Inequality and the Socioeconomic Dimensions of Mobility in Protests: The Cases of Quito and Santiago

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Abstract
Mobility is a multifaceted concept with social, economic and political implications. This article reflects on the role of mobility and its relation to precarity in the emergence of protests in both Quito (Ecuador) and Santiago (Chile) in 2019 by examining the interplay between mobility and inequality. It argues that the announced increases in transport and fuel costs in Chile and Ecuador exposed obstacles to spatial and social mobility and existing inequalities. Although the protests arose in response to the announced reduction in fuel subsidies and possible increases in transport costs, we propose that they reflect a deeper issue, relating to the vulnerability of the livelihoods of significant segments of the population, despite the fact that both Quito and Santiago have seen improvements in several poverty and inequality indicators in recent years. We discuss how mobility and geography relate to patterns of structural marginalisation that are not necessarily evident from aggregate economic indicators, and how understanding inequality in terms of the ‘right to the city’ and access to public services explain the protests in both countries as a response to existing segregation and deep-seated inequalities.

Policy Implications

- Policy makers must consider the multifaceted nature of spatial segregation if they wish to understand how access to transport and spatial mobility relate to mechanisms that produce and reproduce inequalities and exclusions in countries with high levels of social stratification.
- A uniform account of the presence or absence of social and economic rights within a given population is not available to policy makers. They should therefore be aware that their information and data are as fragmented as the experiences and accounts of precarity.
- Policy makers need to acknowledge that although poverty reduction is necessary, it is not sufficient as a way to tackle inequality and marginalisation. At best, poverty reduction amounts to palliative care. The assumption that poverty reduction equals inequality reduction can result in targeted social protection programmes of poverty reduction and income support based on a failure to understand the structures that create and perpetuate differences along lines of race, gender and class.
- Publicly funded and universally provided social policies (universalism) may be better vehicles for social equity and cohesion. By contrast, narrowly targeted policies and programmes may, in fact, be socially divisive and ineffective.

There is a growing understanding that policy priorities should move beyond promoting economic growth and should focus on redistribution to ‘leave no one behind’, as expressed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. The protests in Latin America and elsewhere in 2019, 2020 and 2021 indicate that the remaining challenges to inclusive economic growth (Standing, 2014), manifested in persistent inequality and existing precarity, still cause significant discontent. Moreover, these inequities have been exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

The grievances behind recent mobilisations in Latin America and across the world reveal that precarity coexists with economic growth and declining inequality. However, even critical accounts of the relation between economic growth and inequality tend to favour a narrow approach to designing policies aimed at reducing poverty and inequality. Such an approach fails to take account of the multifaceted...
Social structures and institutions regulate the production and reproduction of inequalities. Consequently, segregation and discrimination also take place through processes that are not always evident or explicit and cannot easily be captured by a single metric or a one-dimensional analysis (Tilly, 1998).

Location and spatial mobility can be a lens through which to understand how the intersection of different layers and categories determines people’s access to opportunities and rewards related to infrastructure, schooling, secure employment or health services along territorial divides.

We argue that the protests in both Chile and Ecuador following the announcement of a series of economic reforms that would increase transportation costs in late 2019 serve to illustrate such divides. In the case of Ecuador, nationwide protests were organised in response to a cut in fossil fuel subsidies, which directly impacted transport costs and the cost of living for various segments of the population. In Chile, protests arose after the announced increase in the price of metro tickets in Santiago (the capital), exposing the disparities in access to transport and the precarious livelihoods of most of the population.

Despite the fact that investments have been made in recent decades to improve the capacity and quality of transport networks in both countries, spatial segregation and stratified access to these networks still prevail. As protests escalated in both countries, it became clear that they were a response to deep-seated grievances relating to shared indignation with the unfulfilled promises of upward mobility, and the remaining multidimensional barriers limiting access and rights to the resources a city has to offer: the ‘right to the city’ (Harvey, 2012).

Although the protests in Ecuador and Chile were nationwide, we will focus on the capital cities of these countries. This is because capital cities are a place of two contradictory forces that involve the promise of upward social mobility: ‘the freedom to make and remake ourselves and our cities’ (Harvey, 2012, p. 4) and the display of great concentrations of wealth and privilege, given that capital cities ‘have arisen through the geographical and social concentration of a surplus product’ (Harvey, 2012, p. 5), which has been extracted from somewhere and somebody, although control over its use lies in the hands of a few.

The Chilean and Ecuadorean cases exemplify the dynamic and relational nature of inequality manifested in Quito and Santiago. In a context of poverty reduction and positive economic growth, particularly between 2002 and 2014, there was an expectation that higher levels of income would mean better livelihoods for the people of both countries. Although both Chile and Ecuador saw improvements in poverty reduction (according to the World Bank’s monetary metric with a benchmark of US$1.9 per day) and economic growth, inequalities remained high. This invites a critical pause to study the structures that reproduce inequality, even in a context of positive economic growth and poverty reduction. This article approaches inequality as a multifaceted process influencing the provision of public goods and access to these goods. To this end, we distil some of the economic and political processes that led to protests in Quito (Ecuador) and Santiago (Chile) in 2019, how they manifested the degree of precarity that segregated populations in both Quito and Santiago experience, and how these reforms undermined the chance of access to the city for important segments of the population to secure their social and economic rights. We argue that spatial mobility and location are lenses through which we can highlight inequalities in access to public goods and services and the right (or lack of right) to the city, and can capture how inequality operates under subtle layers that define the restrictions for specific groups of people living at the margins of the city, the markets and the state.

The article is organised as follows. The second section presents a critical literature review, introduces the case studies and elaborates on some methodological considerations in selecting the case studies of Ecuador and Chile. The third section presents the Ecuadorean case, discussing the intersection of grievances related to fossil fuel and transport prices and inequality. The fourth section discusses the Chilean case, and how the increase in transport costs evinced the persistent generational inequalities and new forms of precarity in Chilean society. The fifth section brings together the Chilean and Ecuadorean experiences to examine the various determinants that led to nationwide mobilisations across these countries.

1. Spatial dimensions of inequality and precarity in Latin America

While different population groups in Chile and Ecuador mobilised against the announced increase in transport costs in late 2019, these protests unveiled a more profound problem that is also found in other Latin American countries: relegation and precarity. This phenomenon is not unique to Chile and Ecuador, as other protests in Latin America in recent years also targeted the costs of transport and the limits to spatial mobility, such as the demonstrations in Sao Paulo in 2013 (de Sá et al., 2019).

To understand the relationship between accessibility and inequality, we need to consider aspects of relegation and spatial marginalisation that delineate the distinction between mobility and accessibility. There is a debate in the transportation and urban planning literature that situates mobility versus accessibility as competing concepts. Following Venter (2016), we argue that mobility is embedded within the concept of accessibility, where mobility (the capacity to move across a given space) is necessary for achieving accessibility (being able to exercise the right to use public goods).

This distinction between mobility and accessibility illustrates the need to reflect on how metrics influence policies. When policies have focused on a narrow set of indicators of mobility (e.g., average speed as an indicator of spatial mobility), there have been unintended consequences, such as
increased urban sprawl and inequitable distribution of access, despite higher average speeds (Venter, 2016). As some of the mobility metrics that are equated to accessibility simply evaluate average speeds, they fail to understand other dynamics and are effectively blind to how such policies create and recreate various inequities that limit the right to the city. This approach has been reinforced by the lack of urban planning and the urban sprawl that has taken place in many Latin American cities.

Inequality and the relegation of significant segments of the population in Latin America have been theorised as a by-product of fragmented production activities, which are highly heterogeneous and have characterised economic development in Latin America (Ocampo et al., 2018), and also of the colonial legacy that reproduced different strata along race and class lines. The heterogeneity of production and stratification of society have resulted in the coexistence of a few high-productivity sectors concentrated in urban enclaves and infrastructure nodes linked to the extraction and export of natural resources, creating a small number of formal and secure jobs. As a result of these structural forces, the region has high levels of informal and casual employment, with vast pools of precarious workers often moving to the cities from peri-urban and rural areas in search of better livelihoods.

These processes of marginalisation were exacerbated during the phase of state-led industrialisation in the region. In addition, these industrialisation processes often reinforced the polarising tendencies of economic development, resulting in further marginalisation. This was identified by Salz (1955), who described the tensions accompanying industrialisation processes in Ecuador, which was unable to fully integrate rural populations into urban centres during the reorganisation of production and territories. Development in Latin America coexists with the ‘geological’ patterns of protectionism and protection of privileges, which ‘rather than altering the structure of protection to promote new industries, [create] new layers of protection superimposed on existing ones’ (Bértola and Ocampo, 2012, p. 162).

The compounding of different layers of protection for existing industries operated in the absence of land reform or redistributive programmes and reinforced an urban bias, as industrialisation was concentrated in one or two cities in each country, in areas with the ‘right’ infrastructure and large markets. This led to the decline of employment activities in the countryside in Latin America and the emergence of a sizeable segment of the population living informally. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, informality in Latin America was 53 per cent per cent, which means that a significant proportion of the working-age population in those countries lacked a stable source of income and protection in case of unemployment, sickness or other risks (International Labour Office, 2018). This explains why large segments of the population there are so vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic and why precariousness is not necessarily reduced during periods of economic growth, given the different processes that produce and reproduce inequality. Following these regional patterns, both Chile and Ecuador also have unequal geographies that relegate population segments while failing to connect them equitably to production networks or give them equal access to public goods and services.

This policy approach has interacted with the urban model of Latin American cities, which has changed from a compact structure to a fragmented and polarised structure, after various waves of urbanisation. The focus on the development models followed in Latin America should not ignore how the fragmented and dispersed Latin American urban model has framed the allocation of rights within cities. This is why, although these urban structures still reproduce previous patterns of segregation, they now function in a more complex setting where these distinctions continue to operate. Therefore, despite the fact that some of the most salient structures of segregation have ceased to exist (e.g. colonialism and slavery), different sets of less visible markers, lifestyles and criteria continue to define access and to relegate those who were formerly segregated (e.g. skin colour, accent, clothing); individuals and groups are still assigned ‘an obscure or inferior position, condition or location’ in society via less overt mechanisms (Wacquant, 2015, p. 247).

While such forces of relegation operated in the past via the use of overt force and violence, they now operate via more subtle mechanisms that are enforced informally, yet no less effectively. One example of this is how wealth defines the real access to products and services. In Latin America, income and wealth define citizens’ capacity to afford access. The combination of these forces operates through social structures and discipline systems that impel people who cannot afford goods and services to migrate to the margins of cities, public services and states. Thus, a multifaceted understanding of inequality will enable us to describe the compounded impacts on mobility within a city, and how this relates to the fragmented and unequal access to goods, services and opportunities that determines the wellbeing and livelihoods of the people.

Because of these compounded impacts and the fragmented production opportunities, the possibility of finding a ‘good’ job is a function of positioning – which involves assigning economic activities and rewards to a specific place or location. Urban studies literature (Contreras et al., 2019; de Duren and Ruth, 2018; Sabatini, 2003) has flagged the effects of increased demand for land and housing in sites that are closely integrated with production nodes. As a result, marginalised populations are forced to relocate to places where housing is somewhat affordable, often peri-urban areas or informal settlements. This relocation to peripheral areas of the city increases transport costs and commuting times, and reduces disposable income and access to public services (Hernandez, 2018; Slovic et al., 2019). It is the norm for peri-urban and rural populations living in remote areas but dependent on urban markets to spend several hours a day moving to and from urban centres.

This enclave model of development evinces how the social and economic order creates and reproduces inequalities, and how such inequalities can be described in relation to spatial mobility, illustrating the limited access to goods
and services. The organisation of space and how this determines spatial mobility is thus not incidental, but rather constitutes a prism through which we can view various inequalities. As Soja (1989, p. 6) argues, ‘[w]e must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences [of inequality] from us, [and] how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life’. Unequal access to public goods and services, particularly infrastructure services and transport, also reveals the limitations and challenges in terms of public policy that aims to tackle the structural sources of inequality. Inequality manifests and reproduces itself in different arrays of social, political and economic dimensions.

The multifaceted nature of inequality also means that inequality is not perceived in the same way by everyone. Not only can inequality be perceived differently by different actors, but this perception even changes over time, adjusting to alterations in people’s expectations, the operation of markets, the promises of governments and the perceived capacity of the state to provide public goods and services (Hirschman, 1973). The relational aspect of inequality has been termed the ‘relative income hypothesis’ in economics literature, and ‘relative deprivation’ in sociology (Gurr, 2015; Therborn, 2009).

Inequalities become part of the collective order through differentiated standards of living. In the cases of Ecuador and Chile, the promise of upward mobility slowly vanished, giving way to frustration and indignation with the unequal distribution of access to opportunities and rewards, as exemplified by the increased costs of transport and fuel: ‘The upwardly mobile who may have risen along one of the dimensions of social status, such as [education], find that a number of obstacles, rigidities and discriminatory practices still block their continued ascent, particularly along other dimensions, as well as their all-round acceptance by the traditional elites, and consequently they feel that in spite of all their efforts and achievements, they are not really “making it”’ (Hirschman, 1973, p. 32).

While inequality is not a ‘natural’ outcome, some accounts of the interactions between economic growth and inequality tend to obscure the channels through which inequalities prevail. Critical voices have challenged the belief that citizens will eventually ‘experience a natural progression from country to city, from farm to factory, and from low to high productivity work’ (Li, 2017, p. 1249), with reducing inequalities as economies grow (referred to as the transition narrative). Yet state policies can help to close structural gaps and address the structures that perpetuate inequalities. By providing equality of opportunities and equality of means (fairer distribution of income, more affordable transport networks, greater access to public goods), states can tackle the multifaceted aspects of mobility that determine access (Atkinson, 2015).

1.1. Methodological considerations

Ecuador and Chile are examined using a most-different case study design, which involves choosing two cases that are different on specified variables other than the main explanatory and dependent variables (Gerring, 2006, p. 90). This means that Chile and Ecuador were selected on the basis of their similar income inequality levels, as measured by the Gini coefficient, which is explored in relation to the emergence of protests after 2019 – our dependent variable. While the two cases differ in terms of several other variables, including the GDP per capita, poverty levels and external financial vulnerability, their levels of income inequality are similar, each having a Gini coefficient of 0.454 as of 2018 (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 2019). Both countries reached a crossroads in 2019 – arguably due to the high levels of inequality – despite differences across several dimensions, such as the nature of their political systems and structures, as well as their geographic and demographic compositions.

Urban and rural income poverty in both countries decreased between 2000 and 2018; however, poverty levels remain in double digits in both countries (see Table 1). The two countries show similar income inequality at the national level (see Table 2). In both countries, inequality is higher in urban areas and informality is high (59 per cent for Ecuador and 40.9 per cent for Chile) (International Labour Office, 2018, p. 99). They have both witnessed a process of urbanisation, albeit with significant differences in their baselines: the Chilean population has become concentrated in urban centres, going from 67 per cent of the population in urban areas in 1960 to 87 per cent by 2018 (higher than the average for OECD members); and Ecuador has seen significant urbanisation, going from 33 per cent of the population in urban areas in 1960 to 63 per cent by 2018.6 The large-scale flow of rural-urban migration that took place during the state-led industrialisation resulted in a particularly marked labour surplus in Ecuador (and other Andean countries), in contrast to Chile, which had already achieved high levels of urbanisation and formal employment before the phase of state-led industrialisation (Bértola and Ocampo, 2012).

Importantly, both capital cities (Quito and Santiago) have in common that they concentrate a high availability of employment, and that employment and spatial mobility determine the ‘right to the city’ there. Thus, although there are differences in the poverty and inequality indexes of other provinces as opposed to the capital cities, both Quito and Santiago have higher levels of inequality, related to uneven spatial mobility and limited access to public services and the right to the city.

This research design allows us to generate hypotheses about the role of urban inequalities in explaining political struggles and describing such protests in relation to unequal access to the city (e.g. transport and mobility, and public services), enabling us to describe the common forces involved in the emergence or mobilisation of discontent in both cities.

Given the high level of variance across these cases, the coincidence of exactly the same level of income inequality (measured by the Gini index at the national level) and the emergence of protests in the same period, foregrounds the use of the two cases for reflecting on how particular
These other cases were not chosen. This is because the protests also emerged there at around the same times, such as Bolivia, Peru, Venezuela and Colombia, given that protests were informed in both countries by the hacienda regime, accompanied by higher levels of gender and racial segregation in the economy. Ocampo, 2012), given that protests were informed in both countries by the hacienda regime, accompanied by higher levels of gender and racial segregation in the economy. Ocampo, 2012), accompanied by higher levels of gender and racial segregation in the economy.

extensive set of capital cities or other Latin American countries where the hacienda regime was predominant, including Colombia, Peru and Bolivia; these focused mainly on extractive activities, such as oil and mining (Bértola and Ocampo, 2012), accompanied by higher levels of gender and racial segregation in the economy.

Both cases are also comparable to a few regional counterparts. For instance, during the early twentieth century, Chile, Argentina and Uruguay all exhibited a pattern of more urbanised labour force development and a commodity-exported approach to development, based on temperate zone agriculture and mining. Ecuador, on the other hand, experienced external constraints in a similar way to other Andean countries where the hacienda regime was predominant, including Colombia, Peru and Bolivia; these focused mainly on extractive activities, such as oil and mining (Bértola and Ocampo, 2012), accompanied by higher levels of gender and racial segregation in the economy.

Although it would have been ideal to include a more extensive set of capital cities or other Latin American countries, such as Bolivia, Peru, Venezuela and Colombia, given that protests also emerged there at around the same times, these other cases were not chosen. This is because the socioeconomic structures informed the rise of protests in both contexts in response to existing inequalities. Moreover, given that protests were informed in both countries by the increase in fuel and transport costs, this condition becomes central in our analysis. We focus the research on the capital cities of Santiago and Quito to operationalise the idea of the city as a site of contestation, where inequalities and political struggles are manifested. Although the protests concentrated in these capital cities are due to arguably similar grievances, the protest sites are morphologically different. While Quito exhibits a hypercentre, Figure 1 shows that Santiago’s structure is geographically more disseminated.

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2. Fossil fuels, poverty and mobilisation in Quito: the protests in Ecuador

The Ecuadorian case illustrates a situation of declining poverty and prevailing inequality before 2018. Measured by the Gini coefficient, income inequality in Ecuador decreased from 0.55 to 0.45 between 2006 and 2018 (see Table 2), in line with the general trends in reducing inequality observed in the region (Gachet et al., 2017).

Table 1. Percentage of the population living below the extreme poverty and poverty lines, in rural and urban areas in Ecuador and Chile

| Year | Chile Urban | Chile Rural | Ecuador Urban | Ecuador Rural |
|------|-------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| 2000 | 41.0        | 54.2        | –             | –            |
| 2001 | –           | –           | 48.0          | 63.7         |
| 2002 | –           | –           | –             | –            |
| 2003 | 38.7        | 48.4        | 41.7          | 62.1         |
| 2004 | –           | –           | –             | –            |
| 2005 | –           | –           | 33.1          | 54.6         |
| 2006 | 35.1        | 41.4        | 28.2          | 50.2         |
| 2007 | –           | –           | 26.5          | 52.2         |
| 2008 | –           | –           | 26.1          | 51.5         |
| 2009 | 28.9        | 29.7        | 28.7          | 49.2         |
| 2010 | –           | –           | 26.4          | 45.2         |
| 2011 | 25.3        | 24.6        | 21.9          | 43.6         |
| 2012 | –           | –           | 19.2          | 41.3         |
| 2013 | 16.2        | 16.3        | 22.1          | 35.5         |
| 2014 | –           | –           | 20.2          | 30.2         |
| 2015 | 13.9        | 12.7        | 19.6          | 33.0         |
| 2016 | –           | –           | 20.3          | 32.7         |
| 2017 | 10.9        | 9.4         | 18.6          | 34.6         |
| 2018 | –           | –           | 19.7          | 33.8         |

Source: Based on ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) (estimates based on national sources). Elaborated by the authors.

Table 2. Income distribution in Chile and Ecuador (Gini coefficient: values between 0 and 1)

| Year | Chile National | Chile Urban | Chile Rural | Ecuador National | Ecuador Urban | Ecuador Rural |
|------|----------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------|
| 2000 | 0.514          | 0.507       | 0.451       | –               | –             | –            |
| 2001 | –              | –           | –           | 0.538           | 0.534         | 0.474        |
| 2002 | –              | –           | –           | –               | –             | –            |
| 2003 | 0.507          | 0.502       | 0.458       | 0.601           | 0.604         | 0.464        |
| 2004 | –              | –           | –           | –               | –             | –            |
| 2005 | –              | –           | –           | 0.522           | 0.504         | 0.455        |
| 2006 | 0.483          | 0.477       | 0.448       | 0.520           | 0.498         | 0.474        |
| 2007 | –              | –           | –           | 0.534           | 0.511         | 0.471        |
| 2008 | –              | –           | –           | 0.496           | 0.470         | 0.450        |
| 2009 | 0.478          | 0.478       | 0.410       | 0.485           | 0.469         | 0.426        |
| 2010 | –              | –           | –           | 0.490           | 0.478         | 0.414        |
| 2011 | 0.469          | 0.468       | 0.413       | 0.458           | 0.430         | 0.435        |
| 2012 | –              | –           | –           | 0.468           | 0.442         | 0.432        |
| 2013 | 0.466          | 0.465       | 0.405       | 0.470           | 0.460         | 0.420        |
| 2014 | –              | –           | –           | 0.449           | 0.442         | 0.422        |
| 2015 | 0.453          | 0.452       | 0.394       | 0.462           | 0.445         | 0.454        |
| 2016 | –              | –           | –           | 0.450           | 0.438         | 0.431        |
| 2017 | 0.454          | 0.451       | 0.430       | 0.444           | 0.425         | 0.438        |
| 2018 | –              | –           | –           | 0.454           | 0.442         | 0.419        |

Source: ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) (estimates based on national sources). Elaborated by the authors.
However, even though income inequality levels had declined in general terms, some argued that this reduced inequality was not expected to last very long. It was therefore suggested that Ecuadorean society had only marginally benefited from the higher oil prices and increased commodity revenues enjoyed by the economy before 2019 (Uribe-Teran and Vega-Garcia, 2017). Despite the inflow of cash, poverty rates remained remarkably high and segregated. Whereas poverty in Ecuador is estimated to be 20 per cent in urban areas and 33 per cent in rural areas, 64.8 per cent of indigenous people in rural areas lived in poverty in 2014 (see Table 2). The indigenous population of Ecuador is 14 per cent but they comprise more than half of the country’s poor.

Macroeconomic changes related to the dollar’s appreciation and the fall in oil revenues meant that the government started to face budgetary restrictions from 2012. As the oil price continued to decline, the Ecuadorian government was compelled to seek loans from international organisations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In March 2019, the IMF approved a US$4.2 billion loan to Ecuador, accompanied by a plan to reduce public debt and restore investors’ confidence in a context of falling commodity prices. In exchange, the IMF had requested fiscal consolidation, elimination of capital controls, cuts in subsidies (including energy subsidies), cuts in wages, and the reduction of ‘labour market rigidities’ (IMF, 2019). In the 2019\textsuperscript{−} budget, fossil fuel subsidies amounted to US$1.74 billion, which was slightly below the budget allocated to subsidise social security and pensions (US$1.9 billion) and considerably higher than the budget allocated to subsidise various social assistance programmes (US$769 million) targeted on poor populations.

At the centre of the IMF’s recommendations was energy reform, which was part of a global trend towards decarbonisation,\textsuperscript{8} and abolition of what was considered a regressive subsidy scheme. The protests that followed the announcement of these reforms brought the capital, Quito, to a standstill, forced President Lenin Moreno to relocate the seat of government to another city, and resulted in the declaration of a state of emergency and a curfew. The 12 days of protests that took place exemplify how economic decisions can highlight the fractures created by structural (and historical) inequalities that drive episodes of social mobilisation, protests and violence.

The emergence of these protests did not operate in a vacuum, as Ecuador has a long history of collective action. Social movements and protests have been vital in extending political, economic and civic rights to the population. Despite the fact that mobilisations have been a historical repertoire observed in Ecuador, mobilisations across groups and locations – needed to broaden the welfare base, including access to social transfers and subsidies – have been historically less likely to occur (Gideon and Molyneux, 2012). Furthermore, as precarious urban wage-earners are inherently atomised and stratified, their capacity for collective mobilisation remains limited.
Although the protests were triggered by the prospect of the changes in fuel subsidies and transport costs, the demonstrations that took place in Ecuador in October 2019 illustrate the deep-seated horizontal inequalities, the fractures in the promise of welfare through economic development, and the role of international financial institutions such as the IMF in influencing policy making. At a time of significant financial need, increased volatility of oil prices and tighter global lending conditions, the IMF’s austerity policies were met with resistance. The clashes uncovered the social tensions arising from the marginalisation and impoverishment of relegated populations in Ecuador.

The reforms proposed in Ecuador entailed eliminating universal fuel subsidies, increasing the prices of retail, domestic and industrial gasoline and diesel for fishing activities, removing the subsidies for industrial gas and raising the price of electricity.

Despite the fact that various organisations mobilised against the announced cut in fuel subsidies, the support for these mobilisations was divided. Some argued that these reforms were not necessarily bad. In the main cities of Ecuador, Quito and Guayaquil, public transport is used by 70 per cent and 61 per cent of the population respectively. The rest of the population use private vehicles or other means of transportation (Zárate, 2018). This is why it was argued that fuel subsidies mostly benefited upper-middle-income citizens (Jara et al., 2018). Because diesel for public transport would have remained subsidised, there would have been less impact on lower-income families.

Other researchers noted the impact that this cut in fuel subsidies would have on households that were not targeted by compensatory measures to soften the blow of these reforms on the poor and the vulnerable, given that fuel is an essential component of household expenditure (e.g. gas for cooking) in Ecuador (Jara et al., 2018). The removal of fuel subsidies and the consequent rise in fuel prices (120 per cent increase in the price of diesel and 30 per cent increase in the price of gas) would have led to higher inflation in Ecuador – about 5–6 per cent, according to CELAG (Oliva, 2019). The forecast in this scenario was that poverty levels would increase by between 1.7 per cent and 2 per cent (about 300,000 people falling into poverty).

Although most groups in society would have been affected by the removal of energy subsidies, the cut in diesel and LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) subsidies would have had most effect on the poor (Schaftitzen et al., 2020). Those in the lower tier of the income distribution would have suffered most from the changes in fuel prices proposed by the IMF, as the bottom deciles depend more on these types of fuel and have fewer resources to adapt to increases in the prices of such goods (Jara et al., 2018).

After negotiations with protestors, the government proposed a gradual removal of fuel subsidies to meet the IMF’s conditions. To facilitate this transition, Ecuador’s agreement with the IMF provided for a minimum allocation of 0.4 per cent of GDP (US$0.4 billion) to social spending via ‘enhanced targeting’, or narrowing, to compensate for the impact of the reduced subsidies on the poor. A new social registry would be put in place by the government to target the bottom quintile of the income distribution. In this context, the suggestion to provide income support targeted at the poorest, and the recommendation of even narrower targeting schemes, could be suboptimal, because: (1) many of the people affected by these measures are not necessarily the poorest, according to official metrics, and they would therefore not benefit from this income support; and (2) it assumes perfect targeting, that is, the ability to locate the poor effectively and thus minimise exclusion errors, which would be a challenge given the high levels of informality.

The debate about fossil fuel subsidies and protests in Ecuador also exemplifies the complexities of determining social spending priorities, and how reforms in the costs of transport illustrate the access to services and existing inequalities. On the one hand, whereas between 2007 and 2017 US$45 billion was spent on fuel subsidies, during the same period only US$18 billion was spent on health and US$29 billion on education. The budget allocated to social protection (including support and promotion of agricultural activities) is insignificant compared with energy subsidies. However, subsidised gas remains central to production activities, even among low-income households. Therefore, although eliminating fuel subsidies for domiciliary gas was perceived as creating the fiscal space to reprioritise social spending, changing these subsidies without considering the compounding of inequities and how mobility and accessibility intersect can lead to policy decisions that in fact increase poverty and deepen inequality (Jara et al., 2018).

In light of these debates, how are the limitations to mobility and inequality manifested by a cut in fuel subsidies? These changes would have a more dramatic effect on populations in peri-urban and rural areas, as people in the lowest income quintile are more dependent on low-cost fuels for their mobility, and on informal transport systems whose prices would have been affected by the change in fuel prices, effectively compromising their access to the city and their livelihoods. In Quito, the parishes with the lowest mobility indexes are the ones with the highest multidimensional poverty indexes. This exemplifies the relationship between place of residence, mobility, access to services, poverty and inequality (Herrero Olarte, 2019).

Peripheral areas in Quito have a higher concentration of poverty: they have the lowest levels of living conditions and lower access to education and jobs, while public services are often absent – as captured by the multidimensional poverty index. These peripheral areas also lack coverage and availability of public transport (Jaramillo Guzman, Philips and Lucas, 2019). As a result, residents of marginalised areas must spend more to access employment opportunities (Jaramillo Guzman et al., 2019). Despite the various transport networks available and the flat rate of transport fares, availability does not necessarily translate into access or affordability (Jaramillo Guzman et al., 2019). This point is often overlooked, as most studies of inequality do not include mobility in the metrics describing the availability of public services, or the existence of informal transport systems (Chunzhu et al., 2016). It should therefore not be surprising...
that the parishes where the public transportation density, quality of education and access to healthcare are lower coincide with the parishes where the distance to work is higher (Herrero Olarte, 2019).

As fossil fuel subsidies benefit various groups in society, the announced reduction in fuel subsidies fostered strategic alliances across different groups: indigenous groups, students, farmers and public transport unions opposed the reduction of subsidies for various reasons. It is therefore worthwhile asking: why were cuts in fuel subsidies more cohesive platforms for mobilising citizens across society than other subsidies and social transfers?

A case in point is the reduction in social transfers in previous years. The number of beneficiaries of conditional cash transfers had been reduced from 2014 to 2020, yet no mobilisation or contestation in response to this policy change took place (Palacio Ludena, under review). The Bono de Desarrollo Humano (BDH) programme was greatly reduced: recipient households decreased from 1.2 million in 2012 to 430,000 in 2016. This decrease in recipients was not due to people being lifted out of poverty but rather to a different prioritisation scheme, which identified different populations as vulnerable and reduced the number of people eligible for social assistance. After social transfers were withdrawn from 800,000 households over a few months, one would expect to see some sort of protest or mobilisation; however, nothing of this kind took place, despite the fact that downscaling this programme had direct consequences for poverty and inequality.

It remains hard for many scholars and activists to explain why, in a country that overthrew several governments in less than a decade (Zamosc, 2007), no mobilisation followed the massive reduction in the number of BDH beneficiaries. Yet when austerity measures targeted fossil fuel subsidies in 2019, various groups organised and took to the streets. This could perhaps be explained by looking at the specificities of urban poverty, and how the monetisation and commodification of livelihoods result in greater responsiveness to changes in input prices, such as fuel. Having the possibility of receiving some extra cash to compensate for such an increase in basic commodities via cash transfers would not be enough to compensate for the general increase in prices that resulted from removing the fuel subsidy and the impact on household incomes.

Analysis of the Ecuadorian case reveals that the marginalised groups with a greater risk of lower access to public services have lower spatial mobility. Although observing changes in labour income distribution and accounting for state transfers can serve as a way to assess monetary poverty, such indexes alone are unable to capture the different layers that illustrate the impact of the increase in fuel prices and the cost of mobility, and its effect on livelihoods. The protests that followed the announcement of energy reform in Ecuador provide a strong basis to explain collective action as a response to unequal access to public goods and the affordability of these goods, and show how compensatory and narrowly targeted income support via cash transfers fail to provide sufficient protection to those populations that: (1) do not qualify as ‘poor’ but are still vulnerable; and (2) would qualify as poor but are excluded from social registers. Because basic goods would have become unaffordable for people at the bottom of the income distribution, the real value of such transfers is marginal in providing compensation for the direct and indirect increases in general prices.

2.1. Metro fare hikes and precarity: the case of Santiago and Chile

The protests that emerged in Chile in October 2019 and continued in 2020 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic drew attention to aspects of precarity and indebtedness that are often overlooked in middle- and high-income countries. Given that these countries often have lower levels of income poverty, there is a tendency to assume that higher income means less inequality and less precariousness. As in the case of Ecuador, the trigger for the protests in Chile was an announced increase in transport costs, locating the interaction between mobility and accessibility at the centre of the protests. Yet the emergence of these protests was the outcome of unheard grievances that had been going on for several years. Protests were not new: between 2011 and 2017, there were around 11,000 protests in Chile.12 What was new in the social mobilisations that occurred in 2019 was the scale of the protests and the explicit denunciation of the current social compact.

Chile’s GDP per capita is 1.7 times the average of the Latin American region (World Bank, 2019). With the 44th highest human development index in the world, the Chilean economy is closer to living standards found in some high-income economies. Not only is the average income of Chileans higher than that in several other Latin American countries, their average wealth also surpasses the levels in countries like Mexico, Brazil or Argentina (OECD, 2018).

Although Chile is regarded an exemplary case of economic growth in the region, the emergence of mass mobilisations following the announced increase in the price of metro tickets in the capital, Santiago, illustrates that discontent and precariousness run deeper than single indicators can capture. Chile’s ‘economic miracle’ has not been for everyone, as evidenced by the protests throughout the country since 2019. On the contrary, the levels of economic growth have reproduced inequalities and led to the precariousness of a significant segment of the population, which is not entirely reflected by single index descriptions of Chile. According to the World Bank, poverty estimates in Chile declined from a 36 per cent poverty rate in 2000 to an 8.6 per cent poverty rate in 2017.13 Similarly, income inequality (measured by the Gini index) has been declining as well, going from a Gini index of 0.572 in 1990 to 0.46 in 2017.14 However, analysis of other indicators, such as the distribution of assets in households, presents a different picture of inequality. In Chile, as of 2017, 5 per cent of households own 47.1 per cent of the assets and wealth, giving a wealth Gini index of 0.72 (ECLAC, 2019). This shows that there are significant inequalities between...
Chileans that are not identified by indexes of poverty or income inequality.

The grievances articulated by the protesters in Chile responded to the precariousness and high levels of vulnerability experienced by an important segment of the population, which are not necessarily accounted for by conventional macroeconomic indicators. Although income levels are used as a rule of thumb to measure economic development, one must also consider the costs and affordability of goods and services. In Chile, salaries for a significant proportion of the population are insufficient to cover living expenses. In this context, the increase in transport fares and the protests that followed in 2019 and 2020 exposed deeper structural factors relating to less visible (i.e. non-enumerated and categorised) forms of precarity. Mobilisations with the scale, reach and duration observed in Chile in the midst of the pandemic reveal how the ‘Chilean model’ has created highly differentiated gains and losses within society and precarity.

Chile remains one of the most unequal countries in Latin America, which in itself is the most inequitable region in the world (ECLAC, 2019; Oxfam, 2015). This high degree of precarity is illustrated by the unequal geography of access to public goods and job opportunities in Santiago, the capital, which are expressed spatially through significant differences between zones in terms of income and access to high-quality education, healthcare and green spaces, as well as access to work (Fuentes et al., 2017).

Given the levels of spatial segregation, being able to move across the city and from peri-urban or rural areas to areas with better opportunities becomes crucial to secure a livelihood and to access goods and services. However, access to public transport and investment in public transport remain highly stratified. Areas where top quintile income citizens in Santiago reside received 2.5 times more investment in transportation and services than areas where lower quintile inhabitants live (Iglesias et al., 2019). These inequalities are also manifested in the percentage of people’s income that is spent on transport. Whereas the wealthiest quintile of the population living in Santiago spend 10 per cent of their income on transport, for the lowest income quintile this amounts to 45 per cent (Iglesias et al., 2019). Unsurprisingly, the announced increases in metro fares resulted in protests and mass mobilisations. Hence, spatial mobility illustrates how residential segregation and the capacity or incapacity to move to and from specific areas are essential ways in which inequalities are manifested in a given territory. The differential experiences of access due to existing inequalities reveal the different dimensions of inequality in Santiago and in Chile, such as the access to public services, jobs and healthcare (Jirón, 2007, p. 63).

Protests in Chile illustrated the social cost of a highly segregated and marketised development model that has brought stratified gains to its citizens under the incorrect assumption that markets are by definition efficient and, ultimately, equitable. This model preceded Piñera’s government. Although there have been significant improvements in life expectancy, lower child mortality, access to healthcare and enrolment in tertiary education, and a significant reduction in poverty, these gains remain very uneven and say nothing about whether public services are affordable or of good quality.

For example, there is evidence that residential segregation is a determinant of educational segregation, as parents tend to choose schools near their place of residence (Carrasco and San Martín, 2012). Similarly, having access to a school does not necessarily mean that people can afford that school. School enrolment does not guarantee scholarly achievement, as marginalised families who send their children to school exhibit higher dropout rates and lower academic achievement levels (Valenzuela and Bellei, 2012). Such segregation is also observed in labour income distribution, because populations at the margins of the city struggle to access and secure formal jobs; and even when they do, they still struggle to afford basic services, such as healthcare and education.

The grievances informing the mobilisation of Chileans also relate to the drop in real wages and the dismantling of universal social protection systems, which had dramatic consequences for the population – in particular for the elderly. The country has more than 1.2 million citizens receiving pensions that are below the minimum wage. This is why 47 per cent of males aged 65 years and above (the pension age) work in the informal sector. This panorama is worse for women, as 58 per cent of women above pension age work in the informal sector, often in unprotected and precarious employment. In a country where the elderly population is expected to increase to 33 per cent of the total population by 2050, these figures raise questions about the access to goods and services for an important segment of the population.

The Chilean case also exposes different layers of precarity among the ‘non-poor’. While targeted social assistance programmes, such as Chile Solidario, benefit the extremely poor and have been in place for decades, populations above the poverty line remain in a situation of vulnerability and precariousness, struggling to secure their livelihoods but not qualifying for social assistance. Vulnerable populations have to navigate a highly segregated context of social provisioning (including health and education), where low quality and overcrowded services coexist with highly elitist and privatised services.

Thus, even though income inequality decreased in Chile over the last decade, an important segment of the population struggles to afford food, transport, education and health services, and many people have resorted to debt as a coping mechanism. The high levels of household debt observed in Santiago have obscured the process of precarisation across various population groups. Needing to incur debt could be regarded as a disciplining force that contains the discontent of these population groups, given the processes of (self-)regulation that accompany indebtedness, while transferring the responsibility for social provisioning away from the state and to citizens themselves. This is a type of precarity that goes beyond what labour income
figures can capture. The percentage of debt is 75 per cent of household disposable income. This percentage is overwhelmingly higher among the elderly: their debt is more than three times their disposable income,17 and many are in arrears.18 Higher indebtedness among the elderly also evinces the generational aspects of inequality and precarity. The Chilean pension system, often praised within policy making circles,19 has resulted in greater vulnerability among the elderly, as many have been forced to use their funds to finance medical care and other necessities in the absence of public provision of these services, and have had to relocate to cheaper places to live, further away from locations with access to goods and services; these are known in Chile as ‘sacrifice zones’.20

Another aspect of precarity revealed by the 2019 and 2020 protests relates to the quality of employment. According to the Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas (INE)21 data, the informal employment rate reached 30.4 per cent as of December 2019, with an increase of 3.5 per cent over 2018. The percentage of self-employed individuals is also high. This means that a considerable proportion of the population work in low remuneration conditions and without social security coverage.

These inequalities of opportunities and outcomes are apparent as a function of location and spatial mobility. Given the high level of spatial segregation in Santiago and the difficulties in meeting the expectation of universal access to infrastructure and public goods, the Chilean case is crucial to understanding how segmented provision of public services perpetuates and increases precariousness and inequality. New forms of precarity can emerge when social provisioning is transferred to the market. A dominant market ethos that allocated the responsibility for providing goods and services to the market and away from the government had material and political implications. Citizens saw their rights and their position within society determined by marketised goods and services, as opposed to the actions of the state and its political system (Vergara-Perucich, 2017). The social mobilisations in 2019 and 2020 that led to the new constitutional assembly illustrate the citizens’ response to these prospects, and offer an interesting case for analysis.

In sum, the protests that followed the announced metro fare hikes in Santiago and led to nationwide protests demanding reform of the state, resulting in a new constitution for the country, provide a strong argument in favour of the protests and contestation being a response to multifaceted processes of marginalisation and persistent inequality. The limitations on mobility and transport costs were associated with processes of marketisation, with publicly funded and affordable services being replaced by a model where services were offered either by the private sector or by underfunded public provisioning. As a result, only a few privileged groups could actually afford high-quality goods and services, and secure their future gains. In a situation of this kind, high levels of average income and low poverty levels conceal the structures that reproduce inequalities and create new inequalities, keeping various segments of the population in a precarious condition and risking a significant segment of the population falling into poverty.

3. Conclusion

This article analysed the relation between the increase in fuel and transport costs and the emergence of protests in both Quito and Santiago; these protests were seen as a response to the limitation of spatial mobility and its relation to the ‘right to the city’ experienced by the inhabitants of both cities. We presented the various impacts of such increases on access to public goods and services and illustrate precarity and inequality in both cities and countries. Inequality is difficult to capture in single indicators, such as poverty metrics or Gini indexes. A multifaceted understanding of inequality calls for a closer look at the compounded impacts of access to goods and services, and their provision, affordability and accessibility for various segments of the population. Textured analysis of the intersection between these different dimensions of inequality evinces the vulnerability experienced by many inhabitants of both Quito and Santiago, and shows how recent policy reforms undermined their chances to secure their social and economic rights.

Spatial mobility and accessibility are useful vignettes to unveil the expressions of precarity and inequality in economies where the access to public services is stratified. As the cases of Quito and Santiago illustrate, segregation in access to public goods and services can occur alongside positive economic growth and declining income inequality. This is a necessary warning, given the popularity of macroeconomic indicators to capture economic development, especially these two indicators. This article has shown how inequality operates under more subtle layers that push some populations to the margins of the city, the markets and even the state. This is not only a Latin American phenomenon, or a Global South issue: spatial mobility and its relation to limited access to goods and services are part of a renewed global discussion on vulnerability, highlighted by the differentiated impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

By recognising the divides between citizenship and access to rights, social protection systems can move towards incorporating social and economic rights and not merely providing temporary claims or palliative interventions to the poorest. The impact of the pandemic and the growing social mobilisation in the region offer a new opening to revive the agenda of universalisation of social policies; such policies can therefore be implemented in the process of recovering from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has pushed millions of vulnerable ‘non-poor’ citizens into poverty and pushed poor citizens into misery.

Some of the policies aimed at curbing protestors’ discontent in Chile and Ecuador were presented as mitigation policies to cushion the effect of these reforms, and as being of a merely technical and non-political nature. A case in point is targeted social assistance, such as cash transfers. Cash transfers are usually framed as technical solutions, insulated from politics and political interference (Peck and Theodore, 2015). However, severing of the link between the state’s
responsibility to guarantee social and economic rights and access to these rights should not be ignored or concealed with a technocratic alibi or palliative social assistance, such as cash transfers. Any intervention that deepens the differences in the status of citizenship and drives groups into precarity illustrates how attempts to isolate policy making from politics and representation can deny a correct understanding of the context in which particular measures are designed and implemented. Using cash transfers as a tool to mitigate policy interventions runs the risk of ignoring a necessary process of social accountability within the state and towards its citizens, and making cash transfers a political instrument to minimise the possibility of dissent.

The governments in both Chile and Ecuador were seemingly surprised by the protests. Nevertheless, a closer look at the recent history of both countries shows the imbalance between claims of progress and real social and economic rights. The enduring levels of social stratification, spatial segregation and inequality reveal the progressive erosion of these rights, which are increasingly represented as claims instead of entitlements deriving from citizenship. As the unequal gains and losses of economic development processes are presented as ‘natural outcomes’, the responsibility for social provisioning is transferred away from the state and towards citizens themselves, thus normalising processes of impoverishment and marginalisation. This normalisation has two consequences. First, it obscures the power structures that create and perpetuate inequality. Second, it fractures society, because some segments support reforms that undermine the protection of collective rights and instead contribute to the loss of accountability, erosion of fundamental rights and weakening of the social compact.

Whereas experiences of inequality and poverty are often presented at an aggregate level, they operate and are perceived at the individual level. This individualisation can sometimes make it difficult to assemble a collective experience of deprivation, and describe the processes behind increasing precarisation. The attempted reforms in Chile and Ecuador in 2019, which targeted goods and services consumed by differently situated actors and not just the poor, helped to re-collectivise the experience of inequality and precarity. They operated as a blanket decision that affected a variety of groups and forged new solidarities.

Widespread reforms, such as cutting fuel subsidies or increasing metro fares, which affected the mobility of citizens of Quito and Santiago, made it possible for disconnected and disenfranchised groups to recognise one another, gain visibility and form new alliances. Nonetheless, undertaking protests in a context of segregated spaces and low spatial mobility requires economic, political and social resources. Those who mobilise might not necessarily be the most impoverished, living on the margins of society, but rather those who have prior knowledge of their rights and entitlements and are afraid of losing them. Yet the protests in Ecuador and Chile have still created a new space for claim-making, in which the existing marketisation and stratified access to goods and services are being challenged.

The protests taking place in Quito and Santiago resonate not only with social mobilisations in those countries but also with protests taking place in Latin America and throughout the world: before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to opportunities and services is a determinant of wellbeing and livelihoods. Government and states must understand how universal access to basic goods and services relates to their obligations towards their citizens (their social contracts).

Inequality and poverty are not natural outcomes: they result from the ideas and decisions of individuals, who shape the path of societies through the practices of institutions. But societies can also make evident the need for transformative change. Protests can thus create an opening for reinscribing participatory democracy and social justice in the political agenda; in this case, the experiences of Ecuador and Chile are examples of how social mobilisations can reinscribe democracy in policy making.

Notes

1. In the urban and transport planning literature, the terms ‘accessibility’ and ‘mobility’ are used interchangeably. In this article, we use ‘accessibility’ to refer to the capacity to access public goods and services (being able to exercise the right to use such public goods) and ‘mobility’ to refer to the capacity to move across space in a given territory. For a more detailed discussion, see section 2.
2. See https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.POV.DDAY?locations=EC-CL
3. See https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=EC-CL
4. According to World Bank estimates, Chile experienced an average yearly increase of 1.95 per cent of GDP per capita between 2008 and 2018, while in Ecuador the GDP per capita increased on average 1.55 per cent every year over the same period.
5. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
6. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?locations=EC-CL
7. https://www.finanzas.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2019/01/Proforma-2019_2.pdf
8. For a detailed review of the decarbonisation agenda, as enforced by international financial organisations, including the International Monetary Fund, and its political and socio-environmental motives and consequences, see Perry, 2019.
9. Horizontal inequalities are inequalities between different groups.
10. Centro Estratégico Latinoamericano de Geopolítica.
11. Human Development Bond.
12. https://coes.cl/
13. Measured as the percentage of the population living below the national poverty line.
14. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.POV.Gini?locations=CL
15. https://www.elmostrador.cl/noticias/opinion/columnas/2019/05/29/chile-ocde-12-millones-de-adultos-mayores-con-pensiones-inferiores-a-162-000/
16. https://www.ine.cl/docs/default-source/informalidad-y-condiciones-laborales/infografia%C3%A1.pdf
17. According to http://chiledeudas.cl data
18. https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-50086133
19. https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2019/06/08/chile-tinkers-with-its-ground-breaking-pensions-system
20. https://www.eldiario.es/ballenaiblanca/365_dias/zonas-sacrificio-Chile-Cumbre-Clima_0_970803029.html
21. National Statistics Institute.
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