The Humanitarian Space on Social Media

Learning from Social Media Narratives in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

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Insecurity Insight

Executive summary

Humanitarian action in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is increasingly shaped by public digital narratives that the aid sector cannot afford to ignore. Social media narratives influence community trust, operational access, staff safety and even political decision-making. The distorted nature of some online discussions about aid can at times feel shocking or uncomfortable. While they may be dismissed as expressing the views of marginal voices, their growing reach and impact make it essential to understand the motivation behind them. This report shares findings from social media sentiment monitoring in the DRC, with the intention of helping aid organisations to better understand and track emerging narratives and shifts in sentiment. By monitoring online discourse on the humanitarian space that go beyond the brand name of individual aid agencies, aid actors can anticipate local attitudes, build community acceptance and adapt to a rapidly evolving operational environment.

Based on the analysis of over 9,000 posts and 11,000 social media comments in the DRC, the report provides a case-study-based analysis of how public online narratives are reshaping the aid sector's operating environment in the country in order to help aid agencies to gain a better understanding of the narratives that influence the real-world dynamics affecting their work. Drawing on seven months of monitoring of publicly accessible Facebook and X content between February and October 2025, the findings reveal how digital discourse around peacekeeping, displacement, armed groups, and aid programmes reflects and reinforces fragile trust, constrained access, and growing operational risk for humanitarian actors and their partners.

All analysed content comes from material that users have chosen to make publicly accessible; i.e. the report does not uncover, reproduce or reveal information beyond what is already circulating in the open digital space. Its purpose is not to amplify harmful narratives, but to help humanitarian actors understand how existing public discourse shapes perceptions and operational realities in the open public social media space.

Public social media discussions show that humanitarian action in the DRC is often interpreted through political and moral framing.[1] Aid and peacekeeping are rarely viewed as neutral or impartial: e.g. the United Nations (UN) Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) is frequently portrayed as complicit with armed groups or ineffective, and the aid sector more broadly as an extension of foreign control. In such views, neutrality is reframed as inaction, independence as allegiance and impartiality as selective concern. These distortions matter far beyond perception; i.e. they shape whether communities accept aid, whether staff can move safely, and whether the principles of humanitarian care and protection can be upheld in practice.

However, it is important to note that harmful narratives in the DRC do not emerge from deliberate disinformation alone. Instead, they grow out of authentic frustration that results in anger about dependency, corruption and decades of unmet needs. Misleading claims, such as accusations that aid agencies exploit minerals or collaborate with armed groups, gain traction because they **echo real grievances**.

A key contribution of this report is the identification of how different platforms and groups of actors shape humanitarian narratives in distinct and uneven ways. Collected posts and comments show that Facebook is the primary arena where humanitarian issues gain mass visibility. Yet discussions about aid that shape sentiment and how facts are interpreted are largely driven by edited media pages publishing factual information related to aid activities to which users respond with comments that apply existing political framings in ways that absorb information about aid into wider debates on sovereignty, conflict, and governance. X, by contrast, generates far fewer posts, yet is characterised by sharper spikes of hostility, less moderation and more rapid mobilisation around emotive or accusatory content. Influencers and individual accounts, although responsible for a small share of total posts, play an outsized role in igniting or amplifying harmful interpretations, particularly when they use graphic imagery, nationalist rhetoric or insinuations of collusion with conflict actors. Meanwhile, local NGOs (LNGOs), despite being the most trusted voices, remain almost invisible in the wider national context, limiting their ability to counter dominant narratives. The combined effect is a fragmented information ecosystem where the social media accounts that reach the largest audiences amplify the most polarised views, while local voices, who are the actors with the highest credibility, have the least reach in terms of numbers. This unequal spread of voices in terms of who gets heard and seen shapes how "aid" is understood long before humanitarian agencies enter the conversation.

The same information environment, however, also carries opportunities for the building of trust. Posts highlighting local staff, community partnerships or tangible project results often generate positive engagement. A handful of aid agencies have demonstrated that when communication is transparent, empathetic and rooted in lived experience, it can strengthen legitimacy even amid scepticism. These examples show that social media can still function as a protective space when it speaks clearly to local realities and reinforces humanitarian values through human stories rather than impersonal institutional messages. Social media can also enable near-real-time listening to public sentiment, the transparent demonstration of the positive impact of humanitarian activities, and collaboration with trusted local voices. Clear, locally framed communication messages – especially when co-authored with local staff and partners – can counter harmful narratives and reaffirm the legitimacy of humanitarian operations.

The report applies the ICRC's framework for *Addressing Harmful Information in Conflict Settings* to the DRC context, showing how harmful narratives undermine protection and humanitarian principles.[2] For the context of the eastern DRC, three communication objectives for the aid sector are proposed that need attention to enable the provision of effective and safe aid in the context of the country's information ecosystem:

1. **Protect people during crises.** Prevent information from worsening risks for affected populations and staff.
2. **Protect principles during crises.** Defend neutrality, impartiality and independence when they are questioned or misrepresented.
3. **Protect resilience during crises.** Sustain and support people's trust in humanitarian values and the actors who uphold them.

The findings fill a critical gap in understanding how digital dynamics intersect with humanitarian operations in the DRC. Existing monitoring efforts often focus on disinformation and hate speech more broadly, but not on how these distortions shape perceptions of aid, legitimacy, and access. Conversely, humanitarian communication policy has often prioritised visibility or donor reporting over the analysis of risk emerging from online narratives. This report links the two by showing that the *information environment is part of the operating environment, and that communication choices can reduce or increase risk*.

Key recommendations include the following:

- Expand the coordinated monitoring of digital narratives beyond a narrow focus on only an organisation's pages to track shifts in public sentiment towards aid and identify early warning signals of rising hostility or misinformation that affects aid acceptance.
- Integrate social media insights into security risk management (SRM) processes, protection strategies and discussions on ensuring access.
- Support local journalists, civil society organisations (CSOs) and humanitarian staff to co-create accurate, context-aware communications.
- Invest in joint rapid-response mechanisms to address disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech and work closely with other organisations and stakeholders to collectively protect the humanitarian space.

The humanitarian space in the DRC is under increasing strain not only from insecurity, political instability and access restrictions, but also from the erosion of trust in humanitarian intentions. As online and offline risks converge, digital legitimacy has become essential to operational security. Maintaining neutrality and acceptance depends as much on how humanitarian actors are perceived as on what they do and deliver.

When people see their reality acknowledged and their dignity respected, trust in humanitarian action endures. When aid appears absent, foreign or silent, suspicion fills the gap. In this environment, principled communication is not optional – it is a fundamental and essential part of protection.

Key findings

- **Disinformation and genuine frustration coexist.** Harmful claims such as accusations that aid agencies fund armed groups or exploit minerals gain traction when they echo real grievances about dependency, inequality, or neglect.
- **The humanitarian voice is marginal.** The majority of social media comments about aid appeared under edited media posts, not humanitarian accounts. When humanitarian actors are absent from the conversation, others define what "aid" is.
- **Local NGOs generate trust, but lack amplification.** Community-based organisations receive more positive engagement, yet reach much fewer users. Their credibility is strong, but their visibility remains minimal.

- **Online hostility precedes real-world risks.** Digital anger over perceived aid failures or collusion with conflict actors can coincide with security incidents, including threats to and attacks on staff.
- **Hate speech undermines protection norms.** Hate speech erodes adherence to the principle of distinction and normalises civilian harm.
- **Effective communication builds resilience.** Posts that used simple language, local imagery, and relatable human stories consistently generated affirmation and trust.
- **The humanitarian space is collective.** Public perceptions of "aid" do not distinguish between organisations. One actor's misstep can erode trust in the entire sector, while transparent communication by one can strengthen legitimacy for many.
- **Digital engagement is an operational necessity.** Social media is no longer peripheral to the environment where humanitarian work takes place. Understanding and addressing harmful information is essential to staff safety, access, and the protection of humanitarian principles in the DRC - and elsewhere.

Introduction

The principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence continue to underpin humanitarian action, allowing aid agencies to provide life-saving assistance safely and ethically, even in contexts of insecurity and political instability. In the DRC, however, the humanitarian space is now shaped not only by physical insecurity and political constraints, but also by rapidly evolving online narratives that challenge the neutrality and legitimacy of aid actors. These narratives can have severe consequences for the security of humanitarian staff and partners.

From February to October 2025, public social media discussions revealed how rapidly trust in humanitarian principles can erode in the face of misperceptions and wider conversations on displacement, armed groups, peace processes, and aid projects. Posts and comments accusing the aid sector of exploiting minerals and supporting foreign agendas or armed groups have made digital narratives central to how humanitarian action is understood – or misunderstood – in the DRC. These narratives are not confined to reputational debates, but directly affect community acceptance, staff safety and operational access.

The DRC faces one of the world's most complex and protracted humanitarian crises. Overlapping layers of armed conflict, political volatility and chronic displacement have produced an enduring humanitarian emergency. By late 2025, more than 21 million people required assistance, nearly 7 million were internally displaced and over half of the population faced food **insecurity**. The crisis in North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri provinces has been deepened by renewed offensives by the March 23 Movement (M23) and other armed groups, recurrent epidemics, and the erosion of basic services. Humanitarian actors in the DRC operate within this environment of overlapping crises – and digital spaces that mirror these pressures. The result is a shrinking humanitarian space where online suspicion can translate into offline, real-world hostility.

Digital platforms amplify both gratitude toward humanitarian workers and waves of anger, disillusionment, and accusations of conspiracy. Between February and October 2025, social media monitoring focused on a series of key topics identified in consultation with humanitarian stakeholders in the DRC. These included the US Agency for International Development (USAID) funding freeze; MONUSCO; the US-brokered peace deal with Rwanda; internal displacement and social cohesion issues; the Wazalendo;[3] and perceptions of LNGOs, international NGOs (INGOs), and UN agencies in the DRC. Each topic generated thousands of public comments linking humanitarian action to wider political and security debates. MONUSCO was portrayed as an occupying force rather than a peacekeeping mission; USAID was accused of manipulation and espionage; and the Rwanda peace deal was denounced as a foreign transaction to exploit the DRC's natural resources. Even LNGOs were sometimes viewed with suspicion when they were associated with international partners, showing how distrust directed at one actor can easily spill over across the wider humanitarian system. In the DRC, social media hostility has preceded security threats and attacks on aid convoys and peacekeepers. Whether hostility stems from disinformation, misinformation, frustration or manipulation, its effects on humanitarian access and safety are real.

With **60 million cellular connections and 7 million social media users** in the DRC, online narratives impacting the aid sector must be taken into account in all aspects of humanitarian action, ranging from planning to implementation, SRM, and community engagement, not because they are representative views, but because these minority views repeatedly shared via online platforms drive the general sentiment towards the adoption of more extreme positions. Understanding the views and allegations millions are exposed to when opening their phones helps aid agencies to prepare for the wider conversations that need to follow.

This report analyses the digital humanitarian landscape in the DRC across three interrelated areas: how information circulates, how it is framed/presented and how it affects operations.

It first explores how information about aid moves through the online ecosystem, across platforms, actors, and amplification chains, and how discussions differ between official humanitarian communication messages, media coverage, and user-generated content.

It then examines how narratives about aid and peacekeeping are constructed, showing how themes such as sovereignty, betrayal, and dependency influence public perceptions of legitimacy and trust.

Finally, it assesses how these narratives translate into operational realities and shape aid organisations' acceptance by communities, the safety of staff and partners, and access to those in need, and what this means for communication strategies, coordination, and risk management.

The analysis matters for different audiences:

- UN agencies and INGOs, who must anticipate how their social media and other messaging enters and is received in local discussions;
- LNGOs and CSOs, who make aid visible and credible on the ground;
- local media, whose factual reporting can counter harmful narratives and protect the civilian nature of aid; and
- communities and individuals, whose posts and comments shape perceptions of what is happening and whose voices can amplify both trust and suspicion.

Digital engagement can no longer be treated as optional. In the DRC's contested information space, protecting the humanitarian principles online is as vital as safeguarding them on the ground to improve the protection of people in need, strengthen community resilience and protect humanitarian action.

In line with the ICRC's response framework, these aims reflect the three overarching objectives of humanitarian response to harmful information: to improve the protection of people affected by crises, strengthen the resilience and agency of communities, and protect and reinforce principled humanitarian action in the digital age.

Box 1: Our data

The findings presented here draw on seven social media monitoring reports covering the period February-October 2025. These analyses were based on **962 posts and 11,424 public comments collected** from Facebook and X as part of an **H2H-funded** social media monitoring project. Monitoring included all publicly available posts and comments from media outlets, influencers, civil society actors, and aid organisations in the DRC.

This report draws on seven targeted datasets of publicly accessible social media posts from the DRC, each collected to understand perceptions around specific aid-related and political topics. The table below summarises the monitoring periods and the volume of posts and comments analysed for each theme.

These datasets do not represent the full spectrum of DRC opinion. They capture the voices of the most active, visible, and influential users; i.e. the individuals and groups who shape public discourse and can influence aid organisations' operational realities. These digital spaces function as echo chambers whose influence often far exceeds their size.

Datasets	Monitoring period	Number of posts examined	Number of comments
USAID funding freeze	February-March 2025	138	739
Internally displaced persons (IDPs)	February-March 2025	33	1,425
Wazalendo	March-June 2025	34	4,508
DRC-Rwanda peace deal	June-July 2025	7	2,767
MONUSCO	August-September 2025	214	582
Local NGOs	May-August 2025	153	275
International NGOs and UN agencies	September - October 2025	382	1,128

Box 2: When humanitarian aid is reframed: the looting of a UN warehouse in Goma

The reactions to the looting of the UN warehouse in Goma illustrate why understanding social media narratives is essential: they reveal how humanitarian intentions are interpreted on the ground, how frustration overrides legal or operational frames, and how gaps in communication or visibility can rapidly erode acceptance and trust. A media post reporting the looting of a UN warehouse in Goma prompted a wide range of reactions. Many commenters did not frame the event as criminal looting, but rather as a legitimate response to urgent need. Across the responses, there was a notable absence of sympathy for the losses incurred by the agency. Instead, users expressed frustration, justification, and in some cases outright support for the looting, viewing it as a necessary act in the face of hunger and prolonged neglect.

Numerous commenters stated that those who took food were simply accessing what was rightfully theirs. Given the scale of violence and displacement affecting the population of Goma – where many people feel abandoned or overlooked – this perspective is difficult to dismiss from a community-based, needs-driven standpoint.

“Les déplacés mourraient de fin” (“The displaced were dying of hunger”)

“Que le PAM arrête avec une telle magouille! Il n'a rien à regretter pcq la population gomatracienne contient actuellement 50% de déplacés. Ses vivres on fait le travail qu'ils devront toujours faire” (“The WFP must stop this kind of scheming! It has nothing to regret because 50% of the population of Gomatra is currently displaced. Its food supplies have done the job they were always meant to do”)

“Soyez quand même raisonnable. Cette nourriture était destinée à la population d'après tout. Et la population, dans le besoin s'en est servie. C'est l'argent du peuple, le pays dépense pour ça. Nous mourons pour ça depuis plus de 30 ans maintenant” (“Be reasonable. This food was intended for the population, after all. And the population, in need, used it. It's the people's money; the country spends it on this. We've been dying for this for over 30 years now”)

“D'ailleurs Le PAM devrais être condamné, parce que c'est n'est pas possible de garder les aliments dans les entrepôts au moment où les habitants ont faim, pourtant dans les entrepôts on a rencontré dans les sacs des haricots était déjà pourri à cause de tarder dans leurs entrepôts. presque tout le monde à trouver quelque chose dans la ville de Goma et ses environs. Pour les gens qui n'ont pas entrée de dans, ils ont acheté un sac de 50Kilos à 10000FC, Et d'autres ont pris gratuite leurs biens. En bref toutes la population de Goma est déplace de guerre. Il y a pas de condamnation. Le PAM devrais toujours rester calme😂😂😂🤣😂” ("In fact, the WFP should be condemned, because it is unacceptable to keep food in warehouses when people are hungry. Yet in the warehouses we found bags of beans that had already gone bad because they had been left there for too long. Almost everyone found something in the city of Goma and its surroundings. People who couldn't get in bought a 50-kilogram bag for 10,000 FC, and others took their belongings for free. In short, the entire population of Goma has been displaced by war. There is no condemnation. The WFP should always remain calm😂😂😂🤣😂")

“Nous sommes venus nous servir Nou même notre nourriture” (“We came to serve ourselves our own food”)

“C'est sont les rebelles du M23 qui pillent et non la population de Goma” (“It is the M23 rebels who are looting, not the people of Goma”)

Some commenters viewed the incident as a consequence of delayed aid distribution and a lack of visible WFP support for the population. Several pointed out that food had been stored for a long period while displaced populations were experiencing hunger, and questioned why distribution had not occurred earlier. A few referred to the action as an "instinct of survival" and criticised the handling of aid as inadequate under current conditions. A small number of users accused humanitarian organisations of acting in alignment with political or foreign interests, particularly in relation to Rwanda and M23, although these views were not universally held.

Overall, the comments reflect a mixture of perspectives, including the following:

- Aid was seen as a right, not a favour, particularly by displaced populations.
- The lack of sympathy for aid losses reflects both emotional fatigue and broader distrust in the humanitarian system to deliver aid to those who need it.
- Criticism of aid operations was driven not only by logistical failures, but by deeper frustrations about prolonged suffering and the lack of protection.
- The absence of public concern for the looting of aid supplies highlights a potential disconnect between community perceptions and humanitarian risk narratives.

This social media discussion highlights key considerations for acceptance-based SRM during crises. There are clear differences of the immediate emotional reaction to the looting of an aid warehouse between the aid community – who would condemn and disapprove of the looting – and affected communities' interpretation of the event. The example also shows how, from an aid agency perspective, necessary security measures such as staff **evacuations** and interrupted activities can be locally perceived as inaction in ways that erode trust in aid agencies. Where communities see themselves as consistently neglected or marginalised, actions such as looting may be rationalised as legitimate redress, particularly when humanitarian responses fall short of visible needs.

These perceptions and interpretations matter when aid agencies are communicating publicly, because the use of language that unintentionally widens the gap between agencies and local communities can undermine trust.

Chapter 1: Overview of the digital humanitarian environment in the DRC

The digital information environment in the DRC is shaped by a rapidly changing mix of public debate, political contestation and community-level storytelling. Social media platforms have become one of the key spaces where Congolese users interpret events, seek explanations and negotiate the meaning of humanitarian action in relation to wider conflict dynamics. Rather than simply mirroring the operating context, these platforms increasingly function as arenas where narratives compete, authority is questioned, and legitimacy is constructed or withdrawn. Understanding this environment is therefore essential not only for analysing public sentiment, but for anticipating how online dynamics may interact with, amplify or distort the realities in which humanitarian organisations work.

How perceptions are built

The patterns outlined in this chapter – focusing on who speaks, who is heard and when aid becomes visible – feed directly into how social media users form opinions about the humanitarian sector. Perceptions are not created in isolation: they emerge from the interaction between information flows, visibility and emotion. Understanding how these perceptions are built helps explain why online narratives can so powerfully influence safety, trust and access on the ground.

Online discussions show that social media users rarely separate humanitarian action from wider debates about power, sovereignty and responsibility. When aid appears in conversations about the DRC-Rwanda peace deal, MONUSCO, or the Wazalendo, it is absorbed into political narratives that portray international actors as either rescuers or meddlers. In this environment, even factual or neutral communications can be interpreted through political lenses, while silence is often read as avoidance or complicity.

The reputation of the humanitarian system is also collective. Individual organisations do not stand apart from one another online; rather, their actions and communications influence perceptions of the entire sector. Positive engagement with visible and trusted actors such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) or the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) often extends goodwill to others, while criticism of MONUSCO or USAID quickly spreads across the broader category of “aid”. This interdependence means that credibility and risk are shared: one organisation’s misstep can erode trust for many others, while clear, empathetic, and transparent communications by one can strengthen legitimacy for all.

Local NGOs sit at the centre of these dynamics. Their authenticity and proximity to communities help bridge trust gaps, but close association with international partners could also expose them to imported hostility. Their success or vulnerability directly affects how humanitarian action is understood nationwide.

In the DRC’s digital environment, perceptions of aid are therefore built collectively through the overlap of voices, topics and emotional responses that circulate across platforms. Managing these perceptions is not only a communication task, but an operational necessity: the way in which humanitarian action is seen and discussed online now shapes the space in which it can safely operate.

Platform and actor dynamics

The digital humanitarian environment in the DRC is defined by asymmetries of voice, visibility and engagement. International organisations, LNGOs, media outlets, government institutions and influencers each play distinct roles within this ecosystem. They do not post the same content, attract the same audiences or provoke the same reactions. Understanding these contrasts is essential for interpreting how perceptions of aid are formed online and how they influence operational realities.

- **Edited media:** Edited media pages in the DRC are the primary amplifiers of humanitarian-related content. They dominate the volume of posts when aid intersects with questions of sovereignty or security, and their coverage becomes the main entry point through which social media users project anti-aid sentiment during high-profile political moments. Although media posts made up only 39% of all posts collected, they drove most of the engagement, accounting for 52% reach for all posts collected. Over the past seven months, 84% of comments on posts mentioning the aid sector followed the publication of an article on an edited media platform. Discussions about aid often appeared as a subtopic within coverage of political and security issues. The consequences are significant: under media posts, engagement volumes are much higher than under humanitarian, influencer or government pages, but sentiment is considerably more polarised. The USAID freeze dataset provides the clearest example-88 percent of all comments on the topic appeared under 15 edited media posts on Facebook, where factual reporting quickly evolved into comment threads dominated by anger, accusations, and political debate.

- **INGOs and UN agencies:** Posts from UN agencies and INGOs are professional, factual, and cautious in tone. They rely on official photography, standard branding, and text-based announcements – i.e. formats likely aimed at public relations and accountability rather than engagement. Because international agencies focus on humanitarian programming rather than politicised debates, users discussing displacement or armed conflict on media posts rarely draw them into the conversation, leaving a gap between where narratives form and where agencies communicate. Across datasets, aid-sector social media accounts produced about 32% of all posts, but generated only 9% of total comments, accounting for roughly 45% of total reach examined in this report. Engagement is largely confined to humanitarian networks. Institutional communications therefore sustain credibility, but have limited reach within a community and struggle to influence the broader narrative environment where humanitarian legitimacy is publicly contested.

- **LNGOs and CSOs** maintain a smaller, but more trusted digital presence. Their posts are less frequent than those of international actors, but are often more personal and concrete, showing local staff, community events or project locations. This grounded tone generates disproportionately positive engagement: **across the LNGO dataset**, 48% of comments were positive, 41% neutral and only around 10% negative. However, the visibility gap remains vast. Over seven months of observation, all LNGO and CSO posts combined reached roughly 42,000 users, compared with more than 13 million reached by national media platforms discussing aid-related topics. Only about 1% of all comments were made in response to posts published by LNGOs. This low share partly reflects the variety of topics covered across datasets (only one dataset focused exclusively on LNGOs), yet

it also highlights that, in broader discussions such as on IDPs, local actors also remain absent from the conversation. Nonetheless, this imbalance underscores a structural challenge: local actors generate trust, but lack amplification, meaning that their credible, community-rooted communications rarely reach or shape the wider national conversation where humanitarian-related perceptions are formed.

- **Influencers and individual social media account users:** A small but influential group of online commentators amplify or distort humanitarian topics, often in order to advance nationalist or anti-foreign narratives. They concentrate their activity around political flashpoints, and influencers and individual accounts act as accelerators of these moments, intensifying anti-aid interpretations and feeding polarised narratives. Across the datasets, this category accounted for 229 posts – around 23% of all posts – and 329 comments, or 3% of total engagement. Owing to technical and GDPR considerations,[4] individual account authenticity was not systematically verified, but overall sentiment trends are clear: although most posts were neutral or positive, the proportion of negative comments (41%) was higher than for any other actor group, including media outlets. This makes influencers and politically aligned users key amplifiers of anti-aid sentiment within the DRC's online information environment, even if they form only a small proportion of the engagement.

Engagement around posts on different social media platforms

Posts on X showed lower levels of engagement than those on Facebook, but were marked by stronger negative sentiment, limited moderation and more reactionary language. The platform's speed and format appeared to amplify emotionally charged content, often blurring the line between legitimate criticism and harmful rhetoric. Although not representative of broader public opinion, these posts illustrate how criticism of aid organisations can quickly escalate online, turning speculation and disinformation or misinformation into seemingly credible narratives.

Identifying origin

The location of social media users can be determined through an Internet Protocol (IP) address – i.e. the unique numerical label assigned to each computer, which functions like a postal address. However, the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) hides the real IP address by providing that of another country.

The analysis procedure for this report was set to only include posts with DRC IP addresses, limiting the analysis to posts with connections to the DRC. While the IP addresses indicate that the posts originated from in the DRC, it is not possible to confirm whether the users or accounts on these posts are Congolese nationals or actually based in the DRC, because the posts can originate from anyone, including those using VPNs set to the DRC. Moreover, the posts provided by users in the DRC who used VPNs set to another country are also not included.

Identifying the geographical location of social media users who leave comments is not possible, because platforms do not provide access to users' IP addresses. The comments analysed for this report therefore come from users who engaged with posts viewed by accounts with IP addresses in the DRC. Because posts can be amplified by influencers and viewed globally, users anywhere in the world may encounter and comment on them. This makes it impossible to determine the commenters' actual locations, which may explain the presence of English-language posts and comments. As a result, some harmful narratives may have been amplified or even initiated by actors outside the DRC. Nonetheless, the analysis did not examine global networks, but focused on posts originating from computers with IP addresses in the DRC, in order to remain as close as possible to debates and discussions within the country.

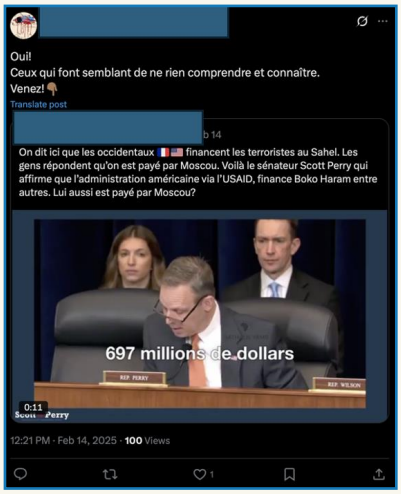
Box 4: Examples of harmful narratives shared or amplified by individual social media users following the USAID freeze

This pattern becomes most visible when the analysis examined moments of political tension, where individual users and influencers drive anti-aid narratives. The examples below – taken from Insecurity Insight's report entitled **USAID Freeze Discussion on Social Media in the DRC, February-March 2025** – show how decentralised accounts can rapidly shift from criticism to misinformation, personalised attacks, and even incitement, illustrating how online hostility evolves when the issues of sovereignty and foreign involvement dominate public debate. On X, 122 public posts were identified in response to the suspension of USAID's operations in the DRC. Of these, 57% expressed a clearly negative stance vis-à-vis the agency or the aid sector in general. All negative posts originated from individual accounts rather than official or organisational profiles, indicating a decentralised but vocal wave of criticism. While many of these reactions voiced objective concerns regarding dependency and governance, on closer examination several posts stand out, because they go beyond critical commentary and include disinformation, misinformation, personal harassment, and even calls for violence. This highlights the growing risks associated with online discourse around international development actors where real flaws in some systems are exploited to discredit whole systems.

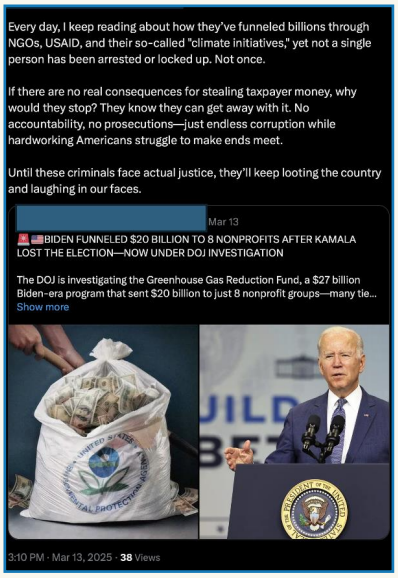
Due to technical and GDPR-related limitations, the authenticity and geographic origin of individual accounts could not be verified. However, the tone and language used suggest that most comments likely came from Congolese users expressing anger about dependency, corruption, and government mismanagement.

Examples of posts

A widely reshared post by a Cameroonian-Swiss influencer known for ties to Russia and active commentary on the Sahel framed the suspension of USAID activities as part of a broader covert agenda involving Western-funded NGOs. For example, in this instance the influencer amplified narratives that USAID funded Boko Haram and that the aid sector and Westerners finance global terrorism. The narrative gained further traction among social media users in the DRC, suggesting that such narratives are not confined to one country, and are gaining traction across other **regions**.



Another post, originally authored by a high-profile X political commentator and reshared by an anonymous account based in the DRC that often posts anti-aid and anti-establishment views, expressed strong frustration over perceived corruption and lack of accountability in the handling of public funds. It specifically targeted NGOs, USAID and climate-related initiatives, claiming that billions are funnelled through these channels without consequences. The message suggested a system of elite impunity, where aid mechanisms serve corrupt interests while ordinary citizens bear the burden of these initiatives.



By engaging with a well-known verified X commentator who frequently blends speculation with high-impact narratives, the post strategically aligned itself with a high-visibility narrative that reinforces public suspicion toward international institutions without presenting verifiable evidence.

Another post escalated beyond criticism of USAID and called for a manhunt against individuals linked to the agency. The language used is inflammatory, portraying USAID supporters as individuals who "sabotage" their own organisation, and therefore deserve punishment. Such content is significant not only for its threatening tone, but for the way it personalises institutional critique, using it to mobilise action against specific individuals. This raises the risk of offline harm, particularly in contexts where aid programmes intersect with political or ethnic tensions. Posts of this nature demonstrate how narratives of external interference can be used to inflame local grievances, reinforcing polarisation and heightening the vulnerability of those associated with foreign-funded initiatives. In digital environments with limited moderation, the potential for amplification and mobilisation is considerable, making such rhetoric a serious concern for both safety and social cohesion.

One frequently active X user on the USAID topic shared a post seeking to discredit pro-democracy actors and portray Western funding as secretive or manipulative. The tone was accusatory, aligning with common narratives used in pro-Kremlin discourse that depict civil society actors as foreign agents.

The user has posted frequently on similar themes, and their profile includes indicators of alignment with Russian geopolitical narratives, such as symbolic references in the username and imagery. While the post did not mention the DRC directly, it reflected a broader pattern of framing USAID and other Western institutions as tools of interference, reinforcing distrust in external support. The user does not generate significant reach, but their posts remain harmful to the aid sector. Given their frequency, these posts could have a greater impact over the longer term.

Edited media platforms and aid-related discussions

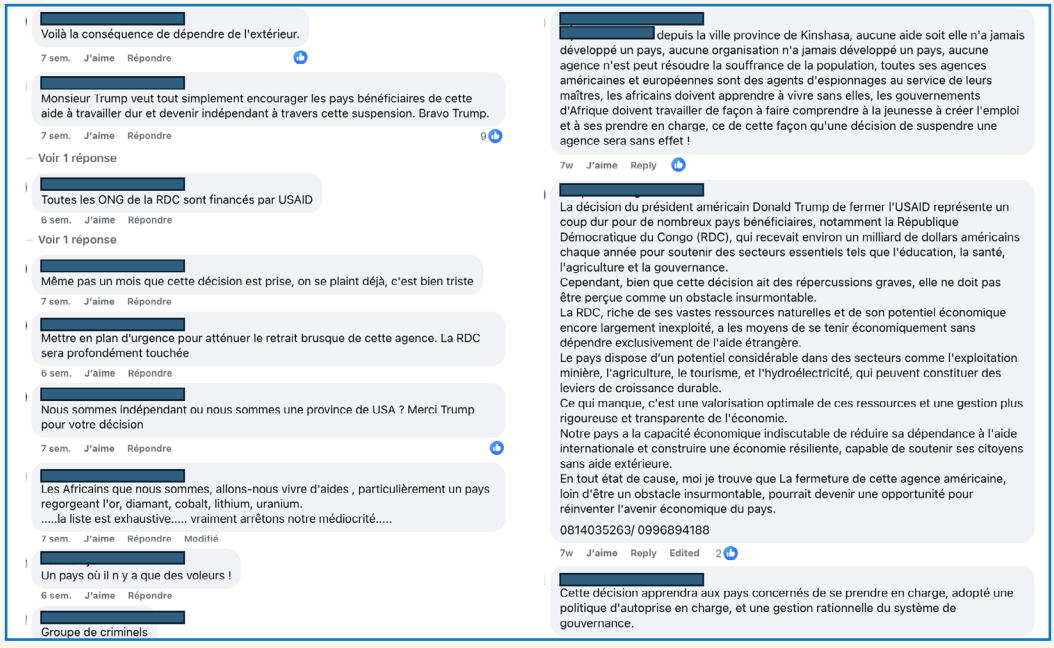
Edited media platforms play a central role in shaping the public narrative landscape around aid in the DRC. While this report does not examine the full breadth of DRC edited media in detail, the findings across multiple datasets show that they act as the primary amplifiers of humanitarian-related content. Their reporting consistently attracts the highest engagement across datasets, but this visibility comes with a cost: factual updates are frequently absorbed into polarised debates, and aid-related topics become reframed to reflect national political grievances. As a result, edited media are both indispensable information hubs and major entry points through which suspicion, hostility, and anti-aid sentiment are activated and circulated.

Box 5: Case study: Radio Okapi

Co-founded by MONUSCO and the Foundation Hirondelle, Radio Okapi occupies a unique position in the Congolese information landscape. Its dual role – as both a credible news source and an institution linked to the UN system – gives it reach and influence, but also exposes it to persistent scrutiny. Across multiple datasets, Radio Okapi was a significant driver of engagement on aid-related topics. Its reporting attracted polarised reactions, with many commenters blurring the distinction between Radio Okapi's journalistic role and MONUSCO's institutional identity, alternately accusing the outlet of propaganda, bias or foreign allegiance.

Between February and March 2025, Radio Okapi published six key posts on Facebook and X that collectively focused on the **USAID funding freeze**, which reached over 460,000 users – nearly half of the total of 915,000 users reached across all posts during the analysed period. The audience's engagement with these posts was substantial, with 81% (600 out of 738) of all comments related to the aid suspension appearing in response to these six posts. The nature of the comments varied, encompassing a wide range of negative sentiments.

- **Civic forums in Facebook comment sections:** The comment sections functioned less like reactions and more like open civic forums. Social media users shared long-form reflections, debated with one another, and proposed alternatives that ranged from local cooperatives to institutional reforms. The radio station's platform, likely because of its credibility and reach, became a springboard for spontaneous public dialogue.



- **Politicisation of a development issue:** Although the news shared by the radio station centred on USAID, the public's response quickly merged into discussions of political issues. Many comments framed the suspension as government failure, transforming a story about foreign aid into a broader indictment of corruption and mismanagement. For example a social media user commented :

  "Malheureusement cette somme été bouffe par nos autorités qui travaillent pour eux-mêmes et ses familles, que les États-Unis, vraiment arrêté ça, et d'ailleurs les aides nous rendent faibles, félicitations Tromp t'as bien fait" ("Unfortunately, this sum has been eaten up by our authorities, who work for themselves and their families. The United States really stopped this, and besides, the aid is making us weak. Congratulations, Trump, you've done well")

- **Message amplification:** Several posts, especially those featuring video, drew repeated phrases and copy-pasted messages, some from individuals, others potentially from coordinated networks (although no tangible evidence of such networks has surfaced). For example, language like the following appeared dozens of times:

  "La fermeture de l'USAID est une catastrophe pour la RDC. Mais retenons que cette aide l'est d'apparence sinon leur intention est une manipulation c'était un outil qui permettait à l'USAID d'avoir une main mise sur la politique des nations et cette fermeture est faite dans l'intention de soulever les populations ce qui amènerait des coups d'État" ("The closure of USAID is a disaster for the DRC. But let's remember that this aid is apparently so, otherwise their intention is manipulation. It was a tool that allowed USAID to have a hold on the politics of nations and this closure is done with the intention of stirring up the populations, which would lead to coups")

The analysis of Radio Okapi's coverage also draws on data collected between March and June 2025 analysing posts in the DRC mentioning the Wazalendo. Although the thematic focus of this dataset was armed-group dynamics rather than humanitarian aid, the reactions to Radio Okapi's reporting revealed broader patterns: the station's association with the UN and, by extension, the aid sector meant that even routine conflict updates or factual explanations were interpreted through a lens of suspicion, foreign influence, or political alignment.

Many users accused the outlet – and three other local edited media – of **bias and alignment with foreign interests**, particularly Rwanda or M23. Users accused the broadcaster of bias, particularly for highlighting setbacks faced by the Wazalendo, while downplaying or ignoring their territorial gains. Language in these comments is often inflammatory, with frequent calls to shut down the outlet. This criticism is not specific to information related to the Wazalendo, because the same outlet also attracted negative comments in relation to internal **displacement** and the USAID **freeze**. This pattern suggests that Radio Okapi's perceived closeness to the aid sector shapes how its content is interpreted. Commenters even reframed neutral political or humanitarian updates as evidence of foreign influence, reinforcing a broader narrative that international actors are manipulating the DRC information space.

In this instance, four additional outlets were also accused of bias, disinformation or misinformation, although less frequently and with less intensity. Of the four other media outlets posting about the Wazalendo and attracting negative sentiment, one is a well-known national platform typically viewed as independent. The others are smaller, locally focused outlets whose coverage may be shaped by regional power dynamics.

This dynamic has direct implications for the humanitarian space. When a media platform associated with the UN or aid agencies becomes the target of accusations of propaganda, the distinction between journalism, public information and humanitarian action collapses in the eyes of many users. The result is a digital environment where support for independent information platforms is misread as an attempt to manipulate political outcomes. Unless humanitarian actors clearly communicate that funding for media platforms is support for professional, independent journalism – not an attempt to promote specific political positions – they risk unintentionally shrinking the humanitarian space by being conflated with political influence.

"Une radio de nos agresseurs. Une honte pour le media congolais" ("A radio station belonging to our attackers. A disgrace to the Congolese media")

Aid agency posts and gender-related discussions

In many contexts, gender-related topics on social media trigger polarisation, backlash or misogynistic responses, which makes the findings in the collected posts and comments striking. The analysed gender-related content in the DRC did not produce this pattern, possibly reflecting the strength of women's voices and leadership in the Congolese digital space.

This section examines how audiences respond to gender-related posts published by both INGOs and CSOs. While later sections show how themes such as sovereignty, collusion with conflict actors or peacekeeping can trigger intense hostility, gender-related posts in the UN and INGO dataset provide an example of the opposite dynamic: largely positive, low-conflict engagement shaped by relatable figures, practical benefits, and human-centred communication. By analysing this more constructive interaction, the section highlights the conditions under which aid communications can build legitimacy rather than activate harmful narratives.

The patterns described above show that visibility and engagement around aid in the DRC vary sharply by topic and actor. Some conversations – such as those on sovereignty, peacekeeping or donor politics – are dominated by controversy and carried by the edited media. Examining gender-related projects under aid posts helps illustrate how tone, framing and communication objectives, whether aimed at raising awareness, reporting on progress or announcing programme transitions, shape public response. These conversations offer an important counterpoint to the polarised debates seen elsewhere, showing that when aid communications focus on people, practical outcomes and relatable leadership, they can build trust rather than fuel division.

This section analyses 109 comments responding to 75 posts on gender-related aid interventions in the DRC between 21 September and 21 October 2025 while examining posts mentioning or published by **UN agencies and INGOs**. Topics ranged from gender-based violence (GBV) and women's health to family planning, empowerment, and awareness campaigns linked to global events such as Octobre Rose (Pink October/Breast Cancer Awareness Month) and the International Day of the Girl Child (Journée internationale de la jeune fille). A smaller set of posts also announced programmatic transitions, notably the closure of MSF's GBV care programme in Salamabila (Maniema province).

Overall, the tone of the discussion was overwhelmingly positive. Of the 109 comments, only four (3.7%) expressed clearly negative or critical sentiment, while the rest conveyed support or appreciation. Users frequently congratulated agencies and praised women professionals, using terms such as “mentors” and “role models”. This language suggests a strong identification with women leaders and points to the social resonance of posts that highlight visible, relatable female figures.

However, engagement remained comparatively modest: gender-related posts reached an estimated 1.6 million users across 75 posts, about 40% lower average reach per post than the full dataset of 382 UN/INGO posts (14.4 million users). This gap reflects both the lower level of controversy around gender issues and the informational rather than emotional tone of these posts.

Beyond sentiment, the communication objectives behind gender-related content varied across the sample, revealing distinct audience relationships:

- **Awareness and advocacy:** Campaigns such as Pink October and the International Day of the Girl Child, which highlight breast cancer awareness and girls’ rights and empowerment, sought to inform and mobilise, using accessible language, photos of Congolese women, and calls to action around prevention or empowerment. These posts positioned audiences as participants, not passive recipients.
- **Programme visibility and accountability:** Regular UNFPA and UN Women updates focused on achievements such as training sessions, partnerships or new service delivery points, signalling transparency and institutional presence. Engagement here was mainly symbolic approval, reflecting recognition rather than debate.
- **Change or transition communication:** The MSF posts announcing the end of GBV activities in Salamabila functioned as closure communication. Their framing was careful and empathetic, emphasising progress since 2019 and encouraging local and governmental continuity. Users largely interpreted the withdrawal as a milestone rather than abandonment, and only a few asked who would “take over” the services.

Negative comments, although rare, highlight important nuances. One user expressed frustration over limited representation, writing: *“Des programmes pour la santé des femmes discutés majoritairement par les hommes. Quelle efficacité dans la prise de décisions et leur suivi?”* (“Programmes for women's health discussed mainly by men. How effective are they in terms of decision-making and follow-up?”). Another commenter voiced moral discomfort, stating: “They invest more in sex than in development 😭😭😭😭 mawa” (“Les s'investissent dans le sexe que dans le développement 😭😭😭😭 mawa”). These remarks illustrate that “negative” sentiment does not necessarily signify rejection of gender equality, but may instead express unmet expectations for representation or differing moral priorities.

In sum, this sample of gender-focused communications was non-polarised and overwhelmingly supportive, distinguishing it from more contested humanitarian topics like sovereignty or peacekeeping. Posts that combined visible local leadership, clear objectives and human-centred framing attracted positive engagement even when announcing programme closures. The few dissenting voices underline the need for context-sensitive communications that balance cultural sensitivity with advocacy for inclusion. Ultimately, the gender dataset demonstrates that when humanitarian communications connect visibility, empathy and participation, they can strengthen legitimacy rather than trigger polarisation.

Harmful information: from authentic frustrations to lack of knowledge and disinformation

The term harmful information is used as the overarching framework for "misinformation, disinformation and hate speech" (MDH). For humanitarian actors, intent or factual accuracy is less important than impact: what ultimately shapes safety, trust, acceptance and access is how information – whether true or false, with deliberate aims or unintended consequences – affects perceptions of aid. Harmful interpretations can arise from several sources: manipulation and deliberate disinformation; misinformed or politicised reactions grounded in lived experience; or the absence of information, where humanitarian silence is misread as complicity, irrelevance, or alignment with conflict actors. Because these dynamics can produce harm even when no malicious intent exists, "harmful information" captures the full spectrum of risks to the humanitarian space, ranging from coordinated attacks on aid legitimacy to misinterpretations of humanitarian principles, dehumanising language targeting protected communities, claims that hospitals or schools are military sites, or the repurposing of genuine grievances into narratives that shrink the perceived neutrality of aid actors. Using this term allows humanitarian organisations to analyse consequences without making accusations about user motives, while still recognising that MDH categories remain useful when referring to specific elements within the broader landscape.

What is disinformation and misinformation?

"Disinformation" refers to false information spread deliberately to deceive, while "misinformation" is false information shared unknowingly. For humanitarian organisations, the goal is not to police the online space, but to understand how such narratives interact with genuine public sentiment and shape perceptions of aid.

Detecting disinformation is rarely straightforward. Coordinated or inauthentic behaviours – such as synchronised posting or the use of anonymous profiles – may suggest manipulation, but intent is difficult to prove. Automated tools also struggle to capture local nuance, irony, or satire, increasing the risk of misclassifying benign content as harmful, or vice versa.

As an H2H organisation, Insecurity Insight's social media monitoring follows clear principles: to do no harm, protect privacy and generate practical insights that support principled aid operations. The analysis covers only publicly available content, collected through country-specific IP filters. Private messaging apps such as WhatsApp or Telegram are not monitored, nor are individual users identified. The objective is to understand patterns of online engagement, not to attribute motives or track individuals.

The following indicators can help humanitarian actors assess whether a narrative may be part of a coordinated or deliberately misleading campaign:

- the repetition of identical or highly similar phrases across multiple accounts;
- the use of anonymous profiles or usernames with political references;
- disproportionate backlash to factual or neutral posts;
- timing that coincides with political events or aid-related announcements;
- refusal to engage with corrections or alternative views; and
- high engagement with inflammatory claims compared to low engagement with standard updates.

None of these signs alone confirms the presence of disinformation. However, when several appear together, they may indicate that a narrative is being deliberately shaped or amplified. These indicators help interpret findings from the DRC datasets, where disinformation, misinformation, partial truths and frustration frequently coexisted.

For humanitarian actors, the key challenge is not to determine whether a hostile comment is "real" or "fake", but to understand how orchestrated messaging and genuine frustration often interact in ways that reduce trust, acceptance, and safety.

Box 6: Social media as an armed group recruiting tool

In eastern DRC, social media serves as both a platform for the genuine expression of identity, solidarity, and grievance, and as a tool for influence and manipulation.

Coordinated inauthentic behaviours in support of armed groups – such as the use of fake accounts and personas – have been documented by multiple sources. This is **particularly the case with M23**. These tactics enable the spread of polarising content while concealing its origins, creating the illusion of widespread grassroots support. In some cases, individuals even pose as activists, civil society representatives or journalists to boost the credibility of messages aligned with M23 **narratives**. Yet among these accounts can also be found the opinions of ordinary social media users who share their views, frustrations and hopes.

Analysis of public content referencing the Wazalendo on X and Facebook between March and June 2025 did not show explicit evidence of online recruitment. However, it did show a pattern of users openly identifying with the Wazalendo, the DRC army (FARDC) or M23. These expressions, whether spontaneous, performative or aspirational, reflect an environment where public declarations of allegiance are normalised, and where online visibility can easily blend into forms of informal mobilisation.

This convergence of genuine voices and covert influence creates an online environment where unverified claims, emotionally charged content, and polarising narratives spread rapidly and take on a momentum of their own. Within this blurred information space, users regularly encounter – and sometimes amplify – disinformation, hate speech, and inflammatory rumours, including targeted attacks against vulnerable ethnic groups such as Congolese Tutsi/Banyamulenge communities. Dehumanising rhetoric, combined with minimal platform moderation, normalises hostility and erodes social cohesion, making online spaces not just mirrors of the conflict, but active drivers of it. In such conditions, the boundaries between expressing sympathy for an armed group, endorsing its actions or taking initial steps toward mobilisation become increasingly unclear. This is reflected in the Wazalendo dataset, where individuals claiming affiliation with armed groups are clearly active and a small number of users openly ask how to join, including one urging people to send their children to fight.

Disinformation, misinformation and authentic frustrations

The DRC's digital space blends deliberate narrative framing with spontaneous, emotionally charged debate. Across datasets, disinformation, misinformation and authentic frustration appeared side by side, with false or exaggerated claims often setting the tone for discussions rooted in real grievances. Conversations around the sudden end of USAID funding, the role of the Wazalendo, internal displacement, peacekeeping and other aid-related issues show that negative sentiment toward the aid sector cannot be explained by disinformation alone. The examples that follow illustrate how different strands of harmful information take hold during moments of heightened tension, revealing how conspiracy claims, patriotic narratives, lived experience, and moral disappointment combine to shape perceptions of aid and reshape the wider humanitarian space.

Between March and June 2025, 34 high-engagement posts on the Wazalendo that generated 4,508 comments pointed to a similar pattern, where patriotic and pro-sovereignty pages posted messages emphasising Congolese self-reliance and military pride. While some users used these narratives to criticise the aid sector or MONUSCO, most comments expressed genuine nationalism and support for local actors. The overlap of disinformation – such as claims of hidden alliances between foreign forces and rebels – with spontaneous expressions of pride created a powerful mix of emotion and suspicion. Taken together, these dynamics are harmful not simply because they are negative, but because they erode the perceived neutrality and independence of humanitarian actors, making aid workers appear politically aligned, foreign-controlled or complicit in conflict. This shift in perception undermines acceptance, increases operational risk, and ultimately restricts the ability of humanitarian organisations to reach and protect the communities they are meant to serve.

Across all datasets, negative sentiment toward the aid sector gains traction when it aligns with existing frustration and moral disappointment. In this sense, the DRC's online environment is less characterised by manipulation than by the collision of partial information and genuine grievance, where people use digital platforms to express distrust in political institutions and to question the purpose and fairness of aid. This becomes harmful when these frustrations are redirected toward humanitarian actors, recasting neutral or lifesaving work as politically motivated or morally suspect. Once aid is perceived as part of the problem rather than part of the protective environment, acceptance erodes and the space in which humanitarian organisations can operate safely shrinks.

Box 7: Social media and the safety and security of aid workers

Understanding how aid is framed online helps to manage operational risks and is essential for an acceptance-based SRM approach. Sentiment analysis helps to identify when and how humanitarian narratives are becoming politicised, allowing agencies to:

- detect early warning signs of misperceptions and rising hostility;
- anticipate reputational risks that may affect staff safety or access;
- tailor communications to reduce disinformation and misinformation and strengthen trust; and
- adapt security strategies to both digital and physical threat environments.

Responses to such awareness can range from restricting staff movement when a threat is thought to be severe to improving communication and information-sharing to influence how activities are perceived.

Threats and real-life security events

Threats against aid staff can circulate in closed groups or publicly online. When attacks occur following awareness of such threats, connections are often drawn between the threats and real-world violence. However, these links are frequently unproven. They may reflect a direct connection or merely an assumption of one. Nonetheless, future security decisions are sometimes based on such awareness, which increases the influence of social media narratives on operational choices.

Communication around security incidents and social media narratives

In the age of social media, communication about security incidents is complex. Attempting to suppress information is rarely effective. Incidents are usually visible to affected communities and are likely to surface in local media, on social media, and in private channels. When information is shared by people outside the aid community, there is always an increasing risk of misinformation resulting from misinterpretion. For example, in 2022, a Red Cross vehicle was ambushed, and on the same day in an unrelated incident agents from the DRC's Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) were attacked and equipment was stolen. A major local newspaper reported both of these incidents, but combined them in a headline that made it sound as if there was a connection: "Kasai: armed men hold up a Red Cross jeep and take equipment from CENI agents close to Tshikapa". Even though the article discussed both events separately and did not suggest that there was any connection between the two incidents, commentators on social media seemed to only read the headline – a common practice on social media – and this started the rumours that the Red Cross had transported CENI election-related material.

"Since when is CENI material transported in a Red Cross vehicle? A people which destroys itself, this is serious!!!"

"A grave abuse, how is CENI material in a Red Cross bus?"

"This time these international NGOs must be controlled without exceptions, we know well the enemy of the Congolese!"

"Since when is CENI material transported by vehicles belonging to international institutions directed and manipulated by an English state [which is] our enemy."

This example highlights that the lack of communication about security incidents in itself may carry risks of distorting the context in ways that can undermine the understanding of principled independent humanitarian work.

When issuing statements about security events, clear and unambiguous language that is not easily misinterpreted is essential. On social media, both silence and vagueness often fuel suspicion linked to allegations of complex networks of complicity and connections that do not exist.

As seen in Box 2, discussions of security incidents can quickly take on converging interpretations in which unrelated events or structural grievances are linked together into broader narratives of abandonment, complicity, or foreign control. Rather than treating the looting of a UN warehouse in Goma as criminal, many commenters interpreted it as an understandable or even justified reaction to hunger, prolonged neglect, and the perceived failure of institutions to respond at the scale and speed the crisis demanded.

In another instance, threatening narratives circulating in local digital communication networks were followed by the killing of two aid workers at a roadblock. When similar narratives resurfaced months later, an aid organisation cancelled a planned convoy out of concern that rising online hostility could again escalate into violence. This illustrates how harmful interpretations, regardless of their factual basis, shape security decision-making in an environment where distrust is deep and information spreads faster than verification.

Communicating about events affecting staff and partners requires close collaboration between the crisis and communication teams on how best to share information in a timely, transparent, and context-sensitive way. In the past, it has often been considered best practice not to issue statements during an ongoing crisis. In the age of the rapid sharing of information on social media platforms, it may be necessary to adapt best practice guidelines to ensure that an accurate description of an event is shared first by the aid agency. Issuing clarification or corrections later is frequently interpreted as evidence of having something to hide. Moreover, it is also essential to reference incidents in a way that reflects community sentiment and does not reinforce perceptions of aid-agency privilege.

What to be aware of:

- Harmful online narratives often follow when partial information is circulating on social media that is misinterpreted and is the start of rumours spreading that suggest connections between aid agencies and political or conflict actors.
- Trust can erode when security practices appear to prioritise the protection of aid agencies over that of the conflict-affected communities they aim to help.

Box 8: How to engage with non-state actors known for violence against civilians in the age of social media

In contexts where non-state armed actors attack civilians, managing the presence of aid agencies in the age of social media has become increasingly challenging. Violent and brutal non-state actors pose a risk, and most aid agencies would seek to negotiate access with them. While in the past this could be quietly done through personal communication, in the age of social media, aid agencies also need to consider the perceptions of their work beyond the area where the aid activities take place.

Today, any person with a mobile connection can report the presence of aid agencies on social media. When such images circulate next to reports of violent events harming civilians, these images support the emergence of narratives alleging dubious affiliations between aid agencies and non-state armed actors, often more from a lack of understanding of the concept of neutrality than from malicious intent.

Because anyone can read and see these public narratives, the main challenge often arises in areas outside of the direct control of these armed groups where access may have been negotiated. Narratives alleging aid agencies' collusion with non-state conflict actors frequently foreshadow difficulties in obtaining or maintaining licences and permission to operate. Because social media has created a globally accessible space, it is no longer enough to locally negotiate access through powerful local non-state actors. When the presence of aid agencies circulates on social media, it becomes essential to manage the perceptions that arise from these social media images among powerful actors further away to counter the risk of aid agencies' activities being viewed by such actors with suspicion.

Using social media monitoring to maintain access

Understanding narratives on social media that describe the work of aid agencies in areas controlled by non-state actors can help agencies to understand what critical interlocutors, possibly far away from the area of the agencies' work, may think about the aid activities. Aid agencies can use insight into what others may read and what perceptions they may have of their work to better communicate with authorities and to provide first-hand information that can reduce the power of social media to spread damaging narratives.

Sentiment analysis thus offers a way to track warning signs that appear in the information environment that may affect perceptions among key actors who have no direct contact with the non-state actor and whose views may be strongly influenced by statements or narratives on social media.

Social media sentiment analysis is not a tool to document representative views. Rather, it is a powerful tool to understand the perceptions that circulate on public platforms and that aid agencies need to engage with to prevent the humanitarian space from shrinking. Frequently, this communication has to be directed at other social media users located outside the area where agencies' work with non-state actors take place rather than the group that controls the area in which these aid agencies operate.

A key challenge is learning to assess how information and perceptions shape multiple stakeholders' perceptions simultaneously, including non-state actors, state authorities in country capitals, and donors in other countries that are conducting parallel conversations with competing interpretations of the same facts and images.

Chapter 3: Harmful association: aid narrative shaped by dominant social media themes in the DRC

Public online conversations about aid in the DRC reveal a clear pattern: humanitarian actors are predominantly perceived through the lens of political, security and cultural developments rather than humanitarian purpose or the practical support these actors provide to people in need. The same content can be interpreted differently by aid agencies, donors and foreign observers. This chapter focuses on perspectives that appear to come from social media users in the DRC. There is a striking absence of references to aid agencies' work in the posts that generate the highest engagement on key humanitarian needs such as internal displacement, protection or general relief. Humanitarian principles that drive aid work are not discussed or shared on social media platforms, and social media audiences exchanging views on human suffering remain unaware of the concrete help being delivered by aid agencies.

Instead, social media platforms are dominated by political themes. When they are mentioned in neutral posts, aid activities are often interpreted through the lens of the dominant themes of sovereignty, dignity and justice rather than the intentions that drive aid. There is a growing divergence between perceptions of aid activities: while the international aid sector continues to understand its activities in terms of principles and norms that are the basis for good and responsible aid work, social media users in the DRC are interpreting what they see through locally dominant concerns. Crossovers between these perceptions are very infrequent.

While many people in the DRC continue to follow news via the radio, social media users have grown to an estimated **7 million**. Many international aid actors continue to consider edited media more important than the often unnuanced or biased communications on social media. Local aid agencies and CSOs have the potential to help bridge this gap, but their reach often remains relatively limited.

This section summarises the dominant narratives that undermine aid legitimacy, highlights these narratives' operational and communication implications, and presents examples of positive engagement that demonstrate how the aid sector can build narrative resilience by strengthening communication about its purpose and intentions in ways that resonate with local concerns and priorities.

For the monitoring period February-October 2025, analysis of more than 11,000 social media comments shows that negative narratives cluster around the following recurrent themes.

1. Sovereignty:

Aid is framed as a vehicle for foreign control, with international organisations portrayed as undermining local autonomy and national decision-making. Even neutral updates are interpreted as attempts to impose external agendas. This becomes harmful when communities reject assistance not on the basis of its content, but on the perception that accepting aid threatens national sovereignty or local identity.

"Vendre la RDC aux mains de trafiquants Américains" ("Selling the DRC to American traffickers")

Aspects of messaging that trigger this response

- Foreign language logos, English-language content or references to Western partnerships can trigger suspicions of hidden agendas.
- Aid agencies' silence after politically charged events fuels perceptions of manipulation or the endorsement of and collusion with conflict actors.
- The use of a formal diplomatic or institutional tone in communications reinforces distance and hierarchy, undermining the emotional credibility of the messaging.
- When interpreted in political terms, neutral or development-focused messaging makes humanitarian communications appear partisan.

Impact on aid agency operations

- Aid programmes labelled as "foreign impositions" may face the refusal of a licence to operate or access constraints, even when meeting urgent needs.
- Compounds, vehicles and staff become targets for protests or threats.
- Local authorities slow or block administrative processes to assert their political independence from donors.
- LNGOs risk community backlash or reputational damage when they are visibly associated with international partners.
- Acceptance strategies weaken as messaging is rejected for being externally driven, regardless of the accuracy of its content.
- Collaboration with UN agencies becomes politically risky for local partners.
- Access becomes volatile in border or resource-rich regions where foreign control narratives mobilise hostility.

2. Collusion:

Aid actors and donors are accused of collaborating/colluding with armed groups, political elites or foreign governments. Visuals of aid staff with authorities or peacekeepers are reframed as proof of hidden alliances. These interpretations erode acceptance, heighten suspicion and increase risks to staff by positioning aid actors as parties to the conflict rather than neutral responders.

"Mission de nations Unis pour le métier de massacre. Après la sortie de la croix à l'est plus des 100 civile sont massacre" ("United Nations mission for the business of massacre. After the cross came out in the east, more than 100 civilians were massacred")

"Usaid sert au soutien du terrorisme au monde plus particulièrement en RDC. Il avait donné 350.000fc aux groupes rebelles en Rdc en 2024. Nous soutenons l'initiative du président Trump" ("USAID supports terrorism around the world, particularly in the DRC. It gave 350,000 FC to rebel groups in the DRC in 2024. We support President Trump's initiative")

Aspects of messaging that trigger this response

- Posts or media coverage showing aid workers alongside security forces are reframed as evidence of collusion with conflict actors.
- Neutral language about "support to stabilisation" or "coordination with authorities" is reinterpreted as taking sides.
- Visuals (e.g. UN vehicles, armed escorts) are used to reinforce accusations of alliance with armed groups.
- The absence of local voices in messaging about security responses deepens mistrust and leaves harmful narratives uncontested.

Impact on aid agency operations

- Aid teams become direct targets when communities believe aid supports hostile armed actors.
- Communities that perceive an agency as partisan may deny it access to villages or displacement sites.
- Local partners engaging authorities face suspicion from communities and pressure from political actors.
- Surveys, assessments and data collection programmes are seen as intelligence-gathering activities, reducing local people's participation in these programmes.
- A UN-linked presence increases risks for neutral NGOs, because all international actors are seen as being basically the same.
- Minor communication errors trigger disproportionately severe reputational damage in environments where rumours of aid agencies' collusion with conflict actors are widespread.

3. Dependency:

Assistance is portrayed as weakening local initiative, enriching intermediaries or offering little tangible benefit to affected communities. This narrative becomes harmful when it delegitimises programmes, discourages participation in them and fuels resentment toward agencies that are perceived as ineffective or self-serving.

"ils boufent des millions des dollars sans impactes sur le terrain" ("They're wasting millions of dollars without any impact on the ground")

"Honte à vous! Vous ne dépendez que d'aide extérieure" ("Shame on you! You depend entirely on outside help")

Aspects of messaging that trigger this response

- Posts celebrating project results that are not felt in the same way locally can be met with sarcasm, undermining the legitimacy of communication messaging.

- Awareness campaigns framed around “assistance” rather than “cooperation” reinforce perceptions of one-sided dependency.
- The absence of local leadership voices in messaging strengthens impressions that aid replaces rather than supports local capacity.

Impact on aid agency operations

- Community participation declines, undermining programme outcomes and ownership.
- National partners distance themselves publicly from donors to preserve their political legitimacy.
- Recruitment and procurement processes are viewed as foreign-controlled, generating resentment.
- Success stories are dismissed as propaganda, hampering learning and scaling.
- Development initiatives become politically sensitive or unwelcome when framed as perpetuating dependency.
- Government actors demand accelerated exit timelines to signal national autonomy, disrupting planning cycles.
- Community uptake of health; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); or livelihoods services decreases when facilities are labelled as dependency symbols.

4. Aid generalisation:

Individual organisations are not seen as distinct from one another: all NGOs, UN agencies and donors are collapsed into a single distrusted entity that is often blamed for insecurity, corruption or political interference. This generalisation is harmful because it eliminates space for dialogue, undermines trusted local actors through a process of guilt-by-association and allows isolated incidents to delegitimise the entire aid ecosystem.

“Ces ONGs étaient à la base d'insécurité dans nos pays en Africains” (“These NGOs were the root cause of insecurity in our African countries”)

Aspects of messaging that trigger this response

- Online discussions under media posts evolve into critical comment threads about “NGOs” in general, limiting space for factual clarification.
- A particular aid agency’s focus on monitoring posts and comments about only itself prevents the aid sector in general from picking up on sector-wide disillusionment.
- The absence of aid agency voices in these critical comment threads allows rumours to harden into accepted truths.
- Highly branded or technical messaging reinforces distance between institutions and communities.

Impact on aid agency operations

- Reputational damage spreads across agencies, even those with strong community trust.
- Any security incident affecting one actor risks undermining other aid agencies' acceptance by the communities they serve.
- Engagement becomes difficult when hostility targets the generalised concept of "aid", not individual organisations.
- Local NGOs are stigmatised as proxies for foreigners, undermining their safety and access.
- Coordination bodies are reframed as conspiratorial collectives, weakening joint action.
- Donor visibility requirements create political risks for front-line partners.
- Efforts to clarify aid agency mandates fail because nuance is erased by generalised suspicion of all aid agencies.

5. Humanitarian principles distorted:

Neutrality, impartiality and independence are misinterpreted as moral indifference. Statements using technical or diplomatic language are read as evasive or complicit. This distortion becomes harmful because it reframes core protections as evidence of bias, undermining the very principles that enable safe aid agency access and acceptance.

Aspects of messaging that trigger this response

- Institutional messaging about humanitarian principles often fails to convince people at the emotional level and is viewed as defensive or elitist.
- The use of abstract or technical language ("impartiality", "principled action") alienates audiences unfamiliar with humanitarian terminology.
- Visuals of aid staff with government or UN escorts are misread as proof of political allegiance.
- Silence on politically sensitive incidents or violence against civilians is interpreted as approval of injustice and the abandonment of suffering civilians.

Impact on aid agency operations

- Communities may block aid agency access when neutrality is misunderstood.
- Staff face harassment for perceived alignment with rival armed groups.
- Authorities retaliate when agencies refuse to adopt political positions.
- Targeting or prioritisation decisions become flashpoints for accusations of hidden bias.

- Security-driven distancing from armed actors is misinterpreted as the abandonment of people in need, harming cooperation.
- Online explanations of neutrality trigger further suspicion in polarised spaces.
- Partners delivering protection or rights reporting face political backlash or intimidation.

6. Exploitation and resource capture:

International aid presence is depicted as a cover for mineral extraction, economic gain or geopolitical manoeuvring. These narratives are harmful because they equate humanitarian work with exploitation, increasing hostility and obstructing access in sensitive regions.

“Cette fameuse mission onusienne cherche quoi sur le sol congolais en dehors de minerais qu'elle exploite dans le sang des congolais 😔” (“What is this famous UN mission looking for on Congolese soil, apart from the minerals it exploits at the expense of the Congolese people? 😔”)

Aspects of messaging that trigger this response

- Messaging that highlights donor funding or infrastructure investment is interpreted as evidence of profit motives.
- Technical language about “value chains,” “partnerships” or “development corridors” reinforces perceptions of exploitation.
- Visuals of foreign staff, equipment or vehicles in resource-rich areas are reframed as proof of the extraction of resources.

Impact on aid agency operations

- Operations in or near mining, trade or border zones are obstructed due to perceptions that their aim is to extract minerals.
- Staff and assets face heightened targeting in areas where economic grievances are acute.
- Local officials hinder aid agency logistics, viewing aid convoys as foreign economic actors.
- Infrastructure projects attract suspicion, reducing cooperation and uptake.
- Efforts at transparency may be reframed as evidence of hidden financial deals.
- Local partners risk accusations of profiteering when associated with sensitive resources.
- Any engagement with land, mining or development ministries becomes reputationally risky.

7. Displacement and abandonment:

Communities affected by displacement accuse aid actors of being absent, selective or indifferent to their suffering. This narrative becomes harmful when frustration translates into hostility, making access negotiations more difficult and placing front-line staff at greater risk.

“La paix, la paix et rien que la paix ☮.Les visites et les déclarations n'empêchent plus les milliers des morts au Kivu” (“Peace, peace and nothing but peace ☮. Visits and statements no longer prevent thousands of deaths in Kivu”)

“Les humanitaires ne se plaignent pas du sort des personnes déplacées plutôt de leur propre sort” (“Humanitarian workers are not complaining about the plight of displaced persons, but rather about their own situation”)

Aspects of messaging that trigger this response

- The absence of timely, localised updates on aid after major displacements reinforces the perception that agencies are uncaring or absent.
- Visuals showing the distribution of aid to small groups are read as proof of exclusion rather than scale limitations.
- Technical explanations (“access constraints”, “security incidents”) sound like excuses when not linked to empathy for victims or survivor voices.

Impact on aid agency operations

- Confrontations increase at IDP sites where frustration turns into direct hostility.
- Access negotiations weaken because communities perceive aid agency bias or selective aid delivery.
- Staff become symbolic targets of anger over aid-system-wide failures.
- Local NGOs and churches face unsustainable pressure as communities turn to them for support.
- Coordination mechanisms lose credibility when lack of presence is seen as indifference.
- Trust collapses quickly, disrupting relocations, health outreach activities and WASH interventions.
- Any delays due to insecurity are interpreted as intentional neglect, amplifying narrative-driven resistance to aid agencies and their operations.

Associations between peacekeeping forces and the aid sector contributed to reinforcing these narratives in particular through a complex network of unmet expectations, ignorance about mandates and lack of communication that would help to situation aid activities within a larger framework. Factual messaging about specific activities is routinely read and interpreted in light of suspicions and geopolitical grievances, triggering an emotional backlash against aid activities and intentions.

Humanitarian stakeholders in the DRC have noted that such misinterpretations can translate directly into operational risk. In one instance, threatening narratives circulating in local digital communication networks were followed by the killing of two aid workers at a roadblock. When similar narratives resurfaced months later, an organisation cancelled a planned convoy out of concern that increasing online hostility could again escalate into violence. This illustrates how harmful interpretations, regardless of their factual basis, shape agencies' security decision-making in an environment where distrust is deep and information spreads more rapidly than verification.

A more detailed examination of the sentiments driving people to emotionally reject aid activities highlights important areas in which humanitarians could improve their accountability to conflict-affected populations by learning to communicate in language that responds to local needs, fears and suffering in a compassionate way that shows humanity rather than a technical response.

Chapter 4: Aid narratives in the shadow of peacekeeping operations

Public online narratives about peacekeeping in the DRC have shown consistency over time: whether discussing MONUSCO, the **East African Community (EAC) force**, or the **Southern African Development Community (SADC) mission**, social media users describe foreign military deployments as ineffective, politically compromised, or aligned with hostile regional interests. During the EAC deployment, nearly 89% of online sentiment from Kivu-based users was negative, fuelled by perceptions of collusion with M23, a refusal to fight, and fears that foreign troops would "balkanise" the eastern DRC or profit from Congolese minerals. Similar patterns resurfaced in 2024 regarding the SADC mission, where sentiment deteriorated rapidly as social media users accused the force of military ineffectiveness, foreign agendas and repeating MONUSCO's perceived failures.

Although MONUSCO, the EAC force and the SADC mission are often treated as equivalent in online discourse, they operate under fundamentally different mandates: MONUSCO is a UN peacekeeping mission centred on civilian protection and political support, while the EAC and SADC deployments were regional peace-enforcement operations that were authorised to conduct offensive combat operations alongside the Congolese army. This distinction is largely absent from social media narratives, where all three are framed as a single category of failed "foreign interventions". The failure to recognise these differences matters because it entrenches blanket hostility toward all international actors; obscures accountability for specific mandates; and increases the risk that humanitarian organisations are targeted for the actions, real or perceived, of military forces.

These reactions form part of a wider narrative in which foreign intervention, Western governments, and the UN system are portrayed as indifferent to Congolese suffering or complicit with Rwanda and M23. During periods of intense insecurity, such as the **February 2024 riots in Kinshasa**, this distrust escalated into violence against UN and diplomatic mission assets, with online content explicitly calling for attacks against MONUSCO, embassies, and UN-linked NGOs. While public posts sometimes distinguish humanitarian actors from military missions, private and encrypted channels often collapse all international actors into a single category of "foreign" influence.

This blurring of roles has direct operational implications for aid agencies. When peacekeeping forces operate near IDP sites or are seen in proximity to aid convoys, humanitarian workers may be misperceived as "foreigners", "spies", or extensions of peacekeeping missions, which heightens suspicion, reduces local acceptance, and increases security risks.

This section examines how these entrenched narratives around the MONUSCO peacekeeping mission shape perceptions of the broader international presence and why they matter for the humanitarian space, where misunderstandings about roles, mandates, and intentions can rapidly translate into reputational harm and operational danger.

MONUSCO on social media and why it matters for the aid sector

Drawing on findings from the **MONUSCO dataset** (June-September 2025), online discussions about MONUSCO show how the international presence is interpreted in the DRC and how quickly peacekeeping narratives spill over into perceptions of the wider aid sector. The examples below show how individual account holders – including journalists, activists, and influencers – use emotionally charged framing, graphic imagery, and accusatory language to portray MONUSCO as ineffective, complicit with armed actors, or deceptive. Understanding these patterns is essential, because the same interpretive framing is routinely applied to humanitarian actors, shaping the environment in which aid agencies must manage acceptance, safety and operational legitimacy.

Many negative narratives about MONUSCO originate from individual social media accounts, including journalists, political communicators and media professionals with established online audiences. Although some of these posts present factual information, e.g. reports about MONUSCO's support to local police in Beni or its role in responding to a fire in Goma, many are framed in ways that evoke anger, mistrust, or ridicule toward MONUSCO. Across the examples of such posts, the authors employ emotionally charged and accusatory language such as "radio silence", "mouthpiece" and "incapable", portraying the mission as either unwilling or unable to protect civilians. Even posts highlighting limited positive actions by MONUSCO (such as firefighting or logistical support) tend to be met with sarcasm and disbelief.

This matters for the aid sector because the same visual and emotional techniques used to discredit MONUSCO also shape how international actors more broadly are judged, creating a narrative space in which suspicion can easily extend to humanitarian agencies.

A notable trend is the systematic use of distressing and graphic imagery. Photos of victims, mass burials and scenes of violence accompany several posts. These visuals, which are often unfiltered, are highly emotive and likely to intensify outrage and grief among viewers. The frequent pairing of these images with accusatory captions linking MONUSCO to security failures reinforces the perception of its negligence or complicity with armed actors. Furthermore, by tagging international organisations, donors, and diplomats, these posts draw the broader aid system into the same framework, suggesting that the same actors accused of military inaction are also those funding, directing, or influencing humanitarian operations. This reinforces the idea that all "international actors" operate as a single political bloc, narrowing the space for aid agencies to be seen as neutral or distinct from peacekeeping missions and foreign policy. The combination of imagery, emotionally charged language and the perceived authority of verified or professional accounts creates a potent ecosystem for anti-MONUSCO sentiment to flourish. This content environment blurs the line between factual reporting and opinionated commentary, shaping an online discourse in which even neutral or operational updates about MONUSCO become triggers for collective frustration and hostility. The motivations of individuals without any apparent organisational ties who post about the peacekeeping mission are uncertain, leaving open the question of whether such activity is spontaneous, influenced or deliberate disinformation.

Box 9: How individual accounts amplify anti-MONUSCO narratives

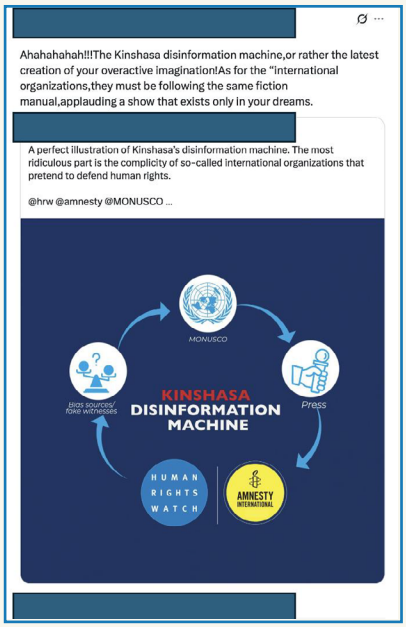
The posts below illustrate how individual social media accounts set in motion dynamics that create strong emotions through the use of imagery, tone, and narrative framing to turn specific incidents into broader claims about international failures or misconduct. These examples help clarify the mechanisms through which anti-MONUSCO sentiment is constructed and circulated, and how easily these same mechanisms can expand to shape public attitudes toward humanitarian agencies, whose roles are often blurred together with other international actors in the online space.

One verified journalist account illustrates how graphic images are used to attribute blame and escalate outrage towards MONUSCO. The user posted several times about MONUSCO between August and September 2025, combining graphic images of victims of violence and emotionally charged language with strongly negative commentary about the mission's role. While some posts refer to verifiable incidents, they consistently frame MONUSCO as complicit or ineffective, reinforcing distrust through their authoritative tone and apparent professional credibility. This case underscores how journalistic or semi-professional accounts can amplify anti-MONUSCO sentiment beyond local circles by pairing distressing visuals with accusatory framing and verified status.

Another example comes from a South Africa-based pro-democracy activist with a large following, whose post about killings in Uvira was shared and echoed by social media users in the DRC. The post accused MONUSCO and human rights organisations of "radio silence" in the face of civilian deaths, accompanied by a graphic image of victims of violence. This framing merges moral outrage with claims of inaction, portraying silence as complicity. The amplification of such posts by multiple Congolese accounts demonstrates how emotional imagery, coupled with accusations of indifference, can rapidly reinforce a wider narrative of abandonment and distrust towards international actors. It also highlights the growing importance of global narratives shaped by digitally connected communities, where transnational solidarity and outrage can blur international boundaries of perception and influence.

Another post, shared by a Kinshasa-based journalist with a modest following, amplifies another damaging narrative about MONUSCO. The video the journalist posted, which allegedly shows sexual activity inside a UN vehicle, cannot be verified or geolocated, yet it was presented as fresh evidence of "what MONUSCO really does". The accompanying caption uses sarcasm to underline accusations of MONUSCO's hypocrisy and ineffectiveness. Although the post gained limited direct engagement, it demonstrates how unverified visual content can support a perception of systemic misconduct, even without factual substantiation, posing reputational and trust risks for both MONUSCO and the UN more broadly.

One post from a communications professional based in Kinshasa shared a visual labelling MONUSCO, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the press as part of a "Kinshasa disinformation machine". The accompanying caption used sarcasm and mockery to discredit these international organisations and their reporting on human rights abuses. The tone framed the UN system as fabricating narratives in collusion with the Congolese government, reinforcing a conspiratorial view of external actors as deceptive and self-serving. This visual, however, was not observed circulating widely beyond this instance. While it did not appear to gain traction across public platforms during the review period, it remains unclear whether it may have spread further in private messaging groups, where such content often continues to circulate and evolve beyond its public visibility.



Box 10: Humanitarian principles in the digital age

The humanitarian principles of **humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence** remain the foundation of humanitarian action. These principles enable aid agencies to deliver life-saving assistance safely and ethically amid insecurity and political instability. Yet these principles are not visibly present on social media platforms dominated by political and security concerns.

In the DRC digital social media space, comment threads regularly conflate humanitarian, peacekeeping and political agendas. When aid activities are interpreted according to other beliefs than humanitarian principles, neutrality is recast as complicity, independence as arrogance and impartiality as bias. In discussions around MONUSCO or the peace process with Rwanda, users often move from specific incidents to sweeping claims that international actors "do nothing", "exploit minerals" or pursue other hidden agendas. These claims erode confidence in protection norms and the role of neutral actors.

Undermining of the protective nature of international humanitarian law on social media platforms

International humanitarian law (IHL) seeks to limit the effects of armed conflict by safeguarding civilians and the civilian character of essential services such as health care and the protection of civilians. During conflict, armed actors are obligated to differentiate between combatants and civilians, prevent excessive harm, and take feasible measures to minimise risk to civilian life and infrastructure. In the DRC's online space, these protection principles are frequently absent, and social media can drive disrespect for these obligations.

In the Wazalendo dataset, explicit hate speech was present, including dehumanising language toward Congolese Tutsi/Banyamulenge communities, which risks eroding the principle of distinction by portraying targeted groups as non-civilian or "legitimate" targets.

At the same time, many users articulated moral boundaries that implicitly aligned with IHL. Comments condemning civilian harm or lamenting displacement reflected enduring expectations of restraint and protection, even when they were not expressed in legal terms.

There is generally little room for nuance on social media, and this has contributed to a dangerous mixture of expectations of the aid sector that cannot be met. Aid agencies are bound by the humanitarian principles, while conflict parties are expected to respect the principles of IHL. This distinction between the responsibilities of each type of actor is rarely made on social media. Instead, broad expectations for the protection of civilians are extended to all foreign actors, and when these expectations cannot be met, disappointment, cynicism, and disillusionment follow that are broadly extended to the wider "foreign aid sector". During the discussions around the hopes for a Rwanda peace deal and calls for real security outcomes, justice, and reparations, calls for accountability coexisted with profound and widespread scepticism toward diplomatic announcements.

Communication implications

Aid agencies face a dilemma: the humanitarian principles are complex and nuanced and not easily communicated on social media platforms. Abstract legal language and complex nuances are not understood by social media audiences when they rapidly read through a mounting number of posts/comments. But remaining silent about the principles on which aid is based leaves the social media space to other ideas and interpretations, which directly contributes to shrinking the humanitarian space.

Communicating principles is essential, yet very difficult. Clear, timely, and specific explanations that are anchored in local voices and provide concrete illustrations of humanitarian principles and the civilian nature of aid services are more credible than theoretical and abstract statements of principle alone.

Understanding social media discourse on the elements that both protect and threaten the humanitarian space is a first step towards ensuring that the compelling ideas of aid can be kept alive in the digital age. Social media sentiment analysis helps to develop the skills needed to reshape the practical application of the humanitarian principles in an area where unchecked, unedited information travels rapidly and widely, profoundly challenging established practices. The objective of humanitarian actors must therefore be to find ways to adapt their social media communication methods and practices to these new realities.

Chapter 5: Communication in a digital space: opportunities and risks

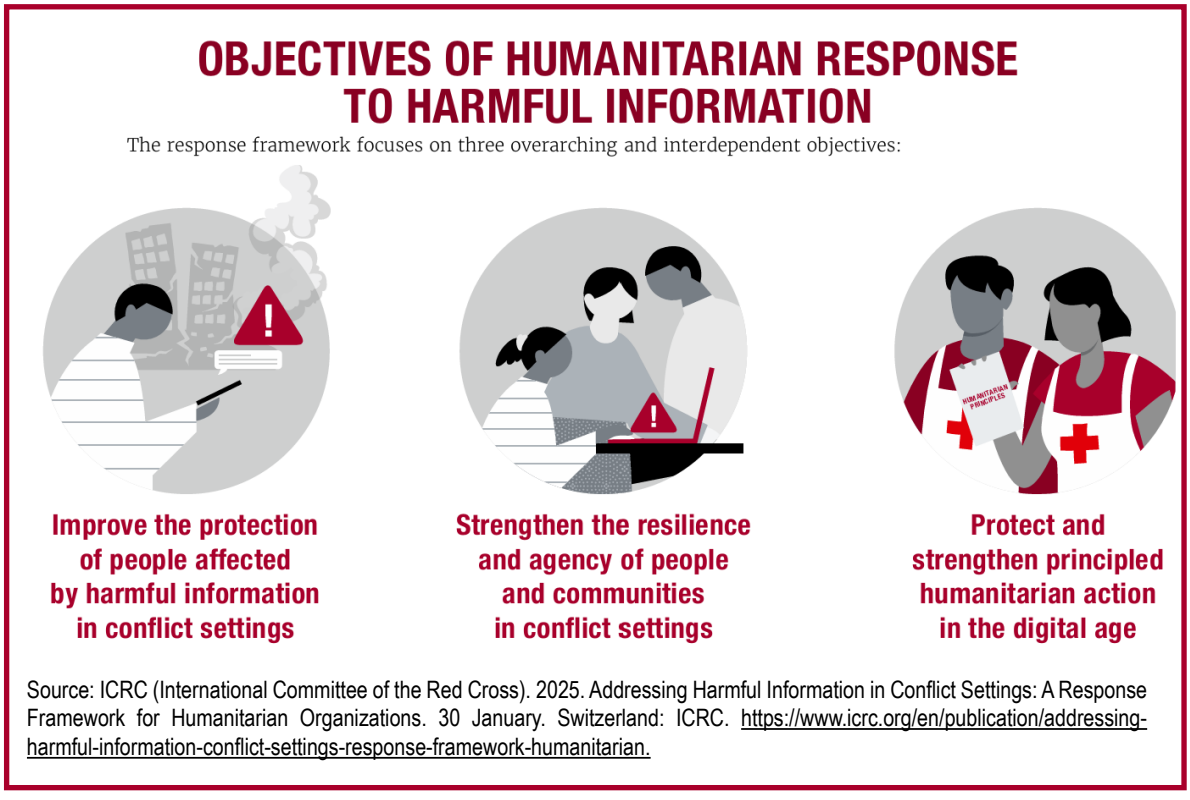
Effective and context-appropriate digital communication in the DRC has become an operational necessity. The way humanitarian organisations communicate (or choose not to) can directly affect perceptions of aid agency neutrality, staff safety and access to affected populations.

According to the ICRC's framework, there are three objectives to humanitarians' response to harmful information:

This chapter examines when and how humanitarian communication can reduce harm, preserve legitimacy, and strengthen trust. It proposes that communication should always pursue three overarching humanitarian information objectives, adapted from the ICRC framework:

1. **Protect people during crises.** Prevent information from worsening risks for affected communities or staff.
2. **Protect principles during crises.** Defend neutrality, impartiality and independence when they are misrepresented.
3. **Protect resilience during crises.** Sustain people's trust in humanitarian values and the actors who uphold them.

These objectives apply differently depending on the situation. Communication in the DRC can be approached from three main contexts: crisis and risk, programmatic work and safeguarding the humanitarian space. These areas require crisis management skills and a long-term strategic objective for humanitarian operations.



Source: ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross). 2025. Addressing Harmful Information in Conflict Settings: A Response Framework for Humanitarian Organizations. 30 January. Switzerland: ICRC. https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/addressing-harmful-information-conflict-settings-response-framework-humanitarian.

The absence of timely, empathetic communication/messaging from humanitarian actors, which was driven by caution on their part, reinforced mistrust and made it harder for these actors to re-enter the conversation later with credibility.

Crisis communication is not about defending reputation, but about preventing harm. In a volatile digital environment, clarity and composure can protect staff, reduce rumours, and preserve humanitarian access.

Towards effective crisis communication

Effective crisis communication is challenging. Scenario planning and guidance developed ahead of a crisis can provide important guidelines for how to protect the humanitarian space when rapidly escalating online content is threatening that space.

Recommendations:

- **Preparedness and structure:** Establish protocols defining when and on which platform to respond, and under what name.
- **Threat and intent analysis:** Distinguish between spontaneous anger and frustration and targeted disinformation. In some contexts, silence may be the only option. In other situations, contributing constructively to the public discussion can help to protect the humanitarian space.
- **A calm, factual tone:** Develop guidelines for the kind of language to use when facts are not fully established. The focus should be on acknowledging suffering, affirming humanitarian principles and expressing empathy.
- **The balance between responding and silence:** Sometimes waiting to respond prevents a negative discussion from rapidly escalating; at other times, silence signals failure, complicity or lack of care. Before a crisis emerges, establish how and when you will respond to crises and how to achieve your objectives for the common protection of the humanitarian space.
- **Coordination:** Communication, security and advocacy need to work together. International, national and local perceptions need to be safely and clearly brought together, and aid agencies need to collectively support the humanitarian space.

2. Programmatic work: sharing aid activities and impact

There are many opportunities to strengthen the day-to-day visibility of aid work: sharing information about new projects, updating progress, reporting results and closing programmes. Communicating about aid activities is both an opportunity to build trust and a potential source of misunderstanding or backlash if it is handled poorly.

Social media comments in the DRC show that public conversations about aid are rarely driven by aid actors themselves, but when they do communicate about programme activities, audience responses are predominantly positive. Among all monitored content, communication about aid programmes and activities consistently produced the most constructive engagement, especially when it focused on people, the purpose of a programme, and partnerships with local communities rather than abstract or theoretical institutional messages.

What worked: positive social media engagement about aid activities

The monitoring process identified successful positive engagement highlighting a number of elements that help to generate positive social media engagement, ranging from personalised aid work to clear, jargon-free language.

Staff-focused storytelling: personalising professionalism

Between September and October 2025 across all INGO social media content, one campaign stood out as a strong and effective driver of positive engagement. The campaign consisted of 11 posts in a consistent format that combined operational transparency and clarity. Each post introduced a local professional aid worker – among them a nurse, a logistician, driver, and a midwife – who described their daily work, challenges, and motivation. The tone was informal, but grounded in a specific purpose. This approach was effective because it humanised the institution that posted the messages by turning a brand into a team of relatable local people. It provided narrative intimacy and projected authenticity, showing humanitarian work as a collective effort rather than a foreign intervention. The use of inclusive pronouns ("we", "our teams"), local greetings and direct language encouraged empathy. Balanced visuals that showed one or two people involved in active work put human agency as its central focus rather than institutional identity.

Posts also summarised outcomes with clear metrics ("XX consultations in XX months", "XX survivors of sexual violence supported") while explaining handover plans ("the project will now continue under the Ministry of Health"). This balance of transparency and stability signalled accountability without triggering anxiety about the aid organisation's withdrawal. In contrast to the suspicion that often greets aid announcements, these posts projected calm competence and partnership, reinforcing their credibility.

Another successful strand highlighted the physical reality of aid work by providing a glimpse into the effort needed to transport equipment required for setting up mobile clinics. These posts showcased teamwork and adaptation, often through simple images of staff on rough terrain. They showed what the online audience rarely sees: the labour, patience and coordination that make aid possible.

Positive engagement from UN and partner organisations

UN agencies and their implementing partners also generated meaningful, although more diffuse, positive engagement. The most successful examples were anchored in the clear framing of the exact purpose of events, local visibility and an approachable tone rather than policy-heavy messaging.

Local partnership and event framing

Posts that announced new appointments, field missions or project milestones performed well across UN agency pages. Comments under a post introducing a new country representative or showcasing maternal health programmes featured numerous expressions of congratulations and encouragement.

Similarly, posts that publicised events and commemorations such as Pink October (breast cancer awareness) or International Day of the Girl Child were well received because they linked global campaigns to recognisable Congolese contexts. These posts succeeded by naming local partner institutions, showing diverse groups of practitioners and participants, and using documentary-style visuals of programme-related activities rather than formal ceremonies. This grounding in local reality gave abstract or theoretical advocacy themes concrete meaning and visual appeal.

Personal testimony and outcome storytelling

A smaller subset from two UN agencies featured personal or community-level stories, such as short narratives highlighting women's empowerment, youth participation, or health outcomes. These posts received above-average engagement compared with more technical or administrative updates. Their strength lay in their accessibility: they presented results through people, not programmes. By focusing on lived experience rather than outputs, these posts invited empathy and offered audiences a clear sense of the purpose and impact of the programmes.

Institutional voice and tone

While UN communications generally retained a formal tone, posts that avoided bureaucratic phrasing and used plain, concise language performed better. Content written with short sentences, clear verbs, and minimal abbreviations or acronyms was easier to understand and more inviting to engage with. Replacing complex institutional language with straightforward explanations correlated with noticeably more positive reactions.

These observations reinforce a simple but critical point: an appropriate tone leads to approachability and positive engagement. When posts sounded clear, human and locally grounded, audiences responded positively. When language remained abstract or distant, engagement declined.

Box 11: Practical lessons from CSO/LNGO posts: post content, design and structure

Example 1: Problem-solution framing

- **Crisis framing:** The post opens by describing the humanitarian situation in North Kivu, stressing how displacement, poverty, and violence affect children and adolescents.
- **Focusing on a solution:** It shifts quickly to the response, outlining a 12-month project with clear parameters – timeline, location, target groups and types of support provided.
- **Credibility through detail:** The mention of specific health zones and concrete activities shows that the project is under way and not just an abstract idea.
- **Practical closure:** The post ends with a link for more information and an image of a staff worker at the programme site, reinforcing transparency and presence on the ground.
- **Impact on sentiment:** This structure, moving from empathetic framing to concrete action, helps to explain why the user response was positive.

As a result, users replied with comments such as:

"Nous saluons la volonté de toutes les autorités qui, animées par cette foi consciente, ont œuvré pour apporter de l'aide partout sur notre chère terre du Kivu. Que Dieu vous bénisse pour le travail accompli. C'est vraiment une grâce d'avoir une équipe guidée par l'esprit d'amour, d'entraide et de collaboration dans des moments aussi difficiles. Merci beaucoup à XXX pour tout ce que vous faites 🙏" ("We salute the determination of all the authorities who, inspired by this conscious faith, have worked to bring aid to every corner of our beloved Kivu region. May God bless you for the work you have accomplished. It is truly a blessing to have a team guided by a spirit of love, mutual aid and collaboration in such difficult times. Many thanks to XXX for all that you do 🙏").

Example 2: Numbers and optimism

- An opening that immediately attracts audiences' attention: The post begins with a bold text "#BONNE_NOUVELLE!" (GOOD NEWS!), framing the content as good news from the start.
- Problem-solution framing: It raises a broad question ("How to protect Lake Tanganyika while improving well-being?") before immediately presenting the launch of the project as the answer.
- Specific details: The project's scope is broken down using concrete figures: the number of decision-makers, the number of companies involved and the number of residents impacted during the project's timeline.

  ✅ Bullet-style checkmarks reinforce clarity and impact.
- Technical approach: References to the "circular economy", waste reduction, and environmental protection give the project credibility and a modern-development framing.
- Local empowerment: Local CSOs and small businesses are described as being employed to test the proposed solutions, which emphasises local participation.
- Broader context: The post situates the project within a larger programme, highlighting regional cooperation and European Union funding. Hashtags further connect it to broader themes.

Clear, upbeat framing paired with quantifiable goals invites users to project their own hopes onto the initiative.

As a result, users replied with comments such as:

"Courage vraiment que ce projet nous amènent à l'amélioration et la multiplication des poissons dans le lac Tanganyika en nous plantant encore des arbres lacustre" ("We truly hope that this project will lead to an improvement and increase in the fish population in Lake Tanganyika by planting more lakeside trees").

Example 3: Sensitive topics and co-branding

- **Author:** The post comes from a UN agency, which immediately gives it international visibility. This is significant, because UN-authored content often attracts criticism, yet here it is being used to amplify a local initiative.
- **Topic:** The focus is on the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV). Posts on such topics can be polarising, yet the language here is careful, appropriately technical, and anchored in awareness-raising and community education.

- **Details:** The post specifies the exact number of leaders (community leaders, NGO staff, civil society members, gender clubs) who participated in an awareness session, making the scale of its impact visible. It also situates the activity within an LNGO partnership and names local service providers and centres, rooting the intervention in local structures.

This illustrates the importance of co-branding international initiatives with credible local actors. By framing a sensitive issue around community leaders, LNGO partnership and education, the post managed to avoid the backlash often associated with the UN.

As a result, users replied with comments such as:

"Ensemble contre les VBG ✋ ("Together against GBV ")"

"Nous vous souhaitons une bonne application de la matière réussi dans le séance éducative en montrant les conséquences de ce six types de VBG aux seins de la communauté" ("We wish you success in applying what you have learnt in the educational session by showing the consequences of these six types of GBV to the community").

The risks from sharing information about aid activities: communications triggering backlash or safety risks

Communications can easily be misunderstood and the worst case can cause harm. Communication planning needs to include threat analysis to understand how well-intended messaging can be misinterpreted. The monitoring identified four areas of how objective project description can lead to harmful narratives.

- **Lack of empathy and humility:** Data-driven posts can be reframed as boasting or exaggeration in the absence of a human story.
- **Political distortion:** Achievements may be claimed or criticised by political actors.
- **Inequity perceptions:** Posts celebrating achievements in one region can alienate audiences in others.
- **Exposure:** Revealing project locations or partnerships can endanger staff.

Communicating aid activities

Communication about activities is both an opportunity and a responsibility. In the DRC, the most successful examples demonstrate that clear, modest and localised communications build resilience. When people see the humanity behind institutions, they are less likely to believe harmful narratives that depict aid as foreign, self-interested or opaque.

Recommendations

- **Plan communication as part of programme design,** not as a post-programme attempt to improve the initiative's visibility. Communication should be embedded in risk assessments and aligned with operational priorities and milestones.

- **Prioritise both empathy and numbers.** Audiences respond to human connection, and statistics underline professionalism. Develop guidance on how to root communications in the local context.
- **Bridge online and offline communication.** Ensure that partners, beneficiaries and other stakeholders learn of programme changes in person before they appear online.
- **Coordinate across partners.** Harmonise messaging when multiple actors work in the same area, to avoid confusion or duplication.
- **Diversify voices:** Amplify references to the involvement of national staff, local partners and beneficiaries to strengthen credibility.
- **Collaborate** with local partners in safe digital storytelling, ensuring that local perspectives reach national and global audiences.

3. Safeguarding the humanitarian space

Safeguarding the humanitarian space in the DRC means defending the legitimacy, principles, and protective norms that allow aid and protection work to function amid polarised, rapidly moving online debates. Across seven months of social media monitoring, it was found three pressures consistently shrink that space: (1) expectation gaps that recast neutrality as failure; (2) emotionally charged frames/perceptions that reach more social media users than corrections; and (3) the dominance of non-humanitarian pages, especially edited media and individual accounts, in defining what "aid" is perceived to be.

Where and how the space is undermined

- **Peacekeeping as a proxy for "international failure":** MONUSCO is routinely framed as ineffective or complicit; even operational updates (firefighting support, logistics) are described as "theatre". Expectation gaps resulting from viewing peacekeepers as combatants rather than peacekeepers cause anger, while graphic imagery and accusatory captions amplify hostility outside MONUSCO/UN pages.
- **Sovereignty and suspicion of aid:** During the initial reactions to the USAID freeze, narratives blurred humanitarian and political agendas, accused donors of manipulation, and questioned the logic of aid itself, while hostile posts and comments appeared under media accounts, not aid pages.
- **Conflict-linked mobilisation and identity politics:** In discussions around armed groups, users aligned themselves with armed actors. Comments show informal signals of mobilisation and pride, while other threads carried ethnicised blame and hate speech that erodes civilian protection norms.

Practical insights

- **Online narratives often precede offline constraints.** When harmful information and polarising threads dominate social media platforms, restrictions to aid access often follow. Hostile comments from non-state actors and regulatory authorities about aid in general should be treated as an indicator of risk affecting agency access and staff safety. It may be too late and risky to respond online, but may require real-life in-person conversations with powerful individuals to counter the impact of such narratives on aid agency decision-making.
- **The most consequential discussions happen off institutional pages.** Negative sentiment forms and spreads through media and influencer content, so monitoring only one's own aid pages may not reveal the extent to which the concept of aid in general may be under attack.
- **Silence is rarely neutral.** When humanitarian voices are missing from politicised conversations, other voices define aid as collusion with conflict actors, exploitation or irrelevance.

Communication approaches that help to protect the humanitarian space

- Close the expectation gap with clear, place-specific explanations. Link the mandate and limits of an intervention with descriptions of verifiable, location-based outcomes delivered by trusted local voices (journalists, community leaders), not just official spokespeople.
- Engage where narratives form. Proactively monitor and, when your risk profile justifies it, respectfully intervene under high-traffic media and influencer posts, and coordinate with security teams so threatening online spikes trigger field awareness.
- Use targeted myth-busting responses sparingly and anchor them in local aid scenarios. Address repeatedly used claims (collusion with armed groups, resource theft) with short factual explainers and concrete examples; avoid generic/standardised rejections of specific claims that sound formulaic.
- Centre principled practice in human stories. Programmatic content that is staff- and community-led earns trust and can help to prevent cynicism, provided it avoids excessive claims and is context-aware.
- Anticipate harm to your agency's identity. Track and flag hate speech and dehumanising rhetoric around displacement and minorities; coordinate with protection teams for ways to counter this kind of language and with local partners for referrals.

Minimum practices for safeguarding the humanitarian space

- Build a shared monitoring procedure that is relevant to all aid agencies by focusing on media/influencer threads and platform features (graphic imagery, accusatory captions) that consistently cause hostility.

- Pre-authorise appropriate responses to the various types of possible crises so that timely, empathetic messages can be issued without bureaucratic delays when narratives start to become hostile.
- Maintain contact with local intermediaries. When messages come from respected local voices, they travel further and are less likely to be read as defensive spin.
- Treat hostile comment patterns as signals that require appropriate action. Escalate your response to the security level when threads contain threats, doxxing[5] or dehumanising characteristics, and align your organisation's digital response with its movement/access policies and decisions.
- In this context, "success" is not defeating critics; it is maintaining enough public clarity and trust for principled action to continue. Indicators of potential problems include shrinking expectation gaps, more place-specific recognition of humanitarian activities/outcomes, and deliberate hostility in response to high-traffic media posts about aid or peacekeeping.

Recommendations

- Establish a humanitarian communication coalition to coordinate monitoring, rapid responses and partnerships with local journalists. This coalition should apply to the humanitarian response as a whole, not just an individual organisation's social media pages.
- Produce a shared list of short, locally anchored possible responses to issues such as mandates, humanitarian principles, and recurring myths about the aid sector that can be deployed through radio/TV segments, statements by respected community members, and social platforms.
- Integrate online indicators of threats (hate speech spikes, recruitment cues, graphic-image campaigns) into standardised SRM responses and design standard operating procedures (SOPs) for adjusting on-the-ground activities (convoys, specific programme activities) and the organisation's social media and public relations approaches.
- Identify and resource local partners who can lead the co-development of narrative content that links humanitarian principles to daily realities (health access, GBV care, displacement services) and uses Congolese voices as primary narrators.

Chapter 6: Towards a communication architecture for the humanitarian space

Earlier sections of this report offered concrete recommendations for approaches to communication during crises, programmatic storytelling and safeguarding the humanitarian space. The recommendations below focus on another level entirely: how the humanitarian community can build an information ecosystem capable of supporting principled action in a contested digital environment. This includes the shared monitoring, coordinated responses, defined risk thresholds, and local partnerships needed to collectively strengthen the resilience of the humanitarian narrative, not organisation by organisation, but as an integrated system.

Strategic approach

- Match context to humanitarian objectives. Before posting any form of digital communication, identify whether the type of communication that is needed deals with (a) crisis and risk; (b) programmatic issues; or (c) safeguarding the humanitarian space. Each type requires a different response speed (an immediate or appropriately slower response), tone, messengers (e.g. respected local figures), and risk tolerance assessment.
- Prioritise the primary objective of the response without creating avoidable risk to the other objectives (e.g. avoid a rapid crisis tweet that endangers staff; a celebratory programme post that inflames local grievances).
- Aim to achieve three key outcomes by consistently aligning communication-related decisions to protect people, principles and resilience.

The building blocks of appropriate communications strategies

- **Monitoring and analysis.** Continuously monitor high-traffic media pages and priority topics; log changes in sentiment, hate speech spikes, and mobilisation cues; share brief weekly reports with SRM and programme leaders.
- **Threat-actor mapping.** Track who drives harmful narratives by topic (edited media, aligned pages, “patriotic” influencers) and how content is communicated (by using copy-paste phrases, graphic imagery and/or accusatory captions).
- **Guidance for risk and opportunity.** Produce short possible responses to specific types of threats: (1) crisis language templates; (2) programmatic storytelling checklists; and (3) one-page responses rooted in local examples to counter aid-related myths.
- **Media literacy and verification.** Run periodic short training programmes for field teams and partners on spotting manipulation, verifying claims, and escalating responses safely.

- **Best-practice exchanges.** Create a shared repository of high-performing, low-risk posts (e.g. staff-focused, place-specific outcomes; locally voiced explainers) and brief lessons learned from difficult episodes.

Monitoring and responding to digital narratives requires investment in both people and systems. Not every organisation can or should take on every element of this work. Smaller local actors often lack the technical capacity, language coverage, or staff time to track and analyse online content safely. Shared monitoring mechanisms, pooled analyses, and light, accessible guidance can therefore provide collective value while reducing duplication and risk.

Resources matter. Sustainable monitoring and principled communication require dedicated staff, appropriate analytical tools, and coordination structures that go beyond ad-hoc reactions of individual agencies. Donors and international agencies should treat these capacities as part of core operational costs, not optional visibility budgets. Investing in the ability to understand and navigate the information environment is an investment in safety, access, and accountability.

Targeted recommendations

For international NGOs and UN agencies

- **Integrate social media into SRM planning.** Add online-narrative indicators to risk registers and the planning of on-the-ground movements (convoys, staff journeys to distribution sites); review hostile threads and incident logs.
- **Implement and practise cross-agency planning and coordination.** Integrate insights gained from online monitoring into access working groups, protection clusters, and liaison meetings; pre-agree joint responses to standard or predictable flashpoints.
- **Plan programmatic communications.** Link communications to the programme cycle (launch → delivery → transition/closure); tell people-centred stories; announce programme closures with empathy; communicate continuity plans first to beneficiary communities, then online.
- **Use trusted messengers.** Co-author content with national staff, local partners, health workers, teachers, and community leaders; prioritise the use of local language, plain speech, and concrete results that were achieved in specific locations.
- **Build journalistic ties.** Establish relationships with local reporters and editors (including radio) for rapid responses to particular issues when they arise, off-record explanations of issues that have arisen, and corrections that will spread further than statements by institutions.
- **Protect staff and data.** Distribute urgent alerts to partners in the event of aid-related locations being identified, the identities of staff or aid beneficiaries being exposed, and reputational issues that will affect the entire aid sector; adopt clear SOPs for responding appropriately to doxxing and threats.

For CSOs and local NGOs (with and without international partners)

- **Focus on the local relevance of aid.** Use community-rooted voices and local languages, and highlight relatively small but specific outcomes of aid programmes; avoid any content that can trigger "foreign control" responses.
- **Co-design messages with partners.** Offer partners advice on local concerns, terminology and images to avoid; co-design counter-narratives grounded in the lived experience of agency staff and beneficiaries.
- **Choose collaboration or independence case by case.** Join joint statements when they will be helpful; stay independent when association with a particular response risks reputational spillover.
- **Keep a record of evidence to support messaging.** Keep simple evidence records (photos to which community members consented, community quotes, service numbers) to support the rapid rejection of false claims and negative accusations without breaching privacy requirements.

For donors

- **Balance the visibility of a donor's funding support with awareness of the context in which aid is delivered.** Avoid politicised branding and rigid demands for the visibility of donors' support for aid operations during sensitive periods; accept low-profile or partner-led attribution of the donor's support for aid activities when safety or acceptance is at stake.
- **Fund the effective management of the digital space as a key part of aid.** Fund the sustained monitoring of social media, the use of local-language content, and partnerships with journalists; support training on crisis communication management and digital safety for national partners.

For media

- **Clarify mandates.** When covering aid/peacekeeping operations, include concise explanations of mandates and the limits of the operations' aims; highlight locally verifiable outcomes.
- **Avoid amplifying harm.** Flag graphic content and dehumanising language; avoid publishing unverified claims that could endanger civilians or staff; publicly and visibly correct any inaccurate reports when new facts emerge.
- **Diversify sources.** Include the views of national staff, local NGOs, health workers, teachers and community members, not just official agency spokespeople.

For collective mechanisms (all stakeholders)

- **Set up a rapid digital response group** to share alerts, align language, and decide when and where to intervene online.
- **Create a shared bank of appropriate explanations of regularly appearing issues,** e.g. short, locally anchored question-and-answer discussions about recurring myths/issues (e.g. neutrality does not mean indifference; why escorts are sometimes used; what a transition/exit means).
- **Agree on triggers and thresholds.** Define what constitutes an online "red flag" (e.g. doxxing, credible threats, calls to attack aid staff or infrastructure, hate speech spikes) and the corresponding operational and communications actions.
- **Invest in radio and community channels.** Pair social media posts with radio spots, call-ins, and community meetings to ensure that affected people hear of incidents and programmes first offline, then see them online.

Conclusion

The DRC digital environment is both a reflection and driver of the country's humanitarian realities. The effort to build and maintain humanitarian legitimacy, trust and protection is no longer only done on the ground, but also across digital platforms. Online narratives increasingly determine whether humanitarian action is understood, accepted or rejected. A growing number of people, in particular among decision-makers, are following and being informed by narratives on social media.

Across seven months of observation of social media narratives dealing with diverse topics in the DRC, the analysis carried out for this report shows that harmful narratives rarely appear as deliberate disinformation alone. They evolve from a mix of real grievances, emotional exhaustion and political suspicion when partial truths are amplified by the speed of social media. The result is an information space where neutrality is easily misread as indifference, independence as foreign allegiance, and humanitarian restraint as moral failure. These perceptions erode the same principles – **humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence** – that make humanitarian action possible.

Yet the DRC's online space is not defined only by hostility. It also contains strong currents of empathy and solidarity. Many users praise humanitarian workers, especially those they perceive as supporting communities, and express moral outrage at civilian harm or displacement. These expressions show that humanitarian values still resonate deeply when they are communicated in language that connects to people's lived experience. They are reminders that the **information environment is not inherently hostile, but a dynamic and contested space that is capable of both harm and opportunity.**

The findings highlight that perceptions on social media platforms are no longer peripheral to humanitarian work, but a factor of growing importance that influences security, access and legitimacy. When information about aid is absent, delayed, or detached from local realities, rumours and anger take its place. When it is clear, timely, and locally voiced, communication can reinforce trust and reduce risk.

Protecting the humanitarian space in the DRC therefore requires three interlocking shifts in practice:

- **Recognising communication as protection:** Every public statement, social media post or silence carries operational consequences. Communication must be understood as a tool to safeguard people, principles and access, not merely as visibility or advocacy.
- **Anchoring trust in local legitimacy:** The DRC's digital ecosystem demonstrates that local journalists, national staff and community leaders are the most credible messengers to deliver aid-related information. Building their capacity, ensuring their safety and amplifying their voices online are central to sustaining humanitarian acceptance.

- **Responding collectively to harmful information:** Just as no single actor can deliver assistance alone, no organisation can defend humanitarian legitimacy alone. Shared monitoring, coordinated messaging and a unified defence of humanitarian principles are essential to maintaining narrative resilience in the digital age.

The lessons from the DRC echo those from other fragile contexts: harmful information does not merely distort perceptions – it shapes realities. It affects who in need of aid can be reached, how protection is negotiated, and how communities interpret neutrality and care. Countering these effects is not a matter of public relations – it is a humanitarian imperative.

In a crisis where perceptions can determine protection, communication must be principled, evidence-based and grounded in humanity. The humanitarian space will endure only if those working to preserve it act and speak with the same principles as they do in the field.

Endnotes

1 The term “framing” will be extensively used in this report. Framing is the way in which social media posts are constructed and presented to evoke a particular interpretation and emotional reaction from the audience.

2 ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross). 2025. Addressing Harmful Information in Conflict Settings: A Response Framework for Humanitarian Organizations. 30 January. Switzerland: ICRC. https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/addressing-harmful-information-conflict-settings-response-framework-humanitarian.

3 Wazalendo is a coalition of militia groups that supposedly supports the DRC army in the eastern DRC

4 The GDPR, or General Data Protection Regulation, is a comprehensive EU law adopted in 2016 that protects the personal data of individuals in the EU and European Economic Area.

5 Searching for and publishing private or identifying information about a particular individual on the internet, usually with malicious intent.

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