

“It prepared me to be the leader that I am becoming.”

A Conversation with Grace Mbaye, Marion Ngoya, and Sora Qalla Sora, Alumni

Ambika Samarthya-Howard and Francis Mureithi
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Sora Qalla Sora: My name is Sora Qalla Sora. I was among the first people who joined DDD (Digital Divide Data).

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When was that?

Sora Qalla: That was in 2011. Then we were the first people to join Kenyatta University through DDD, and then I left DDD back in February 2015.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Let me pass it to you.

Grace Mbaye: My name is Grace Mbaye. I joined DDD in April 2017. I got an opportunity to join the WSP program, which is the Work Study Program in early 2019, January. I graduated in 2023 with a Bachelor of Arts Education, Special Needs.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Amazing. Congratulations.

Grace Mbaye: Thank you.

Marion Ngoya: My name is Marion Ngoya. I joined Digital Divide Data, Kenya, in December 2013 and left in 2018. While at DDD, I was in the Work Study Program, where I was working as I went for my bachelor's degree at Kenyatta University. I did Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Literature and graduated in 2018 when I left DDD. Upon leaving DDD, I went to other ventures. I was employed by a company in the energy industry where I was the program coordinator until 2020. Before then, I was

doing some other projects on the side. I have been helping girls in my village to stay in school through menstrual health awareness and—

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Where is your village?

Marion Ngoya: Homa Bay County.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How far is that from Nairobi?

Marion Ngoya: Driving? Eight hours.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Is that where you grew up?

Marion Ngoya: Yes.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Then you moved to Nairobi, and now you live back in the village?

Marion Ngoya: Absolutely.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Did you just come here today for this?

Marion Ngoya: I came on Monday because I have other meetings. I have a position paper that I'm supposed to present in Washington, DC, later in the year, November. I'm around to do a lot of interviews with the Ireland Embassy. I'm also at the International College of Peace Studies. It's in Washington, DC.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's where you study now?

Marion Ngoya: We have a branch, the only branch in Africa that is in Karen (Nairobi). That's where I'm studying. I've graduated with one diploma there, but we continue. There are a lot of opportunities for their alumni.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: My understanding is that Digital Data Divide is much more than just a training program, that the job experience and the job immersion is really what makes a big difference. I'd love for you to talk a little bit about what led you to DDD, how you heard about it, what your life was like before DDD, and what your work experience was like.

Grace Mbaye: Thank you so much for that question. Before joining DDD, I cleared my high school in 2014. Way back in Kakamega County.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's a rural area or urban area?

Grace Mbaye: It's a rural area. Thereafter, I came to Nairobi in 2015 officially to just look for greener pastures as I wait to join college and further my studies. When I got to Nairobi, it was a bit difficult to secure an excellent job. I've held several menial jobs to earn a living. Hawking, I've been a domestic house manager. That's what I did for two and a half years. Then in early 2017, I heard about SHOFCO. SHOFCO led me, or rather, recommended me to DDD.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you tell me what SHOFCO is for somebody who doesn't know?

Grace Mbaye: Shining Hope for Communities. They also offer employability skills for young people from the underserved communities. Back then, it used to be a nine days program. You go, you are taught about job readiness skills, some skills that will help you get a job and retain one. Upon completion, Catherine (Gathura), who was by then the program's manager, recommended me to DDD. I came here for the interview, took the interview, and then I passed the interview. That's how my journey at DDD began in April 2017.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Then what was your job training at DDD? What did you do there?

Grace Mbaye: Back then, I worked as an associate and worked on a couple of projects. They were data entry projects, and they were off-site projects as well. I worked at NMG, National Media Group, NMK, National Museums of Kenya. When the two projects came to a close, we came back to the office, and I worked on a project called Family Search. It was a night shift project for about two years.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you say that you came to DDD, they mostly did job placement rather than training?

Grace Mbaye: It was a cocktail of both. At SHOFCO, they'll offer the training. Either you are placed internally or externally. For me, I was placed externally, which is DDD.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What makes DDD different from SHOFCO?

Grace Mbaye: I would say the content of the training that we have, because— let me just delve deeper. At DDD, we have a lot of things that happen. Besides what SHOFCO

offers, we also offer training at DDD here. I happen to be the training lead here at DDD, who is in charge of the training programs we offer.

We currently have our BEST training, which B stands for Business Employability, Soft and Technical Skills. Then once the BEST trainees graduate from the program, they transition to the associates now in the production floor where they get to work.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How long is the BEST training?

Grace Mbaye: It's two months, but that is about to change. Because we are transitioning and ensuring that our programs are very sustainable, and they also fit in the trends and in the job market currently. From our next financial year, we will be having the career connect session where it will be a program offering an opportunity of training to young people from the underserved communities, that will not change. However, in addition to that, before they transition to the production floor, we will have something called the Best Bootcamp, where we will be offering on project training. Once you get to the Best Bootcamp, you are now very ripe to transition to the production floor and work on available projects. However, for the people who are not a fit to be onboarded internally, we also help them seek outplacement opportunities outside. We have very many partners whom we are partnering with to ensure that that happens.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's amazing. What about you?

Sora Qalla: I joined DDD back in 2011.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Where are you from, and what were you doing before DDD?

Sora Qalla: It's called Mukuru. I was fresh from high school by then.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's in Nairobi?

Sora Qalla: Yes. It is one of the biggest slums in Nairobi. There's this day I went to a friend from one of the ministries, it is called HELB (Higher Education Loans Board). I was from high school, and I thought that if you just have a certificate, you can just go there and get admitted to any university. He was like, "No, we can't do that. When you get admission, that's when we can pay for your school fees." Then it was at that point that he told me that there is a company that is starting somewhere, and it helps people from slums or those places. You can work at the same time, they can take you to the school. Now the problem is that by then, I didn't have an ID, I was 17.

I had to go to upcountry because in Kenya, getting ID if you're a Cushite is a problem because they say that we are from the border. I had to travel to the upcountry to get an ID. I think it was 2011 April when the DDD started. I got an ID three months later, and then he told me that there's a HR person called Raydon, and he gave me his card. I came to her and she was like "Oh, he told me about you," and that's how I joined DDD.

Since we're the first people, the projects were mostly handwriting projects.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you first joined DDD the whole idea was that you were going to get paid to do work and also be in school at the same time?

Sora Qalla: DDD was designed to have six hours of working, you come from 7 am to 12 noon and then in the evening you go for classes. It was distance learning where we were joining classes online.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Where were you learning?

Sora Qalla: Kenyatta University. I was doing a Bachelor in Commerce.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Then, after you joined, how long did you do that for?

Sora Qalla: We didn't join immediately. We joined after one year. It was in 2012 September the first lot. By then, we were doing some projects like Ancestry, they were handwritten projects, and they were from the state. Most of them are like they scan military records from the 1890s and then we enter them into the system. What happened is that we were the first people also to start the night shift by then because most of the projects were from that end, so we had to do it over a time zone. That's how I joined DDD, and I was here for, I think, three years.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: At that time, did you finish your bachelor's degree?

Sora Qalla: No. What happened is when I left DDD, I was left with four semesters. You see, the problem is with online, it was that the other people were given a chance to do trimester, but for us, you only do two semesters

Grace Mbaye: I did three. I did tri-semester.

Sora Qalla: You did three? but for four hours.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Were you studying as well?

Grace Mbaye: Yes.

Sora Qalla: Online.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Where were you studying?

Grace Mbaye: Kenyatta University.

Marion: Kenyatta University.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You got your degree?

Grace Mbaye: Yes. I graduated in 2023. I'm an educator, so I pursued a Bachelor of Arts Education, Special Needs.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Is that what you do today?

Grace Mbaye: Not really. Not quite related, but I'm in training. They are quite correlated, but not directly.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: She got her degree. What happened to you?

Sora Qalla: I graduated in 2018.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Okay. You just took a little longer.

[laughter]

Sora Qalla: Yes. What happened when I left DDD, I joined a dance company.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You're a dancer?

Sora Qalla: Yeah. I've done quite a lot.

[laughter]

The reason I left DDD was because of the dance company. It was doing a little bit better than DDD. Now I had to sacrifice to leave DDD to that place because you'll have to practice from 8:00 to almost 5:00 in the evening. For the first year, they don't give you any job. You just go there so that they can see you have that endurance, consistency, and discipline.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Even now, you work full-time as a dancer?

Sora Qalla: Yes. When I left in 2015, I joined a company called ArtZone. I trained there for one year. My first job was in June 2016.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you look back on this, she's doing training and she got her degree while she was at DDD, and DDD helped her when she was jobless and unemployed in Nairobi. You're a dancer, and when you look back on it, are you like, "Why did I go to DDD?"

Sora Qalla: No. Actually, I told you I was raised by a single mother, and then in Africa, when you're done with your form four—

Grace Mbaye: You're an adult.

Sora Qalla: You're an adult. From where we came, from the university and everything, you should go find some job and support yourself and also support your family. DDD to me is everything because by the time I met the person who connected me to DDD, I was desperate. I didn't have anything, and I didn't even have any hope of going to university. Through DDD, I joined Kenyatta University and I did first year and second year. I'm here because of DDD, and currently I'm working in the banking industry.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Okay, so you're not dancing right now?

Sora Qalla: I'm dancing and just working. I'll tell you about dancing. Even when I was in DDD, I used to do mentorship in our area because people there are affected with the early child pregnancy for girls and then drug and substance abuse for teenagers. What I did during those times is I do mentorship through dance, and because I use dance to pay some parts of my university fees, I also say that even these kids can help their parents and pay their school with dance. I always believe that charity begins at home. If I can do something by myself, then I can even go and convince someone to come and help them. For me, I choose to first give them what I have for free. I've been in that for 12 years now.

Then I have a dance company that is called SQS, and we do several productions like photography, videography, and event performance. The reason why I started that is so that I can secure some opportunities for them. I can't say it is so sustainable, but at least it can give them something to help their parents and even buy something in school. Recently, I wanted to start a foundation or an NGO so that I can partner with several NGOs so that they can help. I learnt that not everyone of them is a dancer, and so I want to bring on board different people so that they can come and support them. I'm working, but in the evening, I always go to those places and do mentorship programs, teach them.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's amazing. There's like 16,000 graduates of this program because it's been around for 25 years, and every country office was asked to choose 12 to 14 people, so I knew your stories were going to be

amazing, but that is still phenomenal. We have to give time for you to dance at the end.

Marion Ngoya: He has to dance.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You're Grace, right?

Grace Mbaye: I'm Grace here.

Marion Ngoya: I'm Marion.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You didn't tell your whole story, right?

Marion Ngoya: No, I didn't talk about it before joining. Before joining Digital Divide Data, I sat for my KCSC in 2012.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You're from a rural area, eight hours?

Marion Ngoya: Yes, Homa Bay County, it's notorious.

[laughter]

A lot of people know it to be HIV, whatever, the bad side of history. I was born and bred in Homa Bay County. While there, I saw a lot of peers, or even people before me, go through challenges, social economic challenges. Poverty is so high there. I didn't stay with my parents through and through. I went to study in Kisumu, where my sister-- my sister got married very early at 18, but she finished her form four. I lived with her until I was done with high school. I think that was the turning point in my life because I saw life beyond the village.

Most of my friends stopped going to school in class five. I don't want to call their names. They might bump into this. In Kenya, there are students who are always number one, two, three, and people know them. My friends, the two of them, we were always number one, two, three, you have to find us there. I left them at class five when I went to Kisumu from class six to form four. Then, after that, I wanted to do something. In high school, I was a sponsored student. During holidays, I could come to Nairobi.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What does it mean to be a sponsored student?

Marion Ngoya: Sponsored student, it means someone else is offering to pay my school fees. I was an exceptional student. I was sponsored by Xavier Project. Right now it's called Cohere. Its headquarters is in the UK. After form four, even before the results were out, they enrolled us into computer college. I went to Zabibu Community College in Kibera in Olympic. We were so many, but when we did our exams after two months,

almost three months, I was number one in the whole college. Then the director, he's called Alfred, we are still in very good contact, he took our papers to Digital Divide Data after meeting Raydon in one of these conferences.

When he came back, he was like, "You guys really did well. You deserve more opportunities." Close to April 2013, he recommended us for DDD, but I was never called. We were three, one boy and two young girls. We were not yet 18. When that happened, I didn't have a phone. My friend is called Lydia, she's in Europe, but she was called. She came for the interview and started working. A month later, she went to Calvince. Calvince was the social impact coordinator. He's a former social impact coordinator and told Calvin that, "We were three of us, and I can only see one person. I'm the only one here. Where's Marion? Why didn't you call her, yet she was the number one in our college?"

Then he was like, "She didn't write any phone number down. How can I call her?" [laughs] That's why I was never called for the interview. After that, Lidya came home and told me, because we were living together, she came home and told me, "You also had a chance." I went and asked, and I was told, "You were not called because you didn't write a phone number." Then Calvince was able to call me for the interview. They were so kind. He was able to call me for the interview through Lydia. Then I came to the interview. I started working four months after Lydia started. It was different because I came with a waiting card for my ID. You understand? [laughs] I came with the waiting card.

I went and looked for an ID. They told me they have to wait until I'm 18. I came with the waiting card and I was able to start working. I started working on the 8th of December, 2013. I don't know how it happened, but I was introduced to Ancestry a little bit, and I told them, "I don't like this project. It's not my thing." [chuckles] Then they took me for another project. Usually, I speak up, but in a very respectful manner. [chuckles] I talked to them, and then they took me to Alpha team, Ellen Odumbe's team. Then I was able to do a totally different project, daily monitoring, and red flag project.

What we were doing is online research, writing that research, and then putting the data where it's supposed to be. It was really interesting for me because I really wanted to be a journalist then. [chuckles] The project was really good. I did the project alongside others-- can I call it co-curricular activities I was doing at DDD, because while here, I was going to school. After one year, I started going to school in 2015, January, and I was able to be amongst the associates who came up with the Young Professional Club.

Grace Mbaye: I was also part of the team. We share a lot of things in common.

Marion Ngoya: Exactly.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You started the Young Professional Club?

Marion Ngoya: Yes, I was the organizing secretary.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's here at DDD?

Grace Mbaye: Yes.

Marion Ngoya: Back in 2016, right? 2016, 2017.

Grace Mbaye: Yes.

Marion Ngoya: Then, apart from that, we could go for mentorship. We mentored new associates and then, apart from that, outside the office, we used to visit children's homes and support people in our community, however much we could. We were not rich, but with the little that we could. That is how I got into DDD, and it really transformed my life. Usually, when I came in, I was just coming to work and then going back home, and then Calvince told me, "You are better than this. You can do so much more. You cannot just work and go back home."

That's why I got myself into the leadership positions and doing a lot of things. Apart from DDD being the stepping stone that we've always known it to be, it prepared me to be the leader that I am becoming because I'm not yet where I want to be. [chuckles] I'm still becoming.

Francis Mureithi: What did you learn here, and how did it shape your path?

Marion Ngoya: I can start. What I learned here is that you should always be ready to help someone, where they come from, their background, without judging them. It also shaped my leadership skills, where I listen more than talk.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you said right now that you learned how to listen rather than talk, that's not something someone can teach you in a book. How did DDD help you learn that?

Marion Ngoya: We were employed as teenagers, graduating from being teenagers like 18, 19, up to, I think, 24. The oldest was around 24. Having young people in such an environment, and then getting paid at such a young age in Kenya, comes with a lot of challenges. It needs someone to be able to have self-control and learn from the older people how to present themselves in a corporate world.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I think what Francis was asking is, did you learn that from a class?

Marion Ngoya: No.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did DDD teach you that?

Marion Ngoya: We had mentors. For example, Calvince.

Francis Mureithi: Oh, you're assigned a mentor?

Marion Ngoya: No. It's [up to] you to recognize whom you can speak to freely. I had one. The first manager was really good. She's in the US. She was called Hellen Odumbe. I started learning this when I started working, and then I became sick on my, I think, third day. Even the people with whom we were employed thought that I was not going to come back.

She was so graceful with me and just told me, "Don't worry. This is just work. It's not like you're in a prison or something. Just take it easy, and you'll be able to learn all this through the training and everything. We'll walk with you. We are here for you." By that, I was reassured that I'm in the right place and I'll be able to mold myself from time to time.

Employing someone from high school is really—it's a risk. It was a risk that they took on us, and it is my responsibility to see where I fit in. In case I need something tangible from this program, I have to position myself in a certain manner, and this one you cannot learn in school. Character is character.

Grace Mbaye: I think just adding what she said, and maybe I'll be very comprehensive in my explanation so that you can also just learn what's happening beyond what happened earlier on. Now I'll start from my experience. I strongly believe that our backgrounds have also shaped who we are. Just coming from an underserved community with all the challenges you go through, and you transition to a place where people are helping you, you would also want to give back and give them a reason to believe that they gave you an opportunity. That's at least one for me.

Number two, I guess coming from SHOFCO, the nine-day employability skills, we learned workplace etiquette, how do you interact with people. The very basic job readiness skills that you need to have.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Here or at SHOFCO?

Grace Mbaye: At SHOFCO. Accountability, that was one. Then, coming to DDD and being assigned even in off-site projects, that is even a bigger risk. Somebody entrusting you with a project at NMG is a big thing. Even to you, you have to just see that there is something in me that people are seeing.

Ann Mikia: What is the meaning of NMG?

Grace Mbaye: Oh, National Media Group. Then during our time, because Marion and Sora came in earlier than I did, during our times, there was also an extra sacrifice that we were required to make beyond peer coaching and mentors, because somebody would want to mentor you, but the interest has to come from you. Beyond that, we used to have classes after working.

I think it was also a way of just them trying to see if we can commit and how far we are willing to give in. We used to go and take classes that, later on, grew to become the BEST Program. Now the difference is, after our five working hours, if you are in the shift from 7:30 to 3:50, then from around 4:00 to 6:00, you are expected to commit to and attend a class.

Now that class, we were taught a lot of things, just a blend of business skills, basic financial literacy, how do you manage your money, budgeting, and so forth, employability, CV writing, and interview coaching, because beyond DDD, people also want to just get right footing if they transition. If Sora got an opportunity, what would you do when you get greener pastures?

Then, technical skills like data entry, we were being encouraged to improve on our typing. I'll gladly say that most of us, including myself, strongly believe I can type 60 words per minute and above. It's because of the practice and the challenges that were placed there before us.

Now when DDD transitioned to machine learning in 2018, we were also well equipped with skills like data annotation, LiDAR mapping, text labeling, image labeling, and so forth. I know maybe Marion and Sora are a bit surprised.

Marion Ngoya: I have a little knowledge of that.

Grace Mbaye: Of that. Those are some of the programs that helped us. There's also the WSP program. Now remember, and I'm talking as a current DDD employee. At DDD, there are many programs that

should help you grow. Work-Study Program. When you come from the BEST Training, you will transition to becoming an associate. When you become an associate after some months or a year, when we are gauging you and we are seeing you, we can entrust you with a scholarship. These days, they are offering fully diploma-sponsored scholarships. They are not degrees anymore. It is called the Work-Study Program.

From BEST, you will transition to a Work-Study Program where you do your diploma for two and a half years. We expect you, by the time you finish your diploma, you're well ripe to go out there and look for an opportunity so that we can leave space for other people to come in. During this time, you'll still interact with other people.

Currently, we have a program called the ACP program, Associate Credential Program. You get to learn several things. We term it as an upskilling program beyond just DDD because we do not want people to be bitter. You're coming to work, you just work, and you go home. These days, there are a lot of trends. We are riding the wave of the digital era. A lot of things are happening, AI and machine learning. You also get to upskill internally. Yes, you are in the Work-Study Program. There is also the ACP program, where you can learn one or two things.

Then, after you become an associate, now talking from my end because I started off as an associate, we also have internal promotions where you can leverage on to grow your career path. Personally, DDD has shaped me into the person I am today. Starting as an associate, I later joined the Social Impact later in 2020 as a Social Impact intern. That came as a result of the interest that I have in giving back to society.

Like Marion mentioned, the CSR activities, the corporate social responsibility, will go back to the community and give back. As a result, I felt like this would be something that I would love to explore. Then, when I did the internship, later on, there was an open opportunity, and I opted to take it. Over the years, from a Social Impact intern, I became a trainer, and from a trainer, I'm now the training lead. The L&D [Learning and Development] function was open, and I'm currently the person who is leading it.

I've gotten to grow here. I would love to ascribe that not only to the training programs we have, it's also to the mentors that have shaped me into who I am. We have very interesting leaders internally and even externally. I'd love to give a special shout-out. Please allow me to do this to Calvince Odemba. I know everybody speaks about him, and he's a good person who has a heart for young people. He heavily invests in them. For training, I'd also love to give a shout-out to Rael Awuor. She's the one who mentored me to the person I am today. Also, our VP, Judith Obonyo, is a strong believer in allowing people to be promoted internally and grow.

Lastly, I'll also not forget to give a shout-out to our current CPO, our Chief People Operations Officer, Sopheap. She's based in Cambodia, but she's done a very good job of ensuring that we are growing every day. Oh, lastly, our People Operations Manager Stacy. Thank you also to all of you for just believing in us.

Marion Ngoya: It changed gradually, right?

Grace Mbaye: Yes. The mentors, your interests, the available programs, but then at the end of the day, it is your interest.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I was curious about how DDD sets Kenya apart from other countries. Did it make a national impact?

Grace Mbaye: I think first, DDD being a BPO, a business processing outsourcing organization, I know we have other people who do something similar to what we do, but I'd love to address the impact side of it. You're not just coming to work. There's life beyond work.

People are concerned about you growing all-round to become a person who can fit in the society. Beyond work, we are also encouraged to go back to give back to society. I'm sure all of us have talked about this. I'm also passionate about mentorship. I have an organization called Bora Mentors Pool, and we go to high schools out there and just mentor young people from the underserved communities. You can learn that aspect. I'm sure any alumni from DDD, beyond them just talking about work and how DDD has heavily transformed their lives, you will hear an aspect of mentorship. We are also encouraged to go back to society and give what we feel we can give as well.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: DDD is just celebrating 25 years. If you could tell DDD one thing to do differently in the next 25.

Sora Qalla: I think they should partner with other companies out there so that at least when these people are out of here—like last year, I was doing a course online called ALX. I was doing software engineering. What ALX does is that after you're done with their courses, they connect you with other companies. They act as a stepping stone to industries. What I can suggest with DDD is also that, apart from just people being in DDD, they can also partner with other companies, so that they can be a recommendation to other companies.

I think that could help because if they're helping so many students from high school, then that means they should care about where these people will end up after DDD. After all, they can't have all of them as their employees.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Marion, what about you?

Marion Ngoya: By the way, did I tell you what I did after I left DDD? I'm a co-founder of an organization called Gweth Foundation. Gweth is a Luo word meaning blessing. We bless vulnerable girls.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I thought you were telling me that you were studying at the International Peace School.

Marion Ngoya: That is on the side. I do a lot of things. I have an organization that is helping vulnerable girls in the village to stay in school. We have menstrual health awareness- distribution of sanitary pads, digital literacy. Last year, we partnered with the BEST Program, and I brought some people from the village to study to be trained. Also, I'm a social entrepreneur. I make clothes. [laughs]

There are people in our society who didn't go to college, high school, whatever, but they have a special eye for art. I have a company called Lingo Styles. It's based in Nairobi, and we make Afrocentric clothing and even for the modern man and woman. We employ young women and men.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Where do you sell your clothes?

Marion Ngoya: Online in Kenya. Some of them I ship worldwide using DHL. Online, Instagram, Facebook, and at the shop as well. That is a passion that I had when I was still young. I just started during COVID by making masks, and got very good money to even invest back in the business. For my charity organization, right now, as we speak, we have taken over 100 students enrolled in high school, fully funded both boarding items and school fees. A lot of people are transitioning into high school. We work with teen moms, those who dropped out of school, and all that. Right now, we have introduced digital literacy where even those who've graduated from high school can learn, and then they transition to very serious companies like Digital Divide Data. We also have peer mentorship. A lot of girls get pregnant in Homa Bay. It's notorious. How can we help them?

My first cohort is joining the university this year in September. I'm so proud of them. We started with them in 2020. In 2021, they were in form one. We assimilate them into the system, and they are now the peer counselors. We go to schools, we talk to boys, boda boda people, the community, local stakeholders, policymakers, and try to make period poverty something that can be discussed. That's something that we can end.

So many people didn't believe that we could go to school. Right now, I've been enrolled at Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida, for my master's. I'm studying a Master of Arts in Leadership/Entrepreneurship. Imagine, from the villages of Homa Bay, where no one knows you, to being in the US like that. It means there is a lot of potential in everyone, and they should continue to give opportunities. I think the diploma-- Grace, why did you scrap off the bachelor's?

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What's one thing that they could do differently?

Marion Ngoya: One thing that they could do differently is to invest in the young people, not only in the urban area, because you have to come from the village, so that they can know you exist. Why not partner with Gweth so that we can bring more people from the village to learn about machine learning? We have a lot of very brilliant minds in the village, but they don't know where to get these opportunities. We try, but the number is too high.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What can they do to get to the village?

Marion Ngoya: Collaborating with us. Also, sometimes visit there to see first-hand experiences, and we can help with that. Also, have leadership training for even the associates. I know you have those, maybe you're already doing it, but bring experts who are still associates can learn from, and then they have mentors even outside the company.

Also, the transit process, the exit process, how is it? I'm the chairperson/president of the alumni, and I get a lot of challenges through that group because people come to me, they don't have job employment opportunities. We graduated with them, but they don't have chances out there.

Just like Sora said, can we build a bridge if someone steps out of DDD, they still can have—like throwing in a wing so that they can fly out there. No one is going to tell you, you can take time to learn to mold yourself. No. It is like, "You applied for this job. You have to do it."

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I'm going to pass it to her to answer that same question, and then I think we can close.

Grace Mbaye: Well, for me, I just have one thing. I feel like DDD has been doing quite a lot over the years. It's something I've just been thinking about, and it's good that it came up here. From the DDD alumni as well, what can we also do back to DDD? I think

that is a conversation that we can start having. There are many opportunities that we can also leverage to come and give back to DDD now.

I love that Marion talked about how we can even have mentors for the BEST programs (Business, Employability, Soft and Technical Skills.) How well can we also ensure that we're giving and pouring back to DDD? That is a conversation that we can also start having. I know there are many, so we can think about something.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thank you, all of you, for your time.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer. She strategizes on communications, metrics, impact, product and technology, leveraging platforms for the network and creating cool content. She also leads the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of SJN that uses targeted research and analysis to identify and interrogate what's working and what's not in a particular sector or field. She has an MFA from Columbia's film program and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Prism.

Francis Mureithi is the co-founder of Africa Solutions Media Hub, a nonprofit media organization advancing solutions journalism in Kenya through training, mentorship, and publishing impact-driven SoJo stories in newsrooms and communities. With over 16 years of experience in newsroom leadership and digital transformation, Francis currently serves as Digital Editor at Radio Africa Group, where he has led the shift from traditional journalism to agile, audience-focused digital content strategies. He is also a member of the Oxford Climate Journalism Network, a programme of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, which enhances global climate reporting. He holds a Master of Arts in Digital Journalism from Aga Khan University, a Master of Arts in International Conflict Management from the University of Nairobi, and a Bachelor of Arts in Communication and Media from Moi University.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*