

REVIEW

The African Peer Review Mechanism: Lessons from the Pioneers

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The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) has often been referred to as ‘one of the most innovative African initiatives of the 21st Century’. Basing my opinion, in part, on reading this 406-page volume I would argue that there is no longer a need for equivocation, the APRM represents a quantum leap forward in the thinking about how to address the many governance challenges that exist in Africa today. The mechanism is so innovative, and so ambitious in its scope, that the fact that Herbert & Gruzd have been able to draw for their book on the in-depth experiences of five African states which have undertaken the process is remarkable.

One of the many intriguing innovations of the APRM is the platform it provides for non-governmental stakeholders within its processes and institutions. Both corporate and civil society stakeholder input are required, and this tripartite arrangement, involving government, the corporate sector, and civil society, has paved the way for an intriguing examination by the authors of some of the dynamics which play out when the three parties participate in pursuit of a common objective – to contribute to a country report which reviews governance practices and institutions; acknowledging strengths and highlighting weaknesses.

Already these reports have proved to be accurate gauges of the realities of the situation in African states, as evidenced by concerns noted in the Kenyan report about the dangers of ethnic politics (later proved accurate during election-related ethnic clashes in that country after the contested 2007 elections), and the concerns raised in South Africa about xenophobic tendencies in the townships, which were proved, in May 2008, to be valid, despite the South African government’s earlier objections to the inclusion of the concerns in the report.

This volume is worth reading even if only because of the importance of the APRM process and its increasing relevance to people on the continent (more than two-thirds of the people of Africa live in countries which have formally acceded to the APRM). However, Herbert & Gruzd have also produced a resource which balances the need for academic rigour and technical proficiency with the accessible style that is characteristic of so many of SAIIA’s publications.

Interspersing the narrative of the evolving APRM process with precise analysis, the authors reflect a clear understanding of the issues involved – no small task in view of the sometimes chronic shortage of existing sources reflecting the start of the process. To present a coherent and informed picture of the APRM, both as process and institution, in countries which were quite literally making up the rules as they went along, and at local, national, and continental levels simultaneously, is an achievement in itself.

As the title of the book suggests the countries the authors examined were entering uncharted territory, attempting to bridge the gap between the theoretical model outlined in broad strokes in the founding documents of the mechanism and the often messy reality of a national programme implemented under constraints. Herbert & Gruzd offer a glimpse into some of the confusion, controversy, and contradiction which emerged as Ghana, Rwanda, Kenya, Mauritius, and South Africa grappled with a complex, multifaceted process with little precedent to guide them.

Key issues, such as the composition of the national governing councils or the use of technical institutions as intermediaries in the process, were neither easily nor obviously resolved, particularly in light of the fact that the APRM not only permits but encourages diversity at the national level, which adds to the complexity of the task.

These issues are neatly summarised in the case study chapters, prefaced with a section introducing the APRM in broad strokes, a commentary on key issues in the establishment of national institutions and methodologies, and a section which draws out some of the lessons learnt from the early country experiences.

A fifth section, titled 'Appendices', includes an abridged summary of the official APRM documents and a rich cross-section of potential resources and suggestions for those with an interest in undertaking a peer review exercise based on the APRM model.

Of particular interest to me was a collection of video interviews conducted by the authors with some of the key players in the pioneer countries – including a lengthy interview with a member of the APR Panel of Eminent Persons, Ambassador Bethuel Kiplagat.

At times I disagreed with Herbert & Gruzd's arguments for 'best practices', which they based on their experience and analysis of the pioneer states. The issue of national leadership is a case in point – the authors seem to favour a model which resembles the compact Ghanaian version, a seven-member, completely independent council, unattached to any government ministry or body. This is a particularly sensitive and complex issue for governments and non-state actors alike, and one on which there appears to be little clear consensus.

In Ghana, non-interference by the state was prioritised over almost all else, while in Kenya more importance was attached to the process of selection to the national commission which oversees the process. In South Africa, the government argued that it would play a key role in the implementation of the National Programme of Action and thus needed to maintain a central oversight role in the self-assessment process. In each case, the model adopted had both merits and shortcomings, highlighting the complexity of the task facing the APRM in the country context. However, the importance of debating these issues from an informed perspective has been greatly advanced by the publication of this volume, making it an important reference for anyone with a stake or interest in the APRM.

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