

THE GOOD SOCIETY FRAMEWORK – UNDERSTANDING QUALITY OF LIFE

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Good societies are those in which the conditions enable their citizens to have a high standard of wellbeing. Traditionally, the main measures used to quantify a society's level of wellbeing have been financial measures, in particular 'standard of living', which is mainly a measure of people's income and spending power.

More recently, attention has been focussed on wider and more far-reaching measures of wellbeing which look at quality of life in a broader sense. A variety of indices for measuring quality of life have been developed, but currently there is little consensus on what the key dimensions are.

This paper presents a framework, the Good Society Framework (GSF), for assessing quality of life and explains how it was developed. It is conceived as a comprehensive model of wellbeing incorporating all of the major factors included in the various indices and grouping them into nine dimensions.

- **Relationships – the quality of people's social, family and interpersonal relationships; the extent to which society is coherent and harmonious.**
- **Economy – people's degree of economic prosperity and spending power; the extent to which jobs are rewarding and offer potential for growth and development.**
- **Environment and Infrastructure – the pleasantness and sustainability of the natural environment; the degree to which the built environment is pleasant and functions well and extent to which the infrastructure is effective and efficient.**
- **Health – whether people have access to good healthcare and healthy food; whether work, home and public environments are generally safe.**
- **Peace and Security – whether crime is low and people feel safe in their homes and public areas; whether or not society is affected by war or terrorism.**
- **Culture and Leisure – whether there is a rich and rewarding culture, both 'high' and 'popular'; whether there are opportunities to participate in rewarding leisure activities.**
- **Spirituality, Religion and Philosophy – whether there is access to religious and spiritual teachings and the opportunity to practice one's religion of choice; whether there is access to philosophical teachings and ideas about how to live.**
- **Education – whether there is education that enables people to function effectively in society; whether the education is intellectually enriching.**
- **Governance – whether there is democracy, fairness and freedom of expression; whether justice is transparent and consistent, and whether society is governed with compassion and equality.**

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been an increasing focus, both in government and in academia, on the subject of quality of life.

Traditionally, the main criterion on which a society's level of wellbeing has been judged is 'standard of living'. This is essentially a measure of the wealth and spending power of a country's citizens.

Quality of life (QoL), on the other hand, is a broader measure, including not only financial considerations, but also a wider definition of wellbeing.

So far, a wide variety of indices for measuring QoL have been proposed and, although there is some overlap in their dimensions, there is little consensus as to which is the most appropriate.

The indices differ both in terms of the dimensions that they use and in the weightings that they give to each dimension.

The Good Society Framework (GSF) was compiled through amalgamating the dimensions used in the other indices and merging them into a manageable number of dimensions (nine).

The GSF is not intended as an *index* of quality of life as there is no attempt to score nations on its dimensions, nor are the dimensions weighted or ranked in order of importance.

Rather the GSF can be seen as a framework, model or checklist outlining the characteristics that a great society should have in order to enable its citizens to have an optimum QoL.

It was initially created as part of a project involving professional bodies who were interested in looking at how the professions that they represent could contribute to wellbeing in a sense that went beyond just the financial. The aim of the GSF was to help them to structure thinking about this.

Its compilation was both analytical and pragmatic in nature. The framework was put together by looking at the various indices used for measuring QoL (described in the next section of this paper), listing their various elements and then grouping them into a 'manageable' number of dimensions.

A challenge facing not only professional bodies, but also government at all levels as well as other policy makers and other organisations in both the public and private sector is how to help to improve society and improve the quality of life for people. This applies both to the most developed societies as well as the least developed, although the nature of the challenges in each case may be rather different.

The GSF is intended as a reference tool to stimulate thinking about how to improve QoL on all of these dimensions and improve life for all people irrespective of their current circumstances.

2. QUALITY OF LIFE INDICES

The GSF was developed using information and indices from a number of sources including:

- Quality of Life Index
- Gross National Happiness
- Human Development Index
- Genuine Progress Indicator
- World Values Survey
- Life Quality Index
- Satisfaction with Life Index
- Happy Planet Index

Each is described below

2.1 Quality of Life Index

The Quality of Life Index was created by the Economist magazine's intelligence unit. It ranks countries according to quality of life based on the following dimensions: health, family life, community life, material wellbeing, political stability, climate, job security, political freedom, gender equality.

2.2 Gross National Happiness

This index was originally started by the government of Bhutan, but has been developed into an international collaborative project involving many academic and research institutions. It ranks countries based on how they perform on the following dimensions: economy, environment, physical health, mental health, work, society and politics.

2.3 Human Development Index

This index was created by the United Nations Development Program. It ranks countries based on a combination of life expectancy, education and wealth.

2.4 Genuine Progress Indicator

The Genuine Progress Indicator was developed by the Methodist Church in collaboration with the University of Maryland. It ranks countries based on a combination of economic conditions and environmental sustainability.

2.5 World Values Survey

This survey was founded by the University of Tilberg in The Netherlands and is now run as a collaborative project involving social scientists from all over the world. It ranks countries according to happiness based on people's subjective ratings of how happy they are.

2.6 Life Quality Index

This index also results from an international collaborative academic project having originally been created at the University of Waterloo in Canada. It ranks countries based on: wealth, life expectancy and leisure time.

2.7 Satisfaction with Life Index

Another collaborative international project, this was founded by the University of Leicester. It ranks countries based on people's subjective ratings of how satisfied they are with their lives.

2.8 Happy Planet Index

The Happy Planet Index was created by the New Economics Foundation. It ranks countries based on: people's subjective ratings of happiness, life expectancy, and ecological footprint.

The GSF was created from a content analysis and cross referencing of these indices, followed by a grouping of the content in to a manageable number of dimensions.

3. DIMENSIONS OF QUALITY OF LIFE

This section gives more detail of each of the dimensions of the GSF.

3.1 Relationships

This category is about the relationships between the people within society.

Good societies are those that have strong communities where people know their neighbours and are friendly and supportive. They are well integrated, for example people of different races live in harmony with each other and interact fully.

They are also societies in which personal relationships can flourish. This includes people finding love and staying together, parenting children effectively and in a loving environment. It also includes having good and meaningful friendships.

Key Issues

- Communities
- Marriages
- Racial integration
- Parenting
- Romance
- Friendship

3.2 Economy

This category is about the benefits that the economy brings to the people.

Good societies are economically prosperous. They enable their citizens to enjoy a good standard of living which covers the essentials and also gives plenty of disposable income. Both essentials and luxuries are plentiful.

The jobs in good societies are highly rewarding, both financially and in terms of the fulfilment that they provide to those that do them. They also provide plentiful opportunities for personal and career development.

Key Issues

- Wealth
- Essentials
- Luxuries
- Jobs
- Personal Development

3.3 Environment and Infrastructure

This category is about the physical conditions in which people live.

Good societies have a pleasant and sustainable natural environment, free of pollution. They also have an attractive and functional built environment that is pleasant to live and work in.

They have an effective infrastructure with good transport and communication links and cheap and plentiful energy that is available to all.

Key Issues

- Natural environment
- Sustainability
- Built environment
- Transport
- Energy
- Communications

3.4 Health

This category is about how well a society supports the good health of its citizens.

In good societies healthy food and drink is plentiful and affordable for all. There is effective healthcare and the conditions in which good health can thrive. People are safe in their homes and in public, and have safe working conditions.

People have a long life expectancy and good physical and mental health.

Key Issues

- Physical health
- Mental health
- Safety from attack
- Preventing accidents
- Health and safety
- Longevity

3.5 Peace and Security

This category is about whether a society creates a peaceful, secure environment for people.

In good societies, crime is low and people and their possessions are safe. People feel comfortable in their homes and in public areas.

Good societies have civil harmony and are at peace with other nations, their citizens are not at risk from domestic or foreign conflict or from terrorism, nor do they visit war or terrorism on other nations.

Key Issues

- Crime
- Antisocial behaviour
- Terrorism
- Civil war
- War

3.6 Culture and Leisure

This category is about opportunities for rewarding activities outside of work.

Good societies have a rich culture with people having access to excellent arts, literature, music, movies and plays, TV shows, sporting events and other forms of both 'high' and popular culture.

People have a wide variety of leisure opportunities that are affordable to participate in. They also have plenty of time to pursue them.

Key Issues

- High culture
- Popular culture
- Entertainment
- Sports
- Leisure

3.7 Spirituality, Religion and Philosophy

This category is about having access to teachings which look at the meaning and purpose of life.

In good societies people have access to a wide variety of religious and spiritual teachings and the opportunity to practice the religion or belief of their choice.

They also have access to philosophical teachings and different views about how to live. They have the opportunity to put these philosophies into practice.

Key Issues

- Spirituality
- Philosophy
- Religion

3.8 Education

This category is about the quality of education a society provides for people.

In good societies people have access to an excellent education. This education enables them to function and thrive within society. It also enriches them intellectually and is fulfilling and rewarding in and of itself.

This education empowers the individual, giving them choices about how they live their lives and the ability to make informed judgements and participate fully in society.

Key Issues

- Education
- Intellectual development
- Personal empowerment
- Judgement

3.9 Governance

This category is about the way society is governed.

Good societies are democratic with full political and civil liberties. They enable their citizens to have freedom of expression, freedom of religion and freedom of movement and action.

They are compassionate and grant equal rights and responsibilities to all regardless of race, religion, sexuality and age (except minors). They have a fair, consistent, transparent and proportionate justice system. They also act with fairness and peaceful intent towards other nations.

Key Issues

- Political freedom
- Civil liberties
- Freedom of expression
- Freedom
- Justice
- Compassion
- Equality

4. DISCUSSION

As can be seen from the richness of the dimensions of the GSF, quality of life is a multifaceted and complex issue. All organisations and individuals – governments, public services, private enterprise, social institutions, professions and citizens – potentially have a role to play in improving society on all of these dimensions.

This may require a shift in mindset and emphasis, away from making judgements about wellbeing that are based mainly on metrics such as wealth to broader measures that incorporate all nine dimensions of the GSF.

While there have been moves in this direction, as witnessed by the variety of indices cited in this paper, there is still little consensus as to how the overall wellbeing of a society should be measured.

Although the GSF is not itself a metric of quality of life – as it does not offer a ranking or weighting of the importance of the dimensions, nor a set of formulas by which a society's wellbeing can be measured on each – it could be used as a starting point for such an analysis.

Whatever the measure that is ultimately used to assess quality of life, it is important that it includes all the elements that contribute significantly to the wellbeing of a society's citizens.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As quality of life gains increasing prominence as an issue and is considered in increasingly broad terms, the challenges facing all organisations and individuals are also increasingly broad and far reaching.

To gain a true understanding of the level of wellbeing that a society offers to its citizens, it is important to look beyond simplistic measures of wealth and material prosperity and to also assess the wider factors that contribute to quality of life.

The GSF offers a comprehensive model on which such an analysis could be based.

6. FURTHER READING

For more detail of the indices that were used in compiling the GSF take a look at the Wikipedia entries for each index. See also the following references.

Quality of Life Index

Economist Intelligence Unit 2005, The Economist Intelligence Unit's Quality of Life Index, The World in 2005

Human Development Index

United Nations Development Program 2009, Human Development Report 2009

Genuine Progress Indicator

Cobb C., Goodman, G.S., Wackernagel M. 1999, Why Bigger Isn't Better: The Genuine Progress Indicator – 1999 Update

World Values Survey

Inglehart R, Foa R, Peterson C, Welzel C 2008 Development, Freedom, and Rising Happiness: A Global Perspective (1981–2007), Perspectives on Psychological Science

Life Quality Index

Nathwani J.S., Lind N.C. and Pandey M.D. 1997, Affordable Safety By Choice: The Life Quality Method, Institute for risk Research, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Satisfaction with Life Index

White, A., 2007, A Global Projection of Subjective Well-being: A Challenge To Positive Psychology?, Psychtalk 56, 17-20

Happy Planet Index

New Economics Foundation 2009, The (Un)Happy Planet Index 2.0: Why Good Lives Don't Have to Cost the Earth