



HEINRICH BÖLL FOUNDATION

Acceptance Speech The Petra Kelly Prize

Berlin, Germany
April 30, 2004

Hon. Prof. Wangari Maathai

EBS Founder, The Green Belt Movement and Member of Parliament
for Tetu Constituency

In life we never met. I came to hear of her and her work especially for peace and the environment as I got involved in environmental issues when the United Nations established the environment Programme in 1972. I identified with her spirit, passion and commitment to the issues we have continued to work with for all these years.

Already in the early 1960s my path and that of Petra Kelly moved along parallel lines towards America and she and I were in the United States at about the same time: She attending high school and I college: she in Georgia and Virginia and I in Kansas. I had benefited from a campaign organized by a Kennedy team and the Kenyan politicians of the day, and she served as a volunteer in the offices of Senator Robert Kennedy. She and I were greatly honored when we received the Alternative Nobel Prize established by Jacob von Uexkull in Stockholm: she in 1982 and I in 1984. Quite clearly therefore, although we lived worlds apart, we walked similar paths and I am very proud of that coincidence, or perhaps it is no coincidence at all.

For this and many other reasons I stand here greatly humbled by the recognition bestowed upon me in her name by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the Greens and the people of Germany.

For many years we have worked hard to make our world a better place. Sometimes we succeed and sometimes we fail to change the system we set out to improve. In time we learn to accept that changes come very slowly and that we may only be able to initiate while others will carry it to completion. That time at our disposal is short is something we learn later in life, when we suddenly realize that we have not done much of what we had intended to do and yet time and energy becoming rarer.

We have come along way from ignorance to deep insight, from fear to courage and from the streets to Parliament. We moved from self to others, from my issue to our issues, from home to communities, from national level to global. Now we embrace the concepts of a global village, our global neighborhood, our only one planet and our common home and future.

But not all of us. The world is still without peace, without equity, justice and without a clean and healthy environment. As it was when we started, the world is still divided between the few rich and the many poor. Women are still seeking greater recognition and political, economic and social space and many people still lack the basic needs for a human life with dignity. There are many nations still heavily indebted, those who still choose violence to achieve their objectives.

New challenges have emerged: terrorism at a global scale, new diseases like HIV/AIDS which are most prevalent in my part of the world, older ones like Malaria are coming back with a vengeance, Genetic engineering, climate change, deforestation, General environmental degradation and man-induced poverty. None of these issues persist due to ignorance or lack of scientific information. They persist and degrade our humanity because, as in the past, they are driven by selfishness, greed, and uncaring spirit of those in charge. Therefore, the further we have progressed in years, the more things have appeared to remain the same. Therefore, we have learnt to do what is possible and continue the struggle to the next generation, We continue to give them hope that the world can be a better place for all.

For me I continue to planting trees, especially indigenous ones, and where possible, a few ideas. For many years we planted trees on farms but now we have diversified and plant trees on public lands including forests. The tree is a great sign of hope: small seeds germinate as small tree seedling, which quickly grow to become huge trees. These provide homes for many other species of animals, also provide fruits, building and fencing materials, fodder for livestock, shade and aesthetic beauty. They stop soil erosion, restore forests and local bio-diversity, conserve water and change microclimates. As they grow tall and hold firmly into the ground, trees reminds us that we must preserve, persist and hold firmly onto what we believe in so that we can withstand the forces against our values and principles.

Our tree planting activities have been supplemented by civic and environmental education, which assists people to identify the linkage between good environmental management and a better quality of life. Such management takes place in a democratic system, where there is freedom of expression and association. Today I find myself in parliament and in the government. Now I am challenged to implement many of the ideas we always

advocated for. This a most welcome challenge and we are proud and grateful to have a chance to serve in this capacity. We are grateful for the support we received from Heinrich Böll Foundation especially in the promotion of education and empowering of communities for civic action. Members of the Green Belt Movement have been active participant in the pro-democracy movement.

We are government of many political parties and as NARC we are facing challenges in such coalitions. The Mazingira Green Party is one of the 15 parties in the coalition. It is preoccupying itself with the building of a grassroots people who consciously work for cleaner and healthier environment. As a party with values and an ideology, its time has not yet come. Kenya's political landscape is still ethnic-focused and people are still putting their hope in particular strong persons in their communities, rather than in the ideals and values of a political party.

In pursuing the path we have chosen we believe that we are being faithful to the vision of heroes and heroines like Petra Kelly, that we keep the fire she lit burning in us and that we continue to fight for hope.

We are greatly honored to receive the Petra Kelly Prize from Heinrich Böll Foundation and reinforce our old roots in Germany. Those roots were established in the late 1960s. Some of you may know that I did some of my post-graduate work at the University of Munich through a partnership between the University of Nairobi and the University of Gießen. My academic advisor was Prof. Dr. Rhino Hoffman who has remained my friend and mentor. It is a special treat to have him here.

I want to say that this journey has been long and rough. Many of you here and elsewhere have walked with me through thick and thin. This is a great opportunity to share the joy and the happiness that comes with recognition and honor. I am deeply grateful to all of you for making it possible for me to make a stop here and celebrate. I could not have it any better. Thank you Heinrich Böll Foundation for being there, thank you very much Petra Kelly and the German Greens for showing the way.

Thank you all my friends here in Germany. The debt to you all can never be paid. Thank you.