

Public Relations and the Management of Ugambe and Mbaiaase Communal Crisis by the Government of Benue State, Nigeria

¹Favour Sewuese Achado & ²Chile, Caleb Terngu.

¹Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi

²Department of Strategic Communications, Faculty of Communications and Media Studies. Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi
Email: favourakpeh@gmail.com

Abstract

This study seeks to determine the public relations strategies which the Benue State Government adopted in managing the crisis between Ugambe and Mbaiaase communities. The study was anchored on the conflict theory with data collected through the instrument of structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered on 400 respondents involving sampled officials of the Benue State Boundary Commission, NIPR members of the Benue State Chapter and people from both Ugambe and Mbaiaase communities. Findings revealed, different application of public relations strategies involving community/civil peace meetings, community/stakeholder mediation between the warring communities, setting committee of inquiry to unravel the causes of the crisis and others by the government. The study also found that the public relations strategies by the government have not succeeded in effectively managing the crisis between Ugambe and Mbaiaase communities in Gwer-West and Konshisha local government areas of Benue State. The study still discovered that even though there were many challenges against effective use of public relations in managing the crisis, the major one was inadequate budget allocation for public relations activities. The study therefore concludes that the use of public relations in managing the prolonged communal crisis between Ugambe and Mbaiaase by the Benue State government has not been successful as the crisis keeps on reoccurring. The study recommends, among others, that government should increase budgetary allocation for public relations use in managing crises in the state.

Keywords: Public relations, communal crisis, management, strategies and communities.

Introduction

Crises, the world over, have been instances of common breakdown of peace and order, which often result in conflict and normally tend to cause failures in people's ability to live in harmony. In fact, in human endeavours and relations, crises occur due to differences in the way and manner people carry out their activities or perceive issues, their divergent interests, needs, goals and personalities. Crisis comes in form of individuals against individuals, families against families, communities against communities and more contemporarily, countries against countries. Crisis situations have often led to breakdown of order causing threats to peace and security. The primary threats to peace and security in Africa are considerably known to be poverty, weak state institutions and weak governance, among others. Nonetheless, specific economic, political and demographic developments have contributed to observable changes associated with violence and insecurity.

Crisis situations have stimulated outright prevalence of poverty and economic inequality which are on increase in many African countries. Notably, Africa, as a whole, has been considered to have the highest level of crises. According to data from the World Bank, as documented by Dowd

(2015), around half of African countries have experienced increase in income inequality in recent years as a result of one form of crisis or the other despite alleged reductions in poverty rates. Nigeria, for instance, has witnessed a good number of crises which include the 'Egbesu' instigated Delta crisis, the Ijaw, Urhobo crisis, the Ife-Modakeke crisis. A study by Abuul and Abuul (1993), reported well over thirty cases of recent or ongoing intra and inter-communal crises that involved the Tiv people of the Benue Valley, mostly linked to land disputes.

Nwagwu (2017), makes a relatively more elaborate documentation of some reported cases of crises in the country. For instance, Nwagwu has reported that Gyang Dantong, a Senator representing the Plateau North Senatorial District and Gyang Filani, a member representing Barikin Ladi Constituency in Plateau State House of Assembly were alleged to have been brutally murdered in cold blood by Fulani attackers in the struggle for land acquisition for their animal farming. According to Nwogwu, in 2014, the then Governor of Benue State, Gabriel Suswam narrowly escaped death when Fulani herdsmen attacked his convoy during an inspection tour of the crisis area in the state. Such other cases as the Zangon-Kataf crisis in Kaduna State (1992-2001) between the Atyaps (natives) and Hausa/Fulani tribes; the Tiv-Jukun-Wukari conflict in Taraba State (1999-2001); the Aguleri and Umuleri conflict in Anambra State (which reoccurred in 30 years interval - 1936, 1966, and 1996); the Itsekiri-Urhobo-Warri inter-community violent crisis in Delta State (1999-2000); the Ezza-Ezillo communal conflict in Ebonyi State; the Ife-Modakeke communal conflict in Oyo State (from pre-colonial era till date); the Hausa/Fulani and Berom or Birom/Anaguta/Afizere crisis in Jos, Plateau State (2009 - date); the Niger Delta conflicts (which primarily borders on economic deprivation, environmental degradation, political marginalization, government-driven impoverishment and underdevelopment of the region); the scourge of Boko Haram Islamic sect; the Tiv and Fulani herdsmen crisis in Makurdi, Benue State (2014); and a litany of other recorded and unrecorded incidents of indigenes and settlers conflicts in families, villages, and communities in Nigeria (Nwagwu, 2017). On June 7, 2025, over 200 lives were lost in Yelwata, a village in Benue State as a result of the invasion of the area by Fulani killer herdsmen.

Kalathil, Langlois and Kaplan (2008) cited in Elijah, Ogbu and Aer (2015), posit that the role of communication and media in post-conflict and fragile societies in crisis management cannot be overemphasized. Kalathil et al (2008), recognize that communication adjuncts especially public relations is an important element of stabilization, reconstruction and peace building in any given society. Incidentally, many scholars of public relations including Nwosu (2005), Keggku (2005), Ajala (2001), Chiakaan and Chile (2025) have also acknowledged public relations as a crisis management tool. Public relations in this regard, is appreciated as a relationship management instrument; a peace building and sustaining instrument as well.

It is on this note that this study seeks to find out the public relations strategies that were applied by the Benue State government in managing the age long crisis involving Ugambe and Mbaiaase communities in Gwer-West and Konshisha local government areas of the state.

Statement of the Problem

Crisis between Ugambe and Mbaiaase communities is one of the reoccurring crises in Benue State. The crisis is alleged to have started in 1988 when the Ugambe people in Konshisha Local Government Area (LGA) went to farm on the land, which the Mbaiaase people in Gwer-East LGA claimed was theirs. As a result, a physical fight ensued between the people of the two communities on the farm. Efforts from elders and traditional leaders of the communities to end the crisis proved abortive while pockets of attacks and reprisals went on unabated - as the crisis kept resurging at

different times.

The continual attacks and reprisals from both parties prompted the state government through the Benue State Boundary Commission in 2001 to sustainably increase the integration of public relations in managing the crisis. Despite the involvement of public relations for peace, the crisis continues to linger on, as there appears to be skirmishes that have caused panic among many people in the communities. As a result, there seems to be dearth of knowledge on the extent of the deployment of public relations in the management of the crisis by the government. This, therefore, calls for empirical knowledge on how PR has been used in the management of the crisis and other security challenges alike. It is against this backdrop that this study evaluates use of public relations by the government of Benue State in the management of the crisis between Ugambe and Mbaiaase communities.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study include:

1. To identify the public relations strategies used by Benue State Government in managing the communal crisis between Ugambe and Mbaiaase communities.
2. To determine the effectiveness of the use of public relations by the Benue State Government in managing the communal crisis between Ugambe and Mbaiaase communities.
3. To identify the challenges faced in the use of public relations by the Benue State Government in managing the crisis between Ugambe and Mbaiaase communities.

Conceptual Clarification

Public Relations

Public Relations is about communication and creating mutual benefits for the interest of the engaging parties usually an organisation and its various publics. On his part, Black (1989), in Chile and Iyorkyaa (2019, p.8), says the aim of public relations 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. Black (1989, p.3) further quotes the Institute of Public Relations in the United Kingdom 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.”

Public Relations have also been defined in many ways using different words. As affirmed by the Pearson Education (2012, p.7), “Rex Harlow, a Stanford Professor and founder of the organization that later became the Public Relations Society of America, once compiled more than 500 definitions from sources. The definitions ranged from the simple, ‘Doing good and getting credit for it’, to the more verbose one depicting PR as a management function of a continuing planned character, through which public and private organizations and institutions seek to win and retain the understanding, sympathy and support of those with whom they are or may be concerned.

Public Relations, according to the British Institute of Public Relations (BIPR) in Chile, Onyilo and Aer (2020), is the deliberate, planned and sustained efforts to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its various publics.

Communal Crisis

Ithaar (2016) argues that the concept of crisis is an idiomatic concept used by Arabs as an indication for severity and drought. In the English language, it means a change for the better or the

worse. The Chinese Mandarin character for crisis includes “danger” and “opportunity.” This idea is especially useful because it conveys the fact that we may create opportunities out of a situation that threatens us. Some Western and Chinese crisis experts claim that it may mean danger and a turning point, which indicates a sense of possible positive outcome (Johnston, 2016). Gibson (2012) in Zamoum and Gorpe (2018) argue that true communal crisis is usually the result of a management failure to respond appropriately to an issue, emergency or accident that requires a timely response and communication.

Crisis Management Approaches

A number of crisis management approaches abound. Ladipo (2017) identifies conflict management strategies of forcing, structural changes, avoidance, compromise and smoothing. Similarly, Hodge and Anthony (2021) in a study identify conflict management strategies as suppression, smoothing, avoiding, compromise, third-party intervention, cooperation, democratic process, job rotation as well as confrontation. The strategy identified by Meyer (1994) in Elijah (2021) is effective communication which he describes as the best because it would make the group aware of the kind of communication which could lead to problem solving. Nevertheless, Ibukun (1997) in Chile & Chiakaan (2025) identifies problem solving, appeal to superior organizational goals, prevention and avoidance, expression of opportunities and resources, use of authority and command, changing the structure of the organization and compromise as management strategies for resolving conflicts in organizations.

Likewise, Oyeade (1995) in Elijah, Ogbu and Aer (2015) identify certain strategies as important in resolving conflict; they include dialogue, automatic, emergency and delaying approaches. The efforts of all stakeholders in crisis management are required in ensuring amicable resolution. In this regard, Adebayo (2017) has postulates that the first strategy of conflict resolution is commitment to the management of productive conflict, such that conflict does not become destructive. Adebayo enjoins leaders, management and all in positions of authority to promote the rule of law protect the fundamental human rights, promote human freedom, fair allocation of values and equity of justice.

Magaula (2007) cited in Fatile and Adejuwon (2011) articulates three strategies of peaceful crisis resolution between and among warring parties; mediation, arbitration and reconciliation. Magagula also argues that each of the approaches could be used by universities to resolve crisis among and between aggrieved parties. In addition to this, school conflict communication should be devoid of propaganda and cognitive discrepancy (Magagula, 2007).

Public Relations Strategy of Crisis Management

Crisis management is public relations’ responsibility - that is, handling situations in which public awareness of a particular issue may dramatically and positively impact the organisation’s ability to achieve its goals. For instance, when drought was rampant in Kenya, Red Cross Society embarked on providing food items and clothing to the affected people. There was also a programme entitled “Kenyans for Kenya” whereby Kenyans donated money, food and clothing to the Red Cross. It was later discovered that maize that was imported from South Africa had aflatoxins and hence harmful for human consumption. The toxins were discovered after maize had been distributed to a large number of people. The general public tainted the society’s name as corrupt and “not putting the poor people’s interest at heart.” The public relations team had to ensure that the general public did not thereafter automatically associate Red Cross Society with the infected maize. Other public relations activities include lobbying, advertising management about

public issues and planning community events.

Public Relations as a management function serves as an avenue to create a suitable environment for institutions or organizations to successfully operate. For Gilaninia, Taleghani and Mohammadi (2013) in Chile, Onyilo and Aer (2020), public relations activities can enhance successes in organizations or institutions, as they provide a 'fertile' ground for conducive operations. Ogbuoshi (2011) also identifies certain public relations strategies used in resolving crises; They include negotiation, mediation, inquiry, conciliation, arbitration, mass media, public opinion and propaganda devices.

Negotiation appears to be the simplest but the most effective public relations strategy used in resolving crises as it consists basically of discussions between both parties in disputes 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 it involves discussions, arguments and counter arguments, targeted towards resolving the conflict (Ogbuoshi, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the conflict theory. Conflict theory is also referred to as social conflict theory. The theory is credited to Karl Marx, a capitalist scholar who propounded it. Barnier (2020) affirms that the theory, first purported by Karl Marx, is a theory that society is in a state of perpetual conflict because of competition for limited resources. Conflict theory holds that social order is maintained by domination and power, rather than by consensus and conformity. According to the theory's tenets, those with wealth and power try to hold on to it by any means possible, chiefly by suppressing the poor and powerless. A basic premise of conflict theory is that individuals and groups within society will work to try to maximize their own wealth and power.

The recognition of conflicts being inevitable in human and general social endeavours explains why social unrests as one of the forms of conflict is equally inevitable in communities including Ugambe and Mbaiaase, which is the geographical scope of the present study.

Methodology

This study employed survey as its design, using questionnaire as the instrument of data collection. The population of the study was drawn from members of the Benue State Boundary Commission, the Benue State Chapter of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, (NIPR) and the people of Ugambe and Mbaiaase communities of Benue State. According to information from the Benue State Boundary Commission under Office of the Deputy Governor, the number of members of the commission is 15, while information from the state chapter of the NIPR shows that there are 274 registered members. The total population of Mbaiaase Community, as a council ward in Gwer-East Local Government Area, is 9,664 while Ugambe Community has 6, 788 people (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). This amount to 16, 732 populations when put together. The sample size of this study was 400. This was determined based on Araoye's (2006) sample size determination formula that can be used where a population size is greater than 10,000 ($>10,000$).

Two sampling techniques were adopted in sampling respondents for the study. First, out of the sample size of 400, the researcher purposefully sampled all the 16 members of the Benue State Boundary Commission. While members of NIPR, were sampled using simple random sampling. The same simple random sampling was adopted to sample 221 and 156 respondents respectively from Ugambe and Mbaiaase on proportional basis.

The instrument used for data collection was expertly validated. Its reliability was ensured through a pilot test whose result was subjected to Cronback Alpha statistical test with the result of 0.70 upward being accepted. The administration of the questionnaire were carried out for two days from Monday to Friday with the help of 3 research assistants. All the administered copies of the questionnaire were retrieved and used for analysing the data.

Data Presentation and Analysis:

Table 1: Public Relations Strategies used by the Benue State Government in managing the crisis between Ugambe and Mbaiaase.

Option	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
Community/Civil peace meetings	142	35
Community/stakeholder mediation between warring parties	20	5
Peace treaties based on negotiation and conciliation between warring communities	44	15
Setting up committee of inquiries to unravel the causes of the crisis and possible solutions	120	30
Organization of events anchored by advocates of peace for the education of the people of the communities	59	15
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 1 is concerned with the public relations strategies used by the Benue State Government in managing the crisis between Ugambe and Mbaiaase communities. Accordingly, the table indicates that 142 (35%) of the respondents identified community/civil peace meetings, 20 (5%) were in support of community/stakeholder mediation between the warring parties, 44 (15%) of the respondents went for peace treaties based on negotiation and conciliation between warring communities, 120 (30%) identified setting up committee of inquiries to unravel the causes of the crisis and possible solutions while 59 (15%) of the respondents agreed with the organization of events anchored by advocates of peace for the education of the people of the communities. The implication of data in this table is that even though the government used different public relations strategies, it majorly used community/civil peace meetings. This approach involves members from the two communities in the crisis being brought together for negotiation.

Table 2: Effectiveness of PR use by the Benue State Government in managing the crisis between Ugambe and Mbaiaase communities.

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very effective	98	24
Effective	88	22
Averagely effective	154	39
Ineffective	60	15
Very ineffective	0	0
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 2 shows that 98 (24%) of the sampled respondents said that use of PR by the Benue State Government in managing the crisis between Ugambe and Mbaiaase communities was very effective, 88 (22%) said it was effective, 154 (39%) agreed that it was averagely effective while 60 (15%) of the respondents noted that it was inefficient. The implication of data in this table is that PR strategies deployed in the management of the crisis were averagely effective, they were not effective as expected.

Table 3: Challenges faced in the use of PR by the Benue State Government in managing the Mbaiaase and Ugambe crisis.

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Problem of inadequate PR professionals	88	22
Inadequate equipment such as vehicles, stationeries, Public Address Systems, etc.	88	22
Inadequate budgetary allocation for PR activities	102	25
Use of inappropriate PR strategies	82	21
Improper/poor crafting of PR messages	40	10
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 3 has to do with the challenge(s) faced in the use of PR by the Benue State Government in managing the Mbaiaase and Ugambe crisis. From the table, 88 (22%) respondents identified inadequate PR professionals, 88 (22%) identified inadequate equipment like Vehicle, stationaries, public address systems, and so on; 102 (25%) of the respondents identified inadequate budgetary allocation for PR activities, 82 (21%) pitched tent with the use of inappropriate PR strategies while 40 (10%) of the respondents went for improper/poor crafting of PR messages. The implication of data collected here is that although there were many challenges faced by the Benue State Government in managing the crisis between Ugambe and Mbaiaase communities, the major challenge was inadequate budgetary allocation to enable the commission and order stakeholders to effectively employ PR in managing the crisis.

Discussion of Findings

Major findings from this study were presented and discussed in this section. First, findings, as shown by data in Table 1 reveal that the public relations strategies used by the Benue State Government in the management of the communal crisis between Ugambe and Mbaiaase communities in the state included community/civil peace meetings, community/stakeholder mediation between warring parties, peace treaties based on negotiation and conciliation between warring communities, setting up committee of inquiries to unravel the causes of the crisis and possible solutions, and organization of events anchored by advocates of peace for the education of the people of the communities. The prolong communal crisis, as preached by the conflict theory propounded by Marx is caused by the desire of the two communities to have control over a particular piece of land. The Findings clearly show that several public relations strategies were deployed in the management of the Ugambe and Mbaiaase crisis. Oyebade (1995) in Elijah, Ogbu and Aer (2018), collaborating the finding also identifies certain PR strategies in crisis management such as dialogue, automatic, emergency and delaying approaches.

Unfortunately, results of the study further show that the strategies used by the Benue State Government in managing the Mbaiaase and Ugambe crisis were not effective as expected as revealed by data in Table 2 where 154 (39%) of the sampled respondents said the strategies were only averagely effective in managing the crisis. This is rather very unfortunate as the crisis keeps on reoccurring thereby making people in the area to be in perpetual fear.

Findings also identify problems of inadequate PR professionals, inadequate budgetary allocation for PR use and inappropriate use of PR strategies as well as improper/poor crafting of PR messages as the challenges affecting the ability of government to effectively apply PR in managing the prolong crisis between the two communities. This further shows that even though the government

had adopted good public relations techniques, more creative and practical ones should be employed in order to put the crisis to rest finally.

Also, since data collected have shown that the crisis has not been effectively managed, it implies that there were challenges being encountered by the Benue State Government in the application of public relations in its management. Data in Table 3, therefore, have identified many challenges. According to 102 (25%) respondents, however, inadequate budgetary allocations to the Benue State Boundary Commission and other relevant stakeholders for public relations activities is the most challenging issue followed by inadequate equipment such as vehicles, stationaries, and public address system.

Conclusion

This Study concludes that even though the Benue State Government has employed public relations in the management of the land dispute and crisis between Mbaiaase and Ugambe communities, the crisis has not been effectively managed since it keeps reoccurring making people in the two communities to be living in fear.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- i. The right public relations strategies should be adopted by the Benue State Government at every point in time, as each crisis situation demands peculiar strategies to be adopted in order to successfully manage it.
- ii. There should be more synergy between the Benue State Government, public relations practitioners and other relevant stakeholders such as community members, traditional rulers, religious leaders, among others so that the right approaches can be deployed in managing the crisis effectively.
- iii. Benue State Government should increase budgetary allocation for PR use in managing crisis effectively in the state.

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