



IMPERATIVE OF HOST-COMMUNITIES PARTICIPATION IN ORGANIZATION COMMUNITY RELATIONS PROGRAMMES

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ABSTRACT

Whispering Palms, a privately owned holiday resort commenced operations in 1980. Despite the community relations programmes put in place by the holiday resort to create and maintain a cordial relationship with its host-community, there are some strains in their relationship. It is to this end that this study seeks to assess the imperative of host-communities participation in organization's community relations programmes using Iworo-Ajido people and Whispering Palms resort as case study. The study adopted the Social Penetration Theory. The survey research methodology was used on a population of 13,550. The sample size was 371 and non-probability sampling technique was adopted. The questionnaire was the research instrument, supplemented with focus group discussions and an in-depth interview with the Chairman of Whispering Palms. Simple percentages were employed in quantifying the data collected from the questionnaire while the interview conducted with the Chairman, Whispering Palms resort and the focus group discussions were qualitatively analyzed. The hypotheses were tested using frequency distribution of responses in percentages and cross-tabulation. The study found out that Whispering Palms resort failed to carry along the community through regular consultation before embarking on its community relations programmes. Consequently, the community relations programmes lacked the acceptance of Iworo-Ajido people. Findings from the study led to the conclusion that Iworo-Ajido people's perception of Whispering Palms resort's community relations programmes was negative. The study among others, recommends that Whispering Palms resort should always consult the host-community as a precondition for its community relations programmes planning, implementation and evaluation.

Keywords: community relations, host-community, community relations programmes, host-community participation, imperative.

Introduction

The local community believes that the organization is attentive to their needs and will act in their best interests (Asemah et al., 2021). It is to this end that Whispering Palms, a privately owned holiday resort with recreational and sporting facilities stated as one of its mission statements "to give something to the host community of our business and ensure survival and stability of our organization, as one good turn deserves another" (Femi-Pease 2012, pg. 27). The organization claimed to have introduced the following community relations programmes that promote the development of Iworo-Ajido community as shown in table 1:

Table 1: Community relations programmes of Whispering Palms

Community Relations Strategy	Community Relations Programmes
Sports	i. Annual hosting of September race (1995-2005) with students of the Iworo-Ajido Model College. The Larus Football Championship has replaced this.

	ii. The development of a community village stadium (Larus Field of Hope) for a league of 25 rural clubs.
Human Capacity Development Through Education	i. Building of a six-classroom block in Epeme, in Iworo Ajido. ii. Scholarship for citizens of Iworo-Ajido at the university level.
Provision of infrastructural facility and social amenities.	i. The provision of potable water in Epeme, in Iworo-Ajido through the construction of a borehole and overhead tank and distribution across more than 100 meters.
Employment	i. Employment of youth indigenous to Iworo-Ajido.
Corporate Donations	i. Financial assistance to Iworo-Ajido community members in need
Identifying with the culture of Iworo-Ajido Community	i. Financial assistance during cultural celebrations. ii. Renovation of the Iworo-Ajido <i>Zangbeto</i> idol statue at the village square, iii. participation in week-long cultural celebrations. iv. Beautification of the community village square

Source: Femi-Pearse, 2012

There is broad agreement that the primary purpose of community relations is to cultivate a positive image for organizations through effective public relations efforts. Organizations that demonstrate a commitment to understanding and addressing the needs of their local communities, while also initiating projects that enhance collective well-being and foster understanding, are often regarded as considerate neighbors by those communities (Zannu et al., 2024).

Periodic assessments are vital in determining the relevance and effectiveness of ongoing community engagement programs, as the needs of these communities are dynamic and ever-evolving. Sustained investment in social and educational community relations initiatives reflects an organization's commitment to the welfare of its host community (Asemah et al., 2021).

Community relations encompass the various strategies employed by an organization to cultivate and sustain a mutually advantageous relationship with the community in which it operates (Chepkirui & Naserian, 2020). This concept embodies a constructive and collaborative relationship where both parties strive toward shared objectives and seek to meet each other's needs, ultimately enhancing the overall quality of life within the community (Jonathan et al., 2023). One key strategy in community relations involves organizations establishing their credibility within the communities they operate.

Several authors, including Igben & kiyowere (2022), Ukamivi (2020), Kalu (2018), and Agyapong et al., (2015), have explored the dynamics of community relations practices between organizations and their host communities. While these studies have sparked significant academic discourse and underscored the necessity of effective community relations strategies for managing conflicts, they have primarily concentrated on the implementation of such strategies.

This research aims to address a critical gap in the literature: the understanding of how well-intentioned efforts may fail to achieve their intended outcomes. The deployment of community relations strategies and tactics often involves substantial investments, yet this crucial aspect of maximizing benefits for both organizations and host communities has not been adequately investigated. This seems to be the case of Whispering Palms resort and Iworo-Ajido community.

The worrisome aspect of the host-community is that, even though they seem to be poor and as a result, are expected to welcome Whispering Palms resort's community relations initiatives that would promote the development of the community, it appears that there is a strained relationship between Whispering Palms and Iworo-Ajido, the host-community. This study seeks to understand why the Iworo-Ajido community in Badagry Local Government Area, Lagos State, has remained resistant to the Whispering Palms resort, despite its various community engagement efforts.

Problem statement

There are issues that seem to exert some strain on the relationship that exists between Whispering Palms and the Iworo-Ajido community. The Management of the resort has claimed to have initiated some community relations programmes as shown in table 1.2 with a view to enhancing a cordial relationship with the host community. (Femi-Pease 2012, p.27).

However, with the good intentions of Whispering Palms resort, one would wonder why the host community had to resist on some occasions, efforts of the resort to improve on its infrastructure for its growth and development. For instance, the Whispering Palms Management had invited a dredging company to landfill the foreshore of the resort.

The arrival of the large dredger in the village was resisted by the community on the ground of environmental impacts. Whispering Palms was made to pay a fine of ten million naira by the community. The crux of the matter is: since the aim of an organization's community relations programme is to enhance a cordial relationship between the host-community and the organization, how does Iworo-Ajido community perceive the community relations programmes of Whispering Palms, which according to the resort, were initiated with a view to enhancing a cordial relationship with the host-community. This informs why this study sets out to assess the imperative of host-communities participation in organization community relations programmes using Iworo-Ajido community and Whispering Palms resort as a case study.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are:

1. To determine how relevant members of the Iworo-Ajido community perceive the various community relations programs initiated by Whispering Palms Resort;
2. To ascertain the level of involvement of the Iworo-Ajido community in the conceptualization and implementation of these community development programs,
3. To find out Iworo-Ajido people's acceptance level of community relations programmes initiated and executed by Whispering Palms resort.

Literature Review

Host-community participation in organisations' community relations projects: an imperative approach

It is widely recognized that the values and ethical principles demonstrated by an organization in addressing social issues within its host community are crucial for the organization's long-term success and sustainability (Asemah, 2024). Since no organization operates in isolation from the community that surrounds it, particularly for profit-driven enterprises, fostering and maintaining positive relationships with

local communities is essential. Strategically planned community relations activities should involve collaboration between the organization and its host community. (Etim, Inyang, & James, 2022).

Community participation guarantees the sustainability of projects, better decision-making, an autonomous environment, effective services for the host-community, mobilization of local resources, and empowerment of the community (Otieno & Maria, 2020). If successful project implementation, viable follow-ups, and qualitative outcomes are the goals, community participation must be a major part of the planning process. (Ara et al., 2024).

Community participation has been likened to the heart that circulates lifeblood in community development (Waweru, 2015). It is the view of scholars (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2020) that host-community's participation in organisation's community relations projects pays a major role in fostering sustainable development and creating a more democratic environment for key stakeholders.

Participatory development is a global trend and its principles such as equality, awareness, empowerment, and inclusivity must be recognized as essential for effective and cordial community relations. (Ezeudu & Ezekwelu, 2024). Therefore, effective community relations hinge on the seamless integration of the host community into the organization's initiatives.

To avert the danger of disruption of local cultural and belief systems, and subsequently posing a threat to indigenous traditions, strategic community involvement, which ensures that development efforts align with local needs and values while fostering positive social change is significant. (Shrestha et al., 2024, Wodajo et al., 2014).

Consequently, a successful community relations program should only be initiated after consulting community members and obtaining their consent followed by their active participation in project planning and implementation. This would enhance the likelihood of success by achieving desired outcomes and improving sustainability (Okunade et al., 2024).

Although community participation is globally acclaimed, care must be taken when involving the community in the structure and implementation process (Hamlet et al., 2022). The concept of empowerment in participatory approach often excludes women, children or socially excluded people (Klestil, 2023). There may be good reasons to exclude community members from the process of implementation. Bolat et al., (2022) state that local community participation in complex technological projects represent potential threats to the lives, health, security, and prosperity of the community people. The implication of this is that community participation is not always beneficial.

To achieve long-term success, it is essential for organizations to actively involve host communities in their community relations initiatives. This is vital because conflicts are inherent in interactions between individuals or organizations and their respective audiences, and cannot be completely avoided (Igben&Ikiyowere, 2022). The point is: organizations need to prioritize community involvement in their community relations planning to avoid the pitfalls that can arise from neglecting this connection.

Community participation not only enhances project selection, implementation, and follow-up for long-term impact but also fosters transparency and accountability. Mia, Islam, Sakin, and Al-Hamadi (2022) emphasize that community involvement extends beyond mere engagement in planning and implementation—it also empowers individuals and groups to take ownership of development projects and address common challenges collectively.

Theoretical Framework

Social Penetration Theory

When considering a framework that outlines the evolution of relationships from superficial interactions to deeper intimacy, the Social Penetration Theory (SPT) is particularly insightful. Developed by psychologists Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor in 1973, this theory emphasizes the importance of relationship

development through the mechanism of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure involves the intentional sharing of personal information, including one's motives, feelings, thoughts, and life experiences.

According to Derlega et al., (1993), as cited in Carpenter & Greene (2016), self-disclosure is a deliberate process of revealing details about oneself. Social Penetration Theory is especially relevant in the context of community relations, as it illustrates how relationships between organizations and their host communities evolve in a structured and predictable manner.

Essentially, these relationships progress along a specific trajectory, transitioning from superficial understanding and casual interactions to deeper insight and close connections. When businesses and communities foster mutual understanding and build trust, it creates a more favorable operating environment for all parties involved.

Materials and Methods

The researcher used a descriptive survey in this study to assess the role of the community relations practices of Whispering Palms resort towards having a harmonious working relationship with the Iworo-Ajido community, Badagry, Lagos State. The participants in this study were drawn from Iworo-Ajido estimated at 13, 550.

The study was strengthened by using in-depth interviews with the Chairman, Whispering Palms and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) made up of opinion leaders in Iworo-Ajido. The FGD was made of three sessions with each session made up of eight participants.

To determine the sample size, the researcher adopted Philip Meyer's population sampling procedure at a 95% confidence level. Meyer believes that representativeness in sampling is very vital to research acceptability and therefore, proposes the table below to assist researchers in sample size procedure.

Population	Size Sample Size
Infinity	384
500,000	384
100,000	383
50,000	381
10,000	370
5,000	357
3,000	341
2,000	322
1,000	278

Source: Meyer (1979) cited in Stacks and Hocking (1992) *Essentials of communication research*

Therefore, a total of 371 persons made up the sample size of Iworo-Ajido with Philip Meyer's population sampling procedure at a 95% confidence level. The random number function of the Raosoft sample size calculator was also used to further confirm the sample size. The quota sampling method was adopted for the study. The research instruments used for the study were a questionnaire for the survey, a question guide for the in-depth interview and a discussion guide for focus group discussion. Data collected from the field were analysed using descriptive statistics. The interview conducted with the Chairman, Whispering Palms and the focus group discussions were transcribed and qualitatively analysed. The hypotheses were tested using chi-square.

Presentation and Analysis of Research Questions Results

Table 1: Whispering Palms community relations programmes perceived to be identifiable by the people of Iworo-Ajido community

Item No.	Community relations programmes of Whispering Palms identified by Iworo-Ajido people	SA	A	D	SD	% Acceptance Rate	Decision
1.	Six classroom block built by the Whispering Palms.	138 (40.1)	149 (50.9)	41 (11.9)	16 (4.7)	91.0%	Accepted
2.	Bore-hole & distribution of potable water. Transformer for electric power generation.	61 (17.7)	143 (41.6)	111 (32.3)	29 (8.4)	59.3%	Accepted
3.	Larus football field, Sponsorship of annual football match tournaments between Iworo-Ajido and neighboring communities, the annual hosting of Iworo-Ajido Model College marathon race.	18 (5.2)	108 (31.4)	170 (49.4)	48 (14.0)	36.6%	Rejected
4.	Renovation the Iworo-AjidoZangbeto idol statue at the village square, participation in week-long cultural celebrations. .	163 (47.4)	111 (32.3)	44 (12.8)	26 (7.6)	79.7%	Accepted
5.	Corporate Financial donations to members of the Community and Scholarship offered to Youths of Iworo-Ajido	10 (2.9)	101 (29.4)	184 (53.5)	49 (14.2)	31.7%	Rejected
	Overall Average Acceptance Rate					57.0%	Accepted

Source: Author's Field Study, 2024

Table 2: Relationship between the community relations programmes of Whispering Palms identified and their perception by Iworo-Ajido people.

Community relations programmes	Response	% Distribution				Total acceptance or rejection
		SA	A	D	SD	
1. 6 class- room block	A. Identification	40.3.1	41.7	11.9	4.7	83.5
	B. Acceptance	12.3	15.7	57.3	15.4	27.3
	C. Diff. (B-A)	-27.8	-26.0	45.4	10.7	-54.7

.2. Borehole and transformer	A. Identification	17.7	37.5	32.3	8.4	59.3
	B. Acceptance	5.2	31.4	41.4	14.0	36.6
	C. Diff. (B-A)	-12.5	-6.1	9.1	5.6	-18.6
.3. Renovation of idol statue	A. Identification	47.4	32.3	12.8	7.6	79.7
	B. Acceptance	12.8	47.4	32.3	7.6	60.2
	C. Diff. (B-A)	-34.6	15.1	19.5	0.0	-19.5
Average Diff. for all subjects						-30.9

Source: Author's Field Study, 2024

Table 3: The Perceived Level of Participation by Iworo-Ajido community in Whispering Palms community relations programmes

	Item	VHL	HL	LL	VLL	% Acceptance Rate	Decision
1.	The six-classroom block built as well as scholarship granted to the youths of Iworo-Ajido was as a result of the opinion leaders' suggestion to whispering palms.	42 (12.2)	52 (15.1)	197 (57.3)	53 (15.4)	27.3%	Rejected
2.	Whispering palms resort discussed and agreed with Iworo-Ajido community at a town hall meeting before the construction of the borehole for portable water and the provision of electricity transformer.	18 (5.2)	108 (31.4)	170 (49.4)	48 (14.0)	36.6%	Rejected
3.	Whispering palms seek out Iworo-Ajido community youth's opinion through their youth leaders before taking the decision on the annual Model College marathon race and the Larus Football Championship competitions	16 (4.7)	41 (11.9)	144 (41.9)	138 (40.1)	16.6%	Rejected

4.	The elders and traditional rulers of Iworo-Ajido were consulted and approval given before the decision on renovation of the Iworo-AjidoZangbeto idol statue at the village square, and participation in a week-long cultural celebration was taken.	26 (7.6)	163 (47.4)	111 (32.3)	44 (12.8)	54.9%	Accepted
	Overall Average Acceptance Rate					2.5	Rejected

Source: Author's Field Study, 2024

Table 4: Relationship between the participation of Iworo-Ajido community in the decision-making process of Whispering Palms community relations programmes and their acceptance of the programmes

Community relations programme	Response	% Distribution				Total acceptance or rejection
		SA	A	D	SD	
.1. 6 class- room block	A. Identification	12.2	15.1	57.3	15.4	27.3
	B. Acceptance	12.2	15.1	57.3	15.4	27.3
	C. Diff. (B-A)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
.2. Borehole and transformer	A. Identification	5.2	31.4	41.4	14.0	36.6
	B. Acceptance	5.2	31.4	41.4	14.0	36.6
	C. Diff. (B-A)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
.3. Renovation of idol statue	A. Identification	12.8	47.4	32.3	7.6	60.2
	B. Acceptance	12.8	47.4	32.3	7.6	60.2
	C. Diff. (B-A)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Average Diff. for all subjects						0.0%

Source: Author's Field Study, 2024

Discussion of Findings

Iworo-Ajido community recognised only Whispering Palms' community relations programmes that directly impact their life as a people. The Percentage distribution of responses shows that for the three community relations programmes which were identified by the Iworo-Ajido community, none was accepted as the predominant choice of the people.

The average difference between programmes identified and programmes acceptance gave a negative value of -30.9% which indicates a negative relationship but not significant, i.e. (less than 50%). The inference is that the identified programmes were not significantly accepted by the people. The null hypothesis is not rejected. Iworo-Ajido people demonstrated that community relations should involve more than just an annual contribution to charity.

Instead, the organization owner should become personally involved in community relations programmes that impact directly the people. This agrees with Anyanwu (1999) who sees community development as the changes which come in the form of the provision of infrastructure and social amenities which may be visible and tangible in the life of the people, and which translate into a better living in the physical and economic circumstances of the people.

There is a need for Whispering Palms Resort to seek to influence the Iworo-Ajido people's attitude and to understand their perception of corporate donation and sports as community relations strategies. The picture Whispering Palms resort created is that of assumption of Iworo-Ajido people's opinion and behaviour about the resort's community relations programmes.

Significantly, the public of an organization possesses the reproductive capacity of public relations within the existing structure of social relations. On the other hand, with an overall acceptance rate of 33.9%, respondents reject the participation of Iworo-Ajido people in the community relations programmes of Whispering Palms.

The first declaration is to elicit a response to the effect that the six-classroom block was built because opinion leaders in the Iworo-Ajido community suggested the same to Whispering Palms' management. Opinion leaders represent the voice of the community people on issues of common interest. Respondents reacted to the statement and the result was a 27.3% acceptance rate signifying rejection. The traditional rulers' focus group discussants said no consultation on relevant community relations programmes was made by Whispering Palms and that they were only informed about the programme to be carried out.

According to them, there was no community participation or involvement in any community relations process initiated by Whispering Palms from the beginning to the end. The elders' focus group discussants assert that it is the Lagoon Front Development Association club that Whispering Palms consults, not the Iworo-Ajido community. They said Whispering Palms has never requested to know from the community what it needs and what the resort could do for them.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study concludes that Whispering Palms community relations programmes did not achieve the desired organizational goal of mutual peaceful coexistence between the resort and Iworo-Ajido community, despite its huge investment in community relations programmes.

Iworo-Ajido people's perception of Whispering Palms community relations programmes is negative and the non-acceptance of the community relations programmes of Whispering Palms by Iworo-Ajido community is attributed to the organization's failure to consult and carry along the host-community during the conceptualization, planning, implementation and evaluation periods of the organization's community relations programmes. Whispering Palms resort's assumption of the knowledge of the basic needs of the Iworo-Ajido people was a sign of lack of commitment to effective community relations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Whispering Palms should always consult the host-community and receive its consent before carrying out its community relations programmes.
2. Further studies be conducted on influence of effective communication channel for as a community relations strategy for goal achievement in public relations.

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