



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

Vision Young Mothers

Faiths /Traditions Represented: Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional

Location of CC: Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya

Key Areas of Focus: Garbage collection, peace rallies, economic empowerment (through beadwork and hairdressing), family planning and HIV/AIDS awareness, gender-based violence rescue.

Summary:

Vision Young Mothers (VYM) CC works in the impoverished community of Kibera within Nairobi, Kenya. Their membership consists of over sixty Muslim and Christian women from various ethnic groups. Kibera has historically been a hotbed for political and religious violence, but thanks to the efforts of VYM and other peace-building organizations, the community has been more peaceful and cooperative. The members of VYM act as mentors and ambassadors for interfaith peace in their communities by offering mentorship and presentations in schools to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS and family planning. They also focus on building strong relationships within the group through economic empowerment programs and by encouraging members to participate in each other's religious events and traditions.

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

In Kibera, there exists a silent rivalry between various ethnic groups that reside here namely: Luo, Kikuyu, Nubi, Kisii and other minorities. Relations between political parties are not as good because this is an opposition zone whereby deep in some areas such as Kamukunji, no other political party can hold meetings and political rallies at any time. This gets worse during election periods where ethnic groups are forced to side with politicians from their ethnic groups. The situation is however changing owing to the various peace-building initiatives undertaken by various non-governmental and community based organizations. Following incidents of youth radicalization in other parts of Kenya, Kibera was not affected due to the measures taken by significant Muslim scholars to hold forums and preach messages of co-existence. Interfaith relations between Christians and Muslims in Kibera are good as it is mostly based on cooperation.



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

It is more than necessary because Kibera is a known spot for violence during election periods. An underlying problem is that of land ownership that has often been portrayed as a Christian - Muslim conflict and so to deconstruct that, there is a need to re-build relationships and lobby the government to issue title deeds. This can be done through joint initiatives because residents here are faced with the similar challenges associated with poverty regardless of their religion and ethnic affiliations.

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

We plan to continue with our usual activities of table banking (community micro-finance) amongst our 60 members and visit schools to mentor young people.

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

We work with are Muslims and Christians who hail from different ethnic groups such as Kamba, Luo, Nubi, Kalenjin, Kisii and Kikuyu.

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.*

To bring people from different ethnic groups together – in this case women who are mostly semi-illiterate--is not an easy task and so we normally ask them to use Kiswahili as the common language of communication. This helps to neutralize the situation and promote equality. We then try to understand why they decided to join Vision Young Mothers in the first place and this becomes the bottom line for all their actions - about which we constantly remind them. As they get along and know each other, ties develop and most of them develop friendship. Besides work, we also encourage joint private activities such as inviting each other to family ceremonies such as birthday parties, weddings and funerals.

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

Our hope is to completely shun all forms of hatred by bringing on board as diverse groups as possible to engage in common activities for their own benefit. The long- term goal is to have a peaceful Kibera where all residents work together to fight the common enemy: poverty.

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

We do that through engagement in joint group activities that encourage cooperation such as garbage collection, peace walks and rallies, table banking etc.



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8. How is the work of your CC helping to prevent religiously inspired violence or transforming conflicts?

We do this by lobbying and encouraging our members to attend inter-religious dialogue in forums such as “muhathara” (Islamic dialogue forum) where issues affecting the people are analyzed with the aim of finding viable solutions to problems. Our belief is that all religions promote peace and this can be used for the benefit of the society as a whole. Increased incidents of extremism and violence is a huge threat to the whole country but Kibera has not been affected because our religious leaders faced the issue head-on and discussed them in their forums. Following that, the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Kibera has been strengthened and so we know that our common enemy is the one who incites against other religious groups. Thank God for this - in spite of our other problems, we live in peace with each other and this is what we constantly remind our members.

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?

We have seen young women and girls who would otherwise not be interested in education at all, starting to develop interest in pursuing short-courses such as tailoring for their economic gain. Through our members’ outreach, we have observed a change of trend whereby young women who were previously involved in prostitution setting up small businesses as alternative sources of income. Also, through our mentorship programmes in schools, the number of young mothers has reduced significantly hence a sign that young people are beginning to perceive life differently.

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?

Yes, sometime around 2008, our founder Aziza, who is Muslim, lost a number of her relatives due to illness such that most of her family’s friends concluded the cause to have been as a result of witchcraft. People began gossiping and keeping away from them. During the whole period, when she most needed her family friends, it was her Christian friends from VYM that stood by her and even went to the extent of paying for her diploma course at Nairobi University given that she had dropped out of school to support her family during the tragedy. Aziza always shares this experience and teaches that one must love all human beings equally because the unexpected can happen and those that we place high hopes in can let us down.

11. How is your CC’s work helping to achieve the mission or URI? (Interfaith bridge-building)

We help achieve the mission of URI by incorporating different religious and cultural groups in our work. Respect for diversity through joint activities and attending of private ceremonies is part and parcel of us.



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

We had this challenge at the beginning where stereotyping was the norm but as we moved along, things became easier and relationships among our members is now very good. Challenges still exist when new unexposed members come in and also when meeting new people during our work and so it takes a little bit of time before they get used to how things work. In worse cases, we have had situations where some people have even dropped out. Our members attend each other's ceremonies and events as a sign of cooperation and even dress in each other's religious clothing — making it hard to identify us - unless one asks for their names. This cooperation is important because we cannot reach out to others without having the conviction of love for all amongst ourselves.

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

We are happy to be part of URI because being invited to their events exposes us to knowledge that at the end of the day is of benefit to us. Meeting like-minded people also makes our work known and so we in turn end up being invited to more events and beneficial trainings. URI also enhances our understanding of the significance of inter-faith cooperation.

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

We would be happy to be linked to funding organizations and to be exposed to more trainings and workshop opportunities. In this way we will be able to further promote URI work on the ground because as much as its mission is very good, much of it is not as visible here compared to other organizations. It would also be nice if costs to attend URI events could be covered since most people and our members in particular are poor and cannot cover such costs from their own pockets.