Youth visions for peace in the Central African Republic: voices from Bangui

Report
YOUTH VISIONS FOR PEACE IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: VOICES FROM BANGUI

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SMART PEACE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the Smart Peace project led by Conciliation Resources, 550 young people in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR), were consulted in March 2021 on their visions for peace and the future of their country. Despite suffering recurrent crises since 2013 and dealing with a deep legacy of trauma, loss, and disrupted lives and livelihoods, the collective view of these young people was resolutely optimistic. Though clear-eyed about the steep challenges they face, Bangui’s young people rejected sectarian and ethnic division, blamed bad governance and political manipulation – not each other – for CAR’s crises, and professed a deep desire to take the lead in transforming their own outlooks, relationship with government, and life chances.

The main findings that emerged from the research are:

- Participating young people saw divisions and violence from 2013 as a temporary product of political manipulation rather than the product of immutable religious or ethnic hatreds. In their view, this manipulation was able to take hold due to longstanding patterns of bad governance and self-interested leadership that has led to endemic poverty, widespread illiteracy, corruption and cronyism.

- However, young people also acknowledged that the conflict had negatively impacted youth attitudes and behaviours, and were acutely aware that young people remained vulnerable to future manipulation. Young people consulted were determined to take a leading role in driving a ‘counterculture’ and rebuilding a positive narrative and outlook for young people through organising, awareness raising and activism.

- Education, training and job creation emerged as their key demands of government, along with ensuring that employment opportunities are based on merit, not cronism or bribery. However, there was an awareness that changing these practices would involve taking on a system that privileges political leaders and older generations, and breaking a pattern of mistrust between young people and the state.

- Young people firmly believed that the restoration of state authority and securing of national borders were key to a lasting peace, rejecting what they saw as foreign interference. Despite the post-electoral crisis of late 2020 and early 2021, they had a strong faith in democratic elections as the only legitimate mechanism to shape the future of CAR.

- Young people felt that armed groups had benefited from the 2019 peace agreement, despite disregarding its terms. They insisted that any further dialogue be locally owned, be accessible for ordinary Central Africans, take place in CAR, include civil society, avoid rewarding the leaders of armed groups, and address the drivers and root causes of violence.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Seen through the eyes of young people, the fundamental challenge in CAR is one of governance and leadership, not identity or religion. External observers, commentators and policymakers need to be mindful of not letting a religious or ethnic lens dominate their thinking or reporting on CAR.

- Youth associations represent a vital mechanism to reach, engage and mobilise young people in the service of peace – able to act as a bridge to government, businesses and the wider community, and as a forum for young people to discuss, analyse and change their own mentalities, outlook and priorities. These associations need to be supported.

- Youth-led business associations (for instance of taxi-moto drivers, women traders, or credit transfer agents) should be encouraged and supported to help the most marginalised young people trapped in the informal economy to professionalise and to identify policy solutions that could help them scale up their businesses and create employment.

- Young people are highly motivated to take an active personal role in promoting security, with a large number expressing the desire to join the military, police or civil service. However, recruitment was barred to most by the lack of political connections or the necessary funds to buy an appointment. Transparent and fair recruitment practices emerged as a vital step on the road to sustainable peace.
However, a weak state and nascent private sector are very unlikely to provide sufficient jobs for more than a fraction of CAR’s youth population. Accordingly, mechanisms for the peaceful articulation of their frustrations and grievances are vital, most notably through the reinforcement of young people’s participation in politics. Legislation should specify a minimum level of youth participation in politics, supported by empowered youth groups able to engage collectively, constructively and peacefully in political processes from local to national and regional levels.

Youth activism could also constitute a risk, as the spontaneous organisation of community self-defence groups is highly likely if the government is unable to guarantee security. If badly managed this could constitute a significant risk of violence or conflict. However, if such groups were well organised and trained in non-violent conflict resolution, dialogue and peacebuilding they could instead contribute to the security of their communities without resorting to violence.

Some young people already have skills in peacebuilding and are actively working in their areas to reduce violence, including resolving disputes in communities, facilitating dialogue across conflict divides, and raising youth concerns with local authorities. However, they are few in number and lack long-term support. Such positive models should be supported and replicated across the country to enable young people to be peacebuilders in their communities.
1. INTRODUCTION

There is a generation of young Central Africans who have known nothing but conflict and crisis. For the past three decades, the country has faced recurrent socio-political crises that have left young people with a legacy of trauma, poverty and frustrated ambitions.

The majority have had no opportunity to get a good education – in 2018, 62% of those aged 15-24 were illiterate, compared to 39% in 2000 and have little chance of finding a job. Even the few who do get an education are frequently pushed into informal work to survive. The COVID-19 outbreak has added further challenges, with young people hardest hit by the economic consequences of the pandemic and travel restrictions, and most vulnerable to misinformation surrounding the pandemic.

Young people are also excluded from political decision-making and discussions around peace and post-conflict peacebuilding. Such processes are seen as the preserve of elders, with youth representatives reduced to the role of observers – despite people under the age of 35 making up more than 78% of the population. Frameworks such as the National Recovery and Peacebuilding Plan 2017-2021 (RCPCA) are intended to address security, national reconciliation and economic recovery, but do so without a clear focus on young people’s views and aspirations, and do not tackle the factors that have made them marginalised, disenfranchised, and vulnerable to manipulation and recruitment into armed groups. Continued exclusion from peace processes reduces young people’s motivation to engage in local and national peacebuilding initiatives and makes them more likely to take part in violence, with a widespread perception that involvement in conflict is the only realistic way of attaining a sustainable livelihood.

Despite these challenges, the young people interviewed were almost universally optimistic about the future. There was a large measure of agreement on the ultimate causes of CAR’s recurrent crises, reflecting a sophisticated understanding among young people of the pathways from peace to war. Though extremely conscious of the latent religious or ethnic divisions in their communities, young people rejected identity politics and instead focused their attention on patterns of poor leadership, illiteracy, unemployment and underdevelopment as creating the conditions for political manipulation to divide people. These findings held true across religious, ethnic and gender divisions.

The young people consulted were unified on the steps they wished their government to take, particularly in prioritising education, ensuring fairness in recruitment – notably to civil service jobs and positions in the security services – and providing support for job creation and training. They also wished their government to be stronger in preventing what they perceived as external manipulation in CAR, by re-taking control of the national territory and particularly its international borders. They had a clear vision on what an ideal peace process would look like: peace talks should be accessible to ordinary Central Africans, take place in CAR, address the conflict’s root causes and drivers, not be driven by external powers, avoid rewarding rebel leaders with positions, and instead bring peace dividends to the wider population.

Some young people already have skills in peacebuilding and are actively working in their communities to reduce violence, including resolving disputes and facilitating dialogue across conflict divides. However, they are few in number and lack long-term support. As a result of their long-standing exclusion from peace processes, most young people, especially those at the margins of society, still struggle to envisage an active peacebuilding role for themselves. They need support to find entry points into peacebuilding initiatives and peace processes and to explore their own contributions within these. Youth associations represent a vital mechanism to reach, engage and mobilise young people in the service of peace. They are able to act as a forum in which young people can come together to discuss their experiences of the conflict and priorities for peacebuilding, and can be an important bridge between the youth population, the government and the wider community.

In March 2021, Conciliation Resources and its partners (Conseil National de la Jeunesse Centrafricaine [CNJCA], Commission Diocésaine pour la Pastorale de l’Enfance et de la Jeunesse [CDPEJ], Jeunesse Islamique Centrafricaine [JICA], Jeunesse Evangelique Africaine [JEA] and the taxi-moto association) carried out research to uncover young people’s perspectives and views, based on their individual and collective experiences of the crisis, with a focus on peacebuilding processes and their vision for the future. As the new government prepares to review the RCPCA and the 2019 peace agreement, as well as conduct a national dialogue, this research will support young people in presenting their vision for involvement in peacebuilding and forging a peaceful future to government and other stakeholders.

The research was carried out in the eight districts of Bangui, as well as in Begoua and Bimbo, with 550 youth participants (51% of whom were young women), combining listening exercises with individual and group discussions (see annex for details of the research methodology).
2. YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON CAUSES OF CONFLICT

A REJECTION OF RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES

The young people interviewed shared a sophisticated understanding of the root causes of conflict and crisis in CAR. In contrast to the emphasis on religious identity by much external coverage of the conflict, the majority of young people consulted instead saw bad governance and self-interested political leadership as the foundation of violence and of a socio-economic system that left the population – and especially young people – vulnerable to manipulation and mobilisation into armed groups: “…it’s the politicians who manipulate young people to take up weapons”1.

Inter-religious tension was not cited by young respondents as a primary cause of violence in CAR. Some young people from the Muslim community identified the marginalisation of their community as one of the factors driving the Séléka rebellion of 2013 – “some communities felt excluded and abandoned, which is why they took up weapons to claim their rights”2 – along with the conflation of Muslims from CAR with those from neighbouring states such as Chad. However, this was largely blamed on the leadership of former President Bozizé, who came to power in 2003, rather than longer historical patterns of abuse. For all of the young people consulted, the period before the 2013 crisis had been characterised by inter-faith harmony and peaceful cohabitation.

A LEGACY OF BAD GOVERNANCE

Young people were clear that conflict and crisis were ultimately a product of the corrosive influence of bad governance – including corruption, injustice and impunity – on the life chances of young people, which enabled self-interested political leaders to manipulate them into violence. Young people particularly highlighted the importance of fairness in recruitment to stable employment, which in a context such as CAR is largely restricted to government positions. They lamented the lack of access to education and professional training, the dearth of jobs for young people, and pervasive nepotism that saw the few positions that were available – primarily in the civil service or security forces – go to those with money or political connections. The lack of any form of recognition for individual merit was a significant factor in demotivating young people: “It is no longer a question of merit. If merit was considered, the youth would make an effort.”3

In the absence of formal opportunities, there was pressure on young people to resort to any means to gain a livelihood, as highlighted by a young man: “…young people resort to rebellion to earn a living”4. Many youth in Bangui saw recent youth mobilisation into the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC)5 as at least in part a result of a corrupt and nepotistic military recruitment process that saw quotas for applicants from rural areas being filled instead by youth with wealthy or influential urban parents.

“It is no longer a question of merit. If merit was considered, the youth would make an effort.”

Man, 29

For many of those interviewed, these barriers to life opportunities had an explicitly generational aspect, with jobs in the civil service or security services dominated by an older generation: “I wish the government would integrate young graduates and send the old ones to retirement.”5 For others, the central problem was nepotism along ethnic lines, with politicians filling posts with people from within their own community. And for some, it was socio-economic elitism, with the children of the rich able to get a high-quality private education while the poor attended sub-standard public schools and could not afford to sit exams – several of those interviewed had been waiting for years to take their baccalaureate. One young woman reported that it would cost 300,000 CFA to gain recruitment into the armed forces6; other youth have reported a price of 200,000 CFA for a civil service post.

In addition, many young people thought that ‘foreign’ powers or actors bore responsibility for CAR’s crises. The most common view among the young people interviewed was that these external influences had taken advantage of CAR’s institutional weakness to fuel crises.

1. Woman, 19
2. Man, 23
3. Man, 29
4. Man, group discussion participant
5. Man, 31
6. Woman, 38
3. IMPACT OF THE CONFLICT ON YOUNG PEOPLE

A CRISIS OF OUTLOOK

All of the young people interviewed had suffered as a result of the crisis. All felt that their life chances, education and prospects had been severely impacted. The sudden arrival of religious sectarianism had forced the majority of Muslim respondents to leave their homes and move to safer locations: either displacement camps (for instance in ‘KM5’ in Bangui) or, in some cases, to neighbouring states. Young non-Muslim respondents regretted that their communities had become no-go zones for Muslims during the crisis. Notably, there was widespread regret that previously harmonious relations within communities had been poisoned, and particularly that Christians and Muslims had begun to see each other as enemies: “My relationships in the community have changed dramatically as distrust has set in, and the fear of being accused as a traitor.”

“Everything has changed with this crisis: mentalities, languages, the behaviour of young people.”

Woman, age not recorded

In turn, the fear and suspicion engendered by the breakdown of social relations changed the mentality and behaviour of young people themselves, as reported by a young woman: “Everything has changed with this crisis: mentalities, languages, the behaviour of young people.” The deterioration of the outlook, vision and mentality of young people was a recurrent theme in testimonies. Though few examples were provided of changed thinking or language, there was consensus on their impacts – a vicious cycle of young people with nothing to do resorting to alcohol, becoming

GENDER DYNAMICS

Considerations of gender were not given significant weight in the testimonies of young people, with a large majority of participants seeing young men and women as facing the same challenges: of access to education, training and employment, community reconciliation and national recovery. Individual interviews and mixed-gender focus group discussions did not reveal significant gender differences in either the perceived causes of the CAR crisis or the steps they wished to see taken in recovery.

However, the young people consulted did perceive some gender differences in their experiences of the crisis and its aftermath. Young women were seen by both men and women as having been made vulnerable to sexual violence, rape and early or unwanted motherhood because of the crisis. Others, predominantly but not exclusively women, saw the increased incidence of prostitution in communities as a symptom of a breakdown of social order; prostitution emerged from testimonies as something of a marker for the cultural ‘health’ of communities, demonstrating the additional weight of cultural expectation and stigma on women and girls.

However, there was also widespread acknowledgement of the role that increased socio-economic pressure on women, notably over the price of food, played in pushing them towards prostitution. This was seen as a symptom of wider socio-economic breakdown rather than evidence of individual moral failing. Young men, by contrast, were seen as under increased pressure to provide for families in the context of scarcity, employment, and more vulnerable to recruitment into armed groups.

Female participants also perceived a particular role for women in securing peace and prosperity, notably in organising into associations to sensitize other women on the importance of reconciliation and changing mentalities, in taking a particular responsibility for education, and in saying ‘never again’ to future violence. This indicates an opportunity for CAR’s development partners to support women’s associations in seeking to play such roles.

7. Man, 33
8. Woman, age not recorded
poorer and more isolated, and thus more vulnerable to manipulation by politicians. This was referred to by several respondents as suivism (following the herd).

The cumulative stress of crisis and conflict triggered and reinforced divides between elements of their communities. While these divisions were seen as a temporary product of political manipulation, and not the uncovering of deeply felt or historically grounded patterns of religious or ethnic conflict, in some places they had taken sufficient root to persist to the present. In some communities, divisions were described as religious: “My community’s problems are the problems of Muslims and Christians.” More frequently, the most important division was seen as being between ethnic groups: “Tribalism dominates my neighbourhood, a matter of ethnicity.” For some, the ethnic and religious divides had merged into a broad set of identity-based categorisations: “The ethnic groups are divided, the Muslims apart, the Gbaya apart, the Kaba apart.”

Since the end of the crisis – and particularly since the elections of late 2020 – many young people felt that relations between young people of all communities in Bangui had returned to normal, and were now harmonious. All of the Muslim young people consulted reported that they now felt there were good relations between religious communities, at least in the capital – “In Bangui, we live in peace” – and did not testify to bearing any ill will towards other communities, despite the traumas that they suffered.

Instead, the causes of present-day friction within communities were reported to be linked to socio-economic challenges, poor infrastructure (notably competition for access to water, especially during the dry season, and electrification), lingering stigma of young people who had been involved in armed groups, and fear of banditry, street crime and the availability of weapons.
“I can see the change here in Bangui, but not in the provinces. In the provinces, people no longer do their agriculture activities. They have lost everything.”

Woman, 23

President Touadéra was widely recognised by those interviewed, from different communities and religious faiths, as wanting peace: “The government is already working for peace”13. Young people consulted in Bangui appreciated him for having pushed the rebels away from the capital, creating the conditions for peace through the imposition of a curfew and state of emergency (welcomed by many respondents despite the impact it was having on livelihoods, for instance of moto-taxi drivers) and, before the electoral cycle of late 2020, of having brought back a measure of stability: “Before this election there was some peace”14. This view of young people in Bangui stands in contrast with the experiences of young people in the prefectures. Rural regions in particular remain largely controlled by armed groups, and young people’s day-to-day lives in these areas continue to be affected by insecurity, armed group activity and banditry. Some of the youth acknowledged this in their testimonies: “I can see the change here in Bangui, but not in the provinces. In the provinces, people no longer do their agriculture activities. They have lost everything.”15

Nearly all of the young people interviewed in Bangui had voted in the presidential elections of late 2020. Many were proud of the role that young people had played in encouraging a large turn-out, and the majority felt satisfied with the process – despite acknowledging that voting had been difficult in areas outside the capital. It is worth noting that these experiences of the electoral process in Bangui are likely to differ from those of young people in the prefectures, where insecurity and armed group activity constrained the vote. Many young people consulted in Bangui explicitly saw democratic elections as the way out of perpetual crisis, as a mechanism to “...turn the dark page”16 of CAR’s recent past: “We young people all want to vote for a change”17.

13. Man, 23
14. Woman, 23
15. Woman, 23
16. Group discussion participant
17. Man, 22
4. YOUTH VISION FOR THE FUTURE

CHANGING MENTALITIES

The first priority of those interviewed was that young people themselves take the initiative in changing youth outlooks and behaviour: “Young people must say no to the manipulation by politicians, change their mentality, form associations and think about their future.” 18 Resistance to any future attempt at manipulation by political leaders could be inculcated and reinforced through the creation of a “counterculture”19 that would facilitate free exchange between young people, slow the circulation of rumours and disinformation, and stop ethnic mobilisation: “…if the young people become aware, they will have the solutions and political leaders will stop corrupting them.” 20

There are several youth organisations that offer models for such a mobilisation of young people around peace-building, including religious communities and trade-linked bodies like the taxi-moto association and the other youth associations that collaborated in the research.

There was also a recognition that building a broad-based national constituency of young people would involve strengthening existing youth organisations and associations. Most youth structures in CAR exist and operate based on the vision of a founding individual and lack spaces in which they can work with other peer organisations to generate or promote a common vision for Central African youth. This weakens their impact and allows decision-makers to ignore them or mobilise them in partisan street protests. Youth structures also tend to be Bangui-focused, and initiatives do not always reach rural communes or villages, further limiting the opportunities for rural young people to participate.

CHALLENGING THE SYSTEM

There was an awareness that building a broad-based and representative youth-focused civil society would also involve challenging an entrenched system of corruption and nepotism: “...for the country to move forward it is necessary to break with the system.” 21 This system often sees youth groups instrumentalised by political sponsors, for instance in politically-motivated street protests or to drive turnout during elections, further undermining trust between politicians, young people and the wider community. Changing these practices might also bring young people into disagreement with the perspectives of older generations who have held power in CAR for decades: “my vision is not what my parents would have wanted.” 22

“Young people must say no to the manipulation by politicians, change their mentality, form associations and think about their future.”

Woman, 19

There was also widespread agreement that young people’s involvement in violence was born of “ignorance”23. Nearly all the young people consulted wanted their government to place the highest priority on the provision of education and professional training, alongside a programme of job creation for young people. Others stressed the need to create the conditions for young entrepreneurs to found and build successful businesses, and made specific proposals for state assistance such as the provision of loan facilities or the reduction of customs duties for young people. It was felt that improved employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for young people would reduce their vulnerability to political manipulation.

Finding the right policies to meet the needs of young people will necessitate more coherent youth representation in politics. While provisions in the electoral code have lowered the age requirement to stand for the National Assembly and stipulated at least 35% female representation, a serious lack of support has meant that this has not yet translated into giving sufficient priority to youth issues. Youth representatives are placed in ministries or structures for reconciliation or conflict resolution, but are routinely placed at the bottom of hierarchies, are beholden to the political interests that secured them a position, and face an entrenched culture of respect for age.

SECURITY AND SELF-RELIANCE

The self-reliance of a generation who has been marginalised by the government and older generations was also expressed in a view that young people should take responsibility for their own security. For some, this meant organising into community defence groups: “For a better Central African Republic, I want self-defence to be established in order to secure the neighbourhood.” 24

18. Woman, 19
19. Woman, 23
20. Man, 29
21. Woman, age not recorded
22. Woman, age not recorded
23. Woman, 23
24. Man, 27
Many others expressed a desire to join the military or gendarmes, stating that the government should "create jobs for young people and recruit young people into the Central African army."²⁵ "We need mass recruitment of young people into the Central African army."²⁶

"I heard about this agreement, but I do not know its objective or principles."

Man, 33

Those interviewed also wished to see their government taking more of a lead in guaranteeing their security, with external actors supporting Central African security forces rather than leading on security efforts. Further, young people showed a clear desire for the government to prioritise the control of international borders, with many expressing concerns about the role of foreign actors in the CAR conflict.

**PEACE TALKS OR NATIONAL DIALOGUE?**

Young people reflected on the design of and participation in any future peace process. Though most had heard of the Khartoum Accord of 2019, very few of the young people taking part in the research were aware of its contents: "I heard about this agreement, but I do not know its objective or principles."²⁷ All youth consulted were extremely critical of the fact that the negotiations leading to the agreement had taken place outside the country, far from the view of ordinary people. In their view, very little effort had been made to ensure that the population understood the agreement.

Young people were also critical of the fact that the agreement had been signed between the government and armed group leaders with very limited participation of civil society or young people, and that it had rewarded rebels with influential jobs, despite their not respecting the terms of the agreement. This reinforced the perception that violence is the only route to success: "You see rebel leaders occupy positions in government as civil servants, and they earn money. We don’t want that anymore."²⁸

Among some young people, there was a perception that the 2019 agreement was imposed from outside and signed by the CAR government from a position of weakness, not strength. For these young people, the agreement needed to be revisited and any future process had to avoid perpetuating an endless cycle of rewarding the same group of politico-military leaders who had been at the forefront of CAR’s crises since 2003.

Instead, many young people interviewed wanted to see a national dialogue put in place that enabled discussion and renewed the social contract between the population of CAR and its government. They had a clear vision on what such a process should look like: peace talks should be accessible to ordinary Central Africans, take place in CAR, address the conflict’s root causes and drivers, not be driven by external powers, avoid rewarding rebel leaders with positions and instead bring peace dividends to the wider population. Young people consulted were also strongly in favour of seeing rebel leaders face justice.

25. Man, 25
26. Woman, 19
27. Man, 33
28. Group discussion participant
5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The resilience and optimism of the young people of CAR, as illustrated by the findings of this study, is remarkable. It is perhaps the most important asset the country has to secure a peaceful future. Though the challenges they face are severe, the voices of young people as captured in this research offer a number of important insights to help shape the policy of national government and its external partners alike.

- There was a clear desire from the research participants to move away from religious sectarianism and ethnic identification; all saw the divisions and violence of the 2013 crisis as a temporary product of political manipulation and not the uncovering of deeply felt or historically grounded patterns of identity conflict. External observers, commentators and policymakers need to be mindful of not letting a religious or ethnic lens dominate their thinking or reporting on CAR.

- Youth associations represent a vital mechanism to reach, engage and mobilise young people in the service of peace, able to act as a bridge between the youth population and government, business and the wider community, and as a forum where young people can come together to discuss, analyse and change their own mentalities, outlook and priorities. These youth associations need to be supported to develop and articulate a widely shared youth vision for the future, and to provide a space where young people can discuss and analyse the issues they face and identify specific priorities.

- Youth-led business associations, for instance of taxi-moto drivers, women traders or credit transfer agents, should be encouraged and supported to help the most marginalised young people trapped in the informal economy to professionalise and to identify policy solutions – such as reduced customs tariffs for youth with low capital, or a loan system – that could help them scale up their businesses and create employment, taxable income and economic growth. The same processes for entrepreneurial support could also be used to introduce young people to notions of peacebuilding and non-violent conflict resolution.

- Young people are highly motivated to take an active personal role in securing peace, with a large number expressing the desire to join the state security services. A military with transparent and fair recruitment procedures is a vital step on the road to sustainable peace, alongside transitional justice, the re-extension of the rule of law and an end to impunity. Coherent, well-planned and well-supported security sector reform is a key priority.

- However, this reform will take time, and the army, gendarmerie and police will never be large enough to offer employment to more than a small fraction of the nation’s youth. Accordingly, mechanisms for the peaceful articulation of their frustrations and grievances are vital, most notably through the reinforcement of young people’s participation in politics. Youth representation in decision-making – be it at the ministerial level or in parliament – will amplify the voices of young people, who are both the perpetrators and victims of violence. Legislation should specify a minimum level of youth participation in politics, supported by empowered youth groups able to engage collectively, constructively and peacefully in political processes from local to national and regional levels.

- Youth activism could also constitute a risk, as the spontaneous organisation of community self-defence groups is highly likely if the government is unable to guarantee security. If badly managed this could constitute a significant risk of violence or conflict. However, if such groups were well organised and well trained in non-violent conflict resolution, dialogue and peacebuilding they could instead contribute to the security of their communities without resorting to violence. Youth associations, such as taxi-moto drivers for instance, have huge potential to contribute to intercommunal understanding and reconciliation. Supporting such youth groups would also create jobs and help to establish a healthy relationship between young people and authorities.
Some young people already have skills in peacebuilding and are actively working in their communities to reduce violence, including resolving disputes and facilitating dialogue across conflict divides, but they are few and lack long-term support. These young people have become change agents in their communities, addressing issues around violence reduction through dialogue, raising youth concerns with local authorities, as well as sensitising their communities on COVID-19. Such positive models should be supported and replicated across the country to enable young people to become peacebuilding actors in their respective communities.

Young people firmly believe that the restoration of state authority, the fight against impunity, and securing borders are key to a lasting peace; they also have a strong faith in democratic elections as the only legitimate mechanism to shape the future of CAR. It will be vital that these principles are reflected in any future peace process. Young people are clear that future political dialogue needs to be decentralised, held within CAR, and locally-owned – and they want to participate. Such inclusive dialogue will be key to finding lasting solutions that are specific to the needs of young people, including those outside the capital. Young people are also clear that any future dialogue should not offer rewards to those responsible for the violence that has plagued the country.
The research targeted youth between 18-35 years who ordinarily do not actively participate in decision-making processes or are less likely to be consulted in dialogue or peace processes in CAR – categories of youth that are vulnerable to being drawn into violence. A total of 550 young people participated in the research, including young women, single parents, taxi-moto drivers, street vendors, students and young professionals.

The research was conducted in collaboration with five youth organisations: Conseil National de la Jeunesse Centrafricaine (CNJCA), Commission Diocésaine pour la Pastorale de l’Enfance et de la Jeunesse (CDPEJ), Jeunesse Islamique en Centrafricaine (JICA), Jeunesse Evangelique Africaine (JEA) and the taxi-moto association. These structures were selected based on their capacity to easily reach out to the targeted demographics, as well as on the diversity of their memberships and networks.

The role of Conciliation Resources and its partners was to provide a safe space where young people could explore issues, analyse the root causes of conflict, and develop clear and practical recommendations for themselves and decision makers – including articulating their vision for the future, and the practical steps required to reach it.

The process adopted to conduct this research included the following steps:

- Conciliation Resources, CNJCA, CNJCA, JICA, JEA, CDPEJ and the taxi-moto association developed the research methodology.
- The representatives of the youth structures were trained on the research methodology and conducted the risk assessment linked to the research in a three-day workshop.
- Youth structures identified and mobilised their peers in various research locations (Bangui’s eight districts, Bimbo and Begoua) and carried out 15 group discussions (106 women, 80 men) as well as 51 individual listening sessions (26 women, 25 men).
- A data validation workshop was organised with the representatives of the youth structures who facilitated the listening and group discussions to validate the preliminary analysis of the national research expert.
- Ten additional discussions were conducted after the validation workshop with 313 other youth and community members (including 149 women) to hear their points of view on the findings.
REFERENCES


4. The CPC rebel coalition emerged in mid-December 2020, after the candidacy of former President François Bozizé for the presidential election of December 2020 was rejected due to allegations of complicity in war crimes committed by Anti-balaka groups from 2013. The CPC brought together six armed groups: UPC, MPC, FPRC, 3R and two Anti-balaka factions.

Conciliation Resources is an international organisation committed to stopping violent conflict and creating more peaceful societies. We work with people impacted by war and violence, bringing diverse voices together to make change that lasts.

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