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# SAWS Expands Its Focus

by Harrison W. John

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An earthquake strikes southern Italy. Seventh-day Adventist World Service, Inc. (SAWS) is there with 45 tons of warm clothing, blankets, food, and gas heaters, all valued at nearly \$170,000. Over 500,000 refugees from Kampuchea (formerly Cambodia) flee toward Thailand. SAWS is there with thousands of tons of rice, fish, cooking oil, and hundreds of medical volunteers. Unsettled social and political conditions in Zimbabwe disrupt local agricultural production, and SAWS is there with 29 tons of food a month and seed packets which allow the people to resume their normal farming practices. A devastating fire engulfs the cities of Mandalay and Taundwingyi in Burma, and SAWS is there with clothing for 30,000 people, 200 tents, 1,000 blankets, and medicines worth \$20,000. In Dominica, SAWS builds 110 homes for people whose shelters were damaged by Hurricane David.

These activities are merely random examples of the literally scores of projects SAWS sponsors throughout the world every year.

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According to unaudited figures released by SAWS, in 1980 the agency assisted 45 countries besides the United States with some 43.7 million pounds of supplies. The total value of food, clothing, bedding, medical supplies and equipment, cash, and other miscellaneous help amounted to \$15.2 million, with food accounting for more than 50 percent of the total aid. Countries receiving the most aid were Peru, Chili, Haiti, the Philippines and Brazil.

Only a small (but important) portion of the SAWS budget is provided by the Adventist church. Of SAWS' 1980 budget of \$15 million, just \$1 million was received via the annual Disaster and Famine Relief Offering collected by Adventist churches throughout the world. More than half of SAWS' budget is funded through grants from the United States Agency for International Development (AID). In 1980, SAWS received \$6.1 million in food aid from the U.S. government under its PL 480 or Food for Peace program; another \$3 million was provided in ocean freight reimbursement for the food to be shipped to recipient countries. Between 1960 and 1980, AID provided SAWS with \$15,978,300 in grants. This government assistance has enabled SAWS to expand its services as an emergency relief supplier and to

support long-term development projects, especially in less-developed countries.

Most Adventists associate SAWS with disaster relief, but Executive Director Richard O'Ffill reports that in recent years emergency aid has been just a small part of SAWS' work. Most of their work is now "developmental," that is, projects designed to help people help themselves. Recent efforts include an agricultural demonstration project in Zimbabwe to teach people in rural areas how to grow food in poor, sandy soil; a dental clinic in Zaire; a drinking water project in Zambia; and child-care clinics in Peru.

A brief history of SAWS shows its evolution from an agency providing only disaster relief to an agency focusing primarily on developmental needs. Seventh-day Adventists were giving disaster and famine relief as early as 1919, when special offerings were collected in churches to help members affected by the destruction of World War I. Soon this type of relief work spread, and in 1922 the church was sending aid to Russia. In 1923, famine victims in China were aided. And in 1927, the church was involved in helping victims of the great Mississippi River flood.

When World War II devastated much of Europe, the church provided relief aid and helped refugees settle in the United States. Warehouses were established in 1944 and 1945 in New York and San Francisco to receive and process materials for overseas shipment. In the early 1950s, Adventists helped orphans and homeless children in Korea with clothing, food, and other supplies. By this time, the church's relief efforts had burgeoned into such a massive operation that leaders felt a separate agency should be established.

In November 1956, the Adventist church officially incorporated a welfare and relief agency in Washington, D.C., under the name of Seventh-day Adventist Welfare Relief Service, inc. The purpose of the organization was to "undertake, promote, develop and carry on charitable, or educational work; to carry on national and international relief among peoples of all nations . . . to aid in the

spiritual, moral and physical rehabilitation of victims of war or other disaster . . . and to carry on reconstruction by providing technical services, funds, supplies, and equipment for the restoration, construction, and installation of schools, libraries, orphanages, hospitals, health centers, industrial plants, and agricultural projects."

In the early days after its incorporation, SAWS maintained a close tie with the Department of Lay Activities, now called Community Services in the United States. For example, at one time the Community Services director, Carl Guenther, was also the executive secretary of SAWS, and the director of SAWS reported directly to him. So Seventh-day Adventist Welfare Service, Inc., while existing as a separate legal corporation, continued to be very closely administered by Community Services. As the sphere of activities conducted by SAWS expanded even further, church leaders recognized that the corporation was not a mere extension of Community Services, and that it had a much broader scope than providing emergency relief. Thus, in January 1973, the name of the organization was changed to Seventh-day Adventist *World Service*, Inc.

The "new" SAWS now became further involved in some rather large and significant programs in developing countries. Since this expansion involved liaisons with foreign governments and international organizations, as well as the custodianship of enormous resources, the General Conference in 1978 *administratively* recognized SAWS as a full-fledged service organization, set apart from the Community Services function and directly responsible to the General Conference Committee as a separate corporation. This was an important step because by now SAWS was growing at an amazing rate. In 1977 it had provided about \$3 million worth of aid; that figure rose to almost \$8 million by 1979 and topped \$15 million by 1980.

The present-day emphasis of SAWS is in such areas as preventative health, agricultural development, community organization, sanitation, and maternal-child health programs. Much of this work is done at the local

level quite independent of traditional Adventist church institutions. Often SAWS will employ nutritionists, community development experts, social workers, and public health nurses, all working at the grass-roots level. Anything they help build, such as a clinic, is not a SAWS institution but a local institution, and not necessarily a *church* institution.

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As a result, SAWS does not see itself as an evangelistic arm of the church. Its goal is not to convert people to become members of the Adventist church. Rather, on a particular project, the objective may be to reduce the incidence of malnutrition among children under five, or to increase agricultural production in a particular village. When that goal is reached, the project is over.

One example of this is a massive Malnourished Child program SAWS sponsored in Chile for about 15 years. The program was serving about 100,000 malnourished children when specialists decided that it had achieved its purpose, and it was transferred to the government of Chile's Maternal and Child Health Program under the Ministry of Health. Another example comes from Chad, where SAWS initiated an irrigation project to help local farmers increase crop yields on about 60 acres of semiarid land. According to O'Fallon, the project was so successful that farmers making about \$100 a year before the project was started were making \$600-800 per year when the project was fully underway. When civil strife struck Chad, the foreign workers connected with the project had to leave, but it continued to thrive under local control for 6 to 8 months before it was shut down by antiestablishment elements in

the country.

Of all the projects sponsored by SAWS, perhaps one of the most novel was a Clothing for Work project in Kulabo, Zambia. Here, SAWS provided a local community of handicapped lepers with old clothing to build new houses for themselves. The clothing was bartered for construction materials such as reeds and sticks. The advantage of the project is that without any cash being involved, the people were able to get new homes and clothes, and at the same time make their community a much more pleasant and healthful place in which to live. The district governor of the Republic of Zambia was so impressed with the project that he wrote a thank-you letter to the SAWS director for Zambia.

Another significant project in which SAWS became involved in October 1979 was a refugee-relief program on the border of Thailand and Kampuchea. Refugees fleeing from civil war in Kampuchea suffered from various kinds of health problems such as malaria, pulmonary disease, malnutrition, acute anemias, and intestinal disorders. SAWS flew in medical volunteers and obtained medical supplies from the International Committee of the Red Cross. At one point, SAWS volunteers were operating five field hospitals where they worked about 15 hours a day, seven days a week. This massive health-care project seemed inadequate compared to the needs of the refugee camps. But SAWS officials report that at one point in the project, in at least one camp of 30,000 people, the mortality rate was reduced from 35 people a day to six per day. Adventist churches throughout the world contributed one million dollars for this work, and the General Conference assigned two full-time staff people to coordinate the flow of medical personnel from their local posts to Thailand.

In late 1981, the U.S. Department of State awarded SAWS a \$750,000 grant to continue its work there. This is the first significant non-Adventist contribution to SAWS for the Thai project. The relief program there seems to have become a semipermanent operation, and SAWS continues as one of the major relief organizations still providing support for the refugee project.

While the Kampuchean program has claimed a great deal of attention from SAWS, one of the most exciting projects just launched is a proposal to develop community programs in agriculture, family health, and nutrition in 16 different countries. With matching funds provided by AID, SAWS will work within the framework of Adventist institutions to reach out to neighboring communities. Operations are expected to begin during 1982 in the following regions and countries: Africa — Burundi, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe; Asia — Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka; Latin America/Caribbean — Bolivia, Haiti, Honduras, and Jamaica; Pacific — Papua-New Guinea, Philippines, and Sarawak. Under terms of a three-year contract with AID, SAWS is providing \$2.1 million for the project, while AID is matching this amount with another \$1.2 million.

Based on statistics issued by the World Health Organization and other health agencies, SAWS decided that the greatest needs in these targeted countries are programs for health; nutrition, family planning, sanitation, hygiene, and child care, coupled with programs to help communities grow and preserve foods for a balanced and nutritious diet. Specifically, SAWS hopes to provide the following health and economic services, mainly in rural areas: (1) Improvement in environmental and sanitary conditions; (2) A more adequate diet to control malnutrition in children under five; (3) Better-trained medical, health, and agricultural extension personnel to provide services and education at the grass-roots level; and (4) Assistance in developing small businesses designed to encourage farmers to grow more food.

SAWS will not attempt to cover each of these areas in all 16 targeted countries. Rather, after close coordination with the host government, SAWS will provide the kind of service most needed in that particular nation. For example, in Bangladesh, sanitation and nutrition are major problems. SAWS will attempt to provide health and nutrition education, hold cooking and food-preserving demonstrations, and conduct classes in child care through four existing Adventist institu-

tions in that country. In Jamaica, the Andrews Memorial Hospital in Kingston has developed plans to extend its health education outreach into the slum areas of that city. Students from the school of nursing will be trained to conduct classes in health, nutrition, sanitation, and maternal child care. In Burundi, one of the most densely populated countries in Africa, steps will be taken to increase the food supply for communities near Kivoga College, an Adventist institution in Bujumbura. In Kenya, rural health care workers will be trained either at Kendu Bay Hospital or a nearby high school. These workers are expected to expand the preventive activities of 13 dispensaries operated by the church in Kenya. This program has the enthusiastic support of the government's Ministry of Health.

Their goal is that at the end of the three-year project, a minimum of 40 communities surrounding 47 Adventist institutions in 13 countries will have community health outreach programs focusing on nutrition, sanitation, and general health principles. In addition, at least 30 communities in the vicinity of 38 Adventist educational institutions in all 16 countries are expected to have community health outreach programs or agricultural extension programs focusing on better

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methods of growing garden vegetables and legumes rich in proteins. Also, SAWS hopes that a minimum of 10 areas will have small community projects utilizing appropriate

technology to preserve seasonal foods or produce food byproducts through coordination with the church's food manufacturing component, World Foods Service.

By working in smaller communities, SAWS hopes to expand its influence. As Milton Nebblett, deputy executive director of SAWS, states: "Our hypothesis is that we can make the communities around our healthcare and educational facilities the most health-conscious and good-health motivated people in the entire country and through them carry the message of good health to all the people of the country."

SAWS officials are justifiably proud and excited about this new type of outreach, but at press time an AID official told SPECTRUM that for fiscal year 1981, ending September 1982, the project will receive only \$379,000 because of slashes in the agency's budget. According to SAWS' projections, it was expecting to receive \$601,000 in the first year of the project. What effect this budgetary constriction will have on the project is unclear at this time.

Whatever the outcome, SAWS' experience in these 16 countries will likely lead to a greater involvement in other AID-funded projects in the future. This deeper involvement raises questions about a close relationship with a government agency which openly acknowledges that one of the purposes of its existence is to further the foreign policy objectives of the United States. As an AID press release points out, assistance provided by the agency is "regarded as a tool of U.S. foreign policy," and "is essential to the economic and security interests of the United States."

In numerous government documents the same refrain is heard. For example, in the June 24, 1981, issue of AID's biweekly newsletter, "World Development Letter," a question on foreign aid is answered this way: "Progress in the Third World serves the U.S. national interest. Apart from our traditional humanitarian concerns, as these nations develop they become bigger customers for our farms and industries; they become bigger markets for American investments and more accessible sources of raw materials essential

to our economy and our national defense." The aid program is further justified because U.S. exports to developing countries have tripled in the past five years, and about two million American jobs depend on exports to the Third World. Further, all the funds for the Food for Peace program are spent in the United States. And by law, 50 percent of all food shipped to foreign countries under this program must be transported in U.S. ships.

Since government aid is so closely intertwined with the broader, more complex issues of U.S. foreign and economic policy, does SAWS, and by association, the Adventist church, run the risk of being branded as an instrument of the American government? Richard O'Ffill says "no." He sees SAWS' arrangement with AID as being merely contractual in nature. In his view, SAWS enters into a conventional three-year contract on most AID projects. If there were any indication that the government was using SAWS to further its own interests in any way that would be detrimental to SAWS' interests, we could immediately cut off the relationship, he says. He also likes to look at the issue from another viewpoint: If SAWS can be considered to be used by the U.S. government for its own purposes, one could just as well argue that SAWS is using the U.S. government to further its own aims and objectives, which are simply to help people in need. SAWS, he says, has no ulterior motive in providing aid or relief but to participate in helping make people whole again. In that sense, while SAWS operates as a nonsectarian, non-proselytizing agency, providing help regardless of color, creed, race, or religion, it is, in a sense, the very essence of Christianity, O'Ffill notes.

The U.S. government, on the other hand, views SAWS not as a religious agency but as an effective means of channelling government aid on a people-to-people level where government-to-government contact is not always possible. Thomas Fox, director of AID's Office of Private and Voluntary Cooperation, says that agencies like SAWS are chosen for their nonsectarian stance, and if they do attempt to use AID-funded programs as a means to convert people, the funding would be immediately stopped.

Besides the general issue of SAWS acting as an intermediary for U.S. foreign aid, a more specific area in which SAWS may be vulnerable to criticism is its role as a pipeline for shipping U.S. food aid abroad. Almost every aspect of the U.S. food aid program has been questioned.<sup>1</sup> The Food for Work program has been attacked by some because they say it encourages people to work at low levels of productivity. Critics of this kind of aid, in which people in less-developed countries (LDCs) work on various kinds of community projects in return for food, claim that the incentive for work is reduced when people work for food instead of cash.

Other critics say that the flooding of local communities with cheap foreign grain upsets the balance of local markets and discourages farmers from growing local crops. (This has happened in the villages of Kampuchea which surround the area where international relief agencies such as SAWS are providing food assistance to refugees along the Thai/Kampuchea border.) In some cases, critics say food goes mainly to the well-to-do or is used as a political tool by the ruling elites to control various groups so as to solidify their own positions; in other cases, much of the food never reaches the really needy people in the rural areas. Finally, there are ideological arguments concerning AID made against the food aid program by some. They say AID provides support to right-wing totalitarian regimes which oppress civilian populations. Is SAWS by extension supporting such ideologies and should it?

It is difficult to refute these critics, because too often what they are saying is absolutely correct. One response is that the issues are so convoluted and complex that if we get bogged down in ideological debates and administrative boondoggles, we are neglecting the immediate needs of millions of desperate people. Theoretically, AID uses SAWS as a channel for supplying *humanitarian* aid in those countries that have official government approval to receive help. That allows for a range of choices, though certain countries like Cuba and Poland are definitely off-limits. And all food provided to SAWS under the PL 480 program is Title II aid; it is *donated*

to the host country, unlike Title I aid which is *sold* to friendly governments at concessional prices. Presumably, the difference between the two is that Title I aid can be used to gain political leverage with the host country, while Title II aid is donated for sheer humanitarian reasons (though friendly nations tend to get more donations).

But even this distinction sometimes gets blurred. One on-the-scene observer in Kampuchea reports that the exiled Pol Pot seems to be receiving aid from the Thais and the

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Chinese, as well as indirect aid from the Americans. This is the same person whose regime is believed to have mercilessly massacred and tortured thousands of Kampuchean civilians. Now because he provides a kind of foil for the present Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin regime, he seems to enjoy a kind of dubious favor with the West and its allies. In the midst of this confusion, Richard O’Ffill says: We don’t know the difference in the political ideologies of the people. All we know is that they are in desperate need.

Despite SAWS’ good intentions, questions persist. Close involvement with any government’s programs inevitably means identification with that government. At the same time, working hand-in-hand with repressive regimes can arouse local resentment and opposition. One option, which is followed by some church service organizations, including the Mennonite Central Committee, is to refuse direct support from any government.

The Adventist church seems to have accepted quite easily the idea that a church-related organization like SAWS may receive

government funding. Yet this issue has concerned another large recipient of government aid — the Catholic church. In 1981, the Maryknoll General Council of the Maryknoll Fathers in Maryknoll, New York, commissioned a study by the Washington-based Center of Concern on government funding for religious private voluntary organizations.<sup>2</sup> The 200-page study concluded that there is “no one answer to the question of government funding applicable for all organizations in all situations.”

The study did, however, suggest that religious private voluntary organizations (PVOs) consider the following major guidelines before reaching a decision on accepting government funds: (1) Define yourself, your mission, your worldview. (2) Analyze your perception of U.S. foreign policy and the role of AID within that policy. (3) Evaluate the social, economic, and political context in which you will be working. (4) Involve the local people and PVO field staff in the decision-making process. (5) Assess the impact of AID funding on your PVO's internal structures. (6) Establish protective clauses in the grant letter of agreement if AID funding is accepted. (7) Influence the U.S. government and hold the PVO Community accountable.

Certainly, these are thought-provoking guidelines. They outline the complex nature of church-state relations, while focusing on the need for a defined policy. For SAWS, further specific questions arise. What will be the effect on the church's witness, especially

in those Adventist institutions which will be receiving AID funding? In some foreign countries, Adventist institutions consider their witnessing ministry to be a sort of *raison d'être*. Will they feel hampered in their witnessing by the restrictions in SAWS' contract with the U.S. government? Other implications follow: Will a greater dependence on government assistance affect the church's resolve to increase appropriations to SAWS? Will dependence on government funding weaken the desire of individual church members to support SAWS with larger donations since they may feel that the church is managing all right without their “drop-in-the-bucket”?

But for some, these issues are secondary. There is a world in desperate need of help. And the needs are increasing. The U.S. government's *Global 2000 Report* states that world population will grow from 4 billion in 1975 to 6.35 billion in 2000. The gross national product per capita in the populous nations of South Asia is expected to remain below \$200 per year (in 1975 dollars), and the year 2000, per capita food consumption is expected to decline below present inadequate levels.

In the face of such tremendous needs, what are the alternatives for an agency like SAWS? To millions of hungry, homeless, disease-ridden people, political ideology means little or nothing. What is important is a chance to live dignified, healthy lives. The challenge for SAWS is to continue providing that chance in the most effective way possible.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. See Frances Moore Lappe and Joseph Collins, “World Hunger: Ten Myths,” reprinted in Social Issues Resources Series, *Food*, 2 (1981), #21.

2. “Religious Private Voluntary Organizations and

the Question of Government Funding.” For a copy, write PROBE Third World Studies, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 10545. The price of this publication is \$12.