

# Intellectual input into trade unions – 1994

*DEANNE COLLINS speaks to  
JEREMY BASKIN, Director of NALEDI.*

**T**he National Labour and Economic Development Institute (NALEDI), the research institute sponsored by COSATU, opened its doors in January this year.

The establishment of NALEDI is the culmination of a process started as far back as 1991, when the COSATU Congress identified the need to increase the Federation's research and policy development capacity.

## Services Offered:

The NALEDI team of researchers offers COSATU and its affiliates six basic services:

- ❑ Research reports. These are in-depth reports on particular issues. For example, the Institute has just completed a comprehensive report on centralised bargaining.
- ❑ Policy memos, which are short policy reports, written from a labour perspective, which advise leadership on key issues of the day. An example here is the recent memo on the IMF loan.
- ❑ Workshops, where unionists and experts in a particular field are

brought together. A workshop on social security was held recently.

- ❑ Face-to-face briefings on particular topics.
- ❑ A fortnightly discussion forum where unionists give input on a particular topic and there is opportunity for discussion and debate. Subjects which have been covered include the role of the "COSATU MP's", Worker Control and the tasks of COSATU under a democratic government.
- ❑ Library Reports. NALEDI has set up a resource centre where a variety of publications are kept. The Resource Centre is also linked into local and international databases. Monthly reports on acquisitions are sent to the General Secretaries of all affiliates.

## Current Projects

Currently, NALEDI is working in four major areas. These are :

- ❑ A project on trade and industry. The function of this project is to support the Federations's Trade and Industry Working Group. In the longer term, NALEDI will be looking at the future of industry, covering such topics as industrial restructuring.
- ❑ Economic Policy. This project provides support to the macro-economic working group of the NEF, as well as advising on broader economic issues such as fiscal and investment policy, minimum wages etc.
- ❑ Labour Relations, linking into the COSATU team at the NMC.
- ❑ A project on public sector labour relations in co-operation with the public sector unions.

## Demand-Driven:

NALEDI's research programme is demand-driven, with requests being received either via COSATU Head Office or the Head Offices of the affiliates. While policy on this issue is not yet firm, the institute is not in principle opposed to



NALEDI research and resource centre staff

making its expertise available to government or to business.

### Funding

NALEDI was initially funded by a grant raised by COSATU from Dutch and Scandinavian funders. The application was for funding for three years, but it appears that funding for the second and

third years is not guaranteed.

It is clear that the Institute will also need to look elsewhere for funding. Attempts are being made to generate money internally, with users being charged for

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NALEDI's services. At the moment, charges to the Unions are open to negotiation, because, as Baskin points out, the Unions themselves face financial constraints. Should business and government use the institute, they will also be expected to pay.

NALEDI recently made application to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC – a quasi state research body) for funding. Baskin says that “the state has a duty to assist the labour movement, as a key player, to enhance its research capacity”.

### Accountability and Building Capacity

Where NALEDI undertakes research for an affiliate, it sets up a “reference group” within the affiliate which will be involved in the project. This has the dual function of providing for accountability as well as

building capacity for research within the union. These structures would only be set up for longer term projects.

### Relative Autonomy

NALEDI is registered as a “non-profit making” company. While it is “owned” by COSATU, it operates at arm's length under the guidance of a 15 person Board. All decisions are made by the Board, which has on it people from COSATU and the affiliates, as well as people from the broader research community.

Baskin points out that the function of NALEDI is not simply to “go out and prove COSATU policy...we're allowed to say what we want to say”. There have

been occasions where a NALEDI researcher has been told to change a report to reflect the official “line”. Baskin says that they will not do this : “They (COSATU and the affiliates) are free to accept our advice or not”.

### Relationship to other research bodies

During the last decade a number of organisations have emerged to service the labour movement. In addition to these “service organisations”, as they are known, there are various progressive individuals and groupings based at universities which link into COSATU.

Baskin says that there is no intention for NALEDI to replace these groupings. Instead, he sees NALEDI serving as an “interface between the labour movement and the wider research community”. NALEDI will commission work from outside groups and individuals where appropriate.

### The Role of Intellectuals

One of the criticisms that has been levelled at the research community is that it has often either neglected the needs of the labour movement, or, when it has engaged, has produced work which is not informed by the needs of the union movement and is inaccessible to the large majority of union members.

Baskin notes that because of NALEDI's close relationship with COSATU, it does not have to prove its bona fides in the same way as other groupings do, and he does not see these difficulties arising. He notes that “our battle is for our autonomy rather than for our accountability”. ☆



Jeremy Baskin, NALEDI director