



A Brief History of Quality of Life:

From Aristotle to the Present, Evolution of a Concept at the Core of Human Development

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





'Good Life', The Conceptual Ancestor of 'Quality of Life'.

The characteristics of a 'good life' and its constitutive elements can be traced back to Aristotle, who thought the 'blessings of life' can be divided into three classes – those which come to us from without, those of the soul, and those of the body¹. This analysis made nearly two and a half millennia ago is remarkably comprehensive and continues to be a founding concept of what constitutes today 'quality of life', and how it can be interpreted. Transposed to a more current approach, 'good quality of life' has to do with a 'subtle understanding of the nature and role of an individual's agency and intrinsic motivation, as well as the importance of institutional conditions, particularly education, aiming at perfecting human beings' nature'².

The concept of quality of life has to do with the inherent characteristics of a person and his or her surrounding environment. In other words with internal conditions, but also with external aspects that are beyond the control of individuals and connect to the presence of the state that enables people to live well. Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, which simplistically has been reduced to happiness or an individual 'case of mind', introduced the idea that 'good – quality of life' results from a subjective view that can be nurtured by self-mastery, control of passions and vices and the acquisition of both intellectual and character virtues which contribute to create the 'highest good'. In reality, eudaimonia relates as well to the original ancient Greek notion of welfare, which entails the need for state legislators and laws that help to improve individual character and conditions and to discern the difference between good and bad behaviour.

Through history, philosophers and gradually other thinkers and disciplines have been occupied with the immense questions related to the quality of human life. It is possible to group the evolution of ideas about quality of life into three groups³:

Hedonic theories⁴. In general terms refers to a lifestyle of pleasure-seeking and avoidance of pain. Philosophers and thinkers equate quality of life to a state of self-awareness, individual desires and consciousness.

Rational preference theories⁵. Satisfying one's preferences or desires is what improves quality of life. This theory has to do with personal choices, and the possibility of individuals to rely on rational calculations that enables them to make rational decisions that result in better outcomes aligned with their own best interest, as a way of getting satisfaction.

Theories of human flourishing⁶. According to this theory, quality of life has to do with capacities and the development of functions that will enable human beings to flourish. This theory has an external component associated to education, interaction with others and self-development supported by institutions.

Evidently, none of these theories enjoys universal agreement, and to some extent they overlap. The first two are subjective and individualistic in nature⁷, and for this reason contested by cultural approaches that put collective values and the well-being of communities first, or equal to self-realisation.

¹ Schopenhauer A. (2002), *The Wisdom of Life – The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer*, Theophania Publishing.

² Borja L – pez noval (2016), *Handbook of Research Methods and Applications in Happiness and Quality of Life*, Economics, edited by L. Bruni and P. Porta.

³ This classification was proposed by Sandøe, Peter (2023), *Quality of Life: Three Competing Views*. Ethical Theory and Moral Practice, vol. 2, no. 1999, 1, pp. 23–11. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27504064>. Accessed 20 July 2023.

⁴ Diener et al indicate that individuals, after few years and conditions, return to a 'inner set point' of subjective wellbeing independently of external factors, largely because inherited aspects and personality types, which could make possible to adopt common metrics. Refer to Diener, E., Suh, E. M., Lucas, R. E., & Smith, H. L. (1999). Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125(2), 276–302.

⁵ <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.125.2.276>

⁶ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/quality-life-philosophical-and-ethical-dimensions>

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⁷ These theories fall in the realm of subjective wellbeing, and as such have limitations, for instance, preferences may not be factual, they could be based on misinformation, or continuously change overtime.



They are also challenged by philosophical and religious positions that consider human desires as a cause of suffering and pain, and a continuous postponement of happiness⁸. What appears most evident is that quality of life is a compound experience of satisfaction with lifestyle, course and conditions, and with the necessary environment to develop and support new opportunities, overcoming constraints, for expanded liveable options⁹. Quality of life is therefore based on personal values, aspirations and wishes that determine individual subjective experiences and by objective life conditions that are configured and mediated by public policies.

Quality of Life and the Evolution of Policies, from Objective to Subjective Needs

In this saga of more than two millennia, quality of life has moved from the realm of ideas - philosophical discussions, interpretations, theoretical positions – to the political agenda. Quality of life is clearly recognised as a complex, multidimensional concept that has not been shaped by one particular definition. Still, recent advances in the conceptualisation and measurement of this concept have contributed to its inclusion in policy affairs, to the point that decision-makers, practitioners and inhabitants integrate quality of life in different disciplines with very diverse interests.

At the same time, quality of life remains an elusive term that has different meanings and facets. There have been many efforts to create an operational definition for this; yet the essence of quality of life remains vague. The basic idea of what it constitutes is similar in much of the world. A resident from

Jakarta, Naples, Los Angeles or Bogotá has, to a large extent, common concerns, including having a decent job, material wellbeing, good education and health¹⁰. These objective conditions have been measured since the early 1960s, using quantifiable social, economic and health indicators¹¹ to reflect the extent to which human needs are met. These indicators, including for instance, economic production, literacy rates, or life expectancy were gathered without the direct involvement of the individuals being assessed, using universal standards and conditions¹².

Although subjective conditions of quality of life were considered since the early philosophical discussions on this concept, the inclusion of subjective well-being with more integrated methods appeared in the middle of the 1970s, with studies that described how people experienced the quality of their lives through emotional reactions and cognitive judgments¹³. At the policy level, the work of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress¹⁴ (2011) recognised that individuals and specific contexts may value more one of these factors over the others, and these were “the most important features that give life its value”¹⁵. According to this Commission, “Quality of life is often tied to the opportunities available to people, to the meaning and purpose they attach to their lives, and to the extent to which they enjoy the possibilities available to them”¹⁶. Subjective measures of quality of life are premised on the argument that individuals are the best judges of their life conditions, and they “provide valuable information about a crucial component of social change: the values, beliefs and motivations of ordinary citizens.”¹⁷

⁸ Refer for instance S. King (2021), *Buddhist Vision of the good life for all*, Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism. Oxford and New York: Routledge.

C. Fink (2013), *Better to Be a Renunciant Buddhism, Happiness, and the Good Life*, Journal of Philosophy of Life Vol.3, No.2, essay.

⁹ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2023), Quality of Life Program, Vision 2030, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/v2030/vrps/qol>.

¹⁰ UN-Habitat (2012), *State of the World's Cities Report: Prosperous Cities*, Earthscan, London.

¹¹ R. Cummins et al (2003), *Developing a national index of subjective wellbeing: the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index*, Social Indicators Research 64, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Netherlands

¹² R. Constanza et al (2007), *Quality of life: An approach integrating opportunities, human needs, and subjective well-being*, Gund Institute for Ecological Economics, The University of Vermont, Burlington.

¹³ Diener, E. (1984). Subjective well-being. *Psychological Bulletin*, 95(3), 542–575. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.95.3.542>

¹⁴ The Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (CMEPSP), generally referred to as the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission after the surnames of its leaders, is a commission of inquiry created by the French Government in 2008. The inquiry examined how the wealth and social progress of a nation could be measured, without relying on the uni-dimensional gross domestic product (GDP) measure.

¹⁵ Stiglitz Joseph, Sen Amartya, Fitoussi Jean-Paul (2011), *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*

¹⁶ Stiglitz Joseph, Sen Amartya, Fitoussi Jean-Paul (2011), *op cit*.

¹⁷ World Values Survey (2011) *Values that change the world*. Accessed online at http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs/articles/folder_published/article_base_110/files/WVSBrochure6-2008_11.pdf.



The Evolution in the Interpretations and Use of Quality of Life

Several decades of research and the production of a significant body of literature have revealed how quality of life differs between different demographic groups, cultures and moments in history. Without the intention of being exhaustive, some of the most critical interpretations and uses are presented here:

GDP and Quality of Life

GDP was adopted as the main measure of a country's economy in the middle of the last century when the creation of wealth and the emergence of the consumer economy characterised global change. The metric was gradually used to set goals and a proxy of social welfare, and by the 1960s, it was equated to quality of life in different countries¹⁸. The theoretical perspective of measuring progress beyond GDP recognizes that despite the fact that GDP is a well-established metric with a coherent accounting framework that is country-owned and available to all nations, the measurement of progress, well-being and sustainability with it is clearly inappropriate.¹⁹

Capabilities Approach and Quality of Life

Important research efforts were translated into rigorous research practices on how quality of life can be understood and measured. 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 so²⁰. The capability approach has encouraged a paradigm shift in policy debates concerning human development, framing poverty as a form of capability deprivation. It later led to the preparation of the Human Development Index focused on health, education and economic opportunities²¹.

Human Development Index (HDI) and Quality of Life

HDI was created in the 1990s as a synthetic value of key dimensions of human development associated to the possibility of living a long and healthy life, having education and a decent standard of living. Departing from economic growth alone, HDI focuses on people and their capabilities, and has contributed to determining strategies for improving living conditions as an important indicator of country well-being with a strong correlation of high values of HDI and quality of life in countries. The metric has been criticised for the limitations to reflect recent policy changes, real quality of life improvements and related inequalities. The difficulties to be applied at local level, limit the efforts of subnational governments to accelerate quality of life, as well as the inherent restrictions in the makeup of the index to account for people's satisfaction and aspects of subjective wellbeing.

Happiness and Quality of Life

Numerous philosophical studies have shown that the pursuit of happiness is inherent to people and recognised as a fundamental human goal²². For centuries, it remained in the realm of humanities and when it erupted in public policies, it was in very broad terms and with a diffuse goal. In the 1970s, Bhutan's approach to Gross National Happiness (GNH) recognized the holistic nature of this concept, associated to people's spiritual, material, physical and social needs, and as a collective phenomenon with strong connections to ecological sustainability²³. Concurrently, there was a growing understanding that if society's goal is to increase people's feelings of well-being and happiness, measurements on economic growth

¹⁸ G. Becker et al (2005), The Quantity and Quality of Life and the Evolution of World Inequality, The American Economic Review, Vol. 95, No.1, American Economic Association, USA.

¹⁹ Refer to the section Beyond GDP that will elaborate on the ineffectiveness of GDP as a measure of true human well-being

²⁰ "Development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states." A. Sen (1999), *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press.

²¹ Extracted from UN-Habitat Report, *Assessing the Current Landscape of Quality of Life Indices, 2023*, non-published.

²² United Nations (2013), *UN Resolution 65/309: Happiness: Towards a Holistic Approach to Development*, General Assembly, New York.

²³ Sithey G, Thow AM, Li M. Gross national happiness and health: lessons from Bhutan. *Bull World Health Organ.* 2015 Aug 1;93(8):514. doi: 10.2471/BLT.15.160754. PMID: 26478605; PMCID: PMC4581665



did not suffice. Today there is increasing evidence and understanding on the constitutive elements of happiness and how it connects to different disciplines and political science, and the connection to quality of life. There is also more and more knowledge and expertise in measurement conditions. By 2011, as our awareness and data collection capabilities grew, the United Nations suggested governments recognise the value of 'happiness' when developing policies to stimulate social and economic development ²⁴, establishing an important connection to quality of life.

Prosperity of Cities and Quality of Life

UN-Habitat developed in 2012, the City Prosperity Initiative in which it was assumed that quality of life underpins how the city functions. It was considered that quality of life was at the crossroads of all policies and actions, and a synthesis of all dimensions of prosperity. When a city generates jobs and economic growth it creates public spaces that generate attractive, secure, clean and durable surroundings. It raises levels of education and provides good health, thus improving quality of life. Cities that progress in this way experience higher levels of prosperity, and have more prospects to be on a sustainable path. This approach connected economic development, living standards, material progress and individual and collective wellbeing, all as important dimensions of prosperity.

The Quality of Life Initiative has identified and analysed around 50 global or regional indices that measure all or some aspects of quality of life. These indices represent different schools of thought, policy positions and even business interests that could be grouped in different categories and technical approaches. This includes, among others, the OECD Better Life Index, Arcadis Sustainable City Index,

Canadian Index of Wellbeing, Happy Planet index from the New Economics Foundation, the Korean Quality of Life Index, the Global Liveability Index from the Economist Intelligence Unit, the City Prosperity Index from UN-Habitat, The Swiss Index on Quality of Life for Cities, the Social Progress Index and the World Happiness Report from Sustainable Development Solutions. The following paper in this synthesis series, 'A Fresh Perspective on Measuring Quality of Life', details the numerous entry points which this benchmarking exercise identified for the Quality of Life Initiative to build a more comprehensive, inclusive, and actionable conceptualization of quality of life.

In summary, as we are going to analyse in the following sections, what is important to take from the literature on quality of life and its different interpretations - including from the priorities set by governments and international organizations - is that quality of life in urban areas must be composed of both quantitative dimensions of material well-being and qualitative dimensions of satisfaction, both of which could align with the globally agreed goals for humanity, particularly as defined by the SDGs.

Recent Changes in Quality of Life

In recent decades, remarkable progress has been made towards improving the quality of life for communities around the world. More people live in cities to increase their prospects of prosperity and development, life expectancy has improved, and maternal and child deaths have dropped. The proportion of people living in extreme poverty has decreased dramatically and more children are attending school, at least in the pre-COVID era. In

²⁴ United Nations (2013), *UN Resolution 65/309*, op cit.

²⁵ Extracted from *UN-Habitat Report, Assessing the Current Landscape of Quality of Life Indices*, op cit.

²⁶ *Life satisfaction is in this sense a synonym of happiness that has also been termed as 'subjective wellbeing'; a concept that can be measured through self-reported mechanisms with important connections to public policies. According to several studies, subjective conditions can track objective societal and economic conditions fairly well and also help to quantify people's suffering. Refer, for instance, to R. Layard and G. Ward (2020), We can increase happiness through public policy, LSE, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2020/03/17/we-can-increase-happiness-through-public-policy-and-in-our-jobs-and-private-lives-too/>*

²⁷ *UN-Habitat (2020), The Value of Sustainable Urbanization, World Cities Report, Nairobi.*

²⁸ *Eurofound (2013), Quality of life in Europe: Social inequalities, Third European Quality of Life Survey -, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.*

²⁹ *A Faka (2020), Assessing quality of life inequalities: a geographic approach, Department of Geography, School of Environment, Geography and Applied Economics, Harokopio University, Greece, <https://www.mdpi.com/2220-9964/9/10/600>.*



In addition, the advancements and increased use of technology are positively influencing ways of life with a more informed digital society. From social media and improved communication, to online shopping, to flexible working conditions, to health tracking, several technological changes have positively affected quality of life. But technology has also come with a price: well-documented psychological effects, such as isolation, depression, and anxiety, as well as negative health conditions, including living a more sedentary lifestyle with higher prospects of obesity and cardiovascular diseases. Technology has also accentuated exclusion and inequality with differentiated access to tools and means of production, productive assets, market concentration, skills disparities and jobs polarization that affect quality of life of people and places.

Social and economic inequalities are also affecting the quality of life of people. UN-Habitat documented that in the last 25 years, 75% of cities in the world grew more unequal, with a differentiated access to income, opportunities, health conditions and standards of living. In urban areas, the concentration of advantages, amenities and opportunities in some places, and disadvantages in others accentuate inequalities, generating a differentiated geography of quality of life, in which the space acts as a vector to reproduce inequalities further differentiating the spatial aspect of quality of life.

Inequalities are also affecting people in different regions. The means of survival of entire populations in diverse parts of the planet are not secure due to different threats such as conflict and famine.

Localised effects of climate change are becoming increasingly more apparent in recent years, with the devastating expected impact quickly becoming a grim reality.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has not been the same. The way individuals and communities live their day-to-day lives, work, play, interact, and rest has drastically changed and continues to evolve. It is evident that the determinants of success of many

aspects of life have been drastically modified, including the well-being of individuals, the maintenance of positive political relations, and the use of social and physical spaces. This has created a world of uncertainty that affects quality of life at the individual and community levels in different forms:

Changes in Objective Conditions. The pandemic lessened pre-existing opportunities and achievements in health conditions, educational attainment and poverty reduction, and expanded inequalities and different forms of exclusion with significant effects on people's lives.

Changes in Subjective Conditions. People have been affected in individual aspects such as stress, anxiety, fear, sadness, and loneliness with the possibility of deterioration in mental health and life satisfaction. Social networks, support and interactions were also affected in terms of community spirit, cohesion, care, comfort, trust, belonging, values, and affinity, among others.

Space Related Changes. Alterations in proximity, distance, different forms of mobility, use of public spaces, density at neighbourhood level, more flexible work conditions and telemedicine options are some of the spatial changes that are having varied consequences in quality of life.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has provoked a reflection about what matters most to people, and the impact of government actions and investments on citizens' health, income security and quality of life. The way we define this concept and the value we give to the different components necessary to achieve it are also in flux. There is a new emphasis on prioritising overall wellbeing, family and social cohesion, healthier lifestyles, and having a strong connection with nature. Access to new technologies and knowledge along with a focus on innovation and equity are shaping the way we think about what is important and truly valuable about our lives and the lives of our families, friends, and neighbours.



Quality of Life and Global Agendas

Global agendas are about protecting the planet, advancing prosperity for the people, and increasing quality of life for all. The movement towards a sustainable society established a critical connection to quality of life since the early UN Summits. The Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (1972) stated:

"In our time man's capability to transform his surroundings, if used wisely, can bring to all peoples the benefits of development and the opportunity to enhance quality of life".³⁰

Similarly, several declarations and UN agencies recognise, 'the determination to enjoy the best possible health and quality of life' (WHO); the ambition to 'have quality of life for the people living with HIV (UNAIDS); the premise that 'education plays a significant role in promoting quality of life in the short and long term' (UNESCO); the motto 'good jobs, good quality of life' (ILO). All these UN goals and aspirations are a pursuit for the 'good life goals', individual actions to support SDGs, that do not differ from the classic Greek philosopher's thoughts of the 'good life', considered constitutively human and a precondition for inner peace and stability of the wider community.³¹

The resolution that created the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development³² and adopted a comprehensive, far-reaching, and people-centred set of universal and transformative goals and targets, recognised that "sustainable urban development and management are crucial to the quality of life of the people".³³

Countries adopting the "New Urban Agenda" during the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in

Quito, "committed to protect the well-being and quality of life of all persons through environmentally sound urban and territorial planning, infrastructure and basic services and underlining the linkages between good urbanisation and job creation, livelihood opportunities, and improved quality of life."³⁴ As focal point for the implementation of this Agenda, the UN-Habitat Strategic Plan (2020-2025) adopted the vision of "a better quality of life for all in an urbanising world" and created the programmatic conditions for its realisation.³⁵

The European Commission Resolution 'Measuring Progress in a Changing World' urges countries to go 'beyond GDP' (2011), by developing indicators that are as clear and appealing as GDP, but more inclusive of environmental and social aspects of human progress, recognising that economic indicators were never designed to be comprehensive measures of prosperity and well-being, calling for adequate indicators to address global challenges of the 21st century, such as climate change, poverty, resource depletion, health and quality of life.³⁶

Aspirations, needs and satisfaction of countries and peoples have evolved over time from exclusively focusing on the growth of GDP, towards inclusion, social progress, human rights, wellbeing, and environmental sustainability. An international movement to adopt a proxy indicator for overall societal development and wellbeing was initiated, known as GDP+, or 'Beyond GDP', which aims to rethink business-as-usual practices in evaluating the wellbeing of people and the planet. As part of this movement, the international community recognised that new metrics are needed that put people at the centre, with a well-organised framework in which society can participate in things they value and a clear focus on quality of life.

³⁰ United Nations (1972), *Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*, Declaration of the Human Environment, Appendix II, 1972.

³¹ Aristoteles principles of the 'Good Life', eudaimonia.

³² https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_1_70_E.pdf

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³³ https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/9824/20.500.11822/-/Transforming_our_world_the_2030_Agenda_for_Sustainable_Development-2015TransformingOurWorld_2015.pdf?sequence=3&%3BisAllowed=

³⁴ United Nations (2016), *New Urban Agenda*,

³⁵ https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/documents/07-2019/english_0.pdf.

³⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/environment/beyond_gdp/policy-documents_en.html.



A Fresh Look at Quality of Life

The concept of quality of life, from the time of Aristotle through to the present, has been in constant flux. How the various interpretations have been articulated across cultures and societies over the millennia have contributed to a kaleidoscope of interpretations. Quality of life has moved from the realm of philosophers into concrete policy discussions, with traditional measures of happiness and fulfillment being put to the test. A rapidly changing and urbanizing world fraught with pandemics, climate change, conflict, and unprecedented technological advances has turned previously held notions of 'the good life' on their head.

Significant advances have been made in incorporating changing circumstances and preferences into more comprehensive understandings of quality of life. And yet, challenges remain. How can a mayor, who has limited time and resources, understand which policies and investments will pay real dividends in terms of the quality of life outcomes of his or her constituents? Such an information gap continues to plague local leaders, who would benefit immensely from a tool which could inform them, based on their local circumstances and priorities, which policy levers they need to pull to improve quality of life across a number of different domains.

Doing so requires taking into account a diversity of inputs from key actors including those who will be making those policy decisions in the end. It requires innovation in how data is collected, manipulated, visualized and applied. And it requires a unique integration of the subjective experiences of individuals

as a central pillar to understanding what quality of life is made of.

UN-HABITAT, the United Nations Programme for Human Settlements, is the specialized programme supporting sustainable urbanization worldwide. The Quality of Life Initiative implemented by UN-Habitat since July 2023, is positioned to build on the lessons of the past to build a concept of quality of life adapted for the present and with an eye on the future. Central to the Initiative will be the development of a comprehensive tool, harnessing conceptual and technical innovations to provide local leaders with the ability to take evidence-based decisions when it comes to improving the quality of life of those they serve. The Initiative will also be innovative in that the development of this tool is surrounded by the creation of a comprehensive knowledge ecosystem which provides the resources, expertise and guidance that actors from around the world can adapt and relate to their own context.

The examination of quality of life throughout the millennia has provided an excellent basis for reflection, as the Quality of Life Initiative integrates past lessons and moves into action to provide innovative solutions for all.

For More Information:

