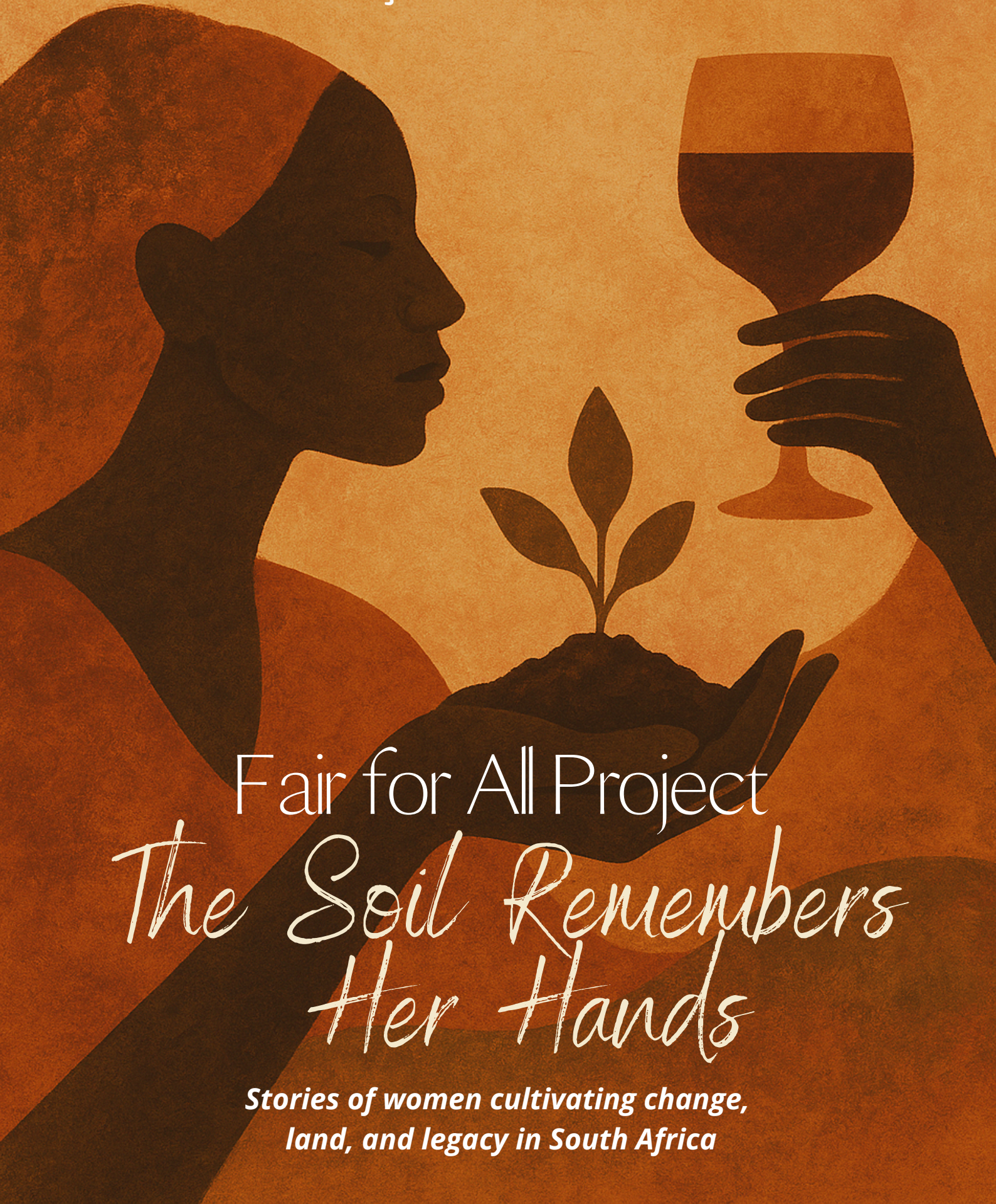




GRAÇA MACHEL TRUST



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.



# Thobeka Mapukata

## Cultivating change in Eastern Cape



*“They told us Black brands don’t sell. Now supermarkets beg for our tomatoes. That’s how you answer doubters — with produce too good to ignore.”*

Thobeka Mapukata, a 70-year-old farmer and community leader from Mgwali village in Stutterheim, Eastern Cape, is the founder and chairperson of **Sinemihlali Primary Cooperative**. After spending years as a caterer in the Western Cape, Thobeka returned home when her business was no longer sustainable and redirected her focus to agriculture, drawing on her background and passion for rural development. Starting with a single agricultural tunnel funded by Old Mutual Foundation, she turned her small operation into a leading tomato-producing cooperative, supplying local supermarkets like Spar and Pick n Pay.

Beyond farming, Thobeka mentors young people, women, and ex-offenders, helping them acquire practical skills and transform their lives. Her cooperative employs eight people directly, while her mentorship extends to five other cooperatives working on a secondary 212-hectare farm. Thobeka is a fierce advocate for women’s access to land, regenerative agriculture, and climate resilience. Through projects like Fair for All, she continues to fight for policy change, recognition, and economic strengthening for rural women farmers.

*“That crisis became my catalyst.”*

The kitchen fires had barely cooled when Thobeka Mapukata faced her reckoning. After seven years of operating a university catering business in the Western Cape, the subsidies dried up in 2002.

"We couldn't feed students properly without support," she recalls, the memory still raw. This crisis became her catalyst, driving her back to her roots in Mgwali village, where she would sow the seeds of an agricultural revolution.

By 2003, Thobeka had established the Sinemihlali Primary Cooperative, starting modestly with small vegetable plots and informal sewing workshops to produce school uniforms. Today, the 70-year-old grandmother oversees a thriving tomato farming operation that earned her recognition in 2017 as South Africa's second-best female farmer in a national competition. However, her journey from a failed caterer to an agricultural trailblazer underscores the determination required for Black women to secure their place in South Africa's farming sector.

Mgwali, located in the Amathole District of the Eastern Cape, faces economic hardship and structural neglect. High unemployment, deteriorating infrastructure, and limited government support present daily challenges for many residents. Youth migration to urban areas drains the village's vitality, while subsistence farming often serves as the primary buffer against hunger. It is against this grim backdrop that Thobeka chose to plant seeds of hope — quite literally.

*"Empowerment means creating space for others to thrive."*

Between 2003 and 2007, Thobeka's initial act of rural entrepreneurship emerged unexpectedly through needle and thread. While establishing her farm, she also launched a school uniform business that bolstered her efforts. "We trained community members, including those whom society had overlooked," she says with quiet pride. Her most poignant success story features a former prisoner who learned to sew by hand for two decades during his incarceration.

"That young man came to me in his rough-stitched clothes," Thobeka recalls. "Today, he owns an industrial machine and supplies the community." This instinct to uplift others would become her trademark - even when it meant sacrificing her market share. "When locals began copying our uniforms, we stepped back. Empowerment means creating space for others to thrive."

*"You can't climb from subsistence to commercial farming without focus."*

In 2008, the transition to serious farming came through painful lessons. Early attempts at mixed farming - chickens here, vegetables there - yielded little progress. "You can't climb from subsistence to commercial farming without focus," Thobeka realised. The breakthrough came when she noticed the Eastern Cape's tomato shortages.

Starting with a single 30x10 meter tunnel funded by the Old Mutual Foundation in 2010, Thobeka's operation now supplies major supermarkets like Spar, local fresh produce markets, and informal vendors. The cooperative also participates in a provincial produce hub, which offers more consistent access to local retailers. By 2015, she had secured funding for four additional tunnels through relentless grant applications, thus increasing production. Her competitive spirit shone when she participated in the Women in Agriculture Awards. "Four hundred women competed," she recalls. "When they announced me as the provincial runner-up in 2017, I nearly fell over!" This recognition led to an even greater honour — being named one of South Africa's top cooperatives at a presidential small business event, selected from 3,000 entrants in 2018.

*"If they close the left door, I pivot to the right."*

Beneath these accolades lies a relentless struggle. "White farmers make it deliberately difficult to access markets," Thobeka says firmly. She recalls how retailers imposed impossible certification hurdles, male farmers undermined women's abilities, and customary village systems refused women land rights without male endorsement.



Her response? "If they close the left door, I pivot to the right." In 2020, she acquired a 212-hectare farm where she is pioneering regenerative agriculture — a model she shares with five other cooperatives. "We're creating climate-resilient systems that may qualify for carbon credits," she explains, her vision extending years into the future.

Climate change casts a long shadow over Thobeka's efforts. Erratic rainfall, prolonged droughts, and shifting seasons have become the norm, making farming increasingly unpredictable. "When the rains delay, our seedlings suffer. When they come too hard, they wash away entire fields," she explains. For farmers like Thobeka, climate change is not just a scientific debate; it is a daily reality that threatens livelihoods, food security, and the very fabric of rural life. "It forces us to rethink everything — our planting, our soil care, and even how we store water." This vulnerability is precisely why she is investing heavily in regenerative agriculture and mentoring others to adapt.

*"Our people don't just need jobs; they need to believe that they too can own."*

Currently, Sinemihlali employs eight full-time workers, primarily local women and youth. In addition to providing jobs, Thobeka mentors five graduates and several aspiring young farmers, including two young women and two former inmates, teaching them farming skills and how to build a business from the ground up. "Our people don't just need jobs; they need to believe that they too can own," she says. Thobeka's leadership extends beyond her own cooperative. She is a passionate advocate for women in farming, striving for greater visibility, equitable access to land, and dedicated support for rural women producers. Since 2015, she has actively engaged in local agricultural forums and provincial roundtables, challenging outdated norms and creating space for others. "If you're a woman in farming, you're often overlooked," she states. "We are changing that — one field and one voice at a time."

*"Fair for All helped me refine my business skills and connect with others who share this struggle and dream."*

Her journey has been further enhanced by her participation in the Fair for All project since 2022. Thobeka has gained invaluable exposure, technical training, and advocacy tools tailored for women entrepreneurs in agriculture through this initiative. "Fair for All helped me refine my business skills and connect with others who share this struggle and dream," she says. The programme has amplified her voice and established her cooperative as a model for inclusive agricultural development in the region.

*"I am old, yes, but I refuse to watch our children leave the land because we failed to show them its value."*

At 70, Thobeka carries her responsibilities and the hopes of many women in her community. "Some nights, I lie awake worrying about securing enough water, market fluctuations, or whether the young people I mentor will have the courage to stay in farming," she confesses. Yet, it is this burden that keeps her going. "I am old, yes, but I refuse to watch our children leave the land because we failed to show them its value."

*"Prepare for blisters. This work requires your hands, not just your mind. But every callus teaches something."*

Thobeka's ambitions now go beyond tomatoes. The new farm will feature livestock, processing facilities, and an agricultural school. "We're constructing guest houses for agri-tourism," she says. "Children need to connect with the soil and understand where food comes from." Her three daughters are central to this vision. The eldest serves as the cooperative's project manager, another handles finances, and the youngest delves into urban agriculture in Cape Town. "I never held corporate jobs," Thobeka reflects. Now my children won't either—we're building our own tables."

Thobeka views her work as a contribution to building national wealth. Through production, employment, and mentoring, she helps transform rural economies from survivalist to entrepreneurial. "We are not just planting tomatoes," she states, "we are planting futures."

For aspiring female farmers, her advice cuts through like a hoe in tough soil: "Prepare for blisters. This work requires your hands, not just your mind. But every callus teaches something." As the afternoon shadows stretch across her tunnels, Thobeka smiles. "They told us Black brands don't sell. Now supermarkets beg for our tomatoes. That's how you respond to doubters - with produce too good to ignore."

*"We are not just planting tomatoes, we are planting futures."*



## GRAÇA MACHEL TRUST

 TheGraçaMachelTrust

 @TheGraçaMachelTrust

 @g\_macheltrust

 @G\_MachelTrust

*With deep gratitude to our donor  
and strategic partner:*



**OXFAM**  
South Africa