COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted food value chains locally, nationally, and internationally. The business of keeping Kenya fed, is kept going by young, resilient, adaptive, and ambitious farmers who have vowed to rise above the current waves of uncertainty in the agricultural sector and come out stronger and more profitable. A common case of paradox caused by the crisis is where supermarket shelves are empty while farmers have excess supply without markets.

One such farmer is Ms. Lydia Akello. A graduate of Agricultural Education and Extension from Kenyatta University, Lydia, 25, grows tomatoes, kale, sweet potatoes, maize, soy beans, cabbages, and french beans on her 7-acre farm in Siaya. She also rears about 20 chicken layers and a few broilers on the side.

A ready market for her produce, which has always been available in the nearby Kisumu City - Kenya’s 3rd largest city - is now at a standstill, forcing the young farmer to devise ways of maintaining profitability while minimizing losses.

“A tomato from my farm typically goes through a number of hands before it lands on your table as part of your favorite stew, ketchup, or salad,” says Ms Lydia. She, however, explains that during this time of uncertainty food value chains are at a tailspin, “the story of a tomato has since changed in a manner that I never could have imagined, so rapidly, and probably forever.”
Consumer behavior has also changed due to the crisis, forcing Lydia to quickly adjust her operations. Clients are, for example, buying more food to stock up, as a way of reducing the number of visits to grocery stores.

Increased consumer purchase volumes have seen Lydia’s general sales increase by 40% in the period between the start of March and end of April 2020. She has also noticed more first-time clients, an aspect she attributes to the movement of people back to the countryside for the fear of COVID-19 in the urban areas.

Generally, the young farmer has discovered a new market niche that she never exploited before. The organic farmer has also observed that her clients are now inclining towards healthier foods - as they watch over their diet and consumption patterns. "The future is organic, people are waking up to the realization of the need to eat healthily and avoid the doctor, especially during the crisis", states the jovial farmer.

Lydia has introduced a number of measures on her farm, for safety purposes, and in adherence to the current work provisions of the government. She, for instance, currently ensures that she hires workers only when necessary and keeps it to the minimum number needed to do the job at hand. She also arranges the workers' schedules differently, with morning and afternoon shifts, so that they minimize the interactions while on the farm. Provision of face masks, improved hygiene conditions in harvesting, handling, sorting, packaging, and distribution of the farm produce form part of the measures she has deliberately enforced.

The young farmer has closed visits to her farm and purchases can now only be done through deliveries. Getting rid of middlemen has also come with increased returns. Before, she could sell a kilo of tomatoes for as low as 60 shillings through brokers. However, she now sells for up to 130 shillings a kilo directly to her customers.

Packaging for customers, and kale farming