

FROM THE MINE SHAFT, FROM THE SHOP AND FACTORY FLOOR*:

African Shop Steward Networks
- Building on our Achievements

Labour Research Service
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**FRIEDRICH
EBERT
STIFTUNG**

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African Shop Steward Networks - Building on our achievements

**“Shop stewards must always be made aware that they are important because they are the link to the shop floor, no one else. Not the general secretary, not the officials. This is shop floor networking. We are trying to change the way that unions and affiliates are built, from the mine shaft, from the shop and factory floor.”*

- *Global Union representative interviewed on the importance of shop steward networks 2014*

By Labour Research Service,

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FES South Africa Office
34, Bompas Road
Dunkeld West
Johannesburg
Phone: +27-11 341 0270
Fax: +27-11 341 0271
E-Mail: info@fes-southafrica.org
<http://www.fes-southafrica.org>

In collaboration with

Labour Research Service
7 Community House
41 Salt River
Salt River 7925
Cape Town, South Africa
Phone: +27 21 486 1100
Fax: +27 21 447 9244
E-mail: lrs@lrs.org.za
<http://www.lrs.org.za>

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FOREWORD – FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG

The FES Trade Union Competence Centre (TUCC) for Sub Sahara Africa based in Johannesburg has been supporting a number of trade union networks established by the Global Union Federations (GUFs) UNI and IndustriALL around South African multinational corporations. Trade union networks or alliances consisting of shop stewards and union officials have been formed - with FES support - by African trade unions organising within the operations of companies like Shoprite, Pick n' Pay, AngloGold Ashanti (AGA) and Massmart/Walmart. Beyond this TUCC is also supporting a regional sector union network formed by energy sector trade unions affiliated to IndustriAll in Southern Africa. Despite the fact that the trade union networks have proven useful in a number of areas like monitoring the implementation of International Framework Agreements (IFAs) signed by the Global Union and the companies, participating in social dialogue meetings, engaging in collective bargaining to improve wages and working conditions, and promoting cross border solidarity among workers, it was also observed that there is obviously space for improvement with regard to the functioning of the networks in areas like communication, interventions, organizing, strategizing, campaigning etc.

To get a clearer picture of the existing networks like how do they work, what are they working for, what have they achieved, what challenges are they facing we thought it fit to review the work of the alliances as they have already been in existence for several years and to show ways what could be improved to make them more efficient.

The publication in hand is a summary of the major findings of the comprehensive report of the review study which is published on our website www.fes-southafrica.org under TU Competence Centre/publications. My thanks particularly go to Michelle Taal of Labour Research Service (LRS) in Cape Town who did the review, wrote the report and the summary.

The FES is a German political Foundation committed to the values of social democracy and has deep roots in the German Labour movement. The foundation bears the name of the first democratically elected President of Germany, Friedrich Ebert, and seeks to preserve his political legacy: the promotion of freedom, solidarity and social justice through its programmes of political education, international cooperation, scholarships and research in Germany and abroad.

Gerd Botterweck

Director FES TUCC, Johannesburg, May 2015

INTRODUCTION

The networks evaluate themselves.

In 2007 the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) began supporting the Global Unions in forming African Shop Steward Networks in South African Multinational Corporations operating in Africa. Networks are a way of bringing together workers across the operations of a company to share experiences and fight for better working conditions across the company. The 2007 project and the processes that have followed have brought together the global unions and their affiliates, the funder foundation (FES) and the labour support organisation, Labour Research Service (LRS) in a way that hadn't been tried before in Africa.

Through the FES, the LRS has been supporting the work of the global unions in five regional shop steward networks: **Shoprite Checkers (UNI Global Union)**, **Pick n Pay (UNI Global Union)**, **AngloGold Ashanti (IndustriALL Global Union)**, and **Massmart/Walmart (UNI Global Union)**. A further network - the **Southern African Energy Network (SAEN) (IndustriALL Global Union)** which includes SADC country unions organising in the major power utilities in the region, is also being supported in its revamp.

In 2014 we agreed that it was time for the networks to have a look at how we are doing, to celebrate our successes, to look at what challenges we face and how we can move forward as well as demonstrating the value of the networks to Global Unions and affiliates. This will be useful both to the networks involved and too new networks that may form. It was clear from the start that the best way to do this would be to pull together the insights of the people in the networks themselves.

The Labour Research Service was asked to do the research and interviewed the network representatives and support organisations in networks. 35 interviews were done with shop stewards and officials in the networks, the funder and the global unions as well as other NOBs in the home unions. The report here does not separate out the networks but brings together findings from across the networks.

The networks described are family, but they are not the same. Companies and sectors differ in their style, attitudes, financial position, management, scope and individual pressures. Within the networks each union faces its own challenges in the company, the country and the union structures themselves. At the same time, despite these differences, there are important similarities that draw the networks into a family of national unions dealing with international corporations and the need to recruit workers, organise them, to bargain for their conditions and to pressurise the companies to improve, to seek solidarity and to educate, to mobilise.

The networks share some common challenges and successes such as how to encourage greater communication between workers across the continent and how to best share information on the company and working conditions.

The aim of this report is to help the process of self-evaluation in order to strengthen the networks in their work. Like that work, this is not a project but, hopefully, the beginning of an ongoing process.

THE NETWORKS

*We must match trade union organisation
with the operations of corporations if unions are to be relevant and powerful.*

When companies were local, trade unions organised locally. When companies became national, trade unions organised nationally. Now that companies are trans-national, trade unions must organise trans-nationally as well.

WHY AND HOW

When the Shoprite network was started in 2007 the following aims were agreed by members:

- To improve labour standards of all employees
- To strengthen the unions in the company and beyond that in the whole sector
- To introduce new workers' tools like International Framework Agreements and /or cross border works councils as new instruments of international labour solidarity in times of globalization.

To do this it was agreed that it was important that networks be a space for sharing facts, insights and experiences. They were also spaces for research into the company and into the unions themselves so that affiliates would have a better understanding of the corporate strategy to help their:

- organising strategies, to recruit members and build a union presence,
- collective bargaining strategies to improve employment policies and practices
- cross-border relations with each other; develop cross-border union strategies together with shop stewards in other countries
- strategy for negotiations that include the above as well as a Global Framework Agreement

Annual meetings hosted by the Global Union and usually chaired by the home union, South Africa, include discussions on the current situations in each of the host countries, updates on union density and activities since the previous years and focus areas for the next years. They also include research on the companies that covers published information by the company in the Annual Report and in press releases. The aim of this has been to discuss the company in its own terms using its own statements and to see how the network can engage with this information.

WHO

The networks are worker-controlled shop steward networks. But there are other groups involved too, from global unions at a global level, to support organisations locally, each with their own ideas, visions and reasons for being involved. We try to keep this in mind as we think about the networks.



MASSMART ALLIANCE - JOHANNESBURG 2011

WHAT HAVE THE NETWORKS ACHIEVED?

There is no structured evaluation of the networks by the Global Unions, no standard tick-off sheet to decide if the networks are doing well. Because each network faces its own challenges, the effectiveness and achievements of each can only be assessed by the networks themselves in the face of those challenges.

Thinking about the network and its success is then the responsibility of each affiliate and of the network as a whole - when we feel the network is working, then this is more or less the case, when we are frustrated and ready to do more, then this is also the case.

CONCRETE ACHIEVEMENTS:

Global Framework Agreement signed by Shoprite Checkers 2010: Through network and UNI Global Union campaigning, and by each union in the network demanding it be signed, this goal was achieved. Through and because of this, channels have been opened where national unions can use UNI Global Union to raise issues with the head office management directly and national shop steward councils are being set up across the

network affiliates. Through the social dialogue mechanism with the company, management has agreed to go on road shows with UNI Global Union to address workers in operations across Africa, an idea unthinkable only a few years ago. This social dialogue mechanism itself is an incredible achievement. The processes that this network followed are now being implemented across other networks.

Supporting national unions: The networks have enabled acts of solidarity between the home union and host unions via the Global Union. In AngloGold Ashanti the union in Tanzania has finally been recognised through the united actions of the global union, the home union and its own campaigns. In the Shoprite Network a dispute in Zambia was resolved through the direct actions of the network and the access that the global union now has to company management and vice versa.

For the home union, these successes also represent important organisational growth and strengthening by being able to intervene in other countries where there are some organizational challenges and being able to assist where there are disputes. The home union also provides an open channel of communication for network unions, a direct link for comrades to ask questions and get support from the union that knows the company better.

“The comrade from Lesotho is having constantly communication with SACCAWU Free State region on several issues and the comrade from Swaziland too. We have been in contact with Mozambique during their wage negotiations in October 2014 in advising on how to deal with non-permanent increases.”

Through social dialogue the global union, as the company contact for the network, is becoming a key resource for the industrial relations system at the company and deepening its recognition by the company. This is a significant achievement.

Network participants from the networks have been identified as spokespeople and have been interviewed on national radio and television shows in South Africa to discuss the workers’ perspective on Multinational Corporations in Africa.

Information resources created: The creation of the database of company information and reporting tools that make company numbers more understandable to everyone is another success brought about by the networks and the collaboration between the Global Unions, the funder and the LSO.

While solidarity requires action on the part of the unions and union members, networks recognised that it is important that information and analysis on both the unions and the company is provided to inform this. Early company research helped the unions to establish the shop steward alliance with a clear understanding of the challenges faced by them. The database was then established to hold union and company information to help make good strategies to organise, bargain and build cross border solidarity.

The result of this thinking is a central resource from which all the affiliates can draw and to which they can contribute. The South African Multinational Company Database is online with up to date information on companies operating from South Africa.

<http://www.lrs.org.za/mnc>



The database has limitations - the contributions of the affiliates are not always forthcoming, there is limited internet access for some affiliates to access the information and not always the level of numeracy required to understand it - but as with everything new, it is part of a process.

Achievements are not always concrete, but in the key areas of organising they are just as important.

Comrades were clear that the most important achievement of the networks was how it strengthens them day to day in their job as shop stewards, changing how they think about their role, their strength and their mission as activists:

"It teaches us how to get joiners, the goodness of the union, how to organise ourselves as shop stewards, how to talk to management and make them listen."

"We understand ourselves and our rights now and how to demand our rights; management is aware that they will be questioned and challenged on issues."

"We show information to members; members and workers ask for more, they want to know more".

"Our 2013 HIV policy was developed through network workshops."

"It helped with recruitment of staff to the union because can show they have information on profit and earnings and the CEO pay at general meetings."

"Because of the network, on a personal level I have changed, it has made me change the way I work and I want to do my own research and become a leader".

"Now we have meetings every second week of the month at company level and have ideas on what to bring forward to UNI and what to bring to the mother body - when problems are too big for the mother body we know to take them to UNI."

"It has taken recruitment into other shops and companies. At the meetings organisers use the information and experience from Shoprite to recruit."

“Shop stewards have a different approach to management now and a new approach to workers. Before they addressed workers on broad issues now more on union related issues.”

“The GFA helps to make staff and union more confident to talk and get on better with management; they get proper meeting times because of the GFA.”

The process of the networks, that they exist at all, is itself a success because networks expose methods of organisation building and running a vibrant organisation to all affiliates. The results are always uneven, but the changes are visible.

We must build on these achievements. All achievements are only building blocks to move on to the next level of organisation, opening a door for further achievements. There can be no end, no “successful” network until worker rights are achieved and companies have changed. Until then everything is in process.

For every achievement we can ask - what does this mean for industrial relations in the company across operations, do we understand what has allowed for this breakthrough and can we bring it to other situations?

WHAT CHALLENGES DO THE NETWORKS FACE?

FROM INSIDE AND OUT

From **outside of the network** management, particularly local management was identified as a threat to the ability of the unions and therefore the networks to carry out their work.

Shop stewards are being lured away or victimised. From every network there are examples of shop stewards being promoted out of the bargaining unit if not the union itself. Every time this happens it is a step back for both the union and the network for the investment in training, education and experience of the lost shop stewards.

At the same time they are threatened or fired from their jobs in order to undermine both the union and the networks. Where shop stewards are openly intimidated and even lose their jobs it is difficult to recruit and organise workers because new workers ask: if the union cannot protect its own shop stewards, how can it protect its members? More subtly management delay or deny shop stewards leave to come to meetings so that it becomes too late to make the logistical arrangements or they must, and often do, use their own annual leave to come to the meetings and do union business.

Local management has the ability to frustrate challenges and engagements by referring unions to head office, by claiming ignorance, by finding ways to work around the policies of the company to undermine the network. All of these are issues that the unions have to confront. To do this they need to know the company and share information.

We must always remember that the company is not a passive recipient of the network engagement but an active opposition to it.

The **company** then also has a role in the network. If we are not active in engaging with it as unions and networks, it will not bother to engage with us. If we do not engage they will roll back gains and make strategic decisions we will learn about through the newspapers. Where they see we are weak and unorganised they will take advantage of this to try and eradicate unions altogether.

“Companies don’t respect us because they like us; they respect us because we are strong”.

Governments in a bid to encourage, in the worst possible “race to the bottom” manner, increased foreign direct investment, can also undermine the work of the union as they support management in the oppression of workers, weakening labour laws and making it more difficult to organise

Variations in **labour laws across the countries of the network make** it difficult sometimes for local unions to enact the common resolutions of the network. Network members ask for better training on the labour laws and how to work with them.

Financial constraints and lack of resources within the network is a clear problem highlighted both in the interviews and the meetings. There is a clear dependency on the funder which is neither good for creating independent, creative unions nor for encouraging unions to work things out themselves. This seems to be a constant concern at Global Union level where there is the need to find more creative ways of sourcing and using funds.

From **inside the network** members acknowledge problems.

“People do not do what they say they will do” is a common complaint levelled at both other participants and the secretariat; “We are letting down the network and the sponsors” when we do not complete reports, communicate, carry out activities to strengthen the union and the network.

The turnover of network meeting delegates is also a challenge, as new representatives do not always know what is going on. In one meeting of a long established network half the shop stewards were participating for the first time. This is either because the previous delegate lost their job or got promoted out of position, or it was decided by the union to rotate the representation of the delegates so everyone could get a chance to attend. The problems with this are many. The new delegates cannot be held responsible for what has gone before, have little to no knowledge of the network and its processes, and often still have to find their bearings in speaking out in front of the union officials.

In many cases, problems people raise are about the union rather than the network itself. The network aim is to build union organisation so these are exactly the kinds of issues that do require our focus and attention. For many participants the problems of the

network and the problems of the union are seen as one, if the unions are having problems then so is the network.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

Communication and information are the life of the network and go together. We need to KNOW where affiliated unions are and have access to the contact details of key members within that union so that we can communicate. Through communication of information and experiences, strategies and challenges, networks can be built where members can support each other in their campaigns and organising engagements. Through sharing information on the company, their strategies and tactics, unions in networks can learn how to engage with the company on its own terms. All this is an ongoing process of communicating information which members recognise as so important to their work.

Despite this, the twin issues of information and communication have long been difficult challenges for the networks.

Why don't people do what they say they will when it comes to getting and sharing information? Why do so few unions and individuals have contact with each other outside of the meetings in an informal, spontaneous way? Why do they not communicate their issues with the network as they face challenges they cannot cope with on their own?

The problem is that issues that union members and workers are experiencing at their work places are being stored up for a whole year and only discussed annually at the meeting when they could perhaps be more easily engaged with as they happen.

In interviews, comrades talked about the reasons:

People often don't have the information being asked for and so there is nothing to say. But it is hard to say that you don't have the information because it makes you and your union look weak.

Emails don't always get to the right people. Often the person who could and would do the work never find out about it because they are not in the information loop. A lack of internal communication is a clear problem in unions where participants often state "I didn't know". The issue the network needs to address is when the shop stewards, the network representatives, are quiet because they are not in the communication loop. As a structure within the union, official communications between the global union and the national union must go through the union organisation, through the general secretary. This communication does not always reach the shop steward.

This challenge has led to some confusion among participants that while they are being encouraged to communicate with each other and with the global union, there is also the protocol that must be observed of communications going through the official channels of the union. Some clarity on communication seems to be needed and repeated.

“We would like communication with the other participants throughout the year, this would signify success.”

Sometimes members, especially new network members do not have a sense of why collecting and supplying the information is important, and so it takes a back seat. **The network process is new way of working** for many of the delegates and for the unions they represent, requiring more of them, asking them to, in their everyday work, think regionally and internationally as well as nationally and locally. It cannot be rushed but has to come as a result of achievements that reflect back the value of cross-border communications, using information, and solidarity. Thinking regionally, working regionally while within your national context is a move all the unions need to make as we face more and more regional and global companies. This will only come about with education and practice.

“Looking at the Annual Report didn’t even cross my mind; this is a new way of working for me.”

NATIONAL UNIONS

National unions in shop steward networks have their own national priorities, processes, politics and problems that affect members participation in the network. These are important but can also be a challenge to the network processes. As networks we need to talk about them so that we can work with and not against them.

For example, the global union stresses sending the same representatives to the annual meetings. This consistency allows for increasing skill and knowledge to be accumulated and easier dialogue. But national unions have different policies, often preferring to circulate the representation so that everyone gets a chance. As networks we need to find a way to ensure that information is handed around to all shop stewards so that new representatives are up to speed when they arrive, rather than working against national policy.

In the network meeting the shop steward is someone different from in the national union structures where they may be seen as second tier activists rather than the key to any success. Shop stewards are unwilling to say they cannot do something in the meeting even though they may realise that back in the union nothing will happen because they have no real power to push through actions and reports. We need to acknowledge that there is not always a spirit of empowerment in the union and work with this reality. As networks we are sometimes challenging the very unions of which we are members.

While networks are focussed on companies and engaging with them, the **real focus is our unions** themselves and how to build them from the shop floor. It is there that we may not have gained enough traction.

How visible the networks are within the union, whether the union understands both the network and the delegates role in the network is important.



SHOPRITE CHECKERS NETWORK 2008

NATIONALISM AND REGIONALISM - SOLIDARITY AND STRATEGY

All international processes suffer from not having unwavering support. The network is not the first priority of the members. Individual and union participation in the network is about self-interest, national issues and how the network work supports their struggles.

One role of the network is to assist with national issues through solidarity and sharing of ideas and strategies. It is also to assist unions to begin to see things more internationally and that in fact, with particular reference to MNCs, many of their national issues have international causes, causes from beyond country borders. Such issues can only truly be engaged with by strengthening cross-border links, through strong communications, through organising exchanges among workers, through educating ourselves on the company and its global purpose and strategy and chiefly by establishing a company council to oversee this. This link has to be made clear at all levels of the national union.

A call for participation is strengthened by the successes of solidarity that have been achieved through the networks, including those mentioned concerning the fired shop stewards in Tanzania and the tension over pension issues in Zambia. These successes need to be publicised.

SOME WAYS FORWARD

Our networks are born from challenges - poor pay, poor working conditions - and they are created by people, each with their own circumstances and issues. In forming a network different ideas will have to engage in order to come up with a structure and processes that are the network. None of these will be perfect. This engagement, these discussions are a sign of success, not failure. The discussion and debate should not end with the establishment of the network but be part of a continuous conversation the network has with itself. Problems are only solved in open discussions so that all participants are brought along. Differences in focus and understanding are not a barrier to but rather an essential part of the functioning of the network and grassroots organisation building.

WHAT IS THE NETWORK FOR? - VISION AND MISSION STATEMENT

For all the different perceptions and perspectives, it is important that **the network must know why it exists**. It needs a vision, a goal to unite it. This will not always be the same for all the members all the time, but it should be clear why the network exists, what it offers, and that like the union the network is not something outside of its members. When we have some clear vision, mission and goal statements it has been suggested that a **statement be printed in a pamphlet** be distributed among all member unions with the vision, mission and goals and contacts. This will also help affiliates and union members not involved in the meetings to begin to know the networks better and to bring the network into the unions. It will also help new representatives to the meetings as the turnover of delegates is not something that is in the power of the network itself to stop. Quite a few interviewees asked for a kind of induction process for new delegates so that they don't get left behind, afraid to speak up. Such a pamphlet and discussion is a small, material achievement that would help.

This kind of clarity will also assist in helping people assume responsibility for taking the network forward because they will really own the network and its mission.

ARE OUR NETWORKS IN OUR UNIONS?

If the network is not embedded in and useful to the national structures, it will struggle to survive. In embedding the network more firmly in the unions the network can also survive a rotation of representatives and the poaching of shop stewards because the unions, up and down the members, understand the network role and value. **Networks need to be taken to the NEC of each member union and to get into the agenda of union leadership.**

A process of **meeting with the network affiliates**, not simply as a network but as global unions, could facilitate an introduction and capacity building for network work in the unions so that the networks, not just these but future networks, find a home there.

Such a process would encounter many challenges, not just weak unions but undemocratic and corrupt unions, unions splitting into factions. Nonetheless, a programme of sort would

assist to bring the weak unions along and also bring those unions that really cannot be worked with into the light.

A **National Shop Stewards' Council** should be regarded as a priority for organising. These councils, made up of company shop stewards who are elected by members in regularised elections, is central to organising in a particular country and in aiming to deepen the regional network - some of these elected representatives will finally be on the Continental Shop Stewards Council. Moving to a national council is therefore an important step in democratising the unions and the global unions through fully elected and representative council of shop stewards for Africa and in time perhaps beyond.

Sometimes **the union is part of the challenge itself**. But capacity building is an expensive operation so it is suggested that **capacity building within unions** be explored jointly by global unions. With combined resources they could build capacity in unions in a broader layer than just the participants in the networks.

HOW CAN WE COMMUNICATE BETTER?

As frustrating and stubborn a problem as it is, we have to spend effort here.

HOW -

- Communications tools do exist, but we need to know how to use them in our particular circumstances. The global union Africa representatives as a group could invite a **communications strategic expert** to assist us. This kind of input would also help with adapting and using social media to its best advantage in our particular circumstances.
- Participants are asking for a **more structured form of communication** to enable more regular contact and clear guidelines.
 - A very simple **monthly reporting tool could be designed** with and for participants to submit every month. The information would be useful both on a shop floor and in the network. When someone misses a month this can be followed up. This would keep the network in the forefront of people's minds when they are working and also alert the network when a representative or union is falling out of contact.
 - A monthly check in from the chair of the network, the secretariat or the global union representative with affiliates would also help set up a routine of communicating
 - Communication with union officials to support the shop stewards should be a priority for the network secretariat.
- A shared internet email address for all the shop stewards in the network could be set up so only one is needed.

- A website where affiliates can easily add comments and information - but a hidden one, like a closed Facebook page for security. This would make people feel like they are contributing and part of the network and bringing people together.

“We want to feel the good results of the negotiations and hear other people’s good stories too, this is key, to share the successes. If we communicate in the year that will be good.”

WHAT -

An important discussion at network meetings would involve getting clarity on

- What should we be communicating and when - again, clear guidelines would help
- What can go through the shop steward network itself and what has to go through official channels so as not to undermine the union or miss the shop stewards

A simple checklist of things can be discussed and listed at a meeting, printed and distributed.

RE-EXAMINING MEETINGS

Meetings are short and only once a year. Some participants had ideas on how they could be more useful:

Too much time is spent reporting back and not enough on discussion and strategizing the way forward. So there were suggestions that reports must be submitted well before the meeting and circulated as part of the improved communications. This would require **the reporting tool format to be changed**. Everyone at the meeting will then have had a chance to read the reports beforehand and only the key points (perhaps noted on a white board) need to be discussed. This would require discipline on the part of the participants that has not been shown but was widely seen as a way forward.

Some ideas for meeting discussions included: the content of recognition agreements or collective bargaining agreements, comparing and contrasting them as a way in to discussing wider issues, perhaps focussing on the small but very empowering matters.

Also, participants wanted to spend more time looking at what has been achieved and what can be built on actively.

A more structured approach: participants asked if the meetings could agree more achievable goals, clear programmes in the year and that more time in the meetings should be spent on discussing and strategizing on how to meet them rather than the last session on the last day. They should, “come out of the meeting with a clear annual plan and a reporting time table.” Further, it was requested that the executive meet after the close of the meeting to finalise concrete plans that are then circulated amongst unions.

While meeting in South Africa is the most cost-effective means for the networks to meet, there have been increasing calls across the networks and from different groups - from funders to shop stewards and global unions, **to take the network meetings into the region** and have rotational hosting of the networks. Such a move, it is felt, will give the network a real feel of regionalism, getting to know the settings and spaces in which other affiliates operate. While South Africa remains the home country for the MNCs itself, the interviewees seemed interested in broadening the hosting responsibilities to flatten the structure.

NETWORK THE NETWORKS

Resources are always scarce and there is much to do. Although the global unions have their own programmes, projects and budgets, much of the work on building strong unions, supporting weak ones, building capacity, education and using monitoring and communications tools are shared. The African Global Union Forum could spend time discussing how to be more creative in organising complimentary structures and more follow up activities together for the networks this could become a new kind of cross-border collaboration which would assist in building the unions.

The role of the global union is so important in dealing with regional and increasingly global companies. The chair of a shop steward council suggested that where one global union has no suitable affiliates in one country the other global unions can support it to reach the workers there to build a union.

In training, collaboration is also our strength. **Company research**, for example, is seen as very important to members but all asked for more training on how to use it. We need cooperation between global unions to facilitate this kind of training inside the unions, within a particular country or at joint meetings of the networks. No presentation of information will be effective unless those that are expected to use it feel invested in the process and understand why it is important. **Global unions collaborating to host workshops** in countries will allow for gathering a wide group of members at a more reasonable cost could be offered.

KEEPING UP THE PROCESS

We are trying together to build worker organisations within difficult and challenging contexts. These will always be imperfect; this is the reality in which we must work.

Evaluation is a process. There are more things to learn about our networks and to adapt to. We could collect the views of management to see how they regard the networks, evaluating the monitoring and championing of GFAs, the role of the network if tackling gender issues inside the union and the companies and so on.

Networks are a process by which national unions can be supported in their primary mission to organise workers in order to fight for the rights and lives of workers. If the network

does not exist as part of each national union structure and each national union agenda then it is on dangerous ground. If it does, then it can support national programmes, survive changes in personal and encourage participants and the union to think regionally and even globally. Importantly, they are then owned and understood by the unions themselves rather imposed, even benevolently, from without, from funders, global union structures and support organisations.

Networks are about coming together. The more that labour organisations - unions - local, national regional and global, funder and research organisations - can work together, across companies and even sectors, the better the chances of progress.

Cross border networks - be they company or sectoral based, regional or global - are a key tool in organised labour's efforts to take on global capital. Capital does not respect national borders and the union movement can also not be restricted by them. Shop floor networks are the only real way to monitor the behaviour of companies, whether they have or do not have a GFA. They bring the voices, knowledge, challenges and ideas of workers in MNCs to the fore.

Is a network a success when a GFA is achieved or when a shop steward attending a network meeting returns to their home country and feels emboldened to stand up for themselves and their members? Both are true and neither are enough. The research shows that both are successes because both show and will contribute to the main goal of all efforts, that is, building organisational strength in order to increase the impact that the global worker movement, in both its global and local context, can have on capital.

Success is everywhere. As members of the alliance we need to appreciate the messages of change and success that are coming through without lessening our efforts.

There are also challenges and issues in all networks because of the very flawed and complicated nature of organisations, especially organisations made of organisations. But these cannot be seen as problems because this is simply the world in which we live and we cannot wait for optimal conditions in order to act. There are many things that we can do.

LABOUR RESEARCH SERVICE

Background

The Labour Research Service (LRS) was established in 1986 as a non-profit labour service organisation. The LRS specialises in research, dialogue-building, and developmental projects with the broad aim of strengthening civil society and a particular focus on the world of the work.

Vision

The vision of the LRS is to work towards an egalitarian society, which treats all people with dignity and respect. All shall have equal access to the political, legislative and economic resources and activities of society.

Mission

To promote and enhance the full and active participation of working women and men in the political and socio-economic activities in South Africa. We do this through developing organisational and leadership capacity of trade unions and labour-focused social organisations to enable collective bargaining on incomes and social livelihood issues.

Labour Research Service Contacts:

Trenton Elsley
Executive Director
tel: +27 (0)21 486 1100
trenton@lrs.org.za

Michelle Taal
Company Research Project Leader
tel: +27 (0)21 486 1100
michelle@lrs.org.za

www.lrs.org.za

www.lrs.org.za/award for wage information

www.lrs.org.za/mnc for company information

www.lrs.org.za/agreed for collective bargaining agreements

How has being part of the network changed your work as a shop steward?

“Other members see that the shop steward knows his stuff and so they come to him despite the difficulties of belonging to a union.”

“I have changed, it has made me change the way I work and I want to do my own research and become a leader.”

“I am braver. I am no longer scared of the managers.”

“Because of the network my representation is better.”

“I feel strong and brave from the information and support that I have gained from the network.”

“We have shown the membership that the Alliance exists, there is solidarity, and they feel part of something bigger and more powerful”.

“It is slow but we are getting there, we are raising more issues than before, the network is pushing us”.

“It is helping; I represent at a higher level now and know more about my rights as a worker which I share with the other workers.”

“It is useful; I want to set up more networks in companies in our union to share information.”