

Corporate Crisis Communication and Institutional Trust at the Kenya Airports Authority

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Abstract

This paper analyzes corporate crisis communication and institutional trust at Kenya Airports Authority (KAA) during incidents affecting service delivery or continuity. Conceptualized through SCCT, Institutional Trust Theory, and Sustainable Governance lenses, this study reviews documentary evidence of official communication materials, regulatory reports, news coverage, and policy statements made public by KAA or key stakeholders during crises affecting Kenya's airport sector. Employing a qualitative documentary case study methodology and thematic content analysis, this study examines crisis communication messaging according to criteria of timeliness, transparency, accountability, consistency, and stakeholder orientation. Results show that KAA communication is formalized and institutionalized, prompt, and heavily weighted toward themes of business continuity, passenger reassurance, and institutional stability. These characteristics enable crisis communication to instill short-term confidence and trust through depictions of competence and control during disruption. At the same time, analysis of the reviewed documents revealed patterns of reactive messaging, unidirectional communication, conditional transparency, and limited public communication of lessons learned or accountability measures. These findings limit the ability of crisis communication practices to build long-term trusting relationships within a public infrastructure context. The paper concludes by arguing that in public infrastructure institutions, crisis communication should prioritize sustainable governance values such as transparency, accountability, and public learning over short-term reputational protection.

Keywords: *Corporate Crisis Communication, Kenya Airports Authority, Institutional Trust, Sustainable Governance, Public Infrastructure*

1.0 Introduction

Public infrastructure institutions serve important functions in national development and serve as pillars for trade, mobility, safety, and access to essential services. In the airport industry, institutions such as airport authorities are expected to ensure safe, efficient operations that earn and maintain the trust of passengers and stakeholders even during periods of disruption or irregularity. Operational disruptions can include flight delays, system failures, unexpected service interruptions, labor strikes, security incidents, or temporary suspension of operations due to emergencies. During these moments, crisis communication serves as one avenue for an institution to explain what has occurred, reassure stakeholders, and attempt to maintain public confidence (Coombs, 2007, 2015).

Scholarship on crisis communication has demonstrated that an organization's response to a crisis can affect stakeholders' perceptions of responsibility, legitimacy, and competence. Through SCCT, we know that crisis response strategies should match crisis type and attribution of organizational responsibility because these factors affect reputational and relational outcomes with stakeholders (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Public organizations are also expected to operate with higher levels of transparency, responsiveness, and accountability because they are responsible to citizens who fund and are affected by their work (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2015; Heath, 2010). Crisis communication has therefore been linked to institutional trust whereby stakeholders view an organization as reliable, competent, and well-intentioned (Blind, 2006; Mayer et al., 1995).

Institutional trust matters for public infrastructure organizations because citizens depend on them to provide continuity of service, ensure safety, and maintain orderly systems. In cases where airport operations are disrupted, poor communication can exacerbate passenger anxiety and diminish confidence in the institution's ability to manage the situation. Effective communication strategies may therefore help maintain institutional trust by alleviating stakeholder concerns, demonstrating care and coordination, and communicating responsibly during times of crisis (Liu et al., 2011; Ulmer et al., 2018). Transparent and responsive communication by public organisations promotes trust, especially in situations where public accountability and service delivery are being questioned (Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012; Kim & Lee, 2012).

Public organizations also have a responsibility to promote sustainable development. Sustainable development calls for not only safe and reliable infrastructure but also accountable governance mechanisms that support transparency, accountability, and public trust in institutions even during disruption. Sustainable Development Goal 9 promotes resilient infrastructure, while Sustainable Development Goal 16 promotes effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. More specifically, SDG 16.6 calls for the development of effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels (United Nations, 2015; United Nations, n.d.). From a sustainable governance perspective, this means crisis communication should centre not just on institutional reputation, but also on building resilient systems and institutions that retain public trust long after crises are contained or resolved (OECD, 2017).

This paper analyzes crisis communication at Kenya Airports Authority from the perspective of sustainable governance and institutional trust. KAA is Kenya's state corporation mandated to manage airports used by millions of Kenyans and international passengers. Disruptions that occur within KAA's operations can affect passenger mobility, service delivery, and public confidence in how Kenya's airports are managed. The present study, therefore, analyses KAA crisis communication around documented events such as system failures, service disruptions, and other incidents that have affected airport operations or raised questions about the institution's credibility.

Research on crisis communication has grown significantly over the years. However, much of this research centres on private corporations or Western contexts. There is limited understanding of how African institutions in the public sector work to build and sustain trusting relationships with citizens, especially through crisis communication. Further, there is limited research on crisis communication and airport operations from an African context. This paper attempts to address these gaps by analyzing documentary evidence from Kenya's airport sector and discussing how crisis communication may support or undermine institutional trust.

Positioned at the crossroads of corporate communication, crisis communication, and public sector governance literature, this study draws its primary analytical basis from crisis communication theory, especially Situational Crisis Communication Theory. SCCT is the theoretical lens through which KAA's framing of disruption, responsibility, reassurance, and continuity throughout crisis events is analyzed. Institutional trust theory and the Sustainable Development Goals are supplemental lenses through which to analyze how crisis communication can impact public legitimacy, accountability, and resilience surrounding a public infrastructure organization.

The theoretical framework clarifies how the study bridges the corporate communication and public policy literatures through crisis communication. This paper draws from Strategic Communication, particularly crisis communication literature because it explores how a public infrastructure organization strategically constructs, contains and communicates crisis to maintain legitimacy, stakeholder confidence and institutional trust.

2.0 Objectives of the Study

2.1 General Objective

To analyze crisis communication and institutional trust at Kenya Airports Authority during operational disruptions.

2.2 Specific Objectives

1. To examine the crisis communication strategies used by Kenya Airports Authority during operational disruptions, and how these strategies reflect timeliness, transparency, accountability, consistency, and stakeholder orientation.
2. To assess how Kenya Airports Authority's crisis communication practices shape institutional trust during operational disruptions.

3.0 Research Questions

1. What crisis communication strategies does Kenya Airports Authority use during operational disruptions, and how do these strategies reflect timeliness, transparency, accountability, consistency, and stakeholder orientation?
2. How do Kenya Airports Authority's crisis communication practices shape institutional trust during operational disruptions?

4.0 Literature Review

4.1 Crisis Communication Practices at KAA

Published literature on crisis communication practices at KAA is limited. Some literature exists on stakeholder perceptions of crisis responsibility within KAA as well as internal employee perspectives on ethical crisis communication. Other literature focuses on public controversies surrounding airport expansion projects where media framing, political interests, and public engagement practices have been criticized. There is also some literature on infrastructure resilience during crises. While these studies highlight important considerations around delayed messaging, opaque communication practices, and limited public engagement around KAA crisis communication practices, more research is needed to directly connect these practices to institutional trust.

We focus narrowly on SDG 16.6 because it specifically promotes the “development of effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels” (United Nations, n.d.). SDG 16.6 applies well to public-sector crisis communication because the transparency and responsiveness of official messaging during crises often signals whether an institution is effective, transparent, and deserving of trust. In KAA’s case, crisis communication should be considered not just a reputational exercise but a governance strategy through which KAA can demonstrate accountability to passengers, airlines, regulators, and the general public. By honing in on SDG 16.6 rather than SDG 16 broadly, we more cleanly align crisis communication and institutional transparency/trustworthiness in a public infrastructure context.

4.2 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework portrays crisis communication efforts as the independent variable and institutional trust as the dependent variable. We believe that stakeholder perceptions of KAA's competence, integrity, credibility and responsiveness are affected by KAA's crisis communication because crisis communication qualities - transparency, timeliness and accountability- affect whether official communications are perceived as trustworthy in the public-sector governance context. Therefore, our framework relates the decisions revealed through KAA's crisis communication messages to trust institutional outcomes.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Independent Variable (Crisis communication strategies at KAA)	Mediating Variable (Intervening Communication Qualities)	Dependent Variable (Institutional Trust)
-Instructing information - Reassurance - Responsibility framing - Continuity framing - Corrective action explanation - Stakeholder communication approach	-Timeliness - Transparency - Accountability - Consistency - Stakeholder orientation	-Perceived competence - Perceived integrity - Perceived credibility - Perceived reliability - Perceived responsiveness

5.0 Operationalization of Variables

5.1 Operationalization crisis communication strategy

As a variable to be analyzed, crisis communication strategy was operationalized as the prevailing pattern of communicating associated with KAA during disruption situations, which included: instructing information, reassurance, responsibility frame, continuity frame, corrective action explanation, and stakeholder reaction. Crisis communication strategies were measured against how timely, transparent, accountable, consistent and stakeholder-oriented they were.

5.2 Operationalization institutional trust

As a variable to be measured, institutional trust was operationalized as how well the communication established competence, reliability, integrity, openness and responsiveness. For this study, trust is determined by documentary cues that demonstrate how much control communication attempted to project, communicate about the disruption, explain why the institution was acting a certain way, ask for confidence or showed accountability and learning.

6.0 Methodology

Instead of outlining the patterns of KAA communications, this paper seeks to examine how messages are framed during crisis situations within documentary evidence and interpret what these patterns may say about institutional trust, responsibility and legitimacy. This was a qualitative documentary case study on crisis communication practices at Kenya Airports Authority, a public infrastructure corporation. This study was not mixed-method because qualitative analysis was used to analyze data and quantitative surveys or measurements were not used. Qualitative research was appropriate because this study sought to understand how crisis communication is framed in publicly available documents.

This study relied on secondary documentary sources published between 2015 and 2025. Data sources included KAA press statements, public advisories, website announcements and notices, KAA annual reports, KAA strategic report, Kenya airports industry report by a regulator, Senate and parliamentary committee reports, audit office extracts, and media coverage by reputable news

outlets pertaining to disruptions in Kenya's airport sector. These materials were selected because they provided primary evidence on how disruption or crisis events were framed, how KAA's responses were communicated, and whether language to construct or deconstruct institutional trust was present in official communications or external narratives.

Documents were selected if they were publicly accessible online or hard copies, referenced Kenya Airports Authority directly, and/or discussed airport-related disruptions that had occurred in Kenya between 2015 and 2025. Documents were excluded if the information they carried was redundant in other documents, lacked a clearly identifiable authorship or institutional voice, or did not directly reference disruption or response efforts in Kenya's airport sector.

7.0 Analytical Framework Summary

Documentary sources were content analyzed, using SCCT as the central theoretical lens, Institutional Trust Theory as the lens through which stakeholder trust was interpreted, and SDG 9 and SDG 16 as governance-inspired lenses through which resilience, transparency, accountability, and legitimacy were assessed. A thematic analysis operationalized two primary variables: crisis communication strategy and institutional trust. Crisis strategy was measured by the presence of themes relating to instructing information, reassurance, continuity framing, responsibility, and stakeholder orientation. Institutional trust was measured by documentary indicators of competence, reliability, integrity, openness, and responsiveness.

7.1 Data Instrumentation

The data collection instrument was a document review guide. This document review guide included instructions for extracting information from each document. Information extracted included; title of document, source or publishing entity, date of publication, nature of crisis/disruption, main communication message, presence of timeliness of communication, transparency, accountability, consistency, stakeholder orientation, and indications that institutional trust was being built or damaged.

7.2 Analysis Procedure

The selected documents were analyzed using thematic content analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Themes included timeliness, transparency, accountability, consistency, stakeholder

orientation, and institutional trust. Identified themes were then interpreted using theoretical perspectives described in the literature review section.

7.3 Ensuring Rigor

Rigor in this study was established by clearly defining inclusion and exclusion criteria for sourcing documents, triangulating data across documents from different institutional and non-institutional voices, and interpreting themes using established theory. Rigor was further ensured by providing a rich description of how data was gathered in the methodology section.

7.4 Ethical Considerations

This study did not require ethical approval because it reviewed documents that were publicly available. All sources were acknowledged through citation, and no confidential documents were used. Review of publicly available documents falls under ethically appropriate research conducted on organizational archives (Bowen, 2009).

7.5 Results

The results presented below are drawn from thematic analysis of targeted discursive evidence collected from KAA press releases, warnings, reports, website announcements, audit committee and parliamentary reports excerpts, and reputable media reporting of incidents.

Theme 1: Formalized Communication around Disruption Events at KAA

Official advisories and public statements showed that there is a strong tendency to institutionalize communication in the event of service disruptions at KAA. This was evident in public notices, official statements, acknowledgement of disruptions, reference to strategic plans, and oversight documents drawn from parliament and audit offices. Responding to incidents at KAA appears to follow a certain procedure which often involves official statements. This formalized approach to crisis communication can promote institutional trust since it portrays order, administrative intent, and efficiency.

Available documentation revealed that crisis communication employed by KAA was primarily informative, reassuring, and designed to signal continuity. In messages pertaining to the JKIA runway closure incident of 11 June 2024, KAA informed the public that there were no casualties,

efforts to remove aircraft from the runway were underway, and further communication would be issued (The Star, 2024; Citizen Digital, 2024). In the Auditor-General's Annual Performance Report for KAA released in 2024 on the financial year ended 30 June 2023, it was reported that KAA's ICT systems were breached on 24 February 2023, rendering services unavailable due to a cyberattack (Office of the Auditor-General, 2024). This presents an incident in which honest and trustworthy crisis communication could have built confidence in KAA. These examples help to empirically illustrate my claim that crisis communication practices within KAA relate to institutional trustworthiness.

Theme 2: Unidirectional Communication Dominates

Audit and parliamentary reports revealed little evidence was found to that KAA opened communicative spaces for dialogue with affected stakeholders or the general public. Messages were crafted and distributed primarily through official statements. This is consistent with SCCT, which explains that instructing stakeholders about what is happening and what they should do is a common crisis response strategy. However, the theory also suggests stakeholders should be given opportunities for feedback during crises or major disappointments. While reassurance may help stakeholders trust that an institution can manage crises, it does not leave much room for dialogue or stakeholder voice, both of which are important components of trust.

Theme 3: KAA Communicates Timely but is Partially Transparent

Evidence from the selected documents suggest that KAA is often timely in its communication. Official messages are often released within hours of an incident occurring or soon after. Timely communication can be important during crisis because it can prevent misinformation and speculation. KAA was less transparent in its communication as frequently demonstrated in official statements sampled. KAA rarely explains what caused a disruption, who might be responsible for a mishap, whether an internal review was conducted, or whether lessons were learned after the incident occurred. The combination of being timely but only partially transparent can help maintain public confidence during crises. However, it does not promote public learning or accountability which are important elements of trust.

Theme 4: Construction of Crisis as Risk to Reputation

Documents from parliamentary meetings and media articles show that incidences at KAA are often framed as regrettable occurrences that are beyond anyone's control. Messages from KAA frequently assure the public that technical problems are being managed or operations have been suspended for security reasons. In news articles, incidents are framed as issues that have been blown out of proportion. Language used in official communication from KAA constructs crises as reputational risks that must be contained by limiting information that can be used to assign blame. This is not to say that all communication by KAA should admit fault or culpability during crises. However, framing crises solely as risks to institutional reputation makes it difficult to detect whether KAA applies learning after a mishap occurs or takes responsibility if necessary.

Theme 5: Construction of Institutional Trust as Confidence in Operational Capability

In much of the sampled data, institutional trust was constructed in terms of confidence in institutional ability to manage technical challenges. Stakeholders are consistently reminded that measures are in place to manage the disruption or that normalcy would soon be restored. Language that might confer goodwill, public inclusion, and moral responsibility is less visible in sampled communication. It can be argued that projecting confidence during crises is important and may prevent panic. However, when an institution communicates solely about its ability to manage operations during a disruption, it misses opportunities to build trusting relationships with its stakeholders.

Theme 6: Language around Sustainable Development is Weak

Few documents contained clear language connecting what KAA does to sustainable development. There were numerous mentions of resilience as an institutional value. However, words like "sustainability", "public learning", and "transparency" were not common in crisis communication sampled. If KAA values sustainable development, its communication should make these commitments visible especially during times of crisis or disruption.

8.0 Discussion

The discussion interprets the thematic findings in relation to crisis communication theory, institutional trust, and sustainable governance within a public infrastructure context.

Relationship between Crisis Communication and Sustainable Development Goals

As discussed in preceding themes, KAA crafts its messages in ways that build confidence during crisis. This strategy may enable stakeholders to trust that services will continue during crisis or soon return to normal. Articles drawn from media outlets show that institutions can even harness news coverage to protect their reputation during times of crisis. However, when crisis communication is used solely to ensure public confidence, it does not promote transparency, accountability, and public learning which are needed to sustain public infrastructure systems. Considerations of timeliness, transparency, and accountability are critical to building or eroding public trust. Promoting infrastructure resilience and public confidence during times of crisis should go hand-in-hand with transparent and accountable communication if KAA is to contribute to sustainable development

Comprehensive Model for Responsible Crisis Communication

The results of this study allow me to propose a comprehensive model for responsible crisis communication at Kenya Airports Authority (and similar public infrastructure institutions). This model seeks to align crisis communication with sustainable institutional practices. Moving away from defensive and reputation-first models of crisis communication, public institutions should consider practicing crisis communication in ways that are more transparent, accountable, and trustworthy. The recommended model includes five mutually reinforcing dimensions.

Readiness & Communication Preparedness

Public infrastructure institutions should define their communication chains before crises occur. Reducing the impulse to adlib during crises, institutions should identify their official spokesperson(s), approval process, escalation procedures, and stakeholder map before a crisis occurs.

Timely & Initial Disclosure

Upon identifying a disruption, public infrastructure institutions should aim to speak to stakeholders as soon as possible to acknowledge the incident, clarify immediate impact (if any), and outline immediate next steps being undertaken. Where full details of the incident are not known, initial disclosure can limit ambiguity and maintain confidence.

Incremental Disclosure

While early crisis communication should reassure the public that everything is under control, institutions should become more transparent about details of the incident as they become available. Timely updates about what happened, known impact, what is being done, and how the institution will prevent a reoccurrence go a long way in maintaining trust long after the crisis phase has passed.

Responsibility and Institutional Learning

In addition to clarifying responsibility and explaining how they will ‘make things right,’ public infrastructure institutions should aim to communicate what they learn from incidents going forward. Portraying responsible institutions are better able to demonstrate integrity and maintain public trust.

Public Dialogue

Last, I propose that public institutions build channels for inquiries, feedback, and stakeholder engagement during and after crisis events. Taking a two-way symmetrical approach to crisis communication ensures it becomes more relational and responsible.

Taken together, these practices align responsible crisis communication with the principles of sustainable governance. By linking day-to-day operational resilience to transparency, accountability, legitimacy, and trust, crisis communication becomes part of an institution’s larger contributions to reliable infrastructure and good public institutions.

9.0 Conclusion

The paper explored crisis communication by a corporation and public institutional trust at Kenya Airports Authority (KAA) during service disruption. It found that the Authority has formalized channels of communication which is timely and powerfully employed around business continuity themes and passenger reassurance which sustains short term stakeholder trust. The study however revealed that KAA crisis communication is mostly reactive rather than proactive, wanting in transparency and weak in accountability, dialogue with stakeholders and demonstrable learning, indicating a tendency to privilege reputation protection over longer-term trust building. The study

contributes to theory by broadening SCCT's application to public infrastructure organizations that must maintain service continuity while managing multiple stakeholder expectations. The study also provides evidence that documentary case studies can be used to explore how crisis communication is framed by public institutions, regulators and the media. The study provides practical recommendations that crisis communication by public organizations needs to balance reassurance with transparency, accountability, responsiveness and visible learning if it is to build and maintain public trust over the long term. As such, this research helps fill a gap in Strategic Communication literature by showcasing crisis communication efforts of a public infrastructure agency as strategic practice of legitimacy maintenance, stakeholder assurance, and trust-building during times of crisis.

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