

ARTICLES

SOCIAL COHESION AS PEACEBUILDING IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC AND BEYOND

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Abstract

Social cohesion has increasingly been touted as a tool of peacebuilding. Theoretically, the concept is linked with efforts to address inequality and build social capital. Practically, social cohesion is bandied about in settings such as the Central African Republic (CAR) as an important objective for building sustainable peace. We argue that peacebuilding scholars focus more on social cohesion as an end goal than they do on the policy-making and implementation aspects of the concept. After reviewing two key social cohesion initiatives in CAR, we find practitioners equally remiss in thinking about process. Also, both communities involved in the initiatives face challenges in grasping the complexity of the horizontal and vertical linkages that sustain conflict and which need to be restructured to build social cohesion. The paper documents these shortcomings and suggests tentative ways forward.

Keywords: social cohesion, peacebuilding, Central African Republic, state–society relations, inequality, vertical linkages, horizontal linkages

Introduction

The web of social relations that connects individuals, groups and communities is one of the most recurrent victims of civil wars. Wrecked by violence (Downes 2008; Kalyvas 2006), the fabric of society is torn asunder by war. Nevertheless, in the past 20 years, post-conflict reconstruction has mostly focused on the twin tasks of state- and institution-building (Autesserre 2014; Sisk 1996; Paris 2004; Paris & Sisk 2009; Wolff 2009). In spite of the considerable human and material resources invested in post-conflict reconstruction, the empirical record is mixed, with an often-touted (although controversial) figure according to which 85% of peace agreements do not survive the five-year mark.

In recent years, and in response to mounting criticism of post-conflict reconstruction practices, social cohesion has become an important part of the peacebuilding toolkit. The social cohesion approach to peacebuilding is also part of a new wave of scholarship that seeks to grapple with the diversity and complexity of peacebuilding contexts. Practitioners and academics argue that social cohesion can reduce inequalities (Stewart 2010) and contribute to (re-)building trust (Chan et al. 2006). It can also build bridges within (bonding) and among (bridging) communities (Putnam et al. 1994), and link state and society. Social cohesion provides a framework that integrates multiple strands of the peacebuilding literature. Not only does it address horizontal inequalities, a root cause of conflict (Stewart 2008), it also bridges top-down and bottom-up

approaches to peacebuilding (Lederach 1997), and provides a blueprint for conflict transformation that should result in more resilient societies (Lederach 2003). In spite of its theoretical appeal and of the urgency of achieving sustainable policy successes in the realm of post-conflict reconstruction, the social cohesion approach to peacebuilding remains underdeveloped.

To date, the literature has spent much time specifying *why* social cohesion closes the inequality gap and builds trust but comparatively little, if any, time explaining *how* social cohesion activities achieve such outcomes. Equally puzzling for a literature that emerged out of a critical stance vis-à-vis the 'naiveté' of institutional approaches and their inability

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to grasp the complexity of post-conflict environments, many analyses of social cohesion as peacebuilding focus narrowly on 'community peacebuilding' (see for instance Murithi 2002), thereby reducing social cohesion to the existence of social capital. For their part, peacebuilding actors have yet to fully integrate the diverse societal relationships captured by the terms 'horizontal' and

'vertical' linkages in the design of their 'social cohesion' interventions. Drawing on the case of the Central African Republic (henceforth CAR),¹ the paper explores the contribution of social cohesion to peacebuilding.

Ranked third worst of 180 states on the Fund for Peace's Failed States Index 2014 and ranked 185th out of 187 countries in the UN Human Development Index for 2014, CAR has been described as a failed or 'phantom state' (International Crisis Group [ICG] 2007, 1). The Central African state has lacked any meaningful institutional capacity since the fall of Emperor Bokassa (ICG 2007). Following recent events in 2012–2013, it is seen to have collapsed and ceased to exist (ICG 2014, 1). A dismal development record, poor governance, and a history of successive coups have contributed to the political exclusion of a majority of the country's citizens, particularly those living outside the capital and notably the minority Muslim population. The 'Seleka'-led coup of March 2013 that brought to power the first-ever Muslim president triggered a series of events that deeply transformed the landscape of the conflict. Not only was the coup accompanied by widespread community-level violence, it also sparked a wave of revenge attacks targeting Muslim communities and ultimately resulted in ethno-religious cleansing.

Given the societal consequences of the conflict, it is not surprising that social cohesion is being touted as particularly relevant as the international community gears up to help CAR build peace. Indeed, a plethora of activities, policies, institutions and programmes fall under this broad label. This paper reviews two of the more important social cohesion initiatives in CAR to date, the 'Religious Platform' and the activities of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). It draws upon the literature to assess these efforts in terms of two dimensions: their focus on process which, we argue, is key to building relations of trust and understanding, and the way in which they frame vertical and horizontal linkages within Central African society. We find that, as they currently stand, social cohesion initiatives are unlikely to achieve their objective of contributing to sustainable peacebuilding in CAR. We argue that the application of the concept in CAR is problematic for two reasons: it focuses mostly on de-escalating violence rather than building bonds of trust, and it privileges horizontal at the expense of vertical linkages. The paper concludes with suggestions to improve the theory and practice of social cohesion interventions.

Social Cohesion and/in Peacebuilding

Social cohesion was imported into the study of war and peace from the field of public policy. In an influential article, Jane Jenson (2007) argues that it emerged from a recognition that classic neo-liberalism had hit a political and ideational wall. Social cohesion, she notes, 'became a key word in policy discussion and warnings appeared of the need to balance attention to economic restructuring with caution about societal cohesion in order to sustain that restructuring' (Jenson 2010, 4). From this perspective, social cohesion is relevant to designing 'public policies and institutions that address the causes and effects of poverty, social exclusion, social distrust, and political marginalization' (Cox & Sisk 2012, 4).

According to Berger-Schmitt (2002, 404–405 cited in Cox & Sisk 2012, 4), social cohesion can be defined and delineated along two dimensions:

1. The inequality dimension concerns the goal of promoting equal opportunities and reducing disparities and divisions within a society.
2. The social capital dimension concerns the goal of strengthening social relations, interactions and ties.

In other words, social cohesion is about reducing horizontal inequalities, an important driver of conflict (Stewart 2008). It is also about building social capital (Putnam et al. 1994). But building social cohesion requires effective state institutions. Indeed, the literature on social cohesion in developing countries (i.e., from the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Development Assistance Committee [OECD-DAC], the UN, inter alia) finds that development outcomes depend on effective institutions (i.e., institutions with 'room to manoeuvre'). These, in turn, depend on the level of social cohesion — defined as 'the nature and extent of social and economic divisions within society' (Easterly et al. 2006, 105).

Social cohesion has been used in a variety of ways. Initially tied to social development, it has been identified as a main policy goal by the OECD and the EU. The Council of Europe and the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean have highlighted social inclusion and social integration as important facets of the concept. For the Council, 'social cohesion is the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding polarization' (Jenson 2010, 7). This is not about homogeneity to the detriment of diversity; it is about managing and fostering diversity through combating social exclusion and poverty on the one hand and creating solidarity such that exclusion will be minimised on the other (Jenson 2010, 7).

It is no surprise, given the varied meanings and the three dimensions of social cohesion (horizontal equality, social capital, and effective institutions) that the concept found its way into the literature on peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. Social cohesion

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entered the discussion at a time when criticism began to mount against the perceived limitations of politico-institutional approaches to peacebuilding. Initially, research on peacebuilding focused broadly on state-building (Call & Wyeth 2008; Paris & Sisk 2009), power-sharing (Sisk 1996; Hartzell & Hoddie 2007), and democratisation (Jarstad & Sisk 2008; Zürcher et al. 2013). Critical voices evaluated these approaches as top-down, influenced by a liberal ethos,

homogenising and thus incapable of yielding sustainable peace (Mac Ginty 2008; Richmond & Franks 2009). Instead, they argued, attention must be paid to individuals and groups, culture and sub-state forms of engagement (Autesserre 2010; Cousens et al. 2001; Donais 2012; Lederach 1997).

This opened the door for 'social cohesion' to enter the debate. Indeed, the concept captures two important phenomena. Social cohesion refers to a set of public policies devised to address inequalities, which are linked to the onset of conflict. An entire stream of the literature on the causes of civil wars argues that horizontal inequalities (inequalities between societal groups) provide a spark for mobilisation into armed groups, particularly where the state has created or fostered these inequalities (Cederman et al. 2013; Stewart 2000). Social cohesion also refers to public policies intended to strengthen the bonds of solidarity within society. As noted in the introduction, the bonds of trust and solidarity are typically the first victims of civil wars. While this is often taken to mean that relationships between warring communities or groups are broken, war equally affects relationships within communities or groups. Both state and non-state armed actors use violence not just to punish the enemy but to induce compliance, prevent desertion, and control territory (Kalyvas 2006). At war's end, it is important to rebuild bridges between communities, and it is equally important to restore bonds of trust within groups (Colletta & Cullen 2000; Weinstein et al. 2009).

Leveraging Social Cohesion to Improve Peacebuilding Outcomes

In spite of the concept's appropriateness to the study of civil wars and to the design of peacebuilding interventions, the study and practice of social cohesion as peacebuilding have yet to fully embrace the potential of this framework. In academic circles, analysis of social cohesion as a tool of peacebuilding remains quite generic. The concept has mostly been used to refer to the end goal of rebuilding trust and social capital and less to the range of instruments likely to achieve this objective. Peacebuilding researchers have paid relatively little attention to the study of social cohesion policies and programmes.² Given the context within which social cohesion was brought into debates on peacebuilding, this is understandable. The concept has been associated with a critique of top-down institutional approaches to state-building as peacebuilding; it has been linked with bottom-up ethnographic and sociological research on the role of civil society in peacebuilding (Murithi 2002; Paffenholz 2010). In other words, social cohesion has become divorced from the field of policy-making from which it originated.

The study of social cohesion as peacebuilding needs to reconnect with its sub-field of origin to be useful in improving peacebuilding outcomes. One cannot dispense with the study of agenda setting, policy formulation, policy implementation and policy evaluation

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to connect objectives, policies, programmes and outcomes with the realities of post-conflict societies. Has the agenda been set based on careful conflict analysis to identify factors contributing to weak social cohesion? Have policies been formulated to target these factors? How have programmes been designed to implement policies? What of the process underlying policy design and programme implementation? Studying social cohesion as a tool of peacebuilding requires attention to process, an understanding of the nuts and bolts of who participates, in what kinds of activities, and how.

Studies of social cohesion in/as peacebuilding must also avoid the trap of reducing efforts to rebuild social cohesion to inter-community peacebuilding. The academic literature uses vertical linkages to mean relations between the state and society; it also uses horizontal linkages to refer to relations between and among societal groups. Such stylised understandings of vertical and horizontal linkages miss the multiplicity of power relations within society. This multiplicity lies at the heart of conflict dynamics and it needs to be fully understood and analysed for the development of effective social cohesion programmes to build peace.

For instance, the notion of vertical linkages should be unpacked to distinguish the relationship of the state to actors in the capital from its relationship to actors in the periphery. Most recent conflicts unfold in centralised settings in which the capital city has a privileged position as the seat of power, the hub of economic life, and as the main (sometimes only) recipient of development funds. This is an essential part of the grievances that set Southern Sudanese and Darfuris against Khartoum and Northern Malians against Bamako. The relationship between state and capital vs. state and periphery (Boone 2003; Herbst 2000) is key to understanding conflict settings such as CAR.

Likewise, academics distinguish between bonding and bridging linkages to describe the bonds that develop within vs. between communities. With geographical dislocation of communities (internal displacement and refugee flows) a defining feature of post-conflict environments (Lischer 2007), one must also account for linkages such as those between members who stayed behind and those who left or between internally displaced persons and host communities. In CAR, a country with 4.5 million inhabitants, the violence of 2012–2013 has left 894,421 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 252,865 refugees.³ The destruction of property is such that most will not return to their places of origin. In this instance, social cohesion cannot simply be understood as inter-community bridging given the dislocation and likely restructuring of communities.

Not all research on social cohesion in/as peacebuilding is guilty of stylising horizontal and/or vertical linkages but research on social cohesion interventions has often been reduced to the analysis of Community Driven Development and curriculum interventions. Such interventions have been divorced from systematic consideration of the broader context (King et al. 2010, 366).

We now turn to the case of CAR to highlight how different actors think about, develop policies around, and attempt to rebuild social cohesion in the wake of conflict. As we will show, some of the shortcomings identified above play themselves out in social cohesion initiatives in CAR. It is still too early to pass judgment on the ongoing social cohesion initiatives that we review since they are very recent. However, the cases serve as a heuristic device to further our claim that academic research on social cohesion and/in peacebuilding cannot dispense with an analysis of policy-making and programme implementation, and that programming in the same field cannot do without a fine-grained analysis of horizontal and vertical linkages.

Conflict and Communal Relations in CAR

CAR effectively illustrates the use and misuse of social cohesion as a tool of peacebuilding. Fuelled by profound inequalities, weak social cohesion is at the heart of conflict dynamics in the country. CAR has suffered repeated cycles of conflict that are largely a result of the political instrumentalisation of these inequalities. Together with violence, they have nurtured a profound lack of trust between state and society and, more

recently, between communities. Social cohesion is therefore a declared objective of local, national, and international organisations involved in peacebuilding in CAR.

A brief summary of the recent history of the country is in order before describing the factors that make CAR a good case to study social cohesion as a peacebuilding tool. The most recent violence in CAR began in December 2012 when the Seleka ('alliance' in the Sango language) began their march on Bangui. A coalition of four mainly Muslim rebel groups, the Seleka overthrew President François Bozizé on 13 March 2012. They installed their leader, Michel Djotodia, the first Muslim hailing from the north-eastern Vakaga province to become president in CAR.

Djotodia did not wield effective control over the Seleka. Widespread looting, clashes and atrocities, targeting mostly CAR's non-Muslim populations, marred his presidency. In response, anti-Balaka (anti-machete) local self-defence groups began to form. These were funded and supplied by Bozizé and other politicians deposed by the Seleka (ICG 2013). Djotodia dissolved the Seleka in September 2013 but, in December, anti-Balaka combatants attacked Muslim neighbourhoods in Bangui, exacting revenge with unprecedented cruelty involving public mutilations and the systematic destruction of property. Djotodia resigned in January 2014 and a transitional government under the leadership of Catherine Samba-Panza, the former mayor of Bangui, was sworn in. One year later, violence has abated but not ceased in spite of the deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission.

Horizontal and vertical inequalities

Three categories of inequalities have fed conflict in CAR. They range across social, political, economic and geographic dimensions and are both horizontal and vertical in nature. These inequalities sometimes overlap creating a multidimensional web of grievances.

Political instrumentalisation and blatant exploitation of ethnicity are to blame for deepening horizontal inequalities in CAR. The country boasts a multitude of ethnic groups who speak different languages. Christians, including Catholics and Protestants, make up approximately 50% of the population. Another 35% hold indigenous beliefs and a small minority of 15% are Muslim. Still, the various groups speak a common language, Sango. Specialists argue that the real distinction in CAR is between the lifestyles of two groups: the people of the savannah and the people of the river (Lacoste 1993, 192).

Under André Kolingba (president 1981–1993) ethnic identity became '... the crucial factor in the political culture of the Central African Republic' (Berg 2008, 20). A member of the southern Yakoma tribe (Amnesty International 2002), Kolingba appointed members of his ethnic group to top positions in the state, particularly the armed forces. Ange-Félix Patassé, a politician who grew up near the northern city of Paoua where the Kaba are the ethnic majority, replaced him in 1993. Patassé immediately reshuffled the presidential guard, demoting the Yakoma and replacing them with Kabas. A cycle of shifting horizontal inequalities was thus created with each new head of state favouring his ethnic group at the expense of others.

Inequality between the political and commercial spheres of society also feeds conflict in CAR. The division is primarily horizontal in nature. It pits non-Muslims who occupy most of the political and bureaucratic domain against Muslims who are the primary commercial actors and have been informally barred from entering the civil service. Southerners refer to Muslims, the majority of whom come from the northeast of the

country, as ‘foreigners’ and they associate CAR’s Muslims with Sudanese or Chadians. Their travel activities are monitored and they are often denied full citizenship (Fiedler 2014, 3). According to Abakar Saboune, a former rebel leader and presidential adviser to Djotodia, ‘Muslims have long had difficulty applying for identity cards and have been excluded from jobs and education. . . . Even the new president adopted a Christian name, Michel, to avoid discrimination, . . .’ (Gall 2013). Several interlocutors in Bangui have underlined the Muslim practice of giving one’s child a Christian name to broaden their future horizons.

During the recent crisis, this division fuelled the targeting of Muslim traders and business people by the anti-Balaka. ‘Bangui neighbourhoods such as PK5, once thriving with Muslim businesses, now resemble ghost towns. . . . the Muslim population has dropped from around 7,000 to just 1,000 here’ (Smith 2014). Commercial neighbourhoods and businesses were systematically destroyed with precision and the primarily Muslim diamond and gold collectors and traders were directly targeted and chased out of the country (e.g., ICG 2014, 11).

A dramatic line of vertical inequality sets the country’s elite apart from the rest of society. Since independence, a small political and military elite has run the country and benefited from natural resources and international aid money, ignoring the rest of the population (Conciliation Resources 2013, 5). Government bureaucrats have exceptional privileges and operate as a self-benefiting ‘parasitic caste’ at the expense of the country’s population (ICG 2007, 4). A ‘series of kleptocratic regimes’ have enriched themselves through natural resources while entangling peacefully coexisting ethnic groups into competition between one another (Berg 2008, 18).

Vertical inequality separates the capital city of Bangui (located in the south) from the rural periphery (particularly the northern prefectures of Vakaga and Bamingui-Bangoran). A popular expression is that ‘the state stops at PK12’, referring to a point at the outer edge of the capital (ICG 2014, 18). CAR’s mostly Muslim northeast is described as the most extreme hinterland in north-central Africa, with completely inaccessible overland contact with the capital for half the year and a local population that does not speak the national language (Giroux et al. 2009, 10). Inequality is most evident ‘in the area of government expenditure: Bangui, home of 30% of the Central African population exhausts nearly 90% of state spending’ (Fiedler 2014, 3). A relatively recent briefing to the World Bank’s Board identifies the state’s virtual absence beyond Bangui, the weak social fabric, and lack of social cohesion between the capital city and rural populations as key drivers of conflict and fragility (World Bank 2014, 5).

Repeated cycles of conflict

Inequalities have played an important role underlying repeated patterns of conflict and instability in CAR since independence. This is evident in a series of successive coups d’états and numerous armed rebellions. The same pattern was illustrated during the brutal communal conflict of 2012–2013.

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The country is in a state of ‘permanent rebellion’ (ICG 2007, 21–29). Leaders have come to power through coups d’états in 1966 (Jean-Bedel Bokassa), 1979 (David Dacko), 1981 (André Kolingba) and 2003 (François Bozizé). Three military mutinies were launched in 1996, Bozizé attempted an unsuccessful coup in 2001, and Djotodia led an armed

rebellion in 2013. This vicious cycle of conflict is grounded in and perpetuates inequality. According to the International Crisis Group, '... people respond to poor governance by taking up arms; the rebels take power; distribution of the faded finery of the state then creates malcontents, who join the previous holders of power in taking up arms to recover their sinecures' (ICG 2007, 22).

Recent communal violence is another expression of inequalities in CAR. The ranks of the predominantly Muslim Seleka included large numbers of angry and alienated youth whose marginalisation was both economic and political.⁴ Similar to previous rulers, the Seleka concentrated power in the hands of a small elite. They also coordinated a campaign of mass killings, sexual violence and looting that targeted primarily non-Muslims. Anti-Balaka self-defence groups rose up against the Seleka and were professionalised when former members of the national army joined their ranks. In turn, they targeted the Seleka and the Muslim community who were seen as collaborators, with an equally horrifying display of violence.

A society riven with deep mistrust

Inequality and violence have bred mistrust in CAR. Against the background of a state unable to project a '... Weberian monopoly on the legitimate use of violence in the hinterlands ...' (Giroux et al. 2009, 10), rural communities live with a constant threat of rebellion. The state's inability to protect citizens has given rise to a multitude of armed groups. These groups use force to redress inequalities and/or to protect communities but, invariably, they also sow fear and destruction.

Even in Bangui where the state was still present, the minimal trust the population may have had in state institutions has disappeared altogether following the recent crisis. The government is seen as nothing more than a 'patronage exercise', in which positions of authority are handed out on the basis of ethnicity and clientelism (ICG 2014, i). This mistrust has made it difficult for the transitional government to convince the ex-Seleka and the anti-Balaka to put down weapons.

Although religion has long been an undercurrent of tension, mostly expressed through disputes across rough lines associated with religious identity (e.g., between mostly Muslim nomadic groups that breed cattle and generally non-Muslim sedentary farmers; between Muslim traders and others who view them as foreigners), explicit religious tension has not been part of the country's history (Conciliation Resources 2013, 4). During the recent crisis, however, Christians feared that Muslims would avenge decades of neglect and marginalisation and worried that radical Islamist actors would attempt to impose rule. In turn, many ordinary Muslims feared a possible backlash from Christians in response to the Seleka (Conciliation Resources 2013, 4). A lack of trust between religious groups now dominates CAR (Conciliation Resources 2013, 4) and the 2013–2014 clashes have taken a sectarian character (ICG 2013, 4). While the religious dimension cannot be denied, much of what has happened has been motivated by revenge and the promise of economic gain (Agger 2014, 6), reflecting the interplay of the inequalities and cycles of violence.

Building Peace through Social Cohesion in CAR

Following the crisis in December 2013, there has been an explosion of international initiatives grounded in or using social cohesion as a guiding concept. The mandate of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African

Republic (MINUSCA) includes support to the Transitional Authorities in areas related to social cohesion (e.g., mediation and reconciliation at local and national levels, inclusive national dialogue, etc.). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is in the

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final stages of approving a large multi-year project focused heavily on social cohesion. The Danish Refugee Council, Mercy Corps, Cooperazione Internazionale (COOPI), the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), Norwegian Refugee Council and Finnish Church Aid all work on

issues grounded in and designed to promote social cohesion. Two of the earliest and most important initiatives are discussed below, notably the efforts of the CAR Interfaith Religious Platform and the work of the IOM.

Social cohesion initiative 1: the Interfaith Religious Platform

The Interfaith Religious Platform is the most sustained national social cohesion initiative. It is a joint initiative of Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga, president of the Episcopal Conference, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, president of the Islamic Community, and Reverend Nicolas Guerkoame-Gbangou, president of the Evangelical Alliance. The Platform has travelled across CAR to initiate interreligious dialogue and Platform members have launched initiatives to ‘reconcile the hearts and minds of Central Africans’. They have broadcast calls for restraint and pleas for forgiveness on radio, they have set up community peace committees in Bangui, in Haute-Kotto, Haut-Mbomou, Mbomou and Vakaga prefectures. Platform members have sensitised the international community to CAR’s situation during a tour that took them to the United Nations, Washington, DC, the Vatican, Geneva and Berlin in March 2014. They plan to establish inter-confessional schools, faith-neutral health centres, joint farming projects, and they advocate the holding of joint Sunday celebrations for Christians and Muslims (Fiedler 2014, 7). The religious leaders also hope to equip villages with radios to broadcast messages of reconciliation.

The main declarations attributable to the Platform, the Bangui declarations I (October 2013) and II (February 2014), were joint appeals by CAR’s Christian religious authorities. Their language reflects the deep ambiguity of CAR citizens vis-à-vis the role of religion as a driver of conflict. The Bangui I Declaration argues that Christians and Muslims have always coexisted peacefully in CAR and ends with a plea to the international community to ‘fly rapidly to the rescue, to prevent the country from falling into the hands of extremists and religious fanatics’ (Worldwatch Monitor 2013).

In spite of its worthy efforts, the Platform can be faulted for not paying due attention to process, to the complexity of vertical and horizontal linkages, and to the manner in which these perpetuate cycles of conflict. The localities where Platform members have set up peace committees are not the most strategic. These have been generally set up in villages that have escaped the worst of the violence or where only one community remains. Further, peace committees are primarily mechanisms for de-escalation. Information gathered while on assignment in CAR suggests that they document incidents of violence, attempt to dissuade would-be attackers, and act as deterrents. While valuable, these activities are a far cry from rebuilding broken bonds between communities.

The Platform describes its approach as grassroots. This characterisation is questionable. ‘It can be argued that the initiatives of the three religious leaders simply constitute an example of chiefs who champion reconciliation’ (Fiedler 2014, 8), but none of them is fully

representative of the communities for which he speaks. While Archbishop Nzapalainga promotes national dialogue, a local priest in the flashpoint city of Bossangoa has repeatedly been reported to fan the flames of anti-Muslim sentiment. Imam Kobine Layama courageously spoke against Seleka attacks on non-Muslims but he has lost support within his own Muslim community. During a visit to the only remaining mixed neighbourhood of Bangui, PK-5, in March 2014, local notables were angry that Imam Kobine had not visited or called them since the anti-Balaka attacks of December 2013. Kobine is also a 'river man' who hails from the Mbomou prefecture, the same area of the country as the Archbishop, while most Muslims are 'people of the savannah' who come from the north-eastern Vakaga and Bamingui-Bangoran prefectures.

While the Religious Platform bills its work as social cohesion, the nature of its activities and the locales where they are carried out are limited in their ability to rebuild trust and linkages between CAR's communities. The Platform has contributed to de-escalating violence but this is not the same as rebuilding social cohesion.

Social cohesion initiative 2: the IOM Community Stabilization Project

The IOM, a part of the UN Country Team, has been active in CAR since September 2013. Social cohesion is central to its Community Stabilization Project that targets the few remaining mixed Muslim and Christian communities in the capital, and aims 'to revitalize local economies in Bangui and promote social cohesion after months of sectarian violence' (IOM 2014a, 1). The initiative involves three sets of complementary activities including cash for work, rehabilitation of community infrastructure, and promotion of social cohesion (IOM 2014b, 9–10). Each area incorporates elements of social cohesion.

Cash for work efforts seek to revitalise the local economy, support community recovery and promote social cohesion. In PK-5 where the IOM began a pilot programme, mixed groups of youths clean the streets and public areas, rehabilitate community spaces such as markets and schools, and collect garbage at locations such as the neighbourhood mosque occupied by Muslim IDPs who flocked into PK-5 in December 2013 seeking refuge and protection. Money is injected into the local economy through these short-term work opportunities that are implemented to promote peaceful coexistence. The rehabilitation of community infrastructure targets community buildings and public systems. Participatory community meetings prioritise projects that meet local needs. The explicit social cohesion activities promote dialogue and cooperation.

The IOM brings two sides of the community together to achieve ends that benefit the community as a whole. Local authorities, traditional leaders and community associations are involved in the selection of cash for work crews and projects. This promotes openness and transparency and mitigates possible conflict (IOM 2014b, 9–10). In PK-5, the local mayor and district council members are key interlocutors of the IOM team. Rehabilitation projects are chosen in community meetings that are facilitated to ensure decent participation, and in close coordination with local authorities and the IOM to make sure urgent needs are addressed (IOM n.d.).

The social cohesion efforts seek to rebuild and strengthen horizontal linkages between Muslims and Christians in capital city neighbourhoods. Many of the people had lived together for years as neighbours prior to the crisis. Youth get special attention due to their heavy role in the violence that transpired, and their importance to future community relations. It must be said, however, that in spite of these efforts, the IOM's programme in PK-5 brings together the remaining Christian and Muslim residents of the area, not the

youth who have joined the Seleka and the anti-Balaka. In fact, in spring 2014, anti-Balaka youth continued to roam the outskirts of PK-5, regularly attacking it.

The IOM's social cohesion work does not target vertical linkages significantly. Although traditional leaders and local authorities are involved in selecting projects and initiatives, the focus is not on strengthening relations between local communities and the state nor other members of the country's elite. For instance, it is telling that, although aware of the criticisms levelled at Imam Kobine Layama by Muslims in PK-5, the IOM team did not take the initiative to attempt to restore links between him and the local Muslim community. While a government of transition had been in place for over two months at the time we were in CAR, to our knowledge, the IOM had also not involved the ministers in charge of national reconciliation or humanitarian and social affairs to help maintain social cohesion in the only remaining mixed population area of the capital.

Observations and lessons

Although the review and analysis of these two social cohesion initiatives are cursory, they provide initial confirmation that shortcomings identified in the literature are reflected in practice.

In regard to process, more attention is directed towards preventing further deterioration than building trust for the longer term, despite the fact that social cohesion discourse informed these initiatives. This was especially evident with the Interfaith Religious Platform. The IOM initiative was more sophisticated in regard to how peacebuilding is done, although this should not come as a surprise given the organisation is a professional international development actor.

Both social cohesion initiatives focus primarily on horizontal linkages between religious groups but the relative inattention to vertical linkages is troubling. Vertical linkages are the main channels of religious mobilisation in CAR. As the religious leaders have recognised, the foundations for a religious conflict were well laid by elites.

Bozizé started to turn the people against Muslims,' Imam Kobine Layama said. 'He said the Seleka were Arabs, that they would come to enforce Islam and change your schools into Quranic schools. He told the people, "Take up your knives and axes and machetes," and he identified Muslim neighbourhoods by name. So the spirit was created. (Gall 2013)

Vertical linkages are thus key to the effective peacebuilding of social cohesion initiatives.

Concluding Thoughts

This paper set out to assess the use of social cohesion as/in peacebuilding. It argued that the literature suffers from relative inattention to process; it also warned of risks associated with a stylisation of horizontal and vertical linkages. The review of social cohesion initiatives in CAR suggested that these shortcomings are reflected in practice. Both the literature on this topic and the social cohesion work in CAR are relatively recent and any analysis and conclusions, therefore, are tentative. Preliminary conclusions suggest new lines of academic inquiry and the need to forge stronger links between theory and practice.

Social cohesion is often defined as an end state in the literature on peacebuilding. It must be understood as a tool, a set of policies intended to reduce inequalities, produce social

solidarity and rebuild trust. Thus, peacebuilding research must engage with the policy-making processes involved in social cohesion initiatives implemented in peacebuilding settings. This involves better analysis and assessment of agenda setting, policy formulation and policy implementation. Social cohesion can be criticised as an ambitious unattainable goal given the weakness of most post-conflict states and the limited capacities and political will of international actors. In the specific context of CAR, it may be unrealistic to expect individual social cohesion programmes to achieve their objective in the short term or on their own. It remains important to ask whether programmes are designed in a way that can deliver even limited social cohesion and, if not, to address their shortcomings.

As Colletta and Cullen (2000) put it, social cohesion is the integration of vertical linking and horizontal bridging of social capital. If so, then social cohesion initiatives cannot overlook state actors and institutions. Some might argue that the weakness of post-conflict states prevents them from formulating and implementing nationwide social cohesion initiatives. Still, they should be seen as partners and their capacity to formulate and design such policies should be strengthened. Although national policy processes

No community peacebuilding is sustainable if divorced from a broader social contract between the state and society.

may need to be supported (and sometimes initially carried) by international actors, they must ultimately be designed to address issues of inequality, stamp out cycles of conflict and, in the process, rebuild trust. No community

peacebuilding is sustainable if divorced from a broader social contract between the state and society. This is the price to ensure legitimacy, national ownership, institutional strengthening and sustainability. In CAR, international actors bemoan the weakness of the state while paying lip service to its importance as a partner. To date, they have failed to engage meaningfully with whatever little state capacity exists in the country, preferring to go it alone.

Peacebuilding research and practice must also grapple with real-world complexities. Social cohesion offers significant potential to do this by focusing the lens squarely on policy formulation and implementation. Sophisticated conflict analysis and actor mapping are the bases of sound policy formulation. They are also the foundations of properly designed social cohesion initiatives. This requires the willingness and ability to go beyond stylised notions of vertical and horizontal linkages to understand the myriad ways in which rulers, citizens, groups, communities, and regions are interconnected. In terms of policy implementation, social cohesion puts forth notions of consensus-based decision-making, joint implementation and the identification and fulfilment of mutual needs. More particularly, joint decision-making across lines of inequality or mistrust can be used to design, prioritise or select specific projects that are then implemented jointly as means of building and reinforcing mutual trust and interdependence.

Social cohesion as peacebuilding can benefit significantly by forging stronger and more focused bridges between academics and practitioners. Academics must look to policy and practice in the field as a source of material to deepen their understanding of the manner in which social cohesion contributes to peacebuilding. Practitioners should draw upon more sophisticated analyses of horizontal and vertical linkages to design programmes to target the right actors and processes, those capable of contributing to rebuilding social cohesion in exceptionally challenging environments.

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Endnotes

¹ Although the authors did not conduct fieldwork for the specific purpose of this paper, both have spent extended periods of time in the Central African Republic on assignment for the United Nations. Privileged information obtained during these assignments was not used in this paper.

² While research has been conducted on the impact of development aid on social cohesion, democratic attitudes, local participation in policy-making and the like (Weinstein et al. 2009; King et al. 2010; King 2013, there is little or no research assessing programmes designed to increase social cohesion with the partial exception of research on peace education.

³ Data from the UNHCR website: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e45c156.html>, accessed 8 December 2014.

⁴ The ranks of the ex-Seleka also included a number of foreign fighters from Chad and Sudan.

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