

Catalin-Ionut CIOBANU

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania

AN OVERVIEW REGARDING QUALITY OF LIFE IN ROMANIA

Review
Article

Keywords

*Quality of life;
Urban environment;
Social progress index;*

JEL Classification

Q19; R00

Abstract

Quality of life is currently a major topic of interest among researchers in many countries. The aim of this article was to assess the country's existing situation in order to outline a complete picture of the quality of life, in the desire to align with the standards set in the European Union and common practices in the field of quality of life in urban areas. Thus, the author conducted a research on the quality of life in the urban environment and described a complete picture of how the Romanian population relates to the various components of quality of life. Also, there are presented the strategic objectives for improving the quality of life of the inhabitants of Bucharest for the period 2020-2024.

INTRODUCTION

Quality of life is currently an important topic, motivated primarily by the desire to align with trends in recent years in quality of life research, in which attention is paid to the study of developing countries and cities (Shek and Lee, 2007, pp. 1222-1229). Studies conducted in recent years on quality of life have focused mainly on urban reality. Urbanization also comes with a series of dysfunctions and problems (especially in terms of deteriorating urban environment and declining quality of life) that require reorganization and evaluation. With Romania's access to the European Union, the urban environment has undergone many changes.

In the context of globalization and the accentuated dynamism of the environment, in order to improve its competitive position, Romania must align itself with the novelties in terms of sustainable development and implicitly the quality of life in the urban environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

At the level of the entire literature there is no generally accepted meaning for the concept of "quality of life" but most of the assigned meanings refer mainly to lifestyle, conditions or standards of living.

For many authors, the concept is considered an ambiguous expression, prone to multiple interpretations, not justifying the effort of measurement and definition (Millbrath, 1978, pp. 33-59). For most authors, it is a concept that refers mainly to adult life, most often related to terminal illnesses or ways of spending free time.

Other opinions illustrate the quality of life as a synonym for luxury living, health or trouble-free life. The evolution of research on the quality of life in the urban environment started from the attempts to define this concept in the 1970s (Wish, 1986, pp. 93-96), evolving over time to measure the quality of life in the urban environment and determine objective and subjective indicators (McCrea, Shyy, and Stimson, 2006, pp. 79-96).

The definitions in circulation attributed to the quality of life would be: "the extent to which a person fulfills his goals in life" (Cella and Cherin, 1988), "the significance for the human being of his life" (Zamfir, 1993).

The quality of life in the urban environment can also be defined as "the relationship between individual perceptions, people's feelings and experiences in the space in which they live" (Senlier, Yildiz and Aktaş, 2009, pp. 213-216).

Quality of life is a concept that refers both to the global evaluation of life (how good, satisfactory is

life for different people, social groups, and communities), and to the evaluation of different conditions or spheres of life: environment, work, interpersonal relationships, family life.

The key areas of quality of life are considered to be: employment, economic resources, family and household, community life and social participation, health care, education and training, housing and the environment, and the quality of society.

Quality of life is dependent on a number of factors of an exogenous (objective) and endogenous (subjective) nature (Lorfi and Koohsari, 2009, pp. 417-435). These two aspects were accepted by researchers and used in the presentation of definitions, measurements and analyses. The objective dimension is represented by the external conditions of life (economic vitality, cultural activities, quality of housing, access to services - health, sports, education, shopping, childcare, social organizations, the need to build a sustainable environment, security and privacy). Objective indicators are obtained from institutional reports and statistical data, especially at city, region, and country level. The subjective dimension measures attitudes, the subjective evaluation of living conditions (Das, 2007, pp. 297-310). Data on subjective indicators are generally obtained through surveys of existing opinion polls and research reports on the satisfaction of residents in an urban environment (Forward, 2003, pp. 1-31). However, the representation of these indicators can be achieved by relating them to certain specific spatial representations (quality of life specific to certain countries, regions, provinces), demographic representations (women, the elderly, the poor, people with disabilities) or specific institutions (food and nutrition, health, education, tourism, recreation and leisure). Following studies to measure the effectiveness of intervention programs at the urban level, indices of urban quality of life were created, in most cases established by comparisons with other cities (Eurobarometer, Urban Audit, Eurostat). Classifications have been built in order to establish the best cities to live in (Mercer, Economist, Global City Index).

QUALITY OF LIFE IN ROMANIA

Following the documentation on the state of knowledge in the field of quality of life both nationally and internationally, different areas of quality of life were synthesized to contribute to the formation of an image of how it is perceived in Romania.

The image of quality of life in terms of living conditions

Income can be listed as an indicator of quality of life, but at national level the values obtained by the

population are low, Romania ranking on the penultimate place in the EU, there is a negative perception of the population on living conditions. With regard to strategies to improve the values of this indicator, it is recommended to design programs to stimulate the employment rate as well as to increase the quality of the workforce, all at the same time as the need for changes in the political environment (The Social Progress Imperative, 2021).

In any country it should be possible to ensure the conditions for a decent living, in compliance with social norms, by ensuring decent material conditions for the population, which is another pole that influences the quality of life. Compared to social norms, material conditions have a high impact on other areas such as health and education of the population or subjective assessments of well-being. Romania is at the bottom of the ranking on the minimum wage in the European Union, which is only 157.5 euros, compared to Luxembourg, which is 12 times higher (The Social Progress Imperative, 2021).

Income is a fundamental resource for a high quality of life. Considering "having a good job" as the most important aspect of a "good life" is closely related to the economic dimension of living conditions. The higher the level of poverty, the more the population of a country will choose employment as an essential element of a good life.

In Romania there is a low level of well-being of the population, the vast majority of Romanians leading a decent life.

The image of the quality of life from the point of view of education

There was a direct relationship between educational level and subjective well-being. A high level of education contributes to a more positive assessment of life and to a higher satisfaction with life. The educational level influences the type of occupation, working conditions and income, aspirations and expectations and allows the avoidance of poverty and social exclusion.

"Educational capital is presented in two distinct forms: on the one hand are the skills acquired through participation in formal education systems, knowledge attested by diplomas; on the other hand are any other knowledge and skills acquired during life, through their own efforts or through contacts with experts in fields completed with knowledge gains following the assimilation of information received through interaction with them" (Voicu, 2005, p. 75).

Higher education leads to better jobs and higher incomes or more generally, the fact that more educated people are better equipped to use their skills and control their lives, which makes them better able to be more satisfied (Delhey, 2004, p. 52).

Education contributes to the feeling of optimism about the future, which leads to a higher satisfaction with life.

In Romania there are not many positive opinions regarding education, the continuous reforms in the legislative environment correlated with the economic crisis leading to the highlighting of new problems. At the same time, the low remuneration of the teaching staff or the frequent changes within the system led to an incoherent approach. To all this is added the low level of resources allocated to education from the state budget, only 3.4% of GDP, a low value compared to the level of investments of other countries in education.

The effects of the shortcomings in the Romanian educational system materialized in the rate of not passing the baccalaureate exam, the increase of school dropout from younger and younger ages and in the weakening of the conditions in the Romanian schools.

However, in terms of the higher education system in Romania, the overall picture is positive among students, teachers and employers according to an ARACIS report from 2010. Among the quality indicators, the one with declining trends is the confidence in universities in terms of their connection to the labor market and in terms of tolerance of plagiarism. Teachers notice damage to the image of the university system, even if overall the opinion is positive.

In terms of quality of life, the education system is primarily responsible for equal opportunities for access to education and thus for equal opportunities in obtaining income, employment, issues that affect the long-term well-being of the population. Through this prism, in Romania are not offered equal opportunities to all citizens. The influence of social origin on a person's access to education or belonging to a rural or urban environment that does not offer the same opportunities is also felt.

The stage of development of a country's education system is also reflected in the socio-economic situation, so that investments in education are recovered by increasing other categories of quality of life.

The image of quality of life in terms of health and health services

In order to lead a quality life, health plays an important role, the social influences that may occur (quality of medical services, quality of environment) contributing to the health of the individual. In Romania, in addition to the lack of a prevention culture, the quality of the health system also has a negative impact. The main problems in the Romanian health system consist in the limited resources invested in medical care or in their insufficiency, the inequity in the offer of medical services, and the inefficiency of organization and

finance in the health field. Assessing personal health is an important dimension of quality of life.

At the individual level, good health is an important component of human capital, allowing people to carry out their activities, achieve their goals, have a full life and be active members of society (Mărginean, Precupețu, Tsanov, Preoteasa and Voicu, 2006). At the societal level, a high state of health is a key element of the human capital of each country, contributing to its competitiveness vis-à-vis other countries (Alber and Kohler, 2004).

Health is the result of a complex combination of factors with relevance at the individual level and at the macro level (Precupețu, 2008, p. 141). At the individual level, the state of health depends on: genetic inheritance, social position, lifestyle choices, attitudes, behaviors and values. At the macro-social level (community, region, society) the factors are: quality of services, quality of environment, type of government, macroeconomic, social or health policies, but also cultural and societal norms and values (CSDH, 2008).

Numerous socio-demographic indicators are used to describe the health status of a population, such as: life expectancy at birth, mortality rate by age groups and causes of death, infant mortality rate but also indicators on morbidity, incidence of diseases within the population etc.

The deterioration of the health condition is due to: the decrease of the living standard of the population, the decrease of the share of the employed population, the underfunding of the medical system and the severe deterioration of its quality.

The image of quality of life in terms of employment

The employment situation has undergone many changes going in a negative direction. The share of the employed population in Romania is decreasing, the unemployment rate being still high. The economic crisis has largely contributed to the deterioration of this indicator, with fewer employment opportunities at national level, leading to a general state of dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction.

Preventive behaviors in the field of health are not part of the routine of the population, being encountered especially among the population with a higher level of education, this category is usually interested in maintaining a healthy lifestyle and being informed in this regard.

The image of the quality of life from the point of view of family life

The family represents for most Romanians the most important aspect of their life, able to offer the greatest satisfaction. Family relationships have a high degree of stability and enjoy a positive appreciation. Traditionalism is still the majority,

mainly finding married couples with children, but there is an increase among single-parent families.

The image of the quality of life in terms of opportunities for social access

The social context is often considered the creative framework of chances and opportunities for success in a given society. Depending on the existing resources on a market, the possibilities of assertion are also approximated, observing clear discrepancies between urban and rural areas, between people with different levels of education or between different age categories. Success is determined by the sum of an individual's attitudes and potential, correlated with the social context. The Romanian society is characterized by a deepening between the mentioned categories, there being in this sense numerous conflicts.

The image of the quality of life from the point of view of the mood of the population

The most important elements that can ensure success in life are embodied as a series of individual characteristics such as ambition and talent, followed by work and luck in the hierarchy.

The state of mind encompasses the affective universe of feelings, emotions and hopes that people experience, along with the evaluation of their own life course until the moment of reflection. The majority of the population tends to be pessimistic, with confidence in a better future being shaken. This indicator is a subjective one, which can be examined through a long-term introspection, and is affected by the sum of the elements of values and many conditions such as material resources, education, employment, health, family life, living conditions, etc. Each person, hypothetically subjected to the same conditions, perceives in a different way the accumulated achievements, the satisfaction, and the mood being different from one person to another. Satisfaction with the achievements in life is higher in the elderly, married, with education and high income.

The image of the quality of life in terms of rights, threats and fears

All the elements mentioned so far can be a basis for fears or a threat. The content of the threats concerns the fear of poverty, taxes and prices, crime, the country's economy, politics, social conflicts and natural disasters or disease. The political environment is also perceived as a threat. In Romania, the rights of the population are less known, citizens being poorly informed or less concerned about this issue and to a very small extent, these rights are respected.

The image of quality of life in terms of ways of spending free time

Among the leisure activities are the practice of household chores or the concern for lifelong learning, depending on the age category. Less common is involvement in volunteer activities, much more common in developed countries.

Along with examining the areas of quality of life that contribute to the formation of an image in terms of how it is perceived in Romania, it is necessary to research it from a cross-sectional perspective, the most appropriate way is by studying the index of social progress, currently used in many countries.

THE INDEX OF SOCIAL PROGRESS IN ROMANIA

Thus, it is easy to notice that the world is a very vast space, full of people who look, eat and talk differently, but drawing a line, people care and depend on similar things - they all need water, to be safe and to live without fear. People everywhere want to get a better education and improve their lives, but all these things are not guaranteed everywhere and to everyone.

All countries have strengths and weaknesses. Indicators such as the income, size or gross domestic product per capita of a country do not reveal that those inhabitants live a better life. Therefore, the quality of life is assessed using the social progress index, an indicator that studies 142 nations and evaluates 54 social and environmental indicators in each country, and indicators that really matter to people. The social progress index is the result of a two-year process, led by a team of scientists and policy experts. It synthesizes a large body of research to identify the dimensions of social and environmental performance of societies. It includes: social and environmental indicators, achievements and relevant elements of a country, measures social progress and the health of society.

The progress of social progress can be defined as the ability of a society to meet its primary needs, to build buildings that allow citizens and communities to increase and sustain their quality of life and create social conditions for all individuals to reach their true potential. From the definition derive three dimensions: basic human needs, well-being and opportunity. Each of these dimensions consists of four components, and each component is composed of three to six indicators.

The top 20 countries for 2020 in terms of social progress index consists of: Norway, Denmark, Finland, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, Canada, Australia, Iceland, Netherlands, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Luxembourg, Austria, Belgium, Korea, France, Spain, United Kingdom (The Social Progress Imperative, 2021).

What does a successful country look like?

About 80 years ago, economic growth or the measurement of gross domestic product were the main methods of measuring success. At the same time, economist Simon Kuznets, who introduced the concept of gross domestic product, gave a clear warning about using the indicator to define people's well-being.

The Social Progress Index aims to introduce a new measure that complements, not replaces GDP, and measures what really matters to people. "The well-being of a nation can hardly be deduced by measuring national income as defined by GDP." (Simon Kuznets).

There is also a need to cover those issues that involve a human dimension. In areas such as basic food and health care, Romania has a high opportunity to improve the well-being of the population, with more emphasis on protecting these rights.

Romania excels in areas such as nutrition and basic medical services and presents a high opportunity to improve the quality of life of the population by focusing on shelters with all the aspects presented below. Romania excels in providing access to basic knowledge and would benefit from investments in ensuring sustainability. In terms of providing opportunities for people to improve their position in society, the country ranks well, with a high score in terms of personal freedom of choice, but is outperformed in terms of tolerance and inclusion.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES FOR IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF THE INHABITANTS OF BUCHAREST FOR THE PERIOD 2020-2024

The program proposed by the current mayor of Bucharest for his term 2020-2024 aims at the following aspects of quality of life: urban mobility, environment, health, education, inclusion, economic growth, safety, education, culture, urbanism through the following objectives (Dan, 2021):

- The creation of a surface metro that will use the existing railway infrastructure in and around the city, will connect the six stations and will offer six routes. The surface metro stations will be interconnected with those related to surface public transport and the metro.
- Expansion, optimization and greening of the public transport network: expansion and modernization of tram and trolleybus lines, greening of the bus fleet, dedication of lanes on major boulevards for public transport, reconfiguration of transport routes to meet peak transport demand, modernization of public transport stations.
- Intelligent traffic light traffic: endowment with video systems, sensors and artificial intelligence programs that will provide real-time information in

order to prioritize public transport and reduce waiting times in traffic.

- Construction of a number of 15 park & ride parking lots (with 1000 places each) at the exits from the city and with access to the surface metro stations.
- Active control of pollution by watering the streets, implementation of a transparent public air quality monitoring system, checks on waste management, imposing measures on the owners of degraded land and buildings.
- extension of green spaces, completion of the Green Spaces Register, start of the green belt project of Bucharest, creation of an urban forest on an area of 20 hectares near Ghencea Stadium.
- Investments in the energy efficiency of buildings by encouraging constructions with a green footprint, accelerating the thermal rehabilitation program of buildings.
- Superior waste management by introducing selective waste collection and stimulating the circular economy.
- Offering non-polluting urban transport solutions, creating a network of bike lanes, renewing the car fleet with ecological buses, converting old buses into trolleybuses, offering financial and fiscal incentives for the purchase of private electric cars.
- Combating crime by creating a direction whose objective will be to monitor areas with increased criminal risk, digital monitoring and alerting systems for areas exposed to crime.
- Anti-seismic consolidation.
- Building at least 30 nurseries and kindergartens, expanding existing schools as needed, organizing afterschool programs at the level of at least 150 schools, teacher training programs and increasing the quality of education, granting vouchers value for families who prefer private preschool education, promoting collaboration between the business environment and the education system to meet the demands of the labor market.
- Initiating research projects in partnership with the faculties in order to formulate solutions to problems associated with quality of life.
- Digitization of the health network, endowment of health institutions with modern equipment, creation of medical and social centers at the level of sectors, launching a health education program at the level of primary and secondary education, continuous training of medical staff.
- Sanitation of parks, replacement of old street furniture, modernization of playgrounds, release of sidewalks in the area, opening at the weekend of schoolyards and sports fields in order to use as playgrounds and events dedicated to children.
- Temporary transformation of some streets into pedestrian spaces.
- Starting a social procurement program, providing school support services for disadvantaged families, building a system of care and home care for the elderly with reduced mobility, organizing cultural

activities dedicated to the elderly, offering free subscriptions to people elderly to have access to sports facilities, implementation of an intersection signaling system for people with audio-visual disabilities, the establishment of special centers for the treatment of children with disabilities.

- Encouraging micro-events at the neighborhood level, providing access to culture to disadvantaged groups, building a new multipurpose hall for cultural and sports events, supporting the development of creative hubs and providing tax facilities to companies in the creative cultural fields.
- Re-initialization of the General Urban Plan and the Integrated Urban Development Plan to be synchronized with the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan 2016-2030, the Cultural Strategy of the Municipality of Bucharest 2016-2026, the Integrated Air Quality Plan and the Integrated Urban Development Strategy.
- Revitalizing the historic center of the city and creating a fund to save buildings in danger of destruction.
- Creating a direction of urban innovation.

CONCLUSIONS

The relevance in relation to previous research consists in the fact that at the end of the research it was intended to outline an image on the quality of life in Romania based on the indicators identified at this stage, to reflect as rigorously as possible the existing situation, objective representation of the perceptions and the degree of satisfaction of the inhabitants regarding the analyzed aspects, reporting the position of the authorities and other actors involved in overcoming the challenges of adopting policies that promote a better quality of life. The obtained results will constitute a frame of reference for the bodies interested in improving the quality of life in Romania and of the urban management and will contribute to the realization of other researches regarding the quality of life in other cities. At the same time, the study can contribute to the identification of new fields for monitoring the quality of life in the urban environment, through the relevance of the indicators used and the availability of new statistical information.

REFERENCE LIST

- [1] Alber, J., Köhler, U. (2004). Health and care in an enlarged Europe, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Commission, 2004.
- [2] CSDH, (2008). *Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health*, Final Report of the

- Commission on Social Determinants of Health, Geneva, World Health Organization.
- [3] Cella, D., & Cherin, E. (1988). Quality of life during and after cancer treatment, *Compr Ther*, pp. 69–75.
- [4] Das, D., (2007). Urban quality of life: A case study of Guwahati, *Social Indicators Research*, 88, pp. 297–310
- [5] Delhey, J. (2004). Life satisfaction in an enlarged Europe, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Commission.
- [6] Forward, S., (2003). *State of the art report on Life Quality assessment in the field of transport and mobility*, Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute Linköping: Sweden, pp. 1-31
- [7] Kuznets, S., (1934), *National Income 1929–1932. A report to the U.S. Senate*, 73rd Congress, 2nd Session. Washington, DC. US Government Printing Office
- [8] Lorfi, S. și Koohsari, M.J., (2009). Analyzing Accessibility Dimension of Urban Quality of Life: Where Urban Designers Face Duality
- [9] Mărginean, I., Precupețu, I., Tsanov, V., Preoteasa, A.M., Voicu, B. (2006), First European Quality of Life Survey: Quality of life in Bulgaria and Romania, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications European Communities
- [10] Milbrath, L. W., (1978). Indicators of Environmental Quality. In *Indicators of Environmental Quality and Quality of Life. Unesco Reports and Papers in the Social Sciences*, No. 38. Paris: Unesco, pp. 33-59
- [11] McCrea, R., Shyy, T. și Stimson, R., (2006). What is the strength of the link between objective and subjective indicators of urban quality of life?, *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 1, pp. 79–96.
- [12] Senlier, N., Yildiz, R., Aktaş, D., (2009). A perception survey for the evaluation of urban quality of life in Kocaeli and a Comparison of the life satisfaction with the European cities, *Social Indicators Research*, 94, pp. 213-216
- [13] Shek, D., Lee, B., (2007). A Comprehensive Review of Quality of Life (QOL) Research in Hong Kong, *The Scientific World Journal*, 7, pp. 1222 -1229
- [14] The Social Progress Imperative. (2021, August 10). Global Index: Results. Retrieved from Social Progress: <https://www.socialprogress.org/index/global/results>
- [15] Wish, N.B., (1986). Are We Really Measuring the Quality of Life? Well-being Has Subjective Dimensions, As Well As Objective Ones, *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 45 (1), pp. 93–99
- Non-English reference**
- [1] Dan, N., (2021). *Programul pentru Noul București*, [The program for the New Bucharest] Retrieved from Noul București: <https://noulbucuresti.ro>
- [2] Precupețu, I. (2008), Evaluări ale protecției sociale și îngrijirii sănătății, [Assessments of social protection and health care] în Mărginean, I. și Precupețu, I. (coord.), *Calitatea vieții și dezvoltarea durabilă, Politici de întărire a coeziunii sociale*, [Quality of life and sustainable development. Policies to strengthen social cohesion], București: Editura Expert și CIDE, pp. 137-146.
- [3] Voicu, Bogdan (2005), *Penuria Pseudo-Modernă a Postcomunismului Românesc*, [The Pseudo-Modern Shortage of Romanian Post-Communism], II: Resursele, Iași, Editura Expert Projects.
- [4] Zamfir, E. (1993), Indicatori subiectivi ai calității vieții [Subjective indicators of quality of life], în: C. Zamfir & L. Vlăsceanu (coord.), *Dicționar de sociologie*, editura Babel, București, p. 745-748