

**Research Article****PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES: A VERITABLE TOOL FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION, PEACE BUILDING, DEMOCRACY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Abstract

This article examines the public relations strategies in Nigeria by focusing on conflict resolution, peace-building, democracy and national development. Its arguments are based on a theoretical review of literature on public relations strategies, conflict resolution, peace-building, democracy and national development. The article suggests an in-depth investigation of the nature of some major problems of public relations strategies in Nigeria and contributes to a better understanding of the concept. The nature of the analysis is more exploratory than definitive and specific investigations are needed to thoroughly explore and better theorise public relations strategies for conflict resolution, peace-building, democracy and national development. This trend requires drastic public awareness and enlightenment to minimise the degree of conflict, promote peace and democracy in the society in order to facilitate rapid national development. This paper recognised the relevance of peace-building and democracy as veritable tools for conflict resolution and national development. It also reviewed some concepts such as peace education, conflict and democracy, causes and consequences of conflict and conflict resolution strategies. The paper suggested important useful strategies to resolving conflicts, promote peace and democracy through regular advocacy for tolerance by Civil Society Organizations, Policy Makers, Government Institutions, Security Agencies and Traditional Institutions to educate their subjects on the need for maintaining peace in their different domains, using mutual understanding and the bottom-top approach.

Keywords: Public Relations Strategies, Conflict Resolution, Peace Building, Democracy and National Development.

INTRODUCTION

It is obvious that no society, community, state or nation can achieve rapid development in the midst of conflict and violence: it is on this premise that public relations strategies are underpinned as the foundation of development in any nation. Since Independence, Nigeria appears to have been bedeviled with series of conflicts arising from ethnic tension, arm struggle for resource control, agitations for sovereignty and independence, religious intolerance, terrorism by Islamic insurgents, Armed herdsmen, banditry, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Niger-Delta Militancy, Asymmetry aspiration for political power, discrimination, marginalisation, injustice, unemployment, youth restiveness and of course communal clashes and land disputes. This point to the fact that all is not well with Nigeria in terms of protection of lives and properties in the context of engaging Public Relation Strategies in conflict resolution. Hence, no sustainable development can be achieved in the atmosphere of violence, conflicts and crisis. There is an increasing consensus among scholars that these crises are triggered by woeful failures in governance and democratisation by our political leaders (Alabi, 2007 and Epelle, 2011) argued that democracy had increased the culture of impunity among some political office holders, while differences are believed to have fueled some of the violence and conflicts that have erupted in Nigeria. In May 1999, when Nigeria returned to democratic rule, the political transition was welcomed with fresh hope and optimism. This fresh hope was predicated on the fact that democracy would guarantee employment for the jobless youths, freedom for the marginalised

groups, liberty, attention to several agitations, and succor to the poor masses and enthronement of sustainable peace that would enhance rapid national development. The recent "EndSars" protests in Nigeria in October, 2020 is a typical example of the violence; lives and properties were lost; both properties owned by private and public properties were also destroyed worth billions of naira. Some states stated that they would be unable to replace properties damaged in their states in 20 years budget through the violent action of the hoodlums who hijacked the peaceful demonstration to destroy and vandalise public and private properties in October 2020. A wide range of non-violent methods of managing conflict avail to the conflict transformation of the nation. These methods are available at the personal, family, group, community and international levels. It is against this milieu that this paper examined the relevance of public relations strategies as a tool to addressing or mitigating conflicts, promoting peace-building and good governance for National Development. The paper also intends to introduce and discuss these methods. The peaceful methods exist in two broad categories. The first is the proactive category, which entails methods that aim to prevent the occurrence of conflict in the first instance and promote peace-building and good governance. Examples include undocumented community-based trust and confidence-building measures, communication, good governance, inter-party collaboration etc. The second category is reactive, dealing with responses to situations that have already turned conflictive or are potentially so. These include third party interventions like mediation, alternative dispute resolution (ADR), brokerage, conciliation, arbitration and litigation etc. The objective of this paper is not only to present these methods in the conflict management spectrum, which as a matter of fact, have been

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with us for a long but also to stress that there are alternatives to violence, aggression and confrontation. It is on this note that public relations strategies in conflict resolution, peace-building and good governance can be evaluated. Public relations practice is defined as a planned and sustained effort towards establishing and maintaining goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics (Black, 1995). From this definition, public relations practice should be based on truth in order to resolve conflict, promote peace and good government for national development, rather than employing propaganda and conflict of interest.

Review of related literature

Public relations, and by implication, community relations in Nigeria, has had a relatively long history but fewer activities. The literature available for review in this sensitive area of business management are numerous, but mainly journal, books, magazines, newspapers and brochures. The research will draw judgment from the literature reviewed. The literature would also provide the conventional approaches to conflict resolution, peace-building, democracy and national development and conceptualise and evaluate whether there are deviations from the practice of public relations in Nigeria.

Overview of public relations

There are several definitions of public relations. But it is shown that public relations are a profession that uses communication to create and sustain a favourable image and reputation amongst its strategic stakeholders called the public. It establishes a cordial and fruitful relationship between an organisation and its publics, including directors, customers, suppliers, bankers, creditors, shareholders, community leaders, media, top management officials, government officials, political office holders and agencies. From the definition of public relations, it is evident that public relations help the organisation to build a reputation, secure public trust for an organisation and management of relationships. It achieves its goal through inspection of trends and issues of public interest and concerns on available feedback to offer friendly counsel to top management to create and sustain mutual understanding between an organisation and its various publics.

Conceptual overview

Public relations management emphasizes the practical application of strategies and techniques in solving diverse problems in business and non-commercial organisations and setting: It emphasizes how public relations can be practised or applied in these organisations to help them achieve their various objectives and goals. According to Black (1995), public relations practice is the planned and sustained effort to create and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between two entities like an organisation and its publics. He further stated that public relations are not fire-brigade responses but should be an integral part of corporate strategy and forward planning. According to Ogunsanya (1981), modern public relations has assumed the position of a scientific management function which involves the creation, building and maintenance of mutual understanding and respect between government or organisation and its publics, based on truth, using effective two-way communication, and strategic management agenda to enhance the performance of corporate institutions or government and the social and economic

development of the society. Furthermore, the democratic system has marked out man as a socially rational being, who has transcended the barbaric level of forcing the wishes of one or few on the majority, thereby oppressing them, and have learnt to respect the views of others in considering his own. In line with the principles of democracy, democracy can be defined as the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people. In all spheres of human endeavours today, dialogue rather than confrontation is a mark of maturity, especially when discussing controversial issues of all the methods used for dispute settlement to regulate the terms and conditions of employment. None is as resilient and is widely accepted as collective bargaining. Thus, it is said that collective bargaining plays a significant role in industrial relations, as it helps in conflicts resolution, peace-building and democracy and this should be recognised by the Nigerian government to ensure national development and unity.

Concept of conflict

Conflict is seen as part of human life, and it is an activity that is almost totally negative and has no positive qualities (Igbuzor, 2011). Conflict describes an imbalance or an existence of differences between the needs and interest of the two sides. It becomes negative only when the response is aggression. It is possible, however, to resolve the differences positively by recognising the problem, needs, interest and also acknowledging the agitations of the opposing side. Bercowitch (2011) defines conflict as a situation that generates incompatible goals or values among different parties. This, according to Bercowitch, depends on the situation at hand. Conflict occurs due to different conditions, such as the influence of a person and external factors. Theoretically, Marxist Scholars propounded the social conflict theory, which argued that individual and groups within society interact on the basis of disagreement between two or more parties from varying background and worldviews Ejibunu (2001) sees conflicts as a disagreement through which the parties involved perceive a threat to their needs, interest or concerns. It is also an active disagreement between people with opposing opinions or principles. An important aspect of the conflict is that it includes potential for change, and peace-building tends to address issues of conflicts through creative approaches, critical thinking and developing competence for a non-violent approach to violence. Conflict, according to Pruitt and Robbins (2002), conflict is described as the observed divergence of concern or opinion that parties' present dreams cannot be attained simultaneously from gradual interaction. It could be discerned as existing along with behavioural (perception), emotional (feeling) and behavioural (action) measures.

These three-dimensional perspectives can help us understand the difficulties of crisis and why a crisis often appears to move inconsistent direction (Mayer, 2001). As an aspect of opinions, conflict is an opinion that one's own needs, interest, wants, or values are incompatible with someone else. There are both objective and subjective essentials to this cognitive dimension. Conflicts further include an emotional reaction to a situation or interaction that signals a disagreement of some kind. Sometimes, a conflict happens because one person feels in conflict with another, even though those feelings are not brought back in return by or even known to the other person. The behavioural element may be small, but the conflict is still very real to the person going through it.

Causes of Conflict

Conflict is universal, and it happens in all places. There has never been a society without conflict in which some individuals or groups come into conflict. According to Famakinwa (2016) contended that conflicts might be caused by the following factors: clash of interest, social change, religions and cultural differences, political tussle, land and boundary dispute, ethnic superiority and chieftaincy dispute. Brock (2012) highlighted some possible causes of conflict to include bad governance and corruption. The author noted that, from the beginning of the post-colonial rule in Africa, these two elements of bad government and corruption have consistently constituted a major cause of conflict in Africa, as several regimes across the region have mismanaged state resources leading to an economic stalemate, political apprehension and breakdown of social peace and stability. Danso (2013) also pointed out that there is a strong linkage between ethnic marginalisation and conflict in Nigeria. Ethnicity has become a master stroke that continues to drive violent conflicts within and among communities and states, destabilising the peace in Nigeria. There is no doubt that most of the violent conflicts in Nigeria are caused by the possession of small arms and light weapons by ethnic militias (Keili, 2008).

Consequences of Conflict

Conflict as a negative term has the capacity to retard the growth and development of any community or nation. It is regarded as a major impediment to national development. The conflict has a negative connotation, which results in negative feelings and often leads to destruction (Alabi, 2007). Its consequence extends far beyond the destruction of infrastructures, death, forced migration, disease and long-term refuge problems, which culminate in damages to social, economic and political institutions. Conflicts also slow down the development gap between one society and another. It tends to set a person against persons or groups in ways that threaten to destroy organised social life in the society. From the foregoing, conflict is the enemy of national development.

Concept of Peace Building

According to Wikipedia, peace-building is an activity that aims to provide solutions to injustice in non-violent ways and to change the structural and cultural conditions that generate destructive or deadly conflict. It revolves around developing constructive individual, group and political relationships across ethnic, class, religious, racial and national boundaries. This process includes violence prevention or transformation and reconciliation after conflict or trauma healing, i.e. before, during and after any given case of violence. The concept of peace-building can be likened to the role education plays in society. The word education comes from the Latin word "Educare", meaning to draw or lead-out (Bass, 2012). This implies that education draws people, their instincts, to live peacefully with others and emphasised peaceful values, upon which society must rely for growth and development. The emphasis here is based on training, disciplining of the mind and the body. Ogoh (2008) defines education as the systematic process of acquiring knowledge for the benefits of individual and society at large. The author contends that the concept of education must provide the formation of a wide alliance of actors, which can collectively tackle problems relating to marginalisation, injustice, intolerance as well as violence.

Peace-building seeks to promote peace, friendship, common values, social justice, equal opportunity, respect for nature and tolerance as this will become an instrument of liberation and emancipation of people from the clutches of conflicts and violence. The central connotation here is the acquisition of a new positive attitude and values on how to relate maturely and peacefully with other people. In this regard, peace-building is conceived as a veritable instrument of resolving injustice, conflict, behavioural pattern and necessary tools capable of solving human and social problems to achieve peaceful coexistence and national development.

Conflict Management

It is the process of reducing the destructive and negative capacity of conflict through planned measures and by working with and through the entities involved in that conflict. This term is sometimes used alternatively with "conflict regulation". It covers the entire subject of handling conflicts positively at different stages, involving those efforts made to prevent conflict by being proactive. It encompasses conflict limitation, containment and litigation. Burton (1990) used the term to connote containment of conflict with the steps introduced to encourage conditions in which valued and collaborative relationships control the behaviour of the parties in conflict. The term "conflict management" is perhaps admits to the reality that conflict is inevitable, but that not all conflicts can always be resolved; therefore, what practitioners can do is to manage and regulate them.

Democracy in Nigeria

Since 1960 when Nigeria got its independence and embraced the democratic option of governance, much has not been witnessed in the country's tortuous road to full democratisation. Over the years, the nation had encountered turbulence characterised by controversies, military incursions, dashed hopes and leadership and systematic failures. In all situations, the political class was at the receiving end. They have been variously accused of anti-democratic tendencies that tend to violate constitutionality, abuse of citizens' rights, promote non-credible elections, and disrespect for the rule of law; others are poor delivery of services, the non-advancement and propensity for violence and protection of personal and collective freedoms. Incidentally, all elements form the fundamental pillars that differentiate democracy from other forms of governance. Negative acts of political misbehaviours, absence of accountability, wanton disregard for the will of the people, electoral malpractices, bad governance, tyrannical attitudes, disregard for the rule of law, propagation of blatant lies, massive stealing of public resources, personal appropriation of state power, increased deprivations and gross ineptitude by elected officials which seem to combine with debilitating poverty to overwhelm the general population and push it to frustration, hopelessness and possible violent outburst. The recent 'ENDSARS' protest was a result of Nigeria bad governance. Indeed, the democratic space is heavily demonised by its immediate beneficiaries, the politicians, to the chagrin of the ordinary people. Nigeria leaders have not adopted the elements of democratisation for national development. These elements: Institutionalisation of the rule of law, creation of a vibrant civil society, institutionalisation of procedures that protect minority rights, fostering a sense of moderation and tolerance among competing political forces, development of an economically

and politically independent broad media and effective citizen control over police and military (Kingsbury, 2007). Arguably, the threats to the democratic process in Nigeria today are incompetent leadership at different levels, poverty, structural weakness of public institutions, abuse of procedures and regulations, undemocratic tendencies, insecurity, massive stealing of public resources, desperate and insensitive conduct of politicians, and the personalisation of state power coupled with the increase of frustrations in the public. It is therefore, only in Nigeria that an individual is stronger than public institutions thereby behaving like a demi-god without any form of checks, regulations or trial by the government.

Public Relations Strategies

In this segment, the following public relations management strategies will be reviewed mass Media (Newspapers, Radio, TV and Films). The application of media is one of the public relations strategies employed in settling the conflict. Eyntachae (2002) described the mass media as the communication devices employed in disseminating information, thoughts, knowledge, ideas and attitudes to a huge and divergent audience. The devices, according to Eyutachae (2002), refer to television, radio, newspapers and magazines. Abagen (2009) asserts that the mass media are, by definition, the entire variety of information distribution institutions and agencies. Asemah (2011) observed that whenever there is a crisis in any community, the mass media are quickly used to preach oneness, unity and stresses the imperativeness to reside in peace and harmony. Similarly, Ndolo (2005) opined that the media gain insight into the circumstances of others, they identify with others and gain a sense of belongings; thus, they are so useful in the period of crisis. It can be recommended that media are both a friend and an enemy to a peace process. Media can promote human security, and there is evidence that media can strengthen motives for fueling wars. They can be instruments for peace and conflict management, which promotes communication and strategies that can lead to serene agreements and tolerant behaviour in a given society. Media can also be a weapon of violence that spread partial information and influence societies or groups in conflict with disruptive ideologies and damaging actions. Thus, the media have become pervasive and tremendously powerful in attitudes towards conflict. The contributions of media in conflict have raised its place in public attention (Foresberg, 2006). Public relations practitioners, Doorley and Garcia (2011), define community relations as "The strategic development of reciprocally beneficial relationships with targeted communities towards the long-term aim of building reputation and trust". They argued that the development of community relations practice "was a response to the realisation that companies and other organisations must obtain a license to operate", a concept based upon the written and unwritten set of expectations between organisation and communities. Nweke (2001) sees community relations as the deliberate effort and planned programme embarked upon by an organisation to maintain a smooth relationship with the host community. Nweke (2001) notes that people who live in the community and within that community must, therefore, practice interdependence, cooperation, collaboration, solidarity, and unification and should strive to ensure all forms of selfishness by working assiduously towards a common goal. Another strategy used by public relations in the management of conflict is negotiation. Negotiation involves two or more people, despite having different decisions, try to reach an agreement (Morhed, 2005).

Negotiation comes in as a communication tool between two sides to reach an agreement on a common or opposite interest. When there are no systematic, determined and certain rules or methods, the negotiation is performed to resolve disagreement and conflict between two people. Bronowski (1983) further puts that negotiation is a process where each party involved in negotiating tries to gain an advantage or minimise disadvantage for themselves by the end of the process. That is, it is intended to aim at a compromise and occur in business, non-profit organisations, government agencies, legal proceedings, international dealings and in personal situations such as marriage divorce, parenting and in everyday life event that is prone to friction and conflict. Michel (1990), the employment of negotiation in conflict resolution stems from the general assertion that when the parties involved in a conflict are optionally satisfied, the conflict will definitely not ensue. Negotiation typically takes place during the early stages of conflict when communication between parties is cordial and good or at the de-escalation point when communication has been restored (Chikwe, 2011). Dialogue is another strategy between two more people or parties, intended to reach an understanding, resolve point of difference, or gain an advantage in outcome of dialogue, to bargain for individual or collective advantage to produce an agreement upon courses of action, to craft outcomes to satisfy the various interest of two people or parties involved in the negotiation process (Burton, 2001). Communication is very vital to conflict resolution. It is the process of sharing and exchanging information between individuals, groups and potential parties in a conflict situation. It is also the process of interacting and relating with others, meaning that parties to a conflict situation still talk to each other. The exchange and sharing of information can help to remove doubt, suspicion and contribute to the process of confidence-building. These are essential ingredients of peace-building. The role of communication in conflict prevention and crisis management stems from the fact that most conflicts have to do with perceptions, assumptions, stereotype and attitudes, which have been developed by conflict parties and progressive manners beneficial to the governed and which delivers the public goods. On this note, we state that grievance suppressed is more dangerous than grievance expressed. Therefore, parties in conflict should be open and communicate accordingly in order to resolve the conflict at an early stage.

Good Governance in Nigeria

Good governance is a controversial concept, especially to the governing elite in Nigeria, which is reluctant to be held accountable. Although, it is at the heart of the process of conflict prevention. Thus, conflict prevention through proactive measures has been known to be the best method of resolving conflicts. Good governance is also the running of the affairs of government in a progressive manner beneficial to the governed and delivers the public goods, It is a relative term to which there is no unanimous acceptance, but most will agree that it characterised by democratisation, maintenance of law and order, accountability and transparency, the responsiveness on the part of the government, the rule of law, due process, competence, separation and devolution of powers, a free press and a free virile civil society environment, competition for power and the existence of a credible opposition, the respect for minority rights among human rights etc. Decision-makers take the right decisions in the right time. In so doing, the rulers gain the support of the citizenry and conflict is reduced. In Nigeria, conflicts are state and government-generated as a

result of the insensitivity and incompetence of the leaders. Democracy, as opposed to dictatorship, is an ideal setting for the practice of good governance. Sadly in Nigeria, which is our focus, democracy is mistaken as winner takes all, sit tight syndrome and manipulation of the electoral process. The country's political system is too broken, its economy too crisis-ridden and its society so fractured since 1999 to date without a competent and successful political leadership. From the study, it found that Nigeria leaders have failed to provide good governance and welfare of all persons in our country on the principles of freedom, equity and justice. Such leadership does not promote and practice good governance. These are the conflict generators in Nigeria today.

Summary/Conclusion

This paper analysed the basic causes of conflicts, ways of resolving conflicts and the role of public relations strategies in conflict management, peace-building, democracy and national development. It is opined that an accurate knowledge of a particular type of conflict will aid the diagnosis of the conflict, and subsequent therapy for such conflict be well-thought-out.

Recommendations

Evident from the foregoing is that the weak or ineffective professional responses by the public relations practitioners in Nigeria have been a big problem in the performance of public relations function in conflict resolution, peace-building and democracy for national development. Based on the findings, the study made the following recommendations:

- 1) Public relations officers should establish a conflict resolution and peace-building centre in every state in Nigeria.
- 2) Public relations should always consciously insist on the philosophy of meeting the public expectation in conflict resolution/peace-building and democracy as a *sin-qua-non* to the success of Nigeria public relations practice. Achieving this means every policy must always be sensitive to public needs and expectations for national development.
- 3) There should be adequate information and communication from the parties involved in a conflict situation to enable public relations officers to use their professional expertise to resolve conflict and enhance peace-building and democracy.
- 4) Public relations practitioners should be in closer and regular contact with internal and external target publics when a conflict situation arises.
- 5) Public relations practitioners should ensure that truths are told in resolving conflict without compromise to any party.
- 6) The integration and implementation of effective public relations strategies in the Ministry of Information are inevitable given the present rates of conflicts in Nigeria.
- 7) There should be a regular evaluation of policies impact by the public relations with a view to re-modifying in order to meet public expectations.

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