



Quality of Life Initiative

Valuing What Matters in Urban Areas

A position paper of the Quality of Life Initiative

March 2024



The following is a position paper developed by the academic community of practice* of the Quality of Life Initiative. The coordinators of the Quality of Life Initiative would like to thank the authors for their valuable insights into the role that quality of life can play in contributing to sustainable urban development.



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Introduction

Understanding what people really value and need in their lives is essential if local leaders are to help make decisions and investments that significantly improve people's lives.

In 2015, the UN's sustainable development goals (SDGs) provided a global framework to address a comprehensive set of interconnected issues focusing on inclusivity, equity, and sustainability. However, as we approach 2030, progress towards many of these ambitious global goals has been limited. SDG 11 on cities is the least advanced of all the 17 goals, with only 10% of its targets being fully realized.

We are therefore failing to live up to our avowed goal to 'leave no one and no place behind'. Part of the challenge is finding a way to explain and tackle these interconnected issues in a way that is widely understood at both a global and local level. Which is where quality of life comes in.





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Why Quality of Life?



The concept of quality of life has been with us for millennia. Intuitively, we know that certain universal elements – health, safety, education, agency¹, and social connections – are important to our well-being. As such, quality of life is a useful guiding principle which speaks to the average person, providing a useful anchor around which important global sustainability agendas can be communicated and discussed. Yet if you ask different people, in different places, at different

times, what they feel contributes to a good life, i.e. human well-being, you will receive a vast array of responses. It is our belief that there is a way of resolving this paradox – of taking a universal concept and mapping it on to the local realities of millions of people in cities around the world. But it will require a paradigm shift in a way that brings together data and adopts processes for citizen engagement to truly deliver for people, planet and our future.

*1 The Nobel Prize Laureate, the economist Amartya Sen, in his theory of capabilities, developed the idea that quality of life is determined by the various opportunities open to individuals, and their freedom in choosing from these many opportunities. This thinking goes beyond the idea of individuals having the right or freedom to pursue a better quality of life, which is commonplace in the thinking of welfare economics. Instead, Sen emphasised whether or not individuals have the capabilities to do so. More information: A. Sen (1999), *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press*



Leaving No One & No Place Behind

Interpretations of quality of life have evolved over time, but we are now reaching a point at which we believe we can agree on certain basic principles that can be applied at both a global and local scale.

Economists and politicians have long used GDP to gauge human development and well-being at the national level, essentially using those measures as a proxy for quality of life. In this interpretation, the basic message is that the richer a society, the higher the quality of life.

At the city level, planning councils and city administrators likewise have used measures of economic development in a similar way. However, the social indicators movement of the 1970s, a function of academic and policy makers at both national and community levels, rejected the notion that

economic indicators are sufficient to capture human well-being. Continuing this trend, the environmental movement of the 1980s went on to underscore the concept of sustainability incorporating environmental indicators to capture their importance to human health and the economy at both the national and community levels.

Starting in the late 1980s, quality of life measures were further enriched by psychological research highlighting individuals' subjective experience that shaped emotional well-being².

2 Sirgy, M. Joseph, Alex C. Michalos, Abbott L. Ferriss, Richard Easterlin, Donald Patrick, and William Pavot (2006), "The Quality-of Life (QOL) Research Movement: Past, Present, and Future," *Social Indicators Research*, 76(3), 343-466.



We now believe that measures of progress at the city level should incorporate both objective indicators of economic, social, and environmental well-being and subjective measures which capture how residents evaluate various aspects of their lived experience. This means finding innovative ways to understand what urban residents value most, and designing policies which can respond in a way which truly enhances quality of life. Researchers and policymakers alike

now believe that measuring progress toward enhancing human well-being at the city level, i.e., quality of life, should incorporate both objective indicators of economic, social, and environmental well-being and subjective measures which capture how residents evaluate various aspects of their lived experience. And given that quality of life traverses so many disciplines, it can be a common thread to frame policy decisions and investments.



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Quality of Life in Human Settlements as a Central Pillar to Sustainable Development

It is against such a backdrop that the UN-Habitat Quality of Life Initiative has taken shape. The triple planetary crises of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, together with pandemics, wars, poverty/deprivation, social unrest, and rapid technological innovations have upended what we understand by quality of life. We believe that a holistic approach to quality of life can help community leaders and policy makers better understand how to invest resources in order to provide the conditions for better, more fulfilling lives.

To fully realize the benefits of embracing

a quality of life metric means addressing the diversity across contexts and community groups. It means focusing on what people truly value by utilizing local and community-based information and data. And it means fostering a tailor-made collaborative approach in assessing, planning, and implementing suitable measurements to leverage a community's quality of life.

Working as a global community, understanding quality of life enables us to invest in interventions that work, and drive both efficiency and effectiveness in pursuit of sustainability. After all, if people and places are not counted and important aspects of people's lives and city conditions are not measured and monitored, how can we best make targeted and effective policies and investments that move us towards a more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive future?

Recommendations from the “Quality of Life Initiative” Academic Community of Practice

Recommendation 1

That local and national governments use the concept of quality of life and life domains to guide and prioritize actions which respond to the changing needs, demands, and expectations of individuals and communities, in order to advance the overall well-being of people.

Recommendation 2

That cities integrate quality of life measures which consider the importance of interpersonal relations, human contacts, social belonging, and access to infrastructure.

Recommendation 3

That participatory mechanisms more fully engage with individuals and communities to (i) produce data that can identify challenges for specific vulnerable groups; and (ii) identify responses that contribute to the achievement of local and global development agendas.

Recommendation 4

That an innovative, user-friendly, contextually relevant and scalable index on quality of life is used by local and national governments to inform policy design which responds to the needs and desires of communities.





Conclusion

A truly holistic vision of quality of life - and its understanding, measurement, and application - can provide a common thread through which ambitious, inclusive, resilient, sustainable development can progress at the scale and speed demanded by the urgency of the interlinked challenges we face. Quality of life is held to be integral to the quest for more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive development given so many of the issues discussed on the global stage - poverty, inequality, nutritious food, innovation in basic infrastructure, clean water and energy, environmental sustainability, peace, justice, and more - are situated locally at the scale of cities and experienced by individuals and communities. We commend early adoption of these recommendations to build a more sustainable and inclusive urban future in a timely manner that advances human well-being for all.

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The Quality of Life Initiative, was initiated in 2022 by the Quality of Life Program Center in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and is being implemented by UN-Habitat. It aims to empower local leaders with actionable knowledge and cutting-edge tools to enhance the quality of life in their communities. Through innovative data and monitoring solutions, the Initiative aims to bridge the information

gap, offering a comprehensive understanding of quality of life in diverse contexts. The initiative also aims to reposition quality of life as a central pillar to sustainable urban development, providing a common thread to link local and global policy agendas and accelerate progress towards the SDGs and beyond.

For additional information visit

[The Quality of Life Initiative | UN-Habitat \(unhabitat.org\)](https://unhabitat.org)



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