



The African Peer Review Mechanism Ten Years On: How Can It Be Strengthened?

Yarik Turianskyi¹

The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) celebrated its tenth anniversary in March 2013. On the threshold of its second decade, where does the APRM currently stand, what challenges does it face and which direction is it likely to take?

The APRM was launched on 9 March 2003 in Abuja, Nigeria, when the memorandum of understanding was signed by the Heads of State and Government Implementation Committee of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad). A voluntary and African-owned framework, it aims to improve governance on the continent. The APRM utilises a system of peer reviews to achieve this goal. Its country reviews are analogous to a performance assessment in an office. In the case of the APRM, a member state develops a Country Self-Assessment Report, which is followed by a separate assessment conducted by an external Country Review Mission. The two reviews are then combined into a single Country Review Report (CRR) that includes a National Programme of Action (NPOA) covering four thematic areas: democracy and political governance; economic governance and management; corporate governance; and socio-economic development.

As of November 2013, 33² African states have signed up to the APRM, and 17³ of them have undergone their first peer-review. APRM reviews are supposed to be periodical, taking place every five years. A number of

countries, including Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa, are already making preparations for their second review.

One of the biggest criticisms of the APRM is a lack of direction and enforcement at the continental level. For instance, the first CRRs for South Africa and Kenya highlighted the issues of xenophobia in the former and the potential for ethnic violence during elections in the latter. In spite of those early warnings neither government chose to act. In fact, in its official response the South African government argued against the presence of xenophobia in its territory. Consequently both countries suffered: ethnic violence broke out in Kenya in the aftermath of the 2007 general election, while intense xenophobic attacks occurred in South Africa in 2008. Given the APRM's voluntary nature, recommendations made in the CRR cannot be enforced. The APR Forum, however, which consists of the heads of state and government of participating countries, may 'exercise constructive peer dialogue and persuasion (by offering assistance or applying appropriate measures) to effect changes in country practice where recommended'. Such peer pressure was not applied in the cases of South Africa and Kenya (or for that matter in any other known instances). Political will seems absent at the highest echelons of the APRM, a situation that may change with the appointment of a new APR Forum

chairperson – Liberia’s President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf – whose democratic credentials are unchallenged.

In fact, all the bodies participating in the APRM process need reinvigorating. After the hype that followed the first reviews, the mechanism seems to have gone almost into auto-pilot mode. Where governance gains have been made as a result of a peer review, all too often the link was never publicly acknowledged. Branding reforms as APRM-related, at both national and continental levels, has been largely avoided by most member states, with the exception of Ghana. Because of this, the mechanism which was designed as a tool to improve the lives of African citizens is not well known, suffers from a lack of media awareness and attention, and is largely perceived as an overly technical process for the elite. Moreover, not all governments have recognised the long-term benefits of the APRM, such as its potential to feed into development plans and streamline various planning initiatives.

Arguably the biggest achievement of the APRM so far has been an opening up of political space, especially in countries where interactions between society and government were previously only sporadic and limited. The APRM reviews created a formal avenue for discussion of governance practices between state officials and key stakeholders, such as civil society and business. Civil society in particular has an important role to play in the process, as it often provides an alternative voice to the government’s (especially where the parliamentary opposition is weak), or pushes for greater accountability. Although civil society was an important factor throughout the review process in all APRM states, in most cases its role significantly diminished afterwards. The APRM should be seen as a two-step process. The first step is to identify existing issues through the CRR and commit to resolving them through an NPoA. The second step is actually to implement the NPoA and address identified governance issues.

Overall, albeit with a few exceptions, the 17 reviews conducted so far have provided very comprehensive and frank assessments of the governance situation in APRM member states.

The majority of these states, however, are struggling to implement their NPoAs. The reasons for this vary, but the most common ones are that:

- NPoAs may not have secured realistic budgets, and have therefore become mere wish-lists;
- the APRM has failed to carve out its space among a myriad other governance and development initiatives in the country undergoing assessment;
- the APRM is seen by the government as a foreign policy exercise, rather than as a tool for domestic governance improvement; and
- a new government has come into power that is not interested in the APRM.

Furthermore, while the APRM is a society-wide process during the review, implementation of the NPoA and the monitoring and reporting of progress are firmly in the government’s domain. National Governing Councils (NGCs), the multi-stakeholder groups that oversee the review process, are often disbanded following completion of the review, and civil society struggles to participate owing to a lack of resources. Non-state actors and civil society in particular need to be given a role in the implementation process, to provide an alternative voice and perform an oversight function and ensure that progress is achieved on commitments made.

The APRM has the potential to improve governance in its member states, as well as continent-wide. At this crucial time, however, heads of state need to consider various changes to the APRM if it is to perform its intended role. Specifically, the following is recommended:

CONTINENTAL LEVEL

APR Forum

- Show the necessary political will and exercise peer pressure on member states that are not implementing their NPoAs.
- Encourage heads of state to attend all APR Forum meetings, and critically interrogate CRRs.
- Hold special meetings in case of an early warning appearing in a CRR, in order to deal with the matter collectively and convince the

member state of the necessity to deal urgently with the issue at hand.

NATIONAL LEVEL

Governments of APRM member states

- Prioritise implementation of the NPoA by all means necessary. This may include mainstreaming it or using it as a central planning instrument.
- Ensure that the NPoA has a realistic budget.
- Involve non-governmental stakeholders, civil society in particular, in monitoring and reporting on the country's NPoA.
- Ensure that the NGC remains active following the completion of the review and plays a part in NPoA implementation.
- Acknowledge all changes in governance practices as a result of the APRM review and recognise them publicly as such.
- Send out regular press releases and hold frequent media briefings on progress achieved regarding the implementation of the NPoA.

Civil society

- Remain involved in the APRM after completion of the country review.
- Hold governments accountable for implementing the NPoA.
- Share with the media information about progress and challenges regarding NPoA implementation.

Media

- Pay close attention to the process at the NPoA implementation stage and provide balanced coverage on progress achieved and challenges remaining.
- Stay in regular touch with civil society working on the APRM to get updates on the status of the process.

INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Donor community

- Work closely with governments of states embarking on NPoA implementation and assist them in an appropriate manner, whether in terms of advice, know-how or funding.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Yarik Turianskyi is the Programme Manager with SAIIA's Governance and African Peer Review Mechanism Programme.
- 2 The 33 member states of the APRM are: Algeria, Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Congo (Brazzaville), Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome & Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda and Zambia.
- 3 The 17 APRM states that have undergone their first peer-review are (in order of review): Ghana, Rwanda, Kenya, South Africa, Algeria, Benin, Uganda, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mozambique, Lesotho, Mauritius, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Zambia.

