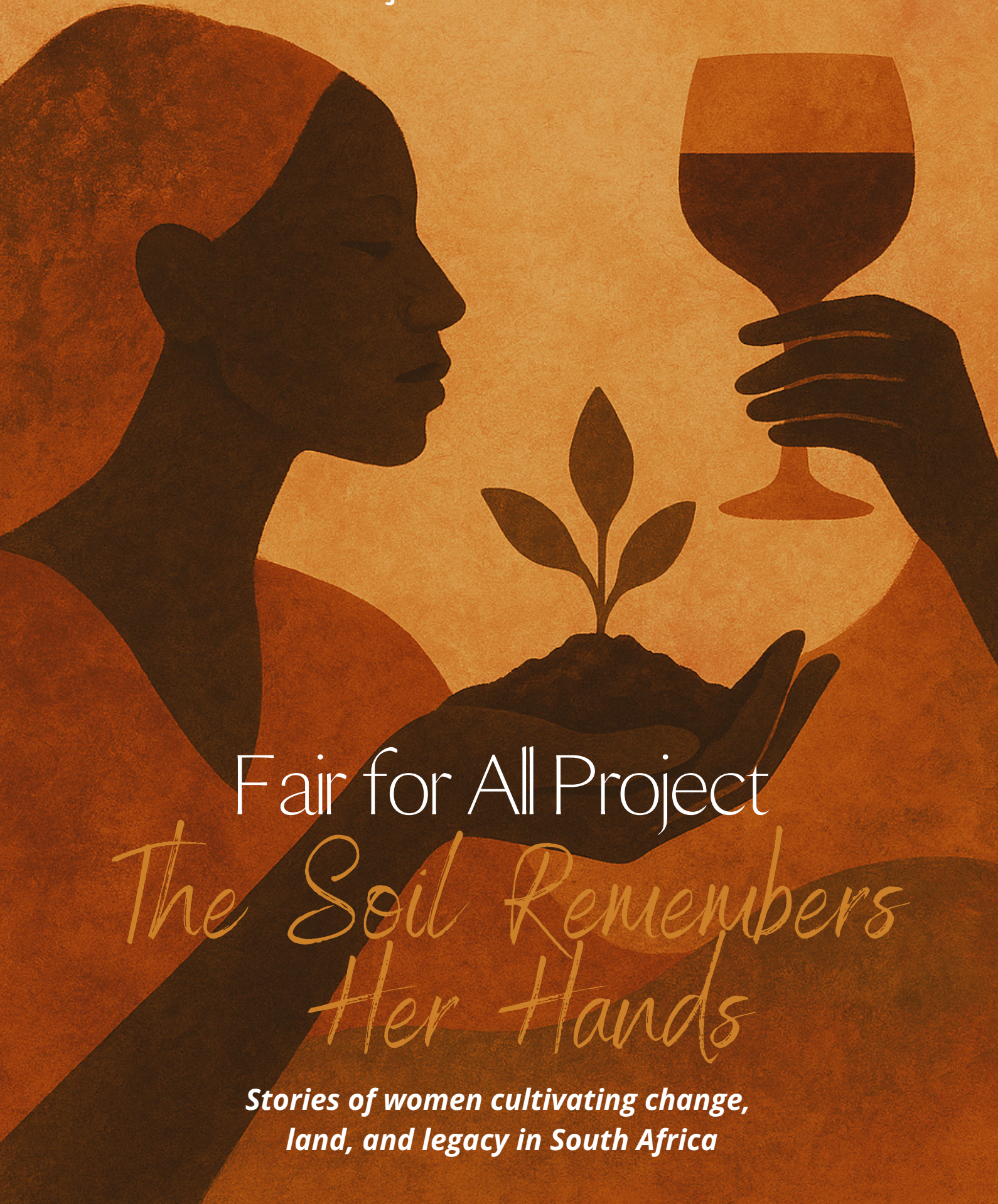




GRAÇA MACHEL TRUST



Fair for All Project

*The Soil Remembers
Her Hands*

*Stories of women cultivating change,
land, and legacy in South Africa*

FAIR FOR ALL PROJECT



Preface

The Soil Remembers Her Hands brings to life the stories of 14 women from different parts of South Africa who are rewriting the future of agriculture from the ground up. In spaces marked by poverty, exclusion, and climate uncertainty, these women cultivate more than crops—they cultivate dignity, employment, and generational change.

Their stories illustrate systems-building from the ground up: both formal and informal job creation, mentorship for young people, ownership of land and businesses, and climate-smart agriculture.

This collection celebrates and reminds us that equitable economies take root when we trust, fund, support and follow women's leadership.

Introduction

Across South Africa's landscapes—from the rural villages of the Eastern Cape to the slopes of Stellenbosch's vineyards—a quiet revolution is underway, led by women who nurture the soil, build businesses, and uplift entire communities. This document collects the inspiring stories of women entrepreneurs who grow crops, craft wine, and cultivate opportunities, equity, and hope.

These women—many of whom launched their ventures after the age of 45—are more than just farmers or founders. They serve as community anchors, mentors, and changemakers. Their achievements include exporting wine to global markets, supplying fresh produce to major retailers, winning international awards, founding agri-cooperatives from backyard gardens, and acquiring farmland through sheer determination and vision. Additionally, some have pioneered agro-tourism sites, received national recognition for innovation, and have become role models within their communities.

The Fair for All Project

The Fair for All project has been instrumental in elevating their journeys. Through access to training, linkages to markets and networks, the initiative has not only provided practical tools; it has also restored visibility and dignity. Fair for All affirms what these women have long understood: that fairness is not charity; it is justice.

This document, featuring remarkable stories of women, does not merely celebrate achievements; it honours pain, persistence, and purpose. It invites readers to bear witness to women who are growing more than crops—they are cultivating futures, transforming systems, and laying the groundwork for a more just economy, one enterprise and one mentee at a time.

The Fair for All project is reshaping South Africa's agricultural value chains to be more inclusive and sustainable, with women playing a central role. Led by the Graça Machel Trust (GMT), in partnership with Oxfam South Africa (OZA), Women on Farms Project (WFP), and the Centre for Competition, Regulation and Economic Development (CCRED), it brings civil society, research, and advocacy together for lasting change.

Launched in 2021, Fair for All emerged in response to persistent challenges faced by women in agriculture—limited land access, market barriers, and exclusion from leadership. It promotes fairer business practices, stronger policy frameworks, and more equitable trade and finance systems. The project reflects GMT’s mission to amplify women’s voices, advance economic justice, and build transformative networks.

“Fair for All is not just a project. It is a movement to unlock the potential of women in agriculture and ensure that they are recognised, rewarded, and respected as key drivers of Africa’s food systems.” - Shiphra Chisha, GMT’s Director of Programmes

Building on this vision, **Mandisa Dyantji** from Oxfam South Africa adds, “Women are the backbone of rural economies, yet they are consistently marginalised. Through Fair for All, we are committed to challenging this reality and driving meaningful change in trade, finance, and governance.”

Together, their voices reflect the heart of the Fair for All Project: a collective determination to reshape value chains so that women are no longer sidelined, but are placed at the centre of Africa’s agricultural future.

The numbers behind the stories

Together, the fourteen women featured in this document directly employ over hundred and fifteen people across farms, agri-processing facilities, marketing operations, and wine production sites. Most of these workers are Black women and youth—many are entering the formal economy for the first time. Their enterprises also provide support for indirect employment through seasonal work, packaging suppliers, transporters, and professional services.

Over 75 individuals have been mentored, trained, or supported through internships, school outreach programmes, and community learning initiatives by our 14 participants. For these women, mentoring is not merely a side activity—it is intricately woven into the very fabric of their work. They actively pass on their hard-earned knowledge to the next generation.

The downstream impact is equally significant. Several businesses provide vegetables to local schools, early childhood centres, and nutrition programmes, while others support neighbouring cooperatives and smallholder producers. These initiatives are not merely farms or businesses—they are essential lifelines.

These figures reveal that each entrepreneur is not only building a business but also actively creating employment and nurturing others. They demonstrate the ripple effect of uplifting women entrepreneurs: they become catalysts for broader economic participation and community upliftment. It also affirms the Fair for All project's theory of change that supporting women in agribusiness unlocks both social and economic value across communities.

Behind these successes lie profound personal sacrifices. Some women have sold their houses to finance their first bottling run. Others have encountered rejection, loss, or exhaustion—struggling through divorce, bereavement, and burnout. One woman lost both her home and business in a single year.

Through all this, they persist. These women continue to support others while also rebuilding themselves. Intergenerational skills transfer is a defining aspect of their work. Many are preparing their daughters and sons to take the baton—training them in the fields, in boardrooms, and at markets.

In a world facing climate uncertainty, these entrepreneurs are adapting as well. They are using indigenous seed varieties, adjusting planting schedules, and investing in sustainable farming practices. For them, climate resilience is not just an abstract policy—it is a matter of survival.

Ownership is a thread woven through every story. These women are not merely participants in agriculture—they are transforming its structures. They are reclaiming land, creating under their brands, and asserting their right to be visible and heard in boardrooms, markets, and policy spaces.



***Meet the incredible women who are
part of the Fair for All Project***

Ayanda Nayo

From backyard gardens to community revival



“We started with five households. Now, we’re working on five hectares, employing 18 people and feeding over 40 families.”

Ayanda Nayo is a 42-year-old South African community leader, mother, and founder of **Potsdam Girls (PTY) LTD**, an agricultural cooperative based in Potsdam Village, near the coastal city of East London in the Eastern Cape province. Formerly a Supply Chain Manager in the Department of Agriculture, Ayanda made the bold decision to leave government employment to respond to the urgent needs of her rural community—where poverty, unemployment, and youth crime had become widespread.

In 2020, amid growing social and economic hardship, Ayanda launched a grassroots initiative that began with simple backyard gardens. Her vision was to combat hunger and restore dignity by helping families grow their own food. What started small, quickly expanded into a five-hectare farming project that now provides food security and income opportunities to more than 40 families.

Ayanda is incredibly passionate about enabling women and youth. She believes that people do not lack potential—they lack access to the right tools and opportunities. Through her leadership, Potsdam Girls has become a model for community-driven change, where agriculture becomes not just a means of survival but a pathway to resilience, pride, and local development. Her story exemplifies how grassroots solutions can address global hunger, inequality, and rural poverty.

“What I saw in the faces of my people pulled me back to the soil.”

In the rolling hills of South Africa's Eastern Cape, in the rural village of Potsdam near East London, Ayanda Nayo begins each day not just by tending vegetables, but by nurturing hope in a community grappling with deep poverty, high unemployment, and limited opportunity. At 42, Ayanda could have remained in the security of her government job, but the hardship she witnessed in her village compelled her to return to the land. "What I saw in the faces of my people pulled me back to the soil," she says. Her mission is not only to grow food—but to restore dignity and create sustainable livelihoods where few exist.

"I returned and saw childhood friends who were unemployed, aging prematurely, surviving off grants, battling alcoholism, and burdened by hopelessness."

Ayanda left her village years ago to pursue education and later secured a position as a Supply Chain Manager in the Department of Agriculture. Yet every visit home unsettled her. "I returned and saw childhood friends who were unemployed, ageing prematurely, surviving off grants, battling alcoholism, and burdened by hopelessness," she recalls. The situation, worsened by a lack of employment opportunities, created a cycle of poverty marked by crime, alcohol abuse, and social decay.



What makes the situation more poignant is that Potsdam while appearing as a typical rural village, is only a short distance from East London, a bustling city. The contrast is stark. Just kilometres away, urban comforts and opportunities thrive, yet in Potsdam, poverty, hunger, and underdevelopment persist stubbornly. For Ayanda, this proximity to prosperity makes the suffering even harder to accept.

The people of Potsdam face daily challenges that threaten the fabric of their community. Chronic unemployment leaves most families dependent on government social grants while young people struggle to find opportunities beyond subsistence. Alcoholism and crime have become coping mechanisms for some, worsening the social instability. Crime, in particular, is out of control, making the village unsafe, especially for women and children. Many households are headed by women who must raise children without reliable incomes or support systems. Access to essential services such as water, electricity, and education is limited, further entrenching the cycle of poverty. For many, hope is scarce, but Ayanda is determined to change that.

"We started with five households..."

"It eats me up inside. You see people you grew up with, reduced to shells of themselves, and it breaks you."

Together with her partner— a former social worker— Ayanda co-founded Potsdam Girls (PTY) LTD, a grassroots agricultural initiative that began by turning household backyards into vegetable gardens. "We started with five households," Ayanda says. "Now, we're working on five hectares, employing 18 people and feeding over 40 families." In 2022, the local government provided a modest grant of R200,000 (approximately USD 10,000) to help support employment. However, the challenges remain significant. The broader community later entrusted Ayanda with 20 hectares of communal land. Still, only five hectares are currently under cultivation due to the absence of essential infrastructure like fencing and reliable water access.

"We can't meet market demand because we simply don't have enough space or equipment," she explains. Still, with determination, Ayanda sells produce to local markets, schools, and supermarkets.

What makes Ayanda's work revolutionary is not just that it grows food—it nurtures people. She prioritises women, youth, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities. "Most of them volunteer," she says. "We don't have funds for salaries, but they stay because they believe in this." Her project is not just agriculture; it's a social intervention, providing purpose and skills to those overlooked by society.

"I cannot rest when I know that the children here fall asleep hungry."

Ayanda carries a deep and personal sorrow that never leaves her. The sight of children scavenging, mothers stretching a single meal to feed many, and young people drowning in alcohol and crime weighs heavily on her. "It eats me up inside," she confesses. "You see people you grew up with, reduced to shells of themselves, and it breaks you." She lies awake at night, haunted by the daily helplessness, often wondering if her efforts are enough. Yet, her desperation fuels her resolve, making each planted seed a silent prayer for change. "I cannot rest when I know that the children here fall asleep hungry," she says, tears welling in her eyes.

Ayanda believes people are not helpless—they need access to the right tools. "If people have the means, they will help themselves," she explains. Her vision is to see every household equipped with the basics to grow vegetables and feed their children. "No parent wants to watch their children go to bed hungry," she says. "They just need seeds, knowledge, and a little land to restore their dignity." For Ayanda, self-sufficiency is not a dream but a necessity.

“Fair for All opened our eyes to new possibilities.”

Ayanda credits the Fair for All project for giving her and her cooperative their first taste of formal recognition. “It opened our eyes to new possibilities” she says. The exposure to skills, networking, and mentorship has given Ayanda renewed hope to push through structural obstacles.

Ayanda confesses that what troubles her most is seeing children growing up under the same hardships she witnessed as a child. “I want to break this cycle,” she says. “We can’t raise another generation without hope.” She knows the stakes intimately as a mother to three children aged 15, 13, and 8.

“We don’t want handouts, we want infrastructure.”

Ayanda believes that the government has a crucial role in turning Potsdam’s situation around. “We don’t want handouts, we want infrastructure,” she insists. She points to the urgent need for fencing, irrigation systems, water access, storage facilities, and basic farming equipment to unlock the full potential of the 20 hectares of land. She also calls for tailored support for smallholder women farmers who face structural challenges, including training, mentorship, and access to markets. “If government could partner with us meaningfully,” Ayanda says, “we could create real jobs, feed more families, and turn this community around.”

Give us water, fencing, and equipment, and we will do the rest.”

Ayanda’s dream is to scale the project into a full-fledged agro-processing hub, supplying larger markets and creating permanent jobs for her community. Her message to government is clear: “We need infrastructure, not handouts. Give us water, fencing, and equipment, and we will do the rest.”

In the dusty fields of Potsdam, Ayanda plants more than seeds—she plants hope, resilience, and a future worth staying for.