YOUNG PEOPLE AND ARMED GROUPS IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: VOICES FROM BOSSANGOA

Report
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The Alternatives to Violence project was funded by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund’s Gender and Youth Peace Initiative (GYPI) and was implemented by Conciliation Resources, War Child UK, Femme Homme Action Plus (FHAP) and AAHC between December 2018 and September 2020. It worked 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.

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Cover photo: Young Anti-balaka fighters on the road. © Marcus Bleasdale.
Conciliation Resources carried out a Listening Exercise with young people associated with Anti-balaka in Bossangoa (Ouham prefecture) in the Central African Republic (CAR). The aim of the Listening Exercise was to understand young people’s reasons for joining the Anti-balaka, their life in the group, pathways for demobilisation and challenges they face when returning to their communities.

Employing a Listening approach, 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 (see more details in the Methodology section below). 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 CAR.
The main findings that emerged from the research are:

- Nearly all young people listened to joined the Anti-balaka to defend their community against Séléka attacks, for protection – for themselves, their parents, or communities – or revenge. In addition, though much less prevalent, some perceived the alleged complicity of local Muslim populations with Séléka as a betrayal of the community and of them personally; a few, perhaps under the influence of political leaders, referred to it as ‘treason’ against the state. Those who joined tended to be younger and poorer than those who didn’t, with poverty being identified by community members as making young people more vulnerable to approaches or manipulation by armed group leaders.

- The Anti-balaka, as understood by former young members, emerged as an organic and largely spontaneous expression of community needs for self-defence and revenge. It had a loose hierarchy and flat command structure, with volunteers being indoctrinated and coalescing around individual commanders. The Anti-balaka was a syncretic mix of armed group and spiritual movement, with ritual ‘vaccination’ commonplace and ritual power acting as an important defining status within the group.
Leaders were reported as exclusively male, and rank-and-file fighters extensively so. The majority of women took up non-combatant support roles. The youngest women we listened to had a ritual role in preparing food or ‘fetishes’ (combat ‘equipment’ which included amulets, clothing and ways of styling their hair). However, a minority of female respondents were involved in combat, suggesting that gender roles were not absolute. Women spent significantly shorter times in the armed group – six months on average, as compared to 18 months for men – for reasons including pregnancy, perceived threat from fellow armed group members, and the need to return to look after children.

The majority of former Anti-balaka members left the group once they felt that their ‘work’ had been completed and they had achieved what they set out to accomplish – this was disconnected from the dynamics of national politics and few respondents stayed in the Anti-balaka beyond the period of local conflict. For some, local ‘peace’ was synonymous with the removal of all Muslims from the region – this suggests an acute risk of a resumption of tensions and possible remobilisation in the event of poorly managed returns of Muslim internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees.

Many former Anti-balaka members remained in contact with their families; some reported that their return was at least in part due to pressure from family members, though it is likely that others felt pressure to continue fighting from the same source. Hard conditions within the group, concerns over weakening group discipline, and abuses against civilians were also important factors in some returns.

Very few young former Anti-balaka members reported having gone through any process or taken any formal steps in leaving the group – their departure was as organic as the process for joining. In most cases, they returned unaided to their home communities with the agreement of their commanders. Only six of those we listened to had gone through a formal demobilisation process, and these reported feeling that they had received little benefit.

Former Anti-balaka members reported a warm welcome from their families, who were in some cases proud of what they had done. Most went through a ritual purification rite before being allowed back to the family home. This rite was not to apologise for their conduct, or for reconciliation – it was instead to safeguard their future health and that of their family. This mirrored the ritual indoctrination that they underwent on recruitment, and implies a commonly understood cycle of moving from peaceful family life into ritually sanctioned violence in response to threats to the community. This, by implication, is a cycle that could be repeated.

Relations between young former Anti-balaka members and the wider community are a complex and difficult mix of sympathy, respect and fear. Most community members appreciate what Anti-balaka members did to protect the community, and have sympathy for them. At the same time, they are frightened and resentful of their conduct.

There are indications that the Anti-balaka had settled back into a latent community defence network, and in some cases were appreciated as such by some community members, particularly in areas with low state presence. Former members remain in touch with each other and with their commanders, and were significantly more willing to rejoin in the event of future threats than former armed group members listened to in Paoua.

The needs of young former Anti-balaka were broadly understood by both combatants and community members to be employment, finance and training, particularly in agriculture, animal husbandry, commerce and trades. Many respondents – including many former Anti-balaka themselves – also identified the need for psychosocial support and counselling. The structural challenges – employment, infrastructure and community development – impact former Anti-balaka and community members alike. Any socioeconomic support to young people formerly engaged with Anti-balaka also needs to be provided to other youth or benefit the wider community to avoid incentivising others to join armed groups or creating social tensions.
BACKGROUND

Bossangoa town and its immediate environs was one of the key centres of the conflict that engulfed the Central African Republic (CAR) from 2012, notably through its status as one of the heartlands of the Anti-balaka groups. The Anti-balaka were at their inception described as ‘...poorly armed civilians backed by a few former military personnel...’ and often seen as Christian, in contrast to the Séléka, a largely Muslim coalition of rebel movements supported by mercenaries from Chad and Sudan, which took Bossangoa in 2013. As the conflict evolved, the Anti-balaka grew and in turn committed widespread attacks and abuses against CAR’s Muslim population. As a result, most of the Muslim population of Bossangoa and its surrounding communes became internally displaced from 2014.

Bossangoa and its immediate environs has been relatively peaceful in recent years compared to many neighbouring areas of CAR. However, the Muslim population remains displaced and trust between the two communities is low. In early 2019 rumours of the inclusion of Muslim armed group representatives in the government-sponsored Comité de mise en œuvre préfectoral (CMOP) resulted in significant local resistance. Subsequent meetings of the CMOP did allow Muslim leaders to temporarily visit Bossangoa, but tensions nonetheless remain high.

METHODOLOGY

The research was part of the ‘Alternatives to Violence’ project which worked with 600 young people in Bossangoa and Paoua, including those associated with armed groups, to strengthen youth participation in peacebuilding, while also increasing young people’s resilience through increased economic opportunities. It also draws on a survey on social attitudes conducted with 1010 people (including 459 women) and interviews held with 257 people in Bossangoa in November 2019. Building on insights from this programmatic work, the Listening Exercise focused on young people associated with armed groups to better understand the specific challenges they face as well as the role they play in wider community and conflict dynamics.

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, 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 Bossangoa-
based partner organisation AAHC, 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
(Bossangoa centre, Koro Mpoko, Soungbe, Benzambé
and Nدورomboli) in Bossangoa sub-prefecture, where
they carried out long-form, unstructured and narrative
conversations with 73 respondents, including 44 young
former Anti-balaka members and 29 community
representatives. Following the field work, the Listeners
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 Paoua (Ouham-Pendé prefecture) using the
same Listening methodology.6

from Paoua (Ouham-Pendé)’ [July 2020]. Available at: https://www.c-r.org/learning-hub/listening-young-people-associated-armed-
groups-northwestern-central-african-republic
FINDINGS

DEMOGRAPHICS
The research team took long-form narrative testimonies from 73 members of the community in five separate locations in and around Bossangoa. Of these listened to, 44 had been involved in an armed group – for all but one of them, this group was the Anti-balaka – and 29 had remained civilians. Women made up 23 of those listened to, and 49 were men.7 The average age of the former Anti-balaka members was 28 at the time of the Listening Exercise. For those with no association with armed groups the average age was 41.

Of the 23 young women we listened to, 16 had been involved with Anti-balaka. Four said that they had roles in the group that involved combat, six that they were occupied with tasks such as cooking and cleaning, and three that they had a particular ritual function in the group, notably preparing ‘pure’ meals for those who had undergone indoctrination.8 The average age of women joining the group was 17, though those with a ritual function were significantly younger when they joined the group, with an average age of 13.

Of the 49 men participating in the Listening exercise, 27 had been involved with armed groups – all Anti-balaka, with the exception of one individual who had been associated with Séléka – while 22 had remained civilians. For those who had been involved with armed groups, the average age at joining the group was 19. Without exception, those who had been involved with Anti-balaka had taken on some form of combat role – even the youngest, who had been 11 at the time of joining, recounted that he had killed an enemy combatant. The single individual associated with Séléka had worked as a driver.

REASONS FOR JOINING ARMED GROUPS
• Nearly all young people listened to joined the Anti-balaka to defend their community against Séléka attacks, for protection – for themselves, their parents, or communities – or revenge. In addition, though much less prevalent, some perceived the alleged complicity of local Muslim populations with Séléka as a betrayal of the community and of them personally; a few, perhaps under the influence of political leaders, referred to it as ‘treason’ against the state.
• Those who joined tended to be younger and poorer than those who didn’t, with poverty being identified by non-combatants as making young people more vulnerable to approaches or manipulation by armed group leaders.

“Listen, would you sit back and watch if you were in my position? This is why I said no, enough is enough. I need to take revenge”. Man, 34, Bossangoa

The narrative of most of the youth formerly associated with Anti-balaka was simple – that they became involved in the group in order to protect and liberate their communities and families following the arrival of Séléka combatants in and around Bossangoa in 2013. For many, this was a result of direct, personal experience of loss or violence at the hands of Séléka – the killing of family members, the burning of houses or the theft of goods – and a desire to take revenge. A former combatant explained: “Listen, would you sit back and watch if you were in my position? This is why I said no, enough is enough. I need to take revenge”.9

Others emphasised protection over ‘liberation’ or revenge, with the view that involvement with an armed group or access to weapons was necessary to avoid abuses: “Those who own weapons hurt those who don’t”.10 One of the few advantages identified as flowing from armed group membership was the ability to protect themselves and their families.

A further important and commonly emphasised element was the sense of betrayal felt by youth formerly associated with Anti-balaka in relation to the perceived complicity of their Muslim neighbours with Séléka. Community relations, notably between Christian and Muslim, were reported by all respondents to have been positive before the crisis, with the Muslim community herding and trading, and the Christians farming and hunting, living together in peace: “…life was good, we lived in symbiosis.”11

7. The gender of one respondent was not recorded.
8. Three respondents did not specify what role they played.
9. Man, 34, Bossangoa
10. Man, 38, Bossangoa, community member
11. Man, 36, Soungbe
The alleged complicity of Muslim community members in the arrival of Séléka, and the abuses the latter committed, was broadly felt as a personal betrayal. A few, perhaps under the influence of political leaders, referred to it as ‘treason’: “The Séléka exactions and the treason of the Muslim community obliged the youth to join the AB [Anti-balaka] armed group.” 12

There was also perceived to be a generational aspect to the motives for joining the Anti-balaka, with community members explaining the mobilisation of young people as taking action to defend their parents: “...some youth decided to take up [arms] to defend themselves and allow their parents to regain their freedom”. 13 However, this was less remarked on by young people themselves, who far more often emphasised revenge.

Nonetheless, families played a significant role in the decision-making process undertaken by young people before they joined, with several young former Anti-balaka, in particular young men, reporting that they had joined with the approval or ‘blessing’ of their family or parents. Two male ex-combatants stated this explicitly, but many more implied that they were acting on behalf of their family in joining. This indicates that community protection was socially and culturally expected of young people, notably men, and may have played a role in incentivising them to join armed groups. More research needs to be done to unpack these expectations as well as the underlying gender dynamics.

Finally, community members believed that poverty and lack of education played a role in pushing young people towards armed groups, though they did not make clear whether this referred to material poverty, social marginalisation or political powerlessness. They saw this as acting in combination with the triggers outlined above: “It was the liberation of the population. We lost everything. And education here is not good.” 14

Nonetheless, it was notable that many among those listened to had faced difficult circumstances before the crisis: the loss of one or both parents, the early abandonment of schooling – often due to a lack of financial resources – and significant poverty. By contrast, older respondents, and those with established careers or positions of authority in the community, were much less likely to have joined. In combination with the immediate humanitarian impact of the Séléka attacks, and suffering in the bush without food or shelter, this left some young people more vulnerable to approaches or manipulation from armed group leaders: “...the person lives a life of poverty and this pushes them to accept certain offers”. 15

The one young man who had been part of Séléka reported that he had been coerced into working for them, and saw himself as a hostage. He ‘escaped’ the group after just four months.

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12. Man, 19, Bossangoa
13. Man, 63, Benzambé, community member
14. Man, 46, Bossangoa, community member
15. Man, 35, Koro Mpoko, community member
The Anti-balaka, as understood by former young members, emerged as an organic and largely spontaneous expression of community needs for self-defence and revenge. It had a loose hierarchy and flat command structure, with volunteers coalescing around individual commanders to push back Séléka control.

It was a syncretic mix of armed group and spiritual movement, with ritual ‘vaccination’ commonplace and ritual power acting as an important defining status within the group.

The Anti-balaka as viewed by the young people we listened to emerged in 2013 from an organic and spontaneous expression of community drive for self-defence and revenge in the face of abuses from Séléka. Rather than joining an already-established group, many of those who wished to fight simply went to the bush and coalesced into loose groups under individual commanders. No-one reported having been coerced to join.

The most common pathway that emerged from testimonies was for young people to travel independently to Gobere, a location which emerges as a key site both in ritual and organisational terms. Here new arrivals were divided between commanders, given very basic military training, and indoctrinated or ‘vaccinated’ by spiritual leaders and traditional practices – which many claimed gave a level of ‘immunity’ against Séléka – then sent back to ‘liberate’ villages. In one case this was defined as a metamorphosis, with combatants becoming indistinguishable from spirits themselves, notably when dressed for combat, wearing what was referred to by one older ex-combatant as their ‘masks’.16: “In Gobere, all AB [Anti-balaka] of CAR gathered to undergo a metamorphosis before going into battle. If we had left our masks on... you would have thought that we were ghosts.”17

“For every medicine, a diet needs to be followed. For example, when taking all these products, I was forbidden to eat smoked rotted meat ... A menstruating woman should not cook for us.”

Man, 19, Benzambé

Interestingly, while all Anti-balaka units were given spiritual ‘vaccination’ and fetishes including potions, amulets and powdered bark, one ex-combatant...

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16. It is unclear if this literally meant masks, or was referring to the fetish combat equipment, which included amulets, clothing and ways of styling their hair.
17. Man, 43, Soungbe
reported that he had also been able to buy enhanced protection from the ‘féticheur’, demonstrating at least some degree of commercial motivation for their involvement with the Anti-balaka – they may have to some extent been independent of the armed group, and simply available for hire. Those who had been provided with such protection had to adhere to a series of dietary rules: “For every medicine, a diet needs to be followed. For example, when taking all these products, I was forbidden to eat smoked rotting meat. Couscous, once prepared, had to be cut into one ball. A menstruating woman should not cook for us. It was forbidden to eat sticky sauces made with okra, for example.”

Testimonies reveal that belief in the effectiveness and importance of spiritual practices was widespread, and at least one sub-group was reportedly led by a Marabout – an animist spiritual practitioner. The ‘gri-gri’ (magical charms) used by ex-combatants were referred to in the same terms as weapons – part of the equipment of a combatant. In some cases, ex-combatants reported that they had kept their fetishes in case of future need. Ex-combatants were very rarely armed with anything more than clubs, machetes or traditional hunting weapons. An older ex-combatant explained: “Our group is led only by the supremacy of our traditional medicine. If your gri-gri are weak, this means that you are weak. However, if your gri-gri are strong, people will respect you.”

The spiritual basis of the group, rooted in traditional animist practices, stands in contrast with the predominant conceptualisation of the Anti-balaka as an armed group representing the Christian population of CAR. Its members were drawn exclusively from the Christian community – including one Muslim member who was reported to have converted and was baptised on joining20 – but the beliefs that shaped the group were not drawn from Christianity. In fact, some of those listened to said that they had not joined the group explicitly because they held a role in the Church. Other former members emphasised that a ‘return’ to Christianity, including confession and baptism, were an important part of leaving the Anti-balaka.

Few respondents spoke of rank, hierarchy or even formal orders; the organisation appears to have been very flat, with a number of key group leaders and zone commanders (‘com-zones’) above a large number of simple ‘elements’ – perhaps its organic foundation and relatively short lifecycle did not allow formalised roles to be developed or assigned. Status within the Anti-balaka seems to have reflected the hybrid nature of the group itself, in that it came from both spiritual weight and experience of armed combat.

One man we listened to, who had held a relatively senior rank in the Anti-balaka, had joined an anti-banditry militia in 2007 – known as the ‘Anti-Zaraguina’ – before moving into a leadership role in Anti-balaka.21 Other reporting makes clear the importance of former FACA officers in organising the force.22 In summary, the Anti-balaka can be seen as a syncretic group that merged quasi-military organisation, community self-defence and spiritual belief. As such, it bears comparison with other non-state armed groups such as the Lord’s Resistance Army operating in southeastern parts of CAR.

GENDER IN THE ANTI-BALAKA

• Leaders were reported as exclusively male, and rank-and-file fighters extensively so. The majority of women took up non-combatant support roles. The youngest women we listened to had a role in preparing food or fetishes, due to ritual rules against contact with menstruating women. However, a minority of female respondents were involved in combat, suggesting that gender roles were not absolute.

• Women spent significantly shorter times in the armed group – six months on average, as compared to 18 months for men – for reasons including pregnancy, perceived threat from fellow armed group members, and the need to return to look after children.

Combatants in the Anti-balaka were predominantly male, with some respondents reporting that the particular sub-group that they joined was exclusively made up of men. All commanders referred to in testimony were male.

“I did not join the armed group for the simple reason that I am a woman.”

Woman, 35, Bossangoa

Of those listened to, 16 were young women who had been members of the Anti-balaka. The motives given by women for joining the Anti-balaka were largely the same as men – for revenge, to liberate the community, or to find protection. Other young women we listened to reported that they had wished to join, but could not do so due to pregnancy, young children, or, in one case, simply because she was a woman: “I did not join the armed group for the simple reason that I am a woman.”23 Some who joined while pregnant departed the group as they came close to term; others to return to look after children they had left behind.

18. Man, 19, Benzambé
19. Man, 43, Soungbe
20. Man, 24, Bossangoa
21. Man, 30, Ndrormboli
22. IRIN Briefing, ‘Who are the anti-balaka of CAR?’ [February 2014]. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/central-african-republic/briefing-who-are-anti-balaka-car
23. Woman, 35, Bossangoa
Twelve of the 16 young female Anti-balaka members listened to reported being unarmed in the group, often engaged in cooking, cleaning or finding water. The women who were youngest at the time of joining – 11, 12 and 15 – had some sort of ritual role, either preparing food for family members or ‘produits de combat’ (combat products) for the féticheurs, possibly linked to the rules about avoiding contact with menstruating women. The gender of féticheurs is implied in testimony to be male, but this is not explicitly stated.

“My only reason was to revenge his death (my husband)... We the women, we are responsible for preparing food... but I have nevertheless avenged the death of my husband.”

Woman, 24, Bossangoa

Despite the recognition that the role of women in the group was largely preparing food, these roles were not absolutely fixed, and women demonstrated agency in their association with the Anti-balaka. One former female Anti-balaka member reported that she was able to profit by trading products purchased in villages to combatants in the camps, and four female Anti-balaka members reported that they became directly involved in combat or violence, in two cases due to their determination to take revenge on Séléka combatants. One woman explained: “I joined the Balaka to kill people. We were given pieces of wood to knock out people.”24 Another young female combatant described the following: “My only reason was to revenge his death (my husband)... We the women, we are responsible for preparing food... but I have nevertheless avenged the death of my husband.”25

Some young women had a more indirect association with the Anti-balaka, most notably the two youngest respondents who had both been drawn into the group by older male family members who needed someone to cook for them and only spent short periods of time in the Anti-balaka camp.

Young women listened to did not directly report abuses suffered within the group, but there are indications that they were at significant risk from male group members. One left because ‘people kept trying to sleep with her’26; another reported that she was protected in the group by her uncle, suggesting vulnerability for those without family links. Another simply said that “girls were very scared”.27 Perhaps as a result, women and girls spent a significantly shorter time associated with Anti-balaka than male respondents – an average of six months, compared to 18 months for men and boys.

24. Woman, 24, Benzambé
25. Woman, 24, Bossangoa
26. Woman, 18, Ndomboli
27. Woman, 18, Bossangoa
While testimonies of female combatants illustrate that gender roles in the Anti-balaka were not absolute, the fact that men dominated both leadership and rank-and-file positions in the group is an illustration of underlying gendered power dynamics which need to be better understood. More specifically, additional research is required to understand what role social and cultural expectations played and continue to play in pushing young men and boys towards armed resistance.

**REASONS FOR LEAVING ARMED GROUPS**

- The majority of former Anti-balaka members left the groups once they felt that their ‘work’ had been completed and they had achieved what they set out to accomplish – protecting their community, driving away Séléka, and the return of ‘peace’. From the perspective of young rank-and-file members, these motives were entirely local and disconnected from the dynamics of national politics.

- For some, local peace was synonymous with the removal of all Muslims from the region – this suggests an acute risk of a resumption of tensions and possible remobilisation in the event of poorly managed returns of Muslim IDPs and refugees.

- Hard conditions within the group, concerns over weakening group discipline and abuses against civilians, and ongoing contact with families were also important factors.

Most of the former Anti-balaka members consulted were only in the group for a short time: joining in the immediate aftermath of Séléka attacks in 2013, spending a few months in the group, then leaving once Séléka had withdrawn or been driven away from their communities – i.e. once they perceived that their work had been completed. For the most part, they did not stay in the armed group.

Very few felt that they had any meaningful advantages from their membership of the group beyond being able to protect their community or take revenge. Most left because they felt they had accomplished what they set out to do – motives which were almost entirely local, with few young people linking their actions with either national or regional dynamics.

“What pushed me to leave the group was that I had already avenged the death of my husband and that calm returned to my village.”

**Woman, 24, Koro Mpoko**

As noted, young Anti-balaka members framed their motives as protecting their community and taking revenge on Séléka. Once this had been accomplished, and ‘peace’ had returned, the purpose of the group fell away. In the words of a young woman: “We fought and afterwards we did not know what to do. This is why I decided to leave.”

Another young woman explained: “What pushed me to leave the group was that I had already avenged the death of my husband and that calm returned to my village.”

“If I’d stayed in the forest people would have thought I was a rebel.”

**Man, 19, Bossangoa**

Conversations with former Anti-balaka members and community members suggested that peace in the context of Bossangoa was understood as synonymous with the removal of the Muslim population from the area, which would allow the rest of the community to come together once again: “…the Muslims have already left. We need to put down the weapons and come together.” This link – between perceptions of peace and the absence of Muslims from the area – has important policy implications for both strategies to prevent future re-recruitment of young people and peacebuilding approaches aimed at promoting dialogue between the displaced Muslim population and the current population of Bossangoa sub-prefecture.

Interestingly, one respondent made clear that he felt the initial response to Séléka was justified, but that lingering in the bush after the achievement of this primary task would see their actions change from patriotic defence of the state to insurrection against it: “If I’d stayed in the forest people would have thought I was a rebel.”

One respondent said that she had waited for the Séléka-backed Presidency of Michel Djotodia to come to an end, and others made clear that they considered the Séléka wholly or in part a ‘foreign’ armed group. But few among the people we listened to felt compelled to remain in the group once the immediate threat to their families and communities had passed, despite violence continuing elsewhere.

28. Woman, 24, Benzambé
29. Woman, 24, Koro Mpoko
30. Man, 48, Bossangoa
31. Man, 19, Bossangoa
32. Woman, 24, Benzambé
These local motivations of the young rank-and-file members contrast with the narratives given by senior Anti-balaka figures, collected as part of a previous research project, who commonly described the Anti-balaka in more explicitly political terms linked to wider dynamics of national politics. One key Bossangoa-based leader described it as ‘the revolution of the population’, led by former soldiers against the new administration that took power from 2013.33

Young people leaving the Anti-balaka were also pushed by the very difficult conditions in the group, recognised by all respondents, notably around lack of access to food, clean water, medical help and shelter. Many said that they were forced to sleep in the bush ‘like animals’, further underlining the symbolic distinction between the ‘bush’ and ‘civilisation’ in villages. It was a combination of these two factors – weakening motives and poor conditions – that pushed most to leave: “I realised that I was suffering for nothing and decided for myself to leave.”34

In some cases, an additional factor was growing concern that some in the group were beginning to commit exactions against their own community, or that their behaviour was beginning to slide towards banditry: ‘What made me leave was that the ones I was fighting were no longer the ones killing the population in my village.”35

Some had also retained a degree of contact with their families during their time in the armed group, either by word of mouth or through direct visits; some were directly motivated to leave the group by their wish to go back to their family, to protect them, to look after their children, or in the case of two young women, because they were pregnant and about to come to term.

**METHOD OF LEAVING ARMED GROUPS**

- Very few young former Anti-balaka members reported having gone through any process or taken any formal steps in leaving the group – their departure was as organic as the process for joining. In most cases, they returned unaided to their home communities with the agreement of their commanders.
- Only six of those consulted had gone through a formal demobilisation process, and these reported feeling that they had received little benefit.

**CONCILIATION RESOURCES • YOUNG PEOPLE AND ARMED GROUPS IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: VOICES FROM BOSSANGOA**

34. Woman, 26, Soungbe
35. Man, 24, Benzambé
36. Man, 25, Bossangoa
37. The pre-DDR in Bossangoa was implemented by MINUSCA and UNOPS, engaging 196 ex-combatants in cash-for-work and income-generating activities. A CVR programme was subsequently launched targeting armed group members not eligible for DDR and other vulnerable community members.
38. Woman, 28, Bossangoa
RECEPTION BY FAMILY

• Former Anti-balaka members reported a warm welcome from their families, who were in some cases proud of what they had done. Most went through a purification rite before being allowed back to the family home.

• This rite was not to apologise for their conduct, or for reconciliation – it was instead to safeguard the future health of them and their family. This process mirrors the ritual indoctrination that young people underwent on recruitment, and implies a commonly understood cycle of moving from peaceful family life into ritually sanctioned violence in response to threats to the community. This, by implication, is a cycle that could be repeated.

“My family is proud of me because I decided to get revenge for the death of my brother, killed by Séléka.”
Woman, 37, Ndoromboli

All former Anti-balaka members reported being welcomed back by their families. In some cases, despite the relatively local operational zone of most Anti-balaka fighters, families had been cut off from communications and had thought ex-combatants to have been killed; returns were often a cause for celebration. Families were in some cases proud of former Anti-balaka members for having taken action, while others had encouraged them to join in the first place. A woman explained: “My family is proud of me because I decided to get revenge for the death of my brother, killed by Séléka.”

Most former Anti-balaka reported having gone through a rite, most commonly known as ‘boro’. These rites involved refraining from returning to the family home until ritual practices had been completed. These practices were longer for men (most often four days) than for women (three days), as men were reported to be more vulnerable to ongoing health risks from spiritual impurity, and took place in the bush in a variety of forms, including ritual washing, shaving hair, consuming particular foods, and the symbolic transference of the spiritual burden of having ‘walked in blood’.

These rites were seen as essential to the future health of the combatant and of their children. A young man explained: “It is because during the war, I walked among dead people. This is why I had to undergo rituals before returning to my family”. A young woman framed it like this: “For the rituals, I was walking too much among the dead people. With the rituals, the ghosts will get rid of me… I sleep badly at night, I dream about battles as if I was still in the group.”

It is important here to note that these rites do not seem to be intended to disavow future violence, or to make amends for any crimes committed – they are rather to protect individuals and their families from illness due to close contact with death and the spirit world. They imply that there is a clearly understood pathway between the peace and civilisation of the village and the environment of the forest where violence is permissible – and potentially that there is a cycle between ‘vaccination’ or metamorphosis, violence, ritual cleansing and a return to the family that could start over again should perceived threats return. This has important implications for the potential of future re-recruitment of former combatants.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

• Relations between young former Anti-balaka members and the wider community are a complex and difficult mix of sympathy, respect and fear. Most community members appreciate what Anti-balaka members did to protect the community, and have sympathy for them. At the same time, they are frightened and resentful of their conduct.

• There are indications that the Anti-balaka have settled back into a latent community defence network and are appreciated as such by some community members, particularly in areas with low state presence. Former members remain in touch with each other and with their commanders, and are significantly more willing to rejoin in the event of future threats than young people consulted in a parallel research in Paoua.

“What I liked about them at the time was that as soon as the fighting stopped they held a meeting and said that they did not want to put up barriers or commit robbery. They then designated a leader amongst them to monitor criminals.”
Man, 59, Soungbe, community member
Relations between former Anti-balaka members and the wider community were a more complex and difficult mix of sympathy, respect and fear. The majority of community members approved of young people joining the Anti-balaka, seeing them as having defended the community and brought back peace. They saw no need for ex-combatants to seek pardon from the community as they had done nothing wrong, and in fact were often seen as ‘heroic’. One official additionally lauded them for having taken steps to prevent abuses or theft: “What I liked about them at the time was that as soon as the fighting stopped they held a meeting and said that they did not want to put up barriers or commit robbery. They then designated a leader amongst them to monitor criminals. This is what I really liked.”

At the same time, many expressed sympathy for the plight of former Anti-balaka, recognising that they had lost everything during the conflict and received no help afterwards: “Yes! I see difficulties that some ex-combatants are faced with, such as no activities, no clothes, mental problems, no parents, children, etc.”

“Some ex-combatants armed with their weapons and potions and/or amulets think that everything is permitted.”

Woman, 28, Bossangoa, community member

However, many community members also expressed misgivings about the subsequent conduct and role of former Anti-balaka members. This was due to perceived changes in their mode of speaking, dress and hair, but also behaviour including harassment, violence and criminality. This was more notable in Bossangoa centre as opposed to outlying communes. One respondent said that young people had developed a ‘war spirit’ and that violence was commonplace (and worse when they had been drinking), and another that some ex-combatants had kept their weapons and fetishes, and one respondent alleged that if someone in the community retained their weapons and fetishes, and one ex-combatant and their family, marking their return from the bush to the society of the village – but they did not therefore imply any sort of public healing or reconciliation; interestingly, one local official denied that rites took place at all.

Underneath the broad welcome of former Anti-balaka on the part of the wider community and sympathy for the challenges faced by ex-Anti-balaka members, there was a hidden legacy of fear and suspicion between former Anti-balaka and the rest of the community, as a result of their perceived involvement in violence: “The Anti-balaka were able to kill and assassinate people but will they fear me, who has not yet killed? No.”

Combatants were also widely suspected of having retained their weapons and fetishes, and one respondent alleged that if someone in the community died the ex-Anti-balaka would blame an old woman for it: they “buried old women alive… assassinated old women without fear”. Others felt that former Anti-balaka members had not yet come to terms with what they had done during the crisis: “…they are not able to recognise their negative actions at the time.”

Community members reported that these difficulties were most acute in the immediate period after the return of Anti-balaka members, and many felt that the situation had improved over time and with sensitisation from elders, community leaders, MINUSCA and NGOs: “At first they were brutal, unbearable; but over time, with advice, they ended up understanding their place in the community.”

Most respondents now reported few tensions between former Anti-balaka and other young people, who live and farm together and face the same difficulties – though again Bossangoa centre stands out as having more acute tensions.

For others, however, bad behaviour on the part of some former Anti-balaka had developed into criminality, what one referred to as ‘organised crime’; “At the beginning, their benefit was to save the population, but at some point they started to steal things… and it was these ill-gotten gains that constituted their benefit.”

These misgivings were in some cases linked to what ex-combatants had done – or were suspected of having done – during the crisis. The boro rites explained above were exclusively private, often secret, and largely took place exclusively within families, though in some cases local ‘sage’ were paid to carry them out. They were concerned with ensuring the future health of the ex-combatant and their family, marking their return from the bush to the society of the village – but they did not therefore imply any sort of public healing or reconciliation; interestingly, one local official denied that rites took place at all.

43. Man, 59, Soungbe, community member
44. Man, 52, Ndoromboli
45. Woman, 28, Bossangoa, community member
46. Man, 62, Bossangoa, community member
47. Woman, 23, Bossangoa, community member
48. Man, 35, Bossangoa, community member
49. Man, 20, Soungbe, community member
50. Man, 63, Soungbe, community member
51. Woman, 18, Bossangoa, community member
In contrast, the latent physical and spiritual danger posed by ex-combatants also brought potential benefits to the wider community, in that some felt that former Anti-balaka members had a role in maintaining security and peace, even mediating conflict within the community or families, in the absence of any meaningful presence of police, judicial authorities or national army. It is perhaps for this reason that misgivings about the present role of former Anti-balaka were much more acute in Bossangoa town, where the presence of MINUSCA and national authorities provides some alternative protection, than in outlying villages where ex-combatants are often the only source of security and are thus viewed more tolerantly.

This latent community defence role was potentially more than just an ad hoc or individual phenomenon, as a significant number of young ex-Anti-balaka reported that they remained in touch with former comrades and commanders, and indicated that they would be prepared to rejoin an group in the event of a future crisis. This reflects the roots of the Anti-balaka in older collective defence militias, such as the Anti-Zaraguina cited above, and suggests that they have at least in part reverted back to this function as a latent community defence network.

NEEDS AND INTERVENTIONS

- The needs of young former Anti-balaka were broadly understood by both former group members and community members to be employment, finance and training, particularly in agriculture, animal husbandry, commerce and trades. Many respondents called for the creation of a ‘Maison des Jeunes’ (youth centre) to implement youth training and development.

- As uncovered in a previous study on social attitudes: Conciliation Resources, ‘Peace and security in the Central African Republic: Community perspectives from Bossangoa and the western border zones’ (May 2020).

- Needs and interventions were much more acute in Bossangoa town, where the presence of MINUSCA and national authorities provides some alternative protection, than in outlying villages where ex-combatants are often the only source of security and are thus viewed more tolerantly.

- The structural challenges – employment, infrastructure and community development – impact former Anti-balaka and community members alike. Any socioeconomic support to young people formerly engaged with Anti-balaka also needs to be provided to other youth or benefit the wider community to avoid incentivising others to join armed groups or creating social tensions.

- The vast majority of respondents report significant ongoing socioeconomic challenges – most are unable to adequately feed their families. In line with this, the needs of young former Anti-balaka were broadly understood by both former group members and community members to be employment, finance and training, particularly in agriculture, animal husbandry, commerce and trades. Many respondents called for the creation of a ‘Maison des Jeunes’ (youth centre) to implement youth training and development.

- Many – including many former Anti-balaka themselves – also identified the need for psychosocial support and counselling: “I want the ex-AB [Anti-balaka] to receive sensitisation about their wellbeing.”54 However, they did not specify what form this should take, or how it would differ from the support already offered by MINUSCA or NGOs. Further research is warranted to understand the nuances of appropriate post-conflict counselling in the context of widespread belief in the long-term spiritual effects of involvement in violence and the role of rites. Many respondents reported that this Listening Exercise was the first time that they had ever been able to tell their stories or frame their needs in their own words.

- Some respondents reported that they had received support from NGOs, including Conciliation Resources and War Child UK. The WFP was identified as having distributed some assistance, along with reports of MINUSCA training for former combatants in Bossangoa centre.

- However, one future challenge may be the overvaluation of the importance of training, which often came up in conversations as something of a panacea: “The training changed my life and I will forget everything I have done before. I want the support of NGOs.”55

- More broadly, it is clear that the central socioeconomic challenges facing former Anti-balaka members are the same as for the rest of the young population – lack of employment, infrastructure and community development; structural shortcomings that far exceed the scope of post-conflict interventions, and are beyond the current capability of either national or local government to address. As a result, it is clear that any socioeconomic support to young people formerly engaged with Anti-balaka also needs to be provided to other youth or benefit the wider community to avoid incentivising others to join armed groups or creating social tensions.

- While many of the young people consulted recognised the importance and commitment of local government, and considered local officials as the first port of call in the event that they faced challenges, they were also realistic about the very limited means at their disposal. They placed little hope in the national government: “It is unnecessary to talk about the government because they abandon us, no road, no support, no appreciation...”56

52. As uncovered in a previous study on social attitudes: Conciliation Resources, ‘Peace and security in the Central African Republic: Community perspectives from Bossangoa and the western border zones’ (May 2020).
54. Man, 20, Soungbe
55. Man, 18, Bossangoa
56. Man, 33, Ndomombi
CONCLUSION

1. Preventing re-recruitment of young people through the promotion of alternatives to violence

The Anti-balaka was an organic and loosely organised expression of broadly shared needs for community self-defence and revenge, expressed through the mobilisation of young people, rather than an archetypal armed group organised around individual leaders. The fact that the group was local, informal, syncretic and spontaneous meant that those involved were never truly ‘mobilised’, making demobilisation ineffective; most were not armed with guns, thus disarmament was moot.

Traditional approaches to DDR will therefore likely be inappropriate and ineffective in the context of Bossangoa. Yet former combatants remain present in the community and in contact with each other as a latent community defence network. This means that they could remobilise very quickly in the event of perceived threats to the community.

To break the cycle of remobilisation and re-recruitment there is a need to work in parallel with young people and those who may encourage them to rejoin the armed fight (notably local Anti-balaka commanders, local community leaders, marabouts, religious leaders and individual family members). This would entail exploring how young people can be seen to be promoting the interests, values and security of their community without resorting to violence. Such strategies would need to demonstrate how dialogue and mediation can help young people to achieve the same objective, of protecting their community. Strategies also need to be informed by an in-depth understanding of the role that social and gendered perceptions and expectations play in incentivising young people to join armed groups and in justifying violence as part of the Anti-balaka group. Finally, there is a need for community development projects which offer tangible socioeconomic alternatives to violence to both former group members and youth from the wider community.

2. The Anti-balaka as a collective phenomenon and implications for the peace agreement

The role of individual commanders in the Anti-balaka seems to be of significantly lower salience than in other armed groups, elsewhere in CAR and further afield. Rather than a group that coalesces around a charismatic or powerful leader, and stands or falls on the ambitions or goals of that leader, the Anti-balaka seems to have been rooted in a collective desire for self-defence and a shared spiritual framework for violence. The motives of young Anti-balaka members were overwhelmingly local, and stand in contrast to the rhetoric of some leaders who claim national and political objectives.

This poses significant challenges for the implementation of national peace accords, such as the peace agreement signed between the CAR government and 14 armed groups in 2019. The 2019 peace agreement provides a critical framework for peace and political engagement in CAR. Its infrastructure (eg. the CMOP) offers valuable space for dialogue between the government, armed group representatives, and community and faith leaders. However, the Listening Exercise has also highlighted some of its limits. The actions of young Anti-balaka members were primarily driven by local conflict dynamics and personal experiences of violence. A concentration on securing the agreement of key individual leaders to national-level settlements will therefore have little traction if local drivers of mobilisation or violence are not addressed in parallel.

Addressing the Anti-balaka as a community phenomenon rather than an expression of individual aspirations or grievances is vital to building sustainable peace. The implementation of the 2019 peace agreement should therefore be approached as a process, which addresses the most important local issues – notably the return of displaced communities – in a sensitive way, works proactively on intercommunity relations and social tensions, and emphasises understanding and unpicking of Anti-balaka networks and justifications. Designed to link local processes with the national peace agreement, the CMOP is one platform which can listen to young people and support community-based peace structures to address local drivers of mobilisation and violence, while also ensuring that the national process is informed by community perspectives and needs.
3. Dealing with the past: the need for intercommunity dialogue

The testimonies from young people have shown that the perceived threat that drove the formation of the Anti-balaka was the Séléka, and by extension – in the eyes of many former combatants and civilian community members alike – the Muslim community members that they saw as complicit with Séléka abuses. ‘Peace’ in Bossangoa – and by extension the sustainable demobilisation of Anti-balaka combatants – has become synonymous with the absence of Muslim communities from the region. There is thus a clear risk of remobilisation and re-recruitment in the event of poorly managed or accelerated return of Muslim refugees and displaced people.

Promoting an accelerated return of the Muslim population to Bossangoa without providing affected communities with a space to recognise and address the legacies of past violence will exacerbate conflict and may lead to renewed armed mobilisation of young people. Instead, the focus should lie on developing strategies to address needs for community-level peacebuilding among the current inhabitants of Bossangoa, among displaced and refugee communities, and – vitally – promoting dialogue between the sundered halves of the community. The CMOP, which includes Muslim armed group commanders, constitutes a unique space in Ouham prefecture in which representatives of both communities already come together. If managed sensitively and with close attention to the needs of both communities, the CMOP could provide an entry point through which future intercommunity dialogue and reconciliation initiatives can be explored.
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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