

## **Nepad's peer review still work in progress**

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AFRO-PESSIMISTS are treating President Thabo Mbeki's comments that political governance would not be a priority of the African peer review mechanism as a deathblow to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad).

Strategically, Mbeki was right to promote good governance political and economic-corporate and enhanced regional co-operation as the three pillars for sustainable development under Nepad. Tactically, though, he is also right to try to dampen expectations that the principles of peer review can be easily put into practice.

A quick look at the work of the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) helps us understand this discrepancy. In no other international organisation has the practice of peer review been so extensively developed a process that began more than 40 years ago. This has been made easier by the high degree of trust and homogeneity that prevails among the 30 highly industrialised nations comprising the OECD.

Yet even the OECD has no rigorous peer review definition, beyond a "systematic examination and assessment of the performance of a state by other states". Members volunteer for review, but each round is negotiated and tailored to the special needs of the target country. Peers have no power of enforcement beyond persuasion.

Political governance issues, as a rule, are not directly addressed. But there is a consensus that peer pressure leads to high levels of compliance in virtually all areas of national policy.

Fabrizio Pagani of the OECD's legal directorate recently published a highly readable Peer Review: A Tool for Co-Operation and Change, available at [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org). It should be required reading for anyone commenting on African peer review.

Tutoring a group of visitors from Africa two weeks ago, Pagani expressed great admiration at Africa's willingness

to declare political governance a legitimate part of their peer review. He said Africa had leapt ahead of the OECD in this area, yet faced far more daunting challenges in assembling information, analysing it and overcoming huge cultural differences.

Cultural differences, he said, are often overlooked but still raise issues of how and what to review among OECD members. And Africa, he said, is the most culturally diverse continent in the world. Africa's biggest immediate problem, however, will be a lack of good data.

Even rudimentary standards for collecting, analysing and comparing basic information have yet to be determined and accepted. Developing subregional frameworks is likely to be the next best step as peer pressure is more naturally organised among smaller groups than in the context of continental or global institutions.

Political governance, inevitably, will be the most problematic, but including it on the Nepad list of fundamental factors will allow the process of building peer pressures to begin, even in advance of any decisions about the nature and location of any implementing mechanism.

The OECD is eager to help. Earlier this year it published jointly with the African Development Bank, African Economic Outlook, which for the first time gives data on all African economies in a comparable manner similar to the OECD's own Economic Outlook. Anyone questioning the salience of good governance for economic development and co-operation need only read the critique of Zimbabwe.

Defining the meaning of "peer", and sticking to the rules once they are defined, will be vital for the success of Nepad. African governments are committed to begin this process early next year. Expectations of progress must be realistic and well-informed. The important thing is to begin the process. Mbeki's comments last week may have actually helped.

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