

IDENTIFICATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND HEALTH FACTORS FAVORING THE TRANSMISSION OF MPOX IN THE TSHUAPA PROVINCE, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (LINGOMO, DJOLU, AND BOKUNGU HEALTH ZONES).

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Abstract

Overview

Mpox, caused by the *Simian Orthopoxvirus* (MPXV), is a zoonotic viral disease that is raising growing concerns due to its increasing transmission among humans. Initially endemic in Central and West Africa, the Tshuapa province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is particularly affected. Epidemiological data reveal an alarming rise in cases, with a marked incidence in the health zones of Lingomo, Djolu, and Bokungu. The increase in cases can be attributed to various factors, including the region's rich biodiversity, traditional agricultural and hunting practices, as well as deforestation and urbanisation, which alter natural habitats. In addition, healthcare infrastructure is often inadequate, with low vaccination rates and a lack of awareness among local populations regarding zoonosis. The aim of this study is to analyse these environmental and health factors that favour the transmission of Mpox, to propose evidence-based recommendations for improving prevention and control of the disease. The method employed includes a quantitative survey and an analysis of epidemiological data to establish a profile of cases and risk behaviours. The results show a high prevalence of contact with wild animals, a low level of awareness about the disease, and cultural practices that expose populations to increased risks. It is therefore essential to strengthen healthcare infrastructure, improve education, and organise targeted awareness campaigns. An integrated approach, involving collaboration between health authorities and communities, is crucial to controlling the spread of Mpox and improving public health in the Tshuapa province.

Keywords: Identification, Favoring Factors, Transmission, Mpox.

Date of submission 15 August, 2025; Date of Acceptance 20 October, 2025; Date of publication 7 December, 2025

Context

Mpox, caused by the *Simian Orthopoxvirus*, is a zoonotic viral disease that has recently attracted global attention due to its increasing transmission between humans. Initially endemic in certain regions of Central and West Africa, this disease presents significant public health risks, particularly in areas where human-animal interactions are frequent (World Health Organization, 2021). The Tshuapa province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the most affected regions, especially in the health zones of Lingomo and Djolu, where environmental and health conditions contribute to the dynamics of transmission (Ministère de la Santé de la RDC, 2022).

Recent epidemiological data show a worrying trend in the spread of Mpox. In 2021, the number of reported cases worldwide was 1,000, with an estimated fatality rate of 3.5%. In the DRC, 150 cases were recorded, representing an incidence rate of 0.2 cases per 100,000 inhabitants (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). These figures already highlight a public health problem that requires urgent attention.

In 2022, the global number of cases almost doubled, reaching 1,800, while maintaining a stable fatality rate of 3.5% (World Health Organization, 2022). In the DRC, the number of cases reached 300, marking a 100% increase compared to the previous year, with an incidence rate of 0.4 cases per 100,000 inhabitants (Ministère de la Santé de la RDC, 2022). This rapid progression of cases indicates a spread of the disease that could be attributed to various factors, including the region's biodiversity and cultural practices.

For 2023, projections indicate more than 2,500 cases worldwide, with a slight increase in the fatality rate to 4.1% (World Health Organization, 2023). In the Tshuapa province, 450 cases have been reported, which corresponds to an incidence rate of 0.6 cases per 100,000 inhabitants (Ministère de la Santé de la RDC, 2023). These data highlight the need for rapid and effective intervention to control the disease.

The increase in Mpox cases in these regions can be attributed to several interconnected factors. Firstly, the rich biodiversity of the Tshuapa province, combined with traditional agricultural and hunting practices, encourages contact between humans and potential animal hosts, such as rodents and primates (FAO, 2020). These frequent interactions increase the risk of virus transmission to human populations.

Secondly, deforestation and rapid urbanisation are altering natural habitats, leading to more frequent interactions between human populations and wildlife (World Bank, 2019). Indeed, activities such as logging and intensive agriculture result in habitat fragmentation, which pushes wild animals closer to human communities in search of food. This phenomenon contributes to the spread of zoonotic diseases.

Moreover, health infrastructure in the Tshuapa province is often insufficient. A recent survey revealed that less than half of health facilities have the necessary resources to diagnose and effectively treat Mpox (Ministère de la Santé de la RDC, 2022). This situation is aggravated by the low vaccination rate in the region, with only 60% of the population immunised against viral diseases (UNICEF, 2021). This lack of collective protection limits the effectiveness of epidemic control measures.

Another crucial factor in the transmission dynamics of Mpox is the level of awareness and education among local communities. In many rural areas of Tshuapa, knowledge about zoonotic diseases and their modes of transmission remains limited (Wildlife Conservation Society, 2021). The absence of adequate information can lead to risky behaviours, such as consuming bushmeat or close contact with potentially infected animals.

Awareness campaigns are therefore necessary to inform local populations about the risks associated with Mpox and the preventive measures to adopt (Red Cross, 2022). Education plays an essential role in reducing risky behaviours and encouraging safer practices.

Research Question

What are the environmental and health factors that influence the transmission of monkeypox in the health zones of Lingomo, Djulu, and Bokungu, in the Tshuapa province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

Objective

The general objective of this article is to analyse the environmental and health factors favouring the transmission of Mpox in the Tshuapa province, Democratic Republic of the Congo, to propose evidence-based recommendations to improve the prevention and control of this disease, while strengthening public health in affected communities.

Hypothesis

The transmission of monkeypox is significantly influenced by environmental factors such as animal population density, hygiene conditions, climatic conditions, a fragile health system, poor communication,

deforestation, and public health practices in the health zones of Lingomo, Djolu, and Bokungu.

Factors that might favouring the transmission of Mpox

1. Environmental Factor

1.1. Biodiversity and Animal Habitat

The Tshuapa province, located in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), is characterised by rich biodiversity, home to a variety of mammals, including rodents and primates, which are potential reservoirs of the Mpox virus (MPXV). Studies have identified squirrels of the *Funisciurus* and *Heliociurus* genera as important reservoirs (Leroy et al., 2004). The proximity of human dwellings to these natural habitats considerably increases the risk of zoonotic transmission. A study carried out in the Tshuapa province between 2010 and 2014 revealed that a squirrel was carrying antibodies against Mpox (Meyer et al., 2019). Furthermore, enhanced surveillance has confirmed the endemic presence of the disease in this area. The diversity of wild mammal species creates an environment conducive to the circulation and transmission of the virus. Transmission occurs mainly through direct contact with infected animals, through bites or scratches, or when handling bushmeat (Yinka-Ogunleye et al., 2017).

1.2. Deforestation and Urbanisation

The expansion of agricultural activities, logging and rapid urbanisation are causing significant changes to local ecosystems. Deforestation fragments natural habitats, forcing wild animals to move to new areas, thereby increasing contact with human populations and domestic animals (Wilcox and Ellis, 2006). Studies have shown that the proportion of primary forest is positively associated with the incidence of Mpox (Nolen et al., 2015). The encroachment of human activities on tropical forests

increases the risk of zoonotic disease transmission. The construction of roads and other infrastructure also facilitates access to forest areas, further increasing interactions between humans and animal reservoirs of the virus (Karesh et al., 2012). Rapid urbanisation in Central Africa has led to increased population density and precarious living conditions, particularly in slums, favouring the spread of infectious diseases, including those of zoonotic origin (Güner et al., 2020).

1.3. Climatic Conditions

Climatic variations, notably changes in temperature and rainfall patterns, can influence animal behaviour and distribution, as well as the prevalence of infectious diseases. Studies have shown that temperature and rainfall are positively associated with the incidence of Mpox (Bai et al., 2020). Periods of heavy rain can favour the reproduction of rodents and increase their population density, thereby increasing the risk of virus transmission. Climate change can also lead to prolonged droughts, forcing animals to move towards limited water sources and thus increasing contact with humans. Floods can contaminate water sources and favour the spread of waterborne diseases, while high temperatures can increase the survival and transmission of certain pathogens (Patz et al., 2005). Climate change can also affect agricultural crops, leading to food insecurity and forcing populations to rely more on bushmeat, increasing the risk of exposure to the virus (Le Polain de Waroux et al., 2016).

2. Health Factors

2.1. Fragile Health Systems

Health infrastructure in the Tshuapa province is often inadequate. The lack of

qualified staff, medical equipment and financial resources limits access to healthcare and hinders the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of diseases. This fragility of health systems contributes to the spread of Mpox (Kakule et al., 2019). Health facilities are often poorly equipped to manage epidemics, resulting in delays in the detection of cases and the deployment of appropriate control measures (Bolaños et al., 2020).

2.2. Education and Awareness of the Population

The low level of awareness regarding zoonoses and the importance of preventive practices, such as personal hygiene and avoiding contact with wild animals, increases the risk of transmission. Studies show that communities with better health education are more likely to adopt preventive behaviours (Afolabi et al., 2021). Lack of knowledge about how the virus is transmitted and the symptoms of Mpox limits the ability of populations to respond quickly in the event of an outbreak, thus worsening the situation.

2.3. Cultural Practices and Behaviours

Certain cultural practices, such as hunting and consuming wild animals, increase the risk of contact with the virus. Hunting traditions, often seen as an economic or social activity, expose individuals to potentially infected animals (Nolan et al., 2015). Moreover, mistrust of vaccinations and traditional medical treatments can complicate efforts to combat the disease, as some communities prefer to use local remedies or unproven practices (Yinka-Ogunleye et al., 2017).

3. Prevention and Control Measures

3.1. Strengthening Health Systems

Improving health infrastructure is crucial to ensure early diagnosis and effective treatment of Mpox cases. This includes training medical staff, improving laboratories and increasing access to care in rural areas (WHO, 2021). Robust health systems are essential for detecting and containing epidemics effectively.

3.2. Awareness Programmes

The development of awareness campaigns about zoonoses and the importance of hygiene and preventive practices is fundamental. These programmes must target high-risk communities and use methods adapted to their culture and language (Kumar et al., 2018). Greater awareness can improve health behaviours and reduce the risk of virus transmission.

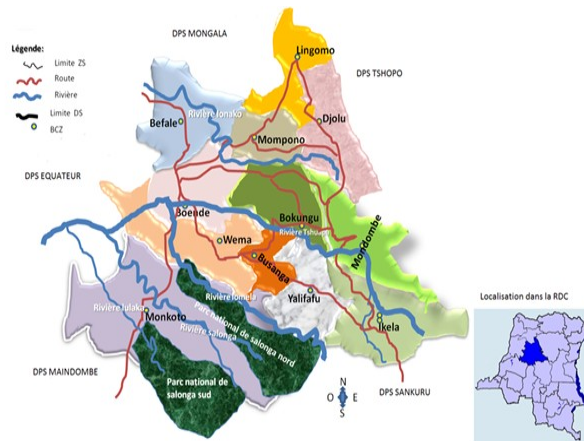
3.3. Epidemiological Surveillance

Establishing surveillance systems to quickly detect Mpox cases is crucial. This includes training local personnel to monitor symptoms and report suspected cases (Sajid et al., 2020). Effective surveillance allows for a better understanding of transmission dynamics and the adaptation of interventions accordingly.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Study Setting

This study was conducted in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, specifically in the Tshuapa province, and focused on three health zones: Lingoma, Djolu, and Bokungu, which constitute our study area within the Tshuapa province.



The Tshuapa province was chosen as the setting for this research, with the health division of Tshuapa and three health zones, more precisely in rural health zones, forming the primary focus. Tshuapa is one of the 26 provinces located in the west of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

4.2. Devise

We opted for a quantitative study, employing an empirical-inductive quantitative model since the approach is grounded in fieldwork (Alexandre Nkum, 2022). The design used in this research is phenomenological, chosen for its flexibility and its ability to adapt to the relatively unique situation of “identifying environmental and health factors favouring the transmission of Mpox in the Tshuapa province.” This approach allows for an understanding of a phenomenon in its natural context, using inductive reasoning (Karsenti & Dewers, 2000).

Consequently, the chosen design is inspired by a phenomenological approach, aiming for the description and understanding of individual phenomena based on lived experiences. Fortin, Normand, Kerouac, and Taggart (1988) describe this type of research as the exploration of a phenomenon through the perceptions communicated by the subjects (Desrosiers, 2009).

Therefore, we consider our study, entitled “identification of environmental and health factors favouring the transmission of Mpox in the Tshuapa province,” to be a descriptive phenomenological study. The quantitative model is empirico-inductive, as it always relies on field observations (Alexandre Nkum, 2023).

We chose a cross-sectional study; the data collection instrument was an individual interview questionnaire, synchronised using Kobocollect Tools, which we utilised. Data analysis was performed using SPSS v25 software.

We used a non-probabilistic or accidental sampling method. The procedure was as follows:

- Occasionally selecting respondents according to the inclusion criteria.
- Conducting interviews with the selected respondents.
- Consulting lists of disease trends from 2021–2023.

Eligibility for our study was conditioned by the following prerequisites:

- Residing in Tshuapa province and within the three health zones.
- Being free to participate in our study.
- Being present on the day of the survey.

Anyone not meeting these criteria was excluded from our study and did not form part of our sample.

As the study population exceeded 10,000, we determined the sample size using Fisher’s exact formula as follows:

$$n = (Z^2 \times pq) / d^2, \text{ where } 1 - p = q, \text{ giving } q = 0.5; Z^2 = 1.96; d^2 = 0.05. \text{ We used } 50\%, \text{ hence}$$

$$p = 0.5; n = (1.96^2 \times (0.5)(0.5)) / (0.05)^2 = 0.9604 / 0.0025 = 384.$$

Legend:

- Z^2 = 95% confidence coefficient.
- p = proportion of the concerned population.
- d^2 = degree of certainty.
- q = proportion of the population not concerned.

The choice of the health zones of Djolu, Lingomo, and Bokungu for the study on identifying environmental and health factors favouring the transmission of Mpox in the Tshuapa province is based on a rigorous epidemiological approach. This selection aims to ensure an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing the dynamics of the disease within the Tshuapa province.

Epidemiological Selection Criteria

Previous Epidemiological Data:

- **Case History:** Historical data shows a high incidence of Mpox cases in these zones. Analysis of public health reports and epidemiological statistics revealed that Djolu, Lingomo, and Befale are among the most affected zones, justifying their selection.
- **Incidence Rates:** Comparing incidence rates between different zones showed that these three zones have significant rates, enabling assessment of the factors contributing to transmission.

Demographic Characteristics:

- **At-Risk Population:** Demographic analysis revealed a high proportion of young adults and children in these zones, groups that are often vulnerable to the disease. This characteristic is crucial for understanding the spread and public health impact of the disease.
- **Education Level and Awareness:** Differences in education levels and awareness of zoonotic diseases between the zones allow for evaluation of how these factors influence risk behaviours and adherence to prevention measures.

Environmental Factors:

- **Biodiversity and Natural Habitats:** These zones are in environments rich in biodiversity, hosting potential reservoirs of the virus. Analysing the distribution of animal species and human-animal interactions is essential for understanding zoonotic transmission.
- **Agricultural Practices and Hunting:** Cultural practices such as hunting and the consumption of bushmeat, which are common in these zones, increase the risk of exposure to the virus. Studying local habits helps identify risky behaviours.

Health Infrastructure:

- **Access to Healthcare:** Assessing the healthcare infrastructure in these zones is crucial. Data show that some areas have better access to care, while others suffer from gaps in resources and services. This directly influences the capacity to diagnose and treat Mpox.

Study Results

Sociodemographics Variables	Frequency	Percentage
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AGE		
18 to 25 years	200	52.1
26 to 33 years	100	26.0
34 years and older	84	21.9
Total	384	100.0
SEX		
Male	200	52.1
Female	184	47.9
Total	384	100.0
RESIDENCE ZONES		
Lingomo	100	26.0
Djolu	150	39.1
Bokungu	134	34.9
Total	384	100.0
EDUCATION LEVEL		
No formal education	150	39.1
Primary	100	26.0
Secondary	84	21.9
Higher and University	50	13.0
Total	384	100.0
HEARD OF MPOX		
Yes	160	41.7
No	224	58.3
Total	384	100.0
KNOWLEDGE OF ASSOCIATED SYMPTOMS		
Fever	90	23.4
Rash	30	7.8
Muscle pain	100	26.0
Others	164	42.7
Total	384	100.0
VACCINATED AGAINST MPOX		
Yes	85	22.1
No	299	77.9
Total	384	100.0
REGULAR HYGIENE PRACTICES		
Yes	161	41.9
No	223	58.1
Total	384	100.0
REGULAR CONTACT WITH WILD ANIMALS		
Yes	241	62.8
No	143	37.2
Total	384	100.0

Table 1. Data source: Our field survey, DPS, Tshuapa, 2024.

1. Interpretation of the results:

1.1. Age: Most participants (52.1%) are young (18-25 years), which may

influence their perception and knowledge of zoonotic diseases.

1.2. Sex: The distribution is relatively balanced, with a slight male predominance (52.1%). This may have

implications for public health practices and awareness campaigns.

- 1.3. Residential areas:** Most respondents live in the Djolu area (39.1%). This could impact access to information and healthcare.
- 1.4. Educational level:** A significant proportion of participants have no formal education (39.1%), which may affect their understanding of health issues.
- 1.5. Knowledge of Mpox:** More than half of respondents (58.3%) have not heard of Mpox, highlighting an urgent need for education and awareness.
- 1.6. Knowledge of symptoms:** A majority (42.7%) mention other symptoms, which may indicate a lack of specific knowledge about Mpox.
- 1.7. Vaccination:** A large majority (77.9%) have never been vaccinated against Mpox, underscoring a potential public health risk.
- 1.8. Hygiene practices:** Most (58.1%) do not regularly practise hygiene measures, which could facilitate the spread of zoonotic diseases.
- 1.9. Contact with wild animals:** A high proportion (62.8%) have regular contact with wild animals, representing an increased risk of zoonotic disease transmission.
- 1.10. Hunting and consumption of bushmeat:** A majority (76.0%) engage in hunting or consume bushmeat, further raising the risk of disease transmission.
- 1.11. Access to healthcare:** Nearly half (58.6%) of respondents do not have access to a healthcare facility, complicating health management.
- 1.12. Information on zoonotic diseases:** The majority (55.7%) have not received

information on zoonotic diseases, highlighting the need for educational initiatives.

2. Discussion

The spread of Mpox in Tshuapa province is a complex problem, closely linked to various environmental and health factors. The results of our survey reveal a concerning transmission dynamic, accentuated by demographic, environmental, and health characteristics specific to this region.

✓ Demographics and Disease Knowledge

The data show that more than half of the participants (52.1%) are young (18 to 25 years), a group that may be particularly vulnerable due to limited access to education on zoonotic diseases. Indeed, 58.3% of respondents have never heard of Mpox, signalling an urgent need for targeted education. Previous studies have shown that raising awareness among populations is crucial to reducing risky behaviours (Afolabi et al., 2021). Lack of knowledge about symptoms and transmission modes may also delay seeking care, thereby exacerbating the spread of the disease.

✓ Human-Animal Interactions and Biodiversity

Tshuapa province is characterised by rich biodiversity, with animal species such as rodents and primates serving as potential reservoirs for the virus. Our study results show that 62.8% of participants have regular contact with wild animals, increasing the risk of transmission. Previous research has emphasised that these frequent interactions are often the result of cultural practices such as hunting and bushmeat consumption, which are common

in the region (Nolen et al., 2015). Deforestation and rapid urbanisation, which fragment natural habitats, worsen this situation by forcing animals closer to inhabited areas (Wilcox and Ellis, 2006).

✓ **Health Conditions and Infrastructure**

Healthcare systems in Tshuapa province are often inadequate, with fewer than half of health facilities able to effectively diagnose and treat Mpox. This fragility is aggravated by a low vaccination rate, with only 22.1% of respondents reporting having been vaccinated against the disease. Studies have shown that robust health infrastructure is essential for rapid detection and management of epidemics (Bolaños et al., 2020). The low rate of access to healthcare (58.6% of respondents do not have access to a healthcare facility) underscores the urgency of improving infrastructure and ensuring adequate health coverage, especially in rural areas.

✓ **Cultural Practices and Risk Behaviours**

The results also indicate that cultural practices play a significant role in the transmission of Mpox. A large majority (76.0%) of participants hunt or consume bushmeat, exposing individuals to potentially infected animals. Distrust of vaccinations and modern medical treatments further complicates the fight against the disease (Yinka-Ogunleye et al., 2017).

Conclusion

The transmission of Mpox in Tshuapa province, Democratic Republic of the Congo, is a complex public health issue, rooted in a multitude of interconnected environmental and health factors. The

findings of this study highlight the significant influence of local biodiversity, traditional agricultural practices, rapid urbanisation, and fragile health infrastructure on the dynamics of this zoonotic disease's spread.

Tshuapa province is characterised by rich biodiversity that includes potential reservoirs of the Mpox virus, such as rodents and primates. Previous studies have shown that these species are often in close contact with human populations, thereby increasing the risk of transmission (Nolen et al., 2015). Traditional agricultural practices, such as hunting and the consumption of bushmeat, exacerbate this risk, as they frequently involve direct interactions with potentially infected animals.

Rapid urbanisation is another key factor. Deforestation and the expansion of agricultural land alter natural habitats, resulting in fragmentation that pushes wild animals closer to human settlements (Wilcox and Ellis, 2006). This phenomenon encourages contact between humans and wildlife, thus increasing opportunities for viral transmission. Furthermore, climate change, which influences animal behaviour and distribution, may also affect the prevalence of zoonotic diseases (Bai et al., 2020). Understanding these complex interactions is therefore essential for developing effective prevention strategies.

Health systems in Tshuapa province have significant shortcomings. According to our survey, less than half of health facilities have the resources required to effectively diagnose and treat Mpox. This lack of infrastructure not only limits access to care but also delays the detection and response to outbreaks (Bolaños et al., 2020). Low vaccination rates, with only 60% of the

population immunised against viral diseases, exacerbate the problem, leaving a large segment of the population vulnerable to potentially serious infections (UNICEF, 2021).

Moreover, the level of awareness and education within local communities is a crucial factor in the fight against Mpox. The results show that most respondents had not heard of the disease, highlighting an urgent need for education and awareness-raising (Wildlife Conservation Society, 2021). Information campaigns aimed at educating the population about transmission routes and preventive practices are essential to reduce risky behaviours. Education plays a vital role in promoting public health practices, and studies indicate that well-informed communities are more likely to adopt preventive behaviours (Afolabi et al., 2021).

It is imperative to strengthen health infrastructure in Tshuapa province. This includes training medical staff, improving laboratories, and increasing access to healthcare in rural areas. Collaboration between health authorities, non-governmental organisations, and communities is essential for developing effective control and prevention strategies. Awareness programmes must be tailored to the cultural and linguistic contexts of local populations to maximise their impact.

Coordinated actions, such as establishing epidemiological surveillance systems and implementing targeted educational programmes, can help reduce the risk of Mpox transmission. Combating this disease requires an integrated approach that considers the region's specific environmental and social challenges. By incorporating local knowledge and strengthening the resilience of health

systems, it will be possible to effectively control the spread of Mpox and improve public health in Tshuapa province.

In conclusion, Mpox represents a major public health challenge in Tshuapa province. A multisectoral response, involving concrete actions on both environmental and health fronts, is essential to reverse the current trend and protect vulnerable communities. Efforts must focus on education, prevention, and building local capacity to address this growing threat.

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