

USING PUBLIC RELATIONS IN RESOLVING COMMUNAL CONFLICTS BETWEEN NEIGHBOURING COMMUNITIES OF CROSS RIVER AND BENUE STATES, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study examined public relations strategies in resolving communal conflicts between neighbouring communities. Anchored on the conflict transformation theory, and the two-way symmetric communication model, the objective was to examine public relations strategies in resolving communal conflicts between neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya Local Government Areas. In achieving the objective, the study used survey research method with questionnaire and in-depth interviews as data gathering instruments. The study has a population of 584,600 as residents of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs, from which the sample size of 400 respondents was drawn, through Taro Yamane formula, and 12 interviewees purposively selected. The purposive sampling technique was used to administer questionnaire to the respondents, as random sampling was used in selecting the clans, while thematic and statistical method of frequency tables and weighted mean were deployed for data analysis, adopting four-point Likert format. It was found that the communities deploy dialogue and negotiation, and community engagement to

facilitate open discussion among parties as PR strategies in conflict resolutions. It also reveals that public relations had initiated open lines of communication between the conflicting parties and mitigated negative perceptions about the communities in conflict. The study concluded that despite the re-occurrence of the conflicts during farming season, the communities have addressed the conflict-related issues through the applications of public relations strategies such as dialogue, mediation, and negotiations. It was recommended that stakeholders from these communities should explore more public relations strategies in resolving their conflicts and amplify on the ones working for ultimate peace.

Keywords: PR strategies, communal conflicts, neighbouring communities, conflicts, conflict resolutions.

Introduction

Communal conflicts in many African societies are multi-dimensional in nature, often entrenched in competition for land and resource competition among the people. In Nigeria, communal conflicts between neighbouring communities are predominantly over land disputes. The Utugwang, Igwo, Abonkib and Atiekpe are communities in Obudu Local Government Area of Cross River State, sharing common boundaries with Mbayongo, Mbadigam, Mbazerem and Mbaaji communities in Vandeikya Local Government Area of Benue State. The boundary disputes have turned those who once lived in peace into enemies. The recurring communal conflict has claimed several lives, properties destroyed and many residents displaced from their homes. The land disputes between the neighbouring communities of Obudu LGA and Vandeikya LGA has been fought for decades (Terwase, Tsuwa, Nfor, Itoje-Akpokiniovo, Atime, Nuhu, Kachalla, Onwuanibe, Sani, Sowore, Mijinyawa, & Anyam, 2023). The authors further assert that many communities over time in Nigeria have witnessed land disputes especially the communities between Benue and Taraba States, between Benue and Cross River States. The unresolved communal conflicts between neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya are as a result of land disputes that have existed for decades between these communities over ownership, leaving many families homeless and property worth millions of naira destroyed (Terwase et al., 2023).

In most states, inter-communal conflicts have degenerated to a level, that communities were abandoned for months, years, while the inhabitants either reside in isolated camps or with extended family members, with of course, terrible life experiences (Anoke, 2023). Disputes typically involve two or more parties who came to a disagreement as a result of pursuing conflicting aims and objectives (Modeyin Oisamoje, & Asemah, 2025). This suggests that conflicts are the result of incompatible viewpoints, interests, beliefs, and goals among people who live together. Anoke (2023) further observes that despite the colossal amount of human and material resources expended on global peace and conflict management by various nations, inter-communal conflicts are rather becoming more virulent and destructive instead of diminishing due to land related disputes. This suggests that conflicts affect every facet of human life, including manpower and material resources of those at war, the society and the government in general. Communal conflicts are inevitable in any human setting, hence, effort should be directed towards its resolution, as it manifests, else, its destructive nature could be better imagined than seen. Most importantly, conflict should not be allowed to thrive in our rural communities (Anoke, 2023).

Therefore, the role of public relations in resolving conflicts is sacrosanct and deliberately recognised and essential for relative peace in any society. Hence, Anoke (2023) asserts that public relations has the vital tools to encourage community members to co-habit peacefully with one another as well as, with their neighbours and thus, nip in the bud, conflict-oriented issues from generating into conflicts. This suggests that continued and effective dialogue among parties in conflicts or two-way communication approach would prevent any breakdown in communications.

It is against this backdrop that this study examines how public relations strategies can be used in resolving communal conflicts between neighbouring communities of Obudu in Cross River State and Vandeikya in Benue State to fosters mutual understanding for permanent peace.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria has faced numerous communal conflicts over the past decades, including Jukun and Kuteb conflict in Taraba, Tiv and Jukun in Taraba, Ugep and Idomi, and Nkpani and Nko in Cross River, Ukelle in Cross Rive State and Izzi in Ebonyi State and other forms of communal violence across other states. Despite numerous interventions, communal conflicts in Nigeria still persist and often re-occur between neighbouring communities. In many cases, periodic communal clashes disrupt agricultural, business and school activities, and social cohesion of the people. Despite the recognition of public relations as a tool for conflict resolutions, there is a significant gap in understanding how public relations strategies can be effectively utilised in resolving communal conflicts in the society. It is on this note that this study examines how public relations strategies can be used in resolving communal conflicts between neighbouring communities of Obudu LGA of Cross River State and Vandeikya LGA of Benue State.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the role of public relations in resolving communal conflicts between neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs. The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. identify the public relations strategies employed in conflict resolutions between the neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs.
2. examine the effects of public relations interventions in resolving and restoring inter-community relations between the neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs.

Research Questions

1. What are the public relations strategies employed in conflict resolutions between the neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs?

2. What are the effects of public relations interventions in resolving and restoring inter-community relations between the neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs?

Review of Related Literature

Concept of Public Relations

Public relations is a practice that entails the strategic management of an organisation and its various stakeholders to build, oversee, and maintain a symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship between the organisation and its publics (Emuru, Kalita, Itam, & Ikangkang, 2025). This implies that public relations activities are tailored towards the masses and not individual gains, and a profession that puts the interest of the public or society on the front burner. This approach therefore, promotes the idea that public relations should also foster open, two-way communication and mutual understanding between organisation and the publics.

In Anoke (2023), public relations activities entail planned communication programmes aimed at achieving a targeted objective, including those intended to influence public opinions and peaceful co-existence in the community. This is geared towards developing and communicating by word or action, definite policies or discussions, giving direction to management, government or community leaders' efforts to utilise and energise human resources to achieve organisational, government or community goals and objectives. Emuru (2026) argues that public relations is a practice that involves organisations and individuals in building, managing and maintaining a harmonious and mutual beneficial relationship with their respective publics. It creates mutual understanding in addition to serving as the basic tool for achieving peace and concord in various communities.

Nwanmuoh, Dibua, Amaife and Obi-Okonkwo (2021) assert that public relations management emphasises the practical application of strategies and techniques in solving diverse problems in business and non-commercial organisations and setting. It is a strategic communication

process that helps organisations build and maintain positive relationships with their stakeholders (Adeyemi, Eke, Chimezie, 2024), it has also been consistently described as a way of maintaining mutual lines of communications between organisations and its publics or communities (Nwachukwu & Abugu, 2023). This implies that sustained communication is to ensure that the various publics of an organisation or the publics understands its operations. It helps organisations to build a reputation, secure public trust for an organisation and management of relationships among individuals or communities for mutual peace.

Concept of Conflicts

Conflict is a disagreement between individuals or groups of people caused by perceived goals and interests, and breakdown in communications between two opposing groups with vested interest. Communal conflict is the term used to describe conflict that occurs between competing groups within a subnational level; a product of antagonistic interest between two or more opposing forces or groups within a society (Enock-Etimighan & Ebimiebo, 2024).

Given its frequent occurrence in everyday life, conflicts appear to have become a permanent feature of human life which we have come to live and cope with and resolve from time to time (Wahab & Adetunji, 2015). Conflicts may arise on account of conflicting values, interests or expectations and can also extend to other broader issues related to social cohesion (Cuppen, 2018). This suggests that conflicts are consequences of actions or inactions that contravene each other's opinions, beliefs, and interests among humans that co-habit in a given society. Conflict is common due to the inter-relationship and inter-connectedness among people that often result in disagreements and confrontations (Modeyin et al., 2025). A conflict may occasionally become confrontational and culminate in physical violence (Keghku, Alom & Fanafa 2019). Conflict is seen as part of human life, and it is an activity that is almost totally negative and has no positive qualities

(Nwanmuoh et al., 2021). It generates incompatible goals or values among different parties. Communal conflicts are products of social relations that involves threat or action of one party directed at a community's rights, interests or privileges or of another party over economic issues, power or authority, cultural values and beliefs (Essien, 2020, as cited in Enock-Etimighan & Ebimiebo, 2024).

In Aondover, Okuneye and Onyejelem (2024), conflict is a hindrance to advancement, economic prosperity, and political stability as well as the general socio-economic development of any society. Therefore, it's important to manage conflict well to prevent it from turning into war. Conflict is a clash between individuals, arising out of a difference in thought process, attitudes, understanding, interests, requirements and even sometimes, perceptions (Asemah, Edegoh & Anatsui 2022). Therefore, conflict result as a disagreement between individuals over perceived suppression from the opposing party(s).

Public Relations in Conflict Resolutions

Public relations is recognised as a communication tool that fosters social cohesion, mobilises stakeholders, and resolves conflict through dialogue, negotiation, and advocacy (Unigwe & Okika, 2025). It serves as a peace building tool by providing platforms for dialogue, shaping conflict narratives, and helping communities understand opposing viewpoints. That is why Chibueze (2019), as cited in Emuru (2026) posits that public relations strategies such as dialogue, negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and community engagement are globally recognised tools for conflict resolutions in community crisis. Hence, these allows conflicting parties to engage in dialogue, express their grievances, and collectively search for amicable solutions. Conflict resolution is about how parties to a conflict can come together to find solution to the problem by addressing the root or cause of conflict in such a way that is mutually satisfactory to all parties and change their behaviours to support peace (Enock-Etimighan & Ebimiebo, 2024)).

This implies that the deep-rooted sources of conflicts are addressed, so that the behaviour of the actors in the conflict is changed and they no longer resort to violent, and the structures that support violence are also modified.

Maiwada, Aondover, Adewale, Falobi and Onyejelem (2025) contend that when conflict situation occurs, public relations take it as a responsibility to move the stakeholders away into the path of resolution. This implies that public relations has the potentials to influence decision associated with conflict resolution process. This further suggests that public relations has the capacity to intervene in conflict situation rather than encourage it. Hence, this pointed to the facts that public relations management and the peace-building process have significant relationship. This, therefore, suggests that public relations has the potential to resolve conflict situations. In Juozėnaitė (2023), public relations is the strategic management of relationships between an organisation and its diverse public, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, resolve conflict, realise the organisational goal, support community peace-efforts and serve the public interest. Public relations helps communities manage their relationships with each other, helps to maintain a mutual understanding and peace-building efforts through dialogue, negotiation and mediation.

Public relations involves the dissemination of accurate information and the use of preventive and corrective measures to sustain favourable relationships (Saidu & Tsegyu, 2024). The authors further assert that public relations is a two-way communication to resolve conflict based on trust, knowledge and full information reflects its broader application beyond institutional settings, including inter-group relations like neighbouring communities. Public relations strategies put the conflicting parties in a right perspective to understand the dangers of conflict. Public relations strategies make the conflicting parties to understand the need for co-existence, mutual understanding and peaceful relationships.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Conflict Transformation Theory, and Two-way Symmetric Communication Model.

Conflict Transformation Theory

The conflict transformation theory was propounded by John Paul Lederach and Johan Galtung, scholars in peace studies in 1950s and 1960s, and developed in 1990s (Botes, 2001, as cited in Modeyin, Inobemhe & Okezie, 2025). The theory's main concern is to understand conflicts and work towards addressing them through keen focus on underlying relationships and dynamics that may be responsible for the conflict. Lederach has been identified as a major proponent of the conflict transformation theory (Modeyin et al., 2025). It is based on the argument that conflict resolution must not be restricted to just merely reconciling the parties but to address the underlying factors that may have led to the conflicts in the first place (Lederach, 1995, as cited in Modeyin et al., 2025). This is known as conflict transformation because the idea is to transform the conflict itself rather than just a focus on the surface issues that are visible and glaring.

According to Modeyin et al. (2025), conflict resolution is better appreciated when conceptualised from the perspective of the multi-dimensional approach that involves rule transformation, actor transformation, structural transformation, and issue transformation. On a related note, the theory is also about the relationships between the parties to a conflict as they seek to improve empathy, communication, mediation, dialogue and mutual understanding among each other. Another principle of the theory is about the importance of considering the interests and needs as well as the values that drive conflicts. Power dynamics relate to the need to recognise the impact that the power imbalances may have on the dynamics of the conflict. Hence, there is the contextual understanding which is an emphasis on considering the broader historical, cultural, and social context of

the conflict.

This study was anchored on the conflict transformation theory because of its explanation on how communication, mediation and dialogue between neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs in conflicts would ensure long-term cohesion among the communities in conflicts when the various principles are considered and addressed on time.

Two-way Symmetric Communication Model

The Two-way Symmetric Communication Model was postulated in 1984 by Grunig and Hunt. The model depicts a communication relationship, where the source(s) and the publics share initiative and power more equally. Grunig and Hunt (1984) as cited in Emuru (2026) observe that practitioners of this model serve as mediators between any organised group and its publics with the goal of ensuring mutual understanding between leadership and their publics. The model, according to Ogbuoshi (2020), harps on a two-way communication mechanism which has it emphasises on using public relations strategies to bring an organisation, be it government, business organisations or communities and their publics together, through mutually beneficial two-way communication.

This communication model is considered relevant to this study because the neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs, and other stakeholders of these communities would benefit through the two-way communication approach where peace would always be enjoyed by the communities. This approach ensures two-way communication, mediation and dialogue which facilitates feedback between neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs. With this, conflicts are easily identified and nipped in the bud to allow peace to reign across the communities.

Methodology

The study used survey research method, adopting quantitative and qualitative approach with questionnaire and in-depth interview as data

gathering instruments. The study examined how public relations can be used in resolving communal conflict between neighbouring communities of Obudu in Cross River State and Vandeikya in Benue State. According to National Population Commission and National Bureau of Statistics (NPC/NBS), projected population (2025), the population of the study comprised youth and adult residents of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs, with the total number of 584,600 from which the sample size of 400 was taken from, adopting Taro Yamane formula. The study used multi-stage sampling techniques, using simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques. The random sampling technique was used to select the six clans, three from each of the two local government areas that participated in the study, while the purposive sampling technique was used to select the respondents and interviewees who responded to the questionnaire and the interviews respectively. Thus, 12 interviewees were carefully selected from among the traditional and youth leaders, and government official from both LGAs, through purposive sampling method. This was adopted to enable the researcher(s) to meet with those who are mostly affected and with first-hand information concerning the conflicts. Accordingly, the data used thematic and descriptive statistical method of frequency distribution on frequency tables, and the statistical information obtained was analysed in a four-point Likert format and scaled thus: SA (4); A (3); D (2); and SD (1), and weighted mean for the analysis. The Decision Rule is, when the calculated mean is equal to or greater than (2.5), then the decision is accepted, but if the calculated mean is less than (2.5), the decision is rejected.

Thus, the sample size for this study was 400 respondents that was determined from the population of 584,600 as shown below:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where n = Desired sample size

N = Population size under study

e = Level of significance of error

1 = unit in value

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{584,600}{1 + 584,600 (0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{584,600}{1 + 584,600 * 0.0025}$$

$$n = \frac{584,600}{1,462.5}$$

$$n = 399.7$$

$$n = 400$$

Analysis of Results

The data used for this study were the 8-item closed-ended questionnaire to address the research questions. A total of 400 copies of questionnaire were distributed but 385 copies were duly filled and returned for analysis.

Table 1: Public relations strategies employed in conflict resolutions between the neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean score	Decision
1	Dialogue and negotiation to facilitate open discussion among parties in conflict.	160	195	20	10	385	3.3	Accepted
2	Community engagement involving community leaders in conflict.	168	186	19	12	385	3.3	Accepted
3	Public awareness campaigns to inform the communities on the benefits of peace and cooperation.	173	191	10	11	385	3.2	Accepted
4	Mediation between conflicting parties to promote reconciliation.	157	190	31	7	385	3.3	Accepted
Mean score = 3.2		Decision Rule = Accepted						

Source: Field Survey, 2026

From the analysis above, with the mean value of 3.2, it was established that dialogue and negotiation to facilitate open discussion among parties in conflict were the public relations strategies employed in conflict resolutions between the neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs. The study further revealed that community engagement involving community leaders in conflict were also the public relations strategies employed in conflict resolutions between the neighbouring communities. In the same vein, the study shows that public awareness campaigns on the benefits of peace and cooperation, and mediation between the conflicting parties to promote reconciliation were the public relations strategies employed in conflict resolutions between the neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs.

Table 2: Effects of public relations interventions in resolving and restoring inter-community relations between the neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs.

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean score	Decision
1	Public relations initiates open lines of communication between the conflicting parties	157	200	20	8	385	3.3	Accepted
2	Public relations helps to mitigate negative perceptions about the communities in conflict	160	189	23	13	385	3.2	Accepted
3	Public relations engages stakeholders through community events to strengthen ties.	158	180	30	17	385	3.2	Accepted
4	Public relations provides timely responses to manage conflicts and promote peaceful resolutions	150	185	36	14	385	3.2	Accepted
Mean score = 3.2		Decision Rule = Accepted						

Source: Field Survey, 2026

From the result analysed in table two above, it was established that public relations initiates open lines of communication between the conflicting parties. The respondents also affirm that public relations helps to mitigate negative perceptions about the communities in conflict. They also assert that public relations engages stakeholders through community events to strengthen ties, and it provides timely responses to manage conflicts and promote peaceful resolutions.

Discussion of Findings

Concerning the public relations strategies employed in conflict resolutions between the neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs, respondents acknowledged that the communities use dialogue and negotiation to facilitate open discussion among parties as PR strategies employed in conflict resolutions. They employ community engagement involving community leaders in conflict. They further revealed that public awareness campaigns on the benefits of peace and cooperation, and mediation between the conflicting parties to promote reconciliation were employed as the public relations strategies in the conflict resolutions between the neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs. Corroborating the views of the respondents, the interviewees acknowledged that they employ community-based approaches such as the use of dialogue and mediation, use of town hall meetings, community forums and village/elders' council. Also, they established that traditional rulers and religious leaders from both local governments were involved at some point in time as one of the strategies employed in resolving their conflicts.

This is in line with Unigwe and Okika (2025) who assert that public relations is a communication tool that fosters social cohesion, mobilises stakeholders, and resolves conflict through dialogue, negotiation, and advocacy, and Emuru (2026) who posits that public relations strategies such as dialogue, negotiation, mediation, and community engagement are globally recognised tools for conflict resolutions in community crisis. They

are in tandem with the conflict transformation theory which is about the relationship between the parties to a conflict as they seek to improve empathy, communication, mediation, dialogue and mutual understanding among each other. And the two-way symmetric communication model which has it emphasises on using public relations strategies to bring an organisation, be it government, business organisations or communities and their publics together, through mutually beneficial two-way communication.

On the effects of public relations interventions in resolving and restoring inter-community relations between the neighbouring communities of Obudu and Vandeikya LGAs, the analysis with the decision rule of 3.2 implies that public relations had initiated open lines of communication between the conflicting parties, and had helped to mitigate negative perceptions about the communities in conflict. Also, it was revealed that public relations engaged stakeholders through community events to strengthen ties, and had provided timely responses to manage conflicts and promote peaceful resolutions. Accordingly, majority of the interviewees established that public relations had played a vital role in the resolution of the conflicts in the past. They further assert that through public relations, they were able to come together in a roundtable discussion to address some critical issues that normally brings the conflicts. This is in line with Anoke (2023) who asserts that public relations has the vital tools to encourage community members to co-habit peacefully with one another as well as, with their neighbours and thus, nip in the bud, conflict-oriented issues from generating into conflicts. This is in tandem with the conflict transformation theory which is based on the argument that conflict resolution must not be restricted to just merely reconciling the parties but to address the underlying factors that may have led to the conflicts in the first place, and the two-way symmetric communication model that ensures two-way communication, mediation and dialogue which facilitates feedback between the parties in conflicts.

Conclusion

Conflict is inevitable in human existence, hence, public relations as a vital tool of communication in conflict resolutions has efficacy of resolving conflicts, be it communal or organisational conflicts. Therefore, using public relations strategies in resolving communal conflicts have changed the attitudes of people towards conflicts in their communities. The study, therefore, concludes that despite the re-occurrence of the conflicts during farming season, the communities have been able to address the conflict-related issues by employing public relations strategies such as dialogue, mediation and negotiation in restoring peace and cooperation between neighbouring communities. It also concluded that public relations has the potentials to resolve conflicts through mutual understanding, and peaceful co-existence among parties.

Recommendations

From the finding of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Stakeholders from the communities in conflicts should explore more public relations strategies in resolving their conflicts and amplify on the ones working for ultimate peace.
2. The Obudu Local Government Council and Vandeikya Local Government Council should establish a joint peace committee involving all stakeholders to open more lines of communication in resolving every conflict amicably to avoid escalation.

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