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SAIIA Roundtable: The African Peer Review Mechanism – Progress and Prospects

Summarised by Steven Gruzd

South African Institute of International Affairs

African perspectives. Global insights.

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Since 2002, SAIIA's Governance and APRM Programme has promoted public debate and scholarship about critical governance and development questions in Africa and beyond. The programme seeks to improve public policymaking by linking governments, citizens and researchers through a variety of publications, training workshops and research fellowships. The project has worked on the African Peer Review Mechanism and governance in almost 20 African Countries. SAIIA welcomes original governance-related manuscripts to consider for publication in this series.

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SAIIA ROUNDTABLE: THE AFRICAN PEER REVIEW MECHANISM – PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS

This summary is based on views exchanged at a SAIIA roundtable discussion on 'The African Peer Review Mechanism: Progress and Prospects', held at SAIIA's Johannesburg offices on 19 February 2010.

The keynote speaker was Dr Kojo Busia, chief of the African Peer Review Mechanism Support Section at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (Uneca) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The respondents were Ozias Tungwarara, director of the African Governance Monitoring and Advocacy Programme (AfriMAP); Evelynne Change, co-ordinator for corporate governance at the APRM Secretariat; and Patrick Mpedzisi, project co-ordinator, Civil Society Support Facility, Southern Africa Trust. The roundtable was chaired by Steven Gruzd, head of SAIIA's Governance and APRM Programme.

More than 35 participants — drawn from South African civil society, research institutions, government and development partners — engaged in a lively and rich discussion, reflected in this summary.

ABSTRACT

The roundtable agreed that, seven years on, the APRM has notched up notable achievements. It has defied the sceptics by attracting 30 member states to accede voluntarily to its rules. After a slow start, a dozen states have now completed their Country Review Reports. These paint a mostly frank and comprehensive picture of governance achievements and shortcomings. States are beginning to implement their National Programmes of Action (NPOAs). The process has carved open political space, engendered national dialogue on governance and fostered peer learning at many levels. It has highlighted common cross-cutting issues — such as land use, electoral processes and managing diversity — that affect all African countries to one degree or another. Reports have diagnosed impending crises, even if their warnings went unheeded. Heads of state, citizens and development partners have sustained their interest in this innovative process, and progress has been encouraging.

Yet the system faces significant challenges and mixed prospects. The APRM is not unique among African institutions 'finding their way'. The process needs to be less cumbersome for would-be participants. Some of its procedures and rules have become archaic and must be revised. A complex, multi-stage, multi-actor process like the APRM needs significant funding to operate. There must be more thought and systematic planning around designing, implementing, reporting on and monitoring the NPOAs, as well as how they relate to national development plans, poverty reduction strategies and national budgets. Action programmes need to reflect Africa's priorities and agendas. It is imperative for the mechanism as a whole to demonstrate clearly the value that it adds and what has changed because of it. It needs to celebrate its success stories.

Much depends on the quality of leadership to consolidate these early gains and drive the process into its next phases. A system promoting governance, accountability and transparency must be exemplary in demonstrating these values in its actions. Perceptions matter. And there is a need to share the remarkable lessons that this unique exercise has generated, if the system is to continue to grow, learn and change.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ADB	African Development Bank
AfriMAP	African Governance Monitoring and Advocacy Programme
APRM	African Peer Review Mechanism
AU	African Union
CRR	Country Review Report
Nepad	New Partnership for Africa's Development
NGC	National Governing Council
NPoA	National Programme of Action
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
PAP	Pan-African Parliament
SAIIA	South African Institute of International Affairs
Uneca	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme



Clockwise from left to right: Dr Kojo Busia, Uneca; Ozias Tungwarara, AfriMAP; Evelynne Change, APRM Secretariat; Dr Kojo Busia, Uneca and Steven Gruzd, SAIIA; Patrick Mpedzisi, Southern Africa Trust.

TURNING SCEPTICISM TO SATISFACTION

Dr **Kojo Busia** noted that despite profound scepticism about the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) prospects, the initiative had registered several qualitative institutional successes. In his view, the process had been rolled out fairly successfully and the APRM had become firmly fixed in the continent's evolving governance architecture. But its institutions seemed more dynamic at national level while exhibiting 'signs of paralysis' at continental level.

The pace of accession to the voluntary APRM process had increased appreciably, from just a few states in 2003 to 30 by 2010. Member countries now represented 76% of the continent's population. Twelve countries — Ghana, Rwanda, Kenya, Algeria, South Africa, Benin, Nigeria, Uganda, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mozambique and Lesotho — had completed the full review cycle. Ethiopia and Mauritius were expected to be reviewed in July 2010. Said Busia: 'This still leaves half of the countries that have acceded standing still or barely started.'

There was 'no evidence yet' of a country leaving the APRM because of dissatisfaction or disappointment with its Country Review Report (CRR) — the documentation that paints a governance picture of each country after the complex, multi-staged assessment process. But some leaders had fiercely debated their findings. These CRRs were comprehensive, incisive and for the most part frank about deep-seated governance challenges, often referred to as 'over-arching' or 'cross-cutting' issues. For many countries, these included corruption, unemployment, land disputes, poor service delivery and managing diversity. The CRRs had integrity and rigour and their publication had raised public awareness of governance issues. They had also pointed to potential threats to stability — most notably in the cases of Kenya and South Africa. Both governments, however, had ignored these warning signs to their cost.

Busia noted that the role of civil society in the APRM had become more accepted, even though there were differences within individual states on the extent of civil society participation. Anecdotal evidence suggested that the peer learning, capacity building and institution building engendered by this remarkable experiment was 'unprecedented' in Africa's development trajectory.

As the mechanism evolved, the exchange of experiences and best practices in member states had expanded beyond the peers envisaged in the APRM's mandate: the Forum of Participating Heads of State and Government (known as the APRM Forum). Among other experience-sharing initiatives were ministerial-level meetings between peer review countries, country exchange visits and other informal modes of communication. This was an area in which most work was needed.

These encounters had become increasingly critical in transferring lessons between peer-reviewed states, but the feedback loop back to country structures needed strengthening. Busia argued that peer learning about best developmental practices 'was not taking place systematically, due in part to a lack of institutional capacity to assemble and disseminate these practices.' While CRRs identified best practices, they gave no details on how these were achieved and how they could be applied in other contexts, or 'borrowed as models of development.'

Busia argued that the APRM should not be seen merely as a development originating in 2002 or 2003, but as a critical component of a broader vision developed over decades.

It had its roots in the history of failed development strategies externally imposed on post-colonial Africa. The APRM sought to bring back a development framework based on domestic accountability. It was created to reverse the phenomenon of accounting to external donors rather than citizens. The transformation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) coincided with the death of apartheid, the end of the liberation struggles and the emergence of South Africa on the African and global political scene. This epochal event, a turning point for Africa, provided the opportunity for African leaders to re-examine Africa's relationship with the world and the global economic system. This was the genesis of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) and its brainchild, the APRM.

Busia observed, however, that there had been a generally low level of implementation of national action programmes and that these had not been well integrated into national development plans and poverty reduction strategies. Annual NPoA progress reports had not been standardised, and quality varied. The extent to which these reports were systematically organised and analysed was unclear, and there was limited public access to them. He identified the following challenges: to harmonise them with national development strategies; to monitor the release of funds to implement programmes and projects; to ensure that implementation agencies identified relevant projects; and to integrate the National Governing Council (NGC) into national planning.

Busia asserted that, because the APRM emphasised participation, it could improve the quality of policy dialogue, particularly in countries that had decentralised their monitoring and reporting systems. But he noted that most APRM states lacked the capacity and funding to implement their action programmes fully. The value of NPoAs was that they helped states to prioritise development strategies and to take ownership and be accountable for them. This was fundamental if Africa were to take responsibility for its own development.

In highlighting prospects, Busia emphasised the need for strong and visionary leadership in the Panel of Eminent Persons. He predicted that relations between National Focal Points and National Governing Councils, and between government and civil society in NGCs, were likely to be less fractious as countries embarked on their second round of reviews. Civil society confidence in the APRM would grow as government and civil society organisations engaged on key issues and, in so doing, 'use the evidence from development practice to help improve both the incidence and quality of evidence-based decision-making.' Trust-building was vital to consolidate and institutionalise the APRM.

Busia foresaw eight major challenges if the APRM were to flourish:

- to speed up the rate at which new countries accede to the APRM;
- to speed up the pace of the country self-assessment process, and improve the design and implementation of the NPoA;
- to raise resources domestically to fund both self-assessment and action programmes;
- to ensure that NPoAs reflected African priorities and not external agendas;
- to increase the leverage of APRM institutions to effect policy change internally;
- to beef up the Secretariat's capacity to monitor and evaluate progress reports and disseminate best practices and lessons learnt.
- to encourage states to be more rigorous in applying evidence-based decision-making so that the APRM could help Africa fashion a common development model; and

- to desist from labelling the heads of state review as a final stage. This detracted from the importance that the public and the APRM Forum attached to implementing NPoAs.

Ozias Tungwarara, director of AfriMAP, noted the important role that perception played in the process. The APRM raised key questions: Where was governance going in Africa? What was the APRM's role in improving it? Was it merely fashionable to accede, amid the hype of the African Renaissance? And was the APRM really relevant?

He acknowledged growing concerns about the credibility of the peer review process. How had the blueprint been implemented? Had all components of the APRM system lived up to its own ideals and key principles of good governance? Were its leaders and structures accountable, and to whom?

Tungwarara asserted that some of the systemic challenges facing the APRM were common to other Pan-African institutions and initiatives. There was a pervasive 'crisis of leadership'. The APRM's utility and relevance were brought into question when the process seemed to disappear in key founder states like Nigeria and South Africa. There was a sense that the level of significance did not match initial ambitions. In Nigeria and South Africa the APRM was barely discussed by political parties, or in parliament or in the media. Some member countries — including Ethiopia, Uganda and Zambia — were restricting the space in which their civil society organisations could legally operate.

He stressed the need for the APRM system to instil confidence in participants. There needed to be greater transparency in selecting members of the Panel of Eminent Persons. Several Focal Points — chief advisors to heads of state and co-ordinators of national APRM processes — raised objections to opaque procedures at the February 2010 APRM Forum meeting in Addis Ababa. All who cared about the APRM needed to guard against it losing its core values of good governance.

The roundtable discussion affirmed that the performance of the Secretariat was critical to the long-term success of the APRM.

Evelynne Change, co-ordinator for corporate governance at the APRM Secretariat, shared perspectives on key achievements and shortcomings. The APRM had gathered momentum and interest since its inception. Seven years on, African stakeholders remained keenly interested. At least two thirds of its funding requirements came from member countries. Designated strategic partners, Uneca, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the African Development Bank (ADB), had remained supportive. Development partners had shown interest and the APRM had lately gained traction from South—South co-operation. After a slow start, the pace of reviews had picked up significantly recently.

Change reiterated Busia's views on the diagnostic value of the APRM. Reports so far had been sharp and credible, helping to focus the governance debate nationally and continentally. Most countries were committed to implementing their NPoAs. Teething challenges on the conduct of peer review among heads of state had waned as leaders became more comfortable about acknowledging shortcomings and debating paradigms of development cordially but seriously. The mechanism had also been able to boost inter-African dialogue and to identify and consolidate shared values.

However, the APRM faced serious challenges. One was the failure to clarify its institutional structures in time. A hosting agreement had only been signed in the past year — seven years after the Secretariat was established — and the institution still seemed nascent and immature. Its tools and processes were not fully operational.

It was not until 2009 that the APRM launched a process to ‘fast-track and streamline’ its procedures. This included revising the Self-Assessment Questionnaire that guides each country; devising a system to monitor implementation of NPoAs; revising APRM documentation, rules and procedures; and producing more comprehensive guidelines on civil society involvement. This fast-track project indicated a determination to consolidate and extend gains made under the APRM in phases.

She underscored that the APRM had not kept pace with its own momentum when it came to moving forward on reviews. Subsequent stages, especially post-review, were not adequately elaborated in base documents; hence implementation was ad hoc. A key fast-track objective was to clarify and enhance the panel’s role in monitoring the implementation of action programmes.

Also needing improvement, according to Change, were areas like knowledge management, benchmarking and experience-sharing. Stakeholders like parliaments (including the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), where reports are meant to be discussed) and the judiciary needed to be more involved. Although civil society had participated robustly at national level, continental voices were often missing or silent. There seemed to be insufficient international networking. Only a few civil society meetings were now held on the margins of African Union (AU) summits. Momentum at forum level might need to be reinigorated, particularly as forum pioneers had moved on after elections.

Patrick Mpedzisi, Southern Africa Trust, runs a programme working on civil society engagement with PAP, Nepad and the APRM. He felt that the spaces for civil society engagement were limited. For example, civil society was not represented in APRM Forum meetings. ‘Exclusion is being institutionalised.’

Echoing earlier comments, he noted that the APRM depended on its good reputation for survival, but many had detected a ‘waning of seriousness’ at the highest levels. Misbehaving heads of state had not been censured by their peers. He questioned the rigour applied to selecting new APRM Panel members.

He asked how civil society should respond, and how it could best become re-energised in relating to the APRM.

In **discussion**, a question was asked about the applicability of the APRM to post-conflict so-called fragile states, in particular Sierra Leone, slated for review in the future. In such cases, governance institutions tended to be nascent and vulnerable. Would society be able to survive the rigour of peer review without undoing painstaking peace-building and reconciliatory work? Did the mechanism need to evolve into a tool more sensitive to post-conflict fragility? Busia revealed an untold story. In its early stages, it was proposed that states be classified into three categories: high performers, middle rankers and post-conflict/fragile states. But the idea was ruled politically unacceptable because it would undermine the AU goal of unifying the continent. Classification would create more political problems than it solved. One instrument was needed for Africa. But the APRM would still add value in a country like Sierra Leone because it was, in effect, reconstructing governance.

Another participant asked whether the designers of the APRM had set up the mechanism to fail. This had happened with other African institutions, whose ambitions far outreached their capacity to effect change. Responses affirmed that the APRM had not been deliberately hobbled, and that the fact that it was growing and changing attested to its resilience and potential to become more significant. Organisations that grew were healthy.

A questioner asked whether heads of state could really be expected to hold one another to account. And could one truly find shared values in APRM countries? Would not gradual expansion to all states ultimately defeat the object of the process and weaken the mechanism? After all, some non-APRM states seemed to have very different notions of democracy. Busia argued that heads of state had shown themselves to be confident enough to take the plunge into the APRM, and had been reasonably able to defend their country's performance. The whole idea was that better performers could be role models for weaker states. But the system had not yet found the formula to make this happen properly.

Another question concerned the lack of definition of key concepts such as 'democracy' and 'good governance' in the APRM Questionnaire. Busia hoped this would be rectified in the streamlining process.

A participant asked whether the ethos of accountability and transparency fell apart at the level of the forum. Responses emphasised the importance of strengthening the voices of other role players who could promote these values, particularly the Pan-African Parliament and Regional Economic Communities, who had hitherto played a negligible role.

Finally, Busia noted that country review reports were just one tangible output of an APRM process that had many intangible benefits. Because it fostered a culture of accountability, societies that had gone through it could never be the same again. But it would take visionary leadership, hard work and commitment by all to consolidate and build on the early achievements of the APRM.



OTHER PUBLICATIONS

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 is 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. Also 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.

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