

The Future is Public: Global Manifesto for Public Services



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Section I.

The what: The public services we want

1. Universal quality public services are the foundation of a fair and just society. They constitute a social pact that implements the core values of solidarity, equality and human dignity. Public services are also an effective way to pool resources to confront collective challenges and meet shared needs.

Public services enable human rights, fulfil shared needs and, being socially defined, their scope can increase over time

2. What constitutes public services is a historic and social construct. Societies determine what they are, and decide how to organise and finance their production and delivery, and how to exercise democratic public control over their operation. As they are not just technically but also socially and politically defined, the scope of public services may vary and change in different times and places and in different societies.
3. Public services encompass a range of services that are vital and necessary to live a dignified life. These include education, energy, food, health and care services, housing, social security, telecommunications, transportation, waste collection and disposal, and water and sanitation. They are either recognised as human rights or deeply intertwined with their enjoyment. Equitable access to these services is crucial to reduce inequalities and to realise social justice. A wider range of public services can be seen in the classification used by the United Nations Classification of the Functions of Government.¹

Public services are owned by people, for people

4. Public services are collectively and democratically determined and developed to produce and deliver public, common and collective goods; to realise human, individual and collective rights; to enable a dignified life and socially inclusive, just societies; and to protect the commons, including the environment and a sustainable planet.
5. Public services are a collective social commitment, for which the State and/or other public authorities have the main or ultimate responsibility and obligations. They may be organised and delivered in various ways, through local, regional or central governments or a mix of their competences, or through a public body, which is a body that is democratically and publicly controlled and is recognised and trusted by people.

Universal quality public services are structured and financed to meet individual and collective needs, to reduce inequalities and to protect everyone's dignity

6. Public services constitute a common pooling of resources among all members of society, contributing fairly according to their capacities and ability to pay, in order to meet everyone's needs and fulfil their rights. They are not a benevolent or charitable endeavour, but a collective public system for redistribution, to address multiple inequalities and historical exclusion, to realise solidarity, and to ensure the fulfilment of States' human rights obligations.

Our principles for universal quality public services in the 21st century

7. There are many misconceptions regarding public services, which have been driven by, and are part of, the neoliberal narrative pushed by powerful private interests. Public services have in practice not always been developed and governed as true public services. Instead, they have at many times served the interests of the wealthy and powerful, rather than the public, contributing to the oppression or exclusion of certain groups. We reject these practices, which reflect a privatisation of the public, for the interest of a particular individual, corporation or group.

1 United Nations Statistics Division, 'Classification of the Functions of Government' (United Nations Statistics Division, 2000) <[UNSD — Classification Detail](#)>.

8. Quality public services meet the following principles:

1. **Universal and accessible to all.** This includes both economic and physical accessibility. Everyone can access services to live in dignity and realise their rights, irrespective of social or economic status and geographic location. All services are accessible to all irrespective of their income and are located as close as possible to users. Some services, including for example education and essential healthcare, should be provided for free to all users at the point of use.
2. **Participatory, transparent, trusted and democratically accountable.** All members of the community or society can participate in the design, organisation, governance, financing, delivery and monitoring of public services. They are transparent and comprehensive information about them is publicly available. They are accountable to the public, and, as a result, they are built on and encourage trust and respect in society.
3. **Improving and adaptable, responsive and transformative to those they serve.** They are evolutionary, adjusting to technical changes and peoples' unfolding needs, and they may expand into new areas. They adapt to different needs and are non-discriminatory. They improve in quality over time, and never lower their standards, in accordance with the obligation of non-retrogression, meaning that there should never be any reduction in the reach or quality of services.
4. **Built on a solid foundation of long-term public financing.** This is reflective of their nature as the fulfilment of the State's redistributive function, and ensures continuity of provision in the long-term, primarily based on progressive taxation .
5. **Founded on solidarity.** They feature or embed solidarity-based redistributive mechanisms between those who can contribute to the system proportionally to their means and those who cannot.
6. **Committed to equality, including gender equality, and social justice.** This applies at all levels of organisation, management and operations. Universal quality public services recognise and actively challenge power imbalances, structural and systemic discrimination, and systems of oppression. This includes a commitment to promoting equality in their organisation, including gender equality in their leadership, management and delivery.
7. **Environmentally and ecologically conscious.** They work to care for both people and the planet, and contribute to building a more sustainable future. All aspects of their management, including governance mechanisms, their cost structure, and the organisation of their operations, decisively contribute to addressing the ecological crisis. They have a long-term vision, placing present and future generations' best interests at the core of decision-making and integrating wider social, cultural and ecological concerns.
8. **In proximity.** Universal quality public services are accessible locally and are managed, delivered, and monitored at the closest point of use to those they serve, backed by funds provided by all relevant levels of government, at the local, regional, national or international level as appropriate, based on a fair and effective distribution of resources. They are available when and where needed, in order to truly realise universal access in practice.
9. **Just, secure and safe, both for those who use the services and those who provide them.** Workers feel physically safe and mentally safe while at work or on their way to and from work. Universal quality public services value the people who work for them as well as the people who use them, including by providing decent employment, pay and working conditions. They are staffed and funded at an appropriate level to ensure quality service can be delivered to all.
10. **Protected from the market economy, commercialisation and financialisation.** Universal quality public services are accessible to everyone as a right, to fulfil life's needs, and not as commercial, commodified products or services to consume. Decisions about public services are not made on the basis of profit making, but are entirely guided by the realisation of human dignity and the fulfilment of collective needs.

Section II.

The why: Public services matter

Building the just society we want

9. Universal access to quality public services, without any marginalisation, discrimination or exclusion, is fundamental to the realisation of human rights and the fulfilment of life's needs. Public services improve everyone's quality of life, strengthen our communities and bind us together as a society. By ensuring for everyone crucial services, they enable a dignified life, ensure socio-economic inclusion and promote rights assertion.
10. Public services are an expression of democracy, embodying a collective social commitment to solve the economic, social and ecological challenges of our time. They can serve as an example of meaningful work by providing opportunities to participate in the collective project of building a more equal and just society.
11. Universal quality public services play a pivotal role in redistributing the burden of unpaid care and domestic work that, due to social norms and structural barriers, otherwise falls disproportionately on women. They are an essential tool in the efforts to realise true gender equality in practice and transition to a gender-just society.

Responding to the world's crises: inequality and the ecological breakdown

12. Public services are critical to address multiple, often intersecting, inequalities and the other crises of our time. By using progressive financing to provide equally to all what would otherwise be available only to those able to pay, they have the power to correct a skewed income and wealth distribution and lay the foundation for a just society where wealth and power are fairly shared.
13. Universal quality public services are crucial in achieving inclusive equality between groups, as they can help rebalance asymmetrical, unjust and often intersecting power relations, including those based on race, gender, ethnicity, caste, disability, age, sexual orientation, class, and any other ground of discrimination. For example, turning care into a collective social responsibility can help advance equality between genders.
14. Because they have the ability to manage and protect natural resources for future generations, public services are decisive in tackling the ongoing climate and broader ecological crisis while respecting people's dignity. While States must implement robust policies and regulations to address the ecological crisis, they must ensure that access to public services is not undermined as they do so. Public services should be at the core of the transition to build communities' resilience to climate impacts and environmental degradation. Guaranteeing collective protection of the environment and sustainable governance, public services are therefore an essential component in achieving intergenerational peace and justice. Universal quality public services are also critical to building resilience and ensuring fully inclusive and resilient societies that are able to respond with dignity to the tensions that will arise from the social and physical changes resulting from the ecological crisis.

Section III.

The how: Funding universal quality public services is possible

Fiscal and policy space to fund quality public services

15. Domestic mobilisation of public resources is essential for States to provide financing for universal quality public services. However, for many countries, efforts to mobilise sufficient resources are undermined by systemic and international issues, including: unfair trade agreements, unsustainable and illegitimate debt, tax abuse by multinational corporations, tax havens, loan conditionalities and coercive policy advice leading to austerity measures, and a lack of democratic and inclusive decision-making on global economic and tax governance.
16. Fair and progressive taxation is the most reliable and sustainable source of financing for public services, while also strengthening the social contract between the government and the people. Progressive taxation of capital, profit companies, wealth, assets, property and labour should be the primary source of funding quality public services. It is important to reduce unfair tax burdens on women and adopt progressive, redistributive taxation that is free of implicit and explicit gender bias – including new forms of taxation of wealth, corporate profits and property or assets – to ensure adequate financing of gender-transformative public services. An effective, reliable tax collection system that is adequately staffed and funded is a prerequisite to ensure sustainable funding. Tax transparency is needed to reclaim the billions flowing into offshore bank accounts, with this funding being used to rebuild public services.
17. Sovereign debt cancellation should also be used as a tool to help finance public services, as unsustainable and illegitimate debt burdens and obligations often lead to vital public financial resources being allocated to debt repayments at the expense of funding domestic public services. A new fair and transparent debt workout mechanism is essential to support universal quality public services.
18. Governments must make all efforts to fund universal quality public services, using all adequate means such as: the expansion of the revenue base; adequate inter-governmental transfers to fund public services mandates; the elimination of illicit financial flows, corruption and tax abuse by multinational corporations and ultra-wealthy individuals; the use of fiscal and foreign exchange reserves; the management of debt; and the development and adoption of an accommodating macroeconomic framework. Prioritising budget allocations for public services and the reallocation of public expenditure to public services, matching at least the minimum international standards, is in many contexts a key action that governments can take immediately.

Public funding is a State obligation to ensure universal access to quality public services

19. States must ensure the provision of universal quality public services that fulfil human rights. This is realised through predictable, accountable and sustainable funding mechanisms. A direct connection exists between the reliability and adequacy of public service funding and public service quality, equity and access.
20. Where they exist, supranational unions of States must commit to supporting the development of universal quality public services through their actions and budgets.
21. Public resources fairly and progressively collected and (re)distributed are indispensable to funding public services, as this is the only way to ensure that everyone can access quality services irrespective of their ability to pay.

Public funding with democratic public control

22. Public services can neither be left to the market nor subject to austerity. Unlike a commodity, their value is determined by the role they play in fulfilling people's inherent dignity, rather than their market position or the opportunity for profit. They therefore demand democratic public control and collective forms of financing, to ensure they meet the shared needs of all.

23. Philanthropy and private finance are increasingly present in public services financing. While philanthropic and private financing may, in certain contexts, contribute to the resourcing of public services, they may only be subsidiary to the role of revenues raised through taxation, and must avoid creating or amplifying power dynamics that benefit the wealthiest and undermining democratic decision-making, oversight and accountability.
24. Governments must make it possible for civil society to meaningfully participate in budget debates and decision-making, through participatory and gender-transformative budget mechanisms and notably by increasing access to information.

International cooperation to enable domestic resource mobilisation

25. Scaling up of international cooperation in fiscal matters is required - based especially on donor countries complying with their extraterritorial obligations - to ensure equal taxing rights among States and stop all forms of tax abuse by multinational corporations and the ultra-wealthy, which particularly affects developing countries. States must avoid a global race to the bottom on corporate taxation, which limits investment in public services.
26. Donor States should increase the quantity and the quality of official development assistance for universal quality public services. This should respect national ownership, be predictable, transparent, harmonised with national priorities, and in line with internationally agreed commitments and legal obligations. This should be done by directly supporting countries' public spending through budget support, instead of through donor-defined projects or actively encouraging the use of public resources to leverage more private finance. In the long-term, countries need to be able to mobilise enough domestic resources to ensure reliable and resilient funding for public service systems that can cater to their people's needs.

Public-private partnerships are failing public services

27. Mechanisms that are increasingly promoted as solutions to limited public services funding, such as blended finance and public-private partnerships, are expensive, opaque, short-term, and unreliable financing models that escape transparency and democratic accountability mechanisms, pose liabilities to the public purse, risk undermining democratic public control and do not generate the funding required for public services.

Valuing and paying public services workers

28. The value of public service work needs to be acknowledged and adequately remunerated. States must ensure just and favourable conditions of work, including safe and healthy working conditions, reasonably limited working hours and paid annual leave. Public sector workers must have access to social security and their remuneration must be fair, allowing for a decent living for them and their families. Equal remuneration for work of equal value must also be ensured without discrimination of any kind, with value being redefined to recognise social contributions, not market-based rewards. Public authorities should not make savings on public services costs by using untrained cheap or unpaid labour such as underpaid workers.

Section IV.

The who: Ensuring democratic public control

States have an obligation to ensure the provision of universal quality public services

29. As the duty-bearer under human rights law, the State holds the obligation to ensure the provision of universal quality public services in accordance with human rights standards and the principles outlined above.

Towards a truly public and non-commercial approach to public services

30. Public services are developed, organised, managed, and delivered publicly and are not provided by commercial actors. A public body is able to take a long-term perspective, and is subject to democratic public control, public accountability and participation from the public.
31. While there are many ways in which universal quality public services can be organised, they are always owned, governed, financed and provided in a transparent, participatory and democratic way in the public interest. They are accountable to the public and subject to democratic public control and ongoing evaluation.
32. Commercial actors such as for-profit private companies and private equity firms view public services as commodities to be produced and sold, which results in a motivation to compete with public institutions and maximise profits. Protection of their own interest(s) is one of their primary goals or incentives, and they operate according to the market logic, which is incompatible with the fundamental nature of public services and their delivery as a public good. In contrast, quality public services do not make profit and any surplus, where applicable, is reinvested in the service or in other related public services for the public good, to improve the services' quality and access, pay workers a decent wage, provide training, and protect the environment.

Enabling communities' efforts

33. Community provision, which is radically different in its objectives and operations from commercial provision, often plays a critical role in ensuring necessary services in many parts of the world. Governments and other public authorities can work together with local communities and community-based organisations, upholding their obligations to regulate and supervise community provision in order to realise universal quality public services, while respecting communities' contributions, as well as ensuring communities have the resources to carry out the work.

Maintaining democratic public control over digitalisation, procurement and data management

34. Digitalisation and artificial intelligence have been changing the way public services work for both users and workers who deliver public services. While digital technologies can play, in the right circumstances and with adequate regulation and oversight, a positive role, new digital technologies in public services should not exacerbate the existing digital divide, which deepens the discrimination of marginalised groups and individuals, or increase negative environmental impacts, in particular as a result of data storage and transfer, but help to improve the service. Digital technologies should be led and controlled by the public at all times and should not be a vehicle or provide incentives to privatise services and to externalise essential elements of public services.
35. Digital technologies and tools should only be used where they improve the provision of public services, in line with this manifesto, and where they are, this should be with democratic public control, regulation and oversight, ensuring equal democratic management of the content of the service, and guaranteeing security and privacy and rights over the data. Moreover, States must ensure that the infrastructure used to collect, store, process and use data as well as to provide services is placed under public control.
36. There should be transparency in procurement and contracting of the goods and services necessary to run public services. All public data should be stored safely, responsibly and in protection of the privacy and human rights of the data subjects.