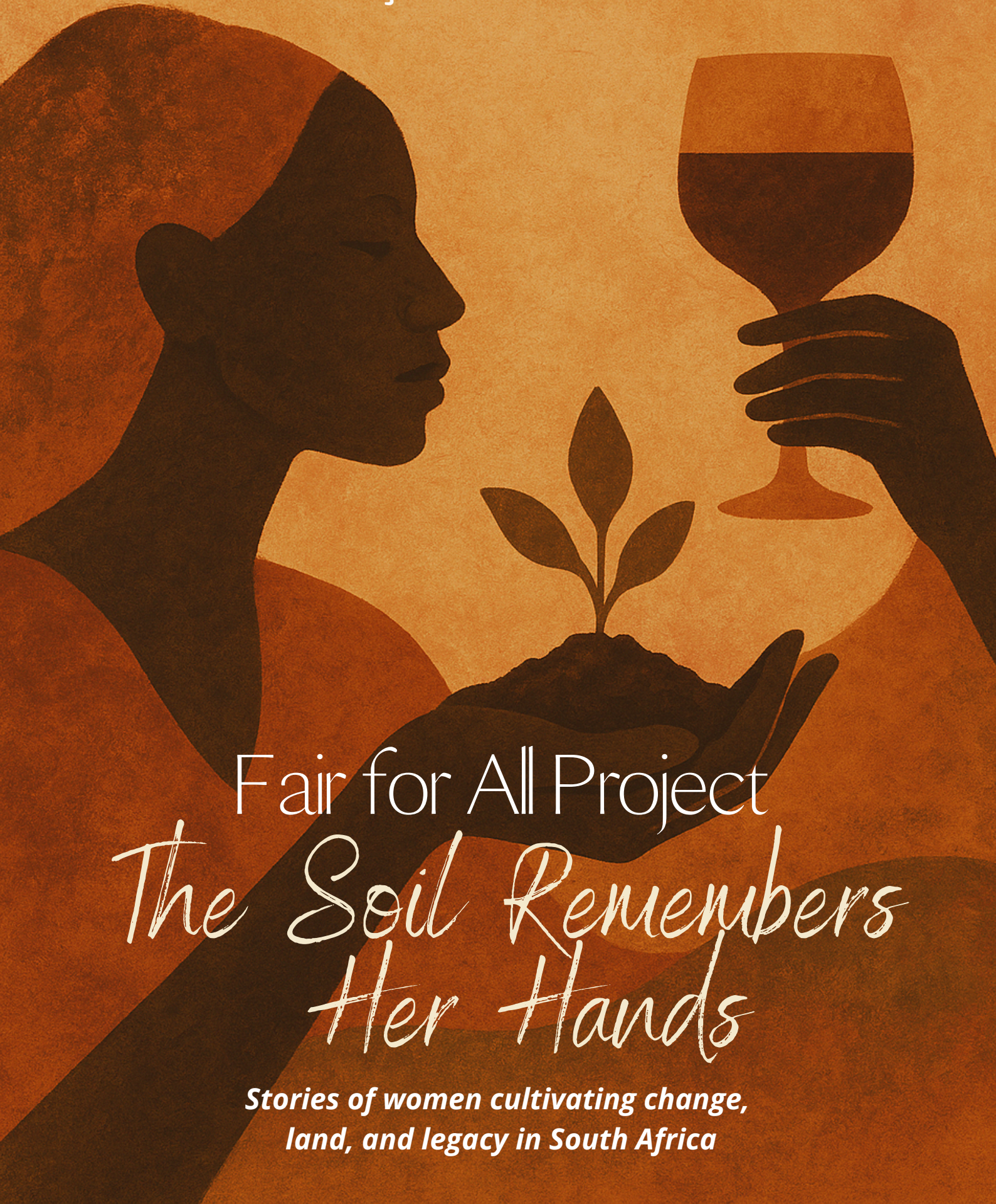




GRAÇA MACHEL TRUST



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.



# Sibongile Cele

## From accountant to agricultural revolutionary



*“Every sale is more than a transaction. It’s food on a plate, dignity restored, and a woman taking her rightful place in the economy.”*

Sibongile Cele, a 58-year-old accountant turned social entrepreneur, founded **Abundant Wealth Limited** and pioneered rooftop farming in Johannesburg. Born in Orlando East, Soweto, and raised by her grandparents, Sibongile was shaped by a deep connection to food security. This was because her father who was a schoolteacher, established food gardens at local schools. After qualifying as an accountant and running her own financial services business, Sibongile transitioned into agriculture in 2013, inspired by the growing food insecurity she witnessed in urban areas. She founded Abundant Wealth Limited to promote innovative farming methods like hydroponics and rooftop gardening, addressing food shortages and land access challenges for women.

In 2024, she broke another barrier by establishing the first 100% Black woman-owned fresh produce agency at the Johannesburg Fresh Produce Market — Africa's largest and most influential market. Through her NPO and partnerships, she has impacted over 1,000 women and youth by providing training in sustainable agriculture.

Sibongile is also a leading voice in advocating for women’s economic inclusion in agriculture and market access. She is a mother of two, a grandmother of four, and she continues to expand her vision of community-driven, sustainable food systems.

*“My father taught us that soil is sacred.”*

In the heart of Johannesburg, where skyscrapers cast long shadows over crowded streets, Sibongile Cele climbs a ladder to a rooftop garden. Her hands, once accustomed to balancing ledgers, now cradle seedlings with the tenderness of a mother.

At 58, she holds many titles: accountant, farmer, market agent, and, most importantly, a visionary determined to rewrite South Africa's food story—one rooftop at a time.

Sibongile's journey began in Orlando East, a historic township in Soweto, South Africa. Her father, a schoolteacher, transformed barren schoolyards into thriving food gardens. "He taught us that soil is sacred," she recalls. However, life led her down a different path—accounting. For years, she crunched numbers at Deloitte, a global professional services firm, before running her own company. Yet, the memory of her father's gardens lingered.

*As a Black woman, access to farmland is like chasing the wind."*

Then came the reckoning. "I saw children in my community eating soya porridge—no vegetables, no nutrition," she says. The concrete jungle of Johannesburg had swallowed the tradition of backyard farming. In 2023, she exchanged her calculator for a trowel, registering Abundant Wealth Limited, a farming enterprise with a social heartbeat.

Land was the first battleground. "As a Black woman, access to farmland is like chasing the wind," Sibongile explains. Undeterred, she looked up—literally. Partnering with a local church, she transformed a 300-square-meter rooftop into a hydroponic farm. "We grew spinach, chillies, herbs—enough to feed the crèche below and sell at markets." Ten per cent of her harvest went back to the church, nourishing children who'd never tasted fresh greens.

"But scepticism was relentless. 'Men in agriculture scoffed. What does an accountant know about farming?' Her voice hardens. "I learned to wear my resilience like armour" she says. Sibongile joined incubators, studied hydroponics, and even petitioned to reform land laws. "If the system won't open doors for us, we'll carve out our own".

*"I didn't leave accounting behind; I took its discipline and structure with me into farming. Now I balance lives, not ledgers."*

Leaving a secure, well-paying career in accounting was not an easy choice—it was a bold act of faith. “I walked away from a steady income because I couldn’t ignore what I saw around me—communities stripped of food security and agency,” she says. For Sibongile, it was not a loss but a redirection. “I didn’t leave accounting behind; I brought its discipline and structure with me into farming. Now I balance lives, not ledgers.”

Finding herself at the Johannesburg Fresh Produce Market, Africa’s largest, was not just symbolic—it was seismic. “It signified entering a space that had never made room for women like me. It meant owning not only the produce but also the process.” As the first Black woman to open a market agency — a business that facilitates the sale of fresh produce on behalf of farmers — she views every pallet sold as a statement: we belong here.

*“Alone, we’re ignored. Together, we’re unstoppable.”*

Sibongile’s secret weapon? Collaboration. She established an NPO with women from Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and the Jewish community in Johannesburg, pooling their skills and resources. “Alone, we’re ignored. Together, we’re unstoppable.” Their crowning achievement? Becoming the first Black woman-owned agency at Johannesburg’s Fresh Produce Market. “Now, we’re training other women to break into this male-dominated space.”

Her eyes light up when discussing the “One Million Trees” campaign, in which schools plant indigenous fruit trees to combat climate change. “We’re not just feeding bodies; we’re healing the land.”



*“Fair for all taught me not to fear big systems —  
and to bring others along.”*

Her work has gained critical momentum through support from the Fair for All project. Through training, workshops, and continental exposure, Sibongile found not only solidarity but also the courage to venture into new spaces. “They taught me not to fear big systems—and to bring others along,” she reflects. Fair for All has helped amplify her advocacy for market access, provided a space for collaboration with other African women, and guided her entry into regulated, male-dominated environments like the Joburg Fresh Produce Market.

*“Every woman who stands beside me is a seed planted against injustice.”*

For Sibongile, advocacy is non-negotiable. “We can’t grow food while ignoring the fact that women are still locked out of markets, finance, and decision-making,” she insists. She believes that food systems are inherently political and that women’s exclusion is deliberate, not accidental. Sibongile fights back by building alliances, challenging policies, and mentoring women to enter spaces previously reserved for men. “Agriculture is not just about planting; it’s about power—who controls it and who benefits from it,” she says. Her work is as much about shifting mindsets as it is about shifting market shares. “Every woman who stands beside me is a seed planted against injustice.”

Today, Sibongile’s produce extends far beyond the rooftop. Through her agency at the Johannesburg Fresh Produce Market, she supplies fresh vegetables, herbs, and hydroponic crops to informal traders, school feeding schemes, small retailers, and local supermarkets throughout Johannesburg and its surrounding townships. The impact reaches even further—into households where children now enjoy fresh greens regularly and into emerging women-led enterprises that she mentors to access these same markets. “Every sale is more than a transaction,” she says. “It’s food on a plate, dignity restored, and a woman taking her rightful place in the economy.”

*“We can’t wait for systems to change—we are the system now.”*

“What keeps me up at night?” Sibongile pauses. “Knowing that millions of women remain locked out of markets.” Her dream? A network of provincial food hubs that shorten supply chains so no child eats a meal that’s travelled farther than they ever will. “We can’t wait for systems to change—we are the system now.”

Her message to young women is clear: “Dream big, but dig deeper. Sustainability isn’t solely about profit—it’s about leaving a legacy of change.”

From rooftops to boardrooms, Sibongile Cele is demonstrating that food sovereignty isn’t a privilege reserved for the elite—it’s a revolution spearheaded by women with dirt under their nails and vision in their hearts.

*“Dream big, but dig deeper. Sustainability isn’t solely about profit —it’s about leaving a legacy of change.”*



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