

Public Relations' Roles and the Local Government Administration in Delta State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how public relations affects the management of selected local government councils in Delta State. Using a survey, we collected data with a structured questionnaire from seventy-five respondents in three councils. These respondents were middle-level and senior staff, information officers, and staff union executives (NULGE). Respondents indicated that councils face problems that public relations could address, but the authorities do not fully recognize its value. The study recommends, among others, that council authorities strengthen the public relations or information unit for better performance.

Keywords: *Public Relations, Administration, Local Government Council.*

INTRODUCTION

The basis for all human interactions is a complex admixture of self-interest, advancement, or self-perpetuation. Virtually every person or group of persons has interests to protect, ambitions to achieve, and hopes to aspire to. Since no two individuals are alike, there are counter interests, demands, and aspirations, which compel the need to solicit, win, and retain attention, support, interest, and loyalty. Every sector of a nation's life is involved in one form of horse-trading or another to advance individual(s), groups, or organizations' interests, be it in commercial business, political campaigns, social welfare programmes, or educational activities. Thus, Jubril (2015) notes that deliberate, planned, and perhaps sustained efforts are made to establish and maintain mutual understanding with prospective clients.

Public relations serves all types of organizations. Governmental organizations (including local governments), nonprofit organizations, and corporations have embraced public relations and set it to work, recognizing it as a means of increasing organizational effectiveness in a complex and changing environment. The effect of public relations could be felt in all spheres of human endeavour, as it involves efforts to convince, win, and retain support for ideas, products, and services. Individuals, family members, commercial and public outfits, and non-governmental organizations

(NGOs) apply PR in one way or another to ensure their survival and perpetuity. The extent to which public relations is beneficial to an individual or organization is relative to factors: the nature of business undertaken by the organization, its mission and mandate, and the level of its application of PR. Public relations provides a veritable opportunity for preplanning ways and means of achieving set goals. It helps organizations identify all the various publics they deal with and demands definite plans on how to interact with them (Johnston and Zawawi, 2004; Madike, 2015).

To operate effectively within these organizations, public relations practitioners must be thoroughly aware of the process of communication, the role of public relations in organizational decision making, the four-step public relations process, and the primary publics of public relations. Practitioners must also recognize the problems and publics that are specific to public relations in each organizational type.

Local government councils in Nigeria have come under intense pressure from the people for failure to deliver democracy dividends and to bring development to the people as expected. This seemingly loss of confidence has led many to call for the scrapping of the LGCs, and this has affected the day-to-day administration of the third tier of government. Experts have observed that local government councils' failure to utilize public relations is responsible for the persistent negative image associated with this tier of government, which is supposed to bring development to the grassroots.

It is against this backdrop that this study was designed. This study, therefore, seeks to evaluate the public relations role in the management of the selected local government councils in Delta State.

Research Objectives

The study was conducted to:

- i. Find out the problems militating against effective management of the local government councils in Delta State.
- ii. Determine the extent to which these problems have affected the quality of governance in the local government councils in Delta State.
- iii. Ascertain the role of public relations in the day-to-day management of the selected local government councils in Delta State.
- iv. Find out the extent to which public relations is utilized in the management of the selected local government councils in Delta State.

Research Questions

This study sought to find answers to the following questions.

- i. What are the problems militating against effective management of local government councils in Delta State?

- ii. How have these problems affected the quality of governance in the local government councils in Delta State?
- iii. What role does public relations play in the day-to-day management of the local government councils in Delta State?
- iv. To what extent do the local government authorities utilise public relations in the management of the Local Government Councils in Delta State?

The study is evaluating the role of public relations in the management of local government councils in Delta State. It also specifically determines the public relations challenges in local government councils and the extent to which public relations problems are being solved.

In doing this, three out of the twenty-five local Government Councils in Delta State were selected for the study: Oshimili South, Sapele, and Isoko North. These LGCs are located in each of the three senatorial districts of the State, namely: North, Central, and South.

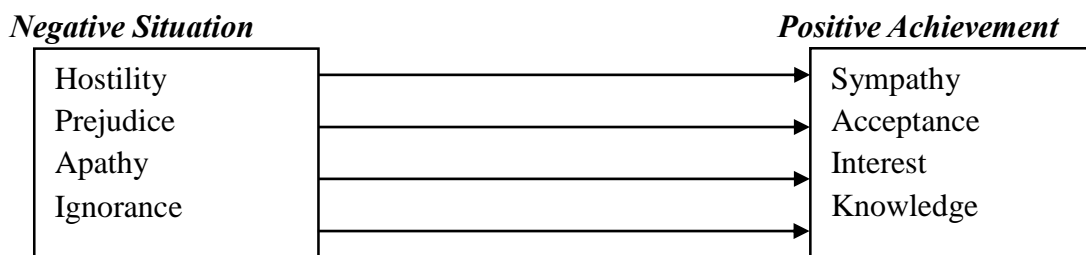
Public Relations is very fundamental to the survival of modern organizations. Its impact could be felt in government establishments, including local government councils in Delta State.

In view of the above, research conducted in this area will be considered worthwhile. To extent, local government authorities have come to realize that public relations is a necessary tool for the management of the councils.

Therefore, the findings and recommendations provide a sustainable framework for the authorities to manage their councils effectively. It will also add to the existing literature within the public relations sphere.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is hinged on the Public Relations transfer process model and the decision-making (or decision theory) approach. The transfer process model is represented below:



Source: Frank Jefkins, *Public Relations Techniques*, Oxford: Professional Publishing, Ltd, (1988), p.9.

According to Jefkins (1988), when the negative situation is converted into positive achievement through knowledge, the result is the primary objective of public relations, understanding. Jefkins expects practitioners to use public relations tools to achieve sympathy where there is hostility, acceptance where there is prejudice, develop interest where there is apathy, and communicate to achieve knowledge where there is ignorance. The organization as a system emphasizes the need for good information and channels of communication for effective decision-making. Here, the focus of attention is on managerial decision-making and how organizations process and use information in making decisions. Successful management lies in responding to internal and external changes. This involves objectives, problems, and the implementation of solutions. The organization is seen as an information-processing network with numerous decision points.

Barnard, as cited by Mullins (1996), stresses the need for cooperative action in organizations. He believed that people's ability to communicate, and their commitment and contribution to the achievement of a common purpose, were necessary for the existence of a cooperative system. These ideas were developed further by Simon (2001), who sees management as meaning decision-making, and his concern is with how decisions are made and how decision-making can be improved through effective public relations.

Literature Review

Public Relations in Government

Governmental activity at every level has a tremendous daily impact, positive and negative, on every organization. Public affairs units help organizations anticipate or respond to issues affecting their activities or environment, lobby public officials, build grassroots lobbying campaigns, and help shape public policy. On the other side, the government also has a public relations function. Governmental Public Relations plays a crucial role in keeping the public informed about issues, problems, and actions at all levels of government. Governmental public information officers, according to Johnston and Zawawi (2004), seek citizens' approval of government programmes, help explain what citizens want from the government, strive to make government responsive to citizens' wishes, and attempt to understand and affect public opinion.

Public affairs is related to issues management because, through its relationship-building processes, it helps organizations anticipate or respond to issues affecting their activities. Lattimore et al. (2004) aver that public affairs efforts include seeking to shape public opinion and legislation, developing effective responses to matters of public concern, and helping the organization adapt to public expectations. Specifically, public affairs may be involved in monitoring public policy, providing

political education for employees or other constituents, maintaining liaisons with various governmental units, and encouraging political participation. To be successful, all organizations, businesses, nonprofits, and governments must build relationships and actively collaborate with those government contacts to influence public policies.

Function of Governmental Public Relations

Governmental public information officers, like any other public relations practitioners, seek to achieve mutual understanding between their agencies and publics by following a strategic public relations process. They must gauge public opinion, plan and organize for public relations effectiveness, and construct messages for the entire process. Like all organizational boundary spanners, Public Information Officers jointly serve two masters, their publics and their employers. On the one hand, they provide the public with complete, candid, continuous reporting of government information and accessible channels for citizens' input. On the other hand, they strive to gain support for the policies of the government in power and suppress anything that undermines the hegemony of the government. Cutlip (2004, p.12) maintains that,

The vast government information machine has as its primary purpose the advancement of the government's policies and personnel... the major objective is to gain support for the incumbent administration's policies and maintain its leaders in power.

However, Public Information Officers serve neither master very well, as evidenced by millions of Americans viewing their government as distant and unresponsive, if not hostile (Final Report of the 32nd American Assembly, Columbia University). Both the public and the politicians might be better served if PIOs could provide more active input for government decisions.

In his seminal reports titled, *Government and Mass Communication* Zachariah cited in Lattimore et al (2004, p.303) held that:

Government information can play a vital role in the cause of good administration by exploring the impact of new social forces, discovering strains and tensions before they become acute, and encouraging a positive sense of unity and national direction.

Conclusively, the most basic functions of governmental public relations are to help define and achieve government programme goals, enhance the government's responsiveness and service, and provide the public with sufficient information to permit self-government. The goal of PIOs is to promote cooperation and confidence between citizens and their government. This, in turn, requires governmental accessibility, accountability, consistency, and integrity.

Concept of Local Government

Local government refers to a government that operates at the most basic level, governing specific geographical areas like cities, districts, or towns, and is responsible for addressing local needs and providing public services. It acts as a tier of administration within a larger State or National system, deriving its powers and functions from higher levels of government but often with a degree of autonomy in managing local affairs, including infrastructure, public safety, and community development (Ike, 2021; Ugwu & Okibe, 2022; Adeyemi, 2023; Zango & Mohammed, 2025). In Nigeria, it is regarded as the third tier of government with little or no degree of financial autonomy, as they are still tied to the apron strings of State governments, despite judicial pronouncements in their favour.

The notion of local government is very important in a democratic society, which ensures the meaningful participation of citizens and mobilization of resources for the enhancement of the lives of the local people. As defined in the official handbook on the reformed system of local government introduced in 1976, local government is governance at the local, grassroots level, exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within a defined area. According to the Handbook, powers should be given to the councils:

Substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff and institutional and functional powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and to determine and implement projects to complement the activities of the State and Federal Governments in their areas to ensure-through devolution of functions to these councils and through the active participation of the people and their traditional institutions-that local initiatives and response to local needs and conditions are maximized (Adenuga, 1991).

Folarin (1998, p.7) identified two major existing models of local government. They are:

Local Administration: which derives its existence, powers, and sustenance from a strong (National or State) centre where policies are determined. The local units act as agents in the administration and implementation of these policies. As part of the arrangement, the central government makes funds available to the local units to enable them to provide the services for which they have been created. In practice, such units have minimal powers (if any) to generate or collect revenue.

Local Government Proper: which has real political authority delegated to it from the centre in a decentralized system of governance. Such local units usually operate as local councils consisting of persons who may be elected in a democratic process by

the local inhabitants, or appointed by the government to run the affairs of the local government. Local governments are given powers to raise a substantial part of their revenue, mainly through the imposition of local taxes. Nonetheless, a substantial part of their operating revenue is provided by the central government through statutory allocation. The local governments are also empowered to enact byelaws, which must defer to the Federal laws and State edicts.

It is clear from the foregoing that our present local government derives from this second model, while most of the local units we had before 1976 (including those that were used to prop up the Indirect Rule System during the colonial period) were various amalgams of the two models. Each of the two models has implications for public relations and decision-making.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The survey method was adopted for this study. Its main instrument for data collection is the questionnaire. Survey method was considered most appropriate approach to gather data for this study because of experts submission that it enhances the study of both small and large number of people that derive from the entire population and share basic characteristics of the elements that make up that population (Black and Champion, 1976; Osuala, 1991; Asika, 2004 and Nwodu, 2006).

The questionnaire elicited demographic variables of respondents and other relevant information about the role of public relations in the management of selected local government councils in Delta State. Seventy-five respondents form the sample size for the study, that is, twenty-five each from the three local government councils. The subjects are middle-level and senior staff, information officers, and executives of the staff unions (NULGE). They were purposively selected. Copies of the questionnaire were administered to those who made themselves available. Responses from the questionnaire were collated, tabulated, and analyzed using simple percentages.

RESULTS

The results are presented based on the analysis of the data generated from the 75 copies of the questionnaire distributed and returned. The high rate of return (100 percent) was due largely to the face-to-face method of instrument administration adopted by the researcher and his research assistants over a period of three weeks.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	Percentage
Sex	
Male	72
Female	28
Age	
25-40	68
41-60	32
Education	
Secondary	52
Tertiary	48
	N = 75

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of respondents as related to their sex, age, and education. The distribution of sex showed that 72 percent were male, while 28 percent were female. The distribution of age groupings showed that 68 percent were between 25 and 40 years, while 32 percent were between 41 and 60 years. Respondents' level of education indicated that 52 percent were secondary school leavers, while 48 percent had tertiary education qualifications.

Table 2: Problems Militating Against Effective Management of Local Government Councils

Problems	Percentage
Inability to pay salaries and other allowances due to staff	29.3
Delayed promotion of staff	26.7
Non-implementation / slow pace of development projects	26.7
Politicization of staff recruitment	17.3
	N = 75

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Table 2 shows that the inability to pay salaries and other allowances due to staff promptly (29.3%), delayed promotion of staff (26.7%), non-implementation/slow pace of development projects (26.7%), and politicization of staff recruitment (17.3%) are the major problems militating against effective management of the local government councils.

Table 3: The extent the Problems have affected the Quality of Governance

Response	Percentage
High level of indiscipline among staff	40
Frequent declaration of industrial disputes	33.3
Loss of confidence in the local government council authorities among the people of the LGA	26.7
	N = 75

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Table 3 indicates that a high level of indiscipline among staff (40%), frequent declaration of industrial disputes (33.3%), and loss of confidence in local government council authorities by the people of the local government area (26.7%) are the extent to which the problems have affected the quality of governance in the local government councils.

Table 4: Public Relations Role in the Management of Local Government Councils

Response	Percentage
Creates understanding between authorities and their publics	32
Makes the realization of management objectives possible	22.7
Creates a conducive atmosphere for policy planning and implementation	26.7
Eliminates doubts and strife	18.6
	N = 75

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Table 4 reveals respondents' opinions on the role of public relations in day-to-day management of local government councils: creates understanding between authorities and their publics (32%), makes the realization of management objectives possible (22.7%), creates a conducive atmosphere for policy planning and implementation (26.7%), and eliminates doubts and strife (18.6%).

Table 5: Extent of utilization of PR in the management of LGCs' Affairs

Extent of PR utilization	Percentage
Very often	16
Often	12
Rarely	20
Not at all	52
	N = 75

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Table 5 shows the extent to which the authorities utilize public relations in the management of local government council affairs: very often (16%), often (12%), rarely (20%), and not at all (52%).

Summary of Findings

The following are the major findings:

- The specific problems that militate against effective management of local government councils include the inability to pay salaries and other allowances to staff, delayed promotion of staff, non-implementation/slow pace of development projects, and politicization of staff recruitment.
- These problems have resulted in a high level of indiscipline among staff, frequent declaration of industrial disputes by the workers of the councils, and loss of confidence in the local government council authorities by the people of the local government area.
- Public relations role in the management of local government councils includes creating and promoting understanding between local council authorities and their publics, making the realization of management objectives possible; creating a conducive atmosphere for policy planning and implementation; and eliminating doubts and strife.
- Local government council authorities do not make use of public relations extensively in the management of the councils' affairs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has shown that public relations plays a major role in the management of local government councils, especially in this era when the third tier of government is faced with a myriad of problems that tend to impact negatively on the councils. If properly applied, public relations can contribute a role in the image of local government councils and good governance at the grassroots level. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are pertinent.

- The Chairmen of the local government councils should endeavour to utilize public relations techniques/strategies more effectively to reduce the tensions often generated in the local government councils because of the failure of the authorities to meet with one obligation or the other that has a direct bearing on the staff and the larger society.
- The authorities of the councils should strengthen the public relations/information unit to enable it to perform optimally. This will benefit the councils and the entire areas the councils are meant to serve.

- The council authorities should strive to fulfill their obligations to the staff and the larger public. If, for any reason, they find it difficult to meet up, the true position of things should be communicated without delay through the public relations/information office to dispel rumour.
- As the chief public relations officers of the councils, the chairmen should offer selfless service to the electorate and pursue policies that will bring about development for a greater number of the citizenry.

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