

## Analysis of Stakeholder Perception of the Government of Kenya's Messaging on the Kenya-Somalia Maritime Border Dispute

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### Abstract

This paper explores the stakeholder perception of the Government of Kenya's messaging on the Kenya-Somalia maritime border dispute (KSMBD). The territorial dispute between Kenya and Somalia has highlighted the significance of the government's clear, transparent, and timely communication. Effective communication and messaging are crucial for ensuring that governments clearly articulate their policies, especially on critical issues of national concern, such as the KSMBD. The dispute touches on Kenya's territorial integrity and sovereignty, making it a core national interest in line with the Kenyan Constitution 2010. The goals of the study were to examine stakeholder perception of the core Government of Kenya (GoK) messages on the KSMBD. The study relied on framing theory, while an exploratory study design guided the methodology. Key findings drawn from key informants and in-depth interviews indicated that government communication lacked a clear strategy. This resulted in incoherent and uncoordinated communication that ultimately affected the GoK response to the maritime border dispute. This paper recommends the need to enhance clear and well-defined strategic communication structures and processes in government, especially when communicating on issues of national importance.

**Keywords:** Effective messaging, government communication, territorial disputes, Kenya-Somalia maritime dispute.

## Introduction

Effective communication is a core function of government, as it serves to elucidate government policies, programmes, and initiatives, thereby fostering public support and nurturing robust bonds between the government and its citizens. Notwithstanding its pivotal importance, the role of communication within government has often been underutilised, leading to numerous challenges in effectively conveying policies to the citizenry. For instance, a report by Wire and Plastics Products (WPP), titled *Leaders Report the Future of Government Communications* (WPP, 2017), focusing on government communication across forty (40) countries highlights several obstacles encountered in the realm of government messaging.

Governments worldwide have faced significant hurdles in effective communication and messaging on issues of national importance. For instance, in the United Kingdom (UK), the communication and messaging around BREXIT, a referendum to exit the European Union (EU), was unclear and did not extensively engage the general public. This posed communication challenges around the BREXIT campaign (Gregory, 2019).

In Kenya, several instances highlight challenges facing the Government of Kenya (GoK) in effectively communicating national issues. For instance, Ngirachu (2020) notes the deficiency in comprehensive information dissemination regarding the Big Four Agenda government policy from the GoK to the media. This shortcoming led to a lack of awareness among the majority of Kenyans about the key objectives of the policy, which constituted a pivotal component of the Jubilee administration's agenda. Other instances where the GoK faced challenges in its communication include the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), a political attempt to fix national issues through a constitutional referendum, where the GoK did not sufficiently educate and convince the larger public to support the referendum initiative, and the genetically modified organisms (GMO) debate, where stakeholders, particularly farmers, pointed out the lack of sufficient information on benefits and effects of the GMO among others. Within the framework of the need for effective government communication on issues of national concern, this study focuses on the Kenya-Somalia maritime border dispute (KSMBD) due to its implications for Kenya's national security and territorial integrity.

Kenya and Somalia have been embroiled in territorial disputes since Kenya's independence in 1963. However, the maritime border dispute escalated in 2014 when Somalia filed a case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Despite the substantial importance and implications of the dispute for the country and its citizens, there was lack of comprehensive information available to the public, particularly during the initial stages. Although the government made efforts to

enhance public awareness regarding the maritime border dispute, there remained a limited understanding and acknowledgment of the severity of the issue among the populace. Consequently, there was diminished support for the government's position, potentially influencing the response to the dispute.

The objectives of this study were to; (i)examine stakeholder perception of GoK messages on the KSMBD and (ii) to assess the challenges that the GoK faced in its communication around the dispute.

The study aims to contribute to the field of communication, international relations, maritime, and security studies by providing new knowledge on mechanisms for government communication on critical issues of national concern. Furthermore, the findings provide valuable insights for formulating effective communication strategies that clearly articulate government policies and programmes on critical matters of national concern.

## Scope

The study analyses the GoK messaging regarding the KSMBD, with a focus on key individuals and governmental entities involved in communication on this matter between 2014 and 2023. This timeframe spans the initiation of the case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to the present, where the dispute remains unresolved.

## Literature review

### ■ *Government messaging on critical issues of national concern*

Government messaging, in essence, encompasses the array of strategies and tactics employed by a government or public institution to effectively disseminate information to the public. It serves the purpose of keeping citizens informed about government policies, actions, programmes, and initiatives. Hallahan (2000), a renowned scholar in the field of public relations, underscores the critical significance of skillfully crafting messages that resonate with diverse audiences. This principle holds substantial importance not only for organisations but also for governmental entities.

Vuving (2019) observes that states utilise messaging as a means of moulding the perceptions and behaviors of their populace, as well as those of foreign nations. This indicates the pertinent role government messaging plays in statecraft.

Several studies have examined government messaging and its role in addressing issues of critical national concern. For instance, Lambert's (2022) study explores how the United States (US) government has employed different frames to shape public opinion around US national security. These frames include the issue frame,

the threat frame, and the realist frame. For example, the realist frame stresses actions that advance or safeguard US national interests abroad. This study illustrates how the GoK can frame national issues in a way that captures the national mood and rallies public support towards critical national issues such as the KSMBD. Issue frame or government frame prioritises specific topics aligned with government preferences. They are crafted to portray a favourable image of desired government policies while downplaying or suppressing the presentation of negative alternatives to the public.

Similarly, a study by Aoi (2018) delves into how the Japanese government has employed strategic communication to foster a favorable international image of Japan. This involves crafting suitable messages, timing their release strategically, and carefully selecting the communication channels and languages, used to convey these messages, all aimed at engaging effectively with the intended global audience.

A study on the Russian government's communication (Petraitis et al., 2022), particularly their review of the ZAPAD 2021 joint military drills, showed that Russia and Belarus used various strategic messages and narratives. These included emphasising the need to reassert Russia's position as a military superpower and, by extension, a 'Great Power'. These messages and narratives were strategically designed to exert influence over the public, portraying Russia as both a formidable military superpower and a prominent global entity.

### ■ **Government communication and messaging challenges**

Despite the prominent role that government communication and messaging play in formulating and articulating critical issues of national importance as discussed above, several studies have highlighted the inherent challenges of communication and messaging on national issues. The Wire and Plastics Products (WPP), a British multinational communication holding company, in their 2017 report on the future of government communication, underscore the limited understanding and underutilisation of government communication.

Liu and Levenshus (2013) point out that the U.S. government encounters communication challenges arising from emerging threats such as terrorism. These challenges involve striking a delicate balance between providing the public with the necessary information to prepare for potential terrorist attacks and avoiding any information that could inadvertently promote the agenda of terrorists. Aoi (2018) highlights the difficulties encountered in Japanese strategic communication, including the risk of errors due to inconsistent messaging, particularly through actions; the discrepancy between what is said and done, as the government finds it challenging to achieve its goals under the policy of 'proactive contribution to peace'; and the challenge of conveying clear, consistent

messages while preventing unintended communications. A study by Edelman (2019) presents the low level of public trust in the Government of Ireland, along with a prevailing sense of disenfranchisement and disengagement among the general public in response to government communications.

In Kenya, Owino (2022) highlights the lack of centralisation and coordination in GoK communication resulting in a predominantly ad-hoc approach. The researcher further underscores the absence of a comprehensive government communications strategy, emphasising a predominant focus on short-term objectives, often influenced by political considerations.

### ■ *Maritime border disputes*

The maritime domain has increasingly gained heightened significance among states. This is due to the enormous economic benefits that accrue from the sea, often called the blue economy (Hasan et al., 2019). Maritime boundary disputes arise when multiple states find themselves at odds regarding the precise demarcation of their maritime boundaries. Such conflicts typically revolve around defining the extent of jurisdiction over the water column, seabed, or both, within a specific maritime zone (Østhagen, 2020). The overlapping claims and counterclaims between states led to the promulgation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) which was effected in 1994 to offer guidance on the delimitation of sea boundaries.

One of the most noteworthy maritime disputes globally is the South China Sea conflict, distinguished by its intricate and multifaceted characteristics, as emphasised in a study by Strating (2022). The South China Sea dispute involves various countries with maritime territorial claims, including China, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, and Vietnam. China's territorial claims in the South China Sea have sparked disputes with neighbouring states and evolved from a mere maritime disagreement into a territorial conflict. This transformation has been facilitated by China's construction of artificial islands, enabling it to assert territorial ownership over significant expanses within the region (HORN International Institute, 2019).

In Africa, the maritime realm was initially overlooked by African states, who primarily focused on their land boundaries, as noted by Walker (2015). It took some time before these states began to recognise the importance of the sea. Oluoch (2017) highlights that the African Union (AU) established a deadline for African nations to delineate their maritime borders, but as the 2017 deadline approached, only a few countries had accomplished this task. However, Okonkwo (2017) contends that African states have made substantial progress in acknowledging the importance of maritime areas, which has consequently led to overlapping territorial claims among neighboring African nations. Notable African maritime

disputes include Ghana vs. Ivory Coast, Cameroon vs. Nigeria, and Somalia vs. Kenya.

Several scholars have examined the KSMBD dispute from various angles. Waweru et al. (2022) discussed the influence of external actors, international law, peaceful dispute resolution, and the role of the media. Kadagi et al. (2020) proposed joint resource management as an alternative resolution approach. Gunawan et al. (2021) analysed the impact of the dispute on diplomatic relations while Kiguru (2021) examined internal issues affecting Kenya's diplomacy, and Mumma-Martinon (2019) explored peaceful dispute resolution. Pamba (2017) noted the focus of the maritime border dispute on political, legal, security, and regional stability aspects, with limited attention to the communication perspective. This study contributes to this literature by probing the Government of Kenya's messaging in the KSMBD.

### **Theoretical Framework: Framing theory**

Framing theory guided this study. The concept of framing was originally introduced by anthropologist Gregory Bateson in his 1972 book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Bateson conceptualised a psychological frame as a "spatial and temporal bounding of a set of interactive messages", serving as a form of metacommunication (Bateson, 1972). Goffman (1974) characterises frames as "schemata of interpretation," facilitating individuals in "locating, perceiving, identifying, and labeling" occurrences or life experiences. A more expansive definition of framing is provided by Entman (1993), who characterises it as a process wherein particular aspects of reality are chosen and highlighted, imbuing them with heightened emphasis or significance. This emphasis is orchestrated to advance a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral assessment, and/or recommendation for action.

Goffman (1974) delves into the notion of frame analysis, which aims to grasp how individuals comprehend and interpret their life experiences. He suggests that people structure their experiences using frameworks, asserting that we tend to view events through primary frameworks, with the type of framework employed shaping how we describe the event. He further divides the primary framework into two distinct categories. Firstly, the natural framework, wherein individuals interpret events literally, devoid of influence from social pressures. Secondly, the social framework, in which events are perceived as being socially constructed, are influenced by the desires, objectives, and manipulations of other social actors. Goffman's fundamental assumption is that individuals adeptly utilise these frameworks in their daily lives, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Chong and Druckman (2007) define framing as the process through which individuals develop a specific conceptualisation of an issue or alter their



perspectives on it. They posit that a fundamental premise of framing theory is the recognition that an issue can be approached from various angles, each with its considerations. This implies that framing influences how issues are perceived and interpreted by different individuals. Chang and Lee (2009) echo this sentiment, by suggesting that framing serves as a communication strategy utilised by marketing campaigns, where the labeling of information can significantly impact consumers' judgments or decisions. In the realm of government communication, this concept is applicable as the framing of critical national issues shapes public perception and determines the extent of public support for such issues.

Entman (1993) elucidates that a fundamental tenet of the framing theory involves selection and salience. He posits that framing entails the process of choosing specific aspects of a perceived reality and amplifying their significance within a communicative context. This is done to advance a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the subject under discussion.

Framing theory elucidates how the selection and presentation of information, whether to the public or an individual, can shape attitudes and behaviours towards an issue (Rodelo & Muñiz, 2019). Hallahan (2008) posits that strategic framing seeks to convey meaning and direct audience attention to specific elements of a message or aspects of a topic to elicit favourable responses. Additionally, Hallahan emphasises that, in the context of public relations, establishing shared frames of reference on mutual subjects or matters is essential for cultivating effective relations. Moreover, issues can be framed as significant or insignificant in terms of public interest, but crucially, they can also define how individuals perceive and contemplate a given matter.

Lambert (2022) posits that Government policy frames are crafted with the intention of advocating for government policies to the public through strategic presentation of the associated issues. He further argues that governments endeavour to establish the agenda within the public discourse by exerting control over the narrative through the framing of these issues.

Based on the fundamental tenet of selective presentation, framing entails utilising language and messaging techniques to present an issue in alignment with people's pre-existing values. The aim is to foster not only understanding but also agreement with the presented viewpoint. This is relevant to the study as it guides in understanding how the GoK framed the messaging around the KSMBD to inform, influence, and convince the public regarding the dispute.

## Methodology

An exploratory case study design was selected because it facilitated a thorough investigation of the KSMBD, while also providing a framework for analysing government messaging regarding the issue. This approach enabled the researcher to glean valuable insights into the strategies, challenges, and consequences of governmental communication on the maritime border dispute.

The researcher employed in-depth interviews and key informant interviews to gather data. Key informant interviews were conducted with individuals chosen from key organisations directly engaged in the KSMBD, whereas in-depth interviews targeted individuals possessing thorough knowledge about the maritime border dispute.

An interview guide was used to collect data. The research was conducted in Nairobi County, Kenya. This was because the key personnel and institutions which were the target of the study were located there.

Quota sampling was used to segment the various personnel and institutions into 11 quotas, from which purposive sampling was used to select 22 respondents from the target population. The respondents were selected on the basis of their knowledge and involvement in the subject under study.

Ethical procedures were adhered to, including obtaining initial permission from National Intelligence Research University College (NIRUC), a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI), and permission from particular study sites as well as assuring respondents of privacy and confidentiality in handling their responses and that they would only be used for academic purposes. Data was analysed thematically in line with the objectives of the study.

## Findings

### ■ *Core GoK messages on the Kenya-Somalia maritime border dispute*

The respondents were asked to identify the main messages disseminated by the GoK and whether they influenced the discourse on the maritime border dispute to favour Kenya's stance.

Respondents identified several themes that were part of core GoK messaging. These included territorial integrity and sovereignty (not an inch less, not an inch more), negotiated settlement/diplomatic resolution of the maritime border dispute, good neighbourliness, third-party interference, challenging the jurisdiction of the international court of justice, and regional peace and stability.



An analysis of the interview data established that territorial integrity was the foremost message disseminated by the GoK, and it entailed messages emphasising that the disputed area was within Kenya and that it would safeguard its territory at all costs as illustrated by the verbatim data below:

*We were trying to say that in the region, we are not going to let any inch of us go anywhere, and we do not envy our neighbour's land and that our territorial integrity must be protected at all costs. (RKD-1)*

The President stressed this message through the caption: Not an inch less, not an inch more. It also entailed laying historical claims to the disputed area and territorial waters that the territory had been Kenyan since the proclamation in 1979 by President Moi.

Second, analysed data from interviews established that negotiated settlement/diplomatic resolution of the maritime border dispute was part of the main messages issued by the GoK on the maritime border dispute, and it entailed emphasising that Kenya and Somalia should resolve the dispute through negotiations guided by the 2009 memorandum of understanding (MOU). This was contrary to the position taken by Somalia of dispute resolution through a legal process at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). A sample of verbatim interview data illustrates the GoK's focus on negotiated settlement/diplomatic resolution of the maritime border dispute as shown below:

*Our first option was a diplomatic resolution: Let's talk; we are brothers. We are your brothers and sisters. We can resolve this issue in Nairobi between the representatives of the Somalia government and the GoK. If that becomes an issue that we cannot mediate, then let us go to the African Court of Justice in Arusha and resolve the issue as Africans. (RL-1)*

Thirdly, respondents highlighted that part of the GoK messages tried to uncover the influence of third-party actors in fuelling the dispute. This included pointing out the hidden hand of foreign actors from Western countries and oil multinationals who were using Somalia as a proxy to further their selfish interests:

*GoK was messaging that Somalia has been unfair. Somali's President Farmaajo is being used by international oil interests to secure oil blocs off our coast that are known to be within Kenya's territory and had been auctioned by Somalia even before the case was settled. (RCEX-1)*

Contesting the jurisdiction of the ICJ court emerged as a pivotal message disseminated by the GoK, primarily directed towards the international community. This message encompassed issues such as promoting the notion of bias within the ICJ and the presiding judges, alongside advocating for the utilisation of an

African alternative dispute resolution mechanism:

*Rejecting the involvement of a foreign arbiter like the ICJ and advocating for a regional approach, with the African Union (AU) or the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) being potential mechanisms for resolution. (RCEX-2)*

Lastly, the GoK conveyed messages regarding regional peace and stability in the context of the KSMBD. This message underscored the potential consequences, emphasising that if Kenya were to lose the case, it could have far-reaching implications on the overall peace and stability of the region, with the added concern that it might disrupt existing boundary agreements within the region:

*To other African countries, this is an unwarranted move to affect regional peace and stability, and this is going to distort settled borders across the region; this is un-African; we do not understand what these people are trying to do or say; there are established mechanisms within the continent to address issues such as this. (RCEX-2)*

The findings revealed that the GoK messaging was centred around specific key issues or core messages, as previously detailed. This approach was aimed at influencing public opinion and, ultimately, advancing its overarching objectives. Nonetheless, respondents expressed the perspective that these messages had a limited impact on the intended audiences and were relatively ineffective in persuading them to rally behind Kenya's stance on the maritime border dispute:

*However, the messaging did not educate/prepare the audience. Kenyans did not understand how they would be affected by the maritime border dispute. (RN-2)*

This diminished effectiveness was attributed to various challenges encountered by the GoK in its communication efforts, as outlined below:

### ■ **Challenges that GoK faced in its communication on the maritime border dispute**

Respondents mentioned several hurdles that the GoK confronted in its communication that significantly impacted its response to the KSMBD. First, the GoK faced a significant challenge of delayed communication regarding the maritime border dispute, particularly during the initial stages when the case was brought to the ICJ in 2014.

*The biggest challenge was that we started a bit late because we had an understanding with the Somali government that we thought would be honoured. It was not honoured. (RMF-1)*

*Getting on board too late. There was scanty information on what Kenya discussed with Somalia. (RJ-1)*

Secondly, a notable absence of clear and well-defined strategic communication structures and processes within the government hindered the provision of overarching direction and improved coordination among the different government departments and agencies:

*The Government of Kenya initially struggled with a unified communication strategy to counter Somalia's propaganda effectively. This lack of coherence hindered its efforts to address the issue comprehensively. (RCEX-2)*

*A well-thought-out communication strategy and plan on the issue was set up much later in 2018 after the ICJ ruled that it had the right of adjudication over the case in 2017. There was no communication strategy or plan before 2018. (RN-2)*

Thirdly, the predominant viewpoint among the respondents underscored the importance of shaping public opinion and securing public endorsement, particularly on matters of critical national security, such as the maritime border dispute. Nonetheless, a majority of respondents were of the opinion that the government's endeavours in influencing public opinion to favour Kenya's stance were insufficient or lacking altogether.

*The messaging ignored members of the public as key/critical stakeholders. GoK didn't take time to educate Kenyans on why this dispute is important to us as Kenyans. (RN-1)*

*If Kenyans had known that we have oil in a particular place, and that is what we are going to discuss, then you are already creating a perception about what would happen later. This would have been a systematic way of keeping people abreast. It was more of a reactionary approach because here we have been taken to the ICJ, and Somalia is all over, so you decide let's pull our card out because these people were actually going against our agreement. (RJ-1)*

The interview data revealed that the KSMBD suffered due to a lack of coordination among state and non-state actors, which hindered effective collaboration and a unified message representing Kenya's position. Furthermore, internal rivalry and competition among GoK agencies weakened their messaging.

*The arms were not working together. And so, most of the communication, fortunately, was coming from the government. But that messaging was not organised and was not coordinated. The left hand did not know what the right hand was doing. And so that created kind of a disjointed communication. (REX-1)*

Finally, the absence of a clear prioritisation of maritime matters posed a significant challenge.

*The mentality of defence is land-oriented. As a country, we have not paid attention to the maritime issue. So, our maritime posture at the top level was wrong, and therefore, the maritime strategy was also wrong. African navies do not see the danger coming from the sea, and they only think landwards. (REX-3)*

This lack of focus led to a deficiency in the commitment and urgency given to the dispute, and insufficient human and financial resources that were allocated to the issue. This affected GoK's capacity to respond to the dispute effectively.

## Discussion of findings

The study aimed to fulfill two main goals. First, it sought to examine stakeholder perception of the key messages conveyed by the GoK about the disputed Kenya-Somalia border. Second, it sought to critically evaluate the difficulties faced by the GoK in efficiently communicating its stance and messages related to the KSMBD.

The study further aimed to examine the GoK communication regarding the KSMBD. This revealed several key themes. Firstly, it showcased the GoK's emphasis on safeguarding Kenya's territorial integrity, encapsulated by the President's motto "not an inch less, not an inch more," which reflected a claim to the disputed territory since 1979. This stance was underpinned by constitutional mandates and aimed at rallying domestic support and international backing by presenting Kenya as committed to its sovereignty yet open to diplomatic dispute resolution. This perspective aligns with existing literature, as demonstrated by Midiwo (2019), Lambert (2022), and Vuving (2019), which underscores the significance of framing messages and issues in a manner that elicits strong public emotions and fosters a sense of national unity. This strategic approach is crucial for garnering public support, particularly in matters related to national interests.

Secondly, the findings highlighted Kenya's preference for negotiation over legal adjudication, advocating for discussions based on a 2009 memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Somalia, which signaled Kenya's peaceful approach towards resolving the dispute. This message was aimed at the international community, illustrating that Kenya was a peaceful country that aimed to resolve the maritime border dispute through talks, negotiations, and diplomatic means rather than by force, coercion, or conflict. This resonates with studies such as Mumma-Martinon (2019) that emphasised the importance of resolving the dispute through diplomatic or peaceful means.

Thirdly, the study portrayed Kenya as a benevolent neighbour to Somalia, emphasising Kenya's sacrifices, such as hosting refugees and aiding the Somali government, while casting Somalia in a less favourable light. This

narrative aimed at fostering goodwill among Kenyans and presenting Somalia's claims as a sign of ingratitude.

Moreover, the research addressed concerns over external interference in the dispute by foreign nations and companies, suggesting that these actors might exploit Somalia to advance their interests, which aligns with the broader geopolitical dynamics and interests in the region. This resonates with Hamasi and Ichani (2022), who argue that the presence of global interests and actors triggered the KSMBD.

The study also touched on the potential regional implications of the dispute. It warns that a negative outcome could unsettle established boundaries and undermine peace and security. It also highlights Kenya's role in safeguarding the area against threats posed by groups such as Al-Shabaab.

Finally, the GoK challenged the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) jurisdiction, alleging bias and expressing a preference for an African-led resolution mechanism, illustrated by a refusal to participate in ICJ proceedings over perceived procedural unfairness. This message encompassed issues such as promoting the notion of bias within the ICJ and the presiding judges, alongside advocating for the utilisation of an African alternative dispute resolution mechanism.

Framing Theory highlights the government's crucial role in shaping messages that resonate with and educate the public on important national issues. This is supported by the study by Kidd et al. (2019), which points out that messages crafted strategically with clear objectives can significantly impact public attitudes and behaviour. Similarly, Lambert's research (2022) reinforces the government's essential function in framing national security concerns to shape public perception. Furthermore, Aoi (2018) reaffirms the significance of developing well-thought-out messages to better the public's grasp of government policies and boost its image.

In the second objective, analysed data brought to the fore several significant challenges that impeded the (GoK) communication regarding the KSMBD. This revealed the following themes:

Firstly, there was a notable delay in communication, particularly during the early stages of the dispute, due to Kenya's previous unchallenged territorial integrity. This led to a perception that the issue would not escalate, resulting in a proactive communication strategy only beginning in 2018. This delay put the GoK at a disadvantage, forcing it to counter Somalia's propaganda and disinformation retrospectively. Studies such as the OECD (2021) highlight the importance of proactive communication in shaping the narrative and

countering misinformation and disinformation.

The absence of strategic communication structures and processes was highlighted, indicating a lack of a strategic framework and dedicated team for coordinating messaging on the dispute. This deficiency in strategic organisation limited the understanding of the implications of the dispute and the ability to guide communication from the onset. The necessity for a comprehensive strategy, supported by a strategic communications framework and a dedicated team, is necessary to ensure a unified approach to national objectives.

Furthermore, the findings pointed to incoherent and uncoordinated messaging, with various GoK actors delivering disjointed messages. This lack of a clear strategy affected GoK's efforts to present a unified stance on the dispute. It underscored the importance of managing communication effectively to ensure consistent messaging across different audiences, which is crucial for fostering trust and alignment with strategic goals. This concurs with studies like Kim and Kreps (2020), which found that uncoordinated communication among US agencies hindered the COVID-19 response; and Kiguru (2021), which highlighted a lack of coherence and coordination in GoK's response to the maritime border dispute.

The research also identified a less effective influence on public opinion, highlighting the omission of the broader Kenyan public as a crucial target audience. A strategic approach involving emotional appeal and public diplomacy is pertinent to mobilising public support on matters such as the maritime border dispute. This resonates with the excellence theory of public relations propounded by Jim Grunig, which emphasises the significance of organisations, including governments, in fostering closer relations with various stakeholders, key among them the public, in order to achieve strategic goals or objectives (Grunig et al., 2002).

Lastly, the failure to prioritise the maritime border issue was identified as a significant challenge, leading to obstacles like financial constraints and resource limitations. This underscores the need for GoK to continuously evaluate its national maritime strategy, and complement it with a strategic communication framework to effectively communicate Kenya's stance on maritime matters.

## **Conclusion**

After analysing the findings and engaging in comprehensive discussions presented in this study, the following conclusions can be affirmed:

The study analysed stakeholder perception of the government's messaging regarding the KSMBD. It emerged that the GoK made notable efforts to frame





key messages to inform, influence and convey its position on the KSMBD. The core messaging revolved around safeguarding Kenya's territorial integrity and sovereignty and resolving the dispute through negotiation, emphasising good neighbourliness, exposing interference by foreign interests in the dispute, contesting the jurisdiction of the ICJ court, and maintaining regional peace and stability.

These efforts were, however, largely insufficient in reaching and convincing the various target audiences and stakeholders, including the Kenyan public, to support Kenya's position on the maritime border dispute. The efforts to issue a unified response were hampered by various challenges faced by the GoK in its communication that entailed delayed communication, lack of robust strategic communication structures and processes, insufficient public opinion shaping, and lack of prioritisation of the maritime issue which hindered the achievement of the government's overall objectives of influencing the narrative in support of Kenya's position on the maritime border case.

## Recommendations

These issues and challenges continue to manifest in GoK communication and messaging on critical issues of national importance and still pose significant hurdles to government communication. This study proposes the following recommendations:

-  the government should create a robust strategic communication framework, which includes a national policy document on strategic communications. This framework would provide clear guidance for government communication on matters of national significance;
-  an independent body, ideally at the highest decision-making level, is recommended to lead communication efforts. This would ensure seamless coordination and the dissemination of a unified message, particularly on critical issues of national importance.

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