

# Handouts are not the solution for famine-stricken Ethiopia

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IT'S just not the same Ethiopia. Despite the recent predictions that famine in the south of the country will see five million people face starvation in the coming months, despite the impact of rocketing world food prices and soaring inflation here, despite the pleas on its behalf to foreign countries not to cut aid to Africa in light of the global recession, it is not the same old Ethiopia.

Slowly, but increasingly, the begging bowl is being seen as part of the problem.

Dr Awole Mela, who works for an Irish-based self-help agency in the country, says that more than 20 years after Bob Geldof brought the plight of starving Ethiopians to the world stage, it is time the handouts ended, to be replaced by hand ups.

"This country cannot survive by continually going to Europe and asking for grain," the Africa director of Self Help Africa maintained. "That has created for us a dependency culture and it is not what is needed.

"Bringing in 'relief food' cannot keep you more than three or four months, but for how long are we going to continue getting it from Europe when there is a drought? In Ethiopia you have to expect drought every time and any time. The most important thing is to teach people to produce a variety of their own crops, teach them how to deal with the droughts when they come. Give them the right type of support to get started and they won't need any support from anybody in the future."

That may sound somewhat Utopian to an Irish audience. Whenever we think of Ethiopia, by and large, our stomachs rumble. We see little black babies with distended bellies from a lack of food and fly-covered faces from a lack of energy to swat them away.

We hum the song about snow in Africa this Christmas, and our hands very probably move towards our pockets, re-tracing a journey made countless times before.

In Ethiopia itself, we imagine a scorched, dead countryside, akin to the surface of the moon, and with just as little water.

But the reality this week in the Huruta region, about 165km (100 miles) south east of Addis Ababa, could hardly provide a starker contrast.

Lush green fields, abundant with the local staple crop "teff" – as well as wheat and maize, onions, tomatoes and cabbage, banana and papaya, coffee trees and sunflowers, cattle and goats – surround the remote area for miles, despite a relatively dry rainy season, which has just ended. Self Help Africa has been running one of its nine Ethiopian programmes here for a number of years, taking in an area of 100,000 acres and about 110,000 people. To the naked eye, it is a success. More so, to the ear.

**A**TO Shita Wolde-sadik, a 55-year-old father of 10, had spent more than 20 years farming his six acres in Kakarssa village, with little success because of the notoriously erratic rainfall.

Dependent on the government for food to keep his family from starving for an average of three or four months each year, he decided to change his farming methods in 2006, despite his advancing years.

Self Help, which only employs Ethiopian natives and has been active here since 1987, provided him with the knowledge of a number of agricultural technologies – including how to build a rudimentary holding sump for water, dug into the ground, lined with cement and covered with thatch to prevent evaporation – through "contact" farmers in the locality it had already helped.

It also gave him access to, and knowledge about, seeds for various drought-resistant crops and crops that produce early. "With the surplus wheat and teff I produced, I was able to send some of my children to Arabian country to work," Ato Shita told the *Irish Independent* through an interpreter. "And with the money they sent back I am able to send my seven youngest children to school."

He calculates that he made approximately €1,750 extra last year, which is a heady sum in a country where huge numbers of casual construction workers on the sites in Addis Ababa take home less than €1 per day.

His success has been imitated by many others, with some of his neighbours telling how they can now pay up to €4,000 to build "modern" houses, with corrugated iron roofs.

In a country where up to 80pc of the people are reliant on agriculture for their livelihood, the figures are noteworthy. But they should also be noteworthy a little closer to home.

Last year, the Irish Government – through the taxpayer – gave €35m in aid to Ethiopia, with millions pumped into the country through non-government organisations like Goal and Self Help.

The notable aspect of the Self Help programme, however, is that the beneficiaries get nothing for free. The seeds for the new varieties of crops, for example, have to be paid for – 25pc up front with the remainder paid at the end of the help programme.

The farmers are given advice and encouragement to set up saving and credit cooperatives. There is an emphasis on social services and on health, especially HIV/AIDS prevention in a country where over five million are estimated to have the disease. After five years, any input from Self Help ends.

"These projects give people their dignity," Dr Awole said. "They want to work, and they want to be a success, and they want their family and neighbours to work and be a success."

Self Help, which, after its amalgamation with British agency Harvest Help, operates in nine countries across the continent, believes that Ethiopia can become an example to others of how it is possible to turn things around.

And Ireland may yet have more of a role in helping Ethiopia than the obvious markers of Sir Bob and donations for the starving. "We're unique in terms of where we are from because of our relatively-recent famine and the conflict in the

North," group CEO Ray Jordan said. "We have effectively gone the full circle to end up as one of the most-developed and successful countries in the world. "It was the Irish people themselves that turned around the country. It has to be exactly the same in the developing world."

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