

# **LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE IN CHILE.**

Brief reflections for the LPSA meeting. March 2024.

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## **1) Positive developments in local democracy and inclusive democracy in Chile:**

### **1.1. Laws and public policies in matters of citizen participation in public policies from the local level or with local impact:**

- Municipalities with citizen participation ordinances,
- Local citizens councils (consultative),
- Local referendums and other instances.
- Environmental impact assessment system, which has an important local component, both institutional and civil society,
- Territorial planning in the same line.
- Therefore, political decentralization, elections and local democracy still matter, but in order to have a lasting effect need to be accompanied by administrative and financial measures as well.

**1.2. laws and public policies on access to public information.** This has allowed enormous access to information, transparency, etc., which is positive and represents a paradigm shift in local governance.

### **1.3. Inclusion of marginalized communities**

- Consultation on indigenous peoples under ILO Convention 169 (very important in terms of indigenous inclusion).
- Specially relevant in certain regions, such as Araucania and Rapa Nui Island.

**1.4. Digital democracy:** internet access and usage has grown exponentially in the country in last 20 years and so has application of different digital platforms by diverse public institutions, including local governments.

### **1.5. Inter-municipal cooperation**

- In these areas, the existing Municipalities' Associations (AChM and AMUCH) have played a significant role as a platform for sharing information, policy learning as well as influencing the central government and the Congress in policy making and law making.

## **2) Challenges/gaps:**

2.1. In terms of citizen participation, the **strengthening of local and regional executives.**

- To some extent occurs at the expense or at least has not been duly compensated or balanced by the strengthening of deliberative bodies.
- Municipal councils and regional councils are affected in their capacity to channel citizen participation and serve as a deliberative forum at the local or regional level.
- This also affects the representative/pluralistic dimension of local democracy, as well as the effective implementation of the competences of these bodies in terms of resources for decision making, oversight capacities, and so on.
- In fact, in terms of oversight, recent corruption scandals at local governments have highlighted the need to construct a more robust system of financial control, particularly considering the increasing contracting out of public goods and services to private entities.

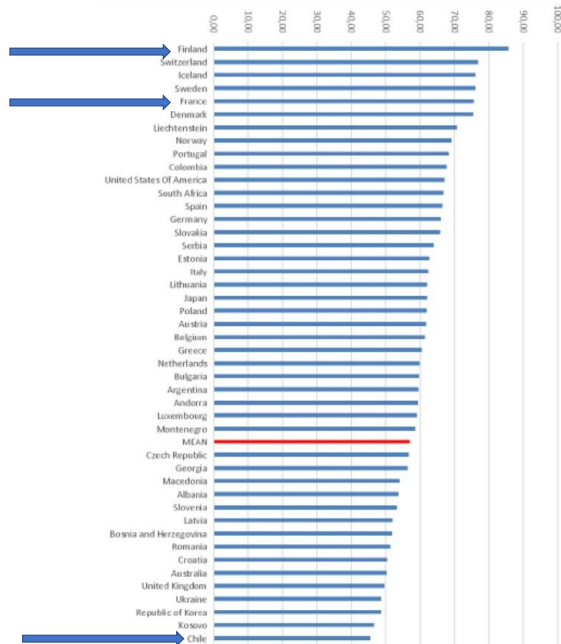
### **2.2. Profound territorial inequalities,**

- This affects the practical implementation of these institutional/legal changes of the last 15 to 10 years. Significant advances in the law, but with limited and unequal implementation.
- Some municipalities have made progress, but others little. The vast majority very little or almost nothing in practice.
- Much depends on the different institutional capacities and resources (human, financial, etc.).
- Territorial inequalities are reflected not only in terms of State capacity, but also in terms of the strength, institutionalization and resources of the civil society, particularly in certain remote areas, and in certain parts of the country. This can be illustrated by the severe divisions in terms of north versus south; rural versus urban; remote and isolated areas versus connected cities. This impacts the real use of semi direct democracy instruments such as local level referendums, the participation and active involvement in local advisory councils, the feasibility of vertical checks and balances at the local level, and so on.
- Therefore, there a number of examples of “best practices” throughout the country, but there is lack of overarching policies for learning from these practices and adapting them to poorer municipalities. Even if they are replicated, often they are not sufficiently institutionalized/embedded in permanent structures and the day to day workings of local governments, hence having a limited temporal scope.

### **2.3. A sort of "efficacy gap"**

- Citizens do not perceive the real impact of many of these developments in terms of local participation (except perhaps with regards to access to information).
- This can be explained by different reasons: reduced capacities of local governments and especially of the regional governments so that the areas of citizen participation are not so transcendent; low level of local autonomy (in terms of budgets, social policies, etc.; see figure below).

Figure 5.15: Local Autonomy Index: Country Ranking, mean 2015-2020



Fuente: Ladner, Keuffer y Bastianen 2021

- Also, this translates into problems of multilevel coordination and IGR: often, the decisions of local/regional governments are altered by the national level, which affects the efficacy of citizen participation.

- On the other hand, if these participatory innovations are to have a real impact on our societies, they need to be considered in the larger scheme of democratic politics. Social movements need to engage with political elites and political parties. As Eisenstadt, Levan and Maboudi (2017) show, well-developed social movements are necessary but far from sufficient: they benefit from mediation, both from interest groups, as well as from political parties. Regardless of the wave of criticisms they have been facing in recent decades, political parties are still indispensable for the democratic process (Szmulewicz 2019). This is why it is all the more concerning that electoral participation at local level is much lower than at national elections. Democratic innovations need to be connected to the representative political system, and embedded in day to day practices of local governance.

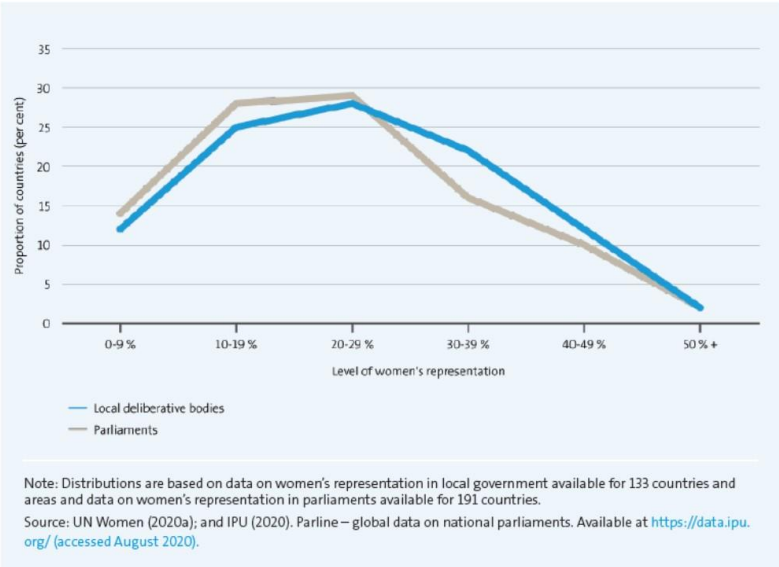
- Consequently, connections are vital across and between all parts of a democratic system: they not only facilitate the inclusion and representation of diverse perspectives and arguments but are also required for achieving democratic legitimacy at a large scale (Boswell et al. 2016). Collective decisions can claim legitimacy only if and when citizens have communicative connections with

each other, with the elected representatives who serve them, and with the administrative bodies that ultimately oversee public policies and implement public services. In theory, then, connections between the disparate settings and practices of democracy help modern political systems strike a balance between inclusion, efficiency, and legitimacy (Dryzek 2001; Parkinson 2003).

### 2.4. Gender gap

- A first step is the necessity to recognize the magnitude of the challenges and their complexities. For instance, a [recent paper by Ionica Berevoescu and Julie Ballington](#) (2021) acknowledged that despite major gains in democratic innovation and inclusion, women still remain highly underrepresented in politics, with over three quarters of the world depicting less than 30% of women incorporated in parliament. This is visible both at the national and local deliberative bodies (see figure below).

**FIGURE 1**  
Percentage distribution of countries by level of women's representation in local deliberative bodies and parliaments, as of 1 January 2020



Source: Ionica Berevoescu and Julie Ballington, 2021.