

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



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 Mali, with the aim of contributing to the development of aid agencies' communication strategies in response to community sentiment.

Summary

From April to June 2024, at least 54 international and Malian aid-related organisations were discussed across Facebook and X in Mali. These individual organisations were mentioned in 368 posts, which reached over 1.5 million social media users and generated over 27,000 engagement responses. International aid-related organisations had a greater visibility on public social media platforms compared to Malian aid organisations.

Overall, the sentiments expressed in these posts about individual organisations tended to be overwhelmingly positive or neutral. Only four posts out of 368 made negative statements about named international organisations, including accusations of financing terrorism in Mali. No posts spreading misinformation, disinformation and hate speech (MDH) targeting Malian aid-related organisations were identified.

Negative sentiment towards the aid sector was more commonly expressed in general terms – without naming individual aid-related organisations. Criticism included accusations of complicity in harmful vaccination campaigns, serving Western interests, perpetuating dependency on foreign aid, and manipulating Malian cattle herders to leave Mali.

Posts containing MDH appear to have mostly been disseminated by users who seemed to hold pro-military and pro-Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, or AES) views.¹ During the examined period, these users (mainly male and located in Mali) posted content about the Malian military junta and its leader, Assimi Goita, and wider geopolitical concerns. Among these posts were some that included allegations that aid-related organisations pursued objectives that were described as being against Mali's interests or those of its people. At least two international influencers with between 50,000 and 200,000 followers also posted similar content when interacting with online communities beyond Mali.

This brief provides insights into the online discourse surrounding aid and humanitarian organisations in Mali. It highlights the importance of social media in shaping public perceptions of aid work to support aid agencies' communication and risk management strategies.

Aid-related organisations in Malian social media sphere

From April until June 2024, **at least 53 aid-related organisations operating or present in Mali were mentioned in 368 public posts on Facebook and X** (formerly Twitter), including 26 Malian aid organisations and 27 international ones (see Figure 1). International organisations included 14 aid or development organisations, seven humanitarian organisations, five UN organisations and one aid donor.

Nearly 73% of these posts were sourced from Facebook, with the rest from X. International aid organisations were mentioned in around 79% of the posts, despite accounting for only 27 out of 53 individual organisations found to have been mentioned on public social media accounts between April and June 2024. The remaining 21% made reference to Malian organisations.

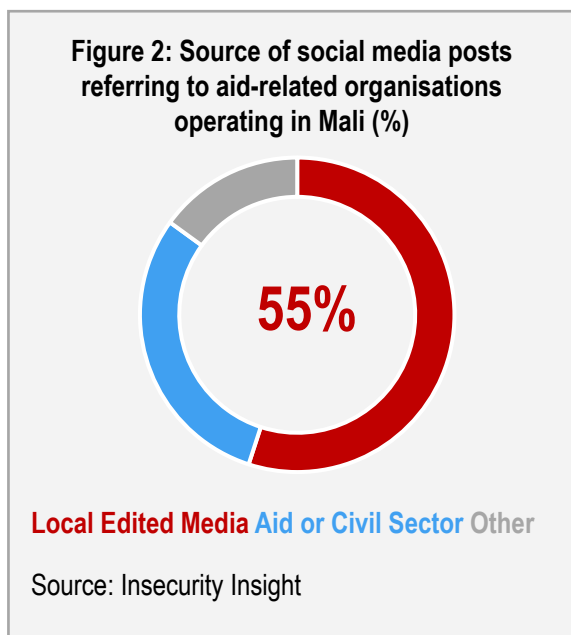
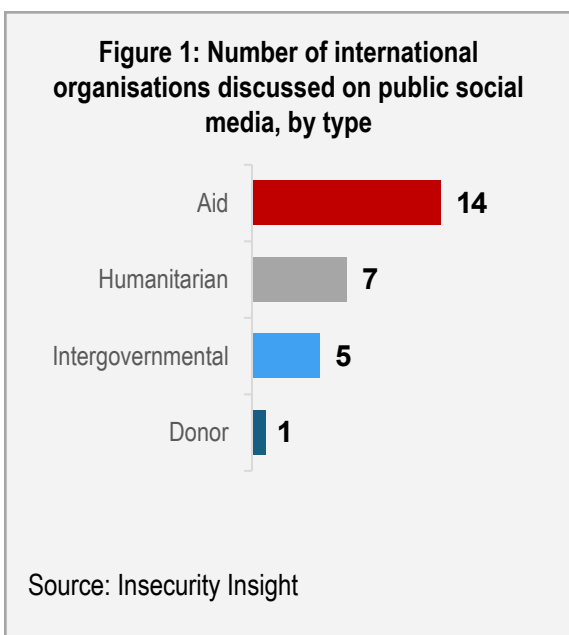
Excluding recruitment agencies,² **the local edited media** were the main source of content related to aid agencies, accounting for 55% of posts (see Figure 2).

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 30% of posts.³

Other sources, including local authorities, donors, etc., accounted for 15% of content.

Content posted by local edited media frequently informed their audience about the work being conducted by aid organisations. Content posted by accounts linked to organisations or networks operating in the aid or civil sector usually focused on various forms of partnerships or collaborations with the aid organisations featured in this analysis. Content posted by local authorities mainly contained information about meetings or forms of collaboration with aid organisations.

Content related to international and local aid-related organisations was shared in separate social media spaces: international aid agencies featured more in content produced by the local edited media (62%⁴), which tends to have a diverse audience and readership beyond communities with an interest in aid work. Malian aid organisations were more commonly mentioned by civil sector organisations or networks (45%) and less by the edited media (34%), suggesting that local aid agencies operate in a smaller and more contained social media space used by individuals with a shared interest in aid and civil society work. The focus on a more closely networked social media sphere may be one of the reasons why Malian aid agencies are less targeted by MDH.



In April-June 2024, posts that referred to named aid-related organisations in Mali are estimated to have reached nearly 1.5 million people, an average of over 4,000 per post. Furthermore, it is estimated that these posts resulted in nearly 27,000 engagement actions in the form of comments, shares and emoji reactions, with an average of around 71 engagements per post.

The posts were accompanied by 173 comments related to aid-related organisations (i.e. not counting comments unrelated to such organisations).

Sentiment analysis

The vast majority of public posts mentioning individual aid-related organisations on social media expressed positive (54%) or neutral (44%) sentiments (see Figure 3). Most of the content uploaded by the local edited media (62% of total posts) presented aid-related organisations' activities in a positive light. Moreover, content produced by aid agencies and civil society organisations (30% of total posts) presented aid activities in a positive way through the dissemination of information about partnerships and programmes.

Throughout the monitoring process, four posts were found to have disseminated MDH about **individual and named aid-related organisations**. Three of these posts targeted an international donor in particular and claimed links between the donor organisation and wider – i.e. Western – political objectives and interests. These three posts included the following content about the donor organisation:

- an allegation that the donor organisation directly financed “terrorism” in Mali and the Sahel;
- criticism of the organisation for its apparently weak support for countries affected by terrorism (reference to Western support for Ukraine was also made); and
- an allegation that the organisation had bought political and economic influence in a neighbouring country.

The fourth post targeted two aid agencies that operated internationally (a humanitarian and a development aid agency), and alleged that the two are working in the interests of the NATO military alliance. The post appears to have been triggered by rumours that an employee of the development agency was involved in the setting up of a rebel group in another sub-Saharan African country.

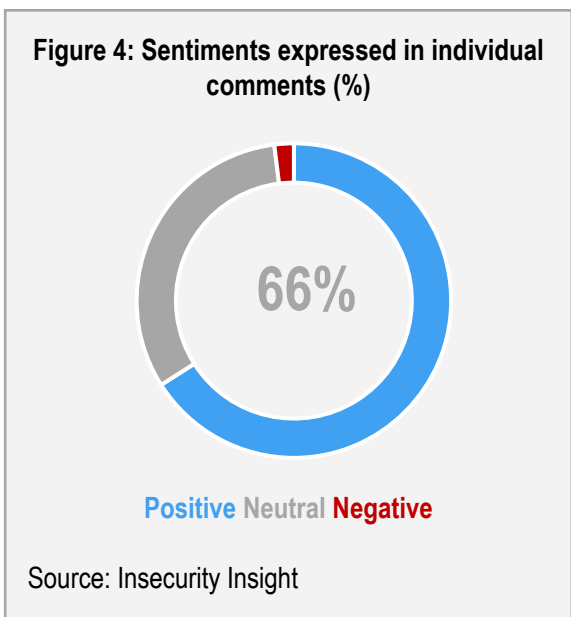
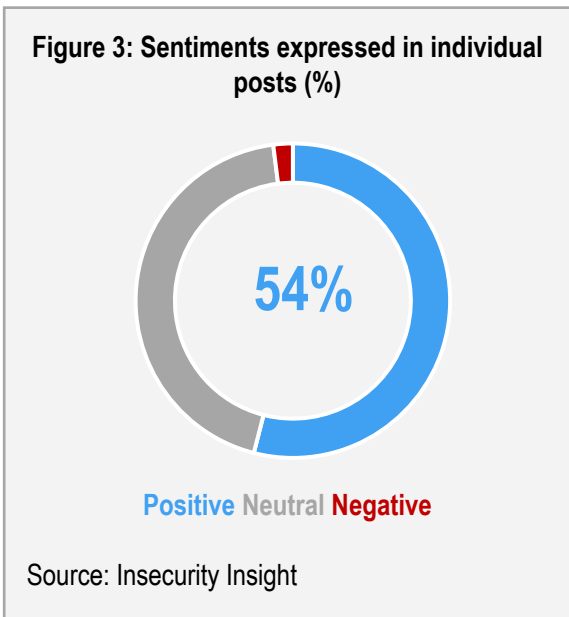
A total of 173 **comments** about aid-related subjects were written in reaction to these posts. Similarly to the sentiments expressed in the original posts, the majority of these comments generally expressed positive (66%) or neutral (32%) sentiments. Positive comments tended to include praise and encouragement for NGO work. It is likely that the individuals who responded to these posts with comments came themselves from the NGO sector or were individuals with an interest in aid work. These positive comments probably mirror perceptions of the aid sector about itself rather than views held among the wider public. They will probably, however, subtly influence sentiments among the wider public who read articles produced by the edited media and who saw such comments. It is likely that the posts and comments contributed to creating an overall positive view of aid work.

A minority of comments, six in total, expressed negative sentiment or MDH (see Figure 4). All of these comments were in reaction to two of the four posts spreading negative allegations about aid activities (see above). This suggests that disseminating MDH

about aid-related organisations often triggers further negative comments. These comments included the following claims and assertions:

- that international aid-related organisations are an instrument of foreign policy and that the “West” uses them to “spy” on Mali; and
- that international organisations seek to “exterminate” civilians in Mali through vaccines and medications.

In the comments, another international (humanitarian) organisation was also identified by one social media user as being a “criminal organisation” that finances terrorism apart from those already identified in the original post.



While negative sentiments referred to four named aid agencies, the majority of negative posts between April and June 2024 related to the aid sector in general and complained about “NGOs” or “aid organisations” in general.

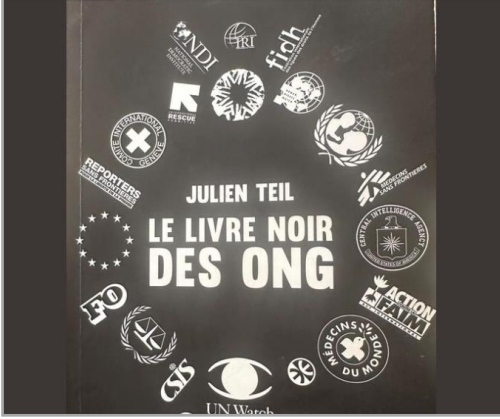
Generic claims about the aid sector included:

- that NGOs support /are complicit with/finance terrorism in the Sahel;
- that NGOs are complicit in the killing of African children by vaccination campaigns;
- that NGOs are tools in the hands of “Western” or “imperialist” interests and a means to “destabilise” the country;
- that NGOs are created by “white” people to obtain financing;
- that NGOs perpetuate local dependency on foreign aid;
- that NGOs are partly responsible for the negative image of Africa in Europe; and
- that NGOs seek to convince Malian cattle herders to take their herds to other countries where they will be supported financially (also repeated here).

Many of the social media users identified as having posted allegations about aid-related organisations also posted mainly political content. Twenty-one of these social media accounts expressed direct support for the Malian military (FAMa) and 17 accounts shared pro-AES sentiments and criticism of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in particular in relation to the ECOWAS summit on 7 July 2024. Influencers supporting the Africa Corps (previously the Wagner Group) labelled any reported human rights violations as disinformation and Western manipulation. This suggests that key influencers use anti-aid sentiment to reinforce nationalist and anti-foreign narratives.

Les ONG soutenues par l'Occident ne représentent pas seulement un moyen de déstabiliser un État, mais également un investissement politique pour des organisations comme la NED. Pour ces États et pour leurs agences gouvernementales, les ONG, en Afrique en particulier, forment un vivier dans lequel recruter de futurs dirigeants.

Extrait - Le livre noir des ONG - Julien Teil, Page 137



Profile analysis of accounts posting negative sentiments about the aid sector in Mali

Twenty of the 32 accounts posting negative comments about the aid sector in Mali listed Mali as their main location, while others stated that they were posting from Cameroon (3), Burkina Faso (1), Benin (2), Italy (1), Croatia (1) and Jamaica (1).⁵ The political posts in two accounts demonstrated a positive leaning towards Iran. Twenty accounts showed approval of Russia, including the Africa Corps, while 18 accounts expressed negative sentiments towards France and the United States. The majority of influencers posting negative comments about the aid sector were male (20 out of 32, of which six were unknown).

The reach of the examined social media profiles

A majority of the profiles that were analysed had posted more than 50 posts during a 68-day period (24 accounts), and only four had produced less than ten posts. The majority of these accounts had also been on social media for more than five years (16 accounts). Moreover, the views of nine influencers with between 50,000 and 200,000 followers were frequently re-posted by accounts with fewer followers. Many influencers posting MDH are not detected and removed by social media administrators, and they have been able to build loyal audiences over several years. Only three accounts showed signs that they may have been removed by social media administrators or were actually deleted, because new profiles with only slightly different usernames appeared once the original account had been taken off the platform.

The high frequency of posts and comments of five social media accounts suggests that these were run by full-time influencers. Two of them include the accounts of Nathalie Yamb and Kémi Séba, who are European-born anti-colonial activists and known [Russian-sponsored](#) influencers⁶ with over 200,000 followers.

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

- Public social media engagement related to aid activities is increasingly important. From April to June 2024, content related to the aid sector reached an estimated 1.5 million people in Mali. On average, each post reached some 4,000 people, but this varies among individual posts.
- Most posts mentioning specific organisations were either positive or neutral, highlighting the importance of the social media space as a place to explain the work and objectives of the aid sector.
- INGOs have a stronger presence on social media platforms linked to the edited media than Malian NGOs, allowing them to disseminate information about their work and mission among a wider general public.
- Malian NGOs have a stronger social media presence than INGOs among NGO and civil society networks in Mali. These communities of discussion groups are more limited to a self-selected group of interested individuals and there was no evidence of misinformation or disinformation circulating on their publicly accessible spaces.
- The monitoring of social media platforms between April and June 2024 identified a limited number of negative posts or comments promoting false content or inciting negative views about the work of the aid sector. Some posts mentioned international aid-related organisations by name, but a larger number referred to the aid sector or NGOs in general terms.
- Most accounts that posted content inciting negative views of the aid sector otherwise posted and reposted content with strong political views that included general anti-French, anti-US, pro-Russian or pro-Iranian views.
- Two-thirds of these accounts were based in Mali, while one-third self-indicated that they were based outside of Mali. Two of the influencers with over 200,000 followers were born in Europe.
- Most communication focused on the aid sector's perceived connections to foreign powers or what the users called "terrorist" organisations. Posts alleging such connections triggered negative comments, underlining how negative sentiment grows in communities that engage with one another around existing shared views.
- This analysis was limited to publicly posted content written in French and does not take into account the impact of video content in other languages.

Recommendations

Positive content

- Positive content on social media is important to accurately reflect aid agencies' objectives and to strengthen public acceptance of and support for aid programmes.
- Posts prepared by aid agencies contributed to positive information being disseminated.
- NGOs may wish to strengthen their capacity to post effective positive content.
- Malian NGOs could seek to engage more with the edited media to ensure that their work features more in edited content.
- INGOs could seek to be more present in Malian online civil society networks to strengthen their local impact and connections with local partners and their followers.

Negative content

- Understanding influencers and how their posts trigger negative content is important for any NGO/INGO communication strategy and security risk management process.
- To counter negative content, international organisations may wish to strengthen communications that explain the reasons for their presence and work in Mali, and clearly state their respect for national/local cultural norms and practices and that they in no way support or further the political interests of foreign governments.

Methodology and limitations

Publicly available social media data published in French was analysed related to aid work in Mali between April to June 2024 using keywords associated with a list of 166 Malian and international aid organisations known to be operating in Mali. 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.

Thirty-two accounts identified as having posted written negative content sentiment towards the aid sector were further examined to understand their reach, audience, subject matter and points of view. Between 1 May and 7 July 2024, the posts and comments of these profiles were analysed according to predetermined criteria examining their geography, reach, followers, subject matter, political links, and socio-economic indicators. The posts of two accounts that posted every few minutes could not be examined in detail due to the high volume of posts.

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

Footnotes

- 1 The AES comprises Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, and was established on 16 September 2023.
- 2 Recruitment agencies, at least some of which may be fake, tend to post jobs related to international aid agencies. Job advertisements related to aid agencies represented 26% of social media content related to aid agencies in Mali.
- 3 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.
- 4 This figure excludes posts related to the posting of vacancies.
- 5 Three accounts provided no information about their locations. However, there is no way of verifying where the account holder is located. One account holder is likely to post from Switzerland without indicating this on their profile.
- 6 Nathalie Yamb - [Wikipedia, Kémi Séba](#) - Wikipedia.

Social media profile analysis: platform usage

- Facebook: 10 accounts
- TikTok: Two accounts
- X: 16 accounts
- YouTube: Four accounts

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