

The Current Status Of Public Relations In Africa

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The European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) initiated the European Body of knowledge Project (referred to as EBOK hereafter) in 1998 in order to share ideas on public relations in different European countries. The purpose of this project was firstly to compile a bibliography of European public relations literature and secondly a Delphi study was conducted in order to understand the current practice and theory of European public relations. Furthermore the authors wanted to contribute to the development of a global public relations body of knowledge (Van Ruler, Vercic, Butschi & Flodin, 2000:2). It is thus important to conduct research in the field of public relations in order to describe (looking at processes, situations or phenomenon's), explain (why something happens and what the causes and effects are) and predict (what will happen if we do or do not do something) the current state. Each of these types of research methods will increase the understanding of people, society and the world (Pavlik, 1987:15).

According to Hutton (1999:200) public relations is a relatively new field of practice and scholarship. The author further states that there is a need for general agreement in order to grow as a scholarly and professional endeavour. Public relations practitioners from developed and developing countries however fulfil different roles. In the industrialized West public relations practitioners are generally socially responsible, however in the Third World public relations practices are designed to be consistent with political ideologies, levels of development, and socio-political controls (Pratt, 1985:10).

The understanding of the current state of thinking and practicing of public relations around the globe will enable the field to draw conclusions towards what the public relations profession is in the 21st century (Van Ruler et al 2001:374). This statement motivated a research study within a developing context particularly in the African continent. The aim of this particular research study is to determine the current status of thinking and practicing of public relations in Africa. This study will be conducted by the author of this paper, Gené van Heerden, as a Masters dissertation at the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

The public relations paradigms developed by both the North American and European scholars will be used in the literature discussion and the data collection of this research

project. These are well-defined concepts and will be used as benchmarks to describe the African situation. The EBOK project's Delphi study will play an integral part in this study. Respondents will be selected from the following sectors: education, corporate, government and consultancies. These sectors will be included in the study in the attempt to determine a broad understanding of the public relations in Africa.

The sectors will be targeted as follows:

- Multinational organisations have opened doors in Africa and these will be used to represent the corporate sector.
- The government communication department will be targeted as the government sector, as the political situation in Africa plays a very important role in organisations.
- The tertiary institutions of each country will be targeted as the education sector, as research into the issues of public relations in a developing context is of great importance. South Africa, in particular, is very interested in public relations research and public relations theory-building (Mershman, Rensburg & Skinner, 1995).
- Public relations consultancies will also be included as a sector because a trend has developed in South African organisations to 'outsource' the public relations activities. A summary of each country and sector will be documented in the abovementioned masters dissertation, order to provide a better understanding of the



current status of public relations in Africa.

It is important to provide background on the current status of public relations in the African and South African context. The following section will focus on a very short summary describing the practice and education of public relations.

The application of public relations techniques is not a new concept in the African continent. It dates back to the beginning of the African civilization. According to Nartey (in Rensburg, 2002:5) the concept of public relations has been practiced in Africa before the era of colonialism. In ancient Egypt the Pharaohs proclaimed their achievements through word-pictures on impressive monuments. Nartey further explains how the spokesman at the chief's seat of power in traditional villages is very similar to the task of a public relations practitioner. According to tradition, no African chief spoke directly to a visitor who called at the chief's seat of power. All interactions and communication with the chief were channelled through a spokesman. These spokesmen were well versed in the customs and traditional practices of the village. Such individuals assumed eminent positions and were highly respected by the people. This incidentally, is still the case in some remote and traditional rural areas of Africa. . Public relations is therefore not a foreign concept in the African context but it has been practiced in a different format and has been deeply rooted in the African culture (Rensburg, 2002:6).

The public relations profession and education in South Africa have largely been isolated from

the rest of Africa. Therefore very little is known about public relations in the African context. One ad hoc research study was found that was done between 1995 and 1997. The goal of this study was to supply South African public relations educators with an overview of the development and current state of public relations practice and education in Africa. The author stated that South Africa is in a position to contribute significantly to the development of public relations in the African continent (Ferreira, 1999:31).

South Africa is currently the most developed country in sub-Saharan Africa and could contribute, as well as set the trend to the African continent, in the area of public relations practice and education. The complex and diverse nature of the culture, development, economic and socio-political issues of the African environment have an impact on the effectiveness of public relations practitioners and consultants, as these have caused social changes in Africa. Therefore Western scholars often struggle to appreciate these complexities and the strong collectivistic approach (as opposed to the traditional individualistic Western approach) of the African continent (Rensburg, 2002:12).

In reviewing the historical development of public relations in South Africa two major approaches can be taken. Firstly, a systems approach where the practice of public relations should be viewed together with political, social and economical development of the country and secondly, a structural approach where the professionalization of

public relations can be viewed in terms of the establishment of professional bodies in the public relations industry (Lubbe in Rensburg, 2002:6).

According to Ferreira (1990) and Roodt (1988) South Africa has extensive educational opportunities in public relations and can compare well with that of North America and Europe. The South African public relations practice and education has been active and has an established professional association called Public Relations Association of South Africa (hereafter referred to as PRISA). This association was established in 1957 (Sinner & Von Essen, 1995:21), and is currently the only public relations association in the world to obtain the International Standards Organisation's (ISO 9002) certification (Rensburg, 2002:9). PRISA has a consultancy chapter – the Public Relations Consultancy Chapter (PRCC) and there are more than 45 registered consultancies belonging to this chapter. South Africa is far more advanced than other African countries where its professional association is concerned.

Few countries in Africa have constitutions and codes of ethics for public relations when referring to standards agreed on for the profession. These encourage the maintenance of high standards through education. Examples of such countries are Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe (Nartey cited in Ferreira, 1998:7). Through correspondence with International Public Relations Association (hereafter referred to as IPRA) during 2001, it was found that the

following countries are currently registered at IPRA: the Public Relations Society of Kenya, the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (South Africa, Namibia, Lesotho and Botswana), the Swaziland Public Relations Association, the Zimbabwe Institute of Public Relations, the Arab Public Relations Society (Egypt), the Institute of Public Relations in Ghana, the Public Relations Association of Uganda and the Cameroon Public Relations Association. All the aforementioned countries as well as Mauritius will be included in the study determining the current status of public relations in Africa.

Africa might in some instances be seen as a “lost crusade” but there have been very successful public relations programmes and therefore it would be interesting to determine and understand the current status of public relations in Africa better and possibly also contribute to the global body of knowledge. The field of public relations has a responsibility towards urban and rural classes of developing countries and empowering practitioners, as this can be used to serve the profession in order to build theory and contribute to the understanding of the field of public relations and its role in society.