Community engagement with armed actors in the Central African Republic

Preventing and reducing protection risks and violence

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Acronyms

3R	Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation
APPR	Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic
CAR	Central African Republic
CLA	community liaison assistant
CLPR	Comités Locaux de Paix et Réconciliation (Local Peace and Reconciliation Committee)
CPC	Coalition of Patriots for Change
CPJP	Convention des patriotes pour la justice et la paix
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
FACA	Forces Armées Centrafricaines
FDPC	Front démocratique du peuple centrafricain
FPRC	Front populaire pour la renaissance de la Centrafrique
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
IDP	internally displaced person
MINUSCA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
MISCA	African-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic
MLCJ	Mouvement des libérateurs centrafricains pour la justice
MPC	Mouvement patriotique pour la Centrafrique
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OFCA	Organisation de la femme centrafricaine
UFDR	Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement
UN	United Nations
UPC	Union pour la paix en Centrafrique

Executive summary

Background

The main conflicts experienced in the Central African Republic (CAR) have led to violence against civilians including forced displacement, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, extrajudicial executions, recruitment and use of children by armed non-state actors, sexual violence and violation of the right to freedom of movement among others (OCHA, 2021). The people of CAR have long known an absence of the state outside the capital Bangui and have had to manage the presence of armed actors for many years. Some armed actors set themselves up to protect civilian populations, although too often they have evolved to become direct threats of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation for these communities. This same trend is taking place today with the return of state authorities outside the capital Bangui through the offensives of the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) and its allied forces (the Wagner Group and the Rwandan armed forces).

To respond to these conflicts, reduce violence and protect civilians, many humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors are active in CAR to respond to conflict, reduce violence and protect civilians including the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). It is in this context that this study examines how communities engage with armed actors, and the implications for peace, humanitarian and protection actors.

Overview of the study

This study seeks to answer three central research questions:

1. What role do communities play in developing and shaping engagement with armed actors in order to strengthen their protection?
2. What factors, actions and actors affect the terms of engagement between communities and armed actors?
3. What are the opportunities, challenges and risks for national and international peace, protection and humanitarian actors to adapt their approach based on a strengthened understanding of community engagement with armed actors?

Focus group discussions and interviews were conducted with community members in Bria, Bambari and Mbaïki in July 2023 with a total of 15 interviews and 30 focus groups representing 308 people consulted. A total of 35 interviews were conducted with international and national peace, humanitarian and protection actors between February and July 2023. In addition, historical data collected by the Norwegian Refugee Council in 2018 on humanitarian mediation interventions were made available to this study to analyse with a focus on understanding how far humanitarian mediation interventions contribute to reducing violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation. The humanitarian mediation

interventions examined were carried out by the Danish Refugee Council in Boda and the PK5 neighbourhood of Bangui between 2014 and 2015, and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Dékoa and the Boeing neighbourhood of Bangui in 2015 and 2016.

Key findings

Communities often exercise considerable influence over armed actors at a community level. This often happens below the radar and is commonly left unrecognised. This study illustrates that communities choose judiciously which community groups or individuals have power and leverage over armed actors. These are often individuals or groups with moral or cultural, rather than political, influence over armed actors. They use persuasion and compensation as key strategies to influence them. The study also shows that communities have influence over specific armed actors: often those that are more embedded in the community and decentralised, as they offer easier entry points for community negotiators. Finally, the study shows that communities tend to have influence over specific types of day-to-day violence that affect them and over the use of resources and assets to encourage the restraint of armed actors.

Too often external interventions, in particular from the government or humanitarian organisations, undermine and frustrate these community-level efforts, the agency of communities and the citizen activism of these community negotiators. The prevention and reduction of risks of violence cannot ignore what communities are already doing and their agency in engaging armed actors. Instead, when seeking to reduce risks of violence, external actors should always start from what communities are already doing rather than imposing externally driven approaches from the outside. It should be based on supporting the needs of communities in their engagement or when the situation escalates to a point where community mediation and negotiation is no longer viable or effective. It should always be done with the objective of reinstating community mediation and negotiation as well as strengthening communities' own capacities to reduce and prevent the risk of violence and protection. External actors such as peace and humanitarian organisations need to be present with these communities and communicate what they can offer to facilitate and support them, such as reopening spaces for dialogue through a humanitarian mediation approach where appropriate.

This study in CAR highlights that peace actors tend to do this much more than humanitarian actors. This is facilitated by their focus on localised approaches, based on proximity and presence, and informed by a continuous analysis of conflict and community dynamics.

Humanitarian actors can play an important complementary role to other peace actors in helping communities to prevent and reduce civilian harm. In CAR, we also see that humanitarian protection actors are becoming more involved in prevention activities. The evidence concerning humanitarian mediation demonstrates without a doubt the incredible potential that this approach has for reducing the risk of violence. This study highlights that even where humanitarian mediation has had a less sustained impact, it still contributed to an overall reduction of violence and the strengthening of community capacity for mediation and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

To be more effective in violence reduction and prevention, humanitarian protection actors could learn from the experience of peace actors, the way they work with communities, the analyses they conduct and their conflict transformation approaches. This requires humanitarian organisations to think about their presence and proximity to communities in volatile and insecure situations as well as their ability to be flexible and agile. This should not seek to replace the role of peace actors but to complement their expertise and ensure that, with phased approaches, each build on the impact of the other.

While there is collaboration in CAR between peace and humanitarian protection actors, there are opportunities for greater complementarity. This is particularly the case with regard to working jointly on conflict analysis, conflict-sensitive programming and understanding community dynamics.

Recommendations

The study therefore offers the following recommendations:

- Recognise and base programming on the agency of communities in what they are already doing to reduce and prevent the risks of violence and protection through engaging with armed actors.
- Invest in community-based organisations and local civil society groups, in particular youth-led and women-led civil society groups, to increase community resilience in conflict, as these groups can prove essential to a community's ability to reduce and prevent violence in conflict.
- Donors should ensure that funding for reducing and preventing the risk of violence is flexible and long term, and based on the understanding that processes of dialogue, engagement and mediation are successful as processes in themselves and not because they lead to agreements.
- Donors should ensure that adequate funding is available for violence reduction and peacebuilding organisations to be present even during a conflict's peak and in emergencies. To do so, donors should dedicate an adequate percentage of funding to local peacebuilding work and initiatives relative to their support of Track 1 processes. This should be done in line with the findings of this report, which highlight the opportunities for local peace agreements and violence reduction at the local level even when national-level Track 1 peace processes fail.
- Support humanitarian protection actors and humanitarian actors to more systematically adopt conflict-sensitive approaches based on sound conflict sensitivity analysis, conflict analysis and community dynamics analysis, jointly working with peace actors including through consortia. This will require humanitarian organisations to work in a more agile and flexible way, addressing the rigidity of their approaches.
- To help fund humanitarian mediation, invest in learning and gathering evidence on its impact as well as strategic communication with donors on the outcome and impact of this approach in reducing and preventing violence.
- Ensure that any conflict analysis includes an analysis of community dynamics and governance (formal and informal) to better understand and integrate how communities organise themselves, make decisions, adapt to conflict dynamics and deal with the emergence of new armed actors and the presence of local authorities. This should include an analysis of the impact of context dynamics on how the power and roles of traditional authorities change.

- Fund the reduction of violence and protection risks in CAR with a diversity of peace and protection actors to link humanitarian/emergency mediation tools, community-based and community-led protection approaches to social cohesion and community capacity-building to manage conflicts peacefully and mediate conflicts. Use a consortium approach to bring together different peace, humanitarian and protection actors as well as a diversity of local, national and international actors.
- Invest in strengthening the capacity of community negotiators and mediators, including through supporting national-level mediators who can take over when the situation no longer allows community negotiators and mediators to play this role. Support mediation capacity at the national level by assisting existing networks of Central African mediators.
- Work on diversity and inclusion in community approaches as a journey through time. Mentor the community in a reflection on inclusion and diversity, particularly of young women, rather than imposing joint committees. Work with more established women in the community for the inclusion of young women and through existing civil society networks in CAR such as the Organisation de la femme centrafricaine (OFCA).

1   Introduction

1.1   Background

CAR has experienced many different conflicts. These conflicts have led to violence against civilians that include: forced displacement,[1] torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, extrajudicial executions, recruitment and use of children by armed non-state actors, sexual violence and the violation of the right to freedom of movement among others (OCHA, 2021). The people of CAR have long known an absence of the state outside the capital Bangui and have had to manage the presence of armed actors. Some armed actors were created to protect civilian populations, although too often they have evolved to become direct threats of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation for these communities. This same trend is taking place today with the return of state authority outside the capital Bangui through the offensives of FACA and its allied forces (the Wagner Group and the Rwandan armed forces).

To respond to these conflicts, reduce violence and protect civilians, many humanitarian, protection and peacebuilding actors are present in CAR including MINUSCA. It is in this context that this study examines how communities engage with armed actors and the implications for peace, humanitarian and protection actors. CAR offers the opportunity to explore these issues through several types of conflicts, several types of armed actors and different configurations of communities. In addition, responses to various cycles of violence make it possible to observe the interventions of different types of actors including a peacekeeping operation, as well as to study practices such as humanitarian mediation.

1.2   Methodology

1.2.1   Overview of study and definition of terms

This study[2] seeks to answer three central research questions:[3]

1. What roles do communities play in developing and shaping engagement with armed actors in order to strengthen their protection?
2. What factors, actions and actors affect the terms of engagement between communities and armed actors?

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1   Forced displacement was particularly significant at the end of 2013 and early 2014 as the Seleka retreated. Some regions, such as the Lobaye region, which had traditionally known a mixed Christian–Muslim population, saw their Muslim populations being forced out due to targeted attacks by the Anti-Balaka with only an enclave of Muslims left in Boda at the time.

2   This work is part of ODI's Humanitarian Policy Group's Integrated Programme (HPG, 2022). This case study on CAR is part of a larger research project that includes a review of literature and practice (Davies et al., 2023), another case study (South Sudan), lessons at the global level of different practices and a final report.

3   See Appendix 1 for additional research questions.

3.   What are the opportunities, challenges and risks for national and international peace, protection and humanitarian actors to adapt their approach based on a strengthened understanding of community engagement with armed actors?

The term 'community' is complex and multiple definitions exist, none of which are perfect. We understand community as a population group that shares cultural, social and economic ties and often (but not only) lives in the same geographic areas. Community boundaries are fluid and change over time, especially in times of extreme violence, and may within them have multiple subcommunities organised around values, principles, kinships, religions, etc.

Similarly, the line between community and armed actors is often blurred. This is particularly the case in CAR where armed actors often come from and are based in their own communities. In addition, communities are not homogeneous. Different individuals in the community may experience and be impacted differently by conflict and violence. They can also have different decision-making and participatory power in the collective affairs of the community, and thus benefit more or less from the communities' engagement with armed actors.

Similarly, the study adopts a broad definition of the term 'armed actors'. No strict definition was imposed and instead communities were free to speak about armed actors who pose a risk of violence, coercion and deprivation. In CAR, these armed actors include: centralised and decentralised non-state armed groups with different structures, modes of operation and objectives (political, economic, criminal); community-embedded armed groups including armed pastoralist herders; the national army (FACA); and bilateral allied forces (the Wagner Group and the Rwandan armed forces). In addition, a number of peacekeeping forces have also been present in CAR with MINUSCA still active today.

1.2.2   Data collection

Data collection consisted of three distinct phases. First, to better understand how communities engage with armed actors in order to reduce and prevent violence, focus group discussions and interviews were conducted with community members in Bria, Bambari and Mbaïki in July 2023. These three localities were chosen to explore different conflict dynamics and community configurations. The focus group discussions gathered the experiences and observations of different community members on engagements with armed actors and included diverse demographic groups, including potentially less powerful and/or marginalised groups. Focus group discussions included men, women, Muslim populations, Christian and other non-Muslim populations, youth, ex-combatants, internally displaced persons (IDP) and returnees. The interviews gathered the experiences of community leaders, religious leaders, customary authorities, local authorities and local committee coordinators, as well as the experiences of community members who volunteered as negotiators and mediators on behalf of their community to engage with armed actors. A total of 15 interviews and 30 focus groups representing 308 people were conducted.

Second, nine preliminary interviews were conducted to prepare and contextualise the study. To explore how actors external to the community reduce and prevent the risks of violence, 26 remote interviews were conducted with national (5) and international (22) peace (8), humanitarian and protection (14) actors, and other actors external to the communities (4) between February and July 2023.

Third, the study benefited from historical data collected by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in 2018 on humanitarian mediation interventions carried out by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in Boda and the PK5 neighbourhood of Bangui (2014–2015) and OCHA in Dékoa and the Boeing neighbourhood of Bangui in 2015 and 2016. This data was collected by NRC staff members through interviews and a questionnaire with 78 people who participated in humanitarian mediation, including 40 in Boda, 17 in Dékoa, 14 in Boeing (Bangui) and 7 in PK5 (Bangui). The analysis of these data is presented in Chapter 3 of this working paper.

1.2.3   Research limitations

The response rate for interviews with peace, humanitarian and protection actors was relatively low with 62 interview requests sent between February and July 2023, or a 42% positive response rate. In particular, the views of key United Nations (UN) actors, including protection cluster coordination, local and national organisations and donors, are all underrepresented in the data. The low response rate from peace, humanitarian and protection actors makes it difficult to identify trends. The results based on these interviews therefore tend to be anecdotal.

The data and analysis on humanitarian mediations in 2015 and 2016 are based on the memory of participants in 2018 (i.e. between two and three years after the intervention), as well as the memories of responders in 2023 (i.e. between seven and eight years after their interventions). Due to the fact that in some localities several mediation processes have taken place, it is not always easy to connect the data with a specific mediation process. Similarly, some stakeholders have conflicting recollections of these mediation processes.

The fact that community actors such as young people, women or community representatives and leaders struggled to differentiate between spontaneous initiatives initiated by their community and those implemented in partnership with national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) hindered data collection. The research team took the time to explain the difference between these two types of initiative before each interview and focus group. Although this explanation phase helped frame the exchanges, it often had an impact on the time allocated to interviews and focus groups with the communities.

1.3   Context and conflict dynamics

Despite its wealth of natural resources and with a population of about 6.1 million, CAR ranks at the bottom of the human capital and human development indices (UNDP, 2022), and 71% of CAR's population lives below the poverty line (World Bank, 2023). The humanitarian situation is alarming,

with 56% of the population (more than three million people) in need of humanitarian assistance and protection in 2023, an increase of 10% compared to 2022 (OCHA, 2023a). In May 2023, there were 475,000 IDPs in CAR, and in August 2023 there were 744,000 CAR refugees (OCHA, 2023b).

Since its independence from France in 1960, CAR has experienced six coups, leading to some violence in the country and relative instability. Following Francois Bozizé's coup in 2003, armed non-state actors have controlled part of the country, particularly the north. From 2004 to 2008, CAR experienced its first civil war between these various armed non-state actors in the north and the government of Francois Bozizé. The second civil war began in December 2012 with the offensive of the Seleka (which means 'alliance' in Sango, the national language), a coalition of mainly Muslim armed non-state actors.[4] The Seleka took the capital Bangui in March 2013 and installed its leader Michel Djotodia as president. While Djotodia was attempting to dismantle the Seleka, it committed serious abuses against the civilian population in the capital and the rest of the country, including looting, summary executions, rape and torture (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

In response to Seleka violence, Christian-majority self-defence militias named Anti-Balaka were created to protect the population. In September 2013, the Anti-Balaka targeted Muslim populations perceived as collaborating with the Seleka. The conflict took on an intercommunal ethno-religious dimension, with extreme violence between communities, the Seleka and the Anti-Balaka.[5] While the conflict was not about religious doctrine, religion became a polarising identity factor often linked to socioeconomic and ethnic considerations, as the Muslim population in CAR tends to be the main economic actor controlling resources such as mines, and the non-Muslim population tends to be overrepresented in the civil service and government offices. Over the years, this has led to increased grievances. In December 2014, Human Rights Watch estimated that 10,500 Muslims were living in enclaves guarded by peacekeepers in Carnot, Yaloké, Boda and Berbérati among others (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

In response to the violence, a bilateral military force from the French army (the Sangaris) was deployed as well as an African Union peacekeeping force: the African-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic (MISCA). In July 2014, a ceasefire agreement was signed that left a precarious security situation in the country under the control of a transitional government set up in January 2014 with Catherine Samba-Panza as president. In September 2014, MISCA was replaced by MINUSCA. At the heart of the mission's mandate is a duty to protect the population and support CAR

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4   The Seleka brought together four armed entities (the Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement (UFDR), the Convention des patriotes pour la justice et la paix (CPJP), the Front démocratique du peuple centrafricain (FDPC) and the Convention patriotique du Salut du Kodro) that were independent of each other (and at times rivals) and continued to exist after the dissolution of the Seleka (Vircoulon, 2020).

5   Since the rise of vigilante groups, conflicts in CAR have become increasingly ethno-religious, albeit focused on identity rather than religious ideology.

in its reconstruction. However, MINUSCA and its 13,000 soldiers have been widely criticised by the government and the population for their ineffectiveness in the face of attacks by armed non-state actors against the population.[6]

In 2016, the security situation deteriorated 'despite significant progress made after the transition, such as the steps taken at the national level for the disarmament, demobilisation, repatriation and reintegration of armed groups and the revival of regional cooperation' (UNSC, 2017: 2). In September and October 2016, the Seleka coalition imploded into different factions, with armed actors often re-establishing their initial configuration as armed non-state actors based on ethnic identity and community. This led to local clashes between factions that worsened and became widespread across the country. Fighting between ex-Seleka factions and the Anti-Balaka increased, with the Anti-Balaka launching a manhunt and seeking revenge for the violence perpetrated by ex-Seleka members (ibid.).

The worsening security situation and the government's objective of recapturing the territories occupied by armed non-state actors led it to identify new support. In 2017, after a request for military support was rejected by the French president and following the departure of the French operation Sangaris, CAR turned to Rwanda and Russia for military support. Since 2 January 2020, Rwandan troops, in addition to being present in the UN peacekeeping forces, have also fought directly alongside CAR's army. In 2018, Russia, through the private military company the Wagner Group, began training the FACA. Wagner became the main ally of the FACA on the ground during the fighting against armed non-state actors.

In 2019,[7] a peace agreement, the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic (APPR) was signed between the government and 14 armed factions.[8] This peace agreement has had little effect on the activities and presence of armed actors, who continue to control large

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6   In the last few years, MINUSCA has also suffered from a proactive campaign of misinformation, disinformation and rumours instigated by powerful politicians who had an interest in decreasing MINUSCA's legitimacy. MINUSCA has worked through its Civil Affairs Department in particular to work more effectively with communities, especially through the deployment of community liaison's officers, which have more effectively informed how forces deploy to deliver better protection of civilians.

7   CAR has had many peace agreements between 2013 and 2023. The 2019 APPR is the most significant. However, all efforts have failed to bring security and peace to the country.

8   The signatories of the APPR include: the Union pour la paix en Centrafrique (UPC), Union des Forces Républicaines-Fondamentale, the Seleka Rénovée, the Union des Forces Républicaines, Revolution et Justice-Sayo wing, Revolution et Justice-Belanga wing, Retour Réclamation et Réhabilitation (3R), Rassemblement Patriotique pour le Renouveau de la Centrafrique, Mouvement des libérateurs centrafricains pour la justice (MLCJ), Mouvement Patriotique pour la Centrafrique (MPC), Front populaire pour la renaissance de la Centrafrique (FPRC), FDPC, Anti-Balaka-Ngaissona wing and Anti-Balaka-Mokom wing.

swathes of the country's territory. The APPR, as with other past peace efforts, has tended to focus on Track 1 mediation (high-level political mediation), without enough effort dedicated to solving local and intercommunal conflict dynamics.[9]

The holding of presidential elections in December 2020 led to a new phase of the conflict with the resumption of fighting. Armed non-state actors dissatisfied with the country's political situation created a new coalition, bringing together ex-Seleka and Anti-Balaka: the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC).[10] The main purpose of the CPC was to stop the holding of presidential elections on 27 December 2020. The CPC failed in their attempt to take the capital Bangui in January 2021. President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, elected in 2016 and re-elected in 2020, adopted a new strategy in view of the persistence of the activities of armed non-state actors. He ordered a counter-offensive by the FACA, with the support of the Wagner Group and the Rwandan armed forces. Since 2021, the government has regained control of a large number of cities allowing control of territory and greater state presence outside Bangui. However, armed non-state actors remain present on roads and in rural areas. Wagner's forces have also become a significant threat to the civilian population, especially in the mining regions of the north and in the forest areas of the south-west.

In 2021, the United Nations Group of Experts on the Central African Republic alerted the Security Council of the conduct of the Wagner Group's mercenaries and the threats they posed to the population.

> There are reports of mass summary executions, arbitrary detentions, torture during interrogations, enforced disappearances, forced displacement of the civilian population, indiscriminate targeting of civilian facilities, violations of the right to health and increasing attacks on humanitarian actors. (UN, 2021)

The Wagner Group is also accused of having developed a strategy of disinformation and spreading rumours against the Western presence, specifically France and MINUSCA. CAR civil society feels that civil liberties have declined given the lack of state response and protection against Wagner's abuses, and as a result it is afraid to denounce the abuses committed by Wagner or the FACA. In 2023, an investigation conducted by the research group The Sentry highlighted how Wagner is increasingly attempting to control the CAR state and army (The Sentry, 2023).

In parallel with these political and security crises, historical conflicts between herders and farmers are reaching an increasingly high level of violence due to the presence of armed actors on pastoralist routes, leading herders to divert traditional routes to new areas and arm themselves in self-defence.

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9   As noted later in the paper, there are a number of peacebuilding organisations as well as some protection actors working actively on local and intercommunal conflict dynamics. The government has also invested in local peace and reconciliation committees to ensure local participation in the APPR. However, the scale of funding and efforts to support local and intercommunal conflict resolution does not compare to that of the Track 1 process.

10   The CPC includes the MPC, the FPRC, 3R, UPC and two Anti-Balaka factions (UNSC, 2021).

This is further compounded by the availability of small arms due to the region's conflicts and the alignment of some pastoralists with armed non-state actors at times facilitating the transport of small arms across borders.[11]

According to Vircoulon, the presence of armed non-state actors in CAR is due to the availability of 'lost soldiers' from the wars in Chad and Darfur who have reconverted into 'rural banditry, poaching and mercenaryism' (Vircoulon, 2020: 11). These 'lost soldiers' were used by politicians such as Francois Bozizé to take power. When these politicians take power, these 'lost soldiers' do not always benefit and return to rural and mining areas to enrich themselves.[12] The other reason for the presence of armed non-state actors is 'the need for self-defence that has manifested itself in the peripheries of the Central African Republic for nearly thirty years' (ibid.: 12). The country's wealth, such as its subsoil rich in gold and diamonds as well as untapped oil deposits and vast forest resources, also facilitates the interests and economic survival of armed non-state actors.

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11   The increase in herder–farmer violent conflict was particularly important between 2013 and 2019. In the last four to five years, there has been a slow but steady decrease in herder–farmer violent conflict.

12   This is the case of Abdulaye Miskine's FDPC (Vircoulon, 2020).

2 Community engagement with armed actors

2.1 The process of communities engaging with armed actors

In all the areas covered by the study, two or more armed non-state actors were present. During research in communities it was noted that the community engagement process is very similar while presenting some specificities in each area.

2.1.1 Bria

Context

Located 580 km north-east of the capital Bangui, Bria is known for its economic dynamism due to the presence of mining sites and a large number of gold- and diamond-buying offices (*bureaux d'achat*). This economic dynamism has attracted a diversity of communities facilitating ethnic mixing. Before the 2013 crisis, the town of Bria was already besieged by armed non-state actors, who saw it as a strategic area. This facilitated the creation of the Seleka, some members of which were already active in the city.[13] Although these actors often comprise individuals from different ethnic and religious groups, the violence that occurred between the Seleka and the Anti-Balaka from 2013 cemented an identity-based organisation of violence with a clear division between Christians and Muslims.

In 2013, with the formation and presence of the Seleka, Bria experienced a series of massacres targeting mainly non-Muslim populations. As a result, the non-Muslim populations found safety in front of the MINUSCA base located 3 km from the city centre of Bria. The IDP site named 'PK3' becomes the largest in CAR, and at the height of the crisis it housed more than 50,000 people. Violence also caused local and administrative authorities to leave Bria, putting communities under the de facto governance of armed non-state actors. Faced with Seleka violence, an Anti-Balaka section was created by displaced youth from the PK3 camp. The activities, objectives and interests of the Anti-Balaka in Bria remained highly localised: at the beginning it had the objective to protect the PK3 and the majority non-Muslim communities living there against Seleka or ex-Seleka actors; over time, it developed the objective of

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13   Comprising mostly Goula ethnic people, these armed actors hold sociopolitical grievances, accusing the central state of historical discrimination vis-à-vis their community. Such grievances were coupled with interethnic and historical tensions between the Goulas and the Rounga, leading to fighting and the forced displacement of populations in the region.

controlling the population to feed their economic interests through illegal taxation. The intercommunal nature of the conflict and violence divided the population of Bria into four distinct areas that followed already existing demographic trends[14] under the governance of different armed actors.[15]

Cohabitating with armed actors had physical and psychological impacts on the populations of Bria who had suffered: illegal taxation; limited freedom of movement for goods and people; destruction of material goods; and cases of torture, murder, massacres, arbitrary arrest and sexual violence against women and girls. Armed actors took over the role of the local authorities by implementing a series of taxes on goods and transport in the neighbourhoods under their control and on roads. The presence of armed actors has also had secondary negative impacts, with the multiplication of hate speech, disinformation and misinformation adding to the disintegration of the social fabric that was already greatly affected by intercommunal violence.

Community strategies, priorities and objectives

Bria's communities' main strategy to protect themselves against violence was to create more ethnically and religiously homogeneous enclaves. For some, such as non-Muslims living in predominantly Muslim or mixed neighbourhoods, this meant moving to the PK3 IDP camp. The creation of these communities also allowed armed non-state actors to organise themselves around their geographic areas to protect the ethnic and religious groups they represented, for example the Union pour la paix en Centrafrique (UPC), which historically claims to be the protector of the Peul, and the Anti-Balaka (the protector of non-Muslim populations).

In addition, communities in Bria also engaged with armed non-state actors to reduce the risk of violence, first within their own community but also between communities and different armed non-state actors. Within communities themselves, the objective of these engagements was primarily to reduce the harmful behaviour of armed non-state actors such as physical violence, sexual violence and abusive taxation. Engagements between communities and with various armed non-state actors were more focused on restoring peace and social cohesion, reducing tensions and facilitating the movement of goods and people.

Engagement within PK3 with the Anti-Balaka

In PK3, the Anti-Balaka cohabited with the community and came directly from the community: they were therefore neighbours, family members and acquaintances. As the Anti-Balaka were initially intended to protect the community from the Seleka and other armed actors formerly associated with the Seleka, they initially found support in the community. However, over time the Anti-Balaka became a significant

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14   For example, before the 2013 crisis, the Gobolo group was already predominantly inhabited by sedentary Peul. After the onset of the crisis, Gobolo became 100% Fulani.

15   (1) PK3 with the non-Muslim population of Bria under the control of the Anti-Balaka. (2) Gobolo with the sedentary Peul population of Bria under the control of the Seleka Peul and then the UPC. (3) Bornou with the non-Peul Muslim population of Bria under the control of the Muslim Seleka and then the FPRC. (3) The Centre-ville, historically an ethnically and religiously mixed area that became mainly populated by non-Peul Muslims following the intercommunal conflict between the Seleka and the Anti-Balaka under the control of the Muslim Seleka.

threat to the community. The community sought a solution through engaging with them. However, the Anti-Balaka in PK3 sought to dismantle traditional authority structures that they perceived to be competing with their own authority and therefore undermining their role. Historically the role of traditional authorities had been to manage conflicts within communities, but this role was significantly weakened with the presence of the Anti-Balaka, who imposed themselves as the sole authority.

The first objective for the PK3 community through engaging with the Anti-Balaka was to reduce daily violence, including physical violence, sexual violence, kidnapping and arbitrary arrests. Religious leaders from the Baptist, Evangelist and Catholic churches volunteered to take on this role. These were not necessarily appointed by the community itself, but they had tacit authority as guarantors of morality. Religious leaders were also well placed because of the fluid relationship that exists between animist healers and the Christian religion. These animist healers have significant authority in the community and play an important role in the beliefs and spirituality of the Anti-Balaka, who use their charms and amulets to protect themselves during fighting. Many animist healers use the Bible and believe that their power is given to them by God. There were therefore entry points to engage through faith, including symbols and rituals.

Religious leaders engaged with the Anti-Balaka directly, and indirectly through animist healers, to influence their behaviour. They used three approaches:

1. Sensitisation to remind the Anti-Balaka of the importance of non-violence, peace and 'living together' (*vivre ensemble*), sometimes using religious texts.
2. Direct engagement and negotiation to seek to restrain the violent conduct of the Anti-Balaka.
3. Coaching and support of members of the Anti-Balaka.

The sensitisation approach was the basis of all engagement with the Anti-Balaka and an important step, which needed repeating, to establish that the community accepted the presence of the armed actor, but that daily violence and insecurity would make living as one community challenging.

Direct engagement and negotiations were used to manage specific situations (e.g. a rape, an arbitrary arrest) as well as when certain behaviour escalated (e.g. an increase in general violence, an increase in taxation). Here religious leaders used the fear of God's punishment for immoral or unholy behaviour as an argument to encourage a change in behaviour. One of the negotiations led by the religious leaders resulted in an agreement for taxes to be collected by the religious leaders themselves instead of the Anti-Balakas, as the latter tended to use violent means. Another success was the reduction of taxation, where religious leaders argued with the Anti-Balaka that the level of taxation was beyond the means of the communities, with serious consequences for the Anti-Balaka's ability to rely on the population for key resources such as food.

Coaching and support to members of the Anti-Balaka was linked more to helping its members consider their future, and was eventually the approach religious leaders used to support an informal

demobilisation process for Anti-Balaka members. Religious leaders played an important role in Bria in helping armed actors through a process of confession and forgiveness, allowing them to rejoin community life as civilians.[16]

In collaboration with religious leaders, Christian women also played an important role in reducing Anti-Balaka violence through sensitisation and negotiation. In Bria, these were mainly older, established women within the church, often widowed as a result of Seleka abuses, with a certain social stature. As described later, while religious leaders were seen as guarantors of morality, these women symbolised maternal authority for the entire community. They sought to exert influence over the Anti-Balaka by leveraging perceptions of maternal authority and of the nourishing mother. Indeed, many of these women took responsibility for caring for children orphaned as a result of the conflict with the Seleka. This role brought them respect throughout the community, including from members of the Anti-Balaka.

Women used the *tontines* (saving groups)[17] as a space for dialogue with women of all ages in the community. Thus, the women were able to gather the opinions of many women in the community to inform the dialogue they then had with the Anti-Balaka. These *tontines* were also used so that women who engaged with the Anti-Balaka could pass on information and update other women in the community.

The role of young women was mixed. On the one hand, some young women married to Anti-Balaka men were used by older Christian women as a way to talk with their husbands. However, young women were perceived as too fragile to directly engage with armed actors within PK3. They were also seen as running the risk of being perceived negatively. Indeed, having young women telling members of the Anti-Balaka they should change their behaviours could have led to negative perceptions of these women, therefore affecting their fitness for marriage. As described below, women were also vulnerable to harmful outcomes of negotiations with armed actors when, for example, sexual violence occurred and this resulted in them being forced to marry their attackers.

Young men who were members of civil society youth groups before the 2013 conflict also engaged the Anti-Balaka. In particular, the young men helped sensitise the Anti-Balaka, including bringing together the different communities of Bria and facilitating dialogue between the different armed non-state actors (as described below). These young men were already respected members of civil society youth groups before 2013 and were often seen as role models in the community. These young men were known by members of the Anti-Balaka of the same age and sometimes had family and friendship ties, which created trust that they could use as an entry point. Young men mainly engaged with members of

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16   Reports from Conciliation Resources highlight that more young people formerly associated with armed actors did not go through formal demobilisation processes but instead through traditional and religious rites and ceremonies. For additional information on young people associated with armed non-state actors see Conciliation Resources (2020a and 2020b).

17   *Tontines* or saving groups are groups of individuals that come together to save money and invest their savings. Each member contributes a small amount of money at regular frequency to one saving pot. The pot is then allocated to one member on a rotating basis to be used by this member as they see fit.

the Anti-Balaka in discussions about the future and the roles that young men could play in a peaceful society. Young men also used their trusted relationship with members of the Anti-Balaka to gather more information, which they then could share with religious leaders to inform their own engagement.

Engagement within Bornou and Centre-ville with the FPRC

Engagement with the FPRC was almost exclusively done through the Imams, with some support from civil society youth groups. Even if the FPRC members were not necessarily practising Muslims, being a fervent Muslim was a precondition to being promoted through the hierarchy, which favoured Imams in engaging in dialogue on behalf of the community.

Unlike in PK3, where the community participated in consultation with religious leaders, women and young men engaged in dialogue with armed actors, in Bornou and Centre-ville this consultation circle was smaller and consisted of elders, Imams and young men who decided what was at stake and whether the priorities were worth the risk of engaging with the FPRC.

The Imams used their role as religious leaders and leveraged religious holidays to negotiate a pause in conflict and violence. They then used the celebrations to bring the community together with FPRC members around a traditional meal with the hope of increasing familiarity, such that the bond between armed actors and the community would decrease violence. The Imams also negotiated with the FPRC to help the World Food Programme gain access to the community to distribute food assistance.

Engagement within Bogolo with the UPC

The UPC has its origins as a community-embedded self-defence group to protect the Peul population. Unlike the Anti-Balaka, the UPC committed very few abuses against its own community in Bria. It had good command and control of its members and, unlike the Anti-Balaka, kept traditional leadership empowered through their *chef de race* (Peul traditional leaders). The *chef de race* coordinated with the Imams when engaging with the UPC. The UPC is by far the strongest organised armed actor with a clear hierarchy. In Bria, it swelled its ranks with young people from the local community to forge close ties with the community. Being mobilised by the UPC was perceived as an improvement in social standing by young people.

The UPC and the Peul community had, in many ways, established a form of social contract, such as youth joining the UPC in exchange for the UPC protecting the community. There was no need for the community to establish other engagement strategies with the UPC. The management of community life remained the same before, during and after the conflict with the *chef de race* and Imams. The UPC was perceived as protecting the Peul community not only physically but also religiously and culturally. Although the UPC benefits from the financial assistance of the Peul diaspora, this actor has also survived thanks to the exploitation of the mines around Bria.

Intercommunity engagement in Bria: the role of youth in supporting religious leaders

Young men from established civil society youth groups were involved in carrying out dialogues between all the communities of Bria. Indeed, young men from civil society youth groups found themselves

separated by the conflict in PK3, Bornou, Centre-ville and Gobolo, although they worked together before the conflict. These young men continued their civil society and citizen activism roles, especially around the need for peace and the importance of living together as one community across religious lines. The role of civil society youth groups in engaging armed non-state actors was limited in Bornou, Centre-ville and Bogolo due to the structures of the FPRC and UPC and the role religious leaders played in leading engagement. This did not prevent the president of the youth civil society of Bria at the time, a Muslim residing in Bornou, to lead other civil society youth in efforts to bring the population of Bria together. The president played a critical leadership role to ensure that communication between youth across the four enclaves of Bria continued and was used for peaceful objectives during the conflict.

In support of the actions of religious leaders, the youth used their networks to start a dialogue between communities, partly motivated by the need to stop arbitrary executions: armed actors in each area systematically executed anyone outside their community who physically approached their area. The presence of dead bodies in full view of the community had a significant psychological impact that made local youth react. They set up an information-sharing network and alert systems in the three neighbourhoods as well as in the IDP camp. This enabled them to carry out awareness-raising and dialogue activities with members of the armed actors, while religious leaders and women engaged their leaders.

These young men, under the leadership of their president, sensitised their own communities. They worked closely with religious leaders who were in direct contact with armed actors to try to open a dialogue between the different communities. This work was difficult as young people, especially in PK3, could not meet formally for fear of reprisals from the Anti-Balaka. They used football matches and impromptu informal meetings to raise awareness among young people. Eventually, the youth were able to organise a peace *caravane* (a peaceful march), which brought youth from Bornou to visit PK3 and discuss the security situation with religious leaders and armed actors. This visit had been prepared by their peers in PK3 through awareness efforts. This and other efforts helped restore some normality and greater freedom of movement between areas. The civil society youth network also played an important role in managing rumours, actively communicating with each other between areas to manage disinformation, misinformation and hate speech.

Community trade-offs

Direct engagement by religious leaders, women and young men with armed non-state actors has not been without trade-offs. Indeed, an important trade-off was the payment of illicit and sometimes abusive taxes, especially in PK3. Tax collection could be violent and often beyond the financial means of the community. Community negotiators, particularly religious leaders, played an important role in engaging with armed actors on their tax demands.

Beyond the payment of taxes, community negotiators also highlighted how payments to armed actors were often a last resort to resolve cases of violence, kidnapping and arbitrary arrests through financial payments or through giving resources such as gold or agricultural products.

Communities also engaged in harmful practices. They offered young girls in marriage to members of the armed actors. This practice is seen as a way to forge stronger ties between the community and armed actors. In the Muslim neighbourhood of Bornou, when FPRC violence became too strong the community offered young women to FPRC members as a way to reduce the violence. UPC leaders also chose wives in the community to strengthen their links to the community, which was supported by the latter as a way to strengthen the mutual benefits to reducing violence.

Similarly, following rape and other sexual violence by armed actors, young women were often forced into marriage with their perpetrators as a way to resolve the abuse. These sociocultural practices remain significant constraints to ensuring that community strategies to reduce violence do not endanger certain parts of the population and lead to further harms. The forced marriage of young women following rape led to multiple suicides by young women in the community. In this case, the security, safety and rights of individuals, in this case young women, were sacrificed by the community in order to manage and mitigate what were perceived as greater, more communal, threats of violence.

Communities also retain the option of using violence as a last resort to reduce the violence committed by armed actors. In PK3, following the rape of a very young child by an Anti-Balaka member, a father burned down their house. The rest of the community took the opportunity to burn other Anti-Balaka houses, indicating to the Anti-Balaka that the community had had enough of their violence and impunity. It is important to note that violence remains an option and a strategy that is on the table to help them put pressure on armed actors. As discussed below, this strategy has ethical implications for external actors wanting to support community engagement. Similarly, as described below, the community also used armed actors against each other to reduce violence. In Bria, community negotiators have requested that the Wagner Group 'secures' the roads around Bria by pursuing armed non-state actors.

New dynamics since 2019: APPR and the Wagner Group

Conflict dynamics started changing in 2019, including with a much stronger state presence in Bria. First, the APPR, signed in February 2019, led to the creation of a new architecture for dialogue at the community level. An official platform for security dialogue between different stakeholders at the community level (armed non-state actors, community and local authorities with MINUSCA as an observer) was set up (the Technical Security Committee). Community participation with this platform was meant to be through the participation of the Local Peace and Reconciliation Committee (Comités Locaux de Paix et Réconciliation, CLPR) set up in 2016 by the government.

The CLPR's aim 'to anchor the culture of non-violence, participatory and inclusive dialogues for reconciliation and lasting peace in the Central African Republic' (Ministère de l'Action Humanitaire et de la Réconciliation Nationale, n.d.). Composed of community members, the CLPR represents the community in the Technical Security Committee, which became the official platform for any security dialogue from 2019. In Bria, the creation of the CLPR created frustration on the part of community negotiators who volunteered and took risks during the conflict on behalf of their community.

The signing of the APPR also supported the return of local authorities, with the arrival of the Prefet in 2019 in Bria. The Prefet is a local administrative individual appointed by the national government and deployed from the capital to the region: they are therefore the local representative of the national authority. The Prefet is not always from the region. In the case of Bria, the Prefet was originally from the town but fled to Bangui when the Seleka came in 2013.

In 2020, members of the Wagner Group arrived in Bria with the aim of terminating the activities of armed non-state actors. The latter were thus pushed out of the city into rural areas and onto surrounding roads. For the individuals interviewed for this study, Wagner 'liberated' the city of Bria. A first wave of members from Wagner remained in the city for several months, but the population did not have direct interactions with them because of the language barrier and the fear of retaliation by Wagner if they complained. Indeed, in their mission to put an end to the presence of armed non-state actors and their accomplices, Wagner committed a number of abuses including violent arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, physical violence and rape. The Peul and Muslim populations were systematically targeted by Wagner as they are perceived to be enemies due to their close relationship with certain armed non-state actors such as the UPC and the FPRC.

Communities do engage with the Wagner Group indirectly. The community of Bria first tried to engage in dialogue through the CLPR in order to involve government or allied security forces, whether they were the Wagner Group, the internal protection forces (police, *gendarmerie*) or the FACA. However, the community did not trust the CLPR to represent their grievances and reverted back to the same community negotiators they had used before: religious leaders, older women and young people from civil society. However, these community negotiators do not have the right to participate directly in the Technical Security Committee. Instead, community negotiators bypass the committee and engage with the Prefet on their security priorities and the problems to be raised with the security actors, the Wagner Group, etc. In Bria, the Prefet has therefore become the 'representative' of the community in the Technical Security Committee. For example, when the community complained of illicit taxes demanded by the remaining armed actors on the roads outside of Bria, community negotiators appealed through the Prefet to Wagner so they could drive these armed non-state actors away.

The language barrier, the fear of reprisals by the Wagner Group and the lack of protection from state authorities against the latter made it difficult for communities to engage with Wagner through their community negotiators, who continue to abuse the local community. Some community negotiators were arrested by the Wagner Group, who perceived their actions as aiding the enemy or positioning them as collaborators with armed actors of the ex-Seleka and CPC. In these cases, the Bria community acted to release the community negotiators, demonstrating the importance of the role of these individuals for the community.

2.1.2   Bambari

Context

The city of Bambari is the fifth largest city in CAR and a vibrant economic centre, in part as it has one of the largest gold and diamond mines in the country: the Ndassima mine. Before the 2013 crisis, the city of Bambari enjoyed an ethnically and culturally mixed population with Christian, Muslim and Peul populations.[18] Bambari is highly coveted by Seleka groups because it was part of their plan to create a new republic within CAR. Bambari has always known the presence of armed non-state actors in the area, especially around the mines. Following a rift among the Seleka over the control of mining areas, the UPC took control of the city in 2015 and, more specifically, of the left bank of the river where the main administrative buildings and the central market are located, as well as where the majority of the Muslim and Peul populations of the city reside. Although the UPC was not originally from Bambari, its troops were reinforced by local inhabitants. Whereas the UPC married young women from the community in Bria, this did not happen in Bambari. As a result, the ties between the UPC and the local Peul community were not as close. In addition, the UPC was controlling a part of the city with a mixed population[19] including non-Peul Muslims. Perhaps as a result, the UPC committed more abuses against the population it was controlling. The presence of the UPC was also not unanimously accepted by Bambari's Muslim community. Indeed, the UPC fought with other armed actors allied with the Seleka to take control of Bambari, which did not please everyone in the community.

The UPC's presence in Bambari led to the arrival of Anti-Balakas who positioned themselves on the right bank of the river, which was a predominantly non-Muslim area well before the beginning of the conflict. These Anti-Balakas were joined by young Christian volunteers from Bambari. The positioning of armed actors separated the city into two religiously homogeneous enclaves separated by the bridge that connects the two banks of the river.

This phase of occupation by the UPC on one side and the Anti-Balaka on the other side of the city restricted the freedom of movement of goods and people and led to physical and sexual violence, including torture and summary executions, and coercion through threats and intimidation against the population. The UPC also imposed a large number of illicit taxes.

Community engagement with UPC and Anti-Balaka in Bambari

Within the right bank controlled by the Anti-Balaka, as in Bria the latter turned against the populations they were supposed to protect, leading to the development of survival strategies within these populations. For example, the community shared their food and agricultural products with the Anti-Balaka to avoid cases of looting or robberies. Similarly, they tried to keep their distance from areas occupied by armed non-state actors and restricted their movement to limit interactions and the risk of physical attacks.

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18   Several ethnic groups are present in the city of Bambari: Banda, Zande, Zankara, Gbaya, Mandjia, Gbanziri and Yakoma.

19   These include Sudanese, Rounga, Goulas and Peul.

On both sides of the river, the communities' priority was to regain a semblance of freedom of movement to gain access to food and the market. As witnesses and victims of abuses committed by armed actors, the main motivation for the engagement by community negotiators was not primarily to bring peace and social cohesion within their community, but to be able to create sufficiently stable channels of formal and informal dialogue with armed actors to reduce violence against populations and promote the free movement of goods and people.

This priority first of all required the community to engage in a dialogue with the UPC leader Ali Darassa to guarantee some security for the movement of goods and people. Then, the strategy was to engage in dialogue with the Anti-Balaka to reduce violence against the population and convince them to start a dialogue with the UPC, or at least to allow the communities on each side to renew links and slowly move towards re-establishing a life together.

On both sides, the traditional leaders had been threatened and were not well placed to engage in a dialogue with the UPC or the Anti-Balaka. The young people, as in Bria, were able to communicate with each other and identify their peers to start sensitising the communities towards peace.

The objective of the youth was to negotiate with their peers from both sides and start a dialogue on how to bring back freedom of movement. The Anti-Balaka were very antagonistic to this request because they saw young Muslims as traitors;[20] however, they did allow young Christians to work with young people from the Muslim community to engage in a dialogue with the UPC on freedom of movement. This initiative was supported by MINUSCA in terms of logistics and other assistance. In 2014, this dialogue led to a reduction of UPC violence and an agreement to have fixed hours when the population could circulate safely and markets could open without the population being threatened.

In addition to young people, Christian women belonging to the local civil society women's group Organisation de la femme centrafricaine (OFCA) supported the engagement led by the youth with the Anti-Balaka by communicating with the members of the latter. Unlike Bria, Christian religious leaders feared engaging in dialogue with the Anti-Balaka and did not have a role in engaging with them.

On the side of the Muslim community, as in Bria, the UPC and its leader, Ali Darassa, listened to the Imams who were able to support the actions of young people in the community. The Imams had some successful dialogue with the UPC in relation to reducing violence against the population. Their engagement was mainly based on shared faith and what religious moral and legal codes say about conduct in conflict. For instance, the local Islamic council met with Ali Darassa to discuss the reduction of violence by UPC soldiers and the reduction of taxes, including on local traders.

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20   Many Christian communities in CAR that have suffered Seleka violence have perceived complicity between the local Muslim population and the Seleka. Even if the local Muslim population had not taken part in the Seleka abuses, for some Christians they were still responsible.

Despite these efforts, there was a surge in rumours that resulted in clashes at the market. The situation became tense again. The Inter-Religious Platform[21] in Bangui, an initiative led by faith leaders with the aim of restoring peace, had to intervene with the Anti-Balaka in Bambari to restore calm through leading a mediation effort.

From 2016, women, religious leaders and young people on both sides were able to start awareness campaigns about peace and living together with prayer sessions and door-to-door awareness, supported and funded by MINUSCA's Civil Affairs department. They organised themselves under the banner of a local peace commission, which was eventually effective in engaging with the UPC. Initially without UPC or Anti-Balaka agreements, the two communities gradually met through peace demonstrations (named *caravanes de la paix*) and sharing meals. Eventually, UPC and Anti-Balaka members were invited to join these meals. As pressure increased within the communities to restore normality though these demonstrations of social cohesion, violence between armed actors reduced until the arrival of the Wagner Group in 2021. MINUSCA provided its support to maintain calm through a peace commission between the armed actors. Young people took on the responsibility for managing information and rumours with prevention activities and giving early warnings in case of rising tensions. A joint FACA, UPC and Anti-Balaka force was also established under the leadership of MINUSCA.

The arrival of the Wagner Group in 2021

As in Bria, the arrival of mercenaries from the Wagner Group and the FACA in 2021 led to the UPC fleeing into rural areas and onto the roads. As in Bria, Wagner was perceived as having liberated the city. The Anti-Balaka remained in Bambari and surrendered their weapons, which were no longer necessary with the departure of the UPC. Many of them joined Wagner. However, the UPC continued to commit abuses against the civilian population outside of the city.

The presence of mercenaries from the Wagner Group in the Ndassima mine led to restricted freedom of movement of goods and people, with violence against the population. Community negotiators who had been active in engagement with the UPC and the Anti-Balaka feared having the same dialogue with Wagner. The Prefet tried to act for the population by filing complaints against Wagner with the national government in Bangui. The government's message to the Prefet was to accept Wagner's presence and the violence it entailed because the community would eventually benefit from mining tax revenue.

2.1.3   Mbaïki

Context

The city of Mbaïki, located 384 km from Bangui in the prefecture of Lobaye, is known for its surrounding equatorial forest and arable land. Its economy is mainly based on coffee cultivation and

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21   Created in 2013 by the Bangui Archbishop cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga, the president of the Islamic Council of CAR, the Imam Oumar Kobine Layama and the president of the Evangelical Alliance, Pastor Nicolas Guérékoyaméné-Gbangou, the Inter-Religious Platform works towards the reconciliation of religious groups and sustainable peace in CAR.

agroforestry. The population is made up of a fairly dense and tight-knit ethnic, cultural and religious mix. At the beginning of the 2013 crisis, the advance of armed actors on Bangui made Mbaïki a host city for displaced people from surrounding towns who were welcomed by local families or housed in hostels. During 2013, the city was occupied by the Seleka on their way to Bangui. This period was marked by targeted abuses, including physical and verbal attacks, looting and kidnappings vis-à-vis the mainly non-Muslim communities. This situation has led to the flight of populations to IDP camps and the surrounding forest.

The presence of the Seleka in the city facilitated the settlement of many Muslims fleeing Anti-Balaka attacks in other towns and villages in Lobaye prefecture. This resulted in increased tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, widespread rumours and hate speech, the destruction of the social fabric and mistrust. In response, the Anti-Balaka announced, through the network of motorcycle taxi drivers, their arrival in the city with the mission of liberating it. The announcement of President Michelle Djotodia's departure from power led to a hasty departure of armed Seleka actors and members of the Muslim community who feared reprisals from the Anti-Balaka and the non-Muslim community. About 2,500 members of the Muslim community, with the support of the Chadian army, were evacuated to Chad or other parts of CAR before the Anti-Balaka arrived in the city.[22] The Anti-Balaka arrived in early 2014 in a town deserted by the Seleka and a large part of the non-Muslim population. The few Muslims still present in the city were then victims of intimidation, accusations of collaboration with the Seleka and physical violence by both armed Anti-Balaka and non-Muslim actors.

The arrival of French forces freed the town from the presence of the Anti-Balaka and put it under the protection of MISCA forces until the arrival of Russian and Rwandan allies, who pushed the remaining armed fighters to disengage or retreat deeper into the forest.

Community engagement with the Seleka and Anti-Balaka in Mbaïki

Unlike in Bria and Bambari, the Prefet remained in the city and supported community stakeholder groups in their negotiations with armed actors or community sensitisation to contribute to protection efforts. This mainly involved their support for the creation of a fund to pay ransoms related to kidnappings. These efforts also enjoyed the support of Muslim religious leaders who served as entry points for non-Muslim community negotiators by facilitating meetings with Seleka leaders. Women and young motorcycle taxi drivers were also engaged in efforts to reduce violence.

Young motorcycle taxi drivers played a specific role in information management for the community. During this period, access to information on the actions and plans of armed non-state actors was considered a key tool to enable populations to develop protection strategies (e.g. collections for ransom payments, identification of areas or people to avoid, future violent events). This mainly involved young motorcycle taxi drivers who, because of their mobility and work, interacted constantly with

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22   See www.jeuneafrique.com/depeches/21914/politique/centrafrique-a-mbaiki-rester-cest-resister/.

armed non-state actors and thus collected information that could be used by community negotiators. Taxi drivers were also instrumental in checking facts and information, reducing rumours and ensuring that misinformation and disinformation did not fuel tension and violence.

When the Anti-Balaka took control of the city, they targeted members of the Muslim community as revenge for the abuses by the Seleka, at times based on requests from the local community. The community experienced a wave of denunciation, reprisals and expropriations for the benefit of some members of the community. Initially, there were few efforts from community negotiators to act on and reduce violence at this stage. Only when the Anti-Balakas started carrying out abuses and violence on the whole population did these community negotiators act.

As the Anti-Balakas increased their abuse against the local population in 2013, women, youth and religious leaders across ethno-religious lines established a peace committee to help reduce violence and reconstruct the social fabric. This peace committee was created organically by the coming together of these three different groups of actors who operated as one under the name of the peace committee. Reconstructing the social fabric was seen as critical to allow Muslims to stay safe as well as come back to Mbaïki, especially as the local populations realised that the departure of the majority of the Muslim population had severely impacted the local economy. Indeed, the Muslim population had been a driver of economic life in Mbaïki, and with their departure normal economic life could not resume.

The reduction of daily violence by the Anti-Balaka was necessary to allow the community to come back together as one. The peace committee engaged the Anti-Balaka in particular on preventing and reducing the summary executions, looting and kidnappings of Muslim communities still present in the city and promote the free movement of goods and people as well as the limitation of illicit taxes and expropriations. For example, the committee helped protect Muslim members of the community from reprisals based on the information-gathering mechanism set up through motorcycle taxis. In the long term, the vision of the peace committee was also to promote the return of Muslims from the city of Mbaïki, who took refuge in Chad and other cities. In the last few years, Muslims have returned to Mbaïki with the support of an NRC-supported committee on housing, land and property that helps Muslims regain access to their homes, which are often occupied by former members of the Anti-Balaka.

The arrival of the Wagner Group in 2019

As in many cities across the country, the arrival of the Wagner Group in 2019 prompted the hasty departure of armed non-state actors into the forest. Wagner, which resettled outside of the city to focus on developing their agroforestry business, is considered a deterrent for armed actors. The agroforestry activities of Wagner are carried out without the collaboration of local populations, thus limiting interactions between mercenaries and populations.

2.2   Factors impacting the parameters of engagement between communities and armed actors

2.2.1   The attitudes of armed actors towards traditional and religious leaders

Historically, traditional leaders have been the guarantors of peace and social cohesion within communities in CAR. They lead dialogue in order to protect the populations. However, as noted earlier, some armed actors such as the Anti-Balaka target traditional leaders whom they perceive as competing with their authority. In these cases, traditional leaders are not well placed to play the roles of negotiator or mediator within the community. Risks to traditional leaders are high as the attitude of an armed actor is not always easy to detect. Indeed, the UPC had a very different attitude with traditional Peul leaders in Bria compared to Bambari. In Bria, the UPC listened to and respected the authority of the Peul traditional leaders, who were able to play a role as negotiators to reduce violence. In Bambari, the traditional leaders were not able to play this role. Indeed, here the UPC was not as embedded and integrated within the community and local traditional chiefs were not of the same ethnic groups, which reduced their influence on the UPC.

Religious leaders are also seen as guarantors of morality within communities. They are often perceived as neutral and have their authority conferred by God. Neutrality and authority are therefore used by religious leaders to influence armed actors and they play a significant role as mediators and negotiators for the community. As leaders of different religions have often acted together in the community, they are also seen as neutral and able to rise above divisions linked to identity. However, at the peak of the violence, religious leaders could not engage with an armed actor that identified as a different religion, for instance an Imam with the Anti-Balaka.

As such, religious leaders' influence depends on the spirituality and religious practice of the armed actors. Indeed, Bria's Christian leaders influenced the Anti-Balaka directly by reminding them of their self-mandated role as protectors of the Christian community. They also engaged traditional healers used by the Anti-Balaka for protection, as a way to influence them indirectly. The Imams of Bria also played their part as religious leaders of the Muslim community and used religious holidays to communicate and create links with the FPRC in order to reduce the violence committed by them. The importance of religious practice to rising in rank within the UPC also allowed the Imams to exert a greater influence on this armed actor.

Another factor is the perception of neutrality of community negotiators by armed actors. Unlike with local traditional leaders, religious leaders were not perceived as a threat to the authority of armed actors. Religious leaders are generally perceived as symbols of neutrality, although they represent different communities (Muslim, Christian, Baptist), but their religious character and the fact that they often act together allow them to establish a neutral image of their engagement.

2.2.2   The nature of armed actors and their relationship to the community

The nature of armed actors changes the ability of community mediators and negotiators to reduce and prevent violence, as does the level of integration into communities in terms of the levels of violence and the availability of entry points for engagement. Indeed, the UPC and the Anti-Balaka, who proclaim themselves to be protectors of their communities, have a greater moral obligation to reduce violence against their own people. This entry point is critical for community negotiators. Communities' knowledge of the narrative of armed actors facilitates the identification of entry points for this engagement. Indeed, the engagement strategy of community negotiators with the Anti-Balaka is based entirely on the stated common goal: the protection of communities. Refocusing the Anti-Balaka on that commitment and their relationship with the community has led to reduced violence.

The protective role that these armed actors give themselves also means that these groups tend to be present within their own communities: they are around their families. The family link between communities and armed actors is therefore close and encourages these actors to reduce their harmful impact on the community. This family link also means that women of a certain age can use perceptions of their maternal authority to engage with younger members of the Anti-Balaka. Armed actors do not see parental authority as presenting unwanted competition, in contrast to their perception of traditional authorities. CAR society is based on beliefs and societal values that give respect to older women as givers of life and educators, even if CAR society remains largely patriarchal. Aware that armed actors will respect the importance of these values, women leverage them to promote armed actors' acceptance of dialogues.

Armed actors also seek this close link with the community in order to be accepted, welcomed and supported. Whether this is material support, financial support or recruiting youth to their ranks, armed non-state actors are dependent on the community for parts of their survival. Thus, the UPC ensured that it recruited members locally in Bambari. Indeed, having members of the community join armed actors changes their behaviour towards the community, reducing abuses against them, facilitating free movement and making dialogue and negotiation easier as these members are much more sensitive to the realities of the populations and are able to serve as channels to make community voices heard by the leaders of armed actors.

Following the same logic, religious or ethnic affiliations are key cohesive factors and therefore affect collaboration between populations and armed actors. Thus, in all locations, it has been easier for community negotiators in Muslim communities to address armed Seleka actors and for Christian/non-Muslim negotiators to engage the Anti-Balakas.

Similarly, the communities themselves seek to strengthen the level of integration with armed actors as a self-protection strategy. This was the case in Bria with the UPC, where the community gave young girls in marriage to create family links between the UPC and the community.

Language, specifically Sango,[23] is a key factor in facilitating exchanges between communities and armed actors. The populations of Bria and Bambari emphasised this language barrier in their relationship with the Wagner Group. They note that the communication difficulties make it impossible for communities to engage and mobilise in the face of their violence. They fear not being understood and therefore not being heard.

There was a clear distinction in how the communities reacted to the presence of the Wagner Group. Very few attempts were made to engage with them directly through community negotiators. Communities did not have the same networks, channels of communication, authority or strategic basis as Wagner. As a result, communities used more formal channels (e.g. the Prefet), which was not as effective because of the role of the government in giving Wagner carte blanche in the country. Community strategies may be more effective with non-state armed actors, which are often (but not always) linked to communities. However, such strategies are more difficult with more formal groups where the informal channels of engagement and influence are less evident. Decentralised armed non-state actors offer more entry points for local efforts to reduce violence.[24] Members of armed non-state actors in CAR are often young people who are themselves looking for security, livelihoods and social recognition, which can all be leveraged during engagement, as seen with the role that local civil society youth groups played.

2.2.3   The existence of social capital through grassroots civil society

In Bria and Bambari, young people from local civil society and women from OFCA are key actors in the collective life of the community. Indeed, they come from representative bodies that bring together youth and women of all religions and ethnicities and are supported and trusted by the population due to the benefits the population sees as a result of their actions.

The existence of intercommunity links through community cohesion and the social fabric has meant that during the crisis, channels of communication could continue despite the physical separation of people. These channels of communication allowed the youth of Bria in particular to ensure coordination between their actions within their community, to communicate opportunities to bring communities across the conflict lines together and to manage information and rumours. Thus, women relied on women's organisations in different neighbourhoods to pass on information, religious leaders relied on networks through churches and mosques and young people relied on youth representatives in each area. In addition, churches and youth centres become spaces for community dialogue as they were perceived as neutral venues for debate and information sharing. The existence of the intercommunity bridging of social capital prior to the crisis has greatly fostered the ability of community negotiators to coordinate and to engage armed actors and reduce the risk of violence.

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23   The national language of CAR.

24   As noted by Davies and O'Callaghan (2022), the ICRC's *Roots of Restraint in War* study highlights that 'less organised groups are more open to outside, or community, influence. Combatants are often influenced more by culture and peer pressure than by rules' (2022: 1).

2.2.4   The success–risk equation

The risks associated with engagement with armed actors is an important factor in whether or not these engagements take place. Indeed, while the Christian religious leaders took the risk of engaging with the Anti-Balaka in Bria, those of Bambari did not wish to take the risk and thus did not take on the role of negotiator for the community. In these areas, the community members interviewed stressed that openly complaining about abuses by armed actors could have serious consequences. The individuals who volunteered to engage with armed actors in these dialogues therefore took a significant risk. In some instances, community negotiators were killed or kidnapped.[25] This often happened at the start of an armed actors' presence in the locality as a way for them to establish their authority through using violence to terrorise the local population. Community negotiators often used subtle approaches, with informal and secret meetings between religious leaders, women and young men as well as with armed actors, as well as careful consideration of when engaging would be less risky.

Moreover, community negotiators only engaged in dialogue with armed actors when the issue was perceived as negotiable. This was defined as an issue that affected the daily lives of the community, such as arbitrary arrests or abusive taxation, and where community assets (whether societal and religious values or material resources) could be used as leverage. Communities did not engage with armed actors on internal or cross-armed actors' dynamics.

2.3   The closing of the space for dialogue

The conflict dynamics in CAR today are changing the population's ability to negotiate with armed actors. The current situation means that in some areas of CAR, control over cities and territory goes back and forth constantly between the Wagner Group and armed non-state actors. The fluctuating presence of different armed actors makes it difficult for the community to maintain engagement with them over the long term.

In addition, in this tense security and political environment, it has become riskier for communities to have engagement with any party to the conflict. Indeed, individuals who are perceived as being close to one side or the other run the risk of being targeted and accused of complicity with the enemy when another armed actor retakes the territory. Communicating or having a dialogue with an armed actor can lead to this perception of complicity.

This issue is aggravated by the fluidity of the boundary between communities and armed actors but also by the Wagner Group's tendency to perceive the general Muslim population as being aligned with armed non-state actors. The principle of distinction – distinguishing between combatants and non-combatants – is not respected by armed non-state actors, nor by Wagner or the FACA. As a humanitarian protection actor explains:

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25   In some instances MINUSCA protected community negotiators that were at risk.

> For armed groups, it is complicated and porous. A double-edged and complex sword. [The principle of] distinction says a person who is not [directly] a combatant, [as well as civilians] should be treated as a civilian. What is clearly observed in the Central African Republic, some communities are assimilated to the CPC and de facto civilians are perceived by the government as being close to or part of the armed group. It complicates how communities interact with armed groups. (Interview 26)

The population thus finds itself 'caught between the government and the armed [actors]' (Interview 8) and finds itself 'in the middle' (Interview 13).

The space for dialogue around security issues, including the reduction of violence, seems to be closing. Several of the peace and humanitarian actors interviewed noted that these issues have become taboo and the community is less open to dialogue for fear of the consequences:

> Communities do not talk about security. There is this fear in the context of communicating with communities: communities avoid addressing substantive issues given the current context. (Interview 5)

3   External interventions to reduce and prevent protection risks and violence

During the conflict that began in December 2013 and the intercommunal violence that followed, humanitarian protection organisations overwhelmingly adopted a traditional protection response focused on responding to abuse (e.g. referral of cases of gender-based violence, responding to protection risks for children or setting up case management systems) rather than trying to reduce and prevent threats (Barbelet, 2015). Driven by individuals within these organisations, DRC's and OCHA's emergency mediation, also known as humanitarian mediation, were significant exceptions to this standardised approach. Proactive protection (protection focused on the prevention and reduction of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation) has remained marginal as part of the humanitarian protection response in CAR, although increasingly humanitarian mediation had become an integral part of the protection cluster strategy and the Humanitarian Response Plan (OCHA, 2023c).

On the other hand, preventing and reducing threats of violence are at the heart of peace actors' interventions. Local, national and international NGOs and initiatives, as well as MINUSCA through its civil affairs and political department, work at the local level in communities on different types of conflicts to help reduce the risk of violence. Some of these organisations, as well as MINUSCA and the UN, are working to support the 2019 peace agreement at the national and subnational levels.

This chapter presents the analysis of data collected by NRC in 2018 on humanitarian mediations implemented by DRC and OCHA between 2014 and 2016 in Boda, Dékoa and the PK5 and Boeing neighbourhoods of Bangui. This chapter also provides an overview of the activities carried out by different peace, humanitarian and protection actors in CAR with the aim of reducing and preventing the risks of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation.

3.1   Humanitarian mediation in CAR from 2014 to 2016

Humanitarian mediation is defined as:

> an inclusive and voluntary process addressing humanitarian concerns in emergency contexts in which a neutral and impartial [...] actor facilitates the communication and the collaboration between stakeholders involved in and/or affected by conflicts, in order to assist them find, by themselves, a mutually acceptable solution. (Humanitarian Mediation Network, 2018: 7).

Humanitarian mediation, also sometimes called emergency mediation, differs from other mediation processes. Whereas political mediation engages primarily with political leaders and leaders of armed actors, humanitarian mediation focuses on engaging members of communities. Humanitarian mediation also differs as it focuses on and is anchored in humanitarian issues and the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence (Grimaud, 2023). Its main objectives are to

prevent and mitigate violence, prevent forced displacement and facilitate voluntary return, improve access to assistance and services, and enhance respect for basic rights (ibid.). Humanitarain mediation follows 10 steps and adopts 10 key principles (see Box 1).

Box 1   The 10 steps and 10 principles of humanitarian mediation

A humanitarian mediation process follows ten steps and ten principles.

The steps begin with:

1. Conflict analysis, often involving a training workshop with key stakeholders.
2. Separate meetings with parties involved and/or affected by the conflict (pre-mediation).

If, and only if, the parties are willing to engage in the mediation process, then the following can happen:

3. Mediation opening and agreement on ground rules.
4. Sharing each party's experience, story and concerns.
5. Defining the agenda and the problems to be discussed and resolved.
6. Exploration of the agenda.
7. Generating solutions.
8. Adoption of commonly acceptable solutions.
9. Agreement and plan of action.
10. Follow-up sessions, sometimes coupled with a crisis management mechanism.

The ten principles are:

1. Support without advising.
2. Question without evaluating.
3. Understand without endorsing.
4. Frame without influencing.
5. Listen, hear, look, feel.
6. Share the process, verify, validate.
7. Promote inclusion and participation.
8. Reaffirm your role, engage the parties.
9. Feel the pulse, be in the moment.
10. Build and generate trust.

Source: Grimaud, 2023: 34–35

Humanitarian mediation differs from sensitisation, traditional community engagement and humanitarian negotiations. Indeed, humanitarian actors often tend to engage with communities in order to sensitise them rather than facilitating a dialogue: that is, they arrive in the community with a specific solution or action and seek to convince the community to follow their advice (Lough et al., 2021). Nor is humanitarian mediation a humanitarian negotiation concerned with issues affecting humanitarian organisations and their interaction with the civilians they are there to support: for example, humanitarian access, respect for humanitarian space and humanitarian principles.[26]

Between 2014 and 2016, when intercommunal tensions were at their highest in CAR and populations were increasingly isolated with no freedom of movement or access to basic services and at risk of high levels of violence including mass killings (Cinq-Mars, 2014), DRC and OCHA intervened in several localities with an innovative approach: humanitarian mediation following the ten steps outlined in Box 1. The main purpose of the humanitarian mediation was initially to protect, prevent and reduce attacks on enclaves and eventually to ensure that populations could regain some freedom of movement and access to basic services, assistance and markets, to reduce the risk of extreme violence against civilian populations and to facilitate dialogue between populations as well as between humanitarian organisations, peacekeeping forces and communities. Very quickly, this approach was recognised as contributing to the protection of civilians by reducing the risk of violence (Barbelet, 2015; IAHE, 2016; Jackson and Zyck, 2017).

In Boda, the humanitarian mediation intervention began in 2014 when OCHA planned to evacuate 11,000 Muslims enclaved in part of the city because of threats of massacre by the Anti-Balaka. At that time, the bilateral military force from the French army (the Sangaris) guarded the red line that separated the two communities. Boda is a city where the Christian and Muslim populations had lived alongside each other for many years, with intermarriages between the two communities and an intertwined economic and social life. When the Seleka arrived in 2013, the Christian population suffered significant violence and perceived the Muslim population of Boda as being complicit in the abuse carried out by the Seleka. With the rise of the Anti-Balaka in the city, the Christian population sought revenge against the Muslim population, committing atrocities against it. The violent collective revenge was underpinned by bitterness and a sense of economic injustice due to the fact that for years the Muslim population had controlled the local economy, including mining. In January 2015, the Red Cross estimated that the conflict had caused 150 deaths, with 447 wounded, more than 10,000 displaced, and 1,500 houses destroyed (Ngaba, 2015).

At a time when violence and atrocities committed by both sides were at their highest, and before taking the radical decision to evacuate the Muslim population, OCHA and the protection cluster called on DRC, which was already doing humanitarian mediation in PK5, to begin a process of humanitarian

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26   Humanitarian negotiation is defined as: 'a set of interactions between humanitarian organizations and parties to armed conflict, as well as other relevant actors, aimed at establishing and maintaining the presence of these organizations in conflict situations, ensuring access to vulnerable groups and facilitating the provision of assistance and protection activities' (CCHN, 2019: 1).

mediation with the aim of avoiding the evacuation and massacre of the Muslim population;[27] restoring freedom of movement to allow access to basic services, in particular schools and hospitals; facilitating the return of humanitarian NGOs to provide aid to the population; and enabling a return to 'living together' (*le vivre ensemble*). The mediation process lasted one year and resulted in a dialogue that achieved the desired objectives. In the words of a non-Muslim woman from Boda, when asked if humanitarian mediation helped (re)build trust among participants:

> It was not at all easy between communities. For us it was not at all possible that there would be reconciliation between Muslims and Christians one day. This dialogue has made the impossible possible. We can now sell together [Muslims and Christians] at the market. They [Muslims] can go free to the construction sites, even if they meet the Balaka, they greet each other in a friendly way.

The situation in Dékoa was similar to that of Boda. However, the mediation process was shorter (twice for ten days each time) and led by a community mediator – the Sous-Prefet of Dékoa – who was supported and trained by OCHA (Jackson and Zyck, 2017: 58). The choice of using the Sous-Prefet was made following conflict sensitivity analysis (step 1 of the humanitarian mediation process) that informed the mediation process. Part of the conflict sensitivity analysis aims to identify any trusted insider actor that is perceived as well placed to mediate the dialogue involving the parties to the conflict and the community. In the case of Dékoa, the Sous-Prefet came out strongly as the best choice during this analysis. The mediation process culminated in a dialogue with the aim of restoring freedom of movement and improving security. A non-aggression agreement between the Seleka and the Anti-Balaka was signed to conclude the dialogue. The market was cleaned and restored and school buildings were constructed. As this Muslim man from Dékoa says:

> [When] I think MINUSCA with their 12,000 men could not do anything. The police and the FACA came here to Dékoa, they did nothing, I think it was the dialogue you did that brought peace here to Dékoa.[28]

Humanitarian mediation in the PK5 neighbourhood of Bangui in 2014 was aimed at improving the security within the enclave and the role of peacekeeping forces. PK5 is a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood but with populations of diverse origins (Kilembe, 2015) (see Box 2). The mediation aimed to bring together the populations of PK5 and different peacekeeping forces to facilitate communication and the restoration of trust between them. Indeed, after the fall of the government of Djotodia, interventions by the peacekeeping and other bilateral forces (Sangaris, the European Union Military Operation in the Central African Republic, MISCA) were perceived as contributing to

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27   As a comparison, the same dynamics of conflict occurred in Mbaïki in the same Lobaye region but no humanitarian mediation happened. As a result, most of the Muslim population forcibly left Mbaïki to take refuge in neighbouring Cameroon.

28   It is important to note that while the population has this negative perception of the peacekeeping forces of MINUSCA and its effectiveness in reducing and preventing violence, MINUSCA through its Civil Affairs Department greatly contributed to the humanitarian mediation efforts through complementary activities. There was a close collaboration between MINUSCA's Civil Affairs Department and the humanitarian mediation interventions throughout.

the vulnerability of PK5 to Anti-Balaka attacks. These included in particular the forced disarmament of armed Seleka actors or those associated with the Seleka at the time of the rise of the Anti-Balaka. This disarmament not only rendered the Muslim population defenceless against Anti-Balaka reprisals but also fed the perception that Sangaris and MISCA were not impartial or neutral (Barbelet, 2015). The mediation helped to re-establish better communication between populations and peacekeepers and to build confidence and trust. However, as described below, the results of the mediation were short-lived and compromised by several waves of violence.

Box 2   The PK5 district in Bangui

The PK5 district is the main Muslim quarter of the city of Bangui and the most important economic centre of the capital. Before the 2013 crisis, the neighbourhood was perceived as an illustration of social cohesion in CAR due to trade exchanges across communities and inter-religious marriages that were achieved without difficulty.

During the 2013 crisis, the non-Muslim populations were forced out of PK5 and it became an enclave for the Muslim community in the face of attacks by non-Muslims from surrounding neighbourhoods. Intercommunal tensions and the divisive narratives that accompanied them impacted negatively on the economy of the entire capital and made this neighbourhood a critical focus for demobilisation and disarmament by the national authorities.

In Boeing, a predominantly Christian neighbourhood, several mediations took place. Mediation focused on the access of PK5 Muslims to the cemetery conducted by MINUSCA's Civil Affairs.[29] This mediation resulted in the signing of a non-aggression pact and access to the cemetery by Muslims. A second mediation focused on a dialogue between displaced populations from Boeing and humanitarian organisations. This second OCHA-facilitated mediation was triggered by an outbreak of violence and a backlash against the construction of houses to facilitate the return of displaced populations to Boeing.[30] To facilitate the return of IDPs, a housing reconstruction programme had been put in place following the significant destruction of homes during the conflict. Unhappy with their quality, the people of Boeing destroyed the homes built by humanitarian organisations. These organisations had called

29   PK5's Muslim population used the cemetery in the Boeing neighbourhood before the 2013 conflict. The isolation of PK5 and the presence of the Anti-Balaka in the Boeing neighbourhood prevented the Muslims of PK5 from being able to bury their dead in the cemetery. This humanitarian mediation restored access for Muslims. It is important to note that through its civil affairs work, MINUSCA supported more than 21 local peace initiatives in CAR.

30   This mediation was facilitated by OCHA as an institution but led by the same individuals who had led the DRC humanitarian mediation interventions. This is important to note as the humanitarian mediation interventions, as noted later in the paper, were not institutionalised with DRC or OCHA but were the result of individuals' efforts and initiatives.

on OCHA to facilitate a mediation process aimed at establishing a dialogue between humanitarian organisations, local authorities, FACA and the population to agree on activities to assist the return of displaced populations.

3.1.1   Impact of the 2014–2016 mediations

Overall, analysis of data from NRC's 2018 questionnaires shows that humanitarian mediation interventions have had a positive impact in all localities despite some differences.[31] Generally:

- The analysis confirms that humanitarian mediation contributed to improving the security and protection of civilians, with a reduction in violence and abuses.
- Humanitarian mediation also contributed to freedom of movement and access to basic services, including the re-establishment of local administrative authorities. Interviewees specifically referenced access to the market, the ability to move around the city and immediate surrounding areas, access to the school and access to the hospital.
- Humanitarian mediation also used non-violent approaches to address other problems in the community, particularly domestic conflicts and domestic violence.
- Humanitarian mediation, in particular during phases of dialogue, facilitated meetings between different actors and people who previously did not have direct contact due to intercommunal grievances following the conflict. For example, since the start of the conflict community-based organisations had no longer been able to bring together members of different religions together. Following the humanitarian mediation process, all members of community-based women's organisations were once again able to meet. This has made it possible to renew channels of communication between communities but also to establish channels of communication with humanitarian actors and peacekeepers.
- Humanitarian mediation has also helped to clarify misunderstandings, reduce tensions and build trust between the participants in the dialogue.
- The humanitarian mediation process has strengthened the capacity of communities to resolve and manage conflicts peacefully.
- Humanitarian mediation has led to the return of humanitarian organisations and the return of local authorities.

Figure 1 provides a more quantitative analysis of the results of the survey undertaken in 2018 by NRC on the impact of the humanitarian mediation interventions. This quantitative analysis highlights some of the differences across impacts as well as across locations.

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31   Data was analysed by religion and gender. However, no differences were noted between the different religions and the gender of the respondents. The results of the analysis are therefore presented by locality.

Figure 1   Survey responses on the impact of the humanitarian mediation interventions, by locality
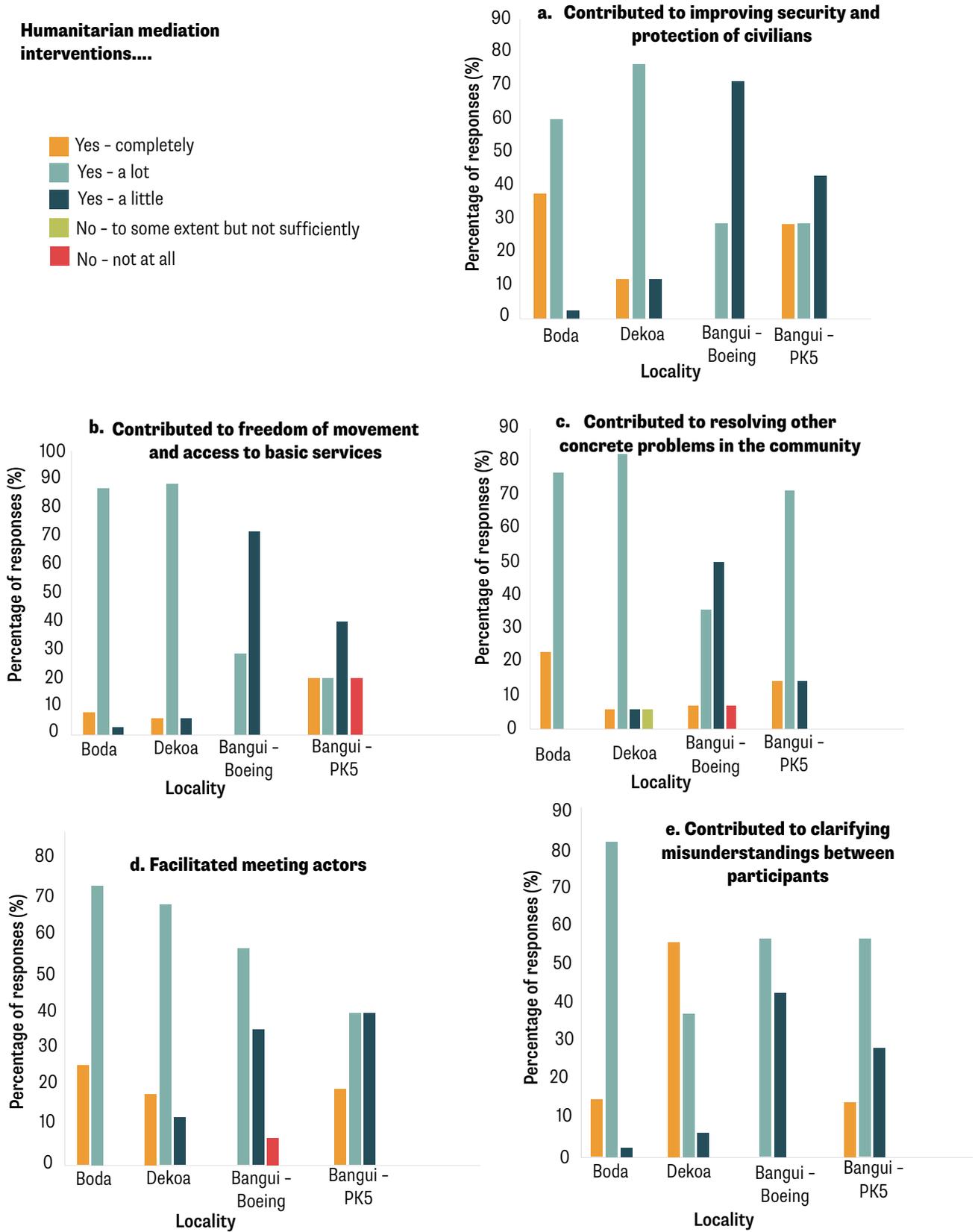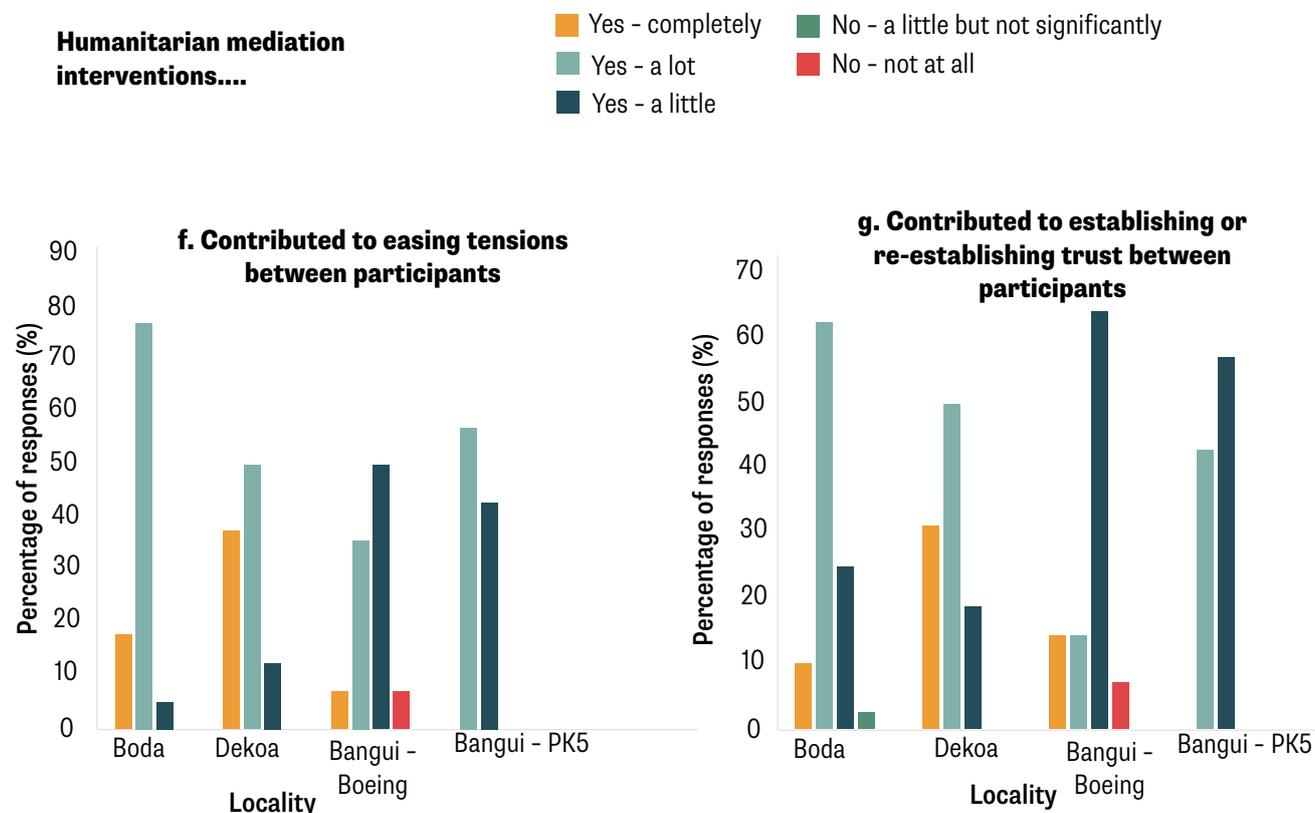
Figure 1 continued

Humanitarian mediation interventions....

Legend:
- Yes – completely (orange)
- Yes – a lot (light teal)
- Yes – a little (dark teal)
- No – a little but not significantly (green)
- No – not at all (red)

f. Contributed to easing tensions between participants

g. Contributed to establishing or re-establishing trust between participants

Indeed, the impact of humanitarian mediation varies significantly across locations. In Boda, 97.5% of survey respondents believe that DRC's humanitarian mediation has contributed totally or significantly to improving the security and protection of civilians, and in Dékoa this response was 88.3% (see chart (a) in Figure 1). This result contrasts sharply with the Boeing and PK5 neighbourhoods in Bangui where a majority of respondents (71.4% in Boeing and 42.9% in PK5) proclaim that humanitarian mediation only had a little impact on the safety and protection of civilians. With the exception of Bangui, the localities where humanitarian mediation took place did not suffer from the waves of violence in 2017 and 2018 (Humanitarian Mediation Network et al., n.d.). In Boda, there was no need for the presence of peacekeepers from 2017 due to good levels of security in the city. The same pattern of results is found for all the indicators of impact tested by the survey. However, while findings are positive, the impact they had differs depending on the locality.

In Boeing and PK5, respondents spoke of a positive impact but one that was short-lived and on a small scale. Context analysis and interviews with humanitarian actors highlight how a number of factors interplayed to explain this. First, Boeing and PK5 are neighbourhoods of Bangui, which can make these areas more vulnerable to national political dynamics, with leaders of armed actors more likely to be

influenced by these dynamics due their the proximity to national-level political forces who stood to benefit from the violence. Indeed, in Boda and Dékoa, the dynamics of conflict were very localised and somewhat delinked from wider national-level conflict dynamics, which means that the mediation process could carry on with no manipulation or interaction from national political leaders and leaders of armed actors. Second, in Boda and Dékoa, individuals with the power to spoil the mediation process were directly participating in the process. This was not the case in Boeing and PK5 where mediation excluded powerful individuals who were not physically in the community or did not belong to the community but who unfortunately had the power to mobilise individuals to commit acts of violence.

Third, communities in Boda and Dékoa, even though they are diverse in their religious and ethnic compositions, are communities where individuals grew up together, went to school together and married into each other's families. This meant that even though the cohesion between these communities was fractured during the conflict, there was a social fabric and social capital on which the mediation process could be based. PK5 and Boeing do not have the same shared capital, especially for PK5, which is composed of a number of subgroups, ethnicities and countries of different origin. This resulted in less social capital to facilitate the humanitarian mediation process. In particular, in PK5 there was less consensus on the value of restoring peace and reducing violence, which was partly related to the economic benefits that some individuals could derive from the existing chaos:

> The armed groups that have occupied PK5 since 2014 defend above all an economic position. If they cling so stubbornly to PK5, it is not to defend the Muslims of Bangui as they say but to defend their control of the local economy. Indeed, although the leaders of the ex-Seleka have been living in the north of the country since their forced departure from Bangui, some of them still have financial interests in PK5. (Vircoulon, 2020: 21)

Apart from geographical differences, the restoration or establishment of trust among participants in the dialogue remains where humanitarian mediation has had the least impact (see chart (g) in Figue 1). The participants mentioned that even if humanitarian mediation has allowed a return to living together with 'peaceful hearts', they do not forget the abuses and violence committed. The humanitarian mediation process does not seek to be a process of transitional justice or of reconciliation or forgiveness. It is a short-term process focused on saving lives. As a result, the process cannot restore total trust but has nevertheless allowed the return of some confidence to everyday life. As one of the participants replied when asked what evidence there was to demonstrate that there was trust after humanitarian mediation, he replied that a Christian can borrow money from or ask a Muslim for a market loan today.

3.1.2   Lessons from the 2014–2016 humanitarian mediation interventions

Participants in humanitarian mediations pointed to the importance of preliminary training (step 1 of the process in Box 1). These trainings focused on a participatory conflict analysis, on the management of rumours and information and on social cohesion. The process of participatory conflict analysis is particularly relevant as it helped participants to reflect on their situation and the conflict. This

helped individuals take a new perspective on the conflict, putting aside perceptions, assumptions and inaccurate information, which supported a greater awareness by participants of the real drivers and dynamics of the conflict. As mentioned by one interviewee, nowhere did the question of religion appear in these participatory analyses of the conflict. This also demonstrates that even if the mediation process does not lead to dialogue, this training sows seeds that help to reduce violence within and between communities. The success of the mediation process cannot only be reduced to the outcome of dialogue and the agreements made, but it is an end in itself to reopen a space for dialogue and critical reflection.

The level of inclusion of different community groups and subgroups in the mediation process was significant. The first workshops and meetings involved all sociodemographic representation including women, young people and armed actors. This ensured that the dialogue was perceived as inclusive even when fewer people were participating in the dialogue that followed the training and pre-mediation. In Boda and Dékoa, representatives of different groups that were involved in the dialogue made an effort to communicate throughout the process with their constituencies and the wider community to disseminate what was said. In Dékoa, however, the short duration of the mediation meant that some people did not feel heard. There was no specific demographic group that felt ignored, but there was general feedback that people did not have enough time to share their views during the dialogue because of the limited time allocated to it.

In PK5 and Boeing, some people lamented the absence of some leaders of the self-defence militias which had a negative impact on the process. The principle of voluntary participation at the heart of the mediation approach means that even if mediators make an effort to be inclusive, it is not within their control to decide who participates and does not participate in the process. In Boda, not only was the decision made by the community to ask some individuals not to participate in the process, but they were asked to leave the city for the good of the community. There remains a question for external mediators of whether to push for inclusive participation, especially of those who could undermine the process, or let communities and individuals decide for themselves who should participate or not. Mediators external to the community, such as humanitarian actors, could still encourage the participation of key individuals through pre-mediation without forcing them, and they could note the importance of the presence of the leaders of armed groups or actors responsible for violence to maximise the chances of success. The question remains how humanitarian mediators can best respect the will of communities while encouraging the participation of the main perpetrators of violence. The pre-mediation phase is essential to resolve this dilemma and gently bring the parties to the conflict into the dialogue process.

The humanitarian mediation processes all had complementary activities and other interventions that followed the dialogue. In Boda, Dékoa and Boeing, participants mentioned in particular the impact of the Cash for Work project of the International Organization for Migration, which brought together Christians and Muslims around the reconstruction of infrastructure such as the market, school, police station and town hall. The cash delivered through the programme as well as the infrastructure developments it delivered were seen as contributions to peace. In addition, the programme was seen

as further strengthening the bond across conflicting communities. Other organisations, including the church, have carried out social cohesion and non-violence awareness activities. MINUSCA, through deploying its forces and the work of community liaison assistants (CLAs), are also part of follow-up interventions that have helped improve security, protection of civilians and freedom of movement. Quick-impact projects are complementary to mediation when they rebuild certain spaces and infrastructures that connect communities together such as markets, roads, schools or town halls. MINUSCA, through its Civil Affairs Department, was critical in offering these complementary activities and collaborated closely with the humanitarian mediation interventions. It is unclear whether humanitarian mediation alone can create the impact described above or whether these complementary activities are integral to this success.

The process has also strengthened the capacity of communities to manage and resolve conflict through non-violent means and has created greater community resilience to conflict: the training workshop in the early stages of the mediation process also contributed to a lasting impact by giving the community new tools to reduce conflict. Many participants of the mediation process talked about their post-mediation ability to manage small, everyday conflicts and thus avoid a rise in tension between communities. In PK5 and Boeing, participants mentioned the importance of having re-established channels of communication between communities and their ability to use these tools for peaceful conflict management as well as to manage rumours. In Dékoa, the process led a Seleka general to make the declaration to the entire community and the Anti-Balaka commander that if the city encounters new security-related problems, he would be the first to convene a meeting to resolve these problems peacefully.

Humanitarian mediation has also emerged as an effective form of engagement between communities and humanitarian organisations. The case of Boeing's humanitarian mediation demonstrates that there was a lack of effective space for dialogue between these actors in 2015, and how mediation, rather than the traditional way in which humanitarian organisations tend to engage with communities (e.g. through community leaders, needs assessments or committees related to humanitarian assistance), can allow the latter to communicate their needs more organically and effectively and therefore help humanitarian actors to put in place better programmes. This form of community engagement with humanitarian actors allows for greater accountability, dignity for populations and respect for their participation and for people to take part in the decision-making process that affects them. By engaging in mediated communication, communities come to the dialogue on the same footing as humanitarian organisations, which is otherwise rarely the case. Indeed, while humanitarian organisations seek to be accountable to affected people, they hold the power through having the resources while communities are 'receivers' of these resources.

However, humanitarian mediation activities have suffered from a lack of institutional anchoring over time and a lack of funding. This was the first time DRC and OCHA used this approach and it was initiated and led by the same individuals in both organisations. The approach was adopted against the wishes of some members of the senior leadership in these organisations.

The lack of institutional anchoring means that humanitarian mediation relied on a small number of trained individuals with limited funding. As a result, capacity was spread thin over several localities, which meant that some humanitarian mediation processes, such as in Dékoa, were too short. The lack of capacity meant that some more complicated processes, such as that in PK5, died out due to significant changes in the stakeholders (especially within the Sangaris command structure) at a key moment in the mediation that required greater investment and a return to pre-mediation.

This lack of capacity also affected post-mediation follow-up. Although some post-mediation activities were designed, they could not be implemented due to lack of funding and human capacity. In Boda and Dékoa, participants deplored the lack of intervention in the villages alongside the roads outside the city that continued to bring significant insecurity during travel. Participants also called for more capacity-building for conflict management and updated training such as those undertaken before mediation for more people in the community. Strengthening the capacities of individuals within the community was clearly preferred as a solution rather than relying on external interventions by NGOs in the future.

The approach to these humanitarian mediations has not been to inject money or resources into the process. Participants were not paid; there was no water, drinks or food provided during the workshops and dialogue; and there was no financial assistance for transportation. Several Boda participants mentioned the lack of per diem or remuneration for their participation in workshops and dialogue. This approach was adopted so as not to risk undermining the dialogue or voluntary basis of the process by inviting tensions or perceptions of injustice, which might have occurred had the people involved been given access to benefits. Moreover, this approach was based on the fact that if the mediation process is useful and necessary then the community will invest its time without financial compensation or other economic benefits. The role of money and resources was raised throughout this study by humanitarian and peace actors and is discussed at greater length below.

3.2   Challenges and opportunities for humanitarian mediation and other approaches to reducing the risk of violence and protection in CAR

3.2.1   Challenges and opportunities for humanitarian mediation in CAR

Although humanitarian mediation has been recognised as an innovative approach with a positive impact on the protection of civilians through the reduction of violence (Barbelet, 2015; Jackson and Zyck, 2017), this approach has faced and continues to face several challenges. Since its implementation in 2014, it has been perceived as very risky by the senior leadership of the organisations that supported it. Indeed, these organisations judged it too close to political processes and issues even though its instigators tried to distinguish it from political processes. This was often due to these organisations perceiving any work titled 'mediation' as a political process and therefore beyond the realm of humanitarian action. Humanitarian mediation was also seen as too risky due to the presence of armed actors in it and the requirement to have staff members in highly volatile and insecure locations. It was also new and not

part of accepted and conventional humanitarian protection interventions. Finally, the paternalistic culture of the humanitarian sector, especially in 2013, gave little consideration to community agency and capacity, often perceiving them as non-existent.

Staff members supporting humanitarian mediation in CAR at the time faced much criticism from parts of their leadership and senior management[32] in their own organisations as well as from the critical eye of other protection actors (Box 3). Little by little, this caused the end of the humanitarian mediation programme in CAR and the departure of staff trained for this approach from DRC and OCHA.[33]

Box 3   Humanitarian mediation: innovation in the midst of a crisis

This case study teaches us that there can be a space to innovate and proactively seek to reduce threats of violence in the midst of conflict. Unfortunately, too often these innovations remain non-institutionalised due to a restrictive risk appetite on the part of the management of humanitarian and protection organisations – including their headquarters. Those who initiated and recommended the humanitarian mediation approach took a significant risk with their careers by opposing conventional practices.

As a result, the humanitarian sector, and in particular the protection sector, remains frozen by the decision of donors[i] and decision-makers within organisations to limit themselves to a list of accepted interventions that they perceive as falling within the parameters of humanitarian protection. This is compounded by the lack of recognition in the protection sector, which tends to approach protection from a rights and legal angle, which assumes that violence reduction will lead to better protection outcomes. This not only kills innovation but also prevents the learning lessons of these approaches and the possibility of institutionalising them where they work.

i   From 2014 to 2016, staff members involved in humanitarian mediation found it easy to convince some donors of the benefits of humanitarian mediation, such as the European Union and the Swiss. However, since 2016, and perhaps as a result of staff turnover, it has become more difficult to convince donors to fund humanitarian mediation efforts in CAR.

In 2023, humanitarian mediation is more anchored institutionally, with a mediation programme managed by NRC in CAR since 2018 (Humanitarian Mediation Network et al., n.d.). Humanitarian mediation is also an integral part of the cluster protection strategy and is referenced in the

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32   This point is to be nuanced by the fact that the work of these staff members was supported by some senior managers but not all, especially at headquarter level.

33   National staff members were trained in and implemented humanitarian mediation interventions. When the initiatives stopped with DRC and OCHA at the end of 2016, these staff members joined other organisations, including NRC, which now leads on humanitarian mediation in CAR. A national network of CAR mediators was also created as a result of this work.

Humanitarian Response Plan 2023 (OCHA, 2023c: 66–67). But despite increased acceptance in the protection sector in CAR, the humanitarian mediation programme is struggling to find funding. Among other issues, donors are not funding this approach because they do not recognise it as part of their agreed-upon list of humanitarian protection approaches. Those interviewed for this study believe that it is challenging to fund humanitarian mediation because it cannot promise to deliver a given level of outputs and outcomes. Indeed, the organisations supporting humanitarian mediation do not have control over how much humanitarian mediation will be needed and how many will go as far as the dialogue stage and a final agreement. The inability to promise a level of output does not fit into the culture of humanitarian funding and how it measures the success of humanitarian action. Indeed, humanitarian interventions tend to be judged by their outputs rather than their outcomes and impacts. Donors tend to prefer visible humanitarian projects with a simple logical framework that ensures at least the 'delivery' of results to as many people as possible. Mediation is about facilitation rather than delivery and the creation of a neutral space for dialogue where communities can decide for themselves. In addition, donors too often adopt a cautious attitude to risk that does not fit into the realities of conflict and mediation. Indeed, conflicts and mediation bring significant risks of failure outside the control of humanitarian and peace actors. Sadly, unless notions of success by donors and humanitarian and protection actors are addressed, this will remain a significant barrier to more institutionalised approaches to reduce threats of violence.

The lack of funding is also due to the lack of strategic communication with donors on the results and impact of humanitarian mediation. Indeed, humanitarian mediation is not well funded because it has not yet convinced senior managers in humanitarian organisations and donors of its effectiveness in terms of protection. Finally, humanitarian mediation is not an approach that is well known or well understood by donors and senior management within humanitarian organisations. It is therefore for humanitarian actors to invest in more visibility for humanitarian mediation, more communication for a better understanding and knowledge of the impacts of humanitarian mediation, and an open dialogue with donors on the risks and how to define expectations and success of humanitarian mediation. These efforts could be put in place with the help of peace actors who themselves had to make donors understand the risks and opportunities of mediation in peacebuilding programmes.

3.2.2 Prevention in humanitarian protection in CAR

More generally, the prevention of protection threats is now a central issue in the humanitarian protection response in CAR. In addition to humanitarian mediation, the protection cluster strategy is based on 'interventions that aim to prevent violence from occurring or recurring', including protection monitoring the self-protection of civilians, particularly through community-based approaches (OCHA, 2023c: 66).

For example, since 2017, Oxfam's protection strategy has been based on the establishment of community protection committees that are trained on their rights and on advocacy methods. These

committees conduct protection threat analyses to develop plans to reduce these threats (Lindley-Jones, 2018). Other humanitarian and protection NGOs in CAR have adopted this community-based protection approach, which can be summarised by the following activities:

- establishing protection committees within the community;
- training and capacity-building;
- analysing threats and protection risks;
- creating a risk reduction plan;
- engaging in advocacy with local administrative authorities and humanitarian actors;
- enabling referrals to protection, justice, psycho-social and medical services.

According to a humanitarian organisation, protection committees are not set up automatically: if there is an existing structure, the organisation works with it. However, the same organisation notes that displacement and conflict can change the social fabric and there is often a need to establish committees as no community structures tend to exist.

Surprisingly, and contradicting the results of findings from communities in Bria, Bambari and Mbaïki, none of these organisations report that these community protection committees carry out engagement with armed actors to negotiate the reduction of violence. Interviews with these protection actors confirm that in other countries such committees do engage with armed actors, but that they have not observed this practice in CAR. At the same time, it is not clear whether these protection actors have explained to these committees that engaging armed actors can be part of their toolbox. Two hypotheses arise: either the communities are reticent to speak openly with humanitarian actors about their engagement with armed actors, or the protection committees set up are not seen by the community as the appropriate avenue to engage with armed actors. However, these protection committees advocate with local authorities in particular to make specific requests to MINUSCA so the peacekeepers are deployed at certain times in the day and in certain locations so they have the greatest impact on the community's daily life and protection (e.g. to facilitate access to the market, fields or school).

NRC also adopted proactive community approaches in their protection programme but linked them to a wide range of modalities related to peacebuilding, social cohesion and security reform. These approaches also have a focus on resilience and capacity-building, working closely with communities to help them find and implement their own solutions. Indeed, NRC approaches protection through the following activities:[34]

- participatory protection analysis;
- humanitarian mediation;
- community dialogue on obstacles to peaceful coexistence with communities;
- community safety plans;

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34   Note that NRC no longer implements all of these activities in CAR. However, many of these have informed NRC's new protection from violence sector, which focuses on community led, proactive protection approaches.

- support to peacebuilding initiatives through capacity-building of local organisations;
- community peace education programmes;
- strengthening community-led advocacy techniques;
- capacity-building of local authorities and community and religious leaders on protection risks and peaceful conflict management.

Some national humanitarian NGOs are called upon by the Humanitarian Country Team and the inter-cluster coordination group to negotiate access in difficult areas and use this opportunity to have a protection dialogue with communities and armed actors. A national humanitarian NGO approaches the issue of access by working closely with communities that already have relationships with armed actors, which are often based on their family relationships or the geographical origin of these armed actors within the community. This NGO uses the connection to the community to gain access to armed non-state actors and at the same time strengthens the capacity of the community on protection and advocacy, inviting the community to meet armed actors with them. Not only has this approach ensured humanitarian access for the international and national humanitarian community, it has also strengthened dialogue between humanitarian actors and the community, fortifying the capacity of communities to engage with armed actors.

3.2.3   Prevention and reduction of risks of violence among peace actors

In addition to interventions by humanitarian actors to reduce the risk of violence, coercion and deliberate deprivation, a significant number of international and local organisations focus on peacebuilding (peace actors), using conflict mediation and social cohesion interventions to reduce and prevent the risk of violence. Peace actors are working in part to support the 2019 peace agreement at the national level, particularly to ensure that local communities are an integral part of this process. However, because of the more aggressive government policy towards resolving conflict, peace actors are now focusing more on managing local conflicts and supporting communities to manage them. This is part of a logic that believes that without reducing local-level communal violence there can be no peace at the national level (Interview 24).

The majority of peace actors work to support communities to reduce the risk of violence, including with the involvement of security forces, the promotion of social cohesion, mediation in conflicts between herders and farmers, the restoration of services and local authorities, maintaining spaces for dialogue, local justice and influencing perceptions of witchcraft and its impact on local conflicts.[35] These approaches tend to strengthen the resilience of communities in managing their own conflicts and reducing day-to-day violence. However, this is a long-term endeavour that requires a sustained, local

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35   As Roland Marchal explains: 'One should not laugh at or be surprised by the importance of witchcraft. While widespread in the region, it is at epidemic proportions in CAR, where it can result in death and years-long prison terms. Every day someone is killed in CAR for having perpetrated witchcraft' (Marchal, 2015: 55). Marchal argues that witchcraft is often perceived as a reason for failures and successes, especially in relation to personal enrichment and economic success.

presence, often through community actors who have been working in conflict mediation and violence reduction before the arrival of these external actors. According to one peace actor, it takes at least three years to make a mediation and peace committee independent and able to manage conflicts on its own.

In addition, MINUSCA, through its Civil Affairs Department, assists in the analysis of the dynamics of violence at the local level, informing MINUSCA's force deployment within its protection of civilians mandate. It also engages in mediations and sets up quick-impact projects. The Civil Affairs Department has deployed 78 CLAs around 12 MINUSCA offices and 35 peacekeeping bases. With the community and their representatives, they have put in place community-based early warning systems and community action plans supported by more than 3,000 volunteers.

4   Community action and external interventions: challenges, risks and opportunities

4.1   Supporting communities to engage with armed actors

The communities interviewed for this study made little mention of external support that helps them in their engagements with armed actors. For example, in Bria, where one international humanitarian organisation has set up protection committees since 2017, the community did not mention the role played by these communities in relation to the actions they had already put in place. Communities did, however, report that the arrival of local and international peace and humanitarian organisations during calmer times strengthened their knowledge and capacity to refine their engagement strategy.

Communities also placed particular emphasis on MINUSCA's assistance. MINUSCA complemented existing initiatives and provided financial support, particularly for additional activities such as peace *caravanes*. MINUSCA's support has also made it possible to create frameworks for consultations that have led to the signing of several ceasefire agreements, free movement agreements and non-aggression pacts. A community violence reduction programme was implemented by MINUSCA and assisted in the demobilisation of a large number of members of armed actors.

For their part, peace, humanitarian and protection actors who seek to support communities in reducing and preventing the risks of violence and protection identify the following ways in which to support community engagement:

- Increase the visibility and legitimacy of community mediation actors through providing T-shirts with NGO logos. According to one peace actor, 'we realised that having the logo on the T-shirt helps them to have access to armed groups. The NGO logo facilitates them and gives legitimacy' (Interview 11).
- Provide logistical support, help with transport and facilitate meeting places.
- Build capacity for advocacy, conflict analysis, mediation, protection analysis and negotiation.
- Facilitate the sharing of experiences between community actors.
- Facilitate liaisons with other actors including the national government.

The support provided by peace and humanitarian organisations is largely in line with the communities' perception of what is useful for their own actions. However, some community negotiators warn that an injection of money or resources can divide communities. Indeed, these community negotiators point out that the arrival of peace and humanitarian organisations from beyond the community has changed community dynamics. This has increased economic interests within communities, resulting in the monetisation of community action and financial dependence on external NGOs.

The peace actors interviewed share the opinion that community negotiators should not be paid to ensure sustainability and self-sufficiency over time. Instead, the role of external actors is to 'give tools to continue' such as training on conflict analysis and mediation techniques (Interview 11). The issue of per diem payment for CLPRs, the local peace committees mandated by the government, has been controversial with an insistence on the part of the government to pay CLPR members. However, as one peace actor notes, 'as soon as there is no more funding, it stops working' (Interview 11).

Where community negotiators are known, it is not always easy to support them through traditional programming and funding. One donor explained that they 'do not have the tools to support these dynamics' (Interview 18). This donor also recognises that some of these individuals do not want to have too much visibility, as it could prevent their actions: 'these people, they do not want to be well established, it prevents their capacity' (Interview 18). A current consortium-based programme is trying to resolve these dilemmas and provide support to these individuals (Interview 13).

In addition, community negotiators and mediators deplored the negative impact of the arrival of external NGOs on their status. Indeed, with the arrival of NGOs, these community members felt the loss of their status as active agents of the community and are being treated as beneficiaries. Instead of NGOs recognising the risks these individuals took to negotiate on behalf of the community when peace and humanitarian organisations were not present, these key actors are too often sidelined in favour of communication focused on the roles and interventions of NGOs and the UN.

4.2   The multiplicity of committees

Support to reduce and prevent the risk of violence tends to be provided through the establishment of committees in CAR. This has created a multiplicity of committees at the community level: security committees, mediation committees, conflict management committees, peace committees, protection committees, etc.

In 2015, the government decided to regain control by setting up CLPRs. According to some interviewees, the government felt that the committees set up by humanitarian and peace NGOs were not legitimate.

Today, peace actors have a pragmatic approach to CLPRs: where they work well and the community uses them, peace actors work directly with them; where this is not the case, peace actors decide with the community on the best approach. Some peace actors observed that CLPR members had not been well trained and that the link with the government meant that they were not always perceived as impartial by the communities:

> The members of these committees were not necessarily the people the community trusts. Some members were former armed groups. (Interview 11)

The problem with committees set up by actors outside the community, including the government, is that too often – even when they are supposed to be elected by the community – they do not

necessarily include the people who were identified by communities to be best placed to carry out dialogues with armed actors. The problem remains that these committees rarely include individuals who have negotiated in the past on behalf of the community, and therefore tend to take up a space that is not naturally theirs or in which they are not best placed to achieve the desired outcomes. Instead, individuals in the community who read and write, and can draft reports to comply with the organisations' requirements, tend to be preferred.

The lack of understanding and recognition of what is happening organically at the community level means that too often external actors, whether from the government, humanitarian actors or more rarely peace actors, put in place structures and mechanisms that do not support community mediators and negotiators. On the contrary, external structures and mechanisms, including those of the government, tend to omit these community negotiators and disrupt community processes already in place. A majority of organisations interviewed for this study, particularly members of humanitarian organisations, perceive communities as lacking the capacity to negotiate with or influence armed actors, and they are predominantly unaware that they exist. This assumption means that external interventions, particularly protection interventions, tend not to focus on community engagement with armed actors, despite the fact that, as this study shows, communities do negotiate and can influence armed actors to reduce risks of violence. The question of sustainability and the autonomy of these committees is also problematic given that they are externally imposed solutions, which are not driven by or owned by communities. The multiplicity of committees does not seem to add value even when the external peace and humanitarian actor(s) ask these committees to be in communication with each other. These committees remain external to the way the community collectively managed and manages its affairs. External support should be more in line with community organic governance.

4.3   The opportunities and limitations of the role of community mediators and negotiators

Just as it is important to recognise what communities are already doing to reduce the risk of violence, we must also recognise the opportunities and limitations of community mediators and negotiators. One opportunity to build on is the ability of communities and the mediators and negotiators that represent them to be flexible and adapt to changing circumstances. Indeed, in 2013, communities organised themselves and identified mediators and negotiators to manage the presence of armed actors. The communities were able to reorganise themselves and establish new rules and agreements, identifying opportunities to change them to their advantage when they could. When CLPRs were imposed by the government, communities also tried to work through these new structures. Where they did not work for the community, as in Bria for example, the community and their representatives used the Prefet to help them influence the behaviour of armed actors. Communities and their negotiators and mediators demonstrate agility and flexibility in the face of changing dynamics. These dynamics and the fluidity of community and armed actors' interactions must be recognised and incorporated into the approaches of peace and humanitarian actors when they consider supporting communities in their engagement with armed actors. This requires peace and humanitarian actors to be agile and flexible.

For humanitarian actors, this can be a challenge in the face of community-based approaches that are often too standardised and not sufficiently contextualised through a specific understanding of conflict dynamics within communities.

However, we also note that at the height of the crisis in the cities of Boda and Dékoa, the community mediators (referred to as trusted insiders in the quote below) could not continue to play this role. The level of violence was such that these individuals were forced to take sides, and were therefore no longer able to mediate the situation:

> This depends on which phase of the conflict cycle you are in. At first, trusted insiders – the elders, the religious leaders – play a role of pacificators helping to deescalate the situation and sometimes that's enough. But if it increases in intensity, at the peak, community members and their peers ask the trusted insiders to choose their side. And there, it becomes more difficult to push them to engage as it could put them at risk [...] And then it calms down, and the trusted insiders take their place. (Initial interview 9)

How to organise the support provided by external mediation without undermining the efforts of community mediators and negotiators remains complicated, especially since it is not necessarily easy to resolve certain ethical dilemmas around the community's way of engaging with armed actors. For example, as discussed in Section 2.1, the community retains violence as an option to manage the presence of armed actors. How can peace and protection actors position themselves in support of community actions while opposing the use of violence when the threat and/or use of violence as a last resort is critical leverage that communities use as part of their engagement strategies with armed actors? This raises questions about how peace, humanitarian and protection actors can support community engagement and not undermine the leverage communities have, while not promoting the use of violence.

Similarly, as described above, agreements between the community and armed actors can increase the risks of protection and violence against young women. How can peace and protection actors help and work with communities to find alternative solutions?

4.4 Challenges of current conflict dynamics to prevent and reduce protection risks and violence

The space for dialogue around security issues, including the reduction of violence and protection risks, seems to be closing. Several peace and humanitarian actors interviewed noted that these issues have become taboo and that the community is less open to dialogue for fear of the consequences:

> Communities do not talk about security. There is this fear in the context of exchanges with communities: communities avoid addressing substantive issues given the current context. (Interview 5)

Security dialogue is more controlled, with security platforms set up by the government where CLPRs are supposed to represent communities.

Peace and protection actors also find it difficult to work in this new context involving highly volatile dynamics of conflict and violence. It is noted that one of the major challenges for these peace and humanitarian organisations to be able to support communities in engagements with armed actors is to have access to and maintain their presence at the heart of communities. Humanitarian actors talk about the fact that they are not always able to access and prioritise the safety of their staff. Peace actors who have been able for several years to maintain acceptance by armed actors and negotiate their access note that this has become a significant challenge for them as well as for the individuals they work with in the communities.

> To have this kind of *laissez passer*, it is downright impossible because the armed groups have [changed], no clear hierarchy and mixing of zones, a lot of fighting between the military and themselves [...] risk of robbery even if acceptance now [it is] survival. (Interview 11)

The fragmentation and constant changes of coalitions of armed actors mean it is not always clear who controls which part of the territory and for how long. With constant changes in hierarchies it is difficult to identify who makes the decisions and whether these interlocutors are able to convey messages up the chain of command, if it even exists. This makes it difficult to constantly renegotiate access. As one peace actor says, 'now we have no interlocutor' (Interview 5).

Even with state security forces such as the army and internal security forces (police and *gendarmerie*), the space for dialogue for peace and humanitarian actors has become limited. One national humanitarian actor mentioned that the national army and the Wagner Group's mercenaries are pressuring them not to negotiate access or have a protection dialogue with armed non-state actors. This situation makes it more difficult for humanitarian actors to effectively support or engage in dialogue on protection or to negotiate access, as well as for peace actors to facilitate local mediation. According to one peace actor, even talking to the police about communal violence is difficult:

> [There are] red flags in the country in terms of security and to speak we need calm so that the institutions function normally. The national agenda imposes itself on local dynamics in terms of restrictions and civic space. (Interview 5)

4.5   Complementarity between peace, humanitarian and protection actors for the prevention of risks of violence

4.5.1   Operational collaboration

Formally or informally, complementarity between peace, humanitarian and protection actors is considered by most of the actors interviewed to be effective. As this peace actor says:

> CAR is special. There is a very good collaboration with the actors, a lot of solidarity between development, peace and humanitarian actors. We coordinate all the time even informally. (Interview 11)

This collaboration exists particularly at the operational level with exchanges of information on the security situation and the organisation of joint convoys. According to one peace actor, OCHA plays a very positive role in supporting this operational collaboration at the sub-national level through its weekly meetings – especially for civil–military coordination.

Some interviewees consider that this informal collaboration has been better in the past as individual personalities drove complementary approaches across humanitarian and peace action. However, according to one peace actor, collaboration with humanitarian actors has now become more difficult, with humanitarian actors adopting conservative positions vis-à-vis peace actors based on a certain interpretation of humanitarian principles. On the other hand, another peace actor finds that coordination with MINUSCA is also difficult, while coordination between peace, development and humanitarian actors is more natural:

> What is difficult is to do that with MINUSCA. They have had a civilian protection mandate for four or five years but I have trouble making a good plan to harmonise with MINUSCA. (Interview 11)

Some actors believe that complementarity between different peace, humanitarian and protection actors is now made more difficult due to a competitive attitude in the face of reduced funding. Consortium work is seen as a solution to reducing competitiveness and improve complementarity. However, existing consortia currently bring together peace actors rather than actors representing different peace, development, humanitarian and protection sectors.

4.5.2 Missed opportunities for greater complementarity on programmatic analyses and approaches

The approach to coordination differs greatly between humanitarian and peace actors. Where it is formalised through clusters for humanitarian actors, it does not exist between peace actors. While some peace actors believe that this is a missed opportunity, others do not necessarily see the utility of formalising coordination in the face of existing informal collaboration and are wary of the harmonisation of approaches if it means working with the bureaucratic, process-driven humanitarian architecture. Since the 2013 conflict, peace and humanitarian actors have come together around issues of social cohesion. This was formalised by the creation of a working group on social cohesion within the protection cluster. This working group is the only formal structure that provides space for dialogue on programmatic approaches. However, despite the efforts of some individuals, the working group on social cohesion is not very dynamic and it now has fewer members. A peace actor notes the cumbersome nature of the coordination mechanism and says that due to funding problems, his organisation no longer has the capacity to participate (Interview 4). The process-driven bureaucratic humanitarian architecture is a significant barrier to more complementary approaches.

There is little collaboration on substance: for example, on programmatic approaches and analysis. Even if some organisations describe a level of collaboration at the local level, for example between peace committees and protection committees, this is not done systematically. One protection actor

describes his organisation as always conducting an analysis of existing structures within the community and ensuring that protection committees work closely with peace committees. Another humanitarian organisation mentions working with a peacebuilding NGO and peace committees to inform their conflict analysis. However, these examples remain very ad hoc and overall there is a missed opportunity for greater complementarity. As this peace actor says:

> At the level of humanitarians they say 'do no harm' and we speak of 'sensitivity to the conflict'. That's why I think it's very important in volatile areas like CAR to combine peacebuilder and humanitarian work to strengthen actions. (Interview 8)

As some humanitarian protection actors use peacebuilding approaches, the trend has been to integrate this expertise within humanitarian organisations rather than working in complementary ways with peacebuilding organisations. While this is the go-to approach in the sector, it can prevent a more systematic exchange of expertise, particularly on conflict analysis, conflict-sensitive approaches and the analysis of community dynamics, which can risk instrumentalising peacebuilding modes of action. As this peace actor says, regarding the conflict-sensitive approach of humanitarians:

> It's not because people are careless [...] but for the less obvious things, this is where collaboration is important because peacebuilders have the nuance. (Interview 11)

Peace actors have a different programmatic approach to traditional humanitarian approaches. Peace actors work almost exclusively in support of what communities are already doing, to build their resilience based on what they see as solutions, working on longer-term trajectories linked to a nuanced and agile understanding of local community and conflict dynamics adapted to the context and in dialogue with communities. Some peace actors also better integrate the impact of conflict on community dynamics, in particular the need to rebuild trust between individuals and within communities in order to rebuild collective community actions.

Peace actors focus on building the capacity of communities based on an understanding of their own initiatives and community dynamics. The approaches are less interventionist and top down, favouring small-scale, non-standardised approaches informed by an ongoing dialogue with the community. Humanitarian actors continue to have standardised, top-down interventions, leaving little room for dialogue with communities and adaptation to the context and dynamics of conflict with externally imposed solutions. But, if the issue is not properly analysed based on local context and specific conflict and community dynamics, the solution proposed from the outside may be irrelevant at best and harmful at worst.

Through this study, we can see that these modes of action are increasingly becoming central to the way humanitarian protection actors' activities are relevant to the prevention and reduction of violence. Protection actors can only benefit from greater complementarity with peace actors, in particular to refine and inform their conflict analysis, their conflict-sensitive approach and their analysis of community dynamics and to ensure this informs programmes. It is important to note that peace actors

work in this way on a small scale. The focus on the large scale and reach in the humanitarian sector is an obstacle to adopting this way of working with communities and may explain why the humanitarian sector is struggling to effectively integrate some of these approaches.

Second, programmatic complementarity between peace and humanitarian actors can be strengthened around mediation actions. Indeed, as one peace actor puts it, humanitarian mediation does not go deep enough and does not seek to mitigate the causes of conflict. Humanitarian mediation remains a limited emergency response in its objective and this does not need to change. However, as one peace actor describes, humanitarian mediation can help calm the situation, allowing peace actors to put in place complementary social cohesion and peacebuilding programmes. By working more closely together, humanitarian protection and peace actors can rethink how to build the pieces of the puzzle and take a holistic approach to ensure that each intervention leverages the investment made by the other.

5   Conclusion: preventing and reducing protection risks and violence

Communities often exercise considerable influence over armed actors at a community level. This often happens below the radar and commonly goes unrecognised. This study illustrates that communities choose judiciously which community groups or individuals have power and leverage over armed actors. These are often individuals or groups with moral or cultural, rather than political, influence over armed actors. They use persuasion and compensation as key strategies to influence them. The study also shows that communities have influence over specific armed actors: often those that are more community embedded and decentralised, as they offer greater entry points for community negotiators. Finally, the study shows that communities tend to have influence over specific types of day-to-day violence that affect communities and where communities can use resources and assets to influence the restraint of armed actors.

Too often external interventions, particularly from the government or humanitarian organisations, undermine and frustrate these community-level efforts, the agency of communities and the citizen activism of these community negotiators. The prevention and reduction of risks of violence cannot ignore what communities are already doing and their agency in engaging armed actors. Instead, when seeking to reduce the risks of violence, organisations should always start from what communities are already doing rather than impose externally driven approaches. Their approach should be based on supporting the needs of communities in their engagement or when the situation escalates to a point where community mediation and negotiation is no longer viable or effective. It should always be done with the objective of reinstating community mediation and negotiation as well as strengthening communities' own capacity to reduce and prevent protection risks and violence. External actors such as peace and humanitarian organisations need to be present with these communities and communicate what they can offer to facilitate and support them, such as reopening spaces for dialogue through a humanitarian mediation approach where appropriate.

This study in CAR highlights that peace actors tend to do this much more than humanitarian actors. This is facilitated by their focus on localised approaches, based on proximity and presence, and informed by a continuous analysis of conflict and community dynamics.

Humanitarian actors can play an important complementary role to peace actors in helping communities to prevent and reduce civilian harm. In CAR, we also see that humanitarian protection actors are becoming more involved in prevention activities. The evidence on humanitarian mediation demonstrates without a doubt the incredible potential that this approach has for reducing the risk of violence. This study highlights that even where humanitarian mediation has had less sustained impact, it still contributed to an overall reduction of violence and strengthening of community capacity for mediation and peaceful resolution of conflicts.

To be more effective in violence reduction and prevention, humanitarian protection actors could learn from the experience of peace actors, the way they work with communities, the analysis they conduct and their conflict transformation approaches. This requires humanitarian organisations to think about their presence and proximity to communities in volatile and insecure situations as well as their ability to be flexible and agile. This should not seek to replace the role of peace actors but to complement their expertise and ensure that with phased approaches, each builds on the impact of the other.

While there is collaboration in CAR between peace and humanitarian protection actors, there are opportunities for greater complementarity. This is particularly the case with regard to working jointly on conflict analysis, conflict-sensitive programming and understanding community dynamics.

The study therefore offers the following recommendations:

- Recognise and base your programming on the agency of communities and what they are already doing to reduce and prevent the protection risks and violence through engaging with armed actors.
- Invest in community-based organisations and local civil society groups, in particular youth-led and women-led civil society groups, to increase community resilience in conflict, as these groups can prove essential to a community's ability to reduce and prevent violence in conflict.
- Donors should ensure that funding for reducing and preventing the risks of violence is flexible and long term, and based on the understanding that processes of dialogue, engagement and mediation are successful as processes in themselves and not because they lead to agreements.
- Donors should ensure that adequate funding is available for violence reduction and that peacebuilding organisations are present even during the peak of conflict and in emergencies. To do so, donors should dedicate an adequate percentage of funding to local peacebuilding work and initiatives relative to their support of Track 1 processes. This should be done in line with the findings of this paper, which highlights the opportunities for local peace agreements and violence reduction at the local level even when national-level Track 1 peace processes fail.
- Support humanitarian protection actors and humanitarian actors to adopt more systematically conflict-sensitive approaches based on sound conflict sensitivity analysis, conflict analysis and community dynamics analysis, jointly working with peace actors including through consortia. This will require humanitarian organisations to work in a more agile and flexible way, addressing the rigidity of their approaches.
- To help fund humanitarian mediation, invest in learning and evidence on its impact as well as strategic communication with donors on the outcome and impact of this approach in reducing and preventing violence.
- Ensure that any conflict analysis includes an analysis of community dynamics and governance (formal and informal) to better understand and integrate how communities organise themselves, make decisions and adapt to conflict dynamics, the emergence of new armed actors and the presence of local authorities. This should include an analysis of the impact of context dynamics on how the power and roles of traditional authorities change.

- Fund the reduction of violence and protection risks in CAR with a diversity of peace and protection actors to link humanitarian/emergency mediation tools, community-based and community-led protection approaches with social cohesion, and community capacity-building to manage conflicts peacefully and mediate conflicts. Use a consortium approach to bring together different peace, humanitarian and protection actors as well as a diversity of local, national and international actors.
- Invest in strengthening the capacity of community negotiators and mediators including through supporting national-level mediators who can take over when the situation no longer allows community negotiators and mediators to play this role. Support mediation capacity at the national level by assisting existing networks of CAR mediators.
- Work on diversity and inclusion in community approaches as a journey through time. Mentor the community in a reflection on inclusion and diversity, particularly of young women, rather than imposing joint committees. Work with more established women in the community for the inclusion of young women and through existing civil society networks in CAR such as OFCA.

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Appendix 1   Local contexts and conflict dynamics

Bria

Bria is located 580 km north-east of the capital Bangui in the prefecture of Haute-Kotto. It is known for its economic dynamism due to the presence of mining sites and a large number of gold- and diamond-buying offices (*bureaux d'achat*) managed by the local population but also attracting citizens from neighbouring countries such as Chad or Sudan or nationals of more distant countries such as Mali or Senegal. This economic dynamism has attracted a diversity of communities facilitating ethnic mixing.

Before the 2013 crisis, the town of Bria was already besieged by rebel groups, including the Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement (UFDR), which is an alliance of three separate rebel groups: the Mouvement des libérateurs centrafricains pour la justice (MLCJ), the Groupe d'action patriotique pour la libération de la Centrafrique and the Front démocratique centrafricain. Comprised of mostly Goula ethnic people, these groups hold sociopolitical grievances, accusing the central state of historical discrimination vis-à-vis their community.[36] Such grievances were coupled with interethnic and historical tensions between the Goulas and the Rounga, leading to fighting and the forced displacement of populations in the region.

Prior to the 2013 crisis, Bria was seen as a strategic area by armed non-state actors, which facilitated the creation of the Seleka, some of which were already active in the city. In 2017, the Seleka broke down into six distinct armed actors (see Box 4). The populations then found themselves trapped in the violence between the various factions. Violence also caused local and administrative authorities to leave Bria, putting communities under the de facto governance of armed non-state actors.

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36   The communities of the Goula and Rounga ethnic groups are present in the prefectures of Vakaga, Bamingui Bangoran and Haute-Kotto. These two ethnic groups have been fighting relentlessly for decades on the basis of economic, social and political competition, resulting in sporadic instability in the three major regions.

Box 4   The fragmentation of the Seleka in Bria

In 2017, the evolution of the situation in Bangui, to the detriment of the Seleka, resulted in their retreat to provincial cities, including Bria, which then became one of the catalysts for the division between the members of the Seleka coalition. Indeed, the struggle for control of mineral resources led to the breakdown of the coalition into six distinct armed actors in addition to the Anti-Balaka self-defence militias already present within PK3: the UFDR and the MLCJ already present in Bria before 2013, the Rassemblement Patriotique pour le Renouveau de la Centrafrique(RPRC), UPC, the Convention des patriotes pour la justice et la paix (CPJP) and the FPRC.

These armed actors tend to mobilise members around a political agenda focused on a perception of the marginalisation of certain communities, mainly Muslim communities in CAR such as the Peuls, and seek to take power locally or nationally to ensure the protection of these minorities. However, this political agenda is linked to economic interests and therefore the control of territories to exploit mines and natural resources as well as the imposition of taxes.[ii] These activities can be likened to organised crime activities that make the nature of these armed actors fluid with interchanging economic and political priorities depending on the dynamics of the conflict and opportunities to advance or not advance their political agenda.

ii See for more details IPIS and DIIS (2018).

Although these actors are often made up of individuals from different ethnic and religious groups, the violence that occurred between the Seleka and the Anti-Balaka cemented an identity-based organisation of violence with a clear division between Christians and Muslims. This phase of the conflict saw a series of massacres targeting mainly non-Muslim populations. As a result, the non-Muslim populations found safety in front of the MINUSCA base located 3 km from Bria city centre. The IDP site, named 'PK3', became the largest IDP site in CAR with more than 50,000 residents at the height of the crisis.

Faced with Seleka violence, an Anti-Balaka section was created by displaced youth from the PK3 camp, composed of the Goula, Rounga and Banda ethnic groups. Although emanating locally, the Anti-Balaka of Bria were quickly supported by other Anti-Balaka sections outside Bria, even though the activities, objectives and interests of the Anti-Balaka of Bria remained highly localised: at the beginning they had the objective to protect the PK3 and the majority non-Muslim communities living there against Seleka or ex-Seleka actors; and over time they developed the objective of keeping control over the population to feed their economic interests through illegal taxation.

The intercommunal turn to conflict and violence divided the population of Bria into four distinct areas that followed already existing demographic trends:[37]

- PK3, with the non-Muslim population of Bria under the control of the Anti-Balaka.
- Gobolo, with the sedentary Peul[38] population of Bria under the control of the Seleka Peul and then the UPC.
- Bornou, with the non-Peul Muslim population of Bria under the control of the Muslim Seleka and then the FPRC.
- The Centre-ville, historically an ethnically and religiously mixed area that became mainly populated by non-Peul Muslims following the intercommunal conflict between the Seleka and the Anti-Balaka under the control of the Muslim Seleka.

Bambari

The city of Bambari is the fifth largest city in CAR and a vibrant economic centre that developed from the production of cotton, coffee, sugar and fishing, and especially due to its gold and diamond deposits. The city has one of the largest gold and diamond mines in the country: the Ndassima mine.

Before the 2013 crisis, the city of Bambari enjoyed an ethnically and culturally mixed population due to its economic activities, with Christian, Muslim and Peul communities.[39] Bambari is a city that is coveted by Seleka groups because it was part of their plan to create a new republic within CAR. Bambari has always known the presence of armed non-state actors in the area, especially around mines. However, the city was spared from their violence.

However, internal conflicts over the control of mining areas have led to a division among the Seleka coalition members. The UPC took control of the city in 2015, more specifically control of the left bank of the river where the main administrative buildings and the central market are located, as well as where the majority of the Muslim and Peul populations of the city live. Although the UPC was not originally from Bambari, its troops were reinforced by local inhabitants. Whereas the UPC married young women from the community in Bria, this did not happen in Bambari. As a result, the UPC did not have such close ties with the local Peul community. In addition, the UPC was controlling a part of the city with a mixed population, including non-Peul Muslims.[40] Perhaps as a result, the UPC committed more abuses against the population it was controlling. The presence of the UPC was also not unanimously accepted by Bambari's Muslim community. Indeed, the UPC fought with other armed actors allied with the Seleka to take control of Bambari, which did not please everyone in the community.

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37   For example, before the 2013 crisis, the Gobolo group was already predominantly inhabited by sedentary Peul. After the onset of the crisis, Gobolo became 100% Fulani.

38   The Peul are a historically nomadic ethnic group of herders made up mostly of Muslims.

39   Several ethnic groups are present in the city of Bambari: Banda, Zande, Zankara, Gbaya, Mandjia, Gbanziri and Yakoma.

40   These include Sudanese, Rounga, Goulas and Peul.

UPC's presence in Bambari led to the arrival of Anti-Balakas from Grimari, Alindao and Ippy, who positioned themselves on the right bank of the river, a predominantly non-Muslim area well before the beginning of the conflict. These Anti-Balakas were joined by young Christian volunteers from Bambari.

The positioning of armed actors separated the city in two zones separated by the bridge that connects the two banks of the river. These zones were divided alongside religious lines.

This phase of occupation by the UPC on one side and the Anti-Balaka on the other side of the city restricted the freedom of movement of goods and people and led to physical and sexual violence, including torture summary executions, and coercion through threats and intimidation against the population. The UPC also imposed a large number of illicit taxes.

Within the right bank controlled by the Anti-Balaka, as in Bria, the latter turned against the populations they were supposed to protect, leading to the development of survival strategies within these populations. For example, the community shared their food and agricultural products with the Anti-Balaka to avoid cases of looting or robberies. Similarly, they tried to keep their distance from areas occupied by armed non-state actors and restricted their movement to limit interactions and the risk of physical attacks.

Mbaïki

The city of Mbaïki is located 384 km from the city of Bangui in the prefecture of Lobaye. It is a city that is known for its surrounding equatorial forest and arable land. Its economy is mainly based on coffee cultivation and agroforestry. The population is made up of a fairly dense and tight-knit ethnic, cultural and religious mix.

Mbaïki has almost always been spared the crises that affected the rest of the country, but at the beginning of the crisis in 2013, the advance of armed actors on Bangui made Mbaïki a host city for displaced people from surrounding towns who were welcomed by local families or housed in hostels. During 2013, the city was occupied by the Seleka on their way to Bangui, and this period was marked by targeted abuses, including physical and verbal attacks, looting and kidnappings that mainly affected non-Muslim communities. This situation has led to an exodus of people to IDP camps and the surrounding forest.

The presence of the Seleka in the city facilitated the settlement of many Muslims fleeing Anti-Balaka attacks in other towns and villages in Lobaye prefecture. This installation has led to an increase in the population with an impact on food prices and an increase in tension between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, which has resulted, among other things, in the dissemination of stigmatising rumours and hate speech, with the consequent destruction of the social fabric and community organisation and the establishment of a climate of persistent mistrust.

In response to this occupation, the Anti-Balaka of the region announced, through the network of motorcycle taxi drivers, their arrival in the city with the mission of liberating it. The announcement of

President Michelle Djotodia's departure from power led to the hasty departure of armed Seleka actors and members of the Muslim community, who feared reprisals from the Anti-Balaka and the non-Muslim community. About 2,500 members of the Muslim community,[41] with the support of the Chadian army, were evacuated to Chad or other parts of CAR before the Anti-Balaka arrived in the city.

The Anti-Balaka arrived in early 2014 in a town deserted by the Seleka and a large part of the non-Muslim population. The few Muslims still present in the city were then victims of intimidation, accusations of collaboration with the Seleka and physical violence by both armed Anti-Balaka and non-Muslim actors.

The arrival of French forces freed the town from the presence of the Anti-Balaka and put it under the protection of MISCA forces until the arrival of Russian and Rwandan allies, who pushed the remaining armed fighters to disengage åor retreat deeper into the forest.

41   See www.jeuneafrique.com/depeches/21914/politique/centrafrique-a-mbaiki-rester-cest-resister/.

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