Original Article

Public Relations and Service Delivery in Local Government in Uganda: Assessing the Impact of Public Relations and Challenges in Service Delivery in the Case of Gulu District Local Government in Northern Uganda

James Onono Ojok[1] & Prof. James Kiwanuka-Tondo, PhD[2]*

[1] Gulu University, P. O. Box, 166, Gulu Uganda
[2] Uganda Christian University P. O. Box 4, Mukono, Uganda.
* Author for Correspondence ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0381-5806; Email: james.onono@gu.ac.ug

ABSTRACT

This study is part of the Masters' Dissertation for the Master of Arts in Strategic Communication at Uganda Christian University, Mukono, titled Analysing the Role of Public Relations in Service Delivery by Local Governments: The Case of Gulu District Local Government in Northern Uganda. The Excellence theory of Grunig and Hunt (1984) and Roger's Diffusion theory of innovation (1962) informed the analytical framework of this study. The study was conducted in the traditional Gulu district under the jurisdiction and governance of Gulu district local government. The areas covered ranged from the two divisions within Gulu Municipality, Layibi and Pece, with a stretch-out to the Bungatira sub-county. In the case of Gulu district local government, the study used both qualitative and quantitative approaches where 243 respondents were sampled using purposive and convenience sampling to select the participants. The study found that over 230 Kilometre Road was opened in the year 2017-2021 without any conflict. The study also found that there was an increase in handwashing practices because of the involvement of the community through sensitisation and the use of different communication platforms. The study exposed professional growth challenges for Public Relations professionals at the district level as the working environment provides no hierarchical growth in the Public Relations office as the structure in place doesn't accommodate promotion to senior or mid-level compared to other offices in Gulu District Local Government. The study argues that Public Relations has the capacity to achieve more in terms of supporting or enhancing service delivery, provided there is a deliberate attempt to develop a feedback communication strategy for most public goods or services. Additionally, with full management or administration support for the public relations department for smooth operation, this study agrees that public relations can improve service delivery in any setting in local government.

INTRODUCTION

The role of PR in organisations has been undervalued in many entities, and the government fares worse in this regard despite the massive scope of benefits associated with good PR practices (Kiambi, 2010). Instead, the top administration does not fully recognise the massive potential of PR as a great tool in enhancing service delivery but only looks at PR as an image-cleaning venture and they would only need them when there is a crisis or for publicity effect (Miller 1999; Russell & Bishop, 2009). PR scholars are also advancing the notion that, indeed, PR can work beyond defending and managing corporate reputations (Carroll and Olegario, 2020; Fehrer et al., 2022).

Subsequently, PR within the local governments is underfunded and given less attention and scrutiny than its true value to the organisation dictates. Besides, the attitude of management towards PR is Luke-warm and the capacity-building programs of the PR function through continuing education, workshops and conferences are widely lacking from the menu of government programs within the Gulu district work plan (Webster, 1992).

This way, the local government has failed to fully harness the true potential and benefits of PR because of the vague implementation and as a result, the LG cannot further organisational objectives and goals to their best as the relationships with their public are not well managed whilst the communication function also remains largely dysfunctional within the environments they operate (Kayode, 2014).

For the purpose of this journal article, we shall audit the Impact and Challenges of Public Relations as studied from the period between 2017 to 2021 at Gulu District Local Government.

Objectives of the Paper

- To assess the impact of the PR done by the Gulu District Local Government in the delivery of public goods and services.

- To investigate the challenges faced by the public relations office/department in Gulu District Local Government in the delivery of public goods and services.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Impact of Public Relations in Service Delivery by Gulu District Local Government

Public relations are a vital tool that governments can deploy in their attempt to foster good governance and ensure democracy (Mbogo, 2011). Once adopted by governments, public relations can help news media cover the important milestones and activities launched, conducted and or implemented by the government (Coombs, 2015).

Asemah, Okpanachi, et (2013), stresses that PR is a goodwill task that helps in building harmony between an organisation and its public through

mutual understanding based on truthful and complete information and this way, it evolves to implement programs of action which will serve both the public interest and that of the organisation. Besides, the PR function is directed towards developing and encouraging behaviours that will nurture seeds of mutual understanding for strong and healthy growth while advocating for the elimination of practices that, though legitimate, may offend public opinion or jeopardise mutual understanding.

Humes (1969) views LG as a means of coordinating and managing functions at the local level; it is a means of involving the local resources, thus providing the members of the public with a sense of identification and participation, which are both essential to effective, economical, and enthusiastic governance at this level. Similarly, Osuji (1990) stresses that LG provides the opportunity for the local members of the community to partake in governance activities and policies that serve her own inhabitants. This creates a sense of belonging and recognition among the local dwellers in the sense that it gives them consideration by the government as worthy and capable of handling things themselves

Particularly in government installations, PR plays a great role in creating mutual understanding between the government and the public it serves, thus ensuring active cooperation of the public in government programs and fostering citizen support for established policies and programs (Johnston & Zawawi, 2004).

Furthermore, PR also informs the public about the government's business, improves the effectiveness of the organisation's operations through appropriate public information techniques, and provides feedback to government administrators so that programs and policies can be modified, amended or continued (Tesfaye 2018).

Challenges Faced by the Public Relations Office/Department in Gulu District Local Government in the Delivery of Public Goods and Services

Njuru (2011) stresses the absence of public relations departments and the use of non-technical personnel in a number of government projects and installations undermines the role of public relations in sensitising the public on government projects, which he attributes to limited participation of the wider team in decision making. Besides, Mbeke (2011) and Mbogo (2011) also stress that there is no remarkable change in the implementation of different government projects despite the presidential directive in Kenya, thus continuing the era of low sensitisation levels among the public on government projects.

On the negative side however, Ogolla, (2011) argues against the misuse of media and the low levels of awareness of public relations tools as some of the challenges that face governments adopting public relations for their work. The low levels of utilisation of public relations have thus culminated in low sensitisation, mistrust and negative perception amongst the public in relation to government institutions, thus complicating the promotion of government projects because of the unprofessional manner in which the public relations functions of government have been handled (Omondi, 2012).

In government institutions, there is little appreciation of the role played by public relations tools in sensitising the public to government projects (Kiambi, 2010). This is evidenced by the fact that public relations officers are not part of the top management teams that make decisions, including policies and regulations that need to be communicated to the public. This underscores the role of public relations in sensitising the public to government projects since there is limited participation in the decision-making process (Njuru, 2011).

Njuru (2011) stresses that the absence of public relations departments and the use of non-technical personnel in a number of government projects and installations reflect a low appreciation of public relations functions. Thus, this underscores the role of public relations in sensitising the public to government projects, and despite the increasing

scholarship on the topic, there seems to be no remarkable change in the implementation of the various government projects (Mbogo, 2011).

Despite all these efforts, there is little appreciation of the importance of public relations in sensitising the public to government projects. This is evidenced by the fact that public relations officers are not part of the top management teams that make decisions, including policies and regulations that need to be communicated to the public (Omondi, 2012).

A number of LGs do not appreciate the need for PR and its programs and thus do not have a department dedicated to this in place. In addition, they do not make use of PR while conducting their business. Whereas some sources attribute it to ignorance of what PR and its importance to LG is, others attribute it to insufficient funding for such programs and the rest due to lack of interest in some local governments, which may result from the aforementioned ignorance of such programs and their importance.

A number of emerging trends affect government and present challenges for communicators within local government. Amongst these are an increase in pressure for responsible flexibility (Pratt, 2013), soft governance, coproduction with and adaptation to citizens and stakeholders (Evans and Reid, 2013) and decentralisation (Kamnuansilpa, 2012).

The communities served by LGs are diverse with a range of competing and vocal interests and as such, activities like engaging, enabling participation, and making appropriate representation are difficult and constant communication challenges. In ideal situations, PR personnel manage transparent processes that facilitate voice and enable ownership but avoid being captured by self-serving elites or minorities (Evans & Reid, 2013). Negotiating paths to decisions that are acceptably balanced for the benefit of the community requires deliberate processes and a special balance of skills and qualities in those who manage the processes (Simmons, 2013).

Wang and Wan Wart (2007) observe that there has been a decline in trust in government institutions in recent decades. A number of factors have been cited as contributing factors towards this decline, including the exposure of scandalous behaviour by politicians, expansion of government, and disappointment with the performance of governments and their service provision.

Within LG, there is a gross lack of guidance on the roles, tasks and positioning and tilting for communicators, which is reflected in the vast number of job titles that indicate differences in focus on media, publications, and relations, and different levels of seniority (Glenny, 2008). Given that approaches to communication at the LG level are mostly determined at the local organisation level (Simmons & Small, 2012) and decisions to manage communication are largely determined by the senior decision makers or management (Grunig et al. 1995), there is a wide gap in guidance on principles for managing executing communication as well as autonomy for LG to address perceived local needs.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed design of qualitative and quantitative approach, where in-depth interviews were conducted to capture facts, opinions and relevant information that was left out when collecting data from the questionnaires during the survey.

Area of Study

The study was conducted in Gulu District. The district is located in Northern Uganda, approximately 333 km north of Kampala, the capital city of Uganda. The district sits on coordinates 02°49'50.0" N, 32°19'13.0" E. The district's approximate population is 396,500 people (Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), 2014). The district is mainly divided into Gulu municipality, Gulu East constituency and Gulu West constituency. The majority of the residents in the rural areas are peasant farmers, while a handful practice commercial farming and petty trade for livelihood; others are formally employed by the government at both local and central levels

governments; others serve in the private sector and non-governmental sector and some are unemployed.

The administration of the district is localised, and the management function is under the Gulu District Local Government headed by the Local Council Five (LCV) Chairperson under the political wing who works hand in hand with the technocrats such as the Chief Administrative officer and presidential appointees; Resident district commissioners (RDC) to oversee the delivery of public services and goods.

The district is also served by a number of media houses, including those at the national level, regional level and district level. These included radio, television, newspapers and tabloids, which are key agents of communication, information sharing and public relations campaigns in general terms.

Content Scope of the Study

The service delivery was assessed based on the following areas: coronavirus prevention through the enforcement of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in 2020, The coronavirus virus mass vaccination program that started in late 2021, and the Water projects. Road works, maintenance, repair, and redevelopment projects under the Gulu District LG and the Emyooga fund under the Gulu District Local Government supported by the Microfinance Support Centre. The assessment took the period from 2017 to December 2021 for the audit of the above thematic areas.

Population and Sampling Technique

The study considered the following category of respondents under the study, and this included Local government technocrats, Political leaders, PR department staff, Agency staff and project leads, radio and TV news reporters, and the General public in Gulu District with an estimate of 1000 study population as guided by Krejcie and Morgan table. This population would serve both survey and qualitative study for this research. The 'publics' considered under the study because they are the ones who were affected or benefited by the

communication on programs by Gulu LG, the members of the media fraternity working with the various media houses amplifying information to the public and others are Radio Managers who determines who speaks on their Radios, the staff of the several agencies involved in the projects considered in this study because they had implemented some government projects from Ministry of Health, Uganda Microfinance Centre, Uganda National Road Authority in partnership with Gulu LG in around the thematic areas under study.

The staff of Gulu District Local Government include the district engineer plus the staff under the Engineering and Water Department, the Emyooga focal point person, the staff under the District Health Office, the staff under the Public Relations Department, which includes the Chief Administrative officer (CAO) and the Communication Officer since Public Relations is under the administration of the district council headed by CAO. These staff have their work fall directly or indirectly under the thematic areas of programs by Gulu District Local Government that were accessed in this study.

Sample Size for Quantitative

The sample size for the study was determined by using statistical tables of Krejcie and Morgan (1970). The estimated population for the study was 1000. Morgan's table suggested that the sample size is 278 at 95% confidence level and 5% sampling error

Sample for Qualitative

The researcher used in-depth interviews to collect data from the category of population, which included the Radio station personnel, Public Relations department staff, Agency staff from Uganda National Road Authority (UNRA), Uganda Micro-finance Center, Ministry of Health staff at Gulu Regional Referral Hospital and project leads or focal point person, technical officers who manage projects like Emooyga and other technical officers like the Gulu District Engineer, the Gulu district Water Officer, the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) political

leaders (LCV Chairperson, District Speaker, councillor fives) among others. This strategic population had relevant information on the topic of the study, which is why purposive sampling was used to get certain facts and personal thoughts that the questionnaire could not answer and are clearly highlighted in the findings and discussions of the research report in the results discussion chapter.

Ethical Consideration

Clearance and permission were confirmed by an offer of approval letter from the Uganda Christian University Research Ethics Committee (UCUREC) and were presented to the relevant office bearers at the various firms who were interviewed for this study.

Informed voluntary consent was sought from the prospective study participants before involving them in the study. To maintain the integrity of the study and data collected, there was no remuneration and no gift for participation in the study.

Utmost confidentiality was observed with the information provided and the participants were expected to provide any identification information such as names while information provided by the participants was kept out of reach for parties not involved in the study.

Methodological Constraint

This was the case of Gulu District Local Government in the analysis of service delivery; hence, it might not necessarily represent the position of all districts in Uganda as far as the findings are concerned in line with this study's objectives.

RESULTS

Response Rate

Out of 278 participants who accessed the surveys, 243 responded to the survey, giving a response rate of 87%. The overall response rate of 87% is an internationally acceptable rate since it is above the 50% rate that is recommendable, according to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003).

The findings of the participant were grouped in four categories 25-34 years, 35-44 years, 45-54 years and 55-above years. The results show majority of respondents were aged between 25-34 years, with 62.1%, followed by 29.2% who were aged 35-44 years, 7.4% of them were aged 45-54 years and 1.2% of them were above 55 years. This implies that most respondents were mature enough to make good judgments about government programs in the Gulu district and how service delivery affects their livelihood and service delivery.

The study revealed that the gender of participants who participated in this study was dominated by males who formed 69.5 % of the total number of respondents compared to 30.5% of Females; this is attributed to the fact that a greater number of men compared to women were seeking information on government programs due to the recent issues of misuse of Emyooga fund. This also indicated that the patriarchal society of male dominance in terms of culture and other factors deeper in villages can't be ruled out.

The results 34.2% of participants live in rural areas, 58.8% reside in urban areas and 7.0% stay in peri-urban. This implies that the majority of respondents stay in urban areas in search of employment opportunities, as well most of the youth have attained a certain level of education with the necessary skills that make them survive in the town.

Table 1: Level of education of respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
No formal education	5	2.1	2.1
Primary	46	18.9	21.0
Secondary	87	35.8	56.8
Tertiary	38	15.6	72.4
University	67	27.6	100.0
Total	243	100.0	

The biggest number of respondents in this study had secondary as their highest level of education and they formed 35.8% of the total respondents; these were followed by those with a degree 27.6% and 18.9% had primary level, 2.1% had no formal education while 15.6% had tertiary which means that generally all respondents were able to read and write which contributed to high response to the questionnaires. Therefore, it can be concluded that the study involved people of all levels of education and they knew what they were responding to. In relation to this study, having such an educated population that is informed makes it reactive to any slight change in service delivery.

Impact of the PR Done by the Gulu District Local Government on the Delivery of Public Goods and Services

The study, through in-depth interviews, found there was an increase in handwashing practice coverage in the whole district and every point of a business centre, shops, bars, daily market, bus park, taxi park because of involving the community through sensitisation using different communication platforms, Gulu District Water and Sanitation Office reported increased in handwashing practice after visiting the latrine to 78.9% in 2021-2022 from 16.07% between 2016 -2017. The Gulu District Water Office also registered minor success in safe water coverage, from 51.2% between 2016-2017 to 59.9% from 2021 to 2022 (see *Table 2*).

An in-depth interview on 20th/04/2023 with a key informant revealed that successful implementation of coronavirus prevention through the Standard Operating Procedures contributed to this rise in handwashing practice coverage that could also help prevent many diseases.

> *I want to be factual; this has been growing over the years, but it is great to note that COVID-19 pandemic sensitisation contributed to this increase and we worked hard on this; we combed everywhere sensitising the people in the district that they should have handwashing facilities and could help them prevent many diseases.*

An in-depth interview with the District Health Office revealed that 86.4% got their first dose of COVID-19 vaccination at that time and 64% got their second dose, which was above the 60% national target. The participant said the reduction in the second dose was not due to communication interruption but rather a merger mix of the various vaccines.

An in-depth interview revealed that Over 230 Kilometre Road opened between 2017-2021 without any conflicts. Gulu District Engineering Department recorded opening over 230 Km of Roads with ease within the district without conflicting with the local community since they understood the need for road networks as a post-war conflict district.

During an in-depth interview, one of the key informants joked that charcoal dealers and log dealers could access Gulu everywhere because of these road networks instead of the community using them to sell other products.

> *This was with proper sensitisation and all road projects involved the community; however, the only sin here is that we ended up providing access everywhere to tree loggers and charcoal dealers in the long run. They are the ones utilising it everywhere in Gulu.*

The result in Table 2 shows 82.7% of respondents performed the recommended tasks briefly but later stopped after realising the information shared did not reflect in the results on COVID-19 SOPS, 100.0% on covid sops, 56% on water projects, 72.8% on works and 65.4% on Emyooga fund. This implies that the majority of participants would only take relevant information on government programs.

The result in Table 2 shows 100.0% of participants strongly agreed that the communication as regards these programs brought about community practices to support the activities on COVID-19 SOPS, 100% on COVID-19 VAC, 90.1% on water projects, 81.5% on

works and 71.6% on Emyooga fund. This shows that the that the majority of participantss in the community support the activities of the the government program.

The study found that at least 376 groups benefited from Emyooga Funds. Gulu District Local Government was able to register 471 groups to benefit from Emyooga Funds and validated 376 out of the 471 associations or groups who all received the UGX 30 million. Key informants say this was possible because of the handy provision of information and proper sanitisation of the community using all the communication platforms like WhatsApp.

Challenges Faced by the Public Relations Office/Department in Gulu District Local Government in the Delivery of Public Goods and Services

The study noted fear of conflicting with the political wing. Technical officers were afraid to communicate because the politicians wanted to be the ones communicating on behalf of the district. This fear has, at times, resulted in giving half-baked information to the public on government programs by and politicians because other information requires the input of a technical person, not the politician.

One of the key respondents in the study shared an opinion on this contentious matter.

> Section 13 of the Local Government Act (B) empowers the district chairperson to monitor the general administration of the district and they say it includes communication; hence, at times, as a technical officer, even if cleared by the Chief Administrative Officer to speak, you might just not speak to keep relationship with the political wing.

The study found that funding was one of the biggest challenges affecting the Public Relations Office of Gulu District Local Government under administration headed by the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and there is no specific budget allocation to the office as a direct vote. The communication funds are normally available for activities under road works and technical services, the water and sanitation office, and the health department, where the communication officer has no control over how they are spent or utilised for specific activities under those public service dockets.

During an in-depth interview with one participant, the key informant revealed how funding challenges had hampered the direct involvement of the office in designing and fulfilling many public relations framework strategies independently.

> At times, there is a need to document and publicise groups doing very well under the Emyooga programs and other government services like Parish Development Model, which is not under your study, but you find I have nothing completely to support this initiative.

The study found out through in-depth interviews that online presence was a challenge. Online presence is key in informing the public and civil society on the development in service delivery, including reports from the various public service dockets within the district; however this study found out that Gulu District doesn't have an active Website, twitter page, Facebook page and where the communication officer should put documentation for public consumption and get details on various project. Strategic to this, there were some partners who were supporting service delivery in the district and needed partners to boost their online presence.

One of the respondents had this to say about this media platform's challenge.

> You do monitoring and you don't see anything for our records and our website is down; this is embarrassing; you are well aware of our strategic need as a postwar conflict district, and many people would also want to know about us.

The study also found out that there was no hierarchical growth in the Communication office: the structure was not in place and didn't accommodate promotion from senior to principal

level compared to other offices in Gulu district local government like the Information Technology Office have senior level, this is in the production department as well and at times communication Officer who wants to grow in service must enrol for another academic programme and change direction where there is promotion or prepare just to exit local government.

This study also found that there is little cooperation and support from heads of department to the communication office, which is a big challenge. The Communication Office is a powerful functionary of administration and heavily relies on what happens in all departments for proper profiling and where necessary, briefing the media. Some respondents, during in-depth interviews, said that some heads of departments still treat communication officers as rumour mongers in this generation of robust communication, which has an impact on service delivery.

> The moment heads of departments want to hide public information, it definitely will create information darkness in the community and will not provoke demand for accountability in service delivery.

In-depth interviews with the Radio Managers also revealed that some of the officials who have access to the Radio free airtime for government programs also sometimes abuse it by taking money from a development partner and want to force the Radio managers to give their associates that free airtime and they might never talk about government programs or service delivery in the districts.

> You see, you realise when those sent in the radio after talking on the free airtime of a given district start asking you to give them receipts because the RDC or LCV chairpersons had picked 'fuel' from them; hence some district officials also abuse this allocation and makes us relocate it away from them by inviting many districts to benefit on a

> weekly basis other than a monopoly of one district.

In-depth interviews also revealed that in the road sector, there have been no deliberate efforts to sensitise people to differentiate between national roads and district roads. The community in Gulu still don't know who is responsible for the maintenance of which road and they end up pushing for accountability of maintenance and rehabilitation on the wrong authority at times, which has been a good scapegoat for UNRA and Gulu district local government on state of bad roads within Gulu district. Interviews from UNRA and the office of the district engineer reveal that some leaders like RDCs and councillors also have this challenge.

Table 2: The impact of the PR done by the Gulu District Local Government on the delivery of public goods and services.

		SA	A	SAA	NS	D	SD
The information shared during the communication program greatly improved my knowledge of the program on	COVID SOPS	91.40%	8.60%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	COVID VAC	100.00%	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	water project	28.40%	63.00%	91.40%	8.60%	0.00%	0.00%
	Work	18.50%	53.10%	71.60%	8.60%	19.80%	0.00%
	Emyooga fund	44.40%	17.30%	61.70%	0.00%	18.50%	19.80%
The information shared as regards the program motivated a uptake of the program on	COVID SOPS	82.70%	17.30%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	COVID VAC	72.80%	27.20%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Water project	35.80%	54.30%	90.10%	9.90%	0.00%	0.00%
	Work	27.20%	55.60%	82.70%	0.00%	0.00%	17.30%
	Emyooga	53.10%	9.90%	63.00%	0.00%	18.50%	18.50%
I can still recall the information shared from the communicators because it has been very important on	COVID SOPS	81.50%	9.90%	91.40%	0.00%	8.60%	0.00%
	COVID VAC	81.50%	18.50%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Water project	54.30%	37.00%	91.40%	8.60%	0.00%	0.00%
	Work	45.70%	44.40%	90.10%	0.00%	0.00%	9.90%
	Emyooga	37.00%	17.30%	54.30%	0.00%	0.00%	45.70%
The information was generally received in my community and upon sharing with my fellow community members i was able to decide on	COVID SOPS	91.40%	0.00%	91.40%	0.00%	0.00%	8.60%
	COVID VAC	81.50%	9.90%	91.40%	0.00%	0.00%	8.60%
	Water project	44.40%	46.90%	91.40%	0.00%	8.60%	0.00%
	Work	27.20%	54.30%	81.50%	0.00%	8.60%	9.90%
	Emyooga	54.30%	27.20%	81.50%	8.60%	0.00%	9.90%
I performed the recommended tasks briefly but later stopped after realising the information shared did not reflect in the results on	COVID SOPS	82.70%	0.00%	82.70%	17.30%	0.00%	0.00%
	COVID VAC	82.70%	17.30%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	water project	28.40%	27.20%	55.60%	35.80%	0.00%	8.60%
	Work	37.00%	35.80%	72.80%	27.20%	0.00%	0.00%
	Emyooga	55.60%	9.90%	65.40%	17.30%	0.00%	17.30%
The communication as regards these programs brought about community practices to support the activities on	COVID SOPS	72.80%	27.20%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	COVID VAC	72.80%	27.20%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Water project	35.80%	54.30%	90.10%	0.00%	0.00%	9.90%
	Works	44.40%	37.00%	81.50%	8.60%	0.00%	9.90%
	Emyooga	45.70%	25.90%	71.60%	0.00%	9.90%	18.50%
The communications of programs has brought about a backlash from the community on	COVID SOPS	56.80%	34.60%	91.40%	0.00%	0.00%	8.60%
	COVID VAC	56.80%	43.20%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	water project	19.80%	63.00%	82.70%	0.00%	17.30%	0.00%
	Work	35.80%	35.80%	71.60%	18.50%	0.00%	9.90%

	Emyooga	38.30%	34.60%	72.80%	8.60%	18.50%	0.00%
The communications as regards the programs was a main factor in ensuring its success on	COVID SOPS	82.70%	8.60%	91.40%	0.00%	8.60%	0.00%
	COVID VAC	91.40%	8.60%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	water project	54.30%	45.70%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Work	17.30%	55.60%	72.80%	27.20%	0.00%	0.00%
	Emyooga	37.00%	25.90%	63.00%	0.00%	18.50%	18.50%

Key: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, SAA =Strongly agree + Agree, NS = Not Sure, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Table 3: The challenges faced by the public relations office/department in Gulu District Local Government in the delivery of public goods and services.

		SD	D	SDD	NS	A	SA
The communication about the program was continuous throughout the life of the project hence it kept reinforcing it on	COVID SOPS	81.50%	9.90%	91.40%	0.00%	0.00%	8.60%
	COVID VAC	81.50%	18.50%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	WATER PROJECT	28.40%	54.30%	82.70%	17.30%	0.00%	0.00%
	WORK	44.40%	37.00%	81.50%	8.60%	0.00%	9.90%
	EMYOOGA	45.70%	17.30%	63.00%	8.60%	0.00%	28.40%
The positive public trust in the government is important for digesting the communication shared and has improved community uptake on	COVID SOPS	72.80%	27.20%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	COVID VAC	71.60%	28.40%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	WATER PROJECT	17.30%	65.40%	82.70%	8.60%	0.00%	8.60%
	WORKS	0.00%	90.10%	90.10%	0.00%	0.00%	9.90%
	EMYOOGA	37.00%	37.00%	74.10%	0.00%	8.60%	17.30%
There is harmonised communication among the several stakeholders involved in the programs on	COVID SOPS	82.70%	8.60%	91.40%	0.00%	0.00%	8.60%
	COVID VAC	63.00%	37.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	WATER PROJECT	18.50%	72.80%	91.40%	0.00%	0.00%	8.60%
	WORK	18.50%	63.00%	81.50%	8.60%	0.00%	9.90%
	EMYOOGA	55.60%	17.30%	72.80%	8.60%	9.90%	8.60%
The content of the communication is shared on numerous platforms such as radio, print media and social media on	COVID SOPS	64.20%	35.80%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	COVID VAC	53.10%	28.40%	81.50%	0.00%	9.90%	8.60%
	WATER PROJECT	53.10%	28.40%	81.50%	8.60%	9.90%	0.00%
	WORKS	44.40%	27.20%	71.60%	18.50%	0.00%	9.90%
	EMYOOGA	72.80%	27.20%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
The communications as regards programs are done in several languages on	COVID SOPS	71.60%	18.50%	90.10%	0.00%	9.90%	0.00%
	COVID VAC	63.00%	27.20%	90.10%	0.00%	9.90%	0.00%
	WATER PROJECT	27.20%	53.10%	80.20%	9.90%	9.90%	0.00%
	WORK	35.80%	44.40%	80.20%	0.00%	19.80%	0.00%
	EMYOOGA	51.90%	0.00%	51.90%	0.00%	29.60%	18.50%

Key: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, SDD =Strongly disagree + Disagree, NS = Not Sure, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree

DISCUSSIONS

The study found there was an increase in hand washing practice coverage in the whole district and every point of a business centre, shops, bars, daily market, bus park, and taxi park because of involving the community through sensitisation using different communication platforms, Gulu District Water and Sanitation Office reported increased in hand washing practice after visiting the latrine to 78%.9 in 2021-2022 from 16.07% between 2016 -2017. This finding concurs with Roper and Hurst (2019), who suggest that PR can function as a cross-sectoral glue between the public and the government to tackle societal problems. This was majorly due to multi-approaches of the COVID-19 team to engage the local community using dialogues and the media to sensitise them on the danger of COVID-19 and yet centrally from Kampala; the president had weekly or monthly updates on COVID-19 which were aired in all Media across the country. This is where the press agentry, part of one-way communication, is good for publicity effect to create a big reach; hence, this study agrees that one-way communication that forms the press agentry model is very important in a time of emergency or natural calamity like floods, war or during pandemic including disease outbreaks since the goal here is to quickly inform or alert. These findings also demonstrate how human beings comply with public health guidelines in terms of health crises and information threads such as the radio become very important during health emergencies because the level of processing information and paying attention to details normally shoots up; this is not necessarily only because of display of great communication skills and approaches but is also related to the fear of death as individuals fight to get the right information to stay off the pandemic or disease outbreak. Therefore, Public Relations becomes more impactful when a strategic model of communication is applied where it fits well. In this case, Radio Talk shows and presidential address on COVID-19 integrated with each COVID-19 district task force in the country immensely contributed to this success; however, shall this statistic remain the same now that COVID-19 is being managed and not as powerful as it used to be in the beginning or because the threat to death due to the contagious nature of COVID-19 is now minimised hence handwashing coverage may also go down in the next five years provided COVID-19 is contained.

The study also found that Over 230 Kilometre Road was opened in the year 2017-2021 without any conflict. Gulu District Engineering Department recorded opening over 230 Km of Roads with ease within the district without conflicting with the local community since the beneficiaries (Gulu District Community members) understood the need for road networks as a post-war conflict district. This was possible due to the dialogues and direct engagements with the community by the district team on the importance of having these roads in their area as a post-conflict community; hence it clearly defends the notion and the uprising of PR scholars that, indeed, PR can do more beyond the traditional corporate brand or reputation management creating more debate and interest of how relevant PR is when the entire team cooperates (Carroll and Olegario, 2020; Fehrer et al., 2022). This creates a sense of belonging and recognition among the local dwellers. Under this arrangement, PR becomes the collective responsibility of all officers in an organisation to achieve a unified goal beyond just the communication officer. In this context, the district engineer becomes the first-line public relations officer, advancing mutual understanding between the community and the local government of the Gulu district. This study notes that communication or Public Relations is a collective responsibility for better impact.

The study also found that at least 376 groups benefited from Emyooga Funds. Gulu District Local Government was able to register 471 groups to benefit from Emyooga Funds and validated 376 out of the 471 associations or groups who all received the UGX 30 million. Key informants say this was possible because of the handy provision of information and proper sanitisation of the community using all the communication

platforms like Radios, and some community meetings were held. However, the study can also authoritatively report that the majority of community members in Gulu District Local Government still don't know anything about Emyooga because it was majorly popularised using the press agentry model and, from inception, has been tapped as a political program. This has greatly affected its revolving nature. Many people believe that the National Resistance Movement Party is headed by the President of Uganda. His Excellency Yoweri Museveni Kaguta gave them as a campaign influencer to vote him back in office during the 2021 elections.

Discussion on the challenges faced by public relations in the delivery of public services and goods

The study revealed that the majority of participants strongly disagreed they had no positive public trust in the government, which was important for digesting the communication shared and did not improve community uptake on COVID-19 SOPS, COVID-VAC, Water project, Works and Emyooga fund. This implies that some people did not trust the information the government was giving, and this never improved communication feedback on government programs, where many people on the Emyooga fund and COVID-VAC had varying opinions. Emyooga was seen as money for politics, ignoring its revolving nature and on COVID VAC, there was fear that it was a Western world agenda to kill Africans. This became worst when medics also were not front liners in taking COVID vaccinations. This finding concurs with Wang and Wan Wart (2007), who observed that there has been a decline in trust in government institutions in recent decades. A number of factors have been cited as contributing factors towards this decline, including the exposure of scandalous behaviour by politicians, expansion of government, and disappointment with the performance of governments and their service provision. Indeed, Emyooga could have performed better. However, it has been tagged to politics, and most of the groups that got the revolving funds are not returning the money to sustain the SACCOs. Out

of the 13 SACCOs that received money, the focal point office reports 50% recovery, although the local leaders SACCOs or group, comprising of politicians only, are the worst performing with no trace of recovery citing 'political' money by the president as cited by the Focal point office during the interview. This demonstrates that from its inception, it was too much mixed with politics. The implementers couldn't communicate to erase the political perception beneficiaries had picked. This report is directly about message processing, perception, and decision-making. Indeed, the community processed that Emyooga is money for politics and not revolving, accounting for its poor revolving nature, agreeing with the importance being highlighted by the diffusion theory (1962), that beyond the press agentry model relevant to create awareness about new public services or goods in the radio, there is also need to do research and audit the existing ones, how is being perceived by the beneficiaries to inform intervention. This also concurs with Verčič et al. (1996), that PR should not be restricted to one-way information-giving since for effective communication to happen, it must be two-way.

The study also found that there was fear of conflicting with the political wing. Technical officers were afraid to communicate because the politicians wanted to be the ones communicating on behalf of the district. This fear has, at times, resulted in giving half-baked information to the public on government programs by and politicians because other information requires input from a technical person, not the politician. This study found that the politicians guide communication at Gulu DLG and extensively this study argues that it directly accounts for unpopular official press comments by district communications or public relations officers about their districts in Uganda's media as most of the space and official comments about districts are occupied by politicians and the technocrat's head in the district, like Chief Administrative Officers (CAO) also are found to be under this spell, allowing all Radio programs and community dialogues to be handled by the politicians.

The study found that funding was one of the biggest challenges affecting the Public Relations Office of Gulu DLG under administration headed by the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO). There is no specific budget allocation to the office as a direct vote. The communication funds are normally available for activities under Works and Technical Services, Water and Sanitation office, and Health Department, where the communication officer has no control over how is spent or utilised for specific activities under those Public Service dockets. This makes the communication officer irrelevant and, at times, negatively affects the motivation of the officer in line with the work passion.

The study also found that online communication presence was a challenge in Gulu district. Online presence is key in informing the public and civil societies on the development in service delivery, including reports from the various public service dockets within the district; however, this study found out that Gulu DLG doesn't have an active website, twitter page, Facebook page where the communication officer should put documentation for public consumption. This finding faults the Gulu district local government for failing to update their partners and the public on the services they are providing to the community as this study found out that under Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), which formed part of the parameter frame under this study, Gulu is being supported by many development partners, supporting borehole rehabilitation, spring well protection in the community. They need an online presence through the district publicity for donor boost, but for over one year, Gulu district's social media pages have been down and not active. Communications play a big role in donor politics, and these partners heavily support these services for the local community through the district.

This finding also presented the person handling communications as 'incompetent' as people who do activities with the public relations office don't see it anywhere online except the supervisor (CAO), who might be reading the hardcopy report. The study on this note also argues that the best reporting platform for a communications officer or a PR Specialist is to have his or her work in a public domain, such as the website or social media pages of their organisation. This creates a public perception of the officer's incompetence, yet the challenges at times are beyond the officer, although being creative would not be an excuse.

The study found that there was no hierarchical growth in the Communication office: the structure was not in place and didn't accommodate promotion to senior or mid-level compared to other offices in Gulu District Local Government like the Information Technology Office, which has senior level, including Production, Natural Resources departments among others. At times, communication officers who want to grow in service must enrol in another academic programme. This finding also shows that a district might need two or more communication officers for effectiveness since having only one person in the office might be tricky in case of health challenges or emergencies. The setting also makes it hard for one to upgrade or take longer study leave for obvious reasons; there would be no one to support the role in absentia.

This study also found that there is little support and cooperation from the heads of the departments directly in the communication office, which is a big challenge. The Communication Office is a powerful functionary of administration and heavily relies on what happens in all departments for proper profiling and, where necessary, briefing the press.

The abuse of free Radio airtime by some district officials who, instead of communicating government programs, invite their associates and get money from them is also a challenge affecting the PR of Gulu district local government as most of the Radios have now been added in many districts to benefit from the free airtime outside Gulu as a control measure limiting contact hour of the officials and the community in Gulu. This created mistrust of free airtime; media owners now want it cancelled by the UCC.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Communication Officers or Public Relations Officers at Gulu district Local government are partly demotivated since funding challenges to implement or document activities are vivid in the system, and hierarchical growth challenges patch a bigger hole in their attempt to be innovative or create more impact as far as service delivery is a concern at Gulu district Local government.

We root that as argued by Roger's Diffusion theory of innovation (1962) about different levels of processing and deciding in regards to new information about a product, it is indeed wise to be careful to do background check or have community input before introducing a new program, product or services since persuading the community might never work after they have made a decision on introduction of that service or product. This was vivid in the study, especially on the Emyooga revolving fund, as the majority of the population processed and decided that Emyooga is attached to politics and as long as they support the National Resistance Movement (NRM), the current ruling party in Uganda, there is no need to return the money with the small interest and this has evidently resulted to the poor performance of the revolving nature of Emyooga as many of the SACCOs are just dying out. This study shows that if the government had made a wider consultation before implementation and made a public contribution to Emyooga's pre-planning, its performance would have been better than it is now. This study then argues that public relations might not achieve much in service delivery once a new program or service is introduced without the input of beneficiaries. However, the public relations feedback embedded in the two-way communication model should help support the redesigning of the strategy of the program, but again, if feedback like on Emyooga is left without action response (redesigning the program to the community feedback) from the Central Government, there would be no much success in service provision of Emyooga to the community by the local government.

Given the above, this study conclusively defines Public Relations as a service delivery tool when an entity, organisation, or institution has a deliberate feedback mechanism embedded in its programming and input of its public on the services or goods provided is given action response by management or authority of the entity. The implication is that PR shall enhance service delivery.

Recommendation

Since the communication department is underfunded and understaffed, the study recommends that the Ministry of Public Service and the Ministry of Local Government cure the structural human resource gap with funding allocation for the implementation of its activities. The Ministry of Public Service has widened communication or PR positions from assistants to senior, principal, and chief communication officers in public universities and other entities in government parastatals, so a similar arrangement needs to be propagated for local governments.

Since Gulu district uses a majorly one-way model of communication to communities using churches, Radios, and funerals, the study recommends investment in building public accountability forums like barazus for community dialogue, which could allow feedback on specific public services or goods.

The study recommends the Ministry of Local Government and Public Service develop a communication policy where the political leader's role in communication is outlined without interference with the communication officer or technical officers' roles. The Communication Policy will also be a great guiding document for Gulu district local government to adopt a serious communication strategy conversant with the service delivery approach to the Gulu district local government.

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