



## The Disease Detective: Dr. Nellie Wadonda-Kabondo's Path to Chief of Epidemiology, Surveillance, and Strategic Information Branch for CDC Malawi

By: Whitney Hall, Administration & Communications Specialist

**How does a mentor make a long-term impact? Just ask Dr. Nellie Wadonda-Kabondo, Chief of Epidemiology, Surveillance and Strategic Information Branch for CDC Malawi and current Mentor for the PHI/CDC Global Health Fellowship Program.** Growing up in rural Malawi, Dr. Nellie Wadonda-Kabondo couldn't have imagined how much her life would change as a university student. Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo attended a rural primary and secondary school and excelled as a student. This commitment to her education paid off, and she was selected to attend the University of Malawi in Zomba, where she received a Bachelor of Science in Demography and Computer Sciences. Eager to explore job opportunities, Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo held a 3 month internship during the summer break of the 3rd year of her program, working in Community Health Sciences Unit of the Ministry of Health for a family planning program. This initial work in public health generated a palpable excitement to learn the causes and study the distribution of diseases. Conducting epidemiological investigations felt like **"being a disease detective"**.

After completing her university studies, Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo worked as a Research Assistant before being hired on full time by the Ministry of Health, located in Malawi's capital city of Lilongwe. It was there that she helped create the Epidemiology Unit, which the Ministry of Health was actively recruiting staff for. A year and a half later, it was her boss and former mentor, Mr. Alan Macheso, who saw an advertisement in the local paper calling for proposals to be considered for a scholarship funded by the World Health Organization to study Epidemiology at a Master's program. With only 10 days left to submit a proposal, Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo worried about the tight window of time, and observed several colleagues and friends not submitting a proposal for that very reason. Not wanting to disappoint her boss who had been so encouraging of her and her proposal, Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo applied and was awarded a scholarship in 1998 and was offered a place to pursue her Masters Degree in Epidemiology at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

### LIFE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Life in London was hectic and fast paced. Since the program was only 1 year and there were so many assignments to be completed, all of Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo's free time was spent studying. Along with the cultural adjustment, it seemed that even time moved by differently.

Upon completion of her Master's, Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo looked for a visa that would allow her to travel in the United Kingdom for 3 months. What



she found instead, was another advertisement. This time, the opportunity was for a PhD program in Epidemiology in Southwest England, in the city of Bristol. Instead of staying in the UK for 3 more months, Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo would stay for an additional 5 years.

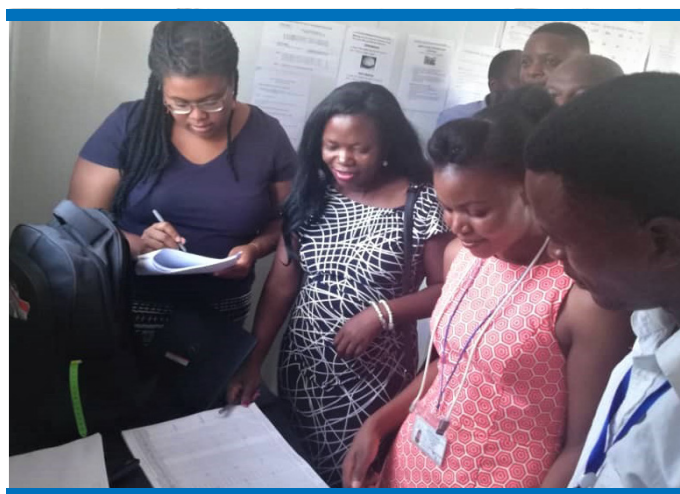


Whereas London was fast paced and Malawi was slower, life in Bristol fell right in between the two. The people were welcoming and Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo found a community, as she befriended the late Dr. Michael Harper who she had previously met in London where they studied an Epidemiology course together. His family in Bristol would become her family, and his friends would become her friends. During school, Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo began working part-time on short term projects with Dr. Annie Reeler, who worked for Axios International.

### **BUILDING A PROFESSIONAL NETWORK:**

Now officially a Doctor of Public Health, Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo moved to Uganda, where she worked with Axios International full time, before welcoming a baby with her now ex-husband. After many years away, she returned home to Malawi with her newly expanded family, and in 2006, she began working with Howard University Technical Assistance Project in Lilongwe, funded by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and seconded to the Ministry of Health in the same Epidemiology Department which she previously helped to establish. While at the Ministry of Health, Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo

led the implementation of HIV surveillance activities including HIV prevalence studies, HIV incidence studies and HIV drug resistance studies alongside supporting implementation of integrated disease surveillance activities. Her work at the Ministry made her recognized as a leader in HIV Epidemiology in Malawi. Fast forward 5 years, and CDC was hiring for an Epidemiologist. Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo applied and was offered the position, and was eventually promoted to her current position of Chief of Epidemiology, Surveillance and Strategic Information Branch in 2014.



*Conducting Field Supervision*

### **BECOMING A MENTOR:**

As a current supervisor to several staff members and a mentor to two PHI/CDC Global Health Fellows, Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo has learned to wear many hats. This included leading monitoring and evaluation efforts when she first started with CDC. As the team has grown, so has her leadership role, with team leads serving as her direct reports.

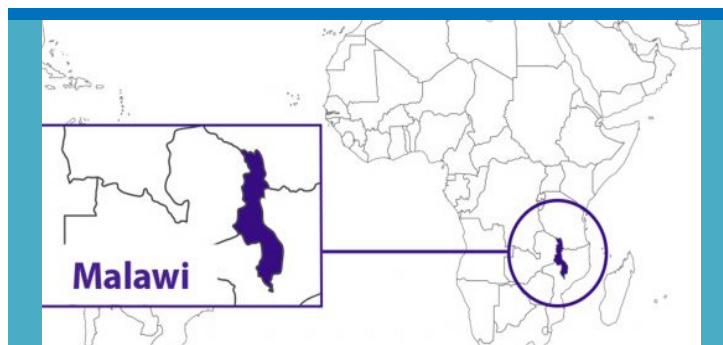
Fellows have played a key role in supporting both Epidemiology and Surveillance efforts since 2016, often traveling frequently in country for site visits. As a mentor, Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo enjoys seeing fellows excitement grow and their hands-on training and technical skills develop further in the field. One of her previous fellows, Danielle Payne, is now a Contractor for CDC Malawi.

## ADVICE FOR FELLOWS & MENTORS:

In looking ahead, Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo's central piece of advice for future fellows is that to be successful, **“the key is flexibility from the mentor side and the fellow side.”** Fellows often come in with an idea of what their role will be, and realize that the opportunity presents itself to be given more responsibility. In the case of CDC Malawi, the fellowship has provided the opportunity to fellows to travel more often than staff, and **fellows “are really valued by so many programs,”** not just by their mentors. Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo gives fellows autonomy, empowering them to make recommendations for improvements, and offering them feedback.

Looking back at the strong mentors in her life, she notes she has been lucky to have several kind bosses. A mentor who stands out is Mr. Alan Macheso, who she reported to when she first joined the Ministry of Health. Mr Macheso was the Head of the Malaria Department, but also acted as the Head of the newly established Epidemiology Department, where they had to start from scratch to create policies and documentation systems. Her boss worked alongside the team, laying the groundwork for the department. He held a Master's Degree in Epidemiology and encouraged all his staff to obtain the same. He is someone Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo always remembers through all of her achievements. Dr. Annie Reeler is another mentor who though she just worked with initially for 3 months on a short survey, believed in her abilities and they developed a long-lasting professional relationship. At CDC, Dr. Sundeep Gupta is a mentor who stands out by giving her the

opportunity to develop her leadership skills and help her carry out implementation plans. **Dr. Wadonda-Kabondo follows in the footsteps of her own stand-out mentors, guiding and supporting fellows along their path in public health.**



Map courtesy of CDC Malawi.

### ABOUT MALAWI:

Malawi is located in southeastern Africa and home to approximately 18.6 million people. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention established an in country office in Lilongwe in 2001. HIV/AIDS, malaria, lower respiratory infections, tuberculosis and diarrheal diseases are currently the top five most pressing public health challenges in Malawi. Under the leadership of Dr. Andrew Auld, CDC has achieved several successful initiatives, including the construction of “64 pre-fabricated clinics in Lilongwe and Blantyre, the districts hardest hit by the HIV epidemic” along with the management of “approximately 70% of patients on antiretroviral therapy (ART) through the CDC-supported electronic medical record system as of April 2019” (CDC Malawi, 2019). For more information about CDC's work in Malawi, visit their website: [cdc.gov/globalhealth/countries/malawi](http://cdc.gov/globalhealth/countries/malawi).

Adapted from the CDC Malawi's website.

**The PHI/CDC Global Health Fellowship Program is a U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-funded program that offers recent global public health graduates from Council on Education in Public Health accredited schools and programs the exciting opportunity to participate in yearlong fellowships with guidance from leading global health experts from the CDC. Fellows work on the front lines of global health while developing the technical and professional skills needed to make meaningful contributions to today's global health challenges. For more information about the fellowship, visit [phi-cdcfellows.org](http://phi-cdcfellows.org).**

**Special thanks to Dr. Nellie Wadonda-Kabondo of CDC Malawi who made this article possible.**