

# UNDERSTANDING THE URBAN QUALITY OF LIFE CONCEPT AND ITS DIMENSIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*Quality of Life (QOL) is a concept, rather easier to understand than difficult to define comprehensively. Nevertheless, this nature of the concept has not deterred the researchers in their quest to define QOL and more than 100 definitions are noted in the literature. Understanding of what the QOL means to different authors is required in deriving a meaning for the concept within the research objectives and the scope. Further, the quantitative assessment of QOL will require identification of a set of dimensions and related indicators over which the public perception may be solicited. The identification of dimensions, indicators and assessment methodology are very crucial in deriving the QOL index and hence they need to be meaningfully derived through the support of the literature and the ground realities. In this paper discusses these aspects in detail.*

**Keyword :** - *Urban, Quantitative assessment and Public perception*

## 1. UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT

Andre et al [1] confirm that there is no universally agreed definition for QOL. Further, it is observed that 'providing a coherent and robust definition of the concept remains problematic'. Quality of Life is a multi-dimensional concept Rybczynski [23] has declared that it is not even possible to define such multi-dimensional concept.

A glossary of definitions and explanations points that the term QOL is used to mean well-being, life satisfaction or happiness of the people. Also, other terms such as social well-being, social welfare and human development are often used as equivalent or analogous terms to QOL. Rahman Tauhidur et al [21] find that literature on well-being is massive and diverse. According to him, QOL is one term used to represent well-being along with other terms of standards of living, human well-being and welfare. While there is no certainty as to what QOL means, QOL has been defined as the degree of well-being, satisfaction and standard of living. One of the problems is that these terms do not have an unequivocal meaning. For instance, the term well-being can refer to any evaluation of persons' situation. The term 'welfare' can refer to how well people live, or what actions are taken by others to help the need.

'QOL embraces not only the material aspects of life like increased wealth measured by higher income, the number of dwellings or availability of basic services and amenities such as water and electricity but also the less tangible aspects of life such as satisfaction with the living environment or a greater sense of happiness or joy' (Housing Development Board: HDB, Singapore). 'It demands, amongst other things, available and accessible social and public infrastructure to satisfy the needs of those concerned in it and affected by it as well as an environment free of serious deterioration or pollution'.

Mercer Human Resource Consulting LLC [19] notes, that the definitions can be different according to the income, social status and health conditions of the individuals who defines QOL. Also how people define QOL varies accordingly to where they live, work and who they are. Like beauty, quality basically lies in the eyes of the beholder. Although, there is no acceptance on any general definition, it is observed that in all definitions of QOL, there is a convergence of interest. All definitions while attempting to define QOL, focus its attention towards the peoples' well-being, or development or satisfaction. Thus, 'people and their lives' have been the concern of researchers, and their definitions possibly have a leaning towards what changes they would like to see in the life conditions of the people they focus or keep in their mind. Therefore, the QOL definitions naturally tend to become

(peoples') case specific or location specific and it emerges that a holistic understanding of QOL can inevitably be conceived in different ways according to viewpoints and hence the term is likely to remain nebulous.

## 2. QOL CONCEPT CHARACTERISTICS

Several attributes of QOL emerges out of the past studies and numerous definitions floated by the researchers. These have been found to be useful in better understanding of the concept as well in designing a complete QOL assessment methodology for any research. The characteristics of the QOL concept as derived through literature are as follows:

- i) QOL concept can be interpreted differently – It is influenced by people who define and it is versatile to the socio-economic, cultural and demographic characteristics people.
- ii) QOL is a multi-dimensional concept which can include numerous components or dimensions of life situations and living environment and there exists inter-relationships among the components which constitute the QOL.
- iii) QOL is a reflection of an individual's possession of desired conditions
- iv) QOL is synonymously referred through the terms like life satisfaction, general well-being, human welfare, human development etc..
- v) QOL measures are constructed from the micro level to the macro level – from the individual to the country level.
- vi) QOL has both subjective and objective connotation in understanding as well as measurement – subjective measures are widely used at the micro level while the macro level constructs adopt objective measures.
- vii) QOL can be measured through indicators, which again could be of subjective or objective nature.

## 3. QUALITY OF LIFE – INTERNAL & EXTERNAL DIMENSIONS

Fahey et al [8] refers to 'internal and external conditions' when he refers to QOL. According to him, the internal factors include things such as income, health, family conditions, educational attainment and the like; the external factors include the status of services, infrastructure and physical environment that are made available in the urban context. Even while, the internal factors remain static for an individual in absolute terms in any location, his life situation will vary according to the location since the external conditions and the individual capacity to operate over the external conditions are spatially dynamic. Generally, the human approach is to seek the best, in any given condition. In the behavioral sciences it is generally assumed that individuals' behaviour is guided by the goal of seeking a higher level of QOL and that actual behaviour should be seen as the reflection of that. Thus, QOL is a measure of 'state of situation' of the citizens, determined by both their personal features and the features offered to them by the public. Availability and accessibility of the urban features are the consequences of urban planning and development activities. Also they have a direct or indirect impact over many of the personal features such as housing, education, health etc.. From the Planners view point, cities are the center of economics, politics, commerce and other activities; hence it is important to understand the spectrum of conditions contributing to the urban quality of life' in any research.

#### 4. PUBLIC PERCEPTION AS AN APPROACH FOR QOL MEASUREMENT

Myers Dowell [30] suggests that the foundation of the planner's approach to QOL measurement is citizen participation. The author adds that experts should not presume to dictate the QOL for residents. Instead, planners need to address residents' expectations, perceptions and political priorities in the QOL measurements. This observation correlates with research investigations of several authors (Campbell et al 1976; Lee and Marans 1980; Connerly and Marans 1985, 1988; Rogerson R 1999; Seik 2000). Lee Yung - Jaan (2005) proposes that the QOL is assessed to measure the perceptions of individuals. Fadda [7] observes that QOL is more than private 'living standards' and refers to all the elements of the conditions in which people live, that is, all their needs and requirements. Thus, QOL is more a localized concept and an expression of life situation. As the internal factors play an important role in life situation, the QOL among the residents in any neighborhood or city is bound to vary. QOL is a variable and its variance depends on internal factors of the residents and external factors offered by the city. Restated, greater variability in internal factors of the people and external factors offered by city will result in wider range of the QOL variable.

Lee Yung-Jaan [16] find that 'quality' is more subjective in nature and the most appropriate method of exploring QOL is to directly ask people of their feelings regarding life. The Ethekwini Municipality[6] also has observed that asking people about their QOL is the best way out, as there is no other single methodology to explore QOL.

#### 5. KEY DIMENSIONS IN ASSESSMENT OF QUALITY OF LIFE

Agreeing the multi-dimensionality of the QOL concept, several authors have attempted to identify the dimensions or domains of QOL. The multi-dimensionality nature of the concept leaves it both in advantages and disadvantages position. Schalock [24], finds that there could not be a single methodology for assessment as the concept is nebulous. At the same time, the multi-dimensional nature of the concept permits professionals to focus on dimensions of their interest and attempt to capture QOL within their own wisdom and domain, though a single dimension alone is not suitable for comprehensive measure of QOL (Canadian Council on Social Development 1996). The multi-dimension nature of the concept, bring wider acceptability and receives greater attention from varied disciplines for assessment. The QOL models are built with blocks of different QOL components / dimensions each comprising of certain indicators. Researchers have attempted to identify the components of QOL and compared various geographical areas such as cities, states and nations using self developed QOL indices. In almost every study of QOL, the various dimensions constituting the QOL are measured. Therefore, QOL is to be considered as a 'conceptual variable' which required to be assessed through measurement of the status of several contributory QOL dimensions and aggregation of the same.

Just like QOL definition, its dimensions also lack consensus, and the fact is also observed by Turksever [27]. Studies (Hendry and McVittie 2004; Holmes 2004) have concluded that there is little agreement in research literature regarding the definition of QOL which has resulted in ambiguity and, therefore, difficulties in it's measurement which further reflects the difficulty in identifying the components of this multifaceted concept. As stated earlier, researchers select only those dimensions which have direct relevance to their respective professions and the objectives of the study. Accordingly, the urban planners tend to focus on QOL issues relating to the physical environment in a city. In fact, QOL has been linked with the concept of sustainability in most of the developed countries and the improvement of QOL has been identified as one of the main objectives in their sustainable development strategies. However, different countries and cities have different emphasis on the aspects contributing to QOL. For example, developing countries may emphasize on economic growth, while developed countries may emphasize on environmental quality.

Generally speaking, aspects contributing to urban QOL can be broadly classified into economic, housing, environment, and infrastructure, social and political issues. Researchers have adopted different methods to shortlist the dimensions for QOL studies. However, directly adopting a set of dimensions used in any other study may not be feasible, as every study has identified the dimensions in a particular context. Also, importantly the choice of dimensions can affect the result of the QOL index. Most of the theories and empirical studies on QOL originate from western societies. Lee [15] observes difficulty in deriving a workable version of QOL on the basis of literature and theories developed mainly in the western context.

Further, the literature does not reveal the ideal number of dimensions for a QOL study and within the literature there is considerable debate over the 'best' composition of indicators and dimensions. The complexity in information collection, analysis and understanding proportionately increase with the number of dimensions. While Holmes [12], points that the 'standard' number of dimensions has not reached consensus within the research community, Hsieh[13] warns that the task of importance ranking could get unwieldy if the number of dimensions chosen gets too large. Therefore, it is essential that the process of selection of dimensions and indicators is carried out in a logical and scientific sequence.

### 5.1 QOL Dimensions in Canadian Policy Research Networks Appraisal

Legowski [17], on behalf of the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) have done an appraisal of 21 QOL and Social Indicator Project (SIP) studies mostly relating to Canada, and summarized all the goals and issues of these studies taking 'components', 'areas of concern', 'objectives' and 'focus areas' as equivalent terms. The appraisal has disassociated these terms from their respective projects and grouped them into a set of 'domains' to which the projects goals and issues appeared to be referring. In this exercise, the researchers were able to group all the goals and issues of both 'people involved' and 'people not involved' QOL / SIP studies under eleven domains as shown below:

Economic Security	Health	Education
Community	Physical Security	Social Services
Natural Environment	Urban Environment	Culture & Leisure
Government	People, Individual, Families	

The above exercise demonstrates that the number of domains or dimensions in a research study could be limited by broadening their scope. Later, in the year 2001, the CPRN evolved 'Prototype National Indicators for Canadians' (PNIC), to track Canada's progress in quality of life through a citizen involvement process, in which they were able to bring all the indicators of importance to the Canadians under 9 elements (can be seen synonymously to QOL domains). The indicators were evolved through intensive interactions with public in 21 Canadian cities and towns, in which 346 Canadians participated and 40 dialogue discussions were conducted on various thematic and sub-thematic areas concerning QOL. The nine elements for the prototype national indicators are presented below:

Economy / Employment	Health	Education
Personal well being	Community	Social conditions
Environment	Government	Democracy

It may be seen that the elements of PNIC, emerged through the citizen involvement are very closely fitting to the eleven domains under which 21 QOL / SIP studies concerns were categorized. It emerges that Economic characteristics, Health, Education, Community and Environment are key dimensions in influencing the QOL, as they find place both in the PNIC and the 21 QOL / SIP studies.

The abridged domains emerged through the appraisal of 21 QOL / SIP studies, but not finding place in the PNIC are 'Physical Security' and 'Culture & Leisure' only. Of these, the aspects of physical security are included in the element of 'Community' in the PNIC, while the theme relating to Culture attracted the interest of only few in the 40 dialogue discussion groups and hence did not emerge as an element in the PNIC. An element to find a place in the PNIC but not there as a dimension in the appraisal study 21 QOL/SIP studies was Democracy, which found the overwhelming relevance of all the 40 discussion groups. More literature was reviewed to find the important QOL dimensions across the globe and the discussion of the same follows.

### **5.2 Analysis of Dimensions used in Quality of Life Studies during 1972-2006**

On reviewing and analyzing 37 QOL Studies of the period 1972 to 2004, Lanteigne [14] has determined the most frequently used dimensions in the QOL studies and points that these were the most supported dimensions within the research community.

Also, a similar analysis was carried in this study, using the QOL studies of this new millennium. Many local governments have turned their attention towards scientific approach in monitoring QOL in their respective cities and identifying the dimensions of QOL through interactive sessions involving the public. The initiatives are largely from the developed countries of Europe, Australia and New Zealand. These studies have grouped the QOL issues under different heads such as 'dimensions', 'components', 'domains', 'themes', 'attributes' etc. (all titles are considered synonymously as dimensions for discussion in this research). There were certain group heads amenable for merger, as only the terminology were different, but referring to similar issues. For instance, the term 'Local Area' and 'Neighborhood' are used as dimensions in different studies, but both generally refer to the similar nature of issues. All the dimension heads used for aggregation by Lanteigne were used and the results were compared as shown in Table 1. It was observed that the five important QOL dimensions viz., Economy, Health, Education, Community and Environment derived from the Canadian Studies were universally important as the analysis of QOL across the globe also had shown that these dimensions were used in nearly 50 per cent or more studies.

In addition, the above analyses have brought the importance of another dimension namely Safety which had been used in more 60 per cent of the studies in both cases. This leads to the inference that Safety along with Health, Education, Economic characteristics, Environment and Community may be considered as 'Core Dimensions' which need to be included in assessment of QOL across any space. A closer look of the six core dimensions reveal that the first two of them namely 'health and safety' are vital to life as they are important for existence and continuation of mankind. Next two dimensions 'education and economic characteristics' contribute importantly to QOL as they are inter-related and in fact, provides sustainability to life and provide opportunity to access comfort in life. The next two dimensions 'environment and community' bring cheer and satisfaction in life and offers scope for improvement in human functionality.

**Table-1:** Summary of Dimensions used in QOL Studies

S. No	Dimension	% of studies using Dimension	
		Period	
		1972 – 2004*	2000 – 2006**
1	Economy	76	80
2	Safety	62	70
3	Health	57	80
4	Housing	57	40
5	Education	51	57
6	Environment	49	70
7	Community / Social	49	80
8	Transportation	46	43
9	Amenities	46	30
10	Infrastructure	22	10

\* analysis performed by Lanteigne (2005)

\*\* analysis performed by the author

Housing and Transportation are the other two dimensions used in significant number of studies. Though these dimensions have been found to be used in more than 40 per cent of studies in the above analysis, the Canadians assessments have not included these in notable number of studies. It appears that the lack of consideration of these dimensions does not undermine their importance but only suggests that they are taken for granted once they are established or in other words, they get overlooked as they are sufficiently provided. In a particular region or location, where these dimensions have not merited well, they would become part of 'core dimensions'. This nature of dimensions may be referred as 'Location Specific Dimensions'. The location specific dimensions need not be confined to these two and there may arise more number of location specific dimensions. The QOL literature and the analyses have thus brought the following eight important QOL dimensions, which are highly desirable for consideration in any QOL study.

Health	Safety	Education	Economic characteristics
Environment	Community	Housing	Traffic & Transportation

## 6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

All QOL definitions centre around the people and many of the researchers consider QOL as the well being or satisfaction of the people. Researchers attempt to define QOL as what they consider as the best or the ideal state of conditions to achieve or as the experiencing state of conditions. The personal value system operates both on people who define the QOL as well as the people who describe their QOL through the satisfaction they derive over a

variety of QOL features. Under these circumstances, the term QOL will continue to remain dynamic. This nature of the concept has given scope for wider acceptability among varied professionals and offers them an opportunity to interrogate the concept within their own perspective.

Urban Planning and Development are highly related to the concept QOL as the state of one set of the QOL dimensions and indicators are totally decided by these efforts. A continuous monitoring of QOL in an urban setting will offer adequate inputs to the planning exercise. There is a wide acceptance of measuring QOL through public perception surveys and the number of such studies is on the rise, indicating its gaining popularity. The QOL studies in the past indicate that there are certain dimensions essentially considered in every place and situation, while some of them are relevant to particular locations, or particular groups. Even in the specific case of place or group, the set of dimensions cannot be permanently established, as the urban growth dynamism and the changes in the personal well-being will attract modification in the set of dimensions. This is found to cause hardships in initiating the QOL studies.

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