

## **Public Relations and Administration in Nigeria: A Case Study of the Activities of Public Relations Officer in Isuikwuato Local Government Area, Abia State**

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**Abstract:** In the domain of Public Administration, the activities of the Public Relations Officer in a Local Government Area are those of delegated administration. The Executive Chairman of the Local Government Area Council is the main administrator. Like in other Local Government Areas in Nigeria, Public Relations in its modern perspective is a novelty. One may rightly assert that all over the country, there is an acute dearth of trained Local Government Area Public Relations Officers. Until now, some basic Public Relations activities which include; Advice and Counsel, Relations with the Public, Special Events and Media Relations in Isuikwuato and other Local Government Area in Nigeria are undertaken by untrained or unqualified Public Relations Officers.

**Keywords:** Nigeria; Public Relations Officer; Activities; Administration; Isuikwuato; Abia State

### **INTRODUCTION**

In his book titled Local Government Administration in West Africa, Ronald Wraith (1972) said the following of West Africa:

“True, at the Divisional or District level, there was a rudimentary form of Local Government known as Native Authority from which Local Government as exists in West Africa today has developed”.

Isuikwuato Local Government Area is part of the districts that underwent this metamorphosis in West Africa, passing through the stages of clan, district, division, native Authority to the present status of Local Government.

Between the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria on 1914 by Fredrick Lord Lugard and the civil crisis in Nigeria which commenced in 1967, Isuikwuato had remained a clan

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in the Okigwe Division under the Owerri Province of Eastern Nigeria. It remained in this status until May 27, 1967 when the General Gowon administration divided the nation into twelve states. Okigwe became thus a province with the new district of Isuikwuato under it. That was the status given to it by Nigeria, rebellion or no rebellion, till the end of the war.

It became part of East Central State, one of the states that evolved from Eastern Region. There was equally; South Eastern State and Rivers State that were carved out from the former Eastern Region.

In 1976, six years after the end of the Biafra-Nigeria war hitherto referred to the Nigerian civil crisis, during the reign of Retired Lieutenant General Olusegun Obasanjo, further states were created. East Central State was divided into Imo and Anambra States. The status of Isuikwuato as a district was not affected. The Military handed over to the civilian administration in October 1979. The incoming civilian government saw the need to create more local governments. By then, the Isuikwuato District under Okigwe was made a full-fledged Local Government.

Corruption at high places and gross misadministration spoilt the reputation of the civilian administration and compelled the military to come back to power. By the time the military took over on December 31, 1983, every Nigerian was sure there were going to be drastic changes. And it happened so. Isuikwuato and Okigwe which had already been enjoying some kind of autonomy as distinct Local Governments were once again amalgamated into a single Local Government Area. The Government of the long-capped civilian President, Alhaji Shehu Aliyu Shagari was overthrown by Major General Mohammadu Buhari, a dynamic but non-tolerant young military officer from the present Katsina State of Nigeria. Military overthrew military in 1985. This brought into power another Head of State and President of Nigeria, General Ibrahim Badamosa Babaginda. His coming into power brought drastic changes one of which was the creation of more Local Governments. This, according to Government, has been to enhance grassroot development throughout the nation. Isuikwuato District was one of the lucky ones affected by this new policy. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of May 1987, Isuikwuato became a Local Government of its own. This has been the summary of the onerous journey so far, from clan, through district, to Local Government Area which it still remains now 2010.

## **PUBLIC RELATIONS IN ISUIKWUATO DURING THE COLONIAL DAYS**

Like in other Local Government Areas in Nigeria, Public Relations in its modern perspective is a novelty. One may rightly assert that all over the country, there is an acute dearth of trained Local Government Public Relations Officer. Right from the beginning of time, the Local Government has gone on without any specialized agency taking care of this important aspect of public co-ordination. Ab initio, the whitemen had found it difficult to administer the Isuikwuato people. The communicative process was so tense that a panel was set up in 1919 by the British overlords to study the peculiarities of Isuikwuato people and suggest ways of governing them since the British indirect rule was already proving to be a failure in the area.

Later in that year, Mr. V. Fox-Strangeways, the District Officer in charge of Okigwe District of which Isuikwuato was a clan supplied the following information in a special report:

### **1. Introduction:**

The primary objective of this report is to review the characteristics and history and the ancient and existing forms of social, administrative and judicial organization within the clan in such a way as to permit the formation of proposals for a form of government which while according as far as possible

with the ideas and customs of the people, shall be sufficiently comprehensive and elastic to meet the increasing and ever-changing demands of the present day.

2. The Isuikwuatos are a small clan of the Ibo tribe inhabiting the Eastern part of Okigwe Division of the Owerri Division of the Owerri Province.

They are an extremely independent, suspicious and quick-tempered race, fond of intrigue and grasping. On the other hand, they have undoubted intelligence and a keen sense of humour, in fact, in these two respects, they appear to surpass the other inhabitants of the District. Their shyness with strangers is accounted for by the nature of their country, which makes the establishment of proper communications a matter of extreme difficulty, while (paradoxical as it may seem), their intelligence has no doubt been fostered by the labour and trade conditions which attend, and have followed the construction of the Nigerian Railway.

They have a keen clan consciousness, but in spite of this – possibly because of it, for until recently they were split up between the Bende and Okigwe Divisions, thus have always been somewhat difficult to administer, and have for at least the past ten years been regarded as the “untrue children” of Bende and Okigwe.

Yet there is something very likeable about the Isuikwuatos for beneath their rather surely exterior they are humorous and reasonable; and their vociferous stubbornness is perhaps preferable to the facile but meaningless docility characteristic of certain other clans (Ugbor Onundinjo (1959): *Isuikwuato, her History, Tradition, Legend and Intelligence Report*, Aba; (unedited work), p.13)

The essence of this citation is to point out some of the administrative and public relations problems in Isuikwuato during the colonial era. It is pertinent to observe that Mr. Fox Strange-ways exposed correctly on the peculiar traits of the people of Isuikwuato. The problems he pointed out nearly One Hundred and Two (102) years ago still continue today. Subsequent administrators, even today that the clan has become a Local Government, find it difficult administering these people who are said to over-know their rights.

Mr. Fox Strangeways was perhaps a fore-runner of a later literary giant Chinua Achebe who in some of his novels exposed on the conflicts that ensued as a result of administrative misconceptions. The difference is that Chinua Achebe spoke generally of the problems of colonial administrators who employed local and untrained interpreters who did the work of public relations officers. Most of the Ibos employed as interpreters by the whitemen spoke dialects different from those spoken by the audience communities. Thus their interpretations were misunderstood. In his *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe demonstrates the ridicule represented by these false public relations officials who went with the whiteman in the name of interpreters. He writes:

When they had gathered, the whiteman began to speak to them. He spoke through an interpreter who was an Iboman, though his dialect was different and harsh to the ears of Mbanta (people).

Many people laughed at his dialect and the way he used words strangely. Instead of saying ‘myself’ he said ‘my buttocks’ (Achebe Chinua (1958): *Things Fall Apart*, London; Heinemann p. 131)

This demonstrates the use of quacks by the colonial master to communicate with the native communities. Quite often, these self-styled interpreters misunderstood the whitemen and gave what they thought could be accepted to the people rather than the real message from the speaker.

In yet another novel, Chinua Achebe showed how major misunderstandings ensued between the whiteman's entourage on one hand and the native communities on the other hand. Achebe carefully reports a typical scene where the whiteman was talking to the villagers through a difficult interpreter. Achebe writes in his Arrow of God:

"If you have any grain of sense in your belly" said Obaka, "You will know that you are not in the house of the whiteman but in Umara in the house of the Chief Priest of Ulu".

'... tell that young man to take care of how he talks to me, if he had heard of me, he should ask those who have'

"Go eat shit" Shut your mouth! "roared Ezeulu"

(Achebe Chinua (1964): *Arrow of God*, London; Heinemann p. 14).

We have intended to demonstrate here the crude business that public relations represented in the days of the colonial administration. There often ensued exchange of harsh words that finally led into colonial bloodshed or at least torture. Such communication gaps continue till today even though bloodshed has been a story of the past.

But till today, the havoc caused by deficiencies in Public Relations in different states and Local Governments in Nigeria is colossal. Isuikwuato shares in the misadventure in Public Relation activities.

## **SOME BASIC ACTIVITIES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICER IN OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD**

Research projects undertaken in the developed world like Western European Countries and North America (Canada and the U.S.A) show that the activities of Public Relations Officers could be divided into two groups: (1) the Broad and (2) Specific Activities.

According to Walter Lindermann and Alison Lapetina (Fall 1981:p.6) in their research found the following five job characteristics listed as the major responsibilities of the Public Relations Staff:

Communicating and defending management action to the public.

Keeping management informed about public reactions to what an organization does.

Identifying for top management social or political problems, needs and issues that may be of importance to the organization.

Helping top management to develop and execute a constructive response to key issues affecting the organization.

Setting goals and priorities in deciding what communications programs to recommend to senior management.

Concerning the said broad picture, Harold Burnson, Chairman of Burnson Marsteller brochure 1982, set forth the following four roles for Public Relations professionals:

**The Early Warner:** Public relations executives serve as the sensor of social change. They perceive those rumblings at the heart of society that augur good or ill for their organizations. And, after detecting the yearnings and stirrings, they interpret the signals for management.

**The Conscience:** The second role the Public Relations professionals must fulfill is that of corporate conscience. One should not infer from this that public relations people behave in ways more moral and ethical or more in the public interest than executives with different titles...But being the professional corporate conscience is not part of the job description of other executives. It is part of the job description of the chief Public Relations Officer.

**The Communicator:** The third major role of the Public Relations professional is that of communicator – internally and externally. Internal communications must do more than tell or inform. Its primary function is to bring about understanding...communicating with the public outside the corporation is an equally critical undertaking. The problem for the Public Relations professional is to convince the public that the corporation is, indeed, being responsive.

**The Monitor:** The fourth function of the Public Relations professional is to serve as a corporate monitor. Since Public Relations is involved with public issues, there is a need for constant monitoring of corporate policies and programs to make sure that they match public expectation. If the programs are not functioning or if they fall short of expectations, it is the professional's job to agitate for new programs and new policies. If the professionals fail to do so, they fail to live up to the requirements of their job.

Another expert, Glen M. Broom ("A comparison of Sex Roles in Public Relations," *Public Relations Review*, Fall 1982, p.17) from San Diego State University as a Public Relations Teaching Staff perceives for conceptual role models for the Public Relations professionals. For Glen Broom, the following are the conceptual role models:

**The Expert Prescriber:** In this role, the practitioner operates as the authority on both Public Relations problems and their solutions...the practitioner researches and defines the problem, develops the program and takes major responsibility for its implementation.

**The Communication Technician:** These practitioners are typically hired on the basis of their communication and journalistic skills – writing, editing and working with the media. Rather than being part of the management team, practitioners in this role are primarily concerned with preparing and producing communication materials for the Public Relations effort.

**The Communication Facilitator:** In this role, the practitioner serves as a liaison, interpreter and mediator between the organization and its publics. The emphasis is on maintaining a continuous flow of two-way communication. Another major concern is with removing barriers to the exchange of information to keep the channels of communication open.

**The Problem-Solving Process Facilitator:** As members of the management team, practitioners operating in this role collaborate with others throughout the organization to define and solve problems. The Public Relations practitioner helps guide other manager and the organization through a rational problem-solving process that may involve all parts of the organization in the Public Relations planning and programming process. Likewise, the practitioner maintains a high level of management involvement in implementing all phases of the program.

On the part of specific activities of Public Relations practitioners, the broad or generalized description just given will become more specific when explained in terms of the work that the practitioner actually does. Authorities in both Western Europe and North America generally agree that most Public Relations positions involve one or more of the following activities:

**Advice and Counsel:** Providing advice and counsel on organizational policies and actions which have Public Relations ramifications. Given to both top management and to the line departments when situations and problems indicate the need for public relations input and expertise.

**Media Relations:** Setting up and maintaining open channels of communication with mass media personnel.

**Programming:** Analyzing problems and opportunities, defining goals, objectives, publics, strategies and plans.

**Production:** Producing publications, brochures, flyers, reports, films and slide-sound presentations.

**Relations with Publics:** Establishing and maintaining two-way communications with those publics deemed important to the organization.

**Research and Evaluation:** Carrying out or sponsoring studies of key publics, issues and trends. Used both for intelligence-gathering and evaluation of work carried out.

**Special Events:** Planning and handling special showings, convention exhibits, anniversary and new facility celebrations, award programs, tours and special meetings.

**Speaking:** Preparing speeches for others and also delivering speeches and talks to groups and organizations.

**Writing and Editing:** Generating all forms of publicity, written reports, scripts, items.

From what has just been considered, it can be conceptually said that the activities of Public Relations Officers have broad and specific variables. The Public Relations activity variables are therefore to be employed in the case of the activities of P.R.Officers in Isuikwuato Local Government Area in Abia State of Nigeria.

## **PUBLIC RELATIONS IN ISUIKWUATO L.G.A TODAY**

Not much change has taken place in the domain of Public Relations in Isuikwuato Local Government since the 1919 report by the Fox Strange-ways panel. The people have continued to retain their characteristic traits that made their administration a difficult task. This has been worsened by the absence of professional public relations practitioners all the while. The outcome of this is the tossing of the fate of the citizenry, about 250,000 people as at the 1963 census, "projected to a population 463,300 in 1988" (*Spotlight on the Local Governments* (1980): Owerri Government Press Ltd. p.17).

The ugly situation which existed during the colonial period whereby a cross-section of those at the top decided the fate of the entire population without their participation still holds till date.

In the present day, as at the time of this research, the person doing the job of public relations officer in Isuikwuato is a graduate of English from one of the Universities in Nigeria. In answer to one question thrown to him during our interview with him, he revealed that his has been a case of learning on the job. Infact, he had that luck of being appointed P.R.O of Isuikwuato Local Government Area by one of his brothers who is a top-notch, at the State level, in the ruling party in L.G.A, the Social Democratic Party S.D.P, when he has spent almost three years without a job.

In developed nations, this situation could not have been the case. The office of the public relations officer should be manned by an expert trained specifically for that job. The modern world has reached a stage in advancement where specialization has become a keyword in job selection especially at the management level.

Writing under the sub-title "The New Authority" Odiorne S. George in his book Management by Objective: a system of leadership declared: "In fact, the new leader makes no decisions, but operates a decision making apparatus, reports Profesor Mason Haire of University of California. And Professor Douglas McGregor of the Institute of Technology says that leadership is a relationship rather than a function performed by one man pulling together a symbolic chief and participating followers" (Walter Lindermann and Alison Laperina:Fall 1981).

The above situation is exactly the case in Isuikwuato Local Government Area where the Chairman, through the agency of the so-called Public Relations Officer (P.R.O) dishes out orders that must be

obeyed by the local chiefs and their citizens. Public relations should follow a two-way channel, a to and fro route, not a unilateral avenue.

## **THE IDENTIFIED BASIC ACTIVITIES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICER IN ISUIKWUATO LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA**

During the fieldwork of this case study between 1990 and 2010 and based on the basic activities of Public Relations Officers already known to exist in other developed countries of the world like those of Western Europe and North America; it was discovered that some of the identified groups of basic activities poorly operating in Isuikwuato Local Government Area were:

(1) Advice and Counsel (2) Relation with the Public (3) Special Events (4) Media Relations.

These identified four groups of basic activities will be briefly discussed below:

(1) Advice and Counsel

By this is implied that the Public Relations Officer should be in regular amicable contact with the communities in the Local Government of his authority. This will arm him adequately to give advice to the Chairman, who is a politician in the Nigerian situation on organizational policies.

This is not the case in Isuikwuato Local Government Area where the two parties vying for rulership all over the country, operate a system of winner-take-all. As the ruling party has the power of appointing even the Secretary of the Local Government, so is it vested with the power of appointing Public Relations Officer. The result is that since January 1991 till the time of writing this research, August 1991, the Local Government of Isuikwuato has had two different Public Relations Officers. Between January and July 1991 when the Social Democratic Party S.D.P was in power in the L.G.A, the Public Relations Officer (P.R.O) was a loyal member of the S.D.P. In July 1991, when the court action instituted by the National Republican Convention NRC turned out in their favour, the NRC appointed a new P.R.O. Later on S.D.P and N.R.C became defunct political parties. Since 1999, when the 3<sup>rd</sup> Republic came into power, the story has been between two new political parties; People's Democratic Party (PDP) and All Nigerians People's Party (A.N.P.P) in Isuikwuato Local Government Area. With the PDP winning at both the State and Local Government levels, the non-party Public Relations Officer was quickly replaced by a P.D.P affiliate Public Relations Officer. Such was the nature of appointment between 1999 and 2007.

With the incoming of a new political party, Progressive Peoples Alliance (P.P.A) into power in Abia State, Isuikwuato Local Government Area was also affected. What followed was that P.D.P appointed Local Government P.R.O was quickly removed and replaced by a newly appointed P.P.A P.R.O even though he had no Public Relations training at all.

This lack of continuity has created a situation where each P.R.O has always aimed at pleasing the Chairman who has appointed him, while the true position of things in the locality remains undiscussed. A true P.R.O should be immune to political gymicks and should give impartial advice to the Chief Executive of the Local Government Area. This is not prevalent in Isuikwuato Local Government Area.

(2) Relation with the Public

This has to do with the establishment and maintenance of a two-way channel of communication with those publics deemed important to the organizations. It may be necessary to mention some of the important publics within the Local Government. There are town unions established by individual towns and villages to see to the self-help projects which have been the order of the day in Igboland of the post-war era. There are traditional rulers recognized by the State Government to serve as natural heads of the different autonomous communities in the Local Governments. The ideal thing would be for the

Public Relations Officer to extend his tentacles of communication to these publics. But it is lamentable that partisan politics has created a situation where almost all interactions are with people loyal to the parties in power. Cases have been reported of traditional rulers of named communities overstepped in the communicative process. The same situation is often the case with the President of Towns' Development Unions. Often, there are major conflicts between the President of Town Unions and the Traditional Rulers over who is supreme in the village political hierarchy. This is an era where the presence and intercession of the Public Relations Officer is mostly needed. But what obtains in actual life is that the Public Relations Officer either assumes a position of indifference or decides to act in favour of which of the two exhibits some kind of sheepish loyalty to the party in power.

An author, Eweka J.A. an Ibo by tribe and an insider in the affair of government in this part of Nigeria, writes in his book titled Village Development Management Strategy: Food Basket:

Rural development planning has from the immemorial been the outcome of grassroot deliberations of age-groups, village councils and Obas (Traditional Rulers) councils in many rural communities. The major problem of modern rural planning is the non-involvement of the grassroots in the planning process. This has created the problem of remoteness of planners to the realities of the rural landscape and thus exacerbated the problem of irrelevance. Additionally, centralized State or Federal rural development has created the problem of ineffectiveness of Local Governments and thus militated against any development mechanism and capability at local level (Eweka J.A:1979 p. 43).

What is interesting here is the confirmation by Eweka that the grassroots are benighted in West Africa "in the planning process". The office of the Public Relations Officer is such that should keep the governed and the government in close association. But this has not been the case especially in Isuikwuato Local Government right from the beginning.

The more unfortunate thing is that even when a conscientious Public Relations Officer, qualified or unqualified, wants to effect a two-way communication channel, he is quickly reminded by his party that so and so autonomous communities never voted massively for their party. Communication channels are smoother towards areas loyal and friendly with the ruling party. Others are "paid in their own coins".

This situation tends to lend credence to the observation of Ade Farugba in his Elements of Government that "Politics (in West Africa) is a game which involves a sharp distinction between the government and the governed and it is an activity in which only a tiny majority engage on a full-time business" (Farugba Ade:1976 p.79).

### (3) Special Events

This aspect includes planning and handling special showings, convention exhibits, anniversary and new facility celebrations, award programmes, tours and special meetings. Here, the Isuikwuato Local Government Area Public Relations Officer performs activities that are praiseworthy. The political bottlenecks hampering the smooth-flow of communication seem to allow him a freehand in his job. The Public Relations Officer plays an active role in planning events which takes place on the first day of October every year. He prepares speeches to be read on this day and those to be read on the workers, and children's day each year. This is all the more necessary when it is recalled that the present Public Relations Officer in the Local Government under study is a graduate of English Language.

On one occasion in the process of this research, we were occasioned to ask him whether he had ever had the privilege of delivering a speech on behalf of the Chief Executive of the Local Government. His ready answer was No.

But this is something a trained Public Relations Officer should do in advanced countries. The Nigerian situation is perhaps peculiar because our political life is still in its early stage of evolution.

### (4) Media Relation

This includes setting up and maintaining open channels of communication with mass media personnel. In this area, the Public Relations Officer of the Local Government Area in question is active. On June 6, 1991, the Ezere Bridge was destroyed by flood consequent on a heavy downpour the night before. The



chairman of the Local Government Area and Public Relations Officer were invited to the scene of this natural disaster. It was carried on the radio news of the next day. And within one week, the bridge was put in order by the Ministry of Works of the Imo State Government. It is insufficient to conclude this singular act that the Public Relations Officer is up and doing. But similar cases in other places confirm his alertness in the area of media relations.

## CONCLUSION

We have so far retraced the origin of Isuikwuato Local Government Area. We have attempted to demonstrate that public relations right from the colonial days till the present day have been a professional Public Relations Officer in the Local Government since the beginning of time. Yet the Local Government by nature of the character of its citizenry demands the presence of an expert as evidenced in the report by the Fox Strangeways panel (vide introduction).

We have equally attempted to indicate some of the duties a good Public Relations Officer should aim at performing at least. This ideal according to our discoveries are not met in Isuikwuato Local Government Area due to constraints, professional and political.

On the whole, we venture to assert that Public Relations activities in the Local Government Area under study has been a matter of trial and error. The situation is further worsened by the fact that professionalism in the domain of public relations is still novelty in this part of Nigeria. Political loyalties have created a major hindrance to a perfect coherence in the area of public relations. This is in the situation is Isuikwuato and a brief portrait of the activities of the Public Relations Officer in the Isuikwuato Local Government Area, young as the Local Government Area still is.

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