

The survival of Nepad and the African Peer Review Mechanism: A critical analysis

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Five years have elapsed since the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) was born as the Millennium Africa Recovery Plan. From the beginning, officials who touted Nepad as a cure for what ails Africa periodically gave assurances that details of its specific programmes would be released in six months. To the detriment of Nepad's credibility, that promise has gone unfulfilled for most of the last half-decade.

In 2004, Nepad's most important project, the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), is set to begin in earnest. Given the urgency of Africa's need to accelerate development and the administrative complexity of both Nepad and peer review, there is a critical need for Africa to take stock of both.

Nepad's virtues

In assessing Nepad's weaknesses, it is important to understand its value. Five key areas stand out:

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- **Nepad as an excuse for conversation:** In politics, ideas are not born fully formed. To become broadly accepted norms, ideas – about right and wrong, about political fairness, about how and why political systems should be structured – evolve through necessarily messy processes of persuasion, condemnation and contestation. If we accept that there is much wrong in Africa, we must accept that there will have to be a large and often unruly public conversation if the wrongs are to be corrected. In this, Nepad offers a valuable starting point.
- **Aside from an initial burst of activity in the 1960s,** Africa has been unimaginative about development and far too passive in accepting formulas from the outside without truly digesting how and why things succeed or fail. An essential virtue of both Nepad and APRM is that they provide a reason for discussions about many governance questions that were never debated openly before. There is more ministerial level interaction on policy questions. Nepad's architects and supporters must engage in serious thought about whether this dialogue is accomplishing anything, although the greater dialogue has potential value. APRM also offers opportunities to engender more robust public debate on policy questions.
- **A structured approach to problem solving.** Complex problems can only be solved by methodically breaking them down into constituent problems and seeking solutions to each. However, in the past 40 years, African development has been managed in a chaotic, piecemeal fashion. Mistakes have been repeated and learned lessons forgotten. By taking a structured approach and asserting a theory about the continent's major problems, Nepad is potentially a valuable step forward but only if governments genuinely digest its reasoning and apply themselves to finding permanent solutions to the problems identified.
- **Shifting the global debate.** Nepad cannot claim sole credit, but it has contributed significantly to sensitising the world about African issues, such as trade, debt relief, and peacekeeping. Nepad has helped sharpen thinking and has successfully thrust Africa onto the G8 stage. Nepad helped to galvanise African solidarity at the Cancun World

Trade Organisation talks. Success at such a level is a long slow process of persuasion, but Nepad has achieved something in this arena.

- Conflict resolution. The Peace and Security Council (PSC), which was recently ratified by the African Union, came from Nepad. It remains to be seen whether the Council will have the political will, decisiveness and material support from members to make it effective, but in principle it offers the potential for more decisive action to end conflict on the continent. The peacekeeping missions and diplomacy to alleviate crisis in Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Sao Tome and Guinea Bissau are examples of how Africa can act far more assertively than in the past. That said, two points are worth mentioning here. The credit for tackling conflict early on belongs less to AU or the Council and more to those member states determined to take action. While the PSC is a good idea in theory, in practice, its success or failure will depend almost entirely on the continued vigour and military/diplomatic backing of South Africa and Nigeria. Other states may follow belatedly, as in Burundi, but the urge to end conflict is still coming principally from these two countries.
- African Peer Review Mechanism: Like the PSC, peer review is a creation of Nepad and is arguably its most important element. It remains to be seen how rigorous the reviews will be, but the APRM has the potential to extend and deepen the Nepad conversation at the national level, where it is a potentially important lever for reform.

The definition problem

Despite its virtues and the broadly positive reception it has enjoyed globally, Nepad suffers from several crucial shortcomings. The most critical is a basic conceptual problem that afflicts how Nepad is organised continentally and whether it will be effectively implemented and promoted at the national level. African leaders remain unable to define clearly what Nepad is. Many descriptions have been offered: it is an African-owned development strategy, a philosophy of self help, a

framework, a new compact, a Marshall Plan for Africa and so on.

All of these descriptions are partially true but unsatisfactory. They fail to answer two questions that are essential to any plan that hopes to achieve broad public support: what specifically does the plan propose to do and who will do the doing? Nepad offers neither. What, ordinary citizens ask, is a framework and why do we need one? A self-help philosophy is nice, but how does that translate into concrete action?

To call Nepad a development strategy or a Marshall Plan is equally unhelpful. The Nepad text and even its sectoral documents fall far short of any common sense definition of a plan or a strategy. They organise the many African development problems into a structure, but offer no guide about which problems must be solved first. The Nepad text and subsequent documents say nothing about how, given the many priorities competing for scarce resources, governments should choose strategically from those competing priorities. They also offer wish lists but fail to note how funds will be raised or how the proffered solutions would do more than tinker expensively around the margins.

For example, Nepad notes the need to bridge the so-called digital or ICT divide between Africa and the rest of the world. Its plans say nothing about how high import taxes and restrictive government monopolies are principal obstacles to the uptake of ICT. Instead, it has stated woolly plans to put personal computers into schools. The plan simply calls for businesses to 'partner' Africa by donating computers for project demonstrations. After a three-year test period, Nepad will consider the value of these demonstrations and how they might be financed in the long-term. Nepad cannot possibly call on business to donate computers to every African school so the project offers no original thinking on the digital divide and no prospect of solving the broader problem. Nothing is discussed about whether the cost of a computer is a good idea for schools that battle to obtain chalk, books or desks. Nor does Nepad analyse where computer instructors will come from, the opportunity cost of funds to electrify schools that lack even more basic supplies or the costs of providing security to safeguard supposedly free personal computers.

The vague language about frameworks has been necessary because Nepad has been grossly oversold since the beginning. Its architects have been at pains to assert that it is not about asking for more aid, but is a genuine effort to spark broad-based reforms within Africa and in its relationships with the world. However, that assertion is deceptive.

To get African economies growing fast enough to reduce poverty, the Nepad text notes that the continent requires some \$64 billion a year in investment. In recent years Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding South Africa) has annually received less than \$1 billion in foreign direct investment outside the oil, gas and mining sectors. Aid is now around \$16 billion. Indeed, funding is a central problem that Nepad has not dealt with candidly even though its text contains dozens of demands for outside funding and assistance to solve specific sectoral problems.

In the run up to the Kananaskis G8 summit, where Nepad was to present its specific plans, aid donors asked a key question that Nepad had sought to avoid: which would come first, greater aid or governance reform? Aid donors effectively answered that aid volumes would move up modestly, that debt relief would not change substantially, no central Nepad project fund would be created and any specific projects would have to run under existing aid or lending systems.

The refusal of donors to open the money taps has not diminished Africa's need for resources. As a result, Nepad has faced a constant temptation to pretend to be accomplishing more than it is.

That desire to use Nepad to win resources has resulted in a lack of candour at the heart of Nepad. Its architects have not been forthright enough to admit what is clear: Nepad is not an implementable plan. Rather it is the intention to create a plan and a loose process for doing so. Set aside the puffed up language about frameworks and philosophy and what is the entity beneath? Nepad is approximately 30 people in a secretariat in South Africa who put on conferences and attend conferences aimed at finding solutions for Africa's problems.

The emphasis on Nepad's grandiose intentions has stolen attention

away from the prosaic issues that desperately need attention. What is the sequence and design of those conferences? How are they organised? What follow up do they require? Who is invited? What can be done to get the conversation out of the conference halls and into realms of national policy? And how should Nepad be organised and staffed to best fulfil its function of generating ideas, analysing strategy and wielding influence?

None of those questions is being asked. From the beginning, Nepad has faced criticism that it is overblown. Instead of taking such criticism to heart, the Nepad leaders have sought to deflect it through two strategies. First, they have focused on developing supposedly tangible projects to demonstrate that Nepad is doing something. Secondly, Nepad has turned ever more inward, restricting access to its information and plans.

The failure to define Nepad in plain English has caused three key problems. First, Nepad has squandered a great deal of goodwill among academics, aid agencies and businesses who hoped to contribute positively. Without a clear definition of what was to be done, who should do it and a process that welcomes outside input, Nepad has turned its potential supporters — aid donors, politicians, businesses, African nations and citizens — into passive bystanders with no handholds to which their energies can be applied. Knowledgeable experts simply cannot volunteer to assist or participate. Certain people are invited to Nepad events through non-transparent processes. But there is no published material stating clearly what the Nepad Secretariat will be doing, how the processes will work, how proposals and papers can be submitted or what form of public comment will be undertaken. Without widespread participation and public pressure in support of reform, Nepad will achieve little because the dysfunction of African states persists not only because of a lack of technocratic answers. Rather, bad policy is pursued because patronage and rent seeking are deeply entwined in the political fabric in most African states.

Secondly, the failure to set out clearly what Nepad will do ensures

that there is little accountability for the Secretariat. Although many members of the initial staff were energetic, there is a constant pressure in any multinational organisation to spread jobs out to participating states. Over time, merit will take a back seat to national quotas and the Secretariat will become as ineffective as the old Organisation of African Unity.

Thirdly, failure to meet the plain-English test dooms Nepad to a kind of limbo in which it cannot truly claim credit for anything because it has never been clear about who specifically would deliver on its grand aims. Wiseman Nkuhlu, the head of the Nepad Secretariat who announced plans to return to a private sector job in October 2004, has said Nepad's role is to co-ordinate, facilitate and catalyse change. The Nepad Secretariat is clear about declaring that it is not a development agency; it does not administer grants or act as a project funder. The lack of these activities make its essential nature harder to fathom. If the African Development Bank, World Bank, United Nations and national governments remain responsible for development projects on the ground, what is Nepad for?

Nepad also will struggle to claim credit because each time it has come up with a good idea – peer review, PSC, trade reform – that idea has been carved out and given to the AU, leaving Nepad with only the bits that are not concrete enough to form programmes.

Nepad has created a list of 20 top infrastructure projects, most of which make good sense but have been on the drawing boards since before Nepad was established. To simply rebrand ongoing development efforts as Nepad projects is intellectually dishonest because it fails to answer what Nepad is needed for if those projects were already going to be managed by other actors. If the African Development Bank is to manage and finance infrastructure projects instead of Nepad, why not launch an initiative to improve the effectiveness and financing of that institution? Why not launch an AU study into why infrastructure projects fail to win financing?

The norms of African diplomacy are part of the problem. The architects

of Nepad will not get credit for their activities because to do so would offend the sensibilities of Africa's many unreformed states. One South African diplomat offered this as the simple definition of Nepad's activities: it identifies problems and political barriers to progress then applies high-level political pressure to remove the obstacles. The difficult reality is that most of the obstacles to infrastructural development are imposed by African politicians who either have competing interests or are unwilling to take the decisive action required to raise the needed funds. Worried that it will offend the sensibilities of members or scare off states which have not yet embraced Nepad, its architects feel they cannot tell the press that Nepad got a railroad project going by giving a stern talk to a ruling party that blocked progress because it profited from the ownership of trucking companies.

Nkuhlu's limited definition of Nepad as facilitator and catalyst for change is reasonable, as far as it goes. But it has been grossly undercut by two things. Firstly, the Nepad Secretariat has not been designed or empowered to deliver on it effectively. The Secretariat is grossly understaffed and senior officials have either left or plan to.

In attempting to co-ordinate, Nepad is interacting with at least a dozen types of international entities, including the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, African Development Bank, regional development banks, various United Nations agencies, TICAD, the African Union, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the European Union, the Conference on Security Stability, Development and Co-operation in Africa, seven African regional economic communities, and 53 African national governments. Anyone who has attempted to get information from the Nepad Secretariat can attest that the task is ridiculously difficult. Senior staff are almost never available as they are constantly on travelling.

Nkuhlu's vision implies that Nepad is part purveyor of influence and part a system for generating and analysing ideas. Unfortunately, it is not structurally well organised to achieve either. It has one or two staff assigned to each of the major priority sectors, such as agriculture and ICTs. In

addition, very few staff are assigned to communications, research and programmes. All are overwhelmed and can barely organise a conference much less engage in real in-depth analysis and investigation.

That lack of capacity shows in the quality of work produced. While its intentions may be good, the sectoral strategies that have so far come out of Nepad's conferences have been conventional distillations without much creative thinking or rigorous analysis. This will only change with a significant pruning of Nepad's aspirations, selection of more and better staff and a thorough review and strengthening of its management practices.

Secondly, Nkuhlu's vision is undercut by the organisation's own operating rules. A variety of secretariat employees note that they have strict orders not to provide information to the public or the press. Although the organisation holds a variety of conferences to develop plans for various sectors, the draft plans and comments from those public consultations are routinely kept secret. If Nepad wants to draft plans for, say energy or agriculture, how can it hope to enlist the thoughts of Africa's best experts if its draft plans are shielded from public comment until they are final?

Promising too much and delivering too little has already cost Nepad significant credibility. The media largely ignore Nepad as a story and public conversation about it has dwindled. To prevent the same slow death faced by other grand African plans, Nepad needs to begin to speak with clarity and candour about its intentions. To begin with, it needs to articulate a clear, common-sense definition of its activities that anyone can understand.

In straightforward terms, Nepad is six types of activity, which variously occur at the continental, regional and national levels.

- Joint negotiations/pressure on the world: working together, the continent should apply pressure to secure better terms of trade, more debt relief and greater global commitment to restoring and maintaining peace in Africa.

- Re-organising continental institutions: ensuring peace, promoting good governance and monitoring elections are central elements of Nepad and require reforms to various continental institutions. The Peace and Security Council and other AU institutions require significant attention and secure funding to ensure that they operate effectively in crisis.
- Applying appropriate political pressure: getting African leaders to end conflicts, reform their governments and rebuild infrastructure requires that Nepad continues with private and public pressure.
- Driving regional projects: properly functioning, cost-effective infrastructure is vital to African trade and economic revival. Nepad must push to improve key transport, communication and energy systems that can accelerate regional economic development.
- Learning how to solve African problems: clearly the solutions attempted in the past 40 years have not delivered progress at a fast enough pace. Nepad must be about discovering what works, what does not and how successes can be more rapidly replicated.
- Managing delivery: Africa has vast experience with development ideas that sound good on paper but break down in implementation. Nepad must study the political, fiscal and managerial reasons why projects fail and develop systems and staff able to manage their way around the common causes for project failure.

What does Nepad mean at the national level?

The Nepad Secretariat is engaged in all of these activities to a degree. But the majority of development activities necessarily occur at the national level. Even if the Nepad Secretariat was reorganised and found answers in each of these six areas, how would it translate into action at the national level? It is too glib to suggest that the Nepad Secretariat will simply share its findings with participating nations. Unless national governments are deeply involved in Nepad's efforts, the by-products of that effort will not make a difference.

Hence, the key question is: how does Nepad relate to national governments and what should Nepad look like at the national level? So far there is no effective answer. A few countries have created Nepad ministers or assigned an official to be the point person but none has created a coherent vision for this person to execute, beyond holding a few public information meetings laced with generalities. Eventually such activity wears thin and governments will most likely shut down Nepad ministries if they cannot find a mission for them.

It is one thing to have a continental agency coming up with good ideas and urging reform, but that same mission is becoming politically problematic at the national level. Cabinet ministers all have their own plans and want to claim credit for reforms undertaken in their area. Theoretically, each country already has its own national development plan. So exactly what will a Nepad minister do if the country has already come up with a plan of how best to use its resources? It will not matter whether the Nepad minister has better ideas or the national plan is totally ineffective. Such a minister, being of the same political party as the rest of the government, cannot simply go to other ministries and tell them they have it all wrong. Unless Nepad is placed very close to the presidency and staffed with obvious close allies of the president and the president is very committed to reform, it will be at best a sideshow to government decision-making.

Kenya offers an interesting example. After four decades of rule by the KANU party, a coalition of opposition parties ousted it in December 2002 elections. The new ruling party coalition embarked on a number of sweeping reforms to improve education, health care, roads and fight corruption. It also created a semi-autonomous Nepad Secretariat with a chief executive officer from the private sector. The secretariat reports to the Minister of Planning, which, like planning ministers everywhere, itself struggles to find a meaningful role among more powerful line ministries that have their own ideas about strategic direction. The government's reform agenda was developed during the political campaign prior to creation of Nepad, which leaves a major question about what the Nepad Secretariat is for. In a recent

interview with SAIIA, Kenya's Planning Minister, Prof Anyang Nyong'o, argued that the government's reform agenda was separate from Nepad. The Kenya government sees Nepad as a tool to help raise funding and the only activities assigned to it are infrastructure projects, namely launching a private sector concession to manage faltering national railroads, granting a concession for the private sector to build and operate a northern corridor toll road and linking the national telecommunications system to an undersea fibre-optic cable. In this national Nepad vision, there is no role for the public and no real purpose to the Nepad Secretariat, except as a fund raising tool to exploit the popularity of the programme with donors.

Nepad as management consultancy

Nepad does have sufficient allure to draw government representatives to its functions. But this drawing power is a wasting asset that will dwindle with time. At the national and continental levels, if Nepad has nothing to bring to governments except development ideas, it will not have the political clout needed to alter development plans and political systems that are created at the national level. Without clout, Nepad's relevance and influence will steadily fade and eventually it will die a slow death. The reality is that bilateral donors, the World Bank and others who have ideas and cash on the table will always command more interest among governments.

It is important to assess the character of the work product that Nepad is generating. Because of its continental role and extremely limited research capacity, it is tending toward the creation of generic sector-wide plans that would apply to all nations. While there is some potential for regional collaboration on research in areas such as education, agriculture and health-care delivery, continental plans will inherently be of limited value because the particular circumstances in each country are so divergent. For example, Nepad's advocacy of universal primary education may be broadly desirable, but it does not and cannot intelligently guide a country in how to restructure teacher

training, create and maintain school infrastructure or revise curricula to make them more economically valuable to students. These all require careful, in-depth study and planning that takes into account the particular fiscal and political circumstances of each country. In short, the real work of development must occur at the national level.

Because Nepad cannot hope to set itself up as a fully fledged development agency, given the chronic underfunding problems of the AU/OAU, it has opted for its present, highly constrained role of facilitator and planner. However, there is a compromise position that can give Nepad a clear mission continentally and nationally. This alternative model is based on well-established practices of turning around troubled companies in the private sector.

When corporations have particular problems they cannot solve internally, they often turn to outside management consultancies, which bring in multi-disciplinary teams to interview key players, analyse the problem and offer solutions. They recognise that the human dynamics within organisations often make radical reform impossible for players within the organisation to plan and execute because they are so immersed in old ways of doing things and caught up in the need to assign or deflect blame. In such situations, an outside expert can serve as a non-threatening catalyst for change.

The same dynamics apply within national governments, where there are powerful incentives for politicians and bureaucracies to cover up problems and shift blame to lack of resources rather than examine how and why management is ineffective. Therein lies the opportunity to create a far clearer, more effective role for Nepad.

There is significant enthusiasm for Nepad in the private sector but currently no organised way to utilise that enthusiasm and expertise. Nepad, organised as a type of management consultancy, could harness that enthusiasm and complement peer review assessments. This vision would also give Nepad a tangible mission at the national level. It could be called upon in an ad hoc manner to find solutions or design small-scale experimental programmes designed to test alterna-

tive systems of management or service delivery. Such a national Nepad body could serve as a co-ordinator of voluntary contributions from business and academia. Line ministries could request Nepad to assemble a multi-disciplinary team of experts to solve selected problems and recommend how state services could be improved. This would allow both Nepad and the ministry in question to share credit, which currently is a key obstacle to the rollout of Nepad at the national level.

The African Peer Review Mechanism

Of all the ideas advanced in Nepad, from giant infrastructure projects to reforming health care or negotiating better trade deals, none has as much potential to bring positive change nor as many practical challenges as the African Peer Review Mechanism.

Seventeen nations have signed up to be reviewed — Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, and Uganda. Reviews are scheduled to begin in the second quarter of 2004 and continue through to 2007 with three or four reviews under way at any one time. The first countries to be reviewed will be Ghana, Rwanda and Mauritius. Kenya was to be among the first four nations to be reviewed but has cast doubt on when this might happen. (In March 2004, Kenya Nepad Secretariat CEO Peter Ondeng told journalists that because of the country's struggle to agree on a new constitution, peer review would be postponed until 2005. However, at an April SAIIA conference in Nairobi, the Planning Minister contradicted Ondeng, noting that the preliminary peer review consultations would begin in May 2004.)

Under the planned APRM process, peer review is a misnomer. The review envisioned is by technical experts, governed by an independent panel of seven eminent persons and the APR Secretariat. The peers, or fellow heads of state, receive the report prepared by the

experts and decide what recommendations, persuasion or pressure is appropriate.

The review process is supposed to take six to nine months from start to finish. In the first stage, the country under review names a person or persons to serve as the APR focal point, which is responsible for co-ordinating with the APR Secretariat, providing documents to the secretariat and setting up appointments on behalf of the visiting APR team. It will also co-ordinate a civil society panel, members of which will receive the self-assessment questionnaire. When complete, the focal point is to forge them into a so-called 'consensus position'. The exact powers of and selection process for the civil society panels have not been stipulated, although the APR Secretariat is drafting guidelines.

Based on the self-assessment, the country is to draft a national programme of action with broad public input. That plan, along with the self-assessment, will then be forwarded to the APR Secretariat. The Secretariat combines this assessment with its own desk research to produce a background paper and a paper outlining the major issues in the country, which will guide the actual country visit by the APR staff.

Each country visit is scheduled to last three weeks and be conducted by six people. These will include one member of the panel of eminent persons, one administrative person and four experts, one for each of the four areas of the APRM.

A critical question is the nature of the civil society input. There is nothing to prevent government from naming only friendly voices to the civil society panel. The APR Panel and Secretariat say they are aware of this danger and are drafting guidelines for public participation but had to make the process palatable to all AU members. Ghana offers a cautionary example. It has a strong democratically elected, reformist government, but has openly adopted a defensive position on peer review. Despite an outcry from civil society organisations and pledges to the contrary, the government appointed a civil society panel without public consultation or involvement of the two major confederations of non-governmental organisations.

Another area of concern is the questionnaire itself. SAIIA participated in the technical experts meeting that advised on the questionnaire. However, the draft that has been prepared bears only modest resemblance to the experts' recommendations. Nearly all of the sharp-edged questions that were recommended about political rights, balance of powers and corruption were removed. In some cases very soft questions that were not discussed by the experts were inserted. For example, questions about the right to work and decent wages are included but none of the questions drafted by the experts remain on freedom of association, the powers of parliament to compel testimony and financial accountability from the executive, and the right of the opposition to access state media.

If the panel of eminent persons was savvy and determined, a thorough review could be done regardless of the questionnaire's structure. The questionnaire need not be highly detailed if the background research is rigorous and the visiting panel thorough. Members of the APR Secretariat noted recently that the questionnaire had to be softened to make it acceptable to all African states, not merely those which had volunteered to be reviewed. That raises questions about whether the Secretariat will feel compelled to make the final APR reports 'acceptable' to governments.

Participants in a SAIIA civil society conference on peer review in Ghana argued that it was far more important who the APR panel talked to than what was contained in the formal questionnaire. Even if the process is open to civil society participation, many participants in the Ghana seminar and another in Kenya argued that civil society organisations would have difficulty preparing thoughtful analyses of governance without resources. Most organisations that did not already have grants to work on governance questions felt they would be unable to divert staff to participate in drafting responses to peer review. There also was broad agreement that making verbal presentations to the visiting APR team would make no difference.

The release of the reports is another key issue. The Panel of Eminent

Persons has declared its unanimous agreement that it believes its reports should be released publicly as soon as they are final and that any comments that heads of state or governments would like to make must be attached as appendices, rather than edited anonymously into the text. However, they noted that the heads of state did not all concur and both points remain controversial.

Like Nepad, the APR process suffers from too broad a focus and too few resources, in terms of both funding and staffing. There are plans to hire about 20 people in the APR Secretariat, including four directors for each area of peer review and two to three researchers to prepare background research on countries.

To make up for the lack of technical expertise within the secretariat, the process envisions drawing on so-called partner organisations to second staff to the reviews. This process puts most of the cost of expertise off budget, but there are concerns that organisations are being asked to offer unknown numbers of staff for unknown periods and that they will have no control over the work to which staff are assigned. Only a limited number of organisations will be in a position to participate. The vast majority of African governance expertise resides in small think tanks, academic departments and corporations. Given the APR Secretariat's small size, it will struggle to administer many small analytical institutions. As a result, the planned structure will exclude participation of Africa's intelligentsia, except those employed at the UN, African Development Bank or personally connected to APR officials. This is a major weakness because one key objective of peer review is to develop broader and deeper African understanding of how to fix the continent's problems.

Another key question is evidence. The APR questionnaire mostly asks about the law as written and government's attempts to manage issues. Almost every country has some form of laws outlawing corruption and abuse of power. But law and actual practice are vastly different. Unless, peer review allows significantly more time to ask about the character and perpetrators of corruption, it will come up with

equivocal reports that do little more than express concern over corruption. Not having had the time or resources to make an unequivocal conclusion, the APR report writers will most likely just split the difference - note problems but acknowledge government efforts. With reformist governments this will not matter, but with governments like Cameroon, Gabon and Republic of Congo, where corruption is a central organising principle of governance, such a tepid approach will make no difference. One could argue that by allowing such countries to participate, peer review buys them time to stave off reform because they can claim that they are participating. It should be noted that the countries with the worst governance are scheduled for reviews in 2006-7.

Despite the elements of uncertainty that still surround peer review and the potential for governments to dominate it, APRM is the most tangible manifestation of Nepad. It contains many points through which the public can participate and, even if the public is partially or fully shut out, peer review will provoke national and continental discussions about governance, development and political reform. And it is beginning in the second quarter of 2004, unlike other Nepad initiatives that may be years away from showing concrete results. Consequently, it is the most important programme in the Nepad programme.

Although Nepad has often been criticised for failing to take a stand on Zimbabwe, peer review is clearly not designed to handle fast-moving crises. That work is most appropriately dealt with through ad hoc diplomacy and the Peace and Security Council. For other states that are neither full reformers nor committed retrogressive states, peer review does offer the potential to broaden and deepen the Nepad debate about reform. But unless it is given proper staff, financial support and openly accepts public participation and criticism, it will not live up to its potential.