Factors Affecting Crisis Communication in Nairobi County: Kenya

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Abstract: **The development of a successful crisis communication plan at the onset of a crisis is crucial in taking responsibility and communicating information to the public quickly consistently and truthfully. "In today's world, it is no longer a question of whether a major crisis will strike any organization, it is only a matter of when, which type and how (Mitroff and Pearson, 1993). Therefore establishing an effective crisis communication plan is essential. Crisis in Kenya is not a new thing, in the most recent case in the Kenyan history, in August 12th 2011, a fuel pipeline exploded in a densely populated Sinai slum in Nairobi due to fuel siphoning, bringing to question the state of crisis communication in Kenya. Therefore this study explored three objectives, to explore crisis situations impacting crisis response strategies in Kenya, to examine the communication response strategies used in crisis situations in Kenya. to analyze the forces within the organization impacting effective crisis communication in Kenya. The research tool used was questionnaires. Out of the total respondents interviewed 59% were male and 41% were female. 87% strongly felt that the fuel siphoning menace is not going to end soon. 51% of the respondents admitted in receiving warning concerning the looming danger of Sinai fire, whereas 49% of respondent denied having got any warnings. The study disclosed that many people engage in fuel siphoning because of poverty, lack of clear information concerning fuel siphoning and dangers associated with it and lack of regular warnings concerning the dangers of fuel siphoning, leading to people engaging in fuel siphoning. The relative authorities' i.e. the government should tackle people's attitudes and perceptions as a major impediment to successful crisis communication.**

Keywords: **Crisis, Crisis Communication, Catastrophe, Effective crisis communication, Policy.**

1.   INTRODUCTION

The interaction between an organization and its publics is a prominent topic in the public relations discipline Fearn-Banks (2002). In recent years, there has been a surge in emphasizing the maintenance of such interaction through relationship building and the repair of these relationships through crisis management Fearn-Banks (2002). However, few studies have blended those themes to adopt a relational approach to crisis communication Fearn-Banks (2002).

Fearn-Banks (2002) defines crisis communication as "the dialog between the organization and its publics prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence". She explains that the strategies and tactics used are designed to minimize damage to the image of the organization (Fearn-Banks 1996). Although crises can have devastating effects on the organization and its stakeholders, these events can also be resolved positively. The communication following a crisis plays an integral role in this success (Ulmer 2001).

The development of a successful crisis communication plan at the onset of a crisis is crucial in taking responsibility and communicating information to the public quickly consistently and truthfully. "In today's world, it is no longer a question of whether a major crisis will strike any organization, it is only a matter of when, which type and how (Mitroff and Pearson, 1993). Establishing an effective crisis communication plan is essential. While the communication industry has changed since 1980, the fundamental principles of crisis communication remain the same. With the internet and so many communication vehicles reaching the masses in record speed it's important to get the message out and be consistent (Argenti, 2006). Values such as honesty, openness and sincerity are vital to the success of the company's crisis

communication plan. Changes in communication behavior and communication practices have profound implications for corporate communicators, especially in the area of crisis communications (Argenti, 2006).

Coombs (2005b) claims that crisis communication is the lifeblood of the entire Crisis Management effort and plays a vital role in all stages of Crisis Management. Crisis communication strategies represent the actual responses the organization uses to address the crisis and have both verbal and nonverbal aspects. Different crises can necessitate the use of different communication strategies as well as an emphasis on different stakeholders (Coombs 1999b).

It is a fact that many crises are unpredictable and in such cases leaders or authorities concerned shouldn't be blamed for lack of foresight but it is also a fact that crises are preventable if communicated well or even if handled properly because if a damaging event happens that was foreseeable and preventable, no excuses should be brooked (Watkins and Bazerman, 2003). Anticipating and avoiding crises isn't just a matter of doing better environmental scanning or contingency planning. It requires a number of steps, from recognizing the threat, to making it a priority in the organization, to actually mobilizing the resources required to stop it. This is termed the "RPM process": recognition, prioritization, mobilization (Watkins and Bazerman, 2003). Lapses in recognition occur when leaders and authorities concerned remain oblivious to an emerging threat or problem. Failures of prioritization arise when potential threats are recognized by leaders but not deemed sufficiently serious to warrant immediate attention. Failures of mobilization occur when leaders recognize and give adequate priority to a looming problem but fail to respond effectively (Watkins and Bazerman, 2003).

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Despite what effective crisis communication can achieve, many countries have not been able to employ effective crisis communication, due to some reasons for instance Tanzania is one example of a country that has faced crises as compared to its neighboring country Kenya. One example is the Zanzibar ferry crisis. On the 12th of September 2011 at least 187 people or more died after an overloaded ferry sank off the Tanzanian island of Zanzibar with at least 800 people on board (B.B.C, 2012). Overloading of marine vessels was blamed for cause and little that the government is doing to regulate the sector (Kironde, 2011).

Another example of a country that has showed evidence of poor crisis communication is the United States of America; this is with reference to Hurricane Katrina. Hurricane Katrina was a devastating category 4 hurricanes, that hit the Gulf of Mexico and various Southern regions of the United States at the end of August, 2005, causing some of the worst damage in that country's history, estimated at$100 billion (Anup Shah, 2005). This calamity exposed various issues, lack of clear communication (Anup Shah, 2005). America being a country that faces such like disasters almost regularly should have been in a better position to avert such like a crisis through an effective crisis communication.

In the most recent case in the Kenyan history, in August 12th 2011, a fuel pipeline exploded in a densely populated Sinai slum in Nairobi, flattening homes, reducing some bodies to dust and forcing a massive evacuation of the area amid fears that big pools of leaked fuel could ignite (Narayan, 2011). Almost 95 people died in the explosion and fire and a total of over 100 people were admitted to Nairobi hospitals for treatment. A 2009 article in a Kenyan newspaper, The Daily Nation, discussed concerns of such a fire in the Sinai slum, where residents built shanties and even a church next to or even on top of the pipeline, according to the Daily Nation. The cause according to the newspaper was laid squarely on the residents where by the newspaper quoted one resident who it said had refused to move away from the pipeline despite eviction notices from Kenya Pipeline Company (Narayan. 2011)

It's encouraging to learn that some of the most successful crisis communications strategies have developed from lessons learned from previous crises. Take for example, Hurricane Isabel. At its worse, Hurricane Isabel disrupted electric service to more than 850,000 U.S. customers (Brown, 2003). Connective Power Delivery had a crisis communications plan in place, which management immediately activated, resulting in regularly timed media briefings, daily press releases, public response lines and an internal communications strategy for all staff, even reaching the crews in the field (Brown, 2003). This is a lesson in how good planning can and does work during the worst of times.

While numerous studies on issues related to various forms of crisis such as terrorism, hunger, and HIV/AIDS have been undertaken, comprehensive and continuous research in the area of fuel siphoning crisis in the specific context of Kenya has been rather limited or not researched at all. This study aims to address the question about proper crisis communication related to fuel siphoning fires. It is crucial to gain a thorough understanding of why we keep on having a recurrence of this crisis and the kind of crisis communication employed to minimize or even stop the threats related to fuel siphoning, so that better and even more improved measures can be taken to tackle this particular crisis.

2.   STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Effective Crisis Communication includes communications that not only alleviates or eliminate the crisis, but also can sometimes bring the organization a more positive reputation than before the crisis (Fearn-Banks 1996). Coombs (2005b) claims that crisis communication is the lifeblood of the entire Crisis Management effort and plays a vital role in all stages of Crisis Management. Crisis communication strategies represent the actual responses the organization uses to address the crisis and have both verbal and nonverbal aspects. Different crises can necessitate the use of different communication strategies as well as an emphasis on different stakeholders (Coombs 1999b) hence, it should be no surprise that identifying and carrying out a series of communication strategies is essential for effective Crisis Management (Barton 2001).

If crisis communication is not done effectively prior to, during and after a crisis, the destruction of infrastructure and the erosion of livelihoods are direct outcomes. These losses may setback social investments aiming to ameliorate poverty and hunger, provide access to education, health services, safe housing, drinking water and sanitation, or to protect the environment as well as the economic investments that provide employment and income (United Nation Development Programme global report, 2004). Many countries have not been able to carry out effective crisis communication for example Kenya has faced some rough times due to lack of proper crisis communication for instance even before the announcement of the presidential results of 2007, 6 provinces in Kenya, had begun demonstration and destruction of properties with claims that election was being stolen. Destructions grew to a higher level that claimed lives of more than 1,300 Kenyans according to reports. Some tribes evicted some particular tribes which were assumed were of the rivalry group (Paul, 2011).

Despite the Kenyan government putting up measures to avert various crises such as fuel siphoning fires experienced in the country, it is important to note that the government has always taken a reactive measure as opposed to proactive one when it comes to dealing with crisis, and hence as a country we always find ourselves facing the same crisis over and over again. This study will therefore seek to look at factors that continuously lead to such recurrence. Since it is crucial to gain a thorough understanding of why we keep on having a recurrence of this crisis and the kind of crisis communication employed to minimize or even stop the threats related to fuel siphoning, so that better and even more improved measures can be taken to tackle this particular crisis.

3.   OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study focused on the following objectives:

i)   To explore crisis situations impacting crisis response strategies in Kenya.
ii)   To examine the communication response strategies used in crisis situations in Kenya.
iii)   To analyze the forces within the organization impacting effective crisis communication in Kenya.

Conceptual Framework:

The conceptual framework of this study was based on the three independent variables that are presumed to affect effective crisis communication in Nairobi
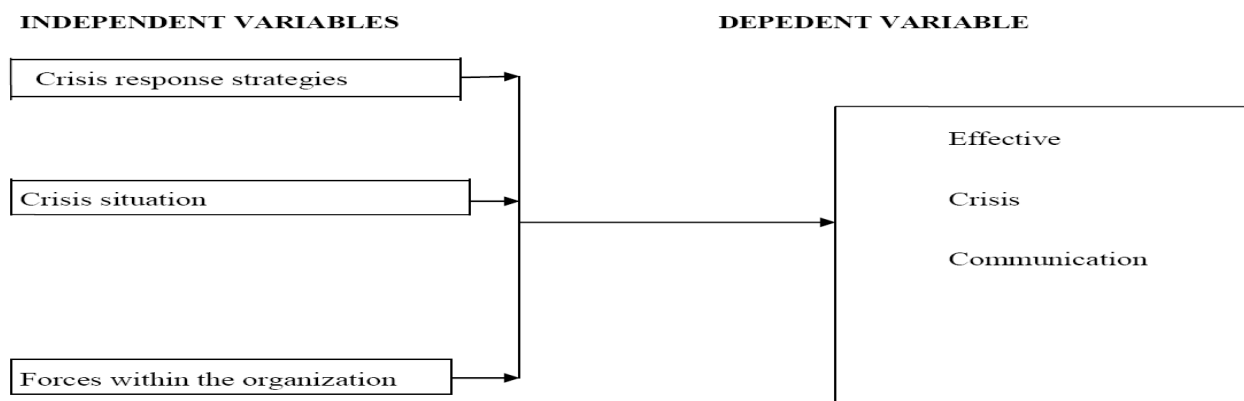
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Literature Review:

Crises are no longer rare, random or peripheral, but have become an inevitable and natural feature of our everyday lives and an integral feature of the new information/systems age. Hardly a day goes by without the occurrence of a new crisis, or the unfolding and "dragging on" of old ones (Mitroff and Anagnos, 2001). The world has recently witnessed a severe increase in **crises** of all kinds. It is literally crisis du jour, or the "crisis of the day". Major crises can happen anywhere, anytime and to anyone (Mitroff and Anagnos, 2001). No company, no matter how financially successful, powerful or reputable, is immune to crises (Regester and Larkin 2005). Crises are threats that actually do or have the potential to severely damage an organization (Coombs 1999b).

Crisis Communication Strategies:

Organizational crisis communications focuses on how individuals or groups within an organization communicate with persons, organizations, or groups external to the organization dealing with a crisis (Infante *et al* 1997).

Organizational pre-crisis communications:

Organizations must operate under the assumption that a crisis will hit the organization. Once this realization is understood, organizations can proactively implement plans and strategies before crises, which can help when a crisis inevitably strikes the organization (Dougherty, 1992). In the case of Sinai crisis, the question that arises is whether the government had any pre-crisis communication and if it had what measures did it take. In 2009 journalist John Ngirachu wrote for the local newspaper *Daily Nation* and reported that the slums in Sinai being located so near to the pipeline were a disaster waiting to happen. The permanent secretary to the Ministry of Energy, Patrick Nyoike, had asked the KPC to refurbish the pipelines but it was reported that the Ministry of Finance declined to give funds for the repair.

Organizational communications during a crisis:

As previously stated a key element in the definition of a crisis is that it is a negative event affecting an organization. Once the public is aware of a crisis affecting an organization the organization must do something about the negative image (Dougherty, 1992). People tend to make judgments about the causes of a crisis hence the need for the organization to act. Organizational communications during a crisis are composed of crisis response strategies that use messages to repair the organization's image (Dougherty, 1992). In relation to communication strategies during a crisis seven critical dimensions of crisis communication management are considered: Operations, Victims, Trust/credibility, Behavior, Professional expectations, Ethics and Lessons learned (Lukaszeweski, 1999).

Organizational forces in crisis communication:

Organizational change means any change that occurs in the work environment. The change could be minor of major. Usually Organizational change re-aligns organizational systems and deal with the factors prevailing in the external environment of an organization. Sometimes, a change is effected to revamp the internal systems of the organization. Organizational change can be described as a situation which emerge due to some management decisions that have an effect on employees. **What are the forces prompting change?** The forces prompting change can be categorized as, external change forces and internal change forces. External forces The forces compels from outside the organization, (on which organization normally have no or minimal control) are termed as *External Forces*. The external forces effecting communication are: Technological developments: Nowadays most of the organizations use technology as a means to improve productivity and market competitiveness. Hence, to retain and advance in competitive market, it is very important for organizations to keep themselves update according to the technological advancements, which are taking place at very fast rate. **Competitive environment:** The emerging global economy has the changed the style of business. Now the market competitors are not from only contiguous area but from throughout the world. This compels every business house to retain quality, lower prices, client satisfaction, etc; to sustain. **Social and political pressure** The needs, values and priorities of customers and political circumstances are unstable. Managers need to adjust their management styles to meet these values and needs. Internal change forces the forces compel from inside the organization, (basically under the organization control) are called *Internal Change Forces*. The Internal forces effecting change are: **Inter-relationship:** Any organization cannot progress without the commitment and dedication of its employees. Hence their perceptions, about individual and organizational needs should be considered important. Dissatisfaction among employees regarding about the working conditions and individual and organizational needs may lead to conflict between management and employees. Excessive interpersonal conflict is often a clear sign that change is needed.

4.   METHODOLOGY

The study used exploratory research design. This is a type of research is conducted for a problem that has not been clearly defined and often relies on secondary research such as reviewing available literature and/or data, or qualitative approaches such as informal discussions with target group, and more formal approaches through questionnaires, in-depth interviews, focus groups, projective methods, case studies or pilot studies.

The study population was strictly both men and women of 18 years and above, residents of Sinai community living along the pipeline. According to Calvary Community Center in Mukuru Sinai slums, Sinai village has a population of about 100,000 people of which 99% are extremely poor. The research focused on Sinai because there was a major fuel disaster in this area related to fuel siphoning fire in the near past and so the population there was best suited to respond.

A cross sectional design was used in this study. Various samples were collected across the village at points that were randomly selected. Simple random sampling was used to get the various sites of sample collection through balloting where various sites were chosen for sample collection based on the distance and direction where they were situated from the area where the Sinai fire occurred. This ensured that the whole area was covered.

Since the population to study was big the sample size was adjusted using the following formula (Israel, 2009)

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e^2)} \quad , \quad n = \frac{350}{1+350(0.05^2)} \quad = \quad 187$$

Where: n = sample size, N = Population size, e = precision at 95% confidence level and P= 0.05.

A total of 187 population sample was therefore used for the study.

When conducting the research, the researcher used both primary and secondary information. The primary study used questionnaires; open ended and closed ended questions were used to provide a list of possible answers. The questionnaires administered to Sinai residents were standard for all residents.

Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods were used. Data entry management and preliminary summaries such as sums and percentages were done in Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet. This is because the researcher used close and open-ended questions in the questionnaire. The data and analysis was presented through graphs.

5.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

A total of 187 questionnaires were distributed to the respondents and all questionnaires were filled. The contributing factor behind full response was due to self-administration of the questionnaires and support from the youth leaders in the Sinai slum area.

One of the objectives of the study was to determine the communication challenges that lead to the recurrence of fuel siphoning fire. 73% of the respondents agreed that the location of Sinai slum makes communication difficult, whereas 27% did not share the same views. 27% of the respondents felt that people collaborated with what was being communicated to them concerning fuel siphoning, whereas 73% felt people did not collaborate fully with authorities before, during and after the Sinai crisis. 37% felt people did not collaborate due to lack of interest, 16% felt that it was due to lack of trust, 47% felt that it was due to selfish interest. 11% claimed to have never received information, 54% admitted to receiving information in the near past, while 36% could not remember. 15% were reserved towards information given concerning fuel siphoning, 46% positvely welcomed the information, whereas 40% were opposed.

With respect to communication strategies used in crisis scenarios in Kenya. 54% of the respondents denied any government involvement to avert the sinai fire, 11% percent acknoledged that the government was involved, and 36% were not sure if the government was involved. 18% were convinced with measures taken to avert the crisis while 82% were not at all convinced with the measures taken. 29% felt it is because there were no arrests being made of the culprits who siphon fuel, 36% felt because there are no fines to the culprits, 35% felt because there is a continuous fuel leak 46% agreed to receiving communication while 54 % denied receiving any communication. Only 18% were satisfied while 82% were not satisfied 6% felt the government blamed itself for what happened in Sinai, 54% felt the government blamed the residents, and 40% felt the government blamed the Kenya Pipe Line. 8% of the respondents were impressed with how the government dealt with the victims whereas 93% felt otherwise. 20% felt the government's actions were honest, whereas 80% felt otherwise. Only 21% of the respondents were contented with the compensation, while 79% were not. 8% of the

respondents felt the government apologized, and 93% felt the government never apologized. 80% felt that no communication measures have to communicate isues related to fuel siponing while 20% agreed to communication on fuel siphoning. 57% agreed for having witnessed counseling whereas 43% denied having received counseling.

Under social media it was realized that 62% of the respondents were connected to social networks, whereas 11% were not connected. 75% of respondents admitted that sending of information through social network is fast, 5% strongly denied and 20% didn't know. 77% of the respondents felt that social media can actually help in averting a crisis, 11% strongly felt it cannot help and 12% did not know. 45% of the reapsondents felt that social media could have been used to come up with meaning full debates concerning fuel siphonig, 28% felt it could a useful tool in educating the public against fuel siphoning, 21% thought it could be a useful tool to report culprits of fuel siphoning and only 5% were not sure of how social media can be used.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The study was designed to examine the factors affecting crisis communication in Nairobi County in Kenya. The specific objectives were; to explore communication challenges that hinder effective crisis communication, examine the communication strategies used in crisis situations in Kenya and to analyze the role of social media as a tool in crisis communication in Kenya.

The study concludes that crisis communication has no impact to fuel siphoning in Kenya. Despite the large percentage of connected to social networks, social networks are not being employed to curb crises. Communication is made difficult due to geographical locations of some places. Attitudes of the people being communicated to is also a hindrance to effective communications.

Crisis communication strategies being employed is still wanting, there is minimal involvement from the government side and more involvement during a crisis, making it a reactive other than a proactive government when it comes to dealing with a crisis.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations were derived. New and accessible communication platforms and technologies, such as blogs, social networking sites, Really Simply Syndication (RSS) feeds, and other formats, have the potential to reach more people with more relevant messages than ever before. Therefore the **g**overnment and the relevant parties must improve their understanding of how to use social media to support their crisis communications strategies.

The relative authorities (the government) should find a much better way tackling people's attitudes and perceptions towards communications that are of benefit to them. Organizing awareness drives on fuel siphoning regularly and not only when a tragedy occurs will help empower citizens to make sound judgments in matters related to fuel siphoning.

Heavy penalties to relevant companies on ignorance and carelessness leading to fuel fire should be imposed to make them more careful and more concerned to protecting the ordinary citizens, this should also apply to those found siphoning fuel.

The government should take a more proactive position as opposed to reactive position when it comes to matters concerning fuel siphoning. This can only be done if the government will decide to take appropriate measures beforehand in averting reckless fuel fire, such as forced evacuation with alternative settlement to the residents of Sinai slum who live along the pipe line. This can also be done in identifying fuel siphoning prone areas and the government to fund education to the people around to educate them against fuel siphoning.

8. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In this study the area of focus was only limited to the residents of Sinai slums, who offered information on the effectiveness of crisis communication as far as fuel siphoning is concerning. There is also need to look at other areas directly or indirectly involved in contributing towards or aversion of fuel fire crisis. There is needed to look at the government entities in charge of fuel and energy in Kenya, Kenya pipeline, Red Cross, and even hospitals, because they tend to handle the victims and hear their side of the story.

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