

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION OF TSHOPO IN THE FACE OF THE MBOLE-LENGOLA CONFLICT IN THE DRC

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<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJREHC.2026.7217>

ABSTRACT

This reflection focuses on the communication of the provincial government of Tshopo in the management of the Mbole-Lengola inter-community crisis. Indeed, the analysis highlights the strengths and weaknesses of provincial institutional communication in the dissemination of crisis messages, the management of rumours and coordination with the central government. The results show that while the provincial authority has been able to ensure a media and symbolic presence, inconsistencies, reactive communication in the face of disinformation and a narrative deficit on social management remain. Thus, communication in times of conflict or better crisis must be transparent, proactive, coherent and inclusive in order to prevent misinformation, restore trust and facilitate social reconciliation.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Mbole-Lengola inter-community conflict, which began in 2023 in the city of Kisangani (Tshopo province, Democratic Republic of Congo), has created a major socio-political crisis affecting community relations, local security, and the boundary of provincial public policies. The conflict has resulted in the loss of life, the destruction of homes and the displacement of thousands of people. The management of this conflict depends not only on security mechanisms, but also on the communication capacity of provincial authorities to inform, appease and coordinate both local and national actions (Actu7.cd, 2023; Actu7.cd, 2025).

In a context of crisis, institutional communication becomes a strategic element of public governance (Coombs, 2007). Effective communication can help prevent tensions, combat misinformation, and restore trust between people and authorities. The present study is motivated by a gap in the critical evaluation of the communication strategies implemented by the provincial government of Tshopo in the management of the Mbole-Lengola conflict.

Therefore, we formulate the following questions:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the communication of the provincial government of Tshopo in the face of the Mbole-Lengola conflict?
- What are the recommendations to optimize this communication?

Indeed, the purpose of this study is to:

- Identify the communication strengths and weaknesses of the provincial government of Tshopo;
- To make recommendations to optimize provincial crisis communication.

Indeed, the choice of this subject is part of a particularly sensitive current context. The Mbole-Lengola conflict is one of the most significant socio-political events in the province of Tshopo in recent years. Because of its scale and its human, social and security repercussions, it is a major phenomenon that deserves in-depth analysis.

In a context of community conflict, institutional communication occupies a strategic place. It plays a key role in preventing the escalation of violence, managing tensions and restoring a climate of trust conducive to peace. It therefore seems relevant to examine the way in which the provincial authority communicated in this delicate and highly sensitive context.

This subject is part of the field of information and communication sciences, more specifically in the fields of crisis communication, public communication and territorial governance. In view of the consequences of the conflict on the populations of Tshopo, it is legitimate to question the effectiveness, coherence and scope of the communication strategies implemented by the provincial authorities.

In addition, this study contributes to enriching the reflection on crisis communication in the Congolese context, on the role of provincial authorities in the management of community conflicts and on the influence of public communication in the consolidation of social cohesion. It made it possible to identify the strengths and weaknesses of public communication through the analysis of official messages and subsequently to formulate relevant recommendations and propose avenues likely to prevent future conflicts.

In addition, this analysis is a decision-making tool. It can support provincial authorities in improving their communication strategies, help public institutions to strengthen the transparency and credibility of their action and support peace actors in structuring their interventions. The results obtained can also serve as a basis for the development of a provincial crisis communication plan, the establishment of an effective rumour management mechanism and the strengthening of inter-community dialogue.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

In the framework of this study entitled "Strengths and weaknesses of communication in the provincial government of Tshopo in the face of the Mbole-Lengola conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo", the descriptive method was chosen in order to objectively present, analyze and interpret the communication facts related to the management of the conflict in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses. 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 descriptive method aims to systematically describe a phenomenon as it occurs, without seeking to modify it. This made it possible to identify the provincial government's communication actions, to examine the content of the messages disseminated and to analyse

the reactions of the audiences concerned. In the context of this study, the aim is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Tshopo Provincial Government 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. Access to internal government data was not possible, given the sensitive nature of the subject. This is a limitation in the analysis of communication strategies in real time.

3.0 DEFINITION OF SOME CONCEPTS

3.1 Inter-ethnic conflict

"Inter-ethnic conflicts are non-state conflicts between two or more social groups. Sustainable conflict prevention requires investing in cultures of peace and having formal and informal institutions dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution" (CARLOS ARTURO, D. quoted by KABULU MUYOYI Glody, 2023).

This type of conflict led to fighting that caused several civilian and military casualties, diseases became more frequent and violent crime increased, and they maintained mass migrations.

3.2 Communication Strategy

"A communication strategy clearly identifies the objectives and processes of the activities to raise awareness of your problem. It covers what the organization wants to share and with whom to achieve its goals. It structures media activities, defines priorities, schedules, target audiences, tasks and resources. In communication for development, the strategy is a framework that includes a combination of communication interventions that can bring about the necessary changes in knowledge, opinions, attitudes, beliefs or behaviours at the target population level to address a development problem, within a given time frame (often in the medium term) and within the availability of resources. It constitutes a commitment and a compass for mobilizing and directing the actions and energies of the various partners. A written and formal strategic communication plan has multiple benefits. A written plan means, first and foremost, that everyone follows the same guide and works towards a clear common goal. This is necessary to keep a consistent message that can resonate with your target group. This sets the tone and direction for all communication activities, products and materials to come together to achieve the desired change. A work plan, the final step of your strategy, helps to clarify everyone's tasks and responsibilities" (AIME KAYEMBE, T., 2020).

The communication strategy also aims to target your audiences. Relevant messaging is key in an overcrowded media landscape. All the messages you put out there should be relevant to each different audience, so you need to understand who they are, what matters to them, the nature of your relationship, and what makes them react.

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Communicative forces

1° Media visibility

The provincial government of Tshopo has regularly reported on human losses and displacement caused by the conflict. For example, a statement issued in 2023 revealed more than 500 deaths and more than 70,000 displaced people (Actu7.cd, 2023). This communication was relayed by the local and national media.

To do this, this visibility avoids an information vacuum that could lead to rumours or a perception of government withdrawal.

2° Institutional coordination

Provincial messages were aligned with national messages at several key points. For example, the reconciliation ceremony between the Mbole and Lengola communities presided over in Kisangani by the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of the Interior was uniformly relayed by the provincial authorities, demonstrating vertical coordination of messages (Actu7.cd, 2025).

As a result, the alignment of messages strengthens institutional credibility and minimizes inter-institutional contradictions.

3° Use of public symbols

The authorities have highlighted symbolic events of reconciliation, such as the burial of the hatchet in Osio, under the eye of the provincial government (LesVolcansNews.net, 2025). The representation of these rituals in public discourse has made it possible to symbolically reinforce the call for peace.

To do this, public symbols serve as powerful tools to anchor the message of social cohesion among affected populations.

4.2 Communication Weaknesses

1° Inconsistencies in the data

The figures communicated at different stages of the conflict sometimes varied depending on the sources or the periods covered, which may have created confusion among the population and humanitarian actors.

Indeed, according to Digital Congo, citing the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, more than 740 people have been killed since February 2023 in this conflict that is shaking the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, particularly in the province of Tshopo (<http://digitalcongo.orgdetail10439>).

For its part, 7sur7.cd reports that the violence between the Mbole and Lengola communities, which erupted in early 2023, has already caused nearly 1,000 deaths and about 2,500 injuries,

according to local sources. The same media outlet also reports that tens of thousands of people have been forced to flee their localities, worsening the humanitarian crisis in the region (<https://7sur7.cd/2024/10/05/conflit-mbole-lengola-plus-de-80000-deplaces-sans-assistance-kisangani>).

In addition, in a statement made on October 24, 2023 in Kisangani, Bernadette Furaha, provincial minister of health and humanitarian affairs of Tshopo, said that "since the beginning of the clashes between members of the Mbole and Lengola communities in February 2023, the toll is more than 500 dead and 76,400 internally displaced until September 2023", according to information relayed by Caritas Development Congo.

As a result, inconsistencies in messaging can weaken institutional trust and reduce the effectiveness of official discourse.

2°) Reactive communication in the face of rumours

Rumours circulated that the provincial government was funding mercenaries to fuel the conflict. Although these claims have been denied by authorities, communication has often been reactive rather than proactive (Actualite.cd, 2023).

In this case, the lack of an active listening strategy for rumors limits the effectiveness of responses and increases the risk of misinformation.

3°) Low valuation of social actions

While humanitarian organizations, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, have communicated on the assistance provided to the affected populations (care, shelter, hygiene), the provincial authorities have not sufficiently relayed these institutional efforts.

On this note, the lack of storytelling of social support actions reduces the perception of positive government actions.

5.0 DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpretation of forces

The proactive visibility and inter-institutional coordination observed show that the provincial government has become aware of the importance of communication in crisis management. The integration of social symbols has helped to strengthen the message of peace.

Indeed, the proactive visibility and inter-institutional coordination observed in the provincial government's action are in line with the theoretical principles of crisis communication developed in the scientific literature. According to Timothy W. Coombs, in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (2007), the speed and visibility of institutional communication are fundamental elements in preserving public trust and reducing uncertainty in crisis situations. An active and structured presence of the authorities in the public space makes it possible to demonstrate the capacity of the institutions to manage the situation and provide reliable information.

In the same vein, the work of Arjen Boin and his companions (2005) on crisis governance shows that leaders must not only act, but also be perceived as acting, in particular through clear and coordinated public communication. In the book *The Politics of Crisis Management*, the author emphasizes that effective crisis management relies largely on the ability of authorities to structure a coherent discourse and to coordinate the various institutional actors in order to avoid contradictory messages (Coombs, 2015).

Moreover, the inter-institutional coordination observed corresponds to the recommendations made by Patrick Lagadec (2000), who insists on the importance of cooperation between institutions in critical situations. According to him, contemporary crises require networked governance where the rapid flow of information and cooperation between public institutions strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of the public response.

The integration of social symbols into institutional communication helps to strengthen the reach of the message of peace. The work of Murray Edelman (1964) shows that political communication is largely based on symbols capable of mobilizing collective emotions and creating a sense of unity within the population. In his book *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, he explains that political symbols make it possible to simplify public messages and enhance their impact on citizens.

Thus, the visibility of the authorities, the coordination between institutions and the use of social symbols appear to be communication strategies consistent with the theoretical principles of crisis communication and political communication. These elements contribute to strengthening the legitimacy of public action and to promoting the population's support for the messages of peace and stability.

5.2 Weakness Analysis

The lack of statistical consistency and proactive communication strategies limits the impact of public messages. According to Fearn-Banks (2011) and Coombs (2007), communication effectiveness is measured not only by the dissemination of messages, but also by their reliability, anticipation and ability to prevent grey areas.

5.3 Implications for public governance

Effective corporate communication in times of crisis is a pillar of democratic governance. The case of Tshopo shows that increased attention to preventive strategies, data harmonization, and the inclusion of a social media plan could improve future crisis management.

The claim that effective corporate communication is a pillar of democratic governance in times of crisis is widely supported by the literature on public communication and crisis management. According to Timothy W. Coombs, institutions must develop clear, timely and transparent communication strategies in order to maintain public trust and limit the spread of misinformation during a crisis. In the context of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, anticipation and planning of messages are essential elements of effective crisis management.

In addition, the need for preventive strategies in public communication is in line with the work of Arjen Boin (2005), who emphasizes that institutional preparedness and anticipation of crises

make it possible to reduce uncertainty and improve coordination between public actors. In *The Politics of Crisis Management*, the authors show that governments that develop anticipation and communication planning mechanisms are better equipped to manage crises and preserve their legitimacy.

The harmonisation of data mentioned in your text also refers to the principles of informational coherence and inter-institutional coordination. According to Patrick Lagadec (1991), effective crisis management relies on the smooth flow of information and the coherence of institutional messages. Contradictory data between institutions can weaken the credibility of public action and amplify confusion among the population.

The integration of a social media plan into crisis communication is now considered an essential element. The work of Yan Jin (2014) shows that social networks play a central role in the rapid dissemination of information, but also in the spread of rumours. Thus, public institutions must integrate these platforms into their communication strategies in order to disseminate reliable information and interact directly with citizens.

In this perspective, the case of Tshopo illustrates the importance of structured, anticipatory institutional communication adapted to new media environments. The focus on preventive strategies, data harmonization and the integration of social media therefore appear to be a relevant direction to strengthen the effectiveness of future crisis management.

6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In short, the study of the crisis communication of the provincial government of Tshopo in the face of the Mbole-Lengola conflict highlights both strengths and weaknesses. Media visibility, coordination with national authorities and the use of public symbols have been important levers for spreading the message of peace and maintaining a certain informational control. These strategies have made it possible to reduce the information vacuum and strengthen the credibility of the authorities with the population. However, inconsistencies in the figures communicated, the responsiveness to rumours and the low valuation of social actions have limited the overall effectiveness of the communication. These shortcomings have contributed to maintaining a certain mistrust and weakening the perception of government interventions.

To address this, it is crucial to harmonize official data, proactively monitor information and rumours, and systematically relay humanitarian and institutional efforts. More anticipatory, transparent and inclusive communication would not only restore public trust, but also consolidate social cohesion between the Mbole and Lengola communities. In addition, it is a key instrument for preventing new tensions and strengthening public governance. Finally, the ability of the authorities to adapt their communication strategy to local needs and perceptions appears to be decisive in promoting lasting peace and harmonious development in the province of Tshopo.

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