

Social Media Watch: Protecting the Humanitarian Space in Burkina Faso



March 2024

To support the humanitarian response in the Sahel region, [Insecurity Insight](#) is conducting ongoing social media monitoring to understand perceptions and key concerns around the aid response in Burkina Faso, with the aim of contributing to the development of aid agencies' communication strategies in response to community sentiment.

Summary

In March 2024 public social media activity surrounding humanitarian and international organisations operating in Burkina Faso was significant. At least 23 organisations were discussed across Facebook and X, with the majority being international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). These organisations were mentioned in 124 posts, reached over 800,000 people and generated over 6,000 engagement responses.

The content originated primarily from social media accounts linked to civil and humanitarian sector organisations, accounting for 41.9% of posts, followed by job advertisements (29.8%), local media (21%), and local authorities (4%).

Overall, the sentiments expressed towards these organisations were overwhelmingly positive, except for a small percentage of negative comments that were primarily found in reactions to social media content uploaded by the edited media. Negative sentiments included distrust towards “Western” NGOs and criticisms of specific programmes or a perceived lack of investment in certain sectors.

Disinformation targeting “Western” NGOs was also identified, notably in the form of comments accusing aid agencies of spying.

These findings aim to provide insights into the online discourse surrounding aid and humanitarian organisations in Burkina Faso and highlight the importance of social media in shaping public perceptions of and engagement with these organisations.

What is social media data?

The main components of social media data are *posts* and *comments*. A *post* refers to the uploading of fresh content by a user account or page which would appear both on the account or page “wall” and followers’ timelines. On X (formerly Twitter) a post would usually be referred to as a “tweet”. In this document, both Facebook “posts” and X “tweets” are referred to as posts.

A *comment* is different from a post and refers to a user’s *reply* to a post in the form of a comment that appears in the commentary section of the social media platform.

In addition to posts and comments, social media data also includes types of user engagement with posts and comments, such as in the form of “likes” and “shares” (or “reposts” on X).

Some organisations, including *edited media outlets*, *NGOs*, *local authorities*, *political actors* and others, participate on social media space by uploading posts or publishing comments for different purposes, including to disseminate information.

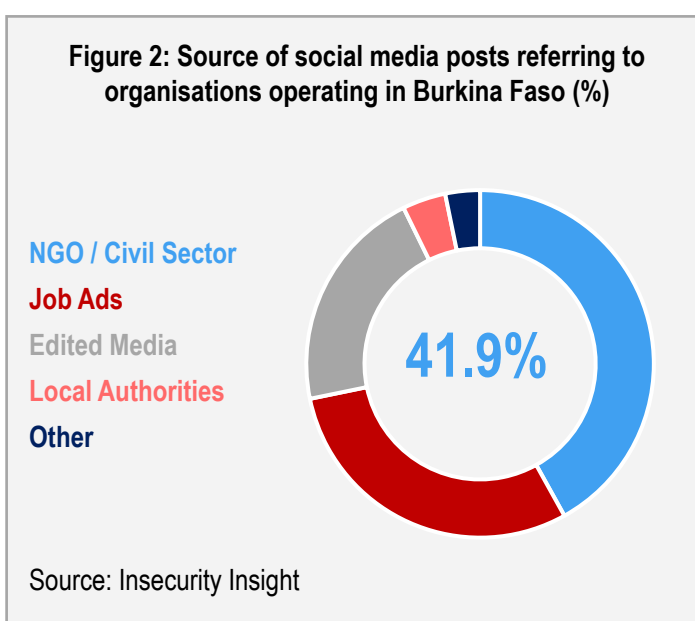
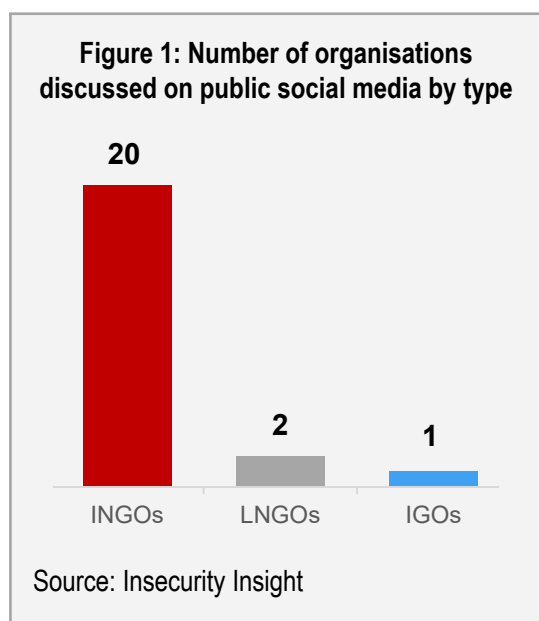
The analysis presented in this document also includes posts and comments produced by aid agencies.

In March 2024 **at least 23 aid organisations operating or present in Burkina Faso were mentioned on Facebook and Twitter**, including twenty (20) INGOs, one (1) international governmental organisation (IGO), and two (2) local NGOs (LNGOs) (see Figure 1).

Posts

These 23 organisations were mentioned in 124 different posts on Facebook and X. Social media accounts linked to organisations or networks operating in the aid sector were the main source of content related to aid agencies, accounting for 41.9% of posts, while job advertisements accounted for 29.8% of posts. Stories that mentioned aid agencies published by local edited media via social media accounted for 21% of total content, while local authorities were the source of 4% of content. “Other” sources of posts account for the remainder (see Figure 2).

In March 2024 posts that referred to aid organisations in Burkina Faso are estimated to have reached over 800,000 people, an average of nearly 35,000 per post. Furthermore, it is estimated that these posts resulted in over 6,000 engagement actions in the form of comments, shares and emoji reactions, with an average of 277 per post.



Excluding job advertisements, **all posts expressed positive sentiment towards the aid sector** (see Figure 3). This includes content uploaded by the local edited media, which tended to present aid agencies’ activities in a positive light. Posts uploaded by local authorities tended to emphasise the role of collaboration and other themes with positive connotations. Finally, posts uploaded by organisations in the NGO sector (over 40%) presented aid activities in a positive way through the dissemination of information about partnerships and programmes.

Comments

A total of 128 comments by social media users written in reaction to the 124 posts referring to organisations were identified and analysed. The majority of comments also expressed positive sentiment towards the aid sector (over 80%), and all comments in

response to aid agency posts were positive. These positive comments tended to include praise and encouragement for NGO work. NGO posts are likely to be read by a specialised niche audience who follow aid agencies’ posts on social media because they are interested in the aid sector and probably overwhelmingly have a positive outlook on the sector.

Some 5.5% of comments expressed negative sentiments (see Figure 4), while 11.7% were neutral. All the negative comments were posted in response to edited media articles that had discussed NGO work. Social media accounts that are used by edited media tend to have a wider and more diverse audience than aid agency accounts. Comments posted in response to edited media posts are likely to come from outside the aid agency “echo chamber”¹ of their preferred social media channels.

Negative comments² included a warning to be careful of “Western NGOs” and disinformation that NGOs are a “nest of spies” and should be reduced in number in Burkina Faso; criticism of a programme supported by an INGO advocating action against gender-based violence; and criticism of an INGO’s perceived lack of investment in health services.

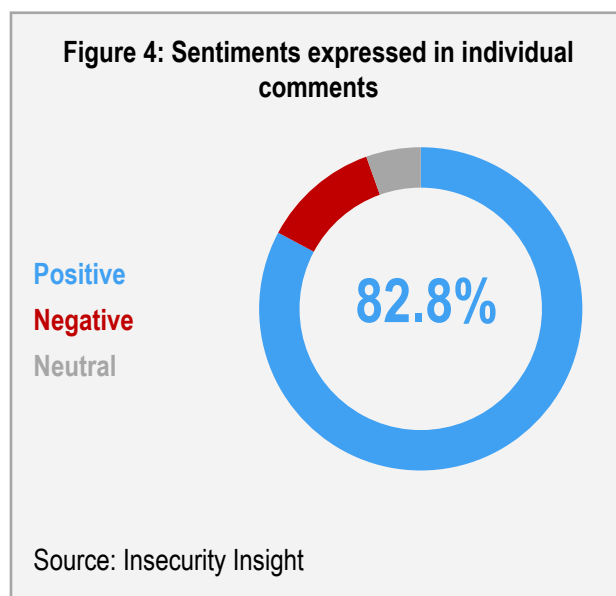
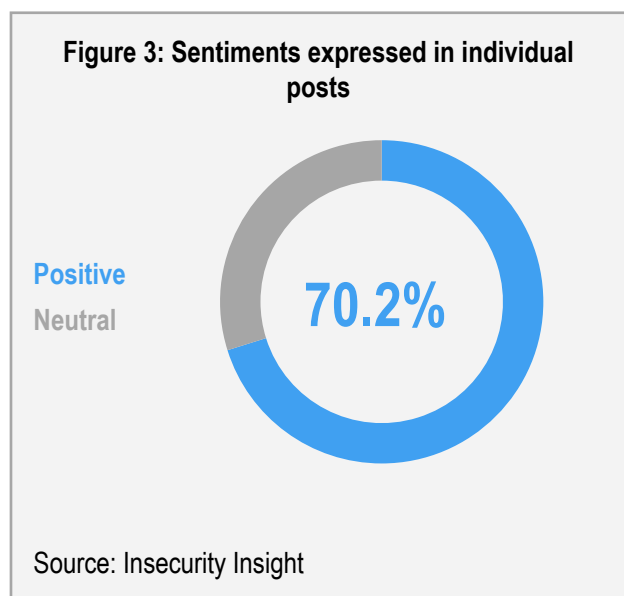
In the past, widespread disinformation targeting Western NGOs was observed when aid agencies experienced [security incidents](#) or [withdrew](#) from highly insecure areas.

“Méfiez vous des ONG de occidentaux”

“Ecoutez foutez nous la paix avec ces ONG qui ne sont que des nids d'espions. Il faut que le gouvernement réduit au maximum le nombre d'ONG operant au Burkina Faso le plus vite possible”

“Façon cette histoire de VBG a remplacé le genre!!! Et c'est toujours ici en Afrique que....”

“Eux là aussi ils ne lancé jamais de recrutement sur le domaine de la santé (infirmières, médecins) rien”



Conclusions

- Public social media engagement related to aid activities is increasingly important. In March 2024 content related to the humanitarian sector reached an estimated 800,000 people in Burkina Faso. On average, each post reached some 35,000 people, but this varies between individual posts. Most content was positive or neutral.
- Just under half of the content was created by NGOs themselves and allowed them to shape perceptions of their work. However, it may be the case that the online space in which NGOs operate is limited to a niche population or an “echo chamber”.
- INGOs have a more prominent social media presence than national NGOs and there is room for local partners to strengthen their public social media profile.
- In March 2024 negative sentiments were mainly triggered by edited media discussing the work of NGOs. Negative sentiments were not directly created by the writers of the main content, but occurred as reactions to published content.

In the past, aid agencies have been specifically targeted with disinformation in the context of security incidents or the general security context.

Recommendations

Positive content

- Positive content on social media is important to accurately reflect aid agencies’ objectives and to strengthen public acceptance of aid programmes.
- Posts prepared by aid agencies contributed to positive information being disseminated.
- NGOs may wish to strengthen their capacity to post effective content.

Negative content

- In March 2024 negative content was exclusively triggered by articles written by edited media outlets, and NGOs cannot control the content of edited media.
- Better analysis of edited media content to better understand triggers and sentiments is important.
- To counter negative content, organisations may wish to strengthen all communications that explain their reasons for their presence and work, and clearly state their respect for national/local cultural norms and practices.
- In case of security incidents or in the context of a deteriorating security context, it may be particularly important to monitor social media sentiment.

Methodology

Publicly available social media data published in French was collected in Burkina Faso for the period 1-31 March 2024 using keywords associated with a list of 165 aid organisations

known to be operating in the country. To do so, Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to identify pertinent data on X and Facebook. The collected data was subsequently analysed and the findings presented in this brief. For ethical and technical reasons, the data does not include private social media content. Moreover, the analysis does not include sentiments expressed in languages other than French.

Should you wish to provide us with any feedback or to get in touch, kindly write to: info@insecurityinsight.org

Footnotes

¹ An echo chamber is an environment in which people encounter only beliefs or opinions that coincide with their own, so that their existing views are reinforced and alternative ideas are not considered (source: Oxford Languages).

² Insecurity Insight does not edit pertinent comments found on social media to ensure that their meaning is unchanged.

Further resources

Assessing Social Media Perceptions of the [SADC Military Deployment](#) in the DRC

Viral Allegations that an Aid Organisation Had Prior Knowledge of the [Djibo Jihadist Attack](#) Underline Aid Agencies' Vulnerability to Disinformation in Burkina Faso

Online [Negative Sentiment Towards International](#) Community in the DRC

[MSF Ambush](#) in Burkina Faso

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Insecurity Insight. 2024. Protecting the Humanitarian Space in Burkina Faso March 2024. Switzerland: Insecurity Insight. bit.ly/SMMMMar2024BFAHumSpace