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Woman farmer shows way as SIDS country battles pandemic's struggles

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Organic Vanilla farmer, Shelley Burich, works on her farm at Vaoala. Photo: FAO.

A woman farmer in Samoa is using innovation and technology to overcome economic hardship as the Pacific island nation seeks ways to adapt to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although Samoa with a population of less than 200,000 remains one of a few countries in the world without a positive COVID-19 case, the border closure, resulting from the State of Emergency imposed by the government to protect lives, has dealt the country's economy a decisive blow.

Tourism which the country regards as the mainstay of the economy, has been crippled by the absence of foreign visitors for nearly two years. Hotels, restaurants and tourism-related businesses have had to shut their doors and look elsewhere to make ends meet. But it's not just the inner circle of the

tourism industry that has been affected. Domestic growers and farmers who had relied on the steady and frequent influx of visitors suddenly found themselves on the back foot.

Among them is Shelley Burich the owner of an island organic vanilla farm, which profited from the tourism industry. Burich's farm and business, perched on the cool heights of Vaoala, overlooking Apia, the capital of Samoa, was booming prior to the pandemic.

"Before COVID I was relying a lot on tourists that would be coming to the islands," said Burich. "I was getting farm tours, people looking to come and visit the vanilla farm and a lot of my business was word of mouth. So when the borders closed, that stopped."

Like other farmers Burich needed to be innovative to survive. She did not sit idle. Days of studying social media and innovation gave birth to her new baby called "Long Distance Vanilla."

"I make my own composting and mulching to feed the vanilla, and from the vanilla beans we export our premium beans, which are the grade ones and twos," she explains. "From the other beans I make value-added products like vanilla syrup, vanilla extract and vanilla powder."

Innovation and digitalization were critical to transforming her fortunes and she had to think outside the box in terms of the local market.

"I decided to go full-time into a social media realm. I created an online store. I had to figure out a way of how to keep my business generating products and getting it out of Samoa. My products are now being sold to Ireland, Japan, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the (United) States and they are going all over."

While COVID is a pain and an unwelcomed challenge, Burich said it forced her to diversify.

"And now I am doing a lot more on the social media platform. So, my reach, even though I am sitting here in Samoa, I am actually building an online store for customers in Canada."

Thinking big

But this woman farmer is not done. She has big plans in the pipeline.

“My dream is really to use (my experience) as a training farm, to get people more into growing it and also teach people how you can use it to build your business online through my experience and knowledge.”

The woman farmer from Samoa will soon share her story with the world in a bid to inspire others who have found themselves in a similar situation. Burich is one of the solutions to be showcased during **Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Solutions Forum**, scheduled for 30 – 31 August 2021.

She will share the stage with other success stories from SIDS around the globe.

The SIDS Solutions Forum creates a space for government leaders, development partners, farmers, fishers, community development practitioners and leaders, entrepreneurs, women and youth to discuss, share, promote and encourage home-grown and imported solutions to respond to the challenges posed by COVID-19 and several of those that pre-existing the pandemic.

The ultimate goal is to accelerate the achievement of the agriculture; food and nutrition related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in SIDS.

To register for the forum please [click here](#)
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