

## HAPPY LIFE-EXPECTANCY

### *A comprehensive measure of quality-of-life in nations*<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** One of the aims of social indicator research is to develop a comprehensive measure of quality-of-life in nations that is analogous to GNP in economic indicator research. For that purpose, several multi dimensional indexes have been proposed. In addition to economic performance, these also acknowledge the nation's success in matters like schooling and social equality. The most current indicator of this type is the 'Human Development Index'. In this approach QOL is measured by input; the degree to which society provides conditions deemed beneficial ('presumed' QOL). The basic problem is that one never knows to what extent the cherished provisions are really good for people.

An alternative is measuring QOL in nations by output, and consider how well people actually flourish in the country. This 'apparent' QOL can be measured by the degree to which citizens live long and happily. This conception is operationalized by combining registration based estimates of length-of-life, with survey data on subjective appreciation-of-life. Life-expectancy in years is multiplied by average happiness on a 0-1 scale. The product is named 'Happy Life-Expectancy' (HLE), and can be interpreted as the number of years the average citizen in a country lives happily at a certain time.

HLE was assessed in 48 nations in the early 1990's. It appears to be highest in North-West European nations (about 60) and lowest in Africa (below 35).

HLE scores are systematically higher in nations that are most affluent, free, educated, and tolerant. Together, these country-characteristics explain 70% of the statistical variance in HLE. Yet HLE is not significantly related to unemployment, state welfare and income equality, nor to religiousness and trust in institutions. HLE does not differ either with military dominance and population pressure.

The conclusion is that HLE qualifies as the envisioned comprehensive social indicator. It has both clear substantive meaning (happy life-years) and theoretical significance (ultimate output measure). HLE differentiates well. Its correlations fit most assumptions about required input, but also challenge some. The indicator is likely to have political appeal.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the first half of this century, quality-of-life in nations was largely measured by the material level of living. The higher that level in a

Criteria for QOL in nations	Examples of QOL indexes			
	Index of Social Progress (ISP) (Eates 1984)	Index of well-being (Kacopff 1996)	Quality-of-life index (Narrol 1984)	Human Development Index (HDI) (UNDP 1995)
Economic affluence	x	x		x
State welfare	x		x	
Education	x		x	x
Public health	x		x	x
Social equality	x			(x) <sup>3</sup>
Peacefulness	x	x	x	
Physical habitability	x	x		
Social stability	x		x	
Cultural diversity	x		x	
Lifestyle		x		

*Exhibit 1. Some current measures of quality-of-life in nations.*

country, the better the life of its citizens was presumed to be. As such, quality-of-life was measured by GNP related measures, currently by 'real' GDP per head.

This materialistic conception of QOL was never unquestioned, but criticism long remained marginal. Yet in the 1960's, the opinion climate changed. Saturation levels were reached and the ecological limits of economic growth came in view. This gave rise to a call for broader indicators of quality-of-life, which materialized in the so called 'Social Indicator' movement. The name of 'social' indicators signifies that the mere economic performance does not suffice.

From its beginning, one of the aims of Social Indicators Research was to develop a social equivalent to the economist's GNP. Several measures have been proposed since.

### 1.1 Current measures of Quality-of-Life in nations

Though social indicators research arose from discontent with economic indicators, most alternative measures do involve material 'level of living'. They add further criteria. The new social indicators of quality-of-life differ in the criteria which they add and how many. Exhibit 1 provides an illustrative overview. Similar indicators of this kind have been proposed by Drenowski (1974), Liu (1977), Mootz (1990) and Slottje (1991), to mention a few.

As yet, none of these indicators reached acceptance comparable to GNP, neither in the realm of politics, nor in the scientific world.