

POLICY RESEARCH INSIDE THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

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Introduction

Social movements like the African National Congress involved in a struggle to change the socio-political landscape have to constantly collect, analyse data and social trends. Understanding the social reality enables these movements to formulate strategies and embark on appropriate actions. Social researchers and intellectuals, both within and without these movements, are critical in this process. Through analysis, progressive intellectuals expand the movement's strategic understanding about what it is it could do in the struggle for liberation and justice.

Up until the late 1980s progressive intellectuals concentrated on a critique of the apartheid system - a critique which demonstrated the impossibility of reforming the system - and thus the need to radically transform it. As such a substantial percentage of progressive intellectual work before February 2 was oriented towards theorising and/or describing the reasons for, or the path towards, the overthrow of the apartheid regime. The mid-1980s saw the emergence of intellectual endeavours inside the country which were directed at empowering the mass movements in their day-to-day struggles. These tended to focus on technical and strategic issues related to campaigns and/or negotiations (in the case of trade unions and civics).¹ As this process unfolded it soon became clear that it is not enough to provide information necessary for successful negotiations without providing alternative policy options. Soon the research endeavours began to shift towards policy issues.

It must be said that the move towards policy research was not a consciously well-thought out process. The question was thrown up by the need to translate people's demands into concrete alternative policies. It is interesting to note that this shift happened in the aftermath of the 1984/85 uprisings. At that time it appeared that the strategy of ungovernability was succeeding and victory seemed possible. But more important was the evident growth and (I dare say!) strength of the mass democratic movement.

The shift to policy work was not only evident within the country. The process was also happening within the ANC in exile. The ANC established policy departments during that period. The legal and constitutional department and the economic research unit, later to become the department of economic policy, are some of the policy research units established at the time. These departments initiated and established contacts with the internal research community.² The DEP was also instrumental in the formation of Economic Research on South Africa (EROSA), a research consortium of sympathetic economists in London.³

This paper explores the workings and effectiveness of the ANC's research oriented structures, in particular its Department of Economic Policy (DEP). The paper is not

concerned with research in general but reconstructive policy research, that is, research work that informs policy formulation or culminates in policy documents. It is also not concerned with the content of the research undertaken or commissioned by the structures. Rather, the paper attempts to explore the problems and lessons of doing research within the organisation. The paper argues that policy research in the ANC faces, *inter alia*, the following two problems or contradictions. First, in-depth research and analysis of policy issues sits uncomfortably with the organisation's commitment to grass-roots participation in policy formulation. Related to this is the accessibility (to rank and file members and non-specialists) of research outputs. Secondly, the tension between medium to long-term policy research work and immediate strategic (political) questions is not an easy one to resolve. These and other related question are the focus of this paper.

I would like to make it clear from the onset that the following discussion recognises that the DEP, and indeed the whole movement, has had no experience in formulating concrete economic (technical) policy, not to say anything about implementation. This lack of experience places certain constraints on the movement. But the movement has a rich political history and insights as well as close affinity to the problems afflicting the majority of South Africans, all of which serve as an invaluable guide in policy formulation.

February 2 Opens a New Chapter

The unbanning of the ANC and other organisations opened a new path to liberation - negotiations. The effect of this was to highlight more sharply the need for the organisation to develop concrete policy positions for the negotiations and for possible implementation. The research landscape changed overnight. The changed conditions demanded that the intellectual energies of the movement be directed towards generating practical and workable policy options.

The first problem that confronted the ANC was the need to transfer its organisational infrastructure from Lusaka to inside the country. It did not take long to establish and transfer the political structures. The DEP was only transferred to Johannesburg in the second part of 1990, around August. This meant that there was a disjuncture between the political structures and the research departments.

The second problem was the actual capacity of its research structures. It was clear that the structures established in Lusaka could not undertake the project on their own. The problem was resolved differently by different research structures. The legal and constitutional department formalised and extended its relations with the progressive legal fraternity, mainly human rights lawyers. Using the resources of the ANC sponsored Centre for Development Studies at the University of Western Cape, the department was able to mount an intense research agenda and produced documents which increasingly dominated the constitutional debate. The DEP responded by increasing its full-time staff complement as well as establishing links with university-based economists who had just joined the ANC or were sympathetic to it.

The relationship between policy departments of the movement and the intellectuals outside the ANC is a complex and often an uneasy one.⁴ Policy planners in the

departments as employees of the ANC are first and foremost accountable to the organisation and therefore policy documents emanating from these are supposed to reflect the organisation's political bias. But as intellectuals they are also accountable to their discipline (economics or political economy) and their peers. While this dual accountability is not a major problem for full-time functionaries of the ANC, I would imagine it would be a problem for some intellectuals who place greater importance on being 'objective' and accountable to one's discipline and peers.

The nature of the relationship between the research departments and outside intellectuals is often an ambiguous one. In some cases it is more like an internal relationship, that is, one is called upon to provide input in one's area of specialisation on the basis that he/she is a member of the organisation. More often there is no commitment of resources accompanying the request. It is true that most people offer to do the work as a voluntary service to the organisation and the 'liberation struggle'. Accepting that the ANC has very little resources, one cannot but observe that it is difficult to sustain policy work on this basis. More important however is that the unprofessional nature of the relationship limits the organisation's possibility of going back to the researcher if the quality of work is not of the required standard.

The Exciting Critique and the Dryness of Policy

Activists within the mass democratic movement in many cases could easily relate to the intellectual output of pre-February 2. Focussed as it were on criticqueing the status quo and theorising the reasons for the overthrow of the apartheid system, this output was a reflection of their daily experiences on the ground. Though the relationship between theory and practice is not an unmediated one, still the activists could relate better to and were excited by intellectual output that project them as social actors, guided them in their daily struggles and helped shape their self-understanding.⁵

The process of economic policy formulation by its very nature combines strategic (political) considerations as well as technical ones. Politics provides the overall context and informs the policy. While in the past it was possible to couch economic demands in broad political terms and slogans, this was no longer possible after February 2, 1990. The ANC had to back up its politico-economic demands with politically and technically sound economic policy alternatives.

If the relationship between theory and practice is complex, that between technical economic formulations and lived experience is doubly so. Technical formulations are usually alienating (but need not be) to non-technical people.

As the DEP entered the terrain of policy, it soon became clear that this was a contested terrain. The terrain of struggle had shifted to the arena of policy. For example, capital and the state tried to pressurise the ANC to concentrate on technical economic issues. The ANC had to say something about the budget, deficits, tax policy, and so on. The state and big business were determined to push the ANC into a position where it will begin to concentrate on technical proposals to what are essentially politico-economic problems. The DEP however resisted this not because it was technically weak (and we were) but because the ANC views the economic

crisis as intricately linked to the political crisis. Instead the DEP tried with difficulty to maintain a balance between the technical and the political. It was important to maintain a balance because a substantial shift towards technicism would have had two effects. Firstly, it would have pushed the ANC into a terrain determined by the state and capital and, secondly, it would have increased the distance between policy formulation and the daily struggles and experiences of ordinary members.

Tension Between Long-term Policy and Strategic Questions

The structural problems afflicting the South African economy call for a fundamental restructuring of the economy. The nature of the crisis is such that marginal tinkering will not solve the problems. Policies required to fundamentally restructure the economy in order to place it on a new growth path by definition will be of a long-term nature. To generate such policies requires in-depth research and analysis and such research tends to take longer. Any attempt to short circuit the research process will result in half-baked and ill-conceived policies.

The experience within the DEP is that it is not always possible to undertake such in-depth research work. Firstly, the resources (material and human) required are not available within the DEP. Secondly, the DEP is expected to respond to a myriad of demands from the organisation's heterogeneous constituencies - political leadership, workers, rural people, the unemployed, squatter communities, black business, etc. These demands, which are not always reconcilable, made it difficult if not impossible for the DEP to develop and sustain a well structured research programme. The point however is that there is no way that a group of five people can undertake research in a whole range of economic issues that needed to be covered. The state for example has a number of departments and utilises specialist commissions to deal with all the issues that the DEP is expected to deal with.

The DEP sought to resolve the capacity issue by farming out work to outside researchers, that is to its associate members and sympathetic economists located in other institutions. The DEP encouraged these researchers to form theme groups focussing on different aspects of economic policy, e.g. fiscal and monetary policy, conglomerate and ownership issues, tax policy and so on. The department also established joint policy commissions with black business groups (i.e. NAFSOC and FABCOS) to explore policies on small and medium enterprises. The DEP increasingly became a research facilitator and manager. But networking and commissioning work from outsiders demands that the DEP be an efficient research co-ordinator and manager. I am afraid this area still leaves much to be desired. It is my view that the situation can only improve through the professionalisation of the relationship.

As an integral part of the ANC the department's work is largely defined by the ebbs and flows of the political situation. This has the effect of engendering short-termism in the DEP's work. This is not surprising given the general thrust of the ANC's work, i.e. consolidating its political position within the country. Its research structures are therefore expected to feed into that process. This means that the DEP has had to produce politico-economic briefings (including speeches) for the political leadership as well as attend to the broad membership. The inter-action between the

DEP and the political leadership has had its problems, particularly the issue of access. For a long time there were no formal and structured information transfer mechanisms from the DEP to the national executive and the other way round. The ad hoc nature of the relationship tended to produce a disjuncture between research outputs and politico-economic pronouncements by the leadership.

An over-emphasis and concentration on strategic questions on policy matters has its own problems. It is not always easy to reconcile long-term economic policy to the immediate questions of poverty, unemployment, homelessness and so on. The economic reality is such that it will not be possible to solve all problems affecting ordinary people at once.⁶ There are trade-offs, and their management is an ongoing problem. This brings me to the question of the role of the rank and file in policy formulation.

The role of the rank and file in policy formulation

The process of policy formulation has to take on board the ANC's commitment to grass-roots participation in its activities. This means that research questions and outputs have to address and reflect the experiences and desires of the general membership and the impoverished majority. This demands that the research process be an inter-active one between the researchers and the members. It means some form of collective activity in the definition of broad research questions as well as the discussion and critical assessment of the initial outputs for final drafting. What is the DEP's experience in this regard?

Initially it was not possible to engage the membership in defining research questions as the movement was in the process of re-establishing itself inside the country. Most structures, that is, branches and regions were in their formative stages for most of 1990. However, after the drafting of the *Discussion Document on Economic Policy* in September 1990, the DEP initiated a process of discussion within the organisation. The DEP organised regional workshops in most of the regions to discuss the document and solicit feedback from the membership. These were attended by two representatives per branch. The DEP also facilitated the establishment of ANC economics associations in most of the ANC regions. In some of the regions DEP associate members in these associations played (and still do) an important role in educating members on economic issues. These associations were meant to bring together people from the branches and to serve as economic forums to discuss and assess economic policy issues. I would like to make three observations in relation to this process.

Firstly, the economic researchers in the department were forced to present and simplify the document to different constituencies of the movement. In the process they were able to develop communication skills necessary to present what is essentially regarded as a technical subject in a non-technical way. Secondly, the process opened space for the membership to enter what is otherwise the preserve of economists and policy makers. That is, it was empowering. The fascinating thing about the workshops was that once people realised that it was actually possible for them to participate in the economic debate and to contribute to shaping their

movement's policy the more forthcoming and critical they became. Thirdly, it began to challenge the notion that policy formulation is the preserve of the specialised departments. I suppose one will be justified to add that it contributed to strengthening the organisation in the sense that the more people feel in control of their organisation the more committed they are.

The workshops did highlight another problem - language. Most policy documents are written in English and the overwhelming majority of ANC members are not highly literate in that language. It became clear that translations were essential in order to enhance the membership's participation.

The disappointing thing was that this process was not sustained. The lack of resources and the pressure of work in other areas gradually marginalised the process from the centre - DEP. The regions, especially the regional economics associations were supposed to continue with the process. For various reasons (which I cannot go into in this paper) this did not happen.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the problems the DEP has managed to be one of the central actors in the South African economic debate. Through its papers, documents, and conference participation the department has managed to place on stage the central questions which concern the impoverished majority of this country.

From the above discussion it is clear that there is no way it could have done this without the input of its fraternal/associate members in other institutions. The lesson from this is that it is possible to tackle complex and varied issues through a process of networking and collaborative research work. It is not always necessary, nor is it desirable, to establish a big research bureaucracy. It is clear however that in order to fully reap the benefits of such networking, the DEP would have to reconsider the character of the relationship with its associate members. This might mean making some resources available as well as establishing some system whereby such work can be given due recognition.

While acknowledging the difficulties involved in participatory policy formation, the DEP's experience does show that it is possible to involve ordinary people in the process. But it also showed that such involvement requires a commitment on the part of the policy planners and the organisation as a whole. The organisation has to make resources available to the DEP and the economics associations for the process to succeed.

Finally, the DEP has accumulated real experience as a research organ within the ANC and as co-ordinator and manager of research inputs emanating from its associate members and sympathetic people. Since its establishment inside the country the DEP has become an important player in the South African economic policy arena. In the past few months communication lines between the department and the political leadership have been improved. These will certainly improve as the negotiations proceed. There is no doubt that the department will become central in the economic forum being established. But in order to play a more meaningful role firstly, the department will have to increase its research capacity⁸ and become a more

efficient co-ordinator and manager. Secondly, the department will have to ensure that the regional economic associations function and can facilitate the participation and inputs of the membership into policy.

NOTES

1. Here I refer to groups such as Trade Union Research Project (TURP), Industrial Health Unit (IHU), Labour and Economic Research Project (LERP), Community Research and Information Centre (CRIC), Labour Research Services (LRS), Education Policy Unit (EPU) and Community Research Unit (CRU), to name a few.
2. These initial contacts culminated in a conference on post-apartheid in Amsterdam in 1986. The discussions on policy formulations for a post-apartheid South Africa finally culminated in the establishment of the Centre for Development Studies, today located at the University of Western Cape.
3. EROSA produced a number of papers on the South African economy. These papers were not just a critique of the apartheid state's economic policies but contained a number of policy recommendations. The EROSA group continues to make a contribution to economic policy formulation.
4. By outside intellectuals I mean all those who are not full-time employees of the ANC, some of whom might be members, others not.
5. Of course activists did not agree with every theoretical formulation emanating from social scientists. At times the tension between intellectuals and activists on the ground were very high. In some instances people were ostracised because they tended to disagree with what the activists thought was the correct formulation.
6. The ANC hopes to attend to the main problems of poverty, unemployment, homelessness through its policy of 'growth through redistribution'. Redistribution is at the centre of the strategy.
7. The DEP's draft economic manifesto for the ANC's July conference was translated into all the languages.
8. The department is in a process of establishing a research institute.

DISCUSSION

NEVILLE ALEXANDER: It's obvious from both presentations, which I must say I enjoyed very much, that this is research for negotiations, essentially. In other words, that the imperatives are the negotiating process. To what extent are people thinking of building in longer-term questions looking at a future, building scenarios, opening up research areas. Because the danger of course is that you get trapped into a purely reactive kind of research and there's no proactive thinking whatsoever going on.

CAROLINE WHITE: I'm involved with a research project where the Hostel Dwellers' Association wanted to be involved in a participative way. The whole thing was designed so that the members of the organisation could be involved in learning how to do the research. But very quickly they started to get pissed off with that and wanted the experts to do the research, and give them the results. That puts the researchers in a difficult position.

ENVER MOTALA: I want to deal with the question of how research is absorbed by mass organisations. I think researchers don't take seriously disseminating their work and participating in that process. They often see their job as limited to producing the research. Unless they actually are forced to participate in the process of disseminating their work, I think they lose out.

MIKE MORRIS: COSATU has been more successful in absorbing research because some of the people who have been involved in interacting with policy research, have an independent base in their own organisations around that research. This impacts

on their ability to absorb and to relate to the work done. The second point is around technicism and fragmentation. If you constantly put forward a growth path (ie a model of social and political vision) within a group of researchers and the organisation, there is a dynamic and a logic which counters the negative effects of fragmentation and technicism. If you don't, then the more powerful intellectual and organisational forces of capital and the state, with their own alternative growth paths, can easily colonise that organisation. Because if you fragment policy research and simply depend upon technical expertise, the state and capital have a much greater ideological and technical system within which you start to get absorbed.

ADRIENNE BIRD: As a person at a recent seminar said, 'If you don't know where you're going, you're likely to end up somewhere else.' Yes, of course, we've got to know where we're going and where those shorter term negotiations are leading us. Our commitment to that proposition can be seen through such initiatives as Economic Trends and Industrial Restructuring.

On Caroline White's point, I would say that the dilemma becomes greatest where the organisation is weakest. Organisations in plural communities need to build the confidence to have a confident relationship with researchers. Where an organisation is weak, it's going to look for direction from outside of itself. Building that organisation is probably not a priority for the researchers but the researcher has a role in insisting that the organisation gives definition to a research area, forcing the key issues back into the organisation, rather than substituting for that weakness.

The combination of participatory research and macro theory is going to be addressed by the 'four Fs'. The first is the need for foresight - we need to know where we're going. But in order to pull the ranks of the trade union movement with us we need a tangible focus. The times when we've reached most people on central policy questions is when we are fighting campaigns. Then there is the forum. There's nothing which concentrates the minds of membership like having a forum where issues are going to be debated. A forum helps to bring people on board, and to bring those big issues and membership participation together. The fourth is force. Many of these issues are not simply an exchange of ideas, they are conflicts of interests which can only ultimately be resolved by some show of force, of organisational strength.

MOSES NGOASHENG: As far as vision is concerned, the discussion document sets the tone for all the research that we do in the DEP. This says, 'We're looking for a new South Africa. Organise us a growth strategy which we call Growth through Redistribution.' Those are the central organising concepts. So if we look at the tax policy, we need to look at it within that framework. The issues of redistribution, the issues of growth have to be central to that policy and then it becomes easier to organise the research. But there's a problem because the DEP can't do that kind of work and we're not sure that the same kind of commitment and questions will be adhered to by the people that are commissioned to do the research. The ANC has a lot of interests within it. So there's a fight and a tension between the growth through redistribution kind of vision that has to inform their research, and the need to provide policy options and solutions which in fact can be tested in a technical sense as an

acceptable policy.

NICO CLOETE: We've got to get away from the fusion of the great researcher and the great teacher. If you look at types of knowledge - critical/analytical, technical and strategic - all of us have to emphasise one of those, although they're all related and they're all varied. You cannot have somebody in the DEP who's a great analytical thinker, who looks at putting together a proposal technically, and who tries to teach political issues. Enver Motlala makes the same confusion when he starts talking about intellectuals who are dealing with critical analytical knowledge, who must also now interpret, simplify, popularise that knowledge and get it into the people. It's a total impossibility. There have to be people who deal with the strategic implications of this knowledge, and other people who interpret that knowledge to rank and file. They are very different skills. We can't do the same thing.

DAVE COOPER: Let me recount an example of trying to get economic policy discussed in our ANC area. First you've got to get 80 branches to come to a weekend meeting and only 40 came. When the 40 send two delegates, they may be activists. Those activists themselves have difficulty understanding issues. Even if you popularise economic issues, it's actually really quite complex, because it's always linkages between supply and demand, unemployment, balance of payments, etc. They could understand unemployment, but the linkages were difficult. These were mainly matric people. Then they had to carry it back to their branches. Those branches didn't meet. Those zones weren't functioning. The central issue of the organisational capacity is absolutely critical.

Two things happened which I didn't expect. The one was that activists became extremely alienated from the ANC because they found themselves unable to think laterally economically. There was a powerlessness at the end of Sunday night where people thought, 'I can't actually deal with these debates.' The other problem with the discussions with the ANC in the Western Cape region, was that there was one discussion document, and people had no capacity to think of alternatives. There has to be more than one document for a discussion. The only way that rank and file branch people can appreciate a growth path, is through having an alternative model. In the end they were just saying, 'Yes, yes, yes'.

PAULUS ZULU: Where does the grass root start? From practical experience with communities in the townships and communities in the church, I always find the question of language very intriguing. Firstly, language can either facilitate access or inhibit access to information. By and large what we translate is definitely not the original. It's a version of the original. And our very process of translation puts us in a position of relative power to those we translate for. I maintain that there is a fundamental problem with the vernaculars in South Africa. Vernaculars have a problem with the conceptualisation of the world in which we live, and the processes that we are engaged in. Secondly there is an international movement towards more complex technologies, which puts the vernaculars in a position of relative powerlessness, which I don't think is going to be easily worked out.

HAROLD WOLPE: It seems to me that this whole notion of participation in the research process by the masses is a kind of conception of the renaissance person,

who's a worker in the morning, an intellectual in the afternoon, and something else in the evening. That applies to the masses, but not to the intellectuals and researchers. They are simply researchers, but we can upgrade the masses. Now, I'm not arguing that we should not derive, through consultation, the perceptions of the masses about the problems that they see require investigation. But I want to ask where the masses end? We ought to start considering the institutional arrangements that can be set up within, and between, organisations and intellectuals. And concentrate, as far as the masses are concerned, on the process of education and discussion which will raise their level, not as technical researchers, but people who become increasingly capable of understanding the technical terms which researchers are bound to use.

DAN SMIT: I really think we need to think about the creation of professional absorbers. The success of the Urban Foundation policy work resides precisely in the fact that most of the people who populate it are professional absorbers, professional managers of knowledge which comes in from somewhere else.

SIPHO PITYANA: I think that it's naive for us to pretend as though we're talking about the movement which has had a long culture of research. Researchers who are in the ANC are fighting for a position. There isn't a recognition of research and the role of research. To what extent is it a good idea to have a research formation, fully fledged, within the ANC? And to what extent does that take away the autonomy of research and research work?