



Now is the time to reclaim public services

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The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the foundations of our socio-economic systems and revealed and magnified the deep inequalities they create. It has also raised awareness about the central role public services can and must play: saving lives; keeping the socio-economic fabric of humanity together; protecting the environment; enabling the attainment of human rights.

What COVID-19 has taught us about public services

With COVID-19, the damage done by decades of underfunding, cutting, and privatizing vital public services¹ materialized into the unsustainable images of saturated intensive care and emergency units; health and support staff overworked to exhaustion, lacking personal protective equipment (PPE) and other essential supplies; and countless coffins driven by army trucks to freshly dug graves.

The pandemic revealed the lack of preparedness and the injustice intrinsic to privatized, outsourced, commodified public services: access is overwhelmingly narrowed to those who can afford to pay, leaving most of the world's population vulnerable –

affected by mass job losses from national lockdowns.² Suddenly, the societal and economic value of public health and care services, water, sanitation, refuse collection, electricity, transport, housing as well as social safety nets has become self-evident; just as has the interdependency and complementarity among different public services in a globally contaminated world.

The appalling conditions endured by many frontline workers - overwhelmingly women, racialized, migrant, low-skilled, outsourced in precarious contracts – have spurred widespread cries of outrage and calls for decent working conditions. Trade unions have demanded governments and employers put a halt to rhetorical 'hero' hailing, and to swiftly enact concrete measures to protect frontline workers; enable them to serve communities under decent working conditions; and remunerate them fairly.³ Yet many frontline service workers and their unions have had to fight for even the most basic occupational health and safety protection and priority vaccine access, such as municipal education, waste and funeral service workers of São Paulo who went on 'strikes

1 Goyenechea Hidalgo, M., and Ruiz Bruzzone, F., "Multinationales en América Latina. Una caracterización a partir del sector salud en Brasil, México, Colombia, Perú, Paraguay y Chile", PSI, Nodo XXI and Vision, May 2020 https://pop-umbrella.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/75dcc16b-c630-4740-8347-757b179791e7_psi.Nod.Lat.Baja20AG.pdf

2 Farha, L., Bohoslavskz, J. P. Heller, L., De Schutter, O., Sepulveda Carmona, M., "COVID-19 has exposed the catastrophic impact of privatising vital services", The Guardian, 19 October 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/oct/19/COVID-19-19-exposed-catastrophic-impact-privatising-vital-services>

3 Pavanelli, R. "After the applause, it's time to rebuild global public services", The Guardian, 23 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/23/after-applause-time-rebuild-global-public-services-covid-19>

for life⁴; or education support, social services, and municipal police in Italy.⁵ Waste and funeral workers have been largely invisible and forgotten by society and policy-makers, workers who have the ungrateful - yet essential - task of safely disposing of contaminated medical waste and human remains.⁶

The pandemic has particularly exposed the injustice caused by the lack of investment in local public services, epitomized by the ‘service desertification’ affecting many territories - notably rural ones – ensured by budget cuts and ‘digital-only’ delivery choices, whereas in the global South public infrastructure and services remain insufficient and/or inaccessible.⁷ In South Africa, public healthcare services are concentrated in urban areas, whereas most women live in the countryside and cannot access or afford public transport when they need obstetric care.⁸ In Sri Lanka, where health outcomes are comparable to some European countries, the majority of people live within 5 kms of a local health centre.⁹ Territorial inequality in public service access was a key spark igniting the 2018 yellow vests

protests in France.¹⁰

Matched with the imposition by authorities of physical distancing to curb contaminations, this situation has popularized the concept of the ‘15-minute city’, preaching a (re)localization of vital public services - such as hospitals, schools, childcare facilities, parks, post offices and cultural venues – within everyone’s walking reach, also to bolster quality of living and local economies.¹¹

COVID-19 also elevated the often-overlooked role of local and regional governments as the key institutional frontline emergency first-responders and helped acknowledge the expertise and professionalism of their staff as they serve people and communities – often with very limited means - putting their own health and that of their families at stake.¹² In their joint statement over the COVID-19 crisis, global public services workers union Public Services International (PSI) and worldwide local and regional government peak association United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) called on national authorities, global policy-makers and financial institutions to “invest on a priority basis in ever stronger, quality public services with universal access to ensure a swift recovery and avoid a post COVID-19 social and

4 Ribeiro, E., “São Paulo’s education workers declare victory in their strike for vaccines”, PSI, 20 June 2021 <https://bit.ly/3lfaI28>; SIEMACO-SP, “Sem vacina, sem coleta! Sindicatos paralisam Limpeza Urbana de São Paulo por 24 horas”, 9 June 2021, <https://bit.ly/3yFz5VO>

5 GCIL FP Firenze, “Vaccino ai lavoratori dei servizi essenziali: nessuno sia escluso”, 8 February 2021, <https://www.fpcgilfirenze.it/sindacato/vaccino-ai-lavoratori-dei-servizi-essenziali-nessuno-sia-escluso>

6 Jozwiak, G., “Clinical waste collectors – unprotected, untrained, underpaid and undervalued”, Equal Times, 5 July 2021, <https://www.equaltimes.org/clinical-waste-collectors?lang=en#YUMbHC221qv>

7 PSI, « Digitalization and public services: a labour perspective », 9 November 2019, p. 16, https://pop-umbrella.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/a9ddf49f-faba-4a3f-8289-8c5c938c9541_2019%20-%20EN%20Digit%20Summary%20with%20foreword.pdf

8 Dr. Soma-Pillay, P. “Think Equal: women’s health, South Africa”, FIGO, 6 March 2019 <https://www.figo.org/news/think-equal-womens-health-south-africa>

9 Coote, A. and Yazici, E., “Universal Quality Public Services. A Policy Briefing for Trade Unions”, PSI, February 2020, p. 19, https://pop-umbrella.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/38065e03-df0f-4299-b2d1-0d4dba72737e_EN_F.pdf

10 Sintès, F. « Services publics en milieu rural : une espèce en voie de disparition ? », France inter, 29 July 2019 <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/le-telephone-sonne/le-telephone-sonne-29-juillet-2019>; Fernandes Rodrigues L.; Gaspar R., « Le Sénat alerte sur le recul des services publics dans les territoires », La Gazette des Communes, 11 March 2020 <https://www.lagazettedescommunes.com/667810/le-senat-alerte-sur-le-recul-des-services-publics-dans-les-territoires/>; and Burns, W. J. « America Needs a Rebirth of Public Service », The Atlantic, 4 May 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/america-needs-a-rebirth-of-public-service/610972/>

11 Whittle, N., “Welcome to the 15-minute city”, Financial Times, 17 July 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/c1a53744-90d5-4560-9e3f-17ce06aba69a>; Yeung, P., “How ‘15-minute cities’ will change the way we socialise”, BBC, 4 January 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20201214-how-15-minute-cities-will-change-the-way-we-socialise>

12 UN-DESA, The role of public service and public servants during the COVID-19 pandemic, Policy Brief 79, June 2020, https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/PB_79.pdf

environmental catastrophe” and “ensure adequate service staffing levels, training and decent working conditions to guarantee continued public service delivery”.¹³

It is time to reclaim our public services

It has taken this global pandemic to make previously unlikely convergences possible among social justice movements, institutions, and political actors. There is a window of opportunity for a systemic shift towards state leadership in economic policy and significant public service and infrastructure investment. Without the urgency caused by the triple climate-pandemic-socio-economic crises, ‘Green New Deal’¹⁴ plans would have had little chance to pick up, and the few examples of social and environmental conditionalities attached to State aid for private companies would have likely remained wishful thinking.¹⁵ The Biden Administration’s initial US\$ 2 trillion ‘American Jobs Plan’ and its backing of the Indian, South African and other developing countries’ position to waive COVID-19 vaccine patents would have been unimaginable.¹⁶

The collective epiphany and momentum for progressive policy change have also emboldened

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- 13 PSI-UCLG, Strong local public services for a safe world. UCLG-PSI Joint Statement in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, 23 June 2021, https://pop-umbrella.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/7b81a165-78b2-4844-b514-4fdd7eefada4_ENG_Joint_UCLG-PSI_statement_V_PSI22.6.2020_Final-2_acc_1_.pdf?key=
- 14 M. Mazzucato and M. McPherson, The Green New Deal: A bold mission-oriented approach, UCL, 21 December 2018, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/public-purpose/publications/2018/dec/green-new-deal-bold-mission-oriented-approach>
- 15 M. Mazzucato, COVID-19 and the Green New Deal, UN SDG Blog, 1 December 2020, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/undesavoiced/more-from-undesada/2020/12/50538.html>; M. Mazzucato and A. Andreoni, No More Free-Lunch Bailouts, Project Syndicate, 25 June 2020, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/conditional-bailouts-of-private-companies-2020-crisis-by-mariana-mazzucato-and-antonio-andreoni-2020-06>
- 16 The White House, American Jobs Plan, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/american-jobs-plan/> and A. Macias. K. Beruniger and T. Franck, U.S. backs waiving patent protections for COVID-19 vaccines, citing global health crisis, CNBC, 6 May 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/05/05/us-backs-COVID-19-vaccine-intellectual-property-waivers-to-expand-access-to-shots-worldwide.html>

societal demands to take back control of our public services through (re)municipalization and other forms of de-privatization.¹⁷

Far from over: remunicipalization vs. privatization battlefields through COVID-19 times

While positive signals are emerging carrying the seed for a much-needed systemic shift, the old pro-austerity reflexes and privatization forces loom to snatch up new grabs of lucrative vital public services and common goods.

In Brazil, in the current political environment the crisis is instrumentalized to fast forward privatizations of profitable State-owned enterprises that have been historical public service strongholds for users and communities for decades, such as Cedae¹⁸ (water), Petrobras (energy), Correios¹⁹ (postal services), and Ceasaminas Mina Gerais²⁰ (food supply).

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- 17 “Remunicipalization is the return of public services from private control and/or ownership in any form to full public ownership, management and democratic control. Remunicipalization means that municipalities and regional governments take back privately owned and/or managed services that are commissioned, under concession or funded by public bodies. The term emphasises the subnational dimension of bringing public services back into public ownership in territories and communities.” V. Wegmann, Taking Our Public Services Back In-House, PSIRU-PSI, Greenwich, UK and Ferney-Voltaire, France, September 2020, p. 10, <https://bit.ly/3fCricB>
- 18 E. Gibb, O dinheiro da Previdência canadense está financiando as privatizações do governo Bolsonaro, CartaCapital, 6 June 2021, <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/artigo/o-dinheiro-da-previdencia-canadense-esta-financiando-as-privatizacoes-do-governo-bolsonaro/>
- 19 L. Rocha, Câmara aprova PL de Bolsonaro que privatiza Correios, 5 August 2021, Brasil de Fato, <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2021/08/05/camara-aprova-pl-de-bolsonaro-que-privatiza-correios>
- 20 “Ceasaminas consists of 744 companies distributed on six warehouses, generates about 12,000 direct jobs, and it is considered a trade reference for approximately 2,100 Brazilian municipalities. The Minas Gerais branch services about 4,000 farmers/month, covering approximately 50,000 direct customers and 15.5 million indirect ones,” <http://www.ceasaminas.com.br/indexestrangueiro.asp?codigolingua=2&codigomenu=52> and PSI, A luta contra a privatização da CEASA Minas Gerais, 23 July 2021, <https://publicservices.international/resources/news/a-luta-contra-a-privatizacao-da-ceasa-minas-gerais?id=12050&lang=pt>

In the UK, while praising the NHS for saving his life from COVID-19,²¹ Prime Minister Boris Johnson is pushing a new Health and Care Bill that would reshape the NHS into an 'Integrated Care System' on the model of American private care companies,²² featuring a mixed decision-making board where public institutions such as local councils would share power with for-profit companies like Centene²³ – involved in procurement scandals.²⁴ In Belgium, the Antwerp city council is privatizing the local care and social services at a time when more – not less – staff and infrastructures are needed.²⁵

Yet, Public Futures – the only available global de-privatization database – continues to record a regular stream of remunicipalizations, up to over 1,500 as of August 2021.²⁶

Conclusion: reclaiming a different future

There are no individual solutions to collective problems. Public services are about cooperation as opposed to competition; pooling resources together to everyone's benefit; and building solidarity within communities, societies and economies so that we can be stronger and more resilient together.

Unless we collectively move from operating public services under an extractivist paradigm to a common-good and solidarity-based approach there can be no resilience, no functioning economies and societies, no long-term perspective and no planet for us. This is the time to bring our public services back in-house and build economies, societies and institutions that work for all. Reclaiming and investing in our public services, even expanding beyond the scope of their traditional boundaries, is a key avenue to envision and build a new future where everyone can have a place. But the window of opportunity opened by COVID-19 is short-lived. We must seize it. There is no time to lose.

21 P. Stubbley, Coronavirus: Boris Johnson praises NHS as country's greatest national asset after saying 'he could have gone either way', The Independent, 12 April 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/coronavirus-boris-johnson-health-news-hospital-nhs-video-tweet-a9461616.html>

22 Keep Our NHS Public, Government used crisis to increase privatisation – NHS white paper will endorse, 6 February 2021, <https://keepournhspublic.com/government-used-crisis-to-increase-privatisation-nhs-white-paper-will-endorse/>

23 C. Molloy, Forget the spin – new English NHS bill is all about cutting our right to healthcare, openDemocracy 13 July 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/ournhs/forget-the-spin-new-english-nhs-bill-is-all-about-cutting-our-right-to-healthcare/>

24 A. Fisher, The NHS is being privatised by stealth under the cover of a pandemic, The Guardian, 3 May 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/may/03/government-pandemic-privatise-nhs-by-stealth>

25 D. Goedertier, Privatiseringsdecreet: zorg als vastgoedinvesteren, Samenleving & Politiek, Vol. 28, 2021, no. 5 (May), pp. 55-61, <https://www.sampol.be/2021/05/privatiseringsdecreet-zorg-als-vastgoedinvestering?fbclid=IwAR0wo7KJx8QfhjdSBhvpp-XqddwgCMw5KM8x1vQqCZN4WUuoXmgx7TsmFk>

26 Public Futures. Global database of de-privatised public services. TNI, University of Glasgow, <https://publicfutures.org/>