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International Public Relations

The interdependence of man has made the economic concept of comparative advantage necessary in the study of societal relationships. It posits that a nation will benefit more if it concentrates its resources and other productive efforts in areas of human endeavour where it has greater advantages over others. Thus, some countries have been identified for the production of certain goods, services and concepts they contribute to the international markets. The United States of America is reputed for democracy and good governance, high quality industrial goods, warheads, space technology, just like Germany, France and Russia while Japan is acknowledged in the world of automotive and electronics engineering. Nigeria ranks among the highest producers of crude oil in the world. The tiger nations of the Asian world are fast on the heels of advanced and industrialised nations in the production of industrial goods, electronics, clothing and even nuclear weapons. The new-found free-trade, market-oriented economy has come to replace closed markets which tended to stifle growth in the past. The developing nations are taking advantage of cheap labour widely available to make their limited effort in manufacturing and assembling of goods.

Having accepted this economic concept as playing major roles in global trade, it is therefore implied that industries and organisations offering goods and services of international nature, and having markets in other countries which may constitute a

minor public (or major public) to the organisation (or industry) should be interested in these distant market destinations. Without these various publics, the organisations may fail to take advantage of economy of scale by which cost per unit decreases as production quantity increases. The larger the scope of your market, the better the chances of bigger returns and profits.

International Cooperation

Political scientists are conversant with international relations and diplomacy. This is, however, quite different from international public relations. The subject of this section, although related because both concepts seek to improve relations at the international level; international relations, is concerned primarily with relations between governments (e.g. Nigeria and Britain) and international organisations such as the United Nations Organisation (UNO), Commonwealth of Nations, Organisation of African Unity (OAU), again now African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), International Labour Organisation (ILO), European Economic Community (EEC), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and are formed through cooperation among nations. The formation of an inter-governmental organisation is always intended to strengthen relations, ensure mutual benefits and promote economic and social development among all the nations involved. The United Nations Organisation was formed after the Second World War, with a view to ensuring better world understanding among nations of the world, and consequently reduce crisis and needless wars such as now abound in several parts of Africa, Europe and Asia. Today, there are many more crises across the globe than when these bodies were formed. It is better not imagined what would have happened if this effort had not been put in place with nations defying the common and agreed principles of harmonious living between the peoples of

the world. The experiences of UN Peacekeeping Force, NATO in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the ECOMOG in Liberia and later Sierra Leone are good examples of how individual ambitions can ruin nations. The parties physically involved in the conflicts were not the only ones that suffered but international peacekeepers soon became victims.

The European Economic Community (EEC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are regional groupings, established for economic development and regional cooperation. The European Economic Community has a successor organisation in the European Union (EU). This is an attempt by all the European countries to have common parliament, currency and guiding laws, in order to maintain their leadership position in the world. We also have the World Bank (i.e. the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development [IBRD]) and the African Development Bank (ADB) as some of the numerous financial agencies set up to achieve the promotion of better economy in the world.

Governments all over the world have had to adopt dynamic and sometimes aggressive public relations strategies to push certain policies which are of political and economic importance to them. Nigeria, for example, had to employ international public relations consultants to fight a continuous negative image as a drug-pushing and fraudulent nation. The political logjam created by the controversial annulment of the June 12 1993 Presidential Election in Nigeria also gave the country's spokespersons several sleepless nights, as the problem that ensued proved difficult to tackle.

The advent of democracy early in the new century has further boosted the reputation of Nigeria as the endemic corruption, money laundering, drug trafficking and debtor nation which led the country to being a pariah nation during the last military era have been tackled boldly with a high degree of success.

Appointments of candidates from various countries to international positions at the United Nations, Commonwealth,

Organisation of African Unity (OAU), Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Organisation of Africa Trade Union Unity (OATUU) and several others, are done through intensive and well-coordinated public relations strategies backed by necessary diplomatic supports. In getting other countries to support a cause, a lot of efforts go into putting the best foot forward in terms of image projection, reputation building and maintenance of international understanding and empathy for the aims and objectives of the government. No nation is an island unto itself and no stone is left unturned in order to secure required mutual accommodation among the nations of the world through good public relations.

The world's greatest conflicts have their public relations dimensions as demonstrated during the Iraq and United States of America 'war of words and wits' fought first on television screen, radio and on the pages of world newspapers before the actual "Operation Desert Storm" took place in Kuwait. Many times, the communication strategies Iraq employed bordered on propaganda, to make believe that her army was impregnable and that United States was up against great odds. If "Operation Desert Storm" did not take place, perhaps many people would have awarded victory to Iraq, based on the intense media hype. Of course the subsequent sanctions imposed on Iraq and its regular face-off with the weapons inspectors were anticlimax and could generate the worldwide interest and attention of the earlier incidence.

The war of words is still on in several parts of the world and has a lot to do with influencing public opinion. For instance, the return of Bertrand Aristide to Haiti was preceded by heavy verbal exchanges, which attempted to convince the international communities on the reason why USA and the Haitian army had to do what they did. By the time the Haitian military dictators agreed to vacate the country, many wondered if it was this same group that vowed to die defending their government.

Nearer home, former President Babangida had to adopt public relations methods to persuade Nigerians that it was necessary for the country to be involved in the civil war in Liberia, through the ECOMOG. After several billions of naira had been spent on the endless war, Nigerians were yet to critically react to this rather queer and expensive adventure.

History repeats itself as America re-enacted another war in Iraq but unlike "Operation Desert Storm," the "democracy war" became a sore point as it created more problems than it attempted to solve. On the other hand, Charles Taylor is finally being made to answer to war crimes in Liberia and the spill-over effects in neighbouring countries. Of course Iran after its eight years war and threats of developing nuclear power has stuck to its gun that nothing would stop it from continuing its nuclear and uranium enrichment programmes wielding its dominant world oil supplier advantage to moderate the West's response to its nuclear ambition. The world is already feeling its immediate consequences in high oil prices and the palpable fear of other dire consequences.

The Berlin Wall had fallen and Russia, Czechoslovakia and the world protagonists of communism had decided to experiment with democracy and with all paraphernalia of free market and competitive economy. The conservative Russians were displeased at the collapse of this utopian kingdom while democracy is still far from being achieved. The merger of European economy in 1992, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), all portend a more open economic order in the world. Several public relations outfits are involved in all these landmark happenings in terms of ensuring effective communication and to secure public support and understanding.

Public Relations Dimensions

Local politics and government programmes, politics of various governments around the world, have powerful public relations

themes built into them so as to ensure that what they do is properly perceived, rather than distorted and biased treatment given to it by the Western press. Experience has, however, shown that public relations can only be effective when it is serving public interest. Whenever it is intended to serve very narrow aims and anti-people purposes, such programmes simply do not work out. The public relations efforts of Nigeria's military governments that continuously scuttled the democratic aspirations of the people, were not effective. Perhaps these governments failed to recognise the relationship between democracy and public relations. A good government is that which embraces democratic norms and relates much better and correctly with its people. Nigeria's fourth democratic republic promises to be interesting as it would be constantly contrasted with the military government of about three decades. Public relations is universal, since all humans are interdependent and would continue to aspire to seek the unknown. Barnays (1986) advocates that:

... if society continues to function in a democratic way through change and adjustment through accommodation of varying groups and viewpoints of one another, through progress at uneven rates of the constituent elements that make up society, there will be even greater necessity than there is today for a public relations practitioner. He will be helpful in evaluating adjustments and maladjustments between groups that make up the society, will advise his clients, or employees on their attitudes and actions, will help them achieve their goals, and will interpret client or employer organisation to the publics concerned.

International public relations in this study however concerns organisations and industries offering services within and outside their countries of origin, hoping to make economic gains. As the economies of the world grow due to improvement in informatics and a borderless global village emerges, more and more industries and organisations will aspire to conquer the entire world with

their products. With the phenomenal rise of Japan and now China in world economy with several multinational companies, events in Asia with promises of improved goods and better services at cheapest cost to the consumers cannot be overlooked.

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) today has to balance the conflicting interests of the erstwhile industrialised nations with those of the emerging ones symbolised by the Asian nations with clamour of more openness and free-trade reign worldwide. In all these, public relations good practices will help in articulating the best methods of accommodating the interest of individual nations on what is good for humanity in the short and long term.

That an industry manufactures a highly competitive and efficient product may not be sufficient for that product to be accepted in another country if there are scanty information on the products. Many times, consideration other than economics play significant role in the acceptance of products in another country. Whereas Americans, especially the young professionals, would ordinarily prefer the sleek, petrol-efficient Japanese cars, until recently, the pride in every American informs the reduction of sales of Japanese cars in their auto-car market. Yet the United States of America constitutes a single largest automobile market in the world which car manufacturers from other nations are willing to penetrate at all cost due to its large population and high per capital income. On the other hand, the Chinese are still hesitant to buy Japanese goods because of the role of Japan in the Second World War. International public relations therefore is concerned with detailed study of the external market publics with a view to working out programmes of acceptance in these distant, yet crucial markets. At other times, a company may have to set up manufacturing or assembly plants in other countries to assuage their patriotic feelings. This also is public relations, as the method seeks to improve relations between the host country and the company. Perhaps this explains to some extent the building of a Honda car plant in Illinois in the USA. The continuing effort by Nigeria to produce her own local car through the indigenous

scientific breakthrough of Project Research and Development Agency (PRODA), the NIGERDOCK Shipyard building of ferries locally and the breakthrough of the Nigerian Building and Road Research Institute (NBRRI) are potent public relations instruments for foreign participation in the economy. This would improve trade relations, particularly for countries that may find Nigerian products more affordable. The textile, and beverage companies are taking good advantage of this.

There is also the likelihood that products and services of the companies deliberately established in other countries would be accepted, because apart from the possibility of lower production costs, the host country will tend to see the foreign industries as part of its economic growth, absorbing part of its labour force, even if profit made in the country will eventually find its way back to the owner country, in hard currency. This may explain in part, the establishment of Peugeot, Volkswagen, Steyr, Mercedes and Leyland Assembly Plants in Kaduna, Lagos, Bauchi, Enugu and Ibadan (Nigeria), respectively in the 1970s and 1980s.

Culture in International Public Relations

The culture of a people is a necessary consideration in packaging international public relations programmes. Culture is the totality of the beliefs of a given people and these beliefs influence, to some extent, the decision-making process. As a result of several differences in culture, a product accepted in one culture may not be easily accepted in another.

In many countries, hardly would anyone ride a motorcycle without wearing a helmet to protect the head, in case of a crash. The same protective device was introduced to Nigerian users and was backed with a law some years ago. No sooner had the law been passed than motorcyclists in some parts of the country protested that the helmet was at variance with their mode of dressing and religion. Today, motorcycles are in use more than ever before all over the country and the use of helmets are exceptions and not the rule.

In several parts of the world where Islam is the dominant

religion, alcohol is frowned at. Under such circumstances, it would be unwise for distillery companies to openly court the public in such areas. A decree on smoking in public places in Nigeria is also worthy of note. To date public places are yet to be defined and nothing has happened to any defaulter. The culture of disobeying laws and paying little attention to erstwhile cultural values is a cause for concern and public relations strategies can be adopted to solve these problems.

Competition

There is hardly any product or service in the world today that is offered by just one organisation. Be that as it may, international public relations requires that attention is paid to other competitors in the marketplace. Frequently, the question must be asked, what are other companies doing in the market? In this regard, product and service designs must reflect the international posture of such goods and services. In spite of the perceived low level of the quality and quantity of some products from developing countries, they still find a place in the global market and, in many instances, the 'inferior' goods have become superior to those that used to lead. Most countries' economic policies tend to restrict importation of goods that may threaten local productions. Expectedly, good products backed by adequate information for the intended buyers overseas would likely be welcomed, irrespective of the political barriers.

Language Constraints

One problem of international public relations is language. There is not yet one language that cuts across the entire world and there may never be, since several languages are spoken within a country. In international public relations communications, the use of words and symbols become very important especially in areas of advertisement, promotions and product marketing. There are specific standards, prescribed for various goods to be internationally accepted. The goods and services necessarily must

carry standard languages and symbols to make them acceptable. In cases where wrong symbols and languages are used against the preference and norms of the target public, both the product and the manufacturers involved have been roundly rejected thereby causing colossal losses and negative image. There was the case of a young marketing professional sent to Saudi Arabia to market a popular product. He did a great promotional concept through graphics. A thirsty and tired customer reaches for his drink, opens, gulps and smiles. But in Arabic, reading starts from right to left. When his message was read the Arabic way, every body was scared because they reasoned that they were happy before gulping the drink and became ill after consuming the product. Of course this spelt disaster for the product.

The Nigerian Government has recently declared French as its second official language. This is long overdue as the country is completely surrounded by French-speaking countries – Cameroun to the East, Benin Republic to the West, Niger Republic to the North-West and Chad Republic, North East. A good public relations executive would be planning strategically if he can learn basic functional and conversational French. Surely, the skills stand him in a good stead when the sub-regional organisations such as ECOWAS fully implement its economic, monetary and social service projects.

Knowledge of External Markets

The decision by an organisation to enter the highly competitive international market is a crucial one. Whether or not the decision will be successful depends on a careful study and thorough knowledge of the characteristics of the external market. Nigeria as an oil-producing nation markets the product internationally. The country does not have total control over what price it can sell its products to the consumers because there are other nations that also produce oil in large quantities. This is why Nigeria as a member of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) should team up with other oil-producing nations to

protect the selling price of oil, through regulation of the quantity of oil pumped into the world market with appropriate pricing.

This notwithstanding, the crisis in the Persian Gulf and the unstable political situation in many countries of the world constantly affects the price of oil. The happenings in the Gulf in world oil production, should therefore be of special interest to Nigeria and other oil-producing countries. Likewise, the Japanese automakers cannot ignore the vast American auto markets and this explains in part why Japanese cars in the United States carry several free extra options, to give them better chances in the face of stiff competition, subtle official opposition and the nationalism in every American.

Population and Income Distribution

The acceptance of a product or service depends on how useful and available it would be to the target publics. The response of the public to the product has a lot to do with the income and population distribution of the target market. A target market with a high population of low-income earners may not be profitable for auto business while Coca-Cola may do very well in the same demographic situation. This consideration becomes very crucial when the product is intended for an international consumer public which is often difficult to predict.

International public relations is becoming crucial as world communication and technology improve. This interdependence and cooperation among nations have increased understanding and so also the demand for goods and services across borders. As democracy and free market become more acceptable around the world, so will the status of international public relations improve.

Public Relations Bodies

Public relations professional practice has come a long way. The International Public Relations Association (IPRA) celebrated its golden jubilee in March 2005 and the Public Relations Institute of

South Africa (PRISA) will follow suit in June 2007. This will be followed by the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations that would attain the golden age come 2013. Just in June 2005, the Federation of African Public Relations Associations (FAPRA) turned 30. Generally, the strides made by public relations worldwide are very remarkable and is worth noting for the purpose of increased attention towards its growth.

These international public relations bodies would be very critical for professionals as the world affairs continue to impact on everybody instantaneously at an alarming speed. It is based on this that knowledge of what public relations is beyond our immediate environment is necessary. Although the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) and Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GA) membership and influence are rapidly expanding throughout the world, only some basic information on FAPRA would be presented here to complement the detailed information on the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR).

Federation of African Public Relations (FAPRA)

The Federation of African Public Relations Association (FAPRA) was formed on June 10, 1975 at an International Public Relations Association (IPRA) conference held in Nairobi, Kenya. Membership of FAPRA is drawn from all the national public relations associations in the continent.

Nature and Mission of FAPRA

FAPRA is a non-governmental, non-political and non-profit making professional association established to foster unity and interaction amongst public relations practitioners in Africa.

Its primary purpose is to help in creating an enabling professional environment for accurate perception, goodwill and understanding of necessary and effective performance of public relations practice in Africa.

FAPRA' objectives are:

- a. To set standards for the practice of public relations in Africa.
- b. To encourage the teaching of Public Relations in Africa's tertiary institutions.
- c. To encourage the establishment of national and sub-regional public relations associations in Africa with a view of promoting the practice of public relations in the continent.
- d. To serve as a consultant body for the African Union, its various agencies and such other bodies and agencies on matters of public relations.
- e. To organise meetings, workshops and other similar public relations events with a view to providing channels for exchange of ideas and professional expertise among practitioners on public relations in Africa.
- f. To publish Africa public relations journals and FAPRA and non-PR practitioners on public relations, and to provide an alternative forum for the exchange of ideas and professional experience among those engaged in the practice of public relations in Africa.
- g. To co-operate and partner with all other international professional bodies.
- h. To undertake such other activities as may be of general benefit to all members.

This continental body would be expected to grow in status to impact the practice of public relations as it joins hands with other bodies to promote well-articulated, co-ordinated and sustainable public relations programmes in Africa. In the years ahead, FAPRA should be able to get all African countries from the various subregions to participate actively in its activities, thus presenting a common front to solve shared and peculiar problems to Africans.