

Quality of Life: Different Points of View

Track Title: Quality/Process Improvement and Management

Abstract: What quality of life represents to an individual may not be the same as to the next. Some individuals value certain features higher than others. Most indicators of quality of life and social development do not change in a population's taste even though they rate differently in terms of scale and reference from one person to another. Local governments should be able to identify such differences in opinions, thus bringing forward projects that meet as much as possible the myriad needs and desires of the population.

Keywords: quality of life, points of view, indicators.

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Introduction

What quality of life represents to an individual is not necessarily perceived as the same by the next. This is one reason why administrations at all levels are faced with unsatisfied clients (taxpayers). Local public administrators, however, must aim at meeting the needs of the majority of the population while alleviating the burdens borne by the part of the population whose needs go unmet.

Different city districts have distinct needs that may vary according to such factors as the cultural and religious background, level of social and economic development, etc. experienced by that given population. Natural preservation areas as well as those most suited for sport, leisure and cultural activities must be distributed throughout the city in such a way that the needs and interests of its inhabitants are properly met. As a result, both direct and indirect costs involved in the commuting of people to and from those areas where facilities are located are diminished.

Man's permanent dissatisfaction with his present state of life drives him to a never-ending quest for ever-higher quality standards, which he demands from his government representatives. However, those who live in developed countries and enjoy a wide range of high-quality goods and services are beginning to realize that these alone do not necessarily translate into higher living standards. To many individuals, a good living standard not only complements but in many cases has even replaced deep-rooted concepts of quality. In fact, a few developed nations are no longer reading health as merely the absence of disease; instead, more comprehensive concepts are being employed, such as quality of life, for instance. The World Health Organization's definition of health is not merely the absence of diseases and illnesses but rather a state of physical, mental and social welfare.

Quality of Life

Quality of life in large urban areas is gauged by a wide range of parameters that include among others the supply and quality of job positions, street and traffic safety, the level of noise in the city, air, soil and water pollution, the supply of leisure-related activities, the quality of traffic and commuting services, the convenience of access to get to work, entertainment areas, various service, and the quality and infrastructure of housing services. However, the perception of quality of life is in the eye of the beholder. While some individuals hold dear a few specific factors, for others different aspects play a major role. Therefore, local public administrators must be sensitive enough to grasp these distinct perceptions while at the same time prioritize projects which best meet the population's needs.

The concept of development has always been more intimately associated with economic growth than to social improvements. The lack of commitment on the part of governments with respect to social causes usually leads to a politically unstable environment, as a result of the hiatus borne out of an unbalanced social and economic development. Several wealthy nations have to deal with such malady, bearing in mind that the quality of life of the population on a higher income bracket depends on that of the majority on a low income. Urban exodus has been a tendency, as shown by the large number of people who flee the large metropolitan areas in search for a better quality of life to small towns where social inequalities and interests divergence are less intense.

The application of quality concepts in urban planning should be aimed at increasing the population's level of satisfaction through the use of sustainable development strategies, which could not only allow for better investments but also lead to constant improvements in quality of life. People in general have been paying a high price for the apparent - though less than real - quality of life they live. Self-benefit and profit-seeking have often constitute an illusory rationale behind people's indifference towards nature and the quality of life of the remainder of the population. The concept of sustainable growth arose in the early 70s out of the dichotomy between an all-out progress drive and a strong commitment towards the environment. From then on, the idea of a model for sustainable growth - one that could meet today's needs without putting the quality of life of future generations at stake - began to take root (Agenda 21, 1992).

Points of View

The human perception of environment is deeply rooted in values closely related to individuals and their level of instruction, as well as to a community and its culture. These values often have a strong bearing on people, both physically and psychologically, and determine the level of satisfaction and quality of life of the population. As such, environmental quality, a factor of utmost importance to ensure quality of

life, depends heavily on how the environment meets the needs and desires of man. These, however, are never the same for different individuals (Saunier, 1993).

Relative standards

Indicators for the most part do not accuse the various preferences between individuals, although the levels of satisfaction do vary in terms of scale and reference. Such variation results from the difference in reference standards among individuals. In other words, what an individual deems as good may not necessarily be considered acceptable by another, and conversely, what one regards as bad may actually be quite acceptable to the other (see Figure 1).

See Figure 1

Some indicators that do not show large variations in terms of personal preference are quality of instruction, medical services and public safety. In fact, the greater the absolute values for these parameters, the better. Reference standards vary from individual to individual and also with time; however, no sooner a level regarded as acceptable has been achieved, what was once regarded as acceptable is now deemed merely ordinary, and thus requires improvement. When reference levels of performance indicators are changed, the order of preference in the prioritization of courses of actions may also change as a result. Therefore, the decision-making process concerning investments and local government strategies should take into account not just environmental variables but also the novel necessities of the population.

According to Helson's (in Frank, 1989), the human central nervous system is less responsive to absolute values of any stimuli whatsoever than to the gradient between his/her current state and the reference level that is present in that particular environment. The gradient difference between the reference standard and the state in which an individual currently finds himself is both psychologically and physiologically disturbing. For instance, low temperatures are thought to be perceived as colder by individuals living in cold regions than by those who live in warmer places due to the reference value rather than the absolute value. However, this does not mean that absolute values should be altogether discarded. Psychological factors also have a more relative influence on people than their absolute counterparts. In a number of professions, workers must be trained both physically as well as psychologically in order to better respond to situations that demand intense efforts. Such is the case of professionals in the fire brigade, the police, the military, air force pilots, to name but a few. The issue usually is not the strenuous effort required (the absolute value), but rather the effort gradient to which one has been used to bear.

Climatic factors can be used as a good example to illustrate changes in preference, not only in terms of scale but also in terms of direction. What an individual deems as good may be perceived as unacceptable by another; conversely, what the former perceives as unacceptable may be deemed as good by the latter (see Figure 2). Climatic factors are practically beyond control, despite having become increasingly more foreseeable in the recent past.

See Figure 2

Development strategies have to take into consideration the whole range of performance indicators in such a way that allow for the selection of decision-making processes that meet the needs of the majority of the population, while also ensuring the highest possible level of satisfaction. The fact that part of the population does not share the same ideas with the others does not make strategic procedures unfeasible; rather, it just points at the need to monitor closely the trends and alternatives that alleviate and offset the burdens borne by the small portions of the population.

Absolute standards

As soon as a given level of quality is reached by a town and thus shown on its indicators, it is necessary that either new levels be set or those indicators be stabilized and new targets be set for yet other indicators. When high performance levels are reached and shown by these indicators, it is possible to resort to absolute comparative standards such as the benchmark at the regional, national or global level.

A comparison using absolute standards fails to take into consideration social, economic and cultural disparities of distinct countries as well as the conveniences and difficulties involved in the quest for achieving levels of excellence. The absolute standard may be used as a reference tool and as a desirable long-term goal, but should not be utilized as a short-term target, in most cases.

Indicators of Performance

The actual values and costs concerning both individual and collective quality of life have increasingly been questioned. A great many people delude themselves with the notion that social and environmental issues are not their concern. The lack of indicators that enable the assessment of quality of life of populations as well as strategic evaluations represents an obstacle to the enhancement of political sensitivity of administrators and to a higher awareness of the importance for the population to take part in direct and indirect actions that translate into benefits for the population as a whole. According to Takashina and Flores (1997) "the assessment of results by means of the use of indicators allows for the evaluation of performance shown by the organization during a given period, compared to the target set and to other referential parameters, thus supporting decision-making strategies and re-planning processes."

Ineptitude in the administration and the embezzlement of public funds at the local level are made easier by the lack of guidelines for the assessment of administrative performance as well as for a deficiency in models of analysis and control of quality of life of a given population. The inability on the part of the federal and state governments as well as the population to control public spending at the local level and the rates of return on investments in benefits for the improvement of quality of life for the population attest to the importance of using indicators of performance as a tool to discipline local administrations.

Strategic indicators may constitute an important tool in identifying problems, in risk analysis, in investigation of possible correlations between indicators, in the prioritization of strategies and decision making in investments at the local level. According to the Institute for Economic and Social Development of the State of Paraná (Instituto Paranaense de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social) "there is demand both on the part of the state and local governments for parameters that support city planning, prioritize necessities, provide a justification for allocation of resources, respond to administrative decentralization process and demand sobriety and transparency in transactions" (IPARDES, 1993). Teixeira (1999) contends that traditional performance indicators are somewhat obsolete and inefficient as managerial tools, since they do not indicate where and when improvements should be attempted and go after results and consequences rather than processes and causes. For Bortolanza (1999), local administrations are in need of more suitable means of gauging administrative performance, given that unawareness of real conditions is among the main problems faced by local governments.

For Kelvin (in Harrington, 1993), when one can actually gauge a determined parameter and present a figure for it, one has gotten a grasp on that matter; however, if one cannot provide a measurement nor express it as a number, his knowledge is sketchy and unsatisfactory. According to Hronec (1994), "research and experience have shown that the most effective and less expensive way of changing human behavior is by means of assessment." For Oliveira et al (1995), the employment of measurements effectively contributes to motivate and involve individuals in the pursuit of improvement, as it allows them to gauge the return of their own performance. Bortolanza (1999) holds that development of local government strategies is hindered by the low reliability of data and the lack of a single data base for the municipality.

Conclusion

A large number of people fool themselves with the notion that social and environmental issues are not their concern. The lack of indicators that enable the assessment of quality of life of populations as well as strategic evaluations represents an obstacle to the enhancement of political sensitivity of administrators and to a higher awareness of the importance for the population to take part in direct and indirect actions that translate into benefits for the population as a whole. Participative action by society in the solution of public concerns, however, does not free the state from its responsibility.

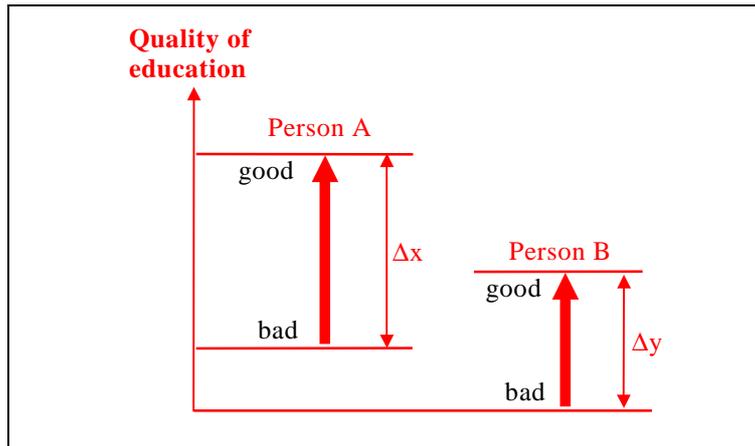
The lack of indicators that gauge quality of life, safe investment environments, political stability, among others, hinders long-term investments that are deemed essential for strategic planning. Short-term investments with high rates of return usually consist of high-risk speculative capital. However, long-term investments such as those made in countries that lack reliable indicators of performance are clearly riskier and therefore less attractive to most investors. The selection of strategic indicators aimed at measuring improvements in the quality of life of the population is also important in the establishment and control of low-cost efficient local level strategies. Monitoring municipalities' performance could lead to the setting of strategies at the inter-municipal, regional, state and federal levels.

Decision making and management control could lead to improvements in procedures and development of comparative advantages vis-à-vis other municipalities. However, in order for such

improvements to take place effectively, strategic and management decisions must be based on reliable and useful data. Correlation analyses from distinct fields of study could represent an important tool in facilitating the decision process regarding investments with a view to medium- to long-term sustainable returns. The utilization of indicators for the assessment of quality of life of a population makes it possible to make comparisons regarding the improvements or worsening of urban performance in time between municipalities. Indicators of performance allow for the creation of more efficient local and regional strategies.

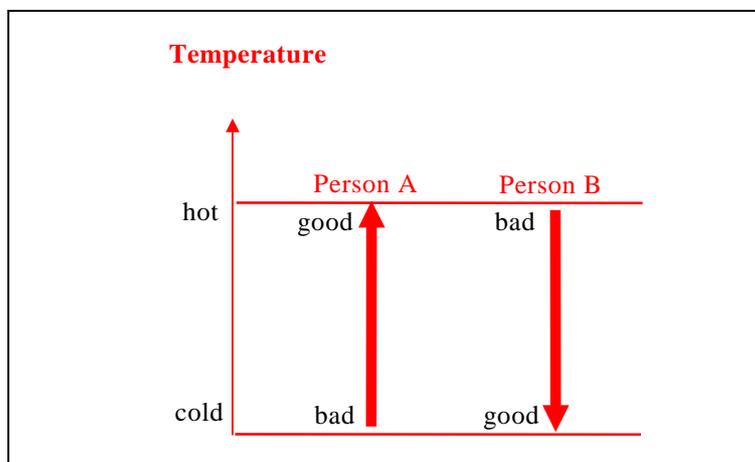
Figures

Figure 1 - Relative standards: changes in reference and scale.



Source: Graeml (2000).

Figure 2 - Relative Standards: inversion of values.



Source: Graeml (2000).

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