



POLICY BRIEF

EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG EX-COMBATANTS IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

May 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Contemporary conflict in northwestern Central African Republic (CAR) is driven by local dynamics. Armed groups are fluid and informal, often starting as an organic expression of community needs for protection or revenge but over time turning to banditry to survive. Individuals involved with groups are predominantly young and frequently unarmed, and the line between combatant and non-combatant is shifting and difficult to establish.

The challenge for policymakers is that these patterns of violence and mobilisation do not fit well with established blueprints for conflict resolution or post-conflict recovery. Political peace processes taking place at national level are disconnected from the local grievances driving inter-community tension. Demobilisation predicated on removing automatic weapons from combatants in a formal military hierarchy excludes nearly all young people involved with armed groups, particularly women and children – the most vulnerable but least likely to have a weapon.

Those seeking to help CAR move beyond its current crisis should look to reframe interventions, bringing the needs and views of young people to the forefront, reducing their vulnerability to re-recruitment, and breaking links with opportunistic conflict entrepreneurs¹. This should include tailored and flexible support for all young people involved with armed groups, alongside local inter-community peacebuilding with youth at its heart, broad-based socio-economic support, and further research into the role that gendered and generational expectations play in patterns of recruitment.

The research underlying these findings was carried out in Bossangoa and Paoua late 2019 and early 2020, predating the emergence of the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) rebel coalition that has dominated thinking on CAR since its creation in December 2020. The CPC is already showing signs of fracturing, and may prove to be only a transient player in CAR's long crisis, but its sudden emergence demonstrates the continuing vulnerability of CAR's young population to the ambitions of conflict entrepreneurs and the risks of being drawn back into armed group activity.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Local dynamics have driven recruitment of young people into armed groups. These have not been sufficiently addressed by national peace processes, which need to adequately engage with local concerns, leaders and communities.
2. Established templates for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) are not a good fit for local patterns of mobilisation and armed groups, making programmes inaccessible to the majority of young ex-combatants. They need to be designed to meet local need and include the most vulnerable.
3. There is a clear risk of re-recruitment of young people. This needs to be addressed through inter-community reconciliation and giving young people non-violent means of having their voices heard.
4. Without alternative livelihoods young people will remain vulnerable to manipulation. Socio-economic interventions must be broad-based and available to all young people, not just ex-combatants.
5. Generational and gendered expectations play an important role in shaping routes into armed groups, experiences in the group, and reception by communities on return. Women and girls have been particularly disadvantaged. This is an area that warrants further study.
6. Violence has left a deep legacy of trauma for individuals and between communities and ex-combatants. Rehabilitation and community reconciliation initiatives are necessary, and must be appropriate to local understandings of the roots and meanings of violence.

FINDINGS IN DETAIL

1. Local dynamics have driven recruitment of young people into armed groups. National peace processes need to adequately address local concerns, leaders and communities.

The research revealed that young rank-and-file combatants from Bossangoa and Paoua were motivated to join armed groups by local issues, predominantly perceived threat to communities or individuals, and anger at past violence or abuses. National political considerations, by contrast, were cited by very few.

Equally, groups were small and disconnected from national command structures or leaders. Around Paoua, the majority of armed groups were operating in 'survival mode' or as bandits – stealing to sustain the group or bring benefit to leaders. Around Bossangoa, the Anti-balaka emerged as a spontaneous expression of community needs for self-defense and revenge, and then largely devolved back to a latent local community defense network.

The role of local dynamics in recruitment to armed groups in Paoua and Bossangoa and the nature of the groups have important implications for the design and implementation of any future peace process. This is particularly relevant as the imperative of finding a lasting resolution to the CPC crisis is leading to pressure to reopen national negotiations, revisit the pre-existing (2019) peace accord, or launch new national dialogue processes. Talks have historically taken place in Bangui or regional capitals, been focused on national-level issues, and involved those claiming overall leadership of armed groups². It is vital that any new high-level political process be complemented with initiatives to identify and engage with key leaders at subnational and local levels. These local peacebuilding processes should not be deprioritised by the short-term imperative of the CPC crisis.

2. DDR has been inaccessible to the majority of ex-combatants. Demobilisation and rehabilitation programmes need to be designed to include the most vulnerable.

Nearly all of the ex-combatants involved in the research left armed groups without the assistance of formal DDR programmes or the involvement of any authorities. Instead, their pathways out of armed groups were informal, unsupported and organic. Established approaches to DDR are based on removing weapons, extracting combatants from a structured and hierarchical quasi-military structure, and then rehabilitating them for a return to 'civilian' life. These methods may not be appropriate for armed groups that do not routinely provide weapons to many combatants and that have a loose command structure with blurred boundaries between combatants and non-combatants. This may particularly be the case for those associated with the CPC, given the opacity of its organisation, weakness of command and lack of structure: if the CPC breaks down, significant numbers of former combatants are liable to turn to banditry to survive in the absence of swift support. Any new initiatives must be shaped by the lessons of past DDR programmes.

In the past, those that were able to access DDR were predominantly more senior figures, while the most vulnerable cohorts – women and children in particular – were excluded due to the fact that they were only rarely in possession of a firearm. Some who had been armed during their time in the armed group reported having their weapon taken away by commanders in advance of DDR, to be given to more favored individuals or sold. It is



THE 2020 ELECTION CRISIS IN CONTEXT

The emergence of the CPC rebel coalition in late 2020 has dominated recent coverage of CAR, triggering a crisis which has drawn attention away from grassroots peacebuilding. But understanding the motives of the CPC and its leaders illustrates precisely why it is more vital than ever to engage with the views and needs of CAR's young people.

The CPC's leaders have claimed to be motivated by fears of fraud in relation to national elections – yet most of the armed groups involved in the CPC had previously been engaged in profiteering, banditry or inter-group fighting for resources rather than politics. The speed with which group cohesion is breaking down as the government reclaims lost territory strongly suggests that the CPC has been held together by the shared ambition of opportunistic leaders rather than political or community grievances.

Rather than a new conflict, the CPC crisis instead represents the latest iteration of a long series of violent mobilisations driven by CAR's conflict entrepreneurs. The CPC may prove to be a transient player in CAR's long crisis – but it has served to underline the fragility of progress made in recent years, and the acute vulnerability of young people to being drawn back into violence.

important that any further disarmament, demobilisation or rehabilitation initiatives are adapted to the realities of informal and often unarmed combatants, accessible to the most vulnerable, and resist becoming a mechanism for profiteering by group leaders.

3. There is a clear risk of re-recruitment and remobilisation of young people. This can only be addressed through peacebuilding, inter-community reconciliation, and offering non-violent ways for young people to make themselves heard, attuned to the local geographic, cultural and political context.

The perception of threats to communities, and consequent pressure for young people to act to protect them, have not gone away – and are likely to have intensified in the context of the emergence of the CPC and operations against it. As a result, young people may be even more vulnerable to re-recruitment and remobilisation by armed groups.

In and around Paoua this pressure on young people was in recent years driven by the continued operation of armed groups, in particular 3R (Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation), as well as endemic conflict between herders and farmers. Though it is not clear the extent to which the CPC crisis has driven local re-recruitment in areas surrounding Paoua, the focus of peacebuilding should nonetheless remain on addressing structural causes of violence in the first instance, including broad approaches to demobilisation of remaining armed groups, a focus on underlying issues of land use and offering alternative livelihoods to young people through broad-based development.



In Bossangoa, where a ‘bubble’ of relative stability held between 2016 and the emergence of the CPC in December 2020, the pressure for young people to rejoin armed groups remained latent. It was linked to lingering community fear of Séléka, and by extension – in the eyes of many former combatants and civilian community members alike – of the Muslim community. This supported a residual connection among some young people to the Anti-balaka as community protectors.

In December 2020, the Anti-balaka and the CPC were able to capitalise on this latent network to rapidly remobilise and recruit young people into their ranks. However, the association of Anti-balaka with ex-Séléka elements in the CPC, and the partial return of Muslim fighters to Bossangoa in the context of the CPC crisis, may have changed the sensitivity of the community to the return of displaced Muslims. It may also have altered the views of young people towards Anti-balaka leaders, who under the CPC have been collaborating with ex-Séléka elements that many in Bossangoa have perceived as a significant threat since 2013. This too is worthy of further research, notably to align community peacebuilding and inter-faith dialogue with local needs.

4. Socio-economic conditions play an important underlying role in fueling violence. Without alternative livelihoods, involvement in armed violence will remain a temptation for young people, and there is fertile ground for local conflict entrepreneurs to take advantage of the lack of adequate state support. Socio-economic interventions must be broad-based and offered to all young people, not just those leaving armed groups.

Poverty, lack of education and training, and unemployment were not often cited as directly pushing young people into armed groups. However, there was widespread recognition that poverty and lack of opportunity increased the vulnerability of young people to manipulation and recruitment, and made life in an armed group seem a more attractive option.

Socio-economic conditions in CAR have only worsened since the 2013 crisis. Though the research did not reveal significant links between armed group activities and the control of natural resources, there was some evidence that patterns of conflict had shifted from inter-community cleavages with their roots in national and regional politics, to self-sustaining local and economically driven violence. Around Paoua, testimony revealed the emergence of a locally embedded war economy, with conflict entrepreneurs able to sustain violence in service of personal profit. In Bossangoa, there were signs that some former Anti-balaka elements were moving towards organised banditry, including competition for control of mining areas.

Research in both locations revealed that very few ex-combatants had received any support, despite the implementation of Community Violence Reduction (CVR) programmes and sundry support from the United Nations, NGOs and others, leaving the majority facing the same severe socio-economic challenges as the rest of the community. Further interventions are clearly necessary – but they must be broad-based and designed to avoid exclusively benefiting ex-combatants or setting up incentives that could push other young people to join armed groups.

5. Generational and gendered expectations of young people have played an important role in shaping pathways into armed groups, experiences of life in the group, and reception by communities on their return. Women and girls have been particularly disadvantaged. This is an area that warrants further study.

In some cases, the research revealed an explicit pressure for young people to take a lead in defending the community against perceived threat or to revenge family losses, particularly around Bossangoa and in relation to the threat of Séléka in 2013. Some former combatants reported that, faced with the Séléka invasion in 2013, their families had condoned or even encouraged their mobilisation, and community respondents were often appreciative of the sacrifices that combatants had made on their behalf. This pressure was perhaps particularly felt by young men, who predominantly took combat roles.

Young women, by contrast, stood out as particularly disadvantaged, facing abuses within armed groups and additional stigma on leaving. Though some female former armed group members had been active combatants, and others had played important roles in accessing supplies and ammunition, women and girls were less likely to be armed than men and boys and thus less able to access DDR programmes or other support. Many also reported fearing sexual violence within the group or taking husbands within the group in part for the protection it offered them. More research needs to be done to understand what role social and gendered expectations played in incentivising young people to join armed groups, including in the most recent mobilisation wave linked to the creation of the CPC in December 2020.

6. Violence has left a deep legacy of trauma, both for individuals and between communities and ex-combatants. There is a clear need for rehabilitation and community reconciliation initiatives. Any programmes must be sensitive to local understandings of the spiritual framework for violence and rehabilitation, particularly in relation to the Anti-balaka.

Exposure to violence and killing was widely understood by communities as leaving a potentially dangerous legacy of spiritual 'contamination' for former armed group members. Though many ex-combatants reported having undergone a purification ritual on returning to civilian life, this was private and concerned with protecting their health and that of their family, and did little to dispel the fear of the wider community, intensified by the disruptive and sometimes intimidating behavior of some former combatants. This was particularly the case in relation to the Anti-balaka, which emerged from the research as a syncretic hybrid of community defence militia, armed group and spiritual movement, intensified by the widespread use of fetishes³ and spiritual indoctrination for new combatants.

So while further work to counsel individuals and reconcile communities is important, it would need to be accompanied by careful research to better understand local meanings of violence and armed group membership, and to formulate appropriate modalities for apology, reparation or reconciliation that reflect local needs rather than external assumptions.

The research for this policy brief was part of the 'Alternatives to Violence'⁴ (2018-2020) and 'Smart Peace' (2018-2022) projects. Funded by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, the Alternatives to Violence project worked with 600 young people in Bossangoa (Ouham) and Paoua (Ouham-Pendé), including those associated with armed groups, to strengthen youth participation in peacebuilding and build their resilience through increased economic opportunities. Smart Peace is a four-year programme (2018-2022) funded by the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). The project promotes strategic conflict resolution in the Central African Republic, Nigeria and Myanmar.

Building on insights from this programmatic work, a Listening Exercise was carried out in February 2020 focused on young people associated with armed groups to better understand the challenges they face and the role they play in wider community and conflict dynamics. Researchers carried out

long-form, unstructured, narrative interviews with 146 respondents in Bossangoa and Paoua, including 101 young former armed group members (30 female, 68 male, 3 unspecified) and 45 community representatives (16 female, 28 male, 1 unspecified). This approach was used to allow time for interviewers to build a rapport with respondents who were frightened, suspicious or traumatised, and for the former armed group members – who are often subject to significant stigmatisation – to explain, in their own words, their pathways into and out of armed groups, and their lives before and after conflict. In Paoua, an additional women-only workshop with 13 women previously involved with armed groups was organised to ensure that female perspectives were captured.

The research also draws on a survey on social attitudes conducted with 1010 people (including 459 women) and interviews held with 257 people in Bossangoa in November 2019.⁵

ENDNOTES

1. The term of 'conflict entrepreneur' is used to designate actors who fuel or sustain violence and war for their own political or economic benefit.
2. President Touadera has so far resisted calls to open negotiations with the CPC, but announced a new dialogue with opposition parties and civil society groups on 18 March 2021. Its precise purpose is still unclear.
3. Combat 'equipment' which includes amulets, clothing and ways of styling hair.
4. For more information on the project see Conciliation Resources, 'Peacebuilding training inspires young people in Central African Republic' (December 2019): www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/peacebuilding-training-inspires-young-people-central-african-republic
5. Conciliation Resources, Peace and security in the Central African Republic: Community perspectives from Bossangoa and the western border zones (May 2020): www.c-r.org/learning-hub/peace-and-security-central-african-republic



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