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The Journal of Strategic Public Relations and Communication (JSPRC) is a peer-reviewed publication that seeks to spotlight strategic perspectives in public relations and communication. It will feature interdisciplinary research and case studies highlighting the evolving dynamics of public relations in the digital age, corporate communications, crisis management, stakeholder engagement, and related fields.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Comrade Ini Ememobong
Honourable Commissioner,
Ministry of Special Duties & Ibom Deep Seaport,
Akwa Ibom State.

CP Baba M. Azare, fsi
Commissioner of Police,
Nigeria Police Force, Akwa Ibom State Command.

Emmanuel Omula, Ph.D
Department of Mass Communication,
Topfaith University, Mkpatak, Essien Udim,
Akwa Ibom State.

Elder Manasseh Umoette
Federal Polytechnic, Ukana, Akwa Ibom State.

Bridget Chiedu Onochie, Ph.D
Institute of Strategic and Development Communication (ISDEVCOM),
Nasarawa State University, Keffi.

Achilleus-Chud Uchegbu
Institute of Strategic and Development Communication (ISDEVCOM),
Nasarawa State University, Keffi.

Okon E. Udoyo, Ph.D
Department of Mass Communication,
University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State.

Kufre J. George
Department of Mass Communication,
Heritage Polytechnic, Ikot Udota, Eket, Akwa Ibom State.

Samuel A. Etifit
Department of Mass Communication,
Heritage Polytechnic, Ikot Udota, Eket, Akwa Ibom State.

Christian U. Egeh
Department of Mass Communication,
Federal Polytechnic, Oko, Anambra State.

Idongesit M. Ashameri, Ph.D
Daily Independent Newspaper, and VirValCher Nig. Limited.

Idorenyin Ekanem
Faculty of Communication and Media Studies,
University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State.

George N. Brown
Department of Mass Communication,
Heritage Polytechnic, Ikot Udota, Eket, Akwa Ibom State.

Ifeanyi M. Nwokeocha
Department of Journalism and Media Studies,
Federal University, Utuoke, Bayelsa State.

Edet Abia, Ph.D
Department of Journalism and Media Studies,
Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua, Ikot Ekpene.

Emem U. Okon, Ph.D
Department of Strategic Communication and Media Studies,
Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua, Ikot Ekpene.

Adekunle B. Ewaoyenikan
Akwa Ibom State University, Ikot Akpaden, Mkpat Enin.

Patrick D. Udo
Department of Journalism and Media Studies,
Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua, Ikot Ekpene.

Uduak M. Iwok, Ph.D
Department of Strategic Communication and Media Studies,
Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua, Ikot Ekpene.

Ifeanyi M. Nwokeocha
Department of Journalism and Media Studies,
Federal University, Otuoke, Bayelsa State.

Solomon S. Kwakfut
Department of Mass Communication,
University of Jos, Plateau State.

Esther G. Ntegwung
Department of Mass Communication,
Heritage Polytechnic, Ikot Udota, Eket, Akwa Ibom State.

Uwem A. Akpan
Department of Mass Communication,
Heritage Polytechnic, Ikot Udota, Eket, Akwa Ibom State.

George N. Brown
Department of Mass Communication,
Heritage Polytechnic, Ikot Udota, Eket, Akwa Ibom State.

Adebusuyi O. Adedotun
Department of Mass Communication,
Koladaisi University, Ibadan, Oyo State.

Akindutire S. Ayomide
Institute of Strategic and Development Communication,
Nasarawa State University, Keffi.

Aribisala T. Moyinoluwa
International Communication Association (ICA), Nigeria.

Godsgift E. Dada
Nigerian Armed Forces Resettlement Center, Lagos.

Ita Oyokunyi, Ph.D
Department of Advertising and Marketing Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media Studies,
University of Uyo, Uyo.

Daniel E. Eshett, Ph.D
Dean, School of Communication Arts,
Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua, Ikot Ekpene.

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Citizen Engagement Through Direct Feedback: A Case Study of the Akwa Ibom Info Hotline as a Strategic Public Relations Tool

Ini Ememobong

Ministry of Special Duties & Ibom Deep Seaport, Akwa Ibom State.

Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of the Akwa Ibom State Information Hotline (070000000001) as a citizen engagement tool and public relations strategy. Implemented in 2020 to address security challenges and enhance government-citizen communication, the hotline represents a shift from traditional one-way government communication to dialogic engagement. Using a mixed-methods approach analyzing 3,312 calls between December 2020 and December 2024, this research evaluates the hotline's effectiveness through the lens of Dialogic Public Relations Theory and Public Sector Communication and Citizen Engagement Theory. Findings reveal that while the hotline successfully facilitated citizen participation in governance and improved emergency response, limitations including the long number format, lack of toll-free access, and operational challenges hindered optimal effectiveness. This case study contributes to the growing literature on technology-enabled citizen engagement mechanisms in governance and recommends expanding outreach to raise awareness of the hotline, especially among rural and underserved populations. Additionally, developing an online platform to complement the hotline would further enhance citizen engagement and streamline feedback collection.

Keywords: Citizen engagement, direct feedback, Akwa Ibom Information Hotline, public sector communication, governance.

Introduction

The need for citizen engagement has been an important element of governance concern in all types of public government, from ancient to contemporary times. Democracy, defined by Abraham Lincoln in his 1863 Gettysburg Address, as a government of the people, for the people, and by the people" (Held, 2006), places a higher premium on citizens' engagement because every government project, programme, or policy is expected to have the acceptance of the citizens. This acceptance can best be obtained through citizens' engagement programmes which occur at different levels through different channels like direct contact, virtual platforms, elite engagement, grassroots sensitization, etc.

Government communication for decades has deployed and relied on a one-way communication flow that it communicated to the citizens without obtaining concomitant feedback. Relying on this one-way communication structure made it impossible for the government to read the minds of the citizens on subjects except when letters of disapproval were sent in, or protests undertaken, by which time a full-blown conflict may have arisen.

In a bid to achieve better outcomes using citizen engagement, scholars and practitioners have proposed the use of different approaches like town hall meetings, call-in media shows door-to-door engagements, and other feedback channels. In its determination to provide an effective feedback mechanism, the Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Information 2020 created a hotline (070000000001) through which citizens could reach the government at any time, on any issue.

This article critically analyses the effectiveness of the information hotline as a feedback avenue and public relations strategy for the state government. It examines the finer details of the hotline's operations, highlighting its attainments and challenges. The article seeks to answer the research question: In what ways was the information hotline effective as a feedback mechanism and a strategic public relations tool?

Conceptual Clarification

Citizen Engagement
Citizen engagement is a multifaceted process that involves the active participation of the public in political and governmental decision-making. It is a key component of democratic governance; it gives backing to the role of citizens in shaping public policies and ensuring accountability. Engagement mechanisms such as public consultations, town hall meetings, social media interactions, and feedback hotlines offer platforms for citizens to communicate with government bodies. These mechanisms not only allow individuals to voice their concerns but also enable the government to gather insights from the public, thus improving transparency and fostering a participatory governance model (Taylor, 2018). Citizen engagement, when done effectively, strengthens the relationship between the government and its people, enhancing trust and ensuring that public policies align with the needs and priorities of the population.

Direct Feedback
Direct feedback, a core element of citizen engagement, involves the direct transmission of citizen concerns, opinions, and suggestions to government authorities. Unlike indirect forms of feedback, such as surveys or public opinion polls, direct feedback is a more immediate and personal form of communication that fosters a direct line of communication between citizens and their government. It can occur through multiple channels, including feedback forms, hotlines, emails, and social media platforms. The value of direct feedback lies in its ability to inform government decisions, improve the efficiency of public services, and ensure that government actions are aligned with public needs. Moreover, this feedback mechanism is essential for enhancing government accountability, as it offers citizens a way to hold public officials and institutions responsible for their actions and decisions (Smith & Wesson, 2020). Direct feedback is also an essential tool for identifying gaps in public services and addressing emerging issues in real time, making it a crucial aspect of responsive governance.

Akwa Ibom Information Hotline
The Akwa Ibom Information Hotline serves as a direct communication channel between the citizens of Akwa Ibom State and their government. Established as a part of the government's

efforts to promote transparency and improve service delivery, the hotline provides citizens with a platform to report issues, ask questions, and offer feedback regarding government services. It is an invaluable tool for promoting government responsiveness, as it allows for the rapid identification of public concerns and facilitates timely interventions. In addition to being a communication tool, the hotline also fosters an environment of accountability by allowing the government to respond directly to citizen queries and grievances. This engagement tool plays a significant role in enhancing the relationship between the state government and its citizens, creating a more inclusive decision-making process and empowering the public to participate in governance (Barker, 2019). Furthermore, the hotline serves as a critical mechanism for ensuring that public sector initiatives are aligned with the needs and expectations of the community, making it an important element of effective public sector communication.

History and Operation of the Akwa Ibom State Info Hotline

The Ministry of Information and Strategy of Akwa Ibom State created a hotline (070000000001) in 2020 to serve as a channel for feedback and information from the public. This was specifically necessitated by the need to obtain information from citizens to help curb a security challenge that existed at that time. Policemen and other security operatives were being attacked, killed, and their arms stolen by some non-state actors who had exerted control over a certain area of the state. Additionally, there was an increase in other acts of insecurity during the last quarter of the year, and the state was preparing to hold the Christmas Village, where thousands of visitors thronged for relaxation and commercial activities. The ministry, as part of its strategic communication, needed to create a channel for citizens who observe anything untoward to report for action.

The ministry purchased a phone number from all the available mobile telephony service providers and connected them to the hotline, 070000000001, which was selected for ease of remembrance. To popularize the hotline, intensive sensitization campaigns were mounted on all traditional and new media platforms including the airing of jingles on the radio, printing and circulation of fliers, social media post sponsorship, etc. The staff to be used were employed and trained for two weeks and provided with phones. The security services provided contact persons to be reached with information requiring action. The staff undertook a test run to acquaint themselves with the system and its operation. They were assessed on their tone, elicitation techniques, knowledge of referral points, etc.

Information from the hotline log as contained in the quarterly report submitted to the government reveals that the total number of calls received between December 2020 and December 2024 was 3,300. A disaggregation of the calls shows that 1,010 were security-related, 390 were seeking financial assistance, 420 were job search and employment-related, 200 just called to check if the hotline was functional, 280 were education-related, 130 were inquiries on COVID-19 and health, 310 were about infrastructure, while 370 were about business and other social supports. Furthermore, feedback freely offered by the callers indicates that the hotline had achieved enhanced public engagement, prompt response mechanism to public concerns, data elicitation platform for government, and enhanced sense of transparency.

The hotline as a channel for dialogic communication was used to obtain both inputs and feedback from citizens on the entirety of government business. People freely called or texted in to either inform the government of the needs of their communities or to react to policies, projects, or programmes undertaken by the state government. When calls were received, the call agent sorted them into the relevant cluster and then reached out to the agency involved. For example, if it was a security call reporting a robbery, the call agent would immediately call the police control room and relay the message to them. One notable example was when a caller reported that a suspected thief was to be burned on Atiku Abubakar Way; the call agent immediately alerted the police, who swiftly arrived at the locus criminis, just after petrol had been poured on the suspect but before he was set on fire. The call center is credited with many successes, especially in aiding the fight against crime and criminals in Akwa Ibom, most of which cannot be discussed in detail because of security implications. The security agencies have offered feedback on the efficacy of the hotline as a veritable means of intelligence gathering and crime prevention. On the receiving end, citizens expressed happiness over the prompt response of government to some of the issues reported.

On the other hand, it must be admitted that the system was not without setbacks; it had its flaws, chief among them being the length of the number. The 11-digit number was too long for the purpose desired. It was not easily memorable, especially to the local population. Despite the use of many zeros to make it memorable, feedback revealed that except for those who saved the number, very few people tried to memorize it, which is what an emergency or info line should be. Obviously, a three or four-digit number would have been better.

Additionally, the line was not toll-free. A toll-free line would have allowed those who are not financially capable, or who do not have call credits but have a need to reach the government, to still do so. The fact that people had to spend money to volunteer information was discouraging, while others who had information did not have the money to purchase call credits for their phones. Reactions gleaned from feedback undertaken by the operating ministry indicated that much information was lost because of this particular fact. This is in addition to the poor network performance and charged dropped calls by network providers.

Furthermore, the dual challenge of not having a dedicated office and insufficient staff made effective monitoring difficult. Call agents could, for example, switch off the phone in their possession, knowing that the system would divert calls coming to their line to the available lines that were on and close by, without the central call manager knowing. If they were working from an office, preferably in shifts, monitoring would have been easier and more effective.

Review of Related Literature
Citizen Engagement and Feedback Mechanisms A growing body of literature highlights the importance of citizen engagement and direct feedback in public administration. Studies have shown that feedback mechanisms, such as government hotlines and online platforms, are vital in enhancing government accountability and transparency (Smith, 2019).

Digital Platforms for Citizen Engagement Research by Jones (2020) emphasizes that direct feedback not only informs decision-making but also builds trust between the public and the government. The research by Clark and Gergen (2018) points to the growing importance of digital platforms in the political process, noting that they not only provide governments with immediate access to public sentiment but also facilitate a two-way communication channel that is essential in contemporary democratic practices. In particular, online platforms allow citizens to engage with their government beyond traditional methods, ensuring that feedback mechanisms are more accessible and inclusive. This digital shift has become even more crucial in times of crisis, as seen in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where public health hotlines and online platforms were essential for disseminating information and addressing citizens' concerns.

Effectiveness of Hotlines: The use of hotlines, specifically, has been identified as an effective strategy for increasing citizen-government communication (Doyle, 2021). However, challenges remain, including ensuring accessibility, addressing issues raised by citizens, and maintaining the privacy of feedback (Taylor, 2018).

Kim & Lee (2007) explored how public participation in government programmes is influenced by perceived openness and accessibility of communication channels. In their study on citizen-government interaction, they found that people are more likely to engage with public institutions when they feel their voices are heard and can lead to meaningful action. This resonates strongly with initiatives like the Akwa Ibom Info Hotline, which symbolizes accessibility and transparency in governance. Their findings suggest that when government communication systems are perceived as responsive and citizen-oriented, trust in public institutions increases. The Info Hotline, serving as a strategic PR tool, becomes not just a communication medium but also a mechanism for participatory governance—allowing citizens to contribute directly to shaping policy outcomes.

Macnamara (2012) highlighted the evolution of public communication from traditional broadcast methods to more dialogic, participatory approaches in government-citizen relations. He argues for the importance of listening in strategic communication, where public relations is seen as a two-way street, not merely about pushing information. Platforms like the Akwa Ibom Info Hotline are prime examples of such evolution, designed to listen as much as to inform. Macnamara identifies government hotlines as part of the broader movement toward 'organisational listening,' where institutions systematically capture and act on stakeholder input. The hotline's ability to record, categorize, and respond to citizen calls demonstrates a shift in public sector PR from monologue to meaningful dialogue—a hallmark of strategic and ethical communication.

Eberle and Stalder (2017) investigated how digital feedback tools impact democratic engagement in local governance. Their study showed that communication technologies that allow real-time citizen input significantly enhance participatory governance and enable public authorities to react promptly to societal needs. This underscores the relevance of the Info Hotline as not just a crisis-response tool but a continuous feedback mechanism that supports active citizenship. They also emphasized that when feedback systems are

integrated with decision-making processes, citizens perceive a stronger sense of agency. For Akwa Ibom State, the hotline serves this function by transforming public relations into a participatory and collaborative endeavour, where government responsiveness translates into increased civic trust and political efficacy.

Okorie and Oyedemi (2019) examined the role of mobile platforms in promoting civic engagement and government accountability. Their study revealed that mobile communication channels, such as SMS hotlines and call centers, play a vital role in enhancing transparency, especially in areas with limited access to formal governance infrastructure. The Akwa Ibom Info Hotline fits into this paradigm as a bridge between government and underserved communities.

They further noted that public relations in Nigeria is evolving beyond media campaigns to include ICT-based citizen engagement strategies. Through their research, they concluded that when governments use technology to open lines of communication, they not only improve service delivery but also legitimize public institutions in the eyes of citizens.

Theoretical Framework

Dialogic Public Relations Theory

This theory emphasises dialogue, as opposed to monologue in public communication. The preference for a two-way or a personalised communication model was advanced by Martin Buber in 1970, where he provided the underpinning foundation for dialogic communication. This form of communication involves a direct, mutual engagement between the parties, where each party is recognised and engaged and not treated as a means to an end (Kent, 2017). Buber views relationships as the foundation and reason for communication (Asakaviciute & Valatka, 2020), without which the essence of communication is lost. This theory criticizes the use of press releases and other forms of communication that are one-sided, which in his estimation treats the decoder of the message as 'it', instead of 'thou' (Asakaviciute & Valatka, 2020; Chen et al., 2020). This proposition situates dialogue as an existential demand (Mabotja & Mkhomazi, 2024), tying it to relation in an inseparable way, and highlights two pathways of communication being "authentic-dialogic existentialist being and inauthentic-monologic existentialist being" (Mabotja & Mkhomazi, 2024, p. 53). In application, the respect and regard that the encoder has for the decoder can be gleaned from the manner of communication deployed; if dialogic, it would suggest that the encoder has respect for the other person's opinion and seeks to engage, while if the communication uses the monologic approach, it would mean that the opinion of the other person does not matter or is not sought.

Contemporarily, with the increasing dependence of humans on technology for many aspects of their existence, Kent and Taylor have applied technology to the dialogic communication theory, seeking to achieve negotiated interface among persons where ideas and opinions are shared, which is clearly different from just disseminating information to people without further engagement. This position pursues the building of relationships through open dialogue in a two-way approach, relying on the technology of the internet (Kent & Taylor,

1998; Kent, 2017; Kent, 2023). Their advocacy is apt because people view technology as a vehicle of communication and simply transport their traditional approach to communication to the virtual space, validating the call for the dialogic approach. Whether it is through formal or social e-media platforms, the approach to information conveyance can still be either one-way (broadcast, dissemination) or two-way (dialogue, engagement).

Public Sector Communication and Citizen Engagement Theory

This theory presents a framework that examines how government and its agencies communicate with citizens in the governance process. This theory is founded on some key concepts like bi-directional communication, deliberative democracy, trust building, partnership, etc. (Luoma-aho *et al.,* 2020; Vagena & Sneiders, 2022). A comprehensive framework that examines the evolving relationship between citizens and public organisations is the focus of this theory, as it posits that the traditional one-way communication approach is grossly insufficient to adequately undertake contemporary governance, which requires the building of a healthy dose of acceptance and trust (Luoma-aho *et al.,* 2020). Theory and practice agree that the existence of a communication gap threatens the cordial relationship between government and the governed. And this threat is as big and consequential as the size of the gap. This theory advocates the establishment of an engaging and meaningful relationship between government entities and the public, where the people are seen as co-creators of information, rather than being mere receivers of information.

To achieve this, different media must be deployed to reach the people almost simultaneously. Reliance on technology as a means of public engagement is seriously supported and encouraged. It clearly advocates for interactive communication, in a bi-directional manner rather than the one-directional mode. This is intended to give citizens an opportunity to contribute their thoughts and ideas to the process of governance.

Methodology

This study employed a case study approach, focusing on the Akwa Ibom Info Hotline as a strategic public relations tool for citizen engagement.

In-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including officials responsible for managing the hotline. Relevant documents, such as reports and policies related to the hotline, were analysed to provide context and background information.

Qualitative analysis was done whereby interview data were analysed thematically to gain insights into citizens' experiences and perceptions.

This research relied on primary data from the comprehensive call log maintained by the Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Information from December 2020 to December 2024. This log specifically recorded:
  (i)   Total number of calls received.
  (ii)   Call categorization by issue type
  (iii)   Actions taken in response to calls

(iv)   Response times
(v)   Follow-up activities

Additionally, quarterly reports submitted to the state government by the Ministry of Information were analyzed to identify patterns, trends, and institutional responses to the information received through the hotline.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Call Volume and Distribution

Between December 2020 and December 2024, the Akwa Ibom State Information Hotline received a total of 3,312 calls. Figure 1 presents the categorical distribution of these calls.

Figure 1: Distribution of Calls by Category (December 2020 - December 2024)

Category	Number of Calls
Security-related	1,022
Financial assistance	390
Job search/employment	420
Functionality check	200
Education-related	280
COVID-19/health inquiries	130
Infrastructure	310
Business/social support	370
Other	190
Total	**3,312**

The data reveal that security-related concerns constituted the largest category of calls followed by employment-related inquiries and requests for financial assistance. This distribution reflects the primary concerns of citizens during the period under study and aligns with the initial security-focused purpose of the hotline's establishment.

The data was classified into nine thematic areas: security-related issues, financial assistance, job search/employment, functionality checks, education, COVID-19/health inquiries, infrastructure, business/social support, and other miscellaneous concerns. Security-related calls accounted for the highest number, totalling 1,022, representing 30.9% of all calls received. This aligns with the main intent of the hotline as a security intervention medium. Employment-related calls (12.7%) and financial assistance requests (11.8%) followed closely, indicating the economic situation of the citizens at that time.

Further analysis revealed a consistent pattern in call volumes, with spikes in security-related calls during periods of heightened insecurity and an upsurge in health-related calls following the COVID-19 pandemic prevalent at that time. Additionally, calls categorized under "functionality checks" (200 calls, or 6.0%) suggested ongoing public curiosity and trust

deficit about the availability and responsiveness of a government-owned and managed hotline.

Discussion of Findings

The data from the Akwa Ibom State Information Hotline between December 2020 and December 2024 offers significant insight into public concerns and engagement patterns with government communication platforms during this period. The total of 3,312 calls distributed across nine thematic categories reflects a varied landscape of citizen needs, anxieties, and interests.

1. Security Concerns as a Dominant Issue; Security-related calls constituted the highest number (1,022 calls or 30.9%), which underscores the critical importance of safety and security in the lives of Akwa Ibom residents. This trend validates the original purpose of the hotline, which was primarily to function as a security feedback and response tool. The high volume of such calls, including observable spikes during periods of heightened insecurity, illustrates a strong reliance on the hotline for immediate and direct communication with authorities during crises.

2. Economic Hardship and Employment Concerns: The second and third most frequent categories—job search/employment (420 calls or 12.7%) and financial assistance (390 calls or 11.8%)—reveal the socio-economic pressures faced by citizens during this period. These figures highlight the lingering effects of economic downturns, inflation, and possibly the residual impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on livelihoods. That the citizens turned to a government hotline for economic relief and job-related inquiries suggests both desperation and hope in governmental support structures.

3. Trust and System Functionality: Calls categorized under "functionality checks" (200 calls or 6.0%) point to a perceptible scepticism regarding the operational capacity of the hotline. This may reflect a historical mistrust in public service efficiency or a genuine desire to verify the responsiveness of a new government initiative. The presence of such calls implies that building trust in public systems requires not just establishing infrastructure, but consistent, transparent communication and service delivery.

4. Health and Education Inquiries: While COVID-19/health-related inquiries (130 calls or 3.9%) and education-related calls (280 calls or 8.5%) were lower in volume, they still represent significant thematic areas, especially during and after the pandemic era. The relatively low number of health-related calls might suggest either a preference for health-specific platforms or limited awareness that the hotline could address such concerns.

5. Infrastructure and Social Support: Calls relating to infrastructure (310 calls or 9.4%) and business/social support (370 calls or 11.2%) emphasize the continued demand for improved public amenities and socio-economic interventions. These concerns reflect a public that is engaged not only in immediate survival needs but also in broader developmental and societal well-being.

6. Miscellaneous Needs: The "other" category (190 calls or 5.7%) suggests a range of citizen concerns that fell outside predefined categories, further emphasizing the need for flexible, adaptive government communication channels that can accommodate emerging issues. The data demonstrates that the Akwa Ibom State Information Hotline served as a vital communication tool between the government and its citizens, addressing a broad spectrum of needs—security, economic survival, social welfare, and public service delivery. The findings highlight the need for sustained investment in responsive communication infrastructure, trust-building through reliable service, and expansion of the hotline's capabilities to cover a wider array of public concerns.

Limitations

This study encountered some limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, while the call log data provided valuable insights into usage patterns, the absence of comparative data from similar hotlines in other regions or states limits our ability to benchmark the Akwa Ibom Info Hotline's effectiveness against established standards or practices. This was so because the few hotlines in other parts of the country are part of a full command and control center, unlike that of Akwa Ibom State, which is made up of normal phone lines. Such comparative analysis would have contextualized our findings within broader patterns of citizen engagement tool deployment in developing regions.

Second, the study relied primarily on quantitative call data and institutional reports, with limited opportunity for qualitative follow-up with callers after their concerns were addressed. This limitation prevented a comprehensive assessment of citizen satisfaction and post-intervention outcomes. While some feedback was obtained through voluntary comments, a systematic follow-up protocol would have yielded more reliable data on resolution effectiveness and citizen perception of government responsiveness.

Third, the hotline data inherently excludes perspectives from citizens who lacked access to telecommunications facilities, or who could not afford call charges, or who were unaware of the service. This limitation is particularly significant in rural areas with limited network coverage or among lower socioeconomic populations. Consequently, the findings may overrepresent the concerns of urban, more affluent, and technologically connected citizens.

Finally, the study period coincided with several extraordinary events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and specific security challenges, which may have influenced both the volume and nature of calls in ways that might not reflect typical citizen-government communication patterns during more stable periods.

Conclusion

The Akwa Ibom State Information Hotline represents a significant advancement in government-citizen communication infrastructure and demonstrates both the potential and challenges of technology-enabled citizen engagement mechanisms in developing contexts. This case study makes several important contributions to public relations and governance literature.

First, the implementation of the hotline confirms the efficacy of dialogic communication theory in governance even in a global south setting. By establishing a direct, bidirectional feedback channel, the state government transformed traditional one-way government communication into a more participatory model that empowered citizens to contribute meaningfully to governance processes. The security success stories documented through the hotline demonstrate that well-designed citizen engagement tools can yield tangible governance outcomes, particularly in crisis management and service delivery.

Second, findings revealed that technical considerations such as shorter memorability, toll-free access, and better operational management significantly impact utilisation and effectiveness. Future implementations should prioritise accessibility through shorter, preferably 3-digit, toll-free numbers and establish robust monitoring mechanisms to ensure improved service quality.

Third, this case study highlights the importance of institutional readiness and capacity for responsive governance. The effectiveness of citizen feedback mechanisms depends not only on the communication channel itself but also on the government's ability to process, prioritise, and act upon the information received. The coordinated response system established between the call center and security agencies demonstrates how information pathways can be optimized for rapid response when properly designed.

Future research should explore comparative analyses of different feedback mechanisms across multiple jurisdictions, examine the long-term impact of such initiatives on citizen trust-building and governance outcomes, and investigate how emerging technologies such as mobile application platforms and artificial intelligence might address the limitations identified in this study. As governments worldwide seek to strengthen democratic participation and improve service delivery, the lessons from the Akwa Ibom Information Hotline offer valuable guidance for designing more effective citizen engagement tools that bridge the communication gap between governments and the governed.

Recommendations
The study therefore recommends:
  (i)   **Increased Outreach:** Efforts should be made to increase awareness about the hotline, particularly among rural and underserved populations. Promotional Jingles and information on the hotline should be translated into the major local languages spoken within the state.
  (ii) **Improvement in Response Times:** The government should invest in resources and staff to shorten response times and improve the resolution rate of reported issues.
  (iii) **Toll-free access:** The lines should be toll-free to allow persons who do not have the financial wherewithal to pay for the call to volunteer information. Their economic situation should not exclude them from participating in this strategic communication exercise.
  (iv) **Digital Integration:** Developing an online platform to complement the hotline could further increase citizen engagement and feedback collection.

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