Should All Africa's States Join the APRM?

STEVEN GRUZD & YARIK TURIANSKYI

SAIIA

SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE
OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Executive summary

When the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) – Africa's governance monitoring and promotion instrument – was launched on 9 March 2003, it was voluntary. Given the sensitivity of governance reviews, its voluntary nature was deemed necessary, as reviews ultimately require members to partially cede their sovereignty and open themselves up to scrutiny by their citizens and their peers. Accession was seen as a deliberate demonstration of the particular country's commitment to open government, transparency, good governance, accountability and policy reform.

Currently, 40 of the 55 African states are members of the APRM, and it has set 2023 as its target for universal accession. It has always aspired to be both voluntary and universal – entailing a choice to join by individual countries and a collective expectation that every African state would make that choice. This policy insight explores the implications of this goal.

Among the non-members are countries with low-level civil wars, such as the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya and Somalia. Governance is hard to monitor and track under such circumstances. Yet some would argue that the APRM is precisely what is needed to diagnose problems and develop solutions in these states, provided they have the political will to address the challenges.

The APRM has also instituted targeted reviews, which examine specific areas of interest, rather than the comprehensive, all-encompassing reviews conducted during the first generation of reviews. While shorter, more focused reports would indeed be faster to produce and more digestible for readers, targeted reviews could give governments an opportunity to sideline sensitive issues. While there is undoubtedly a place in the APRM system for targeted reviews, they should not replace the full reviews.

Although universal accession is a worthy goal, the APRM should meet its core objectives first. Too few countries have been reviewed in the 17 years since its inception and hardly any have undergone second reviews. Country reviews are the APRM's raison d'être. It should also be stricter with member states that do not make meaningful progress.

The APRM still has the potential to improve governance in Africa, but to do that it needs to be more focused. This means ensuring that all of its members have undergone first reviews, and that those that already have are implementing their National Programmes of Action (NPoAs) and preparing for the second reviews.

Introduction

When the APRM – Africa's governance monitoring and promotion instrument – was launched on 9 March 2003, it was voluntary. The first clause of its Base Document states:

'The African Peer Review Mechanism … is an instrument voluntarily acceded to by Member States of the African Union as an African self-monitoring mechanism.'[1] Given the sensitivity of governance reviews, this voluntary nature was deemed necessary, as reviews ultimately require members to partially cede their sovereignty and open themselves up to scrutiny by their citizens and peers.

> Accession was seen as a deliberate demonstration of the particular country's commitment to open government, transparency, good governance, accountability and policy reform

Accession was seen as a deliberate demonstration of the particular country's commitment to open government, transparency, good governance, accountability and policy reform. The APRM has remained a voluntary process ever since. After the first six states signed up in 2003, the mechanism's membership has steadily grown to almost three-quarters (40/55) of African states.[2] The newest members are Zimbabwe and Seychelles, which joined in February 2020.

The APRM has always aspired to be both voluntary and universal – entailing a choice to join by individual countries, and a collective expectation that every African state would make that choice. In its Strategic Plan for 2016–2020 the continental body noted: 'The APRM is unique among AU bodies and programmes in that accession is voluntary. Although not all AU members have joined the APRM, this Strategic Plan contains plans to continue the drive towards universal membership.'[3] It pledges to 'develop and adopt a detailed APRM MoU [Memorandum of Understanding] ratification campaign strategy and take it to each AU member state that is not within the APRM today'.[4] A target date of 2023 for universal accession was subsequently set. This policy insight explores the implications of striving for this goal.

The 'expanded mandate' given to the APRM by the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government in January 2017 emphasises that it should 'be strengthened to track implementation and oversee monitoring and evaluation in key governance areas on the continent'.[5] This has been interpreted to mean that, to the extent its mandate derives from

---

1   New Partnership for Africa's Development Secretariat, *African Peer Review Mechanism: Base Document* (Addis Ababa: AU, 2002), 1.
2   As at 1 March 2020.
3   African Peer Review Mechanism, *Strategic Plan 2016–2020* (Addis Ababa: APRM, 2016), 4, https://www.aprm-au.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/APRM-Strategic-Plan-2016-2020.pdf.
4   APRM, *Strategic Plan*, 30.
5   AU Assembly, "Decisions, Declaration, Resolution and Motion: Decision on the Revitalisation of the African Peer Review Mechanism, 28th Ordinary Assembly, 20–31 January 2017, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia", Article 6, 10, https://au.int/sites/default/files/decisions/32520-sc19553_e_original_-_assembly_decisions_621-641_-_xxviii.pdf.

the January 2017 decisions, the APRM covers the whole continent and not just the states that have joined it. This does not mean that all African countries are automatically APRM members. But assuming continental coverage was the approach taken in developing the first African Governance Report (AGR) in 2019. The AGR did not name any particular countries, which was seen by critics as a fundamental weakness, but tried to cover governance issues relevant to all of Africa.

> ## Other than geography, there are no entrance criteria to join the APRM

Other than geography, there are no entrance criteria to join the APRM. Similar governance promotion systems such as the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) have high standards that a country is expected to meet even before joining. Early on the APRM adopted the view that every state starts from a different position in terms of its socio-economic development and democratic consolidation, but all ultimately strive towards the same universal standards adopted by the mechanism.

A key question to ask is: Why is universal accession desirable? If less-than-enthusiastic states join and then do nothing or attempt to manipulate and water down the reviews, is there any point? The APRM would then be catering to the lowest common denominator, rather than encouraging states based on the best practices of others.

> ## If less-than-enthusiastic states join and then do nothing or attempt to manipulate and water down the reviews, is there any point?

While staffing at the APRM Secretariat has increased significantly since 2016, the APRM has struggled to cope with its current membership. On the other hand, additional members could increase the political capital and resources invested, allowing the APRM Secretariat to build more institutional capacity.

A statistical analysis conducted in 2016 used 10 years of data from the Ibrahim Index of African Governance to compare three categories of African states: those that have signed up to the APRM and completed the review; those that are APRM members but have not yet undergone the process; and non-APRM states. The study concluded that merely joining the APRM and undergoing a review do not make much of a difference in improving a

country's governance score. However, the data supported a case of self-selection by states more inclined to improving their governance and thus joining the APRM, rather than a causal link to improving their governance through the APRM. Thus, by voluntarily acceding to the mechanism they have demonstrated the will to improve governance.[6] This underlines the importance of voluntarism and the political will to reform.

TABLE 1	TIME PASSED SINCE LAST MILESTONE ACHIEVED BY APRM MEMBER STATES				
#	Country	Date of Accession	1st review	2nd review	Time passed since APRM accession or review (until 1 March 2020)
1	Algeria	9 March 2003	July 2007	No	12 years 8 months
2	Angola	8 July 2004	No	No	15 years 7 months
3	Benin	31 March 2004	January 2008	No	12 years 1 month
4	Botswana	31 January 2019	No	No	1 year 1 month
5	Burkina Faso	9 March 2003	October 2008	No	11 years 4 months
6	Cameroon	3 April 2003	No	No	16 years 10 months
7	Chad	25 January 2013	October 2016	No	3 years 1 month
8	Republic of Congo	9 March 2003	No	No	16 years 11 months
9	Côte d'Ivoire	31 January 2015	No	No	5 years 1 month
10	Djibouti	1 July 2007	November 2015	No	3 years 1 month
11	Egypt	9 March 2004	February 2020	No	1 month
12	Ethiopia	9 March 2003	January 2011	No	9 years 1 month
13	Equatorial Guinea	29 January 2014	No	No	6 years 1 month
14	Gabon	14 March 2003	No	No	16 years 11 months
15	The Gambia	28 January 2018	No	No	2 years 1 month
16	Ghana	9 March 2003	June 2005	No	14 years 8 months
18	Lesotho	8 July 2004	June 2010	No	10 years 8 months
19	Liberia	29 January 2011	No	No	9 years 1 month
20	Malawi	8 July 2004	No	No	15 years 7 months
21	Mali	28 May 2003	June 2009	No	10 years 8 months
22	Mauritania	30 January 2008	No	No	12 years 1 month
23	Mauritius	9 March 2003	July 2010	No	9 years 7 months
24	Mozambique	9 March 2004	June 2009	February 2019	1 year 1 month
25	Namibia	28 January 2017	No	No	3 years 1 month
26	Niger	14 July 2012	No	No	7 years 7 months
27	Nigeria	9 March 2003	June 2009	No	11 years 4 months
28	Rwanda	9 March 2003	June 2005	No	14 years 8 months
29	São Tomé & Príncipe	28 January 2007	No	No	13 years 1 months
30	Senegal	9 March 2004	January 2017	No	3 years 1 month

6   Yarik Turianskyi, "The State of Governance in Africa: What Indices Tell Us" (Occasional Paper 232, South African Institute for International Affairs, Johannesburg, May 2016), https://saiia.org.za/research/the-state-of-governance-in-africa-what-indices-tell-us/.

31	Seychelles	8 February 2020	No	No	1 month
32	Sierra Leone	8 July 2004	January 2012	No	8 years 1 month
33	South Africa	9 March 2003	September 2007	No	12 years 7 months
34	Sudan	22 January 2006	January 2018	No	2 years 1 month
35	Tanzania	26 May 2004	January 2013	No	7 years 1 month
36	Togo	29 June 2008	No	No	11 years 8 months
37	Tunisia	26 January 2013	No	No	7 years 1 month
38	Uganda	9 March 2003	January 2009	31 January 2018	2 years 1 month
39	Zambia	22 January 2006	26 January 2013	No	7 years 1 month
40	Zimbabwe	8 February 2020	No	No	1 month

▇ Acceded over 10 years ago

▇ Underwent first review over 10 years ago

Source: Compiled by the authors from Country Review Reports and the APRM website

Since 2016 the APRM has been on a proactive campaign to encourage new members to join, including working with regional economic communities to encourage accession at regional events. Has the APRM reached critical mass, making it hard for the remaining 15 states to remain outside? Non-members include countries with low-level civil wars, such as the CAR, Libya and Somalia. Governance is hard to monitor under such circumstances. Yet some would argue that the APRM is precisely what is needed to diagnose problems and develop solutions in these states, provided they have the political will to address the challenges. There is a precedent of reviews of post-conflict states such as Côte d'Ivoire, Rwanda and Sierra Leone.

Of course, there is also the possibility that the drive for universal accession could draw in countries already committed to good governance that then become a force for good. Botswana's recent accession could be a case in point; it would arguably have stayed away if not for the campaign for universal accession. A balance should be maintained – universal accession is not a panacea, but neither should it be assumed that those who accede because of the campaign will have a negative impact on the APRM. If it adds value, states will accede regardless, and the campaign for universal accession will deliver results only to the extent that each African country decides to join intentionally.

Will it prove ever more difficult for non-members to remain outside the APRM?

With the APRM now more closely tied to the AU as a 'specialised agency', in terms of its budget and reporting lines, will it prove ever more difficult for non-members to remain outside the APRM?

'Slow' states

The APRM currently has a serious problem with 'slow' states, defined for the purposes of this paper as members that have joined over 10 years ago but have since made little effort to start the review process. There are nine such states, with the worst offenders being Cameroon, Gabon and the Republic of Congo. All three signed up to the APRM in the year it was launched – 2003. Angola, Egypt and Malawi joined a year later. Of these six states, only Egypt has been reviewed, in February 2020. While aiming for new members, the APRM must ensure its existing members comply with and speed up their national processes.

> While aiming for new members, the APRM must ensure its existing members comply with and speed up their national processes

The pace of the APRM reviews does not, however, inspire enthusiasm. Only two reviews (one first generation and one second generation) took place in both 2018 and 2019. In 2020 one full review and three targeted reviews were presented to heads of state. If universal accession were achieved, the APRM would need substantial gearing up to serve so many states adequately, and do something about its recalcitrant members.

Potential pitfalls

It is important to bear in mind the spirit in which APRM reviews are carried out. Country Review Reports (CRRs) might be competent but at the same time neglect (or downplay) difficult and sensitive issues, as was the case in the CRRs of Ethiopia, Rwanda and Sudan. This is complying with the APRM on a technical level without adhering to its spirit. The APRM was conceptualised as a thorough and honest country review, intended to unpack challenges in the realms of politics, society and economy, no matter how uncomfortable. To drop these standards and ease off pressure on countries because of tragic historical events is to fail to hold a frank discussion about the present and what needs to be done to improve it. Even worse is allowing authoritarian governments to control the review process, the narrative and, subsequently, the research findings. Countries that stifle public conversation about governance shortcomings for fear of being portrayed in a negative light should arguably not be part of the APRM in the first place.

A pertinent point in this regard is the late release of CRRs. According to APRM rules, these reports should be made public six months after being discussed at the forum. However, in some instances years pass before an official country launch takes place and before the

APRM Secretariat uploads the report to its website. Some reports are still only available in one language on the website and others have not been uploaded at all.

Conversations with high-ranking officials indicate that political sensitivity, particularly at election times, is often the reason for the delay. The governing party does not want to open itself up for scrutiny domestically and give the opposition extra ammunition. This narrow view indicates that some APRM member states see it as a foreign policy exercise rather than as a tool for improving governance domestically.

Dealing with the backlog

Another serious problem has been the failure to implement NPoAs, which are intended to address governance shortcomings identified in the final CRR. Some member states have not even bothered reporting on their implementation, as they are obliged to do. Many countries did not capitalise on the potential of the APRM by failing to implement their NPoAs. The APRM has also failed in establishing a space for itself amid numerous other initiatives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and poverty reduction strategies. It was conceptualised as an ongoing process whereby a country undergoes review, implements recommendations to address shortcomings, and then undergoes another review, with the cycle repeating every three to five years. However, in the 17 years since its inception, only Kenya, Uganda and Mozambique have undergone second reviews. A further 10 states underwent their first reviews over a decade ago with nothing happening since, except a few implementation reports.

> Targeted reviews could allow governments to sideline sensitive issues

The APRM has also instituted targeted reviews that examine specific areas of interest, rather than the comprehensive, all-encompassing reviews conducted at first. While shorter, more focused reports would indeed be faster to produce and more digestible for readers (on average, APRM CRRs are over 350 pages), there are nonetheless potential pitfalls. Targeted reviews could allow governments to sideline sensitive issues. Targeted reviews should not replace the full reviews.

Conclusion

Although universal accession is a worthy goal, the APRM should meet its core objectives first. Too few countries have been reviewed since its inception and hardly any have undergone second reviews. Country reviews are the APRM's raison d'être. The mechanism should also be stricter with member states that do not achieve meaningful progress.

Country reviews are the APRM's raison d'être

Its counterparts, the OGP and the EITI, show how this could be achieved. The former denotes errant members as 'inactive', effectively suspending them. The latter suspends or delists countries that do not make progress on EITI commitments or that close down civic space. While these are largely symbolic measures they mean much in international politics, as they affect the status of a country. The APRM still has the potential to improve governance in Africa, but to do that it needs to be more focused. This means ensuring that all of its members have undergone first reviews, and that those that have are both implementing their NPoAs and preparing for the second reviews.

Recommendations

- Pursue two strategic objectives simultaneously – clear the existing backlog of 'slow states' and ensure that new members hit the ground running.

- Keep the review comprehensive, spanning the four original thematic areas, but ensure that the CRRs are shorter and that the secretariat distils them, creating executive summaries, fact sheets, main findings and infographics to popularise them.

- Consider implementing a sanctions mechanism to use against countries that do not make progress in undergoing reviews, as well as countries that have undergone reviews but are not implementing their NPoAs.

- Encourage the APRM Secretariat and members more generally to pursue the goal of active participation just as strongly as the campaign to sign up new countries.

Authors

Steven Gruzd

is the head of the African Governance and Diplomacy Programme at the South African Institute of International Affairs. Steven holds an MSc from the London School of Economics in International Relations and works on the APRM, African governance and South African foreign policy.

Yarik Turianskyi

is the deputy programme head. He holds an MA in Political Science from the University of Pretoria and works on African governance, technology and multi-stakeholder initiatives.

Acknowledgement

About SAIIA

SAIIA is an independent, non-government think tank whose key strategic objectives are to make effective input into public policy, and to encourage wider and more informed debate on international affairs, with particular emphasis on African issues and concerns.

SAIIA's policy insights are situation analysis papers intended for policymakers, whether in government or business. They are designed to bridge the space between policy briefings and occasional papers.

Cover image

A colorful African map made out of tiles on Escadaria Selaron stairway in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2011 (Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP via Getty Images)