The European Union funded Capacities for Peace project, implemented by Conciliation Resources, Saferworld and their partners, supported local actors to enhance the effectiveness of early warning and early action in conflict-affected contexts. In East and Central Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan), Conciliation Resources used the Capacities for Peace project to support communities’ local protection mechanisms and early warning processes in the areas affected by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA).

The project contributed to improving community-led warning mechanisms to respond to violence, and addressed a lack of communication and understanding between remote communities and policymakers in capitals. This paper focuses on achievements and lessons from the work in CAR.

The Capacities for Peace project activities contributed to an ongoing programme of work between Conciliation Resources and local civil society leaders and communities in the LRA-affected areas, which aims to tackle some of the root causes of the conflict and reduce its impact on local people.

Achievements

- Workshops in remote areas in south eastern CAR helped to improve the relationship between communities and military forces in the region.
- The ability of communities to mitigate the risk of attack (for example by circumventing routes used by the LRA) was enhanced as a result of activities to map relevant actors, develop communication channels between communities, and improve monitoring of security incidents.
- The project encouraged greater readiness on the part of participants to engage in advocacy. This was particularly true for those who had not been involved in similar processes, or who had previously assumed that advocacy was a domain only for jurists and lawyers.
- Bringing together those who rarely meet – in particular, local actors with national government and international representatives - was fruitful in developing understanding and responses. A seminar in Bangui involving participants from the EU Delegation, UN Mission and the US Embassy resulted in a constructive conversation and discussion of ways to respond to tensions and violence, which improved relationships and communication between the actors.

Insights

Co-facilitation by partners and international staff can enable complementary strengths and contributions to come to the fore in CAR. Local facilitators made good use of vernacular and familiar metaphors to ensure discussions were meaningful for participants, while international staff brought comparative perspectives and expertise.

Allowing civil society groups to discuss, prepare and agree constructive messages is important for effective advocacy. The advocacy workshops gave community representatives the opportunity to interact and think through approaches and needs, helping them to shift from ‘protest to proposals’ in advance of their meetings with policymakers at the seminar in Bangui.

“People feel really empowered now.... It was beneficial because some of the things we have been saying you have also raised, about the importance of accurate information and analysis.”

Ugandan People’s Defense Force Officer, based in Obo, Central African Republic
Community mediation as early action

In CAR, Conciliation Resources supports local organisation Femmes Hommes Action Plus (FHAP) – a group of local, mainly women peacebuilders - to improve early warning processes, mediate local disputes and facilitate the return and reintegration of LRA combatants into society. Below is an example of the ways in which local peacebuilders who are part of FHAP and involved in peacebuilding processes can prevent the escalation of violence and reduce tensions.

**Inspirational peacemaker**

Madame Rosalie Nawira, Mayor of Zemio in southeastern CAR, plays a key role reducing tensions in her community. In December 2014, violence broke out in Zemio between the local Muslim population and groups of youth. As tensions increased, run-ins with youth on the road to Zemio drew in ‘arrow boys’ (local self-defence groups) who began shooting. Houses of Christians were burnt in retaliation and several Muslims were killed.

Madame Rosalie was able to prevent violence due to her persuasive speech, firm convictions and commitment to peacebuilding. In an effort to calm the situation, Rosalie tried to get the support of the local police and the Ugandan Armed Forces (who were present as part of the African Union Regional Task Force combatting the LRA). However, they were reluctant to get involved. The police, relying on Rosalie’s credibility as Mayor, instead asked her to speak to the youth herself.

Initial reactions from both communities were accusatory and threatening. Appealing to their sensibilities, their humanity and their shared history - Christians and Muslims have lived alongside one another in CAR for decades with few problems - and asking them not to allow Bangui’s political troubles to affect them, she succeeded in convincing them to lay down their arms. The groups even asked forgiveness for the violence their behaviour had sparked.

Rosalie’s personality, confidence and principles have earned her great respect and credibility in the community. Following this incident, the National Transitional Council asked her to give a testimony in Bangui as to her experience and brave contribution to peacebuilding.

“All of this is because of the way Conciliation Resources works to build the capacities of women and how they view the importance of the involvement of women in peace processes.”

Madame Rosalie Nawira, Mayor of Zemio, CAR

*Lessons from the Capacities for Peace project have been published by Conciliation Resources and Saferworld in ‘Effective local action: from early warning to peacebuilding’, February 2016.*