Tracking Aid Narratives on Social Media: Weekly Observations from the Sahel

09-16 March 2025

This new briefing by Insecurity Insight analyses social media activity from 1 to 8 March 2025, assessing observed narratives based on 12 months of systematic social media monitoring in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

SUMMARY: Between 09 and 16 March, 129 social media posts generated 430 comments in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. 65% of the discussions largely centred around WFP funding cuts, with many framing food aid as a barrier to self-sufficiency, while a smaller portion expressed concern over its impact on vulnerable populations. Engagement with UN agencies, LNGOs and INGOs remained low. Discussions on USAID's aid freeze continued to decline but retained negative sentiment.

Past editions: 01-08 March

Spotlight: Value of food aid questioned in context of WFP funding cuts on Facebook in Niger and Burkina Faso

The anticipated suspension of WFP food assistance in April 2025 in Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, and Nigeria due to insufficient funding has triggered debate on Facebook, with particular negative sentiment towards food aid in Niger and Burkina Faso. While some users acknowledged the potential humanitarian and economic impact (such as losing jobs), the dominant narrative was one of rejection—framing food aid as an obstacle to self-sufficiency and a tool of foreign control.

Many social media users celebrated the suspension as a path to self-reliance. The idea that humanitarian aid fosters laziness and dependency was a recurring theme, with multiple comments stating that people had survived before WFP and could do so again. The suspension was framed as an opportunity for "true autonomy," with calls for populations to return to agriculture rather than "waiting for handouts."

Distrust in UN agencies and perceived foreign interference: There was a strong rejection of WFP as part of a broader distrust towards UN agencies and international organisations. Many comments accused these organisations of having hidden agendas, including funding terrorism, manipulating economies, and maintaining geopolitical influence. These narratives have been recurring, with Insecurity Insight tracking them since 2022 across the region, as well as in the DRC and Ethiopia.

Religious framing of the situation: A significant portion of the comments invoked religious beliefs, asserting that "God provides" for people, not foreign organisations. Some posts dismissed the necessity of food aid entirely, arguing that faith and the divine will determine survival.

Criticism of beneficiaries: Some users attacked vulnerable groups, referring to them as "dependents" and "lazy people who refuse to work."

This rejection of food aid by social media users comes at a time when food insecurity in the Sahel is reaching critical levels. According to WFP, over 52.7 million people in the region are facing acute hunger, with funding shortages forcing drastic reductions in assistance.

Absence of voices: In 2023 there were 8.9% social media users in Burkina Faso, and 2.4% in Niger (as of 2021) therefore the expressed views in 430 comments are unlikely to come from food insecure communities. By comparison, when WFP announced aid cuts in Syria in July 2023, negative sentiment towards the aid sector was driven by disappointment and anger and the expectation that corruption may have deprived them of support. Women made up 43.5% of social media users sharing their views on aid cuts in Syria. There is little indication that women from across the Sahel are taking to social media to share their experiences and views.

Challenges ahead: As humanitarian needs rise, shifting perceptions of aid—both as a necessity and a perceived obstacle to sovereignty among the loud minority with access to social media platforms—may further complicate response efforts.

Navigating this increasingly hostile perception of humanitarian aid requires a delicate balance:

- **Avoiding unnecessarily provocative messaging** that reinforces the perception of aid as a tool of control.
- **Affirming humanitarian principles**—especially the commitment to supporting those most in need—while recognizing and respecting local resilience and sovereignty.
- **Emphasising partnership and** how assistance supports long-term self-sufficiency rather than replacing local efforts.
- **Recognising community resilience** and recognising how a focus on 'negative coping mechanisms' can be perceived as undermining the dignity and agency of communities.
- **Addressing economic concerns transparently**, acknowledging the reality that humanitarian work also provides employment and contributes to local economies.

See here for Insecurity Insight's analysis of the links between food security and conflict in Mali.

Key Narratives and Trends: 09-16 March 2025

USAID's aid freeze

Engagement (number of comments) on the topic continued to decrease but remained mainly negative.

What this tells us

- While some still criticize the aid freeze, last week social media users in Burkina Faso framed it as an opportunity to become self-sufficient.
- Negative narratives around USAID and foreign aid in general are becoming entrenched, fueled by distrust and perceptions of corruption and foreign interference. As the topic resurfaces on social media, scepticism about USAID endures.

UNHCR continued to face backlash

- Sudanese refugees communities in Agadez continued to use X to call out in English to UNHCR requesting help (see last week's brief for more detail)

Election of female chief framed as external interference in local customs

- **A UN agency was criticized in Burkina Faso** after a post highlighting a project during which a young female chief was elected. 40 percent of commenters framed this as an external

interference in local customs, opposing the idea of a young woman in what was perceived as a traditionally male role. Many viewed this as a Western imposition on African traditions, while others saw it as an erosion of cultural heritage.

Patterns of aid narratives on social media continued

- **UN agencies** accounted for 80% of comments from March 9-16, largely driven by debates on WFP food aid cuts.
- **Local NGOs received positive but limited engagement (11%)**, with 15 LNGOs in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali sharing updates on community initiatives. Their interactions remained neutral to positive, mainly consisting of congratulations and logistical inquiries.
- **International NGOs saw minimal engagement (**9%), with six INGOs mentioned or posting content, generating mostly neutral or positive reactions.

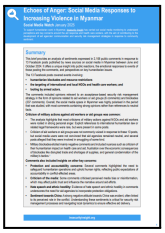
Further Resources

Surge in Negative Discourse About Aid on Social Media Since the US Funding Freeze

The value of aid is being disregarded and social media campaigns attacking humanitarian efforts are playing a critical role in this shift. Insecurity Insight has been monitoring how aid operations are discussed on social media. Our findings highlight growing hostility towards aid, particularly in the context of recent funding cuts.

Echoes of Anger: Social Media Responses to Increasing Violence in Myanmar

This brief provides an analysis of sentiments expressed in 2,106 public comments in response to 13 Facebook posts published by news sources on social media in Myanmar between June and October 2024. The analysis highlights that most criticisms of military actions against NGOs and aid workers were rooted in strong personal anger. Explicit references to IHL or related legal frameworks were rare, but were present in some posts.



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