

Responsibility as Activism: Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement and Democratic Rights in Kenya

Dakyung Yoon^{1*}

¹Asia Pacific International School Seoul, Seoul, South Korea

*Corresponding Author: clarabunnyhop2@gmail.com

Advisor: Zachary Hooker, zhooker@apis.org

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Abstract

This study investigates how Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement (GBM) transformed environmental stewardship into democratic resistance in post-independence Kenya. Founded in 1977, the women-led initiative sought to address environmental degradation, gendered land exclusion, and authoritarian state control stemming from British colonial policies such as the 1902 Crown Lands Ordinance and the 1954 Swynnerton Plan. Using qualitative historical analysis, documentary research, and comparative case studies of the struggles over Uhuru Park and Karura Forest, this study explores how tree planting initiatives served as both an environmental intervention and a strategy for reclaiming communal land rights and social agency. The study argues that the GBM evolved from a grassroots conservation initiative into a broader democratic movement against state repression.

Keywords: Environmental stewardship, Women's rights, Postcolonialism, Land reform

1. Introduction

Kenya's post-independence environmental crisis grew out of the colonial and postcolonial land systems. British colonial policies, including the 1902 Crown Lands Ordinance and the 1954 Swynnerton Plan, restructured land tenure in ways that privileged male titleholders and postcolonial elites. These patriarchal policies not only contributed to deforestation and soil erosion but also displaced women from their traditional role as land managers. After independence from British rule, rural women continued to be excluded from legal land ownership, and land became increasingly tied to state authority.

In response, Wangari Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement (GBM) in 1977. As a grassroots initiative, the GBM mobilized women to reclaim their political voice and help restore Kenya's ecological integrity. Through tree planting, the movement addressed ecological issues such as firewood scarcity and soil conservation. Beyond conservation, the movement created networks of participation and collective responsibility that helped dismantle both colonial land legacies and postcolonial authoritarian governance, thereby contributing to Kenya's democratic transition.

Existing scholarship has often studied the GBM through separate lenses—as an environmental initiative, a feminist movement, or a democratic struggle. This separation, however, obscures the mechanism that connects the three dimensions. This study explores how tree planting functioned as that mechanism. Through this practice, the GBM fostered environmental stewardship while enabling rural women to gain social standing and claim democratic rights.

Using qualitative historical analysis, documentary research, and comparative case studies of the struggles over Uhuru Park and Karura Forest, this study contends that the GBM enabled marginalized communities to translate ecological action into sustained grassroots democratic resistance. Through this argument, the paper demonstrates that assuming responsibility for land and forests could become a practical way for marginalized communities to defend

their democratic rights and fight political corruption.

2. Literature Review

Scholars have interpreted the GBM through multiple frameworks, reflecting broader debates over whether environmental activism should be understood primarily in ecological, gendered, or political terms. One scholarship strand positions the GBM as an environmental conservation initiative addressing deforestation and resource scarcity. Michaelson (1994), for example, emphasizes the movement's practical programs, such as agroforestry among small-scale farmers, and ecological outcomes. By contrast, feminist interpretations foreground the movement's role in challenging patriarchal systems. Muthuki (2006) characterizes the GBM as a vehicle for expanding women's agency and economic independence. Her perspective is reinforced by historical analyses of women's systematic exclusion from land ownership under colonial policies such as the 1902 Crown Lands Ordinance.

A third line of scholarship situates the GBM within political resistance and democratization. In particular, Shattuck (2022) interprets the movement as a struggle against postcolonial authoritarianism, highlighting confrontations over the environmental stewardship of Uhuru Park and Karura Forest as direct defiance of the state. This political interpretation is further supported by Maathai (2004), who asserted in her Nobel Peace Prize lecture that "responsible governance of the environment was impossible without democratic space," transforming the tree into a "symbol for the democratic struggle."

Despite these contributions, the literature remains analytically compartmentalized, often treating ecological degradation, gender inequality, and state repression as separate phenomena. A key historiographical question thus arises: How did the seemingly apolitical activity of tree planting generate broader democratic activism? Building on debates over whether the GBM should be understood primarily as an ecological, feminist, or political movement, this study frames environmental action as the critical mechanism that links ecological practice, gendered agency, and political mobilization. Specifically, tree planting operated simultaneously as a material intervention, a socially embedded reclamation of agency, and a symbolic contestation of state authority. The study uses this synthesis to demonstrate how everyday environmentalism enabled rural women to translate localized action into sustained democratic resistance.

3. Methodology

This study employs qualitative historical analysis and documentary research to investigate the sociopolitical evolution of the GBM. Sources were selected based on their relevance to three central themes, including colonial and postcolonial land governance, women's exclusion from land rights, and the GBM's role as a political movement. This study also examines primary sources, including colonial statutes such as the 1902 Crown Lands Ordinance and legal records from the post-independence era, to trace the origins of land-based marginalization. Additionally, the analysis incorporates eyewitness accounts and reports from international organizations, such as Amnesty International. These sources are used to trace key moments of political confrontation that shaped the context behind the GBM.

This study also uses the Uhuru Park and Karura Forest cases to identify the specific mechanisms by which the GBM defied state power. These cases were selected because they represent clear examples of the GBM's environmental activism intertwining with political initiatives. Both cases involved public land being threatened by politically connected development. Both also show how tree planting could be used to call for democratic accountability. Comparing these cases allows the study to explore the intersection between environmental stewardship and political mobilization.

4. Historical Context and Analysis

The air reeked of tear gas (Amnesty International, 1992). Protesters in Uhuru Park lay sprawled on the ground as police beat them with batons (White, 2013). The Kenyan government had deployed riot squads to suppress the demonstration, but the protesters were not criminals. They were unarmed women—their only weapons were the seedlings they clutched in their hands. Among them stood Wangari Maathai, who had long fought against illegal land

grabs, deforestation, and the government that now sought to silence her. The struggle for Kenya's forests was never solely about trees. It was about power, rights, and responsibility. This moment encapsulates the study's central argument that environmental action in this context cannot be separated from struggles over political authority and social rights.

4.1 Socioenvironmental Pressures and Activism in Kenya

Toward the end of the twentieth century, Kenya was grappling with an environmental crisis marked by rampant deforestation and ecological destruction. Much of this predicament can be traced back to British colonial-era land practices, where forests were cleared to establish expansive commercial plantations and infrastructure development, with little regard for land conservation (Cerutti et al., 2023). The 1902 Crown Lands Ordinance exemplified this neglect by emphasizing land productivity and granting British settlers large tracts of "idle land" for agricultural production. This Ordinance set the legal foundation for the Swynnerton Plan of 1954, a colonial land tenure policy that further prioritized large-scale agricultural production over environmental sustainability in the pursuit of economic growth (Harbeson, 1971). Beyond environmental damage, these policies disrupted traditional land ownership systems, stripping women of their rights and roles in land management.

Under this statute, the British government institutionalized a patriarchal land-grabbing system that excluded women from ownership. The exclusionary nature of this policy is further evidenced by its explicit goal of creating a class of "progressive farmers" with individual titles, effectively codifying the erasure of customary and communal land use. Before British colonial rule, women had inherited rights to cultivate and manage land through patrilineal lineage (Karanja, 1991). Notably, as primary agriculturalists, women determined land fertility practices such as intercropping, managed systems of exchange, and organized the storage and distribution of surplus production (Karanja, 1991). British authorities, however, established monoculture under a cash-crop-oriented system that systematically disenfranchised Kenyan women and entrenched gender bias in land ownership (Harbeson, 1971; Karanja, 1991). As such, colonial land policies not only restructured ownership, but actively created the conditions for gendered political exclusion that later movements such as the GBM sought to challenge. In this sense, the emergence of this movement was not incidental, but structurally conditioned by the long-term consequences of colonial land policies.

Even after gaining independence in 1963, Kenya continued to neglect socioenvironmental responsibilities by incorporating British-designed land tenure policies into postcolonial modernization efforts. In 1965, the Minister of Economic Planning, Tom Mboya, promoted industrialization policies emphasizing land development and the adoption of modern agricultural methods (Harbeson, 1971). These policies echoed the logic of the 1902 Ordinance and the Swynnerton Plan, which framed "idle" land as a resource for modernization, while also perpetuating the colonial legacy of environmental degradation and patriarchal governance that marginalized women. Intended postcolonial land redistribution initiatives were largely abandoned as political elites continued to accumulate and commodify vast tracts of land (Harbeson, 1971).

4.2 Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement

The Green Belt Movement's environmental and social initiatives grew out of Maathai's scientific training, civic activism, and engagement with rural women's everyday struggles. Born in Nyeri, Kenya, on April 1, 1940, Maathai pursued higher education abroad, earning a Bachelor of Science degree from Mount St. Scholastica College in 1962 (Nobel Foundation, n.d.) and a master's degree in biological sciences from the University of Pittsburgh in 1966 (Makgabo, 2020). In 1967, she moved to Germany to pursue a doctoral degree at the University of Munich. While studying abroad, she was introduced to environmental restoration efforts through local activist campaigns to reduce air pollution (Makgabo, 2020). These experiences helped Maathai later develop the GBM's philosophy that sought to empower the community and especially women to address both ecological concerns and state corruption.

After returning to Nairobi, Maathai taught veterinary anatomy at the University of Nairobi, where she advocated equal opportunities for women staff members (Makgabo, 2020). She also became active in civic organizations,

including the Kenya Red Cross Society, the Kenya Association of University Women, the Environment Liaison Centre, and the National Council of Women of Kenya (Makgabo, 2020). Through this work, she came to view environmental degradation as being connected to multiple problems such as rural poverty, women's rights, and authoritarian governance (GBM, n.d.; Makgabo, 2020).

Maathai's growing awareness of environmental and social justice issues soon translated into action. In 1974, her husband, then elected to parliament, pledged to expand employment opportunities. His campaign promises inspired Maathai to found Envirocare Ltd., an initiative designed to simultaneously address deforestation and urban unemployment by hiring underprivileged individuals to plant trees on private land (GBM, n.d.; Makgabo, 2020). However, this initiative failed because landowners resisted allowing unemployed workers onto their property. Despite this setback, Envirocare enabled Maathai to refine her approach, showing that the environment should be restored not only through top-down development or landowners but through a community-based model led by the people affected by environmental decline (GBM, n.d.).

In 1977, Maathai founded the GBM, a large-scale grassroots non-governmental organization that replaced her earlier fragmented efforts. By connecting the environment with local neighborhoods, the movement empowered supporters to become community activists. One of the movement's earliest initiatives focused on deforestation. Extensive tree loss had contributed to drought, soil erosion, declining agricultural productivity, and threats to wildlife habitats. The movement empowered followers to address environmental concerns, training them to plant trees and conserve the land. Thus, it effectively fostered a sense of shared responsibility and cooperative action.

Beyond ecological preservation, Maathai's broader goal was to improve living conditions for Kenyan citizens by advancing environmental justice and gender equality. She synthesized land conservation with women's rights, initiating strategies that strengthened their political voice. Although Maathai championed women's rights, she did not exclude men. She bridged local men and women with environmental initiatives to foster an inclusive movement. Under this vision, the GBM operated with a clear objective: publicizing and working toward both its short- and long-term goals. Indeed, Maathai viewed these goals as "very important because mass movements need tangible success stories" (Michaelson, 1994).

The movement's short-term goals prioritized practical solutions to protect the environment while strengthening women's economic stability. Short-term goals included developing a positive image for women, encouraging women to involve themselves in environmental practices. Many of these initiatives included tree planting and agroforestry among small-scale farmers for fuel, training women as seedling cultivators, generating income for women, educating communities on the interrelationship between the environment and issues such as food production and health, advancing environmental education, and promoting soil conservation.

Meanwhile, the movement's long-term goals sought to achieve sustainable environmental conservation and broader social transformation. Long-term goals included averting desertification through tree planting and soil and water conservation, promoting environmental conservation and sustainable development, and protecting indigenous trees and shrubs that faced extinction amid the intensified cultivation of exotic species. Long-term goals centered on women included promoting a positive image of women by highlighting their leadership in national development, and encouraging women to make independent decisions, define objectives and strategies, and implement them to benefit from their labor (Michaelson, 1994). Therefore, Maathai effectively linked environmental concerns with rural women's rights, addressing the issues as not separate but interconnected problems.

These goals reflect Maathai's deep engagement with feminist activism as a strategy for addressing deforestation. By training women to cultivate seedlings and identify sites suitable for native tree nurseries, Maathai helped women reclaim their traditional roles as land managers. Maathai helped strengthen women's economic position by compensating them for each seedling planted. The project provided forestry education to lower-income women, generating nearly 3,000 employment opportunities. Since its founding in 1977, the movement has facilitated the planting of over 51 million trees across Kenya (GBM, n.d.).

The significance of the GBM can be understood by examining the mechanisms through which environmental practices translated into political mobilization. The seemingly apolitical practice of tree planting functioned as a low-risk form of collective action that enabled widespread participation among rural women who were largely excluded from formal political participation. Thus, by organizing women around shared environmental concerns—such as

firewood scarcity, soil erosion, and water insecurity—the GBM created networks of cooperation that extended beyond ecological goals. Collective resistance gradually increased political awareness, effectively dismantling Kenya’s authoritative regime and guiding the transition to a democratic state.

Moreover, the act of tree planting itself carried symbolic significance. In reclaiming degraded or contested land, participants implicitly challenged state authority over land allocation and usage. This embodied form of activism blurred the boundary between environmental stewardship and political resistance. In this sense, the movement can be understood as an ecofeminist movement in which environmental practices directly intersected with the restructuring of gendered political agency. In the process of planting trees, women were asserting claims to land, labor, and decision-making power, thereby redefining their role within both the household and broader political sphere.

Significantly, this form of mobilization reduced the barriers to entry in political participation. Women who might otherwise have been excluded from formal political processes were able to engage through familiar and culturally embedded practices. Over time, these localized actions accumulated into a broader movement capable of confronting state power, as evidenced by the protests at Uhuru Park and Karura Forest. Therefore, the GBM illustrates how environmental practices can serve as a strategic foundation for democratization, particularly in contexts where direct political engagement is constrained.

4.3 Government Pushback and Protest Action

Amid the success of the GBM, Maathai’s marriage to Mwangi Mathai deteriorated. In 1979, he filed for divorce, citing her independence and refusal to conform to traditional gender roles. He claimed that she was too strong-willed for a woman and that he could not control her (Makgabo, 2020). His opposition mirrored broader resistance to the GBM, which faced escalating hostility from the government. Authorities viewed Maathai’s efforts to restore ecological responsibility and reclaim women’s rights as a threat to their power.

The government’s hostility became particularly salient during Maathai’s campaign to preserve Uhuru Park, a vital green space in Kenya. In October 1989, a law student informed her of the government’s plans to construct a 60-story Kenya Times Media Trust Complex in the center of the park (Shattuck, 2022). The proposed development included corporate headquarters, shopping centers, and parking for 2,000 cars. Alarmed by the threat to public green space, Maathai took immediate action against the project. She wrote letters to the *Kenya Times* and President Moi’s office and petitioned the Kenya High Court to halt the construction (Shattuck, 2022). Legal action failed, however, and the court dismissed the case. The government ignored her appeals and attempted to discredit her by portraying her as a bitter, frustrated divorcee in the media. Authorities denounced the GBM as a fraudulent organization, and President Moi publicly condemned Maathai as a “mad woman,” insisting that she conform to patriarchal traditions by remaining silent (Shattuck, 2022).

A critical turning point occurred in January 1992, when Maathai learned that her name appeared on an assassination list. After receiving this warning, she barricaded herself in her home. However, police soon forced entry and charged her with sedition and treason. She secured release on bail and continued her activism. She led a hunger strike in Uhuru Park to demand the release of political prisoners. After four days of protest, on March 3, 1992, police attacked Maathai, provoking international outrage. It was not until November 1992 that authorities dropped all charges following intervention by international organizations. Despite sustained intimidation and violence under Moi’s repressive rule, Maathai refused to yield. Through her continued leadership in the GBM, she successfully halted the construction project and preserved Uhuru Park (Shattuck, 2022).

Undeterred, Maathai continued to defy the government, organizing a protest against the exploitation of Karura Forest, another green space in Nairobi. In 1998, she discovered government plans to misuse Karura Forest for commercial development and private distribution to political allies. She responded by organizing a peaceful demonstration with her supporters in January 1999 (University of Pennsylvania—African Studies Center, 1999).

However, unbeknownst to the demonstrators, Karura Forest was heavily guarded by gangsters positioned to ambush the group. Maathai and the protesters were brutally attacked when they attempted to plant seeds in an area designated for a golf course (Makgabo, 2020). Although police protection had been requested in advance, officers failed to arrive. When authorities were later alerted to the violence, police refused to arrest the attackers and fled the

scene (University of Pennsylvania—Africa Studies Center, 1999).

Supporters of the GBM captured the attack on video, triggering international outrage and sparking student protests. In response, police employed further violence to suppress student demonstrators. Despite this repression, protesters remained resolute in their support for Maathai. Their efforts succeeded on August 16, 1999, when the president declared the distribution of public land illegal (Makgabo, 2020). Evidently, the GBM's environmental activism extended beyond ecological concerns, becoming a direct challenge to state power and the misuse of public land. This case also illustrates how grassroots action can disrupt entrenched political structures.

4.4 Recognition, Legacy, and Enduring Impact

In recognition of her work, Maathai received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, becoming the first African woman to earn the award (Muthuki, 2006). In her Nobel lecture, Maathai emphasized how the GBM catalyzed political and social transformation in Kenya:

Although initially the Green Belt Movement's tree planting activities did not address issues of democracy and peace, it soon became clear that responsible governance of the environment was impossible without democratic space. Therefore, the tree became a symbol for the democratic struggle in Kenya. Citizens were mobilized to challenge widespread abuses of power, corruption and environmental mismanagement. In Nairobi's Uhuru Park, at Freedom Corner, and in many parts of the country, trees of peace were planted to demand the release of prisoners of conscience and a peaceful transition to democracy. Through the Green Belt Movement, thousands of ordinary citizens were mobilized and empowered to take action and effect change. They learned to overcome fear and a sense of helplessness and moved to defend democratic rights.

Maathai's speech highlighted how localized environmental action can evolve into broader forms of political resistance, particularly in contexts where formal participation is constrained. The GBM demonstrated how the act of tree planting evolved into a symbolic and practical tool for challenging state authority and mobilizing citizens. By linking women's rights and ecological preservation, Maathai empowered thousands to take action and assert their place in society. Through her activism, she showed that when individuals embrace responsibility, they defend their rights.

Wangari Maathai's work demonstrates that responsibility and rights function as interconnected forces rather than separate ideals. By recognizing the importance of both personal and communal responsibility, she founded and led the GBM to address deforestation while empowering communities to lead reforestation efforts. In doing so, she defended the right to clean air and a sustainable environment. At the same time, her activism advanced democratic rights by holding Kenyan authorities accountable for prioritizing commercial interests over ecological preservation. She also challenged political oppression and patriarchal structures that denied women control over property and financial autonomy. Ultimately, Maathai's legacy shows that lasting change emerges when individuals assume responsibility and actively exercise their rights.

5. Conclusion

Ultimately, the GBM transformed environmental conservation into a political movement that successfully assisted Kenya's transition to a democratic state. By grounding political engagement in everyday practices such as tree planting, Maathai mobilized Kenyan women to manage environmental issues while handling systematic inequalities in gender, poverty, and politics. Therefore, the GBM resonates as a model for integrating responsibility, rights, and collective action in the pursuit of global justice. Crucially, this investigation highlights the importance of accessibility in activism. By empowering followers to contribute to routine practices for their land, the movement lowered the threshold for participation and enabled individuals with limited resources to contribute meaningfully to collective action. This approach contrasts with forms of activism that rely heavily on institutional access or specialized knowledge, which can reinforce existing inequalities. The GBM underscores the potential for localized environmental actions to serve as powerful catalysts for democratic change.

Beyond its historical significance in Kenya, Wangari Maathai's work holds broader implications for

contemporary global challenges, particularly in the context of climate justice and grassroots activism. In many parts of the world, environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized and politically excluded communities. The movement's model also suggests that environmental initiatives can provide an entry point for these communities to engage in broader struggles for rights and representation.

This investigation, however, has limitations. It relies primarily on documentary sources, which means it cannot fully explore the everyday experiences of GBM participants or investigate the weaknesses of the GBM's strategy. Future research should build on this study by reviewing a wider range of literature, first-hand accounts of the movement's participants, and the GBM's implications on later grassroots movements. Additionally, studies could build upon a comparative approach, comparing the movement with other environmental grassroots activism in Africa. Such work would allow for understanding the processes by which grassroots demonstrations combated injustice and reshaped Africa's governance.

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