

TWELVE

PUBLIC RELATIONS IN AID OF GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT (Cases: *Social Mobilisation and Rural Financial Intermediation*)

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Public relations is not only about blue chip conglomerates posting millions of naira in annual profits, it has also been effectively used to uplift the living standards of the rural poor. The primary objective of development communication is to “create an understanding, acceptance of, and willingness to participate in development activities” — paying particular attention to relationships, to what is communicated, to whom the communication is directed and to how the communication is carried out.

In order to put the issues to be discussed in their proper perspectives, attempt would be made to define the three operational terms — public relations, development and development communication.

Public relations is “the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its public”.

Development Communication does not have the wide coinage and usage that public relations has acquired. However, it is the extent that communication is “used to keep people thinking about development, make them recognise and accept the need for development, mobilise and make them predisposed toward development”. Dudley Seers’ “*basic needs approach*” through probing statements is worth noting. In a series of searching questions in the development mix he states:

The question to ask about a country's development are: what has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? If all three of these have declined from high levels, then beyond doubt this has been a period of development for the country concerned. If one or two of these central problems have been growing worse, especially if all three have, it would be strange to call the result "development" even if per capital income doubled.

Even then, some scholars wonder whether the whole idea of development should not be dropped and terminologies such as "transformation", "progress", and "beneficial change" would be more appropriate. However, Mercado's definition of development would be adopted for this exercise. He defined development as:

a process of providing disadvantaged people the opportunities to realise and improve their knowledge, attitude, and skill to utilise, sustain, and improve their productivity of available resources within their environment in order to improve the quality of their life and the society where they belong.

This paper would not go into the semantics of what development communication, non-development communication, development-support communication and development journalism are all about. Suffice it to say that they are inter-related and as far as the use of public relations strategies are concerned, they are basically the same.

Furthermore, Everette Rogers, an apostle of development and communication defined development as a:

widely participatory process of social change and materials advancement (including greater equality, freedom and other valued qualities) for the majority of the people through their gaining greater control over their environment.

Development communication, according to Moemeka (1989) is therefore:

the art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country's (economic growth, modernisation, industrialisation, etc) through ... the identification

and utilisation of appropriate expertise in the development process that will assist in increasing participation of intended beneficiaries at the grassroots level.

Experience has shown that there is a strong correlation between communication and social, economic and political development. The two institutions that this paper would examine have drawn extensively on the basic principles and concepts of public relations, development and development communication. The Directorate for Social Mobilisation (a.k.a MAMSER) and the Community Bank System were conceived to redress the unfortunate exclusion and neglect of the silent but productive rural majority from the socio-political processes in the society. These two organisations achieved various degrees of successes through the use to which each of them put public relations strategies in carrying out their objectives. Incidentally also, both the Directorate for Social Mobilisation and the Community Bank System have a close symbiotic relationship in which the process of social mobilisation contributed in a very significant way to the conceptualisation and establishment of the Community Banks. These two institutions would now be considered in greater details.

Directorate for Social Mobilisation

The Political Bureau in its 1987 report proposed that a Directorate for Social Mobilisation be established to ensure the effective mobilisation of all Nigerians towards socio-political development. Among others, the Directorate for Social Mobilisation was set up to achieve the following specific objectives:

- a. creating a new cultural and productive environment which will promote pride in productive work, self-reliance and self-discipline;
- b. generally awaken the rights and obligations of citizens to the nation;
- c. encouraging the people to take part actively and freely in discussions and decisions affecting their general welfare; and
- d. promoting new sets of attitudes and culture for the attainment of the goals and objectives of the Nigerian state.

In addition to the above, twelve functions were enumerated for the Directorate, five of which include:

- i. establishing an appropriate framework for the positive mobilisation and education of all Nigerians towards economic recovery and development and a new social and political order;
- ii. inculcating in all Nigerians the value and spirit of civil responsibility, commitment to social justice and economic self-reliance through mobilisation and harnessing their energies and natural resources into productive use;
- iii. preparing the framework for creating the basic institutions and norms of democracy at all levels in the society;
- iv. sensitising, inducting and equipping all Nigerians to fight against internal and external domination of resources by a few individuals or groups; and
- v. ensuring that materials which appear in the mass media, both electronic and print are in consonance with the national objectives of self-reliance, social justice, human rights, democratic norms, economic recovery and development.

In order to achieve these objectives and functions, the Directorate was requested to liaise and co-operate with relevant government ministries and agencies at all levels. In fact, its structure was grassroots oriented as there are social mobilisation officers working from the Wards up to the Local, State and Federal Government levels.

The work of the Directorate was therefore communication-based but was regularly misconstrued for the Ministry of Information. Indeed the functionaries at the Ministry saw the activity of the Directorate as a way of usurping its functions as manifested in reduced funding and a shift of public attention to the newer and more innovative body. However, the task of social mobilisation was carried out through the adoption of several public relations strategies. Among these are: the Television, Radio (electronic); newspapers, magazines, periodicals, books (print), face-to-face, oramedia, village square meetings, music and dance (Traditional Communication) and seminars, workshops, roundtable discussions and rallies (Public Fora) were all adopted to prosecute various aspects of the programme.

The Directorate's programmes were basically in the area of mass mobilisation, mass education, political education and the mobilisation of the Armed Forces. From the onset, a multi-media approach was adopted to espouse the mission of the Directorate. The public relations strategies used would be discussed under four sub-heads — electronic, print, traditional and other media.

Public Fora

Just as the idea of social mobilisation emanated from the work of the Political Bureau which organised public debates on virtually all issues of concern to the citizenry, the Directorate began its programmes by relating to the various areas of people's interest. Seminars, workshops and conferences were organised for labour unions, women, academics, student union leaders, journalists (National Association of Political Correspondents), public servants, cooperatives, farmers congress, private sector operators and the Armed Forces. The main objective for creating these fora is to ensure the involvement of all the sectors of the economy in the three tiers of government, cutting across all the various societal strata. The fora served as an effective gauge for public response to the political education programmes that were being espoused as a necessary condition for a successful transition programme. The various seminars, workshops and conferences were well documented and the proposals, problems and recommendations articulated were dutifully collated and forwarded to government for their action.

Rallies were a special feature of the public fora strategies. The Directorate toured the country for seventy-two days stopping in fifty-four cities, towns, villages and hamlets to address rallies. Music, speeches and poetry were used to deliver messages geared towards political and social mobilisation. The immediate effect of peoples participation and identification with the ideals were felt. In towns, the governors began for the first time a programme of meet-the-people where dialogue in local languages and free trade of ideas were encouraged.

Electronic Media

The need to reach every Nigerian in all the nooks and crannies

irrespective of their social standing, necessitated the extensive use of the electronic media. The radio was naturally a choice for a mass mobilisation exercise such as was embarked upon because of its special ability to reach many more people more effectively. Radio Link (a phone-in audience participation programme) was used, backed up with appropriately worded jingles in Ibo, Hausa, Yoruba, Pidgin and English languages to ensure very wide coverage. At the state, local government and ward levels, equivalents of the media used nationally are replicated through community viewing centres for television and listening groups for the radio. Television jingles (MAMSER: The Birth of a New Social Order) were made and used extensively in conjunction with some sponsored play series with mobilisation themes. The themes were usually taken from political awareness, economic self-reliance, War Against Indiscipline, food first campaign and social justice. In order to attract and retain the attention of the people, most programmes for mobilising the people were backed up with catchy slogans and very apt acronyms — Operation Service Alert (Armed Forces Mobilisation), Operation Service With Excellence (OPEX), Operation Food First (Agriculture) and War Against Indiscipline/WAI Brigade among many others. Nigerians will continue to remember for a long time the popular quote of MAMSER..... “*if you are a cleaner, clean well, if you are a teacher, teach well, if you are a Managing Director, manage and direct well...*” Other programmes used include *Morning Ride*, *Tonight at 9* and several documentaries. The nation’s number one citizen, General Babangida, was engaged at strategic periods in making public statements in support of the social mobilisation programmes for emphasis.

Print Media

The Directorate was not too welcomed at the onset as a result of suspicion, misconception and the charge of displacement of the statutory Ministry of Information. The print media was well positioned for articulating the views of the sceptics, marxists, socialists and other people of different political persuasions. The Directorate, recognising the elite as a powerful block, decided to take the message of social mobilisation to the newsroom where the editors engaged the chief mobiliser in extensive dialogue on the goals of the various

programmes. In time, the extreme antagonism turned to passive resistance, and later an enthusiastic and emphatic support was achieved.

Traditional Communication

Oramedia as popularised by the late Professor Frank Ugbuajah is the terminology fondly used to represent traditional communication methods of face-to-face, village square meetings, town crier, community theatre, music and dance. The dialogue sessions held with the critical elite opinion leaders were ultimately intended to get to the people at the grassroots level during the various established contacts put in place by several communities. The sophistication in politics and economy were broken down for easy understanding. This was complemented by local artists who through their works of art and entertainment use current issues to communicate with the people.

The combination of these various methods of public relations and communication achieved the objective of enhancing the political awareness of Nigerians. The determination with which the Nigerian citizenry went through the eight years still-born transition programme is an indication of the success of the social mobilisation exercise. Notwithstanding the in-built imperfections in the system, the positive result of public enlightenment is still palpable in the country today. The awareness created at a point became a source of embarrassment each time the government attempted rescinding an agreed line of action that has been disseminated to the public. However, freedom, of whatever description, is the first casualty of unelected and autocratic governments the world over. The gains of the social mobilisation era would hopefully come to play when democracy returns.

Community Banking System

Wherever the MAMSER train went in the rural areas to “give” the people political education, they always asked: “how can you mobilise a hungry man?” This was a challenge to which MAMSER responded by giving a concrete answer which later manifested as Community Banks in 1990. Communication with benefit goes down with people better.

In Nigeria, the peasants and artisans in the informal sector

continue to constitute the critical productive elements of the economy. Yet they have no access to the much needed credit that would help boost their productivity. All the programmes enunciated by government to cater for their financial needs are hijacked by the elite, the so-called progressive farmers and contract-seeking businessmen. All the specially-packaged agricultural loans, small- and medium-scale business loans and many others ended up with unintended and predatory beneficiaries. As long as the government continues to operate an elite-based system to resolve the problems of the rural poor, so long would they (the rural poor) continue to be marginalised and the yawning gap in the productive sector of the economy would continue.

Community bank system is one of the creative and indigenous ways that the government finally came up with to resolve the problem of the dearth of credit to the rural people. The system itself is unique in the sense that for the first time, government decided to acknowledge the fact that the rural people have the capacity to own and operate a credit-delivery system based on their enduring financial practice known variously as *ajo*, *esusu*, *bam* and *adashi*, in different parts of the country. The experience of the past six years has vindicated the landmark decision of government, the imperfections in the system notwithstanding.

The community bank system has brought banking very close to the people through a broad-based grassroots participation such that several millions of Nigerians are now shareholders of the 1,366 community banks in the country. The deposit mobilisation at about 4 billion naira is an indication that many people have imbibed the savings culture. Also, most of the billions of naira outside the purview of the monetary authorities can now be accounted for as the banks have brought in a lot of money held outside the banking system. The loans and advances at about 1.5 billion naira also justify the creation of the banks as most beneficiaries would not have been attended to by the urbanised and sophisticated conventional banks.

To articulate the ideals and actually establish the unit banks, the National Board for Community Banks (NBCB) was established by Decree 46 of 1992. The Board is a second-tier regulatory body acting on behalf of the apex bank, the Central Bank of Nigeria, to supervise the operations of the Community Banks nationwide. The Boards' audiences are thus very specialised and varied.

The objectives of setting up the Community Banks are principally to:

- a. promote rural development through the provision of finance and banking services;
- b. enhance the rapid development of productive activities especially in the rural areas; and
- c. improve the economic status of small-scale producers both in the rural and urban areas.

Their main functions include to:

- i. accept from persons various types of deposits, including savings and time deposits;
- ii. provide credit facilities to its customers; and
- iii. perform such non-banking functions as may promote grassroots development within the bank's geographical area.

These unit banks are however not expected to engage in sophisticated banking like foreign exchange transactions in order not to lose focus.

The communication strategies used to propagate the idea of community banking is very similar to that of social mobilisation in some aspects. To the extent that the special audiences of the *nouveaux* banking system are the rural poor, a multi-media approach was adopted. However, the National Board for Community Banks being a supervisory agency could only undertake the introductory public relations activities, subsequently, the Board reverted to its monitoring and supervisory duties with only occasional media activities mainly on policy issues.

Corporate Affairs (Public Relations)

Propagating a new idea in a predominantly illiterate society such as ours is an herculean task. Public relations was rightly accorded a pride of place at the conceptualisation, planning and implementation stages of the scheme. The head of the Public Relations Unit, an Assistant Director, was the second employee of the Board. Infact he served as Secretary to the Implementation Committee and covered Board meetings. He served as the Liaison Officer between the Board and

other financial agencies such as the Central Bank of Nigeria, Nigerian Deposit Insurance Corporation, National Economic Reconstruction Fund among others, and reported directly to the Chief Executive. Of course, he served as the information links man in the organisation as he ensures bottom-top, top-bottom and peer information sharing among all categories of staff. Five years have passed and the unit has been upgraded to become a Corporate Affairs Unit with responsibility for corporate communications, industrial relations as well as other fringe duties of protocol and passages.

Multi-Media Approach (Electronic & Print)

Broadly, the Corporate Affairs Unit developed programmes for the various media with specific targets in mind. In the beginning, the Community Bank Implementation Committee (CBIC) used the populist publicity methods to introduce the bank with DFRRIs "a hundred thousand autonomous communities" as its main target. Popular radio and television programmes in various dimensions were used nation-wide. The initial tumultuous welcome and support the scheme received was a direct consequence of the mobilisation through the media and MAMSER's grassroots organs. In the process, a highly technical and complex programme was presented as commonplace to the public. Of course, banking cannot be an all-comers concern, the emphasis on the concessions in terms of initial capital needed to start the bank, ₦250,000.00 (Two Hundred and Fifty Thousand naira only) also complicated the problem. These mistakes later affected the scheme as several rent-seeking financial speculators and adventurers were attracted into the scheme. The newspapers and news magazines were also used to complement the information disseminated through the radio and television. These were usually interviews and feature stories. Jingles, documentaries and film have not been used extensively yet.

Communicating Technical Information

After the first year, the communication strategies that were adopted at the onset were modified. The Corporate Affairs Unit adopted a more cautious and activity-based public relations strategy. As a financial regulator, the Board was no longer involved in any publicity unless it

was in the course of carrying out its mandatory responsibilities. Thus, future communications were planned to target specific audiences and to achieve predetermined objectives. One of the areas needing creative and controlled communication handling is the non-banking functions of the bank. This major difference between the community banks and the conventional banks relate to how the former can help promote the local economic development of the people in their catchment areas. The Anniversary Conferences, Induction Courses, Commissioning Ceremonies, Annual General Meetings and the Community Conferences became the main arena for public information on community banking. Below are some of the board's communication methods:

Publications (Internal and External)

Although community banking is for the poor, the basic practices in the banking sector also apply. This means that the bank personnel as well as their customers must of necessity know what banking is all about and how to relate appropriately. Fortunately, every community entrusts its bank to its knowledgeable sons and daughters to administer.

A range of publications were developed which included the "Community Banks Newsletter, Introduction to Community Banking, Community Banks Induction Papers, Annual Report, Community Banks Directory, Inspection and Appraisal Manuals." among others.

Of all these, the CB Newsletter is the most strategic. This is because the publication tries to reflect the happenings in the sub-sector from the perspective of the policy makers (Government, CBN, and NBCB), the community bankers and members of the public who are active participants in the scheme.

Internally, the Board publishes a News bulletin for its staff only. Also, the Chief Executive's Memo is published occasionally whenever there are issues of common interest needing his personal attention. The publications are meant to complement other forms of information sharing such as meetings and in-house seminars.

Activity-Based Communication

There is a misconception within the rank of public relations practitioners — the extent to which the media can accomplish the

achievement of organisational goals is grossly exaggerated. Many chief executives judge the performance of their public relations departments with the column inches recorded in their favour in national newspapers. The practitioners too are hooked on this belief hence, they attempt to run their various organisations on the pages of newspapers and on the airwaves. This is not correct. As Davis Young puts it "Building a good reputation starts in the boardroom, not with a news release. Your company's good name is based on the development of good policies not reactive damage control of bad ones". The activity-based communication approach is therefore a way of making public relations work for the people through their active participation — it is better to think and work with them rather than assume we know what they want and proceed to impose our preferences on them.

Prominent among the activities the Board uses for public communication are the commissioning ceremonies and community conferences. The commissioning ceremonies are the first public acts of the banks as they mark their formal opening for banking business. Consequently, the opportunity is used to invite representatives of the financial sector, top government functionaries and respected captains of industries to perform the ceremony. Usually, far-reaching policy statements are made in support of the scheme. Most times, the ceremony ends up with a lot of exhortations on the aims, objectives and functions of the scheme and the cultivation of appropriate banking practices among the new converts into the banking world. The community conference on its part is an empowering instrument in the hands of the community to check the excesses of their leaders as far as the banks are concerned. It was developed as a veritable forum for free exchange of ideas on the running of the banks. All cases of default in repaying loans, fraud, mismanagement and outright sabotage of community efforts are brought up for resolution during the meetings. It has worked very well among the community bankers.

Conclusion

Public relations is very dynamic and has been used most creatively in aid of development over the years. Development communication is new but making a lot of impact in consonance with the attention being

placed on development-related issues the world over. Nonetheless, some problems have been identified as militating against the impact of public relations and communication in the two programmes thus evaluated. In designing government programmes, too many objectives, sometimes unrelated and even contradictory are enunciated for implementation by its agencies. Naturally, there is no time limit for the tasks. Also, too many agencies are created with ill-defined and overlapping responsibilities. A corollary of this is the penchant for experimentation. Thus, most programmes, schemes and campaigns are not seen to their logical conclusion. Each regime (mostly the Military) that comes along ensure the complete dismantling of the previous programmes of their predecessors irrespective of their value and use to the people. Lack of continuity, for example, has made the War Against Indiscipline a mere "sloganeering" and "monthly sweeping affair" in contrast to what the Buhari/Idiagbon duo made of it way back in 1983-1985 respectively. These highlights do not help the cause of public relations.

The two organisations sited above achieved their corporate objectives considerably. For each of them and the period considered is their first five years (Directorate for Social Mobilisation 1988-1993 and National Board for Community Banks 1991-1995). This is because social mobilisation is now a task for the National Orientation Agency (NOA). The National Board for Community Banks has not changed in terms of its structure but the current happenings in the banking sector and the general distress can only signify the modification of the existing public relations strategies.

Development communication promises to be an important factor in the Nigeria of the future. The economic depression will even make improved communication network more imperative. The linkage with the modern information network of computers, internet, and other components of the Information Superhighway would be a positive development for the country's future economic and political growth. Regrettably, Nigeria is yet to fully hook on to the superhighway which means the practice of public relations cannot be fully realised as the basic ingredients needed for its modernisation are still lacking. Practitioners functioning in-house or as consultants should strive to adopt modern public relations practices in terms of their methods of

communication and the rapid adoption of modern tools. Of course, there will always be need for a conscious effort to choose those channels, tools and strategies that will ensure the attainment of the corporate objectives and goals of the concerned organisations.

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