Quality of Life Initiative

Harmonizing Our Knowledge:

A Look Across the Quality of Life Initiative July – October 2023

The present document is the third in a series which takes a closer look at how the Quality of Life Initiative is co-creating a more inclusive, human-centered vision of quality of life in cities. This series zooms in on different aspects of the initiative, while taking care to present a coherent picture of how the different pieces come together.

Against the backdrop of rapidly changing circumstances and shifting priorities, there has been a global interest in re-conceptualizing what is meant by quality of life. Global pandemics, climate change, armed conflict, and other challenges have brought into question previously held notions of the 'good life'. At the same time, forthcoming opportunities such as the digital transformation and others are already underway, and poised to drastically alter countless aspects of day to day life moving forward. How such massive changes are managed will have important and varying implications on the quality of life of people around the world. At such a critical juncture, the Quality of Life Initiative has taken shape, to stand on the shoulders of a rich body of work which has been accomplished, while bringing in an innovative, up to date, flexible and robust perspective in light of the latest trends and forthcoming issues that we will face together.

What Are We Doing?

The Quality of Life Initiative has several distinct, yet interrelated pieces which interact with one another to form a larger picture. At it's core, the initiative calls for the development of an innovative, globally relevant, locally applicable index on quality of life, which can link concretely with and accelerate progress towards both local and global policy agendas in order to improve quality of life in cities. If this index is the skeleton at the center of the initiative, there are additional layers which bring institutional depth and buy-in, partner engagement, communication, and the creation of an overall knowledge ecosystem that is driving a narrative forward around a revamped, holistic and inclusive look at quality of life. These technical, institutional and programmatic pieces feed off one another to build an increasingly robust and participatory conceptualization of quality of life which is pushing the actual index creation forward.

It is this interconnected process which in turn will provide the foundation for linking quality of life to both local and global policy agendas, and provide a genuine public good for use by governments and other stakeholders.

Why Are We Doing It?

The percentage of people living in urban areas is projected to rise from 55% to 68% of the world's population by 2050[1]. In this context, the policy decisions which city leaders make will have dual impacts: trickling upwards to contribute, or not, to the achievement of global development agendas like the SDGs; and trickling downwards to affect the well-being and quality of life of inhabitants.

The Quality of Life Initiative endeavors to develop a decision-support ecosystem that allows local leaders to bridge the information gap and better understand the **concrete outcomes of their decisions and investments on the quality of life of their constituents.** Whereas a plethora of indices and tools are already on the market, the issue often comes in finding what is relevant and applying it across varying contexts. The Quality of Life Initiative does not aim to provide a toolbox, but rather **a customized and tailor-made set of knowledge that puts the right tools in the right hands.**

An extensive analysis of existing measurements of quality of life provides an interesting base on which to build. Recent events have shown the opportunities for, and necessity of, bringing quality of life squarely into the **global policy development discourse.** There are opportunities to take advantage of technical innovation and a real process of co-creation in order to onboard the relevant partners and measure what matters.

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[1] https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html

Through extensive consultations and examination of preceding work – including an in-depth analysis of 50+ indices that measure some form of human progress or quality of life - the Quality of Life Initiative has identified a series of entry points for building something new, with a unique coalition of partners. This initiative needs to:

Be Globally Relevant and Locally Applicable: This initiative needs to be innovative in localizing the SDGs, based on varying contexts, cultures, and concerns, in order to be relevant in cities everywhere while, at the same time, accelerating progress towards global development agendas. Although challenging, there appears to be a strong interest to develop an index that captures the universal values of quality of life, while at the same time, accounting for the local and individual nuances encapsulating individual cities and towns. UN-HABITAT has the mandate and the experience to spearhead such efforts at localization, bringing a participatory and inclusive perspective to quality of life in cities.

Provide a Human-Centric Examination of Quality of Life: At the center of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda is the idea that no one should be left behind. Quality of life – if measured well – helps to approximate this notion of inclusion, by understanding what provides satisfaction and fulfillment to inhabitants around the world. This initiative will explore how quality of life can anchor notions of placemaking, meaning making, and leaving no one behind to concrete policy decisions and outcomes.

Focus on Outcomes Rather than Inputs: Local leaders need to be able to understand how their decisions relate to concrete improvements or degradations in quality of life and well-being. Addressing this information gap is a key aim of the initiative. It is critical that decision makers in cities can follow the pathway from their interventions (inputs) onto real outcomes, thus informing policy and investment decisions.

Provide a More Holistic Understanding of Quality of life: We find ourselves at a unique moment in history, with unprecedented challenges but also opportunities, both on a scale that many have not encountered before in their lifetimes. As such, the elusive notion of quality of life has likewise been altered. It is important that this initiative undertake the proper level of consultation and co-creation in order to unravel the objective and subjective factors that contribute to quality of life across a dizzying range of contexts

Harness the Power of Technical Innovation to Better Understand Quality of Life: Leaps in the technical capacities to capture and measure data on a large scale can help to create a knowledge ecosystem where users are exposed to the most relevant, applicable information on quality of life in their particular context. At the same time, it is important that targeted technical innovations are implemented to solve intractable problems which have plagued efforts to create a truly representative picture of quality of life in the past.

Ensure Global and Local Engagement: Through stakeholder mapping, communication, and advocacy efforts, the Quality of Life Initiative will bring on board the support of a diverse group of partners from across local and national governments, academia, civil society and the UN. Such engagement is unique in its scope, rallying a truly multistakeholder perspective around the conception of quality of life and how it can be the organizing principle for measuring progress towards important development milestones. Such engagement is critical in order to raise awareness among all stakeholder groups for the need to better measure quality of life, and to mobilize a critical mass of support to transform how considerations around quality of life can impact global policy and local outcomes.

How Are We Doing It?

As mentioned above, at the core of the Quality of Life Initiative is the creation of a globally relevant, locally applicable index on quality of life. It is only by understanding the interaction with layers around this core, however, that the potential of the initiative will be realized.

Index Development

The development of the index undoubtedly has a highly technical component, in order to develop a scientifically robust and conceptually sound product that will help decision makers understand, measure, and improve the quality of life of their constituents. An initial and critical step was to undertake a benchmarking exercise, to analyse the current landscape of quality of life measurement and indices to understand where the current gaps lie and whether there is need for a new effort. As we see in the section above 'Why are we doing it', this analysis indeed identified a number of entry points for building upon previous work to deliver a truly human-centric, relevant, innovative and applicable tool to decision makers.

The technical team is deciding, in close cooperation with other experts, on the domains and attributes which should be covered in a revamped conceptualization of quality of life. The initial phase of the project has seen a series of Expert Group Meetings (EGMs), co-designed and co-organized through both a technical and institutional lens in order to build on top of one another layers of technical validity along with institutional legitimacy. The first EGM, conducted as a series of in-depth interviews from June – August 2023, investigated the definition of quality of life and essential domains which would need to be covered in order to fill the current gaps in information and understanding mentioned earlier in this document. Importantly, it also provided an initial confirmation of the viability of using the existing Urban Monitoring Framework[2] (UMF) as the structure for a quality of life index. With these findings in hand, the second EGM took place in August 2023, to better understand the challenges that cities are facing and how this affects their capacity to improve the quality of life of inhabitants. It needed to ensure the analysis was undertaken with an understanding of the broader concept of quality of life.

To that end, the EGM included 10 local government representatives and 10 quality of life experts. Such considerations point to the fact that, indeed, the technical development of the index does not exist in a vacuum. An institutional workstream provides insights into the organizations, individuals and networks who can be leveraged, ensuring the legitimate co-creation of an index with adequate engagement from across a spectrum of stakeholders. The second EGM was an opportunity to bring together the technical and political considerations, to investigate the challenges that cities are facing and come to a consensus on what domains are critical for improved quality of life.

In parallel, a roundtable with academia experts took the valuable insights from these technical meetings in order to design a more expanded discussion with a policy slant. Such roundtable discussions are integral to the actual development of the index, providing additional context and nuance to the more nuts and bolts – domains, indicators, data – which are being discussed in the expert group meetings.

The ongoing consultations and developments of the index are bringing together these technical and institutional pieces, recognizing that the technical development of the index is feeding into larger strategic processes. As the index progresses from a technical perspective, the institutional elements will be building an ecosystem of political and institutional support, crucial to the eventual engagement and buy-in from local and national governments as well as the UN system. At the same time, there is a key communications piece which is telling the story of this process in a way which speaks to decision makers, key partners, and the general population. These stakeholders must understand how the index development fits into a broader initiative that is putting quality of life at the forefront of the important decisions happening in communities, cities, and countries across the globe.

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[2] UN-Habitat's Global Urban Monitoring Framework. A performance monitoring framework recommended for subnational states to use to measure attainment of key sustainable development outcomes. It was endorsed by the UN Statistical Commission in November 2021. The UMF recommends a set of indicators to measure the achievement of SDG11 objectives (safer, more inclusive, more resilient and more sustainable cities and human settlements) in five domains: society, economy, environment, culture and governance.
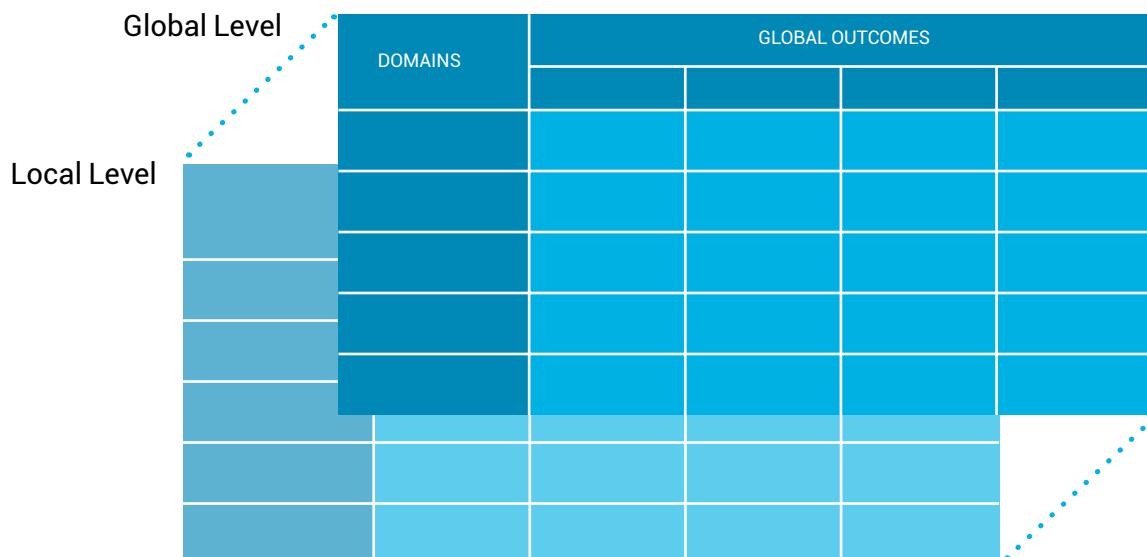
Innovation

Innovation can occur on various scales, from incremental improvements in existing products to groundbreaking breakthroughs that disrupt entire industries. The Quality of Life Initiative gives a central and crosscutting role to innovation, and it is key to realize that these innovations are proposed at a number of different levels: Innovation in how relationships are established with institutions and how they interact with technology and the index; Innovation in the social and participatory aspects of data collection; Innovation in how data is communicated, visualized, and interacted with; Innovation that is more technical or technological in nature, with regards to collecting, analysing, manipulating or visualizing data.

It is clear that such a wide-ranging concept is relevant across the initiative, from ICT, to institutional engagement, to the index development, and beyond. The emphasis is on not developing innovation for the sake of innovation. Rather, it is about taking what is a good problem-solving idea through to an effective impact. Currently, the technical workstream of the Initiative has started to produce documentation which hones in on some of the potential planned innovations from that angle. In developing the Index, the technical team has sought to ensure innovation is not only useful and efficient but that it also avoids creating longer-term technical or operational debts for the Index. The proposed innovation should respond to a challenge which has been documented, consulted and confirmed through previous research and consultation. Indeed, those past months of research and consultation - including the review of 50+ previously developed indices and a series of interviews and in-person meetings with experts from the around the world – have revealed a central problem which has plagued such efforts at index creation in the past. **How can a global index take into account the local and individual nuance in the comprehension of quality of life?**

The proposed innovation is to take the existing Urban Monitoring Framework (UMF) as the basic template for the index, but to take a 'portfolio of indicators' approach. This would consist of multiple layers of indicators, including a global layer of indicators that measure universal concepts that apply to improving the quality of life for all individuals, but moving down to local indicators which measure concepts unique to a specific urban settlement due to local values and priorities.

This particular innovation is more conceptual in nature, describing an efficient way to solve the 'global relevance' problem of indices. How to actually collect, measure, and visualize the data which will bring such a concept to fruition will require collaboration across all workstreams of the initiative. This innovation already points in some promising directions, such as the possibility of such a spatial layer permitting the use of innovative, crosscutting indicators.

Innovation is a far-reaching and sometimes difficult concept to grasp, depending on how it is defined and it's scope of application. It is also core to the Quality of Life Initiative. As such, efforts thus far have worked to fine-tune and operationalize just how, when and why certain innovations will be applied. As mentioned above, such considerations are not limited only to technical innovations per se. Efforts must span the full breadth of communications, institutional engagement, and how we create and distribute knowledge. To be successful, this initiative must be innovative in changing mindsets in a way which puts Quality of Life at the center of policy discussions and at the core of development.

Pilot City Selection

The initiative will work initially with eight pilot cities to co-create the index, and better understand the needs to be measured in relation to quality of life in cities. This process is one in which technical and institutional elements of the initiative will be closely intertwined. The institutional workstream plays a key role in discussing the needs and expectations with local leaders, to arrive at a common understanding of how the process can inform the increased engagement of additional local and national governments. This institutional focus provides a space to discuss the opportunities and risks, in order to leverage participation that will be anchored at higher levels, from national governments to the United Nations. The institutional lens is also important in order to ensure a broad representation of cities which can legitimately claim to be on a path to leaving no one and no place behind. Such a consideration carries significant weight in international fora such as the UN Statistical Commission, where this index aims to be endorsed.

At the same time, the technical workstream is examining potential pilot city selection based on considerations related to the eventual index calculation, such as data availability and collection methods. They will work with cities in order to design, test and refine a method for calculating the local level Quality of Life index values. From a technical perspective, it is important that these cities be enthusiastic and active participants in order to foster the actual co-creation of the index in a way that will provide ownership to those participating municipalities. At the same time, this initial group of cities will be key players not only in co-creating an index which can be applied in their particular context, but also providing the initiative with the material, guidance, and lessons which can be deployed more widely. If the eventual rollout in 100 cities or more is the desired outcome, these initial pilot city are a crucial part of the means for getting there. The initial pilot cities can be viewed as a kind of stepping stone, or foundation, picking up momentum and additional cities along the way in order to establish a critical mass of recognition, support and uptake.

Both the technical and institutional considerations play distinct, yet complementary roles in moving the pilot city process forward in a way which will connect local governments to something they own, and which brings a scientifically, innovative new index into the global discourse. The balance between institutional objectives around engagement with the index are not at odds with a deeply technical process which will necessitate the inclusion of an initial cohort of first movers. Rather, the project will most likely proceed in an iterative manner, plunging forward with a few cities that we can count on now to bring the enthusiasm and capacities necessary for the technical process, while the institutional work will continue to build increasing layers of engagement, validity and support through important conversations, consultations and engagements with the right stakeholders. The overall programmatic rollout of the initiative aims to bundle these different threads together, so to speak, through a continuous documentation which shows the added value of each, and presents a coherent and unified narrative for both an internal and external audience.

These complementary perspectives are key to ensuring a robust process that will not only technically validate the quality of life index, but also provide a snowball effect around the engagement with local and national governments, the UN System and others. This engagement, it should be noted, is not strictly around the index itself, but rather the initiative as a whole. The aim is to provide a comprehensive landscape of capacity building, knowledge products and services to empower leaders to understand the impacts of their decisions and investments on quality of life. This process starts with an index but does not end there. The full programmatic rollout that begins in these pilot cities must bring together the different streams of the initiative in a unified and coherent way forward.

Finding the Right Partners

The initiative has an important stakeholder engagement dimension, in order to onboard an engaged coalition of partners who can leverage a new understanding of quality of life towards key policy outcomes. The process of identifying and engaging with new partners implies a common understanding of the overarching objectives of the initiative, and how each organization or each individual will contribute to those objectives. On the other hand, it is equally important that the initiative offers concrete benefits to those with whom we engage.

The starting point has been the development of a stakeholder engagement plan from the institutional workstream of the initiative, but this plan involves the whole team. From a technical perspective, finding the right technical experts to co-create the quality of life index is of fundamental importance. These stakeholders are at the forefront of a constantly evolving research landscape, providing crucial insights as to the nuances around quality of life in a rapidly changing world that this index must account for.

At the same time, a parallel yet related track is engaging academic experts to bring the quality of life discussion to a more strategic, policy level. It is critical that such engagement bring support and credibility behind this effort to re-imagine how quality of life can become a pillar of sustainable development and integral to both local and global development agendas. Doing so can attract the attention of key players across various development agendas, from climate change, to pollution, and many more. Bringing quality of life into these conversations means engaging with the right people and the right organizations at the right time.

An initial roundtable discussion with several universities from across the globe revealed a number of important points. First of all, there is a hunger amongst this distinguished group to collaborate on such an initiative. From their perspective, the fact that quality of life is being elevated through this initiative to have a central importance to sustainable development as a whole, is already a unique and innovative effort worth engaging with. A number of concrete outcomes have already been proposed from these stakeholders, including the creation of a position paper (or series of position papers) detailing the thematic areas and entry points where quality of life can play a role in major international fora, and in particular the UN General Assembly convened Summit of the Future.

The representatives also provided insights around the state-of-play of research on quality of life, including the crucial challenge of participatory and inclusive urban planning and design in order to foster a real sense of meaning to quality of life in cities.

This meeting served as a proof-of-concept, in terms of selling the idea, the aspiration, and the potential behind the Quality of Life Initiative in a way which engendered concrete engagement and outputs. As the physical products (e.g. the Index) of the initiative are developed, such engagement is crucial in order to build momentum and support.

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[3] The Summit of the Future is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to enhance cooperation on critical challenges and address gaps in global governance, reaffirm existing commitments including to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the United Nations Charter, and move towards a reinvigorated multilateral system that is better positioned to positively impact people's lives. https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda/summit-of-the-future

Such meetings do not exist in a vacuum, but are rather part of a larger process of stakeholder engagement punctuated by a number of technical and thematic meetings throughout the lifespan of the initiative.

The lessons learned and knowledge produced from the initial meeting with academia will feed into the development of a subsequent series of roundtables which will go into different regions and understand from city representatives, UN organisations and others how we can most effectively collaborate. The insights gathered from these strategic, policy-oriented meetings are in turn being fed back into the technical workstream, to inform the development of an index which can inform and guide the decisions of local leaders. Such continuous feedback loops among the different elements of the Quality of Life Initiative, and across such diverse stakeholder groups, are key to ensuring a truly innovative, aspirational and unique outcome.

For More Information: