



Interfaith Partnership in Emergency & Development Programming

Interfaith engagement for social cohesion: World Vision Central African Republic

Introduction

World Vision Central African Republic (World Vision CAR) has been implementing a variety of social cohesion and peacebuilding programmes as a part of its larger response to an ongoing humanitarian crisis. These initiatives promote peace and tolerance, with the intent of bringing communities closer together.

World Vision began operations in the CAR in 2014 in response to the humanitarian crisis that followed the outbreak of violence in 2013. The current crisis is often framed in religious terms, in the context of a 'Muslim' Seleka group seizing power in the majority-Christian country in early 2013 and then 'Christian' militias, called the 'anti-Balaka', rising up to counter this. In the years of fighting that have ensued, peaceful coexistence between different communities, most notably people of different religious traditions, has broken down and continues to suffer.

World Vision CAR's programming sectors include food, WASH and child protection. As a part of its social cohesion portfolio, World Vision has participated in the Central African Republic Interfaith Peacebuilding Partnership (CIPP) project since 2015. The CIPP supports inter-religious platforms of religious leaders across the country by building their capacity and partnering with them to implement a variety of humanitarian and recovery activities.

Through the implementation of these projects, World Vision CAR, as a faith-based organisation, is proactive in acknowledging and addressing inter-religious dynamics inherent in the crisis. Further, it supports the role of faith leaders in influencing the interfaith relations within their communities. This case study seeks to develop a deeper understanding of these issues and how World Vision CAR addresses them by proactively engaging faith actors.



‘Then other Muslims came from outside and started killing Christians; some of the local Muslims joined them, but most didn’t. Even so, [the Muslims] all left. The ones living in the community who were peaceful were scared of repercussions for affiliation with the perpetrators, so they fled for their lives. That was probably the right thing to do; their fear was valid.’ – beneficiary man, rural town

Key findings

Religion has been instrumentalised for both good and bad

While religion may be one of the drivers of conflict in the CAR, humanitarian and religious actors are adamant that it is not a root cause of the crisis. Rather, they claim that religion has been instrumentalised in what is primarily a political and economic conflict. Now religion is being used to promote messages of

peace. Religious leaders set themselves up as visible models of coexistence, and faith-based organisations (FBOs) such as World Vision use religious messaging to argue for coexistence. It is possible that many religious organisations are motivated to partner with the humanitarian community by the potential for financial gain through project funding. There is also some concern that inter-religious partnerships like the CIPP can bridge across religions while inadvertently supporting denominational, or intra-religious, divisions.

‘I don’t see this crisis as a very bad thing; it has some good, too ... the model of the Platform, of leaders coming together to share their experiences, is a strong one. The government listens to them. They are serious, and there is transparency. We can share externally how Muslims and Christians have been killing each other, but the Platform brought people together, saying there is no sense in the violence and with a message for peace.’ – Catholic priest, Bangui



‘Social cohesion’ is difficult to define

A narrative of restored social cohesion is important for many people, especially those living in communities where the fighting has stopped. Cohesion is important to them. When people say there is social cohesion, they seem to actually be saying that there is tolerance in their communities. This includes tolerating the

presence of people of different religious, ethnic or political affiliations in their midst. Tangible benefits of tolerance include freedom of movement and active engagement in economic activity, some education, social activities and trade. However, community members do not claim to be supporting returns, reconciliation, forgiveness or a return to peaceful coexistence as they remember life pre-2013.



'Here we have social cohesion, but it is true that we do not fully have social cohesion. Returnees are not really possible. There are some that have returned, but only a couple of families. The perpetrators of crimes in the fighting will never be accepted back.'

– World Vision CAR field staff

Faith-based organisations such as World Vision are particularly influential in communicating this message because they emphasise the concept of a God-given dignity that all people share. World Vision CAR ensures that this concept is embodied in their staff and their approaches. Some faith leaders recognise that genuine social cohesion remains elusive, and they observe that forgiveness, or an ability to put the traumas and hatred behind them, would be necessary for the nation to move on from this conflict. They also feel that justice for the perpetrators of violence would be an important element.

Poverty is closely linked to cohesion

Various connections between poverty and conflict emerged over the course of this research. Competition over scarce resources can be a driver of conflict. When people do not have enough food to eat, they are less concerned with the dignity of their neighbour than with their own survival. World Vision has implemented a number of livelihoods interventions to help people develop their livelihoods. Assistance with agricultural

development, small business ideas, and savings groups all allow people to grow increasingly self-reliant, to trade and interact with each other and to become more confident. Economic stability also contributes to peace by encouraging engagement in productive activities and keeping people active. Furthermore, World Vision and many of its partners view economic activities as opportunities to promote social cohesion messaging. Finally, but perhaps most importantly, caring for neighbours is a key Christian value and, indeed, a key value in most faiths. Humanitarian actors are seen as promoting social cohesion simply by demonstrating that they care.

'World Vision recognises our shared humanity and sees that World Vision is good for social cohesion. World Vision works with everyone.' – neighbourhood mayor's representative, Bangui

'Initially, WFP [World Food Programme] was giving complete rations, but these had to be halved at one point and it became a big problem. The religious leaders helped to reduce tensions and to make people aware that WFP was short. As a result, the distribution of existing food continued.' – World Vision CAR staff



Religious leaders play a role both as faith leaders and as community leaders

In the CAR, the term ‘religious leader’ is used more often than ‘faith leader’; these are understood to be designated leaders within a specific religious tradition. In the context of the CAR, this refers to Muslim or Christian (Catholic or Protestant) leaders. There are other leaders in a community, however, and the influence of religious leaders varies. Local leaders may best be described as individuals who are widely respected, in

many cases because of deeds they have done. They may be representatives of religious communities or government or may simply be honourable individuals.

In some places, religious leaders have earned their influence; in others, they are perceived as abusing their power. The extent to which a religious leader is involved in political activities, intervenes in social affairs or is followed by community members depends more on the specific community and on the character, interests and capacity of the leader than on the religious tradition or structure from which they hail.



‘A religious leader is someone who has local authority – an imam is someone who has stepped into a position at the centre of the community and is not as distant as a government representative. They have a voice and are listened to [because] people don’t see them as a threat.’ – Catholic Relief Services (CIPP consortium lead) representative

Engagement with faith leaders, and interfaith engagement, is part of World Vision CAR’s ‘DNA’

Faith partnerships with religious leaders of different faith backgrounds are a part of World Vision CAR’s ‘DNA’, its operating principles. These religious leaders include Muslim as well as Catholic and Protestant and even, at times, traditional leaders. Faith leaders in the communities where World Vision works are familiar with World Vision and have experience with World Vision’s programming. They recognise that the organisation’s staff consider faith leaders to be important partners in whatever World Vision does.

Faith leader partnerships with World Vision may primarily take the form of relationships, information-sharing and invitations to attend activities planned by World Vision, such as child protection trainings or food distributions. Thus, there may not be a specific project output for social cohesion in project designs. However, staff have been well trained to seek ways to support social cohesion, faith partnerships and interfaith engagement in whatever they do. This also influences hiring practices and is a common component of biweekly staff devotions.

‘Staff are also sensitised, extensively, for [such relationships] – in meetings, and devotions, which are contractually mandatory for all staff. They talk about how we distribute as stewards of resources: Someone gives the food, and someone receives it, and our job is to steward it to those who need it. We need to respect the dignity of everyone, because these are Christian values.’ – World Vision CAR staff



Lessons learned

Social cohesion means different things to different people. When implementing humanitarian or recovery work in fragile contexts, aid providers often want to promote social cohesion. However, they should be aware that the way social cohesion is understood and achieved varies between communities. Thus, their understanding of social cohesion should reflect that of the community they are serving. When there is a difference of understanding, this can be used to promote dialogue about principles of conflict transformation, peacebuilding and social relationships. Recognising that the conflict in the CAR is still evolving and the situation is still volatile at the time of this research, World Vision CAR's ability to engage in this complex and sensitive field of programming reveals some important potential lessons learned thus far:

- **Staff as a team's greatest asset:** Building a response team that values faith actors of all religious communities represented in the area served, and sees them as important stakeholders, is key to ensuring that these partners are engaged to facilitate both humanitarian response and social cohesion. This can be done by using faith awareness and sensitivity as a lens in hiring practices, hiring staff who reflect the religious diversity of the affected community (if appropriate within country office policies). Regular meetings and devotions with staff, in which World Vision's Christian identity and value for faith are regularly reiterated, are also effective.
- **Relationships with faith leaders an important foundation:** It is important to proactively network with religious leaders by thoroughly mapping religious actors in a community, meeting with leaders regularly and inviting them to meetings and World Vision-sponsored events. These relationships should be maintained, though it is not always necessary that religious leaders be assigned a specific role in World Vision's programming. Rather, by World Vision maintaining a commitment to work alongside religious
- leaders and build relationships with them, these leaders can access messaging on social cohesion and promote values of human dignity and social cohesion within their communities. This has a social impact and can be a calming force facilitating aid delivery.
- **World Vision's credibility enhanced by a commitment to interfaith engagement:** The fact that World Vision staff know and interact regularly with leaders of different faith groups means that World Vision CAR can partner with the leader or leaders most respected by beneficiaries to facilitate aid delivery. Additionally, these leaders are well-positioned to promote dialogue and social cohesion work. This is also a means by which a Christian non-governmental organisation is able to affirm its humanitarian goals to various stakeholders at the community, partner and donor levels.
- **A clear, consistent message across all teams:** Messaging is important, but its effectiveness is largely in its repetitiveness. World Vision CAR is working with religious leaders, other community leaders, youth groups, national-level forums, other humanitarian actors and other stakeholders. It is repeating and modelling the same messages with stakeholders in all interventions: human dignity, child protection and social cohesion. Furthermore, other humanitarian partners are delivering the same message in their activities with diverse stakeholders. Thus, these principles are communicated widely throughout affected communities of the CAR.
- **Mainstream social cohesion into humanitarian work:** World Vision CAR included a social-cohesion and conflict-sensitivity lens in all its programming. This supported its unified message. However, measuring social cohesion outcomes is difficult, especially in short-term projects. Therefore, aid delivery projects may not necessarily be held accountable for their impact on social cohesion. However, they benefit from efforts to regularly report and reflect upon its effectiveness.