

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ARTICULATES A RETHINK OF PUBLIC SERVICES

BANGALORE: A wide-ranging reimagining of how public services need to be strengthened, in the fields of health, water and energy, emerged from the two day (24-25 Oct) International Conference on 'Re-claiming and Re-imagining Public Services: Perspectives from the Global South' which concluded in the city today. The conference crystallized in the form of a 'Bangalore Declaration on Public Services'.

Researchers, activists, trade unionists and policy makers advocated a series of proposals such as public-community partnerships, strengthening labour-management cooperation within public utilities and links between government and civil society. Re-imagination could include pushing the boundaries of the public sector and introducing criteria such as equity, ecology, transparency, sustainability, fair labour and solidarity. The political agenda to reclaim public services would entail removing the state from the clutches of capital and legitimate democratic takeover of governance of territories, natural human resources and institutions by communities.

The critique of privatization of public services included denouncing the World Bank for making development loans subject to privatization, exposing the tendency of the state to be co-opted by the private sector and trying to camouflage private sector involvement as public sector activities. Discussions were held on the state of health services in rural India as well as rural South Africa. The problems of water access and distribution in different parts of Asia were highlighted. The debate on energy saw articulation of challenges in achieving electricity for all, and the need for innovative energy systems. The Latin American model, where a great deal of electricity is in the public sector, was also cited.

More than 80 participants, from across India and the Global South, participated. Perspectives and articulation of local experiences were brought in from Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh and Delhi while international perspectives were brought in from South Africa, Latin America and Philippines and the UK.

Speakers included Dr. Sharan Prakash Patil -Minister of State for Medical Education, Karnataka who expressed concern about the inequity in the health sector in Karnataka and said that he had proposed six new government medical colleges in different districts of Karnataka and also state-run super specialty hospitals. Some other key speakers were Sujatha Rao- former Union Health Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare ; David Sanders- People's Health Movement founder, South Africa; Daniel Chavez- academician and filmmaker, Uruguay; Ashim Roy, general secretary of the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI), Greg Ruiters, co-director of the Municipal Services Project, Madhuri Krishnawamy-tribal rights activist, and Prabir Purkayastha, NewsClick founder.

The conference was organized by various groups including the Janaarogya Andolana Karnataka, the Peoples Campaign for Right to Water, the Municipal Services Project and the South-South Knowledge Hub at ActionAid India.

