



Is Open Access to Information Through Libraries on the Agenda at the African Union When It Comes to Assessing Countries' Development under the African Peer Review Mechanisms?

Matseliso M. (Tseli) Moshoeshe-Chadzingwa
National University of Lesotho
Roma, Lesotho

Meeting: **146 . Access to Information Network – Africa (ATINA) SIG / Réseau d'accès à l'information en Afrique (RAIA)**

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 76TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND ASSEMBLY

10-15 August 2010, Gothenburg, Sweden
<http://www.ifla.org/en/ifla76>

Abstract:

Is the issue of Open Access to information through libraries part of business for the African Union (AU) when it comes to assessing countries' performance under the African Peer Review Mechanisms (APRM)? Whereas the scope of this review is limited as on record it focuses on three areas, namely politics, economics and good governance, in fact individual countries are free to incorporate relevant cross-cutting issues, such as HIV/AIDS, gender, or information access. The paper indicates that although technically speaking the matter of Open Access might in some regions be more of a librarians' preoccupation, they should not remain indifferent but rather seize the opportunity to influence others, such as researchers and political leaders, on the relevance of Open Access in the business of the APRM. A brief is given on the prevailing situation in Africa, as well as relevant factors to be addressed, as positively and/or negatively affecting how Open Access becomes part of the APRM processes.

1. INTRODUCTION

In April 2009, the National University of Lesotho's academics and administrators were invited to meet the African Peer Review Mechanisms' team of consultants who were assessing the performance of Lesotho in terms of the APRM. The author as an academic librarian and a manager was among the invitees. We were appreciative, grateful and enthusiastic that we had that opportunity to influence the process. But alas, the review was nearing its end and most stakeholders had already submitted their inputs, mainly through

debates. An enquiry was made from the floor on whether Lesotho could be assessed on how it was performing regarding access to public information, especially through libraries which tend to be affordable means for all.

The answer was initially a categorical “no”, the parameters had already been set around which to conduct the review. They are i) political, ii) economic and iii) corporate good governance of African governments. It was indicated however, that each country could incorporate related matters within the given focus. That consideration and the remarks received from the consultants have influenced the author to enquire more broadly and within the objective of Access to Information Network - Africa (ATINA), if information workers could join forces to take the advantage of the ongoing APRM process, such that the authorities of the Africa continent may concurrently support the principle of open access to information as a factor in good political, economic and corporate governance.

Inspired by the ongoing African Union (AU)’s African Peer Review Mechanisms that determine the performance of governments regarding political, economic and corporate governance, the author enquires if the AU also considers *Open Access* policies, publishing, and repositories as issues that matter, that need to be looked at within this umbrella agency of the African governments.

To the question of whether Open Access is on the African Union’s agenda, the first answer is unfortunately “NO”!!!!

A more qualified second answer is yes, Open Access could be on the agenda, by accident, or if individual countries decide to incorporate the subject as a cross-cutting issue.

2. Open Access principles

What is the rationale for Open Access?

Open access to information makes sense where censorship, repressive authorities and ignorance fuel the suffering of societies.

The Open Access movement that is supported by many libraries worldwide in general, and in Africa in particular, should be regarded as commitment by libraries on the one hand, to promote free access and availability of public and scientific information for the building of knowledge societies. On the other hand, it should be seen as a locus of commitment by authorities, especially governments, to provide administrative, financial, technical and legal support to those libraries and services that manage information in an open way.

That a number of African governments have voluntarily acceded to the self-examination APRM exercise on political, economic and governance is a commendable move. Yet, for the task to bear the desired results, one assumes, the exercise should be thorough and convincingly attend to all salient matters. Notably, external donors are as usual responsible for the funding of the APRM process, although countries such as Botswana argue on the contrary that for the review to be focused and successful, it should self-sustaining, being owned financially and technically, for example, by African Union and the countries that are being reviewed.

3. Open Access in Africa and its implications for ATINA

The enquiry is made within the context of Access to Information Network - Africa (ATINA), an IFLA special interest group whose aim is to help “*assess and promote free public access to government information and information about governments, freedom of expression and democracy through libraries and library professionals across the African continent*”. (Cf. <http://www.ifla.org/en/about-the-atina-special-interest-group>)

Within this context, the Open Access movement requires libraries and other relevant institutions in Africa to formulate Open Access policies, create repositories and facilitate Open Access publishing.

4. AU and APRM

There are pre-conceived notions that African countries and governments have generally been notoriously undemocratic, corrupt, in violation of human rights, plagued by censorship and continued instability, regional conflicts and socio-economic adversities. Even after colonial independence, while there were a few states that achieved economic growth, peace and stability, the image of the continent has on the whole been gloomy.

But what is the actual fact?

Subsequent to numerous resolutions, commitments and decades of development strategies, there emerged a quest for a more meaningful unity among African states – the African Union.

The African Union is the continent’s supreme oversight body, a stronger organization that was established in 1999 by the Sirte Declaration as a successor of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The objectives of the AU include, *inter alia*:

- solidarity
- territorial integrity
- encouraging international cooperation as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- peace, stability
- promotion of sustainable development in the economic, social and cultural levels
- promotion of all fields of human activity to raise the living standards of African peoples
- advancing the development of Africa by research in all fields, in particular in science and technology
- cooperating with relevant global partners in eradicating preventable diseases.

In this regard, while no one country is all bad or all good, there have been notable good and bad performers among African governments. They have committed themselves with good intentions to be assessed by their peers on how they perform in the given areas of focus.

As well, it is clear that there is a niche for information access as an assessment criterion, not only in all the listed objectives, but also in the three set parameters of the African Peer Review Mechanisms (APRM).

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) was the umbrella under which the Union of African governments launched the African Peer Review Mechanisms, a vehicle that enables each state that is so willing, to facilitate the review of its performance by the set standards. The outcome of the APRM process does not necessarily imply any punitive measures by the AU against a country, although the record of the review should undoubtedly and essentially be accessible to all. That is central to the argument of this paper.

5. APRM parameters and the outcomes

So far, not all the countries of Africa have undergone the APRM review.

The methodology involves research and consultation with communities by the local team of experts, that use existing yardsticks such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) protocols to determine whether or not a country is on the right track. The external team of consultants, or Eminent Persons group, then goes through the background information already gathered, has talks with stakeholders and analyze all the data.

The three subjects of concern stipulated in the APRM data collection are: **politics, economics, and good governance practices.** Further, the standard questionnaire according to Matlosa (2006:6), may tease out more data relating to these areas, such "promotion and protection of the rights of vulnerable groups", an issue which an information worker, for example, can extend to rural dwellers who lack easy access to public information even by radio or television.

By September 2007 the following 27 African countries were APRM participants: Algeria, Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Nigeria, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. By 2010 a handful of these were undergoing a second round of review.

There is no doubt that this is a significant process within our countries. By the APRM consultations, through its research or data gathering, even by the reports that are generated, all libraries and information workers that have a stake in Access to information in Africa are affected. But to what extent do we as information professionals get involved, make input to the peer reviews mechanisms, for the benefit of our people or of libraries themselves?

The Republic of South Africa APRM Report indicates that the Legislative Framework that was used included the *Act for the Promotion of Access to Information (Act 2 of 2000)* and the *Promotion of Access to Information Amendment Act (Act 54 of 2002)*. This confirms the direct relevance to the African Peer Review Mechanisms of the Open Access principles that we uphold.

We have to admit that, in some cases, there are factors that can prevent the leaders of Africa, or ourselves as information professionals, from strongly pushing the issue of Open Access to Information onto the agenda of a development strategy such as the APRM; while on the other hand other factors may be enabling and promote the inclusion of Open Access on the APRM agenda. It suffices that such factors be enumerated so that we are able to address them.

6. Factors that Either Negatively or Positively Affect the Inclusion of Open Access In The APRM Processes

6.1 Too specialised an issue?

Open Access to information through libraries is in the first instance possibly seen as too technical an issue, proper only to the library and information profession, and often too far removed from the African leaders who focus on hard politics and governance that will give credit to their own performance

Nevertheless, where they are apprised of these technical issues, it seems that political leaders are quick to find a niche for them in their thinking.

On his return from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) conference held in Geneva in October 2009, the Prime Minister of Lesotho applauded the objectives of the gathering, which encouraged internet connectivity in all the countries of the world. He announced that in Lesotho, while the target date for full connectivity was 2015, they intended to achieve that goal by 2012. This was a testimony of the good will of political leaders, even on issues that we may regard as too technical or trivial for their high state.

6.2 State or lack of national laws and policies enabling public access to information

It is not surprising that some countries will be quick to brush off the idea of putting Open Access into their APRM review. Lack of an enabling environment might give a bad name to such states. Examples of laws that might promote Open Access, as South Africa has demonstrated, are an Act specifically for the Promotion of Access to Information. In other countries it could be National Library Services Act, or a reform of outdated Copyright Laws, Media and Communication Policy (as for example proposed by MISA, the Media Institute of Southern Africa). Absence of appropriate legislative and policy tools in this regard is tantamount to lack of yardsticks in the African Peer Review Mechanisms, both in terms of openness of information in general and Open Access to it through libraries.

6.3 The general level of Information and Communications Technologies

Most African governments have websites on which they publish public information such as gazettes, speeches, etc. This is a sound framework on which to consider Open Access publishing as a factor by which leaders could be assessed under the APRM.

But the libraries that are directly controlled by governments and that would be the subject of assessment in terms of APRM would likely be the national or public libraries, many of which leave a lot to be desired regarding their implementation of Information and Communications Technologies for Open Access. The INASP Report edited by Chisenga indicates the limitations in this regard in most of the ten African public libraries that were surveyed.

By comparison, and as the eIFL.net Report illustrates, university libraries, which would not be assessed as a governance factor under the APRM process, are comparatively in the lead in promoting the principles of Open Access and free flow of information in Africa.

6.4 *Impact of the Cape Town Open Education Declaration*

African researchers, educationists, political leaders, unions, professional societies, policymakers and governments are among the global supporters that have signed this declaration to accelerate efforts to promote Open resources, technology and teaching practices in education. That governments and policy makers also see the need for open resources, confirms that the time is ripe for libraries that in the educational sphere to join hands also to put Open Access on the business agenda of African political leaders.

6.5 *Kigali Declaration on Development of an Equitable Information Society in Africa – the role of Parliaments (Rwanda, 2009)*

There are signs and indications that African leaders are poised to support Open Access. With regional groupings like the Pan African Parliament, the East African Legislative Assembly, ECOWAS and the SADC Parliamentary Forum in attendance, the Kigali Declaration was signed in March 2009 by parliamentarians from 27 African countries, representing over 50% of the continent's governments. They recalled their governments' commitment to the World Summit on the Information Society, they considered the critical role of information in development, they also realized the significant role that parliaments must play in promoting an equitable information society, through the enactment of legislation that supports transparency, accountability and openness. They underscored the need for information exchange, then agreed upon establishing a repository of policy, legislation, and regulations of each country in the areas of Information and Communications Technologies, in line with the African Information Society Initiative (AISII).

With the above, we can rightly hold it against our governments when Open Access through crucial information institutions such as libraries does not feature at all in the agenda of their noble self-assessment programmes like the APRM. So do we? It is for the library fraternity to answer.

6.6 *Do national library associations or consortia stand up to publishing groups?*

It should be the duty of local library professionals, and within the ambit of library consortia and associations, to influence decisions, developments and trends among publishers that support or oppose Open Access, as touching both academic and public libraries. A good example is that of Malawi National Libraries, that have benefited from internet connectivity through the VSATS project of the Malawi Library Consortium.

7. A Recommendation

The African Peer Review Mechanisms process is on-going, so it is never too late for librarians operating in the countries that have acceded to the APRM to advocate and lobby for inclusion of Open Access to information through libraries as a criterion in the process.

8. Conclusion

The initial answer I gave as to whether Open Access through libraries is on the agenda of the African Union as it undertakes the African Peer Review Mechanisms process was “No”. But

at the second level my answer was “Yes and no”. “No” again, because Open Access to information is not part of the three set subjects for the APRM, and because librarians are not directly involved in the process. But “Yes”, if the climate is ripe for showing African governments how favourable it would be for their APRM outcomes on many of the listed criteria, if only librarians can help them to put the matter on their agenda. Nothing prevents us from doing so.

9. References

- “African Union in a Nutshell” http://www.africa-union.org/root/au/aboutau/au_in_a_nutshell_en.htm (accessed on 10 June 2010)
- APRM – African Peer Review Mechanism Country Review Report No. 5, Republic of South Africa, September, 2007
- ATINA <http://www.ifla.org/en/about-the-atina-special-interest-group> (accessed 8 June, 2010)
- Chisenga, J. (ed). 2004. The use of ICTs in African Public Libraries – a survey of ten countries in Anglophone Africa (INASP)
- Development of an Equitable Information Society: the role of African Parliaments, 4th-5th March, 2009 (Parliament Building Kigali, Rwanda)
- eIFL.net 2010. Open Access: State of the art in eIFL partner countries
- Matlosa, K. 2006. Democracy and Political Governance in Lesotho: key issues and challenges. Background Paper prepared on behalf of the APRM Secretariat, Midrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
- Mukamunana, R & J.O. Kuye 2005. “Revisiting the African Peer Review Mechanism: the case for leadership and good governance in Africa”, *Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 590-604