



PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A TOOL FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF FARMER-HERDER RELATIONS IN ELELU VILLAGE, EDO STATE, NIGERIA

Unigwe, Rosemary Ifeyinwa, Ph.D & Okika Nnaemeka

Ibinedion University, Okada, Edo State
ifeyinwa.rosemary@iuokada.edu.ng, okikia.nnaemeka@iuokada.edu.ng

Abstract

This study explores the effectiveness of public relations (PR) strategies in mitigating community conflicts and promoting sustainable rural development, using the recurring farmer-herder clashes in Elelu Village, located in the Erah community of Owan East Local Government Area, Edo State, Nigeria, as a case study. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, the research examines how PR through dialogue facilitation, information management, stakeholder engagement, and media outreach has been deployed to address tensions between indigenous farmers and migratory herders. The findings reveal that proactive public relations initiatives, when locally grounded and culturally sensitive, play a vital role in conflict de-escalation, trust building, and fostering development-oriented cooperation. However, limitations such as government inaction, misinformation, and inadequate rural communication infrastructure hinder the full potential of PR efforts. The study concludes by recommending an integrated communication strategy involving traditional leaders, civil society, and state actors to institutionalize peacebuilding processes in conflict-prone rural areas. This research contributes to the growing discourse on strategic communication as a development tool in sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: Public relations; Farmer-herder conflict; Community dialogue; Rural development

Introduction

In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, rural development is often disrupted by localized conflicts, particularly those rooted in competition over land, water, and livelihood resources (Adisa, 2012; Benjaminsen et al., 2009). One of the most persistent and devastating of such conflicts is the recurring clash between farmers and herders—a conflict that has evolved from isolated incidents into a national crisis with regional implications (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; International Crisis Group [ICG], 2018). In the rural communities of Edo State, such as Elelu Village in the Erah community of Owan East LGA, these tensions have led to loss of lives, destruction of farmland, and displacement of families (Olaniyan, Francis, & Okeke-Uzodike, 2015). The complexity of these conflicts calls for more than just security interventions; it demands innovative, participatory, and communication-centered solutions (Asemah, 2011; Servaes, 2008).

Public relations, traditionally associated with corporate image building, is increasingly being recognized as a valuable tool in peacebuilding and rural development. As a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics, PR has the potential to bridge divides, promote understanding, and facilitate collaboration in conflict-prone communities (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Heath & Coombs, 2006). This



study investigates the role of public relations in managing farmer-herder conflicts in Elelu Village, with the dual aim of conflict resolution and sustainable development. It evaluates how PR practices such as community dialogue, conflict-sensitive communication, and stakeholder engagement are utilized by local leaders, non-governmental organizations, and government agencies to mitigate violence and rebuild trust.

The research is grounded in the two-way symmetrical model of public relations, which emphasizes mutual understanding and dialogue (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), and the peace journalism framework, which promotes responsible media reporting during conflict (Galtung, 1998). By examining real-life communication interventions and their impact on the ground, this study seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations for integrating public relations into rural development and conflict management strategies in Nigeria and beyond.

The Significance of Communication in Addressing Grassroots Conflict

In conflict-prone rural areas, the role of communication is paramount. Effective communication not only facilitates mutual understanding and reduces misinformation, but also serves as a tool for negotiation, trust-building, and post-conflict reconciliation. Public relations (PR), when applied strategically, offers a framework for conflict-sensitive communication that engages stakeholders in meaningful dialogue and collaborative problem-solving.

Unlike conventional top-down interventions, PR-driven approaches are participatory and adaptive, emphasizing empathy, feedback loops, and respect for local knowledge systems. They enable communities to become co-creators of peace rather than passive recipients of external directives. Through tools such as community forums, radio broadcasts, stakeholder meetings, and traditional conflict resolution platforms, public relations helps bridge the divide between opposing groups and supports a shared vision for sustainable rural development.

Overview of Elelu Village and the Nature of its Farmer-Herder Tension

Elelu Village, located within the Erah community of Owan East Local Government Area in Edo State, represents a microcosm of the broader farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria. The village is predominantly agrarian, with farming serving as the primary livelihood for most residents. In recent years, however, the village has witnessed growing tensions between local farmers and migrating herders who move into the area during the dry season in search of pasture for their livestock.

Disputes over farmland destruction, water access, and cultural misunderstandings have led to periodic clashes, property damage, and displacement. In some instances, these tensions have escalated into violence, disrupting communal harmony and threatening the livelihoods of both parties. Despite the efforts of local leaders and security operatives, a sustainable and inclusive solution remains elusive. Against this backdrop, public relations offers an untapped potential for fostering dialogue, reconciliation, and co-existence.

Purpose of the Study



This study seeks to examine the role of public relations in managing community conflict and advancing rural development in Elelu Village. Specifically, it investigates how public relations strategies have been utilized to address the recurring tensions between farmers and herders, and evaluates the effectiveness of such approaches in promoting peace, collaboration, and sustainable development in the community.

By focusing on a grassroots context often overlooked in national discourse, the study aims to highlight the power of communication in transforming conflict narratives and empowering local actors to take ownership of peacebuilding processes.

Research Questions

1. What public relations strategies are employed in the community of Elelu Village to address farmer-herder conflict?
2. How effective are these strategies in reducing tension and fostering mutual understanding between farmers and herders?
3. What is the relationship between public relations intervention and sustainable rural development in the context of Elelu Village?

Literature Review

1. The Concept and Scope of Public Relations

Public relations (PR) have evolved from being merely a tool for corporate image management to a strategic function that facilitates mutual understanding between organizations and their publics. According to Grunig and Hunt (1984), PR is a “management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends.” In contemporary development contexts, PR is increasingly recognized as a participatory communication tool that fosters social cohesion, mobilizes stakeholders, and resolves conflict through dialogue, negotiation, and advocacy.

Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006) emphasized that public relations, particularly when practiced through the two-way symmetrical model, serves not only to inform but also to listen and adapt communication efforts based on stakeholder feedback. This dialogic approach is especially critical in fragile or conflict-prone settings, where the legitimacy of intervention hinges on trust, empathy, and inclusiveness.

2. Public Relations and Conflict Management

Conflict management in the 21st century increasingly relies on communication strategies that promote understanding and de-escalate tensions. Public relations, particularly in its strategic form, has emerged as a viable mechanism for conflict transformation. Heath and Coombs (2006) argue



that public relations can serve as a peacebuilding tool by providing platforms for dialogue, shaping conflict narratives, and helping communities understand opposing viewpoints.

In rural settings, where traditional authorities and communal identity play key roles, PR methods must be adapted to reflect local norms and values. Community-based communication initiatives—such as town hall meetings, radio dialogues, and mediated negotiation forums—have proven successful in easing tension and promoting reconciliation (Asemah, 2011). These practices allow conflicting parties to engage in dialogue, express grievances, and collectively search for solutions, thereby preventing the escalation of disputes into violence.

3. Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Nigeria

The conflict between farmers and herders in Nigeria is one of the most serious and intractable rural crises in the country's recent history. Rooted in climate change, population growth, desertification, and the collapse of traditional grazing routes, this conflict has escalated due to the absence of regulatory frameworks, weak governance, and ethnoreligious tension (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014). Farmers accuse herders of destroying their crops and farmlands, while herders claim harassment and displacement by host communities.

Several studies (e.g., Olaniyan, Francis, & Okeke-Uzodike, 2015; Ibrahim, 2017) highlight the economic, political, and social dimensions of these clashes, noting that they are no longer just about livelihood survival, but have taken on political and security overtones. Responses from the Nigerian state have included security deployments and the proposal of Ruga settlements and grazing reserves, but these have often been met with resistance or insufficient implementation.

However, scholars argue that community-driven, communication-based conflict resolution strategies remain underutilized. This study contributes to this gap by examining how PR strategies can serve as peace tools in such volatile rural environments.

4. Public Relations and Rural Development

Sustainable rural development involves more than just infrastructural growth—it requires social harmony, community participation, and inclusive dialogue. PR plays a pivotal role in shaping attitudes, mobilizing resources, and driving stakeholder collaboration in development efforts. According to Servaes (2008), communication for development must be participatory, culturally appropriate, and people-centered.

In Nigeria, rural development has often been hindered by poor communication between government and local communities. Public relations, when employed effectively, can bridge this gap by ensuring that development messages are clearly conveyed, expectations are managed, and feedback mechanisms are instituted. Scholars such as Nwosu (2003) and Ojebuyi (2014) contend that PR professionals have the potential to act as development communicators building bridges between communities, facilitating peace, and laying the foundation for long-term progress.



Thus, in conflict-prone areas like Elelu Village, PR is not just a mediator for peace but also a catalyst for development creating the enabling environment for agricultural productivity, education, infrastructure, and youth empowerment to thrive.

5. Summary of Gaps in Existing Literature

While numerous studies have documented the farmer-herder conflict and its socio-political implications, few have focused on the role of communication especially public relations—in conflict resolution and rural development. Even fewer have undertaken localized case studies in communities like Elelu Village where grassroots PR efforts may be the most impactful. This study seeks to bridge that gap by demonstrating how strategic communication can play a vital role in mitigating conflict and fostering peace and development at the community level.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical lenses that highlight the strategic role of communication in conflict resolution and rural development: the **Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Theory**, the **Peace Journalism Framework**, and **Development Communication Theory**. Together, these frameworks provide a robust analytical foundation for understanding how public relations practices can be applied in mitigating communal conflict and promoting sustainable development in rural settings like Elelu Village.

1. Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Theory (Grunig & Hunt, 1984)

The Two-Way Symmetrical Model, developed by James Grunig and Todd Hunt, is one of the four models of public relations and is widely considered the most ethical and effective form of communication in democratic and conflict-sensitive contexts. This model emphasizes **dialogue**, **mutual understanding**, and **reciprocal feedback** between parties, rather than one-way persuasion or manipulation. It prioritizes negotiation, compromise, and relationship-building to resolve conflicts and create shared value.

In the context of the farmer-herder conflict in Elelu Village, this model is particularly relevant. Effective public relations practices in such a volatile environment require active listening to the concerns of both farmers and herders, fostering communication channels that allow for grievance expression, and creating platforms for mutual agreement. By encouraging inclusive dialogue and participatory decision-making, the two-way symmetrical approach promotes conflict resolution grounded in respect, empathy, and cooperation—key ingredients for lasting peace and development.

2. Peace Journalism Framework (Galtung, 1998)

Introduced by Johan Galtung, the Peace Journalism Framework challenges traditional media narratives that tend to sensationalize conflict and exacerbate divisions. Peace journalism advocates



conflict-sensitive reporting, constructive storytelling, and a deliberate focus on peace initiatives, reconciliation efforts, and the human cost of violence. It aims to de-escalate tension by reframing narratives to highlight common ground, non-violent solutions, and the underlying causes of conflict.

In rural communities like Elelu, where local media, town criers, religious sermons, and informal communication channels are influential, this framework supports the use of public relations strategies that do not inflame conflict but rather humanize all stakeholders. Community-based public relations efforts aligned with peace journalism principles can foster tolerance, promote shared identity, and counter harmful stereotypes between farmers and herders.

Moreover, peace journalism emphasizes the role of local communicators—such as traditional rulers, youth leaders, and religious figures—as peace ambassadors. When empowered through public relations training, these actors can become central in spreading messages of unity and sustainable coexistence.

3. Development Communication Theory

Development Communication Theory regards communication not merely as a channel for information delivery, but as a participatory process that empowers communities, promotes dialogue, and drives social change. It gained prominence in the 1960s and has since evolved to emphasize community participation, indigenous knowledge systems, and cultural relevance.

This theory aligns with public relations practices that engage rural populations in meaningful dialogue about their development needs, choices, and conflict resolution mechanisms. In the case of Elelu Village, development communication implies that resolving farmer-herder conflicts is not just about maintaining peace, but also about creating conditions for social and economic progress such as improved land-use policies, resource-sharing agreements, and joint livelihood projects.

By framing PR as a development communication tool, this theory supports the notion that conflict resolution is foundational to sustainable rural development. Public relations, when practiced as participatory development communication, becomes a strategic bridge between peacebuilding and long-term community empowerment.

Synthesis

These three theories intersect to provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the dual role of public relations in Elelu Village: as both a conflict resolution mechanism and a development enabler. While the Two-Way Symmetrical Model emphasizes stakeholder balance and mutual respect, the Peace Journalism Framework calls for ethical storytelling and the amplification of peace narratives. Development Communication Theory completes the framework by placing communication at the center of social transformation and community self-determination.



Together, these theoretical tools underscore the need for a holistic, ethical, and locally grounded communication strategy that addresses not only the symptoms but also the root causes of rural conflict, paving the way for peace and prosperity.

Methodology

This section outlines the research design, population, sampling techniques, data collection methods, and analytical approaches used to investigate the effectiveness of public relations in mitigating farmer-herder conflict and promoting sustainable rural development in Elelu Village, Edo State, Nigeria.

1. Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative case study design** with some quantitative elements to allow for a rich, contextual understanding of communication practices within the community. The case study approach is appropriate because it enables an in-depth investigation of real-life issues within a specific locality (Yin, 2014). The use of qualitative methods such as interviews, focus group discussions, and observation helps capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and communication dynamics of the stakeholders involved in the conflict.

The inclusion of limited quantitative tools (e.g., questionnaires with closed-ended questions) complements the qualitative findings and provides supporting statistical insights into the extent and perceived effectiveness of PR strategies in the community.

2. Study Area: Elelu Village

Elelu Village is situated in the Erah community of Owan East Local Government Area, Edo State, Nigeria. The village is predominantly agrarian, with residents relying on farming for livelihood. In recent years, the area has experienced recurrent clashes between local farmers and nomadic herders, resulting in property damage, strained inter-group relations, and disruptions in agricultural productivity. The setting presents a fertile ground for exploring communication-based conflict resolution practices.

3. Population and Sampling

The target population for this study includes:

- Local farmers
- Nomadic herders residing or grazing in the area



- Traditional and religious leaders
- Local government officials
- Representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) and conflict mediators
- Public relations practitioners involved in grassroots communication

A **purposive sampling technique** was employed to select participants who have direct experience or involvement in the conflict and/or its resolution. The sample size consisted of approximately:

- **15 farmers**
- **10 herders**
- **5 community leaders (including traditional and religious leaders)**
- **3 local government officials**
- **2 representatives from NGOs or CSOs**
- **2 PR officers or media workers involved in peace communication**

This diverse sampling ensured a holistic view of the issue from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

4. Data Collection Methods

a. In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants such as traditional leaders, government officials, and public relations officers. This method provided insight into formal and informal communication practices used to address the conflict.

b. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Separate FGDs were held with farmers and herders to explore their perceptions, experiences, and attitudes toward PR efforts in resolving disputes. Each session consisted of 6–8 participants and lasted approximately 60–90 minutes.

c. Questionnaires

Structured questionnaires with both open- and closed-ended questions were administered to community members to collect data on the visibility, reach, and impact of specific PR campaigns or dialogue initiatives.

d. Observation



The researcher attended two community meetings and one peace dialogue session to observe how communication strategies were implemented in real-time and how various actors interacted.

e. Documentary Review

Official documents, conflict mediation records, public announcements, and media materials related to peacebuilding in the village were reviewed to provide secondary data and contextual support for primary findings.

5. Data Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using **thematic analysis** to identify patterns, recurring themes, and significant insights. Coding was done manually and with the aid of NVivo software.

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics such as frequency tables, percentages, and bar charts to complement and validate qualitative findings.

6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant academic board. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and given the option to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing. All data were anonymized, and sensitive information was handled with discretion to protect the identities and safety of participants in a conflict-prone context.

7. Limitations of the Study

- **Access constraints:** Some herder communities were mobile, making it difficult to conduct consistent interviews.
- **Language barriers:** Local interpreters were employed when necessary to bridge communication gaps.
- **Security concerns:** The volatile nature of the conflict limited movement to certain areas and times.

Despite these challenges, triangulation of data sources and methods helped ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings.

Findings and Discussion



This section presents and analyzes the key findings from interviews, focus group discussions, questionnaire data, and observations conducted in Elelu Village. The findings are organized around three thematic areas aligned with the research questions: public relations strategies employed, their effectiveness in reducing conflict, and their contribution to sustainable rural development.

1. Nature of the Conflict in Elelu Village

Findings revealed that the farmer-herder conflict in Elelu Village is primarily driven by disputes over land use, grazing rights, and destruction of farmland by cattle. Farmers complained of repeated crop losses due to open grazing, while herders expressed concerns over shrinking grazing routes and increasing hostility from host communities. The absence of clear land-use policies and weak enforcement of local agreements exacerbated tensions.

Discussion:

These findings align with previous literature (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; Olaniyan et al., 2015) that identify resource competition and poor governance as root causes of the conflict. However, what sets Elelu apart is the community's willingness to explore communication-based solutions rather than rely solely on state intervention.

2. Public Relations Strategies Employed

Multiple PR-related strategies were identified as tools of engagement and conflict mitigation in the village:

a. Community Dialogue and Peace Forums

Local leaders, supported by NGOs and government officials, organized regular peace meetings where both farmers and herders could air grievances and negotiate coexistence agreements.

b. Use of Traditional and Religious Leaders

Trusted figures such as village heads and clerics acted as mediators and communicators, transmitting messages of peace and negotiating behavioral change.

c. Radio Broadcasts and Local Announcements

Some PR messages were disseminated through rural radio programs, town criers, and places of worship to reach non-literate audiences with conflict-sensitive content.

d. Conflict Mediation Committees

A small local task force was formed with representatives from both groups to address incidents before they escalated.



Discussion

These strategies reflect the application of the **two-way symmetrical model** of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), where feedback, dialogue, and mutual respect are central. The reliance on trusted local figures and informal channels also aligns with **development communication theory**, which emphasizes culturally grounded, participatory processes (Servaes, 2008).

3. Effectiveness of PR Strategies in Reducing Tension

Findings indicate that PR initiatives—especially those involving dialogue and traditional mediation—led to a **noticeable reduction in violent clashes** over a 12-month period. Participants in both FGDs acknowledged that communication had improved mutual understanding, although some skepticism remained among younger community members.

Questionnaire results showed that:

- 78% of farmers and 65% of herders believed peace meetings were "very helpful."
- 52% reported fewer incidents of violent confrontation since dialogue efforts began.
- 40% noted that while PR strategies were helpful, they needed to be more consistent and inclusive.

Discussion:

These responses validate the peacebuilding role of public relations when practiced consistently and inclusively. However, the mixed effectiveness also reveals gaps—particularly in sustainability and institutional support. This reflects the concerns of Galtung's **peace journalism framework**, which warns that peace messaging must go beyond rhetoric to impact structures and mindsets (Galtung, 1998).

4. Relationship Between PR Interventions and Sustainable Rural Development

Participants reported that improved communication not only prevented conflict but also enabled joint community development efforts:

- **Joint borehole projects** and **shared farm-road maintenance** were initiated after peace agreements.
- **Youth in both communities** participated in agricultural training and vocational workshops.
- **Market access and productivity** improved slightly due to increased security and cooperation.



Discussion:

These developments reinforce the idea that **peace is a prerequisite for sustainable development** and that public relations can act as a bridge between both. By creating communication platforms that facilitate trust and collaboration, PR fosters a stable environment for social and economic growth. This aligns closely with the **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

Summary of Key Findings

Research Focus	Key Findings	Implication
PR Strategies	Dialogues, local media, traditional mediators	Grounded in cultural context and two-way communication
Effectiveness	Reduction in violence, improved trust	PR contributes to de-escalation when applied consistently
PR Development	& Joint projects, youth engagement, community collaboration	PR fosters stability and development readiness

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of public relations in resolving community conflicts and advancing sustainable rural development:

1. Institutionalize Public Relations Units in Rural Governance Structures

Local governments and community development councils should establish dedicated PR or communication units tasked with handling conflict communication, community engagement, and stakeholder liaison. These units should be staffed with trained communicators who understand both the cultural context and the principles of strategic, peace-focused communication.

2. Strengthen the Role of Traditional and Religious Leaders as PR Ambassadors

Given their trust and authority within the community, traditional rulers and faith leaders should be trained in conflict-sensitive communication and basic public relations skills. Their influence can be harnessed to mediate disputes, correct misinformation, and promote peaceful co-existence using locally resonant narratives.



3. Enhance Community Media and Rural Radio Programming

Sustained investment in community radio and local media platforms can amplify peace messages, improve public awareness of grazing/farming boundaries, and promote understanding between farmers and herders. Content should be delivered in local languages, use storytelling formats, and highlight successful peacebuilding stories to reinforce positive models.

4. Mainstream Public Relations in Development and Agricultural Policies

Government and NGOs implementing rural development projects should integrate public relations frameworks into their planning and evaluation processes. Communication should not be treated as an afterthought but as a core tool for managing change, preventing resistance, and fostering cooperation.

5. Promote Youth Engagement through Peace and Media Education

Young people are often at the forefront of community tension or retaliation. Empowering them through peace education, conflict mediation workshops, and media training can convert them into proactive agents of reconciliation and innovation. Youth-led communication initiatives such as radio clubs or peace dramas can have strong influence among their peers.

6. Conduct Further Research on PR and Conflict Resolution in Rural Africa

There remains a dearth of localized studies that explore the relationship between PR, conflict resolution, and rural development in sub-Saharan Africa. Further empirical research especially longitudinal studies should be encouraged to build theory and inform policy.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that public relations, when strategically applied through culturally relevant, participatory, and dialogic methods, can significantly contribute to conflict mitigation and sustainable development in rural Nigerian communities. In Elelu Village, the use of peace dialogues, local mediators, and inclusive messaging not only helped reduce the incidence of farmer-herder clashes but also laid the groundwork for cooperative community development.

Drawing on the Two-Way Symmetrical Model, Peace Journalism Framework, and Development Communication Theory, the study affirms that PR is not limited to corporate image building—it is a powerful tool for peacebuilding and social change, especially in underserved rural contexts.



However, for PR interventions to be sustainable and scalable, they must be institutionalized, supported by policy, and adapted to the unique needs and languages of local communities.

Ultimately, resolving conflicts like the farmer-herder clashes in Nigeria requires more than policing or political declarations it demands consistent, community-driven communication strategies that respect voices, foster trust, and inspire collaboration.

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