

## Classroom Lesson - Wangari Maathai

### What's this lesson about?

Wangari Maathai translated her passion for the environment into a course for action. The Green Belt Movement, which she founded in 1977, focused on concrete action, such as planting trees and reforestation. Human rights topics explored in this lesson are the right to a decent living, health, and wellbeing.

### Learning Goals

- Students will understand that small ideas and changes can have a big effect
- Students will understand the power of grassroots movements; what starts at the local level can end up having an impact on the national/international level

### Materials

- Lesson slides
- Computer with internet and large screen to share a video

**Time:** 35 minutes

### Steps:

#### 1. Introduction (5 min)

- Use the lesson slides to introduce the history and key facts about Wangari Maathai and The Green Belt Movement to students
  - Key points to mention include:
    - Wangari Maathai was a Kenyan woman
    - She started the Green Belt Movement
    - The Green Belt Movement helped to save the environment and advocate for democracy. It did this by empowering women with the skills to plant trees and take care of the environment, and the opportunity to gain not only skills but wages for participating.
- Ask students to take a few minutes to reflect (written, partner, or small group discussion) on this quote by Maathai: "When we plant trees, we plant the seeds of peace and hope." Questions could include:
  - What do you think she meant?
  - What does this mean to you?
  - Is this quote only about planting trees? Could its meaning extend beyond planting trees? If so, what is the larger message here?



## 2. Guided learning (20 min)

- Explain what students will learn in today's lesson:
  - The power of small, local actions to catalyze global change
  - How Maathai used the action of planting trees to launch a grassroots movement
  - Planting trees turned into a larger campaign not only for the environment, but for every person's right to a decent living, health, and wellbeing.
- Show students this 1-minute video reel about Wangari Maathai and her contributions to the world: [Wangari Maathai - Defender of the Earth, fighter for democracy](#)
- Ask students if they have ever heard the phrase "grassroots movement" before. Encourage students to share what they know or think it might be. Depending on your students' background knowledge:
  - *If they know what a grassroots movement is*, ask them to list examples of grassroots movements they know about, past or present
  - *If they do not know or are still unclear on what a grassroots movement is*, explain that it is a movement from "the ground up," where people, average citizens who care about something, come together and do what they can to make change. Even if it starts with the small actions of a few, a grassroots movement can grow and have national or even global impact as more and more people unite together in a collective effort
    - Follow-up: Ask students to explain why Maathai's work creating The Green Belt Movement is considered a "grassroots movement"?

## 3. Physical Likert Scale Activity (20 min)

- Share the following statement with students: "There are some big problems in the world today and if I take even one small action, it can make a difference."
- Point to one wall in the classroom that will become a "physical Likert scale" for students to show their agreement or disagreement with that statement.

Explain that standing on one end of the wall represents "I Strongly Agree," and that standing on the other end of the wall represents "I Strongly Disagree." Standing at the midpoint represents "I'm not sure."

- Ask students to move and stand in a spot that shows how much they agree or disagree with the statement you just shared.

### Teacher note:

Post the statement in a place that the students can clearly see and refer to. You may choose to hang up signs or mark the floor to show students where to stand for "I Strongly Agree," "I Strongly Disagree," "I'm Not Sure," or anywhere on the "scale" based on their opinion.



- Call on a few students standing on different areas within this “agreement scale” and ask them to explain why they agree, disagree, or are unsure about the statement.
- Allow students to move and change their spot on the line if anything a classmate shares makes them change their mind about “where they stand” in agreement
- If students choose to move one way or another, ask them to share why.

**Teacher note:**

Consider allowing students to “turn and talk” to peers standing on either side of them to share why they chose to stand where they did. After a few minutes of sharing, students may choose to move their spot on the line, or remain where they are

**4. Share and reflect (5 min)**

- Ask students to jot down a list of 3 causes they care about—these can be within the classroom, the school, the local community, the country, or the world.
- Ask students to think about one small action they can take to address each cause, and be ready to share their idea in the next class meeting
  - Example: “One cause I care about is pollution. One small act I can take to address this cause is to stop using plastic straws / pick up one piece of litter I see outside / use a refillable water bottle instead of disposable plastic water bottles.”

**Lesson Resources:**

**On environmental activism:**

TED-Ed video and student-facing lesson materials: [“Why Act Now?” TED-Ed Earth School video and lesson](#)

Larger resource: [TED-Ed Earth School video and lesson series.](#)

**Tools for student campaigns:**

Online platform hosting youth projects from the United States and 131 other countries  
[DoSomething.org](#)

