LISTENING TO YOUNG PEOPLE ASSOCIATED WITH ARMED GROUPS IN NORTHWESTERN CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: VOICES FROM PAOUA (OUHAM-PENDÉ)

JULY 2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DISCLAIMER:

This report was written by Ben Shepherd and Lisa Heinzel with the support of Kennedy Tumutegyereize, Theophane Ngbaba and Basile Semba. It was produced by Conciliation Resources in partnership with Femme Homme Action Plus (FHAP).

Conciliation Resources is grateful to the young people and their communities who accepted to share their experiences and perspectives during the Listening Exercise. We also would like to thank the research team, including staff members of FHAP, who supported the development of the final methodology, conducted the field research and contributed to the analysis of the findings.

This publication has been produced with generous financial support from the UN Secretary General’s Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) and UK aid from the UK government. The contents of the publication are the sole responsibility of Conciliation Resources and the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the position of the Peacebuilding Fund or the UK government.

The Listening Exercise was conducted as part of the “Alternatives to Violence: Strengthening youth-led peacebuilding in the Central African Republic” and “Smart Peace” projects.

The “Alternatives to Violence” project is funded by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund’s Gender and Youth Peace Initiative (GYPI) and has been implemented by Conciliation Resources, War Child UK, FHAP and Association pour l’Action Humanitaire en Centrafrique (AAHC) since December 2018. It works with 600 young people in Bossangoa and Paoua sub-prefectures with the aim of strengthening young people’s role in peacebuilding at the local, prefectural and national level while also increasing their resilience through increased economic opportunities and psychosocial coping skills.

Smart Peace is a four-year UK Department for International Development (DFID)-funded programme (2018-2022) for strategic conflict resolution in the Central African Republic, Nigeria and Myanmar. Smart Peace is implemented by Conciliation Resources, in partnership with International Crisis Group, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the Asia Foundation, ETH Zurich, Behavioural Insights Team and Chatham House. In the Central African Republic, the project seeks strengthen the link between local and national peace processes.

Published by:
Conciliation Resources
Burghley Yard, 106 Burghley Road
London NW5 1AL

Design & layout: www.revangeldesigns.co.uk
Proofreading: Asha Pond

Cover photo: Young man walking on the main street of Paoua. © DFID/Simon Davis
Conciliation Resources and Femme Homme Action Plus (FHAP) carried out a Listening Exercise with young people associated with armed groups in Paoua (Ouham-Pendé prefecture). The aim of the Listening Exercise was to understand young peoples’ reasons for joining armed groups, their life in the armed groups, as well as pathways for demobilisation and challenges they face when returning to their communities.

Employing a Listening approach (see more details in the Methodology section below), the research also sought to empower young people, providing them with a space in which they felt comfortable to reflect openly on their own situation. By sharing the experiences, views and concerns of young people with a wider audience, this report seeks to amplify the voices of young people, while also providing analysis for the development of policies and programmes, aimed at supporting the reintegration of young people returning from armed groups in northwestern Central African Republic (CAR).

Executive Summary
The main findings that emerged from the research are:

- The picture that emerges from young people’s testimonies is of a complex conflict with multiple cross-cutting armed groups and no overarching conflict dynamic or cleavage, and communities and individuals trapped in a self-perpetuating security dilemma. Loss, trauma or fear have been the primary drivers for young people joining poorly disciplined or predatory armed groups seeking protection or revenge. This then perpetuates conditions for further recruitment as the armed groups joined by the young people further abuse communities, who feel like they need to mobilise to protect themselves.

- Though initially driven by a desire for community protection or revenge, there is now little evidence for a purpose beyond group survival or the pursuit of profits that go to benefit individual group leaders. Control of an armed group may buy group leaders a seat at the table in political negotiations in Bangui as the leader of an ‘armed opposition group’, but political issues play no role in motivating young people associated with armed groups. Seen from the bottom up, armed groups in Paoua are exclusively rooted in local dynamics.
Conditions in groups were universally reported to be extremely hard, with most activity centred around day-to-day survival – finding food, theft or levying illegal taxes on travellers. Conversations revealed that young men and women had a wide and fluid range of roles and experiences in armed groups, from commanders and combatants to cleaners and cooks. 37% did not report having a weapon of any sort, and another 25% reported having a traditional weapon.

The predominant pathway out of armed groups for the majority of young people was ‘organic’ – either due to the individual armed group member deciding to leave independently or the group itself dissolving. Only a comparatively small number did so as a result of sensitisation or formal demobilisation programmes.

Eligibility criteria for the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme allowed access only to the most senior combatants, all of whom were men. Senior commanders systematically removed weapons from more junior combatants in advance of DDR. The most vulnerable cohorts – women, girls, and the very young – did not have automatic weapons and were therefore never eligible for DDR. The pilot phase of the Community Violence Reduction (CVR) programme in Paoua, intended to address this shortfall, has had promising results but had not reached the majority of those young people that we listened to.

By ‘monetising’ automatic weapons, DDR programs may have inadvertently hastened departures from armed groups, simply by making the selling of AK-47s more profitable than continuing operations.

Young women and girls suffered disproportionately, playing menial roles and facing ubiquitous sexual harassment and assault, as well as significantly greater subsequent stigma upon return to the community. During individual conversations and the female-only workshop, young women confirmed that little support was available for them. However, it is equally clear that women play important roles in both communities and armed groups, for example in collecting illegal taxes, in combat, conducting surveillance or buying ammunition in armed groups, or serving as Chefs du Quartier in communities. This contrasts with policy and community narratives which depict women as passive victims, dismissing their agency in conflict settings.

The majority of young people returning from armed groups were welcomed back to their communities but were nonetheless regarded by community members with suspicion, notably over perceived disruptive behaviours. Stigma seemed notably more acute for girls and women who had suffered sexual violence, and least problematic for the senior, male armed group members who were in positions of power in the armed groups and also benefitted from DDR.

Rites to purify and protect the future health of former combatants were relatively common upon return to the community, but were exclusively a private process largely undertaken within families – no community-level ritual was mentioned.

The lack of support to former armed group members and acute socio-economic hardship indicates a risk of re-recruitment in the event of the reemergence of perceived threat or mobilisation. However, these socioeconomic challenges are shared by the rest of the community, in particular other young people. To avoid generating community resistance or incentivising other youth to join armed groups, any socioeconomic support for young returnees from armed groups needs to include the wider community.
Paoua is an important town in Ouham-Pendé prefecture, in the north west of the Central African Republic close to the Chadian border, and is an important hub for humanitarian operations. It has been heavily affected by violence since at least 2005, playing host to a changing array of armed groups and repeated waves of violence, abuses and displacement in a context of pervasive insecurity, endemic poverty and significantly restricted livelihood opportunities.

The Armée Populaire pour la Restauration de la Démocratie (APRD) was founded in 2005 and was very active in the region before signing a peace agreement in 2008. In 2013 the Révolution et Justice (RJ) group was formed by Armel Sayo in response – or so it was claimed – to attacks on the community by Séléka fighters and the Fulani community. The group drew on fighters from the APRD and had deep roots in and around Paoua. When founder Armel Sayo became minister of sports in 2014, opposing factions started emerging within the group, leading to the creation of a splinter group (RJ-Belanga) by Raymond Belanga. The RJ temporarily formed an alliance with the ex-Séléka group Mouvement Patriotique pour la Centrafrique (MPC)1 which broke up, and multi-sided violence between them worsened after the killing of Raymond Belanga in late 2017. Both RJ factions agreed to demobilisation in 2018, but multiple smaller groups remained active, as did elements of the MPC, bandits and self-defence militias.

Challenges in Paoua are particularly acute for young people, many of whom have never known peace, had their education repeatedly interrupted, and seen access to livelihoods severely restricted by endemic destruction of property and reduced access to agricultural land as a result of security threats. Given their involvement in armed groups, many young people also face stigma from older members of the community and exclusion from both local power and national politics. Though levels of violence and mobilisation have reduced in recent years, the large marginalised and impoverished youth population in and around Paoua represent a deep reservoir for future recruitment – as well as the most important resource for peaceful community development. This report aims to share their experiences, views and concerns with a wider audience.

**METHODOLOGY**

The research employed a Listening approach, a qualitative methodology aimed at gathering a wide range of individual opinions in extended narrative form. As opposed to formalised and structured interviews, the Listening approach works with Listeners – trained individuals from the context who have an in-depth understanding of local dynamics and speak the local languages. The Listeners conduct unstructured conversations with individuals, which often take place over two or three hours and are held in an informal setting. The aim is to allow time for Listeners to build a rapport with respondents, creating an environment in which they feel comfortable to speak openly about their experiences and views. This approach seeks to reduce self-censoring and is particularly suited to people who lack confidence and are not used to being asked for their views, such as young people. It is also a sensitive approach for individuals who may be frightened, suspicious or traumatised, and/or subject to significant stigmatisation and stereotyping, such as former armed group members, to talk about sensitive topics (such as life in the armed groups) and explain their experiences in their own words.

For this research, the team of Listeners was predominantly made up of staff from our Paoua-based partner organisation FHAP, who live in the communes targeted by the research, speak the local languages and have an in-depth understanding of local conflict dynamics. Prior to the field work, Listeners received a three-day training on the Listening methodology, equipping them with communication and listening skills required for empathic Listening. The Listeners then travelled to five communes (Paoua centre, Nana Barya, Bah-Bessar, Mia-Pendé and Bahn) in Paoua.

---

1. A group founded in 2015 drawn from the Fulani community with strong links to neighbouring Chad.
sub-prefecture, where they carried out long-form, unstructured and narrative conversations with 73 respondents. Respondents comprised 57 young former armed group members (14 female, 41 male, and 2 where gender was not specified) and 16 community representatives, including local authorities and young people (9 female, 6 male and 1 unspecified).

During the research, it became apparent that women did not wish to be identified as formerly associated with armed groups, making it difficult to reach them. To overcome this barrier and ensure that young women associated with armed groups had the space to share their perspectives, a separate women-only workshop was organised, bringing 13 women together who had previously been involved with armed groups.

The workshop was co-facilitated by a female facilitator and a female psycho-social officer and created an environment in which young women felt comfortable to talk about their experiences before, during and after joining armed groups.

Following the field work and the female-only workshop, the Listeners and Conciliation Resources came together for an analysis workshop to identify emerging findings. A parallel research exercise was carried out with young people involved with armed groups in and around Bossangoa (Ouham prefecture) using the same Listening methodology – a comparative analysis exploring the similarities and differences between the two regions will also be produced.
1. DEMOGRAPHICS AND CONTEXT

- Though the groups do not seem to have been predominantly made up of child soldiers, there is a clear spike in vulnerability to recruitment in the mid-to-late teenage years.

- The picture that emerges from young people’s testimonies is one of a complex multi-sided conflict with multiple cross-cutting armed groups, lacking a clear overarching conflict dynamic or cleavage.

41 of the ex-armed group members that we listened to were men, and 14 women, with 2 where gender was not recorded. The majority of those individuals lived with their families before joining an armed group, with most farming or combining farming and attending school. All said that life had been relatively calm before the 2013 crisis, with good relations among the community. However, many respondents, in particular young women participating in the female-only workshop, also described bereavements, family tensions and significant poverty, including insufficient money for education.

The average age at joining the armed group was just over 20 years, but there was a clear spike in recruitment in the mid-to-late teens, with the largest numbers of those participating in the Listening Exercise joining between the ages of 16 and 18. Overall, 14 of the sample were under 18 at the time of joining. The average length of time they spent in armed groups was 4.5 years.

Respondents reported that they had been associated with a large number of armed groups and smaller factions. While the young people we listened to mentioned as many as 15 different groups or sub-groups, it is likely that they were using different names (eg. the names of their commanders) to refer to the same entity. The RJ group was by far the most represented, with 29 of the sample having been RJ members, although this was divided among nine named sub-factions. Among these the RJ-Belanga faction was the most cited sub-group with 10 members, and RJ-Sayo faction the second most cited with seven. Four respondents had been in Anti-balaka under two separate named commanders.

Four others reported that they had been members of multiple armed groups, one starting in the APRD in 2007 before moving to the RJ, and another moving from ‘Enfant Soldat’ to ‘Patriotes’ before this group merged with RJ during the Libreville Accords of 2016 to become RJ-Patriotes.
There was some clustering – for instance, the four individuals who reported that they had been associated with the Anti-balaka all came from Bahn and joined in 2014. The largest factions, RJ-Belanga and RJ-Sayo, seemed to recruit from all communities and across a relatively wide timescale, with members joining between 2013 and 2016. But despite the fact that both are under the RJ banner, the Belanga and Sayo factions were reported to have been enemies. One respondent recounted having joined RJ-Belanga after exactions committed in his community by RJ-Sayo, rising to a command position in the group, and seeing his purpose as driving RJ-Sayo out of communities.

2. REASONS FOR JOINING ARMED GROUPS

• The testimonies of former young armed group members about their reasons for joining the group give a clear picture of communities caught in a self-perpetuating security dilemma. In a context in which armed groups are present while communities lack protection, vulnerable individuals react to loss, trauma or fear by joining poorly disciplined armed groups for revenge or protection, thus perpetuating the conditions for further recruitment.

94% of the former armed group members participating in the Listening Exercise said they joined an armed group out of a desire for protection or revenge following personal experiences of abuse by other armed groups – including the killing of family members, theft of goods, or violence against their person – or fear of potential attack against them, their family or their community. As one female community member put it, armed groups “justify themselves by a spirit of vengeance”; a young man explained “the objective of our group was to kill Muslims”.

“Some people that I didn’t know came and took my husband and...killed him. And I had children and I did not know what to do and by anger, I decided to join the RJ-Belanga group to revenge my husband.”
Woman, 25, Nana Barya

Men and women cited protection and revenge as the primary reason for joining in equal proportions. However, some responses indicated a gendered dynamic to pressures to join, with men feeling a cultural imperative to join an armed group to protect the community. One respondent explained his joining by saying: “A man is a man”. By contrast, other pathways demonstrated a combination of vengeance and survival: “some people that I didn’t know came and took my husband and...killed him. And I had children and I did not know what to do and by anger, I decided to join the RJ-Belanga group to revenge my husband.”

The majority cited the ex-Séléka as the source of this threat or trauma. Of the remainder, one man gave poverty as the reason, one woman followed her husband into an armed group, and another woman was forced to join after being raped by an armed group member.

However, the reasons stated by young ex-combatants contrasted with the views expressed by community members who had not been associated with armed groups. Of the 16 community members we listened to, five agreed that protection or revenge for themselves or their community were the primary motive for young people joining armed groups. This compares to six who thought young people were driven by poverty and lack of education, and a further four who thought it was a combination of a lack of other opportunities and a response to threats.

FORMER SÉLÉKA MEMBERS

Two men – the only two in the sample who had been associated with one of the ex-Séléka armed groups – described a reluctant or forced recruitment. One had been left destitute after the death of a family member and had been tempted to join by the offer of material support – “I did not join the armed group voluntarily. I was still a minor. They gave me a lot of things so that I would join” – and as he put it, “with my eyes averted”. The other young man was also left without family and was beaten by Séléka before being forced to join.

Both were eventually able to escape the group, with no external assistance – one after he was captured and tortured by another armed group, the other in the chaos following an attack. Both describe acute continued marginalisation and stigma from the community, as they are known as former Séléka members and are blamed for the exactions suffered by the community. One of them told the researchers: “Some youth are saying ‘You are Séléka. You killed our parents.’” They have received no support – one had no family to carry out a purification ritual and had no money to pay for one.

2. Woman, 40, Bah-Bessar
3. Man, 33, Nana Barya
4. Man, 32, Paoua
5. Woman, 25, Nana Barya
3. LIFE IN THE ARMED GROUP

- The pattern of activity in the testimonies indicates armed groups operating as bandits rather than parties to a conflict; there is almost no evidence for a purpose beyond group survival or the pursuit of profit. This suggests that despite both RJ factions being signatories to the 2019 peace agreement, political objectives did not seem to play a significant role in the day-to-day lives of young members of armed groups.

- Individual conversations revealed that young men and women had a wide range of roles and experiences in armed groups, from commanders and combatants to cleaners and cooks. This diversity needs to be reflected in the design of demobilisation and post-conflict initiatives.

Only 10 of the former combatants participating in the Listening Exercise thought they had gained any advantage from being in the group. These advantages ranged from access to food, the chance to defend their community or to take revenge, and the opportunities for theft and looting. 21 explicitly stated that they gained no advantages, with the remainder giving no answer, and a majority of female workshop participants agreed that they had left their armed group worse off than at the time of joining. A young man said: “we lost our time unnecessarily.”

34 of the sample described themselves as playing command or combat roles in the armed groups, 32 of whom were male and two female. A further 17 described support functions including cooking, laundry and buying provisions and ammunition, 11 of whom were female – a clear trend for women and girls to play roles away from combat. In some cases, it was reported that commanders were worried that women would use the chaos of combat to escape the armed group, as well as not seeing them as physically capable as men. However, it is noteworthy that all three of those who reported that their tasks included buying ammunition were female, and one female respondent reported that she had trained other armed group members in combat tactics – all while having no access to a weapon herself.

Of those that chose to describe their life in the group, all but two individuals painted a picture of suffering – of insufficient food, constant threat of attack, and being forced to steal to survive: “Life in the armed groups is suffering, there is nothing to eat”, or simply “Life is hard”.

“We roamed through the villages to eat, we looted people, we forcefully took the men and the women of the villages to take their belongings and food to feed ourselves.”
Man, 27, Paoua

Though some described taking part in operations against Séléka or ‘Chadians’, and one described the purpose of missions as being to ‘eradicate the Muslims’ in his area of operation, the majority of armed activity that respondents reported were attacking other communities or migratory Peul herders to steal their livestock, goods and weapons, or manning roadblocks to levy informal taxes on traders. A young man explained: “We roamed through the villages to eat, we looted people, we forcefully took the men and the women of the villages to take their belongings and food to feed ourselves.” This is consistent with a conflict phase in which many groups were concerned with sustaining themselves, banditry or basic survival, rather than any more explicit political or strategic goal.

Overall, it is clear that young people, both women and men, had a very wide range of roles and experiences in armed groups, a critical issue for the design of demobilisation and post-conflict support programs (see section 5, below).

4. PATHWAYS TO LEAVING ARMED GROUPS

- It is striking that the pathway out of armed groups for the clear majority was ‘organic’ – either due to the armed group member deciding to leave independently or the group itself dissolving. Only a comparatively small number did so as a result of sensitisation or formal demobilisation programs.

“They [the commanders] sent us out to torture and loot the community... and shared [the loot] between them without taking care of us.”
Man, 22, Paoua

There was a relatively even split in the sample between former armed group members who chose to leave the group while it was still in existence and active, and those who left when the group itself disbanded.

---

6. Man, 23, Bah-Bessar
7. Participants at a female-only workshop
8. Man, 31, Paoua
9. Man, 28, Beboy
10. Man, 27, Paoua
23 of those we listened to departed from an active armed group, largely as a result of suffering and poor living conditions, abuse experienced in the group, or factionalism and the breakdown of relations with others in the group or a commander – triggered either by chiefs taking weapons away and the realisation in one case that “everything was going to benefit commanders and their families”; in other words, that the loot was not being evenly shared. “They [the commanders] sent us out to torture and loot the community… and shared [the loot] between them without taking care of us”\(^{11}\), a young man explained.

Of this second category, whose departure was triggered by the dissolution of the group itself, seven reported that the group disbanded organically without external intervention, either because the commander was killed or because the group itself came to a collective realisation that the war was over or that there were no more enemies to fight. 13 of those participating in the Listening Exercise did so because they or the group they were in disarmed via a formal process or after sensitisation by the government or other actors.\(^{12}\)

5. EXPERIENCES OF DISARMAMENT

- The eligibility criteria of the DDR programme allowed the most senior combatants, all of whom were men, to access DDR support. They are reported to have systematically removed weapons from more junior combatants.
- The most vulnerable cohorts – women, girls, and those in non-combatant roles – did not have automatic weapons and were therefore never eligible for the DDR programme. However, the CVR programme intended to address this shortfall does not seem to have succeeded in offering support to the majority of those we listened to.
- It is clear that formal DDR processes have not addressed the diversity of roles and backgrounds of those in armed groups, or made provision for the younger armed group members, some of whom may have joined as children but grown to adulthood in the group. Nor has any specific provision been put in place in terms of psycho-social or post-traumatic counselling.

11. Man, 22, Paoua
12. Both RJ factions accepted to participate in the DDR process in 2018.
Nine of the young people the researchers spoke with reported having been through a formal DDR process. These were all men, were slightly older than the whole sample when they joined the armed group – an average of 23 – and had been in the group for an average of 4.7 years. They held senior or command roles in the armed groups, including captains, sergeants and assistants to the commander, and all bar one had an automatic weapon. All of these respondents had left along with a wider group of people – with the exception of one individual who had left alone before rejoining the armed group to take advantage of the DDR programme. More than half of them reported that they were now occupied in a non-farming trade, including driving, brick-making and commerce, thanks to support and training given as part of DDR.

A further four respondents, two female and two male, reported that they had received some assistance with leaving their armed group, though at a level which fell short of DDR. All four left as part of a wider group, following sensitisation or a government request and with the support of the International organisation for Migration (IoM). None faced any resistance from group leaders.

By far the largest group in the sample, 77% or 44 out of 57, did not report receiving any assistance in leaving their armed group. This included 86% of all female respondents and 78% of males. Of those among this cohort who specified, 18 reported leaving entirely alone, while nine left as part of a larger group. 12 reported that their departure was resisted by group commanders, with several reporting that there had been attempts to return them to the group by force.

Of the 14 former armed group members in the sample who joined before they were 18 – thus meeting the UN criteria for child soldiers – only two reported being given any assistance to leave the armed group, with just one going through a DDR programme. Five of the sample said that the reason they did not have access to DDR was that they did not have an automatic weapon. However, they seemed likely to be welcomed back by both their families and the wider community, with only one saying they had poor relations.

6. THE STATUS OF WEAPONS

• Automatic weapons – AK-47s – emerge from the testimonies as more important as status symbols and currency than as weapons of war.

• By ‘monetising’ automatic weapons, DDR programmes may have inadvertently hastened departures from armed groups, simply by making the selling of AK-47s more profitable than continuing operations, and increasing the vulnerability of those who lost weapons.

• Those leaving armed groups without automatic weapons were poorly informed as to the criteria for entry to DDR, and nearly universally left without any form of support.

“I was the one responsible for looting, killing Peuls and taking their belongings by force. I did not own a weapon. It was when I killed a Peul in the bush and took his weapon that I owned an AK-47.”
Man, 27, Bah-Bessar

22 of those participating in the Listening Exercise reported having been armed with an AK-47 automatic rifle, 14 a traditional weapon, and four no weapon at all. Automatic weapons emerged in the testimonies as a key status symbol, often taken from a Peul herder killed by the combatant themselves. “I was the one responsible for looting, killing Peuls and taking their belongings by force. I did not own a weapon. It was when I killed a Peul in the bush and took his weapon that I owned an AK-47”, explained a young man.

“The boss chased me... He took my weapon to give it to another one, so that that person can do the DDR instead of me.”
Man, 23, Bah-Bessar

13. This individual did not specify how he was able to access DDR without a weapon, but was disarmed by MINUSCA as part of a 50-strong group, so was perhaps included by default.

14. That only one individual reported this pathway – of rejoining to benefit from DDR – is of some surprise; it was suspected that this would be relatively common. However, it is perhaps explained by the low number in the sample that accessed DDR at all – a study of DDR recipients would be necessary to clarify.

15. IoM has implemented a pilot Community Violence Reduction (CVR) programme in Paoua since 2016.

16. The remaining 27 did not specify whether they were armed, or what kind of weapon they had.

17. Man, 27, Bah-Bessar
Weapons also clearly hold significant monetary value, especially in light of DDR programming. 17 of the sample said that they couldn’t go through DDR because they didn’t have an automatic weapon. Of these, six said that their commander had taken their weapon in advance of the start of DDR; three said that this was the reason that they decided to leave the armed group, both because of the associated loss of status and perceived vulnerability to attack. “The boss chased me... He took my weapon to give it to another one, so that that person can do the DDR instead of me”, a young man explained.18

These weapons were reported to have been sold or given to others to allow them to go through DDR instead of group members. Two respondents reported that they were waiting for a second phase of DDR that would admit those with only traditional weapons, and one woman that she had purchased a traditional weapon in order to access DDR – suggesting a poor understanding of the criteria for entry to DDR programs.

7. EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG WOMEN

- Despite most making an individual choice to join the armed groups, it is clear that young women and girls suffered disproportionately once involved, playing menial roles and facing ubiquitous sexual harassment and assault, as well as significantly greater subsequent stigma upon return to the community. Little support seems available for them.

- However, it is equally clear that women play important roles in both communities and armed groups, including as chiefs, commanders, trainers and those entrusted with money. This contrasts narratives which depict women as passive victims and dismiss their agency in conflict settings.

The majority of the young women and girls listened to played a menial role in the armed groups with which they were associated, with eight of 14 reporting that their duties were largely made up of cooking, cleaning the clothes of commanders and their families, and collecting water, food or firewood.

18. Man, 23, Bah-Bessar
All had joined for reasons of revenge or protection, but none who participated in individual conversations felt that they had received any advantage from being a member of the armed group – though interestingly participants of the female-only workshop were more open about the benefits they gained, including food and opportunities to make money. Nonetheless, many reported that conditions in the group were of unremitting suffering.

Only one woman gave a clear account of a combat role, which included taking part in raids, killings and manning roadblocks. She was one of only two women to receive any support after leaving the armed group, from Oxfam, but was nonetheless the only respondent, male or female, who reported a willingness to rejoin an armed group.

Notably a further three of the women and girls we listened to reported that they had been responsible for sourcing and buying ammunition for the group, including through making contacts in Chad and travelling widely. This reflects the experiences of workshop participants who reported that women were often trusted to collect informal taxes at roadblocks and to handle money. Another woman reported that she had trained other armed group members in combat tactics, while not having access to a weapon herself. It is also noteworthy that the RJ-Belanga faction is led by a woman, Esther Audrienne Guetel-Moïba, who is also the only woman to have signed the 2019 peace agreement.

Most women said that they were welcomed back by both their community and family on their return from the armed group, with 12 of 14 reporting that they had experienced few problems. One respondent explicitly said that being a woman made returning easier: “As I am a woman, the community does not say anything.”

“I was hated by community members because I was a bad woman, a rebel woman. During disagreements, members of my family would say that I was useless and that I did not contribute anything to the family.”

Woman, Nana Barya

However, there were indications that women did not wish to be identified as formerly associated with armed groups, and two felt that they were the subject of clear stigma or suffered from poor relations with community and family. One woman, who had been in charge of buying ammunitions in the armed group (see above) described her return to the community in the following words: “I was hated by community members because I was a bad woman, a rebel woman. During disagreements, members of my family would say that I was useless and that I did not contribute anything to the family.”

Another woman had married an armed group member while in the group who was subsequently killed, leaving her without protection in the group – none “to stand beside me.” She reported persistent rejection by her community: “the community does not accept me at all. They think I am a bandit.” Even though she seemed to be largely accepted by her family, she also experienced some level of stigmatisation, with family members calling her “RJ” during arguments.

Participants at a workshop for female former armed groups members reported sexual abuse as common within armed groups, as was subsequent stigmatisation by the wider community around perceptions of sexual purity. However, the status of women as trusted agents in handling money, collecting ‘taxes’ or buying ammunition, as well as the leadership position of RJ-Belanga being held by a woman, suggests nuanced and complex gender roles at play. Likewise, three of the non-combatants we listened to were female neighbourhood chiefs (chefs de quartier).

8. EXPERIENCES OF RETURN

The picture generated in the Listening Exercise was one in which the majority of former armed group members were welcomed back to their communities, as long as they had not committed exactions there, but were nonetheless regarded by community members with some suspicion, notably over changed and perceived disruptive behaviours. Stigma seemed notably more acute for girls and women who had suffered sexual violence, and least problematic for the senior, male armed group members who had benefitted from DDR.

Only three of the former armed group members participating in the Listening Exercise reported that family relations had been poor after their return, two of whom were women and one man. The man was one of two in the sample who had been a member of Séléka; one of the women reported that the reason for the ill-will was that her family had expected her to return with money.

By contrast, 33 reported that they were welcomed back by their families. The pathway after leaving the armed group for the majority of those interviewed was
returning immediately and directly to the family home, and only subsequently reintroducing themselves to the wider community. Most also said that they had been able to remain in touch with their family during their time in the armed group, either via mobile phone or – more commonly – though being allowed periods of leave from the group to go back to their home village for a visit. However, only four of those interviewed reported that their family played a direct role in convincing or pressuring them to leave the group. 13 of those interviewed reported that their relations with the community after returning were poor – it was more difficult to re-establish relations with the wider population than with families. This was sometimes due to expectations that they would have money following their time in the armed group. For some respondents, relations had been difficult immediately after their return but subsequently improved.

“I was the commander, I made sure that the members of the group did not harm members of my community or their belongings. Therefore, I was not disturbed when I returned.”

Man, 32, Paoua

A further 33 reported that community relations were good immediately following their return from the armed group, with many saying that they had avoided committing any exactions or attacks against their home community while in the armed group. “I was the commander, I made sure that the members of the group did not harm members of my community or their belongings. Therefore, I was not disturbed when I returned.”

However, this generally positive picture was contrasted by the views of non-combatants interviewed, one of whom contrasted ex-combatants with the rest of the community, saying: “Those who are not part of the armed groups walks with their heads high.”

Many reported that former armed group members were disruptive, exhibited changed behaviours, could be abusive, had not apologised, and faced significant stigma and difficulties. According to community members interviewed, this was worse if ex-combatants had been drinking or taking drugs, and was in part a result of the lack of livelihoods or productive activities: “Because they do not do anything and this will always push them to react badly in the community.” From the interviews with community members it is not clear whether this negative perception had been caused by a small number of misbehaved ex-combatants or whether poor behaviour was a more widespread problem.
9. RITES AND RECONCILIATION

- Rites to purify and protect the future health of former combatants were relatively common, but were exclusively a private process largely undertaken within families – no community-level ritual was mentioned.

25 of the sample said that they had undergone some form of traditional rite on their return – to purify them and remove spirits they may have come into contact with during their time in the bush, especially if they had been involved in combat or had killed: “I insisted a rite be carried out by an old woman who washed me in the traditional manner. The rite was for my health because I was living with people who had killed.” 27 Young people interviewed felt that rites were important to ensure their future health, mental and physical. One individual was extremely upset about being unable to pay for a rite, and was clear that he saw it as essential for his psycho-social wellbeing: “I intend to undergo rituals to get rid of the nightmares. Even when I am standing still, bad things come back to my mind. The African culture does not allow us to speak about rituals. It is only marabouts who do them. They do things with oils and then finish the ritual in the bush.” The young man added: “Other people who had nightmares underwent rites, and it helped.” 28

These rites were exclusively private, largely held within the family, and took a variety of different forms, involving symbolic washing by family members, animal sacrifice or anointing with oils – there was no one template or name. Versions under the auspices of a paid local marabout or ‘wise woman’, rather than family, were also possible. They were seen as extremely important by many ex-combatants, as illustrated by a young woman: “When I left, the only rite that was done was the Ndindja. Without this, I would not be alive today.” 29

Given the importance of Catholicism in the community, rites may be even more widespread than was reported – there may be stigma or embarrassment in admitting the conduct of rites that sit outside religious doctrine. Several others reported that they had gone to churches for a blessing on their return, sometimes immediately after a private traditional rite. By contrast, none of the sample reported a public or community ceremony or formal apology by former armed group members, with the exception of a single armed group leader who apologised to gathered community members at the culmination of a DDR process.
10. LIFE AFTER ARMED GROUPS

- The lack of support to former armed group members and acute socioeconomic hardship may indicate a risk of re-recruitment in the event of the reemergence of perceived threat or mobilisation.

The picture drawn by former young combatants was almost universally one of acute socioeconomic challenges, with the vast majority returning to subsistence agriculture and lacking the resources to support their families. Very few indicated that they had received significant support since their departure from armed groups. Eight of the sample reported that they were beneficiaries of the UN Peacebuilding Fund’s Gender and Youth Peace Initiative, two reported support from the IOM, two from the World Food Program, and one from Oxfam.30

It is notable that none of the young people raised the issues of revenge or protection that drove them to join an armed group in the first place. Instead, socioeconomic issues have now become predominant. This may indicate an enhanced sense of security, and a willingness to invest in a peaceful future. However, they have returned to communities where everyone is facing the same challenges of poverty and lack of opportunity. Channeling support to ex-combatants is likely to be low on the list of collective priorities, and may indeed risk generating resistance or anger if it is felt that ex-combatants are being rewarded for their involvement in violence – it could even incentivize others to seek to become involved with armed groups. Broad-based community socioeconomic support would avoid these risks.

The ambition of most young ex-combatants was limited to building a house and perhaps owning oxen to be able to help with agriculture. Many felt that they could play a positive role in the community, though few had yet been able to assume the roles that they hoped. The few that seemed to have been able to establish more secure new livelihoods and more prominent places in the community were largely those who had been given support and training under a DDR programme. However, despite the difficulties presented by life in an armed group, only one woman – as noted above – expressed any willingness to rejoin an armed group should the occasion arise. Few expressed any significant hope for assistance from the government, with the majority looking to Bangui to provide security but little else. However, there was widespread trust in local authorities, with the majority of those who expressed an opinion saying that they would go to the village or neighbourhood Chief in case they had a problem. The assistance that the majority wanted to receive was limited in most cases to support in building a house or the provision of livestock for farming. Few expressed an interest in being given training.

COMMUNITY VIOLENCE REDUCTION (CVR) PROGRAMME IN PAOUA

The CVR programme was implemented to help the 60,000 people associated with armed groups countrywide estimated to be ineligible for the national DDR programme. It was piloted in the sub-prefecture of Paoua, implemented by the IOM and funded by the UN Peacebuilding Fund. The aim of the pilot phase was to provide immediate support to vulnerable groups, including former armed group members without automatic weapons (and therefore ineligible for DDR) and young people at risk of becoming involved in violence; revitalise the local economy through construction of community infrastructure and Cash For Work; and strengthen social cohesion through community dialogue and mediation.

Initial evaluations have found that the programme has led to a stabilisation of the target communes. Community members felt that CVR had contributed to a reduction of violence, through the promotion of social cohesion and reconciliation, increased socioeconomic opportunities for young people, and strengthened early warning and mediation mechanisms.

However, several issues were identified where the CVR programme could be extended and deepened. The CVR pilot phase in Paoua offered important benefits some 7,000 individuals, but needs to be substantially extended to offer support and opportunities for economic reintegration to all young people in high risk communities, as well as under-18s associated with armed groups who are not currently eligible for support. Further the coverage of CVR in the research areas for this study was restricted to Paoua and communes south of the town (including the commune of Bahn), leaving young people in the fragile and highly conflict affected communes of Bah-Bessar, Nana Barya and Mia-Pendé without assistance, in part due to delays in the launch of the DDR programme in these zones. An EU-funded stabilisation program, implemented by the IOM, has been launched to make good this shortfall.

30. One respondent reported both being a beneficiary of the UN PBF and the OIM.
CONCLUSION

1. Limited impact of national-level political processes on local conflict dynamics

There is a clear disconnect between young people associated with armed groups in Paoua and national-level politics and peace processes. Instead, the motivations for individuals involved in violence were overwhelmingly local. Their motives for joining armed groups was for protection or revenge, most often in reaction to exactions carried out by other relatively local armed groups. Subsequently, they were motivated either by the exigencies of daily survival or the commands of group leaders.

The character of armed groups was highly fractured and highly localised with very weak chain of command. The overarching ‘parent’ group was much less important than the dynamics of smaller factions and individual local commanders, who had no clear political agenda beyond survival, at least as understood by the young group members consulted in the Listening Exercise. Group conduct and activities were not dictated by overarching military strategy or political context, but were instead linked to the personality and ambitions of the localised group leaders. The leaders were known personally both to the combatants and the wider community and played a central role in keeping their faction in the bush – there were several reports of groups dissolving on the death of a leader.

Conflict in and around Paoua seems to be overwhelmingly local in its dynamics – wider links were largely limited to resupply of ammunition from Chad. It is therefore unlikely that solutions to violence in the Paoua region will derive directly from national-level peace processes alone, notably the implementation of the 2019 agreement, despite the fact that some of the ‘parent’ groups are signatories. Serious and sustained attention needs to be paid to local issues and views, including in the framing and formulation of further peace initiatives.

2. Reframing DDR and support to former armed group members

The fluid and hyper-local nature of the conflict actors revealed through the Listening Exercise is a challenge for DDR programming developed to tackle more formal, large scale and hierarchical armed groups. The majority of those involved with armed groups were not in formal combat roles, nor were they routinely armed with an automatic weapon, meaning that most were not eligible for demobilisation – instead ‘traditional’ approaches to DDR can be seen to have benefitted the most senior commanders.

By contrast, demobilisation for the majority was ‘organic’, self-motivated and unsupported, and most of those young people formerly involved with armed groups have subsequently fallen through the cracks into serious socioeconomic hardship. This is most acute for the most vulnerable – former child soldiers and women. There is a clear risk of ex-combatants rejoining other armed groups or being lured into criminal gangs. Though there has been recognition of this challenge from the policy community, and the implementation of the CVR programme to meet this need; this too has not been sufficiently broad in its eligibility criteria, scale or geographical coverage to make up the shortfall. The 2019 extension of stabilisation programmes to areas to the North of Paoua – communities where the Listening Exercise was in part carried out – is welcome, but the overall design and implementation of demobilisation and post-reinsertion support should be revisited in light of the experiences of the young people who make up the majority of armed group members. Further research is warranted into the ‘organic’ processes that led young people to leave armed groups spontaneously, and how to work within these realities.
3. Avoiding stigma in community reconciliation and socioeconomic support

Most of the young people consulted through this listening exercise report that have been welcomed back into both family and community – but views from other community members were not so universally positive, with many flagging up latent stigma, frustration and tensions that could catalyse future division and even violence in the context of ongoing state weakness. Rites are clearly an important element of psycho-social rehabilitation after exposure to death and violence in the bush – but these were exclusively private, intended for the individual and within the family. No community-based reconciliation activities were reported to have taken place.

Further, the challenges reported by youth associated with armed groups are very similar to challenges faced by young people who were not involved in violence – of acute socioeconomic hardship and lack of opportunity, infrastructure and broad-based development.

These factors suggest two considerations for policy. First, attention should be paid to the need for community-based reconciliation to address stigma and social tension – however, this would need to be carefully considered in light of the private nature of the rites reported. Further research on appropriate forms for any community reconciliation should be carried out before any external intervention in order to avoid further stigmatising young people involved with armed groups. Second, socioeconomic support should be offered to all young people and the community at large, regardless of their prior involvement in armed groups or violence, in order to avoid generating resentment against recipients or incentivising young people to join armed groups in order to access support.
Conciliation Resources is a charity registered in England and Wales (1055436) and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (03196482).

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.

Conciliation Resources, Burghley Yard, 106 Burghley Road, London NW5 1AL UK

@ cr@c-r.org
☎ +44 (0)20 7359 7728
🌐 www.c-r.org
🐦 CRbuildpeace
👀 ConciliationResources

Conciliation Resources is a charity registered in England and Wales (1055436) and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (03196482).