
THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL INDICATORS OF LIFE QUALITY

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Abstract

The concept of life quality is widely used today, especially with reference to the general well-being of individuals and societies. This paper mainly addresses the problem of measuring the quality of life. In this context are presented some subjective and objective indicators that have been developed to measure the life quality of communities or nations.

Keywords: quality of life, measuring instruments, evaluation, criteria, life standard

1. Introduction

Most people can expect to live longer than their parents. They are better nourished, enjoy better health, are better educated, and on the whole face more favourable economic prospects. However, there are also many aspects to deplore and correct as the grinding poverty and striking inequality that persist within and among countries even amidst unprecedented wealth. Diseases, old and new, threaten to undo painstaking progress. Nature's life-sustaining services, on which our species depends for its survival, are being seriously disrupted and degrade by our own everyday activities, states former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi A. Annan [http://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/We_The_Peoples.pdf]. Therefore, to increase the quality of life should be the ultimate goal of any policy.

2. Indicators of life quality

Within literature, the research of life quality and that of poverty has always been an important segment. In 1998, the English economist of Indian origin Amartya Kumar Sen was awarded the Nobel Prize for Economics. In his

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theoretical and empirical works, Sen has made a fundamental contribution to the research of quality of life. Introducing the new indicator for measuring the level of poverty, he has provided a quantitative measure of poverty [1-3]:

$$P = H*[I + (1 - I)*G] \quad (1)$$

where: H is head-count ratio, I is the income-gap ratio, and G is Gini coefficient of the income distribution of the poor, which varies between 0 indicating complete equality and 1 indicating complete inequality.

To measure welfare, Sen has developed other indicators which also incorporate income distribution. The new indicators launch the idea that income is relevant in relation to the opportunities it creates. These in turn depend on other factors (such as health) to be taken into account in quantifying welfare [1, p. 138-142; 2, p. 13-27; 3, p. 373-387; 4].

There are evaluation criteria that help to assess the positive or negative quality of life of a person or community. But, in this assessment, because of the wide variation of the evaluation criteria, a number of difficulties arise, both from one individual to another and from one society to another, depending on a number of factors: schooling, occupation, level of education, training, income, social status, level of aspiration, social class to which an individual belongs, etc.

Based on the above described issues, we may conclude that the assessment of life quality is made according to the type of society (evaluation criteria differ from one community to another), on the one hand, and to the aspirations of each individual in that society, on the other hand [1, p. 138-142; 2, p. 13-27; 3, p. 373-387; 4].

Assessing quality of life is many times subjective, because each of us assigns a greater or lower level of importance to a particular evaluation criterion, depending on each individual's need and aspiration system. Although the evaluation criteria list is universal, the specific configuration of each criterion is different. For example, the constant need for information and knowledge is much greater in the case of a teacher than a worker. Based on this need, the teacher should read more, buy a computer in order to access the Internet, go to libraries, participate in cultural and professional activities, etc. The worker also needs information and culture, but limited to the system needs, having lower weight and importance. Thus, the level of aspirations is essential to the theory of life quality and refers precisely to the differences in the intensity and development of needs within a community [1, p. 138-142; 2, p. 13-27; 3, p. 373-387; 4; 5].

For a better understanding of the quality of life, it is necessary to use a diverse set of possible indicators that capture not only global elements, but also matters affecting households, families and personal life, including the subjective dimensions of perception of an existing state, and felt satisfaction, dissatisfaction and eventually frustration.

Through the quality of life indicators can be captured different aspects of life related to physical and social environment, employment, material resources, resources, economics, culture, politics, consumer tendencies, etc. Thus, in recent years, intense research has been undertaken to determine the life status

indicators and indicators regarding the evaluation criteria. The quality of life index can be expressed as [1, p. 138; 2, p. 22]:

$$I_{CV} = I_S/I_V \quad (2)$$

where: I_{CV} - is the quality of life index; I_S - is the state of life index; and I_V - is the evaluation criteria index (the development of methodologies to measure quality of life, despite the particularly high difficulties in this regard).

In literature, quality of life indicators are the synthesis of two types of indicators, namely [1, p. 138-142; 2, p. 13-27; 3, p. 373-387; 4-6]: status indicators and indicators of evaluation criteria.

2.1. Status indicators

There are many social indicators that can be used as status indicators: such as demographic indicators (e.g. life expectancy), population's health, schooling, economic indicators (real income per individual), socio-cultural circumstances, living conditions (heating, water, sewage, electricity), consumer tendencies, etc. To determine the quality of life using these indicators, we should have more accurate measurements of the states of different conditions and activities of individuals and communities. In this regard and in the context of measuring life quality, there are some substantial difficulties in their use.

The first disadvantage is that they are not built for making assessments of life quality, but for a more specific and practical use and they usually offer only a partial picture, often nonspecific for life status evaluation [1, p. 138-142; 2, p. 13-27; 3, p. 373-387; 4-6].

The second disadvantage is the fact that social indicators generally relate to social activities and their efficiency is reduced to meet the needs of the community referring to the quality of life. For example, a low number of hospital beds may indicate fewer opportunities to medical care. But can a large number of beds express a better health care? Yes or no, as it may indicate other aspects too. The fact is that up to a certain level, each additional bed represents extra healthcare quality and therefore better quality of life. Above a certain level, the contribution of the each additional unit decreases and can even induce negative consequences (manifesting the law of diminishing returns).

On the other hand, many aspects of life cannot be measured. For example, how can we measure the feeling of love, friendship, happiness, the aesthetic sense? And examples may continue. It is very difficult to measure the higher needs of self-expression) [1, p. 138-142; 2, p. 13-27].

Thus, there is a number of difficulties in determining life status, because the range of phenomena that must be considered is very large and it is therefore necessary to distinguish between what is and what is not relevant to human life, taking into account both conditions and the activities that are not homogeneously distributed within the community (they vary substantially from individual to individual).

2.2. Indicators of evaluation criteria

These indicators raise the question of determining the needs, the aspirations, the ideals and the human values. Determining the needs of different systems, presents a very high degree of complexity. It is very difficult to know what the individual needs are and whether it should be one thing or another. A number of needs, such as the physiological ones are more easily measured (e.g. determining the amount of calories per day and person, depending on the work they perform), but the spiritual needs are difficult to measure (e.g. Does man need love and to what extent?)

Another issue is the hierarchy of evaluation criteria. Since various aspects of life have different importance, the evaluation criteria show a high degree of relativity, they vary not only from one society to another, but from one person to another (e.g. a person wishes to participate intensely in the leadership of the company where he works, while another person is satisfied, even if not participating in the leadership of the company) [1, p. 138-142; 2, p. 13-27; 4; 5].

According to the evaluation criteria, there are absolute and relative indicators of life quality. If man would have the same set of evaluation criteria at all times and all places, the same needs, the quality of life would have an absolute sense (universal evaluation).

The absolute indicators of life quality (I_{CVA}) can be expressed as [1, p. 140; 2, p. 23]:

$$I_{CVA} = S_i/N_U \quad (3)$$

where: S_i ($i = 1$ to n) are different states of life (person, group or community) and N_U is a universal constant human need.

With the development of society, people's needs have recorded an increase and a continuous diversification. The development of knowledge has enormously increased the need of the individual for the assimilation of knowledge, of new information, so that in addition to increasing the amount of goods there is an increased level of aspiration, and so the quality of life will have a relative sense (private assessment). The indicators of life quality (I_{CVR}) can be expressed as follows [1, p. 140; 2, p. 24]:

$$I_{CVR} = S_i/N_i \quad (4)$$

where: S_i are different states of life (person, group or community) and N_i are the level of needs that correspond to these states ($i = 1$ to n).

If the absolute indicators of life quality refer to the degree of abundance in human life, the degree of development, the human progress, the relative indicators of life quality consider the actual condition of the human being, the actual, real balance/imbalance, aspirations, the real achievements and frustrations. No matter which of the indicators we use, we have to specify personalized evaluation criteria for each society, culture or lifestyle separately.

Thus, the analysis of the variations in the quality of life should be conducted both on a quantitative (the degree to which states of life correspond to the human needs) and on a qualitative level (assessing the ways of life with their specific system of needs).

Also, depending on how these indicators are constituted, there are several types of indicators [1, p. 138-142; 2, p. 13-27; 3, p. 373-387; 5; 7; 8]: subjective indicators of life quality (evaluation), objective indicators of life quality, global and partial indicators of life quality.

2.3. Subjective indicators of life quality (evaluation)

They are organized based on the assessment of each individual's quality of life. The individual reports naturally and continuously his/her life status to his/her evaluation criteria, his/her own aspirations and needs, developing an assessment of his/her own life. The Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung says that if we want to determine the quality of life, we must look at how many smiling faces you find on the street [9].

The application of the subjective indicators has the advantage that the quality of all conditions can be estimated at a relatively low cost but it has some disadvantages too. These regard the fact that the natural observer must have in his/her mind a proper scale of the state assessment, and many times these scales are present in the social consciousness, but other scales do not exist naturally in the social consciousness, and in that case, people may have only a dim perception of that phenomenon's quality (good/bad, satisfactory/unsatisfactory). This perception is associated with a less structured view of the real state [1, p. 138-142; 2, p. 13-27; 3, p. 373-387; 5; 7; 8]. In this sense, we can say that state estimation depends on evaluation criteria.

2.4. Objective indicators of life quality

The objective indicators of life quality [1, p. 138-142; 2, p. 13-27; 3, p. 373-387; 5; 7; 8] are composed of objective status indicators and objective indicators of evaluation criteria. From the objective indicators we can detach three cases:

- the condition of subjects is very clearly recorded so that the risk of error is virtually null (e.g. age, sex, number of children);
- the registration is based on census reports, statements, situations, etc., and in this case there can be significant distortions;
- the registration is done by specialized observers, using specially designed tools (highly developed tests, questionnaires and scales) with a high validity. However the data obtained through these methods are not without distortions, full objectivity remains more of an ideal to which we aspire.

The objective indicators of evaluation criteria are based on the analysis of available means of science, but given that most evaluation criteria involved in assessing the quality of life cannot be measured by objective means it is necessary to recourse to the natural observer process (subjective indicators), because each person is characterized by a unique configuration of needs and aspirations, which can not be entirely determined by objective factors.

2.5. *Global and partial indicators of life quality*

A final issue refers to global and partial indicators of life quality. Creating a global indicator of life quality is more an ideal than a feasible option, since there are no global indicators of the state of life, and usually there are several indicators used from different perspectives, to approximate the overall quality of life. The partial indicators of life quality can be merged into a global indicator since they have a common metric: how good and satisfactory the status of each component of life is in relation to the assessment criteria.

We mention some global indicators: life satisfaction, the perceived quality of life, integration/psychological alienation, perception of a change, etc. Some partial indicators of different life areas are used to determine these indicators (self, family, habitat, work, free time, personal development opportunities, tone of life, social environment, participation in social and economic life, etc.).

But as we can see, analyzing these indicators, each of them capture the measured area from the subject's own perspective, and only together can measure at a given time, the quality of life of a group or community. Obviously, they have some distortions that cannot be overcome except through the development of other areas of Social and Human science [1, p. 138-142; 2, p. 13-27; 3, p. 373-387; 5; 7; 8].

3. **Conclusions**

A system of indicators is valuable when it allows a junction between social outcomes and causes, on the one hand, and the various and correlated aspects of social life, on the other hand.

One of the important issues raised in the analysis of quality of life is to provide data needed to study this field. To characterize the quality of life we have to use data sets obtained from exhaustive observations or those obtained based on selective research.

The system of indicators used in the analysis of quality of life depends on the development level of the country. Thus, while in developing countries the focus is on the system of indicators in order to characterize the degree of poverty, in the developed countries, attention is focused on those indicators that quantify the level and quality of investment in human resource, environmental protection, social protection, security of people, etc.

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