



FIELD BRIEFING

FORGOTTEN AND VULNERABLE

**THE PLIGHT OF CENTRAL
AFRICAN REPUBLIC'S
CHILDREN**





Acknowledgements

This briefing was edited by James Addis and is based on a longer assessment report produced by World Vision's Central African Republic response team, and supplemented by a World Vision Good Enough Context Analysis for Rapid Response, both conducted in July 2014.

A rapid assessment survey was initiated, funded and conducted in an unfavourable security environment by World Vision and local organisation Jeunesse Unie pour la Protection de l'Environnement et le Développement Communautaire (JUPEDEC) in July 2014. The survey involved more than 11,400 people in six regions of Ombella M'Poko, one of 16 prefectures in Central African Republic, with a population of nearly 440,000 people. Participants were randomly chosen from urban and rural communities using standard sampling methods. Data from both household and community questionnaires were compiled, checked and analysed in the country's capital, Bangui.

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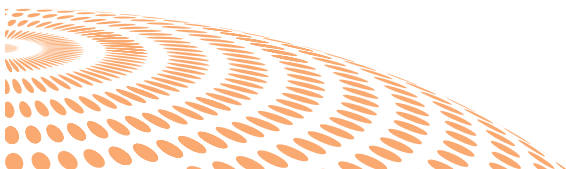
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Photograph on cover: Dalila, 20, was widowed when her husband was killed in front of her. She suffers from malnutrition; both of her children are sick and she says: "I don't know how we are going to survive." © Joelma Pereira/World Vision

Interior photographs:

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid escalation of conflict in Central African Republic (CAR) has proved horrific for the country's children. The results of a recent World Vision assessment, conducted in partnership with local partner JUPEDDEC, reveal an alarming humanitarian situation for children in the south-west of the country. People living in Ombella M'Poko region have suffered from massive displacement and violence, including extortion, rape, robbery and destruction and looting of homes, farms, health centres and schools.

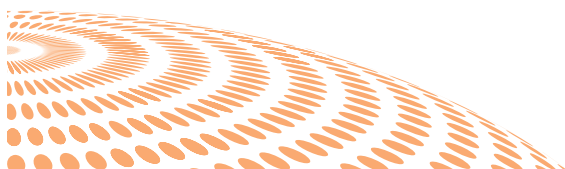
Almost 60 per cent of households are highly vulnerable, meaning they suffer serious food shortages, high rates of disease, poor sanitation, limited access to clean water, poor hygiene and limited access to schools. These deprivations deal an especially harsh blow to children who are the most vulnerable among the vulnerable. When food runs out, adults go hungry, but children can die.

To make matters worse, children have been sucked into the spiral of violence. They have taken up arms to defend their villages and, often denied access to education, they have been embraced by armed groups.

In Ombella M'Poko, almost 60 per cent of households are 'highly vulnerable', suffering serious food shortages, high rates of disease, poor sanitation, limited access to clean water, poor hygiene and limited access to schools.



Displaced children and their families take shelter in Bangui airport.



The humanitarian crisis demands an urgent response to provide immediate aid to those who are suffering, to help diffuse tensions, to restore essential infrastructure and livelihoods, and most importantly, to restore hope for children.

Children are the most vulnerable among the vulnerable.



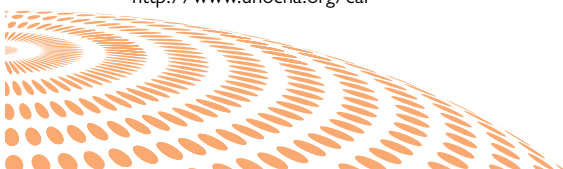
WHAT WENT WRONG

The current crisis began in 2012, when several rebel groups formed a coalition called Séléka (alliance). In March 2013, Séléka took control of the capital, Bangui, and overthrew President François Bozizé. This led to the formation of vigilante groups opposed to Séléka, a rapid escalation of hostilities between warring parties and gross violations of human rights. Reports of massacres, recruitment of child soldiers and other violent acts have triggered an International Criminal Court investigation into alleged war crimes.

The United Nations estimates that nearly half of the population of CAR, about 2.5 million people, is in need of humanitarian assistance. More than 420,000 people have fled the country and nearly half a million are internally displaced.¹ Many of those who have had to flee their homes now live in camps in and around Bangui.

- People needing aid: 2.5 million
- Refugees: 420,000
- People internally displaced: 490,000

¹ <http://www.unocha.org/car>



All these problems have occurred in one of the least-developed countries in Africa, ranked 185 out of 187 countries according to the UNDP Human Development Index.² Even before the current crisis, it suffered from poor health care, education and nutrition. For every 1,000 children born in CAR, 129 do not live to see their fifth birthday. The country has seen 10 coup d'états in its 54-year history, and its governance structures are weak. As a sign of the severity of the humanitarian crisis, CAR has been declared a 'Level 3 emergency' by the United Nations, the most serious category of emergency. Currently, only three other countries – Iraq, Syria and South Sudan – have Level 3 status.³

In response to the crisis, an International Contact Group (ICG), consisting of national, regional and international partners such as the African Union, United Nations, Economic Community of Central African States and the CAR government has been assembled to work out a peaceful solution. So far, this has yet to be achieved.

To combat insecurity, the African Union deployed a peacekeeping force (MISCA) in 2013, which was replaced in September 2014 by a United Nations peacekeeping force (MINUSCA). Alongside MINUSCA, there are military deployments from the European Union (EUFOR) and the French army (Operation Sangaris). Despite the presence of these forces, security remains a challenge. MINUSCA is understaffed and many parts of the country are difficult to access by aid agencies like World Vision because they remain insecure.

In addition to battling insecurity, humanitarian efforts are seriously underfunded. The United Nations and humanitarian organisations have put together a US\$555 million response plan for CAR, which is only 59 per cent funded as of October 2014.⁴

ABANDONED AND INACCESSIBLE

Clashes between armed groups and a stalled reconciliation process have created a volatile atmosphere in Ombella M'Poko – a problem exacerbated by the proliferation of weapons, particularly among young people. People World Vision spoke to told of how abuses perpetrated by armed groups against civilians have destroyed the social and economic well-being of households and weakened their resilience. This is made worse by the wilful destruction of essential infrastructure such as health centres and schools, which hurts children the most.

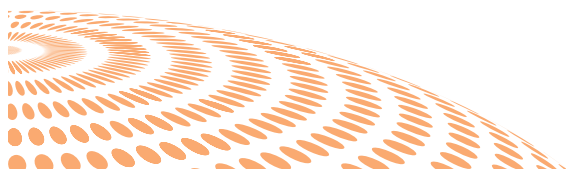
Children are dealing with the loss of their fathers – many are dead or away fighting or, in some tragic cases, have abandoned the family after the rape of the wife. The number of female-headed households, often the poorest in a community, has risen.

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² <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/table-1-human-development-index-and-its-components>

³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28785725>

⁴ <http://fts.unocha.org/>



Insecurity is more pronounced in rural areas. World Vision's assessments found that more than half the population – about 30,000 people – of Ombella M'Poko's 108 villages have fled. Those who have left are more likely to come from male-headed households as they have more resources to enable them to flee. Children entirely dependent on their mothers have had little opportunity to escape their dire circumstances.

Some of those who have been unable to escape have sought to defend themselves by arming young people with rifles and machetes. World Vision's assessments found that children have been recruited by armed groups in all six sub-prefectures of Ombella M'Poko. Children in armed factions may serve as soldiers, cooks, porters, guards and even sex slaves.⁵

Reaching the children and those left behind remains an enormous challenge. Although roads in Ombella M'Poko tend to be somewhat better than elsewhere in CAR, some have deteriorated to the point where they are unsuitable for use by four-wheel vehicles. Unofficial checkpoints, erected by armed groups, facilitate the looting of vehicles. Pedestrians and those travelling by car and motorcycle are forced to hand over cash before being allowed to proceed. The number of barriers is highly erratic and unpredictable.

Waterways, such as the river, are serving as one way for aid agencies like World Vision to access a number of villages. But this too presents a number of challenges; transport is usually a handcrafted canoe, often in poor condition; the cost of a river journey varies and can be up to US\$4 per person, putting it out of reach for most families; and the risk of accidents is high. Many parents avoid sending their children to school because of this danger.

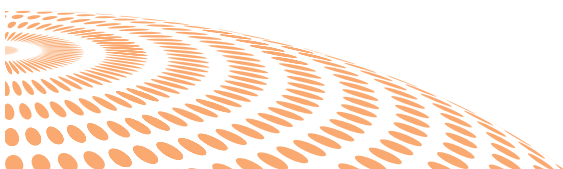
HUNGRY AND VULNERABLE

The crisis has had a devastating impact on agriculture in Ombella M'Poko, leading to severe food shortages. Granaries have been destroyed, and the area that farmers can cultivate has substantially diminished due to the looting and destruction of agricultural plots, seeds and tools. World Vision research found that food prices have increased by as much as three times in some areas, which is likely to increase food security needs in the near future.

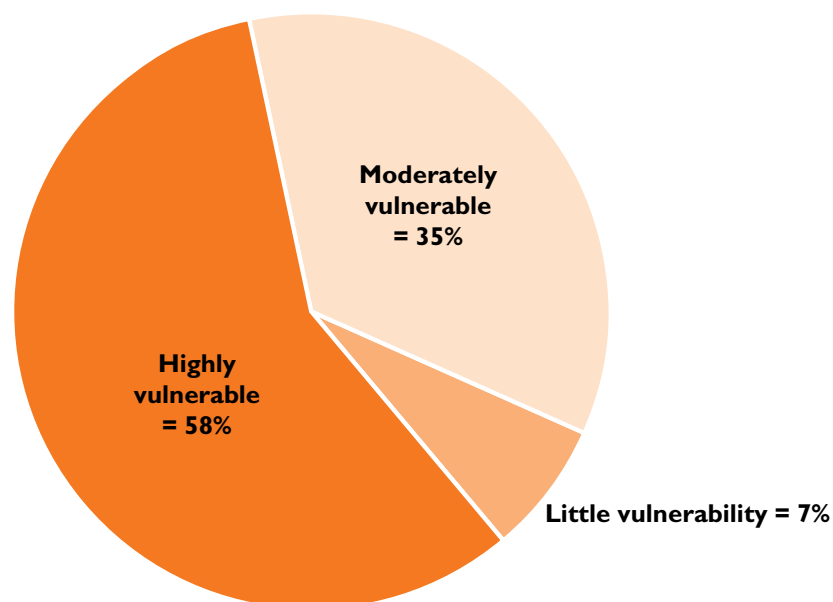
More than 14,000 children are suffering from some form of malnutrition in one region alone.

An estimated 70 per cent of people living in rural areas do not have sufficient food to meet their needs. Households headed by women are more than twice as likely to be suffering severe food shortages as those headed by men. And in a food shortage, children are in an especially risky position. Children who suffer from moderate acute malnutrition are 2.5 times more likely to die than a well-nourished child if they don't receive treatment. This increases to about nine times if the malnutrition is severe. World Vision estimates that more than 14,000 children are suffering from some form of malnutrition in Ombella M'Poko alone.

⁵ <http://www.unicefusa.org/stories/mission/emergencies/conflict/unicef-frees-1000-child-soldiers-central-african-republic/16666>



Household economic vulnerability

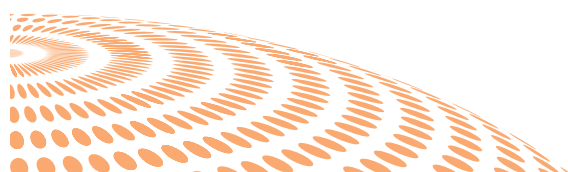


Recent assessments found that 58 per cent of households are highly vulnerable, meaning they have lost their productive assets and are suffering from poor health, poor housing, insufficient food and lack of access to education. The budget of these households is devoted entirely to food. Most survive by taking out loans, begging or offering themselves out for hire. Children are abandoning school to try to earn money to support their families.

A further 35 per cent of households are moderately vulnerable. These households have consumed all their food stocks and sold some of their animals, but so far have been able to hang on to the remainder of their productive assets and could regain their standard of living relatively easily should conditions permit. Only 7 per cent of households were classed as suffering little vulnerability, and the current crisis had little appreciable effect on their food security.

HEALTH IN CRISIS

The combination of poor quality water, poor sanitation and the destruction of health centres has inevitably led to serious effects on people's health, including high rates of sickness and death among children. During the rainy season, mosquitoes proliferate, posing an especially acute risk for displaced people hiding in the bush. Health centres that continue to operate are poorly dispersed, forcing large numbers of people, especially those in rural areas, to walk many miles to attend – an especially difficult problem for pregnant women. When patients arrive at a health centre they frequently find that there are few qualified staff. Instead they find centres staffed by volunteers with inadequate knowledge and limited access to medicines.



Poor access to clean water and sanitation has led to a rise in diarrhoea and skin diseases, particularly among children.

World Vision research found that about a third of boreholes had failed and were in need of repair, leaving thousands of people with limited access to clean water. Many families have lost containers suitable for storing water and must make journeys of more than two miles several times a day to collect it. Poor access to clean water and sanitation has led to a rise in diarrhoea and skin diseases, particularly among children.

Personal hygiene remains a major concern for people, resulting in many cases of scabies, diarrhoeal diseases and other skin diseases. Children and women are the most vulnerable. Nearly 80 per cent of people spoken to do not wash with soap, simply because they cannot afford it in light of the inflated prices for other essential supplies.

EDUCATION DISINTEGRATION

World Vision's research found that over 40 per cent of schools have been attacked by armed groups and almost 40 percent of children have dropped out of school because of violence, the need to find work to support their families or the poor condition of schools. Schools have suffered extensive looting, destruction of school property and buildings burned; there is a shortage of experienced teachers and few resources.

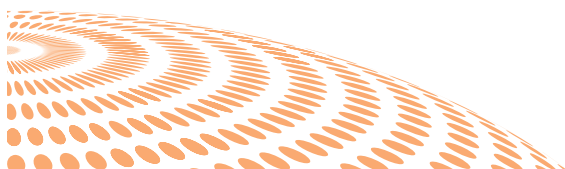
Children who do attempt to return to school report finding classrooms littered with explosives left behind by armed occupiers. Schools have also been used as places to dispose of corpses in recent armed attacks.

More than 30 schools in Ombella M'Poko are no longer operational, including all the schools in one region and all the rural schools in another. Schools that are functioning are overcrowded. Desks designed for two students must accommodate for four or five. Displaced students who attempt to attend classes outside their local area are stigmatised and therefore generally stay away.

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Students line up for a meal outside their school. Food distributions by World Vision and the World Food Programme enable students to have one good meal a day.



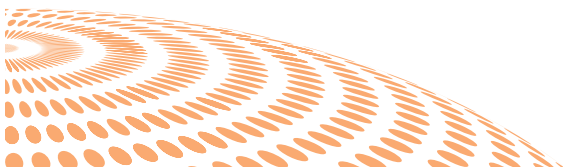
CONCLUSION

In parts of Central African Republic, every aspect of children's lives has been affected by the conflict that has rocked the country over the past year. They have witnessed violence first hand, lost family members, been forced to join in the fighting. Those who have escaped the violence now face an uncertain future. They need peace and security, access to food, clean water and sanitation, basic health services and shelter. Grave violations against children in CAR have all been documented by the UN.⁶ The life-long effects on children are appalling, and everything must be done to stop these violations

World Vision believes that there is hope for these children and that leaders and the international community should take the following actions:

- **Continue international engagement for a sustainable and inclusive peace process.** Following a lack of progress since its conference in Brazzaville in March 2014, the International Contact Group should continue to proactively lead in pushing for a cessation of hostilities and a movement towards reconciliation, through concrete implementation of the Brazzaville agreement and an inclusive political settlement. Initiatives should have the voices and needs of local communities at the centre of this process. Governments that have yet to establish a permanent presence in Bangui need to do so, in order to ensure that the crisis remains on the international agenda and that any engagement is guided by on-the-ground context analysis.
- **Increase funding, both immediate and longer term, in addition to meeting existing financial pledges.** The UN Strategic Response Plan for CAR needs to be fully funded, with an emphasis on channelling resources to underfunded sectors such as education, as well as to livelihoods and protection for children. Pledges (US\$80 million) to the newly established European Union Bekou Trust Fund for stabilisation and reconstruction need to materialise, and further donor support must be added, to enable an immediate focus on the relaunch of public and social services such as health and food security.
- **Ensure that MINUSCA has a special focus on protecting children.** The Mission needs to implement its strategy for the protection of civilians and support it with adequate resources. It should include provision of child protection advisers and child protection training for troops, including pre-deployment and in-theatre as part of the wider training on international human rights and humanitarian law. Protection of civilians should also include proactive protection measures, including the use of day and night foot patrols, community meetings and local threat analysis. Overall, MINUSCA remains massively understaffed, and the international community needs to rectify this in order to ensure sustainable security in country. Government security forces listed in the annexes to the UN Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict should be prohibited from contributing troops to MINUSCA until the Secretary-General has certified the full implementation of their action plan with the UN to end and prevent violations against children.

⁶ Secretary-General's report on Children and Armed Conflict, UN Doc A/68/878-S/2014/339, 15 May 2014.



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