

Teaching Human Rights in Africa; Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement

Wangari Maathai called for broadened definitions of development that were complex and multi-faceted, rather than simply measuring GDP.

The World Bank and the IMF promoted development that furthered the interests of “first world” economies and corporations, producing and deepening in Africa (and elsewhere):

- gender inequities
- repressive regimes
- abuse of human rights
- prevention or elimination of civil society
- arming and organizing of militias to carry out the repressive projects of the state.

Wangari Maathai and Women’s Rights:

- Traditional women’s organizations in Kenya were allied with the ruling party (KANU) and focused on “**practical gender interests**”
- Wangari became an enemy of the state because she chose to focus on “**strategic gender interests**”

Decision-making process in the Green Belt Movement helps to “grow” democracy

- women **learn about environmental issues** in their own land and in their own communities.
- women develop **autonomy and self-confidence**, often provoking interest and action for **health care** and **protection**
- gives women a way to **deal with hunger and poverty** by planting food crops and selling seeds and plants
- begins to **restore women’s visible worth** in the community.
- helps people **question why** they are in the circumstances they are in & begin to **question power on local, national, and global levels.**

[Special thanks to Dr. Eunice Sahle, for material above presented at UNC in 2008]

Seeds of Change, by J C Johnson, illus. by S L Sadler, NY: Lee and Low Books 2010 (for young readers)
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Lesson Plans for Wangari Maathai and *Seeds of Change*:

http://www.africaaccessreview.org/aar/pdfs/Seeds%20Lesson_revised.pdf

<http://rfkcenter.org/sttp/profile/wangari-maathai>

Background Resources:

www.greenbeltmovement.com

www.takingrootfilm.com

http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2004/

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wangari_Maathai

Unbowed; a Memoir, Wangari Maathai, NY: Anchor Books 2006 (adults/young adults)

The Challenge for Africa, Wangari Maathai, NY: Anchor Books 2009 (adults/young adults)

PUT A BOX TOGETHER TO SHARE BETWEEN TEACHERS:

Include: *Seeds of Change*, “Taking Root” Documentary, Wangari Maathai’s Nobel Peace Prize speech, maps of Kenya and Africa, and lesson plans. Have students research and create statements on environmental issues in their own community and ask a representative of a local environmental activist organization to come talk about the work they do AND how it grows democracy!

Suggestions of Responsible Ways of Teaching about Human Rights in Africa

What are Africans doing?

- In your first preparations to teach about a human rights issue, look for how *Africans* are responding to suffering and violence in their own societies. Work from the assumption that these responses are almost certainly more appropriate than what Americans or Europeans might come up with.

Choose carefully where you start the lesson!

- Particularly with Africa, if we lead our teaching with depictions of African violence or atrocities, this is what will have a lasting impression, *not* the good that many African citizens and activists are engaged in.

Don't shy away from the truth of human rights abuses.

- It does Africa and Africans no good for us to pretend that genocide, rape, torture, and other atrocities are "not as bad" as the news portrays OR that these abuses are somehow "OK" if it is Africans against Africans. Hold African governments and leaders responsible!

Find the connections to the US

- Remember that virtually every war in Africa has a connection to Globalization and in some way benefits Europe, the US, and other vigorously "emerging economies" like China.
- Encourage learners to imagine complex problems in their own communities. Why haven't *Americans* been able to end homelessness or drug addiction or unequal education?

Look for the complexity!

- Urge your students to explore multiple reasons for conflicts.

African "Special Capacity"?

- Never let students assume, even passively, that Africans have some "special capacity" for suffering OR for violence!
- Likewise, never let students assume that the causes or experiences of human rights abuses in Africa are "inexplicable" or "unimaginable."
- Often an expression of unacknowledged racism, this exploration can be very fruitful for teachers and students.

Avoid the "unimaginable"!

- Be sensitive and alert to subtle questions like: "What kind of people would do this to other people?" (the unimaginable or inexplicable).
- Encourage questions like: "What kind of circumstances and preconditions would make ordinary people like me and you do this kind of thing?"

Not just for Africa anymore!

- Use social justice movements like the Green Belt Movement or the Liberian women's peace movement and "heroes" like Nelson Mandela, Wangari Mathai, or Leymah Gbowee to teach about social justice issues that are not Africa-focused.

These are heroes for the world, and their commitments to justice can inspire all of us, always.

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