



## **Exploring Public Relations Strategies and Stakeholder Engagement in the Implementation of the World Bank-Supported L-PRES Project in Taraba State, Nigeria**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Effective public relations (PR) and stakeholder engagement have become indispensable components of development interventions, particularly among donor-funded projects that depend on community participation, transparency, and sustained public support for successful implementation. In Nigeria, agricultural and rural development initiatives have increasingly adopted participatory communication approaches to improve project ownership and sustainability. Despite this growing emphasis, limited empirical evidence exists on how public relations strategies facilitate stakeholder engagement and project implementation within World Bank-supported agricultural development programmes, particularly the Livestock Productivity and Resilience Support (L-PRES) Project in Taraba State.

**Objectives:** This study therefore investigated the public relations strategies employed by the L-PRES Project Implementation Unit in supporting project implementation and stakeholder engagement in Taraba State, Nigeria with particular focus on their influence on stakeholder awareness, trust, and participation, and explored the communication-related challenges encountered during project implementation.

**Methods:** The study adopted a qualitative research design, employing In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Thirty-two purposively selected participants, comprising project officials, community leaders, and project beneficiaries, participated in the study. Data were analysed thematically.

**Results:** Findings revealed that stakeholder engagement meetings, community outreach programmes, workshops, local media engagement, printed information materials, and the Grievance Redress Mechanism (GRM) constituted the principal public relations strategies supporting project implementation. These strategies significantly enhanced stakeholder awareness, trust, participation, and collaboration. However, their effectiveness was constrained by low literacy levels, language barriers, irregular community engagement, and persistent communication gaps.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that strategic public relations practices are critical to the successful implementation and long-term sustainability of donor-supported rural development initiatives. Effective stakeholder engagement strengthens trust, promotes community ownership, and enhances project outcomes.

**Unique Contribution:** The study extends development communication and public relations scholarship by providing empirical evidence on how dialogic, participatory, and excellence-oriented public relations practices facilitate stakeholder engagement and improve the implementation of donor-funded agricultural development projects in rural communities.



**Key Recommendation:** Project implementing agencies should institutionalise culturally sensitive, participatory, and continuous multi-channel communication strategies that strengthen stakeholder engagement, improve feedback mechanisms, and enhance community ownership throughout the project lifecycle.

**Keywords:** Public relations strategies, stakeholder engagement, L-PRES Project, development communication, rural development, Taraba State, Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

Livestock production is one of the major sources of rural livelihoods, economic development, and food security globally, especially in developing nations where the livelihoods of over one billion people depend on it (World Bank, 2022). Globally, the sector is valued at approximately US\$1.72 trillion and accounts for about 40% of total agricultural gross domestic product (Schroback et al., 2023). In Nigeria alone, the livestock production sector is valued at over ₦30 trillion and contributes substantially to income generation, employment, and the nutritional needs of millions of households, as well as approximately 5% to the national GDP (Essiet, 2024). These figures underscore the strategic importance of livestock production as a driver of rural livelihoods, food security, and economic growth. However, the Nigerian livestock industry is threatened by climate variability, farmer–herder conflicts, disease outbreaks, and weak market infrastructure, which have persistently led to low productivity (Majekodunmi, 2022). These challenges have resulted in massive economic losses estimated at ₦7.17 trillion annually, equivalent to nearly 10% of the country’s Gross Domestic Product (Ajeniyi, 2025). Such losses undermine national food security and exacerbate poverty and social instability in states such as Taraba, where livestock production is the mainstay of many families.

Given the increasing challenges facing the sector and the growing global demand for animal-based products and food security, the L-PRES Project was launched in 2022 (Global Centre on Adaptation, 2026). L-PRES is a six-year intervention jointly implemented by the Federal Government of Nigeria and participating state governments to improve livestock productivity, commercialisation, resilience, and institutional capacity across the country. The project is financed through a World Bank facility valued at approximately US\$500 million, complemented by about US\$46 million in counterpart funding, making it one of the largest livestock-sector interventions in Nigeria’s recent history (Falaju, 2024). The project is structured around several strategic components, including institutional and innovation system strengthening, animal husbandry and advisory support services, animal health services, livestock value chain enhancement, crisis prevention and conflict mitigation, and natural resource management and pasture improvement across 20 participating states, including Taraba State.

Despite substantial financial and technical investments, the success of L-PRES and other related development initiatives depends on the effective application of public relations (PR) strategies. This is because the project is built around stakeholder engagement, public acceptance, and



sustained participation, all of which are critical components of PR. The effective application of PR strategies plays a pivotal role in bridging the gap between project design and community buy-in through awareness creation, trust-building, and stakeholder mobilisation (Jones, 2023). Yet, empirical evidence on how PR is applied in donor-funded livestock projects remains limited. While a growing body of PR research exists, a significant proportion has focused on PR in corporate settings (Odey et al., 2023; Okafor & Malizu, 2014), educational funding (Salihu & Santas, 2025), crisis management (Ada, 2025; Harold & Onyekosor, 2024), inclusive education (Ahmed et al., 2024), and general agricultural development (Garba et al., 2024; Yeibo & Onyekosor, 2024; Ugboodu et al., 2025). A few studies have addressed communication in livestock transformation programmes (Emejor, 2024) and in non-profit or conflict contexts (Kente & Oyinoiyi, 2023; Juliet & Santas, 2024; Unigwe & Okika, 2025). However, studies that specifically investigate PR strategies within the L-PRES Project or similar World Bank-funded livestock initiatives at state level, particularly in Taraba State, are lacking. This leaves critical questions unanswered regarding the effectiveness of PR in addressing low literacy levels, cultural diversity, logistical barriers, and trust deficits in grassroots implementation.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the forms of public relations strategies deployed in the L-PRES Project in Taraba State. Guided by Martin Buber's Dialogic Theory, the study focuses on how dialogic communication anchored on mutuality, presence, empathy, and genuine two-way engagement facilitates meaningful interaction between project implementers and community stakeholders, thereby enhancing understanding, participation, and trust-building. In addition, informed by the Excellence Theory of Public Relations (Grunig et al., 2002), the study evaluates the extent to which symmetrical communication, two-way balanced interaction, and relationship management contribute to effective stakeholder knowledge, mobilisation, and long-term trust in the project. Together, these theoretical lenses enable an assessment of how participatory communication processes strengthen implementation outcomes, as well as how asymmetries or breakdowns in dialogue may hinder effective project delivery. This aligns with calls from previous studies in African development communication (Flowerina & Syaidah, 2024; Ude-Akpeh et al., 2019; Ackah & Bimpong, 2025). However, these prior studies have largely focused on corporate, educational, and crisis-management contexts, with limited attention to livestock-sector interventions. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature and offers actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, utilising in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). This approach was selected because it enables researchers to gain deeper insights and a richer understanding of the lived experiences of L-PRES officials and other key stakeholders regarding the effectiveness of public relations (PR) strategies in promoting the L-PRES project in Taraba State (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). Purposive sampling was employed to select a total of 32 participants because it allows the deliberate inclusion of individuals who



possess relevant experience, knowledge, and direct involvement with the L-PRES project. This ensures that only information-rich participants are selected, thereby enhancing the depth, relevance, and credibility of the qualitative data collected. The participants comprised two L-PRES project officials from the Taraba State Project Coordination Unit and three traditional/community leaders, who were interviewed through in-depth interviews (IDIs). For anonymity and confidentiality, L-PRES project officials were coded as L-PRES 1 and L-PRES 2, while the traditional/community leaders were coded as CL1, CL2, and CL3. The 27 beneficiary community members who participated in the focus group discussions (FGDs) were drawn from three communities that had benefited substantially from the L-PRES project: Jimlari (Lau LGA), Jibu (Wukari LGA), and Mayo-Kama (Bali LGA). Nine participants were assigned to each FGD, with one FGD conducted in each community. Participants from Jimlari were coded as Jimlari 1–9, those from Jibu as Jibu 1–9, and those from Mayo-Kama as Mayo-Kama 1–9.

Data were collected using semi-structured interview and FGD guides, which were reviewed by communication experts at Taraba State University, Jalingo, to ensure content relevance. Data collection took place between May and November 2025. The extended data collection period reflected a phased approach necessitated by the dispersed nature of the study communities, participants' availability, and the need to build sufficient rapport to ensure rich and reliable qualitative data. The phases involved conducting in-depth interviews with key informants during the initial stage, followed by focus group discussions with beneficiary communities in subsequent stages, thereby allowing emerging insights to inform and refine later rounds of data collection. Conducting the study in phases also enabled iterative reflection between data collection rounds, which improved probing, informed subsequent interviews, and enhanced the depth and credibility of the data. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, which were coded, categorised, and interpreted in line with the study's five objectives. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research and Ethics Committee of the Department of Mass Communication, Taraba State University. The principles of informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation were strictly observed throughout the study.



## RESULT

The findings from thematic analysis of the qualitative data are summarised in the table below.

Objective	Emerged Themes	Supporting Quotes
1. To examine the forms of public relations strategies employed	<p>Stakeholder Engagement Meetings and Consultations</p> <p>Community Outreach and Sensitisation Campaigns</p> <p>Workshops and Training Programmes</p> <p>Media-Based Communication</p>	<p>L-PRES 1: “One of the key strategies we consistently use is stakeholder engagement meetings... to explain the objectives of the L-PRES project, update them on implementation progress, and receive feedback.” CL1: “We are usually contacted first by the L-PRES team before any programme... ensuring that information reaches every household.”</p> <p>L-PRES 2: “We also rely heavily on community outreach programmes where our officials visit rural areas to sensitize farmers on the goals of L-PRES.” Mayo-Kama-FGD9: “The project people sometimes come to our villages to sensitize us about livestock care... in central places like community squares.”</p> <p>L-PRES 1: “We organise regular workshops and training programmes... not only to build technical capacity but also to ensure that beneficiaries fully understand the objectives.” Jimlari-FGD5: “We have attended several training sessions... they teach us better ways of taking care of livestock... and help us better understand what the project is trying to achieve.”</p> <p>L-PRES 2: “Radio remains one of the most effective tools... We partner with local radio stations especially TSBS.” Jimlari-FGD9: “The GRM is truly helping us... We have a committee right here in the community... It makes us feel the project is serious and transparent.”</p>
2. To explore how public relations strategies influence stakeholders’ knowledge and understanding	<p>Awareness Creation and Basic Understanding</p> <p>Practical Knowledge Enhancement</p>	<p>L-PRES 1: “Through our communication activities... we have been able to create a basic level of awareness among farmers.” Jimlari-FGD3: “Through meetings, radio messages, and visits... we now know that it is a government and World Bank project meant to support livestock farmers.”</p> <p>L-PRES 2: “When we engage beneficiaries directly through training... their level of understanding increases significantly.” Mayo-</p>



<p>3. To examine how public relations strategies contribute to building trust</p>	<p>Transparency and Consistent Communication</p> <p>Community Involvement and Ownership</p>	<p>Kama-FGD7: “During the training sessions, they explain everything in detail and even show us how to take care of livestock properly.”</p> <p>L-PRES 1: “We ensure that all communication activities... are transparent and consistent... which helps to reduce suspicion.” Jibu-FGD6: “This constant interaction has made us more confident that the project is real.”</p> <p>L-PRES 1: “Involving community members and leaders... significantly improves trust.” Jimlari-FGD4: “It makes us feel that the project belongs to us.”</p>
<p>4. To analyse how public relations strategies facilitate stakeholder mobilization and participation</p>	<p>Generation of Interest and Motivation</p> <p>Promotion of Community Togetherness</p> <p>Linkage with Development Partners</p>	<p>L-PRES 1: “Our public relations activities... stimulate interest among farmers... to participate in project activities.” Jibu-FGD1: “We became interested because we saw that it was meant to help farmers improve their livestock.”</p> <p>CL1: “The project has helped unite farmers... around common interests.” Jimlari-FGD1: “We are brought together as farmers... to discuss common issues.”</p> <p>L-PRES 2: “We serve as a bridge between development partners and rural communities.” Jibu-FGD8: “Through the project, we have been able to meet experts.”</p>
<p>5. To identify the major challenges affecting the use of public relations strategies</p>	<p>Low Literacy Levels Among Beneficiaries</p> <p>Irregular Communication and Limited Reach</p> <p>Traditional channel dominance and message distortion</p>	<p>L-PRES 1: “One of the major challenges we face is the low literacy level among some of the target beneficiaries.” Mayo-Kama-FGD1: “Many people in the community cannot read them properly.”</p> <p>Mayo-Kama-FGD1: “The irregularity of some outreach... due to logistical constraints.” Jimlari-FGD2: “Their visits are not regular.”</p> <p>CL2: “Sometimes, the information... is difficult to be communicated accurately... which creates misunderstanding.” Jimlari-FGD1: “We rely a lot on our leaders... but sometimes the message is not fully clear.”</p>



## DISCUSSION

The study found that the implementation of the L-PRES Project in Taraba State was characterised by the adoption of multiple public relations strategies and communication channels, with a predominance of interpersonal approaches, including stakeholder engagement meetings, community outreach programmes, workshops, and the strategic use of traditional and community leaders. This indicates that project communication is largely mediated through face-to-face and culturally embedded structures, where traditional leaders play a central role in information dissemination and mobilisation. Participant accounts further suggest that while this structure facilitates access to communities, it also contributes to instances of message distortion and limited clarity at the grassroots level. In comparison with existing literature, this finding aligns with Garba et al. (2024) and Emejor (2024), who report that agricultural development communication in Nigeria is predominantly interpersonal and culturally grounded. However, it also reflects concerns raised by Joshi et al. (2022), who caution that reliance on hierarchical gatekeeping structures may marginalise women, youth, and minority groups and reinforce existing power imbalances. The implication is that while traditional communication systems enhance legitimacy and reach, they require complementary inclusive mechanisms to ensure equitable participation and message accuracy.

The study further revealed that the public relations strategies deployed under the L-PRES Project were effective in generating awareness and improving beneficiaries' understanding of project activities. Participants reported increased knowledge of project components through engagement meetings, outreach activities, and community-level interactions, although the depth of understanding varied depending on proximity to information sources and frequency of engagement. This demonstrates that interpersonal communication remains a key driver of knowledge dissemination in low-literacy rural contexts. This finding corroborates Ugboodu et al. (2025) and Ahmed et al. (2024), who established that participatory communication significantly enhances knowledge acquisition in rural development interventions. However, it contrasts with studies in more digitally advanced contexts, such as Akinsola and Santas (2024), which emphasise the growing effectiveness of digital and mass media platforms. The implication is that face-to-face and interpersonal communication remain particularly effective in low-resource and low-literacy rural contexts.

The findings also show that the public relations strategies implemented under the L-PRES Project significantly strengthened trust, transparency, and stakeholder mobilisation within beneficiary communities. Participants indicated that regular engagement activities and interactions with project officials improved their confidence in the project and encouraged active participation in livestock-related initiatives. This suggests that PR functions not only as an informational tool but also as a relational mechanism that fosters legitimacy and sustained engagement. This outcome aligns with Harold and Onyekosor (2024) and Unigwe and Okika (2025), who emphasise that transparent and participatory communication enhances trust in



development interventions. It is also consistent with Kente and Oyinoi (2023) and Sawir et al. (2024), who highlight the role of communication in promoting social cohesion and mobilisation. The implication is that trust-building should be recognised as a central outcome of PR in development contexts, not merely a secondary effect of communication activities.

The study identified several challenges that constrained the effectiveness of PR strategies in the L-PRES Project. These included low literacy levels, irregular outreach, and structural communication gaps, which collectively limited message clarity, reduced consistency of engagement, and weakened the reach of communication efforts, particularly among vulnerable groups. This finding is consistent with Okereke and Emeka (2018), Juliet and Santas (2024), and Omosotomhe and Okeke (2025), who similarly identified structural and contextual barriers as persistent constraints in rural development communication in Nigeria. The implication is that without addressing these structural limitations, even well-designed PR strategies may fail to achieve inclusive participation and sustained behavioural change in rural communities. This challenges the universal applicability of dominant Western PR theories (Grunig et al., 2002; Kent & Taylor, 2002) in Global South contexts and reinforces the need for more culturally grounded and context-sensitive communication models, as advocated by Flowerina and Syaidah (2024) and Ackah and Bimpong (2025).

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that effective public relations strategies are fundamental to the success and sustainability of rural development interventions such as the Livestock Productivity and Resilience Support Project (L-PRES). In Taraba State, the findings suggest that communication practices characterised by dialogue, stakeholder engagement, and feedback mechanisms contributed significantly to awareness creation, trust-building, and stakeholder participation in the project. However, persistent contextual barriers, including low literacy levels, irregular outreach, and over-reliance on traditional gatekeepers, limited the depth of behavioural change and inclusive engagement.

Despite these insights, the study has certain limitations. Its findings are based on a qualitative inquiry conducted in only three purposively selected communities in Taraba State, which restricts the generalisability of the results to other L-PRES implementing states or diverse agro-ecological zones in Nigeria. Future studies should examine PR strategies across multiple L-PRES implementing states and employ mixed-methods designs to provide broader empirical evidence. Nevertheless, this research affirms that, when properly contextualised and culturally adapted, public relations can serve as a powerful catalyst for the effective implementation of development projects. It holds considerable potential to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of agricultural development interventions in Nigeria, particularly livestock production, by fostering greater community ownership, social cohesion, and project sustainability.



### **Implications of the Findings**

This study reinforces the need for culturally grounded and context-specific public relations (PR) frameworks in rural development communication within the Global South, particularly in Nigeria. Government agencies and development partners implementing large-scale agricultural projects in the country should therefore mainstream robust, culturally sensitive PR and communication strategies into project design, rather than treating them as peripheral activities. Theoretically, the findings extend Martin Buber's Dialogic Theory by demonstrating that dialogic principles such as mutuality, empathy, and genuine two-way engagement are not automatically achieved through the use of interpersonal channels alone; rather, they require deliberate inclusion mechanisms that prevent message distortion and ensure that dialogue remains inclusive of marginalised groups. Similarly, the study nuances the Excellence Theory of Public Relations by showing that while symmetrical communication and stakeholder engagement are essential for trust-building and effective relationship management, structural constraints such as low literacy, reliance on gatekeepers, and irregular outreach can limit the attainment of true two-way symmetrical communication in practice.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The research was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for the social sciences. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research and Ethics Committee of the Department of Mass Communication, Taraba State University. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were strictly maintained throughout the study.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

### **Author Contributions**

Ezra Artimas conceived the research idea, collected the data, and conducted the initial analysis. Idi Shadrach designed the methodological approach, supervised the overall conduct of the study, and contributed to data interpretation and manuscript development.

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### **Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure**

The author(s) used Grammarly for language editing, grammar correction, readability improvement, and formatting assistance. The author(s) carefully reviewed, revised, and verified all outputs generated by the tool and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript content.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The datasets on which the conclusions of this study are based are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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