



(Sustainable) quality of life in English city locations

Paul Higgins^{a,*}, Josep M. Campanera^b

^a Department of Public and Social Administration, City University of Hong Kong, Tat Chee Avenue, Kowloon, Hong Kong

^b Departament de Físicoquímica, Facultat de Farmàcia, Universitat de Barcelona, Av. Joan XXIII, s/n, Diagonal Sud, 08028 Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 December 2010

Accepted 26 February 2011

Available online 15 March 2011

Keywords:

Sustainable development

Quality of life

England

Cities

Local authorities

ABSTRACT

Ever since the United Kingdom published its second sustainable development strategy in 1999, the legitimacy-governing construct of quality of life has been refashioned in the English policy context to accommodate a novel intergenerational dimension. This paper examines the magnitude of this sustainability transformation by examining the operationalisation and reported outcomes of formally established sustainable quality of life data in conjunction with commensurate *quality of life* information compiled twenty years previously, amongst 63 matched city locations. Conceptually, we find that although the sustainable quality of life data is comparatively more sophisticated in its environmental connotation it has not managed to reconcile this effort with the social and economic domains of sustainability, tending instead to neutralise the distributive, class-based tenor of its predecessor. Empirically, meanwhile, we find that whereas Northern-based city locations perform comparatively worse on the sustainable quality of life rankings Southern ones do much better. We also find that while the lowest scoring localities tend to be afflicted by *similar* types of quality of life deficiencies the top ones shine on a *diverse* range of issues.

© 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

For many years, humans have been engrossed in the alluring, elusive and evolving endeavour to conceptualise and pursue quality of life (QOL) purposes (Baldwin, Godfrey, & Propper, 1990; Costanza et al., 2007; Noll, 2004; Nussbaum & Sen, 1993; Seed & Lloyd, 1997; Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009). The widespread appeal of the QOL cause is, in part, a reflection of the inherent 'goodness' of the construct and as such it has become a key feature of our contemporary rhetoric (Andersen, 1999). Contemporaneously, QOL is also an elusive phenomenon that can be shaped to reflect our multifarious individual and/or collective life preferences and priorities. As Leitmann (1999) notes, at the personal level of private QOL, there are as many different definitions of life quality as there are citizens of a locality. Such versatility makes it difficult to contemplate the QOL construct as some evolving endeavour since that would imply a degree of durability in its application. However, by theorising QOL in terms of its facilitation of legitimating governing – what Landhauber and Ziegler (2005) refer to as normative 'social-cultural-political issues' – its evolutionary potential is able to materialise.

Considered in terms of some shared 'public based' understanding of desired human existence (Leitmann, 1999), QOL adopts a transitive, *quasi-stationary* form that can be observed as having gradually evolved throughout history from the time when it was first mentioned by Aristotle as a measure of an individual's philo-

sophical fulfilment (Ross Translation, 1915) until the time it became associated with assessing individual health status as a prominent life achievement (Bowling, 1991; Kaplan, Atkins, & Timms, 1984; Weinstein & Stason, 1977). More recently, a broader conceptualisation of this shared QOL understanding has emerged in contraposition to the individualistic approach. This involves the consideration of the quality of living conditions surrounding a given community as mediated according to such multi-dimensional life terrains as health, economic stability, life satisfaction, shelter and psychological well-being.

Despite differing foci and traditions, one striking feature that is common to all these various QOL standpoints is the possibility of *improvement* or *enhancement*. This particular feature owes its existence to the integrity of the QOL construct and the fact that one can always do better on at least some of its numerous dimensions, such as becoming healthier or living longer. Following the publication of the 1997–2001 Labour government's 'A Better Quality of Life, A Strategy for Sustainable Development in the UK' (DETR, 1999), however, this insatiable QOL position was revised to adopt a prospective, futurity outlook. This latest transformation in the shared QOL understanding thus tempers the notion of unrelenting QOL progress by recognising its potentially deleterious impact on the QOL opportunities of future generations, as well as others intra-generationally. As the Executive Summary of the previous Labour government's second (and current) sustainable development (SD) strategy maintains (DEFRA, 2005: Executive Summary), the purpose of sustainability is to enable everyone "to enjoy a better quality of life without compromising the quality of life of future generations".

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +852 3442 9211; fax: +852 3442 0413.

E-mail address: phiggins@cityu.edu.hk (P. Higgins).

Only the passing of time will tell whether Labour's establishment of the *sustainable* QOL notion has initiated a further paradigmatic shift in the public use of QOL. However, early signs drawn from the arena of party politics lend strong support to this proposition. For example, all three major political parties contesting the UK's 2010 General Election made reference to sustainable QOL in their election manifestos, with the Conservative Party even publishing a separate QOL manifesto (Conservative Party, 2010a) as part of this commitment. According to the Labour Party, the QOL challenge for Britain was expressed in terms of the need *'To be on track for the transition to a low carbon economy in a way that is fair, secure and helps create the jobs of the future, as we protect and enhance our natural environment and quality of life'* (Labour Party, 2010, s. 8:2). Likewise, in promising to protect the global environment, the Liberal Democrat's manifesto (2010, p. 61) proposed that *'coordinated international action and effective global institutions are necessary to help create a sustainable future and improve the quality of life of all the world's citizens'*. Finally, akin to the extant SD strategy (DEFRA, 2005), the Conservative's election manifesto promised to encourage the development of an *'economy where not just our standard of living, but everyone's quality of life, rises steadily and sustainably'* (Conservative Party, 2010b, p. 35).

What is particularly striking about each of the three manifesto commitments is that while they continue to embody the established QOL trait of improvement/enhancement they also stress the sustainability issues of futurity, fairness and the environment. Not only does this mean that the *sustainable* QOL term been around for at least a decade (DETR, 1999) in the UK policy context but that it has also gained tri-partisan endorsement (Conservative Party, 2010b; Labour Party, 2010; Liberal Democrat Party, 2010). However, in order to gain a greater feel for the conceptual and empirical magnitude of this emerging sustainability conversion, it is necessary to consider how the notion of *sustainable* QOL has been operationalised in practice and whether this approach differs qualitatively from pre-SD QOL assessment.

Consequently, in the first known study of its kind, this paper compares the conceptualisation and reported outcomes of formally established contemporary *sustainable* QOL data with proportionate QOL information compiled twenty years earlier. The *sustainable* QOL data that is deployed for this purpose comprises the Audit Commission's local QOL indicators dataset which since 2005 has formed the basis of a sustainability reporting platform in local government (Ball & Grubnic, 2007). Containing 45 core QOL indicators which expand to 73 indicators once secondary¹ indicators have been included and data cleansing has been undertaken² the dataset is designed to help local communities become sustainable while complementing the national SD indicators and other work on sustainable communities (Audit Commission, 2005). Our chosen comparative QOL counterpart, meanwhile, involves a re-examination of the rationale, procedures and findings of a two-part academic study published in 1988/1989 which had also adopted a public, multi-dimensional and established notion of QOL, having been based on the compilation of such official sources as the Census of Employment, the Chief Constable's Reports and the Derelict Land Use Survey of England and Wales.

Both datasets, by utilising officially sanctioned sources of (sustainable) QOL information, thus provide a combined and robust basis to gauge the magnitude of the sustainability transformation in the QOL term at the level of its formal operationalisation. From an analytical perspective, the timing of the two studies is particularly significant having been produced before and after the publication of the Bruntland report in 1987, which had of course popularised the concept of SD. This means that for our study an archetypal approach to sustainable QOL assessment can be compared with a mature and refined example of the earlier alluded to collectivist, multi-dimensional but pre-SD QOL aspiration.

In addition to examining the operational magnitude of the sustainability transformation in the QOL construct, this paper will also consider the empirical implications of their respective data processing. This dimension of the research involves examining the reported (sustainable) QOL outcomes of the two datasets amongst 63 matched city locations in England. First, we will compare some of the broad-based continuities and disparities in the overall ranking of (sustainable) QOL, pointing out some of its spatial distribution and scaling properties. Then, we will focus more heavily on the *prevaling* sustainable QOL conditions, considering, in particular, the thematic composition of QOL. In both these ways, the empirical implications of our study will provide an important and timely response to Bell and Jayne's (2009) recent call for more 'smaller' urban centres research as a complement to the tendency towards a 'global cities and global city-regions' preoccupation. However, before carrying out these various tasks, it is first necessary to brief readers on some important properties of our overall study.

Parameters of study

Table 1 outlines the broad parameters of our (sustainable) QOL comparison and therein the major properties of the two studies under consideration. In terms of geographical coverage, it should be noted that whereas the two original studies covered the landscapes of England, Wales and Scotland, our study covers England only. This difference reflects the process of devolution that has occurred in the United Kingdom (DEFRA, 2005), with the administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland free to set out their own strategies for SD in the areas for which they are responsible. Consequently, of the 72 cities used in the earlier work, 63 are included in our English only version: 33/38 major cities +30/34 intermediate cities.

Table 1 also shows that whereas the unit of analysis in the two earlier studies involved a quantitative definition of a city – initially a population of over a quarter of a million residents (Findlay, Morris, & Rogerson, 1988) and then a population between 190,000 and 250,000 residents (Rogerson, Findlay, Morris, & Paddison, 1989) – our study captures the equivalent local authority districts. This slight adjustment reflects the national policy context in which the current dataset has been produced and the leading role that local authorities play in sustainable communities strategy formation (Department for Communities & Local Government, 2006). It is important to mention, however, that many of the single-tier local authorities considered in our current dataset – the unitary and metropolitan districts – are responsible for the governance of the particular cities concerned and thus equate exactly with the entities captured in the two initial studies.

Finally, the lower half of Table 1 provides some information on the thematic dimensions of the two datasets. It demonstrates that both datasets are formed of approximately the same number of core QOL indicators (48 and 45 indicators) while spanning nine shared QOL domains and one exclusive domain each. In making this latter connection, it was necessary for us to collapse the twenty original QOL themes into their sustainable QOL equivalents

¹ Although each of the core 45 indicators represents a unique construct some of them are composed of several secondary indicators. For example, the age standardised mortality rates can first be divided into male and female responses and then into those representing (a) all cancers; (b) circulatory diseases; (c) respiratory diseases and (d) stroke. Thus, in this example, one core indicator becomes eight secondary indicators.

² Data cleansing involved excluding those with variables with too many missing values (>10% threshold, with 12.1% excluded); those variables that were not actually provided in the dataset although they were listed officially; and also nominal variables. Consequently the final set was reduced from 82 expanded indicators to 73 analysed indicators.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1008736>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1008736>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)