

REBUILDING TRUST THROUGH STRATEGIC HUMANITARIAN COMMUNICATION IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED NIGERIA

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Abstract

Humanitarian communication plays a vital role in sustaining the lives and dignity of people affected by violent conflict across Nigeria. Over the years, persistent insecurity including insurgency in the Northeast, banditry in the Northwest, and targeted attacks in other vulnerable regions, has contributed to widespread displacement, heightened fear, and continued reliance on humanitarian actors for timely information and relief. Yet, trust between affected populations, state institutions, and humanitarian organizations remains fragile. Poor messaging coordination, limited participatory engagement, and the rapid spread of misinformation often create communication gaps that weaken the acceptance and effectiveness of humanitarian response. This conceptual paper examines how strategic communication can strengthen trust-building processes in Nigeria's conflict environments. The discussion integrates crisis communication and trust perspectives within a humanitarian context to explain why communication must move beyond emergency messaging to fostering credibility, empathy, transparency, and inclusion. The paper argues that rebuilding trust requires recognizing affected communities not merely as recipients of aid but as partners in communication processes that support safety, resilience, and peace. Ultimately, this paper highlights communication as an underutilized but powerful resource for reinforcing humanitarian operations and contributing to peacebuilding within Nigeria's evolving security landscape.

Keywords: Strategic Communication; Humanitarian Engagement; Trust; Crisis Communication; Conflict-Affected Nigeria; Peacebuilding.

Introduction

Nigeria has, over the past decade, experienced significant security challenges ranging from insurgency and banditry to communal violence and targeted attacks across several regions. Communities in Yelwata (Benue State), Jos (Plateau State), Ondo State, and Kwara State have witnessed recurring violence that has displaced populations, disrupted livelihoods, weakened social cohesion, and eroded public trust in both governmental and humanitarian institutions (UN OCHA, 2024; UNICEF, 2023; International Crisis Group Nigeria briefings, 2023). Beyond the direct humanitarian consequences, these crises have exposed critical communication gaps between authorities, humanitarian actors, and affected populations.

Communication plays a central role during humanitarian emergencies because it shapes public perception, influences cooperation, and determines the level of trust communities place in institutional actors. In conflict-affected environments, delayed information, inconsistent messaging, misinformation, and limited community participation often weaken humanitarian responses and increase public uncertainty (Amobi, 2021; Sambe, 2020). In Nigeria's socio-culturally diverse environment, communication failures may further intensify historical grievances, fear, and distrust among vulnerable populations.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to humanitarian response and crisis management, limited studies have systematically examined how strategic communication and organisational trust interact within Nigeria's conflict settings. Existing studies often address communication strategies or trust-building separately, leaving an important conceptual and practical gap in understanding how communication can strengthen humanitarian engagement and public confidence in fragile environments.

Therefore, the central research question guiding this study is:

How can strategic humanitarian communication strengthen trust-building processes in conflict-affected communities in Nigeria?

To address this question, the study specifically seeks to:

1. Analyse the role of communication in shaping public trust in conflict-affected Nigerian communities.
2. Examine how crisis communication strategies can be integrated with organisational trust principles.
3. Identify practical lessons from verified humanitarian reports and existing literature that can improve communication interventions in fragile environments.

The significance of this study is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the study contributes to scholarship by integrating Crisis Communication Theory and Organisational Trust Theory within the Nigerian conflict context. Practically, the study provides evidence-based insights for policymakers, humanitarian organisations, media practitioners, and conflict-response agencies on how communication strategies can improve trust, cooperation, and resilience in conflict-affected communities. The study also highlights communication as a strategic humanitarian resource capable of supporting peacebuilding, improving intervention effectiveness, and enhancing long-term community engagement.

Literature Review

1. Trust and Public Confidence in Conflict Zones

Trust is a critical determinant of how communities respond to crises and humanitarian interventions. In conflict-affected areas of Nigeria, public trust in both governmental and non-governmental actors has often been eroded due to inconsistent communication, inadequate service delivery, and prolonged insecurity (Amobi, 2021; Izuogu, 2019). Studies indicate that communities with higher levels of trust in authorities are more likely to comply with safety guidelines, participate in relief programmes, and support peacebuilding initiatives (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). Conversely, mistrust can exacerbate conflict dynamics, reduce cooperation, and increase vulnerability to misinformation.

Sambe (2020) emphasises that in Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-religious context, historical grievances and social inequalities further complicate trust-building. Effective communication must therefore address both relational and structural components of trust, ensuring transparency, reliability, and fairness in information dissemination. Verified reports from UN OCHA (2024) and UNICEF

(2023) highlight that communities in Plateau, Ondo, and Kwara States frequently perceive humanitarian actors as distant or unresponsive, underscoring the need for communication strategies that are participatory and context-sensitive.

2. Crisis Communication Strategies in Nigeria

Crisis communication theory offers a framework to understand how organisations can manage public perception and maintain credibility during emergencies. Coombs (2019) argues that timely, transparent, and consistent messaging is central to preserving stakeholder trust during crises. In the Nigerian context, the application of these principles remains limited. Field reports indicate that communication failures during insurgencies and banditry often result in rumours, fear, and social tension (International Crisis Group Nigeria briefings, 2023).

Amobi (2021) and Sambe (2020) note that media interventions, including both traditional and social media, have the potential to mitigate conflict-related misinformation. However, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on cultural sensitivity, message clarity, and alignment with community expectations. Integrating crisis communication principles with trust-building mechanisms can therefore enhance not only the perception of credibility but also the overall efficacy of humanitarian responses.

3. Humanitarian Response and Community Engagement

Humanitarian interventions in conflict-prone Nigerian states require both operational efficiency and community legitimacy. Verified reports from UN OCHA (2024), UNICEF (2023), and academic studies on Boko Haram insurgency and banditry impacts emphasise that engagement with local populations is crucial for the success of relief programmes. Izuogu (2019) highlights that participatory communication strategies, where communities are involved in planning and dissemination, significantly increase compliance and cooperation.

Evidence from Yelwata, Plateau, and Ondo State indicates that failure to consider local dynamics and trust perceptions has sometimes undermined otherwise well-resourced humanitarian efforts (UN OCHA, 2024). Integrating organisational trust theory (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995) with crisis communication strategies provides a conceptual lens for understanding and addressing these challenges. By recognising both the informational and relational needs of communities, policymakers and humanitarian actors can design interventions that

strengthen resilience, encourage collaboration, and reduce the likelihood of conflict escalation.

Gap in Existing Literature

The reviewed literature demonstrates the growing relevance of communication and trust in humanitarian response; however, important conceptual gaps remain within the Nigerian conflict context. Despite the growing body of research, there remains a paucity of studies that systematically link **crisis communication theory** with **trust frameworks** in Nigeria's conflict-affected contexts. Existing studies tend to either focus on communication strategies or trust in isolation, leaving an integrated, conceptual understanding underexplored. This gap justifies the present study, which seeks to conceptualise how verified communication strategies can enhance trust and improve humanitarian and governmental interventions in fragile Nigerian communities.

Theoretical Frameworks

1. Crisis Communication Theory

Crisis Communication Theory (CCT) provides a structured approach to managing communication during emergencies, focusing on how organisations can maintain credibility, reduce uncertainty, and influence stakeholder perceptions (Coombs, 2019). The theory emphasises the importance of timely, transparent, and consistent messaging, alongside strategic adjustment of communication strategies based on crisis type and stakeholder needs.

In the Nigerian context, especially in conflict-affected states such as Yelwata, Plateau, Ondo, and Kwara, CCT offers a valuable lens for analysing how government agencies, media outlets, and humanitarian actors can communicate effectively with communities facing insurgency and banditry (International Crisis Group Nigeria briefings, 2023; UN OCHA, 2024). For instance, in areas with heightened fear and misinformation, applying CCT principles can reduce panic, clarify actionable instructions, and foster a perception of accountability and reliability among local populations.

Furthermore, research by Amobi (2021) and Sambe (2020) underscores the critical role of culturally sensitive and context-specific messaging in Nigerian communities. By integrating these insights with CCT, communicators can develop strategies that are not only informative but

also relational, thereby addressing both informational needs and emotional concerns during crises.

2. Organisational Trust Theory

Organisational Trust Theory, as conceptualised by Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995), provides a framework for understanding trust in institutional and interpersonal interactions. The model identifies three key determinants of trustworthiness: ability, benevolence, and integrity. In crisis or conflict situations, these dimensions influence whether affected populations perceive organisations as credible, reliable, and committed to their welfare.

Applying this theory to Nigeria's conflict-affected regions highlights the importance of designing communication and operational strategies that reinforce perceptions of trustworthiness. For example, UN OCHA (2024) and UNICEF (2023) reports illustrate that populations in Plateau and Ondo States are more responsive to humanitarian interventions when actors demonstrate consistent competence (ability), show concern for community wellbeing (benevolence), and adhere to ethical standards (integrity). Izuogu (2019) further argues that trust-building in fragile communities is both relational and contextual; it requires ongoing engagement, transparency, and sensitivity to local norms and grievances.

By integrating Organisational Trust Theory with Crisis Communication Theory, this study provides a conceptual framework to understand how communication strategies can simultaneously address **information gaps** and **relational trust deficits** in Nigerian conflict contexts. The dual-theory approach allows scholars and practitioners to design interventions that are not only strategically effective but also socially legitimate, fostering cooperation, compliance, and resilience among affected communities.

Conceptual Integration

The convergence of Crisis Communication Theory and Organisational Trust Theory offers a robust lens for analysing communication in Nigeria's conflict-affected regions. CCT addresses the **“how”** of message delivery during crises, focusing on timing, clarity, and appropriateness. Organisational Trust Theory complements this by addressing the **“why”**. Therefore, explaining why populations accept, act upon, or resist messages based on perceived trustworthiness of the sender. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive structure

for examining communication strategies that enhance public trust, community engagement, and the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study adopted a conceptual research design based on the systematic review and synthesis of verified secondary sources. The conceptual approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore and integrate existing knowledge on strategic humanitarian communication, crisis communication, and organisational trust within conflict-affected Nigerian communities rather than generate primary empirical data.

Data Sources

Data for the study were obtained exclusively from secondary sources, including:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Humanitarian situation reports
- Conflict briefings
- Institutional publications

Key sources included reports from:

- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA)
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
- International Crisis Group

Academic materials relating to crisis communication, trust, insurgency, banditry, and humanitarian response in Nigeria were also reviewed.

Selection Criteria

Sources included in the study were purposively selected based on:

- Relevance to communication, trust, and humanitarian engagement
- Credibility of publication source

- Recency of publication (primarily 2019–2024)
- Focus on conflict-affected Nigerian communities

Unverified online materials, opinion blogs, and non-academic sources were excluded to ensure reliability and scholarly validity.

Data Analysis Procedure

A thematic content analysis method was adopted to analyse the reviewed materials. Relevant information from the selected literature and humanitarian reports was categorised into major themes, including:

1. Trust and public confidence in conflict zones
2. Crisis communication strategies
3. Humanitarian engagement and community participation
4. Communication challenges during emergencies

The identified themes were synthesised to establish conceptual relationships between communication practices and trust-building processes in conflict-affected communities.

Ethical Considerations

Since the study relied exclusively on secondary data and publicly available reports, no direct human participation was involved. Consequently, formal ethical approval was not required. However, all sources used in the study were properly acknowledged to maintain academic integrity and avoid plagiarism.

Statistical Analysis

This study did not employ quantitative statistical analysis because it was conceptual and literature-based in nature. Instead, qualitative thematic synthesis was used to interpret patterns, relationships, and recurring issues identified across the reviewed literature and verified humanitarian reports.

Results

Trust Deficits in Conflict-Affected Communities

Findings from reviewed humanitarian reports and academic studies indicate that significant trust deficits exist between affected

communities and institutional actors in Nigeria's conflict-prone regions. Reports from UN OCHA (2024) and UNICEF (2023) revealed that prolonged insurgency, banditry, and violent attacks contributed to declining public confidence in governmental agencies and humanitarian organisations. Communities in Yelwata, Plateau State, Ondo State, and Kwara State were frequently identified as areas where distrust affected cooperation with crisis interventions.

Communication Challenges During Crises

The reviewed materials showed that conflict situations in Nigeria are often characterised by:

- Delayed dissemination of information
- Inconsistent messaging
- Spread of rumours and misinformation
- Limited access to credible communication channels

International Crisis Group Nigeria briefings (2023) reported that fragmented communication during emergencies contributed to confusion, panic, and uncertainty among affected populations.

Humanitarian Response and Community Engagement

Findings further indicated that humanitarian interventions achieved better reception in communities where local populations participated in information dissemination and decision-making processes. Reports reviewed in the study showed that participatory communication approaches improved cooperation between humanitarian actors and community members.

Role of Media and Communication Platforms

The reviewed literature identified traditional media, social media, and community-based communication channels as major platforms used for crisis communication in conflict environments. However, findings showed that the effectiveness of these channels depended on message clarity, cultural appropriateness, language accessibility, and perceived credibility of the information source.

Integration of Communication and Trust Principles

The findings also revealed recurring emphasis on:

- Transparency
- Consistency
- Community participation
- Cultural sensitivity
- Credibility of communication actors

These factors appeared repeatedly across the reviewed studies and humanitarian reports as major elements influencing communication effectiveness in conflict-affected communities.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that communication and trust are deeply interconnected within Nigeria's conflict-affected environments. The reviewed literature and humanitarian reports indicate that ineffective communication contributes significantly to mistrust, fear, and limited cooperation during crises. These findings are consistent with Crisis Communication Theory, which emphasises the importance of timely, transparent, and context-sensitive messaging in maintaining credibility during emergencies (Coombs, 2019).

The study further supports Organisational Trust Theory proposed by Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995), which identifies ability, benevolence, and integrity as major determinants of trustworthiness. Communities affected by insurgency and violence tend to cooperate more with humanitarian and governmental actors perceived as competent, ethical, and genuinely concerned about public welfare. This finding aligns with studies by Amobi (2021) and Izuogu (2019), which emphasise that trust-building in fragile environments depends heavily on sustained engagement and culturally appropriate communication.

The findings also reveal that participatory communication strengthens humanitarian response effectiveness. Communities that are actively involved in information dissemination and decision-making processes show greater acceptance of humanitarian interventions. This observation corresponds with existing literature suggesting that community-centred

communication enhances legitimacy, compliance, and resilience in crisis situations.

One major strength of this study lies in its integration of Crisis Communication Theory and Organisational Trust Theory within the Nigerian conflict context. The study contributes conceptual clarity by demonstrating how communication strategies and trust-building principles operate simultaneously during humanitarian crises. Additionally, the use of verified humanitarian reports and scholarly literature enhances the credibility and reliability of the study.

However, the study is limited by its conceptual nature and reliance on secondary data. The absence of primary empirical data means that findings are dependent on existing literature and institutional reports. Future empirical studies involving affected communities, humanitarian personnel, and policymakers would provide deeper insights into communication and trust dynamics across different conflict settings in Nigeria.

The implications of this study are significant for policymakers, humanitarian organisations, and media practitioners. The findings suggest that communication should not be treated merely as information dissemination but as a strategic humanitarian tool for rebuilding trust, strengthening cooperation, and improving crisis response effectiveness in conflict-affected communities.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of strategic humanitarian communication in rebuilding trust within conflict-affected communities in Nigeria. The findings revealed that ineffective communication, misinformation, delayed messaging, and limited community engagement contribute significantly to distrust and reduced cooperation during humanitarian crises. Conversely, timely, transparent, culturally sensitive, and participatory communication approaches improve public confidence, enhance collaboration, and strengthen the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions.

By integrating Crisis Communication Theory and Organisational Trust Theory, the study established that communication effectiveness in conflict environments depends not only on the accuracy of information

but also on the perceived trustworthiness of communication actors. The study therefore contributes to existing scholarship by providing a conceptual framework that links crisis communication with trust-building processes in humanitarian settings.

The study concludes that rebuilding trust in Nigeria's conflict-affected regions requires communication strategies that prioritise transparency, consistency, cultural sensitivity, and active community participation. Humanitarian actors and policymakers must recognise communication as a strategic component of crisis response and peacebuilding rather than merely an operational activity.

Future research should adopt empirical approaches to examine communication and trust dynamics across different Nigerian conflict zones. Comparative studies involving affected communities, humanitarian agencies, and government institutions would further strengthen understanding of how strategic communication can support sustainable humanitarian engagement and peacebuilding initiatives.

Recommendations for Policy and Future Research

Based on the findings and theoretical insights, the study offers the following recommendations:

1. Policy Recommendations

● Strengthen Community-Centred Communication

Humanitarian agencies and government authorities should actively involve local communities in designing, disseminating, and monitoring crisis-related messages.

Messaging should be culturally sensitive, linguistically appropriate, and delivered through trusted local channels

● Enhance Trustworthiness of Actors

Organisations should consistently demonstrate competence, benevolence, and integrity, as these dimensions of trust significantly influence public cooperation

Transparency regarding operational decisions and resource allocation can further build credibility and confidence.

● **Integrate Crisis Communication with Trust-Building**

Crisis communication strategies should explicitly incorporate trust-building elements, ensuring that information is not only accurate and timely but also perceived as reliable and ethically sound

● **Policy and Operational Implications**

Policymakers should develop frameworks that institutionalise participatory communication and trust-sensitive approaches in conflict response strategies.

Training for humanitarian and government personnel should emphasise the practical integration of communication principles with trust-building practices.

2. Future Research Directions

- Empirical studies should test the proposed integration of Crisis Communication Theory and Organisational Trust Theory in Nigerian conflict zones.
- Comparative analyses across states and regions could provide nuanced insights into context-specific communication and trust dynamics.

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