

## Briefing Summary

# Interfaith engagement for social cohesion: World Vision Central African Republic

World Vision Central African Republic (World Vision CAR) has been implementing a variety of social cohesion and peacebuilding programmes as a part of its larger response to an ongoing humanitarian crisis. World Vision began operations in the CAR in 2014. In addition to humanitarian projects in various sectors including food, WASH and Child Protection, the organisation has been implementing social cohesion projects including participating in the Central African Republic Interfaith Peacebuilding Partnership (CIPP) project since 2015. The CIPP supports inter-religious platforms of religious leaders across the country by building their capacity and partnering with them to implement a variety of humanitarian and recovery activities.

Through the experience of implementing these projects, as a faith-based organisation, World Vision CAR has been proactive in acknowledging and addressing inter-religious dynamics inherent in the crisis and the role of faith leaders in influencing the inter-faith relations within their communities. This case study seeks to develop a deeper understanding of these issues and how World Vision CAR has worked to address them by proactively engaging faith actors.

### **Religion has been instrumentalised for both good and bad**

While religion may be one of the drivers of conflict in CAR, humanitarian and religious actors are adamant that it is not a root cause of the crisis. Rather, they claim that religion has been instrumentalised in what is primarily a political and economic conflict. Now, religion is being used to promote messages of peace, with religious leaders setting themselves up as visible models of coexistence, and faith based organisations (FBOs) like World Vision using religious messaging to argue for coexistence. It is possible that many religious organisations are motivated to partner with the humanitarian community by the potential for financial gain through project funding. There is also some concern that inter-religious partnerships like the CIPP can bridge across religions while also inadvertently supporting denominational, or intra-religious, divisions.

*“Then other Muslims came from outside and started killing Christians; some of the local Muslims joined them but most didn’t. Even so, they all left. The ones living in the community who were peaceful were scared of repercussions for affiliation with the perpetrators, so they fled for their lives. That was probably the right thing to do; their fear was valid.” – beneficiary man, rural town*

*“I don’t see this crisis as a very bad thing; it has some good, too... The model of the Platform, of leaders coming together to share their experiences, is a strong one. The government listens to them. They are serious and there is transparency. We can share externally how Muslims and Christians*

*have been killing each other, but the platform brought people together, saying there is no sense in the violence and with a message for peace.” – Catholic priest, Bangui*

## **‘Social cohesion’ is difficult to define**

A narrative of restored social cohesion is important for many people, especially those living in communities where the fighting has stopped. Cohesion was important to them. When people said that they had social cohesion, they were saying that there was tolerance – that they tolerated the presence of people of different religious, ethnic or political affiliations in their midst – because of the tangible benefits it gave around freedom of movement with active engagement in economic activity, some education, social activities and trade. But they did not claim to be supporting returns, reconciliation, forgiveness or a return to peaceful co-existence as they remember life to have been pre-2013.

Faith-based organisations such as World Vision are particularly influential in communicating this message because they emphasise the concept of a God-given dignity that all people share and make sure it is embodied in their staff and their approaches. Some faith leaders recognised that genuine social cohesion remained elusive, and observed that forgiveness, or an ability to put the traumas and hatred behind them, would be necessary for the nation to move on from this conflict, as would justice to perpetrators of violence.

*“Here, we have social cohesion, but it is true that we do not fully have social cohesion. Returnees are not really possible. There are some that have returned, but only a couple of families. The perpetrators of crimes in the fighting will never be accepted back.” – World Vision CAR field staff.*

## **Poverty is closely linked to cohesion**

Various connections between poverty and conflict emerged over the course of this research. Competition over scarce resources can be a driver of conflict. When people do not have enough food to eat, they are less concerned with the dignity of their neighbour than with their own survival. World Vision has implemented a number of livelihoods interventions to help people develop their livelihoods. Assistance with agricultural development, small business ideas and savings groups, all allow people to grow increasingly self-reliant, to trade and interact with each other, and become more confident. Economic stability also helps peace by encouraging engagement in productive activities and keeping people active. Furthermore, World Vision and many of its partners view economic activities as opportunities to promote social cohesion messaging. Finally, but perhaps most importantly, caring for the neighbour is a key Christian value and, indeed, a key value in most faiths. Humanitarian actors are seen as promoting social cohesion simply by demonstrating that they care.

*“Initially WFP was giving complete rations but these had to be halved at one point and it became a big problem. The religious leaders helped to reduce tensions and to make people aware that WFP was short. As a result the distribution of existing food continued.” – World Vision CAR staff*

*“World Vision recognises our shared humanity and sees that World Vision is good for social cohesion. World Vision works with everyone.” – Neighbourhood mayor’s representative, Bangui*

## **Religious leaders play a role both as faith leaders and as community leaders**

In the CAR, the term ‘religious leader’ is more often used than ‘faith leader’; these are understood to be designated leaders within a specific religious tradition. In the context of the CAR, this refers to Muslim or Christian leaders, and amongst Christians, Catholic or Protestant leaders. There are other leaders in a community, however, and the influence of religious leaders varies. Local leaders may best be described as individuals who are also at times widely respected, in many cases because of deeds they have done. They could be representatives of religious communities or government, or simply honorable individuals.

In some places religious leaders have earned their influence, while in others they are perceived as having abused their power. The extent to which a religious leader is involved in political activities, intervenes in social affairs, or is followed by community members, depends more on the specific community and the character, interests and capacity of the leader, than on the religious tradition or structure from which they hail.

*“A religious leader is someone who takes local authority – an Imam is someone who has stepped into a position at the centre of the community and is not as distant as a government representative. They have a voice and are listened to as people don’t see them as a threat.” – CRS (CIPP consortium lead) representative*

## **Engagement with faith leaders, and interfaith engagement, is part of World Vision CAR’s ‘DNA’**

Faith partnerships, and including religious leaders of different faith backgrounds, most notably Muslim as well as Catholic and Protestant and even at times traditional leaders, were a part of World Vision CAR’s ‘DNA’, in terms of its operating principles. Faith leaders in the communities where World Vision works are familiar with World Vision and feel a relationship with its programming, and that the organisation’s staff consider faith leaders to be important partners in whatever they do.

Often, faith leader partnerships are comprised of little beyond relationships, information-sharing and invitations to attend activities planned by World Vision, such as child protection

trainings or food distributions. There may not be a specific project output for social cohesion in project designs, but staff have been well trained to seek ways to support social cohesion, faith partnerships and interfaith engagement in whatever they do. This also influences hiring practices and is a common component of bi-weekly staff devotions.

*“Staff are also sensitised, extensively, for that: in meetings, devotions, which are contractually mandatory for all staff. They talk about how we distribute as stewards of resources: someone gives the food and someone receives it, and our job is to steward it to those who need it. We need to respect the dignity of everyone, because these are Christian values.” – World Vision CAR staff*

## **Lessons learned**

Building a response team that values faith actors of all religious communities represented in the area served, and sees them as important stakeholders, is key to ensuring these partners are engaged to facilitate both humanitarian response and social cohesion. This can be done by using faith awareness and sensitivity as a lens in hiring practices, hiring staff that reflect the religious diversity of the affected community (if appropriate within National Office policies), and regular meetings and devotions with staff in which World Vision’s Christian identity and value for faith is regularly reiterated.

It is important to proactively network with religious leaders by thoroughly mapping religious actors in a community, meeting with leaders regularly, and inviting them to meetings and World Vision-sponsored events. These relationships should be maintained, though it is not always necessary that religious leaders be assigned a specific role in World Vision’s programming. Rather, by maintaining a commitment to working alongside religious leaders and building relationships with them, they can access messaging on social cohesion and promote values of human dignity and social cohesion within their communities. This has a social impact and can be a calming force facilitating aid delivery.

Social cohesion means different things to different people. When implementing humanitarian or recovery work in fragile contexts, aid providers often want to promote social cohesion, but should be cautious that their understanding of social cohesion reflects that of the community they are serving. When there is a difference of understanding, this can be used to promote dialogue about principles of conflict transformation, peacebuilding and social relationships.

It is a best practice to mainstream social cohesion into humanitarian work, and this should be continued. However, measuring social cohesion outcomes is difficult, especially in short-term projects. Therefore, aid delivery projects may not necessarily be held accountable for their impact on social cohesion. To ensure that social cohesion is mainstreamed into humanitarian work, it should be reported and reflected upon regularly.

World Vision’s credibility was enhanced by its commitment to interfaith engagement. The fact that World Vision staff knew and interacted regularly with leaders of different faith

groups meant that World Vision CAR could partner with the leader or leaders most respected by beneficiaries to facilitate aid delivery, and was well-positioned to promote dialogue and social cohesion work. This also is a means by which a Christian NGO was able to affirm its humanitarian goals to various stakeholders at the community, partner and donor levels.

Messaging was important, but its effectiveness was largely in its repetitiveness. World Vision CAR was working with religious leaders, other community leaders, youth groups, national-level fora, other humanitarian actors, and other stakeholders. It was implementing a variety of different interventions. With all of these stakeholders and in all of these interventions, the same messages were repeated: human dignity, child protection, and social cohesion were all defined and their importance reiterated. Furthermore, other humanitarian partners were delivering the same message in their diversity of activities with their diversity of stakeholders. Thus, these principles were communicated widely throughout affected communities of the CAR.

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