

**PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT-A
SURVEY OF SEEFOR PROJECT IN YENEGOA, BAYELSA STATE.**

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Abstract

The analyzes the role of Public Relations as a tool for sustainable development to host communities where government and governmental agencies embark on lofty community development programmes aimed at enhancing a better life for the people. Since public relations is about relationship building and management, this synergy often produces a higher level of personal, group or societal advancement. Projects generated by State employment and expenditure for result (SEEFOR) should capture priorities of community interest with mutual understanding on the parties for optimal accomplishment. The survey methodology was adopted for the study, with the development media theory as the theoretical framework. Findings shows that the host communities be incorporate in initiating a development project that will be of interest to them through public relations, with recommendations that such projects can only be sustained when the public relations department plays a vital role in the process.

Keywords: Public relations, sustainable, development, SEEFOR project, tool.

INTRODUCTION

The mass communication activity of public relations is universally recognized as a very potent and a most effective promoter of organizational development and a facilitator of the achievement corporate success. All of the functions of this form of communication are aimed at taking any entity, especially business organization, to a higher level of operation—one desired by the diverse stakeholders of the organization concerned.

Directors as well as managers of organizations, particularly the business ones, always invest a lot of resources into their business, in the hope of achieving corporate success precisely by making substantial profits, so that the organization can remain in business. It is their strong belief that maximally exploiting the communication activity of public relations which is chiefly concerned with establishing and maintaining mutual understanding and goodwill between and an organization and its public's, all of this can be realized (Obe, 2008).

Ebunu (2012) affirms, this fact when he notes that the aim of managers the world over is often profit making which they do so that their organization can pay salaries of workers, buy raw materials, pay for its electricity and water charges, among other demands.

In the case of a non-profit—making organization, it should be able to, at least, break even so that, the organization will not be a liability. It is inarguable that without attaining this critical goal, an organization is yet to realize the corporate success desired.

It is a fact that managers of organizations have long realized that public relations services are critical to the survival and growth of their organization, for which reason they often exploit its services, an effort which holds tremendous development potential for organizations. This is because communication, according to Ebunu (2012), “enables people to achieve organizational objectives and without communication one is helpless and may not know what to do”. This implies that an organization that does not sufficiently inform its various publics about the organization’s operations and plans is destined to fail, the host community customers, the government and other stakeholder must be kept abreast of realities and programmes of the organization concerned to guard against their being misinformed.

The public relations officer of an organization, in a bid to improve the image as well as fortune of his or her organization, very appropriately and effectively shares pertinent information with the community or stakeholders concerned. Failure to do this makes the realization of organizational success elusive.

It needs to be further pointed out that public relation is essentially a business of communication mostly within a corporate setting in an effort to achieve corporate goals. By managing organizational information as well as to providing other related services, public relations is able to make the various stakeholders of an organization understand and empathize with the organization (Sunday, 2012).

It is clear from the foregoing that public relations is a potent tool for achieving sustainable development in the society.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The business and activity of public relations can no doubt, be exploited to achieve societal as well as corporate transformation and sustainability. The varied critical functions of this activity, in addition to its emphasis on performance and recognition make public relations the ideal business that can boast corporate productivity as well as viability.

Public relations, a top management job, can certainly about the realization positive social change, particularly sustainable development through its evaluation of public attitudes, identification of policies and procedures of an organization by planning and executing

programs and actions that can immensely benefit the publics of public relations. To get his organization out of crises or to boost its operations the public relations officer of an organization strategically plans develops programmes and take critical actions that can meet the challenges encountered by this organization.

It is no exaggeration of fact to say that so much of this huge potential and benefit of public relations for achieving sustainable living have not yet been fully explored and taken advantage of by those concerned consequently, they often perform below their expectations as the organization become less productive. This may come in the form of poor profitability of inability to make any substantial positive societal impact.

This paper seeks to lay bare the various sustainable-development possibilities of public relations, so that this rich communication field can begin to hold greater appeal for members of the public. When this happen, the organizations concerned can be sure that they will be able to realize their goal and objectives.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What activities of public relations can be exploited to affect sustainable development?
2. Are the objectives of the SEEFOR project and the efforts of its public relations department directed towards achieving and promoting sustainable development?
3. Has the SEEFOR organization demonstrated its commitment to the principles and demands of corporate responsibility by way of creating employment opportunities, providing socio-economic services and among others, building roads?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A large amount of literature has discussed the concept of public relations, with many of them pointing out how the activity can be exploited to achieve significant societal development.

Describing public relations, the British Institute of Public Relations, cited in Obe (2008), points out that public relations is the deliberate and sustained efforts to establish and maintain understanding between an organization and its publics.

To Rex Harlow, cited in Obe (2008), public relations describes the art and science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organizational leaders and implementing planned programs of action which will serve both an organization and its publics' interests." Sunday (2012), described public relations as "a management function that helps organizations to communicate and relate appropriately, with the community in which they operate".

All of the foregoing descriptions of public relations apparently carry some societal development implication, for and program me—execution of the public relations practice is designed for the improvement of both the society and the organization concerned. Onwunali, (2006) speaks of development focus of public relations when he briefly described public relations as “good performance that is publicly appreciated. In other words, the activity of public relations seeks and strives to do only those things that could earn it public understanding and acceptance.

According to Onwunali, (2006) certain uses of public relations can be exploited and maximized to achieve sustainable development in an organization’s host community or its surrounding communities. He identifies community relations and affairs, special events, crisis management, consumer relations, fund raising, among others, as some of these co-operate strategies.

He explained that community relations demands that the public relations officer of an organization understands the host community intimately. To successfully do this, Onwunali, posits that “the public relations officer needs to “marry” the community in which it operates, focusing on building for the company a reputation for good citizenship through social corporate responsibility. Writing further, Onwunali notes that the public relations officer of an organization should always strive to provide enough support when the community is in need of such essential things as water, school, health facilities, job opportunity, vocational training, scholarships and so on.

The public relations officer’s good contribution in the area of crisis management also has to do with sustainable development by using the professional resources at his disposal to manage and resolve crisis that directly affect the organization.

Onwunali (2006), speaks of the connection between public relations and the promotion of social and economic development, particularly in the host community. He further explains that “the philosophy of public relations is what establishes the sustainable development of the public relations practice in an organization.

Onwunali (2008), posits that the philosophy of public relations which essentially denotes “the creation, building and maintenance of mutual understanding and respect based on truth and effective two-way communication process for the betterment of corporate institutions and enhancement of social and economic development clearly saddles with the public relations officer with the responsibility of spreading sustainable development”.

Continuing on, he notes that “the philosophy postulates that an organization should do right and pursue the greatest good of the greatest majority and support only those things that will improve the welfare of humanity”. The foregoing submission, clearly underscores the fact that public relations is largely about ensuring the provision and sustainable development in the

society. Onwunali (2006) adds that “to be effective in public relations its philosophy must be expressed in action. Good public relations involve acting in the public interest so that the public may be pleased.

Ogunsanya,(1991) implies the fact that public relations promotes sustainable development when he writes that “public relations is an inalienable lubricant in wheel of strategic public relations management. It demands from the Chief—Executive Officer (CEO) an open management system, the installation of a responsive information management system, preparedness to share power without abdicating responsibility and a decision-making machinery that accommodate the overall interest of the society and ensure equity, justice in all ramifications”. Living up to these professional responsibilities within the area of operation makes the public officer of an organization a true promoter of sustainable development.

Owunali, (2006) also submits that such special events as celebrations, anniversaries, seminars, exhibitions, book launches, convocations, sales, conferences and the like are often utilized. Public relations practice can promote sustainable development as these activities could substantially impact the host community concerned. Fund-raising has also been recognized as one of the activities of the public relations officer which could bring about the realization of sustainable development among the host communities of organizations.

Speaking of the importance of fund raising and its relevance to achieving sustainable development, Onuwali “a PR practitioner may be charged with raising funds for the following causes—community development, health facility, victims of natural disasters...”

Obe (2008) has identified certain qualities of public relations that facilitate its achievement of sustainable development. According to him, public relations is capable of achieving the foregoing because the activities establishes mutual understanding, is planned deliberate and sustained. Other descriptions of public relations provided in Obe, (2006), in relation to sustainable development, are that public relations is proactive, productive and dialogue—based.

THE PUBLICS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Ilupeju, (2003) has identified as well as described the varied publics of an organization which public relations activities concerned with: Having defined the public’s of an organization as”...those groups whose common interests are affected by the acts and policies of an institution or those whose acts and opinions affects the institution, he broadly identified the following as the public’s internal public’s and external public’s. He refers to the internal publics as “the category of public that are already connected with the organization and normally relate in the ordinary routine of work with them”. He notes that those who belong to this group are an organizations customers, employees and suppliers.

On the other hand, Ilupeju, (2003) sees the second type of publics—external publics-- as “the category that are not necessarily closely connected to particular an organization. Those who belong here are the press, government officials and so on.

Ilupeju, (2003) also explains how the public relations unit of a firm can strive to achieve sustainable development for the community in which the organization operates. Speaking in this regard, he notes that a large organization in a small town may be the life line of both the small town and other surrounding communities.

Continuing on, he points out that an organization must wholeheartedly participate in community development, pointing out in particular that a community expects an organization to make civic efforts in such areas as developments of social and among others, welfare services. Regarding staff security and recognition, he stated that the public relations officer of an organization should work towards ensuring that employee’s jobs are secured and they are rewarded for good and faithful service to the organization.

Ilupeju (2013) further explains how an organization can achieve substantial development for its employees or workers, adding that sustainable development can be achieved and promoted among all those that make up the internal publics, particularly its employees. He explained that the areas an organizations unit can ensure the achievement of sustainable development for its internal publics have to do with security, recognition, participation, consideration, as well as opportunity. He pointed out that the public relations officer must ensure that his organization “creates good conditions of service for workers, good salaries, housing and pensions and always strive to guarantee all the needs of his organization’s employees are met at all time. He concludes that doing this could make the employees have happier and more productive.

The Economist magazine of January 22nd, 2005 has rightly observed that by living up to their corporate responsibility, organizations working through their public relations units, will be achieved as well as promote sustainable development in their host communities. Regarding this matter, the news magazine writes “The profits of private enterprise go exclusively to shareholders”. What about public good? Only if corporations recognize their obligation to society-to stakeholders other than the owners of the business-will that broader social interest be advanced”.

For the public relations department of an organization to achieve much desired sustainable development for both its internal and external publics, Frank, (1988) advises that “the process of public relations must be strictly followed. This process accordingly involves analysis, research and defining the problem, drawing up of plans and programmes of action communicating and implementing the programme of action as well as evaluating or assessing the performance of information machinery or public relations outfit.

Corroborating the fact that public relations has positive impacts on society and has the ability to make it develop somewhat sustainability, Onwulani, (2006) points that “as a subset of communication, public relations functions to inform people, to persuade people or to integrate people. In doing this, public relations are able to promote mutual adjustments and adaptation between groups and provide avenues through which organizations and governments speak to people.

To Owunali, (2013) public relations offer society many positive impacts, a quality that predisposes the practice to promoting sustainable development for its publics, especially in its host communities.

According to him there is “one perspective of public relations that sees it as impacting positively and adding value and progress to society” (p134). He further points out that by making such positive impact as minimizing conflict, promoting mutual adjustments between groups, enhancing social change and creating channels for governments, organizations and other well-endowed people to contribute to uplifting the conditions of the less privileged in society.

The commendable involvement of the SEEFOR project, a United Nations and European Union Organization established in Nigeria in 2003 has been acknowledged by a number of writers and scholars. Osacon, (2010) applauds the Bayelsa State branch of the SEEFOR project for constructing over 406 roads and empowering more than 17,03 youth of the state since it was established in 2003. He explained that the youths, who hailed from all the local government areas of the state, had been given sustainable jobs and vocational training in such areas such as public works, road maintenance and sanitation.

SEEFOR project, (2020), speaking of the sustainable development activities of the organization, pointed that the organization had disbursed over #24m to some beneficiaries of its economic-empowerment scheme, adding that “its sub-components have impacted largely the lives of rural dwellers through the provision of grants to support community social and economic activities”. The source noted these efforts had won the commendations of most of the beneficiaries of the SEEFOR Project’s schemes.

SEEFOR project (2020), also provides the main objectives of the organization which predispose it to promoting sustainable development across its host communities. According to the source, these objectives are as follows:

- Enhancing youth employment and access to socio-economic services through public works

- Provision of grants to Technical Vocation and Agricultural Training institutions, (TVAT)
- Provision of grants for Community-Driven Development (CDD)
- And seeking to build viable public finance management systems in participating states.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is hinged on the development media theory, which, according to MC Quail (1987), has the following as a few of its tenets:

The media must accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy, freedom of the media should be open to economic priorities and development needs of the society. Explaining the foregoing in simpler terms, he points out that the media should accept and help in carrying out the special development tasks of national integration, socio-economic modernization promotion of literacy as well as cultural creativity.

The theory is in consonance with the thrust of this study because the public relations officer, like the journalist, saddled with the mandate of utilizing his or her professional services to create a better society, characterized by a truly sustainable development.

METHODOLOGY

This investigation adopted the survey design and used the questionnaire for collecting the necessary data. The population was made up of both junior and senior staff members of a number of large private business organizations and government parastatals. To draw a total of one hundred (100) respondents used in the research from the population, the purposive sampling technique was utilized by fifty, senior management staff of the SEEFOR project situated in Bayelsa State. The remaining fifty were beneficiaries of the SEEFOR community development and empowerment scheme. Their responses to the questions posed in the questionnaire were used for the analysis of the data. The following characteristics were sought from the respondents: age, educational attainments, work experience as well as socio-economic status and involvement.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

RQ1: What activities of public relations could be exploited to achieve as well as promote sustainable development in the society?

To elicit answers for research question one, respondents were asked a variety of open-ended questions.

Firstly, what strategies do you think could be employed by public relations officers of organizations to both achieve and promote sustainable development in their host communities? Out of the one hundred respondents involved in the study 65% of them believed that sponsoring and participating in community development projects such as providing basic social amenities- electricity, portable water good roads, health care, scholarships and so on could be used by the public relations unit of an organization to achieve sustainable development in its host communities.

They explained that the people grossly lacked these essentials of life, a situation that often led to widespread of poor living standard and low life expectancy. 25% of the respondents were of the opinion that the most effective ways of promoting sustainable development in the host communities were communicating and often meeting with community concerned so as to know their expectations of the organization at every point in time. Another 10% believed that constantly organizing and participating in fund - raising for community development would go a long way in ensuring the achievement of sustainable development in host communities.

RQ2: Are the objectives of the SEEFOR project and the efforts of its public relations department directed towards achieving and promoting sustainable development?

TABLE 1: SEEFOR'S OBJECTIVES AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

options	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	85	85%
No	15	15%
Total	100	100%

Out of 100 respondents, 85% of them indicated that the objectives of SEEFOR the achievement and promoting of sustainable development. The remaining 15% explained that they were not quite sure about the organization's objectives.

It is clear here that most of the respondents believed that SEEFOR sustainable development objectives in seeking more information from the respondent on research question one, another question was posed:

Are the efforts of the public relations unit of the SEEFOR organization aimed at achieving and promoting sustainable development? 75% of the respondents opined that the public relations

unit of the SEEFOR organization made the most efforts to achieve as well as promote sustainable development in host communities, 15% of them said the unit made moderate efforts whereas, 10% said the efforts were not substantial enough. From the responses above, it is evident that the public relation unit of SEEFOR promotes sustainable development.

Thus, the SEEFOR organizations public relations unit clearly promotes sustainable development. Has the SEEFOR organization demonstrated its commitment to the principles and demands of social corporate responsibility by creating employment opportunities, providing socio-economic services as well as building roads in its host communities?

RQ3: Has the SEEFOR organization demonstrated its commitment to the principles and demands of corporate responsibility by way of creating employment opportunities, providing socio-economic services and among others, building roads?

TABLE 3: SEEFOR'S DEMONSTRATION OF AND COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

options	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	90	90%
No	10	10%
Total	100	100%

Out of 100 respondents asked the above question, 90% of them said that the SEEFOR organization is highly committed to creating employment opportunities, provide socio-economic services and, among others, building roads, while 10% of them were of the view that the SEEFOR organization was only slightly committed to spreading sustainable development across its host communities. From the responses above, it can be deduced that the SEEFOR establishment often demonstrates its commitment to achieving and promoting sustainable development in its host communities.

In other to gain more information from research question two, another pertinent question was asked. Has the SEEFOR organization created many jobs and socio-economic services as well as constructed roads in its host communities? 90% of the respondents believed very strongly that the SEEFOR organization had done so much in the area of sustainable development as its youth employment and acquisition of technical skills unit had provided jobs in public works for about 17, 665 young people and constructed more than 400 roads across Bayelsa State alone.

10% of them explained that the SEFOR project had provided very useful technical skills, thousands of youths both in Bayelsa and other benefitting States. Another 10% posited that, since its inception, the organization had made access to certain basic socio-economic services much easier for the people of its host communities.

From the responses above, it can be deduced that SEEFOR project exists for the improvement of lives of people of its host communities. It is quite clear that the organizations main focus has been to make the people of the four States where it operates enjoy sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from this study that public relations is evidently a potent tool which organizations can utilize to achieve sustainable development. The functions or rules of public relations, its positive impacts, components and philosophy make public relations highly suitable for the achievement of sustainable development and in the host communities of organizations and in the society in general.

The paper revealed that such public relations strategies as community development, which entails fund raising, provision of scholarships, jobs, minimizing conflict in the society as well as the provision of socio-economic services in all parts of an organizations community development efforts are critical to achieving sustainable development for host communities.

The conclusion was also reached that the SEEFOR project has been deeply involved in the promotion of sustainable development as the organization consistently strives to meet most of the basic needs of the people among whom the organization is established.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations are made.

- The top management of organizations should develop and empower their public relations unit a lot more so that they can make greater positive impacts on society.
- The public relations department of an organization should realize the success or failure of the organization depending largely on how the unit maximizes the resources at its disposal.
- The public relations department should also seek information about the current development needs and challenges of the people in whose community the organization operates.

- The public relations practitioners with organizations should think of more community development programmes which, if executed, can very easily positively impact lives in the community concerned and make them behave favorably towards the organization.
- An organization along with its public relations unit should not embark on a development project they cannot complete which they cannot complete, for this may generate the people's mistrust of the organization.

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