

TAKING ROOT: THE VISION OF WANGARI MAATHAI **TWO-PAGE SYNOPSIS**

Planting trees for fuel, food and timber is not something that anyone would imagine as the first step toward winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet with that simple act Wangari Maathai of Kenya started down the path that helped to reclaim her country's land from a century of deforestation while providing new sources of livelihood to rural communities. She gave previously impoverished and marginalized women the tools to participate for the first time in the political processes of their communities and the growing movement to end Kenya's twenty-four-year dictatorship.

TAKING ROOT weaves a compelling and dramatic narrative of one woman's personal journey in the context of the turbulent political and environmental history of her country. Wangari Maathai was born and raised in the rural highlands of Kenya. She went to University in the United States during the 1960s civil rights era, and was the first female to receive a doctorate in East and Central Africa. Maathai discovered the core of her life's work by reconnecting with the rural women with whom she had grown up. They told her that their daily lives had become intolerable: they were walking longer distances for firewood, clean water had become scarce, the soil was washing down hills in their fields, and their children were malnourished. "Well, why not plant trees?" Maathai thought to herself. Trees provide shade, prevent soil erosion, supply firewood, building materials, and produce nutritious fruit. With this realization Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement, a grassroots organization encouraging rural women and families to plant trees in community groups.

A seemingly innocuous idea, Maathai soon discovered that tree planting had a ripple effect of empowering change. In the mid 1980s, Kenya was under the repressive regime of Daniel arap Moi under whose dictatorship group gatherings and the right of association were outlawed. In tending their nurseries, women had a legitimate reason to gather outside their homes and discuss the roots of their problems. These grassroots women soon found themselves working successively against deforestation, poverty, ignorance, embedded economic interests, and political oppression. They became a national political force.

As the trees and the Green Belt Movement grew, a spirit of hope and confidence also grew in ordinary citizens – especially amongst rural women – only to be met with violent opposition from the government. Maathai and her colleagues soon bore the brunt of President Moi's political oppression. In response, Maathai's political activism only grew. At great risk she led numerous confrontations in defense of the environment and social justice, all of which brought her country closer to democracy.

Through TV footage, newspaper headlines, and chilling first person accounts, ***TAKING ROOT*** documents these dramatic confrontations of the 1980s and 1990s and captures Maathai's infectious determination and unwavering courage. Kenya's fight for democracy finally prevailed. In 2002, a new democratically elected coalition government

replaced Moi, and Maathai became a member of the new Parliament and Assistant Minister of the Environment and Natural Resources.

The trees continue to grow. Today there are more than 6,000 Green Belt nurseries throughout Kenya that generate income for 150,000 people, and thirty-five million trees have dramatically altered the physical and social landscape in various regions of the country. The Green Belt Movement has also started programs teaching women about indigenous food crops, income generating activities, HIV/AIDS, and self-empowerment. Cinema verité footage of the tree nurseries and the women and children who tend them brings to life the confidence and joy of people working to improve their own lives while also ensuring the future and vitality of their land.

TAKING ROOT makes clear that Britain's quest for resources and its systematic oppression of the diverse ethnic communities resulted in massive deforestation and disconnected Kenyans from their land and from themselves, creating long-standing issues over unequal resource distribution and social unrest that exist to this day. At heart, Maathai's work is about solving these social and environmental issues by getting to the root of this deep wound.

Through intimate conversations with Maathai, whose warm, powerful, and luminous presence imbues much of the film, ***TAKING ROOT*** captures a world-view in which nothing is perceived as impossible. The film presents an awe-inspiring profile of one woman's thirty-year journey of courage to protect the environment, ensure equality between women and men, defend human rights, and promote democracy--all sprouting from the achievable act of planting trees.

TAKING ROOT was produced and directed by Alan Dater and Lisa Merton.