

# The Practices and Challenges of West Shewa Zone, Ambo Town Government Public Relations Office

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## Abstract

The public relations field has dramatically grown to build relationships between an organization and its key publics through effective communication. It serves a wide variety of institutions. In this modern world, the success and failure of an organization also depends on the strategic communication of PRs practitioners. The purpose of this study is to investigate the practice and challenges of west shewa zone, Ambo town government public relations office. All, five (5), workers of Ambo town government PRs office are selected as primarily source of data. In addition, documents (annual report, minutes, brochures, flyers and etc) are used as secondary source of data. Both Primary and secondary sources of data are selected purposively to get reliable and in-depth information on the practice and problems facing the office. The study employed interview, observation and document analysis as tools to gather data. The collected data analyzed qualitatively and the finding of the study revealed that there is a misconception about the function of Ambo town government PRs among the workers and the local community. This misunderstanding emerges from the lack professional man power in the office. The workers also have lack of courage and effective communication to create a good relationship between government and the people. Besides, there is mistrust of people on the role of Ambo town government PRs office and workers sometimes are neglected by the people. To overcome these challenges and create an opportunities for future, the office needs reformation through short and long term plans. In the short term plan, different short training should be given for workers to build their capacity and the office should hire totally PRs professionals to change the negative attitude of the key publics and create mutual understanding between government and people in the long term process.

**Keywords:** Ambo, Communication, Government, Public Relations, Reformation

## 1. Introduction

Public Relations plays an indispensable role in the community. It helps our complex, pluralistic society to make informed decisions and function more effectively in creating mutual understanding between community and institutions. It is key profession in promoting development in the society through communicating with government and groups with regard to societal (public) policies, action and legislation. Public relations is also an integral part of today's democratic world. It creates effective communication strategies between the government and society so that public opinion is taken under consideration when government is formulating policies, making laws, and implementing different programs. This ensures and enhances active participation by all the stakeholders in the development of one country (Banik, 2004 & Theaker, 2004).

Public relations serves a wide variety of institutions in society such as businesses, trade unions, government agencies, voluntary associations, foundations, hospitals, schools, colleges and religious institutions. To achieve their goals, these institutions must develop effective relationships with many different publics such as employees, members, customers, local communities, shareholders, and other institutions, and with society at large. The public relations practitioner acts as a counselor to management and as a mediator, helping to translate private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policy and action. Thus, it is clearly evident that public relations plays a fundamental role in political, economic, social and environmental dimensions of the society (Tench and Yeomans, 2006 & Cutlip *et al.* 2000).

Particularly, government public relations plays great role in creating mutual understanding between the government and the public it serves. It works to ensure active cooperation of the public in government programs and foster citizen support for established policies and programs. It also informs the public about the public's business; improve the effectiveness of the organization operations through appropriate public information techniques; provide feedback to government administrators so that programs and policies can be modified, amended or continued. In addition, it advises the management on how best to communicate a decision or a program to the citizens; serve as an ombudsman by representing the public and listening to representatives; and educate administrators and bureaucrats about the role of the mass media and how to work with them. To make these practical, government public relation organizations must have the knowledge and skill to build the bridge between government and public for mutual benefits (Theaker, 2004; Ermias, 2006; Chala, *et al* 2017).

The modern PRs was raised from different practitioners and continent for different purpose. For instance, Nartey (1988) stated that public relations was practiced in Africa long before the era of colonialism. However, in most African countries, the PRs sector is under developed due to lack giving attention for the profession and

attaching the role of Public Relations with propaganda. Likewise the issue of public relations is a recent phenomenon in Ethiopia. Even though, various organizations came to understand the benefits of PRs, the profession is still in its infancy stage. Among various PRs areas, government PRs is predominantly practiced in Ethiopian context. The goal of government PRs is creating awareness among the citizens about unity in diversity and tolerance among nation and nationalities found in the country; build the image of Ethiopia internationally and create smooth relationship with neighboring countries. It also aspires for the Ethiopia to have its rightful place in international politics. However, the practice of government public relations has become controversial due to the lack of clearly understanding the role and function of the department. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the practice and challenges of government public relations in Oromia region, West Shoa Zone, Ambo town

## 2. Statement of the Problem

An effective PRs practice is very crucial for good organizational performance and achievements. PRs practice becomes successful when its organization achieves its goals, vision and mission. But, if an organization has some sort of problems on its practice, it is obvious that it is difficult to make the organizations successful.

Government public relations plays great role in creating mutual understanding between the government and the publics (Cutlip, *et al.* 2000). For instance, government PRs mainly:

- ✓ sets and coordinates discussion forums to raise awareness about the offices' policies, strategies, regulations;
- ✓ plans, coordinates and oversees the implementation of various public relation activities so as to achieve the Office's vision and mission, develop a good relationship between the Office and the public and improve the image of Office;
- ✓ prepares, organizes and disseminates various information to the key publics;
- ✓ provides the necessary information when journalists and other stakeholders seek information related to the sector;
- ✓ works with pertinent bodies to normalize the situation when an unanticipated incident (crisis) occurs;

However, as Black (1962) stated government public relation face several challenges face government PRs to function appropriately. There is always criticisms from public and media forwarded to the office due to the function of government PRs is highly attached with the concept of "propaganda" or/and 'spin doctor'. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the practices and challenges of government PRs office in Oromia region, West Shoa zone, Ambo town.

## 3. Objectives of the Study

### 3.1 General Objective

The main objective of this study is to assess the practices and challenges of Oromia region west shewa Zone, Ambo town government public relations office.

### 3.2 Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. Examine the function of west shewa zone, Ambo town government PRs office
2. Investigate the problems facing west shewa zone, Ambo town government PRs office.
3. Recommend the way challenges are disentangled and opportunities are produced to pronounce the importance of west shewa zone, Ambo town government PRs.

## 4. Rationale of the Study

The findings of this study would help the West Shewa Zone, Ambo town government public relations office to review their office role in order create mutual understanding with the local community. The findings of this study also relevant for the practitioners of west Shewa, Ambo town govern PRs office to have clear understanding about government PRs function and serve the organization through modern and effective ways to attain the region as well as the city goals of development to change the social, economic and political situation of the people. In addition, other public relations found in different sectors like NGO, nonprofit organizations, and etc will get factors that hinder the function of PRs.

## 5. Methodology

A research design is a plan or blueprint of how one proposes to do the research. It is the research design that determines the research methods and procedures to be applied as determined by the nature of the research problem (Babbie, 1992). Thus, descriptive research design was employed to investigate the practice and challenges of West Shewa zone, Ambo town government public relations. PRs practitioners of west Shewa zone, Ambo town government public Relations office were the primary source of data. There are five (5) practitioners

in the office. In addition, different documents (annual report, brochures, press release, and etc) were used as secondary source of data. Both primarily and secondary sources of data were selected purposively to get vital information for the study. To get the necessary data, Interview, focuses group discussion and document analysis were used as tool to collect data. Qualitative approach was used to analyze the collected data through aforementioned data gathering tools.

## 6. Result and Discussion

### 6.1 Practice of Ambo town Government Public Relations Office

Ambo town located in the West Shewa Zone of the Oromia Regional state, 125km (80 miles) west of Addis Ababa. Ambo town is the city West shewa Zone. It has a latitude and longitude of 8°59'N 37°51'E and an elevation of 2101 meters. The town is known by the production of carbonated mineral water called 'Ambo Mineral Water'. Nearby attractions include Mount Wenchi to the south with its crater lake, and the Guder and Huluka Falls. Ambo is also the location of a research station of the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research; initiated in 1977, this station hosts research in protecting major crops in Ethiopia. Afaan Oromoo is a first language spoken by almost all the people. The people strongly oppose the current government on the issue of fair distribution of resource and autocratic nature of the ruling party (<https://www.google.com/search?q=ambo+ethiopia>).

**Table 1. Demography of West Shewa Zone, Ambo Town Government PRs Office Staffs**

No.	Job Title	Gender	Work Experience	Education Level	Education Background
1	Top Manager	M	4 years	Diploma	Law
2	Media relation	M	2 years	Grade 12 complete	-
3	Audio visual	M	2 years	Grade 12 complete	-
4	Documentation	M	2 years	Diploma	Agriculture
5	Secretary	F	2 years	Certificate	Secretarial science

West Shewa zone, Ambo town government public relation office is highly working to win the heart and mind to get political capital and to ensure peace and security of the people found in the city and neighboring woredas. It investigated and urges the responsible department to take necessary measurement on the unsecure related activities take place in the city and woredas. This is because Ambo has always considered as unstable city and opposition stronghold whenever the election comes in every five years. As top manager of Ambo town government PRs office says,

*"The main role Ambo town government communication office are giving information to people; creating an informed citizenry and motivating people's participation to government policies and program"*

Thus, the office functions as spin doctor/ propaganda. It informs the people about the good deeds of government to get the vote of the people. As Shelburne (2003) & L'Etang (2004) stated public relation was practiced as 'Spin doctors' who give favorable response about the organization and PRs and propaganda were still being used interchangeably. In fact, the majority of academics writing about PRs (Goldman, Bernays, Grunig, Lasswell, Miller, D. Dinan, *et al.*) also conclude that PRs has been manipulative communication in the very great majority of its practice. However, the function of government PRs is not exactly similar with the concept of propaganda and/or spin doctor in the modern word. It creates strong relationship between with key publics through strategic communication to build mutual understanding. Government Public relation makes government more meaningful and more useful in the lives of every citizens.

As document from Ambo town government PRs office shows the goals of the Ambo town government communication are:

- a. Acting government policies and strategies in favorable way
- b. Giving information for the people and create informed citizenry
- c. Creating good image of Ambo town at every sectors

The above stated goals share somehow what Cutlip, *et.al* (2000) stated in their book '*Effective Public Relation*'. The overall goals of government PRs are informing constituents about the activities of government agency; ensuring active cooperation in government program; and fostering citizen support for established policies and programs though there is a gap on the implementation process.

### 6.2 Challenges of West Shewa Zone, Ambo Town Government PRs Office

However, there are several challenges facing the ambo town government PRs office to achieve its goals. Firstly, there is lack of man power. The west Shewa zone, Ambo town government PR office has only five (5) workers. This shows that the numbers of the workers are below the standard of one government PRs office should have the number of practitioners. This has a direct relationship on effectively executing the office objectives. As the top manager said,

*"We are overloaded with a lot of tasks due to the absence of enough human power."*

*Sometimes we can't cover all the office activities. The office has no clear division of power and communication flow structure in practical. We do every activities of office without sharing the job. "*

Besides, the workers have problems related to professionalism to perform effectively the office tasks. As Cutlip, *et al* (2006) & Banik, (2004) asserted that an excellent public relations departments have practitioners who have learned a theoretical body of knowledge of public relations to bring the necessary output. Unprofessionalism is always a factor failure of any organization. The main function of government PRs is creating mutual understanding between the government and people on formation of policies and legislation. Lack of skilled personnel who have few understanding of the PR profession to achieve necessary goal and to function properly can affect the organization effectiveness. Thus, absence of knowledge about the public relations profession has an effect on achieving goals of the organization.

In fact, as several studies (Bereket, 2015; Chala, 2017; Ermias, *et al*, 2006) indicated that the public relation is a young profession in Ethiopia. It is nearly three years since the public relation field of study is independently launched and started to train students at first and second degree program in higher education. Most of former Public relation officers found in government organizations are from related discipline like management or other social science disciplines. Some are also appointed to the position by the good will of managers in the institution. However, as it is shown from table.1, there is no staff member among the workers of West showa Zone, Ambo town government PRs office who had accredited educational background of Public Relations or related fields. Even two of the workers are preparatory completed. This shows that almost all workers are appointed by their political affiliation and contribution. This leads to the controversy on conceptual understanding of the role PR, propaganda and public diplomacy.

Secondly, the office has lack equipments. As the respondent assigned to media relation said,

*"The office has no full equipment to prepare news for media, flyers and brochures. For instance, when there is any ceremony, inauguration and other events take place in the Ambo or different woredas, we ask other organizations to give us equipment like video camera, audio recorder and etc"*

Lack of Budget the base of lack of human and physical resources. As Banik (2004) asserted shortage of enough budgets is one of the problem face government public relations. It is difficult to make advertisement; to disseminate information about the organization and to build favorable image of the organization. It is clear that the lack of budget related with the worker's salary. The workers low economic income has a symbiotic relationship with effectiveness of the organizations. As Ermias (2006) stated that low salary income affects the motivation and courage of practitioners in discharging their public relations role. Concomitantly, the workers don't give consideration for the organization efficacy.

Moreover, West Shewa zone, Ambo town government PRs office has communication problem to create awareness about the function of the office among the people and media. As the top manager says,

*"The local communities do not know exactly the function of our office. They perceive the office stand for propaganda purpose and perceive us as cadre that appointed only what government wants to achieve. As a result, the local community is not interested to cooperate with the office to give information. Sadly, the workers of this office are mistreated by the people in various social interactions."*

It is true that the workers Ambo town government PRs office hired in the office based on their political achievement. Leave alone the local community, the workers themselves didn't know the correct function of government public relations. As all of the workers said the function of their office is to keep the security of the people through investigating and disclosing people who initiate protest among to oppose the current government. This creates mistrust among the people and media. As Cutlip, *et al* (2000) asserted public apathy is one the challenge face government PRs. People lack interest and trust towards in all levels of government activities due to government corruption, biasness on distribution of resource, and etc.

Besides, there is misconception about the function of west Shewa zone, Ambo town government PRs. The people and the media perceive the workers as politicians and every activities of office as bias and manipulative. However, as Black (1962) stated that the main functions of public relations in government organization are to give regular information on policy plans and achievement; and to inform and educate the public on legislation, regulations all matters that affect the daily life of citizens. Similarly, Cutlip, *et al* (2000) also stated in every real sense the function of government PRs is ensuring democracy among people and creating smooth relationship with public based on mutual understanding and effective communication. In this regard, the goal of PRs officers is to promote cooperation and confidence between citizens and their government. This in turn requires government accountability, transparency and integrity.

Again, Ambo town government PRs facing the problem cooperatively and honestly works with media. As audio visual respondent says,

*"We prepare and send different press releases and news to both print and broadcast media."*

*We have been also asked to give interview or documents by journalists from Oromia media. However, no single information has been published or broadcasted yet”*

In fact, journalists do not want to get information from public relations practitioners. Journalists believed PRs practitioners give always favorable responses of their organization and try to influence journalists as they produce positive stories about their organization. Even though there is suspicion between Journalist and PRs practitioners, content and quality of message prepared by the workers of Ambo city government Public relations Office is not fit for media (Cutlip, *et al*, 2000).

## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study was conducted to investigate the practice and challenges of west Shewa zone, Ambo town government PRs office. The findings of the study reveal that there is contradiction between the main function of government PRs and the practice of Ambo town government PRs. The role government PRs is to create favorable attitudes in the minds of the people to implement government policies and strategies and addressing societal need of the public. However, the main role of government public relation is not well understood by the workers of Ambo town government PRs. The office also has no good relationship to work with /for local community on various societal issues. As a result, the office couldn't create mutual understanding between government, the people and media through strategic communication. An effective communication is crucial for government PRs to inform mission, vision, goal and its objectives to the public and increase the participation of the people to evaluate and support government policies and strategies in order to create cooperation between government and the public.

Moreover, the west Shewa Zone, Ambo town government has internal and external problems. Internally, the office has lack human and physical resource. The human resources found in the organization still not have PRs or related field educational background. Externally, lack of the people trust on the office and lack of media acceptance are the main challenges of west Shewa Zone, Ambo town government PRs office. To overcome these challenges and create opportunities, the reformation of the office is very crucial. To do so, the study suggests short and long term plans. In short term plan, short trainings on the function government PRs should be given for the workers to capacitate their theoretical understanding and practical skill. In the long term plan, the office should have structure and lead by PRs professionals to create trust between government and local community in order to engage the community in every government activities.

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