‘What would you do if the government fails to deliver?’ COSATU members’ attitudes towards service delivery

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The COSATU Workers’ Surveys of 1998 and 2004 indicated a slight decline in perceptions of availability of government services for COSATU members in their areas of residence. There is a pronounced decline in the 2008 COSATU survey, particularly in the delivery of housing, health and education. COSATU members’ expectations of service delivery in 1994 were radically different from their assessment of real service delivery in 2008. In 2004, more than 70 per cent of surveyed COSATU members said that, if the government failed to deliver, they would participate in ongoing mass action. This chapter asks, now that several years have passed since the 2004 survey, what have COSATU members done about their declining access to government services and unmet expectations of democracy.

The chapter has two central aims. The first part discusses perceptions of service delivery by COSATU members over time, but focuses mainly on the COSATU Workers’ Survey of 2008. The second part considers action taken by COSATU members, given their growing dissatisfaction with service delivery. The 2008 survey shows that the majority of COSATU members do not participate in local government structures and in community protests to demand service delivery and challenge the state to deliver on its election promises. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the complex political reasons for this lack of community participation and failure to force the state to account; which amounts to COSATU members going back on their 2004 undertaking to participate in ongoing mass action, if the government fails to deliver.
It is worth beginning this discussion by noting the government’s stated service delivery record. According to various reports by Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) (1996, 2001, 2007a and 2011), access to services has improved, with more households having access to basic services such as water, electricity and sanitation. In 1994, it was estimated that, nationally, 12 million people lacked formal water supply and about 20 million people had no formal sanitation. The majority of people with no access lived in the former homeland areas (Department of Water Affairs and Forestry 2002). Since then, the number of households with access to electricity, water, and sanitation has increased. Access to electricity has increased by 23 per cent, with more than 10 million households with electricity in 2007, compared to over 4 million in 1996. Households with access to water increased from 80 to 89 per cent and those with access to sanitation increased from 83 to 90 per cent. In 2010, the percentage of people living in formal and fully owned dwelling was 58 per cent. The majority of households (82 per cent) had access to electricity (StatsSA 2011).

Yet, numerous studies in South Africa have revealed a growing dissatisfaction with access to services (Desai 2002; Khunou 2002; McDonald 2002; Mosoetsa 2010). This growing dissatisfaction in many communities has been corroborated by the escalating incidence of community protests. While not all community protests have been only about lack of service delivery – but also about poverty and unemployment – most protests have included demands for access to services. According to the Municipal IQ (2011), between 2004 and 2008, there were 105 community protests. In 2009 alone, a total of 105 were reported and the majority of these occurred in Gauteng (28 per cent), North West (13 per cent), Western Cape (13 per cent), Mpumalanga (12 per cent), and Free State (11 per cent). There seemed to be a decline in 2010, with only 64 service delivery protests reported by April, but by the end of the year, there were a total of 111 protests reported. There was, interestingly, a 33 per cent decline in protest in 2011 (81 protests) compared to 2010 (Municipal IQ 2011).

Therefore, many communities have responded to their perceived lack of services by staging numerous protest actions. This chapter will show that COSATU members, by contrast, have been less vocal about their dissatisfaction with access to services. The chapter argues that the declining participation in community ‘service delivery’ structures and willingness to participate in ongoing mass action deprives the country’s civil society of the strategic,