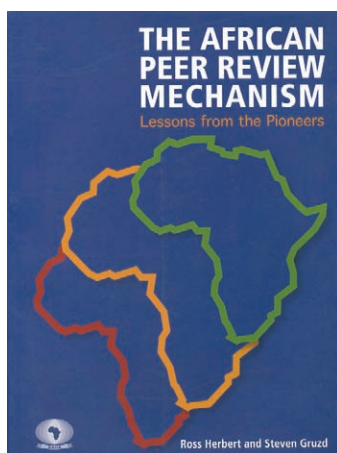


Learning from APRM pioneers

A timely new study examines the strengths and weaknesses of a key tool for Africa's renewal, writes **Ozias Tungwarara**



The African Peer Review Mechanism: Lessons from the Pioneers

Ross Herbert and Steve Gruzid
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THIS BOOK is a remarkable resource for those serious about making the African Peer Review Mechanism work. The 406-page publication is divided into five parts, comprising 14 chapters covering a diverse range of issues. The appendices contain vital information on official guidance documents, APRM standards by thematic area, sources for desk research, a civil society checklist, and lessons for success. It comes with a CD-ROM that includes APRM guidelines, country reports, survey instruments, video testimonials, and standards embraced by the APRM.

The publication is timely, coming at a time of growing scepticism about the utility of the APRM. At its launch, the APRM was applauded as an organically evolved African response to the continent's deep-seated

challenges of governance. Since its launch, 29 countries have signed up to the APRM, and nine have completed the review process so far.

While the continent has continued to consolidate democratic governance, political and economic systems remain fragile. In some countries we have seen reversals to earlier progress. The study is candid about the shortcomings of the APRM, while offering practical suggestions to make the process efficient and effective. It would have been useful to have had some assessment about whether the critical assumptions on which the APRM was based still hold. For instance, enthusiasm associated with Africa's renewal, characteristic of the late 1990s and early 2000s, seems to have waned. Have the initial incentives for signing up to the APRM, including increased foreign direct investment, changed?

Highly political

Experiences of the pioneer countries amply demonstrate the unprecedented level of ambition of the APRM, the complexity of which was compounded by methodology, process, and political challenges encountered. It was estimated that the APRM process would take six to nine months to complete, but it has taken between 33 and 39 months. Also, what might have been conceived as a technical exercise is proving highly political. While acknowledging the daunting challenges that the APRM faces, the study is positive in its view of the process

as an opportunity to improve governance in Africa.

The study highlights challenges regarding APRM rules, processes, and institutions in a detailed and substantive manner. Guidance provided by a variety of documents, and orally by the APRM secretariat, is still evolving. While the documents are becoming more specific with experience, the study notes that later documents contradict earlier ones and it is not clear what takes precedence. Some documents are not available on the website to allow easy access to information and guidance to the wide range of stakeholders engaging with the APRM.

Establishing national APRM institutions, key to the credibility of the process, has not been without controversy in pioneer countries. The book highlights the independence of the national governing council (NGC) as a contentious issue. There is division between those that advocate autonomy from government and those that suggest there should be an even split between government, civil society, and the corporate sector. Different configurations of NGCs have emerged in pioneer countries and there is urgent need to consolidate the rules into one set of authoritative guidance to give clarity and consistency to the process.

Use of technical research institutions (TRIs) is emerging as a standard feature of the APRM. It is important that processes to establish national APRM institutions should be transparent – to create trust and avoid conflict that can undermine the project.

The study recommends that particular attention be paid to the capacities and independence of the TRIs in order to maintain consistency in the self-assessment report and the programme of action (POA).

The greatest challenge of the APRM is the questionnaire, which aims to ensure that reviews are done in a consistent manner across countries. The questionnaire is too long, containing 25 objectives, 58 questions and 183 indicators. APRM rules promote broad public participation, but

The questionnaire marginalises important subjects such as freedom of information laws

responding to the majority of questions and indicators requires technical knowledge. There is need to simplify the language of the questionnaire to make it more accessible. The principle of broad-based public participation underpinning the APRM provides an excellent opportunity for a national dialogue critical to a country's development, yet it could be undermined by such technical demands.

A far-reaching criticism of the questionnaire is its division into four discrete thematic areas. This, the study argues, imposes artificial barriers to the economic, social, political, and corporate spheres – resulting in the reports being very repetitive. The study suggests clustering related issues together – such as gender, human rights, and vulnerable groups. It further suggests focusing on institutions not thematic areas, as the current format invites superficial generalisations. The questionnaire is extremely diverse in the information and expertise it requires, making it difficult to manage information and find expertise

from a research perspective. It is estimated that the questionnaire in its current form requires between 27 and 35 forms of specialised expertise.

Another criticism is that the questionnaire marginalises important subjects such as freedom of information laws, restrictions on media freedoms, criminal libel laws, journalist licensing systems and criminal justice. Questions relating to political and democratic systems are not well structured to diagnose sources of poor political governance.

A key output of the APRM is the POA, which is supposed to address democratic deficits identified by the country self assessment and country review. Reports of the pioneer countries reveal gaps between analysis and recommendations in the POA. There are many instances where the analytical part of the report identifies problems and urges action but recommendations in the POA ignore this. This might imply a lack of political will to act on problems considered too difficult, and perhaps not enough time is allocated to development of the POA compared to other phases of the process.

Unrealistic

This publication rightly observes that POAs should seek to offer better quality solutions, more useful prioritisation, stronger political consensus, and improved integration with existing systems. The guidelines should be clearer on how to write a POA and how to monitor and evaluate progress. Pioneer countries have struggled with the requirement to report progress to the heads of states forum every six months. All that they have been able to report are intentions, confirming that the reporting period is unrealistic.

The APRM's many political aspects include: the potential to embarrass politicians, discussion

of corruption, examination of national political power dynamics through the necessary discussion of political systems, and the allocation of political goods. These political aspects have implications, such as the choice of who gets consulted, invited to meetings, appointed to governing structures, or chosen to write and edit reports. It is important that political tensions inevitably arising from the APRM be mediated through democratic processes. There needs to be a healthy tension between government and civil society, with each party acknowledging that they play different roles and have different responsibilities. In most countries that have undertaken the APRM, the government appears to have controlled the process.

It is critical that clear guidelines on the size and rules of procedure for governing councils be provided. The study makes very useful suggestions about how civil society can effectively influence the process. In most cases, civil society organisations (CSOs) are reactive to government's exercise of power in setting the rules and shaping the process. CSOs need a balance between applying pressure and persuasion – knowing when to protest and when to persuade. The APRM should not be seen as an exercise in scoring political points but rather as an opportunity to reform systems of governance, and this requires CSOs getting priorities right and building strategic alliances. An important role for CSOs is establishing monitoring and tracking systems for the APRM, as well as seeking to influence the panel of eminent persons and the secretariat through well-researched submissions.

Part IV of the book comprises five case studies (Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Mauritius, and SA), which provide extremely useful information on how the

process was conducted and the challenges faced. By drawing out the lessons learnt in the pioneer countries, best practice can be developed. This is vital for countries beginning the process and for second-generation APRM assessments.

This publication makes it clear that the APRM needs revision, in both process and substance. Given the magnitude of suggested changes, it is important to ensure that the APRM secretariat has the capacity to make them. It will be a real pity if this becomes another

APRM study with recommendations that are not translated into concrete reforms. ■

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Understanding the war on Gaza – continued from page 23

Developments in the Middle East have reached an important crossroads. While the situation still remains in relative flux in the short term, there are strong indications that a fundamental paradigm shift can be expected in the medium to long term in favour of the resistance trend.

Ironically, it is Israel that bears major responsibility for rising militancy in Palestinian politics. Reflecting on SA's struggle and the demands made on the ANC by the apartheid regime to abandon violence, Nelson Mandela responded, '...the state was responsible for the violence and it is always the oppressor, not the oppressed, who dictates the form of the struggle. If the oppressor uses violence, the oppressed have no alternative but to respond violently.'

This is, however, not the most profound lesson SA has to offer, for it also teaches us that ultimately, reconciliation is only possible amongst equals. This universal truth was poignantly captured by French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, who said: 'The cry of the Zionists to justify their racist violence has always been "We are not a people like any other" while the Palestinian cry of resistance has always been "We are a people like all others".' ■

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The people vote, but does the market rule? – continued from page 42

The flip side is the negative effect of the recession on global trade, GDP and commodity sales – especially gold – and its implication for the government's external earnings. In any event, the sluggish emergence of the EU from recession (slower than in the US, even though the projected growth of Europe for 2009 is 0.2% compared to 0.1% for the US) and its repercussion for, among other things, foreign direct investment, provides ample opportunity for SA to rethink the decidedly right-wing leaning of its mixed economy. Analysts and activists who have waited to see SA move a little to the left of the mixed economy may be delighted by the fact that, unlike the Mbeki government that talked left but walked right, the Zuma government seems set to talk right and walk left. But will it? Can it?

Except for very isolated pockets (e.g. Cronin, p. 241-242; Turok, p. 166-168), the book sets little store by either the democratic component of developmental states or the critical role of women in development. If we take both together, it can be argued that, unlike in East Asian countries, SA cannot dispense with democracy and concentrate only on capitalist development. Cronin rightly conceptualises the democratic developmental state as one

that, in the exceptional context of SA, is anchored on 'popular participatory mobilisation and struggle' (p. 240) and on working class politics 'that seeks to roll back capital's managerial prerogatives, in which the working class plays an active role ... in developing industrial policy or investment decisions, both on the shop floor and in national bargaining for a' (p. 242). Cronin's 'revolutionary politics' that 'seeks to defend, strengthen and transform (the) democratic state' finds resonance in Jara's call for 'sustained mass conscientisation'. The latter would involve 'the patient work of building ordinary people as critical, conscious, self-organised and engaged social agents with social power, voice, and capacity'.

The flurry of strikes by an array of public sector workers in May 2009 and the threat by COSATU to call a nationwide strike over wage increases and better conditions of service for public servants are eloquent testimony to a vibrant and politically engaged working class. The agreement on salary increases reached between government and labour in 2007 has yet to be honoured. The ball is in the court of the governing elite to no longer see workers as electoral canon fodder, but as strategic partners in the development process and in the construction