

MEDIATION

UNDERSTANDING THROUGH INFORMATION AND DIALOGUE



Biannual
publication
of Fondation
Hirondelle



Informing to build trust

When a community faces a crisis and needs humanitarian assistance, access to reliable information and trustworthy media is essential. Guaranteeing rights such as protection from harm, a place in a camp, healthcare, and food depends on the right of access to information.

However, with the widespread use of social networks and digital platforms, rumours and manipulation now spread like wildfire and give rise to a tide of harmful information, including about the work of aid organisations. This type of harmful information impacts first and foremost the people requiring aid: it can obstruct protective measures and impede access to the most vulnerable, and can sow doubt within communities about aid organisations' neutrality.

Local media play a crucial role in this context. They can communicate concrete needs and questions from the population; provide a platform for community leaders to explain the aid available and how to access it; and enable aid workers to clarify the principles that guide their work. This dialogue fosters trust - trust that saves lives and empowers people to take control of their own destinies.

Though Fondation Hirondelle is not a humanitarian aid organisation, the journalistic work of its media and partner media outlets at the heart of crisis situations makes it an important ally for the aid sector. Its initiatives help to counter disinformation and the manipulation of public opinion, preventing them from hindering aid work or from increasing the suffering of the most vulnerable populations.

Caroline Vuillemin, General Director

The editor in chief of local Ukrainian newspaper Mezhyvskiyi Merydian photographs the results of an air strike in the village of Mezhyova, 5th July 2025. © Anton Shtuka / Fondation Hirondelle.

INFORMATION: A HUMANITARIAN DEFENCE AGAINST HYBRID WARFARE

2026 saw record numbers of people displaced due to catastrophe or conflict. Against this backdrop, aid work - more vital than ever- is increasingly hampered by disinformation campaigns that affect victims first and foremost. Ensuring that these populations are better informed is surely instrumental in better assisting them.

In 2026, due to catastrophe, and even more so to armed conflict, more than 82 million people (around 1% of the world's population) remain displaced with no immediate hope of returning home. These are record-breaking statistics. The numbers of catastrophes, victims of conflict and displaced persons all speak to a rise of around 50% in the level of insecurity caused by extreme events since 2020. In terms of the resurgence of imperialism and the increasingly-felt effects of climate change, the numbers confirm the impression received from the daily news. The world is less stable today than at the beginning of the decade.

Against this backdrop, the need for humanitarian aid work has never been so great. However, aid

workers around the world are coming under attack. Of the 385 aid workers killed in 2024, 231 died in Gaza. Such shocking war crimes have become commonplace. In addition to losing their lives, aid workers risk injury, kidnap and threats. The increase in often sophisticated disinformation campaigns against them weakens the trust of populations affected by disaster. In the 2026 edition of its World Disasters Report, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies deemed harmful information to be a widespread threat in all the areas in which it operates. It emphasised that trust must be built over time by delivering reliable responses to the vulnerable populations which such disinformation seeks to further disorient.

At a time when digital communications are widespread, disinformation seems to have become a weapon for destabilisation: 65% of the global population fears that a foreign disinformation campaign will attempt to influence the outcome of elections in their country. The fact that the most popular information-sharing platforms - social networks and messaging apps - foster affinity groups of users who tend to be less critical of what they see on their screens further increases the effectiveness of such campaigns. Debunking rumours spread with the aim of undermining societal cohesion is a complex task that local journalism based on strong values can help to accomplish. Faced with hybrid warfare practices that threaten the physical welfare of populations while sowing chaos in people's minds, trustworthy, local information remains one of the most important defences we can build. ■

Interview



BUILDING INFORMATION RESILIENCE

© DR



Charlotte Lindsey Curtet is the editor-in-chief and author of the 2026 World Disasters Report published by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. She elaborates on the link this report establishes between Truth, Trust and Humanitarian Action in the Age of Harmful Information.

The 2026 World Disasters Report of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) focuses on the concept of harmful information. How should we define this concept, and why is it the central theme of this document?

Charlotte Lindsey Curtet: Harmful information is information that is likely to harm a person or entity. The theme responds to the wish of the IFRC and its societies to better understand the direct consequences of this type of information on the health, security and dignity of people experiencing catastrophe or armed conflict.

Residents carry their belongings after the deadly flash floods that struck La Torre, south of Valencia, in eastern Spain, on October 31, 2024. © Manaura Quintero / AFP

Around sixty organisations, most of them aid organisations, contributed to the report. All of them observed that harmful information affects their ability to help populations across the areas in which we operate. However, there is not much documentation on this type of information. The report suggests that we improve the way in which we document harmful information in order to create a quantitative and qualitative database. This should make it possible to measure its spread as well as its physical and mental impact through a process of systematic collection across all media platforms: social media, of course, but also newspapers, radio and television, because harmful information is everywhere. Nowadays, it is also spread by word of mouth, and increasingly over encrypted electronic messaging platforms where thousands of people belong to private groups, which makes it difficult to measure the extent of the harm caused by such information.

Could you give us a few examples?

The floods that occurred on 29th and 30th October 2024 in Valencia are a case in point. The Spanish Red Cross documented more than 80,000 messages posted on social networks over the following days that attempted to discredit it. These included disinformation claiming that the Red Cross was not present in the area, and xenophobic accusations claiming that it favoured Ukrainian, Palestinian or migrant victims over the Spanish people. This disinformation did not directly obstruct aid

work, but it did have an impact, as extra work was necessary to counter it. It also gave rise to a form of demoralisation within the population by challenging people's trust in the Red Cross.

In South Sudan, where the situation remains critical, the report cites two incidents. In the capital city of Juba, rumours were spread claiming that food distributed by international aid organisations was poisoned. This led to aggression against aid workers and resulted in a drop in the number of people receiving food. The Canadian NGO The Sentinel Project worked with radio stations and high-profile locals to reassure inhabitants and re-establish trust in aid organisations. In Lainya County, rumours announcing that armed groups were approaching villages caused a panic, population movement and the suspension of aid. However, when community ambassadors arrived in the area, they were able to prove that the information was false and to refute it over the radio and via group text messages.

In 2025, the Red Crescent Society of Kyrgyzstan held an information and training campaign to promote preventive vaccination in communities. Anti-vaccine sentiment during the Covid-19 pandemic gave rise to a general distrust of vaccines, including routine

In the end, affected populations are the main victims of the rise of harmful information

childhood jabs. This led to a marked increase in vaccine refusals and contributed to the outbreak of a measles epidemic in Kyrgyzstan between 2023 and 2025. To counter this rumour and its consequences, the Red Crescent Society of Kyrgyzstan trained 337 religious leaders to enable them to encourage immunization within their communities by combining evidence-based health information and religious interpretations.

Lastly, in autumn 2024, the arrival of Hurricane Helene in the south-western US was accompanied by a surge of disinformation claiming that the American Red Cross was not present in the area, or that it was confiscating donated items. The American Red Cross responded with a clear statement to set the record straight, as well as social media messages stating that disinformation obstructs aid efforts.

How do you explain the generalised spread of harmful information in areas experiencing crisis over the last few years?

There are many different sources of harmful information, including governments, influencers and individuals. However, they all share a common goal in spreading it: to weaken trust in institutions, whether governmental, media or humanitarian. This effect is apparent in the 16-point rise, in 2021–2025, in the proportion of people who believe that institutions deliberately

Governments, digital platforms, aid organisations and affected communities must work together to rebuild an information environment that encourages trust

lie to people, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer. The motivations behind the spread of harmful information can be summed up by the acronym MICE (Money, Ideology, Compromise, Ego), often used in the intelligence and security sectors to explain how individuals can be induced to commit harmful acts. This acronym refers to individual interests that

Understanding Humanitarian Rejection on Social Media in Burkina Faso

Since February 2024, the Swiss NGO Insecurity Insight has been monitoring social media to better understand perceptions of the humanitarian response in Burkina Faso. In May 2026, it published a brief entitled “This NGO Must Disappear”, quoting a hostile comment directed at a US NGO, in order to better understand online mistrust of international aid and Western countries.

The brief examines 461 posts by Burkinabè accounts on Facebook (70%) and X (30%), which together reached 16.4 million users. These posts notably address a recent report by a US NGO on serious human rights violations in Burkina Faso, as well as the 25 March 2026 vote by the UN General Assembly on a resolution describing the transatlantic trafficking of Africans as “the most serious crime against humanity”.

The surge of criticism, the brief notes, begins with an initial, terse post published by a reference account. This first post generates a wave of comments overwhelmingly critical of NGOs or Western countries, with international aid often described as a vehicle for their interests. Many comments go beyond criticism alone, calling for certain NGOs to be expelled or physically threatening some of their staff members. A reminder of the initial post in the following days tends to accelerate this flow of hostile comments.

This indictment of international humanitarian aid, driven by influential accounts, resonates in a climate already marked by mistrust, the brief concludes. The accusation is directed less at humanitarian aid itself than at the colonial legacy that continues to weigh on relations between Burkina Faso and Western organisations. To facilitate humanitarian aid today, the report recommends that Western donors not underestimate the issues of colonisation and slavery, but instead fully integrate them into their approach and accountability efforts, while ensuring that they respect the sovereignty of the states receiving assistance.

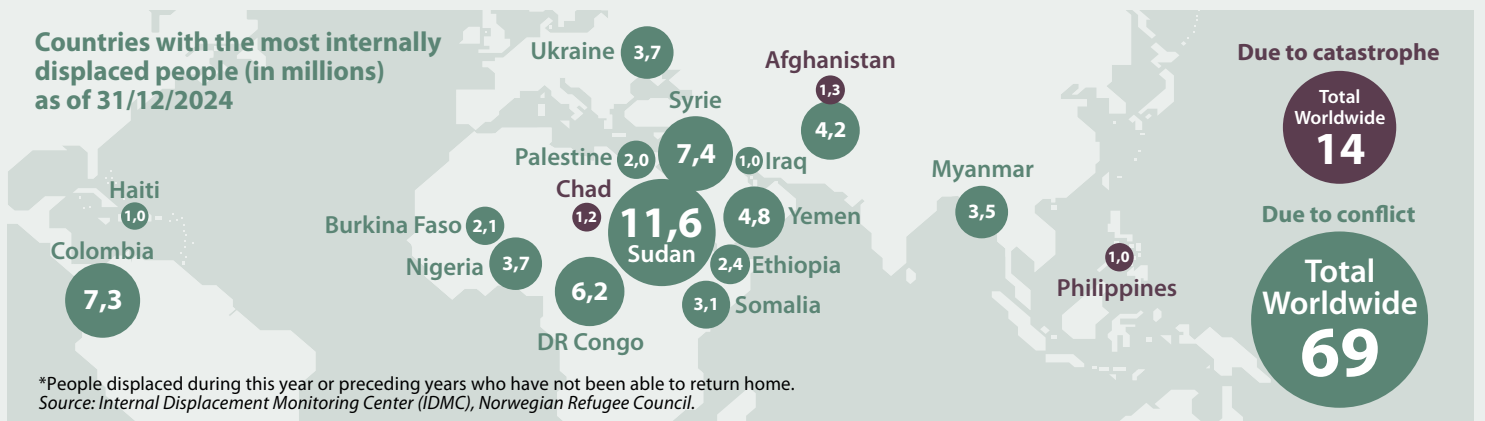
have a negative impact on aid organisations, which, on the contrary, work for the public interest. Aid organisations are having to allocate resources to counter disinformation, and are seeing their ability to act affected by the mistrust of vulnerable populations. In the end, these very populations are the main victims of the rise of harmful information.

What are the report’s main recommendations for protecting these populations in a context dominated by harmful information?

There are multiple recommendations: governments, digital platforms, aid organisations and affected communities must work together to rebuild an information environment that encourages trust and favours aid work. In crisis situations, authorities must adopt a transparent

and precise communication strategy. Digital platforms must prioritise essential information in order to assist populations. Aid organisations must be proactive, and not merely reactive: they must work with local partners to strengthen their delivery of factual, reassuring information to populations. Lastly, local communities should not hesitate to communicate with aid organisations.

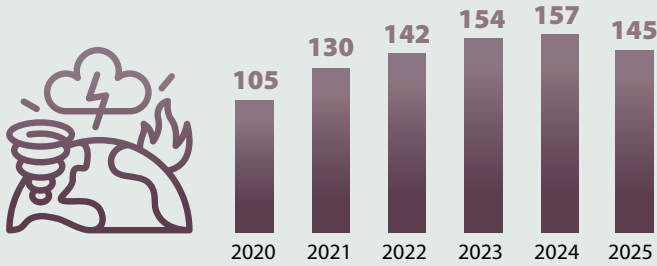
Trust is built by constant commitment to populations over the long term, and cannot simply be decreed in the middle of a crisis. Today, communication is often a means of reacting to a crisis, but it should, on the contrary, become a key tool in crisis prevention. All the stakeholders can commit to building an environment of information resilience in which reliable information is accessible to those who need it. ■



Big Data

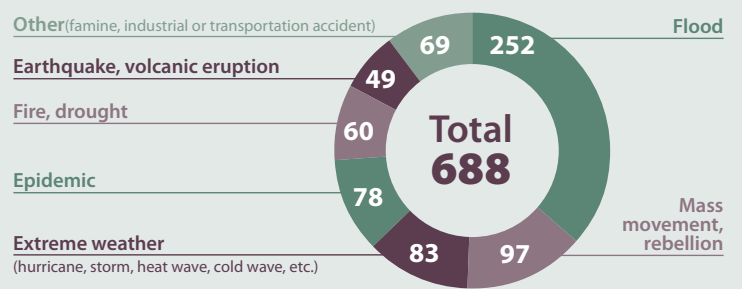
Catastrophe and conflict on the rise since the beginning of the 2020s

Number of catastrophes requiring an emergency IFRC* response



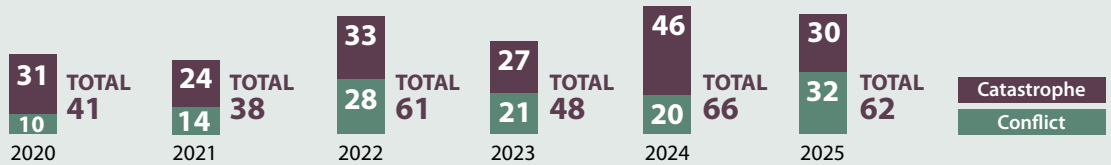
*International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Types of catastrophes that led to an emergency IFRC* response between 2020 and 2024



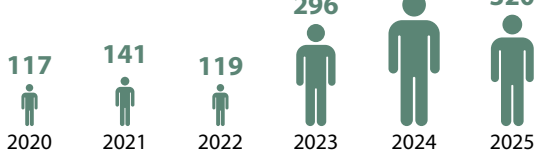
Source: IFRC

Number of people (in millions) displaced due to catastrophe or conflict



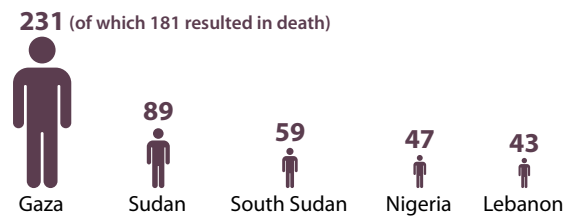
Aid workers face growing insecurity, especially in areas experiencing conflict and particularly in Gaza

Number of aid workers killed



Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

The 5 countries with the highest number of attacks* on aid workers in 2024



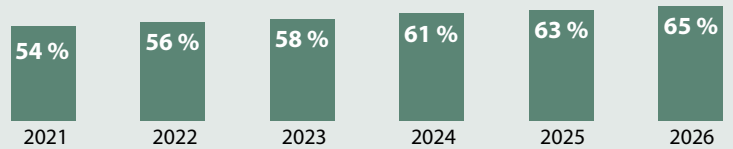
*Resulting in the death, injury or kidnap of aid workers. Sources: Aid Worker Security Database, Humanitarian Outcomes, London 2025; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

A growing concern over information warfare



Proportion who fear that foreign actors are spreading disinformation to sow division in their country

Source: Edelman Trust Barometer 2026. Study of nearly 34,000 people in 28 countries over 5 continents.

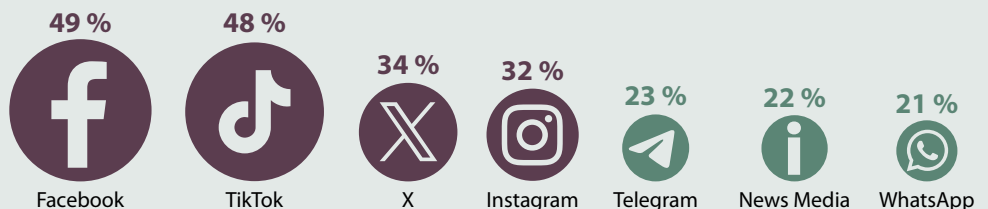


A mistrust of information spread via social networks, but not via messaging apps



Proportion who consider each a major disinformation threat

Source: Reuters Institute Digital Report 2025. Study of nearly 100,000 people in 48 countries over 5 continents.



Our experience

JOURNALISM AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE TO PEOPLE AND REALITY



Faïshal Ouédraogo, a journalist at Studio Yafa, interviews a market gardener in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. © Philippe Zoundi / Fondation Hironnelle



Adam's Kaled Ouedraogo, editor-in-chief, and Samiratou Guiré-Illboudo, coordinator of the humanitarian programme "Faso Yafa", present Studio Yafa's work in combating disinformation and supporting displaced people in Burkina Faso.

What role does disinformation play in Burkina Faso's current media landscape? What responses is Studio Yafa trying to provide?

Adam's Kaled Ouedraogo: On social media, disinformation is so widespread and so well coordinated that it is hard to believe it is the result of chance. For example, several series of messages have spread false news about political developments in Côte d'Ivoire. You can tell there is real work behind it, with credible, very well-made fake images. We also see videos circulating of well-developed, brightly lit streets, supposedly located in one country when the footage was actually filmed in another. In Burkina Faso, Facebook is the most widely used social network. WhatsApp is also increasingly

used, especially thanks to its voice-message sharing feature, which makes it easier to spread content among people with low literacy levels, particularly in rural areas.

Before liking or sharing, you need to make sure that the content of the post is actually true

In response to this situation, we created an audio fact-checking segment broadcast every Wednesday, "Yafa Vesgo". Vesgo means "to investigate, to seek to understand" in Mooré, the most widely spoken language in Burkina Faso. We give listeners the tools they need to verify information. We tell them: before liking or sharing, you need to make sure that the content of the post is actually true. We produce "Yafa Vesgo" with the fact-checking media outlet Fasocheck. We are also currently working on creating video fact-checking segments for distribution on social media.

Burkina Faso has been facing a crisis marked by terrorist attacks and conflicts, which has resulted in thousands of deaths and a very large number of internally displaced people since 2015. Does disinformation particularly affect communities impacted by the crisis?

Adam's Kaled Ouedraogo: Very often, when false information circulates, there is an intention to manipulate. This can only harm everyone who absorbs this disinformation. But people who are less accustomed to news media can be more easily deceived, because they generally believe that what appears on social media is true.

Samiratou Guiré-Illboudo : Displaced people are sometimes exposed to harmful information claiming that they need to pay in order to receive assistance. Most often, this comes from ill-intentioned individuals posing as state social services officers or humanitarian organisation staff, who take advantage of these populations' vulnerability. "Faso Yafa", the humanitarian programme I coordinate, advises displaced people not to pay and to go directly to the relevant assistance service to obtain accurate information.

It is a weekly 30-minute programme that provides useful information to internally displaced people. When they arrive in a host community, they do not know where to obtain emergency shelter, which NGOs to contact for what kind of assistance, or how to access state support. "Faso Yafa" produces programmes on these issues. Once a month, the programme is recorded as close as possible to the field in nine regions of the country, in order to meet people, listen to them and help guide them.

We address the psychosocial support available to displaced people, inviting psychologists who speak with them and provide practical information. After listening to the programmes, many displaced people turn to health facilities because they are living through traumatic situations. They can no longer sleep or work; they have lost their will to live because of all the atrocities they have witnessed. Because it is produced locally, the information broadcast by "Faso Yafa" helps both to curb disinformation and to provide a real service to displaced people. ■

Eyewitness

WE HIGHLIGHT THE VOICES OF PEOPLE WHO ARE OFTEN OVERLOOKED

Hadja Lahbib, European Union Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management, exposes the challenges of information and communication European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) is faced with as a major aid donor worldwide*.

What are the main challenges the European Union (EU) is facing today in its humanitarian aid?

Hadja Lahbib: Since early 2025, we have seen major cuts in aid budgets, mainly from the US. This is devastating, as needs are going up and resources are decreasing. In the meantime, international humanitarian law is routinely violated, blocking aid access and putting humanitarian workers in danger. Last, disinformation is often used as a weapon in situations of conflict. This undermines humanitarian efforts and misleads the people they serve.

One of our priorities is to counter these harmful narratives. We do it by sharing accurate and reliable information about our work in every area. Promoting our partners activities through EU-funded projects increases their visibility and helps to counter false narratives. One example: with United Nations High Committee for Refugees (UNHCR), we created a toolkit to protect information on digital platforms. This toolkit helps humanitarian workers spot and stop misinformation, especially about displaced and stateless people. It is used worldwide.

In this work of information and communication, how do you check the dignity and agency of people receiving humanitarian action is respected?

Everything we do is based on deep respect for the people we assist. As donors, we have a responsibility to not only fund humanitarian action, but to shift how that action is communicated. We must remain credible, factual, principled, and consistent. People affected by crises must not be considered just as subjects of our stories nor enabled victims, but rather as storytellers. In our communication, we always try to show real and personal stories. These stories reveal not only

Supporting local media must also be part of the solution

the hardships people face, but also their strength and how they move forward with EU support. We show people as human beings with dignity and resilience, because this is who they are.



© European Union, 2024

That means actively creating space for local voices, perspectives, and media. This is even more essential in crises zones, where narratives are often dominated by external actors. Our approach is to step back, listen, and ensure that those living through crises are able to share their experiences in their own words. With consent, we highlight the voices of people who are often overlooked. Supporting local media must also be part of the solution. That means building long-term partnerships that go beyond visibility and amplify local voices.

What does the EU gain in giving voice to people in need for help?

By sharing compelling human-interest stories from the field, we help make our humanitarian action more understandable to the public. These challenges are also an opportunity for the EU to step up as a trusted humanitarian actor.

When we talk about crises, we are flooded with numbers. Take Sudan: 13 million people forced to flee their homes. But what does 13 million actually mean? It is too vast to grasp, too distant to feel. We forget that each one is a face, a name, a human being. Because in the end, we don't connect to numbers, we connect to people and their unique personal stories.

These stories also show something else: that in a world of growing crises and retreating commitments, the EU is still there, showing up, delivering. Our partners in the field know it. The people we support know it. And European citizens deserve to know it too because this work is done in their name. It reflects their values.

The EU is a reliable humanitarian actor. We will always defend international humanitarian law. That is our responsibility, and it is a promise worth keeping. ■

Fondation Hironnelle is a Swiss non-profit organisation working to ensure that people facing crises have access to reliable, local, independent information. It has been supporting local media and journalists in fragile contexts for over 30 years (since 1995). With a global remit and local roots, it creates spaces for dialogue, to strengthen social cohesion in fragmented societies.

Impressum

Mediation

Biannual publication of Fondation Hironnelle

Director of publication:
Caroline Vuillemin

Editors:
Julie Crenn
Benjamin Bibas /
la fabrique documentaire
with the participation of
Enzo Reggane

Graphic design:
Marek Zielinski

Translation:
Julie Windebank

Printing:
Groux & Graph'style

Avenue du Temple 19C
1012 Lausanne, Suisse

hirondelle.org
info@hirondelle.org
T. + 41 21 654 20 20

Support us:
UBS Switzerland AG
BIC - SWIFT: UBSWCHZH80A
IBAN:
CH39 0021 5215 3121 7002 T

ISSN 2624-8840 (Print)
ISSN 2624-8859 (Online)