



Impact of Public Relations in Trust-Building for Citizens' Positive Perception and Support of Socio-Economic Programmes of the Government of Rivers State, Nigeria (2015-2023)

¹Okpowhor Chikwudi, & ²Enuolare Mba-Nwigoh

¹Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Humanities, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

²Postgraduate Student, Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

***Corresponding author:** chuksclins@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Background: Trust building through public relations for positive public perception and acceptance of governments' policies is one important subject that has not attracted sufficient scholarly scientific enquiry.

Objectives: This study investigated the impact of Public Relations in trust-building for citizens' positive perception and support of socio-economic programmes of the government of Rivers State, Nigeria (2015-2023).

Method: The study anchored its discussion on persuasion and social influence theory, and social exchange theory. This study adopted literature review method as its research design, reviewing existing concepts and theories with a view to compare contrast findings.

Result: Public Relations played significant role in building trust for citizens' positive perception and support of socio-economic programmes of the government of Rivers State, Nigeria during the administration of Governor Nyesom Wike (2015-2023).

Conclusion: The study concludes that public relations should be recognised and treated as a profession where only professionals should be allowed to practice.

Unique Contribution: Practically the paper made incursion with a view to reinventing public relations as an introspective review of the profession.

Keywords: Trust-Building, Application, Public Relation, and Aspirations.

INTRODUCTION

The basis upon which any government exists is to provide the basic goods to a greater mass of its population. In doing this, it is expected that governments put in place strategies, policies and programmes that serve as special purpose vehicle to actualizing this cardinal end. Suffice to say that the extent to which any society develops, say socio-economically is largely predicated on how well governments have systematically developed systems capable of galvanising and coordinating every strata of the economy.

Yet, beyond systems and structures is the level of social capital and aggregate trust every government earns from its citizenry over time. Arguably, every system and policies of government either thrives or fails at the instance of trust. Governments that enjoy varying level



of support from citizens have over the years been cautiously managing their reputation in such ways that they have continued to earn their trust and confidence. This in itself is a tall order. There seems to be a growing level of trust deficit between governments and its citizens. This could account for the growing friction between them (Pew Research Center, 2021). While government economic policies are not to entirely favour everyone it should translate to economic development for the good of all.

In the face of ebbing trust, governments seem to be struggling to get citizens buy-in for economic programmes and other policies. The application of public relations in government business is increasingly becoming expedient. This could be seen from the prism that when rightly applied in terms of development of programmes, policies and system, and implementation governments through public relations could create some significant level of goodwill needed to reduce suspicion, build trust and achieve socio-economic development. For instance, the campaign for the patronage of made-in Nigeria goods, which is one of the recipes to developing our local economy seem to have hit the rock, largely because government seem not to have earned public trust on the subject matter. Same applies to a number of other economic programmes and policies. The thesis of this study therefore, is to attempt to establish the link between public relations application and socio-economic development of Rivers State.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. Investigate the level of application of public relations in governments' socio-economic programmes and policies in Rivers State.
2. Evaluate the nexus between public relations application and socio-economic development.
3. Make a case for the application of public relations by government towards achieving its socio-economic policies and programmes in Rivers State, Nigeria.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

This study was anchored on the theories of Persuasion and Social Influence, as well as the Social Exchange Theory. The Theories of Persuasion and Social Influence was developed by Herbert Kelman in the early 1950s to explain how people attempt to influence the thoughts and behaviours of others. Persuasion usually is concerned with changing the attitudes and consequently (under specific conditions) the behaviour of people in a context of relative freedom (O'Keefe, 2002; Crano & Pristin, 2008; Perloff, 2010; Shen, 2012 cited in Gardikiotis & Crano, 2015). It is achieved through the learning approach, which emphasises the process of learning attitudes; the consistency approach, which focuses on the importance of consistency between attitudes and behaviours; the attitude-behaviour approach which is concerned with the conditions under which attitude predict behaviour and the cognitive approach, which is concerned primarily with the cognitive processes that inhibit or promote persuasion (Gardikiotis & Crano, 2015). Accordingly, persons who will be influenced by these approaches will be looking out for the following: (1) the credibility and reputation of the communicator; (2) the order of statements; (3) completeness of statements and; (4) announcement of conclusions (takes a position). This theory can be applied in politics business (advertising, positioning, PR) and conflict and negotiations (12manage, n.d).



An elaborate form of the persuasion theories is the Dissonance Theory. One that leads to an expectation that people will selectively expose themselves to information and prefer to be exposed to information that is supportive of (consonant with) their current belief rather than to non-supportive information which presumably could arouse dissonance (O'Keefe, 2010). In relation to the subject matter, government's efforts to drive socio-economic development must be consistent first in convincing the citizen on practical steps to actualizing this beginning with the extent it will be of immense benefit to all. For instance, while the emphasis should be on patronizing made in Nigeria products, government officials are expected to be seen to be complying with the same policy. This way more citizens could be persuaded to patronize made in Nigeria products. Therefore, the adoption of trust which is a key component in public relations practice can be far-reaching in persuading people towards engaging in positive attitudes that will develop the economy.

The Social Exchange Theory was developed by Homans (1950, 1958, 1961) cited in Redmond (2016) as a norm of reciprocity, which simply argues that people expect benefits in a relationship. It is social psychology concept that views human relationships as a kind of results-driven social behaviour. Relationships are weighed on the scale of how much benefits are maximized and costs minimised (Bajracharya, 2018). There is a certain amount of give and take in each relationship and the valuing of benefits and costs within them determine whether or not one chooses to continue that association (Bajracharya, 2018). Its core assumption stems from the fact that every relationship should be reasonably profitable to parties involved. Redmond (2016) explains that the Social Exchange Theory operates within the paradigms of value of a reward, social rewards, profit, equity and distributive justice and social exchange. The theory can be applied in several areas of human relationship (Redmond, 2016). However, among the criticism trailing the theory is the fact that it has not been explicit in explaining the degree to which humans really are as rational and calculating as the Social Exchange Theory would lead us to believe (Redmond, 2016). This is especially against the backdrop that people have gone into a relationship first.

The justification for this study again borders on the extent government policies, programmes and systems when implemented, could benefit the citizenry to whom their support is needed for its success. Public relations therefore comes handy when government uses its techniques to emphasize what it expects to be a win-win situation for both itself and the citizens in the quest to foster socio-economic development.

METHOD

This study adopted literature review method as its research design, reviewing existing concepts and theories with a view to compare contrast findings. Also, to highlight strengths and weaknesses, contradiction in literature, identify gaps, inconsistencies, or areas needing further research.



CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Government, Public Trust and Policy Executions

Overtime government develops programmes and policies aimed at developing society. Depending on the means of engagement, some of these policies and programmes are usually greeted with suspicion and skepticism. Suspicion as to real motive behind the programmes and policies and skepticism drawn from previous experiences where governments fail to meet expectations. This could partly account for one of the reasons policies and programmes fail. Citizens who do not feel included at the level of policy formation may not be cooperative in its implementation. It is imperative that governments shift from policy measures to understanding how best to design policy and implement them through inclusivity and public buy in. A priority for governments should be to build a policy making process conducive to trust. A policy-making process conducive to trust is built on informed decisions using reliable and relevant information, that are in the public interest, and are carried out with high standards of behaviour (OECD, n.d). OECD explain that inclusive growth policies move beyond GDP as a measure of success, to target outcomes that matter most to people's lives; brings the benefits of growth to a larger number of people in different social groups; evaluates the effects of policies on growth, income and outcomes that matter for well-being e.g. health and jobs, and sits in motion a virtuous cycle to build fairer societies and stronger, sustainable growth.

Considering that these policies and programmes of government have direct bearing on the end users who are the citizens the need to include them at the formation stages is in itself a strategic measure to ensuring successful implementation. In fact, governments business is getting much more tasking that leaving policy development and implementation solely at its beck and call could impede development. Contemporary governance now places much emphasis on inclusive and participation. Good governance has become an increasingly important policy issue in developing countries, particularly in Africa, with a movement away from the traditional hierarchical 'top-down' Weberian government structures (whereby government is responsible for the development and implementation of all public policy) to an increasing recognition of the value in creating 'policy networks', whereby civil society, together with private sector, work with government in policy development and service delivery (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Kjaer, 2004; Messner, 2013; African Union, 2015 cited in Lang, Schneider, Kett & Groce, 2017). Moreso, Torfing cited in Lang et al. (2017, pp.13) argue that:

The very nature of developing social and economic policy has now become so complex, that it is no longer feasible for the state to undertake all the stages of policy-making alone. Globalization, the fragmentation of social and political life, the growing number of 'wicked problems' and the new ideas of how to govern through 'regulated self-regulation' make it clear that government's agencies cannot govern alone. Indeed, no actor has the knowledge, capacity and authority to regulate society and the economy, single-handedly (p.4).



But then, the more reason government should open its doors including the citizens is to build trust. Arguably inclusiveness in policy formation could breed trust. It has been described as the ‘grease’ that allows the gears of collaboration and inclusiveness to turn (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Ansell & Gazh, 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi & Bolagh, 2012 cited in Ansell, Doberstein, Henderson, Siddiki & Hart, 2020). Trust in government or political trust – is a necessary precondition for representative democracy. The erosion of trust in government is thought to indicate “the crisis of democracy” with direct and severe consequences for the quality and ability of representative democracy, its institutions and its actors (Crozeer et al., 1978; Van der Meer, 2017; Van der Meer & Zmerli, 2017 cited in Kumagai & Lorio, 2017). While we will not delve into the ambiguity of the concept of trust, and ways to measure (Boukaert & Van de Welle, 2001), we can safely say that governments that earn some measure of it may succeed in seeing its policies and programmes scale the acceptability quotient.

No doubt, there is an increasing trust deficit for governments in many countries in fact public trust in government remains low (Pew Research Center, 2019, 2021). Distrust in government is on the rise or so is the perception (Bonekaert & Van de Welle, 2001). The point is that the implication of trust deficit is far reaching for any society. For instance, there are growing concerns about how a crisis in public trust is contributing to among other things support for extreme political views increasing public discontent, protests and in some cases violent conflict (UN, 2021). Of much concern is its implication for economic security. Research has shown that measures of trust in society are closely connected to economic growth and the effectiveness of government (Hilsenrath, 2013). Wolfers (n.d) cited in Hilsenrath (2013) alludes that the U.S government could not introduce some aggressive fiscal-stimulus programmes to revive its economy during its financial crisis because its ‘credibility was in tatters’ (p.1). Like other clime, the issue of trust in Nigeria has been a subject of discourse overtime. Many Nigerians are very cynical and skeptical about whatever policies and projects government may initiate. Governments at all levels has not earned the people’s trust and confidence over the decades (Ojo, 2020). It is disturbing to note that many economic policies seem to have failed due to lack of trust in government. Some economic research suggests that countries with low levels of trust can find themselves in a reinforcing cycle of greater regulation and lower economic growth (Swanson, 2016).

It is a usual practice of government to use the mass media for dissemination of information and campaigns of its economic policies and programmes. The information channels around which government use to strategize and engage citizens in its policies and programmes range from mass media to (mass mailings), from print media to electronic media, from telephone contacts to face-to-face contacts, the purpose includes informing, educating, selling, all targeted at changing attitudes and behaviours (Pelz, 1983 cited in Edwards, n.d). While the use of the media by government is not out of place, the concern of this discourse is that it has become imperative for government to explore other innovative means of not just reaching the public but also attempting to get their trust. Arguably, mass media seem to have be caught in the “distrust frenzy” by citizens. The declining public trust in the news media and polarization of news audiences have profound effects on civic life (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Even with the proliferation of more private media organizations, many still struggle to believe media contents how much more information from government. For instance, a recent report by



an independent panel on the ethics and credibility of South Africa's news media makes for worrying reading (Wasserman, 2021). Wasserman (2021) explains that the Sunday Times which had dominated the country's media landscape for over 100 years had lapses which included factual inaccuracies in some of its reports (alleged illegal deportations of Zimbabweans, rogue unit), as well as not "giving any – or adequate- opportunity to affected parties to respond to the stories pre-publication. Others included failing to seek credible and sourced validation of allegations made against individuals" (p.2). Equally, the media and the new social media landscape has continued to hold the public in a state of uncertainty, because the parameters that allowed them to evaluate the reception and scope of traditional news media have been eroded (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2008).

Gains of Public Relations Adoption

Incidentally, public relations could serve as a veritable trust booster which could translate to economic development. Trust is critical to the functioning of societies at all levels and is especially central to the practice of public relations (Rawlins, 2007). In fact, Edelman public relations firm, the biggest in the World, has conducted a Trust Barometer Survey around the world every year since 2000 because the firm considers trust is a key indicator at every level of business and society (Cutting Edge PR, 2020). We will at this point establish the nexus between public relations, trust and economic development, while preferring it for adoption in government's socio-economic aspiration. Cutting Edge PR (2020) notes that overtime, organizations or government entities are assessed on whether they use fair means in achieving its goals, including socio-economic development goals.

According to Sacher and Gupta, to build strong trust, organization need to understand and be respected for four types of organizational fairness that have been identified: Procedural fairness (whether good processes, based on accurate data are used to make decisions, and are applied consistently, and whether groups are given a voice in decisions affecting them); Distributive fairness (how resources like pay and promotion, or pain points such as layoffs, are allocated); Interpersonal fairness (how well stakeholders are treated) and Informational fairness (whether communication is honest and clear). Suffice to say that a cursory look at these types of fairness brings to the fore the importance of the public relations persons in every organization and countries. This is because PR professional seems better to coordinate relationship between and among stakeholders. Trust as it relates to public relations entails that parties in a relationship are benevolent, reliable, competent, honest and open. Trust is critical to establishing and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders on whom the organization depends (Dorbian, 2008).

In an era where there is growing mistrust across strata of society, the public relations profession becomes handy, serving as a bridge and blurring the impediments to relationship that engender development. The scarcity of certainty in the different subsystem of society and the ambiguity that pervades this postmodern hypercomplex society brings us to reconsider the concept of "trust" and its potential role in 21st century global society (Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2011). In this instance, Valentini and Kruckeberg (2011) note that public relations can engender "system trust" in every society. As conceptualized by Luhmann (1988) cited in Valentini and Kruckeberg (2011), the 'system trust' is a form of trust submits that when parties in a system hold positive experiences, they can better trust it. Positive experience with the system also can contribute to increased first (Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2011). Furthermore, Valentini & Kruckeberg (2011)



explain that the role of PR in a system is to coordinate all parties towards building mutual trust which will in turn engender socio-economic development among others. Trust can be maintained by means of communication and through constructive and mutually beneficial relationship among the different systems through which society is composed. In this respect, the role of public relations would be that of establishing mechanisms of trust among systems and between systems and individuals, so as to keep open the channels of communication and to facilitate the occasions for creating relationships (Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2011). The basis of the above assertions is that public relations when applied in economic policies could be far reaching in first raising, inclusion, trust and mutual cooperation which are some recipes for viral socio-economic development. Citizens must be given every benefit of the doubt to trust government economic policies and programmes when there is a reasonable level of trust for the system. Valentini and Kruckeberg explaining the role of public relations in a system makes reference to Luhmann's "idea of society as being comprised of systems and sub-systems that are at the same time interdependent and dependent of one another" (p.100). The organic role of public relations, therefore entails the engendering of organic interrelationship among elements in social systems that are mutually constituted (Vugnovic & Kruckeberg, 2005; Vugnovic, Kumar & Kruckeberg, 2007 cited in Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2011). This community-building function of public relations is of particular value in social/economic/political system that have undergone rapid transformation to a more individualistic social system, to a more capitalistic economic system, and to a more democratic political system (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2001; Kruckeberg, 2006 cited in Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2011).

Unfortunately, public relations has not been given its place in government in terms of policy formulation and implementation. The fact that they serve as the 'corporate conscience' of organizations or governments, puts PR in a position to broker a 'fair' bargain between and among parties in an economic context. However, a state of neglect of this role exists in terms of education and support, even lacking support among some public relations practitioners (Bowen, 2008). In fact, the subject of government public relations is more of a legacy in antiquity. It is more theoretical than practical. It is almost non-existent. Martinelli (2012) cited in Lee, Neeley and Stewart (2012) corroborates the above assertions, noting that "many government organizations are so busy with the things they must do, that they do not take the time to strategically think through and plan their public relations activities, except in the case of special campaigns, where outside counsel is often secured" (p.5). So, in the end, there has always been an alternate for public relations in government schemes. Until this is corrected, governments may not be successful in bridging the widening lacuna between it and the public and as such build public trust.

Public Relations Reinvented

To give public relations its right of place in a postmodern society, we adopt Ihnen and Van Ruler's (2007) proposal of the need to reconceptualize the profession. Accordingly, society at large becomes the unit of analysis and considers its social structure and institutions as the basis and the outcome of public relations. This implies that the main interest is not the corporation, organization or government, but its place in society at large (Ihnen & Van Ruler, 2007, cited in Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2011).



Furthermore, the reinventing public relation calls for an introspective review of the profession. Accordingly public relations role should move beyond simply maintaining and cultivating relationships of an organization with its publics, to addressing how organizations and government relate themselves to the public media arena and society at large in the context of trust, inclusion and transparency (Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2011). Public relations role must also include reinforcing societal values and belief systems in which values, beliefs and ideologies will be continually changed. In the light, Vugnovic (2004) cited in Valentini and Kruckeberg (2011) provides a normative model about how public relations practitioners' individual values and world views should influence organizational and government cultures, exploring how these individual values and world views should influence the choice of public relations models and ultimately should define the character of the organization or government. Known values, beliefs and ideologies of an organization or governments are the requisites to trust, upon which society members can reasonably predict and anticipate an action by an organization or government based on their prior behaviour and other communication (Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2011). Again, the need to train public relations practitioners to squaring up to the demands of the contemporary society is equally becoming very key. The fact that the industry is a free-for-all still portrays the profession they should not be taken 'seriously'. The increased role of public relations for all kinds of business has demanded more highly qualified individuals to fill the position. Surprisingly, the public relations practitioners mostly do not possess any public relation related degree. On the other hand, they tend to come from generalist background such as marketing, journalist, psychology, foreign language and many others (Putra, 2009). This will remain albatross of the profession and its implication will continue to be far reaching particularly in terms of its relevance to government. The profession must first take itself seriously before it could be seen that way.

CONCLUSION

Public relations holds a massive prospect as a veritable tool to engendering trust between government and the citizens. Treated as the conscience of any organization or government, its role puts it in a position to foster values and beliefs that will engender socio-economic development. However, it is imperative that the profession (which suffers from deliberate neglect from government in terms of inclusion in policy formulation and execution) purges itself and squares up to a state of relevance. Like other professions, public relations should be a 'closed group' where only those who are qualified are allowed to hold offices. This way, there will be a strict adherence to its core tenets and save it from the pitfall of 'distrust'.

Consequently, the fact that public relations is still tied to the apron string of mass communication still takes the sheen from a profession, which ought to be a tendon of society. Its roles in organizations and contemporary governments are critical to socio-economic development. However, it must rebrand itself as a 'beautiful bride' attractive enough to be used by government in bridging the trust deficit with the citizens.

At the moment, we have demonstrated that it is public relations, driven by its core value of trust and not the media that can effectively get public buy-in and confidence in government's economic policies and programme.



Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors contributions

Okpowhor Chikwudi and Mba-Nwigoh Enuolare conceived of this study, including the design, Prince Chindah and Ikechi Amadi collected the data, Okpowhor Chikwudi and Mba-Nwigoh Enuolare handled the analysis and interpretation. Also, Okpowhor Chikwudi and Mba-Nwigoh Enuolare wrote the manuscript. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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