

Ethiopia needs continued aid, urges charity

THE Irish public need to keep supporting aid and relief efforts in Ethiopia despite the confusing messages emerging about the extent of the famine alert there, the head of one of the top development agencies has warned.

Ray Jordan, chief executive of Self Help Africa, said ongoing assistance was essential to ease the effects of the drought which the World Food Programme says is causing severe hardship for 10 million people, almost half of whom are said to be under immediate threat of hunger and malnutrition.

His comments came after seemingly conflicting reports that the rains had returned but that vast tracts of the country faced a water crisis, and that Ethiopian authorities were denying a famine was under way while international agencies were pleading for food aid.

"It's a very complex situation," Mr Jordan said. "There is rain in parts but in places it has washed away the young crops and in other places it has started the crops growing but they won't be harvested for months."

He said it was difficult to say when a food shortage was an elongation of the usual "hunger gap" — the short period between food stores depleting and the next harvest becoming ready — and when the gap was becoming a famine.

"There is a hunger gap in a lot of African countries

every year but it's getting harder to predict when it will happen and how long it will last because people are

dependant on rain-fed agriculture and climate change means the rains are not reliable any more as the people in Ethiopia have found."

Self Help Africa, which grew out of the response of Irish farming communities to the devastating Ethiopian famine of 1984/85, has long-term development projects across the country helping one million people to produce a reliable food supply from the land. He said the news from those areas was promising.

"They are in trouble and they are suffering but they're coping. They're not having to sell their assets or leave the land and they will get by until they can harvest.

"In 2002, the last major famine alert in Ethiopia, I saw people eating the seeds they needed for their next planting. It was a life or death decision. When it gets to that stage, you're into emergency feeding programmes costing hundreds of millions.

"You save lives but the people end up with absolutely nothing left to make a fresh start — they've sold their chickens and goats and left the land. Parallel with emergency assistance we should be getting to the root cause of the problem."

Mr Jordan said he was confident about the public's support, despite the economic downturn.

"I would never be concerned about the generosity

of the Irish people."

● Staff from Self Help Africa's Irish headquarters will be visiting the charity's project areas all this week to check on progress. The Irish Examiner will carry reports throughout their visit.

by Caroline O'Doherty