

**STATEMENT FROM WANJIRA MATHAI ON THE OCCASION OF THE
NGOCSD MAY 2015 GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING: “CELEBRATING
NOBEL LAUREATE PROFESSOR WANGARI MUTA MAATHAI: HER
LEGACY CONTINUES”**

Greetings from Nairobi. I'm so pleased that you all have gathered in New York today at the Church Center to celebrate my mother's continuing legacy. It's a fitting place to hold such an event, since my mother spent many hours in the Church Center and in and around the UN grounds with a number of you who have come together today. She cherished her NGO friends and colleagues and the work you did together over decades, and she also loved New York.

I'd like to thank the NGO Committee on Sustainable Development in New York for organizing this afternoon's powerful group of speakers and I'd like to acknowledge the leadership of the Committee co-chairs Margo LaZaro and Yvonne O'Neal, and the committee's executive board, in making this event a reality. I'd also like to express gratitude to everyone who is participating and all those who worked behind the scenes as well.

Nearly 40 years ago, women in the Kenyan countryside reported to the authorities that their streams were drying up. Their crops were failing. And they found themselves walking farther and farther to gather firewood for fuel, building and fencing. Deforestation, in short, was threatening their livelihoods.

The women petitioned the government to take action. But my mother had an insight. She saw that women themselves could be the solution to environmental degradation. She started a project to offer small stipends to women to work together to grow seedlings and plant trees - trees that could bind the soil, store rainwater, provide food and firewood.

That project, which as many of you here today know, became known as the Green Belt Movement, and earned my mother the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, has led not just to the planting of some 51 million trees and the restoration of rivers, watersheds, and rural landscapes across Africa, but the transformation of the lives of nearly a million women and their families to protect their environment, stand up for their rights and protect the commons..

Today, the fight against deforestation and environmental degradation continues, and women still remain the world's most effective weapons in this fight. I am proud to carry on my mother's work as Chair of the Green Belt Movement and director of the Wangari Maathai Institute at the University of Nairobi.

Today, even as we continue our tree planting and poverty alleviation efforts, we have opened a new front in our efforts against deforestation – the adoption of renewable sources of energy and clean technologies. Technologies such as clean cookstoves. Today, millions of women around the world still cook indoors over an open fire or harmful stoves, a practice that pollutes the air they and their children breathe and causes the deaths of some 4 million people a year. But cleaner cooking technologies exist. The challenge today is to get these technologies to the women who need them.

Again, we see women themselves as the solution. In January 2013, on Secretary Clinton's last day as U.S. Secretary of State, I was proud to join her at the announcement of the Partnership for Women's Entrepreneurship in Renewables (wPOWER), a collaboration between the State Department and the Maathai Institute to identify and train more women to become clean energy entrepreneurs, women who can help evangelize and sell clean technologies to other women. With the participation and support of NGOs such as the Green Belt Movement, the MacArthur Foundation, CARE International, Solar Sisters, SSP India and the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves, we are aiming to bring clean technologies to some 3.5 million households over the next three years.

There is an African proverb that says the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The next best time is today. We cannot change the mistakes and missed opportunities of the past, but we can indeed to plan for the future. With women in the lead, I know we can succeed in helping the next generation to live the very best versions of themselves in a safer, cleaner, more peaceful world.

I also know that women – and men -- in the Church Center today and many others around the world are drawing on my mother's example and commitment to keep her legacy alive to help bring into being a more just, sustainable and equitable world.

I'd like to end with a few words of my mother's, who wrote the following in her autobiography *Unbowed*:

"Those of us who witness the degraded state of the environment and the suffering that comes with it cannot afford to be complacent. We continue to be restless. If we really carry the burden, we are driven to action. We cannot tire or give up. We owe it to the present and future generations of all species to rise up and walk!"

Thank you for your vital work; long may it continue.