

“It’s My Utmost Wish to see Eritrea get International Recognition for the Elimination of Mother-to-Child HIV Transmission Shortly” Madam Therese U. Poirier



Interview conducted by :Ruth Abraham

Our guest today is Madam Therese U. Poirier, UNAIDS country representative in Eritrea. Madam Poirier has completed her three-year term and is leaving Eritrea on January 1, 2023. The interview focuses on her professional and personal experiences in Eritrea.

Thank you for being with us. Please introduce yourself to our audience

This is an honor that I don't take for granted. Thank you very much. My name is Madam Therese Poirier. I am a Rwandese- Canadian and a mother of two. I have over 30 years of progressive leadership experience in international development. I started my journey working with grass root community development in my native Rwanda. Later on I moved around many countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and North America (Canada). Before joining UNAIDS, I was working as a diplomat for the Canadian government working with regional and pan African institution. A decade ago, I moved to UNAIDS and worked as its representative in Mali, Malawi, and now Eritrea.

You have been in Eritrea for three years; how would you describe your time here?

What to say! What to say about Eritrea! It has been an incredible journey and I am extremely grateful for the opportunity I have had to work in this beautiful

country. I have made lifelong connections with the local people and international community that I will always cherish. Here, I have learned so much about this country. Eritrea is making its own progress at its own pace. That is something you need to experience Eritrea. You need to be here to see how Eritrea is able to be on track to meet many SDGs, especially the one I am interested in, SDG 3. I have seen tremendous achievement. They don't make noise but they are scoring tremendous achievement. I am impressed by the level of commitment of the people and the civil society I have been working with. I describe my time here as an invaluable learning path and I will really miss this. The exposure allows me to experience firsthand how a country with a vision can perform. And I am very grateful for this experience.

As a UNAIDS representative to Eritrea, what are your observations and impressions about AIDS in Eritrea?

Thank you for this question because it is one of the things that I would like to say from the bottom of my heart. I would like to commend Eritrea for the partnership I have with the Ministry of Health (MOH).

They have made outstanding progress, especially in health sector. If we see the strong leadership skills of all involved in HIV response, it's really impressive. And somehow, it contributes to making my job easier and fascinating. One of the things I really appreciate is how people work together. You know, the way in the UN, the different sister agencies work with each other and coordinate the response. The same way, the MOH works with other ministries to ensure that the response is very focused and well-coordinated. That's how I have got the opportunity to work with people from the MOH, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Information, National Union of Eritrean Women, National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students, the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers. All of them are involved and I really appreciate the dedication of the team. That, I believe, is what led to achieving these outstanding results that we are seeing now. Eritrea is on good trend. According to statistics, in 2003, the prevalence [of AIDS] was 4.34; now we are almost at 0.5. This is a huge leap forward. We may not make noise about it but we know it's a very big achievement. This is because of the multi-sectorial approach; the work of all the people involved is

what makes this happen. There are 284 sites dedicated to HIV testing services. And all departments are working to ensure that everyone can be tested by providing equal access. People living with HIV are involved in the planning and implementation of services and that is commendable. That is what the Global Fund appraises Eritrea for. This kind of working together and coordinated response.

Have you travelled out of Asmara? Are there experiences you would like to share with us?

I wish I could travel more. Unfortunately, I arrived during the covid-19 lockdown and couldn't travel all over the country, but I managed to visit some zones and it was really interesting to see the beauty of the country, the serenity of the country side. I remember when I was going to Massawa for a site meeting. Passing through the mountains to Massawa, it somehow reminded me of my native Rwanda. I really enjoyed it and I always like to go to the health facilities and get firsthand experience and discuss with communities. One of the things I really enjoyed, which would be my takeaway, is community members working with a health facility staff to build the waiting room for pregnant women who live in hard-to-reach areas. This meant that pregnant women could come prior to their delivery and have safe delivery under medical supervision.

This is a very good example of what Eritrea can teach others. I enjoy visiting the country side to see the marvelous landscapes and visit HIV testing centers. HIV testing services are incorporated in healthcare facilities, making them easy to access. For example, a pregnant woman attending an antenatal clinic (ANC) has HIV tests conducted at intervals. Currently, I can say 95% of women are attending ANCs, which is very good. Of course, we still have some women who don't deliver in hospitals. That is something we need to keep working on to ensure that all pregnant women come to health facilities for delivery and checkups.

If I asked you to paint a verbal picture of Eritrea, what would it look like?

Thank you for this question. Honestly, the country will leave a lasting impact on me. You know there is this saying that the taste of the pudding is in the eating.

Should I speak about the warmth of the Eritrean people? Kindness comes naturally to them. Walking around in my neighborhood even in late hours, I feel safe. This is something unique. You cannot do that in some countries. Even in Canada, there are some parts of the country you can't feel safe to go to. Honestly, during my time in Eritrea, I found the Eritrean people to be very cordial and welcoming. I have made several friends at all levels. In addition to that, I have had some privileges to be invited at local homes for meals and local coffee ceremony! I struggle with the first round of the coffee, i.e. Awel (first), and the second because they are very strong. I really enjoy the ceremony and the coffee from the third round on. Moreover, the working environment in Eritrea is very friendly and I really appreciate the interaction that I've had with people in Eritrea as a whole. I've really benefitted from my stay. That is something I would take away with me.

How does it feel to depart Eritrea?

As I said earlier, in my career for more than 31 years, I have traveled in various continents. I stayed longer in some countries than others but one of the things I want to say is that it is never easy to prepare for this inevitable day, to say your goodbyes. Last week, I had a workshop with health workers and women living with HIV, preparing this country to eliminate the disease. At the end of the workshop, as we were saying goodbye we were all crying. It was heartbreaking. It is tough to leave this country; I know how much I will miss my Asmarinos. I will keep the friendship I have started here and I will keep it forever.

Any other messages you would like to put across?

My key message would be to my partners; continue to build resilient and sustainable system for health and strengthen your pandemic preparedness so that Eritrea stays healthy. You did well under the threat of Covid-19; you can keep doing well. I would also say keep raising awareness and eliminate shame about HIV because the stigma may hinder the response.

That's how the media and others could help combat HIV. Continue the push forward and gain more ground in fighting HIV, maintain the tremendous gain we have made. As I said, HIV/ AIDS prevalence among clients coming to HIV

testing services has declined from 4.34 to 0.6 in 2021. So, there is a lot of hope for Eritrea. And my most genuine wish is to see what Eritrea will be in the coming year or two years. It can become the first country in Africa to get the full international recognition of the elimination of mother-to-child HIV transmission. Botswana has got the bronze but Eritrea can go straight for the top without having to pass levels. It's my utmost hope that this continues so that in some years I hear that Eritrea is an AIDS-free country.

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December 26, 2022