



ON THE CLIMATE CHANGE FRONT LINE

GLOBAL MARKETS OFFER A
VITAL BUFFER FOR ISOLATED
PACIFIC FAMILIES

WRITES
Lisa Hiller-Garvey, freelance journalist

PHOTOGRAPHY
Abrill Esquivel, Jane Ussher

Experts believe that climate change will hit countries in the Pacific islands first, as the low-lying island countries there have fewer barriers against the more extreme weather and predicted sea-level rises that are expected to threaten the main industries: fishing, tourism and agriculture. While the region's leaders seek ways to help people adapt, one organization, founded by Samoan businesswomen, is helping hundreds of families to protect their livelihoods by offering links to expanding niche markets. If crisis does strike, these families will have the resources to recover.

In Samoa's capital Apia, white taxis and round buses make slow progress past a bustling market. Seemingly an everyday scene, except that this market represents a quiet revolution – one that could prove a vital buffer against climate change for hundreds of isolated families, like Fai-



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umu Faimafili's. Just a few years ago he was a subsistence farmer, living far from the capital, struggling to pay his water bills and meet community obligations. Mr Faimafili's land produced more coconuts than the family needed, but with no market for the surplus, they were left to rot. With financial pressures mounting, he sent his two eldest sons away to work.

"In rural Samoa there are so few people that local markets are basically non-existent," says Adimaimalaga Tafuna'i, Executive Director of Women in Business Development Incorporated (WIBDI), an organization that emerged in response to a triple national crisis more than 15 years ago. In 1993, while Samoa was reeling from two devastating cyclones and a disease that wiped out the staple taro crops almost overnight, Ms Tafuna'i and other businesswomen investigated other options.

"I heard the same story from everyone. They needed a reliable income and just didn't have opportunities," she explains. External shocks, like cyclones, set those reliant on subsistence fishing or farming back years, even decades. Experts predict that the island nations of the Pacific Ocean will be the first affected by climate change, which is expected to deliver more furious and frequent cyclones, storm surges, floods and droughts. Governments across the region have recognized the urgent need to adapt. Support-





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ing ordinary people to overcome their economic vulnerability is critical.

"Our focus is on adding value to what people have through niche markets," says Ms Tafuna'i. A market niche that WIBDI stumbled upon was organics. Samoan agriculture is largely made up of home gardens that spring up in the volcanic soil and are tended by hand, largely without chemical fertilizers.

Determined to create market opportunities for subsistence farmers, the women started a monthly fair. "At first we were terrible business-women," Ms Tafuna'i recalls, "and we'd end up covering the costs from our own pockets." But today the regular markets are focused on organic products, and are so popular that they take over the centre of Apia once a month, selling internationally certified goods from more than 350 families across Samoa. WIBDI's focus has also crystallized and, with financial and technical backing from supporters such as Oxfam, they now provide opportunities for rural families to earn an income where they live. WIBDI also provides farmers with ongoing training, supervision and support, assists them with international organic certification and, critically, facilitates links with global markets.

WIBDI recently began exporting bananas to New Zealand and has contracts with Body Shop



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01 One of the Samoan families who produce organic products for WIBDI. *Jane Ussher, Oxfam*

02 Husking organic coconuts for oil production. *Jane Ussher, Oxfam*

03 More than 350 Samoan families now have the opportunity to sell a range of organic products to expanding local and international markets. *Abrill Esquivel*

04 Mr Faimafili and his family dry-grate coconut ready for pressing to produce organic virgin coconut oil. *Jane Ussher, Oxfam*



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International. "The Body Shop approached us and, over the past few years, we've done a lot of work with them to improve our systems and processes," says Ms Tafuna'i. The Body Shop now buys organic, cold-pressed, virgin coconut oil from WIBDI farmers like Mr Faimafili, for use in their new Coconut Bath and Body range. "When the range was launched in June 2009, we got emails from people all over the world. It was beyond our wildest dreams."

"The issue now is supply," Ms Tafuna'i says. "It's so difficult for someone in the Pacific to get a market like the Body Shop. We want that market to stay in the Pacific." WIBDI is now looking at vital regional cooperation with countries like Tonga and Fiji. "Cyclones could devastate our coconuts. If that happened to us, we would say to the Body Shop that Tonga could now produce. That way the Pacific could retain this important market."

Far from the politics of regional cooperation, Mr Faimafili and his family prepare organic vegetables and coconut oil for WIBDI staff to transport to Apia. Since becoming involved his family has benefited from training in organic production and was able to get their land certified to international standards. But he says that the biggest change is having a reliable income – made possible through the local and international markets developed by WIBDI. "Our sons no longer have to send us money," he says, and they have returned home to work on the land producing coconut oil and organic vegetables. Should disaster strike, they will have savings to fall back on, as well as a link to local and global markets, allowing them to recover quickly. 