



Policy brief

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Central African Republic: Building the peace



**CONCILIATION
RESOURCES**
working together for peace

Summary

The root causes of conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR) are complex, multiple and overlapping. They include¹ weak or absent governance, mistrust between the population and those who govern, marginalisation of the periphery, economic mismanagement, corruption and poverty². The conflict has been characterised by cycles of inter-communal violence and vengeance. Conciliation Resources recognises that neither religion nor ethnicity are root causes of the conflict. However, religious narratives of the conflict continue to be 'live', including among Central Africans.

Building a just and sustainable peace in the CAR requires:

- **A conflict transformation approach – beyond the social cohesion model.** Interventions which focus on the conflict's symptoms – episodes of violence – rather than addressing root causes, risk entrenching false conflict narratives, which could deepen the crisis and increase violence.
- **A common language (narrative) of the root causes of the conflict.** This will enable dialogue, support reconciliation and contribute to breaking the cycles of violence.
- **A shared national manifesto for peace** – a contract between individuals and communities, and between citizens and the state, which would identify the structural and relational changes needed.
- **Actual or perceived discrimination in law, policy or practice to be addressed.**

Once a new government is formed it will face significant political, economic and operational challenges for many months if not years ahead. Civil society actors will remain important peacebuilding actors and have a critical role to play in leading individuals, communities and armed groups away from violence and towards peace.

The priority in the post-election period will be to ensure that the government;

- Rebuilds trust between it and its citizens and increases accountability and responsiveness.
- Protects civil and political space and supports a growing and vibrant civil society.

- Recognises the 'capital' and agency of traditional and emergent community structures and individuals, and meaningfully engages them in strategies aimed at reducing violence, resolving conflict and building peace.

Peace in the CAR requires a conflict transformation approach – beyond the 'social cohesion' model.

The root causes of conflict in the CAR are complex, multiple and overlapping. Conciliation Resources recognises that neither religion nor ethnicity are root causes of the conflict. However, religious narratives of the conflict continue to 'be live', including among ordinary Central Africans.

The predominance of narratives that identify the conflict as religious or inter-communal, risk interventions that focus on the conflict's immediate symptoms (ie violence and how it manifests itself) rather than addressing its root causes. Limiting peacebuilding and prioritising donor funding to such initiatives risks entrenching a false conflict narrative, which could in turn deepen the crisis and increase violence.

A conflict transformation approach requires the development of a shared and common language (narrative) of the conflict, a lens to 'safely' examine the immediate situation and the root causes of the crisis and to envision a framework that addresses the structural and relational changes required in the CAR.

This would shape a common and shared national manifesto for peace – one that crosses divided communities and enables citizens to engage with duty bearers, including the state.

In the CAR, 'social cohesion' is currently the main 'approach' to building peace. It takes many different forms and remains undefined. Many Central Africans admit to not fully understanding what it means, and regard it as an external construct. For donors and (I)NGOs alike, 'social cohesion' activities are attractive. They can be readily planned and budgeted for, are relatively easily implemented and, unlike some peacebuilding or conflict transformation processes, can be more easily reported against and monitored, (although reporting tends to focus on the delivery of the activity as opposed to any transformative effect of the intervention.)

There are many documented cases, including those supported by Conciliation Resources,

1 See Conciliation Resources' *Analysis of Conflict and Peacebuilding in the Central African Republic*, for an in-depth analysis of the conflict and the drivers of violence.

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

which have successfully opened up or created spaces that bring together divided communities in dialogue. Some social cohesion projects create spaces for individuals from different or conflicting communities to come together in cash for work programmes, sporting events or community development projects. These social cohesion initiatives can serve as important confidence building opportunities between communities. However, in the absence of complementary conflict transformation approaches, relationships may not be transformed and any 'peace dividend', for example the absence of violence, may be short-lived. The events in Bangui in September 2015 demonstrate that 'social cohesion' gains can be quickly reversed.

Though the root causes of conflict in the CAR are not religious or ethnically driven, armed actors and political elites have used religion and ethnic identity to secure support from their constituencies and to mobilise resources and personnel. However violence that has been acted out seemingly based on identity, can conceal other drivers, in particular socio-economic factors. For example, some acts of violence, especially looting, have been opportunistic, aimed at securing assets – when a trader is targeted, his identity as a Muslim is not the primary driver for the violence against him. Other conflicts, for example in Ouham and Ouham Pende prefectures in northern CAR are resource conflicts over land and not identity, between cattle herders and sedentary farmers.

This is not to deny the actual and perceived discrimination experienced by some Muslims and the fear some Muslim communities report. Addressing real and perceived discrimination, which may be contained in law, policy or practice, will also be necessary for the conflict to be transformed. For example, to date, challenging issues regarding the actual and perceived nationality of Muslims born in the CAR have not been addressed.

The conflict, although not driven by religious identity, some of its characteristics, are identity based, for example the murder of a Christian or a Muslim and the disposal of the individual's body in front of a church or a mosque. These acts of violence are often highly provocative and can be catalysts for further violence. To address the immediate violence, criteria are needed to recognise identity-based violence, including faith-based violence.³ This will support religious leaders, the local media, community leaders,

security actors, and the judiciary to examine acts of violence, interrogate the causes and challenge false narratives. Equally, criteria will ensure incidences of faith-motivated violence are acknowledged and addressed (through formal and informal mechanisms) when they do occur.

Dialogue and reconciliation between the citizen and state and a vibrant civil society are necessary preconditions for peace in the CAR.

In many contexts in the CAR the state is effectively absent, failing to provide adequate basic services or security. For many, they perceive the 'state' as predatory, 'best-avoided'. Political elites are regarded as unaccountable and not responsive to their constituents, there is a lack of understanding and absence of a 'social-contract' model. There are few opportunities for citizens, or structures representing the interest of citizens, to engage constructively with the state or state institutions.

Rebuilding trust between the government and citizens, increasing accountability and responsiveness of the state need to be priorities for the newly elected government.

Despite encouraging efforts in the past to engage civil society, for example the May 2015 Bangui National Forum, there are worrying indications of a narrowing of civil and political space. 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 the actions of civil society leaders.

International law protects the right of a state to impose limitations in a state of emergency. For example, during periods of civil and violent unrest, the right to peaceful protest can be suspended. However measures limiting rights have to fulfil a number of requirements, such as proportionality, i.e. proof that the measures in question are strictly required by the exigencies of the situation, rather than arising from an abstract assessment of the situation as a whole.

The concern among Central African civil society actors is that this 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'.

3 For example, elements of a 'faith-motivated crime' might include one or more of the following elements: reference to instruction from a religious leader, religious language used during the act of violence, a place of worship being attacked.

To reduce violence, resolve conflict and build peace the 'capital' and agency of traditional and emergent community-based structures and individuals must be recognised.

In the current security vacuum in the CAR, it is easy to remain focused on the seemingly endemic cycles of violence – without examining how violence, when it escalates, 'stops'.⁴

It is critical we understand the 'capital' that enables some individuals to access no-go areas, engage armed actors and successfully intervene to end violence and resolve conflict.

For example, in a conflict analysis workshop facilitated by Conciliation Resources in Bangui in October 2015, 'proximity to the community' has enabled religious leaders⁵, heads of local associations and youth leaders to effectively engage to end violence.

Before the September 2015 violence, information about the likelihood of violence, even likely targets, was widely circulated, even reaching policy makers and INGO headquarters in European capitals.

4 Conciliation Resources recognises that lack of security and experienced violence is an everyday occurrence in many parts of the CAR. We have identified 'escalated violence' as having the following concurrent elements: 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 – and in turn violence 'stopping' when the majority of these elements have ended.

5 Faith leaders' interventions gain further legitimacy among communities through the idea that "God is behind them."

However, within the CAR, community structures and leaders did not have the mechanisms, communication channels, relationships or trust to engage with duty bearers responsible for security.

The capital and agency of community structures and individuals should be harnessed in the absence of effective state security provision.

State and UN structures should develop and support formal links with community structures to develop more appropriate, gender sensitive and responsive security strategies and policies aimed at preventing violence, including early warning. For example, in Bria, decisions pertaining to security provision are made with advice from the local peace committee. The role individuals and community structures (formal and informal) already play in stopping violence and resolving conflict, through dialogue and reconciliation, and the potential role, preventative as well as transformative, these change agents and structures could play, should be recognised. Peace in the CAR can only be built with the active engagement of the conflict-affected communities.

This should include traditional governance mechanisms and traditional links between different ethnic groups, which were in the past used to resolve conflicts. Historically, for example, traditional structures were used to negotiate between the sedentary farmers and the cattle herders, agreeing compensation and negotiating passage.

Cover image: A local peace committee meeting in 7e arrondissement, Bangui, CAR. July 2015.

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