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.





Tandiswa Hopa

Sowing seeds of change in the Eastern Cape

"Every seed I plant is a protest. A protest against hunger, against inequality, against a system that forgot its people."

Tandiswa Hopa, affectionately known as Tandi, is a 50-year-old organic farmer, community activist, and founder of ***Green Riverbend Programs****, based in the rural Eastern Cape. With 17 years of experience as a community development specialist, Tandi transitioned into full-time farming in 2016, driven by her passion for food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture. Starting with no formal funding but strong family support, she and her husband purchased a 44-hectare virgin farm along a riverbend, where she established a thriving vegetable, poultry, and agro-processing enterprise.*

Tandi mentors women and youth, training them in organic farming techniques and market access strategies while leading a food hub that enables farmers to set fair prices. She is a mother of three sons, all actively engaged in her business, ensuring that her work is both a livelihood and a legacy. Tandi is also a passionate advocate for just food systems, climate adaptation, and women's leadership in agriculture.

"I wanted to grow food that wouldn't poison people."

In the quiet hills of the Eastern Cape, where the soil tells stories of resilience, Tandiswa "Tandi" Hopa kneels in her organic vegetable garden. At 50, she is more than a farmer—she is a mother, a mentor, and a revolutionary, transforming barren land into bounty while fighting for a future where no child goes to bed hungry. Tandi's journey began not with a hoe but with a notepad. For 17 years, she worked as a community development specialist, helping rural cooperatives access funding.

But as she witnessed the struggles of small-scale farmers—chemical-dependent crops, exploitative markets, and malnutrition in villages—she realised her calling was more profound. "I grew up tending my parents' garden and hating it!" she laughs. "But the soil called me back."

In 2016, with her husband's full support, she took a leap of faith. Tandi resigned from her formal employment and purchased a 44-hectare farm situated along the bend of a river, untouched by chemicals. "I wanted to grow food that wouldn't poison people," she says. This river, gently curving along the edge of her land, inspired the name of her initiative — **Green Riverbend**. "Where the river bends, so does life," she often reflects, drawing from its geography and symbolism. The farm became her refuge and her frontline in the fight against hunger and inequality.

"They said their land was 'too salty' for crops. We planted beetroot there. It thrived."

Starting with minimal equipment and inherited knowledge, Green Riverbend Programs is a non-profit organisation that equips rural women with sustainable farming skills. She taught them to plant in old vehicle tyres, buckets, and degraded soil patches previously dismissed as infertile. "They said their land was 'too salty' for crops," she recalls. "We planted beetroot there. It thrived."

In 2020, her breakthrough came when the Buffalo City Municipality entrusted her with managing a food hub at the local fresh produce market—a rare space where farmers could bypass middlemen and sell directly. "When a grandmother sells her cabbage now, she keeps every rand," Tandi smiles. The food hub has become a lifeline for over 50 women farmers and their families.

"Nothing goes to waste. Every vegetable has a home, whether it's on a table or in a pot feeding the hungry."

Tandi's markets are not merely transactions but acts of resistance against a system that has historically marginalised smallholder and women farmers. Through the Buffalo City Food Hub, Tandi and her women farmers supply produce directly to informal traders, school nutrition programmes, local supermarkets, and feeding schemes in and around East London. "We used to watch our vegetables rot because we couldn't access commercial markets," she says. "Now, we control who buys and at what price."

In addition, she has forged partnerships with emerging restaurants, hotels, and catering businesses looking for locally grown, organic vegetables. Seasonal surpluses are channelled through her food rescue programme to assist community soup kitchens, churches, and orphanages. " Nothing goes to waste," she says. "Every vegetable has a home, whether it's on a table or in a pot feeding the hungry."

However, challenges remain. Small farmers are often restricted to local sales without proper cold storage and transport. “We miss out on distant markets because we simply can’t keep produce fresh long enough,” she laments. Yet, Tandi views these limitations as temporary. “That’s why a community-owned processing and storage facility is part of our dream,” she adds.

“I’ve had men openly tell me farming is not for women.”

Tandi’s path has been anything but smooth. In rural Eastern Cape, women farmers often navigate layers of cultural and institutional exclusion. “Men still control land ownership,” she explains. “We lease, borrow, we beg, but very few of us own.” Since 2016, Tandi has struggled to secure formal land tenure beyond her current farm. Financing presents another hurdle. “Banks want collateral, and when you say your assets are chickens and compost, they shut the door,” she says.

On top of systemic barriers, gender bias is deeply embedded in the community. “I’ve had men openly tell me farming is not for women,” she recalls. Even government agricultural programmes in the area still promote chemical farming, dismissing the knowledge women have carried for generations about organic and regenerative practices.

The situation worsened in 2019 when floods swept away part of her irrigation system and again in 2022 when a prolonged drought nearly crippled production. “We don’t have insurance like commercial farms; we bear the losses alone,” Tandi says. Despite these setbacks, she relied on community solidarity and sheer determination.

“This land is their inheritance. But more than that, it’s our shared purpose.”

Tandi’s resilience is deeply rooted in the community and the family. Her three sons have become indispensable to the daily operations and future vision of Green Riverbend. One manages logistics, ensuring that produce moves efficiently from farm to market. Another son, skilled with tools, maintains machinery and infrastructure vital for production. The youngest, still learning the ropes, assists with operations wherever needed. “This land is their inheritance,” she says proudly. “But more than that, it’s our shared purpose.” For Tandi, involving her sons is not simply about labour—it is about continuity, mentorship, and embedding values of self-reliance and community responsibility into the next generation.

"When I plant, I pray. I speak to the ground. I believe the soil listens."

Beneath Tandi's determined demeanour lies a personal struggle—balancing her roles as a mother, community leader, and activist while bearing the weight of generational expectations. "Sometimes you feel like you must be strong for everyone," she admits. Yet, she finds healing and strength in the soil itself. "When I plant, I pray. I speak to the ground. I believe the soil listens," she says. For Tandi and the women she mentors, farming is more than survival— it's spiritual. "We are returning to what our grandmothers did, but with new tools."

"We aren't just training farmers, we are advocating for policy reform."

Since 2020, Tandi has intensified her advocacy efforts. Through the **Fair for All project,** [1]**Women Creating Wealth**, and **WoMin**, she has found solidarity and the tools to drive change. "We aren't just training farmers—we are advocating for policy reform," she explains. She has participated in national and regional forums, lobbying for equitable access to land, fair market systems, and the recognition of women as pivotal to food security.

For Tandi, advocacy is about survival. "If policies don't change, we will always be at the mercy of middlemen, donors, and floods," she says. With the support of Fair for All, she has amplified Green Riverbend's voice and learned to navigate power structures more strategically.

What keeps her awake at night is both her burden and her passion. "I worry that small farmers will be left behind as the climate worsens," she confesses. "But I also dream." Her dream? To establish a community-owned fresh produce market with processing and storage facilities, as well as a mobile poultry abattoir to help women farmers meet export standards. "We lose too much income to middlemen and regulations designed without us in mind."

And the young? "I dream of a centre where youth learn not just how to farm but how to lead," she says. She offers young women this: "Dream but dig deeper. Passion alone won't pay the bills. Build partnerships, demand policy change, and never let anyone tell you that soil isn't power."

Tandi surveys rows of spinach, maize, and free-range chickens as the sun sets over Green Riverbend. "Every seed I plant is a protest," she smiles. "A protest against hunger, against inequality, against a system that forgot its people."

"Dream, but dig deeper. Passion alone won't pay the bills. Build partnerships, demand policy change, and never let anyone tell you soil isn't power."

[1] Women Creating Wealth (WCW) is a Graça Machel Trust programme that equips women entrepreneurs across Africa with skills, networks, and confidence to grow sustainable businesses

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