What went wrong in the Central African Republic?

International engagement and the failure to think conflict prevention

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Executive summary

This paper presents the results of a project on international engagement in the Central African Republic (CAR) – a joint initiative by the Applied Research Seminar of the Graduate Institute's Master in Development Studies and the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform. In light of the outbreak of violence in CAR at the end of 2012, the paper aims to decipher the shortfall in preventing conflict in CAR despite repeated international interventions over the last two decades.

The research's overall finding is that the Central African Republic matters to the international community only to the extent that its internal problems affect the stability of the region. In turn, CAR's position in the eyes of the international community shapes the extent, effectiveness and relevance of its response to peaks of violence in the country. Specifically:

- International actors predominantly share a pessimistic view of CAR, coupled with a general lack of interest in and misunderstanding of the country's internal dynamics.
- This perception shapes the type of engagement privileged by the international community in CAR, which is mainly reactive in nature and designed to simply stabilize the country for the sake of regional affairs that are deemed to be of greater importance.
- The dominant reactive nature of engagement in CAR produces an unsuccessful response that comes to the detriment of long-term development projects, needed to reach an effective conflict prevention approach. A combination of both strategies (short-term and long-term) could help avoid the routine reoccurrence of conflict.
- International perception of CAR should be reoriented towards addressing state governance as well as the drivers of violence (rather than only the symptoms). Such a change in attitude would open avenues for a type of engagement that goes beyond the quick, short bursts of intervention the country has witnessed so far.

The Central African Republic matters to the international community only to the extent that its internal problems affect the stability of the region.

Introduction

The Central African Republic (CAR) is not a stranger to internal strife. Its modern history has been characterized by armed conflicts, state coups and violence despite numerous peace agreements. Conflicts in CAR are a reoccurring phenomenon and have prompted various forms of international involvement attempting to restore peace. Yet such efforts have failed to materialize, leading to a new outbreak of violence in December 2012 that still haunts the country today.

> *"Peacebuilding is a process, not a destination."*
>
> High-level peacebuilding practitioner

Within the context of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform's work stream on "peacebuilding and the prevention of violent conflict," this paper attempts to understand the reasons why international involvement in CAR has failed to prevent the reoccurrence of conflict. The research investigates the international stakeholders involved in CAR and their respective conflict prevention initiatives in the country. In the framework of this project, we thought it appropriate to specifically link the international community's general perception of CAR to its lack of success at establishing long-term peace. Simply put, we argue that the relevant actors' perception of CAR's conflict-related issues is both overly negative and inherently flawed, and consequently shapes their engagement in the country. Although we describe a mainstream perception, we are fully aware that not all relevant members of the international community fall under this representation.

For the purpose of this paper, relevant international actors include the United Nations and regional organizations, international NGOs, donors, research centres, national development agencies and foundations implementing their mandates in CAR. Transnational armed groups, multinational business companies and the media have been excluded from the analysis. Although they affect the situation and the perception of CAR's setting in their respective ways, they do not fall under our categorization of the international community as peace and development actors.

Using the understanding of the international community outlined above, this paper identifies common perceptions of the situation in CAR, and the ways these help shape international engagement since the country's independence. It also divides CAR's history of international engagement into two parts. The first corresponds to the post-independence period until 1996, during which only a small number of technical development projects were implemented. In the post-1996 period, a series of mutinies changed the nature of engagement into reactive and short-term responses. Since then, peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions as well as humanitarian relief efforts are the dominant form of international involvement in CAR.

This research is a qualitative analysis of secondary sources as well as collected primary data. It is based on a review of the relevant literature on CAR and semi-structured interviews conducted with 24 key informants from international organizations (such as OCHA and IOM), international NGOs (such as HRW, ICG, Interpeace, MSF and World Vision International), national development agencies (SDC and JICA), research centres (Small Arms Survey and CNRS), and foundations (GCSP and AIF). The views of CAR citizens and officials were also captured, so as to juxtapose their ideas on the role of the international community in their own country against the perceptions of international stakeholders. What emerged was a number of recurring themes and narratives, as well as a series of discursive contradictions.

In order to encourage authentic appraisals, the substance of interviews is not directly quoted or attributed to specific interviewees in the paper. Nonetheless, our informants' insights have helped shape our findings. It is our hope that the present paper will uncover standard perceptions and the institutional dynamics surrounding conflict in CAR, and underline the nature of the resulting response of the international community.

1. What are the conflict drivers in CAR?

Background

This section on conflict drivers is based on a wide review of secondary literature as well as interviews with scholars. It depicts the general academic comprehension of the underlying fault lines in the country, which varies from the perception of the international community, as we will demonstrate in the following sections.

Scholars trace the current state of CAR back to the colonial period. During this time CAR, unlike other French colonies in Africa, was largely neglected by the colonial power. France shared its power of sovereignty over CAR with *Grandes Compagnies Concessionaires*, which used it as a resource extraction site and a reservoir for slaves (Saulier 1997). By independence in 1960, CAR inherited a web of contradictions from its colonial period marked by a disequilibrium between the rural areas and Bangui, preoccupying public finances, a food shortfall, inequalities between different groups within the population – all leading to the underdevelopment of the country (Téné-Koyzoa 2005).

> *"CAR's government has never had much presence outside of Bangui. Regions outside the capital are stateless societies."*
>
> CAR scholar

In the 1980s, structural adjustment programs seem to have further contributed to the downfall of the Central African state. The formal economy was drastically reduced, as foreign companies gradually left the country and unemployment became the common fate of most of the population (Vircoulon and Lesueur 2014).

Further, scholars mostly agree that CAR's history since independence has been characterized by a weak, corrupt and predatory state. They point out that regions outside of the centre of power, Bangui, have consequently become marginalized to the detriment of populations and ethnic groups living in those areas. Additionally, many living in these marginalized areas are followers of the Islamic faith, further depicted by many Central Africans as foreign traders who came from neighbouring Chad and Sudan, and who do not truly belong to their current territory. As such, there has been a growing resentment towards these communities that are gaining wealth quite rapidly, through commerce and pastoral activities.

This crippled Central African state, with marginalized populations coupled with brewing resentment from different communities, is portrayed as the backdrop to the drivers of conflict in the country.

Map of CAR highlighting the population size in major cities and towns
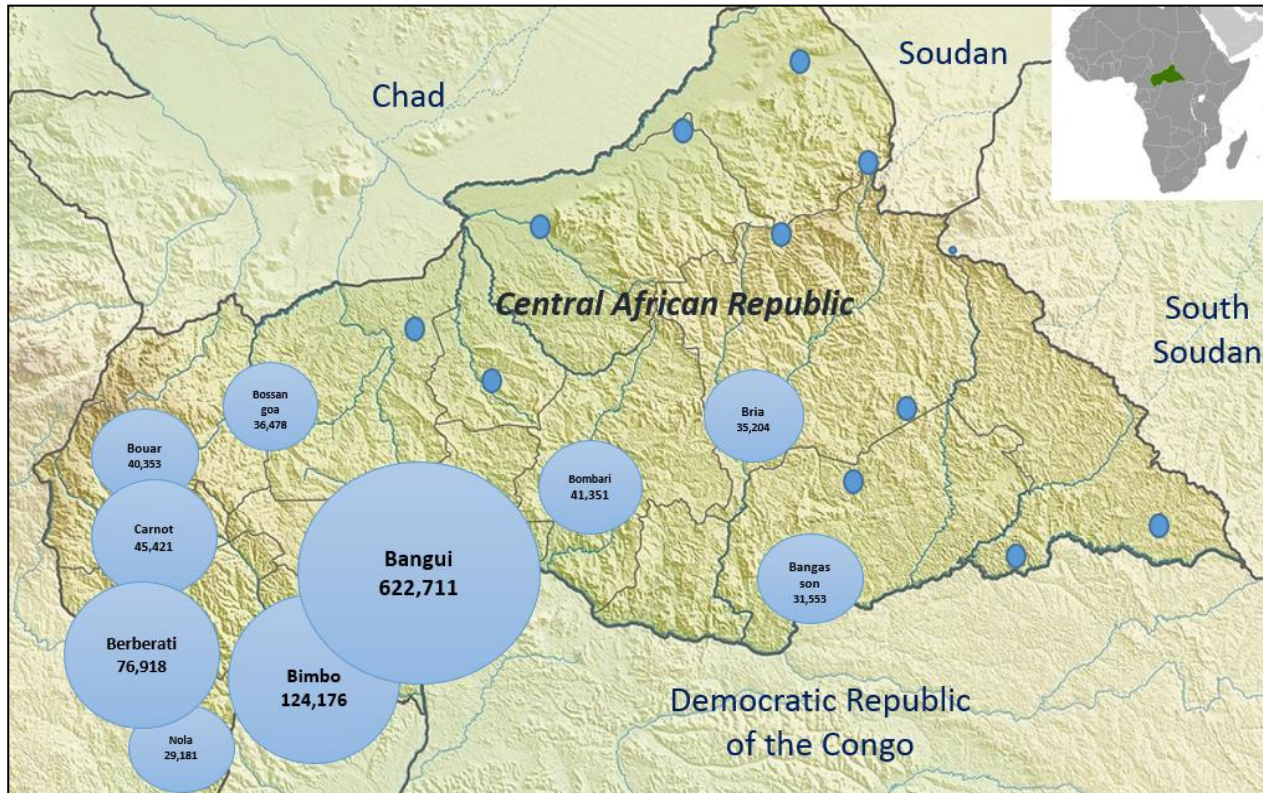
Design: Genta Akasaki. Data source: www.citypopulation.de

Conflict drivers

Insights from secondary literature suggest that conflict in CAR is the consequence of an exacerbation of current and ancient political, social, and economic tensions (Mayneri 2014). The most recent outbreak of violence, in 2012, is thus not a religious conflict as often pinned by the international media. Rather, it seems to relate back to the unequal distribution of resources in the country and the frustration of certain population groups, especially the youth.

> *"Not only is CAR externally landlocked, it's also internally landlocked."*
>
> Interviewed scholar

The dynamic of state disintegration through predation has led to the rise of armed groups looking to expand their territorial, political, and economic influence (Vircoulon and Lesueur 2014). They finance guerrillas through illicit revenues from the trafficking of diamonds, gold and ivory. Further, the marginalization of a significant part of the population and, more importantly, the outright negligence of regions such as the northeast (with a majority of Muslims), leave a pool of frustrated youths to recruit into armed militias. These issues can quickly escalate to important levels of violence in a context where the central state is virtually non-existent and enjoys only a light security apparatus, outside of the presidential guard (Breman and Lombard 2008).

According to one interviewed scholar, CAR's political leaders have attempted to negotiate their access to power by heightening the existing ethnic tensions and by exploiting the dissatisfaction of young people. Yet, they failed to keep their promises once in power. In the recent conflict, these dynamics unfolded through the formation of two main groups. The Seleka arose to overthrow the ruling party in Bangui. As a response to exactions committed during this process,

the Anti-Balaka forces, mainly composed of civilians, also took up arms. Together, their actions have turned the country's situation into a dire humanitarian crisis.

Further, it appears that CAR's geographical location is such that interests and agendas of surrounding countries play out in its territory. Indeed, it is generally accepted in academia that conflict in CAR is intimately linked to integrated cross-border dynamics such as the instability in Sudan and Chad.

In summary, violence in CAR seems to be linked to three central themes:

- Exclusion of population groups deprived of resources controlled by elites and lacking influence in the political sphere;
- Grievances related to the absence of development and the marginalization of certain communities, such that war itself becomes an income generator in order to better one's life; and
- Regional dynamics driven by the agendas and interests of neighbouring countries.

2. How is CAR perceived at the international level?

"CAR is a wild jungle." "CAR is a desert." "Bangui is a big village."

These phrases quoted from various interlocutors echo the general portrayal of CAR by international actors mandated to bring peace to the country. These stakeholders, whose perception of CAR is at the centre of this paper, seem to mainly emphasize certain points in contrast to scholars, who delve deeper in the country's historical trajectory. The international community's usual language, focalizing on the current condition of the country, reflects an overarching cloud of cynicism. Such pessimism is widely expressed, but in ways that are at times contradictory. The use of antagonistic terms such as jungle, desert or village illustrates, at the basic level, the different images of the country as created by the community of practitioners who are at the core of our research.

> *"CAR was generally regarded as a fragile state, with poor governance, dysfunctional services and a chronic conflict."*
>
> NGO Humanitarian Coordinator

A few themes often appear in the discourse of the international community. For instance, CAR has one of the lowest human development indices (HDI) in the world. In addition, the country lacks basic infrastructures, consequently isolating certain areas during the rainy season. Power and wealth are concentrated in the hands of an elite minority to the detriment of a majority population with restricted access to public services and a bulging youth with limited opportunities. Further, the state lacks a strong security apparatus to ensure the monopoly of violence. It is thus unable to provide security to its citizens, creating pockets of resistance by non-state actors, who instead fulfill this role. In short, CAR is seen as the perfect example of a failed, predatory state: it has no competent justice system, resulting in impunity and corruption governing the country. This perception reinforces the vision of a helpless country where, according to a peacebuilding practitioner, "it is very difficult to get anything done".

Box 1: World Bank indicators on CAR

As an illustration to the previous paragraphs, these indicators chosen from and developed by the World Bank help reinforce the perception of CAR as a poor, underdeveloped and illiterate country. In turn, we argue that this type of data shapes the international community's policies of engagement, regenerating and strengthening the existing perception of CAR among international actors as defined in this paper.

- GDP   1,538 billion USD
- HDI   0.341 (185/187)
- Population   4.616 millions (2013)
- Population density 7.41/km
- Population growth 1.99%
- Language   French, Sango
- Language counts   72
- Literacy rate   43%

(Source: The World Bank)

CAR's lower scale violence has not garnered much visibility, in contrast to more significant episodes of armed violence in "high interest countries" such as Iraq. According to two former UN officials, the country has never been at the top of donor and governmental agendas due to an outright lack of political and economic interest as well as a low priority register in global affairs.

> *"You can't ignore something unless you know it exists. Very few people know CAR is a country and even fewer have time to worry about it."*
>
> A former high-level UN Officer in CAR

However, we have found that CAR matters in the eyes of the international community. Still, CAR is only in the spotlight to the extent that its internal dynamics threaten the stability of the central African region. As stated by an interviewed scholar, the most recent intervention by the French *Operation Sangaris* followed by UN peacekeepers is the consequence of the post 9-11 obsession with securitization. The general confusion around the religious nature of the 2012 outbreak of violence creates a potential link between the Seleka in CAR and Islamic fundamentalists in the region. It has also been argued that, with the presence of Boko Haram in Nigeria, AQMI in Mali, the Shabab in Somalia and the Janjaweed in Sudan, the fall of CAR could imply serious dangers for the establishment of extremism in the Sahel belt. Therefore, international engagement in CAR is motivated by the need to stabilize the region rather than the will to respond to the country's internal dysfunction. This phenomenon is not exclusive to CAR. It can be extrapolated to other cases such as in Somalia, where growing US preoccupation with security has led to peacebuilding activities "largely driven by outside rather than Somali interests" (Menkhaus *in* Bradbury and Healy 2010: 16). As an illustration of this lack of interest in CAR as a stand-alone country, we have noticed through our research that many agencies are based in neighbouring countries rather than in Bangui or in other areas of the territory.

In addition to international fatigue as a consequence of the perceived hopelessness of CAR and the lack of political will to resolve its internal issues, there appears to be a gap in the international understanding of local realities. At the political level, the Central African state is assimilated to Westphalian ideals of the nation state. As a result, it is treated as a single, unified country destined "to follow the path towards a rational and bureaucratic state" (Lombard 2012b: 193). However, scholars showcase an almost *de facto* partition of the country between the northeast and the southwest. More specifically, competition for state and resource control focuses on the capital city with the remaining territories more or less acting as a haven for banditry and criminal activities. At the social level, interviewed scholars explain that the complex local dynamics, such as tensions between pastoralists and

> *"Local complexities and dynamics, which continue to drive the crisis, are poorly understood and not well represented in Bangui, much less at regional summits."*
>
> Geneva Peace Talks participant

agriculturalists or the role played by the invisible world (witchcraft) in threatening locals' feelings of security, seem to be underestimated.

The international community's overarching perception, namely the cynicism towards, lack of interest in and misunderstanding of CAR, shapes in turn the types and the modalities of engagement in the country.

## 3. How has international engagement taken shape in CAR since independence?

In order to understand the nature of international engagement in CAR, one must differentiate between two periods, namely *pre-* and *post-* 1996. In 1993, Ange Felix Patassé defeated the incumbent candidate Kolingba and the former president Dacko in the presidential elections (Breman and Lombard 2008). During his rule, frustration over unpaid wages became rampant across civil servants, pushing soldiers to stage a series of mutinies in Bangui lasting until 1997 (*Ibid*). This period marks the start of repeated multilateral peacekeeping, peacebuilding and humanitarian relief interventions responding to peaks of crisis. Intermittent manifestations of violence have become a pattern of CAR's political situation until today.

According to a scholar from CAR, international engagement prior to the mid-1990s was mostly led by national agencies through bilateral development aid. These projects were rather technical and focused on the southwest of the country, closer to Bangui. France, referred to by an interviewed French scholar as "a prisoner of its colonial legacy", had the strongest presence but was also accompanied by other powers such as Japan and Germany. Altogether, they implemented the usual development projects focusing on the agricultural, infrastructure, health and educational sectors. However, many scholars echoed that such projects were insufficient (in terms of scale and funding) in achieving a necessary level of development, favorable to the prevention of conflicts. Further to such limitations, development aid was absorbed by a predatory state under Bokassa and his successors, gradually draining the country of its potential (Titley 2002).

Such an approach can directly be related to CAR's perception at the international level as a hopeless state with no real incentives for consistent and meaningful actions. Yet this attitude towards the country changes when crises develop at a level perceived to threaten regional stability. This potential risk is rooted in the 1996 mutinies, which transformed the intensity and the form of international engagement. We find that from this period, the vision of CAR metamorphosed: from a poor country to a chronic post-conflict situation, prompting a different type of intervention.

Following the increased scale and frequency of violence after the mutinies, the international community introduced humanitarian operations as well as peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions to alleviate the people but also to stabilize the region. Since then, interest in CAR "expands and contracts like an accordion": an influx of peacekeeping, peacebuilding forces and humanitarian agencies during peaks of violence followed by a prompt exit as soon as the emergency situation is quelled (Picco 2014).

Intensity of International Engagement in CAR
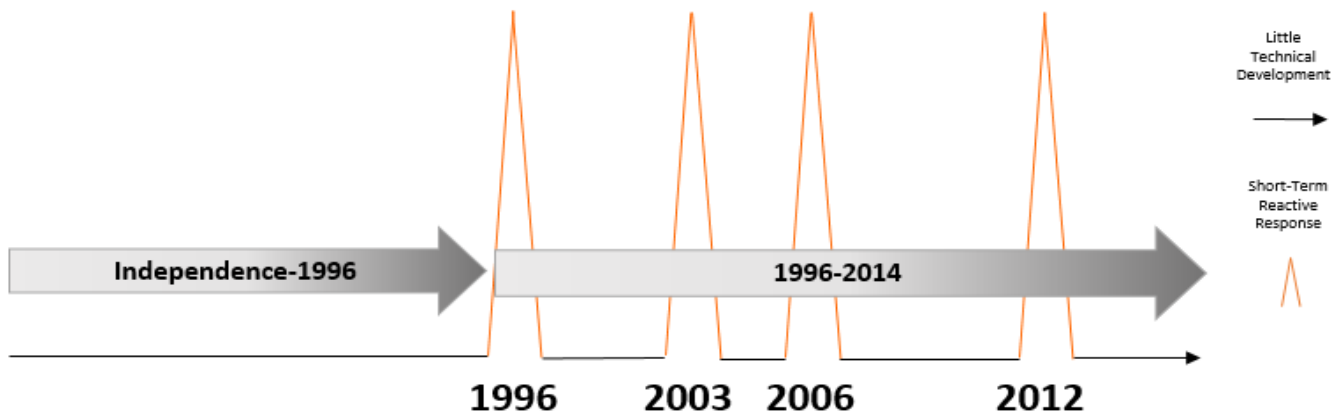
The humanitarian modus operandi implemented by mandated actors such as MSF, ICRC, UNHCR and WFP, is characterized by a series of relief efforts (e.g. food supply, assistance for the displaced and emergency medical care). On the other hand, a plethora of peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions, including MINUSCA, MINURCA, MINURCAT, BONUCA, BINUCA, MISAB, CEN-SAD, FOMUC, EUFOR, and MICOPAX, have progressively stormed into the country to smother the crisis and re-establish regional security. One of the main foci of these efforts is to conduct disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs for combatants, the inefficacies of which will be relayed in box 2. Once the short mandate of these organizations expires, the country is vacated with insufficient long-term development.

For instance, community radio programs perceived to be conflict prevention tools sometimes follow the reactive response. According to Internews, one of their objectives when setting up such initiatives is to counteract the negative manipulation of communities. This might indeed play a vital role in the restoration of peace, security and stability in a setting where institutions are strong; government officials are vested in their country, and where populations need not engage in war to secure a livelihood. In the context of CAR, however, we find that projects of this kind are only beneficial when coupled with long-term, tangible development efforts that tackle the drivers of conflict and not only its superficial symptoms. Yet Jaurer (2009) reveals, for instance, that there was a virtual halt to aid during CAR's civil war in 2002/03, limiting the funds available for health, education, or water and sanitation projects.

> *"Peacekeeping without long-term development projects will not work. They are doing a little bit of everything but not enough of each and in a confusing way."*
>
> Legal adviser from CAR

In treating CAR as an eternal post-conflict setting since 1996, the international community oscillates its engagement between emergency relief and limited development. We argue that this lack of a long-term commitment contributes to the re-emergence of peaks of violence in the country. Ideally, development agencies should take the lead during times of relative peace to ensure continuity. Nevertheless, we have found that the international community only reacts temporarily to insecurity in CAR to fulfil its humanitarian duties and pursue its regional interests.

4. To what extent has international engagement proved effective in the long-term stabilization of CAR?

This section will make use of components of conflict prevention theory to shed light on the international community's failure to effectively contribute to the deterrence of resurging crises in CAR. Scholars conceptualize conflict prevention as a combination of various approaches. There is no consensus on a single definition but some elements reoccur in the literature as a foundation to effectively prevent the materialization of tensions into conflict. Wennmann and Ganson (2012) merge these main elements into three broad categories: effective prevention should be *multi-layered* (through coordinated interventions at the local, national and international levels), *multi-sectorial* (through the involvement of various state and non-state actors), and *broadly owned* (through the inclusion of all relevant actors). Eavis (2011) adds that successful conflict prevention is a result of direct and indirect actions, targeting both the context-specific conflict drivers and the symptoms of violence. There is thus a need to work at different levels to create partnerships among international and governmental agencies, local authorities, and the private sector.

Yet, as demonstrated in the previous section, international involvement in CAR has mainly consisted of brief responses to peaks of crisis. This approach fails to account for the necessary long-term engagement required by its setting. In addition, the short-term intervention is itself problematic: it is mired with inadequacies linked to three main aspects.

> *"The overall picture of the humanitarian presence in the country is distressing: a handful of actors are struggling to provide aid with only half of the requested funds available."*
>
> NGO Humanitarian Coordinator

The first aspect is the low presence of actors in areas outside of Bangui due to perceived security issues. For instance, an interviewed Central African priest pointed out that UN agencies have an extremely risk averse analysis of the situation in CAR, prompting their actions to be fairly restricted to areas around Bangui. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), on the other hand, is able to cover a wider area of the country and considers "the UN security concerns as disproportionate to field realities" (Liu 2013). In this respect, UN humanitarian agencies seem to overestimate insecurity levels during peaks of violence.

Additionally, several Central African interlocutors stated that peacekeeping forces generally stay in particularly secure places such as the airport in Bangui and the city's major axes. This partly explains the difficulties in fully achieving the humanitarian mandate across the country, which "requires the deployment of enormous resources in a short period of time" (Picco 2013). As for NGOs, we received contradictory statements from our interlocutors regarding their presence in and outside of Bangui, even in times of relative peace in the country.

Secondly, an analysis of our interviews with international actors reveals that their low presence creates a lack of information of field dynamics. In turn, there is a misunderstanding of the local realities, which has direct implications for the success of projects. This flawed knowledge of CAR's internal dynamics is tied to the international "ideal-typical state vision" and to "excessive perceptions of insecurity" (Lombard 2012b: 190). Concretely, this translates into the failure to address deeply entrenched social divisions as described in part I. For instance, the lasting resentment towards Muslim traders and nomads, seen as wealth stealers, is largely overlooked. Additionally, the lack of a strong central command within both the Seleka and the Anti-Balaka,

whose members' views and interests differ widely, is another important but neglected dynamic in CAR's conflict (Agger 2014). This helps to explain the failed peace agreements signed at the Brazzaville summit in 2014, which treated armed groups as a united front represented by a single leader.

The third problematic aspect of the international response to CAR's conflict can be linked to the political realities inherent in the bureaucratic functioning of the international sphere. CAR is a perfect illustration of the international system working as an *anti-politics machine*, "depoliticizing everything it touches, everywhere whisking political realities out of sight, all the while performing, almost unnoticed, its own pre-eminently political operation of expanding bureaucratic state power" (Ferguson 1990). International actors have turned CAR's social and political realities into a technical field. This approach, required to reach the necessary consensus among donors and practitioners, fits into a certain theoretical conception of international engagement. The failures to prevent conflict are hence interpreted as "the result of technical issues such as lack of funds and capacities", but the conceptualization of engagement is never questioned (Marchal 2009). Project templates are parachuted into CAR with little consideration of prevailing dynamics in the field (*see* Box 2 as an example).

Box 2: DDR – a technical solution disconnected from the local context

In the last decade, DDR programs have been a top priority on the agendas of international agencies in CAR. Yet such activities have showcased many aspects of the international engagement's ineffectiveness in providing long-lasting peace in the country. Various authors have argued that the technical implementation of a universal DDR model without consideration of the local dynamics failed to respond to the issues faced by the population.

According to one informant, DDR programs have mostly targeted ex-members of armed groups residing in the southwest of the country, neglecting young men who had spontaneously joined freelance militias in search of a better livelihood. These programs further seek to reintegrate the newly disarmed fighters into the national army. Yet such integration requires the presence of a strong army, able to retrain and form these groups. Furthermore, because the international actors understand CAR as a post-conflict setting, one of the objectives of DDR is to help former combatants in non-state armed groups reintegrate their communities as pacific workers. However, the complex and specific local situation prevented the expected results from materializing, because there is no clear distinction between wartime and peacetime in CAR and a strong state with monopoly of violence is inexistent (Lombard 2012a).

Several scholars argue that failed DDR programs have thus contributed to the perpetuation of social tensions by only targeting their assistance to recognized fighters. For example, the reintegration possibilities offered in cash or goods seem to have acted as incentives for underprivileged young people in remote areas to become belligerent, in order to attract and accumulate capital through assistance provided by DDR programs. Altogether, these programs seem to have nourished insecurity instead of providing stability, due to the disconnection between the state-centred DDR template and dynamics governing the field. Although post-project DDR evaluations included recommendations to rethink the way these programs were implemented in CAR, past failures have mainly been ignored and the usual template continued to be applied without critical thinking. In CAR and elsewhere, improving the effectiveness of such projects would require that "aid providers not only listen to and respect aid recipients, but also be willing to change what they do and how they do it based on what they hear" (Anderson *et al* 2013: 124).

As a result of the functioning of international engagement as an *anti-politics machine*, three distinct but interconnected issues arise: the lack of funds allocated to CAR, the prevalence of interest-driven actions to the detriment of an effective implementation of mandates, and insufficient vertical and horizontal coordination among relevant actors.

The lack of political will to fund projects in CAR is well tied to the international community's perception of CAR as an irrelevant, stand-alone country. Most of our informants pointed to the lack of financial resources as an impediment to the implementation of efficacious, long-lasting programs that can benefit CAR.

Further, it took close to a year for the magnitude of the most recent outbreak of violence to be classified at a level allowing UN agencies to scale up their interventions. This recognition came too late and according to local informants, even the peacekeeping missions tasked to take the lead in accessing the most remote areas lacked capacity, mandate, and budget. On the ground, the lack of accountability and constant rotation of UN staff give no incentive to rethink engagement in CAR, in light of past failures (Picco 2014).

Lastly, a former UN official affirmed that the lack of coordination among international actors on the ground often impedes the achievement of positive results. Horizontally, UN agencies and other organizations do not share information related to project missions, timelines and objectives to protect their own territory in terms of budget hunting. Further, the need to fulfill specific mandates as well as competition among a multiplicity of actors creates inappropriate and overlapping projects. Throughout our research, we have noticed that informants themselves are unaware of the various projects undertaken in CAR. More importantly, we received contradictory statements from practitioners, on both the local realities and the implemented projects.

Moreover, several of our informants indicated that vertical coordination at multiple levels is quasi inexistent, whereas engagement with locals is crucial to addressing the underlying triggers of violence. As Brickhill argues, "the starting point should be to understand the ways in which locals actors mediate conflict, negotiate ceasefires and manage security" (Brickhill *in* Bradbury and Healy 2010: 28). Vertical coordination should also include multinational business companies and extractive industries, which have the essential interests and the means to acquire knowledge of their work environment (Ganson and Wennmann 2012). Such partnerships could help overcome the lack of information dilemma faced by international agencies.

As an illustration, a former UN peacebuilding practitioner affirmed that the 26 projects implemented in CAR under the framework of the UN Peacebuilding Fund, between 2008 and 2012, suffered from a lack of strategic coherence among implementing agencies and poor relevance to peacebuilding. As a reference, the implementing agencies included UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNFPA, FAO, WFP, UNHCR and UNOPS. The evaluation of the projects further highlighted a failure to adopt a participative approach, a lack of monitoring, an excessive focus on technicalities rather than on strategic planning, and a late implementation (Vink *et al.* 2012).

Concluding reflections on the improvement of international engagement in CAR

There seems to be a general consensus among our informants that "CAR has all the wrong ingredients": lack of governance, a predatory political class, unfair distribution of resources as well as insufficient and poor public services. These internal issues require home-grown solutions; as such, elites could take the lead in promoting change at the domestic level. For instance, with a better mechanism of elite reproduction, CAR could improve its financial public management, reinforce its public institutions, and establish fair control over its resources. Furthermore, given the drivers of conflict highlighted above, the education of the upcoming generations should be prioritized, to prevent participation in vicious cycles of war.

Whereas the state currently lacks the necessary conditions to absorb long-term development, the international community lacks the political willingness to think outside the box and to reinvent a new model of intervention – more demanding in the short-term but more successful in the long-term (Vircoulon and Lesueur 2014). The international community also has an important role to play in promoting a process of change. As many would argue, the Central African Republic is not the most difficult situation to deal with: its population is rather small, it is resource-rich, and its government does not dissuade international involvement. In addition, the basic demands of armed groups, namely greater opportunities, better inclusion in political matters and overall increased welfare, can be met with the right political will (Lombard 2011). The international actors could build on these positive aspects to reshape their perception of the country.

Given the critical approach we have highlighted in this paper, we argue that the international community's perception of CAR should be rethought in order to generate a more effective engagement in the country. Such a change would encompass a linear, continuous presence as a replacement of the short bursts of reaction to peaks of violence that are currently the norm. We recognize that rapid actions to stop armed conflicts and assist people affected are absolutely necessary. However, CAR cannot only be perceived as a post-conflict situation, because, as a former UN official recently reiterated, "peace is more than the absence of war".

The international community should also think conflict prevention by including long-term and large-scale engagement in sustainable development initiatives. Once a level of stability is reached through a first reactive intervention, a more development-oriented approach should then be privileged in order to tackle the drivers of conflict. In contexts such as in CAR, we have found that education and the creation of better opportunities for the youth, for instance, contribute to long-lasting peace.

Over the months during which we have worked on this research, it has raised interesting food for thought. We are therefore continuing the discussion by raising questions on the future of international engagement to prevent conflict in CAR.

- We have noticed that, recently, some humanitarian and emergency organizations in CAR seem to have realized the necessity of including, precisely, conflict prevention and development aspects in their responses: cash for work activities, livelihood and social cohesion projects. Yet is there a more appropriate strategy in CAR's context, namely to include a peacebuilding perspective into intensified development activities carried out between peaks of violence?
- How should the international conceptualization of CAR itself be rethought, in order to achieve long-lasting peace in the country?
- How can one think about the linkages between peacebuilding, development and conflict prevention in CAR as well as in similar contexts?

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List of acronyms

AIF	African Innovation Foundation
AQMI	Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb
BINUCA	United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in the Central African Republic
BONUCA	United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in the Central African Republic
CAR	Central African Republic
CEN-SAD	Community of Sahel-Saharan States
CNRS	French National Center for Scientific Research
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
EUFOR	European Union Force
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FOMUC	Force Multinationale en Centrafrique
GCSP	Geneva Centre for Security Policy
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HDI	Human Development Index
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICG	International Crisis Group
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
MICOPAX	Mission de Consolidation de la Paix en Centrafrique
MINURCA	United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic
MINURCAT	United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad
MINUSCA	United Nations Mission for Stabilization in Central African Republic
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
OCHA	Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
WFP	World Food Programme

About this paper

This paper has been written as part of a project on international engagement in the Central African Republic. The project was a collaboration between the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform and the Applied Research Seminar (ARS) of the Graduate Institute. The ARS projects partner students of the Graduate Institute with international organizations, NGOs and the private sector to complete discrete research projects for these organisations and provide students with 'real world' research experience.

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About the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is an inter-agency network that connects the critical mass of peacebuilding actors, resources, and expertise in Geneva and worldwide. Founded in 2008, the Platform has a mandate to facilitate interaction on peacebuilding between different institutions and sectors, and to advance new knowledge and understanding of peacebuilding issues and contexts. It also plays a creative role in building bridges between International Geneva, the United Nations peacebuilding architecture in New York, and peacebuilding activities in the field. The Platform's network comprises more than 3,000 peacebuilding professionals and over 60 institutions working on peacebuilding directly or indirectly.

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