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Slaves, virgin concubines, eunuchs, gun-boys, community defenders, child soldiers: The historical enlistment and use of children by armed groups in the Central African Republic

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Table of abbreviations

AEF	Afrique Équatoriale française (French Equatorial Africa)
AFP	Agence France Press
APRD	Armée Populaire pour la Restauration de la Démocratie (Popular Army for the Restoration of Democracy)
AU	African Union
CAAFAG	Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups
CAR	Central African Republic
CFA	Communauté financière africaine
CNC	Corbeau News Centrafrique
CPJP	Convention des Patriotes pour la Justice et la Paix (Patriotic Convention for Justice and Peace)
CPSK	Convention Patriotique du Salut du Kodro (Kodro Patriotic Salvation Convention)
DDR	Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
EBA	Élements Blindés Autonomes (Autonomous Armoured Elements)
FACA	Central African Armed Forces
FDS	Defence and Security Forces
FIDH	Fédération Internationale pour les Droits Humains (International Federation for Human Rights)
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICC	International Criminal Court
MLPC	Mouvement de Libération du Peuple Centrafricaine
MPC	Mouvement Patriotique pour la Centrafrique (Patriotic Movement for the Central African Republic)
RJ	Révolution Justice (Justice Revolution)
UFDR	Union des Forces Démocratique pour le Rassemblement (Union of Democratic Forces for Unity)

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In this report we elaborate on the historical dimensions of young people's enrolment and use in armed groups or armed forces in the Central African Republic (CAR). While this phenomenon, also understood as the enlistment and use of child soldiers, is often seen as a recent phenomenon, the report aims to show that children and adolescents have historically been involved in self-defence groups or were forcefully recruited in what is currently the territory of CAR. In the past, they were not called child soldiers; they may not even have always been seen as children due to different cultural definitions of childhood. However, the phenomenon is not new as will be shown in this report.

Much has been written about CAR's violent history and armed groups, especially about those that have sprung up since the 1980s: their nature and origins, splits and alliances, political and ethnic bases (see for example Chauvin 2009; Lombard 2012, 2016a,b ; Chauvin & Seignobos 2013/2014; ICG 2015; Dukhan 2017). However, none of these publications has systematically investigated the recruitment, participation, and role of children and youth in the midst of these various armed groups over time. The present report is an attempt to bring existing sources together to extract what we know about the continuities and ruptures in the recruitment of children and youngsters and to identify where gaps in our knowledge still remain.

Several things are clear: the specific context of CAR, marked as it is by quasi-permanent insecurity caused by armed actors—varying, for example, from slave-raiders, to colonial auxiliaries, security guards connected to concessionary companies, and road-cutters—made and makes the people of CAR liable to displacement, disease, and violent death, and it has forced and continues to force them often to employ specific tactics to defend themselves and their communities. Children and youth, like adults, were and are often exposed to insecure surroundings, food shortages, poverty, disease, and an extreme lack of state services, including a lack of army protection (see Chapter 4). In fact, such surroundings have an influence of the conceptions of childhood, youth—if existent—adulthood, and old age.

In a context of chronic crisis or duress, it is often impossible for parents to guarantee protection to their own children. Sometimes children are called upon to protect younger children and elders in the community. Especially boys and young men are often socialised and potentially mobilised to contribute to the safety of communities, and they are frequently trained at a young age to be able to do so. Girls are especially vulnerable to heavy duties and sexual exploitation when growing up in dire poverty and generalised insecurity.

Conventional ideas about children and childhood that inform accepted principles of human rights, or the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989), are far from the realities of life in this context—where, to name just a few, the right to education, the right to registration at birth, and even the right to basic protection are difficult to realise (see for example Ellison & Kassai 2017;[1] Hopman et al. 2017).

Given the harsh realities in which children and adults in CAR live, it becomes easier to understand why, at times, children can appear to be better off joining an armed group. It may provide them protection, or at least makes their parents believe it does; it may offer the promise of being looked after, of earning some money working at a roadblock; or it may offer the only chance to survival at times of high-intensity fighting. Hence, such enrolment practices become almost normal. At the same time, it is difficult to consider this to be a free choice, and the organisers behind these armed groups are often exploitive of the already marginal position of these children. Group leaders or their direct subordinates may also engage in forced forms of child recruitment especially to boost the size and threat of their group.

The present report examines the nature of recruitment in CAR from historical times to the present to enable us to understand continuities and discontinuities surrounding this phenomenon against a background of recurrent conflict and insecurity.

[1] On the website of the publisher of the book by Ellison and Kassai on childhood in CAR (2017), it is stated: 'Even before the beginning of the crisis, this former French colony was considered the worst country in the world to be a child' (https://www.la-boite-a-bulles.com/book/351 — last accessed 10 October 2019).

1.2 Methodology and limitations

This report is intended to provide an overview of historical continuities and discontinuities with regard to the involvement of young people under 15 and 18 in armed groups / resistance movements or in forms of forced recruitment in CAR. The analysis begins at the end of the 19th century, for lack of accessible written sources on the earlier periods.

The report is based on a review of secondary literature about the history of CAR and NGO and UN reports published over the last 15 years. It also relies partly on interview data collected by the authors and the larger research team in CAR between 2016 and 2019 among a variety of actors who are currently no longer members of armed groups—including young former recruits of the Armée Populaire pour la Restauration de la Démocratie (APRD), Révolution Justice (RJ), Anti-balaka, and Seleka groups—and some (active and pensioned) members of the Central African Armed Forces (FACA).

In the brief time provided for compiling this report, it was unfortunately impossible to conduct historical archival research (primary sources) or exhaustive reading of the wide range of historical sources. We therefore we do not claim to present a complete picture, but nevertheless the report will clearly show the recurring patterns of the phenomenon of child enrolment in armed groups in CAR.

One of the major limitations to research in this area is the frequent lack of exact references to age in historical as well as in more contemporary sources. As a consequence, we carefully analyse in more depth in each chapter the implications of the information gathered, in order to gauge what we can conclude on ages of recruitment, while we also describe the larger phenomenon, including the motivations and forces that made and continue to make young people join armed groups.

Chapter 2. Pre-colonial slave-raiding

2.1 Introduction

This chapter takes us to a specific region of CAR, the north-eastern part of the country, a region with its own particular history of fighting, displacement, and involvement of children. The focus is selective: while slave-raiding also took place in the north-western parts of CAR, we focus here on one particular region in more depth, to highlight how the phenomenon of slave-raiding, originating from the north in this historical period, impacted the lives of children and youngsters.

The very particular history of the north-eastern region in present-day CAR led to a specific range of categories of armed actors that emerged in chronological order from the late 19th century onwards: slave-raiding armies (also raiding ivory and food), kidnapping merchants, different types of poachers, armed anti-poaching guards, self-defence groups, road-cutters (*zaraguinas*),[2] and later more conventionalised armed groups. Selected information gathered below points to the raiding and engagement of children and adolescents in various forms—for example, as 'gun-boys', virgin concubines, or highly valued eunuchs already—in these first mentioned groups of armed actors. The following description of this region's history convincingly shows that insecurity has been a recurrent experience that often led to forced displacement or incorporation in specific armed groups. This phenomenon has affected children as well as their parents.

2.2 Pre-colonial times, slave-raiding

> North-eastern CAR was the last frontier that Muslim traders and raiders from the north reached before European colonialism disrupted and arrested southward expansion. During the first half of the nineteenth century, increased centralization and routinization of rule in the powerful Muslim empires to the north (such as Khartoum, Wadai, and Dar Fur) enabled the expansion of slave-raiding and trading into Equatorial Africa. Dar Fur's leaders sought to control long-distance trade with the Mediterranean basin. To make progress toward this

[2] See Chapter 5 for more explanation on the *zaraguinas*.

> goal they needed to create standing armies of bazingirs (slave-warriors) instead of relying on intermittent access to spontaneous conscripts, as they had done before. This need resulted in an increased need for slaves, and the raiding frontier shifted with the expansion of Islam. (Lombard 2012: 83)

Raiding was considered an integral part of the practice of the 'northerners' who entered the north-eastern part of present-day CAR from Dar Runga to the north (currently located in Chad), establishing Dar al Kuti as their stronghold, with as the first leader a man called Kobur (settling around 1860–1870 in the area). Over time, N'Dele became the capital, and the wide and rocky plateau was chosen by Kobur's nephew Muhammed al-Sanusi to enhance protection soon after he succeeded him as Dar al Kuti's leader in the early 1890s. Increasingly, slave-raiding activities spread southwards, together with the Islamic frontier (Lombard 2012: 84). The Banda people were heavily raided by Sanusi, as were the Aja, Buma, Kresh, and Yulu (Santandrea 1957: 153). To give an impression of what the raiding entailed in terms of human loss, the following quotation is telling:

> Capt. Julien, in 1901, estimated at some 30,000 the people enslaved by Sanusi and at as many again those who had either been killed or had died on their way to slavery. In a single expedition against the Tambaggo (doubtless to be identified with the Tanbagu) about 2,000 were made prisoners, half of them dying en route to Ndele. (ibid.)

Many people sought refuge to avoid the raiding—for example, in what is presently Bahr-el Ghazal in Sudan (Santandrea 1957; Cordell 1979).

What happened to children in villages that were raided by the bazingirs is not clearly described; however, Lombard seems to suggest that all villagers were taken captive, except those that fled in time before the raids and could run fast enough (Lombard 2012: 86–87). Cordell (1979: 390–391) provides more details about the fate of captured young men and women: young men were integrated into the armed forces, and young women were incorporated into the general population as wives and concubines for Muslim raiders. Conversion to Islam was at stake for both. In his earlier work (Cordell 1977), more specific information related to children and young people emerges. Here he describes that Sanusi

himself was entitled to choose, among the captives, the slaves he wished to keep. Among the slaves made by the bazingirs:

> Generally one-third to one-half of the prisoners went to the sultan, while the other half remained property of their captors […] the ruler usually had the first choice of prisoners [...] The right to first choice meant that al-Sanusi acquired the best of the prisoners. And even if he did not exercise his privilege to take the most desirable of the captives, he often ended up with them anyway, since it was common practice to curry favour by giving the sovereign the most able-bodied young men and the prettiest of the young women. (p. 300)

> Most desirable slaves were kept by the sultan. (p. 301)

> He retained as many of the young men and women as possible, even though he could not keep all of them since they were the greatest in demand. (p. 301–302)

There was strong evidence for a preference for 'young' slaves, both male and female:

> From the viewpoint of the buyers, older slaves were the least desirable captives. They did not easily withstand the long trip to North Africa or the Middle East, and they were not as malleable as young girls and boys who could be readily converted to Islam and incorporated into harems, households, and military forces. (p. 305)

> Young prisoners brought better prices than older ones. Probably because they could bear children, young women were worth more than young men, and if they were pretty and virginal, they brought an even better price. (p. 303)

It is not difficult to imagine, therefore, the fate of young girls. But another category of young people gained some interest over time:

> Boy eunuchs commanded the best prices of all, but they were rare, at least during al-Sanusi's first few years in Ndele. (p. 303–304)

> As for eunuchs, they were probably not available in Ndele in 1901–2. […] A few years later, however, the sultan did begin to produce eunuchs for sale. Trade in boy eunuchs was quite lucrative despite the high mortality rate. Survivors fetched two-and-a-half or even three times the price of a young male Sudasi captive. (p. 305)

The age categories concerned become clearer when discussing categories of slaves (according to age and sex) and their various prices, which are cited in detail by Cordell (p. 307): the youngest category specified are girls from 6–8 years onward, followed by a category of young women from 15 years. There is no doubt, therefore, that children and adolescents, in addition to young men and women, were key targets of the slave economy at the time.

Not only slave-raiding armies were active in the area and a menace for all the population; young children were apparently also threatened by the slave traders (called Jallaba). The traders would normally buy or receive slaves in return for other products through Sanusi or the slave-raiders and thus obtain slaves indirectly. Often these were older slaves (p. 302).

> […] apart from whatever captives they could get from al-Sanusi, slave traders in Ndele also kidnapped people on rare occasions. The victims were usually children unfortunate enough to be in the fields or in the outskirts of town after nightfall whom the kidnappers spirited away inside large woven sacks. A Banda informant who lived in the sultan's compound as a boy recalls that when he and his companions went out in the evening to collect firewood for the nightly Qur'anic school, they were always cautioned to be on the lookout for Jallaba kidnappers. They particularly avoided the nearby Jallaba quarter. To be sure, the sultan opposed kidnapping and severely punished any trader caught taking children. He did not want Muslim children taken into slavery and obviously preferred to sell his own captives to the merchant. (p. 303)

Other studies on slave-raiding and *zarã'iba*[3] in neighbouring Sudan identify special roles for young boys in the camps. Based on the suggested strong link between the 'Nilotic Sudanese commercial/military system and the structure of Sanusi's capital N'Dele' (Johnson 1992: 171), we can assume that the role described in the following for young boys in the *zarã'iba* in Sudan was similar to that in Sanusi's settlement:

> Slaves were recruited into the companies' armies from a variety of sources. The most regular (though not the most numerous) source where the 'gun-boys'. These were slave boys, starting at the *ages of about seven or ten*, who attended individual soldiers as their gun-bearers. Every Nubian soldier had at least one, some had two or more, and many slave-soldiers themselves had a gun-boy. Their service to the soldiers was part of their training, and when they got older they became soldiers themselves. (Johnson 1992: 168, emphasis ours)

2.3 Conclusion: Children in Sanusi's Dar-al Kuti

The above sources that describe the slave-raiding economy around Ndele and in the wider region show that children, adolescents, and young adults were favoured targets of enslavement. Kidnapping also took place—though people were abducted not for ransom, as in later days by the road-cutters, but rather to be kept or sold as slaves. Specific characteristics explain the interest in the young: physical strength (for carrying guns, general recruitment into the army, walking and surviving long distances as slaves to be sold further away), attractiveness, youthfulness, the ability to reproduce (for women), trustworthiness (eunuchs), and ability to adapt (convert to Islam and a new lifestyle, in the army or workplace)—all these characteristics made young people the favourite targets. The sources used in this chapter are among the rare historical sources on what is present-day CAR in which very specific reference is made to children and young people, explicitly providing their ages and their value in the slave economy; more importantly, however, we also obtain

[3] *Zarã'ib* are 'armed camps in the southern Sudan during the nineteenth century' (Johnson 1992: 163). Initiated as military/trading outposts, they expanded in size as they recruited an ever-expanding number of slaves, some of whom (those who were not sold and moved on) settled in for work as labourers, concubines, etc.

a glimpse of their fate and some of the acts of recruitment (and underlying intentions) that have more recently returned to the region in one form or another.

Chapter 3. The Kongo-Wara rebellion (1928–1931)

3.1 Introduction

We now move to a later period and another part of the country. In this chapter, a colonial resistance movement among the Gbaya and neighbouring peoples from western CAR are the central themes touched upon to emphasise the long roots of insecurity and hardship experienced by people in CAR and the related forms of mobilisation of communities. With a further focus on Gbaya initiation rites, we show at what age Gbaya boys are considered to be adults, thereby explaining the cultural connection between youth, or early manhood, and community defence. This chapter is a prelude to later chapters that describe other forms of child recruitment and normalised practices of (community) defence that engage children.

The Kongo-Wara movement is inscribed in people's memory as a popular resistance movement countering colonialism's generalised brutality, including its increasingly high demand for forced labour (with the attendant implications for local food security) and the levying of head taxes.

There is no doubt that the early colonial system was characterised by terror and atrocities as its structural features (Van Walraven 2019: 6):

> Men who did not deliver on (ever more) rubber or portage were shot, while women were raped or taken hostage together with children to force the men to come forward. […] During the early years of the new century concessions personnel (17 Europeans with some 200 African auxiliaries) committed 1,000 to 1,500 in the Mpoko concession alone (north and south-west of Bangui). Porters were worked to death. Thus even if, at the time, colonial forces were very thinly spread on the ground, the havoc they caused made the impact of the European presence profound. (ibid. 6–7)

The brutalities of the system affected many adults and children alike: 'That the Lobaye was, between 1900 and 1920, in the grip of anomie is best illustrated by the increasing number of orphans roaming the forest.' (ibid. 8) Van Walraven shows how the childhood of

Bathélémy Boganda (the Central African Republic's first Prime Minister) was exemplary in this sense; marked by death loosing 3 caretakers at a young age to the extreme violence of 'the system' (including his biological parents) and an uncle (who was the father of Jean-Bédel Bokassa) surviving smallpox (ibid).

The Kongo-Wara rebellion became a popular resistance movement against these forms of terror. The Kongo-Ware rebellion was a memory called upon by Bozizé in 2012 when the Seleka were threatening to march on Bangui, which they finally and successfully did in December 2012. It proved to be a powerful image, as this report will attest to also in a later chapter (Chapter 6). We will also show throughout the report that it was not only the image of a colonial resistance movement that led young people, and adults, to mobilise and establish roadblocks and surveillance in Bangui and form the Anti-balaka. The promise of weapons, the promise of a potential future army career, and the contribution of a popular singer, as well as the very real and tangible threat from people framed as outsiders, and a little later the traumatic experiences of people in CAR—all these factors contributed to the popular engagement in the defence that Bozizé called upon. In fact, what helped mobilise against the Seleka was that from a Bangui perspective they were understood as a foreign, invading force, just as the slave-raiding forces of Sanusi more than a century before were framed, and again the colonial invasion against which the Kongo-Wara movement had delivered some successful blows.

Studying some aspects of the Kongo-Wara movement (and Sanusi's raiding; see previous chapter) helps us understand the roots of self-defence, resistance movements, and the culturally expected engagement of young people therein as one of the explanations for the current forms of engagement in armed groups by youngsters. At the same time, describing these movements and the harsh conditions under which they were formed or which they created for the people in their surroundings shows how much insecurity and crisis must have influenced both actual praxis and the habitus of people in this country (see also Both 2017). We should think of certain forms of action and repertoires of defence as routinised and normalised in these contexts (see for example Vigh 2006, 2008; De Bruijn & Both 2018).

3.2 The Kongo-Wara rebellion

The colonisation that followed the slave-raiding period was extremely violent against the populations of the territory that constituted French Equatorial Africa (AEF): forced labour, head taxes, portering, forced soldiering, etc.

> The hardship imposed by private profit-seeking, endowed with state authority was added on to the 'ordinary' colonial practices such as forced labour and the impressment of unpaid porters. The colonial archives are replete with documents attesting to the difficulty of levying 3,000 bearers every month to transport loads from the Congo-Brazzaville river-front, or Cameroon to Chad, where French troops depended on a steady provision of supplies. For lack of genuine volunteers, the authorities resorted to increasingly coercive methods. On 16 October 1901, a colonial circular ordered the construction of hostage camps, which were to be hidden in the forest lest travellers would see them (International Crisis Group, 2007: 3). A whole range of sanctions was inflicted on chiefs incapable of supplying the required numbers of porters: they were arrested or flogged with a strop made of hippopotamus rawhide, the *chicotte*; the women and children of their villages were taken prisoners and kept until the bearers[4] returned. Finally, if this blackmail failed, punitive expeditions were organized against recalcitrant villages, which were burned down and their inhabitants killed as an example (Faes and Smith 2000, p. 284). (Lombard and Carayannis 2015: 23)

These acts exasperated the population and were at the origin of the Kongo-Wara revolt, which stretched well beyond the current borders of CAR (Cameroon, Congo, and Chad today). The Kongo-Wara rebellion, or 'the War of the Hoe Handle', erupted in the west of the country 'in Gbaya territory' between 1928 and 1930, under the impetus of a charismatic leader called Karnou, his real name being Barka Ngaïnombey (Nzabakomada-Yakoma 1986: 44). The spread of the movement was vast and had been evolving for three years before the colonial administration started to take note of it—after some herdsmen had been attacked and reported it (ibid. 48–51).

There are researchers who strongly doubt that Kongo-Wara, presented by the colonial administration as a dangerous and widespread movement, was well organised with a central

[4] Who had fled to avoid recruitment

hierarchy under Karnou (O'Toole 1984: 342); rather, they understand the movement as having been decentralised, more fragmented and dispersed than often depicted, but definitely born of a shared cause in different neighbouring peoples: the extreme exploitation which the populations of the region suffered.

At the beginning of this rebellion, the signs of discontent were directed in the first place against the Mbororo populations, whose second phase of penetration into the High Sangha, begun since 1923, had begun to take on greater proportions. They were accused of colluding with the administration in order to dispossess the Gbaya of their land, while the colonial administration often took it up for use by the Peul, Fulbe, and Mbororo (Nzabakomada-Yakoma 1986: 51). Others identified as adversaries were Gbaya, Pana, and Mboum chiefs who collaborated with the colonial administration (ibid. 50).

Early successes in battling their adversaries gave courage to the movement and reinforced the message of Karnou that the power of the white man would be reversed one day. Karnou and his people were able to chase away a European *chef* and his guards (ibid. 55). The willingness of the people to confront the occupiers and their aides became clearer and clearer, and the occupiers later reported a deterioration of the atmosphere: 'populations no longer greeted them, not even the children who were accustomed to gather during the passage of the commander and his escort: the people were armed with arrows, spears, shields' (ibid. 56). Mobilisation was collective; it involved thorough preparations by the whole community in assuring food was stored in places of refuge (in the bush, forests, and caves) before ceremonial preparations took place. 'Children, women and elderly people participated in ritual dances and encouraged the warriors' (ibid. 56). There are reports of traders plundered by children, women and older people (ibid. 59). On one occasion a survivor of an attack testified he had identified ex-pupils of a missionary school participating in the attack.

The movement lasted from 1928 until 1930 and

> … it mobilised about 50,000 supporters against 1,000 infantry and regional guards, plus 3,000 auxiliaries, scouts and porters. In its final phase, when 10,000 implacable opponents

> were pursued into the caves to which they had retreated, the war resulted in thousands of deaths. (ICG 2007: 4, referring to Géraldine Faes & Stephen Smith (2000) *Bokassa 1er: Un empereur français*, 65)

With regard to the current report, an interesting element in the Kongo-Wara revolt is related to the specifically community character of the preparations for the war. Children, women and old men allegedly participated in the preparations that secured food for when warriors had to hide, they participated in rituals that encouraged the warriors, and they engaged in looting. This is therefore evidence that children participated to some extent and in various ways in this movement.

Questions also arise about who participated as warriors. The ages of the warriors (or of the people forcefully recruited for porterage, forced labour, or forced soldiering during WWI) are not specified by the authors who write on the Kongo-Wara rebellion; however, anthropological sources on the Gbaya (the ethnic group at the heart of this movement, before its wider spread) shows that childhood ended at a young age among some of the Gbaya. After an initiation, they were considered to be adults. Although the popular idea in CAR is that, in the past, women and children did not participate in war, it is necessary to understand at what age a child was no longer seen as such. This information is essential to estimate the ages of warriors in movements such as that of the Kongo-Wara. According to Pierre Vidal (1976), who studied Gbaya initiation rites for boys and girls, Gbaya boys during his research participated in an initiation called *labi* when they were between 12 and 17 years old (Songo (1993) refers to the ages of 12–15 years for entering initiation). During the initiation—which could last from a few months to a few years (Brunet and Vidal documentary of 1965), or up to three years according to Burnham (1983)—these young people lived in the bush. After their initiation, they were considered adults and were expected to take up adult responsibilities. This could very well mean that some adolescents aged from 15 (who had started initiation at 12) to 18 years joined as warriors in the Kongo-Wara-inspired resistance activities.

The practice of *labi* is reportedly rare today and has survived only in an adapted/shortened form, because the period of this initiation has been in conflict with participation in the

modern schooling system (Songo 1993). According to Burnham (1983: 34), the ceremony was adapted in length before being abandoned in most of CAR, but not in the more isolated areas. Later in this report (Chapter 5) we explain why initiation at this age was in some way perhaps preserved, albeit transformed, among the Gbaya and other people in the north-western region with regard to anti-*zaraguina*[5] formations. In anti-*zaraguina* village self-defence movements in the same region, boys were sometimes invited to participate and learn to contribute to village defence (with bow and arrow) at the age of 11, according to our sources—that is, at the same age as boys that participated in *labi*, or even younger.

3.3 Conclusions

Four aspects related to the Kongo-Wara rebellion(s) emerge that are of relevance to the present report's questioning of continuities and changes with regard to child recruitment and participation in armed groups. Points 2 and 3 below, in particular, relate to the engagement of young people.

1. A first aspect relates to the rejection of 'foreigners' (here the Mbororo, Hausa, and Fulbe) accused of wanting to dispossess the natives of their land. President Bozizé, himself of Gbaya origin, clearly appealed to this idea of the Kongo-Wara uprising by calling on the youth to defend themselves against foreigners invading the country while Djotodia led his Seleka troops to Bangui from the end of 2012[6] (see also Chapter 6).

2. The sources make reference to the community-based character of the insurrection, which began to normalise war among all members of the community: active participation of children, women, and old people is mentioned. The community character of the mobilisation of the Anti-balaka is a topic that returns in Chapter 6 (see also ICG 2015).

[5] For more information on the *zaraguina* and anti-*zaraguina*, see Chapter 5.

[6] RFI, 27 December 2012, 'RCA: François Bozizé appelle la jeunesse à défendre son pays', ICG 2015: 3.

3. The reference to initiation practices that lead to the termination of childhood and affirmation of adulthood makes it reasonable to assume that a proportion of the warriors at the time must have been young men below the age of 18 and potentially below 15. This leads us to question in a broader sense at what age local communities in present-day CAR thought and still think of self-defence and fighting as appropriate for boys / young men. The answer to this question may vary per community and cultural group, as well as in relation to specific circumstances (e.g. when a large proportion of men had been taken for forced labour before, there was the question of how to assemble sufficient fighters, and signs of physical strength and maturity could sometimes be more important than actual age).

4. The use of fetishes was common, according to the descriptions of Nzabakomada-Yakoma (1986). There was already a strong belief in the power of the Kongo-Wara (a hoe-shaped cane that possessed magical properties), an object which should be rubbed on the chest of each warrior during these ceremonies. Today we see the fighters wearing *gris-gris* and other fetishes, performing rituals to protect themselves against bullets from the opposing side. These elements testify to a certain continuity in the current conflicts.

Chapter 4. The Central African Armed Forces (Forces Armées Centrafricaines / FACA) and government militias

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we focus on the role of the national army of CAR (les Forces Armées Centrafricaines, hereafter FACA) during different periods of difficulty and crisis in the country, periods in which FACA did not always play the role of a national army but also repeatedly caused some of the unrest and violence by rebelling against the sitting president. At times the national army was strongly divided along ethnic lines. This chapter deals with the recruitment of young people into the national army and the militias, or into separate presidential guards created—often on an ethnic basis—by various presidents when they feared the disloyalty or limited capacity of their standing army.

This chapter is important because it allows us to highlight how young people of certain parts of Bangui were recruited in the past, not unlike what happened in 2013 and 2014 with the Anti-balaka. It also describes the popularity among Central African youth of securing an army job and the contextual factors that explain this popularity in CAR. While our overview of FACA touches upon the narratives of young people under 18 years, reference to precise ages is often missing in the sources. Nevertheless, the chapter is important in order to understand specific dynamics of army recruitment, ethnic or regional loyalty mobilised in the face of threat, and aspirations and disillusions that help explain the massive support that young people in the country and Bangui later offered to the Seleka and thereafter to the Anti-balaka (Chapter 6). Furthermore, the chapter shows that also in an urban context, mobilisation of young people and people of similar ethnic backgrounds by leaders calling upon them and distributing arms was not uncommon before the rise of the Anti-balaka.

4.2 FACA

FACA are part of CAR's defence and security forces (FDS).[7] This Central African army was born at the dawn of independence (Ngolo 2016: 22). Being in the service of the nation, '[h]er principal mission is to prepare and assure the defence of the country. It ensures at all times, in all circumstances and against all forms of external and internal aggression, the security and integrity of the territory' (Report of the Defence and Security Committee to the National Dialogue, 2003).[8] However, does FACA manage to play this role fully? What has its role been during the recurring crises that the country has experienced? What about its role (at least that of certain FACA elements) in the recruitment not only of young people but also of minors in military actions?

4.3 The place of the FACA in the different crises in CAR

The Central African army has played a prominent role in the history of CAR. Among the eight Central African presidents that the country has known since independence, three were former army chiefs of staff who took power after a coup d'état (Bokassa, Kolingba, Bozizé). Added to this is FACA's repeated involvement in the many attempts at failed coups and in the mutinies of 1996–1997. According to some observers, this situation reflects a lack of loyalty of the army. At the same time, the army, through these events, became an institution of which presidents became more and more mistrustful. As a result, most Central African presidents tended to secure their protection by forming parallel forces composed of close relatives, or by resorting to foreign troops. In his time, Patassé, aware of the relative weakness of his position and with little trust in the army, secured his protection by Libyan troops and Bemba's Movement for the Liberation of the Congo (MLC) troops; Bozizé called upon the Chadians and South Africans for help; and Djotodia was content with the Seleka, among them foreign mercenaries from Chad and Sudan (see IPIS 2014). The national army, considered to belong to Bozizé, was sidelined by him (Arieff 2014: 6).

[7] The defence and security forces include the Gendarmerie, the Police and, secondarily, the paramilitary bodies, including customs, water and forestry, hunting and fishing (Ngolo 2016).

[8] http://dialogue.national.free.fr/dn_commissions_defsecu_diag2.htm

The following examples confirm the establishment of parallel militias by almost all these heads of state. Recruitment took place at the level of relatives in Bangui and in the different neighbourhoods dominated by members of a president's ethnic group. Often the recruits are described as young men. For example:

> During the army mutinies (1996–1998), Patassé created the Karako, Balawa and Sarawi militias in the Boy-Rabe, Combattant and Sara districts of Bangui (*1,500 young men*) [...] In the early 2000s, he put Abdoulaye Miskine in charge of forming a militia to combat highway robbery after the archers were dissolved. Abdoulaye Miskine (Martin Koumtamadji) was the traditional healer of Ange-Félix Patassé, responsible for treating his physical mobility problems. His militia had 300 to 600 men recruited in the Combattant district of Bangui. (Chauvin & Seignobos 2013/2014: 141, translated from French, emphasis ours)

> Finally, after 2001, President (...) Bozizé formed a rebellion with many civilians recruited among young people living in the northern neighbourhoods of Bangui. (Chauvin 2009: 9, translated from French)

This type of militia recruitment is not a recent dynamic. It is linked to the ethnic divisions that play their role in the national army.[9]

> Under Bokassa, the 'Abeilles' [Bees], the state militia of the president-emperor, held the monopoly of violence, unlike the FACA—which had 'no role, no function, except that of labour force exploited at will for the personal plantations of Bokassa in Béréngo' (Bigo: 83). As Didier Bigo showed, Bokassa deflected the initial role of the army and surrounded himself with militiamen recruited from the *youth* of his region of origin to avoid any attempted coup. Under Kolingba the 'Bees' were replaced by Armoured Independent Elements (Ëlements Blindés Autonomes, EBA), entirely Yakoma. After his election in 1993, Patassé turned the EBA into the regular army and moved them away from the centre of power, Bangui. He sent them to fight against the cross-border banditry of the 'road-cutters'. At the same time, Patassé set up a close guard composed of members of his original ethnic

[9] Although ethnic division does not explain it all, see other explanations given by Chauvin below.

> group […]. On the eve of the conflict, the vast majority of armed troops, close to former President Kolingba, was therefore marginalised, sent to the provinces and unpaid, while a minority group close to the president controlled the capital and was paid generously. (Chauvin 2009: 8–9, translated from French, emphasis ours)

These sources do not mention children or minors. In fact, the sources on these forms of recruitment are minimal, but it is likely that among these young men often mentioned, there were youngsters under 18 years and even those under 15—if we try to understand these events through more recent experiences such as community-based recruitment for self-defence groups like the Anti-balaka (see also Chapter 6) and the economic situations in the northern neighbourhoods of Bangui. In neighbourhoods where recruitment was undertaken, it seems that young people were available for this type of recruitment because there were not many other opportunities other than work in the informal economy; or probably many of them could not finish school owing to lack of funding. In 1988, the northern districts of Bangui were the poorest of the capital. (Chauvin 2009: 5, referring to the work of Villien 1987: 663)

While evoking ethnic cleavages aroused and mobilised by different presidents, Chauvin argues that for young people themselves another issue was at stake:

> […] young people did not engage in conflict to support their ethnic group except for economic reasons. The willingness of the armed forces to recruit civilians has found favour with some of the poorly educated youth with no economic perspective. (Chauvin 2009: 9, translated from French)

He quotes a young man who earned 100,000 FCFA for each operation for one to two weeks with the Sarawi (ibid.).

This scenario was repeated under President Bozizé's rule between 2003 and 2013. His army included mostly, and in increasing numbers, Gbaya (see for example UN Security Council Report 2014: 41), and hence a great disappointment befell those belonging to other ethnic groups who wanted to be integrated into FACA. Therefore, some young men changed their

names into Gbaya-sounding names to have a chance at army recruitment (Both & Mouguia 2017).

4.4 Limited army capacity

This attitude by Central African presidents has led to the negligence of the CAR army, which suffers from a lack of infrastructure, logistical resources, and staffing, while much emphasis has gone into arming and training these 'private militias'. The army reached its peak during the reign of President Jean-Bédel Bokassa. At the time of the departure of the latter in September 1979, FACA had 7,500 soldiers (Decalo 1989: 165, quoted by Berman 2006). In addition, the French troops, present since that date (until 1998 when they left the country briefly), contributed to ensure the security of CAR. The reliance on French protection resulted in a decrease in the number of FACA soldiers, which in 1996 reached 50 per cent of the initial 7,500. Decline in numbers continued in the years thereafter due to the desertion of alleged FACA putschists, estimated at 1,250 soldiers who fled to the Democratic Republic of Congo after the failed Kolingba coup attempt in May 2001 (Berman 2006).

For 2006, after Bozizé had been in power for three years, Mehler states:

> the UN estimated the total strength of the FACA at 4,000 but with only 1,250 elements considered to be operational. This means that the army was always small compared to the million inhabitants. The FACA's strengths were still very weak in arms and received a particularly low degree of attention under President Patassé. (Mehler 2012: 53–54)

At the time of the advance of the Seleka in 2013, FACA numbered around 7,000. This was considered too few, and UN and AU reports suggested that when the Seleka arrived, the majority of FACA had deserted or were forcefully disarmed. The Seleka forces reportedly targeted the killing of FACA officers in early 2013 (Arieff 2014: 6).

These dynamics resulted in an absence of FACA and military material within the country to defend the population. This situation explains the proliferation of self-defence groups in

CAR, and these self-defence groups did not exclude the participation of minors (see also the following chapters). As described in 2011 by 'Watchlist':

> FACA lacks the proper training, equipment, and troops needed to fulfill its mandate of protecting civilians. FACA is thought to number only about 5,000 troops, but only half of these are on duty at any given time, and very few are deployed to the country's conflict zones. The limited capacity of FACA includes a lack of vehicles and fuel, and a lack of communications equipment. In addition, FACA troops are not authorized to patrol beyond five kilometers (3.1 miles) from their posts. In the absence of a functioning national security force, the local population in conflict-affected areas in CAR has had no choice but to create community self-defense militias to protect themselves from attacks by armed groups, Zaraguina (criminal gangs), and foreign armed groups like the LRA. (Watchlist 2011: 21–22)

Similar capacity issues—and thus the limited protection of the civilian population—were reported earlier in 2007 by Human Rights Watch for the Batangafo–Kabo–Ouandago triangle in the Ouham prefecture, which extends over 100 kilometres but had only one FACA section of about 30 people at its disposal. 'Even this section was not permanently based in the triangle, but had recently arrived in temporary deployment' (HRW 2007: 30).

In conclusion, FACA in CAR is certainly and paradoxically, though not exclusively, a source of political instability and social violence in CAR. Many rebel leaders also originated from FACA or the political elite (Beninga, Manga Essama, Mogba, 2017: 10–11). As demonstrated above, FACA has had difficulty in reflecting the ethnic diversity of the population and suffers from limited strength;[10] it is also characterised by a lack of cohesion and discipline: there are ex-loyalists, ex-mutineers, and ex-liberators,[11] who are all part of

[10] 'In most of CAR, but particularly the north, the military does not have barracks to house its troops—most have been destroyed in successive rebellions and mutinies. Troops find their own lodgings in civilian neighborhoods. This is an obstacle to army commanders asserting effective control over their soldiers and contributes to indiscipline, drunkenness, and abuses against the civilian population. Troops often do not receive food and other supplies, leading to looting and extortion' (HRW 2007: 30).

[11] Ex-loyalists are FACA members who remained loyal to President Patassé during mutinies by part of FACA in 1996–1997, but also during the coup attempts of May 2001 and October 2002 up to his overthrow in March

FACA (Ngolo 2016: 23). Efforts are currently being made to address these challenges with a policy of recruiting in all regions of CAR to combat these regional ethnic inequalities in order to constitute a true national army.[12]

4.5 Human rights abuses

The actions of FACA and presidential guards are not without fault. Human rights organisations have criticised FACA for engaging in killings, torture, and sexual violence. This was, for example, the case for Bozizé's presidential guard in its actions against the people around Paoua: detailed reports on unlawful killings and widespread village burning by these government forces were made available by Human Rights Watch (2007). In the north-east in March 2007, FACA 'engaged in a brutal orgy of destruction, destroying up to 70% of Birao homes' (Mehler 2012: 56).

4.6 Recruitment of young people and minors by elements of FACA and militia linked to the armed forces

With the army fully involved in conflict, it is not uncommon for child protection agencies to question the recruitment of children into FACA's ranks. In this regard, a report by Child Soldiers International states about the recent crisis:

> The Central African Armed Forces / FACA as such did not recruit children during the crisis because they were dissolved following the seizure of power by the Seleka. If some ex-FACA elements are responsible for the recruitment and use of children, it was as part of the Anti-balaka or Seléka groups after March 2013. (2016: 4)

It can be deduced that if FACA as a state institution did not resort to the recruitment of children to strengthen their numbers and tactics of fighting, the FACA elements that have

2003 (Marcel Ounda 2018). Ex-mutineers are Yakoma-majority soldiers who mutinied against President Patassé's regime from 1996 to 1997. Ex-liberators are rebels who supported General Bozizé to seize power through a coup in March 2003.

[12] http://ndjonisango.com/securite/centrafrique-recrutement-de-1023-jeunes-ages-de-18-a25-ans-dans-armee/

integrated Seleka and Anti-balaka promoted and encouraged the enlistment of minors and their involvement in conflict. On the other hand, it has been observed that children have been enrolled by their 'parents'[13] in FACA in view of the limited employment opportunities in the country. The massive presence in FACA of elements of the ethnic groups of the previous regimes often leads their successors to recruit more FACA among their own ethnic group to counterbalance this workforce, given the constant fear of a coup d'état. In this logic, not only minors can be useful, but also limited employment opportunities lead parents to facilitate their children's entry into the defence and security forces. This is reflected in this analysis in the press after the launch of the 2019–2021 National Campaign to Combat the Enlistment of Children in Armed Groups:

> While armed groups are mainly targeted by the head of state Faustin Archange TOUADERA in his speech, some national observers also raise the issue of the incorporation of minors often from his parents into the national defense forces: 'often they take children under 18 by changing their ages to incorporate them, sadly, within the security forces or FACA', reports a Central African lawyer contacted by CNC [Corbonews]. 'Well-ordered charity begins with oneself' [concludes this lawyer, whose words were reported by Corbonews]. (Corbonews - Centrafrique, 15 May 2019)

Certainly, in a country characterised by extreme poverty, state weakness, and above all by a lack of security and jobs, young people may well view military life as an economic opportunity. Continuing insecurity is driving some parents to encourage their children to join the military to protect the family beyond the employment opportunity it provides. Thus,

> […] Encouraged in some cases by members of their family [...], children have joined armed groups [...], and some of them even hoped that they would eventually be integrated into the national armed forces. (Child Soldiers International 2016: 25)

Anthropological sources are not often very specific about the age of recruits. Debos (2008: 176) refers to ex-combatants who had engaged in rebellion in CAR between 2001 and 2003, and whom she met in 2006 in refugee camps in Chad, as being around 20 years old. It is

[13] In the Central African context, 'parents' can also refer to uncles or cousins.

quite possible that during their engagement between five and three years earlier, some of these young people were under 15 or 18 years old. Debos explains that some of these young people had given as their reason for commitment to rebellion the vengeance of the deaths of their relatives killed by the elements of Abdoulaye Miskine (who had come to the aid of President Patassé), whereas others referred to money as a motivation. They had been promised that they would receive 15 million CFA francs (22,867 euros) after the victory (ibid.)

It is evident that young Central Africans recruited in militias / paramilitary groups are attracted by money (Debos 2008; Chauvin 2009). But they are often also very attracted to military service. In 2018, for example, for the recruitment of 1,023 new FACAs, 30,000 applications were registered throughout the country (MINUSCA, Note to Media, November 2018).

This infatuation with the military may also have been maintained by old practices tending to value the military more than the civil service, in what has been a history of war and security disorder. As Oscar Leaba (2001: 172) put it:

> it is clear that a senior officer of the presidential guard has more weight than a minister, whose main function is often to serve as external guarantor. Such a situation is primarily the consequence of the excessive position conferred on the forces that suppressed the coup attempt.

Even if this statement makes more sense in the context of the failed coup in May 2001, it is clear that this enthusiasm of young people for the military is linked to the strong consideration for and role played by the army in a situation of security crisis that endures.

Another example was recorded by Both and Mouguia (2017), who insisted on the motivation of these young people to integrate the army:

> But ... something else motivated them too ... because the majority of the FACA members and the presidential guard belonged (at the time of Bozizé) to the president's ethnic group,

> they had all the power. They could get everything they wanted from the people on the roads and even if you had not broken any rules, they would still insist that you pay for something. They could put you in jail without any form of lawsuit whenever they have a problem with you. So, at the time, the young people thought that 'if I can get into the FACA, no one will be able to abuse me any more in this way'. Joining the army was so fashionable. A Central African musician even sang on this subject: *'... if everyone becomes FACA, who will be able to protect the civilians ...?*'

As we can see, this enthusiasm remains constant despite the fairly low wages received by the military, at least among the lower ranks. As recalled by Marielle Debos (2012: 103):

> If the pay of the military is modest and irregularly paid, the integration to the regular forces allows one to experience the fruits of the corruption and the racketeering [the famous 'formalities' on the roads]. Being a soldier, gendarme or policeman also means having a social status, the possibility of settling and starting a family.[14]

It should be added that this enthusiasm of young people is also due to the fact that the requirements to integrate into FACA are not as complex as those required to join the other bodies of the administration, the latter sometimes requiring high levels of studies. As a result, given that conflicts have often led to missed years or the interruption of schooling of young people, it is easier for an uneducated youth to join the ranks of FACA to claim a certain stability and respectability within their society.

It is common for young people to approach soldiers (FACA) and ask them for possible 'circuits' to join the national army (field interviews, August 2018 with some FACA). This is seen in the various recruitment processes where young people are always looking for military intermediaries who can facilitate their recruitment into the defence and security corps. This state of affairs creates a certain esteem for the elements of FACA in their respective quarters. They can easily get their hands on young people and control them. As a result, during crises, it is easy for FACA staff to bring together young people to organise

[14] Regarding joining the army to be able to feed a family, the necessity of finding a job with a certain amount of security (in income) was also mentioned by the (pensioned) FACA members we spoke to.

defence and, beyond that, to offer them a possible future recruitment into FACA after the fighting—whatever that promise is really worth. Young people thus become more receptive to the messages of mobilisation. This is evident in the fact that many of the Anti-balaka or Seleka zone commanders were originally from the ranks of FACA. They joined either one 'group' or the other after the FACA practically dissolved in 2013, and it is often they who are entrusted with the recruitment and training of youngsters and with the organisation and direction of the fighting on the ground. Despite former FACA members being able to draw many youngsters into mobilisation at the height of the turmoil in Bangui, this was denied by our few FACA informants. When recounting the protection of their quarters they would not refer to themselves as Anti-balaka and would emphasise that they 'only secured the neighbourhood' together as 'FACA', failing to admit that, or how, they involved young people in their endeavours.

We also met a FACA member who presented himself as a protector of a large group of children who were lost (adrift, having lost track of their parents) during 2013–2014 in Bangui. However, we understood later that at some point he was like an Anti-balaka leader, who had used some of the children whom he regrouped for more military purposes. This example is intended to illustrate how, in a situation of persistent crisis, it is easier for a FACA member than for a civilian to gather young people in a defence group of any kind.

4.7 Conclusion

Young people in Bangui, in and around the northern neighbourhoods, were a target of recruitment for several parallel militias, founded by the presidents to strengthen their grip on power. This occurred under most of the last presidents—namely, Bokassa, Patassé, and Bozizé, but also Kolingba. In particular, some of the data refer to the engagement of those under the age of 18, whereas for those under 15 we lack specific references. More than emphasising age of recruitment, in this chapter we have intended to show how much the army, despite its many challenges (understaffed, underpaid, lacking materials), speaks to the imagination of young people as one of the few avenues to advancement (regular income; see also Lombard 2016a on the importance of working for the state) as well as to the ability

to protect one's family and generate some extra income through bribery. Young people themselves, therefore, actively seek recruitment into the army (see Lombard 2016a).

As a culture of defence is also somehow rooted in people's habits, young people, even independently, often meet spontaneously—to 'protect their neighbourhood', as they usually say. Whether this tendency stems from the recurring call of various presidents upon youths from their neighbourhood, or on a more longstanding tendency, is difficult to determine.

Chapter 5. Fear and self-defence in the north-west (1980s–present)

5.1 Introduction

The regions of the north-west and north-east of CAR have been marked by a large variety of armed groups (non-state) and criminal groups in the past decades. They formed layer upon layer on each other, mobilising the same and new people during various waves of increased tensions. The earlier movements certainly recruited children, though not on the same scale that the (ex-)Seleka, Anti-balaka, and more recent armed groups have been doing.

In this chapter we focus on the Ouham-Pendé region in the north-west of CAR, to show how such recruitment worked out in a specific part of the territory. We are particularly interested in showing how young people are drawn into rebellion, in a region where they have almost no other choice because uncertainty is so widespread. We show this by highlighting our contemporary ethnographic data from the north-western region, before going back in time to highlight various aspects of the history of the armed groups that engaged children before the present day. We rely on a contemporary case because it helps, through rare in-depth data, to show the despair of young people (as well as adults) caught between contesting groups and the lack of choice people experience, as well as their all-pervasive fear and frustration.

Besides highlighting the lack of choice and the continuing duress (De Bruijn & Both 2018) under which people live and have lived their lives for long periods, our description also focuses on some of the cunning ways in which rebel groups draw disenfranchised children into their ranks, and the way in which self-defence has been and remains important in these communities.

For the other northern region of the country—the north-eastern part of CAR and its histories of rebellion—we refer to the work of Louisa Lombard (2016a and other), who conducted extensive fieldwork in this area before the alliance of armed groups, called the Seleka, was formed and marched to Bangui. While very important in its own right, as a region with its

own particular history and dynamics, some of the dynamics described in this chapter (feeling excluded from the state, widespread poverty, being threatened by criminal groups and Bozizé's presidential guard causing widespread violence) are part of the shared dynamics that can be found in both regions' contemporary histories.

This chapter is primarily devoted to the results of our qualitative interviews and observations conducted in the villages around Paoua in March 2017. The data represent only a particular period at the time of research, as the security situation has been changing rapidly in various directions since this data collection took place. The research illustrates some of the more general challenges that children and young people were facing during one particular period in villages and small towns in north-western CAR.

5.2 Living in fear

The villages the researcher visited were surrounded by armed groups at the time of the field visits (March 2017). These groups were RJ and the Seleka-Patriotic Movement for the Central African Republic (MPC), which had formed an alliance by the time of research.[15] Reference was also made to *zaraguinas* and Anti-balaka as other groups responsible for insecurity in the area at the time. Villagers in this rural region considered MINUSCA to be ineffective; the latter would take too long to arrive after an attack occurred and would not ask the correct questions to allow them to identify the perpetrators, never mind to pursue them. As a consequence, people and local authorities felt obliged, just in order to survive, to respect the rule of the rebels. Although local people were sometimes so afraid that they fled and hid in the bush or in the fields, local authorities were obliged to work with the rebels when it came to collecting 'taxes' and handling matters of justice in the absence of other state representatives in the area. The following testimonies illustrate how the armed groups were in charge. In Bétoko, it was explained:

[15] Dukhan states: 'Since 2016 MPC has had an alliance with: Révolution Justice. This is an opportunistic alliance based mainly on sharing economic revenues in areas they both control. MPC remains stronger than RJ.' (2017: 9). Despite the alliance, interviewees declared, the groups sometimes clash among themselves over authority issues. At the same time, division within the RJ group is noted (interviews Mouguia, Dukhan 2017).

> If you make a small mistake, they take you and empty your house before asking you to pay a large sum of money. […] they solve the problems. [...] It's the contesting parties [in a local village or domestic conflict] themselves who bring the issues before them. Even if someone commits an offence, it's taken directly to their base [rebel base]. But now, they say that if a problem arises, it must be submitted first to the warden or group leader. And it's when they can't come up with a solution that it must be transmitted to them. So they don't want everything to be submitted to them every time.
>
> *Interviewer:* This means that armed groups and local authorities get along well?
>
> We get along. We don't have a choice. We accept things in order to protect ourselves. (49-year-old woman, former councillor to the mayor's office)

Another story, related to the fear people live in and the taxation of the population, was shared in Korozian:

> Even now, more than 80 Seleka and Balaka people [mixed, referring to the Seleka-MPC and RJ] have recently set up a base near here. [...] Just around the Nana River. […] And now we know that we're already dead because we don't know what they're going to do. Lately, they've announced that they'll collect 20 bundles of straw and four goats per village. So as long as they pass and do what they want, they must be left to do so—at the risk of being killed or, at best, tortured. We suffer, but we have no other more secure places to go. We keep our calm so as not to be tempted to go and take up weapons. We place everything in the hands of God. (27-year-old man from Korozian, formerly associated with an armed group, former beneficiary of a Danish Refugee Council (DRC) reintegration programme)

Violence is never far from the horizon in the villages:

> *Interviewer:* What are the violent acts they [armed groups] commit against the people?
>
> If you make a mistake and get caught, they beat you properly. (19-year-old man, in Bétoko)

Thus, people go about their daily lives and work in fear, as illustrated by the following statements from a male health worker and a female farmer:

> For example, if they [the armed men] come for treatment, we rush to look after them and release them; then we take care of the other patients afterwards. Because we don't know what they'll think about us if we turn a blind eye to them. So, we rush to help them as we help any patient.
>
> *Interviewer:* So, even if there are patients here before them, do you prefer to treat them before all the others to release them?
>
> Yes, because even if there are patients here, they [the armed men] come in directly. So we have no choice, and we're familiar with the other parents and we can get treatment afterwards. (53-year-old male in Bétoko, former project adviser and health assistant at the local health centre)

> We've been screaming for the help of NGOs for a long time, but since then nothing has changed here. We sleep in our homes in fear; we go to the field with fear in the stomach; etc. At this moment, if a problem arises, we don't try to hide in the forest. Because the Fulani [referring to the *zaraguinas*—see below] are everywhere in the bush. They rape us too. We place it back in the hands of God and don't know when God will decide to change things. (49-year-old woman, former councillor to the mayor's office, currently farming)

Farming activities are hindered because the insecurity, real and anticipated, evokes fear in people and prevents them from going about their daily activities. Mobility in the area is also obstructed, with repercussions for the petty-trading livelihoods engaged in by people in this part of the country:

> Even to leave here to go to Paoua, we do it with fear in the stomach. At the present time, there is only us and God—that's all. (Village leader, Kounpo)
>
> How is it that nowadays, they [armed actors] can ask you to catch your own goat, which you've been raising for a long time, to donate for free? That's not possible! Look, just

> yesterday, they stopped a young man on a motorcycle. They undressed him and stripped him of his property. And, instead of the rebels taking his bike and leaving with it to reach their destination, they took his bike and left him empty. You see, it's things like that: through a desire for revenge, young people join the armed groups to also seek to acquire new goods to replace what they've lost. (Village leader, Kounpo)

The foregoing respondents' remarks offer a glimpse of what daily life is like in times of besiegement in the north-western part of the country, and they repeatedly show how people turn to God as their only hope. The armed parties, and the threats by such parties, are multiple: these groups include the RJ and MPC and those seen as criminal groups, such as the *zaraguinas*. This last group, in particular, has led to the formation of local self-defence groups at least since the early 2000s in this area; and these local self-defence groups are often incorporated into larger armed groups once they make their appearance on the scene, as happened when the APRD was formed around 2005. This was also the case with the RJ. One former child soldier told us he was in a self-defence group (anti-*zaraguina*) before he joined APRD in the past. It is also known that RJ relies 'on a network of self-defence groups located in northwestern CAR' (Dukhan 2017: 22), as recorded below and in our data.

When self-defence members join armed groups, this means there are often family relations between village populations and armed groups, which earlier interviews in Paoua also revealed. However, during our research in March 2017, people often denied recruitment took place in their own village. In one village, for example, a few people denied that any person went to join the APRD in the past, except for one boy whom they claimed was actually not originally from their village. The same people denied that any youth from the village joined 'new' rebel activity. While this is possibly the case, it is more likely a reflection of a lack of people's trust in researchers that can pay only a short visit to the environment where the villagers live. People may also be afraid to denounce family members in the bush, as they think this may have repercussions for them in the future from the armed group or from the government army. But certainly there are connections. In the same village where certain people denied there was any participation in armed groups, a young man admitted that there was contact between youth from his village and those in the

bush (read: armed groups)—but he was afraid to approach the youth concerned and discover more about the nature of this contact.

An older man in the same village later said that eight children were with the APRD earlier and that two youngsters from the village population of 2,800 had joined the currently active armed groups. His statements concerned child recruits, not necessarily adult recruits—so the actual number of participants could be higher.

Despite possible family connections or other types of connections between village people and the armed groups, the fear people live in was very real, as the statements above have shown. Unfortunately, after our research in March 2017, there was a major escalation of violence at the end of 2017 around Paoua, and thousands of people became displaced.[16] They began returning only recently (August 2018), but their situation still remained precarious.[17] This means that the research presented below should be understood as having been undertaken at a particular moment in time—after which the insecurity became even more threatening and people's living conditions greatly deteriorated owing to displacement and other disruptions.

5.3 Recruiting children in the context of fear

Our time in the field was limited, in contrast with the preferred method of anthropological research where the researcher stays in the field for a long period to build trust and returns to the field to follow up in order to be able to better interpret the data obtained (from interviews, observations, etc.) and to triangulate them. Under the circumstances in CAR at the time, this type of research was impossible.

[16] See https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/01/09/centrafrique-au-moins-25-000-nouveaux-deplaces-dans-le-nord-ouest_5239303_3212.html —accessed 31 August 2018.

[17] See https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/rca-les-deplaces-de-la-region-de-paoua-rentrent-chez-eux-256582 —accessed 31 August 2018.

While no assessment of present-day numbers of recruitment by RJ or MPC in the villages was conducted (the original research concentrated on former APRD 'child soldiers' in the region), interesting data about recruitment by these groups came up during interviews. For example, kidnapping of children seemed to be uncommon; but young people—like those who were active in self-defence groups—were more or less lured into armed groups:

> When they came, they [the MPC, also referred to as 'the Seleka' by the respondent] asked that the group of *young self-defenders* from here go find them. That's how they [the self-defenders] went to meet them. So, the Seleka asked them to clean the surroundings of the house they occupied. That's what they did. Then they told them that in the future there would be a disarmament programme—and to be part of it, you had to be registered. This is how these young people went to join them up to now. (22 year-old man, Gadoulou village, brother of a former APRD child soldier)

This confirms what was suggested earlier in this chapter—namely, that the members of existing self-defence groups are repeatedly persuaded to become part of the armed groups. Among the new wave of young people joining RJ and MPC, there were also children. Two of them recently returned to the village of Gadoulou with the support of War Child. The preceding respondent offered the following explanation:

> *Interviewer*: Were these children really part of the armed groups?

> They were here [in the village] and hunted rats that they were selling. But since the arrival of armed groups, they joined them and did chores for them—like fetching water or washing their clothes. That's how they [War Child] removed them to train them. (22-year-old man, Gadoulou village, brother of a former child soldier from the APRD era)

In Bétoko, there was also reference to girls who entered on their own initiative into sexual relations with the armed elements. The following respondent situated this trend within a larger tendency of girls in the village to get pregnant in relationships that were not approved of by their parents:

> We parents of these children, we complain. Because now, we can't hope for much from these children. Someone can abuse your daughter and make her pregnant. Then he leaves the child to your charge. It's such acts that we live with here. Some girls who don't listen to our advice offer themselves to these armed elements. On the other hand, others don't do it—because they [armed men] don't take people by force: it's the girls who go there on their own. (49-year-old woman, former councillor to the mayor)

Others report that young women are forced into relations with members of armed groups, including a girl who recently reintegrated with the help of War Child and its partner organisation AFRBD.

> Among those we've trained here, there is one who is at XX. The ex-Seleka elements wanted to marry her by force.[18] She opposed it and, according to the reports, she even slapped a Seleka element. Another has already been married to the ex-Seleka; and since she doesn't like this marriage, she fled to take refuge in XX. This Seleka element went to see her parents to ask them to return his money, because—according to him—it was they who pushed her to flee. And, apparently, the parents had to pay him back. We were told it was about 300,000 CFA francs. One day, even, we were on a mission to XX and we were told that she wanted to go to her uncle's funeral. She had to go through the bush, avoiding the base of the Seleka, to get to the funeral location—because if they see her, they'll take her. This is the risk for reintegrated girls. (AFRBD staff member, Paoua)

There was also reference to young people who had fled the village since Seleka's arrival and who had not returned thus far. According to those who remained, it was young people from families who could sell some farm animals; with the money they received, they could flee. The others, the poor, are forced to stay. Some people also stated that they did not leave (migrate or take up arms), because they wished to stay with their wife/wives, children, and older parents.

[18] Though not specified in this interview, in other contexts such as in South Sudan/ northern Uganda, this 'marrying by force' would mean rape (fieldwork first author in Uganda / South Sudan).

In conclusion: We found evidence that, despite the heightened insecurity that had prevailed for some time in the region and then again during our fieldwork, recruitment of 'former child soldiers' who had been soldiers under the APRD and demobilized earlier was not widespread. But we found reference to various types of cases: armed groups laying a claim on those youngsters who are part of village self-defence units; poor young boys being lured in by armed groups for specific tasks; and girls and adult women being at risk of sexual violence.

As noted above, our research was conducted at a specific time, before the security situation worsened for the villages in this area when at the end of 2017 many people were displaced. We do not know the effects of this further heightened insecurity on the former young recruits.

5.4 Earlier armed groups in the region

Before these latest groups there were others that recruited children. The most important and well-known armed actor in the region that did so was the APRD, formed in 2005 as part of one of many anti-Bozizé rebellions. Concerning these rebellions, according to Chauvin and Seignobos (2013/14: 127):

> The insurgents share some common points. They dispute the legitimacy of François Bozizé, with no real ability to make him fall. Poorly equipped (homemade weapons, motorcycles, some pickups), they do not have any strong external support.

The APRD group drew its major support base from the north-west, around Paoua. The group was supposedly initiated by ousted president Patassé (ibid.), who hailed from the region and was excluded from the presidential elections by Bozizé in 2005 (HRW 2007: 37–38). The APRD allegedly consisted of various groups including militiamen earlier recruited under Patassé in Bangui (see previous chapter)—namely, the Karako, Balawa, and Sarawi militias he formed around the late 1990s when he was threatened by recurring mutinies (Chauvin & Seignobos 2013/14: 127). Besides also engaging Chadians and former FACA (loyal to Patassé), the APRD drew heavily on self-defence groups that had formed in villages

earlier—in particular, as villagers organised to protect themselves from *zaraguina* activities (HRW 2007: 39). The *zaraguinas*, also known as criminals or road-cutters / highway bandits, became a well-known phenomenon in the region in the 1990s. They are transnational groups of criminals who move freely in the border region and are active in Cameroon, Chad, and CAR (Berg 2008: 22). After Bozizé was helped to power through a coup by Chadian mercenaries in 2003 and these Chadian mercenaries were left uncompensated for their help to the regime, they returned to northern CAR and Chad, many plundering the country on their way and seeking alliance with the *zaraguina* criminal groups, with whom several connections existed, causing their numbers to grow (ibid. 23).

> As a result, the number of road robberies rose dramatically, bringing transport in the region to a virtual halt. The Zaraguinas then began to direct their focus increasingly at the population, with the mounting violence forcing thousands of people to flee to neighbouring countries. Those who chose to stay organised themselves in village self-protection groups, which were, however, hopelessly outgunned by the Zaraguinas. (ibid.)

Previously, the *zaraguinas* were held at bay in the region by anti-*zaraguina* groups formed by Mbororo armed with bows and arrows who had been supported by the regime of Patassé to do so. But following growing attempts to regulate the anti-*zaraguina* groups, the latter became increasingly less effective and many withdrew from this movement in the early 2000s, with the result that villages in the north-west were increasingly targeted by the *zaraguinas* (Chauvin & Seignobos 2013/2014: 127). This thus favoured the need for local self-defence movements again (sometimes also called anti-*zaraguina*), which, according to some of our interviews, could include male children from the ages of 10 upwards. Two of our informants from the north-western region had been 'trained' to handle a bow and arrows in their early teens. Some of these youngsters in the past were then drawn into the APRD.

Spittaels and Hilgert (2009: 9), in an attempt to identify the APRD political agenda, identified its following reasons for fighting:

- The country suffers from foreign aggression. Chadian elements that helped President Bozizé come to power in 2003 have become road bandits and spread terror.
- The state security services commit grave human rights violations against the population.
- The economy was destroyed by the current regime. Bozizé and his allies marched on Bangui plundering and they continued to do so after they took over power.
- The economy needs rebuilding. Because of the above, radical changes are required. The regime has betrayed the country and needs to be replaced. If necessary, the APRD will conquer the whole territory

The armed group—and, in fact, all civilians in the APRD area of operation—were brutally repressed by Bozizé's presidential guard soon after the APRD emerged. Detailed accounts of unlawful killings and the widespread burning of villages by these government forces were noted by Human Rights Watch (2007).

The APRD admitted to Human Rights Watch (HRW) that they had children in their midst, some of them much younger than 15, as the following HRW report shows:

> The APRD rebel commanders said that there are many children in their ranks, including some as young as 12, and that many are armed and participate in combat. Almost every APRD unit encountered by Human Rights Watch had some child combatants in its ranks. A leading APRD commander told Human Rights Watch that many of the children had come to the APRD for security from attacks by government forces: 'Our recruitment is voluntary, and we have some child soldiers with us. Since the Presidential Guard moved here [around Paoua], the children were insecure. So they came to stay with us because they wanted security, it is for their own safety.' Even if the APRD commander is correct, the APRD's use of children as combatants remains a serious violation of international humanitarian law and may amount to a war crime. Human Rights Watch explained this to APRD commanders, who appeared unaware that their conduct violated the laws of war. When informed of the relevant international standards, and the current ICC [International Criminal Court] prosecution of a Congolese warlord for the use of child soldiers, a top APRD commander

> immediately offered to demobilize the child soldiers, as long as their security could be guaranteed, and asked Human Rights Watch to contact UNICEF for assistance with the demobilization. (HRW 2007)

In the same HRW report, the APRD was depicted as also engaging in extortion against the local population but being far less brutal and repressive than the government forces were. In 2008 the APRD publicly vowed to release all the children in their midst.[19] According to the available data, this occurred in phases. A key actor in the region, which engaged with the APRD-released child-soldiers to help them 'reintegrate', was the DRC.

We lack specific data about the DRC programmes and have fragmentary data only—such as a project sheet stating that, between 2008 and 2011, 417 children were removed from the APRD and assisted by the DRC. This was a total number for the sub-prefectures of Paoua, Markounda, and Nanga Boguila. From the same document, we learn that the DRC had also begun identifying children in self-defence groups in the region and estimated their number to be approximately 2,000,[20] a total from which they hoped to assist 500 in 2012 (DRC 2012).

Before the APRD, a group called Codo-Mbakara was active in this same region and had been formed after a failed coup attempt in 1982 against president Kolingba by later president Patassé, who hailed from the region. Given that it was formed in the 1980s and not very well organised, it proved very difficult to find more data about this armed movement and its engagement of children. Lombard mentions that the movement dissolved in 1993 when president Patassé became president and integrated the armed group's members into the presidential guard, thereby creating a dangerous precedent:

> This armed opposition—having proven its ability to threaten—became a means to achieve salaried personhood at the same time as other means, such as a university education were closing off and discontent within the population was rising. (Lombard 2016a: 132)

[19] http://centrafrique-presse.over-blog.com/article-20107564.html —accessed 31 August 2018.

[20] In our conclusion to this report, we are critical of these beautiful round numbers and estimates in general.

Another aspect links the Codo-Mbakara and later armed groups in the region: it was often difficult to distinguish between criminal activities (banditry at roadblocks, etc.) and more political forms of operation (ibid. 131). These observations reoccurred in interviews in Paoua in 2017 with regards to RJ and the Seleka-MPC. There was frequent reference to opportunistic youth joining the latter groups in order to benefit from the fact of carrying arms.

To conclude: Lombard (2016a) identifies a number of dynamics that this region shares with the north-east, and they lie particularly in the way in which participation in armed groups was increasingly related to the promise of future integration into the state through the army (about the scarce and highly valued position of an army job in CAR, see the previous chapter and the various works of Lombard) or entailed the promise of access to Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes, as highlighted in one of the quotes in this chapter about young self-defence group members drawn into the MPC armed group:

> Then they told them that in the future there would be a disarmament programme—and to be part of it, you had to be registered. This is how these young people went to join them up to now.[21]

Lastly, a related point: Lombard describes this past as part of a process of conventionalisation of rebellion:

> […] in a process that is hard to treat as a single trajectory, over the past decade international intervenors and armed actors have adapted to each other in order to facilitate collaboration with each other. Armed actors, particularly in rural areas, in part through tutelage from interveners and others, have learned to conventionalize various aspects of their organisations such that they are easier to apprehend as *rebels*, rather than criminals. Conventionalization entails such things as a patriotic name and a corresponding acronym, an officer corps and a list of grievances, a desire for DDR. (Lombard 2016a: 128, emphasis in original).

[21] Such arguments are also used in various other countries to convince young people to engage with armed groups.

> Thus with the mediation of international agencies, conventional rebellion has a greater chance of bringing about inclusion or other largesse for the groups' political leadership and of bringing some largesse to *marginalized youth* in the hinterlands. (ibid. 129, emphasis ours)

5.5 Conclusion

Lombard underlines—and this has been shown in the previous chapter on the Kongo-Wara and also in the current chapter when we speak of groups defending themselves against, for example, the *zaraguinas*—that

> armed opposition to coercive operations has a long history in Equatorial Africa. The shift in recent years has been to frame that impulse in terms of an aspirational project related to the state, that is, in the form of conventionalized rebellion. (2016a: 129–139)

While this argument is certainly important—it emphasises the *longue durée* and likely persistence of armed groups—it does not in itself explain why children also join such movements and why they increasingly do so.

From the limited data we have about the situation around Paoua in 2017, we can add that next to this rather 'rational argument'—that is, employing one's ability to 'threaten' as an almost rational choice by marginalised groups and marginalised youths (see also Lombard 2018), which is obviously related to a complete lack of prospects and of feeling disadvantaged as rural northerners in underdeveloped regions far from Bangui—there seem also to be other dynamics at play. Other motives for young children to join such groups arise from the generalised fear, noted in this chapter, that affects all community members, and the way in which, within these regions, armed group members are able to manipulate children and young people. We have also seen that boys engage in armed self-defence groups from a young age in this area ravaged by various armed groups—including Bozizé's presidential guard and the so-called liberators that brought him to power—and that, historically, such self-defence groups were absorbed, at least by the APRD and the RJ and MPC recently, into larger armed initiatives.

There is a definite lack of accurate data on recruitment of children, especially since for a long time—before all the non-state international actors came into the region—no one really took much interest in the subject, and the participation or at least training in the use of traditional arms by young men was common.

There is reason to believe, however, as some data on recruitment numbers show in the next chapter, that the participation of young people in armed groups, for many different reasons, has recently grown quite exponentially since 2012.

Chapter 6. The proliferation of children in Anti-balaka and Seleka groups

6.1 Introduction

This chapter emphasises the magnitude child and youth recruitment attained during the latest period, in particular in the period that the Seleka was forming and marching on Bangui, and with regards to the Anti-balaka movements that developed from local defence structures, a dissolved army and politically incited patriotism. It highlights the different modes of recruitment and some of the roles preserved for young people in the (increasingly) fragmented movements. The chapter is based on in-depth interviews with both children and youth that have been engaged in the Seleka and Anti-balaka movements and also builds on secondary sources (including academic publications, NGO reports, and newspaper articles).

6.2 The Seleka and Anti-balaka groups

The Seleka group, created in September 2012, was a gathering of armed groups from the north[22] and north-east of CAR, whose ranks were inflated by so-called road-cutters and mercenaries from Chad, Sudan, and Niger. Former rebels ('liberators') used by President Bozizé for the seizure of power by force in March 2003 also took part in the rebellion, along with many Central African unemployed young people looking for opportunities (Ceriana Mayneri 2014).[23] In addition, a large number of children was recruited and deployed in the course of the formation of the Seleka and its march on Bangui.[24] Being opposed to president Bozizé, whom they accused of not respecting the signed peace agreements, the (initially more separate) armed groups and new recruits joined forces and finally overthrew the sitting

[22] These include the Patriotic Convention for Justice and Peace (CPJP), the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR) and the Kodro Patriotic Salvation Convention (CPSK) (Gomina Pampali, 2017).

[23] A considerable proportion of these young people are those who had not managed to integrate into the defence forces during a large recruitment campaign for the Central African Armed Forces (FACA), called 'promotion 5,000' with reference to the 5,000 CFA francs they had to pay to submit their file and 'lost' to the state without being promoted. See Both and Mouguia 2017.

[24] Estimations vary, but some of the data below show that children were central to the Seleka forces in the battle for Bangui and at least in protecting military leaders (as bodyguards).

powers in March 2013. As is often the case, this coup d'état again opened the way to a generalised chaos, generating conditions very favourable to looting, settling of accounts, murders, exactions, and theft of all kinds. The abuses committed by this coalition, seen as a Muslim grouping, were understood to be directed against the non-Muslim majority of the country. The violent abuses of one section of the population led to increased inter-communal hatred, which was soon to explode.

In 2013, a self-defence group made up of certain elements of the pro-Bozizé FACA and ex-anti-*zaraguina*—but above all of villagers and young people from different parts of Bangui—took shape. At the basis of this movement were relatives of Bozizé, including Lévi Yakété, political coordinator of a faction of Anti-balaka militia, who allegedly, encouraged 'the distribution of machetes to unemployed young Christians, to facilitate attacks against Muslims' (Security Council Committee, quoted in Ceriana Mayneri 2014: 34). This group clearly stood out as a counter-force to the Seleka, an anti-Seleka group. It carried out its largest attack on the city of Bangui in December 2013; and like the Seleka, it employed many children in its ranks. The killings perpetrated by this group targeted not only Seleka elements but also, by association, the population of Muslims accused of having been accomplices of the Seleka. The Anti-balaka response led the city of Bangui into an unprecedented spiral of violence, to the point that some were tempted to call the crisis ethnic or religious (UNICEF 2014). For Ceriana Mayneri, it is simply an 'instrumentalization of a religious argument, which is grafted on specific political and economic interests' (2014: 35).

The Seleka was better organised than the Anti-balaka. It had a political wing, a military wing with representatives, and a staff responsible for training and military operations. Even after its dissolution in September 2013 by President Djotodia, the now ex-Seleka still survive in rather well-structured armed groups. In contrast to this model, the Anti-balaka, some of whom even reject this name, are made up of disparate groups. Some of these groups are formed according to the ethnic or regional origin of the combatants and are mainly led by the zone commanders ('com-zones'). These com-zones, for the most part, are former FACA members who have the military experience necessary to train the youth in their group.

There is also another difference: while the Anti-balaka wear civilian clothes and use mainly machetes and homemade weapons in addition to the automatic weapons they say they recovered after attacks against the Seleka, the latter use rather modern means and are still in military uniforms.

That said, in order to achieve their ends (defeating the enemy), each of these groups, which on both sides took on a community-like appearance, resorted to all types of combatants, including young people under the ages of 15 and 18 years. So what are the modes of recruitment of these young children by these two armed groups? And what did the young people experience who served in these two armed groups during the last crisis in CAR? It is these two main questions that this chapter aims to answer. To answer these questions, we will first explore the stories of children enlisted in the Seleka, before we look at the mode of enrolment in the Anti-balaka.

6.3 Enlistment and use of children under 15 by armed groups in the Central African Republic

6.3.1 The enlistment and use of children under 15 by the Seleka

Generally speaking, as mentioned above, the Anti-balaka groups and the Seleka at their origin were largely community-based. Both have resorted to recruiting various types of fighters from their home communities, not excluding those under 15 years of age.

UNICEF estimated that more than 2,000 boys and girls were associated with armed groups, including self-defence groups, before the upsurge of fighting by the Seleka in December 2012. Sources mention the recruitment of children under 18 by the Union des Forces Démocratique pour le Rassemblement (UFDR) and CPJP armed groups, two founding groups of the future Seleka together with the Convention Patriotique du Salut du Kodro (CPSK). The predecessors of the Seleka reportedly resorted to sexual exploitation/abuse and sent children to combat, and it was mentioned that uniformed and armed boys circulated in

coalition-controlled areas, conducting patrols, operating at checkpoints, and participating in looting actions (Save the Children 2013).[25]

For some of these children, release from the armed groups had been negotiated by UNICEF, and at least some of them have been brought to Bangui for reintegration purposes. A number of them later allegedly returned to the Seleka, after the latter took over Bangui.[26]

To increase the strength of their fighters against the enemy, the Seleka, before the capture of the city of Bangui, had recourse again to young children, whom they made pass in front of the front lines of the adult combatants. (Remember that there were already children in the ranks of the different armed groups in the north and north-east before they merged to form the Seleka.) A young adult ex-Seleka whom we held extensive interiews with told us: 'children are not afraid (...) especially when they are drugged. (...) At the sound of a weapon they will go to know where the weapon was fired.' He further added:

> A child is not afraid of heavy weapons, be it rockets, grenades, etc. Even when we entered Bangui, only children were on the front line in Damara, everywhere. It was when we arrived here in Bangui that with the multiple integrations of young people, the ranks of the Seleka grew. *So the majority was made up of children.* (Interview conducted on 14 December 2017 in Bangui, translated from French, emphasis ours)

This statement substantiates that of the South African soldiers who came to the rescue of the Bozizé regime and who said they were fighting against children:

[25]https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/documents/PE_Revue_documentaire_R%C3%A9publique_Centrafricaine_06SEPT2013.docx

[26] Network of human rights journalists, 'Bangui: children associated with rebel groups have taken up arms alongside Seleka (6 April 2013)', http://reseaudesjournalistesrca.wordpress.com/2013/04/06/bangui-des-enfants-associes-aux-groupes-rebelles-ont-repris-les-armes-aux-cotes-de-la-seleka/. Information confirmed in the neighbourhood of Bangui where the shelter for former child soldiers stood.

> ‘It was only after the shooting stopped that we saw that we had killed children. We did not come here for that ... to kill kids. It makes you sick; they were crying, calling for help, calling (their) moms’ a South African soldier told the *Sunday Times* after returning home.[27]

One of the underlying mechanisms that helped bolster the Seleka with young recruits is related to the known fact that Muslims had difficulty integrating in CAR’s state positions (army, administration, and political positions) and were often depicted as outsiders. From this point of view, the seizure of power by the Seleka was seen as an opportunity for members of the Muslim community to access the CAR administration. Thus, quite willingly, some parents encouraged their children to join the Seleka, with the ambition of later integrating into the ranks of the armed forces.[28]

> [...] the recruitment of children into the militias can also constitute an indispensable source of income for families, particularly as a result of the destruction of their means of existence. (ACAP 2014: 35)

The International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) reported that on 30 May 2013, at Camp Roux, the president himself, Michel Djotodia, delivered around fifty child soldiers to UNICEF. In doing so, the head of state justified the presence of these children in the ranks of the Seleka by the fact that:

> ‘[…] everyone wanted to join this rebellion; that’s why, despite the fact that we took care to send these children back, a few have stayed [with us] up to Bangui’. And he added: ‘For

[27] AFP, 31 March 2013; https://www.rtbf.be/info/article/detail_centrafrique-des-soldats-sud-africains-disent-avoir-tue-des-enfants-soldats?id=7960109). The Red Cross reported having found 78 corpses on the streets of Bangui and reported around 200 wounded and admitted to Bangui hospitals during the city’s capture by the Seleka on March 2013. https://www.rtbf.be/info/monde/detail_centrafrique-la-croix-rouge-a-trouve-78-corps-dans-les-rues-de-bangui?id=7958989

[28] It should be added that the FACA hardly existed after the seizure of power by the Seleka. The latter had meanwhile replaced the army, which it defeated on the battlefield (formations of the new recruits were even launched). While some became Seleka (see below), a few others have engaged in Anti-balaka movements. The rest of the FACA were somehow ‘unemployed’.

> some, they are already mature, but they have a small posture—which makes people believe that they are minors.' (FIDH 2013: 32)

A kind of voluntary drive, motivated by circumstances (search for livelihoods and work), certainly prevailed for many of the adolescents and youths who joined the armed groups. However, we also note cases of forced enrolment, particularly of children, as explained by our former Seleka informant cited below—an important strategy to which he himself had contributed:

> [When] we arrive in a village, we bring together all the children and intimidate them that we are going to kill them; but in reality, we use them in the end. We bring them together, and as soon as we eat together with them, their mind changes. (Interview conducted in Bangui on 14 December 2017)

The goal of the Seleka was to seriously frighten the children before proposing themselves as friends, to win their loyalty. Explaining the reasons for recruiting children, the same informant said that they were considered the most loyal; they could therefore guarantee the physical security of group leaders:

> […] being a commander and taking a child as a bodyguard is due to the fact that children are often extremely mean. With the 'little things' [drugs][29] we give them, they are not scared and are able to save the lives of leaders because they know their life depends on them. While an adult will be afraid to die because he will start thinking about his wife, his children, a child does not have this type of calculations. We never take adults as bodyguards. I give you the example of his excellence [referring to President Djotodia]; he has six bodyguards. The closest are the adults, but the other three are children who were given to him by the generals for his protection, because the children do not fear anything. Whatever happens, it is they who will sacrifice themselves to save you. For example, one will cover you with his body and his weapon and allow the other to get you out of trouble. […] The problem with adults is that they will start thinking about having two or three children; and if they die, who will

[29] It is unclear what drugs he is referring to.

care about them? He can save himself and let the leader be killed. But for a child, it's all right! It's only forward. Even if they meet their parents in combat, they will kill them.

Interviewer: Their parents? They will not refuse?

No, because they have used drugs that have transformed their minds. [...]

Interviewer: And how many children were there among the more than 130 elements in your group?

I don't know exactly. I did not count them. But personally, I had recruited at least five children for my own account. They were still very small. And we had worked together until ... even now, we are still in contact. Some are scattered; others wash vehicles in the city [Bangui]. It's really sad. (Interview, Bangui, March 2018)[30]

This informant explained to us the strategy and logic of the commanders vis-à-vis their personal protection. In the end they often win the trust of their young 'elements' and give them drugs. We lack specific information about the types of drugs, frequency of use etc. He expressed sadness about the fact that his former elements had difficulty surviving economically in the post-Seleka period. At the same time, they still visit each other, and mutual loyalty between them persisted, as declared several times by our informant. Besides having developed loyalty towards their commander, the youngsters probably also hope to be remunerated at some point—if, somehow, our informant were to benefit from some kind of DDR selection.[31]

[30] In another article we gain additional insight into the magnitude of the recruitment of children by the Seleka: 'Three months after 11 year old Hassan joined the Seleka, Hassan says, he was promoted to lieutenant and put in charge of about 50 people, including 10 other children. "At the beginning, I was scared," he says. "But later, I lost this fear. I got used to holding a gun." […] The rebels also tasked him with recruiting more children, offering him sporadic and meager rewards. "I liked my work," he says. "On special holidays, I would be given cigarettes and money."' https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/child-soldiers-central-african-republic-rise — accessed 28 August 2018.

[31] The latter is unlikely, because the young man had left the armed group by the time the Seleka came under intensified attack in Bangui and had holed up in refuge some time before returning to Bangui. He was originally

Another informant who took part in a Seleka military training in Béréngo told us the story of her training, which is informative regarding the gendered nature and brutality of the recruitment. The following text is based on an extensive interview with her in December 2017:

> Merveille (21) was 17 when she joined Seleka in 2013. She already had three children and was in conflict with her 'husband'. She established a relationship with this young man when, after the death of her father, no one could pay for her school fees. She became pregnant very soon after their first meeting. Because of her pregnancy, she was violently treated by her elder brothers for the shame it brought upon the family and, beaten and naked, was dragged to the house of the young man. The couple stayed together, having three children in a short period of time. While her husband was initially good to her, soon after the birth of their third child the relationship turned sour and Merveille returned to her mother's home with the children. It was from there that she left her children at one point in 2013 and headed towards the roadside hoping to join the Seleka and secure a job—to be able to take charge of her family—in this 'new army'. About her training with the Seleka, she said: 'After joining the group, we were sent to Béréngo for training.[32] During training, some of us died. Those of us who stayed alive continued to train [...]. We thought we needed the training to find a job. It was a question of training and being given military uniforms to work in the country. We were well trained. But we were also beaten. If you supported it bravely, you would do well; otherwise, you would leave your life there. Some of us died [...]. The one who trained us is called XX. [After our inquiry, she confirmed that he was the only trainer and a general, and that it was he who was so violent with them. He was a FACA member before joining Seleka in Damara]. He trained us from Béréngo until we returned to Camp Beal [in Bangui]. Currently, he is still there. It is the general who currently commands us in the camp [...]. All the women, big or small: they cut our hair and then we started training to become soldiers. Every time they wanted to beat you, they beat you; we were beaten, tortured, tied up in

not from Bangui, which may have made it easier for him to settle there as a former Seleka who had converted long ago to Islam but also held a Christian name that was used in the neighbourhood.

[32] For images of Seleka being trained in Béréngo with wooden guns, see: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-3118022/Forgotten-fighters-haunt-ruined-Central-Africa-palace.html

> Arbatacha,[33] etc. [...] We, the women who were part of the group sent to Béréngo, we were 50. Among us, five died. They died because they were recalcitrant. They were trained like us, but they took what they were taught as amusement. That's how they were so battered that five of them lost their lives. There were 45 of us until the arrival of the Anti-balaka, when we had to go back to the base.'

With regard to the violence she suffered, she shared the following:

> When I arrived in the training, I refused to go wash myself with the men. Suddenly, XX asked his bodyguard to tie my limbs [arms and legs] from behind. With my belly on the ground, they gave me 15 lashes. They placed me on the veranda in this position from five in the morning to eight in the evening, at which time they decided to give me food and drink. The next day I had the idea of fleeing and returning home; but I told myself that I was coming to look for work to take care of my children, so I will continue. Even if it's about dying in training, I'm going to die. That's how I stayed until I returned to Bangui with them. (Interview with Merveille in Bangui in December 2017)

When asked how her current relationship was with the commander who did this to her, she replied: 'We are in a good relationship.' Her narrative about her actual situation and the support he gave her when her mother passed away confirmed this statement: she actually sees the relationship as good and hence is not just saying so out of fear, for example.

It is obvious, as described above and by the following source, that

[33] Arbatacha, is a well-known torture technique used by armed groups in the wider region, being referred to in Uganda as 'the helicopter' (fieldwork first author). It consists of tying the limbs (arms and legs) behind the body and having the victim lie down with his or her stomach on the ground, combined with beating and maintaining a person in this position for long periods. The beatings may cause internal bleeding and lead to death. In CAR 'Arbatacha' is seen as a Chadian torture technique that entered the counry with the Chadian 'liberators' who helped Bozizé to power in 2003 (see: http://centrafrique-presse.over-blog.com/2015/12/des-jeunes-cadres-du-knk-adressent-une-lettre-ouverte-a-bozize.html.)

> the Seleka armed groups [...] both inside and outside this coalition, had political and military recruitment and training processes as well as relatively sophisticated equipment and infrastructure. (Child Soldiers International, 2016: 21)

The story of Merveille shows that the training of the Seleka at Béréngo endangered the lives of new recruits gathered in Bangui, girls included.

Merveille was not the only one to be recruited during the advance of the Seleka on Bangui or while in Bangui, and like her compatriots she wished to be part of the new Central African army:

> 'During their brief stay in power, the Seleka recruited men to help form a new army. In April 2013 alone, they recruited more than 1,300 newcomers […] We engage these young people to prevent them from becoming bandits and thieves, but unlike François Bozizé's regime, we welcome everyone, regardless of their ethnic group or religion', said Colonel Oumar Bordas to AFP at the time […] While most of the ex-Seleka members are Muslim, Patrick and his classmates in Berengo are Christian. They say that the interim government installed after the departure of Djotodia in January 2014 promised to integrate them into the national army. 'We are no longer rebels, there is no more Seleka, we are FACA (Central African Armed Forces),' said Patrick.[34]

After the retreat from Bangui by the Seleka in the aftermath of the attack by the Anti-balaka in December 2013, it is likely that many more Muslim youth, in search of protection and revenge, bolstered the ex-Seleka re-grouping up-country, and reference to this is made below.

6.3.2 Enlistment and use of children under 15 by Anti-balaka militia

[34] https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-3118022/Forgotten-fighters-haunt-ruined-Central-Africa-palace.html (published 10 June 2015) —accessed 15 October 2018.

Early 2013, after the Seleka coup, the number of children associated with armed forces or armed groups was estimated at 3,500.[35] Later in 2014, organisations reported an estimate of at least 10,000 children engaged in the various armed groups/factions scattered throughout the country (Child Soldiers International 2016: 20). In mid-2016 we heard UNICEF staff in Bangui referring to the number of 14,000.[36] While many of these children had supposedly been liberated, they could not all be helped by the UN agency, which was overwhelmed with work and hampered by a lack of funding. At the same time, the number does not include the number of 'self-demobilised' children and youth and the young people that died on the battlefield (see earlier references above to children put on the frontlines). In the meantime, numbers allegedly increased again significantly between 2016 and 2017 in an attempt to bolster the various groups' threat and in anticipation of rewards expected from DDR programmes.[37] In regard to the community-based recruitment, 'some agencies suggested that tens or hundreds of thousands of children could have been associated with Anti-balaka groups' (ibid. 22).

Among the Anti-balaka, it was observed that during this crisis, when some villages were attacked, the whole community gathered and committed themselves to defend their village or their land. In these cases, all those who physically contributed to the war effort were called Anti-balaka. In the south-eastern centre of the country, a young person who had been in the villages informed us:

> If you are not an Anti-balaka, you would have to leave the village for fear of being considered as a stranger (or even an opponent) which could betray the combatant inhabitants to their adversaries. (Informal interview in Bangui, February 2018)

Before going further, it is useful to revisit the basis for the Anti-balaka formation that 'normalised' the recruitment of young people into this militia. Indeed, before the arrival of

[35] http://www.unicef.fr/contenu/actualite-humanitaire-unicef/l-unicef-condamne-le-recrutement-d-enfants-soldats-en-rca-2013-04-12

[36] Fieldnotes, first author.

[37] https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/child-soldiers-central-african-republic-rise —accessed 28 August 2018.

the Seleka in Bangui, former president François Bozizé, whose army (the presidential guard and the FACA), were regularly defeated by the rebels of the Seleka, gave xenophobic speeches directed at the Seleka, whom he described as 'terrorist extremists' and 'invaders'. He urged young people and the population to stand up and defend their homeland with 'bows and arrows'.[38] Soon we saw the group of young people called Kokora[39] (bow in sängö) and the group of Patriots emerge, who erected barricades on all the streets of the capital in order to track down possibly infiltrating 'enemies of the nation' and to create a barrier to block the overtake of the city of Bangui. This galvanised a staggering number of youth and children, whose participation in community defence was virtually normalised in the neighbourhoods. It was therefore quite normal to fight to protect one's community and to involve everyone in the fight against the 'invaders'. Many of the same youngsters later joined the Anti-balaka, while some of them joined the Seleka before.

Several modes of enlistment were used by the Anti-balaka, apart from this popular mobilisation instigated by the president and by neighbourhood-based initiatives in Bangui. A former child associated with the Anti-balaka group at the age of 11 said he had joined the group to protect himself. After the murder of his parents in Bossangoa, he managed to escape with his sister to flee towards the bush. During their flight, they came across a group of Anti-balaka, which took them into their fold. According to our informant, he and his sister were then taken under their protection, and they guarded the camp when the others left to fight. But the decision to become an Anti-balaka fighter was made by this child later when he found that he himself could serve other purposes in the group; helping to defend those that were smaller than him. It was then that he asked his leader to be part of the armed fighters. His younger sister did domestic work and took care of the preparation of the group's protective remedies.

[38] RFI, 12 December 2012, 'RCA : François Bozizé appelle la jeunesse à défendre son pays'. It should also be added that in his speech, as referred to earlier in this report, President Bozizé was clearly urging people to take inspiration from the popular insurrection against the colonial oppression that was at the origin of the Kongo-Wara rebellion.

[39] Named COCORA in a report by ICG, where they are described as a kind of urban-Anti-balaka led by Lévi Yakété to attack the Seleka and Muslims (ICG 2015: 4).

A family disaster, flight, and seeking and finding protection with an Anti-balaka group explain the initial absorption of these children into the group. They speak of protection. Realising his maturity or abilities to fight compared with others that were protected by the group, the child later moved on to become a fighter himself.

Another illustrative case is that of a young person who was integrated into the group after being discovered by an Anti-balaka ex-FACA member. Terrorised and hiding under a bridge, he was 'rescued' to be taken 300 kilometres away from his hometown and his parents. He was then employed to monitor the Anti-balaka camp on the outskirts of Bangui, until UNICEF and Caritas agents offered him a training opportunity in agriculture.

Like for the Seleka, another young person recruited at the age of 17 in Damara by the Anti-balaka shared how children were put forwards in battles:

'

> 'I was part of the group of child soldiers. That is to say that today for example, we can send us on mission to attack ... example camp De Roux, because our base was located at BoyRabe. From there, we were going to attack the Chadian mercenaries from Camps de Roux. So if for example, there is a fight, they retain some of us [child soldiers] and we are sent to the front.' (Interview 15-08-2017, translated from French)

Asked whether he had a rank he said; 'we were called child soldiers. So we are only fighting-men' therewith explaining the primary role assigned to them.

The desire for revenge is also an aspect of the problem that should not be forgotten, although some would be tempted to think that children are too immature to think of revenge in terms of assassinations in cruel and inhumane circumstances. Deb is a teenager who is 16 years old today and whose parents were murdered by the Seleka. He told us that he continued to grow up with support from his community, but when he heard about the Anti-balaka he decided to join them to avenge the death of his parents. As he told us later, he was given a machete after losing his weapon in combat: 'I was asked to hit people in the head with it!'[40]

[40] Interview at Damala, 10 July 2019

6.4 Conclusion

In summary, it is clear that these two armed groups—the Anti-balaka and Seleka—have resorted to children in many ways. They did so by focusing on community 'enthusiasm' to defend, through means of offering protection, or by promising jobs / future perspectives, whether implicitly (through historical precedent in the country, in particular DDR programmes in the past) or explicitly, through forced conscription, or through a combination of circumstances. The children have been used for various purposes. Their roles range from that of human shields on the front lines (confirmed both for the Seleka approach above, as well as for the Anti-balaka when they engaged in their battle for Bangui, according to other young informants not cited here). Other roles we encountered were trainees (Merveille), more 'domestic' and supportive tasks such as preparing remedies, personal bodyguards, and providing sexual services (young women not referred to in this report, but interviewed in Bambari).

Our informants have made it clear that the reasons someone becomes incorporated into an armed group vary, ranging from being forced against one's will to cases containing elements of choice and opportunism and everything inbetween. What happens after one becomes a member of a group can also vary. For Merveille it was certain that she never knew how harsh the training among the new Seleka recruits would be when she opted to join the movement. At the same time, suffering maltreatment and violence committed by men in her environment was not a new circumstance for her, and she resisted the feeling of wanting to resign and decided to stay put, with the hope of obtaining a job that provided regular income for her to provide for her three children.

We have also shown that young people who lost their parents or lost track of them in the conflicts and turmoil fell prey to the mercy of others—such as former FACA / armed group leaders—and thereafter the lines between protection and abuse become more and more blurred.

Once within the armed groups, young people were likely to be indoctrinated, and hatred towards ‘the other’ (of another religious denomination or regional background) was most likely actively fed and cultivated, having an unstoppable effect on children (Child Soldiers International 2016: 25) especially when added with personal feelings of revenge after losing parents and siblings, as some of our informants reported.

Chapter 7. Discussion and conclusion

We have yet to discover the full depth and magnitude of the phenomenon of enlisting and using children in armed groups or forces in the territory CAR, both from a historical perspective and a more contemporary one.[41] We are also far from understanding how the number of children affected relates to the number of children that never set foot in or became absorbed by an armed group where they lived. Limited historical sources are available that highlight the fate of children in CAR in this respect. In this report it has been shown, however, based on the sources available that are somewhat explicit about this topic that specific forms of child enlistment and use predated the activities of the latest armed groups that formed in CAR. Child recruitment—whether by force, despair, or opportunism (often a combination is at play)—is not a new phenomenon in this sense; it simply gained more public attention in CAR in the 21st century. Shepler (2014) relates the increasing visibility of child soldiers at least partly to the increasing number of organisations operating in the field of children's rights worldwide and suggests these organisations build on Western models of childhood that do not necessarily resonate well with local conceptions of childhood. The extent and magnitude of the problem of child recruitment in CAR in more conventional armed groups seems to have significantly increased in the past years however, as a consequence of the generalised insecurity (not so new to the country), the massive, splintered number of armed groups that are currently present in the country (newer), and the failure of the state and its army to protect its territory and protect and acknowledge its citizens (not so new but reaching a peak under Bozizé, which certainly helped the Seleka to fill their ranks).

The splintering and proliferation of armed groups recently in CAR (Dukhan 2017) allows us only to guess how many children and adolescents are enrolled in these groups nowadays.

[41] And it is important to note that borders are fluid and crossed by certain groups and their child-recruits. Think only of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) as an example of this phenomenon. In that sense a country focussed perspective on the topic is not necessarily very useful, also because in the time of Sanusi's trade in child and adult slaves, these boundaries were non-existent. But for this report we focus nevertheless on the present territory of CAR.

Beautiful round estimates that are shared with the media by UNICEF and NGOs are unlikely, of course, to reflect reality, but they serve a function in fundraising and, relatedly, stimulating worldwide moral indignation. However, this is not to say that the putative numbers help sufficiently to raise the estimated funds required to address the problem—far from it.[42] Furthermore these numbers tell us little about the number of self-demobilised children and youth, or about the number of children killed on the battlefield, an aspect we draw attention to in Chapter 6 without being able to give numbers. The gendered nature of the phenomenon of enrolment is also a large and significant question. Girls and young women are less likely to come forward as former recruits, and they may move in and out of armed groups more fluidly. Our field data in this domain is admittedly limited, but the few stories we have managed to collect do not paint a promising picture for girls and young women (see the few pieces of information in Chapter 5 and the story of Merveille in Chapter 6).

We have shown that fundamental insecurity, as well as cultural practices such as initiation rituals, underlie both the need for and the habit of socialisation into self-defence in the country. The unfortunate prediction for the area is that the perception in local communities of a need for self-defence groups is likely to remain in place for reasons of generalized insecurity, especially among rural populations that have seen this need increase over past decades. We have also shown how, for youngsters, engaging with an armed group holds the promise of a future army job—a job and regular income highly valued in families for their young ones and among youths themselves in CAR. Under Bozizé we know that people went as far as changing their names in order to have a chance of being integrated into the army. We have also noted accusations of falsifying ages in order to try to enlist youngsters in the regular army (Chapter 4).

[42] At mid-2018, UNICEF's operations in the field of reintegration of the so-called former child soldiers was almost 90% underfunded. https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/child-soldiers-central-african-republic-rise — accessed 28 August 2018. See also Child Soldiers International (2016: 6) about problems with funding operations.

We have attempted to delineate changes and continuities in the recruitment and use of children by armed actors. We see clear continuities in the value children have as carriers of arms, bodyguards, and protectors of adults between the time of Sanusi (Chapter 2) and the present-day armed movements where children are preferred as bodyguards (Chapter 6). Likewise, girls remain vulnerable to sexual exploitation in most of these groups, and there is no doubt about continuities in this field (compare chapters 2, 5, and 6).

Another trend in which we see historical continuity is the recurring inability of parents to protect their children in times of distress, and 'big men' such as leaders of armed moements or external organisations offering such 'protection' instead. The definition of such 'protection' can be strongly contested, from an outside perspective. Based on different ideologies that may all claim the best interests of the child, we see that in most cases children are harmed, at least psychologically and emotionally, for they end up being used merely for others' violent and sexually exploitative purposes—or, in the minimal case, they end up not being heard. Children are a resource to many in CAR, whether to bolster a young slave force, the legitimacy of a new system (colonial/missionary schools), ethnic militias, the ability for community self-defence, or the showcasing of the good work of organisations in the field of 'liberation and integration' programmes. All the different claims they made and make on young people do at least some injustice to different aspects of children's identity and ability, and these claims rarely operate in the child's interest alone, as all visions are more or less blurred by greed, self-interest, or ideology.

In terms of scale and types of recruitment we can note differences. While numbers on recruitment numbers in the past are lacking, from more recent decades, through estimates used by UN organizations and NGO's we can tell that the phenomenon has grown significantly between 2005 and 2019. The earlier more conventionalized armed groups certainly recruited children, but not on the same scale that the (ex-)Seleka, Anti-balaka, and more recently formed armed groups have been doing.

In general, the situation affecting children in CAR was and is both dire and disturbing (for examples, see references to children in Cordell 1977, Ellison and Kassai 2017, Hopman et

al. 2017, Van Walraven 2019). Any efforts to improve the situation and assist children and youth to integrate as non-violent participants in society must take into account the historical depths of insecurity and despair affecting children and youth and their families, and the types of 'protection' of children this engendered. Specific dimensions of interdependency (for access to protection, or for access to future jobs) bring adults (including rebel commanders or FACA uncles or neighbours) and children and youth together in shared 'projects' (Ortner 2006) in which they collaborate for their own and community protection, or strive for better social positions. Only a more holistic and historical understanding of the context and motivations/factors that lead to child recruitment in armed groups can suggest likely avenues for durable change in this field.

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