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## FROM THE CHILEAN SOCIAL OUTBREAK TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: APPROACHES OF A DEEP CHANGE

**Desde el estallido social chileno a la pandemia COVID-19: aproximaciones de un  
cambio profundo**

**Loreto González Suazo**<sup>1</sup>  
University of Valparaíso Chile  
[loretogonzalezsuazo.20@gmail.com](mailto:loretogonzalezsuazo.20@gmail.com)

### Abstract

In October 2019, Chile began to experience a process of deep social, political and economic crisis that was triggered by the rise in the price of public transport, one of the most frequently quoted phrases during the beginning of the crisis was **“it's not 30 pesos It's 30 years”** that the crisis is not only explained by the increase in transportation, but by the overwhelming sum of inequalities that the Chilean people have been experiencing for more than 40 years, this is expressed by the extreme indebtedness of households, the high delinquency and low wages, the detestable distribution of wealth.

**Keywords:** Social outbreak; Neoliberal crisis model; COVID-19; Public health.

### Resumen

En Octubre de 2019 Chile comenzó a experimentar un proceso de profunda crisis social, política y económica que detonó por el alza en el precio del transporte público, una de las frases más citadas durante el comienzo de la crisis era **“no son 30 pesos, son 30 años”**, indicando que la crisis no solo se explica por el aumento del transporte, sino por la suma agobiante de desigualdades que el pueblo chileno viene experimentando hace más de 40 años, esto se expresa por el endeudamiento extremo de los hogares, la alta morosidad y bajos salarios, la detestable distribución de la riqueza.

**Palabras clave:** Estallido social; Crisis modelo neoliberal; COVID-19; Salud pública.

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: Loreto González Suazo, Universidad de Valparaíso, [loretogonzalezsuazo.20@gmail.com](mailto:loretogonzalezsuazo.20@gmail.com).

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to describe the main events that Chile has experienced during the past October 2019 regarding the citizen "Social Outburst" and how this "Social Outburst" has been deepened with the COVID-19 pandemic. This challenge requires revision efforts, since addressing issues of social crisis, legitimacy crisis and pandemic times need special attention and care.

It has been this interest in this article to describe the main facts from the **Chilean social outbreak to the COVID-19 pandemic**, in order to approach a profound change that our society is undergoing, which allows us to stress the logics of the prevailing neoliberal model and identify key dimensions to rethink another society for Chile.

## 2. GENERAL OBJECTIVE

Describe the main events that Chile has experienced during October 2019 regarding the "Social Outburst" and how the "Social Outburst" has shown the inequalities of a Political and Economic System that in COVID-19 pandemic has deepened.

## 3. DEVELOPMENT OF THE RESEARCH

### 3.1. The Beginning of It All: Our Context

For more than 40 years Chile has been the scene of a profound economic and social experiment. During the military dictatorship in September 1973 and indeed the entire time it lasted, Chile experienced a bloody repression of political and social leaders, Pérez (2014, p. 42) notes that "civilian ministers of the military government were able to brutally clear all institutional obstacles and implement, governing through decree laws, an economic model completely alien to the Chilean tradition". Many of the social policies and formulas conceived by the neoliberal theorists that were installed in Chile during the military dictatorship, were applied for the first time in Chile and from there they were preached and installed in Chilean life. This made Chile, a country with a small population of sixteen million in 2012, and with an essentially minor economy despite its undeniable natural resources, become a true model for the new world right wing. According to Pérez (2014, p. 43) the "success" of this model that began to be installed during the dictatorship and was deepened during the governments of the Concertación was only covering up an "enormous social catastrophe for the broadest sectors of the Chilean people, and a mode of gross depredation and plundering of its riches".

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Perez (2014, p. 43) points out that between the years 2006 and 2011, large foreign mining companies had taken more than \$160 billion in profits from Chile. Perez (2014, p. 43) states that according to data from the Internal Revenue Service (SII), 99% of Chileans live on an average salary of US\$680 (\$339,680), the other 1% on an average salary of US\$27,400 (\$13,703,000), i.e. 40 times higher"

These data shown by the author allow us to understand the fraud hidden behind the macroeconomic discourse, what we will try to do here is to describe what this deepening of the neoliberal model has consisted of during the last 30 years in order to link it to the demonstrations and the Chilean awakening of October 2019 and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **3.2 The First Chilean Neoliberal Stage.**

The first evident fact of the Chilean neoliberal stage was the privatization of state assets and the reduction of state spending. All this occurred with the military violence that characterized the military dictatorships in Latin America in the 1970s, on the other hand Pérez (2014, p.44) states that the "civil corruption that, protected by that position of strength, privatized and denationalized the wealth and state productive apparatuses after decades of developmentalist economies". What the author indicates is the first approach that then becomes much deeper in a second stage that is related to the consolidation of the neoliberal model as an exemplary model to follow and that it is necessary to criticize and analyze, since it is present to this day showing that Chile already needs another form or social pact, which is being gestated for the next 50 years.

It is necessary to expose and denounce above all to leave the uncovered, According to Perez (2014, p. 44) states that:

one of the main myths of the prevailing anti-neoliberal critique: the neoliberal model was NOT imposed, nor was it made effective and viable, starting and through military dictatorships. Its true effectiveness and depth has been progressively implemented through civilian governments, by "democratic" means, and by political coalitions claiming to be "center-left".

In this sense the shock policy mentions Perez (2014, p. 45) is related to the following:

1. Precarization of employment policies and weakening of labor rights
2. Privatization policies in the branches of production in the hands of the State
3. A general policy of denationalization of natural resources
4. A general policy of liberalization of world trade, of tariff opening, congruent with the new forms of organization distributed at world level.

This shock policy mentioned by the author is nothing more than for example the precarization of labor, which is presented as a "promotion" or "generation of new jobs" to young people, women, poor, recently graduated university professionals, are creating a trend, accompanied by a pompous propaganda campaign, According to Perez (2014, p. 46) states that:

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in which the labor rights traditionally acquired through prolonged struggles of the workers are weakened by sectors. A propaganda that constantly claims to favor employment, to make the economy viable, to open new possibilities for the economic advancement of individuals and families, without taking any responsibility whatsoever for the quality of the employment favored, nor for the low wage levels involved, nor for the absolute lack of labor and union rights that surround them.



Figure 1. Salaries of male and female paid workers in Chile

Source: Fundación Sol "Los verdaderos sueldos en Chile" based on NESI 2016.

### 3.3 The Chilean Awakening: Social Revolt and Health Emergency COVID-19

Soublette (2020, p. 10), points out that this context now covers the whole world, equalizes all social events in the same phenomenology where cultural differences that once distinguished peoples from each other by their customs and habits have disappeared today. This disappearance is what is Chile, has lived for the last 40 years in a regime where big capital has managed to turn social rights into business areas, Perez (2014, p. 51) points out "that had to be provided and guaranteed by the State". This commodification and privatization of basic services resulting from these policies and that fall directly on users, the abandonment of the State of these essential goods, begins to be evident in the social movements of 2006 with the penguin revolution, 2011 with the spring of Chile and the university awakening by the excesses of profit in education, end up deepening and culminate in the Chilean awakening of October 2019 that apparently has no turning back, where it is absolutely clear that the citizenship has four main sensitive areas that are common to them: **public transportation, education, health and pensions.**

These four sensitive areas are what we intend to address during this section and also begin to describe and analyze them in light of the COVID-19 Health Emergency. Well, "**Chile woke up**", "**Crisis in Chile in 2019**", and "**Revolution of the 30 pesos**": This social awakening happened in Chile, had as a trigger a series of inequalities in the access to the public transportation system, which was called the "30 pesos revolution",

initiated this by high school students, which gave rise to the generalized uprising of the citizenship, which had been experiencing more than 40 years of social, political, and economic inequalities, which are to this day protected by the fundamental charter created in Civic-Military Dictatorship.

Once the awakening of the Chilean citizenship had begun, the government of Sebastián Piñera ***responded to the social discontent and demonstrations with repressive measures, taking the military to the streets for several days***. These first attitudes of the government of Sebastián Piñera to address the social unrest that Chile was beginning to experience, showed that from the interstices of civil society pre-announcements are made every so often of such unrest as Madariaga (2019, p. 146) points out that it was: "the penguin revolution, the struggles of the Mapuche people against the State and the powerful timber industry for their land and the freedom of their loncos, leaders and imprisoned communards, the massive marches of university students for the right to education, the citizens against the AFP, women for gender equality and their sexual and reproductive rights", have been the cumulative events that have exploded social unrest and show the strength of Chilean social movements, which emerge and articulate themselves as social phenomena become more complex. In these almost already nine months since the Chilean social outburst and that now only the "confinement" is maintained due to the COVID-19 health emergency, we can visualize that now there is a new public subject, which has become a relevant social actor with a will of power and decision for change that inaugurates a new construction of a social conscience, According to Madariaga (2019, p. 147) this is a "rationality that orients citizen action towards critical reflection and the gestation of a final demand: a new social pact through constituent assembly and new political constitution". We must hope that this subject that is in full construction of itself and of the new social pact of which the author speaks, can achieve the materialization of its transformative purposes.

### **3.4. Social Crisis and Public Health Effects**

As we have been describing, the Chilean social crisis has undoubtedly greatly affected the public health and mental health of all Chilean men and women. The national character of the social outburst that has been able to summon an entire territory, where its strength and multitudinous participation of different civil society organizations. According to Madariaga (2019, p. 150) "important sectors of the citizenry have been exposed in a sustained way to conditions of maximum psycho-emotional demand and to the daily danger of being affected by police repression". These psycho-emotional effects that are now aggravated in the "confinement" by the COVID-19 health emergency, show us that Chile is living two deep transformations, one of them related to the social outbreak and more than 40 years of social, political and economic inequalities and the second crisis of COVID-19 health emergency that makes visible and increases even more the uneasiness of the citizenship. In this sense we can see that Chile is going through a double period of crisis which according to Madariaga (2019, p. 150) is visualized in "traumatic events of different types and level of severity, which affect three-dimensionally the corporeality (its biological, psychological and social aspects), just as they are projected in an expansive way from the individual subject."

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These effects of both the social crisis and the effects of the COVID-19 health emergency are very worrying because Chileans have been exposed to processes of traumatic violence that affect society as a whole.

This repressive violence experienced by Chilean society is of a cyclical type where, according to Madariaga (2019, p. 150), "policies of control and social submission are reproduced, cycles that are not born with the experience of Pinochet and State terrorism, but are inaugurated with the colonial invasion and are repeated from time to time since the foundation of the Chilean Nation State". Thus, we can see that Chile has experienced an archeology of historical violence, which is installed in social subjectivities and also in the production of discomfort and disease.

We have lived more than half a century an experience of extreme social traumatization. Madariaga (2019, p.150) states that this violence was:

Inaugurated with the 1973 civil-military coup, which installed almost two decades of State terrorism, the generations that were victims of that historical period carry with them a burden of illness and death that transforms them into vulnerable groups, especially those individuals and families who experienced severe traumas (torture, murder and disappearance of family members, exile, political imprisonment, etc.).

### **3.5. The Management of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Chile**

If we are linking that Chile from October 2019 to early March 2020 has been experiencing a series of profound changes, regarding the management of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has been handled during the first months that the cases of contagion were detected, we can point out according to Heiss (2020, p. 3) that "the initial reluctance of the government to take measures of social isolation seemed to suggest that it would follow the British model of "herd" immunity, that is, to seek that the exposure of the population to the virus would generate immunity."

As can be seen, in Chile the main strategy to manage the pandemic was to have the population itself regulate its mobility in order to prevent the spread of the virus. However, almost two weeks after the beginning of the pandemic, the authorities began to give guidelines and intermediate solutions, which meant following a path of gradual and episodic confinement, unlike countries such as New Zealand or Norway, which called their population to mandatory and nationwide confinement.

In this way Heiss (2020, p. 3) points out that "on March 16, President Sebastián Piñera, accompanied by the Minister of Health, Jaime Mañalich, announced the entry into Phase 4 of the pandemic, with 156 people infected and the impossibility of tracing the origin of the infection", an impossibility that was very complex to trace because there were not enough resources and health infrastructure to start with the PCR analysis, making the traceability of the virus complex, This was also coupled with the fact that the government, due to this Phase 4, began to close borders, suspend classes in

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educational establishments, begin with mandatory quarantines for people already infected, reduce the number of people in public events and sanitization of public transport, and then two days later decreed a State of Constitutional Exception of Catastrophe.

After the first month of the pandemic in Chile, the first analyses have suggested according to Heiss (2020, p. 3):

that the country has controlled COVID-19 more effectively than others in the region. Minister Mañalich has said that there are enough PCR tests and mechanical ventilators to deal with the peak of the disease curve. These teams would reach 3,300, if those in the private sector are included.

In fact, in March, the investment bank J.P. Morgan pointed out in its report entitled "Chile vs. COVID-19: initial measures show encouraging results, this report mainly points out the strengths that Chile had when implementing the strategies to control the pandemic, according to Heiss (2020, p. 4):

early preventive measures and that a high level of testing for the presence of the virus has been applied, which would give figures closer to the reality of those of other countries, he adds that there is a high number of infected people, but with low lethality. As an example, he mentions that eight days after the first case there were only seven victims, compared to 35 in Italy, 84 in Spain and 57 in Brazil.

However, in contrast to this optimistic reality pointed out by the report and the Chilean authorities, there are also analysts who have a much more pessimistic view regarding the low lethality of the virus in Chilean cases. One of the most critical voices regarding the management of the pandemic in Chile has been Dr. Iskia Siches, president of the Chilean Medical Association, who has been critical of the government's handling of the pandemic. In this context, in the media, the president of the Medical Association stated that <sup>2</sup>"the government strategy of diagnosing to contain the expansion of COVID-19 is impossible to implement by force because our doctors, who are located throughout the health care network, have not reported that there are relevant problems of saturation of the diagnostic capacity and that the protocols mandated by the health authority are not being applied, not because of contempt but because of implementation problems". In fact, what was stated by the president of the Medical Association shows that the Chilean medical community, at the beginning of the pandemic, was concerned because the medical association pointed out that they did not have all the information to collaborate with the government.

The data provided were incomplete, inconsistent and had a tremendous lack of transparency that had not been seen in the institutional history of Chilean public health. Heiss (2020, p. 4) states that:

at a more advanced stage, the health system could be saturated, which would generate two additional phenomena: less testing and increased lethality. In other

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://www.poderyliderazgo.cl/presidenta-del-colegio-medico-califica-de-fracaso-estrategia-del-gobierno-por-coronavirus/> accessed August 19, 2020.

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words, "it is not possible to foresee how the situation will evolve when cases spread among more vulnerable groups of the population.

As can be seen, both the statements made by the president of the medical association and by the author Heiss, show that the pandemic and its management during the first months in Chile was a late and somewhat clumsy management, given that even the Chilean public health professionals themselves were aware of the collapse of the health systems from the beginning, that is, according to Heiss (2020, p. 4) the same "health workers complained about the lack of basic supplies such as masks. As of April 8, it was known that 286 health workers were infected, most of them belonging to the public health network" (Heiss, 2020, p. 4).

Now, with respect to the capacity of the health system Heiss (2020, p. 5) states that:

The confusing announcement of a purchase of mechanical ventilators whose arrival date is uncertain has been criticized, as well as the scant information on how decisions regarding the management of COVID-19 are made. For example, the government has indicated that the peak infection rate will occur between late April and early May, but has not shared the criteria used for that forecast.

As a consequence of the above, the COVID-19 pandemic in Chile is still in process <sup>3</sup>Tuesday, August 18, 2020, the Ministry of Health reports 1,336 new cases of COVID-19, of which 846 correspond to symptomatic persons and 443 have no symptoms. In addition, 47 PCR Positive tests were recorded but were not reported. Regarding the number of deaths, the report indicates that <sup>4</sup>The total number of people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the country is 388,885.

Of this total, 15,869 patients are in the active stage of the virus. The number of recovered cases is 362,440. As for deaths, according to information provided by the Department of Health Statistics and Information (DEIS), in the last 24 hours 33 deaths were recorded due to causes associated with COVID-19. The total number of deaths amounts to 10,546 in the country".

### 3.6. The Economic and Social Measures of COVID-19 in Chile

At the same time that the government was trying to manage the pandemic and keep the curve under control, the economic and social measures in the context of the pandemic also began to be important when carrying out the relevant social analyses. In this sense, many Latin American countries have had to resort to the IMF (International Monetary Fund) to seek resources and contain this health and social crisis, however in the case of Chile, these measures do not involve increasing public spending, but the main government announcements have been focused on increasing access to credit in private banks, reallocate funds to the health sector from other items <sup>424</sup>of the fiscal wallet and use individual funds from unemployment insurance. In this sense, Chile has

<sup>3</sup> Source: [www.minsal.cl](http://www.minsal.cl) August Report COVID-19 Ministry of Health of Chile

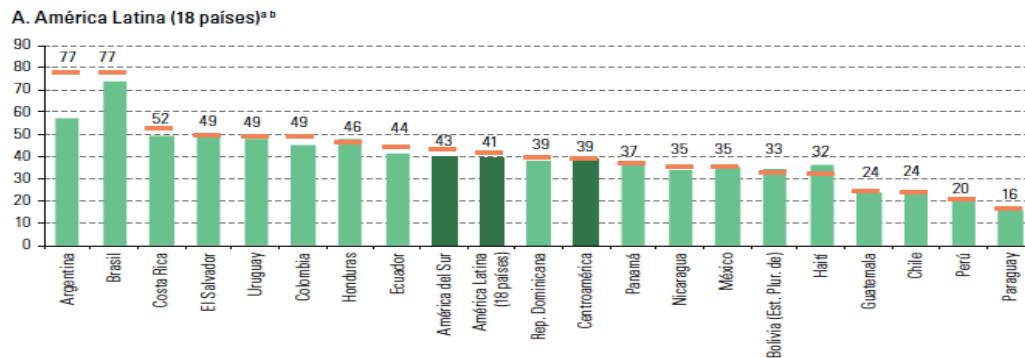
<sup>4</sup> Source: [www.minsal.cl](http://www.minsal.cl) August Report COVID-19 Ministry of Health of Chile



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not resorted to foreign aid or indebtedness to contain this pandemic, as explained in the following chart:

Gráfico VII.5  
América Latina y el Caribe: deuda pública bruta del gobierno central, 2017-2018  
(En porcentajes del PIB)



*Latin<sup>5</sup> America and the Caribbean: central government gross public debt, 2017-2018  
(In percent of GDP) Figure 2.*

**Source:** Own elaboration

This graph shows that the gross public debt in the case of Chile corresponds to 24% of its GDP, one of the lowest in the region (ECLAC, 2019, p. 86). This gives us to infer that Chile has a margin to get into debt and be able to face the pandemic without resorting to the IMF. The treasury could, for example, according to Heiss (2020, p.5) issue:

Debt in international financial markets. It could also resort to the 12.4 billion dollars it has in the Economic and Social Stabilization Fund, which exists precisely to avoid indebtedness in crisis situations, and which is equivalent to about 4% of GDP.

However, the measures announced so far are timid compared to other Latin American countries.

In this sense, the government of Chile, during the month of March proposed an economic plan to be able to face the COVID-19, which had three main axes: the first was to reinforce the health system budget, the second axis was to protect family income through unemployment insurance and the delivery of 58 dollars per family, people who were teleworking could receive part of their unemployment insurance as long as there was an agreement between the employer and there was a mandate from the health authority, the third axis was oriented to small and medium enterprises, considering tax measures that referred to postponement of payments.

While the pro-government sector celebrated these measures adopted by the government of Sebastián Piñera, Heiss (2020, p. 8) states that some economists such as:

<sup>5</sup> Source: ECLAC 2019: Preliminary Overview of the Economies of Latin America and the Caribbean.

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Andrea Repetto objected that the payment from the worker's unemployment insurance is not an expense but a loan, which will come from the individual insurance accounts of each worker. *"This policy does not provide security because if they later lose their job, they will not be able to finance their unemployment, since they used the funds during the crisis to pay their own salary,"* she said. On the other hand, for those who do not have unemployment insurance because they do not have labor contracts, the only benefit is the bonus that will be delivered once. *"Those people will necessarily have to go out to work and the quarantine effort is going to be ineffective."*

After this economic plan was announced, the opposition did not delay in proposing another economic plan which consisted of 4 main axes which are related to: establishing an emergency basic income for all families for the duration of the pandemic; postponing payments and prohibiting cuts in basic services, postponing interest-free credit installments and temporarily controlling prices of some products to avoid hoarding; a third axis has to do with state support to companies including loans with state guarantee for small and medium enterprises; and finally prohibiting the dismissal of workers and injecting state resources in strategic companies in exchange for state participation in them.

This opposing plan to the one proposed by the government required an unprecedented amount of fiscal resources, so the opposition considered according to Heiss (2020, p. 9) that:

Chile was prepared to go into debt" to reduce the costs of the health crisis. Once this has passed, a new progressive fiscal pact is needed to reduce the larger fiscal deficit that will be generated. "But if bold action is not taken today, future spending will be higher and will be accompanied by painful social costs.

From the above statements it can be deduced that the Chilean government announcements have sought to moderate the recessive effects brought about by the pandemic, without incurring in public expenditure such as would be necessary to keep families in total confinement. In some ways the responsibility of the Chilean state has been weak in the sense that it has not put all its efforts to safeguard the health of the population, and in addition this crisis has been coupled with an ongoing constitutional process that has put Chile on the verge of profound change.

### **3.7. Approaching the October 2020 Plebiscite**

As we have seen in the previous statements, and how the pandemic has put everything on hold in our country, we are approaching a new historic moment in our history and it is the one related to the upcoming plebiscite of October 2020, which was born in the midst of the social and political upheaval that we also experienced in October 2019. This is a historical process of relevance even since the return to democracy in 1990. As a result of the social upheaval on November 15, 2019 political parties across the ideological spectrum agreed on a set of proposals to make possible the change of the 1980 Constitution, imposed during the Dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. Many

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sectors point out that the effects of the pandemic could weaken the constituent process due to the fact that the pandemic could take the limelight away from the plebiscite and it could even happen that it will increase the government's approval.

However, it seems unlikely that the demands for structural change in Chilean society will disappear as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; indeed, in a context of economic recession, malaise and social discontent with political institutions and their elites, the constituent process could emerge with greater force.

Therefore, it becomes difficult to foresee what will happen with the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing constituent process, we could think that the COVID-19 could reinforce a structural change that Chile has been waiting for more than 40 years and we could also think that this pandemic exposes the evident weakness of the Chilean social protection systems, it revealed the miserable pensions of our elderly, the precariousness of work and its almost null labor rights, to mention aspects that have been at the center of the debate since the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Chile took place in a context of full social outbreak, where citizens had and still have a deep social malaise expressed by the crisis of legitimacy of institutions and their ruling elites, the profound inequalities of a political, economic and cultural system that has profited for years from the labor force of Chilean men and women where individualism and consumption was the way of living and existing in Chile. The Chilean people have awakened to all that and much more. But if we enter the post-pandemic scenario that if at some point we will have to face, it is possible to think of the following: social demobilization could favor the right-wing forces with a view to the October plebiscite, in the understanding that these right-wing forces build a unity discourse that helps to get out of the health crisis process, it is possible that the support for a new Constitution will suffer. A second possible scenario is related to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic is under control and may cease to be the focus in our society, the opposition forces may resume and point to the weaknesses of the market economy, the fragmentation and inequalities of the health system and the lack of universal policies that protect the social rights of Chileans. If this happens we will see a process of profound change and the concrete and real creation of a new social pact for Chile. However, we are still in a process of parallel walking and we have no certainty of what will happen, what is possible to assure is that in a context of enormous discontent, limitations of the system and the adverse results that have been visualized, could exacerbate the social discontent and increase the reformist pressures.

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### AUTHOR

#### **Loreto González Suazo**

Sociologist, Master in Education, mention in Educational Curriculum, with proven experience in higher education, specifically in the training of teachers and students in teaching/learning processes in Higher Education. I have a background in the design and implementation of social research in areas such as higher education and social research methodologies. Ability to work in teams and solve complex problems. Ability to communicate complex information in a simple way, through the management and handling of data by means of programs such as Excel and SPSS. Ability to create and design pedagogical/audiovisual resources through ICT information and communication technologies, such as: Screencastify, Screencast; Virtual Classroom/questionnaire. [loretogonzalezsuazo.20@gmail.com](mailto:loretogonzalezsuazo.20@gmail.com)