THE CO-OPERATIVE UNIVERSITY OF KENYA
Qualis Cooperationem Disciplina

The Bulletin

January 2026

CHANCELLOR DR. BENARD CHITUNGA ANSWERS, "IS A FIRST-WORLD KENYA TOO AMBITIOUS?"

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YAP Dialogue: Chancellor Dr. Benard Chitunga Expounds on Kenya as a First-World Country

By Meshack M. Ngangi, MPRSK | 16th January 2026

Dr. Benard William Chitunga (2nd left), CUK Chancellor, Mr. Michael Kirui (left), Entrepreneurship Educator and Start-up Coach, Joy Brenda Masinde (2nd right), Kenya Power Board Chairperson, and Dr. Duncan Ojwang, Advisor on Human Rights & Justice at the Executive Office of the President (right) during the Youth Assembly Platform (YAP) Debate held on Friday, 16th January 2026, at The Co-operative University of Kenya (Karen, Nairobi). | Photo Credit: DPAK

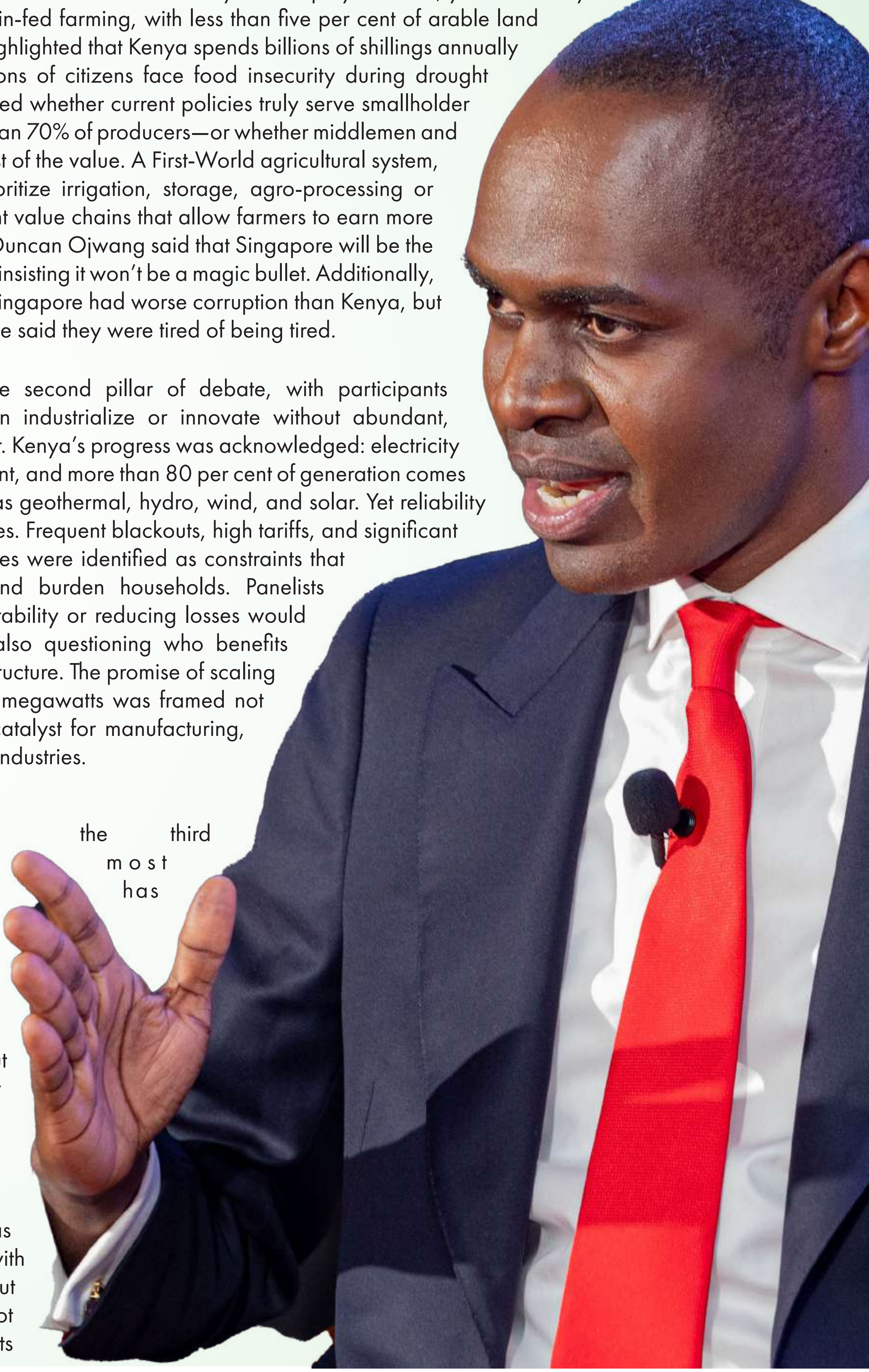
On Friday, 16th January 2026, young leaders, scholars, policymakers, and students gathered at The Co-operative University of Kenya, hosted by the Chief Debater and the University's Chancellor, Dr. Benard William Chitunga, for the Youth Assembly Platform (YAP). The platform was organized by the Digital Publishers Association of Kenya (DPA-K) to interrogate a question that has long lived in policy papers, political speeches, and public debate: can Kenya realistically become a First-World country—and what would that actually require? Held as a two-hour hybrid town hall bringing together a physical audience and thousands of online viewers, the forum adopted a deliberately sober tone, seeking to move beyond slogans and interrogate the hard choices behind national ambition.

The session moderator, Journalist Betty Njeru, expressed that the debate was anchored on the theme of Kenya as a First-World Country. The session was framed around a clear premise: development should not be measured by rhetoric or rankings alone, but by everyday lived experience. As the lead host stated at the outset, the conversation was not about aspiration for its own sake, but about "ideas, choices, and what kind of country young Kenyans want to inherit, and help build." Against the backdrop of President William Ruto's stated plan to transform Kenya into a developed nation within the next 20 to 30 years—targeting around 2055—the forum challenged participants to assess whether the vision is achievable, and at what cost.

The discussion by the Chief Debater, Dr. Benard W. Chitunga, and co-debaters Joy Brenda Masinde, the Chairperson of the Board of Directors at Kenya Power, Dr. Duncan Ojwang, Advisor on Human Rights and Justice at the Executive Office of the President and Mr. Michael Kirui, an Entrepreneurship Educator and Start-up Coach, was grounded in four foundational pillars identified as critical to any First-World transition: agricultural transformation and food security, energy expansion, modern infrastructure, and a skilled, innovative workforce. These pillars were examined through structured debate, expert input, and open-mic engagement, allowing both panelists and participants to test ideas against evidence and lived reality. In his opening remarks, Dr. Benard William Chitunga expressed that Kenya has proven to have the capacity to manage challenges like debt without defaulting and that the country is at a pivotal and advantageous place, just like Singapore, because many Kenyans are learned and brilliant. Additionally, the Chancellor said that there is always room for improvement and that Kenya can do better to make all systems work.

On agriculture, the debate quickly exposed a central contradiction in Kenya's development story. Agriculture remains the backbone of the economy and employs millions, yet the country continues to rely heavily on rain-fed farming, with less than five per cent of arable land under irrigation. Discussions highlighted that Kenya spends billions of shillings annually importing food, even as millions of citizens face food insecurity during drought cycles. The discussion questioned whether current policies truly serve smallholder farmers—who make up more than 70% of producers—or whether middlemen and cartels continue to capture most of the value. A First-World agricultural system, the panel argued, would prioritize irrigation, storage, agro-processing or value addition, and transparent value chains that allow farmers to earn more while consumers pay less. Dr. Duncan Ojwang said that Singapore will be the total of what we do every day, insisting it won't be a magic bullet. Additionally, the legal scholar argued that Singapore had worse corruption than Kenya, but it reached a point where people said they were tired of being tired.

Energy expansion formed the second pillar of debate, with participants agreeing that no country can industrialize or innovate without abundant, reliable, and affordable power. Kenya's progress was acknowledged: electricity access now exceeds 90 per cent, and more than 80 per cent of generation comes from renewable sources such as geothermal, hydro, wind, and solar. Yet reliability and cost remain major obstacles. Frequent blackouts, high tariffs, and significant technical and commercial losses were identified as constraints that deter industrial investment and burden households. Panelists debated whether fixing grid stability or reducing losses would unlock growth faster, while also questioning who benefits most from the current energy structure. The promise of scaling power generation to 10,000 megawatts was framed not as an end in itself, but as a catalyst for manufacturing, e-mobility, and value-adding industries.



Infrastructure development, the third pillar, provoked some of the most pointed exchanges. Kenya has invested heavily in roads, railways, ports, and logistics, with transport and storage accounting for a significant share of GDP. However, concerns were raised about rising public debt and whether large projects always translate into broad-based economic benefit. The Standard Gauge Railway extensions and port modernization were cited as examples of infrastructure with transformative potential, but also with high fiscal risk if not efficiently utilized. Participants questioned how success should be measured: by engineering milestones and GDP figures, or by how infrastructure connects communities, lowers costs, and expands opportunity. The conversation also extended to the digital superhighway, with ambitious plans to roll out fibre optic networks and public Wi-Fi nationwide. Past audits revealing "ghost" digital projects underscored the need for strong procurement oversight and enforcement if digital infrastructure is to support inclusion rather than waste.

The final pillar of building a skilled and innovative workforce resonated deeply with the university audience. Speaking at the event, Michael Kirui argued that the first world means shared prosperity and that growth and equal access to basic resources and services are signs of prosperity. He therefore called out the Government to ensure equal quality of life across the country, so citizens in Mandera enjoy the same healthcare, security, and dignity as those in Nairobi. Despite education commanding the largest share of national expenditure, youth unemployment and underemployment remain widespread. Panelists highlighted a growing mismatch between education outcomes and labour market needs, noting that Kenya performs better in creative outputs than in inputs such as research funding and skills development. Questions were raised about whether universities are training graduates for an economy that no longer exists, even as technology, artificial intelligence, and digital services reshape global work. The discussion emphasized the need to align curricula with industry, strengthen vocational and technical education, and create pathways for entrepreneurship, particularly within the Silicon Savannah ecosystem. A First-World Kenya, speakers argued, must offer young people not just jobs, but meaningful, productive, and dignified work.

Advocate Joy Brenda Masinde argued that a first-world country remains a moving target defined by improving living standards, from basic dignity like self-contained housing to higher expectations as progress continues. True first-world status exists where functional systems deliver balance and enable a meaningful life for citizens through stability, service delivery, and opportunity. As the session drew to a close, the moderator pulled together areas of agreement and tension, reframing ambition as responsibility. The central challenge was no longer whether the dream of a First-World Kenya is too big, but whether the country is prepared to commit to the discipline, governance reforms, and long-term investment required to realize it. Panelists were challenged to name three actions they would prioritize within 12 months to move Kenya forward, with a strong emphasis on practicality, realism, and youth inclusion.

The forum concluded with a clear call to action for young Kenyans: to remain engaged, informed, and demanding of evidence-based leadership. Broadcast live across multiple digital platforms and hosted in a university setting, the Youth Assembly Platform underscored the role of informed public debate in shaping Kenya's future. If Kenya is to achieve First-World standards by mid-century, the discussion suggested, it will not be through copying other countries wholesale, but by fixing what Kenyans experience daily—through accountable institutions, productive investment, and a generation willing to turn ambition into execution.

CUK Hosts Cornell University's SC Johnson College of Business Delegation

By Esther Nalotwesha | 6th January 2026

The Co-operative University of Kenya (CUK) hosted a delegation from Cornell University, SC Johnson College of Business, USA, for a 10-day academic and experiential study tour. This tour is aimed at advancing research and collaboration on sustainable cooperative models in emerging markets. The visit, which took place from 6th to 15th January 2026, marks a significant milestone in strengthening international academic partnerships focused on cooperative development.

During their stay, the delegation will engage cooperatives and institutions across Nairobi, Kiambu, and Nyeri counties, examining governance structures, management practices, member participation, and the role of public policy in cooperative sustainability.

In his welcoming remarks, the Vice Chancellor. Prof. Kamau Ngamau formally welcomed the Cornell University delegation to CUK and expressed his appreciation for

(Seated) CUK Vice Chancellor, Prof. Kamau Ngamau (centre) and Prof. Todd Niemann (2nd left) flanked by delegations from CUK and the SC Johnson College of Business at The Co-operative University of Kenya, Main Campus (Karen, Nairobi), 6th January 2026.

The delegation comprises two faculty members and four students drawn from Cornell University's globally renowned business school. The team is led by Prof. Fridah Mubichi-Kut and Prof. Todd Michael Schmit, accompanied by students Kaia Worrell, Miriam Frank, Syed Muhammad Abdullah, and Joseph Gicharu. Their visit to Kenya is anchored within Cornell's Student Multidisciplinary Applied Research Teams (SMART) Program, an applied learning initiative that integrates field-based research, faculty mentorship, and student engagement to address real-world development challenges.

The SMART study tour is designed to deepen understanding of how cooperative enterprises operate in diverse socio-economic contexts, with a particular focus on the application of International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) principles within Kenya's vibrant cooperative movement.

selecting CUK as a partner institution for the inaugural SMART engagement in Kenya. A pre-briefing session was done by Mr. Silas Maiyo and Dr. Victor Wambua, who outlined the purpose and scope of the engagement. They emphasized that the study tour aims not only to collect empirical data but also to expose students and faculty from both institutions to practical cooperative environments, thereby enriching teaching, learning, and research outcomes.

It was noted that data collected during the field engagements will support graduate-level research, particularly for master's students, and contribute to comparative studies on cooperatives in emerging markets. The delegation is expected to interact with a wide range of cooperative forms, including coffee, housing, dairy, transport, and savings and credit cooperatives, as well as county-level cooperative development offices. The meeting also reflected on earlier academic exchanges, including a previous visit to Cornell University by Dr. Lydia Mutua, underscoring the continuity and growing depth of the CUK–Cornell relationship.

Speaking during the session, Prof. Todd Michael Schmit highlighted the academic motivation behind the study tour, noting that the team seeks to examine how ICA principles are interpreted and implemented by cooperative management and county authorities in Kenya. He underscored the importance of understanding how these principles translate into operational effectiveness, member value, and long-term sustainability within diverse cooperative contexts.

The Dean, School of Cooperative and Community Development, Dr. Lucy Ngare, welcomed the delegation and expressed optimism about the outcomes of the engagement, noting that the University looks forward to the research findings and to expanding collaboration with Cornell University across multiple disciplines. She reaffirmed CUK's openness to joint research, staff and student exchanges, and co-publication initiatives that advance cooperative knowledge and practice.

In his remarks, Prof. Todd Niemann emphasized the critical role of empirical data in validating cooperative research and informing policy and practice. He observed that cooperatives contribute an estimated 40 percent of Kenya's economy, making research essential to understanding their effectiveness, resilience, and development impact. He noted that insights from the Kenyan cooperative sector would provide valuable comparative perspectives for global cooperative scholarship.

Beyond academic discussions, the programme includes field visits and stakeholder engagements with key cooperative institutions such as CUK–Institute of Cooperative Development (ICD), the Co-operative Alliance of Kenya (CAK), ICA-Africa, Limuru Dairy Cooperative, National Police SACCO, 2NK Transport Cooperative, and the County Government of Nyeri, among others. These engagements are intended to provide first-hand exposure to cooperative operations, governance dynamics, and policy environments.

The inaugural SMART engagement is strategically positioned as a foundation for a long-term partnership between The Co-operative University of Kenya and Cornell University. Future collaboration is expected to encompass joint research projects, longitudinal field studies, data collection and analysis, student and faculty exchanges, and co-authored publications that advance cooperative education and practice globally.

As a leading institution dedicated to cooperative education, research, and outreach, CUK continues to position itself as a global hub for cooperative knowledge. Hosting the Cornell University delegation not only reinforces CUK's international profile but also affirms its commitment to fostering evidence-based research, global partnerships, and innovative learning models that strengthen cooperatives as engines of inclusive and sustainable development.

CUK Hosts Homeboyz Radio's Campo Vibes

By Esther Nalotwesha | 23rd January 2026

CUK Students and Homeboyz Radio 103.5 FM Presenters interact during the Campo Vibes Show hosted at The Co-operative University of Kenya, Main Campus (Karen, Nairobi), Friday, 23rd January 2026.

The Co-operative University of Kenya (CUK), on Friday, 23rd January 2026, hosted an electrifying campus experience as Homeboyz Radio 103.5 FM brought the much-anticipated Campo Vibes event to the University. The event drew large numbers of students who turned out in high spirits, transforming the campus into a vibrant hub of music, entertainment, and youthful expression.

Campo Vibes forms part of Homeboyz Radio's nationwide campus engagement initiative aimed at connecting with students through music, media, and interactive experiences. At CUK, the event provided a dynamic platform that blended entertainment with community engagement, reinforcing the University's commitment to nurturing a holistic and vibrant student life.

The event was masterfully emceed by the energetic MC Sir James, whose commanding stage presence and interactive style kept the crowd fully engaged throughout the afternoon through to the evening. With his humour and crowd-hyping prowess, Sir James effortlessly connected with students, setting an upbeat tone and sustaining the high-energy atmosphere from the opening moments to the close of the event.

Taking charge of the music deck was DJ Chunky, who delivered an exhilarating musical experience through a carefully curated mix of local hits, international chart-toppers, and campus favourites. His seamless transitions and ability to read the crowd ensured a nonstop flow of music that had students dancing, singing along, and fully immersed in the Campo Vibes experience. Media personality Jakes Nyanjom further complemented the experience through lively interactions and on-ground engagement, ensuring the event maintained its momentum and interactive appeal.

Beyond entertainment, Campo Vibes has offered students a much-needed opportunity to unwind from academic routines and the harrowing examination period, socialize, and celebrate campus culture in a shared space. The impressive turnout reflected students' enthusiasm for creative and recreational platforms that promote unity, self-expression, and a balanced university experience.

The event has also highlighted the growing collaboration between The Co-operative University of Kenya and leading media brands, particularly Homeboyz Radio. Such partnerships align with CUK's broader student development agenda, which recognizes the importance of co-curricular engagement in fostering confidence, creativity, and social cohesion among students.

As music echoed across the campus and students danced well into the evening, Campo Vibes concluded on a high note, leaving behind lasting memories and a renewed sense of community. The successful hosting of the event further reinforces CUK's reputation as a student-centred institution that values innovation, engagement, and vibrant campus life. Through initiatives such as Campo Vibes, The Co-operative University of Kenya continues to position itself as a progressive institution that embraces partnerships, youth culture, and experiential engagement as integral components of university life.

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