

**Interview with
UNICEF Regional Director**

“What Eritrea looks like from a distance and the real time experience I had with the community show huge discrepancy”



Conducted by: Ruth Abraham

UNICEF Regional Director for East and Southern Africa, Mr. Mohammed Malick Fall, conducted a three-day visit to Eritrea from 3 to 6 November. He met and had talks with high level government officials and visited basic development and social service sites in Anseba region. Following are excerpts of an interview with the director upon concluding his visit.

Welcome to Eritrea, Mr. Malick, and thank you for agreeing to have this interview.

What is the purpose of your visit?

I was due to visit Eritrea before the world got into the covid-19 crisis but was delayed because of the pandemic. The prime reason for my visit is to tour and see; to socialize and understand and to watch and learn the realities in Eritrea as an agent of UNICEF in this region. I came to see the progress achieved and

problems that remain unsolved and discuss them with the government and enhance our cooperation framework.

Mr. Malick, what was your stay like?

It was a three-day mission, limited in time but very intense with a series of activities that allowed me to interact across the board. I interacted with stakeholders, members of the government, members of the UN, UN staff, and development partners. Most importantly, I interacted with the community which was eye opening on what Eritrea is today.

How do you see Eritrean progress on issues that concern UNICEF and the Government?

This trip was important because it has helped me to open my eyes on the realities and to rearrange some of the convictions that I had before coming here. We are confronted with challenges in today's world: the climate issues, conflicts and the pandemic. It is true that we need resources but unlike what we think, it is not the only critical element that one needs for development. What I found to be more important is the determination, the commitment, the vision and the engagement of the community; people of all ages and genders working together towards a common goal. I think this trip was extremely important for me because it helped me build a new narrative around Eritrea. Unlike when looking from a distance, you see tangible progress as you get to the country.

I was struck by the level of immunization, 94% immunization of children, and increasing funds from the government for the procurement of vaccines. There are many advanced countries that have a hard time reaching that threshold. I have seen government funding match the funds from Global Partnership of Education (GPE). I have seen the determination of the people and their insights of education; girls outnumbering the boys in schools was an amazing feature. I could see the desire to learn in the eyes of the children. I have also seen barefoot doctors travelling on foot and on camels trying to ensure the well-being and vaccination of every child in hard-to-reach areas. Therefore, all those experiences have helped me to learn that to make progress in social and development sectors, it is not wealth and resources that you need but the

determination and commitment of the people and government. I see this taking place in Eritrea. We need to work together to craft a new narrative of the country, which is different from the pre-established assessments.

What further measures do you suggest should be taken to achieve the goals (SDGs) important to Eritrea in line with its national priorities?

There are a lot of initiatives for which we need to scale up our efforts now. I visited a water distribution center for villages that had difficulty accessing clean water; now they have solar-powered pumps. I have seen the Government helping to build schools to meet the increasing demand of education. I have also seen a health system where children are referred to for treatment, prevention of malnutrition and vaccination with utmost devotion of health workers. I have seen pregnant women coming for antenatal care. Now, while I saw all that, all I could think was how we can intensify the development to keep pace with the needs of the people in all sectors. I think that is the direction we need to march on. In Eritrea, all the ingredients and the ground we need to get it right as in the rate of vaccination are met. What we need to increase is the effort to have the quality, speed and scale of service provided. If those elements are pulled together, I think Eritrea is going to be in the development landscape in an area which will surprise a lot of people. What Eritrea looks like from a distance and the real time experience I had with the community show a huge discrepancy. We should close the gaps by telling the real stories.

Give us an overview of your visit of Anseba Region.

First of all, the commitment and determination are outstanding. I have seen workers that did not have a lot of means but the determination of continuing to deliver the services that people needed. There are teachers who barely had what they needed to teach properly but they are there doing it with grace and hard work. I could say a lot about the sectors in which I saw service being delivered to the people by the people assisted by the government. That is why I say this is a development driven by the community.

I am an African; from West Africa which has the same challenges. That is why when I gave the speech I spoke as the son of this continent not simply as the

Regional Director of UNICEF. I have learned that sometimes all the services can be in place but if the community does not demand it, it may not be utilized. Here [in Eritrea], I could see it was otherwise. All the services are fully utilized because there is full demand and thirst for access to the services. All the villages in the sub-zone that I visited have declared Open Defecation Free (ODF) because they demanded it and adopted it, which is another big milestone. You cannot have health if you do not have sanitation or nutrition. We need to integrate the package and that integration was evident in the places I have visited. That impact is priceless and to have that impact you would need the government, UNICEF, and other partners. But most of all, you would need the community to come towards the services and demand them.

In how many places in Africa can one find females outnumbering males in primary school? Females tend to be fewer in schools because of the responsibilities they have in their homes at an early age. But here, even in conditions that are not ideal, the ratio of females was more than or equal to males. Their desire for education can be easily seen on their faces.

Is there anything special in the new UN cooperation framework?

The new cooperation framework is just a stage in a journey that started a long time ago. It is part of a long succession of plans that has been developed in this country. We need to build on the important accomplishments that I have mentioned in all sectors. We shouldn't turn our backs to the success we have accomplished but should learn a lesson. For instance, UNICEF has been here since the early 90s and some challenges persist. We might need to reflect and be critical if there is anything we can do differently to avoid repeating the same solutions that are not taking us anywhere toward ending our problems. This is why the notion of speed and scale are necessary. Another important factor that I have seen and that we need to encourage is innovation. I saw some young people showing me a mobile app that they used to spread news and Covid 19 guidelines to the people. This speeds up the behavioral change in adopting certain things and accelerates the solution delivery.

Though Africa accounts for a very minor percent of carbon emission we need to look at the challenges we are facing. How would you address climate change if

you do not have tools and interventions such as a solar power system to generate power for services and daily lives? The idea of barefoot doctors in itself is something that all African countries should adopt. It not only ensures service delivery but it is affordable, effective and community-oriented.

The education system and training of young people is basic and directly related to the development needs of their country. There is also a new area of social protection that we need to explore. If we have a scheme that transfers resources, we can also expand and accelerate the constraints children face to access these services. I have been discussing with the team that we need to figure out why our pace of development is slow and work on it in our new country program. The biggest challenge is how to accelerate the achievement that we have already scored in partnership with the government. What we are facing is a challenge that every development actor is facing. I think those are the paradigms that we need to integrate.

What was your meeting with Eritrean officials like?

It was extremely good and cordial. For someone who has arrived for the first time, I had a warm welcome and great hospitality. I met with Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Finance, Minister of Health, Governor of Anseba region, Minister of Education and many other officials. The meetings were extremely candid across the board; very open discussion where I could hear and learn what the Government's main concern really are. That was the reason of my stay here; an eye opening experience because it was open and frank discussion. There were no bureaucratic complications in the meetings that I had. I was struck by the openness and positively impressed by the determination, vision, self-reliance, commitment and the people-centered approach of the officials I met.

Thank you so much, Mr. Malick.

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