



Only one long-term answer to new famine stalking Ethiopia

□ THE combination of severe drought and rising food prices that has left hundreds of thousands in Ethiopia threatened with starvation must provoke a real sense of déjà vu for people in the west.

The emergency is not on the same scale as the catastrophic famine of 1984 when around one million people died, yet it is causing the global relief agencies to mobilise in anticipation of a major humanitarian crisis.

Some suggest that up to five million people are affected, although the Ethiopian government maintains this figure is inflated.

This year's famine threat is the result of a combination of factors, including the failure of early season rain which is critical to farmers at planting time, widespread drought in many areas of the country and skyrocketing global food prices.

In Ethiopia, a drought is more disastrous because more than 80% of people live off the land. Agriculture drives the economy, accounting for half of all domestic production and 85% of exports.

Ethiopia already receives more food aid than almost any other country in the world.

The US alone has provided the country with \$250 million in emergency food aid in the past year, while the World Food Programme estimates that it is supporting eight million people.

Self Help was established in the wake of the Ethiopian famine of 1984.

We have spent nearly 25 years in the country, with the primary objective being to strengthen food production systems both at farm household and regional levels.

Judicious use of available water for irrigation purposes, the development of systems that enable farmers to access good quality seed stock, the support and promotion of crop diversification and the establishment of micro-finance systems that have enabled more than 13,000 Ethiopian women to begin small income-generating activities are among a broad range of activities being undertaken to help Ethiopians to break the cycle of famine.

Reports we are receiving from our programme areas in the south, and west of the country indicate

that while many farmers will lose their staple grain crops, including maize and the traditional Ethiopian 'teff' this year, those who have developed homestead irrigation systems and diversified their on-farm activities, including growing the drought-resistant 'enset' alongside their other produce, are far less vulnerable.

I am confident the international community will not be found wanting in their response to the current humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia.

However, in the longer term it is critical that more is done to look at treating the causes — and not the symptoms — of the food shortages which are now blighting Ethiopia, and that affect Sub-Saharan Africa with such alarming frequency.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon last month spoke of the need to "revitalise agriculture" in order to overcome poverty in Africa, while his predecessor, Kofi Annan, is currently heading up an initiative whose primary objective is to increase farm production in the Sub-Sahara.

At Self Help Africa we believe this is the path that development assistance must follow if the spectre of famine is to be lifted from many millions of Africa's most vulnerable people.

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