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.

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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.





Verdra Brown
A journey of legacy, land and love

"It's about restoring our pride, claiming space, and ensuring that the next generation inherits not just land but a future."

Verdra Brown is a 59-year-old farmer, agro-processor, and community leader based in Nyarai, a rural village in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. After a career in higher education, specialising in marketing, development, and fundraising at various universities, Verdra returned home during the COVID-19 pandemic and revived her family's smallholding. She founded ***All Things Last Lap****, an agro-processing and beekeeping business inspired by two surviving beehives left by her late mother. Through this venture, she trains and mentors local women in sustainable agriculture and beekeeping, supporting over 20 women through cooperatives.*

Verdra also serves as the operations manager of her daughter's NGO, which is based on the family farm. The NGO tutors nearly 200 children in mathematics and English. Together, they run an after-school programme, creating a safe and nurturing space for children in their community. Verdra's work is deeply rooted in legacy-building, sustainability, and community development, blending traditional knowledge with modern agro-processing techniques.

"Those hives were a sign. A reminder that even when the world stops, the earth never does."

In the heart of the Eastern Cape, where the rolling hills of Mhlangeni meet the sky, Verdra Brown tends to her bees. The hum of their labour is a melody of resilience—a sound that carries the weight of her mother's legacy, the dreams of her village, and the unyielding spirit of a Black South African woman determined to ensure that the last chapter of her story is one of impact.



For decades, Verdra shaped young minds and raised funds for higher education, working at universities in the Eastern Cape and Johannesburg. But when COVID-19 shuttered the sorghum farming project she was leading, life brought her back home to the family smallholding near East London. Waiting, two weathered beehives were still buzzing with her late mother's bees.
"Those hives were a sign," Verdra recalls. "A reminder that even when the world stops,
the earth never does."

From that moment, she and her daughter, who founded Masiphuhlisane, an NGO focused on tutoring local children, began reimagining what this land could become.

"Nothing has changed since we left over a decade ago."

Mhlangeni is like many villages scattered across the Eastern Cape—beautiful yet burdened. High unemployment, deteriorating infrastructure, and limited opportunities have left generations feeling stuck. "Nothing has changed since we left over a decade ago," Verdra reflects. Yet this rural village is also brimming with potential. Its residents, though often marginalized, possess deep knowledge of the land and a desire for a future beyond mere survival.

This village fuels Verdra's work. The word "we" punctuates every sentence. "I don't live alone. I live as part of a community," she states. Her choice of words is intentional. "It takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes a village to sustain itself."

"They watch you, waiting to see if you'll fail."

Verdra started small—just two beehives—but today, her cooperative of 20 women manages 200 hives. Together, they produce honey, herbs, spices, and processed foods that are sold locally. "They watch you," she laughs. "Waiting to see if you'll fail."

However, the women she mentors are now thriving producers in their own right, selling to Verdra and beyond. “We do more with less,” she says, highlighting how they navigate limited land, modest incomes, and unpredictable markets.

Her products now reach markets across the Eastern Cape, with loyal customers in East London, Mthatha, and Butterworth. She has also begun tapping into urban health shops and small supermarkets that value organic and community-grown produce. “We aren’t in the big chains yet, but we’re present where it matters—where people appreciate quality and a story,” she says. Verdra is exploring opportunities to expand into Cape Town and Johannesburg through emerging fair trade networks. Each sale represents more than just a price tag; it embodies the pride of a village

“It's about teaching them not just to pass tests but to think critically about food security, sustainability, and legacy.”

More than just a business, Verdra views her farm as a place for learning. Through Masiphuhlisane, she tutors 200 local children in mathematics and English. “It’s about changing mindsets,” she explains. “It's about teaching them not just to pass tests but to think critically about food security, sustainability, and legacy.” The after-school centre is rapidly becoming a beacon of hope, even as other schools in neighbouring villages express eagerness to be included.

The disengagement of young people is her greatest frustration. “There’s a lethargy,” she says. “A sense of hopelessness that we have to fight against every day.” However, her grandchildren, who eagerly don beekeeping suits and help tend the hives, give her hope. “They understand the land’s worth and the value of working with their hands,” she smiles.

“We are not asking for space anymore. We are taking it.”

Verdra knows firsthand that women entrepreneurs in rural South Africa face numerous challenges. Patriarchal traditional authorities often mediate access to land, capital is scarce, and agricultural networks remain male-dominated. “There are meetings where you walk in and know you’re the ‘woman in the room,’” she states. Through organising, partnerships, and sheer perseverance, Verdra and other women steadily carve out space. “Every hive we build, every seed we plant, every young woman we mentor—it’s all part of pushing back,” she remarks. Her work has inspired other women to form collectives, challenge gendered land allocation, and claim their positions in the agricultural economy. “We are not asking for space anymore,” Verdra asserts. “We are taking it.”

"Fair for All showed us that justice in the food system isn't a dream—it's a right,"

Support from the Fair for All project has strengthened her mission. Through this initiative, Verdra has gained exposure, training, and tools to implement gender-inclusive practices in her operations. "Fair for All showed us that justice in the food system isn't a dream—it's a right," she says. The programme has helped her cooperative consider value chains, market readiness, and how to document their impact. "We're still growing, but now we're doing it with support, strategy, and purpose." For Verdra, Fair for All has reaffirmed what she has always believed—that women's work in agriculture is central to national development.

"We create income when we impart skills, preserve indigenous knowledge, and ensure our children view farming as a dignified way of life."

Verdra perceives herself and the women in her cooperative as creators of income—not only in financial terms but also in social, cultural, and ecological dimensions. "We create income when we impart skills, preserve indigenous knowledge, and ensure our children view farming as a dignified way of life," she states. Through cooperative farming, shared profits, and intergenerational learning, these women are redefining wealth in their communities. "It's not just about selling honey or vegetables," Verdra clarifies. "It's about restoring our pride, claiming space, and ensuring that the next generation inherits not just land but a future."

The changing climate also influences Verdra's work. "The rains don't arrive as they should," she explains. "We've had to revise our planting calendars, invest in water tanks, and adapt as best we can." While global climate debates rage on, in Mhlangeni, the small decisions—when to plant garlic and how to capture rainwater—determine the difference between a successful harvest and a failed season.

"It means stepping into spaces where you're doubted, overlooked, or patronised—
and asserting your presence, regardless."

At 59, Verdra describes this season as her “last lap,” but there is nothing slow or retiring about her pace. The business is profitable, even though it has not yet scaled to the extent she envisions. More importantly, it has a significant impact. Through employment, training, and local procurement, Verdra generates wealth for women who previously had none. “I may be the face, but we are doing this together,” she asserts.

For Verdra, being a Black woman in agriculture carries profound significance. “It means stepping into spaces where you’re doubted, overlooked, or patronised—and asserting your presence regardless,” she states. “It means creating a legacy for the next generation.”

When asked what keeps her awake at night, she replies, “How can I do more, faster, with less?” As the sun sets over Mhlangeni and the bees hum in harmony, Verdra and her community continue their work. The last lap? It is only the beginning.



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With deep gratitude to our donor and strategic partner:

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