Above are the words of Ms. Christine N. Umutoni, Resident/ Humanitarian Coordinator and UNDP Representative in Eritrea, surprising the crowd by singing happy birthday to UNDP’s 50th Anniversary during her speech in Keren. Indeed, the UN agency’s anniversary was celebrated in Eritrea in a very unique way. “Instead of celebrating it in two hours confined at Asmara Palace with some wine, isn’t it better to celebrate it for two days by going on a field trip?” she expressed. With this idea in mind, UNDP Eritrea organized a field trip to the Anseba Region on May 5 and 6, 2016.

On this occasion, members of the diplomatic corps from China, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States, the European Union, Government officials and representatives, UN agencies as well as the European Union embarked on this two-day field expedition to the Anseba Region to witness some of UNDP’s ongoing projects in partnership with national civil society groups, as well as the Ministry of National Development, Ministry of Agriculture without failing to recall the Ministry of Land Water and Environment.

After two hours drive, guests arrived in Keren, just the time to grab a tea and quickly rushing to one of UNDP funded projects called “youth employment skills” in partnership with the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS). This project allows the youth, particularly the disadvantaged, to get the chance to acquire skills and get employed through one of the 21 centers in the region. From metal to woodwork, passing by pottery, audiovisual and electronics, youth from the age of 16 are trained for a period of one-school year. During the visit to the NUEYS metal and woodwork training center located in Keren, presentations and a tour on site gave a glimpse to the successful implementation of the project. Young women and men timidly addressed the crowd about their work and gratitude to the support given. One of them, Teklom Ghebrehiwet, a young man and father of three explained how, through the program, he managed to maintain his living conditions:

“Since my childhood, I was passionate about visual arts and especially video camera shooting. I used to work for 100 or 200 Nkf, even some people would just pay me by simply saying ‘yeqenyelna’ – thank you. I always had the ambition to be a professional cameraman. When I heard about the course organized by the NUEYS in camera shooting, I, without hesitating, decided to take part and, then from what I learned, I was able to become a qualified professional in this field. Before I started my own business, when I was working under someone else, I was living in a little shelter and now, that I rent a video camera and I am working at
various events such as wedding ceremonies, I get 6000 Nkf which allows me to rent a video camera for the price of 3000 Nkf and with the rest I cover my family’s expenses... As a result, I have a sustainable income and I managed to get a bigger house for my wife and children...”

After a round of applause, a group of youngsters exhibited their work in pottery. One of them, an ill-impaired young man explained how it gave him a sense of life by getting such training and sustains himself. Learning the skills allows him to be part of the society as every other citizen without being marginalized due to his hearing disability.

The visit continued in the metal and woodwork workshops, where impressive finished products were showcased to visitors, passing by the wardrobe, the table to the school desk. In fact, the vocational training does not solely benefit those youth but the entire community. In other words, some of the materials produced in the center will be used by the Ministry of Education for its schools or the Ministry of Health for its health facilities as well as individuals who are able to buy it at low price. Hence, this youth employment skills program have a positive effect to the society as a whole. Terence Malamnlo, the youth project coordinator for UNDP, explained that through the funding provided by the Governments of Japan and Norway, NUEYS can provide training to youth in various sectors for a period of one year preparing them for a job and tackle unemployment, subsequently bringing down migration to the minimal.

As guests walked around the site, a group of young students were actively working on finishing the last details of their latest artwork. A young woman was standing by their side explaining to them the techniques, Mrs. Haddas Rebibu, from Keren. A mother and wife, in her thirties, who also took part in the training program in 2008, was then recruited as an employee and trainer at the NUEYS vocational training site. As one of the few women involved in this sector of activity, she proudly explained, “women, in our region especially, have to understand that we can work in any field of activities without any gender distinction. I would like my other female counterparts to understand the importance of work and of not being passive and dependent financially. This is the reason why I chose to work; to provide for my family.”

The pilot project started in 2007 in Keren and quickly extended to the Gash Barka region and under the Strategic Partnership Cooperation Framework (SPCF) 2013-2016 between the Government of Eritrea and UN in Eritrea, the project expanded to all regions of the country. Through its implementing partner, NUEYS, youth employment skills project has already targeted 1046 youths nationwide including 167 in the Anseba region. Trainings as well as equipping the workshops and centers have revitalized these youth vocational training centers without failing to recall the upcoming project in micro-credit schemes as a starting kit to young professionals to enable them to start their own business.
As the anniversary of UNDP goes in line with the upcoming National Greening Day, this field visit surely comes at an important juncture. Thus, the field visit continued by including a stopover to one of the project named ‘Climate Change Adaptation’. After a short drive outside of Keren in Hamelmalo sub-zone, while visitors walked up a little hill, wondering what’s hidden behind, a whole community was waiting on them to greet them and proudly show their newly built micro-dam. The Musha micro-dam, built in 2013, has changed the lives of its inhabitants. The community of farmers of the Musha village, organized in a committee, are some of the beneficiaries of this project piloted by UNDP in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture.

As part of the food security and sustainable livelihood program implemented in 2015, the construction of the micro-dam and the installation of a solar water pump allowed villagers to irrigate the land and subsequently grow foodstuff and have sustainable agricultural activities. As part of the program, members of the community are provided with a livelihood support systems consisting of: household receiving one dairy cow, 25 chicken and 2 beehives.

This integrated project has already impacted the lives of the residents to not only this village but to three others. In fact, Mr. Abrar Gidari, member of the farmers’ community, explained that before the construction of the micro-dam, they had to walk for more than three hours without the guarantee of finding water upon destination. Abrar, a father of seven, stressed that not only has it eased their burden, but now they can ensure food throughout the year and can sell their products to the local market in Keren.

As the sun started to go down, it was time for visitors to rejoin in Keren and assist in the official ceremony of UNDP’s 50th anniversary in the premises of Sarina Hotel. Starting with a video show of UNDP’s history, Mr. Ali Mahmud, Governor of the Anseba Region gave a welcome speech under the theme of cooperating for development.

Ms. Umutoni took the attention of the crowd through her speech and expressed her gratitude to all stakeholders and invited guests. During her speech, Ms. Umutoni stressed the importance of working in partnership for sustainable development. Hence, the partnership between Eritrea and the UNDP goes back to 1992 through post-conflict reconstruction program focusing on demining and livelihood followed by development programs in areas of food security, livelihood, environment, energy, public sector development, governance, justice and human rights without failing to recall its support to youth and women.
Through this different format in celebrating, the UN agency’s anniversary has allowed donors, embassy representatives as well as other UN agencies to come together and have knowledge of the country by interacting with local communities. Ms. Umutoni also took the opportunity to highlight the importance of collaboration “to reposition the eyes of the international community on Eritrea and vice versa”. What visitors also appreciated is the impressive outcome of development project to the livelihood of Eritreans who are eager to improve their living conditions. “We give money for one micro-dam and they built three of them”, Ms. Umutoni continued. This is surely the motto of the people of Eritrea, which makes it some of the unique case and explained the great achievement of the 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the ongoing work in progress in achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The UK Ambassador to Eritrea, H.E. Mr. David Ward highlighted the resilience of the people of Eritrea and the importance of such projects in tackling economic challenges the youth in particular are facing through skills development. The Chinese Ambassador to Eritrea, H.E. Mr. Qiu Xuejun also expressed his gratitude to UNDP and the Government of Eritrea in its efforts for sustainable development. He also highlighted the fast approaching silver jubilee anniversary of Eritrea’s independence and it is the occasion to assess the progress achieved and the way forward in which China is committed to continue partnering with the government of Eritrea and UN partners. The EU representative, Mr. Nelson Jorge, also gave a solidarity speech by enhancing the importance for regular policy dialogue and cooperation between the EU, the UNDP and Eritrea. Representative of Japan shared his great impression and strategy of development implemented focusing on community-based approach.

The evening continued with a dinner followed by an instructive presentation on Habero project on Climate Change adaptation program followed by cultural show in which guests took over the dance floor dancing to the traditional Eritrean beats.

Next morning, on May 6th, the field trip continued towards the town of Aretey in the subzone of Habero, a more than two hours drive passing by the serpentine road, surprising villagers running towards the roadside to greet the multiple cars passing by. Arriving at the Fiza project, as part of the integrated agricultural package, the rain welcomed visitors. Wearing the UNDP caps, visitors did not hesitate to join the local community in the farmland. The agricultural project through a system of solar powered irrigation allowed communities to strengthen their agricultural services as well as undertaking soil erosion control measures through forestation, hillside terracing while providing with the livelihood support systems as in the village of Musha. As part of the National Greening Day, all guests actively participated in planting trees in the Fiza project site.
Later on, dwellers in the town of Aretey rushed to arrange the latest settings and show the Eritrean hospitality to their guests. After solidarity speeches by the Governor of the sub-zone, Mrs. Aisha Mohamed, Minister Arefaine Berhe of Agriculture as well as Minister Tesfai Ghebreselassie of Land, Water and Environment expressed their gratitude and the government’s willingness to continue working in partnership for better livelihood of the people of Eritrea. Certificates were also handed over to members of the farmer communities, representatives of NUEYS as well as NUEW of the region before ending the visit with a well-prepared and delicious traditional dish and coffee ceremony.

Cooperation between Eritrea and its various partners including diplomatic missions, organizations and companies surely continue to grow with the sole aim of achieving sustainable development. Hence, partnering for development is the motto of the country since independence until today. As part of its national priorities; food security, this project, not only ensure food but also nutrition as Minister Arefaine stressed. Surely, the efforts towards sustainable development can only be achieved by continued cooperation between various institutions and the Government of Eritrea. Working in common with mutually agreed goals and plans of action are surely the ingredients of the well-implementation of UNDP and Eritrea joint programs.

Happy 50th Birthday UNDP and Happy 25th Birthday Eritrea!