

## THE AFRICAN UNION PEER REVIEW MECHANISM AS A PUBLIC RELATIONS CHALLENGE

**Dr Baffour Agyenian-Duah**  
*Associate Executive Director, CCD-Ghana*

### INTRODUCTION

NEPAD? What's new in that? Is it different from the (O)AU? How serious are African leaders this time? These are relevant questions considering the disappointing outcomes of previous development initiatives for Africa. Nonetheless, I want to believe that NEPAD is different and is very promising; there is evidence of greater passion and commitment this time by African leaders. Moreover, unlike the past, this new initiative is people-centred with minimal control by our Heads of States. Hence, although some gaps remain, NEPAD has better prospects and should be spared the usual cynicism that greets African initiatives. NEPAD gives new hope by shifting focus on conditions for development:

- Ensuring peace and security, through conflict management and prevention, and by combating the trade in arms;
- Promoting democracy and sound political governance, through inclusiveness and political participation, respect for human rights, rule of law, accountability and integrity;
- Instituting sound economic and corporate governance, by enforcing prudent management of public finances and ethical and socially responsible conduct of business affairs.

In my view, NEPAD provides appropriate responses to the political and economic confusion and the high sense of insecurity in Africa. By insisting on good governance, prudent management of the economy and the full participation of civil society and the private sector in governance, NEPAD brings a refreshing air to African politics. Nearly all conflicts in Africa result from political exclusion, the absence of the rule of law, abuses of human rights, and the lack of transparency and accountability in the conduct of public affairs.



The lack of economic and corporate governance and the wanton plunder of resources by greedy and self-seeking politicians have led to the pitiable economic circumstances of citizens. By insisting on prudent management of public finances and ethical and socially responsible conduct of public business, NEPAD seeks to reverse the economic decadence and generate a buoyant development.

The biggest challenges, however, are:

- How to popularize NEPAD;
- How to translate and operationalize the lofty ideals of NEPAD; and
- How to make NEPAD a living document.

## THE APRM

Most innovative of the NEPAD initiative is the introduction of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). According to the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), APRM is “the systematic examination and assessment of the performance of a State by other States, with the ultimate goal of helping the reviewed state improve its policy making, adopt best practices, and comply with established standards and principles.” The APRM, therefore, establishes in Africa a mechanism for ensuring that our leaders pursue policies that are in consonance with the principles and values enunciated by NEPAD.

## Objectives of APRM

The objectives of the APRM are to:

- Enhance African ownership of its own development agenda;
- Identify, evaluate and disseminate information on best practices;
- Monitor progress;
- Use peer review to enhance adoption and implementation of best practices; and
- Identify deficiencies and capacity gaps and recommend approaches.

It must be stressed that the intent here is not for APRM to become a tool for separating the “good” from the “bad”, but rather to encourage those countries that are performing well to continue, and to assist those performing poorly to improve on their governance. Nonetheless, it has a built-in mechanism to sanction those countries that refuse to address serious deficiencies.



## The APRM and Public Relations Challenge

Good governance is not the sole responsibility of government. Indeed, good governance is possible only when citizens take full responsibility for it. And, citizens play this role effectively when they themselves believe in and observe the values and norms of good governance. Charity, they say, begins at home.

For Africa's public relations practitioners to be relevant and useful to NEPAD and, in particular the APRM, they should begin to cultivate the values and principles that the initiative seeks to promote.

- Is there good governance within the institution?
- Are elections of officers and the conduct of business transparent and above board?
- Are your leaders accountable?
- Have you developed effective mechanisms to manage and resolve internal conflicts?
- Do members respect the law?
- How transparent is your dealing with clients and how accountable are you to them?
- Do we question the autocratic tendencies of our leaders and do we exact sanctions as the rules say?

These questions may sound petty, but they expose the kinds of challenges we have to confront. If we cannot ensure that our homes or institutions respect these values, then how do we expect our national leaders to do the same?

### WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Traditionally, PR practitioners are known to cosmetically improve the image of what is not necessarily good-looking. However, realities today require that they represent and manage information that is noble and uplifting. PR practitioners have a responsibility to be fully engaged in promoting NEPAD and the APRM. Granted, a host of African leaders remain despicable, and serious challenges remain of autocracy, corruption, weak political institutions, respect for human rights, etc. Nonetheless, we should be proud of and commend the new breed that has emerged to champion the “renaissance.” We should also begin to accentuate the positive values in Africa.



Most importantly, African public relations institutions can no longer afford to remain on the sidelines of Africa's development. They should regard themselves as partners in development and actively seek to promote the development of the continent.

### **Holding Leaders Accountable**

Although the APRM could be a powerful accountability mechanism, citizens should reserve the right to hold their leaders accountable for their stewardship. Political accountability is achieved through the exercise of the franchise: educating the people on how to exercise their voting power should, therefore, be of prime interest to PR practitioners.

I have serious doubts about the extent to which African leaders would be bothered by the APRM, since subscription to the mechanism is voluntary. Frankly, when I heard Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo and Thabo Mbeki say that the Commonwealth should lift the sanctions on Mugabe's Zimbabwe, I wondered whether the APRM will ever achieve any meaningful result!

### **Collaborating with Other Civil Society Groups to Create Stronger Counterweight to State Power**

One important means to check government excesses and to ensure transparency and accountability in governance is to build a strong and vibrant civil society and this can be achieved through collaboration and networking among civil society organizations. As part of civil society, public relations institutions should join coalitions of civil society groups to undertake democracy-enhancing activities like monitoring elections, civic education, and monitoring the performance of governance. There should be a standing and sustainable network that would respond promptly to government actions and policies that undermine the peace and security of the country. Governments in Africa should be made to accept that civil society is united in the determination to uphold the rule of law, respect for human rights, and the prudent management of public finances and resources.

Indeed, it will serve the purpose of NEPAD if a network can be created to monitor the policies, behaviour and actions of governments in Africa to ensure that they are in consonance



with the tenets of NEPAD and the APRM. Such a civil society initiative will complement the APRM, which, as I have indicated, could become a toothless bulldog unless our leaders show genuine commitment and political will.

### **Competing with Multiple Sources of Information**

Finally, how will PR practitioners cope with the ever-increasing multiple sources of information? We live in a world with instant information and multiple sources. Example: the current military violence in Iraq. Television networks, radio broadcasts, and Internet services (hotmail, yahoo, etc.) give instant, minute-by-minute reports, oftentimes, contradictory reports. This situation poses real challenge to public relations practitioners: how do you relate to clients and present credible information in the face of such competing sources of information?

In promoting NEPAD and the APRM, you are bound to face competing information. You should be able to discern the truth from the falsehood, the serious from the frivolous, and the inspiring and uplifting from the gloomy. In so doing, you will be able to present the true picture of the African experience and promote the ideals of the APRM. Ultimately, the peace, security and general well being of Africa should be your preoccupation.

