

The return of famine. 2 September 2011

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Xan Rice points to several of the factors that have resulted in the humanitarian crises of starvation and migration in the Horn of Africa (Why has famine returned? 19 August).

While recognising that the impact of climate change on rainfall patterns is the most likely cause of the drought that has precipitated the current catastrophe, there is a great deal that we can do to alleviate the impact in the future. Combating desertification through the application of agroforestry and conservation agriculture techniques and practices will go a long way towards stabilising

soils and using precious water resources more effectively.

The Green Wall reforestation initiative to hold back the encroaching desert right across the Sahel is a good example of the kind of technology, approach and co-operation that is needed. Planting locally adapted leguminous tree species will boost production and help to free smallholder farmers from the need to purchase inputs. And conservation agriculture will keep the soils protected against erosion and raise fertility, as well as conserve moisture for food crops.

We have the technology and we know how to apply it. But the twin curses of political instability and ineptitude, coupled with unsustainable increases in the human population, are effectively preventing the potential advances that we should be making as a matter of global urgency.

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