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Reducing children's vulnerability to violence: A case study from the Central African Republic

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These children, along with more than 4,000 people, took refuge at the airport of Bangui, the capital city of CAR. © Bruno Col/World Vision.

Introduction

Children in the Central African Republic (CAR) have been living through cycles of conflict, instability and chronic poverty for decades. They live in a 'forgotten crisis' that has largely slipped off the international agenda and rarely makes it into the headlines.

More than 13,000 children and adolescents are currently being exploited by armed groups.[1] Children have been subjected to sexual abuse and gender-based violence and face ongoing risk of being injured or killed. Many remain displaced and separated from their families, exposing them to even greater risk of abuse and exploitation.

Since 2014, World Vision CAR has worked with 4,900 children and adolescents (aged 8 to 18), including 590 children formerly associated with armed groups, in the sub-prefectures of Damara.[2] Many of these children displayed signs of distress, suffered nightmares, presented social withdrawal, had difficulty concentrating and sometimes regressed to previous developmental behaviours (e.g. bedwetting or thumb-sucking). Former child soldiers also met with reticence and opposition from their communities, leaving the children feeling isolated, lonely and hopeless.

[1] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), '2017 Aperçu des humanitaires republique centrafricaine' (October 2016), 21.

[2] World Vision, *Bringing hope to 'a forgotten crisis': Central African Republic Response Report* (August 2016), 7.

It was in this context that the project Empowering Children as Peacebuilders (ECaP) was implemented. The project provides a community-based approach for the protection and empowerment of children affected by conflict in the Damara sub-prefecture.

This case study examines how World Vision and partners developed the peacebuilding and social cohesion programme to address challenges facing children, youth and their communities in the post-conflict Damara sub-prefecture. It also sheds light on the importance of community-led project adaptation and design to fit the specific needs of this conflict context and to ensure that the interventions will yield positive impact on all communities involved.

In this specific example, World Vision met for a whole week with community leaders, children affected by the conflict, Christian and Muslim faith leaders, youth groups and other community-based organisations involved in peacebuilding and reconciliation work to make sure that the ECaP project was fit for purpose and served the needs of project beneficiaries.

Context

CAR is one of the world's poorest countries and often described by the international community as a failed state in permanent crisis. Decades of political instability have led to the destruction of the national economy, the weakening of state institutions and a stagnation of development efforts. By all measures, even before the devastation from the 2012 conflict, CAR was already facing severe development deficits.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Index, prior to the 2012 coup, CAR had the second lowest level of human development (187th out of 188 countries), with a life expectancy of 50.7 years. More than 62 per cent of the population lived below the international poverty line of US$1.25/day, while the under-5 mortality rate was 164 per 1,000 (the eighth highest in the world). The country's immunisation coverage stood at just 23 per cent; 41 per cent of children under 5 were chronically malnourished; and less than 35 per cent of the population had access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation facilities.[3] In 2016, out of 183 countries reviewed against the Global Youth Development Index, CAR was rated the worst place to be young.[4]

The current crisis in CAR began in December 2012, when the northern-based Muslim Séléka forces overthrew the government, forcing then-president François Bozizé to flee the country. This led to the formation of Christian self-defence militia groups, the Anti-Balaka. Since then CAR has experienced spiralling violence (including atrocities and massacres), inter-community tensions and ethno-religious conflict.

Almost the entire population of 4.6 million has been affected by the crisis: 2.3 million people remain in need of humanitarian aid, nearly 385,000 have been internally displaced and another 12,700 have fled the country.[5] According to UNICEF, one-third of school-age children do not attend school, more than 40 per cent of children under 5 are suffering from chronic malnutrition, and between 6,000 and 10,000 children have been recruited by armed groups during the crisis.[6]

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3 UNDP, *Human Development Report 2015* (2015).

4 Commonwealth Secretariat, *2016 Global Youth Development Index and Report* (2016), 31.

5 UNOCHA, '2017 Aperçu des humanitaires republique centrafricaine' (October 2016), 6.

6 UNICEF, 'Central African Republic: Nearly one in five children is a refugee or internally displaced' (15 November 2016), https://www.unicef.org/media/media_93278.html.

Impact of the conflict on children

A World Vision–facilitated multi-sectoral assessment revealed that the Damara sub-prefecture of Ombella-M'poko prefecture experienced some of the conflict's heaviest impacts.[7] In addition to lives lost, families separated and a shattered economy, the assessment revealed acute vulnerability, particularly among orphaned children and youth, many of whom had been forced to engage in the conflict.

Four to six thousand children are estimated to have been recruited by armed groups during the conflict. © Bruno Col/World Vision.

According to community members interviewed,[8] the underlying problems that increased children's vulnerability to exploitation during the conflict extended beyond religious, political or tribal affiliations. These problems included the murder of their parents or family members, rape and gender-based sexual violence, and the destruction and looting of property, which in turn made some children vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups. Food insecurity (including looting and destruction of livestock), population displacement and the destruction and looting of health centres were less obvious but equally important push factors.

Even after the end of active conflict, mistrust and violence pervaded the community. Communities did not trust the children and youth who in turn did not trust caregivers; especially those caring for children and youth in temporary (or foster) care arrangements.

The crisis in Damara has had a negative impact on children in a variety of ways:

- Psychological impact: Many children became fearful, regressed in their age-appropriate development and socially withdrawn.
- Education impact: Qualified teachers either fled or were killed, leaving a void in the schools. Orphans often had to leave school to assume domestic work or other duties. In addition, it was often hard to pay for school kits, clothing and fees, given the impact of the conflict on people's livelihoods; this often meant that children left school at an early age.
- Hygiene impact: Toilets that were set up for children living in Internally Displaced People (IDP) sites were contaminated, and children had no access to safe drinking water or adequate care in case of illness.
- Former child soldiers were often left without any reintegration opportunities. While 70 per cent of children associated with armed groups and forces returned to agricultural or small-business activities, 22 per cent were left with nothing to do, while the other 8 per cent went back to school.[9]

World Vision's Response

World Vision started working in CAR in March 2013 at the peak of the conflict. Based on the scale of the humanitarian crisis and existing development deficits, World Vision developed a multi-sectoral programme to meet urgent needs and build longer-term resilience of communities in CAR. At the heart of this approach was a cross-cutting emphasis on building social cohesion and peacebuilding efforts.

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[7] World Vision Multi-sectoral Assessments (August 2016).

[8] Interviews conducted by Bureau d'Etudes AZIMUT Capacités as part of the research for the case study, August 2016.

[9] World Vision, *Plan de development local (PDL) de la commune de Damara* (2016), 28.

In the Damara sub-prefecture, World Vision's programme began with emergency water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions and gradually extended to include education, child protection, peacebuilding and livelihoods programming. In line with a broader strategy to address longer-term social cohesion and peacebuilding issues, World Vision began implementing the ECaP project model.

This project model promotes participatory community-based management of Peace Clubs. The Peace Clubs are designed to help children and adolescents become agents of peace and change for themselves, their families and their communities. The Peace Road Curriculum implemented in the Peace Clubs helps targeted children and youth to:
1)   protect themselves and make good decisions
2)   treat others with respect, tolerance and peace
3)   foster relationships that result in a safer, more cooperative community for all.

Peace Clubs have been established in seven villages in the sub-prefecture of Damara: Trangué, Gbago, Damara Centre, Gbozo, Bosselé, Dombe/Liby and Oumba.

In order to support local sustainability, World Vision and implementing partner URU engaged community leaders to provide community management and oversight of the Peace Clubs. Each Peace Club is managed by a committee comprising representatives from youth groups, women's groups, religious leaders and village chiefs. (The local government is represented by the village chief.)

While World Vision developed and funded the project, it has been directly implemented by URU and the community. URU's staff were trained by World Vision on peace building, World Vision CAR policy, child protection guidelines in coordination with the local protection cluster and on existing guidelines for peacebuilding and social cohesion resolution developed by the social cohesion cluster. It is worth noting that URU's primary responsibility has been to ensure the establishment and continuity of the management committees, to train instructors and to conduct community training on child protection and child rights.

Challenge: Absence of appropriate peer support

In the initial stages of project implementation, the World Vision team quickly came to understand that the model had to be adapted for CAR's specific context. The original project model is primarily centred around peer-supported psychosocial interventions; however, most of the children and adolescents in CAR were not yet in a position to offer peer support. Substituting parents and caregivers for peers was also not an option as many had lost trust in their parents and their community due to the dynamics of the conflict.

Adaptation

Following the realisation of the need to adapt the model to the CAR context, World Vision worked with children and adolescents to revise the programme and incorporate a whole-of-community approach. The Peace Clubs offered a platform for children and youth to receive individual and peer support. This meant that while children received targeted support from URU facilitators (and each other) in the Peace Clubs, parents, caregivers and community leaders were also trained in child protection, child rights, peacebuilding and conflict resolution and were supported to begin the reconciliation processes in their communities.

World Vision and URU worked with community members to sensitise them to the needs of children and youth attending the Peace Clubs, the aims of the programme and how they could effectively support efforts. In the end, so many community members were interested in supporting the programme that it became a challenge to organise enough training to accommodate all volunteers.

> My name is Odre. I'm 18 years old, and I used to be part of the Anti-Balaka militia until the election of the transitional government, after which I concluded that the reason why we decided to fight was no longer relevant. Going back home was much more difficult than I imagined. People were afraid of me. I was lonely and frustrated at the fact that they judged me for having been part of the militia. I had the urge to turn the tables and help my community with something other than a gun.
>
> A head of Damara came to my village and explained that a new project was starting, with the aim of bringing young people and ex-combatants like myself together to take part in peace-promotion activities. I joined with a friend of mine without hesitation. The project is definitely helping change the way people see us – I feel a lot better now.

World Vision also targeted the involvement of children within the community who were at risk of being recruited by armed groups. To attract these children, World Vision supplied Peace Clubs with play material, including slides, swings and other equipment. This provided children with a safe space to play, forget about daily worries and share lessons they experienced through the Peace Clubs with others not yet engaged in them. This play space also created a natural mingling area for children and families from various backgrounds, facilitating interactions that might not have otherwise taken place.

> My name is Sofia. I'm 8 years old. I'm an orphan, and I live with my aunt.
>
> My aunt is not involved in the club, but she told me that this is a place I can go when I don't have school. When I'm at the club with the facilitators and the other children, I feel happy, and I don't want to go back home because we have a lot of fun together. The Peace Club is full of girls like me, so I enjoy being part of a big group of girls, and the games we play become more interesting and more challenging. You have to do your best to make your team win.
>
> On the way back home after the Peace Club I like to share with my peers new strategies to be sure that the next day we will improve our game and win over the other group. Those girls are becoming my sisters at some point because we all come from different backgrounds and we have our own complicated stories. But during our activities we forget our complicated life and just enjoy the moment.

Challenge: Creating alternative positive means of livelihoods

Many of the children and youth who joined the armed groups were driven to do so because of underlying poverty issues. With no alternative livelihood opportunities, youth remain at risk of being recruited into armed groups as a means to provide for basic necessities. Sometimes children can also be coerced by caregivers to join armed groups as a means for reducing the number of people they need to provide for. Therefore, protecting children from needing to join armed groups required creating alternative options.

Many children were among those forced to take refuge at the IDP camp near Bangui Airport. © Bruno Col/World Vision.

ECaP as a project model in CAR would respond to those needs by increasing economic opportunities for demobilised children and thereby actively investing in maintaining peace.

Adaptation

To supplement the activities driven by the Peace Clubs, World Vision worked to re-enrol children into school. Women's groups were equipped with sewing machines and supported to develop savings groups so they could support their children. These women's groups further contributed to the reintegration of girls formerly associated with armed forces by providing them with vocational training, specifically on sewing skills, so they could earn a sustainable income in the future.

Youth who were unable to return to school have been introduced to vocational training, savings schemes, entrepreneurship and targeted cash-for-work activities. To increase the income generated via cash-for-work projects, participating youth were divided into groups of 20 and requested to use learned techniques introduced to them to develop their own savings strategy. On their own, these groups would meet regularly and devise strategies to reinvest earnings into further income-generating activities. As well as building core life skills, the development of these savings groups multiply the benefits gained from engagement in cash-for-work activities.

Challenge: Developing sustainable funding

In 2016, only 34 per cent of the humanitarian funding needs were met for CAR.[10] At the time of writing, only 2 per cent of the estimated humanitarian funding requirements are pledged for 2017.[11] Chronic underfunding for this crisis often results in short-term project design, with donors prioritising urgent and immediate life-saving interventions versus addressing underlying causes of fragility and conflict with measures that have the potential to significantly reduce the impact of the crisis and its cyclical reoccurrence.

Adaptation

World Vision CAR was able to deliver this peacebuilding programme due to private fundraising from World Vision Korea. It was originally designed for only two Peace Clubs. World Vision's community-participation approach enabled community adoption and ownership of the clubs – enabling five additional Peace Clubs to be established per the communities' request and through the support of community volunteers – and achieved a level of self-sustainability. The

[10] UNOCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2017* (2017), 8.

[11] Based on data from the UNOCHA website, Central African Republic Country page, accessed 8 February 2017, http://www.unocha.org/car.

programme has become attractive to young people, who are coming from remote villages to attend the Peace Clubs. Children and youth who were introduced to conflict-management techniques and familiarised with child protection best practices and child rights have become agents of peace. These agents of peace are now actively engaged in educating their peers on ways to promote peace in their communities.

My name is Yasmine. I'm 23 years old and I live in Damara with my husband.

When the project started in Damara, one of the community leaders called me to say that they needed someone to replace the girls' leader and they said that everyone recommended me. So I accepted the position, knowing that it will be something I'll do as [a] volunteer. I talked about it with my husband and we decided that I can be part of it.

Since then, my life is moving a lot. I have the feeling that I am giving a good contribution to my community. I am part of the team working to sensitise our community on the project, to build the Peace Club and help the implementation team to achieve our common goal.

As [a] young woman, I'm proud to be involved in that project. I see the benefit for my community and even for my family. I feel more engaged, more credible towards people, at some point more empowered. From my perspective, the project is just there to help us to start a change at the community level. I am aware that World Vision and URU will leave, but they are giving to us a present we have to take care of. The more the community is engaged, the more the Peace Club will stay alive, and this is our mission as leaders and facilitators.

Impact of the project

Approximately 4,900 boys and girls have benefitted from the programme. All these children come from very poor families and many from different faith backgrounds. Despite their personal histories and the brutality they have been subjected to, these children continue to demonstrate incredible capacities for peace and tolerance.

'Due to the project, I was able to be accepted by my community, which I never thought could be possible. Now I have made friends and I feel like a normal child again. People have accepted me. I could not ask for more.'
– Former boy soldier, 16 years old.

Reduction in negative coping mechanisms

Children involved in the project were provided a safe space in which to identify and address underlying issues that led to aggressive behaviour. Both caregivers and children expressed that the children involved in the project and they were able to make significant gains in overcoming manifestations of acute stress.

Most of the children and youth involved in the Peace Clubs are regaining normal social behaviour, routines and regular activities (such as education and play), despite the country's ongoing turmoil. They are responding well to the peer support, in familiar or family settings, with the appropriate care and protection from their regular caregivers.

Since implementation of the programme, none of the children or adolescents within the targeted communities have been reported to have been forced to join or expressed the desire to rejoin armed groups.

Increased trust and reduction in underlying social tensions within communities

Trust within communities is growing progressively and is being built on multiple levels. As children build trust with one another, they are also restoring relationships with their caregivers and the broader community. Today these children report a sense of belonging within their community.

The principles of forgiveness, tolerance and reconciliation introduced within the Peace Clubs have had a secondary benefit of bringing together previously strained Christian and Muslim communities. Although this was not the original intent of the programme, the peacebuilding principles and skills that have enabled children and youth have had important and far-reaching effects. Examples have been noted in which Christian members of a Peace Club have approached Muslim community members and requested they bring their children to attend. The Christians assured their Muslim neighbours that the security of their children would be guaranteed by children and parents already attending the Peace Club. There has not been an incident of violence between the two groups since. This is a tangible result of the project and its contribution to social cohesion.

Students participate in a classroom in Seka 2 School in Bangui. © Joelma Pereira/ World Vision.

My name is Mady, I'm widow, I am from the Muslim community and I live in Trangue.

When this project arrived in our village, I was not there because I spent months in the bush. I didn't want to risk my life even though I'm old. Some women living in the village met me on my farm and they gave me news of the village. They said that a new project is coming, targeting our children. I told them that I'm old and I don't have children anymore; they are all dead, so this project is not relevant for me. They answered that the project needs women coming from different religions in order to prove to men that women are promotors of social cohesion and that we don't want our children to make the same mistake as their older brothers. I took two weeks to think about it alone at my farm, and I realised that I have to shut down the anger I have in my heart and go back in my community to participate as a woman.

I'm back in my village, and I realise that I don't have to be scared anymore. People welcomed me and I asked to reintegrate into the association of widowed women of the village. They talked to me about the good things coming thanks to the project, and it is motivating me to be more involved in my community.

Most of the Muslim families left the village during the conflict. I meet some of them from time to time, so I try to sensitise them to the project as a way to reintegrate the community. I think the project just opened a door in which Muslims and Christians living in the same community have to seize the chance to keep it open for a better future.

Recommendations

Peace-first approach: Fighting has not ended in CAR. Many times during the implementation of the Peace Clubs, work had to be suspended due to new clashes. While the traditional approach to social cohesion has been to implement programmes only after urgent humanitarian needs are met, the CAR example has shown that addressing both immediate and longer-term needs is not only possible but is crucial to prevent recidivism.

Integrating Mental Health and Psychosocial Support from the beginning: It is critical to integrate the MHPSS approaches from the very beginning of the project cycle to address the most pressing needs of children affected by conflict in CAR as well as their long-term MHPSS needs which can persist over time. Integrated MHPSS approaches substantially enhance child protection programmes and will more likely contribute to building children's resilience, or at the very least, ensure their psychological well-being does not worsen. All staff working, designing and implementing programmes for children affected by conflict need to be trained in the Inter-agency Standing Committee Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings. Additionally staff working directly with children should all receive training in Psychological First Aid and the signs and symptoms of children who might require more specialised MHPSS and care.

Social cohesion as the foundation principle: Going beyond a 'do no harm' approach to actively 'do more good' meant intentionally building emergency programmes that foster interaction, build trust and engage all community members. While World Vision's programme in Damara began with WASH activities, well-designed, transparent programming laid the foundation for the community to trust World Vision to implement further programming. This ultimately opened the door for the Peace Clubs to take root. The end result was a project that goes beyond immediate emergency relief and has contributed to uniting entire communities.

Increased funding for programmes that address social cohesion: World Vision's programme demonstrates how small investments from private donors can have significant impact for a conflict-affected community. For sustained impact and to truly break the cyclical and detrimental effect of conflict, donors need to strategically invest in and prioritise peacebuilding and youth-engagement programmes.

Transparent and participatory targeting: World Vision CAR worked with the community leaders and local authorities to ensure a transparent targeting process of the most vulnerable children. This included orphans, children associated with armed forces and groups, children who are head of households (especially girls), disabled children and children from very poor families. Focus group discussions with communities revealed that almost all participants were able to describe the target group and agreed it was the right group to target. By ensuring that the targeting criteria were appropriately defined and communicated, World Vision was able to gain greater community buy-in and sensitise the community to the specialised needs of these groups.

Multi-sectoral approach: In addition to attending Peace Clubs and/or Child Friendly Spaces, children and youth previously engaged in armed groups (as well as those who were not) need to be engaged in productive activities by going to school, receiving vocational training or participating in income-generation activities. Failing to recognise and address the economic factors that push vulnerable youth and children into armed groups will result in higher rates of recidivism. Access to economic opportunities needs to be equitable to all.

Acknowledgements

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Children share experiences and life stories at a child friendly space in Yaloké.
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World Vision's World Humanitarian Summit commitments

At the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, World Vision made 21 commitments which are now being implemented and monitored.

Among these commitments is the aim to reach 20 per cent of all affected children when World Vision responds to conflict and natural disasters. This will be achieved in a number of ways, including prioritising child protection and education in emergencies and investing in strengthening protection systems.

> World Vision aims to reach 20 per cent of all affected children when responding to conflict and natural disasters, prioritising child protection and education in emergencies and investing in strengthening protection systems.

In continuing to work towards avoiding preventable deaths and enabling every woman, child and adolescent the opportunity to survive and thrive, World Vision has committed to spend US$500 million on health, nutrition, HIV and AIDS, and WASH in humanitarian settings by 2020. This funding is part of the US$3 billion committed by World Vision to the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health.

Furthermore, to help protect development gains and bridge the relief-development divide, World Vision will commit to allocating up to 20 per cent of its development funding as a crisis modifier* (where national affiliates decide this is needed) to prepare and respond to humanitarian needs when disasters strike.

World Vision will also seek to deliver 50 per cent of its humanitarian aid through a multi-sectoral and multi-purpose cash-first approach by 2020, where context appropriate. This will leverage digital payment and identification systems and shared value partnerships with others, such as Mastercard Corp, to track the delivery of assistance from donor to beneficiary.

Other commitments include the areas of child protection and education, peacebuilding, accountability and the scaling up of humanitarian and private-sector engagement.

To see the full list of World Vision's World Humanitarian Commitments visit http://wvi.org/disaster-management/our-commitments.

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* Crisis modifiers allow a quick injection of emergency funds to response to early warning and protect existing development gains in our programmes. These funds allow us to respond rapidly to address humanitarian needs and reduce livelihood losses.

World Vision

World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. Inspired by our Christian values, we are dedicated to working with the world's most vulnerable people. We serve all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity or gender.

A 12-year-old girl cooks in Yaloke IDP camp. © Bruno Col/World Vision.

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