

SAIIA OCCASIONAL PAPER

Analysing key policy and governance issues
in Africa and beyond



MAKING THE NEWS: WHY THE AFRICAN PEER REVIEW MECHANISM DIDN'T

Brendan Boyle

Number 12, September 2008

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Abstract

The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) has not generated a national conversation in South Africa. Why not? Is it a failure of the African Union and its subsidiary organisations, or of citizens who did not seize the opportunity? Or is it the fault of the media? The answer is: all of the above.

The peer review process was intended to involve millions of people in a frank assessment of each participating country's achievements and failings. The outcome would be best-practice policies that could be shared among governments. But in South Africa, it was crafted without significant civil society input and the media were largely ignored.

Public Service and Administration Minister Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi centralised the review process in her own office. It was inevitable that the Country Self-Assessment Report (CSAR) would be overwhelmingly influenced by the government's analysis and views.

The APRM slid off the radar screens of most media. Only the *Sunday Times* took the process seriously – but when the paper published drafts of the Eminent Persons Panel's Final Report, which did not reflect the South African government's rosy view of the situation, Fraser-Moleketi accused the paper of 'scurrilous lies, untruths, myths and reactionary propaganda.'

The APRM has the potential to become an important vehicle for broad-based policy review and development, but has not gained that status because of the government's determination to dominate and drive the process. Governments are more likely to nurture a sustained interest in the process if it is more transparent and if they are less defensive. Merely denying the experience or perceptions of the public and civil society will not deliver a more comfortable reality.

Brendan Boyle is a South African journalist. After working in Europe for The Guardian and United Press International, he returned to South Africa in 1984 and spent 18 years with the Reuters news agency, the final five as Southern Africa bureau chief. He then joined the Sunday Times, where, from a base at Parliament in Cape Town, he specialises in macro-economic and macro-social policy issues. This paper was originally produced for 'African Peer Review and Reform: A Workshop for Experts and Civil Society' hosted by the South African Institute of International Affairs in Johannesburg from 20-22 November 2007.

Many hoped the APRM would get the nation talking. It did not happen. There are voices talking, but there is no hubbub across the country of citizens arguing the merits of government, social and private-sector engagement with the developmental challenge we inherited in 1994. It is a significant missed opportunity.

Imagining it

The idea of an African mechanism of peer review – largely the initiative of South African President Thabo Mbeki – was for a continental introspection involving millions of people in a frank assessment of each participating country's achievements and failings. The outcome was to be a compendium of best-practice policies that could be shared among governments to address the many challenges of underdevelopment. And at least one benefit would be to turn up the volume on the voice of African civil society.

'At the most basic level, peer review is an excuse for an in-depth public conversation on policy directions, something that has been long neglected in African politics,' said Ross Herbert of the South African Institute of International Affairs. 'Although a number of states attempted to weaken or eliminate civil society participation... the final APRM agreement includes clear requirements for broad public participation in drafting the country Programme of Action and in interacting with the Country Review Team.'¹

The mechanism was crafted without significant civil society input into its design. Though its rules put public consultation at the heart of the process, its authors presumed to know how best that could be done. Whether by design or default, they made little specific provision for the involvement of the media.

The official APRM Guidelines do not require countries to involve media in the preparation of the Country Self-Assessment Report (CSAR) that forms the basis of the review process. Media freedom is not included in the questionnaire proposed for the domestic review. The Memorandum of Understanding, which participating countries must sign, does not refer to media or media freedom.

Paragraph 19 of the APRM Guidelines does say:²

In Stage Two, the Review Team will visit the country concerned, where its priority order of business will be to carry out the widest possible range of consultations with the Government, officials, political parties, parliamentarians and representatives of civil society organisations (including the media, academia, trade unions, business, professional bodies).

In the case of the national *Sunday Times* newspaper, interaction with the Country Review Team, the only APRM structure with a mandate to engage with the media, was easier and more fruitful than interaction with the continental APRM Secretariat in Midrand, South Africa, or with the domestic APRM Secretariat housed in the offices of the Minister for Public Service and Administration.

Cutting out the papers

To exclude an assessment of media freedom as part of the peer review was a glaring omission from a process said to be testing the practice and consolidation of democracy. It drew into question the fundamental understanding of the good governance the APRM was designed to test. Raymond Louw, chairman of the Media Freedom Committee of the South African National Editors' Forum wrote:³

Journalists and institutions have protested to the Nepad [New Partnership for Africa's Development] and APRM Secretariats that the criteria for assessing good governance is seriously deficient in that it fails to take any account of the important role, indeed the essential role of a free and independent press in a country professing to be a democracy and to practise good governance.

That apart, however, it was sheer negligence to tackle the peer review project with no clear strategy to use the reach of the media to improve the quality of the research.

Ousmane Déme, a researcher at Partnership Africa Canada wrote:⁴

For the APRM exercise to be a success, it is important to push for broader media involvement in the review process. In terms of making the APRM accessible to the public and encouraging their active participation, the press is an

indispensable lever in the dissemination of information. It has the means to reach a wide audience as it can deliver information in various African languages.

Valuing news

Perhaps time was of the essence when Mbeki and then-Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo and Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika pulled the project together, but any experienced editor of print, radio or television would have been able to identify the fence at which executive enthusiasm for the process was most likely to fall.

News value was set, from the start, to be the Becher's Brook of this ambitious exercise. Like that infamous Grand National fence, it is not an insurmountable obstacle, but it does need to be tackled with deliberation and determination.

It was obvious from the outset that when the final report was made public, the immediate news value for free media would be in the faults found rather than in the successes noted.

Buying in

The *Sunday Times* took the process seriously from the start because it was apparent that among the rush of initiatives to save Africa from itself around this time – including then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Commission for Africa and the Doha development round of the World Trade Organisation talks – this was one that could win the active commitment of a critical mass among Africa's own leaders.

Editor Mondli Makhanya and I both felt that a project led and implemented by Africans was likely to reflect Africa's own challenges better than any external analysis if it was conducted with full commitment to the principles enunciated in the Base Document and Guidelines of the APRM. It was also likely to come up with better solutions to those challenges.

The APRM Base Document states in paragraphs 2 and 3:⁵

The primary purpose of the APRM is to foster the adoption of policies, standards and practices that lead to political stability, high economic growth, sustainable development and accelerated sub-regional and continental economic integration through sharing of experiences and reinforcement of successful and best practice, including identifying deficiencies and assessing the need for capacity building.

Every review exercise carried out under the authority of the Mechanism must be technically competent, credible and free of political manipulation. These stipulations together constitute the core guiding principles of the Mechanism.

In April 2006, the *Sunday Times* sought through interviews and analysis to introduce the APRM and its personalities to readers and to explain its complex procedures in stories that took up a full page of the most valuable newspaper real estate in the country.⁶ The package had been ready to run for more than three months before space was found to carry it. It was published not as news, but as information of long-term relevance to the country, its people and the continent. The treatment took the government and the APRM leaders at their word and reported their stated intentions, including the promise of wide and genuine consultation and public participation.

Staying with the story was difficult in a country jaded by a plethora of projects each with its own acronym and little evidence of real results. Foreign donor fatigue is matched in South Africa by social scepticism. The default position of most readers and viewers is to be interested in results rather than promises or even plans.

Becoming the story

When Public Service and Administration Minister Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi began to assert herself on the review, including controlling the process to appoint civil society representatives to the National Governing Council (NGC) that would have nominal responsibility for the domestic review process, she, rather than the review, became the story.

Her interpretation of the APRM rules was not corrupt, nor was there any indication of active malfeasance, and it did not rate the treatment media usually would give to that sort of thing. For most media, it was just another example of a government that would rather tell than listen. The APRM slid off the active radar screen.

The *Sunday Times* was seen to own the story, but the prize was not really worth fighting for when there was – and is – so much else going on that is more likely to grab public attention. ‘So what do you think of the APRM?’ was never going to become a popular pick-up line in the local shebeen or a big question at dinner tables in the leafy suburbs.

The government’s frequent reaffirmation of its commitment to effective public participation and consultation was not borne out by evidence on the ground and the old maxim applied: ‘Saying it is so doesn’t make it so.’

The result was that most media reported only sporadically on the APRM process – mostly routine reports on news conferences marking major milestones, at which reporters with no background knowledge took notes, but asked few or no questions. There was no public clamour for more. The APRM simply had not grabbed the public imagination.

Hanging in

The *Sunday Times* continued to track the process closely, however, travelling with the Country Review Team to remote parts of the Eastern Cape as well as to the townships of Cape Town.

With significant assistance from a handful of civil society organisations and a few useful leaks from sources in Kenya, the newspaper published the CSAR, the first draft of the panel’s Final Report and the first draft of the South African government’s highly critical response prior to their public release.

I attended a number of workshops around the country and kept contact with those NGC members that were willing to talk to me. The *Sunday Times* reports were, in our view, balanced and accurate, with due regard to the concerns of participating and non-participating civil society.

Falling out

The relationship between the Ministry of Public Service and Administration and the *Sunday Times* plunged, however, with Fraser-Moleketi charging eventually that I and my newspaper had ‘perpetuated a series of scurrilous lies, untruths, myths and reactionary propaganda that serves the interests of those who continually seek to question the integrity of the government of South Africa’.⁷

This was after the *Sunday Times* had acquired a copy of the draft Country Review and published a package of stories about it on 3 December 2006. One story was devoted to the 18 examples of best practice identified by the Review Team, but the newspaper reported most fully on the challenges identified in the report.

‘Fight crime, Africa tells South Africa’ was the main headline. Another reported the panel’s concern about how South Africa was protecting the health and safety of its children.

It was not news to South Africans that crime was a major concern, but the report was newsworthy because it contradicted the government’s analysis of the crime situation and offered the hope that someone might now take the public perception more seriously.

Making the news

News judgement is consistently the most difficult aspect of journalism to explain to outsiders and it is the most common source of discord or outright conflict between newsmakers and news reporters – as it was between the *Sunday Times* and Fraser-Moleketi.

There is no formula that can be captured in a software programme and applied to the flow of news and information that reaches any newsdesk on any day to decide what should lead the paper or head the bulletin, what should run inside or lower down in the newscast, what should be set aside for feature treatment and what, in the parlance of pre-digital media, should be spiked or left on the cutting room floor.

News editing is not a science; it is a skill acquired over years and honed by anecdotal experience of the material that gets a reaction and that which sinks without trace. A good news editor presides over rising audience figures; a bad one is identified by falling readership or viewership and, unless protected by extraneous factors, is quickly shown the door.

The decisions the good ones make are seldom random. Flick between the BBC, CNN, Sky TV and even the English-language Al Jazeera channel, which is premised on a different set of news values, and you will find that in newsrooms often a continent away from each other, experienced editors come to the same conclusions about what at that moment in history constitutes news. Despite the suspicions of some conspiracy theorists, they don't call each other up to collude.

Even in South Africa, you will find that editors at the SABC and eTV make the same decisions for the 7pm news until politics intervenes and the public broadcaster dumps news judgement in favour of political expedience.

It was therefore entirely predictable that independent media and governments would, if media decided to report at all on the APRM, highlight different aspects of the reports envisaged in the APRM Base Document, Guidelines and Memorandum of Understanding. They were never going to agree on what constituted the breaking news of the process.

News or information

There are, however, a few basic principles that, though journalists might consider them axioms, seem to perplex and often infuriate those about whom they report. A distinction needs to be made between news and information. Both have their place in every publication or broadcast bouquet, but those places are quite different.

News, which is usually unexpected or unforeseen, goes at the top of the bulletin or on the front page of the publication. Information, which has its own importance, goes inside the publication or lower down in the bulletin. In the cliché of journalism school, news is the plane that fails to land and information is the record of those that arrive safely.

News is not always bad – though, in truth, it often is – but it is different. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is currently one of the more dangerous places to fly, an improvement in the air safety record might be news because it defies the expectations of the public. In South Africa, a credible report that the incidence of murder, rape or hijacking was declining would be news because it would contradict the perceptions of ordinary people.

These simplistic examples make a simple point: targets missed are more likely to be considered news than targets achieved, which generally will rate as information.

It is a common criticism of the commercial media that they select news to sell newspapers. That's like criticising a politician for trying to win votes. Selling newspapers is what the media does; garnering votes is what politicians do. Each endeavour has its own rules.

News on the front page is what makes you pull over at a traffic light on your way to work and buy the paper. Information, which makes up the bulk of the content of any newspaper or magazine, is what makes you come back, perhaps subscribe, because this publication is consistently useful to you. Much like the politician's pitch, a media product is a package of promise and delivery.

A promise to be heard?

The launch of the APRM was a promise, too, and it was enthusiastically reported across the continent. It was news because it defied the common wisdom that African governments were not big on accountability or transparency and it promised change and improvement.

Paragraph 23 of the APRM Base Document reflected a radical new mood in African government, which suggested this initiative should be taken seriously:⁸

If the Government of the country in question shows a demonstrable will to rectify the identified shortcomings, then it will be incumbent upon participating governments to provide what assistance they can, as well as to urge donor governments and agencies also to come to the assistance of the country reviewed.

However, if the necessary political will is not forthcoming from the Government, the participating states should first do everything practicable to engage it in constructive dialogue, offering in the process technical and other appropriate assistance.

If dialogue proves unavailing, the participating Heads of State and Government may wish to put the Government on notice of their collective intention to proceed with appropriate measures by a given date. The interval should

concentrate the mind of the Government and provide a further opportunity for addressing the identified shortcomings under a process of constructive dialogue. All considered, such measures should always be utilised as a last resort.

Missing the boat

As Fraser-Moleketi moved to implement the review, however, civil society voices were increasingly raised in protest against the centralisation of the review process in her own office.

In an article headlined 'Citizens Missing the Boat', the *Sunday Times*, based on input from a variety of non-government players and after interviews with officials of the South African APRM Secretariat, criticised the arrangements for public consultation.⁹

In interviews with APRM staff in the minister's office, the *Sunday Times* tried to explore plans for drafting the Country Self-Assessment Report. The official argument was that staff working alongside the minister could still be independent of the government's interest and would faithfully reflect the public consensus – or the variety of public views.

The APRM Guidelines state in paragraph 15: 'Every review exercise must be technically competent, credible and free of political manipulation.'¹⁰ The South African exercise, in the view of the *Sunday Times*, failed to meet the conditions of credibility or political neutrality. It was inevitable that the Country Self-Assessment Report, written in Fraser-Moleketi's office by staff and consultants in her pay, would be overwhelmingly influenced by the government's analysis and views.

Ironically, the kernel of the newspaper's opposition in commentary to the centralisation of APRM authority was reflected in the South African government's own response to the Panel's final report. The response complained of inherent bias amongst the Eminent Persons responsible for the final review:¹¹

How are the various ideological predispositions of different reviewers and authors expressed and mediated in the review process as writing itself is not a neutral endeavour? Embedded in discourse are ideological and value-laden propositions.

The product of the APRM process, the Country Review, was always going to be combed for signs of hope and, where there were none, for acknowledgement of the reality in which ordinary people live. Journalists were always going to go straight to the conclusions and pull out the admissions made by or on behalf of governments which they felt would strike a chord with readers or listeners; officials were always going to want to trumpet the praise and celebrate the successes noticed by the Panel. That should have been clear to the APRM architects.

For as long as the South African Focal Point, Fraser-Moleketi, was going to regard independent and critical coverage of the process as hostile, developing a dialogue through the media was inevitably going to be only partially successful.

The Secretariat

The APRM's own Continental Secretariat (based in Midrand, South Africa) offered very little support and was not responsive to enquiries. Efforts to set up a flow of information failed completely and the organisation was unable to help facilitate contact with the Panel of Eminent Persons or the review leader, Professor Adebayo Adedeji. (Adedeji was very cooperative as a result of direct contacts, however.) Nor was the Secretariat able to provide a diary of the Country Review Team's plans when they were in South Africa in July 2007.

The *Sunday Times* was the only newspaper to establish a record of consistent coverage. If this was regarded as hostile by the Secretariat, the usual response would have been to engage the newspaper and offer a different view, but this did not happen.

Media conference and news releases were put out by the South African Secretariat, but not by the APRM's own team.

A civil voice

Interaction with civil society representatives on the NGC was inconsistent. Some organisations were routinely helpful to media, some were initially supportive but withdrew as tension built between the government and the media and some were never willing to interact directly with reporters.

Individual NGC members initiated very useful contact with the *Sunday Times* and other media, but there was no structured effort to make the voice of the non-governmental sector heard and to build a momentum of media coverage.

Meetings of the NGC were not publicly announced and were routinely closed, obliging media to cover them on the basis of leaks and unnamed sources willing to reveal something of the exchanges within the NGC. This appeared to be in conflict with the commitment to transparency in the APRM Guidelines, which state in paragraph 34: 'It is the responsibility of the participating country to organise a participatory and transparent national process.'

Former central bank governor Chris Stals, the South African representative on the APRM Panel, advised in an address to an APRM workshop in September 2005: 'The APRM process must be an open and fully transparent operation. It cannot be broadly based and fully participatory if it is not visible, understandable and open for all stakeholders.'

But hostility from the office of the Focal Point towards NGC members or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who assisted interested media caused many of them to shut down the flow of information or to insist that it could only be on the basis of background briefings.

The national Secretariat did not encourage or facilitate independent civil society access to the media and capacity constraints facing most of the NGOs on the NGC left them with limited scope to lead the process themselves.

Despite Fraser-Moleketi's efforts to broaden the scope of the review, the effect of the government's response to the media and the limited resources of non-governmental players was to keep the focus on the review of the government itself.

Conclusions

- The APRM is a complex process that results in a large and detailed report that is going to appeal only to a select group.
- It has the potential to become an important vehicle for broad-based policy review and development but has not gained that status in South Africa because of the government's determination to dominate the process.
- The final report will be studied by officials, academics and NGOs who have the interest and capacity to absorb it, but the focus of the media is going to be headline-oriented and will pick on the newsworthy conclusions of the Panel.
- Fraser-Moleketi and her team are more likely to nurture a sustained interest in the process if it is more transparent and if the government is less defensive. Merely denying the experience or perceptions of the public and civil society will not deliver a more comfortable reality.
- The credibility of the government's leadership is undermined by the concentration of APRM resources in the Ministry of Public Service and Administration. A separation of the roles of Focal Point and NGC chair would help to rebuild the credibility of the review.
- The APRM Secretariat should engage the media to popularise the process in terms that a newspaper or broadcaster is able to carry. The media, rather than brochures or radio jingles, remain the most effective mechanisms to spread information about the review process.
- The Secretariat needs to develop a more effective and, most importantly, responsive media team.
- Civil society organisations and interested NGOs need to establish their independence from the government team and claim their right to speak out.

- Civil society groups should pick causes and issues that have the potential to capture the attention of the media and make focussed presentations on them. Linking APRM issues to current news events is most likely to win space or airtime.
- Media owe it to their readers, listeners and viewers to take the APRM process more seriously, to make an effort to understand it and to present it in attractive packages aligned to the interests of their public rather than those of the government.

A CSO tip sheet

Finally, here's some practical advice to civil society organisations from the perspective of a reporter on how to interest the media in your issues:

- **People like me:** News consumers want most to hear about themselves and people like themselves. Editors, reporters, readers, listeners and viewers have little interest in process. The APRM is about people and that should always be your focus. It will make the news most often if you can help people understand, also, that it is not about other people - it is about them.
- **Beware the press release:** It is important to get your views and information on the record so e-mailed statements and press releases are necessary. The more organised media might even bank them against the day when they do want to write about the APRM. But don't assume that your statement will be read.
- **Cultivate reporters:** Developing sources is a two-way street. Identify reporters in every medium who have shown an interest in the issues that are important to you – not in your organisation, but in the topic. Get to know them, spend time with them and talk them through the subject. Be ready to invest: Don't expect every call or visit to result in a story.
- **Demand transparency:** There can be absolutely no justification on the government's part for taking the APRM process behind closed doors. Insist that every step is conducted in the open, from public consultations to report writing.
- **Take the long view:** Transparency will backfire on you sometimes, but in the long run it is good for your organisation and for society. Trying to suppress news about a disagreement will make it a longer running news story than talking about it frankly.
- **Have your say:** Demand a place at the table if the government calls a briefing.
- **Manage the news:** Think about the right time to tell your story. Don't call a news conference on Budget Day. Monday papers are hard to fill but there are few reporters on duty on a Sunday and they can't always get out so it's a good day to drop by the newsroom with a story. Anniversaries and big planned events can make good news pegs.
- **Pick your cherries:** Present the issues in bite-sized chunks. Don't try to tell the history of man in one session. Try to imagine realistically what might make the news on the day and focus on that. If there are linkages to other running stories, exploit them.
- **Something for everyone:** One good story is worth more than several mediocre ones. Give different reporters first bite at different aspects of the story, but save something good for others. An exclusive lead into a common story makes everyone feel special.
- **Time is your enemy:** Most reporters file three or four stories a day. Use summaries, bullet points, highlights and boxes to make the issues easy to chew. A good journalist will want the whole background, but can use it better with a roadmap through the data. Tell them where the highlights are.
- **Do the legwork:** Time your briefings to match the media's working day. Knowing that planning takes place early in the day, hold press conferences as near to the media centres as possible (its often easier for three briefers to drive to the media area than for 15 reporters to drive to your venue and wait for you to finish). Be willing to

visit newsrooms – you will make new contacts, meet news editors and save reporters hours.

- **Let people tell the story:** Stories are about people. Facts are about people. Research, reports and strategies are about people. Take reporters with you into the field – one or two at a time - and introduce them to the people who are the story you want to tell. Help reporters to see the reality behind the numbers and the theories that are your life. Encourage the people you work with to tell their own stories and tell your own story, too.

Endnotes

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