Editorial

Tamu Kijani Harakati

"It's the little things citizens do. That's what will make the difference. My little thing is planting trees."

- Wangari Muta Maathai (1 April 1940 – 25 September 2011)

The Fall season of 2011 is a remarkable period for African women. By now, you may have already read several obituaries written about Dr. Wangari Muta Maathai, leader of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, and first president of the African Union's Economic, Social and Cultural Council. Within two weeks of her death, the Nobel committee announced that the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to two African Women, Ms. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia, and Leymah Gbowee, also of Liberia, both cited along with the third recipient, Tawakkul Karman of Yemen "for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work."

The spirit of the Nobel Peace Prize captures Dr. Maathai's profound statement that "It's the little things citizens do." All four women started with little things that became very big indeed. Dr. Maathai's little thing is "planting trees," but the trees have provided shelter and nourishment for the blossoming of ideas associated with development and conflict resolution. Upon learning of being awarded the 2004 Nobel Prize, she issued a statement that presaged the next Nobel Prize for African women:

"It is evident that many wars are fought over resources which are now becoming increasingly scarce. If we conserved our resources better, fighting over them would not then occur...so, protecting the global environment is directly related to securing peace...those of us who understand the complex concept of the environment have the burden to act. We must not tire, we must not give up, we must persist."

And at the 1995 Women's conference held in Nairobi in 1995, she said:

"In the world there is a new collective force of people mobilising around the issue of peace but linking it to the need to protect the environment. But we must assert our collective vision and responsibility to shape that peace not only for our country but also for the whole of Africa."

And finally, on leadership in Africa, on the occasion of her reception for the United Nations Africa Prize in 1991, she said:

"It is not as if leaders do not understand the impact of the unjust political and economic systems which are promoting environmental degradation and promoting a non-sustainable development model. When will such business be considered unacceptable in the world community?...Africa's challenges are being tackled at different levels, and some successes have been recorded. But not fast enough. The concepts of sustainable development, appropriate development models, and participatory development are not foreign. We are aware that our children and the future generations have a right to a world which will also need energy, should be free of pollution, should be rich with biological diversity and should have a climate which will sustain all forms of life."

We celebrate Dr. Maathai's life for her path-breaking influences in empowering women and advocates for environmental integrity worldwide. We celebrate her dedication to peaceful advocacy. And her commitment to education and research, which is the bedrock of the "sweet green movement" (Tamu kijani harakati) that has survived as her legacy, and will continue the work that she started in Kenya to reach all corners of Africa and the world at large.

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1 The Green Belt Movement: http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/w.php?id=10