

THINK TANK NEW IDEAS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Africa can cultivate its salvation

Invest in sub-Saharan farms to stop famine, argues Ray Jordan

Nobody's discussing cutting aid budgets any more. As images of famine appear on our television screens every night, those who claim "we can't afford aid to Africa" have fallen silent. Today, the talk is of how quickly aid can arrive.

At the heart of the crisis in the Horn of Africa are two political failures. The first is Somalia's — the anarchy that grips the south of the country, in particular, has frustrated efforts to ease the suffering.

The second political failure is the West's, because it didn't need to reach this point.

"When it comes to fighting hunger, the reality is that we either pay today or we pay more tomorrow," said a senior US aid official recently. This ignores the heaviest cost of this crisis: nobody can put a price on the death and suffering across the Horn. But the comment is also half right, because western governments know that failing to invest in Africa today will lead in the long run to a crisis that will demand a western intervention, and cost more to resolve.

Development aid is a choice in the same way as education is: short-term cuts store up significant problems for the years ahead. For the moment, the famine can be "fixed" only by bringing large quantities of food aid to the region. After the wave of chronic hunger is dampened, however, the world will be left with the same problem: how can Africa, with increasingly prevalent droughts and increasing populations, feed itself?

The solution to hunger rests in the soil. If Africa is to feed itself, it needs help to

grow more food. There are 80m smallholder farmers in Africa, most of them eking out a living on a hectare or two of land. With their families, they make up a group of about 500m people. Up to one in three is hungry. Their farms are poor and unproductive, but they are the solution to Africa's problems.

Agriculture is the way out of Africa's poverty. It accounts for 70% of employment and 30% of GDP in the subcontinent. With the exception of a few city states, no nation in history has

managed a rapid rise out of poverty without significant increases in agricultural productivity. The World Bank reckons investment in agriculture is between two and four times more effective in reducing poverty than investment in any other sector.

Farms have made great leaps in productivity in recent decades. Since 1960, global productivity has increased by 145%, due in large part to the use of irrigation, fertilisers, improved seeds and better farm practices.

In Africa, yields have fallen by 10% over the same period. It happened because, at a time when the world had massive food surpluses, it didn't make sense to invest in the planet's most unproductive farms. So aid for agricultural development fell consistently from the late 1960s.

That the United States and other western countries delivered aid to Africa in the form of surplus grain reserves muddled the picture further, as the availability of western grain discouraged many African farmers from attempting

to grow their own, and the activity depressed local prices.

Now the food mountains are gone, and the UN estimates that global food production must double by 2050 to avoid mass hunger. Productivity increases on farms have levelled off — most have the best seed, fertiliser and technical assistance available, and irrigation is widespread where needed.

In Africa, meanwhile, where 96% of agricultural land is not irrigated, more than 75% of agricultural land has medium to high potential for increased productivity. African agriculture could be "smarter" than its developed world equivalent, relying less on fossil fuels and more on sustainable improvements to soil fertility and seed supply.

Investing in African farms will bring significant increases in yields. It will

bring cuts in both hunger and poverty. Africans with an income from food production can afford healthcare and education for their children.

Pledges made by the G8 governments to invest in African farms in the wake of the world food crisis of 2007 were, in many cases, broken. The current crisis demands an immediate response but, if the world really wants to end famine, it must invest in farms. Precisely because of our economic decline — and the sacrifice which an aid budget demands of this country — Ireland is in a good position to convince other nations to stay with this slow build for Africa's future.

Ray Jordan is chief executive of Self Help Africa, which works with smallholder farmers in nine countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Ethiopia and Kenya

