



Policy brief

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Disarmament of the heart: Reconciliation in the Central African Republic



**CONCILIATION
RESOURCES**
working together for peace



Local leaders in Lakuanga, Suburb of Bangui after peace meeting, January 2014.

1. Summary

This policy brief addresses the aftermath of the conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR) and outlines a forward-looking political solution that, through national and local reconciliation processes, can help create new relationships of trust between citizens and the state. The brief draws on Conciliation Resources' work in CAR since March 2013, including support to civil society partners and Local peace cell members working in their respective communities in Bangui, Bimbo, Bagoua, Carnot, N'Dele and Bria. The brief also draws on discussions with the Ministry of Social Affairs and National Reconciliation.

We publish this document with the knowledge/ understanding that national actors, international agencies and civil society organisations have invested enormous efforts to pull Central Africa Republic out of the 2013 crisis. It is now time to support national and community structures so that they have the capacity to avoid a relapse into another cycle of violence. The November 2016 CAR donor conference in Brussels is yet another indication that the international community is willing to support recovery, reconciliation and development in the country.

In CAR there are a number of unresolved structural issues since the 2013 crisis that could easily disrupt the fragile stability in place and lead to the re-emergence of violence. Interventions by national and international actors have provided only a minimal level of security in and around the capital

Bangui, and other parts of the country. Corroded institutions, a fragile security environment and a much-weakened economy still blight the country, while people struggle to deal with the effects of extreme violence.¹

We recommend and encourage Local Peace Cells (LPCs) and religious leaders to be mindful of the involvement of young people and women of all ages and backgrounds to fully participate in peace processes and community peacebuilding at all times. National reconciliation in such circumstances requires strategic engagement at multiple levels. Such efforts will help build trust in government as a core part of national and local statebuilding. Shifting the discourse so that religious differences are no longer identified as a primary conflict driver, and instead prioritising community reconciliation as a peacebuilding measure, will reduce the risk of violence re-emerging in areas where armed groups are still operational.

Conciliation Resources proposes the following priority areas for action:

- **Support to conflict prevention initiatives through local reconciliation structures.** In areas outside government control, community based structures can reduce tensions and resolve conflict through dialogue and reconciliation.

¹ The 2014 UN Human Development Report ranked CAR 187th out of 188 countries and territories, which put the country in the low human development category.

There is now a common saying emerging in the Central African Republic that there is a need for disarmament of the heart. It is important to encourage communities to listen deeply to each other's stories and experiences with empathy, creating understanding between citizens and state and amongst citizens.

- **Engaging communities in national reconciliation processes.** Supporting government initiatives to create dialogue platforms between national and local governance, and communities is important. This will go a long way in linking up with a national reconciliation initiative that addresses structural violence. The past absence of government and the predatory nature of state institutions during the conflict engendered mistrust; establishing greater confidence in the state will require a process that engages the people in statebuilding from the community level to the national level.
- **Challenging the religious narrative of the conflict. Religious leaders have a key role in promoting reconciliation.** Throughout CAR, religious leaders of various faiths often possess the social capital, institutional resources and legitimacy in their communities to access no-go areas, engage armed actors and successfully intervene to end violence and resolve conflict. Religious leaders are also uniquely placed to challenge the persistent, yet misleading, religious conflict narrative in CAR – a source of misinformation that has fuelled intercommunal violence.

2. Background

Violence erupted in Central African Republic in 2013 due to longstanding grievances that went unaddressed in a context of rapid state disintegration. Concerted efforts by national and international actors led to a reduction in physical violence, allowing for elections to be held in December 2015 and early 2016. After a second round of elections on 31 March 2016, the government of Faustin-Archange Touadéra assumed power. However, addressing the pre-existing structural violence, and other political issues that gave rise to the crisis, will take time.

2.1. A new electoral mandate, new opportunities for peace?

The clear mandate secured by President Touadéra has given him the opportunity to work towards meeting the significant challenges faced by the country. Recent high-level peace initiatives have met with some success. The Brazzaville (Congo) peace talks resulted in a commitment by the armed

groups to cease hostilities and engage in a process of dialogue, with an agreement signed on 24 July 2014. The Bangui Forum that was convened on 11 May 2015 offered unprecedented opportunities for much needed dialogue between the state and civil society, and demonstrated the potential of national processes that engage civil society and support greater inclusion. However, the recommendations of the Bangui Forum need follow-up, especially at a time when the signatories of the Brazzaville Accord have fragmented into smaller factions. A challenging security situation should not be used as an excuse for the continuation of violence (see 2.2 below).

The new government offers a fresh sense of optimism among Central Africans. A key challenge for President Touadéra's administration will be to demonstrate a commitment to reconciling the different interest groups. His government will also need to demonstrate that it understands, and is responsive to, the different needs and interests of all people in CAR. However, the current lack of transitional justice mechanisms affects the credibility of statebuilding efforts and political dialogue processes.

Despite encouraging efforts in the past to engage civil society, for example the Bangui Forum in 2015, there have been indications of a narrowing of civil and political space in recent months. Some national civil society leaders have reported intimidatory tactics, including bank accounts being suspended without due process, and efforts made to prevent them from travelling overseas, aimed at limiting their activities. In a state of emergency, the government is permitted under international law to impose limitations on certain freedoms but is simultaneously required to provide proof that the measures in question are strictly required by the exigencies of the situation – the principle of proportionality.² The concern among Central African civil society actors is that the disproportionate narrowing of civil and political spaces for ordinary citizens risks pointing individuals and communities towards violence as their sole means of making their voices heard.

2.2. Deteriorating security situation

Despite the efforts of national and international actors to bring communities together and provide security, violence persists in locations such as the 3rd arrondissement in Bangui (commonly known as KM5), Kago Bandoro and Bambari. The Seleka forces have disintegrated into various small groups, while anti-Balaka have maintained their presence

² Article 4(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Derogations from obligations under international human rights law are permissible only to the extent that the relevant measures "do not involve discrimination solely on the ground of race, colour, sex, language, religion or social origin."

and capacity to fight. In some places the ex-Seleka groups are the *de facto* security providers in the area, collecting revenue at checkpoints; freedom of movement by the population is therefore curtailed. The Central African people must feel a sense of security to enable them to begin rebuilding broken relationships within the community. The reluctance for the armed groups to disarm is mainly driven by mutual fear of attack.

The state authority has not yet been re-established throughout the country, Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, and Repatriation (DDRR) is likely to struggle without addressing this mutual fear of attack and individual interest in maintaining the lack of provision of security by the state. The Local Peace structure being established by the Ministry of Social Affairs and National Reconciliation should play a crucial role in establishing that trust in the DDRR process.

2.3. Persistence of misleading conflict narratives

Contemporary analyses of the conflict in CAR agree that religion was not a primary cause, a fact recognised by the majority of Central Africans. However, popular narratives of the conflict have become divorced from this analysis. Since the crisis, religion has become a marker of community identity. Armed actors have used religion and ethnic identity to secure support from their constituencies and to mobilise resources and personnel. The exploitation of religious identities by elites has fuelled the longstanding narratives of real and perceived religion-based discrimination that exist in Muslim communities. Violence has occurred along lines of identity that are often overlapping, stoking religious and ethnic tensions and igniting a cycle of revenge attacks. Crucially, this misleading conflict narrative has led to interventions by national and international actors that privilege 'social cohesion' (i.e. bringing Muslims and Christians together in shared activities such as football matches).³

While CAR faces a number of challenges, continuing violence and lack of political consensus should not be a barrier to reconciliation efforts. A focus on challenging the religious conflict narrative would contribute to de-escalating tensions at national and local level and preventing outbreaks of violence. Forums in which community grievances and conflict experiences can be shared, acknowledged and

some form of redress provided, will promote greater confidence in the state as well as provide potential mechanisms for ex-combatants to be integrated with their communities.

3. Existing reconciliation initiatives

There are a number of existing efforts being led by national and local actors that are already prioritising reconciliation.

3.1. National reconciliation processes

In October 2016, the Ministry of Social Affairs and National Reconciliation launched a consultation with international non-governmental organisations, on a document that spells out a vision, objectives and details for establishing local peace and reconciliation committees in the Central African Republic.⁴ It is envisaged that this will be an inclusive National Network of Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees (NNLPRC) that will be established and based in Bangui, to promote the reinstatement of local chiefdom responsibility for social cohesion and reconciliation. The initiative is an effort to unite many initiatives that were formed and organised during the crises in 2013 within local communities, mainly supported by international civil society organisations. This initiative should be looked at positively to allow the government to develop new relationships with citizens on reconciliation, guided by a structured national comprehensive framework as well as at the regional and local levels.⁵

3.2. Community reconciliation efforts: local peace cells

Community owned structures known as local peace cells (LPCs) have been set up throughout CAR. LPCs play a catalytic role in increasing dialogue among Central Africans. Through their work, significant gains have been made in the quality of relationships, particularly in terms of trust levels and perceptions of relationships between communities and their local authorities. LPCs also act as an interface between government, community and community leaders when responding to conflict and insecurity. The areas and communities in which LPCs operate have witnessed reduced frequency of conflicts, early detection of potential violence, and synergies in peacebuilding efforts among state and non-state

3 Analysis of Conflict and Peacebuilding in the Central African Republic, Conciliation Resources, (2015) www.c-r.org/downloads/872%20CR%20CAR%20report%20ENG%20FINAL%20web.pdf. For a discussion of how the instrumentalisation of religion exacerbated intercommunal tensions in CAR, see also *Central African Republic: The Roots of Violence*, International Crisis Group (2015) www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/central-african-republic/central-african-republic-roots-violence

4 The document on "comités locaux de paix et de réconciliation en république centrafricaine" was issued by Madam Virginie Baikoua, Ministre des Affaires Sociales et de la Réconciliation Nationale, on 15 October 2016 during a consultation workshop with INGOs working in CAR.

5 Central African Republic: National Recovery and Peacebuilding Plan 2017-21 as a result of the CAR donor conference in Brussels December 2016 signed by Central African Republic President Faustin Archange Touadéra supported by the European Union, World Bank and the United Nations.

actors. LPCs are seen to be particularly beneficial in areas that had experienced extreme violence (so-called 'hotspots') or where international assistance was otherwise lacking.

4. Priority areas for action

Conciliation Resources proposes the following priority areas for action in order to maximise the chance of successful reconciliation in CAR:

4.1. Support to conflict prevention through local reconciliation structures

In the current security vacuum in CAR, it is easy to remain focused on the seemingly endemic cycles of violence, without examining how violence, when it escalates, eventually 'stops'.⁶ In the absence of effective state security provision, local institutions and structures, such as LPCs, can detect, address and prevent inter-communal conflict at an early stage. They can feed information for action to relevant authorities before disputes turn violent and, in the event that violence does occur, provide support to communities to help restore broken relationships and settle long-term grievances. Such institutions include traditional governance mechanisms and links between different ethnic groups, which were in the past used to resolve conflicts.⁷

The capital and agency of these traditional and emergent community-based structures should be recognised, harnessed and supported. Local peace cells require support to build their capacities in community dialogue.

4.2. Engaging communities in national reconciliation processes

Conciliation Resources welcomes the consultation process started by the Ministry of Social Affairs and National Reconciliation on a national reconciliation process (see 3.1). However, in many cases peace processes and reconciliation processes are seen as a national effort, at the expense of the involvement of communities. Rebuilding trust between government and citizens, increasing accountability, and responsiveness of the state to community needs must be priorities for Touadéra's newly elected Government.

⁶ Conciliation Resources recognises the following concurrent elements common to 'escalated violence': comparatively high numbers of deaths and injuries from armed violence, limitations (actual and self-imposed) on freedom of movement, displacement, closure of businesses and looting. In turn, we consider violence to have 'stopped' when the majority of these elements have ended.

⁷ Historically, for example, traditional structures were used to negotiate between the sedentary farmers and the cattle herders, agreeing compensation and negotiating passage.

It is therefore crucial for any reconciliation process in CAR to establish a working relationship within society that works hand-in-hand with local and national authorities. This could take the form of a dialogue platform through which a voluntary community group within a particular locality where violence occurred could work together. Government authorities such as the Chef de Quartier, the Mayors, and the Prefet and Sous Prefet should liaise with the platform to support victims of violence in their communities. In turn, structures of government, from local to national level, can support reconciliation processes by addressing past violence, listening to grievances in the community, acknowledging victims of violence and ensuring that they are provided with necessary support to rebuild their lives. LPCs should feed into the national reconciliation process, sharing crucial local insights and information and, in so doing, ensuring that the process stays relevant to realities on the ground.

4.3. Religious leaders have a key role to play in promoting reconciliation

It is critical to understand the social capital that enables some individuals to access no-go areas, engage armed actors and successfully intervene to end violence and resolve conflict. Religious leaders are particularly 'high capital' individuals in this context.

Firstly, they are embedded in communities, in times of crisis and of peace, with supporting structures and resources behind them, and strong links with community members. At a workshop on understanding reconciliation, facilitated by Conciliation Resources in Bangui in October 2016, community members identified religious leaders' 'proximity to the community' as a critical factor that enables them to effectively end violence.

"I lost my daughter Ndembalet Ines Belvia on 19 May 2013. She was killed by the Seleka, she was only 16 years old. Her death was an enormous shock for me and my family and at first we wanted her killers to be executed.

Today we have gotten over this shock. We think that these victims have paid in blood to liberate the people of CAR. I have let go of my hate because violence and revenge do not solve problems. I pray that Central Africans forgive one another in the name of peace, so that the people of CAR can once again come together."

Pastor Ndembalet Marcelin Mesmin, Secretary General, Local Peace Cell, Bimbo

Secondly, religious leaders are also uniquely placed to counter the misleading religious conflict narrative. Faith leaders' interventions have legitimacy among communities through the idea that "God is behind them."⁸

⁸ This finding emerged during a conflict analysis workshop facilitated by Conciliation Resources in Bangui in October 2016.

Conclusion

Transforming relationships is not simply post-conflict endeavour but a continuous process that can start at an earlier stage, before a formal settlement.⁹ The national religious leaders through the Interfaith Platform started working together under difficult circumstances during the crises and are able to contribute to steering Central Africans out of the religious narrative of the conflict and develop a better future of peaceful co-existence.

⁹ *Accord Insight 3, Transforming broken relationships: making peace with the past*, Conciliation Resources (2016) www.c-r.org/accord/reconciliation-and-peace-processes-insight

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Further information and resources

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A priest and an Imam after prayers in Lakuanga a suburb of Bangui. Caesar Poblacks © Conciliation Resources. January 2014.



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Conciliation Resources is an independent international organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence, resolve conflicts and promote peaceful societies. We believe that building sustainable peace takes time. We provide practical support to help people affected by violent conflict achieve lasting peace. We draw on our shared experiences to improve peacebuilding policies and practice worldwide.

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