

Over the past decade, governance in Africa has improved considerably, aided in part by the African Peer Review Mechanism. There are fewer coups, more elections and better management of national economies. But there is still need for more accountability and transparency before Africa can claim credit for good governance. Corruption is still rife and illicit financial flows are draining the continent's domestic resources.

African Peer Review Mechanism comes of age

Countries embracing self-monitoring mechanism to shine light on domestic affairs

By Kingsley Ighobor



A high-level panel discussion, "Africa's innovation in governance through 10 years of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)", took place during Africa Week at United Nations Headquarters.

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A delegation from the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), a self-monitoring instrument created by African leaders in 2003, did not exactly beat the drums this past October to celebrate its 10th anniversary at the United Nations in New York. Rather, members explained the APRM's activities and achievements at the different forums organized to mark Africa Week at the UN. And they acknowledged the huge tasks ahead.

The APRM is one of the ways African leaders have responded to calls for good governance—a self-assessment instrument

they promoted from the outset as "an innovative approach designed and implemented by Africans for Africa." APRM experts work with governments and civil society groups to review country performance in areas like democracy and good governance, socio-economic development, corporate governance, corruption, human rights—particularly women's and children's rights—conflicts and judicial independence. Membership in the APRM is voluntary.

The not-so-subtle message hammered at the UN was that the APRM is a full-fledged African approach to dealing with Africa's

problems. "APRM is an instrument for transformation and a lot has been achieved in the last 10 years," says Fatuma Ndagiza Nyirakobwa, vice-chair of the body's panel of eminent persons.

Political will

So far 33 African countries have joined the APRM, of which 17 have been reviewed by their peers. Ms. Nyirakobwa, a former Rwandan ambassador to Tanzania, sees that as a glass half full. "Thirty-three countries [signing up] over the past 10 years is no mean achievement... We have to consider that this is a voluntary process," she explains in an interview with *Africa Renewal*.

Africa comprises 54 countries, meaning 21 have yet to join the APRM. And just 17 of the 33 participating countries have been peer-reviewed. "Why don't the remaining 16 countries want to be reviewed?" asks Ms. Nyirakobwa rhetorically. "This is an issue of commitment and political will right at the highest level. I think we need to accept that every country has its reasons."

There is no need to fret over the number of countries in the APRM, says Liberian finance minister Amara M. Konneh, who represented his country's president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, at Africa Week. "Going all the way to 33 is progress. We will get there. It's a matter of time."

President Sirleaf is the chairperson of the APRM Forum, its highest decision-making authority, which is made up of heads of state of participating countries. Ms. Nyirakobwa is urging every African country to join and all those in it to undergo peer review.

The review process

The peer review process typically has five stages. In stage one a country conducts a self-assessment, guided by an APRM questionnaire. At the same time, APRM officials conduct a background study of the country's governance and development issues. During

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the second stage, an APRM panel of experts visits that country for extensive discussions with government officials and civil society.

In stage three the panel writes a report building on the country's self-assessment, using information from background research and consultations with government and civil society. In stage four the panel submits its report to the heads of state. "This is the stage where they [heads of state] ask us questions regarding the strengths and weaknesses mentioned in the report," notes Ms. Nyirakobwa. The fifth stage consists of efforts by the APRM and the country under review to launch, publish and promote the report.

Implementation snags

Peer-reviewed countries are expected to implement the APRM's recommendations, states Mr. Amara. And therein lies the system's weakness. Ms. Nyirakobwa says that many peer-reviewed countries don't have the capacity to implement recommendations, which may involve expenditures not in a country's budget. She also says that technical experts are not readily available in many countries. In addition, countries are not bound to implement APRM recommendations; they may even reject some of them as inappropriate. "These reports have more moral value than any kind of coercive value," according to Maged Abdelaziz, head of the Office of the UN Special Adviser on Africa. Currently it appears that a report's moral force isn't strong enough to pull 21

countries into the APRM or make 16 others agree to be peer-reviewed.

However, the APRM has been an eye-opener for African leaders in its role as an early warning system. In 2007 its reports warned the continent's leaders about brewing violence from xenophobia in South Africa and post-election fallout in Kenya. "It was very clear in our report in 2007 that something was going to happen if no strong measures were taken to avert the crises," recalls Ms. Nyirakobwa. "But they [governments] didn't take them [recommendations] seriously." The loss of lives and property in both countries was a wake-up call for African leaders, who later requested a follow-up special investigation on Kenya.

Insufficient resources

Although African leaders would like to have the APRM insulated against foreign influence, they also realize that the body needs resources, some of which could come from outside Africa. "We encourage African countries to build capacities but also we need the support of the UN and the global community in financial and capacity building," Ms. Nyirakobwa says. She wants charity to begin at home and encourages African nations to offer support. "Nigeria has abundant skilled persons in engineering and medicine. They can lend a hand to other countries."

The APRM secretariat is already supported by experts from the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the UN Development Programme. Ms. Nyirakobwa emphasizes the acute need for resources to help peer-reviewed countries implement recommendations. "The biggest challenge

is on the ground, in different countries... especially after the review process." She believes they will get more support if the APRM's activities and successes become visible. "We want the world to know what APRM is doing."

UN support

The UN is already assisting the AU in different ways, notes Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information Peter Launsky-Tieffenthal. The world body channels assistance at the global, regional and country levels, he explains. OSAA concentrates on global advocacy for the AU; the ECA, through NEPAD, coordinates regional engagements; and the UN country teams partner with individual countries.

Mr. Launsky-Tieffenthal adds that an office in his department also functions as one of the UN programmes helping to promote the African Union's work. "We have been playing a role and will continue to do so by providing strategic advice on public information and raising public awareness of APRM's activities across Africa." He says the APRM could also benefit from outreach campaigns run by the UN Information Centres throughout Africa.

With the APRM likely to mobilize more resources in the future, and given cooperation from its members, it looks as if the stars are aligned in its favour. But this is also true because African leaders derive pride from their own creation and are determined to see it succeed. The APRM will help realize the dream of "an Africa where prosperity is felt by all," says Ms. Nyirakobwa. 🇦🇪