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## Investigating Rationales of Malaysia Quality of Life and Wellbeing Components and Indicators

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### Abstract

This paper reviews the formulation of Malaysia Quality of Life Reports published in 1999, 2002, 2004 and 2011 as well as Malaysia Wellbeing Report published in 2013. The reports are Malaysia Economic Planning Unit’s (EPU) committed approaches to measuring the impact of economic development on Malaysia social development through a set of social indicators. This paper evaluates the rationales of the components and indicators and reveals the changes made in the reports. The document analysis identified gaps in the objective measurement of quality of life and wellbeing towards improvements in future reports.

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*Keywords:* Quality of Life, Well-Being, Social Indicators

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, growing number of research seek to understand and reason with factors that influence and constitute wellbeing. The Economic Planning Unit Malaysia (EPU), the principal government agency in the Prime

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Minister Department are responsible to prepare Malaysia Quality of Life Reports (MQLI) and Malaysia Wellbeing Reports (MWI). MQLI and MWI are EPU's committed approaches to measuring the impact of economic development on Malaysia social progress through a set of social indicators. EPU anticipated that MQLI and MWI highlight the commitment towards providing a holistic approach to an all-inclusive and a well-balanced development concentrating on all aspects of life which includes economic, social and psychological aspects. However, the suitability and reliability of the indicators and the components of MQLI and MWI were questionable. The MQLI reports stated that the reports cannot cover all aspects of wellbeing. Additionally, although economists have long realized that GDP fails to capture the multidimensional aspects of wellbeing, fluctuations of wellbeing indices in MQLI and MWI depends on economic growth and higher levels of income. In June 2014, during one of the latest presentations of MWI 2013, EPU inquired researchers on what matter most to the Malaysian citizens. This ongoing study intends to investigate the underlying principles that justify the selection of components and indicators of MQLI and MWI. The first objective is to explore MQLI and MWI reports from the first to the latest published reports in terms of purposes, contents and methodology. The second objective is to determine the inconsistencies and limitations of MQLI and MWI in terms of their relevance and comprehensiveness. The methodology of the study is Literature Review and Document Analysis. The essential data are the established Malaysia QoL Report of 1999, 2002, 2004 and 2011 and finally Malaysia Wellbeing Report 2013. An assessment of the reports enables researchers to recognize the strengths and limitations of the formulation processes and rationales behind the selection of components and indicators of MQLI and MWI.

## **2. Literature review**

This study focuses on the national reports of QoL and wellbeing aiming to keep track of social development in Malaysia. The study reviews the social indicators that construct the components of MQLI and MWI. The parameter of the literature review begins with the understanding of social indicators, QoL, and wellbeing. This section summarizes the understanding of social indicators, quality of life [QoL] and wellbeing. The literature review provides the understanding of theoretical meanings and functions of QoL and wellbeing as indicators of social development at the national level.

### *2.1. Social indicators*

For some researchers, any practical social statistic or any observation on social affairs are social indicators. The term social indicators are the fashionable alternative to the old-fashioned term 'social statistic'. However for many other writers, social indicators serve larger role than social statistics. Social indicators are the data that directly exhibit the most significant features of social change. The indicators serve as explanatory tool to the whole complex of social changes steered by key mechanisms, trends or practices implemented administratively, governmentally or internationally (Miles, 1985; Sharpe, 1999).

Development of social indicators is a two-way process. The indicators stem from policy objectives but also concretize and shape the policies. So developing indicators cannot be a purely technical or scientific process; rather, it should be an open communication and policy process (Valentin and Spangenberg, 2000). In order for indicators to be suitable for components that they are measuring, indicators must be simple and directionally clear. In order to be simple, the number of indicators must be limited, and the method of calculating them must be transparent. Directionally clear means that they should indicate items and trends obviously relevant in terms of importance for sustainability, sensitivity and ability to signal progress or the absence of progress (Valentin and Spangenberg, 2000).

Studies on social indicators or development indicators addressed that the dimension of indicators exists in two ways. They are objective indicators and subjective indicators. Both objective and subjective indicators are measured quantitatively or qualitatively based on the nature of the data and the purpose of the measurement (Haworth and Hart, 2007). Objective indicators alone cannot comprehensively measure a component without subjective indicators (Haworth and Hart, 2007; Rapley, 2003). Subjective wellbeing indicates a system of decisions and causes that enable researchers to observe, predict and manipulate the consequence of the changes in the environment of the social aspects (Rapley, 2003).

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