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ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICES IN THE MITIGATING FARMER-HERDER CONFLICT IN OWAN EAST LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, EDO STATE

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ABSTRACT

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Farmer–herder conflicts remain one of the most persistent sources of communal violence in Nigeria, often escalating into loss of lives, destruction of property, and food insecurity. This article examines how public relations (PR) strategies are deployed to reduce tensions and foster dialogue between farmers and herders in Owan East Local Government Area (LGA) of Edo State. Drawing on conflict-resolution and two-way symmetrical communication theories, the study investigates the communication channels, community engagement methods, and mediation mechanisms used by government agencies, traditional leaders, and civil society actors. Findings reveal that consistent dialogue, culturally sensitive messaging, and stakeholder collaboration significantly reduce violence, while weak feedback mechanisms and inadequate funding limit impact. Recommendations include strengthening community-based communication networks, training PR officers in conflict-sensitive reporting, and institutionalizing participatory evaluation of peacebuilding initiatives.

Keywords: Public Relations, Conflict Mitigation, Farmer–Herder Conflict, Owan East, Communication

Introduction

Conflicts between farmers and herders in Nigeria have escalated markedly over the past two decades, creating one of the country's most persistent internal security challenges. Scholars attribute the rise in violence to multiple, interlinked drivers: competition for shrinking arable land and water resources, population growth, climate-induced desertification in the Sahel, and the proliferation of small arms (International Crisis Group, 2021; Okoli & Atelhe, 2014). Drought and erratic rainfall patterns have pushed pastoralists further south in search of grazing land, increasing contact and often confrontation with settled farming communities (Abbass, 2012; Musa et al., 2020). Weak enforcement of land-use regulations, porous grazing policies, and limited institutional capacity for dispute resolution have compounded the crisis, allowing localized skirmishes to escalate into protracted communal conflicts (Blench, 2017; Olaniyan et al., 2015).

Owan East Local Government Area (LGA) of Edo State exemplifies these national trends. Predominantly agrarian, the region relies on smallholder farming for both subsistence and market supply. Recurrent farmer–herder clashes have led to destruction of crops, loss of livestock, displacement of households, and declining agricultural productivity, thereby threatening food security and local economic stability (Ero & Ogbimi, 2022; Omoera & Esekheigbe, 2023). Beyond economic losses, the violence erodes interethnic trust, disrupts communal relations, and hampers rural development initiatives that depend on cooperative social networks (Audu, 2014). Traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms such as arbitration by village elders, family mediators, and religious leaders remain significant cultural resources; however, they are increasingly strained by the scale, frequency, and complexity of contemporary disputes, especially when armed groups or criminal elements exploit the conflicts (Ofuoku & Isife, 2010; Olanrewaju et al., 2019).

Within this context, public relations (PR) offer a professional, communication-based framework for building mutual understanding, negotiating competing interests, and fostering sustainable peace. PR is defined as a deliberate, planned, and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization or groups and its publics (Cutlip et al., 2013). Applied to farmer–herder relations, PR entails creating effective communication bridges between stakeholders, promoting transparency, and enabling constructive dialogue that moves beyond episodic crisis response to proactive relationship building (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Ike, 2017). Techniques such as community forums, participatory radio programming, and conflict-

sensitive media framing can enhance trust, clarify grievances, and mobilize collaborative solutions (Akinwale, 2021; Nwosu, 2019). Assessing the effectiveness of these PR practices in Owan East is therefore critical for designing context-specific strategies that balance livelihood needs with the overarching goal of communal peace.

Context of the Study

Farmer–herder conflicts have become one of Nigeria's most persistent internal security challenges, rooted in a complex interplay of environmental, socio-economic, and political factors. Over the past two decades, climate change has accelerated desertification and reduced grazing resources in northern Nigeria, driving pastoralist migration southward in search of pasture and water (Blench, 2021). Edo State, situated in Nigeria's South–South geopolitical zone, has increasingly become a destination for these migratory herders because of its fertile land and relatively stable climate.

Owan East Local Government Area (LGA) represents a microcosm of these national tensions. Farming is the primary occupation, and agriculture provides both livelihood and cultural identity for the local population. Seasonal migration of herders into this agrarian landscape often leads to competition over land and water, crop destruction, and retaliatory violence (International Crisis Group, 2021). Previous government interventions such as the National Livestock Transformation Plan and anti-open grazing laws have met with mixed success, partly due to weak enforcement and limited community engagement.

Within this context, public relations (PR) emerges as a potentially powerful peacebuilding tool. By facilitating dialogue, building trust, and shaping narratives that reduce stereotypes, PR practices can bridge the communication gap between farmers and herders. This study situates the Owan East experience within these broader historical, environmental, and policy frameworks to assess how strategic communication can mitigate conflict and foster sustainable coexistence.

Statement of the Problem

Despite multiple government initiatives, violent clashes between farmers and herders continue to disrupt livelihoods and threaten food security in Owan East. Existing interventions often focus on security enforcement rather than communication-driven peacebuilding, leading to mistrust and cycles of reprisal. There is limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of PR strategies—such as community dialogue, conflict-sensitive media campaigns, and stakeholder

engagement—in addressing these tensions at the local level.

Research Questions

1. How are public relations practices currently employed to manage farmer–herder conflicts in Owan East LGA?
2. What is the perceived effectiveness of these PR strategies among farmers, herders, and community leaders?
3. What challenges and opportunities exist for enhancing PR's role in long-term peacebuilding?

Significance of the Study

This research is significant on three levels:

1. **Scholarly Contribution:** It adds to the growing body of literature on communication for peacebuilding in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly by linking public relations theory which traditionally focuses on corporate or organizational contexts to rural conflict management.
2. **Practical Value:** Findings guide PR professionals, local governments, and NGOs on best practices for designing conflict-sensitive communication campaigns that foster dialogue and trust.
3. **Policy Relevance:** Results can inform state and federal policy on land-use regulation, grazing policies, and community policing, supporting a shift from purely security-based responses to participatory conflict-resolution approaches (Adebayo & Fagbemi, 2022).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. All respondents were briefed about the purpose of the research and signed or verbally agreed to a consent form. Pseudonyms were used in data transcription to ensure anonymity. Sensitive data including personal narratives of violence were handled with care and stored securely, in compliance with the Nigerian National Code of Health Research Ethics and the guidelines of the researcher's university Institutional Review Board.

Implications

Practical Implications

For PR Practitioners: Demonstrates the need for community-based, culturally sensitive campaigns, integrating indigenous conflict-resolution practices such as village councils and elders' mediation.

For NGOs and Government Agencies: Suggests that continuous engagement, not one-off sensitization, is critical to sustaining peace.

Policy Implications

1. Recommends incorporating communication strategies into land-use and grazing-route legislation, ensuring that affected stakeholders participate in drafting and implementation.
2. Supports state-level adoption of early-warning systems that rely on community reporting through local media.

Theoretical Implications

1. Extends Excellence Theory of Public Relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) to a non-corporate, rural conflict context, highlighting the effectiveness of two-way symmetrical communication as a peacebuilding mechanism.
2. Challenges traditional PR boundaries by positioning practitioners as mediators and cultural translators, not just image managers.

Literature Review

Strategic Communication and Conflict Resolution

Strategic communication is widely recognized as a cornerstone of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. It entails the purposeful use of information exchange to influence attitudes, reduce tensions, and create mutual understanding among conflicting groups (Macnamara, 2018). Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical model remains one of the most cited frameworks in public relations scholarship. This model stresses reciprocal communication and negotiation, positioning dialogue not persuasion as the heart of relationship management. Through this lens, communication is not merely about disseminating messages but about facilitating an ongoing exchange in which all parties can adjust their behaviors based on feedback (Grunig, 2011). Such a dialogic process is particularly critical in protracted communal conflicts where mistrust and misinformation often perpetuate violence.

Evidence from Nigerian Communal Conflicts

Studies on farmer–herder and other communal conflicts in Nigeria affirm the value of strategic communication for conflict mitigation. Akinwale (2021) observes that early-warning systems built around local radio broadcasts and village-level forums have proven effective in identifying triggers of violence and facilitating quick mediation. Similarly, Ibrahim and Umar (2022) report that culturally grounded messaging such as the use of local proverbs,

storytelling, and traditional town criers helps reframe conflict narratives and promotes empathy between rival groups. These findings echo international scholarship suggesting that community-driven communication channels, when combined with participatory decision making, can reduce the likelihood of violent escalation (Lederach, 2015; Oloruntoba, 2020).

Public Relations as Peace Communication

Public relations (PR) provide a professional framework for applying these communication strategies in a systematic manner. Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2013) define PR as a deliberate, planned, and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization or groups and its publics. Within conflict settings, PR goes beyond image management to function as a peace communication tool. Effective PR campaigns can (a) create awareness of the structural and immediate causes of conflict, (b) foster dialogue among farmers, herders, traditional leaders, and government agencies, (c) build trust through transparent and consistent messaging, (d) mobilize support for policies and programs that promote coexistence, and (e) reframe public narratives to discourage stereotypes and hate speech (Akinwale, 2021; Ike, 2017).

Empirical studies reinforce these roles. For example, Nwosu (2019) documents how community-oriented PR strategies such as participatory town-hall meetings, drama, and mediated negotiation have helped stabilize relations in parts of the Middle Belt plagued by similar farmer–herder disputes. Okoli and Atelhe (2014) further note that PR-driven mediation fosters shared ownership of outcomes, making peace agreements more durable than those imposed through top-down governmental interventions.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing body of work on communication and peacebuilding in Nigeria, there is a dearth of research focusing on localized PR interventions in Edo State, particularly Owan East Local Government Area. Most existing studies concentrate on high-conflict zones such as Benue, Plateau, and Kaduna States (International Crisis Group, 2021; Uzochukwu, 2020). The unique socio-cultural dynamics of Owan East where agrarian livelihoods intersect with seasonal pastoral migration remain underexplored. This gap is significant because conflict-management strategies that succeed in other regions may not translate seamlessly to Edo State due to differences in language, political structure, and traditional governance systems. Addressing this lacuna is critical for designing context-sensitive PR strategies capable of sustaining long-term peace.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theoretical perspectives. The first is the Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Theory, which emphasizes dialogue, mutual understanding, and reciprocal feedback between parties in conflict. Developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), this theory posits that effective public relations practice relies on open channels of communication where all stakeholders actively listen and respond to one another. In the context of farmer–herder disputes, the model encourages sustained interaction between farmers, herders, community leaders, and government agencies. Such balanced communication fosters trust, reduces misinformation, and supports collaborative problem-solving rather than one-sided persuasion.

The second framework is Conflict Transformation Theory, which moves beyond merely ending violence to address the underlying structural and relational causes of conflict (Lederach, 1995). This perspective highlights the importance of changing attitudes, social systems, and power dynamics to achieve lasting peace. For farmer–herder conflicts in Owan East, conflict transformation underscores the need to tackle root issues such as land tenure insecurity, climate-related migration, and economic inequality. By integrating this theory with two-way symmetrical communication, the study situates public relations not only as a tool for immediate dialogue but also as a catalyst for long-term structural change and sustainable coexistence.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to capture both quantitative and qualitative perspectives on the effectiveness of public relations practices in mitigating farmer–herder conflict in Owan East Local Government Area of Edo State. The mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of communication dynamics and allowed for the triangulation of findings across multiple data sources.

The quantitative component consisted of a structured survey administered to 200 respondents drawn from key stakeholder groups, including farmers, herders, local government officials, and community leaders. The survey captured demographic data and measured perceptions of public relations strategies, communication reach, and the level of community participation in conflict-mitigation efforts.

To deepen the analysis, the study incorporated a qualitative component involving semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Key informants included public relations officers from the Ministry of

Agriculture, traditional rulers, and representatives of non-governmental organizations working on peacebuilding and agricultural development. These sessions' explored participants' experiences with conflict resolution initiatives, their assessments of PR effectiveness, and recommendations for improving dialogue between farmers and herders.

Additionally, a document review was conducted to complement the primary data. Relevant materials such as policy briefs, conflict incident reports, and communication campaign documents were examined to understand existing institutional frameworks and past interventions.

Data analysis combined descriptive statistics for the quantitative survey results with thematic content analysis for qualitative interview and focus group transcripts. This dual analysis enabled the evaluation of perceived effectiveness of PR interventions, the breadth of communication outreach, and the extent of stakeholder participation in conflict-mitigation strategies. The mixed-methods design thus ensured a robust assessment of how public relations practices contribute to fostering sustainable peace in the study area.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach.

Quantitative Data: Survey responses from farmers, herders, and local officials were processed using descriptive statistics (percentages, mean scores) and chi-square tests to identify relationships between communication strategies and conflict outcomes.

Qualitative Data: Key informant interviews and focus-group transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing the emergence of patterns around trust-building, media influence, and cultural barriers. Triangulation of both data sets enhanced validity and reliability.

Findings

Dialogue and Mediation

Town hall meetings and peace dialogues facilitated by traditional rulers, local government officials, and religious leaders have been instrumental in preventing violent clashes between farmers and herders. These forums provide opportunities for direct engagement, allowing grievances to be expressed and negotiated in real time. However, respondents noted that inconsistent follow-up and the exclusion of certain stakeholder groups often limit the long-term impact of these initiatives. Without sustained engagement and broader participation, the

potential of dialogue as a conflict-mitigation strategy remains underutilized.

Information Dissemination

Information campaigns particularly radio programs, community announcements, and sensitization drives have significantly increased public awareness about the importance of peaceful coexistence. Local radio has proven effective in delivering messages in indigenous languages and at convenient times. Yet, poor access to media infrastructure in some rural communities weakens the overall reach of these efforts. Limited electricity supply and the cost of radio devices further reduce listenership, creating information gaps that hinder consistent messaging.

Trust Deficit

Despite ongoing communication efforts, a profound lack of trust persists between farmers and herders. Public relations strategies emphasize openness and transparency, but repeated experiences of crop destruction, cattle rustling, and inadequate compensation fuel suspicion on both sides. This trust deficit undermines dialogue initiatives and slows progress toward sustainable peace, suggesting that communication must be paired with concrete conflict-resolution measures and verifiable agreements.

Role of Security and Government Agencies

Government-led communication, including press statements and crisis briefings, is often perceived as reactive rather than proactive. Stakeholders reported that official responses tend to occur after violence has already erupted, weakening credibility and public confidence in PR interventions. The absence of early-warning communication systems and timely conflict-sensitive updates limits the ability of security agencies to build community trust.

Cultural and Traditional Mechanisms

Traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms such as arbitration by community elders and the deployment of local vigilante groups remain influential and widely respected. When these cultural practices are integrated with modern public relations approaches, they enhance the legitimacy of peacebuilding efforts. Participants emphasized that leveraging these indigenous structures, alongside professional PR strategies, provides a culturally grounded framework for sustaining dialogue and reducing violent confrontations.

Discussion

The findings indicate that public relations (PR) practices in Owan East Local Government Area have contributed meaningfully to conflict mitigation between farmers and herders, yet they have not fully addressed the underlying structural grievances driving the clashes. Similar to observations in other Nigerian contexts (Akinwale, 2021; Ibrahim & Umar, 2022), PR interventions in Owan East tend to be episodic, intensifying only after violent outbreaks rather than functioning as continuous, structured processes. This reactive pattern limits opportunities for early warning and proactive relationship building, both of which are essential for sustainable peace (Lederach, 1995).

A notable gap is the exclusion of women and youth from many dialogue platforms. Women often play key roles in household decision-making and community mediation, while youth are frequently at the forefront of both farming and herding activities. Excluding these groups undermines inclusivity and reduces the legitimacy of peacebuilding efforts (Okeke, 2020). Their participation is critical to ensuring that negotiated solutions are representative and widely accepted.

For PR to be more effective, it must embrace sustained two-way communication, aligning with Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical model. This approach prioritizes mutual understanding and continuous feedback, ensuring that both farmers and herders feel genuinely heard and represented. Moving from reactive crisis management to proactive relationship building requires institutionalizing regular town-hall meetings, community radio programs, and culturally appropriate feedback channels that function even in the absence of immediate conflict (Eze & Onwe, 2019).

Moreover, integrating traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms such as elder arbitration and community vigilante systems into modern PR strategies can enhance credibility and cultural resonance (Olaoba, 2021). Such hybrid approaches acknowledge local norms while leveraging professional communication techniques, thereby increasing the potential for long-term transformation of the farmer-herder relationship. Ultimately, a paradigm shift toward proactive, inclusive, and dialogic public relations is necessary to transform the conflict from recurring violence to sustained coexistence.

Implications

Practical Implications

1. For PR Practitioners: Demonstrates the need for community-based, culturally sensitive campaigns, integrating indigenous conflict-resolution

practices such as village councils and elders' mediation.

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Key Limitations

A primary limitation of the public relations (PR) initiatives examined in this study is the inadequacy of feedback mechanisms. Communication efforts frequently flowed in a top-down manner, with government agencies and local authorities disseminating information to farmers and herders without establishing strong channels for real-time feedback. This unidirectional approach restricted continuous conflict monitoring and reduced the ability to adapt messages or strategies in response to emerging tensions. Effective conflict mitigation requires two-way communication loops that allow for rapid exchange of concerns and timely adjustments (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Another significant constraint is resource scarcity. Persistent funding gaps limited the continuity of sensitization campaigns, training of PR personnel, and maintenance of community media platforms. As observed in similar rural peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria, inadequate financial and logistical support often results in sporadic interventions rather than sustained programs (Akinwale, 2021). Such interruptions weaken community trust and reduce the overall impact of PR strategies.

Finally, cultural and ethnic barriers presented ongoing challenges. Deep-seated mistrust between farming and herding communities sometimes undermined communication efforts, making it difficult for PR practitioners to gain acceptance across group lines.

Historical grievances and ethnic identities often shaped how messages were received, occasionally leading to skepticism or outright rejection of conflict-resolution initiatives (Olaoba, 2021). Overcoming these barriers requires culturally sensitive messaging and the inclusion of respected local mediators to bridge divides and foster mutual understanding.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that public relations (PR) practices hold significant potential for mitigating farmer–herder conflicts in Owan East Local Government Area of Edo State. Through structured dialogue, mediation, and targeted awareness campaigns, PR initiatives have helped reduce the frequency of violent clashes and improved mutual understanding between farmers and herders. These interventions illustrate how communication when deliberate, inclusive, and contextually appropriate can serve as a vital peacebuilding tool in rural, agrarian communities (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Akinwale, 2021).

Nevertheless, the findings highlight that progress remains fragile. Many PR efforts remain episodic, often activated only after violence occurs, and suffer from inadequate feedback mechanisms, resource limitations, and persistent mistrust between ethnic groups. The exclusion of women and youth from decision-making further undermines the inclusivity required for long-term success (Okeke, 2020). Without sustained engagement and proactive relationship building, communication campaigns risk becoming temporary fixes rather than transformative strategies.

For PR to realize its full peacebuilding potential, stakeholders including local government authorities, civil society organizations, and traditional leaders must adopt a holistic, integrated approach. Such an approach would blend modern communication strategies (e.g., community radio, participatory social media platforms, and crisis hotlines) with traditional mechanisms such as elder arbitration, cultural festivals, and community vigilante structures. By institutionalizing two-way symmetrical communication and conflict transformation principles (Lederach, 1995), these initiatives can move beyond crisis management to foster enduring trust, equitable resource sharing, and inclusive governance.

Ultimately, strengthening PR as a conflict-mitigation strategy offers more than short-term stability. It provides a pathway to sustainable peace, food security, and agricultural development not only for Owan East but also for other regions of Nigeria experiencing similar farmer–herder tensions. Policy makers and development agencies can draw on these insights to design replicable frameworks that prioritize continuous dialogue, cultural

sensitivity, and shared responsibility for peace. When public relations are embedded in long-term rural development planning, it becomes a catalyst for resilience and coexistence across Edo State and beyond.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several actionable recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of public relations (PR) practices in mitigating farmer–herder conflicts in Owan East Local Government Area and similar settings.

Institutionalize Peace Committees.

First, there is a need to establish local peace communication committees composed of farmers, herders, traditional leaders, and government representatives. These committees would serve as permanent platforms for dialogue, early-warning communication, and real-time conflict monitoring. By creating a structured mechanism for continuous interaction, stakeholders can address emerging grievances before they escalate into violence.

Leverage Community Media.

Second, the expansion of community media outlets, especially local-language radio, is crucial for consistent peace messaging. Community radio has the advantage of reaching rural populations and disseminating culturally appropriate content. Regular broadcasts that emphasize mutual understanding and highlight successful cases of cooperation can reinforce peaceful coexistence.

Capacity Building.

Third, targeted capacity-building initiatives should be implemented to train local PR practitioners, community leaders, and youth mediators in conflict-sensitive communication, negotiation, and mediation techniques. Well-trained communicators are better equipped to craft inclusive messages, defuse tensions, and maintain trust across diverse groups.

Inclusive Engagement.

Fourth, efforts must prioritize inclusive engagement, ensuring the active participation of women and youth who are often sidelined in decision-making processes despite being significantly affected by the conflict. Incorporating these groups enriches dialogue, brings diverse perspectives to negotiations, and enhances the legitimacy of peacebuilding outcomes.

Policy Support

Finally, policy support from government is essential. Clear and enforceable policies on land use, grazing routes, and compensation frameworks will provide a legal foundation that complements PR interventions. When communication strategies are reinforced by well-articulated policies and fair enforcement, public confidence in conflict-resolution mechanisms is strengthened. These recommendations emphasize a holistic approach that combines continuous communication, inclusive participation, skill development, and supportive policy measures. Together, they provide a roadmap for leveraging public relations as a sustainable tool for peacebuilding and agricultural development in Edo State and other regions facing similar farmer–herder tensions.

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