



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

The Big Brother Society (BBS)

Faiths /Traditions Represented: Islam, Christianity, Different Ethnic Groups

Location of CC: Nairobi, CBD, Kenya.

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Key Areas of Focus: Mentorship of primary, high school and university students on leadership skills and intercultural bridge-building.

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Summary

The Big Brother Society (BBS) CC is a youth-led group in Nairobi made up of alumni from the Starehe Boys and Girls Schools. Their membership is primarily young Christian and Muslim men from many different ethnic groups. They hope to reduce stereotyping and prejudice in the younger generation by offering training and mentorship to schools in and around Nairobi. Simultaneously, they are building bonds across religious and cultural lines amongst members of their own group. BBS is successfully being invited back to schools to speak about interfaith work, and they hope to reach even more young Kenyans through their example.



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

In the area where we are working, although we see a well representation of different religious groups, intolerance based on ethnicity and religious affiliation also exists. In schools, some teachers do not have a good understanding of how to mentor their students against such vices hence making the problem worse. The country has just completed its presidential elections and as we know it, voting in Kenya is mostly based on ethnic affiliations and so what politicians tell their voters in the grassroots has an effect on their relationships beyond the campaign and voting periods. People in Kenya are generally kind to each other but politicians come in the way to promote divisions for their own benefits. Relationship between different religious groups is fairly good but based on recent happenings, fear is developing between Christians and Muslims but we hope this will pass and so we will have a lot of work to do to restore relationships.

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

Interfaith and intercultural bridge building is necessary in restoring the weak relationships between different ethnic and religious groups in Kenya, caused by the fear of the unknown. No one chooses where they were born and so it is wrong to have divisions based on hatred and ignorance as witnessed in our country.

As alumnus of one of the best school in Kenya - the Starehe Boys and Girls schools - we feel that we have a responsibility towards the society that made us what we are. It is time to give back by bridging the divide amongst most Kenyans and especially those in various educational institutions that should otherwise be the hope for the future.

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

Normally we do pre-school visits to assess the specific needs of the groups before doing training on leadership skills, giving motivational talks and mentorship. This year, we will be visiting various schools such as Starehe Boys High school, Kariobangi Girls, Valesa Grant Girls' school, Magereza Academy in Naivasha, Ilbisil Girls's school in Kajiado, Ruai Children's home among others — to implement these ongoing activities. We also will engage in voluntary work such as environmental cleanup exercises in Kibera slums and art performances on good leadership.

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

Mostly between Christians and Muslims and a number of ethnic groups.



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- 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.**

First of all we do that by treating others as equals. Our strategy for engagement is to focus on the poor and disadvantaged regardless of ethnicity and so people's participation as humans is more important to us. Besides that, we also preach messages of cohesion and engage intercultural activities such as story-telling, music and comedy — that make our target groups realize that their similarity is always greater than their differences. We bring as many groups on board as possible, and use our list / or ask for a show of hands to ensure intermingling and that each person sits next to someone from a different religious or cultural background.

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

We hope to become financially stable so as to be able to help more people and to further implement our activities. We also hope to reach as many educational institutions as possible in order to meet our objectives of empowering youths with the knowledge that they can make it in life regardless of their situation.

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

Our team spirit, multi- ethnic and religious composition and messages of hope to everyone - particularly young people regardless of ethnicity and religion has played a significant role already in changing people's mindsets and so we believe this is the way to go. It is a culture that was instilled in us back during our times in Starehe schools. Also, the fact that we were all best students from across the country but from poor backgrounds generated a sense of unity and responsibility to be role models and this is the spirit that still holds us together and is helping us creating huge impacts.

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

Our group was formed after the 2007/8 post-election violence, whereby the trend of bad ethnicity was dangerously raising albeit in a non-violent way. Ethnic divisions was/is rampant even among university and high school students translating to rioting and violence and this is where we decided to intervene by engaging student leaders on communication skills and constructive conflict resolution methods. Recent developments in our country indicate increased inter-religious hatred and so our mentorship and discussion forums are now channeled towards changing this perception.



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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?

It is not easy to monitor such changes especially because we are not often in the schools where we implement our activities. It is however important to point out that we have witnessed improved relations amongst high school students that we have trained and mentored and also amongst our fellow university students. Seclusions based on religious affiliations has significantly improved and is not as common among our members even though we still have a long way to go before claiming victory against such vices. We are happy when institutions that we have mentored invite us back to talk to their students because that means we did a good job.

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?

BBS itself is a great example of co-existence. The fact that we are all from the same Starehe Schools, the fact that we are all from different ethnic and religious groups and the fact that we mean it when we say, we are all equals, is something unique in Kenya that deserves to be celebrated. We love our country and hope that every Kenyan can learn from our Starehe Schools alumnus model.

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

Working together and encouraging cooperation amongst people from different backgrounds without discrimination is in line with URI's mission. It is only through cooperation that relationships are built.

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?

As pointed out earlier, we are all alumnus of the same schools and so we have the same culture of mutual respect for all. However, our different regional backgrounds have some degree of influence in our behavior that has proved challenging sometimes. A case in point is Brian, who had never been exposed to Cushitic people even at Starehe Boys School, and so he never used to feel comfortable around them. However, after joining our group and interacting with us and some of our members who are Cushites, Brian discovered that they were actually just like him and this got rid of his fear. Generally we encounter such challenges but we counter this by holding informal meetings besides work just to strengthen our own relationship.

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

Since the celebration to launch the Golden Rule in Kenya, we found renewed encouragement about what we were implementing and so we are happy to have a big brother to learn from on interfaith issues.



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

Since both URI and BBS are working on issues of interfaith and intercultural cooperation, it would be useful if URI could expose us more to opportunities and link us to likeminded youth groups. Sponsorship to attend training of trainers seminars/ workshops would also be helpful including increased presence of URI staff when we hold our activities and events.