

Policy Insights

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Spotlighting Governance Challenges: Lessons from Namibia

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African perspectives
Global insights

Executive summary

In January 2017 Namibia became the 37th state to join the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), the continent's self-assessment tool promoting good governance. In 2018 Namibian civil society organisations (CSOs) met to develop an evidence-based written submission, highlighting 13 of the most critical governance issues in the country. Through the APRM Sensitisation Project in Namibia (ASPIN), the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) provided ongoing technical support while the Windhoek-based Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) brought together the Namibian CSOs and helped develop the submission. This policy insight unpacks the key lessons from these experiences, to serve as guidance for civil society in other countries that may want to adopt a similar approach for their own national APRM processes.

Introduction

The APRM was established in 2003 as a voluntary instrument for participating AU member states to assess their governance strengths and weaknesses and develop a National Programme of Action (NPOA) to remedy shortcomings. It is meant to be an open, inclusive and participatory process involving all sectors of society, evaluating governance institutions and practices in four broad thematic areas: democracy and political governance, economic governance and management, corporate governance, and socio-economic development. After a country completes its self-assessment, African experts conduct an independent review. The head of state then presents the report to his/her peers and commits to reforms to improve governance in the country. Reviews are conducted in a non-adversarial manner, which encourages frank discussions about governance progress and challenges. As of June 2019 the APRM had grown to 38 member states, with 22 having completed the full review process and three countries reviewed for the second time (since it is envisioned as an ongoing process to incrementally improve governance).

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In January 2017 Namibia joined the APRM, after a long period of profound scepticism about the mechanism. This accession gave Namibian CSOs a platform to influence the government's plans for the process, become meaningfully involved, and spotlight critical

governance issues. To assist in this endeavour, in 2018 SAIIA developed the [ASPIN](#). SAIIA's main local partner was the Windhoek-based think tank, the [IPPR](#).

The participating country is required to designate a high-ranking government official as the National Focal Point, and set up a National Governing Council (NGC) – a multi-stakeholder body with members from the government, the private sector and civil society – to oversee the development of the Country Self-Assessment Report (CSAR). Namibia was slow to allocate a budget to the APRM and at the time of writing, June 2019, the country was in the final stages of establishing an NGC.

CSOs decided to take a proactive approach. Through five workshops in 2018 a civil society APRM working group was formed to jointly construct an evidence-based written submission on Namibia's critical governance concerns, identified by the participating CSOs. It was presented to national and continental APRM stakeholders on 21 June 2019.

This policy insight reflects on the process in Namibia and offers 10 lessons to CSOs in newly-acceded countries at a similar level of development, such as Botswana and Zimbabwe. It will also be of use to civil society in countries that may still join – the APRM is aiming for the universal accession of all African states by 2023 – as well as in those countries that joined some time ago but where the APRM process has not advanced significantly.

Ten lessons from the Namibian experience

1 Become familiar with the APRM process as soon as possible

The APRM with its various stages and structures can seem like a complex and intimidating endeavour for CSOs. Entry points for CSOs are not always readily apparent. To prevent this from being a lost opportunity, civil society needs to understand the APRM, how it operates, and the opportunities it presents to further those objectives organisations are already working towards. Shortly after Namibia joined the APRM in early 2017, the IPPR

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commissioned SAIIA to write a short [guide about what Namibia could expect from its APRM journey](#). The IPPR also partnered with SAIIA to inform and involve Namibian CSOs in developing a written submission on governance issues. This began with workshops to expose CSOs to the APRM and its relevance to Namibia. This has put them in a position to

engage with the government on the APRM from an informed perspective, and to push for an inclusive, consultative and transparent national process.

2 Use the APRM to strengthen civil society collaboration

In the past few years Namibia's CSO sector has been under pressure. Many traditional funders no longer have a presence in Namibia, partly owing to the country's being classified as 'middle income'. Civic space has contracted as critical CSOs have been attacked as 'unpatriotic' by the government. The Namibian Non-Governmental Organisation Forum (NANGOF) has faced serious funding and governance problems. This made the task of convening a representative group of CSOs especially challenging for the local partner. There has also been diminished cooperation between CSOs, which tend to work in



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isolation or on specific issues such as HIV/AIDS or access to information. The APRM process successfully brought together CSOs to work on the common project of a written submission. A database of over 60 active organisations working on some aspect of governance was developed in 2018. The IPPR, as lead local partner, is intimately familiar with the political environment, key civil society actors and governance issues, and successfully catalysed diverse CSO engagement. The project also demonstrated the importance of having a committed lead CSO and several other strong CSOs in the governance sector, as these formed the core of the working group.

3 Select issues that matter

The APRM's Self-Assessment Questionnaire, which guides the development of the CSAR, is 105 pages long and covers the entire gamut of governance concerns. It is impractical and unnecessary for CSOs to attempt to respond to the entire questionnaire. In Namibia, through consensus, the working group selected 13 key governance issues on which to focus in their submission. These were governance issues in areas of concern about which the CSOs were knowledgeable and passionate, and that they considered the most important to get right. Identified issues included:

- education
- youth unemployment
- health
- land
- gender-based violence
- environment
- corporate governance
- executive power
- policy coherence
- access to information.

The submission also lists CSOs' recommendations for addressing each of these problems. They made an effort to link the issues to the government's own programmes and priorities, so that they would resonate and have identified champions in government for policy implementation and reform. These are likely to be among the cross-cutting issues in the country's final APRM report.

4 Plan multiple interventions to maintain momentum

A once-off workshop is often insufficient to inform, mobilise and enthuse CSOs. Given the relative lack of capacity of civil society in Namibia in recent years, often owing to funding constraints, the project was designed to allow several trips to Namibia by SAIIA to provide

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ongoing technical support to national CSOs in developing their written submission. Active participation increased as the project unfolded, and more and more CSOs became involved. Ideally, however, the working group should have been more active and less reliant on SAIIA's visits to convene meetings. Nevertheless, as the project progressed, CSOs' understanding of the APRM grew and they wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to positively influence governance at the highest level.

5 Involve government stakeholders to build trust

Throughout this project, civil society endeavoured to keep the government and the APRM continental institutions informed about events and intentions, and forge links with key stakeholders. Meetings were held with the presidential spokesperson and advisors, the National Planning Commission and the Ministry of International Relations and Cooperation (MIRCO). Workshops were conducted for both the National Assembly and the National Council of Parliament. Parliament can be an important ally for CSOs in the APRM if it takes an active interest. The continental APRM Secretariat was also kept informed of the project and its progress, and a representative presented at one of the workshops, as did members of the Pan-African Parliament. The deputy minister of MIRCO made a presentation at one of the civil society sensitisation workshops and explicitly welcomed civil society's initiative in

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developing a submission. This emphasised that the civil society submission was intended as a positive, constructive and well-researched input to feed into the CSAR. Efforts were made to avoid putting the government on the defensive, and to rather underline the value of civil society's involvement. The main takeaway was that the CSO submission helped galvanise the government and NGC's preparations for the reviews, in a positive and collaborative manner. It also helped deconstruct the APRM project into several readily apparent and obvious steps, and eased the NGC's perception of the steps required to complete a CSAR, with input from CSOs already at hand.

6 Spur the government to advance the national process

The Namibian CSOs' rapid progress in developing their submission put pressure on the government to speed up its own plans for launching and advancing the national process. Colleagues from the APRM Secretariat noted that the work on the APRM by Namibian civil society had accelerated the fielding of the APRM Advance Mission, which took place on 10-11 September 2018. Importantly, many CSOs involved in ASPIN were represented at the official APRM stakeholders' meeting with the advance mission on 11 September, as well as the subsequent sensitisation meeting on 21 June 2019. At this meeting CSOs presented the results of the ASPIN project to the Namibian government and the continental APRM's Support Mission to Namibia. This model of CSOs' pushing their governments to move on the APRM could be replicated in recently acceded countries such as Botswana. It could also work in several countries that acceded several years ago but whose governments have shown little commitment, or perhaps have been paralysed by the perceived immensity of the task of self-assessment.

7 Draw on the experience of other countries

Namibia is in the fortunate position that many other states have already undertaken the APRM process, so there are experiences than can be drawn upon. During the workshops SALLA was able to bring civil society experts, activists and members of Parliament from

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Lesotho, Uganda and Zambia to Namibia to enrich discussions and share lessons. Now that Namibia has been through this process, Namibian CSOs are potential resources for CSOs in other Southern African countries such as Botswana, Malawi and Zimbabwe. In theory, peer learning is a crucial aspect of the APRM, but in practice it has not been used sufficiently between CSOs of different member states. Namibia is in a position to pioneer such good practices and foster a regional culture of peer learning, especially in the SADC region. Ghana, a pioneering APRM country in the first 10 years of the mechanism, fostered peer learning that led to the peer reviews of Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Sierra Leone in the ECOWAS region.

8 Ensure ownership and buy-in

The ability to offer modest payments to those making written contributions to the report gave some incentive to CSOs. It was also important to fully validate the draft, and obtain the endorsement of some of the most important Namibian CSOs, including through the use of their logos on the submission. CSOs also need to be given a reasonable time period to read, study and comment on the draft, to enhance their endorsement and ownership of the document. A weakness of the process was that the project was not able to include CSOs outside of the capital, Windhoek. Other countries developing submissions should make special efforts to ensure wider national coverage.

9 Develop a dissemination strategy

Funds were available to ensure that the Namibian CSO submission was professionally typeset and presented. Once the report is published, it is important to have a well-considered dissemination strategy to ensure that it is received by the relevant parties. At the national level, the report should be presented to the National Focal Point, the NGC, the National Planning Commission and APRM technical research institutes (when these are selected, as they are responsible for the research phase in completing the CSAR). The submission should also be sent to the media to popularise its findings. At the continental level, the submission should be presented to the Continental APRM Secretariat, the Panel of Eminent Persons and the Country Review Mission (the team of experts who will visit the country during the review mission).

10 Ensure civil society's voice is heard throughout

Producing a submission for a CSAR is just a small part of the APRM journey. Going forward, Namibian CSOs should be active on the NGC, developing and monitoring the NPoA, holding government accountable for its commitments and participating in subsequent

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reviews. It is important that the voice of civil society constantly and constructively helps to shape the national APRM process. CSOs may want to select a focal point to interact with these stakeholders and share information with the broader civil society. A revived NANGOF could possibly play this role. Namibia could also learn from CSOs in other countries on how to remain engaged and establish strong relations with APRM continental and national bodies. Further fundraising may be required.

Conclusion

The experience of CSOs in Namibia to develop a soundly-argued, well-referenced and professional-looking written submission as a contribution to the APRM process in their country can serve as a model for CSOs in other countries. Despite all the difficulties facing the NGO sector in Namibia, this process allowed CSOs to unite for a common purpose, and helped strengthen collaboration between non-state actors and the government with the goal of collaboratively improving national governance. It also helped to accelerate the national APRM process.

In essence, the lack of a functioning umbrella body for CSOs made it difficult to locate and bring together all the relevant CSOs, especially from outside the capital. However, the various meetings were largely representative of at least the leading Windhoek-based CSOs. The working group remained largely informal in structure – other countries might want to set up a more formal committee, which would be easier to do if it was a sub-project of the national umbrella body for CSOs. Despite these issues, the Namibian process maintained a positive momentum and was able to complete a large amount of work in a relatively short space of time. A new information hub for civil society called Civic +264

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is a voluntary association that will be jointly managed by the IPPR, Namibia Media Trust, Namibia Institute for Democracy, Legal Assistance Centre and Citizens for an Accountable and Transparent Society. This formation largely arose from the APRM experience, which re-emphasised the need for an information-sharing and coordinating body for civil society. It will create a national database of CSOs and develop a website and newsletter to promote civil society and share news about activities. Civic +264 will be a vital conduit for future engagement with the APRM process and a means of drawing in the wider civil society for a constructive engagement with the government. Well done to Namibia, which has now presented a roadmap for other APRM countries to follow.

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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

The Namibian National Assembly building in Windhoek (Travel_Nerd/iStock/Getty Images)

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