

Public Relations Role and Impact in Managing Environmental Related Crisis in the Niger Delta

Idorenyin Akpan, University of Uyo, Nigeria; and Presly Obukoadata Delta State Polytechnic, Nigeria

Abstract

That the Niger Delta crisis in Nigeria has assumed a dimension fit to be described as a global affair is not in dispute. What is however disputable is why it has taken so long for the crises to be resolved, especially when obvious pointers to the imbroglio have glaringly posted some strands of frosty relationships. Undoubtedly, the custodians of harmonized relationships are the public relations practitioners. This, more than any other reason raises questions of the role and impact public relations stands to contribute resolving and managing the Niger Delta Crisis. Consequently, this paper appraises the Niger Delta situation and highlights the roles and prospective impact of applying public relations strategies/models in managing the environmental and resource control centred crises in the Region.

Introduction

In our society today, almost every individual person, company, voluntary organization, or even government now realizes the need for or develop some instinct to use public relations daily as a routine tool of mutual understanding. Organizations have come to realize that it is important to scan, monitor, track and analyze the external forces surrounding the business world. This is in recognition of the fact that public relations, like those other forms of social communication and information exchanges, is largely influenced by the interactions that take place at different levels of the social structure. It is worthy to note that individuals do not ordinarily form opinions or attitudes on features of their environment or events simply on the basis of personal experiences. Whatever impressions individuals may hold about situations in their operating environment are to a large extent constructed for them in the process of social interaction within clearly defined strata of social formations. An individual would always want to share his personal experiences with those he socializes outside the narrow confines of his occupation, the impression he has about his work situation, about the nature of the economy, the policies and programmemes of government, about the salience of public affairs issues, social movements, and a wide range of concerns that control him in the process of living in a society. It thus follows that, most information and messages, on any feature of the society or any issue and event occurring in the society, that are passed on to individuals – either through the mass media or through Ora-media encounters are invariably interpreted at different strata of social formation which the originator may not have control over. The Niger Delta is seemingly a volatile region. This is because of the neglect of the region by successive governments in Nigeria, despite the fact that the resources of the area are the mainstay of the Nigerian economy. Angered by this margmalization, oppressive and negligible approach of the government, the region is characterized by crises, disputes and disturbances. The need to

assess the role and impact of public relations in managing environmental crisis in the Niger Delta becomes imperative.

The Concept of Public Relations:

Most individuals and Chief Executives do not have a complete understanding the concept of public relations. They have simplistic conception of public relations work. They tend to see public relations work exclusively as the effort to obtain, through press releases, press conferences, interviews, sponsored press articles, favourable coverage or publicity in the media for their organization's actions, policies and programmemes. Some tend to confuse it with personal publicity. Others confuse public relations work with the corruptive habit of influencing strategically located persons in the system, including the press men, with material inducements to adopt their views or those of their organization issues.

On this note, Nnaemeka, in Salu (1993:3) asserts that, "All these are not what Public Relations is all about. Public relations aims at persuading or influencing others on the reasonableness of one's view or perspective of life through information, dialogue, and exchange of ideas, rather than through material reward." Obtaining favourable publicity, or what is termed a good press in the parlance of the craft, for an organization, is only a small part of the public relations efforts. Also obtaining goodwill for an organization's chief executive can be a worthy goal of public relations, in so far as it is not reduced to personal ego sustaining publicity. But enlisting the support and cooperation of key persons in the society through material inducement, is definitely not what public relations entails. Similarly, Offonry (1985:2) agrees with Nnaemeka's position but goes further to say that:

Public Relations however extends beyond the performance of these essential functions, it is related to the needs of the day. It is concerned with telling the truth - explaining the organization to all those who need to know about it and vice versa in an impartial and objective manner. The problem of specifying precisely the organization goals and activities of public relations may never be solved to every one's satisfaction. Meanwhile, in the face of disturbing cynicism about the relevance of public morality and disenchantment with the disappointing roles of most leaders, every organization, whether in the public or private sector needs to reconsider its relations with the society, if such an organization wants to succeed in the fast changing social, political and economic climate. Offonry, (1985:1) notes that:

The first cardinal point of public relations is the fact that the general good must be served, and this can best be done by making available to the public at all times the facts and interpretation of events behind the scene in the language they can understand. In an attempt to incorporate most of the central issues in public relations, Defleur and Dennis (1994:357) state that, "Public Relations is an organized communication process, conducted by hired communicators in which messages are transmitted via a variety of channels to relevant and target audiences in an attempt to influence their beliefs, attitudes, or even actions regarding a client, whether a person or a group."

They however, maintain that, there are other elements that could be included in the definition. For example, as a business, public relations is provided by specialists who use various ways to get their messages to the target public. These include, sponsoring various kinds of contests and sporting events (that usually receive media coverage), providing press releases, and holding press conferences to appeal to reporters, editors, and publishers. They

further added that: Public Relations is a way of manipulating the meanings that receivers in the target audience construct for messages about the person or group represented by the communicator. This does not mean, however that such manipulation is deceptive. (Defluor and Donniss, 1994:351)

The manipulation of the target audience is aimed at maintaining good will and understanding between an organization and its public. It is in this regard that, the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) in 1960 conceived public relations as:

A management function of a continuing and planned character, through which public and private organizations and institutions seek to win and retain the understanding, sympathy, and support of those with whom they are or may be concerned by evaluating public opinion about themselves, in order to correlate, as far as possible, their own policies and procedures, to achieve by planned and widespread information, more productive, cooperation and more efficient fulfillment of their common interests. (Cutlip and Centre, 1994).

Inherent in the above view of the International Public Relations Association, is the element of evaluation, which is essential in establishing the success or failure of the strategy an organization, individual, or government may employ.

The British Institute of Public Relations defines public relations as the deliberate, planned and sustained, effort to establish and maintain an atmosphere of mutual understanding between an organization and its publics. And at the international conference of Public Relations Institutions held in Mexico in 1978, this definition emerged, “Public Relations practice is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders and implementing planned programmes of action, which serve both the organization and the public interest.” (Cutlip and Centre, 1994)

The significance of this definition is that it particularly incorporates some interesting elements like the need for research to assess the current situation and its implications. The advisory role of public relations management. Public relations programmes must be planned. Public relations action must not only benefit its sponsors but must be socially responsible.

One of the earliest definitions of Public Relations was coined by Edward Bernays (1945). He defined public relations as a management function, which tabulates public attitudes, defines the policies, procedures and interest of an organization followed by executing a programme of action to earn understanding and acceptance. In their own view, Cutlip and Centre (1994) say: public relations is a planned effort to influence opinion through good character and responsible performance based upon mutual satisfactory two-way communication.

It is the art and science of managing communication between an organization and its key public constituents to build, manage, and sustain its positive image. Public relations is also the process of aligning the perceptions of target audiences or publics with the current realities and reasonable prospects of another entity. Public relations is about building public relationships. It involves: Evaluation of public attitudes and opinions. Formation

and implementation of an organization's procedures and policy regarding communication with its publics. Coordination of communication programmes. Developing rapport and goodwill through a two way communication process. Fostering a positive relationship between an organization and its public constituents.

Generally, however, the numerous definitions and perspectives of public relations are somewhat suggestive of an obviously dynamic, significant and complex phenomenon- a phenomenon that has assumed an increasing importance and complexity in recent times, in all spheres of human activity. Not surprisingly, every one wants to form strong views on the subject reflecting different purposes and circumstances.

Be that as it may, it is widely acceptable that the basic philosophy beneath the practice of public relations is that public opinion matters and that the support of public opinion is of paramount importance. This explains why it is part of public relations function to ensure that the policies and objectives of the organization are in tune with the views, opinions, and needs of those who constitute the organization's publics. This is clearly done with a view to establishing and maintaining a favourable atmosphere of mutual understanding between an organization and its publics, as well as securing the publics goodwill and positive attitude towards the organization and everything associated with it. This is the focal point of public relations. Interestingly, a clearer understanding of the concept of public relations can reasonably be constructed out of its basic functions.

Accordingly, Benson-Eluwa (1998:201) writes that public relations functions are to help management to secure favourable legislation and ward off unfavourable legislation. It is aimed at helping management to maintain loyalty, respect and patronage for the organization among its various internal and external publics as well as sustaining the acceptance of the organization's policies. It combats false publicity or propaganda and embarks on informative communicational and persuasive programmes for the organization's publics. In every successful public relations programme, it is essential that all members of the organization take part in the philosophy of sound public relations and the recognition that its importance permeates every facet of the organizations activities. Onuoha (1994:246) summarized the functions of public relations thus: to determine and evaluate the public attitudes and opinions as they relate to the organization; to advise line executive on the best way to handle existing public opinion(s); to employ a two-way communication to positively influence public opinion.

Also, Wilson (1997:206) posits that public relations is the management, government or organization's function which attempts to maintain favourable public attitudes; foster greater public understanding and acceptance of procedures and policies, and identify such institutions with the public interest through a sustained programme of personal and mass communication. Before looking at the causes of crisis in the region lets us appraise the Niger Delta Environment

The Niger Delta Environment

According to Shell (2005:3), the Niger Delta is a wetland containing a number of ecological zones; sandy coastal ridge barriers, brackish or saline mangroves, freshwater permanent and seasonal swamp forests, and lowland rain forests. Over the years, the rainforest has been cultivated, leaving only the seasonal and permanent swamps as original

vegetation. Subsistence farming and fishing are the mainstay of the people. The ecosystem is particularly sensitive to changes in water quality, such as salinity or pollution, or to changes in hydrology of the region. The area is inhabited by more than 3,000 long-settled communities. However, in recent times, economic activities, mostly the oil industry, have caused significant migration of people to the area. Estimates of the areas and population of the Niger Delta vary, depending on how it is defined (i.e. by hydrology, ecology or political boundaries). For example, the 1995 World Bank Environmental Study puts the area at 20,000 square kilometers (but says that this relates only to the riverine and coastal areas), whilst the Niger Delta Environmental Survey estimates that the Niger Delta covers an area of some 40,000 to 70,000 square kilometers, but more recently, an extreme study by the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) for the Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan put the figure at 112,000 square Kilometer. This is in line with the political boundaries of the region, which includes nine states of the federation. Similarly, NDDC's study estimates the population figure for the Niger Delta to be 27 million.

For Ogbondah and George (2004:257), the Niger Delta where the bulk of the country's oil is produced, is situated in the Southeast and parts of Southwestern sections of the country, the region is made of six states of the Nigerian federation: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers States". But on a specific geographical phenomenon, the actual context of the Niger Delta detailed in the Shell (2005) report, clearly locates only Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States as actually in the Niger Delta. Significantly, the area "approximately the area of Belgium" and England is "among the biggest expanses of wetland, and includes the ninth most vast drainage area in the world and the third largest mangrove forest" and has four ecological zones (Oyerinde, 1998; Ogbondah and George, 2004).

The region, according to Ogbondah and George (2004:258), "consists of a vast network of rivers and creeks with a coastal zone of beachfront and barrier islands. The area is a triangular-shaped landmass through which one of Nigeria's distinguishable features, the River Niger, empties into the Atlantic coasts that define the Southern most part of the country. It is a difficult terrain in terms of its physical, tactical and technical dispositions. Taiwo (2000:208) contends that activities in the region have resulted in environmental pollution which encompasses the terrestrial, atmosphere and marine environments" with the most common being gas flaring and oil spillage, while Hutchful (1985) argues that petroleum pollutants destroy the food sources of higher species by the incorporation of carcinogens into food chains fishery resources, and human food resources. Health risks arise from these.

Dode (2006:3) submit that what prevails in the Niger Delta is "victual darkness or at best epileptic power supply (with a state like Bayelsa not yet looked to the national grid, as at the second quarter of 2006), pot filled roads where they exist and lack of clean, hygienic drinkable water". He further described the area as a "poverty stricken environment" where the indigenes watch haplessly the zealous exploitation of the environment in search of crude and gas. Crisis in the environment is further heightened by the absence of any form of livelihood for the people who are originally farmers and fishermen before the discovery of crude oil, and whose environment in Dade's (2006:1) words "has been rendered unproductive".

Causes of Environmentally Related Crisis in the Niger Delta

Some of the causes of the environmental related crisis in the Niger Delta Region includes but not restricted to oil exploration, exploration and production; environmental pollution of both terrestrial, atmospheric and aquatic habitat; loss of vast expanse of limited land to oil wells and extensive pipeline networks; oil spillages and gas flaring; absence of good drinkable water; non or partial implementation of memorandum of understanding (MOU) between oil firms and government on the one hand and the host communities on the other; employment quotas for host communities; ownership tussle for oil wells and need to claim royalties; dearth of basic social infrastructure; over population or high population density occasioned by influx of job seekers into the region; eroding of cultural values, desecration of ancestral shrines. etc. government inability to translate revenue generated from the region into appreciable living standard for the inhabitant of the region; accruable revenue to the region, which is believed not to be commensurate with the environmental degradation.

Role And Impact Of Public Relations Strategies In Managing Crisis

With the increasing complexities in life and business, the world does not just need information, but sensitive communicators and facilitators who can explain as well as contextualise the significance of such information to others in a socially responsible manner. These experts must provide a direction in thinking, in planning, in counseling, in managing and in reorganizing to enhance mutual understanding and avoid or reduce crises. So what are these roles in the context of crises typified in the Niger Delta Region?

Crisis is a multi-dimensional thing that creeps up at any time, sometimes with an alarm and at other times unsuspectingly on the subject. Not planning for crisis is synonymous with planning for disaster. However, confining crisis to the rigid borders of definition is almost impracticable. Guth and Marsh (200:386) conceptualize crisis by differentiating it from problem. Accordingly, they advanced that “the difference between a problem and a crisis is in matter of scope. Problems are commonplace occurrences and fairly predictable. “They usually can be addressed in a limited time frame, often without arousing public attention or without draining an organization’s resources”, but for crisis, the scholars argued that “crisis tend to be less predictable”, as they “require a considerable investment of time and resources to resolve and often bring unwanted public attention”, challenging an organisation to its very core values.

The Pacific Telesis manual on Crisis Communication, notes that crisis is an ‘extraordinary event or series of events that adversely affects the integrity of the product, the reputation or financial stability of the organisation; or the health or well-being of employees, the community, or the public at large’. This, no doubt, buttresses the multi-dimensional frame of crisis. Fundamentally, crisis can only turn out adverse or negative effects, but if properly managed, can turn into an opportunity for the subject.

Consequently, Fink (1986:15-16) characterized crisis as being prodromal situations (situations often marked by forewarning) that run the risk of:escalating in intensity; falling under close media or government scrutiny; interfering with the normal operations of business; jeopardizing the positive public image enjoined by a company and its officers; and damaging a company’s bottom line.

Crisis is a dynamic thing. From postulations above, it can come in any shape, form, size, level, position, and can place the actors on either side of the divide as villain or

hero; as victim or victor. But suffice it is mentioned that crisis and their consequences are avoidable if necessary steps are taken to influence such events before they happen or possibly avert it all together. Here the role of public relations comes to bear. Crisis, according to Guth and Marsh (2000:388), occurs in stages. First is the 'Warning Stage; where advance signs of trouble are sounded; next is the 'Point of no Return', where the crisis is unavoidable; the third stage is the 'Clean-up' phase which implies that there is still opportunity to minimize the damage; and finally is the stage at which things return to normal, which is a little bit deceptive as things are very unlikely to be normal again. The first and the last stages need proactive approaches, while the second and third stages need reactive approaches. Deductively, not planning for crisis implies courting disaster. In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, crisis is better pictured from the environmental realm, that is, they are majorly environmental related. The environment in this regard is seen as the physical environment of the region which is such a dynamic one that produces intriguing and intractable ecstasies for the inhabitants of the region. Crisis in the region has arisen from two divides with government and the oil producing companies on the one side and the host communities and their inhabitants on the other. These are the two parties to a potential crisis in the region.

The strings of crisis in the region has more than anything else attracted negative publicity to not only the companies operating in the region, but also the inhabitants, with the terms "militants", 'vandals' 'terrorists', 'irresponsible' and others used extensively to describe the youths from the region. Of interest is the fact that issues of environment are of global dimension as one uncontrollable act of environmental degradation in a place is likely to affect another place. A case in point is gas flaring which not only produces acid rain in the region but combine to deplete the ozone layer.

Wilcox et al (2000:376) observed that, "environmental cleanup holds a high place on the public agenda, primarily because of vigorous campaigns by environmental organisations". The positioning of the issue of environment on the social scale defines a milieu for any organisation whose activities touch on the environment to ensure among several things promotion of recycling, elimination of toxic waste sites, purification. Environmental issues often take on global implications for all concerned, and if not properly managed can snowball into serious crisis. Environmental issues revolve around the need for clean-up, especially in the Niger Delta region, where there is a frenzy of oil and gas exploration activities and allied businesses, which no doubt creates attendant crisis. Consequently, crisis point in the region is manifested in terms of: hostage taking; kidnapping of expatriates and foreign nationals; vandalizing pipelines and oil facilities; blowup of oil installations; agitation for resource control, better employment quota, and youth restiveness in what ever guise.

The focus of public relations functions are aimed at building, maintaining and changing relationships to promote mutual understanding. Consequently, it relied on applicable models in achieving these goals. Four models tend themselves to the Public Relations Practitioner namely the Press Agency/Publicity model; the Public Information Model; the Two-way Asymmetric model and Two-way Symmetric Model.

According to McQuail and Windalil (1993:193), "the first to appear in American and Public Relations history is the agent-publicity model, in which propaganda is the main purpose of communication". Public Information, according to the authors above focuses

on “the dissemination of information with the ultimate aim of establishing or maintaining reputation, while with the two-way asymmetric Public Relations model, the “aim was persuasion, often based on communication principles developed in communication science”.

Specific to this work is the two-way symmetric model, which McQuail and Windahl (1993:194) say “stresses mutual understanding as a goal and involving genuine efforts to exchange views and information with relevant publics”.

For Ajala (1993:15), in the two-way symmetric model, “dialogue exists instead of monologue”. The practitioner’s role is to bring the two groups together to make communication possible to enhance mutual understanding. According to Ajala (1993:16) it is the ideal public relation model, and capable of achieving the Public Relations process as elucidated by Jefkins (1988:9) which turns negative situation as crisis to positive achievements. Jefkins (1988) expects public relations to achieve sympathy in place of hostility, acceptance in place of prejudice, and the publics to show interest rather than apathy and be knowledgeable rather than perceived ignorance.

McQuail and Windahl (1993:195) concludes that “the two-way symmetric model is “especially relevant when the aim is to solve problems and to avoid conflicts and whose lasting communication relationship is one of the requirement rather than an adhoc campaign” as with the Niger Delta issue.

Strategic Public Relations Roles

Since the two-way symmetric model is dialogic and makes communication among the feuding parties possible so as to enhance mutual understanding, Ajala (1993:94) submits that in so much as the “organisation of a crisis management plan is often a role left to the Public Relation specialist,” it simply add up to the facts that “communication takes top priority”. The first step is “to understand the extent of the problem” as only with this understanding can the right messages be packaged, designed and disseminated. This comes through research. Research carried on by scholars in the region such as Ogbondah and George (2004) Oyeninde (1998) and Taiwo (2000) clearly revealed the issues raised earlier as detailed in the module, ‘causes of environmentally related crisis in the region’.

Underscoring the importance of research, Wilcox et al (2000:120) stated that “effective relations are a process, and the essential first step is research” which is seen as the “controlled, objective, and systematic gathering of information for the purpose of describing and understanding”. Research is a multi-pronged tool that is evolved in virtually every phase of a communications programmeme. Research according to Wilcox et al (2000) helps in achieving credibility with management; defining audiences and segment publics; formulation of strategy; testing messages; enabling management keep in touch; preventing crisis; monitoring of the competition; swaying public opinion; generating of publicity; and measuring of success. Several research techniques are available, but the Survey and Content Analysis techniques are most suitable and as such used to generate the data on the causes of environmental crisis.

Having identified the problem and understood them, the next step using Public Relations is crisis communication planning. Guth and Marsh (2000:393) maintained that since public relations is by definition a management process, it plays a major role during times of crisis through and effective crisis communication. Crisis communication is in integrated

process involving the four steps of (a) risk assessment, (b) crisis communications planning, (c) response and (d) recovery.

Risk Assessment: Risk assessment involves identification of various threats and what steps should be evolved to eliminate or lessen them. Fink (1986) raised five questions that help in risk assessment in relation to appraising which has the lowest crisis impact value (CIV). The questions adaptable to the region are: •If the crisis runs the risk of escalating in intensity how intense can it get and how quickly can it escalate as in the Afam 2004 fire incident? To what extent will the crisis fall under the watchful eye of key stakeholders, including the media, regulations, shareholders and so on? To what extent will the crisis interfere with the organization's normal operations? To what degree is the organisation the culprit? To what extent can the organization's bottom line be damaged? With adequate answers to these questions, a proper risk analysis would have been evolved, and the next stage steps on.

Developing the Plan: Suffice it is mentioned that crisis permeates three zones, the pre-crisis period, crisis and post-crisis management period. Scholars are unanimous in defining the pre-crisis or proactive approach as most suitable in crisis management as it put to bear the ingenuity of the public relations man. Gone is the era of "let's get to that bridge".

Consequently, Guth and Marsh (2000:396) stated that crisis "communications planning mean developing communications strategies for identified risks-making as many decisions and taking as many steps as you possibly can before a crisis occur", no doubt these plans must be flexible because crisis, itself, is not a strait jacketed thing. The plan should incorporate issues as definition of what is crisis in the region, for instance, crisis is when there is an oil spill occasioned by vandalized pipelines. Crisis should be distinguished accident. A list of crisis managers, which will include government functionaries, community leaders, opinion leaders, the common man, the oil companies, non-governmental organisations, pressure groups employees, public relations experts from the major stakeholders, lawyers, accountants, appropriate technical experts and support personnel. Stakeholder's communication strategies which identify the various stakeholders that "must be contacted and should provide appropriate telephone numbers and other form of contact".

These stakeholders should be contacted promptly. They include in the case of the Niger Delta region employees of the various multinationals operating in the region, where on outline of how to notify them of a crisis situation should be spelt out. The media who are critically important, especially the local press. A media information centre should be established that will manage the volume and content of information which filters from the crisis area. News releases, media briefings, as well as monitoring of report is very crucial. The host communities are a stakeholder that should be treated fairly and faithfully. They should not be goaded or treated with levity because they are illiterate or poor or not knowledgeable enough. Often times, it is the illiterate youths in the community that snow balled what could have been a manageable crisis. For other key stakeholders such as board members, financial experts, union leaders, shareholders, government, there should be a liaison who will bridge the gap to avoid a situation of under informing or misinforming the people. The curious publics who could deduce and arrive at most times, unfriendly impressions about any of the parties in the crisis owing to improper information. For

instance, the Niger Delta youth are branded ‘militants’, Kidnappers’ and the area labeled “restricted” or ‘no go area’ because of the series of activities reported in the media. In actual fact, the picture is not as gloomy as presented most times. This could be testified to by the zero tolerance of killing of kidnapped persons. There has been no media report indicating that any of the kidnapped persons were killed, the only wave of violence was directed at oil facilities and personnel and were done after issuing appropriate warnings. The publics should be appropriately informed.

Coordinated responses from selected members, who should be thoroughly informed or happenings and what to say, as against the prevalence of uniformed reportage in the media from persons who think they are experts, or have the solution, but do not have the facts. A good instance is the statement or revelation by then Vice President of Nigeria Atiku Abubakar who alleged that the federal government has earmarked 2 billion dollars to deal with militants in the region. No doubt, this statement inadvertently triggered off a new spate of violence in the region. His response was politically motivated. The plan should equally include where reporters can get adequate information and must be appropriately staffed with competent hands that is core public relations staff and communication experts.

Response: From Guth and Marsh (2000:401) “crisis response is the execution of crisis communications strategies,” a kind of reward for hard work of effective planning. It details who and how the person involved should respond. For instance, in Shell Petroleum Development Company; western operation base in Warri, response to crisis comes majorly from the Corporate Affairs Director, Engineer (Dr) Harriman Oyofe, who is in constant touch with his Media Manager, Joe Anaiah. Besides, the employees are regularly briefed on a happening, which goes a long way in preparing them for crisis and how to respond in case they are accosted.

Recovery: Recovery is an evaluative step that assesses all the efforts put into place to manage a crisis and the questions that prop up include: • Were our actions during and after the crisis consistent with organizational goals and values? What aspects of the crisis did our plan anticipate and how do we build upon success recorded? Which aspects of the crisis were left out, why, what could be done to forestall such oversights? How did the various stakeholders respond to their roles during the crisis, were there noticeable gaps that engendered or reduced the crisis? What is the public’s perception of the crisis management strategies in terms of increased public acceptance and support of the organisation or apathy? Which new vistas of opportunities were opened up by the crisis? What plans could cater for future crisis?

Obviously, another index at Recovery is the Public Relations Transfer Process of Jenkins (1988). Apathy must be replaced with interest in the affairs of the company, hostility with sympathy; acceptance with prejudice, while ignorance should give way for a better informed stakeholders who will stand behind the organisations in future occurrence. It should be stated that no crisis repeats itself in much the same way as the first; there must be some new and complex angle to it. Consequently, Recovery for the Niger Delta region implies good working environment for the organisation, peaceful co-existence and the likes. Recovery equally opens up a new vista to renew the entire crisis communication process with a view to redesigning newer ones that will take into considerations newer

challenges.

Wilcox et al (2000:181) observed that these are many lists giving advice on what to do during a crisis and went on to give a good compilation of suggestions. These include putting the publics first (a list of Niger Delta publics is treated in the next module). Taking responsibility. An organisation should take responsibility for solving the problems. Most organizations in the region and even government have referred to take specific responsibility. Take for instance, the oil companies and the federal government has continued to shift the bulk of responsibility over the failure of stoppage of gas flaring, expected to have been completed by the end of this year. SPDC for instance argued that it has met its own funding and that the Federal Government has not made any monetary commitment whatsoever. Being honest with the facts as obscuring them will no doubt raise more questions and issues that will ultimately escalate the crisis you are trying to manage. Never say “no comment” as it only confirm that the organisation is guilty of wrong doings. The position of the organisation as touching on the issue must be stated, no matter how trivial, bad or damaging it could be. Designate a single spokesman so that the responses could be better coordinated and measured. Setting up a central information centre. Providing a constant flow of information, as withheld information only provides new fuel for media men to use the cover-up as banner headlines. Being familiar with media needs and deadlines. Being accessible and monitoring news coverage- and telephone inquiries as this puts you in a to gauge public opinion and helps you to plan strategies at redressing and influencing negative opinion. Finally, Communicating with your key publics through the two-way symmetric approach.

These suggestions become relevant in the face of the dynamic and diametric nature of crisis. Guth and Marsh (2000:88) sees “publics as any group whose members have a common interest or common value in a particular situation”, but the fact should be stressed that certain publics become important to an organization as its values and values-based goals interact with the environment. Consequently, the various types of publics to include Traditional/ Non Traditional: Traditional publics have on ongoing, long-term relationships with the organisation. Non-traditional are groups that usually are unfamiliar and the organisation never gets to meet them. They include beneficiary of projects commissioned by oil companies, government, and friends from Internet chat rooms. Latent Aware and Active Publics: Latent publics are groups whose values have come into contact with the values of the organization, but haven’t been recognized yet. Aware public are those whose members are aware of the intersection of their values but haven’t negotiated any kind of response to the relationship. Active publics recognize the relationship between itself and the organisation and work assiduously to manage that relationship on its own terms. Intervening Publics: These are publics that help you to reach out to another set of publics; they intervene to help you reach some yet to be identified publics for example the reporter is an intervening publics. Primary and Secondary Publics: Primary publics directly affect your organisations pursuit of its values-driven goals and of great importance. The secondary publics, though of importance, has only minimal effect on your organization’s pursuit of its goals. Internal and External Publics: Although sometimes the lines between internal and external publics are difficult to draw as in the case of alumni of a university, it is pertinent to state that internal publics are those inside the organizations or government while external are those that operates from the outside. **Domestic and International**

Publics: Domestic publics are those within your own country; but the point is proximity doesn't translate to familiarity. Domestic publics can be non traditional. The international publics are those beyond your country's border. They are becoming very important in that with the global village ideology, they hold strong influence on local activities.

In each of these class of publics, the issues that come to mind in each crisis situation are how much influence does the public has; what is their stake in the enterprise; who are the identifiable opinion leaders among them; what is their demographic profile; what is their opinion as touching the organisation and what is the publics' opinion on the issue? Consequently a probably list of publics in the region that is amenable to any crisis situation include and not restricted to Employees Community Organisations; The News Media (Modem) Investor (Oil companies); Government-Federal, Local, State ; Consumers/Customers; Traditional media institutions Multi Cultural Communication; ProfessionalCommunity Leaders Non-governmental Organisations Tertiary Institutions; Religious Leaders Traditional Leaders Opinion LeadersGovernment Agencies, International Regulatory Agencies Environmentalist Groups, Politicians Pressure Groups, Security Operatives Student Bodies.

At each crisis point; the public relations man should be able to identify the relevant publics, but cultivating a standing relationship of communicating information to them is best suited for crisis management. Firstly, there is the need to categorize them into controllable and uncontrollable media. The controlled media include.

PRINT	SPOKEN WORD	THE IMAGE
Organizational Publications	The Grapevine; Rumours and Corporate Gossips	Films and slide
Newsletters	Meetings	Presentation for new employees
Pamphlets for new employee orientation	Speeches	Display and exhibits
Books	Seminars	
Letters	Closed Circuit Television	
Bulletin boards and posters	Radio messages	
Printed speeches		
Fax Messages		

The uncontrolled media are:

PRINT	SPOKEN WORD	THE IMAGE
Daily and weekly newspaper	TV news	Pollution Control
Tabloids	Cable TV	Sponsorship of events
Magazines	Video tapes on company activitiesa	Public information centres

Business and professional publications	Annual General Meeting	
Public Relations/advertisin	Corporate Social Responsibility programmemes	
Radio announcements		

(Adapted from Ajala (1993:52)

Next is the Integrated Public Relations Media Model which details the scope and variety of media and communication tools available to public relations professionals. It transcends the spectrum from mass media to one-on-one communication.

Characteristic	Public Media	Interactive Media	Controlled Media	Events Groups	One-on-one	Traditional
Key use	Build awareness	Respond to queries; Exchange information	Promotion ; provide Detailed information	Motivate attendees; Reinforce attitudes	Obtain commitments; Resolve problems	
Examples	newspapers, magazines, radio, television	Computer-based World Wide Web, databases, e-mail, list-serves. Chat rooms, bulletin boards	Brochures, newspapers, sponsored magazines, annual reports, books, direct, mall, point of purchase displays, video brochures.	Speeches, trade shows, exhibits, meetings/ conferences, demonstrations, rallies, sponsorship, anniversaries	Personal visits, lobbying, personal letters, telephone calls, telemarketing	Communal meetings
Communication	Nonpersonal	Nonpersonal	Nonpersonal	Quasi-personal	Personal	Face to face verbal/non verbal
Direction of communication	One-way	Quasi-two-way	One-way	Quasi-two-way	Two-way	Two way transactional
Technological sophistication	High	High	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Locally sophisticated, internationally unsophisticated
Channel ownership	Media organizations	Common carrier or institution	Sponsor	Sponsor or other organization	None	Communal
Messages chosen by	Third-parties and	Receiver	Sponsor	Sponsor or joint organization	Producer and audience	Shared by participants

	producers					
Reach	High	Moderate-low	Moderate-low	Low	Low	High for the audience
Cost per impression	Extremely low	Low	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low
Key challenges to effectiveness	Competition on media clutter	Availability, accessibility	Design, distribution	Attendance, atmosphere	Empowerment, personal dynamics	'Political will' to kick start the project.

(Adapted from Wilcox et al 2000:180 and modified by Akpan (2008))

Besides, there is the need to integrate other traditional media in the communication plan. These are drama, folklore, dance, music, etc.

Other Public Relations Strategies

Other public relations strategies that come handy according to Ogbondah and George (2004) include Educational and Skill Training Programmemes. Although this is already on-going, it should be intensified and the people given adequate information on how they could benefit from this equally, the company should deal directly with the beneficiaries rather than go through middlemen, as most times these middlemen have hijacked the programmemes and made it a family affair where cronies and family members get to benefit while the larger society are sidelined. Infrastructural Projects: Projects that meet the real developmental needs of the people should be established in consultation with the beneficiaries. Environmental Safety: Oftentimes, if crisis keeps on re-occurring occasioned by negligence, then the likelihood of any crisis communication plan succeeding is zero. There is the need to maintain an acceptable standard of environmental safety for both her facilities and the public. It is not enough for instance to provide powerful generating sets for organizational operations, where the fumes help to destroy the environment and the people, and the organisation goes ahead to provide good roads.

These strategies should be adequately communicated to the people and they could be co-opted in helping to execute these laudable projects. In line with Lesley's (1997) submission, the following are likely impact from the above articulated public relations process for the region: familiarity with the reputation of the organisations as a people oriented one which will boost its prestige and image; development of public taste and desire for the organisations products and services; detecting and dealing with issues and opportunities even before they occur; enable the organisation to master the public, block negative publicity, parry with the publics and achieve mutual adaptation; gain and sustain goodwill of employees and other relevant publics; prevent and restore labour problems; foster the goodwill of local communities; ensure the goodwill of stakeholders or constituents; overcome misconception and prejudices; forestall attacks on the organization's facilities; maintain the goodwill of suppliers, government and industry at large; attract the best personnel; proper educating of the publics on organizational goals; appreciate and determine the attitude of the various groups towards the organisation; formulate and guide policies targeted at mutual understanding; deal effectively with emergencies; and manage

changes. Wilcox et al (2000) added increased media opportunities; access to research and development; and increased corporate profitability.

Conclusion and Recommendation

So far, the preceding exposition has shown that current efforts at addressing and arresting the restiveness in the Niger Delta region in Nigeria are glanced with high egocentric and politically motivated rhetorics even when the wall-gazetted projects are spasmodically implemented. And the single most important missing component of the whole corrective exercise is the psychology of the Niger Delta people. Though more often than not considered to be insignificant, notwithstanding the wealth of researches about the area, this variable appears to be the starting point of the in-roads to addressing the crises in the Niger Delta region. The psychology implies an understanding of the peoples intellect, complex, individual and corporate personality, shared values in relation to other sections of the Nigerian polity, their felt not assumed and subsumed needs and wants.

There is no gain saying that the task of harmonizing there psychological indices requires shared and mutual communications, goodwill and understanding of the 'haves' and the 'have nots' in the Niger Delta region. And the starting point of such of the proposed converge point are the 'haves' in the likes of the elites such as leaders, representatives, elders, starting and professionals. These people need to be 'debriefed from the ecstasy and paraphernalia of the their opportuned wealth's and offices and then be 'rebriefed' to take on their responsibilities and roles toward the 'real' Niger Delta people. It therefore the submission of this papers that proper communication through the practice of effective and professionally girded public relations is one sure out of the Niger Delta Crises.

References

- Ajala, V. (1993) *Public Relations: In Search of Professional Excellence* Ibadan; Afrika-Link Books.
- Dode, Robert (2006) "Youth Restiveness and Hostage Taking: A Panacea". Being Text of Paper Presented at a One day Workshop on Managing Political Violence in the Niger Delta at Summit Garden Hotel, Uyo on December 2006.
- Fink, S. (1986) *Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable*. New York: AMACOM
- Guth, D. W and Marsh, C. (2000) *Public Relations: A Value-Driven Approach*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, A Pearson Education Company.
- Hutchful, H (1985) "Oil Companies and Environmental Pollution in Nigeria" in Ake, C. (ed) *Political Economy of Nigeria*. London: Longman.
- Jefkins, F (1988) *Public Relations Techniques*. Oxford: Heinemann Professional Publishers.
- Lesly, Philip (1997). "The Nature and Role of Public Relations" in Lesly (ed) *Lesly's Handbook of Public Relations and Communication* 5th edition. Illinois, Chicago: Contemporary Books.
- McQuail, D, and Windahl, Sven (1993) *Communication Models for the Study of Mass Communications*; (2nd Edition). England: Pearson Education Limited and Associated Companies.
- Ogbondah, C. W. and George, Amiso (2004) "Fire at Nigeria's Treasure Base: An Analysis of Shell Petroleum's Public Relations Strategies in the Wake of the Niger Delta Crisis" in Tilson and Alozie (eds) *Towards the Common Good: Perspectives in International Public Relations*, Boston: Pearson Education Inc.
- Oyerinde, O. (1998) "Oil Disempowerment and Resistance in the Niger Delta" in Olorode et al (eds) *Ken Sara-Wiwa and the Crisis of the Nigeria State*. Lagos, Nigeria: CDHR.
- Shell (2005) *2004 People and the Environment Annual Report*. Nigeria: Shell Visual Media Services.

- Taiwo, F (2000) "Nigeria and Other Oil Producing Countries: A Comparative Analysis of Oil Revenue Sharing Formular" in Raji, Ale and Akinsola (eds) *Boiling Point: A CDHR Publication on the Crises in the Oil Producing Communities in Nigeria* Lagos: CDHR.
- Wilcox, D. L.; Ault, P. H; Agee, W. K and Cameron, G. T (2000) *Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics* (6th Edition). New York: Addison-Wesley Longman Inc.
- Adams, W. (2000) "Responding to the Media During a Crisis: Its What you say and when you say it". *Public Relations Quarterly*. 45(1), 26-28.
- Benson- Eluwa, Virginia (1998) *The Practice of Human, Industrial and Public Relations*. Enugu: Virgin Creations.
- Bernays, Edward (1945) *Public Relations*. Boston, MA: Bellman Publishing Company.
- Birch, J. (1994) New Factors in Crisis Planning and Response. *Public Relation Quarterly* 39(1),31-34.
- Caponigro, J.R. (2000) *The Crisis Counselor: A Step by Step Guide to Managing a Business Crisis*. Lincolnwood, it: NTC / Contemporary Books.
- Cutlip, M. Scott and Centre, Allen H (1994) *Effective Public Relations* (7th Edition). NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.
- Cutlip, M. Scott. And centre, H. Allen (1982) *Effective Public Relations* (5th Edition). NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.
- Defleur, Melvin and Dennis, Everette (1994) *Understanding Mass Communication*. Boston Toronto: Houghton Milttlin Company.
- Gonzalez-Herrero, A, and Prath, C (1995) "How to Manage a Crisis Take your Company or when it Hits". *Public Relations Quarterly*, 40(1) pp. 25-30.
- Gordon, Kim (2001) "Under Fire": Will a Crisis Take Your Company Down? Here's How Deft Handling can Turn Public Opinion Around. *Entrepreneur*.
- Grunig, J. E. (2000) Collection, Collaboration, and Societal Corporation as Core Professional Values in Public Relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 12(1) pp. 23-48.
- Grunig, J. and Huang, T. (1999) "From Organizational Effectiveness to Relationship Indicators: Antecedents of Relationships, Public Relations Strategies, and Relationships Outcomes". In J. Ledingham and S Bruning (eds) *Relationship Management: A Relational Approach to Public Relations*. Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Ertbaum Associates.
- Horsefali, A. (1999) *The OMPADEC Dream*. London: Imprint Publications.
- Jefkins, Frank (1988) *Public Relations*. Bungay Suffolk: Richard Clay (the Chaucer Press) Limited.
- Krucheberg, D. (2000). "The Public Relations Practitioner's Role in Practicing Strategic Ethic". *Public Relations Quarterly* 45(3) pp. 35-39.
- Lolomari, O. (1995) Oil Companies and Oil Communities as Partners in Development. In Soremekun, K (ed) *Perspective in the Nigerian oil Industry*. Lagos: Amkara Books.
- Martison, D. (1995-1996) Clients Partiality and Third Parties: An Ethical Dilemma per Public Relations Practitioners. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 40(4) pp. 41-44.
- Newson, D. Turk, J.V and Krukeberg, D. (2002). This is PR: The Realities of Public Relations (7th Edition) Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Thompson.
- Nnaemeka, Tony (1993) "Understanding Public Relations" in Salu (ed). *Public Relations for Local Government in Nigeria*. Lagos: Talkback Publishers Limited.
- Offorry, H. Kanu (1995) *Guide to Public Relations in Nigeria*. Owerri: New Africa Publishing Company Limited.
- Ogbondah, Chris W., and George, Amiso (2004) "Fire at Nigeria's Treasure Base, An Analysis of Shell Petroleum's Public Relations Strategies in the Wake of the Niger Delta Crisis" In Tilson, D. J. and Alozie E. C. (eds) *Toward the Common Good Perspectives In International Public Relations*. New York: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Onuoha, B. Chima (1994) *Entrepreneurial Development in Nigeria: An Integrative Perspective*. Okigwe: Avan Global Publications

- Oyorinde, O. (1998) "Oil Disempowerment and Resistance in the Niger Delta in Olorode, O. et al (eds), *Ken Saro Wiwa and the Crisis of the Nigerian State*. Lagos: Committee for the Defense of Human Rights.
- Patterson, Bill. (1993) "Crisis Impact on Reputation Management". *Public Relations Journal*.
- Smith, Stephanie, and Kim, Hunter (1997) "Virgil Scudder Tackles Crisis Tactics" *Communication World*.
- Soremekun, K., and Obadare, E. (1998) Politics of oil Corporations in Postcolonial Nigeria. In Olorode, O. et al (eds) *Ken Saro Wiwa and the Crisis of the Nigerian State*. Lagos: Committee for the Defense of Human Rights.
- Taiwo, F. (2000) "Nigeria, Other Oil Producing Countries: A Comparative Analysis of Oil Revenue Sharing Formula. In W. Ragi, A. Ale, and Akimsola, E. (eds), *Boiling Point's*. A Cadre Publication on the Crisis in the Oil Producing Communities in Nigeria. Lagos: Committee for Defense of Human Rights.
- Tebekaem, A. (1999) *The Twelve-Day Revolution*. Benin City: Idodo Umeh Publishers.
- Sha'aba, R. (1998) MOSOP and the Ogoni Struggle. In O. Olorode et al (eds) *Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Crises of the Nigerian States* Lagos: Committee for the Defense of Human Right.
- Seitel, F. (2001) *The Practice of Public Relations*. Upper Saddle NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Wilsson, Des (1997) *Communication and Social Action*. Port Harcourt: footstep Publications.
- World Bank (1995) Environmental Economic study of the Niger Delta, Nigeria, and Document Prepared for the World Bank by Carl Bro. International Denmark.
- Zoch, L and Duhe, S. (1997) Feeding the Media during a Crisis. A Nationwide Look. *Public Relations Quarterly* 42(3) pp. 5-19.