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Assessing the Influence of Public Relations Activities in the Management of Amnesty Programme in the South-South Region of Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of public relations (PR) activities in the management of the Amnesty Programme in the South-South region of Nigeria. Amidst longstanding militancy and oil-related conflicts, the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) was designed to address insecurity, promote peace, and foster rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-militants. However, the success and sustainability of this initiative heavily rely on strategic communication, stakeholder engagement, and public perception—all of which fall within the domain of public relations. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study examines the extent to which PR strategies such as community engagement, media relations, conflict resolution communication, and image management contribute to the overall effectiveness of the programme. A structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews were administered among programme beneficiaries, government officials, and PR practitioners operating within the region. Findings reveal that while PR activities significantly enhance transparency, trust-building, and reintegration outcomes, challenges such as misinformation, poor feedback mechanisms, and limited community involvement persist. The study underscores the need for more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and two-way symmetrical communication models in the management of reintegration and peacebuilding initiatives. It recommends a restructured PR strategy that prioritizes grassroots engagement and continuous dialogue between stakeholders.

Keywords: Public Relations, Management, Amnesty Programme, South-South Nigeria.



Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria, also referred to as the South-South zone, has long been a focal point of political unrest, environmental degradation, and economic neglect despite being the nation's primary source of crude oil revenue (Ibeanu, 2010). The persistent conflict in the area, marked by militant activities, pipeline vandalism, and hostage-taking, has drawn national and international attention. In response to these crises, the Nigerian Federal Government introduced the Amnesty Programme in 2009 under President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua. While the Programme initially succeeded in reducing militant activities and restoring relative peace in the region, questions persist about its long-term sustainability, transparency, and communication strategy. The management of the Programme has been critiqued for failing to sufficiently engage stakeholders and for being shrouded in opacity (Ibaba & Olumati, 2016). As a result, many communities in the Niger Delta still harbor feelings of marginalization, while the threat of recidivism among former militants remains a pressing concern.

One of the critical, yet under-researched components of the Amnesty Programme is the role of public relations (PR) in its administration. Public relations serve as a bridge between policy implementers and stakeholders by fostering mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation (Ibaba, & Olumati, 2024). Effective PR strategies—such as community engagement, media advocacy, conflict communication, and feedback mechanisms—are essential in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction (Idom, 2020; Ajayi, 2018). In the context of the Amnesty Programme, PR activities are supposed to help clarify government intentions, manage public expectations, and promote reintegration processes. However, the fragmented media narratives and persistent community unrest suggest that PR efforts may not have been adequately designed or implemented. There is a noticeable gap in literature and practice concerning how PR tools have been utilized to manage the Amnesty Programme and to influence its perception among the people of the South-South region. This gap underscores the necessity for an academic inquiry into the extent, nature, and influence of public relations in the Programme's management.

Since its inception in 2009, the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) has been a central strategy in addressing the conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. While the initiative has led to the disarmament and initial reintegration of over 30,000 ex-militants. It has not fully resolved the underlying grievances of the local population nor eliminated the threats of renewed violence and instability. The South-South region, despite its economic significance, continues to suffer from youth restiveness, environmental degradation, and growing mistrust toward government-led interventions. At the heart of this discontent is a communication gap between the Programme's administrators and its primary stakeholders—ex-agitators, local communities, traditional rulers, and civil society actors. Public relations, which should play a pivotal role in bridging this gap, appears to be underutilized or misapplied (Ogwezzy, 2020).

Given this background, this study is driven by the urgent need to assess how public relations activities are influencing the management and outcomes of the Amnesty Programme. It seeks to examine whether strategic communication efforts are adequately tailored to the sociocultural and political context of the South-South region, and how they affect the perception, participation, and trust of stakeholders. The primary objective of this study is to assess the influence of public relations activities in the management of the Amnesty Programme in the South-South region of Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to: examine the public relations strategies employed in the implementation of the Amnesty Programme in the South-South region; evaluate the effectiveness of these PR activities in shaping public perception and stakeholder engagement in the Programme and investigate the challenges hindering the use of strategic public relations in the successful management of the Amnesty Programme.



Theoretical Framework

For this study, Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) is adopted as the most appropriate theoretical lens to examine the influence of public relations activities on the management of the Amnesty Programme in the South-South region of Nigeria. While several theories such as Agenda-Setting, Social Exchange, and Framing provide valuable insights into communication and perception management, Stakeholder Theory offers a more holistic and strategic foundation for analyzing how diverse actors interact with and influence the success or failure of public policy interventions, particularly in complex post-conflict environments. Stakeholder Theory emphasizes the need for organizations and programmes to identify, engage, and communicate effectively with all individuals or groups who are impacted by or have an interest in their operations (Freeman et al., 2010). In the case of the Niger Delta Amnesty Programme, stakeholders include ex-militants, host communities, non-governmental organizations, oil companies, state and federal government agencies, traditional leaders, and the media. Each of these groups plays a critical role in shaping public perception, legitimacy, and ultimately, the effectiveness of the Amnesty initiative.

The relevance of Stakeholder Theory in this context is threefold. First, it provides a strategic framework for mapping stakeholder relationships and designing targeted public relations activities that foster trust, transparency, and collaboration. Second, it emphasizes accountability and inclusiveness, which are essential in peacebuilding and reintegration programmes. By engaging stakeholders through continuous dialogue and participatory communication, the Programme is more likely to address grievances, align expectations, and gain long-term acceptance. Third, the theory encourages mutual benefit and respect, principles that are crucial in restoring social order and empowering affected communities to become co-owners of peace initiatives. Several studies validate the relevance of Stakeholder Theory to public relations and conflict management in the Niger Delta. For instance, Ibaba and Olumati (2016) stress that failure to consider grassroots stakeholders during the initial design and communication of the Amnesty Programme contributed to mistrust and sporadic resistance. Similarly, Ojakorotu and Gilbert (2020) argue that inclusive communication strategies grounded in stakeholder engagement are essential to the legitimacy and sustainability of conflict intervention programmes.

Furthermore, Stakeholder Theory aligns with best practices in public relations, which advocate for two-way symmetrical communication—a model that balances organizational interests with stakeholder needs (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Applying this approach to the Amnesty Programme ensures that public relations does not merely serve to inform or persuade but also to listen, adapt, and build durable relationships. In summary, Stakeholder Theory is not only theoretically sound but also practically adaptable for examining the influence of public relations in managing the Amnesty Programme. It emphasizes that effective communication is not an end in itself but a continuous process of negotiation, feedback, and trust-building among all parties involved.

Method

This study adopts a quantitative research design, specifically a descriptive survey approach. This design is appropriate for systematically gathering data from a defined population to identify patterns, relationships, and perceptions related to public relations activities within the Amnesty Programme in the South-South region of Nigeria. The choice of this design is driven by the need to quantify opinions and attitudes, allowing for generalization of findings to a larger population (Creswell, 2014). The survey design enables the researcher to use standardized instruments—in this case, a structured questionnaire—to collect measurable data across various categories of stakeholders including government officials, communication officers, ex-militants, and community leaders. Descriptive survey is ideal for exploring the nature, scope, and impact of public relations strategies, as it permits comparisons and statistical analysis of stakeholders' perceptions and responses. The design also supports the study's objectives of determining the



effectiveness of public relations in influencing perception, fostering communication, and addressing conflict management challenges associated with the Amnesty Programme.

The population of this study comprises individuals and groups directly or indirectly involved in or affected by the Niger Delta Amnesty Programme. These include: (i) officials in the Presidential Amnesty Office; (ii) public relations and communication personnel; (iii) beneficiaries of the amnesty (ex-militants); and (iv) members of affected communities in states such as Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers. According to the Presidential Amnesty Programme Annual Report (2022), there are approximately 30,000 documented beneficiaries of the programme, alongside 500+ staff members and community facilitators involved in its implementation. Community populations in the Niger Delta region (Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers states combined) exceed 10 million people, but for this study, attention is focused on those living in direct proximity to amnesty operations or facilities. Thus, the target population includes government officials, community members, ex-militants, and public relations professionals, estimated at approximately 35,000 relevant stakeholders.

The geographical area of this study is the South-South region of Nigeria, specifically focusing on Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers States, which are the epicenters of both militant activity and Amnesty Programme operations. These states are not only rich in oil resources but have historically experienced unrest due to perceived environmental degradation, marginalization, and lack of economic opportunities. Bayelsa State is the home of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), one of the primary militant groups whose activities triggered the launch of the Amnesty Programme. Delta and Rivers states also recorded high levels of militant agitation and have subsequently served as major hubs for rehabilitation, vocational training, and reintegration exercises under the Programme. These three states collectively house most of the ex-militants enrolled in the Programme and have served as pilot regions for communication and reintegration strategies. By focusing on this specific area, the study ensures that data collected reflects the experiences of those most directly impacted by the Amnesty Programme and public relations activities used to manage it.

In a quantitative study, determining an appropriate sample size is essential for ensuring the representativeness of the population and the reliability of results. Using Taro Yamane's formula for sample size determination at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error; the calculated sample size is approximately 400 respondents. They were selected proportionately across the identified stakeholder categories in Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers states, ensuring a balanced and comprehensive representation of perspectives.

To select the sample of 400 respondents from the estimated population of 35,000, this study adopts a multi-stage sampling technique, combining purposive sampling and stratified random sampling to ensure representativeness across the stakeholder categories. In the first stage, purposive sampling is used to identify the three states—Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers—due to their centrality in the Amnesty Programme's operations and militant activities. Within these states, Amnesty Programme officials, communication officers, ex-militants, and community stakeholders are purposively targeted based on their active involvement or proximity to the programme. In the second stage, the study applies stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation from the four major stakeholder categories:

Amnesty Programme officials, Public relations and communication officers, Ex-militants and Community leaders/members.

The sample size is proportionately distributed across these strata, and within each stratum, respondents are randomly selected to minimize bias. This approach enhances the reliability of the findings and allows for comparative analysis across different stakeholder experiences and perceptions (Etikan et al., 2016). The primary instrument for data collection is a structured questionnaire designed to capture quantitative responses relevant to the study objectives and research questions. The items explore themes such as the



effectiveness of public relations strategies, the extent of community engagement, transparency in communication, conflict resolution, and trust-building. This instrument allows for efficient data analysis and easy interpretation of stakeholder opinions.

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was subjected to review by three academic experts in the fields of mass communication, public relations, and peace and conflict studies. These professionals assessed the clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the questionnaire items, ensuring they adequately covered the scope of the research objectives and questions. Additionally, a pilot test was conducted with a small sample of 20 respondents—representing all four stakeholder categories in the region—to identify potential ambiguities or misunderstandings in the items. Feedback from the pilot test led to minor revisions in item wording to enhance clarity and reliability. The validation process ensures that the instrument accurately measures what it is intended to assess and aligns with best practices in survey-based research (Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2018). The structured nature of the questionnaire also improves its replicability and consistency across different respondent groups.

The data for this study was collected using self-administered structured questionnaires. These copies of questionnaire was distributed physically to selected respondents in the South-South states of Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers through field assistants trained on ethical data collection and respondent engagement procedures. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the research, assured of confidentiality, and given the right to decline participation at any point. No identifiable personal data were collected, and responses were used solely for academic purposes.

Findings

This section presents and analyzes the data collected from respondents regarding the influence of public relations (PR) activities in the management of the Amnesty Programme in the South-South region of Nigeria. Data was obtained through structured questionnaires from 395 respondents across three key Niger Delta states: Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers. Descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentages, are used to summarize demographic data, while Likert scale responses are presented in tabular form with interpretation.

RQ1: What public relations strategies are being employed in the implementation of the Amnesty Programme in the South-South region of Nigeria?

Table2: *Respondents' views on awareness of PR strategies*

ITEM STATEMENT	SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{X}$	Decision
The Programme regularly disseminates information through official media	98	212	64	21	2.9	Accepted
PR personnel are involved in community engagement efforts.	90	195	80	30	2.8	Accepted
Media campaigns are used to promote peace and discourage militancy.	88	172	97	38	2.7	Accepted
Town hall meetings are organized regularly.	45	105	175	70	2.3	Rejected
Community feedback is used in designing PR strategies	80	190	90	35	2.8	Accepted
Grand Mean					2.7	Accepted



Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Decision rule: *Given that the benchmark of a 4-point Likert scale is stated at 2.5, this means that when the calculated mean is above 2.5, then the item in question is accepted. However, if the calculated mean is below 2.5, then the item is rejected.*

Most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that information dissemination, engagement through PR personnel, and feedback integration are practiced. However, the relatively lower mean score for town hall meetings suggests a need to strengthen physical community engagement mechanisms.

RQ. 2: How effective are these public relations activities in influencing public perception and enhancing stakeholder engagement?

Table3: *Respondents' views on awareness of PR activities*

ITEM STATEMENT	SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{X}$	Decision
Communication from the Programme improved understanding of its goals.	106	194	67	28	2.9	Accepted
PR activities have enhanced stakeholder trust	74	206	82	33	2.8	Accepted
I feel more involved due to PR outreach.	91	189	75	40	2.7	Accepted
PR initiatives reduced misinformation and community conflict	100	165	83	47	2.7	Accepted
Stakeholders are more receptive due to PR engagement.	75	195	90	35	2.8	Accepted
Grand Mean					2.78	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

The responses indicate that PR has a moderately positive effect on stakeholder awareness, trust, and receptivity. There is room for improvement in inclusivity and clarity in communication.

RQ.3: What challenges hinder the effective use of strategic public relations in the management of the Amnesty Programme?

Table4: *Respondents' views on challenges hindering effective PR*

ITEM STATEMENT	SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{X}$	Decision
PR efforts are constrained by lack of funding.	105	210	60	20	3.1	Accepted
There is a shortage of trained PR professionals.	90	200	65	40	2.9	Accepted
Cultural/language barriers limit message effectiveness.	93	187	80	35	2.8	Accepted
Mistrust between government and locals affects PR outcomes.	216	84	81	19	3.2	Accepted
Lack of two-way communication weakens	107	203	55	30	2.7	Accepted



stakeholder relations						
Grand Mean					2.94	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Funding constraints and mistrust remain critical challenges to effective public relations in the Amnesty Programme. Other concerns include limited professional capacity and lack of inclusive two-way communication mechanisms.

Discussion

From the first research question, it is evident that the Amnesty Programme employs several public relations strategies, including media dissemination, community engagement through PR personnel, and use of town hall meetings. These strategies reflect the adoption of two-way symmetrical communication as advocated by Grunig and Hunt's (1984) Excellence Theory, which promotes mutual understanding between organizations and their publics. The responses show that while these strategies are in place, they are not fully optimized. For instance, town hall meetings and localized engagement were perceived as insufficient, indicating a partial commitment to community-based public relations practices. This is consistent with findings from Ekeanyanwu (2015), who observed that government-driven conflict resolution programmes in Nigeria often lack genuine participatory platforms, undermining their communication effectiveness.

The second research question explores the effectiveness of these PR strategies. Respondents acknowledged that PR activities have enhanced public understanding of the programme's objectives, built moderate levels of trust, and facilitated stakeholder involvement. These findings support Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), which posits that the media and communication processes can shape public priorities. However, the relatively moderate mean scores suggest that while awareness has improved, stakeholder perception and trust levels have not reached the desired impact threshold. This may be attributed to inconsistent messaging or inadequate stakeholder targeting. Research by Oso and Adebayo (2019) reinforces this point, highlighting that poorly coordinated government PR campaigns in conflict-prone areas often result in fragmented communication and reduced public confidence.

The third research question highlights several challenges undermining the effectiveness of strategic public relations in the Amnesty Programme. Chief among these are funding limitations, lack of trained PR professionals, and persistent mistrust between the government and local communities. These findings align with the Situational Theory of Publics (Grunig, 1997), which explains that public responsiveness to communication efforts is influenced by problem recognition, involvement, and constraint recognition. The persistence of mistrust and communication barriers implies high constraint recognition among affected communities, which inhibits active engagement. In a related study, Idom (2020) found that the inability of public institutions to integrate local communicators and community influencers into programme planning significantly weakens stakeholder buy-in and long-term peacebuilding outcomes.

The challenges identified point to an urgent need for professionalization of PR practices in the region and a rethinking of stakeholder engagement strategies. The absence of a structured two-way feedback system, as revealed in the findings, limits opportunities for public input and weakens the mutual benefit principle of PR. This highlights a disconnect between the strategic intent of PR within the Amnesty Programme and its execution on the ground. Furthermore, the communication challenges observed in the programme reflect systemic issues in the broader governance structure of public engagement in the Niger Delta. The continued marginalization and skepticism among the communities underscore the importance of culturally sensitive communication strategies that speak to local realities and build trust over time. In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that while public relations activities are present in the Amnesty



Programme, their potential is yet to be fully harnessed. A recalibration of the PR framework—one that embraces inclusive communication, builds trust, and leverages local knowledge—is essential for achieving sustainable peace and reintegration in the South-South region.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study assessed the influence of public relations activities in the management of the Amnesty Programme in the South-South region of Nigeria. Grounded in communication and public relations theories, the study explored the extent of PR strategy application, their effectiveness, and the challenges affecting their success. The results show that the Amnesty Programme incorporates various public relations strategies such as media campaigns, town hall meetings, and stakeholder engagements. These activities, when effectively implemented, have the potential to shape perceptions, encourage dialogue, and foster reconciliation. The findings also reveal that these strategies have had a moderate positive effect on public awareness and stakeholder trust in the programme.

However, significant barriers persist. These include inadequate funding, insufficient training of PR professionals, communication gaps, and longstanding mistrust between the government and community members. These limitations have constrained the reach and effectiveness of PR efforts. Importantly, the data shows that the absence of a robust two-way communication system further alienates stakeholders who should be active participants in the peacebuilding process. The study underscores the need for the Amnesty Programme to adopt a more strategic and inclusive approach to public relations—one that emphasizes transparency, cultural sensitivity, and sustained community dialogue. Building trust and genuine participation requires more than information dissemination; it demands structured feedback mechanisms and responsive communication tailored to the needs of various stakeholder groups. Ultimately, the role of public relations in post-conflict rehabilitation is indispensable. A reformed, people-centered PR strategy can reposition the Amnesty Programme as a model for sustainable peace, reintegration, and development in the Niger Delta region. Based on the findings and the stated objectives of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the influence of public relations in managing the Amnesty Programme in Nigeria's South-South region:

1. In line with the first objective, the Amnesty Programme must institutionalize strategic public relations as a core operational component. This includes hiring qualified PR professionals trained in peace communication, conflict sensitivity, and stakeholder engagement. Emphasis should be placed on the use of culturally relevant media channels, local languages, and face-to-face forums such as community dialogue sessions, town halls, and radio jingles that reflect grassroots concerns.
2. To achieve the second objective, the programme should implement a two-way symmetrical communication model where communities, ex-agitators, civil society groups, and local governments are actively involved in planning and feedback loops. This means establishing participatory communication channels—such as feedback desks, community liaison officers, and digital engagement platforms—that ensure transparency, responsiveness, and trust-building.
3. As the third objective addresses constraints, the government and policymakers should increase funding for communication efforts within the Amnesty framework. Budgetary allocation should support the development of communication infrastructure, training workshops for PR personnel, and community sensitization programmes. Additionally, the programme should invest in research-based communication planning and monitoring to adapt PR strategies to the dynamic socio-political realities of the region.



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