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Do think tanks benefit from APRM work? Kenya's experience

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ABSTRACT

When Kenya volunteered to be among the first to take part in the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), hopes and expectations were high. But for at least one local academic research institute, committed to play an important role, the process was beset by problems and challenges not of its own making.

The Institute for Development Studies at the University of Nairobi was appointed Lead Technical Agency (LTA) in the socio-economic development section of the country's self-assessment report. This paper, written by three members of the Institute's research team, describes the situation that confronted them.

While the roles of the various players seemed clearly defined initially, they quickly became confused, particularly as the local Secretariat assumed responsibilities that belonged to the LTAs. This led to disagreements, frustration and unnecessary delays. In addition, the fact that the National Governing Council (NGC) – in itself experiencing problems – had to pre-approve all actions by the LTAs compounded the difficulties. Work timetables were thrown into disarray, extra hands had to be hired and additional hours allocated. The final Country Self-Assessment Report had to be produced within a shorter period than planned and under great pressure.

The authors conclude that while the work they were required to do was essential and in the national interest – and was, indeed, of value to the Institute too – greater sensitivity was needed to smooth the tricky path that had to be followed when a large number of parties with different interests had to come together to produce a co-ordinated report and plan of action.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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BACKGROUND

The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) is considered the most innovative aspect of the armoury of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). It is a tool used to track and measure political, economic, corporate and social governance in a signatory country, and so help that country to identify deficiencies and find solutions. The APRM is an instrument that can be used to pursue the socio-economic objectives of NePAD and the Millennium Development Goals. In the case of Kenya, these are reflected in the government's Economic Recovery Strategy Paper and other policy documents.

By implementing the APRM, a country commits itself to both an internal and external audit of its institutions and systems in four areas: democracy and political governance; economic governance and management; corporate governance; and socio-economic development. The audits help to identify capacity problems in each area and to estimate resources required to address them.

It is important to note that the APRM does not replace existing national processes and systems, but is meant to audit them and subsequently reinforce them by identifying capacity needs required for their successful implementation. It analyses policies in place, how effective the mechanisms are to implement them and the results being obtained.

In Kenya, the roles and responsibilities of the different players were well-defined, as were the expectations. The Ministry of Planning and National Development, as focal point, was charged with ensuring transparency and providing technical capacity to complete the self-assessment report.

Leadership came from the National Governing Council (NGC). Members were appointed by the Minister for Planning and National Development and consisted of elected civil society members and government representatives. Key responsibilities included ensuring the technical assessment was carried out; that a national Programme of Action (POA) was developed; that the Kenyan public was adequately involved through a competent information, education and communication strategy; and that the external assessment was executed. The NGC worked through the Kenyan APRM Secretariat, which was under the Ministry of Planning and National Development. The Secretariat consisted of employees of the Ministry of Planning and National Development and seconded interns from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Sourcing the Secretariat staff from the Ministry may have undermined their independence and accountability. They were supposed to report to the NGC but in practice reported to their seniors in the Ministry.

Four research institutes (three independent research organisations and one government policy research body) were appointed as Lead Technical Agencies (LTAs), and were non-voting members of the NGC. They reported to the NGC through the Secretariat and were responsible for executing the technical assessment and drafting the National Programme of Action. The assessment was developed with input from thematic groups in the four areas of assessment. These thematic groups, led by conveners, were drawn from civil society according to their experience in development issues.

The Institute for Development Studies (IDS) participated in the APRM process as a Lead Technical Agency working on socio-economic development. This paper presents some of the experiences and challenges it faced.

WHY IDS WAS QUALIFIED TO BE A LEAD TECHNICAL AGENCY

Established in 1965, the IDS is a premier development research institute at the University of Nairobi. For more than 40 years it has been involved in research on development issues in collaboration with government, the private sector, international development partners and civil society organisations.

It is multi-disciplinary, focusing on economics, political science, sociology and geography as well as law and demography. With other university departments it has worked with specialist teams on specific research assignments, allowing it to explore a wide range of development issues. For example, from 2000 onwards it worked on Kenya's Human Development Reports for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), producing two reports. The first, in 2002, was titled *Addressing Social and Economic Disparities* and the second was *Participatory Governance for Human Development* in 2003. The two reports addressed socio-economic problems and provided a systematic appraisal of the country's efforts to deal with them, especially as they related to human development. This background illustrates IDS's capacity to undertake multidisciplinary research and highlights its ability to handle socio-economic development in the APRM process.

It also explains why the Ministry of Planning and National Development and the APRM national taskforce, responsible for identifying suitable researchers and think tanks, recommended that IDS be commissioned as an LTA.

The Institute's participation in collaborative research activities is governed by the University of Nairobi's mandate in terms of research projects, which offers advantages to both the institute and the collaborating partner. IDS makes sure that a project fits into its research and capacity building priorities before committing to it. It is bound to follow the university's prescribed procedures especially relating to fulfilling contractual obligations and allocating resources. Contractually, it commits itself to deliver on its responsibilities on the understanding that the other parties honour theirs. In the APRM process, this proved costly to the institute as the Secretariat did not honour its financial commitments after the assessment had been completed.

CHALLENGES OF PARTICIPATING IN THE APRM PROCESS

To complete the Country Self-Assessment Report (CSAR) and the Plan of Action (POA), Kenya assigned one LTA to each of the four thematic areas of the APRM. IDS led research on socio-economic development. Democracy and political governance was handled by the African Centre for Economic Growth (ACEG); economic governance and management by the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA); and corporate governance by the Centre for Corporate Governance (CCG). Having four different institutions working on a single large report provided a unique opportunity but also presented formidable challenges.

Participation in any collaborative exercise involves mobilising the resources – human, financial and physical – of each. It implies that each party adjusts sufficiently to adhere to a common framework. Co-ordination of the activities of each institution is critical, and requires the timely allocation of resources by each,

On the whole, the process went smoothly, but there were some challenges, which are

dealt with in the sections that follow.

- **Resolving budgets:** Each institution had its own rules to conform to when it came to preparing individual budgets for submission to the ARPM Secretariat. The challenge was to accommodate these differences so that a consolidated budget could be prepared.
- **Harmonising research approaches:** Four different instruments were used to collect data and information – desk research, structured interviews with an expert panel, national sample surveys and focus group discussions. These four instruments had to be harmonised across the four thematic areas to ensure consistency. This meant that the four LTAs had to meet at specific times to ensure useful collaboration, proper exploitation of synergies and improved interaction, especially in fieldwork. It required high levels of commitment from each LTA as well as support from the secretariat and the NGC to ensure the instruments were ready for use. The LTAs demonstrated a high level of discipline and commitment to the process by ensuring that the instruments harmonised and ready in time for the filed work. Support was, however, not appropriately forthcoming from the secretariat and the NGC.
- **Unstructured information from civil society:** Apart from information gathered by the four instruments, important additional material came from the thematic groups via convenors and provincial forums. But the convenors did not have any clear structure for collecting the information in a way which could be immediately analysed and used in the CSAR. Their collection was ad hoc and without guidelines. Furthermore, they were not always trained in the specific thematic areas. Thus their data needed auditing by the LTAs before it could be useful.
- **Tight timeframes:** Because time was limited, the LTAs agreed to start the harmonisation process and even parts of the research before receiving any payment. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed as a form of commitment by the government and the donors and the harmonisation was completed in about three weeks. But then red tape became a problem. Because the LTAs were answerable to the NGC, every stage of their work required approval. The harmonised instruments needed to be approved before fieldwork could start. However the NGC was bogged down in protracted discussions regarding its own responsibilities in the process, and was virtually paralysed by disputes among NGOs represented in the NGC. Much time was wasted on arguing and unproductive meetings. As a result, the agreed work plan was highly disrupted. And all the while, the time available to do the work was significantly reduced.

Research steps, well-sequenced in planning, were conflated in practice. According to the work plan, expert panels were to be convened between March and April 2005; they did not take place until May–June. Eventually, the provincial forums were delayed to July 2005 and took place over one week instead of two. The national sample survey was planned for April to mid May; it did not take place until late July-early August. The focus group discussions had to be carried out almost immediately in August and right after that, the report writing had to start simultaneously with the data analysis. So great was the pressure that LTAs and the data analysts from the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) had to be taken on retreat to finalise the drafting of the report in two weeks.

- **Confusion of responsibilities:** Over time, the Secretariat assumed other responsibilities more properly left to the LTAs. Delays in implementing the process only served

to complicate this confusion of responsibilities. At the heart of the problem was a disagreement between the NGC and the Secretariat over their respective roles and powers. Some NGC members insisted on their right of prior approval of LTA work; others were more flexible. The impasse was eventually resolved by the Ministry of Planning and National Development authorising the fieldwork to go on. Later, the three members of the NGC, including the chairperson, who were considered especially disruptive were de-gazetted from the council. These ructions may also go some way in explaining why the APRM Secretariat assumed additional responsibilities.

For example, according to the work plan, the LTAs were to be in charge of implementing the data collection exercise, but then the Secretariat decided to coordinate the exercise. One reason may have been that it seemed easier to handle fieldwork finances from a central point. But having the Secretariat select research assistants and field enumerators posed a serious challenge. Despite the fact that they had nothing to do with the appointments, the LTAs had to train these research assistants in data collection methodology and fieldwork. In addition, the research assistants were from different backgrounds with varying levels of experience, so they had to be brought to a certain level of understanding. It is not clear how and why the Secretariat took charge of this process, but it does indicate a lack of clear definition of the role it should have been playing, which was to provide logistical support.

- **Work plan disrupted:** Another challenge came from competing commitments for human resources. IDS, for example, had committed to other projects on the strength of the original agreed work plan, and associated timelines. Delays meant it had to reorganise its arrangements, a costly exercise. It was envisaged that the APRM process would be over by the start of the university academic year in September 2005. Since it wasn't, other projects demanded attention and IDS staff had to juggle their time between the APRM and research and teaching commitments.

All the LTAs had their own institutional schedules and commitments. They had to find common times to hold their planning meetings and working sessions. Some meetings had also to be attended by convenors and government ministry officials, a further complication.

- **Funds withheld:** After the signing of the MOU the LTAs had to commit their own financial resources to the project while the Secretariat sought funds. There were two problems: How much was paid, and when. Among the additional responsibilities assumed by the Secretariat was that of making financial decisions. Payment of the first instalment to LTAs took place on schedule, but was for only 85% of the budgeted amount. The rest would come later, we were promised. The second instalment was paid after the first draft of the CSAR was completed, contrary to the agreement, and again it was only for 85%. This meant the IDS was financing the shortfall. The third and last instalment was supposed to include all outstanding amounts, but the APRM Secretariat suddenly decided it would not pay in full. It took a number of meetings between the Secretariat, the IDS and the UNDP for the Secretariat to partially honour its commitment. The IDS saw the decision not to pay as unprofessional and a betrayal of trust, but accepted, to bring the matter to a conclusion since the follow-up was taking too much time, adding up to the indirect costs of the project to the Institute.
- **Working with other stakeholders:** The APRM process understands that major governance problems cannot be resolved without involving a broad array of stakeholders. In

Kenya, this meant collaborating with other players like the NGC and convenors, and adjusting schedules accordingly. Arranging such meetings, useful as they were, took time that could have been used for technical work. Sometimes they became counter-productive. Many players meant many perspectives on any issue, and led to even more longer meetings. Eventually it was agreed that the NGC meetings would be held on a monthly basis. This didn't stop other meetings between convenors and the LTAs.

In theory, participants in the process had clearly defined roles. The APRM Secretariat was supposed to give logistical support; the LTAs were to undertake the technical assessment; the convenors were to mobilise stakeholders. In reality, as outlined above, roles become confused, with the APRM Secretariat taking over technical aspects like organising surveys and focus group discussions. The convenors did not follow any format in collecting information from stakeholders. All this tended to slow things down, and the technical component of the process became overshadowed by other activities. Diverse interests meant LTAs had to respond to different needs of different players. Some members of the NGC and convenors got involved in conducting the FGDs instead of mobilising participants. LTAs had to try to make sense out of formless information so generated.

For a research institute like IDS, adhering to a work plan is crucial. But delays became inevitable because progress depended on how fast the NGC could approve activities. It was no longer possible to plan. Meetings were called at short notice by the Secretariat and LTAs were expected to come up with outputs. These meetings at short notice extended beyond the planned time for the project. Inevitably IDS was faced with additional costs.

Timing of activities was a major problem. Poor planning – combined with the ongoing disagreements in the NGC – left very little time, which created immense pressure in writing the CSAR. All the researchers and data analysts from the CBS were brought together for two weeks of intensive drafting. We were sequestered in a work room in a hotel basement dubbed 'the bunker' by some. There was no time to work on separate reports that could be subjected to peer discussion before being consolidated into a single country report. Extra researchers had to be added to the initial team. The depth of information was compromised and some information may have been unwittingly excluded. Tackling the self-assessment questionnaire was another challenge. It covered a massive field, but not in a consistent manner. Information might be found in a variety of places, often overlapping thematic areas. This necessitated intensive co-ordination between the four LTAs. But it also meant that, in analysing the data and writing a report, each LTA had limited time to glean information from a variety of areas.

The consolidated questionnaire was administered by CBS which was also responsible for doing the data entry and analysis at the same time as the report was being written. With time short, the CBS struggled to meet the needs of all the LTAs concurrently.

THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

Participating in the APRM process created a unique opportunity for a research institute like IDS to interact with policymakers and civil society practitioners. Not only did it offer valuable experience that would be of use in future ventures, but it created an opportunity to apply its own experience to contribute to an important national process initiated by a

continental organisation. It was able to highlight policy issues that had been previously neglected and enhance its own profile.

But the opportunity cost goes up when efficiency is impaired, the work plan goes awry and co-ordination of activities is problematic. In implementing the APRM, there was pressure to complete the job in the shortest time possible, especially the final drafting process. Yet fieldwork had been delayed by more than two months because of the internal NGC problems outlined previously. And the fact that there were so many different stakeholders meant that the demands of inclusiveness required time and resources. Even after the report and Programme of Action had been drafted, LTAs were still being summoned by the Secretariat at short notice to take part in APRM-related activities. Meetings continued for close to a year. IDS had to allocate additional human, financial and physical resources, often at short notice. This sometimes required sacrifices on other projects.

Another major disadvantage was absence of recognition. Both the CSAR and review reports failed to acknowledge the critical contributions of the LTAs. For an academic institution, this loss of recognition for such important work was a significant loss.

At the start of the APRM process, the Ministry of Planning and National Development assured the LTAs of their independence. The (then) minister's statement said:¹

Kenya is committed to ensuring that its policies and practices conform to the agreed political, economic, and corporate governance values, codes and standards contained in the NEPAD declaration on democracy, political, economic and corporate governance. It is for this reason that Kenya volunteered to be among the first four 'front runner' countries in implementing the African Peer review mechanism.

IDS joined the process on the strength of this understanding. However, during the exercise, key people changed. Both the minister and the permanent secretary who had conceptualised the process left the Ministry before the exercise was over. The minister lost his job after the Cabinet was dissolved following government's defeat in a referendum on the new constitution, while the permanent secretary had earlier been transferred to another ministry in a routine government reshuffle. LTAs had to work with a new team who were not party to the initial agreements and not committed to the values previously endorsed. This new team saw criticism as an attempt to discredit the new government.

An early challenge to government was the revelation at consultative forums that ordinary Kenyans felt that the reported economic growth had not translated into improved livelihoods. They urged greater effort to redistribute wealth. They were also critical that 'free primary education' didn't recognise the poverty that prevented some children from buying school uniforms and forced others to miss school so they could help the family earn an income. Some players, including members of the NGC, wanted the final report to emphasise government's positive achievements. The challenge for LTAs was to retain integrity and reassure technocrats that their report would reflect the reality as revealed by research. At a workshop with permanent secretaries to discuss the draft report before it was presented to the Head of State, the LTAs stressed that field information was important in defining challenges, and to demonstrate that government was not complacent about them. It did not mean that achievements could not be highlighted as well.

LESSONS AND CONCLUSIONS

- Proper planning and adherence to the work plan was important. The exercise could be costly to a research institute if it had to commit additional human resources.
- The project seemed to have no definite end, and LTAs were often called upon at short notice to undertake work outside their contractual obligation. This interfered with other projects.
- Bureaucratic processes took much more time than research. While inclusivity was important, it created costly layers of actors and processes, adding little value and delaying completion.
- The Secretariat's administrative work needed to be delinked from the technical work of the institutes. At times it appeared as if there was no clear definition of roles, especially for the administrative staff of the Secretariat, resulting in delays.
- There was need for a clear definition of roles of all players to avoid duplication of duties and encourage focus.
- Honouring agreements was crucial in building trust and morale among those involved in the research work.
- Research institutes needed to have their contribution acknowledged, and this should be made clear from the start. There should also be a clear understanding by all parties of how this acknowledgement would be made.

This paper was an attempt to present the experience of a research institute participating in the APRM process as an LTA. Weaknesses revealed were:

- Delay in implementing the exercise;
- Poor co-ordination;
- Failure to honour contractual obligations;
- The manner in which the Secretariat often usurped the responsibilities of the NGC;
- Failure to acknowledge the contribution of LTAs;
- Inclusivity is important in exploring perspectives, but comes at a price in protracted delays and higher direct and indirect costs.

Finally, it is evident that the APRM is an important national and regional exercise. Academic institutes and think tanks have a responsibility to contribute, but need to be aware of the delicate process of dealing with different stakeholders and government bureaucrats.

ENDNOTES

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OTHER PUBLICATIONS

The African Peer Review Mechanism: Lessons from the Pioneers is the first in-depth study of the APRM, examining its practical, theoretical and diplomatic challenges. Case studies of Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Mauritius and South Africa illustrate difficulties faced by civil society in making their voices heard. It offers 80 recommendations to strengthen the APRM.

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