

**“Eritrea has made a good progress  
in terms of Human Development Index”  
– UNDP Representative in Eritrea**



Interview conducted by: Sabrina Solomon

*Our guest today is Mr. James Wakiaga. He is the UNDP Resident Representative in Eritrea and we will be talking about the human development report of 2021 and 2022. This report is a follow-up from last year which was aired on Eri-Tv and covered on Eritrea Profile Newspaper.*

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**Q – Thank you for your time Mr. James. Please tell us about UNDP activities in Eritrea?**

Thank you for having me. UNDP has been in Eritrea since 1992 and then we formalized our existence in 1994. We’ve basically been a partner with the Government of the State of Eritrea for the last twenty-five years and we remain a partner of choice working very closely with the Government and other development players in this country to promote sustainable development. Therefore we had quite huge spectrum of areas that UNDP is closely partnering with the Government, ranging from the areas of capacity building to building

resilient and robust institutions. We are also looking at the areas of climate change and basically looking at policies and programmes that can help to mitigate the challenge of climate change, looking at areas of biodiversity, working closely to support in the areas of afforestation, soil conservation as well as investment in water, which as we know is another important resource for the country's development. We're also in the areas of promoting institutions, particularly institutions of governance, working in the area of justice and areas such as universal theoretic review which Eritrea is participating in, as well as looking at other areas focusing on the promotion of agenda 2030.



Therefore, it's also gratifying to note that because of this partnership and cooperation, Eritrea did very well especially on the MDGs that aired in 2015 particularly being among the first countries that attained the health related MDGs and now working closely in the area of Agenda 2030 so that we look at how we can work together and accompany the Government on the implementation of the SDGs. And here again it is important to appreciate the efforts of the Government in the formulation and presentation of the recent Voluntary National Report at the high level political forum which was well received but also the report was very important in terms of articulating areas that the country is making progress towards the attainment of the SDGs.

**Q – To get to the main agenda for this Q&A, let's talk about the Human Development Report 2021/2022.**

The Human Development Report is an independent, analytical and empirically grounded report that the UNDP has been producing since 1990. Therefore, it has been a journey of thirty-two years of producing this report and it's one of our flagship reports but also very important report in terms of assessment of global development that looks at the dimensions of social and economic development for countries. Hence, the Human Development Report provides the Human Development Index that looks at the dimension of health in terms of life expectancy, looks at the social dimensions in terms of education; where it looks at the completion rates and years of schooling and it also looks at the income dimension. What's important about the Human Development Index is that it doesn't just look at progress in terms of income, but it also looks at social and economic progress that we are making as a society. So in the last thirty-two years, we've been producing this report and seeing tremendous progress in terms of human progress across the world.

However, for the last two years, we've also witnessed a decline in Human Development Index at a global level. This decline can be attributed to the recent COVID-19 pandemic as well as some of the challenges brought about by the crises in Ukraine. This year, we produced the 2021/2022 Human Development Report which is of course focusing on area of our future entitled: "Uncertain Times – Unsettled Lives", "Living in a future of an over-transforming world" and how lives have become unsettled because of the recent challenges; principally the COVID-19 pandemic which has really un-settled our lives. Note to mention the uncertain complexities that have also been accentuated by technological upheavals; by the impact of the climate change; also by polarization as well as issues around gender and equality which is dominant.

These are things that we need to address because they're beginning to have an impact on human progress. And importantly, the fact that uncertain times, which is being fed by these upheavals is creating uncertain lives, the report is bringing out issues around mental health particularly with the experience of the COVID-19 and so we are seeing sadness and stress levels across the world. The Pandemic for example have had a huge impact in terms of how we live. It created a "New Normal", a 'normal' that we are not used to; and so issues of

mental health have come to the forefront and this has an impact on productivity and on human development as a whole.

So we need to see how we address this uncertain complexes but this complexity brings its own advantages. The fact that it is doubling down on human development is also unleashing its own force of creativity and so we are seeing technology taking effect in terms of supporting us on how to deal with this “New Normal”. It is not necessarily negative, but it is also helping us to unleash new opportunities in terms of moving the human progress.

**Q – So what are the standards you have used to catalog the progresses achieved in health, education and standard of living that you’ve mentioned?**

We are seeing in the last two years over 90 countries have been affected in terms of a decline of the human development index. In addition to that above 40 countries in 2022 have already had a decline. We are seeing a decline in all the three dimensions – health, education and on income. And so this is having an effect in terms of the human progress. In addition to that, we look at the technological upheavals and as much as technology is good, we are also seeing misinformation across the world. So how do we deal with these new issues of misinformation? We are seeing elements of mistrust. ‘Trust’ as a currency is being affected in this kind of uncertain complexity. The report does provide data for example where we see less than 30% of the global population putting premium on “trust”. So these are the issues which are being brought forward in this report.

So how do we address this uncertainty complex? – We should look at the issues of investment and focus on what investments are needed. For example, investments in nature based developments to deal with the impacts of climate change; we look at issues around insurance where we have to invest on social protection in order to safeguard the most vulnerable from the impacts of uncertainty; we have to look at issues around building ‘trust’ in communities as well as addressing the issues of inequality; narrowing the gap on Gender and Inequality while focusing more on women empowerment as an important

currency of development. These are issues we need to focus more in terms of addressing Human Development.

**Q – How do people have access to knowing where we are now in regards to the Human Development Index?**

Certainly, the report is available on our website and we try as much to make sure to have conversations around the report and making it available. It's important for countries to look at the findings because it does come out with very robust recommendation. The whole idea is to trigger policy debate around some of these issues which had not been uncovered before. For instance in the case of Eritrea, we have seen between 2002 and 2022 a good progress in terms of its Human Development Index, which has appreciated up-to 0.492, which is the current value for the index above 15.5% of appreciation of its human development value. In addition to that, you look at the life expectancy in Eritrea which is much higher – It has grown by about 7.7 years over this period and averaging about 60-70 years of life expectancy which is much higher than the average for the Sub-Saharan Africa. This in a sense accentuates the gains the country has made especially in areas of health as I've mentioned in attainment of health related MDGs.

There is also progress in the areas of education, in terms of completion rates and still more investment are needed in terms of quality of education and which is where all counties are now focusing on – Universal attainment in the areas of education. Even on health now, the country is moving towards Universal Health Coverage, which is also another critical component for human progress. And in the area of 'income', in terms of looking at building the productive capacities and improving the living standards of the people. So the report is important in that sense because it does bring out some of the salient issues that can resonate to focus on in terms of programmatic as well as in the area of the policy support and importantly in the area of Gender Equality and women empowerment because we need to look at both male and female whether in education or in health and being able to measure the human progress attained across; which the Government of the State of Eritrea is focusing on and as the UNDP we've been working very closely with the Ministry of Finance and National Development

and other bodies such as the NUEW who have been in the forefront in terms of promoting women empowerment.

### **Q – What is the way forward?**

Moving from here basically is looking at these complexities that are doubling down on Human Development and then finding solutions and therefore looking at investments that we need to make in the areas of technological advancement; investments in the area of environmental sustainability, addressing the vagaries of the climate change through adaptive policies that we can put in place but also the coping mechanisms. These are whole area from ecological to biodiversity as well as areas of water but importantly the areas of renewable energy. Already the UNDP and other partners across the UN as well as the development partners are now looking at the areas of renewable energy which is a win-win both in terms of mitigation measure and development instrument with transformative impact by harnessing on nature like the sun which we are blessed with and transforming it into energy and then having an impact on livelihoods and impact on women and businesses – like the Areza Power Plant in Debub region, which is one of the transformative projects the Government has been able to work on. This is the direction we need to go. We need to look at investments in social services, access to water, Universal Health Coverage, investment in quality education and also skilling the youth and women to be able to fully participate in the economy as drivers of change.

I really believe that the kind of partnership we are having is critical in terms of accompanying the Government on some of these priority areas; in the areas of education and health which is key for human progress and development and also investment in infrastructure that is key in being catalytic for creating transformative change. For instance, investment in renewable energy which is a priority of the Government is one of those key areas in terms of accessibility to energy that can have an impact on lives and boosting of productivity, and creating conducive environment for the country to go to the next phase of industrialization. I take this opportunity to commend the Government for the efforts it is making in these areas of health, education, renewable energy and ensuring that it has a ‘Human Centered Development’ that focus on the people.

The UNDP is and will be available to accompany the Government in its journey of improving the lives of the people, to move forward towards the attainment of the Agenda 2030.

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