



Ten Years of the State of Democracy Assessment

Before the Unrest

Prologue and Introduction
to the Report



This document is a translation of the *prologue* and *introduction* sections for the report “Diez Años de Auditoría a la Democracia: Antes del estallido”, published in December 2019 by UNDP’s Chile Country Office (available [here](#)). Other studies and reports from the country office are available at <https://www.estudiospnud.cl/>

Prologue

18 October 2019 will mark a turning point in the history of Chile. Public disturbances, acts of violence and serious human rights violations have been added to the myriad social protests and demonstrations the country has experienced. In recent months the range and seriousness of citizens’ demands has changed, as have the responses proposed by the State and private sector to deal with the crisis. Political priorities and the social development agenda have been modified. As these lines are written, people are discussing social projects that aim to improve the living conditions of thousands of Chileans, formulating measures to kickstart the economy and protect jobs, promoting anti-corruption and anti-abuse measures, proposing legal initiatives to restore order, and starting a conversation about replacing the current constitution that until recently seemed unlikely to take place.

Chile has changed, and yet all the factors leading to the biggest social movement since the return to democracy were already present before the unrest began. In order to understand a post-18 October Chile and develop routes out of the crisis – routes that promote sustainable development founded on a robust and participatory democracy – we must understand the characteristics of the

social, cultural, and political order that make up the country today. We must also understand how it arrived at this crossroads, three decades after the return of democracy.

The Report titled *Ten Years of the State of Democracy Assessment: Before the Unrest*, is, in some senses, a piece of archaeology of the recent past: apart from this prologue, the final draft was completed on 17 October 2019, with a view to being published at the beginning of December. The next day the population took to the streets. The team in charge of the Report therefore faced a dilemma: they had in their hands a detailed photograph of the relationship between the ‘old’ Chile and its democratic institutions, while out in the streets there were new demands every day, more diverse repertoires of participation, more questioning of political institutions that have failed to inspire trust and are seen as increasingly distant from people’s actual needs.

Given the context, one option was to revise and rewrite the entire report in order to take the events following 18 October into account in the analysis. The other was to leave the original unchanged but add a prologue contextualising the findings. It was clear from rereading the final draft in the light of the first weeks of



unrest that it provided valuable clues for understanding how this crisis, which had not been on everyone's radar, emerged. So the decision was made to keep the original draft and add a prologue articulating a set of theses that have emerged from the various research projects the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has carried out in Chile over more than twenty years, and that function as keys, as it were, for interpreting the current crisis.

Before describing each of those theses it is important to clear up one central issue: no one could have foreseen the magnitude or weight, and much less the duration of this period of unrest, nor the precise moment in which it was to occur. Because even if there existed plenty of research on the social, cultural, political, and institutional factors characterising the development of Chilean society since the beginning of the 1990s, it was not possible to predict their coming together to unleash massive, sustained collective action such as we have seen. The unrest might have taken years longer to arrive, or it might never have happened at all.

Key Factor 1: The Many Faces of Inequality

The inequality that has historically characterised Chile is the first key to explaining what the country has gone through since the middle of October 2019. It is expressed in many aspects of the country's social life, income inequality being one of the most evident. In the last World Report on Human Development (UNDP, 2019a), of all the 'very developed' countries it is Chile that has the highest

level of income inequality. According to the latest data from the World Bank, it ranks sixteenth among the most unequal countries in the world in terms of household income and occupies an intermediate position among Latin American countries. The concentration of income in the upper part of the distribution is very high: the top 1% of people with the highest income made up a third of the country's total income during 2013, while the top 5% made up more than half the total income (World Bank, 2015). The book *Desiguales* (Unequal, UNDP, 2017a) also showed the enormous number of 'low salary' jobs, which is to say, salaries that do not allow workers to maintain an average sized family above the poverty line. These socioeconomic inequalities interact with others, like those based on gender (UNDP, 2010), ethnicity (UNDP, 2013) and territory (UNDP, 2018a).

But inequality in Chile is not limited to the socioeconomic realm. There are other very marked inequalities felt by the country's population. One that people find particularly disturbing is unequal treatment, expressed as much in their daily interactions with other people as in the kind of treatment they receive from certain institutions. In 2016, four in every ten people claimed they had been mistreated. Almost half of them attributed those experiences to their social class, while four in ten women attributed them to their gender. The reported poor treatment occurred mainly in the workplace, in the street, on public transport and in public services, including health centres. It is closely related to



patterns of socioeconomic stratification and the way cities replicate them through partial segregation. In almost every major urban centre, separate territories have emerged over time for the poor and the rich, and the task of crossing those borders has become difficult for both groups.

Uncertainty about the future is also deeply stratified. Among the middle and lower classes, for example, low pensions are one of people's main fears. For an enormous number of Chileans, retirement is the ghost of future poverty. We can observe something similar when it comes to health: people's confidence that, in case of catastrophic or serious illness, they will have access to rapid, quality care varies according to their position in the social structure. While among the higher classes a majority say that they are very or quite confident of receiving medical attention in such circumstances, among the lower classes less than a fifth of people have that certainty. Educational inequality, on the other hand, means that the education system, besides being the repository of families' hopes for their children's future, is in practice a mechanism for the intergenerational reproduction of inequalities.

All these inequalities generate a growing feeling of injustice. In their daily lives (on public transport, in health centres), people hope to be treated with equal dignity. People use this expectation, which most of the time is not met, to judge how fair (or not) social differences are. This idea of personal dignity, which has taken root strongly in the last decade

in the social imaginary, is a key factor in understanding the current crisis.

Key Factor 2: Increasing Distance Between Elites and the General Population

A second key factor is the widening gap between the elite and the general population, a distance that, in accordance with the UNDP's research, means the former is increasingly held responsible for what is happening in the country. Since 2015, evidence shows that people hold the elite, especially the political and economic elite, responsible for the country's existing inequality and the numerous cases of abuse that have been reported (UNDP, 2015a). There is also a more or less generalised perception that people are living in thrall to a closed socioeconomic elite, which self-replicates by protecting its privileges and therefore puts in jeopardy the meritocratic ideal which, along with the expansion of access to higher education, has been established as a normative principle in Chilean society.

Indeed, high socioeconomic status groups are over-represented in Chile in spaces where decisions are taken. In the period between 1990 and 2016, nearly 75% of State ministers, 60% of senators and more than 40% of deputies had either been to secondary school at one of sixteen elite schools in Santiago or studied one of three degrees at two elite universities (also in Santiago), or both. The gender gap in these spaces is also very marked: 2017's elected Congress may be more diverse, but it remains far from reflecting the composition of society at large. Men



occupy 76% of seats in Congress. This socioeconomic bias in decision-making spaces is reflected in public opinion: seven out of ten people think that business owners have a lot or quite a lot of influence over decisions made in Congress. On the other hand, less than a third think the same of social movements, workers, or indigenous peoples. Moreover, in 2016 nine out of ten people thought that in Chile inequality still exists because it benefits the rich and powerful (UNDP, 2017a).

This disconnection between the elite and the general population is appreciated when the opinions and demands of those who occupy positions of power are compared with those of the rest of society. For example, while 59% of the general population suggested in 2013 that private companies should not be allowed to do business and make profit in areas such as health, education, and basic services, 74% of the elite population thought it should be permitted. Likewise, 45% of the general population thought society needed profound changes, a percentage that dropped to 19% among the elite (UNDP, 2015a).

Key Factor 3: The Transformation of Malaise and a Sense of Urgency

A third key factor in explaining the current crisis is the transformation of malaise and a renewed sense of urgency. The Human Development Report diagnosed the malaise in Chilean society early on: in the version titled *Las paradojas de la modernización* (The Paradoxes of Modernisation, UNDP, 1998), it was suggested that, in the

context of significant economic advancement and the reduction of poverty, Chilean society was experiencing a deep subjective malaise. The report characterised this as a 'mute malaise, diffuse and difficult to explain', which was expressed as a long-term feeling of insecurity in key areas of social life such as health, pensions, unemployment and crime. Later publications from the UNDP reiterated these findings, though now stating that this malaise had become increasingly active (UNDP, 2015a, 2017d).

The Human Development Report (Informe de Desarrollo Humano, IDH) 2015 accounted for this change and put forward two central processes for understanding it. One was that people began to recognise that the feeling was shared, running across society at large. The other was a new sense of urgency about required changes. In 2004, 61% of people surveyed thought that the solutions would take time to be completed; in 2013, 61% thought that the solutions could not wait.

The other two key factors for interpreting the unrest are developed throughout this Report, which looks closely at the political and social conditions resulting in the events of 18 October and the weeks that followed.

Key Factor 4: Institutional Deficits

As we will see in Chapters 1 and 5, when asked about the value of democracy, the general population made clear that it remains their preferred system of governance. Nevertheless, since the 1990s there has been a group, near



20% of the population, who in some circumstances prefers an authoritarian regime. This is one of the highest figures in Latin America. Moreover, in the last ten years the number of people who perceive Chilean democracy to function badly or very badly has increased. This last perception is related to at least two issues.

On the one hand, as we will see in Chapter 2, it has to do with a widespread lack of trust in political institutions, such as Congress and political parties, and in other institutions key to the functioning of the State, such as the courts of law. Although the expansion of mistrust over the course of the decade has extended to other institutions such as the Police, the Armed Forces, and the Catholic church, it is the political institutions that are the least trusted. This is linked to people's negative assessment of their functioning, their ability to take into account citizens' needs and demands, and the perception that corruption has spread to these institutions. The Report titled *Auditoria de la democracia* (State of Democracy Assessment, UNDP, 2014) was already issuing warnings about the deterioration of political parties and the risks this situation posed for representative democracy. Despite all the recent reforms to the political system –such as the end of the binomial system used in legislative elections between 1989 and 2013, and the new law governing party financing– the drop in confidence in political institutions has not been reversed.

Moreover, the proper functioning of democracy is linked in people's minds not only to procedural concerns, such as free

and regular elections, but also to the construction of an inclusive and just society. In this sense, from the perspective of the general population, persistent inequality represents a failure of democracy and its institutions.

Key Factor 5: New Types of Political Involvement

Between the beginning of the political transition and the beginning of the new millennium, political disaffection was transformed into obvious apathy, which failed to put pressure on the political system in any important way. But since the 'penguin revolution' (2006) Chilean society has seen growing politicisation. Not only do more people today feel that they have things to say, but also, from 2008 onwards, more people have participated in varied political actions and the justification of different types of political action has grown, including disruptive types of action such as roadblocks and occupations.

Two key aspects of this politicisation help us to understand the current moment: politicisation is happening at the margins of institutional politics -- in fact, it has increased in inverse proportion to electoral participation, especially following the introduction of voluntary voting -- and it coexists with a low collaboration with, or membership of, social organisations. These two elements give the politicisation a disjointed character. This has been in evidence in the current context. Since 18 October 2019, the social movement has been heterogeneous and fragmented, both with respect to those who are mobilising and with respect to their motivations,



demands, and strategies for action. It has lacked clear leadership and until now has been led neither by the traditional actors of representative democracy, such as political parties, nor by social organisations like labour unions.

Chapters 3 and 4 of this Report show a new citizenry emerging between 2008 and 2018, the product of accelerated cultural transformations and profound changes in political involvement. Likewise, a sector of the population that participates in political action despite no longer recognising themselves either in political parties nor in the left-right ideological axis, has grown considerably. This change has been profound among younger generations.

Obviously, the evidence put forward in this Report doesn't allow us to account for all phenomena observed since mid-October 2019. It does not explain, for example, the particular dynamics of collective action during this crisis, the responses of political parties, the behaviour of the Police and the Military, the acts of violence, or the role of traditional and social media, among other phenomena.

The current social unrest is some of the most powerful since Chile's return to democracy, not only because of the violence we have witnessed, but also because it questions the political,

economic and social arrangements on which the transition to democracy rested. These weeks of social mobilisation have been dizzying, unleashing changes to politico-institutional regulation that in other circumstances would have either been very slow or simply not have happened at all, and they have accelerated long term social processes that were already being revealed by the data presented in this document, although it was impossible to predict their consequences with any precision.

This turning point can be an opportunity for the political sphere to open a process of honest re-engagement with the general population, with the aim of moving towards a new phase of development and building a more sustainable, fair, inclusive and democratic Chile. For this reason, it is centrally important to rebuild people's confidence in institutions, to strengthen channels of participation and to improve the quality of political representation and of the systems for ensuring accountability. It is key, in this regard, that citizens legitimate proposals made by the elite and by institutions. It is also fundamental to move towards a more comprehensive understanding of Chilean society 'before the unrest', one that takes into account the political, economic and social factors that came together to create the current crisis. This Report aims to be a step in that direction.



Introduction

The main aim of this Report is to assess, from the perspective of the general population, the quality of Chilean democracy during the decade 2008–2018. With that aim in mind, it analyses the opinions of the population and their evolution regarding a number of key issues for governability and sustainable development: evaluation of the democratic regime, confidence in institutions, cultural changes taking place during these years, changes in people's ideas about what it means to be a good citizen, support for collective causes and forms of political involvement.

The UNDP aims to achieve various goals with this work. First, it aims to bring about a profound and data-driven diagnosis of democracy in Chile during the period in question. Second, it aims to reveal the transformations the country has undergone over the past decade in terms of political culture and democratic processes. And third, to recognise the key obstacles preventing the strengthening of an effective democracy in order to achieve sustainable and inclusive development.

The theme of this Report responds to a historical preoccupation, in Chile's UNDP office, with the social, cultural, political, and institutional conditions that make the democratic regime viable and sustainable. Proof of this are the multiple publication¹

¹ See, for example, *Auditoría a la democracia. Más y mejor democracia para un Chile inclusivo* (State of Democracy Assessment: More and Better Democracy for an Inclusive Chile, UNDP, 2014); *Informe sobre el desarrollo humano en Chile. Los*

and technical assistance projects led by the UNDP which, over the past ten years, have focused either on proposing improvements and reforms in different areas related to the quality of democracy, or on accounting for its progress and challenges.

The present work is preceded by a long tradition of collective reflection on the part of the UNDP in publications that have analysed the functioning of democracy in Latin America from different perspectives. The reports titled *La democracia en América Latina. Hacia una democracia de ciudadanas y ciudadanos* (Democracy in Latin America: Towards a Citizens' Democracy, 2004), *Democracia/ Estado/ Ciudadanía. Hacia un Estado de y para la democracia en América Latina* (Democracy/ State/ Citizenry: Towards a State of and for Democracy in Latin America, 2008) and *Nuestra democracia* (Our Democracy, UNDP-OEA, 2010) constitute concrete examples of the persistent efforts by the UNDP to widen knowledge of the quality of democracy in the region and contribute towards its consolidation.

In these reports the UNDP showed the heterogeneity of the State in Latin America – in functional and territorial terms – as well as its weakening in much

tiempos de la politización (Human Development in Chile: The Era of Politicisation, 2015a), *Desiguales. Orígenes, cambios y desafíos de la brecha social en Chile* (Unequal: Origins, Changes and Challenges in Chile's social gap, UNDP 2017a), and also UNDP (2015b), (2015c), (2015d), (2017a), (2017b), (2017c), (2018b), (2019b).



of the continent and the problems of political participation and representation, which correlated with low levels of institutional legitimacy and confidence (UNDP, 2004). Likewise, it identified a clear tension between the representative and participatory dimensions of democracy in the region (UNDP, 2010) and between the horizon of equality that democracies promote and the enormous socioeconomic inequality that inhibits a full exercise of rights and the progression from democracies of voters to democracies of citizens (UNDP-OEA, 2010).

For its part, UNDP Chile's last State of Democracy Assessment Report established seven key challenges on the road to deepening and improving the country's democracy: 1) legitimating democracy in order to maintain governability; 2) confronting political inequality, which reinforces socioeconomic inequality, and understanding it as differences in access to a voice and influence; 3) incorporating the general population into democracy through effective participation; 4) improving the quality of political representation; 5) strengthening political parties for a sustainable democracy; 6) improving public opinion of democracy, and 7) generating more and better democracy, with a population that 'values democracy and, however dissatisfied it may be, doesn't question it but rather demands that it improve in order to meet people's expectations' (UNDP, 2014: 45). Given the relevance that the 2030 Agenda

for sustainable development (UN, 2015)² attaches to respect for human rights, the rule of law, governance, transparency and institutional effectiveness, these challenges are taking on renewed validity today.

Why a new report on democracy in Chile? There are many different reasons. First, because the relevance of democracy to sustainable development requires permanent monitoring. Democracy is more than electoral competition for power, and while it is true that its quality depends on the existence of free elections, it also requires the enshrinement of full citizenship rights and conditions that allow for their effective exercise, including a State with the capacity to guarantee the rule of law. What's more, it depends on transparent and efficient institutions, on having a population that is interested in and gets involved with collective decision-making through diverse channels of participation, and a culture that advocates for the respect of human rights for all. Democracy is at once an ideal and a process in permanent construction, not an isolated event that can be finished once and for all. As such, its quality and legitimacy should be examined systemically.

Second, democratic governance in Chile is not exempt from risks and tensions. Some of these go beyond the country's borders, such as the emergence of xenophobic populist leaderships, the growing distrust

² The 2030 Agenda is a global action plan for achieving sustainable development, which takes in seventeen Objectives for Sustainable Development and 169 milestones. It was subscribed to by Chile and 192 other countries and its validity covers the period from 2015 to 2030.



of institutions and the phenomenon of the oligarchisation of politics, which are affecting consolidated democracies. In Latin America, various countries have gone through political crises and in many of them the authorities have been accused of corruption. And in the last decade numerous waves of protests have marked the global landscape, for example, the Arab Spring in 2010 or the conflicts in Ecuador and Hong Kong in 2019. As we will see, Chile is experiencing many of these phenomena, as well as an intensification of social protest (Somma and Medel, 2017). The Report confronts the anxiety that has arisen in recent years over the future of liberal democracies.

Third, Chile is a very different country today to what it was at the beginning of this period. Between 2008 and 2018 important political, legal, and social transformations have taken place. For example, after years of public discussion, an end was put to the binominal electoral system that marked the transition to democracy. After several collusion and corruption scandals, a new electoral financing law was enacted. The balance of political power was also modified following the appearance of new parties and coalitions in parliament, and new regulation introduced regarding the presence of women on Congress electoral lists. In addition, there have been a series of measures in the areas of tax, education and environmental regulation, as well as the approval of an anti-discrimination law, the decriminalisation of abortion on three different grounds, and, since 2015, a Civil Union Agreement that includes same sex couples. The physiognomy of Chilean society has also changed as a

result of social processes such as foreign migration or increased conflict. In cultural terms, then, Chile is in many ways no longer the country it was during the first decade of the century.

This Report is based mainly on the results of a series of five national public opinion surveys carried out during the years 2008 to 2018 and developed by the UNDP's State of Democracy Assessment project.³ The surveys share methodological attributes which make them invaluable tools when it comes to analysing the quality of the country's democracy. First, a number of the questions are derived from international studies -- such as the World Values Survey -- which allows for comparative analysis to be carried out. Others replicate questions used in national questionnaires, such as the Centre for Public Research's surveys. In both cases these are widely validated instruments.

The series of surveys allows us to analyse the evolution of public opinion about the functioning of democracy over time, because, although each version of the survey has had a different focus, and as such the questionnaire has changed over the course of the decade, it has maintained a stable core of questions.

Finally, the sample frames in each version are statistically representative of the

³ The organisms responsible for the 2008 and 2010 versions of the project were the UNDP, the *Centro de Estudios Públicos*, the *Corporación de Estudios para Latinoamérica-CIEPLAN*, *Libertad y Desarrollo*, and *ProjectAmerica*. The 2012 version was run by the UNDP and the *Consortio de Centros de Estudios* (the Consortium of Research Centres). In 2016 and 2018 the organism responsible was the UNDP.



national population during the period. Thus, the datasets allow for comparisons across time of different segments of the population, such as by generation, level of education (which here is used as a proxy for socioeconomic status), sex, residency macrozone, urban and rural zones, political identification and religion, among other variables of interest.

With regard to technical aspects, all versions of the survey have national geographic coverage,⁴ a sample size of approximately 1500 and a maximum sampling error of 2.7 percentage points, taking into account maximum variance and a confidence level of 95%. The universe considered in each one of these surveys corresponds to individuals over eighteen years of age, Chilean or resident in Chile, living in private homes, located in urban and rural areas across all of Chile's regions.⁵

Important findings emerge from the data set analysed in this Report. In 2018, a little over 50% of the population believed democracy was the best form of government. That figure contrasts with what is observed in the rest of Latin America and situates Chile in an advantageous position relative to the region. However, almost a fifth of the population thinks that, in certain circumstances, an authoritarian government might be preferable to a

democratic one. That figure is one of the highest in the region. Similarly, the data reveals an increase in negative assessments of the functioning of democracy, and increased pessimism about its future in the country.

We also note that mistrust in institutions has grown. This tendency has been observed, in the case of political parties, ever since the 1990s, but by the year 2018, following cases of corruption and abuse affecting other institutions too, the lack of confidence had become a generalised phenomenon affecting almost every institution in the country. Despite this, a 'republican ethos' persists, expressed in the fact that there is still a significant portion of the public that values voting, political parties and the rule of law. During the period in question, the group the Report calls 'Democracy Sceptics' has increased in important ways: these are people who legitimate the democratic system but do not trust in any of its central institutions. This attitude is linked to negative public opinion of the functioning of Congress, political parties, and the courts of law.

Similarly, the data reveals that political involvement during the period has undergone deep transformations, which are expressed in the increase in the number of people participating in different kinds of political action, and in the support for more disruptive action. This is happening in a context in which identification with political parties and with the left-right axis is diminishing, membership of social organisations remains low and citizenship ideals such



⁴ Only Difficult to Access Areas, as defined by Chile's National Statistics Institute, are excluded.

⁵ Those who have not lived in the property for more than six months, are in prison, or in retirement homes are excluded. Detailed explanations of the methodologies of each survey can be found in the Appendices of the original Spanish language version of this Report, which is available at www.pnud.cl.

as looking after the environment are being consolidated.

challenges facing democracy as a political system in Chile.

Lastly, it highlights the accelerated and extensive cultural changes the country has undergone. During this period, approval of traditional representations of gender roles has diminished, the percentage of people who approve of same sex marriage and abortion has increased and public opinion of immigration has shifted. Taken together, these changes have made Chile a country that, culturally speaking, is more equal, more respectful of individual liberties and more tolerant than it was in 2008. However, a deeper analysis of these changes also shows some signs of polarisation around morally charged issues, a problem that has already shaken other contemporary democracies: it has produced a growing distance between social groups that hold different values, depending on generation, political orientation, religion, and educational level.

The Report is organised into five chapters. The first analyses the evolution of public opinion about democracy during the decade 2008–2018. The second focuses on trust in institutions. The third analyses cultural changes during the reference period, such as societal ideals and the collective causes that attract greater sympathy in 2018 than in 2008. The fourth chapter takes on transformations in political involvement over the course of those years. Finally, the fifth chapter presents the key sociodemographic factors leading to the changes described in the previous chapters and explores the main



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