

Mastering the APRM: Creating Your Submission

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What is the APRM?

The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) is a process that allows governments and their citizens to analyse their problems, assess their progress towards improved governance and make suggestions for effective reform. As of March 2008, 28 countries on the continent have voluntarily agreed to take up this opportunity and for the first time, propose solutions rooted in the aspirations of Africans themselves.

To begin active participation in the APRM, a country's government will sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the continental APRM authorities indicating its willingness to undergo review and its commitment to the process. The next step involves gathering information and documentation on the performance of the government and other stakeholders in key areas. To help gather this data and manage the process, the country typically forms a National APRM Governing Council (NGC) charged with this responsibility, and it usually appoints research institutes (Technical Research Institutes – TRIs) to carry out the technical aspects of this review.

All parts of society – civil society groups, religious institutions, labour unions, business groups, as well as the government – should contribute to answering questions on a wide range of issues. The APRM Questionnaire guides the review process by highlighting the country's performance in four broad areas: Democracy and Political Governance; Economic Governance; Corporate Governance; and Socio-Economic Development. Specific issues include human rights, health care provision, the state of the economy, the role of the judiciary and the behaviour of corporations.

Next, the results of this review are incorporated into a Country Self-Assessment Report, which is drafted by the NGC and TRIs. The Country Self-Assessment Report includes a Programme of Action (POA). The POA sets out the plans to deal with the problems identified in the review.

Once the Country Self-Assessment Report is completed, the country will be visited by a Country Review Mission. This is a delegation of respected scholars and experts who will conduct an independent study of the country and produce their own report. They will be led by a member of the Panel of Eminent Persons, which is a small body of seven highly respected Africans who are responsible for managing the process across the continent. A draft Country Review Report is submitted to the country by the Panel and its Secretariat for comment, recommendations are put to the participating country, and the country is expected to amend its POA accordingly.

The final Country Review Report will be produced by combining the previous ones. It will be presented to the Forum of the Heads of State for discussion and final review. This body consists of the leaders of all the participating countries. It tends to convene on the margins of African Union summits (though not all AU members are participants in the APRM). Once the country has been reviewed by the Forum, it must agree to deal with the various problems that have been identified. Other states undertake to assist the country in its efforts, and to take action if the country does not try to deal with these issues. Finally the country reports annually on progress in implementing the POA, and prepares itself for subsequent reviews (every five years).

NOTE: The APRM is about governance. Governance is the way we are ruled and organised to live together as a community or country. Governance is not the same as the country's government. The government is probably the most important part of governance, but governance also includes the systems that exist to rule a country, such as the laws and the institutions. So governance can also involve the way the courts work, how parliament functions, and traditional leadership. APRM also recognises corporate governance: how businesses are managed and regulated.

What does the APRM mean for civil society?

The APRM has been deliberately designed as a participatory and consultative process, allowing the broadest range of stakeholders to give their perspectives, express their concerns and frustrations, and make suggestions for reforms to improve governance in their countries. CSOs, religious bodies, professional and business organisations, labour unions, think tanks and any other interest groups have a unique opportunity to make themselves heard. In this process, you are not only able to talk about your issues to the government, but also to a continental body that will be doing its own review. You can use this opportunity to raise important policy issues, and also to help create a culture of debate and participation. The APRM can be far more important than just the review process – it can help change the way we practice governance.

NOTE: The APRM does not require government to take the lead. The APRM insists that broad public involvement in diagnosing and remedying problems must be solicited and incorporated. Though government cannot bar your participation – in fact, they must actively seek it – you need to assert your rights to participate at the earliest possible opportunity, not wait for invitations. This means you must know the rules.

Especially at the beginning of the process – before the establishment of a national governing council – governments may use their greater knowledge to restrict access to APRM information to 'friendly' groups. As the review process gets underway, invitations to meetings or to make contributions have a significant 'gate-keeping' effect. Don't wait.

Creating your submission

APRM provides a unique opportunity for civil society organisations to highlight problems, propose alternatives, and persuade other groups and government to share your point of view. Governments are unlikely to consider substantial changes to policy based only on people's opinions, even if these appear to be widely shared. For this to happen, they will need to be given evidence that helps to prove that policy changes would be in the country's best interest.

A written submission, backed by strong evidence, has the greatest impact on the different groups that review your government's performance. Your submission needs to convince readers that your concerns are important, the situation requires change and your solution is compelling enough to implement.

Here are five steps to create an effective submission:

1. Identify the issue
2. Gather and analyse evidence
3. Develop convincing written arguments
4. Circulate your draft to gain consensus & allies
5. Submit to the right place at the right time

1 Identify the issue

To save time and resources, concentrate on an issue that your organisation thoroughly knows and understands. Most likely, the issue is something that you deal with every day. Your organisation may be concerned with ending child abuse, securing women's rights, or increasing access to anti-retroviral drugs. Your organisation may deal with matters in the governance or political system, such as encouraging citizen participation or fighting corruption. That should be the focus of your submission. There is no need to create a new mandate for your organisation. If your issue concerns people in your community, it probably is addressed somewhere in the APRM Questionnaire, which is filled with both specific and general questions regarding matters that your government should be dealing with.

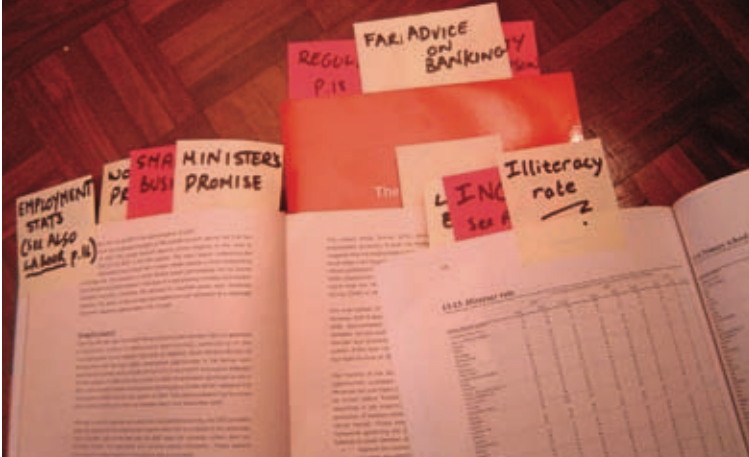


If you deal with a number of issues, narrow the scope through a brainstorming session with your staff, partners, beneficiaries or like-minded organisations to create a short list (no more than 3-5) of top priorities. The issue could be very specific – such as denial/access to services – or broader – such as stigma or an inability to exercise of political rights. Regardless, it should involve some aspect of governance.

While it is good to become acquainted with the APRM Questionnaire (available at <http://www.aprm.org.za/docs/questionnaire.pdf>), do not feel constrained by the absence of your issue or by the exact wording of any given question. However, it is helpful if your submission reflects the four broad divisions of the Questionnaire or can be explicitly linked to a specific objective and/or question as this will make it easier for the APRM authorities and Country Review Team to review the material in a systematic way. For example, discussion of rights from people with disabilities could be linked to Objective 9 of the Democracy and Political Governance thematic area, 'Promotion and protection of the rights of vulnerable groups including internally displaced persons and refugees'. Likewise the role of the media, and issues pertaining to media freedom, could be dealt with under Democracy and Political Governance, and specifically Objective 3 ('Promotion and protection of economic, social and cultural rights, civil and political rights as enshrined in African and international human rights instruments'), as well as a number of other areas where media activity is important, such as in respect of fighting corruption (Objective 6, 'Fighting corruption in the political sphere'). The media, is, however, not dealt with in any detail in the Questionnaire.

2 Gather and analyse evidence

Your submission must be persuasive to an audience that will consist of policymakers, academics, international eminent persons, and the public. Your views are not necessarily shared by others, so you need to support your suggestions, conclusions and recommendations with evidence. The more evidence a submission contains, the more of an impact it is likely to have.



Use Post-it notes to easily draw attention to key statistics, quotes, or evidence in your source material

Where can you find such data? Start with your own organisation's reports, particularly if you monitor or analyse your government's impact on particular groups. Place a Post-it or highlight the key phrase or sentence that you think provides some evidence that your issue is a real problem that needs government attention in each document.

Other good sources include:

- Government reports
- Speeches or policy statements made by public officials (in the media or in parliament)
- Auditor-general's reports
- Media reports
- World Bank reports
- UN Human Development Report

Some governments worry that the APRM process will be used to criticise their actions. They may adopt a defensive attitude and deny or downplay particular problems. In fact, the APRM process is unlikely to reveal anything new, and most of the main problems that submissions deal with are already well known – and often acknowledged – by government in its own publications.



Collect media coverage on your issues and use as evidence to illustrate government's inaction or failure to uphold its own policies.

Quoting a government source can be a potent indication that a particular problem exists or needs attention. It will also be necessary to gain access to government documents for any effective critique of government plans.

Go through your sources one by one, grouping evidence logically to support your key issues. If you are able to do so, an excellent way to gather information is by interviewing experts.

You should carefully evaluate the accuracy of sources. This can be a very challenging task, but it is important. You should think about whether you can believe the information, and why or why not. For example, you might ask yourself whether the institution that produced a report has a reputation for honesty and thoroughness. You may ask whether a government minister's claim about the rapidly rising standard of living is supported by your observations and by other pieces of evidence. Your argument is even stronger when it is supported by different pieces of evidence from different, unrelated sources.



Gather and analyse research data from trusted sources. Good analysis is the foundation of your submission.

NOTE: One of the most common attacks is on the accuracy of your information. Ensure that your information is accurate, that the source is reliable, accurately quoted and acknowledged and that you understand its proper interpretation. When preparing your submission, ensure you have properly cited the sources of the information you are presenting.

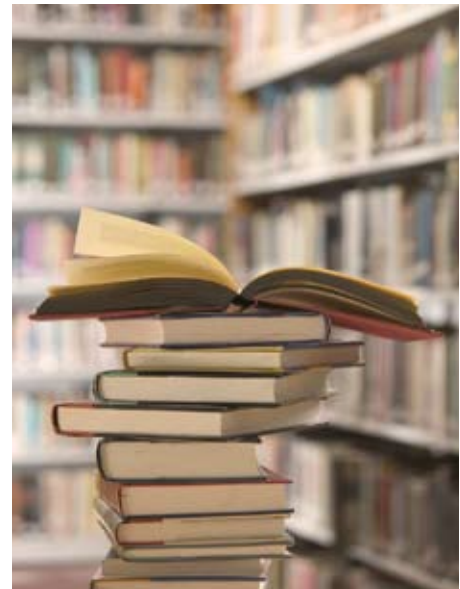
3 Develop and present convincing written arguments

After you process the evidence, you will need to analyse it and explain what it means. Though you could and should use this evidence to make an oral presentation at a workshop, meeting or APRM conference, a written submission is more durable and allows your views to be communicated without relying on someone else to record what was said. A written submission can be widely circulated and can also contain much more detail than an oral presentation. Most public consultation in the APRM tends to rely on mass meetings and public conferences. While these may be politically important as they give a sense of participation and involvement to ordinary people, they are generally less effective for expressing detailed arguments.

Though quotes, facts and figures can be revealing, they are also open to interpretation. You will need to guide your reader towards the correct conclusions.

Your submission should answer the following:

- a) Describe the true situation and the challenges facing your country in the areas you have chosen to focus on. What achievements have been made? What programmes are in place to deal with these issues? Are they effective? If not, why not?



Effective research involves skimming through reports and documents looking for key words or phrases that will support your arguments. Quote these sources directly and accurately.

b) What can be done to improve things?

Remember to use the evidence you have gathered to support the case you have made. Your analysis and arguments should aim to persuade the APRM authorities that your perspective and proposed course of action will move the country in the right direction.

Here are some tips on arranging your material:

Organisation: If your submission includes more than one issue, divide the material up into different sections. Interested parties will find carefully organised material easier to read and absorb.

You might also consider introducing each major section with a brief summary – no more than a few paragraphs outlining your chief contentions and recommendations to be found in that section. This can make understanding much easier.

Find the positive: While your submission will understandably highlight areas where government needs to improve, don't lose sight of the fact that the APRM is also about identifying strengths. If your country has an innovative approach to an aspect of governance, mention that in your submission. The APRM is not just for evaluating problems, but also to capture best practices. Give credit where credit is due. The experience of one country can often provide a valuable lesson for others which may be struggling with similar issues.

Solutions: You should also devote time and effort to devising solutions for problems. Your submission will likely be better received if you appear keen to help solve problems rather than simply draw attention to them. The APRM should be viewed as an opportunity for self-assessment, not a self-destruction process. Remember that one product of the process is the Programme of Action: this is the document that should guide government policy in terms of solving the problems that the APRM process identifies. You can make a valuable contribution by suggesting how difficulties may be addressed.

Even if you don't have a solution to a serious problem, do not avoid addressing that issue in your submission. Instead, discuss the problem and admit that there is no obvious solution. Then suggest a defined time period for research and policy experimentation to determine the best approach.

If your organisation works in a given policy field, you will probably already have some good ideas for policy reforms. Include these in your submission, as far as possible with supporting evidence. Explain why a particular change to policy X should produce a given result and why that result is the best way forward at this time.

Presentation: You must proofread your draft for grammar and spelling mistakes as well as more substantive errors such as illogical arguments or lack of compelling evidence. Make sure it is legible. Such basic mistakes will distract the reader and suggest – perhaps unfairly – that you have not made a sufficient effort to be taken seriously.

4 Circulate your draft for comment, critique and consensus

Once you have a draft submission, actively seek out comments from other groups, particularly those who share the same issue/concern. Another group may have an insight into a problem that you were not aware of, and you may want to incorporate this into your submission. They may also spot weaknesses in your reasoning or evidence. Do not be embarrassed to admit error and to alter your submission accordingly. Enhancing the accuracy of the material you are presenting will make your arguments more compelling.

You should also invite other groups to sign and endorse the submission. Though seeking allies for your submission may require a bit more work, you will be rewarded with enhanced credibility and legitimacy for your views. Remember that several voices joined in chorus are louder than a solo singer.

5 Submit at the right place and right time

Finally, submit your finished document in a timely fashion to the official APRM structures: your country's APRM Secretariat and Focal Point; the National Governing Council; contracted technical research agencies; the Country Review Mission and any other official structures.

When your submission is finished, you should distribute it as widely as possible. At a minimum, you should distribute your submission to the official APRM institutions and any agencies with a stated role in the process. Possible points of influence include:

- APRM Focal Point
- National APRM Governing Council
- Think Tanks
- Country Review Missions
- Secretariat
- Parliament
- Media
- Panel of Eminent Persons
- Experts & CSOs

Country Review Missions include academics and experts in the various thematic areas, as well as Eminent Persons. In the past, these teams have been diligent, responsive, and have submitted final assessments that were considered independent-minded and rigorous. They serve as an important safeguard against attempts by governments or the APRM authorities to create country reports that gloss over or ignore key challenges. Ideally, you should submit a hard-copy, preferably in person when the Team is in your country (during or after public meetings or perhaps at their hotel). Handing over the copy personally will impress upon the team member that you are serious about your participation and your contribution.



Additionally, you may want to give your submission to the media. Often the media have a difficult time explaining how the APRM process – which seems long and abstract – will impact the average person in their daily struggle. Your submission will put a human face on the APRM.

Conclusion

To be heard, a person first has to speak. The APRM process encourages all voices in society to express themselves on the issues facing their country. This opportunity must be seized. Without the participation of a cross-section of interests in a country – government, business, civil society – the APRM will not produce the results it hopes to achieve. By sending in a written submission, you will be helping to ensure that the APRM is a meaningful process that reforms governance, builds democracy and encourages active citizenship in your own country and across the continent.

Civil society successes – It can be done!

Some civil society organisations have effectively utilised the APRM process to raise key issues in their countries.

In Uganda, the local chapter of the Minority Rights Group International – an advocacy group promoting the interests of marginalised minority communities – saw the APRM as a platform to draw attention to the plight of minority groups, usually neglected by policymakers. Initially, they were daunted by the complex questionnaire. But after a workshop in July 2007 with other CSOs run by SAIIA, MRG realised that they need only write a short position paper outlining their main issues, providing evidence and suggesting solutions, and get it into the right hands. This submission was circulated, commented upon and validated by like-minded groups before being sent to the Ugandan and continental APRM Secretariats. It was used to beef up minority rights issues in a joint submission by the Ugandan NGO Forum, and also to lobby the Country Review Mission when it visited in February 2008, to push for more items in the POA to address minority issues.

The Cape Town-based Open Democracy Advice Centre used the APRM to promote improvement in laws and regulations on access to information, and protecting those reporting corruption (whistleblowers). Despite many setbacks, ODAC made sure it was informed at each step of the local process. It distributed its written arguments widely, at parliamentary hearings and to the contracted research agencies. And it too lobbied the Review Team when it realised these two issues were underplayed in the CSAR and POA, handing over its written submission and POA recommendations.

Both MRG and ODAC had to be informed, strategic, focused and tenacious. In the end, both groups managed to have important matters addressed in their respective APRM reports and POAs, which might otherwise have been ignored.

Glossary

Country Review Mission: After the country has completed its self-assessment, this team of experts will conduct their own investigation.

Country Review Report: The final report produced by the Country Review Mission, which is presented to the Forum of Heads of State.

Country Self-Assessment: The process in which all stakeholders in contribute to an assessment of the country, to produce a Country Self-Assessment Report.

Focal Point: A high-level government representative appointed by each country to coordinate the APRM process. S/he will liaise with the continental APRM authorities, the national government and national stakeholders, and help set the process in motion.

Forum of Heads of State: An assembly of the leaders of all countries involved in APRM.

National Governing Council: The body appointed to run the process in each country. It usually consists of representatives from government, civil society and business.

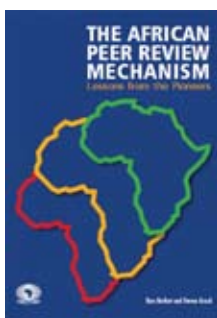
Panel of Eminent Persons: A continental body of seven prominent, widely respected Africans, responsible for the overall conduct of the APRM. One will lead each Country Review Mission.

Programme of Action: The set of commitments that the government agrees to undertake in order to address the challenges identified in the Self-Assessment and Country Review reports.

Technical Research Institutes: Think tanks or academic institutions contracted to assist in writing the Country Self-Assessment Report.

Secretariat: The body providing administrative support to the APRM. There is continental secretariat in South Africa, and national secretariats are usually established within each country.

Other SAIIA APRM resources



The African Peer Review Mechanism: Lessons from the Pioneers is the first in-depth study of the APRM, examining its practical, theoretical and diplomatic challenges. Case studies of Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Mauritius and South Africa illustrate difficulties faced by civil society in making their voices heard. It offers 80 recommendations to strengthen the APRM.



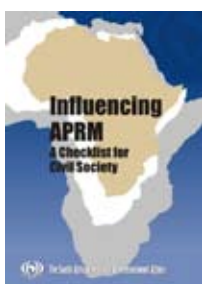
The *APRM Toolkit* DVD-ROM is an electronic library of resources for academics, diplomats and activists. In English and French, it includes video interviews, guides to participatory accountability mechanisms and surveys, a complete set of the official APRM documents, governance standards and many papers and conference reports. It comes included with the *Pioneers* book.



APRM Governance Standards: An Indexed Collection contains all the standards and codes mentioned in the APRM that signatory countries are meant to ratify and implement, in a single 600-page volume. Also available in French.



Planning an Effective Peer Review: A Guidebook for National Focal Points outlines the principles for running a robust, credible national APRM process. It provides practical guidance on forming institutions, conducting research, public involvement, budgeting and the media. Available in French and Portuguese.



Influencing APRM: A Checklist for Civil Society gives strategic and tactical advice to civil society groups on how to engage with the various players and institutions in order to have policy impact within their national APRM process. Also available in French and Portuguese.