

PRESS RELEASE

Global report redefines how cities measure quality of life

Insights from nine cities worldwide demonstrate powerful new data-driven approach linking people's perceptions and objective conditions to redefine urban success

Nairobi, 8 December 2025 — The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) today launched the report *Quality of Life in Cities: Insights from the Quality of Life Initiative Pilot Phase*, unveiling a groundbreaking comprehensive global dataset integrating objective and subjective indicators to measure and understand how urban residents experience life in their cities.

The Initiative, implemented by UN-Habitat and sponsored by the Quality of Life Program in Saudi Arabia, is a global effort to enhance urban well-being through data-driven, people-centred measurement, monitoring, and insights. The Initiative has piloted the Quality of Life Index in nine cities across five continents, including: Bhubaneswar (India), Kampala (Uganda), Logan (Australia), Madinah (Saudi Arabia), Niš (Serbia), Querétaro (Mexico), Quito (Ecuador), Udon Thani (Thailand), and Vancouver (Canada), representing nearly 13 million inhabitants, and is expanding to more than 100 local governments worldwide.

The Initiative's novel Quality of Life Index combines 28 universal "global layer" indicators across 9 domains with one universal benchmark indicator as well as context-specific "local layer" indicators to capture the lived reality of residents. It integrates both objective data (like unemployment, housing affordability, air quality, and access to public services) and subjective perceptions (like mental wellness, satisfaction with public services, and trust in local government). By adopting the Quality of Life Index, local and regional governments gain a powerful tool that goes beyond GDP and typical metrics to measure what matters to residents in their unique local contexts and to improve well-being holistically in their communities.

Key findings from the report reveal the following:

- Life satisfaction is strongly associated with city performance in education, the economy, and basic services and mobility, in that order.
- Life satisfaction shows very strong correlations with self-reported mental wellness, trust in local government, and confidence in local law, underscoring the importance of responsive, people-centred city institutions and policies.
- Across all cities, healthcare satisfaction and education quality satisfaction move almost in tandem. This may reflect shared underlying drivers, such as investment

in public services, or the mutually reinforcing effects of strong performance in these sectors.

- Satisfaction with sport and recreation facilities closely tracks satisfaction with green and open spaces, highlighting the role of accessible, well-maintained public environments in supporting health and well-being.
- Confidence in local law, trust in local government, community belonging, and mental well-being all show strong negative relationships with public transport convenience. This may be linked to governance or mental health challenges more common in larger cities, which typically have more extensive public transport networks.
- Perceived housing affordability also tends to decline as public transport convenience increases, suggesting that investments in public transport should be paired with inclusive housing policies.
- Life satisfaction does not correlate with GDP per capita, with cities in countries of divergent incomes per capita showing similar Life Satisfaction scores. While GDP remains an important indicator of economic performance, it does not explain how people experience their lives.

Building on new insights from its initial pilot experience, the Quality of Life Initiative is now onboarding more cities, while launching new, innovative, AI-powered digital tools to provide cities with people-powered experiential knowledge and evidence to sustainably transform their cities. The Index leverages cutting-edge data sources such as satellite imagery, mobile data, and social media surveys to measure quality of life, providing cities with dynamic, actionable insights, visualizations and tools on the Quality of Life Index Platform that aim to inform impactful urban policies. Informed by the city's own Index priorities and Index results, and a vast, searchable knowledge ecosystem, the Quality of Life Platform is equipping cities with tools that translate knowledge into clear points of action.

"How cities are planned, governed, and invested in determines whether they are inclusive, resilient, and liveable for all. This is the purpose of the Quality of Life Initiative" said UN-Habitat Executive Director, Anacláudia Rossbach. "The report we launch today brings forward lessons from a groundbreaking first cycle, showing what cities value and demonstrating how cities can use the Index to rethink priorities, improve public spaces, strengthen mobility, and deepen social connection. The Quality of Life Initiative is working to usher in a growing movement and a mindset shift: one where cities place people and their lived experience at the centre of planning and decision-making."

The report recommends that cities:

- Recognize quality of life as a fundamental pillar of sustainable urban development;
- Use the Quality of Life Index as a diagnostic tool to identify strengths, gaps, and priorities for urban planning;

- Bridge gaps between traditional quantitative data and perception-based data to design more inclusive, people-centred policies;
- Integrate quality of life monitoring into existing city initiatives such as Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR) and urban observatories, for longer-term sustainability;
- Build cross-departmental coordination to act on findings across housing, transport, health, and environment sectors, among others;
- Focus on well-being measures such as trust, belonging, and mental wellness alongside service and infrastructure delivery.
- Share results transparently with local stakeholders and engage communities in interpreting data and co-creating solutions.
- Track progress over time and share lessons with other cities to strengthen collective learning.

The report recommends expanding the Index to new cities globally, building the data pool as a learning resource for all cities, and integrating findings into ongoing policy frameworks such as VLRs of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and local urban policy documents. By opening the analytical space between common and context-specific objective and subjective perspectives on quality of life, the Index provides a new evidence source to help cities understand and improve life for their residents.

[Download the report](#)

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About the Quality of Life Initiative

Implemented by UN-Habitat and sponsored by the Quality of Life Program, the Quality of Life Initiative is a global project transforming how cities understand and improve urban well-being by harnessing human-centred data to capture what people truly value. The Initiative invites cities to undertake an assessment of their residents' quality of life to identify key areas for monitoring and improvement. Going beyond numbers and using an inclusive approach, the Initiative empowers people to pioneer a better future by providing new insights and knowledge to create more resilient, compassionate, and thriving communities. This innovative approach paves the way for a more inclusive future, where multiple dimensions of quality of life are brought to light, driving improvements in urban governance, design, and investment.

About UN-Habitat

UN-Habitat is the United Nations entity responsible for sustainable urbanization. It has programmes in over 90 countries supporting policymakers and communities to create socially and environmentally sustainable cities and towns. UN-Habitat promotes transformative change in cities through knowledge, policy advice, technical assistance, and collaborative action. To know more, visit unhabitat.org or follow us on X @UNHABITAT.

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Note to editors

1. What is the Quality of Life Initiative?

The Quality of Life Initiative is a global program implemented by UN-Habitat and sponsored by the Quality of Life Program in Saudi Arabia. It provides cities with an innovative measurement tool, the Quality of Life Index, for cities to assess and enhance urban well-being using data-driven insights.

2. What does the Quality of Life Index measure?

The Index evaluates various objective and subjective dimensions of quality of life and urban well-being in cities, across nine key domains:

- Basic services & mobility
- Culture & recreation
- Economy
- Education
- Environment
- Governance
- Health
- Housing
- Social cohesion

It also measures overall self-reported Life Satisfaction independently from the domains.

3. Which are the highest scoring pilot cities per domain, and for the overall Life Satisfaction benchmark?

- Basic Services & Mobility: Madinah
- Culture & Recreation: Udon Thani
- Economy: Udon Thani
- Education: Udon Thani
- Environment: Logan
- Governance: Bhubaneswar
- Health: Kampala
- Housing: Udon Thani
- Social Cohesion: Udon Thani

- Life satisfaction benchmark: Kampala