

The Use of Public Relations Strategies in Tackling Cases of Flood in Rivers State

AMADI, Richard Nlemany Ph.D

Department of Mass Communication, Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt

NWAUBETA, Grace Nnennaya

Department of Mass Communication, Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic, Port Harcourt

Abstract

Flooding has become a recurrent environmental problem in parts of the world including Nigeria. Several events cause flooding in Nigeria. Flood impact negatively on the people and society in form of loss of lives, destruction of houses, farmlands means of livelihood and infrastructural facilities as well as exposure to diseases, infections and dangerous reptiles and insects. Therefore, the study was carried out to review the causes and effects of flood and how best to utilize the techniques and strategies of the Public Relations to tackle its menace in Port Harcourt, Obio/Akpor and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Areas of Rivers State. The urban resilience and social responsibility theory formed the theoretical framework used in this study. Sampling quota drawn from each of the three LGAs was adopted. Apart from the use of interview technique and questionnaire to collect data, a combination of public relations strategies was deployed to address flooding in the affected LGAs of the State. Many factors, including paucity of funds, idiosyncrasies of the flood victims, religious and cultural beliefs of the people challenged the efforts of the PR practitioners for a social re-engineering process towards a harmonious society. The study, therefore, recommends that government should come up with legislation to fight flooding as well as provide financial and material support to flood victims.

Keywords: Flood, flood hazard management, public relations, social responsibility theory, urban resilience theory and strategy

Introduction

Like most countries, Nigeria is known to be vulnerable to climate change impacts especially changes in rainfall as a result of extreme weather events. These events cause farm, house and business concerns to be flooded or washed away by ravaging flood. The effects of flood in the given environment has rekindled the need for experts to undertake the task of ensuring that a favourable environment is created in event of natural disaster or crisis. Interestingly, public relations practitioners have the edge of being a veritable catalyst when the environment, for instances, is ravaged by flood. No wonder Orukari (2010) said that “conflict is a word that the public relations practitioners have come to appreciate in course of their practice”.

According to Tawari-Fufeyin, Paul and Goodleads, flood hazard is measured by possibility of occurrence of their damaging consequences, conceived generally as flood risk or by their impact on society, conceived usually as the loss of lives and material damage to society. Rivers State falls within the coastal and wetlands of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Parts of Rivers State, therefore, contend with periodic floods especially during excess rainfalls or general rise in sea level. In the events of floods, the PR practitioners bring his skills to bear to examine key socio-economic factors and environmental services like number of people put at risk, effects of flood on ecological services and capacity of human population to recovery, all arrangements being equal and recommend way to check reoccurrence.

Risk assessment is important in making decisions, policies and managing flood events towards a harmonious living. The PR practitioners, who are perceived as “risk takers” appreciatively undertake the task of addressing or tackling the flood problems through stage-by-stage approach in the areas of identification/analysis of the problem, plan of action and implementation/monitoring/evaluation processes.

Statement of the Problem

Managing crisis has become the toast or beauty of the public relations practice. Therefore this study investigated problems that arise as a result of flood. Adopting strategies of the PR activities also present another line of investigation of this work. Question may be raised whether there are challenges confronting the line of duty of the PR personnel in tackling the problem of floods. Hence, it will attempt to establish influence of these challenges on the part of the PR practitioners to give a new lease of life to flood areas in Port Harcourt, Obio/Akpor and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Areas of Rivers State.

Objectives of the Study

The study, among others, was aimed at identifying and addressing problems associated with flooding in Rivers state

Importantly, this study mapped out strategies through which those problems, could be tackled through the Public Relations techniques with a view to prescribing a simplified and workable formula for policy makers as a management tool to achieve the individual's or organization's objective in tackling flooding in the state

Research Questions

For the purpose of thorough investigation, the following questions were examined.

1. What are the events that triggered flooding in Rivers State?
2. What are the problems that are peculiar to floods in Rivers State?
3. What are the strategies or techniques available to the public relations practitioner to address flood in Rivers State?
4. Do the challenges of poor funding affect the operations of the PR practitioners in the management of flood disaster?

Literature Review

Flooding, its causes, impacts and remedies especially in the urban and local communities of Rivers State may have received considerable attention in the literature. In an attempt to review literature concerning flood, and the practice of public relations practitioners, it will not be out of place to take off with the theory on urban resilience to floods.

According to Liao, 2012, the idea of resilience has a long history in ecology and engineering, but its application to natural hazard management is relatively recent. While he argued that what defines resilience to floods remain ambiguous, despite the increasing attention given to the concept of resilience in flood hazard management, Liao, in his paper entitled "A theory on urban resilience to floods - A basis for alternative planning practices, said ecological resilience is a more appropriate theoretical framework for management and for defining urban resilience to floods.

In an attempt to operationalize the theory for planning practices, Liao further proposed a resilience surrogate measure for assessing urban resilience to floods. The theory and the measure together indicate that flood adaptation should replace flood control in order to build urban resilience to flood (Liao, 2012).

Because flooding is inherently a part of the normal community and urban dynamics, Liao (2012) noted that "resilience is the tendency to survive, which is itself an end to stability". Resilience theory has been applied to community resilience, stressing the capacity to absorb recurrent hazard impacts and reorganize, while undergoing change so as to maintain fundamental structures processes, identity and feedbacks (Liao, 2012).

Flood control decisions are often involved with quantitative and qualitative criteria (Chen, 1994). But according to Wang, Zhao and Hao (2011), to make decision for flood control operation, operators must consider fully the flood natural characteristics (i.e. natural quality) and the serious consequences caused by flood (i.e. 'sociality).

Flood hazard, vulnerability and risk assessment require an understanding of the causes of a potential disaster. Reviewing flood risk assessment, Bajracharya, Koirala and Begum (2016), identified four important steps in flood risk assessment such as characterizing the area, determining hazard level and intensity, assessing vulnerability and risk.

Given weight to the assertion that flood hazard management epitomizes the multi-dimensional nature of much environmental management, Bajracharya et al (2016) noted that:

Flood risk management is an organized process of using administrative directives, organizations, and operational skills and capacities to implement strategies, policies and improved coping capacities in order to lessen the adverse impacts of flood hazard and the possibility of disaster. However, the public relations practitioners are socially responsible in the road map of facilitating social reengineering especially in the events of flood. There have been rich literature that public relations practice encompasses a deliberate, planned and sustained efforts to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics (The Institute of Public Relations (IPR) of Great Britain).

But in a paper entitled "Public relations: Past, Present and Future", Black (1998) described the profession as "the establishment of two-way communication to resolve conflict of interest by seeking common ground or areas of mutual interest and the establishment of understanding based on truth, knowledge and full information".

The definition of Osuji (1999) appears to bring out more the beauty of the public relations practice. In his book, "Dynamics of Public Relations, Osuji (1999) described public relations as:

A creator of a favourable image, builder of a bridge of goodwill, a monitor of public opinion, a facilitator and harmonizer of issues, crises and problems, with a view to prescribing a simplified and workable formula for policy makers as a management tool to achieve the individual's or organization's objective.

Roger Harwood (1994) baptized public relations as "the discipline responsible for creating the optimum environment within which the organization operates, through evaluating the attitudes of those upon which it depends for success, then developing both the policies and the supporting communications to earn their

understanding and support”.

Basic features of what public relations practice stands for can be deduced as follows:

- a. It is a planned effort
- b. It involves two-way communication process.
- c. It is a veritable tool to address issues, crises, problems.
- d. The PR practitioner wears the garment of risk taker

Underpinning this perspective, Center & Jackson (2006) highlighted activities that are basic and endemic to the practice of public relations:

1. **Research** - Gathering of intelligence to define, clearly the specific problem.
2. **Strategic Planning** - Devising programmes and packaging strategies to address the issues involved.
3. **Counseling** - Getting the efforts of the supporting staff and parties involved.
4. **Education** - Education of all stakeholders on the plan of action.
5. **Communication/Action** - Unfolding the Action Plan to the affected publics
6. **Evaluation** - Monitoring and evaluation of the programme to determine results and to decide what, if anything, to do next or not to do differently.

The fact that public relations has a social responsibility towards their organization in particular and the society in general is therefore, not in contention. Public relations involve all the things practitioners do to build a connection with the people (Hasan, 2013). But there are a variety of tools and techniques available to the PR personnel to influence opinions and decision. According to Hason (2013), PR strategies are nothing but the means, media and practices PR persons use to communicate with the public, though not limiting to the use of conventional communication but also done through actions, activities, incentives etc.

Generally, the tools used interchangeably with strategies available to the PR personnel include:

Use of traditional media, News Releases, Newsletters, Survey, Flyers & Brochures, Internet, Blogs, Public speaking, Interviews, Faith organization - church/mosque, E-mail, Letters to the Editors, Social media/yahoo Groups, Guest columns, Print & Broadcast Media, Lobbying and By-Lined articles

These tools are engaged by the public relations professionals in all cases they handle. What that means is that the professionals adopt a combination of strategies and techniques that are unique in solving problems and building favourable environment.

There are many strategies available to the PR staff. Amadi (2017), while describing strategy as the art and science of marshalling resources mostly for efficient and effective use to achieve set objectives, further said that strategy is a method or plan of action chosen to bring about a desired future such as achievement ‘of a goal or solution to a problem.

According to Mintzberg and’ Quinn (1996), strategy involves planning and thinking that will ensure long-term success in the wellbeing of the society: Drawing conclusion, strategy is all about human attempt to get to a deliberate end with available means which is sine-qua-non to public relations principles, (Amadi 2017).

Interestingly, the public relations practitioner does not exist in a vacuum. He or she operates within a social system under the umbrella called “the society”. While the society should be made conducive for the operations of the media, public relations which is an integral part of the media, should be responsive and responsible in building a harmonious society. This is the birth of social responsibility theory.

Historically, the Social Responsibility Theory originated in the United State of America in 1947 from the Hutchins Commission Report on Free and Responsible Press. The underlying principle of this theory, according to Okunna (1997), is that the press. should be free to perform its duties, but that this freedom should be exercised with a responsibility. Another leg of the theory is that while the press is “obliged to carry out essential functions of mass communication in contemporary society, the press loses its claim to the right the society confers on it if it abuses or fails to use them responsibly” Osunsiji (1989).

Given its topography and despite the warnings by the Nigerian Meteorological Agency (N:MET), ‘parts of Rivers State were rattled by devastation caused by massive flash floods after two days of torrential rainfall last July. Worst hit areas included Rumukalagbor, Elekahia, Nkpogu, Abuloma, Amadi-Ama, D-Line and some parts of Diobu, all in Port Harcourt Local Government Area of Rivers State., According to The Tide newspaper of July 24, 2017; residents of Eneka, Rukpokwu, Rumuigbo, Atali, Elingbu (Obio/Akpor Local Government Area) and Omoku-Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni LGA had tale of woes as they became victims of the devastating effects of floods. Beyond the fact that the affected Omoku flood submerged houses and businesses of residents, Scan News (2012), an online media, reported that “snakes sacked by the flood have forced themselves to the city causing harm to the people”. The online media also reported that “about seven persons are hospitalized at Omoku General Hospital for snake bite”.

Unfortunately, as the flood submerged houses, schools, business concerns, farmlands to force many residents to join the growing population of internally-displaced persons, a sadcommentary is the fact that despite all the challenges confronting Nigeria, “the environment is not often listed as one of them” (This Day, October 6, 2017). This probably may have challenged the efforts ‘of the Public Relations Practitioners to dust their

professional bags in making “Nigeria became part of the global trend of putting issues of the environment on the front burner, while the relevant authorities should be more proactive, especially in the prevention of natural disasters” (This Day, 2017).

The PR Strategies in Tracking Flood Problems

The public relation practitioners put to test the following communication strategies to create mutual relationship towards achieving set objective. The strategies include:

- a. **Traditional media (town criers):** To educate the people especially those in rural and semi-urban areas on the need to avoid unhealthy habit of dropping refuses on drainages and building on waterways and channels.
- b. **Press Releases to print and electronic media:** Enlightenment of the people emphasizing on the economic, environmental and human/animal losses from the occurrence of flood and of course the need to check future occurrence.
- c. **Jingles and advert placement:** Depending on the budget, radio jingles and adverts in selected media houses to further create awareness on why flood is not a good visitor and how to avoid its negative impact.
- d. **Films shows and door-to-door campaign:** This campaign is carried out in selected flood, areas as aforementioned. The visuals on flood and its tragedies on doubt will encourage residents of the flood-prone areas to “choose to build houses and cities in ways that can keep them safe from flooding”.
- e. **Summit on flood:** The essence of the summit is to engage environmental experts to do holistic analysis on the problems of flood as well as fashion out workable paper for policy making. Victim of floods are also encouraged to share their experiences and suggest way forward. The findings and recommendations of the environmental summit on flood will be forwarded to government for necessary consideration and action.
- f. **Bill against Floods:** Executive (Government) or private bill is encouraged at the State House of Assembly. When the bill is passed into law, the fight against flooding in the state has been given a legislative backing and offenders of the law stand the risk of prosecution. Generally, the legislation against flooding will check the excesses of human activities which result to flood.
- g. **Periodic Monitoring and Evaluation:** This move is not only necessary but’ also crucial in two areas. Firstly, to create awareness on need to, sustain healthy environment & living. Secondly, to remind residents of flood areas that their plight though pitiable, can be avoided if they take environmental precautions

METHODOLOGY

One measure for data gathering or acquiring information about the issue under study is to do a quantitative research. The research design for this study is survey. The survey design is a method where a group of people is studied by collecting information from them. Questionnaires were administered by the public relations practitioners on the population of the study to examine the problems of flooding and how best to check its menace in a given environment. Oral interview also formed the method of gathering information from respondents for this study.

Population of the Study

The population of this study was drawn from three (3) Local Government Areas of Rivers State i.e. Port Harcourt,

Obio/Akpor and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni of Rivers State. A sample of 300 residents (100 residents from each LGA) were selected through a stratified random sampling technique. In carrying out this study, data were basically collected from primary and secondary sources. While the primary data were obtained through the administration of questionnaires and interview to respondents who constituted the sample population, the secondary data were obtained from documented works, books, journals, newspapers, reports of research works of other scholars. The secondary data, however, formed the bulk of information on section two of this study.

Data Analysis and Result Presentation

Out of the 300 questionnaires distributed to respondents, only a total of 250 were retrieved and presented in table form for analysis.

In analyzing the collected data, the simple percentage approach was used. Items in the questionnaires relating to each research questions were grouped together and percentage found. The formula adopted is thus: Total number of persons who responded to a particular research question, multiply by 100 over the total number of respondents to the study.

Table 1 Socio-demographic data of respondents (n = 250)

Items	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Respondents' Age Distribution	20-29	30	12%
	30-39	101	40%
	40-49	72	28.8%
	50 and above	47	18.8%
Educational Qualification	SSCE	127	50%
	Diploma/NCE	85	34%
	B.Sc/HND/Masters	38	15.2%
Gender Distribution	Male	132	52.8%
	Female	118	47%

Source: *Field survey, 2018*

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic data of respondents. It shows that 101 respondents representing 40% were between the ages of 30 — 39, another 72 respondents representing 28.8% came between the age bracket of 40 — 49. 47 respondents with 18.8% representation responded within the age bracket of 50 and above, while 12% representing a total of 30 respondents under 20 — 29 age bracket. It further shows that 99.2% represented the total number of the respondents with, educational qualification. Out of the 250 respondents, 127 of them representing 50% had SSCE and those with Diploma/NCE had 85 responses (34%), while 38 respondents with 15.2% had first degree and above. 250 questionnaires successfully retrieved, 132 respondents representing 52.8% were males, while 118 respondents (47%) were females.

Table 2 Psychographic Data of Respondents (n = 250)

Items	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Events that Cause Flood	Heavy rains	68	27.2%
	Human activities building on channels, blockage of drainage with refuses poor drainage system, etc	145	58%
	No. environment impact assessment, no legislation	37	14.8
Flood Problems	Destruction of houses, infrastructure, etc	135	54%
	Deaths of people/Animals	30	12%
	Pollution of water bodies	65	26%
	Distortion of ecosystem natural balance	20	8%
PR Strategies/Techniques to Manage Flood Problems	Traditional Media Only	20	8%
	Print/Electronic Media only	45	18%
	Film shows/public campaign	65	26%
	Combination of techniques	120	48%
Poor Funding	Fair enough	61	24.4%
	Very poor	171	68.4%
	No idea	18	7.2%
Government Bureaucracy/Flood victims' Idiosyncrasies	No idea	22	8.8%
	Negative	183	73.2%
Solution to flood problem	Positive	45	18%
	Stop Building on waterways	51	20.4%
	Stop unhealthy habit of, waste dumping On drainages	38	15.2%
	Government to bring culprits to book	20	8%
	Regular desilting of canals, drainages, creeks, etc	41	16.4%
	Option A - D above	91	36.4%
	Synergy Among Government Ministries, Agency and, Establishment of Emergency Management Agency	9	3.6%

From the responses on the research questions in the table above, 145 respondents representing 50% are in agreement that building construction on water channels, blockage of drainage with refuses, poor drainage system majorly causes flooding in an environment. 68 respondents representing 27.2% agreed that heavy rains are responsible for floods, while 37 respondents with a percentage of 14.8 believed with the option that little or no

environmental impact assessment, no government legislation against flooding can encourage residents to engage in human activities that will trigger flood. A total of 135 respondents representing 54% ticked the option that destruction of houses, farms, infrastructural facilities are main problems of flood. 65 respondents representing 26% voted for the option of pollution of water bodies, while 30 with the percentage of 12 said death of people/animals is major flood problem. But 20 respondents representing 8% said flood majorly result in distortion of the natural balance of the ecosystem. From the data, 120 respondents representing 48% said a combination of techniques would be best to tackle flood problems even as 65 respondents (26%) and 45 respondents (18%) voted for film shows/public campaign and print/electronic media respectively. Yet another 20 respondents representing 8% said traditional medial holds the key for PR practitioners to address flood problems. It was the opinion of 1.71 respondents representing 68.4% from the, the responses also revealed that poor funding militate greatly against the attempts at addressing flood problems. Also 61 respondents (24.4%) said funding of flood project is fair enough, but 18 respondents representing 7.2%, however, agreed with the option of No Idea. The vote of 183 respondents representing 73.2% showed government bureaucracy and the idiosyncrasies, of flood victims to go a long way in affecting flood management. Another set of 45 respondents representing 18% scored government with positive votes. While 22 respondents with 8.8% representation said they have no idea of the challenge of government bureaucracy etc to flood management. On the solution to flood problem, a total of 91 respondents representing 36.4% were affirmative that Option E holds the practical solution to manage flood events. 51 respondents (20.4%) and 41 representing 16.4% voted for Options A and Option D respectively. Twenty (20) respondents (8%) is the answer to the problem, while nine respondents representing 3.6% agreed with option F in the table above.

Discussion of Findings

The respondents' responses from the questionnaire as analyzed in tables above were used to resolve the weakness or strength of the research questions. The responses were not only quite revealing, but also showed that the problems were enormous and need PR professional touch. Tables 2 dealt with causes of flood, flood problems, PR techniques in tackling the problems, poor funding, government apathy of flood challenge, while Table 4.9 provided answers to flood management.

Conclusion

The study was able to ascertain that floods have devastating consequences and the effects are summarized in three areas namely economic, environment and people:

To start with, during floods, roads, bridges, farmlands, houses and automobiles are destroyed. People become homeless. Government also deploys intervention measures to help flood victims. All, these come at a heavy cost to government and the people. Secondly, the environment also suffers when flood occur. Chemicals and other hazardous substances in flood are washed into water bodies and subsequently pollute them. Additionally, the natural balance of the ecosystem is destroyed or distorted in wake of flood. Thirdly, many people and animals die in floods. Flooding brings a lot of diseases and infections including fever, dysentery. Sometimes insects and snakes make their way into the area as a result of the flood and cause a lot of havoc.

The study however concluded that the stage-by-stage approach facilitated the study of floods in Port Harcourt, Obio/Akpor and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Areas of the Rivers State by the public relations personnel and that despite bearing challenges, the PR practitioners "walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4) to rescue and restore confidence on the system.

Recommendations

Given the limitation of this study, it may not be out of place to recommend measures aimed at managing flood events. The Tide Editorial of July 31, 2017 highlighted them as follows:

- (a) Need for stakeholders to be proactive to measures aimed at forestalling flood occurrence.
- (b) Stoppage of constructions on water ways.
- (c) Nigerians to imbibe the correct attitude to waste disposal rather than indiscriminate throwing of refuses on drainages
- (d) Government should intensify efforts at bringing culprits to book.
- (e) Need for synergy between RIWAMA and Ministries of Environment, Works, Urban Development and Physical Planning in prevention and management of the disaster.
- (f) Regular desilting of major canals, creeks, drainages and waterways.
- (g) Need to establish Rivers State Emergency Management Agency to compliment the efforts of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) in meeting the management needs of the flood victims.

Additionally, the researcher made the following suggestion as means by which problems of flood can be tackled:

- (a) Need for Government to resettle those living in flood-prone areas, and sustain campaign on

- consequences of residing on flood areas
- (b) Demolition of houses and other structures built along water ways after a quit notice of not less than six (6) months.
 - (c) Enforcement of environmental laws against indiscriminate building of houses around flood-prone areas.

References

- Amadi, R.N. (2017). Tackling incidence of divorce in Nigeria through the application of public relations strategies. *International Journal of Innovations in Management Science Information Technology*, Volume 6, Number 1, 2017.
- Bajracharya, R.M. Koirala, H.L. & Begum, F. 2016. A review of flood risk assessment. *Internal Journal of Innovative Research in Science, Engineering and Technology*. <http://www.riij.com/open.access/a-review-of-flood-risk-assessment-pdf>. Retrieved January 18, 2018.
- Black, S (1998). *Public relations: Past, present and future*, Dr. Sam Epelle memorial Gold Paper Public Relations Lecture, Sábó Mohammed (ed).
- Center, A.H & Jackson, P (2006). *Public Relation Practices-Managerial Case Studies and Problems 6th Edition* NewDelhi: Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited.
- Chen S.Y. (1994). *System fuzzy decision theory and the applications*. Dalian University of Technology Press. Dalian, pp 65-75 Google Scholar.
- Hasan, S (2013). *Mass communication - Principle and Concepts*. New Delhi: CBS Publishers and Distributors Pvt Ltd.
- Holy Bible (Psalm 23:4)
- Liao, K-H (2012). A theory on urban resilience to floods — A basis for alternative planning practice. <https://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/bitstream/handle/10535/8705/es-2012-5231.pdf?..> Retrieved January 15, 2018
- Mintezberg, H & Quinn, J.B..(1996). *Public relations' speech, media writing and copy* Prentice Hall Press.
- Ogunsiji, M.A. (1989). *An introduction to print journalism*. Lagos, Nigeria: Nelson Publishers Limited.
- Okunna, C.S. (1999). *Introduction to mass communication*. Enugu: New Generations Book.
- Scan News (2012) Over 200,000 residents of Omoku live in fear over persistent flood. <http://scannewsnigeria.com/news/over-200-000-residents-of-omoku-live-in-fear-over-persistent-flood/> Retrieved on January 23, 2018.
- Tawari-Fufeyin, P; Paul, M & Goodleads, A.O. (2015). Some aspects of a historic flooding in Nigeria and its effects on some Niger Delta Communities. *American Journal of Water Resources*. 2015 3(1), pp 7 -16 DOI:10.12691/ajwr-3-1-2.
- The Tide Newspaper, Monday July 24, 2017.
- The Tide Editorial July 31, 2017.
- This Day, October 6, 2017. Tackling the flood problem.
- Wang; W.J; Zhao, R. H & Hao, Y.W (2011). Flood control operations based on the theory of variable fuzzy sets <http://link.springer.com/artice/10.1007/s11269.010-9729-5>. Retrieved on January 15, 2018