

Removing Neocolonialism's APRM Mask

A Critique of the African Peer Review Mechanism

Patrick Bond

New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) has faced a crippling problem with the elites responsible for its implementation. It has been suggested that the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) can help fix this, although promoting APRM is very hard work.

A rethink is required by any community-based organisation, social movement, non-governmental organisation and other progressive body if they are presently legitimating NEPAD policies, Bretton Woods Institution mandates, donor conditionalities and local elites via the APRM. The merits of participating are few, and the damage done to progressive politics appears very high in some cases, not merely in terms of institutional frustration.

The national middle class discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary... the transmission line between the nation and capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neocolonialism.

– Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Introduction: Talk Left, Walk Right

Seen from Washington, NEPAD can be summed up in a frank description by the Bush Administration's leading State Department official for Africa, Walter Kansteiner: 'philosophically spot-on.'² But as the host institution of the APRM, NEPAD has faced a crippling problem in assisting Kansteiner and his ilk: the elites responsible for its implementation

– and for legitimising neoliberalism more generally – are not democrats, and do not even seem to be committed to building their nations' economies. Can the APRM help fix this, or is it just a vanity of politicians and middle-class NGOers but, in reality, a transmission line between Africa and neocolonialism?

Whichever it may be, promoting APRM is very hard work. Charles Manga Fombad and Zein Kebonang point out that starting around 1990, Africa's second wave of democratisation (the first being decolonisation) witnessed an increase not only in elections (albeit "a majority of the post-1990 elections have been marred by electoral fraud"), but also coups, especially from 1995-2001: "Many of the old dictators are still firmly entrenched, whilst some of the new leaders who have joined

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the 'club' have, in recent years, been devising ever more sophisticated ways to perpetuate their rule while using the democracy slogan as a convenient mask to disguise their despotic practices."³

Adds Ian Taylor, "With very few exceptions (Botswana, Mauritius, Senegal, South Africa) the majority of the heads of state involved in NEPAD are quintessentially leaders of neo-patrimonial regimes and certainly do not regard their rule as 'temporary,' nor that institutional law should constrain their pre-eminence or that their rule be transparent and accountable."⁴

One example might be Meles Zenawi, Prime Minister of Ethiopia. Zenawi conspired with George W. Bush to invade Somalia in 2007, with the connivance of Mbeki; this, after the senseless war over a strip of sandy land on the Eritrean border between 1988-2000, which killed at least 70 000 combatants and civilians. According to the lobby group Ethiopian Americans for Justice, Zenawi's government

hosted the 'African Guantanamo,' participating in the illegal kidnapping, imprisonment and torture of Africans. In return for its services for the 'war on terror,' the Bush Administration rewarded the Zenawi group both financially and diplomatically. Most importantly, the Bush administration looked the other way when Ethiopia's rulers stole elections, tortured and killed many innocent people... Mr. Zenawi stole the 2005 elections, destroyed all opposition, muffled the press, banned advocacy for human rights and made a mockery out of the rule of law. Following the elections, his troops shot and killed 193 people who protested electoral fraud, massacred innocents in Gambella and the Ogaden. They had also bombed civilians in Somalia on many occasions. Mr. Zenawi's government has been one of the worst violators of human rights in Africa.⁵

Still, Zenawi was *unanimously* chosen as Chairperson of NEPAD in 2007, and also as Chairperson of the Committee of Heads of State and Government of Countries Participating in the APRM. At the same moment in early 2009 that his parliament was passing the Charities and Societies Proclamation law – 'designed to strictly control and monitor civil society in an atmosphere of intolerance of the work of human rights defenders and civil society organizations,' according to Amnesty International⁶ – Zenawi was writing in the APRM's *2008 Annual Report* of the mechanism's ability to support "countries in improving their policy-making processes, adopt best practices from other countries, and comply with

ratified standards and codes, while involving all stakeholders in the country."⁷

This may be the most extreme case of hypocrisy associated with the APRM, but it is not surprising. Writing for a civil society lobby group, Partnership Africa Canada in 2005, Ousmane Dème recognised – with undue regret – NEPAD's morale rot:

It increasingly appears that out-and-out criticism is replacing the strong enthusiasm that prevailed at its inception. In fact, the hopes originally raised by this ambitious programme are now beginning to dissolve. Criticism is emerging from all directions. NEPAD's biggest supporters, among them President Abdoulaye Wade, are starting to publicly voice their misgivings and censure.⁸

According to the Senegalese president, in October 2004: "I am disappointed. I have great difficulties explaining what we have achieved when people at home and elsewhere ask me... We're spending a lot of money and, above all, losing time with repetition and conferences that end and you're not quite sure what they've achieved."⁹ In June 2007, at the World Economic Forum meeting in Cape Town, Wade acknowledged that NEPAD "had done nothing to help the lives of the continent's poor."¹⁰ Later that year, Wade was even more frank: "The redirection of the project has become inevitable, because nobody has yet understood anything from NEPAD and nobody implemented NEPAD."¹¹ As Mbeki himself confessed a few weeks after his ouster from power in December 2008, "I am afraid that we have not made the progress we had hoped for. Indeed, and regrettably, I believe that we have lost some of the momentum which attended the launch and detailed elaboration of the NEPAD programmes."¹²

But this is unsatisfactory, and leads merely to a head-shaking about African implementation incapacity. A further-reaching structural critique is required, based neither on limited African elite agency nor NEPAD's failure to help poor Africans, as if this was a genuine goal in any case. Such were merely symptoms of a deeper problem, which is Africa's insertion into the world economy in a manner that, as Frantz Fanon warned, would "inherently generate a failed development project". Masking the neocolonial relationship during the period of the 2000s – in the wake of two decades of rampant structural adjustment that demolished living standards, except for newly-empowered political, financial and commercial elites – was a new rhetoric: 'good governance.'

That phrase is often deployed within an all too easy 'blame Africa first' narrative in which the

machinations of outside forces simply evaporate. But the alleged corruption that led to SA Police Commissioner (and Interpol president) Jackie Selebi's leave – and apparent protection from prosecution by Mbeki – was thanks to mafia infiltration. And the alleged corruption that had Mbeki firing Jacob Zuma as deputy president in 2005 was traced to a French arms company, Thint, as part of the vast, bribery-ridden, foreign-sourced arms deal that Mbeki himself pushed into the SA budget over the objections of many inside and outside the government. Or, in the wake of Mbeki, his successor Kgalema Motlanthe's refusal of a visa to the Dalai Lama was almost certainly a result of the pressure the Chinese government – a major contributor to the African National Congress – concedes they put on Pretoria.

How can one disentangle such organic 'good governance' shortfalls fewer than 20kms away from NEPAD headquarters from the exogenous forces? Can tearing off the APRM mask assist us in such a task?

An African Governance Mask

To understand the masking of neocolonial relations through the APRM requires reminding ourselves of how much ideological damage has recently been done to neoliberalism, even before its 2008 financial meltdown in the North. Writing for the Institute for Democracy in South Africa, analyst Len Verwey concedes that amongst the sites the Afrobarometer surveyed in 2002, "Mozambique is the only country where more people perceived government economic policies positively than negatively. Nigeria, Uganda, Zambia and Malawi demonstrate a particularly acute [70%+] perception of the negative impact of government economic policies on most people."¹³ If that is the case, and if international financial institutions and the 'donor' governments must continue to reproduce a neocolonial system widely understood as damaging to the interests of the masses, then the first requirement is for elites to adopt good governance rhetoric. Verwey here provides the conventional wisdom:

NEPAD differs from previous African development initiatives, and this difference has contributed to its positive reception in the West, due to its adoption of the following pre-conditions for sustainable development:

- A shift from statism to markets and public-private partnerships as the drivers of growth and development;

- Competitive integration into the global economy, which would include export-orientated domestic production, diminishing tariff- and non-tariff barriers to imports, and the soliciting of foreign direct investment; and
- The foregrounding of governance issues in securing positive developmental outcomes.¹⁴

Adds Greg Masterson of the Electoral Institute of South Africa,

APRM lies at the heart of the AU drive for a broad vision of African rejuvenation and renewal that seeks to generate more goodwill from foreign trade partners and donors by proving good political and economic governance and accountability... Arguably, the most unique and original aspect of the NEPAD initiative, the APRM is largely responsible for thrusting African development into the international development spotlight at a time of chronic global donor fatigue and a slump in the global economy... The APRM's central philosophy of African states taking responsibility for their own development, and compliance has been greeted enthusiastically by the donor community.¹⁵

In the same spirit, Ross Herbert and Steven Gruzd claim that the APRM is "arguably the continent's most innovative and challenging experiment to date"¹⁶ (perhaps forgetting the rise of nationalism, successful anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles, debt and climate campaigning, and the like). Herbert and Gruzd are representatives of Africa's explicitly pro-capital SA Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA). Gruzd posits that SAIIA and similar 'think tanks' staffed by exceptionally persuasive 'experts' are crucial to APRM: "Their reputation for objectivity, integrity and expertise has, in most instances, managed to convince skeptical citizens that the APRM is not just another government project designed to celebrate mediocrity and whitewash inadequacies."¹⁷

Although, Herbert and Gruzd argue, APRM is "designed to be more palatable and consensus-oriented than conditionalities imposed by debt-relief or aid-driven processes,"¹⁸ the neocolonial direction is essentially the same as that imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), State Department and Brussels. What was apparently required, by the early 2000s, was the adoption of a rather more sly approach, one capable of teaching 'democracy' talk to tyrants and of adding a certain fraction of *civilised* society ('think tanks') to give legitimacy to the standard conditionality menu.

But the results of APRM are not encouraging, even seen through these partisans' eyes. In

addition to two typical grievances present in most of the APRM case studies, namely lack of financial resources and an overambitious timeframe, Herbert and Gruzd add some important caveats about the APRM technical process worth noting:

The rules and regulations governing the process are loose. Later documents contradict earlier ones, without revoking or revising them. The wide-ranging flexibility afforded to countries in developing their national APRM structures — particularly their national governing council or national commission and local APRM secretariat — has spawned a variety of different institutional models. This permissive approach has mollified some nations apprehensive about the process, but it has also undermined the ability of the system to establish governance norms or bring about genuinely improved dialogue around governance reform. The Panel has been reluctant to publicly challenge governments, even when their APRM plans are contrary to the written and verbal guidelines.¹⁹

Nor would one expect the APRM Panel to break ranks with other elites, and to side with civil society. The South African representative to the APRM Panel, after all, was Chris Stals. His prior job was as Reserve Bank governor, when he initiated extreme monetarist policies that shifted resources to financial instead of productive sector economic activities, from poor to rich.

The Case of South Africa

The most revealing APRM case study is surely South Africa's, given the home-based context. Herbert and Gruzd served on the South African APRM civil society team, which led a long process that eventually persuaded the final Panel on the need for 182 formal recommendations (of varying politico-ideological orientations). But the July 2007 programme of action agreed upon with Peers ignored most of these and diverted from internal APRM procedure, according to Herbert and Gruzd:

The Panel called for action on crime, regulation of political party finances (called for in the UN and African Union anti-corruption codes), action on racism and xenophobia, reconsideration of South Africa's electoral system, efforts to strengthen parliament, and actions to fight corruption, among other high-profile recommendations. These are addressed [by Pretoria] with varying degrees of clarity, but are in many instances ignored or dealt with superficially. In this, South Africa has

demonstrated very real limits to the ability or willingness of the system to press unwilling nations toward particular reforms.²⁰

As Paul Graham from Idasa observed, Pretoria's APRM document "shows substantial alteration from the report discussed in Kliptown (in front of 1700 delegates) and, as a result, a substantial amount of the texture of the debates has been lost."²¹ Another SAIIA report noted that SA's APRM report "was crafted without significant civil society input and the media were largely ignored."²²

What does the power of South Africa over the entire APRM process teach Herbert and Gruzd? "Despite the strong recommendations, the system declined to take action or publicly comment when South Africa ignored a large portion of the recommendations in its action programme. The process highlighted the limits of the Panel's ability to stand up to a powerful nation that might resist its advice."²³

One specific point deserves mention. A well-known feature of Mbeki's management style – arrogant denialism – was evident, as *Business Day* editorialised in relation to an important APRM Panel finding:

Several months before the recent xenophobic attacks, Mbeki disputed the findings of a report warning of SA's 'brutality and detention' of foreigners from other African countries... He cannot have missed the APRM's cautionary note. Its SA country report concluded that "xenophobia against other Africans is currently on the rise and must be nipped in the bud." In his response to the report last year, Mbeki denied that xenophobic tendencies existed in SA, pointing out that the country did not even have refugee camps. To illustrate the friendly environment, Mbeki alluded to a state visit by Congolese President Joseph Kabila when illegal immigrants from that country openly requested the two presidents to regularise their status. In Mbeki's view, the fact that illegal immigrants were able to address the two leaders showed how comfortable they felt in SA. Yet, a few months later, 62 people were killed in anti-foreigner attacks that erupted in Alexandra on May 11.²⁴

Simply said, the APRM was not treated seriously in Pretoria. Six months after taking office as Minister of Public Service and Administration, in March 2009, Masenyani Baloyi had not tackled even the much-diluted tasks he inherited from his predecessor, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi: "At a conference to reveal what the government was doing about the problems cited, Baloyi was slammed for convening

yet another 'talk shop.' Johannesburg ANC Woman's League organiser Bontle Setshogoe said, 'On the ground, nothing concrete is been done.' Baloyi said that time was needed for 'reflection.'²⁵

Other cases

Herbert and Gruzd praise the Ghana, Kenya and Rwanda reviews, but do concede that the reports "also suffer from lack of specificity, measurability and the extreme brevity used to describe commitments, using terms such as 'monitoring and enforcement' and 'improved human resource management'."²⁶ Gruzd makes specific claims about APRM progress in other countries (regrettably, not documented), such as that "Rwanda is in the midst of fundamental reforms to its business environment. Kenya points out laws passed, for example on witness protection and public procurement, new funds to foster youth and women's development, and a draft national land policy created through consultation. In South Africa, issues flagged in the APRM, such as unregulated private funding to political parties and floor-crossing in parliament, have been slated for reform."²⁷

To what extent can the APRM be credited for such changes? It cannot be deduced from the information provided and, in any case there are multiple power vectors at work in any given context. For example, the political party floor-crossing fiasco in South Africa had to come to an end because of the ludicrous way deals were being done, undermining the system from the standpoint of the majority and minority parties; the minor APRM input on floor crossing can hardly be given credit for this. However, it appears that there are no reforms contemplated on private funding of political parties, notwithstanding the extent to which the Chinese financial grip on the ruling party caused acute embarrassment during the recent Dalai Lama visa affair.

And the Rwanda 'reforms' appear neoliberal in orientation, not at all inconsistent with standard Washington Consensus conditionalities. Moreover, the 2005 Rwanda APRM report was excessively 'rosy,' according to Eduard Jordaan, and the final document "inadequately addresses a number of serious political problems in Rwanda, such as Rwanda's involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the inadequate separation of powers in the Rwandan political system, tensions in Rwandan society, and the flawed presidential and parliamentary elections of 2003."²⁸

Moving to Kenya, prior to the December 2007 ethnicised electoral catastrophe, the APRM

process went smoothly, according to Herbert and Gruzd.²⁹ But consider what the APRM *failed* to do. The report, according to Bronwen Manby (from the London-based AfriMAP project),

does not identify the issues relating to the independence of the Electoral Commission of Kenya that were so critical on election day and in the following period... But the biggest concern is the issue of political will. Was the Kenyan government ready to try to fix what was broken? Were the APRM eminent persons and secretariat willing to hold them to account? And were other African heads of state who had signed up for the APRM process – to whom the APRM eminent persons and secretariat report – ready to urge remedies for poor performance, or would their own glass houses discourage the throwing of stones?³⁰

Conclusion

The arguments made here should suggest a rethink by any community-based organisation, social movement, non-governmental organisation and other progressive body if they are presently legitimating NEPAD policies, Bretton Woods Institution mandates, donor conditionalities and local elites via the APRM. The merits of participating are few, and the damage done to progressive politics appears very high in some cases, not merely in terms of institutional frustration.

The main point is to not forget the context, which is neocolonialism's need for a mask. As the Partnership Africa Canada's Déme explains,

The launch of the APRM is not neutral in that it coincides with the first difficulties of NEPAD's initiators to persuade the foreign private sector to invest massively in Africa. Africa's poor image in the international community, the result of its reputation for bad governance, is in some minds one of the main obstacles to attracting foreign private investment.³¹

As a result, Déme and others in similar donor agencies and donor-funded liberal 'think tanks' have a huge difficulty in their task of re-legitimising the APRM: "The APRM represents a major challenge for African civil society. It needs to seize this opportunity to parlay its extensive experience into improved governance in African countries."³²

In contrast, argue Charles Manga Fombad and Zein Kebonang,

Either carefully selected pro-government NGOs and CBOs are involved or those brought in are

given so little information that they are unable to play a constructive role in the process. In the final analysis, the NEPAD APRM will remain a closed state-to-state process with no room for non-state, independent critical voices who could contribute constructively to making the process more productive, effective and credible.³³

Herbert and Gruzd conclude that “the system as a whole is beneficial and opens space for meaningful national dialogue.” Yet, this is apparently only true for those institutions – like SAIIA – which have impressive clout in their own terms, e.g. elite connections and a high media profile. As for ordinary citizens, they concede, the ‘meaningfulness’ of the dialogue is open to question:

Civil society members have participated in public meetings during country support missions, but these encounters have only discussed the APRM process in the most general terms, have not provided detailed information on process and governance requirements, or lessons on how other countries have managed public consultations, used surveys or managed research institutions. Notably, the memorandums of understanding between the continental authorities and participating governments have not been made public.³⁴

Finally, Manby offers quite a sobering reflection on the APRM’s distracting capacity, based not only on Kenya but the other cases as well:

Although each country that has undergone the APRM process is supposed to report back to the APR Forum on its progress, there is no serious monitoring exercise of how effectively this is done. Nor any sanctions for failure to act. Nor, apparently, is there any real system to ensure that the commitments the government makes address the most important problems highlighted in the APRM review. Certainly, no individual or institution at the African level, least of all the APR Forum, raised the implementation of the APRM commitments as critical issues during the recent Kenyan crisis – or, perhaps more importantly, during the lead up to the election, when such a focus could perhaps have averted the near-catastrophe into which Kenya was drawn.

At national level, meanwhile, the implementation of the APRM programme of action is also left entirely to the executive, with no formalised role for parliamentarians or civil society to hold the government’s feet to the fire should it fail to perform. As in other countries, the APRM process has not been well-integrated into other national

development planning processes – a problem recognised by the APRM secretariat in South Africa – and it does not appear to have informed other important reform programmes under way at the same time.

Moreover, the systems in place to monitor the implementation of other national policies (however imperfect) are also not mobilised to engage with the implementation of the APRM programme of action. President Kibaki did not report back to parliament on the APR Forum meeting and on the actions he had committed to take, nor was the report tabled for debate. Though there was some coverage in the media of the APR Forum discussion of Kenya, it did not generate a real national debate on the report and programme of action and their implications. The conclusions and recommendations were not widely disseminated throughout the country by the NEPAD-Kenya secretariat or other means. Although a meeting hosted by the NEPAD-Kenya secretariat in mid-February 2008 aimed – encouragingly – to involve civil society in the process of preparing the country’s progress report to the next APR Forum, the report of the meeting is surreal in its lack of any suggestion that this review might be relevant to, or affected by, the national political crisis.

Even the continental APRM secretariat failed to engage in any serious way with national institutions, such as the Electoral Commission of Kenya or the Kenya National Human Rights Commission, in order to brief them on the conclusions relevant to them and the follow-up role they might play.

Without this sort of integration into other national planning systems, debates and oversight mechanisms, the APRM process seems doomed to become little more than a cosmetic exercise without effect in the real world of policy and decision making.³⁵

To close, recall how NEPAD has indisputably failed: the global elites who demanded it as a mask for the continuation of 2000s neoliberalism in a home-grown variant did not, ultimately, want to give NEPAD’s African elites the resources required to do the job they promised. Not even the likes of Bono, Geldof, Make Poverty History and white-banded Global Call for Action Against Poverty civil societians could compel global capital to be slightly less brutal to Africa, notwithstanding heady promises at Gleneagles. Since 2005, there has been demonstrably less North-South money for aid, and much more military spending. This is not disputed, and hence it would appear that NEPAD’s functionality to neocolonialism – once considered important – is rather irrelevant.

Does the same pessimism apply to the APRM's functionality to NEPAD, as neocolonialism's governance mask? Yes, it should by now be crystal clear – especially from the South African APRM case but also more generally – that elite APRM processes chock full of civil society 'experts' from 'think tanks' have generated not a fruitful consultation process that helps change society but, on the contrary, disrespect from state actors amidst business-as-usual. Led by the likes of Zenawi, the APRM is not even a very effective *cosmetic* exercise for the sake of neocolonial legitimation.

Alternative strategies entail that Africa's social justice, environment, women's, labour, youth and so many other movements increase and interrelate the work they already do now, and pressure their national states to adopt post-neoliberal public policies.³⁶ If such activists are distracted into neoliberally-grounded work with the APRM or NEPAD, or the next generation of IMF PRSPs, or the UN MDG bureaucracy,³⁷ or similar elite gimmicks, this probably represents a tragic waste of time, and will delay genuine breakthroughs against injustice.

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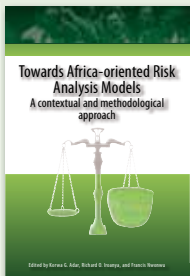
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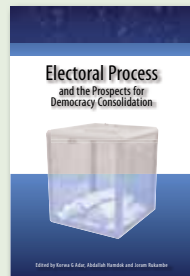
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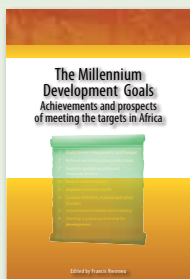
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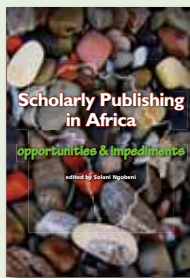
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