

# Psychological and behavioral impact of mpox outbreaks on Red Cross staff and volunteers in Gabon

\*This article was originally published in IOA Newsletter ([here](#)). We are republishing it here to share its insights with a broader audience.

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## Introduction

The recent mpox epidemic, declared a public health emergency of international concern (USPPI) in August 2024, generated a massive wave of information[1]. However, just like during the COVID-19 pandemic, the spread of false information, misinformation and rumors considerably exacerbated the impact of this health crisis. Erroneous claims about modes of transmission and vaccine efficacy were widely circulated, particularly on social networks, contributing to confusion and mistrust within communities[2]<sup>[3]</sup>. This media overload, marked by the dissemination of inaccurate information, has amplified mistrust of the authorities and made the task of public health experts more complex, making the dissemination of reliable, fact-based recommendations particularly difficult[4].

False information, often spread via social media, creates an environment where rumors and misconceptions reinforce each other, overshadowing expert messages[5]. This phenomenon, described by the WHO as 'infodemic'[6], refers to the overload of information, often misleading, during a health crisis. This has had a major impact on Red Cross teams in Gabon, causing stress, confusion and sometimes a loss of trust in response strategies. This article explores the challenges faced by Red Cross staff and volunteers in dealing with the proliferation of misinformation. It also suggests ways of strengthening the psychological and behavioral resilience of teams, highlighting effective communication strategies, improved collaboration with civil society and the importance of consistent messages to limit the deleterious effects of misinformation on community responses.

## Context and challenges

The emergence of clade 1b of the mpox virus (MPXV), combined with its rapid spread to neighboring countries, has led to an overload of information that is often contradictory or alarmist. It is in this context that on 22 August 2024, the Ministry of Health of Gabon reported an imported case of mpox, drawing the attention of Red Cross volunteers and staff in the front line of the response.

The psychological impact of misinformation on humanitarian workers is well documented. Studies of previous epidemics, such as Ebola and COVID-19, have shown that misinformation can exacerbate stress, anxiety, burnout and loss of motivation among aid workers[7]. During the mpox epidemic, stigma emerged as a major challenge, particularly in contexts where the disease was falsely associated with certain social groups. This situation further complicated the work of healthcare workers, who were faced with high expectations from the communities they served, regular scientific updates and rumors spread on social networks[8]<sup>[9]</sup>.

For Red Cross staff and volunteers in Gabon, these dynamics generated additional pressure in the midst of ongoing epidemics. It was therefore crucial to understand how these infodemics specifically affected their mental health and professional behavior. These impacts particularly manifested through:

**1. Increased stress and anxiety:** : Constant exposure to information, often focused on the risks and severity of the disease, exacerbated the emotional stress of the teams. Some members reported feeling powerless in the face of the sheer volume of information to be processed.

[1] Ndembi N, Folayan MO, Ngongo N, Ntoumi F, Ogoina D, Rabbat ME, et al. Mpox outbreaks in Africa constitute a public health emergency of continental security. *The Lancet Global Health*. Elsevier; 2024 Oct 1;12(10):e1577-9.

[2] Impact de la couverture médiatique sur la perception du public de la variole du singe [Internet]. [cited 2024 Dec 3]. Available from: <https://www.medicoverhospitals.in/fr/articles/monkeypox-media-public-perception>

[3] Araújo FWC, Rodrigues SMDSS, Carvalho TA, Sousa DSD, Tenório MDL, Martins-Filho PR. Misinformation, disinformation, and fake news amid the new global Mpox emergency. *Revista Panamericana de Salud Pública*. 2024 Oct 15;48:1.

[4] Farahat RA, Head MG, Tharwat S, Alabdallat Y, Essar MY, Abdelazeem B, et al. Infodemic and the fear of monkeypox: call for action. *Tropical Medicine and Health*. 2022 Sep 5;50(1):63.

[5] Yan X, Li Z, Cao C, Huang L, Li Y, Meng X, et al. Characteristics, Influence, Prevention, and Control Measures of the Mpox Infodemic: Scoping Review of Infodemiology Studies. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*. 2024 Aug 30;26(1):e54874.

[6] <https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic>

[7] Torales J, Barrios I, Castaldelli-Maia JM, Ventriglio A. The Mpox outbreak is a public health emergency of international concern: Implications for mental health and global preparedness. *Int J Soc Psychiatry*. SAGE Publications Ltd; 2024 Sep 11;00207640241280714.

[8] Norberg AN, Norberg PRBM, Manhães FC, Filho RMF, Souza DG de, Queiroz MM de C, et al. Public Health Strategies Against Social Stigma in the Mpox Outbreak: A Systematic Review. *Journal of Advances in Medicine and Medical Research*. 2024 Feb 10;36(2):33-47.

[9] Chang R, Barrita AM, Wong-Padoongpatt G. Predictors of the fear of monkeypox in sexual minorities. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*. US: Educational Publishing Foundation; 2024

An analysis of the responses to the GAD-7 self-administered scale[10] revealed a diversity of anxiety symptoms experienced by team members. Nervousness, worry or tension were the most common symptoms reported by 60% of participants lasting 'several days.' Other dimensions, such as difficulty controlling worrying, restlessness or feeling afraid as if something awful might happen, were mainly reported as being experienced 'not at all' or 'several days', reflecting significant variability in responders' experiences of infodemic.

**2. Eroded trust :** Contradictions between official and unofficial sources created doubt among some volunteers, compromising their ability to convey consistent messages to communities. When asked about the reliability of different sources of information, health authorities were considered the most reliable, with 54.5% of participants rating them as 'very reliable'. Television and radio followed, with 45.5% of respondents sharing this opinion. In contrast, social media and print/online media were less well regarded, with only 4.5% and 22.7% respectively rating them as 'very reliable'. Rumors and word of mouth were considered the least reliable sources, with only 2.3% rating them as 'very reliable' and 31.8% as 'not at all reliable'.

**3. Decision fatigue:** The constant need to discern reliable information led to cognitive overload, reducing the effectiveness of interventions in the field. Analysis of emotional responses over the past month revealed significant variations in participants' experiences across different dimensions. For example, 40% of participants said they sometimes felt overwhelmed by unexpected events that they could not control, while 30% said this never happened to them. Similarly, 50% of respondents said they sometimes felt nervous or stressed, although 30% said they almost never felt these emotions. The ability to manage personal problems and control important aspects of their lives also varied: 50% reported moderate confidence, answering 'sometimes', while smaller proportions answered 'quite often' or 'very often'.

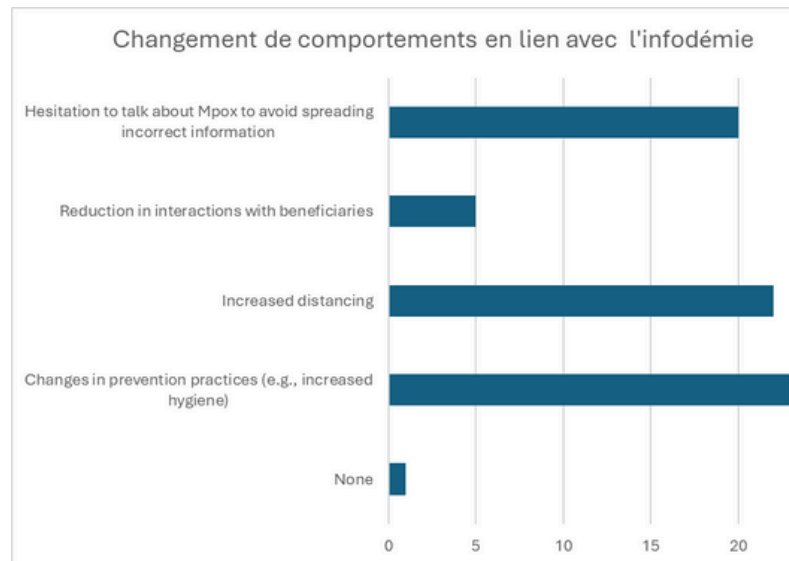


Figure 1: Behaviour modifications due to mpox infodemics

## Responses put in place

A number of measures have been taken to mitigate these effects :

- **Targeted training :** Awareness-raising workshops on the critical analysis of information enabled teams to distinguish real facts from rumors. This training strengthened their ability to manage community interactions in a context of misinformation.
- **Psychological support :** The Red Cross set up discussion groups and psychological support to help staff and volunteers overcome stress. This initiative has fostered an environment of mutual support.
- **Centralised information channels :** Creating an internal platform for official updates on mpox reduced confusion, giving volunteers direct access to validated information.

## Lessons learned and recommendations

**1.Importance of internal communication:** Clear, centralised information reduces the impact of infodemic and allows teams to work with confidence.

[10] Generalized Anxiety Disorder - 7 ou GAD-7 est une échelle de mesure des symptômes d'anxiété générale dans divers contextes et populations. Spitzer RL, Kroenke K, Williams JB, Löwe B. A brief measure for assessing generalized anxiety disorder: the GAD-7. Arch Intern Med. 2006 May 22;166(10):1092-7. doi: 10.1001/archinte.166.10.1092. PMID: 16717171.

**2. Strengthening psycho-social skills** : Including a psychological support component in crisis management training improves volunteers' resilience in the face of prolonged stress.

**3. Partnerships with the media** : working with media platforms (including community radio stations) to broadcast coherent, contextualised and reliable messages in local languages helps to limit the spread of rumors in communities (Figure 2).



*Figure 2 : Volunteers and staff from the Gabonese Red Cross participate in an interactive broadcast to address rumors about mpox  
Photo : Cameroon Red Cross*

## Conclusion

The mpox epidemic in Gabon revealed the impact of disease outbreaks on front-line workers, underlining the importance of strategies combining communication, psychological support and training to strengthen their resilience. This experience offers valuable lessons for improving the global response to health crises, based on adaptive and replicable approaches. By protecting those who protect others, these efforts help to sustainably strengthen the capacity of healthcare systems to deal with current and future emergencies.