



The African Peer Review Mechanism – How Far so Far?

Concern with governance has become a prominent topic in Africa. With the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), African leaders have addressed a taboo in post-independence Africa. The Organisation for African Unity's (OAU) emphasis on the sacrosanct principle of non-interference and territorial integrity has been used by most African governments to abdicate their responsibility to protect human rights as well as to avoid accountability for bad governance. The OAU successor organisation, the African Union (AU), aspires at introducing a different political culture.

The most direct governance framework, embraced by the AU, is the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Predating the AU by one year, NEPAD does not only deal with socio-economic issues, it also addresses political governance. A special feature of NEPAD is the APRM, which sets out the governance preconditions for development. All countries acceding to the APRM are, therefore, expected to improve their governance in line with a set of identified preconditions.

Previous assessments have shown some overall improvements in political representation throughout Africa, while shortcomings in the areas of corruption and effectiveness of institutions prevail. However, a number

of countries have signed up to the APRM that face questions on the credibility of their political will to conduct a thorough analysis.

Thus far, very little is known about how the peer review process actually unfolds at a country level. Ghana and Rwanda have completed the first full-cycle peer review mechanism in Africa, and their respective reports are expected to be published in the first half of 2006. Kenya is about to follow. Other countries, namely Mauritius, South Africa and Nigeria, are progressing on their reports and have seen public debate about the reviewing process.

Processes in Ghana and Rwanda – precedents for other countries to follow – have unfolded in different forms, especially with regard to civil society participation. Some critical comments of the reports are expected: they are likely to highlight Ghana's bloated government and Rwanda's lack of governance capacity. A crucial aspect will be the governments' reactions to recommendations of the reviews. Donors should align to the recommendations to foster African capacities. At the same time, support for civil society institutions seems necessary in the light of the two almost completed review processes.

Peer review in the new African setup

While "governance" was predominantly a donor concept in the 1990s – often attached to conditionalities in aid – interest in and concern about governance issues seem to increase in African states themselves.

Historically, African leaders have not been keen to discuss governance issues as part of their political discussions in the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). While the OAU's emphasis on independence has made an important contribution to the political emancipation of the continent, most African governments used national sovereignty to abdicate their responsibility to protect human rights as well as to avoid accountability for bad governance. Encouragingly, the OAU successor organisation, the African Union (AU), launched in 2002, seems to be introducing a different culture. While the recent AU Summit in Khartoum illustrated difficulties with governance in Africa, it also symbolised a different approach: Sudan's candidacy for AU Presidency trig-

gered a political quarrel and was ultimately not put forward. There are currently AU peacekeepers in the Sudanese province of Darfur, protecting civilians against allegedly government-supported militias. Thus, Sudan was deemed ill-suited to chair the AU.

The most direct governance framework is the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), launched in 2001 (see box 1). Not only does NEPAD deal with socio-economic issues, it also addresses political governance. Through the APRM, NEPAD sets out the governance preconditions for development. The peer review has often been referred to as one of the things that give NEPAD a distinctive and new character. While being new to Africa, the tool of peer review is, however, not unique; other international organisations have a longstanding practice of peer reviews, such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, not least in its specialised development assistance committee (DAC).

Box 1: The "initiating" states of NEPAD

The New Partnership for Africa's Development dates back to several initiatives by African heads of state. Ultimately based on improved popular demands for better economic performance – in many cases illustrated by democratic change in government since the 1990s – five heads of state in 2001 created plans for improved African efforts for development. Starting off separately, they ultimately joined forces: South African President Thabo Mbeki, President Olosegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade, Algeria's Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt. Their five countries are referred to as "initiating states" in NEPAD.

Based on the analysis that governance deficits hinder African development, NEPAD aspires at improving cross-country cooperation and, through the APRM, mutual learning in Africa, as well as exercising peer pressure where necessary to improve Africa's governance record. Improved governance is hoped to reap benefits for Africa and to increase foreign investment on the continent, both by the private sector and via development assistance and debt relief. The main areas of activities were identified as infrastructure and social services. In 2002, after the creation of the African Union, NEPAD was adopted as a socio-economic programme of the AU. Improving governance – due to weak states in Africa – was regarded as a collective challenge for African leaders. Joining a "club" of committed members already is hoped to bring some benefits by generating international reputation and thus attract more investment.

The APRM, like OECD peer reviews, is a system of voluntary self-assessment, constructive peer dialogue and persuasion (building on contacts between heads of state), as well as the sharing of experiences.

Until now, twenty-six states have acceded to the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). This potentially entails the risk of being "named and shamed" for governance shortcomings. Yet, the list of states that have signed up to the process suggests that a number of African leaders with doubtful political credentials regard this risk as "manageable". Currently, the countries that have acceded to the APRM are: Algeria, Angola, Benin, Burkina-Faso, Cameroon, DRC, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Nigeria, Kenya, Lesotho, Rwanda, Senegal, Sao Tome & Principe, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia.

It is unlikely that APRM in itself is going to create a "race to the top" and thereby lift all countries with poor governance records out of developmental deadlocks; a number of governments can be expected to try and fudge the review process. The fact that they have committed themselves to good governance, however, opens up some chances for civil society to hold them accountable to their own statements.

UNECA's governance assessment as a first step

A governance report by the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) was an initial exercise for African governance reviews. UNECA's indices are based on data from both household surveys and expert panel studies; they cover a wide range of governance issues, from the

institutional effectiveness, over economic management and freedom of speech to the fight against corruption. The project was intended as an exercise in preparation for the APRM to which UNECA is a partner.

Results of the UNECA report have been presented in a synthesis report. In the end of 2003, 28 countries were assessed, of which Ghana, together with Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, Mauritius and Morocco, are above average of these 28 in all assessment categories. Overall, shortcomings in the assessed countries were most obvious in the areas of corruption and institutional effectiveness, while political representation was relatively positive.

Accordingly, Ghana's overall success was less impressive with regard to efficiency of its fiscal system and the control of corruption (see diagram). Kenya in all categories was performing below the average, particularly so in the fight against corruption. There is no comprehensive diagram for Rwanda, which is listed as a participating country in UNECA's synthesis report. This might be noteworthy, as post-genocide Rwanda arguably provides an internationally very contested governance record and is thus a difficult country to assess.

The process of peer reviewing under APRM

The operationalisation of the African peer review system is based on the NEPAD *Declaration on Democracy, Political, Economic and Corporate Governance* of June 2002, which identifies four focus areas on governance, regarded as important preconditions for development on the continent:

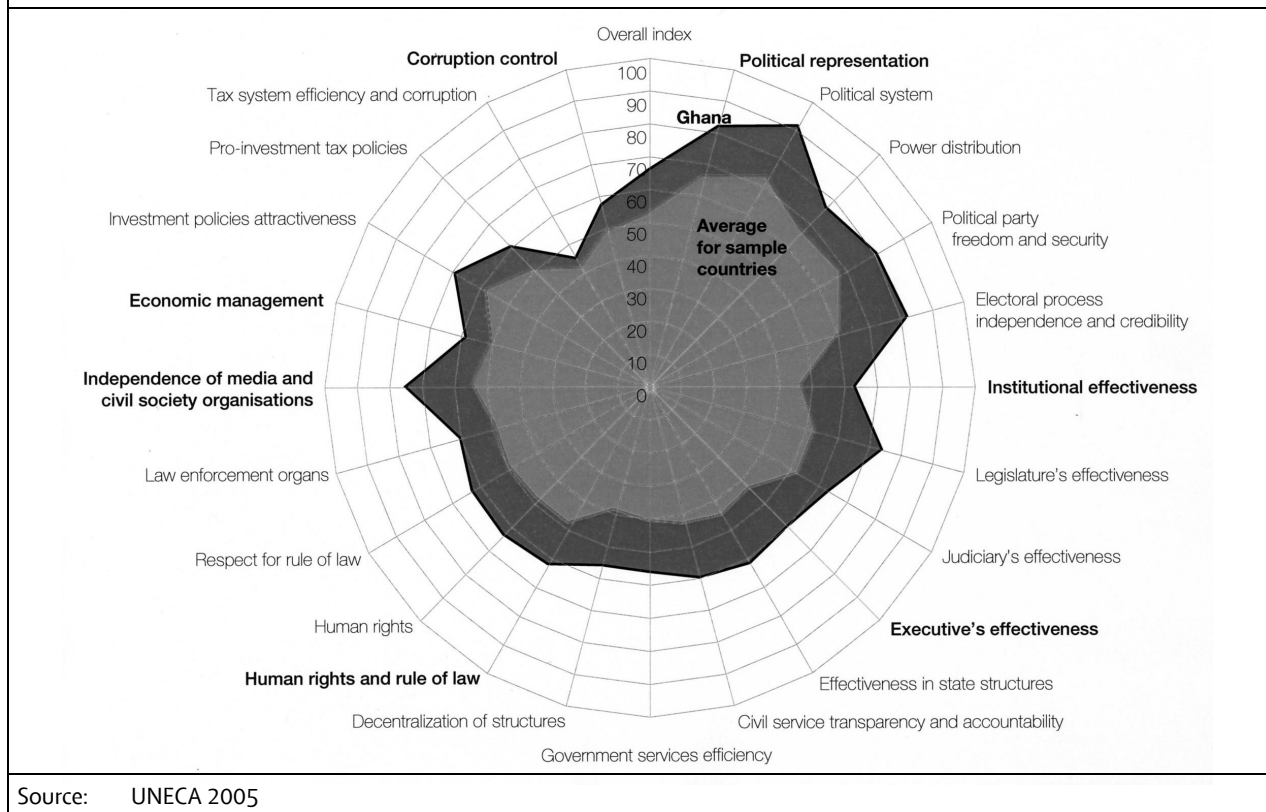
- Democracy and Political Governance,
- Economic Governance and Management,
- Corporate Governance, and
- Socio-Economic Development.

Each country under review goes through five stages: First, a national focal point is established and the APR Secretariat sends out a questionnaire, which may be adapted to local conditions. The aim is not to compare or rank states, but to make individual assessments of strengths and shortcomings. At this stage, the Secretariat also prepares a Background Paper on the Country to check against the self-assessment. Where necessary, a country support mission visits the country (during stage 1) in order to ensure that the APRM guidelines are followed. Thus far, all countries that have undergone reviews have been visited by country support missions.

In the next stage, a country review team undertakes consultations with stakeholders. Members of the assessment team come from NEPAD partner institutions, such as UNECA, the African Development Bank, the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights, etc.

This is followed by drafting the report by the country review team, which is then submitted to the APR Secretariat, APR Panel and ultimately to the APR Forum. The

Diagram: Ghana's and African average performance assessed in UNECA's governance report



Source: UNECA 2005

final stage of the APRM – now prepared for Ghana and Rwanda – involves making public the country's report and related advices as well as the exercise of peer pressure. This is done by the APR Forum, which is the paramount body of the Peer Review process.

Below the Forum sits the APR Panel of Eminent Persons, which acts as a "credibility buffer" between the heads of state and country assessment processes. The Panel comprises seven members appointed by the Forum, who are persons of integrity of various backgrounds. Administrative support to the APRM process is provided by a small, 12-professional-staff strong Secretariat, which is based in Midrand, South Africa. The structure of the Secretariat is currently under review and a number of the 12 positions are vacant.

APRM: On track, but with amended timetable

As per the original APRM plan, four countries were supposed to undergo a review at a time. In practice, Ghana and Rwanda to date have progressed most with their reports; the review process in these "pioneer countries" has thus particularly generated interest. Public attention in some countries under review included wild media speculation fuelled by the absence APRM related information in the public domain.

The process of reviewing a country was originally envisaged to take four months. This has now been adjusted to nine months, after it became clear that this new process could not be completed in this short time. The first round of reviews started in March 2004 and was completed in the same month the following year, with

the countries' reports formally presented to the APR Forum meeting in June 2005 in Abuja.

In January 2006, the APR Forum made their recommendations to the Ghana and Rwanda reports, which was the last step before the reports are made available for public consumption. It is, therefore, expected that the reports will be in the public domain in a matter of weeks, hence.

Ghana – a participatory process?

Ghana acceded to the APRM even ahead of the NEPAD initiating states (see box 1). This country is one of the few NEPAD non-initiators that have demonstrated political seriousness about NEPAD in general. Its national APRM process has been located within a newly established NEPAD ministry.

Ghana started its review process in March 2004. The process began with the setting up of a seven-member National APRM Governing Council in charge of the overall coordination of the process in the country. Its members were drawn from the Ghanaian civil society, giving the process unparalleled credibility. Moreover, the national governing council appointed four independent research organisations to be the lead agencies in the four review areas, thereby providing expertise in conducting research. The national governing council, assisted by a small secretariat, and the research organisations jointly organised workshops and administered nationally adapted questionnaires across the country.

On the whole Ghana's review process appears to have been a thorough exercise. The most important feature

of the process is the political will to allow for meaningful participation of civil society. While the APR Forum has not yet released the report on Ghana for public consumption, it is expected that the country will be criticised for having a bloated cabinet and for not being stern with regard to the protection of the judiciary.

Rwanda – a project driven by the President?

Rwanda conducted its review almost simultaneously with Ghana. Unlike Ghana, however, it acted in accordance with many of the other participating NEPAD countries by locating its NEPAD focal point and APRM activities in the office of the President. Nevertheless, a similar body to that of Ghana, the National APRM Commission, was set up – also to coordinate the activities of the national review process. The role of another body, the Rwandan APRM steering committee, remained unclear in the whole exercise.

It should be noted that members of the Commission were, like in Ghana, drawn from the public. The difference, though, is that Rwanda did not make use of research organisations as lead agents in specific areas. The Commission was the lead facilitator of the process, also assisted by a small secretariat. In order to manage its work, the Commission constituted a national technical review team for each of the four themes, thematic sub-commissions. The only purpose for which the services of an independent organisation were solicited was at the end of the review process in order to ensure quality control. This was ultimately validated by a national workshop, which was preceded by numerous similar countrywide meetings.

Rwanda's report has not yet formally been released to the public. Institutional incapacity resulting from a lack of resources is likely to be among Rwanda's identified key weaknesses. Yet, the centrality of the country's President in the review process has raised concern about political manipulation. It will be interesting to observe what the APRM recommends to Rwanda and how the country will react in practice.

Preliminary conclusions and implications for external support

One of the important lessons learned so far is that the review process is more cumbersome than expected. Civil society involvement potentially adds credibility to the process. However, in-country stakeholder consultations are not as easy as anticipated. The slow process on reports is largely due to country-specificity of the process. The APRM is about a commitment to move towards common standards and practices, i.e. it is about the direction of change (Cilliers 2002). At the current rate, it is necessary not to be overly expectant of the APRM process. Yet, it is too early to dismiss the APRM as futile.

Rwanda has announced a 100 million US \$ programme to address the shortcomings identified in its review, while Ghana has proposed an ambitious \$ 2.9 billion, five-year programme of action after its peer review. In this regard, the EU's proposal to launch a Governance Initiative that provides support to African countries for implementation of APRM-driven reforms should be seen as a progressive development model.

The Peer Reviews will need to keep track of political will – or lack thereof – for thorough analysis. Much will depend on the willingness to address identified shortcomings in the APRM. Most importantly, civil society should be encouraged to exert pressure on their governments in order to make the APRM process meaningful. Additionally, development partners should not merely be assigned the role of money-giver. They should also hold African governments to their words with regard to commitments for change based on the peer review. The crucial point for the APRM will be with governments which lack political will to implement reforms and use peer reviewing as a window-dressing exercise.



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