



# The Palgrave Handbook of Language and Crisis Communication in Sub-Saharan Africa

*Edited by* Ernest Jakaza  
Hugh Mangeya · Isaac Mhute

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Communication in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Isaac Mhute  
Editors

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# Preface

Zimbabwe, Africa and the wider world have had to contend with one crisis/disaster after another. These crises or disasters are spread over different parts of the society, including the political, economic, social and cultural sectors. Organisations and institutions are being affected and impacted differently by these crises in strategic communication 'areas' such as brand and reputation management communications. Organisations have devised various management and communication ways for preventing and mitigating the effects of crises and disasters to protect themselves as well as their stakeholders.

The edited Handbook packages debates, trends and insights relating to language and crisis/disaster communication in all types of institutions, including private and public sector organisations, formal and informal sector organisations, governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), political parties as well as social movements and at both the macro and micro levels. It examines organisational and institutional practices in Zimbabwe, exploring how they adopt and adapt new methods of strategically communicating in order to survive in the face of new environmental and operating challenges. The researches equip organisations and institutes with apt insights and experiences on language and crisis communication theories and practices in order to have a competitive advantage.

Considering the many crises and disasters that have befallen and approaching the entire planet in general and Zimbabwean organisations and institutions in particular, the edited Handbook is a valuable resource for worldwide scholars and organisations. It is a key resource book for academics, students

and practitioners. It appeals to subject areas such as political communication, media communication, language and communication, brand communication, social/digital media communication, crisis communication among others.

Zvishavane, Zimbabwe

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Isaac Mhute

# Acknowledgements

*The Palgrave Handbook of Language and Crisis Communication in sub-Saharan Africa* is a resounding success because of teamwork and support from a number of people and organisations.

As editors, we appreciate and are grateful to invaluable professional comments from chapter reviewers. Our heartfelt thanks!

The Handbook has become a reality because of the cooperative and erudite contributors who provided stimulating and thought-provoking manuscripts. Your high-quality and sterling work will greatly contribute towards the mitigation of crises and disasters to Zimbabwe, sub-Saharan Africa and the wider world. You are exceedingly revered.

We also humbly appreciate and are thankful to Palgrave for honouring and bequeathing us with the mandate to edit and publish this Handbook. We are grateful to the editorial and publishing team for making this process effortless and hassle-free.

Above all, we thank the Almighty for wisdom and guidance!

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# 1

## Language and Crisis Communication in Sub-Saharan Africa

Hugh Mangeya, Ernest Jakaza , and Isaac Mhute

### Introduction

*The Palgrave Handbook of Language and Crisis Communication in sub-Saharan Africa* (the handbook) explores the scope, purpose and practical application of crisis and disaster management communication in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). It is a multidisciplinary engagement of crisis and disaster management communication in the region. It harnesses broad, interdisciplinary expertise in interrogating the multiple dimensions of crisis and disaster communication in SSA. It is important to highlight that the region is located in a ‘disaster zone’, that is, one prone to natural disasters. This renders it one of the most vulnerable parts of the globe to disasters and crises, especially in light of endemic poverty, political and other factors. The handbook is an engagement with the nature of crises and disasters bedevilling the region as well as with the role

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played by communication in their prevention and/or mitigation. It also explores some of the possible resolutions to the identified challenges. Of course, the primary focus of the handbook is on the critical role played by language and communication in the management of crises and disasters in the region. Communication plays a critical role in relation to the identification, social construction, awareness raising, preparation, mitigation and eradication of crises and disasters in the region. Most importantly, communication plays a crucial role in potentially reducing the impacts of crises and disasters before their occurrence.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the region has had to contend with a seemingly never-ending series of crises or disasters. These have been spread over different sectors of the society, including political, economic, social and cultural events. They have emanated from both natural and human-made phenomena. These include weather-related phenomena (extreme temperatures, floods, cyclones, famines, etc.), epidemics (cholera, typhoid, Ebola, COVID-19, HIV and Aids etc.), ideological differences (party conflicts, factional fights, wars, electoral problems, legitimacy issues, sanctions) and greed (child trafficking, abductions, ritual killings, ownership wrangles, etc.). Organisations of all shapes and sizes are all affected in both the public and private sectors. Carter (2008, p. xiii) makes the apposite observation that,

Losses from [crises and] natural disasters reduce the pace of sustained economic development and often lead to a heavy drain on available resources, diverting them from pursuing developmental aims.

It is imperative to point out that losses from crises and disasters may not be localised to the affected organisation, town/city or country. A case in point is in Bari et al.'s (2017) argument that natural disasters, such as the 2014–2015 Ebola epidemic in West Africa and the 2016 droughts induced by El Niño in parts of Eastern and Southern Africa, highlight the multiple costs posed by natural disasters not only in the respective locales of the disasters, but across SSA as a whole. Bari et al. (2017, p. 3) further argue that

The significant international spill overs and scale of humanitarian relief needs drive home the point that these challenges are a concern of global as well as regional scale.

It follows, therefore, that preparing for crisis and disaster situations and, where possible, preventing them is an integral part of sustainable development.

In spite of operating in such adverse conditions, marred by a plethora of crises and disasters of different magnitudes, organisations and institutions, are, however, still expected not only to deliver, but also to stay competitive and remain relevant. Unfortunately, these crises and disasters significantly impact on the manner in which they operate and strategically communicate with their various stakeholders, both internal and external, in furthering their goals and objectives. This implies that they should adopt and adapt new methods of communicating strategically in order to survive in the face of new environmental and operating challenges. Whilst they are, therefore, obliged to engage in strategic communication practices best suited for the contextual environments in which they are operating, they have to be equipped with suitable crisis and disaster management communication theories in order to engage in appropriate practices. To theoretically equip organisations accordingly in such difficult times, this call is for research into how institutions have had to adapt their strategic communication practices to secure or maintain a competitive advantage.

At both national and regional levels, there have been efforts to build and maintain brands in the face of crises and disasters. This concern goes beyond 'profit-making' business institutions, since every entity needs to survive and further its interest. For instance, government departments, ministries and institutions have all been on a drive to strategically communicate their brand in the face of challenging hydrological, meteorological, geophysical, climatological and biological hazards, among others. The same applies to regional organs, such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which has had to contend with major political crises and various disasters since the turn of the millennium. Needless to say, these pose significant threats to the region, in general, and to respective countries, in particular.

However, the role of ethical communication within such an environment is also crucial. A balance has to be struck between effective communication before, during and after a crisis and adherence to ethical requirements. For instance, governments and regional bodies have both been widely criticised for failing to communicate ethically, especially when faced with a crisis. In addition, there is a tendency on the part of researchers to focus exclusively on crisis and disaster management at a macro national level, yet some of these

crises and disasters have occurred at a district, or even a communal, level. In as much as they might be guided by national and regional/continental policies, it is paramount for districts and communities, for example, to devise strategic communication practices applicable to their respective needs in so far as might assists with the mitigation and/or prevention of any future crises and disasters at a micro level.

Organisations across the globe have been found wanting, especially with regard to the relationship between theory and practice on crisis and disaster management communication. Governments and organisations alike are normally good at coming up with ‘blueprints’, that is, roadmaps stipulating how they will respond to crises and disasters. However, there seem to be a gap between theory and practice. Considering the many crises and disasters that have befallen and are approaching the entire planet in general, and sub-Saharan African organisations and institutions in particular, it is pertinent to explore how this relationship is, or has been, realised.

Research on crises and disaster management has largely been carried out from the physical sciences and/or social sciences perspective. However, the place of linguistics and communication in effective crisis and disaster management cannot be ignored. Organisations and institutions require linguistic and communication practices to be in place for them to manage and survive in such a crisis- and disaster-infested environment. Proper crisis communication plans should be drafted and implemented, since in business deciding not to communicate properly is deciding to fail. There are numerous crisis communication plans that can be used, but in order to strategically communicate, organisations and institutions have to tailor-make their communication plans to their needs. Yet the role and nature of linguistics and communication in crisis and disaster management is still a virgin area of research, especially in the Zimbabwean context.

Organisations, however, respond differently to these crises and disasters; which have impacted differently on strategic communication ‘areas’ such as crisis, conflict, brand and reputation management communications, among others. Whilst organisations should have clear crisis and disaster management communication plans, research into how organisations in SSA strategically communicate these critical issues is still scant. As such, it is pertinent for researchers to explore how various organisations integrated the management and strategic communication functions in preventing and mitigating the effects of crises and disasters through protecting themselves as well as their stakeholders (Coombs, 2015).

The volume, thus, packages researches from diverse experts in this critical sub-region. The chapters are representative of the wide diversity of

perspectives on and around issues of crises and disasters in the sub-region. These include theoretical, empirical, review, and case study perspectives. They represent contemporary thinking on crises and disasters in SSA. That is, their definition, trends and underlying causes. The handbook, therefore, adds onto the existing body of knowledge in crisis and disaster communication in SSA. It, therefore, draws upon crisis and disaster management communication practices in the region and endeavours to relate realistically to the needs of national disaster managers. In the process, it also enables comparative analysis with global trends. Furthermore, it also provides research-based insights for crisis and disaster communication practice at both managerial decision-making and strategic communication response optimisation levels in the public and the private sectors. Whilst not offering a panacea to ending crises and disasters in the region, it takes a step in that direction and provides the requisite foundation on which future discussions on these critical issues can proceed.

## Defining Crisis and Disaster

### Crisis

As in any other discipline, the term ‘crisis’ can be defined from a multiplicity of perspectives, with each definition emphasising either the disciplinary interests and/or specific dynamics of the term. This section presents some of the definitions that have been offered by different scholars. It also briefly summarises the salient types of crises that have been explicated in the literature.

Coombs (2015) defines a crisis as a period of intense difficulty, trouble or danger. This is a basic definition of crisis which, however, provides the foundation on which more precise ones are developed. This definition focuses on just two salient aspects of a crisis situation. These are intense difficulty and the presence of trouble or danger. Both of these aspects are key ‘ingredients’ of crisis. However, whilst these could also occur at a personal level, the focus of the handbook is on crises that are collectively felt or realised. Awuh et al. (2022, p. 6) underscore how “crises are generally associated with a system, organisation and group of people...” This could be at an organisational, community, national or regional level.

Fearn-Banks (2011) defines a crisis as a major occurrence that has the potential for producing negative outcomes that affect an organisation, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name.