



Trauma, Violence Prevention, and Reintegration: Learning from Youth Conflict Narratives in the Central African Republic

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This research report is a case study on the relationship between trauma, peacebuilding, and reintegration for conflict-affected youth in the Central African Republic (CAR) following the 2019 peace agreement. Based on qualitative research fielded in Spring 2022, the study examines how youth experience conflict, trauma, and reintegration in CAR, highlighting individual experiences through a participant narrative approach. In doing so, the report provides localized insight into the challenges that impact social reintegration and cohesion in fragile, conflict-affected contexts. The report further underscores the implications of these insights for local and international efforts to establish peace and security through disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs and community violence reduction (CVR) initiatives.

In addition to standard data collection methods such as interviews and focus group discussions, data collection undertaken for this report utilized a trauma-informed method called body mapping. The use of body maps—life size images of a human body with visual representations of experiences— in research can offer a means for individuals to reflect on potentially difficult experiences through a non-verbal process. Given the potential relevance of this tool in future studies examining the nexus between conflict, reintegration, mental health, and trauma, this report also includes discussion of the implementation of this method with considerations for others hoping to adapt it for their own use.

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ACRONYMS

CAR	Central African Republic
CPC	Coalition des Patriotes pour le Changement
CRSV	Conflict-related Sexual Violence
CVJRR	Truth, Justice, Reparation and Reconciliation Commission
CVR	Community Violence Reduction
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration
DDRR	Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, and Repatriation
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MINUSCA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
NGOs	Non-governmental Organizations
PTSD	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
SCC	Central African Special Criminal Court
UN	United Nations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the decade since a new cycle of violence began in the Central African Republic (CAR), youth have been involved extensively in waves of conflict, ranging from forced recruitment into nonstate armed groups to voluntary participation in localized community-based armed groups. In 2019, the signing of the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation led to the establishment of a Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, and Repatriation (DDRR) strategy for CAR.¹ The resulting programming aimed to address the disengagement and reintegration of former members of the fourteen armed groups signatory to the agreement. Parallel to the DDRR strategy, the United Nations (UN) DDRR office implemented a community violence reduction (CVR) strategy aimed at the disengagement and reintegration of youth who joined or were affected by community-based armed groups in CAR.²

Five years later, despite these efforts, the country faces ongoing violence, extreme poverty, impunity, and general insecurity. In this context, it is essential to further understand how reintegration efforts have been implemented in CAR. This case study examines reintegration through the lens of understanding how trauma, violence prevention, and peacebuilding interconnect. This line of inquiry reflects a growing academic and policy interest in the role of trauma in conflict-affected contexts. Here, trauma is understood as a traumatic event experienced during conflict and its psychosocial and social aftermath. Specific questions arise concerning the ways in which trauma shapes peacebuilding and social cohesion. While experts recognize that violence prevention and reintegration programming are key to these initiatives, our understanding of the ways in which trauma interacts with reintegration and social cohesion in fragile contexts is limited.

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- 1 Elizabeth Murray and Rachel Sullivan, "Central African Republic Struggles to Implement Peace Deal," *United States Institute of Peace*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/10/central-african-republic-struggles-implement-peace-deal>.
 - 2 Irma Specht, "Innovations to DDR to Address Conflicts and Stabilise Combatants and Communities in the Central African Republic," in *Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in Africa*, ed. Ibrahim Bangura (Routledge, 2023), 119-35.

To address this knowledge gap, this case study focuses on the connections between trauma and reintegration and asks how conflict-affected youth experience trauma, reintegration, and violence prevention in CAR. It offers practitioners and policymakers a nuanced yet beneficial understanding of trauma in this context and proposes policy and research avenues based on these findings. The research employs a multi-method approach that includes narrative interviews, focus group discussions, and body mapping, with particular attention to not only generating new findings, but also exploring the value of body mapping as a methodological tool in exploring and assessing the impact of trauma-informed peacebuilding. Body mapping is a creative research and practice methodology initially utilized in South Africa³ and Latin America that focuses on narrative exploration and encourages participant reflection. The case study also focuses on the ways in which the research design is constructed and reflects on the implementation of these methods in CAR. The methodology worked particularly well as a mechanism with women and youth to introduce further discussion, either through interviews or focus group discussions.

Using these qualitative methods, the research yields four main findings:

1. Reintegration is viewed as a temporary means of violence reduction. For conflict-affected youth, reintegration is seen as temporary violence reduction rather than a long-term transition toward peace.

2. Reintegration is experienced as a struggle to survive. Struggles to survive dominate daily life. Reintegration is primarily seen as an attempt to meet everyday socioeconomic challenges that otherwise impede the development of strong and peaceful communities.

3. Everyday trauma shapes reintegration, violence prevention, and peacebuilding efforts. Trauma prevents communities from moving forward and ex-combatants are seen as requiring support in order to “leave war behind.”

³ For more on the use of body-mapping in South Africa, see MSF Access Campaign, “Body Maps: Art and Memory,” <https://msfaccess.org/body-maps-art-and-memory>. For more on its use Latin America, visit Rosa dos Ventos Lopes Heimer and Nina Franco, “Travelling Body-territories: A Video-essay on Survivors Mapping Coloniality, Violence and Resistance,” *Imaging Social Justice*, https://www.artscabinet.org/imagingsocialjustice/travelling-body-territories-a-video-essay-on-survivors-mapping-coloniality-violence-and-resistance#_ftnref1.

The physical reminders of these traumatic events and stigma emanating from them can further hinder reintegration and violence prevention.

4. Community and individual trauma are mutually reinforcing. Everyday social issues, economic struggles, and trauma are connected. Financial insecurity and stigma bring to the surface the trauma of war.

These findings suggest practical avenues for those working in peacebuilding, reintegration, and violence prevention in CAR and elsewhere. First, they underline trauma and violence as ongoing challenges in CAR that did not end with the signature of a peace agreement. The findings specifically highlight the importance of educational structures and the socioeconomic connections made within them. Second, the findings demonstrate the interconnectivity between insecurity, violence prevention, and transitional justice that shapes reintegration in CAR, with implications for further violence reduction and prevention. Additionally, the richness of these findings suggests the utility of narrative methods for research conducted in conflict-affected communities. A special callout section of this report (page 42) presents reflections on the utility of the tools and suggestions for researchers and practitioners wishing to use body mapping with vulnerable populations in conflict-affected contexts.

The report concludes with considerations for Central African communities and those others who carry the weight of conflict. Based on the findings, the report recommends deeper study of social networks that support or hinder reintegration and further examination of trauma among communities, including its impact on perceptions of different groups participating in peace and conflict. In addition, the report highlights the extent to which reintegration is deeply influenced by experiences of impunity and calls for justice, and the implications of that for policy and practice. Overall, the approach taken by the case study demonstrates the complexity of trauma, violence prevention, and reintegration, and the ways in which they interconnect in fragile contexts. While not generalizable, the findings and considerations presented here are instructive for other contexts facing similar conflict dynamics and/or building out their own violence reduction and reintegration initiatives, including, for example, in areas impacted by violent extremism in the broader region.

INTRODUCTION

Since its independence from France in 1960, the Central African Republic (CAR) has been plagued by cyclical conflict and violence, including decades of civil strife and recurring coups d'état. Against this backdrop, human rights violations, interreligious schisms, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), forced armed group recruitment, and widespread trauma have come to characterize the conflict.⁴ In 2019, after years of violence initiated following the Séléka-led coup d'état in 2013, warring parties in CAR signed the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation. As part of the agreement, the Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, and Repatriation (DDRR) program—used by the CAR government and supported by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA)—was established to help demobilize and reintegrate former combatants in the country. Still, questions remain regarding the successes and failures of these efforts in the context of ongoing impunity for crimes and participation in violence while armed groups continue to operate in the country.⁵

Further compounding challenges to building peace and stability, facilitating DDRR, and bringing an end to continuing cycles of violence, the far reaching psychological and social impact of violence on CAR communities raises serious concerns.⁶ Recent studies suggest that most Central Africans have been exposed to traumatic events and between 50 percent to 80 percent report anxiety or depression symptoms.⁷ Médecins Sans Frontières found the number of people treated for sexual violence tripled between 2018 and 2022.⁸ The

4 "Conflict in the Central African Republic," Council on Foreign Relations, updated August 10, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violence-central-african-republic>.

5 Specht, "Innovations to DDR to Address Conflicts and Stabilise Combatants and Communities in the Central African Republic."

6 Enrica Picco, "Ten Years After the Coup, Is the Central African Republic Facing Another Major Crisis?" *International Crisis Group*, March 22, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/central-african-republic/dix-ans-apres-le-coup-detat-la-republique>.

7 Sita G. Patel et. al., "A Qualitative Approach to Informing Mental Health Programming in Central African Republic," *International Perspectives in Psychology* 9, no. 4 (2020): 212–29, <https://doi.org/10.1037/ipp0000144>. Here, trauma is understood as a traumatic event experienced in conflict and its psychosocial and social aftermath.

8 For information on the ongoing crisis and sexual violence, see: *Invisible Wounds: MSF's Findings on Sexual Violence in CAR between 2018 and 2022* (Médecins Sans Frontières, October 2023), <https://www.msf.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/Invisible%20wounds%20report%20-%20CAR%20sexual%20violence.pdf>.

impact of these experiences, combined with economic and social hardship, is particularly important among youth, who make up nearly two-thirds of CAR's total population.⁹ Youth in CAR, as elsewhere, are enormously impacted by the traumas of conflict, whether due to forced or voluntary recruitment into armed groups; displacement; experiencing violence; loss of family members; or lost social, economic, or educational opportunities.¹⁰ Still, youth are often overlooked in formalized reintegration programs and peace processes. Little is understood about how conflict-affected youth and communities experience the aftermath of conflict and its impact on mental health in CAR and elsewhere. Overall, while the field recognizes the lasting effect of traumatic experiences on conflict-affected communities, it is missing an examination of the ways in which these experiences—among youth especially—manifest internally and impact local peacebuilding and reintegration outcomes, particularly in contexts experiencing continued violence.

This case study explores the intersection of conflict, youth, trauma, and violence prevention in CAR, focusing specifically on youth and local community perceptions of reintegration and peacebuilding processes. In doing so, the study offers an in-depth analysis of conflict and trauma through the lens of conflict-affected youth narratives.¹¹ This analysis deepens our understanding of the individual challenges created by trauma and reintegration in fragile contexts and their implications for social cohesion, local peace, and policy responses. While focused on CAR, findings from this study also illuminate important considerations for reintegration and violence reduction initiatives occurring elsewhere, as well as those meant to address different types of conflict and violence with shared reintegration concerns (e.g., interstate wars and violent extremist conflict).

9 UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "Central African Republic," accessed August 8, 2023, <https://uis.unesco.org/en/country/cf>.

10 "Human Rights Council Discusses the Situation of Children in the Central African Republic and Strengthening Institutional Capacities in South Sudan," *United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, March 31, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/03/human-rights-council-discusses-situation-children-central-african-republic-and>.

11 Walt Kilroy, "From Conflict to Ownership: Participatory Approaches to the Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in Sierra Leone and Liberia," PhD diss., Dublin City University, 2012, [doi:10.1353/isia.2011.0013](https://doi.org/10.1353/isia.2011.0013); Walt Kilroy, "Does a More Participatory Approach to Reintegrating Ex-combatants Lead to Better Outcomes? Evidence from Sierra Leone and Liberia," *Conflict, Security & Development* 14, no. 3 (2014): 275–308, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2014.923151>; Walt Kilroy, *Reintegration of Ex-combatants after Conflict: Participatory Approaches in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (New York: Springer, 2015); Jaremeay McMullin, *Ex-combatants and the Post-conflict State: Challenges of Reintegration* (New York: Springer, 2013); Evelyn Pauls, "Female Fighters Shooting Back: Representation and Filmmaking in Post-conflict Societies," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22, no. 5 (2020): 697–719, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2020.1844031>; and Roxani C. Krystalli, "Narrating Victimhood: Dilemmas and (In) Dignities," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 23, no. 1 (2021): 125–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2020.1861961>.

Study participants included youth formerly associated with armed groups, those who had been abducted, and those who lived through cycles of violence until the peace agreement in 2019. The study employed a multi-method approach, using focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews alongside body mapping to better understand trauma and conflict experiences, as well as their implications for reintegration and peacebuilding policies. Using reintegration as a lens through which to examine conflict dynamics and perceptions, the study serves three purposes:

1. It investigates the relationship between trauma and reintegration in CAR from the perspective of conflict-affected youth and their communities;
2. It establishes trauma as an important but underexplored component of reintegration and violence prevention; and,
3. It proposes the use of body mapping—and narrative methods—to understand this relationship and suggests approaches for practitioners designing programs in these communities.

The report begins with an overview of conflict in CAR, with a focus on trauma among youth, followed by a discussion of how this study is situated within broader reintegration, psychology, and global health literature addressing trauma in conflict contexts. The report then outlines the study's research methodology prior to presenting the research findings and discussing their relevance. It concludes with a special callout session providing lessons learned for the utilization of visual and narrative methods in research in conflict-affected communities and research involving vulnerable populations, followed by a section detailing considerations for further research, policy, and practice.

CONTEXT

In CAR, reintegration is experienced in a context of chronic insecurity and cyclical violence where the conflict's impact on mental health is poorly understood.¹² Since the most recent cycle of violence began in CAR over a decade ago, waves of conflict have involved extensive youth recruitment into armed groups and participation in violence. In 2013, an alliance of armed groups known as Séléka overthrew the government of François Bozizé, which led to ongoing clashes between the group and a coalition of self-defense groups known as anti-Balaka.¹³ Despite the signing of the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in CAR in February 2019, abductions, CRSV, and grave violations against children, women, and youth continue. The high level of CRSV is often described as a public health epidemic¹⁴ and sexual violence is seen as directly related to the experience of living in CAR.¹⁵ Even before the 2013 coup, a 2011 study by Potts et al. demonstrated the scale of human rights violations and trauma experienced in the country: numerous incidents of CRSV, forced recruitment, and abduction were reported at that time.¹⁶

Today, despite the 2019 agreement, nonstate and community-based armed groups remain active in large parts of CAR. Among these groups, the CPC (Coalition des Patriotes pour le Changement) and its affiliates continue to perpetrate human rights violations across the country while the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)—a group once added to the United

12 For an extensive study of local and national conflict dynamics in CAR, see, for example: Louisa Lombard, *State of Rebellion: Violence and Intervention in the Central African Republic* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016). See, also, Tim Glawion's work on perceptions of security in CAR, South Sudan, Haiti and Somaliland in Tim Glawion, "Cross-case Patterns of Security Production in Hybrid Political Orders: Their Shapes, Ordering Practices, and Paradoxical Outcomes," *Peacebuilding* 11, no. 2 (2022): 169–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2022.2079246>.

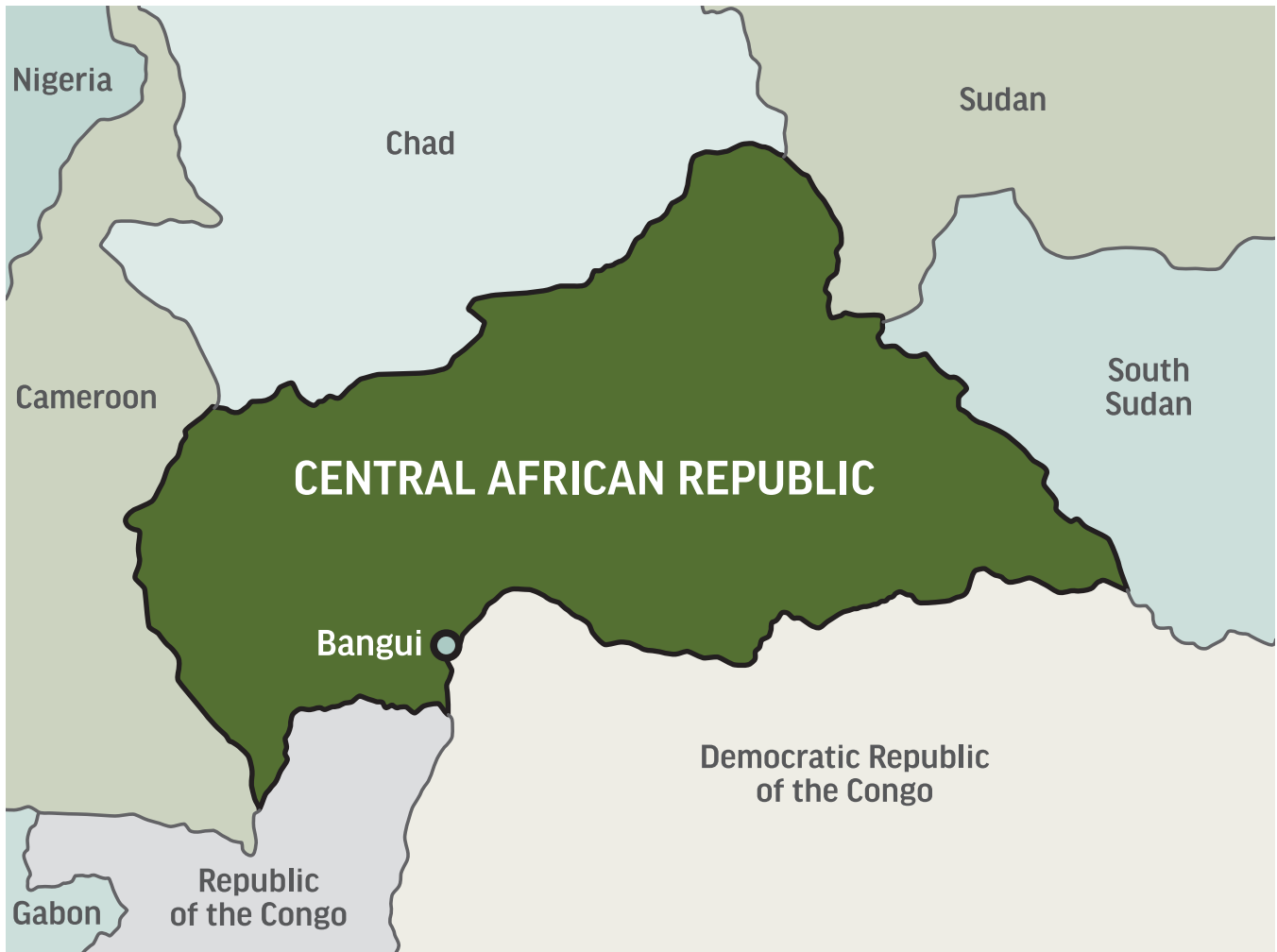
13 For more on this historical conflict context, see: Peter Knoope and Stephen Buchanan-Clarke, *Central African Republic: A Conflict Misunderstood* (Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2017), <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/central-african-republic-a-conflict-misunderstood/>.

14 Phuong N. Pham et al., "Assessment of Efforts to Hold Perpetrators of Conflict-related Sexual Violence Accountable in Central African Republic," *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 18, no. 2 (May 2020): 373–96, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jicj/mqaa009>.

15 Focus group discussions (FGDs), Spring 2022.

16 Alina Potts, Kathleen Myer, and Les Roberts. "Measuring Human Rights Violations in a Conflict-affected Country: Results from a Nationwide Cluster Survey in Central African Republic," *Conflict and Health* 5, no. 4 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1186/1752-1505-5-4>.

Figure 1. Map of the Central African Republic and surrounding states



States' Terrorist Exclusion list in 2001 and designated by the African Union as a terrorist organization in 2011—¹⁷still operates in the east, albeit at a much smaller scale.¹⁸ In this context, armed groups—and thus reintegration experiences—are diverse, with practices ranging from child soldiering to forced recruitment and with compositions ranging from

17 "Press Release: The African Union Commission Commends the United Nation's Listing of the Lord's Resistance Army and its leader, Joseph Kony, as Subject to Sanctions," *African Union*, 2016, <https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/auc-commends-the-united-nation-aos-listing-of-the-lra-and-its-leader-joseph-kony-as-subject-to-sanctions.pdf>. For information on the U.S. Terrorist Exclusion list, see: <https://www.state.gov/terrorist-exclusion-list/>.

18 "Central African Republic: UN Reports Detail Serious Violations, Some Possibly Amounting to War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity," *United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, July 25, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/07/central-african-republic-un-reports-detail-serious-violations-some-possibly>. See also, the UN Secretary General's 2023 Report on Children and Armed Conflict (S/2023/363): https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2023_363.pdf.

armed militias to community-based and nonstate armed groups.¹⁹ Past research has additionally warned of the vulnerability of CAR to exploitation by violent extremist groups due to fragile local conditions, some of which have been brought on by issues discussed in this case study, notably youth unemployment, conflict-related trauma, religious and social divides, and increased criminal and illicit activities.²⁰ Still, while violent extremist groups operate in surrounding states and across the broader region, to date, there is no evidence to suggest these groups have taken root in the country.²¹

In this context, the significance of the impact of the conflict on youth, as well as the importance of youth involvement in and perceptions of reintegration, local peacebuilding, and transitional justice, is of note. Based on UNESCO statistics, more than 65 percent of the population of CAR is under the age of twenty-four.²² Youth in CAR have been impacted, traumatized, and displaced by continuing cycles of violent conflict and continue to be actively recruited by armed groups as combatants.²³ A readout from a March 2023 United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council convening noted that “more than half a million children between the ages of three and seventeen were out of school or at risk of dropping out of school due to a severe lack of qualified teachers and inadequate school facilities.”²⁴ As of 2022, a majority of child rights violations documented in CAR were “related to the use of children in armed conflict, violations of their physical integrity and freedom, arbitrary detention, and conflict-related sexual violence.”²⁵ Studies in other conflict-affected contexts emphasizing the importance of local approaches to peacebuilding and to reintegration also highlight the ways in which these processes can be shaped by the youth who experience them.²⁶ In CAR specifically, others have underscored the central role of youth in establishing

19 For information on youth armed group recruitment, see, for example: *Young People and Armed Groups in the Central African Republic: Voices from Bossangoa* (Conciliation Resources, October 2020), https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Young_people_and_armed_groups_in_the_Central_African_Republic_Voices_from_Bossangoa.pdf.

20 Knoope and Buchanan-Clarke, *Central African Republic*.

21 For more on risks of violent extremism in CAR, see: Peter Knoope, Amanda Lucey, and Kessy Martine Ekomo Soignet, “How at Risk is the Central African Republic from Violent Extremism?” *The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation*, 2022.

22 UNESCO Institute for Statistics, “Central African Republic,” accessed August 8, 2023, <https://uis.unesco.org/en/country/cf>.

23 For more on youth in CAR, see: Basile Semba, “The Young Are Key to Avoiding Old Mistakes in Central African Republic,” *New Humanitarian*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2021/5/24/to-stop-conflict-in-central-african-republic-speak-with-youth>.

24 “Human Rights Council Discusses the Situation of Children in the Central African Republic and Strengthening Institutional Capacities in South Sudan.”

25 Ibid.

26 For more on youth and everyday peace, see, for example: Helen Berents, *Young People and Everyday Peace: Exclusion, Insecurity, and Peacebuilding in Colombia* (Routledge, 2018).

effective and sustainable violence prevention, long-term reintegration, and peacebuilding efforts, noting specifically the detriment of having not previously included youth input.²⁷

These factors combined only emphasize the need for a better understanding of local experiences and insight on the implementation of strategies, including reintegration efforts, to prevent further violence and limit its impact on youth and local communities. As in other fragile states, the reintegration of former combatants in CAR has proven complex and challenging.²⁸ With greater insight into some of these underexplored complexities and challenges—notably related to youth and local community experiences and traumas—policymakers and practitioners can learn from and adapt programming for more successful and conflict sensitive reintegration and violence prevention outcomes.

Reintegration, Justice, & Social Cohesion Amidst Chronic Insecurity

For many in CAR, reintegration takes place in a context of chronic insecurity where armed groups remain present. Three main dynamics explain progress on reintegration in CAR's most recent DDDR project:

- First, although reintegration activities have increased in CAR since the signing of the peace agreement in 2019, MINUSCA's DDDR policies (which support efforts by the CAR government) remain limited in scope and scale.²⁹ For example, in the earlier 2015 agreement between the CAR transitional government and armed groups, reintegration is primarily defined as a transfer of former combatants from demobilization programming back into "host" communities, along with the promise of community development initiatives that will assist them (and other members of the host community) in creating employment opportunities. However, the agreement specifies little beyond the expectation that this will lead to a reduction in violence.³⁰ Further, implementation has been delayed and few have benefited from

27 For more on youth in CAR, see: Semba, "The Young Are Key to Avoiding Old Mistakes in Central African Republic."

28 For policy analysis on current CAR dynamics, see: "Conflict in the Central African Republic," *Council on Foreign Relations*.

29 Interviews, Spring 2022.

30 See: "Central African Republic, Towards Demobilisation, Release and Repatriation," *ICRC*, <https://ihl-in-action.icrc.org/case-study/central-african-republic-towards-demobilisation-release-and-repatriation>.

the programs—those who have benefitted were mainly reintegrated into security forces.³¹

- Second, complementary to DDRR, MINUSCA implemented a violence prevention initiative in CAR—Community Violence Reduction (CVR)³²—that aims to address youth and community-based violence in several locations across the country.³³ Among those targeted for participation are youth “prone to violence including youth associated with armed groups and/or self-defense groups not eligible for”³⁴ the national DDRR program. In eastern CAR, several hundred youth have participated in these activities since 2018.³⁵ As of September 2022, MINUSCA reported that 22,337 youth have taken part in CVR activities across CAR.³⁶
- Third, in areas out of reach of these initiatives, reintegration support has been left to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local authorities.³⁷

Overall, reintegration efforts in CAR remain heavily influenced by the political, social, and security environment.³⁸ While reintegration encompasses government-led DDRR campaigns, MINUSCA CVR programs, and informal community-centered approaches, beyond anecdotal cases, it is generally limited to disarmament and demobilization rather than sustainable reintegration. Furthermore, reintegration takes place amid ongoing nonstate armed group violence and, importantly, is both linked to justice and social cohesion and operates parallel to transitional and formal justice mechanisms directed from Bangui. Justice and social cohesion and concerns of impunity and recidivism are prominent for many.³⁹

Although not characterized as a post-conflict country,⁴⁰ two transitional justice mechanisms have been implemented: the Special Criminal Court (SCC) and the Truth, Justice, Reparation

31 Interviews, Spring 2022.

32 Specht, “Innovations to DDR to Address Conflicts and Stabilise Combatants and Communities in the Central African Republic.”

33 For an overview on the CVR approach, see: “Disarmament Demobilization Reintegration,” *United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic*, https://minusca.unmissions.org/en/DDR_En.

34 Ibid.

35 Interviews, Spring 2022.

36 See note 33.

37 Interviews, Spring 2022.

38 “Reintegration” is used hereafter in this report to describe the umbrella of initiatives related to reintegration in CAR.

39 “MINUSCA Chief to Security Council: Decade-long Cycle of Conflict Can Be Broken,” *United Nations News*, June 20, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1137947>.

40 “Conflict in the Central African Republic,” *Council on Foreign Relations*.

and Reconciliation Commission (CVJRR).⁴¹ Supported by the UN and the International Criminal Court, the SCC and CVJRR aim to bring armed group leaders and perpetrators of grave human rights violations, including CRSV, to justice.⁴² According to interviews conducted for this case study, the launch of these initiatives sparked local conversations about establishing transitional justice mechanisms locally.⁴³ Many participants in this research saw CVR interventions as a preliminary step to justice and to reintegration.⁴⁴ They viewed transitional justice as an essential step to break the cycle of violence and combat impunity,⁴⁵ and expressed that the roots of further conflict can form if victims are not compensated for damages incurred during the conflict.⁴⁶

Complicating efforts to expand and implement justice mechanisms in the country is the fact that people in CAR predominantly experience conflict as localized within their communities and surroundings areas.⁴⁷ Some have described conflict and violence as an illness or epidemic that their communities “caught.” As one individual interviewed for this project noted: “War came to us and now we want it to leave.”⁴⁸ Widespread trauma and this lack of a unifying historical narrative characterizing conflict in CAR contribute to a lack of consensus on what sparked the most recent cycle of conflict ten years ago.⁴⁹ This, combined with the localized impacts of conflict, poses specific challenges related to and spanning beyond the judicial context. When combined with chronic insecurity and violence, these challenges can further stymie social cohesion and reintegration.

41 “Paving the Way for Transitional Justice in CAR,” *United Nations Peacekeeping*, February 22, 2021, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/paving-way-transitional-justice-car>.

42 UN Peacekeeping, “Paving the Way.”

43 Interviews, Spring 2022.

44 FGD, Spring 2022.

45 FGD, Spring 2022. This echoes findings from HHI/UNDP survey report: http://www.peacebuildingdata.org/sites/m/pdf/CAR_Poll6_FR.pdf.

46 Interviews, Spring 2022.

47 Interviews, Spring 2022.

48 Interviews, Spring 2022.

49 Knoope & Buchanan-Clarke, *Central African Republic*.

Trauma & Reintegration

Understanding reintegration

Literature on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) frames reintegration as essential to successful war-to-peace transitions.⁵⁰ The primary goal of reintegration processes has been to help ex-combatants acquire civilian status and obtain sustainable employment and income.⁵¹ Overall, the importance and imperative of reintegration,⁵² alongside addressing youth grievances,⁵³ to resolving conflict is well established in the literature, as are critiques of existing reintegration processes.⁵⁴ Studies focused on reintegration not only take different avenues in analyzing reintegration processes (focusing on the process, the ex-combatant, or the communities in which they occur), but also question their sustainability, complexity, and linearity.⁵⁵ Some studies focused on reintegration

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- 50 Mats Berdal, *Disarmament and Demobilisation after Civil Wars: Arms, Soldiers and the Termination of Armed Conflicts* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1996); Kees Kingma, "Assessing Demobilization: Conceptual Issues," in *Demobilization in Sub-Saharan Africa* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 23–44, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-62742-4_2; Anders Themner and Thomas Ohlson, "Legitimate Peace in Post-civil War States: Towards Attaining the Unattainable," *Conflict, Security & Development* 14, no. 1 (2014): 61–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2014.881088>.
- 51 Anders Nilsson, "Reintegrating Ex-combatants in Post-Conflict Societies," *Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency*, 2005. <https://www.sida.se/en/publications/reintegrating-ex-combatants>; Gwinyayi A. Dzinesa, "Postconflict Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Southern Africa," *International Studies Perspectives* 8, no. 1 (2007): 73–89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1528-3585.2007.00270.x>; Andy Knight, "Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration and Post-conflict Peacebuilding in Africa: An Overview," *African security* 1, no. 1 (2008): 24–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19362200802285757>.
- 52 Kees Kingma, "Demobilization of Combatants after Civil Wars in Africa and Their Reintegration into Civilian Life," *Policy sciences* 30, no. 3 (1997): 151–165, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1004215705156>; Jessica Schafer, "A Baby Who Does Not Cry Will Not Be Suckled': AMODEG and the Reintegration of Demobilised Soldiers," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 1 (1998): 207–222, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057079808708573>; Mats Utas, "West-African Warscapes: Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman's Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone," *Anthropological Quarterly* (2005): 403–30, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4150840>.
- 53 Yukitoshi Matsumoto, "Education for Demilitarizing Youth in Post-conflict Afghanistan," *Research in Comparative and International Education* 3, no. 1 (2008): 65–78, <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2008.3.1.65>.
- 54 Mats Berdal and David H. Ucko, eds., "Introduction to the DDR Forum: Rethinking the Reintegration of Former Combatants," *International Peacekeeping* 20, no. 3 (2013): 316–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2013.843971>; Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy W. Weinstein, "Demobilization and Reintegration," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 4 (2007): 531–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002707302790>; Else Derluyn et al., "Toward a Relational Understanding of the Reintegration and Rehabilitation Processes of Former Child Soldiers," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 22, no. 8 (2013): 869–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2013.824058>.
- 55 Randolph Wallace Rhea, "Ex-Combatant Reintegration in the Great Lakes Region: Processes & Mechanisms, Trajectories & Paradoxes," 2016, <https://hdl.handle.net/10037/9500>.

needs have explored specific elements of reintegration, including psychosocial support.⁵⁶ Michael Wessels, for example, highlights the psychosocial needs of former child soldiers in Uganda⁵⁷ in his own research.

Other research on reintegration has highlighted the importance of community perspectives of reintegration processes and the contexts in which they occur. For example, recent research in Nigeria emphasized community attitudes towards ex-combatants in post-conflict contexts as instrumental to DDR success.⁵⁸ Critiques of reintegration focused on processes alone argue that considerations should go beyond reintegration assessments and examine the reintegration contexts and the role of ex-combatants in post-conflict societies.⁵⁹ Stressing this point, in contexts experiencing ongoing conflict, scholars argue that if reintegration efforts are unsuccessful, violence remains a risk.⁶⁰

Understanding trauma

Citing Judith Herman's 1997 book, *Trauma and Recovery*, Liza Hester notes that "trauma—when an experience overwhelms natural capacities to manage distress—arises in reaction to different situations and conflicts."⁶¹ Research on trauma from the disciplinary perspective of global mental health and psychology outlines the prevalent exposure to trauma across populations who have experienced conflict and migration.⁶² Importantly, research also

56 Anders Themnér, *Violence in Post-conflict Societies: Remarginalization, Remobilizers and Relationships* (New York: Routledge, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203814598>; Themnér and Ohlson, "Legitimate Peace in Post-civil War States"; and Richard Bowd and Alasplan Özerdem, "How to Assess Social Reintegration of Ex-combatants," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 7, no. 4 (2013): 453–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2012.727537>.

57 Michael Wessels, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*, (Harvard University Press, 2006).

58 Tarela Juliet Ike et al., "Rethinking Reintegration in Nigeria: Community Perceptions of Former Boko Haram Combatants," *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2021): 661–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1872376>.

59 Robert Muggah, "No Magic Bullet: A Critical Perspective on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and Weapons Reduction in Post-conflict Contexts," *The Round Table* 94, no. 379 (2005): 239–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358530500082684>; McMullin, *Ex-combatants and the Post-conflict State*; Berdal and Ucko, "Introduction to the DDR Forum."

60 Siobhán McEvoy-Levy, ed., *Troublemakers or Peacemakers? Youth and Post-accord Peace Building* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); and Subedi Dambar and Bert Jenkins, "The Nexus between Reintegration of Ex-combatants and Reconciliation in Nepal: A Social Capital Approach," in *Reconciliation in Conflict-Affected Communities*, 41–56 (Singapore: Springer, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-6800-3_3.

61 Liza Hester, "Examining Peacebuilding through a Trauma Lens: Practitioner Reflections on Programs for Youth Exposed to Traumatic Stressors in Intergroup Conflict," *Peace and Conflict Studies* 23, no. 2 (2016): 5, <https://doi.org/10.46743/1082-7307/2016.1345>.

62 Kathryn M. Magruder, Katie A. McLaughlin and Diane L. Elmore Borbon, "Trauma is a Public Health Issue," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 8, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2017.1375338>.

highlights the danger of ignoring psychological trauma and its impact in conflict contexts,⁶³ and has called for further examination of the phenomena.⁶⁴ Evidence from Colombia, Sri Lanka, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, suggests that repeated exposure to violence, potential stigma (from experiencing sexual violence or abduction, for example), forced migration, and resource scarcity are immediate mental health concerns during and after conflict.⁶⁵ The impact of armed conflict on children's mental health is of particular concern.⁶⁶ This is true of trauma among children impacted by conflict, as well as those who participated in it. For example, scholarship on the subject outlines how the trauma of conflict⁶⁷ and violence relates to stigma and mental health challenges among former child soldiers.⁶⁸ More broadly, literature on conflict and trauma covers the negative

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- 63 Siddharth Ashvin Shah, Elizabeth Garland, and Craig Katz, "Secondary Traumatic Stress: Prevalence in Humanitarian Aid Workers in India," *Traumatology* 13, no. 1 (2007): 59–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534765607299910>; Allan K. Chrisman, and Joseph G. Dougherty, "Mass Trauma: Disasters, Terrorism, and War," *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics* 23, no. 2 (2014): 257–79, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chc.2013.12.004>; and Anna Ornert, "Implications of Not Addressing Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Needs in Conflict Situations," 2019, <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/14493>.
- 64 Hugo De Vries and Nikkie Wiegink, "Breaking Up and Going Home? Contesting Two Assumptions in the Demobilization and Reintegration of Former Combatants," *International Peacekeeping* 18, no. 1 (2011): 38–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2011.527506>; and McMullin, *Ex-combatants and the Post-conflict State*.
- 65 Garth Stevens, Gillian Eagle, Debra Kaminer, and Craig Higson-Smith., "Continuous Traumatic Stress: Conceptual Conversations in Contexts of Global Conflict, Violence and Trauma," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 19, no 2 (2013): 75–84, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032484>; James M. Shultz et al., "Internally Displaced 'Victims of Armed Conflict' in Colombia: The Trajectory and Trauma Signature of Forced Migration," *Current Psychiatry Reports* 16 (2014): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-014-0475-7>; and Lars Dumke et al., "Patterns of Conflict-related Trauma Exposure and Their Relation to Psychopathology: A Person-centered Analysis in a Population-based Sample from Eastern DRC," *SSM-mental Health* 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2021.100005>.
- 66 Daniel S. Pine et al., "Trauma, Proximity, and Developmental Psychopathology: The Effects of War and Terrorism on Children," *Neuropsychopharmacology* 30, no. 10 (2005): 1781–1792, <https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.npp.1300814>; and Ruth Feldman and Adva Vengrober, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Infants and Young Children Exposed to War-related Trauma," *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 50, no. 7 (2011): 645–58, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2011.03.001>.
- 67 Mona S. Macksoud and J. Lawrence Abe, "The War Experiences and Psychosocial Development of Children in Lebanon," *Child development* 67, no. 1 (1996): 70–88, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1996.tb01720.x>; and Richard F. Mollica et al., "The Mental Health Sequelae of Traumatic Head Injury in South Vietnamese Ex-political Detainees Who Survived Torture," *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 55, no. 7 (2014): 1626–38, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.comppsy.2014.04.014>.
- 68 Theresa Betancourt et al., "Past Horrors, Present Struggles: The Role of Stigma in the Association between War Experiences and Psychosocial Adjustment among Former Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone," *Social Science & Medicine* 70, no. 1 (2010): 17–26, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2009.09.038>.

impact trauma can yield for ex-combatants and communities, but, with a few notable exceptions,⁶⁹ seldom examines how trauma experiences impact reintegration.⁷⁰

Understanding trauma's impact on reintegration

A focus on reintegration offers a valuable lens through which to study peacebuilding, social cohesion, and violence prevention efforts in local contexts, including areas, grievances, and individual experiences that have been left neglected and can undermine broader social goals. Studies focusing on the failures of reintegration processes and studies demonstrating the impacts of trauma among conflict-affected youth, ex-combatants, and communities tend to occur separately from one another. Overall, scholarship investigating the ways in which trauma and reintegration interact and impact youth and local communities remains limited and, as such, does not provide sufficient evidentiary support to practitioners and policymakers operating in the violence prevention and peacebuilding space, particularly in contexts where youth are active participants in conflict.

With this gap in mind and through a narrative case study approach, this case study builds on previous studies and asks a central research question: *How do conflict-affected youth in the Central African Republic experience conflict, trauma, and reintegration?*

The following three questions supported the qualitative inquiry:

- What challenges to reintegration are most salient in CAR?
- How have trauma and conflict experiences shaped reintegration?
- How is civil society partaking in reintegration and psychosocial support efforts?

69 Michael Niconchuk, *Whose Vulnerability? Trauma Recovery in the Reintegration of Former Violent Extremists* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.37805/pn2021.16.vedr>.

70 Christopher Blattman and Jeannie Annan, "Child Combatants in Northern Uganda: Reintegration Myths and Realities," in *Security and Post-Conflict Reconstruction* (London: Routledge, 2008), 123–145, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203886915>; Myriam S. Denov, *Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), <http://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.169>; Betancourt et al., "Sierra Leone's Former Child Soldiers: A Follow-up Study of Psychosocial Adjustment and Community Reintegration," *Child Development* 81, no. 4 (2010): 1077–95, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01455.x>; Sophie Vindevogel, Michael Wessells, Maarten De Schryver, Eric Broekaert, and Ilse Derluyn, "Dealing with the Consequences of War: Resources of Formerly Recruited and Non-recruited Youth in Northern Uganda," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 55, no. 1 (2014): 134–40, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2013.11.023>.

The report makes two contributions. First, it examines the relationship between reintegration, trauma, and violence prevention among conflict-affected youth in CAR and specifically explores links between trauma experiences and peacebuilding contexts. Second, it frames conflict and reintegration as fundamentally lived experiences and centers youth narratives as the focus of the research. This approach aims to provide a trauma-informed and conflict-sensitive research framework that supports exploring current empirical and conceptual understandings of a complex “real world” phenomenon.⁷¹ It considers the local conflict context in its implementation and participants’ traumatic experiences in its delivery from the perspective of those impacted by it.

71 Colin Robson and Kieran McCartan, *Real World Research* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

Building on qualitative research on mental health in CAR carried out by Palo Alto University,⁷² this case study engaged conflict-affected youth and communities in CAR in both qualitative narrative interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) and body mapping exercises to further explore thematic insights into experiences of reintegration, trauma, and conflict.⁷³ A brief discussion of each technique and its implementation in this research is included below.

Qualitative Interviews & Focus Group Discussions

Qualitative interviewing has been used extensively to examine experiences of violence.⁷⁴ The method allows for in-depth examination of participants' experiences and views of their environment.⁷⁵ Narrative interviews take the form of discussion focused on themes rather than specific questions. The narrative discussions—whether individual or group—establish participants as leading the exchange and interrogate their views, memories, and experiences. In practice, we found participants chose FGDs, which offered a more suitable means for sharing their narrative. These discussions are centered in a biographical research method aimed at understanding participants' life experiences.⁷⁶

72 Patel et al., "A Qualitative Approach."

73 For this project, a methodology anchored in trauma-informed practice was selected.

74 Christine Barter and Emma Renold, "I Wanna Tell You a Story': Exploring the Application of Vignettes in Qualitative Research with Children and Young People," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 3, no. 4 (2000): 307–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570050178594>.

75 Coralie McCormack, "Storying Stories: A Narrative Approach to In-depth Interview Conversations," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 7, no. 3 (2004): 219–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570210166382>.

76 Joanna Bornat, "Biographical Methods," *The Sage Handbook of Social Research Methods* (2008): 344–56, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446212165.n20>.

Body Mapping

This study also employed the “body mapping” method—the process of creating life-size human body images, or “body maps,” using drawing, painting, or other art-based techniques to visually represent aspects of people’s lives, their bodies, and the world they live in”⁷⁷—to gather data supplemented by narrative interviews or FGDs. Body maps tell a story and simultaneously challenge the interpretation of those stories.⁷⁸ Through the process, participants create a visual and mental representation of their experiences.⁷⁹ The maps are then discussed with research participants who participate in the initial thematic analysis.

Drawing methodologies have been used as an assessment tool in global mental health for many years.⁸⁰ These unique methods can create space for expression of lived experiences by vulnerable or underrepresented groups.⁸¹ The use of body mapping in geography and health research is common and its recent use with migrant populations has been impactful.⁸² The process enables participants to communicate creatively through a deeper, more reflexive process.⁸³ Part of the richness of the method lies in its flexibility and adaptability. There is no single method of body mapping; it can be adapted to a variety of contexts.⁸⁴ When successfully adapted, the approach offers a safe space for individuals to reflect on potentially

77 Denise Gastaldo et al., “Body-map Storytelling as a Health Research Methodology: Blurred Lines Creating Clear Pictures,” *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 19, no. 2 (2018): 1–26, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-19.2.2858>.

78 Treena Orchard et al., “Imagining Adherence: Body Mapping Research with HIV-positive Men and Women in Canada,” *AIDS Research and Human Retroviruses* 30, no. 4 (2014): 337–38, <https://doi.org/10.1089/aid.2014.0021>.

79 For more on the ethics and origins of body-mapping, see: Treena Orchard, *Remembering the Body: Ethical Issues in Body Mapping Research* (New York, NY: Springer International Publishing, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-49861-4>.

80 Sarah Baird et al., “Identifying Psychological Trauma among Syrian Refugee Children for Early Intervention: Analyzing Digitized Drawings Using Machine Learning,” *Journal of Development Economics* 156 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2022.102822>; and Cassandra Rowe et al., “Evaluating Art Therapy to Heal the Effects of Trauma among Refugee Youth: The Burma Art Therapy Program Evaluation,” *Health Promotion Practice* 18, no. 1 (2017): 26–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839915626413>.

81 Adèle De Jager et al., “Embodied Ways of Storying the Self: A Systematic Review of Body-mapping,” in *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/forum: Qualitative Social Research* 17, no. 2 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-17.2.2526>; and Chernelle Lambert et al., “Making Life Stories Visible: An Ethnographic Study of Body Mapping in the Context of HIV and AIDS in South Africa,” *Anthropology & Medicine* (2021): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2021.1893981>.

82 For insights on body-territory mapping in geography and its ethical implications, see: Rosa Dos Ventos Lopes Heimer, “Travelling Cuerpo-Territorios: A Decolonial Feminist Geographical Methodology to Conduct Research with Migrant Women,” *Third World Thematics* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23802014.2022.2108130>.

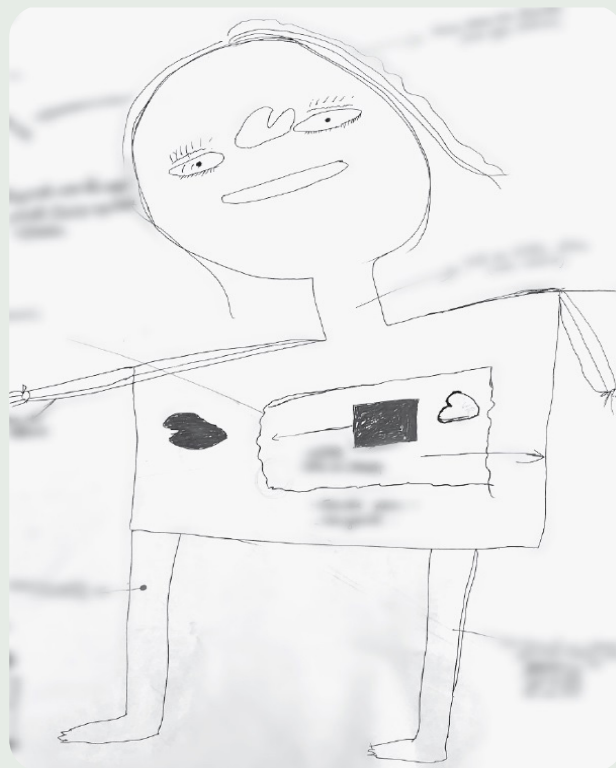
83 Michelle Skop, “The Art of Body Mapping: A Methodological Guide for Social Work Researchers,” *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work* 28, no. 4 (2016): 29–43, <http://dx.doi.org/10.11157/anzswj-vol28iss4id295>.

84 Elizabeth L. Sweet, and Sara Ortiz Escalante, “Engaging Territorio Cuerpo-tierra through Body and Community Mapping: A Methodology for Making Communities Safer,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no. 4 (2017): 594–606. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2016.1219325>.

difficult experiences through a non-verbal process that supports both individual reflection and follow-on community exchanges.

Body maps have two uses particularly applicable to this research. As a biographical tool, body maps can be used to show and tell people's life stories and important relationships.⁸⁵ As a research method, they explore themes "derived from people's lived experiences."⁸⁶ Figure 2, for example, shows a body map completed during the data collection phase of this project. Based on the author's conversations during the exercise and subsequent analysis, it depicts the loss and pain of loss experienced during conflict. Portions of this map and others appearing in this report to illustrate research findings have been blurred to protect the privacy and anonymity of the individuals who participated in this research. Where relevant, portions of the maps have also been magnified for clarity and ease of interpretation.

Figure 2. Body map, loss and physical reminders



Body map depicting pain of loss during conflict and the physical scars that remain (Body mapping exercise, Central African Republic, Spring 2022).

Given the potential benefit and broader application of this method in similar research, Text Box 1 provides additional insight on the method, and a special section at the end of this report, expands on lessons learned from using body mapping as a tool for research based on this study.

85 Serena Coetzee et al., "Collaborative Custodianship through Collaborative Cloud Mapping: Challenges and Opportunities," in *29th International Cartographic Conference (ICC 2019) 2*, 2019. [10.5194/ica-proc-2-19-2019](https://doi.org/10.5194/ica-proc-2-19-2019).

86 De Jager et al., "Embodied Ways"; and Maïke Klein and Rebecca J. Milner, "The Use of Body-mapping in Interpretative Phenomenological Analyses: A Methodological Discussion," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 22, no. 5 (2019): 533–43.

Text Box 1. Body Mapping in Research and Practice

Body mapping originated in South Africa and the Caribbean as a therapeutic approach for women with HIV¹ that aimed to explore personal narratives of HIV and refocus discussion on survivors' experiences.² It later evolved into a research method and a programming tool. Projects in Colombia have long relied on body mapping— or *Cuerpo Territorio*—in feminist and peacebuilding spaces, using narrative discussion and body mapping in conflict-affected contexts³ and, recently, to explore topics related to peacebuilding, education, and human rights.⁴

In research, body mapping constitutes an opportunity to deepen our understanding of localized social dynamics and communities' experiences in a trauma-informed way. It can bring dominant issues to the surface, and it has potential for use with vulnerable youth and those who have not had access to formal education. In practice, body mapping offers a means to engage community members on their needs and experiences, which could serve as a resource for program design and evaluation in peacebuilding interventions. Body mapping also has the potential as a group activity to bring together children and youth as part of social cohesion programming. Nonetheless, the approach requires a delicate and sensitive contextual adaptation implemented alongside research participants.⁵

The creative method can enable and foster a safe space for research participants, offering ways to explore the lived experiences of trauma in conflict without relying on narrating specific events and provides an entry point to sensitively interacting with communities. Accompanied by narrative discussions of the maps with research participants, it also allows participants the opportunity to participate in the initial thematic analysis. Such an approach to peacebuilding and conflict research can harness unique insights and offer policy recommendations useful in the design and evaluation of various peacebuilding programs and P/CVE programs.

1 Lambert et al., "Making Life Stories Visible."

2 Initially, body-mapping utilized art and memory therapy, see MSF Access Campaign, "Body Maps."

3 Sofia Zaragocin and Martina Angela Caretta, "Cuerpo-territorio: A Decolonial Feminist Geographical Method for the Study of Embodiment," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111, no. 5 (2021): 1503–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2020.1812370>.

4 For an example of body-mapping in Colombia, see: Monica Lozano, Mario Mendoza Toraya, Daniela Montaña, and Rodrigo Parra Sandoval, "Participatory research, biographical narratives and peacebuilding: An experience with teachers in Tolima, Colombia." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 125 (2023): 104054.

5 The method should also be adapted to the local context.

Data Collection

To effectively implement the approach and select research participants, this project adopted a convenience sampling methodology. With a focus on individual narratives, the project design rested primarily on field research. The table below outlines the research implementation in CAR and the resulting data collected.

Table 1. Data Collection Overview

Methods	Objectives	Data Collection	Research Participants
Body Mapping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life before and after conflict Views of reintegration and trauma 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 body mapping workshops 35 body maps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 13 youth 22 CVR youth
Narrative Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build in-depth understanding of conflict, reintegration, and trauma narratives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8 interviews 7 youth FGDs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8 local leaders (community, youth, religious, victims' representatives) 15 youth 15 CVR youth

Fieldwork took place between March and May 2022 in two locations, one in the east and one in the west of the country.⁸⁷ These locations were selected based on the following criteria:

- the likely presence of diverse youth experiences;
- conducting research in these locations would be appropriate for researchers and participants at that point in time; and
- access to these locations could be reasonably arranged through the UN infrastructure present in the selected areas.

⁸⁷ Ethics approval was granted by King's College London (number-RESCM-21/22-21030).

In each location, we first presented the research project to community and local leaders, after which we invited youth and local leaders from different areas (rural, peri-urban, and urban) to participate. Across locations, we recruited participants with the support of civil society organizations, international NGOs, MINUSCA DDR, and DDR initiatives. The author conducted the research in French with the support of two research partners and translators (for Sango- and Zande-speaking participants). Half of the forty research participants were women.

Four body mapping workshops took place primarily with women and youth, each over a half-day in a large private space. Each session began with a presentation of the project, its aims, and a demonstration of body mapping and display of the resulting body maps. Groups of four participants were brought together with drawing materials. Small group sessions began with drawing a shape of a body and identifying key details that make the drawing personal. After this, the workshop split into three parts designated for: (1) exploring life memories, (2) illustrating current circumstances, and (3) drawing ideas about the future. Participants were invited to continue drawing anything additional to illustrate their lives. Generally, participants requested that group discussions take place directly after the workshop. Group discussions were requested by groups made up of women and the subsequent FGDs were integrated in the research design.⁸⁸ Most participants discussed their body maps in a manner of describing their lives to the research team.⁸⁹ Outside of the body mapping exercises, interviews with local leaders were conducted to further support the overall analysis. Based on the research experience, this report suggests further use of visual and narrative methods in future research and practice.

Data analysis—including thematic analysis and narrative interpretation—was conducted in three stages. Initial analysis was carried out in the field with local partners, particularly to identify central themes on the body maps as well as those that came to light during the discussions. Analyses of the body maps and narratives were conducted separately. Themes identified in the body maps established the framework for subsequent analysis.

88 Additional body-mapping workshops were organized to accommodate participants' requests and out of respect for COVID-19 guidelines.

89 Participants showing potential signs of distress were offered connections to MHPSS services and referred to them for further mental health and psychosocial support.

Adaptations & Limitations

Conducting research in a conflict-affected context alongside populations that have likely experienced deep trauma is challenging and comes with several limitations. The research design and data collection for this study also required several adaptations.

First, the initial design of the study focused on ex-combatants and specifically youth formerly associated with armed groups as the central sample. After initiating the research alongside local partners, circumstances necessitated two modifications to the original design. Access to ex-combatants who participated in national Central African government DDRR programs was difficult and, as a result, the research adapted to focus on conflict-affected youth, including those who had participated in a UN CVR project. While this limited our ability to derive perspectives from those who actually participated in formal reintegration processes, it did allow us the opportunity to explore perceptions of those processes and the experiences of those who participated in parallel CVR efforts. Further, the involvement of youth more generally (beyond just those who participated in CVR) enabled the research to adequately explore experiences of reintegration and violence prevention and thereby provide a more complete picture of its current state in CAR.

Second, identifying locations for data collection depended on physical access, the security context at the time of research, and partners who could assist in implementing the research. At the time of the fieldwork, locations were selected based on the presence of the UN and NGOs, local authorities, and whether or not there was support for the research in those locations. Locations were also selected based on attention to ensuring diversity, partnership, and access throughout the research process. Based on these criteria, research was implemented in two cities, and their surrounding areas, over a period of two months. Within each location, our sample was also limited, selective, and in part determined by the UN and NGO programs in each area. Based on initial conversations with community leaders and a review of the method and its suitability in local communities,⁹⁰ participant selection was narrowed to peri-urban and rural conflict-affected youth,⁹¹ community leaders, and

90 We conducted community engagement meetings with local leaders and representatives to both review and present the methods selected for this research. Tools were translated alongside Central African partners and reviewed for appropriateness.

91 For more on children and youth formerly associated with armed groups, see: *Brighter Futures for Children: A Year of Impact: 2022 Annual Report* (Save the Children, 2022), <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/resource-library/annual-report>.

religious leaders. Given these geographic and participant sampling limitations, findings derived from this study are not necessarily broadly generalizable nor representative of experiences throughout the country as a whole.

Third, when beginning data collection, we found narrative discussions to be much more successful in a group setting and that certain groups were less eager to engage with the body mapping methodology. As a result, we shifted our approach to center on FGDs. Interviews were carried out with mostly local leaders.

FINDINGS

This study explains how conflict-affected youth experience reintegration, trauma, and conflict. Based on an analysis of the body maps, it interrogates how experiences of trauma and of the struggle for survival deeply shape reintegration—and peacebuilding more widely—in CAR. Through this approach, the results find trauma and conflict to be deeply intertwined and show that loss, emotional distress, and displacement deeply impact youth experiences. In doing so, it finds that the relationship between trauma and reintegration is shaped by everyday survival, community trauma, and efforts toward violence reduction. The table below details the themes identified within and across the 35 body maps created by research participants and through subsequent discussion.⁹²

⁹² Central themes were first identified alongside research partners in CAR and then discussed with participants in group discussions. Themes were then coded through initial analysis of the maps and reassessed alongside recordings.

Table 2. Body Mapping Themes

Theme Identified	Description	Theme Prevalance (by count)
Trauma	Traumatic events and intrusive memories were depicted by all research participants. Conflict was presented as remaining on the mind, its psychological scars leading to physical symptoms, such as nightmares and headaches. All participants drew experiences of trauma either as events that were most impactful or as memories that prevent them from experiencing life fully.	35
Survival	Over half of the body maps depicted their daily lives as survival, as a struggle to rebuild life, suffering from hunger, and experiencing broken social relationships in their communities. Institutional challenges and existing policies were also represented as insufficiently supportive.	20
Loss	Participants illustrated the loss of family, belongings, and dreams. Some had lost their home and loved ones; some had lost the possibility to hope for something better.	14
Social Cohesion	Participant depictions of social cohesion fall in three categories: concern for the future social cohesion, focus on family cohesion and a hope for peace.	12
Displacement	Participants depicted displacement from one location to another due to violence. Of those who experienced displacement, most travelled to the DRC and back. Many participants have yet to return to their home communities.	9
Emotional Distress	Emotions including anger, hatred, and fear were depicted by participants. Feelings of revenge were also illustrated by many.	8
Socioeconomic Support	Participants illustrated the socioeconomic support they received from religious leaders, NGOs or MINUSCA as instrumental to their daily lives and survival.	7

Reintegration & Community Violence Reduction: Two Sides of the Same Coin

Reintegration was understood by youth in urban, peri-urban, and rural areas of CAR as a form of violence reduction and prevention. In a context of chronic insecurity, youth perceived reintegration as prevention—a necessary strategy to prevent yet another cycle of violence.⁹³ Focus group participants expressed that, without a viable livelihood alternative for ex-combatants, criminality and a return to armed group participation become immediate concerns.⁹⁴ At the same time, interviews with community leaders suggested that reintegration efforts have been slow to materialize, which has caused worry within local communities.⁹⁵

Conflict-affected youth also expressed concern that state-sponsored DDRR efforts had thus far been limited in scope and recognized the value of the complementary CVR approach. To reiterate an earlier point, the CVR program was launched as an effort to support conflict-affected youth, including youth associated with armed groups and community youth, notably “to reduce violence at the community level and strengthen the resilience of communities against local and external conflict dynamics.”⁹⁶

The opportunity for CVR support was noted as widely appreciated by conflict-affected youth but was perceived as failing in fulfilling some of its promises. Youth identified a lack of opportunities to market the skills acquired through these programs, lack of post-training support, and insufficient adaptation of programs for local communities. This finding corroborates trends discussed in literature on DDR programs more broadly, critiquing limited and short vocational training with little follow-up support, whether that support be financial, material, or emotional.⁹⁷ CVR, on the other hand, was recognized by participants as an experience that could further fuel stigma and challenge delicate balances of social

93 FGDs, Spring 2022.

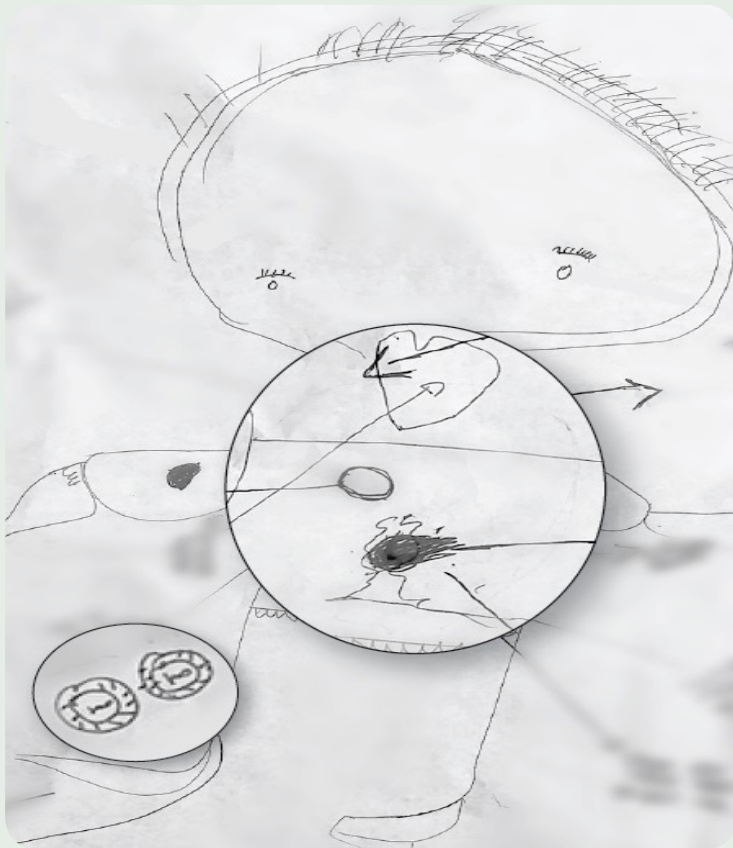
94 FGDs, Spring 2022.

95 Interviews, Spring 2022.

96 MINUSCA, “Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration.”

97 Robert Muggah and Chris O’Donnell, “Next Generation Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration,” *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 4, no. 1 (2015), <http://doi.org/10.5334/sta.fs>; and Jairo Munive and Finn Stepputat, “Rethinking Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programs,” *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 4, no. 1 (2015), <http://doi.org/10.5334/sta.go>.

Figure 3. Body map, pain and financial hardship



Body map that depicts lingering pain in the heart and stomach of the participant, and the financial hardship that characterizes their everyday life. Magnified areas appear in two circles, one to the bottom left magnifying a depiction of money, and one in the center magnifying depictions of the heart and stomach (Body mapping exercise, Central African Republic, Spring 2022).

cohesion. Like in the DRC or Sierra Leone,⁹⁸ CVR youth in CAR were, in some cases, seen as having access to opportunities that are often not available to the wider community. Many expressed concerns that support for other survivors was not provided in parallel to these efforts. Analysis of the body maps and narrated illustrations further echoed well-established critiques in the study of reintegration.⁹⁹

Interestingly, “cash for work” opportunities were seen as a starting point that would facilitate reintegration. For those who saw CVR as an opportunity to change life paths, the experience was deemed more successful. Two CVR youth, for example, outlined how after participating, they utilized the funds received to go back to secondary school or to start a small business. They described

their experience as beginning their reintegration process and leaving what happens in the next phases of the process “up to them.”¹⁰⁰ For others, reintegration activities were understood as “faire quelque chose” (doing something). The use of the phrase referred to

98 See, for example: Michel Thill, *In Search of a Winning Formula: Lessons on DDR and Community Reintegration in the Democratic Republic of the Congo* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2021), <https://www.ssrc.org/publications/view/in-search-of-a-winning-formula-lessons-on-ddr-and-community-reintegration-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo>.

99 For an example of well-established critiques, see: Berdal and Ucko, *Reintegrating Armed Groups after Conflict*; and Rhea, “Ex-Combatant Reintegration.”

100 Interviews, Spring 2022.

“taking action” rather than waiting for governing structures, local authorities, or international organizations to provide further support.¹⁰¹

These findings support research on ex-combatants’ experiences in other sub-Saharan countries that discuss the delicate balance between youth having “nothing to do” and the provision of support that can be perceived as “rewarding” armed group participation.¹⁰² The latter concern was particularly salient among several youth participating in this case study for whom justice took priority over reintegration support,¹⁰³ and for whom trauma and emotions defined how reintegration was considered. For many participants, the experience of seeing those who participated in violence either brings back trauma, potentially triggering re-traumatization, or elicits emotions of anger, fear, and revenge. These two sets of experiences also brought to the surface community concerns around impunity. One youth leader highlighted that if those who committed atrocities were not punished, this would lead to further violence, either in the form of taking revenge or because it would create an understanding that there would be no consequences for committing atrocities.¹⁰⁴ In either case, impunity was seen as fueling a cycle of conflict that prevents communities from moving forward beyond the conflict.

These narratives require further investigation to establish how to effectively present and implement reintegration programs. Interestingly, findings across participant groups were aligned in their consideration of reintegration as something that is within, and not separate from, wider peacebuilding processes and transitional justice efforts and as an effort requiring investment beyond initial violence reduction strategies alone.¹⁰⁵

101 Workshops, FGDs, and Interviews, Spring 2022.

102 For a more complete discussion of these themes, see, for example: Nikkie Wiegink, “‘It Will Be Our Time to Eat’: Former Renamo Combatants and Big-man Dynamics in Central Mozambique,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 41, no. 4 (2015): 869–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2015.1060090>; or Nikkie Wiegink, “Why Did the Soldiers Not Go Home? Demobilized Combatants, Family Life, and Witchcraft in Postwar Mozambique,” *Anthropological Quarterly* (2013): 107–32. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41857313>; McMullin, *Ex-combatants and the Post-conflict State*.

103 FGDs, Spring 2022.

104 Interviews, Spring 2022.

105 FGDs, Spring 2022.

Reintegration: A Barrier to & Necessity for Survival

Conflict-affected youth widely experienced reintegration as a part of the everyday psychological, social, and economic challenges that hinder daily life. Most participants discussed difficulties in meeting the basic needs of themselves and their families at length. They discussed limited opportunities that were negatively impacted by current security and social dynamics. Participants often referred to peaceful times prior to conflict. For women in particular, the financial burden to support and provide for children was widely described as different from in the times “before conflict.”¹⁰⁶ This they explained as resulting from a combination of experiencing stigmatization and the loss of family members during outbreaks of violence.¹⁰⁷ They described stigma and rejection from host communities, family members, and social support structures because of their participation in, support of, or association with armed groups, most often highlighting experiences of isolation and limited support. A narrative salient among young women participants was one of trauma caused by what has been lost—whether that be belongings, family members, or social ties. Participants describing this common narrative considered the economic and social aspects of reintegration to be the most distressing of their challenges. These socioeconomic struggles further aggravate trauma, particularly when remembering “how things used to be.”¹⁰⁸

Education was portrayed as a way out—a means by which to overcome challenges associated with the struggle for survival. For those who became associated with armed groups as children, education was seen as the clear solution to many of the challenges listed above.¹⁰⁹ Local leaders also insisted on the potential role of education in preventing youth from joining armed groups in the first place. Many participants insisted on the importance of formal education and attending secondary school as opposed to vocational training. However, despite this focus, formal education is not often accessible for many communities.

106 Workshop, Spring 2022.

107 FGDs, Spring 2022.

108 Trauma narratives are further explored below.

109 Interviews, Spring 2022.

Financial, social, and educational problems are compounded by ongoing security issues in local CAR communities. These security issues hinder the opportunity to build the lives they hoped for. Local leaders highlighted criminality as leading “to fear and anger then fueling cycles of violence further.”¹¹⁰ Community members faced similar risks. As one participant explained, “if there is no justice, people will do it themselves.”¹¹¹ These frustrations can lead to a dramatic return to violence. Interviews with community and religious leaders indicated that some youths have now joined criminal gangs for income, further fueling this climate of insecurity. This is akin to findings from Colombia and South Africa related to mechanisms and networks through which ex-combatants perpetrate further violence.¹¹²

Figure 4. Body map, hope and financial opportunity



Body map depicting the participant's hope to rebuild community and financial opportunity. Magnified areas appear in two circles, one in the top left magnifying a depiction of labor, and one in the top right magnifying a depiction of a house (Body mapping exercise, Central African Republic, Spring 2022).

110 Interviews, Spring 2022.

111 FGD, Spring 2022.

112 For more on these dynamics, see the work of Andrea González Peña and Han Dorussen in “The Reintegration of Ex-Combatants and Post-Conflict Violence. An Analysis of Municipal Crime Levels in Colombia,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 38, no. 3 (May 2021): 316–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894219894701>, and Lephophotho Mashike, “You Are a Time Bomb...! Ex-combatants in Post-conflict South Africa,” *Society in Transition* 35, no. 1, (2004): 87–104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2004.10419108>.

The link between insecurity, livelihood, and education brings to light the importance of social reintegration. For example, some youth emphasized what they viewed as progress in social cohesiveness over the past two years, while also illustrating their hearts as heavy and full of mistrust. As noted by one participant, “social cohesion seems present, but the trauma is still here and, in our hearts, and souls, there is still hatred.”¹¹³ This suggests that social cohesion and trauma are closely connected. Reminiscence of traumatic events, daily economic struggles, and mistrust create a climate of survival that in turn lays the foundations for further conflict to develop.

Reintegration & Everyday Trauma: Psychological & Physical Barriers

As noted in Table 2, all participants who created a body map drew experiences related to trauma, whether in reference to a specific event, an intrusive memory, or a reminder of loss and struggle.¹¹⁴ Importantly, this not only illustrated the scale of trauma across communities but also the variety of trauma experiences that exist. The body maps showed that trauma and its aftermath take different forms that require different approaches. Specifically, the evidence points to three dominant trauma experiences for conflict-affected youth in CAR:

First, many participants experienced displacement and did not return to their communities of origin, either because these communities are still controlled by nonstate armed groups or because their belongings were destroyed and, as one participant explained, “there is nothing to go back to.” Some families split, others experienced the death of loved ones, and reintegration initiatives did not account for such individual experiences. Social structures and support systems that existed before conflict were noted as having broken down—for most, these support systems were essential.¹¹⁵

Second, traumatic experiences led to feelings of anger and the desire for revenge. These emotions emerged from witnessing or experiencing atrocities and acted as barriers to individuals moving forward.¹¹⁶ In many cases, physical reminders, and symptoms, such as

113 FGDs, Spring 2022.

114 Workshop, Spring 2022.

115 Interviews, FGD, Spring 2022.

116 FGDs, Spring 2022.

scars and headaches, brought trauma back to the forefront.¹¹⁷ Two women, for example, illustrated and later discussed how the scars from gunshot wounds acted as a trauma reminder in two ways. First, seeing the scar every day brought the traumatic event to the forefront of their mind. Second, they discussed how the pain these scars still incur prevents them from working as efficiently as they used to. Other youth highlighted headaches that prevented them from carrying out daily activities.

Third, most participants described the struggle of daily life and of providing for family as the most dominant and long-lasting trauma.¹¹⁸ Conflict-affected youth considered identifying solutions to socioeconomic challenges, namely addressing issues associated with income and stigma, as the best approach to healing the trauma of war.¹¹⁹ Several drew body maps with depictions of their prior business activities (hunting, trading, fishing) while others shared their childhood school experiences. The thought of “what could have been” was at the heart of their experiences.

The Entanglement of Community & Individual Trauma: The Need for Social Healing & Accountability

Across locations, participants referred to ex-combatants as still experiencing war in their hearts. The data supports that assessment in two ways. First, it demonstrates that in many Central African communities, peace is fragile—it is experienced as a precarious absence of violence. Local leaders viewed a lack of opportunity and a lack of psychosocial support as challenges that contributed to this precarious dynamic. Several conflict-affected youths participating in this research supported this view, noting that: “We need help in letting go.”¹²⁰ This dynamic is mirrored in the research on South Africa.¹²¹ Second, many participants referenced addressing community trauma and the role local leaders can play in that process.

117 Workshop, Spring 2022.

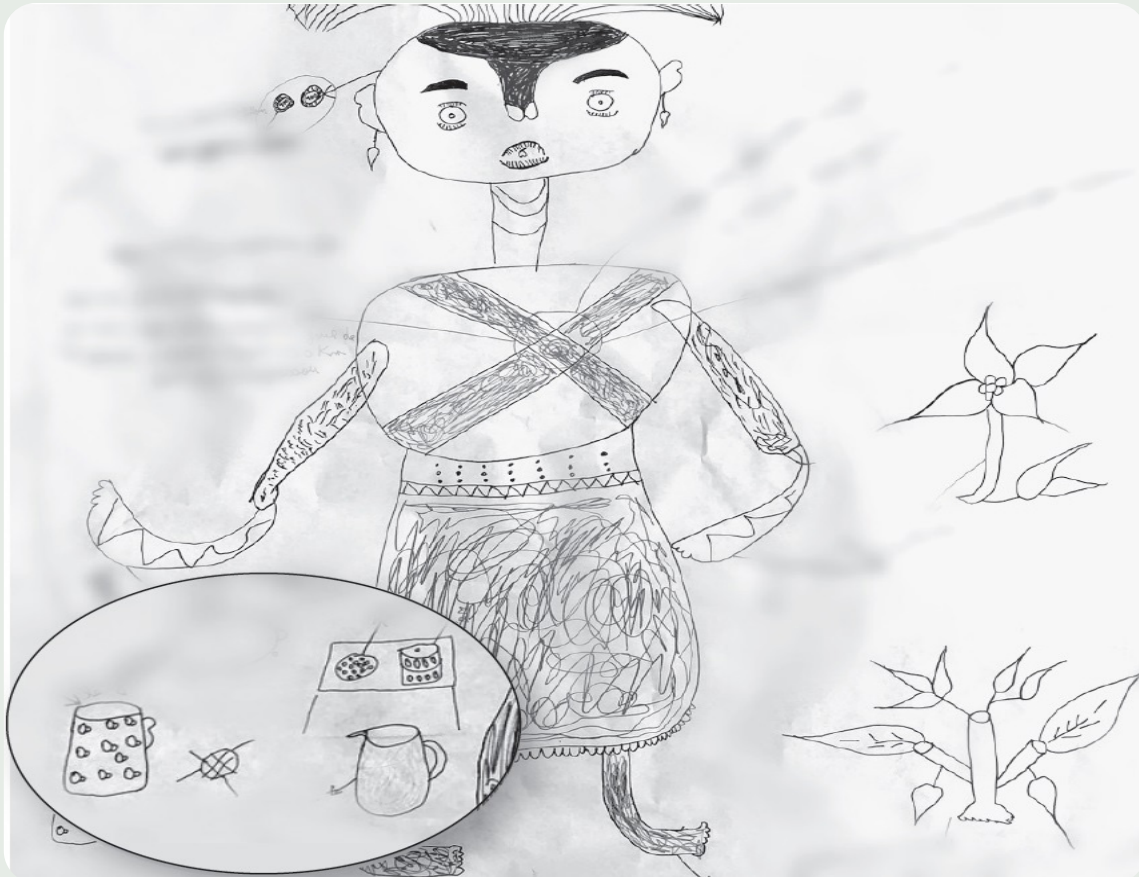
118 See discussion section for more on this element.

119 For more on these questions, see: Alexandra H. Blackwell et al., “Drivers of ‘Voluntary’ Recruitment and Challenges for Families with Adolescents Engaged with Armed Groups: Qualitative Insights from Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of the Congo,” *PLOS Global Public Health* 3, no. 5 (2023): e0001265.

120 Interviews, Spring 2022.

121 For more on “militarized minds”, see Godfrey Maringira, “Militarised Minds: The Lives of Ex-combatants in South Africa,” *Sociology* 49, no. 1 (2015): 72–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038514523698>.

Figure 5. Body map, family and hope for the future



Body map depicting the daily practice of providing for children and family as the participant's priority and the hope for the future. A magnified area appears in one circle in the bottom left depicting food and other sustenance (Body mapping exercise, Central African Republic, Spring 2022).

For many, community trauma must be addressed first. Half of community participants noted that fears and grievances must be resolved in order to prevent further violence, emphasizing the importance of accountability. In the absence of other governmental efforts, it was noted that local leaders can play a key role in beginning to address fear and grievances as they relate to justice. Participants also noted that there is both an opening for and a desire to see local leaders support local communities to address their past experiences and support transitional justice.

Participants identified community leaders as having an important role in supporting youth reintegration, noting that there are different types of role models for youth to look up to (teachers, religious leaders, parents, etc.). One neighborhood leader highlighted that, “what is important is preventing children and youth from entering that cycle in the first place.”¹²² Some described the importance of educators (mothers, teachers, or colleagues) who can support youth both in reintegration and in violence prevention. Local and religious support structures that existed before the conflict continue to be seen as the first point of contact to address trauma, grievances, or justice.

¹²² Interview, Spring 2022.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this research demonstrate that, in CAR, reintegration, violence prevention/peacebuilding, trauma, and conflict are deeply intertwined. Beyond the limited scope and delays of DDRR efforts, this interconnectedness challenges our understanding of reintegration as the penultimate phase of conflict resolution, and instead, underscores its importance to violence prevention. It demonstrates that reintegration takes place in a nonlinear context of chronic insecurity, in which reintegration in practice is part and parcel with demobilization. This view also establishes that economic and social challenges faced by youth and the growing demand for justice among community members should be immediate priorities for policymakers and practitioners. Both consider peace and security to be precarious and reintegration successes to be widely challenged by those on the ground, both in CAR and in other contexts impacted by violence, including other types of violence such as violent extremism.

Beyond providing insight into the state of reintegration and violence reduction in CAR, central contributions of this study focus on how youth experience reintegration, peacebuilding, and violence prevention and how those experiences can, in turn, inform our overall approach to the process of reintegration and to peacebuilding on a local level. This research suggests reintegration should be understood as a long-term process that is linked with and shaped by experiences of conflict, trauma, peacebuilding, and violence prevention. These findings have relevance far beyond the context of CAR, particularly when considering the application of DDR and CVR principles to address and prevent other types of conflict, e.g., violent extremism.¹²³ Policymakers and practitioners pursuing community violence reduction and reintegration programs should take into consideration these findings and their relevance within their own contexts moving forward given the implications they may have on peacebuilding and reintegration outcomes. Additional considerations for researchers

¹²³ For further discussion of DDR and violent extremism, see, for example: Mary Beth Altier, *Violent Extremist Disengagement and Reintegration: Lessons from Over 30 Years of DDR* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.37805/vedr2021.1>.

considering using a similar methodology in future studies are provided in the *A Note for Future Research* special section on page 42.

Trauma & Violence are a Continuous Experience

In CAR's fragile context, trauma is not merely experienced as specific events during conflict—it can take the form of repeated trauma before, during, and after conflict. Trauma in conflict can lead to a variety of mental health conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), moral injury, depression, or aggression.¹²⁴ As Liza Hester observes, “while the magnitude of the stressor is an important factor, trauma does not reside in the event, but in the physiological and psychological manifestations of that experience.”¹²⁵ This research explores both individual traumatic events and the subsequent trauma they cause. It also highlights the role of community trauma in reintegration processes and shows the importance of everyday social and economic struggles as they relate to trauma. Financial insecurity and stigma bring to the surface the trauma of conflict as the relationships that existed before conflict may no longer exist after the violence has ended. The reminders of what used to be are salient. Conceptions, like those of participants, that “war never leaves us,” and traumatic memories often prevent reintegration. This is of particular importance for those children formerly associated with armed groups.¹²⁶

These findings have parallels beyond CAR. In Sierra Leone, Theresa Betancourt and colleagues conducted a longitudinal study of mental health among ex-child soldiers. The study identified community acceptance and social support as important factors in mitigating trauma symptoms.¹²⁷ They notably found stigma to be one factor shaping poor mental health outcomes upon reintegration.¹²⁸

124 Edgar Jones and Simon Wessely, “Psychological Trauma: A Historical Perspective,” *Psychiatry* 5, no. 7 (2006): 217–20, <https://doi.org/10.1053/j.mppsy.2006.04.011>.

125 Hester, “Examining Peacebuilding through a Trauma Lens.”

126 In Sudan for example, “one of the main challenges confronting DDR in Sudan is the child soldiers, who are now adults, and have been seriously traumatised by their brutal experiences and the violent acts that they have committed” (see Mohammed Hassan Babiker and Alpaslan Özerdem, “A Future Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Process in Sudan: Lessons Learned from Ethiopia, Mozambique and Uganda,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 3, no. 2 (2003): 211–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1467880032000126921>).

127 Betancourt et al., “Past Horrors, Present Struggles.”

128 Theresa Betancourt et al., “Family-Based Mental Health Promotion for Somali Bantu and Bhutanese Refugees: Feasibility and Acceptability Trial,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 66, no. 3 (2020): 336–44, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2019.08.023>.

Support from family structures specifically relates to trauma and its aftermath.¹²⁹ For young women, the financial pressure of childcare is particularly salient. While taking care of children is a priority, many outlined the role of social support within the family and community as instrumental. Without the social and emotional support family structures provide, young women face more difficulty dealing with new challenges brought by conflict. These circumstances may necessitate living with their sisters and mothers, for example. Participants in this research continually highlighted families as crucial in supporting a feeling of belonging. Lack of this support was credited to leading to worsening economic and social struggles. “It is really the everyday problems of today that are the hardest, the consequences of the conflict, some of us now have to take care of seven children, but with less money than before.”¹³⁰ In turn, both the social and economic challenges continued to shape experiences of trauma during reintegration.

Although further research on social cohesion is needed, this research points us toward social cohesion and mental health as two essential components of reintegration. This research suggests that socioeconomic struggles during reintegration can deepen the trauma of conflict and that material support is linked to addressing trauma for youth and communities.¹³¹

It invites the development of innovative evidence-based approaches to healing trauma. The research reminds researchers and policymakers alike that several factors at the individual and social levels shape reintegration.

Community trauma equally shapes experiences of reintegration for both ex-combatants and communities. Central African communities see ex-combatants as still having “war on the brain” and emphasize the need for psychological support, seen by communities as a necessary avenue to reducing violence. Otherwise, stigma and fear often characterize social reintegration. The latter suggests community trauma and social cohesion influence reintegration experiences. This influence warns practitioners against ignoring community trauma in program offerings. The risks lessen if ex-combatants and communities heal, rebuild social relationships, and find economic opportunity.

129 Blackwell et al., “Drivers of ‘Voluntary’ Recruitment and Challenges for Families with Adolescents Engaged with Armed Groups.”

130 FGDs, Spring 2022.

131 When asking about trauma, most participants discuss concerns about money linked to physical ailments.

As such, psychological, social, and economic reintegration can be understood as violence prevention. The interrelated experiences and complex dynamics at play in CAR are clear. As noted, research in other conflict contexts recorded similar dynamics and experiences.¹³² In CAR, experiences of conflict and trauma are localized but provide concrete insights for practitioners and researchers.

Violence Prevention, Justice, & Reintegration are Connected

While CAR implemented reintegration initiatives, their scale and scope are minimal in comparison to the need. In CAR more widely, ex-combatants are seen as being demobilized rather than reintegrated. An ambivalence exists among research participants between understanding these disarmament strategies as an important violence reduction effort while questioning an approach that seems to reward armed group participation. Such findings yield important insights for both research and practice.

First, the research echoes findings from other African contexts wherein armed groups and their former members gravitate toward criminal groups, further contributing to widespread insecurity and fragility.¹³³ Without justice, many fear the experiences that led to previous violence will cause the next wave of conflict, this time led by those who seek revenge or retribution. Community perceptions of reintegration play a role in its success. If communities see programming—such as CVR—as a reward for taking up arms, long-term efforts are unlikely to succeed.

Second, fears of ongoing criminality and further violence shape the daily life of many communities. Still, local leaders and youth highlighted that effective governance and justice systems are lacking in attempts to address the aftermath of violence. The findings suggest

132 For more on how these findings might relate to considerations around violent extremist reintegration, see: Chris Bosley, *Violent Extremist Disengagement and Reconciliation: A Peacebuilding Approach* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2020), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/07/violent-extremist-disengagement-and-reconciliation-peacebuilding-approach>.

133 Tim Eaton et al., *Conflict Economies in the Middle East and North Africa*, (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2019), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1528-3585.2007.00270.x>. For more on armed groups and fragility, see Nicolas Perrin and Aly Rahim, “Towards a Regional Response to Fragility, Conflict, and Violence in West Africa: ‘Think Regionally and Act Locally,’” Brookings Institute, January 14, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2022/01/14/toward-a-regional-response-to-fragility-conflict-and-violence-in-west-africa-think-regionally-and-act-locally/>.

that transitional justice and peace are intertwined,¹³⁴ which further suggests that justice should be integrated within DDRR.¹³⁵ This is particularly important in contexts like CAR, wherein conflict dynamics are cyclical. As such, it indicates a fragile peace at the local level.

Third, reintegration is seen as involving both recovery and support to return home. For many, “reintegration is not just about ex-combatants. It is also for refugees or IDPs [internally displaced persons] who returned after escaping. Some have taken the land and moved there because they too were displaced. Reintegration work must be for everyone.”¹³⁶ Communities and social networks have long been known to impact reintegration,¹³⁷ and new research among ex-combatants in Uganda showed similar findings.¹³⁸

134 Interviews, Spring 2022.

135 Further research is needed to map out ways in which expectations for reintegration and justice overlap in this context.

136 Interviews, Spring 2022.

137 De Vries and Wiegink, “Breaking Up and Going Home?”

138 Carla Suarez and Erin Baines, “Together at the Heart: Familial Relations and the Social Reintegration of Ex-combatants,” *International Peacekeeping* 29, no. 1 (2022): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2021.1952408>.

A Note for Future Research: Reflections on Using Body Mapping as a Method in Conflict-affected Contexts

Body mapping, narrative interviews, and creative research methods more generally, strengthen our understanding of conflict-affected contexts. They do so by creating a space for communities to reflect on their lives and share those reflections in a conflict-sensitive manner that can help to inform our understanding of complex, diverse, and multi-faceted daily experiences and conflict-related policy and practice (e.g., reintegration). In doing so, methods such as these can also help us identify important challenges and blind spots in our own efforts to address conflict-related dynamics. These methods can elucidate important information on the experiences and needs of individuals as well as elucidate hyperlocal and individual-level differences in how those affected experienced both conflict and recovery to better localize and adapt local, national, and international efforts. What is more, creative and conflict-sensitive methods like body mapping are well-suited to working with communities who have experienced violence, offering an entry point to research with vulnerable populations in contexts impacted by conflict.

When applied to peacebuilding processes (and related processes, including reintegration and violence prevention), creative methods, therefore, have the potential to inform our understanding of policy and practice through better understanding the experiences of the communities involved. Based on the use of body mapping as a method in the research informing this report, this callout offers reflections from the author for researchers and practitioners wishing to also use the method in their work with vulnerable populations and in conflict-affected communities.

Reflections of the Method's Applicability

1. Body mapping—an approach originating in South Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean—is well-suited to generate data or create a space to conduct focus group discussions centered on participants' experiences. Body maps are most

informative when participants also have the opportunity to discuss the maps. Standalone analysis can be more difficult, whereas discussions allow more accurate understanding of the data garnered.

2. Body mapping places more ownership of data collection in the hands of participants—it allows them to share what they are comfortable sharing without the pressure of a more rigid research framework. In practice, body mapping offers an approach to learn from participants and focus on lived experiences. In this way, it has potential to inform peacebuilding practice and evaluation, with relevance for local peacebuilding.
3. Beyond value as a research method, body mapping could be utilized as a tool for monitoring, evaluation, and learning activities of MHPSS and peacebuilding programs.¹³⁹

Reflections on the Method's Advantages

1. This methodological choice fosters an opportunity to begin discussing difficult and complex questions essential to the study of peace and conflict. It also yields insights researchers may not have expected. In CAR, the relationships between displacement and reintegration came across for many. Depending on the context, localized adaptation might be necessary or challenging. This project highlights that the success of using body mapping depends on preparation, adaptation, and implementation.
2. The combined methodological approach allows research to explore some traumatic experiences while creating a safe space through body mapping. Through drawing memories, places, and events, participants illustrate the impact of trauma and conflict on their daily life. This permits a shift toward examining the traumatic impact of conflict on individuals and their local communities. Essentially, the method rests on recognizing the nature of the methodology and its origins in health research while adapting to best suit participants and their experiences.

¹³⁹ For more on its use in public health, see the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Network, "Body Mapping in Health," <https://www.mhpss.net/toolkit/mhpss-m-and-e-mov-toolkit/resource/body-mapping-in-health-rrapra>.

3. Body mapping offers a space to discuss memories and events without the strict framework of establishing time. Those who experience trauma often have a complex relationship to time and removing those barriers by focusing on the experiences and emotions, rather than a specific timeline, aids in the process. Body mapping encourages researchers to center the personal narratives of participants and is strengthened by its flexibility.

Reflections on the Method's Limitations

1. Body mapping is a valuable approach for researching individual stories, yet it is not a panacea. In CAR, the research found that body mapping was better suited to certain groups. Adult men, for example, did not find the method engaging or, in some cases, appropriate. In some contexts, social norms may prevent the use of body mapping with certain groups. Nonetheless, it remained successful as a mechanism of community engagement more widely. Leaders in some communities appreciated trying the methodology and providing feedback prior to its implementation.
2. While body mapping can be more accessible to some communities, such as those who may be less comfortable speaking or writing, it nonetheless brings its own set of barriers. In CAR, we found some participants felt self-conscious about drawing while others felt pressure to add content on their maps during the sessions. As result, we adopted a practice of offering drawing support to participants as well as encouraging participants to work in pairs to complete their body maps. The body mapping workshop should be flexible and safe, as some participants may want a break or may want to pass on certain sections or may want to linger on specific parts. Ultimately, contributors shape body mapping success.
3. A clear plan for the drawings themselves should be developed prior to data collection (or implementation) and in collaboration with community partners. In some contexts, it may be most appropriate to retain the drawings, while in others, returning the drawings to participants or sharing them with communities may be most suitable. Regardless of the adopted strategy, the wellbeing, safety, and security of participants must remain the priority.

CONCLUSION & CONSIDERATIONS

The reintegration of former combatants is a crucial element in war-to-peace transitions. Reintegration, however, can be a particularly fraught and difficult process, especially given the myriad issues that can both impact and be impacted by violent conflict and its prevention. This can be particularly so in areas of protracted conflict, such as CAR. Adding to our further understanding of reintegration processes and violence prevention and reduction outcomes, this case study utilized a narrative approach—including qualitative interviews, FGDs, and body mapping methods—to explore how conflict-affected youth experience trauma, conflict prevention, and reintegration in CAR, with important findings regarding the relationship between each. In linking these three issues, the report finds an increased need for the integration of trauma-informed and trauma-focused assessments and understandings in reintegration and violence reduction processes, given the significant impact trauma can have on reintegration and peacebuilding outcomes and experiences. Key takeaways from this research are detailed below, with additional considerations tailored to the international community, the government of CAR, and policy-oriented research and academia expanded upon in specialized text boxes throughout this conclusion.

First, the study demonstrates that trauma and reintegration are complex, cyclical experiences that go well beyond current international efforts. In CAR, reintegration is understood by study participants as a violence prevention strategy that generally fails to address mental health and socioeconomic problems. Everyday socioeconomic issues, such as employment or stigma, were found to deeply impact reintegration and psychological wellbeing. The research also shows that contexts of chronic insecurity can present specific challenges for reintegration, decreasing opportunities for social and economic development and thereby prompting the emergence of criminal gangs and other violent groups driven by necessity and perpetuating the cycle of violence.

Further Considerations: For the International Community

- Address community needs linked to recruitment and recidivism among children and youth formerly associated with armed groups, such as education interventions, mental health and psychosocial support, and violence prevention (including CRSV).
- Prioritize transitional justice, social cohesion, and peacebuilding programs; particularly those that emphasize mixed approaches and address community and youth grievances.
- Support local leaders and civil society organizations leading violence prevention efforts, interventions for women and girls, and community-based MHPSS approaches.
- Consider localized approaches to conflict analysis supported by creative and narrative research methods.
- Integrate increased awareness of human rights violations within programming and create spaces for community members to offer experiences and views of current programmatic approaches.

Second, the research showcases the important role of social support in reintegration. It highlights the importance of families in reintegration and suggests religious and local leaders as key social support providers. Teachers and formal education opportunities offer an avenue for rebuilding those support systems. Similarly, the absence of these support networks exacerbates the negative impacts of trauma on reintegration.

Third, the report links reintegration to social cohesion and transitional justice through the ways in which it is experienced by communities. Transitional justice and the establishment of strong institutions and accountability mechanisms is seen as an essential component of effective reintegration, particularly in terms of preventing criminality and breaking cycles of violence. The destruction of individuals' belongings and relationships that can occur during violent conflict can produce feelings of hatred and revenge that can in turn shape future behaviors. In this way, Central African communities perceive trauma and impunity as a wound that must be healed to move forward. Yet, further study is needed to engage both those who implemented and participated in DDRR efforts on this question.

Further Considerations: For the CAR Government

- Prevent recruitment of children and human rights violations against women and children, as well as strengthen support provided to victims of nonstate armed group violence.
- Address challenges and delays in the implementation of DDDR programs across CAR to respond to community calls for justice, mitigate recidivism risks, and prevent further waves of violence.
- Expand DDDR programming scope and scale to encompass CVR youth.

Nonetheless, the report emphasizes priorities for Central African communities and those who carry the weight of conflict. It highlights the interplay of reintegration and trauma for ex-combatants and for the communities to which they return. It recommends deeper study of social networks that support or hinder reintegration, examination of trauma among communities, and its impact on the perception of ex-combatants. Finally, it suggests

Further Considerations: For Policy Research and Academia

- Examine the role of families and communities in prevention, recruitment, and reintegration in CAR and beyond.
- Conduct interdisciplinary research that links reintegration with transitional justice; specifically exploring what reintegration and transitional justice mean to Central African communities and the ways in which reparations play a role.
- Explore micro-level conflict impact through individual narratives of community members or other creative and participatory research methods.
- Extend research focus to the study of reparations, transitional justice, and forgiveness.
- Examine research approaches that support victims participating in research without causing further trauma.

reintegration is deeply influenced by experiences of impunity and demands for justice. Overall, the approach taken by the study supports recent research that emphasizes the linkages between trauma, reintegration, and violence reduction. More importantly, it demonstrates the complexity of trauma, violence prevention, and reintegration in fragile contexts and shows how integrating conflict-affected youth voices in research helps practitioners effectively support local communities.

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