

TELLING THE AFRICAN STORY THE AFRICAN WAY: PUBLIC RELATIONS & CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

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WHO SHOULD TELL WHAT STORY?

In 2002, while working as a Television Foreign Correspondent for an Australian Network, I visited an island off the western coast of Africa. The island is called Biokoii, and is close to the shores of Cameroon and just below Nigeria. However, it does not belong to either countries but houses the city of Malabo, the capital of Equatorial Guinea.

I flew into Malabo from **Doula** in a plane full of Americans and Europeans with my camera gear and a thirst to tell the story of this mostly unknown country. The Americans were not flying to Malabo for holiday but were there to reap the fruits of the country's newfound wealth. Equatorial Guinea had just struck offshore oil and had been converted from being the poorest nation in Africa to potentially one of the richest. I was there to find out how the people of Equatorial Guinea were taking in their newfound status and to paint an African picture of the nation from an African perspective.

As we touched down, I looked out of the window to see the country that I mostly understood from a book written by a World Bank advisor, Dr Robert Klitgaard. Keeping to the traditions of the portrayal of Africa by the West, the New York Times Bestseller was called *Tropical Gangsters*.

I spent a week in the Spanish speaking Equatorial Guinea looking for the “Tropical Gangsters” highlighted by Dr Klitgaard and not finding them. I interviewed President Teodoro Obiang



Nguema Mbasogo, other leaders, journalists, oil company executives and many citizens, on their future and their place in the world. One evening, I was invited to meet the Minister of Agriculture and his officials in his office. He showed me a can of processed cocoa that the country had made into chocolate. He told me that he wanted to market the chocolate all over the world so that people did not just eat Swiss Chocolates made from Cocoa grown in Equatorial Guinea. He wanted the whole world to hear of the developments in the country.

When I remember my meeting with the Minister of Agriculture my heart becomes heavy because, despite all his wishes, the country had never set up nor considered setting up an office to co-ordinate communication, nor launched a publicity campaign to market Equatorial Guinea. As a result, the only knowledge we have of Equatorial Guinea is of military coups, mercenaries and the occasional foreign perspective in a book such as *Tropical Gangsters*.

THE REALITY: WE DO NOT TELL OUR STORY

Equatorial Guinea is not alone. Majority of African countries do not see communication and, especially, public relations as a vital if not one of the most vital factors in their development. As a result, we have citizens who do not understand how they can participate in the development of an overall negative image of our continent.

Today, to address the issue of corporate governance and its role in African public relations, I will first look at the role of communication in telling the African story, then, the responsibility of corporations in PR campaigns to stimulate development, and, finally, how governments can use legislation and open space to support the growth of PR in Africa.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN TELLING THE AFRICAN STORY

Communication can play a very useful role in telling the African story if we take the following steps:

- Creating the Office of Public Communications – few governments have it because they do not think it is important;
- Providing government position on issues through briefings, etc.;



- Participating in policy decision making and providing communication impact guidance;
- Using communication for development;
- Providing information for citizens by creating access point for those seeking assistance (information empowers);
- Enhancing the democratic space and media freedom;
- Coordinating communication/ media policies;
- Initiating and implementing marketing strategies, for example, the Najivunia Kuwa Mkenya campaign;
- Imbibing useful lessons from the “Brand Kenya Initiative” which allocated Kshs10 million to start the process and to get the rest from the corporate market;
- Organizing youth conventions;
- Learning that perception is more powerful than reality;
- Demonstrating that perception is more powerful than reality. Hence, the need to ensure that the correct image and reality of Africa are presented in a memorable way. We have to tell our story; just as we need to have control over the economy in view of the activities of such organizations as the World Trade Organization (WTO).

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CORPORATIONS IN PR CAMPAIGNS

Corporations have a huge responsibility to use PR campaigns for development. This can be done through the following means:

- Injecting profit back into the community by promoting social issues, not just in one or two quick ads to show our civic responsibility but through campaigns – especially on such issues as national disasters;
- Using African images, African stories and cultures in ads – not Western ideas which we tend to see most of the time;
- Watching the environment and the future for sustainable socio-economic development;



- Countering cultural imperialism by fighting neo-colonialism; diffusion and technology transfer. It is sad that we judge ourselves by other standards, thus people say nothing original comes out of Africa. A friend was once told that the monkey was his cousin. Moreover, black Kenyans practise racism against other black Kenyans and join exclusive clubs.

Media and Choice of Programming

In the choice of media programming, there is a need to protect the innocent. At the moment, many African countries:

- Lack a rating system to ensure that parents are warned of the contents of media programmes before they are shown. This underscores the need for a rating system for all programmes and advertisements;
- Have a situation where most times, parents only get to know there is nudity after they have seen it – with the children looking away and fathers getting embarrassed and staring at the ceiling as two naked people get it on in front of the children. As government welcomes consultations on this in order to set the standards, it should be open to good advice

USING LEGISLATION AND OPEN SPACE TO SUPPORT GROWTH OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN AFRICA

Governments can use legislation and open space to support the growth of PR in Africa by allowing debate into the rating systems and how they can form partnerships with PR firms and other stakeholders on the way forward. To succeed in this, governments need to use the skills and the creativity in our countries to:

- Support the arts;
- Promote education. Communication should be given top priority and considered a major discipline in the universities;
- Support PR initiatives and get rid of draconian legislation;
- Guarantee press freedom, growth of the media and growth of public relations



- practice, government should guarantee all of them for the good of the society given the correlation between all of them; and
- Provide budgetary support for technology. For example, in the Kenyan budget, government removed duty from computers and computer software.

CONCLUSION

There is a film called *Out of Africa*, which is well made and tells the story of Karen Blixen in Kenya. The film begins with the line, “I had a farm in Africa at the foot of the Ngong Hills” and continues to show us a picture of Kenya and East Africa from the eyes of the Western world. The film does not tell our story but tells a Western story set in an African background. The story is not about us, it is about them and what they should think of us. I like the film for it yanks my heart and reminds me of the beauty of my land and the humanness that we all possess. What I hope we will be doing more of is conducting public relations campaigns which include filming our own stories and telling them, not as *Out of Africa* but here where our hearts and reality lie – *Into Africa!*: so that, instead of saying, “I had a farm in Africa”, we can proudly say I WAS BORN IN AFRICA!

