



Perspectives of families in Central African Republic on adolescents' involvement in armed groups

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The recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups has detrimental consequences for the child and their families. To contribute to family strengthening where child recruitment occurs, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) developed a project to gain greater understanding on the drivers of recruitment, as well as the barriers and facilitators for reintegration, through participatory formative research. Through a two-year initiative funded by USAID from 2019 - 2021, the IRC is building on existing research and programming to develop an intervention to support families and promote reintegration following child recruitment by armed groups. To guide the development of this family-based intervention and to better understand the experiences of adolescents and their caregivers on conflict settings, the IRC carried out qualitative, formative research in the Central African Republic (CAR).

The Context: Armed Conflict and Child Recruitment in the Central African Republic

The Central African Republic (CAR) has been characterized by conflict since gaining independence from its former colonial power in 1960, escalating to the height of the civil conflict and military coup in 2012.ⁱ⁻ⁱⁱⁱ The dynamic between armed groups in CAR stems from longstanding tensions between religious and ethnic groups within the region. Northeastern communities (Muslim by faith) considered themselves as marginalized by the State and pro-government anti-balaka groups (Christian by faith) due to a lack of basic social services and infrastructure in the region and challenges to their citizenship. The poor socioeconomic conditions of populations in the region and the continued discrimination and lack of governance were the root causes of the rise of armed groups against the central government, leading to military coups which aimed to establish a new political and social order.ⁱⁱⁱ In the last decade, the country has witnessed multiple military coup attempts in a protracted conflict between the Seleka coalition of armed groups and the anti-balaka militias. In this context, militia groups on both

sides of the conflict mobilized the manpower of their communities, including youth and adolescents.^{iv} An estimated 60% of the territory in CAR is controlled by non-state armed groups.^v

Throughout the protracted conflict, communities in CAR have experienced cruel treatment and traumatic conflict-related events such as attacks on their villages and homes, torture and abuse, and rape and other forms of sexual violence, in addition to witnessing the deliberate killings of their family and friends.^{vi} Women and girls have reported thousands of incidents of gender-based violence, with little to no formal protection structures for survivors outside of the capital of Bangui.^{vii} Estimates of displacement in the country have stated that 300,000 refugees have fled the country and nearly 700,000 people have been displaced internally.^{viii} This internal displacement has triggered additional fighting and further escalation of conflict.^{ix}

From the early stages of the confrontation, combatants involved children in the conflict. In 2019, 473 cases (144 girls, 329 boys) of child recruitment were verified by the UN, according to the report of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict^x, however, this is likely an underestimate. UNICEF estimates that since 2013, approximately 10,000 children have been recruited by armed groups.^{xi} While the recruitment of child soldiers is escalating, reintegration of rescued or released children is very difficult due to stigma against the children who were associated.^{xii}

The CAR youth unemployment rate in 2013 was 6.4%^{xiii}, but prior the conflict the lack of job opportunities was already acute. The violent insurgency exacerbated the economic situation of youth in the country. Youth unemployment and economic insecurity—as well as the failure of social and political systems to adequately support communities suffering from lack of basic needs—is seen as a key driver of the conflict and a contributor to child recruitment.

Methods

In Ouham-Pendé prefecture in the northwest of CAR, in-depth interviews were conducted with 35 adolescents and 20 caregivers residing in Bohong, Boyanwatoun and Kouï villages. Participants were selected through engagement with community child protection groups and through the IRC's child protection case workers based on age, gender, and experience with armed groups. Adolescent participants were either formerly involved in armed groups or were identified as being at risk of joining based on socioeconomic criteria. Caregivers participants were all caregivers of children who were formerly involved in armed groups. Interviewers were trained on research ethics, consent, confidentiality, and child protection concepts, and all had prior experience working on research or counseling with children. The research methodology and procedures were approved by the IRC Institutional Review Board and reviewed by the IRC CAR Child Protection team.

Family Dynamics and Adolescents' Decisions to Join Armed Groups

While the formative research with caregivers and adolescents in CAR demonstrated that, similar to other conflict settings, economic drivers such as community-level poverty, the effect of conflict on livelihoods, unemployment and lack of access to school all influenced adolescents' decisions to join armed groups, it also revealed the strong influence of family relationships on the child's decision. Upon their return home, the lack of acceptance of these children back into their families, and the need for them to be self-reliant as a result, also contributes to a cycle of re-recruitment into armed groups. This brief focuses on the family dynamics that may have played a role in the decision of boys and girls to join armed groups and their reintegration, and how this decision may have further affected relationships between adolescents and their caregivers. The perspectives of both adolescents and their caregivers are presented below.

"When I was at my parents' house, I didn't have a problem. When the conflict started, I was separated from them. My parents went to Cameroon, I stayed here in Kouï."
(18-year-old boy from Kouï)

"Yes, [the armed group] killed my two older brothers in Tôlé village. ... Which made me angry and decided to join the armed group to avenge my two older brothers." (20-year old boy from Bohong).

Adolescent perspectives on why they joined the armed groups

Separation from family

Adolescents who participated in the research in Ouham-Pendé reported multiple traumatic conflict experiences, including attacks on their villages, homes, kidnapping, witnessing the killing of family members, and beatings and torture. In such an environment of violence and chaos, some of the interviewees noted that they were brutally separated from their caregivers who

were killed by the armed groups. Other boys and girls described how they were separated from their family when fleeing the attacks on their village. This forced migration resulted in the dispersion of many family members, leaving children and adolescents with few places to go other than to seek shelter and food from armed groups.

Desire to avenge family members

The communal violence resulted in the killing of family members of some of the adolescents interviewed. The brutal separation from loved ones and the destruction of their properties created in the heart of the boys and girls a deep sentiment of revenge. In this regard, they joined the armed groups voluntarily to achieve this desire to avenge their relatives. In fact, most of the boys and girls interviewed stated that they made the decision to join armed groups because they believed in the cause of the armed group and wanted to defend their communities.

“My dad agreed that I would come into the group to help them, but my mom did not want for the simple reason that I am a girl, if there was an attack how would I protect myself?” (15-year-old girl from Boyawantoun)

“[My uncle] doesn't treat me well. Because of the insults and the disagreement between us, I decided to stop selling with him. ... I decided to regroup with the other children, and we joined the armed group.” (18-year-old boy, Kouï)

Family and community influence on the decision to join

Boys and girls reported varying support from their parents for joining the group, with parents both supportive and against. Many described their mothers not wanting them to go for fear of their safety. Several had family members who were also in the group. Girls more often reported joining the armed group upon the advice or permission of their family members. This possibly reflects gender norms within the community, as girls needed their caregivers' permission to join the armed group more so than boys. While most adolescent boys and girls described positive relationships with their families, many emphasized that the relationships deteriorated after the conflict, due to trauma, separation, and economic stress. A few boys described particularly negative relationships with their caregivers.

Moreover, children ill-treated within their families described more easily deciding to join armed groups. In contrast, among at-risk youth who had never joined an armed group, none reported having negative relationships with their caregivers before or after the conflict, and none reported having caregivers support the idea of them joining.

Community influence also played an important role in adolescents' decisions to join the group. Both boys and girls mentioned being influenced by their peers and trusted people in the community to join the groups. Male influential community members also played a significant role in some boys' decisions not to join the armed groups, showing the possible positive influence of these individuals.

“I myself thought of not joining the group, because my mother did not want and if I insisted it was like a disobedience towards my mother and the religious leaders, and I risk dying while there. Once at 4 am, my grandfather came to advise me so that I could not join the armed group.” (17-year-old boy from Boyawantoun)

“When the armed men first arrived in our village, they were distributing money to the young people, they were distributing things to them, which also pushed our children to join them. They told young people to come and join them because they have money, they have food. Given our living conditions, our children were forced to join them.” (Female caregiver of multiple children who joined, boys and girls).

Caregiver perspectives on why their children joined armed groups

Overlapping social and economic influence within the community

Caregivers underscored the economic and social drivers behind their child's involvement in armed groups, and many lamented about their inability to adequately provide for their children as being what pushed them away. While some caregivers reported that their children joined the groups for economic reasons, others said it was under the social influence of family members, the community, or other young people. The ethnic dimension of the conflict was reflected in the social influence of the children and their peers.

Caregivers against their child's decision to join, with exceptions for physical and economic security

The majority of both male and female caregivers reported that they were against their child joining the armed groups and advised them not to, but the children “didn't listen” and still affiliated. Only two male caregivers reported

expressly supporting their child joining—for economic reasons and belief in cause. IRC program staff also confirmed that this engagement was also considered a way to preserve the community and family's safety and security.

Experiences in the armed groups

Adolescent experiences in the armed groups

Adolescents reported remaining affiliated with the armed groups from a few weeks up to three years and entering as young as 12 years old. The majority of boys and girls reported doing tasks such as cooking for or selling food to the group members. Mostly older male adolescents (18-20 years old) reported being involved in fighting and raids, though one 15-year-old boy also reported engaging in fighting.

"I didn't feel comfortable with my son's decision to join the armed group. He was still a child. Me and all his uncles, we are against this decision, but he made a decision on his own, because they killed his father in the events. It's a decision he made as a child and therefore he doesn't measure the unseemly well." (Female caregiver of boy)

"I thought this kind of job was no longer guaranteed, that's why I left the group. And with that allure I could not build my future, nor build a house, and marry a woman. That's why I decided to go out looking for jobs."

(18-year-old boy, Kouï)

Family dynamics while the child is with the armed group

Most boys and girls reported staying in contact with their families while in the armed group. Adolescent boys of all ages more often reported living with the groups away from home and visiting their families, with only one boy reporting he was not permitted by the group leaders to see his family. Most adolescent girls reported living at home and engaging with the armed groups during the day, with exception of those who were separated from their families and lived in the group's camp. Across age groups and gender, adolescents reported that their caregivers did not want them to be in the groups once they were affiliated. Several adolescents reported seeing orphans living within the camps of the armed groups, including those who were separated from their families and had no home to return to.

Adolescents persuaded by their caregivers to return home after experiencing extreme and violent conditions in the groups
Both boys and girls described normalization of violence and poor living conditions as reasons they decided to disaffiliate from the armed groups. A few expressed regretting their decision to join the group once they arrived and feeling alone and neglected. Even with these bad experiences, girls and boys of all ages emphasized their caregivers' advice to leave the group being what ultimately influenced them to disaffiliate. A few older adolescent boys and girls also said they needed to earn a steady income to support their families and therefore returned home. This decision to leave was not without consequence, however; a few adolescent boys described being beaten after they were caught fleeing the group.

"As I lost parents, my friends from the armed groups supported me when I was among them. When someone wants to provoke me, they often defend me. ... When I miss a few things, they support me." (20-year-old boy, Bohong)

Nevertheless, many adolescent boys and girls also described supportive social dynamics within the group and experiencing support from friends and group leaders. For those who lost their parents in the conflict, they described this as support they needed, and that some of the leaders treated them like their own children.

"At first, when he came out from the groups, he didn't tell me about that. [After] a while, he confided in me. He told me that, he was angry because it was the rebels who killed his father, that's why he joined their community to revenge his father's death." (Female caregiver of boy)

Caregivers had limited knowledge of their child's experiences, but advised them to return home

When asked about their child's experiences while affiliated with the armed group, most caregivers had little to no knowledge of this time in their child's life. However, some did know of the violent and difficult living conditions their children experienced, and female caregivers seemed to have more knowledge of this time than male caregivers. Two caregivers mentioned specifically taking the time to speak with their child about their affiliation and advising them to disaffiliate. Several male and female caregivers reported that they noticed a change in their child's behavior during this time, and that their sons or daughters were aggressive or distressed. Similar to what adolescents described, many caregivers reported that their children ultimately left the

armed groups because they continually asked them to come home, expressing concern for their wellbeing and needing them to support the family economically.

Returning home: Changes in family dynamics upon adolescents' reintegration into the community

Adolescents struggle with their mental health as they adjust to returning home

When the boys and girls returned home from the armed groups, they experienced varying reception from their communities. Some of them were warmly welcomed, while others reported being stigmatized. Little had changed in terms of the economic situation, and these harsh economic conditions and lack of job opportunities exacerbated the difficulty of their reintegration.

Most adolescents reported returning home with no access to basic needs or livelihoods, leaving them at risk of rejoining the groups. According to several adolescent boys and girls, this economic stress also had a toll on their mental health and the quality of their family relationships. At the time of the interviews, six adolescents (4 boys, 2 girls) reported still being separated from their families and having to provide for themselves financially.

"Since I came back, I have lived in perfect harmony with my little brothers. But some of my fellow girls call me a brothel because I sold porridge to the [armed group]. However, others continue to play with me."
(15-year-old girl, Boyawantou)

For those interviewees who were able to reintegrate with their families, many reported that their family relationships went back to normal after they returned home; however, for some it was more difficult. Indeed, several adolescents described tension as they adjusted to being back with their families. In the cases of a few boys where they had reported that relationships with their caregivers were very bad before they joined the armed group, the relationships remained negative upon their reintegration. Several boys and girls also explained that they cannot speak to families about what happened to them in the group, even after a few had tried.

"We are really concerned about the future of our children. When your child is out in the armed group and you have nothing to give him, it hurts. Me and my husband have a lot of worries because if we cannot find something for these children, they will one day risk re-entering the armed group. When they ask us something, we are unable to give them, it hurts as parents."
(Female caregiver of multiple children)

Both adolescent girls and boys reported experiencing stigma for having been associated with the armed groups. While a few boys mentioned experiencing stigmatization in the community, more adolescent girls described experiencing stigma from both the community and their own families. This treatment was largely related to the perception of their sexual relationships, or having "been with", armed men.

Caregivers adjust to changes in parenting

Experiences after their child came home

Male and female caregivers reported being unable to adequately provide for their children, which they feared would drive them away once again. Male caregivers specifically mentioned the inability for their adolescents to find jobs was making it more likely for them to rejoin the armed groups, as both boys and girls could not provide for their own basic needs. Caregivers' described how their own financial instability and inability to find adequate sources of income or support further affected their children's ability to reintegrate.

While many caregivers described positive family relationships that had gone back to normal, a few expressed the tense dynamics within their household and their challenges with the change in behavior of their child. Behavior issues and their subsequent parenting challenges were mostly reported among those caregivers who had boy children, and that they had noticed their sons expressing anger and aggression or a general disinterest in life.

Moreover, both male and female caregivers also reported dealing with their own challenges such as mental health issues from the trauma they experienced during the conflict, lack of financial stability, and being unable to talk to their child about what they experienced. Notably, one male

"Sometimes [he and his brothers] fight and quarrel with each other. ... If he asks for food and his brothers say there is no food, he gets angry and sometimes he beats them. I also get angry sometimes, I insulted him and for almost two weeks, he didn't come home. ... He didn't behave like that before. ... It was his time in the group that had an impact on his behavior."
(Female caregiver of boy)

caregiver reported the successful approach of talking to the child by having the whole family engage him through both individual and family conversations.

“You can train us in psychology to help our children who are a little confused about this crisis.”
(Male caregiver of boy)

Supporting caregivers to support their families: Caregiver needs for the future

When asked about what type of support they needed, male and female caregivers mentioned wanting to build their knowledge and skills around child development, child wellbeing, and how to practice different approaches to discipline. A few also mentioned specifically wanting support with how to talk to their children about the ongoing conflict and their affiliation with the armed group.

The findings of the formative research indicate that many children join armed groups intentionally, when they lack the economic or social structures to adequately support them. Others are separated from their families through forced displacement or killings that leave them alone with no choice but to join the armed group. The critical economic situation that confronts household is a driver of household stress and child involvement in armed groups. The protracted conflict has completely eroded the economy and depleted households' livelihoods. In this regard, armed groups become the only opportunity for boys and girls to provide for their basic needs. Moreover, caregivers burdened by crippling economic stress and their own mental health issues struggle with parenting and fostering a warm and supportive environment for their children to seek protection.



RECOMMENDATIONS

In this research, the adolescents and parents interviewed presented serious protection issues related to these crisis situations. Based on its knowledge of the context and the evidence from this research, the IRC CAR child protection team makes the following recommendations for response:

- Ensure psychosocial support through comprehensive case management of these children, and even provide parents and guardians with the same psychosocial support as needed;
- Provide parents, guardians, and household members with family strengthening programs such as parenting interventions and specialized support based on the specific needs of families with CAFAAG;
- Enable adolescent children to participate in life skills sessions and group psychosocial support (such as the [SAFE methodology](#));
- Promote opportunities for meaningful socio-professional reintegration of these children in order to encourage their social and economic reintegration;
- Support parents and guardians in income-generating activities to meet the needs of their children in the short, medium and long term;
- For future projects, conduct community engagement activities on the themes of child recruitment into armed forces and groups, in order to promote the self-demobilization of CAFAAG and the acceptance of these children in the community;
- Involve Government social affairs services in the implementation of projects in order to contribute to systems strengthening and promote a better response in the longer term;
- Involve more local partners and strengthen the referral system between child protection actors to ensure better care.

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