



## SUPPORT FOR THE CREATION OF A PILOT TRAINING AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC INTEGRATION CENTRE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CONFLICTS IN CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

by Claudio Ceravolo, COOPI – Cooperazione Internazionale President

FAO Director-General, Professor Muhammad Yunus, Your Eminence, Authorities, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning.

On behalf of COOPI – Cooperazione Internazionale, I would like to thank the Director-General José Graziano da Silva, for inviting us at this pivotal initiative, together with Nobel Peace Laureates, and for allowing us to discuss our first-hand experience in this prestigious location.

Moreover, I do hope that the agreements negotiated in Kartoum and revised last March 20 in Addis Ababa between the Government of Bangui and the armed groups will put an end to a conflict that has ravaged the Central African Republic since 2003.

We are certainly facing one of the most complicated conflicts on the African continent, where political, economic, religious, ethnic and international relations factors are blending. Among all these elements, food insecurity and control over food resources play a crucial role.

On the one hand, food insecurity plays an important role in any conflict - it creates instability and puts different groups one against the other to achieve the control over resources.

On the other, armed clashes increase food prices and supply difficulties; consequently, young people often find it more advantageous to fight than to work in the fields.

In Central African Republic, these general factors are associated with other more specific ones, for instance its peculiar geographical position, which is right in the middle of the African continent and where it is difficult to access roads. Therefore, when new conflicts strike, borders close and food products are scarce. The inter-community violence, which is so frequent in the Central African Republic, hampers trades and deeply increases the number of internally displaced persons - estimated at 621,600 on March 31st 2019, by OCHA - who are thus driven away from their traditional agricultural activities.

Last but not least, the war has caused a historical rivalry between nomadic shepherds and farmers - herds are stolen by armed groups, and farmers reacted violently, since livestock is the only source of income for the poorest families. Often young shepherds, with no more livestock to look after, are forced to join armed groups just to make a living.



In accordance with the declaration "New Way of Working" signed by the Secretary General and main UN agencies, it is crucial to plan interventions over the years, with different actors - each of them must bring a comparative advantage and be involved at both national and local level.

What I am about to describe is an attempt, in a difficult situation, to apply to aforementioned principles.

The intervention programme called "Appui à la création d'un centre pilote de formation et d'insertion socio-économique des jeunes affectés par les conflits en République Centrafricaine" (Support for the creation of a pilot training and socio-economic integration centre for young people affected by conflicts in Central African Republic) has involved:

- FAO, which has strongly supported this intervention and is responsible for it to the National Government and international actors;
- The Foundation of Professor Muhammad Yunus with his Yunus Social Business, committed to create the socio-economic conditions to end poverty;
- the Tavakkol Karman Foundation, which works on social cohesion and inter-community dialogue, to promote dialogue between Christians and Muslims;
- The Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, which has provided substantial financial support;
- The Order of Carmelites, whose Carmelite Monastery, located on a large area of 130 hectares on the outskirts of Bangui, houses the production and training activities;
- The Central African Government and its ministries: Economy and Plan; Agronomy; Livestock and Animal Health, which has always supported this project, recognizing that it is fully included in the National Plan, which provides for "the reintegration into the agro-pastoral sector of vulnerable young people affected by the conflict" and the local communities, who enthusiastically welcomed the project;
- and finally COOPI Foundation, which I have the honour of chairing, and which is responsible for the implementation of the activities. COOPI has been intervening in the Central African Republic for more than 45 years - the first agricultural development project was carried out in Ngaoundaye, Ouham Pendé, in 1974, and since then, COOPI has carried out dozens and dozens of projects in every region. From the beginning of the war in 2012 to date, we have developed 45 projects of agricultural development and food security, with FAO, WFP, EU, Italian Agency for Development Cooperation.

But let me add that, perhaps, this project would have never seen the light of day, if it was not for an exceptional event - on November 29th 2015, Pope Francis opened the Holy Door of Bangui Cathedral and inaugurated the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. The visit was a watershed for the country. The Pope met the struggling factions and obtained a truce of 7 months. He went to "Kilomètre 5", the Islamic quarter, where terrible massacres took place, and together with the imam they greeted the population, who warmly welcomed them. Pope Francis has been the first world leader to stop and stay in Bangui. That night, people slept in the street to protect him. At that time,



the Carmel Monastery was home to many thousands of refugees (it has now reached 10,000) and has turned into an extraordinary place of solidarity, where food safety initiatives are being developed and a brick factory has been implemented – Pope Francis seems to have been one of its first buyer...

I would like to think that our project is also an ideal response to the many appeals of the Pope to tackle this terrible humanitarian crisis.

The philosophy of this project is simple – it aims to increase food production and to eradicate food insecurity for the populations of the surrounding districts (Cattin and Plateau de Bimbo). In the long run, the initiative plan to boost production in Bangui markets, by training young people on entrepreneurial activities, thus preventing them from joining armed groups. The project also focuses on improving the production and processing of agricultural and livestock products, but above all on training 500 young people in technical production and business creation skills.

Specifically, this pilot project is being carried out on a large area of 130 hectares, owned by the Carmelite Monastery, which already includes:

- a palm grove of 100 hectares with a small workshop for the production of palm oil
- a farm with about 80 head of cattle
- fruit trees and wood on about 10 hectares
- gardens and orchards on about 15 hectares.

Today the preparatory activities have almost been completed. FAO is providing the infrastructure - irrigation systems, new machinery for the production of palm oil and palm kernel - and the necessary know-how to strengthen the beneficiaries' ability to achieve food security. COOPI, for its part, has already started the practical and theoretical training of 500 young people in horticulture, cattle and poultry farming, palm oil production and soap production.

The training will be followed by the intervention of the Yunus Foundation to prepare the young participants to start their own business, by adopting a "social business" approach.

The beneficiaries of the training were immediately paid since they work directly in the preparatory and productive activities. In addition, a "Resilience Fund" for each group was encouraged to allow the creation of a small capital, which is the backbone of micro-credit. These AVEC (Association Villageoise d'Epargne et de Crédit) groups have already been set up, each with a Management Committee, and their operation is being monitored by the project's representatives.

Finally, an open day was organized on March 18th, where several Central African Ministers participated together with FAO representatives and other institutional actors, such as the World Bank, the European Commission (Fonds Bekou), the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation and other local authorities, who were able to visit the different areas of interventions – apparently, the production of high quality soap made from palm kernel oil was much appreciated.



As it has been previously stated, this meeting aims to focus on the ability to work together on development and reconciliation to build peace, by implementing social business interventions in the agro-pastoral field.

It would be naive to think that complex problems like the ones taking place in the Central African Republic can be easily solved. But, it is a fact that today this program is viewed with great respect by the different groups in conflict, and it is extremely significant that, so far, no episode of violence has ever occurred against local partners or expatriates.

According to what our representatives in CAR have told me, I would like to add that many other local communities are interested in this pilot project and they would like to implement it on their territory. I am not entitled to say whether these other initiatives will ever take place, but if it is the case, COOPI would be more than happy to continue its commitment to the peace and development process.

Let me share with you what Father Federico Trincherio, one of the trainers of the Carmel Community and a passionate supporter of this project has once told me - he loves to remember that in the darkest periods of the Middle Ages, where hunger and violence were ravaging, monasteries were a peaceful haven, where ancient culture was safeguarded and agricultural best practices were developed, for instance crop rotations, viticulture, livestock improvement. And those practices altogether put an end to hunger in Europe.

We all hope that the Carmel Monastery in Bangui, with the contribution of all of us, will also become a peaceful haven and the starting point of a new economic process.