



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI)

Faiths /Traditions Represented: **Christian Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox, Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventist and Muslim**

Location of CC: **Uganda, Acholi Region**

Key Areas of Focus: **Peacebuilding**

Summary:

Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) is an interfaith peace building and conflict transformation organization formed in 1997 as a proactive response to the conflict in Northern Uganda. ARLPI brings together leaders of six different religious sects/denominations (Anglican, Catholic, Muslim, Orthodox, Pentecostal, & Seventh Day Adventist) and their respective constituencies to participate effectively in transforming conflicts in Northern Uganda and the surrounding region. ARLPI's programs are primarily conducted within the northern Ugandan districts of Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum, & Pader, although they are occasionally involved in initiatives throughout Uganda and abroad.

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

ARLPI started as an informal initiative in 1997 by the religious leaders in Acholi region at the time people were facing radical abductions by the Joseph Kony rebels in the bush. Given the wide spread insurgency in the entire region, the religious leaders of all faiths moved in to talk to people through radio stations and other platforms about restoring peace.

The region was faced with indiscriminate rebel abductions of children from schools, women, and youth. They were taken into captivity as child soldiers or wives to the rebels. This is what brought together the religious leaders of different faiths to condemn the barbaric actions of the rebels. However, the war was not ending soon, thus necessitating a long-term intervention.

Since the war, there has been a huge transition in the issues addressed, from peace building campaigns to new development issues, particularly in land based conflicts due to eroded border demarcations, domestic violence, poor economic livelihoods, and HIV and AIDS. These issues are intertwined, take for instance, as people returned from the Internally Displaced Persons Camps (IDPCs) from a twenty year war; most of the



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captives had died and those left were either born in the camps, and they lacked historical knowledge of the land demarcations. This resulted into the scramble for land as they struggle to fit within the community.

Under the religious context, there's a kind of religious pluralism in the region that is witnessed currently. There's mushrooming Pentecostal churches everywhere attracting large numbers of the youth and women due to their preaching style and contemporary music. This has led some people to leave their Catholic and Anglican faiths because the new religious sects claim to cure sicknesses and advise them not to go to hospital which results in the death of many people.

Culturally, people are gradually moving away from their cultural beliefs and adopting the contemporary ways. For example in the past, culture would dictate on the person who one is to marry, and for any man intending to marry, his family would hold a series of talks with the bride's family to obtain their consent. Nowadays, it's very common to find youth getting involved in a relationship without consulting their families. In the event, many families are breaking spontaneously.

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

Interfaith/intercultural bridge building is needed because when two or more people or groups with different religious or cultural beliefs live together, disagreements are inevitable. Despite the religious differences, we value our tradition so much. These two are uniting and identifying factors and identity is one key thing in life. Religion therefore comes in to unite the people of different cultures. It is very important for a community like ours which has faced so many problems to stick together for the sake of restoring peace and development.

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

Our activities and programs since the war have gradually transited from reception and reintegration of people into their communities, to peace building and economic livelihoods development. The new issues we address currently include land rights, conflict resolution and economic livelihoods.

We conduct advocacy and conflict resolution dialogues to address the post war conflicts on land. We have established structures in the communities starting from the local or village level councils, cultural leaders, police and others. All these are easily accessed by the community members, and are commonly regarded as alternative dispute resolution mechanisms.

We have also trained case managers to handle domestic violence cases, in particular the use of role model men, who are reported as the major perpetrators. The role model



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men are generally respected by the community due to their commitment and value for women.

The livelihoods program is operated in two ways; the Village Savings Loan Association (VSLA) and Agriculture. Under the VSLA, community members form in small groups of seven members and take on a minimum saving of shs. 1,000 daily and at every meeting the savings are loaned. The loans are used for meeting scholastic, health, food and other basic needs.

The agricultural program involves training of the community in agronomy of crops and animals and supporting them with farm inputs such as seeds and tools. A common model used is kitchen gardening where every household is encouraged to grow vegetables to ensure household food security.

Last but not least is the HIV and AIDS program implemented in collaboration with the member organizations such as the Born Again Faith Federations (BAFFE) and SDA, a campaign initiated as a result of the escalated spread of HIV during the IDP camp life in which it was common practice for the rebels to force young girls and women into sex.

Lastly is the advocacy program in which all the different activities are brought to the attention of the policy makers in the region to task them with accountability and commitment towards addressing problems.

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

Catholics, Anglican, Orthodox, Islam, SDA, and the Born Again Faith Federation.

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.*

Our CC uses inclusiveness of all people. Our members subscribe to the different religious backgrounds and the peace committees which work at the grassroots level. And if we had fronted only one religion, people from other faiths would not have joined our activities. This is coupled with targeting of youth and women, who are the major social groups found in every community.

In addition, our programs address common social problems affecting everyone in the community. As returnees or survivors of the war, they are met with similar problems back in their communities and they need similar development interventions to help them overcome their precarious situation.



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

Our CC hopes to see a community living in peace and harmony. By peace we don't necessarily mean the reduction of gun shots but holistic peace. We want to see non violent resolution of conflicts, people engaged in economic activities that lead to prosperity since the region has suffered for quite a long time with the population confined in Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps. Such a life has denied them education, health, and business ventures thereby crippling the region's development.

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

Peace building is such an interesting venture and sometimes you may not notice spontaneous change. For instance the only answer people believed in addressing land based conflicts, was violence through fighting and burning down of huts; but with our intervention of mediation dialogues; people no longer use the violent way instead they opt for the formal justice system or locally trusted means of mediation.

The people in particular women (widows) are also waking up to claim their rights to the land of their deceased husbands.

After people attend our HIV and AIDS prevention and education program, they tend to request for Voluntary Counselling and Treatment (VCT) because they have gradually to appreciate the importance of testing and linking them to available service providers.

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

The peace building programs we undertake through the religious leaders help communities to co-exist amidst their problems. We mobilize people for socio-economic development programs and emphasize the importance of economic recovery and development as a common binding factor. The bad memories of the war are also a constant reminder to the people that help them to continue to promote and restore peace in the region.

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?*

People come together to support each other during funeral activities irrespective of their cultural or religious background. Furthermore, we no longer experience open violence as a means of resolving conflict as the communities are opting for mediation.



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Among religious leaders too we are observing improved relations. For instance, it was very rare to find an Anglican leader drinking water from the home of a Catholic or Muslim, but now they together with their congregations freely mix and work together as they emulate their religious leaders, the founders of ARLPI.

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?

Bishop BM Ocolla shares an experience during the peace talks with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) under Joseph Kony. Despite several attempts by the Government of Uganda to reach a compromise with the LRA, the religious leaders (founders of ARLPI), presented a proposal to the government to let them talk with the rebels. The letter of a religious leader to the LRA leader requesting to meet over peace talks was received as they were regarded as neutral parties. The meeting took place and it resulted in the relative peace which is currently experienced in the Northern part of Uganda. The lesson drawn from this story is that religion is a strong binding factor even during armed conflict.

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

The coming together of religious leaders is of key importance in ALPI's work and we take pride in having the best model of putting aside religious differences for the well-being of our followers. Thus disunity and religiously inspired violence becomes minimal. For instance, having a Muslim leader (*Khadi*) on board has demystified the thinking people had that the majority of Muslims are terrorists.

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

The members of our CC are brought together by a common past of the 20 year war which affected all of them equally. As the region is undergoing socio-economic transformation, people are joined together by the development agenda at hand, and any difference based on culture or religion doesn't seem to make any sense.

Though our programs are relevant to the people, we fall short of affording psychosocial programs which can rehabilitate the people from the traumatic conditions of the war which often affect our progress.

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

In terms of broadening our coverage, being part URI has made other partners around the world become aware of what we do and given us an opportunity to share the different approaches and strategies in addressing more or less similar problems.



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The collaboration with URI-GL in the advocacy and mediation program has enabled ARLPI to reach out to more communities which we would otherwise not have reached with our limited resources.

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

URI should continue to create a platform for inter-CC collaboration and sharing of ideas and practices along with affording CCs space to showcase their work in the Great Lakes and global publications. The publications should also be brought to the lower level for CCs' input.