

## REVIEW

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# *Grappling with Governance: Perspectives on the African Peer Review Mechanism*

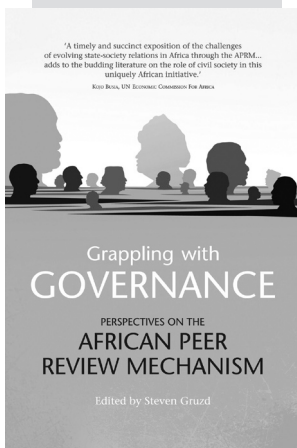
*The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) is an instrument which was designed by African leaders to deal with African problems. It has its genesis in the idea that Africa has the capability and the willingness to identify and solve its own problems without having to rely on the Western world for its one-size-fits-all solution, so pervasive in the previous decades. It evolved out of discussions with heads of state of African countries which were signatories to the African Union Charter.*

Steven Gruzd's, *Grappling with Governance* is an attempt to explore and understand the impact this tool has had on solving the governance issues in Africa, as the APRM approaches its first decade of existence. While he cautions that universal conclusions should not be drawn, he does point out that the APRM has added value in unexpected ways.

The book itself is put together very well and the chapters offer key insights into the functioning of the APRM in all of its constituent parts. It also helps to shed light on the way in which the process unfolded in a number of countries including South Africa, Uganda, and Kenya.

Many of the challenges faced by civil society organisations (CSOs) as they plotted their course through this process are characteristic of the perennial problems we encounter when analysing "Africa" – centralised government power, restrictive laws and the restricting of political space by political elites determined to control the process in all its operations. These challenges are not new but the overwhelming feeling is that with the continued pressure being applied by CSO groupings, African governments can begin the slow march towards increasing the political and economic freedom of the people they govern.

There are a number of examples provided throughout the book of the challenges CSO actors face in their attempts to be represented in the review process; or, in South Africa's case, the sidelining of the process in the mainstream media, except for the Sunday Times. One theme which is constantly present throughout the book is the heavy hand of the government. While we should embrace the process as an African tool, spearheaded by the governments of this continent, it is interesting to note the difficulty with which the APRM process was handled by some governments which had committed themselves to review. I use the South African example in Chapter 3 which Hutchings, Dimba and Tilley discuss, *Assessing South Africa's APRM* as an example because this is closest to home and President Mbeki was a key figure in the institutionalisation of African solutions for African problems.



**GRAPPLING WITH GOVERNANCE: PERSPECTIVES ON THE AFRICAN PEER REVIEW MECHANISM**, edited by Steven Gruzd.  
ISBN: 9781 920196301  
Published by Fanele in association with the South African Institute for international Affairs

When it was South Africa's chance for review, the Open Democracy Advice Centre (ODAC) was determined to engage with the APRM process, as it provided a valuable opportunity for advocacy on two central issues ODAC focused on, namely, it provided a platform for national debate on issues around democracy and secondly, the APRM was a continental initiative and thus could help strengthen regional governance standards.

The Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) was the government department tasked with carrying out the APRM process. It soon became clear to members of ODAC that the DPSA was intent on controlling, as much as possible, the outcomes of the process. ODAC had made a number of submissions arguing for access to information and whistleblower protection to be included in the APRM questionnaire, while continuing in their attempts to contact the DPSA – to no avail. When the South African Institute for International Affairs (SAIIA) invited ODAC to a civil society meeting on the 22 September 2005 to discuss the APRM process, it became clear that the government had systematically excluded a number of NGO's, policy think tanks and policy organisations. Yet, when the final National Programme of Action (NPoA) document was released it included both access to information and whistleblower protection. This is testament to ODAC's tenacity in pushing hard for these important principles to be included. The government was guilty of unduly politicising the entire process.

While the APRM represents an important tool for governments in Africa to self reflect and engage with CSO and other non-government actors in reviewing their governance structures and the challenges they still face, a lot still remains to be done. The South African example highlights most poignantly the strong hand of government in trying to control the process. There is always, undoubtedly, the fear of being embarrassed by an honest, independent appraisal of one's policies. In order for these types of initiatives to yield the types of results that were envisioned when this process initially got underway, they need to be as open and transparent as possible. If African leaders are serious about taking this continent forward on a path which will yield long term sustainable growth and wealth creation for the millions who still live in conditions of abject poverty, then processes like the APRM need to be strengthened and taken seriously at a political level. African leaders need to have the confidence to open up these processes to all civil society groupings and members of the public so that real engagement can take place and real solutions can be arrived at. This will ultimately benefit the entire country.

*Grappling with Governance* helps us to understand the governance challenges facing many African countries. It signals that a lot of good work is being done to overcome these challenges and that these initiatives need to be sustained and supported going forward. On a positive note, more countries are signing up and submitting themselves to the review process. This is obviously good news for the long term realisation that governance matters, and Grudz's book affords us the opportunity to evaluate just how far we have travelled down the road of transparency.