

Our history

The beginning

In the 1970s, two influential businessmen on opposite sides of the globe asked the same important question of poor people: "What do you need?" The answer came back, "We need work. With jobs, we will solve our own problems."

The late Al Whittaker, former president of Bristol Myers International Corporation, acted on that answer in 1971. He believed in the ability of people to improve their lives, if only they were given an opportunity. At the age of 52, he resigned from his corporate position, sold his country home, and moved into a cramped office in South America to establish the Institute for International Development Incorporated (IIDl).

In 1976, Australian entrepreneur David Bussau took his family to Bali, Indonesia to help rebuild rural areas devastated by an earthquake. There he found that traditional development solutions still left poor families trapped in poverty. His solution was to offer business loans – a hand-up rather than a hand out. David established Maranatha Trust to build his dream to help the poor help themselves.

Good ideas coming together

From those early and separate foundations, David Bussau and Al Whittaker joined forces in 1979 to form the organisation that is now known as Opportunity International. Today, Opportunity International has grown into a global network that provides a sustainable solution to poverty through microfinance and other support services.

The story of Opportunity International Australia founder David Bussau AM inspired many when he was featured on ABC's Australian Story – 'Champion of the World' in 2001. The story outlined how David, who grew up as an orphan with little education, went on to become a successful entrepreneur operating a multi-million dollar construction business. In 1974, following Cyclone Tracey, he took a volunteer construction team to Darwin to help rebuild the city. Then in 1976, David travelled to a small rural village in Indonesia after it had been devastated by an earthquake.

David took his family to live with the villagers and help rebuild their lives. As he applied traditional solutions, re-establishing water supplies, repairing bridges and roads and rebuilding schools, he realised that sustainable development needed more than just infrastructure. This traditional approach still left poor families trapped in poverty. David's solution was microfinance and enterprise development.

Ketut Suwira, a struggling Indonesian farmer, received the first loan from David. A loan of \$50 enabled Ketut to buy a sewing machine and start his own tailoring business. Today Ketut runs an import/export business and owns a fleet of taxis, providing a wide range of employment for his local community.

David provided finance to a further 20 people – achieving dramatic results. These flourishing small businesses not only provided for the basic needs of poor families, they also gave the entrepreneurs confidence, dignity and self-respect.



As loan after loan was repaid and the original investments reapplied to new opportunities, David clearly demonstrated that small loans could achieve amazing returns.

David was inspired. He sold his businesses and established Maranatha Trust to provide small amounts of capital to people in poverty so they could become entrepreneurs in their own environments. In 1979, David joined forces with Al Whittaker, who had been piloting a group-lending methodology in South America. In 1992, they began to test group-lending programs in the Philippines.

Convinced that no single group can tackle the issues of poverty alone, Opportunity International began developing partnerships in various regions around the world - independent, self-governing organisations with a similar heartbeat. In 1998, the partners linked together to form the Opportunity International Network.

Recent years

In 2003, David Bussau was given the Queen's Honours of the Order of Australia and awarded the Ernst & Young Australian Entrepreneur of the Year. In 2006, he received the ACFID Human Rights Award, and in 2007, David was named the recipient of the Beta Gamma Sigma Award for Entrepreneurship. Most recently, he was announced Senior Australian of the Year 2008. Now retired from Opportunity International, David continues his work by providing consultancy services to governments, multinationals and other organisations. He also retains an honorary position on the Board of Opportunity International Australia.

Today, the Opportunity International Network has support partners in five countries (Australia, United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Germany), with implementing partners in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe.

Opportunity International Australia currently works in three countries – India, Indonesia and the Philippines. With a repayment rate of 97%, we remain dedicated to helping eradicate poverty by changing the course of generations, communities and countries – one life at a time.

