

STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTION OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES OF STERLING GLOBAL RESOURCES LIMITED IN AKWA IBOM STATE

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Abstract

This study examined stakeholders' perception of Sterling Global Oil Resources Ltd's community relations and crisis management activities in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, with particular attention to awareness, interpretation, effectiveness, and long-term corporate-community relations. Anchored on Stakeholder Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory, the research adopted a survey design to capture community voices. A total of 383 respondents were sampled using a multi-stage approach from the population of the study. Data were collected through structured questionnaire and analysed using frequency distribution and weighted mean scores. The findings revealed moderate awareness of both community relations and crisis management initiatives, though visibility was uneven across sectors, with infrastructure projects more recognised than skills or environmental programmes. Interpretations of these initiatives reflected cautious approval, with stakeholders acknowledging certain benefits while questioning consistency and openness in corporate communication. Perceptions of effectiveness were mixed: while tangible contributions such as infrastructure and health projects were positively rated, critical areas such as employment creation, inclusivity in decision-making, and trust-building received negative evaluations. In crisis management, stakeholders acknowledged prompt responses, environmental restoration, and fairness, but rated compensation, trust enhancement and sustainability poorly. Overall, the study highlights a gap between visible interventions and deeper, intangible dimensions of corporate-community relations. The study recommends greater stakeholder participation, transparent communication, and fair compensation as pathways to strengthening sustainable corporate-community relationships.

Introduction

The idea that community relations constitutes a central pillar of organisational sustainability, particularly for companies operating in socio-economically sensitive environments. It reflects the systematic processes through which organisations engage with their host communities to build trust, foster collaboration, and mitigate potential conflicts. Far from being mere philanthropy or image management, community relations involve strategic interventions such as local employment schemes, educational support, healthcare initiatives, and infrastructure development. In practice, these initiatives seek to align corporate objectives with community expectations, thereby creating a mutually beneficial environment where both the organisation and the community can thrive. For example, in Nigeria, several oil companies have invested in community schools, vocational training programmes, and healthcare facilities, illustrating the practical manifestations of structured community engagement (Omotayo, 2022).

The importance of community relations becomes particularly evident when organisational operations intersect with local socio-political and environmental realities. Weak or neglected relations with host communities can escalate into disputes, protests, and operational disruptions, highlighting the fragile link between corporate initiatives and societal acceptance (Okafor, 2021). Poorly managed expectations, environmental degradation, or exclusion from decision-making processes can trigger conflicts that compromise both corporate and community welfare. These tensions underscore the inherent connection between community relations and crisis management: proactive engagement reduces the likelihood of crises, while neglect or misalignment can exacerbate vulnerabilities and heighten organisational risk which could result in crises (Ezeani&Uche, 2022).

Crises in organisations emerge in diverse forms, ranging from environmental disasters and operational failures to social unrest and reputational shocks. Within Nigeria's oil and gas sector, high-profile examples illustrate the consequences of inadequate engagement. The 2008 Shell oil spills in the Niger Delta led to community protests, international scrutiny, and multi-million-dollar litigation, while Total Nigeria's 2020 pipeline incident provoked environmental concerns and disrupted local livelihoods (Ite, Ibok, Ite, &Petters, 2020). These instances highlight that crises are not limited to operational mishaps; they also arise from breakdowns in trust and communication between companies and communities, reinforcing the need for strategic relational practices.

When crises are not effectively managed, their impacts multiply uncontrollably, thereby affecting not only financial performance but also stakeholder trust, operational continuity, and corporate legitimacy. Poorly handled incidents can provoke long-term grievances, legal sanctions, and reputational damage, often extending beyond the immediate organisational environment (Coombs, 2021). These challenges demonstrate that crisis management is not merely a reactive function but a proactive mechanism embedded within organisational culture and communication practices. It involves anticipating risks, preparing response strategies, and coordinating actions that mitigate both immediate and long-term consequences.

In practical terms, crisis management is grounded in structured planning, transparent communication, and timely responsiveness. Organisations that invest in scenario analysis, emergency response training, and stakeholder engagement frameworks are better positioned to contain the effects of crises (Smith, 2020). For instance, companies that maintain open channels of dialogue with local communities can quickly assess grievances, clarify misconceptions, and mobilise solutions before disputes escalate. The interplay between preemptive engagement and effective crisis response illustrates that crisis management is

inherently relational: the quality of existing interactions shapes how crises are perceived, interpreted, and resolved.

Within the contemporary oil and gas sector, the stakes for effective crisis management are magnified. Companies operate in high-risk environments where ecological sensitivity, local socio-political dynamics, and historical grievances intersect.

Understanding the nature of crises, and how they are perceived by affected stakeholders, is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions by organisations. Perception, in this sense, becomes the lens through which organisational efforts are judged, determining the credibility and legitimacy of corporate actions. Stakeholders' perceptions are shaped by the interplay between corporate initiatives, communication quality, and observable outcomes. Positive perceptions reinforce trust, cooperation, and social licence to operate, while negative perceptions can intensify grievances, fuel protests, and damage organisational reputation (Ezeani&Uche, 2022). For Sterling, examining stakeholder perception provides critical insights into the alignment between community relations strategies, crisis management practices, and the lived realities of host communities. Based on this discussion, therefore, this study seeks to investigate stakeholders' perceptions of Sterling Global Oil Resources Ltd's community relations and crisis management activities in Akwa Ibom State. This focus ensures that interventions are not only strategically designed but also socially effective.

Statement of the Problem

Observation indicates that despite Sterling Global Oil Resources Ltd's presence in some communities in Akwa Ibom State and its claims of engaging in corporate social responsibility through health outreach, educational scholarships, and infrastructure development, seem to raise tension between the company and its stakeholders. Host communities often report inadequate consultation, limited inclusion in decision-making, and perceptions of neglect, which create trust deficits and recurring conflicts that disrupt both community life and corporate operations. While the company maintains that it has functional mechanisms for crisis management and community engagement, discrepancies between official claims and stakeholders' experiences highlight a perception gap. Moreover, although studies exist on oil companies' practices in the Niger Delta, little research specifically examines Sterling Global's community relations and crisis management from the perspective of direct stakeholders, necessitating this study.

Objectives of the Study

This study sought to:

- i. determine stakeholders' level of awareness of Sterling Global Oil Resources Ltd's community relations and crisis management activities in Akwa Ibom State;
- ii. assess stakeholders' interpretation of the company's community relations initiatives and crisis management responses;
- iii. evaluate stakeholders' perceptions of the effectiveness of Sterling Global's community relations practices in meeting host communities' needs; and,
- iv. examine the extent to which stakeholders perceive the company's crisis management activities as fostering trust and sustainable corporate-community relations.

Literature Review

Community relations in Contemporary Society

Community relations represents a vital dimension of organisational strategy, encompassing the deliberate efforts of firms to engage meaningfully with the communities in which they operate. It extends beyond traditional philanthropy to integrating corporate social responsibility (CSR), stakeholder engagement, and ethical communication to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes (Lee & Carroll, 2018). Strand et al. (2020) emphasise that community relations is both a social and strategic imperative, fostering trust, legitimacy, and relational capital between organisations and their host communities. Different scholars stress varying aspects; while some define it primarily as a mechanism for ethical accountability, others highlight dialogue, participation, and long-term relational development as central features. Collectively, these perspectives underline that community relations is inherently relational and context-dependent.

Conceptually, community relations intersects with CSR, corporate citizenship, and stakeholder theory. CSR provides the ethical and regulatory framework within which organisations operate, yet community relations foregrounds active participation, inclusivity, and reciprocity (Crane, Matten, Glozer, & Spence, 2019).

The evolution of community relations reflects a shift from philanthropic gestures to strategic engagement. Early corporate practices relied on ad hoc donations and infrastructural contributions, often detached from community priorities (Visser, 2021). Over time, structured CSR programmes emerged, integrating community needs with corporate strategy. In resource-intensive sectors such as oil and gas, initial approaches were largely reactive, aimed at addressing grievances or avoiding conflict. However, contemporary practice increasingly adopts proactive, participatory models emphasising sustainable development and mutual benefit (Idemudia, 2018). This progression underscores the recognition that community

relations is most effective when continuous, contextually informed, and designed to foster enduring trust and cooperative partnerships with host communities.

Fundamental principles of community relations include trust, transparency, inclusivity, and reciprocity, which guide both strategic and operational practices. Organisations cultivate credibility through open communication, participatory decision-making, and responsiveness to community concerns. The objectives of these initiatives extend beyond reputational enhancement to include conflict prevention, local capacity building, and sustainable development. In resource-intensive sectors such as oil and gas, engagement that prioritises environmental stewardship, local employment, and infrastructure development simultaneously mitigates operational risks and strengthens social legitimacy (Ekhator&Iyiola-Omisore, 2021; Abimbola&Negin, 2023). Embedding these principles into practice ensures that corporate initiatives are perceived as authentic, relevant, and beneficial by community stakeholders.

Practical strategies employed in community relations include dialogue forums, development initiatives, environmental stewardship, corporate philanthropy, and collaborative partnerships (PRSA, n.d.; Flores &Ebi, 2024). Dialogue forums facilitate ongoing consultation, enabling communities to articulate needs and influence decisions. Development projects target socio-economic challenges such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Environmental stewardship addresses ecological impacts of corporate operations, particularly critical in extractive industries. Corporate philanthropy complements broader engagement but must be aligned with community priorities to avoid perceptions of tokenism. Collaborative partnerships with civil society and local authorities enhance resource mobilisation, credibility, and long-term impact, operationalising the principles of trust and reciprocity.

Regardless of its strategic significance, community relations faces persistent challenges. Tokenistic engagement, misaligned priorities, insufficient stakeholder mapping, and conflicts of interest can undermine credibility (Della Corte, Del Gaudio, Sepe, &Luongo, 2021; Abimbola&Negin, 2023). In resource-intensive industries, high community expectations combined with limited communication capacity may exacerbate grievances. Corporate initiatives that neglect cultural dynamics or marginalised voices risk resentment and operational disruption. These challenges underscore the importance of rigorous stakeholder analysis, authentic dialogue, and responsiveness. Organisations that invest in understanding local dynamics, fostering inclusivity, and addressing grievances proactively are better positioned to achieve both social and operational objectives, mitigating risks inherent in high-stakes environments.

Evidence demonstrates that effective community relations enhances corporate reputation, builds trust, and mitigates conflict. In oil-producing regions, investments in

education, healthcare, and infrastructure correlate with higher stakeholder satisfaction and operational stability (Ekhator&Iyiola-Omisore, 2021). Long-term engagement strengthens social legitimacy, facilitates regulatory compliance, and fosters collaborative problem-solving. Moreover, it supports crisis preparedness, providing communication channels and relational networks that prevent disputes from escalating. These outcomes highlight that community relations is a strategic and ethical imperative, integral not only to corporate social responsibility but also to operational resilience and sustainable business performance (Bagnall et al., 2025).

Digital technologies are transforming community relations, enabling real-time engagement through social media, virtual forums, and online consultation platforms (Wongsuphasawat&Buatama, 2019; Flores &Ebi, 2024). Such tools broaden participation, increase transparency, and facilitate rapid feedback, particularly in geographically dispersed or resource-constrained communities. Digital engagement supports data-driven decision-making, helping organisations monitor satisfaction, identify emerging issues, and co-create solutions. Nevertheless, virtual approaches must complement traditional face-to-face interactions, which remain crucial for trust-building in culturally complex environments. Integrating digital and traditional engagement reflects a contemporary shift toward hybrid, adaptive strategies responsive to evolving stakeholder expectations and operational realities.

Integration of community relations with corporate strategy reflects its evolution from a peripheral activity to a core organisational function. Strategically aligned engagement ensures initiatives reinforce business objectives while addressing community needs. In high-risk sectors, such as oil and gas, integration enhances operational stability, regulatory compliance, and sustainable development (Ekhator&Iyiola-Omisore, 2021; Bagnall et al., 2025). Systematic assessment of community needs, prioritisation of interventions, and monitoring of outcomes create feedback loops that strengthen both corporate performance and social impact. Strategic integration also supports crisis preparedness, providing early-warning signals and communication channels that enable a timely, effective response to emerging disputes or emergencies (Abimbola&Negin, 2023).

Crisis Management Activities in Modern Organisations

Crisis management is broadly considered as the ensemble of processes, structures, and practices that organisations deploy to anticipate, prepare for, respond to, and recover from adverse events threatening their stakeholders, operations, reputations, or the wider public interest. While early approaches to crisis management concentrated heavily on organisational readiness and strict command-and-control mechanisms, more recent scholarship has

highlighted adaptability, resilience, and institutional learning as crucial to effective crisis governance (Mikušová, 2019). Yet, to appreciate the complexity of the concept, one must first distinguish it from related terms. Crisis response, for instance, refers to the immediate actions taken in the wake of a disruptive event, encompassing communication, containment, and triage. Disaster management, by contrast, generally describes multi-agency emergency operations in the context of large-scale natural or human-made disasters, often extending beyond the remit of individual organisations (Wennman, Lindberg, Huzell, & Fältholm, 2022). Risk management also differs in its orientation: it is essentially preventive, geared towards identifying and mitigating potential threats before they materialise, whereas crisis management becomes salient when risks have crystallised into actual disruptions (Mikušová, 2019; Durugbo, Tiwari, & Alcock, 2022).

Historically, crisis management was more of a reactive than anticipatory endeavour. Organisations largely designed measures to restore order after disruption rather than to embed resilience beforehand. This reactive stance, however, has gradually been supplanted by a more proactive orientation, where resilience, redundancies, scenario planning, and rapid learning cycles have become central to organisational survival (Mikušová, 2019; Oscarsson, Tehler, & Danielsson, 2022). Globalisation and the increasing complexity of supply chains have reinforced the necessity for such systemic thinking, given that shocks rarely remain localised and often reverberate across networks and borders (Yang, Zhang, & Ji, 2021; Raj, Mukherjee, de Sousa Jabbour, Srivastava, & Ramanathan, 2022). Moreover, corporate governance reforms and heightened stakeholder expectations for transparency and accountability, combined with the speed of digital communication, have demanded a recalibration of approaches. No longer is crisis governance a matter of closed, hierarchical response; it now requires openness, collaboration, and multi-stakeholder engagement (Schneider, Bundy, & Coombs, 2024; Wennman et al., 2022).

Across the literature, three interdependent phases consistently emerge: prevention and preparedness, response, and recovery. Prevention and preparedness focus on risk assessments, contingency planning, training, and scenario modelling (Mikušová, 2019; Durugbo et al., 2022). The response phase is defined by immediate actions such as incident command, rapid decision-making, communication to stakeholders, and operational containment (Raassens, van der Heijden, & Veldman, 2022; Schmidt, Weiss, & Sitter, 2022). Recovery, by contrast, is longer-term in scope, entailing the restoration of normal operations, the rebuilding of trust, and the institutionalisation of lessons through after-action reviews (Wennman et al., 2022; Oscarsson et al., 2022).

Equally transformative has been the role of digital technologies. Social media and digital platforms have become crucial tools for situational awareness, crowdsourced reporting, and immediate stakeholder communication. At the same time, they also amplify risks, particularly the rapid spread of misinformation (Eismann, Posegga, & Fischbach, 2021; Chon, 2022). AI-driven analytics and modelling enhance early-warning capabilities and scenario planning, while collaborative platforms allow for dispersed but coordinated incident command (Shen et al., 2021; Eismann et al., 2021). Nevertheless, scholars caution against overreliance on technology; digital tools remain most effective when complemented by human judgement and grounded in trustful relationships (Eismann et al., 2021; Oscarsson et al., 2022).

Any comprehensive account of crisis management must also grapple with ethical and cultural considerations. The principles of truthfulness, empathy, and fairness are repeatedly identified as the ethical cornerstones of effective crisis response. Moreover, crises are not socially neutral: they exacerbate inequalities and expose vulnerable groups to disproportionate harm. Hence, ethical crisis governance must include measures for equity and justice (Bourmistrova, Solomon, Braude, Strawbridge, & Carter, 2022; Wennman et al., 2022). Culture also profoundly shapes crisis practice: which voices are trusted, which strategies are deemed acceptable, and how alerts are interpreted are all contingent upon cultural context (Kochigina, 2021; Oscarsson et al., 2022).

Recent empirical studies of COVID-19 underscore these conceptual debates. Firms that diversified suppliers, engaged local networks, and communicated decisively with customers and staff were more likely to sustain operations (Shen et al., 2021; Raj et al., 2022; McDougall & Davis, 2024). The food service sector, in particular, demonstrated the importance of swift operational adjustments and transparent communication in retaining customer trust (Raassens et al., 2022). Beyond the organisational sphere, the pandemic also revealed the long-term mental health consequences of crises, suggesting that psychosocial considerations must be integrated into recovery strategies (Bourmistrova et al., 2022). Across sectors, a recurrent theme has been the role of organisational learning: after-action reviews and the diffusion of lessons significantly enhanced future readiness (Eismann et al., 2021; Wennman et al., 2022).

Taken together, this review demonstrates that crisis management is no longer a narrowly defined organisational function but a multi-layered, interdisciplinary endeavour. From its definitional clarifications to its theoretical foundations and empirical applications, the scholarship converges on the recognition that resilience, adaptability, and reputation protection are interdependent goals. Achieving them requires a balanced portfolio of activities:

planning and preparedness, stakeholder engagement, technological integration, ethical sensitivity, and institutional learning (Mikušová, 2019; Shen et al., 2021; Raj et al., 2022; Schneider et al., 2024). Organisations that internalise these insights and practise them actively are far better positioned not only to weather crises but also to emerge from them with renewed legitimacy and stronger relationships with their stakeholders.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the theories as reviewed below:

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) was advanced by W. Timothy Coombs in 1995 as a framework for explaining how organisations can protect their reputation during crises. Coombs built upon Attribution Theory, proposing that stakeholders' perceptions of responsibility influence how they evaluate an organisation's crisis response. The theory assumes that crises vary by type—victim, accidental, or preventable—and that each requires an appropriate communication strategy. SCCT assumes that stakeholders assign responsibility and blame during crises, and that selecting the correct response strategy (e.g., denial, apology, corrective action) can mitigate reputational damage and restore trust.

In this study, SCCT is relevant in understanding how Sterling Global Resources Limited manages crises in Akwa Ibom State and how stakeholders perceive such responses. By applying SCCT, the study can evaluate whether the organisation's crisis communication aligns with the crisis type and whether such responses reduce community tensions or escalate conflicts. The theory provides a lens for assessing the effectiveness of Sterling's crisis management activities, thus directly aligning with the study's objective of examining stakeholders' perception of the company's crisis handling strategies.

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory was originally propounded by R. Edward Freeman in 1984 in his book *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. The theory challenges the traditional shareholder-centric view of corporations, instead arguing that businesses must consider the interests and well-being of all stakeholders—internal and external. Its basic assumptions include that organisations depend on stakeholders for resources, legitimacy, and survival; that stakeholder relationships must be managed ethically; and that success comes from balancing and addressing the needs of multiple groups such as employees, communities, governments, and investors.

In relation to this study, Stakeholder Theory provides a strong basis for examining how Sterling Global Resources Limited builds and sustains relationships with host communities through its community relations practices. Since the study is concerned with community perception, the theory allows an exploration of whether Sterling's engagement with communities is inclusive, responsible, and mutually beneficial. It also highlights the degree to which the company recognises the community not as passive beneficiaries, but as vital stakeholders whose trust and cooperation are crucial for long-term stability. This makes Stakeholder Theory central in interpreting the objectives of assessing perceptions of Sterling's community relations efforts.

Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design because it enabled the collection of data directly from stakeholders to ascertain their perception of community relations and crisis management activities of Sterling Global Resources Limited. The study population comprised residents of Ikot Abasi and Eastern Obolo LGAs, with projected 2025 figures of 189,800 and 85,800 respectively, giving a total of 275,600. To focus on stakeholders, only adults aged 18 years and above were considered, estimated at about 60% of the population, resulting in an adult population of approximately 165,360 persons formed the basis for sample size determination and subsequent sampling procedures. Thus the population of the study was 165,360 male and female residents of Ikot Abasi and Eastern Obolo LGAs.

Using the Philip Meyer sampling guide, the sample size of 383 respondents was selected. A multi-stage sampling technique was adopted for the study. First, the two LGAs (Ikot Abasi and Eastern Obolo) were divided into clusters based on communities. At the second stage, purposive sampling was employed to select communities directly impacted by Sterling's operations. In Eastern Obolo, for instance, host communities such as Okoroinyong, Amazaba, Ikonta, Emere-Oke, and Obianga were purposively chosen due to their proximity to the company's facilities and exposure to its activities. At the third stage, within each selected community cluster, respondents were identified using judgmental sampling to ensure the inclusion of knowledgeable adult stakeholders across gender, age, and leadership lines. The instrument for data collection was the questionnaire, structured on a Likert scale to measure respondents' perceptions of community relations and crisis management activities of the company. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency tables, percentages, and mean scores to summarise respondents' views.

Data presentation

Table 1: Stakeholders' Awareness of Sterling Global Oil Resources Ltd's Community Relations and Crisis Management Activities

Item / Activity	Yes (Freq %)	No (Freq %)	Not Sure	Total
1. Are you aware of any community relations activities?	241 (58)	99 (36)	21 (6)	361 100
Awareness of Community Relations Activities				
Scholarships for students	145 (40)	216 (60)	361	100
Employment opportunities	123 (34)	238 (66)	361	100
Infrastructure projects (roads, water, electricity)	198 (55)	163 (45)	361	100
Health facilities/support	165 (46)	196 (54)	361	100
Environmental protection projects	102 (28)	259 (72)	361	100
Skills acquisition programmes	114 (32)	247 (68)	361	100
4 Source of Awareness				
Community meetings	157 (44)	204 (56)	361	100
Company officials/representatives	136 (38)	225 (62)	361	100
Radio/TV/Newspapers	182 (50)	179 (50)	361	100
Social media platforms	154 (43)	207 (57)	361	100
Word of mouth (opinion leaders, friends, neighbours)	190 (53)	171 (47)	361	100
4. Are you aware of any crisis management responses?	198 (55)	116 (32)	47 (13)	361 100
5. Awareness of Crisis Management Responses				
Compensation to affected persons	142 (39)	219 (61)	361	100
Dialogue / conflict resolution meetings	171 (47)	190 (53)	361	100
Provision of relief materials	118 (33)	243 (67)	361	100
Security interventions	93 (26)	268 (74)	361	100
Others (please specify)	12 (3)	349 (97)	361	100
6. Frequency of Information				
Response	Frequency	Percentage		
Very frequently	87	24		
Occasionally	143	40		
Rarely	86	24		
Never	45	12		
Total	361	100		

Table 1 indicates that the majority of respondents (58%) are aware of Sterling Global's community relations activities, though over one-third (36%) remain unaware; infrastructure projects (55%) and health facilities/support (46%) are the most widely recognised community relations initiatives, while environmental projects (28%) and skills programmes (32%) are

less visible; word of mouth (53%) and radio/TV/newspapers (50%) are the strongest sources of awareness, while official company communication (38%) lags behind.

For crisis management, more than half of the respondents (55%) are aware of Sterling Global's crisis management responses, though 32% have no awareness and 13% remain unsure; dialogue/conflict resolution meetings (47%) are the most recognised crisis response, while security interventions (26%) and compensation (39%) have limited awareness; information on the company's activities is most often received occasionally (40%), suggesting an inconsistent communication.

Table 2: Stakeholders' Interpretation of Sterling Global Oil Resources Ltd's Community Relations and Crisis Management Initiatives

Item Statement	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Total	Weighted Mean	Decision
Community projects reflect community needs	102	146	77	36	361	2.86	Positive
Employment & empowerment create opportunities	87	152	84	38	361	2.79	Positive
Company communicates openly about initiatives	76	133	97	55	361	2.63	Positive
Company responds promptly to crises	91	141	80	49	361	2.75	Positive
Crisis management is transparent & trustworthy	74	128	96	63	361	2.59	Positive
Crisis responses help to restore peace & trust	98	143	79	41	361	2.82	Positive

Table 2, on interpretations of community relations, indicates that most stakeholders moderately agree that Sterling Global's community projects reflect community needs (WM = 2.86); employment and empowerment opportunities are interpreted to have fairly positive impacts though not overwhelming (WM = 2.79); and respondents are less convinced about the

company's openness in communication with the stakeholders as communication is not consistent (WM = 2.63),.

The stakeholders' interpretations of Sterling Global's crisis management initiatives suggest that while crisis response is seen as moderately prompt (WM = 2.75), transparency and trustworthiness are interpreted to mean a weak area of the crisis management (WM = 2.59). Even at this, the crisis efforts are still understood as fairly effective in restoring peace and community trust (WM = 2.82).

Table 3: Stakeholders' Perception of Sterling Global's Community Relations Practices

Items	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Total	Weighted Mean	Decision
Improved infrastructure and social amenities	110	142	70	39	361	2.89	Positive Perception
Created meaningful employment and livelihood opportunities	75	96	104	86	361	2.44	Negative Perception
Investments in health, education, and skills training delivered measurable benefits	94	118	91	58	361	2.68	Positive Perception
Engagement with leaders promotes inclusion and shared decision-making	80	102	99	80	361	2.50	Negative Perception
Practices have strengthened mutual trust	70	90	110	91	361	2.38	Negative Perception
Overall community relations support sustainable,	83	120	92	66	361	2.60	Positive Perception

Table 3 presents the stakeholders' perceptions of Sterling Global's community relations practices where the responses reveal a mixed pattern of approval and disapproval, with the grand weighted mean of 2.6 indicating moderate but divided perceptions across the six dimensions assessed. For tangible needs, stakeholders recognised that Sterling Global's programmes is gradually improving infrastructure and social amenities (WM = 2.9, Positive) and to some degree contributed to health, education, and skills training (WM = 2.7, Positive). These findings suggest that visible, project-based interventions are acknowledged and valued by the host community. However, the claim that the company has created meaningful employment opportunities was rated poorly (WM = 2.4, Negative), reflecting a common frustration in oil-bearing communities where corporate promises of jobs rarely meet the expectations of residents. On intangible community relations practices, stakeholders' perceptions were less favourable than tangible interventions. Engagement with leaders was perceived as limited in fostering inclusion (WM = 2.50), while trust-building attracted the weakest rating (WM = 2.38), a negative perception reflecting scepticism rooted in strained corporate-community relations in the Niger Delta. Although the company's overall commitment to long-term relationships earned a borderline positive score (WM = 2.60), this cautious optimism was overshadowed by concerns about inclusivity and trust.

Statement	Strongly Agree				Strongly Disagree (1)	Total	Weighted Mean	Decision
	Agree (4)	(3)	(2)	(1)				
Sterling Global responds promptly and effectively to crises (oil spills, environmental damage, disputes).	85	120	96	60	361	2.63	Positive Perception	
The company provides adequate material support/compensation to affected communities.	72	101	105	83	361	2.44	Negative Perception	
Crisis management efforts include restoring the environment and facilities after crises.	95	112	90	64	361	2.65	Positive Perception	

Crisis management demonstrates fairness and transparency in addressing concerns.	88	108	92	73	361	2.58	Positive Perception
Approach has enhanced trust between company and host communities.	70	99	110	82	361	2.43	Negative Perception
Crisis responses contribute to long-term sustainable relations.	76	106	97	82	361	2.48	Negative Perception

Table 4: Stakeholders' Perceptions of Sterling Global's Crisis Management Activities

Table 4 presents stakeholders' perceptions of Sterling Global's crisis management activities. The findings indicate a mixed assessment of the company's performance. Stakeholders positively perceived Sterling Global's prompt crisis response (WM = 2.63), environmental and facility restoration efforts (WM = 2.65), and fairness in addressing concerns (WM = 2.58). These suggest that the company is seen as somewhat responsive and transparent during crisis situations. However, negative perceptions were recorded in critical areas. Respondents negatively rated the adequacy of material support and compensation (WM = 2.44), the company's ability to enhance trust with host communities was rated poorly (WM = 2.43), and the contribution of crisis responses to sustainable corporate-community relations was rated (WM = 2.48) poorly. These results reveal that while Sterling Global is perceived as reactive during crises, its efforts are considered insufficient in building long-term trust, delivering fair compensation, and sustaining relationships.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: What are the stakeholders' level of awareness of Sterling Global Oil Resources Ltd's community relations and crisis management activities in Akwa Ibom State?

The question of stakeholders' awareness of Sterling Global Oil Resources Ltd's community relations and crisis management activities arises from the understanding that awareness is the foundation of meaningful engagement. Communities cannot meaningfully participate in or evaluate initiatives they do not know about. The table demonstrates the uneven awareness levels surrounding Sterling Global's activities, offering crucial insights into the reach and limitations of its communication strategies. Awareness here is not merely about information exposure but about recognition, understanding, and recall of specific initiatives. The data reveal that while a majority of respondents reported being aware of the company's community relations activities, a substantial minority remained unaware or uncertain. This

suggests that Sterling Global has achieved only partial success in reaching its host communities. Awareness of initiatives such as infrastructure and healthcare indicates tangible visibility, residents tend to notice projects that directly alter their environment or touch on vital needs. However, the relatively high proportion of respondents who remain unaware highlights a failure of comprehensive outreach. Effective community relations must not only deliver interventions but also ensure that stakeholders recognise and identify with those efforts.

When the analysis is disaggregated by specific initiatives, a striking contrast emerges. Infrastructure projects and health services recorded the highest recognition, reflecting their visible and immediate relevance. By contrast, programmes such as environmental protection and skills acquisition are less recognised, despite their long-term importance. This imbalance in awareness signals a possible prioritisation of high-visibility projects over sustainable, developmental interventions by the company. More critically, it may reveal communication gaps, projects may exist but lack sufficient publicity or accessibility. The low visibility of environmental and skills-based initiatives underscores an urgent need for Sterling Global to re-strategise, ensuring these programmes are not overshadowed by more tangible but less sustainable projects.

The findings on sources of awareness further illuminate the dynamics at play. Word of mouth (community/opinion leaders, friends, etc) and traditional media (radio, etc) emerged as the most influential channels, while official company communication was considerably weaker. This implies that Sterling Global relies less on direct communication with stakeholders, ceding much of its narrative to informal networks. While interpersonal and community-driven information channels build legitimacy and trust, over-reliance on them risks distortion or selective framing of information. Moreover, the relatively low impact of social media suggests a missed opportunity, especially in an era where digital communication could enhance reach, especially among younger demographics.

Awareness of crisis management activities reveals another pattern: stakeholders are more familiar with dialogue and conflict resolution than with compensation or security interventions. This suggests that while Sterling Global engages communities in participatory approaches to crisis resolution, the tangible outcomes such as relief provision or adequate compensation remain less visible or inconsistent. Importantly, awareness levels here are lower compared to community relations activities, indicating that crisis responses are less publicised or poorly experienced by those directly affected. This raises questions of credibility, as stakeholders expect crisis management not only to involve dialogue but also to produce concrete remedial actions.

The frequency of information access is another vital dimension. Most respondents reported receiving information only occasionally, with fewer citing very frequent updates. This suggests that Sterling Global's communication is reactive rather than proactive, occurring intermittently rather than systematically. Inconsistent information flow undermines stakeholder trust and diminishes the effectiveness of both community relations and crisis management strategies. Regular and transparent communication would not only strengthen awareness but also enhance perceptions of accountability. For a company operating in a context as sensitive as the Niger Delta, occasional information dissemination may appear tokenistic rather than a demonstration of genuine commitment to engagement.

These findings are consistent with recent scholarship on oil multinationals' community relations in Nigeria. Akpor-Robaro et al. (2024) found that host communities consistently rated oil companies' CSR performance poorly, with many initiatives either unnoticed or dismissed as inadequate. Similarly, Nkem et al. (2022) highlight that community wellbeing is undermined not only by the absence of interventions but also by the lack of awareness and transparency surrounding them, particularly in crisis contexts. Akporiaye (2023) further notes that effectiveness in CSR cannot be measured by company activity alone but by stakeholders' recognition and perception of these efforts. Together, these studies corroborate the present findings that awareness remains patchy, selective, and unevenly distributed, thereby undermining the potential for oil companies to foster sustainable community relations and crisis trust.

Stakeholder theory and the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) together provide a critical lens for understanding the findings. Stakeholder theory argues that organisations must actively recognise, engage, and respond to the needs of all stakeholders, yet Sterling Global appears to fall short, as awareness of its initiatives and crisis responses remains uneven. When interventions are poorly communicated, communities may perceive neglect or exclusion, undermining trust and legitimacy. The reliance on informal awareness channels reflects weak engagement and insufficiently proactive communication. Similarly, SCCT emphasises the need for clear, consistent, and timely crisis communication to protect reputation. Limited awareness of compensation, relief, and security interventions, coupled with occasional communication, highlights lapses that expose Sterling Global to reputational damage and weakened corporate-community relations.

Research Question 2: How do stakeholders interpret the company's community relations initiatives and crisis management responses?

Stakeholders' interpretations of corporate community relations and crisis management responses are critical, as they determine how much trust and legitimacy an organisation enjoys within its host environment. The research question arose from the need to understand not just whether people are aware of Sterling Global's activities, but how they actually interpret them in terms of value, relevance, and credibility. The findings in Table 2 reveal that community members generally interpret Sterling Global's initiatives positively, though their agreement is moderate rather than overwhelming. This suggests that while the company's efforts are acknowledged, stakeholders still harbour reservations about depth, inclusiveness, and long-term impact.

The interpretation of community relations activities points to a belief that projects align with community needs, with infrastructure and empowerment initiatives receiving modest rating by stakeholders. However, stakeholders remain cautious about the openness of communication surrounding such initiatives. Communication is not merely a transactional tool but the lifeline of legitimacy, and the less convincing score in this regard underlines the perception that Sterling Global has not been fully transparent or inclusive. This creates a gap between action and interpretation, reminding us that the value of corporate initiatives is not just in their execution but in how they are experienced and perceived by stakeholders.

On the crisis management aspect, stakeholders recognise that the company responds fairly promptly to crises, but transparency and trustworthiness are less convincing areas. Interpretations here are significant because crises test organisational character; when responses are not interpreted as open or trustworthy, stakeholders may assume that the company prioritises damage control over genuine remediation. That said, stakeholders also concede that crisis responses have some effectiveness in restoring peace and trust, which suggests that Sterling Global's interventions are not entirely dismissed but are seen as requiring greater consistency and credibility to achieve stronger interpretations of effectiveness.

Taken together, the findings present a narrative of cautious approval rather than wholehearted endorsement. Stakeholders interpret the company's initiatives as steps in the right direction but remain attentive to gaps in communication, transparency, and the inclusivity of responses. Interpretation is inherently subjective, shaped not only by what the company does but also by what stakeholders feel it represents. The fact that trust and openness score moderately low indicates that Sterling Global's relational capital is fragile and requires nurturing. In essence, stakeholders' interpretations are signalling that legitimacy is not yet fully earned, and greater efforts are needed to bridge the perception gap between corporate intentions and community expectations.

These findings are consistent with prior scholarship. Ekpo, Okereke, and Omojefe (2024) note that community relations strategies in oil-producing regions often fall short when communication is weak, leading to modest improvements in corporate image rather than strong legitimacy. Similarly, Asare (2025) shows that in Ghana's oil and gas sector, communities interpret crisis interventions more positively when companies demonstrate transparent dialogue and consistent engagement, a factor Sterling Global appears to lack. Emeka-Okoli, Nwankwo, Otonnah, and Nwankwo (2024) reinforce this by noting that effective CSR communication strategies are central to strengthening stakeholder engagement. The current findings therefore corroborate these studies by showing that while Sterling Global's actions are recognised, interpretive gaps persist because of weak communication and limited trust-building mechanisms.

From a theoretical perspective, stakeholder theory insists that organisations should actively engage all stakeholder groups to build legitimacy and trust. The findings suggest Sterling Global has not fully achieved this, as interpretations remain only moderately positive, highlighting gaps in inclusiveness and mutual dialogue. Similarly, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) emphasises timely, consistent, and transparent communication during crises to protect organisational reputation. The mixed interpretations of Sterling Global's crisis responses, acknowledged as somewhat prompt but lacking transparency, illustrate a misalignment with SCCT principles. Both theories, therefore, highlight the urgent need for the company to strengthen communication and inclusivity if it is to shift stakeholder interpretations from guarded approval to genuine trust and endorsement.

Research Question 3: How do stakeholders perceive of the effectiveness of Sterling Global's community relations practices in meeting host communities' needs?

The rationale for Research Question 3 stemmed from the persistent debates around whether oil companies' community relations practices genuinely meet the needs of host communities or merely offer token interventions. In environments such as the Niger Delta, where corporate-community relations are both contested and fragile, stakeholder perception becomes an essential indicator of effectiveness. Table 3 illuminates this complexity by showing how stakeholders simultaneously appreciate certain tangible contributions while voicing dissatisfaction with intangible practices, revealing the mixed but instructive pattern of approval and scepticism that defines Sterling Global's relationship with its host communities.

When tangible interventions are considered, the findings suggest that visible projects, particularly in infrastructure, social amenities, health, and education, are relatively well received. Communities tend to value initiatives that address pressing material needs, which immediately improve living conditions and create concrete symbols of development. However,

the disappointment expressed regarding employment creation points to the gap between expectations and delivery. Employment opportunities remain the most sensitive metric of corporate goodwill, and unmet promises in this area breed disillusionment. This divergence highlights the paradox whereby infrastructure projects generate visibility but fail to substitute for direct livelihood opportunities that communities perceive as more empowering and enduring.

Intangible aspects of community relations tell a different story. The low ratings for inclusivity and mutual trust suggest that while Sterling Global may have invested in projects, it has struggled to cultivate genuine relational capital. Inclusion in decision-making processes and transparency in engagements are not merely procedural matters; they form the moral fabric of trust. The absence of these elements fuels the perception that the company operates in a paternalistic rather than participatory manner. Thus, despite some positive evaluations of long-term commitment, the failure to strengthen intangible relationships undermines the broader effectiveness of the company's community relations efforts.

Together, these findings answer the research question by revealing a layered picture: community relations are partially effective in addressing immediate, tangible needs but less successful in fostering deeper, sustainable relational bonds. In practice, this implies that the company is perceived as delivering visible but transactional interventions while failing to embed itself as a trusted partner in the community's long-term aspirations. The grand mean score reinforces this view of divided perceptions—communities recognise certain benefits yet remain cautious, even sceptical, about the motives and inclusivity of corporate actions. The implication is that effectiveness cannot be judged by projects alone but must also be measured by the quality of relationships nurtured over time.

The findings resonate with prior scholarship. Alaburo, Tajudeen, Abubakar, & Babatunde (2024) showed that while CSR initiatives in Nigeria's oil and gas sector improved resilience, effectiveness was contingent on meaningful community participation. Similarly, Asare (2025) demonstrated in Ghana that trust and community engagement are central to how PR strategies shape perceptions of corporate crisis responses. Meribe, Ayentimi, Oke, & Adonteng-Kissi (2021) further affirmed that CSR without genuine partnership is perceived as insincere, often eroding trust rather than strengthening it. The present study's evidence of cautious optimism coupled with mistrust corroborates these works, reinforcing the idea that effectiveness in community relations is less about the scale of interventions and more about inclusivity, transparency, and trust-building practices.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings align closely with Stakeholder Theory, which asserts that corporations must balance the interests of diverse stakeholders to achieve

legitimacy. Sterling Global's partial success with tangible needs but shortcomings in trust and inclusion highlight the failure to fully accommodate stakeholders' non-material concerns. By undervaluing intangible expectations, the company risks eroding its social licence to operate. Also, through the lens of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the findings illustrate how poor perceptions of fairness and trust weaken corporate reputation and relational capital. SCCT emphasises that organisations must adopt accommodative strategies, demonstrating transparency, responsiveness, and responsibility, to maintain legitimacy in crisis-prone contexts. Sterling Global's mixed ratings suggest that while some accommodative actions exist, the lack of deeper relational engagement leaves its crisis communication and community relations effectiveness under question.

Research question 4: To what extent do stakeholders perceive the company's crisis management activities as fostering trust and sustainable corporate–community relations.

The concern that informed Research Question 4 arises from the persistent demand in oil-bearing communities for crisis management strategies that not only resolve emergencies but also foster trust and long-term corporate–community stability. In resource-dependent contexts like the Niger Delta, a company's response to crises is scrutinised not just for speed and technical adequacy but also for its ability to demonstrate fairness, inclusivity, and sustainable commitment. Table 4 reveals the complexity of stakeholder evaluations, showing that Sterling Global's efforts receive mixed appraisals, reflecting a distinction between immediate responsiveness and the deeper, long-term trust-building that stakeholders ultimately seek.

The positive assessments of prompt responses, restoration of facilities, and fairness indicate that stakeholders acknowledge some capacity for immediate crisis handling. These outcomes demonstrate that Sterling Global has developed mechanisms for visible and timely interventions during oil spills, environmental hazards, or disputes. Such efforts are crucial in projecting corporate responsibility and providing communities with short-term reassurance. From a logos perspective, the company appears to be fulfilling a rational expectation that crises should be addressed quickly and visibly. However, from an ethos standpoint, this reactivity only scratches the surface of what communities define as effective crisis management.

The negative perceptions in critical areas such as inadequate compensation, weak trust-building, and unsustained relationships highlight deeper relational failures. Stakeholders seem to perceive Sterling Global's crisis management as transactional—resolving problems as they arise without embedding long-term commitment. The insufficiency of compensation fuels resentment, while poor ratings on trust reveal scepticism about the company's sincerity.

Pathos is central here: communities interpret the absence of trust-building measures as evidence that their welfare is secondary to corporate interests. This interpretation shifts the overall perception from one of partial success to a reminder that crisis management without empathy or fairness in redress mechanisms cannot sustain corporate–community relations.

Synthesising these results, the findings suggest a dual reality: Sterling Global demonstrates competence in operational aspects of crisis response but underperforms in relational and reparative dimensions. This imbalance weakens its capacity to foster trust or long-term partnership. The community’s cautious appreciation of immediate efforts is overshadowed by concerns that the company prioritises damage control over genuine reconciliation and sustainable development. In effect, the research question is answered by showing that stakeholders perceive crisis management as reactive rather than transformative, capable of providing short-term fixes but not of building enduring trust or sustainable corporate–community relations.

These results resonate with broader scholarship. Alaburo, Tajudeen, Abubakar, and Babatunde (2024) found that CSR interventions in Nigeria’s oil sector often lack participatory depth, leading to mistrust despite visible projects. Similarly, Asare (2025), studying Ghana’s oil sector, observed that while companies manage crises with some efficiency, the absence of transparent communication and adequate compensation limits their ability to build legitimacy. Meribe, Ayentimi, Oke, and Adonteng-Kissi (2021) emphasised that trust deficits persist when firms focus on transactional crisis responses rather than relational investments. The present findings corroborate these insights, underlining that effectiveness in crisis management requires both technical responsiveness and the relational capital of fairness, trust, and sustainability.

From the perspective of Stakeholder Theory, the findings illustrate Sterling Global’s partial engagement with its host communities. While prompt responses and restoration projects address certain stakeholder needs, the company neglects non-material expectations such as fair compensation, inclusivity, and trust-building. Stakeholder Theory insists that all relevant interests must be balanced to preserve legitimacy and prevent conflict. Sterling Global’s limited focus on tangible, short-term measures reflects a narrow interpretation of stakeholder needs, which risks undermining its social licence to operate. The findings thus affirm that crisis management is effective only when both material and relational demands of stakeholders are adequately addressed.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) also provides an interpretive lens for the findings. SCCT highlights the importance of accommodative strategies, responsibility-taking, transparency, and compensatory actions, in maintaining legitimacy during crises.

Sterling Global's relatively positive scores in fairness and responsiveness suggest the application of some accommodative strategies. However, its failures in compensation, trust enhancement, and sustainability indicate a gap between strategic intentions and community expectations. This misalignment reduces the company's reputational capital, as stakeholders judge its crisis responses as insufficiently empathetic or transformative. The findings, therefore, affirm SCCT's argument that reputational repair requires not just prompt responses but deeper accountability and genuine relational engagement.

Conclusion

This study focused on examining stakeholders' perceptions of Sterling Global Oil Resources Ltd's community relations and crisis management activities in Akwa Ibom State, highlighting both the tangible and intangible dimensions of corporate-community engagement. The findings revealed that while stakeholders acknowledged the company's contributions to infrastructure, social amenities, and partial responsiveness during crises, deep concerns remained regarding employment creation, inclusivity in decision-making, fair compensation, and trust-building. These mixed perceptions suggest that Sterling Global's efforts, though visible, are yet to translate into sustained goodwill or long-term legitimacy in the eyes of host communities. Ultimately, the study infers that genuine, inclusive, and transparent engagement remains the most critical pathway to strengthening sustainable corporate-community relations.

Recommendations

From the findings, recommendations are made that:

- i. Sterling Global should prioritise participatory approaches in designing and implementing community development initiatives. This means moving beyond top-down provision of infrastructure and integrating host communities into decision-making processes, ensuring that interventions in health, education, and skills training reflect local priorities and generate measurable, long-term benefits.
- ii. To address dissatisfaction with employment creation, the company should establish structured local content policies that guarantee preferential recruitment of host community residents. Complementary programmes such as vocational training, entrepreneurship funding, and capacity development can enhance employability, reduce dependency, and foster sustainable livelihoods.
- iii. Sterling Global should complement its prompt technical responses with transparent compensation systems and fair restitution for affected individuals. This requires

independent needs assessments, clear timelines for redress, and collaborative monitoring mechanisms to reassure communities of the company's sincerity in addressing grievances.

iv. To strengthen long-term trust, Sterling Global should institutionalise continuous engagement platforms, such as joint community–company committees and quarterly accountability forums, where stakeholders can openly discuss crisis responses, CSR projects, and relational challenges. Such sustained dialogue builds credibility, mutual trust, and a foundation for sustainable corporate–community relations.

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