



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

Peace Kawomera Cooperative Society CC

***Faiths/Traditions Represented:* Jews, Muslims & Christians**

***Location of CC:* Namabwa village, Namanyonyi Sub County, Mbale district**

***Key Areas of Focus:* Coffee, Vanilla, Cocoa Farming, Environmental Conservation, Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SACCOs) etc**

***Key Languages:* English Lugisu, Lugwere, Lusoga, Lunyole, Luteso, Luganda**

Summary

Peace Kawomera Cooperative Society CC is located in Uganda and works with Jewish, Muslim, and Christian farmers from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The Eastern part of Uganda enjoys relatively amicable relations between different faith communities, and Peace Kawomera is working hard to ensure that those relations are deepened and sustained. The group cooperatively runs a coffee growing co-op where they train, employ, and buy coffee from community members of all different faiths. In addition to providing economic stability, they conduct trainings on interfaith dialogue, and encourage community members to participate in each other's traditions.

1. Can you please help me understand the current religious/cultural/political contexts in the area where your CC is working?

The religious situation is currently fair as upon our inception in 2004, we have been striving to build good relations among people of different religions including the Seventh Day Adventists (SDA), Pentecostals, Jews, Malachi, Muslims and others. For example as we talk now, our community has lost quite a number of residents in the Juba bus accident which claimed over fifty nationals; but we notice that community members are jointly organizing the funeral arrangements during this trying time.

On the side of culture, almost all cultures of the Bantu speaking people converge in this region. This includes the *Banyoli*, *Bagisu*, *Bagweri*, *Baganda* and others, thus the different cultures here are celebrated. For example you will find that almost all the peoples here are able to fairly speak all the languages which helps them to relate better. So in such an environment, cultural differences are minimized by celebrating common values and practices together in order to prevent eruption of conflict. For instance, it is a tradition for everybody interested to participate in the cultural dances that are often organized by the different peoples of this region. You will be surprised to find non Bagisu participating in the *Kadodi dance*, non Baganda in a *Kiganda dance*, the *Efumbo dance* of the Banyoli,



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Enswezi dance of Basoga and the trend continues. Such diversity is what makes our region notably unique with tolerance and accommodation of each other.

Talking in the political sense, the Jews in this area are the minority as seen from the availability of approximately 100 mosques, 60 churches and about 3 synagogues for the Jews. However, if it were numbers to determine the political fate, the Jews would not be considered for electoral positions. For example, as a Jew, I was elected on the local council I (village level) for a term of 5 years yet I come from the minority religion. During political elections, we usually sit as people of different religions and parties to agree on one candidate.

2) Why is interfaith/intercultural bridge building needed where your CC is working?

As seen above, the region is multicultural and heterogeneous in the religious sense. Such an environment warrants regular interactions to address any differences that are often typical in a heterogeneous society. If not addressed before hand, such cultural and religious differences can be potential avenues for conflict.

3) Can you please briefly describe the main activities or programs your CC is doing this year?

This year our efforts are geared towards strengthening relations among religions through community dialogues, conducting sensitization/training of members to produce quality coffee in order to secure the international market, as well as the construction of solar dryers.

4) Between which specific religions or cultures are bridges being built?

We are currently working together as Jews, Muslims and Christians, with Muslims being the majority and Jews the minority in the area. There are also the indigenous traditions of the Malachi (locally known as *Abamalachi*) with whom we have had minimal engagements. The recently conducted national census revealed their attempts to boycott it on the grounds that their religious values have no room for the use of modern science and technology. With advance planning, we hope to organize sensitizations with this faction to open up community dialogue about the relationship between religion and technology.

5. Please explain the method or strategy that your CC uses to bring together people of different cultures and faiths that would otherwise not interact or cooperate with each other.

In the event of celebrating our different cultures and traditions, we fully participate as members and not simply becoming onlookers as people are celebrating the diversity in the region. As shared above, in this area you will find everybody participating in the different dances organized on the streets and other public gatherings without considering the fact that they may be foreign or not their native dances.



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Whenever we buy coffee from the community members we don't discriminate on anyone. We buy from everyone who meets our standards of quality coffee to help us compete favorably on the international market. And whoever sells us coffee is paid in an equal measure of what they brought for sale, not looking at their religious or cultural background.

Even in-house during our board elections we ensure fair representation of all the religions and cultures of our members to have an equitable discharge of business and related programs.

We also support each other during trying times such as burial or funeral ceremonies. For example, recently we lost a Jew who had to be buried on a Saturday, which is their day of rest, and out of respect for the Jewish tradition, people had to wait until the sunset to bury and volunteered to dig the grave on the Jews' behalf.

6. Given the current contexts, you described, what does your CC hope to achieve?

Our efforts are all geared towards contributing to peace and cooperation among people of different religious and cultural backgrounds. We want to be a model to the entire world as God yearns to see his people living in peace with everybody.

7. How do you see your CC's work improving cooperation among people of different traditions?

Wherever our coffee goes, it carries the message of peace which makes our consumers always want to associate with our story because our brand has different religious symbols which preach about co-existence and diversity. As members we usually support each other during grieving times and celebrate joy and happiness as a family. In the process, the community is able to emulate our ways of living, a practice which was rare before our intervention.

We also report about an initiative which has just been started to support each other in the construction of religious or spiritual centers such as mosques, churches, synagogues and one case in point is of one church which donated an equivalent of \$400 towards the construction of a mosque.

8. How is the work of your CC helping to prevent religiously inspired violence or transforming conflicts? (as this in areas with open conflicts)

At the moment we do not have marked conflicts that are religiously inspired.

9. What are some indicators / observations you see that relations are improving between people of different faiths/cultures in the area where your CC works?

As an area which is considered the hub of almost all the Bantu speaking cultures in the Eastern part of Uganda, one would only expect conflicts resulting from the cultural mix. On the contrary, people in this area put aside their cultural and religious differences to cooperate on social causes, in for instance funeral ceremonies, festivities, traditional



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dances, elections and others. The move for interreligious support as seen in the construction of worship or spiritual centers is one good indicator of relations improving between the people. Our coffee business for one attracts everybody in need of an income and this accommodates all as we all work for survival.

10. Do you have a specific short story you can share about your work that might inspire other CCs or teach us a lesson about interfaith?

Recently, as a Jew I was surprised with an invitation to attend a religious talk hosted in one of the mosques given by an American evangelist. His message urged people to peace and non violence and as a Jew I found this more humbling to be invited in a mosque and to learn more about Islam as a peace striving faith contrary to what is purported by the extremists who are tearing the world apart with their negative dogmas.

11. How is your CC's work helping to achieve the mission or URI?

We have a shared vision of peace building realized through our programs in environmental conservation, interfaith cooperation, promotion of diversity through our coffee and many others.

12. Within your CC, you have members from different faiths/cultural traditions. How would you describe cooperation between these members? What are the challenges?

When you visit our demonstration site, you will find people of different background joined together for the coffee export business. And since everyone desires to earn a living, it's natural that they get on board. As people work in the fields, you notice members reminding themselves about honoring the prayer days and hours for the sake of the Muslims.

13. How is being part of URI helping your CC to achieve its goals?

As we set out, we didn't know that there are other organizations which share the same vision of peace building but we came across URI not in Uganda but in San Francisco, and from that encounter we became brothers and sisters and we now know we don't stand alone. In effect, the continued support has been extended to us to push the peace-building vision forward as seen in the about 1,000 tree seedlings that we received from URI which enabled us to shelter the coffee, which thrives better in tree shades. This is notwithstanding the local and international platforms created for us to network and collaborate with other individuals from other CCs and the global support office among others.

14. How can URI better support your CC in reaching its goals?

Two areas are critical for us currently: a) More afforestation/tree restocking as our coffee thrives well under tree shades; and b) Improving the Quality of exported coffee, and we are currently constructing solar dryers. We also call upon URI for the continued promotion of our work through the global platforms; to provide more technical support in conflict prevention and resolution using the interfaith approach, support for environmental conservation and management to address the wide tree cutting.



The Peace Kawomera coffee fields (Left) and the founder, JJ Keki (Right) taking URI visitors around the fields





The CC Liaison Officer URI-GL, May Nakyejwe (right) with Peace Kawomera staff appreciating the religious symbols on the sign post (top) and Below are the coffee berries ready for drying

Note: Pictures taken from mobile phone