

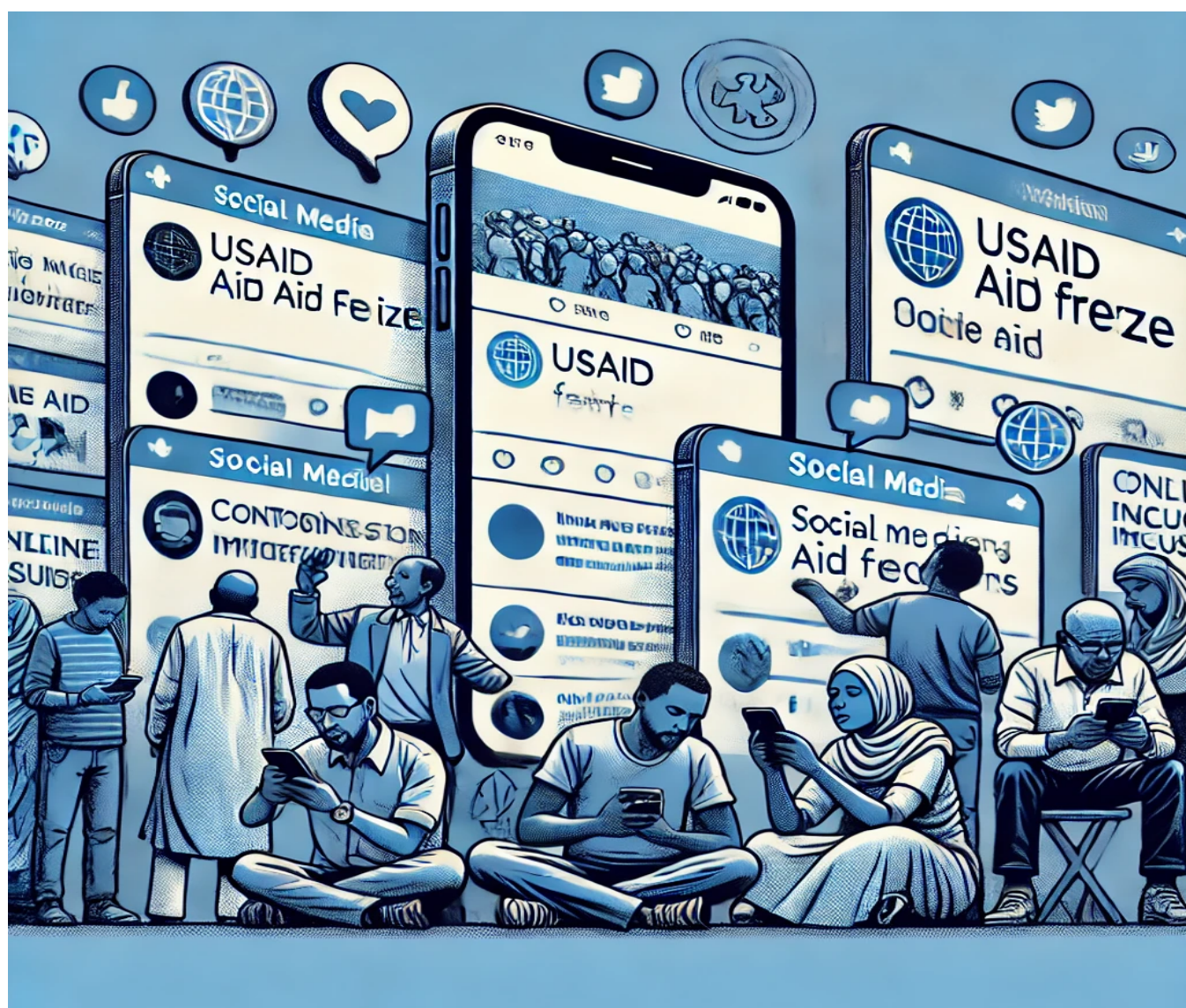
# USAID Freeze Discussion on Social Media



## Protecting the Humanitarian Space in the Sahel Region

Social Media Watch, March 2025

This document provides analysis of the discussions on social media around the freeze of USAID funds, with a more general focus on perceptions of aid agencies across the Sahel region. The document analyses public sentiment regarding these issues, with the aim of providing insights that can inform aid agencies' communication strategies and security risk management approaches as the aid sector adjusts to the shock of the funding freeze. The document is part of **Insecurity Insight's** ongoing monitoring of public social media spaces in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.



## Findings at a glance

Across social media in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the US government's 90-day freeze on foreign development assistance sparked a widespread rejection of foreign aid. Many social media users saw the freeze as a chance for African nations to pursue self-sufficiency and invest in their own economies. Commenters frequently argued that aid fosters long-term dependency rather than genuine development. A common sentiment was that foreign aid primarily serves elites, NGOs and donors rather than benefitting the local population.

Criticism of foreign aid, and USAID in particular, was strongest in Burkina Faso (645 out of 810 comments) and Mali (587 out of 698 comments), but was much less pronounced in Niger (44 out of 96 comments). Negative discourse in Burkina Faso was concentrated in a few viral Facebook posts, while in Mali it was fragmented across multiple discussions. While Facebook users drove the critical discussions in Burkina Faso, in Mali, 87.8% of comments on X expressed anti-aid sentiments, highlighting how platform use differs between these countries. Niger showed more balanced sentiments, with both positive and negative perspectives present, while negative sentiment towards the aid sector was more prevalent on X (75% of negative comments) compared to Facebook (25%).

### Limited support for aid

Pro-aid sentiment was marginal, with Niger showing the highest proportion (22.5%) compared to Mali (6.6%) and Burkina Faso (4.6%). Those defending USAID cited concerns over the impact on vulnerable populations, food security and health care. Some acknowledged USAID's role in economic development, while others called for these countries' governments to take responsibility for development. However, pro-aid social users faced a backlash, including insults and accusations of supporting Western control.

### Pro-Russia and anti-Ukraine narratives overlapping with aid-related conversations

Anti-Western rhetoric frequently overlapped with discussions on the aid freeze, with social media users portraying Russia as a more reliable partner than the US and Europe. Many framed Western aid as a tool of control, while emphasising Russia's non-interference approach. These narratives align with broader geopolitical shifts and growing Russian influence in the region.

### Social media accounts amplifying anti-aid narratives

A small number of influential accounts played a key role in driving anti-aid narratives, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso. Two Malian accounts actively attacked pro-aid sentiment and accused media outlets of spreading propaganda. Another, with clear pro-Russian indicators, repeatedly posted anti-USAID disinformation, linking it to corruption while promoting Russia. In Burkina Faso, a previously identified nationalist account framed the aid freeze as a victory over Western influence. This account holder's engagement suggests that anti-aid sentiment is not solely organic, but also strategically amplified by key actors, which also likely explains the high levels of engagement on social media during the analysed period.

## Protecting the humanitarian space in the era of social media influencers

The growing portrayal of humanitarian aid as harmful stands in stark contrast to the principles that guide the sector. While aid has traditionally been viewed as a positive, laudable and charitable endeavour, social media narratives increasingly challenge this perception. The disconnect between these dominant online discourses and the aid sector's own self-understanding highlights the urgent need for a strategic response to these negative views. Protecting the humanitarian space in the digital sphere requires a long-term approach that avoids escalating tensions by directly engaging with aggressively negative content. Instead, efforts should focus on strengthening a constructive, evidence-based narrative that upholds the integrity and necessity of humanitarian action.

### Heightened real-life security risks

In contexts where vital services are forced to shut down, the highly negative and inflammatory portrayal of aid providers and their motives must be closely monitored, recognising that online agitation can escalate into physical violence. From a security risk management perspective, it is crucial to note that such negative sentiment is rarely directed at specific organisations, but rather at the concept of aid itself, making it more challenging to track and respond to emerging threats through searches focused on individual agencies.

This document's analysis is only based on publicly available posts from social media, and other conversations may be unfolding on private groups and platforms that are not captured in this assessment.



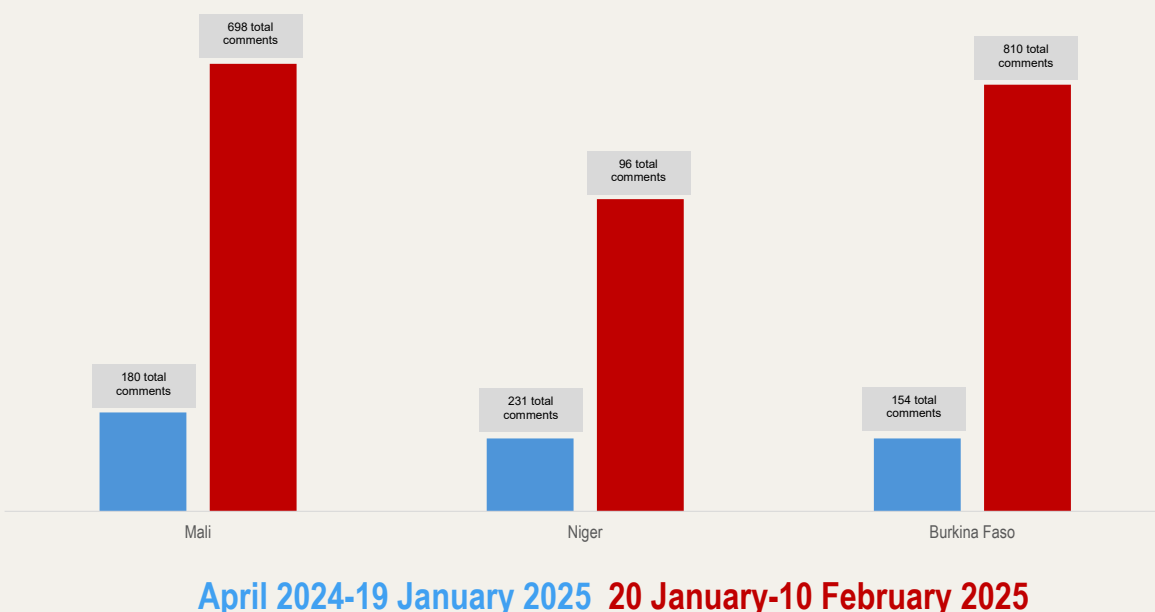
## Introduction

The Sahel region has been marked by rising insecurity, political instability, and shifting international influence, while military coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) have further destabilised the region. European armed forces have also scaled back their presence, and the US announced plans to withdraw its military base from Niger by 2024. As Western influence declines, Russia has expanded its foothold in the region, notably through the **Afrika Corps (former Wagner Group)** presence in Mali and Burkina Faso.

On 20 January 2025, President Donald Trump issued an **executive order** to freeze US Agency for International Development (USAID) foreign aid for 90 days, which has had profound repercussions on humanitarian assistance, both globally and in the Sahel region. This freeze has disrupted essential sectors such as health care, education and infrastructure development, where US support has long been a cornerstone. The move has sparked intense public debate, raising concerns about the freeze’s impact on vulnerable populations dependent on international aid.

On social media, discussions have grown increasingly polarised, with a surge of disinformation fuelling right-wing campaigns against USAID. False claims about USAID's work and funding have been propagated by influencers within the US and beyond and amplified by US administration officials to justify actions against the **organisation**. For instance, a recent **post** by a South African influencer that reached over one million social media users alleged that the US was funding Boko Haram: "Nigerians are up in arms after finding out Boko Haram is funded by the United States". This claim, which lacked credible evidence to support it, exemplifies how disinformation can shape public perceptions and influence policy decisions.

**Figure 1: Percentage of negative comments in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger referring to USAID on X and Facebook, April 2024-19 January 2025 and 20 January-10 February 2025**



**This brief delves into social media sentiment related to the US aid freeze in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.** Activity on social media around aid topics was exceptionally high for the period 20 January to 10 February 2025 compared to previous weeks and months, based on Insecurity Insight’s systematic monitoring of social media engagement since April 2024. While the proportion of negative comments ranged from 14% to 19% before the freeze, it rose to between 60% and 86% after the announcement of the freeze on 20 January 2025. This proportional increase also occurred against an overall increase in the volume of social media activity. Between 20 January and 10 February 2025, Insecurity Insight detected and analysed **1,604 comments** referencing USAID and the US aid freeze. This represents a volume of content normally typical of the **three-month average** of comments across the three Sahel countries covering all local and international aid organisations – not just a single aid actor.

## What is social media data?

The main components of social media data are posts and comments.

- A post refers to the uploading of new content by a user account or page that would appear both on the account or page “wall” and followers’ timelines. On X 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.

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

- 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.

While the conceptual distinction between misinformation and disinformation is clear, such a distinction can be difficult in practice when social media users’ motives and level of knowledge are not known.

## Negative perceptions of the aid sector on public Sahel social media platforms

Negative sentiment in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger revolved around distrust of foreign aid, scepticism toward NGOs, and a push for national sovereignty. In Mali, many users perceived the aid freeze as a path to self-sufficiency, arguing that aid benefits donors more than locals. In Burkina Faso, criticism also focused on corruption and claims that NGOs exploit aid, particularly in the health sector. In Niger, social media users' concerns centred on state dependency, with frustration over the government's reliance on NGOs instead of investing in essential services. Across all three countries, pro-Russian sentiment was evident, with users praising Russia as a reliable partner, while condemning Western aid as a tool to exert control over the three Sahel countries.

### Negative sentiment in Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso, negative sentiment was heavily driven by scepticism about aid organisations themselves, particularly their role in the health care sector. Many believed that foreign aid primarily enriches elites and NGOs rather than benefitting the population.

- **Belief that aid funds corruption**

Many users argued that aid is misused by local elites and NGO workers rather than going to the intended beneficiaries:

**Example:** *“Ceux qui pleurent ne s'inquiètent pas pour les malades, mais pour leur propre ventre.”*

**Example:** *“L'aide est une mine d'or pour certains dirigeants.”*

- **Accusations that the health sector exploits foreign aid for profit**

The belief was expressed that NGOs and foreign donors intentionally prolong health crises like HIV for profit:

**Example:** *“Pourquoi depuis l'apparition du VIH, nous n'avons toujours pas trouvé un remède nous-mêmes?”*

**Example:** *“C'est parce qu'il y avait ce financement que la maladie ne finissait pas.”*

- **Praise for the aid freeze as a step toward independence:**

**Example:** *“Merci Trump! Il est temps qu'on apprenne à vivre sans eux.”*

## Negative sentiment in Mali

Social media posts with IP addresses in Mali expressing negative sentiments were deeply tied to nationalist narratives and scepticism regarding foreign interventions. Many users supported the aid freeze, seeing it as an opportunity to strengthen Mali's sovereignty and break free from foreign dependency.

- **Rejection of foreign aid and push for self-sufficiency:**

**Example:** *“Tout aide qui ne t'aide pas à dépasser les aides est à éviter.”*

**Example:** *“Avec le retrait du Mali de la CEDEAO, nous avons quitté la liste des pays mendiants.”*

- **Belief that aid benefits foreign powers more than Malians**

Many suspected that aid is used as a tool to strengthen foreign influence rather than genuine assistance:

**Example:** *“L'aide au développement n'a développé aucun pays, elle sert seulement aux donateurs pour exercer leur pression.”*

- **Support for Trump**

Many comments praised President Trump and viewed the aid freeze as a necessary step towards economic independence:

**Example:** *“Trump est une bénédiction. Grâce à lui, nous allons apprendre à travailler.”*

## Negative sentiment in Niger

In Niger, negative sentiment regarding the US aid freeze was less widespread, but reflected frustration with how aid dependency has weakened state institutions. Many argued that NGOs and aid agencies have taken over responsibilities that should belong to the government, particularly in the areas of health care and poverty reduction.

- **Criticism of government reliance on aid**

Many users believed that foreign aid has allowed the Nigerien government to neglect key sectors like health care and food security:

**Example:** *“Moi étant médecin, j'aime cette situation. L'État ne fout rien dans la santé parce qu'il compte sur les ONG.”*

**Example:** *“Les cas de malnutrition doivent être pris en charge par l'État, pas par des*

## Impact of anti-aid narratives on social media in Niger

In the past four months, Niger's military government expelled Acted and Action Pour le Bien-Etre (APBE),<sup>1</sup> reflecting a broader regional trend of increasing distrust toward international aid organisations. Social media discourse around the expulsion of Acted and ABPE, although limited, largely framed the expulsions as a triumph for national sovereignty, reinforcing anti-NGO and anti-Western narratives that have gained traction in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and nationalist rhetoric have previously fuelled real-world violence against aid workers, portraying NGOs as agents of foreign control rather than humanitarian actors. The arrest of a journalist who criticised the aid freeze further highlights how online discourse can justify repression, discourage open debate and reinforce a climate of fear. This digital environment not only shapes public opinion, but also contributes to the shrinking operational space for humanitarian organisations in the region. Moreover, the real-world repression of activists and social media users expressing pro-aid sentiments likely explains the low levels of positive sentiment on social media regionally.

## Pro-Russia and anti-Ukraine sentiment in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso

Across all three Sahel countries, a notable segment of users expressed pro-Russian sentiment and hostility toward Ukraine, often framing the debate within the larger context of anti-Western and anti-colonial rhetoric.

- **Framing Russia as a more reliable partner than the West**

Many users contrasted Russia's perceived reliability with what they see as the hypocrisy of the West, accusing the US and Europe of using aid as a tool to control their countries while praising Russia for its "non-interference" approach:

**Example (Mali):** *"L'Occident nous donne des aides avec des conditions et des chantages. La Russie, elle, respecte notre souveraineté!"*

**Example (Burkina Faso):** *"Nous avons choisi la Russie, et nous ne reviendrons jamais en arrière!"*

**Example (Niger):** *"Avec la Russie, c'est un vrai partenariat. Les États-Unis nous donnent des miettes pour nous tenir en laisse."*

## Support for aid and opposition to the aid freeze in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso

Across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, support for USAID and opposition to the aid freeze was limited compared to negative sentiment, but still present. The percentage of positive comments about aid agencies and/or against the aid freeze varied by country:

- **Mali:** 6.6% of comments expressed support for aid agencies or opposed the aid freeze (34 out of 513 comments).
- **Niger:** 22.5% of comments were positive towards aid (20 out of 89 comments).
- **Burkina Faso:** 4.6% of comments showed support for aid (31 out of 806 comments).



## Common narratives

- **Concern for the humanitarian impact of the aid freeze**

Social media users expressed concern that the suspension of aid would harm vulnerable populations, particularly in sectors like health care, education and food security:

**Example (Mali):** *"Dommage que beaucoup de Maliens ne mesurent pas l'impact de la suspension sur la gratuité de la césarienne et l'accès à l'eau potable."*

**Example (Niger):** *"Les effets négatifs de la suspension de cette aide publique pour des États comme les nôtres qui n'arrivent même pas à assurer le minimum."*

**Example (Burkina Faso):** *"Merci au Secrétaire d'État RUBIO pour cette dérogation vitale qui permettra de sauver des vies."*

- **Recognition of USAID's role in development**

Some users acknowledged USAID's contributions to economic growth, education and health care:

**Example (Mali):** *"L'USAID a soutenu des initiatives visant à stimuler la croissance économique et améliorer les infrastructures."*

**Example (Niger):** *"USAID n'est pas une ONG, c'est une agence gouvernementale qui aide au développement."*

**Example (Burkina Faso):** *"Nous sommes très reconnaissants de la générosité du peuple américain en appui aux États fragiles."*

- **Call for government action**

A few users argued that their governments should step up and find alternative solutions to the issue of development:

**Example (Mali):** *"Le gouvernement doit combler le vide laissé par l'USAID pour garantir la poursuite des progrès."*

**Example (Niger):** *"Si vos Chefs d'État souverainistes veulent vraiment l'indépendance, ils doivent assumer leurs responsabilités."*

**Example (Burkina Faso):** *"Espérons qu'ils n'opèrent pas de coupure sur les salaires des travailleurs."*

Concern for the humanitarian impact of the aid freeze was present in all three countries, but was more prominent in Mali and Niger than in Burkina Faso. Mali had the highest number of positive comments about aid, but they constituted a small proportion compared to negative comments. Many users expressed concern over the potential loss of development gains, particularly in food security, health care, and education, arguing that USAID's absence could harm the most vulnerable populations. Niger, on the other hand, displayed the most balanced perspective, and had the highest proportion of support for aid, although the overall discussion volume was lower. Unlike in Mali and Burkina Faso, where nationalism dominated the discourse, Nigerien comments were more pragmatic, recognising both the importance of aid and the need for self-sufficiency.

## Backlash against pro-aid sentiment on social media

While most online discussions in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso were critical of USAID and the aid sector, evidence surfaced that individuals who defended foreign aid or expressed concerns about the aid freeze faced significant backlash. In several cases, social media users who supported aid were subjected to mockery, insults and accusations of being complicit with Western influence.

One female social media user who posted pro-USAID content faced intense hostility in both Mali and Burkina Faso:

*"Heureusement que c'est une femme, sinon j'étais prêt à injurier cette personne ... du fougariya n'existe plus dans l'AES. Ceux qui ne pourront pas vivre sans l'aide de l'Occident peuvent aller ailleurs réaliser une autre vie avec l'argent qu'ils ont eu avec l'Occident."*

A former Malian prime minister, Moussa Mara, also faced criticism for defending foreign aid. His post defending the role of USAID and warning about its potential impact received 189 overwhelmingly negative responses, many of which accused him of being a political opportunist or perpetuating dependency.

- **Negative responses:**

*@MoussaMaraMali: "Une aide qui aide pas à se développer est un poison, tu est une grosse honte pour le Mali, étant un politicien tu doit faire en sorte que ton peuple soit pas dépendant."*

*@MoussaMaraMali: "Regardez l'esclave qui est fier d'être esclave."*

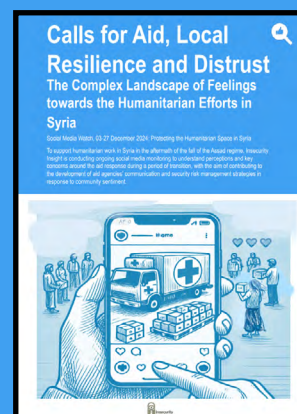
*"un des plus babiè qui soit, il nous demande d'éviter qu'on nous bloque les aides! un vraie mandiant, ceux qui pient nos pays sont cela qui nous envoye des miettes sous forme d'aide, une aide empoisonée."*

The hostility toward Mara's remarks reflects a growing rejection of traditional political figures who advocate for international assistance. His attempt to argue for aid's necessity was dismissed, with many seeing it as proof of political weakness rather than economic pragmatism.

This reinforces the idea that opposition to USAID and foreign aid is not only widespread, but also socially enforced in certain online spaces, effectively making it difficult – if not completely impossible – for alternative viewpoints to gain traction.

## Comparison of social media reactions to the aid freeze in Syria and the Sahel

An Insecurity Insight [report](#) published before the aid freeze in January 2025 highlights how Syrians engage with aid through a mix of calls for assistance, local resilience narratives, and also deep-seated distrust of foreign organisations. While many Syrians express scepticism about the intentions behind aid, they also stress the need for humanitarian assistance, often linking it to fundamental humanitarian principles. The analysis showed that while aid is sometimes viewed as politically motivated, discussions frequently emphasise fairness, neutrality and the ethical responsibilities of aid providers.



In the Syrian context, where aid was largely viewed as positive, there was little discussion of the aid funding freeze. During the same period, where over 1,600 posts related to USAID were identified across the Sahel, fewer than 40 posts discussing the aid freeze were detected in Syria. This low volume could be attributed to technical restrictions such as VPN requirements, social media access limitations or a lack of traction among Syrian users.

The few posts shared in Syria in relation to the USAID funding freeze expressed hostility toward USAID, including accusations that the agency funds terrorism and operates as a covert instrument of US foreign policy. They also included false claims such as: *"USAID funded Trump impeachment and Wuhan lab"*.<sup>2</sup> Another alleged that the agency was responsible for supporting terrorist groups: *"USAID provided funding to terrorist organisations including ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram"*. But there was overall little reaction to these accusations.

In contrast, pro-aid sentiment was marginal in Syria. One post warned of the severe consequences of the aid freeze for essential services in the country, stating: "The sudden USAID cut to three programmes – Al-Furat, Iijaz, and Rashad – supporting water station maintenance, purification, electricity, and irrigation will have a huge impact on essential services for civilians".

### Absence of discourse on the humanitarian principles on social media in the Sahel

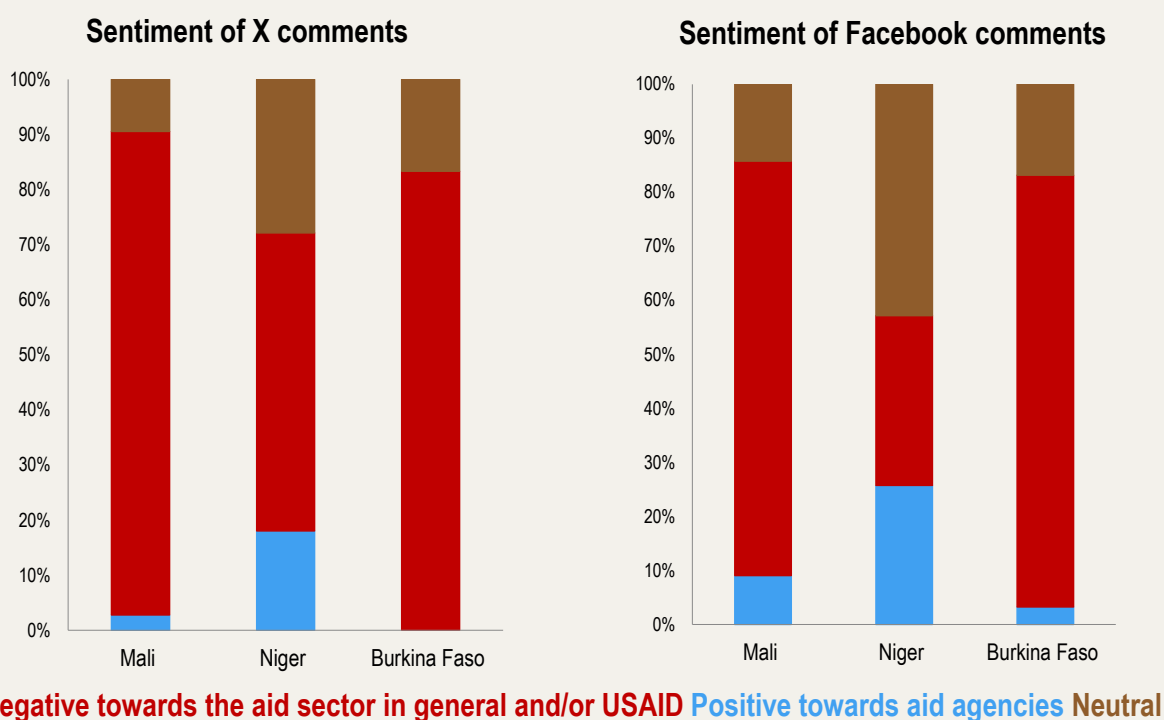
Unlike in Syria, where discussions around aid have often referenced humanitarian principles, social media users in the Sahel rarely engage with aid-related concepts. Insecurity Insight's analysis of social media narratives in Syria and the Sahel highlights a stark contrast: while Syrians debate whether aid is just and impartial, conversations in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger revolve around sovereignty and political control. In the Sahel, aid is largely viewed as either a tool of foreign dominance or a necessity for economic survival, with little discussion of its ethical foundations. This suggests that in the Sahel, aid is perceived primarily through a geopolitical lens rather than as a fundamental humanitarian right. The strategic objectives of foreign assistance – whether to support vulnerable populations or advance political interests – remain largely unquestioned by social media users in the region.

## Reach, sources, and overall engagement with aid and aid organisations in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger

The total volume of negative comments was highest in Burkina Faso (645), followed closely by Mali (587), and was significantly lower in Niger (44). Facebook exhibited the strongest negative sentiments in Burkina Faso, where 640 negative comments against USAID or the aid sector in general were recorded. In contrast, Mali had the highest proportion of negative sentiments on X (87.8%), while Niger showed a more mixed sentiment distribution. Burkina Faso's sentiments on X are an outlier, with fewer total comments and a relatively higher share of positive sentiments, although the small sample size limits interpretation.

While Burkina Faso had the highest total number of negative comments (645), these were concentrated in fewer Facebook posts compared to Mali, with one post generating 364 comments. This suggests that discussions in Burkina Faso are more intensely focused on a few viral posts rather than spread out across many different discussions.

**Figure 2: Discussions on the aid sector and/or USAID in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso**



Source: Insecurity Insight

Mali showed a more distributed pattern, with 25 Facebook posts generating 232 comments, and 70 X posts generating 466 comments, which means that, on average, each post received fewer comments compared to Burkina Faso. This indicates that while negative sentiment is high in both countries, the nature of the engagement differs:

- In Burkina Faso, criticism was concentrated on fewer posts, amplifying certain narratives.
- In Mali, discussions were more fragmented across multiple posts, each receiving fewer comments but contributing to a broader volume of discourse.

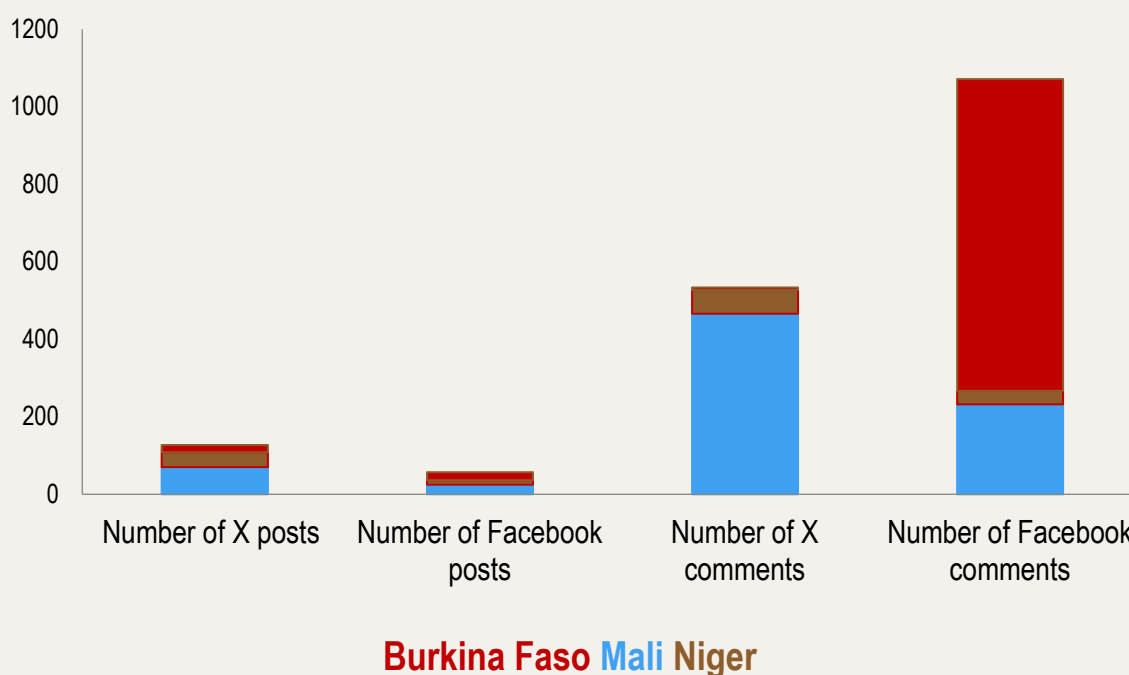
## What can we tell about the dynamics of the social media discourse?

The dominant narratives across the Sahel strongly opposed the concept of aid, and such sentiments were more dominant on social media than in some other parts of the world. Our understanding of how narratives surrounding aid and international involvement are shaped and amplified has still to be fully clarified. The analysis in this document focuses on public conversations on Facebook and X and highlights some patterns in information dissemination and audience interaction that show some patterns, but leave other questions unanswered.

### Increased polarisation through user-created content on X

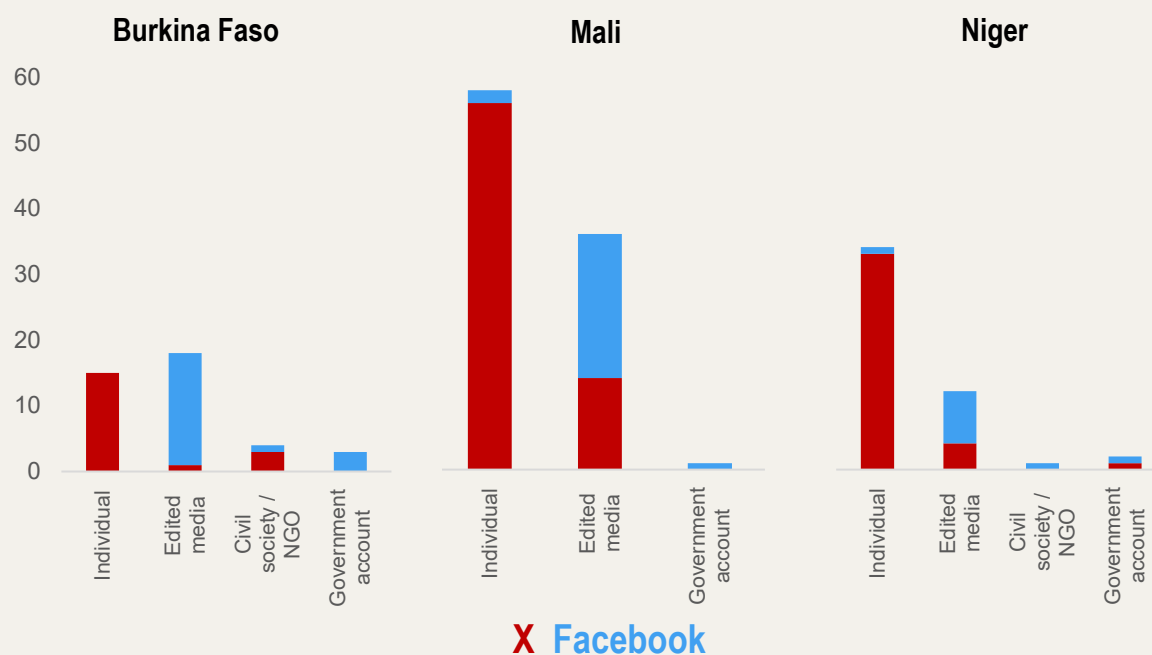
The examined period (20 January-10 February 2025) showed a growing number of user-generated negative posts about aid on the platform X in all three countries. These replaced the edited media as the primary source of posts in Mali and Niger, as was observed over the months preceding the examined period. Past Insecurity Insight analyses demonstrated that while posts published over the months preceding the freeze were themselves often neutral or informational, much of the polarisation occurred in the comments, where users actively debated, challenged, or reinforced narratives. By contrast, when responding to the USAID freeze, posts – i.e. the initial content – were pushed by individual account holders rather than the edited media, highlighting how these sentiments were driven by individual interests. The exception occurred in Burkina Faso on the platform Facebook, where edited media accounts continued to be the largest source of initial content around the USAID freeze. Government and civil society accounts provided minimal contributions to the overall engagement across all three countries, suggesting that official narratives played a smaller role in shaping online discourse on this topic.

**Figure 3: Sources of posts and comments, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, 20 January-10 February 2025**



Source: Insecurity Insight

Figure 4: Sources of posts and comments, 20 January-10 February 2025



Source: Insecurity Insight

## Highly active and influential accounts

Across Mali and Burkina Faso, a small number of highly active and influential accounts played a significant role in amplifying anti-foreign aid and pro-sovereignty narratives following the USAID aid freeze. Some of these accounts had been previously flagged in Insecurity Insight's social media monitoring reports for spreading misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech, while others were new and exhibited clear pro-Russia links.

Three accounts previously identified by Insecurity Insight as spreading anti-aid narratives were involved in attacking pro-aid sentiment and promoting a hardline nationalist stance with regard to USAID. In Mali, two accounts attacked pro-USAID users, one engaging in direct insults and accusations of treason, while the other targeted media outlets like RFI, labelling them as mouthpieces of Western propaganda. Another Malian account with pro-Russia affiliations spread disinformation linking USAID to corruption and geopolitical conspiracies, citing Donald Trump as their source to reinforce its claims. In Burkina Faso, a previously identified account framed the aid freeze as proof that Africa must reject Western dependency, celebrated Trump's decision and condemned African leaders who support foreign aid. These accounts blended nationalist rhetoric, disinformation, and geopolitical framing to discredit USAID and promote a hardline anti-Western stance.

The motives behind these account holders for engaging so actively on the subject are not clear.

## Conclusion: The USAID aid freeze and the politicisation of humanitarian aid

The social media discourse following the USAID aid freeze highlights how humanitarian aid, despite being based on neutral and impartial principles, has become highly politicised and its value has been increasingly questioned.

Influential nationalist and pro-Russia-linked accounts played a key role in shaping and amplifying negative sentiment, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso. This contributed to high engagement levels and an increasingly aggressive online discourse. The broader conversation reflects deepening geopolitical tensions, the rise of nationalist- and sovereignty-based narratives, and growing mistrust of Western aid organisations, creating a more challenging environment for humanitarian and development actors in the region.

While not representative of public opinion as a whole, social media narratives can influence political decisions that directly impact aid operations. The use of dehumanising language to describe aid workers lowers barriers to real-world violence and thus increases security risks. Recognising the potential power of these narratives, even when they are driven by a vocal minority, underscores the need to defend the humanitarian space in the digital sphere.

However, directly reacting to hostile content risks reinforcing polarisation. Instead, aid agencies should take a proactive approach, driving their own narratives and shaping discussions around their core values. Future strategies should focus on defending the principles of aid itself rather than solely protecting individual organisations' reputations. A narrow focus on brand management overlooks the broader threat posed by narratives that frame aid as inherently harmful. In an era of viral attacks on the legitimacy of aid, a collective, principle-based response is more critical than ever. The sector can no longer afford to dismiss these discussions as unrepresentative chatter on fringe platforms.



## Recommendations

Growing hostility towards aid operations on social media platforms not only undermines public perceptions but also poses potential safety risks for aid workers and organisations, because misinformation and disinformation can fuel resentment and even incite threats or violence. Where possible, aid agencies should enhance their security risk management activities by closely monitoring sentiment trends, strengthening community engagement to build trust, and implementing proactive communication strategies to counter false narratives. Collaborating with local leaders, media, and trusted voices can help to mitigate hostility and ensure the safety of humanitarian personnel and operations.

In light of this, we make the following recommendations:

### **Strengthen local partnerships and visibility**

- Prioritise partnerships with trusted local actors, including community leaders, civil society, and local government bodies, to increase legitimacy and mitigate foreign interference narratives.
- Improve transparency and communication about how aid is delivered and its tangible impacts to counter misinformation and disinformation.

### **Adapt communication strategies to address sovereignty concerns**

- Develop localised messaging that aligns with national sovereignty narratives, emphasising how aid supports – not replaces – local capacity.
- Engage in proactive storytelling through social media, highlighting African-led solutions and ownership of development programmes.

### **Counter misinformation and disinformation**

- Work with fact-checking organisations and local media to debunk false claims about aid organisations.
- Monitor pro-Russia and nationalist accounts that spread disinformation and adjust engagement strategies accordingly.

### **Increase support for locally led development initiatives**

- Shift towards the greater localisation of aid, ensuring that funding and decision-making empower local organisations rather than being perceived as externally imposed.
- Invest in capacity-building programmes to support self-sufficiency and reduce dependency narratives.

### **Enhance crisis preparedness for possible future aid reductions**

- Work with partners to develop contingency plans to deal with possible further aid reductions to ensure that critical services continue without major disruptions.
- Focus on long-term resilience strategies such as consolidating projects and partnerships with other organisations to prevent overlap.

### **Monitor dehumanising language to identify related security risks**

- Monitor the online space to understand threats that can turn into real-life security concerns.



## Methodology and limitations

Publicly available social media data published in French and English on social media related to aid work in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso between 20 January and 10 February 2025 was analysed using keywords associated with international aid organisations known to be operating in these countries. 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 are presented in this brief. For ethical and technical reasons, the data does not include private social media content.

Between 20 January and 10 February 2025, discussions on the US aid freeze and USAID in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso resulted in significant discourse and the analysis of 1,604 comments. Mali had the highest engagement, with 95 posts and 698 comments, while Burkina Faso saw fewer posts, but high levels of Facebook activity, with 810 comments. Niger had the lowest engagement, suggesting less public interest or fear of retribution.

Audience exposure mirrored this trend, with related social media discourse in Mali reaching 562,691 users, Burkina Faso 361,465 users, and Niger 50,841 users. In Mali and Niger, individual users dominated discussions, while in Burkina Faso, edited media accounts were the most prominent on Facebook. Unlike past trends where aid agencies or official sources shaped discourse, government and civil society accounts played a minimal role across all three countries.

The analysis is limited to public social media posts on X and Facebook and does not take into account messages shared via private social media channels.

**Should you wish to provide us with any feedback or to get in touch, kindly write to: [info@insecurityinsight.org](mailto:info@insecurityinsight.org)**

## Endnotes

1 Niger has also suspended the ICRC; however, the analysis of social media users' responses to this decision has not been completed.

2 Insecurity Insights translated quotations from the Arabic.

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