Water crisis and social inequalities

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I was born in Chile, a country that simultaneously has everything and nothing. A country with a variety of climates, fruits, vegetables, and landscapes, the largest mines of copper and lithium in the world, and the huge Pacific Ocean. But the only thing the Chilean people actually possess is hope. Almost the whole country was sold to private and foreign companies during periods of colonisation and dictatorship. But we, Chilean poor and middle-class people, believe that working together in communities and in solidarity will create a better future for new generations. We hope and work in solidarity because the Chilean state provides no social warranty; that is

to say, in Chile, everything is in private hands. Even when we work 45 hours a week for a low salary (compared to other countries), we must keep working to ensure that we have access to education, proper healthcare, food, water, shelter, etc. Even the pension system is private, and a lifetime of work is no guarantee for a life of dignity after the age of 67.

The pandemic situation, together with climate change, is causing a huge crisis for the lower- and middle- class families in Chile. There is no social safety net, but the lockdown has meant that people are not allowed to work, and so they have lost their incomes and cannot afford to educate their children, to eat, or to access basic sanitation services. The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that sanitation and proper hygiene are essential to contain the current

pandemic. In a country where the agricultural sector accounts for 85-90 per cent of water use and is crucial to the economy, how can water be protected when it is a private resource? How can sanitation and access to drinkable water be ensured in a context of water scarcity and a global pandemic?

A root cause of the ongoing water crisis in Chile is the neoliberal policies and experiments that have been imposed since the dictatorship in the 80s. In this country, water management and control is in private hands and climate change is exacerbating the ongoing crisis. This translates into water being a privilege that private companies benefit from: more than 80 per cent of water management is directed towards mining, livestock, agriculture (mainly avocados and vineyards), and industrial production. In other words, water management is not focused on public consumption or viewed as a public right. Furthermore, there is no evidence that climate change has been taken into account in Chilean public policies, nor has there been an assessment of the private sector and its impact on water management. Both should be considered in policymaking.

Since October 2019, there have been massive protests against the systematic privatisation and social inequality, particularly evident in the National Constitution, that are the legacy of seventeen years of dictatorship. So, what hope is there for us? People helping each other and protesting against systemic exploitation as an effect of historical colonial processes, enhanced by the neoliberal economic model and its racialised and patriarchal politics. The systemic oppression Chilean people have experienced in a variety of ways, characterised by racial, gender, and class divisions rooted in colonisation, is furthered by the globalised neoliberal economic system. People are protesting against a system that is more worried about production and accumulation of private capital for a world's minority, rather than focusing on sustaining life. While long overdue, it is time to think ahead and apply new socio-economic models, such as degrowth and circular economy, with a renewed focus on local communities, eco-systemic equilibrium, and inter-species life rather than accumulation in the global circuit. In Chile, solidarity and empathy are helping people to survive this crisis with empowered women and indigenous peoples taking care of neighbourhoods and cooking common pots. This is our hope. Solidarity and empathy are our hope for a better and more just future for all beings.