Towards a Communication-Based Approach to Combating Armed Terrorist Groups in the Commune of Matéri, Northern Benin

Abstract

Terrorism and violent extremism constitute one of the most significant security challenges of our era. The proliferation and diversification of attacks perpetrated by Armed Terrorist Groups (ATGs) are bringing about substantial changes in the operational concepts of regular armies. Benin is now one of the latest countries to suffer the ravages of ATGs, particularly in its northern region. The objective of this research is therefore to examine the strengths of a communication-based approach to combating ATGs in the commune of Matéri. Indeed, given the mixed results of a fight against ATGs that relies essentially on purely military mechanisms, it is worth examining the strengths offered by the communication function so as to adapt it to Beninese realities and secure the active participation of the local population in preventing and combating this phenomenon. To this end, P. Watzlawick's theory of human communication, combined with the participatory approach to communication as initiated by international organisations in the context of rural development activities, opens up the range of possible applications of communication. The joint analysis of the existing literature on military communication and of the data collected revealed that communication is the poor relation in the fight against ATGs, even though it has already proven its worth elsewhere. Accordingly, in the face of the resilience of ATGs, sustained through intimidation propaganda, counter-terrorism should be reconsidered through the lens of communication, so as to combine conventional asymmetric warfare mechanisms with the strengths and assets that communication offers in crisis prevention and management. Better use of the communication function by the Beninese Armed Forces (BAF) will thus make it possible to guard actively against the abuses of ATGs through active citizen participation.

Keywords: Communication-based approach, counter-terrorism, Armed Terrorist Groups, Matéri, Benin.

Introduction

The recent history of terrorism is characterised by a resurgence of attacks whose modus operandi are becoming increasingly sophisticated. For the Republic of Benin, May 2019 marked the starting point of action by the Defence and Security Forces and the government to curb, as far as possible, the expansion of Armed Terrorist Groups (ATGs) in Benin.

Indeed, the kidnapping of two (02) European tourists in Pendjari National Park, followed by the murder of their Beninese guide, showed that Benin, until then spared, was not necessarily safe from attempts by groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda to penetrate its territory. As Bernard E. (2021) stated, "Al-Qaeda's organisation in the Sahel region is currently examining a plan to expand towards the Gulf of Guinea, in particular towards Côte d'Ivoire and Benin". In December 2021, the first attacks by Unidentified Armed Individuals (UAIs) were recorded on Beninese soil, notably in the areas of Porga and Banikoara, close to the borders of Burkina Faso and Niger respectively, two countries that have been plagued by terrorism for several years. This new situation inevitably calls for action both at the level of the government of the Republic of Benin and at the level of the military hierarchy, which constitutes the nation's first line of defence. Military action in various forms has accordingly intensified in the

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

northern part of Benin in order to guard against further acts of this kind. The mixed results of these armed interventions in northern Benin raise questions about the effectiveness of an exclusively military response to this scourge. What other response is possible? For on the night of Wednesday 8 January 2025, a large-scale attack targeted a forward position of the Beninese Armed Forces (BAF) in the so-called "Triple Point" area of Banikoara, in the Alibori department. This area lies at the junction of the borders of Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger, a region particularly exposed to the expansion of ATGs from the Sahel. The official toll initially released reported 28 Beninese soldiers killed. This information was confirmed by military officials and relayed by several international media outlets, while Colonel Faïzou Gomina, Chief of Staff of the National Guard, issued a statement acknowledging a "very heavy loss" and offering his condolences to the families of the soldiers who fell at the front. It was in this context that the online outlet *Olofofo*, run by the Beninese journalist Comlan Hugues Sossoukpè, relayed a different version of the toll. According to this source, the fighting lasted nearly eight hours and the assailants killed and burned 30 Beninese soldiers, a figure higher than the one initially put forward by the military authorities.

This discrepancy between the official toll of 28 dead and the figure of 30 victims reported by *Olofofo* fuelled a debate on the transparency of security communication in Benin. It also illustrates the tension between, on the one hand, the army's need to verify information and preserve operational secrecy and, on the other, society's demand for fast, accurate and credible information in a context of asymmetric warfare.

Indeed, in the face of the damage caused by attacks on units of the Defence and Security Forces (DSF), an uncontrolled flow of information from various sources has been observed. In this context, the BAF's communication is being put to the test by the media, which speculate on the reasons for the attacks and on the means deployed by the BAF to combat the phenomenon. Taken together, these events have shown that warfare strategies alone cannot contain this threat and maintain a climate of calm among the population. It is therefore important to look at the various actions undertaken by the BAF in the fight against ATGs and at the place given to communication. Known to be an asymmetric form of warfare, the fight against ATGs requires the collection of human intelligence in order to be as effective as possible. Intelligence gathering inevitably depends on communication. Local and indigenous populations thus appear to be best placed to provide the Defence and Security Forces (DSF) with the intelligence likely to help them track down ATGs. The need to offer the BAF a new approach to this fight justifies the present research, entitled: Towards a Communication-

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

Based Approach to Combating Armed Terrorist Groups in the Commune of Matéri, Northern Benin.

Admittedly, the military domain is somewhat sensitive when it comes to sharing information and communicating, notably because of defence secrecy and the duty of discretion imposed on military personnel. Nevertheless, the upsurge in extremist acts in the north of the country calls for genuine collaboration between the Army and the Nation, which is essential to preserving the integrity of the national territory. This requires that the military mechanisms deployed in this war be accompanied by a carefully designed communication policy that respects the requirements of defence secrecy while taking into account Beninese realities with regard to civil-military operations and actions. Such a policy would not only strengthen the image of the military institution but also foster among the population a patriotic impetus conducive to their cooperation with the army in security matters.

Would it not therefore be necessary to analyse the actions carried out by the Beninese Armed Forces (BAF) in the fight against armed terrorist groups (ATGs), in order to determine how a communication-based approach could benefit them?

The general objective of this work is to analyse the counter-terrorism actions undertaken by the BAF with a view to proposing a communication-based approach against the Armed Terrorist Groups operating in the commune of Matéri in northern Benin.

This research posits that improving communication between the Beninese Armed Forces (BAF) and the population of the commune of Matéri helps to strengthen community collaboration, the circulation of reliable information and the prevention of the recruitment of young people into armed terrorist groups (ATGs).

1. Materials and Methods

This section presents the study setting, the methodology adopted and the theoretical framework.

1.1. Study setting

The institutional setting of this study is the Beninese Armed Forces (BAF), and its geographical scope is the commune of Matéri in northern Benin. The relevance of this institutional setting stems from the leading role played by the BAF in the Beninese government's fight against ATGs in northern Benin. Indeed, under Law 2020-15 of 3 July 2020 amending and supplementing Law 90-016 of 18 June 1990 establishing the Beninese

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

Armed Forces, their primary mission is to preserve "at all times, in all circumstances and against all forms of aggression, the integrity and security of the national territory as well as the lives of the population". The BAF are placed under the supreme authority of the President of the Republic and under the organic authority of the minister responsible for national defence. Their missions are to:

- Preserve at all times, in all circumstances and against all forms of aggression, the integrity and security of the national territory as well as the lives of the population; safeguard independence, sovereignty and national unity;
- Contribute to the fight against other threats likely to endanger national security;
- Take part in public order and internal security missions under the conditions defined by decree of the President of the Republic;
- Take part in economic development, in the intellectual influence of the Nation and in any other missions of public interest under the conditions defined by laws and regulations;
- Ensure compliance with international alliances, treaties and agreements.

The Beninese Armed Forces are made up of Beninese military personnel assigned to the following components:

- The Army (Armée de Terre);
- The Air Force (Armée de l'Air);
- The Navy (Marine Nationale);
- The National Guard (Garde Nationale).

In accordance with Decree No. 2021-579 of 3 November 2021 on the general organisation of the Beninese Armed Forces and the organisation of command within the Beninese Armed Forces, the General Staff (État-Major Général, EMG) is the single command structure of the BAF, responsible for design, planning and command within the Beninese Armed Forces. It is placed under the authority of a general officer known as the Chief of the General Staff (CEMG), who is assisted in his duties by a general officer holding the title of Deputy Chief of the General Staff. The BAF are thus the custodians of the government's counter-terrorism strategy, in collaboration with the other institutions of the Republic. The commune of Matéri was one of the first to be struck by terrorist acts, in December 2021. Owing to its strategic geographical position, its cosmopolitan character and the Pendjari hunting zone it hosts, it is of particular interest in terms of the fight against terrorism.

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

Matéri, the geographical setting of this study, lies between latitudes 10° 38' and 11° 4' North and longitudes 0° 48' and 1° 10' East. The commune is bordered to the north by the Republic of Burkina Faso, to the south by the communes of Cobly and Tanguiéta, and to the west by the Republic of Togo. The commune of Matéri is one of Benin's seventy-four (74) ordinary communes. It is organised into administrative entities comprising 77 villages spread across six (06) arrondissements of varying size in terms of area and population. It is governed by a Municipal Council of 24 councillors. The rural population numbers 90,283 inhabitants, i.e. 79.2% of the total population. The working population accounts for around 50% of the total population. Between 2002 and 2013, that is, over eleven (11) years, the population of Matéri grew by 30,237 inhabitants (from 83,721 in 2002 to 113,958 in 2013). The population density is thus 23.7 inhabitants per km² (INSAE, 2018). According to the same source, the commune of Matéri has 113,958 inhabitants distributed across 3,959 households in the administrative centres of its arrondissements. The average household size is estimated at 7 persons.

The economy of the commune of Matéri rests essentially on agriculture, which employs more than 90% of the working population. However, livestock farming, fishing and hunting, crafts and trade are also practised. To all these activities must be added the processing and storage of certain products, notably millet, sorghum, soya and néré (African locust bean), as well as crafts carried out by informal blacksmithing, pottery and sculpture businesses. In addition to the activities mentioned above, Pendjari National Park is a highly popular and well-frequented tourist site, with more than 5,000 visitors coming to the Reserve each year. However, given the evolution of the terrorist threat in the area, a decline in visits to this protected area is to be feared.

Finally, the media landscape of the commune of Matéri is characterised by the absence of a community radio station. Nevertheless, Radio Bénin Alafia can be received there. In addition, network coverage provides local populations with internet access. The media landscape of the commune also includes "gongoneurs" (traditional town criers), who act as information relays in rural areas.

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

1.2. Research methodology

The research is based on an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. It began with a qualitative approach, followed by a quantitative one, the latter being built on the results of the former.

1.2.1. Data collection techniques and tools

The qualitative techniques used were direct observation, documentary research and interviews.

Observation was used as a data collection technique in order to obtain relevant data on site. It mainly made it possible to assess the state of BAF communication in the context of counter-terrorism, and to gather information not only on the BAF's communication environment but also on the cultural and social functioning of the inhabitants of the commune of Matéri. Documentary research mainly served to establish the theoretical framework of the research and to learn about the communication models of major armies in domestic and external operations. It also involved searching for documents on terrorism, on military services, and on related reports, dissertations and other publications. Several electronic resources were also used. In addition to these two techniques, interviews were conducted with members of the Military High Command in order to understand the ins and outs of the communication function in domestic military operations. These interviews also made it possible to ascertain the BAF's vision regarding institutional communication, so as to compare it with the theoretical data derived from empirical research.

For the quantitative approach, a questionnaire survey was used. Questionnaires were administered both to soldiers deployed in the study area and to local civilians in order to obtain reliable data for the study. This technique made it possible to understand the population's perceptions and to gather proposals for improving citizen participation in the fight against ATGs.

1.2.2. Sampling technique

This study targets two (02) groups: BAF personnel and the residents of the various arrondissements of the commune of Matéri. This parent population was subdivided into more specific samples. Interviews were thus conducted with five (05) members of the Military High Command. As regards BAF personnel deployed in the operational theatre, no troop headcount can be provided owing to the confidential nature of this information. However, forty-eight (48) deployed personnel of all ranks (officers, non-commissioned officers and enlisted personnel) completed the survey questionnaire. As regards the inhabitants of the commune of

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

Matéri, sampling was based on the population's level of education. In this way, one hundred and three (103) civilians answered the questionnaire in five (05) arrondissements of the commune of Matéri. In addition, and in order to obtain as representative a sample as possible, fifteen (15) members of the Matéri municipal council also completed the survey questionnaire. For this quantitative sample, 166 people were surveyed.

In total, 171 people took part in this research.

1.3. Theoretical framework

The research is conducted in the light of two theoretical approaches: Paul Watzlawick's theory of human communication (1967) and the participatory approach to communication for development (Paulo Freire, 1970; Jan Servaes, 1999).

1.3.1. Theory of human communication

For Watzlawick (1967), communication is the outcome of a social interaction that takes place both consciously and unconsciously. Communication thus arises from an exchange of information whose main source is the relationship linking the actors involved in the process. Consequently, this process takes into account not only the message in extenso but above all the indication of how the message should be perceived by the recipient. He sets out five (05) axioms of communication:

- 1. One cannot not communicate;
- 2. Every communication has a content level and a relationship level (metacommunication);
- 3. Punctuation determines meaning according to the communicators;
- 4. Communication involves both digital and analogue modalities;
- 5. Communication is either symmetrical or complementary.

Axioms 1, 2 and 5 are particularly relevant to the subject of this research. As regards the first, the author demonstrates that it is impossible not to communicate. Thus, in a situation where people share the same geographical environment, a communication process inevitably arises, even if it is punctuated by silence. It is also argued that silence is a form of communication. As regards the second axiom, it appears that in the communication process, not only the message matters but also the relationship between the interlocutors. It is on the strength of this relationship that the transmitted message is received in one way or another and that the desired feedback is obtained. Finally, as regards the fifth axiom, communication does not only involve actors of the same level operating in the same environment (symmetry) but can also

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

be the product of complementary relationships and actions. Contextual factors determine the roles of the partners in the interaction. Thus, within the framework of our study, the communication action of the Beninese Armed Forces in the fight against terrorism could and should be complemented by the actions of other institutions and bodies.

1.3.2. Participatory approach to communication

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (*Pedagogia do Oprimido*, 1970), Paulo Freire develops a theory of liberating education based on dialogue, critical consciousness and transformative action. He criticises the model of "banking education", in which the educator passively deposits knowledge into the learner, and proposes a "problem-posing education" in which actors analyse their reality together in order to transform it. Three concepts structure his thinking:

- Conscientisation (*conscientização*): the process by which individuals become aware of the social, political and economic relations that produce their situation of oppression or vulnerability.
- Dialogue: a horizontal and reciprocal relationship between actors, based on listening, humility and mutual recognition; it stands in contrast to monologue and to the mere transmission of messages.
- Praxis: the linkage between critical reflection and concrete action with a view to transforming unjust social conditions.

For Freire, populations are therefore not passive receptacles of messages: they are capable of naming their reality, analysing its causes and taking part in its transformation. Jan Servaes conceptualises this theory in the field of communication for development through the *multiplicity paradigm*, set out in *Communication for Development: One World, Multiple Cultures* (1999). For him, development cannot be imposed according to a single, universal model. It is a plural, culturally situated process that depends on the values, identities, power relations and specific needs of each community. His conceptualisation of participatory communication rests on the following principles:

- The community is the starting point of any development intervention; problems must be identified and analysed on the basis of its lived experience.
- Communication must be dialogical and horizontal, rather than a top-down dissemination of information by experts or institutions to passive audiences.

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

- Populations must take part in every stage of the process: needs assessment, priority setting, message design, implementation and evaluation of actions.
- Development aims at *empowerment*, that is, strengthening the capacity of communities to act upon their own reality.

It should be borne in mind that Freire (1970) provided the philosophical and pedagogical basis of the theory, and Servaes (1999) operationalised it in communication for development, making community participation, respect for cultural diversity and empowerment the conditions for sustainable and inclusive development.

In the context of this research, this approach implies that populations should not merely be recipients of press releases or awareness messages. They must be involved in identifying risks, choosing languages and communication channels, designing prevention messages and setting up alert and reporting mechanisms suited to their local realities.

2. Results

The results are presented according to the approach used for data collection: first the results of the interviews, then those of the field survey.

2.1. Results of the interviews

The interviews made it possible to hold discussions with members of the Military High Command, who are the senior leaders of the Beninese Armed Forces and, as such, the custodians of the strategy employed by the BAF in counter-terrorism. The interviews were held respectively with the Head of the Operations and Training Division of the BAF General Staff (C/DOE), the Chief of Staff of the Army (CEMAT), the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army (CEMATA), the Head of the Operations Planning and Conduct Bureau (C/BPCO) and the Director of Human Resources of the Army (DRH/EMAT). They mainly show that the hierarchy's understanding of the concept of terrorism derives from the various training courses attended and from each officer's personal background. In the fight against ATGs in northern Benin, the BAF have opted for a defensive military operation focused on holding specific military compounds and forward operating locations. The communication discipline known to and valued by military personnel is operational communication conducted via military radios during engagements. Institutional communication and all its related fields are not necessarily known or mastered by the BAF, although some personnel have basic training in journalism. As a result, the possible applications of these fields in counter-terrorism are unknown to the military hierarchy. Within the BAF, there is an Information and Public

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

Relations Bureau (BIRP) at the General Staff, headed by an officer who does not necessarily have a communications background. For operations against ATGs, a headquarters staff is set up, including an intelligence cell responsible for collecting information. No direct official relationship exists with the religious leaders of the various villages in which the BAF are deployed. No BAF communication policy has been drawn up for counter-terrorism. The only actions taken are press releases issued by the hierarchy and by the Ministry of Defence.

2.2. Results of the questionnaire survey

Administering a survey questionnaire to local populations and to military personnel deployed in the fight against ATGs yielded important information for achieving the objectives, notably with regard to knowledge of the phenomenon of terrorism, the most effective means of interacting with the population and obtaining intelligence, the population's willingness to collaborate with the BAF, and other support mechanisms to be used to better guard against the abuses of ATGs.

2.2.1. Knowledge of terrorism

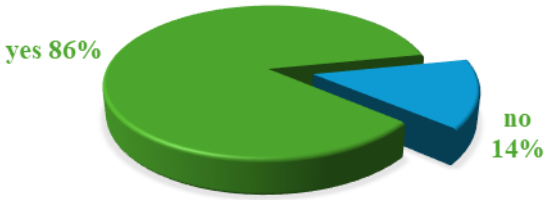


Figure 1:
People familiar with the phenomenon

Source: The authors, field survey, 2025

Figure 1 shows that 86% of the survey participants are familiar with the phenomenon of terrorism, compared with 14% who are not.

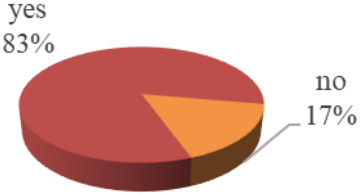


Figure 2: People who know that Benin is affected by terrorism

Source: The authors, field survey, 2025

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

According to Figure 2, 83% of those who said they were familiar with the phenomenon know that Benin is affected by terrorism, compared with 17%.

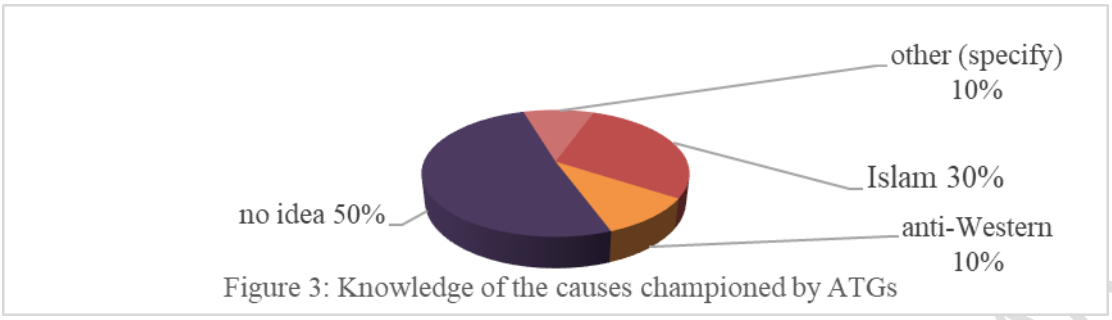


Figure 3: Knowledge of the causes championed by ATGs

Source: The authors, field survey, 2025

In Figure 3, 50% of those familiar with the phenomenon have no idea of the causes championed by these groups, compared with 30% who believe it is Islam. For 10%, ATGs are pursuing an anti-Western cause.

2.2.2. Population information channels

All the knowledge held by the local populations and by the military personnel deployed in the fight against ATGs was conveyed to them through several channels. Figures 4 and 5 present the various channels through which respondents prefer to obtain information.

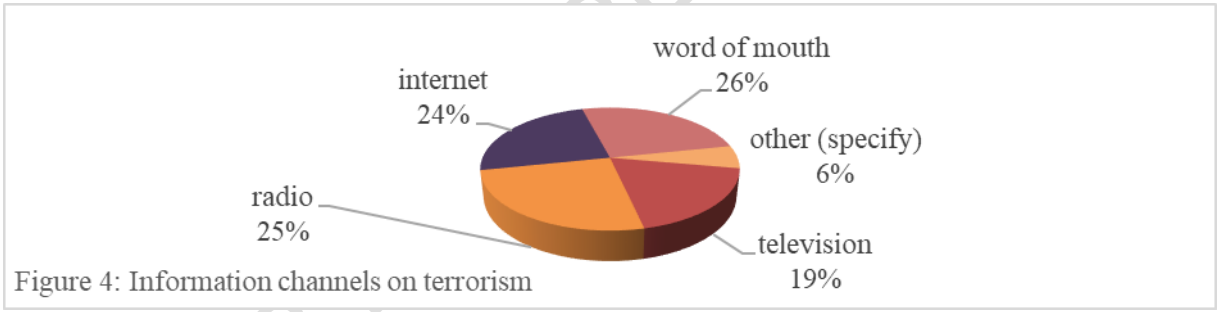


Figure 4: Information channels on terrorism

Source: The authors, field survey, 2025

According to Figure 4, 26% of those familiar with the phenomenon say they obtained this information by word of mouth, compared with 25% through radio, 24% through the internet, 19% through television and 6% through other channels.

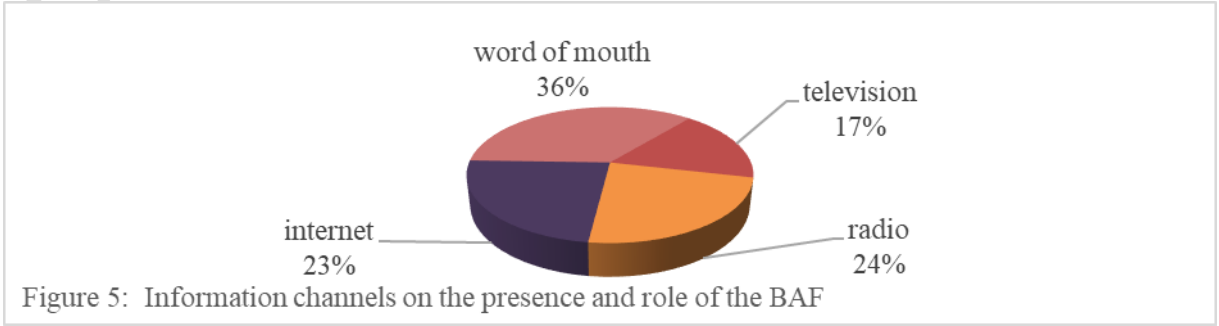


Figure 5: Information channels on the presence and role of the BAF

Source: The authors, field survey, 2025

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

Figure 5 shows that 36% of those who know the role of the BAF's presence in their localities say they obtained this information by word of mouth, compared with 24% through radio, 23% through the internet and 17% through television.

2.2.3. Willingness to collaborate with the DSF in the fight against ATGs

In the face of the ravages of ATGs in the commune of Matéri, local populations are ready to collaborate with the DSF for a more effective fight against ATGs. Figures 6, 7 and 8 present the data on the population's willingness to help effectively in this fight.



Figure 6: Civilians' assessment of the military presence in their locality

Source: The authors, field survey, 2025

Figure 6 shows that 77% of those who know the role of the military presence in their localities have a very good opinion of this presence, compared with 15%. 8% expressed no opinion.



Figure 7: Current collaboration with the DSF

Source: The authors, field survey, 2025

According to Figure 7, 51% of those who know that Benin is affected by terrorism collaborate with the BAF, compared with 49%.

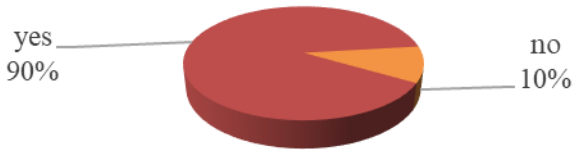


Figure 8: Willingness of the population to collaborate with the DSF

Source: The authors, field survey, 2025

According to Figure 8, 90% of those who do not collaborate with the BAF wish to do so, compared with 10%.

2.2.4. Support mechanisms for the fight against ATGs

As part of the BAF's fight against ATGs, local populations and deployed military personnel were given a survey questionnaire in order to obtain their proposals for effective support mechanisms and the means they would be willing to use to assist the DSF.

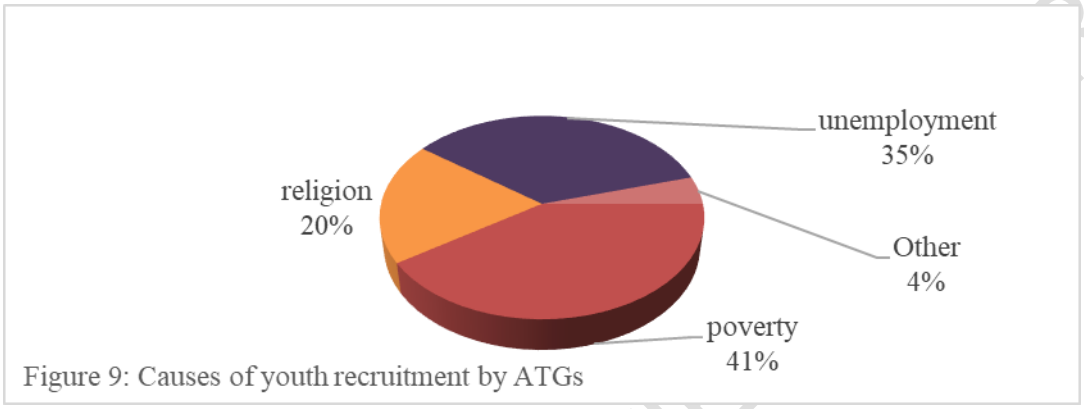


Figure 9: Causes of youth recruitment by ATGs

Source: The authors, field survey, 2025

For 41% of respondents, the main cause of young people's recruitment into ATGs is the poverty of the population, compared with 35% who cite unemployment. For 20%, it is religion (Figure 9).

Figures 10, 11 and 12 summarise the means and mechanisms of support for the DSF proposed by the local populations.

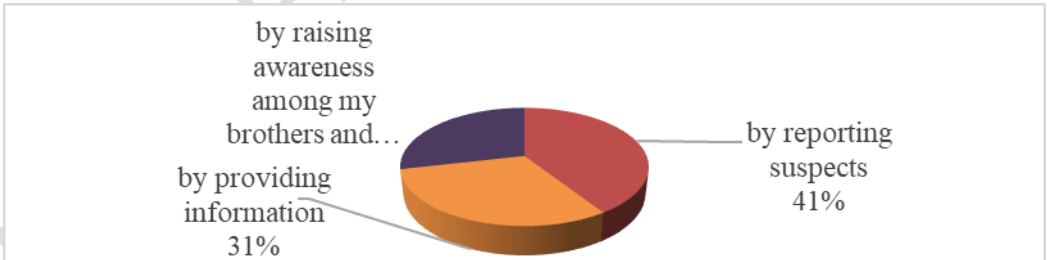


Figure 10: Direct support from the population to the DSF

Source: The authors, field survey, 2025

According to Figure 10, 41% of respondents believe they can be useful to the DSF by reporting any suspicious person, compared with 31% who think they can do so by providing important information and 28% by raising awareness among their peers.

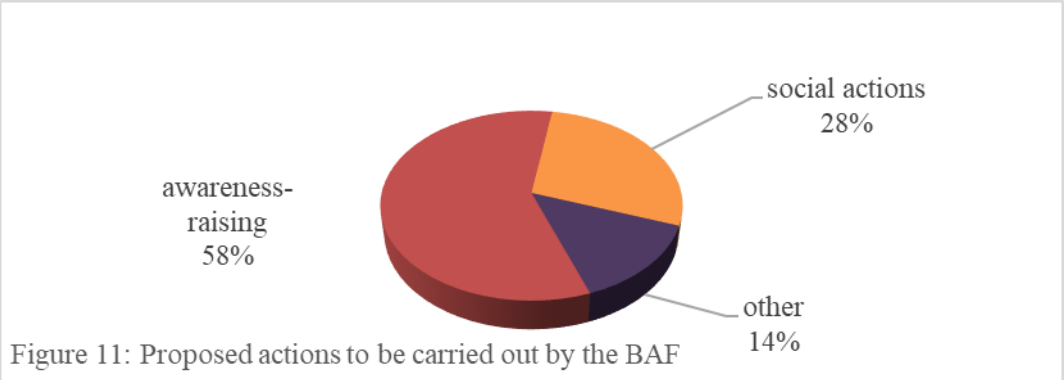


Figure 11: Proposed actions to be carried out by the BAF

Source: The authors, field survey, 2025

Figure 11 shows that 58% of respondents propose that the BAF organise awareness-raising activities for the population, 28% propose that the BAF carry out social actions and 14% propose other types of action.

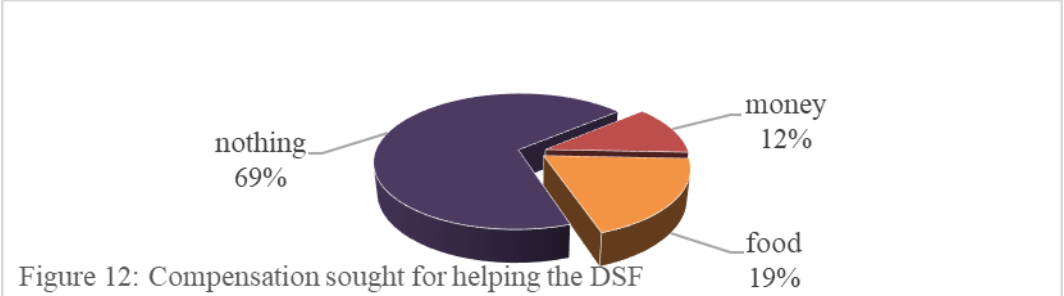


Figure 12: Compensation sought for helping the DSF

Source: The authors, field survey, 2025

According to Figure 12, 69% of respondents offer their help to the DSF without expecting anything in return, compared with 19% who offer their help in the hope of receiving food in return and 12% who offer their help in the hope of receiving financial assistance in return.

2.3. Analysis of the Results

2.3.1. Analysis of the interview results

With regard to the fight against ATGs in northern Benin, the interviews revealed that the BAF have opted for "a defensive military operation focused on holding specific military compounds and forward locations". Since this is a typically military mechanism, it is clear that apart from military actions, the BAF do not use any other related methods in counter-terrorism. This weakens the impact of their actions in the areas of engagement, because in an asymmetric war, where the threat is diffuse by nature, it would seem appropriate to consider combining the conventional methods of the armed forces with various social actions that would win the support of the population and, consequently, foster useful and effective collaboration.

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

Furthermore, within the BAF there is an Information and Public Relations Bureau (BIRP), notably at the General Staff, headed by an officer who does not necessarily have a communications background. This shows that the communication function is not really considered important in the BAF's action and that personnel are not trained in this specialty. This is borne out by the absence of communication actions aimed at promoting the values defended by the army in the fight against armed terrorist groups (ATGs). More broadly, this situation reflects the absence of a designed, planned and implemented communication policy. The only actions carried out by the BAF are press releases from the hierarchy and the Ministry of Defence. This situation could undermine the credibility of troop deployment in the area of engagement, since public opinion is always informed of the toll of attacks within the ranks of the DSF without, however, knowing the impact of their action in the fight.

According to Watzlawick's theory of human communication (1967), "every communication has a content level and a relationship level (metacommunication)". Thus, if no action is taken to maintain the relationship, the result could be a withdrawal of public support following the many deaths of Beninese citizens, and a degree of psychosis among BAF personnel, who would no longer be motivated to go into combat. All these situations could be anticipated and managed through good communication, both internal, within the BAF, and external, towards the population. As regards communication with the rural populations of the areas where BAF soldiers are deployed, no direct official relationship exists with the religious leaders of these areas. This prevents effective collaboration between the BAF and the population in terms of information and intelligence sharing.

Indeed, the "two-step flow of communication" theory, although not adopted as a primary theoretical framework for this research, supports it by demonstrating the importance of maintaining communication relationships with populations, especially rural ones, and how to do so. As Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet already wrote, "ideas often flow from radio and print to the opinion leaders and from them to the less active sections of the population". Although BAF personnel are known for remaining in barracks, communication work must be undertaken to create a climate of trust and a framework for both formal and informal communication with the population so that the mission can proceed smoothly.

2.3.2. Analysis of the field survey data

The data analysis reveals that the institutional communication of the Beninese Armed Forces (BAF) in the fight against armed terrorist groups (ATGs) remains essentially vertical, centralised and poorly adapted to the actual circuits through which information circulates in

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAP

operational theatres. The only actions observed consist of press releases issued by the military hierarchy and the Ministry of Defence, broadcast mainly on television and radio in French. Yet this mode of dissemination rests on a top-down logic of information transmission, in which the military institution produces the message and the population is supposed to receive it, understand it and possibly adhere to it.

However, the cross-analysis of Figures 2, 3, 5 and 6 shows that knowledge of the terrorist phenomenon, as well as information on the actions conducted by the BAF, circulates mainly by word of mouth, radio and the internet. These results call into question the effectiveness of press releases as the main communication tool. Indeed, press releases are not the medium with the greatest potential for reaching target audiences, particularly in rural localities where orality, proximity networks and local radio stations remain decisive in shaping representations and behaviour. Figures 4 and 5 yield a ranking of the information channels preferred by the population of the commune of Matéri. This ranking places word of mouth at the top, followed by radio, the internet, television and, finally, other parallel channels.

Moreover, the BAF do not have an institutional website through which information on their operations could be relayed in a structured, regular and verifiable manner. The Army's Facebook page, the only one available, does not have a sufficiently broad or targeted audience to ensure the effective dissemination of messages intended for the populations of exposed areas. This weakness of institutional digital channels limits the BAF's capacity to counter disinformation, contextualise their actions and build a relationship of trust with citizens.

The difficulty is further compounded by the nature of the relationship between the rural populations of the theatres of operation and the BAF. Figure 7 shows that approximately 51% of the population collaborate with the deployed personnel to achieve common security objectives. It must be stressed that, under these conditions, word of mouth, although identified as the population's preferred channel, cannot effectively relay messages carefully crafted by communication specialists. It may even become a space for rumours, mistrust or reinterpretations unfavourable to military action when official information is insufficient, late or difficult to access.

The cross-analysis of Figures 6 and 8 reveals a favourable disposition of the population towards the presence of BAF personnel in their localities in the context of the fight against ATGs. This finding is significant: it suggests that, in the collective imagination and subconscious, there is already a strong willingness (90% among non-collaborators) to support

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

the defence and security forces in carrying out their mission. This disposition constitutes significant social and communicational capital, provided that the BAF put in place appropriate cooperation mechanisms, notably reliable, secure and accessible reporting and tip-off systems co-constructed with the communities themselves. Figure 11 also confirms that the populations themselves propose mechanisms likely to facilitate their contribution to the fight against terrorism.

It is precisely at this level that the participatory approach to communication for development takes on its full meaning. It does not regard populations as mere recipients of awareness messages but as full-fledged actors in the communication process. From this perspective, information and communication should not be produced solely by the military hierarchy and then disseminated to communities; they must be developed with them, drawing on their local knowledge, their languages, their preferred communication channels, their fears and their specific needs. The co-construction of information thus makes it possible to produce content that is more credible, more comprehensible and more culturally appropriate, while strengthening community ownership of prevention, vigilance and cooperation messages.

Such an approach also requires recognising community and local radio stations, religious and traditional leaders, youth and women's associations, and community relays as communication partners. Their involvement in the design, production and dissemination of messages would make it possible to move beyond the mere logic of the press release towards a dialogical, continuous system adapted to local realities. It would also promote the circulation of reliable information by word of mouth, turning this informal channel into a trusted relay rather than a space for the spread of rumours.

Finally, poverty and youth unemployment in rural areas appear to be factors favouring the recruitment of young people by armed terrorist groups. The cross-analysis of Figures 10, 11 and 12 shows that the effectiveness of the communication response cannot be dissociated from a socio-economic response. To achieve more lasting results among young people, the BAF cannot act alone: the government must also commit to reducing idleness, precariousness and the feeling of abandonment in these areas. Participatory communication must therefore be part of a comprehensive strategy combining security, local development, youth integration and community dialogue. From this perspective, the fight against ATGs rests not only on military operations but also on the capacity of institutions to build, together with the population, a shared communication founded on trust, participation and collective responsibility.

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

However, none of this can be achieved without structural reform. The BAF should equip themselves with the institutional and regulatory framework essential for conducting well-considered and effective communication actions. In this way, the BAF could establish a dedicated communication policy. This would entail:

- Reorganising the Information and Public Relations Bureau of the General Staff into a communication cell equipped with competent personnel and the resources needed to fulfil its mission;
- Consulting communication experts to draft policy documents on the institutional communication of the BAF;
- Integrating the institutional communication function of the armed forces into the Operations Planning and Conduct Bureau, with focal points established in each theatre of operations.

This architecture is similar to that of France, which has the Defence Information and Communication Delegation (DICOD) and the Defence Communication and Audiovisual Production Establishment (ECPAD), the bodies responsible for the armed forces' communication strategy. In addition to these two structures, there is the Information and Public Relations Service (SIRPA) specific to each service branch, and the Planning and Conduct of Operations Centre (CPCO), which permanently deploys specialised communication officers to conduct operational communication as close as possible to units in contact.

3. Discussion

This reflection is part of a field of research that has gradually shown that the response to violent extremism cannot rely exclusively on military force. Schmid (2013, pp. 5-6) stresses the need to approach radicalisation as a multidimensional process, which calls for responses combining security, social dialogue, education and development. Similarly, Briggs (2010, pp. 971-981) demonstrates that community engagement is a key lever in counter-terrorism, as it fosters trust, early warning and the prevention of youth recruitment.

The work of Harris-Hogan, Barrelle and Zammit (2015, pp. 6-24) confirms that Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategies become more effective when they mobilise communities, strengthen local resilience and develop communications capable of countering extremist narratives. This orientation is in line with the participatory approach to communication for

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

development, according to which the populations concerned must be involved in the assessment, design, implementation and evaluation of actions.

The analysis also has a preventive dimension. It shows that the vulnerability of young people, linked to poverty, unemployment and idleness, cannot be addressed solely through awareness messages. Participatory communication systems must therefore be linked with policies for local development, professional integration and social cohesion. Harris-Hogan, Barrelle and Zammit (2015, pp. 6-24) point out, moreover, that programmes to counter violent extremism aim in particular to strengthen community resilience, social cohesion and communication capable of challenging extremist messages.

It should also be noted that this analysis is of major scientific interest for information and communication sciences, as it shifts the question of military communication from a logic of institutional dissemination to one of social co-construction of information. It shows that press releases, although necessary to make the actions of the Beninese Armed Forces (BAF) official, are not sufficient to effectively reach the populations of rural areas exposed to the threat of armed terrorist groups (ATGs). Indeed, word of mouth, radio and the internet remain decisive channels in the circulation of information and in the formation of collective representations. The study is thus in line with research that conceives of radicalisation not only as an individual phenomenon but also as a process rooted in favourable social environments and political contexts. Schmid (2013, pp. 5-6) emphasises that radicalisation must be analysed at several levels: individual, community and societal. This perspective justifies the attention paid in this research to the relationships between the BAF, rural populations, young people and local alert and reporting mechanisms.

It also echoes research on CVE, which stresses the need to involve local communities, families, women, young people and religious, cultural and educational leaders in developing responses to violent extremism (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle and Zammit, 2015, pp. 6-24). From this perspective, populations should not be treated as mere recipients of awareness messages, but as actors capable of producing meaning, identifying risks and taking part in the decisions that affect their security.

At the social level, the analysis highlights the need for the “co-production of security” between the BAF and communities. Briggs (2010, pp. 971-981) shows that community engagement in counter-terrorism makes it possible, among other things, to establish an early warning system, protect young people from recruitment, address real or perceived grievances

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

and reduce the negative effects of security measures perceived as stigmatising, for example by the Fulani (Peulh) community. These functions correspond directly to the results of the study, which reveals that part of the population does not yet collaborate with the BAF, even though they express a favourable disposition towards their presence in their localities.

The co-construction of information and communication thus appears to be a prerequisite for trust. When populations take part in defining messages and in choosing languages, channels and community relays, they are better able to take ownership of the information and disseminate it reliably. Word of mouth, often presented as a channel that is difficult to control, can then become a space for the circulation of credible information rather than a vector of rumours and mistrust.

Conclusion

The objective of this research, entitled "Towards a Communication-Based Approach to Combating Armed Terrorist Groups in the Commune of Matéri, Northern Benin", was to analyse the counter-terrorism actions undertaken by the BAF with a view to proposing a communication-based approach against the Armed Terrorist Groups operating in the commune of Matéri in northern Benin.

It seeks to offer the BAF a new approach that links communication and military action for improved security. With security developments in the Sahel-Saharan zone strongly marked by the abuses of Armed Terrorist Groups (ATGs), Benin experienced its first terrorist attacks in December 2021, notably in the areas of Porga and Banikoara, close to the borders of Burkina Faso and Niger respectively. This new situation led to the implementation of several actions both by the government of the Republic of Benin and by the military hierarchy, now resolutely committed to the fight against terrorism and violent extremism. Military action has thus intensified in the northern part of Benin in order to guard against further acts of this kind. The study of the mechanisms implemented clearly shows an exclusive reliance on conventional military methods by the BAF against ATGs, stemming not only from the military hierarchy's lack of awareness of the assets offered by the communication function, but above all from the legal framework and the organisation of operational theatres, which fail to incorporate social communication. As a result, the sole communication tool currently deployed—namely press releases—proves insufficient to guard effectively against the abuses of ATGs. To remedy this shortcoming, appropriate use of the communication function by the BAF, through the establishment of an enabling organisational framework in operational theatres and of a dedicated counter-terrorism communication policy, will help, to some extent,

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

to prevent ATG abuses by providing the BAF with an effective early warning system. It should be stressed, however, that such initiatives within the BAF can only succeed with the approval and active engagement of the Beninese government, ensuring that all forces involved work in synergy.

In the Beninese context, this research opens up several avenues for further study: evaluating civil-military communication mechanisms, assessing the role of community radio stations in early warning, exploring youth and women's participation in preventing violent extremism, and establishing ethical protocols for reporting, notably informant protection and reprisal prevention. Finally, it calls for security communication that sacrifices neither defence secrecy nor the local population's fundamental right to clear, reliable and culturally adapted information.

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