOMAN’S STORY*

'QUANDO MUITAS PESSOAS JUNTAS FAZEM UMA PEQUENA COISA ...': UMA LEITURA DE *UNBOWED: ONE WOMAN’S STORY*, DE WANGARI MAATHAI

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Abstract: Wangari Maathai was a humble scientist, and an activist, whose life-long passion for tree planting, environmental conservation, and equitable distribution of resources eventually won her the Nobel Peace Prize. The life of Prof. Wangari Maathai, as represented in her memoir *Unbowed: One Woman’s Story*, provides a positive vision of change. This reading of *Unbowed* unpacks Maathai’s philosophy of development as the process of improving the living standards of a community, working from the grassroots, and empowering individuals to put what is readily available to the best possible use. The starting point in this reading is Maathai’s understanding of ecology. We then scrutinise how environmental protection affects social and economic progress. The current reading also touches on the importance of gender relations and the question of how to deal with the colonial past in Kenya today. While *Unbowed* may increase awareness of gendered implications of language and style, it foregrounds acceptance and moving on and urges people to do their best for the common good. The memoir provides inspiration for the young who crave an education, women who desire freedom and achievement, and leaders of integrity everywhere. Reading the memoir plants that all-important seed for development through transformative leadership and social justice.

Keywords: Africa. Development. Kenya. Leadership. Literature.

Resumo: Wangari Maathai foi uma cientista modesta e uma ativista, cuja paixão, ao longo de sua vida, pelo plantio de árvores, conservação do meio ambiente e uma distribuição equitativa de recursos acabou lhe rendendo o Prêmio Nobel da Paz. A vida da Prof.ª Wangari Maathai, como representada no seu memorial *Unbowed: One Woman’s Story* oferece uma visão positiva da mudança. A leitura de *Unbowed* desvenda a sua filosofia de desenvolvimento como um processo de melhoria dos padrões de vida da uma comunidade, trabalhando desde a base e empoderando os indivíduos a usar, da melhor forma possível, o que está disponível a eles. O ponto inicial da leitura é a sua compreensão de ecologia. Nós, então, investigamos como a proteção do meio ambiente afeta o progresso econômico e social. A presente leitura também discute a importância das relações de gênero e a questão de como lidamos com o passado colonial do Quênia hoje. Enquanto a obra *Unbowed* pode aumentar a conscientização sobre as implicações de gênero na linguagem e no estilo, ela põe em primeiro plano a aceitação e o progresso e urge que pessoas deem o melhor de si para o bem comum. O livro de memórias inspira os jovens que desejam uma educação, as mulheres que desejam liberdade e realização, e líderes de integridade em todos os lugares. Ler o memorial planta uma semente de grande importância para o desenvolvimento por meio de uma liderança transformadora e de justiça social.

Palavras-chave: África. Desenvolvimento. Quênia. Liderança. Literatura.

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Introduction

If development is defined as "an economic, social and political process which results in a cumulative rise in the perceived standard of living for an increasing proportion of a population" (HODDER, 2000, p. 3), it would be difficult to ascribe any development to Sub-Saharan Africa in the course of the 20th century. In 2000, the continent accounted for 30 percent of the developing world's poor, as against 16 percent in 1985 (HODDER, 2000, p. 10). This paper looks at the changes that have taken place in Kenya between 1940 and 2006, as captured in the memoir of Wangari Maathai.

Maathai writes from a development-conscious perspective. Her understanding of development resonates with a current definition by the World Bank, which foregrounds "basic global needs," including "affordable, nutritious food; access to health services and education; and the ability to tap natural resources sustainably" (WORLD BANK, 2012, p. xi). Maathai's approach focuses on acceptance and moving on and demands from every individual to do their best for the common good. She was an environmental activist, whose actions had a positive effect on her family, neighbours, friends, and the community at large. The Nobel Peace Prize recognised her "for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace" (THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE, 2004).

Being the autobiography of an environmental conservationist, *Unbowed* illustrates environmental concerns. Maathai is determined to make the relevant and necessary connections between nature and society. While she may not detect "an irrational and groundless fear or hatred of the natural world," she criticizes attitudes that make "looting and plundering of […] resources possible" (ESTOK, 2011, p. 4). She then moves, step by step, day by day, towards transformation. As one of her readers, Krista the Krazy Kataloguer, notes in a review, Wangari Maathai "showed that when many people together do one small thing, they create something great" (2007, n.p.).

Maathai's memoir invites a feminist reading. In engaging with *Unbowed*, we "increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style," one of the aims of feminist criticism described by Lisa Tuttle (1986, p.184). Maathai extends her environmental focus by including issues related to the perceived intentional and unintentional patriarchal programming within key aspects of society, including family, education, politics, and the workplace. We also get to see a woman outsmarting the norm of being "unoriginal, private and domestic" (EAGLETON, 1991, p. 7) and succeed. *Unbowed* is the autobiography of a woman who, while "trying to improve the lives of rural women" (RAMANATHAN, 2004, n.p.), assumes characteristics

often considered ‘masculine’ (such as a desire for achievement), survives the discomfort of being “hunted out of society” (ROTHSCHILD, 2005, p. 4), and is eventually “accepted in her homeland for who she is” (RAMANATHAN, 2004, n.p.).

Traditional beliefs and culture in development

From her earliest years, Wangari Maathai seems to be surrounded by development-conscious people. Her grandfather was a far-sighted man and had the courage to take action. He was the one who first bought land in Ihithe: “[b]efore the British arrived, animals, especially goats, were the main form of exchange. ‘How many goats *(mbũri*)?’ you would be asked if you were selling land, or paying a marriage dowry or compensation” (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 13). Eventually, Maathai’s father, Muta, bought more land to add to his father’s estate. This purchase ultimately saved the family from being displaced when the settlers came to Kenya. The area in which Maathai’s family had bought land was located within the part of Kenya that was eventually designated as the “African reserve” in the central highlands of the country (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 10). Maathai’s father was also enterprising and forward-looking. In addition to living “from the soil” (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 3), he ventured beyond the homestead and followed new developments. He learnt how to read and write (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 12) and was among the first Africans to learn how to drive and repair vehicles (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 15). Eventually, Muta became “part of the first generation in Kenya to leave their homes and families behind to find jobs and accumulate money” (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 13). This characteristic of being proactive set him apart from other men. When he was hired on a farm, he did not have to do the menial jobs of digging and harvesting like the other workers because he already had driving and motor-repair skills. Maathai’s mother was a results-oriented and hard-working individual and ensured that the “children always had enough” (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 13). While this might seem basic and obvious, having enough to eat is a significant parameter of development, as highlighted in the *Global Monitoring Report*: “quantity and quality of nutrition is a critical factor for children in the first two years of life, when even a temporary reduction in nutritional intake can affect long-term development. This loss of nutrition can, in turn, set back a whole generation” (WORLD BANK, 2012, p. xi). Furthermore, it was Maathai’s mother who transmitted the values of hard work to the children. She was also reserved and positive. She remained quiet even when there was reason to castigate (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 21). Another family member featuring strongly in the memoir is Maathai’s uncle Kamunya. Contrary to the prevailing practice of limiting formal education to the boys in the

family, Kamunya sent all his children to school, both boys and girls (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 39). He was also one of the earliest leaders of the African Independent Church.

These individuals in her family seem to have influenced Wangari Maathai and allowed her to view her world in a positive light. Gratefully, she accepts what is and looks forward. It is in this positive frame of mind that we are introduced, in the early pages, to the traditions and beliefs that contributed to the survival of the Kikuyu society and their ecosystem:

> For the Kikuyus, Mount Kenya, known as Kirinyaga, or place of Brightness, and the second-highest peak in Africa, was a sacred place. Everything good came from it: abundant rains, rivers, streams, clean drinking water. Whether they were praying, burying their dead, or performing sacrifices, Kikuyus faced Mount Kenya, and when they built their houses, they made sure the doors looked toward it. As long as the mountain stood, people believed that God was with them and that they would want for nothing. Clouds that regularly shrouded Mount Kenya were often followed by rain. As long as the rains fell, people had more than enough food for themselves, plentiful livestock, and peace (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 5).

The above excerpt indicates that Maathai conceptualised 'peace' as the result of enough food and plentiful livestock. The words 'ecology', 'environmental conservation', and 'development' may not have been part of her vocabulary in her formative years, but she clearly already had a special affinity for nature. She spent her earliest years observing nature, marvelling at the beauty, grandeur, and diversity of the natural surroundings. Her most pleasurable moments in her youth seem to be those spent in the natural environment, whether by herself or in the company of others (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 31-33).

Wangari Maathai did not lose touch with the culture and traditional beliefs of her people in the course of her career. She travelled the world: after she had studied in boarding school in Kenya, she proceeded to America for further studies. She was away from her homeland for many years. However, on the completion of her studies, she returned home and re-integrated into the rural environment in her home village. She continued to spend time with her mother and other relatives outdoors, cultivating crops and planting trees. She seems to have had a clear understanding of the fact that cultivating crops for domestic consumption improves the quality of life, even if there is no surplus for the market, and that people did not need to be "turned into wage earners and consumers" (SACHS, 1995, p. 1) for effective development to take place.

Language and the concept of development

Language is a crucial factor in debates around development in Kenya, Maathai's country of origin, and the whole of Africa. The language controversy, juxtaposing colonial and African

languages, has been raging for many decades (MBITHI, 2014). Pioneer African students, who benefitted from the colonial education system, had to learn the language of the coloniser, English in the case of Wangari Maathai. Below, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's describes the colonial legacy of Kenya's education system in relation to his acquisition of the English language in his memoir *Decolonising the Mind* (2004):

> It was after the declaration of a state of emergency over Kenya in 1952 that all the schools run by patriotic nationalists were taken over by the colonial regime and were placed under District Education Boards chaired by Englishmen. English became the language of my formal education. In Kenya, English became more than a language: it was *the* language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference. (emphasis in original)
> Thus one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gĩkũyũ in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment – three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks – or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes the culprits were fined money they could hardly afford. And how did the teachers catch the culprits? A baton was initially given to one pupil who was supposed to hand it over to whoever was caught speaking his mother tongue. Whoever had the baton at the end of the day would sing who had given it to him and the ensuing process would bring out all the culprits of the day. Thus children were turned into witch-hunters and in the process were *being taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one's immediate community*. (2004, p. 11; emphasis added)

In contrast, Wangari Maathai does not dwell on the details of the process. Rather, she seems fascinated by the wealth of opportunities that opened up for her and for others as well as the advantages that come with the acquisition of an education, in whatever language:

> I admire the missionaries' patience and ingenuity in facilitating communication among people who did not understand one another's languages. They did their work well (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 8).
> The art of reading and writing must have hit people like lightning. It must have been extraordinary to them, that lines and dots on a page or a slate when taken together could transmit a message that a person many miles away could receive. It must have seemed like a new form of magic that overshadowed what Kikuyus had known until then (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 8).

Like most Kenyans, Maathai spoke at least three languages: her mother tongue, Kikuyu, the national language, Kiswahili, and the official language, English. She communicated with members of the local population in Kikuyu. She also acquired her ethnobotanical knowledge of native plants in the local language while growing up in the rural environment. She later studied the biological sciences using English as a medium of instruction. Even without being a specialist "contracted to design, carry out and evaluate development projects" (ALCORN, 1999, p. 2), Maathai seems to have found a way to integrate the two knowledge systems for the benefit of the community. As Alcorn argues:

> For ethnobotanical knowledge to be mobilised as a resource to meet development goals, greater interaction is needed between the users of ethnobotanical knowledge – rural residents – and specialists contracted to design, carry out, and evaluate development projects. Two barriers have limited this interaction: the status difference between ethnobotanical knowledge bearers and development specialists, and botanical illiteracy of development specialists. Ethnobotanical knowledge systems are currently associated with the lowest socioeconomic classes – tribal peoples and peasant farmers. That status association has led the élites who design development interventions to think of the knowledge base of these lower classes as the cause of their low socioeconomic status.
> Elites have not recognised that the knowledge of the lower classes might be valuable in improving socioeconomic conditions if coupled with modern insights and other development intervention activities. Secondly, rural sociologists or agronomists who access and transfer knowledge are generally not educated to pay attention to natural vegetation or to recognise techniques in indigenous resource management that manipulate non-crop vegetation as a resource (ALCORN, 1999, p. 2).

The words Wangari Maathai uses in her writing and the way she uses them suggest a positive attitude towards development as a common goal. She acknowledges that "there are opportunities even in the most difficult moments" (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 144). Her language is simple and direct. In many instances, she admits not having known the implications of certain happenings until much later. It is noticeable that she has no angst about using the English language. Instead, she seems capable of distinguishing between mere language use and the art of reading and writing (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 8). In spite of the inhumane treatment she received, sometimes from the very people who should have been supporting her, Maathai does not describe them in anger; and she does not judge them. She describes painful moments in simple language on the basis of the pain she felt and moves on.

The role of education in development

Wangari Maathai realised the importance of education throughout her own life course. She studied in Kenya and in America and eventually attained a Doctor of Philosophy degree (Veterinary Anatomy) in 1971, becoming the first Kenyan woman to hold a doctoral degree. In 1982, she became the coordinator of the Green Belt Movement, which has initiated the planting of more than 47 million trees in Kenya. Between 1989 and 1990, Maathai was part of a movement that stopped the construction of a skyscraper at Uhuru Park in Nairobi. In 1992, she participated in the Hunger Strike at Freedom Corner in the city. Between 2003 and 2005, she was the Kenya Government Assistant Minister for Environment and Natural Resources.

Wangari Maathai seems to have been aware of how lucky she was to get the opportunity to go to school. She remained grateful for all her blessings, especially for the education she

received. After her studies in America, she came back to Kenya, a newly independent state, ready to work with other Kenyans to develop the country and raise her family. She was a female conservationist and political activist.

Maathai also reminds us of those aspects of the history of the Kikuyu society often overlooked in postcolonial theory. In the latter, it is mostly the male voice of the colonized that is heard. As *Unbowed* shows for the case of Kenya, the colonized male internalized the values of the colonizer, including the subordination of women, and assumes he should speak for all. Maathai corrects this bias by presenting the Kikuyu creation myth (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 4-5), which existed long before Kenya was colonised. There are many Kikuyu postcolonial writers, yet few talk about the fact that Kikuyu society used to be matrilineal. Kenyan male writers were so interested in sending the colonist out of their country that it never occurred to them that women may have had different ideas and voices to express them. The title of Maathai's autobiography already speaks volumes: it is expected that women will bow. There is a very interesting short story by Jonathan Kariara with the title "The coming of power." The story focuses on a group of (Kikuyu!) men, who discuss the pros and cons of electricity. In the end, they settle the argument against electricity on the assumption that if women had electricity for peeling potatoes and time-saving gadgets for other domestic chores, they would get bored! There was not a single woman in the discussion. None of the men contributing to the debate had ever peeled potatoes.

It is very likely that some of the characters mentioned by Wangari Maathai later felt ashamed of the way they had treated her and regretted their words and actions. Moreover, that Maathai has captured her trials and tribulations in writing serves as a warning to would-be oppressors. They may not wish to take the risk of having their unflattering ways so publicly exposed. They might have mended their ways because Maathai taught them that the 'other' does, indeed, have a voice – a voice that she is willing to use extensively. Her writing has also empowered others who might otherwise have kept silent: they can tell their stories and they can explore their potential to the fullest without the fear of being labelled.

The following excerpts shed light on Maathai's journey through the education system, what she thinks about education, how it affected her personally, and what she thinks it should do for others and for the planet:

> Soon after we arrived in Nyeri, my brother Nderitu posed a question to my mother: 'How come Wangari doesn't go to school like the rest of us?'. Nderitu was about thirteen at the time and had just started high school. It was not a wholly shocking question. There was a precedent in my family for educating girls. My uncle Kamunya

> was sending all his children, including a daughter, to school, but it was still not a common practice (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 39).
>
> It is fair to say that America transformed me: It made me into the person I am today. It taught me not to waste any opportunity and to do what can be done – and that there is a lot to do (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 97).
>
> Education, if it means anything, should not take people away from the land, but instil in them even more respect for it, because educated people are in a position to understand what is being lost. The future of the planet concerns all of us, and all of us should do what we can to protect it. As I told the foresters, and the women, you don't need a diploma to plant a tree (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 138).

Wangari Maathai recognises how she was lucky to have gone to school. She used that opportunity to keep moving the frontiers forward. As Claire McAlpine (2006) has noted, education "was a major turning point and was the first of many open doorways through which she walked to make the most of her circumstances, not only for her own benefit, but always for the good of all."

Rights and power at the personal level

In her rendition of the Kikuyu myth of origin, Wangari Maathai introduces us to the matrilineal nature of Kikuyu society:

> According to the Kikuyu myth of origin, God created the primordial parents, Gikuyu and Mumbi [...]. Together, Gikuyu and Mumbi had ten daughters – Wanjiru, Wambui, Wangari, Wanjiku, Wangui, Wangeci, Wanjeri, Nyambura, Wairimu, and Wamuyu – but they had no sons. The legend goes that, when the time came for the daughters to marry, Gikuyu prayed to God under a holy fig tree, *mũgumo*, as was his tradition, to send him sons-in-law. God told him to instruct nine of his daughters – the tenth was too young to be married – to go into the forest and to each cut a stick as long she was tall. When the daughters returned, Gikuyu took the sticks and with them built an altar under the *mũgumo* tree, on which he sacrificed a lamb. As the fire was consuming the lamb's body, nine men appeared and walked out of the flames.
>
> Gikuyu took them home and each daughter married the man who was the same height as she was, and together they gave rise to the ten clans to which all Kikuyus belong. (Even though the youngest daughter, Wamuyu, did not get married, she did have children) Each clan is known for a particular trade or quality, such as prophesy, craftsmanship, and medicine. The daughters made the clans matrilineal … (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 4–5).

As happens in written renditions of myths and legends, the details provided by Wangari Maathai may differ from those of other writers. It is clear, however, that in presenting the creation myth, Wangari Maathai is not trying to find fault with the current patriarchal setup. She is simply describing the society into which she was born and notes in passing that it used to be matrilineal. By the time of her birth, however, certain changes had quietly and invisibly already taken place. In his depiction of the same Kikuyu myth of origin, Jomo Kenyatta goes

on to explain that men had planned and executed an overthrow for the sole purpose of replacing polyandry with polygamy (KENYATTA 1992, p. 1-19). By the time of Maathai's birth, the male children were taken to school while the girls were not. In Maathai's own family, for example, her father Muta had the opportunity to learn how to read and write, which her mother did not. In spite of this change in societal organisation, Maathai depicts her upbringing as having taken place in a healthy home, where there was no gender discrimination. It was, in fact, her brother Nderitu, who asked the all-important question as to why his sister Wangari did not go to school with her male siblings (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 39). The mother's response was positive and thus began the professor's journey.

Against her own wishes, Wangari Maathai had adopted her husband's name as her surname after marriage (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 96). One day, her husband unexpectedly walked out on her (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 141) and later demanded that she should stop using 'his' name. Earlier, when her husband had run for political office, she would go to work as a university professor, then come running home to serve tea to campaigners, many of whom did not even have a Bachelor's degree. She was also urged to stop wearing trousers and started wearing 'African' outfits, complete with headgear, while men were free to dress as they chose.

The description of Ugandan weddings and marriage ceremonies provided by Akumu (2015) may be extreme, but it captures deeply rooted beliefs and expectations in all the countries of Eastern Africa:

> In this machismo display, it is not uncommon for the groom's spokesperson to boast of how many university degrees the groom and his team have among themselves. They count their pieces of land and scream their job titles so they can be heard above the din of African drums. While the groom's family roar about these accomplishments, the bride's guests are expected to sing praises of her meek beauty.

Retrospectively, Wangari Maathai suggests that living a dishonest life in order to assuage the male ego was never an option for her: "[n]obody warned me – and it had never occurred to me – that in order for us to survive as a couple I should fake failure and deny any of my God-given talents" (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 140). Meanwhile, she was surrounded by unrealistic expectations of the patriarchal system. In the case of Kenya, the deceptive image that women are forced to display in public, as well as the convoluted reasoning behind it, are aptly captured by Nyabola (2015):

> The Madonna/Whore paradox is prevalent, and to navigate it many women live a Janus-faced existence that hides elements of their sexuality, their ambition or their personality from the male gaze. They are forced to pretend to be 'good' to satisfy

> societal expectation and navigate the relatively small social and political space that remains.

This tension leads to the internalisation of discrimination that Maathai illustrates with an example. Together with a friend, she agitated for 'equal pay for equal work' at the University of Nairobi. As a result, the gender on their payslips was changed to 'M' and their payslips were processed to include housing allowance and medical coverage – they received 'equal pay', while other female members of staff continued to be discriminated against. Yet, Maathai became a living example for those women who desired empowerment while struggling with the pre-conceived and gendered concept of goodness. She set a precedent and put her story in writing for posterity.

Gendered expectations were also linked to returning home after having gone abroad. While both men and women were airlifted from Kenya to the USA in the 1960s for further studies, once they had returned, the men expected the women to continue being illiterate, disadvantaged caregivers, wearing the so-called 'African attire' as a symbol of submissiveness. The men, on the contrary, were to become the new elite, dressed in suits and ties, speaking English, and driving cars (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 110). A problematic division between public and private was to be established or maintained. In this context, Kathleen Staudt hints that "debates about the family are often, in reality, debates about women's behaviour" (2008, p. 347).

Wangari Maathai's own continued close association with her family and relatives in the village influenced her behaviour in the city and elsewhere in the world. She was, for example, very aware of traditional beliefs regarding nudity and had no qualms capitalising on those beliefs, as Nyabola points out:

> [S]he revolutionised the act of protest in Kenya by centring it on the female body. In urging the protesting mothers of detainees to strip when threatened by security officers who were threatening to break up their protests, Maathai wove traditional beliefs on nudity and gender together with contemporary political struggles to foment a decisive moment in the struggle that brought women into the centre of a political discourse from which they had previously been excluded (NYABOLA, 2015).

When she was offered a job in Zambia, Maathai left her children with her ex-husband (and his new partner) and left the country (MAATHAI, 2007, p. 153). This was against tradition and gender-related expectations. She could do that because she had already built confidence and was aware of support from beyond Kenya. She had the confidence to live her life as she thought best, even when she faced criticisms and accusations. She did not try to fit into the pre-conceived description; and she eventually paid dearly for not conforming to the ideal of women

as meek, obedient, and subservient. She went through a difficult divorce but survived the false judgements that followed. Throughout her life, she set a precedent and kept encouraging other women. Eventually, she ran for public office and contributed to the development of Kenya.

Indeed, experts at the World Bank, the pre-eminent 'development institution', have since come to the conclusion that "making development sustainable requires progress at several levels" (SERAGELDIN; STEER, 1995, p. v):

> Our measurement of progress needs to be enriched. We need to go deeper in implementing a 'people-first' approach to development, in which the empowerment of the powerless is central to our activities. And we need to take issues of civic society and governance more seriously (SERAGELDIN; STEER, 1995, p. 1).

Gobind Nankani concurs:

> While empowerment has been identified to be of instrumental value in contributing to developmental effectiveness, good governance, and growth, empowerment is equally of value intrinsically in improving people's lives.
> In researching the paper I helped prepare on poverty reduction strategies for a recent meeting in New York on Human Rights and Development, it became clear that much of the poverty work of the World Bank and other donors is informed by the same notions of equality and non-discrimination that are central to human rights and empowerment approaches to development.
> In practice an empowerment approach is more likely to have the effect of reinforcing citizen rights rather than directly addressing them (NANKANI, 2005, p. vii-viii).

It is encouraging to note that readers of Maathai's memoir seem to understand her non-judgemental and inclusive style. Indeed, Brittany Flittner (2006, n.p.) makes this comment about the memoir: "One of the most inspiring books I have ever read. A book filled with courage, persistence, and empowerment. If you're looking for a way to make a difference, this book has plenty of ideas."

Transferring development to the community

Even after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Maathai kept her focus on Kenya. Her words and actions illustrate her continued concern for the environment and her desire to bring positive change. In her work, she appreciated and made optimum use of diverse development partners. In the acknowledgement preceding her autobiography, she presents a long list of both individuals and organisations from many different parts of the world, thanking them for encouragement, assistance, and support over a lifetime.

Ultimately, Maathai became the coordinator of the Green Belt Movement, which planted more than 47 million trees by 2011, and continues to empower local populations to plant more trees. According to DeLap (2006), by equating environmental wrongs with human rights violations, under the stewardship of Wangari Maathai the Green Belt Movement provided an 'innovative spin' to the definition of a non-governmental organisation. It was through the Green Belt Movement that Maathai managed to capture the imagination of Kenyans and the world. Many forests were saved, although at the expense of proposed chunks of concrete and therefore to the consternation of Kenyan politicians. When Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, many young Kenyans were drawn to environmental conservation and began to understand the value of ecosystems. She convincingly argued that the environment is core to development. Development organisations must take it into consideration when formulating policy, as is increasingly affirmed by development experts:

> It is striking how the best strategies have been based on participation, building on good existing plans and processes, with clear attention to environment and development priorities. Conversely, failed strategies have tended to be prepared by small elite task forces, without consultation, neglecting existing initiatives, and have been limited in scope. Experience shows you cannot deal with environmental issues without getting to the heart of development needs. National policy processes need to be linked with local planning and action. It is at the community level where many traditional and experimental participatory resource management approaches have borne fruit; but their sustainability remains constrained by poor policy environments (SANDBROOK; MCDOWELL, 1994, p. vii).

Development aid is intended to help the poorest countries in the world to improve the living standards of their population in areas such as health (maternal health and especially infant mortality), education (basic education for all, higher education for those who may be interested), equitable access to resources, equitable distribution of available resources, freedom from hunger, democratic space, freedom of speech (DESAI; POTTER, 2008, p. 31, 37-38).

Wangari Maathai knew and understood the rural ecosystems. She was both a scientist and a peasant, having grown up in the rural areas and later studying science to postgraduate levels without losing touch with the rural agricultural systems. She acquired her ethnobotanical knowledge of native plants in Kikuyu while growing up in the rural environment. She later studied the biological sciences using English as a medium of instruction. In the end, she seems to have found a way to integrate the two knowledge systems for the benefit of the community, in the sense proposed by Alcorn:

> By bringing rural people with ethnobotanical knowledge of plants, plant ecology, crops and farming systems into a dialogue with scientists, agronomists, development

> planners, and extension agents, rural development can proceed at a steady pace (1999, p. 2).

This is what Wangari Maathai seems to have done through the Greenbelt Movement, even if she was not a development specialist and did not engage in the respective theory. Graness puts it very well:

> When she focuses on self-empowerment and self-knowledge, Maathai connects the responsibility of individuals for improvement of their life with valuing selfless service and the use of volunteer labour for the benefit of the community – which clearly indicates a high appreciation for harmonious communal life and solidarity, instead of selfish individualism (GRANESS, 2018, p. 194).

Conclusion

Throughout her life, Wangari Maathai faced the future squarely. Her inclusive style of development, starting from the grassroots and going up, continues to be felt. In the 1970s, she stated that 'nature is unforgiving. We shall pay a very high price for our mistakes.' This statement came forcefully to the fore when the professor died in September 2011. People in Kenya were going through a very difficult time: paying exorbitant monthly power bills while power was being rationed.

The existence of the autobiography carries a message which is just as pertinent. This one woman is telling postcolonial scholars that it is not necessary to protest at everything related to colonisation, whereby she contradicts the dominant narrative. She suggests that opposition, as and when necessary, does not have to be militant and violent but needs to be strategic. Work for social and environmental change needs to be sustained and, most importantly, should always be for the benefit of humanity rather than just a few. Her philosophy has been captured and is being shared on the Internet through forums such as the ones already cited. In Kenya itself, Maathai's thought has inspired MK-Africa, a marketing and sustainability consultancy, to launch clubs in universities dubbed #MyLittleBigThing, with the aim of deepening the way young people engage with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Wangari Maathai remained development-conscious even post mortem. She expressed her wish to be cremated, much to the astonishment of most Kenyans, in order to ensure that there would be no waste of unnecessary resources arranging a funeral. Her coffin was made of the water hyacinth, which is generally considered only in negative terms. Prior to her death, the University of Nairobi had set aside 50 acres of beautifully landscaped land for the setting up of the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental studies. The vision of this institute

is ‘to transfer knowledge and skills on sustainable use of natural resources from academic halls and laboratories to the citizenry in villages and rural communities.’ Indeed, Wangari Maathai planted “seeds of peace” (TAL, 2006, p. 254), which will sprout and flower long after her death.

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