



REINTEGRATING GIRLS AND BOYS

**FORMERLY ASSOCIATED WITH ARMED FORCES AND ARMED GROUPS:
A CASE STUDY FROM CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC (CAR)**

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SUMMARY

This case study describes Plan International's community-based reintegration programmes for girls and boys released from armed groups in Central African Republic (CAR).

The outbreak of violent conflict in CAR in December 2013 led to mass displacement, leaving 2.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance - half of them children¹. From 2014, Plan International supports the education and protection needs of children affected by armed conflict including girls and boys associated with armed forces and groups (CAAFAG); for example, as fighters, cooks, sex slaves, or spies. In the provinces of Mambere-Kadei, Ouham and Lobaye, Plan International provides a comprehensive integrated child protection, psychosocial and education programme, aimed at both preventing child recruitment as well as supporting the reintegration of former child soldiers, unaccompanied and separated children and other vulnerable children into the community.

Plan International implements multiple strategies to identify girls and boys and young people (formerly) associated with armed forces and armed groups and support their reintegration back into their communities. Through community-based support programmes such as supporting temporary foster families, forming and supporting youth groups, operating Child Friendly Spaces, and community outreach activities former child soldiers receive the care and support they need to recover and go back to normal life.

Achievements include the strong involvement of parents in psychosocial interventions, which has reinforced both parents' capacity to care for their children as well as supported the prevention of child recruitment. Strengthening local capacities to identify and respond to child protection issues including recruitment has been challenging due to the lack of pre-existing human resources, structures and financial resources in the community and in local Government structures. A key lesson learned is to provide intensive mentoring and support to community-based structures in the early phase of the programme, as well as continued technical and operational support to local Government structures to strengthen formal child protection services.

¹ PLAN INTERNATIONAL DEFINES A CHILD AS A PERSON BELOW THE AGE OF 18 YEARS.

BACKGROUND

Central African Republic (CAR) is one of the poorest and most under developed countries in the world. Life-expectancy is among the lowest in the world and nearly 14% of all children die before their fifth birthday (Unicef, 2017)². Basic services such as education, health care, social welfare and protection services are limited. In 2013, a violent coup led to widespread displacement and brutal attacks on civilians, leading to a humanitarian crisis in the country. Nearly 20% of the population of 4,7 million has been forced to flee their homes as a result of the violence, many of them to neighboring countries Cameroon, Chad and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). A total of 2.7 million people, including 1.3 million children, were left in need of humanitarian assistance. The conflict disrupted health and education services as many schools and hospitals were destroyed or occupied by armed groups. Today, many displaced families are still dependent on humanitarian aid for food and other basic services. At the same time, humanitarian actors face severe limitations in safe access to affected areas due to insecurity, and a lack of funding to respond to the urgent needs of affected children and families.

The needs of conflict-affected girls and boys

Displaced girls and boys are among the most vulnerable in CAR. They lack basic needs such as health, shelter, water, sanitation and food. During the conflict, many children have become separated from their parents due to displacement, poverty or death of their caregivers. Unaccompanied and separated children face high risk of abuse, exploitation and sexual violence in the absence of parental care. Since 2013, many girls and boys have been abducted or forcibly recruited into armed groups, as fighters, spies, cooks, or sex slaves. Unicef estimates that between 6,000 and 10,000 children have been associated with armed groupsⁱ. Many children have witnessed their homes and schools being destroyed and their friends and parents attacked by armed groups. The experience of violence and continued daily stress due to insecurity, the lack of basic needs and education severely hampers the development and well-being of children in CAR.

The local government has limited capacity to provide comprehensive support to survivors of violence, abuse and exploitation, as the technical, human and financial resources are scarce. In May 2015, at the National Reconciliation Forum in Bangui, the leaders of ten armed groups committed to release all the children under their control. In 2016, Unicef reported to have supported the release of 3,720 children from armed forcesⁱⁱ. The target for 2017 is 3,500 childrenⁱⁱⁱ. Returning, unaccompanied and separated children, require urgent support to return to their normal live and routines, go back to their families and reintegrate into their communities.

² [HTTPS://DATA.UNICEF.ORG/COUNTRY/CAF/](https://data.unicef.org/country/caf/)

PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S ACTION

Community-based child protection, education and psychosocial support to prevent child recruitment and support reintegration

The purpose of the community-based reintegration programme is to strengthen and restore the protective environment for children formerly associated with armed groups and provide them with new perspectives. A child's parents, family and community members are the main caregivers of children in CAR and they are critical in both preventing child recruitment from happening, as well as in the reintegration of children who are returning back into the community. Children themselves also play an important role in protecting themselves and their peers from recruitment. By strengthening the knowledge, skills and capacities of children and adults, child voluntary recruitment can be prevented and eliminated more effectively. At the same time, Plan International works with formal systems including government service providers to ensure that child survivors and their families have access to appropriate services and assistance.

Plan International provides a range of integrated protection, psychosocial and education interventions to children affected by the conflict in CAR, with special attention to the needs and capacities of unaccompanied and separated children and children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups. The section below describes key activities involved, divided into prevention and direct response activities.

Prevention activities

The child protection prevention activities aimed to increase the knowledge, skills and behaviours of children, caregivers, and community members to recognise protection risks, and take actions to prevent and respond to child protection concerns.

Strengthening life-skills and leadership potential of girls and boys

Life skills methodology I DEAL^{iv} is specifically designed to strengthen the social and emotional skills of girls and boys (9-12 years old) and adolescents (13-18 years old) affected by the armed conflict. The 16-week intervention consists of structured group sessions addressing topics such as dealing with emotions; relationships with peers and adults; conflict and peace; reproductive and sexual health and building a positive future. I DEAL is characterised by its creative and child-centred approach: psychosocial skills and knowledge are offered through a mix of creative and participatory exercises, such as games, sports and interactive group activities. The sessions were delivered by trained community workers in community centres and youth clubs. Plan International provided ongoing coaching to the facilitators during the implementation of the intervention. The most vulnerable children were invited to participate in I DEAL groups including separated children, children formerly associated with armed



groups, and children in foster families. Their participation in I DEAL contributed to their psychosocial recovery, while at the same time the new skills and knowledge helped to prevent them from experiencing further harm such as recruitment into armed groups.

Strengthening the skills of parents and caregivers to care for and protect their children

For parents of children enrolled in I DEAL, parallel parenting groups were organised, called Parents DEAL. This theme-based methodology offers structured sessions with participatory groups activities related to child development, child protection, and positive parenting practices for children affected by armed conflict. The aim of the parent groups was to strengthen care practices of parents and contribute to improved relationship between parent and child. The groups also contributed to a strengthened support network of parents in displaced communities. Parents of children in need of special care were specifically targeted, including foster parents, caregivers of former child soldiers and family members of separated children. Also in the parenting groups emphasis was placed on risk prevention, such as family separation and child recruitment.

Community mobilisation and awareness raising

Plan International supported community based facilitators to initiate awareness-raising sessions in schools and communities, in cooperation with children, youth clubs and community-based protection committees (RECOPE). Sessions were held to inform the community about the impact of conflict on a child and how to care for and protect healthy child development. Issues identified by the community, such as child recruitment, domestic violence and neglect,

were prioritised for mass awareness raising sessions, as well as smaller scale group discussions among caregivers and community elders. Through awareness raising, Plan International informed the communities of the ongoing activities such as life skills, recreational activities, positive parenting sessions, identification of children in need of specialised support and enrolment in education programmes.

Strengthening the capacities of local communities to prevent and respond to child recruitment

Recognising that community members and caregivers play an essential role in preventing child recruitment, Plan International supported the (re)activation of 16 informal community child protection networks (Réseau Communautaire Protection de l'Enfant, or: RECOPE) with the mandate to prevent and respond to child protection concerns in their locality. These networks comprised of community leaders, elders and parents, among others. Both the RECOPEs and youth clubs were trained on child protection in emergencies, provision of basic psychosocial support to children and adults, community mobilisation and sensitisation techniques. Plan International technically assisted them with developing their key messages, developing and monitoring action plans and developing awareness raising tools (such as Boîte à Image^v) for activity implementation aimed at retaining children within the family and the community.

Since the start of the programme, Plan International supported the reactivation and strengthening of 93 community-based child protection structures consisting of 116 persons (including 53 male) and 47 children/youth (including 16 girls) in 3 conflict-affected districts (Mambere Kadei, Ouham and Lobaye).



The Boîte à Image tool presents a series of visuals, such as pictures and photos, that show different child protection concerns, such as family separation, child soldiers, neglect or violence against children. It is used as a sensitization tool for members of the community to understand and discuss the different issues affecting children in the context of the conflict. It is an effective tool when working with children and adults with limited literacy skills. RECOPE members used this tool to guide group discussions with communities, along with a staff member from Plan International to assist them.

Response activities

The child protection response activities aimed to ensure a timely and adequate response to identified children at-risk and survivors of violence and abuse, and referral to age and gender appropriate multi-sectoral services.

Identification of children (formerly) associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG)

The identification of girls and boys associated with armed forces, or at-risk thereof, is a crucial first step in providing effective protection. There were different ways through which at-risk children were identified:

1. Youth clubs: the club leaders identified children with risk behaviour, such as school-drop out, signs of aggressive behaviour or withdrawal, or direct signs or information that indicated association with an armed gang or group;
2. Child Friendly Spaces: the CFS facilitators who worked with girls and boys in the community safe spaces were able to identify children at risk of joining armed groups, or those who had returned;
3. Outreach Teams: Some children were identified through mobile outreach teams that Plan International deployed in the communities. They were composed of trained volunteers who made regular visits in the communities to promote child enrolment in school and prevent child marriage, abuse or other protection issues;
4. Self-reporting and direct referral: In some instances, children themselves, or community members knew of boys or girls who were involved with armed groups reported it directly to Plan International staff members.

Family tracing and reunification

The children identified as associated with armed groups were referred to the national Task Force on Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) led by Unicef. This Task Force led the release efforts of children from armed groups. Where children required support in tracing their original families, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) assisted in initiating (cross-border) family tracing. Since October 2014, Plan International has identified 539 CAAFAG (including 58 girls) and referred 342 children (including 43 girls) to the DDR task-force, ICRC and community-based services. At the time of writing, 59 (11%) identified CAAFAG have been successfully reunited with their families, have finished their education or vocational training and received school materials, clothes and other materials to help them get back to normal life.

Alternative care

Children who were released from the armed groups, and could not immediately be reunified with their parents, were offered a temporary foster family until family reunification was possible and desirable. Plan International identified and trained in total 142 temporary foster families to receive and care for unaccompanied children including children returning from armed forces and groups. The foster care families were identified in collaboration with community leaders and RECOPEs within the target communities, based on criteria developed by the Ministry of Social Affairs: a family's presence in the community; experience with caring for children; and perceived high moral conduct in the community. Each foster family could receive a maximum of 4 children. The foster caregivers were trained by Plan International on the impact of the conflict

and family separation on a child, basic skills in providing care and psychosocial support to highly vulnerable children, and preparing a child for family reunification. Plan International provided the foster families with material support in the form of household and personal care items, based on a standardised kit (kitchen ware, bedding, petrol lamps, etc.) identified in coordination with other international and national NGOs. On average, Plan International found that a child spent 6 months in a temporary foster family before s/he was reunited with his or her biological family. When biological families were identified, Plan International provided transition and family reunification support.

Temporary placement and orientation centres

In exceptional circumstances and as a last resort measure, when placement in a foster family is not possible nor desirable and a child's original family cannot immediately be identified, children can be referred to temporary placement and transit orientation centres (Centres de Transit et Orientation, CTO). These temporary care centres are run

by the state and provide protection, medical services, water and sanitation, ECCD, life-skills activities and psychosocial support in a safe environment. Children are provided with clothes and all the necessary personal care items. These centres can host children up to six months. However, these centres were located outside Plan International's operating areas and therefore no children were referred to these centers. All children were placed in temporary foster families within a community-based setting.

Strengthening local capacities to respond to child protection issues

In each community, Plan International worked with the community-based RECOPE to ensure effective follow-up on vulnerable children identified by the community. First, a services mapping was carried out in which all available services and resources in the community were identified including health and legal services, social support groups and child protection actors. Plan International trained in total 16 RECOPEs in the safe and confidential identification and referral of concerns that required specialised support. The RECOPE would



report these cases to Plan International's child protection officer, who was responsible for the referral to services that were often located in the towns, sometimes far away from the local community.

Where possible, the RECOPE worked together with service providers at community level including schools, to help identify, refer and support the reintegration of children who experienced abuse, neglect, exploitation or violence. The more known the RECOPE members became in the community, the more concerns were disclosed to their representatives. Plan International provided them with information and tools to document referral and follow-up actions taken, and regularly coached each RECOPE in this process. Home visits to children and their families were always done by a Plan International child protection officer, and if necessary with a RECOPE member. Where possible the government social worker was involved in the case investigation and response. However, government social workers were not available in many locations.

Strengthening local capacities to reintegrate children formerly associated with armed groups

Plan International supported the RECOPEs to be an active player in the reintegration process of children who returned from armed groups. The RECOPE played a particularly important role in identifying and supporting temporary foster families, as well as in mediating between the biological family and the child to facilitate their reunification. Also, after foster placement or family reunification RECOPE members would monitor the child, by visiting the child and caregivers on a regular basis. For specific high risk cases, Plan International child protection officer and sometimes a UNICEF officer were present during these visits.

Access to Education for children formerly associated with armed groups

School-aged children (6-16 years) were enrolled in the national education programme, according to their age and level. Given that many children had been out of school for one or two years during this intervention, Plan International provided an Accelerated Learning Programmes (ALP) to help children catch up with the requirements of the national educational curriculum. For these purposes, Plan International built and equipped 15 temporary learning spaces (TLS) and 22 classrooms in the conflict-affected area of Mambere-Kadei and trained 30 community teachers to work in these spaces. To date, Plan International managed to reintegrate 3,328 children (1,365 girls and 1,963 boys) in the national school programme following accelerated learning and second chance education, of whom 267 children were associated with armed groups.

Vocational Training and Income-Generating Opportunities

Plan International worked with national educational authorities and its community-based representatives to integrate 196 children (including 74 CAAFAG) aged 13-17 years into 4 to 8 months long vocational training in areas such as auto or motor bike repair, agriculture, livestock breeding and restaurant business. Training was followed by mentored apprenticeship and apprentices were provided with start-up kits with materials necessary to begin working. Programme monitoring showed that this support allowed adolescents to become more economically self-reliant through income generating activities.

Activities in Child Friendly Spaces

Plan International established 14 child friendly spaces (CFS) in the provinces of Mambere-Kadei and Ouham and trained 49 facilitators from the target communities to

deliver age and gender appropriate activities related to the development of leadership and life skills. These activities helped children formerly associated with armed groups to reintegrate in the community and prevent their repeated recruitment. At the time of writing 10,672 children (4,003 girls and 6,669 boys) were recorded to have attended CFS activities, out of which circa 800 were identified to have previously been associated with armed groups.

Coordination

Plan International CAR is a member of the working group on reintegration under the task force on DDR, led by Unicef and MINUSCA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic), the child protection sub-cluster and the national Education cluster. Through membership in these groups, Plan International promoted the interests of CAAFAG at national and inter-agency level, ensuring that their needs are considered in the development of inter-agency standards and national policies. In September 2016 Plan International became the NGO co-lead of the Child Protection sub-cluster through which Plan International promotes cooperation

between stakeholders to address the protection needs of the most vulnerable children including children associated with armed forces and armed groups. The DDR Working Group co-led by the Government and Unicef was formed around March 2016 and is currently working on advocacy efforts to include children into the national DDR activities in the country. The Working Group is trying to convince the government to include children in their national policy and legislation and to mobilise additional funds for this.

POSITIVE IMPACT

Community mobilisation and identification

The identification of children associated with armed forces and groups through youth clubs and community awareness sessions proved to be very successful. Although Child Friendly Spaces were established, CFS typically targeted young children who face a lower risk of recruitment than adolescents and youth. Also, the RECOPE played an instrumental role in the mobilisation, awareness raising and identification of the children at risk of recruitment.



Community-based reintegration support

The engagement of the community in the care for and support to former child soldiers has been a process of increased community ownership and responsibility for at-risk children. Both the RECOPE and the identified foster families play a significant role in the protection of demobilised children and other unaccompanied children at risk of (re-)recruitment into armed groups. The comprehensive approach of child protection, psychosocial support and education support to these children, has proven to be effective in meeting their specific needs.

Inter-generational psychosocial support

Working with children and parents in parallel groups ensured that new knowledge and skills were mutually reinforced at home between children and caregivers. Parents highly appreciated the group sessions and reported that they paid more attention to the needs of their children, and that their children behaved better at home.

CHALLENGES

Security situation

One of the most striking operational challenges is the volatile security situation in which Plan International operates. In most programme areas, armed groups are still operational and security incidents are not uncommon. Insecurity has led to restrained access to communities and hindered Plan International staff from monitoring and following up on referred cases. The rise of violence in Bangui in autumn 2015, caused the paralysis of humanitarian assistance for several weeks, and led to additional population movement in communities.

Funding and prioritisation of national DDR processes for children

The national legislation and policy on a DDR does not outline specific provisions for children associated with armed forces and groups. Thus, inadequate financing and investment in the release and reintegration of former child soldiers is jeopardising efforts to provide these children with an opportunity to return to normal life. In 2016, the humanitarian community intensified advocacy efforts with the new government to prioritise inclusion of children in national DDR programmes.

Over reliance on community-based support

In most target areas, government services such as social welfare, child protection and education are limited. This leads to an over-reliance on already strained communities and families in supporting children formerly associated with or at risk of joining armed groups. Although the community plays a crucial role in the protection of children, the community-based support structures and resources remain fragile due to insecurity, population displacement and a general lack of knowledge, skills and resources to assist children who require specialised support. Strengthening community-based care arrangements and protection structures therefore require a heavy investment of technical, financial and human resources to supervise programme actions and quality of services.

Programmatic challenges

Children associated with armed forces and armed groups are not a homogeneous group and present a variety of needs, vulnerabilities and capacities that require a multi-faceted approach. Some children are separated from their families and the community, while others are well-integrated

into the community, living with their families and attending school. This group challenges the way programmes respond to their needs. Traditional identification and reintegration approaches need to be adjusted to the specific risks these children face and a proper follow-up mechanism must be put in place to prevent repeated recruitment. Their experiences in the conflict often led to reduced well-being and low self-esteem. Teachers who provided catch-up education to formerly recruited children had to conduct regular home visits to keep these children motivated for school and prevent drop-out. Also, more intense work with the community was needed to prevent child involvement in armed conflict and to support the reintegration of children who have been separated from armed groups. Plan International contributed to the development of inter-agency approaches and tools such as registration forms and referral pathways for the identification of and support to CAAFAG.

Acceptance of armed groups

A major challenge was the communities' appreciation of children associated with armed groups, such as anti-Balaka. These children were seen as heroes and communities supported in their association with the armed activity. Long-term community sensitisation and awareness raising about the risks of child recruitment to

their survival and development was used to gradually change community perspectives including those of local leaders.

Coordination

The sensitive and time-pressing nature of reintegration work requires strong coordination of a variety of humanitarian actors, from identification to the release of children from armed groups, alternative and interim care provision, and tailored reintegration services. Overall, the inter-agency DDR process to release children from armed forces had been slow, affecting timely and effective reintegration. For example, there were challenges in the coordination and collaboration between agencies during the family tracing process. Some organisations have established strong working relationships and assist each other in family tracing but not all CP actors are aware of each other's presence. A lack of coordination directly affected the effectiveness and efficiency of family tracing. For example, the slow pace of initiation and implementation of family tracing and reunification efforts led to an additional burden on the communities as temporary foster families, already strained, had to keep foster children under their care for longer periods.

Lessons learned

Working with communities:

- Provide intensive support to community-based structures in the early phase of the response programme. For example, by ensuring presence of Plan International staff in the communities to provide on-the-job support in child protection actions, to monitor community-based protection services and to provide technical support to community workers in handling sensitive cases.
- In a context where formal services are mostly absent at local level, it is essential that Plan International has its own case workers to respond to and follow-up on identified child protection cases that require specialised support. Over time, local community capacity to provide this support can then gradually be built.

Working with the Government and humanitarian actors:

- Provide continued technical and operational support to local Government structures and start advocacy efforts early to lobby for strengthened formal child protection services. For example, by providing operational support to local Government, training and on-the-job coaching of Government social workers, and coordinating closely with formal services.
- Invest in humanitarian coordination through the sub-cluster and technical working groups to ensure better oversight and direction of the overall Child Protection response, as well as to advocate for improved direct strategic response.
- It is essential to establish effective information sharing and coordination mechanisms between UN/NGO DDR actors and State Actors. Even when a situation is fragile, data collection and information sharing about the number of children associated with armed groups to make clear that it is a serious issue and that UN/NGOs need the Government's support and participation for an effective response.

Innovating programme strategies:

- Implement new and innovative strategies to identify hard-to-reach vulnerable children, including children and youth at-risk of abduction or recruitment by armed forces, including youth peer-to-peer outreach, community-based awareness raising and parenting groups. These strategies could include peer-to-peer activities, community mobilisation and awareness activities, mobile outreach teams and sensitisation of existing community groups and networks.
- Engagement of both children and key adults such as caregivers, teachers and community workers is essential to prevent and respond to children at risk of recruitment. A multi-faceted and multi-sector approach with protection, psychosocial, education and livelihoods support is required to address key risks associated with child recruitment.
- Traditional identification and reintegration approaches need to be adjusted to the specific risks these children face and a proper follow-up mechanism must be put in place to prevent repeated recruitment into armed groups.
- Teachers and community facilitators who provide support such as catch-up education or psychosocial support to formerly recruited children will need specific training to adopt an effective way of working with children whose experiences in the conflict have often led to reduced well-being and low self-esteem. For example, additional efforts may have to be undertaken to prevent early drop-out, such as close follow-up with both the child and (temporary) caregivers through home visits to keep children motivated and engaged.

i [HTTP://WWW.UNICEF.ORG/MEDIA/MEDIA_67117.HTML](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_67117.html) LAST ACCESSED 23 NOVEMBER 2015

ii [HTTPS://WWW.UNICEF.ORG/APPEALS/CAR.HTML](https://www.unicef.org/appeals/car.html) UNICEF 2016 PROGRAMME TARGETS AND RESULTS

iii [HTTPS://WWW.UNICEF.ORG/APPEALS/CAR.HTML](https://www.unicef.org/appeals/car.html) UNICEF 2017 APPEAL

iv THE DEALS IS A PROGRAMME DEVELOPED BY WAR CHILD AND CONSISTS OF COMPREHENSIVE THEME-BASED PSYCHOSOCIAL INTERVENTIONS DESIGNED TO BUILD THE RESILIENCE OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE. PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS CAN ALSO SIMULTANEOUSLY FOLLOW THEIR OWN COURSE THROUGH A SIMILAR INTERVENTION. MORE AT: [HTTP://WWW.WARCHILDHOLLAND.ORG/WAR-CHILDS-LIFE-SKILLS-COURSE-DEALS](http://www.warchildholland.org/war-childs-life-skills-course-deals)

v BOÎTE À IMAGE IS A CP SENSITISATION TOOL, DEVELOPED BY PLAN INTERNATIONAL IN CAR, THAT HELPS CHILDREN AND YOUTH BETTER UNDERSTAND THE CP RISKS IN THE COMMUNITY AND IDENTIFY PREVENTION STRATEGIES, AS WELL AS LEARN ABOUT EXISTING SERVICES IN THEIR COMMUNITY.



About Plan International:

Plan International strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children.

We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge.

For over 75 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 70 countries.