



**Remarks by Jane Gitau,
Chair of the Green Belt Movement Board**

The Cabinet Secretary Ministry of Environment and Forestry Keriako Tobiko, the Green Belt Movement Board Members, esteemed guests, ladies and gentlemen, all protocol observed, good morning!

My name is Jane Gitau, and I represent several brands this morning. I work for government- as the Snr Corporate Communication Officer for the Kenya Seed Company, a parastatal charged with ensuring best quality seed is produced so farmers can feed this nation. I am grateful for the support I receive from my organization. Since our election in November last year, my Managing Director and several senior colleagues have shared ideas about how our two brands –Kenya Seed and Greenbelt Movement complement each other. Both have great interest in the environment and in ensuring that every woman can feed her family and both are friends of Michuki Park.

I wish at this point to invite my Senior Colleague David Kiplagat, the General Manager of Simlaw Seeds to bring greetings from our Managing Director Mr Fred Oloibe and the Kenya Seed group.

David Kiplagat, Simlaw

I am proud to stand before you today as the Chair of the Green Belt Movement. An organization whose work, spanning over 40 years, has inspired Kenyans from all walks of life to take up active



roles towards the protection of their environment. **Ask Board members to stand for recognition.**

The Board of directors, members and staff of the Green Belt Movement, and our network of over 5,000 tree nursery groups, are delighted that our partners in government, civil society, and the private sector, stakeholders, and friends have joined us, both here in Nairobi and around the country, to remember and celebrate our founder.

The decision by the AU to link Wangari Maathai Day and the African Environment Day is a double victory. Not only does it raise awareness of the pressing environmental challenges facing the continent, but it also recognizes Professor Maathai's life-long commitment to the protection of our natural environment in Kenya and across Africa.

This year's celebration has additional significance as indicated by the theme *-Reimagining the Future: Clean and Green Cities for All. Build Back Better!* I can only imagine that wherever she is, Prof Maathai is smiling that this is the theme we reflect on this year. I remember as a young news reporter, straight from college, eager to break ground, a colleague came to the newsroom and announced that we would soon get new offices as a group. It already had a name Times Tower. Our office then was in an old building with a winding narrow staircase at the junction of University way and Muindi Mbingu Street. From the artists' impression which we lavishly published on the front page of our newspaper, the Kenya Times, we would be the newspaper with the most modern office in the republic of Kenya, away from the



congested CBD situated in a corner of Uhuru Park. As you obviously know, our joy was shortlived, because one Prof Wangari Maathai, who I had never heard of before then, decided to claim the public green space that was Uhuru Park.

As my career evolved and I moved to different spaces such as the church media we interacted with Prof Maathai, interviewing her and even offering her shelter within Church premises when the going got very rough as you ladies and gentlemen know very well.

As the Green Belt Movement, we continue to appreciate the role of public green spaces as critical infrastructure, especially in the age of unprecedented crises and urban concentration. The multiple benefits of these spaces cannot be overemphasized.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to draw your attention to the UN-Habitat 'Public Space Inventory & Assessment' report that sheds light on the gaps in quality, distribution, and accessibility of public open spaces in Nairobi. The report provides a starting point to develop strategies and policies for the creation, protection, revitalization, and management of public spaces, and restoration of the Capital's image as the 'Green City in the Sun'.

In December, a report released by an environmental group indicated that Nairobi was getting covered by heat because we were destroying trees to put up buildings and expand roads.



Unfortunately, we are not replacing the tree cover in the urban areas.

Many urban centers across the country are facing increased pressure from limited resources, expanding populations, and growing impacts of climate change. For cities to provide sustainable and healthy living environments, these challenges must be addressed with community participation to assure that local needs are met – planning for people is planning with people.

Notably, the role of green spaces in public health has become paramount in recent times. In the context of COVID-19, these spaces have helped people remain proactive and safe during otherwise tough times, further stressing the urgency of quality green spaces.

For the Green Belt Movement, the protection of these green spaces remains at the core of our work with the historic protests to save Karura Forest, standing in arms with the mothers of political prisoners at Freedom Corner, and stopping the grabbing of Jevanjee Gardens and Uhuru Park. We charted a path and inspired generations of individuals in Kenya and around the world to stand up for their rights and raise their voices for environmental protection.

Today, we continue to advocate for cleaner and greener public spaces and we have partnered with individuals and community groups across the country working on innovative solutions that regenerate urban green spaces particularly through recycling in Nairobi, Kisumu, and Nakuru Counties.



Ladies and gentlemen,

I am also delighted and proud to inform you that last year, the Green Belt Movement was named a Global Alliance Partner of the Earthshot Prize and is closely working with Prince William's Royal Foundation on this project to support global efforts to protect and restore the environment and reverse the impacts of climate change. This project seeks to highlight the ability of human ingenuity to bring about change. Together, the five Earthshots, – 'Protect and restore nature', 'Clean our air', 'Revive our oceans', 'Build a waste-free world' and 'Fix our climate', will generate new ways of thinking, as well as new technologies, systems, policies and solutions.

Wangari Maathai Day, is observed a few days ahead of the International Womens Day. I would be remiss therefore, not to recognize the multiple talents that Prof Maathai had and exploited to be the person that she became. A rural girl who lived a rural life like her peers did, she pushed herself, to study in difficult circumstances and possibly made it only because she was in a boarding school, sheltered from the vagaries of the time including the Mau mau war that saw her parents resettled elsewhere. In spite of these, she excelled in the sciences, becoming the first in many ways in the country including as a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. This is the kind of hope and experience that we need to share with upcoming generations of women. Yesterday, I visited a school in rural Trans Nzoia County that has been transformed from mud structures with gaping holes to a modern school through Kenya Seed Companys Corporate Social



Responsibility program. Trans Nzoia is the County where just on Monday this week, the CS for Internal Security put leaders on notice because of cultural practices that compromise school completion rates. As I listened to the teachers talk, I wondered how many potential Wangari Maathais are here, untapped because of the myriad of challenges that they encounter daily? It is to such that we must also address ourselves and as we ***Choose to Challenge***, which is the theme of this years womens day, let us seek to challenge the practices and beliefs that keep the potential Wangari Maathais hidden.

As I conclude my remarks, I acknowledge that our achievements have been made possible thanks to the many partners, some of whom are here, whom we have worked with over the last four decades. Indeed, in Africa we say if you want to walk fast, walk alone, if you want to walk far, walk with others. As the Greenbelt movement we chose to walk with others because it is only then that our holistic value is evident.

Together, we have implemented programmes and projects across the country to ensure that we not only conserve biodiversity and restore ecosystems but also empower communities to take action against climate change and improve their livelihoods. As we look forward to many more years of environmental stewardship, I would like to thank everyone who has been part of this journey so far.

Thank you and God bless you.