

CRISES AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN NORTH-WESTERN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The onslaught of Banditry and kidnapping activities have devastated Northwest parts of Nigeria which implies peace and security eluding the region and the country at large, unless some other actions are pursued as alternative means of attaining sustainable tranquillity in the country. To this end this paper explored the application of principles and techniques of public relations as method of achieving attitudinal transformation for winning the terrorists. The process involves professional practices which will subtly and surely revise the violent disposition of the terrorists through the use of communication. Descriptive analysis was applied encompassing review of literature, theoretical framework and recommendations which include government's use of professional public relations practitioners and consultants; training and retraining of media and communication practitioners on global best practices of coverage of national security issues, and preparedness with reliable strategic action plans for effective management of future crisis situations like the Banditry in North West.

Keywords: Public relations, conflicts, conflict management, Northwest, Nigeria

Introduction

After almost half a century of independence in Nigeria, the self acclaimed super power of Africa, has traveled in reversed gear. If Nigeria had been a motor vehicle it would have been a scrapped, and the scrap dealer would probably have refused the metal because of its flaws. On

every measure of performance for a state with its wealth has been a failure. The historical record is almost blank since 1976, with hundreds of billions in oil revenue, Nigeria has retrogressed, (Wilmot, 2007:20).

Over the years, ethnic, religions, communal, social and political conflicts have been

threatening the fragile unity of the Nigerian nation. This problem has been exacerbated by the win-at-all-costs attitude of some Nigerian politicians. To worsen the matters, terrorism dimensions to violence have now entered the Nigerian social history and political diary, with bombings and news of bombings being heard everyday (Amadi, 2011; Njoku, 2011; Osai, 2011). All these social problems pose great hindrances to the country's corporate existence. Several reasons have been advanced to explain such an anomaly in Nigeria society. "Banditry in North West" a group campaigning for the imposition of Sharia law on some states of the Nigerian federation, blames western education, unemployment and political injustices as being behind their actions. Since after the 2011 general election, arson, wanton destruction of lives and property have been unleashed sporadically on the police, public, churches, innocent people and even the international community which the United Nation's building bombing in Abuja typifies.

Meanwhile, Angaye (2003:1) buttresses this point that it is the divisive interplay of politics, ethnicity and religion in Nigeria that has led to the recent spates of micro-nationalism, and militancy of the various ethnic movements like the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), the movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Odua People's Congress (OPC), the Boko-Haram and many more), all seeking self-determination, local autonomy, separate identity, resource control and true federalism. All these are given vent through accusations and allegations of neglect, oppression, domination, exploitation, victimization, discrimination, marginalization and rotation of major political offices.

Conceptual Issues

Concept of Public Relations

Public relation is the actions of a corporation, store, government, individual, etc., in promoting goodwill between itself and the target publics, the community, employees,

customers, etc, (Zhao, 2003; Grunig and Hunt, 1984). The first World Assembly of Public Relations Associations, held in Mexico City, in August 1978, defined it as the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organizational leaders, and implementing planned programs of action, which will serve both the organization and the public interest (Wikipedia.org, 2009; Nwosu, 1996). Common activities of public relations include speaking at conferences, working with the media, crisis communications, social media engagement and employee communication, ((Rubel, 2007:7; Kamau, 2009: 67; Maloney,2003:19). Almost any organization or country that has a stake in how it is portrayed in the public arena employs some level of public relations, (Cutlip, 1994:113).

Concept of Conflict

Conflict is the aftermath of the inherent differences in man. Onigu Otite buttresses this position when he states that “Conflicts arise

from the pursuit of divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals and, or groups in defined social and physical environments”, Otite (1999: 1). In another popular definition, an analyst sees conflict as “a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power, and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralise, injure, or eliminate their rivals”, Coser (1956: 8). At any level, the eventual consequences of any conflicts can only be guessed. Hence, the best thing is to avoid it at all costs. Yet, they continue to rear their ugly heads and will ever be so as man’s interests differ.

These two definitions appropriately contextualise the preponderance of troubled spots all over the global today. Right from the family to global levels, conflict manifests as struggles, clashes, skirmishes, fighting, battles and wars. In Nigeria, there is abundant evidence of conflicts in the political, financial and other sectors. However, most pronounced is the current armed conflict the Goodluck Jonathan’s

regime could not end and now inherited by a new administration of Mohammadu Buhari.

On the other hand, crisis connotes conflictual situations, usually resulting in negative consequences like damages to lives and property, as a result of man's quest for supremacy or high-handedness. Often some perceive crisis as the level where conflict has gone out of control. It, however, includes naturally induced circumstances which also cause casualties and fatalities like disasters, calamities and catastrophes that may result from such events. Instances are earthquakes, fire outbreaks, droughts, famine, epidemics or floods. But in all, crisis leads to destruction of life and property.

Conflict arises whenever people disagree over issues, interests, values, motivations, perceptions, feelings or desires. In personal relationships, a lack of understanding about differing needs can result in distance, arguments and break-ups.

We respond to conflicts based on our perceptions of the situation, not necessarily to

an objective review of the facts. Our perceptions are influenced by our life experiences, culture, values, and beliefs.

Conflict Management

This refers to the long-term management of intractable conflicts in society, organization, institution, community or family. The form of conflict management option or strategy to be adopted is determined by the social structure or social geometry of the country and the cases involved. But the functional-conflict school of thought believes that when conflict is handled in a respectful and positive way, it provides an opportunity for growth. Dysfunctional conflicts, like the ones in Nigeria today, are destructive and cause loss of lives, property, man-hours, investment opportunities, hunger and starvation, open violence, wars and other forms of social disruptions (Nkamnebe, 2007; Nwosu, 1996).

Angaye (2003:1) reports that compounding the problem of underdevelopment in poor countries like Nigeria is micro nationalism, ethnic,

religious and communal conflicts which pose great threat to peace, security and progress. In every nation there is no complete agreement on how to share wealth, power and status among individuals and groups, and how to effect necessary changes and reforms. Since different groups and individuals have diverse interests, the aims of some groups will conflict with those of others. Effective conflict management is therefore needed for peaceful co-existence of the people.

The divisive interplay of politics, ethnicism and religion in Nigeria has led to rising nationalism and militancy of various ethnic movements, seeking self-determination, local autonomy, separate identity and true federalism. The existence of artificial and arbitrary boundaries that split ethnic groups among different local government areas (LGAs) and states has resulted in boundary disputes and demands for re-unification or separation, (Angaye, 2003:1).

Accusations and allegations of neglect, oppression, domination, exploitation,

victimization, discrimination, marginalisation, nepotism and bigotry are common, Angaye (2003:2) observed. Today, struggles for the control of power at the centre have become a major cause of social crisis up to a terrorism dimension in the country. All these discourage foreign investors from coming into Nigeria, while others already in are running away.

Evolution of Public Relations in Nigeria

Public relations represent the various policies and activities developed by government, local authorities, communities or individuals to secure self and corporate promotion, mutual understanding and positive relationships with a defined group of people on a continuous and sustained basis. Nigeria is a former British colony. Her public relations history was greatly influenced by this relationship. Public relations history in Nigeria can be classified into two major phases: historic and modern. Excellence theory classifies public relations practice as: publicity or press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical communication and

two-way symmetrical communication. These four models help to explain the level of maturity in the practice of public relations in Nigeria in its historic and modern eras of public relations development.

Public Relations Practice

For ages, public relations have remained an efficacious and reliable choice and tool for effective management of conflicts and crises at organisational, local, regional, national and international levels. Organisations and governments have always utilised it as a potent instrument for resolving conflicts/crises: face-offs with workers; skirmishes of communities; over-bearing influence of stakeholders/shareholders; exploitative tendencies of financial institutions; misconstrued perception of customers/consumers; aspersive and negative disposition of Research on Humanities and Social Sciences competitors; uncomplimentary and harsh media reports and adverse or punitive legislations from governments. Similarly, public relations always have been handy during

national emergencies, disasters or wars. At the global arena and diplomatic circles, its principles and techniques are always in use for the management and resolution of conflicts and crises through diplomacy. It is at play in the current bid to douse the tension between Israel and Palestine; minimise the hostilities in Ukraine; find enduring solution to the Syrian crisis; restore peace and order in South Sudan, Congo and Central African Republic.

Whatever way it is defined, public relations cultivates cordiality, corporative disposition, healthy relations, favourable disposition and goodwill; restores understanding, trust, confidence, fraternity; repairs and heals wounds, frayed nerves, broken hope and despair, and builds linkages and partnerships. It re-establishes an opportunity for peaceful negotiations, diplomacy, tolerance, accommodation and eventual restoration of normalcy. Even under war situations, effective communication processes through public relations is usually deplored with a view to through effective engagement evolve

mechanisms for restoration, rehabilitation, reconstruction, reabsorption and transformation when the crisis would be over.

It is, therefore, on the strength of the above insights that this paper attempts, through the application of qualitative analysis, to explore the applicability, effectiveness, capacity and capabilities of public relations in restoring peace and national security, evolving measures with which to nip future conflicts and crises in the bud and ensure harmonious relation and cohesion and consequently sustainable development which is currently eluding Nigeria due to the crisis in north-eastern parts of the country. Pertinently the question is: how do we attain peace in terrorist ravaged Nigeria and what role can public relations play?

Public relations use communication to create mutual benefits for the interest of the contending parties in an organisation and its various publics. Sam Black states that its aim is “to establish a two-way communication, seeking ground or areas of mutual interest, and to establish understanding based on truth,

knowledge and full information.” He also quotes the Institute of Public Relations as defining public relations as the “planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its various publics”, Black (1989: 1).

Public Relations and conflict management

To successfully apply public relations in tackling conflicts and crises, the practitioner should stick to certain fundamental principles of communication. These are the process of communication that ultimately lead to securing the attention of the audience, retaining it, ensuring that the message is consumed, understood, assimilated and made use of. In other words, it leads to action. Impliedly, the campaign programme or project has such compelling influence that leads the target audience to strictly behave in accordance with the intention of the programme implementers. Public relations strategies and techniques when

applied professionally will convince members of this radical group to abandon their dogmatic ideologies, cooperate with the government, relate amicably with people from other parts of the country and respect the religious and political beliefs/rights of others.

These principles should act as guides in writing and packaging any campaign communication message that would make audience-friendly and effective communication capable of achieving the desired impact on the targeted audience, in the opinion of Skinner, von Essen and Mersham (2001:77). To be meaningful and capable of attaining the intended goals, such messages must have certain features, which Cutlip, S. M, *et al* present in what they call “The Seven C’s of Communication”. The components are:

- i. Credibility: communication must acceptability, believability lead to confidence and high regard.
- ii. Context: it must reflect the realities of the environment. Should lead to

participation and should reaffirm and support the prevailing social setting.

- iii. Content: the message should be meaningful in line with receiver’s value. It should be relevant, rewarding and gratifying.
- iv. Clarity: conveyed message must be in simple, clear themes, slogans or stereotype. There should be one voice and no ambiguity.
- v. Continuity and Consistency: there should be repetition for penetration. This with variation to “factual and attitudinal learning.”
- vi. Channels: use conveyance vehicles familiar to the audience, if this must be massive accessibility and respectability.
- vii. Capability of the audience: Audience’s condition should be put into consideration, their affordability, availability, habits, reading ability and level of

knowledge and socialization, all affect the effect and impact of communication, communicator must note this and put it into consideration while packaging their messages. As tested and proved guidelines and principles, they are capable of aiding campaigners in a crusade like the fight against *Banditry in North West* in achieving the communication goals if meticulously followed in planning, scribing, producing and packaging campaign communication messages.

However, the very first aspect of any strategic communication campaign exercise, as is the case here, starts with its proper planning, Center (2003: 339). To attain effective crisis management, Skinner, von Essen and Mersham (2001: 288) also state that proper planning is necessity. They propose these four key factors: “Well

defined corporate policies and procedure of crisis management; Giving responsibility to staff to involve in tackling such crisis; Training and preparing staff to handle communication during such crisis situation at all Research on Humanities and Social Sciences necessary avenues, and establishing communications system and equipping it.” They went further to provide a blueprint for preparing/planning crisis management, roadmap for tackling challenges like the *Banditry in North West* insurgency as shown below:

- i. Prepare crisis management plan.
- ii. Be ready to show concern for the incident.
- iii. Categorically position the corporate body involved as the right source of information on the incident and available remedial measures.
- iv. Make effective use of the media in containing the situation.

- v. On the onset, set up a crisis/emergency control room, well-staffed and equipped to manage the crisis.
- vi. Maintain telephone hotlines to handle torrents of calls that will accompany the crisis and man them with seasoned personnel.
- vii. Involve the affected, effected or opponents involved in the crisis management and control. Also involve “objective, authoritative bodies” in the crisis management. This will elicit credibility. While communicating, be meek, modest, truthful, fair, accurate and concerned. Understand the audience and their grievances and expectations.
- viii. When making the crisis plan, involve outside independent consultancy services, (Skinner, von Essen and Merham, 2001: 289).

Theoretical framework

Balance theory primarily seeks to explain how individuals cognitively coordinate their viewpoints consistently in the direction of certain individual or object. This theory is about relationship where three entities are involved with the third being an object. The balance theory of Heider (1958) tends to share similar position with two-way symmetrical model where three entities are involved, the third being an object. The Heider’s paradigm of 1958, fundamentally addresses the question of like or dislike in a relationship between person (P) and person (O) depending on the attitude of the either person(P) or (O) towards the object, idea or event (X). He maintains that an equilibrium state exists when all the three entities are in his words ‘positive in all respects or if two are negative and one is positive’(p176). Where one of the entities is positive, the equilibrium state may not be for a long term as there is yet no satisfaction of the interest of all strategic concern. The model which is structured on the postulation that a

relationship can be unbalanced or balanced, posits that an unbalanced condition is believed to be erratic and subsequently result in intra-personal worry. A balanced condition is realized when a solution is found to address the state of worry. The balanced status, according to Heider's model is attained when all three entities are positive in all areas.

Heider postulates that the consequence of disequilibrium relationally is the manifestation of ill feelings among persons who have a stake in a relationship. He argues that the idea of a balanced or equilibrium state relationally is realized when the 'perceived units and experienced sentiments co-exist without stress' (Heider, 1958, p176). This paradigm is used because it has some measure of closeness to the Boko-Haram question.

Methodology

For our methodology, secondary data were used for the analysis. The data sourced, were collated and analysed using content analysis for ease of understanding.

Implication of Public Relations for Conflict Management in Nigeria

Public relations (PR) practice in Nigeria holds significant implications for various aspects of society, including conflict and conflict resolutions and management. These implications are shaped by the country's cultural, political, and economic dynamics. The evolving nature of public relations in Nigeria has led to both positive and negative consequences, influencing how societal dynamics and complexities evolves overtimes. One implication of public relations practice in Nigeria is its impact on government communication and transparency. Effective PR strategies are essential for governments to convey their policies, initiatives, and achievements to the public. However, challenges in maintaining transparency and addressing public concerns can lead to skepticism and mistrust. This highlights the need for ethical and accountable PR practices to

bridge the gap between the government and citizens (Okigbo, 2014). Effective public relations can enhance security, build trust, and facilitate meaningful interactions among and between members of the society, while ineffective or unethical practices can result in public mistrust, skepticism and reputational damage. To navigate these implications successfully, public relations practitioners must adhere to ethical standards, adapt to cultural diversity, and embrace the evolving dynamics and complexities of the society. Effective public relations can bolster brand image and build stakeholder trust. On the other hand, misleading public relations efforts can lead to reputational damage and a loss of consumer confidence. With Nigeria's diverse market and competitive landscape, organizations must tailor their PR strategies to resonate with the local culture and values (Ojo & Adeyemi, 2017). Media relations are another key implication of public relations practice in Nigeria. PR professionals collaborate with media outlets and community members to

disseminate information for enhance security and sustainability.

The country's rich cultural diversity requires public relations practitioners to navigate various linguistic and cultural nuances in their communication efforts. Neglecting cultural sensitivity can lead to misinterpretations and miscommunications and invariably poor cohesion and members of the society. Thus, public relations professionals must adopt culturally inclusive strategies to ensure their messages resonate with diverse audiences (Edegoh, 2016). The digital age has transformed public relations practice, introducing new implications related to online reputation management and social media engagement. Organizations must monitor and respond to online conversations, as public sentiments can spread rapidly across digital platforms. The instantaneous nature of social media requires public relations practitioners to be vigilant and adaptive in managing online interactions (Nwachukwu et al., 2019).

1.9 Conclusion

The existence of social peace is a sine qua non for socio-economic development in any society. The lofty dream of Nigeria joining the league of 20 most developed nations in the coming ten years will be difficult to realize under a climate of social insecurity. This paper tried here to X-ray this problem, its manifestations and ramifications, the impact on direct foreign investment and the public relations and conflict resolution options for the redress.

1.10 Recommendations

- i. Periodic public relations research must be initiated by the government to track issues that are likely to balloon into conflicts and nip such in their buds.
- ii. Integrated stake-holders meetings should be held from time to time at both national, states, local governments and community levels to sieve the feelings and opinions of the populace. These harvests of opinions will then be

factored by policy makers into their social and security plans for the nation.

- iii. The nagging unemployment problem in the land must be tackled head-on by the government.
- iv. Entrenchment of good, transparent and service-oriented governments at all tiers of governance in Nigeria.
- v. Religious bodies and traditional and socio-cultural institutions in the transformation agenda in order to stem the tide of political, ethnic and communal conflicts, and usher in the much needed peace.

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