

Wangari Maathai Day Remarks

From Wanjira Mathai on behalf of the Family of Prof. Wangari Maathai & the Wangari Maathai Foundation

Honorable Cabinet Secretary, Keriako Tobiko
(get list of other VIPs to recognize from GBM)
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen

Good morning and Happy Wangari Maathai Day!

It is always an honor and privilege to be part of an Africa-wide celebration of this day. I am so sorry I had to leave early to participate in the Climate Ambition Roundtable even for Kenya which overlapped with our celebration. But I am with you in spirit.

It is no mistake that today is a triple celebration: Wangari Maathai Day, Africa Environment Day and World Wildlife Day.

It is fitting because Wangari Maathai was one of the most committed advocates for the African Environment which is home to some of the most beautiful wildlife and other biodiverse species.

It is also fitting that this year's theme is "Re-imagining the future: clean green cities for all". The truth is that if we do not get our cities right, we will not win our fight against climate change. Because AS CITIES GO, SO GOES THE PLANET. African Cities are urbanizing faster than any other cities in the world AND the infrastructure needed for the next 50 years has not yet been built. But as we know and SEE in Nairobi, that infrastructure is on it's way to being built and we are not always getting it right.

It is a mistake for us to plough down trees that have been growing for years to make way for a concrete jungle. Cities around the world, like London, are pulling down super highways to make way for greenways. They see that their cities are becoming ovens and they need their green vegetation back. Cities in Kenya and Africa have the unique opportunity to Build Forward Better so that we avoid the mistakes that have been made by others. But it will take ALL of US. ALL of us must engage and support the growth of our cities.

Waziri, I know you must be having a difficult time defending the natural environment and making the case that economic development and environmental protection go hand in hand. It is a fallacy that we can only develop at the expense of the environment. The truth of the matter is that we can only develop sustainably IF we PROTECT and work with nature. Building urban resilience is crucial if we are going to cushion Kenyans against the devastating impacts of climate change.

So our hope on this Wangari Maathai Day is that we would commit to engagement. Engaging with our local government authority and our National Ministry of Environment to leverage the best of what Kenya offers. But it goes both ways. Government agencies should open opportunities for engagement so we can work together to plan the cities of the future.

Wangari Maathai always sought to engage. She was always ready to listen and invite ideas. Because, as she always said, "Nobody has the monopoly of wisdom". Let's recommit ourselves to engaging with one another and making the right decisions today for a brighter tomorrow.

Thank you!