

Labour force experiences

The Mesebetsi Labour Force Survey is a joint project between the Department of Labour and the Institute for Applied Social Science: Fafo. It is funded by the Norwegian Agency for Development Co-operation (NORAD).

Mesebetsi is one of the most comprehensive surveys to be conducted in the history of labour relations in South Africa. It represents a groundbreaking event and a unique opportunity to gather information about the factors that influence people's access to the labour market and conditions within that market.

The project got under way in June this year. At the moment, the various stakeholders are being informed about the project and their participation or contributions are being solicited. A reference group, which includes labour market researchers and experts, will be involved in the conceptualisation and design phases of the project.

Battlefield

Labour market policy is contested terrain in South Africa. It exists in an environment of low economic growth, high unemployment, lack of job creation, huge income and wealth disparities and a growing informal sector. There are major disagreements on labour market 'flexibility' and 'rigidity' and strategies for job creation and redistribution. Negotiations on the Labour Relations and

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the Basic Conditions of Employment Acts broke down on a number of occasions.

Political debates about future labour market restructuring are sometimes based on different interpretations of the available data or a lack of legitimacy of the information that exists. There is also a major lack of well-researched information about the actual conditions under which people live and work and the conditions that determine productivity, growth and distribution.

While much emphasis is placed on the need for a skilled workforce to develop a globally competitive economy, very little is known about the *actual* skills base of workers and the unemployed. In critical areas for job creation and labour market restructuring, such as training, we have little information. In areas such as organisation of work, decision-making at work, etc, we have even less knowledge.

The challenge to researchers, statisticians, politicians and unionists is to fill the large, unexplored territories in our knowledge of the labour market and to develop reliable information. The Mesebetsi Survey hopes to go some way towards meeting these objectives.

Information

Around the world, labour force surveys are conducted in order to inform labour market policy formulation and evaluation. The Mesebetsi Survey aims to provide new information where little or none exists, as well as complementing existing information necessary to policy-making and evaluation in key areas for the Department of Labour.

We need to gather more information about employment, unemployment and underemployment. We also need to know more about the cash and non-cash benefits received by the labour force and the distribution thereof. We need to know how the unemployed manage to survive, and the financial responsibilities of those in employment.

The survey also seeks to provide information on issues such as conditions of employment, affirmative action programmes and discrimination, health and safety, training, organisation of work, decision-making at work, industrial relations issues, etc. This refers especially to issues addressed in the LRA, the BCEA, the Employment Equity Bill and other recent labour legislation. Finally, the survey will test the perceptions and priorities of the economically active population in areas of job creation, industrial relations and conditions of employment.

Approximately 10 000 interviews will be conducted to investigate the working and living conditions of the labour force, as people themselves perceive them. The economically active population in the formal sector, the informal sector, the self-employed as well as unemployed will be targeted. This will provide more in-depth information on each of these sectors, as well as providing greater comparative value across sectors. The survey is a once-off study, and should not duplicate or seek to take over areas that are already covered

by the Central Statistical Services and other agencies.

In the past few years, there have been many new pieces of labour legislation. It is time to start monitoring the effects of these laws. Whilst it is not the task of Mesebetsi to achieve such an ambitious goal, it can at least give some momentum to such a monitoring process.

A statistical report will be made available early in 1999. This will be followed by a more in-depth, analytical report. The full database will be made available to the public for further scrutiny and analysis.

In the longer term, Mesebetsi can make a contribution on a number of levels:

- ☐ It can contribute to the development of suitable concepts, definitions and survey designs which can adequately measure employment and other labour market concepts.
- ☐ It can provide information to labour, government and business about the nature and extent of unemployment, labour market barriers, work restructuring etc. This can be used for policy formulation and evaluation in areas such as human resource development, income and employment policy and other social programmes aimed at redressing inequities in the labour market as well as for macro-economic planning and monitoring.
- ☐ It will contribute to building legitimacy for research as an instrument for policy-making.
- ☐ It can develop more agreement about the measurement and estimates we use for the labour market, and hence contribute to broader agreement about policies to deal with problems. ★

If you have any contributions or information please contact the project co-ordinator, Lluís Torres, on tel (012) 309-4475. The authors are the members of the Mesebetsi research team.