CONCILIATION RESOURCES

Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

PEACE AND SECURITY IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC:

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES FROM BOSSANGOA AND THE WESTERN BORDER ZONES

Report

PEACE AND SECURITY IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES FROM BOSSANGOA AND THE WESTERN BORDER ZONES

MAY 2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DISCLAIMER:

This report was compiled by Ben Shepherd based on reports written by Ben Shepherd for Conciliation Resources and Guy-Florent Ankogui-M'Poko for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and Conciliation Resources are grateful to the research team who conducted the baseline assessment and the staff members of Association for Humanitarian Action in the Central African Republic (AAHC) who contributed to the development of the final questionnaire, and identification of and contact with community leaders and members of their respective communities.

UKaid from the British people

This publication is funded with UK aid from the UK government. The contents of the publication are the sole responsibility of Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and Conciliation Resources and the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

SMART PEACE

Smart Peace is a four-year UK Department for International Development (DFID)-funded programme (2018-2022) for strategic conflict resolution. Smart Peace is implemented by a specialist consortium, led by Conciliation Resources, in partnership with International Crisis Group, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the Asia Foundation, ETH Zurich, Behavioural Insights Team and Chatham House. The Smart Peace consortium combines expertise in conflict analysis, community dialogue, elite mediation, evaluation, policy influence and behavioural science to deliver targeted and adaptive conflict resolution interventions in CAR, Myanmar and Nigeria. Smart Peace will share learning from practical experience to improve global policy and practice.

In the Central African Republic, the project will be implemented by Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and Conciliation Resources in Mambéré-Kadéï, Sangha-Mbaéré, Nana-Mambéré and Ouham. International Crisis Group and ETH Zurich will provide research and analytical support.

Published by:

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

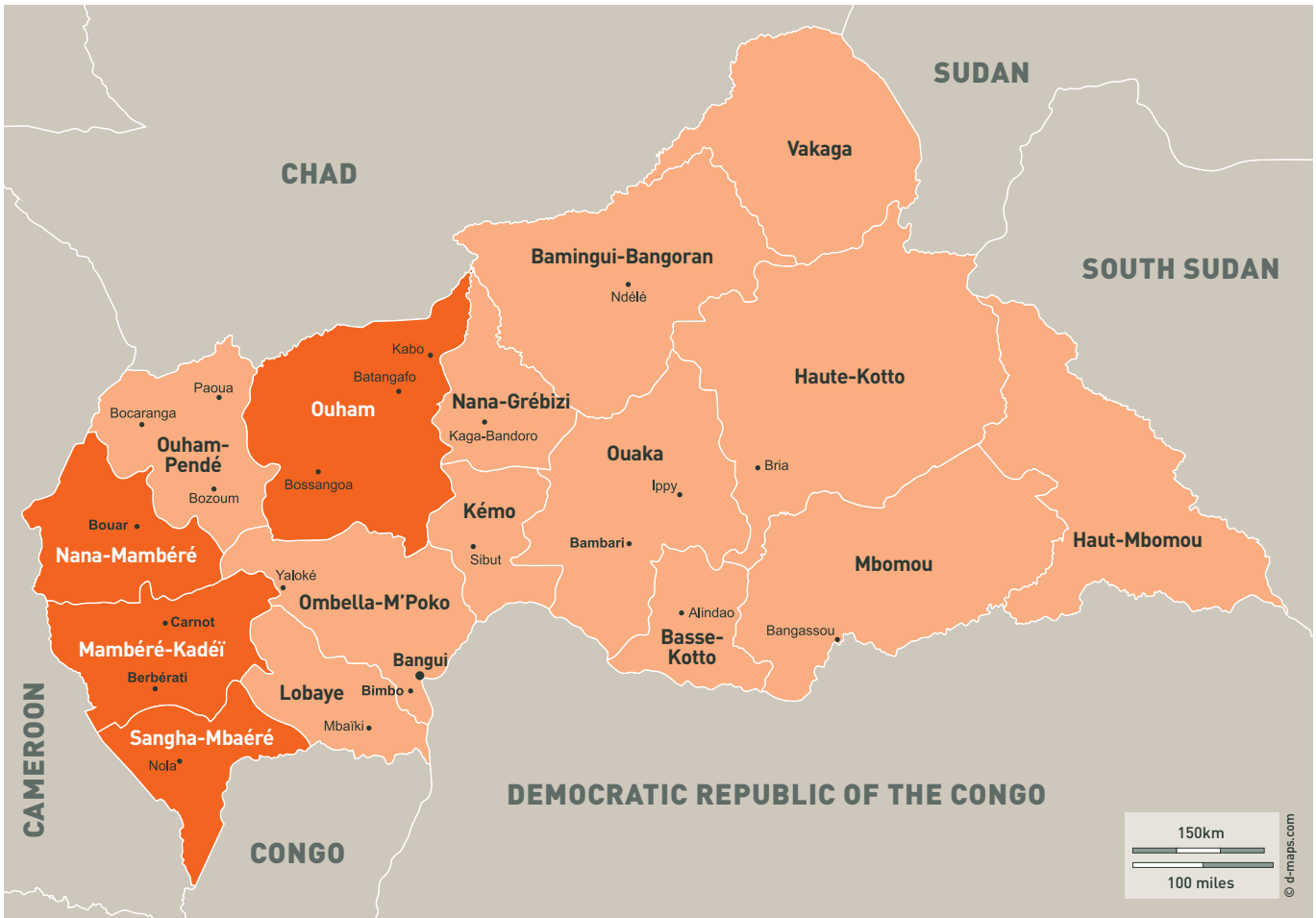
Design & layout: www.revangeldesigns.co.uk

Cover photo: Peacekeepers serving with the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) operate a checkpoint. © UN Photo/Herve Serefio

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Field research was carried out in late 2019 in two locations: in and around Bossangoa town in Ouham prefecture, in the geographical north west of the Central African Republic (CAR) between the capital Bangui and the Chadian border; and along CAR's remote western border with Cameroon, across four communes in three prefectures, Mambéré-Kadéï, Sangha-Mbaéré, Nana-Mambéré. The two research areas are referred to in this document as 'Bossangoa' and 'border zone' respectively. This report presents results from surveys and interviews conducted with more than 1700 respondents, as well a preliminary comparative analysis.
- Both the Bossangoa and border zone areas were found to be relatively peaceful in comparison to the height of the crisis. The absence of cattle in the border zone in the last two years, due either to theft or to their large-scale movement to Cameroon for protection, had reduced conflict between herders and farmers by about 60-70%, and two thirds of respondents felt that insecurity was less acute than in 2013.
- In Bossangoa, the former Séléka rebels were no longer present and the Anti-balaka were revealed as relatively peripheral; the absence of armed groups meant that most security incidents in 2019 were low-level crime and concentrated in Bossangoa town. However, the ex-Séléka nonetheless remained the most significant perceived threat for those in the Bossangoa research area, and just over half of respondents felt that security had deteriorated in the past twelve months.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC



A UN Police officer serving with MINUSCA, conducts a class on gender violence at a school.
© UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

- There were some suggestions of a change in underlying conflict dynamics, away from organised armed group activity towards pervasive low-level insecurity linked to crime and economic interests. Crime, banditry and young people – especially youth associated with armed groups – were the most acute perceived threats in the border zone and were also important in Bossangoa town.
- The research found that communities in both areas looked to local actors and traditional methods for conflict resolution, notably traditional leaders and village chiefs. Respondents were likewise clear that these local and traditional actors needed material and financial support, as well as appropriate training, in order to work effectively. Further detailed research is necessary on how these local actors relate to both the state and communities, and what types of conflicts they can address. The recognition of non-governmental organisation (NGO)-led mechanisms was low, perhaps because of the limited visibility of NGOs in the border areas and in the rural areas outside Bossangoa town.
- The extent to which communities still looked to the state, broadly defined, to protect them and their communities was also striking, given the very low level of state capacity in CAR. The United Nations Mission in CAR (MINUSCA) was the most widely-cited protection actor in Bossangoa town, where it is deployed in a significant population centre. Young people consistently saw MINUSCA as their biggest protector, while older people were more likely to look to local authorities.
- Interviews revealed that the crisis had caused enormous economic damage, entrenching endemic poverty and social divisions (herder-farmer in border zones, Muslim-Christian in Bossangoa). Both areas are vulnerable to external shocks and cross border dynamics from Chad or Cameroon, as well as from the return of displaced people – herders in the border zone and the wider Muslim population in Bossangoa. The structural conditions persist across both areas for a future resurgence of conflict.

BACKGROUND

Significant efforts have been made to pull the Central African Republic (CAR) out of the armed conflict that erupted in 2013. After several failed peace processes, a peace accord was negotiated in Khartoum and signed in the capital Bangui on 6 February 2019 by the CAR Government and 14 armed groups, following presidential and local elections in December 2015 and early 2016. The deal included provisions to create mixed units between armed groups and the national army, and to bring armed group leaders into government. Implementing this agreement is crucial to break the cycle of violence in CAR.

Some leaders of armed groups have already proved to be more interested in consolidating territorial control, profiting from local taxes and control of resources, than in engaging in peaceful politics, and violence continues between non-state armed groups, particularly in north eastern areas bordering Sudan and Chad.

The country is also now preparing for elections in December 2020. If successful, the election process could reinforce the legitimacy and stability of the government, but it also brings risks that politicians will manipulate or deepen existing social divides. Smart Peace project partners – International Crisis Group (ICG), Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), ETH Zurich and Conciliation Resources (CR) – have conducted research to understand the views of local communities in order to inform effective, proactive policy during this crucial period and beyond.

The two research areas presented contrasting aspects of CAR's conflict and social dynamics. Bossangoa town and its immediate environs were one of the key centres of the conflict, a heartland of the Anti-balaka[1] militias and the site of fierce fighting with Séléka[2] militias. Nearly the entire Muslim population of this area was displaced. By 2019 the immediate area of Bossangoa was reported to be relatively peaceful; tensions nonetheless remain high.[3] By contrast, the border zone along CAR's border with Cameroon was not central to the conflict between Anti-balaka and Séléka. However, the border zone has seen persistent and endemic conflict between herders and farmers over destruction of crops and access to resources, and is exposed to overspill from the activities of armed criminal groups across the Cameroonian border.

METHODOLOGY

In Ouham prefecture, a team of field researchers administered 1010 surveys, conducted 257 structured interviews with a cross-section of survey respondents, and undertook 23 long-form key informant interviews with officials, armed group leaders, and international observers.

Due to limitations on time, in part due to security concerns limiting time in the field, respondents were selected through convenience sampling. However, care was taken to ensure a representative sample in terms of gender, with 54.1% of survey respondents male and 45.4% female.[4] The age of survey participants was also relatively balanced, though with more young and middle-aged respondents compared to those over fifty.[5] Breaking this down by age and gender, the sample is also relatively balanced, with a slight over-representation of women among younger people, and men among middle-aged and older respondents.

In the prefectures of Nana-Mambéré, Mambéré-Kadéï and Sangha-Mbaéré, collectively referred to in this report as the border zones, data collection was based on a qualitative approach collecting the perceptions and reflections of key players on the existing conflicting dynamics between farmers and herders in cross-border areas of CAR. Thirty-eight group interviews were conducted, including eight with community leaders, eight with herders, seven with women representatives, six with youth representatives and two with all target groups. In addition, 29 individual interviews were conducted.

FINDINGS

PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY

Both research areas saw a significant reduction in armed violence since the height of the conflict between 2012 and 2015. In the CAR-Cameroon border zone, inter-community conflict between farmers and herders was found to have reduced significantly, and a sharp drop in monthly incidents of conflict in 2019 compared to 2012 was reported, down to zero in two cases[6]. United Nations (UN) sources reported comparatively few security incidents in the research area around Bossangoa in 2019; reported incidents were overwhelmingly low-level criminality and concentrated in Bossangoa town.[7] This matches the pattern of significantly reduced conflict events in and around Bossangoa from 2014 onwards.[8]

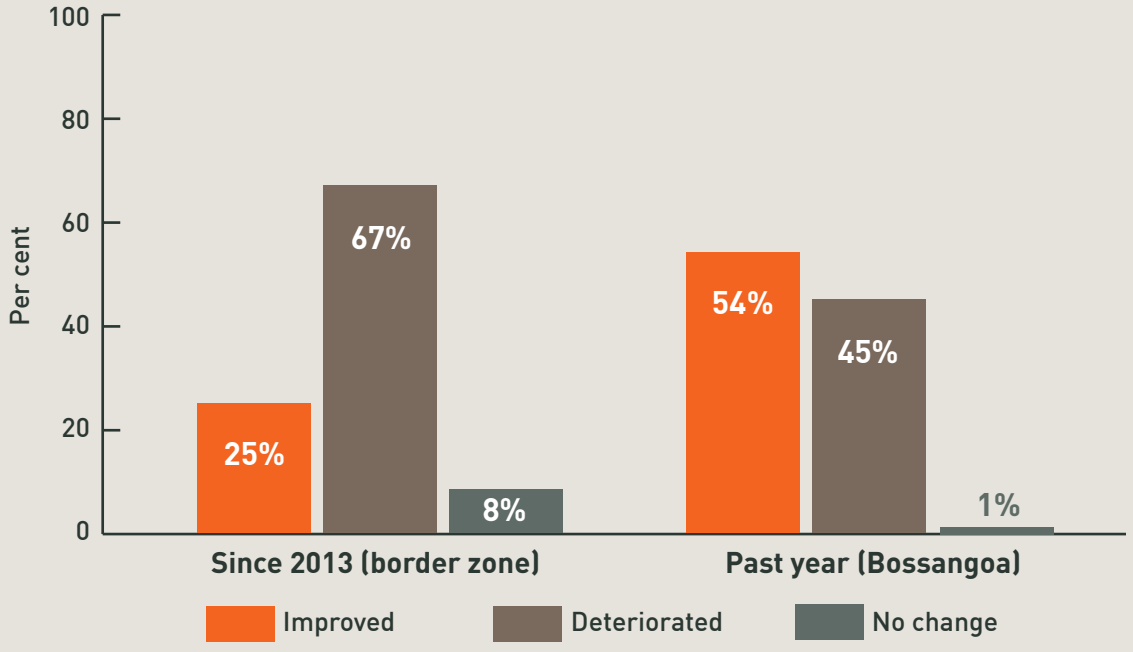
However, this was not unambiguously reflected in community perceptions of insecurity. In the border zone, two thirds of respondents felt that insecurity had become less prevalent since the height of the violence in 2013-14. Only a quarter of respondents felt it was worse. However, a small majority of 54% in Bossangoa and its environs felt that security had deteriorated in the past twelve months.

CONFLICT DYNAMICS

These perceptions of security conditions may reflect a shift, indicated in the research, in the predominant dynamics of insecurity from the height of the CAR crisis. In the border zone, conflict had been orientated around long-standing friction between herders and farmers over crop destruction, theft of oxen and access to resources. Around Bossangoa, the conflict at its height had been centred on non-state armed groups associated with different religious communities, broadly pitting Muslim against Christian.

In both areas, neither of these conflict dynamics was still present. The removal of the majority of cattle from the border zone and the displacement of the Muslim population from around Bossangoa meant that the perceived nature of the threat to communities had begun to shift away from the long-standing pattern of herder-farmer violence or clashes between religious communities represented by armed groups. Instead, banditry, crime and young people had emerged as the most significant threats. Of course, 'young people' is a broad category in a context where a significant percentage of the population is under 25; it could include those previously involved in armed groups,

CHART 1: PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY



many of whom are now unemployed, or those involved in banditry and illegal taxation, or simply a perception of idleness and disorderly conduct. Further research to interrogate how the category of young people should be understood and disaggregated may be worthwhile.

However, there was widespread recognition in both areas that entrenched social divisions remained, most notably between religious communities. Ethnic friction was also reported, albeit to a lower level, as were persistent tensions between herders and farmers. These divisions were exacerbated by deep poverty and economic damage from the conflict. Thus, acute conflict vulnerabilities remained. Triggers could include the return of displaced populations (herders in the border zone and Muslim communities in Bossangoa) and cross-border dynamics. In the border zone these risks are illustrated by the border community of Sabewa, which has experienced an acute spike in conflict caused by crop damage by cattle crossing from a community in Cameroon, something which CAR state authorities are unable to prevent.

PERCEIVED THREATS

Changing conflict dynamics were to some extent reflected in community perceptions of threat. In the border zone, the most commonly perceived threat was young people (29%), especially young people associated with armed groups, followed by bandits (23%) and cattle thieves (17%). By contrast, the Anti-balaka were seen as a threat by 12% and ex-Séléka by just 6% of the sample. Changes in patterns of conflict were also to some extent visible in Bossangoa, though underneath a widespread and lingering fear of ex-Séléka. Despite their complete absence from the research area, ex-Séléka were widely seen as the most important threat, named by 37% of the overall sample.[9] This was followed by those who perceived no threat at all (20%) and those who identified young people (19%), while only 7% of respondents identified the Anti-balaka as the most important threat.

However, there were indications of significant local variation between Bossangoa town and its outlying communes. In Bossangoa town, where the vast majority of recent security incidents had been recorded, more of the sample perceived a threat from young people, banditry and Anti-balaka, taken together, than from ex-Séléka. By contrast, communities in outlying areas that had experienced very few recent security incidents were more likely to perceive a continued threat from ex-Séléka.

PERCEIVED SOURCES OF PROTECTION

Significant differences also emerged in relation to community perceptions of who is able to protect them. In Bossangoa, the largest percentage of the sample looked to MINUSCA for protection (39%), followed by 'local authorities' (19%) and the police (18%). The Central African Armed Forces (FACA) was seen as offering protection by just 1% of the Bossangoa sample, which is unsurprising given the limited FACA deployment in the Bossangoa area.

By contrast, in the border zone the police were perceived as the largest single source of protection (29%), followed by FACA (23%) and 'local authorities' (18%). MINUSCA was seen as protecting the community by only 6% of the sample.

CHART 2: PERCEIVED THREATS

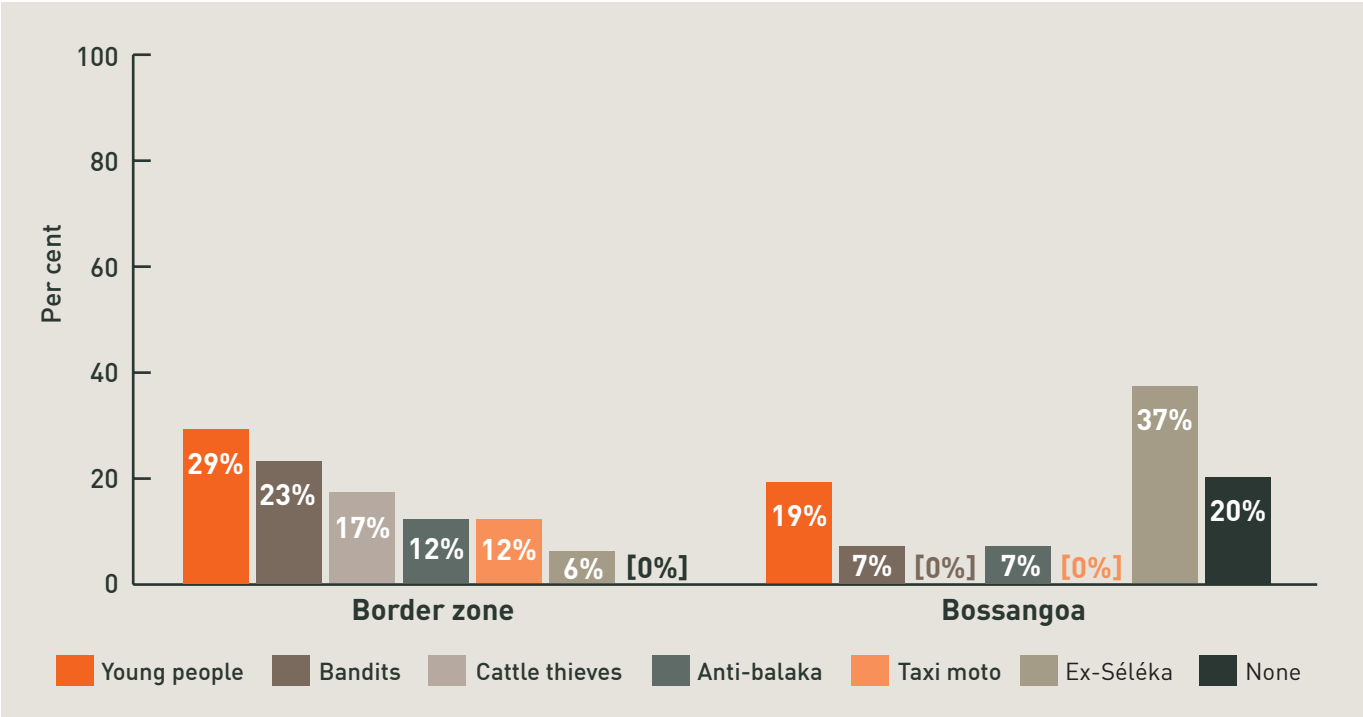
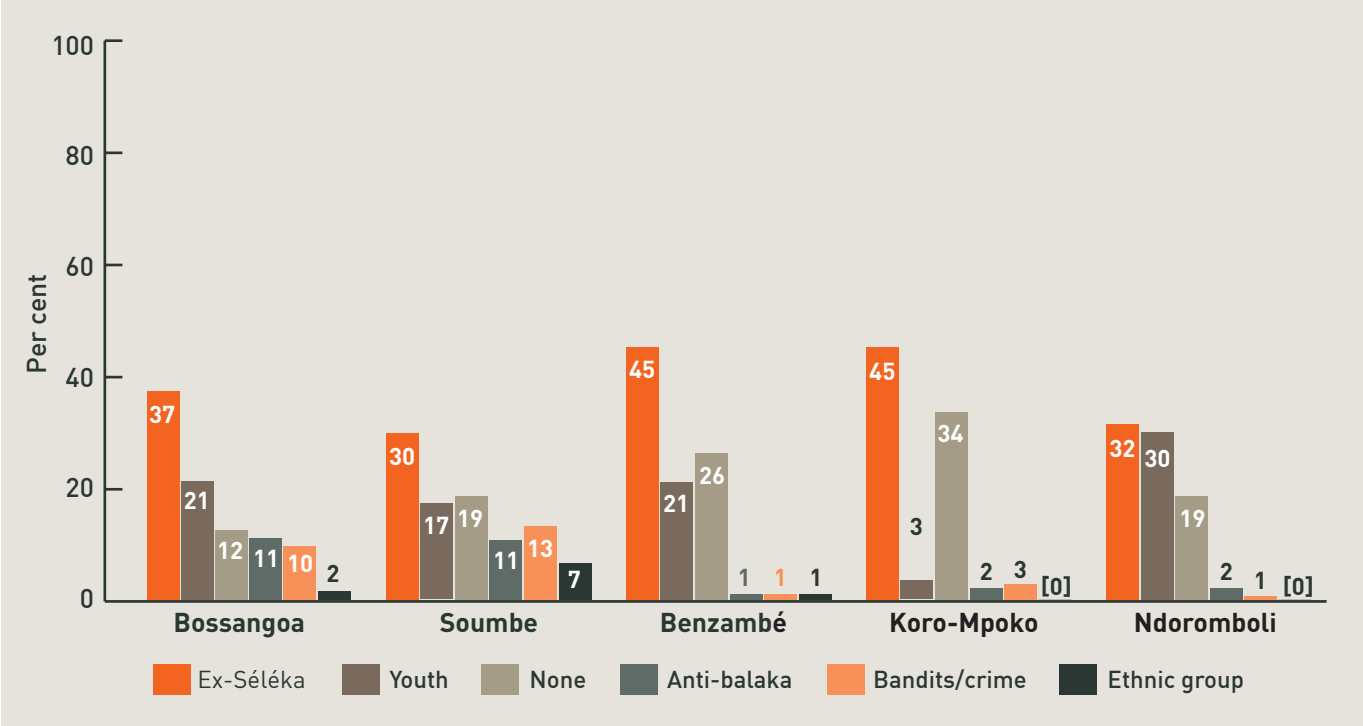


CHART 3: PERCEPTIONS OF THREAT – BOSSANGOA



This disparity reflects MINUSCA's deployment in Bossangoa, an important local population centre, and its absence in the predominantly rural and remote border zone. However, even within Bossangoa there were differences in community perceptions of the role of MINUSCA and the police: in the town itself, MINUSCA was cited by 52% of respondents as the most important source of protection, and the police cited by 30%; while outside the town these figures fell to 27% for MINUSCA and 6% for the police.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Both studies found that the population still largely looked to traditional conflict resolution methods,[10] despite the multiplicity of new mechanisms established in recent years, although the fact that new initiatives have often built upon pre-existing 'traditional' structures makes a precise distinction difficult. In the border zone, the largest proportion of the population looked to 'traditional leaders' for conflict mediation (26%), while 14% identified 'local committees', a newer structure, as an effective mechanism. In Bossangoa this trend was even more pronounced, with most respondents looking to village chiefs for conflict resolution (43%).[11]

'Government' and churches were identified as effective conflict mediators by 12% and 17% of respondents respectively in the border zone, while in Bossangoa a much higher proportion of respondents looked to the government (28%) than to the church (8%). Just 11% of the population in the border zone and 8% in Bossangoa reported looking to NGOs, which suggests limited community recognition of externally-sponsored conflict resolution mechanisms.[12]

Under current practices, there is limited participation of women and young people in community conflict resolution. Social norms and power relations do not support women's and young people's engagement in peacebuilding. The Smart Peace programme will need to explicitly work towards supporting the empowerment of these groups. More research is needed to better understand the barriers to participation and how the meaningful involvement of women and young people can be encouraged.

Significant differences between the research areas emerged between the perceived role of armed groups in conflict resolution. In the border zone, the study found that armed groups 'overshadowed' traditional mechanisms in some locations, with 14% of respondents seeing the Anti-balaka as playing an important mediation role, and 6% the ex-Séléka. This compared to just 2% of respondents in Bossangoa looking to Anti-balaka, despite the widespread perception of Bossangoa as one of the Anti-balaka heartlands. This may be explained by the ambiguous role that some Anti-balaka leaders play: engaging in peace mechanisms but benefiting economically from the displacement of Muslims.

These findings may risk over-simplifying the roles played by key individuals, who may be present in more than one capacity. Exploring and clarifying the definitions of terms such as 'traditional leaders', 'village chiefs' and 'local committees', understanding the roles they play in the community, and investigating the relationship between local figures and institutions such as village chiefs and the state, may be a valuable focus for future research.

CHART 4: PERCEIVED SOURCES OF COMMUNITY PROTECTION

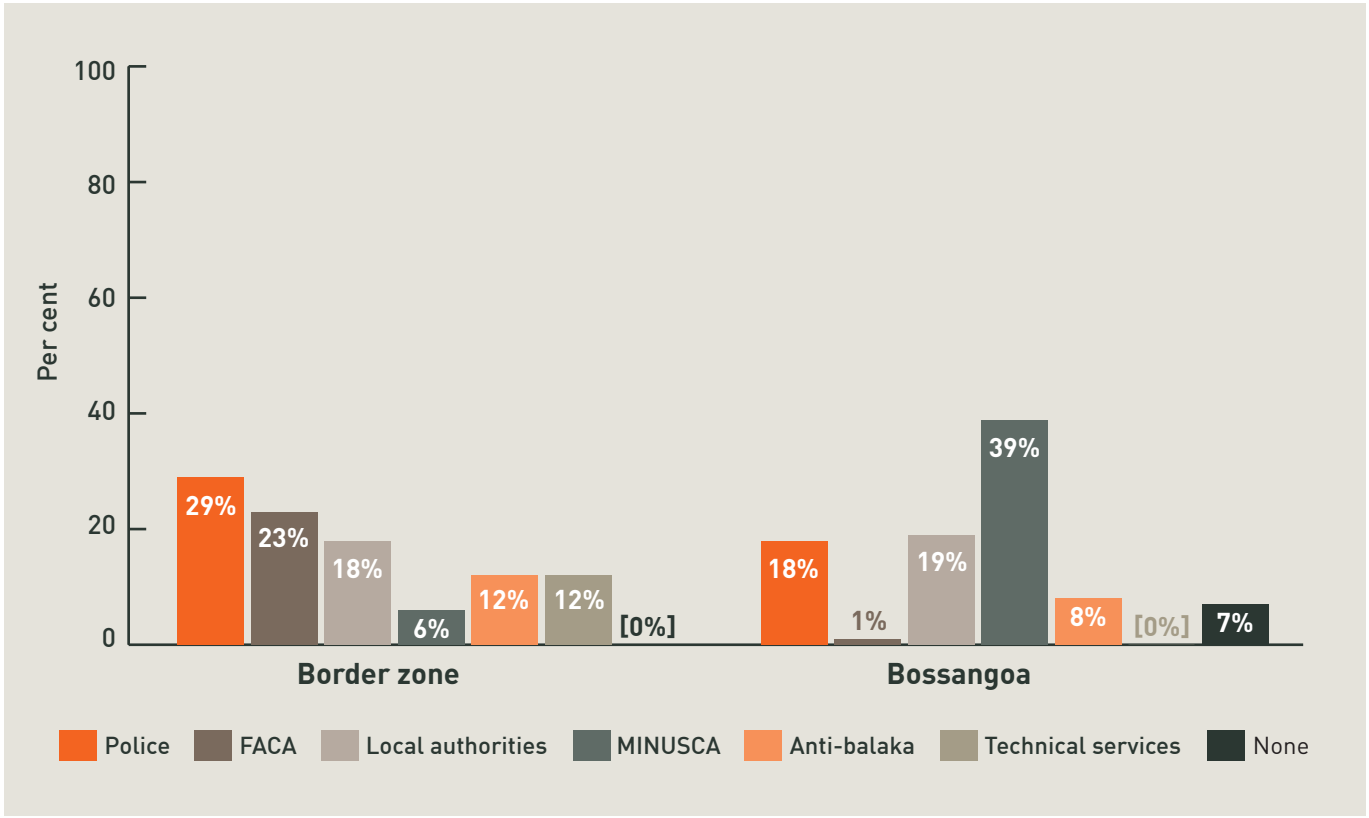
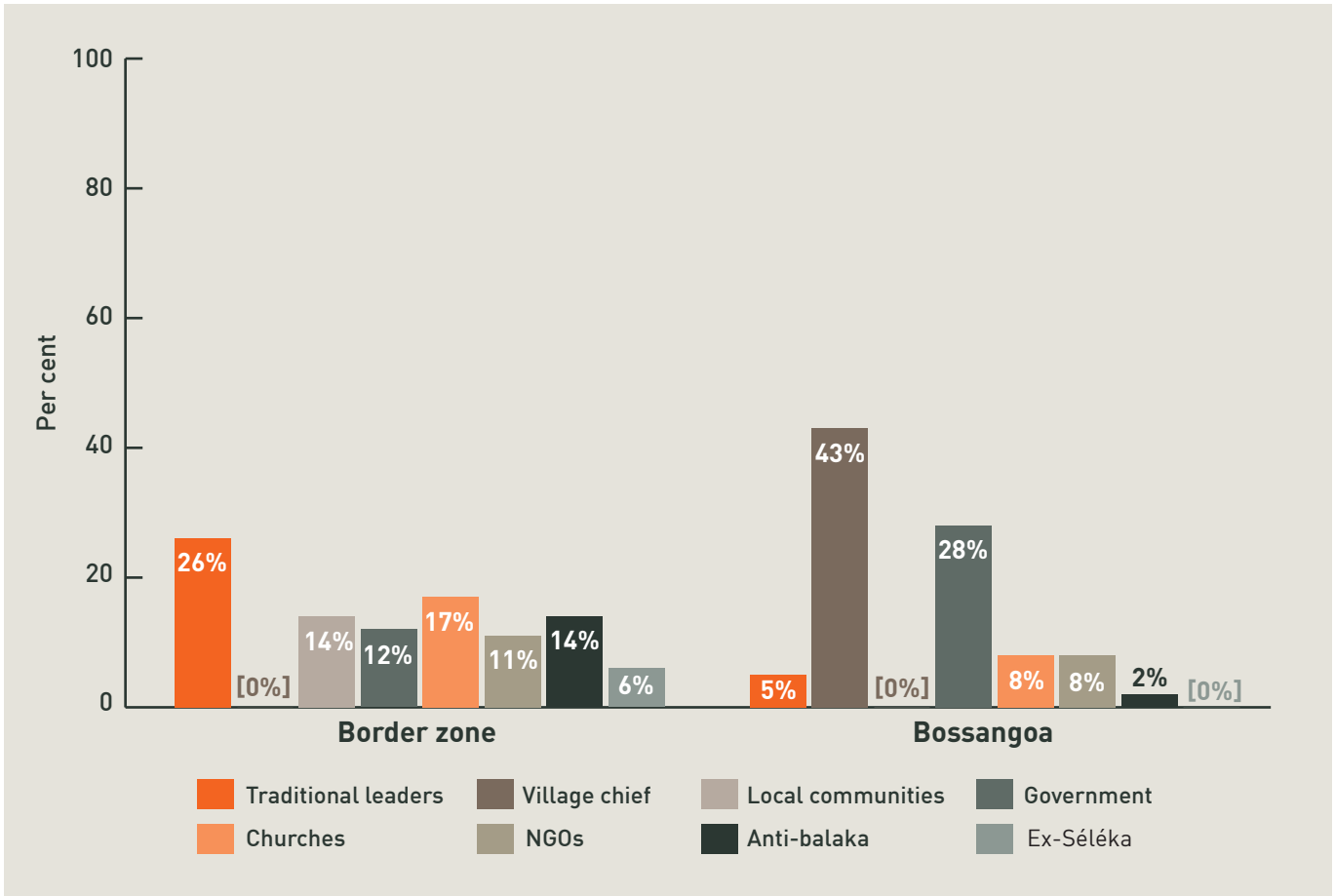


CHART 5: PERCEIVED COMMUNITY CONFLICT MEDIATION



CONCLUSION

The research has three main conclusions:

- There is scope and a need for local community leaders, informal and formal peace structures, and local government to act as convenors of dialogue and reconciliation. This is to prepare and accompany their communities in a process that could be termed 'the cooling of hearts' from the trauma of the 2013-2015 crisis that left communities divided along religious and ethnic lines. There is an urgent need to support structures and capacities for non-violent means of resolving political and inter-communal conflict and co-creating a shared future together as Central Africans. Local leaders and peace actors may benefit from support in thinking through and developing ways to address trauma and anger among members of armed groups and to broker intra- and inter- community dialogue.
- There is a need to consider providing strategic support to traditional conflict resolution structures and government-led processes such as the Prefectural Implementation Committee (CMOP) set up by the CAR Government to implement the peace accord signed on 6 February 2019. This is an opportunity to provide the necessary conflict analysis and peacebuilding skills so that CMOP members and other peace structures carry out their responsibilities to encourage people to engage with local dialogue and reconciliation mechanisms, to convey community perspectives to national government, and to communicate government policies across the country, including what it can and cannot achieve, in order to manage expectations.
- There is a need to address the fears and stigmatisation of youth as troublemakers and to engage young people, including those who have returned from armed groups, in peacebuilding efforts within their communities. Young people have a valuable and positive role to play in their communities, when engaged in productive activities and provided with skills in conflict resolution.

Based on these conclusions and consultations amongst the Smart Peace CAR Hub, the members of the Hub will focus on supporting the government's efforts on the implementation of the peace agreement. Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue will focus on agro-pastoral conflict resolution linked to cross-border transhumance in the border zones of CAR, Cameroon and Chad. Conciliation Resources will support the work of local peace structures in Ouham prefecture and link them to the national peace process. International Crisis Group will lead on advocacy at the global and national level, including engagement at ministerial and presidential level. This will include engaging with presidential candidates in the lead-up to the election set for December 2020, to secure a commitment to a peaceful election and acceptance of the result; advocating for an electoral code of conduct; and pushing for a commitment from the current president to roll out peace programmes that are better able to respond to the conflict, especially during elections.

A young man tending his livestock.
© UN Photo/Evan Schneider

ENDNOTES

1. Anti-balaka formed from elements of the national army and local self-defence militias to resist abuses by the Séléka and protect the community. They are often associated with Christian communities.
2. Séléka was a coalition of predominantly Muslim rebel movements, with strong cross-border links to Chad and Sudan.
3. In mid-2019 rumours of the return of Muslim representatives as part of government-sponsored talks resulted in significant local resistance. Subsequent iterations of the talks did allow Muslim leaders to return peacefully, and there were several reports that Muslims are able to circulate in the town without threat.
4. Overall, 547 respondents were men and 459 women. Gender was not recorded for 4 surveys.
5. Life expectancy at birth in CAR is 52 for men and 54 for women. https://www.who.int/countries/caf/en/
6. With the exception of Sabewa, a border region with Cameroon where there had been a sharp increase.
7. Ninety-two incidents were reported by the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) in Bossangoa itself, compared to eight in Korom-Mpoko, seven in Benzambé, four in Soumbe and none in Ndorombli.
8. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) lists just seven 'conflict events' in and around Bossangoa since the end of 2014. By contrast, they list 151 incidents for Ouham prefecture as a whole from 2015, with more recent violence concentrated in Batangafo – over 100km distance from Bossangoa. An alternative data source, a CAR-focussed conflict mapping project undertaken by the International Peace Information Service, lists significantly more security incidents in the research area, identifying 27 between early 2015 and the end of 2017. None of these incidents, however, involved conflict between two armed groups, or an armed group against the government.
9. This may be due to the severity of the exactions suffered by the population in and around Bossangoa, or/and their sense of vulnerability to a return of ex-Séléka from the Chadian border areas – as noted, Bossangoa is more directly connected to both national and regional dynamics than the border zone, which may make the population feel more vulnerable.
10. In the border zone, these include mechanisms of consultation between herders and community leaders, and transhumance meetings set up by the state to prevent conflicts. In and around Bossangoa, this included accepted processes of community identification of conflict or risk, in some instances through 'autodefence' groups, and the communication and/or escalation to the authority seen as most appropriate to address it – to village chiefs in the first instance, then to more senior officials and, if necessary, the police and Governor.
11. Some of these differences are no doubt due to different methodological and survey approaches – respondents may have understood village chiefs and traditional leaders in different ways. In addition, it is not clear how respondents understood the differences between 'government', different chiefs and local committees.
12. This may be because of the limited visibility of NGOs in the border areas and rural areas outside Bossangoa town. The distant villages of Soumbé and Ndoromboli, for example, were particularly appreciative that Conciliation Resources reached out to them.

Conciliation Resources is an international organisation committed to stopping violent conflict and creating more peaceful societies. We work with people impacted by war and violence, bringing diverse voices together to make change that lasts.

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

cr@c-r.org

+44 (0)20 7359 7728

www.c-r.org

CRbuildpeace

ConciliationResources

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