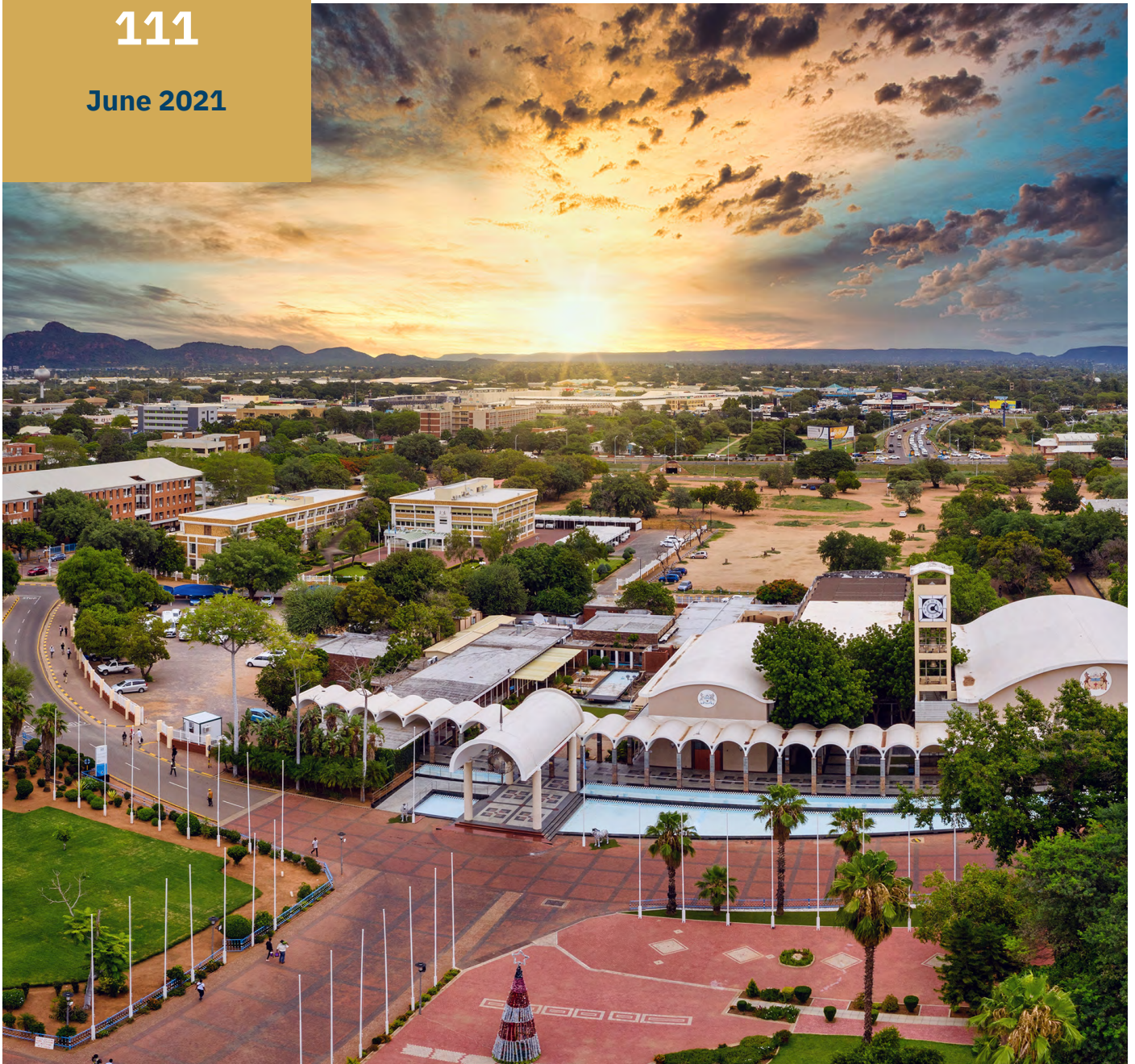


Policy Insights

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Governance at a Glance: Botswana's APRM Experience

MAIPELO OLGA PHALE & PHETSO KEGAISAMANG KGOSIEMANG

African perspectives
Global insights

Executive summary

Botswana acceded to the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) in February 2019, making it the 38th AU Member State to take this step. The APRM, Africa's peer-to-peer governance assessment and promotion tool, was introduced in 2003 and has been accepted and adopted by a majority of countries in the continent. In 2020, civil society organisations (CSOs) in Botswana resolved to tender a written submission from their perspective on key governance issues for the APRM process.

CSOs in Botswana thus initially convened in March 2020 to lay a way forward for participation in the APRM process. The Botswana Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (BOCONGO) and the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) were at the helm of engagement. The two organisations facilitated the input by local CSOs in unpacking 12 carefully selected key governance issues, through the Botswana APRM Popular Sensitisation (BAPS) Project. Written submissions were then put together by over 35 CSOs that sought to frankly highlight pertinent governance concerns.

A notable challenge as the process unfolded was the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected Botswana and the world at large. This pandemic did not only test the resolve of CSOs towards their civic and national duty, but further posed a challenge in the coordination and facilitation of their engagement with the APRM process. It went on to dictate how the entire exercise should be implemented by shifting to online delivery. This new development came with fears and confusion that were coupled with some inertia or resistance towards innovation that the pandemic engendered.

In light of the above, this policy insight seeks to explore the invaluable experiences and lessons learnt in Botswana through the APRM. It further highlights challenges faced during the roll out of the APRM process and concludes by selecting key issues that the team experienced in putting together the CSOs final submission.

Introduction

Botswana is believed to be a shining example of a good democracy. This perception was put up for proper review as the country took the decision to voluntarily accede to the APRM in 2019. This in effect meant that (at least from the perspective of CSOs) a social audit of Botswana's governance health would be carried out, allowing the country to introspect. The APRM principles call for local CSOs to be involved in the APRM process.

Inarguably, the APRM has potential benefits for Botswana. It can showcase its best practices to its peers and benchmark itself against others. Needless to say, a well-run, inclusive and transparent APRM process can promote accountability in the country and enhance a healthy governance environment.

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What is the APRM?

The APRM, established in 2003, is Africa's premier governance self-assessment and promotion tool.¹ APRM reviews focus on four broad thematic areas: democracy and political governance, economic governance and management, corporate governance, and socio-economic development. African countries accede voluntarily and after the review, the country starts to address identified governance challenges, through implementing its National Programme of Action. The APRM is an example of a multi-stakeholder initiative in that it is not merely a government review but a country review that brings together different stakeholders, including government, civil society and the private sector to identify key governance concerns. The APRM currently has 41 member states, with 24 having been through the full review process. Three countries have undergone second-generation reviews.²

The Botswana Experience

The BAPS Project³ had six key activities: 1) a pre-planning meeting in March 2020; 2) a sensitisation workshop; 3) an online working group; 4) submission development (where small teams worked on 12 important governance issues); 5) a validation workshop; and 6) the launch of the APRM civil society submission, the final event in April 2021.

COVID-19 dictated that plans be adjusted and tailored for online delivery. This was not without challenges

These activities were originally planned to be physical, face-to-face engagements. However, the advent of COVID-19 dictated that plans be adjusted and tailored for online delivery. This

1 AU, 'African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)', <https://au.int/en/organs/aprm>.

2 See: African Peer Review Mechanism, <https://aprm-au.org/>.

3 SAIIA, 'Botswana APRM Popular Sensitisation Project', <https://saiia.org.za/project/aprm-sensitisation-project-in-botswana>.

was not without challenges, including the short supply of good internet connectivity and data bundles, as well as supporting devices. Accessing research material and interviewing key resource persons was also a formidable task under COVID-19 restrictions, such as lockdowns and social distancing. Writers had to wait for lockdowns to be lifted, which in some instances slowed down the process.

Despite these challenges, the process was undertaken successfully, with a commendable number of CSOs partaking in the initial workshops and writing process. Important stakeholders from government also participated and attended some meetings, including the permanent secretary from the Office of the President and representatives from the Directorate on Corruption and Economic Crime. Paramount among a number of factors that made stakeholder contributions and the entire consultative process successful was BOCONGO's commitment to 'leaving no one behind'. BOCONGO made contingency plans for accessing the internet as well as ensuring that CSOs, especially those in rural areas, were brought on board. It is also worth mentioning that stakeholders were equally committed to ensuring the process was successful, especially in noting its significance in the success of the country's democracy and governance.

Throughout the implementation process, virtual meetings were well attended. In addition to the commitment of CSOs, the success of the process is also attributable to SAIIA making financial assistance available to facilitate the acquisition of data bundles for CSO participants.

Following the pre-planning meeting in March 2020, a working group was set up to discuss and outline key governance issues for review. The participating CSOs selected 12 major governance topics namely:

- 1 citizen participation and economic inclusion;
- 2 human rights;
- 3 education;
- 4 vulnerable groups;
- 5 food security;
- 6 public service and decentralisation;
- 7 separation of powers;
- 8 transparency and accountability;
- 9 crime and security;
- 10 foreign policy;
- 11 research and development; and
- 12 sustainable development, natural resource management, and access to land and infrastructure.

Lessons from Botswana

The lessons presented are based on the experiences of Botswana CSOs involved in the APRM journey. While they resonate with some countries, there were notable differences experienced. The collating of data was participatory. An online survey was used as a tool so that each CSO could select issues pertinent to them.

Engage as many CSOs as possible

Integrity and inclusiveness are essential. The need to interact with a wide range of CSOs that work in different sectors and locations cannot be overemphasised. Stakeholders involved in the project included academia, trade unions, faith-based organisations, civic societies and minority groups, among others. This helped to ensure broad representation of communities and that the voices of minorities were heard. CSOs from rural areas in Botswana, as well as those working with minorities and marginalised groups, took active part and ensured no one was left behind. Sign language interpreters were also engaged to ensure that Botswana with hearing impairments were also catered for.

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Work through a coordinating council or body

Having an active and well-respected council of CSOs such as BOCONGO was critical to the success of the BAPS Project. The umbrella body helped to coordinate and facilitate the process and ensured the work was done. Acquiring and availing internet bundles for CSOs to attend the virtual meetings, irrespective of their location, was a key strategy that ensured all were able to participate. There was also a dedicated coordinating team assigned by BOCONGO to monitor the process and ensure compliance with submission deadlines amongst other things. BOCONGO therefore played the role of laying the foundation for all

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participating CSOs, supporting them through the process and finally bringing the process together.

Focus on priority governance issues

When engaging in the APRM, it is important for CSOs to decide on priority governance issues within the context of their country and not attempt to tackle the APRM's long self-assessment questionnaire in its entirety. It is important to focus and prioritise issues that matter and are of interest to all. Participating CSOs should also be passionate and knowledgeable about the issues selected.

Build trust by involving government

Quite often, CSOs take a position that persistently critiques government. This can tend to cloud any good work that government may be doing, as well as to excuse CSOs from their role of augmenting government initiatives where possible. Side effects of this kind of environment are mistrust and a sour relationship between CSOs and authorities in government. In instances where CSOs have sound recommendations for consideration by government, the lack of a good working relationship makes it difficult for any exchange of ideas. The successful engagement or involvement of government also means keeping officials abreast on civil society APRM activities (and issues, if any) for their appreciation and contribution, as may be necessary.

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Be familiar with the process

A good understanding of the APRM process is key for successful and meaningful participation. Implementing organisations should ensure that CSOs fully understand and appreciate the process to apply themselves constructively. In Botswana, SAIIA and BOCONGO took all writers through sufficient training and were available at all times to provide guidance. This contributed to the quality of the submitted sections.

Conduct project sensitisation interventions

It is important to plan multiple interventions to maintain momentum and enthusiasm throughout the process. For example, BOCONGO became very active on its social media

platforms (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) and opened a large WhatsApp group for all involved, where APRM was discussed regularly and participants were kept abreast of developments. This helped to maintain impetus and create a common purpose among CSOs to move with the same understanding.

Benchmark best practices

Lessons and experiences from other countries are important. These help to avoid pitfalls in the implementation of the APRM at a country level, which could in turn affect the quality of submissions and even reflect badly on the implementing CSOs. Botswana benefited from lessons from Zambia, which acceded in January 2006 in Khartoum, Sudan, and Namibia, which acceded in January 2017 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Presenters from these countries shared their APRM experiences with Botswana CSOs in online events. SALLA also had vast experience to share about working with CSOs on the APRM. These lessons shaped and paved a way for Botswana CSOs to not make the same mistakes.

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Don't politicise the process

The engagement should not be tainted by politics. It is advisable to take a non-partisan approach from the start for the APRM to work well. The issues discussed should be a representation of the ordinary person's voice and not according to party affiliation. In Botswana, the coordinating body, BOCONGO, was apolitical in its facilitation and engagement. This led to a good number of CSOs coming on board and seeing the process through.

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Warm up to ICT

COVID-19 highlighted the importance of infusing information and communication technologies (ICT) into CSO operations. The APRM engagement was made possible

by online tools such as Zoom, because the pandemic dictated that it was no longer possible to meet. BOCONGO established a formal WhatsApp group, allowing convenient communication with the participants that helped to maintain momentum for the APRM process. If any issues needed to be shared or needed prompt action, this platform was used.

Tolerate other organisations and partners in your space

The willingness to let outsiders examine national findings and express a view on how a country is governed is a new experience that should be encouraged. Botswana CSOs welcomed this development. The Botswana government is still yet to implement the APRM process.

Conclusion

In summary, the APRM process in Botswana, under the stewardship of BOCONGO and SAIIA, was a success. Different stakeholders participated and each made important contributions to Botswana's formative journey of self-reflection. A number of lessons learnt throughout the journey emphasised the need for CSOs to work together and to take to heart their civic duty of representing the interests of the people without leaving anyone behind.

Needless to say, CSO engagement with the APRM process in Botswana was not without challenges. Notable among them was the outbreak of COVID-19, which not only brought a number of uncomfortable restrictions and imposed new ways of doing things, but also threatened lives. As a result, CSOs in Botswana had to quickly adapt to the 'new normal' while simultaneously engaging with the APRM process.

It is worth noting that despite these challenges, Botswana CSOs published a well-researched and professional report on the state governance in Botswana, further highlighting pertinent issues that need attention from government. The issues covered 12 key governance areas and frankly assessed how the country fares in those areas, further bringing to light recommendations towards rectification and improvement.

Despite these challenges, Botswana CSOs published a well-researched and professional report on the state governance in Botswana, further highlighting pertinent issues that need attention from government

The culmination of the process was a successful launch event and handing over of the report to stakeholders in April 2021. The success of the process galvanised the need for continued cooperation among CSOs, the integration of ICTs under the new normal and a good rapport with major stakeholders, among others.

The BAPS Project page and CSO submission can be accessed [here](#).

Authors

Maipelo Olga Phale

is the programmes coordinator of BOCONGO, a post she resumed in September 2019. She has a Bachelor of Arts in English and Sociology. Maipelo further graduated with a Masters in Politics and International Relations from the University of Botswana.

Phetso Kegaisamang Kgosiemang

is currently employed as assistant research officer for the Parliament of Botswana. He is also the chairperson of the Class Volunteers Foundation, a member organisation of BOCONGO. Phetso is currently studying for a Doctorate in Business Administration after graduating with a Master of Science in Strategic Planning from the Heriot Watt University in Scotland. He has a Postgraduate Certificate in Strategic Planning from the same university and a Diploma in Business Management and Marketing from the London Centre of Marketing.

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Botswana: Parliament House, Gaborone (poco_bw/Getty Images)

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Jan Smuts House, East Campus, University of the Witwatersrand
PO Box 31596, Braamfontein 2017, Johannesburg, South Africa
Tel +27 (0)11 339-2021 · Fax +27 (0)11 339-2154
www.saiia.org.za · info@saiia.org.za