

COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT OF THE CRISIS BY THE PROVINCIAL EXECUTIVE OF TSHOPO IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MBOLE-LENGOLA CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the communication crisis management of the provincial government of Tshopo in the face of the Mbole-Lengola interethnic conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Triggered in 2023 against the backdrop of a land dispute related to the transfer of land to an agro-pastoral company, the conflict is part of a context marked by historical, socio-economic and identity tensions. The violence has caused hundreds of deaths, mass displacement and a serious humanitarian crisis. The analysis reveals an initial management marked by inertia, the absence of a structured crisis communication strategy and the incoherence of institutional messages. The channels used proved to be unsuited to local linguistic and socio-economic realities, limiting their reach. The communities' mistrust of the authorities has increased polarisation and the circulation of rumours. Although late initiatives for dialogue were undertaken, they were perceived as insufficient. The study highlights a lack of strategic communication based on transparency and inclusion. It recommends the adoption of a proactive, culturally appropriate and participatory approach. Such an orientation appears essential to restore confidence and foster lasting peace.

Keywords: Crisis communication, Mbole-Lengola conflict, provincial executive, Tshopo, Democratic Republic of Congo.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

No one can deny that in the Democratic Republic of Congo, many inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts endanger the lives of the population and seriously compromise their security. These conflicts, sometimes between members of the same community, sometimes between distinct ethnic groups, are characterized by their diversity and complexity.

In order to combat these conflicts, state institutions are implementing various strategies aimed at establishing lasting peace. They favour, in the first instance, peaceful and persuasive means such as dialogue and reconciliation between the antagonistic parties. If these steps fail, legal recourse is envisaged.

In addition, "communication plays a fundamental role in the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts within a society. Any society facing a crisis seeks, in principle, to put in place effective communication aimed at informing the population about the situation, the actions taken to deal with it as well as the solutions envisaged or being implemented" (Coombs, 2015).

However, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, this approach often seems insufficient. In conflict situations, state organizations struggle to develop and implement appropriate communication plans. The measures put in place are generally ineffective, which contributes to the aggravation of violence, the loss of human lives and the destruction of homes.

The crisis communication of the provincial government of Tshopo, in the context of the conflict between the Mbole and Lengola communities, illustrates the complexity of information management in an environment marked by ethnic and socio-economic tensions. The predominance of mostly reactive communication, coupled with a lack of inclusive and transparent approaches, has limited the effectiveness of pacification efforts. An in-depth analysis highlights the need to adopt a proactive communication strategy, based on transparency, active listening and the involvement of local actors, in order to restore trust and promote a lasting resolution of the conflict.

Thus, through this research, we try to answer the following fundamental question:

- What are the communication mechanisms put in place by the provincial government of Tshopo in the context of the Mbole-Lengola conflict?

To this end, the communication mechanisms used would be structured dialogue (forums and mediation), the dissemination of official messages (radio, TV, press), digital communication and social networks, the presence on the ground and listening to the populations and the mobilization of community and religious leaders as well as information and awareness campaigns.

The objective of this study is to identify the communication mechanisms put in place by the provincial government of Tshopo in the context of the Mbole-Lengola conflict.

The choice of this research is justified by its topicality, which focuses on the communication of organizations, and more particularly on the crisis communication of the provincial government of Tshopo in the context of the community conflict between the Mbole and the Lengola. The analysis of crisis communication is indeed a major issue in the management of social and political conflicts, especially when the State is confronted with ethnic and community tensions that are likely to destabilize the regional balance.

Indeed, these mechanisms aim to restore trust, reduce polarization and create the conditions for lasting peace by involving all stakeholders and correcting historical and socio-economic misunderstandings.

This article is part of a scientific approach aimed at examining the nature, strategies and effectiveness of this crisis communication, highlighting its mechanisms, its limits and its impacts on the conflict resolution process.

In addition, the Mbole-Lengola conflict, which occurred in the province of Tshopo, is characterized by a deep socio-cultural and historical complexity, exacerbated by land, identity and political issues. The provincial government's handling of this crisis highlights not only the methods of communication adopted, but also their degree of effectiveness in a context marked by mistrust, misinformation and the need to preserve public order. In such a framework, crisis

communication, as Thierry LIBAERT (2018) states, must be based on fundamental principles such as transparency, sincerity, coherence and adaptation to local socio-cultural realities.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

For a scientific work to be well developed, it must meet the requirements of the appropriate method and investigation techniques.

The descriptive method was chosen in order to objectively present, analyze and interpret the communicative facts related to the management of the conflict. As part of this research, the descriptive method made it possible to identify the provincial government's communication actions, to examine the content of the messages disseminated and to analyze the reactions of the audiences concerned. The descriptive method "consists of gathering information from observations made about this or that other phenomenon in order to provide as coherent and in-depth a picture as possible of it" (LOUBET DEL J-L., 2000).

The aim is to describe the communication strategy adopted by the Provincial Government of Tshopo during the Mbole-Lengola conflict.

This research adopts a qualitative approach based on interviews with privileged respondents. In addition, we used a literature review of institutional discourses, provincial government communiqués, local press articles, and reports from humanitarian organizations covering the Mbole-Lengola conflict.

The study is based on publicly available media and institutional sources.

3.0 UNDERSTANDING THE MBOLE-LENGOLA CONFLICTS IN THE DRC

3.1 Genesis of these conflicts

The genesis of the Mbole-Lengola conflict is part of a complex process, spanning several years, even decades, and resulting from intertwined historical, socio-economic and political factors. Although tensions between the Mbole and Lengola communities have long existed latently, various triggers have gradually led to the escalation of the conflict.

Since February 2023, the Mbole-Lengola conflict has pitted two neighbouring ethnic groups against each other in the province of Tshopo, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is part of a complex dynamic combining land issues, historical rivalries and socio-economic pressures. According to Barth, interethnic conflict "arises when two or more ethnic groups claim the same space or limited resources, which generates tensions and sometimes violence" (Barth, F., 1969). The Mbole-Lengola case fully illustrates this definition, with land being the central issue in this confrontation, a vital resource for these agricultural communities.

The Lubunga region, located in the urban-rural commune of Kisangani, is characterized by a high population density and an almost exclusive dependence on subsistence agriculture. The scarcity and high demand for arable land have exacerbated tensions between the two communities. As Turner points out, "demographic pressure on limited natural resources is a recurrent factor in the emergence of land conflicts in Africa" (Turner, S. 2004). Despite a

centuries-old cohabitation, the Mbole and the Lengola are fighting over access to these lands, a situation that has gradually fuelled hostility.

The immediate trigger for the conflict was the transfer, in 2023, of a hundred hectares of land to the agro-pastoral company CAP Congo by the provincial authority, without prior consultation with the communities concerned. This decision was perceived by the Mbole as a dispossession of their ancestral lands, deeply weakening trust between the communities and the authorities. According to several local notables, this land transaction was the breaking point that triggered the violence. The ensuing clashes resulted in armed attacks, burning of villages, looting and mass displacement of populations. "More than 500 people are believed to have lost their lives, while thousands more have been forced to flee, living in precarious conditions." (MSF, Tshopo, 2023).

This violence has seriously affected the social, economic and health structures of the region. Médecins Sans Frontières has reported hundreds of wounded, some with serious mutilations, as well as saturation of health infrastructure.

The conflict also has a significant historical and cultural dimension. As Nzongola-Ntalaja argues, "ethnic conflicts in Africa are often rooted in complex histories of cohabitation, migration, and long-standing rivalries" (Nzongola-Ntalaja, G., 2002). Relations between Mbole and Lengola have been marked by periods of rivalry, particularly during colonization and successive land reforms. The customary system, once the guarantor of regulating access to land, has gradually been weakened by state intervention and the rise of private economic interests. On the political front, the fragility of local institutions and the absence of inclusive conflict management mechanisms have contributed to the intensification of tensions. As Lund points out, "the absence of legitimate and inclusive local structures is an aggravating factor in the management of land conflicts" (LUND, C., 1996). Provincial authorities have been criticized for their involvement in the signing of disputed land contracts, despite denying any direct responsibility.

The conflict has also taken on a broader inter-ethnic dimension, involving other neighbouring groups and various external actors, further complicating the situation. According to a United Nations report (2020), "the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the region has contributed to the militarization of the conflict, making clashes more deadly". This dynamic has accentuated the climate of insecurity and fear among the civilian population.

The humanitarian consequences are particularly alarming: more than 4,800 households have been displaced, exposed to food insecurity, disease and poor hygiene conditions. Women and children are among the most vulnerable, victims of sexual violence and exploitation. The parish priest of the parish of Saint-Gabriel de Simisimi (the parish that welcomed the displaced into its ranks) denounced the extreme misery of the displaced, deprived of education and access to healthcare.

In response to this crisis, the provincial government has combined security measures with mediation initiatives. The organization of a peace forum in December 2024 was an attempt to revive dialogue and promote reconciliation between the parties. In this context, crisis communication has played a decisive role in easing tensions, informing the population and mobilising humanitarian actors.

3.2 Evolution of these conflicts

The socio-political situation in the province of Tshopo cannot be dissociated from the economic realities that prevail there. The living conditions of the population, marked by persistent poverty and inadequate basic infrastructure, fuel frustrations that are likely to turn into open conflicts. In the context of the Mbole-Lengola crisis, the provincial government faced significant challenges related to food security and access to resources, in a context exacerbated by ethnic tensions. These socio-economic factors constitute a fertile ground for the emergence and aggravation of conflicts, making an integrated approach essential that articulates economic dimensions and communication strategies.

The management of crisis communication, as exemplified by the actions of the provincial government, also highlights the importance of transparency and institutional accountability to citizens. In a province where trust in institutions remains fragile, the ability of the authorities to establish a sincere and inclusive dialogue with the various communities appears to be crucial. In this regard, the peace forum held in Kisangani can be seen as an opportunity to establish a culture of continuous dialogue, based on mutual respect and inclusion of marginalized groups. Such an approach is likely not only to ease immediate tensions, but also to lay the groundwork for more equitable and participatory governance in the long term.

Thus, the socio-political context of Tshopo, marked by both its wealth and its vulnerabilities, calls for crisis communication management that is attentive to the different components of society. By adopting a strategy based on dialogue, transparency and citizen participation, the provincial government has the opportunity not only to contain the Mbole-Lengola crisis, but also to promote more inclusive and sustainable governance. It is on this condition that the province can hope to overcome historical tensions and build a peaceful future for all of its communities.

a. Start and first events (2022-2023)

The first tensions were reported as early as 2022, particularly in the Lokwa-Osio district, located on the Opala Road, in the urban-rural commune of Lubunga in Kisangani. This initial focus of conflict has gradually spread to other outlying districts such as Lokata, Batiangubu, Maniema and kilometre 16 on the road to Ubundu. These areas, characterized by high agricultural activity and significant cohabitation of the Mbole and Lengola communities, quickly became the scene of clashes.

According to a local notable, Léonard Isatuo, "the killings began in 2022, but it was in February 2023 that the situation really degenerated". The major trigger was the signing, in February 2023, of twenty land occupation contracts covering about 4,000 hectares for the benefit of the agro-pastoral company CAP Congo by the provincial authority. This decision, perceived as a land spoliation by the Mbole community claiming these lands as ancestral, crystallized the accumulated frustrations and triggered violent clashes between the two communities.

b. Intensification of violence and geographical extension

From February 2023, the violence intensified, taking the form of repeated attacks, looting, burning of homes and targeted killings. The human toll has rapidly worsened, with more than

700 deaths recorded according to several sources, including more than 740 according to the United Nations (2023). The clashes, initially concentrated in rural areas, have gradually moved closer to the outskirts of Kisangani, affecting urban life and compromising the safety of the population.

The outlying neighbourhoods of Lubunga were particularly affected, with civilians directly targeted in armed incursions. Faced with this persistent insecurity, many families have been forced to flee to areas deemed safer or to downtown Kisangani. According to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, 2023), more than 4,800 households have been displaced, i.e. several tens of thousands of people now living in extremely precarious humanitarian conditions.

3.3 Local perception and impact on the population

The local perception of the Mbole-Lengola crisis is essential to understand the deep dynamics of this conflict and to measure its impact on the population. This perception is strongly influenced by the history of rivalries between the Mbole and Lengola communities, which are amplified by socio-economic and political issues. It is therefore crucial to examine how residents interpret the crisis and how these interpretations influence their daily lives.

The Mbole and Lengola communities, linked by a common history marked by confrontations and struggles for power, show persistent feelings of mistrust and rivalry. These reactions are not only linked to recent events: they are part of a collective memory where negative perceptions have accumulated. The marginalization of the Mbole in decision-making processes and the Lengola's fear of seeing their cultural identity threatened fuel this climate of tension. Polarizing political discourses contribute to a Manichean reading of inter-community relations, with each community perceiving itself as a victim and in a position of defense.

This mistrust has significant psychological repercussions. The inhabitants live in a context of uncertainty and fear, generating considerable stress and withdrawal. This climate limits participation in inter-community initiatives, which are essential for reconciliation, and hinders the construction of lasting peace.

Socio-economic factors also play a central role. The province of Tshopo, although rich in natural resources, suffers from high poverty and unemployment. This situation creates a breeding ground for frustrations, which, combined with identity tensions, can result in conflictual behaviour. Feelings of injustice related to restricted access to resources and economic opportunities reinforce divisions between communities and fuel the spiral of discontent.

In this context, the crisis communication of the provincial government of Tshopo must imperatively integrate these local perceptions to be effective. Initiatives such as the peace forum, launched on the instructions of President Félix Tshisekedi, reflect a desire to respond to the concerns of communities. To be credible, this forum must not be limited to a symbolic approach, but must constitute a space for inclusive dialogue where all voices, including those of marginalized actors, can be expressed. The effectiveness of these actions will depend on their ability to deal simultaneously with economic and identity issues.

The impact of the crisis goes beyond the immediate violence. It has a lasting impact on social cohesion and economic development, hindering collaboration between communities and weakening collective initiatives. Confidence-building measures must therefore be accompanied by concrete efforts to improve living conditions and meet the basic needs of the population.

Thus, effective crisis management requires the provincial government to take into account historical, socio-economic and psychological factors, by putting in place mechanisms for genuine dialogue and responding to economic concerns. Such an approach can not only defuse the current conflict, but also lay the foundations for peaceful coexistence and sustainable development in Tshopo province.

3.4 Divergent interpretations of events and polarizations of opinion

The interpretation of the events surrounding the Mbole-Lengola crisis reflects the complexity of the conflict and the dynamics of polarization it engenders. In this context, where communication plays a key role, it is essential to examine how these divergent interpretations influence public opinion and, by extension, the perception of government actions. The crisis, resulting from an entanglement of historical grievances, social rivalries and struggles for resources, is perceived differently by the actors involved: the Mbole and Lengola communities, opinion leaders and the media. These perceptions evolve according to the interactions between these groups and the narratives that emerge from them.

On the one hand, the Mbole and Lengola communities interpret events through the prism of their history and aspirations. Each group often considers itself to be the victim of injustice, which tends to bias the reading of the facts in its favour. The actions of the other community are then frequently perceived as hostile or disloyal, feeding a climate of mistrust. For example, a gesture deemed provocative by one group may be interpreted as a justified response by the other. In this context, community leaders play a key role: they can either ease tensions by relaying moderate messages or intensify polarization through extreme rhetoric.

On the other hand, the media, whether traditional or digital, strongly influence this polarization. The dissemination of sensationalist or biased information can generate misperceptions of events. On social media, where news circulates quickly and often unchecked, the perception of urgency and crisis is amplified, as is the mistrust of government institutions. It is therefore crucial that the provincial government of Tshopo develops a communication strategy capable of correcting false information and promoting narratives that foster unity between the Mbole and Lengola communities.

The polarization of opinion is also the result of the lack of dialogue. Peace forums are essential opportunities to reduce this polarization, by providing a space where the concerns of each community can be expressed and heard. The establishment of an inclusive discussion framework not only makes it possible to address the concerns of the groups concerned, but also to co-construct a shared understanding of the facts. To be effective, these forums must go beyond symbolism and become true instruments of reconciliation, capable of transforming divergent interpretations into a more nuanced vision of the needs and aspirations of each community.

The role of international actors and non-governmental organizations in this process cannot be neglected. Their intervention can promote the dissemination of reliable information and support dialogue, but it can also reinforce polarization if their action seems to favour one side over the other. NGOs and the media therefore have a responsibility to contribute to building bridges between communities, while avoiding fuelling existing tensions.

Consideration of differing interpretations and polarization of opinion must be integrated into the provincial government's communications strategy. A proactive approach, based on active listening, transparency and empathy, not only clarifies misunderstandings, but also promotes narratives that highlight the commonalities between the Mbole and Lengola people.

Finally, divergent interpretations of events and the polarization of opinion are determining factors in the management of the Mbole-Lengola crisis. To develop effective crisis communication, the provincial government of Tshopo must engage community leaders, ensure that all voices are heard, and foster spaces for constructive dialogue. This approach not only helps to reduce tensions, but also to strengthen the legitimacy of government action in a context marked by historical mistrust.

3.5 Socio-political context of the Tshopo/DRC region

The socio-political context of the province of Tshopo is characterized by a complexity stemming from its history, its ethnic diversity and the governance issues that run through it. Although rich in natural resources, the region has often been the scene of ethnic rivalries and conflicts of interest, exacerbating social tensions and weakening community cohesion. The Mbole-Lengola crisis is part of this already unstable landscape, where socio-economic challenges and power struggles are profoundly influencing relations between different communities. The recent history of the Tshopo bears witness to recurrent struggles for the recognition of the rights of ethnic groups, particularly the Mbole and Lengola, whose tensions have intensified over the years.

This crisis, born of local claims and historical misunderstandings, revealed the vulnerabilities of the provincial political system. Resource management, which is often divisive, has been complicated by the lack of constructive dialogue between community leaders and local authorities. In this context, the provincial government of Tshopo faced a major challenge: to establish an effective communication framework, capable of addressing the concerns of all stakeholders while maintaining public order. The tensions between Mbole and Lengola are not limited to economic conflicts of interest; They also reflect deep-rooted identity issues, requiring an inclusive and sensitive approach to prevent any escalation of violence.

It is in this context that the decision to convene a peace forum for Tshopo appeared to be a strategic initiative. This forum aims to establish a structured dialogue between the communities concerned, providing a space for exchange where economic, social and identity concerns can be expressed and taken into account, with the aim of restoring trust and fostering reconciliation.

4.0 COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT OF THE MBOLE AND LENGOLA CONFLICT BY THE PROVINCIAL EXECUTIVE

At the end of our analyses, it appears that the conflict between the Mbole and Lengola communities is essentially a land conflict, which has led to massive displacement of populations, considerable loss of material property and human lives. To date, insecurity remains persistent and no effective return of displaced persons has been observed on the ground.

It should be noted that, in the face of this crisis, the provincial government of Tshopo initially stood out for a certain inertia and inadequate management of the situation, even though it had the possibility of curbing the conflict at its beginnings. The measures adopted have proved to be late and ineffective. As soon as the first tensions emerged, the rumours of the conflict were not taken into consideration with the requisite seriousness. According to the respondents, this negligence has largely contributed to the worsening of the situation. The absence of a field visit to immerse himself in the realities experienced by the two communities was an aggravating factor.

Moreover, although the conflict has its origins in a land dispute, its escalation can also be explained by demographic, economic, political and cultural factors, as well as by the structural weaknesses of the State. However, it should be noted that it has not formally turned into a structured armed conflict. To deal with the crisis, the provincial government has mainly resorted to digital communication and radio. Nevertheless, the actual reach of the target audiences remained more theoretical than real.

For their part, the communities concerned were mainly informed by the testimonies of victims fleeing conflict zones. These sources, which are often fragmentary and sometimes unreliable, have encouraged the circulation of imprecise or even contradictory information.

It also appears that the populations of the two communities have shown only limited trust in the provincial government, accusing it, for some, of being at the origin of the conflict. This mistrust has considerably reduced the acceptability of institutional messages, in a context where sincerity, coherence and transparency were lacking.

Some of the key factors that have limited the effectiveness of the provincial executive's communication include:

- the high cost of access to media (social networks, online media, television and radio) for disadvantaged populations;
- the inaccessibility of several affected areas due to the poor state of road infrastructure;
- the lack of specialized training in conflict journalism;
- the use of French as the main language of communication, while the protagonists mainly express themselves in Swahili and Lingala.

Thus, the channels mobilized (radio, television, online media and social networks) did not make it possible to effectively reach the populations living in the isolated villages.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

At the end of this research on the crisis communication of the provincial government of Tshopo in the face of the Mbole-Lengola conflict, Mbole-Lengola reveals a mixed approach:

communication efforts to reassure and call for vigilance, coupled with actions on the ground (deployment of special forces, facilitation of dialogue) to stop the violence linked mainly to a land dispute, but with criticism of the slowness of actions, the lack of objective information and the effectiveness of measures to address root causes, despite recent reconciliation initiatives.

Indeed, the analysis points to a communication deficit on the part of the provincial government in the face of the Mbole-Lengola conflict. For the simple reason that the provincial government's reaction did not pay much attention to this conflict. In addition, it was noted that there was no crisis communication structure at the provincial level. It should be noted that the three ministers involved in this community conflict (i.e., the Ministries of Health, the Interior and Social Affairs and National Solidarity) each communicated at his or her own level with a strong tendency on the incoherence of the messages.

As a result, the five elements that determine crisis communication are: concern, commitment, competence, clarity and trust. Unfortunately, it must be noted that all these elements were not taken into account in the provincial government's crisis communication. Thus, there would have been no escalation of the conflict if the provincial government had reacted in time by reaching out to these two communities with well-crafted, coherent, clear and convincing messages. This could limit the escalation of the deadly conflict that has plunged several families into mourning with no peaceful way out. As this conflict escalated, several other tribes took part. On the side of Anamongo ethnic groups supporting the Mbole; there was the presence of the Lokele, Topoke and Mongo tribes. On the other hand, the other ethnic groups that have rallied to the Lengola are the Kumu and the Minyamutuku.

Moreover, the strategies used by the provincial government are traditional in nature and not adapted to the context of the present conflict. As a result, the targets were never reached by the various messages launched by the members of the provincial government. Thus, the crisis communication of the Tshopo government was in transition, moving from reactive crisis management to attempts at structural solutions, while facing a significant deficiency.

All in all, the analysis of the provincial government's crisis communication in the face of the Mbole-Lengola conflict reveals a response that is often perceived as late and insufficient, characterized by media silence in the face of complex ethnic and land violence, aggravating community deficiency (Mbole-Lengola) and political instrumentalization, despite research efforts and recommendations for proactive communication, transparent and taking into account the deep socio-economic roots of the conflict.

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