

Episode 3: Soil for Life in Cape Town, South Africa

[intro music]

1. Introduction

- Welcome back to another episode of **Peace of Earth**. This is your host, Akil Cole.
- In this episode, I'll be discussing the second subject in my comparative case study: Soil for Life and the city of Cape Town, South Africa. You'll learn some relevant historical background on Cape Town—the country's oldest and second largest city,, what makes SFL a relevant example for my research question, and how SFL relates to 4 essential themes.
- So, without further adieu, enjoy the episode!

[music/transition]

2. Relevant historical background on Cape Town, South Africa

- What we now call "The Republic of South Africa" was long inhabited by several indigenous African peoples, especially the Khoekhoe and San, who have lived in Southern Africa for tens of thousands of years ([IPACC, 2019](#)). The Khoe were hunter-gatherers and the San were semi-nomadic herders of cattle and other animals. These peoples had distinct and sophisticated cultures, languages, and social structures, with notable characteristics including a deep, sustainable relationship with their natural environment and complex trading networks between clans and chiefdoms. While the Khoe and the San were the longest-term inhabitants of Southern Africa, they were joined by later-arriving Bantu-speaking peoples from East and Central Africa, among several other groups. The extensive presence of these peoples predates the permanent settlement of the region by Europeans, namely, the Dutch, by thousands of years. Even though European settler colonialism, trading of enslaved people, and later, racial segregation have undeniably transformed South Africa's history and present-day society, I find it essential to remember that the country's history does not begin with Europeans.
- That said, an important shift in the region occurred with the establishment of a permanent settlement at the Cape of Good Hope, in 1652 by the Dutch East India Company. Though Portuguese navigator Bartholomeu Dias was the first recorded European to reach the Cape in 1488, regular contact between Europeans and Indigenous South Africans didn't occur until Jan van Riebeeck and other employees of the Dutch East India Company, were ordered to establish a supply station ([SAHQ.n.d](#)); this station provided fresh water, vegetables, meat, and other provisions to the Dutch and other Europeans

conducting trade in the Indian subcontinent and the East Indies ([Ward, 2007](#)). An essential part of this station was the “Company’s Garden”, a vegetable garden that used fertile soil and waters flowing down from Table Mountain to provide fresh produce to passing ships and the growing Dutch settlement. Despite being created over 370 years ago, The Company’s Garden still exists today in central Cape Town, making it the oldest garden in the country.

[Mr. Right] Wow, so South Africa’s gardening roots go deep, huh? How else did this Dutch settlement change the demographics and culture of the Cape?

- I’ve barely scratched the surface—The Dutch ruled what would be known as Cape Town from the establishment of the Cape Colony in 1652 until 1795, and then ruled from 1803 to 1806. As the Dutch population in the Cape grew and the settlement expanded, settlers also imported enslaved people from Madagascar, Mozambique, and Southeast Asia for labor in farms and other places ([North, 2020, p.198](#)). Descendents of unions between White European settlers enslaved Africans and Asians, and Indigenous South Africans formed a new racial-ethnic group referred to as **Cape Coloureds**. A particular subgroup of the Cape Coloureds are the Cape Malay, a Muslim ethnic group descending from the many enslaved and free Muslims of Indonesia (formerly called the Dutch East Indies).
- Following Dutch occupation, the British started to rule South Africa as part of its empire at the beginning of the 1800s. This transition from Dutch to British rule had roots in centuries-old European economic rivalry for sea access to Asian markets, but came to a head in the 1790s when Great Britain occupied the Cape Colony in 1795 ([Worden et.al, 1998 p.86](#)). This occupation effectively ended the role of the Dutch East India Company in the Cape. In the midst of shifting alliances and power dynamics in Europe during the Napoleonic Wars, Great Britain re-annexed the Cape from the Dutch in 1806 after briefly relinquishing the colony in 1802 ([Pooley, 2014](#)).
- Though they abolished slavery in 1834, the British continued to implement political, legal, and economic systems that dispossessed Indigenous Africans of their land and disadvantaged non-Europeans, continuing a tradition of colonialism initiated by the Dutch before them.

[Transition sound]

- Fast forwarding a century, The Union of South Africa—which consisted of the former British colonies of the Cape and Natal, and the Boer republics of Transvaal, and Orange Free State—declared itself a “sovereign, independent state” from Great Britain in 1934 ([Contributors to Wikimedia Projects, 2013](#)).

- Beginning in 1948, the all-White, mostly Afrikaner National Party instituted a system called apartheid that lasted until 1994. Afrikaners are a South African ethnic group that consist mainly of descendants of early Dutch settlers (though many also have German and French ancestry) ([Richard, 2020](#)).

[Mr. Left] Hold on, I think I've heard of this. Wasn't this the political, legal, and economic system of racial separation in South Africa? And doesn't "apartheid" translate to "separateness" in Afrikaans—the Dutch-derived but distinct language spoken in South Africa? It kinda reminds me of segregation and Jim Crow in the United States.

- Yeahhh, unfortunately they were very similar systems. Do y'all remember the "Coloured" people I mentioned early?

[Mr. Right AND Mr. Left] Yeah, what about them?

[Mr. Left] Mhmm, I do.

- Well, they're a racial-ethnic group that we don't have here in the U.S. And even though the term "colored" was used to describe African-Americans before the Civil Rights Movement and is now considered offensive, "coloured" is still used in South Africa to describe people of mixed African, European, and/or Asian descent.

[Mr. Right] Okay, gotcha. So how did coloured people fit into this apartheid system?

- Well, let me break down how everyone fit into this. And be sure to stay with me, because the legacies of apartheid will show up later in this episode. Under the apartheid regime created by the National Party, there were 4 rather arbitrarily constructed racial categories, placed into the following hierarchy: White, Asian/Indian, Coloured, and Bantu (or Black South African) ([Britannica, 2019](#)). Under the premise of so-called "separate development", the South African government forced each of the racial groups to occupy separate parts of urban areas. Separate residential and commercial areas were designated based on race, prohibiting members of one racial group from living, traveling, and working in areas not assigned to their race.
- Given the White supremacist foundations of apartheid, non-White people were dispossessed of lands, businesses, and homes in favor of White people. Black South Africans, who were the overwhelming majority of the national population, were especially disadvantaged and forced into all-Black areas called townships. Intentionally placed far away from the central business districts of major cities, including Cape Town, townships often feature a lack of job opportunities, poor infrastructure, unreliable electricity access, under-resourced schools, and

challenges with crime. Ultimately, that meant “socioeconomic status (or class) became synonymous with race ([Turok et. al. 2021](#)).”

[Mr. Left] How brutal! However, as with colonialism and slavery before it, I know South African people resisted apartheid in big and small ways—even in the face of violent government suppression.

[Mr. Right] Exactly. Isn't that something you learned a lot about when you studied abroad in Cape Town last summer, Akil?

- Yeah, it was! From late May to mid-June of 2023, I participated in a Georgetown study abroad class in Cape Town called “Social Transformation in South Africa”. During that time, I was introduced to how decades of grassroots political, economic, and cultural resistance by the country's non-white majority brought the apartheid regime to an end (Kurtz, 2010). For the sake of keeping this episode focused, I invite you to check the **show notes** to learn more about the movements and figures, like Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu that were instrumental in ending apartheid.

[Transition sound]

- One of the major and most contested aspects of the new South African constitution, which was adopted in 1996, was the issue of land rights ([SAHO. 2014](#)). Land access and property ownership are some of the most important pieces to survival and wealth generation. Healthy land provides the ground for food production, quality housing, and economic development.

[Mr. Left] Speaking of land rights and economic development, what's the layout of Cape Town like?

- In Cape Town, the central business district is located in an area called City Bowl, which is defined by Table Bay on one side and several mountains on the other side. As the city center, City Bowl is Cape Town's financial, cultural, and political hub. The prime real estate of the central business district and the neighboring suburbs are home to some of the city's most wealthy, and mostly white, residents ([Turok et. al. 2020](#)). This is one of the key legacies of apartheid, which forced most Coloured and Black residents into the Cape Flats, a region of the Cape several miles from the City Bowl characterized by poor, sandy soils. It was here, the Cape Flats, that townships like Langa (South Africa's first township) and Gugulethu were constructed during the 20th century.
- My classmates and I had very comfortable accommodations in the City Bowl and for one of our classes, we were generously shown around the Langa township by one local community member and tour guide. On this community visit, and the several others I experienced when I returned to Cape Town a

month later, I saw first-hand how privileged life in the City Bowl was compared to in the Townships.

- I could better understand that despite apartheid officially ending 30 years ago, Cape Town still remained the country's most racially and economically segregated city ([Turok et. al, 2021](#)). That said, there are many non-profit organizations that have been working in and around Cape Town to empower people, especially the most marginalized, to make the best use of their land through gardening.
- One such organization is Soil for Life.

[music and transition]

3. Why is Soil for Life a relevant example?

- I first learned of Soil for Life when my Georgetown classmates and I visited the Woman Zone Women's Library in Cape Town. Woman Zone is a non-profit organization that "Bring[s] together women from all communities and unite[s] Cape Town with various projects and events", among many other services ([Woman Zone, n.d.](#)). While at the Women's Library, I was introduced to the book *Woman of the Soil: Changing Lives*, which Woman Zone produced in collaboration with Soil for Life in 2022. In addition to celebrating Woman Zone's 10th anniversary and Soil for Life's 20th anniversary, the book shares the stories of 10 women home gardeners from Soil for Life. The organization, founded in 2002 by the late Pat Featherstone, is a "public benefit organization that teaches people how to grow their food, improve their health and well-being, and nurture and protect the environment" ([Soil for Life, 2024](#)).
- In practice, this takes the form of several community programs. These include a Home Food Gardening and Basic Health Program, Community Gardening Projects, an online home gardening training course, and two international partnerships—one in Kenya and another in Uganda. Through their programs, Soil for Life teaches people, especially economically and socially marginalized people, how to create their soil, take care of produce, incorporate waste materials into gardens, and best utilize any available space. Their home office is located in the affluent Cape Town suburb of Constantia. It features a demonstration garden, greenhouse, and fruit forest; hosts workshops and plant nursery sales, and has a venue where small groups can host conferences and meetings.

[Mr. Right] Y'know, I bet your sustainability senses were tingling when you learned about Soil for Life. Their work reminds me of the organization we talked about last episode. What was it called again?

- The Community Ecology Institute. And yes! My sustainability senses and curiosity were popping off, in large part because of my work at CEI. As I reflected on my time in South Africa, I sought to better understand what role Soil for Life had in the communities it serves. What kind of impact was SFL having in and around Cape Town? What about their programs and their engagement with the broader community, help SFL be a force for resilience in Cape Town?

[transition]

4. Soil for Life as a specific example (using my developed themes: analysis and claims)

After reading *Women of the Soil*, diving through the Soil for Life website, and analyzing those sources, I gained some valuable insights. For instance,

- Healthy human relationships
 - i. On the theme of Healthy Human Relationships, I learned that the founding of this organization was rooted in Pat Featherstone's childhood and relationship with mother figures. Both her mother and grandmother were avid gardeners and she grew up being given the agency to explore the outdoors alongside her sister. Similarly, SFL's ethos of growing people's agency through their Home Garden training program, among other things, has led to over 8,250 learning how to maintain their gardens since 2002.
 - ii. Furthermore, several of the women home gardeners reported a sense of pride, purpose, and/or belonging as a result of involving their family members in home garden maintenance. From watering to weeding to planting, participants in the Home Food Gardening program could use the skills, equipment, and guidance provided by SFL to in turn provide a place for children, grandchildren, and others to contribute to the household.
- Oppressive systems and community transformation
 - i. Next comes how SFL's work interacts with "Oppressive systems and contributes to community transformation". By training groups of folks, especially women, in the Cape Flats—a historically and continually under-resourced part of Cape Town—to develop a network of home gardeners, Soil for Life re-infuses personal dignity into often dire situations; furthermore, cultivators find new people to provide support to and be supported by, empowering others with agency and tangible skills where agency is often stripped away.

- ii. Additionally, Soil for Life directly addresses the systemic lack of food access facing many of Cape Town's residents. Both the Community Gardening Projects and Home Food Gardening programs empower people with practical skills, mentorship, and equipment in a way that's more sustainable than simply giving away food. Training and equipment are covered by sponsors, reducing the economic burden that comes with garden start-up. Also, the emphasis on training reduces community dependence on the organization and increases interdependence of gardeners. In a city where nearly a quarter of a million households "have either "inadequate or severely inadequate access to food" ([Statistics South Africa. 2021](#))", SFL seems to be a catalyst for elevating community member's capacity for self-reliance.
- o Gardens and farms as essential goods:
 - i. Now comes my third theme, "Gardens and farms as essential goods". With a focus on growing home gardens, the organization puts community members in contact with trainers—who teach how to grow food using whatever space and materials folks have access to—as well as other home gardeners. In doing so, SFL has helped create networks of home gardeners that support each other with produce, knowledge, and often friendship.
 - ii. Furthermore, SFL's programs seemed to increase participants' sense of connection to the Earth and responsibility for their environment. Pairing gardening training with education on healthy living encouraged trainees to see how the land-based activity of garden maintenance simultaneously provided healthy food and protected local environments. Home gardeners would use bottles, tires, jugs, plastic bags, and other would-be waste materials as containers and other inputs for their gardens. Sometimes, they reported picking up litter in streets within their neighborhoods after becoming a home gardener. These new, environmentally positive behaviors built upon the sense of agency that being a gardener helped cultivate in the first place.
- o Organizational features and operations:
 - i. Finally is SFL's key "Organizational Features and Operations". Initially, the organization focused on developing community gardens in and around Cape Town. But, due to poor retention and engagement with these gardens, SFL pivoted to helping folks in the Cape Flats establish home gardens and has made a great impact doing so: according to their

website, they've trained over 7,065 people to be home food gardeners since their founding in 2002 ([Soil for Life, 2024b](#)).

- ii. On another note, while some of the gardeners in *Women of the Soil* had no gardening background, others had helped tend gardens before they were adults or heads of households. The benefit SFL provided was a more structured, supported return to practices these women had experienced in childhood.

[music/transition]

5. Conclusion

- [Mr. Left] That's another episode in the books!
- [Mr. Right] Thanks for that journey to the Mother City! There's so much more I want to learn about Soil for Life and South Africa.
- [Mr. Left] Yeah, same here!
- Well, I appreciate y'all for hanging with me. If you have any questions about today's episode—whether it's about the organization I highlighted, my themes for analysis, or questions I myself have—please feel free to contact me! My email, which you can also find in the show notes is alc332@georgetown.edu. I'm also open to suggestions or constructive critiques. Afterall, the best research and art (if I can call this podcast "Art") involves multiple perspectives.
- Call to action
 - i. I know we talked about a whole lot of information, stories and people in this episode, and that might be overwhelming for you. Just know that you are not alone in your pursuit of a better, healthier, and more sustainable world. Because of that, I invite you to get outside, to get into a community, and to get to work in whatever way excites you or helps you feel connected. Maybe that means volunteering at your nearest community garden or calling up some friends to start a garden of your own. Maybe that means researching organizations in your city or county that are working to provide food assistance to those in need. Whatever the case may be, try to take some action today.
 - ii. And please—feel free to let me know what you do! I'd love to hear from you.
- So, until next time— *go outside, talk to someone new, and remember that the **Peace of Earth** begins with you.*

[outro music]

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