PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN NIGERIA
Ezekiel S. Asemah
asemahezekiel@yahoo.com

Abstract
Public relations is a planned communication that can be used by both government and nongovernmental organisations to build and maintain mutual understanding with the publics. It is a tool which can be used to facilitate development in any country that is desperate for social, economic, political and technological development. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines how public relations strategies can be used to achieve the millennium developments goals. The millennium Development Goals are drawn from the actions and targets contained in the Millennium Declaration that was adopted by 189 Nations signed by 147 heads of state and governments, during the UN Millennium Summit in September, 2000. The paper examines the different public relations strategies like corporate social responsibilities, sponsorship, community relations, information management, research, etc, and how they can stimulate national development. It examines the extent to which public relations is relevant to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and also examines whether the government has adequately harnessed public relations approaches in the quest for the attainment of the MDGs. The paper recommends that the government should explore public relations possibilities, which will in turn lead to national development.

Key Words: Public Relations, Communication and Development

Introduction
Public relations describes any form of communication which is aimed at bringing about goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. As a planned communication, it concerns every organisation, whether commercial or non-commercial, government inclusive. This is because, every organisation needs to create a favourable image for itself before its internal and external publics for successful operation.

The recognition and acceptance of public relations as a vital communication tool in the hands of all organisations in all modern societies cannot be overemphasised. Public relations is a management function in human organisation, which helps in establishing a favourable relationship between an organisation and its publics. The import of this is that, every organisation, be it commercial or non commercial, government or non-governmental, has certain goals to achieve; such goals may be long term or short term, ranging from increase in sales, expansion, customer satisfaction, innovation, fighting competition, diversification and increase in the numbers of customers. Effective coordination of activities will be needed to achieve these goals and objectives. Public relations, which is a management function becomes handy in facilitating effective communication of organisational goals and objectives. The public relations department in any human organisation handles various activities, which include: conflict resolution or crisis management, internal or employee relations, community relations, promotions, media relations, environmental scanning and sponsorship programmes (Asemah, 2009).

Public relations is acknowledged to be very vital to the survival of organisations, institutions and individuals. Through its multifaceted functions of evaluating attitudes and executing actions, it eliminates suspicion and friction thereby,
providing bridges of understanding upon which goodwill reigns between an organisation and the publics that deal with it. As a planned communication, public relations is capable of redeeming an organisation’s image (however poor an organisation finds itself) and in its place, restore confidence, goodwill and mutual understanding and patronage that every organisation needs for survival. Since public relations is all about creating mutual understanding through action, information and communication, as well as, knowledge management, the imperative of every organisation seeking to maintain mutual understanding with its teeming publics for harmonious coexistence can no longer be overemphasised. This is because, when properly harnessed, public relations can assist organisations to achieve their objectives; it can be used to positively influence the attitudes of both, internal and external publics. Through public relations, an organisation can win the favour of the publics and this will in turn, bring about the achievement of set aims and objectives.

Conceptual clarification

Let us quickly clarify the following concepts:

Public relations

Public relations has varied definitions. But it is agreed that public relations is a profession that uses communication to create and sustain favourable image and reputation among its strategic stakeholders called the publics. In other words, it establishes cordial and fruitful relationship between an organisation and its publics; including directors, customers, suppliers, bankers, creditors, shareholders, community leaders, media, top management officials and agencies. The British Institute of Public Relations, cited in Yaroson and Asemah (2007) defines public relations practice as the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.

Another working definition for this study is the Mexican statement as quoted by Nkwocha (2004:103). It says that public relations is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisations leaders and implementing planned programmes of actions, which will serve both the organisation and the public interest. Analysing in the Mexican statement simply implies critically studying developments in the society that is, within and outside the organisation. The public relations officer of an organisation needs to critically identify their threats and opportunities. As a result of the analysis, a public relations practitioner should be able to predict what may happen in the nearest future, this now prompts him or her to begin to council or advise the management of an organisation in such a constructive manner so that problems can be averted.

Contributing to the numerous definitions of public relations, Nwosu (1992) says that public relations includes winning friends, keeping them and influencing them, as well as others. Through effective public relations, an organisation will be able to win public acceptance.

Going by the above definitions, one will discover that public relations is a continuous exercise that enables the organisation to win the goodwill of the publics. The British institute of public relations definition suggests that the public relations practitioner should plan a good public relations work to persuade and influence public opinion. This means that public relations is organised as a campaign or programme and it is not haphazard. The organisation needs to know the attitudes, feelings, opinions etc. of the public towards its programmes, policies, etc and this is only possible through effective public relations.

Communication

Communication is the process exchanging ideas, feelings, messages, etc. between two or more people through previously agreed symbols
or codes or language. Corroborating this definition, Idowu, in Mojaye et al (2008:769) says that communication is the process of transmitting mutually understandable and meaningful message that is, information between two or more interacting parties. The import of the definition is that communication is not just giving of information, it is the giving of understandable information and receiving and understanding the message. For communication to be effective there must be a common understanding of the information by the parties involved. That is the sender and the receiver.

Communication is an essential aspect of human life which can be said to be the basic essence of life that it revolves round. Communication apart from being essential is also the central fact of human existence and social process. Nobody can be an Island without communicating with others in one way or the other, and existence would be impossible without it. Thus, communication process itself involves action, reaction and interaction which can also be linked to “cause and effect” relationship.

Development

Development as a concept is broad and therefore does not subject itself to a single definition. It indeed covers a wide range of human endeavours. In its simplest term, it means growing or advancing. Development is a process of change in attitude, social structure and general acceleration of economic growth through reduction of poverty and inequality. Development in human society is a many sided process. At the level of the individual, it implies increased skills and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self discipline, responsibility and material well being. The achievement of any of these aspects is very much tied in with the state of the society as a whole.

Development involves the creation of opportunities for the realisation of human potentials. Human beings have certain basic requirements which must be satisfied so that they can properly function in the society. Among these are enough food, employment and the elimination of the kinds of inequality which leads to poverty. Asemah (2010) sees development as a gradual process of bringing about positive attitudinal change in the people. It is a continuous process of improving their living condition through positive change. By development, we mean that the people need to be informed thereby leading to positive attitudinal change. The essence of development according to Asemah is the development of people with change in their attitude, leading to change of habit. This means that just changing things without concurrent change of habit or attitude is not a healthy development. Development is seen as a changing process of knowledge, attitude and practices. It is in the above context that the writer looks at development. Keghku (2005:53) says that development generally implies change and that this is one sense in which the term development is used- to describe the process of economic and social transformation within countries. The process often follows a well- ordered sequence and exhibits common characteristic across countries.

What are the millennium development goals?

The millennium development goals are eight goals to be achieved by 2015 that respond to the world's main development challenges. The millennium Development Goals are drawn from the actions and targets contained in the Millennium Declaration that was adopted by 189 Nations signed by 147 heads of state and governments during the UN millennium summit in September, 2000. The eight millennium development goals are:

**Goal 1: To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger:**

The major targets of this goal are: to reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day, to achieve a full an productive employment and decent work for all including women and young peoples and to reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.
Goal 2: To achieve UNIVERSAL Primary education:
The target of this goal include: to ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling.

Goal 3: To promote gender equality and empower women:
This is primarily aimed at eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2015 at all levels.

Goal 4: To reduce child mortality:
This is to reduce by two thirds the mortality rate among children under five.

Goal 5: To improve, maternal health:
This is basically aimed at reducing by three quarters the maternal and mortality ratio, to achieve by 2015, universal access to reproductive health.

Goal 6: To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other disease:
To achieve by 2015, universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it; halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, to halt and begin to reverse the incidence of malaria and major disease.

Goal 7: To ensure environmental sustainability:
The essence of this is to integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes, reverse loss of environmental resources, reduce bio-diversity loss, achieve by 2010 a significant reduction in the rate of loss, reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water, achieve a significant improvement in lives of at least,100 million slum dwellers by 2020.

Goal 8: To develop a global partnership to development:
To develop further an open rule based, predictable, non discriminatory trading and financial system. This includes a commitment to good governance, development and poverty reduction both nationally and internationally, to address the special heads of the least developed countries. This include tariff and quota free access for the least developed countries exports; enhance programme of relief for heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) and cancellation of official bilateral debt, and more generous ODA for countries committed to poverty reductions, to deal seriously or comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries through national and international measures in order to make debt sustainable in the long term; in cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications.

Factors militating against development in Nigeria

There are so many factors that serve as hindrance to development in Nigeria. Asemah (2010) identifies the obstacles as:
a. Crisis: Nigeria is a country riddled with so many kinds of crises- ethnic, inter tribal and religious. No country with these different crises can experience development. That is why countries in the world believe that nothing good can come out of Nigeria and this is simply because of such negative things and crisis is one of them.
b. Advance fee fraud: This is popularly known as 419. This activity has bastardised Nigeria's image abroad. This often makes many countries not to want to come to Nigeria for any business. This has posed serious challenge to the rebranding project because if your image has been damaged, it is difficult for the people to accept whatever you offer. 419ners’ activities are still very much on in Nigeria and this has become a serious impediment to the rebranding project. Waziri (2005) opines that fraudsters normally contact their victims by mail in which he is informed that the Federal Government has approved the payment of millions of dollars. The whole transaction is usually classified. The victim is instructed to provide an account number in which the money is to be transferred within hours or days. The scam letter usually bears the name, signature or picture of a notable
serving government functionary. It is sent by regular post, fax, voice over, the inter-protocol or email. Various fees are collected in advance from foreign conspirators.

c. Corruption: Corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of most key position holders in Nigeria. According to Jacdomi (2010:17) corruption is a cancer that has eaten deep into the Nigerian system. Nigeria is rated very high in global corruption index. The resultant effect of corruption according to Jacdomi is that no serious investors will be attracted to come and invest in a corruption ridden environment. The Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Act 2000, says corruption includes bribery, fraud and other related offences while the vision 2010 committee in its reports explains corruption as all those improper actions or transactions aimed at changing the normal course of events, judgment and position of trust.

d. Unemployment: The alarming rate of unemployed persons in the country poses a great threat to the goal of giving the nation's image a face lift. Public analysts have argued that rebranding cannot be meaningful and realistic in a country where a large chunk of her labour force is jobless or underemployed. Productivity, certainly, will be low and image laundering only becomes possible when these people are gainfully employed and empowered to contribute their quota to the campaign and national development.

e. Inadequate Funding of Educational Sector: Education is a vital driving force of economic development and if poorly funded, it will hamper national development. Education is inadequately funded by the government which has resulted in incessant face-off between the government and stakeholders; most notably, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). The nation's vision of becoming one of the 20 most developed economies in the year 2020 will remain a dream never realised if the sector is not well funded. Arguably, there is no better way to rebranding Nigeria than an improved funding and commitment to human capital development through education.

f. Power and Energy: Nigeria has overtime become synonymous with power failure. Constant power supply is an illusion in a nation that claims to be the giant of Africa. Nigerians are faced with a near total black-out situation despite the huge sum of money sunk into the sector by past and present regimes. The staggering unemployment figure has, in some quarters, been adduced to the epileptic nature of energy because most industries have been observed to operate at 40 percent production capacity while the remaining 60 percent which would have maximised productivity is wasting. Power and energy is a critical sector whose development and availability will facilitate the nation's race for industrialisation by 2015 as well as boost the rebranding project.

g. Hunger and Poverty: The case of Nigerians is that of suffering in the midst of plenty. In the face of abundant resources, most Nigerians still live in abject poverty and hunger. Politicians are paid stupendous salaries for doing nothing at the instance of providing the ordinary Nigerian with food, job, shelter and other necessities of life. Nigerian legislators are adjudged to be among the highest paid in the world yet, the government claims there is no money to execute the wishes of the people. Poverty alleviation scheme like National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) has come under severe public criticism recently for its failure to meet set objectives and rather than alleviate, it has increased poverty among Nigerians. To the average Nigerian, rebranding only means putting food on his table and if this is not tackled, the nation cannot get her desired improved image because, the pictures of these hungry, malnourished and starving populace will keep appearing in the local and international media.

Theoretical framework

Two theories have been chosen to provide the theoretical framework for this paper. The theories are two way symmetric model and the persuasion theory.
Public relations transfer model

The public relations transfer process model was propounded by Frank Jefkins in 1988. According to Nweke (2001:53), the model is an antidote against some negative developments in organisations. Jefkins (1988) that when the negative situation is converted into positive achievements through knowledge, the result predictably, is the primary objective of public relations practice – understanding. The model explains how practitioners can use and apply public relations tools and strategies towards changing hostility among an organisation’s target publics to sympathy so as to be in a better position to convert prejudice into acceptance, develop interest when there is apathy and then, be able to communicate effectively to achieve knowledge where there is ignorance.

From the foregoing, it means that organisations can use the Jefkins’ public relations transfer process model to win the goodwill of the publics so as to reduce crisis. Through communication, the public relations practitioner can convert the four negative attitudes of the publics into four positive attitudes – ignorance to knowledge, hostility to sympathy, prejudice to acceptance, apathy to interest.

The transfer process model was discovered to be relevant to this study in that, perfection is something humanity cannot attain but, always strive towards. Based on this premise, organisations are bound to experience hostility, apathy and prejudice from members of their publics, and once an organisation experiences any of these, the transfer process model comes in handy. As such the model is said to be relevant to this work.

Public relations strategies that can help in the attainment of MDGs

The strategies of public relations that can be used to assist the attainment of Millennium Development Goals are:

Research, trend analysis, environmental scanning and monitoring

Research is a fact finding exercise. The public relations practitioner in the course of his practice, engages in a lot of public relations research. This is done before, during and after a public relations campaign. Public relations practitioners research before PR campaigns so as to know the major problems on ground, research is done during the campaign so as to find out how the campaign is going, while research is done after the campaign so as to evaluate the campaign either in success or in failure. This is what is simply referred to as evaluation. Public relations is a research-based activity. Research provides information with which public relations decisions are taken and programmes are planned. Public relations research helps in understanding the terrain upon which to operate and how to tread cautiously and carefully in a bid to sustain goodwill for an organisation.

Community relations

An organisation can be very successful if its cares for the environment where it operates. Every organisation is supposed to make life easy for the people living in the community it operates. A company is a vital part of a community and as such, has obligations to that community through various kinds of supports, including, encouraging employees to do volunteer works, providing a grant to the local orchestra or art museum, donating needed equipment to local schools or hospitals and so on. Good community relations includes efforts to improve the quality of life in the community.

Crisis management

There is the known – unknown crisis and there is the unknown – unknown crisis. The practitioner must make conscious efforts to manage crisis through effective communication. A very special type of work that PR practitioners do is, helping their organisations to resolve crises whenever they occur. They do this essentially by managing the flow of information between the organisation and the publics, via the mass media and by advising
management on what to do and how to do it so that the crisis is not aggravated. To practise preventive public relations, it is necessary to plan extensively to avoid crisis, but since crisis must occur, it is your duty to counsel management in crisis situations.

**Persuasive strategies in communication approach**

Communication that does not consciously integrate elements of persuasion is bound to fail in intent and purpose. This is hinged on the fact that persuasive communication is viewed as a psychological change process. Meaning that, application of strategies or techniques of persuasive communication would increase the potency of corporate communication.

Here, emphasis is placed on tactful use of logical reasoning patterns, generalization, analogy, syllogism, causality and correlative thought process and other appropriate measures of persuasion which could be rightly inbuilt into corporate communication system for effective stakeholder relationship in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. This recommendation is made on the strength that persuasion is a constructive art or process that brings about a responsive change in the lifestyle of those who are exposed to this communication form (Maamaa, 2011).

**Planned public relations**

Planning simply means making arrangement for tomorrow. Armstrong, (1995:234) says that as a manager, you will normally plan ahead over a relatively short period of time -up to one or at most two years. This goes to say that planning can be short term or long term. Planning involves selecting missions and objectives and the actions to achieve them. It requires decision making that is, choosing future courses of action among alternatives. Nnaemeka in Salu (1993:8) observes that planned public relations efforts have form and order, and are generally designed to dovetail to specific corporate philosophy or mission of an organisation, its administrative and management posture in its relations with various publics. It is generally characterised by a chain of organised and interconnected communication activities and programmes, that have to be executed in a sequential order, over a clearly specified period; resources and efforts that have to be mobilised at what times and scale, in order to attain a set of public relations objectives. Planned Public relations efforts are deliberately designed to fit into the overall administrative and programmatic scheme of the organisation, budget, management and programmes, either in the short or long term.

The term planned public relations can also be referred to as preventive public relations. It is the kind of public relations practice which entails an organisation continuously carrying out public relations activities so as to create goodwill for itself. Public relations according to Ubani (1996:12) is a planned and continuous efforts to close the gap between how an organisation wants to be seen and how its publics actually see it through responsible action, mutual communication and feedback process which improves management and publics understanding. This implies that an organisation must not allow problems to crop up before embarking on public relations activities, otherwise, so many things must have gone wrong before the image can be corrected. That is why public relations practice must be a continuous and sustained process, which necessarily implies research and evaluation of programmes, including issues management. This also implies that conscious effort is needed in public relations and not a fire-brigade approach. Planned communication does not necessarily mean that the organisation must plan public relations campaign programmes constantly. It can be done through increment in salaries, allowances, christmas bonus, etc. It will be unfair for any organisation to declare profit of about 5 billion in a year only to gather the employees and start thanking them for their cooperation and supports without giving the workers a token to appreciate their efforts. This will definitely tarnish the image of the organisation. When the organisation considers
the workers' welfare, it is also planned public relations.

Planned public relations also covers crisis management. Many organisations today prepare for crisis by brainstorming the possible problems in advance and creating contingency plans to deal with them. Companies with good issues management operations usually survive better in crisis situations because they have developed written communications plans that define individual moves, including establishment of a single spokesman, usually a public relations officer for the organisation in times of crisis.

Corporate social responsibility

Organisations, including governments have to be socially responsible to the society. There is the need to provide the citizens with good roads, electricity, jobs, pipe born water, etc. Even though companies are not the governments, they are also encouraged to provide some important infrastructures to the communities where they operate. They need to execute certain projects in the vicinity where they operate so that, they will be seen in good light and perceived as socially responsible. Harrison in kitchen (1997:128) notes that companies are not the states and they are not there to provide services and facilities which should properly be provided by the welfare agencies and paid for out of taxation. But, companies as it were are part of the society in which they exist and operate and they need to consider their corporate behaviours as part of their roles in the society. This implies that, as an organisation takes so much from the society for its existence and survival, it should also contribute to the maintenance, well-being and growth of the society. This it can do by executing certain projects that will be of benefit to where it operates. This is what corporate social responsibility is all about and it can contribute positively to a company’s corporate image.

Most organisations have had serious clashes with the youths in the regions where they operate because, they fail to execute certain projects that will benefit them, especially in the oil region of Niger–Delta. Corporate social responsibility is therefore, an intelligent and objective concern for the welfare of society which restrains individual and corporate behaviours from ultimately destructive activities no matter how immediately profitable and which leads in the direction of positive contribution to human betterment (Nwachukwu, 1988:272). It has however been argued by Harrison in kitchen (1997:130) that organisations should consider their social responsibilities for the following reasons:

i. We live in a pluralistic society where many diverse groups exist and where power and responsibilities are shared. This implies that every organisation has some powers over its employees and external publics and is responsible to a number of groups of which its stakeholders are only one. They include the staff and the wider community, that is, the community at large. The organisation has to be socially responsible to these staff and the community where it operates.

Organisations need to be socially responsible to its staff and the community so as to build a good reputation for themselves. A reputation according to Harrison in kitchen (1997:130) can be seen as the sum of the public’s belief about a company, based on their own experiences of its products, services, what they have read or heard about it from others and the way through which it is perceived by the front line and top level staff is seen to behave. A company or an organisation can therefore, have a reputation for fast service delivery, good product quality and good customer care, good reputation for fair dealings with its suppliers, good reputation for project execution in the community where it operates and for solid achievement with its shareholders. Organisations may have good or bad reputation or no reputation at all, because they are not well-known.

Going by the above, it is important for organisations to embark on projects that will benefit the employees and the host communities. This is to create a favourable
reputation for the organisation. It is however not just sufficient to execute projects, the organisation must also publicise projects executed so that the people will be in cognizance of such projects that have been executed as this will lead to good reputation thereby, positively affecting the corporate image of the organisation. Corporate responsibility is important because, it shows an organisation as:

a. Showing high standard of corporate ethics.
b. A good employer.
c. Committed to training.
d. Committed to equal opportunities.
e. Investing in research and development.
f. Having respect for community contribution.

iii. The demand of public opinions. The public opinion may be of the view that an organisation should execute some projects in the community.

iv. Corporate social responsibility is a licence to operate in a community. Davis’s Iron law of responsibility states that those who do not take responsibility for their power will ultimately loss it. (Davis and Blomstrom, 1966:174). The RSA’s inquiry into tomorrow’s company cited in Harrison in kitchen (1997:135) makes a similar point when it notes that business success will only be sustained if there is a supportive operating environment. This can only be achieved by companies who are understood by the communities in which they operate and whom they affect.

Thus, when government and non-governmental organisations carry out public relations activities, they will win the goodwill of the publics and this will in turn engender development, leading to the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals in Nigeria.

Conclusion / recommendations

It is evident from the discussion that public relations cannot be divorced from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS). Public relations entails winning friends and sustaining them; it entails winning goodwill and support of the publics who are so crucial to the successful running of an organisation. The Government needs to create good image for itself and positively influence public opinion. The specific areas of public relations that can help to attain the MDGS in 2015

Based on the conclusion that public relations is relevant in the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS), the paper, therefore, makes the following recommendations:

i. There is urgent need for the coordinators of the MDGS to apply public relations strategies to the management of activities towards the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals in 2015.

ii. Public relations managers should constantly embark on research in order to understand current public sentiments regarding the policies of the government. Public opinion is not always static, it shifts, depending on prevailing circumstances. Where public sentiments are discovered to be negative, public relations can advise management on how best to correct such impressions.

iii. Public relations is a continuous exercise; it is not what you do today and abandon tomorrow. Thus, the government needs to constantly carry out public relations activities so as to win the goodwill of the publics.

Bibliography
Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Mass Communication, Benue State University, Makurdi.


Relations: Being a Paper Presented at the International Conference on Africa, Media and Peace Building, With the Theme “Mass Media and Peace Building” Which Held at the University of Jos Multi-Purpose Auditorium, Between 5th and 9th Of June, 2011


