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'The pandemic cannot be defeated by vaccination alone'

The success of Chile's vaccination campaign has proved to be its undoing. Simone Reperger reports from Santiago de Chile

Just a few weeks ago, Chile's vaccination campaign was celebrated as a success story. But now, the number of new infections is very high and the government has imposed an extremely strict lockdown to contain it. How can we make sense of that?

Chile has been in a hard lockdown again since mid-March. No one is allowed to leave their homes; only twice a week can people go grocery shopping with the permission of the police. There are currently more new infections than ever before, Chile is now a high-incidence country and since January the number of Covid-19 deaths has doubled. More than 95 per cent of intensive care beds are occupied nationwide and hospitals are overcrowded. The Andean country is at a very critical moment in the pandemic. Since 50 per cent of the population has already been vaccinated and Chile is celebrated worldwide for its efficient and rapid vaccination strategy, at first glance this really does not really seem to make sense.

However, there are a number of reasons for this development. One of them is the recently published study by the Universidad de Chile, which confirms statements made by the Chinese government. According to this study, the Chinese vaccine CoronaVac, which makes up 90 per cent of doses used in Chile, offers only 50 per cent protection against infection with the virus.

Moreover, it's likely that the Brazilian mutation is now widespread in Chile. It's considered to be much more contagious than the original version and drives up incidence rates. In Chile, however, there's hope that all this is only a matter of time: the Chinese vaccine is only effective against severe illness two weeks after the second dose. And only 37 per cent have received this second dose. The government still hopes to fully vaccinate more than 60 per cent of the population in July, so that herd immunity will be achieved and the pandemic will be

a thing of the past.

Another explanation is that many people cannot abide by hygiene and lockdown rules. Chile is a socially divided country: many people do not manage to protect themselves sufficiently. They don't have money for masks, live in very cramped spaces, can't keep their distance when they get sick and can't stay at home because they don't have any money otherwise. Opinion polls show that more than 30 per cent of those infected with Covid-19 continue to work and hide their infection to make ends meet. The Chilean state is no guarantor of social security – even when there is a pandemic.

What lessons can other countries learn from Chile's example?

The lesson is that the pandemic cannot be defeated by vaccination alone. Since the beginning of the vaccination campaign in Chile, *everything* has been focused on vaccination. Other important measures such as testing, contact tracing and prevention are neglected. This is what the Chilean Medical Association has repeatedly called a mistake.

In a way, the country's "vaccination success" seems to be its undoing. Because of the country's image as "vaccination world champion" and the government's discourse of soon achieving herd immunity, Chileans did not protect themselves as well as before during the Latin American summer months from January to March: less use of masks, more parties on the beach, package holidays in Brazil, crowded shopping centres, big New Year's Eve celebrations.

Chile shows that the pandemic *cannot* be defeated by vaccination alone. The carelessness of the vaccinated can quickly become a danger for the rest of society. They are still contagious. This is why the virus was able to spread so quickly. Especially younger, unvaccinated people are the most affected group today.

Virologists also criticise the quick relaxation of measures at the end of 2020. Although the first wave was never completely over, the right-wing conservative government had quickly prioritised boosting the economy at that time. Restaurants, tourism, retail and open-plan offices operated for about 6 weeks with only minor restrictions. This triggered the second wave. Underestimating the pandemic and focusing only on the economic, both of which had already exacerbated the first wave, is now plunging the country into chaos again.

Has the willingness to get vaccinated suffered from the sharp increase in the number of infections?

Despite the critical questions about the effectiveness of the Chinese

vaccine, Chileans' willingness to get vaccinated remains high. People trust that any kind of protection is better than no protection. There is a coherent political discourse and a clear communication strategy: "Vaccination helps". Getting vaccinated is seen as an expression of solidarity. Moreover, the headlines of overcrowded intensive care units make many Chilean women want to get vaccinated sooner rather than later. There are still high hopes that herd immunity will be achieved in a few weeks.

Given this setback, how's the atmosphere among the population?

The atmosphere in Chile is tense. Many people thought the rapid vaccination success would spare Chile from another wave. Now they are stunned and disappointed. Already in 2020, the country had one of the longest lockdowns in the world. Nurseries and schools have been closed almost continuously since the outbreak of the pandemic. A large proportion of Chileans are experiencing major income losses. 55 per cent of the population say they cannot cover their expenses until the end of the month. Only 32 per cent can afford three meals a day.

Unemployment, homelessness and poverty are spreading. In the capital Santiago alone, the number of people living in slums or on the streets has increased by 235 per cent, and many people now feed themselves by eating out at soup kitchens. The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean estimates that the coronavirus could be a setback of 20 years in Chile's development. With each additional day of lockdown, more people will have to fear for their livelihoods.

The pandemic exacerbates the country's social problems and the social inequality against which people were already protesting nationwide before the pandemic. Unemployment benefits and social assistance are only available to a very limited extent. Until now, workers have been paying for the crisis out of their own pockets; since 2020, they have been allowed to withdraw their deposits from the pension fund when they need money. More than 3 million Chileans have already had their entire pension savings withdrawn since the outbreak of the pandemic. This means that they will no longer be entitled to a pension in the future. In total, around $18bn in pension savings have been withdrawn so far, while the Chilean state has only spent around $5bn on social programmes. The trade union confederation CUT is calling on the government to act immediately, demanding more social programmes and rapid financial support for impoverished Chileans.

Because of the new hard lockdown, the government has also postponed the election of the members of the Constituent Assembly

from mid-April to mid-May. The referendum had already been postponed by six months in 2020 because of Covid-19. The drafting of a new Carta Magna, one of the main demands of the protest movement, is once again delayed. Many Chileans are frustrated, because only new rules can provide the framework for more public goods and more social justice in Chile, which is considered the most neoliberal country in the world. Some critics accuse the government of tactical behaviour, because the delay of the constitutional process continues to secure the privileges of the rich elite.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



Simone Reperger
Santiago de Chile

Simone Reperger is a political scientist and works as a country representative of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Chile. Previously she worked for the foundation in Uruguay and as head of the Regional Trade Union Project for Latin America and the Caribbean.