



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

Friends of Community Health (FCOH) CC

Faiths /Traditions Represented: Muslim, Orthodox, Protestant, Catholic, SDA and Pentecostal

Location of CC: Kavule village, Mayuge Town Council, Mayuge district

Key Areas of Focus: Empowering the poor and marginalized people to fight poverty and ignorance

Key Languages: English, Lusoga and Luganda

Summary

Friends of Community Health (FCOH) CC is located in Kavule Village, in Uganda. FCOH is committed to supporting community members on issues of health, income generation, education, and the environment. Their programs and exhibitions are aimed to include people of diverse faiths and traditions from the region. The CC is committed to inclusiveness and uses this approach in their programs, where all religions and cultures are given free entrance and participation.



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

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

Religiously, the Mayuge district is one of the leading districts home to a minority faith called the *Njiri nkalu* who are known for obstructing government programs such as the attempted boycott of the recent national census, immunization, family planning and other health programs. All this goes on with community wide polarization of this religious sect mostly caused by ignorance about their values and norms and the lack of sensitization to address the misleading religious doctrines.

The district too suffers from high rates of high school dropouts, leaving many young girls idle and more susceptible to early marriages and pregnancies. The situation is so precarious that young girls are simply conned by men with promises of buying them a chapatti and other personal effects. There are also notable cases of rape and defilement with the police constrained by transport to reach out to the affected communities. The adult age bracket too lacks reading and writing skills as a result of minimal education efforts by the local and central government.



There are also noticeable pockets of practices of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) often practiced by people who intermarried with other cultures from Bugisu region. This is commonly seen at the landing sites where people from mostly Bugisu region use this as a hideout from the authorities since the practice is illegal in Uganda.

Politically, people now regard politics as something to provide them with immediate income gains, losing sight of the community development objective. Thus, people work tooth and nail to become electoral representatives and cheap political games are rampant in the area.

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

Our region is faced with broad social problems, marked by high levels of poverty, poor health and sanitation standards, ignorance among children as well as the adult folk and others as reported by the Uganda Bureau of Standards (UBOS) with a range from 27% to 62% (the Spatial Trends of Poverty and inequality in Uganda: 2002-2005). As people experience such problems, it is highly pertinent to bring them to work together to address the issues collectively. The divisive sentiments and practices brought about by religion and culture tend to affect the relations and eventually cripple general development. So our programs strive to support an individual in almost all aspects of his/her life, such as in health, income generation, education, environment and others, and this can only be achieved when people work together.



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

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

This year we are embarking on mobilizing community members on sanitation, training in youth skills development such as respect for their parents and communities, patriotism, leadership and others. We have also mobilized about 100 groups in the different sub counties of Mayuge district with which we intend to provide tree seedlings to deal with environmental challenges. Some training for women on reproductive health, domestic relations, HIV risk reduction and counseling as well as home visits on sanitation and home development are also in the pipeline.

Through our Livelihoods Program, we are organizing a district level exhibition to showcase the hand crafts made by our women's groups along with all other programs and activities. This is intended among others to create more visibility of our work and to identify partners.



FCOH women's group attending at a feast of one of the member (right) and the founder members and Coordinator, Mukisa David addressing the members at the gift giving ceremony in Mayuge (left) and the CC Liaison Officer URI-GL, May Nakyejwe(extreme left) with FCOH members showcasing some of their handcrafts

Note: Pictures taken from mobile phone

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

Our community has people from the Muslim, Orthodox Christian, Protestant, Catholic, SDA and Pentecostal faiths. So our programs are all inclusive. However, we have some religious sects, in particular the *Njiri Nkalu*, living near the landing sites but we have had minimal interactions with them. We need to sensitize them on interfaith cooperation as well as development initiatives since they have proven to be a major stumbling block to the government programs; a case in point is their attempted boycott of the recently held national census on the grounds that it's against their religious beliefs and norms.



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

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 use an all-inclusive approach in our programs, where all religions and cultures are given free entrance and participation. On the cultural aspect, we try to respect all cultures and use the diversity therein to draw people together. Our work is also aligned to government programs where we use structures such as the police, local council administration, politicians and technical staff to mobilize and reach out to as many people as possible.

We also organize exchange visits to other regions or parts of the country to enable people to appreciate other cultures. This is coupled with tapping from the natural endowments to make handcrafts for income generation. As people use the natural fibers to make different pieces, they come to appreciate nature and seek to conserve it. Through the handicrafts made (handbags, table linen, wall hangings etc), we put religious messages intended to educate people on religious values and diversity. For example, *praise the Lord, praise Allah, Praise Jehovah* and others with biblical scriptures quoted to create lasting impressions.

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

We work with the marginalized and vulnerable people to redress incidences that cause low incomes, diseases, ignorance and inequality.

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

FCOH is the first of its kind CBO in Mayuge district that looks at the human being in totality. At inception, we moved in the communities and selected activities that would bring people together. First was poultry keeping and subsequently group savings, all aimed at enabling community members to address their domestic needs. We later came to realize that, without improving people's relationships in homes, we would not achieve much. So we decided to integrate home visits and educating couples on domestic relations. Lately, we take pride in the home development scheme in which members, in a rotational cycle, feast together on a special day and give out gifts (mostly home care appliances) and money to a fellow member. During such feasts, people of different religions and cultural background, share, laugh and eat together.

On top of that is the sanitation and hygiene program where members help each other to have basic hygiene standards such as construction of pit latrines, kitchens, drainage channels, and plate stands for drying utensils among others. As members take part in such activities, their relations are built and cooperation enhanced. Due to such programs, FCOH is looked at in the community as a non-discriminatory entity!

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

Our area does not have pronounced elements of conflicts. However, the domestic and community focused programs we undertake tend to allay some of the likely tendencies of group



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

conflict. Instances of political violence during elections are always managed with messages of maintaining peaceful relations with the support of the local authorities.

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?

Before our interventions, people, in particular women, were very individualistic and some held enmity with each other. Our programs have improved their relationships with helping them to work together, as seen in making handcrafts, cultivation of vegetables, poultry keeping and the home development scheme to mention but a few.

The children and youth are also primary targets of FCOH. As we speak now, the youths who used to be idle playing cards or loitering around the village, are now busy tending to their coffee plantations. They work as a group on the coffee plantation, which serves as our demonstration site; and the proceeds from the farm are given to each of the members to start their own individual projects at home.

Our programs on domestic relations have cemented our relations with the local council authorities who are grateful for our work since most of the domestic cases are reported to our offices as people find our services more humane. This alone attracts people to come on board.



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

Our work is community driven; meaning the well-being of people in our society is very pertinent. As URI strives to cultivate grassroots efforts through CCs on the ground, we contribute towards realizing this goal by building interfaith and intercultural cooperation through mobilizing all people equally. Our environmental sustainability programs too are aimed at enabling an environmentally friendly setting for all living beings in our region to live harmoniously as envisaged in URI's mission.



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

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

As a region with high levels of intermarriages, it was a challenge to bring people of different cultural and religious background to work together. Our common programs on development embrace all and as people engage in the different programs, it's inevitable that their cooperation is gradually built.

As the only active and focused CBO in the area, the challenge we face is the limited funds to reach out to the wider community which is continuously demanding our services.

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

We are greatly indebted to the introduction to URI. The capacity building gained since we became members has led us to respect and appreciate bridge building. Morally, as we recite the religious values during the different meetings organized in-country; they often draw us to the Golden Rule principle of loving one another in appreciation of humanity. URI is like a parent to FCOH because it traverses the globe promoting each of the CCs' work. It has enabled us to reflect and appreciate each other's faiths and created a sense of brotherhood within the region.

In partnership with URI, we were able to address the "jigger" (a small flea/bug) problem that affected a greater part of Busoga region in 2010. We received technical support and sanitation materials to treat about 500 people (mostly school children) in nine (9) districts of Busoga region affected by jiggers. These helped launch the environmental campaign during the 2010 UN Mother Earth Day in Mayuge district during which tree seedlings were distributed to the community members. On this account FCOH has gained recognition from the President's office as well as the district administration for being the first CBO to preserve the native tree species- *Mvule tree* which is considered a long-lasting species.

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

As members, we can take advantage of URI's rich global audience to promote our work to other regions. The same is true with continuing to open the platform for information exchange especially with CCs like us who are in remote areas where modern means of communication are not easily accessible.

