Strengthening Peer Learning in the African Peer Review Mechanism: The Case for Best Practices

Tšoeu Petlane[1]

RECOMMENDATIONS

For official APRM structures

• Define best practices, and provide guidance for their investigation as part of the country self-assessment report.

• Mandate technical research institutions to document best practices during self-assessment research.

• Establish a repository documenting all best practices from assessed countries at the APRM Secretariat for public information, and package these for peer learning purposes.

• Schedule sessions at each APRM Forum meeting to showcase best practices and facilitate peer learning. This could begin with 'self-assessment process best practice' to assist new member countries.

For civil society and researchers

• Civic organisations and other non-state actors (including academic and research institutions) should use existing cross-national forums to discuss national best practices in specific fields, and encourage their adoption.

• Establish 'APRM learning forums' on a yearly basis to assess the uptake of identified best practices and to disseminate information around new ones.

• Encourage and enable African scholars to spend their sabbaticals at universities and research centres studying and documenting best practices.

• Initiate courses and programmes in AU and APRM studies at universities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Identification of best practices is central to the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), which is meant to foster the adoption of policies that lead to good governance, sustained development, economic growth and enhanced integration on the continent. Although still underdeveloped and poorly defined, best practices can contribute to strengthening and achieving the objectives of the APRM.

This policy briefing argues that best practices remain an underutilised output of the APRM, although they have the potential to stimulate and enhance robust engagement by all stakeholders. The best practices already identified in the 15 published country review reports (CRRs) provide a rich resource for peer learning nationally and across borders. This policy briefing makes recommendations for using best practices to drive peer learning, including developing a clear definitional framework, integrating their identification into country self-assessment research, outlining their uses, and developing cross-country mechanisms for communicating about them. Academics and researchers are encouraged to engage in rigorous debate on the concept and to contribute towards a better understanding and use of best practices within the APRM, thereby strengthening indigenous thinking about governance in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

One of the key pillars of the APRM is the identification of best practices in the four thematic areas of country assessment.[2] These are then reported in each country's official CRR. With 15 CRRs published thus far,[3] more than 200 of these practices – sometimes labelled 'good' practices – have been identified.

Ideally, best practices identify specific (and often common) problems, outline a course of action or process undertaken, and detail how the action was successfully used to resolve the issue. Because they are ostensibly the most successful, reliable or effective approach to solving identified challenges, best practices could be seen as examples, models or templates for other countries facing similar problems. Therefore these are to be encouraged and widely publicised so as to contribute to improvements in governance – and to more effectively assist in bolstering and spreading reform. Within the APRM, best practices provide the most valuable material for peer learning (the sharing of experiences and mutual support among participating countries, as well as others around the continent).

However, as the APRM enters its second decade, little attention seems to be paid to best practices, and those so far identified remain confined to the CRRs, with little usage and impact beyond their countries of origin. This raises a question as to the place and purpose of best practices within the APRM's wider mandate, namely the improvement of governance, sustainable development, economic growth and integration on the continent.

EXPERIENCE WITH APRM BEST PRACTICES

In 2011, the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) published *'African Solutions: Best Practices from the African Peer Review Mechanism',* a study based on the first 12 CRRs.[4] This was the first comprehensive treatment of both the concept and content of best practices in the APRM; it represented the culmination of work started in early 2010 by a team of researchers involved in APRM research and analysis (including participation in country self-assessments and revision of the Country Self-Assessment Questionnaire). At about the same time that the SAIIA research was initiated, the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) also convened a workshop of APRM experts in Addis Ababa to discuss, among other things, best practices. The result of this work was a book launched at the African Union (AU) Summit in May 2013.[5] Therefore, some work has begun on examining the place, function and future of best practices in the APRM during the past two to three years.

The work of UNECA has highlighted, among other things:

> the challenge for the APRM … to mobilise and sustain citizen participation in its country and continental structures and processes in order to prevent 'APRM-fatigue' … particularly its bureaucratisation and [the potential of] being used to legitimise anti-people policies and anti-democratic processes.[6]

The SAIIA study identified three areas of weaknesses in APRM best practices:

- conceptualisation and definition;
- processes and logic of their identification; and
- integration into the overarching APRM project.[7]

This policy briefing is concerned with the last point, that of integration. For it will only be with the proper situating of best practices within the APRM that these will be transformed from reported instances in reviewed countries into widely adopted, adapted and used templates that change governance in Africa. The question therefore is: how can this be done?

STRENGTHS OF APRM BEST PRACTICES

The APRM is an innovative and welcome initiative in the quest for good governance, citizen participation and the promotion of sustainable,

integrated and prosperous economies in Africa. One of its greatest achievements has been the opening up of space and encouragement of frank dialogue between citizen and state, as well as among African countries on important national issues. The following four points are the APRM's strengths, specifically regarding the place and function of best practices within this trajectory of review, planning and reform:

• demonstrating that serious, critical and constructive dialogue can take place within countries without threatening the state – and thereby transforming the nature of political dialogue and dynamics in Africa;
• demonstrating that African leaders are willing to discuss frankly the challenges facing their countries, and thereby distilling lessons and learning from each other in a non-threatening, non-confrontational manner;
• documenting home-grown solutions to common problems that many countries have faced in isolation in the past, thereby demonstrating that there are things that Africans do well; and
• providing an incentive to perceive review as more than just a diagnosis of difficulties but also as a record of progress made towards agreed goals and standards.

BEST PRACTICES: POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES FOR PEER LEARNING

The APRM remains a work in progress: many of its processes are still evolving, and its ultimate objectives will only be achieved in the distant future. It is therefore important to identify the challenges it faces, as well as the potential that exists towards addressing these.

Although the collection and collation of best practices in the APRM have yielded many examples, these continue to remain in the CRRs, and are yet to be systematically disseminated, communicated and integrated into practice. The reason for this weakness is threefold. Firstly, the vision of where and how best practices fit in and contribute to the wider objectives of the APRM has not been systematically articulated.

Secondly, the conceptual definition of what constitutes a best practice and how to identify one remains unclear. Thirdly, the strategies for the dissemination, debate and integration of identified best practices into the planning, programming and implementation platforms of the various stakeholders (and not only governments) are yet to be developed.

As the SAIIA study revealed, the concept of best practices is one of the APRM's main anchors and is crucial for translating this initiative into a practical tool for transformation and governance reform. *How* this should happen, however, is not spelled out. The use of best practices as a key anchor for peer learning would be a strategic way to place these at the centre of the APRM's project. This would make it easier to engage stakeholders and to develop strategies and programmes of knowledge dissemination, lesson distillation and practice adaptation. In this manner, therefore, best practices can be placed at the centre of the APRM as the material demonstrating that Africa is capable of solving its problems, and as examples of what can be achieved in specific cases.

In addition to anchoring best practices within the wider APRM project, it is important that the identification and documentation of best practices are built into the procedures that guide the country self-assessment research. So far this has not been done, and these successes are still identified at the end of the assessment, and mainly by external country review teams, rather than internal country self-assessment teams (researchers).

Building the search for best practices into self-assessments, and providing guidelines for this, would have several advantages. The first is depth, namely the possibility of providing systematic details of what problems the identified practice sought to address, how and why it was adopted, how it has worked, and what its results are. The second is national ownership: the identification of best practices would be part of the national input that is the self-assessment research. Identification of these practices would have indigenous ownership, thus creating support for their further popularisation and dissemination among peer communities – nationally and across

borders. Another advantage is identification of possible transmission strategies from as early as the assessment phase. In summary, therefore, the integration of best practices research, including guidance on their identification and documentation, would greatly enhance the rigour of self-assessment research, and directly support the systematic treatment of best practices as a peer learning tool within the APRM.

In order to be effective, peer learning has to be based on the use of existing and new modes of transmitting information, knowledge and behavioural change. At the heart of the APRM is the idea that practices in policy and governance will change through gentle persuasion among peers – from government leaders to communities and civic organisations. Therefore, the 'marketing' of best practices as material for and examples of successful policy, governance and developmental behaviour has to be approached systematically and be built into APRM processes. So far, only passing references to workshops and networking are made in official documents, and there appears to be little cross-country dialogue beyond formal summits and forums of (mainly) government focal points. Here the strategies have to come from both the continental secretariat and country-level actors, independently and collectively exploring and using avenues that would enable them to share experiences and information more effectively.

ENDNOTES

1   Tšoeu Petlane is the Director of the Transformation Resource Centre in Maseru, Lesotho. In 2013 he was a Visiting Research Fellow at SAIIA. He is the former Deputy Programme Head for Governance and APRM at SAIIA, and has worked extensively on the APRM, including leading the Lesotho self-assessment research (2007–8), and revision of the Economic Governance Section of the APRM Questionnaire (2010–11).

2   The four thematic areas of APRM review are: Democracy and Political Governance, Economic Governance and Management, Corporate Governance, and Socio-Economic Development.

3   By July 2013 the following 15 CRRs had been published (in alphabetical order): Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa and Uganda.

4   Petlane T & S Gruzd (eds), *African Solutions: Best Practices from the African Peer Review Mechanism*. Johannesburg: SAIIA and Jacana Media, 2011.

5   UNECA, *Capturing the 21st Century: African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) Best Practices and Lessons Learned*. Addis Ababa: UNECA, 2011.

6   *Ibid.*, p. 10.

7   Petlane T & S Gruzd, *op. cit.*