



Ten Reasons to Keep Faith with Africa's Peer Review Process

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A system promoting good governance should demand more accountable and transparent leadership and operations, and improve its communications and public outreach.
- Countries and continental structures should document, publicise and celebrate APRM successes — large and small — to maintain momentum, sustain interest, and garner support.
- All Panel recommendations should be integrated into National Programmes of Action, and implementation, monitoring and reporting must improve. All implementation reports should be made public and uploaded to national and continental APRM websites.
- An evidence-based, multi-country impact study would highlight successes, identify obstacles and provide proof of where the system works.
- The system creates many peer-learning opportunities and communities. These developments should be nurtured.

Steven Gruzd¹

Almost a decade after Africa's major governance monitoring mechanism was mooted, we must ask: What value has the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) added? Has it been worth the time and money? What has it changed?

Like any tool, much depends on the way it is used. Thus far, the APRM has raised awareness of governance issues, energised a continent and taken small but significant steps to remedy big problems. With committed leadership, greater transparency and better documentation of success stories, the mechanism promises to become even more significant in future. Here are ten reasons for optimism.

The fact that the system exists is remarkable. Many doubted that Africa's leaders could hold one another accountable — even to a limited degree — after asserting for decades that individual states were sovereign and internal affairs off limits. Now, through this African-owned and African-driven effort, the APRM fundamentally seeks to reverse this lack of accountability. It acknowledges that it matters how leaders behave. Peer review seeks to make frankness, robust debate and criticism less threatening and more acceptable in Africa.

KEY OBJECTIVES AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

According to its 2002 *Base Document*, 'The primary purpose of the APRM is to foster the adoption of policies, standards and practices that lead to political stability, high economic growth, sustainable development and accelerated sub-regional and continental integration through sharing of experiences and reinforcement of successful and best practices, including identifying deficiencies and assessing the need for capacity building. Every review exercise ... must be technically competent, credible and free of political manipulation.'

The APRM is more ambitious and extensive than the sectoral peer review system of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development which served as a model. For some, the heads of state 'peer review' discussions are the weakest link. Meant to epitomise the system, they are over in a few hours. Critics point out that Kenya's president has never been asked to explain his country's post-election violence; nor have the leaders of Algeria and Uganda been questioned about alleged constitutional manipulation to extend their terms of office. Yes, the APRM undoubtedly needs to improve its ability to hold leaders to account, but at least it provides a regular, institutionalised platform for doing so. It is helping to make Africa's leaders more comfortable about sharing their problems. Meetings are starting to interrogate robustly big questions facing Africa, such as the best path to development. The system is unique, and some Latin American states are reportedly considering adopting the APRM for use in their region.

2 The APRM has outlived its architects. At the turn of the millennium, the APRM was merely an idea. It was built on the conceptual work of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in its 'Compact for African Recovery' in 2000, after decades of searching for ways to spur and sustain Africa's development. A single sentence in a 2001 document outlining the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) spoke of 'setting up mechanisms for reviewing progress in the achievement of mutually agreed targets and compliance with mutually agreed standards.' Promoted most vigorously by Presidents Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, the APRM did not implode when both left office. The continental and national structures have been established and continue to meet and engage regularly, sometimes vigorously.

Systemic reforms have been initiated. In mid-2009 the APRM Secretariat launched a project to 'streamline and fast-track' the APRM. Through open tenders, technical institutes from Algeria, Ghana, South Africa and Uganda were selected to help rework and modernise the APRM Self-Assessment Questionnaire. An Ethiopian

institution was chosen to develop a system to improve the quality of information submitted by states, and so enable better monitoring and reporting. A report recommending refinements to APRM tools is due to be considered by the APR's Panel of Eminent Persons, which was invigorated by four new members in January 2010. New blood presents an opportunity for renewal. Dynamic and visionary leadership, with integrity and transparency, is crucial to maintain trust in a process with a strong track record and tremendous potential.

3 More states support the system. Today 29 African countries, representing more than 75% of the continent's population, have voluntarily acceded to peer review: eight in 2003, 14 in 2004 and one or two more in each succeeding year. Togo was the last to formally sign up in June 2008. Cape Verde will make it 30 when paperwork is completed. None has yet chosen to leave, although Mauritania was suspended after its 2008 coup, and several long-time signatories have shown negligible progress. Debate continues on whether the APRM should concentrate on adding new members or consolidating its influence. Whatever the mix, the APRM will need strong forward planning to sustain this success and enhance its efficacy and longevity.

4 Pace has picked up. The first country (Ghana) was only peer reviewed in January 2006, almost four years after the APRM's establishment. But the system has become more efficient with time and experience. Two more (Rwanda and Kenya) were reviewed in June 2006, two in 2007 (Algeria and South Africa), four in 2008 (Benin, Uganda, Nigeria and Burkina Faso) and three in 2009 (Mali, Mozambique and Lesotho). With expected reviews of Ethiopia and Mauritius in July 2010, the mechanism will have hit the halfway mark well ahead of predictions based on the initial tardy pace. This suggests that the remaining reviews could be tackled more briskly if countries are ready (a big 'if' in some cases). Other factors necessary to sustain the pace include reinvigoration of the Panel, more stability and authority for the Secretariat to make staffing and

funding decisions once the host agreement signed with the South African government crystallises, and the expected expansion of Secretariat staff.

5 Reports are comprehensive and frank. The Country Review Reports paint an honest picture of governance. They commend countries for 'best practices'; constructively point out governance weaknesses; and emphasise fundamental fault lines (dubbed 'cross-cutting' or 'over-arching' issues). Importantly, they are made public, albeit well after the stipulated six-month period. Reports diagnosed both election-related ethnic violence in Kenya and bubbling xenophobic tensions in South Africa, even if recommendations went unheeded. Common challenges that were revealed include a dominant executive, insufficient separation of powers, managing diversity, curbing corruption and strengthening accountability institutions. While seldom revealing new information, the reports highlight key intervention areas. Potentially, they can harmonise overlapping reform efforts by setting realistic deadlines, budgets and oversight processes.

6 The APRM has spurred reforms. Many identified problems are complex and it will take time to discern real change. So showing where and how the mechanism makes a difference is vital. Here are some reported governance gains from the implementation of APRM National Programmes of Action from early countries:

- Ghana has developed a draft land use master plan; established a ministry of chieftaincy and cultural affairs; increased its district assemblies from 138 to 166; passed laws on human trafficking, persons with disabilities, whistleblowers and domestic violence; drafted a national policy on the aged; and established several institutions to counter corruption including tender boards and internal audit agencies.
- Rwanda was singled out for praise in the World Bank's 2010 *Doing Business* survey for implementing business reforms and rectifying corporate governance weaknesses revealed by

its APRM report.

- Kenya has established 148 peace committees; passed laws on political parties, maternity and paternity leave, sexual offences and refugees; developed a master plan on land use; established agencies to combat drugs and tender irregularities and improve ethical conduct; increased immunisation coverage dramatically since 2003; and established a ministry of women and children's affairs. APRM recommendations helped inform its proposed new constitution.
- In South Africa — despite no explicit attribution to the APRM — unregulated private funding to political parties has been slated for reform, and parliamentary floor-crossing scrapped.

The APRM has also helped to raise awareness of codes and standards developed in Africa, and the degree to which these are implemented. It has caused Ghana, Lesotho and Rwanda to improve record-keeping systems.

7 Profiling positive practices. 'Best practices' highlight a body of commendable initiatives that help counter negative images of Africa. Some, like South Africa's low-cost *mzansi* accounts for previously un-banked clients, offer home-grown solutions to common problems. Others highlight global leadership. Since 1987, Nigeria's Technical Aid Programme has offered practical skills and technical expertise to developing countries, belying the perception that African states are only aid recipients. Countries offer inspiration by example; Kenya mobilised domestic resources to reduce dependency on foreign aid. They also acknowledge important policy steps taken, such as Nigeria's enactment of national legislation to promote transparency in its oil and gas sectors. However, countries should avoid merely copying what has worked elsewhere, without paying attention to the particular context. Some quick-win solutions proved unsustainable — such as Ghana reducing the size of cabinet, only to increase it again. Countries should concentrate on implementing reforms, not manufacturing public relations material to fill reports.

8 The APRM empowers people. Participating countries are required to involve their citizens in assessing governance systems. APRM guidelines state that the process is 'designed to be open and participatory ... the APRM will engage key stakeholders to facilitate exchange of information and national dialogue on good governance and socio-economic development programmes, thereby increas[ing] the transparency of the decision-making processes, and build[ing] trust in the pursuit of national development goals.' This opens up political space for both the governed and their governors. The reports may not be written exclusively by permanent secretaries or professors, and countries create multi-stakeholder councils to manage the process. Tensions between government and civil society often surfaced, notably in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. But this friction allowed underlying issues to be aired and, ultimately, managed. In some countries with nascent multi-party politics, where opposition parties and civil society are routinely labelled 'enemies', the APRM provided a first chance for antagonists to collaborate formally on national initiatives. The APRM demonstrates that citizens need to demand better governance if they want to get it. If the process is fair, the people will support it; if they sense exclusion and manipulation, they will condemn and criticise.

9 The APRM promotes peer learning. The process is not limited to heads of state. Other groupings — focal points, governing councils, national secretariats and technical research institutions — learn much from their regular interaction. Ghana and Kenya pioneered a four-pronged research system (desk work, household surveys, expert interviews and focus group discussions) widely adopted by others. Uganda made a point of actively learning from Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda and South Africa. Ghana took the initiative to mentor West African states, including

Benin, Burkina Faso and Sierra Leone. There has also been a burgeoning collection of African governance analysis published by think-tanks and academics, while APRM reports have provided material for activists and the media to focus debate on governance issues, from corruption in Nigeria to population growth in Uganda and xenophobia in South Africa. However, there has been less cross-country information-sharing and networking by civil society groups. The APRM ethos of 'learning by doing' incrementally imbeds good governance expectations and practices. It shows that Africa can.

10 Strong international support. Although undertaken by Africa for Africa, the APRM is closely watched by external partners and has generated considerable international support. According to the APRM's 2009 annual report, bilateral and multilateral partners contributed almost \$13 million at continental level between 2003 and 2009, compared to \$20.5 million contributed by member states (Algeria, Nigeria and South Africa paid more than half, and many countries remain in arrears on their minimum annual contribution of \$100,000). At this point it is difficult to ascribe changes in aid, trade and investment levels solely and directly to the APRM; no comparative, empirical work has been done. But if a country has undergone review and is tackling problems, this would help improve its international image, particularly among major Western donors. And if the process continues to be taken seriously and programmes of action gain real traction, this support is likely to grow. Conversely, if the APRM becomes a hollow shell, support will wither.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Steven Gruzd is head of the Governance and APRM Programme at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA).

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