The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), launched in 2003 as one of the pillars of NEPAD, is the most innovative and audacious initiative adopted by member-states of the African Union (AU) in their quest to improve governance on the continent. More than half of Africa’s countries (30 countries, accounting for three-quarters of its population) have signed up to the APRM, and 12 countries have been through the first review.[[1]](#footnote-1) Of these, seven have presented implementation progress reports on their national Plan of Action.[[2]](#footnote-2) (For the full list of countries that have joined the APRM, See *Table 1 - Country Status in the APRM Process* in annex 1.)

The APRM was designed so as to provide a door through which African countries could voluntarily walk, sign up to a set of principles, and agree to improve their adherence to them, in ways that would be measurable. The APRM invited African countries to assess themselves on the basis of their performance in four thematic areas: democracy and political governance, economic governance and management, corporate governance and socio-economic development. The critical element of this process is that governments agree to a rolling cycle of activities comprising self-assessments, national programmes of action (POA) to be implemented over a number of years, peer reviews by fellow heads of state, followed by further self-assessments to monitor the implementation of POAs.

For a continent that has jealously protected its sovereignty, it is diplomatically exceptional for nations to throw themselves open to outside scrutiny. But the APRM is perhaps most extraordinary for the opportunity that it presents to civil society and business to contribute to policy-making, and to do so on the basis of evidence. By requiring broad public participation, the APRM has the potential to rebuild trust in politics and inject fresh thinking into national problem-solving. Governments can use the APRM to reposition themselves as champions of reform and win political credit for fostering rather than frustrating reform.

The APRM involves five forms of review, each building on the previous. First, each country must conduct an in-depth self-assessment that involves broad public input. This is supposed to be directed by an independent National Governing Council that has a majority of non-government members and a chairperson drawn from civil society or business. A detailed Self-Assessment Questionnaire (88 pages in length, with 25 objectives, 58 questions and 183 indicators) was created to ensure that the APRM self-assessments are done in a consistent manner across countries.

The APRM does not stipulate what types of research should be used to assemble the self-assessment report. The Country Guidelines include only four clear requirements: 1) that the process should be based on broad public participation, 2) that the work should be conducted by independent research institutions supervised by the National APRM Governing Council, 3) that the report should be based on the Questionnaire, and 4) that it should involve a mix of quantitative and qualitative research (more than 15 types of research have been used by pioneer countries, from citizen surveys to parliamentary hearings, to formal invitations to make written submissions, etc.)

On balance, the Self-Assessment Questionnaire provides a useful framework for analysis, but a few aspects of reorganization would make it easier to use, and would make the writing of APRM progress reports and the design of POAs more straightforward. Moreover, a number of significant subjects are not mentioned at all in the Questionnaire, including forest governance issues. Nevertheless, several other ‘forest-related issues’ including environment, agriculture, land and property rights are covered by the Questionnaire. There is therefore tremendous potential for REDD initiatives to tap into the governance assessments of relevant APRM countries (e.g. Uganda, Kenya, Benin, Nigeria and Rwanda) to see how the aforementioned forest issues have been analyzed and dealt with by national stakeholders including media, civil society, private sector and government.

At the same time, REDD partners need to engage with the AU/NEPAD to discuss the synergy and potential linkages between the APRM and the various governance monitoring mechanisms being built into the deforestation and climate agreements with African countries. As the APRM already has a built-in methodological and political process validated by countries, REDD initiatives should be careful not to duplicate or undermine this when engaging in governance monitoring and evaluation in Africa.

As part of a larger project aimed at streamlining and fast-tracking the implementation of the APRM, the APRM Secretariat recently invited suggestions of improvements to the APRM Questionnaire, and suggestions to elaborate modalities for enhancing the participation of  
civil society in the process. It is therefore a very opportune moment to integrate forest and climate change concerns into the APRM, and to propose a broad-based participatory monitoring mechanism for this agenda.

This first ‘self-assessment stage’ results in a Country Self-Assessment Report and Programme of Action (POA) to fix the identified governance gaps. Second, the country is reviewed by a team of eminent African academics, diplomats, and governance experts, who write the final APRM Country Review Report. Third, the head of state of the country under review must discuss the team’s report and recommendations before a gathering of African heads of state. Fourth, the country under review must present annual reports to heads of state on progress in implementing the agreed Programme of Action. And finally, the cycle is to be repeated every two years with another self-assessment and country review.

Though the APRM is quite specific about the process (summarized above) leading up to the submission and review of the Country Review Reports (and the national POAs therein), it is more vague on the country-level procedures for monitoring the implementation of POAs after the review process. But irrespective of the specific monitoring architecture chosen by a country, what matters most is that the same principles of building trust and exercising transparency, which are core to the self-assessment phase of the APRM, should be applied when reporting on progress (or delays) in implementation national POAs.

In some countries, participatory monitoring regimes were instituted. This approach has involved setting up structures at district and regional levels not only to monitor the implementation of the POA but also to conduct opinion surveys to gauge public perceptions of the success of APRM-inspired reforms. This approach appears to have raised the profile of the APRM in the popular consciousness among civil society and community based organizations. It has also shifted the locus of debate from the capital city where the national civil society groups are located, to the regional and district levels where they do not have so much of a presence. This idea initiated in Ghana has been adopted in Benin, and Kenya, whilst Nigeria and Burkina Faso have indicated that they will use a similar approach.

The APRM, by requiring governments and civil society to engage collectively over the issues that face a country, and to do so using evidence from development practice, offers a tremendous opportunity to improve both the incidence and quality of evidence-based decision making. But this will only be possible when the data needed for monitoring the POAs is generated in a rigorous and systematic manner. Civil society has a crucial role to play in this regard, in terms of influencing the design of a transparent and robust monitoring system, in playing an active role in data collection, and in sharing the findings of APRM progress reports with citizens. This use of a participatory monitoring system may prove to be one of the most positive legacies of the APRM – the only way, in fact, to make it viable and credible in the longer-term.

**Sources:**

*The African Peer Review Mechanism – Lessons from the Pioneers*, Ross Herbert and Steven Gruzd, SAIIA, 2008

*Reviewing Africa’s Peer Review Mechanism – A Seven-Country Survey,* Adotey Bing-Pappoe, Partnership Africa Canada, March 2010

**Annex 1**



Source: *Reviewing Africa’s Peer Review Mechanism – A Seven-Country Survey,* Adotey Bing-Pappoe, Partnership Africa Canada, March 2010

1. The 30 countries that have joined the APRM are, in alphabetical order, Algeria, Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cap Verde, Congo (Brazzaville), Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, and Zambia. Mauritania has been suspended from the mechanism following a military coup d’état in September 2008. The twelve that have been reviewed are Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa and Uganda. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. They are Algeria, Ghana, Benin, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa and Uganda. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)