

## USING BODY MAPPING AS A RESEARCH METHOD: CONSIDERATIONS FROM RESEARCH ON VIOLENCE AND REINTEGRATION IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

This fact sheet presents methodological considerations based on research conducted for the RESOLVE Network report, "[Trauma, Violence Prevention and Reintegration: Learning from Youth Conflict Narratives in the Central African Republic](#)," by Pauline Zerla. 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 fact sheet summarizes discussion of the implementation of this method with considerations for others hoping to adapt it for their own use.

For more, see: Zerla, Pauline. [Trauma, Violence Prevention and Reintegration: Learning from Youth Conflict Narratives in the Central African Republic](#). RESOLVE Network, 2024.

### REFLECTIONS ON THE METHOD'S APPLICABILITY



**Body mapping—an approach originating in South Africa, South 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.



**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.



**Beyond value as a research method, body mapping could be utilized as a tool for monitoring, evaluation,** and learning activities of mental health and psychosocial support and peacebuilding programs.

### REFLECTIONS ON THE METHOD'S ADVANTAGES



**This methodological choice fosters an opportunity to begin discussing difficult and complex questions** essential to the study of conflict. It also yields insights researchers may not have expected. In CAR, the relationships between displacement and reintegration came across for many. The success of using body mapping depends on preparation, adaptation, and implementation.



**A combined methodological approach, like the one used in CAR, 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.



**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



**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.



**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, some participants felt self-conscious about drawing while others felt pressure to add content on their maps during the sessions. The body mapping workshop should be flexible and safe, as some participants may want a break, to pass on certain sections, or to linger on specific parts.



**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 them 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.

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