



BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE DURING VIOLENT CONFLICT

Lessons Learned from Mercy Corps' Stabilizing Vulnerable Communities Program in the Central African Republic | October 2015

Bouar, Central African Republic — Sean Sheridan/Mercy Corps

Overview

In January 2014, during the worst violence in the Central African Republic's most recent civil war, Mercy Corps launched a unique humanitarian program in the country's two most socio-economically vital cities, Bangui and Bouar. The program set out to help stem retaliatory community violence and rebuild social cohesion. Activities began at an especially delicate time for Central African communities and the nation: roughly 2.5 million civilians were in need of humanitarian assistance, with one million had been displaced.ⁱ Many in the country and international community feared the conflict could evolve into protracted civil war, or even genocide.ⁱⁱ

The results of the program were stunning – even to us.

By August 2015, end-line program data showed a 532 percent increase in community members' perceptions that conflicts were being resolved peacefully in their communities. 96 percent of those surveyed reported feeling hopeful about peace in their community, and a majority of those displaced by the violence (68.8 percent) had either returned home or were willing to return. From baseline to end-line, the program showed an 86 percent increase in the number of people who trusted 'the other' group within their community.

This empirical and quantified evidence affirms that supporting conflict management and peacebuilding activities during a complex crisis can both stem immediate violence and address the underlying drivers of violent conflict, thus laying a foundation for more swift and sustainable post-conflict recovery. These findings are particularly timely as the international community considers how to best manage today's unprecedented global humanitarian caseload.

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SVC Community leaders session, Bangui - Mercy Corps



The Context

The current violent conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR) is another dark period within a long history of volatility, violence, underdevelopment, and socio-religious fragmentation following the CAR's independence in 1960. Years of exploitative and exclusive governance reached a breaking point in March 2013, when a violent coup d'état overthrew President Bozizé and a predominately Muslim-dominated Séléka rebel coalition seized power. In response, "anti-Balaka" armed groups, composed primarily of Christians, emerged in order to exact revenge on the ex-Séléka groups. Their rise led to targeted attacks on Muslim communities throughout the country, resulting in the mass displacement of Muslims and reversing decades of mostly peaceful cohabitation.

By December 2013, UN officials warned of a possible genocide. These "early" warning signs prompted the international community to act with unprecedented speed to prevent mass atrocities against civilians. The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and major diplomatic actors enacted a suite of diplomatic interventions to help stem violence and stabilize the county; the African Union peacekeeping unit, MISCA, transitioned into a United Nations blue helmet operation; and major international donors released contingency funding to support community-led conflict management and peacebuilding activities.ⁱⁱⁱ

One such contingency mechanism was USAID's Complex Crises Fund (CCF), one of the agency's only sources of global, flexible, non-earmarked aid reserved specifically for crisis mitigation.^{iv} With USAID/CCF support, Mercy Corps launched the *Stabilizing Vulnerable Communities in the Central African Republic through the Promotion of Inter-Community Dialogue and Economic Cooperation* (SVC) program in January 15, 2014.

The Program

The goal of the SVC program was for Muslim and Christian communities to work together to peacefully manage tensions and rebuild community cohesion in Bangui and Bouar with three key objectives:

- i. Strengthening the capacity of local leaders in Muslim and Christian communities to resolve community conflicts and deal with the legacy of violence in an open, inclusive, and sustainable manner;
- ii. Reinforcing sustainable dispute resolution methods and generating increased trust through joint social and economic initiatives benefiting both Christian and Muslim communities;
- iii. Promoting attitudes of tolerance and non-violence through support of inter-faith peace messaging.

The program's first objective was to enhance community leaders' capacity to resolve inter-community disputes non-violently. To achieve this, Mercy Corps trained local community leaders and community associations on *Interest Based Negotiation* and conflict analysis techniques, and supported key stakeholders to resolve conflicts at the community level.

Its second objective focused on enabling Christian and Muslim communities to find mutually-beneficial community restoration and livelihoods activities to rebuild their communities. Mercy Corps supported local grassroots associations and entrepreneurs to implement 90 joint socio-economic projects in Bouar and Bangui, which benefited both Christian and Muslim communities and set an example for the wider community about the benefits of cooperation.

Finally, Mercy Corps and our local partners helped to organize a network of motivated and trustworthy peer educators (predominantly youth) to conduct regular outreach and community mobilization activities around the principles of non-violence. The peer educator networks were instrumental in achieving the program's third objective of influencing public attitudes towards tolerance and non-violence. Peer educator sessions reached hundreds of thousands of people in 5 arrondissements of Bangui and in Bouar over the duration of the program.

Key Impacts and Findings

Mercy Corps conducted an end-line survey of the SVC program in Bangui and Bouar in May 2015. A total of 600 households across multiple target communities were surveyed through simple random sampling. The results of the evaluation highlight promising changes in community perceptions of security and relationship dynamics, while illuminating important findings around household-level decisions for displacement and return. The findings also identify communities' perception of the most effective program activities and change makers.

KEY IMPACTS

- A 532 percent increase in respondents' perceptions that conflicts are being resolved peacefully in their communities — from 13 in the baseline to 82.2 in the end-line. This shows that the project significantly improved perceptions of both immediate safety and security and non-violent dispute resolution efforts.
- An 86 percent increase in the number of respondents who trusted "the other" group — from 30.1 in the baseline to 56.1 in the end-line. This denotes a positive shift in perceptions and public attitudes towards 'the other' group (ie. Muslim or Christian);
- 96 percent of respondents reported feeling hopeful for peace in their community;
- 220 anti-Balaka fighters with ten commanders **voluntarily disarmed** in December 2014 to join community leaders and Peace Committees to support non-violent social change because of the enabling environment created by religious leaders, community leaders and Peace Committees that afforded legitimate alternatives to violence.
- In Bouar, 26 youth and 26 community leaders representing a population of 39,205 minorities in Bouar signed a reconciliation pact through which the leaders committed to non-violent conflict resolution in forestalling discrimination on any premise, safeguarding minorities in Bouar, and facilitating the (re)integration of Muslim traders (back) into the local economy.
- 35 of the Bangui Forum's civil society representatives received support from the SVC program via inter-community dialogues and training sessions. These sessions were run by local Mercy Corps staff. And included SVC Peace Committee members and religious and youth leaders.

A Pact for Peace: A Social Contract Promoting Protection and Prosperity in Bouar

The SVC program brought together 26 youth and 26 community leaders representing the main ethnic groups (6 from Muslim community and 20 from Christian community) in Bouar to discuss the promotion of peace in communities inhabited by previously antagonistic factions. Broadcast through radio, the talks enabled a large number of the population to hear the message of peace in their homes. All 26 leaders used their own ethnic dialect to advocate for peace and strengthen solidarity among different marginalized and vulnerable groups who had previously shown signs of distrust towards other groups perceived as "opponents".

The talks resulted in a **reconciliation pact** signed by 26 ethnic group leaders. The pact affirms leaders' commitments to non-violent conflict resolution to forestall discrimination on any premise, safeguard minorities, and facilitate conditions conducive to economic recovery. Community leaders have since managed to maintain peace and stability within Bouar, a town that witnessed deplorable human rights violations, mass violence, and a cessation of all forms of cooperation between groups. Whereas trade between communities of different ethnicities and religions froze during violence, traders of all faiths are now successfully cooperating. *The pact has especially helped to facilitate the **integration of Muslim traders into the local economy.***

KEY FINDINGS

- 1. Insecurity was the primary reason communities fled their homes during the height of violence, with 82.3 percent of respondents citing lack of security as the cause of their relocation.**
- 2. Dialogues, religious peace messages, and radio messages were seen as the most effective methods for promoting improved community cohesion.** Of the seven peacebuilding activities used in SVC, respondents ranked dialogue, religious messages about peace, and radio messages as the most effective – 32.8, 24.7, and 13.8 percent, respectively.
- 3. Improved security, reconciliation, and economic opportunities in communities of origin were cited by respondents as the most significant factors that impacted their decision to return home.** 66.7 percent of respondents cite improved as the leading “pull factor” for willingness to return home, followed by 20 percent due to reconciliation, and 13.3 due to economic opportunities.
- 4. At the time of the end-line assessment, over two-thirds (68.8 percent) of respondents who had been displaced had either returned home or stated that they were willing to return.**
- 5. Communities perceived religious leaders, community leaders and the MINUSCA as the key peacemakers over the fifteen-month period.** 42.2 percent of respondents perceived religious leaders to be the most involved in peaceful conflict resolution, 10.7 percent of respondents stated that community leaders held a key role in community peace and 10 percent viewed MINUSCA as the most involved.

Ex-Anti-Balaka fighters engage in SVC - Mercy Corps



Lessons Learned

AND IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER COMPLEX CRISES

Findings from the SVC program experience should affirm the centrality of conflict management and peacebuilding in effectively addressing today's complex crises. While violent conflict and crime continue to plague much of CAR, we see conflicts being resolved peacefully between previous adversaries where the international community strategically intervened to support community peacebuilding and physical security. Within these communities, support for violence has decreased, which is the first step needed to lay the ground work for displaced populations to return home and for communities receiving IDPs to be equipped to handle future challenges non-violently. Among the key lessons learned in the SVC experience are:

- 1. Community capacities to mitigate conflict always exist in crisis—but can erode quickly as crises drag on.** Waiting until “the end” of “the emergency phase” of a crisis to support conflict management or violence reduction efforts may compound and extend the crisis, making it protracted. When a humanitarian crisis breaks out due to violent conflict or fragility, we cannot wait until “the lifesaving relief phase” is over to begin addressing the cause of the crisis.
- 2. Community-led conflict management activities can help break cycles of retaliatory violence during complex crises.** The SVC program began during a time of uncontrollable retaliatory violence in the CAR. The marked change in community perceptions around peaceful dispute resolution and community trust demonstrate that the program contributed to altering community perceptions about the utility of violence. The positive results should encourage replication in other complex crises.
- 3. Both physical security and peacebuilding activities are needed for peace to take hold.** The ability of the African Union peacekeeping unit, MISCA – reinforced by the United Nations peacekeeping unit, MINUSCA – to maintain major roadways and create conditions conducive to the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance significantly contributed to our ability to operate. By contrast, in many other regions across CAR where Mercy Corps works in which neither police nor peacekeepers have restored order, we have had to cancel conflict mitigation programs due to ongoing, now chronic, insecurity, violence and criminality.
- 4. Supporting youth and civil society during crisis helps ensure their inclusion in peace processes.** The April 2015 Bangui Forum, a country-wide discussion on national reconciliation, was the most participatory post-conflict forum in CAR's history. Thirty-five of the Forum's civil society representatives participated in inter-community dialogues and trainings organized by the SVC program and facilitated by local Mercy Corps staff. Representatives included SVC Peace Committee members and religious and youth leaders.
- 5. Flexible donor funding and adaptive management enabled timely, aptly tailored interventions.** USAID's Complex Crises Fund (CCF) is one of the agency's only sources of global, flexible funding mechanisms, enabling partners to undertake rapid prevention, stabilization, and response activities when assistance funds cannot be reprogrammed to address emerging crises. Its structure focuses on outcomes, not outputs, and allows for iterative program rewrites, including a broad mid-term rewrite opportunity, which afforded Mercy Corps the ability to adapt activities to support new needs, evidence and opportunities.
- 6. Facilitative conflict management in complex crises is low cost and takes time.** Mercy Corps experienced a slow 'burn rate' during the first ten months of the program, as communities needed time to process fear and grievance internally and with their families before they were willing to engage in inter-communal peacebuilding activities. Pressuring communities to 'build peace' through joint projects and funded activities before they are ready could have exacerbated conflict. Fortunately, the CCF funding mechanism supported this adaptation. Few institutional donor mechanisms, however, are appropriately flexible or patient.

Recommendations

FOR FUTURE INTERNATIONAL INVESTMENT IN THE CAR

- 1. Launch conflict management and peacebuilding programs in key cities and regions where violence is pressing, namely Bambari, Bria, Kaga Bandoro, and, eventually, Ndele.** Conflict management and stabilization efforts must continue throughout the country, particularly given that 82.3 percent of surveyed respondents cited insecurity as the primary factor for displacement and 66.7 percent cited improved security as the primary factor for willingness to return. We will not be able to reduce humanitarian needs or advance economic recovery ambitious in areas where violence continues. As seen in the SVC experience in Bouar Bouar, brokering peace is vital to enabling the return of economic life.
- 2. Reinforce peacebuilding and early recovery investments in Bangui and Bouar.** While the data from this program offer hope, community relations remain fragile. The ongoing violence in CAR is set against a backdrop of decades of socio-economic desperation, marginalization, and community-institutional mistrust. Recovery and reconciliation processes will be long and bumpy. Donors mustn't presume that tensions between communities are fully restored. Now is a vital time to reinforce peacebuilding and early economic recovery programs to leverage fragile peace dividends in order to mitigate the severity of future disruptions that will surely arise during the elections and transitions cycles and test communities' capacities to cope with violence.
- 3. Ensure the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSCA has the resources necessary to fulfil its mandate.** As previously mentioned, MINUSCA, and its predecessor the African Union force MISCA, played a vital role in securing the main transport routes in and surrounding both Bangui and Bouar by upholding their mandates to facilitate conditions conducive to humanitarian response. In other regions where Mercy Corps works in which neither police nor peacekeepers have restored order, we have had to cancel conflict mitigation programs due to ongoing, now chronic, insecurity, violence and criminality. It is imperative that the UN mission is financially supported, both for operations and personnel, to help establish security throughout the country, protect civilians, and facilitate conditions conducive for the effective delivery of humanitarian aid.



Community leaders discuss reconciliation - Mercy Corps

Recommendations

FOR INTERNATIONAL INVESTMENTS IN OTHER FRAGILE STATES

- 1. Make conflict management and peacebuilding core competencies of international engagement in fragile states.** Violent conflict is a primary source of human displacement, severely disrupts development, and is costly to both individuals and countries. Yet, of the billions spent annually on foreign aid, very little is dedicated to conflict prevention, mitigation or peacebuilding. A 2015 OECD Fragile States report found that only nine percent of official development assistance globally is dedicated to justice, security and legitimate politics.^v Ignoring grievances or violent tendencies during a humanitarian crisis, moreover, can contribute to worsening cycles of violence, fragility and poverty that keep countries like the CAR, South Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan and Yemen mired in poverty and conflict. Enhanced investments in conflict management and peacebuilding efforts are needed in fragile states and humanitarian emergencies and should include:^{vi}
 - a. Increasing investments in conflict management and peacebuilding efforts that address the drivers of chronic vulnerability to violence, either through standalone funding streams and/or mainstreaming within existing humanitarian and development platforms, and
 - b. Where applicable, legally classifying violence reduction as a lifesaving intervention so that humanitarian dollars can be used to support conflict management and peacebuilding.
- 2. Increase the availability of rapid, flexible funding mechanisms for conflict management in complex crises.** Conditions change constantly in the context of violent conflict. Narrow windows often arise in which community level interventions can help stem the escalation of violence in order to prevent further destruction or consolidate peace. However, opportunities are often missed to prevent the types of responses needed to mitigate violence because donor funding mechanisms and agreements are inflexible.
- 3. Normalize multi-year, multi-sector funding models that promote resilience in fragile states.** For decades, the CAR's recurrent crises have been met with short-term humanitarian interventions that were vital in saving lives but never reinforced with investments to tackle the nation's fundamental fragility. This is broadly consistent with international aid approaches in places like the DRC, South Sudan, Yemen and other countries trapped in recurrent cycles of violence. These funding modalities are outdated and must be changed. As effective aid programming in these fragile contexts must integrate activities that address grievances, emergency needs, livelihoods, and governance, donors must support as standard best practice in fragile states multi-year programs that transcend 'humanitarian' and 'development' silos.

Moving Forward

SITUATING PROGRAM FINDINGS IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT

As policymakers continue to assess the relative impact, cost effectiveness, and contributions to stabilization of various interventions in the context of competing needs in the CAR and globally, the data presented here should encourage sustained and increased investments in community-led conflict management and peacebuilding.

The sudden resurgence of violence triggered on 26 September 2015 in the CAR provides a clear example. Set against a backdrop of public frustration with the transitional process and triggered by the reported beheading of a young Muslim cab driver, violent clashes erupted in and around Bangui's "PK5" neighborhood, sparking clashes throughout city as well as looting, criminality and shootings in Bambari and Kaga-Bandoro. During this outbreak, peer educators trained through the SVC program acted and advocated for non-violence throughout Bangui by monitoring the situation to dispell rumors and mitigate tensions and organizing their peers to discuss non-violent ways to address mounting grievances. In Bouar, community leaders and religious associations publicly condemned violence and worked to swiftly restore order in order to keep the main road open to traffic, commerce and a sense of normalcy.

Episodes of violence will continue to test Central Africans and the international community's commitment to enduring peace. The positive, real-time responses of SVC program actors and structures to manage peace demonstrate that where commitments to and structures for non-violent dispute resolution exist, communities are more resilient to shocks.

Girls and adolescents play safely on the streets of Bouar - Mercy Corps





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ⁱ Central Africa Republic (CAR) Situation Report No. 46 (as of 21 January 2015), UN Office of for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (January 2015): <http://bit.ly/1LK4h5I>

ⁱⁱ On 1 November 2013, United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Mr. Adama Dieng, asserted that violence in the country may already constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes, civilians face imminent threat of atrocities, and he would not rule out the possibility of genocide. On 13 November 2013, John Ging, director of the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs warned, "We are very, very concerned that the seeds of a genocide are being sown." The first statement of the US Government can be found in the Testimony of Acting Assistant Secretary Robert P. Jackson for the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee Hearing, *The Central African Republic: From 'Pre-Genocide' to Genocide?* (May 2014): <http://1.usa.gov/1G9Oj1V>.

ⁱⁱⁱ See "[US Ambassador Visits Central African Republic Amid Bloodshed](#)", *New York Times*, 12/19/13; "[President Obama's Message to the People of the Central African Republic](#)", *The White House*, 12/09/13; "[CAR Interim President Michael Djotodia Resigns](#)", *BBC*, 1/11/14; "[Timeline of the International Response to the Situation in the Central African Republic](#)", *Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect*, updated 1/15, "[UN Takes Over Peacekeeping in the Central African Republic](#)", *The Guardian*, 9/16/14.

^{iv} The Complex Crises Fund was authorized by the U.S. Congress in 2010, at an initial \$100 million dollars though in FY15 appropriated at only \$30 million. Violence prevention advocates have praised the tool, arguing for a return to \$100 million funding levels. The CAR experience was the first time that the funds went directly to support non-governmental organizations, as opposed to through a USAID Mission.

^v States of Fragility, OECD (2015): <http://www.oecd.org/dac/states-of-fragility-2015-9789264227699-en.htm>

^{vi} This recommendation builds on a growing body of Mercy Corps' evidence from effective engagement in fragile states that conflict resolution must be viewed as a primary intervention to facilitate transitions into food security, agricultural development and livelihoods improvement. See: [Ethiopia](#), [Uganda](#), [DRC](#), and [Nigeria](#).