

Guided by Passion, Grounded in Community - The Story of Dr. Mojisola Debbie Kupolati and Well Being Africa in an exclusive interview with Xinyi Ji

Effective social development is driven by collaboration among governments, corporations, development partners, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), with NGOs playing a vital role in supporting and enhancing these efforts. Experts working in health-focused NGOs provide invaluable guidance and inspiration for aspiring professionals like myself, seeking a career in global health and community development." One such person is Dr. Mojisola Debbie Kupolati, the CEO of Well Being Africa (WBA).

Dr. Kupolati's journey into WBA work was inspired by a personal experience: the loss of her mother to heart disease many years ago. With the accumulation of knowledge, she realised that her mother's life could have been extended if she had received early nutrition intervention. She was passionate about helping people escape malnutrition and non-communicable diet-related diseases through nutrition education, empowerment, and research. Dr. Kupolati began by studying for a Diploma in Nutrition and Dietetics in 2006, followed by a master's degree and a PhD in nutrition. After completing her PHD, she noticed that many people in need couldn't afford to pay for professional nutrition services. "How could you bridge the gap?" I asked. She smiled softly, "That was when I decided to establish an NGO that would serve the less privileged and vulnerable people," she explained. In 2018, she brought this vision to life, founding Well Being Africa alongside her colleagues from related fields, united by a shared mission to improve the nutritional health of people across the continent. "Together we identified poverty, poor health, and anger as the key challenges in African countries," Dr. Kupolati shared. "That's how we shaped the themes of Well Being Africa's operations: nutrition/public health promotion, psychosocial support, and skills development."

Over the years, Dr Kupolati has worked in various challenging environments, often with scarce resources. Yet, precisely this dynamic and people-centred context fuels her passion. "Working in WBA is completely different from working with the government or corporate," She explained, "Resources are limited, and you always have to work directly with the communities."

True to her words, WBA has trained over 700 community health workers to support, promote and protect breastfeeding in the communities and support many mothers with breastfeeding support. WBA's field workers engage directly with mothers during their antenatal and postnatal clinic visits for breastfeeding support. "Many mothers, especially those living with HIV, have concerns about breastfeeding," Dr. Kupolati shared, "Our workers help them understand how they can safely breastfeed while following the recommended guidelines." Beyond the clinics, the team goes even further, visiting mothers/caregivers at home to offer hands-on support, nutrition education, and monitor compliance with the immunisation schedule, Vitamin A uptake, and deworming. "Many mothers believe they don't produce enough milk and start mixed feeding, which undermines exclusive breastfeeding," she noted. "Our field workers guide them, help them re-establish breastfeeding, and when they see their babies growing well, they feel encouraged to continue." In these intimate, face-to-face encounters, far from boardrooms and policy tables, the true heartbeat of WBA's mission comes alive. It is here, in these modest homes and crowded clinics, that limited resources meet boundless commitment.

Throughout the years, networking has become a cornerstone of WBA's progress. "You can't work in isolation if you want to make real change," Dr. Kupolati emphasized. Meaningful change in social impact work, particularly in public health aligned with human rights, as exemplified by WBA's operations, often hinges on collective action and shared resources. Well Being Africa is a member of the Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR), a coalition promoting women's rights in Africa." Joining a larger coalition not only amplifies WBA's voice, but also brings opportunities to learn, adapt and influence policy. Through its observer status with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, WBA participates in key policy dialogues and actively contributes to advancing women's rights across the continent.

In South Africa, partnerships are just as vital. "For example, when we organised a symposium to promote the Maputo Protocol, we partnered with Melusi Youth Development Organisation because they have a strong network in those local communities," she explained. By partnering with organisations that are rooted in the community, WBA ensures that its advocacy is both heard and accepted by the people it serves.

Institutional collaborations also enrich WBA's projects. "We work with the University of Pretoria on breastfeeding support. Recently, WBA signed a memorandum of understanding with a Provincial Department of Health in South Africa for a child health and development project, she added. Partnering with the University of Pretoria brings technical expertise and evidence-based guidance to WBA's programs, while the agreement with the Department of Health offers institutional backing and access to broader public health support. It is through these networks that WBA extends its reach and deepens its impact.

During our conversation, Dr. Kupolati emphasised several qualities essential for anyone seeking success in the NGO setting. First is passion, the driving force that sustains people through the sector's inevitable challenges. "Without passion, it's hard to keep going when resources are limited and deadlines are tight," she reflected. Dr. Kupolati's words reflect the reality of NGO work, where motivation is often internally driven. In an environment where financial and human resources are scarce, passion becomes a steady force that drives long-term commitment.

But passion alone is not enough. "You have to develop your communication skills," Dr. Kupolati advised. Whether engaging directly with community members or coordinating with team members, clear and empathetic communication is key. Empathy, she stressed, is a key to communication. "You need to empathise with people's situations, to understand why they do and what they do," she said. This human connection not only improves program effectiveness but also builds trust with stakeholders and communities. Additionally, teamwork is vital, as NGO projects are often collaborative efforts that require strong team spirit and cooperation.

Networking emerged as another recurring theme in our discussion. "Success in an NGO setting depends a lot on your ability to network with other stakeholders," Dr. Kupolati pointed out. Building relationships with government officials, other NGOs, and even political figures can amplify an organisation's impact and open doors to new opportunities. For individuals, networking is also a learning opportunity. It is a way to exchange ideas, build collaborations, and stay informed. As Dr. Kupolati suggested, knowing how to engage with others is helpful and central to NGO work.

When asked about advice for graduates aspiring to enter community development, Dr. Kupolati offered practical guidance. Beyond developing passion, improving communication, and nurturing networking, she highlighted the importance of monitoring and evaluation skills. "You want to be able to track the impact of your interventions," she explained. Solid monitoring and evaluation skills allow NGOs to present data and outcomes that can attract resources and ensure the sustainability of their interventions. "With facts and figures, you can convince funders that this is an initiative worth supporting," she added. Passion and connections are what drive programs forward, and data is often the foundation that sustains them. Monitoring and evaluation provides the evidence needed to make informed decisions, improve strategies, and demonstrate value to partners and funders. For aspiring professionals entering the field, mastering these skills means being able to demonstrate the importance of the work, the how and why of the work.

Dr. Kupolati's work with WBA shows how NGOs can fill critical gaps in health and social services by staying connected to the communities they serve. For early-career graduates in global health, her story offers practical insights into the values and skills needed in the field. Passion, communication, networking, and monitoring and evaluation are not just abstract qualities but essential tools for making a meaningful impact.