An Investigation Of Public Relations Practices And Challenges: A Case Of West Wollega Zone Government Communication Affairs Office

Hamza Hase[1] , Yohanis Tafara[2]

[1]Department of Journalism and communication, College of Social Sciences and Humanities Dambi Dollo University, Ethiopia. hasen.hamza061@gmail.com

[2]Department of Journalism and communication, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Dambi Dollo University, Ethiopia.johntefera2020@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The study aims to investigate the public relations practices and challenges in West Wollega Zone Government Communication Affairs Office (WWZGCAO). To achieve this, case study design among qualitative research approach was employed as it suit well in adequately answering the research questions. Twelve participants were purposively selected from PR sector and media organizations based on their position, experience and expertise on media and PR practices. Data was gathered through interview, FGD and document analysis. Accordingly, Interview was conducted with a manager and the planning and coordinating expert from PR sector, and managers and reporters from media members of OBN West Wollega district and Fana FM Nekemte district. FGD was also conducted with PR practitioners based on their positions. Concerning document analysis, the working documents like 5-year, 2013 E.C annual strategic plan and 3rd quarter report, social media page, employee profile and organizational structure, available press releases, newsletters, and brochures were reviewed. The data generated was triangulated, translated and analyzed thematically to draw meanings. The finding of the study shows that PR sector of the zone performs two main activities. It lets the government know what the public's feelings and attitudes through conducting situational analysis and public opinion survey. It also creates awareness for the public about the government's plan, accomplishments and activity of the administration by using different media through media relation activities. In relation to PR strategy, the sector has a 5-year and 2013E.C strategic annual plan adopted from Oromia communication bureau based on the vision of the government in 3rd DTP 10-year plan that clearly states the vision, roles and activities in the document. However, they neglected research to clearly understand and incorporate the real situation of the zone for better accomplishment. Practice of PR sector was not in professional way because of lack of a professional practitioners, limited training and perception towards this sector from managers and reporters. Similarly, practitioners' performance also determined by a security problem, infrastructure, logistics, public attitude, insufficient budget, limited materials for media activity, transportation problem, network disconnection, political pressure, and structure of the sector.

Key Words: Public relations, Media relations, Government PR, Challenges in PR practices

1. Introduction:

Public relations(PR) is an effective way of delivering messages to a targeted group to communicate information intended to influence the decisions of the people/public among government communication strategies. RRSA (2012) defines, "Public Relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics." Strategic communication is focused on engaging in purposeful communication to fulfill an organization's mission with an emphasis on strategy versus on specific tactics, which includes audience analysis, goal setting and message strategy (Meganck et al., 2020).

The importance of a sustainable relationship between an organization and public for organizational success applies to all types of

organizations across various sectors (i.e., corporations, nonprofits, and government). Recently, government PR encouraged adopting a relational approach to public management, acknowledging that a sustainable relationship requires collaboration with the public in their decision-making processes (Osborne et al., 2015). According to Hopkins (2015), one of the various strategies that government can use to engage citizens in a dialogue about policies and government actions is public relations.

In democratic societies, government PR practitioners are accountable for distinct duties like; provision of public information and involving citizens in the government's decision-making processes. They are expected to communicate what they have achieved, what and why they are attempting to accomplish in the future (Kim and Cho, 2019). Furthermore, government officials should adopt a proactive role in connecting citizens with administrative systems by providing the citizens with immediate and equal opportunities to influence processes and outcomes, which strengthens democracy.

Government PR officers play an important role because they contribute to public understanding of government policies and raise awareness of the roles of decision-makers and purview of public institutions, the availability of social services, significant trends, and risks to public health and safety. Government PR practitioners are public servants who must provide information to citizens about the work of their respective state institutions (McCollough, 2015). Thus, PR practitioners' facilitate communication activities to inform the public about government plan, get feedback from citizens to amend the programmes and advise government officials on how best to communicate with public through media relations.

On the other hand, media relations has been a predominant function of PR practitioners, which can be expressed as communicating with journalists, experts and editors of newspapers, magazines, radio, television and internet-based communication environments at local, national, international and sectoral levels (Fawkes, 2004). Aja et al. (2019) argued that media relations is an integral part of individual and organizational communication activity as it deals with the selection of media channels, their combination and effective utilization

to achieve a desired goal. Most PR activities are carried out with the help of the media. Hence, one can convincingly state that the success of every PR activity bothers on media relations, as the media is the ultimate guarantor of the people's right to know. Media are among social institutions that have the power to influence the reputation of one organization. Thus, media relations is the core activity in daily PR as mass media have a powerful influence on organizational activities in general.

Organizations globally as well as media relations practitioners must adopt different strategies to be able to survive and succeed in this global competitive environment. Organizations' media relations department is expected to map out effective strategies for effective media relations practice. Essentially, media relations should be planned and implemented based on certain rules, principles and guidelines (Aja et al., 2019). Media relations practitioners seek favorable among diverse media platforms, both online and traditional media, for the organization's products and services often through information subsidy to enhance the reputation of an organization (Pang, 2010). Every media relations program should focus on the relationship aspect, working to develop long-term relationships with those who cover your organization.

In the Ethiopian context, there has been a little relative focus from academic researchers on public relations conducted focusing on this title. The study conducted on the Practices and Challenges of Public Relations within Two Ethiopian Towns: Harar and Dire Dawa revealed that the practices of public relations in the study area have been subjected to a wrong perception of what public relations person actually does as a result of very little understanding of the major functions and roles of public by managers, journalists and practitioners. It also found that public relations practitioners are rarely involved in strategic planning, decision-making and in following up the implementation and lack qualified practitioners in their organizations (Geremew, 2017).

A similar study conducted on the Practices and Challenges of West Shewa Zone, Ambo Town Government Public Relations office, shows that there is a contradiction between the main function of government PRs and the practice because the practitioners do not understand the main role of government public relations (Mulualem, 2017).

From experiences and internship practices, the researchers understood that most PR work is not getting media coverage, rather reporters/journalists prefer their own work, which needs due consideration. Because of this, it needs research to investigate more about PR practices and challenges to improve organizational performance. Hence, as West Wollega zone government communication affairs office coordinates the overall government information of all sectors at zonal level, the researchers believes there is a need to assess the extent to which PR strategy of the sector supports the vision of the organization by conducting research.

Furthermore, to the best knowledge of the researchers, no study was conducted in the area. Therefore, this study investigates the practices and challenges of public relations in West Wollega Zone Government Communication Affairs office by forwarding the following four main research questions. How public relations strategies applied in the organization? What are the public relations practitioner's tasks in the organization? What are media relations activities performed by practitioners? What are the challenges that influence the practitioner's performance?

Defining Public Relations: Various scholars define public relations in different ways. PR is defined as a strategic communication process that aims to create, maintain and promote mutually beneficial cooperation between the organization and its environment (PRSA, 2012). According to Kotler and Armstrong (1996), PR professionals' aim is to build good relationships with various audiences, to build a good image of the organization and fix problems due to unfavorable stories, rumors and events. PR is the organization's communication activity designed to ensure public confidence and create a positive and favorable image of the organization in public.

Most scholars frequently express the management function of PR while they define public relations. Cutlip et al. (2006) define it as, the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends. There are several phrases to note in this definition. It explains PR as a 'management function', which entails a deliberate, planned action that has a result in mind. This is reinforced by 'identifies, establishes

and maintains', which illustrates research and a continuum of activity. 'Mutually beneficial relationships' refers to a two-way communication process through which the organization will act in the interests of both itself and the groups or publics with which it interacts. This notion goes one step further than others do by defining publics as those 'on whom its success or failure depends'. This verges on tautology as publics by their very nature are of essential importance to an agency by giving it a reputation and a commercial, governmental or other organizational raison (Watson and Noble, 2007).

Government Public Relation: According to Lattimore et al. (2011), government PR was a management function that helped organizations formulate organizational goals and adapt to the demands of its constituents and society. Furthermore, they state that government PR is a type of communication function that connects the interaction of the citizens with their government, regulators, and other extensions of government policies. It is responsible for disseminating information and government policies in accordance with the institution in order to increase public awareness and participation on government policies and programs, build interaction between government and public, accommodate and cultivate public aspirations and build public trust to improve government's image and reputation (Hasnawati and Salamah, 2017).

Government departments are always engaged in various PR activities. Information dissemination and keeping various stakeholders within a loop of confidence and trust are the cornerstones of all PR activities that are conducted by any organization (Wilcox et al., 2015). Lee et al. (2012:24) stated the three purposes of PR department for government administration as, "They can use public relations to (1) accomplish the democratic responsibilities associated with the public sector, (2) implement the central missions of their agencies on a cost-effective and efficient basis, and (3) contribute to public support for their agencies."

Public Relations Strategies: PR practitioners implement different strategies to accomplish their activities. Strategic communication is focused on engaging in purposeful communication to fulfill an organization's mission with an emphasis on strategy versus on specific tactics, which includes audience

analysis, goal setting, and message strategy (Meganck et al., 2020).

According to Saidah and Rusfian (2020), practitioners might use four strategic steps to achieve organizational goals: issue identification; planning and programming; action and communication; and program evaluation. In the early stage, PR practitioners identified and defined the issues concerning the organization by conducting research, gathering facts, and immersing themselves into the issue. After finding out the problem and its cause, practitioners developed a plan to deal with the issue by making a program containing a set of actions and scenarios to be carried out based on the available budget. The action and communication step was the execution of the plan and programs formulated in the previous step. The action referred to the execution of plans and programs. This step might involve all members of the organization to convey the desired message to the public. PR practitioners must evaluate after undertaking activities related to dealing with an existing issue. It was necessary to assess whether the program run according to plan and to identify any shortcomings.

Media relations: It is the relationship between the organizations and media members with different levels for creating good interaction with stakeholders. Media relations are the core activity in daily PR jobs. Supa (2014) stated:

> The goal of media relations is not to only obtain media coverage, but to develop relationships with those people who are able to best communicate with audiences across the spectrum. And while new media technologies allow for public relations professionals to directly communicate with multiple stakeholder groups, third-party credibility remains an important aspect, which can often best be gained by developing relationships with journalists (p 9).

Media relations practitioners must provide valuable information that is newsworthy and targeted for effective media relations. The integration of social media into the media relations mix has the potential to elevate the mutual benefit of both practitioners and media members (ibid). As Etta (2017) stated, a media relations expert needs to master the basic skills of writing and editing, learn to become a 'reporter's reporter' without being afraid to ask

questions of the reporter, and try to get a good grasp of what reporters need in order to do their job well. Great care and emphasis must therefore be attached to the relationship that exists between companies and the media. The basic objectives are to cultivate profitable liaison with them, build goodwill and maintain cordial and sustained relationships.

Media relations department of PR performs different activities to foster media coverage. Ardianto (2013:267) as cited in Kartika and Julyatiningsih (2018), practitioners performs activities like Press conference, Press briefing, Media tour, Press release, Special event, Media interview and etc.

Challenges that Affect Public Relations Practices: There are scholars who argued as PR is a worldwide discipline, global in operation and has relevance in the image of any institution employing it Joseph (2017). Public relations problems are peculiar to the country or organization where it is operating. He mentioned seven major challenges the profession faces globally are Financial Constraint, Increase in Communication platform, Client expectation management, Poor manpower situation, Poor appreciation of professionals among leaders, Low awareness of PR and what it stands for, Poor usage of social media Joseph (2017).

Theoretical Framework: Excellence theory: James Grunig and his squad of researchers originated the Excellence theory in 1984. Grunig's model of Excellence in public relations is a benchmark for success in public relations (Grunig et al., 1995). The model helps to define excellent public relations and demonstrates why and to what extent it contributes to producing effective organizations (Grunig et al., 2002).

PR contributes to organizational effectiveness when it helps reconcile the goals with the expectations of its strategic constituencies by building long-term relationships with strategic constituencies. PR is most likely to contribute to effectiveness when the head/senior PR manager form part of management meetings where he/she is able to shape the organization's goals and to help determine which external publics are more strategic (ibid).

As stated by Kim et al. (2013), the theory specifically:

- explains how PR contributes value to organizations, publics and society;

- explains how an empowered PR function makes a unique contribution to strategic management and distinguishes its role from that of other management functions, especially marketing;
- prescribes techniques that PR managers can use to fulfill their role in strategic management;
- explains the critical role of relationships in the planning and evaluation of PR programs;
- identifies different models of communication and explains which models are the most effective strategies for cultivating relationships with publics;
- incorporates ethics into the strategic role of public relations;
- explains how to apply the theory globally.

The Excellence study concluded that PR makes an organization more effective when it identifies the most strategic publics of the organization as part of strategic management process and conducts communication programs to cultivate effective long-term relationships with those publics.

Relationship Management Theory: The very essence of PR is building a mutually beneficial relationship between an organization and its publics. Relationship Management Theory (RMT) specifies how to build toward symmetry (managing organizations–public relationships around common interests and shared goals) and when to apply that approach (over time). The theory argues that effectively managing organizations–public relationships around common interests and shared goals leads to mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics. The end goal of relationship management is mutual understanding and benefit (Lendingham, 2003). RMT views PR as a management function charged with initiating, nurturing, and maintaining relationships between organizations and interacting publics (Ledingham and Bruning, 2007).

According to this theory, media audit can function as a valuable tool in managing media relationships. It provides the practitioners with information that could help balance the interests of the organization with those of the media. From the organization's perspective, the audit not only provides practitioners with a list of best practices, it also offers insight into areas practitioners can focus on in order to raise

performance ratings and nurture a relationship. From the perspective of the media member, it helps ensure that the material they receive meets their need for accuracy and timeliness, and that they are assured access to sources when needed in order to present coverage that is comprehensive and meaningful (ibid).

Empirical Studies: This section summarizes the different scholars' research findings in relation to the study topic but agreement has been shown on the significant effect.

The study conducted by Mulualem (2017), The Practices and Challenges of West Shewa Zone, Ambo Town Government Public Relations Office, found that the main role of government PR is not well understood by the workers of Ambo town government PRs. The office also lacks a good working relationship with and for the community on a variety of societal issues. As a result, the office couldn't create mutual understanding between government, the people and media through strategic communication. Moreover, it has internal problems-lack of human and physical resources, and also external problems-lack of trust in the office and lack of media acceptance.

A similar study conducted to assess the practices and challenges of public relations within two Ethiopia towns (Harar and Dire Dawa) revealed that the practices of PR in the study area have been subjected to a wrong perception of what the PR person actually does. It verified that there is a very little understanding of the major functions and roles of PR 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 PR at the strategic planning level rarely exist due to lack of PR qualified persons. This resulted in the confusion of recognizing PR as communication expert, as management body and as marketing disciplines (Geremew, 2017).

Another study entitled "PR and the Media: A Collaborative Relationship" argued that the contacts between PR agents and journalists are extensive, in the sense that they are frequent, and mainly initiated by the PR practitioners. Thus, media members are constantly the designated targets of PR activities. The PR industry and the media collaborate in-line with the logic of traditional exchange theory – one

party's need for media space is served by satisfying the other's need for material. This also means that the parties have become mutually dependent on each other and that they have developed a common interest in the relationship. The parties are thereby in collaboration, even if the relationship is perceived as unequal (Larsson, 2009).

In addition, the study entitled, "Assessing the Practices of Public Relations: The Case of Seka District Communication Office at Jimma Zone, Ethiopia", shows that the organization has a tremendous role to play in overcoming societal problems, creating and maintaining good relationships with its publics, facilitating communication, and equipping society with information and ongoing development. On the other hand, the work of the department is not so effective and successful as a result of problems like lack of professional manpower, shortage of materials, and lack of enough budgets that make the organization unsuccessful (Eyasu, 2019).

Furthermore, the study conducted by Demelash and Hamza (2020), Exploring Public Relations Practitioners' Actual Practice: Jimma Zonal Government Offices in Focus, revealed that there are three dominant roles of PRs in the study area, namely the technician, media relations, and communication liaison. The majority of PRs practitioners did not take part in top-level management and were not decision-makers. They were not allowed to play a major role in organizational strategic planning. Similarly, the finding shows that, out of the four models of PRs, three of them, namely the two-way asymmetrical, the public information, and the press agentry model were in use in the study area.

2.   Research Methodology:

This part deals with the description of the research methods and designs.

Research Approach and Design: The qualitative research approach was employed in this study. Accordingly, qualitative research method was employed in order to be more effective in interpretative approach, which dictates the study of research problems and establishes meaning that can be associated with social or human problems Creswell (2013). Qualitative research methods are particularly important if one intends to study people, groups, organization and societies. From qualitative research designs, case study was preferred as it well

suit in adequately answering the research questions. Case study design allows researchers to examine a phenomenon in-depth using various kinds of evidence obtained from interviews or analysis of documents and artifacts (Yin, 2003).

Study area and Period: West Wollega Zone is one of the administrative zones found in the Oromia region of Ethiopia. It is located in the western part of Oromia Regional State and has 20 woredas and 3 towns. The office is one of government sectors found in this zone, Gimbi town, at a distance of 441 Km West from Addis Ababa. It is one of the Oromia regional sectors restructured by proclamation 213/2011 article 22 with its own structure from the region to the woreda level. The office was established with a mission: 'To promote a modern, timely, and effective communication system; facilitate accurate information flows between government and the public for national consensus; increase public participation and efficiency; and build a good image of the town in the right way.'The data was collected between December 2020 up to March 2021 G.C

Population and Sampling Technique: In line with the research objectives, the researchers employed purposive sampling among non-probability sampling types. The basic assumption of purposive sampling relies on the judgment of the researcher as to who will provide the best information to succeed for the objectives (Etikan and Bala, 2017). Thus, the researcher selected the participants based on their position, experiences and expertise in media and public relations practices.

Accordingly, the researcher purposively selected two participants from WWZGCAO; the manager and a planning, monitoring and evaluation expert. From media organizations, the researcher selected 4 informants based on their frequency of contact with PR sector for media activities. These media personnel include managers and reporters from both OBN west Wollega district and Fana FM Nekemte district.   Similarly, the researcher purposively selected 6 PR practitioners from WWZGCAO based on their position and experience of PR practices for focus group discussion (FGD). Thus, the total target population of this study was 12 respondents.

Data Collection Instruments:

a)   **In-depth Interview:** For this study, the researcher employed an in-depth personal interview with the manager, a planning, monitoring and evaluation

expert from the PR office, and media members having a direct understanding of the issue under study. An in-depth interview gives a wealth of detailed information and provides detailed and accurate responses on the issues.

A semi-structured interview offers the merit of using a list of predetermined themes and questions, while keeping enough flexibility to enable the interviewee to talk freely about any topic raised during the interview (Wahyuni, 2012). Accordingly, the researcher employed a semi-structured interview in order to get flexibility in raising follow-up and probing questions

b) **Focus Group Discussion:** The researchers employed (FGD) to collect data from PR practitioners in the study area. FGD is a qualitative research method data collection technique in which a selected group of people discusses a given topic of interest facilitated by an interviewer. According to Mishra (2016), FGD is a good way to gather together people from similar backgrounds or experience to discuss selected topics of interest. Accordingly, the researcher believed that FGD is appropriate for this specific study as it permits richness and flexibility in the collection of data that are not usually achieved when applying an instrument individually within a short period. The researcher organized one FGD group, which had 6 participants from PR sector and conducted the discussion using semi-structured questions. Those participants were selected based on their position and experience, i.e. they are expertise in PR practices.

c) **Document Analysis:** According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents-both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. It requires the use of data to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge. Hence, the researchers analyzed available documented materials being used by the office in relation to public relations so as to attain the objectives of the study mentioned so far. It entails gathering relevant documents to the problem under investigation, such as the 5-year, 2013 E.C annual strategic plan and 3rd quarter report, organizational structure, employee profile, press releases, brochures, newsletters, social media page, and other related documents.

Data Collection Procedures: Before the data collection activities took place, some important

steps were undertaken to increase the reliability and validity of the instruments mentioned. First, the instruments selected in line to investigate the public relations practices and challenges of WWZGCAO were dispatched to advisors and other experts in the area to get their opinions. Then, the researcher revised and modified according to the advisors and experts' suggestions. Based on research questions, in-depth interview and focus group discussion guide questions were prepared and translated to Afan Oromo and checked whether the items contain an equivalent meaning or no for approval. After approval, a brief orientation for participants (both interviewees and FGD members) on the overall purpose of the study was given by a researcher contacting them face-to-face. After necessary adjustments, the researcher organized one focus group discussion, which had 6 participants, and entered the discussion. Also, the researcher conducted interviews with the selected participants. For both interviews and FGD, the researcher used a mobile sound recorder and took short notes while conducting data. Finally, the researcher reviewed the necessary documents in relation to the topic based on the availability of the documents in mentioned sector.

Methods of Data Analysis: After conducting the interviews, the researchers analyzed the notes and recorded data to prepare the full report. First, the researcher transcribed and translated all audio recorded interviews and focus group discussions. Then, the transcribed data was categorized in a way that gave meaning and was convenient for the data analysis based on the research questions of this study. The written and recorded data was translated from Afan Oromo to English and analyzed by grouping similar responses/strata together. The key statements, ideas, and attitudes were expressed under various topics. The researcher analyzed the data thematically to derive meaning from the qualitative data generated by an in-depth interview, FGD and review of relevant documents. Thematic Analysis is a type of qualitative analysis that is used to analyze classifications and present themes (patterns) that relate to the data. It illustrates the data in great detail and deals with diverse subjects via interpretations (Clarke et al., 2015). It permits the researcher to combine meanings behind respondents' statements within their particular context. Finally, the data was presented in a narrative form based on the objective of the study.

3. Results:

In order to address the purpose of the study, this part is organized into four main themes and specific sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis in order to build on the results and discuss the meaning of the findings. It begins with the presentation Demographic information of the participants and follows with the presentation of results from interview, FGD and document analysis separately, and concludes with a discussion in light of scholarly findings in the area.

In relation to demographic information, one is female among 12 respondents. Concerning their level of education; the PR sector holds one MA degree, six BA degrees, and one diploma level. Their fields of study were: 2 of them are journalism and communication, 1 is language studies, 1 is ICT, and others are from other social sciences. They have 1 to 10 years of work experience in this sector. From the media members, four of them are degree holders and HRM, Journalism and Communication, language studies, and management are their fields of study.

Result from Interview:

The researcher conducted an in-depth interview with 6 informants and presents the result below.

1) **PR strategy:** The first part of interview was in relation to PR strategies or strategic plan of the PR sector in relation to the four-steps (research, planning, communication, and evaluation).

In relation to realization of government PR role, interviewees were asked how they understood the WWZGCAO main task in West Wollega zone administration. Their common reflection indicated that government PR serves as a bridge between the government and the public. As for II_2, his sector's work in the zone serves as a bridge between the government and the public, informing the community about government plans and activities and informing the government about the public's attitudes and needs.

In his opinion, PR sector in this zone serves both government and the public. It serves the government by surveying public opinion, analysis and interpretation of the situation as input for government policy formulation. It also engaged in media relations activities to inform society.

Similarly, media members who were engaged in media activity with this communication sector raised their points of view concerning the main activity of PR sector. As II_4 stated:

> I think the main activity of PR sector is to serve as a bridge between government and the public by opening two-way communication flows. It was intended to influence public attitudes towards government policy on the economy as well as socio-political aspects and inspire active participation of society in government strategy implementation. It also assesses public feelings and attitudes towards government program.

Other informants, II_3 and II_6, understood the main activity of PR sector as creating awareness for the public about the government's plan, accomplishments and activities of administration using different tools like media, arranging conference and meetings with different parts of community.

In general, one can conclude from the above informant's idea that WWZGCAO's main task is to serve as a bridge between the government and the public by opening two-way communication flows. It informs the public about government programs and activities that are intended to inspire community participation. It also helps the government to know public feelings and attitudes to take action. However, it was unbalanced as mostly it engaged in promoting government side information to persuade society and neglected equally serving the public.

Realizing organizational vision through PR processes: The researcher raised questions about what the PR process known as RACE (research, action, communication and evaluation) looks like in the sector.

Concerning conducting research for strategic planning, informants from PR office mentioned that their organization did not conduct formal research to formulate a plan. However, the general plan and activities of the sector is adopted from Oromia government communication affairs bureau. II_2 elaborated as, "Our organization didn't conduct research yet for strategic planning and evaluation of our organization's performance both in situation analysis and media relation activities. Rather, we adopt and share our part of the Oromia communication bureau."

According to II₁, the sector is implementing a 5-year and annual strategic plan based on the vision of the government in its 3rd Development and Transformation Program (DTP) 10-year plan. However, the plan directly comes from bureau level and structures at zone and woreda level were mandated for implementation of this plan rather than formulation.

From these ideas, PR sector has a strategic plan which is being implemented by office staff members. However, the organization neglected the importance of research to implement their activities strategically rather than tactically.

In relation to planning, II₁ mentioned that, based on vision of government in 3rd DTP, the sector was applying 2013E.C annual strategic plan adopted from the bureau. His organization evaluates and analyzes previous accomplishments with sectors at woredas and towns levels to fix the challenges that hinder the effectiveness of the organization. Another officer, II₂, added that this analysis was intended to identify things, list down the specified opportunities in society and then prioritize what may affect or threaten to achieve the desired goal.

From these informants' reflection, the researcher learned that the PR practitioners plan their sector's activity based on Oromia communication bureau and every activity in each position was mentioned in detail. They also evaluate their sector's performance to fix past problems during implementation. However, as the organization engaged in this analysis only with managers and planning experts at woreda and town structural levels, it lacked detailed investigation.

On the other hand, informants reflect on how they implement and evaluate the task of their organization. In their reflection, practitioners implement their activities based on their position and review their accomplishments regularly. Accordingly, II₁ expressed it as:

> To achieve the mission and vision of the organization, every practitioner in the sector plans based on his/her position and implements accordingly. Workers of the organization evaluate their accomplishments weekly and set the direction of next week's activities regularly on Monday morning. Most of the time, the activity of this sector needs teamwork, and practitioners exchange

necessary information and work together to achieve the desired goal. We share information, show direction, follow up and monitor the activity.

As stated by II₂, practitioners collect information in order to analyze existing situation, activities and events from woredas and towns found in the zone daily by contacting them. They analyze and interpret daily collected situational information and report it for bureau through their chain of communication twice a week. They also organize woredas and towns activities to report it for bureau monthly. Finally, they evaluate and forward feedback by considering their plan and accomplishments and rank all 20 woredas and 3 towns quarterly.

To sum up, the researcher concluded that the practitioners implement by cascading their own plan from the mother plan of the organization based on their structural position. The activity of practitioners is coordinated in a scheduled and formal way, which can be taken as good.

2) **Public Relations activities:** From activities of the PR sector, public relations wing activity is the focus of this part.

Major Public Relations activities: According to II₁, the major activity of this wing was to survey public opinion, analyze public idea about the situation, their fears, their level of satisfaction with government actions on politics, economic, social development, and security, as well as the needs and problems of the community. In other words, it is assessing what the public is talking about, taking as an agenda, and scanning the environment to give an appropriate response on time.

Another informant, II₂, stated it as:

> Under the public relations wing, the situation analysis is engaged; the daily situation of woredas and towns in the zone is analyzed by collecting information from the PR sector at that level through our communication chain. This work may be based on events or planned activities. In this case, assessment of problems, good accomplishments and public compliances are among the major tasks of this wing.

From these responses, one can analyze that the main activity of public relations as a sub-branch was situational analysis and environmental scanning, which is among managerial role of PR activities (communication facilitator).

Tactics for assessing situations and anticipating crisis: When officers asked to describe how practitioners assess situational analysis, informants mentioned that they conduct survey or scan environment using questionnaires, through telephone and interview. As II_1 mentioned, the sector is deeply concerned with assessing what public is talking about as an agenda and scanning the environment to give an appropriate response on time. Concerning the anticipation of crisis, he elaborated as:

> We strive to predict by assessing the environment, what the public is talking about, identifying public fears, rumors in the community, and following what may be happening daily that may create a crisis in the future. I will present the report by prioritizing the issue for zonal management while we meet for discussion, but most of the time, the management body is reluctant to take immediate action to fix the problem.

As stated by informants, the practitioners survey public opinion and analyze the situation using telephone, questionnaire and interview. However, they don't conduct formal or informal research. Also, they contact only PR sector at woreda or town level which might make it difficult to assess the overall scenario. Similarly, even though the manager, as a top management body member of the zone, raised issues which may need immediate action, the management body undermines the work of this sector.

Public attitude towards PR office and practitioners: PR officers were asked how they understood the perceptions of public towards their sector as well as practitioners. Accordingly, II_2 categorized it into two main areas. First, most individuals view the sector as an agent for political ideology of the ruling party. They perceive this sector as information seekers and serve the party in power for political manipulation. On the other hand, others perceive it as serving the community similarly to other government sectors. He said, "Most of public don't know the sector's real work even though it is organized by law and proclamation, which has its own main roles and activities to perform."

Reporters were also asked how they perceived government communication affairs office of the zone and reflected a similar perception. As II_4 mentioned, PR sector was among government sectors mandated to organize and coordinate government information. The organization works to create awareness for publics to seek public participation in every government activity. II_3 and II_6 also added that intention of government communication office is to just act as government mouthpieces. Even both media relation and PR activities more serves government than public as it is intended to persuade public and assess public attitude towards government policy.

From these informants' reflections, one can conclude that the perception of public towards PR sector was not on the right track. Most of the public perceive it as standing for the ruling party rather than serving the general public. Even reporters who seem to understand the work of the PR sector as they have worked together, perceive that the PR sector's main task is just to persuade the public towards government needs and wants. Thus, most of the public didn't understand the real professional work of the PR sector, which might have influenced the success of the organization.

3) **Media Relations activities:** In this part, media relations activities performed in sector, its significance, how they evaluate their relationship and factors that affect their relationship were discussed.

Major Media Relations activities: PR officers were asked what activities they perform at zonal level under this wing. According to II$_2$, the PR sector at woredas and towns level activity is to produce government news and zone monitors it. However, as some of them have no experts and enough equipment, like standard camera, they produce news to fill the gap. They will give this news for OBN, Fana FM Nekemte and Kallacha Oromia among broadcast and print media. He added, "We produce press releases which show the reality of our zone's development, economic, social achievements and also problems that harm the wellbeing of the public to seek immediate action from concerned body."

In a similar expression, II$_1$ stated practitioners produce press releases for TV, radio/FM, social media/Facebook, and print media (Kallacha Oromia Newspaper). They also produce brochures, newsletters to distribute to the public, especially on different events which are intended to create awareness and give information on certain issues. Similarly, producing photo exhibitions, organizing necessary data with audio video and photos for documentary, inviting available media on different events to get media coverage in program form or news, answering media requests are among the activities of this sector.

To sum up, PR sector performs media relations activities to create awareness about the government's plans, accomplishments and activities of the administration using broadcast media (television and radio), print media (newspapers), social media (Facebook) and producing brochures and newsletters. Hence, practitioners implement the role of technical under this wing.

Significance and handling of media relations for PR sector and Media: Interviewees were asked about the significance of media relations activity in achieving organizational goals. From informants of PR sector II$_2$ said:

> The activities of our sector are boldly viewed through media relations activities. We can address the community using appropriate media like OBN, Fana FM and Kallacha Oromia newspaper to provide information about government plan, accomplishments, and achievements to boost transparency of an administration and seek public participation in the implementation of government

program. Thus, media play an irreplaceable role in achievement of our sector's vision.

Similarly, reporters of OBN at West Wollega and Fana FM Nekemte districts, respectively, revealed that, working with this government communication office will help them in achieving their own organizational plan. II$_3$ stated, as PR sector of the zone organizes the overall government information at zonal level, it will help their organization when they need current information for media coverage and also in organizing necessary adjustments. As II$_6$, WWZGCAO feeds their organization with news at necessary time. This will help them to fill media coverage gaps in a short time without extra effort from reporters to fill air time for news program. Similarly, PR sector will help them with necessary adjustments when his organization needs to produce different programs by facilitating certain activities.

From this, one can conclude that interviewees from both PR sector and media members' points of view show that creating relationships will help them achieve their organizations' goals and their relationship is based on mutual benefit.

Concerning who initiates communication among PR sector and media organizations/reports, PR officers reflect that they mostly need and approach the media, but the media also needs PR sector sometimes. II$_2$ stated their relationship as follows:

> As the PR sector monitors and administers government news and information, we are mostly concerned about working with media. Sometimes media houses need our sector and another time we need and contact media houses and reporters to get media coverage. Those media organizations come to get information they want and our organization is also open and serves those who need government information at a zonal level.

II$_1$ added that his organization contacts media while they have a certain activity at hand to get media coverage and media members contact this sector when they need aid. He also said, "In addition to regional and national media like OBN, Fana, EBC, and Walta, sometimes international media like BBC and VoA contact us to balance certain news they have covered, and we will respond to their request accordingly."

Similarly, reporters mentioned that their relationship with PR sector is situational rather than regular. According to II_4, as PR sector has practitioners at all Woreda levels, they will come to our organizations with news produced for media coverage. But sometimes his organization may contact PR sector to seek current information and adjustments for different media programs. Also, II6 mentioned as:

> We contact PR sector at the time of need. But most of the time, as PR has its own structure up to woreda level, they have lots of press releases at hand and contact us to get media coverage. We use their news selectively in accordance with our media rules and regulations and transmit it by adjusting it to our newsroom style. We contact each other mostly through phone calls and receive news by fax and phone. But sometimes we contact them physically, arriving at their office at the time we need to produce different programs.

From the above explanation of informants, one can understand that it is mostly the PR sector that initiates communication to boost its media coverage. Both media and PR organizations will not come up with a plan together and implement what they have planned. Rather, they communicate when they need each other for different activities to accomplish their own targets.

Relationship evaluation between PR sector and Media: PR officers respond that they have a good relationship with Fana FM Nekemte. As II_1 stated, West Wollga zone administration sign contract with Fana FM Nekemte to buy air time, this media organization produces certain programs on different government sectors' accomplishments based on this agreement. In addition to this, PR practitioners write and send press releases to this media and get free media coverage in the news program. Concerning PR relationship with OBN, he added that their relationship is sometimes in difficulty for certain interests.

On the other hand, according to reporters of FM Nekemte, they have a good working relationship with PR sector. II_5 mentioned that, "As our media is profit oriented organization, we sell airtime and sign contracts with government administration to cover different programs accordingly. We also receive press releases from the PR sector for free news coverage." II_6 added that:

> We have a mutually beneficial relationship with PR sector. We accept press releases from PR to fill airtime for news program like projects, development activities in agriculture, health, and education sectors that are not controversial. We will receive this news from practitioners through fax and phone calls, and attribute it to government PR sector for information transmission. Our willingness to work together is free from pressure and according to the rules and regulations of our organization.

From these informants' reflection, both PR and Fana FM Nekemte have a good working relationship. Their relationship is based on mutual benefit.

In relation to their relationship with OBN of zonal district, II_2 raised the fact that their sector mainly contacts OBN for media activities they want to cover by this media. However, sometimes OBN ignores practitioners' news releases and raises complaints against practitioners. For this reason, it is difficult to say there is a good relationship with OBN of the zone.

Similarly, manager of OBN West Wollega zone district, II_3 stated that, his organization was working with, but independent of PR sector. He elaborated as:

> We act based on our plan as our performance will be evaluated and counted for us as a result of these accomplishments rather than that of PR sector. Most of the time, PR practitioners come with their press release and ask for transmission of this news, but we need to accomplish our plan. From the very beginning, government PR practitioners were not mandated to produce news for media. Rather, they are mandated to invite media reporters by creating a suitable environment. They are expected to facilitate and, when necessary, provide answers to media requests. But sometimes we receive news produced by PR practitioners for the sake of creating smooth relationships with them, even though news production is the mandate of reporters.

Here he stressed that his organization is independent of PR sector and strives to accomplish their activities. He also perceived that press release production is not PR sector's activity rather than

facilitation and inviting media, which shows a misperception of PR sector's mandate.

In the same case, another reporter from OBN II_4 stated that, as PR sector has structure from all woredas and towns, they come with a lot of news to their studio. He said:

> As it is difficult to manage sometimes, we merge together similar content of news and produce a news which represents up to three or four woredas, but it takes time. As a result, we are forced to waste a lot of time, which interrupts our program. Even sometimes this PR practitioner's news, which comes from different woredas has no quality, current issue and covers all sources and information. But it is better for PR practitioners to facilitate necessary adjustments and invite reporters rather than producing news.

From this point, time pressure on reporters and quality problem is the reasons why reporters are not interested in PR practitioners' work.

Social Media practices: Informants from PR sector were asked how their sector was using social media and evaluate its effectiveness. They reflect that PR sector is using Facebook account from social media to deliver information for the public concerning government activities of the zone.

Accordingly, II_1 stated that their sector uses Facebook account among social media by hiring an expert on the structural position to run the activity. Government program, activities and accomplishments that need to inform the public will be covered in the form of news, messages, pictures and videos. However, it can be said it was ineffective in using this as it has few followers and reaction from these followers.

4) Challenges of PR practices

a) **Professional related factors:** Here, interviewees were asked to explain professional-related factors that affect their performance. II_2 mentioned that most managers in the PR sector are appointed only for the sake of political representation. As they have little knowledge about the organization's mandate, they are challenged to monitor practitioners on the right track. But if a manager has knowledge and skills in communication activities, he/she will be effective as a practitioner implementing what is expected from them without interference.

From this, one can conclude that hiring a manager for the PR sector based on his/her profession and political competence will enhance not only the internal achievement of practitioners by giving the right guidance, but also minimize external pressures from top management influence.

In addition to this, II_2 elaborated it as, "Lack of professional practitioners and short and long-term training determines the effectiveness of an organization. Top managers' and reporters' perceptions of the activity of the PR sector also affect the performance of our practitioners."

Similarly, media organization respondents' II_4 and II_5 elaborations support the idea of unprofessional activity by PR practitioners. They mentioned that sometimes press releases from the practitioners lack quality and promote the political ideology of the ruling party. In contrast to this, II_3 stated that the PR sector was not mandated to produce press releases, which shows a negative perception of reporters towards practitioners.

To summarize, the practice of PR sector was not done professionally as it was influenced by the lack of professional manager and practitioners, and the limited training and perception towards this sector by top managers and reporters.

b) **Organizational Related Factors:** PR officers were asked the problems related to organizational factors that may affect practitioners' performance. They mentioned peace and security problem as the major one. According to II_2, it is difficult to reach woredas and towns as a result of security problem, and even practitioners fear working as necessary for their own safety as the public views this sector as a security guard for the ruling party.

Infrastructure and transportation were another factor raised by PR officers. Accordingly, II_2 elaborated that the zone is wide. For example, Begi woreda is located at a distance of 280 km from the zonal organization, which makes it difficult to address and cover the reality happening there as expected because of limited budget and logistics. Furthermore, most of Wereda's roads are not suitable for transportation during the summer season.

Another problem added by informants was structure of PR sector. II_1 said:

> The organization had been restructured from time to time. But, when we see its level of standard from this structure, even the maximum stage will not attract practitioners in relation to other sectors. However, the practice of this sector is more related to expertise, which necessitates a profession and years of experience. Thus, it is better to revise the structure of the sector to attract and hold experienced experts.

The perception of the public towards this sector and its practitioners also has a great influence. According to II_2, as public perceives it from a political point of view, they will not reveal the information they have but will hide it when asked. They have no right understanding of PR practitioners; they fear if they reveal the information, it will harm their wellbeing.

Generally, as mentioned by PR officials, the major organizational factors that might affect the performance of the practitioners include; security problem, infrastructure, logistics, public attitude, budget and structure of the sector were raised.

Result from Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

1) **Public Relations Strategy:** FGD participants from PR practitioners reveal similar idea on government

communication office main task in the west Wollega zone administration. Among these practitioners, FGD_{P3} mentioned that, WWZGCAO works between government and the public. The sector aims to accomplish two main tasks. Informing the public about government through various media channels such as social media, brochures, articles, and traditional media (TV and radio/FM). On the other side, informing the government about the situations, attitudes and complaints from the society by conducting a situational analysis and public opinion surveys.

According to FGD_{P5}, the organization, being the government's mouth, gives information on development, security and all aspects for the public. Similarly, the organization informs the government about security and socio-economic development activities of the zone which may help the government as input in policy formulation.

From this, one can conclude that the PR sector of the zone performs two main activities. It conducts situational analysis and public opinion surveys, which help the government to know what the public's feelings and attitudes are and formulate policies based on these analyses. It also creates awareness for the public about the government plan, accomplishments and activity of the administration by using different media through media relations activities.

Realizing vision of an organization (PR process): The researcher raised a question about how PR practitioners realize the vision of their sector. Concerning conducting research for strategic planning, FGD_{P2} mentioned that the organization's plan wasn't planned based on research, but what was planned at the bureau level will be shared for sectors at zone and town levels. The zone will share its part rather than formulating its own strategic plan based on researching the reality and considering the situation of the zone. Another participant, FGD_{P3}, stated:

> In reality, the annual or five-year strategic plan of the organization directly comes from the bureau and shared for us. The activities will be shared and the general information about the zone; farmers, town residents, government employees, and students' situations will not be considered. Starting from this, we plan what should be considered for media activities based on the plan given

from top level rather than planning on the reality of our zone.

On the other hand, both participants, FGD$_{P3}$ and FGD$_{P2}$ stated as adopting plan from bureau have certain problems. FGD$_{P3}$ said, "We compete with town at central part of Oromia region where there are a lot of industries and access to media. But, in our zone there is no such input for media coverage and even access to different media like TV and FMs, which affects our performance." As FGD$_{P2}$ stated, adoption of organizational strategic plan from bureau does not entertain creativity of practitioners. In addition, as the plan didn't incorporate or reflect the situation of the zone, most of the time it is difficult for practitioners to implement it.

From this discussion, one can conclude that WWZGCAO neglected research to formulate its own strategic plan by considering the general reality of the zone. Respondents also mention the demerits of adaptation of the plan by the bureau, as it will not consider the reality of the zone and encourage competition among practitioners.

In relation to planning, FGD$_{P1}$ stated that every employee of the organization plans his/her activities by taking his/her part of activities from general annual plan of the sector, which was derived from their sector at bureau level. As a result, their sector will take its share from the bureau, which incorporates all activities of practitioners in structural positions.

Similarly, respondents FGD$_{P5}$ expressed that they will evaluate and analyze their performances in the previous year's accomplishments with all woredas and towns. They clearly state their weakness and strength in detail and share what they have experienced.

From these respondents' ideas, one can conclude that, even though the strategic plan of the sector is directly shared from bureau, the zonal level PR sector conducts evaluations of sector's accomplishments to incorporate them into future plans and formulate directions of implementation for better performance. However, they don't use their previous year's accomplishments as a benchmark as they adopt it from the bureau.

On the other hand, respondents reflect on how they implement and evaluate the task of their sector.

Accordingly, FGD$_{P3}$ stated that for tactical implementation, the plan was cascaded annually, quarterly, monthly and weekly, and the practitioner takes his/her share based on his/her position to run the activity. They evaluate their accomplishments weekly with the coordinator by discussing their strengths and weaknesses and pointing out future directions.

FGD$_{P4}$ reflects that they daily contact practitioners at woredas and towns level, especially for situational analysis, and report twice weekly to the bureau. They review their accomplishments weekly at an organizational level and through reports monthly. They also regularly evaluate activities at woredas and towns level quarterly and give feedback based on this evaluation.

Generally, from these ideas, one can conclude that the sector organizes the activity and reports to the bureau monthly and evaluates all woredas and towns organization's performance based on their plan and accomplishments at hand quarterly for coordination.

2) **Major Public Relation activities:** As FGD$_{P5}$ stated, the work of PR wing activity is to conduct situational analysis concerning daily activities and survey public opinion using questionnaires, personal interviews and telephone calls. They conduct situations in the community which may be on aspects of development, security, economic and social issues for analysis. In this situational analysis activity, the idea is to conduct a survey to find out what the public is saying about the situation.

Similarly, FGD$_{P1}$ clarified the activity of this team in the following way:

> Situational analysis will be held in two ways; immediately and regularly. An immediate public opinion survey will be conducted when the government needs to know the public's point of view on certain current regional and national issues. These may include government situations, concerning timely public questions or complaints, and issues that may be raised from a different point of view that need immediate government action. On the other hand, regular situational analysis will include an examination of daily activities, events, public satisfaction, and public criticism of the government.

To summarize the reflections of these participants, the activities of PR specifically can be categorized into two-folds. Firstly, practitioners conduct situational analysis regularly on politics, socio-economic activities, security and development aspects, public complaints, problems and level of public satisfaction with government action. Similarly, practitioners conduct surveys of public opinion in relation to current issues, the public's opinion towards government press conferences, events, disasters and crisis immediately. This serves the government body at different levels to know what is happening, the public's needs and attitude towards its program, which is among the managerial roles.

Tactics for assessing situation and anticipating crisis: Practitioners were asked to describe how they assess situational analysis and reveal similar ideas. According to FGD_{P2}, situational analysis will be conducted through three tactics; questionnaires, telephone calls and interviews. By using the telephone, the zonal organization contacts woredas and towns level sectors to share information concerning the events and situation in their area through a chain of communication. Practitioners collect, interpret and organize information by categorizing it as positive and negative indicators. Then, report the organized information to the concerned body, either for the zone or bureau. Similarly, the issue might be given for media based on necessity and follow up its feedback.

According to FGD_{P3}, most of the time they use the telephone to contact practitioners of woreda and town level offices through their chain to conduct relevant information. These woreda and town-level communications collect information from kebele administration structures.

From this, one can understand that PR practitioners use questionnaires to survey, telephone and personal interviews for situational analysis. But they frequently use telephone calls to contact PR practitioners at woreda and town level daily through their chain of communication to assess public attitude. However, as they contact their sector at grass-root level, the PR sector at that level contacts government structures, i.e., kebele leaders, especially managers, it is difficult to assess and conclude whether it reflects the real situation of the general public.

Similarly, the participants raised a familiar idea in relation to anticipation of crisis proactively. FGD_{P5} mentioned, forecasting and anticipating the situation before the crisis to minimize the risk, there are different activities the organization done to overcome the problem. But sometimes the concerned body may not give value to the prediction to take proactive measurements. Another participant, FGD_{P3} said:

> PR practitioners mostly collect information by contacting different woredas and towns through sectors' chain of communication about the public's problems, complaints, fears, rumors and agendas in the community. We share the information with manager of the sector as he is a member of the management body of the zone. However, most of the time management bodies undermine it. They will not care about and give value to what this sector comes up with in predicting the situation.

Thus, even though the organization is working proactively to anticipate a crisis and minimize its harm, lack of concern or attention pushes the concerned body to take action only after the problem happens. This indicates that, manager of the sector will not come up with an influential idea in management body rather than symbolic representation.

Public attitude towards the PR office: PR practitioners were asked how they understood the perceptions of public towards their sector and practitioners. Most of them revealed similar points of view. Accordingly, FGD_{P2} categorized the attitude of the public towards the sector into 3 areas. He said:

> Firstly, most of the public perceive the sector as the security guard or information seeker for the ruling party, or as the peace mouth of the government and its propaganda, which may harm the public rather than serve them. These parts of the community sometimes give unnecessary nicknames to this sector, even using social media, which may damage its image. Secondly, some individuals view the sector as serving them by presenting their ideas to the government, as the government takes necessary considerations while planning certain policies. Thirdly, others do not consider and even not know mandate and what the sector is.

This respondent mentioned, even though the sector serves public similarly to other sectors, most of public misunderstands what the PR sector stands for. Another participant, FGD$_{P3}$ stated it as:

> The perception of the public towards this sector is poor and in difficulty. Though the sector works to change attitudes to create good image of the zone, since the sector was structured, the attitude of the public hasn't changed. Even in common sense, individuals call this sector the government's mouthpiece and the right hand of the ruling party. These nicknames have a connotation meaning that indicates PR practitioners are manipulators, propagandists, or information seekers. As the zone, the majority, especially the youth, don't view this sector as serving them and present their problems to the government for solution.

Similarly, FGD$_{P1}$ stressed this public attitude by taking an example. "When a camera person goes to work, they neglect and don't like him/her because their perception of this sector is very poor. Even the perception of managers at different levels of government sectors has a poor understanding of the mandate of the sector." FGD$_{P5}$ added that:

> Most members of the public are not open to giving information to practitioners as they suspect it will harm their safety if they disclose it. There is a time when they see your ID which shows you are an employee of this sector and shocked. Political leaders of different sectors also reflect this negative attitude. When practitioners go to collect necessary information for media activity, they suspect you as a fault finder to reveal it to their top managers and practitioners adopting this behavior. Unfortunately, top management body of the zone perceives the activity of this sector as decorating the stage, adjusting microphones and electronic sound systems for the stage, taking videos and pictures of event for documentation, and generally creating suitable environment for different stages.

From these responses, the researcher learned that public perception of the PR sector was at a poor stage. Misconceptions about this sector have dominantly harmed the effectiveness of the practitioner's performance. Even leaders at different levels did not understand the actual activity of the PR office. Thus, the sector was not running its activity properly as the public's negative attitude towards practitioners.

3) Media Relation Practices

Major media relations activities of sector: Most participants reflect their sector tasks in a similar way. Accordingly, FGD$_{P3}$ stated:

> We produce news for electronic media, print media (newspaper) and social media. The sector works on different activities in the zone concerning socio-economic development and different meetings in order to increase awareness of the public intended to motivate and inspire them to participate in every aspect of government activity. We try to cover by media about events, current activities, problems and complaints in society, as concerned body will consider the issue.

In a similar explanation, FGD$_{P6}$ said, "The major activity for media takes place at woredas on agriculture, health, education and different projects. By communicating with practitioners there, we produce news for TV by incorporating all sources and information needed. Then, we give it to OBN; send it to Fana FM and Kallacha Oromia newspaper."

From these respondents' ideas, researcher summarized that media relations' main focus was to create awareness for the public by using mainstream media and social media. The sector works, especially in collaboration with OBN, Fana FM Nekemte from broadcast media, sending articles and press releases to Kallacha Oromia newspaper and posting news and message content on their Facebook to deliver information for the public, which is among the technical role of PR.

Significance and handling of media relations for PR sector and Media: Participants were asked the significance of media relations activity in achieving organizational goals. PR practitioners elaborated similar ideas with interviewees. According to FGD$_{P2}$, creating a smooth relationship with all available media will enhance their activities. It has an incredible advantage in reaching a large number of publics for awareness creation and pushes the concerned body to take necessary action, as media have power to influence public attitude.

Similarly, FGD$_{P3}$ stated the advantage of media for PR sector as, "Building relationships with the media is very important. Because the media is a vehicle through which the organization reaches the general public, it is best for us to create good relationships with every accessible media outlet to use as an opportunity. Hence, the work of our sector can reach the public to create awareness."

From these responses, one can understand that creating a good relationship with the media and effective use of available media enhances their performance. This was because the media can reach a large number of public and has the power to influence the general public as well as push leaders to solve community problems.

Concerning who initiates communication among the PR sector and media, FGD$_{P3}$ stated that:

> Mostly, our sector initiates communication to foster media coverage of the zone. This is because, except social media, the sector has no means at hand to reach the general public and using media, especially electronic media has great value in delivering our message. Other times, the media will come to this sector to get necessary information and ask for adjustment of different programs their media wants. Accordingly, PR sector will give necessary information and direction to help them for their media program.

Similarly, FGD$_{P6}$ stated that they mostly contact media, especially OBN and Fana FM Nekemte, while practitioners produce press releases to get media coverage. PR sector also invites media for different media program productions as the sector cannot produce media program rather than news. He added that, sometimes media organizations also contact PR sector for information and press releases, even though practitioners more often initiate communication.

As it can be concluded, PR practitioners more initiate communication for media relations activities to deliver their press releases through media for the public. But sometimes reporters contact PR sector for press releases, information or adjustments for their own media program. Thus, there is an imbalanced working relationship between media and PR sector.

Relationship evaluation between PR sector and Media: Concerning their relationship with the media, most participants reflect similar ideas. According to FGD$_{P5}$, they have a good relationship with Fana FM Nekemte and both of them communicate smoothly. Their organization writes news and sends it to this FM and gets coverage. Other times, reporters from FM ask them if they have news for media coverage. Similarly, these reporters ask the PR sector to adjust different programs their media organization wants to cover. So, their relationship is good and they work together by understanding each other for mutual benefit. In contrast, the relationship between PR sector and OBN of West Wollega district is not good.

Another respondent, FGD$_{P2}$, stressed relationship between PR sector and OBN of the district, as:

> Reporters of OBN perceive the PR sector as working for the political party, and the task of the sector is simply to collect different information and give it to government bodies rather than consider media activity. This mostly results from the reporter's personal interests, and they prefer to do this for themselves rather than by PR practitioners. In other words, devaluing PR experts' work in a sense, reporters want to produce news and expect PR experts to invite them rather than write it.

Similarly, FGD$_{P1}$ said, "They don't want to entertain our news as a sector rather than what we do together personally. When our office wants to create a relationship with them, they defend themselves as both organizations are independent and have no need to create a relationship. "

From these ideas, one can convincingly say that the PR sector with OBN of the zonal district was full of complaints in the engagement of media relations

activity. Participants mentioned that the media was not interested in the press releases of practitioners and engagement in relationship building by defending themselves as both organizations are independent. This idea was supported by the manager of OBN's reflection in the interview part, which pointed out his misperception of this sector. Generally, all respondents expressed in the discussion that the integration between PR and media like Fana FM of the district is good, but complained about OBN, which needs improvement to build smooth relationships for effective media relations.

Practitioners were also asked concerning the standardized quality of their work. They mentioned that such problems are mostly related to producing TV news, as it incorporates audio-video and scripts. FGD$_{P3}$ elaborated that sometimes there might be a problem with quality work from experts at woreda level, but this is not mostly the case of PR work's failure. Its failure is mostly the attitude of reporters towards the government's PR sector. In a similar expression, FGD$_{P1}$ said:

> I'm not saying we are free from error and all practitioners are perfect. There are certain problems from woreda reporters' skills, which include; taking low-quality videos and photos, not incorporating necessary sources and information in a full manner needed for media coverage. Even though training the practitioner is the mandate of the bureau, sometimes we create 2-3 days short training and demonstrations at zonal level for sharing experience to fill skill gaps of these practitioners. We can't blame reporters in such cases.

The researcher concluded from these ideas that, sometimes press releases of practitioners lack standardized quality for media organizations. This idea was also supported by reporters from both OBN and Fana FM during interviews. Thus, lack of quality work and the reporter's perception of PR practitioners determine media relations performance.

Social Media practices: Practitioners were asked how they use social media and its effectiveness. FGD$_{P2}$ mentioned it as:

> Our sector use Facebook account to post different news and messages in relation to this

zone. The information on this Facebook represents government news and activities of the zone as it coordinates the activities of all woredas and towns. However, we have few numbers of followers when compared to the population and even followers themselves will not comment, like and share what the practitioner posts. Managers, among very few followers, react to post information rather than youth and the general public.

He added, as the acceptance of the organization is low, the general public will not follow and give constructive comments, but they sometimes prefer giving comments that will harm the image of the sector. Similarly, FGD$_{P3}$ reflected this:

> Most people have no good image of the sector, so even though they see what we post, they will not like, comment or share it. When PR experts post something on sector's Facebook account, they will not comment on it. In my understanding, they will not react to it because they fear it will harm their safety and isolate them from their friends and community.

From these reflections, one can understand that the PR sector use Facebook account among social media platforms. Also, they mentioned that it has fewer followers and reactions among these followers. Thus, the organization is not using different social media effectively.

4) **Challenges of PR practices**

a) **Professional related factors:** Here, participants were asked to explain professional related factors that affect their performance. Accordingly, FGD$_{P1}$ mentioned that appointing a manager who has no knowledge of communication skills to the PR sector is a major problem. As this manager doesn't know about communication and media activities, it negatively affects the effectiveness of the sector. Appointing a professional manager can improve misconceptions about the PR sector, as those who have knowledge about the profession can create awareness for others.

Additionally, FGD$_{P3}$ said, "Managing PR sector should not be viewed only in terms of individual's political competence, but also based on profession. This is because, as a manager leads expertise related

activity, directly his/her profession should be related to achieve the desired goal."

Another problem revealed by participants is employing practitioners who have no related field in the PR profession and lack of training to build a skill gap among practitioners. FGD$_{P1}$ mentions it as, "Most of the time, individuals who have no profession and an unrelated educational background will be employed as experts. As a result, the individual employee has no knowledge about what to plan and how to implement it." As FGD$_{P2}$ expressed, employing new applicants for PR practitioner positions needs due consideration. In his words:

> It needs to consider while employing experts based on their profession, level of education, which profession fits the position, and identify whether the appointed individual adds value based on his profession or not. Similarly, it needs to identify which positions need training and give them the necessary training to improve the practitioner's performance. For instance, experts in this sector may get short training after at least five years, but as the activities of this sector are influenced by technology, it is better to refresh and update the knowledge of practitioners on a timely basis.

This idea indicates that most PR practitioners were not professionals, as managers employed individuals in the sector based on their wants rather than considering an applicant's profession. Also, experts were not getting enough training to update their knowledge and fill their skill gap.

Another problem raised here was related to lack of awareness about the PR sector's activities by top management bodies and reporters. According to FGD$_{P3,}$ the top management body of the zone perceives the activity of PR sector as decorating the stage, adjusting the microphone and electronic sound system for the stage, taking videos and pictures of the event to document it, and generally creating a suitable environment for different stages. Thus, awareness and government emphasis towards this sector's activity is very low.

Similarly, FGD$_{P6}$ illustrated attitudes of managers and OBN towards this sector as:

> Both organizations serve the community and the government of the zone; the activity by itself will not contradict; rather, it will be similar to and supplement one another; and creating smooth relations will help to achieve the desired goal. Thus, the communication sector should be treated as a media organization because they perform similar activities.

From this reflection, one can understand that there was a misconception of the PR sector among top level managers and reporters. They were not considering PR sector activity as a profession rather than serving the government body as a conduit. Similarly, the researcher observed that some practitioners didn't clearly understand the difference between media and public relations mandate. Thus, treatment of PR as a profession was at its infant stage.

Generally, from the discussions with practitioners, professional challenges affecting the practitioner's performance include; appointment of unprofessional manager, employing unprofessional on expert position, lack of training to fill skill gaps, the misconception of PR sector among managers, reporters and some practitioners.

b) **Organizational Related Factors:** Concerning organizational factors, participants expressed that peace and security problem was the major one. According to FGDP1, the situation of the zone in relation to the security problem is the major problem in PR practices. As the perception of the public towards PR practitioners is not good, the practitioners can't implement what they have planned and generate necessary information which directly affects their performance. FGDP5 supports it, "even though the security crisis affects the overall activities of all sectors, as PR practitioners, we are targeted victims as most individuals perceive us as information seekers, which hinders our daily activities."

Another problem was lack of budget and logistics. The practitioner may plan and begin implementation, but most of the time, he/she will not complete his/her task due to a limited budget. Similarly, FGD$_{P3}$ said, "As an expert, you may plan, and when you want to implement what you have planned, the budget will restrict you. It needs to allocate sufficient budget and invest that budget for necessary things and activities appropriately. "

Similarly, other participants pointed out that lack of enough materials for PR activity is another problem. As FGD$_{P2}$ elaborated, lack of enough equipment for activities of the sector, especially in media relations activities like video cameras, computers, tablets, laptops, and network disconnection are among the problems. He argued that, most of the time, materials that PR sector uses for media activities are very expensive and sensitive in nature. Due consideration should be given to government PR offices while allocating budget.

FGD$_{P6}$ stressed the problem of video camera among materials in the PR sector as:

> In relation to writing news for TV, we organize what woredas and town practitioners produce. However, most of the time we produce television news by going to different woredas and towns that do not have video camera and enough experts on that position, as the activities of this sector boldly viewed from media relations activities. Starting from the previous year, we are ordered to buy a new video camera to adjust it for the OBN digital system. But, among 23 woredas and towns, 8 of them didn't buy this video camera yet. So we are forced to produce news on behalf of these woredas to fill the gap.

Infrastructure and transportation was another factor raised. As FGD$_{P5}$ mentioned, network disconnection interrupts their daily situational analysis activity. They contact woredas and towns level PR sectors daily for situational analysis by phone to exchange information with their chain of communication. But most of the time, network disconnection will interrupt the exchange of information. Similarly, FGD$_{P3}$ stated that it is difficult to reach most woredas in relation to road problems. Road to different woredas are not suitable for transportation during the summer.

Political pressure is also among factors raised by practitioners. FGD$_{P6}$ expressed it as:

> Managers mostly influence us by denying what we have planned and giving us another task enforced by top managers. When we ask for approval to implement what we planned before, manager forced us to perform what top managers asked by neglecting our plan. There is a saying that a government

communication affair is the right hand of ruling party. Thus, there is great pressure from the top management and executive body of the zone on PR practitioners to perform according to their will rather than what is expected of us.

This indicates practitioners are forced to implement additional work given to them by managers out of their profession, which is wastage of time and affects their performance. Also, they were forced to perform their activities in accordance with managers' will rather than professionally.

Similarly, FGD$_{P3}$ stated that most activities in the sector serve political consumption. Starting from manager of the sector to management body of the zone, they push the practitioner as he/she shapes activity towards promoting political ideology of the ruling party. At this time, practitioners are compelled to perform in accordance with the wishes of managers while neglecting their profession.
The structure of the sector has its own drawbacks, as stated by these participants. According to FGD$_{P1}$, the working structure will not entertain experienced practitioners to stay in this sector as it invites only few experienced personnel. Mostly, as the structure of the sector changes from time to time, the trained practitioners leave the sector, which creates skill gap of the practitioners.

As FGD$_{P5}$ stated, the perception of the public towards practitioners is very poor. He said:

> When you want to create a relationship with them, they don't believe you. The problem of attitudes towards this office's practitioners is not only from society, but also reflected by political leaders in different sectors. When the practitioners go to these sectors to collect necessary information for media activity, they suspect you of being a fault finder.

The researcher concludes from participants' reflections that organizational related factors that affect practitioners' performance are security problem, insufficient budget and logistics, limited materials for media activity, infrastructure and transportation problems, network disconnection, political pressure, structure of the sector, and public perception towards PR practitioners.

Results from Document Analysis

1) **Organizational Structure:** The West Wollega Zone Government Communication Affairs office is one of the Oromia regional sectors restructured by Proclamation 213/2011 Article 22. The functional structure of the organization consists of a manager and a coordinator at the top. The manager is appointed by the West Wollega zone administration council and is directly responsible for this council. The coordinator is responsible for coordinating the overall technical activities of this sector. On the other hand, the organization has two sub-wings/departments known as public relations and media relations as core expertise activities coordinated under one department known as the government and public information department. The structure of this organization also contains supporters. Even though it has 12 positions by its structure, currently it has an actual total of 11 workers (no driver). Let us see the structure of human resources of the organization as follows:
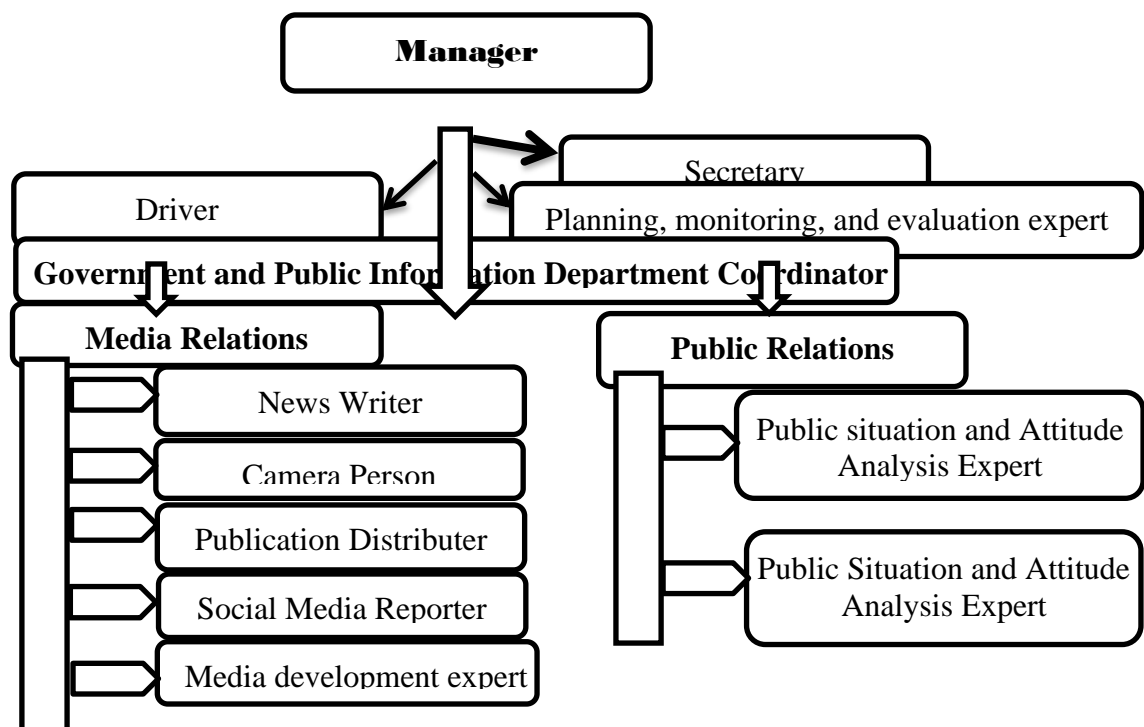

Figure 1: Organizational Structure of West Wollega Zone Government Communication Affairs Office

2) **Strategic PR plan:** The researcher also reviewed the 5-year and 2013E.C annual strategic plan of the organization and described its mission, vision, values and activities below:

The vision of the sector is to see West Wollega Zone in a way of civilization and prosperity by 2022.

Mission:

To promote a modern, timely, and effective communication system in order to facilitate accurate information flows between the government and the public for national consensus, increase public participation and efficiency, and build a good image of the zone on the right track.

West Wollega Zone Government Communication Affairs Office has the following mandate:

- ✓ Organize and supervise the zone's administration's information and government relations function in different sectors.
- ✓ Serves as the zone administration's spokesperson and a source of government information.
- ✓ Inform the government's position on West Wollega zone administration and regional governments on different issues.
- ✓ Creating a suitable environment for events that create a good image and relationship with the zone's administration.
- ✓ Following and analyzing the information disseminated by local and national media about the zone and giving necessary feedback.
- ✓ Giving and explaining issues that need answers with other concerned government bodies.
- ✓ Gathers public opinion and presents it to the concerned bodies.
- ✓ Giving the brief to local and national media on a regular basis
- ✓ Writing news at the zonal government level and disseminating it through different media.
- ✓ Producing audio-video documents on government plans, accomplishments, and effects by supporting it with necessary evidence and give it for those who need the data.
- ✓ Follow and analyze wrong news and information disseminated through social media and give necessary feedback, increase the number of social media followers.

Organizational Values

- ➢ Readiness for change
- ➢ Transparency and Accountability
- ➢ Honesty
- ➢ Best information center
- ➢ Participation
- ➢ Team work spirit

Overall, the researcher reviewed and presented some points stated above, the elements that should be incorporated in formal annual communication plan elaborated by Lee et al., (2012) shown in the literature review of this study (page 14), were incorporated into the strategic plan of the PR sector. Also, as mentioned above, the two dominant activities of the sector, i.e., public relations wing and media relations wing activities are clearly stated in the document.

The researcher also observed brochures and newsletters among the publications, products of practitioners' activity. The message was intended to just promote the ruling party for the election campaign, which was one-sided information. For instance, in the PR sector's brochure of September, 2013 E.C. it states, "Our structure at all levels should contribute to making a democratic and fair election and as the ruling party should win the 6th election campaign is the focus message of the brochure." Slogan messages such as, 'Prosperity for all, all for prosperity!' and others were incorporated. Thus, practitioners were not performing their activity professionally.

In relation to the organizational report, the researcher reviewed the third quarter report of the organization. The researcher observed that they have clearly discussed in detail each and every activity, accomplishment, and challenge by the concerned body, which is supported by pictures in their report. But the researcher observed that there are certain problems as their accomplishment seems exaggerated. Most reports show that they accomplished 100%, but unfortunately, few documented activities, e.g., press releases and articles, were available. Others like public trust in government and public satisfaction were also mentioned as very good accomplishments, but they did not conduct research to evaluate these variables yet.

3) **Social Media:** The researcher reviewed the WWZGCAO Facebook account of the organization. The sector was using its Facebook account among other social media to deliver information for the public concerning government activities of the zone. The Facebook account name is stated as, 'Waajjira Dhimmoota Kominikeeshinii Mootummaa GWLixaa' which represents and is used by the PR sector of the zone to inform the public about government information and activities. It had 4,992 friends, and the organization posts different updated news or messages at least once daily. However, it is a Facebook account rather than an official page and very few reactions from followers in the form of likes, comments and shares as it represents government activity of the zone when compared to the population of the zone.

4) **Professional challenges:** In relation to professional indicators, the researcher reviewed two documents from the sector. These were the employee's profile and criteria in the hiring expert documents.

Accordingly, the document of WWZGCAO employees' profile shows their detail information. Among these PR practitioners, only three of them had related fields of study, like two from journalism and communications, and one from language and literature studies. The rest were from unrelated fields of study like management, accounting, human resource management, sociology and ICT.

Additionally, the researcher reviewed a document that shows the criteria for hiring an expert on PR practitioner positions. According to the document the criteria for the PR practitioner (expert) are; journalism and communication, language and literature, management, political science and international relation, sociology and federalism field of studies. Here, one can understand two things: first, the PR field of study was not incorporated into these criteria. This may be because the field is new and most universities do not give the profession as a program in their curriculum at the BA degree level, except for a few universities (not more than 4) in Ethiopia. Another thing is that most of the fields incorporated above were unrelated, except journalism and communication, and language and literature. Even these fields of study will not take PR or journalism related courses as a subject. This shows, as informants expressed, that even the top-level PR sector (Oromia Communication Bureau) didn't give the necessary emphasis while formulating the structure by itself.

Discussion

In general, the PR sector of the zone performs two main activities. PR activities through situational analysis and public opinion surveys help the government to understand public feelings and attitudes by opening two-way communication flows. This is among the management roles as mentioned in the literature review. It also creates awareness for the public about the government plan, accomplishments and activity of the administration by using different media through media relation activities. This indicates technician role of PR. However, in reality, the sector partially serves government rather than public.

Structurally, the idea confirms Pranav (2019), who asserted that the work of government PR serves awareness creation and feedback by filling the communication gap between the government and citizens. It helps in conveying information and spreading messages related to schemes and policies.

Governments use PR to get the view of the public and get feedback on current and running schemes and policies. But, the actual activity of WWZGCAO confirms Somerville and Ramsey (2013) argument which states that PR practitioners working for government may struggle with conflicts of interest, i.e., interests of their organization and perhaps their immediate political boss as a key influence on their conduct, but, like the elected politicians they serve, they ultimately have a duty to put the public interest first. Similarly, Kim and Cho (2019) revealed that, many government PR practitioners aim to strengthen political support, but this political attachment precipitates public distrust toward the government. Lee et al. (2012) stated it as dangerous concerning political purposes of government PR to seek public support.

In relation to PR strategy, the finding show that the strategic plan of PR sector was formulated at bureau level and shared for all PR sectors found in the region. The vision, roles, activities, strategies, and tactics are clearly stated in this strategic plan. The organization was implementing a 5-year and annual strategic plan based on vision of government in 3rd DTP 10-year plan. Practitioners implement their activity based on their position and regularly evaluate their accomplishments in order to coordinate the activity. However, they neglect research to clearly understand and incorporate the real situation of the zone for better accomplishment. Their accomplishments seem exaggerated when researcher review their 3rd quarter report of 2013 E.C. as there were few documented activities.

Different scholars argue concerning PR strategies, as PR activity should be planned strategically for the effectiveness of the organization. Grunig and Grunig (2000) argued that PR should be planned, managed by objectives, evaluated, and connected to organizational objectives as it describes how activities should be practiced to contribute for organizational success. Strategic PR begins with environmental scanning (research) to identify stakeholders, public, problems, and potential issues (Grunig, 2011). Similarly, Austin and Pinkleton (2015) state that research-based PR practices enable managers to solve complex problems, set and achieve or exceed goals and objectives, track the opinions and beliefs of key publics, and employ program strategies with confidence. Also, Ugoani (2020) stressed that all PR work is underpinned by research involves on issues, organizations, publics,

competition, opportunities and threats, and managers must spend considerable time incorporating research findings into PR activities. As it was mentioned in chapter two, Lee et al. (20012) argued that government PR communication annual plans should start with research. These ideas show the importance of research in PR sector.

Public Relations activities: Based on respondents' reflection and document analysis, the finding indicated practitioners perform two main tasks, specifically under the PR wing, which let the government know public opinion. They conduct situational analysis regularly on political, socio-economic activities, security and development aspects, public complaints, problems and the level of public satisfaction on government action. They also conduct immediate survey public opinion on current issues, which may include public opinion on government press conferences, events and current issues. But they frequently use telephone call to contact PR practitioners at woreda and town level to assess public attitude which is difficult to assess and conclude it to the real situation of the general public as they contact only government structure. They haven't conducted research yet, but collect information from this structure without verification from other parts of the public.

System theory supports this idea as practitioners play the roles of boundary spanning, counseling management and bridging organization and the public for a two-way flow of supply and information to scan the environment by acting as the 'eyes and ears of the organization' (Grunig et al., 2002). Practitioners use formal and informal research mechanisms to gather information about key publics and issues and feed them back into the organization. They become the eyes and ears of the organization, staying well connected to key stakeholders to ensure that the organization is always well informed of events in its environment (Mehta and Xavier, 2009). By understanding what is happening within the environment and how changes might affect the organizational goal, PR can drive adaptation to better suit stakeholder needs (Cutlip et al., 2006).

In relation to forecasting situations, the finding indicates that PR practitioners work to anticipate by scanning the environment as much as possible, but they are not satisfied with their efforts. From both interviewees' and FGD's reflections, even though the manager is among the management body of the

zone, his ideas are not influential rather than symbolic representations. As one can observe from the structure of the organization above (figure 1), two individuals were hired for the public situation and analysis expert position. Their main task was to assess and analyze the situation and serve as communication facilitators, which is a managerial role. However, they do not participate in the dominant coalition, except for the manager of the office.

This finding confirms the study of Demelash and Hamza (2020) which stated that the majority of PR practitioners did not take part in top-level management and were not decision-makers. They were not allowed to play a major role in organizational strategic planning. Also, Geremew (2017) verified that there is a very little understanding of the major functions and roles of PR as practitioners are rarely involved in strategic planning, in decision making, and in following up the implementation of plans in their organizations. The functions of PR at the strategic planning level rarely exist due to lack of qualified practitioners.

Concerning public attitude towards PR practitioners, the finding indicates that public perception towards PR sector was at poor stage. Misconceptions of this sector dominantly harm the effectiveness of practitioners' performance. Even leaders at different levels didn't understand the actual activity of public relations office. Thus, the sector was not running its activities properly as the public had a negative attitude towards practitioners.

The finding of this study confirms the findings of Mulualem (2017) and Geremew (2017), which found that the PR office has no good relationship with the public on various societal issues. The office couldn't create mutual understanding between the government, the people and media through strategic communication. There is a misconception about the function of the PR sector. Most of the public do not understand what the organization stands for and view the practitioners as politicians and every activity of the office as bias and manipulative.

Media Relations Practices: In relation to media relations activities, the finding indicates that the PR sector at zonal level produces news for broadcast, print and social media, creates messages for social media, produces brochures, newsletters, distributes Kallacha Oromia newspapers, invites the media and reacts to their requests in relation to government information in the zone.

This confirmed the statement of Mahoney (2013) which asserted that PR practitioners employ a variety of communication tactics, including media releases, media events, social media accounts, backgrounders, fact sheets, pamphlets, annual reports, newsletters, and other materials, in order to manage the public image and stakeholder relationships of companies and organizations. This implied the technician role of PR.

In relation to the significance of media relations activity in achieving organizational goals, both the PR sector of the zone and reporters' (OBN and Fana FM Nekemte) reflection show that creating relationships will help them achieve their organization's goal and their relationship is based on mutual benefit. This indicates that both PR officers and media members mentioned that creating smooth relationships and working together will enhance their achievements.

Concerning who initiates communication among the PR sector and media organizations/reports, mostly the PR sector initiates the communication and contacts media houses to seek media coverage, which is an imbalance between the two. Both media and PR organizations communicate when they need each other for different activities to accomplish their own targets rather than discussion and planning together.

From scholars' view, Larsson (2009) revealed that the contacts between PR agents and journalists are extensive, in the sense that they are frequent and mainly initiated by the PR practitioners. Both are thereby in collaboration, even if the relationship is perceived as unequal.

Concerning an evaluation of their relationship, both PR sector and FM Nekemte have a good working relationship in relation to media activity. They work by understanding each other's needs. However, the relationship between PR sector and OBN of the district was not as interesting. Reporters' perception of the sector affects their relationships, even though

practitioners want to build smooth working relationships with this media. Thus, the finding shows that PR sector has a good working relationship with Fana FM Nekemte and needs to improve its relations with OBN.

This is consistent with Cornelissen (2013), who stated that "communication practitioners hold fewer negative perceptions towards journalists and are often eager to work with them" (p. 210). Ledingham and Bruning (2007) asserted on antagonistic relationships between practitioners and journalists that delivering on promises, being honest and forthcoming, and working with the needs of journalists in mind all help improve working relationships and can help to change the culture of antagonism once so prevalent in media relations. To build smooth relations with the media, RMT has identified elements such as control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationships and communal relationships to build a positive relationship. According to the excellence theory, organizations that practice excellence should achieve positive results in the form of stronger, longer-lasting relationships with strategic publics such as the media (Gruing, 2009).

In relation to using social media, the study shows that the PR sector of the zone adopted Facebook account from social media and the sector posts different updated news or messages at least once daily to deliver government information. However, it is a Facebook account rather than an official page, and there are very few reactions from followers when compared to the population of the zone. The messages were mostly intended to promote the party in power, which was one-sided rather than in a professional way. Moreover, the sector is not using available social media platforms like Twitter, YouTube and others effectively.

According to Wang (2015), social media communication is not only interactive but also participatory, collaborative, personal, and simultaneously communal, thus allowing organizations to engage the public in constant conversations, supportive behaviors, and meaningful relationships. Nica et.al (2014) argued that social media is a powerful tool for public organizations in their efforts to open up and increase participation or engagement from the communities that they are representing. It is also an instrument for increasing good governance practices, facilitating

communication and interaction between stakeholders and increasing accountability.

Challenges of PR practices: Concerning the professional challenges affecting the practitioner's performance, the study found that PR practice was not implemented professionally as it was influenced by the lack of professional manager and practitioners, limited training and perception towards this sector by top managers and reporters.

Similarly, based on respondents' reflections and document analysis, the finding show the major organizational factors that might affect the performance of the practitioners include; security problem, infrastructure, logistics, public attitude, budget, limited materials for media activity, transportation problem, network disconnection, political pressure, and structure of organization.

This finding supports the study conducted by Mulualem(2017), Tesfaye (2018) and Eyasu(2019), which revealed the main challenges of PR practitioners as; lack of skilled human power; passive attitude towards the office, including top leaders; absence of professional leadership and adequate capacity-building training; structure of the office; logistics and financial constraints; infrastructure and inadequate assistance from managers. Out of this the study comes with other findings such as; peace and security problem, political pressure, frustration among practitioners and network disconnection.

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