

# WE COME TOGETHER

Community-based Protection in the Tri-border Region  
of CAR, DRC, and South Sudan

January 2022



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The tri-border region between eastern Central African Republic (CAR), northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and western South Sudan is a critical connection point where the Sahel meets equatorial central Africa, allowing trade, movements of people, and cultural exchange. But the porous borders that nominally separate these three countries are also widely exploited by a range of armed groups, traffickers in illicit resources and weapons, and poachers. Invisible Children's (IC) Crisis Tracker project documented 839 attacks on civilians and 120 incidents of intercommunal violence in the tri-border region between January 2019 and September 2021, highlighting the impact these actors have on the safety and security of the civilian population. Though considered an isolated periphery to elites in Bangui, Kinshasa, and Juba, violence in the tri-border region has destabilizing ripple effects that undermines stability of all three countries.

Recognizing that local communities are best placed to identify threats to their own security and the most effective mitigation measures, IC works alongside local civil society organizations (CSOs) to collaborate with 157 community-based Peace Committees. Comprised of locally elected community members, the Peace Committees include women, youth, and individuals from vulnerable groups. Members work together to prevent and respond to violence against civilians, resolve inter- and intra-communal conflicts, enhance social cohesion, improving both local security and localized events from spiraling into more widespread instability. This approach utilizes a core protection model that includes participatory community mapping, the development of localized Community Action Plans (CAPs), and an Early Warning System (EWS) utilizing High Frequency (HF) radios and telecommunications as appropriate for each communities' individual context.



We are still vulnerable to abductions, looting, and ambushes by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and other armed groups in the area, and many of our children and women have been assaulted and kidnapped. Since the creation of the Peace Committee and the installation of the HF radio, we are alerted of every armed group presence in the vicinity, which feeds into the implementation of the strategies created by the Peace Committee as preventive measures for more resilience. With the radio, we can communicate between communities, not only for security reasons, such as emergencies or the warning of armed group movements (especially the LRA) but also on a daily basis in case of needs, such as illnesses.

– Peace Committee member in DRC's Bas Uele province

Local Peace Committees are central to this protection model, as they serve as key focal points within the communities and with IC and local partners. Between January 2019 and September 2021, Peace Committees implemented over 1,536 risk prevention and response strategies and other activities within their communities. They addressed a wide-range of threats, from arbitrary detentions by armed groups to intercommunal tensions between farmers and pastoralists to gender-based violence (GBV).

Peace Committees are active not only in responding to violence, but also proactively working to prevent and mitigate potential threats, through activities such as social cohesion sensitizations that utilize technologies ranging from bullhorns to Secure Digital (SD) memory cards loaded with locally produced films. Through the EWS, Peace Committees not only share information with each other, they actively collaborate on inter-community strategies between communities to address threats and enhance social cohesion. Peace Committees' leadership in protection initiatives has made them well-suited to serve as focal points for a range of other interventions, such as supporting livelihood initiatives that reduce risk to armed groups and serving as Community Counselors that help people in need access the psychosocial services they need.

The extensive peacebuilding work conducted by Peace Committees highlights several key lessons learned for practitioners in the field. In order to ensure diversity and inclusion, practitioners must be mindful of dominant groups within communities, and work with community members to include representatives of minority groups as Peace Committee members. Early planning for sustainability of Peace Committees should include collaboration with members to develop income generating activities (IGAs), which will enable the continuation of the Peace Committees' work after external support has concluded. Most importantly, the Peace Committees' work is a reminder that centering civilian-led, community-based initiatives is critical to disrupting cycles of violence and instability in all three corners of the tri-border region.



In this community, we had many problems: Conflicts between the population and authorities from the national park, intercommunal conflicts, land conflicts, lack of means of communication, conflict between families... From the day I became a member of the Peace Committee and received training, I can now testify that the presence of the HF radio supports community protection. As soon as we receive an alert, we come together to discuss which strategy to put in place to protect the community. And it works. The project's presence into our community brings different 'sections' of the population together through the Peace Committee. We are all here and we are dealing with these issues together, which encourages non-Peace Committee community members to peacefully resolve their issues together as well. Personally, I invest a lot in this activity. Even at church, I'm making the strategies more comprehensive for churchgoers to understand how to report and resist threats in our community.

– Pastor in DRC's Haut Uele province, 2019



## ACRONYMS

<b>APPR-RCA</b>	Accord politique pour la paix et la réconciliation en République centrafricaine
<b>CAP</b>	Community Action Plan
<b>CAR</b>	Central African Republic
<b>CLPR</b>	Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees
<b>CRCA</b>	Community Resilience in Central Africa
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organization
<b>DNH</b>	Do No Harm
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of Congo
<b>EWS</b>	Early Warning System
<b>FGD</b>	Focus Group Discussion
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-Based Violence
<b>HF</b>	High Frequency
<b>IC</b>	Invisible Children
<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced Person
<b>IGA</b>	Income Generating Activities
<b>LRA</b>	Lord's Resistance Army
<b>MHPSS</b>	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
<b>MINUSCA</b>	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
<b>MONUSCO</b>	UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>OCHA</b>	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>SD</b>	Secure Digital
<b>RSF</b>	Rapid Support Forces
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development

## I. METHODOLOGY

This report is based on data collected during three projects managed by IC in the tri-border region of eastern CAR, the Uele region of DRC, and South Sudan's Western Equatoria state from September 2017 - June 2021. Each project utilizes a version of a similar community-based protection model in which IC collaborates with regional CSOs and community-based volunteer Peace Committees. Primary data collection methods include an EWS that spans 157 communities in the tri-border region as well as data collected during consultations with Peace Committee members and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) during 470 community visits conducted by IC and local partners to those communities since January 2018. Additional field missions were conducted by IC conflict analysis staff in eastern CAR (April 2021), Bas Uele province in DRC (May 2021), and Western Equatoria (May 2021). For the safety and security of the communities, this report does not disclose the names of individual communities or armed groups, instead focusing on broader trends in the region and at the province, prefecture, and state levels.

Through the EWS, Peace Committees report incidents as well as activities which they implement to prevent and respond to atrocities and other forms of violence, as well as those to promote civic engagement and social cohesion. This information is recorded in IC's secure database as part of IC's Crisis Tracker project.<sup>1</sup> The Crisis Tracker is a geospatial database and reporting project which aims to track incidents of violent conflict in the tri-border region, available at [CrisisTracker.org](https://CrisisTracker.org). Through publication of regular reports and sharing of collected data, the Crisis Tracker aims to help overcome the current deficit of relevant and timely information related to armed group activity and to support improved policy and protection responses.

Activities included in the community-based protection model are funded primarily by the Community Resilience in Central Africa (CRCA) Activity, a five-year, USAID-funded project of IC operational in Haute Kotto, Haut Mbomou, and Mbomou prefectures of CAR and Bas Uele and Haut Uele provinces in DRC. CRCA takes a cross-border, holistic approach to strengthening the resilience of central African communities where violence and exploitation threaten the safety of people and the natural resources and wildlife they rely upon. Supported by a foundation of strong community-based protection initiatives, CRCA reinforces the resilience of 137 communities in the CAR-DRC border region by equipping them to address trauma, access sustainable economic opportunity, and transform conflict to prevent violence, improve safety, and strengthen unity. The other two projects referenced in this report include a US Government-funded project active in northeastern CAR from September 2017 - April 2021, and a project funded by a private foundation active in Western Equatoria State, South Sudan, since December 2018.

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive guide to the Crisis Tracker methodology and codebook, visit [CrisisTracker.org/codebook.pdf](https://CrisisTracker.org/codebook.pdf). For more information about the Crisis Tracker or IC's programming, contact [crisistracker@invisiblechildren.com](mailto:crisistracker@invisiblechildren.com).

## II. TRENDS IN VIOLENCE IN THE TRI-BORDER REGION

The tri-border region between eastern CAR, DRC's Uele provinces, and Western Equatoria in South Sudan is the scene of vibrant cross-border trade, movements of people, and cultural exchange in a landscape where the Sahel meets equatorial central Africa.<sup>2</sup> Each of these regions also faces various degrees of fragility, fed by poverty, a lack of formal economic and educational opportunities for youth, and a history of state neglect and underrepresentation in national governments. The 2020 Human Development Index, which ranks nations by health, education, and standards of living, ranked the DRC 175, South Sudan 185, and CAR as the second lowest ranking country at 188.<sup>3</sup>

Many civilians are cut-off from regional capitals, let alone national capitals, by poor roads and the absence of basic communication systems such as mobile phone and FM radio networks. While mobile phone network coverage in the region is slowly expanding, many communities still lack coverage as the economics of the telecommunication industry often prevent the extension of networks to small, remote villages where there is little hope the company will recover the costs of the extension. Thus, remote communities have a limited ability to rapidly share and receive information outside their community. Furthermore, formal justice systems are weak throughout the region, especially in rural areas, reducing civilian access to credible state conflict resolution and accountability mechanisms. Many communities have experienced widespread trauma, but professional psychosocial services remain rare and inaccessible to most.

These conditions, combined with the proliferation of small arms and illicit markets for a range of natural resources, have manifested in varying degrees of insecurity for civilians in the tri-border region. Security forces, including both military and police, are absent in many communities. Where they are deployed, security forces are often poorly trained and equipped and present another source of tension and abuse. In the absence of – or in opposition to – state authority, various non-state armed groups (referred to in this report simply as “armed groups”) and armed communal groups remain active, pursuing their own agendas while targeting civilians. Though communities in the tri-border are considered isolated peripheries to elites in Bangui, Kinshasa, and Juba, events there have destabilizing ripple effects. Armed groups in eastern CAR played a central role in the overthrow of the Central African government in 2013, and were part of the coalition that threatened Bangui again in late 2020. The intercommunal tensions in DRC's Uele region between local farmers and pastoralists migrating from conflict and drier climates in CAR highlights the risk of future farmer-herder conflict in other areas of DRC. And recent armed group and ethnopolitical violence in Western Equatoria has evolved into one of the most serious threats to consolidating peace in South Sudan.

Between January 2019 and September 2021, IC's Crisis Tracker documented more than 839 attacks on civilians by armed groups<sup>4</sup>, during which more than 689 civilians were abducted and 191 were killed.<sup>5</sup> Women, youth, and children comprised 31% of the 689 civilians abducted during the period, reflecting the frequent targeting of vulnerable groups in the region.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the Crisis Tracker documented 120 incidents of intercommunal violence, often involving armed Peuhl civilians involved in pastoralism.

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<sup>2</sup> This report covers conflict dynamics primarily in the following areas: Haut Uele and Bas Uele provinces in DRC; Haute Kotto, Haut Mbomou, Mbomou, and Vakaga prefectures in CAR; and Western Equatoria state in South Sudan.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Development Programme, [Human Development Report](#). 2020.

<sup>4</sup> To mitigate the risk of retaliation, this report does not identify or specify specific armed groups or actors, aside from the LRA.

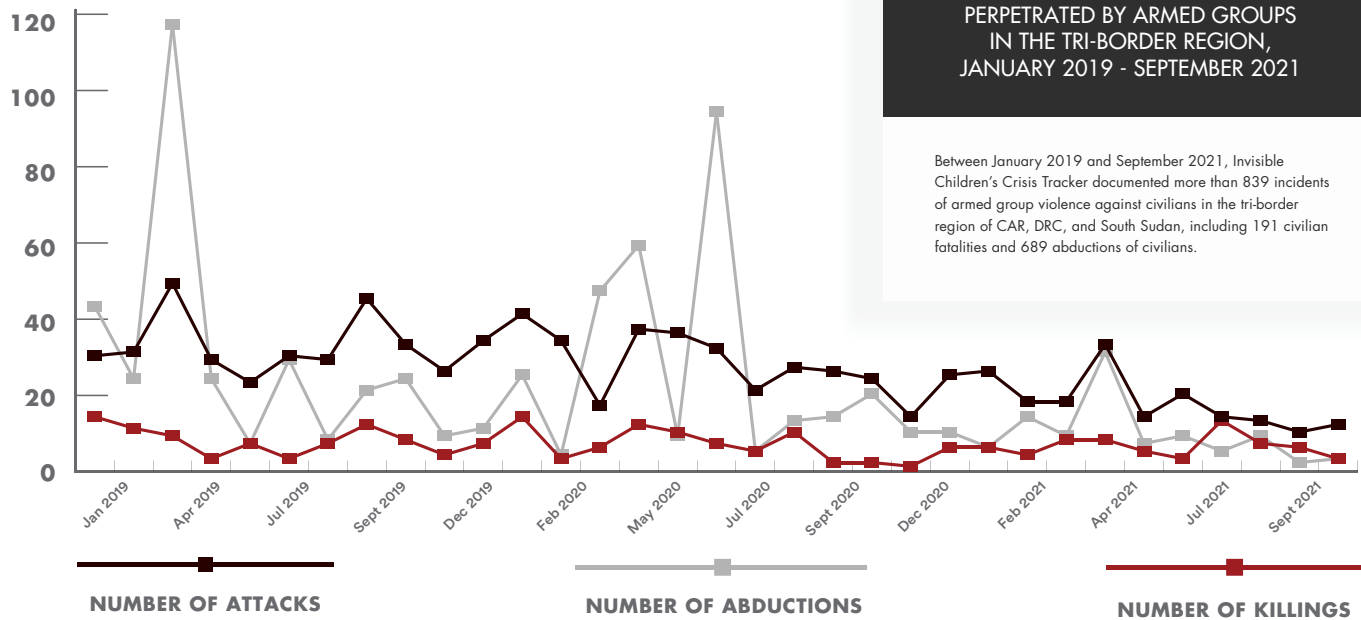
<sup>5</sup> The Crisis Tracker is a geospatial database and reporting project that tracks armed group activity and conflict-related incidents in the tri-border region of DRC, CAR, and South Sudan. Crisis Tracker data is drawn primarily from the community-based EWS. A limited, publicly accessible version of the Crisis Tracker's online mapping platform is available at <https://crisistracker.org/>. For a summary of the Crisis Tracker's methodology visit <https://crisistracker.org/codebook.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> The Crisis Tracker also documents GBV by unarmed civilians, recording 70 cases between January 2019 - September 2021.



**VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS  
PERPETRATED BY ARMED GROUPS  
IN THE TRI-BORDER REGION,  
JANUARY 2019 - SEPTEMBER 2021**

Between January 2019 and September 2021, Invisible Children's Crisis Tracker documented more than 839 incidents of armed group violence against civilians in the tri-border region of CAR, DRC, and South Sudan, including 191 civilian fatalities and 689 abductions of civilians.



**EASTERN CAR**

In eastern CAR, Central African armed groups have fought state security forces and each other for control of major towns and outlying communities for over a decade. They are fueled in part by illicit trade networks for weapons, gold, diamonds, cattle, and other natural resources that operate domestically and stretch into Chad, DRC, South Sudan, and Sudan. Despite efforts by the United Nations (UN) Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) to protect civilians and stabilize the country, periods of intense fighting have overlapped with attempts to negotiate peace deals, six of which have been signed since the outbreak of civil war in 2013. The latest, *L'Accord politique pour la paix et la réconciliation en République centrafricaine* (APPR-RCA), was signed in Khartoum, Sudan, in February 2019, between the Central African government and 14 armed groups, six of which have been active in eastern CAR. The most recent round of fighting began in December 2020, when a new coalition of armed groups sought to overthrow the government in advance of contested presidential elections. In recent months, the CAR government and its bilateral allies have pushed the armed groups into strategic retreats, but they have yet to consolidate state authority and peace in a sustainable and inclusive manner. Civilians have often been in the crossfire of these developments, and are periodically targeted by armed groups based on their ethnic, religious, or livelihood identity. Pastoralism dynamics in eastern CAR have also been impacted by the crisis, including reported increases of cattle theft, for example in Sam Ouandja in December 2020, and transhumants no longer adhering to designated corridors due to insecurity.

**The complex relationship between ethnic identity and armed groups**

The proliferation of small arms among civilians and the recruitment by armed groups along ethnic lines can blur the lines between armed group and intercommunal violence. Coinciding with the onset of the dry season in 2020, tensions escalated between nomadic Misserya from Sudan and Goula communities in CAR's Vakaga prefecture. The conflict, which is rooted in longstanding mutual grievances, was reignited on March 27, 2020, when a Central African armed group that recruits from the Goula clashed with Misserya in a border town, resulting in six fatalities on the Misserya side and the killing of a general from the armed group. Cross-border reprisal attacks by Misserya against Central African armed groups escalated afterwards, with a group of Sudanese Misserya attacking a community in Vakaga on November 3. On December 1, Misserya forces, reportedly led by members of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), clashed with Goula forces, because Goula had refused to pay for 'diya' (blood money) for the killing of six Misserya combatants in April 2020. Both sides suffered fatalities and several homes in the community were set on fire. Following the clash, Goula forces reinforced their positions and a contingent of security forces was deployed to the community. At least 2,000 people were reportedly displaced during the clashes.

### **Notable trends: Eastern CAR January 2019 - September 2021**

- Armed group violence against civilians has been far more prevalent in eastern CAR (574 attacks between January 2019 and September 2021), than in the Uele region of DRC (210 attacks). Within eastern CAR, armed group abuses were most frequent in Haute Kotto (380).
- Civilians are particularly vulnerable to armed group attacks within communities (43%), which are frequently under the control of armed groups, as well as while traveling along roads (19%).
- The Khartoum agreement led to a temporary reduction of fighting between armed groups party to the accord in eastern CAR, but did not result in reduced abuses against civilians. The Crisis Tracker documented 145 abuses by armed groups in eastern CAR in the year preceding the agreement, and 252 in the year following.

### **DRC'S UELE REGION**

Security in DRC's Uele region has gradually improved in recent years, as attacks by the LRA have reduced, though not stopped completely. National military and police forces are sparingly deployed in the region, though many smaller communities remain unprotected. The UN's Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) pulled out of the DRC's Bas Uele in 2017 and Haut Uele in 2019 after nearly a decade in which it struggled to protect communities from the LRA and other threats. Conflict between Congolese farming communities and Peuhl pastoralists with roots in CAR and other countries is increasingly the most pressing conflict driver in the Ueles, with worrying trends in hate speech and misinformation often targeting the ethnic minority Peuhl.

### **Notable trends: DRC's Uele region January 2019 - September 2021**

- In the Uele region of DRC, the LRA was responsible for the most armed group attacks (112) from January 2019 - September 2021, including the abductions of over 360 civilians. Still, violence there has declined dramatically from the 2008-2012 peak, when the LRA averaged 281 attacks and 749 abductions per year.
- Tensions between Peuhl pastoralists and sedentary communities remains a challenge within the Ueles, with 80 incidents of violence between Peuhl and other ethnic groups, resulting in 28 fatalities, including an escalation of violence mid-2020 following increased anti-Peuhl rhetoric and hate speech in the Uele region. Additionally, 83 incidents of non-violent intercommunal tensions between Peuhl and other groups, such as communities barring transhumant pastoralists from accessing local markets, hunters killing pastoralists' cattle, and cattle trampling farmers' crops.
- Unlike CAR, civilians are less likely to be attacked within their communities, with 70% of all attacks occurring while people travel along remote roads or while they are hunting, fishing, farming, or herding.

### **WESTERN EQUATORIA**

Western Equatoria experienced a brief stretch of relative stability before and after South Sudan's 2011 referendum on independence, though intercommunal conflicts between Dinka pastoralists and the state's Azande majority and attacks by the LRA posed significant threats to civilians. Youth militias, known as the Arrow Boys, were formed to counter the LRA and other perceived threats (such as cross-border movements of Peuhl pastoralists from CAR) in the region. The LRA was responsible for 109 attacks and 331 abductions in Western Equatoria between 2008 - 2012, but only 10 attacks and 44 abductions from January 2013 - September 2021. The decline in LRA activity in Western Equatoria was due in large part to the group's overall reduction in capacity, but resistance by the Arrow Boys also played a significant role.

The outbreak of civil war in South Sudan in 2013 dashed short-term hopes for stability in Western Equatoria, though the region remained relatively quiet during the first several years of the civil war that has ravaged the country and killed nearly 400,000 people since 2013<sup>7</sup>. However, simmering political tensions led to intense fighting between government and rebel forces in Western Equatoria, beginning in 2015. Failures to effectively demobilize and reintegrate former combatants from the various armed groups which have operated in the region have contributed to this violence, as former Arrow Boys were active in the rebel groups who took up arms against the government in 2015, resulting in cycles of remobilization and re-recruitment of former combatants into armed groups and illicit networks engaged in wildlife trafficking. Since a 2018 peace deal was signed, fighting has subsided, but periodic outbreaks of armed group and politically-motivated ethnic violence in recent months are a reminder of continued instability. Most recently, ethnopolitical tensions between Azande and Balanda in areas of Western Equatoria along the border with CAR have led to cycles of violence, exacerbated by political divisions within the state government. More than 60 civilians were killed and thousands more displaced during the latest outbreak of fighting between January - September 2021.

## CROSS-BORDER THREATS

Though most armed groups and conflict dynamics in the tri-border region are oriented around local and national politics, they are fueled, at least in part, by cross-border illicit trafficking networks and the ability of armed actors to cross borders with impunity.

### Cross-border attacks by armed groups along the CAR-South Sudan border

Armed groups frequently operate across borders, and, in some cases, even control border crossings. On November 8, 2020, a South Sudanese armed group launched a [cross-border attack](#) on a Central African rebel group in a Central African border town. The attack came amid rising tensions with South Sudanese border communities, which face frequent abuses by a Central African armed group having taken control of the border crossing in 2019. The group carried out a reprisal attack on the neighboring South Sudanese border community on November 18. The attackers looted and burned homes in the community, prompting residents to flee. The cross-border violence also displaced over 1,000 Central Africans, who reportedly crossed the border to seek refuge in South Sudan. Some of the displaced have returned as there have not been any major attacks since. Following the initial attack on November 8, there was notable movement of the Central African rebel groups in Haut Mbomou, as reinforcements were sent to the border area.

### Notable trends: Cross-border security dynamics

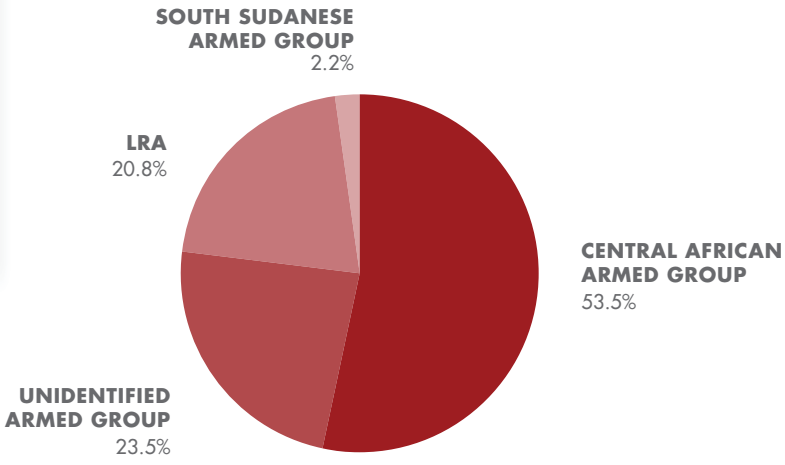
- **Spillover of South Sudan conflict:** South Sudanese armed groups have periodically set up rear bases in bordering areas of CAR and DRC to escape military pressure. The Crisis Tracker documented nine attacks by South Sudanese armed groups in CAR and DRC between January 2019 - September 2021, as well as clashes between armed South Sudanese groups and Central African armed groups in late 2020 (see below).
- **Peuhl migration and movements into DRC and South Sudan:** Peuhl pastoralists have crossed from eastern CAR into DRC's Uele region since at least 2001, driven by the search for greener pastures and, during periods of heightened insecurity in CAR, by the search for safety. A further source of tension with local Congolese is that many Congolese accuse Peuhl of collaborating with the LRA, which since 2018 has looted Congolese communities and then traded the goods with the permission of Central African armed groups in neighboring towns in CAR's Haut Mbomou prefecture. However, there is little evidence of substantive collaboration between the groups. Peuhl pastoralists also cross into Western Equatoria from neighboring CAR, as well as DRC – particularly during periods of increased intercommunal tensions in DRC. While the Peuhl sometimes engage in trade with pastoral groups in Western Equatoria, cattle raiding can also occur. Additionally, their presence is often a source of tension with local sedentary communities.

<sup>7</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, [Civil War in South Sudan](#). 2021.

- **Splintering of the LRA:** Since 2020, LRA splinter groups have been most active in the DRC provinces of Haut Uele and Bas Uele, and Haut Mbomou and Haute Kotto prefectures in eastern CAR. A small LRA group led by Joseph Kony is also active in the Sudanese-controlled Kafia Kingi enclave along the border of Sudan, South Sudan, and CAR.
- **Armed communal groups and trafficking in northeastern CAR:** Armed men from Sudan, often aligned with ethnic groups such as the Misserya that engage in pastoralism, periodically cross into CAR’s Vakaga prefecture to commit attacks, where they periodically clash with Central African armed groups, who recruit from ethnic groups with long-standing tensions with Sudanese groups. Conversely, Central African armed groups collaborate with Sudanese actors on illicit trafficking of weapons and natural resources and have even allowed Sudanese armed groups to cultivate marijuana in Central African territory<sup>8</sup>.
- **Poachers and illicit wildlife trade:** The abundant wildlife in the tri-border region attracts poachers and armed groups who seek to poach elephants, pangolin, and other protected species. The tri-border region is exploited by poachers and traders, who exploit the porous borders and work alongside armed groups who capitalize from the illicit trade of animals, as well as illegal logging.

**VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS BY ARMED GROUPS IN THE TRI-BORDER REGION, JANUARY 2019 - SEPTEMBER 2021**

Between January 2019 and September 2021, Invisible Children’s Crisis Tracker documented more than 839 incidents of violence against civilians perpetrated by armed groups in the tri-border region of eastern CAR, northeastern DRC, and South Sudan’s Western Equatoria state. Over 53% of these attacks were perpetrated by Central African armed groups.



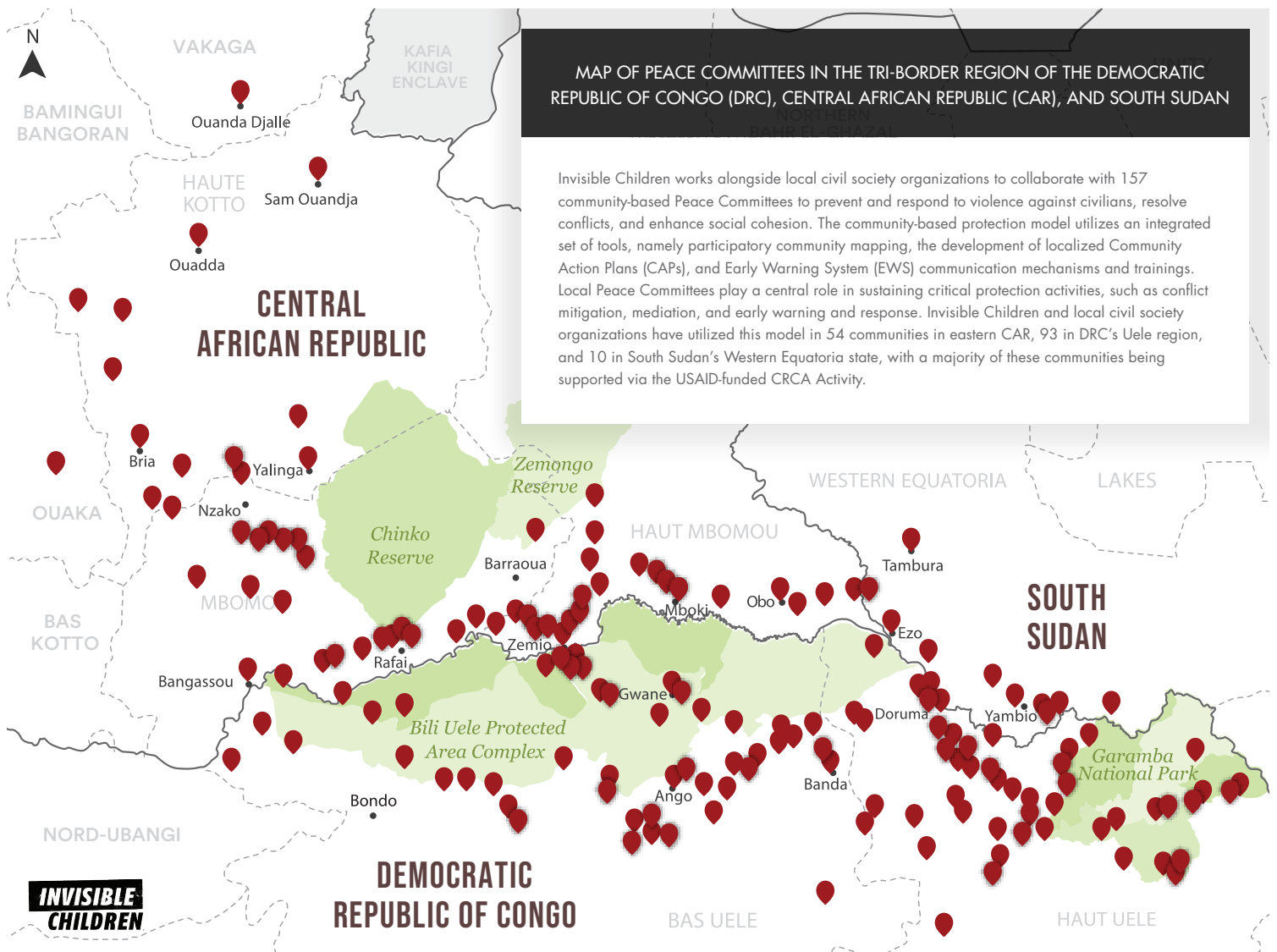
<sup>8</sup> UN Panel of Experts for the Central African Republic, [S/2021/87](#). January 27, 2021.

### III. COMMUNITY-BASED PROTECTION AND RISK MITIGATION MODEL

Local communities are best placed to identify threats to their own security and the most effective mitigation measures<sup>9</sup>. Due to the lack of state presence, civilians in the tri-border region also have critical roles in implementing risk mitigation measures that improve local security and help prevent the spread of conflicts into neighboring regions. Working in close collaboration with regional CSOs, IC adopted a community-based approach to civilian protection and atrocity prevention in the context of the tri-border region, where national protection and peacebuilding mechanisms are scarce. These CSO partners have offices in “hub” communities and have a long-term, permanent presence in the region. With IC staff, CSO partners play an active role in designing, planning, and implementing protection interventions.

#### CORE COMMUNITY-BASED PROTECTION MODEL

The community-based protection model utilizes an integrated set of tools, namely participatory community mapping, the development of localized CAPs, and EWS communication mechanisms and training. Local Peace Committees<sup>10</sup> are central to these efforts, serving as the primary point of contact for IC and its CSO partners, and play a central role in sustaining critical protection activities, such as conflict mitigation, mediation, and early warning and response. IC and partner CSOs currently utilize a version of this model in 54 communities in eastern CAR, 93 in DRC’s Uele region, and 10 in South Sudan’s Western Equatoria state, with a majority of these communities being supported via the USAID-funded CRCA Activity.



<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, [Understanding Community-Based Protection](#). 2013.

<sup>10</sup> The 54 Peace Committees supported by IC in eastern CAR are distinct from the Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees (CLPRs) formed by the Central African Ministry of Reconciliation beginning in 2016. As of early 2020, there were five CLPRs in eastern CAR, located in Bangassou, Gombo, Pombolo, Ngandou (Mbomou), and Bria (Haute Kotto).

## **The community protection model includes the following stages:**

**Community buy-in:** To introduce the protection and resilience module to communities, IC and CSO partners conduct an initial community visit to consult with key local stakeholders to assess the relevance and need for activities included in the protection model. During these initial field missions to target communities, IC and partners introduce the idea of the EWS and allow community leaders, including individuals representing marginalized groups, to decide if they want to join the EWS.

**Assessing appropriate communication tools:** If a community approves during the initial visit, a second visit is organized during which IC and CSOs work with residents to determine the appropriate EWS communication platform (HF radio, mobile phone, etc.) for that community. Most of the participating communities in DRC and CAR are not covered by mobile phone networks, therefore, HF radios are the predominant communication platform for these communities. However, communities that are covered by phone networks, may also utilize the HF radios, which allow for information sharing with communities without phone networks. In Western Equatoria, pre-implementation assessments determined that HF radios were not an appropriate tool for the context, so information is shared via phone in connected communities and is also collected during frequent visits to communities which do not have network access.

**Peace Committee formation:** IC and its CSO partners facilitate a General Assembly meeting within the community, taking steps to ensure representation from relevant women's groups, ethnic and religious groups, youth, and people with disabilities. These assemblies are frequently attended by dozens or even hundreds of community members, including local leaders. If a Peace Committee-like structure does not already exist, IC and CSO staff introduce the concept. Then a community vote is held to elect 16 community members, with facilitators placing an emphasis on the importance of the inclusion of women, youth, and other marginalized groups. Communities are encouraged to elect at least four to six women. In addition to the 16 elected Peace Committee members, two local authorities are selected to participate in the training alongside the Peace Committee to create a foundation for collaboration between the Peace Committees and authorities in DRC and CAR. In South Sudan, local authorities and in some cases members of security forces, such as park rangers or military officials, are elected to serve on the Peace Committee, as a mechanism for increasing information sharing and collaboration between communities and officials.

### **Peace Committees work alongside local authorities**

To ensure increased support of and efficiency in their activities, Peace Committees regularly collaborate with and work alongside local government authorities, as well as traditional leaders. This collaboration provides a foundation for community buy-in, increases acceptance, and can mitigate possible tensions between authorities and the Peace Committees. Amid a surge of armed group violence and movement in CAR's Haute Kotto prefecture in March 2021, for example, one local Peace Committee registered all of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) who arrived in their community, then utilized the EWS HF Radio to contact prefectural authorities and NGOs to advocate for humanitarian support for the IDPs who fled to the community. Another Peace Committee in CAR's Haute Kotto, frequently worked alongside local authorities during armed group mediation efforts following a surge of inter-ethnic violence in early 2020. They also conducted joint sensitization efforts, traveling to near-by communities to sensitize the population and armed group combatants on social cohesion and adhering to the national peace agreement.

**Participatory community mapping:** A participatory mapping exercise is conducted with the Peace Committees to identify the community's threats and dividers that pose a risk to their security, as well as identify the connectors and resources to mitigate such risks. By locating them on their community map, Peace Committees are able to contextualize identified connectors and dividers within space and time, which, in turn, helps them create efficient mitigation strategies. The process frequently begins with an interactive ground mapping exercise (e.g. using sticks in sand or chalk on cement floors) and facilitated discussion, which creates space for diverse communal groups to exchange their understanding of the environment, and leads to the creation of maps drawn on butcher block paper.



Peace Committee members in Haut Uele during participatory community mapping exercise

### Central African Peace Committee utilizes community map to mitigate risks

On February 11, 2020 a Peace Committee in CAR's Ouaka prefecture used their community map after armed group combatants attacked six women merchants along the Samba River, looting them of their goods. The Peace Committee located the incident on the map they had created, gathered community members in the center of the community, and updated their risk mitigation strategies to include advising women not to take that route when doing commerce.

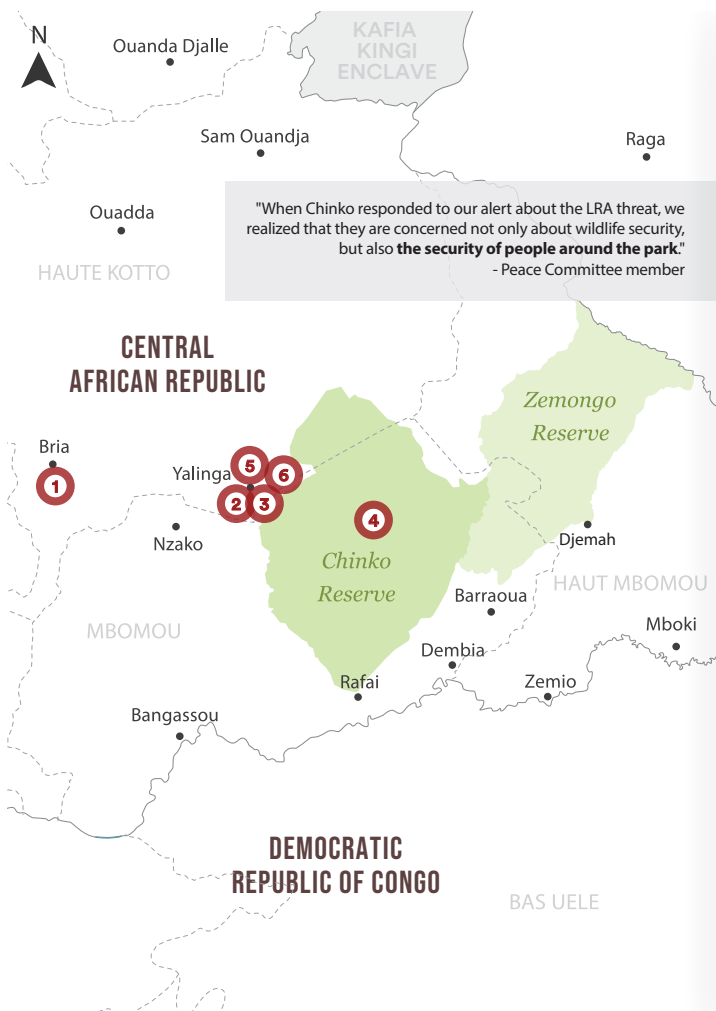
**Development of Community Action Plans (CAPs):** After the participatory mapping process, IC and CSOs collaborate with the Peace Committees to develop CAPs. These collections of risk mitigation strategies support the capacity of Peace Committees – and, by extension, local communities – to rapidly respond to potential threats and atrocities. These strategies are rooted in the communities' unique strengths, assets, and vulnerabilities, including those identified during the mapping exercise. CAPs are neither static nor comprehensive, but instead are intended to be a tool for the community to draw from and expand upon in case of a potential threat or as a response to atrocities. CAPs often include strategies related to alerting authorities to threats, reducing civilian travel in areas where a threat was reported, and engaging in livelihood activities, such as farming, in groups. Many Peace Committees also include atrocity prevention activities in their CAPs, such as sensitization and awareness sessions on locally relevant topics such as GBV or intercommunal social cohesion.

STRATEGIE NUMERO: 01		
	Lingala	Français
<b>Menace identifiée</b>	Bobimi ya ba LRA	Incursion des éléments de la LRA
<b>Activité qui expose les membres de la communauté</b>	Misala ya bilanga	Travaux champêtres
<b>Période</b>	Ngonga ya bonokoli mbuma (sanza ya 8 mpe 9)	Temps de récoltes (mois d'août - Septembre)
<b>Stratégie identifiée</b>	Kozala na bibombelo mibale, moko na bilanga mpe mosusu na mboka	Avoir deux greniers, un au champ et l'autre à la maison.
<b>Points Focaux et rôles</b>	Mokambi ya lisanga ya kimia mpe mokonzi ya localité	Le Président du Comité de Paix et le chef de localité
<b>Etape à suivre</b>	-Mokambi ya lisanga ya kimia akokutana na mokonzi ya localité kosolola ; -Akokabola ba membres ya lisanga ya kimia na éqaïpe ; -Bafandi mboka bakolendisama o kati ya ba ndako Nzambe mpo ya likambo ena ; -Mokonzi ya localité akobianga bato mpo asolola na bango na mpo etali likambo wana.	-Le président du Comité de Paix rencontrera le chef de localité pour lui expliquer ce problème ; -Il va diviser les membres du Comité de Paix en équipes ; -Les membres de la communauté seront sensibiliser dans des églises de la place pour cette fin ; -Le chef de localité invitera les membres de la communauté pour les informer d'avoir deux réserves pour les produits agricoles.

Example of Community Action Plan created by a Peace Committee in DRC

**HF radio operator selection:** In each community connected to the HF radio-based EWS, daily reporting via the HF radio is led by an HF radio operator. Depending on the context, communities will choose up to two people as the HF radio operators via the larger community assembly or via a selection process overseen by the Peace Committee. HF radio operators receive training on how to securely report information, assess rumors to avoid sharing misinformation, and how to securely dismantle the HF radio in case of a threat. In southwestern South Sudan, focal points in each target community share and receive information via mobile-phone based platforms and/or through in-person exchanges with CSO representatives during regular field visits.

**Connection to EWS:** HF radio installation takes place during the field missions in which the Peace Committee are elected and undertake the community mapping and development of CAPs. In CAR and DRC, the EWS includes over 150 community-operated HF radios. 147 of these are managed by IC-supported Peace Committees, while IC operates four ‘hub’ HF radios, and 18 are private HF radios operated by other civil society actors and parks. The Peace Committee members and HF radio operators are trained on how to document and safely report security threats and atrocities and begin participating in twice-daily ‘conference calls’ facilitated by IC and CSO staff during which clusters of neighboring communities share urgent information on threats to civilians and potential atrocities. Often, this information would not otherwise be shared with neighboring communities, or would be shared much more slowly (e.g. via handwritten notes delivered by bicycle). IC and CSO staff also operate their ‘hub’ HF radios throughout the entire day in case of emergency HF radio calls from participating communities. The objective of the EWS is to enable early responses by communities through the sharing of information, ensuring they can rapidly implement risk mitigation strategies, including those incorporated into local or regional CAPs. While the limited presence of security and protection actors in the tri-border region means that in many areas the local communities are left vulnerable to threats, these strategies play a critical role in reducing civilian vulnerability to violence and atrocities. The EWS also feeds vertically into IC’s Crisis Tracker, which shares security incidents, as well as conflict analysis that informs and enables responses from other key stakeholders in the region.



**PEACE COMMITTEES IN ACTION:  
RESPONDING TO THE LRA THREAT IN HAUTE KOTTO**

- 1 September 2018**  
A team of personnel from Invisible Children and a local partner CSO conducts a field mission to a community in Haute Kotto, strengthening the local Peace Committee and working with them on community mapping exercises, the development of a Community Action Plan (CAP), and protocols for utilizing the HF radio for early warning network (EWN) reporting.
  - 2 October 6**  
The Peace Committee utilizes the HF radio to report to other communities in the EWN in eastern CAR that armed Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel fighters abducted five men from near the town.
  - 3 October 11**  
The Peace Committee reports via the EWN that the five men had been released by the LRA. However, they also report continued LRA movements nearby that are causing fear and restricting movements outside of the town.
  - 4 October 12**  
The Peace Committee contacts African Parks personnel in the nearby Chinko Nature Reserve via HF radio to report the continued LRA activity. In response, park personnel conduct overflights of the area on October 12 to provide reassurance to the community and collect information on movements of the LRA and other groups in the area.
  - 5 October 17-20**  
The LRA commits two more attacks near the community and clashes with local hunters.
  - 6 October 23**  
A young girl escapes from LRA captivity and walks to the community. The Peace Committee provides her with support, reports her escape via the EWN, and helps coordinate her transport to a secure location. Invisible Children then provides support to her there, including tracing her family.
- November 2018–September 2021**  
No LRA activity is reported near the community.

**Perceptions of improved security:** Even though LRA activity near the community continued for a short period after the Chinko overflights, the Peace Committee reported that many people believe that they helped deter the LRA from prolonging its presence in the area and thus provided a tangible security benefit to the community.

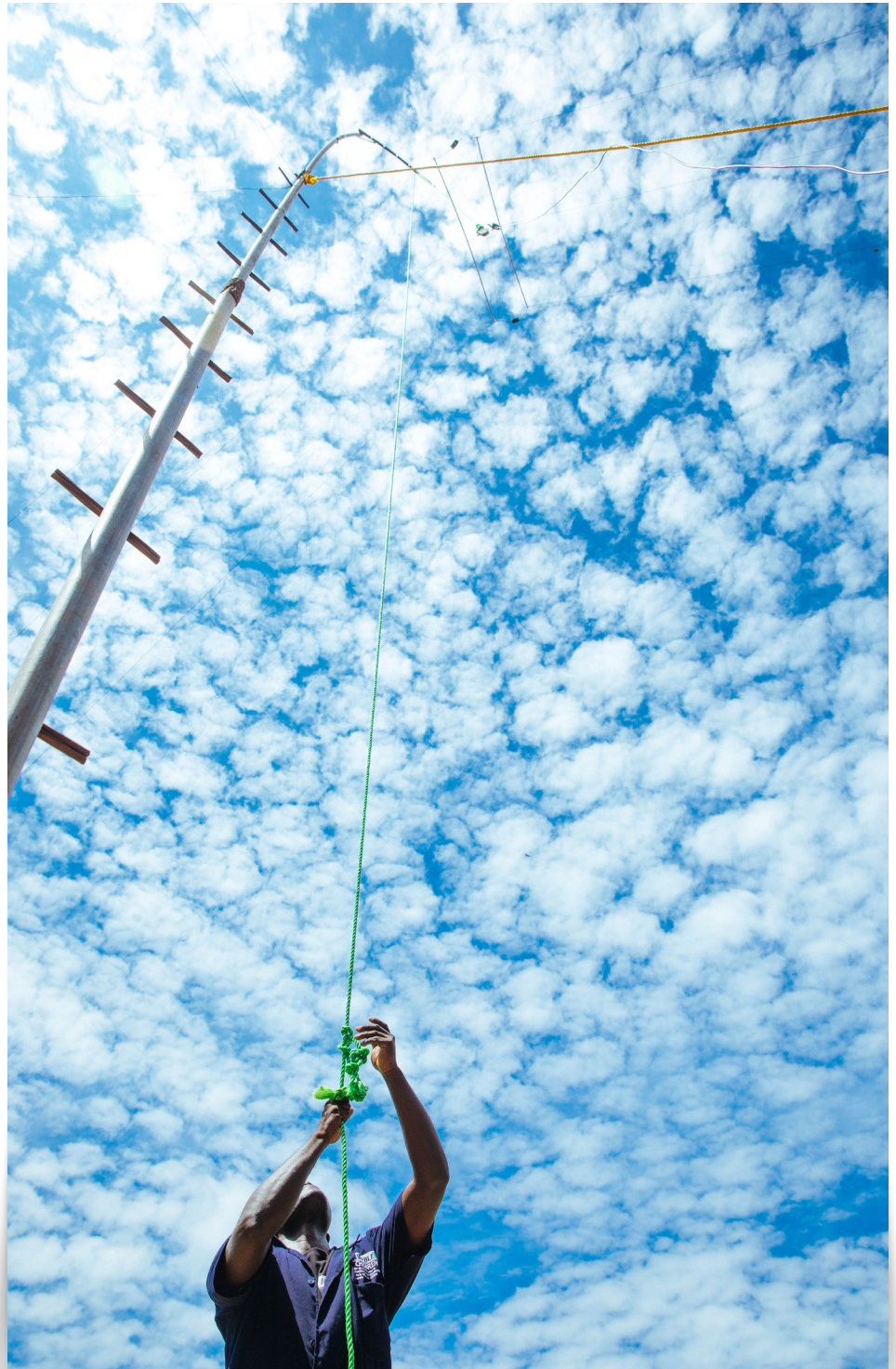
**Opportunities for collaboration:** As a result of African Parks’ rapid response to the LRA threat, the community has a more positive perception of Chinko and the park management. They believe that park personnel are concerned not only about wildlife security but also the security of the communities surrounding the park. As a result, the Peace Committee of expressed a desire to collaborate with Chinko to do sensitization in the community to reduce the movements of poachers and pastoralists into the park.



**Adaptation and learning:** Security threats in the tri-border region are constantly evolving, meaning protection and atrocity prevention efforts must be iterative and dynamic. EWS, participating mapping, and CAP guidelines and best practices are adapted via periodic workshops involving CSOs and Peace Committee members and regular field visits to individual communities.

One such update to these efforts was to incorporate different types of conference calls into inter-community HF radio calls. Originally, there were only daily HF radio calls in which communities shared information on immediate, specific threats and incidents. Following feedback from local Peace Committees, partners, and staff, IC and CSO staff facilitate weekly and/or monthly network HF radio calls to complement the daily HF radio calls.

During these calls, communities within close proximity or sharing similar threats can “step back” and “zoom out” to discuss simmering tensions and broader patterns of violence to develop and coordinate more preventative risk mitigation strategies, facilitating the regional coordination of Peace Committee responses to threats. These network calls include one network which is comprised of communities along the CAR-DRC border so that the communities can discuss cross-border threats.



HF radio equipment being installed in northeastern DRC

## IV. PEACE COMMITTEES IN ACTION: PREVENTING VIOLENCE AND BUILDING PEACE

Between January 2019 and September 2021, IC documented 1,536 risk mitigation responses, civic engagement initiatives, and community support activities<sup>11</sup> undertaken by Peace Committees in the tri-border region. These responses and activities vary by context, but there are common approaches and responses. On all three sides of the border, Peace Committees play a critical role in mobilizing to prevent and respond to atrocities and other forms of violence against civilians, and support recovery in their aftermath<sup>12</sup>. In many cases, Peace Committees engage in all three stages. For instance, Peace Committees often recognize escalating interethnic tensions and seek to prevent them from sparking violence, but then will respond to mitigate the impact of violence if it breaks out, followed by efforts to address the aftermath by supporting victims. This is especially true in an area like the tri-border region, where the prevalence of armed actors can limit civilian-led efforts to prevent violence.



Peace Committees, though organized by community, intervene against violence on multiple levels. They address threats that originate in and impact their own communities, such as abuses by locally deployed armed actors, as well as threats that originate outside of but impact their communities, such as the threat of foreign wildlife poachers. In addition, they collaborate to address threats that impact neighboring communities but could spread to their own, such as outbreaks of intercommunal violence.

<sup>11</sup> Activities include a wide range of actions taken by Peace Committees, including community clean-ups, medical referrals, providing humanitarian information to local authorities and international aid groups.

<sup>12</sup> Adapted from the strategic framework on atrocity prevention outlined in [USAID, Field Guide: Helping to Prevent Mass Atrocities, April 2015](#).



**INTERETHNIC TENSIONS AND PEACE COMMITTEE RESPONSES IN EASTERN CAR, JULY 2019–MARCH 2020**

Beginning in July 2019, a fragile status quo between armed groups in northeastern Central African Republic (CAR) was shattered by the outbreak of interethnic tensions and fighting in Vakaga prefecture between rival armed groups aligned with different ethnic identities. In the following months, interethnic tensions and armed group clashes rippled into neighboring Haute Kotto, Bamingui-Bangoran, and Mbomou prefectures. The Crisis Tracker\* documented 37 incidents of violence linked to the tensions in the following months, including 13 clashes between armed groups and 16 attacks in which civilians were targeted based on their identity. Peace Committees swiftly responded to the outbreak, coordinating with each other via the EWS to implement de-escalation strategies that reduced tensions and prevented further atrocities.

- 1 **July 2019, Am Dafok:** MLCJ and FPRC forces clashed, leading to the death of four combatants.
  - 2 **September 2019, Birao:** Armed groups clashed, heightening interethnic tensions across the region.
  - 3 **September 2019, Haute Kotto:** The clashes in Birao triggered isolated attacks on civilians in the communities of Aigbando (#3), Mouka (#4), and Bria (#5) in Haute Kotto. Peace Committees responded by intervening to stop retaliatory violence by civilians and arbitrary arrests by armed groups.
  - 4
  - 5
  - 6 **October 2019, Tissi:** Rival armed groups clashed over control of this strategic border town.
  - 7 **October/December 2019, Am Dafok:** Rival armed groups clashed over this strategic border crossing between CAR and Sudan.
  - 8 **December 2019, Sam Ouandja:** Armed group clashes sparked interethnic tensions. A nearby Peace Committee helped mediate between factions to stop the violence.
  - 9 **January 2020, Vakaga:** Armed groups clashed northwest of Birao, near the community of Takamala.
  - 10 **January 2020, Bria:** Armed group clashes killed at least 23 people and displaced thousands.
  - 11 **February 2020:** The clashes in Bria triggered clashes and attacks on civilians in Mbaye (#11), Pambayamba (#12), Nzako (#13), Ngoundja (#14), Gbodjo (#15), Mouka (#16), Birao (#17), and Boungou (#18).
  - 12
  - 13
  - 14
  - 15
  - 16
  - 17
  - 18
  - 19 **March 2020, Bria:** Peace Committees participate in ceasefire negotiations, advocating for the return of displaced persons, protection of civilians, and the resumption of school attendance. Armed group factions later sign a ceasefire agreement, contributing to a reduction in violence.
  - 20 **March 2020, Ndele:** Additional clashes between armed groups.
- Other incident(s) of armed group violence against civilians stemming from ethnic tensions.

\* Most incidents included in this analysis were documented by Invisible Children and its partners, including through the High Frequency (HF) radio Early Warning System (EWS). Additional information on armed group clashes, particularly in Vakaga, was also sourced from the report by the UN Panel of Experts for CAR (S/2019/930) released on December 14, 2019.

**COMMUNITY PROTECTION STRATEGIES**

Peace Committees monitor and report on the movement of armed groups, enabling them to utilize the EWS to warn neighboring communities if an armed group is heading in their direction so that the neighboring Peace Committee can advise community members on protective measures they can take, such as avoiding traveling on that axis. When a community is attacked by an armed group or observes an armed group movement, they utilize the EWS to report the incident to IC and neighboring communities. The Peace Committees in the area will then identify protection strategies that they will implement, which are frequently coordinated and agreed upon between neighboring communities. For instance, if there has been a series of ambushes along a road Peace Committees in communities along the vulnerable portion of the road may all agree to cease traveling along the road until the threat is deemed to have passed.

**Communities utilize HF radios to coordinate response to armed group attack**

On October 24, 2020, an unidentified armed group ambushed a group of fishermen in Haut Uele, DRC. The assailants, who spoke broken Lingala, held the fishermen hostage for several hours and looted goods from the victims before releasing them. The fishermen returned to the community and alerted residents. The HF Radio Operator utilized the EWS to alert IC and neighboring communities. The nearby communities coordinated via the EWS to implement community action plan strategies including, reporting any unusual incidents or sightings to the local authorities, traveling in groups of three or more people, and avoiding traveling alone.

IC collaborates with Peace Committees through the EWS to adapt the strategies to the tactics of specific actors. Because the LRA frequently abducts children and youth, when there is a threat of LRA violence, Peace Committees often advise families against sending children and youth to farm or collect water, or other goods outside of the community to reduce the potential exposure of young people to the threat. Similarly, Peace Committees may agree with the community on using a gong or drum to signal a threat, at which point vulnerable groups, including women, children, people with disabilities, and the elderly will seek shelter in a predetermined location. Between January 2019 and September 2021, Peace Committees implemented 520 responses to armed group threats.

### **Community preemptively flees before the arrival of the LRA**

On September 21, 2019 a large LRA group armed with AK-47s attacked a community in CAR's Haut Mbomou prefecture. The assailants looted livestock but did not encounter community residents as they had preemptively fled days before having been alerted by the EWS. Continued tracking by the EWS indicated that the LRA group departed southeast to a campsite in DRC, located across the Mbomou river, which underlines the transnational nature of armed group movements in the area.

## **NEGOTIATION WITH ARMED GROUPS IN EASTERN CAR**

Peace Committees have been effective at mitigating abuses by armed groups occupying towns in eastern CAR. Between January 2019 and September 2021, Peace Committees in CAR have engaged in negotiations with armed groups more than 170 times; many of these involved negotiating with armed groups for the release of civilians who were arbitrarily extrajudicially detained by the armed group who held *de facto* control over their town. Over 27 cases of armed groups carrying out abuses while acting as illegitimate authorities have been reported by local communities. Frequently, the armed groups will temporarily detain a civilian, accused of a crime in violation of the armed group's "rule", and will demand a "fine" for the release of the civilian. Unsurprisingly, the "rules" and "fines" imposed by armed groups are often arbitrary, or even intended to target particular ethnic or religious groups. Peace Committees regularly negotiate with the armed groups to successfully secure the release of the civilians, often while negotiating a lowering of the fine and advocating that armed groups refrain from future detentions.

### **Peace Committee advocates to armed group in CAR**

Following the ambush and looting of a young man by armed group combatants in CAR's Haut Mbomou prefecture in May 2021, the local Peace Committee arranged a meeting with leaders of the armed group in the community. During the meeting, the Peace Committee was able to convey the need for the civilian population to be able to move freely without the threat of armed group abuse to the commanders. This dialogue exchange would not have occurred without the creation of Peace Committees and is vital to sensitize armed groups on the protection of civilians in areas under their control.

## **CONFLICT MEDIATION AND SOCIAL COHESION CAMPAIGNS**

Peace Committees act as mediators in a broad range of cases, from domestic and family disputes to intercommunal tensions. They also often take on the role as mediator when tensions arise between communities and security forces. Peace Committees are equipped to rapidly identify tensions and sources of potential violence within their communities. In eastern CAR, where armed groups are frequently tied to ethnic groups, clashes between armed groups can spillover into interethnic communal violence. To prevent this, many Peace Committees implement community *social cohesion campaigns* when violence or tensions break out between armed groups in the region. Following outbreaks of interethnic violence, they frequently coordinate with local leaders, including religious leaders, to negotiate with the armed groups to cease hostilities. Similarly, in DRC, Peace Committees have responded with mediation efforts following localized disputes over resources or leadership positions.

Social cohesion campaigns utilize a variety of platforms, often capitalizing on existing gatherings at churches, mosques, and markets to spread messages via word-of-mouth or bullhorn. When possible, Peace Committees often try to include key religious and cultural leaders in such practices to increase the impact of and support to their campaigns. FM radio broadcasts is another popular method, though FM radio coverage is limited in many communities in the tri-border region. In order to reach particularly isolated communities, IC has equipped Peace Committees to leverage existing, locally-appropriate technologies, such as SD cards. Using phones and radio receivers adapted for SD card use, civilians have adapted this technology as a way to access popular music and movies in remote areas, such as pastoralist campsites, artisanal mining areas, and small rural communities.

### **Innovative Sensitization through Central African Cinema: The Power of Dialogue**

In 2019, IC learned that Peace Committees in northeastern CAR were recording videos of local leaders advocating for social cohesion and distributing them within their communities. To strengthen these efforts, IC facilitated a collaboration between two Central African filmmakers, local CSOs, Peace Committee members, and local leaders to produce a narrative movie, *Le Pouvoir du Dialogue*, filmed in northeastern CAR with local actors that showed local leaders engaging with armed actors to reduce intercommunal violence. The film was then combined with a dialogue module and distributed via SD cards in ten communities.

Security forces and police are also sources of tensions and abuses, and engaging with them can bring a risk of retaliation. Peace Committees decide at the local level when and how they can effectively intervene with state security forces to mitigate risks to civilians, informed by Do No Harm (DNH) training and guidance provided by IC and its CSO partners. Tensions frequently stem from security forces originating from different ethnic groups or region of the country are deployed or based within and then commit abuses against the civilian population, varying from extortion at illegal barriers to violence against civilians including rape. Similar to Peace Committee approaches of negotiating with armed groups in CAR, Peace Committees in DRC will report such abuses to higher-ranking officers to address the abuses. Some Peace Committees in South Sudan similarly reported intervening to mitigate against abuses by security forces.



SD card used for distributing sensitization messaging



The Peace Committee has changed the way we behave: before we would just go to the market and take what we want. If we were drunk and wanted a woman, we would take her by force. Now because of the work of the Peace Committee we no longer do these things.

– Soldier, Western Equatoria, South Sudan



Central African film production team on the set of *Le Pouvoir du Dialogue*

## Conflict mediation in focus: Tensions involving Peuhl and other pastoralist communities

Throughout the tri-border region, intercommunal tensions between pastoralists and sedentary communities that engage in farming, fishing, and hunting are often a challenge. In particular, tensions are often high between sedentary communities and the Peuhl pastoralist community. In many communities in CAR and South Sudan, Peace Committees have worked to mitigate such tensions and provide mediation between pastoralists and other community members to prevent further escalation. In Western Equatoria, Peace Committees have sought to mitigate potential intercommunal violence when Peuhl pastoralists enter their surrounding areas by engaging in dialogues with the Peuhl leaders, and also counselling local youth against attacking or rustling cattle from the pastoralists.



Recurring issues near our community often involve tensions between pastoralists traveling from South Sudan and Sudan during the dry season and destroying farmers' fields with their cattle. This was the case in a nearby community, where farmers requested that armed groups and local authorities take retributive action against pastoralists in May 2019. These authorities referred them to the local Peace Committee who then traveled to the community where the tensions were reported to conduct a large-scale sensitization campaign on social cohesion. Our main message was "We are all human beings; we can all communicate and cooperate despite past problems." Along with community members, the Peace Committee created a strategy for future risk mitigation which involved the creation of a local committee to peacefully resolve disputes. Since this sensitization effort, there has only been one dispute in the community, which was peacefully resolved by the new committee.

– Peace Committee member in Haute Kotto, CAR

In eastern CAR, the use of micro SD cards has organically emerged as popular mechanisms for the spread of music and videos, including among pastoralists operating in remote regions. Taking advantage of this, one Peace Committee in CAR recorded versions of IC peacebuilding sensitization messaging in Fulfulde, the language spoken by Peuhl, and distributed them via micro SD cards to Peuhl pastoralists to ensure broader dissemination within their communities.

In DRC, high levels of intercommunal tensions between Peuhl and sedentary communities have limited the willingness and ability of Peace Committees to mediate conflicts. However, there have been cases of constructive interventions, such as in October 2020, when a Peace Committee in Bas Uele province returned four donkeys to Peuhl pastoralists who had fled after local military officials arbitrarily confiscated their livestock.

## CONSERVATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGIES

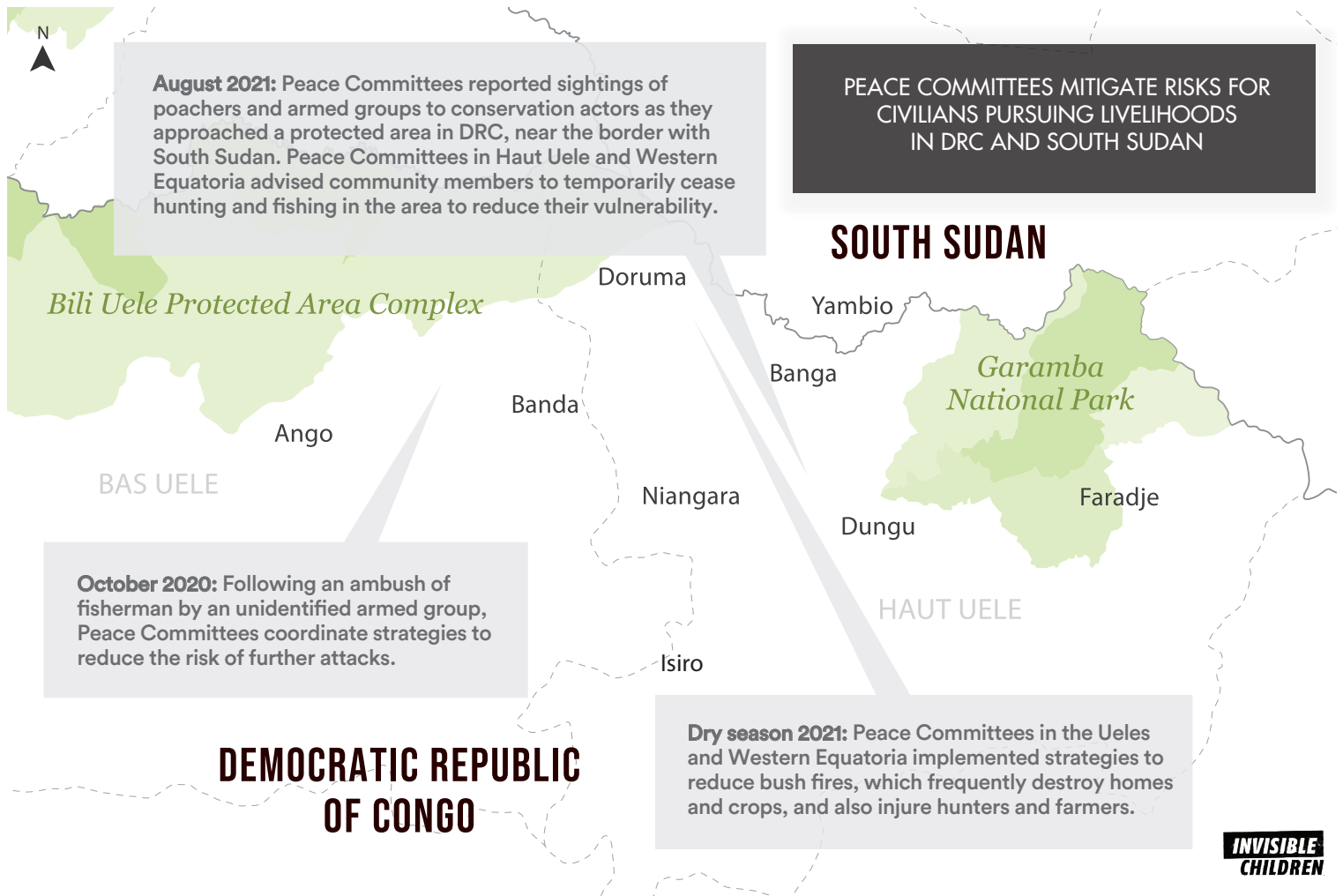
Peace Committees in DRC have adapted risk mitigation strategies to respond to wildlife threats, such as the wandering of elephants or lions near or into their communities. When such incidents occurred, Peace Committees notified park authorities to request the relocation of the animals into the protected areas and have also utilized strategies to deter the animals from entering the communities or damaging fields, such as hanging metal objects that serve as deterrents. Given the traditional reliance on hunting in the region, the use of such strategies illustrates both behavioral changes as well as community ownership and adaptation of the EWS / risk mitigation model. Similarly, Peace Committees in CAR, DRC, and South Sudan have developed and implemented strategies to combat bush fires during the dry season. Peace Committees can also act as intermediaries in cases of tensions between local communities and conservation actors.



As a village leader, I had lost all hope that people would wish to return to live in the community. I myself was beginning to consider taking my family to another town. However, our village has experienced rebirth and brought back social cohesion with the Peuhl community here, with whom we never thought we could live together in this community. This is a miracle for us. The change that marked me the most was the free movement of Peuhl herders in our community after the many mediations and negotiations organized and led by the Peace Committee.

– Community leader from Haut Mbomou, CAR

Peace Committees in areas frequented by poachers and traffickers frequently report sightings and violence by such groups through the EWS. These reports are shared with conservation actors to inform their counter-trafficking and poaching responses. The local Peace Committees implement risk mitigation strategies and CAPs in response to the threats posed by such groups. In DRC, communities implement a wide range of mitigation strategies when poachers are observed in the area. Peace Committees will warn community members against movement in areas where poachers are observed and sensitize the community on the importance of traveling in groups and reporting any sightings to warn others.



## FAMILY TRACING FOR ARMED GROUP ESCAPEES

Armed groups, particularly the LRA, frequently traffic abducted children and youth hundreds of miles, often across the border between CAR, DRC, South Sudan, and Sudan. As a result, LRA abductees who escape captivity are often stranded far from home with few resources to return. Boys and male youth who escape the LRA in CAR are also vulnerable to re-recruitment by other armed groups. Peace Committees play a critical role in protecting escapees from harm immediately after escape, providing them with shelter and care. They also utilize the EWS to help IC and CSO partners contact their home community and identify their family members, a critical first step in the reunification process. IC, which reunifies many LRA escapees, also uses the EWS to coordinate with Peace Committees and family members to receive escapees and then follow-up to monitor the reintegration process. Since 2018, IC and its CSO partners have utilized the EWS to coordinate the reception and/or reunification of an estimated 60% of LRA escapees that they have supported.

## COORDINATION WITH NGOS, MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS, AND GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITIES

In many communities Peace Committees have emerged as key focal points and community leaders. In CAR's Haute Kotto, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) frequently utilize the EWS to contact Peace Committees ahead of community visits to check on security and plan their activities. Sometimes the Peace Committees will help visiting NGOs implement their activities or awareness campaigns. In communities without medical facilities, they often utilize the HF radio network to notify the closest community with such facilities that an injured person will be brought there for medical care.



Without the HF radios and radio operators from the Peace Committees we would not be able to securely carry out our activities in remote communities. We are constantly in contact with the radio operators who are the most reliable source for information on the security along the axes to the communities.

– NGO Logistician in Haute Kotto, CAR

### South Sudanese Peace Committee responds to an influx of Congolese refugees

In April 2020, the LRA carried out a series of attacks in DRC's Haut Uele province, near the border with South Sudan. The attacks caused many civilians to flee across the border seeking refuge in Western Equatoria. The local Peace Committee and church leaders hosted the displaced in a local church and notified IC's local CSO partner in Western Equatoria. IC then alerted INGOs to the humanitarian need and the refugees were taken for quarantine due to COVID-19, before being transferred to a refugee camp.

Peace Committees are often the first to report forced displacement from communities, as well as the arrival of IDPs and refugees into communities. They are frequently the first responders when displaced persons arrive in their communities. They help organize shelter and immediate support, while utilizing the HF radios to notify IC's operators who can then share the information with relevant humanitarian organizations.

## COMMUNITY RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Peace Committees engage in a variety of activities to help manage and develop community resources. In eastern CAR, Peace Committees frequently organize community clean-ups or repairs, in which volunteers from the local community clean the schools or marketplaces, or clear and/or repair roads and bridges, to ensure access to and from the community. Such activities can also benefit communities by creating opportunities for intercommunal dialogue and interaction.

## POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN EASTERN CAR

Peace Committees have demonstrated their capacity to support electoral processes within volatile regions. Many Peace Committees in eastern CAR mobilized ahead of the national presidential elections held in December 2020 to promote the electoral process and try to mitigate armed group tensions surrounding the elections as early as August 2020. On October 14, 2020 a Peace Committee coordinated with local authorities to distribute the electoral list to district chiefs throughout the city. On December 9, the Peace Committee President spoke during a sensitization organized by prefectural authorities on the smooth running of the electoral process. On December 24-25, Peace Committee members sensitized residents on the importance of casting their votes and advised on ways to minimize political tensions.



On November 25, a Peace Committee participated in a meeting with government delegations from Mbomou, Ouaka, and Basse Kotto prefectures to discuss how to enable peaceful elections. Another Peace Committee participated in a similar meeting with armed group leaders, the Sous-Préfet, representatives of political parties, and other civil society members to discuss election security on December 25. They advocated toward the armed groups for secure elections.

### **Central African Peace Committees advocates for humanitarian response for IDPs**

On November 3, 2020 a Peace Committee in Haute Kotto advocated to IC and a local partner to alert humanitarian actors on the needs of IDPs arriving from a town that experienced clashes. Local partners shared the information during a UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), following which NGO and UN actors responded by distributing goods to the IDPs. On November 19, 2020 another Peace Committee in Haute Kotto conducted a social cohesion sensitization campaign, advocating for the IDPs following the decrease in tensions within the community.

## **“MOB JUSTICE” FOR PEOPLE ACCUSED OF WITCHCRAFT OR THEFT AND OTHER**

Across the tri-border region, the Crisis Tracker documented 66 cases from January 2019 - September 2021 of mobs targeting civilians accused of witchcraft or theft and other crimes. Accusations of witchcraft have been most commonly reported in eastern CAR, and are often followed by violence. Incidents related to witchcraft allegations documented by the Crisis Tracker disproportionately target elderly men and women in eastern CAR, and tend to arise following cases of death, illness, or injury within communities. In DRC, Peace Committees played an important role in mitigating such incidents, both in interventions to save the lives of individuals targeted by mobs and those to prevent recurrences. In some communities of Western Equatoria, communities may also seek to carry out vigilante justice in cases of crimes or death. Examples include:

- On August 1, 2020 community members in a town in CAR’s Haute Kotto prefecture accused an elderly man of witchcraft and attacked him as he was traveling. The man fled to a neighboring community but was rejected by the community and died shortly after of his injuries. To prevent future accusations of witchcraft and human rights abuses, the local Peace Committee increased sensitization efforts on the subject.
- On September 4, 2020 Peace Committee members in a community in CAR mediated a conflict between the parents of a deceased girl and an elderly man they accused of witchcraft. They advised the parents against vigilantism and a local leader allowed the man to take refuge in his home until the situation was de-escalated.
- In March 2021, a local Peace Committee in Western Equatoria intervened after community members were planning to carry out an attack on a local resident, who started a fire which later spread, injuring several others. The Peace Committee intervened to prevent any reprisal violence.

## **RESPONDING TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

Peace Committees actively seek to reduce GBV in response to domestic violence and child abuse within their communities. Between January 2019 and September 2021, Peace Committees responded to 88 cases of GBV, often providing medical referral and counsel to the survivors and perpetrators. Peace Committees in CAR have implemented community level sensitizations against domestic violence. In conjunction, the Peace Committees frequently provide support including mediation and medical referrals in cases of domestic disputes and violence. Peace Committees in South Sudan also carry out similar activities. One South Sudanese Peace Committee member provided testimony on how she had been a victim of domestic violence but was unable to address the abuses on her own, so she brought her situation to the rest of the Peace Committee, who provided her with support and guidance and went on to counsel her husband against violence.

## PROMOTING MORE SECURE LIVELIHOODS

In some communities, Peace Committee members also participate in IC-supported initiatives that provide access to improved economic opportunities while also reducing reliance on livelihood strategies that put civilians at risk of violence. In one community in DRC's Haut Uele province, participants repaired a road connecting them to a nearby community, which garnered an infusion of cash that allowed them to start small businesses. These businesses benefited from the road, which reduced travel time to the nearby community by 75%, thus leaving civilians less exposed to armed actors who target travelers and providing them with better access to markets. In another community in Haut Uele, the introduction of microloans allowed hunters to spend less time in the bush, where they are more vulnerable to armed group activity. The involvement of Peace Committee members in these initiatives helps ensure that EWS information and CAP risk mitigation strategies are taken into consideration during the design and implementation of activities.

## SUPPORTING PSYCHOSOCIAL INTERVENTIONS

Some Peace Committee members also serve as Community Counselors, supporting local Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) initiatives implemented by IC. In these roles, the Peace Committee members are trained via trauma awareness and trauma healing seminars, allowing them to provide basic guidance to those in need in some cases and, in more serious cases, referring them to appropriate MHPSS service providers (where available). These Peace Committee members also benefit personally from these seminars, building their capacity to manage stress and motivation to continue doing work that benefits the broader community.



Cattle market in southeastern CAR

## V. CHALLENGES, LESSONS LEARNED, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are many similarities between CAR, DRC, and South Sudan, which allows for the cross-border operation and coordination of the EWS and Peace Committees. Approaches have also been adapted to fit the unique context in each country.

### DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

A frequent challenge in Peace Committees is diversity and inclusions. However, lessons learned show that diversity within Peace Committees helps them overcome traditional barriers between groups and improve collaboration within communities. Community-based approaches can replicate pre-existing social exclusions and marginalization, and risks monopolization by community elites<sup>13</sup>. As community Peace Committees are elected, there is a tendency for over representation of men or dominant ethnic or religious groups. For example, many Peace Committees fail to attain an equal gender balance, and Peace Committees in areas where communities with a history of marginalizing a particular ethnic group frequently do not have representatives from that group. This is especially true in the Uele region of DRC, where Peuhl pastoralists are often excluded from Peace Committee membership. This can uphold dominant groups, be they ethnic, religious, or gender, which can lead to dominance among the communities' elite within the Peace Committee and reinforce the marginalization of vulnerable minorities from the relative protections afforded by CAP implementation. Furthermore, in some circumstances such systems risk protecting some communities or groups while further marginalizing others. Thus, programming should work to address social cohesion and cleavages to minimize such risks.

#### Female Peace Committee member builds trust with transhumant pastoralists

Due to their close proximity to the CAR-Sudan border, one local Peace Committee in Haute Kotto regularly engages with transhumant pastoralist groups as they migrate across the border. Peace Committee members, including a Peuhl woman, travel to visit the pastoral camps. The Peuhl woman is widely recognized by the Peace Committee for her ability to build trust with the pastoral groups, who might otherwise be suspicious of the Peace Committee visits. During the visits with the pastoral groups, the Peace Committee members are able to advise the pastoralists on insecure areas in the region and also sensitize them on strategies to mitigate potential tensions and conflict with farmers.

To mitigate this, the General Assembly process emphasizes the need for an inclusive Peace Committee with an equal gender balance and an appropriate representation from minority groups. In regions where ethnic or religious groups live in separate communities, diversity within the Peace Committees is not possible, but efforts should be made to establish Peace Committees in communities from both sides, and support exchanges and coordination between Peace Committees from different ethnic or religious groups. Efforts to promote the representation of women on Peace Committees and a mainstream gender-sensitivity into Peace Committee activities have shown positive impacts. In some communities the participation of women in the Peace Committees, including in leadership roles, has contributed to broader shifts in attitudes related to women's participation in community matters. It has also ensured gender responsive risk mitigation and mediation responses by the Peace Committees.

### CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In Western Equatoria state, the concept of Peace Committees and local peacebuilding was sometimes met with weariness and disinterest as it was viewed as the responsibility of the government and politicians. Such sentiments have been tied with authoritarian rule, where “there is a legacy of passivity, powerlessness, and dependency”<sup>14</sup> and given the history of crackdowns on civil society in South Sudan, such sentiments and apprehensions are justifiable. Despite the prevalence of such feelings, Peace Committees in Western Equatoria became increasingly engaged by coordinating with and advocating to local officials. By contrast, in eastern CAR, where there is little to no government presence, Peace Committees have proactively taken on such roles. While this has filled a necessary void, it may pose a challenge when the government eventually re-establishes itself in such communities and will require communication, collaboration, and engagement between both sides for an effective transition.

<sup>13</sup> Haider, Huma. Community-based Approaches to Peacebuilding in Conflict-Affected and Fragile Contexts. 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Haider, Huma. 2009. Community-based approaches to peacebuilding in conflict-affected and fragile contexts.

Another factor contributing to weariness of civic engagement stems from deference to traditional norms and leaders. Roles such as negotiating on behalf of the community or providing mediation are held by traditional and religious leaders and the emergence of Peace Committees as focal points for such efforts challenges traditional structures, potentially becoming a source of tension within communities. However, through continued engagement with traditional leaders starting with the elections of the Peace Committee, such tensions have been mitigated, with many Peace Committees regularly coordinating with traditional and religious leaders to respond to challenges and tensions within their communities.

As a member of the Peace Committee for three years, I have been participating in all activities aiming to protect my community in coordination with the evaluation and activation of our Community Action Plan, which has proved to be the only way to ensure our community's safety. In late 2019, I participated in an IC workshop as a representative for their Peace Committee. It was focused on gender, development, and the voices of women in reconciliation and peace processes. Despite being a widow, I am committed, alongside my Peace Committee president, to participate in peacebuilding activities [to facilitate] the return of our community members who have been displaced to refugee camps. We have held meetings with the armed groups and local authorities at the town hall, where I had the chance to speak up and my opinion was considered. I was so happy. Since that day, I have regained the courage to use my voice alongside those of men because women are also promoters of peace.

– Peace Committee Member in Haut Mbomou, CAR



You can see that the commander has taken the trainings and lessons from the Peace Committee training and applied it to how the military treats and interacts with the community.

– Peace Committee Member in Western Equatoria, South Sudan

## **COORDINATION WITH STATE SECURITY FORCES**

Despite increased warning and information of threats being shared by the EWS, protection responses are overwhelmingly limited to what communities can do to protect themselves due to the lack of security and protection actors in the region. However, in communities where security forces maintain a presence Peace Committees are able to share reports with the security forces and help inform responses and intervention by security actors, though these are often limited and “too little too late” to result in significant improvements to civilian safety.

While the inclusion of members of security forces as Peace Committee members could be problematic in some countries, police, park rangers, and even soldiers have served as Peace Committee members in Western Equatoria. This approach was utilized to provide transparency to mitigate potential suspicion of the project and to support the responsiveness by security forces to threats shared through the EWS. Testimony from both community members and customary authorities indicated that through working collaboratively through the Peace Committee, relations between security forces and broader community improved.

## EXPANDING THE UTILITY OF HF RADIOS

Peace Committees have proven to be innovative, including through their adaptation of the HF radio EWS beyond the community protection initiatives envisioned by IC. These initiatives not only have immediate benefits for civilians, they also increase the overall sense of community buy-in and ownership of the radio, increasing the chances community members will take initiative to protect the equipment from disrepair and threats from armed actors. These initiatives include:

- **Personal connections:** The EWS is often used to share important news (e.g. the death of a local leader), as well as to contact family members in other communities that are part of the EWS. The latter function can be especially useful in the aftermath of violence in which civilians are displaced.
- **Facilitating trade and proto-banking:** The EWS is used by traders across eastern CAR and DRC's Uele region to share information on market dynamics and transportation logistics. In northeastern CAR, traders have gone even further, using the EWS to give each other credit and transfer cash remotely, a system built on Muslim traditions of hawala. This increases traders' access to capital and reduces the need for traders to travel with large amounts of cash along roads where armed groups and bandits are more likely to attack.
- **Training teachers:** In eastern CAR, Peace Committees have utilized the EWS to initiate basic trainings for parent-teachers in an attempt to compensate for the lack of government-funded personnel in schools in remote communities. The success of these efforts inspired similar trainings for women regarding maternal health in an effort to decrease the number of women who suffer complications or death related to pregnancy.
- **Coordinating election related-activities:** In eastern CAR remote communities and government agencies utilized the HF radios to coordinate election activities, such as organizing voter registration visits.

## SUSTAINABILITY

Peace Committee members, many of whom struggle with poverty, carry out activities as volunteers. Members need to be able to balance their own livelihood needs with their volunteer responsibilities in order for Peace Committees to be sustainable. To avoid decreased local Peace Committee activity following the closure of an NGO or government-supported project, sustainability planning must be initiated during project design and planning and developed in conjunction with the Peace Committees. Peace Committees will often be able to identify the resources and opportunities for generating and managing collective funds, so collaborating with them through the planning and initial implementation of IGA will help ensure their sustainability after external funding has come to an end. In some cases, Peace Committees have created their own financial savings mechanisms. Such activities meet the needs of the Peace Committees members and their communities, while reinforcing the utility of the groups and member participation.

Upon the end of one IC-supported project, the participating Peace Committees elected a Coordination Committee, comprised of representatives from the local Peace Committees. The Coordination Committee ensured the continuity of activities beyond the end of the project, in collaboration with the local partner CSO. Peace Committee representatives, including the Coordination Committee, decided to continue to organize weekly feedback loops in addition to the daily HF radio calls.

### Peace Committee shares lessons on conflict management skills with community leaders

In October 2020, following rising tensions between national security forces and armed combatants related to a soccer game, members of a Peace Committee in CAR's Ouaka prefecture participated in a meeting organized by the sub-prefectural Youth President on peaceful conflict management. Participants included representatives from security forces as well as the armed group, as well as 40 civil society representatives. During the meeting, the Peace Committee shared lessons on how to peacefully resolve disputes with the attendees.

Peace Committees members often share their knowledge and training with other community members and communal groups, including local youth groups, creating a multiplier effect. In Western Equatoria, youth Peace Committee members have taken the information they learned during workshops and training conducted by the CSO and shared the lessons with other youth and women's groups in which they also participate. Similarly, a Peace Committee in CAR's Haute Kotto provided mentorship for a local youth organization, encouraging them to implement activities in the community and providing them with guidance on the creation of an action plan which they could submit to the local authorities.

## COINCIDING WITH CUSTOMARY SYSTEMS AND SIMILAR ACTORS

Anecdotal reports from chiefs and traditional leaders in some communities suggest that there has been a reduction in the number of cases brought before customary courts in some communities due to the success of sensitizations and mediations of Peace Committees in resolving local disputes and tensions. While this illustrates the success of Peace Committees in addressing internal threats and building peace within their communities, attention must also be given to how this can be perceived by traditional rulers. Among the Azande customary system, chiefs typically receive some form of compensation for handling cases through customary courts, a reduction of community disputes escalating may have financial impacts or could potentially cause feelings of disempowerment. This can in part be mitigated by including traditional leaders in Peace Committees or encouraging collaboration and buy-in between customary leaders and the Peace Committees. In CAR, there is the possibility of Peace Committees overlapping with the work being done by the CLPR in some communities, or organizations such as the Transhumance Management Committees. To mitigate creating tensions or competition between such groups collaboration and coordination should be encouraged.



When a problem is brought to the Peace Committee, I take off my hat of the Chief and put on my hat as a Peace Committee member before I begin to approach the situation.

– Customary Leader, Western Equatoria,  
South Sudan

## VI. CONCLUSION

Peace Committee members in the tri-border region face a dizzying array of challenges each day, ranging from attacks by armed groups to intercommunal tensions inflamed by distant events outside of their control. Still, Peace Committees have consistently demonstrated that local solutions that leverage existing resources and connectors can be effective in mitigating threats to civilians, including vulnerable and marginalized populations. To strengthen these efforts, Peace Committees must continue to expand their inclusivity to marginalized groups, help members balance their own livelihoods with volunteer responsibilities, and coordinate with existing government and customary stakeholders. External support in the form of capacity-building, facilitating opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and information, and context-appropriate technology and resource investments can play a key role in helping Peace Committees build on the lessons from the past to meet the challenges of tomorrow.