

**NOTES OF H.E. THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC, MICHELLE BACHELET JERIA,
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF LEUVEN (KU LEUVEN):
EQUITY AND SOCIAL COHESION FOR DEMOCRACY**

Leuven, June 10, 2015

Friends and friends,

It is an honor to be at Leuven University with you, in one of the oldest educational institutions in the world, and the largest and most important in Belgium. The distinction that you have bestowed upon me - this Doctorate Honoris Causa - fills me with pride and creates a deep tie between us.

I know well that this University, whose rich history is inseparable from that of Europe it has always been, both for its privileged geographic location, as well as its recognized academic quality, a distinguished place for reflection, research and generation of ideas.

Great thinkers, including some of the most prominent humanists have walked through these halls and this land – Flanders. I think of Erasmus de Rotterdam, Thomas More and Juan Luis Vives, whose monumental works expressed their interest in people, in the political and social order, in education and human institutions and their connection to the divine.

Vives, one of the most renowned of all Spanish thinkers, had a particular concern for equality and dignity of human beings, which he expressed even when referring to the situation of the indigenous peoples of America.

This line of thought is present in all those who work for equality and justice in social relations. Obviously, today's world is different, and the relationships of power and domination that existed then -in the colonial era - no longer exist, thankfully. But, especially in Latin America, injustice and inequality prevail, and a small elite still concentrates power and enjoys a level of well-being, that could and should be shared by all.

The task we have set for ourselves in Chile aims precisely at responding to this ageless problem, to reconstruct the ties that bind us, rebalance relations and reach broad agreements that allow us to build a better society.

European countries after World War II did something in this regard. A new spirit of solidarity and cooperation emerged from the war's desolation, enabling the construction of a public support network, the European Social model, and more equitable and prosperous societies.

Europe has changed, and the model is in question. This is proof that societies undergo constant transformations, and that it is necessary to adapt policies, institutions and organizations to the historical contexts and realities of each country. And many of those adjustments are a result of the reflection and research carried out in Universities such as this one.

In fact, I think that one of the fundamental tasks of universities, particularly those engaged in social sciences, consists of studying reality, detecting anomalies and tensions, and proposing solutions, such as policy and institutional reforms.

That is a fundamental task of Academia, and of social scientists, but it is not the only one. It is also to imagine possible worlds, to question established truths, to think and discuss what should be the great ideals and dreams which give meaning to social and political activities.

So I believe that the space in which we find ourselves right now is the perfect place to talk about the type of society and democracy that we desire, for Chile, Latin America and Europe, and what can we do to build it.

Today, I would like to share what we are doing in Chile to advance towards that ideal that lights and shows the way; that which Thomas More called *Utopia*^{[\[1\]](#)}.

Most of my fellow citizens share with me the belief that our society must be at the same time, prosperous and just. And these characteristics are mutually reinforcing.

Society must set the foundations - objective and subjective - that promote well-being for all, and the achievement of individual and collective projects, guided by the values of cooperation and solidarity.

It must be a society that guarantees rights and opportunities, but also duties and compensation ensuring that everyone can take advantage of the opportunities created, and that no one is left behind.

It must be a democratic and inclusive society, in which differences are valued and conflicts are resolved through dialogue and public discourse.

And to make all this possible, so that we can actually make progress towards that ideal society, a significant degree of equality and social cohesion must be present.

As the political scientist and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr stated "something of balance (...) is the basis of any justice achieved in human relations".

Because where there are inequalities, or imbalances, a few can impose their will, their world view, and their interests on the many, who, in turn, are unable to satisfy their needs and realize their dreams. And, as a result, there is no justice.

Without a minimum of equality –and the promise that it will grow – it will be difficult that all commit themselves to working with energy on a common project. And that is not only a problem for the public and the "national community" in the abstract, but also for each individual, each family and for economic and human development in the medium and long term.

Without an equitable and universal access to public goods and services of quality, the logic of the market will prevail - as it already does. Competition will be the only way to relate to each other, "every man for himself" will be the motto, and there will be no cohesion, no possible cooperation nor solidarity. All of this threatens the stability and the development of a solid modern democracy. And undermines the foundations of the social pact, which is to achieve the greatest possible welfare for all.

In a scenario like that –not far from what we see in Latin America- where the "common good" is perceived by many as alien and where little value is given to the Public –largely because it does not give satisfactory answers to everyday problems - it is difficult to ask men and women to work in pursuit of shared objectives. And without that effort by all, it is difficult to move forward and arrive at the desired destination.

That's why I put the focus on equality and cohesion when I think of the future of our people, and why in my country we are carrying out reforms aimed at reducing inequalities and social segregation.

Now, if what we want is to generate real change we must start with a correct diagnosis. How far are we in Latin America from that cherished society? The reforms are urgent or can we wait for a "more favourable" moment, as demanded by some, independent of what is the context?

We have reduced poverty in the region, but we know that there are still significant pockets of poverty.

We know that the gaps between rich and poor have deepened, and that ours is the most unequal region in the world.

We know that many are excluded, and have no access to basic services and opportunities for progress. This mainly affects the children and young people of the continent, women, our indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and those living in rural areas.

And we know that our societies are not very cohesive, which can be explained by the unequal access to services and opportunities, by an increasing individualism and the resulting difficulty in articulating collective projects. Let me give you some examples:

Despite the important reduction of poverty experienced by the region in recent decades, 165 million people remain poor. This is 3 out of 10 people, and 69 million live in extreme poverty^[2].

And there is a fact, which is particularly troubling: high child poverty. ECLAC estimated that there are 70.5 million children and adolescents who live in poverty in the region. That is: 4 out of 10.

This is an urgent wake up call, because we must be aware that this reality, which foreshadows an unpromising future for these children, hangs a question mark over the future of Latin America.

With regard to economic inequality, we see that the bottom income quintile of households receive only 5.6% of total revenues, while the richest quintile is left with 46.7%.

Sadly this is a trend that is becoming more acute, and not just in our continent. According to a recent study from OXFAM^[3], 1% of the planet's richest owns 48% of the wealth, and it is expected that this figure will reach 54% in 2019.

And if we look closely, it is even more dramatic: today, 80 of the world's richest people possess the same portion of the cake than 3.6 billion of poor women and men. No one can say that this state of affairs is fair.

In terms of the inequality of access to services, we can mention –for example - that 4 of every 10 families have no roof to live under, or live in poor quality housing. This percentage exceeds 70 per cent in countries such as Nicaragua, Bolivia and Peru.

Meanwhile, 33 percent of the region's rural population lacks basic sanitation services, and 36% does not have safe drinking water.

To revert these gaps and move towards the construction of a just and developed society entails combating poverty and exclusion, creating conditions for equality, and opening spaces for diversity, which allow the gestation of a shared identity and a community of interests and values.

One tends to think - and in Latin America this idea is prevalent- that these conditions of equality and inclusion can only be generated if a country is rich, when there is a large enough “cake”, which can be distributed among all.

However, international experience –and the history of Europe is clear in this regard - shows us that this is not true.

Some time ago, a Norwegian Minister told me something that very few remember when they talk about the road to success of developed countries, particularly the Nordic ones, which are the ones with the highest standards of living and better rates of equality and human development.

He told me "it is not true that Norway today is an inclusive country because it is wealthy. After the World War, we were very poor, and we decided that we should have an inclusive strategy, which included men and women, girls and boys, and thanks to that we are rich, and not the other way around."

This example shows us that when we speak of equality, inclusion and cohesion we are not referring only to ethical principles on which we can legitimately disagree, we are also referring to a strategic imperative. We speak of essential factors for the development to achieve that shared prosperity that the World Bank talks about, as well as political stability and social peace.

Today, we have empirical evidence –endorsed even by economists of the IMF - which shows that the social fragmentation and income inequality run counter to economic achievements.

We must also bear in mind that inequality, the exclusion of large segments of the population and social fragmentation create discomfort and can, if we do not act decisively and timely, weaken the legitimacy of our political and economic systems.

The same can occur if rising expectations of substantive change and progress that we see in much of contemporary societies –including the European – are frustrated. This was evident –in the Chilean case - with the recently published "Report on Human Development in Chile", prepared by the United Nations Development Program.

All this shows that we are still far from the society that we crave, and shows us that the time for action; the "enabling environment" is now.

This is why in Chile we are building consensus and putting great energy on the generation of equality of rights and opportunities, and equity and inclusion in different fronts, such as taxation, education, labor, politics, childhood and youth and gender, among others.

We are making great efforts to close social gaps and prevent segments of the population from being left behind, by ending inequalities and integrating the excluded.

Our purpose –as I have said on other occasions - is two-fold. We want all citizens, independent of their social, political, cultural, sexual, or geographical condition, to develop their potential and have a good life. And, on the other hand, we also want each and every one of them to contribute to the common development of the country.

We seek, in short, to develop personal skills and collective strengths, and the various reforms we are implementing all point in that direction.

For example, we have carried out tax reform, the largest of its kind in the last 30 years, which sparked great discussions and disputes, but which finally received overwhelming support in our Congress.

It is a reform that will allow us to share the burden in a more equitable and fairer manner, so that those who have more, contribute more. And it ensures permanent financing for those transformations, especially in education and social protection, which we promised and which were supported by our citizens.

We are also carrying forward significant political reforms, essentially those that will lead to a more democratic system. This Includes one that's a historic milestone: a few weeks ago, we replaced the binominal electoral system, inherited from the dictatorship and designed to undermine the power of the vote and generate a permanent tie between the two main political forces in the legislature.

The new system, which is of a proportional variety, will allow us to have a more representative, inclusive and legitimate democracy in the eyes of the citizens, in which each vote is worth what it truly deserves, where there is more competition and better territorial equity in the representation criteria.

Along with this, we have moved towards gender equality with a quota system, which establishes that, from now on, at least 40% of the nominations for Congress must be female.

While women, who constitute more than 50% of the population in my country, remain underrepresented in Congress and the Executive, the words of Serafina Davalos, a Paraguayan lawyer, at the first international feminine Congress of 1910, will continue to ring true: "The democratic character of the State is pure "myth", because "democracy", which means *sine qua non* equality, freedom... cannot admit privileges of birth, being born male or female".

For this reason, and because we are confident that women's contributions are fundamental to economic and social progress, my Government has given priority to the work for gender equality.

As soon as I assumed the Presidency, in March of last year, I sent a bill to Congress, creating the Ministry for Women and gender equality, in order to strengthen the institutional framework and promote and guarantee the rights of all my countrywomen. This law has been already enacted, and the Ministry has begun its process of installation.

We have also promoted other policies aimed at safeguarding such basic principles, as the right to life, liberty and security.

For example, to protect victims of violence, which in Chile causes around 40 femicides per year, we are doubling the number of safe houses for women when they are threatened by violence. And we will increase by 25% the number of Centers that deliver support and timely assistance to women who need it. Of course, these measures will be of little use if we do not promote the independence and autonomy of women, at the same time. That is what we are doing, ensuring that they are part of the workforce, with vocational training and skills, especially focused on the poorest women. Thus, we reduce their vulnerability to violence and abuse and, at the same time, promote their personal growth and the productive development of Chile.

But if we talk about policies that promote equality, the most important of them is currently focused on education.

This is a particularly relevant topic –and so we understood it very early on, because it is in this area that the hopes of the younger generations and their families are placed, and therein resides the future of the nation, its ability to progress, to have cohesion and democratization.

Through the educational system we can deliver the essential tools for the full development of each individual, prepare children and young people for life in society and strengthen the foundations of democracy.

Thus, schools must be a space for learning, integration, understanding differences, promoting civic equality and for contact with the democratic experience. In other words, a Republican space par excellence.

Unfortunately, in Chile –and Latin America in general - this ideal is far from a reality. Although in recent decades, we have advanced significantly in coverage and access to education, we have a serious deficit in quality, especially in the poorest sectors. Worse still: we have a highly segregated system that not only is not conducive to integration but also reproduces and widens social inequalities.

In my country we have a mixed school system, made up of private paid schools, schools that are private but receive grants from the State, and public schools managed by local governments (municipalities).

Many of these schools –in general, private ones- charge incorporation fees, very high monthly payments and select students. Others –many which receive public funds - require also an additional payment by families. Thus, we have created a highly segregated system, in which the rich study with the rich and the poor study with the poor.

This means that for too many years Chile has underwritten private profit with public funds. But above all, it means that we have perpetuated unequal capacities and opportunities, as well as created divisive social networks and world views.

This has deeply damaged the social fabric, has contributed to widening gaps and, in consequence, prevented Chileans from sharing a common vision of the country, to recognize each other in a context broader than their own, live in diversity and build channels of cooperation.

In short, it does not contribute to the construction of an inclusive and democratic country that we seek.

In addition, this segregation –according to money, according to academic standards - eliminates the positive effect that better performing children have on those less advantaged, compromising the quality of the system as a whole.

It is a proven fact that the learning of the most vulnerable children improves when they share a classroom with others of higher cultural capital. Likewise, the more advantaged are deprived of a more diverse environment, which would enrich their understanding of the world. This effect –called the peer effect - disappears in highly segregated schools such as ours, creating less favorable conditions for the development of all.

These are just some of the shortcomings of our educational system that we are already correcting. A few days ago, we enacted the "law of inclusion", which ends with the practice that families must pay a part of the monthly payment in private schools that receive public funding. In addition, it eliminates the selection process and profits in all primary and secondary schools, which receive public funds.

Thanks to this law, we can guarantee free access to quality education adequately funded by the State, which is also inclusive and that will generate synergies between students.

In the medium term, our goal is that all schools achieve equivalent levels of excellence and inclusion, and become the cornerstone of the Chile that we all dream about

There are other measures –such as free higher education, which we will begin to implement next year. We seek to ensure that education, at all levels, stops being a consumer good, dependent on families ability to pay and becomes a right that ensures access and quality for everyone.

When all the children and young people have equal opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills, and may learn from the diversity of the world that surrounds them, we will have taken giant steps toward our goal. We will be closer to having a just, prosperous and equitable society.

For this reason, I fully agree with Andres Bello, founder of the most important public university in Chile, when he stated that education is one of the most important tasks which a Government can tackle because it is "a primary and urgent necessity; the basis for all progress and the indispensable foundation of Republican institutions."

Friends,

This concern for building a better society, in which the basic principles of equality and dignity prevail, in which there is "some balance" in social relations and justice, democracy

and prosperity, is not unique to a group of people or a country. It is a concern shared by many.

In Latin America, each nation has built and gone their own way; but the goal, the dream, has almost always been the same.

In fact, less than a decade ago, in Santiago de Chile, the representatives of the Iberoamerican Community of Nations, committed ourselves to work toward increasing levels of inclusion, justice, protection and social assistance, and to strengthen the idea of solidarity, belonging and identity.

And there was agreement that to meet this goal it is necessary, among other things, to ensure universal access to social services and public benefits of quality, eradicate all forms of discrimination, recover public spaces for social and cultural life, and strengthen Ibero-American cooperation.

We also recognized that to deal with the problems of the region we must encourage a broad social dialogue. A dialogue that will allow Governments, employers, workers and citizens to join efforts to create wealth, decent work and human development in a context of Justice, equality, and inclusion.

Surely, in a few hours, at the second Summit of the European Union-CELAC, to be held in Brussels under the motto "shaping our common future: work for prosperous, cohesive and sustainable societies for our citizens", we will make a new appeal to work towards these objectives.

I hope that this summit will allow us to renew our commitment to these objectives, which are the noblest causes of politics and public life. And I hope that we shall find transatlantic areas of cooperation that will allow us to move forward together, faster, in the direction indicated, which is none other than that which leads to *Utopia*, the ideal society with which we dream.

We know that to reach that place seems impossible. However, it continues to be our beacon. Eduardo Galeano, a world renowned Uruguayan writer, described it thus:

"Utopia is on the horizon. I take two steps forward, she takes two steps back and the horizon moves ten steps beyond. Then what is utopia for? "To walk: that's what it's for".

We can and we must walk together towards these new horizons. We can and we must do more to improve our laws and institutions, our society, our culture. We can and we must do more to multiply and improve our spaces of encounter, dialogue and of citizen deliberation.

We can and we must maintain this flag raised to ensure the steady expansion of equality, inclusion, cohesion, justice and shared prosperity to our peoples.

This is the target that we have set in Chile, and towards that we are walking confident and steadily.

Thanks.

^[1]the book It was published at Louvain in 1516.

^[2]ECLAC, 2014.

^[3]2015.