

Social Media Watch April-June 2024: Protecting the Humanitarian Space in Burkina Faso



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

From April to June 2024, 50 predominantly international aid-related organisations were mentioned in 358 public posts on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) in Burkina Faso. The international organisations included 32 aid or development organisations, 11 humanitarian organisations, four UN organisations and one aid donor.

Facebook accounted for 89% of the posts, with local edited media as the main content source, contributing 59%, followed by social media accounts of aid or civil sector networks at 31% and other sources at 10%.

These posts reached an estimated 4.5 million people, averaging 12,500 views per post, and generated nearly 25,000 engagements. Sentiment analysis showed that all posts were either positive or neutral.

However, 9% of the 1,179 comments (i.e. responses to posts) expressed negative sentiments that often stemmed from mistrust and misinformation. Negative comments linked aid organisations to terrorism and the creation of dependency, highlighting the need for aid agencies to address misinformation to maintain the safety and efficacy of aid operations in the region.

Misinformation, disinformation and hate speech targeting NGOs appears to have mostly been disseminated by social media users who seem to hold pro-military and pro-Alliance of Sahel States views. During the examined period these users (all male and located in Burkina Faso) also posted content related to the Burkina Faso military leaders and wider geopolitical concerns, including allegations that aid-related organisations pursued objectives that were described as being against Burkina Faso's interests or those of its people.

Aid-related organisations in Burkina Faso's social media sphere

From April to June 2024 **at least 50 aid-related organisations operating or present in Burkina Faso were mentioned in 358 public posts on Facebook and X** (formerly Twitter), including 48 international organisations and two local ones (see Figure 1). These international organisations included 32 aid or development organisations, 11 humanitarian organisations, four UN organisations and one aid donor.

Around 89% of these posts were sourced from Facebook, with the rest from X. These posts almost exclusively referred to international aid organisations: 48 of the 50 named organisations mentioned on public social media recorded between April and June 2024 were international organisations.

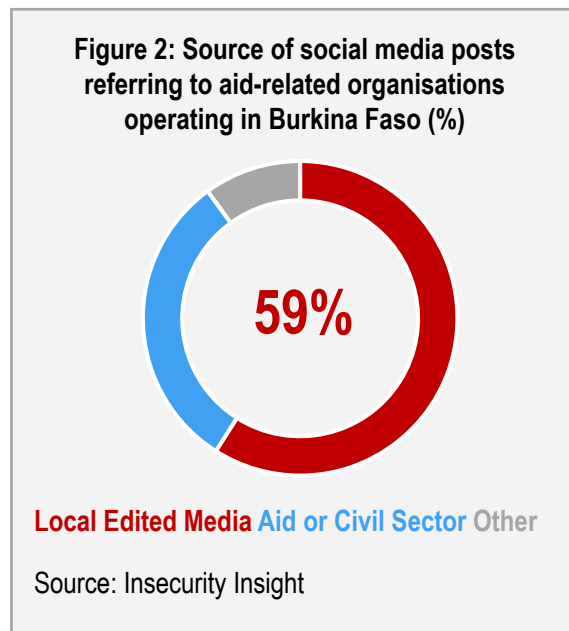
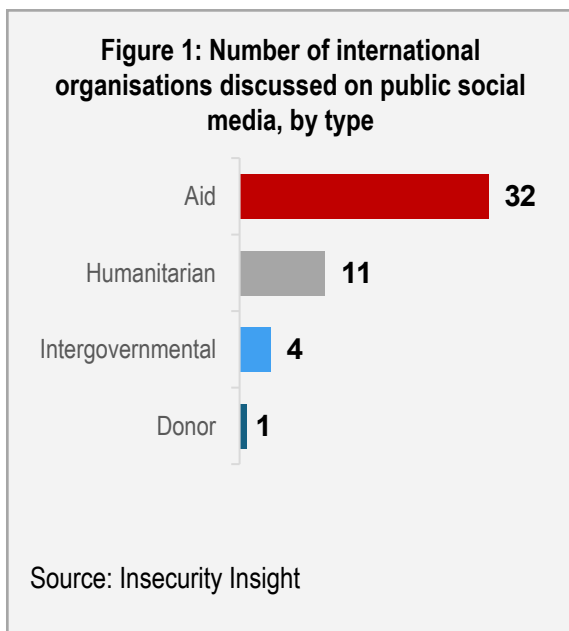
Excluding recruitment agencies,¹ the **local edited media** were the main source of content related to aid agencies, accounting for 59% of posts (see Figure 2).

Social media accounts linked to organisations or networks operating in the aid or civil sector were the second most important source of content related to aid agencies, accounting for around 31% of posts.²

Other sources, including local authorities, donors, etc., accounted for 10% of content.

In April-June 2024 posts that referred to named aid-related organisations in Burkina Faso are estimated to have reached over 4.5 million people, an average of over 12,500 per post. Furthermore, it is estimated that these posts resulted in nearly 25,000 engagement actions in the form of comments, shares and emoji reactions, with an average of around 69 engagements per post.

The posts were accompanied by 1,179 comments related to aid-related organisations (i.e. not counting comments unrelated to such organisations). The large volume of comments indicates that the social media space in Burkina Faso is larger than in other Sahel countries, including Mali.



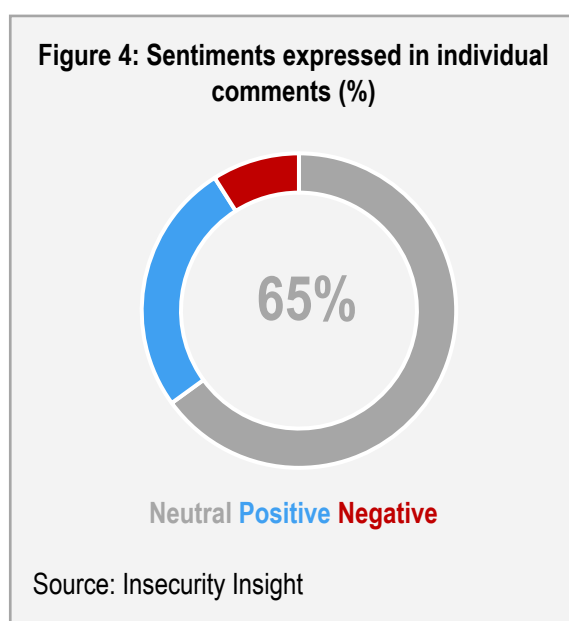
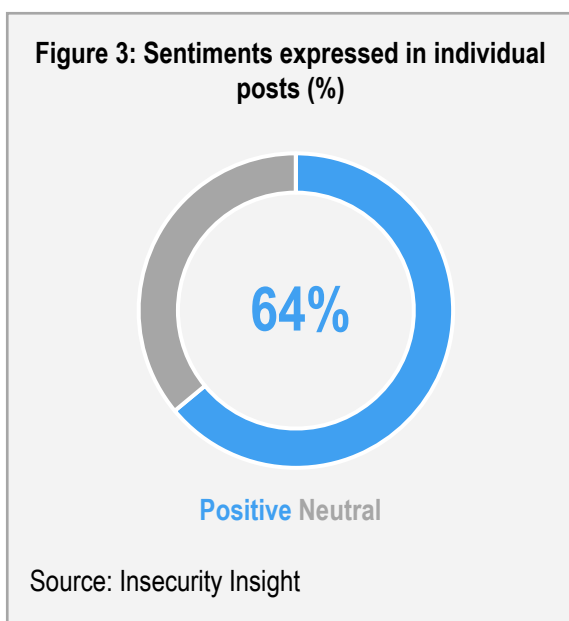
Opinions, misinformation, disinformation and hate speech

All **public posts** mentioning individual aid-related organisations on social media expressed positive (64%) or neutral (36%) sentiments (see Figure 3). Most of the content uploaded by the local edited media (59% of total posts) presented aid-related organisations’ activities in a neutral light by reporting on the facts surrounding their activities. Moreover, content produced by aid agencies and civil society organisations (31% of total posts) presented aid activities in a positive way through the dissemination of information about partnerships and programmes. In other words, no negative posts about **individual and named aid-related organisations** were detected from April to June 2024 in Burkina Faso’s online space.

A total of 1,179 **comments** about aid-related subjects were written in reaction/response to these posts. The majority of these comments generally expressed positive (26%) or neutral (65%) sentiments. However, 110 comments, or 9% of the total, expressed negative sentiments (Figure 4).

Negative sentiments in these comments referred to six aid-related organisations: one donor, one intergovernmental organisation, one humanitarian organisation, and three aid or development organisations. Several instances of negative sentiments towards the aid sector as a whole (i.e. referring to “NGOs” in general terms rather than specific aid-related organisations) were also detected. However, as seen in this section, individual aid-related organisations were targeted more frequently. This contrasts with findings in Mali, where negative sentiments were generally aimed at the aid sector as a whole and rarely at individual organisations.

Negative sentiments towards aid-related organisations generally took two forms: *misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech (MDH) and unfavourable or critical opinions.*



Clearcut examples of MDH were detected when some social media users made a direct link between international aid-related organisations and “terrorism”, arguing that these organisations equip rebels with armaments (e.g. “The same people who want to help us are the same ones who also help terrorists with weapons that massacre us; it’s hypocrisy”; “... they are the ones who finance terrorism in the Sahel”).³ This finding is compatible with previous observations made by Insecurity Insight in Burkina Faso, where disinformation seeking to associate humanitarian organisations with rebel groups was widely disseminated and detected (see Box 1).

In other instances, while comments expressing negative sentiments did not constitute MDH in themselves, they may have been influenced by MDH. For example, when a news site announced an aid-related organisation’s donation of equipment to Burkina Faso, comments urged authorities to be wary of the donation and to check the equipment (e.g. “*The equipment needs to be well scanned before any usage ... be wary, Madam Minister.*”).⁴ The underlying assumption is that aid-related organisations may be deliberately providing equipment that is harmful to civilians.

Box 1: Previous cases of MDH on social media in Burkina Faso

In February 2023 two employees of a humanitarian organisation were killed in the Boucle du Mouhoun region of Burkina Faso, resulting in the organisation suspending its humanitarian activities in the region. Social media monitoring conducted in the aftermath of the incident indicated that some social media users falsely claimed that the aid organisation was aiding armed groups and acting on behalf of Western governments, while the decision to suspend humanitarian activities in the region was generally welcomed on social media.

In November 2023, in the aftermath of the deadly jihadist attacks on the city of Djibo, another humanitarian organisation was targeted via an audio recording alleging that the organisation had been informed of the impending attack by the jihadists and that it had withdrawn its staff from the area prior to the assault. The analysis showed that most social media users who reacted to the public discussion about the content of the audio clip appear to believe that the allegations were true, suggesting an underlying lack of trust in INGOs.

Another recurrent example of mistrustful and critical opinions, which may also have been generally inspired by MDH targeted at aid-related organisations, is the perception that foreign aid is essentially a tool designed to create a relationship of dependency between Burkina Faso's population and external actors. The suspicion expressed was that foreign or "Western" aid serves as a guise for more insidious intentions (e.g. *"Everything has a price, even humanitarian gestures. Especially when coming from ..."*; *"We must quickly stop this kind of funding These NGOs always have ulterior motives"*; *"Beware of bilateral and multilateral aid. Its disadvantages outweigh its advantages. Westerners have never helped a country without self-interest."*)⁵ Sentiments such as these were repeated in relation to a number of aid-related organisations.

Some social media users also argued that the aid is not having a positive impact on beneficiaries and localities in Burkina Faso. For example, in reaction to an international donor's donation of equipment to a number of departments in Burkina Faso, one user complained that it was not continuous "presents" by international organisations that are needed, but "real national projects":

"It seems like it's the donations that keep our [communities] running. Always projects. Always waiting for others. We need real national projects for all our services. And avoid international projects in our agendas because they don't really come to give us gifts".⁶ Another underlined that in some cases the provided aid is not enough: "You often need to specify the amount because some NGOs are pointless, giving two barrels of oil to a school with 800 students and claiming they have supported that school".⁷

While negative in their outlook, *unfavourable opinions* are not dangerous or problematic in themselves and can possibly be seen as a form of feedback for the aid sector. However, other comments falling into the category of MDH are a direct threat to organisations' continued safety and access to beneficiaries.

The difference between posts containing MDH and unfavourable opinions can also be seen through various social media profile characteristics. Users who posted unfavourable opinions about aid-related organisations tended to have more diverse posts in their feed about lifestyles, sports, etc., indicating they are not necessarily trying to purposefully spread MDH and influence opinion. The evidence also suggests that they post more personal information (marital status, occupation, etc.) than the seven accounts analysed for MDH (see more details in the section on the "Reach of social media profiles", below).

Indeed, of the seven analysed social media profiles that posted MDH about regional topics and organisations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), four accounts posted negative sentiments about NGOs or the UN in general, with a few instances of an NGO being targeted specifically. All seven accounts posted mainly political and military content. Six of these accounts expressed direct support for Burkina Faso's military government and the Alliance of Sahel States, and criticism of ECOWAS. Three out of the seven accounts also expressed pro-Russian sentiments. All of the examined influencers posting negative comments about the aid sector were male. These profiles held less personal information than those posting unfavourable opinions and were more likely to be anonymous and to almost exclusively post political content. Finally, another indicator differentiating these accounts from the ones that posted unfavourable opinions was the rate at which they re-posted MDH taken from the posts of much more prominent regional influencers like Nathalie Yamb.⁸

Reach of social media profiles

The seven profiles that engaged in MDH were based in Burkina Faso and had between 25 to 550 followers, and their posts and comments typically garnered only a handful of reactions, indicating a limited reach. These accounts frequently reposted political content from much more prominent regional influencers, highlighting the cross-border links between the content that is being spread. Three of these influencers are highly active, commenting on posts multiple times a day. However, given their small number of followers, it is unlikely that they are making a living from being an influencer. The majority of these accounts have been active on social media for over three years (six out of seven accounts), making it likely that they are run by a human. However, four of the seven users did not use a private profile picture or their real names, likely due to the political nature of their posts and comments.

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 that 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 social media user’s *reply or response* 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 various *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.

Additionally, seven social media profiles that had posted misinformation, disinformation and hate speech (MDH) about aid-related organisations in Burkina Faso were examined to analyse trends in the topics they were referring to and their reach.

The analysis is limited to publicly available posts or comments. It does not include information shared via private social media platforms like WhatsApp or private Facebook groups. It is further limited to written posts and does not include analysis of spoken video messages posted on YouTube.

This document discusses both unfavourable opinions expressed about individual aid-related organisations or the aid sector as a whole, as well as MDH.

Misinformation refers to situations where users pass on false content without being aware that they are spreading factually incorrect information. *Disinformation* occurs when users knowingly and deliberately spread false allegations. *Hate speech* occurs when negative sentiments are used to incite violence. MDH poses direct threats to safety and security, and contributes to shrinking the operational space of aid-related organisations. Unfavourable opinions provide insights into public perceptions that may potentially offer constructive accountability-related feedback for the affected populations that the aid sector seeks to serve.

Conclusion

- From April to June 2024 social media activity in Burkina Faso showcased the significant presence and influence of aid-related organisations. At least 50 such organisations were mentioned, comprising 32 aid or development organisations, 11 humanitarian organisations, four UN organisations and one aid donor.
- Facebook dominated as the platform of choice, accounting for 89% of the analysed posts. Local edited media were the primary source of content related to aid agencies, generating 59% of the posts.
- Burkina Faso has a particularly vibrant social media sphere compared to other countries in the Sahel such as Mali. For example, posts referring to named aid-related organisations in Burkina Faso reached an estimated 4.5 million people, compared to an estimated 1.5 million over the same period (April-June 2024) in Mali.
- While posts expressed either positive or neutral sentiments, 9% of the comments (110 out of 1,179) expressed negative sentiments, some of which can be considered unfavourable but seemingly fact-based opinion, while some had traits of MDH.
- Unfavourable opinions or criticisms of aid agencies particularly focused on the alleged lack of lasting or real impact of some aid-related organisations or of the aid sector in general in Burkina Faso.
- MDH included claims directly linking international aid organisations to terrorism, including claims that these organisations provided armaments to rebels.
- Underlying all negative sentiments was often a mistrust of aid-related organisations and their programmes. Some users viewed foreign aid as a tool to create dependency and expressed their suspicion that the aid provided by foreign or “Western” entities concealed ulterior motives.
- Addressing criticism of and feedback regarding aid organisations expressed via social media is important for these organisations’ accountability towards affected populations. Being able to listen to and adjust programmes where necessary is important in the age of social media in order to develop and maintain a good reputation.
- Understanding misinformation, disinformation and hate speech is important for aid agencies’ security risk management policies. Misperceptions about these agencies’ intentions can become a direct threat to both their safety and their operations. Addressing these issues is crucial for maintaining the safety and efficacy of aid operations in Burkina Faso and the wider region.

Recommendations

- **Enhance communication and transparency:** Transparency about an aid-related organisation's activities, goals, and outcomes helps to counteract mistrust and negative sentiments. Regularly updating the public with clear, factual information about projects and successes can help build trust and dispel misconceptions.
- **Engage with the community:** Active engagement with local communities and stakeholders on social media can help to address concerns and provide feedback. This involves responding to comments, clarifying doubts and participating in open dialogues. Such engagement can turn unfavourable opinions into constructive feedback and improve an organisation's reputation.
- **Develop strategic counter-MDH campaigns:** Targeted campaigns should be implemented to counter MDH. These campaigns should include fact-checking services, collaboration with local media, and partnerships with influencers to disseminate accurate information and debunk false claims.
- **Monitor and mitigate risks:** Social media should be continuously monitored for negative sentiments and MDH targeting aid-related organisations. These organisations should develop and deploy mitigation strategies, such as training staff in digital literacy and risk management, to safeguard against potential security threats and ensure the safety and efficacy of aid operations.

Methodology

Publicly available social media data published in French related to aid work in Burkina Faso between April and June 2024 was analysed using keywords associated with a list of 165 local and international 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 various social media platforms. 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 and is only based on the analysis of written content.

Seven accounts identified as having posted written negative content sentiment towards the aid sector were further examined to understand their reach, audience and the topics they focused on. The posts and comments of these accounts were analysed according to predetermined criteria examining their geographic location, reach, followers, topics, political links and socio-economic indicators.

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

Footnotes

1 Recruitment agencies, at least some of which may be fake, tend to post jobs related to international aid agencies. Job advertisements represented 23% of social media content related to aid agencies in Burkina Faso.

2 This figure does not include content produced by the organisations themselves. For example, if organisation A publishes a post to publicise the work it is conducting, this post is not included in the data. However, if organisation A publishes a post regarding organisation B, then the post features in the data.

3 “Les mêmes qui veulent nous aider sont les mêmes qui aident aussi les terroristes avec des armes qui nous massacrent, c’est de l’hypocrisie”; “... c’est eux qui financent le terrorisme au Sahel.”

4 “Il faut bien scanner tt le matériel avant tt usage ... méfiance Mme le Ministre.”

5 “Tout à un prix, même les gestes humanitaires. Surtout venant de ...”; “Il faut vite arrêter ces genres de financement Ces ONG ont toujours une arrière-pensée dans leurs enveloppes”; “Attention aux aides bilatérales et aux aides multilatérales. Ces inconvénients dépassent ces avantages. Les occidentaux n’ont jamais aidé un pays sans intérêt.”

6 “... on dirait ce sont les don[s] qui font fonctionner notre [communes]. Toujours des projets. A attendre toujours des autres. Il faut des vrais projets nationaux pour tous nos services. Et éviter les projets internationaux dans nos agendas parce qu’ils viennent pas pour nous faire vraiment des cadeaux.”

7 “Il faut souvent précise le nombre parce qu’il y’a certains ONG là c’est pas la peine déh il y’a des ONG qui donnent deux bidons d’huile a une école qui compte un effectif de 800 élèves et ils disent qu’ils ont soutenu ladite école”

8 Nathalie Yamb is a known [Russian-sponsored influencer](#) with over 200,000 followers on X who posts MDH on various political and military topics in the Sahel on a daily basis.

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Insecurity Insight. 2024. Protecting the Humanitarian Space in Burkina Faso April-June 2024. Switzerland: Insecurity Insight. bit.ly/BFASMMJul2024