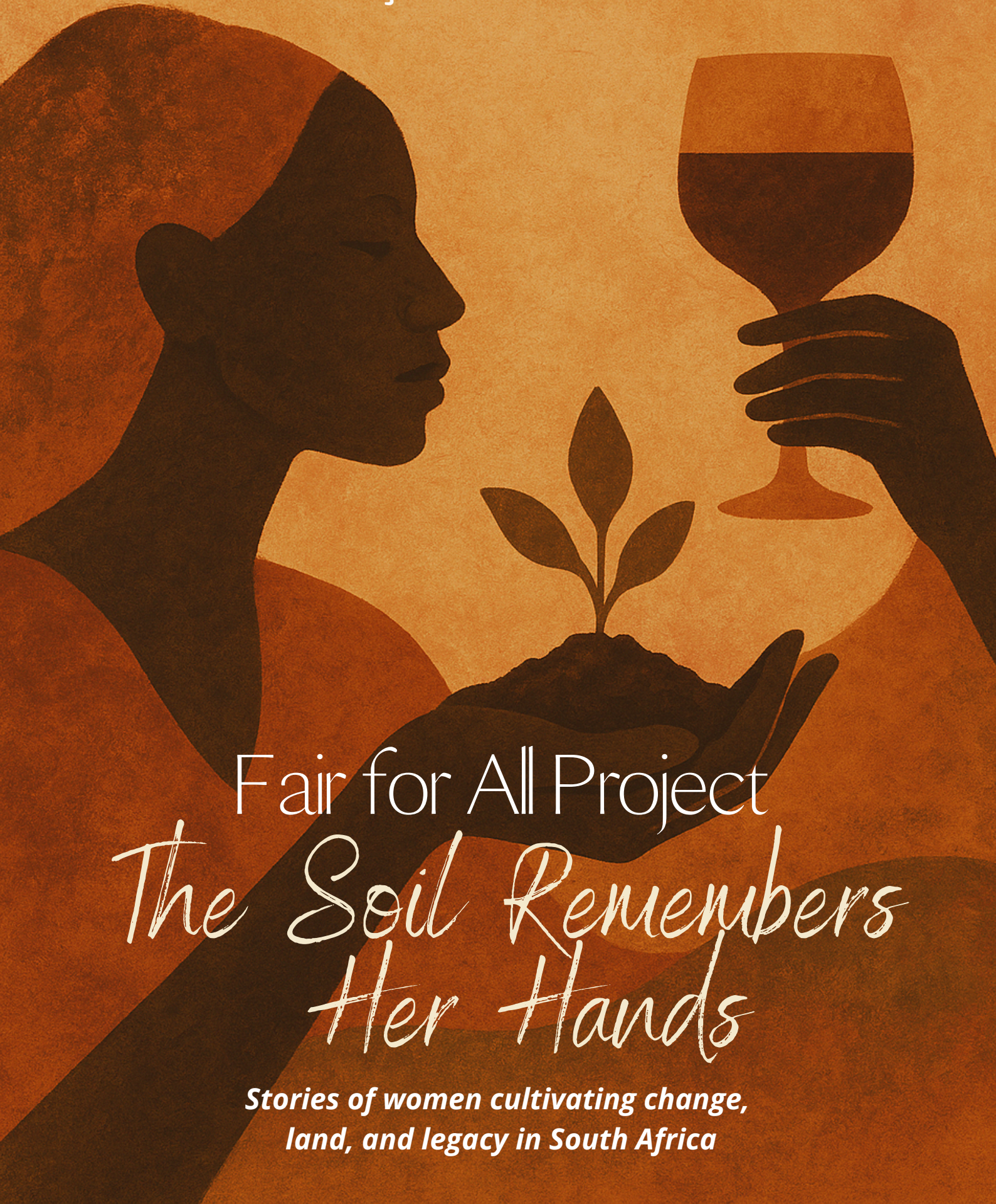




GRAÇA MACHEL TRUST



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.



# Lungisa Nonkwelo

## A mother's fight against a family curse



*"I refused to let my grandchildren inherit this curse. When science gave no answers, I turned to the soil."*

*Lungisa Nonkwelo is a 64-year-old farmer, herbal remedy producer, and community leader from Nqamakwe in the Amathole District of the Eastern Cape. After working for over 15 years at leading financial institutions, including FNB and Old Mutual, she transitioned into farming and agro-processing following a personal battle with breast cancer in 2011. Inspired by her family's tragic history with cancer and determined to find a natural solution, Lungisa developed **Defender**, an indigenous herbal supplement used for chronic illnesses, including cancer, arthritis, and general immune support.*

*Operating from humble beginnings, Lungisa grew Defender into a respected brand, now stocked in pharmacies and used by hundreds across South Africa. Her initiative currently employs eight full-time and two part-time workers, including her own children, who are in distribution and plant management. As a vocal advocate for rural women farmers, she champions the integration of indigenous knowledge with modern science while calling for better policy implementation to uplift women entrepreneurs. Through the Fair for All project, she continues to gain exposure, support, and guidance as she works towards scaling her production.*

*"It's not just your body that is attacked. Your dreams, your dignity, your sense of tomorrow—it all crumbles."*

Lungisa Nonkwelo's voice trembles as she recalls the moment in 2011 when her oncologist told her, "Your family's death certificates are already written—only the dates are missing."

Those words were more than a diagnosis; they were a generational sentence. At 64, this grandmother from Zikhovane Village, nestled deep in the rural hills of Stutterheim in the Eastern Cape, has survived breast cancer, buried relatives lost to the same disease, and vowed to break the cycle for her children. Her weapon isn't just hope; it's a humble jar of herbal remedy she calls Defender, born from desperation, indigenous knowledge, and a sacred bond with the soil.

"I refused to let my grandchildren inherit this curse," she says, cradling a bottle of the amber liquid. "When science gave no answers, I turned to the soil."

For Lungisa, the diagnosis in 2011 felt like reliving a nightmare she thought she had escaped. "I had already buried my mother, my sisters, and other relatives," she says. "When they told me I had it too, it felt as if the disease was chasing us, one by one." Cancer did not just threaten her health—it threatened to take away another mother, another pillar from her family.

"There is a fear that people who have never had that word (cancer) directed at them cannot understand," she says. "I thought of my children first. Who would hold them when they cried? Who would teach them the songs my mother taught me?" It was this maternal instinct, not medicine, that drove her to refuse to surrender. "It's not just your body that is attacked. Your dreams, your dignity, your sense of tomorrow — it all crumbles," she explains, wiping away tears. Yet in the midst of that crumbling, something stirred: defiance.

*"The land saved me.  
It became my hospital, my counsellor, and my church."*

For over twenty years, Lungisa was a prominent figure in the corporate world, known for her success and influence. Beginning in the 1980s, she rose through the ranks at Old Mutual, a major financial services company, and later at First National Bank (FNB), one of South Africa's leading banks, where she worked until 2011. She navigated boardrooms, drove strategy, and mingled with the country's financial elite. Yet beneath the tailored suits and impressive CV, there was a woman silently battling the trauma of witnessing cancer take her mother in 1998, followed by two siblings in the early 2000s.

When the diagnosis came in 2011, Lungisa returned home and wept—not out of fear, but out of resolve. "I remembered my mother's garden," she says softly. "The herbs, the teas, the prayers." What began as personal survival became a movement. By 2012, she had resigned, sold her assets, and embraced the land's unfamiliar rhythm. "The land saved me," she says. "It became my hospital, my counsellor, and my church."

*"We are not witch doctors.  
We are scientists of another kind."*

In her kitchen, she began mixing indigenous herbs—wild garlic, African potato, cancer bush, and others that were whispered from her mother’s memory. When she regained her strength in 2013, fellow farmers took notice. “Mama, why do you look younger than us?” they asked.

Thus, Defender was born—not merely as a product but as a living testament. By 2015, Defender was being informally sold to neighbours and church members. Word spread quickly. Today, Defender is available in pharmacies across Pretoria, East London, and Queenstown. Testimonials pour in: a woman with arthritis dancing again; a man declared infertile now cradling his baby; a prostate cancer survivor’s scans returning clean. Even hospitals are inquiring, as Defender has been undergoing research trials since 2020 for its immune-boosting properties. “We are not witch doctors,” she states firmly. “We are scientists of a different kind.”

*“Our ancestors knew this long before microscopes existed.”*

Defender has emerged as a quiet yet significant case study for the scientific community. As hospitals and research institutions began to take note in 2020, Defender underwent laboratory testing for its anti-inflammatory, immune-boosting, and antiviral properties. The results astonished many, revealing measurable benefits. “When they see the lab reports, even the sceptics whisper, ‘What is in there?’” Lungisa smiles. For her, the fusion of science and natural remedies is not a contradiction but a reunion. “Our ancestors understood this long before microscopes existed,” she says. Yet, the real breakthrough has been how Defender compels the medical world to acknowledge that healing doesn’t always wear a white coat. “Science is learning to listen to the soil,” she adds. The recognition of Defender is gradually shifting perceptions, affirming that indigenous knowledge and modern science can coexist to benefit communities.

*“My daughters keep me going. They have witnessed the pain, but they also believe in the healing.”*

Despite the increasing demand for Defender, Lungisa acknowledges that profits are still modest. “I don’t make millions,” she says. “Some months, I only earn enough to buy more ingredients and keep the lights on.” Without formal production facilities and dependable distribution networks, scaling remains difficult. “I am profitable—just enough to survive,” she adds. Yet, every rand earned is significant, as it not only feeds her family but also upholds the legacy of Indigenous knowledge passed down through generations.

Her children, especially her two daughters, have now become essential to the mission. One helps with packaging and labelling, while the other manages informal sales and assists with administrative tasks. “My daughters keep me going,” Lungisa says. “They have witnessed the pain, but they also believe in the healing.” Even her grandchildren are learning the craft, sitting by her side, measuring herbs and uncovering the secrets of Defender. “This is how we will keep this alive,” she says. “Through them.”

*“Men dismiss us until our herbs heal their families.”*

Yet success conceals the weight she carries. Rural women farmers, she explains, remain invisible in formal value chains. “We farm without electricity, records, or recognition,” she states. “Men dismiss us until our herbs heal their families.” Climate change exacerbates the situation. “The rains no longer arrive when they should, and we lose entire harvests overnight.”

Her production space? Her lounge. “I process 800 litres a month in my living room,” she smiles wryly. “Imagine what I could do with a factory.” In 2017, grants from the Department of Science and Technology and the Eastern Cape Development Corporation enabled her to acquire pots, fridges, and essential safety gear. However, expansion remains a dream deferred.

*“For once, someone listened to us women.”*

Since joining the Fair for All project in 2021, Lungisa gained not only technical support but also a sense of community. “For once, someone listened to us women,” she says. The project equipped her with business skills, market connections, and advocacy tools. More importantly, it confirmed that Defender is not merely folklore but a legitimate medicine worthy of protection, scaling, and global recognition.

Lungisa’s journey is closely linked to her identity as a mother and grandmother. Since 2020, her daughters and grandchildren have been learning the recipes and the philosophy behind Defender. “They understand that this isn’t merely about herbs. It’s about breaking a curse,” she says. She envisions creating a facility where young women can receive training in indigenous knowledge, ensuring that Defender evolves into a multigenerational legacy.

She has much on her mind. “I worry that if I leave today, no one will carry this on,” she says, tears welling. “But then I see my grandchildren measuring herbs and taking notes. That gives me hope.”



## A Message to the Next Generation

To young Black women entrepreneurs, Lungisa offers three commandments:

- Integrity: "Every bottle carries someone's life. Don't betray that trust."
- Record Everything: "Your ledger is your legacy."
- Stay Humble: "The soil teaches patience. So does poverty."

As we part, she whispers a plea: "Tell our stories. Not as folklore but as science.  
Our healing is Africa's future."

Lungisa's story embodies more than resilience; it signifies a refusal to be silenced by systemic neglect. In her hands, Defender transcends being just a herbal remedy; it transforms into a living protest, a gift from ancestors, and a vision of dignity for rural women everywhere. Behind the hills of Zikhovane Village, Defender's amber liquid glows in her hands—not just a product, but a promise.

*"Tell our stories. Not as folklore—as science.  
Our healing is Africa's future."*



## GRAÇA MACHEL TRUST

 TheGraçaMachelTrust

 @TheGraçaMachelTrust

 @g\_macheltrust

 @G\_MachelTrust

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



**OXFAM**  
South Africa