The 2008 COSATU Workers’ Survey continues to illustrate the trend that COSATU is still a vital actor in the policy-making arena. The results continue a trend identified in earlier surveys. With reference to the 2004 COSATU Workers’ Survey, Cherry (2006: 145) made the same observation and further argued that, ‘what is notable about the results of this survey is that they demonstrate clearly how the understanding of workers does correspond substantially with that of the union leadership’. However, while the continued trend is statistically accurate, a closer examination of the facts shows that the notion of union influence on policy is doubtful. This chapter argues for a multi-faceted understanding of policy-making and how social movements such as trade unions may influence it. Once a multi-faceted approach is adopted, COSATU’s ability to shape or influence policy-making will become more precarious. The federation’s ability to effectively influence progressive policy in South Africa is impacted upon by a variety of factors.

It is important to begin the discussion in this chapter by addressing the widely-held, but erroneous, understanding of social and economic policies as mutually exclusive. Economic production and social reproduction are two sides of the same coin and, thus, it is incorrect to assume that it is feasible to satisfy one and not the other. Unfortunately, this separatist view continues to influence social policy processes and thinking, both in the government and within significant social sectors like labour. At the level of government, this unacceptable philosophy has led to undemocratic articulations and enactments of ‘biased’ macro-economic strategies. Such approaches tend to assume that the state is less efficient than the market; that women and children will be provided for by the income of a willing and able male breadwinner; and
that there are low inflation, low debt and low budget deficits, among others. These misleading assumptions are complemented by biases that advantage those who are dependent on wage labour for their survival. Barchiesi (2005: 386) succinctly illustrates the reality of these misconceptions in his analysis of the social welfare scenario in post-apartheid South Africa, when he argues that, ‘the post-apartheid policy discourse has responded to the material collapse of wage labour as a condition for dignified existence with an aggressive reassertion of wage labour centrality as a mode of social inclusion’. As a consequence, citizenship is limited to participation in work, which this chapter argues should not be the case.

Again, the comprehension of social and economic policies as being separate has consequently led to the rejection, downplaying and ignoring of the mutually constitutive nature of these policies (Mkandawire 2004: 3). In the South African policy-making arena, this was witnessed in the imperatives underpinning the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macro-economic strategy of 2006 and through the fact that COSATU failed to influence and challenge its articulation and implementation. Contemporary researchers have, however, shown that this disconnected comprehension presents various challenges for sustainable social development. These researchers illustrate that the social and the economic are intricately connected and are similarly connected in how human beings live their lives (Elson 2004; Mkandawire 2004). This chapter argues that the separatist conceptualisation of social and economic policy is at the centre of COSATU’s challenges, with regards to consolidating its power and charting a sustainable and coherent social policy for post-apartheid South Africa. Even though the federation has played a significant role in the establishment of the South African welfare regime, it is facing challenges, due to the imperatives of the neo-liberal macro-economic framework, globalisation, increasing unemployment and the economic recession, among others.

At the level of labour, this separatist thinking leads to incoherent articulation of policy options for negotiation. Although, on the surface, labour seems to be progressive in its understanding of the relationship between social policy and macro-economic strategies, this is not coherently facilitated at the level of processes followed to materialise it. Their lack of success with regards to the reversal or influence of GEAR meant that they had to continually compromise and work within the constraints it has set, thus forcing them to define social