

PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT OF FARMERS-HERDERS CLASHES IN CROSS RIVER NORTHERN SENATORIAL DISTRICT

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Abstract

The study examined public relations strategies for crisis management of farmers-herders clashes in Cross River Northern Senatorial District. It anchored on situational crisis communication theory, and two-way symmetric communication model. The objective was to examine the role of public relations in crisis management of farmers-herders clashes in Cross River North. To achieve this, the study adopted mixed-method using questionnaire and in-depth interview as instruments for data collection. The population of this study was 1,339,329 comprising residents of the five LGAs in the senatorial district, from which the sample size of 400 respondents was drawn, using Taro Yamane formula. The purposive sampling technique was used to administer questionnaire to the respondents. The frequency tables and weighted mean was employed for data analysis. It was found that public relations strategies such as mediation, dialogue, and face-to-face reconciliation are used in crisis management. It reveals that the PR strategies deployed has helped in restoring some level of peace in the farmers-herders clashes. The study concluded that despite all the efforts by the stakeholders to put an end to the incessant farmers-herders clashes in Cross River Northern Senatorial District, the crisis still persists because there are no existing crises management committee in place to have a regular peace meeting with them. Therefore, the study recommended that the government, traditional institutions and community members should introduce more public relations strategies in managing farmers-herders crisis in Cross River Northern Senatorial District, as well as leveraging on the existing ones that are working for better results.

Keywords: Crisis management, clashes, PR strategies, farmers-herders, Cross River North

Introduction

The issues of farmers-herder's crises in Nigeria today have multi-dimensional causes, ranging from climate change to seasonal migration, farmland pressure, grazing routes, weak enforcement of land and livestock regulations, and breakdown in community dialogue between farmers and nomadic herders (Udosen, 2021). Cross River Northern Senatorial District comprised five Local Government Areas of Ogoja, Yala, Bekwarra, Obudu and Obanliku located in northern part of Cross River State. They are predominately an agrarian community, cultivating yam, cassava, maize, groundnut and rice; and the increasing pressure from seasonal livestock movements has affected its productivity as a result of crop destruction by the rampaging herds of cattle. This has resulted in tension between the local farmers and the nomadic herdsmen.

In our contemporary society, the place of public relations in crisis management is increasingly recognised as essential for effective peace building in the society. Public relations is fundamentally a strategic communication process that seeks to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their various publics (Omachi et al., 2024). In the context of Nigeria, a country plagued by recurring crises such as insurgency, terrorism, communal violence, and farmers-herders clashes, the importance of public relations in managing communication during crises cannot be overstated (Garba, 2024). Therefore, strategies employed in public relations are essential for achieving communication goals and addressing the specific needs of different audiences including crisis management in communities (Onalaja, 2024).

Crisis is one of the essential components of human existence, which is inescapable in various communities and organisations. It occurs as a result of clash of interest between two or more people, states or nations (Odoh et al., 2022). Hence, Odoh et al. (2022) further aver that farmers-herders interactions in our various communities have periodically escalated into

crisis due to competition over land and water, crop damage, destruction of farmlands, rape, kidnappings, cattle rustling and weak crisis management institutions.

According to Udosen (2021), the farmers-herders' conflict can be understood as a problem of access to land for economic survival, which as a result has caused economic, political, and environmental tensions in the country. The destructive effects of this crisis on the activities of rural farmers in Cross River Northern Senatorial District of Cross River State can, therefore, be better imagined.

Therefore, the recent local protests and advocacy by women and youth groups in Cross River Northern Senatorial District over the destruction of their farmlands by nomadic herdsmen underscore the rising mistrust and hostility that exist towards the herdsmen (Cross river watch, May 18, 2025). Consequently, to contain this, two-way communication strategies are required to promote factual information, sustain dialogue during tense periods and prevent the escalation of crisis. This study examines how public relations strategies can be applied in managing crisis in the farmers-herders clashes in Cross River Northern Senatorial District of Cross River State.

Statement of the Problem

The rate of incessant attacks by nomadic herders on farmers across Nigeria has become alarming and has affected both farming and economic activities which Cross River Northern Senatorial District is no exception. The place of public relations in crisis management cannot be overemphasised as it fosters cordial relationship, build good neighbourliness and trust between individuals and organisations. The neglect of public relations strategies in crisis management can lead to misperceptions and distrust between individuals and organisations. The farmers-herders crisis is one of the most challenging issues in many communities across the country today.

Despite multiple interventions, recurring attacks suggest there are gaps in crisis management as a result of untimely compensation of farmers and inconsistent communication among stakeholders. To this end, public relations strategies seem not to have been effectively utilised by the stakeholders in crisis management in the farmers-herders clashes in Cross River Northern Senatorial District. This study, therefore, seeks to find out the efficient ways by which public relations strategies could be used by the stakeholders in managing the crisis in the farmers-herders clashes in Cross River Northern Senatorial District in order to put an end to the incessant clashes and for them to live together peacefully.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine public relations strategies for crisis management of farmers-herders clashes in Cross River Northern Senatorial District. The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To find out the public relations strategies used by the government, traditional institutions and community members in managing the crisis between farmers and herdsmen in Cross River Northern Senatorial District.
2. To examine the level of awareness of public relations strategies in crisis management between farmers and herdsmen in Cross River Northern Senatorial District.
3. To ascertain whether the public relations strategies were effectively beneficial in sustaining the stakeholders' engagement in managing the crisis between farmers and herdsmen in Cross River Northern Senatorial District.

Research Questions

1. What are the public relations strategies used by the government, traditional institutions and community members in managing the crisis between farmers and herdsmen in Cross River Northern Senatorial District?

2. What is the level of awareness of public relations strategies in crisis management between farmers and herdsmen in Cross River Northern Senatorial District?
3. To what extent had public relations strategies been effectively beneficial in sustaining the stakeholders' engagement in managing the crisis between farmers and herdsmen in Cross River Northern Senatorial District?

Review of Literature

Concept of Public Relations

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. Public relations is a strategic communication discipline that aims to build and maintain positive relationships between organisations, individuals, or entities and their various stakeholders (Sheyigari, 2023). According to Emuru et al. (2024), 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 for themselves. Public relations manage relationships and build trust among different groups or interest.

Saidu and Tsegay (2024) argue that public relations has emerged as an indispensable communication tool in contemporary organisations, playing a critical role in fostering mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation between organisations and their diverse stakeholders. This, they argue, is based on its role to create mutual understanding in addition to serving as the basic tool for achieving peace and concord in various communities. Chibueze (2019) posits that public relations is a deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.

According to Aligwe and Alegu (2018), public relations is the art and science of achieving harmony with the environment through mutual understanding based on truth and full information. Public relations has evolved from being merely a tool for corporate image management into a strategic function that facilitates mutual understanding and relationships between organisations and their publics (Unigwe & Okika, 2025). Consequently, public relations activities entail planned communication programmes aimed at achieving a targeted objective, including those intended to influence public opinions, peaceful co-existence among community groups.

Crisis and Crisis Management

Crisis could be seen as a disagreement between individuals or groups over an ideology, perceived suppression or sudden change of event in an organisation. According to Saidu and Tsegay (2024), crisis is a struggle over scarce resources or status, often involving zero-sum outcomes. A crisis occurs when a person faces an obstacle to important life goals that generally seems insurmountable through the use of customary habits and coping patterns. It is a point of decision which, if not taken care of in a proper and timely manner or neglected all together, may turn into a catastrophe or disaster (Singhal, 2021). Bringing in the idea of psychology in the definition of crises, Yeager and Roberts (2015) assert that it is a period of psychological disequilibrium, experienced as a result of a hazardous event or situation that constitutes a significant problem that cannot be remedied by using familiar coping strategies.

According to Udosen (2021), there are a number of factors that combine to cause and escalate crisis between herdsmen and farmers. The main cause of farmers-herders crisis has been the change in climate occasioned by the absence of adequate rainfall, poor grazing land for their animals and lack of coping mechanisms by the herdsmen. Akinpelu and

Aroriode (2021) assert that the major causes of conflict between herdsmen and farmers was the indiscriminate destruction of farm produce due to invasion of farmlands by herders. Others are forceful encroachment of farmlands, cattle rustling by local miscreants, poor handling of crises by government and the security agency (the police) and community leaders/traditional rulers.

Obi (2023) assert that the consequence of crisis in a country is a sharp rise in food prices owing to the substantial reduction in food production as a result of attacks by herdsmen. Ojelade (2019) argue that one of the major consequences of crisis was the loss of lives and properties. Mbah et al. (2020) posit that the destruction of farm crop could cause poor harvest, insufficient food supply and loss of productive resources culminating to poor income.

Managing a crisis requires a deliberate effort and plan as an individual or organisation to prevent them before they occur or manage them effectively when they occurred. According to Barango-Tariah et al. (2022), there are three basic strategies for resolving conflict: dominance, compromise, and integration. The authors further assert that the strategies in resolving interpersonal conflict are: forcing, retreating, smoothing, compromise, and issue solving. Victor et al. (2025) identify strategies to mitigate farmers and herdsmen conflict to include: community engagement approaches that build social cohesion for sustainable peace, and legal and policy frameworks reform to address structural causes of conflict.

In view of the foregoing, Sabo (2025) identify crisis management strategies in farmers-herders crisis to include: Community-based Peace Architecture – properly constituted peace committees reduce violent incidents when fully implemented in the areas; these committees should be individuals comprising representatives from both farmer and herder groups. Establishment of Open Communication Channels – breakdowns in communication often exacerbate minor disputes into major conflicts. Most violent escalations stem from unresolved minor disagreements that could

have been mediated.

According to Diddi and Wei (2022), management of crisis encompasses a range of strategies aimed at mitigating crises and minimising the resultant harm. Hence, organisations, individuals and communities should adopt proactive and preventative measures to mitigate and manage the impact of crisis if it occurs within their operational milieu.

Public Relations Strategies in Managing Crisis

Crises are inevitable occurrences in every community and human life. They often occur unexpectedly, disrupting the peace and stability of communities. Thus, public relations has increasingly been recognised as a critical tool in crisis prevention and management (Saidu & Tsegysu, 2024). Unigwe and Okika (2025) posit that public relations can serve as a peace building tool by providing platforms for dialogue, shaping conflict narratives, and helping communities understand opposing viewpoints. Public relations strategies are instrumental in shaping public perceptions and behaviours towards crisis management in communities (Sheyigari, 2023). Saidu and Tsegysu (2024) posit that public relations strategies such as dialogue, negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and community engagement are globally recognised tools for crisis management and resolutions in community crisis. Hence, Chibueze (2019) identifies the following as public relations strategies use in resolving community conflicts: negotiation, mediation, inquiry, conciliation, arbitration, mass media, public opinion and propaganda devices.

According to Alhasani and Muslim (2022), negotiation as a public relations strategy is essentially a two-or more-party communication process. This process can range from open and cordial, with free information exchange even though parties work collaboratively and seek to meet mutual interests, to close and adversarial, with information hoarded as parties compete to gratify only their own interests and, if necessary, destroy the

interests of the other party in the process. Negotiation is when two or more people with different needs and goals address mutually compatible alternatives to address crisis situations with their community (Idham et al., 2022).

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), and Two-way Symmetric Communication Model.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) was propounded by Timothy Coombs in 1995. It is a comprehensive theory that examines the communication strategies that organisations should adopt when faced with a crisis. The theory suggests that organisations should consider the nature of the crisis, the stakeholders affected, and the communication strategies that are most appropriate for the situation (Ali, 2024).

In the context of the farmers-herdsmen crisis, the SCCT suggests that communities should take a proactive approach to crisis communication. This means that all the stakeholders should identify the potential risks associated with farmers-herdsmen crisis, as well as the potential consequences of those risks. The relevance of the theory to this study is that all the relevant stakeholders – farmers, herdsmen, traditional leaders, community members, security agents – need to develop comprehensive response strategy that guides the community's actions during the crisis. This would help the community identify the specific crisis they are facing and then develop a communication strategy that is tailored to that particular situation.

Two-way Symmetric Communication Model

The Two-way Symmetric Communication Model was propounded by Grunig and Hunt in 1984. The two-way symmetric model depicts a

communication relationship, where the source and the public share initiative and power more equally. Grunig and Hunt 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 model is considered relevant to this study because farmers, herdsmen and other stakeholders of these communities or its publics would benefit through the two-way communication approach. This approach ensures two-way communication, which facilitates feedback between farmers, herdsmen and other stakeholders. With this, crises are identified on time and nipped in the bud and peace would reign in the communities.

Methodology

This study adopted both quantitative and qualitative research methods, using questionnaire and in-depth interview as instruments of data collection. The study examined how public relations can be applied in managing crisis in the farmers-herders clashes in Cross River Northern Senatorial District. According to NPC/CRSBS projected population (2024), the population of the study comprised youths and adult residents in Cross River Northern Senatorial District, totaling 1,339,329 from which the sample size of 400 was drawn, using Taro Yamane formula. Consequently, eight stakeholders who are most affected and with first-hand information were interviewed to get their feelings, they are two farmers, two nomadic herders, two traditional leaders, one youth leader and one women leader. A purposive sampling technique was used to administer copies of questionnaire to the respondents; this is to enable the researcher reach out to those that are most

affected and with first-hand information. Accordingly, the data used descriptive statistical method of frequency distribution on frequency tables, the statistical information obtained was analysed in a four-point Likert format and scaled as: SA (4); A (3); D (2); and SD (1), and weighted mean for the analysis.

Thus, the sample size for this study was 400 respondents that was determined from the population of 1,339,329, 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
l = unit in value

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$
$$n = \frac{1,339,329}{1+1,339,329 (0.05)^2}$$
$$n = \frac{1,339,329}{1+1,339,329 (0.0025)}$$
$$n = \frac{1,339,329}{1+1,339,329 \times 0.0025}$$
$$n = \frac{1,339,329}{1,339,330 \times 0.0025}$$
$$n = \frac{1,339,329}{3,348,325}$$
$$n = 399,999$$
$$n = 400$$

Results

The data used for this study were the 9-item closed-ended questionnaire designed to address the basic research questions. A total of 400 copies of questionnaire were administered but 380 copies were duly filled and returned correctly.

Table 1: Public relations strategies use for crisis management between farmers and herdsman

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean score	Decision
1	They use mediation and dialogue among parties as PR strategies in crisis management	180	200	-	-	380	3.4	Accepted
2	They use negotiation and face-to-face reconciliation meetings in crisis management	160	192	18	10	380	3.2	Accepted
3	They engage traditional rulers and council of elders to coordinate crisis response and peace building efforts	152	190	31	7	380	3.2	Accepted
Mean score = 3.2		Decision Rule = Accepted						

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Decision Rule: If the calculated mean is equal or greater than the criterion Mean (2.5), then the decision is accepted but if the calculated mean is lower than the criterion mean (2.5), the decision is rejected.

The table above indicates that at a mean value of 3.2, respondents accepted that they have adequate knowledge about the public relations strategies use by the stakeholders in Cross River Northern Senatorial District to address the issue of farmers and herdsman crisis. The study further reveals that they use mediation and dialogue, negotiation and face-to-face meetings in crisis management. Further investigation reveals that they engage traditional rulers and council of elders to coordinate crisis response and peace building efforts in crisis management.

Table 2: The level of awareness of public relations strategies in crisis management in Cross River Northern Senatorial District

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean score	Decision
4	I know what a public relations strategy is.	90	115	93	82	380	2.5	Accepted
5	I am aware of community meetings used to settle disputes.	102	174	83	21	380	2.9	Accepted
6	I know about the role of traditional leaders in crisis management.	96	160	78	46	380	2.8	Accepted
Mean score = 2.7		Decision Rule = Accepted						

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Decision Rule: If the calculated mean is equal or greater than the criterion Mean (2.5), then the decision is accepted but if the calculated mean is lower than the criterion mean (2.5), the decision is rejected.

From the result analysed in table two above, it was established that the respondents know what public relations strategy is. They also affirm that they are aware of community meetings used to settle disputes by the stakeholders. Further analysis indicates that the respondents are aware about the role traditional leaders play in crisis management between farmers and herdsmen in Cross River Northern Senatorial District.

Table 3: The extent to which PR strategies has effectively sustained the stakeholders' engagement in crisis management

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean score	Decision
7	Creating awareness and information dissemination through sensitisation programmes and community dialogue as PR strategies have been effective.	91	157	62	70	380	2.7	Accepted
8	The use of dialogue and stakeholders' meetings as PR strategies to sustain engagement among parties have been effective.	94	146	67	73	380	2.6	Accepted
9	The use of indigenous communication systems as PR strategies have been effective.	97	129	89	65	380	2.6	Accepted
Mean score = 2.7		Decision Rule = Accepted						

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Decision Rule: If the calculated mean is equal or greater than the criterion Mean (2.5), then the decision is accepted but if the calculated mean is lower than the criterion mean (2.5), the decision is rejected.

From the analysis above, with the mean value of 2.6, it was established that awareness creation and information dissemination through sensitisation programmes and community dialogue as PR strategies have yielded positive results in sustaining the stakeholders' engagement in crisis management between farmers and herdsmen in the community. The study further revealed that the use of indigenous communication systems as PR strategies have yielded positive result in effectively sustaining the stakeholders' engagement in crisis management between farmers and herdsmen in Cross River Northern Senatorial District.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question One: What are the public relations strategies use by the government, traditional institutions and community members in crisis management between farmers and herdsmen in Cross River Northern Senatorial District?

With regards to public relations strategies use in Cross River Northern Senatorial District for crisis management between farmers and herdsmen, respondents accepted that the stakeholders use mediation and dialogue among parties as PR strategies in crisis management; they use negotiation and face-to-face reconciliation meetings. They further revealed that they engage traditional rulers and council of elders to coordinate crisis response and peace building efforts as part of PR strategies in crisis management. Corroborating the views of the respondents, majority of the interviewees identified public relations strategies in crisis management to include community dialogue and peace forums where local leaders support government officials organised regular peace meetings with both farmers and nomadic herders to discuss their grievances and negotiate coexistence agreements. Traditional and religious leaders such as village heads and clerics acted as mediators and communicators, transmitting messages of peace and negotiating behavioural change.

This is in line with Saidu and Tsegwu (2024) who posit that public relations strategies such as dialogue, negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and community engagement are globally recognised tools for crisis management and resolutions in community crisis.

Research Question Two: What is the level of awareness of public relations strategies in crisis management between farmers and herdsmen in Cross River Northern Senatorial District?

In terms of the level of awareness by stakeholders of public relations strategies in crisis management in Cross River Northern Senatorial District between farmers and herdsmen, majority of the respondents admitted that they know what public relations strategy is, however, insignificant numbers that does not know what public relations strategy is, should not be ignored, but adequate sensitisation be carried out. They further revealed that they are aware of community meetings used to settle disputes by the stakeholders. Further investigation indicates that they are aware of the role traditional leaders play in crisis management in Cross River Northern Senatorial District. Contributing to the question to address the level of awareness, interviewees affirm that the majority of the farmers and herdsmen are aware of the PR strategies, because they are always carried along in any discussion involving them. However, one of the interviewees suggests that more awareness and sensitisation should be done because some of them may be ignorant. This finding is in tandem with Unigwe and Okika (2025) who said public relations can serve as a peace building tool by providing platforms for dialogue, shaping conflict narratives, and helping communities understand opposing viewpoints.

Research Question Three: To what extent had public relations strategies been effectively beneficial in sustaining the stakeholders' engagement in crisis management between farmers and herdsmen in Cross River Northern

Senatorial District?

In examining the effectiveness of public relations strategies in sustaining the stakeholders' engagement in crisis management between farmers and herdsmen in Cross River Northern Senatorial District, the analysis with the decision rule of 2.6 implies that the public relations strategies had effectively sustained the stakeholders' engagement in crisis management between farmers and herdsmen, and had reduced some level of tensions in the community. According to the respondents, creating awareness and information dissemination through sensitisation programmes and community dialogues as PR strategies have been effective. Further investigation revealed that the use of dialogue and stakeholders' meetings as PR strategies to sustain engagement among parties by government agencies, traditional rulers and civil society organisations have also worked to reduce the issue of incessant attacks by the herdsmen on the farmers. The analysis also found that the use of indigenous communication systems as PR strategies have helped to manage farmers-herders crisis.

Consequently, majority of the interviewees assert that the strategies have been effective because it had led to noticeable reduction in violence and attacks for some time. The participants acknowledged that dialogue had brought mutual understanding and relative peace. This is in line with Sheyigari (2023) who posit that public relations is a strategic communication discipline that aims to build and maintain positive relationships between organisations, individuals, and their various stakeholders. Therefore, this behoves on all the stakeholders to embrace dialogue and amplify all the necessary strategies and continue to engage farmers and herdsmen to avoid further clashes between them.

Conclusion

Public relations is crucial in crisis management either in society, community or organisation. The research highlighted the public relations

strategies use in Cross River Northern Senatorial District to manage crisis between farmers and herdsmen. The study identify mediation, negotiation, dialogue, face-to-face reconciliation meetings as well as engaging with traditional rulers, and community leaders to coordinate crisis response and peace building efforts as part of PR strategies in crisis management. The study revealed that a significant number of respondents are aware of community meetings used as part of dispute resolutions mechanism by stakeholders, and the role traditional leaders play in crisis management between farmers and herdsmen.

Findings further revealed that the public relations strategies have effectively sustained the stakeholders' engagement in crisis management between farmers and herdsmen. The study, therefore, concludes that despite all the efforts by the stakeholders to put an end to the incessant farmers-herdsmen crisis in Cross River Northern Senatorial District, the crisis still persists because there are no existing crises management committee in place in Cross River Northern Senatorial District to have a regular peace meeting and interface between farmers, nomadic herdsmen and other stakeholders.

Recommendations

From the finding of the research, the study therefore recommends that:

1. The government, traditional institutions and community members should introduce more public relations strategies in managing crisis between farmers and herdsmen in Cross River Northern Senatorial District, as well as leveraging on the existing ones that are working for better results.
2. The government, traditional institutions and community members in Cross River Northern Senatorial District should carry out more awareness and sensitisation programmes on public relations strategies in crisis management between farmers and herdsmen, as well as regular peace meetings for mutual understanding.

3. The stakeholders in Cross River Northern Senatorial District should continually engage both farmers and herdsman amicably to maintain peacefully atmosphere in the community.

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