

# Healing personal trauma to restore communities

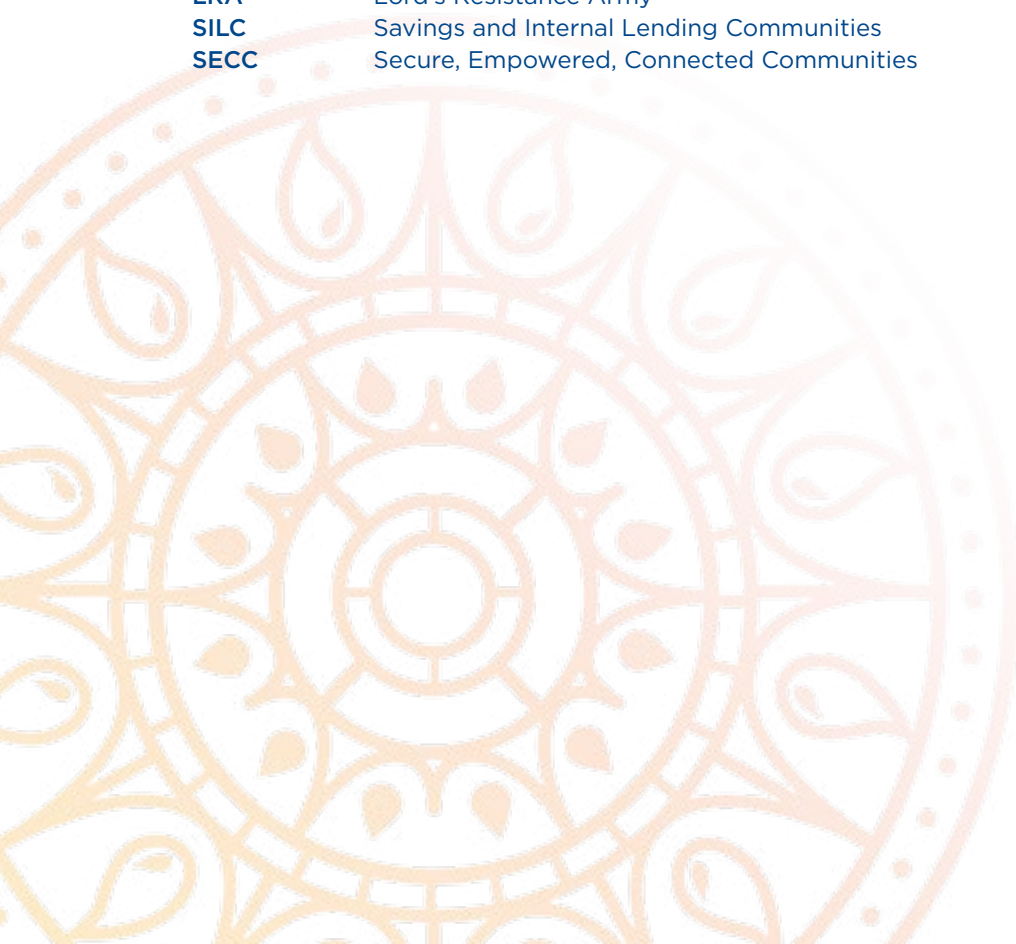
INTEGRATING TRAUMA HEALING FOR PARTNER STAFF  
INTO RECOVERY PROGRAMMING

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## Acronyms

<b>AGLI/FPT</b>	African Great Lakes Initiative of the Friends Peace Teams
<b>CAR</b>	Central African Republic
<b>CDJP</b>	Diocesan Commission for Justice and Peace
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of Congo
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization
<b>HROC</b>	Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities
<b>LRA</b>	Lord's Resistance Army
<b>SILC</b>	Savings and Internal Lending Communities
<b>SECC</b>	Secure, Empowered, Connected Communities



# Context

The people of the Central African Republic are suffering from the results of the most recent conflict, in which the Seleka rebel coalition seized territory, resulting in a coup in March 2013. Some in the Seleka alliance abused their power by attacking civilians and enriching themselves. As a result, local defense forces calling themselves the ‘anti-balaka’ began attacking civilians who they viewed as aligned with the Seleka.

As the Seleka largely claim a Muslim identity, the conflict quickly took on religious undertones, with the anti-balaka, who claim a Christian identity, targeting Muslim communities, and both sides engaging in acts of revenge. Christians and Muslims were displaced from their homes, with some settling in camps or in single-identity enclaves inside the country and others leaving the country. The more publicized violence in the capital of Bangui was mirrored in towns in nearby regions, including Bouar and Boda.

The violence in Bouar in the northwest, near the border with Cameroon, peaked in the first half of 2014, with the attacks subsiding in 2015. This year, Muslims have started returning and were able to move freely, though some security concerns limit their ability to fully resume their economic activities.

In the southwestern town of Boda, the violence began later in 2014 and resulted in revenge attacks and the destruction of both Muslim and

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<b>Partners</b>	Caritas, Diocesan Commission for Justice & Peace

Christian houses as well as the main market. Muslims were confined to an enclave within the town, which was later protected by peacekeepers, but tensions remained between Christian and Muslim communities. Muslims are beginning to feel more comfortable outside of the enclave, though restrictions remain, especially for young men.

In Bouar and Boda as well as in the surrounding rural areas, almost all citizens were targeted by or witnessed the violence. Many lost their homes and other property as well as their livelihoods. Those most impacted lost family and friends. While the attacks have subsided, the trauma faced by the majority of Central Africans remains.

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# Intervention overview

While the immediate CRS emergency response to the conflicts in Bouar and Boda included emergency food, household items, and shelter and livelihoods support, social cohesion was an urgent need. The provision of emergency aid saves lives and protects the dignity of those most impacted by the crisis, but any long-term response needs to address the societal conditions left in the wake of violence. Even after the attacks subsided, Muslim and Christian communities still lived in fear and distrust. The memories remained of the losses and the horrors witnessed.

CRS works closely with local partners in the CAR—mainly Caritas and the Diocesan Commission for Justice and Peace (CDJP)—in Bouar and Boda. Most CRS and partner staff come from, and experienced the same trauma as, the communities they serve. As partner field agents are from Christian and Muslim communities and also work with beneficiaries with diverse identities, CRS wanted to provide them with adequate support. They are key actors in the emergency response and thus have the opportunity to lead their own communities towards forgiveness, understanding and, ultimately, peace.

With the support of Caritas Norway and the FAO, CRS had introduced Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILC) into the recovery stages of the emergency response in Bouar and Boda. This supports community members to form self-selected groups that work together to save and lend to one another to promote greater economic security and self-sufficiency. SILC groups are also a support network in which social funds are used to assist members in need, and guidance is shared for business, social or personal concerns. The social nature of SILC makes it the ideal option for piloting the integration of social cohesion activities into emergency recovery programming.

While multiple organizations in the CAR had begun sensitizing communities on the importance of social cohesion, some community members were reticent about considering social cohesion while still mourning the lives, property and livelihoods lost. Reconciliation must often be preceded by healing. Thus CRS prioritized trauma healing as the first step in a social cohesion process.

CRS was already using a successful trauma-healing methodology in another part of the country through the USAID-funded Secure, Empowered, Connected Communities (SECC) protection project based in southeastern CAR and northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This responded to the threat posed to communities by the presence of the rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). In 2014, CRS began using a comprehensive trauma-healing program based on Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities (HROC), a methodology developed in post-genocide Rwanda by the African Great Lakes Initiative of the Friends Peace Teams (AGLI/FPT).

The original workshops brought together small groups of Tutsis and Hutus and included 3 days of discussion on the nature of trauma and its effects on individuals and communities. In the CAR and DRC, CRS similarly uses small groups—of all genders, ages and faiths—focusing on the survivors of the LRA and other violence. Religious leaders, members of community protection committees, and local authorities also participate in these groups. Basic trauma-healing workshops focus on individual sharing and healing while laying the foundation for communities to build capacity to respond to widespread suffering. They also aim at strengthening interconnections that will reduce isolation, a key component of the SECC community-based protection model. Selected participants are then trained as “healing companions” and, after leading apprentice workshops, continue grassroots trauma-healing work in their communities.



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Recognizing the positive effects of the trauma healing as part of the SECC project, the same approach was taken for emergency programming in Bouar and Boda with partner staff from Caritas and CDJP who would be working with communities and leading SILC groups as field agents. It was believed that if these leaders could face the trauma they had experienced, they would be comfortable working across religions with one another and in diverse communities, and would form a shared vision of social cohesion that they could promote in their work and communities.

The facilitators chosen to lead the trauma-healing trainings were SECC project community members (both Christian and Muslim) who had been serving as trainers and receiving refresher trainings since 2014. Local community members were trained as trainers by SECC to ensure that the skills stayed in the community, an approach also taken in the emergency response in Boda. Thirty CRS and partner staff participated in each training in Boda and Bouar for a total of 60 emergency responders trained to address their own trauma and to sensitize others impacted in their communities. This is in addition to the 165 community members trained by the SECC project.

### The 3Bs: a first step to social cohesion

This training is the first step in a social cohesion process used globally by CRS and called the 3Bs. Trauma healing represents the first step of personal **binding** to face losses and build a desire for peace; to be followed by group **bonding** to promote a shared vision, and culminating in **bridging** activities between diverse groups to ultimately bring them together for mutually beneficial purposes.

CRS plans to continue rolling out this social cohesion model through cross-border coordination, following the success of the SECC project's work across borders in the CAR and the DRC. With multiple CAR refugees from Boda and Bouar displaced across the border in Cameroon, trauma-healing and social cohesion activities—coordinated with CRS staff serving this community—present opportunities to lay groundwork for safe and harmonious returns.

### Vital protection for staff

In recognition that staff and partners serving as healing companions may face heightened emotional and interpersonal risks as a result of their role, the trauma-healing training includes self-care skills to avoid and diminish the risks of secondary trauma.

The trauma-healing approach is meant to reduce the likelihood of conflict as it offers an outlet other than future violence for those suffering. Many of the field agents serving as healing companions had either received conflict management training or will receive this training in a planned succession of social cohesion programming. The SECC project has utilized in-service sessions to assist healing companions

with the difficulties they face in their duties. This best practice will also be considered for emergency staff and partners.

While referral services were not in place in most of the communities assisted, the master trainers who had been serving as healing companions since 2014 shared their contact information with all trainees and offered themselves as resources to provide guidance should the field agents have faced any challenges which they felt they could not handle. This served as a back-up for field agents in addition to the support of their fellow colleagues with whom they attended the training. Weekly project planning meetings also served as an opportunity to share challenges in trauma healing.



# Section 1: Personal trauma transformations

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At first I could not live together with the Muslims due to experiencing many negative things; but after this training I changed.

— Caritas Bouar field agent Sonia Sehoulya

## Sonia's story

One reality of trauma is that those impacted often do not realize the effect it is having on their lives. The children of Caritas Bouar field agent Sonia Sehoulya had noticed that their mother had become irritable but, after the trauma-healing training, said she was no longer as nervous as before. Sonia realized that she had been scolding her children often, but not realizing that this was as a result of the suffering she had faced.

Both Sonia's family house in Bangui and her father's home in Bouar had been looted by the Seleka forces. She and her family had to flee. This experience not only affected her relationship with her children, but also her view of her neighbors. She avoided spending time with them and even forbade her children from playing with them. "At first I could not live together with the Muslims due to experiencing many negative things; but after this training I changed. I work with Muslims. I even go to their houses and I eat with them. This training has changed me," she said. Sonia now leads SILC groups with Muslim members and coordinates with the local imam.

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I was a bit restricted, harsh and mean ... but after this training, I learned that people need one another to live better.

— Caritas Bouar field agent Abel Wanou

## Abel's story

Caritas Bouar field agent Abel Wanou had to face his reactions to trauma during the training. "I was a bit restricted, harsh and mean; I did not want to share with others," he said. He was distressed by events he had experienced during the conflict. One day he had gone to work in the fields while his brother went to get fuel for their group. He never saw his brother again as he was killed by the Seleka that day. After another attack, Abel and his family were forced to live in the bush for months.

The trauma-healing training taught Abel that alternatives to hate were accepting what he had lost and embracing others. "Before, I did not even know what social cohesion there could be in relation to these events with the Muslims. I was very mean. But after this training, I learned that people need one another to live better." Now Abel works with both Muslim and Christian communities to promote free movement. He sensitizes them on mutual acceptance to allow them to be comfortable living with one another again.

## Section 2: Living the message of interreligious forgiveness and fellowship

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The news [of my brother's death] made me panicked and traumatized.

— Caritas Boda field agent Claudia Fami (pictured here with her granddaughter)

### Claudia's story

The field agents selected by Caritas to work with communities in Boda had also experienced trauma that had impacted their personal and professional lives. Claudia Fami lives in the village of Bossoui outside of Boda town. Bossoui had many Muslim residents prior to the conflict but they had all fled. When the Seleka arrived, Claudia's brother had to hide in the bush with other relatives. However, he became sick and died. "The news made me panicked and traumatized," Claudia said. She also had to face the death of her brother-in-law; he was a Muslim married to a Christian woman and, fearing being targeted by the anti-balaka, joined them for protection but was ultimately killed.

During the conflict, Claudia's youngest daughter left her to join her Muslim husband in the capital with their children. Claudia felt abandoned. "Since that time I considered her a Muslim and I would not answer her calls. Communication no longer passed between her and me." However, after the training in April, she realized that this reaction was a result of her trauma so she called her daughter and asked for forgiveness. Her daughter accepted the reconciliation and sent two of her children to return to live with Claudia. Claudia is now caring for the children and stays in touch with her daughter and son-in-law. She has also begun to notice the signs of trauma in others in her community ("If a person in mourning suddenly changes his behavior, not dressing normally, refusing to eat and throwing himself into alcoholism"), and approaches them to listen and provide support.

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With this training ... I found peace of heart.

— Caritas Boda field agent Prisca Yamboubou

### Prisca's story

Field agent Prisca Yamboubou was also impacted by what she saw during the conflict. "Before the training I was very suspicious to work and collaborate with agents who were Muslims," she said. However, being in a training on trauma together with Muslims changed her mind. "With everything negative that has passed, the bad things in Boda, I was outside of myself. But with this training on healing trauma and especially with Muslims being in the same room, I confess that I found peace of heart."

During the training, Prisca shared that her trauma was causing problems in her marriage when she would quickly become angry with her spouse during a dispute. After the training, a Muslim participant approached Prisca and asked her for advice with problems that she had been having with her own husband. Prisca invited this colleague to her house and counseled her using skills from the training. Prisca cites this relationship as evidence that she is now capable of maintaining strong relationships with Muslims, which was for her an important result of the training.

## Section 3: Active listening in practice

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We must be in a position to hear a person.

— Caritas Bouar field agent Gladys Goum

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To do good listening, I sit next to the person. I leave him time to express himself and I do my best to understand.

— Caritas Bouar field agent Victoria Passineme

### Gladys' story

One aim of integrating trauma healing into emergency response and recovery programming was for the participants of the training to practice what they had learned to promote healing in their own communities. A session on good and bad listening skills was one that stuck with the Caritas field agents. Gladys Goum, a Caritas field agent in Bouar, said that the training taught her how to approach someone in her community who had a problem. When a fire destroyed the crops of a local family who became distraught, Gladys was able to help them come to terms with the loss and decide how they could seek compensation. She credits her listening skills with her success. Gladys said: “We must be in a position to hear a person.”

### Victoria's story

Caritas Boda field agent Victoria Passineme noticed suffering in herself and others after seeing multiple corpses in the streets during the violence. She believes that it was trauma that caused some people to kill others in revenge. She now feels that she should sensitize others on trauma healing by listening to those most at risk of committing violence, such as the youth. “To do good listening, I sit next to the person. I leave him time to express himself and I do my best to understand,” she said.



## Section 4: Mobilizing communities in trauma healing

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I was keeping the wounds inside ... Now I am happy ... There is still hope.

— Caritas Boda field agent Mahamat Abdelkarim

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[After the training] I began to forget and at this moment I feel relieved.

— Caritas Boda field agent Diane Bouaka

### Mahamat's story

Some trainees recognized that the trauma-healing approach could contribute to transformation more widely and began to mobilize groups in their communities to identify and manage their suffering as a first step to promoting social cohesion. Caritas Boda field agent Mahamat Abdelkarim began sensitizing his community on trauma so that, like him, they could be healed.

Mahamat was a diamond miner who lost his livelihood, savings and motorcycle to the Seleka rebels. When they retreated, he and his family, who are Muslims, suffered losses during the violence between the anti-balaka militias and those believed to be aligned with the Seleka. He said: “I was keeping the wounds inside...Returning from [the training], I gathered all of my family and asked that we forgive all that had happened. I did the same with my friends. Now I am happy... There is still hope.” Mahamat leads mixed Christian and Muslim SILC groups and has used his training to share the trauma-healing message with both communities.

Most of the Muslims in Boda are living in an enclave where movement in and out is limited. Every Saturday Mahamat gathered the other field agents in the enclave who attended the training and they practiced between themselves the various exercises from the training. He spoke with the imam and men in the mosque on the topic of owning and releasing their suffering. Some in his community, who were not yet ready to forgive as a result of all they had lost, insulted and argued with him but he was still aiming to further sensitize leaders, youth and women on trauma.

### Diane's story

The 15-year-old brother of Caritas Boda field agent Diane Bouaka was killed by Muslims during the conflict. Shortly after this Diane began working in the Muslim enclave to distribute emergency materials. She noticed many people who seemed traumatized and was concerned by the divide between Christians and Muslims that still exists in Boda. She approached those who appeared to be suffering, and highlighted the importance of maintaining neutrality.

Diane said that that she had not faced difficulty in conveying the trauma-healing messages in her community. “Before this training, when I was working, I kept the wounds of the trauma always with me. [After the training] I began to forget and at this moment I feel relieved,” she said.

## Section 5: Serving as healing companions to promote community unity

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Guy intends to use his experience to identify those outwardly suffering and to sensitize people to the symptoms of trauma.

— Guy Joel, CDJP Mbaiki

### Guy' story

The members of the CDJP were also trained in trauma healing given their position as promoters of peace in their community. In Boda, a training of trainers prepared Caritas field agents and CDJP members to become healing companions in their communities. They will now be able to recognize suffering in others and assist those in need to accept and manage their trauma and begin walking the path towards forgiveness.

Immediately after the training of trainers, Guy Joel from the CDJP in Mbaiki town began recognizing community members with trauma including a man previously employed at the gas station, who had been attacked and walked around talking to himself and making gestures. Guy planned to approach this man as well as others he had seen with similar responses to the conflict. He intended to first use his experience to identify those outwardly suffering, to sensitize them to the symptoms of trauma and how to respond to it. He will then train youth, who are the most susceptible to violence. He will target the training to locations where youth gather, such as the central market where motor taxi drivers and other youth can be reached.

Guy used his experience from the training to intervene when the death of a woman with both Christian and Muslim relatives caused conflict in his community. The woman's mother was living in fear of neighborhood youth and Guy acted as her healing companion to ease her fears and comfort her.

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After the training I was able to intervene to advise both brothers and for the moment there is a return to calm across the two families.

— Mbalanga Geoffroy, CDJP Mbaiki

### Mbalanga's story

CDJP Mbaiki member Mbalanga Geoffroy was traumatized by an event he witnessed when he was traveling by road with a Muslim woman in the vehicle. When they reached a checkpoint, she was harassed. Her baby was thirsty but when she asked for water no one would give her any. Mbalanga asked those present to help her but all refused and Mbalanga did not know what to do. But since the training he now has skills to deal with such issues. When a man in his area was angry at his half-brother for selling family land, the resulting fall-out included the use of weapons. Mbalanga said: "After the training I was able to intervene to advise both brothers and for the moment there is a return to calm across the two families." He plans to continue to identify those who have been traumatized, to listen to them and serve as a healing companion.



# Conclusion: Next steps to support communities in healing

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We overcame a lot. And now there is joy, freedom to accept Muslims; people get along well.

— Field agent Fabrice Boykette

## Fabrice's story

The Caritas field agents and CDJP members have begun to use trauma healing to train their SILC groups, sensitize community groups and serve as healing companions to community members suffering from their distressing experiences. The trained Caritas Bouar field agents have now been taking part in these activities in their communities for a year and are beginning to see the effects of this and other approaches to social cohesion.

Field agent Fabrice Boykette said: “We overcame a lot. And now there is joy, freedom to accept Muslims; people get along well.” Caritas staff in Bouar will continue reaching out in their community. Fabrice noticed that the youth in town, some of whom may have been involved in the fighting, were still taking part in looting and banditry so he had a plan to attempt to sensitize this group on the trauma they may have faced during the conflict.

The Caritas and CDJP staff in Boda completed the training only a few months prior to their testimonials and have many ideas for how they will use what they have learned in their communities. Many would like to focus on youth, recognizing

that they were both the main perpetrators but also the main targets during the conflict and are most at risk of negative behavior as a result of their trauma. The agents aim to seek out youth in markets and around the main intersections in town where there are motor taxi drivers and the boys who push carts. They hope to bring these youth together so that they can form a common understanding.

Other field agents promote the bringing together of Christian and Muslim communities just as trainees were brought together as a mixed group during training and saw the benefits of this approach. The CDJP agents have recognized the role that they can play in their community through their positions in a peace-promoting organization, to serve as healing companions who may be able to mitigate conflict situations that arise. All staff and partners will be involved in follow-on trainings and sensitization events that CRS has planned for the SILC projects but they recognize that their own independent efforts are also necessary to truly transform their communities to allow those suffering from trauma to forgive and become open to a socially cohesive society.

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