

RESEARCH IN SERVICE ORGANISATIONS

Imraan Valodia

The trade union movement in South Africa is without doubt the most organised force for real transformation in the political and economic arena. The union movement has with time developed a capacity for directing and absorbing research.

Much of the research used within the trade union movement has been carried out by service organisations. The research being conducted in these service organisations is interesting for a number of reasons. In particular, this paper addresses the special, if at times ambiguous, relationship that has developed between unions and the service organisations and the type of research that service organisations are engaged in.

It should be pointed out right at the outset that this paper has been prepared in the spirit of this conference i.e. discussing research and transformation. In attempting to explore the relationships between service organisations and trade unions, some contentious issues cannot be avoided. This paper must, however, not be seen as an attempt to influence changes in this relationship through the use of this platform. While some aspects of the relationships between unions and service organisations do need rethinking, the many years of close contact have engendered a mutually respectful and open relationship. Service organisations and trade unions can and are discussing and debating aspects of their association.

This paper has been prepared by staff of the Trade Union Research Project, and draws to a large extent on the experiences of TURP, the work that TURP does and the problems that we face. Other service organisations may have different experiences and perhaps even a marginally different relationship with the union movement. We believe however, that the issues discussed in this paper are broadly applicable to all service organisations connected to the trade union movement.

The Work that Service Organisations Do

TURP works on request from the progressive trade union movement. Broadly, we service unions in the field of economics and collective bargaining. TURP's activities range from teaching unionists how to use calculators to conducting in-depth research on sectors of the economy. Our work covers the following areas:

- The preparation of company reports setting out profitability, ability to pay and the financial structure of particular companies. These reports are used in collective bargaining.
- The preparation of sectoral reports investigating the state of particular sectors of the economy. These are also used for collective bargaining purposes.
- The designing and running of education programmes which are relevant to the trade union movement. In this regard, we have run seminars and education

programmes on the economy, VAT, productivity, UIF, job grading and basic numeracy amongst others.

- The production and publishing of books and pamphlets on contemporary issues facing workers. TURP has published inter alia books and pamphlets on the conglomeration of the economy, unemployment insurance, deregulation, pension fund investment, income tax and medical schemes. These are used mainly as educational materials.
- The preparation of accessible materials aimed at equipping union rank and file to participate actively in policy formulation. To this end, TURP acts as a link between academic researchers and unions. This area of TURP's activities is aimed at 'translating' academic research thus making it accessible to large sections of the trade union movement.
- The conducting of in-depth research on request from unions. TURP has done research on issues like casualisation, sub-contracting, the effect that decentralisation has had on employment levels, investment levels in the metal and allied industries, international experiences in job creation and a host of other questions facing the trade union movement.

The Relationship to the Union Movement

As has been mentioned earlier, the special relationship that service organisations have with the trade union movement raises interesting research questions.

The problems of accountability have dominated discussions among service organisations themselves and between service organisations and the trade union movement. Service organisations have set up a range of controlling and managing structures that have no formal connection to the trade union movement. At the same time, however, service organisations are able to influence, and in some cases have influenced, union policies. This ambiguity has led to a number of problems and tensions in the relationship between service organisations and the union movement.

Service organisations could only be truly accountable if they (service organisations) were to be absorbed into the trade union movement. This would allow unions to regulate and supervise the activities of service organisations.

In the absence of this formal accountability an ambiguous relationship between unions and service organisations has developed. This ambiguity has led to a host of difficulties and tensions. Most important among these are:

- *Who do we do research for?* - Are service organisations to conduct research for all disadvantaged communities, working class organisations only, or certain working class organisations only, and on what basis can we make these decisions?

While these might seem to be trivial matters, some of our practical experiences might highlight the difficulties that service organisations face in this regard.

On a number of occasions, TURP has been pressurised to work exclusively for an affiliate of one of the large union federations, or for one faction of a union that has split. In fact, on one occasion two affiliates of the same federation demanded exclusive access to TURP research as they were competing for membership in one factory. These can become extremely contentious and difficult issues to deal with when no formal structures of accountability exist.

• *Who in the union movement do we relate to?* Having no formal accountability to any union structures has forced service organisations to relate to particular individuals in the unions. Unions consist of a variety of personalities, needs and levels of expertise. The union movement in South Africa ranges from fairly well resourced unions with a developed capacity to absorb research, to emerging unions still attempting to consolidate membership in their industry. Attempting to relate to this diverse grouping, and attempting to service the research needs of such a wide ranging audience is an extremely difficult task. This task is made easier when research is directed at federation level where a more co-ordinated approach to research is possible.

The union movement is not an homogenous group. Different unions and at times different persons in one union may have opposing needs. Attempting to match the needs of a varied group with limited resources and no formal accountability arrangements is no mean feat.

Having no structured relationship with unions leads to the unions not co-ordinating their research needs. We have had individuals from one union requesting research that has already been commissioned and completed for the same union. In addition, unions have on occasion commissioned more than one service organisation to conduct the same piece of research. This leads to duplication between service organisations. Unions and service organisations will have to develop a systematic approach to commissioning research to overcome this.

• *What do we research?* Without any formal accountability to our constituency, the question of what research we conduct is particularly difficult. Do service organisations decide on a research agenda based on qualifications of its staff, their interests or academic ambitions, or can the research carried out in service organisations be matched with the needs of unions?

Informal Accountability

To overcome the difficulties mentioned above, service organisations have had to develop informal accountability to the union movement in order to regulate their activities. This has been achieved in a number of ways. Some service organisations have for example drawn trade unionists onto their controlling structures. Others have asked unions to affiliate to their organisations.

While these measures have engendered some vague form of accountability, service organisations still do not have any formal or constitutional relationship with unions as organisations. The difficulties of what to research, who the recipients of research are and so on still confront service organisations.

In particular, some service organisations have attempted to conduct policy oriented research aimed at 'pushing' unions to address and confront issues which the particular service organisation might honestly believe to be correct. While this might be acceptable to some unions, having no formal structures of accountability makes this form of policy intervention open to abuse by service organisations and persons with 'hidden political agendas'. Most unions have been able to stem this development. Nevertheless, this is an area that is still open to abuse.

'Demand Driven' Research

In order to ensure that unions direct our research, TURP has a policy of conducting research specifically at the request of the progressive trade union movement. While this does not solve the problems of accountability, it does ensure that the research conducted by TURP is relevant to the needs of the organisations that we claim to be working for. This decision does however, raise a number of other difficult issues.

The decision to work on request has resulted in service organisation being 'demand driven'. We are thus constantly reacting to unions' needs rather than anticipating and preparing for these needs. While this does ensure some form of accountability, it seriously impedes the nature and content of research in service organisations. Being viewed as the 'researchers of the union movement' creates pressure from within some unions to present solutions and conduct proactive research.

The nature of research in service organisations is such that units or personnel are unable to develop to any level of genuine specialisation. Responding to at most times short-term needs restricts the capacity to develop expertise in any one or selected number of areas. In TURP for example, we have conducted research in pensions, subcontracted labour and deregulation. Being located in service organisations has, however, restricted our ability to develop further expertise in any of these areas.

Being demand driven also has implications for the pace at which research is done. We have developed the reputation of 'not saying no' and accommodating our clients. Thus, research in TURP is carried out at a pace that would astonish most academics. This does however impact on the nature, expertise and at times depth of the research.

Of course, being demand driven has also been of immense benefit to TURP and the union movement. Notwithstanding the problems alluded to, this mode of conducting research has ensured that the research is relevant to the unions' needs. It has also ensured that TURP has kept abreast with developments in the union movement. Being demand driven has also allowed TURP to develop an extremely close working relationship with the trade union movement, and ensured that TURP has not been used to negatively influence union policy.

The Research Carried Out in Service Organisations

We identified the research that is carried out in service organisations as the second major point to be addressed in this paper.

The research that TURP conducts is tied to union needs because we only conduct commissioned research. Of particular interest is the level at which research conducted by TURP is pitched.

In general, TURP's research reports are aimed at union shop-stewards and organisers. This has meant that our reports are pitched at a level that is accessible to the target groups. The union movement is, however, not an homogenous group. Thus, we have had to develop the ability to pitch research reports at a range of different levels. Further, operating within a university environment has pressurised us to conduct research and make research findings available to a university community. This tension is one which we find difficult to overcome.

Being demand driven has also had far reaching implications on the research

conducted in TURP. This process has led to TURP addressing all research on a short term basis without having the space to develop specialisation. In addition, we have been unable to satisfactorily make our research findings available to other academic researchers who we interact with daily. This is one area which service organisations need to develop.

Being dependent on a unionist requesting research has led to the research that service organisations undertake being of an extremely micro nature tied to a unionist's immediate and personal needs. This has surely impeded the generation of valuable research at a macro level.

In addition to the above, being demand driven has meant that TURP is unable to follow up and delve deeper into important areas of research that arise out of research that we have conducted unless unions commission further research. Since the research commissioned in the first place is tied closely to an immediate need, unions rarely follow up relevant research questions that stem from research that they have commissioned.

The ambiguous relations between unions and service organisations have made it difficult for service organisations to question the relevance of research requested by unions. As has been pointed out earlier, unions are not an homogenous group, and have different capacities to absorb research. However, because service organisations are located outside formal union structures, we are unable to question the need of and relevance of research sometimes commissioned by unions, even though we may suspect that the research will not be used.

Conclusion

The research experiences of service organisations like TURP raise a number of interesting issues in the context of research and transformation - in particular, the importance of conducting research that is accessible and making academic research accessible to a large section of mass organisations. The research and servicing function of organisations like TURP has allowed workers and other non-specialists to participate in and influence research and the policy discussions that follow. In addition, the close relationship between service organisations and unions has ensured that research conducted within service organisations is relevant and tied to the needs of mass organisation.

The experience of service organisations also raises questions about accountability and the difficulties of attempting to address accountability.

The problems related to service organisations responding to immediate and short term research needs have been discussed. This together with the problems of accountability discussed above makes it extremely difficult for service organisations to have a long term vision of their work.

Events in the political and collective bargaining arena have shifted unions' focus into areas of development and restructuring of industry. Unions' research needs in this context have changed. The unions now need sophisticated and in-depth research which can and sometimes cannot be provided by service organisations. The role of service organisations in this context needs to be examined.

The long-term role of service organisations, particularly in the context of research for transformation, has not been addressed by service organisations themselves, by the union movement or by other researchers. In TURP for example, we do not have a vision of our role beyond the very immediate needs of the trade union movement. The future role of service organisations needs to be urgently addressed.