



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

## Introduction and Background

As a Christian organisation, World Vision regularly engages faith actors in its humanitarian programming, to ensure programmes are appropriately designed, assist in aid delivery, and broker relationships with local communities. It has also worked on stand-alone programmes with faith leaders directly to improve social cohesion. In conflict settings, this approach is particularly relevant for ensuring an understanding of the dynamics which may contribute to conflict, thus helping ensure that the principles of do-no-harm are adhered to and, where possible, emergency assistance can be leveraged to support social cohesion. Thus, even if not the explicit objective, the involvement of faith leaders in humanitarian programming also has potential for contributing to and/or helping to restore social cohesion.

The current crisis in Central African Republic (CAR) is often framed in religious terms, with a 'Muslim' Seleka group seizing power in the majority-Christian country in early 2013, then with 'Christian' militias called the 'anti-Balaka' rising up to counter this. While, prior to the outbreak of violence in 2013, most of the citizens of the CAR have memories of living side-by-side despite different religions, this coexistence broke down quickly as the political conflict unfolded, with many growing entrenched in their existing religious communities, marked by increased suspicion and mistrust of others. Furthermore, with the rise of violence, more than 13,000 children have been exploited by armed groups. Many more children have been subjected to sexual abuse, gender-based violence and ongoing risk of injury; there are still many children who are displaced and separated from their families, exposing them to even greater risk of abuse and exploitation.

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 the crisis. World Vision began operations in the CAR in 2014, and in addition to humanitarian projects in various other sectors including Food, WASH and Child Protection, the organisation has been implementing Empowering Children as Peace Builders (ECaP). More recently, in consortium with CRS, Central African Inter-Religious Platform, Aegis Trust and Islamic Relief Worldwide, World Vision has been a part of the Central African Republic Interfaith Peacebuilding Partnership (CIPP) project since 2015. The CIPP consortium 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. World Vision's primary role in the consortium, alongside Islamic Relief Worldwide, is to lead efforts for strengthening livelihoods security for peace.

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 through proactive engagement of faith actors.

## Methodology

Two senior World Vision technical advisors visited the CAR in June 2017 to conduct a series of interviews with people involved in World Vision programming. Interviews were conducted in two communities where World Vision CAR is implementing humanitarian programming and at the national level.

One of the communities selected was a rural town which experienced some of the worst violence in the early years of the crisis but which has seen stability restored. Its population is mostly Christian. The majority of its Muslim residents have fled and not returned, but Muslims from elsewhere in the country have sought refuge in the town. In this location, the researchers interviewed (individually unless otherwise noted): four representatives of the mayor's office (group interview), a CRS staff member, a local pastor, an Imam, a Catholic leader, two local beneficiary men, eight IDP men (group interview), four IDP women (group interview), four adolescent girls (group interview), five adolescent girls (group interview), two World Vision volunteers, and three World Vision staff.

The other selected community was a Muslim-majority neighbourhood in the capital city of Bangui. This neighbourhood has received a large number of displaced Muslims from elsewhere in the country and was mostly cut off from the rest of the city until late 2016. Trade and freedom of movement have now resumed but the neighbourhood still hosts a large number of IDPs. World Vision implements a variety of humanitarian and recovery activities there. In this location, the researchers interviewed (individually unless otherwise noted): the mayor's advisor, 12 district chiefs (in two group interviews), an Imam, seven IDP women (group interview), three local beneficiary women (one of which was accompanied by her two adolescent daughters), two beneficiary men, and two World Vision staff.

At the national level, interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in order to better understand the wider humanitarian context and ongoing debates regarding social cohesion. These were also individual interviews unless otherwise noted. These were with eight World Vision CAR national office staff<sup>1</sup>, two CRS staff (group interview), one WFP representative, one representative of the Interreligious Platform, one Catholic leader and one Protestant leader.

Interviews were semi-structured and narrative in format, using a simple question guide to promote a discussion about four themes: interfaith engagement, World Vision's relationship with faith leaders and faith communities, the role of faith leaders in their communities, and overall community change since the crisis began. The researchers adapted the questions to the individual being interviewed, allowing the space for the participant to speak about their concerns and priorities. All participants were assured of the confidentiality of their interviews, so names of individuals and specific locations are not used in this report. While the research team, in consultation with World Vision CAR, concluded that written consent would not be appropriate to the cultural or political context, verbal informal consent was

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<sup>1</sup> These were asked questions about their personal opinions and responses by World Vision CAR staff should not be seen as necessarily reflecting World Vision CAR's official position.

obtained from all participants at the outset of each interview.

Interview notes were typed up daily and data was analysed using a narrative approach, seeking to identify themes emerging from the participants' account. The subsequent sections of this document present five themes that were identified as of particular relevance for understanding faith engagement in the CAR humanitarian response, with a lens of social cohesion.

## **How religion has been instrumentalised for both good and bad**

Religion may be one of many drivers of conflict in the CAR, but humanitarian and religious actors are adamant that it is not a root cause of the crisis. Instead, they claim that religion has been instrumentalised in what is primarily a political and economic conflict. They are quick to point out the economic divisions facing the country left it susceptible to a breakdown in cohesion, and that politicians and rebel militias used religious identity to garner support to their respective movements. It was important to many people to emphasise that Christians and Muslims lived side by side, with full acceptance of one another, before the conflict.

*“Back at home, we got along fine with Christians. We sold milk to our Christian friends there. We also invited them over for celebrations or for visits. Before, everyone got along, but since then everything changed.” – beneficiary woman, rural town*

*“Some think this conflict is a religious one but in most situations, if you live here and look closely, you can't say that. It is a political agenda. The problem is information and being well informed.” – World Vision CAR staff member*

The narrative promoted in humanitarian circles is that, while economic drivers motivated armed groups, they used religious identity to mobilise support. For example, while competing for control of the nation's mines, a militia may have recruited fighters or garnered community support in Christian-majority areas by pointing out that the mines were controlled by Muslims, or vice-versa. Youth were particularly susceptible to such use of identity politics. Now, after years of fighting, the country has become somewhat segregated, and militias are further dividing using other identity markers such as ethnicity or tribal affiliations to garner support, turning Muslims against Muslims and Christians against Christians. This adds credence to the claim that the underlying driver of conflict is not religion. In the same vein, within the country's religious structures there is also division, for example denominational competition among Protestants. However there weren't reports that this is currently causing outbreaks of violence.

*“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*

A parallel argument could be made that religion is also being instrumentalised in order to support humanitarian needs. Religious leaders are setting themselves up as visible models of coexistence, and

Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) like World Vision use religious messaging to argue for coexistence, among other things. They are working through religious structures to promote peace messaging, and working with faith leaders to preach messages about values relating to human rights, child protection and coexistence, in mosques and churches. Many participants explained that this was possible, and in many ways perfectly acceptable, as faith leaders are influential, trustworthy, often seen as neutral, and that most people are likely to follow the guidance of their religious leaders, so the wider humanitarian community especially FBOs such as World Vision, can utilise religious networks to get their messages to the community. However, this was seen as effective only if it was done across different religions, and was also accompanied/reinforced by messaging from other actors such as community leaders as this then could promote the right motivation.

*“Religion played a huge role in bringing people together – most of the population in the CAR are believers.” – Permanent Secretary of the CAR Inter-Religious Platform*

*“The clear word that comes from the pastor and from these meetings is PEACE with everyone and with each other. He tells his congregation what was said in the meetings and that they have to seek peace. I know that it is true that we must do it because it is in the Bible. The pastor says it and I know it is there in the Bible, so that is confirmation.” – beneficiary man, rural town*

This is effective and supports a return to coexistence in the country, but in some ways is not very different from what armed groups have done to mobilise support through faith communities. When the financial resources of the humanitarian community are taken into consideration, this motivation behind religious partnerships can actually become of some concern. In some instances, it was unclear to what extent faith actors were partnering with World Vision or other INGOs (usually faith-based) as opposed to say missionary organisations because it brought them, or their communities, material support, and to what extent they were partnering because of shared vision and objectives around concepts such as holistic mission. Furthermore, religious leaders had to be and often were held accountable by their communities not to attempt to seek material gain or misuse resources.

The interreligious platform supported by the CIPP is led by a coalition of three religious leaders: a Catholic Cardinal, a Muslim Imam and a Protestant Pastor. This structure has historically favored some specific religious groups or denominations over others. CIPP consortium INGO partners are aware of this and are seeking to be inclusive, but it remains that some denominations and some religious leaders are more visible because of this or because they seem to more naturally relate to humanitarian actors than others. Thus, CIPP and other humanitarians working with interfaith networks have to balance supporting religious cohesion without creating or promoting different, intra-faith, divisions. Furthermore, the religious infrastructure has suffered greatly throughout the country. Mosques and churches have been destroyed, and faith leaders and entire congregations have fled their communities. This makes partnering with faith communities that are genuinely integrated into their social structures difficult.

*“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*

## **Defining ‘social cohesion’**

A phrase the researchers heard repeatedly was, “Now we have social cohesion.” In probing further to understand what people meant by that, the common mantra was that the violence and fighting had stopped, and that there was at least some freedom of movement for different groups of people to journey between neighbourhoods or towns for trade and other purposes. There was a narrative in areas where the fighting has diminished, of sharing space and new friendships. Residents proudly shared that they had become acquainted with newly-arrived IDPs or that they had renewed friendships with members of other religious communities.

One of the themes that humanitarian agencies have emphasised when talking about and working on social cohesion has been the importance of recognising each other’s humanity. 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. Religious leaders then reinforce this through scripture and their teaching.

*“In my experience with World Vision, I am happy with what World Vision has taught me. It is a religious organisation that considers the value of each individual... The message for others to accept each other, and... that it comes to the assistance of others.” – World Vision CAR field staff*

Staff from humanitarian agencies often defined social cohesion by the types of activities, approaches (such as adhering to ‘Do No Harm’ principles) and sectors that would deal with social issues and/or connect people together. Sectors included Child Protection and Education, Governance and Leadership, Gender, family issues, conflict resolution, human rights and Food Security and Nutrition. Particularly helpful activities for social cohesion included training, coordination through platforms, communication, mediation and dialogue, joint celebrations and activities. If people were kept busy, this was seen almost as a way to maintain social cohesion. Equally if people applied the principles of ‘do no harm, in ensuring activities did not contribute to tensions but reinforced things that connected society, this was also seen as a form of social cohesion.

What social cohesion was not, however, was integration or re-integration. In most towns and neighborhoods of the CAR, groups of people who fled have not been able to return, and there is an increased level of segregation throughout the country as well as some ongoing stigmatisation (perceived or actual) based on religion. With more than one-fifth of the population displaced, there have been massive demographic shifts and a return to the composition of most communities pre-2013 is seen as unlikely to happen. This segregation is not solely religious, but in most communities, a characteristic of the changed demographics is an increased religious homogeneity.

*“There is hypocrisy in the mentality of some people, who say they accept the other but wouldn’t accept returnees to live by them. One of the big problems is that people have occupied the houses of refugees.” – Catholic priest, rural town*

Therefore, 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.

*“WFP projects for cash transfer... a useful tool for social cohesion. People have to redeem vouchers in the market which forces Christians (mainly agriculturalists) to trade with Muslims. In doing exchanges and businesses they build good interactions.” – WFP Programmes Head*

*“Now, compared to in the crisis, there is less killing, less argument, more understanding. We are more able to work out our problems. We can go to [another neighbourhood] now and everything - we have movement.” – beneficiary man, Bangui*

Social cohesion was, however, important to most community members we met. Displaced communities, such as the enclave of Muslims on the outskirts of the mostly-Christian town we visited, emphasised the fact that they had been accepted by the residents of the town. They were not economically integrated and their children were not attending school with local children, but they told us that they were allowed to trade and their children were allowed to attend school. They said that they had forged friendships with local shopkeepers and others in the market. Similarly, the town’s other residents were proud of the fact that they had accepted this Peulh, that is, nomadic Muslim, community. In Bangui’s Muslim-majority neighborhood, many were quick to tell us about how Christians had returned or were accepted in their midst, and vice-versa.

*“More recent changes include that we can now move around. I can now leave the neighbourhood because I have courage and can hold my fear; I am confident in the government. I went four years without leaving because of fear. There was killing everywhere - but now someone has come who can intervene to protect us.” – beneficiary man, Bangui*

There are a number of reasons that may explain this strong apparent urge to convince researchers that social cohesion had been restored. It may have been a hopeful narrative, an eagerness to believe that life was returning to normal after years of crisis. It may also have been a celebration of the progress that had been made. Many told us that at some point in the past year their movements had been limited to a few local streets or that militia attacks had sent them into hiding. There may also have been an element of performance for humanitarian actors, as they demonstrated that they had applied the lessons taught in the sensitisation sessions organised by World Vision and other agencies. This may have been the case given the fact that many interviewees gave prominence to NGOs for their role in social cohesion, alongside faith actors, local leaders and family structures.

*“The social cohesion right now is just in theory, not practice. It is not just dialogue; it is a way of bringing people together. We say that we can’t continue to fight, because we have one Father God. So we need to go together to the market, to the bank, like we did before. But there is nothing material now for social cohesion, just theory.” –*

*Catholic priest, Bangui*

Some faith leaders recognised that genuine social cohesion remained elusive. Forgiveness or, at least, an ability to put behind them the traumas and hatred that had developed with the social breakdown of the past five years, would be necessary for the nation to move on from this conflict. Justice would be needed in order for this to happen, though. The CAR's citizens' willingness to tolerate others ends at an expectation that they would welcome perpetrators of war crimes, people who killed their own flesh and blood, back into their midst. There is no functioning infrastructure or system to facilitate this. There appears to be no government structure prepared to manage a truth and justice process, and indeed in many local communities there is not even a functional police station or active protection system. Therefore, people who want justice are either frustrated, or they are making it happen themselves. This may have the potential to increase tensions in the future if not dealt with.

*“To bring about peace, it is important that there not be impunity for the perpetrators in the conflict. All groups need to be disarmed. Military and militia leaders need to be taken to justice, and national reconciliation efforts undertaken.” – World Vision CAR staff*

*“People are not ready to forgive; they were victims in the crisis, and there is still a lot of prejudice. So we talk about the Word of God and what it teaches about forgiveness, tolerance, living together.” – Protestant pastor, Bangui*

The barriers to returns in many ways illustrate this issue. If asked to accept returnees back into one's community, a person has to face their own hurt, loss and stigmas. To bring up returns is, for many people, to ask people to forgive atrocities committed against them. Humanitarian sensitisation sessions, while promoting important messages related to social cohesion, are not currently moving toward, nor necessarily should they aim to be, healing hearts.

*“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.*

## **Relating poverty to social cohesion**

Many participants said that World Vision is contributing to social cohesion through its food programming. While such a comment at first may seem to be a statement of appreciation for material inputs, with people preferring a humanitarian agency for its aid delivery than for its contributions to cohesion, various connections between poverty and conflict emerged over the course of the research.

*“World Vision contributes to social cohesion through these activities by giving us what we need, because we lost everything and we were desperate so are now recovering ourselves.” – Protestant Pastor, rural town*

*“Some of the changes I saw were that the country is very poor – in extreme poverty even more so than before; nothing is working or going well; there is lots of hatred, division within communities, people don't like each other.” – Permanent Secretary of the CAR Inter-Religious Platform*

First, competition over scarce resources is 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. As communities have been marginalised from economic resources and/or activities, tensions have also increased. An influx of IDPs, or the potential of returnees coming home, threatens to increase competition, which can be partly alleviated with humanitarian food aid. Over the years, the World Food Programme (WFP) has had to cut its rations by as much as half to families in need. Some pointed out that in Bangui and areas where the fighting has died down, the cutting of rations was particularly untimely, as it happened at a time when people were just starting to think of returning home. In some instances, participants reported that World Vision has been able to top up the rations to ensure families are still able to get the aid they need.

*“They like the projects – especially in relation to economic development as that is one of the sources of the conflict and it is good that World Vision is therefore addressing it.” – Protestant Pastor, rural town.*

*“Vulnerabilities within the community are very high according to assessments. This has increased because of the number of returns. More people need more food so it is stretched. It also puts a strain on health and education services.” – World Vision CAR field staff*

World Vision’s partnership with faith leaders is also a key contributor in linking food to social cohesion. With limited rations, community members in many locations throughout the country have grown restive and even violent when they did not receive the food they had hoped for. World Vision has mobilised faith leaders to help facilitate communication with beneficiaries, help explain beneficiary selection criteria, and generally alleviate tension at distributions. However, there have been a number of stories told of faith leaders who redirected aid to their family members or congregants, abusing their influence because they felt the same desperation that others in the community felt.

*“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*

Beyond food aid, for the same reasons as listed above, overall poverty contributes to tension, and 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, 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.

*“For reconciliation, we can sensitise but the big problem on the ground is poverty. Everything revolves around this. That is why we are planning income generation work, and professional skills training for youth on topics like mechanics, tailoring, agro-pastoral development, herding, etc. This is the plan for the future... We can’t stop sensitisation; we also need to create income-generating activities. I was discussing this with the chief of [a militant group]. He said he wants to lay down his arms, but then what would he eat? ‘I need something, anything, to feed my family,’ he said.” – Permanent Secretary of the CAR Inter-Religious Platform*

The theory of change of the CIPP project holds that, “If equitable economic opportunities are increased, Central Africans, especially women and youth, will be actively invested in maintaining peace.” The logic is that many people, especially youth with whom World Vision has implemented significant livelihoods programming, may engage in fighting out of anger about their desperate situation or to bring in an income, or simply because they have nothing better to do with their time. Furthermore, after five years, reliance on humanitarian aid is growing but the reliability of humanitarian aid is decreasing, so World Vision is helping the nation’s citizens transition to development and begin thinking once again about their futures.

*“They are helping people to keep busy which is a good thing.” – World Vision CAR field volunteer*

*“We do believe that social cohesion is not enough; without economic opportunities there will not be social cohesion – the source of the conflict, actually, is underdevelopment, so this needs to be addressed.” – CRS (CIPP consortium lead) representative*

Furthermore, World Vision and many of its partners view economic activities as opportunities to promote social cohesion messaging. For many people, trading in the market may be their only interaction with people of a different religious or political affiliation. Similarly, savings groups and food distributions are events that can bring people together. World Vision therefore promotes social cohesion by, when possible, ensuring that savings groups include diverse community members, and teaching values of tolerance and acceptance at the group meetings, or delivering peace messaging at food distributions. The drive for financial independence can be a strong motivator to bring people together. The key challenge going forward will be in identifying how to continue this parallel track of social cohesion and humanitarian relief/economic activities as returns increase and tensions potentially heighten.

*“During the food crisis we received assistance from World Vision which we were grateful. It was visible and a job well done. During food distributions it has brought people together. People also come together at markets, schools, to learn and play together.” – beneficiary woman, Bangui*

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. When World Vision has taken a holistic approach to its work, for example helping build homes for IDPs or helping returnees rebuild their homes, or delivering food to the neediest of a community, it has earned credibility and an audience for its messaging on social issues. World Vision’s care for both material and social needs was described by many as an expression of its Christian identity.

*“Humanitarian activities deal with the exterior but need to use faith to change mindsets. It is a complementary dimension of their work.” – Catholic priest, rural town*

This was confirmed by beneficiaries who thanked World Vision in the same sentence for both their sensitisation and relief efforts. Furthermore, many stories were shared that demonstrated tolerance and shared humanity through demonstrations of practical mercy. An Imam gave food to the displaced

families who took refuge on the mosque grounds, regardless of their religious background. The Cardinal housed and protected an Imam and his family for the better part of a year. Local families allowed displaced people to squat on their land or, in some cases, even in their homes. These stories have inspired others to think of peace and tolerance.

*“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*

*“We appreciate World Vision because they are doing our mission... They work with the most vulnerable groups, like the elderly and children. This is the church’s mission, but World Vision has helped us to achieve our vision. They are helping to restore the community and responding to our needs.” – Protestant Pastor, rural town*

## **Defining ‘faith leaders’**

World Vision partners with faith leaders, but who is a faith leader and are they the most influential actors in their communities? In the CAR, the term ‘religious leader’ is more often used than ‘faith leader’, which may be simply a question of ease of translation, but bears implications for people’s understanding of who these leaders are. Religious leaders are 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 was a donor meeting last November, with a wide range of high-level people from the international community invited. The three leaders in the platform were also invited. At the end of the conference some donors asked the religious leaders if the money would be well-managed if give, and the leaders said yes; as a result millions were pledge.” – Permanent Secretary of the CAR Inter-Religious Platform*

The interreligious platform supported by the CIPP defines itself in this way. Its figureheads are a trio: one Muslim Imam, one Catholic Cardinal, and one Protestant Pastor. At its local levels, this understanding of religious diversity is replicated, with platform members identifying with one of these three traditions. This poses two limitations, however. First, traditional faith communities, namely animist traditions, are excluded – though at least in some instances traditional leaders have joined local interreligious platforms. Second, there is an assumption in the structure that one leader from each of the three main traditions will represent the others of his tradition, whereas in fact there is great denominational and relational diversity. Imams do not necessarily follow a hierarchical structure, so one Muslim leader cannot be assumed to speak for other Muslim leaders, and Protestants include a diversity of denominations, each with its own leadership structure.

*“This is why the positions of the platform need legitimacy, not the person.” World Vision CAR staff*

However, this presentation of the diversity of religions is being used to promote a narrative that is compelling and easily understood. When three leaders from three traditions come together, they demonstrate unity in diversity.

There are other leaders in a community, however, and the influence of religious leaders, per se, varies.

In some places religious leaders have earned their influence, while in others they are perceived as having abused their power. In some locations religious leaders have been complicit in violence and have lost the trust of their congregants, while in others they are respected community leaders even beyond their specific religious tradition. Stories were told of religious leaders whose authority transcended religious lines, who were respected by all members of their community and were thus entry points and gatekeepers for the people. In other places, though, the words of a religious leader were all but ignored, as that person had not earned the respect of others, and in some cases had lost it by turning civilians over to militias or simply turning a blind eye to suffering. Sometimes the key to influence was the need to remain politically neutral whilst at other times credibility was earned when the religious leaders spoke up for the most vulnerable. World Vision CAR had to do proper actor mapping in order to identify the most influential individuals, rather than working on the assumption that all religious leaders were viewed the same.

While some participants claimed that “everyone” listens to religious leaders, others said that some do not listen. Examples were given where militia members blatantly disregarded the word of religious leaders, acting autonomously, but other examples were given where militia members attended church and heeded the word preached on a Sunday.

*“At the moment, people are more confident in their priest than they are in politicians. The priest is considered a man of God, while politicians are seen as out for their own interests only and not looking for development of people’s well-being.” – Catholic priest, Bangui*

Each community also has non-religious leaders. Indeed, 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. All villages and towns have leaders who are part of the local government structure, and who may also be traditional tribal leaders. These leaders were rarely described as the most influential members of the community, particularly in terms of influencing how people think, but they were largely recognised as the entry point to the community, the networkers and the connectors. Humanitarian actors, including World Vision, approach these local leaders first, because they know the entire community and often have more information, including an understanding of who the other leaders are, and which religious leaders will want to, or be able to effectively, partner with humanitarians. Other actors identified as potentially influential included youth and women’s representatives and local community organisations or committees.

*“If people have a problem they go to the head of the district. In some places, depending on the area, they may go to the Pastor or Imam. The head of the district is very close to the community and the government representative. However the religious leaders have more authority and are often the first to be informed about events.” – Local district chief, Bangui*

*“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*

Leadership is exerted differently in Islam than it is in Christianity. Various participants in the research described the differences in leadership structures between religions, but as we met more people it became increasingly clear that 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. There are instances when a leader is respected simply for his status, while other respondents believed that leaders earn the respect they are afforded. Furthermore, credibility can be lost, and in these years of crisis often has been. Some religious leaders have gained credibility as a result of working with members of other religions and denominations presenting a united voice.

*“One story that illustrates this is [when] we went to do a distribution and a group of youth tried to divert their resources at the distribution centre, which was near a school by a church. The pastor of that church came and influenced the youth to get them to stop. As far as I know, though, the youth were not from his church; they listened to him for his authority as a pastor, though.” – World Vision CAR staff*

Many examples were given in which leaders played a role in mediation, directly negotiating with militias to bring a cease to the fighting or to allow safe passage for displaced families. However, they were often working in partnership with MINUSCA, armed peace forces, and there was insufficient evidence to warrant a claim that they were able to bring peace in these situations on their own. Rather, their role seemed to be in facilitating communication and information, and modeling tolerance as representatives of a religious community willing to approach members of other communities.

*“When there was violence between anti-Balaka and Bangladesh contingent of MINUSCA, religious leaders came and stood in-between, they mediated, exchanged with both sides, calmed the situation. People didn’t want conflict and they saw the message from religious leaders that conflict is not good.” – World Vision CAR field volunteer*

## **The ‘DNA’ rather than the ‘tool’**

The above sections have not described many specific activities World Vision has conducted with faith leaders for social cohesion, rather they have identified ways in which World Vision has interacted with the crisis in a more holistic sense. Indeed, when trying to understand how World Vision engaged religious actors proactively, it was difficult to identify specific models or tools beyond the CIPP project, which is just one part of a large and diverse programming portfolio. However, it became clear that faith leaders are familiar with World Vision and feel a relationship with World Vision programming, and that World Vision staff consider faith leaders to be important partners in whatever they do.

*“The fact that they have demonstrated that they work with the community and religious leaders has brought about a change in mindset of people towards us.” – World Vision CAR staff*

Often, faith leader partnerships comprised of little beyond relationships, information-sharing and invitations to attend activities planned by World Vision, such as child protection trainings or food distributions. World Vision had arranged for some faith leaders to attend Channels of Hope Child Protection training in Senegal, supported the interreligious platforms through the CIPP project, and was

planning a Do No Harm for Faith Leaders training. However, such events comprised a relatively small portion of World Vision CAR's programming portfolio.

*"The food department in World Vision works with religious leaders in the same way that it works with all leaders." – World Vision CAR field staff*

*"In World Vision trainings leaders come together to discuss a topic. World Vision has done a lot to change mentalities, for education, for food, social issues. More training at the social level would be better." – Representative of Mayor's office, rural town*

However, it became clear that 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 principles for how to operate. There were some tools in place for doing this, but the genuine partnerships were rooted in relationships, an understanding that when engaging stakeholders in a community, religious leaders are important stakeholders; and that when addressing socially sensitive issues such as child protection or social cohesion, interfaith engagement is essential. Wider principles of good communication, grassroots presence, bringing people together, investment in capacity building and always focusing on children, were also aspects of World Vision CAR's DNA that people felt contributed to social cohesion.

*"We need to empower communities via their leaders. Without this, any fuel on the fire will lead to clashes. We need to collaborate with everyone, and do training so that everyone changes their behaviour... When talking about interfaith engagement, the important thing is that we must come back to our statement of faith: we work for the poor and we work for kids, and we are about serving others." – World Vision CAR staff*

When asked how World Vision contributed to social cohesion, and in particular to facilitating improved relations between Christians and Muslims, the most common response was messaging. Before conducting humanitarian activities, whether they be food distribution, sanitation, or child protection, staff explain that World Vision is a Christian organisation motivated by faith and that it is important to World Vision to support people regardless of affiliation or background. This inclusivity and messaging is tied to a message of shared human dignity and tolerance, as well as an emphasis on interfaith engagement.

*"We talk a lot about World Vision's Christian identity, but emphasise that World Vision serves all with dignity, regardless of their religion or faith." – World Vision CAR staff*

*"They do know that World Vision is Christian. They know this because there is no discrimination and they serve everyone." – beneficiary man, rural town*

*"World Vision's interfaith engagement can be seen in the fact that World Vision serves everyone, regardless of background. When we go to the community we point out the cross/star on the World Vision logo to emphasise our Christian identity. We do work with the church, and we tell people to see how World Vision has already made a difference in the lives of children, and made a difference in other ways as well." – World Vision CAR field volunteer*

Furthermore, social cohesion is integrated into sectoral activities, as described above. Often there is no 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. When asked how staff learned to prioritise this, some people pointed out that it is a part of hiring criteria. Project staff are hired not only for technical skills but also for their support of World Vision's wider goals. This includes some instances of choosing staff based on their religious identity in order to ensure community acceptance; though most staff are Christian, Muslim staff also attend devotions and participate in all staff activities. Of particular significance, staff devotions were mentioned by several participants. In devotions, senior management speak with the entire staff team about what motivates World Vision, their desire to support peace in the CAR, and the importance of faith leaders in this process.

*“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*

*“The key to World Vision's effectiveness in interfaith engagement is our Christian identity. It is key to understand this and talk about it; when we do that, it works. But it is hard to communicate this to militarized groups, though we need to try.” – World Vision CAR staff*

## **Further research**

More research would be warranted to better understand the divisions within religious communities, the tensions that those divisions may create, and how they can be addressed to model genuine collaboration and cohesion. Also, the role of the secular humanitarian community in engaging with religion was not clear in this research. There was little mention of secular humanitarians engaging with faith leaders, but the interreligious platform is highly visible and active and recognised outside of religious networks. The extent to which secular humanitarians are actively engaging with religion, and how their attempts at promoting interreligious cohesion are perceived, was not clear.

Further research into the links between poverty and social cohesion is also needed. On one hand, the links are clear: many community members gave World Vision credit for facilitating social cohesion through its provision of material aid, and economic drivers of conflict are widely recognised by humanitarian actors. At the same time, though, the humanitarian community tends to speak of transition to development as a goal to seek only after aid has been delivered, fighting stabilised and some degree of social cohesion restored, rather than a part of social cohesion itself. The relation between development, poverty and conflict merits further exploration, therefore.

## **Lessons Learned**

The following lessons learned identify best practices and approaches that World Vision CAR can and should continue or scale up, and that other humanitarian responses in conflicts with an interfaith element may apply.

- 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 important 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 can not only have a social impact, but 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, and therefore aid delivery projects may not necessarily be held accountable for their impact on social cohesion. Nonetheless, 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 also 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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