



Identifying universal measures of quality of life:

A Technical Process, a Human Story

This paper is the fourth in a series which aims to depict the journey of the Quality of Life Initiative since its start in July 2023. It explains how the different moving parts articulate to reach the goal of the Initiative: to create a tool to measure quality of life in cities, considering quality of life as a dynamic assessment, collective or individual, of the opportunities provided by a city for people to thrive. This Synthesis focuses on how the Initiative has progressed to come to a consensus on a first iteration of a globally relevant and universal set of indicators on quality of life.



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A people-centered approach to creating a technical tool

The previous paper in this series shared how the Quality of Life Initiative had begun consultations with a variety of experts to establish an initial list of domains to build the foundation of a universal understanding of quality of life¹. Subsequent consultations homed in to identify indicators and metrics to efficiently and effectively capture the essence of quality of life in urban settings. At the end of this exercise, the number of proposed indicators for a global layer of the index had been whittled down, across the nine domains of quality of life.

One particularity of the Quality of Life Initiative is that such technical processes do not exist in a vacuum. In parallel, a *knowledge ecosystem* has been built through consultations with academia, across the UN system, and others. The idea is that **through diverse levels of institutional engagement and knowledge creation, the resulting tool will not be 'just another index'. It will take these domains, such as governance, economy, and housing, – which are not in themselves novel or unique – and filter them through a people-centered quality of life lens.**

A quality of life lens presents an opportunity to re-frame common urban development issues such as housing, transport, and economy, in a way that speaks to the human dimensions of cities. For instance, it is not just about the supply of housing, but also the adequacy and affordability aspects that affect quality of life. Similarly, the economy is not

just about employment but about job satisfaction. A quality of life lens establishes a clear link between the provision of a particular urban development priority and the satisfaction that the individuals and communities derive from it. It is through this lens that we were able to arrive at a refined set of quality of life indicators.

In this paper we explore how the Initiative has drawn upon the latest and best knowledge from academia, civil society, the private sector, and across the UN System, to develop **a global layer of the index – a universally coherent and applicable set of indicators on quality of life**². In the last several months, the Quality of Life Initiative has begun its next step, actively engaging with cities and experts to co-create and pilot the proposed index methodology to build a narrative that tells the story of a future where quality of life is the thread through which urban development runs.

Adding value to existing metrics

This Initiative is not the only attempt to define and measure quality of life or to take a more holistic look at what should matter when it comes to measuring progress. Particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been much reflection on the role of spaces, places, and human interactions, and a variety of other factors in contributing to human well-being, life satisfaction, and other initiatives seeking to go beyond simple economic measures of progress.

¹ The EGM 2 first discussed with city leaders key problem areas and challenges across different geographical regions when it comes to quality of life. These challenges were then explored through the evaluative lens of different QoL experts in order to come up with a list of domains which are relevant determinants of quality of life. The nine domains of QoL to be used in this index, as agreed in EGM 2, are Education, Economy, Environment, Housing, Social Cohesion, Culture & Recreation, Basic Services & Mobility, Health, Governance.

² One of the main methodological challenges to developing an impactful measurement tool for quality of life in the past has been developing a framework that has universal coverage and can also take local nuances and priorities from different contexts into account. To solve this problem, the Quality of Life Initiative is taking measurements at two levels. The first layer is "Global" - aspects of quality of life that are universal to all people, regardless of geography, income, or culture. These are foundational. The second layer is "Local" - aspects of QoL that matter most to a specific community. The current paper focuses on the process behind the conception and development of the global layer.



The Quality of Life Initiative is building upon this broad shift in mindset and trying to push the needle and go a step further. It does so by working with cities to define those areas of life that matter most and by introducing new forms of data to better understand how people interact with their surroundings. In doing so, it helps to answer questions such as, what can the revealed preferences of individuals tell us about their values and priorities? How can we tap into the objective and subjective experiences of individuals, to better understand and value what matters most to people and communities? How can we help local leaders and planners draw a more direct line between their policies and quality of life improvements?

It is about looking beyond numbers and Beyond GDP,³ to better comprehend people's behaviors and what matters to them, and how city leaders can tap into those preferences and needs, to build their strategies, policies and plans. Central to this approach is the need to harness emerging technologies and innovation to better put people at the center of the conversation. Such an understanding has come through much deliberation. But gradually this Initiative understands the true value it proposes: to bring the overall satisfaction, needs and well-being of citizens to the center of decision-making and to guide sustainable policies, investments and people-centered innovations in communities and neighborhoods.

A global and consultative process

At the heart of this Initiative is the development of a practical tool to help better understand and measure quality of life in different contexts. Several stakeholder engagement processes have contributed to its development so far, and a series of technical workshops were hosted with different stakeholder groups and in different parts of the world to explore the domains, indicators, metrics, and data sources

necessary to create a tool that can be used by cities and countries around the world.

Between July 2023 and July 2024, around 20 global events were organized to engage with selected experts and key stakeholders from different regions of the world, facilitating the creation of a global community of practice and supporters of the Initiative and tool. As a result, over 500 individuals were directly engaged in the process. This included UN agencies, quality of life researchers, representatives of local and national governments, regional groupings, youth, civil society and local community groups, to name a few.

Extensive institutional engagement with experts and organizations has helped support the technical undertaking of the Initiative, allowing the team to tap into relevant expertise to expand the knowledge base further. An engaged group of academics from different regions of the world has provided critical and relevant feedback and insights to translate the technical work into recommendations for wider uptake by local and global policymakers⁴. Partners from the UN system, civil society and private sector were involved to ensure that the tool fits into a larger ecosystem of knowledge creation, support, and advocacy. Youth have been engaged specifically to better understand what is most important to young stakeholders – who have the most to gain and the most to lose – when talking about quality of life in cities. They have echoed the sentiment that quality of life is multidisciplinary and highly subjective, comprised of both universal necessities and context-specific elements.

This experience of multifaceted and global stakeholder consultation throughout the index construction process has shown the immense value and importance of bringing a wide range of partners to the table when discussing quality of life. Crucially, the engagement with several pilot cities to test the *global layer* and develop a locally adaptable methodology, or *local layer*, has also started.

³ The Beyond GDP Initiative aims to develop a more comprehensive approach to measuring prosperity and well-being. Adequate indicators are needed to address global challenges such as climate change, poverty, resource depletion, health and quality of life. In the context of the QoL Initiative, it is about looking beyond defining growth solely in economic terms, to better comprehend what people really value, and how city leaders can tap into those motivations

⁴ The UN-Habitat Quality of Life Academia Community of Practice prepared a position paper with a set of recommendations for the international community, available at: <https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2024/05/qoli-valuing-what-matters-urban-areas-position-paper.pdf>



Version 1.0 of the global layer of the quality of life measurement tool was the fruit of extensive probing across diverse communities of expertise. An important ingredient, however, was still missing: in order to be measured, these indicators require data, and good data requires innovation.

From data gaps and overload to meaningful metrics

It is estimated that over 90% of all data ever produced was produced in the last two years [2023 statistic]⁵. Much of the data that is needed to develop an innovative tool to measure quality of life is already available. However, there are still major data gaps, depending on the places and issues of focus. Is the data available in the right format? Is it providing the right information? Even if it is, data alone does not tell a story. Data needs to be innovative and transformed to inform the identified quality of life indicators. Overall, the challenge is about finding, extracting, organizing, and visualizing it in such a way that we move from data, to insights, and finally to real knowledge and wisdom which can be applied to create impact. If the goal of this Initiative is to equip local leaders with the knowledge and tools they need to inform impactful policy interventions, data is only the first step on that journey.

And yet, this first step, of identifying the correct data sources, already presents many challenges. Who owns the data? How can we access it? Is it sustainable? Trustworthy? There are a number of data gaps which need to be considered. Given the indicators that the Quality of Life Initiative is hoping to measure for the global layer – both objective and subjective – how can relevant, accessible and reliable data be sourced?

To dig deeper, the Initiative consulted with a wide community of data experts from various horizons to review the proposed global quality of life indicators, and determine whether they were suitable, optimal and, most importantly, measurable.

The participants discussed and validated several novel data sources and collection techniques – including administrative data, survey data, Earth Observation (EO) data and mobile phone data – while highlighting potential limitations and ways to mitigate those risks. This aligns with the results of a previous consultation that took place with a primarily academic audience who raised flags related to the challenges of homing in particularly on subjective preferences. Nevertheless, they were largely optimistic about the possibilities and opportunities to do things differently.

Such feedback loops between the technical consultations and additional engagement with key stakeholder groups have become a hallmark of the Initiative and are key to the development of a robust knowledge ecosystem. These considerations eventually led to recommendations to change some of the indicators, in favor of others which could measure the same phenomena but have wider coverage across both developing and developed countries.

Constant evolution, refinement and co-creation

It is important to note that the end goal is not to produce a static tool. Even for the global layer, it is envisioned that it may be revised and evolve as newer better, data becomes available, or as new insights roll in.

The technical development of this tool does not exist in a vacuum; the information is constantly being updated and informed. A first roundtable with academia in October 2023 laid the foundation for technical discussions which would delve into the current conceptualizations of quality of life and how they might be measured. And in parallel, this work has informed the beginnings of the co-creation process with several cities to go beyond the global layer to explore what quality of life means in their local contexts.

⁵ <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/data-generated-per-day>



Now the collaborative process of co-creation is shifting to another level, as the Initiative embarks on its first real 'rubber meets the road' encounters with local governments, to design the locally applicable layer of the methodology. This process is already well underway, and a first glimpse of the results were on display at a meeting in Singapore in May 2024, which brought together, among others, representatives of several pilot cities to share their experiences so far.

The last several months of the Quality of Life Initiative have been an exciting journey of discovery and demonstrated the importance of casting a wide net to bring diverse partners to the table to create knowl-

edge and drive innovation. As the theory turns to action and the puzzle pieces start to fall into place, there is a tangible momentum which has picked up.

That momentum is creating the conditions to bring quality of life into focus – to shine a light on well-being, dignity and satisfaction of people in cities. It also aims to center policy discussions on what matters most to the people and their aspirations. As the Quality of Life Initiative looks forward, it does so with a wealth of lessons learned, and the support of a growing and diverse coalition of partners all working towards the same north star – a better quality of life for all.

