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## Assessing the Implications of the APRM's Expanded Mandate

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# Abstract

The core mandate of the AU's African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) – initiated in 2002 and established in 2003 – is 'to foster the adoption of policies, standards and practices leading to political stability, high economic growth, sustainable development and accelerated regional and continental economic integration'. While the Expanded Mandate and the leadership's turnaround strategy can be credited with the momentum, renewed energy and interest the APRM has enjoyed from member states, civil society organisations and development partners on the continent (and beyond), some contend that it has also distracted the APRM from its core focus. This paper reflects on the implications of this Expanded Mandate as it currently stands (ie, decisions taken between 2016 and 2019). It also explores some of the opportunities and challenges it has created for the APRM, the impact of COVID-19 on its implementation and, finally, how institutional changes within the APRM Continental Secretariat could influence its future. The Expanded Mandate has created an opportunity for the APRM to tackle some of the challenges that come with its voluntary nature. With innovative instruments such as targeted reviews, countries that were not necessarily keen on full reviews or that may have faced challenges in conducting full reviews are still able to participate by opting to scrutinise specific areas of concern. For instance, Djibouti, Namibia, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Zambia have conducted targeted reviews. In repositioning the APRM to also monitor progress against the AU's Agenda 2063 and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), countries that are not APRM members can also benefit from technical workshops. The intervention areas pursued in response to the Expanded Mandate have generated renewed momentum and interest from countries and development partners on the continent and globally. The question must be asked, however: are the priorities and projects that this period of renewal, reinvigoration and restoration has produced sustainable, and do they add significant value to the intent of the APRM? In short, the APRM has an opportunity to harness the energy created by Expanded Mandate projects to sharpen its focus; retain relevance to member states (beyond the political sphere to meet the expectations from citizens); and ensure institutional stability. In order to do this the building that has taken place over the past years needs to be consolidated. This means rationalising actions and, importantly, focusing on those that will have a direct influence or positive impact on member states' ability to actualise the recommendations in reviews.

## Introduction

The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) is a specialised agency of the AU that was initiated in 2002 and established in 2003, in the framework of the implementation of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).<sup>1</sup> At its establishment, through the

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<sup>1</sup> African Peer Review Mechanism, "[About the APRM](#)".

decisions of the NEPAD Heads of State and Government Implementation Committee and per its Base Document,<sup>2</sup> the APRM was defined as ‘an instrument voluntarily acceded to by Member States of the African Union for self-assessment, peer-learning and self-monitoring in democracy and good governance’.<sup>3</sup> The core mandate of the APRM, lauded as a pioneering ‘African-owned and African-led’ instrument, was<sup>4</sup>

to foster the adoption of policies, standards and practices leading to political stability, high economic growth, sustainable development and accelerated regional and continental economic integration, with codes and standards contained in the Declaration on Democracy, Political, Economic and Corporate Governance and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG).

From 2003 to 2015, this was the scope within which the APRM pursued its activities and acceding African member states engaged with it.

## The Expanded Mandate of the APRM emerged when the mechanism was at a turning point in its history

The Expanded Mandate of the APRM emerged when the mechanism was at a turning point in its history. Broadly speaking, the Expanded Mandate refers to the series of decisions taken by the AU Assembly between 2016 and 2019 that broadened the scope of the APRM’s work in promoting and supporting governance improvement efforts on the continent. During this period, most member states’ appetite to embrace and apply this novel governance self-assessment tool seemed to have waned. Although 33 countries had acceded to the APRM by December 2015, only 17 have conducted their first-generation reviews (ie, base reviews),<sup>5</sup> with the most recent ones being in 2013.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the APRM’s Continental Secretariat, the structure responsible for executing the implementation of the APRM, had been without a permanent chief executive officer (CEO) for over seven years. It faced management

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2 APRM, *Objectives, Standards, Criteria and Indicators for the African Peer Review Mechanism ("The APRM")*, NEPAD/HSGIC-03-2003/APRM/Guideline/OSCI/, March 9, 2003, 1; AU, *African Peer Review Mechanism Base Document*, AHG/235 (XXXVIII), Annex II, Thirty-Eighth Ordinary Session of the Organization of African Unity (Addis Ababa: AU, July 8, 2002).

3 APRM, *Objectives, Standards, Criteria*, 1.

4 APRM, "Memorandum of Understanding on the African Peer Review Mechanism", NEPAD/HSGIC/03-2003/APRM/MOU, March 9, 2003; AU, *Decisions, Declarations, Tribute Resolutions*, Eleventh Ordinary Session, AU Assembly Decision 198 (XI), July 8, 2008; AU, *Decisions, Declarations and Resolutions*, AU Assembly Decision 527 (XXIII Assembly of the Union, Twenty-Third Ordinary Session, June 26-27, 2014; AU, *Assembly of the African Union: Decisions*, Eleventh Extraordinary Session, Ext/Assembly/AU/Dec.1-4(XI), November 17-18, 2018.

5 Steven Gruzd and Yarik Turianskyi, "Should All Africa's States Join the APRM?" (Policy Insights 86, South African Institute of International Affairs, Johannesburg, June 2020), 6.

6 The last reviews before the 2016 Expanded Mandate decision and turnaround strategy by the newly appointed CEO were conducted in Zambia (January 2013), Tanzania (January 2013) and Djibouti (November 2015).



deficiencies, waning political and financial support, and diminished confidence from citizens, seemingly incapable of effectively delivering on its core mandate.<sup>7</sup>

Although 33 countries had acceded to the APRM by December 2015, only 17 have conducted their base reviews, with the most recent ones being in 2013

It was in this context that in January 2016, under the leadership of Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, the APRM Heads of State and Government Forum held a special summit dedicated to the 'revitalisation of the APRM'. It appointed a CEO – Prof. Eddy Maloka, a South African – and deliberated on six priority areas,<sup>8</sup> which are now the core features of the Expanded Mandate. In addition, the summit adopted a three-pronged turnaround strategy focused on the restoration, reinvigoration and renewal of the APRM. The six priority areas identified through the decision of the January 2016 Summit and that anchor the Expanded Mandate are:

- revisiting the philosophy of the APRM;
- revising the review methodology;
- ensuring compliance with APRM principles;
- mobilising resources;
- integrating the APRM into the AU system; and
- interrogating the role of the APRM in monitoring the AU's Agenda 2063 and the UN's post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>9</sup>

## Renewal, restoration and reinvigoration: An overview of the Expanded Mandate

The expansion of the mandate of the APRM did not end there. Three further decisions were taken by the heads of state in January 2017,<sup>10</sup> January 2018<sup>11</sup> and February 2019. The January 2017 decision obligates the APRM to track the implementation of, and monitor

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7 APRM, Strategic Plan 2016–2020 (Addis Ababa: APRM, 2016), 4.

8 APRM, *Annual Report 2019–2020* (Addis Ababa: APRM, 2020), 12.

9 APRM, *Annual Report 2019–2020*, 12.

10 AU, *Assembly of the African Union*.

11 AU, *Assembly of the Union: Decisions, Declarations and Resolutions*, Assembly/AU/Dec. 686 (XXX), 30<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session, 28–29 January 2018.

and evaluate, key governance areas on the continent. It also compels the APRM to provide support to member states in the field of rating agencies.

## In January 2018 the AU Assembly assigned the APRM to situate itself as an early warning tool for conflict prevention on the continent

In January 2018 the AU Assembly assigned the APRM to situate itself as an early warning tool for conflict prevention on the continent, ‘in the context of harmony and synergy between [the] APRM, APSA [African Peace and Security Architecture] and AGA [African Governance Architecture]’.<sup>12</sup> This decision also urged non-member states to accelerate their accession to the APRM to ensure universal accession by 2023. By implication, it would be the APRM’s responsibility to drive action towards this goal. Finally, through the February 2019<sup>13</sup> decision, the APRM was given the responsibility to collaborate with the AGA and develop the AGR, to be tabled every two years. Linked to this, the APRM was also asked to assist all member states to generate national governance reports.<sup>14</sup>

Also critical was the influence of the ‘Kagame Reforms’, aimed at the overall AU system, as a contextual driver within which the revitalisation agenda of the APRM was conceived. These reforms emanated from a review commissioned in July 2016<sup>15</sup> by Rwandan President Paul Kagame, in response to ‘the urgent need to accelerate the ongoing reform of the AU’ by conducting a systematic identification of ‘the AU’s strengths and shortcomings and consider proposals for reform’.<sup>16</sup> In the words of Kagame,<sup>17</sup>

Africa today is ill-prepared to adequately respond to current events, because the African Union still has to be made fit for purpose ... as a result, we have a dysfunctional organization in which member states see limited value, global partners find little credibility and our citizens have no trust.

This diagnosis informed the six areas of reform that were identified as key to strengthening the overall AU system. These areas<sup>18</sup> were the core elements of the Kagame Reforms (along

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12 APRM, *Overview of the African Peer Review Mechanism and its Mandate* (Johannesburg: APRM, 2021), 2.

13 AU, *Decisions, Declarations, Resolutions and Motions*, Assembly/AU/Dec.720(XXXII), 32<sup>nd</sup> Ordinary Session of the Assembly, February 10-11, 2019.

14 AU, *Decisions, Declarations, Resolutions and Motions*.

15 Paul Kagame, *The Imperative to Strengthen Our Union: Report on the Proposed Recommendations for the Institutional Reform of the African Union*, Report (Addis Ababa: AU, January 2017), 5.

16 Kagame, *The Imperative to Strengthen*, 5.

17 Kagame, *The Imperative to Strengthen*, 6, 9.

18 Paul Kagame, Report on the Implementation of the Decision on the Institutional Reform of the African Union, PowerPoint presentation (Addis Ababa: AU, 2017), 2.

with 21 decision items falling within the six areas) through the Reform Decision adopted at the 28<sup>th</sup> Summit of the AU Assembly in January 2017.<sup>19</sup>

- Focus on key priorities with continental scope;
- realign AU institutions;
- connect the AU to citizens;
- manage the business of the AU efficiently and effectively;
- finance the AU sustainably; and
- implement the reforms.

As one senior official of the APRM Secretariat explained,<sup>20</sup>

The Kagame Reforms were central because they [sic] said they wanted the APRM to take on a monitoring and evaluation role in the continent and this opened the space [for the APRM] to engage with the AGA. In the past, there were African Governance reports compiled by UNECA. The Reform Decision allowed the APRM to take the space to re-establish an Africa Governance Report, become central to governance reporting and gain acceptance in the African Governance Architecture.

The revitalisation ambition was necessary at the time, as it aimed to re-align the APRM with evolving continental and global realities and ultimately, as per its core mission, deepen democratic practices in African member states and ‘encourage and foster the building of transformative leadership and continuing constructive national dialogue through inclusive and participatory self- and peer-assessment processes’.<sup>21</sup> It has, however, come with its own complexities and raised questions regarding the efficacy of some of the interventions. Some critiques also suggest that, since its inception, the Expanded Mandate has encroached on the core mandate of the APRM, ie, conducting comprehensive country reviews. This may have led to insufficient focus on areas such as increasing the pace of reviews among longstanding APRM members and improving the implementation of National Programmes of Action (NPOAs).<sup>22</sup> However, while the APRM’s scope may have increased, it is debateable

The revitalisation ambition was necessary at the time, as it aimed to re-align the APRM with evolving continental and global realities

19 AU, *Decision on the Outcome of the Retreat of the Assembly of the African Union on the Institutional Reform of the African Union*, Assembly/AU/Dec/635(XXVIII), 28th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the Union, January 30–31, 2017.

20 Senior official at APRM Secretariat, interview by Kgothatso Semela, May 17, 2021.

21 APRM, *Strategic Plan 2016–2020*, 1.

22 Gruzd and Turianskyi, “Should All Africa’s States”, 8–9.

whether this has affected the pace of country reviews. As indicated earlier, 17 countries conducted first generation reviews between 2003 and 2013, while 10 peer reviews were conducted between 2017 and 2020.<sup>23</sup> In addition, six country and targeted reviews were 'ready and awaiting peer reviews' by the March 2021 APR Forum.<sup>24</sup>

Given the additions (between 2017-2019) to the initial scope of the Expanded Mandate (2016), it should not be surprising that the APRM has been under pressure to balance its focus on country reviews with what appears to be a continuous increase in the scope of its work, as a result of the decisions of member states. This paper looks at the implications of this Expanded Mandate, as it currently stands (ie, decisions taken between 2016 and 2019). It also explores some of the opportunities and challenges it has created for the APRM, the impact of COVID-19 on its implementation, and how institutional changes within the APRM Continental Secretariat could influence its future.

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## What has the Expanded Mandate produced?

The Expanded Mandate has created an opportunity for the APRM to tackle some of the challenges that come with its voluntary nature. With innovative instruments such as targeted reviews, countries that were not necessarily keen on full reviews or wanted to scrutinise specific areas of concern began to participate. For instance, Djibouti, Namibia, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Zambia have conducted targeted reviews.<sup>25</sup> In repositioning the APRM to also monitor progress against the AU Agenda 2063 and the SDGs, countries that are not members of the APRM can also benefit from technical workshops such as the Annual Methodology Forum (initiated in 2017) and the Annual Dialogue, focused on best practices to effectively integrate, monitor and implement Agenda 2063 and the SDGs into their National Development Plans (NDPs).<sup>26</sup> The forums not only help to build the capacity of countries' planning entities and statistical management departments but also create incentives for participation by those countries that would otherwise be reluctant to engage in APRM activities. Linked to these annual technical workshops has been a useful

23 APRM, *Close Out Report on APRM Revitalization: 2016-2020* (Addis Ababa: APRM, 2021), 11.

24 APRM, *Close Out Report*, 11.

25 APRM, *Annual Report 2019-2020*, 11, 19. The focus area of the target reviews for each of these countries was as follows: Djibouti - decentralisation; Namibia - youth unemployment; Senegal - mineral resources in the structural transformation of the Senegalese economy; and Sierra Leone - health governance and the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

26 APRM, *Annual Report 2019-2020*, 12.

scrutiny of the institutional implementation mechanisms, levels of awareness, partnership and coordination arrangements that countries have established to strengthen national implementation of the SDGs and Agenda 2063.<sup>27</sup> While the findings of this research project were useful in accelerating AU Agenda 2063 and SDGs, the endeavour did raise one question. Given the challenges countries seem to experience in implementing NPoAs, should a similar analysis not be prioritised to better understand the influence of country institutional arrangements, coordination mechanisms and partnerships on the implementation of NPoAs?<sup>28</sup>

In the following section, highlights of other projects pursued within the ambit of the Expanded Mandate are summarised.

The flagship AGR was produced as per the decision taken at the 32<sup>nd</sup> Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the AU in February 2019. The AGR is intended to be a biennial report on the state of governance in Africa, as a way of drawing attention to the collective governance challenges confronting African countries. To date, two AGRs have been published, in 2019 and 2021. This project has evolved and has been identified as one of the nine 'selected Key APRM initiatives' that will be embarked upon during the 2020–2024 strategic period. As set out in the 2020–2024 Strategic Plan, while the APRM 'will provide technical support to all 55 AU States to produce their own governance reports, there is a new intention to conduct National Governance Reports in every African country'.<sup>29</sup>

The APRM has also initiated a series of engagements aimed at positioning it as an early warning tool for conflict prevention

The APRM has also initiated a series of engagements aimed at positioning it as an early warning tool for conflict prevention. Specific measures established include linking APRM Country Review Reports to early warning and conflict prevention initiatives and mechanisms throughout the continent. One tangible output has been the AU Peace and Security Council's endorsement of the APRM Early Warning Framework for Conflict Prevention.<sup>30</sup> Technical support was given to 16 AU member states that elected to conduct Voluntary National APRM Reviews (VNRs) on the SDGs, in preparation for the 2019 round of the UN High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. The support given by the

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27 APRM, *Agenda 2063 and SDGs Implementation in Africa: Assessing Governance Mechanisms for Implementation of the African Union Agenda 2063 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Africa* (Addis Ababa: APRM, 2020), 2.

28 APRM, *Agenda 2063 and SDGs*, 2.

29 APRM, *Overview of the APRM*, 21.

30 Kapinga-Yvette Ngandu, "Positioning the APRM as an Early Warning Tool for Conflict Prevention", *Governance Link Newsletter* 8 (May 2020): 11–12, 14.



APRM Continental Secretariat was a critical milestone in the joint APRM–UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) project partnership, which supported AU member states to monitor and deliver VNRs on the SDGs.<sup>31</sup>

Efforts have been made to drive the AU process to develop a continental policy framework that responds to the practices of international credit rating agencies. This included completing the first *African Sovereign Credit Ratings Review Report*, which was launched in October 2020. The APRM also publicly contested and responded to what are largely viewed as unfair and exploitative approaches to ratings decisions, as seen in the case of South Africa and Ethiopia.<sup>32</sup> In the context of the ambition to achieve universal accession to the APRM by 2023, extensive investments were made in lobbying and increasing membership by African countries. With Namibia (2017), The Gambia (2018), Botswana (2019), Zimbabwe (2020), Seychelles (2020) and, most recently, the Democratic Republic of Congo (March 2021) joining, the APRM has now been adopted by 41 out of 55 AU member states.<sup>33</sup>

As part of strengthening citizen participation and influence in the APRM, platforms for youth across the continent to formally own and shape their engagement with APRM processes were established. This began through the APRM Inaugural International Youth Symposium held in Ndjamena, Chad in July 2019 under the patronage of Idriss Déby Itno, the late president of Chad, who was also regarded as the ‘AU Youth Champion’. Under the theme ‘Youth as a driving force for good governance in Africa’, the symposium adopted the N’Djamena Declaration on Youth Participation in Good Governance Efforts in Africa<sup>34</sup> and set the tone for the establishment of platforms such as the APRM Youth Network. In 2020 the APRM Youth Network conducted a series of critical webinars in partnership with UNESCO to give voice to youth participation and leadership on strengthening good governance in the context of African responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>35</sup>

## Platforms for youth across the continent to formally own and shape their engagement with APRM processes were established

The APRM has also invested extensively in establishing and strengthening its partnerships (with global and regional development actors, think tanks, and research and academic

31 APRM, *Close Out Report*, 29–30.

32 Misheck Mutize, “Why the Neoliberal Policy Influence of Rating Agencies Must Be Neutralised”, *Governance Link Newsletter* 8 (May 2020): 21–25; APRM, “APRM, Moody’s and Fitch Seek to Bridge the Gap Between Rating Agencies and African Countries”, Press Release, November 6, 2020; APRM, “The Republic Of Congo Became the First Country to Receive APRM Technical Support on Credit Ratings”, Press Release, February 17, 2021.

33 APRM, *Overview of the APRM*, 9.

34 APRM, *Annual Report 2019–2020*, 14.

35 APRM, *Annual Report 2019–2020*, 44.

institutions) for joined-up project delivery and to expand its funding base. Joining longstanding partners such as the African Development Bank, the UN Development Programme and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), other partnerships were established or recalibrated with the APRM. Key partnerships have included the UN Committee of Experts in Public Administration, UNDESA, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation and Delaware State University. The partnership with Delaware State University is notable as it emerges from a growing interest to 'mobilise the sixth region of Africa' (ie, the African diaspora). It is aimed at establishing the Centre for Global Africa to 'serve as a platform to provide a more institutional and structured mechanism to enable Diaspora Africans to collaborate with actors on the Continent to support sustainable African progress from external assets'.<sup>36</sup> It is also worth noting that as part of this partnership expansion drive there has been a recalibration of civil society engagement through APRM National Governing Councils (NGCs), for instance. Efforts were made to galvanise the continental NGC platform and continue to build on longstanding formal cooperation with civil society partners such as the South African Institute of International Affairs.

Within the Continental Secretariat, the strategy to recruit and create opportunities for young African experts and scholars has proven to be effective in deliberately building a cadre of young activist governance professionals. These young experts not only gain important experience and build technical capability but also bring energy and agility to the Secretariat's project delivery. Although often overlooked, this has been an important feature of the Continental Secretariat's approach to rebuilding its institutional capability.

Within the Continental Secretariat, the strategy to recruit and create opportunities for young African experts and scholars has proven to be effective

This is only a snapshot of the many project areas that have been embarked upon over the past six years as part of the APRM's response to the Expanded Mandate. For instance, flagship projects such as the development of the AU Guidance Note on Corporate Governance (2019)<sup>37</sup> – in response to the high levels of non-compliance with country corporate governance guidelines and the absence of corporate governance frameworks in some countries – were also initiated. In addition, as part of the effort to improve the performance of countries' state-owned enterprises, the Africa Network on Corporate Governance of State-Owned Enterprises was launched in 2018. In 2020 webinars were held

<sup>36</sup> APRM, *Annual Report 2019–2020*, 13.

<sup>37</sup> APRM, *Framework for the Development of the African Union Guidance Note on Corporate Governance* (Addis Ababa: APRM, 2019), 3.

on the role of state-owned enterprises in the economic recovery of African countries post COVID-19, with a special focus on state-owned airlines and banks.<sup>38</sup>

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed globally forced the APRM to shift its strategic and operational approaches. In addition to adjusting its operational delivery, the Continental Secretariat developed guidelines to support national review processes. These guidelines were a necessary stop-gap measure since the Country Support Missions that would ordinarily take place in-country could not be conducted. Therefore, the guideline framework aimed to 'provide detailed steps and available ICT tools that National Governing Commissions, National Secretariats and Technical Research Institutes (NGCs/Secretariats/TRIs) tasked with conducting the self-assessment in participating countries could adopt/use during the various phases of the review process'.<sup>39</sup>

## The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed globally forced the APRM to shift its strategic and operational approaches

More significantly, by employing new ways of working during the pandemic (ie, going virtual) the APRM embarked on a project to investigate the responses of member states in combatting the spread of the virus, and deal with its impact on Africa's people and economies. Through the *Africa's Governance Response to COVID 19: Preliminary Report 2020*, comprehensive information was provided on the various governance measures and strategies countries implemented in response to COVID-19.<sup>40</sup> More importantly, the report sought to facilitate evidence-based policy responses to the crisis and enable information sharing.

The interventions pursued in response to the Expanded Mandate generated have renewed momentum and interest among countries and development partners on the continent and globally. These and many others (ie, research and knowledge products) have enabled the APRM to extend beyond the narrow focus of country reviews and the bureaucratic processes that come with the demands of review processes. The Continental Secretariat's response to the Expanded Mandate spoke to sceptics, those whose commitment have waned because of frustration with the process and, perhaps most importantly, inspired citizens to perceive the potential value of its impact and so re-engage.

The APRM's identification of NDPs and NPoAs as the most suitable mechanisms to track the implementation of the SDGs and the AU Agenda 2063 is also worth noting. Highlighting

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38 APRM, *Annual Report 2019–2020*, 43.

39 APRM, *Draft Guidelines for Countries to Implement the APRM Reviews Under Covid-19* (Addis Ababa: APRM, 2020), 2.

40 APRM, *Africa's Governance Response to Covid-19: Preliminary Report 2020* (Addis Ababa: APRM, 2020), 4.

this places the focus on one of the key impacts of the Expanded Mandate; that is, the scope it has created to engage with the practices of African countries (through reporting against what is reflected in their NDPs, if there are no NPoAs), irrespective of whether or not they have acceded to the APRM. It has also opened the door for engagement with African countries on their national level-reporting structures as many were found to be weak, thus creating a point of departure to establish mechanisms that would help to strengthen national structures. Politically, the membership has increased from 33 (December 2015) to 41 (April 2021), with 24 members having completed first generation peer reviews. Three have completed second generation reviews and five have done targeted reviews.<sup>41</sup>

The question must be asked though: is this basket of priorities and projects that this period of renewal, reinvigoration and restoration has produced sustainable, and does it add value to the intent of the APRM? The decisions that have cumulatively become the Expanded Mandate and the inherent obligation that the APRM has to execute these decisions mean that it faces the challenge of balancing tensions between several imperatives. First, sustaining the political appetite of member states to participate while remaining relevant; second, demonstrating concrete value addition for member states and citizens, particularly in terms of governance improvement efforts; and third, ensuring high-calibre expertise through a stable pool of professionals within the Continental Secretariat.

## The APRM has an opportunity to harness the energy created by Expanded Mandate projects

So what possibilities exist in managing this balancing act? In short, the APRM has an opportunity to harness the energy created by Expanded Mandate projects to

- sharpen focus;
- retain relevance to member states (beyond the political sphere but also in so far as the expectations of citizens); and
- ensure institutional stability.

In order to do this, however, the building that has taken place over the past years must be consolidated. This means rationalising actions and, in the first instance, focusing on those that will have a direct influence or positive impact on member states' ability to actualise the recommendations of reviews.

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<sup>41</sup> APRM, *Overview of the APRM*, 11.

# Deepen value addition from the APRM's core processes

## National Programmes of Action

The expectation that the APRM should monitor and evaluate progress against Agenda 2063 and the SDGs led to renewed calls for the APRM to be repositioned as a mechanism that galvanises member states to actually act on their NPoAs in relation to their NDPs. This renewed impetus, however, is not a new development – in as early as 2007 it became clear that it would be a challenge to implement NPoAs.<sup>42</sup> A 2011 UNECA report noted that effective implementation of NPoAs by pioneering APRM member countries was proving to be difficult and that, in fact, NPoAs were a ‘weak link’ in the APRM process. The report further stated that the lack of implementation was undermining the main objective of addressing the shortcomings uncovered in self-assessments.<sup>43</sup> The analyses conducted among pioneering countries identified a range of issues confronting NPoA implementation. These included the harmonisation of NPoAs with medium-term expenditure frameworks and national planning systems; synchronisation within existing national plans; budgeting and performance monitoring weaknesses; and absorptive capacities (ie, ensuring that APRM NPoAs reflect only governance projects and programmes and only those that are top priority).<sup>44</sup>

### NPoAs were a ‘weak link’ in the APRM process

The issues identified and the recommendations made are instructive in pointing to the technical complexity and skills required if effective monitoring of NPoAs is to take place. By its own admission, in its baseline analysis of 2016,<sup>45</sup> the APRM Continental Secretariat conceded that it did not have the capacity to independently assess countries’ NPoAs against the recommendations made in peer reviews. This gap should be prioritised, especially in view of the expectation that the Secretariat will assist all member states to generate annual governance reports. This, however, cannot just be the responsibility of governments. Civil society organisations that are committed to improving governance on

42 UN Economic Commission for Africa, *Summary Synthesis Report: Harmonising APRM-NPoAs and other National Plans into a Common Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) – Experiences from Ghana, Rwanda, Uganda, and Benin* (Addis Ababa: UNECA, March 2010), 2.

43 UNECA, *Harmonizing APRM-NPoAs and other National Plans into a Common Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF): A Framework Document* (Addis Ababa: UNECA, May 2011), vi.

44 UNECA, *Summary Synthesis Report*, 10–12.

45 APRM, *Strategic Plan 2016–2020*, 11.



the continent must be ready to support these efforts technically, and by continuing to give constructive critiques. Such critiques must point out deficiencies while also proposing solutions that help to ensure, for instance, that the governance responses emanating from NPoAs are prioritised, appropriately financed and implemented.

Finally, the ways in which the Expanded Mandate has been interpreted and the Secretariat leadership has driven the turn-around process, (ie, renewal, reinvigoration and restoration) suggest a recognition that, in real terms, political will operates on a spectrum. This is demonstrated by the varying paces at which countries have moved from first generation to second generation reviews. It also shows an appreciation of the fact that the success of the APRM, in all of its ambition, hinges on state capacity. This is the capability to not only conduct country reviews with the rigour demanded by the instrument but, perhaps more importantly, also to respond to the recommendations made in peer reviews and translate these into actionable policy interventions within their national contexts.

The ways in which the Expanded Mandate has been interpreted and the Secretariat leadership has driven the turn-around process, (ie, renewal, reinvigoration and restoration) suggest a recognition that, in real terms, political will operates on a spectrum

## National Governance Reports

The ambition to provide technical support to all African states to develop and prioritise National Governance Reports raises several issues.<sup>46</sup> Aside from the technical and capability demands, will this not further disincentivise countries that have not formally joined the APRM from coming on board? Will this mean that countries could opt to generate National Governance Reports instead of conducting full reviews? What will be the substantive difference between Country Self-Assessment Reports and National Governance Reports? These are pertinent questions.

The danger is that generating a National Governance Report does not require adherence to the same guidelines set out for the generation of a Country Review Report. Therefore, it is not an 'instrument of assessment' as it does not carry the same weight as a Country Review Report. While National Governance Reports may be tabled to heads of state at the APR Forum – like the Country Review Reports – and may have some substantive value for countries, they run the risk of being used as weak substitutes without the rigour demanded of Country Review Reports. Some may argue that the governance reports are a stop-gap

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<sup>46</sup> APRM, *Overview of the APRM*, 30.

measure, particularly for non-members and those countries that have never conducted a review. Again, this may be a useful approach to expand inclusion but at what cost, especially with respect to the weight of the formal instrument, ie, country reviews?

## If reviews can be circumvented or ‘short circuited’ through annual governance reports, there is a real risk of undermining the APRM

If reviews can be circumvented or ‘short circuited’ through annual governance reports, there is a real risk of undermining the APRM. It is well known that, over time, a practice can become more acceptable than a policy prescript or formal decision. This would be an unfortunate outcome for the intent of National Governance Reports and, more seriously, the APRM. If the APRM is to be strengthened and National Governance Reports are to hold substantive value for countries, then their complementary role should be to enable countries to give particular attention to those issues/gaps that have emerged from the formal peer reviewed outcomes, that is the Country Review Reports and NPoAs. It is worth noting, however, that National Governing Reports have ‘catalysed a working relationship, not just with a small group of Member States, but the entire continent. This would not have happened without the African Governance Report.’<sup>47</sup>

### The inclusion of additional thematic areas

One of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has been to shine a light on the resilience of African governance systems and institutions to shocks and disasters. The impacts of COVID-19 will be with African countries for years to come, along with many other impending shocks and disruptions.<sup>48</sup> While the inclusion of the thematic area of ‘governance responses to shocks and disasters’ is probably wise, the critical issue will be the extent to which countries are willing and able to act on the recommendations and insights that flow from assessments of this governance dimension. Currently, in the absence of the long outstanding systematic review of whether recommendations from peer reviews (on the current four thematic areas in the APRM assessment instrument) are reflected in NPoAs, optimism must be tempered. The traumatic effects of COVID-19, however, may create the needed impetus for countries to give this area specific attention, specifically regarding their governance mechanisms related to disaster preparedness and management.

<sup>47</sup> Senior official at the APRM Secretariat, interview.

<sup>48</sup> Seth Borenstein, “Think 2020’s Disasters Are Wild? Experts Predict Worse in the Future”, *Public Broadcasting System*, September 9, 2020; World Meteorological Organization and World Health Organization, “[Anticipating Epidemics](#)” (Geneva: WHO, May 2014), 1.

## Targeted reviews

Countries will continue to conduct reviews and it should be remembered that the APRM Institutional Framework embodies four types of reviews, even though much of the preoccupation has been with the comprehensive review (ie, base reviews). Targeted reviews create an opportunity for greater agility, focusing attention on a particular sector or issue of concern for a country. They also ease the strain (financial and human resources) that typically comes with conducting a full first or second generation review. However, this type of review should not become a replacement or a means of obfuscating scrutiny of governance areas that may have significant deficiencies. The ways in which targeted reviews are conducted should also adhere to the same high standards and rigour typically expected in comprehensive reviews. It is therefore incumbent upon the political and technical leadership of the APRM to show finesse and leadership in confronting instances where there is a perceived intent to avoid meaningful scrutiny or deviate from the principle of inclusive participation.

Targeted reviews create an opportunity for greater agility, focusing attention on a particular sector or issue of concern for a country

## Leadership changes and the possible departure of senior staff

The newly installed CEO has played a central role in galvanising and sustaining the required political and financial support to revitalise the APRM. It is through his leadership that the APRM has seen restoration, reinvigoration and renewal, both in the African governance context and institutionally, within the Continental Secretariat. The CEO was key to creating financial predictability – and thus institutional stability – for the APRM. In 2019, for instance, and for the first time in its history, the APRM’s budget was included in the statutory budget of the AU.<sup>49</sup>

However, a leadership transition is imminent,<sup>50</sup> given the existing guidelines on tenure duration at the AU. This will test the extent to which the institution has re-established a firm foundation. This change – and any others among senior staff members – raises important questions about the sustainability and continued technical improvement of the APRM’s work. This issue is particularly important, given that the APRM is embarking on its next strategic period (2020–2024), the second successive plan developed by the Secretariat since

49 APRM, *Annual Report 2019–2020*, 5. The decision to integrate the APRM as an autonomous entity within the AU System, taken in June 2014 at the 23<sup>rd</sup> AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government, was instrumental in making this possible.

50 The term of office of the APRM CEO, Prof. Eddy Maloka, was extended in 2019. His current and final three-year tenure in office will end in 2022.

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its establishment in 2003. Under the theme ‘Governance as a Tool for Africa’s Integration’, the Strategic Plan outlines the APRM’s role in Africa’s integration as a governance outcome and sets out four priority areas:<sup>51</sup>

- governance reviews and assessments;
- research, monitoring and evaluation;
- institutional and human capacity development; and
- advocacy and communication.

Sound leadership and high calibre and experienced technical expertise are prerequisites for any organisation; in the case of the APRM, perhaps even more so, given the complex and dynamic political context it operates in. This reality makes it crucial that the APRM puts into place proper institutional processes that will enable it to manage both the coming leadership transition and the requisite layers of technical expertise to buttress any senior staff departures. It is encouraging to note that there is recognition within the APRM Secretariat that ‘fitness of purpose’ in expertise and human resources must remain a priority in this next phase. This will mean ensuring that the re-design of the organisational structure to align with the new strategy is full operationalised and functions optimally.<sup>52</sup>

### Contain further ‘expansion’

The potential risks of leadership changes or the departure of experienced senior officials at the Continental Secretariat reinforce the need for the APRM to resist the propensity seen from 2016–2019 to incrementally expand the Expanded Mandate. In practical terms, this will mean posing difficult but necessary questions when new expansion areas are considered and exercising discipline in assessing what projects should be pursued. Experience has shown that success in this regard largely depends on the quality and management of relationships between the head of the Secretariat and the heads of its governance platforms, namely the chairperson of the Committee of Focal Points, the chairperson of the Panel of Eminent Persons, and the Heads of State and Government Forum.

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51 Senior official at APRM Continental Secretariat, interview.

52 Senior official at APRM Continental Secretariat, interview.

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## Recommendations

- A systematic programmatic evaluation should be conducted to establish which challenges countries experience in moving from a first review to a second generation report. This would enable the APRM Continental Secretariat to more systematically identify supportive mechanisms or tools that it could give these member states, enabling them to progressively strengthen governance assessment processes. As part of this analysis, an investigation should be conducted on institutional implementation mechanisms, levels of awareness, partnerships and coordination arrangements to enhance implementation of the recommendations of Country Reviews.
- The APRM must rationalise its actions and focus on those that will have a direct influence or positive impact on countries' ability to actualise the recommendations in Country Reviews. Such an approach will also ensure that the fundamental pillar of the APRM – ie, Country Reviews – remains central to its interventions. This means rationalising the key projects and interventions that have emerged as a result of the Extended Mandate. A critical and simple starting point for this consolidation will be to answer the question: to what extent does this intervention enable countries to implement the recommendations of Country Reviews?
- Notwithstanding the challenges (financial and human) most civil society actors interacting with APRM processes currently confront, they must galvanise and provide meaningful critiques and analyses of the value of Expanded Mandate interventions for their respective countries. Furthermore, they must continue to shine a light on those areas where governance progress is not being made or where there is regression. Platforms such as the Continental NGC could be a potential entry point for focused mobilisation and building the necessary solidarity to focus the discourse on these areas of stagnation and, as such, should be strengthened.
- Despite some of the difficulties experienced in pivoting to virtual platforms because of COVID-19, the Secretariat must build on this experience and pursue a hybrid model of engagement. This will assist significantly in managing the exorbitant costs that usually accompany face-to-face activities in review preparations. This will also enhance the Continental Secretariat's ability to focus purely on substantive matters relating to reviews.



- The Continental Secretariat must ensure that the necessary transitional arrangements and capabilities continue to be built into the core complement of professional staff. This will ensure the institution's stability should there be changes among senior staff.

## Conclusion

The tenuous balancing act that currently confronts the APRM will not be easily resolved and will likely remain a feature of the political reality of being an instrument that aims to 'keep everyone walking in the same direction, no matter how slowly some may be walking'. Whether this approach is right remains open for debate. This posture should not, however, be taken at the expense of the core values and principles of the APRM. Bluntly put, creating products or instruments that allow countries to muddy the core values and intent of the APRM will only erode hard-fought gains, such as those reflected in important normative instruments such as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, and the Declaration on African Shared Values.<sup>53</sup> For the APRM Continental Secretariat, it will also serve to create momentum and an investment of resources in activities and projects that are unsustainable and that do not substantively contribute to the transformative changes that African citizens expect from the APRM. The Expanded Mandate and the turnaround strategy implemented have indeed resuscitated the APRM and propelled it to make important strides. These must be harnessed, focused and consolidated, so that the APRM is seen to be making a difference on the ground, supporting governments to progress beyond their current state of practice and radically improving the status quo.

The tenuous balancing act that currently confronts the APRM will not be easily resolved and will likely remain a feature of the political reality of being an instrument that aims to 'keep everyone walking in the same direction, no matter how slowly some may be walking'

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<sup>53</sup> AU Commission, *Strategic Plan: 2009–2012* (Addis Ababa: AU Commission, 2012); AU Commission, "Declaration on the Theme of the Summit: Towards Greater Unity and Integration through Shared Values" (AU Commission, Addis Ababa, 2012).

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# About SAIIA

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SAIIA's occasional papers present topical, incisive analyses, offering a variety of perspectives on key policy issues in Africa and beyond.

## Cover image

Delegates leave the plenary hall of the Africa Union (AU) headquarters, before the start of the 30<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the AU in Addis Ababa on January 27, 2018 (Simon Maina/AFP via Getty Images)

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