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## The Quality of Life and the Environment

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### Abstract

The problem of the quality of life is a multidimensional and complex issue. It concerns the members of more than one profession such as planners, designers, architects, economists, lawyers and design-makers. Although it is not easy to find the most suitable indicators for the measurement of the quality of life, appropriate definitions can be made depending upon the goals of the researcher. The relationship between the quality of life and the environment has become an important subject for study for the last several decades. Numerous publications are produced in the academic circles. In addition, organizations like the United Nations, its specialized agencies, the European Union and the Council of Europe contributed greatly to the progress of environmental thought which keeps the phenomenon of the quality of living constantly in the agenda.

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### 1. Introduction

The Quality of Life is a worldwide phenomenon concerning billions of people in developing and developed countries even at the beginning of the 21st century. Although it has great many dimensions, ranging from physical to socio-cultural, psychological and environmental ones, the role of economic factors is undeniably decisive in raising its level. In a presentation which will be dealing with the linkages between environmental conditions and the quality of life, the concept of environmental needs to be

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regarded in its broadest sense, covering not only physical, but also socio-cultural, political and economic requirements of human prosperity.

## 2. On the Concept of the Quality of Life

Quality of life is a broad concept which is concerned with the overall well-being in society. However, there is no an agreed-upon definition of the term in academic and policy discourses. Rather, the tendency is towards divergence. According to one of the definitions, “well-being reflects not only living, but also the ways in which people respond and feel about their lives in those domains. (Fahey,T.,Whelan, C., and Maitre, B.,2005, p.14).The concept of quality of life has three main characteristics: First, it reflects the individuals’ life situations and their perceptions rather than a country’s quality of life; secondly, it is a multidimensional concept, covering multiple life domains such as housing conditions, education, employment, work-life balance, access to institutions and public services, and their interplay; and finally, it brings together objective information on living conditions with subjective views and attitudes to provide a picture of overall well-being in society. (Shucksmith, M., Cameron, S., Merridew,T.,Pichler, F.,2009, p.1276).

It should be noted that the micro concept of quality of life has perhaps been most widely used in relation to health conditions where it is essentially used to extend the assessment of clinical outcomes beyond simple physical survival. It is also argued that the concept of quality of life needs to be used in a context beyond an economic perspective privileging income and wealth in measuring well-being (Shucksmith et al.,p.1276).An American environmental activist and writer, Hazel Henderson argued, without ignoring the decisive role and function of the economy in improving the quality of living, that per capita income was a very weak indicator of human well-being, and therefore she suggested that it should be replaced by less tangible measures such as political participation, literacy, education and health.

Maslow’s theory of the classification of human needs developed in the 1960’s is taken as a starting point in most of the investigations extensively. As rightly observed in one of the publications of the Turkish Academy of Sciences on the Indicators of Quality of Life, the concept may be approached from more than one angles, in addition to philosophical, ethical and psychological ones, such as human rights, health considerations and environmental concerns. (Türkiye Bilimler Akademisi, (Turkish Academy of Sciences, 2003, pp.9-19).

Environment quality has always been one of the most important components of the quality of life. Although this reality is not faced with any reaction, the measurement of qualitative and effective evaluation of environmental quality has been a bit of a headache for social scientists (O’Riordan,T., 1976, p.178). Evaluation of such values as beauty, fresh air, noise, fumes, and congestion cannot be precisely determined because people themselves are not very specific about their likes and dislikes. As rightly emphasized by O’Riordan, no device, no matter how carefully thought out, can overcome the inherently contradictory psychological and social processes which cause any assessment of environmental quality to be problematic (O’Riordan, T., p.178).

In a worldwide survey carried out recently by French researchers, it was found out that the basic preconditions of good living in cities included security, health, mobility, sanitation, cost of living. And these conditions were far more important in the eyes of the respondents as compared with such factors as beauty and attractiveness of the community (Damon, J., 2011, p182). Robert Marans and his Turkish colleagues carried out important studies on the quality of life on the basis of scientific criteria they developed, both in İstanbul and Famagusta, North Cyprus. Their aim was to provide useful information for developing planning and design strategies that will foster sustainable urbanization. At the same time, they made an effort to explore the impact of environmental, economic, social, physical and health related indicators on quality of life satisfaction among İstanbul and Famagusta residents. (Oktay, D., Rüstemli

A., Marans, R. W., 2009, pp.6-20; and Türkoğlu-Dülger, H., Bölen, F., Baran,P.,K.,Marans, R.,W., 2008, pp.103-113).

It is because of the increasing role of the health conditions in the concept of the quality of life that Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has recently voted for an Additional Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights concerning the right to a healthy environment (11 September 2009, Doc.12003).

From another point of view, one has to remember that economists use the term *negative externality* to express misallocate or disagreeable effects of the free interplay of the market forces. In the source of most of the environmental disturbances, hazards, degradations and dilapidation are found the impact of such externalities that can be overcome only by paying a certain price to the transacting party.

Numerous factors contribute to the improvement or worsening of the quality of life from an environmental point of view.(Görer, N. and Uğurlar, A.,2007, pp.225-234). First and the most critical threshold is undoubtedly the access to environmental infrastructure and services. These include water and sanitation systems, solid waste management, drainage, and transportation. When people do not have adequate access to these amenities or when their quality is poor, a set of important health consequences occurs immediately. Secondly, pollution from urban wastes and emissions caused by city-based activities affects daily life considerably. The examples are the air, water pollution and land degradation. It has been estimated that 300 to 700 million premature deaths could be avoided each year, if the WHO's minimum clean air standards are taken into consideration in practice. According to the statistics of the WHO, environmental conditions are responsible for one quarter of the deaths from respiratory and other infectious diseases (Keleş, R.,2010, Bodrum, p.10).

Resource degradation is the third factor affecting the quality of life. For instance, urban development can damage surrounding ecosystems through construction on sensitive and fertile lands, as well as through improper disposal of urban and industrial wastes. Cultural and historical heritage is another resource which may be lost as a result of neglect and ignorance. Fourth is the environmental hazards coming from both natural sources, like earthquakes, floods, etc., and human sources, such as accidents caused by industries, traffic, municipal facilities, and fires. Finally, environmental problems of a global nature, like greenhouse gases, sea level rise, climate change and pollution of international waters create important risks for the living environments (Leitman, J., 1999, pp.60-73). Among the factors mentioned above, urban land use decisions are critically important determinants of the environmental security, and consequently urban and rural life. Distortions in land markets, combined with ineffective land management policies and practices result in degradation of environmentally fragile lands. (Leitman, J, op.cit.,p.83).

A certain level of quality which guarantees the inhabitants a sustainable welfare may have, from another point of view, socio-cultural, economic and spatial characteristics. The fact that the people have numerous wishes constitutes the socio-cultural dimension of the issue. On the other hand, if they desire to be able to consume certain material and immaterial goods at the desired level, this points to the essentially economic nature of the problem. Finally, by realizing their wishes, they use space to live in, to work in and to recreate in. The fact that they create the physical conditions, in other words, the built environment for living, working and recreation, it means that spatial factors too will have a special role to play in raising the level of the quality of life. There are strong signals that we are destroying the equilibrium between the processes in biotic and non-biotic spheres. Therefore there is a need to work together in such a way that the results of one part do not cross the results of the others. (van der Heuvel, H.,M.,M., 1992, p.215).

### 3. An Introduction to the Concept of Environment

In order to analyze the relationships between the quality of life and environmental conditions adequately, it would be appropriate to have a brief look at urban and environmental stresses affecting the rapidly urbanizing world at the beginning. Rapid population growth and urbanization, industrialization and technological change, increased expectations caused by rising affluence, gaps between the level of expectations and actual consumption patterns, lack of adequate public awareness concerning the deterioration of environment and dilapidation of resources and finally persisting human egoism make both the protection of the environment as well as the quality of life difficult goals to reach.

Environmental stresses are linked one to another, they are dependent upon the nature of the economy, and the dichotomy of environment-economy causes, at the same time, occasionally social tensions and political unrest. The international aspects of the issue are no less important. Because, the fact that pollutants recognize no national boundaries and no country seems willing to give up any of its freedoms and sovereignty make the problems of transboundary linkages extremely important. This is the main source of the need for close cooperation among nations. As noted by René Dubot in the early 1970's, "The Earth is one, but the World is not". Different parts of the World, in other word, the North and the South, the States, sailing in the same Spaceship Earth possess moral responsibilities towards each other. "The Principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibility" in the Rio Declaration is just an expression of this need.

At the Millennium Summit in 2000, the members of the United Nations had reaffirmed their commitment to working towards a world in which eliminating poverty and sustaining development would have the highest priority. The Millennium Development Goals, which had grown out of the agreements and resolutions of successive world conferences organized by the United Nations in the past decades, had been commonly accepted as a framework for measuring development progress. The goals focus the efforts of the world community on achieving significant and measurable improvements in the quality of life. They establish yardsticks for measuring results, not just for developing countries but also for the rich countries that help to fund development programs and for the multilateral institutions that help countries implement them.

It is an undeniable fact that the eradication of poverty all over the world must be the starting point for any kind of improvement in the quality of life. Therefore, an emphasis on some global ecological challenges which might create important consequences for the quality of life in cities and for keeping the man-environment balance in general seems highly important in this respect. Let us look briefly at the Millennium Development Goals with this objective in mind. The first seven goals directed at reducing poverty, in all its forms, are mutually reinforcing. The eight goal, which is called as the global partnership for development is about the means to achieve the first seven. Many of the poorest countries will certainly need additional assistance and must look to rich countries to provide it. Countries that are poor and heavily indebted will need further help in decreasing their debt burden. And all countries will benefit if their trade barriers are lowered, allowing freer exchange of goods and services.

The environment is an essential component of the Millennium Development Goals. The Millennium Development Summit's Declaration dedicated a section to environmental protection, making explicit reference to climate change, desertification, biodiversity, forestry and water management. The Millennium Development Goals framework captures the environmental concerns in Goal seven, namely Ensuring Environmental Sustainability. The targets associated with that goal refer to mainstreaming the environment in policies and programs, reversing the loss of environmental resources, and improving access to environmental services. It makes sense to try to achieve the goals together, because of the many synergies among them. Addressing environmental issues would help to ensure environmental sustainability. The centrality of the environment to the Millennium Development Goals is reinforced by

its strong linkages to the rest of the goals. Promoting non-farm sources of income and technological improvements in agriculture is essential to reducing income poverty in rural areas. But it is difficult to imagine achieving this reduction where land is degraded and water absent. Reductions in child mortality will be more likely if households have access to adequate water supply, sanitation facilities, and modern fuels. Ready access to fuels and water lessens the time demands on women and girls, facilitating their engagement in productive activities and school attendance. Climate change will favor the spreading of vector borne diseases and increases the likelihood of natural disasters. Those disasters, in turn, reduce income and destroy the infrastructure for education and health.

In order to ensure environmental sustainability, a) we have to integrate the principle of sustainable development into national policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources, b) reduce by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water, and c) have achieved by 2020, a significant improvement in the daily lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers all over the world. The attainment of this goal may help to ensure that future generations enjoy the benefits from development and the achievement of the other Millennium Development Goals. The goals comprise three targets referring to mainstreaming the environment in policy and programs, reversing the loss of environmental resources, and improving access to environmental services, with special reference to slum dwellers.

Integration of the principle of sustainable development, which is defined as the kind of development which, meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs, into policies and programs and reversing the loss of environmental resources is not an easy task. Environment which is an essential component of the quality of life is too often overlooked by policy makers and planners as a key resource for sustainable growth and poverty alleviation. It must urgently be integrated into decision-making. The loss of environmental resources has far reaching implications for the welfare of the current generation and for the ability of future generations to maintain and improve the welfare and living conditions of human beings. This has a close bearing on ensuring sustainable development. The focus should perhaps be on a few natural resources now being rapidly degraded or polluted or at risk of further deterioration: These are land, water, forests, biodiversity, clean air, and climate change and ozone depletion.

Land degradation has become a global problem. Nearly 2 billion hectares of cropland, pastures and forests worldwide have been degraded over the past fifty years. Desertification causes economic instability and even political unrest in the areas affected. More than one million people are at risk from desertification in the world. The impacts fall undoubtedly disproportionately on the shoulders of the poor. Efforts to tackle land degradation must be linked to measures fostering broad economic and social change, to overcome the conditions that have resulted in degradation.

The challenges for sustainable development of water management are formidable. While the world population tripled in the past century, the aggregate use of water increased six fold. Some rivers no longer reach the sea. Half of the world's wetlands disappeared in the past century. It is estimated that water use will increase fifty percent in the next thirty years. And half of the world population will be living under severe need for substantial improvements in managing water sources.

Biodiversity is another important issue. This is often understood as a wide variety of plants, animals and micro-organisms. But it also includes genetic differences within each species. It provides many goods and services that sustain our lives. The quality of living has much to do with sustaining its existence in the future. Local communities benefit from biodiversity in many ways. However, it is often not protected or managed sustainably. It is faced with increasing risk of extinction or genetic erosion. Carefully designed institutions, including forms of man-made environment, are a prerequisite for capturing the full value of biological resources, avoiding their overexploitation. While most developed countries have recently made good progress in addressing urban air pollution, clean air can no longer be taken for granted in the

developing world. Pollution from transport is a major concern. There are adverse health effects of exposure to air pollution in urban areas as a result of increasing number of motor vehicles. And there are the effects on global climate change. Every year an estimated one million people throughout the developing world die prematurely from respiratory and other illnesses associated with urban air pollution.

Many ecological purposes are global public goods and their degradation affects people across the world. Addressing them effectively requires coordinated international action, as in the cases of climate change and ozone layer depletion. Many less developed regions are especially vulnerable to climate change and within these countries the poorest of the poor are likely to suffer most. Dealing successfully with climate change requires major reductions in emissions of greenhouse gases. In the Millennium Declaration, the International Community committed itself to making every effort to implement the Kyoto Protocol, which sets precise targets for reductions in greenhouse gases. Ozone layer depletion is a similar and related topic. The depletion allows more radiation to reach Earth, with severe consequences for human health, plants and marine ecosystems. The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, signed in 1987, has proven successful in reducing the emissions of human-made ozone depleting substances by ceasing their production and consumption. It is estimated that with the implementation of the Protocol, more than 20 million cases of skin cancer and nearly 130 million cases of cataracts will be avoided. In order to avoid altogether or to reduce adverse consequences of all these global environmental challenges, a number of principles developed by International Environmental Law, in addition to the principle of Sustainable Development. These include the Precautionary Principle, and the principles of International Cooperation, Prevention, Integration, Common but Differentiated Responsibility. Concern for the Rights of Future Generations (intergenerational equity) is also crucially important in this respect. Of course, reciprocal responsibilities of the States (intergenerational equity) in ensuring sustainable development and use of natural resources are of utmost importance too.

There is no doubt that effective implementation of the principles of International Environmental law depends upon a number of factors. Their incorporation into the domestic legislation may not be enough. There is also a need to get them properly enforced. Enforcement may be defined as a set of actions that governments and other authorities take to achieve compliance within the regulated community and to correct and halt situations that endanger the environment or human health. In addition to legal action, to compel compliance and to impose some effective sanctions for violating law, non-governmental groups should become involved in the enforcement process. Finally, we have to remember that moral and social values for environmental quality in general, lack of public support for environmental problems, societal respect for the rule of law and a clear government will to enforce rules and regulations are of prime importance. Much will depend upon the normalization of economic and ethical relationships between the North and South in order to ensure the proper implementation of the principle of common but differentiated responsibility adopted in the Rio Summit.

Culture is an essential element of a sustainable city. The environmental conditions are affected by our culture, which is, in turn, shaped by the environment. Bio-culture represents a conscious effort to reach this interdependence. Aesthetic values, music, science, the arts, politics, economics, and determination to changing the existing consumption patterns shaped by contemporary capitalist development and globalization, can all come together on the struggle for a better quality of life (Vlavianos-Arvanities,A. and Keleş,R (2010).



## 4. Action Taken at the International Level

### 4.1. *The United Nations*

A number of international organizations are making considerable and constant efforts to internalize all environmental costs and negative externalities, and not to transfer problems and tensions into shoulders of the future generations. Since the United Nations Organization is keenly concerned with physical, social, economic well-being of human beings since its establishment, the first step taken in that direction was to insert a specific provision in the text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly in 1948. According to the Article 25 of the said Declaration, “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age and other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control”. Of course, concrete realization of all these fundamental rights depends upon each nation’s ratification of the concerned international covenants concerning these rights. I must underline that the efforts of the United Nations and its specialized agencies in this field are of utmost significance for any concrete improvement in the quality of life.

A few examples are the world conferences convened by the U.N. in Vancouver (1976), Istanbul (1996), Stockholm (1972) and Rio de Janeiro (1992) and the declarations and action plans adopted in these conferences. The Vancouver Declaration on Human Settlements drew the attention of the world public opinion, among its general principles, “to the continuous improvement in the quality of life of all people, beginning with the satisfaction of the basic needs of food, shelter, clean water, employment, health, education, training, social security without any discrimination as to race, color, sex, language, religion, ideology, etc.” Similarly, Action Plan, namely the Habitat Agenda, adopted during the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in Istanbul, in 1996, emphasized once again (par.36) that “Human health and quality of life are at the center of the efforts to develop sustainable human settlements”. World leaders participating in the Conference expressed “their commitment to promote and attain the goals of universal and equal access to quality education, the highest attainable standards of physical, mental and environmental health, and the equal access of primary health care, making particular efforts to rectify inequalities relating to social and economic conditions.” (UNCHS, 1997, p.20).

International conferences on the protection of the environment organized by the United Nations in 1972 (Stockholm) and in 1992 (Rio) drew attention of the public opinion to the relationship between the quality of life and the environment. The first principle of the Stockholm Declaration stresses that “Man had the fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permitted a life of dignity and well-being, and he bore a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations”. Similarly, in the Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, it is stated that “Human beings are the center of concern for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature”.

The United Nations continued its efforts to improve the quality of life on Earth through a series of world urban forums towards the direction of what it called “harmonious urbanization.” The first of these forums was held in Nairobi in 2002, followed by the Second World Urban Forum in 2004, which was convened in Barcelona, and the third one in Vancouver in 2006. The location of the Fourth World Urban Forum was Nanjing, the Peoples’ Republic of China, which was taken place in 2008. Fifth meeting took place in Brasilia in 2010. The concept of harmonious urbanization, dealt with in these forums, which is closely related with increasing the level of quality of life, can be regarded as a kind of urbanization that possesses entirely opposite features of unbalanced and disorderly urbanization which largely neglects

ecological considerations and the concern for the quality of life. *Socially harmonious cities* (equity, inclusiveness, income, poverty reduction, cheap land and social housing), *Economically harmonious cities* (infrastructure development, financing urban development, foreign direct investment, urban informal economy), *Environmentally harmonious cities* (climate change, energy and resources savings, bio-diversity, water, sanitation and transport, green buildings and cities), *Spatially harmonious cities* (urban planning, urban and rural linkages, integrated regional development, mixed land use), *Historically harmonious cities* (heritage, culture, architecture and urban renewal), *Harmonious cities for all age groups* (youth, aging population, internet and ICT, education and health care, sports and music) are the basic characteristics of cities where human beings enjoy a quality of life consistent with their dignity.

On the basis of these characteristics, harmonious of urbanization may be defined as a policy option which aims at ensuring the sustainability of the nature, to provide opportunities for living, shelter, employment, entertainment, health and education, to eradicate poverty without alienating people from their natural environment.(Keleş, R., 2008, p.3).

## 5. Contributions of the European Institutions

Raising the level of quality of life by improving environmental conditions has been always at the center of concern of the European institutions. For example, the principle of sustainable development has been included as a requirement in the Article 37 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union which determines that “A high level of environmental protection and the improvement of the quality of environment must be integrated into the policies of the Union and ensured in accordance with the principle of sustainable development”. Brought into force by the Treaty of Lisbon on 1st December 2009, the Charter itself has acquired the strength of a Treaty with the purpose of imposing penalties in instances of its infringement. According to the Article 191 of the consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, “the policy of the European Union in the sector of the environment will seek to achieve the following goals: a) The conservation, protection and improvement of the quality of the environment, b) The safeguarding of the health of the individual, c) The sensible and rational use of natural resources, and, d) The promotion at international level of measures to deal with regional or global environmental problems and in particular to combat climate change”.

Earlier than the Lisbon Treaty, in 1999, in another EU document, in the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESPD, Towards Balanced and Sustainable Development of the Territory of the European Union), attention was drawn to the fact that, despite all efforts to combat environmental problems such as noise, air and water pollution, traffic congestion, waste production and excessive water consumption, the quality of the environment was still in need of further improvement in many respects. It was pointed out that urban development measures had often diminished the historic fabric of many cities and eroded their identity. This not only had a negative effect on the quality of life and the health of their inhabitants, but also had an economic impact due to the loss of attractiveness and reduced investment, employment and municipal financial resources. (European Commission, 1999, p.66).

The European Urban Charter adopted by the Council of Europe in 1992 and revised in 2008 under the title of Manifesto for a New Urbanity underlines the fundamental rights of urban residents and describes almost all material and non-material components of what is called the quality of life in urban centers. This Charter is not a kind of international convention open to ratification of the States, but a document addressing to local authorities, bringing together necessary guiding principles for a reasonable level of quality of life in cities. (Conseil de l'Europe, 1993).



## 6. Concluding Remarks

The problem of the quality of life is a multidimensional phenomenon. It has numerous linkages with economic, social, cultural, psychological and environmental factors. None of these dimensions can be taken and assessed in isolation from each other. Therefore there is a pressing need for an holistic approach in reaching a just and enduring solution as far as the quality of life is concerned. From an environmental point of view, the solution has something to do with reversing the present selfish attitudes of some States and to ensure close cooperation among nations as stipulated by the United Nations Charter. Steps must be taken by the world community in order to ensure that the Rio principle of common but differentiated responsibility be respected by all States, particularly the developed ones. The determining role of economic conditions in raising the level of quality of life in all spheres should not be overlooked. Eradication of poverty must be the fundamental goal of everyone to deal with the improvement of the quality of life. This certainly requires something more than the implementation of legal rules. Ethical considerations are also involved to a greater extent. An ethically inspired conscience, independent of external pressures from legislation and the courts must shape the behavior of the individuals. Therefore, the cultivation of an environmental conscience, which must begin as early as from the primary school, is a prerequisite for the strategy to be successful.

Despite all the efforts reflecting the goodwill of the United Nations and other international organizations and individual States, there is still a wide discrepancy between what the governments said and what they did. “The speeches are beautiful, but the reality awful”. It was rightly noted in the World Urban Forum 3 in Vancouver some years ago that all urban players must do their part in this respect rather than simply transfer responsibility to others. Planners, architects, designers, decision-makers, teachers and scientists must cooperate closely to deal with such worldwide phenomena such as rapid urbanization, eradication of poverty, rational settlement patterns, problems of sanitation, nutrition, shelter needs of the poor, environment friendly urban growth and development. All components of the quality of life require a planned intervention into the process of the free play of the market forces, not only in developing but also in developed countries.

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