

WHY WE NEED A GENERAL AGREEMENT ON PUBLIC SERVICES

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We are often reminded that our human rights include access to essential services such as education, health care and water supply. We hear less about how governments and international institutions will ensure that those rights are honoured. That is the backdrop to this call for a *General Agreement on Public Services (GAPS)*.

National and local service providers can be public or private, foreign or domestic, or in a competitive or monopoly environment. But they must be obliged to have this in common: *that they uphold human rights established globally, and civic, consumer and employment rights determined nationally and locally.*

Primary responsibility for ensuring that they do so lies with governments, because:

- Whether by regulating utility tariffs, licensing bandwidth or ensuring that food is wholesome, *governments must protect the public interest.*
- Whether by funding schools, overseeing health care or protecting citizens from crime, *governments must ensure that justice is done.*
- Whether by organising public transport systems, supervising care of the elderly or supplying clean water, *governments must promote security.*

Governments also have a vital co-ordinating role in public service provision, which is essential because:

- Quality education requires *not only* quality schools and teachers, *but also* healthy children, safe and reliable transport and transparent budget tracking.
- Quality health requires *not only* quality hospitals and doctors, *but also* sound water supply, reliable communications and efficient administration.
- Quality water supply requires *not only* water

resources and engineers, *but also* sound sanitation, reliable energy supply and equitable cost recovery.

Public services are interdependent, and it takes integrated publicly led systems to mobilise the resources and build the institutions required to bridge the gaps and meet economic and social needs effectively, equitably and sustainably.

But if national and local governments are primarily responsible, why the need for an *international agreement*? Here are three reasons:

- *Governmental authority is shaped by international institutions and markets*, as the WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) illustrates.
- *Public services are themselves increasingly linked across national borders*, as international recruitment of public service professionals illustrates.
- *Regulatory decisions in one country have consequences for others*, as the link between energy use, climate change and water resources illustrates.

At a time when powerful forces are transforming the world economy, and when international institutions are seeking both to regulate that process and 'make poverty history', the crucial role of public services needs strong global advocacy.

A *General Agreement on Public Services* could provide the required focus by expressing the principles that should guide local and national governments in fulfilling their public service responsibilities not only to their own citizens but also internationally. By articulating the rights and responsibilities of service providers, citizen-users and employees, it would also provide a framework for action by international institutions.



An alliance representing consumers, employees and organisations working for essential services for all stands behind the GAPS proposal. GAPS partners believe that democratic accountability, good services and fair employment go together because effective systems require sufficient resources, active citizenship and worker involvement.

Gaps partners plan to grow the alliance and to promote a global discussion leading towards an international conference to define the terms of a GAPS and determine the best institutional means of establishing and implementing it.

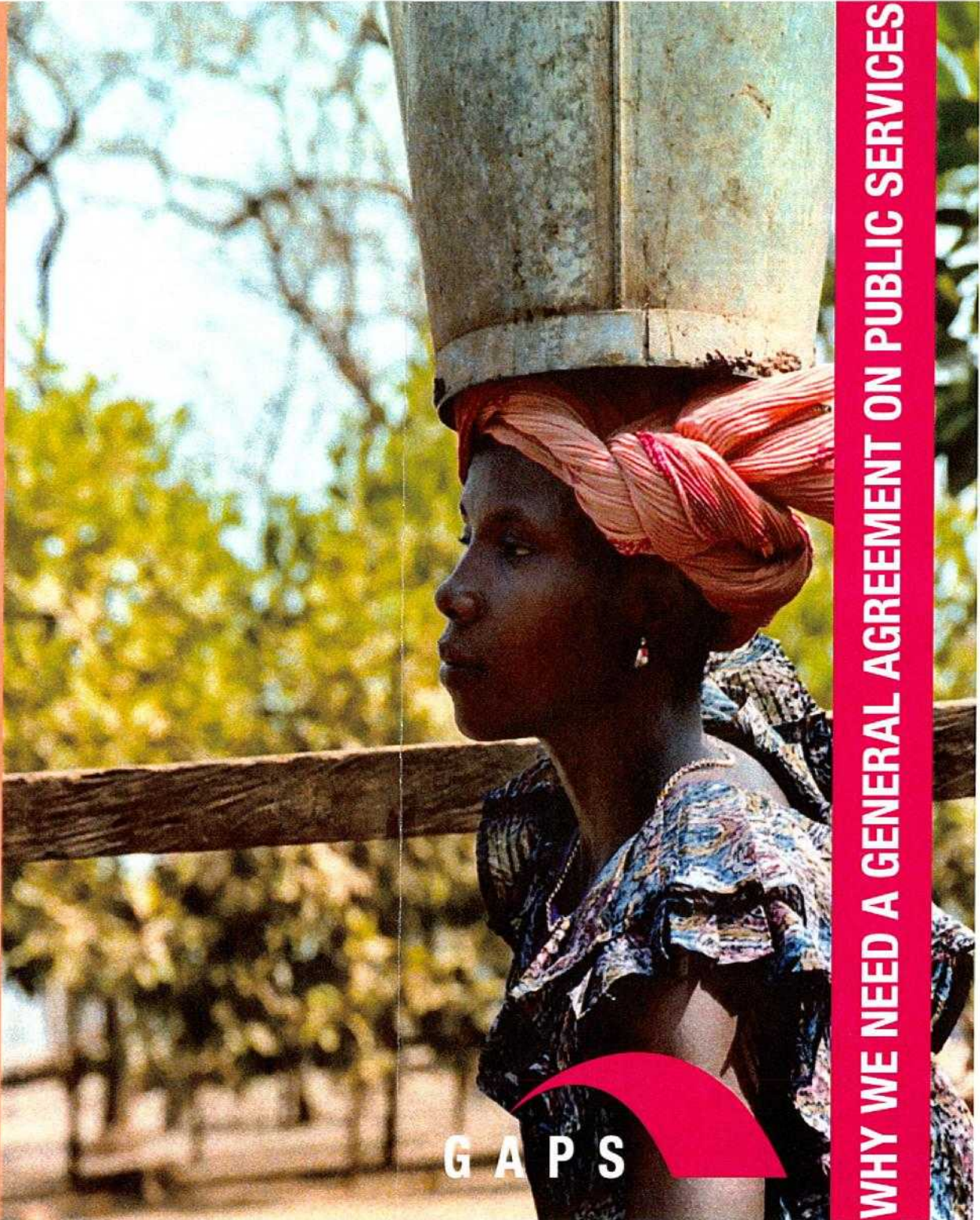
This is the time to get involved!

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