

Curbing The Prevalence of Inter-communal Conflicts in Nigeria: The Public Relations Perspective.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the application of Public Relations (PR) Strategies in the Management and Resolution of Inter-Communal Conflicts in Nigeria. Public relations strategies can be applied to create the needed understanding, support and cooperation that will ensure peaceful co-existence in our communities. These strategies also play vital role(s) in conflict prevention as they help to identify issues that would have individually or collectively, resulted to conflicts, which are usually nipped in the bud. There is a significant link between application of Public Relations strategies and peaceful co-existence among warring communities. The study adopted Frank Jefkins PR Transfer Process and Two-way Symmetric Models as Theoretical Framework. It recommended among others, that traditional and other community stakeholders should adopt Public Relations strategies in the management of inter-communal conflicts. State governments should establish functional Public Relations departments in all its Local Government Areas and employ Public Relations professionals to head such units. These professionals should provide profitable link between local communities and the state government, especially during periods of

conflicts among communities.

Keywords: curbing, prevalence, inter-communal conflict, perspective

Introduction

Several scholars have identified conflicts as one of the greatest enemies of development especially at the grassroots, (Albert, 2001, p. 6; Adekunbi, 2009, p. 65; Akande, 2002, p. 12). In every society, local communities fall within the third tier of the government, constitutionally, identified as Local Government Council.

Expectedly, it should be able to bridge the wide gap between the government and the governed and thus bring democratic dividends down to the rural masses. Unfortunately, unresolved inter-communal conflicts have made these unrealistic to the extent that rural dwellers, especially in the warring communities exist in very pitiable conditions characterized by hunger, poverty, disease, illiteracy, poor and unimaginable living conditions, etc. In most areas, inter-communal conflicts have degenerated to a level that communities were abandoned for months, years while the inhabitants either reside in isolated camps or with extended family members, with of course, terrible life experiences. In such cases, children drop out

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of school, primary health care delivery system were usually grounded and many other unimaginable experiences. Nwabueze (2016), observes that in the recent past, the world's socio-political environs have been on the boil despite the colossal amount of human and material resources expended on global peace and conflict management by various nations, states, local government and communities. In spite all these, inter-communal crises continue to be more virulent and destructive. Worse still, conflict drains the energy, manpower and material resources of warring communities in particular and the government in general. During these conflict periods, it was indicated that adults of these communities were made to make financial contributions, meant for prosecuting court cases and other propaganda measures despite their meagre resources. These contributions further worsen their living conditions as inability to pay such levy, attracts severe penalty, such as confiscation of their domestic animals like goat or sheep, etc. This is why no effort is exhaustive in stemming the tide of inter-communal conflicts in our society.

Conflict is an inevitable and recurrent fact of life. As a result, every effort should be directed towards its resolution as it manifests as its destructive tendencies can be better imagined than seen. Most importantly, conflict should not be allowed to thrive in our rural communities. This is against the backdrop that issues at the grassroots level should be of concern to all given that about 80% of Nigerians as Akinfeleye (2003), posits, live there. In addition, the rural dwellers produce the bulk of the nation's food needs. Thus, it is apt

to say that the people at this level in variably form the bedrock of a sustainable national development.

The prevalence of inter-communal conflicts and the attendant devastations in the affected communities is best captured by the French novelist, Antoine De Saint, when he states that "In conflict, the firing line is invisible, it passes through the hearts of men and remain permanent."

In other words, if conflicts are not resolved peacefully, it will leave indelible wounds in peoples' hearts and communities' conscience, which will be very difficult to heal, as there are transferred across generations.

Ogbuoshi (2011) asserts that Public relations has the vital tools to encourage community members cohabit peacefully with one another as well as with their neighbours and thus nip in the bud conflict-oriented issues from escalating to conflicts. This is in line with Mogoluwa (2011) who observes that when one talks of a breakdown in communication either between employer and employees or between one communities with another, the condition refers to a lack of positive public relations. The argument of the above scholar is hinged on the fact that continued dialogue or two way communication would have prevented any such breakdown.

Many scholars have argued that depending on the way conflict is handled, it can either bring development or damnation. This study also shares the same view as above. It is against this backdrop that Public Relations strategies should be applied as a way out in curbing the prevalence of inter-communal conflicts in our communities to pave way for community development. At

one time or the other, the government has been accused of either taking sides or unable to act decisively and swiftly during crises periods, until serious devastations have taken place. This condition, according to Nwosu (2004), is a serious indictment on the government, concerned agencies and political leaders for their inability to apply practicable strategies in the resolution of Inter-communal conflicts. In reaction to the above condition, Eyita (1993,p.66-67), advised that in managing inter-communal conflicts, mediators, be they government, its agencies or political office holders, must apply strategies that *"identify with," "talk with," rather than "talk to"* the people, as has been the case and the reason why most conflict interventions failed in the past. Lending his support to the above view, Ogbuoshi (2004) opines that Public Relations can be used effectively to ensure peaceful co-existence between and among neighbouring communities. This, he concludes, is based on its ability to create platforms for interaction that fosters mutual understanding, goodwill, support and cooperation between or among parties in conflict. Also, Aliede (2004, p.62), notes that:

Effective communication can reduce incidents of conflicts, where it exists. It ensures mutual understanding between an organization, the government, communities and her publics on issues affecting them. Open and transparent communication will generate trust on issues affecting them, and in such a way, resolve conflicts.

The Concept of Public Relations

The above discussion takes us to the concept of Public Relations as a form of

communication. If we agree with the Mexican Statement of 1978 that "Public Relations is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organization and the public interest" (Tyotom, 2004, p. 2), then, we are left with no option than to agree that effective Public Relations, like communication, which is interwoven, is therefore the best instrument needed by an organization, the government and communities to attain its goals and objectives. Public Relations activities entail planned communication programmes aimed at achieving a targeted objective, including those intended to influence public opinions, peaceful co-existence, etc.

According to Tyotom (2004), the management concept of Public Relations is geared towards developing and communicating by word or action, definite policies or discussions, giving direction to management, government or community leaders' efforts to utilize and energize human resources to achieve organizational, government or community goals and objectives. It follows that such enviable scenario as expressed above, can only be achieved in a peaceful atmosphere where people co-habit interactively and harmoniously.

Nwosu (2004), opines that Public Relations as a form of effective communication involves the management of problems or issues that help leadership to be kept informed on and responsive to public opinions and live and let live principles.

Ogbuoshi (2004, p.166), agrees with the

above scholars, as he says that "Public relations plays the role of creating mutual understanding and as well, serves as the basic tool for achieving peace and harmony in any organization, especially communities". He insists that as the creation of more nations, states, communities and expansion of areas increases, the need for adequate communication and peace-keeping between these communities in particular and nations in general, becomes more urgent and paramount. And for such communities to progress and attain higher level of development, there is need to establish good relations between them through the application of Public Relations strategies. (Ogbuoshi 2004, p.167) goes further to inform that Public Relations is theoretically, practically and universally recognized as a management function aimed at creating friendship and understanding between or among their publics for prosperity and growth of all endeavours. He concludes that the emphasis should be to apply public relations principles, strategies and techniques in settling diverse conflicts in communities since it has been established that no matter the level of mutuality and intimacy, the elements of conflicts, disagreement and opposed interests are inevitable, especially as human beings who make up the organic entity of any society socialize differently and tend to pursue diverse interests. As such diverse problems become inevitable, mainly in relationships. The need then arises for people, the government and others to be knowledgeable in certain basic strategies of Public Relations that help in conflict resolution. Once, individuals and leaders are aware of the need for the acquisition of certain basic skills conflict would be

managed effectively.

Inter-Communal Conflicts

Ogbuoshi (2004) asserts that mankind has suffered from conflicts and crises the world over, and highlighted cases of community conflicts in Nigeria to include Zango-Kataf crisis, Tiv-Jukun, Ife-Modakeke, Eleme-Okirika, Itsekiri-Urhobo, Itsekiri-Ijaw crises and Aguleri-Umueri conflict, Umuode-Oruku conflict; Igbo-Ikom, Ezza Ezillo-Ezillo conflicts and recently Igbeagu-Iyalla, Ekoli-Nguzu, Enyigba-Enyibichiri, Oso Edda-Akaeze, Azuoviaedda-Obubra and Ekpaomaka-Inyimagu inter-communal conflicts, etc.

In fact, conflict is abnormal, dysfunctional and detestable. That is why it is imperative that efforts should be made to search for suitable means of managing conflicts in our society, especially in the local communities considering their enormous contributions to national development in the area of Agriculture, etc. This is the thrust of this study.

Conflict is inevitable in all spheres of life. It is multi-faceted and also appears to be ubiquitous in human relationships. Conflicts have been the bane of development in our society. So many lives, marriages/relationships, and property worth billions of naira have been lost as a result of conflicts. So many people have been rendered homeless. The lucky ones are sheltered in Internally Displaced Persons' (IDP) camps, while others are left at the mercy of fate. Worse still, the children among them have had their formal education interrupted or abandon.

Despite efforts of the government, NGOs and researchers at controlling conflicts, it is still a common phenomenon in

our society, unabated despite efforts at curtailing them. **The question is:** Why has conflict continued persistently in our communities in spite the efforts of many researchers in this area? Could it be said that no effective strategy has been adopted in this regard? Conflict should be managed effectively especially in our communities.

Research has shown that about 80% of the Nigeria population that live in the rural areas and are the real farmers (Akinfeleye,2011). This notwithstanding, these areas are characterized by pervasive poverty, owing to prevalence of conflicts, with observable intrinsic development stagnation in agricultural productivity and other areas (WHO,2016).

It appears that the government representatives, community leaders do not carry out their obligations of ensuring peace and order in their areas of jurisdiction. Consequently, youths in these communities, out of frustration, often take to violent actions. This in turn has often led to general deterioration of both political and social cohesion in these areas.

Conceptual Review

Brief History of Public Relations

Oyawole (1993), notes that throughout the ages, man has practiced Public Relations in his quest to be at peace with nature, constituted authority, fellow men and self. He said that even the Holy Bible, the Holy Quran, other great works of history and our daily living are replete with the efforts of man in this regard. The wages of success or failure in good human relations have always been discernible and so human beings practice public relations naturally, he concluded.

However, the term “Public Relations”, according to Oyawole (1993 p.186), was first used by Thomas Jefferson, 3rd president of the United States of America in his seventh address to congress on October 27, 1907. Although the prominent lawyer, Norman Eaton, addressed the Yale law school on “the Public Relations and Duties of the Legal Profession” earlier in 1882, it was in 1906 that a firm foundation was laid for Professional Public Relations practice.

Ivy Led better Lee, a graduate of Princeton, Harvard and Columbia issued his “Declaration of Principles”: The people's right to be fully informed truly, honestly and accurately. The declaration emphasized openness and frankness in communication and ends thus:

In brief, our plan is, frankly and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions, to supply to the press and public of the United States Prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about.(Ivy Lee).

Thus, it is absolutely clear that public relations started with press relations. In addition, during World War 1, President Wilson set up a committee on Public Information-one of the World's first Public relations consultancies. Also in England during the same period, John Elliot worked as a Public Officer for the London underground railways (Oyawale, 1993).

By 1901, a foreign office News Department, an Air Ministry Press office, and a Ministry of Health and Housing Information Department were also created. Britain had a library of information in New York by 1920 and by 1923, there were Press Attaches in Paris, Berlin and Rome, (Oyawale, 1993).

Stephen Tallents ran the first contemporary public relations organization known as the Empire Marketing Board, 1926-1931, when he successfully ran the "Buy British" Public relations campaign; thus, he became the Public Relations Officer (PRO) to the Post Office in 1952 (Oyawale,1993).

Summarily, Ivy Ledbetter Lee has the credit as pioneering Public Relations in the US. This is probably because of the famous "Declaration of Principles" the theme of which was that the public can no longer be ignored nor fooled in information management and dissemination. Also, in Britain, Sir Stephen Tallents got the credit for organizing public relations activities in 1926 (Oyawale, 1993).

Public Relations in Nigeria

Eyita (1993, p.66), opined that Nigeria experienced the first wave of public relations during the World War II (1939-1945) when the British Colonial government saw the need for organized Public Relations to counter Adolf Hitler's formidable war propaganda machinery and to establish a steady flow of government information to Nigerians. He promptly established an outfit which in 1944 became the Public Relations Office in a bid to refurbish its "detective" and "propaganda" image. In 1947, the PR Office was renamed as PR Department, and had regional offices in Ibadan and Enugu in 1958. As government activities were expanding into the local areas (grassroots), the PR Department became a strong force in using the local press to inform people about government plans.

In the words of Eyita (1993, p.69), the

government recognized the importance of Public Relations in the administration of the country and so, the private sector yearned for a piece of the action. And in 1949, the United African Company, Now UACN, came up with the first public relations outfit in the private sector. That outfit metamorphosed from an information department in the UAC network into a full- fledged public relations department in 1960.

Also, Shell BP came up with her own Public Relations Department in 1969. The PR activities of shell embraced all activities relating to relations between the company, on one hand and the government of the federation, local communities, the press, commercial Organizations', educational institutions and the other sectors of the public, on the other hand. Like UACN, Shell's objectives for fostering these relations were to ensure constant existence of unobstructed channels of communication with these publics, thus creating an atmosphere of understanding and cooperation.

Eyita (1993, p.68), believes that the unparalleled consistent records of success of these companies would not have been possible without effective use of public relations, especially at the management level. The researcher shares the same view with the above scholar.

The Institute of Public Relations in Great Britain, defines Public Relations as the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics. In other words, public relations is sound human relations geared towards the elimination of misunderstanding and chaos between

individuals and bodies whose lives touch one another, in one way or the other.

Also, the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), defines Public Relations as the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve the public interest.

Furthermore, Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000, p.45), define Public Relations as the management function that identifies, establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends. The researcher believes that the above definitions are synonymous with maintaining a sustainable two way communication between an organization and its publics. It also shows that, in today's management style, public relations have transcended the lower level of the official hierarchy to the top, thus, becoming the responsibility of the management.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary says that "Public Relations is the business of inducing the public to have understanding for, and goodwill towards a person, firm or institution." Also, Webster's third new International Dictionary sees the conduct of public relations as "the art or Science of developing reciprocal understanding and goodwill."

In addition, the International Encyclopedia of social sciences sees public relations as "*an organized effort to communicate information and to modify attitudes and behavior of a client or to a cause.*"

Nwosu and Uffort (2005,p.78), define

public relations as a veritable tool that can be effectively used as information, persuasion (communication) and actions to bring about generally accepted public consents, attitudes, opinions, interests and behaviours for positive environmental management.

A fact about public relations is that of all the known professions practiced around the world, public relations seems to be the most exciting and most cherished, because every activity of man boils down to an attempt to impress the other person, or at least to improve either our personal status or corporate image (Udeze, 2001).

Nwabueze (2005), opines that public relations is the art, act and activity of deliberating, initiating, maintaining and sustaining favourable cordial and mutually beneficial relationship between an organization and its publics. It is an organized, planned and strategically approached activity which gingers the public into a willing loyalty to an organization's dealings or activities.

Supporting the above view, Ogbuoshi (2011, p.166), opines that "*Public Relations can be used to effectively ensure peaceful co-existence between and among neighbouring communities*". This, he concludes, is based on its role of creation of mutual understanding, in addition to, serving as the basic tool for achieving peace and concord in various communities. From the above discussions, one can easily deduce some elements common to these and other definitions of public relations.

In line with this, Cutlip, Centre and Broom (2000, p.45), identifies nine issues inherent in various definitions of Public Relations. They include:

- i. Public Relations involve a planned and sustained programme as part of an organization's management.
- ii. Deals with relationship between an organization and its publics
- iii. Monitors awareness, opinions, attitude and actions of an organization's publics.
- iv. Analyses those policies, procedures and actions of the publics
- v. Adjust those policies, procedure and actions found to be in conflict with public interest and organizational survival.
- vi. Counsels management on the establishment of new policies, procedure and actions which are mutually beneficial to the organization and its publics.
- vii. Establishes and maintains two-way communication between the organization and its publics.
- viii. Produces specific changes in awareness, opinions, attitudes and behaviour inside and outside the organization.
- ix. Results in new and or maintained relationship between an organization and its publics.

The paper shares the same views with the above authors, taking cognizance of the fact that if the above issues or guidelines are committedly, followed by Public Relations Practitioners, the government or its agents and or agencies, the prevalent nature of communal and inter-communal conflicts will be drastically reduced in our society.

Negative Conceptions about Public Relations

Nnaemeka (1993), notes that most chief executives have simplistic and erroneous conception of public relations. They tend to see public relations strategies exclusively as the effort to obtain, through press releases, press conferences, interviews, sponsored press articles, favourable coverage or publicity in the media for their organization's actions, policies and programmes.

In addition, some others tend to confuse Public Relations work with the corruptive habits of influencing strategically- located persons in the system, including the pressmen, with material inducement (Brown envelopes) to adopt their views or those of their organization's on issues.

Thus, enlisting the support and cooperation of key persons in the society through material inducement is definitely not what Public Relations is all about. Also, obtaining a "good press" for an organization leadership, which is ego sustaining publicity, is not what Public Relations stands for.

A public relations executive is one whose job is to ensure the success of Public Relations activities. He is quite different from the press. While the press disseminates information, the Public Relations executive makes sure that the objective of the information being disseminated is achieved, (Nnaemeka, 1993). In support of the above view, Omenugha in Okunna (2002, p.51), put it succinctly:

Public Relations is not about lying to temporarily protect your client or organization. It is not window dressing or saying what is untrue because it will please

the public at that particular time. Since the goodwill, acceptance and understanding in which an organization seeks to establish is long lasting and enduring, it follows that good Public relations should not masquerade falsehood as truth., PR is not deception, nor is it the same thing as circumventing the truth to please your publics.

In a nutshell, public relations involve winning friends, keeping them and influencing them, as well as others, to achieve particular set objectives. It is obviously, not the opposite of the above.

As earlier pointed out, Public relations do not only involve “talking to” but also, to a greater extent, it relies on “talking with” to achieve its goals. In other words, it is not just about public information in which objective and truthful information is disseminated to the publics, but devoid of a good feedback mechanism. That is to say, under this style, the publics are objectively informed about the organization's activities, but they do not have opportunity of expressing their feeling to the organization.

This is obviously not in line with Public relations principles. Furthermore, Ikoiwak (1986, p.185), in his views on the misconceptions of Public relations, opines that:

Unlike the term government whose connotations are fairly consistent, public relations means many things or everything to many people particularly here in Nigeria. For instance, the mediocre who spends his unproductive but official hours, catering for the lusts and fancies of his principals, in return for advancement and progress at work is said to have “excellent public

relations.” “Lobbying” now the most active catalyst of contemporary Nigerian public life, is also regarded erroneously as a practice in public relations.

Lobbying is also associated with the practice of public relations in its altruistic sense. But in the pejorative connotation with which “lobbying” is associated with, public relations in Nigeria, is certainly neither a tool nor a function of disciplined, professional public relations practice.

Public relations can be used by local government administration to establish appropriate and effective communication system that enables its key functionaries , including elected and appointed officials, and the various publics of the local government, to develop a common definition of the meaning and goals of its programmes, the expectations of each group and most importantly, the acceptance by the publics, who are the ultimate beneficiaries of the programmes adopted for the enhancement of their individual and community well-being.

In his support to the above Public relations strategy, Owuamalam (2011, p.176), refers to it as “consent engineering” which according to him, is an “effective Public relations strategy for conflict management”. He defines consent engineering as the ability of the management to make things happen through agreement. It means that any set objective must be explained, clarified and interpreted in order to show reason why support and cooperation is necessary. The above scholar opines that the essence of consent engineering is to influence the behavioural attitude of people (internal and

external publics) in order to accomplish a task, works on people and through people, the achievement of consent.

Public relations, prepares us on how to predict and control the reactions of individuals or groups in a given situation or stimulus. Psychologists refer to this as "Stimulus-Response Theory" (Eyita, 1993, p.67).

The question we may need to ask ourselves, whether there is any social institution that does not require an atmosphere of peace and cooperation in going about its set objectives, obviously, none. Take the marriage institution for example; the husband has a wife, the in-laws, etc, as his publics. He has to consider these publics in all decisions he takes. In fact, he has to "identify," "establish" and "maintain" mutually beneficial relationships with these publics, because the success or failure of his matrimony depends on the goodwill of these publics. The same goes for the wife. They all need public relations in conflict resolution.

We apply Public relations in our daily routines in life. The schools and even religious institutions all need Public relations in the conduct of their affairs, if they must enjoy the respect and cooperation of the community in which they operate and thus win more members and souls for Christ.

In my view, therefore, wherever people gather, communication and relationship must exist. And because communication and relationship make mankind independent, Public relations comes in.

Finally, the researcher believes that effective public relations entail making

friends before you need their assistance, support or cooperation. Also, in public relations, familiarity does not bring contempt (as some people believe) rather, it brings favourability; it brings support; it brings cooperation; it brings understanding; it brings goodwill; it brings oneness; it brings peace and happiness.

The Role of Public Relations in Conflict Management

Eyita (1993), asserts that public relations is about people, about communication, planned communication. It is about identifying and fulfilling the needs of the publics so as to have mutually beneficial relationship with elements in these publics.

In other words, Public relations entails effective utilization of planned communication to get the consent, support, cooperation of the publics and thus, influence their behaviour and attitude to a desired point.

However, Ikpe (2011, p. 60), notes that, "in the process of communication, conflict may be generated." Hence, human conflicts are situations of discord and disharmony, discontent and disillusionment and of dissatisfaction and brought about by communication interaction.

This is why Ikpe (2011, p. 60) opines that:

Communication has a causal relationship with conflict. Conflict is dependent on or has dependent relationship with communication. Thus, conflict manifests as a function of interaction or interactive escalated or mismanaged.

It could be based on the above view, that Goldberg and Sander (1994, p.81), asserts that "planned communication (a major

component of Public relations strategies) plays preventive and curative roles in conflict situation." Communication can prevent conflict be it in an organization, or in a community or between the organization and environment, or between the government and community or between employees and management, (Redding, 1977, p.214).

Goldberg and Sander 1994, p.81), have asserted that perhaps the most useful approach to preventing the occurrences of conflict is the fostering of a supportive and participatory communication climate. What Owuamalam (2011, p.177), calls "consent engineering" in Public relations strategies. Furthermore, Redding (1977, p.214), opines that:

Seriously destructive conflict would rarely occur if in fact the organizational climate is one of (a) trust and confidence (b) everyone wins approach, and (c) openness and candour in the airing of differences.

Also, the above scholars agreed that communication plays curative roles in conflict management. This is achieved when the parties, through participatory communication or dialogue on the most generally, accepted solutions to conflicting issue(s). In his contribution to the role of Public relations in conflict management, (Tyotom, 2011, pp.151-152), states that:

Specifically, the role of Public relations in conflict management requires the adoption of a sharp focused and concerted effort comprising: planning a strategy, an action plan. The key lies in first defining the problem clearly, with all seriousness and then, fix clear cut objectives that need to be

met and be achieved through communication with the target publics.

As earlier mentioned, Public relations activities are always planned. There is no fire brigade approach in dealings with Public relations publics. Public relations activities have to be effectively planned in order to ensure productive result and to enable the impact of the activity, adequately felt their target publics.

The most important contribution which Public relations can make towards the process and management of political power is to break the barriers of ignorance. We must begin to explore the ways of ensuring that majority of the people in this country whether they reside in the rural or urban areas are constantly informed about government policies. Lack of information and understanding of the actions and programmes of the holders of political power can be very detrimental to effective democratic governance. Providing essential information will lead to proper interpretation and execution of plans and programmes, which will result in goodwill and public acceptance.

The point being made here is that, successful democratic governance is a two-way affair, a collective responsibility. It should originate and emanate from the people and lead to what Nwosu (1996, p.45), describes as "action versus words strategy" and not empty talks and promises.

Public relations in government ensures that government establishes appropriate and effective communication system that enables it to initiate planned action programmes to sustain government's goals

aspirations, programmes, activities and policies to reach the ultimate beneficiaries of the programmes, especially, communities.

The bottom line of the above Public relations strategies, is to ensure the progress and development of the nation, including the grassroots. It is obvious that no development can be achieved where people do not cohabit peacefully and where there is generally insecurity of lives and property, owing to conflicts.

It is in support of the above views, that Asemah (2013, p.128), notes that "Public relations provides beneficial linkages among government business and people, enabling them to work together optimally for the progress of the nation". Finally, Ogbuoshi (2011, p.167), affirms that there are various Public relations strategies used in resolving community conflicts.

Ogbuoshi (2011, pp.169-171), identified the following as Public relations strategies used in resolving community conflicts. They include:

- i. Negotiation
- ii. Mediation
- iii. Inquiry
- iv. Conciliation
- v. Arbitration
- vi. Mass media
- vii. Public opinion
- viii. Propaganda devices

In his analysis, the above scholar noted that:

Negotiation is the simplest and the most effective Public relations strategy used in resolving community conflicts. It consists basically of discussions between both parties in dispute and their allies with a

view to reconciling divergent opinions or views or at least, understanding the differing positions of the stakeholders. The parties involved decide amongst themselves how best to resolve their difference... although, involves discussions, arguments and counter arguments, targeted towards resolving the conflict, (Ogbuoshi, 2011, p.169).

One striking difference between this and other Public relations strategies is that the parties will continuously discuss the issues at stake, to enable members of the community who have no proper knowledge of the fundamental causes of the conflict, be in a better position to understand more of the conflicts and thus, cooperate adequately towards resolution.

In addition, in the case of mediation, Ogbuoshi (2011, p.169), notes that it involves the use of a third party in settling of the conflict. The Public relations input is to encourage the contending parties to come for a settlement and influence, persuade the opposing sides to enter into negotiation. He recommended the use of influential community or religious leaders from both communities as members of the mediation team. According to Ogbuoshi (2011, p.169), mediation worked successfully in the conflict between Umuode and Oruku in Enugu State, when the leaders of Catholic Church waded into the settlement of the conflict in 1995.

Also, Inquiry is one of the Public relations strategies used in resolving community conflicts. It is most appropriately used, when difference of opinions on factual matters underlie a conflict between parties. Usually, the logical

solution is to institute a commission of inquiry to be conducted by reputable observers such as Public relations experts and others. The essence is to ascertain precisely, the facts in contention and therefore, make recommendations.

Furthermore, in Conciliation, the above scholar pointed out that it is a Public relations strategy which involves a Third Party investigation of the causes of the conflict and submission of report embodying suggestions on how to resolve the conflict. Conciliation involves elements of both inquiry and mediation and its report may stimulate negotiation between the parties concerned. The Public relations inputs also include carrying out thorough research, to ascertain the causes of the conflict as well as, making productive recommendations. (Ogbuoshi, 2011).

More so, in Arbitration, as Public relations strategy in resolving conflicts, a neutral body, panel or tribunal intervenes, to resolve the conflicts between the parties. Public relations is used to appeal and persuade the opposing parties to cooperate by attending the proceedings. Through this process, a decision is reached which is binding on both parties concerned (Ogbuoshi, 2011).

According to Ogbuoshi (2011), mass media is another Public relations strategy used in resolving conflicts. The media can resolve conflict situation through reports that are devoid of inflammatory remarks, sensational captions or playing to the gallery and maintain neutrality and objectivity in their reportage. He opines that the media can be used to create a conducive atmosphere for effective persuasion of the

conflicting communities, to see reasons why they should resolve their differences. He cited the Ife-Modakeke conflict as a good case in point, in which the media, through interpretative investigative reports, motivated concerned Nigerians to wade into the matter that brought lasting peace in the area.

Public opinion is one of the strategies used in Public relations to resolve community conflicts. Public opinion is the expression of views held in common by members of the community on controversial or salient issues. Public relations is used to monitor Public opinion, in a community so as to know their feelings and views on the matter under dispute for easy resolution. It is said that problem known/shared, is problem solved. (Ogbuoshi, 2011, p.171).

Finally, Ogbuoshi (2011, p.171), also identified Propaganda devices as Public relations strategies in resolving community conflicts. It is useful in this regard since, it is a conscious effort by persons; pressure groups or government to influence the formation of attitudes. The Public relations experts use such Propaganda techniques as glittering generalities, bandwagon effects and name calling to achieve their motive. The above scholar notes that propaganda was used by the Yorubas, after the annulment of the June 12, Presidential election and interpreted the crisis as "Yoruba's affair". Through this, popular sentiments and support from "Yorubas" was achieved, which generated their cooperation and subsequent wide condemnation of the annulment.

As earlier pointed out, Public relations

introduces the human factor into management. It has to be the responsibility of decision makers. That is why various scholars have advised that public relations experts should be part of every management. Specifically, he is the eyes and nose of the management. This is in line with the views of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) that sees Public relations as:

The Art and Social Science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organizations and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve the public's interest.

The above assertion further underlies the identification of trouble shooting, education and research as serious and strategic functions of the Public relations expert. He finds out the attitudes, feelings, expectations, fears of the public toward government programmes, policies and actions and briefs management accordingly and thus, help in bridging the communication gap between the government and the governed.

The Nigeria situation, one can conclude, is of special interest in this regard. There are the issues of conflicting economic and developmental interests among the various composite states of the federation; there are the sociological and ethnic differences, the social injustices in our various communities, inter-boundary, inter-communal and communal conflicts, which must be reconciled. Such reconciliation is inevitable in order to ensure peaceful co-existence that will guarantee contributions to national development especially, from the composite states, including communities.

Furthermore, Ukozor (2013), pointed out that in carrying out the bridge building function of Public relations, government representatives such as permanent secretaries, commissioners, local government chairmen, traditional rulers, village heads and indeed, leaders of thought in different communities should act as Public relations practitioners for the government, by building bridges of understanding and unity between members of the grassroots and the government. They should build a non-collapsible bridge of acceptance and goodwill for government programmes and policies, including binding government decisions, especially on conflicting issues such as land or boundary disputes.

Government at all levels need Public relations, if they must fulfill their mission to the governed, especially as it concerns peaceful co-existence between and among members of the various communities.

In support of the above views, Ukozor (2013, p.206), opines that the roles of governmental public relations in conflict management could be divided into two major roles:

- i. Research/Trouble shooting role
- ii. Education/Information role
- I. Research/Trouble Shooting Role:

One can deduce from the various definitions of Public relations, practitioners activities in public institutions, encompasses analyzing future trends and predicting their consequences. What this means, is for the practitioner to research on the expectations, fears, pains, reactions and on general public opinions and as well as interpreting government's policies to the public. The

government needs to be informed of public opinions towards its decisions, or policy statements concerning conflicting issues within and between communities. A thorough research is needed in order to appreciate the situation on ground, before planning Public relations programmes. This, also include identifying the various publics. In his views on the above topic, Ukozor (2013, p.205), opines that:

One of the most important aspects of research and troubleshooting roles of Public relations, lies in its ability to identify “early warning” signals that pose as threat either to the survival of such organization, programme, project or to the peaceful or harmonious relationship between such organization and its publics.

ii. Education/Information: Having embarked on series of researches that enables the practitioner to among other things, identify the publics and situations on ground, educating and informing these publics should be his next role. This will discourage rumours and close any gap in communication between the government and the governed. The question now is, how does the practitioner build and sustain goodwill, trust, cooperation and mutual understanding of the external publics?

In a nutshell, when one talks of a “breakdown in communication” either between employers and employees or the government and any segment of the governed, the expression infers a lack of positive Public relations, which should have facilitated the continuing dialogue or two-way communication that would prevent any such breakdown. The two way nature of

public relations distinguishes it from other forms of communication, such as advertising and propaganda, which are outward only.

In other words, a good Public relations practitioner must cultivate a feeling for words. Words, written or spoken are the main weapons in public relations and an intelligent use of words can be a powerful influence for the development of good understanding.

Problems Militating Against Effective Utilization of Public Relations Strategies in Governance/Conflict Management in Nigeria

Ukozor (2013) says many institutions and organizations in Nigeria do not have Public relations departments as a regular part of their management structures and even when they exist, the practitioners operate under severe bureaucratic bottlenecks that inhibits the successful implementation of their duties. Consequently, the impact of public relations efforts remains minimal in scope.

It is on record that different governments in Nigeria uses the Federal Ministry of information, its parastatals and agencies with liaison officers in each state, to promote their images. Similarly, in the private sector, only few companies like the United African Company (UAC) Shell BP and others in that category utilize the benefits of the PR industry.

The above views are consistent with the observation made by Akande (2002) when he notes that Public relations practice could be said to be in the embryonic stage in Nigeria.

In addition Eyita (1993, p.70), opines that most political leaders/public office holders indulge in a style of communication which Geoffrey Nightingale calls “a standing position”. According to him, it is a major dent in most governmental organizations, most often than not, “communicate” at or to people” it is difficult to have the management of government agencies, parastatals or ministries see the need or have the indignation to “communicate with” their publics, which is synonymous with Public relations principles, rather than “communicate to their publics. This ugly development, according to Eyita (1993), could be the reason why most of their communication efforts do not work.

In his support for the above views, Moguluwa (2011, p.155), opines that many at times, company executives and management, government officials, regard and treat public relations practitioners like fire fighters that can only be called upon when there is “fire out break”. In the same vein, Public relations is only remembered and wanted when there is conflict and crisis. This is not the case, Public relations practice is not based on firefighting approach, but on planned and sustained programme of action.

Also, Udeze (2001, p.34), notes that of every other aspect of mass communication practice, the practice of Public relations has been the most bastardised, so much more that every mischievous act by government and government agents is termed “PR.” He further points out that when government gives money to a corrupt journalist to either suppress or sensationalize information, it is

termed “PR”, when a contractor gives money upfront to get a job approved for him or give such negotiated 10% for a job, it is termed “PR.” Nwosu (1996, p.45), share the same view with the above scholars as he notes that:

Very often, many people in government especially those in developing countries, seem to forget the relevance of public relations in government circles and as a result, they operate as if they could do without the support and acceptance of the citizenry. They run state affairs as rulers or feudal lords, instead of leaders or servants of the people for whom they hold political power and trust.

But the theory and practice of modern governance teaches that government, like any other social institution, must be accountable to the people and operate in the people's interest. This is in line with the corporate social responsibility concept in modern governance and Public relations management. Unfortunately, this is far from being the case.

Furthermore, Ikoiwak (1986, p.182), points out that although Public relations is a concept that has gained popular recognition in everyday language of private and of institutional behaviour; it is also a matter of fact that its existence, practice and importance are more closely associated in the “untutored” minds with the private corporations and institutions than with the public ones. Not surprisingly, therefore, the growth and expansion of the discipline and practice of public relations have flourished more and in direct relationship with the growth and expansion of the private sector.

Worse still, although, there is proliferation of public establishments across the states of the federation leadership of most of these offices usually ridicule the potentials of public relations as a skilled professional practice and discipline. In political dispensation, for instance, officials of ministries or departments of information which exist to carry out PR functions for political leaders are treated as relics of the paraphernalia of colonial bureaucratic trappings who can be ignored or barely tolerated notwithstanding the value and importance of their contributions. This is why despite scores of assorted cadres of Public relations practitioners both in public corporations, as well as institutions, their assigned roles are more of “errand boys” or “press agents” (Ikoiwak 1986, p.183).

Finally, Nwosu (1996), asserts that the misconception associated with Public relations and flippant recognition accorded the practice by most political office holders and few others in the private sector, as well as the negative influences of quacks in the profession, are factors militating against the utilization and impacts of Public relations in governance/conflict management.

However, the good news is that there is light at the end of the tunnel. There are rooms for improvements. Public relations strategies, if utilized effectively, has the potential of “making things happen” in any human relationship or public administration, (Nwosu, 1996, p.205).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The imperative of theories in every

academic work cannot be over emphasized. Asemah (2013), notes that Public Relations theories generally refer to generalizations that are put forward to explain, describe, prescribe or predict the behaviours of the public, to an organization or issues of public interest. To this end, Frank Jefkins' Public Relations Transfer and the Two-Way Symmetric Model have been chosen to provide the theoretical anchor of this study.

2.3.1 The Public Relations Transfer Process Theory.

The public relations transfer process model was propounded by Frank Jefkins in 1988. According to Nweke (2001), the model is an antidote against some negative developments in our society, especially in organizations. Also, Jefkins (1988), asserts that when negative situations are converted into positive achievements through knowledge, the result predictably, is the primary objective of public relations practice which is understanding.

The theory explains how practitioners and others in leadership positions can use and apply public relations tools and strategies towards changing hostility among organization's target publics or community members to sympathy. This enables them to be in a better position to convert prejudice into acceptance; develop interest where there is apathy and then be able to communicate effectively to achieve knowledge where there is ignorance.

Deductions or inferences from the above discussion show that organizations, including the government and community leaders can use the Jefkin's Public relations

transfer process model to win the goodwill of the publics so as to reduce or prevent conflicts in our local communities and other organized groups. This can be achieved through effective communication that is so much needed to convert the four negative attitudes of the publics into four positive attitudes as earlier mentioned.

The central idea in the above discussion is that community leaders or government representatives or local government Public relations officers, should act as the clarifying link in this transformation process.

Finally, this model clearly illuminates the nexus between the government, the governed and public relations. With the level of disenchantment of the rural dwellers, no amount of tricks and propaganda and or lobbying can succeed without the effective application of public relations principles, practices and strategies (Ogbuoshi, 2004; Aliede, 2004).

2.3.2 The Two-Way Symmetric Model

This is the fourth theory of Public Relations as propounded by Grunig and Hunt, (1984). According to McQuail and Windahl (1996, p.195), the two-way symmetric model depicts a communication relationship where the sender or source and the public share initiative and power more equally. This model is very relevant, especially when the aim is to solve problems and avoid conflicts and where a lasting communication relationship is one of the requirements, rather than adhoc campaign.

Nwosu (1996) is of the view that the theory harps on a two-ways communication mechanism which has its emphasis on using

Public relations tools and strategies to bring an organization, be it government, business organizations or communities and its Publics together through a mutually two-way beneficial communication.

In this model, the Public relations practitioner, government representatives or community leaders assume a new role. They are no longer persuaders and one way communicators. Rather, they become the mediator between an organization, or community and its publics. The essence is simple: to bring about mutual understanding.

Another important aspect of this model is that it emphasizes the use of research, feedback and evaluation in order to effect genuine accommodation of different viewpoints. It ensures the cooperation of all interest parties working together to achieve a desired objective that will be beneficial to them (Wimmer and Dominic, 2011).

Furthermore, the two-way symmetric model of public relations uses research not only to shape and modify messages but also to change the organizations or leadership behaviour when it is in disharmony with its publics.

Also, Grunig and Hunt (1984) observe that practitioners of this model, "serve as mediators between any organized group and its publics with the goal of ensuring mutual understanding between leadership and their publics.

Finally, Nwosu (1996), notes that this model places emphasis on using public relations to bring the views of all interest groups together to ensure mutual understanding and respect.

The researcher believes that prevention

is better than cure. The application of Public relations strategies will offer opportunities for individuals and community leadership in the bud issues that would have resulted to conflicts.

Conclusion

Public relations strategies have the efficacy of either preventing or controlling the prevalence of inter-communal conflicts in our communities.

Public relations strategies have effective platforms have the capability to fuel war that tear apart the peace of these communities. The applications of Public relations strategies in the management and the resolution of inter-communal conflicts have facilitated change of attitudes of the people against conflicts.

Most importantly, the study found that Public relations strategies play more significant roles in the prevention of conflicts than in its resolution. This is against the backdrop that these strategies such as community/inter-community dialogue, advocacy visitations, and village square meetings, among others help to identify conflict-oriented issues which will be nipped in the bud before they trigger off conflicts. The point being made here is that prevention is said to be better than cure. It is much easier, cheaper, peaceful and friendly to prevent conflicts from occurring than to engage in war. Just like preventive medicine, preventive public relations is a functional antidote to the management of inter-communal conflicts. The implication of this finding is that community leaders/stakeholders who apply Public relations strategies in the management of issues experience peaceful co-existence and as

such conflicts are prevented or controlled. As earlier mentioned, this is so because issues that may generate conflicts/crises are identified and settled.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

1. Traditional/community leaders, community stakeholders and the government should be proactive in conflict management. Public relations strategies should be adopted in the management of issues and or conflicts. This will provide platforms for feedback mechanism that will generate the expression of diverse views, grievances, and expectations by both seemingly minority and majority groups. When this occurs, the leaderships/stakeholders will have opportunities to identify conflict-oriented issues (early warning signals) and nip them in the bud before any of the signals turns into conflicts and crisis.
2. Government through its agencies such as the National Boundary Commission (NBC) and others should promptly, swiftly and objectively intervene through visiting warring communities and buffer zones to make official and clear demarcation of such areas. Thereafter, strict sanctions should be taken against any community/leadership that allows its subjects fight over such areas after demarcation. Victims/casualties of the conflict should be rehabilitated and their medical bills taken care of by the government.
3. Community leaders and other

stakeholders should consistently use the town/village announcers, churches/mosques, village square meetings, open van public address system (PAS) to break the barriers of ignorance and then close up the knowledge/information gap through, giving adequate information about government programmes and policies and other issues of concern of the community, to masses.

4. State Governments should establish functional Public relations departments in all their Local Government Areas (LGAs) and employ Public relations professionals to act as the link between the government, the community and the masses. The Public relations personnel should be made to facilitate the feedback mechanism between these groups, especially in warring communities.

5. Government representatives, NGOs who act as conflict mediators should visit warring communities and “identify with” and “talk with”, rather than “talk to” them, on proposed measures of preventing and or resolving the conflict. This ensures participatory communication, which generates consent, cooperation, confidence, trust and support between mediators and warring communities. The reverse of this approach, usually blind mediators from major issues or peculiarities that are behind the conflict in such areas.

6. Political and kingship positions and other resources should be evenly shared to all the components of a community. Allocation of democracy dividends should be shared in cognizance of “Community character”, just as we have “Federal

Character” for the National Government. One area or community should not produce political office such as National or State Legislator, Governor during every political dispensation. Other communities should be allowed to taste the “Community Cake”. This is a way to avoid or prevent conflict and ensure cooperation, unity and peaceful co-existence in our communities.

7. Government agencies such as the Nationals Orientation Agency (NOA) and others, should organize periodic public awareness programmes such as seminars, workshops, public forum on the need to imbibe the culture of peaceful co-existence, tolerance and live and let live principle.

8. Finally, every human being, especially those involved in conflict should know that conflict is inevitable in any human relations and must be addressed, failure will lead to its escalation to an unimaginable dimension. At this level, lives and unquantifiable materials and human resources are lost. Thereafter, dusts of enmity, hatred, envy and jealous are spread from generation to generation. Both human and community development are halted, health and social infrastructure are destroyed and the people live in penury, hunger and other pitiable conditions.

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