

From 21 April to 2 May 2014, CRS conducted a rapid assessment in five communities of Lobaye prefecture to evaluate the capacity of conflict-affected households to meet essential food and non-food needs while recovering livelihoods. Lobaye is a habitually food insecure areas of CAR, with low levels of production and a heavy reliance on markets for food. The CRS assessment team carried out key informant interviews, focus group discussions with men and women, market visits, and/or price data collection in five communities: Boda, Mbaiki, Mbata, Pissa, and Safa. CRS has also received some general information from church partners in the Boganangone and Ngotto areas.

Background and Context

Many households in CAR's southwestern prefecture of Lobaye are reliant on natural resource exploitation of timber, gold, and diamonds and small-scale production of cash crops (namely coffee and palm oil) for income. **These households are heavily reliant on markets for access to food,¹ yet livelihoods have faced a general decline due to contraction of the global timber market and CAR's loss of Kimberly certification for diamonds in 2013.** Though many families engage in food crop production as well, this is done using **low levels of agricultural inputs and produces extremely low yields.** There is some limited animal husbandry of small ruminants (goats, pigs, ducks, chickens), apiculture, and aquaculture, but the heavily forested region is known for its strong tradition of hunting (bush meat) and gathering (caterpillars, snails, leaves). **In normal times, a large percentage of foods are imported to the region from Cameroon and Bangui, including the main staple: cassava.**

Before the most recent round of conflict-related shocks in Lobaye, the 2012 SMART analysis found a daily gross death rate of 2.2 per 10,000 children under five years and 1.29 per 10,000 in the population overall, which put the prefecture well above the emergency threshold.² **The 2012 survey found a 6.5 percent prevalence of moderate acute malnutrition and 1.3 percent severe acute malnutrition. The prevalence of chronic malnutrition was 50.4 percent (20.8 percent severe) in children under five.** Health practitioners reported malaria, diarrhea, intestinal parasites, anemia, and malnutrition among the most common illnesses in 2012. Incidence of kwashiorkor³ indicates probable insufficient consumption of protein.

Key Findings

- **A cross-section of livelihoods groups in the region have been heavily affected by asset loss, destruction of infrastructure, and reduced food availability and access.** This includes both agriculture (cash and food crops) and non-farm livelihoods – particularly mining, livestock, and commerce.
- **Pockets of severe food insecurity and reports of elevated incidence of acute malnutrition** in the communities most cut off from markets as the result of the crisis: Ngotto, Mbata, and Boda.
- **Farming households are planting significantly less than usual** – with all focus group participants in Safa reporting only 25% of their usual land area. Although FAO seed distributions to 2,500 households are set to begin in late May, there is still a high likelihood of severely reduced harvests.
- Several factors have contributed to a **major contraction in the cash economy.** In heavily affected areas, there are reports of a total lack of liquidity and use of bartering.
- In Boda and along its axes, women report that Anti-Balaka stole or killed all of their small animals (goats and pigs) in March 2013. This represents **widespread loss of key assets that households normal rely upon for resilience to shocks.**
- Affected communities in southern Lobaye report **health services and water as priority needs, along with food and shelter.**

¹ In 2009, households in Lobaye got over 60 percent of their food from cash purchases and spent 72.23 percent of their overall budget on food (WFP Global Analysis of Vulnerability and Food Insecurity).

² Enquête nationale sur la situation nutritionnelle et la mortalité en République Centrafricaine, Enquête basée sur la méthodologie SMART, Collecte des données : Du 30 Mai au 15 Juillet 2012.

³ http://www.msfl.lu/fileadmin/WEBLibrary/1_Sur_le_terrain/Autres_missions/Afrique/a_state_of_silent_crisis_fr.pdf

Recommendations	
Address urgent food needs	Provide market recovery support
<p>Immediate: Food distributions and nutrition support in zones experiencing a spike in acute malnutrition, including Ngotto and Mbata.</p> <p>Immediate: Work with current actors to ensure validation of beneficiary lists and post-distribution monitoring in the Muslim quartier of Boda to see that the most vulnerable households and household members are served by distributions.</p> <p>Short-term: Provide seeds for quick-growing nutrient-rich vegetables, including in the Muslim quartier of Boda, since that population remains trapped in the absence of evacuation or a political solution.</p> <p>Medium-term: Integrate WASH and nutrition education components into food security programming in Lobaye.</p>	<p>Short- and medium-term: Assist traders with small grants or in-kind inputs so that they may resume normal market and livelihood activities.</p> <p>Short-term and continuous: Monitor food prices and markets for eventual re-introduction of food voucher programming.</p> <p>Short-term: Advocate for the reopening of schools and/or introduction of child-friendly spaces to relieve the all-day burden on mothers and their livelihoods activities.</p> <p>Medium-term: Invest in rebuilding market infrastructure and explore ways to help entrepreneurs in isolated areas access safe transportation.</p>
Invest in youth	Further evaluation
<p>Short- and medium-term: Especially in Boda, youth livelihoods programming is important, both in and of itself and for protection. Providing cash-for-work, training, and/or earning-while-learning programs for young people may discourage involvement in armed groups that continue to racketeer and threaten the safety of civilians.</p>	<p>Immediate: Confirm acute malnutrition case load in Ngotto and Mbata and connect these communities with appropriate services.</p> <p>Immediate: Assess short- and medium-term food security needs of the northern hub, in and around Boganangone.</p> <p>Immediate: Assess the food security and livelihoods needs of hard-to-reach vulnerable groups: Peuhl pastoralists and forest-dwelling pygmy populations.</p>

In July 2013, CRS evaluated markets in Lobaye prefecture and found several **challenges in adequacy of food supplies, levels of competition, access to transport and credit, and merchants' time to re-supply.** In areas deemed able to meet food demands without market distortion, CRS did a food voucher pilot (the Lobaye Prefecture Emergency Food Security Project) in partnership with Caritas Mbaiki. The four-month market-based emergency food support project targeted 1,811 food insecure households in eight towns: Boda, Batalimo, Boganangone, Mbaiki, Mbata (Bouchia), Mongoumba, Ngotto, and Pissa. Due to the deteriorating security situation nationwide, CRS halted the voucher program on December 5, 2013.

The April/May 2014 rapid assessment considered the impact of the most recent shocks on communities' food security and livelihoods across Lobaye. Specifically, the departure of then-President Michael Djotodia was accompanied by some combination of inter-communal violence, looting, pillaging, and the destruction and burning of homes and property in several areas. Both foreign and Central African Muslims have largely fled the prefecture under threat of violence, except for **a population of between 10,000 and 14,000 Muslims who remain trapped and under siege in the town of Boda, and an unknown number of Peuhl potentially remaining in the bush.** The Muslim population has historically played a central role in the cash economy, particularly in trade and transport. **In Boda as well as Boganangone, Mbata, and Sefa, many households remain displaced (sheltering in host families, hiding in the bush, or staying in camps) following widespread destruction of homes in January 2014 and in response to continuing fear of insecurity.**

These conditions are contributing to a situation that preliminary results of the April 2014 Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis⁴ classified as a Crisis phase in Lobaye, meaning "one in five households face significant food consumption gaps with high or above usual acute malnutrition, or is marginally able to meet minimum food needs only with unsustainable coping strategies such as liquidating livelihood assets." The nutrition cluster has named Lobaye

⁴ Food Security Cluster meeting, 6 May 2014.

prefecture as one of 11 priority intervention zones in CAR.⁵ **Most humanitarian actors in Lobaye prefecture are currently concentrating on Boda, with seed distributions to 2,500 households along the Bangui-Mbaiki axe, Mbaiki-Boda axe, and 15km around Boda. To our knowledge and according to reports of church leaders, this has left heavily-affected communities in the southern hub around Mbata and the northern hub around Boganangone underserved.**

Assessment Methodology

CRS' rapid food security and livelihoods assessment in Lobaye consisted of two weeks of market visits and price collection, focus group discussions with men and women, and interviews with vendors (both those who have dropped out of the market and new entrants) and key informants regarding the impact of the crisis on food security and livelihoods of conflict-affected groups. A combination of rapid appraisal techniques were used throughout, including proportional piling exercises, timelines and chronologies, needs prioritization exercises, and/or daily activity profiles by gender were used across the visited locations.

Assessed towns and villages were chosen based on reports from church leaders of high numbers of burned houses and/or alarming food security trends. Security and time constraints prevented the team from visiting Boganangone or Ngotto, so general findings for those zones are based on reports from parish priests. **Further evaluation of Boganangone and Ngotto as well as hard-to-reach pastoralists and forest-dwelling vulnerable groups in Lobaye are priorities.**

Location	Assessment Activities
Boda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Market visits (3 new ad hoc markets) Price collection Visits to observe damage to market and houses Interviews with 8 traders (4 still active) Interviews with 4 women's association leaders Focus group discussions with men and women in Bombandoro village (Boda-Boganangone axe) Visit to Bombale village (Boda-Mbaiki axe) for discussions with manioc vendors, coffee farmers Discussions with church leaders from Boda, Boganangone, and Ngotto
Mbaiki	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Market visit with trader interviews Price collection Key informant interviews with the secretary general of the mayor's office Discussions with church leaders at the diocese
Mbata	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Market visit Visits to observe damage to houses Focus group discussions with men and women Key informant interviews with church leaders
Safa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key informant interview with village leaders Visits to observe damage to houses Focus group discussions with men and women
Pissa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Market visit

Detailed Findings by Location

The assessment found major differences in the severity and type of impact that the crisis has had on communities' food availability (in terms of supplies, market mechanisms, and prices) and food access (livelihoods) across the prefecture. The following are summaries by location.

Boda and its axes

In Boda town, **between 11,000 -14,000 Muslims (including some foreigners, Boda natives, and many from the surrounding area, including Balingo, Bodjula, Boganangone, Boguira, Bomandoro, Busai, Ngotto, Pama, Yawa, and Sasile) remain trapped without freedom of movement or access to staple foods, sheltering in host families.** There are distributions of rice, oil, and Plumpy Nut ongoing in the Muslim quarter and in **five Christian camps, which have over 18,000 displaced people.**⁶ However, ongoing severe malnutrition⁷ and child deaths indicate that there is an urgent need for **verification of beneficiary lists and post-distribution monitoring** to ensure that assistance is reaching

⁵ based on the number of malnourished children expected, number of IDPs, populations at risk, current coverage, prevalence of chronic malnutrition, level of food insecurity, child mortality, and access to drinking water <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Cluster%20Nutrition%20RCA%20-%20Bulletin%20%232%20-24April.pdf>

⁶ Rapport sur la mission technique conjointe WASH et SHELTER CLUSTER, 24-26 Avril 2014.

⁷ 188 cases of admitted severe acute malnutrition, according to OCHA Situation Report from 23 April 2014.

the most vulnerable people. Members of the CRS shelter team reported that the majority of people they spoke with in the Muslim quartier expressed a desire to be evacuated. This sentiment may be different among those who have significant property holdings and businesses which they would stand to lose to looting and/or squatting if they leave Boda.

Boda's market infrastructure is completely destroyed (mostly on January 28, 2014), including the depot where most small and medium merchants stored stocks. There are ad hoc markets forming next to the IDP camps as well as one in the Muslim quartier. Vendors sell very small amounts of left-over merchandise that was not destroyed or else (outside the quartier) recently harvested local agricultural products. **Manioc prices have fallen extremely low, at 37.5 percent of normal seasonal levels - while prices of other staples (groundnuts, palm oil, maize) are well above seasonal norms.** **There is generally neither capital nor access to transport to re-start selling at the same scale as before or to reintegrate Boda's markets with neighboring markets.** Availability of transport is low and generally limited to motorcycles, which favors those supplying light goods (i.e. cigarettes) rather than food. Women described travel as expensive and risky, so supplying is currently left to young men who feel secure enough to move between towns. Eight interviewed merchants (four have totally dropped out, while the other four are still selling drastically reduced quantities) lost between 200,000 and 9 million FCFA in food and non-food stocks from fire. Many traders have also lost personal assets (especially houses and small livestock) that might normally serve as insurance or loan collateral in recovery. **Leaders of women's associations which used to engage in commerce and group savings and loan activities expressed a desire to restart their activities, but had lost all their materials, supplies, storage space, and local sources of credit.** Several mentioned a 2007 European Union-funded project that gave start-up grants and management training for their group's commercial activities (i.e. soap-making, fish selling) which were ongoing until the burning of their stocks and equipment in January 2014.

In villages outside of Boda, the ongoing tensions in Boda are a logistical and psychological blockage to the resumption of normal livelihoods activities, especially where Anti-Balaka remain active and influential. In needs prioritization exercises in Bombandoro village, men in focus group unanimously cited the "unconditional departure of the Muslims" (currently barricaded in Boda town) as well as the exit of MISCAs forces as their top priority need. With some probing, they revealed a need for the return of government services (health, education), agriculture inputs, the re-start of commercial activities, and education/employment for young people. They also expressed the opinion that there is too much aid focused on Boda town itself, while the axes are ignored. Women prioritized food, re-establishing the market ("nobody sells anymore" and "money isn't there to sell or buy"), access to medicine, and the re-establishment of regular activities. This final point was in response to the **stress women are experiencing since the closure of schools and fear of insecurity means that children accompany their mothers all day long, limiting movements and productivity.** In villages on two different axes, women reported that **Anti-Balaka killed most or all of their small animals (mostly goats and pigs) in March 2013.** Following clashes between Anti-Balaka and Congolese MISCAs troops in Boda in 19 April 2014, church informants in Ngotto reported that the Anti-Balaka traveled there in order to loot the belongings and attack small livestock of a Congolese civilian working at the parish.

Proportional piling exercises revealed that many households had diversified sources of revenue both before and after the crisis, including heavy reliance on cash crop production and mining (diamonds). However, now there is **greater reliance than before on minerals and agriculture**, despite the fact that the price of diamonds is 40 percent of normal, coffee buyers have not returned to the axes, and transport remains a major barrier to all market activities. The biggest shift has been away from commerce, because there are no longer weekly trucks that come from town to purchase agricultural goods, and women feel they cannot safely go to Boda. **Household food consumption has shifted from reliance on the market previously to reliance on household agricultural production currently.** There has been a reduction in food obtained from hunting/fishing due to generalized fear and a disappearance of inter-communal aid (food given to vulnerable households by their neighbors). **The majority of households eat one meal per day. Women cited the lower price of manioc as a problem because now they cannot afford sugar, salt, oil, meat, or soap.**

Boganangone

Though the rapid assessment team was unable to visit Boganangone, discussions with a priest from there revealed that Caritas has identified **400 burned homes and IDPs have reported additional burned villages within a 30-40km radius, in Mbinimunu and Mboro.** Due to their proximity to routes between Cameroon and Boda, markets in Boganangone were quite active prior to the crisis, implying this area will be hard hit by the departure of Muslim traders and transporters. **This area is a priority for future assessment.**

Mbaiki

The Mbaiki market appears to be partially recovering, though food quantities remain below normal for this time of year. Vendors said this was due to **clients' lack of purchasing power, high prices of goods sourced from Bangui (i.e. wholesale sugar prices in Bangui are at 128% of pre-crisis levels), and transport challenges** – both vehicle unavailability and fuel shortages and price hikes (round trip public transport to Bangui was 133% of pre-crisis price on April 22). Some vendors, especially men selling dry goods sourced from Bangui, who were involved in CRS' previous program claim they can re-stock within “a few weeks” to meet increased demand if voucher activities were to resume. Others, especially women (selling bush meat, fish, and food commodities), said they would need more time than that and/or access to credit in order to mobilize supplies in sufficient quantities. **Meat from farm-raised animals (goat, sheep, pork) costs 5,000 FCFA or more per kilo, and beef is no longer available as Peuhl herders and their cattle have been attacked and/or fled the area.** Prices of food commodities (cassava, groundnuts, rice) reflect a reasonable level of market integration with Bangui. Some vendors who used to rent small market tables for which they paid 50 FCFA per day have moved into storefronts (100 FCFA per day). One vendor said that this step up was thanks to profits made during the CRS voucher markets, while others took up spaces vacated by Muslim wholesalers. At least one young man said that he bought his stock of pharmaceuticals and non-food items “nearly for free” from a Muslim before he fled.

Officials from the Mbaiki mayor's office reported that whereas those engaged in agriculture before struggled with productivity due to small cultivated areas, **this year they also are finding challenges paying labor to assist in cultivating and accessing good seed.** Animal proteins are rarely consumed, as they are expensive. Approximately 35 percent of the population raised small animals before, but he estimated only 10 percent do so now due to **animal disease and lack of veterinary supplies.** Prior to the crisis, there were some cooperatives focusing on coffee and timber that stopped due to poor management. Some associations focusing on agriculture, apiculture, and pisciculture still exist, but they lack access to technical services and guidance for good management.

Mbata

Focus groups of men and women in Mbata showed that **the community prioritizes its needs of food and the means to buy food, resumed medical services, shelter reconstruction, and water.** Focus group participants reported that **residents of Mbata have not engaged in cultivation at normal levels since the arrival of the Seleka in late March of 2013.** One focus group participant said, “I hesitate to plant much now, because the market isn't good, so we're doing more gathering.” Some focus group participants noted that they lack the means to diversify their diets or produce on a larger scale, especially money to pay laborers to prepare agricultural land as planting season begins. **Families are generally eating one meal per day, which shows an early reliance on hungry season coping mechanisms.** In January of this year, many families fled into the bush or to Congo when their homes and businesses were set on fire by Seleka. Violence that followed left several dead and was followed by the mass departure of the Muslim community. **Some displaced families are living in host families while others remain in the bush.**

Church officials report that community-based Caritas animators have identified 102 cases of severe acute malnutrition (some with signs of oedema) and 606 cases of moderate acute malnutrition in Mbata (total under 5 population of 2,505) and an additional 47 cases of severe and 222 cases of moderate malnutrition along the Bangui-Boucia axe (total under 5 population 1,740). They report that there are currently no nutrition actors intervening in Mbata. The church does not have any remaining Plumpy Nut or access to necessary medications.

Even before the conflict, cassava prices in Mbata experienced major fluctuations based on minor weather changes or numbers of irregular vendors present in the market on a given day. Now **both the number of vendors and overall food supplies available in the market appear extremely low.** The only exception during the assessment visit was the large quantity of snails for sale, which numerous people mentioned were a fortunate relief from hunger, since they do not appear on a predictable basis. **In July, the season of gathering and selling caterpillars will provide some income and protein as well, however salaried government workers – the major client base – remain absent from Mbata.** During a normal caterpillar season, many households take their children out of school, leave their agricultural activities, and go deep into the forest for weeks at a time.

Though the former market structures are still standing undamaged, the market location has been shifted to be close to the main road and more open, where vendors say they feel safer. **Sale of non-food items (especially clothes and shoes) and dry goods sourced from Bangui used to be the domain of Muslim traders, so these products are completely or nearly absent from the market.** Transport is a major barrier to recovery of markets here, as there used to be two daily vehicles between Mbata and Bangui but now there is about one per week. The lack of cellular phone coverage is also a

major obstacle to market information access as well as general social isolation of the population. Focus group participants explained that **of 17 water points, there are only five that remain functional**. There is an artisan who was trained to do repairs, but he lacks access to the necessary pieces to fix them. They also expressed an **urgent need for medicine, the return of qualified medical personnel, and transport for urgent cases to Bangui**.

Ngotto

Though the assessment team was unable to reach Ngotto, church leaders report that **Seleka looted the local timber factory, which remains closed and has resulted in unemployment of many households' breadwinners. This has also led to a ten-month interruption in Ngotto's ferry which connects the center to surrounding markets. Priests report 200 cases of severe acute malnutrition in Ngotto town alone**, and their supplies of Plumpy Nut are finished. There is an urgent need to follow up to confirm these reports and respond.

Pissa

During a brief stop in Pissa, the market appeared lively and active during a brief visit, with quantities of food and non-food items present in near-normal quantities and without reports of abnormal movements in prices. Transport is available for moving food supplies to and from the area at nearly pre-crisis prices, and traders can take advantage of close proximity to Bangui.

Safa

Community members reported that when President Michael Djotodia left office in January 2014, youth in the Safa Poto Poto (population 856) killed several sheep belonging to a Seleka commanders' family. Seleka arrived soon after, setting fire to dozens of houses (between 30 and 60 burned, with some others pillaged), killing four people, and injuring others. In focus groups, **men reported that they are planting less than 25 percent of their normal field size. At the same time, they said they are becoming more reliant on their own production for food.** Muslim traders who used to arrive occasionally to buy food and sell non-food items no longer come to Safa. There were associations engaged in agriculture, livestock, and apiculture that lost tools and/or inputs in burned houses. In focus groups, men prioritized the community's needs for health services, food, and housing. Women prioritized reconstruction of houses, health services, and water.

Recommendations

Relieving acute malnutrition will require alleviating inadequate dietary intake and disease immediately. However, **considering the acute-on-chronic nature of the conflict's impact on Lobaye's food security situation, addressing the underlying causes of food insecurity at household and community level will require a multifaceted strategy that extends beyond the short-term.** A livelihoods approach will ensure that households can maintain and rebuild their income-generating activities without further compromising their food security and vice versa. This will require a strategy that targets different actors in the community, including those who may not be the most vulnerable, yet are key players in food production, the resumption of normal market functions, and/or pose a risk to overall stability. **Especially given the extent of the need and multilayered nature of the recovery, CRS welcomes cooperation with other organizations, especially those with technical expertise in treatment of malnutrition, child-friendly spaces, access to pastoralist populations, and WASH.**

CRS will undertake a combination of short- and medium-term strategies to reach different affected livelihoods groups across Lobaye. Markets can begin to recover if economic actors who lost productive assets receive support (small grants or inputs) to resume normal economic activities and relieve some of the supply side gaps in isolated markets. Improvement of youth's livelihoods prospects is also central to minimizing the appeal of joining armed groups for material gain. Reintroduction of food voucher programming should be phased in, beginning on a small scale and only once markets are deemed capable of responding. Provision of seeds for quick-growing, nutrient-rich vegetables to food insecure households can help alleviate some nutritional concerns in the short-term, but medium-term nutrition and agriculture programming should have an integrated nutrition education and behavior change component to address the underlying determinants of chronic malnutrition in Lobaye. This will likely include addressing some of the WASH issues that affect food utilization. **Further assessments in the areas north of Boda (Boganangone and axes) and of food security among pastoralist and forest-dwelling populations are necessary to identify other possible needs.**