

Researching alternatives

public service delivery

The public sector in South Africa is under-researched. This is common all over the world. Until the Municipal Services Project (MSP) researched the water privatisation in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the World Bank had done the only other research. The recent Southern Africa Anti-privatisation Forum held in Zimbabwe also revealed that the World Bank sponsors nearly all privatisation research in Africa.

This article looks at two cases where workers are doing research on privatisation and coming up with their own findings.

SAMWU's research

As part of a new project, SAMWU will research how best to restructure a municipal workplace, keeping privatisation out of the picture.

This research will check whether and ensure that municipalities adhere to the new Municipal Systems Act. The Act stipulates that municipalities first assess and reorganise internal delivery systems before resorting to privatisation. Thus, municipalities must make internal restructuring their first option.

The project

The project, of which the research is one part, started at the end of July 2001 and will run until November 2002. It will start with pilot projects in three workplaces.

by Anna Weekes

These workplaces come from different geographical areas as well as a range of categories of municipalities and services. A reference group, consisting of researchers, workers, the employer body – the South African Local Government Association – and the Department of Provincial and Local Government, will be formed.

This project is in line with SAMWU's position to complement its opposition to privatisation with strategies to improve municipal delivery. The project is part of the MSP.

The research

The research should come up with concrete findings on:

- ☐ the relationship between workers and management; -
- ☐ the role of the union in service delivery;
- ☐ how workers participate in decision-making;
- ☐ how work is organised; and
- ☐ what machines and equipment are available.

SAMWU will publish the results in three reports, as well as in shortened popular versions in different languages.

The research findings will:

- ☐ allow the union to draw up a profile of



SAMWU will research the relationship between workers and management.

- workers' skills and experience;
- ☐ show the issues which workers believe hamper effective service delivery;
- ☐ help design guidelines for municipalities to use existing resources better;
- ☐ build the general confidence of workers and local government officials in the public sector to deliver services effectively; and
- ☐ improve ways to involve workers in internal restructuring, as workers are an untapped source of knowledge, skills and experience.

Research in Zambia

Research on privatisation has also been done in Zambia. The Workers Christian Movement of Zambia studied the contribution of economic structural

reform policies to the decline in living standards. The research specifically looked at workers employed by two privatised state-owned enterprises.

The research found that the government's privatisation policy 'left people open to exploitation by multinational corporations'. The policy, instead of contributing to economic growth, hampered production at the two enterprises. The policy also did not help existing state enterprises survive.

The government introduced the privatisation policy in Zambia under a structural adjustment programme in 1992. The research found that the number of people living under extreme poverty had increased from 50% in 1990 to 80% today. The research concludes that privatisation cannot improve the standard of living of most Zambians who live in poverty and have no hope of employment.

Using research

The conclusion from Zambia is nothing new to us in the labour movement. It is saying that structural adjustment programmes like Gear do not work for workers. But it helps that there is proof of the suffering and increased poverty of the workers under privatisation in Zambia. It gives the other side less ammunition in its bid to privatise.

Research on its own cannot distract government from its pursuit of privatisation. SAMWU realises that even successful pilot projects will not mean that local governments abandon privatisation and choose internal restructuring. But a successful project will boost the union's capacity to keep up the fight against privatisation and show that public sector delivery is the way to go. ★

Anna Weekes is SAMWU's media officer.