The reality that sustainable development, democracy, and peace are indivisible concepts should not be denied. Peace cannot exist without equitable development, just as development requires sustainable management of the environment in a democratic and peaceful space. In order to advance peace, we must promote its underlying democratic institutions and ideals. In large part, this is only possible if management of the environment is pursued as a universal priority. Only a holistic approach that takes these interlinked factors into account can ensure effective, ecologically sustainable development.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee challenged the world to appreciate this link and, in doing so, broadened our understanding of peace and security. The task at hand is to act on this challenge. This entails motivating leaders to build fair and just societies in which resources are shared equitably; to protect the environment to ensure that the needs of future generations are not compromised; and to expand democratic space, particularly for women and minorities, so that minority representation can exist alongside majority rule. Setting a foundation for peace and development requires that citizens feel vested in a common future and empowered to realize their own potential in addressing the problems they face.

Sustainable Development and the Environment

In many developing countries, particularly in Africa, environmental problems are relegated to the periphery because they do not appear to be as urgent as other issues. Protecting the environment is often seen as a convenient luxury when, in reality, it is a question of life and death. People cannot survive without clean drinking water, which comes from the forested mountains, or live without the food that is grown in fertile fields watered by the rains. Even the air we breathe needs trees to provide oxygen and recycle carbon dioxide. Our very survival depends on the survival of our fragile ecosystems.

The Green Belt Movement (GBM) was initiated in 1977 with the planting of seven trees on World Environment Day. It was conceived as a practical way to address the needs that rural women were facing, specifically for clean drinking water, nutritious food, firewood, and fodder. These are all benefits that come from the land. Simple methods of caring for the environment have a huge impact on the health of communities as well as on economic empowerment and growth. Because the land had been so degraded, an obvious solution was to rehabilitate it by planting trees. Trees stop soil erosion, thus conserving water. In addition, tree planting is a simple and realistic goal which guarantees successful results within a reasonable amount of time. In the Green Belt Movement
model, trees provide women with the basic needs they require to sustain their families—food, fuel, shelter, and income—since women receive monetary compensation for every tree that survives up to three months.

Working with women to teach them how to plant and care for trees was a natural choice. Throughout Africa, women are the primary caretakers, tilling the land and feeding their families. As a result, they are often the first to feel the effects of environmental damage as vital resources become scarce and even unusable. Environmental degradation forces them to walk farther to attain wood for cooking and heating, to search for clean water, and to find new sources of food as old ones disappear. When the environment is destroyed, plundered, or mismanaged, it is their quality of life, and that of their children and families, that is ultimately undermined.

In addition to planting and nurturing new trees, it is imperative to protect and conserve the trees that still stand in forests around the world. Forests are catchment areas for water; without them, flash floods would carry away the soil and nutrients needed for agriculture. Forests also serve as major carbon sinks, trapping carbon dioxide and thus helping to maintain the climate. Finally, forests filter and purify water supplies, while providing a habitat for wildlife.

The United Nations recommends that each country have at least 10 percent of its land covered with forests. Very few countries are able to claim that they have achieved this goal. In Kenya, for example, forest cover is less than 2 percent; from 1950 to 2000, Kenya lost 90 percent of its forests. To compound this problem, for the last 80 years, the Kenyan government has been planting exotic species of trees for the timber industry, often in indigenous forests. As the trees are planted, people are invited to go into the forests and grow crops along with the exotic trees in a system known as shamba. Under shamba, subsistence farmers are supposed to plant trees before moving on to a fresh plot of land after three years of farming. Unfortunately, much of the clear-felled plantations have not been replanted with tree seedlings, and some farmers refuse to vacate land earmarked for tree planting, resulting in a serious lag in reforestation. Currently, the Kenyan government is trying to reintroduce this destructive practice, partly to appease demand for agricultural land and partly to win favor with voters. Eventually, shamba will undermine the livelihood of millions of Kenyans unless the process is quickly reversed. Commercial plantations are not forests; on the contrary, they are biological deserts. The Green Belt Movement and similar organizations are trying to fill this gap by prioritizing tree planting with communities in degraded forest areas. So far, these efforts have proven highly successful, and there is great hope for further forest restoration.

Peace and Equitable Resource Management

A degraded environment leads to a scramble for scarce resources and may culminate in poverty and conflict. As resources become scarcer or are squandered—whether they be land, water, hydrocarbons, timber, or minerals—some will seek to control them by excluding others. Consequently, the excluded seek justice and dignity through whatever means they can, often resulting in conflict. In fact, most conflicts in the world today relate in some way to competition over the access, control, and distribution of resources. Sometimes these conflicts take form within a
state's own borders as local disputes over water, grazing ground, and agricultural land. Others are international conflicts, such as those in the Middle East. Almost without exception, these conflicts are over the distribution of these limited resources: who will own them, who will control them, and who will be excluded.

Inequality often results from such situations, contributing to desperation and further conflict. To ensure the equitable provision of resources, a country must guarantee the rule of law and basic human rights—including the right to be heard, to eat, to have water, to receive quality education, and to live in a clean and healthy environment. Good governance is necessary to give a voice to societies' weak and vulnerable populations, even while it accepts the decision of the majority. Most importantly, it seeks justice and equity for all, irrespective of race, religion, gender, and any other parameters, which can be used to discriminate and exclude.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Many African leaders have recognized the need for good governance in their respective countries and in the greater region, realizing that despite the continent's wealth in resources, development has sorely lagged. Through multinational deliberation and cooperative organs like the African Union, there is movement toward greater engagement by leaders in order to consult with one another and decide amongst themselves how to end conflicts, rather than wait for assistance from external resources. To further promote these initiatives, African governments need to be supported—both by their own people and by one another. While challenges such as corruption and resource mismanagement do remain in many countries, it is encouraging to see leaders committing to resolve conflicts peacefully and give development a chance.

Development and Peace through Participation

The strengthening of civil society and grassroots movements to catalyze change is essential for development and peace. Doing so enhances the democratization process and respect for human rights. Weak civil societies cannot hold their leaders accountable to the people. As a result, it becomes much easier for citizens to ignore the rule of law. In contrast, a strong civil society can also be an important vehicle for the delivery of services like health, education, and protection of the environment.

As a civil society institution, the Green Belt Movement initially started off as a way to address the immediate needs of rural women. It quickly grew into a movement that educated citizens about the links between the problems they were facing, the degradation of the environment, and governmental policy. Initially, empowering citizens was difficult because they had been persuaded to believe that they were poor not only in capital, but also in the knowledge and skills they needed in order to address their challenges. They were conditioned to believe that solutions to their problems had to come from the "outside." This way of thinking led to a dependency syndrome that was disempowering.
In order to help communities to understand these linkages, the Green Belt Movement developed a citizen's education program. In this program, women identify their problems, the causes of these problems, and then possible solutions. They make connections between their own personal actions and the problems they witness in the environment and in society. Women then come to understand that meeting their needs depends on their environment being healthy and well-managed, and that they must be part of the solution.

This is one of the most significant messages of the Green Belt Movement's holistic approach toward development: the need to expand "democratic space" by educating, mobilizing, and empowering local communities to take action and create change. People must come to realize that they should not wait for local authorities, government, or development agencies to bring about change. Rather, all individuals themselves can and should take action, no matter how small that action may seem. These individual, small acts have resulted in the planting of over 30 million trees in the past 30 years. Furthermore, the courage and commitment of ordinary citizens can push for political change and demand reform from the government. In 2002, ordinary people and civil society organizations realized Kenya's peaceful transition from a one-party state to a democratic government.

Turning Theory into Action

The experience of the Green Belt Movement underscores the link between the environment, development, democracy, and peace. A country cannot develop where there is no peace; peace, in turn, will not prevail if resources are mismanaged or put in the hands of a few at the expense of many. Finally, sustainable development and peace can only be ensured if citizens participate in protecting and restoring their environment and demanding a place at the decision-making table. Understanding these indivisible links is critical to promoting sustainable development.

A number of excellent initiatives indicate that leaders, international organizations, and civil society are already acting to promote these fundamental pillars of development. One example at the regional level is the Congo Basin Forest Partnership. The forests of the Congo Basin are among some of the last remaining large areas of primeval forested lands in the world, second only to the Amazon Basin. Together with the forest ecosystem in Southeast Asia, they are considered the "three lungs" of the planet. The Congo Basin ecosystem includes almost one-quarter of the world's tropical forests and is home to 400 mammal species and more than 10,000 plant species. It provides food, materials, and shelter for over 20 million people and plays an important role as a global sink for carbon dioxide. However, logging, hunting, agriculture, and the oil and mining industries are degrading these forests at a rate of two million acres every year.

The Congo Basin Forest Partnership brings together about 30 governmental and non-governmental organizations to manage the Congo Basin in a sustainable manner. The Congo Basin Forest is located within the boundaries of Cameroon, Central Africa Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Republic of Congo. The goal of the partnership is to promote economic development and alleviate poverty through conservation programs in the region, improve local governance through natural resource conservation, and enhance resource management.
through control of illegal logging and wildlife poaching. This partnership is the result of a growing understanding that managing forest ecosystems' resources sustainably and equitably can help stabilize the planet’s atmosphere and ecology. Additionally, doing so can also help foster peace in an area that has been historically torn by conflict over resources. Under the leadership of Former Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin and myself, the government of Britain has been the first to make a substantial contribution to support the implementation of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership agreement. We are currently working hard to develop a governance structure that will allow other donor agencies to provide similar financial support.

Another important example of an effort to expand democratic space and bring the voices of African people into decision-making processes is the formation of the African Union's Economic, Social, and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC). According to its Statutes adopted in 2004, ECOSOCC’s objective is to establish an assembly of civil society organizations from all African countries to facilitate dialogue between governments and civil society and to promote African civil society's participation in implementing policies and programs of the African Union. It provides African civil society with an opportunity to have a voice during the AU Heads of State summit.

In 2005, I was asked to preside over the formation of this assembly and was proud to do so. I strongly believe that until a critical mass of Africans are sufficiently empowered to hold their leaders responsible and accountable, Africa's resources will continue to be plundered for the benefit of others.

The Green Belt Movement is not alone in recognizing the importance of empowerment through environmental action. Indeed, thousands of other organizations around the world are educating and mobilizing citizens and instilling in them a sense of responsibility that deliberate, doable steps can and do make a difference. One such effort is The Billion Tree Campaign, which is an initiative that encourages people, communities, business and industries, civil society organizations, and governments to plant trees. Participants record their pledges on the campaign's website. The campaign strongly encourages the planting of indigenous trees and trees that are appropriate to the local environment, demonstrating the power of organized efforts.

A Call to Action

It is imperative that humanity stops threatening its life-support system and starts treating the earth and its resources with respect. This is wonderfully articulated in the word mottainai, which is a Japanese concept that means "do not waste resources," "have respect for the resources around us," and "use them with a sense of gratitude." It personifies the need to respect our environment and encapsulates the concept that the Green Belt Movement has been actively promoting for decades: reduce, reuse, and recycle. To this, we should add one more word: "repair."

The concept of mottainai captures how each one of us can protect the environment through simple, deliberate, conscious efforts every day. We can use both sides of a piece of paper before discarding it; we can conserve water every time we turn on the tap; we can use public
transportation; and we can always plant more trees. Finally, we must remember that while the rest of the species on the planet can survive without us, we cannot survive without them. In protecting the survival of other species and respecting their right to be, we can, in turn, ensure our own.

Wangari Maathai founded the Greenbelt Movement in 1977 and was elected to the Kenyan parliament in 2002. In 2004 she became the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

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Africa 50% Asia 4% North & Central America 6% South America 36% Note: Table made from pie chart.

Total Forest Cover, 2000

Africa 17% Asia 14% Europe 27% North & Central America 14% Oceania & Australia 5% South America 23% Note: Table made from pie chart.

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