



# A Fresh Perspective on Measuring Quality of Life:

## *Initial Process to Conceptualise a Universal Tool to Measure Quality of Life in Cities*

The present document is the second 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.

*This progress report aims to inform colleagues, partners and stakeholders engaged in or consulted during the implementation of the Quality of Life Initiative. This report summarizes outcome documents and results obtained during the Project activities, which frame the methodology and technical process followed during the first four months of the Initiative (July to October 2023)*





## Background

In recent decades, remarkable progress has been achieved across a number of societal markers. On average, children are healthier, the elderly have witnessed improvements in living standards, and people are living longer. Globally, the middle class has expanded, and until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, global poverty was continuing to decline. The sum of this has led to a substantial improvement in quality of life for millions. Yet, simultaneously, inequality has increased, and different forms of marginalization and exclusion continue to persist. Hunger and conflict are threatening the means of survival for entire populations, while climate change is becoming a grim reality with dire consequences. As a result, aspects of people's well-being have been affected, and quality of life eroded. This has resulted in a reassessment of one's values and priorities and ultimately the reconceptualization of what is meant by quality of life.

## Introduction

UN-Habitat is the UN agency responsible for human settlements and the promotion of sustainable urban development. It monitors progress on sustainability in cities through the lens of *the New Urban Agenda*, the global blueprint for urban sustainability. UN-Habitat has a long history of developing metrics and indices for measuring progress in urban areas. The Quality of Life Initiative is building on UN-Habitat's experience and mandate through a number of activities which will place quality of life at the centre of global development agendas, while simultaneously giving local leaders the tools they need to understand which levers they can pull to improve the quality of life of their constituents. A key component of these efforts is the creation of a measurement tool or Index. While previous indices have demonstrated the importance of this work, none have been able to effectively overcome the intractable problem of creating an index that is both globally relevant and locally applicable. Aligning with the *Urban Monitoring Framework* (UMF), which ensures thematic integration and interlinkages among important dimensions of development, this project aims to develop a tool that identifies those

aspects of quality of life that are universal, while permitting the opportunity for local governments to localize based on the needs and priorities of their community. This performance monitoring and decision support tool for local authorities will optimise policies, projects and investments.

This report summarizes the progress of the Index development in the first four months of the Project Implementation from July - October 2023, which has advanced through a number of sequential stages. The different elements of this process build upon one another towards the creation of a conceptually sound and scientifically robust product that will be turned into a practical tool in order to provide real, concrete value to the stakeholders who use it. It is important to note that while the present report summarizes the technical development towards this tool, this process does not exist in a vacuum. The Quality of Life Initiative is creating a unique knowledge ecosystem which combines technical processes, institutional engagement and strategic consultations to put quality of life at the center of local and global policy agendas.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/covid-19-leaves-legacy-rising-poverty-and-widening-inequality>



## 1- Assessing the Current Landscape of Quality of Life

*The first phase of the Quality of Life Initiative examined the current landscape of quality of life, and how it has been understood and measured in the past until the present. Such an exercise was critical in order to determine if and where the greatest opportunities lie to expand on the current work. The review aimed to identify which (if any) indices align with the project's objectives or could provide guidance in the development of a new global index.*

The review found that the concept of quality of life is ever evolving. Early definitions of quality of life focused on measuring progress through economic metrics such as GDP per capita and later expanded to include measures of health and education as more comprehensive assessments of human development and social progress.

The passage of time suggests that there is unlikely a single, specific definition that cuts across the range of communities, preferences and aspects of life. Instead, quality of life means different things to different people. Perhaps the single most important contribution towards quality of life has been that which was embedded in the Beyond GDP movement, that emphasized the importance of not just looking at objective measures of progress, but subjective ones too. Here, quality of life in urban areas must involve both quantitative dimensions of material well-being and qualitative dimensions of satisfaction which potentially corresponds with universally agreed goals for mankind. A more comprehensive understanding of quality of life needs to include aspects of sustainability, resilience, unity, and safety. Additionally, it is important that quality of life be anchored to the objectives of global development agendas, in particular the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The international community has agreed on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs as the primary vehicle for advancing on the most important social, economic and environmental challenges of our time. Unfortunately, efforts to deliver on the SDGs have fallen behind in many countries, with only 15% of the targets

on track and many going in reverse. In the case of SDG 11, more than 60% lack sufficient data to measure progress. Consequently, the UN Secretary-General has called for an organized effort to rescue the SDGs. Any new index on quality of life must provide governments with concrete data which they can use to improve the lives of their constituents, in a way that moves towards the achievement of the Goals across diverse contexts and communities. The SDGs provide an overarching structure, but the opportunity for an advanced understanding of quality of life lies in local application.

Choosing metrics which bring people back into focus will allow for the localization of the SDGs, so that progress towards those global goals is rooted in results on the ground. Therein lies the opportunity for an updated, human-centric understanding of quality of life.

The Global Urban Monitoring Framework (UMF), endorsed by the United Nations in 2022, has been identified as a relevant structure to which an innovative index on quality of life could add significant value. The UMF has the advantage of being an established reference for an increasing number of cities around the world, having been developed through a structured and comprehensive consultative process.

Following this initial foray into the evolution of the concept of quality of life, and an understanding of where some of the major conceptual opportunities lie, the Quality of Life Initiative set out to review a number of existing indices. This step aimed to examine past efforts and identify the concrete entry points for an evolving understanding and measurement of quality of life. Indeed, the research found that there is an opportunity for an innovative approach and exploration of how objective and subjective indicators on quality of life can be integrated to understand what quality of life means more fully to people in different contexts, and putting this into practice. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to explore new innovative datasets and their capacity to inform both objective

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<sup>2</sup><https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf>



and subjective metrics (ie. remote sensing, mobile phones, social media, etc). Doing so can demonstrate the capacity to accelerate the SDGs (localization, data gaps, etc), and also has the potential to open up innovative means focusing more on output-based, rather than input-based metrics.

This endeavour has the power to fill part of this information gap which local policy makers currently face, to better understand how their decisions and investments concretely link to quality of life outcomes.

Based on this analysis, it is clear that a new index can be developed, which harnesses the power of innovative data collection and visualization, to provide something that is practical, easy to use, and embodies a shared, yet contextually specific, understanding of quality of life.

## 2- Developing a More Holistic Understanding of Quality of Life

*A critical step in the development of the Index involved discussing with experts the essentials for creating a more holistic understanding of Quality of Life, including missing areas and suggestions on how to fill the gaps. From June to August 2023, a series of 33 meetings and interviews investigated the definition of quality of life, the essential domains, and the viability of using the UMF as an organizing framework. The participants were drawn from diverse geographical and disciplinary backgrounds.*

This stage of the process was designed to be exploratory in nature, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of quality of life. Through a series of individual or small group interviews (online), each participant was asked to articulate what quality of life meant to them in their professional role. One of the key findings from the initial stage of the process was that the definition of quality of life took on varying forms. While some definitions were outcome oriented (e.g. “quality of life is the substantive enjoyment and satisfaction experienced in day-to-day living”), others

were found to be input related (e.g. “High levels of access to economic opportunity, social mobility and services”). In some instances, definitions were a combination of the two.

A few key elements were raised on several occasions, such as the importance of choice. As choice matters across the spectrum of urban systems, one way to incorporate it into the Index would be to ensure that at least some indicators query the level of choice that city inhabitants have. For example, some groups in society may view the use of public transport as an obligation, due to a lack of a viable alternative, whereas others may see it as an advantage to the alternatives. The idea of choice captures a sense of agency that places the onus on the individual to make a decision that is in their best interest. This aligns with the early work of the Nobel Laureate, Amarta Sen, in his book ‘Development as Freedom’<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Sen argues that poverty is characterized by lack of at least one freedom (Sen uses the term unfreedom for lack of freedom), including a de facto lack of political rights and choice, vulnerability to coercive relations, and exclusion from economic choices and protections. Based on these ethical considerations, Sen argues that development cannot be reduced to simply increasing basic incomes, nor to rising average per capita incomes. Rather, it requires a package of overlapping mechanisms that progressively enable the exercise of a growing range of freedoms. A central idea of the book is that freedom is both the end and a means to development.





Overall, the themes of the definition and the critical domains described by consulted experts and stakeholders confirmed the soundness and relevance of aligning with the Urban Monitoring Framework. This approach will be pressure-tested at future consultations. At the same time, the mix of common themes and distinctive interpretations in understanding quality of life (even within the same country) creates a challenge for designing a globally relevant quality of life monitoring tool which can be applied locally across different contexts.

An important takeaway from this stage of the process was that while quality of life is considered a universal concept, depending on who you are, where you live or what your values are, it manifests itself in different ways. As such, there is no compelling index that has been able to effectively overcome the intractable problem of being both 'globally relevant, yet locally applicable'.

### 3- Innovating to Make 'Globally Relevant, Locally Applicable' a Reality

*Developing a Quality of Life Index presents the opportunity of building innovation into the process. This includes opportunities to use ICT solutions to improve how data is collected or the type of data being collected; innovative statistical methods to disaggregate data to sub-city levels; using big data analytics to carry out trend analysis and statistical correlation; using innovative solutions in data visualizations, and importantly: innovation which is conceptual in nature, describing an efficient way to solve the 'global relevance' problem of indices.*

It is important that any innovation strategy begins with a general understanding of what constitutes good innovation. Where innovation tends to go wrong is when technology is used for technology's sake, instead of seeking to solve an intractable problem. The objective of the innovation strategy that comprises the work of the Quality of Life Initiative is to solve problems in an efficient manner while ensuring the innovation serves the ultimate **purpose** of the

project. The innovation is also meant to overcome any long-term technical or operational debts<sup>4</sup> for the Index, helping to secure the long-term **sustainability** of the index.

As mentioned in the above section, one of the challenges that was discovered during the conceptualization stage of the project was that it is difficult to account for locational variation in the definition of quality of life. This is because quality of life is subjective and contingent upon cultural impositions and sways at every spatial and temporal scale. Consequently, it is extremely challenging to create a tool that can capture universal values of quality of life while at the same time accounting for local values and priorities.

To overcome this, one solution would be to create a portfolio of indicators that could be applied at different levels, essentially creating a three-dimensional Urban Monitoring Framework. The foundation levels are global indicators; national indicators; local indicators; with the option of including regional or thematic layers. Global indicators would be those which measure universal concepts that apply to improving the quality of life of individuals, regardless of geographic location. Moving down through the levels, the indicators become more and more specific, until the local level which measures concepts unique to a specific urban settlement due to local values and priorities. It is the city government or other local stakeholders who would select these.

The proposed solution adapts a simple and familiar framework (the UMF) to solve a long-standing problem: that these indices are regionally or culturally biased and lack rigour regarding the indicator choice and use and their relevance to different settings. Moreover, while they are often applied to comparing cities in different parts of the world, they should not be.

This process of innovation will continue to be developed through further collaboration, research and discussions. This approach is in keeping with the general principles of good innovation, that is, to be purposeful, efficient, and sustainable.

<sup>4</sup> Within this initiative, technical and operational debts refer to sunk costs and the notion of being locked into something that is costly or burdensome that may compromise the sustainability of the index.



## 4- Exploring the Relevant Domains of Quality of Life

*On the sidelines of the International Society for Quality of Life Studies (ISQOLS) 21st Annual Conference in Rotterdam, The Netherlands (August 2023), the Quality of Life Initiative hosted an Expert Group Meeting to identify important domains and attributes that will capture the essence of Quality of Life at the local level. The meeting included a preparatory workshop with local government representatives to identify, through root cause analysis, the challenges and priorities their communities were facing. The following day brought together local government representatives, quality of life researchers and representatives from UN agencies to discuss and deliberate on quality of life themes and to start defining the details of the domains that need to be monitored to understand how different communities are performing (or underperforming) when it comes to quality of life.*

The Expert Group Meeting sought to build upon the conclusions of the initial set of consultations which had taken place between June – August 2023. These first interviews had raised important considerations such as choice and agency into the conversation, and importantly led to the conclusion that a truly innovative way to measure quality of life must try and solve the problem of creating something which is both globally relevant and yet locally applicable.

The results of the Expert Group Meeting demonstrated that quality of life is a nuanced concept that covers a variety of thematic areas and touches upon both individual and social relations. There was an emphasis on basic needs being covered, underscoring the importance of maintaining minimum standards of quality of life. The domains that were proposed both confirmed and enhanced important messaging that was identified in earlier stages of the process. The current working set of domains are as follows:

The meeting sought to take the next step, to unpack some of the domains of quality of life, and understand how their interpretation and measurement might vary across regions. This meant bringing together city leaders and quality of life experts from a number of disciplines. How can the practical, day-to-day concerns of city officials be informed and addressed through the lens of quality of life? What are the data capacities which exist, or which are needed, for local leaders to have a more comprehensive understanding of what quality of life means in their context? The configuration of the meeting allowed for a true spirit of co-creation, allowing theoretical ideas from academia to come in contact with the on-the-ground issues that local leaders face. Such co-creation is a central pillar of the Quality of Life Initiative, and is in itself a unique addition to the work being done around quality of life.

-  Social Cohesion
-  Culture & Recreation
-  Governance
-  Economy
-  Education
-  Basic Services & Mobility
-  Environment
-  Housing
-  Health



At the end of two days, this meeting came to a number of conclusions based on the discussions and close consultations with the experts gathered. First of all, there was a coherence between this meeting and previous consultations, around the dual nature of quality of life, as being individually defined and yet underpinned by some universal values. A number of critical conversations revolved around data, and the variation in capacity among different cities to collect, process, visualize, and apply data in a meaningful way which can impact quality of life. There was a clearly expressed desire from cities for frameworks and support processes in this regard at the local level, as many municipalities are reliant on national (or even international) systems for urban monitoring. Furthermore, it was stated that the index could select indicators that cut across several domains, in order to avoid double-counting and reduce the data collection load on cities. The conversations over the two days of this Expert Group Meeting provided meaningful insights into the types of domains that the index can look at, and set the stage for the subsequent Expert Group Meeting which will take this information and move down a layer into detailed discussions of the indicators to be measured and the data to be gathered."

## Continuing to Build an Innovative New Concept of Quality of Life

The initial stages of index development within the Quality of Life Initiative have documented a rigorous process to cast a wide net of consultation, combined with intensive research. Such efforts are crucial for better understanding the large body of work on quality of life which exists already, and how this can be worked with and improved upon to provide local leaders with something that they can practically use to help make decisions with their policies and investments that will improve the quality of life of their constituents. This exploration of the state of play of quality of life concepts and metrics coalesced around a number of broad conclusions, which have been further refined and sharpened as the consultations have continued.

As the list of domains and sub-domains to be measured takes shape, challenges which have plagued efforts in the past have been raised. In particular, the difficulty of designing a tool which is globally relevant and yet sensitive to local needs, was noted by several stakeholders. The Quality of Life Initiative has proposed an innovative approach to adapt an existing framework in order to include a spatial layer that should be able to solve for this problem. As the work continues, this proposal will be put to the test. The innovation will be flexible according to challenges or opportunities which arise, or new insights which come through ongoing consultations.

The technical development of the Quality of Life Index will continue, onward from the discussions around concepts and domains and into the details of indicators and the actual data sources which will be needed. This process will continue to be an inclusive one, implicating a wide range of experts and stakeholders in order to produce something which represents a holistic, updated understanding of quality of life against the backdrop of a rapidly changing world.

### For More Information:

