

interview

[00:00:00] Welcome to this interview, Professor Dr. Hangari Mathai. It's a pleasure to have you here in Stockholm. Thank you very much. It's great to be here. Thank you very much. Uh, we, we, we have, we had the opportunity to speak to each other very briefly 2004, just as you got the prize, the announcement of the prize.

What was your first reaction? Well, uh, that announcement was almost unbelievable. As, uh, for most people in the whole world, this was the first time that the Norwegian Nobel Committee had connected governance, uh, peace and sustainable management of resources together and had shown that managing the resources in a sustainable way and governing ourselves in a, in a more democratic, inclusive way where we respect human rights.[00:01:00]

and respect diversity and promote equity that it is very, very important to peace and that when you do so, you preempt many of the reasons why we eventually end up fighting each other. And so it was surprising to many of us. to myself, but it was also extremely, uh, rejuvenating in that we, we always knew that, but we didn't know that the Nobel committee was also looking at the issue.

It was certainly, uh, uh, something that was quite surprising to quite a number of people, but for your movement and for the greenbelt movement, what did it mean right then? Well, uh, For many, for, for many of us. Of course, it was, uh, uh, as I say, very rejuvenating, very encouraging, uh, that other people were also seeing things the way we were looking at them.

And we are recognizing that many of the conflict we have in the world are due to competition over [00:02:00] resources, competition, over limited resources that we have on our planet, and recognizing that unless we learn to manage these resources differently. The future wars are going to be more and more on these primary resources and especially the essential resources like land, like, um, uh, water, uh, and like, uh, the air we breathe, as a matter of fact.

So, uh, for, for us, suddenly our work became extremely important and extremely valuable, not only to, to, to NGO movement, uh, many of whom we are also working, uh, like we were in the same areas, to women's movement. Because we were very much part also of the movements of the women's movement to human rights movement, which was also very important.

So in many ways, what I saw was that so many people, there was such a wide spectrum of organizations and movements in the world that suddenly [00:03:00] felt that even though I'm the one who got the prize and stood in front of the cameras that they were all being honored and they were all being recognized and, and that the Nobel Committee was finally recognizing this.

This is an extremely important, uh, part of the puzzle for working for peace. Exactly. And, and you, if I say, say that, what kind of responsibility did it come with from your point of view? Because we have moved into an era where Global warming, environmental issues have been quite high on the agenda. From your personal point of view, what, what kind of commitment did it mean to receive the prize and what responsibilities?

Well, the immediate responsibility was that suddenly, uh, something that was extremely local and regional became global. And, uh, I had this wonderful privilege of, of being [00:04:00] on a global stage, of being able to articulate the issues that I was concerned about at a global stage. But this meant traveling a lot, uh, being, um, on great demand.

I've been traveling ever since. Uh, and more people see me outside Kenya than inside. And, um, and also one of the challenges that I have found is that not only are there so many people wanting you to go and talk to them and you feel an obligation. to go and talk to them, you feel an obligation to go and celebrate with organizations that are working in similar areas, because as I said, they feel like they are part of the being honored, and they want their work to also come to the forefront, and they think that you have the honor to make them be recognized and come forward.

But the other thing that I also found is that the Nobel Committee, once they [00:05:00] recognize you, they They put you on a pedestal where people think you know everything about everything and, uh, and so you, you have to constantly have to tell people, I don't know anything about that. And then that, so there is a very heavy responsibility of upholding that honor and upholding that privilege of being a Nobel Laureate.

What issues could have come up when you said, Oh, no, I have to go home and study this, so I don't know about this. Well, some of the people who ask you about everything, for example, right now, we are talking about climate change. And we have been planting trees for years. And of course, in the beginning, we were addressing issues that had to do with the basic needs of our people, firewood, water, building material, fencing material, fodder for the animals, very, very basic things.

And then 30 years later, the tree planting and protection of forests becomes important because it's part of, [00:06:00] um, Solving the issue of climate change because we know now that we always knew, but we didn't associate it with the global warming that trees trap carbon and because they trap carbon and keep it occupied as long as those trees remain standing and alive, not only do they continue to trap the carbon that is in the atmosphere, yeah.

But they keep the carbon, uh, away from the atmosphere and doing the damage that freak, uh, carbon is doing in the atmosphere. And so trees suddenly become great friends for us because they're removing and trapping that carbon. And, uh, and so I don't have the science, uh, of what is happening to the, to the atmosphere.

I don't have the science of how, how degree, how many degrees, uh. Has the the planet warmed up? What is [00:07:00] happening at the polar region? How much of the ice is disappearing in the polar regions? How much of the glaciers are melting from all the mountains of the world? And how are the fluctuations and what has been happening for the last Three, four hundred, five hundred years so as to compare with what is happening now.

I don't have it. All that science is mostly concentrated in the hands of the, the international framework for climate change, which is a United Nations, uh, uh, committee. And all I do is read what the conclusions they are coming up with. But when people talk to you, they think, uh, you must know everything because, um, You are the one who is talking about protecting forests so as to help the planet reduce the rate at which it is warming up.

That's all you know. But what you know is that the way it affects human beings, don't you? [00:08:00] That's right. You see it in Africa. That's the region where We can see, uh, some of the, the, the problems with climate change most precise, most clear. Yeah, absolutely. The one thing you cannot say for sure because of the rate at which environmental changes take place.

Uh, one of the disadvantages and advantages, you know, it's an advantage that the planet doesn't suddenly shock us. And, uh, like. Suddenly we are down to 15 degrees minus, or and then we all freeze. Uh, the changes in the environment are usually extremely slow. So slow that we don't feel it. Uh, and, and that, uh, sometimes is a disadvantage.

But today, for example, we see the snow and, and glaciers on Mount Kenya and Mount Kilimanjaro are disappearing very, very slowly so that Many people don't quite appreciate, uh, that they are [00:09:00] disappearing. But on the

ground, we can see rivers are drying up. Streams are drying up. The land is drying up. Uh, rainfall patterns change because precipitation changes, and there is less Moisture in the atmosphere.

The, the rain clouds don't form as easily, and therefore sometimes when the rains come, they're not adequate. So the crops fail and you have farming as we speak, as we speak in East Africa, in Kenya in particular, uh, the government just announced a few weeks ago that we have 10 million people who need food.

We have thousands and thousands of animals, domestic and wild wildlife that are dying. Because grass has disappeared, water has disappeared. And this may very well be some of the impacts of climate change. And, and this, for these people, is very real. But, uh, for some people, [00:10:00] there are still people who don't believe that climate change is real.

They're saying, Okay, maybe, maybe it is the normal changes of the weather. Well, whatever it is, definitely some people are already suffering and many people are already moving as environmental refugees to greener pastures. Now, you can only move so far in Africa because you have the Sahara Desert to the north, you have Karahali Desert to southwest.

So, You can only move so, so far, uh, before you have a disaster. So for us, it is extremely real. Uh, it is not a far fetched, uh, situation at all. Talking about the movement of people, I mean, that's also a problem, of course. Climate refugees, you know, there are, uh, there are no more green pastures, really.

Absolutely, yeah. And what can that lead to? I mean, talking about peace and conflict and following the climate change. And this is what [00:11:00] people need to understand that. As the land is lost, and it can be lost, as I'm saying, through drought, desertification, and desertification processes such as soil erosion, deforestation, clearing of the vegetation and exposure of the soil so that it is washed away either by wind or water.

Eventually you are left with the sand. This is happening every day. If you fly over Africa, especially during the rainy seasons, the rivers are brown or red with the silt that is coming from the land. And those, uh, patches are micro deserts that eventually coalesce and form masses of deserts. Once the land has become Once it cannot sustain livelihoods, people and animals have to move if they don't die.

And as you say, you can only move So far [00:12:00] before you have to, uh, give up, but you see a lot of people, for example, coming to the northern part of

Africa. Some of them are coming from northern Africa, but some are coming from deeper south in Africa and, and literally trying their best to cross the Mediterranean Sea to come to Europe.

Uh, the more the climate is affected. The more of these people will continue coming, and that's what I think more than anything else ought to make our leaders, such as the leaders we have at the moment, meeting in London as G20, they need to understand that when people have difficulties, they will migrate, and so there will be mass migrations of people moving away from Toronto as well.

areas with difficulties to areas which are perceived to be better. We're going to come back to these very challenging, uh, questions. [00:13:00] But before we do that, I just want to go back to your childhood. What kind of child were you? Did you think that you would plant millions and millions of trees? No, certainly not.

But I must say that I had a wonderful experience as a child. I had a wonderful mother and a father. My father was a wonderful father. Uh, on one of the British, British farms that we, uh, uh, established as I was being born, I guess. And, and I'm, uh, my father was a youngster. He actually moved into the area of the Rift Valley when he was a young man.

Uh, I recently captured that in a book called Unbound, uh, which was published several years ago. And it was a wonderful childhood. And I grew up in an area that was extremely green, lots of good vegetation, lots of clean drinking water, lots of streams and rivers, rolling rivers. And, and then I [00:14:00] saw that change in the name of development.

Clearing forests, replacing those indigenous forests with the monocultures of plantations of trees, such as the eucalyptus, the pines. As I said, to develop the new colony, I saw the introduction of coffee and tea as a cash crop for the people. I saw the introduction of, um, uh, farms for, for maize, for wheat, crops that are very foreign to Africa.

And, and all these, as I was growing up, were, were, uh, parameters of development. But then as I hit adulthood and was coming out of college, um, I started to see that sometimes that very development is a process for de development. And that instead of taking people to prosperity, it has [00:15:00] taken people to poverty.

And I have seen greater poverty now than I saw when I was a child, which is, uh, ironic because we are supposed to be more progressed and we are supposed to be more developed. But this has a lot to do with the way we decided to govern ourselves, the economic and political systems that we adopted, the way we decided to share the resources that came our way.

And, um, and so, uh, at the moment, When I look at my childhood, I think I was extremely lucky, much more than, uh, my own children or my grandchildren. Because you had that beautiful landscape around you. Did that shape you to, to obviously appreciate it? Yes, that really helped me because when I saw the church, I could relate to what I saw as a child.

Because as I said earlier, environmental changes take, take place very slowly. And sometimes what you see, [00:16:00] which is as a result of degradation, you think that the world has always been like that. And sometimes it helps to remember all the times when, when the environment may have been better. Uh, if you don't have pictures, if you don't have films, it's just the memory.

And for me, that's what helped me, uh, recapture. I wanted to recapture what I knew as a child. You, you studied and became the first woman in Eastern Central Africa to achieve a doctor's degree. Uh, what was the driving force within you to, to go through that? I mean, it's hard to study. Yeah, I think I was very lucky.

From, in many ways, I went to school at a time when many girls were not going to school. Uh, I ended up, um, in the hands of missionaries, mostly nuns, initially Italians, then there were Irish Loretto sisters, and then I, I had this wonderful [00:17:00] privilege of going to America in the 60s, uh, in a program that was organized.

Partly by politicians in Kenya, politicians like Tom Boyer, uh, and then in the United States, politicians like Kennedy, uh, Martin Luther King, uh, and other black leaders who were around Kennedy at that time in the 60s. And a lot of us ended up in America. Um, and when I went back home, I was one of the very few privileged, certainly privileged women, and I did my Ph.

D. there, uh, and so in a way, I think I was really inspired by the fact that I was doing well, and I was exploring new fields, and there were great opportunities at that time, uh, and I guess I was just lucky, as I have said many times, When you do well in school, you enjoy school. If you don't do well, you hate school.

And so I always tell children, do [00:18:00] well, because then you'll really love learning. And then from there You moved on and started the Green Belt Movement. I started the Green Belt Movement almost by chance, because I was already at the University of Nairobi, I was teaching, but I was also interested in what was then a very important movement, the women's movement, in the 60s and 70s, had taken up a global dimension, and women all over the world were Uh, very energized and very sensitized and especially led by the women in the West.

The United Nations agreed to hold a global women's conference in Mexico in 1975. And that was the conference that declared the first women's decade. And I was very much involved in that. And it was during that time that I listened to women from the [00:19:00] countryside and those women we're actually talking about.

Needs like firewood, needs for clean drinking water, needs for good food, nutritious food. And because a lot of these women came from the same area I had grown up, it started really raising my awareness to the fact that the environment I knew as a child had drastically changed for the worse. And, and as I said earlier, that the environment had degraded.

Even though the environment had coffee, the environment had tea, the environment had these huge monocultures of, um, tree plantations. Uh, apparently these women were in a much worse position than I was as a child. They were not able to give their children the same kind of food that my mother was able to give me.

So I told them, now I think one thing we could do together is plant [00:20:00] trees. And that's how the whole idea started. And, uh, and then once we started, we saw the need. There was a desire by women to plant these trees. There was, uh, a need for them to be planted for sure. The only challenge we had at that time is that the women said they didn't know how to do it.

So we borrowed techniques from the foresters. And before too long, we started teaching each other. And before too long, we replicated several thousand times, and we moved from a very small pilot project to coincide with the International Conference in Mexico to a movement. And from then on, it has been, uh, expanding, and, and, and we are happy that we have been able to inspire many other groups, both in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

You have connected your work very, very strongly with, as you said, uh, with, uh, [00:21:00] democratic issues, women's issues, uh, human rights issues. Uh,

why and how is that? It was, again, the, the Green Belt Movement for me, um, was a side issue. My real issue was teaching in the University of Nairobi. And I was teaching anatomy.

So in many ways, I was diverting from my career. But it was a diversion that was very attractive, because it was very relevant to me, uh, as a woman. And as I said, this was a time when women were really trying to understand the obstacles that keep them away from the boardrooms, keep them away from Uh, top positions, uh, even though they, they have the, the, the capacity, they have the knowledge, they have the abilities, but somehow blocks are put before them.

So I was very keen, uh, [00:22:00] to, to follow also the women's movement and, um, I noticed as we were trying to plant trees. And trying to engage ourselves as women that the government was very concerned about the fact that we were meeting. We were asking questions like, who destroys the forest? Like, if we don't have clean drinking water, who has polluted it?

Like, if we don't have food, who has the responsibility to feed? What's going wrong that we are not able to feed ourselves? Now, when you ask such questions, you are almost asking questions that go directly to the government. Because they touch on governance. If it is forest, forests are a responsibility of the government. [00:23:00]

Our forests are managed by the government. But they don't belong to the government, because we are all the government. The government is a custodian. So if the forests are being cleared, if they are being destroyed, if we are losing biodiversity, if we are, if rivers are drying up because the forests are being destroyed, you're putting those problems at the doors of the government, the relevant ministries.

And that's when problems started. And because we saw that the government did not want to be asked questions. And that's when the issue of human rights come in because people ought to have a right to ask their governments questions. That's part of a democratic system of governance. People need to, to appreciate, the government needs to appreciate that people have a right to clean drinking water.

That's a, that is an environmental right. It should be a human right. People have right to food. [00:24:00] So if, uh, if the forests are destroyed, so that rainfall pattern is interfered with, so that soil is lost, and people eventually are not able to grow food, and they starve, there's something wrong with the way the government is managing these issues.

And that becomes an, uh, a human rights issue. So the right to speak. The right to question, the right to assemble, so that you can be more than so many, the right to move, the right to read, the right to information, all these rights become very, um, important once you are dealing with issues such as the environmental issues and once you need to ask the government.

And that's how we moved from an organization that was just supposed to plant the trees, a very benign [00:25:00] activity, to a movement that was asking questions and demanding some basic human rights. And that put you in trouble. And that puts me into a lot of trouble because not only was I asking myself, but I was training people to ask.

I was training women to ask, men to ask, communities to ask, and communities to demand these rights from their government. And that's what the government did not like about the Green Belt Movement. Sometimes people do ask the question, why would the government be against planting of trees? Well, the government was never against the of trees per se.

It was against the education. We actually developed a campaign which we called Civic and Environmental Education. This was a campaign to educate ourselves [00:26:00] why we govern ourselves the way we govern ourselves, where we came from as a pre colonial community, uh, colonial community. Uh, the how we governed ourselves during the colonial, uh, era and how we moved from the colonial era to post colonial independent era and how we were governing ourselves that time.

That civic education was combined with and therefore how are we managing ourselves? How are we managing our resources? How are we sharing our resources? How are we distributing our resources? And that civic and environmental education is what the government was against because many of the people Who were in the government, and it's the same even today, are beneficiaries of these resources.

Either because they assign them to themselves, or they acquire them because they have the [00:27:00] power and the capacity. And therefore they become extremely privileged vis a vis the rest of the community. That's why they don't want these questions being asked. And certainly they don't want too many ordinary people being taught.

This was mid seventies. Today we are almost 2010. Many years have gone and there are many challenges. You are releasing your new book, The Challenge for Africa. I would like to just come back to the challenges because people are

getting aware, but it's not enough, is it? Is it enough? What can be done? Where do you see the hopeful?

What can be done? Where do you see hope in Africa, considering that Africa is the continent in the world who has the most natural resources, the sort of the, the [00:28:00] bed of natural resources, and yet there's so much poverty, so much mismanagement, so much undemocratic governing going on. Where do you see hope?

Yeah, uh, the reason for writing that book actually is almost a reflection of my over 30 years of work, uh, not at an academic institution, as I had hoped when I go back home that I would spend the rest of my life in an academic institution, but that, but at a grassroots And what I have found is that it's so difficult to make the changes, it's so difficult to change the life of the people.

And the reasons for this is that, um, the, the, the leaders in particular are really, if I was to, to say the challenges of Africa, for Africa, the biggest [00:29:00] of them all is the leadership. That we have continued to have leadership in Africa that is prepared to enjoy the luxuries of, uh, the luxuries that, um, the colonial system enjoyed, uh, and to exploit the, their own people.

And to have such little sensitivity to the welfare of their own people and to take advantage of the diversity that Africa has in terms of communities and literally, uh, continue the same system of divide and rule so that they, they, they encourage their communities to fight each other and to, to hold their people almost at lansome.

While they do business with the rest of the world. With the resources in the [00:30:00] country, these are the challenges that I find, uh, if it were possible for leadership in Africa to truly be transformed, which is perhaps a miracle, to really be transformed so that they would care for their people, that they would see the people within the borders, even though they did not create those borders, to see those people as their people.

Rather than as different tribes and, and to use them, uh, and make them rise one against the other. We would move so fast because as you say, we are a very rich continent. We are endowed with a lot of resources. But instead of engaging in educating our people, to give them skills, to give them knowledge, So that they can add value to the resources that we have.

Um, we keep them uneducated and poor and therefore extremely vulnerable. [00:31:00] And in their vulnerability, they continue to idolize these leaders. who

really prey on their ignorance and their lack of information. So it's a very tragic situation that we have and nobody from outside can change it. Only Africans can change it.

And it may take a long time before the African people learn to go against their own people, their own leaders, you know, kind of follow the French model and say, uh, We refuse to be used by our leaders, to be exploited by our leaders, to rise with the same courage and determination as they did against the colonial systems.

And until we get there, then for me, I see that the hope is In leadership that truly transforms and we have seen countries transform. We have seen India. India was also a colonized system and although it is a very different kind of [00:32:00] heritage than much of Africa, India was able to to be led by leadership that has actually transformed the Indian experience.

To the point that now we are talking about India being almost a superpower and India got high dependence in 1947. Kenya got high dependence in 1963. Uh, Korea was a colony and they got their independence at about this the same time, uh, around the 60s, early 70s. We were moving at about the same. Uh, rate economically.

We were actually moving. Uh, we had about the same economic level of development, yet Korea was able to literally fly and become a tiger. They call them, uh, Asian tiger when Kenya is to, uh, scrubbing at the, um, at the bottom of the economic ladder. And [00:33:00] the difference It's leadership. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind.

It's leadership. And I just wish there was a way that the African leaders, especially through the African Union, can truly challenge themselves to lead their people outside poverty. Because they can. If they became determined, they could. They have the resources. If, if they could. I want to give an example of, uh, not too long ago, I had the privilege of attending one of the African Union's meetings somewhere in Egypt and, uh, I left the meeting a little earlier than the rest of the delegations and when I came to the airport, I could, I could not believe the number of private jets that I saw at the airport.

Every one of those heads of states had arrived at that airport with a private jet.

[00:34:00] I asked them, How much of this tree will you use? To my shock, they told me, 35%. 65 percent will go to waste. It was literally being turned into charcoal. That's the kind of wastage. That's the kind of exploitation. And that,

that's the kind of insensitivity that we have. Why doesn't the rest of the world care?

Well, I guess if you ask many of the, of the leaders in the rest of the world, they would probably tell me, if the African leaders don't care, why should I care?

That's make you very angry. Makes me angry. Makes me very Uh, disappointed because, uh, it's the leaders who are supposed to protect the people and the people cannot protect themselves. That's why people become leaders is to to provide the leadership to protect. But I also hope [00:35:00] that we have angels out there.

When you look at some of the work that, for example, presidents like President Clinton is doing now all over Africa, he's very, very engaged and you really would want to say, well, I wish they would also be engaged when, when they're in the White House, when they're in down, uh, in 10 Downing Street. Uh, that when they're in power that they can engage our leaders in a positive way and, and, and don't work with them to destroy the people of Africa.

Thank you so much. We could have continued longer, but I say thank you now and wish you good luck. Thank you. I hope to see you again. Thank you very much. Thank you. It's great to be here.

[00:36:00]