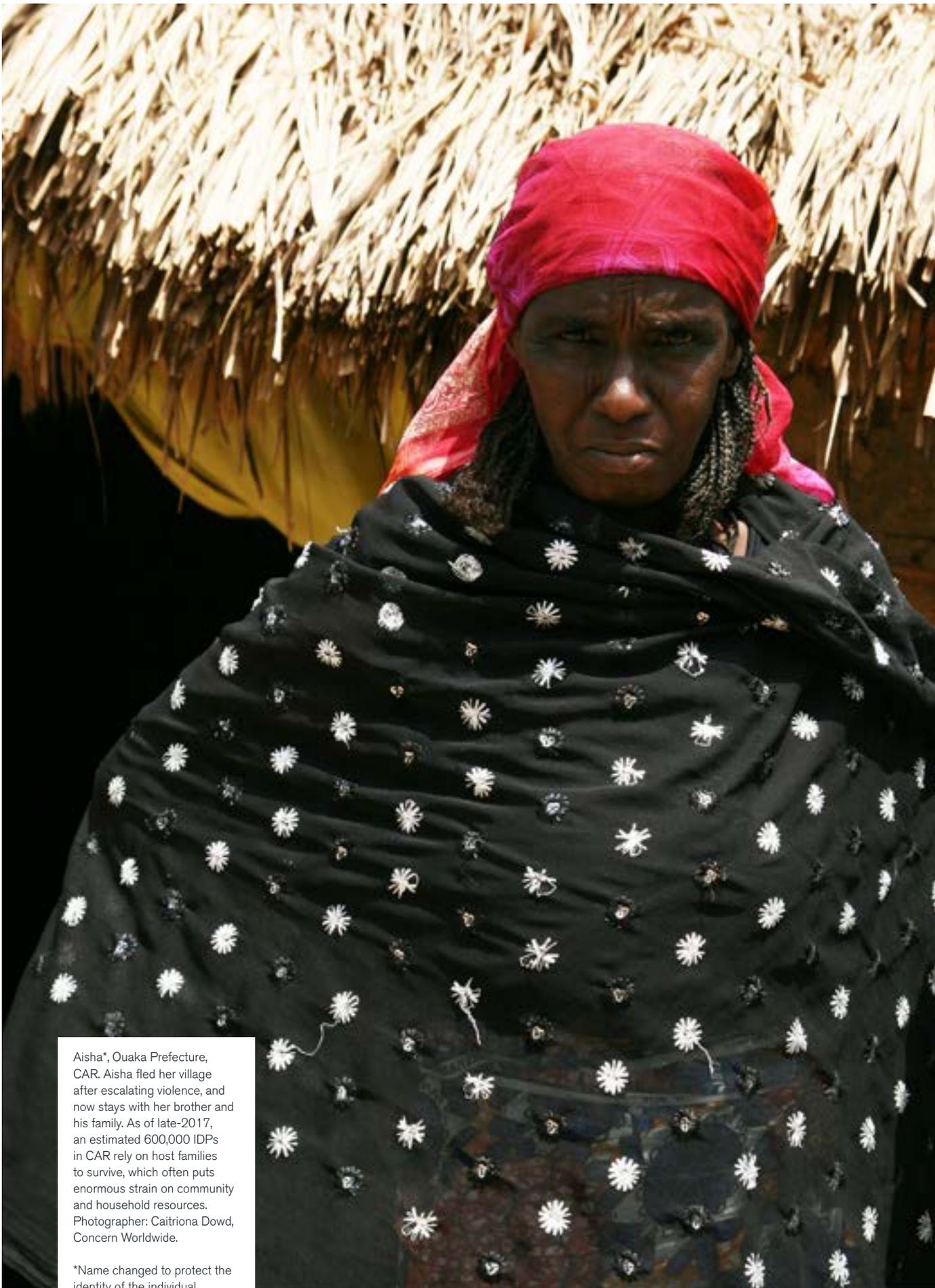


Displacement

CONFLICT AND DISPLACEMENT:
Voices of Displacement and Return in
Central African Republic's Neglected Crisis

CONCERN
worldwide



Aisha*, Ouaka Prefecture, CAR. Aisha fled her village after escalating violence, and now stays with her brother and his family. As of late-2017, an estimated 600,000 IDPs in CAR rely on host families to survive, which often puts enormous strain on community and household resources. Photographer: Caitriona Dowd, Concern Worldwide.

*Name changed to protect the identity of the individual.

Executive Summary

Concern's commitment to leaving no one behind has increasingly taken the organisation to fragile contexts, where the devastating consequences of conflict and resulting levels of human suffering have soared in recent years. Displacement is a defining characteristic of modern conflict: by the end of 2016, over 65 million people were displaced by persecution, conflict and violence.

This report seeks to understand how conflict affects different individuals', groups' and communities' experience of displacement and return; the different dynamics of displacement; and what gaps or opportunities remain for addressing or mitigating the impacts of conflict on displacement.

Central African Republic (CAR) is one of the world's most conflict-affected countries. Despite the fact that an estimated 2.5 million people – more than half the country's population – are in need of humanitarian assistance, the international humanitarian response to this neglected crisis has been severely underfunded in recent years. Since a violent takeover of power in 2013, stability in the country has deteriorated. As a result of five years of conflict, over 1.1 million people, or more than one in every five Central Africans, are displaced.¹ The country remains plagued by ongoing insecurity, limited state capacity and acute access barriers for humanitarian actors.² As such, even people who have returned to relatively more stable areas face immense challenges in rebuilding their lives.

The report finds that conflict-induced displacement is highly context-specific, and rarely an isolated event: millions of people around the world are affected by cyclical and recurring waves of conflict and insecurity. They are often displaced multiple times, and engage in a near-constant search for safety. The long-term effects of protracted and cyclical displacement can reduce household and community resilience and erode coping strategies over time. In addition, repeated cycles of displacement are linked to more risk-averse economic behaviour and shortened planning horizons among households, with implications for reduced investment in property, assets and livelihoods.

Although many people share similar challenges when displaced, gendered dynamics, and the intersecting vulnerabilities of groups such as people with disabilities, demand unique attention. Women and girls are at risk at every stage of the displacement cycle. At the onset of conflict and initial flight, women and girls are often targets of sexual and gender-based violence. During displacement, they may experience not only sexual exploitation and abuse, but also gendered denial of access to basic services. On return, women face challenges that are conditioned by social roles, and their status as mothers, widows, property owners or survivors of violence. Men's and boys' experiences of conflict and displacement are also profoundly gendered, and include being severely restricted in their mobility and targeted for forced recruitment. Men also reported deep-seated feelings of shame and helplessness in the face of their own perceived failure to provide for and protect their families.

Finally, conflict-induced displacement severely disrupts the social fabric of communities, and makes the task of rebuilding lives and reintegrating after displacement even more challenging. Violent conflict and trauma can undermine trust, social cohesion and acceptance between different groups. Even relationships within relatively homogenous communities – including systems of mutual support, solidarity and reciprocity – can be eroded by violent shocks and the isolation of displacement. In such a context, the risk of post-conflict communities relapsing into violence is very real. Rebuilding relationships, and supporting local systems for managing community-level disputes are vital steps in laying the foundation for meaningful and sustainable peace.

Based on these findings, the report makes five recommendations for those working to reduce the impact of conflict and displacement globally:

- 1. Humanitarian actors should implement and support more local-level conflict prevention, management and resolution initiatives in conflict-affected contexts.** The report illustrates the complex inter-connections between national and local-level conflicts, and the value of enhancing community's capacity for local conflict management, to enhance resilience, improve the chances of building lasting, sustainable peace, and ultimately, contribute to breaking the cycle of conflict and displacement.
- 2. Humanitarian actors should implement programmes that are highly attuned to the intersecting vulnerabilities and gendered impacts of conflict and displacement.** Prioritising a deep analysis of intersecting vulnerabilities in any needs assessment, and integrating measures to address the needs of the most vulnerable is a crucial first step in any response. Addressing the differential and gendered consequences of conflict and displacement at every stage of the displacement cycle, including on return, is vital.

- 3. Humanitarian actors should implement integrated programmes to support populations seeking to rebuild their lives and integrate during and after displacement; and to facilitate safe and voluntary return for those wishing to do so.** For those who have returned, rebuilding lives and livelihoods, and reintegrating into communities are enormous challenges. For people who have not yet returned, potentially because of insecurity or divisions within the community, enabling safe and voluntary return for those who wish to do so, is an immediate priority. This goes beyond supporting economic conditions for integration alone, to rebuilding relationships, strengthening institutions for managing conflict, and addressing the trauma of past violence.
- 4. Donors and national governments should provide sufficient, flexible funding and policy frameworks for multi-year, integrated responses to address the multi-faceted challenges facing displaced, host and returning communities.** Humanitarian responses that meet these mounting needs depend on the political will to close funding gaps; address the complex consequences of conflict; and confront the realities of supporting, hosting and integrating the long-term displaced in a way that empowers them and their host communities to live safe, stable and secure lives. In CAR, only 35 per cent of almost \$500 million required to address humanitarian needs was provided in 2017.³ This funding is inadequate and unpredictable, and short-term funding means that humanitarian agencies cannot work effectively to address profound challenges that require long-term engagement.
- 5. All parties to conflict must abide by, and continue to advocate for compliance with, international humanitarian law and the protection of humanitarian access and principles.** The accounts in this report reveal the extreme levels of deliberate, targeted violence against civilians, including sexual and gender-based violence, taking place in CAR, and the urgent need to monitor violations and hold perpetrators to account. Insecurity is one of the chief constraints for humanitarian access, compounding the suffering of conflict-affected populations, and necessitating stronger collective action, coordination and preservation of humanitarian space.

The accounts in this report reveal the extreme levels of deliberate, targeted violence against civilians, including sexual and gender-based violence, taking place in CAR, and the urgent need to monitor violations and hold perpetrators to account.

Amplifying the voices and experiences of individuals affected by conflict and displacement is vital to: i) improving our understanding of the priorities of displaced people themselves; ii) providing support that empowers them to meet their needs and live safe, stable and secure lives; and iii) understanding the challenges and obstacles they face, as well as the skills, capabilities and strengths they bring to overcoming such immense barriers. In doing so, Concern seeks to give a platform to the voices, hopes, needs and experiences of populations most affected by conflict, inform humanitarian and policy responses, and ultimately contribute to breaking the cycle of conflict and human suffering.

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Acronyms

CAR	Central African Republic
DEC	Disasters Emergency Committee
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ECHO	European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations Department
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICGBV	The Irish Consortium on Gender-Based Violence
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IEP	Institute for Economics and Peace
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Programme
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPC	Union for Peace in Central Africa (l'Union pour la Paix en Centrafrique)

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Introduction

Concern's presence in many of the world's most conflict-affected contexts calls for new thinking on how its programming can evolve to include some form of conflict response.

Concern's commitment to 'leaving no one behind'⁴ has increasingly taken the organisation into fragile contexts where the devastating consequences of conflict and resulting levels of human suffering have soared in recent years. Concern's presence in many of the world's most conflict-affected contexts calls for new thinking on how its programming can evolve to include some form of conflict response. This report is one in a series of papers exploring the humanitarian consequences of conflict, aimed primarily at humanitarian agencies, and suggests ways to improve action to break the conflict cycle.

Displacement is a defining characteristic of many of the fragile contexts in which Concern works. By the end of 2016, over 65 million people were displaced by persecution, conflict and violence. 10.3 million people were displaced in the previous twelve months: the equivalent of 20 newly displaced people every minute of the year.⁵

Conflict and displacement are inextricably linked: around the world, violent conflict is a key predictor of large-scale population movements.⁶ In 2016, over half of all refugees under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) mandate came from just three war-ravaged countries: Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan.⁷ While a small number of high-profile conflicts draw considerable international attention, conflict-induced displacement in the world's neglected crises is relatively overlooked, and demands unique attention. In some cases, displacement is a form of 'collateral damage,' as civilians flee wider insecurity. However, in many contexts, displacement is a deliberate strategy of conflict actors seeking to force the movement of civilians to and from territories under their control.⁸

Conflict-induced displacement has immediate and often devastating consequences for individuals, households and communities. Beyond the experience of violence, destruction of property and hardship of flight, displacement has profound long-term political, economic and social implications. The nature and dynamics of conflict are often compounding factors in these conditions: conflict both generates population movements, and creates conditions in which movement is immensely dangerous.

The effects of conflict on wider economic activity, livelihoods, food security, and health and education systems mean that many host communities and families into which displaced people move are already facing considerable hardship. Moreover, the very fact of insecurity in a country often creates acute access challenges for humanitarian actors seeking to respond to these urgent needs.

1.1 Overview of conflict

Concern defines violent conflict as 'Protracted violence between groups resulting in significant human suffering.'⁹ This definition encompasses large-scale, national or international armed conflict; as well as localised conflict systems, both of which can result in displacement and significant humanitarian suffering. In recent years, global violent conflict has increased in frequency and intensity. After a period of relative gains in global peace, conflict has significantly increased in the past decade.¹⁰ In 2016, 136 state, non-state and anti-civilian conflicts were recorded around the world, up from 80 in 2010.¹¹

The nature of conflict has also transformed in several ways in recent decades. First, contemporary conflict is increasingly transnationalised, involving extensive networks of international actors. This has particular implications for displacement: neighbouring countries are the most frequent hosts of cross-border refugee flows, and regionalised conflicts can both limit options for seeking safety, and put more strain on already fragile systems. At the same time, in many fragile states, multiple conflicts with different agents and victims of violence co-occur in different parts of the state.¹² This contributes to a complexity that puts more civilians at risk, hampers humanitarian access, and undermines political and diplomatic efforts aimed at establishing a sustainable peace.

Accompanying this proliferation of conflicts is an increasingly complex network of conflict actors: alongside state and clearly identified armed opposition forces, contemporary conflicts are host to more diffuse, decentralised forces, including paramilitaries and communal militias.¹³ Finally, conflict is becoming more protracted in many of the world's most acute humanitarian crises, with recurring cycles of violence creating a 'conflict trap' from which countries struggle to escape.¹⁴ This pattern condemns many populations to repeated cycles of displacement, movement, return and re-displacement. This attests to the fact that underlying conditions of conflict and insecurity need to be addressed to build lasting peace and facilitate durable solutions to displacement crises.

1.2 Overview of displacement

Displacement is a general term that refers to the process by which people leave their homes, usually in response to a trigger event such as a disaster, environmental stressor, conflict or persecution, to seek a more secure and stable situation elsewhere. Populations can be displaced within state borders as internally displaced people (IDPs); or across international borders as refugees. Globally, the number of displaced people has almost doubled between 2007 and 2016 to over 65 million people, driven in large part by violent conflict and insecurity. The vast majority of displaced people have remained within their countries of origin: in 2016, almost twice as many people were recorded as internally displaced (40.3 million) than as refugees (22.5 million).¹⁵

This study is particularly concerned with the consequences of violent conflict on displacement, and so is primarily focused on what is sometimes referred to as 'forced displacement'.¹⁶ In focusing on this, it is important to note that behind this simple definition is the contested issue of designating migration as 'voluntary' or 'forced'.¹⁷ While not seeking to minimise the significance of population movement driven by other considerations, this study is primarily concerned with the impact of violent conflict on displacement.

Primary qualitative research, particularly focused on understanding the narratives of populations who have experienced displacement and conflict, is particularly important in understanding the diversity of displaced people's lived experiences.

In exploring the process of displacement, it is important to note that displacement rarely follows a linear path from settlement, to flight, resettlement, and ultimately return. Displacement is typically an iterative, staggered and cyclical process that involves complex calculations of security, risk and opportunity.¹⁸ This means that experiences of displacement are extremely diverse and context-specific, and often mediated by individuals' and communities' unique capacities and vulnerabilities. While immediate responses to displacement tend to focus on emergency assistance, long-term displacement is extremely common. As of 2014, one-third of UNHCR's caseload had been in exile for over ten years,¹⁹ while the average duration of a protracted refugee situation is 26 years.²⁰ There is insufficient data to accurately estimate the scale of protracted IDP displacement, but almost 90 per cent of countries monitored by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) in 2014 hosted IDPs who had been displaced for over ten years.²¹ These overall numbers, however, often conceal the complex and changing composition of IDPs, including multiple waves of displacement, resettlement, local integration and return within aggregate flows.²²

1.3 Research methodology

This report seeks to understand: i) how conflict affects different individuals', groups' and communities' experience of displacement and return; ii) the different dynamics of displacement, including both internal and transnational movement; and iii) what gaps or opportunities remain for addressing or mitigating the impacts of conflict on displacement.

This study is based on a combination of desk-based secondary research supplemented by primary qualitative research in select case study countries. Primary qualitative research was carried out in November 2017 and February 2018 in CAR; in February 2018 in Syria; and in March 2018 in Bangladesh. Primary qualitative research involved key informant interviews with stakeholders including NGO staff; local, national and international policy makers; and national and international researchers. In addition, 14 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and 10 community-based focus group discussions were held across the three countries.

Sites for qualitative research were selected based on the profile of ongoing or recent violence, and subsequent patterns of displacement from and return to those communities. In CAR, Kouango is the site of an ongoing displacement crisis and there is considerable violence in the surrounding area; in Bossembélé, the peak of displacement has passed and security has been largely re-established for the time being, with communities now facing the challenges of return.

Primary qualitative research, particularly focused on understanding the narratives of populations who have experienced displacement and conflict, is particularly important in understanding the diversity of displaced people's lived experiences.²³



Lydia, Guy and their children (L-R) Marie, Sandra, Flora and Regina*, outside their rebuilt home in the village of Belegbe II in Kouango, Central African Republic. There were among hundreds of houses burnt down in a wave of violence across 14 villages in the area in September of 2016. The charred roof posts of the old structure are still visible.

Photographer: Kieran McConville, Concern Worldwide.

* Names changed to protect the identity of the individuals

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Conflict and Displacement

Violent conflict is a primary cause of displacement. Cross-country statistical analyses of both refugee and IDP flows consistently show the importance of violent conflict as a direct driver of displacement.²⁴ These findings are confirmed in quantitative analyses of individual- or household-level data,²⁵ and borne out by qualitative research and the accounts of displaced people themselves. For example, in DRC, 93 per cent of IDPs interviewed cited conflict as the main cause of displacement, as did a similar percentage of Syrian refugees arriving in Greece.²⁶ Yet, two equally violent conflicts do not always generate the same level of displacement, and even in highly violent environments, not everyone flees. Fleeing is often a strategic decision, and some people decide to stay.²⁷ This points to the need to understand the individual and local conditions that shape displacement.

While violent conflict is a primary driver of displacement, conflict-induced displacement in the world's neglected crises is relatively overlooked.

In general, much greater evidence is available on transnational population movements than on internal displacement.²⁸ This is despite the fact that the majority of people displaced today remain within the borders of their own country.²⁹ While transnational population flows fuelled by a small number of high-profile conflicts draw considerable international attention, conflict-induced displacement in the world's neglected crises is relatively overlooked, and demands unique attention. Displacement in protracted conflicts is often recurring and cyclical, attesting to the long-run impacts of ongoing insecurity. In such contexts, displacement can last for decades, if not generations, fuelling wider issues around the sustainability of aid, impacts on resilience, and challenges of integration and return.

Beyond this general research context, two specific gaps exist in current evidence: i) the differential experiences of displacement; and ii) barriers to integration and return. These limit our understanding of conflict-induced displacement, and therefore actions, responses and policies, in a way that this report seeks to address.



Children stand beside a shelter in the Mpoko displacement camp near the airport in Bangui.

Thousands of people fled to the site seeking protection on December 5, 2013, when Anti-Balaka groups ambushed Seleka forces, who were in control of the capital since March 2013. Hundreds of civilians were slaughtered. People who live in the camp refer to the day as "le cinq" or simply "the fifth." Many fled with just the clothes on their backs, leaving behind their homes and belongings, which were largely looted and destroyed.

Photographer: Crystal Wells, Concern Worldwide.

2.1 Differential and gendered experiences of displacement

The first of these gaps relates to understanding the differential experiences of displacement for individuals, households and groups. While all displaced people face some similar challenges, our understanding of the diversity of experiences of displacement is relatively limited: the decision to flee, and subsequent experiences of displacement, are highly diverse. Violence affects different people in different ways, and poses different threats to lives and livelihoods across a population. Sometimes violence is indiscriminate, but in other instances, it is selectively targeted.³⁰ For example, studies in Colombia and Nepal found that land ownership increased the likelihood of displacement, suggesting that people who owned land expected to be targeted by armed actors on account of their property.³¹

Even in contexts of more generalised violence, some people are better placed than others to negotiate threats. For example, during the civil war in Somalia, members of minority groups lacked strong clan protection systems and hence were especially vulnerable.³² Similarly, in countries as diverse as Sri Lanka and Ukraine, ethnic minorities or those who experienced discrimination made up large shares of the displaced population.³³ Studies from Colombia, Indonesia, Nepal and Kyrgyzstan indicate that while violence is a key determinant of displacement, socioeconomic variables are also significant.³⁴ They suggest that households with lower incomes, for example, have more limited capacity to adopt coping strategies or withstand threats to their livelihoods.

The experience of displacement is also highly diverse. Contrary to conventional wisdom, several recent studies have highlighted the extent to which refugee livelihoods become integrated into host country economies, attesting to the capacity, resilience and purposive action of many displaced people.³⁵ Some studies suggest integration and self-sufficiency increase over time, albeit with estimates for the length of time necessary to reach economic parity with host communities ranging widely.³⁶

However, many displaced people remain socially and economically marginalised throughout the duration of their displacement, with a number of case studies reflecting increasing economic difficulty and impoverishment over time.³⁷

As a group, refugees and IDPs also often experience discrimination and stigmatisation. In some instances, displaced people are treated with active suspicion: those displaced from conflict-affected areas may be accused of being members or supporters of an armed group, and subjected to violence, intimidation, or exploitation as a result.³⁸

In contexts of protracted and recurring crises, it is important to note that displacement is rarely an isolated experience: many people in long-running conflicts have been displaced several times.³⁹ For example, estimates of internal displacement in Syria suggest some IDPs have fled as many as 25 times in the face of continually

Many displaced people remain socially and economically marginalised throughout the duration of their displacement, with a number of case studies reflecting increasing economic difficulty and impoverishment over time.

shifting frontlines and the collapse of basic services⁴⁰ (see Concern case study, page 16). This has profound implications for displaced populations' livelihoods, education, wellbeing and long-term resilience. Multiple displacements generally means that more household assets are lost, education is interrupted, coping strategies are eroded, and support networks are undermined or destroyed.

In many cases, women make up a larger share of the displaced population than men,⁴¹ and often face particular challenges related to displacement. In contexts of wider conflict, levels of sexual and gender-based violence can increase.⁴² While poor data and barriers to disclosure typically result in underestimation, data suggests that one in five displaced women suffer sexual violence.⁴³ High levels of sexual violence have been reported in camp settings, as well as in sites of urban displacement, attesting to the widespread and pervasive nature of this threat.⁴⁴ Rates of early marriage also tend to increase in contexts of displacement, as a result of the severe economic, social and security concerns households face.⁴⁵

Women may also be forced to resort to transactional sex and other high-risk coping strategies as aid diminishes and other strategies are depleted. The challenges women face when displaced often have implications for the wider household. In a study of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, for example, female-headed households had higher levels of vulnerability across a range of indicators, including levels of poverty, food security, quality of diet, and adoption of severe coping strategies.⁴⁶ Moreover, the new roles women take on as income-generators and heads of household during displacement can be sources of tension – and sometimes violence – in their households and communities during displacement and on return.

This evidence underscores the fact that experiences of displacement are highly differentiated – some individuals and households become well-integrated economic agents, while at the same time, some displaced people and groups struggle with specific obstacles. This points to the need to understand more about the differential levels of vulnerability of different segments of displaced populations.

The Constant Search for Safety in Syria

Now in its eighth year of war, unprecedented levels of violence in Syria have resulted in the largest refugee crisis since World War Two. As of December 2017, over six million people are internally displaced in Syria; and 5.5 million have fled the country.⁴⁷ International attention has often focused on refugees arriving in Europe. However, the vast majority of Syria's displaced remain in the region, and the largest number are inside the war-ravaged country itself. Many have experienced multiple displacements, in a near-constant search for safety, as shifting frontlines create new threats.

Laila* is a 31-year old mother who lives in Northern Syria with her five children. Laila's tragic journey from her home in Aleppo began in 2012. In the early stages of the war, she and her husband fled south of the city with their children, to a house her father's family owned. There, the extended family of 14 lived in a small three-room house for seven months. When they first arrived, there was little food, but as the front line got closer people began to leave, abandoning crops. Laila says, "At the beginning we only cooked one meal a day, but as the town became empty, people left their crops and then there was lots of food to eat." However, as shelling came closer, the family were also forced to flee.

In the countryside north of Aleppo, the family found a small farmhouse where they stayed with 25 people. Women and children slept in the house, while men slept outside in cars. The cramped conditions soon became untenable, and in mid-2013, the family moved again to another city, that was considered safe at the time, and was under the control of opposition forces. On arrival, the family were brought to a school where IDPs were accommodated. While conditions were crowded, they were an improvement. The family received assistance from NGOs, and both Laila and her husband were able to find work. Nevertheless, the constant threat of war was never far away. Military personnel established headquarters in other schools, leaving all schools vulnerable to attack.

In January 2014, the city was attacked, ousting the forces previously in control. Under a new armed group, Laila was forbidden from working in the small sewing workshop where she was employed. "Life was like a prison. It was forbidden to go out or move to other areas [...] there was no work, no freedom to leave; there was fear." After a year in the school, the armed group forced IDPs out and the family moved again, this time to a house still under construction, where they lived for two years. Although they had access to some services, Laila's daughter was forbidden from attending school.

As the war intensified in 2016, the armed group fled the city using the family and thousands of others as human shields. Laila's family were forced to accompany the retreating forces, settling only briefly in towns along the way. During this time, the family ate food from abandoned houses. After more than three months of constant movement and fear, the family managed to escape. Their final journey was perilous: on their route, they came across dead bodies, and had to avoid areas littered with landmines.

Checkpoints and registration points are very common in Northern Syria, especially in areas that have recently changed hands or are close to conflict lines. At one such point, Laila and her family were stopped. After years of displacement, Laila had lost her identification papers. She was detained for questioning for six days along with her youngest son. After being released, Laila discovered that her husband had left to travel to his mother's funeral: in the course of his journey, he was shot and killed.

Laila has now returned to the city in which she previously lived for three years. There, Concern has supported her and her family with a food basket, food vouchers and a hygiene kit. In all the devastation of war, Laila misses the normalcy of life before the conflict: "I miss my neighbours, friends and walking inside the traditional markets of the old city; and eating ice cream from Salloura with my husband in the public park." When asked whether her children have missed time in school during their period of displacement, Laila remembers the family's time squatting in a crowded school building: "My children entered school, but not for teaching, only to live." Laila's hope for the future is to find work in a sewing shop so that she can find a better home for her family, and send her children to school.

Life was like a prison. It was forbidden to go out or move to other areas [...] there was no work, no freedom to leave; there was fear.

Concern is one of the few organisations providing assistance to IDPs in Northern Syria, where IDPs are often displaced multiple times, each time moving further from their homes in search of assistance. As Laila's story shows, in addition to the very real physical threat of violence, IDPs are at risk of harassment at checkpoints and face severe restrictions on movement. Beyond the fundamental need for security, access to basic services is severely limited, with long-term consequences for the population's well-being. Concern's response to the Syria crisis began in April 2013, and includes multi sectoral life-saving actions through emergency assistance and rehabilitating water supply systems. Concern's emergency response activities in Syria are funded by ECHO, OFDA, DFID, Irish Aid, Food for Peace and the Centre for Disaster Philanthropy. Concern's interventions provide for the immediate and ongoing multi-sectoral needs of IDPs arriving from conflict-affected areas, as well as targeted support for the most vulnerable.

* All names have been changed for security purposes



An IDP site in Northern Syria where Concern provided food and WASH services for vulnerable people. Photography: Concern Worldwide.

2.2 Barriers to integration and return

The second major gap relates to our understanding of the changing nature of conflict-induced displacement over time, and particularly in relation to processes of onward movement, integration or return. Over the course of a protracted crisis, new dynamics emerge, but the documentation of different experiences and pathways remains weak, particularly for internally displaced populations. This gap is even greater in contexts, such as CAR, which witness multiple waves of violence, displacement and return in different parts of the country simultaneously, as this complexity can obscure the diversity of experiences in a multi-sited crisis.

As conflicts become more protracted and prone to relapse, displacement has become a long-lasting phenomenon that can condemn conflict-affected populations to years, if not decades, of uncertainty and risk (see Concern case study, page 20). Although typical responses to displacement continue to prioritise emergency action that is by definition, a short-term measure, today, protracted displacement is the norm, rather than the exception. More than four-in-five refugee crises persist for a decade or more, and two-in-five last for 20 years or more. While data is more limited and measurement more challenging, reporting suggests that conflict-related internal displacement crises may last for an average of 23 years.⁴⁸

Understanding the dynamics of displacement is crucial to developing appropriate and effective responses that empower displaced populations to achieve durable solutions and the full exercise of their rights. Among international and policy actors, it is often assumed that displaced people who have fled violence will return once the conflict has ended. However, even in contexts where peace is restored, evidence suggests that this assumption often does not hold. In many cases, displaced people do not return even when the situation is much improved: over the last six years, return accounted for only 27 per cent of exits from refugee status globally.⁴⁹ In other cases, people choose to return even in the absence of improvement.

These different decisions reflect the fact that people – and conditions in both their location of origin, and host or potential host communities – change over the course of a conflict. For example, there is evidence that the aspirations of people displaced from rural to urban areas change, with many displaced people preferring to settle in an urban area than return to rural locations of origin.⁵⁰ Second, conditions other than those which drove the initial displacement also change in the place of origin over time. For example, refugees and IDPs cannot always reclaim land or property left behind. These challenges can themselves sometimes result in flare-ups of violence, such as over land disputes⁵¹ and/or control and access to contested resources or power within communities.

Displacement as a result of conflict can particularly compound challenges of return. Security and safety are among the top priorities for displaced populations considering return in conflict-affected contexts,⁵² and suggest a role for humanitarian and development actors in supporting peace-building, reconciliation, social cohesion and integration either in return, integration locally or resettlement elsewhere. In addition to lost assets, there may be physical destruction of property and agricultural infrastructure through fighting; as well as insecurity associated with landmines or unexploded ordnance, for example. Checkpoints along the route to travel back to locations of origin may be – or may be perceived as – unsafe. Even where formal conflict between main parties to a conflict has ended, other actors may still be engaged in conflict, and generalised violence may emerge in a power vacuum to continue to threaten returning people's lives. Women also

face particular barriers on return – while housing, land and property rights pose challenges for many displaced people, women can be further prevented from owning, accessing, controlling or inheriting land under various land tenure and inheritance systems.⁵³

Social and communal tensions between the returning households and those that remained may be a cause of resentment, anxiety or fear. This is particularly the case where those divisions map onto the main fault-lines (e.g. religious, ethnic, political) of the underlying conflict, and may make returning to locations of origin – rather than integration or onward settlement – less appealing. In extreme circumstances, displacement in these conflicts may result in a demographic shift through which communities self-segregate to reduce contact with members of other groups. Creating or migrating to relatively homogenous communities or enclaves can increase people's sense of security, and provide access to support systems through close social networks and communal ties.

However, this kind of demographic shift also carries considerable risks. Clustering in groups can increase the risk of collective targeting, making ethnic or religious enclaves more vulnerable to attack.⁵⁴ Over the longer term, segregation reduces contact and exchange (such as trade) or shared experiences (such as shared education or health systems) between communities, which can contribute to further eroding social cohesion and inter-group trust, and intensify perceptions of other groups as different or distinct.⁵⁵ In some cases, this can, in turn, make violence between groups more, rather than less, likely.⁵⁶ These dynamics compound the challenges of return for communities, contributing to the perception that return is not safe, or only viable if it is accompanied by the creation of segregated and internally homogenous territories. Evidence from Bosnia suggests that even where other important conditions – such as property restitution – are met, reversing segregation and recreating diverse communities can still prove elusive.⁵⁷

Ultimately, it is important to recall that not all displaced people wish to return, and that even among those who do, 'return is a process not an event.'

Ultimately, it is important to recall that not all displaced people wish to return, and that even among those who do, 'return is a process not an event.'⁵⁸ It is typically iterative; it may be staggered, with some (often male) family members returning first and others following after; or possibly periodic, punctuated by continued cycles of displacement or movement if living conditions or security deteriorate. Return does not automatically equate to a durable solution – it can mask people's challenges on return to locations of origin, including poverty; issues over land access, tenure and rights; and the need for continued humanitarian assistance and/or development support.⁵⁹ Similarly, those returning from cross-border flight may find themselves internally displaced within their own countries if they are unable to reclaim their land or rebuild livelihoods.⁶⁰ In the absence of support, some displaced populations may find themselves fleeing again, trapped in a cycle of poverty and displacement in search of safety.

Generations in Exile: Waves of Rohingya Displacement in Bangladesh

The Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh was the fastest growing refugee crisis in the world in 2017.⁶¹ As of March 2018, an estimated 671,000 people had crossed the border from Myanmar into Bangladesh⁶² since violence escalated in Rakhine State in August 2017. As is often the case, neighbouring states hosting refugees face their own challenges: Bangladesh is home to around 40 million poor people, is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, and is highly prone to large-scale natural disasters. These conditions compound the challenge of hosting large numbers of refugees.

Because of the immense scale of this movement, international attention has tended to highlight the most recent wave of refugees. However, the recent influx of displaced people has added to an existing displaced population of approximately 212,000, bringing the total number of displaced people to close to one million.⁶³ Some of those displaced prior to 2017 have been in Bangladesh for decades, or have spent their entire lives in exile. The experiences and coping strategies of these populations, and those who have been more recently displaced, are remarkably similar in some respects, including the shock of initial flight and facing challenges on arrival. These attest to the complex challenges of responding to protracted crises and waves of displacement over time.

Many Rohingya arrive in Bangladesh with reports of extreme violence in Myanmar, and an arduous journey to flee the country over several days, sometimes traversing mountains and river crossings in search of safety. For both those newly arrived, and those who have been in Bangladesh for a longer time, their initial experiences of arrival are quite similar. "We didn't have any shelter when we arrived," says Amina*, who arrived in September 2017 after a ten-day journey with her five children. "Most of us were tired, sick and traumatised. I saw people sitting scattered on the roadside. We also joined them. We were very hungry but could not manage food". Mohammed Amin* is a former madrasa teacher who fled Myanmar in 1992. He recalls facing similar challenges on arrival: they had very little food for the duration of their journey, and women and children became unwell on the route. Even on arrival, they struggled to access food every day.

For many people arriving, life in the camp presents new challenges. Feelings of shock, fear and helplessness were common for many refugees on arrival. Selina*, who arrived in September 2017, told Concern, "I was feeling helpless and it frightened me a lot. The only consolation was that my family members were together and we were alive". Mohamed Azad*, a married father of two, first came to Bangladesh in 1992 as a small

child with his family. He does not recall his first days in the camp, but has heard from his parents and uncles how they struggled in the new environment: “Everything was new for them, even the language, and the people”.

Those interviewed were unanimous in agreeing that their lives are better in Bangladesh because of improved security and greater stability. As Amina stated, “At least we are safe here”. Nevertheless, both new arrivals and those longer-term displaced continue to face difficulties in exile. Layru Khatun* arrived in Bangladesh in 2012 with her husband. Their son, Mahmud*, was born in the camp, and is being treated for malnutrition by Concern, reflecting the struggles they still face with food security. “When we were in Rakhine [Myanmar], we used to eat fish and meat [...] Now in the camp, we mostly get only rice and lentils”. Layru and her family are largely dependent on food aid, and if they miss a distribution, the family can go hungry for days.

While experiences on arrival may be very similar, the conditions in the camp have changed drastically since the first waves of refugees began to arrive: when Mohamed Azad first reached Bangladesh, he recalls the area was heavily forested. Now all greenery has gone and the surrounding area is occupied by people. This humanitarian crisis is therefore, also an environmental one, and may paint an even more uncertain future for the Rohingya. The region’s topography and seasonal weather patterns, coupled with the high density of refugees, means camp residents are extremely vulnerable to monsoon rains, flooding and landslides, which could herald another catastrophe and further displacement within Bangladesh in the near future. Both new arrivals and those who have lived as refugees for decades report a shared wish to return to Myanmar if peace returns, but more than anything, want to build a better life for their families. Solaiman Ali*, a married

I was feeling helpless and it frightened me a lot. The only consolation was that my family members were together and we were alive.

father of three who arrived in September 2017, reflects: “If peace comes sometime in our country, definitely I will go back with my family. Until then, in here, I want proper education for my children. I was a school teacher, so I know the value of education”.

Concern began working in Bangladesh in 1972, and stepped up its emergency response to the rapidly escalating Rohingya crisis in September 2017. As the accounts above show, access to food, nutrition and related health needs are among the most urgent needs of new arrivals and the more long-term displaced alike. Concern’s emergency response activities include the provision of food rations, distribution of non-food items, nutrition screening and treatment, and counselling pregnant women and new mothers in infant feeding practices. Concern is also scaling up disaster risk reduction activities to prevent and mitigate against environmental disasters exacerbating the current crisis. Concern’s activities in Cox’s Bazar are funded by UNICEF, the Disaster Emergency Committee, and public donations.

* All names have been changed for security purposes



Refugee camp, Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. Photographer: Kieran McConville, Concern Worldwide

3

Central African Republic's Neglected Displacement Crisis

Central African Republic (CAR) is one of the world's most conflict-affected countries. CAR ranked third most fragile in the world in 2017; and lowest in the world in 2016's Human Development Index.⁶⁴ An estimated 2.5 million people – more than half the country's population – are in need of humanitarian assistance in 2018, while the international humanitarian response to this neglected crisis has been severely underfunded in recent years.⁶⁵

Since a violent takeover of power in 2013, stability in the country has deteriorated. Fighting has in part coalesced along religious lines. In late 2012, armed groups were formed in the north-east of the country, mostly among the minority Muslim population, including the former Seleka coalition and a splinter group, Union for Peace in Central Africa (UPC). In response, in late 2013, militias known as 'Anti-Balaka' were formed mostly among the country's majority Christian and animist populations. All groups have targeted civilians from other communities, often assuming religion serves as an indicator of support – and a justification for attack. The conflict, however, can by no means be reduced to a simple religious divide: instead, shared identity markers and pre-existing communal systems of security have served as a basis for mobilization around much deeper issues of poverty, exclusion and weak governance in a state long beset by cycles of war and poverty. Moreover, the crisis has evolved to draw in a growing number of actors. Of particular importance are agriculturalists and pastoralists, who have long clashed over cattle grazing routes and the protection of crops from livestock.

These conflicts have intensified since the crisis, owing to a perceived alliance between predominantly Fulani herders and the former Seleka. Now entering its fifth year, violence peaked in 2013-2014; followed by a relative improvement in 2015-2016 during which time, peaceful elections were held. This period presented a possible window for consolidation of peace, but renewed violence since late 2016 has marked a return to instability.

Meanwhile, the displacement crisis shows no signs of abating: over 1.1 million people, or roughly one in every five Central Africans, are displaced. In 2017, levels of displacement increased by 50 per cent. Just over half of those displaced in the crisis remain within CAR itself, with pronounced needs, and often facing uncertain futures. Of these, almost 10,000 people are estimated to be displaced in wilderness areas such as forests, with no access to shelter, protection, health services, or emergency support.⁶⁶

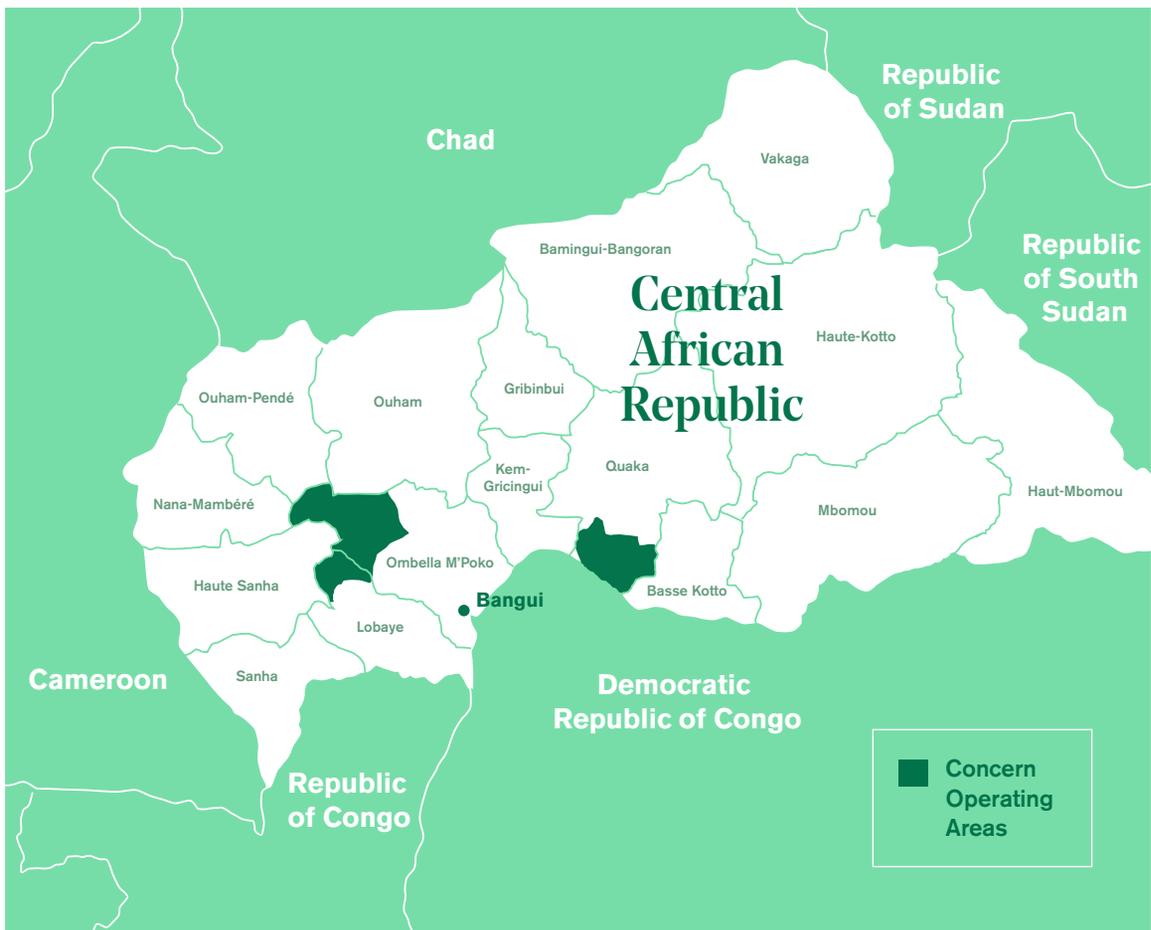
The country remains plagued by ongoing insecurity, limited state capacity and acute access barriers for humanitarian actors.⁶⁷ As such, even among those

populations who have returned to relatively more stable areas, the challenges they face in rebuilding their lives are immense. To investigate these processes more closely, and better understand the lived experience of these impacts, research in CAR took place in two sites: Kouango, in Ouaka prefecture, where there is an ongoing displacement crisis; and Bossembélé, in Ombella M'Poko prefecture, where the peak of displacement has passed, and communities now face challenges of return (see Map 1).

Concern is working in both areas supporting food security, livelihoods, water and sanitation, health and nutrition, and community efforts to reduce vulnerability to natural disasters, address gender-based violence, and improve conflict management at the local level.

MAP 1:

Map of Central African Republic with Concern Operating Areas Highlighted.



3.1 Kouango

Kouango is a town of approximately 8,000 people, situated on the Ubangi River in southern CAR. The town is diverse, with both Christians and Muslims living side-by-side. Geographically, the area sits at the meeting point between CAR's predominantly Muslim north-east and predominantly Christian south-western region. This position means that the surrounding area has witnessed heavy fighting as armed groups have vied for control. The town of Kouango fell under the control of former Seleka rebels in February 2013, and has since transferred to the control of the UPC, which split from Seleka in 2014. Throughout the crisis, the region experienced extreme violence, including high-fatality attacks, kidnappings for ransom, and killings of civilians suspected of collaborating with rival forces. Concern's activities in Kouango include seed fairs and Cash-for-Work activities for those who have lost their livelihoods because of conflict and displacement, as well as support to fisheries through distributions of fishing kits and training on processing and storage. Concern also works to combat malnutrition through activities to enhance dietary diversity, such as seed distribution and training in household vegetable gardens; and increasing access to improved water sources for communities, schools and health centres through hygiene promotion, rehabilitating existing water points, and constructing new wells, boreholes and protected spring catchments.

3.1.1 Regional and local dynamics of displacement

Insecurity has driven hundreds of thousands of Central Africans from their homes in search of safety within and beyond CAR's own borders. At the peak of the crisis, over 20,000 people fled from Kouango and the wider region across the Ubangi River to DRC, reflecting the regional nature of the crisis.⁶⁸ As of November 2017, over 167,000 Central Africans were registered as refugees in DRC.⁶⁹

Populations faced immense challenges while displaced. Among the primary concerns of the communities consulted for this report was the lack of access to food. Many people reported that they had no access to fields to cultivate. Although many were registered as official refugees, they reported that they did not receive large enough food rations to support their families, and in some cases, alleged that those charged with distributing aid did not deliver it fairly or in full rations. Communities in Kpangba and Yangouasso in CAR, who were displaced to DRC during the crisis, reported frequent disputes with host communities over access to potable water. These sometimes resulted in violent confrontations between women who bore primary responsibility for collecting water. Women in Yangouasso reported that many children became malnourished while displaced. Poor nutrition was compounded by poor access to health services, with multiple communities reporting that children had died while displaced as a result of conditions.

The experience led some women in Yangouasso to conclude: **"Before, we had only heard talk of war, but we had never lived it. The Seleka were in our village and raped girls, even elderly women. But when we arrived as refugees, we lived the worst"**. A key informant in Bangui working in the protection sector, confirmed similar experiences are extremely common among displaced Central Africans in DRC. Due to local tensions over land and resource use, coupled with geopolitical dynamics between DRC and CAR, many displaced people report experiencing discrimination, violence and severe restrictions on their movement and access to services in DRC.

Because of the shared challenges among the community, opportunities for mutual support and community-level assistance were limited: **“Everyone was in misery,”** women in Kpangba reported, **“There was no way to help each other. Each family was focused on their own household.”** Women in Yangouasso agreed: **“Everyone is in trouble, we cannot help each other. It’s up to everyone to manage”.**

Since the peak of the crisis, as frontlines in the conflict have become more established, conflict has become more localised, and pockets of insecurity have produced more concentrated displacement, from smaller towns and villages into Kouango. Fleeing violence and insecurity, often with only the clothes they are wearing, life is extremely difficult for those who have recently arrived in Kouango.

I have feelings of pain, because I have lost all that I had. The standard of living is very hard here... In [my home village], I lived on the fruits of my cattle and my field. Here, I cannot make ends meet.

Albert,* a 50-year-old former coffee farmer, used to be a prominent figure in his village. His success, however, attracted attention: Anti-Balaka forces attacked him in a violent robbery in which he lost his right arm. He fled with his family in June 2017, and now rents a small house. He has since struggled to adjust to the impact of his disability and his heightened dependence on others:

“I have feelings of pain, because I have lost all that I had. The standard of living is very hard here... In [my home village], I lived on the fruits of my cattle and my field. Here, I cannot make ends meet”.

The issue of work and self-reliance was a recurring theme in discussions in Kouango. Aisha,* a 50-year-old woman who has been displaced for 10 months by conflict in her home village, lives with her brother, Hassan,* and his family. Hassan reflected on their situation, concluding: **“Life has become very difficult [...] You cannot go to the field to cultivate and pick the products. But now, we only live on temporary work in other people’s homes”.** Many displaced people spoke about the need for increased humanitarian aid, health services and emergency provisions, but above all, they emphasised their desire to rebuild their lives for themselves. As one community group responded on their hopes for the future, **“We are waiting for peace to return so that we can go back to our occupations. We hope that stability and security can return to allow everyone to live well”.**

3.1.2 Gendered experiences of displacement and intersecting vulnerabilities

While displacement is undoubtedly challenging for everyone who flees their home in search of safety, it often has different impacts on different groups, including gendered effects on women and men, and intersecting impacts on the most vulnerable. Women’s experiences of conflict and displacement were deeply gendered. The largest share of household tasks fell to women, including finding food and drinkable water, which often put women at risk of confrontations with host populations. Men in Yangouasso reported, **“The host community does not allow access to refugees. If a woman insists on having drinking water, the host community strikes that woman”.** The burden of these responsibilities was immense: as one young woman in the same village reported, after her husband suffered an injury and could no longer work, **“everything depended on the woman”.** Men in Kpangba shared the view that women bore a huge burden, reporting that many had become unwell, **“because of an overload of household activities”.**

In addition, women's experience of displacement was also profoundly affected by sexual violence, exploitation and abuse. When armed forces first attacked, women reported extensive sexual violence. Moreover, this experience did not end once they fled. Many communities reported that while displaced, women were exposed to sexual exploitation and abuse at the hands of host populations, who forced them into transactional relationships in exchange for food or temporary employment:

“Food was sometimes exchanged for sex... Women did temporary work to find food. The people who hired them sought to sleep with them. Host populations want to have sex with women before they are hired” (women, Kpangba).

“The host community often takes the girls forcibly to have sex with them. Our children are raped ... Women take on temporary work to survive, as their husbands do not have money. The owners of the fields make them work for crumbs and seek to have sex with them” (men, Yangouasso).

It is important to recall that gendered impacts of conflict and displacement are relational. Men reported feelings of hopelessness and uselessness in the face of widespread violence beyond their control. The crisis severely restricts their movement and, therefore, their ability to work and take care of their families. While women often risked exposure to sexual violence when moving outside their villages, men were at risk of being killed and face, **“a lot of pressure from armed men. The men did not have access to the market in Kouango [...] We want peace to come back so that we can move freely”** (men, Kpangba)

Examples of how these different gendered impacts relate to one another are clear within individual families. Faced with a lack of food for their children, two of Albert's wives periodically make the 80km roundtrip journey by foot back to their fields across dangerous territory, to cultivate cassava. The responsibility for agricultural work, sourcing and preparing food typically falls on the family's women and girls, putting them at great risk as they travel to source this. At the same time, this risk is compounded by the fact that Albert is unable to find work in Kouango, in large part due to his recent disability, which makes his family even more dependent on their crops. As a father and husband, he perceives this as a profound weakness and is deeply affected by this sense of failing: **“Before I had both hands, now I am disabled. I am totally dependent. What hope can I have for the future?”**

Albert's story also reveals the particular vulnerability of specific groups. For example, when Seleka forces attacked, many of the most vulnerable people in the community were left behind because they could not flee. Bernadette* is a mother of two who has a pre-existing disability affecting her ability to walk. As Seleka forces entered her village, she recalls, **“only a few disabled people stayed [...] They committed abuses and raped girls. I had to hide my daughter under the bed. I lost everything”**.

3.1.3 National and local-level conflict

Recently, violent conflicts between livestock herders, who are perceived by some to be aligned with the ruling UPC, and agriculturalists, have escalated to open conflict. Regional insecurity is a contributing factor in driving many pastoralists and their herds closer to towns, as this reduces the risk of violent attacks in the more remote areas where they traditionally grazed. The result of this movement is that cattle are now increasingly encroaching on agricultural fields, resulting in clashes over grazing and land access that have escalated into violence. While this movement is not entirely unprecedented, consultations with residents among both pastoralist and agriculturalist communities indicated that the degree and extent of encroachment has risen sharply as a result of insecurity.

Before, we had only heard talk of war, but we had never lived it. The Seleka were in our village and raped girls, even elderly women. But when we arrived as refugees, we lived the worst.

Coupled with the proliferation of small arms, and heightened tensions at the national level, this has led to intense altercations in which civilians belonging to both livelihood groups have been killed, livestock have been attacked or seized, and agricultural land has been burned. For poor populations of all livelihood groups who are extremely dependent on often precarious livelihoods, the consequences of this can be devastating. Pastoralists perceive their movement in traditional grazing areas to be severely restricted as a result of wider insecurity. Meanwhile, agricultural communities perceive their movement to be severely restricted in the areas around Kouango, including fields for planting: several communities spoke of herders “**occupying**” their fields, and the need for fields to be “**liberated**”.

Violent confrontations continue in the villages to the north and east of Kouango, and the town has continued to receive waves of displaced populations as a result of the surrounding unrest. These dynamics reveal that as patterns of conflict at the national level have transformed, they have interacted with and shaped local-level disputes. A community representative of livestock herders emphasised that the national crisis has aggravated disputes that rarely escalated to large-scale violence in the years before 2013. One key informant leading protection activities in the area maintained, “**The conflict has evolved since the crisis [...] As the conflict has evolved, it has intensified livelihood disputes locally. These are now the most significant protection threat to the population in Kouango**”.

In spite of these tensions, all communities share a desire for peace, and a return to free movement in the area. As levels of violence continue to climb once more in CAR, for communities rebuilding their lives, daily insecurity is a persistent and devastating threat. As men in Yangouasso reported, “**We do not have peace, how can we have hope? Without peace, there is no hope**”.

3.2 Bossembélé

Bossembélé is a town of approximately 21,000 inhabitants, which sits roughly 150 miles north-west of Bangui, on a major transit route to Cameroon. Nearby, are the villages of Yamien and Yérémon, connected by the main road to Bangui. Owing in part to its strategic position along this main transit route, the area was the site of heavy clashes during the peak of CAR’s crisis.

Before the crisis, the town was home to both Christians and Muslims, with members of the Muslim community playing a key role in local market and trade systems. During the crisis, inter-communal attacks between both groups took the form of a vicious cycle of reprisal killings and targeted violence aimed at punishing assumed supporters of different groups. In the course of this violence, many civilians were killed. As the area fell under control of first the former Seleka, and subsequently, the government, patterns of displacement shifted. Many Christians fled the town as Seleka took over, then returned as the Seleka forces retreated, and with them, many Muslim households. As in Kouango, the



A woman drinks water from one of four new water sources that Concern Worldwide rehabilitated around Dawili, which sits between the towns of Bokoum and Bossembélé in Ombella-M'Poko prefecture in southern Central African Republic.

The area is now relatively stable after conflict erupted in the Central African Republic in 2013 and the country descended into vicious violence. Humanitarian needs skyrocketed. Many of the families in Dawili were forced to flee their homes due to fighting in 2013 and live in the bush until they felt it was safe enough to return home.

Photographer: Crystal Wells, Concern Worldwide.

national-level division between Muslim and Christian groups has been in part fuelled by, and in turn, aggravated local-level disputes between largely Christian agriculturalists and predominantly Muslim pastoralists. Although security and calm have largely been restored in the area now under government control, the effects of the crisis are still pronounced.

Concern is responding to needs in Bossembélé through a multi-sectoral programme that integrates components of food security, livelihoods, water and sanitation, health and nutrition. Concern also implements an integrated programme supporting community-level institutions to reduce the impact of natural disasters, address gender-based violence, and improve community management of conflict.

3.2.1 The challenges of return

In contrast to displacement into camps, camp-like settings, or even to host communities, inhabitants of the area predominantly sought refuge in the region's forests. There, like thousands of people still displaced in the Central African wilderness, they found no infrastructure, and had no access to emergency food and non-food assistance, health or education services or clean water. Countless stories of survival illustrate the devastating impact of this flight: many described the plight of pregnant women or new mothers, some fleeing with children as young as one week old, as they struggled to survive and protect their children. Without clean water, shelter or health services, young children were particularly vulnerable to disease: in Yérémon, a community of approximately 450 people, residents reported that at least 10 infants and young children died over several months of displacement.

Communities also had very few strategies for social support during displacement, due in part to its isolated nature. Conflict-induced displacement is unique in this way, as the experience or threat of violence itself can profoundly damage social networks, trust and cohesion in a community. Moreover, displacement to forests appears to have been particularly isolating. Residents reported having to **“fend for themselves”** during displacement, and even later on return, there were relatively few social networks for mutual support and solidarity among the community members. As one older woman described, **“The only help we could offer each other was advice; and our prayers to God”**.

Predominantly Christian households began to slowly return to their homes in Bossembélé and the surrounding areas after the Seleka forces left in 2014. However, even then, many in the town reported that friends and neighbours remained away out of fear. As one woman stated, **“only the brave came back”**. Communities returned to face the total destruction of their homes, possessions, reserves of seeds and agricultural tools. Many people reported returning to burned out and pillaged homes, with all their belongings destroyed. Antoine* is a 47-year-old farmer, who was displaced with his family of 15 for several months in the wilderness. He reflected on his circumstances, three years after his return: **“We are like refugees: we had to reconstruct everything from zero”**.

Communities whose assets were destroyed began to undertake the enormous task of rebuilding their lives, but in doing so, often faced precarious economic futures, forcing them into different – and potentially unsustainable – lines of work. A chief in Yamien described how the community had never engaged in charcoal-making before the crisis, but were forced to take up the practice after returning due to the lack of alternative livelihood options. The devastation of so many livelihoods also disrupted systems of mutual aid in the community. Local associations, self-help organisations and community initiatives all suffered as a result of members' displacement, their inability to contribute on return, and the more profound erosion of collective action and solidarity systems in traumatised communities: **“It was difficult to help one another [on return], because we were all victims. We had all fled”**.

The costs of displacement were also profound on the individual level. On return, many people faced the challenge of living with the long-term consequences of exposure to violence and sudden flight: women attributed current ill health among many of the town's inhabitants to their period of displacement without any assistance. In Yérémon, women described the high number of deaths due to illness among men who returned, leaving a large number of widows facing uncertain futures. The psychological impact of displacement is also pronounced: the trauma continues to affect members of the community. One young woman described how on return, the women had **“lost the peace in our hearts”** – an expression of the unease and anxiety in which they live after their traumatic experience.

Sadly, for many people, the most recent crisis is not their first experience of displacement. Many communities have lived through multiple waves of conflict and instability, reflecting the cyclical nature of conflict and the risk of countries being caught in a conflict trap. Many of the area's residents were previously displaced in 2003, when Congolese armed groups passed through the area. Residents reported that this previous episode of displacement had, however, been shorter lived. The previous crisis was also less destructive than the most recent unrest. In the crisis of 2003, armed groups kidnapped a smaller number of people to serve as porters for the forces as they passed through, typically releasing them after a number of days. By contrast, as one man in Yamien reflected on the most recent unrest, **“if they [Seleka] took people from the village, their family should prepare the burial place”**.

These repeated waves of conflict and displacement have made some community members more risk-averse, and shortened their planning horizon. Women in Bossembélé reported being reluctant to reinvest in their homes and belongings out of fear that they would lose all of their possessions in future violence. Some reported being afraid that owning items such as furniture made them a target to armed groups in the first instance, and therefore increased their vulnerability to violence. Concern also received reports of households in the area planting smaller plots of land than before the crisis because of fear and uncertainty. Households weigh the risk of planting larger plots and losing their investment, against planting smaller plots, allowing them to eat some remaining seeds, but leaving them without enough food for the year. These practices may be strategic efforts to manage risk, but carry serious implications for food security, as well as community reconstruction, resilience and long-term development.

3.2.2 Reintegration, reconciliation and rebuilding lives

The wider societal consequences of the conflict are also devastating, and potentially irreversible. In Bossembélé, the majority of those who initially fled were Christians. Some Muslims chose to stay, and be relatively more protected, under the control of the Muslim-dominated Seleka group which briefly controlled the area. After Anti-Balaka militias ousted former Seleka forces and gained control of the area, the pattern of displacement reversed: almost all Muslim residents fled, while Christian households began to return under conditions they saw as more secure. Today, very few – if any – Muslims remain in the town, and relations between the two communities are deeply fractured.

Christian communities spoke repeatedly of the **“perfect life”** and **“total harmony”** they enjoyed with Muslim counterparts in the years before the crisis. Even accepting that this idealised narrative obscures structural divisions within Central African society that pre-date 2013, the evidence of inter-community exchanges and mixed neighbourhoods before the crisis indicates considerable inter-dependence and cohabitation. The conflict profoundly damaged this social fabric.

After returning from displacement, Christian community members spoke repeatedly of the “other,” “second” or “foreign” community (referring to Muslims), rarely using the term ‘Muslim’ directly. By contrast, they referred to themselves as “natives” and “autochthones”;⁷⁰ reproducing a narrative of indigeneity that is often constructed in confrontations between pastoralist and agricultural livelihoods.⁷¹ This process of ‘othering’ reflects a heightened sense of differentiation and hardened lines of division between the two communities, and affects prospects for return among Muslim populations. The largely Christian inhabitants of the area maintained that Muslims have been unable to return due to the extreme violence that took place in the area, which they attribute to the Seleka, in collaboration with local Muslim populations.

This reflects the long-lasting and potentially permanent social and demographic consequences of violent conflict fought along religious lines. In some places, mass displacement has resulted in a total demographic shift. One key informant reported that while in some areas of CAR, peaceful inter-religious co-existence was possible after displaced populations began to return, it was not feasible in a context such as Bossembélé. There, he reported that the previously diverse town was now entirely homogenous, with no members of the Muslim population living openly among the inhabitants. He felt that fighting in the town had been so intense as to deeply – and he feared, permanently – divide the two communities, with members of the Muslim minority possibly never returning.

They killed without distinction. That is an unforgettable act in the memory of the community.

The community in Yamien appeared to confirm this, as they described the indelible mark the violence had left on their community: **“They killed without distinction. That is an unforgettable act in the memory of the community”**. The resulting trauma and fear of future violence in the case of return, have contributed to a profound shift in the settlement and social integration of Muslims and Christians across the country. Today, isolated enclaves and areas of greater integration create a patchwork of social relations across the country. Beyond the immediate cost of population movement, this has implications for long-term reconciliation and peace.

While Christian groups and individuals interviewed were largely opposed to the return of Muslim community members, there were some notable exceptions. Some community members spoke of their desire for Muslim community members to return in terms of the opportunities for commerce and exchange between them. Antoine described the negative impact the absence of pastoralists has on local trade. Similarly, Louise,* a grandmother from the same village, was part of a group who described the community’s openness to agree a **“pardon”** or **“forgiveness”** to some of the Muslim community members who fled since the fall of the Seleka regime. Critically, the community’s openness was dependent on whether or not Muslim individuals had participated directly in violence during the crisis.

These initial indications of openness towards reconciliation may seem small, but in the context of the enormous violence and trauma experienced in these communities, their significance – and the opportunities they present to support locally-led processes for rebuilding peace – should not be understated. Concern’s multi-sectoral programming in the Bossembélé area seeks to identify and consolidate these opportunities for healing and reconciliation, by supporting communities to reduce sexual- and gender-based violence, build environmental resilience, and ultimately, promote peace and more effectively manage conflict.

4

Conclusions and Recommendations

The accounts above demonstrate the profound needs and challenges confronting communities affected by conflict and displacement in its many forms – from initial flight, to the experience of displacement, and returning to rebuild lives. However, they also attest to the strength, resilience and hopes of communities who have survived extreme violence, continue to navigate uncertainty and insecurity, and are committed above all else to rebuilding peace.

Ultimately, it is important to bear in mind that even those who have been forcibly displaced are not only victims of violence, but active agents in rebuilding their lives. A better understanding of people's survival strategies and the means by which they seek to (re)build livelihoods in the midst of insecurity is a vital step in developing informed, effective, accountable and empowering humanitarian and development responses.

To achieve this, we make several recommendations:

1. Humanitarian actors should implement and support more local-level conflict prevention, management and resolution initiatives in conflict-affected contexts.

The capacity of civilian populations to overcome the challenges of displacement and return is severely undermined by ongoing insecurity. While violent conflict has important global, regional and national-level drivers, evidence from CAR illustrates the complex interaction between national and local-level conflicts. As conflict dynamics at the national level have evolved, these have aggravated and intensified local-level disputes. Even as the frontlines of national conflict appear to have stabilised somewhat in recent months, local-level disputes over livestock grazing, access to land, and the conditions of reintegration, reconciliation and return, continue to escalate into open violence with tragic consequences. This dynamic clearly demonstrates the importance of building communities' capacities to manage, mitigate, de-escalate and ultimately prevent violent conflict at the local level. Strengthening community relationships to rebuild and reinforce trust, positive exchanges and mutual respect, while supporting and working with local-level, legitimate and representative structures for conflict management is vital to re-establishing stability. It is also an important investment in preventing further violence, and subsequent cycles of displacement.

In CAR, as in many conflict-affected contexts, pre-existing systems have been disrupted and undermined by the crisis, but can be rebuilt and reinforced through greater engagement with civil society and community actors. Wherever possible, conflict management efforts should strive to create vertical linkages to relevant local, regional and national authorities and initiatives; and horizontal linkages to efforts in other localities. This can maximise impact at scale, while supporting the critical work of community-level peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery. These efforts are important in communities from which people have fled, to begin to lay the groundwork for safe, voluntary and sustainable return should displaced people wish to go back. Initiatives are also vital for already vulnerable host communities,

as they often take on additional burdens. In light of the deep divisions within CAR, and fears that some displacement will be irreversible, ensuring strong, positive relationships and durable systems for conflict management between host and displaced communities is vital.

Conventionally, peacebuilding and conflict management programming has not been a priority in emergency contexts, as conditions have often been considered too volatile or dynamic to facilitate longer-term community engagement. However, needs should dictate the response: the devastating consequences in terms of physical security, livelihoods, reconciliation, trauma healing and longer-term wellbeing necessitate interventions geared at rebuilding relations and more effectively managing conflict in these deeply divided societies, if a vicious cycle of conflict is to be broken.

2. Humanitarian actors should implement programmes that are highly attuned to the gendered impacts and intersecting vulnerabilities of conflict and displacement.

The dynamics of conflict and the impacts of displacement are fundamentally gendered. Women experience persistent, widespread, targeted sexual and gender-based violence in the course of the conflict, as well as during flight, displacement and return. Sexual violence, exploitation, and transactional exchanges of food and other basic necessities for sex were all widely reported among women displaced to DRC. Responsibility for finding food, accessing clean water and taking care of the household typically falls on women, in ways that expose them to significant risk of physical, sexual and psychological harm. On return, women are confronted with challenges of rebuilding their lives in conditions of ongoing insecurity and uncertainty, conditioned by social roles and their status as mothers, widows, property owners or survivors of violence.

As gender dynamics are relational, the burdens borne by women are further compounded by the fact that men's movement and circulation is often extremely circumscribed. Men reported pronounced feelings of hopelessness in the face of widespread violence beyond their control, and deep-seated shame and helplessness in the face of their own perceived failure to provide for and protect their families. Men and boys have also undoubtedly been severely victimised in targeted, physical and sometimes sexual violence. Intersecting vulnerabilities also shaped the experience of people with disabilities of initial violence and subsequent displacement. Although many people with disabilities can and do become self-reliant actors, displacement can compound existing inequalities and vulnerabilities among those who already face barriers to economic and social integration, and therefore require more direct and intensive support.

Prioritising an analysis of intersecting vulnerabilities in any needs assessment, and integrating measures to address the needs of the most vulnerable is a crucial first step in any response. Addressing the differential and gendered consequences of conflict and of displacement is vital. To support this, all agencies should implement the Call to Action on Protection from GBV in Emergencies and its roadmap.⁷²

The accounts shared demonstrate the multifaceted ways in which households and communities struggle to rebuild their lives after displacement.

3. Humanitarian actors should implement integrated programmes to support populations seeking to rebuild their lives and reintegrate during and after displacement; and to facilitate safe and voluntary return for those wishing to do so.

The accounts shared demonstrate the multifaceted ways in which households and communities struggle to rebuild their lives after displacement. For those who have returned, rebuilding lives and livelihoods, accessing basic services and reintegrating into communities, including recovering from the trauma of violence, are enormously challenging. These tasks are further complicated by ongoing insecurity that limits the coping strategies and livelihood activities individuals can undertake.

As the cases of CAR, Syria and Bangladesh demonstrate, many people in fragile contexts have experienced multiple waves of displacement, or been displaced multiple times in an ongoing search for safety. This greatly undermines household and individual resilience and coping strategies, and negatively affects future planning and investment. For those facing uncertain futures on their return, re-establishing stability and creating reliable conditions for investment in households' futures is a necessity for peace and development. For those people who have not yet returned, perhaps because of ongoing insecurity or deep-seated divisions within the community in the wake of violence, enabling safe and voluntary return is an immediate priority.

This requires targeted engagement with authorities at all levels to create enabling conditions through policies on reclaiming property and rebuilding livelihoods. However, efforts must also go beyond supporting the economic conditions for integration alone. Humanitarian actors must engage sensitively with communities to prepare for return, support the rebuilding of community relationships, and strengthen inclusive institutions for managing conflict to begin to address the legacy of past violence.

4. Donors and national governments should provide sufficient, flexible funding and policy frameworks for multi-year, integrated responses to address the multi-faceted challenges facing displaced, host and returning communities.

Humanitarian responses that meet these mounting needs depend on the political will to close funding gaps and address the complex consequences of conflict. In CAR, only 35 per cent of almost \$500 million required to address humanitarian crisis was provided in 2017.⁷³ Not only is this funding inadequate, but unpredictable and short-term funding means humanitarian agencies cannot work effectively to address profound challenges that require long-term engagement.

Crucially, the feasibility programming interventions discussed above, including peacebuilding and investment in supporting reconciliation and healing, is dependent on donors' continued engagement and support to areas that may no longer be in acute crisis, but are nevertheless entering a critical recovery stage. This stage presents a unique window of opportunity to consolidate peace and development gains. Failing to capitalise on this opportunity to reinforce peace dividends at the local level increases the risk that conflict-affected communities, struggling to recover, will become trapped in a cycle of recurring conflict and suffering.

Moreover, today, both conflicts and associated displacement crises are becoming more protracted. Recurring cycles of violence condemn some communities to never being able to return. This requires donors and national governments to confront the realities of supporting, hosting and integrating the long-term displaced in a way that empowers them and their host communities to live safe, stable and secure lives. Forward planning from the early stages of a displacement crisis is vital to provide funding and develop sustainable policies for shelter, education, health, and livelihoods that facilitate integration, independence and empowerment.

5. All parties to conflict must abide by, and continue to advocate for compliance with, international humanitarian law and the protection of humanitarian access and principles.

The accounts in this report reveal the extreme levels of deliberate, targeted violence against civilians, including sexual and gender-based violence, taking place in CAR.

The accounts in this report reveal the extreme levels of deliberate, targeted violence against civilians, including sexual and gender-based violence, taking place in CAR. These accounts are supported by independent monitoring of conflict dynamics and targeted violence in the country. Between 2013 and 2017, almost 50 per cent of conflict-related reported fatalities recorded in CAR have been attributed to anti-civilian violence.⁷⁴ This clearly demonstrates the urgent need for all governance actors to monitor violations and hold perpetrators to account.

Insecurity is also one of the chief constraints for humanitarian access, with aid agencies either indirectly affected or specifically targeted in ongoing violence. As a result, numerous agencies have been obliged to withdraw or temporarily suspend much-needed and life-saving activities in the areas where they are most needed,⁷⁵ compounding the suffering of conflict-affected and hard-to-reach populations.

In many conflict-affected contexts, information-sharing and coordination within the humanitarian sector can be undermined by insecurity, shrinking humanitarian space, and fear of reprisals against humanitarian actors. Nevertheless, the humanitarian community must strengthen efforts to speak with one voice in denouncing attacks on civilians and on humanitarian organisations. Donors must go further in promoting respect for humanitarian space, and supporting efforts for enhanced coordination and collective action among humanitarian actors in defence of humanitarian principles.

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