



Packing clothing.
Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

ADRA Australia

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The Adventist Development and Relief Agency in Australia (ADRA/A) was established in Australia in 1978 to provide assistance to people in the South Pacific region.¹ Initially referred to as the Seventh-day Adventist World Service in Australia (SAWS/A), the fledgling organisation was attached to the Australasian Division of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church and operated as a branch of the global SAWS organization with headquarters in Washington D. C. Pastor A. H. Forbes, the first Australian director, wrote “We plan to build up a stock of good used clothing, tents, blankets, and certain medical supplies to be available immediately in the event of a major disaster north of Australia or in the South Pacific Islands.”² Armed with a mandate to provide humanitarian relief, a depot in Thornleigh, a suburb of Sydney, was leased to stockpile clothing donated by over 150 SDA churches in New South Wales³

Background

The early work of SAWS/A represented a continuation of welfare work long practised by SDAs. In 1931 the General Conference had authorised the establishment of SDA Welfare Societies (including Dorcas) by the Home Mission Departments, and these played a prominent role in church life. Despite this, as early as 1936 it had become apparent to Australasian Division leaders that there was a need to “return to those methods of Christian Help work that proved so successful in the early years of our history.”⁴ After failing to establish a medical missionary department in the mid-1930s, the church leaders agreed to establish a SDA National Emergency and Relief and Welfare Service (NERWS) tasked with responding to major disasters in Australia, New Zealand, and the islands of the South Pacific. Formalised in 1941, the NERWS proposed “To relieve physical suffering and need” and “To bring new life and spirit into our churches by making available a good supply of food and clothing.”⁵ While the success of NERWS is not readily apparent, it did represent an important step forward in positioning the SDA church in Australia as a service provider in times of emergency.

When SAWS/A was established in 1978, Dorcas Welfare societies were considered vital partners in supplying “...clean, first-class clothing”⁶ in readiness for emergencies at home and abroad. SAWS/A staff proposed to fund their activities through the annual Australasian Division Disaster and Famine Relief Offering with the expectation that \$75,000 would be raised in 1978.⁷ Notably fifty percent was forwarded to SAWS in Washington and the balance was kept to fund operations in Australia.⁸ Constrained by its small budget, the SAWS/A committee was nevertheless aware of the need to fund development activities in addition to disaster relief. With the blessing of SAWS in Washington, which received significant grants from the United States Agency for International Development, Division Treasurer Pr. L. L. Butler wrote to the Australian Development Assistance Bureau (ADAB) requesting government aid for development programs in the South Pacific.⁹

As a consequence of Butler’s request, SAWS/A celebrated its first grant from the Australian government in 1979 when it received \$20,500 for the agricultural work of Betikama High School in the Solomon Islands!¹⁰ A further \$25,000 was requested for vocational industries training at Batuna School also located in the Solomon Islands!¹¹ These grants established an early pattern of government support for projects in select Adventist boarding and vocational training schools in the South Pacific region and laid the foundation for development of ADRA as a professional and well-respected entity.

A year passed before SAWS/A would have opportunity to engage in an emergency response. In February 1979, Cyclone Gordon struck the New Hebrides after which the SAWS/A Committee forwarded the modest sum of \$5,000, mainly for food relief. In March 1979, Cyclone Kerry struck the Solomon Islands triggering the shipment of twenty bales of clothing, provision of \$1,500 for galvanised iron, and \$1,500 for food. Also in March of that year, Cyclone Meli struck Fiji resulting in the purchase of 200 tents from SAWS International and their distribution to affected communities. As director of SAWS/A in these early years, Forbes coordinated each of these responses. Described as “...the gentle genius behind the organisation,”¹² Forbes would be remembered as a willing retiree who worked tirelessly to establish the emergency response capacity.

History

Following a General Conference Annual Council vote in 1983, SAWS became the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in 1984.¹³ The SAWS constituency had voted a major reorganisation in order to “...create a management system capable of meeting the ever growing demands on its resources.”¹⁴ In Australia the newly appointed director for ADRA was George A. Laxton. Securing government funding for the support of Adventist schools and projects became a priority with ADRA/A receiving \$230,000 in 1985. This government funding for SDA schools in the South Pacific Region formed the basis of several grants in the early years mostly on a project-by-project basis.¹⁵ Nevertheless, an emphasis on refugee care and volunteering remained strong. In a letter from Warren and Robyn Scale they wrote that they had originally gone to help Kampuchean refugees for three months as nurses but “fell in love with the people, learned their language, lived with them, slept in the same thatch buildings with them, even had to evacuate from heavy artillery shelling with them on three occasions.”¹⁶

Staff at ADRA/A approved of the name change stating, “We like the new name, because it describes the two primary functions of this branch of our church organisation, namely: DEVELOPMENT—which is aid to Third World developing countries, and RELIEF—which is aid in the wake of famines and disasters.”¹⁷ In his memoirs, Peter Truscott recalls being appointed to ADRA in 1986 because of his administrative experience acquired in schools. Like many other Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs), ADRA/A had begun to recognize the importance of appointing staff with both administrative experience and a commitment to sustainable development as a means of lifting people out of poverty!¹⁸

While ADRA/A became one of the earliest FBOs to receive accreditation with the Australian Development Assistance Bureau (ADAB),¹⁹ it wasn't until the late 1980s that Neil Hughes was appointed to manage disaster responses at which time Peter Truscott focussed on development activities.

ADRA/A Quarterly Bulletins reveal rapid financial growth and significant diversification of activity by 1986. Despite a dip in government funding to \$196,000 that year, projects encompassed a range of activities in Papua New Guinea including water tank installation at Sonoma College, provision of a water pump on Buka, a self-help project in the Sepik, ablution blocks at Kabiufa High School, teacher training programs, gravity-fed water systems, and Wokabout timber mills. In 1986 ADRA also began a partnership with Rotary International to install rainwater tanks in the Pacific. Additionally, a partnership in Tanzania saw ADRA working with Oxfam to construct a 10-million-gallon reservoir benefiting 1,000 families.²⁰ Taken collectively, these activities indicate experimentation with a wide range of project activity.

A pivotal moment for ADRA/A came in 1987 when the board of Asian Aid Organisation "voted to bring Asian Aid under the ADRA umbrella." Established 21 years earlier, Asian Aid was then supporting over 3,000 children in Adventist schools (with sponsors paying \$15 per month) in India, Bangladesh, Korea, and Pakistan.²¹ Despite mutual goodwill the merger did not eventuate due to ADRA Australia's decision not to use child sponsorship as a form of fundraising.

Noting a planned increase in government funding from \$196,000 in the 1986-1987 financial year to \$392,000 for the 1987-1988 financial year, ADRA/A staff wrote, "We rejoice in this opportunity to participate in more development activities." Notably, a new warehouse was nearing completion, and in the 1988 annual report it was observed that for the first time total income had exceeded \$6 million in one year. Of this amount, \$1,350,037 came from the church led annual Appeal, known colloquially as the 'doorknock'.²²

A unique feature of work in the late 1980s and early 1990s was that 100 percent of donations were used for humanitarian and development assistance which positioned ADRA/A as one of the most frugal Australian overseas charities.²³ As a faith-based organisation it had ready access to Adventist publications and congregations, a factor that kept marketing costs down. Furthermore, for some time ADRA/A had benefited from Australian Government matching grants with AIDAB (ADAB had been renamed the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau in 1987 providing \$3 for every \$1 raised by ADRA in Australia.²⁴

By 1992 ADRA/A was receiving grants totalling almost \$2 million per annum from AIDAB.²⁵ In that year enthusiastic church support led to 186 volunteers taking part in 19 Fly'n'build teams to Fiji, India, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Kiribati, and PNG.²⁶ Enthusiasm for fly'n'build projects continued to grow through the 1990s – so much so that in 1995 ADRA reported that it had supported 30 projects that met agreed local community needs, demonstrated clear local involvement, and involved transfer of skills.²⁷ Such was the enthusiasm for volunteering with ADRA/A that in 1995 approximately 450 volunteers contributed 750,000 hours of voluntary service in more than 20 developing countries.²⁸

The 1990s saw further expansion of ADRA/A and a consolidation of its reputation as an effective and ethical organisation. In 1995 the Australian Government's Agency for International Development (formerly AIDAB) introduced an accreditation process for non-government organizations (NGOs). ADRA/A was given provisional full accreditation at this time and in 1997 it became a signatory to the Australian Council for Overseas Aid. Deepening its commitment to addressing disadvantage in Australia, in 1999 ADRA/A took over AdCare which then became the domestic program within Australia.²⁹ At this time the Annual Church Appeal officially became the ADRA Appeal.

To the delight of ADRA staff, full accreditation with AusAID occurred in 2000 and the renaming of AdCare to ADRAcare followed. During this period government authorities noted programming of a high standard and added that "ADRA has the capacity to design, appraise, implement, monitor, and evaluate development programs in a systematic and timely way."³⁰ Notably, at the time this was written, ADRA was involved in funding or co-funding 236 projects in 41 developing countries. These programs included Agriculture, HIV/AIDS Education, Small Income Generation, Water, Health and Sanitation, Refugee and Disaster Relief, and Women in Development.³¹

In 1996 Warren Scale was appointed as International Program Director. David Syme arrived in 1998 as CEO also carrying the portfolio of the South Pacific Division Regional Director and Regional Vice President of ADRA international. The roles of ADRA/A and ADRA South Pacific Division were clearly separated to meet Accreditation compliance. ADRA/A retained its role as an accredited NGO with tax-deductibility status while the latter came to function as a regional office tasked with servicing the various ADRA's in the South Pacific Division. With approximately 36 percent of its income derived from the Australian Government or other grants by the year 2000;³² ADRA/A continued its transition to supporting larger projects in fewer countries. In the 2000 financial year it disbursed \$10.5 million to international projects in 35 countries. Gary Christian, the Domestic Programs Director, noted the successful establishment of the Cabramatta ADRAcare Centre which received 18,000 client visits in its first year and an addition of a fifth women's refuge. Other achievements included 16 opportunity shops and a mentoring program providing support to disadvantaged children.³³

The early twenty-first century was a time of innovation and significant growth. ADRA/A was elected by the NGO community to serve through its CEO as a member of the AusAID Committee for Development Cooperation and as Vice President of ACFOA/ACFID. A unique partnership with Sanitarium Health Food Company and cricketers Brett and Shane Lee (via the New Day Foundation), not only raised additional funding for youth projects dealing with drug addiction, anger management, self-esteem and health education, it also saw the ADRA brand displayed on four million Weet-Bix boxes, the largest ever branding of ADRA in Australia.³⁴ Further publicity followed with the surgical

sponsorship of Safari, a young Kenyan burn victim treated at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital by leading plastic surgeon, Dr. David Pennington.³⁵

In 2004, ADRA/A incorporated and rebranding transitioned ADRAcare, the domestic arm, to ADRA. That year ADRA/A also led the negotiation and development of the innovative, inter-agency Papua New Guinea (PNG) Church Partnership Program Phase 1, which commenced with full funding from AusAID.³⁶ This program subsequently progressed to Phase II (2010) and Phase III (2017) and is seen as one of the most successful development initiatives in PNG.

Role and Place in the Country/Region

Since 2005 ADRA/A has reached several key milestones. In 2009 oversight was transferred from the South Pacific Division to the Australian Union Conference.³⁷ In 2011 ADRA/A raised in excess of \$1.1 million for the food crisis in East Africa as one of 19 privileged agencies involved in the Australian Government's Dollar-for-Dollar matching program. This was almost nine percent of the national total raised by participating agencies.³⁸ Building on previous experience in responding to disasters in the Pacific, ADRA/A played key roles in response and recovery efforts after earthquakes in Nepal in 2015 and a devastating cyclone in Vanuatu the same year. ADRA/A's capacity to respond in times of major disasters was further strengthened in 2017 when it joined the Church Agencies Network Disaster Operations (CANDO) coalition which receives funding from the Australian government during disaster activations.³⁹

ADRA/A's commitment to engaging supporters in volunteering was strengthened under the leadership of CEO Jonathan Duffy and further deepened during the tenure of CEO Mark Webster. Reflecting on this period, Webster estimated that in 2017 "more than 50 percent of ADRA Australia's program expenditure (domestic + international) would be either direct in-kind volunteer time, or funded by direct volunteer fundraising efforts (including the ADRA Appeal)."⁴⁰ A notable achievement during Webster's tenure was the establishment of a formal partnership with Sydney Adventist Hospital and the acquisition of Open Heart International (OHI). While collaboration between ADRA and the Hospital's outreach program had existed prior, the integration of Open Heart International into the ADRA Australia family in 2016 broadened ADRA's focus in the health sector and leveraged growth opportunities for both organizations. OHI reported that as of June 2018 it had provided life-changing surgeries to 6912 patients.⁴¹

There has been so much support for ADRA/A that in the 2016-2017 financial year it reported 297,664 hours volunteered in national programs and 39,737 hours in international programs.⁴² Just 16.9 percent of its income was derived from the Australian government with private donations and in-kind support being the other primary funding sources. Additionally, 30 Opportunity Shops raised over \$1m for national programs.⁴³ According to CEO Paul Rubessa, "Church members have always been the heart and soul of ADRA's work and their generosity and commitment continue to make ADRA Australia's work possible today."⁴⁴

In recognition of the high quality of its work, in 2018 ADRA Australia was granted full re-accreditation by the Australian government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade after a rigorous review.⁴⁵ Based adjacent to the headquarters of the South Pacific Division in Wahroonga, Sydney, more than 40 staff oversee a wide range of domestic and international programs funded with revenue exceeding \$20.7 million.⁴⁶ ADRA Australia's vision statement is "A world without poverty – An Agency of Excellence – A church making a difference."⁴⁷

IV. List – Directors of SAWS Australia and ADRA Australia

A. H. Forbes (1978-1983); G. A. Laxton 1983-1990; H. Halliday (1991-1998); D. R. Syme (1998-2004); David Jack (2004-2008); Jonathan Duffy (June 2008-2011); Mark Webster (2012-2017); Paul Rubessa (2018-).

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