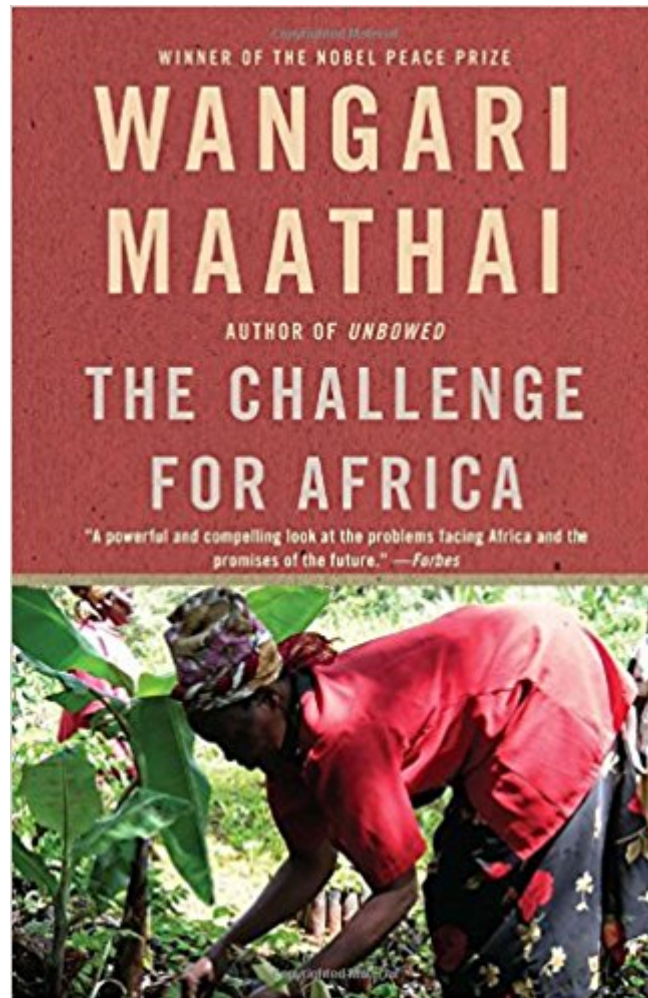




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# The Challenge For Africa



## Synopsis

In this groundbreaking work, the Nobel Peace Prize-winner and founder of the Green Belt Movement offers a new perspective on the troubles facing Africa today. Too often these challenges are portrayed by the media in extreme terms connoting poverty, dependence, and desperation. Wangari Maathai, the author of *Unbowed*, sees things differently, and here she argues for a moral revolution among Africans themselves. Illuminating the complex and dynamic nature of the continent, Maathai offers "hardheaded hope" and "realistic options" for change and improvement. She deftly describes what Africans can and need to do for themselves, stressing all the while responsibility and accountability. Impassioned and empathetic, *The Challenge for Africa* is a book of immense importance.

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## Customer Reviews

**Book Description** Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and founder of the Green Belt Movement, offers a refreshingly unique perspective on the challenges facing Africa, even as she calls for a moral revolution among Africans themselves, who, she argues, are culturally deracinated, adrift between worlds. The troubles of Africa today are severe and wide-ranging. Yet what we see of them in the media, more often than not, are tableaux vivantes connoting poverty, dependence, and desperation. Wangari Maathai presents a different vision, informed by her three decades as an environmental activist and campaigner for democracy. She illuminates the complex and dynamic nature of the continent, and offers "hardheaded hope" and "realistic options" for change

and improvement. With clarity of expression, Maathai analyzes the most egregious bottlenecks to development in Africa, occurring at the international, national, and individual levels--cultural upheaval and enduring poverty among them--and deftly describes what Africans can and need to do for themselves, stressing all the while responsibility and accountability. Impassioned and empathetic, *The Challenge for Africa* is a book of immense importance.

**A Q&A with Wangari Maathai**

**Question:** Why did you decide to write about Africa? **Wangari Maathai:** I had been working in Africa for thirty-five years, and at all levels of society--in the academy and at the grassroots, as an activist and in the government, as a human rights advocate and an environmentalist. My experience is that dealing with the issues requires a holistic approach and a broad understanding of the issues at play, so that one feels challenged to keep going rather than giving up. I wanted to share my experience with others who, like me, want to see a better Africa. I hope that reading of my experience will help them understand why things are the way they are.

**Q:** You place as much blame on Africa's post-independence leaders as on the legacy of colonialism for the failure of Africa to progress, and strongly advocate for better leadership. How do you feel this will be accomplished?

**WM:** First and foremost, it is important for the African leadership to let go of the excuse of the legacy of colonialism, and to accept that it is many decades since the colonial powers left Africa and some of the expectations of the African people should have been realized. It is the people in charge of the countries that should have made that possible, especially since many of them were educated, enlightened, well-traveled, and well-exposed. Their people, however, were largely just the reverse and so put a lot of their faith in their leaders. My experience is that it is the leaders who let their people down, and it is they who must make a decision to work for their people. That is more likely to happen than their people having the capacity to hold them accountable and therefore to change the status quo. That's why I emphasize leadership.

**Q:** You emphasize the loss of culture as one reason why Africa is not progressing. Why is this important?

**WM:** Every people in the world has a code of wisdom they have developed out of their experiences over the course of time. That code of wisdom is reflected in their ways of life: their worship practices; their sense of justice and fairness; their agriculture and the food they eat; their biological heritage and environment; their songs, language, and dances; and the way they mourn their dead and celebrate life. All of these are what we mean when we talk about the culture of a people. The reason why I think culture is important in Africa, especially south of the Sahara, is that peoples' cultures were deliberately demonized, trivialized, and destroyed, and people were encouraged to embrace a culture that was largely Western. Now the problem is that, when you deny people their cultural heritage, you render them vulnerable and make them feel inadequate. They become people with no ground to stand on, and

they are disempowered. That is what happened to Africa during the colonial period, and because the cultures of Africans were largely unwritten when they got their independence, it was very difficult to go back to the pre-colonial cultures, and to a large extent many of them died with their ancestors. Because the people who were given power by the colonial administrators were devoted convertees to Western culture, they imposed that culture even more on their peoples. As a result, when we look back and try to deal with the challenges that confront us, we don't have one of the very important platforms we need to stand on to start. When I compare the experience of sub-Saharan Africa with Africa to the north, the reason why the northern Africans seem to have been able to pull out of the colonial legacy better than the southerners is, in my opinion, probably because they have a culture that is written, that wasn't completely destroyed, and even if the colonial power tried they were able to resist. India also seemed to deal better with their post-colonial period than Sub-Saharan Africa. Gandhi removed his three-piece suit (which represented Western success) and put on a dhoti; he ate Indian food and adopted the symbol of the spinning wheel--all to appeal to the Indian peoples' sense of themselves and their rich, written culture. This gives me reason to question aloud, and encourage Africans to do the same, whether culture may be a missing link in Africa's failure to progress.

Q: You examine the negative perspective of Africa that is present in Western media. What do you believe the West doesn't understand about Africa? WM: I think there are people who understand Africa but like to present it in a distorted fashion. I also believe there are people who genuinely want to understand Africa, but don't because they look at Africa through the eyes of the Western media. The African media are not able to penetrate the Western media to give their own story, and even if they did, sometimes that media are already very pro-West, because the journalists have been educated and acculturated in the West and are unable to present Africa as it really is. Quite often in the case of Africa, people will just present one aspect--for example, poverty--without having the time or patience to explain that poverty is manmade and created both by the local leadership and the international community in the way it deals with Africa. A Western person looking at poverty makes a judgment, without understanding that that poverty is partly caused by the way their government is dealing with Africa. Another good example is the debt issue. Many of us who wanted to campaign for debt cancellation came to appreciate that Africa has already paid the principal on the debt many times over, but the way the debt was structured, Africa was going to pay it through several generations. This is unfair and exploitative. Yet most Western people are only told that Africans have borrowed and are refusing to pay the money. They don't get the whole truth.

Q: African leaders often use the phrase "African solutions to African problems." Do you support this idea? WM: I've yet to see it

applied. Q: You seem optimistic about Africa's future, despite entrenched challenges. Why?

WM: I would have to accept defeat if, after so many years of committing myself to Africa, I arrived at the conclusion that Africa cannot be saved. My personality is that of an optimist, because I believe that almost every problem has a solution. There are very, very few problems in life that have no solution whatsoever. Where there is a will and a commitment we can always find a solution. I do believe Africa can change. I am an African, I am highly educated; I was educated in the West, I went back home. I worked at all levels of development--among the rich and poor. If I was able to change and was willing to devote my life to trying to improve Africans' quality of life and, in spite of all the obstacles, was able to accomplish some measure of success, which even the world came to recognize, why not another person? And not just two people, but four--and then a critical mass of Africans who think like me in every other African country? If that happened, we could change; indeed, it is how things change. There are countries who have been poor, colonized, and enslaved, and they have been able to get out of that situation--mostly due to the kind of leadership they enjoyed. I don't believe that other people have a monopoly of good leaders. I know I'm not alone. We need to speak out. We need to hold our leaders accountable, so they can stop dividing us along ethnic and economic lines, and begin uniting us so we can have a respectable place at the table of the nations of the world. (Photo © Brigitte Lacombe) --This text refers to the Digital edition.

Africa's moral and cultural dysfunctions loom as large as its material problems in this wide-ranging jeremiad. Maathai (Unbowed), a Kenyan biologist and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for organizing the tree-planting Green Belt Movement, surveys Africa's struggle with poverty and disease, political violence, climate change, the legacy of colonialism and a global economy that's stacked against it. But the deeper problem she sees is the selfishness, opportunism and shortsightedness of Africans themselves, from leaders who exploit their countrymen and loot their nations' resources to poor farmers who ruin the land for short-term gain. Maathai means this as an empowering message aimed at a mindset of dependency that would rather wait for someone to magically make development happen; she urges Africans to recover indigenous traditions of community solidarity and self-help, along with the virtues of honesty, fairness and hard work. Maathai shrewdly analyzes the links between environmental degradation and underdevelopment, and floats intriguing proposals, like banning plastic bags as a malaria-abatement measure. But the challenges she addresses are vast and intractable--and sadly, many of the development and environmental initiatives she extols seem to have already fizzled. (Apr.) Copyright © Reed

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Very perceptive views on African development, from the perspective of a major world leader who left us much too soon. Gives a new perspective to development issues from the African point of view, from someone who was educated in the West so understands both Africa and the western point of view of the continent. Highly relevant still in the years after her death. (I saw Wangari Maathai three times in Seattle, each time more perceptive than the last ... I will continue to use the points she makes here in understanding future directions of development in the decades to come).

Certainly heartfelt, but no really stunning perspectives or prose. A call to action, but one I have heard before...

One of my many required readings for International Development program. Most books were boring me out of my mind. However, this book is quite interesting if you care about social justice and surviving in Africa. Too bad I never heard of Dr. Maathai until after she already passed away a few years ago.

This book is a stirring critique for both those inside Africa and those concerned outsiders. She writes to both and minces no words. She addresses the histories of obstacles to Africa's progress and can speak from a grass-roots level as well as from a policy-making level...we need more people like her! I was reading this book while touring around Kenya and much of what she wrote just came to life in the friendliness of the people and their industriousness and determination to do well for the reputation of their country. Compared to other African countries, I could sense and see the difference she has made in Kenya...and what a difference that is! I wish I could take some West Africans on a field trip east to Kenya so that they could experience the hope that is blooming there!

I have chosen to buy and own one of this books after recommending it to the Hedberg Public Library (Janesville, WI) for the following reasons:1) Of all the books I have read on Africa's problems, this is by far the best. It's directly from someone who has actually been in the political arena and seen all for herself regarding what most people out of that loop do not see and know- the politics of deceit.2) The language is also very rich and easily understandable. One can feel the passion and the need to chart a different path for the continent in those words. And her commitment towards this goal is

easily noticed.<sup>3</sup>) Last but not the least, the facts (or truism) of the information presented is just amazing; very up-to-date analysis of the continent's pre-historic times, colonial past, the current situation, and where the continent is heading and/ or must head. I'll encourage all those who want to know about the problems of Africa to read this amazing book! And the sons and daughters of the continent must also read this book.

Great read for anyone interested in making positive changes to the social, economic and political scene in Africa!

I was very impressed with Dr. Maathai's book, "The Challenge for Africa". This was not just a book of complaints about Africa but also a book of solutions, ideas and suggestions for a greater and more inclusive populace. Africa's problems are numerous and complex and should be solved by Africans. The book reiterated that some nations are on the brink of collapse due to corruption, gross mismanagement and lack of the peoples' trust and faith in African leadership--this is one of Africa's biggest challenges. I was particularly pleased to read the juxtaposition of the "tradition" vs "modern" culture and how African culture was obliterated by the Europeans causing untold psychological and emotional damage. The lines drawn by the Europeans, in the late 19th century, to designate their domain, divided ethnic groups and destroyed family ties that existed for centuries. After the colonial period, the European system of governance was not suited for nor appropriately designed for African nations to use as a political template. The vivid description of the micro-nation she described was extremely interesting. The "ethnic typing" correlates to the "kinship corporation" identified by Dr. Peter Ekeh where allegiance and loyalty are more associated with the "micro-nation"(tribes) than with the nation-state or "macro-nation". Monetary gifts sent to assist African leaders in resolving the myriad of issues and problems have not worked. Dr. Maathai calls for African leaders to reject these "handouts". Further, she advocated that the political process include rural people to assist in building stronger infrastructures; economic, social and political. One of the key highlights of the book is Dr. Maathai's vision and commitment to the environment which revealed information that should be widely disseminated. Her analysis of the deforestation in Africa's Congo Basin and the linkage to the Rain Forest in Brazil may be the cause for the unusual climatic conditions in many parts of the world. Her remarkable leadership in the Green Belt Movement played a key role in the planting of over a billion trees in Kenya and is a vital part of the structure for introducing farmers to proper techniques in soil conservation, crop rotation and diversification. Globalization has had a negative impact on locally-grown products which have had limited success in competing with mass-produced

goods distributed by transnational corporations. The African market place is the centerpiece for economic and political activities in most countries and has been unfairly affected by the international markets. Dr. Maathai's book is a must read for those wanting to learn more and to know more about Africa and the challenges facing this huge and diverse continent.

I highly recommend.

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