

Reimagining Strategic Public Relations for Climate Change Mitigation in Nigeria

Balka Musa Maina Ph.D

Department of Mass Communication

Federal University of Kashere

Gombe, Nigeria

balkamn7@gmail.com

Abstract

Climate change has become a pressing reality in Nigeria, manifesting through desertification, floods, droughts, coastal erosion, and widespread threats to food security. Despite these escalating challenges, climate communication in Nigeria remains fragmented, reactive, and limited by technical language, low awareness, and uneven media coverage. This paper examines how strategic public relations (PR) can be repositioned as a participatory, culturally grounded, and research-driven tool for climate change mitigation. Drawing on secondary data from peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, NGO reports, and media content, the paper demonstrates that PR holds significant potential to translate climate science into accessible local knowledge, influence public behaviour, strengthen policy engagement, and coordinate stakeholders across sectors. Using Framing Theory and the Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Model as its theoretical foundation, the paper highlights how PR can enhance climate literacy, drive behavioural change, counter misinformation, support crisis communication, and promote sustainable innovation through targeted messaging and dialogue-based approaches. The paper concludes that a strategically repositioned PR practice can enhance Nigeria's climate resilience by bridging communicative gaps and mobilising collective action across.

Keywords: *Climate change communication, Nigeria, Desertification, floods, droughts, coastal erosion, Public relations (PR), Strategic communication*

Introduction

Climate change is a present reality in Nigeria with visible impacts like desertification and floods amongst others. There is hardly any part of Nigeria that has not felt the scourging impact of climate change in Nigeria. According to Eboreime Anjorin Obi-Jeff, Ojo and Hertelendy (2025), rising desertification in the

West African Sahel to more frequent and intense droughts in recent decades, directly affecting Nigeria's northern region. This phenomenon threatens land use, agricultural productivity, and food security.

The southwestern part of Nigeria has experienced temperature severe drought. According to Rabi, Zakari, Usman, and Kura (2023), states like Jigawa, Katsina, and Sokoto are identified as highly vulnerable due to high exposure and sensitivity and low adaptive capacity. Okon, Falan, Solaja, Alabi, Okikiola, Adesina, Tokula, Kipchumba, and Edeme (2021) added that, the north eastern Nigeria is considered a hot spot of climate change impact suffering from aridification and food insecurity.

Also, the north central is characterized by variable rainfall patterns leading to both flood and drought. This affects agriculture and water resources. The southern delta regions is plagued by coastal erosion, flooding, oil exploration, related environmental degradation making it the most vulnerable zone on southern Nigeria. (Okon et.al) they added that yearly rainfall of about 4000 millimetres. Increasing the risk of flood. Generally, Climate change poses a critical threat to food security globally, with significant implications for Nigeria where agriculture employs about 70% of the workforce and contributes 25% to GDP (Anderson et al., 2020; Akinkuolie et al., 2024a; Adegoke et al., 2014; World Bank, 2022).

Public Relations (PR) has been traditionally linked to crisis communication with the aim of snapping transnational reputation and sustaining stake holders relationships works by Coombs and Holladars 2012, Heath and Johanson 2018 revealed that PR possesses the capacity to influence public discourse, mobilize communities and shape policy frameworks. Positioning it as an indispensable tool for addressing, the complex challenge like climate change. However, it has been observed by Azu and Alakwem (2023), that in the Nigerian context, the communication landscape for climate change is fragmented and reactive, characterized by technical jargons and limited public engagement. PR campaigns that involve community leaders, youths group and local influencers are potentially potent of successfully promoting sustainable practice and influence policies

The absence of coherent PR strategy has led to low awareness, weak behavioural change and minimal policy support. According to Adelekan *et.al.* (2020), strategic public relations could fill this gap by crafting clear, persuasive message that resonate culturally and socially to take care of the diverse Nigerian audience. In the light of this, repositioning PR as an innovative climate advocacy mechanism, Nigeria can leverage the discipline's expertise in storytelling, media relations and stakeholders engagement to mitigate climate issues.

Climate change presents one of the most urgent challenges to Nigeria's development, with impacts ranging from desertification and flooding to food insecurity and coastal erosion. Yet, communication responses remain fragmented, reactive, and often inaccessible to the wider public. While public relations has been applied in environmental and development contexts, its contribution to climate change mitigation has not been re-imagined (strategically re-positioned) to meet the scale of the crisis. This paper is therefore necessitated by the need to re-imagine PR as a strategic, participatory, culturally grounded, and research-driven communication tool that can bridge gaps between science, policy, and public understanding. PR is uniquely suited for this role because it goes beyond information dissemination to strategically frame issues, build relationships, and mobilize diverse stakeholders. Unlike journalism or education, PR emphasizes dialogue, trust-building, and culturally resonant storytelling, making it especially effective in translating complex climate science into accessible knowledge and actionable behaviour in Nigeria's sociocultural context. In doing so, PR can enhance climate literacy, foster behavioural change, and strengthen stakeholder collaboration for Nigeria's climate resilience.

Also, one of the needs that necessitates re-imagining public relations in climate change communication is low literacy level. According to Lee and Armstrong (2022) the Afrobarometer Survey of 1,600 respondents across Nigeria shows that 29.8% are aware of climate change, 67.5% haven't heard of it. In a related study, Nicholas (2021) finds that climate literacy in Africa is at 37% the analysis ranks Nigeria low with 73% of the population lacking climate knowledge. This climate literacy varies widely by regions ranging from 71% in Kwara to just 5% in Kano. Centre for climate change and development (2025) noted that the low literacy is caused by poverty, limited formal education and linguistic diversity. Nwafor and Aghaebie (2025), state that PR can utilise oral media, traditional and contemporary communication methods such as story telling, folklore proverbs and communal gatherings in conveying knowledge related to climate change adaptation and resilience especially in the rural areas where literacy level may be low.

The objective of the paper is to examine the strategic repositioning of public relations as a participatory and culturally grounded tool for climate change mitigation in Nigeria, with a focus on its potential to enhance public engagement, influence policy, and strengthen communicative coherence across sectors. hereby bridging the gap between climate science, policy frameworks, and everyday public understanding

Literature Review

Conceptual clarification of Public Relations

Public relations (PR) is defined as the strategic communication process aimed at building mutually beneficial relationships between an organization or individual and its target audience, including the public, media, stakeholders, and society at large (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2016). PR professionals utilize various communication tools and techniques to manage the spread of information, shape public perceptions, and influence attitudes and behaviours.

The significance of public relations lies in its ability to bridge the gap between organizations or individuals and their target audience. PR helps establish trust, credibility, and goodwill through transparent and effective communication (Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, & Shin, 2019). It plays a critical role in shaping public opinion, managing crises, and fostering mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and stakeholders.

Strategic communication is a key component of public relations and plays a crucial role in combating misinformation. Strategic communication involves the deliberate planning and execution of communication activities to achieve specific objectives (Freberg, 2020). In the context of combating misinformation, strategic communication focuses on effectively disseminating accurate information and countering false narratives.

Strategic communication enables PR professionals to identify misinformation, analyse its sources, and develop targeted messaging to address and correct false information (Distaso & Bortree, 2017). By utilising evidence-based messaging, PR practitioners can provide accurate and reliable information to the public, debunk myths, and promote a better understanding of complex issues.

Strategic communication also involves selecting appropriate communication channels to reach the target audience effectively. PR professionals leverage traditional media outlets, digital platforms, social media, and other channels to ensure that accurate information reaches a wide audience and competes with misinformation (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2017).

Public relations has immense potential in promoting evidence-based policies. Evidence-based policies are those that are informed by rigorous research, data, and scientific evidence (Lavis, 2019). PR professionals can play a crucial role in communicating the benefits and rationale behind evidence-based policies, fostering public understanding, and garnering support.

Strategic Public Relations in Climate and Development Communication

The primary objectives of public relations are to build, sustain, and safeguard an organization's reputation, strengthen its credibility, and promote a positive public image. It serves as a vital instrument for promoting public awareness initiatives. According to Public Relations Institute of Australia (2016) says it is a deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between organization (or individual) and its (or their) publics. This definition portrays the fact that public relations is strategic when it says "deliberate" "planned" "sustained effort". Gone (2024) defines public relations as managing relationships between organizations, stakeholders, and the public through strategic and goal-oriented communication.

PR has traditionally served as a strategic communication tool in both global and Nigerian contexts by informing the public, shaping perceptions, persuading communities, and building support for development and environmental initiatives. Globally, PR strategies have been adopted by the United Nations in 2017 to fight against plastic litter. In Nigeria, Ikeowu (2005) reported that public relations strategies have been used to settle environmental conflict between Shell Petroleum Development Company and the Ogoni Village in rivers state. These strategies helped in achieving long-term benefits for the environment and local population (Subi & Amodu, 2020; Nwagbara & Brown 2020). Corporate social responsibility as a public relations strategy was repositioned to help Nigerian oil and Gas in environmental conservation, manage good image, conflict resolution and long term sustainability (Ebisi, Guo, and Soomro 2025).

Public relations role in the mitigation of climate change in Nigeria include turning climate science into local knowledge, mobilising the public support, influencing policy and coordinating many actors government, companies, communities and NGO. This could be achieved through awareness, advocacy and stake holder's engagement. This underscores the role of public relations in climate change mitigation. Climate change awareness through seminars and mass media messages among others make citizens sensitive towards nature (Onnoghen et al. 2023). Ezekiel, Kajang, Glory (2014) posit that Climate change awareness strategies and mitigation measures involves creating knowledge, understanding and values, attitude, skills and abilities through seminars could help towards the issues of climate change for attaining a better quality environment. Essien et al. (2020) support the above by stating that a solution to climate change mitigation will require climate change awareness.

A study conducted by Nziedebe, Egbule, Chukuwuone and Agu. (2011), found that the mass media (radio/TV and newspaper) was the largest source of information on the climate change phenomenon. How public relations achieves this

awareness role is through its unique media relations strategy. According to park and Reber (2010), public relations practitioners used the media to reach out to various publics and to frame issues. This is because of PR's potentials to develop credible and effective PR messages that combat misinformation and promote evidence-based policies, economic growth and environmental protection (Tsegyu, Garba, Muhammad. 2021). The above position confirms public relation relations as an indispensable tool in mitigating climate change.

Climate Communication Realities in Nigeria

Despite the important role of awareness in educating and informing the public on climate change issues, PR faces some limitation in exercising its full potentials. Batta, Ashong, & Bashir (2013), reported that there is an under coverage of climate issues by the media. This makes it hard for the public to know about climate issues and bad practices to avoid that affect the environment. Studies have indicated that there is a low coverage of climate issues in the media from the findings radio stood out as most used media for climate change reporting. However, the findings further indicate that the dominant reporting pattern was straight news which could not give detail analysis and interpretation required for behavioural change (Guanah 2023; Omu-Ngebo & Alegu 2024; David & Asemah 2023). In this regard, it is challenging the media, which is supposed to be the channel which PR will use to get to the public on climate issues covers less of climate issues. This could limit the potency of PR efforts in creating awareness

Okeke, Butu, and Okereke (2023), observed that another limitation faced by PR is that, Nigeria has developed several adaptation policy frame works for climate change. However, there is a lack of clear focus and implementation due to fragmentations and technological needs. Other issues include limited literacy rate and unequal access to information (Akinwumi & Fadeyi, 2019). The above challenge could limit PR strategies in mitigating climate change because once policies are not implemented, it reduce trust on the side of the populace this in turn weaken public relations messages designed at behavioural change.

Also, according to Ilesanmi (2020), Nigeria's divers cultural landscape means that one-size fits all approach to communication which is often ineffective. Also, traditional beliefs about whether patterns and environmental changes my either support or hinder climate change adaptation efforts of PR.

In addition, public awareness remains low with climate change often absent from school curricular and formal education leaving most of the citizens uninformed about local impact of flooding and desertification. (Monitoring and Evaluating Climate Change Communication Education Project MECCE 2023). Despite the

presence of agencies like federal ministry of environment, agriculture, water resources Nigerian metrological agency that have important roles to play in climate change communication and interpretation. Ultimately ministry of education is saddled with the responsibility of educating at all levels in Nigeria and curriculum development but no mention of climate change on the agency's website. This undermines the efforts of public relations in climate change communication because instead of changing behaviours, they will first of all educate the public on what climate change is.

These realities, limited media coverage, fragmented policies, cultural barriers, and weak educational integration, collectively highlight the urgent need for a coherent theoretical framework to reimagine PR's role in climate change mitigation in Nigeria. Brook (2025) argue that ineffective climate communication limits public engagement with adaptation strategies this is because without effective communication strategies, scientific knowledge about climate impact remains inaccessible to non-expert audiences. Cambridge University press (n.d), noted that this communication gap contributes to a disconnect between awareness of climate change and meaningful behavioural policy responses as individuals may recognize climate risk but lack the motivation or clarity needed to act. When climate impact are communicated in locally relevant and accessible ways, communities are better equipped to understand risk and implement adaptive measures (Springer Plus, 2016, UNFCCC 2025). from the above, it could be deduced that effective public relations through communication strategyp play a vital role climate change mitigation by translating complex scientific knowledge into accessible narratives that influence public attitude and policy.

According Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2023), climate science has produced and documented climate change impact and mitigation strategies. However, Moser (2010), observed that the existing studies largely emphasize climate science and general communication approaches with limited focus on the strategic use of public relations using effective communication to bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and public engagement. The above points to the fact that though climate science has documented climate impact and mitigation strategies, the role of PR in translating this knowledge for public understanding appear to be unexplored.

Theoretical Framework

To reposition strategic public relations (PR) as a driver of climate change mitigation in Nigeria, this section draws on three interrelated communication frameworks: Framing Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory, and the Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Model. Together, these theories explain how PR can shape public perception, prioritise climate issues within policy and media agendas, and foster meaningful public engagement.

Framing Theory, originally advanced by Goffman (1974) and later refined by Entman (1993), explains how audiences interpret information through cognitive frames that emphasise certain aspects of an issue while marginalising others. Entman identifies four core framing functions: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. In strategic PR, framing is central to shaping how complex socio-environmental issues are understood and acted upon.

In climate change communication, effective framing transforms climate change from an abstract scientific concern into a lived social reality. By aligning messages with culturally salient values such as economic livelihoods, public health, moral responsibility, agriculture, or national security, PR practitioners can enhance public relevance and engagement. In Nigeria, where climate impacts are evident through flooding, desertification, food insecurity, and health risks, frames that emphasise community resilience, livelihood protection, and environmental stewardship have been shown to resonate strongly with local audiences (Adebayo & Olorunfemi, 2021).

Complementing framing, the Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Model developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984) provides an ethical and participatory foundation for climate communication. This model prioritises dialogue, mutual understanding, and relationship building between organisations and their publics, moving beyond one-way information dissemination. Through feedback, negotiation, and collaboration, communication outcomes reflect shared interests rather than unilateral persuasion (Grunig, 1992).

In the Nigerian climate context, where misinformation, low risk perception, and socio-cultural diversity complicate public engagement, two-way symmetrical communication is particularly valuable. Participatory approaches have been found to enhance trust in science, improve understanding of climate risks, and strengthen the legitimacy of climate policies (Akerlof et al., 2019; Ogunyombo &

Ekeanyanwu, 2020). Strategic PR grounded in dialogue enables communities, scientists, policymakers, and traditional leaders to jointly define climate challenges and co-create locally relevant solutions, integrating indigenous knowledge with scientific expertise (Adebayo & Olorunfemi, 2021).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative desk-based synthesis approach, relying entirely on secondary data to explore how strategic public relations can be repositioned for climate change mitigation in Nigeria. Sources were drawn from peer-reviewed journals, government policy documents, NGO reports, campaign materials, and media as well as social media content. These materials were selected for their relevance to public relations practice, climate communication, and Nigeria's socio-cultural context, providing a broad and representative evidence base without the collection of primary data. To ensure analytical rigour, the study employed a thematic synthesis approach. Sources were first reviewed for relevance, and recurring concepts such as awareness, behavioural change, policy influence, crisis communication, and sustainable innovation were coded. These codes were then grouped into broader themes aligned with the study's objectives. The themes were derived inductively from the literature but organized deductively around the guiding research questions, ensuring that findings were both grounded in evidence and structured to address the paper's aims. The analysis followed a thematic synthesis process, organising insights into domains aligned with the study's objectives: raising awareness and climate literacy, driving behavioural change, influencing policy and agenda setting, managing climate crises and misinformation, and promoting sustainable innovation. While limited to published sources, this desk-based design ensures that the outcomes presented are firmly grounded in documented evidence, making the repositioning of PR strategies both conceptually rigorous and practically relevant for climate change mitigation in Nigeria. The thematic synthesis of these documented sources yielded key outcomes that illustrate how strategic public relations can be repositioned for climate change mitigation in Nigeria.

Repositioning Strategic Public Relations for Climate Change Mitigation

PR provide a strategic communication infrastructure for addressing climate change this strategic communication is borne out of the most formidable tool of public relations which is research. According to Elijah (2021), sees research as a process of arriving at dependable revelations and findings through planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data. Research helps PR to

know cultural perception, literacy barriers, and audience preference. This helps in developing informed strategies and crafting messages that resonates with the public and that can shape public understanding, promoting sustainable behaviour, influence policy making and strengthens collaborative governance.

In the light of the a above, strategic public relations must be repositioned as a transformative tool, one that cannot only disseminate climate knowledge but actively mobilise public will, policy attention, and cross-sectional collaboration for climate change mitigation in Nigeria. Below are some of the ways strategic PR can be repositioned to mitigate climate change in Nigeria:

Raising awareness and climate literacy: PR plays a pivotal role in climate awareness. According to Ebito, Kajang and Basil (2014) climate change awareness campaign utilize public relations technique to raise awareness and mobilise support for climate change action. Hine, Reser, Morrison, Philips, Num, and Cooksey (2014) stated the PR plays a crucial role in addressing climate change by foastering awareness, promoting action, and influencing policy effective climate change communication. Communication is important for educating the public about the impact of climate change thereby, building the necessary behavioural change. Otuogh Eke, and Asak (2025), illustrate how grassroot targeted PR messaging in Nigeria significantly increased climate literacy even in low education communities. Showing PR's power to counter misinformation. This means that strategic PR could be repositioned as a translator of climate science simplifying complex environmental data into accessible narratives that aligns with Nigerians.

Also, Alawade (2024) stated that PR could harness localised messaging which is essential in increasing awareness about climate impact which complements formal communication approach. This is an effective way to make scientific information relevant to various audiences (Salawu, 2015). To achieve awareness and advocacy, PR rely on media relations as one of the strategies to get across to the public. Rich (2011) noted that effective media relations enhance visibility and credibility of information. Onyilo, Hope, Omula, Chinanuife and Ndah-John (2025) stated that strategic public relations build strong relationship with the media to help climate change information dissemination effectively. Tran (2025), added that story telling in PR campaign offers a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between climate awareness and action. This is because story telling is powerful for translating complex scientific information into relatable and actionable messages (Arnold, 2020).

From the forgoing, it means that through culturally rounded storytelling, compelling messages, culturally acceptable messages, PR makes climate risk both

relatable and urgent, bridging the gap between scientific urgency and public understanding.

Driving behavioural change: PR as a Behavioural Catalyst

Strategic public relations can function as a behavioural change catalyst by designing targeted communication interventions that encourage sustainable habits such as waste reduction, energy conservation, recycling, and support for environmentally friendly policies. Behavioural science research highlights that social norms, role modelling, and social proof significantly influence climate-related actions (Cialdini, 2007). PR leverages these principles through influencer partnerships, community radio, participatory campaigns, and grassroots mobilisation to establish climate-friendly behaviours as socially desirable and collectively beneficial (Adebayo & Olorunfemi, 2021). In multicultural societies like Nigeria, culturally tuned messaging delivered in local languages through trusted community voices helps accelerate the mainstream adoption of climate-conscious practices.

In addition, Nwabueze and Oyima (2021), aver that PR draws on theories like theory planned behaviour and social norms among others to encourage significant shift in environmental conduct. Chatteree, Thongprasert and Some (2024), illustrate how strategic PR can achieve behavioural change across multiple levels which include: individual level which consist of factors like individual personality traits, beliefs and attitude; secondly is the immediate environment, consisting of family and friends; social context including institutions and systems where people are imbedded into the media and political system; finally, is the societal and cultural norms, values and ideology

Influencing policy and agenda setting: strategic public relations can be repositioned as a policy shaping force that frames climate issues in way that attract media attention and political interest. Brulle (2021), document how PR historically shape climate politics, often negatively, but argues that the same powerful communication infrastructure can be ethically reoriented towards mitigation and policy support. PR employs strategic framing emphasising economic opportunities like green jobs or health benefits from reduced emission, to transforming abstract climate data into compelling stories that dominates news cycles and policy debates (Chalterjee et. Al. 2024 and Tuitou 2025). In Nigeria, this involves this involves highlighting local crises like Niger delta oil spills or northern desertification through data visualisation and experts briefs has proven to increase media coverage by and prompt parliamentary enquiries

In addition, Brulle (strategic PR monitors and synchronise grass root patterns, influencers endorsement an elite lobbying to exploit agenda cycles turning sentiments in to bills like afforestation mandates. PR also elevates marginalised voices like farmers, fishers and indigenous leaders through stake holder mappings; media training for fostering real narratives that resonates beyond the elites circle (Bargquist, 2017, Otuogha, 2025).

Managing Climate Crises and Misinformation

Strategic PR can also be repositioned as a resilience-building mechanism that facilitates coherent, empathetic, and timely communication during climate-related crises such as floods, heatwaves, droughts, or coastal erosion. Effective crisis communication improves public preparedness, guides behavioural responses, and reduces panic by offering accurate, actionable information (Coombs, 2015). In climate-vulnerable environments like Nigeria, where misinformation spreads rapidly through social and digital media, PR plays a crucial role in correcting false narratives, amplifying verified scientific sources, and sustaining public trust in institutions and emergency authorities (Akerlof et al., 2019). By coordinating with meteorological agencies, humanitarian organisations, and local leaders, PR fosters a unified voice in crisis response that supports community resilience and recovery.

Promoting Sustainable Innovation and Green Branding

Public relations can be reconceptualised as a strategic sustainability enabler by shaping how climate-friendly technologies, policies, and organisations are perceived within society. Contemporary scholarship argues that PR is increasingly moving beyond reputation management to facilitating social responsibility, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable development (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2017). By employing persuasive storytelling, stakeholder dialogue, and value-driven branding, PR helps position environmentally responsible actions as credible, aspirational, and culturally meaningful (Bergquist & Lindmark, 2018). This is particularly vital in contexts where climate change communication requires localisation to enhance public acceptance.

Furthermore, PR supports sustainability transitions by translating complex technological or policy innovations into narratives that resonate with community values and lived experiences. This involves highlighting local benefits such as green jobs, cleaner energy, reduced flooding, and agricultural resilience which enhances relevance and public support (Adebayo & Olorunfemi, 2021). In doing so, PR fosters a shift from external pressure to internal motivation, enabling businesses and

institutions to embrace climate action as an expression of national pride, innovation, and long-term development aspirations.

Conclusion

From the forgoing, Nigeria's climate future depends not only on policy and technology but on public engagement. Strategic public relations can play a transformative role in Nigeria's climate change response by reframing environmental issues in ways that are culturally resonant, actionable, and widely accessible and translating complex climate science into relatable narratives, PR bridges the gap between expert knowledge and everyday experience, enhancing climate literacy and motivating behavioural change across diverse communities. PR's ability to counter misinformation, engage community influencers, and amplify verified information makes it essential in an era of rapid digital communication. By leveraging social proof, participatory storytelling, and community media, PR can shift social norms toward climate-conscious behaviours while fostering collaboration among citizens, policymakers, scientists, and businesses. Reimagined in this way, strategic public relations becomes a vital driver of Nigeria's climate mitigation and adaptation. Through strategic PR, Nigeria can transform its climate communication landscape and lead the way in African climate advocacy.

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Author

- *Balka Musa Maina Ph.D is a lecturer at the Department of Mass Communication, Federal University of Kashere, Gombe, Nigeria*