



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

Bloodlife Initiative Kenya

Faiths /Traditions Represented: Christianity (Catholic and Protestant), Bahai, Hindu, Islam

Location of CC: Nairobi CBD

Key Areas of Focus: Promoting good health through blood transfusion

Summary

Blood-life Initiative is motivated by the need to save lives through blood transfusion. It is headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya and works against cultural and religious stereotypes associated with blood transfusion. It successfully brought people of different faith and religious groups together to realize their full potential of peaceful co-existence. Blood-life Initiative is driven by the belief that if blood has one colour, then humanity is also one.

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

We live in a country that is multicultural and multifaith (particularly in cosmopolitan Nairobi where we mostly operate), but where residents unfortunately do not necessarily have a history of good interfaith and intercultural cooperation due to existing historical prejudices developed over the years.

This has always had a direct effect on our blood transfusion work because in some communities, spilling blood is considered a taboo while in others blood donated by someone from a different ethnic or religious group is not acceptable at all.



The results of such norms are blood shortages and death, especially during emergency situations. The cause of such prejudice is ignorance and to a greater extent, political influence, such that political goals are often fronted at the expense of peaceful coexistence. It is therefore important for our people to



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understand that peace, harmony and cohesion is vital if anything is to be operationalized including blood transfusion. Besides divisive politics however, Kenya is generally a peaceful country where people co-exist in numerous other aspects.

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



Interfaith and intercultural bridge building is necessary in Nairobi because most people have diverse cultures and beliefs that guide their social behaviours. Whereas this is often neither a problem nor a cause for division, some people believe that it is wrong to donate or receive blood from others. This is problematic in emergency situations where the need for blood cuts across cultural and religious beliefs. When people

understand each other and eradicate the fear of the unknown, they will embrace each other for their own good. This is the reason why we spend time to educate them that blood has only one colour - red.

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

Normally our three main programmes run annually, namely: a) sensitization of communities on the need for blood transfusion, b) trainings to equip communities with information on how blood transfusion works and c) operating virtual blood banks for urgent intervention in case of an emergency. In addition to these three programs, we are about to start a road safety awareness project aimed at reducing traffic accidents and consequently blood loss, and launch a research unit for development of a centralized blood transfusion data. This will boost our efficiency.

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

We work with people across all cultures and religions in Kenya namely: Hindus, Muslims, Christian, African traditional groups as well as other minorities.



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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.

We sometimes encounter difficult groups that resist our actions and so in such situations, we use the strategy of talking and trying to convince a key person from that particular group about our ideas. The person must be someone that commands some followership - could be an elder, a religious leader or even a youth or woman leader. This gives us a sort of “gate-pass” to the community that we then talk to on the significance of blood transfusion. Often times, by the time we finish our dialogue sessions, they will already be convinced about the meaning of donating blood in the spirit of “love for all humanity”. This then serves as our “operation license” to engage with the community even more in future. Building such positive relationships with difficult and seemingly unapproachable communities has proven effective for us hence making our work much easier.

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

We hope to create more awareness about blood transfusion and educate as many communities as possible about the universality of blood so as to prevent blood-shortage-related deaths. We tend to move a notch higher and use audio-visual media as opposed to just word of mouth campaigns to reach out to more and more people and eradicate existing misconceptions.

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

We contribute to improving relations through our training and sensitization programmes in which our messages are aimed at promoting unity and the oneness of humanity; that we all need each other regardless of differing religious and cultural affiliations. Each one of us has therefore the responsibility of being the custodian of the wellbeing of his/ her fellow human being.

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

Violence is a vice that hinders going about daily chores and so as a preventive measure, we remind communities, particularly the youth about the 2007/8 post election violence that was caused by political frictions between some ethnic groups. We also educate them about conflict and how it emerges into violence through petty differences that can otherwise be prevented. We believe that it is only by learning and knowing each other that people can engage positively and this is the message that we try to pass. Luckily, most people are receptive to us and reflect on those issues after we speak with them.

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?

One strong indicator is personal testimony whereby people come to us to confess their earlier biases and how they managed to transform for the better. This is measured by the amount of transfused blood (the higher the volume, the more the donors) particularly by people who would otherwise not have participated. When the same people call us again for the same exercise, it is a strong sign that negative perceptions are changing because such biases are often influenced by cultural perceptions and so by embracing others, it means they have somehow overcome their prejudices.



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?

We once were in Isiolo District hospital deep in the rural Northeastern region of Kenya when we encountered two patients, a Christian and a Muslim. Both needed urgent blood transfusion and so we hurriedly mobilized blood from various people around but as doctors prepared to perform the transfusion, the Muslim patient refused and said he would only accept blood from a fellow Muslim. We looked for fresh blood, showed him two packages, and asked him to select the one that had been donated by a Muslim. Obviously he was not able to do that, so our question to him was whether it was possible to differentiate between bloods- i.e. that of a Muslim, Christian or others. After a long chat, he embraced the idea that blood has only one colour regardless of one's affiliations because we are all human beings. From that day on, this man became a strong campaigner for blood transfusion.



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

We help support the mission of URI by making sure that people come together to participate and save lives. In that process, they get to discover and learn about blood transfusion and that all human beings are one. It is through our training and sensitization that we manage to change prejudices related to blood transfusion. Also, by working together as a team despite our own cultural differences also contributes to the mission of URI.

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 are working together as a strong team with a particular objective. Of course, initially or when a new person comes on board, getting accustomed to the system takes a bit of effort and time but generally speaking, despite our differing political stands, we are a very strong team facing minimal challenges.

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

Being part of URI has several advantages. Among them is the fact that we get to reach out and know many community organizations in the grassroots where we are also based. This helps in terms of cooperation; various URI CCs have developed their own friendship networks and invite each other to function such as the upcoming International Day of Peace (IDP.) We use these events as opportunities to call for blood donation by participants.

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

We are aware that URI does not provide funding to community based organizations like ours but it would be nice if they could facilitate our participation in various events, forums, and workshops to build our capacity. We would appreciate gaining more knowledge on how to enhance intercultural and interreligious cooperation, an important component of our activities. It would also be beneficial if URI could be more visible on the ground and partner with some of us in our work.