

## Carrying Hope: Behind the Scenes of International Humanitarian Aid

*Interview with Sophie Gebreyes*

***Us Australians are a generous bunch, often willing to support an important cause that might bring hope in a time of need. But when it comes to financial giving, we don't always get to hear the impact that our donations really have.***

### ***Part 1: How Sophie became involved in humanitarian aid work***

**Tania:** Today we're going to be hearing about Ethiopia and the work of the Humanitarian Aid Arm of the Lutheran World Federation. I'm here with Sophie Gebreyes who works within the organisation in Ethiopia. She's travelled to Australia and is sharing with us how our generous donations are supporting countries like Ethiopia.

So welcome Sophie. Can you tell us a bit about yourself?

**Sophie:** My name is Sophie Gebreyes and I was born in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. However, now I'm a Canadian citizen, and I lead the Lutheran World Federation country program in Ethiopia.

**Tania:** Now a lot of our listeners won't know what the Lutheran World Federation is. Can you just tell us briefly what that is?

**Sophie:** The Lutheran World Federation is a communion of churches. As World Service, we are the service delivery arm of the Lutheran World Federation. Meaning we're implementing projects on behalf of the Lutheran Communion in about 30 countries around the world, and Ethiopia is one of those.

**Tania:** So, tell me a little bit more about your background and how you came to be involved in international aid.

**Sophie:** I grew up during the Derg regime and there was a revolution that toppled the Emperor. It was a very popular revolution where everybody got involved because we needed democracy in the country. The farmers, the taxi drivers, the students were all involved. But then the popular revolution was hijacked by the military junta and it became a Marxist Leninist government – very violent. And so, for the following 27 years, Ethiopia really suffered a lot, particularly the young people.

So, I went to Canada and I claimed refugee status there and I was welcomed by the Lutheran Church in Canada, and I started working as a secretary and a

receptionist because I was bilingual, so it was easy for me to be integrated in the mainstream society. And then after that, after working for 18 years in Canada, I wanted to go back to the field and so I decided to leave and I went to Rwanda. That's when I joined the Lutheran World Federation for the first time. And I went to Kigali in Rwanda. And for the program I was working also in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is a neighbouring country to Rwanda. And I worked there for two years. After those two years, there was a position open again for Latin America and the Caribbean based in Geneva. So, I moved to Switzerland, and I did that work. And I travelled a lot in the Caribbean and also in Latin America, as well as in Mozambique and Angola. I did that for four years. And then this position came up as a country director in Ethiopia, which was a fantastic opportunity for me to take, because that would mean I would go back after 25 years. And that's how I returned to Ethiopia.

## **Part 2: The Problems and Needs of Ethiopia**

**Tania:** In the media in Australia, we really don't hear much about Ethiopia. So, can you tell us, what are the needs?

**Sophie:** We have recurring droughts in the country. This year is the seventh consecutive drought in Ethiopia, year after year after year. And so, food insecurity is a major problem, and continues to be a major problem, although we don't have these famines of biblical proportions like we did in the 60s and the 1970s.

The other is displacement – forced displacement of people because of conflict; refugees coming from neighbouring countries because Ethiopia is located in the Horn of Africa. All the neighbouring countries are refugee producing countries; Sudan, Eritrea, South Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia. And so, we have about 1 million refugees in the country, meaning forcibly displaced people crossing borders, but also we have our own displaced persons because of conflict within the country, and also due to flooding or droughts.

So, we have about 4.5 million displaced people.

**Tania:** That's such a huge figure that's mind blowing. When I think about the privileged life I live in Australia, and we think about the support we give for people who are seeking refuge in Australia, that is just a mind-blowing figure.

So, what does your role in humanitarian aid look like on a day-to-day basis?

**Sophie:** My role is to ensure that our programs are implemented and they are in alignment with our values, with our core principles. One of my biggest roles is to ensure that the money is really reaching the intended beneficiaries. My job requires a lot of field visits to see if all the resources that we have are being implemented in an accountable way and reaching the intended beneficiaries.

**Tania:** And I think that when people, give their money to international aid organisations, they absolutely expect that accountability, so it's good to hear.

### **Part 3: Providing Support to Ethiopia**

Sophie, can you tell us about the kind of on the ground practical work that the organisation you work for does in Ethiopia?

**Sophie:** Ethiopia is very susceptible to recurrent droughts and one of the works that we do is building an irrigation scheme, because 80 percent of the Ethiopian population of over 110 million people are farmers, and they depend on grain-fed agriculture. And the rains, as you know, don't come when they're expected. They come early. They stop early, or they come late and then they leave early. And so, farmers are really in a very difficult situation.

**Tania:** Yes, we all know about the devastating effects of rain not coming or coming at the wrong time here in Australia too.

**Sophie:** And so, irrigation is one of the responses. Because Ethiopia has a lot of perennial rivers and irrigating that will would reduce a farmer's vulnerability. And this is very sustainable because the irrigation schemes that we construct are not motorised, they are gravity fed. So farmers would be able to have a climate resilient, sustainable livelihood. This is one of the practical way of helping.

The other one is we work with a lot of women, because in Ethiopia, we have a huge population, and we just don't have enough resources to reach everyone. And so, what we do is we prioritise women, unaccompanied children, disabled people, the elderly. And the most practical way of helping women is to provide them with sheep or goats. And what we do is give two goats for one family. And then they start a little animal husbandry activity in their household. And then when there is an offspring, the first offspring they give to another one that was not in the original list of beneficiaries. So, there is that gift keeps on giving. And we have a bigger reach of the gift.

**Tania:** Wow, that's an amazing story. The gift that keeps on giving and I should imagine it's very empowering for the women that receive those goats.

**Sophie:** It changes their lives.

### **Part 4: Stories From the Field**

**Tania:** So, I can only imagine that you've witnessed so many things as you travel. What has impacted you the most as you engage with individuals or communities?

**Sophie:** I'm amazed and in awe of how people are resilient. Going through this trouble over and over again, and they still have their faith. And I've never heard them say, 'where is God when I'm going through this difficult time?' And they always are so faithful to God, to their faith, and to their Christianity. That's the most amazing thing for me to see in people, their faith and their resilience.

Everybody asks me about what motivates me to do the work that I do. Mainly my faith, of course, the first one is *the* one because I think what we do is like faith in action. We do the things Jesus Christ did. He walked among the oppressed, the poor, the sick, the elderly and the hungry.

And we do that, and God uses us to do this work. And we do the things that Jesus himself did when he lived on earth.

**Tania:** Have you got any stories of your time working in humanitarian aid that really stand out and stay with you?

**Sophie:** I have many stories, but the one that I really love to tell is the story of Siye. In 2020, a violent conflict erupted in Ethiopia in the north between the federal government and the regional state Intigray, and that produced a lot of internal displacement within that region.

And we were working there thanks to ALWS. So, I was in this camp. And at the time, because a lot of IDPs, millions, came into Mekelle, the capital city of Tigray. The government didn't have any space to put them. So, what they did is to vacate all the schools, and they were turned into temporary settlement and IDP camps. And so, children in Tigray didn't go to school for three years because the schools were occupied by displaced people.

And most of the time when you go to these camps, they're very crowded. There's no space and they're not well organised. But this one was very well organised, it was just amazing. There was no need for crowd control, nothing.

And I thought, 'Oh, my goodness, who is this camp manager here?' And they told me it's Siye. And they introduced me and he himself was an IDP. And during flight, he was separated with his young wife. So, he didn't know whether his wife was dead or alive.

But he just had that leadership skill and just took over and organised the camp and was helping. And he was not being paid or anything, this was just his nature.

So he was there organising and I said, 'OK, I need this guy on my team.'  
And he joined LWF as a community development facilitator.

And then I came back again a few months later, and I was happy to see that they were reunited. He found his wife, and she also got a job as a midwife because she was a midwife, and she was working in the mobile clinics, delivering babies in the IDP camp.

And a few months later, I went back. He told me that they had a child and he wanted me to be present during baptism.

So, I went there and I met the baby, they were very joyful and very happy.

**Tania:** That's a wonderful story. And so wonderful to hear that that gentleman was such a blessing to that camp and to that community. And wonderful to hear a story of finding his wife again in such a turmoil, or such a difficult time.

## **Part 5: The impact of a lot done with a little**

**Sophie:** I know when I talk about Ethiopia and, the numbers are so staggering, the people who need the assistance, but it's incredible what we can do with very little. You can change lives. And that's what we have been doing with the funding that we receive from all the supporters with all the kind of projects that I described.

And it's just amazing to me when I look back and I talk to the communities that I see every day when I talk to them and when they tell me how much the project has meant to them, what they have received.

We work with a lot of people who have suffered a lot, particularly women who are now in women-friendly space and also children in child-friendly spaces in Tigray. And this is what one of them said:

**'Amongst life's trials, a simple act of kindness feels like a sunbeam piercing the storm. It reminds us that care exists even in chaos.'**

And this sums it up. They know that even though they are in this dark place, that there are people out there in Australia, so far away from them, thinking about them and caring about them.

**Tania:** We can all be a sunbeam piercing through a storm.

**Sophie:** Yes. Absolutely.

## **Part 6: How can Australia support Ethiopia?**

**Tania:** So, for those of us in Australia, those listening in today who hear these stories and want to be a part of supporting these people on the other side of the world, what could we do? How can we support?

**Sophie:** First of all, I just want to thank Australians. We're able to do the work that we do because you share your blessings and your gifts. And we're able to support refugees, IDPs and other people in the country who need assistance.

Cash is better to receive as donation instead of in-kind assistance, because you can actually procure the stuff in the country, and you also contribute to the local economy, and also you can buy, things that are really appropriate. Because in Ethiopia, people eat different kinds of foods, need different kinds of clothing because of the weather and this kind of thing.

And your prayers always. That's very, very important.

And also, a little bit of advocacy. Because we work in a country where we can't really do a lot of advocacy. And we need a lot of advocacy; asking for peace in the country so that Ethiopia becomes peaceful and reconciled. And really for the churches to advocate on our behalf with the Australian government, not just for

increased amount of Overseas Development Assistance but also to work with the government to bring lasting solutions and peaceful solutions in Ethiopia.

**Tania:** That's a lot of food for thought.

I'm always conscious when it comes down to election time, that in Australia, there's various issues that face the Australian people and how they vote, but one of the things that's often off the table is how much overseas aid that our Australian government gives. That doesn't even make the media sometimes.

And so, you've reminded me that we can be advocates for that area as well as other issues of, like you said, reconciliation.

So perhaps our listeners are wondering how they can keep up to date with what's happening in Ethiopia through Australian Lutheran World Service.

Have you got a suggestion of how what that could be?

**Sophie:** Yes, they can be updated through the website. ALWS has a website and they have a range of projects that are described on there, Ethiopia would be included in that as well. And they can also go to the Lutheran World Federation's website. It's a global website, but we also have our own sub site for Ethiopia that we update regularly.

**Tania:** Wonderful.

Sophie, would you like to share any final words with us about the hope you find working in Ethiopia?

**Sophie:** Ethiopia has a rich history, but currently we're going through a difficult period. And what I wish for Ethiopia is a peaceful and reconciled Ethiopia so that we continue to rally around that flag, around that country, around that history.

Yeah, I think that's mostly what I want. And for people to live in peace. And that we have enough for people to live a full life.

When I go to poor Ethiopian communities, we always say we are supporting these vulnerable people, because when you change a woman's life, she changes the lives of her household and the community.

They transform their life, but they also give that gift to others and transform other people's lives too.

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