

Out of Africa

The LGA is working with Africans to improve local government across the continent, as **Cllr Dave Wilcox** and **Cllr Peter Fleming** explain

The UK's experience of peer review and sector-led improvement is now in demand internationally.

Councils becoming more confident in shaping their own improvement over the last decade resonates strongly with our counterparts around the world.

In 2010, with support from the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, the Local Government Association (LGA) was asked to pilot the UK peer review model in South Africa.

More recently, we have been called on by United Cities and Local Government Africa (UCLGA) to roll out the same model across the African continent, with all the funding coming from an external donor, the Government of Luxembourg.

Says Jean Pierre Elong Mbassi, secretary general of UCLGA: 'The UK peer review model is one of the best in the world, and successfully adapting it to Africa will put African local government on a much stronger footing.'

The LGA has a long track record of supporting local government in developing countries – we rely on external funding to do so, our international work is demand-driven, and the call on us is always for local government practitioners and peers.

When we harness the skills and experience of our peers, we can very quickly, and cost effectively get to the heart of a council's issues and challenges. Peer-to-peer challenge comes from critical friends who can use their insight to work across political groupings, and who know the day job of a council well, not consultants or inspectors from outside the sector.

It's practical because it's local government holding up a mirror to local government.

At the beginning of this month, a pan-African cohort of local government councillors, chief executives and experts from 13 African countries was trained by the LGA in London on the principles and methodology of peer review.

Throughout 2012, African-led reviews made up of peers from across

the continent and shadowed by UK peers, will be delivered for urban and rural municipalities, as well as local government associations in Namibia, Ghana, Uganda, Cameroon and Ivory Coast.

The timing could not be more relevant. Compared with Britain, the economic, social and environmental challenges facing local government across Africa are immense. And although the epicentre of the global financial crisis is in the northern hemisphere, slow growth and fiscal tightening is affecting many fragile economies in the south.

Supporting the development of local democratic institutions is a key priority for the UK's overseas aid programme and now, more than ever, the pressure to improve the tier of government closest to local people could not be greater.

Moreover, although the answers to our questions may be very different, many of the principles of local government improvement transcend geographical, cultural and economic differences.

Wherever we are in the world, local leaders are asking similar questions – how do we maintain our vision and focus at the top of our organisation? Are our stakeholders adding the value they

should or are we missing a trick? Is our organisational culture hampering the way we communicate to local people? Where are the

ship includes a free peer review every three years. We are now talking about an improvement tool which is recognised, credible and central to British local government improvement.

Africa is, of course, a very different place from Europe. The continent's challenges may be huge, but its human capital is one of its greatest assets. Yet, in the same way that central government too often tells local government it knows best, many Western aid programmes impose outside expertise on Africa.

Less time and money is spent on drawing on African expertise that already exists, and this applies to local government too.

Mr Mbassi believes that 'harnessing existing local government know-how to improve municipalities should be taken just as seriously in Africa as it is in Europe'.

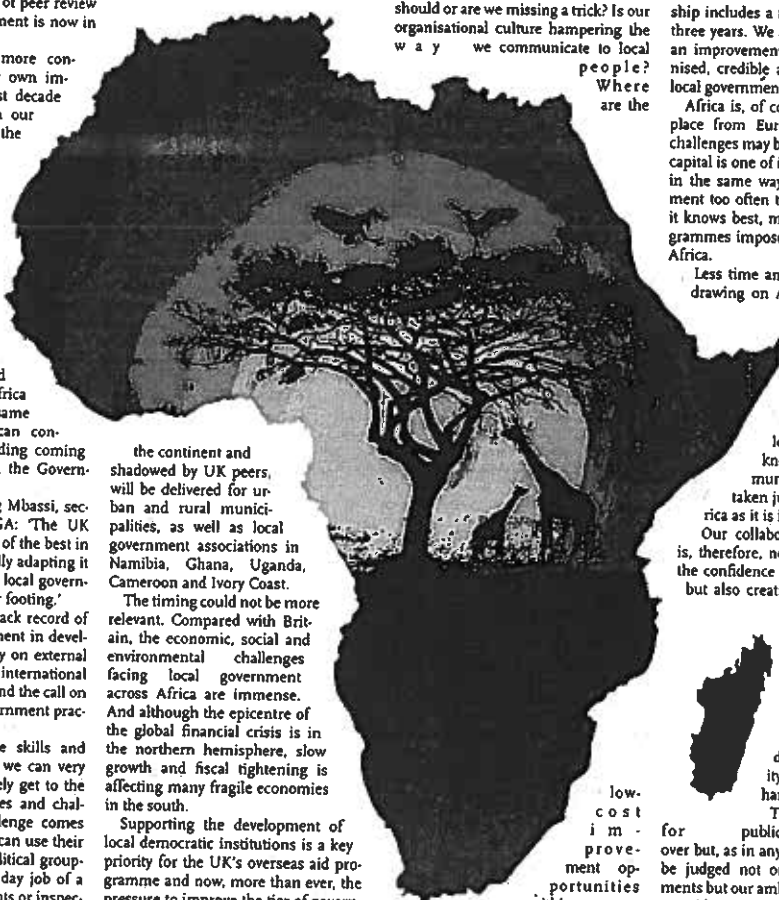
Our collaboration with UCLGA is, therefore, not only about raising the confidence of local government, but also creating an improvement model which is genuinely African lead.

We may be helping UCLGA to set up the structures and methodology of peer review, but its delivery and, indeed, its sustainability, will be in African hands.

These are tough times for public services the world over but, as in any peer review, we will be judged not only by our achievements but our ambition too. As a country with strong ties to Africa through trade, diaspora links and wider co-operation Britain and Africa have vested interests in each other's development.

Our prosperity and security is shared, and it will be all of us missing a trick if we fall back into isolation at a time when co-operation is needed more than ever before. ■

Cllr Dave Wilcox is chairman of the LGA's European and international board, and Cllr Peter Fleming is chairman of the LGA's improvement board



low-cost improvement opportunities within our current budget that we've not been able to see?

Local government, not central government, is best placed to answer these questions, and the UK experience demonstrates this powerfully.

More than ever, councils are now in the driving seat of their own improvement since Whitehall replaced a cumbersome inspection regime and recognised the value of sector-led improvement. Indeed, part of the LGA's core improvement offer to its member-