

Reducing children's vulnerability to violence: A case study from the Central African Republic

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These children, along with more than 4,000 people, took refuge at the airport of Bangui, the capital city of CAR. © Bruno Col/World Vision.

Introduction

Children in the Central African Republic (CAR) have been living through cycles of conflict, instability and chronic poverty for decades. They live in a 'forgotten crisis' that has largely slipped off the international agenda and rarely makes it into the headlines.

More than 13,000 children and adolescents are currently being exploited by armed groups.¹ Children have been subjected to sexual abuse and gender-based violence and face ongoing risk of being injured or killed. Many remain displaced and separated from their families, exposing them to even greater risk of abuse and exploitation.

Since 2014, World Vision CAR has worked with 590 children and adolescents (ages 8 to 18 years) demobilised from armed groups in the sub-prefectures of Damara.² Many of these children displayed signs of distress, suffered nightmares, presented social withdrawal, had difficulty concentrating and sometimes regressed to previous developmental behaviours (e.g. bedwetting or thumb-sucking). Former child soldiers also met with reticence and opposition from their communities, leaving the children feeling isolated, lonely and hopeless.

¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), '2017 Aperçu des humanitaires republique centrafricaine' (October 2016), 21.

² World Vision, *Bringing hope to 'a forgotten crisis': Central African Republic Response Report* (August 2016), 7.



It was in this context that the project Empowering Children as Peacebuilders (ECaP) was implemented. The project provides a community-based approach for the protection and empowerment of children affected by conflict in the Damara sub-prefecture.

This case study examines how World Vision and partners developed the peacebuilding and social cohesion programme to address challenges facing children, youth and their communities in the post-conflict Damara sub-prefecture. It also sheds light on the importance of community-led project adaptation and design to fit the specific needs of this conflict context and to ensure that the interventions will yield positive impact on all communities involved.

In this specific example, World Vision met for a whole week with community leaders, demobilised former soldiers (Séléka and Anti-Balaka), Christian and Muslim faith leaders, youth groups and other community-based organisations involved in peacebuilding and reconciliation work to make sure that the Empowering Children as Peacebuilders project was fit for purpose and served the needs of project beneficiaries.

Context

The Central African Republic is one of the world's poorest countries and often described by the international community as a failed state in permanent crisis. Decades of political instability have led to the destruction of the national economy, the weakening of state institutions and a stagnation of development efforts. By all measures, even before the devastation from the 2012 conflict, CAR was already facing severe development deficits.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Index, prior to the 2012 coup, CAR had the second lowest level of human development (187th out of 188 countries), with a life expectancy of 50.7 years. More than 62 per cent of the population lived below the international poverty line of US\$1.25/day, while the under-5 mortality rate was 164 per 1,000 (the 8th highest in the world). The country's immunisation coverage stood at just 23 per cent; 41 per cent of children under 5 were chronically malnourished; and less than 35 per cent of the population had access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation facilities.³ In 2016, out of 183 countries reviewed against the Global Youth Development Index, CAR was rated the worst place to be young.⁴

The current crisis in CAR began in December 2012, when the northern-based Muslim Séléka forces overthrew the government, forcing then-president François Bozizé to flee the country. This led to the formation of Christian self-defence militia groups, the Anti-Balaka. Since then CAR has experienced spiralling violence (including atrocities and massacres), inter-community tensions and ethno-religious conflict.

Almost the entire population of 4.6 million has been affected by the crisis: 2.3 million people remain in need of humanitarian aid, nearly 385,000 have been internally displaced and another 12,700 have fled the country.⁵ According to UNICEF, one-third of school-age children do not attend school, more than 40 per cent of children under 5 are suffering from chronic malnutrition, and between 6,000 and 10,000 children have been recruited by armed groups during the crisis.⁶

³ UNDP, *Human Development Report 2015* (2015).

⁴ Commonwealth Secretariat, *2016 Global Youth Development Index and Report* (2016), 31.

⁵ UNOCHA, '2017 Aperçu des humanitaires republique centrafricaine' (October 2016), 6.

⁶ UNICEF, 'Central African Republic: Nearly one in five children is a refugee or internally displaced' (15 November 2016), https://www.unicef.org/media/media_93278.html.



Impact of the conflict on children

A World Vision–facilitated multi-sectoral assessment revealed that the Damara sub-prefecture of Ombella-M'poko prefecture experienced some of the conflict's heaviest impacts.⁷ In addition to lives lost, families separated and a shattered economy, the assessment revealed acute vulnerability, particularly among orphaned children and youth, many of whom had been forced to engage in the conflict.



14-year-old 'Francis' (not his real name) is a former child soldier with the Anti-balaka armed group. © World Vision/Bruno Col

According to community members interviewed,⁸ the underlying problems that led children to be recruited in armed groups extended beyond religious, political or tribal affiliations. These problems included the murder of their parents or family members, rape and gender-based sexual violence, and the destruction and looting of property. Food insecurity (including looting and destruction of livestock), population displacement and the destruction and looting of health centres were less obvious but equally important push factors.

Even after the end of active conflict, mistrust and violence pervaded the community. Communities did not trust the children and youth who returned to their communities after having been recruited into armed groups and forced to commit violence. At the same time, these youth did not trust caregivers who, in many cases, had coerced them to join the fight.

The crisis in Damara has had a negative impact on children in a variety of ways:

- **Psychological impact:** Many children became partial or full orphans in sudden and violent ways. Children of both sexes who had seen their parents killed often enlisted in armed groups as an act of revenge.
- **Education impact:** Qualified teachers either fled or were killed, leaving a void in the schools. Orphans often had to leave school to assume domestic work or other duties. In addition, it was often hard to pay for school kits, clothing and fees, given the impact of the conflict on people's livelihoods; this often meant that children left school at an early age.
- **Hygiene impact:** Toilets that were set up for children living in Internally Displaced People (IDP) sites were contaminated, and children had no access to safe drinking water or adequate care in case of illness.
- **Former child soldiers were often left without any reintegration opportunities.** While 70 per cent of child soldiers returned to agricultural or small-business activities, 22 per cent were left with nothing to do.

World Vision's Response

World Vision started working in CAR in March 2013 at the peak of the conflict. Based on the scale of the humanitarian crisis and existing development deficits, World Vision developed a multi-sectoral programme to meet urgent needs and build longer-term resilience of communities in CAR. At the heart of this approach was a cross-cutting emphasis on building social cohesion and peacebuilding efforts.

⁷ World Vision Multi-sectoral Assessments, August 2016.

⁸ Interviews conducted by Bureau d'Etudes AZIMUT Capacités as part of the research for the case study, August 2016.



In the Damara sub-prefecture, World Vision's programme began with emergency water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions and gradually extended to include education, child protection, peacebuilding and livelihoods programming. In line with a broader strategy to address longer-term social cohesion and peacebuilding issues, World Vision began implementing the Empowering Children as Peacebuilders (ECaP) project model.

This project model promotes participatory community-based management of Peace Clubs. These clubs aim to support and sustain the efforts of local, national and international actors towards the protection, reintegration and empowerment of demobilised children associated with armed forces and groups. They also reduce the risk of these children being recruited again.

The Peace Clubs are designed to help children and adolescents become agents of peace and change for themselves, their families and their communities. The Peace Road Curriculum implemented in the Peace Clubs helps targeted children and youth to:

- 1) protect themselves and make good decisions
- 2) treat others with respect, tolerance and peace
- 3) foster relationships that result in a safer, more cooperative community for all.

Peace Clubs have been established in seven villages in the sub-prefecture of Damara: Trangué, Gbago, Damara Centre, Gbozo, Bosselé, Dombe/Liby and Oumba.

My name is Emmanuel. I'm 18 years old and I'm from Bouka. I moved to Damara few months after Mrs Samba Panza was elected president. I spent one year and half in the Anti-Balaka group.

I joined the Anti-Balaka movement because when the Séléka militia entered my village, my neighbours pointed out my father as a partisan and personal traditional healer of the former president François Bozizé. They beat my father in front of us and left him for dead, lying in a pool of his own blood.

They did it as if we were not there. They didn't touch my mother or my sister: they were angry with my father. Just after they left, I saw my father crying on the floor.

I left home the same night, walking in the village and watching the impact of the Séléka forces. Houses burned, men lying dead on the floor, women crying. That night I vowed to avenge my father and my community.

I was walking around trying to find the Anti-Balaka group present in my village to ask them to let me join the group. I realised I was not alone; many others boys I knew felt the same dynamic. That evidence gave me strength.

The General selected three boys (some friends of mine) because they were taller and more muscular than me; he rejected me. All night, with some others boys, I slept close to the camp. In the morning, he woke me up and just asked me to follow him.

I fought for one year and half with that group; I even entered Bangui for the famous last battle.



In order to support local sustainability, World Vision and implementing partner URU engaged community leaders to provide community management and oversight of the Peace Clubs. Each Peace Club is managed by a committee comprising representatives from youth groups, women's groups, religious leaders and village chiefs. (The local government is represented by the village chief.)

While World Vision developed and funded the project, it has been directly implemented by URU and the community. URU's primary responsibility has been to ensure the establishment and continuity of the management committees, to train instructors and to conduct community training on child protection and child rights.

Challenge: Absence of appropriate peer support

In the initial stages of project implementation, the World Vision team quickly came to understand that the model had to be adapted for CAR's specific context. The original project model is primarily centred around peer-supported psychosocial interventions; however, most of the children and adolescents in CAR were not yet in a position to offer peer support. Substituting parents and caregivers for peers was also not an option as many had lost trust in their parents and their community due to the dynamics of the conflict.

Adaptation

Following the realisation of the need to adapt the model to the CAR context, World Vision worked with children and adolescents to revise the programme and incorporate a whole-of-community approach. While maintaining a platform within the Peace Clubs for children and youth to receive individual and peer-supported psychosocial support, World Vision activated the entire community to offer multi-dimensional support for demobilised children. This meant that while children received targeted support from URU facilitators (and each other) in the Peace Clubs, parents, caregivers and community leaders were also trained in child protection and child rights and were supported to begin the reconciliation processes.

World Vision and URU worked with community members to sensitise them to the needs of children and youth attending the Peace Clubs, the aims of the programme and how they could effectively support efforts. In the end, so many community members were interested in supporting the programme that it became a challenge to organise enough training to accommodate all volunteers.

My name is Odre. I'm 18 years old, and I used to be part of the Anti-Balaka militia until the election of the transitional government, after which I concluded that the reason why we decided to fight was no longer relevant. Going back home was much more difficult than I imagined. People were afraid of me. I was lonely and frustrated at the fact that they judged me for having been part of the militia. I had the urge to turn the tables and help my community with something other than a gun.

A head of Damara came to my village and explained that a new project was starting, with the aim of bringing young people and ex-combatants like myself together to take part in peace-promotion activities. I joined with a friend of mine without hesitation. The project is definitely helping change the way people see us – I feel a lot better now.



World Vision also targeted the involvement of children within the community who were not associated with armed groups but were at risk of joining due to peer influence. To attract these children, World Vision supplied Peace Clubs with play material, including slides, swings and other equipment. This provided children with a safe recreation space to play, forget about daily worries and share lessons they experienced through the Peace Clubs with others not yet engaged in them. This play space also created a natural mingling area for children and families from various backgrounds, facilitating interactions that might not have otherwise taken place.

My name is Sofia. I'm 8 years old. I'm an orphan, and I live with my aunt.

My aunt is not involved in the club, but she told me that this is a place I can go when I don't have school. When I'm at the club with the facilitators and the other children, I feel happy, and I don't want to go back home because we have a lot of fun together. The Peace Club is full of girls like me, so I enjoy being part of a big group of girls, and the games we play become more interesting and more challenging. You have to do your best to make your team win.

On the way back home after the Peace Club I like to share with my peers new strategies to be sure that the next day we will improve our game and win over the other group. Those girls are becoming my sisters at some point because we all come from different backgrounds and we have our own complicated stories. But during our activities we forget our complicated life and just enjoy the moment.

Challenge: Creating alternative positive means of livelihoods

Many of the children and youth who joined the armed groups were driven to do so because of underlying poverty issues. With no alternative livelihood opportunities, many youth joined armed groups as a means to provide for basic necessities. Children who joined armed groups were often coerced by caregivers who were unable to provide for them. Therefore, keeping demobilised children from needing to rejoin armed groups required creating alternative options.

ECaPs as a project model in CAR would respond to those needs by increasing economic opportunities for demobilised children and thereby actively investing in maintaining peace.

Adaptation

To supplement the activities driven by the Peace Clubs, World Vision worked to re-enrol children into school. Women's groups were equipped with sewing machines and supported to develop savings groups so they could support their children. These women's groups further contributed to the reintegration of girls formerly associated with armed forces by providing them with vocational training, specifically on sewing skills, so they could earn a sustainable income in the future.



Many children were among those forced to take refuge at the IDP camp near Bangui Airport. © World Vision/Bruno Col



Youth who were unable to return to school have been introduced to vocational training, savings schemes, entrepreneurship and targeted cash-for-work activities. To increase the income generated via cash-for-work projects, participating youth were divided into groups of 20 and requested to use learned techniques introduced to them to develop their own savings strategy. On their own, these groups would meet regularly and devise strategies to reinvest earnings into further income-generating activities. As well as building core life skills, the development of these savings groups multiply the benefits gained from engagement in cash-for-work activities.

Challenge: Developing sustainable funding

In 2016, only 34 per cent of the humanitarian funding needs were met for CAR.⁹ At the time of writing, only 2 per cent of the estimated humanitarian funding requirements are pledged for 2017.¹⁰ Chronic underfunding for this crisis often results in short-term project design, with donors prioritising urgent and immediate life-saving interventions versus addressing underlying causes of fragility and conflict with measures that have the potential to significantly reduce the impact of the crisis and its cyclical reoccurrence.

My name is Yasmine. I'm 23 years old and I live in Damara with my husband.

When the project started in Damara, one of the community leaders called me to say that they needed someone to replace the girls' leader and they said that everyone recommended me. So I accepted the position, knowing that it will be something I'll do as volunteer. I talked about it with my husband and we decided that I can be part of it.

Since then, my life is moving a lot. I have the feeling that I am giving a good contribution to my community. I am part of the team working to sensitize our community on the project, to build the Peace Club and help the implementation team to achieve our common goal.

As young woman, I'm proud to be involved in that project. I see the benefit for my community and even for my family. I feel more engaged, more credible towards people, at some point more empowered. From my perspective, the project is just there to help us to start a change at the community level. I am aware that World Vision and URU will leave, but they are giving to us a present we have to take care of. The more the community is engaged, the more the Peace Club will stay alive, and this is our mission as leaders and facilitators.

Adaptation

World Vision CAR was able to deliver this peacebuilding programme due to private fundraising from World Vision Korea. It was originally designed for only two Peace Clubs. World Vision's community-participation approach enabled community adoption and ownership of the clubs – enabling five additional Peace Clubs to be established per the communities' request and through the support of community volunteers – and achieved a level of self-sustainability. The reintegration of former child soldiers in Damara has become attractive to young people, who are coming from remote villages to attend the Peace Clubs. Children and youth who were introduced to conflict-management techniques and familiarised with child protection best

⁹ UNOCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2017* (2017), 8.

¹⁰ Based on data from the UNOCHA website, Central African Republic Country page, accessed 8 February 2017, <http://www.unocha.org/car>.



practices and child rights have become agents of peace. These agents of peace are now actively engaged in educating their peers on ways to promote peace in their communities.

Impact of the project

Approximately 4,900 boys and girls, including the 590 demobilised children, orphans and child-headed households, have benefitted from the programme. All these children come from very poor families and many from different faith backgrounds. Despite their personal histories and the brutality they have been subjected to, these children continue to demonstrate incredible capacities for peace and tolerance.

'Due to the project, I was able to be accepted by my community, which I never thought could be possible. Now I have made friends and I feel like a normal child again. People have accepted me. I could not ask for more.'
– Former boy soldier, 16 years old.



Students in a classroom in Seka 2 School in Bangui.
© Joelma Pereira/World Vision

Reduction in negative coping mechanisms

Children involved in the project were provided a safe space in which to identify and address underlying issues that led to aggressive behaviour, and they were able to make significant gains in overcoming manifestations of acute stress.

Most of the children and youth involved in the Peace Clubs are regaining normal social behaviour, routines and regular activities (such as education and play), despite the country's ongoing turmoil. They are responding well to the peer support, in familiar or family settings, with the appropriate care and protection from their regular caregivers.

Since implementation of the programme, none of the demobilised children or adolescents has returned to the armed groups. No children within the targeted communities have been reported to have joined or expressed the desire to join armed groups.

I decided to leave the Anti-Balaka a few months after the election of the transitional government. I decided to go back home. That was more difficult than I imagined. People were scared of me. I felt alone and I was angry to see that they are not able to understand my place in the community.

Today, I'm 18 and I see myself as a man. I want to start helping my community with something else than a gun. A leader of Damara came to my village and explained that there is a new project starting to bring young people and ex-combatants like me together to participate in activities promoting peace. My friend and I asked to be part of it.

I feel that it helps us to change the way people see us; this is the main benefit I see from that project. I live with my uncle and I can see that he is proud of me. He is proud to say to anyone around him that I'm changing in a positive way. My uncle is like a father to me, and I want to honour him through my behaviour. His pride is a blessing for me and my future. World Vision's project brought that change in my life, and things are better at home. I feel that my family can trust me again.



Increased trust and reduction in underlying social tensions within communities

Trust within communities is growing progressively and is being built on multiple levels. As children build trust with one another, they are also restoring relationships with their caregivers and the broader community. Today these children report a sense of belonging within their community.

The principles of forgiveness, tolerance and reconciliation introduced within the Peace Clubs have had a secondary benefit of bringing together previously strained Christian and Muslim communities. Although this was not the original intent of the programme, the peacebuilding principles and skills that have enabled children and youth have had important and far-reaching effects. Examples have been noted in which Christian members of a Peace Club have approached Muslim community members and requested they bring their children to attend. The Christians assured their Muslim neighbours that the security of their children would be guaranteed by children and parents already attending the Peace Club. There has not been an incident of violence between the two groups since. This is a tangible result of the project and its contribution to social cohesion.

My name is Mady, I'm widow, I am from the Muslim community and I live in Trangue.

When this project arrived in our village, I was not there because I spent months in the bush. I didn't want to risk my life even though I'm old. Some women living in the village met me on my farm and they gave me news of the village. They said that a new project is coming, targeting our children. I told them that I'm old and I don't have children anymore; they are all dead, so this project is not relevant for me.

They answered that the project needs women coming from different religions in order to prove to men that women are promoters of social cohesion and that we don't want our children to make the same mistake as their older brothers. I took two weeks to think about it alone at my farm, and I realised that I have to shut down the anger I have in my heart and go back in my community to participate as a woman.

I'm back in my village, and I realise that I don't have to be scared anymore. People welcomed me and I asked to reintegrate into the association of widowed women of the village. They talked to me about the good things coming thanks to the project, and it is motivating me to be more involved in my community.

Most of the Muslim families left the village during the conflict. I meet some of them from time to time, so I try to sensitise them to the project as a way to reintegrate the community. I think the project just opened a door in which Muslims and Christians living in the same community have to seize the chance to keep it open for a better future.



Recommendations

Peace-first approach: Fighting has not ended in CAR. Many times during the implementation of the Peace Clubs, work had to be suspended due to new clashes. While the traditional approach to social cohesion has been to implement programmes only after urgent humanitarian needs are met, the CAR example has shown that addressing both immediate and longer-term needs is not only possible but is crucial to prevent recidivism and mitigate a protraction of conflict.

Social cohesion as the foundation principle: Going beyond a 'do no harm' approach to actively 'do more good' meant intentionally building emergency programmes that foster interaction, build trust and engage all community members. While World Vision's programme in Damara began with water, sanitation and hygiene activities, well-designed, transparent programming laid the foundation for the community to trust World Vision to implement further programming. This ultimately opened the door for the Peace Clubs to take root. The end result was a project that goes beyond immediate emergency relief and has contributed to uniting entire communities.

Increased funding for programmes that address social cohesion: World Vision's programme demonstrates how small investments from private donors can have significant impact for a conflict-affected community. For sustained impact and to truly break the cyclical and detrimental effect of conflict, donors need to strategically invest and prioritise peacebuilding and youth-engagement programmes.

Transparent and participatory targeting: World Vision CAR worked with the community leaders and local authorities to ensure a transparent targeting process of the most vulnerable children. This included orphans, children associated with armed forces and groups, children who are head of households (especially girls), disabled children and children from very poor families. Focus group discussions with communities revealed that almost all participants were able to describe the target group and agreed it was the right group to target. By ensuring that the targeting criteria were appropriately defined and communicated, World Vision was able

to gain greater community buy-in and sensitise the community to the specialised needs of these groups.

Multi-sectoral approach: In addition to attending Peace Clubs and/or Child Friendly Spaces, children and youth previously engaged in armed groups (as well as those who were not) need to be engaged in productive activities by going to school, receiving vocational training or participating in income-generation activities. Failing to recognise and address the economic factors that push vulnerable youth and children into armed groups will result in higher rates of recidivism. Access to economic opportunities needs to be equitable to all.



Children share experiences and life stories at a child friendly space in Yaloké.
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Girls play a game at Yaloke IDP camp. © Geoffrey Kalebbo Denye/World Vision

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A 12-year-old girl cooks in Yaloke IDP camp. © Bruno Col/World Vision

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