

African Research Review

AN INTERNATIONAL MULTI-DISCIPLINARY JOURNAL,
ETHIOPIA

AFRREV VOL. 11 (1), SERIAL NO. 45, JANUARY, 2017:136-155

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

DOI : <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.v11i1.10>

The Practices and Challenges of Public Relations within Two Ethiopian Towns: Harar and Dire Dawa

Geremew, Chala Teresa

Department of Afan Oromo, Literature and Communication

College of Social Sciences and Humanities

Haramaya University,

P. O. Box 138, Dire Dawa, Ethiopia

E-mail: geremew.chala@gmail.com, geremewchala@yahoo.com

Mobile: +251912039401

Abstract

This paper examined the practices and challenges of public relations within two government organizations in Ethiopian towns. It assessed the roles and functions of public relations within the organizations in Harar and Dire Dawa towns, pertinent to the contemporary global views of the practices of public relations. The paper observed that the issues of public relations is still at its pre-historic stage which deals with propaganda, publicity, and manipulation. This is seen as a serious problem been practiced by employees of the public relations organizations. The paper is based on quantitative data generated through an introspective Likert-Scale questionnaire. The respondents in the study were selected using simple random sampling technique. A descriptive data analysis of the practices and challenges of the public relations was used to communicate the findings of the study. The paper revealed that the practice of public

relations in the towns under study is very deprived and highly challenging for effective performance and implementation of public relations activities. The reason being that the major perspectives of public relations roles and functions are not clearly identified. Hence, public relations practitioners should get involve in strategic management, decision making and implementation of organizational planning.

Key Words: Harar and Dire Dawa, management, marketing, organization, public relations

Introduction

Public relations study is a major interest of scholars within the field of communications. It is an important subsystem of an organization and its effective practice is integrally bound to the success of an organization. It provides an opportunity for organizations to effectively monitor, interact and react with other key groups within the organizational environment. Public relations practitioners have been struggling to describe the strategic contribution that public relations make for an organization's success for many years (Rawjee and et al., 2012). There have been a number of studies emerging since 1990s on the practices of public relations and its related components used for an organization and publics. Stroh (2007) maintained that in order to build and enhance healthy relationships between an organization and its publics, it is vital to recognize that many cross-disciplines have been integrated to build a theory of public relations in terms of relationships and relationship management. This idea strengthens the view that public relation is a communication process that maintains mutual benefit for both an organization and its public. Piperopoulos (2003, p. 284) argued that public relation is a distinctive management function which helps in the understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics. It also involves the problems or issues of the management. Further, public relation helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinions; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management to effectively utilize change; serves as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools. Mekonnen (2001) asserted that public relations in Ethiopia is less significant in the eyes of top level managements in an organization. As a result, the consistency of the public relations practices may not be on the right track. In spite of significant changes in the focus and practice of public relations during the last decade in Ethiopia, the term is still misused and misunderstood in many organizations. It is often wrongly associated with propaganda, publicity, and manipulation. Rosenberg (2013) argued that many people wrongly assume that public relations is preoccupied with image-making in the sense of creating a false front or cover-up.

Although the name public relations is expanding and growing rapidly in many organizations in Ethiopia, the profession is still suffering from many problems emanating from misunderstanding of the clear roles and functions of the public relations, low understanding of the difference between public relations as a discipline on its own, as a management tool, as marketing expert and as a communication process in an organization.

The issue of public relations practices in different countries including Ethiopia has been controversial within in the field of communication. The possible reason for this could be attributed to the lack of understanding of the role of public relations. At the same time, very few people know what public relation encompasses, what it aims to achieve and how it works. Some persons see public relations as propaganda, while some other persons understand public relations as a technique of embellishing ugly or even antisocial realities in some other part of the world (Piperopoulos, 2013). According to Henslowe (1999), the public relations discipline is often either misunderstood or deliberately misinterpreted so that it is used in a pejorative way, associating it with propaganda, 'economy of the truth' or evasion. Most organizations disregard public relations as an integral part of the organization. In most instances, organizations only acknowledge the importance of public relations when things go wrong and in times of crisis. Hence, public relations practitioners rescue the situation by apologizing to the organizations' publics. They take the responsibility to assure that all will be managed and the crisis is under control. The functions of public relations overlap with and are interrelated with that of other disciplines. It is often merged with Marketing which function separately and maintain separate sector in most organizations. However, there are major differences between the two disciplines that arise from establishing relationships. The primary difference, according to Sudhashan (1995) cited in Stroch (2007) is the type of stakeholders served by the two fields. Marketing management focuses on the relationships with customers, clients, and channel (via the organizations reach their customers). Public Relations on the other hand, constitutes a much wider than ensuring the selling of products and services. As Gruning et al., (2002) put it, stakeholders such as the mass media, the activist groups, employees, unions, funders, or the direct community who may not be part of the market are also important to change and influence the organizational goals intended. Public Relations and Marketing function together by building exchange relationships with consumers, customers, clients, distributors, and other marketing parties through areas such as sponsorships, corporate identity, image building and media relations (Kotler et al., 2005). In Ethiopia, where the public relations practice is at its preliminary stage, the struggle to achieve the right track for the development of this outlook is not yet very clear.

Despite the practice of public relations in every organization for its betterment, rare has been investigated about the status and practices of public relations in Ethiopia. As a

result, the crux of this paper is to explore the practices of public relations in Ethiopia. The paper is of the views that the practice of public relations is highly challenging for the practitioners in organizations. There still exists in Ethiopia wide gaps in understanding the roles of public relations in relation to other units within organizations. Hence, this study used the fundamental roles of public relations to identify and further explore the practices and challenges of public relations within selected organizations in Harar and Dire Dawa towns in relation to the global context. The paper checked and evaluated public relation practitioners' and managers' attitudes and practice of the profession. Firstly, this paper presented the different theoretical perspectives of public relations and its related components. It then examined the factors that impede the development of public relations practices in Ethiopia.

Definitions of Public Relations

Many definitions of public relations have been documented by many scholars. Some are based on what public relations is and others are based on other business processes, such as communication arts and marketing. In this study, it is important to only focus on the most working definitions of public relations. Harlow came up with the following definition after analyzing more than four hundred of definitions of public relations:

Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools (cited in Kayode, 2014).

The other definition is that public relations is a management function of a continuing and planned character, through which public and private organizations and institutions seek to win and retain the understanding, and support of those with whom they are or may be concerned by evaluating public relation about themselves, in order to correlate as far as possible, their own policies and procedures to achieve by planned and widespread information more productive cooperation and more efficient fulfillment of their common interest (PRSA,2009).

Public Relations Institute of South Africa defined public relations as “the management, through communication, of perceptions and strategic relationships between an organization and its internal and external stakeholders” (Mersham, Rensburg, & Skinner 1995 cited in Sriramesh, 2003).

The very important term and concept of the modern public relation is that it is viewed as a corporate image. This can be reflected through many facts, such as its history, reputation, stability, financial success, etc. The corporate image is how an organization presents itself to the outside world (Henslowe, 1999).

Theoretical Models/Concepts of Public Relations

Different theoretical models and concepts exist regarding the roles and function of public relations. In order to describe the various roles and functions of the public relations, it is important to look at the various world views of public relations models and theoretical roles. Gruning cited in the Kitchen (2003) conceptualized that there are four models of public relations:

1. Press agency or publicity,
2. Public information,
3. Two ways-asymmetric and
4. Two-way symmetric.

While the four theoretical roles of public relations as Gruning has it, (in Heerden, 2005) are:

1. The communication technician
2. The communication facilitator
3. The expert prescriber and
4. Problem solving facilitator.

The communication technician role of public relations is mostly conceptualized as the beginning of professionalism (Gruning & Gruning, 2002). The practitioners are often responsible for the communication tactics of news releases, organizing press conferences, employee newsletters, position papers, designs brochures and media placements (Castelli, 2007). Gruning and Gruning (2002) further maintained that the practitioners, in performing this role, are usually not involved in defining problems and developing solutions, but base their tactics on the technical skill of writing. Theaker (2004) further stated that the communication technician's role of public relations may not require them to undertake researches or be involved in organizational decision making; except to decide which communication mechanism suits their prescribed purpose.

The communication facilitator of public relations is a boundary spanner who listens to and brokers information between the organization and its key publics (Theaker, 2004). According to (Cutlip et al., 2000), the goal of this role is "to provide both management

and public the information they need for making decisions of mutual interest.” Practitioners serving as the public relations manager within an organization are expected to be knowledgeable about innovations in public relations and are expected to demonstrate leadership in new approaches to old problems (Dozier 1984, cited in Castelli, 2007).

The expert prescriber’s theoretical role of the public relations is associated with the responsibility to handle consultation function or participation by other senior management. It is the role where the practitioner is responsible for describing and solving public relations problems independently. The expert prescriber acts as the authority on both public relations problems and their solutions (Castelli, 2007).

The problem-solving facilitator’s roles of public relations, according to (Dozier cited in Castelli, 2007), is the role where the practitioners are assumed as problem solver, decision-maker and planner. They are expected to be knowledgeable about innovations in public relations and expected to demonstrate leadership approach to solve problems. Ströh (2007, p. 1) explaining the importance of public relations stated that it must be the parasol function that manages the communication between an organization and its publics to build and enhance healthy relationships to the benefit of all parties involved. As Rosenberg (2013) put it, “the most valuable type of public relations activities involves anticipating problems, planning to prevent problems or at least trying to solve them while they are still small” (p. 13).

The issue of the roles of public relations were also dealt by Cutlip et al., (in Theaker, 2004, p. 57). They identified two dominant roles of public relations: the communication manager role and the communication technician role. The communication manager plans and manages public relations programs, advises management, makes communication policy decisions and oversees their implementation. On the other hand, the communication technician is the one who is not involved in organizational decision making, but implements public relations programs.

Concerning the roles of public relations practitioners, Pearson (2008) stated that public relations practitioners today varies from the purely technical to the respected counselor within organizations of every kind, from huge profit-making conglomerates to small grassroots not-for-profit and everything in between. On the other hand, Mehta and Xavie (ND), points out that the roles and responsibilities of public relations practitioners are influenced by two forces: the professionalization of public relations and the nature of the organizational environment. In fact, the multiple roles of public relations may be because of its multiple functions through its association with communications, management, marketing and others.

Lubbe and Puth (2002) showed how public relations practitioners are involved in a variety of work assignments or functions which may include research, strategic planning, counseling, communication, evaluation, media relations and placement, organizing, writing, editing, media production, speaking, training, management. However, the most common prevailing perspectives that influence the function of public relations in broad concept, as Venter (2004) put it, are communication, management and marketing.

Communication Perspective of Public Relations

Of the important factors, for the success of high level officers, communication perspective of public relations is the basic ingredient to make a good decision that can contribute to the goals of an organization. Public relations practitioners help to provide managers good information which may be vital for managers in order to impart the right decisions. The communication perspectives of a public relation are, therefore, used to provide genuine data or information about their organizations.

The communication role of public relations Saylor looks at all the stakeholders in the organization and uses a variety of tools and tactics to enhance relationships with these publics. At its best, the communication function uses research and monitoring methods to keep a finger on the pulse of internal and external perceptions of the organization. It uses a variety of communication channels to enhance the organization's reputation. And most importantly, it provides strategic counsel to the organization's leaders to help the team make better decisions (<http://www.saylor.org.book>).

The communication perspective of public relations is also emphasized by Rosenberg (2013). He stressed that public relations have to be interpreters and functions as communication links between an institution and all of its publics.

Public Relations and Management

The practice of public relations, from management perspectives, according to Rosenberg (2013), has the oversight of organizational internal communications policies and actions, oversight of organizational external policies and actions and coordination of internal and external communications. According to Theaker (2004, p. 50), the management perspective of public relations is twofold: first helping to collect and interpret information from the social environment so that strategic decision can be made and second, the communication of the strategic vision. The notion of public relations as a managerial function is emphasized in many definitions put forward to explain the nature of the discipline (Kitchen, 2003). Numerous studies have been done in an attempt to explain the management role of public relations; e.g., Cutlip et al.,

2000; Skinner et al., 2001 and Seitel, 2004 advocate that when managing an organization's public relations system, practitioners must demonstrate comfort with the various elements of the organization itself. They must be the interpreter of the organization's philosophy, policy and programmes, all which emanate from top management. The management perspective of public relations is also supported by Onwunali (2006) who stated that public relations is an instrument of management and its consideration should be taken into account when formulating policy. He also suggested that public relations should be placed at top management level of an organization. Gruning and Gruning (1998) contextualize that when public relations is part of the organization, it is likely to manage communication programs strategically. By drawing on the concept of the management's role of public relations, Gruning and Gruning have been able to show that public relations must report to those who run the organization. However, in many organizations, this reporting relationship has not always been in practice.

Seitel (2011) pointed out that the management function of public relations is in a position to: (1) evaluate internal and external opinions, attitudes and needs on an ongoing basis; (2) to advise management regarding their possible effect and to act as an instrument in bringing about policy changes and in directing new courses of action. Hence, the high-level of organizations and the practitioners of public relations should know very well their publics to achieve organizational missions. These organizational missions can be determined by the external and internal stakeholders. The public relations practitioner acts as a counselor to management and as a mediator, helping to interpret private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policy and action. This view clearly indicates that relationships are at the center of public relations, and is seen as an important ingredient for the effective functioning of an organization.

Public Relations and Marketing

The marketing perspective of public relations is being incorporated into the marketing communication mix (Kitechen, 2004). As it is also indicated in Kotler and Mindak (cited in Kitechen, 2004), public relations and marketing communications are inextricably interlinked. Although marketing and public relations have a lot in common, many scholars believe that they are not the same thing. They deal with organizational relationships and employ similar processes, techniques and strategies. However, the two functions have to be separated by mission and goal. Gruning and Gruning, (1998, p. 141) concluded that public relations is most excellent when it is strategic and when marketing does not dominate public relations. The overarching premise that the organization is best served by an inherent diversity of perspectives provided by marketing and public relations when those functions remain distinct and coordinated yet not integrated.

According to Belch and Belch (2003), marketing is the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, sales promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfies individuals and organizational objectives. The purpose of marketing is to attract and satisfy clients at a long-term premise. Thus, its aim is mainly to maintain and build customers for the organizational products or services. Whilst, public relations as Koekemoer (1998) said is the management function through communication of perceptions and strategic relations between an organization and its internal and external publics. When an organization deliberately plans, and distributes information in an attempt to control and deal with its image and the nature of the publicity it receives, it is really engaging in a function known as public relations (Rawjee et al., 2012).

Kotler and Mindak, in Guning & Gruning (1998) identified five alternative arrangements of relationship between public relations and marketing:

1. Separate but equal functions (marketing and public relations have different functions, perspectives and capabilities).
2. Equal but overlapping functions (both are important and separate functions, but they share some terrain, particularly product publicity and customer relations; in addition, public relation serves as a 'watch dog' on the social responsibility of marketing).
3. Marketing as the dominant function (marketing manages the relationship with all publics in the same way as the relationship with customers – 'mega marketing').
4. Public relation as the dominant function (if public relation builds relationship with all key publics of organization, then programs to build relationships with customers, i.e. marketing, would be a subset of public relations).
5. Marketing and public relations as the same functions (public relations and marketing converge in concepts and methodologies and a single department manages the external affairs of the company (p. 143).

However, Gruning and Gruning (1998, p. 141) argued that public relations is excellent only if it is housed in a single department or specialized communication departments.

The differences between public relations and marketing as argued by Gruning et al. (2007), are that the marketing function should communicate with the markets for an organization's goods and services. In contrast, the public relations should be concerned with, all its publics of the organization. Still, it is crucial to recognize that both public relations and marketing convey the essence of communication. The main focus of both functions is to maintain and build harmonious relationships with the organizations and

their internal and external stakeholders. The major purpose of marketing is to make money for the organization by increasing the slope of the demand curve. While the major purpose of public relations is to save money for the organization by building relationships with publics that constrains or enhances the ability of the organization to meet its mission (Rawjee et al., 2012). Based on this, it is important to understand that without a clear indication of the role and place of these interrelated disciplines in an organization, their contribution to the overall functioning and performance of the organization could be greatly misunderstood and diffused.

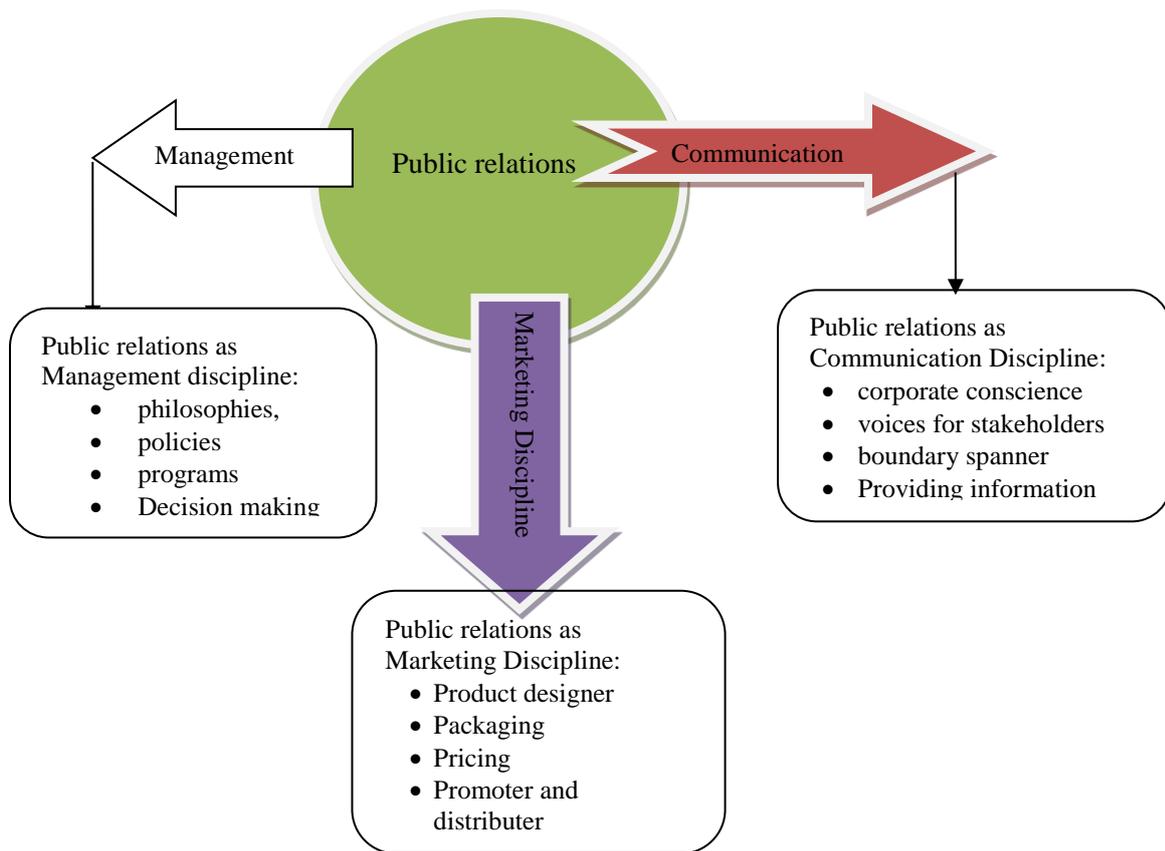


Figure 1: Public relation and related disciplines

Public Relations Education

According to Hornaman (2000), public relations education can greatly contribute to public relations status as a profession. Public relations qualified individuals in Ethiopia

are rare. Unlike other professional public relations training in Ethiopia did not get attention for many years and also now. None of the Ethiopian universities and colleges are offering public relations as its own field of studies with the exceptions of few courses within language, and journalism and communication studies. However, Kruckeberg (1998) asserted that public relations is a professional occupation which requires specialized professional education. Scholars such as J. Grunig (1989) and Bissland & Rentner (1988) cited in (Hornaman, 2000) have argued that public relations education is the key to developing the profession of public relations.

Materials and Method

Harari Region is one of the nine regional states of Ethiopia and is located in the eastern part of the country. Harar is the capital city of the Harari peoples' regional state. According to CSA, 2007, the region has an estimated population of 185,000 of which 52% are males and the remaining 48% are females. Of the total population estimation, 65% are urban inhabitants, and 35 % rural inhabitants. The region is the smallest both in population and in land settlements compared to the other regional states of Ethiopia. Dire Dawa town is one of the largest cities of Ethiopia with a diverse and racial population. It has numerous economic and social institutions, with a large number of permanent and temporary employees, including the Ethio-Djibuti railway station, textile and food factories, and higher education institutions with a large number of students (Amare, 2009). It is the second biggest city of Ethiopia next to AddisAbaba (Zykowska, 2011). According to CSA, 2007, the town has an estimated population of 234,000 of which 49.8% are males and the remaining 51.2% are females.

Quantitative research approach was used in this study in order to understand how many believe certain viewpoints, to measure the level agreement and disagreement of Liker-Scale questionnaires which were intended to create the strongest reverberation of the participants' perceptions and realities. This approach involves the generation of data in quantitative form which can be subjected to rigorous quantitative analysis. Hence, this study was conducted on fourteen organizations purposely selected on the basis of their size from Harar and Dire Dawa towns. The organizations were considered because they are the mainstreams both in internal organization and in their human power development. Questionnaires which attempt to explore the practices of public relations within the selected organizations were used as an instrument of data collection. Seventy (70) copies of questionnaire were distributed to public relations practitioners, journalists and communication officers in the towns. Out of the distributed seventy (70) copies of questionnaires, fifty-four (54) copies were returned while the rest sixteen (16) questionnaires were disappeared. The seventy (70) respondents were selected using simple random sampling technique. Simple random sampling is a type sampling

technique where each subject or unit in the population has an equal chance of being selected (Wimmer and Dominic, 2006).

The design of the questionnaire was based the Likert-Scale type data collection. Hence, the participants were asked 19 items Likert scale measurement questions which touch on their insights of the status of the practices and challenges of public relations. These Likert-Scale items are simply-worded statements to which respondents can indicate their extent of agreement or disagreement on a five-scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” (Bhattacharjee, Anol, 2012). The Likert scale measurement questions, in which 1 mean “strongly disagree” and 5 means “strongly agree” were used to better discriminate among the responses of respondents. A descriptive Likert scale method of data analysis was used to communicate the themes encompassed in the practices and challenges of public relations within the selected organizations in Harar and Dire Dawa towns. This study used an introspective research which examines the field of public relations. It was used to survey the opinions of the proper roles of public relations practitioners (Wimmer and Dominic, 2006). Introspective examines what public relation is, how it differs from other related disciplines. The main aim of the introspective approach is to develop concepts on how practitioners practice the public relation to the contemporary organizations.

Results and Discussions

The Likert-Scale type of questions was aimed to examine the practices and challenges of public relations in the particular study area. To describe the status, the roles and the functions of public relations, data were collected from managers, communication officers and practitioners selected using simple random sampling technique. The analysis generally paid attention to the various practices and challenges observed in the selected organizations. The findings and results of the paper on the current status of public relations practices and challenges are presented here under.

Table 1 below shows general information of public relations’ activities and roles collected from the two Ethiopian towns. Accordingly, table 1 item 1 reveals that all (100%) of the respondents replied that the activities of the public relations in their organizations are writing a press release, organizing events on anniversaries and preparing reports for managers. None of the respondents denied these activities are major roles and activities of public relations practitioners in the towns. 94.4% of table 1, item 2 of the respondents believed that public relations practitioners in their organizations played the role of disseminating information from higher level managers to its public and vice versa, while only 5.6% of the respondents revealed that public relations are not involving in disseminating information from managers to its stakeholders and the vice versa. This datum definitely confirms the idea of Rosenberg (2013) that states “public relations can represent the needs, interests and desires of the

organization's various publics/stakeholders to management and then back from management to them, explaining management's perspectives" (p. 15). Item 3 of table 1 indicates that the effort of public relations activities in Harar and Dire Dawa towns are mainly to get media coverage about their organizations optimistically. In this study, it the effort get media coverage accounts 61.8%, while 39.2% of the respondents' responses indicated that need get media coverage is pessimistic.

Table 1: Opinions Regarding the Practices of Public Relation in Harar and Dire Dawa Towns

No.	The roles and activities of public relations in your organization are	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree	
1.	... to write press release, organizing events for anniversaries, preparing reports for managers	N	0	0	5	15	34
		%	0	0	9.3	27.7	63
2.	...to disseminate information from manager to public and vice versa	N	2	1	15	20	16
		%	3.7	1.85	27.78	37	29.63
3.	...always to get the media coverage or publicity	N	9	10	20	11	4
		%	16.67	18.52	37	20.4	7.4
4.	...always responsible to conduct official ceremonies and festivals	N	3	7	13	12	19
		%	5.56	13	24	22.22	35

The implications of the data in the table 1 are mainly intended to measure the communication technician roles of public relations. As a result, a greater proportion of the respondents' views were that the roles of public relations practitioners are still dominated by publicity or press agency, because practitioners are significantly involved in implementing public relations programs such as writing press releases, organizing events or preparing an annual plan, writing minutes during meeting are held in an organization.

Table 2 presents the management perspectives of public relations. Items in table 2 were designed to address whether the public relations practitioners in Harar and Dire Dawa towns are significantly involve in the top-level management and related activities or not.

Table 2: Practitioners Regarding to Management Roles

No.	Public relation in our organization		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
1.	...discusses on policies and strategic plan with top managements.	N	25	21	1	4	3
		%	46.3	38.9	1.85	7.4	5.56
2.	...participates in the top-level management decision making.	N	19	17	10	4	5
		%	35	31.5	18.5	7.4	9.3
3.	...takes responsibility for the success or the failure of public relations plans.	N	13	15	14	5	7
		%	24	27.78	25.9	9.3	13
4.	...follows the implementation of public relations plans.	N	16	12	12	9	6
		%	29.63	22.2	22.2	16.67	11.1

Table 2 item shows that most (85%) of the respondents did not involve in discussing on strategic plans and policies with top level managements. It is only 15% that public relations in these towns involve in the interpretation of philosophies, policies and programs within their organizations. Cutlip et al. (2000) supports this notion by stating that in order to become involved in strategic planning, public relations practitioners should operate at the highest level of organizational management and have access to the most senior information and decision-making systems. Moreover, 66.5% responses show that public relations did not participate in the top-level management decision making, while, 33.5% of the participants indicated that they participated in the top-level management decision making. However, the involvement of public relations in the organizational decision making is very crucial. Mykkanen and Vos (2015), states that decision making is strategic actions and the involvement of public relations in the organizational decision making helps the practitioners to change the organizations' environment. This data clearly indicated that the level of participation of the public relations practitioners at the top-level decision making is very low.

52% of the respondents said that they did not take responsibility for the success and/or the failure of the public relations plans of their organizations, where as less than half (48%) of the respondents confirmed that they take responsibilities for the failures and successes of the public relations plans of their organizations. In fact, 52% of the

respondents disagreed that they take part on the implementation of public relations plans in their organizations. Yet, 48% of them responded that they take part on the implementation of public relations plans in their organizations.

From the table 2, we can conclude that the majority of the public relations practitioners did not take part in the top-level management. They are not part of decision makers. Further, they showed us that they did not follow the implementation of public relations' plans, success and failures of their plans. Based on the data in table 2, it is clear that the majority of the organizations have failed to acknowledge the roles that the public relations can play in top-level decision making.

Table 3: Responses of the Participants Regarding the Level of the Practices of Public Relations

No.	Public relation in our organization is/has	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
1.	...well organized in trained public relations related human power.	N 42	9	3	0	0
		% 77.78	16.67	5.56	0	0
2.	...well recognized and influential	N 37	12	4	1	0
		% 68.52	22.22	7.4	1.8	0
3.	...highly knowledgeable and perform complex activities	N 33	17	2	1	1
		% 61.11	31.48	3.7	1.85	1.85
4.	...its own budget allocation	N 18	16	12	6	2
		% 33.33	29.63	22.22	11.11	3.70
5.	... Independently functions every activity it is concerned with	N 13	15	11	10	5
		% 24	27.78	20.37	18.52	9.3
6.	...viewed as propaganda and manipulation of peoples', mind	N 10	24	10	10	0
		% 18.52	44.8	18.52	18.52	0

The majority of the respondents (94.4%) identified that public relations in their organization are not well organized by trained manpower. Further, 91% of the respondents accounted that public relations in their organization are not well recognized and influential. Regarding the knowledge level and performing complex activities of the public relations practitioners, 50 respondents (93%) had shown disagreement. Whilst, 52% of the respondents in the study had disagreed on the independently performing every activity they are concerned with. Whereas, about 48% of the respondents showed that independently perform every activity of public relation in their organizations.

Out of the total, 34 (63%) of the respondents disagreed that public relations in their organization are viewed as a propagandist and manipulators of peoples' mind. In this study, only (37%) of the respondents agreed that people view public relations in their organizations as propagandist and manipulators.

Regarding the level of the practices of public relations Harar and Dire Dawa towns the respondents' organizations is very low. The implication of the data in table 3 is that public relations in Harar and Dire Dawa towns does not give due consideration to the practice public relations.

Table 4: Responses of the Respondents on the Possible Challenges of Public Relations

Public relation in our organization		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
1. ...is well understood by both the top managers and staff members	N %	11 20.37	12 22.22%	21 38.89	6 11.11	4 7.4
2. ...is clearly identifiable from other disciplines (such as marketing and communication).	N %	23 42.6	24 44.4	4 7.4	3 5.5	0 0
3. ...is well equipped and resourceful	N %	36 66.67	12 22.22	2 3.70	3 5.5	1 1.85
4. ...is to handle public complaints (if any) properly	N %	4 7.4	14 25.93	18 33.33	12 22.22	6 11.11

Table 4, item 1 shows that public relations is well understood by more than half, (57%) the organizational managers and others staff members. But approximately 43% of the respondents' responses show that public relations in their organizations are not well understood by top level management bodies and by their staff members. Kayode (2014:289) supported this idea that "organizations must endeavor to maintain mutual understanding with their environment." Table 4, Item 2 (87%) of the respondents shows that public relations in the two Ethiopian towns are not clearly identified from other related disciplines (marketing and communication). Few (13%) of the respondents witnessed that public relations is clearly identified from marketing and communication perspectives. Majority of the respondents' responses (88.9%) shows that public relations in Harar and Dire Dawa towns are well equipped and resourceful, while few (10%) of the respondents' responses was that public relations is well equipped and resourceful. The finding from table 4, item 3 (66%) of the respondents recognized that public relations in their organization handle public complaints properly whilst, less than half (34%) the respondents do not handle public complaints properly.

It can be understood from table 4 that there is lack of resources; there is a greater gap between public relation practitioners and managers which have prevented them from fully and properly handling public complaints. Its general implication is that most top managers neither have a clear understanding of the practices, roles and functions of public relations, nor do they have a straight idea about the roles and functions public relations practitioners.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to assess the practices and challenges of public relations within two Ethiopia towns (Harar and Dire Dawa). The practices of public relations in the study area have been subjected to a wrong perception of what public relations person actually does. The paper verified that there is a very little understanding of the major functions and roles of public relations in Harar and Dire Dawa towns including managers, journalist and practitioners because, public relations practitioners are rarely involved in strategic planning, in decision making and in following up the implementation of plans in their organizations. The functions of public relations at the strategic planning level rarely exist due to lack of public relations qualified persons. This resulted in the confusion of recognizing public relations as communication expert, as management body and as marketing disciplines.

Generally, the status of the practices of public relations in Ethiopia looks like it is in the early stage of its maturity and formation. Most of its practices lie at the limits of Grunig's first model of public relations, which focuses on only publicity or press agency. The major communication channel can be described as one-way official communication and can be equated to the earlier concept of Westerns' public relations.

The roles public relations practitioners within the organizations can be seen as a communicator, a mediator, an interpreter or communication link between the organization and all its stakeholders. Challenges such as lack sufficient budget allocations, lack of understanding and misconceptions towards the roles and functions can greatly affect the organization's overall aims and objects.

It is therefore recommended that public relations education and training should be organized so that public relations professionals can emerge which may bring a change on the practices of public relations. Public relations should be an independent rather than a political tool for publicity, propaganda and being considered as supportive higher management. Public relations practitioners must be the interpreter of the organizations' policies, philosophies and programmes.

References

- Amare, D. (2009). *Distribution of Most-at-risk Population Groups and Their Perceptions towards HIV/AIDS: A baseline Survey in Dire Dawa for the Implementation of Mobile HIV Counseling and testing*. Bethesda, MD: Private Sector Program-Ethiopia, Abt associates Inc.
- Belch, G. E., & Belch, M. A. (2003). *Advertising and promotion: An integrated marketing Communication perspective.6th edition*. The McGraw-Hill Companies.
- Castelli, W. J. (2007). *Government public relations: A quantitative assessment of government public relations practitioner roles and public relations model usage*. Florida: University of South Florida.
- Cutlip, S. M., Center A. H., & Broom, G. M., (2000). *Effective public relation*. Upper Saddle, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- GedionTimothewos. (2010). Freedom of expression in Ethiopia. *Mizan Law Review*, Volume 4, No. Autumn 2010.
- Grunig, L. A., Grunig, J. E., & Dozier, D. M. (2002). *Excellent in public relations and effective organizations: A study of communication management in three countries*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gruning, J. E. & Gruning, L. A. (1998). The relationship between public relations and marketing in excellent organizations: Evidence from the IABC study. *Journal of marketing communications*, 4, 141-162.
- Grunig, J. E. (1989). Teaching Public Relations in the Future. *Public relations review*, 14 (1), 12-24.

- Grunig, L. A., Grunig, J. E., Toth, E. L., (2007). *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management: Challenges for the next generation*. New York: Routledge.
- Grunig, J. E. (1979). The status of public relations research. *International Public Relations Association Review*, 3(2), 9-16.
- Henslowe, P. (1999). *Public relations: A practical guide to the basics*. London: Kegan-page.
- Heerden, V., Rensburg (2005). Public relations roles. Empirically verified among public relation Practitioners in Africa. *Communicare* 24 (1) - July 2005.
- Hornaman, L.B. (2000). *Public relations educations and public relations profession*: University of Florida, Theses & Dissertations. Paper
- Kirat, M. (2005) Public relations practice in the Arab world: A critical assessment. *Public Relations Review*, 31 (1), 323–332.
- Koekemoer, L. (ed.) (2004). *Marketing communications*. Lansdowne: Juta and Co Ltd.
- Kotler, P. Keller, K. L., (2009). *Marketing management*.13th edition. New Jersey: Pearson.
- Kruckeberg, D. (1998). The future of PR Education. Some Recommendations. *Public Relations Review*, 24 (2), 235-248.
- Mykkanen, M. & Vos, M. (2015). The contributions of Public Relations to Organizational Decision Making: Insight from Literature. *Public Relations Journals*, 9(2). Available Online <http://www.prsa.org/intelligence/PRJournal/vol9/No2/>.
- Rensburg, R., & Cant, M. (2009). *Public relations: African perspectives*. 2nd edition. Johannesburg: Heinemann.
- Lubbe, B. & Puth, G. (2002). *Public relations in South Africa: A management reader*. Cape Town: Heinemann.
- Rosenberg, M. (2013). *This is PR: The realities of public relations*. 11th edition. Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- Seitel, F.P. (2011). *The practice of public relations*. Upper Saddle, NJ: Prentice Hall Inc. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Skinner, C. Von Essen L., & Mersham, G. (2001). *Handbook of public relations*. 6th edition. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

- Sriramesh, K. & Verčič, D. (2003). *The global public relations handbook: Theory, research and practices*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ströh, U. M. (2007). The conundrum of public relations versus marketing: Clarifying the differences in terms of relationship management. *PRism* 5(1): 1-15. http://praxis.massey.ac.nz/prism_online_journ.html/ [accessed 28 June 2008].
- Tench, R. Yeomans, L. (2006). *Exploring public relations*. London: Pearson Education Limited.
- Venter, B. P. (2004). *The role of public relations practitioners in South Africa*. Cape Town: Cape Technikon. Theses & Dissertations. Paper 38. http://dk.cput.ac.za/td_ctech/38 [accessed 20 October 2014].
- Watson, T. (2012). The evolution of public relations measurement and evaluation. *Public Relations Review*, (2012), doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2011.12.018
- ZyKowask, L. (2011). Complementary Cities, the Case of Harar and Dire Dawa (Eastern Ethiopia): *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, T. LXIV, z. 2 (31-37).