

## One Century of Quality-Of-Life Studies and Research

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**Abstract**

*Quality-of-Life (Qualité de Vie, Lebensqualität) is a term which is used in the worldwide field of scientific and other activities related to the individual and societal quality of living conditions and the perceived quality of life. The idea came up about one hundred years ago and concepts for their measurement were also on the table at that time. It took many years until research on quality of life was developed further in the context of the social indicators movement and the societal value discussion. In the course of time worldwide activities and networks of researchers on quality of life emerged. Around 1995 time has come to constitute stable organizations for quality of life studies and research: the science organizations of ISOQOL and ISQOLS were founded and were accompanying quality-of-life research. What followed was an inclusion of the quality-of-life-idea in all spheres of life for example science, politics, economy, climate change, advertising and societal debates of any kind. Many related publications appeared and the question is now what quality of life studies and research contributed to the knowledge of mankind. As it stands now quality-of-life is a critical, multi-faceted and non-militant concept for the definition and evaluation of social progress in respect to human development and individual growth.*

**The Emergence of the Quality-of-Life Concept**

The term „quality of life“<sup>1</sup> was obviously first introduced in England by Pigou (1920) in the context of the Economics of Welfare. Among others, Pigou „distinguishes between economic and non-economic wellbeing and considers possible trade-offs“ (Borja, 2016), which is still a virulent question. About the same time, Alfredo Niceforo from Italy published his book about „Les indices numeriques de la civilisation et du progrès (1921). „He may be considered the originator of an approach of comprehensive welfare and quality of life measurement“ (Sabbatini & Maggino 2018), which is still a big task today. Of course the idea of a „good life“ is ancient and was already a topic in the classical Greek culture and in the following two millennia (Borja, 2016). It is an open question what resonance the first concepts of quality-of-life found in the time of the world economic crises and the following World War II.

But the original ideas were not forgotten, moreover they are visible again in the early fifties. An UN-commission on measuring the level of living explained 1954: „It was agreed

that the problem of levels of living must be approached in a pluralistic manner by an analysis of various components representing international accepted values (health, nutrition, education, etc.) and by the use of various statistical “indicators” for these components (e.g. life expectancy rates, infant mortality rates, etc., as indicators of health). It was also agreed that, conceptual “non-material” as well as “material” factors should be included in the definition of levels of living“ (UN, 1954). The UN-commission recognized that conceptual „non-material factors“ are part of the level of living but they did not see a methodology to investigate them.<sup>2</sup> The breakthrough happened many years later. In the social sciences in Germany Wolfgang Zapf, who was engaged in the social indicators movement, wrote the first articles in German scientific journals discussing „Die Messung der Lebensqualität“ (1972). Just in the same year „The Human Meaning of Social Change“ (Campbell & Converse, 1972) was published in the US and emphasized key social-psychological traits for monitoring social change. In an overview on „Social Indicators“ Land (1992) demonstrated that early quality-of-life research was one of the branches of the social indicators movement.<sup>3</sup> Support

<sup>1</sup>In the course of time different terms were used for the research field of quality of life, which had always some common traits: level of living, standard of life, human development, quality of life, well-being, good life, happiness, life-satisfaction, life style, wellness, utility and others. They hint to different concepts but basically there is a similar target.

<sup>2</sup>The UN were later engaged in quality of life research with the concept of Human Development and the Human Development Index (UN, 2020).

<sup>3</sup>Social Indicators are defined from Raymod Bauer (1966) as „Statistics, statistical series, and all other forms of evidence – that enable us to assess where we stand and are going with respect to our values and goals, and to evaluate specific programs and determine their impact,“ (cited from qol-researchers Møller and Roberts (2000) p.1). Social reporting and public enlightenment were also basic concepts.

came especially from OECD meetings which defined in two publications „Subjective Elements of Well-being“ (OECD 1974, edited by Burkhard Strümpel) and explained „Measuring Social Well-being“ (OECD, 1976). In the style of the Social Indicators Movement was told: „We must develop indicators of peoples experience and satisfaction with work and income, physical environment and community, health care and public services“ (OECD 1974, p.5). The OECD meetings were part of social indicator programmes which supported the concept of quality of life (Land, 1992; Noll, 2010) significantly in the sixties. Basic ideas for social indicators were a source and gave orientation for the concept of quality of life<sup>4</sup>.

The term „quality of life“ was transformed from a partly hidden existence in the course of time to a broader socio-political discussion.

Examples are the past president of the USA (Johnson, 1964), who claimed quality of life for all Americans within the idea of the Great Society. The German chancellor Brandt (1974) proposed quality of life in his political speeches on social progress. Erhard Eppler, a leading social democrat at the time in Germany published a book about the tension between standards of living and quality of life (1974). The influential German union IG-Metal under the chair of Otto Brenner organized a prominent conference on „Lebensqualität“ in 1972, published some volumes and is still posting today that „Lebensqualität“ is the task of the future. On the political side received growing attention to local respectively communal quality of life as there was found an adequate target for policymakers (Sari, 2012) Measurements and reporting on quality of life finally took place on all continents usually with their own perspective and approaches. Especially in Europe and not at least in Scandinavia distinct paths were taken (Vesan & Bizzotto, 2011). Regional approaches were partly independent from the worldwide conceptual discussion and they were developed with a lot of official statistical engagement (Delhay et al 2002; Abdallah et al., 2013). Also in Africa, where less developed societies were opposed to unique challenges, the concept of qol found a lot of resonance (Møller, 2020).<sup>5</sup>The fascination with the quality of life concept soon swept through Europe from the West to the East. For example, Rudolph (1997), who was engaged in comparing societies, invited scholars to a conference in Budapest where quality of life was debated. In the second part of the last century, the concept of quality of life

<sup>4</sup>The OECD regarded also the historical development of quality of life in the long run since 1820 (OECD, 2004).

<sup>5</sup>It is reported that Lawrence Schlemmer was the Pioneer who tracked South African quality-of-life between 1983 and 1994 (Møller, 2021)

<sup>6</sup>This comprehensive project was carried through in the context of the Special Research Department 3 „Micro Analytical Foundations of Social Policy“ under the lead of Hans-Jürgen Krupp and Wolfgang Zapf.

<sup>7</sup>I have participated in some meetings where researchers from different parts of the world discussed the preparation of an international organization for quality of life studies, for example in Bad Homburg, Budapest, Mannheim, Mexico City, and also in Prince George. There in British Columbia, I met people from around the world who wanted to participate at an international cooperation forum for qol-research. Surprisingly, 30 years later they are still my friends and conducting quality-of-life research.

<sup>8</sup>The year of the foundation of ISQOLS is confirmed from one colleague who participated at the event among them Joe Sirgy. I heard only from one colleague that he is member of both organizations ISQOLS and ISOQOL but the regular case is personell separation.

spread into many everyday languages, primarily into English, German, French, Russian, apart from other languages (Szalai, 1980). Nowadays it seems there would be no day without any mention of „quality of life“ somewhere in the world's and in local communication.

Qol-research enriched the world by a number of innovative publications. Most prominent were qol-reports about countries. First examples came from the USA (Andrews & Withey 1976; Campbell et al., 1976), that would allow comparisons of the US-society of today with the US-society fifty years ago. In Germany, the first big country study was carried through in 1978 (Zapf, 1984)<sup>6</sup> aiming at the perception of living conditions of the whole population but also at the quality of life of often disadvantaged groups.

The quality of life of specific groups like children, elderly, people in working life or in poverty attained increasing awareness. Around 1995 the time seemed to have come to transform loose research networks<sup>7</sup> into relatively stable organizations: ISOQOL was established in 1994 and ISQOLS was founded one year afterwards in 1995. The history of quality-of-life research developed according to a usual path: From its innovation, which is the first mentioning of the idea in 1920, it went through a process of differentiation and attained a variety with growing challenges for integration, which was performed by the foundation of new organizations who stabilized the ongoing process of studies and research.

#### ISQOLS and ISOQOL and Others

The International Society for Quality of Life Research (ISOQOL) was founded first and the actual mission is „to advance the science of quality of life (QOL) and related patient centered outcomes (PCO) in health research, care and policy“. In the beginning of ISOQOL its purpose was broadly defined „to promote the exchange of information about QOL and its investigation throughout the world“ (ISOQOL's homepage).

The International Society for Quality of Life Studies (ISQOLS) followed about one year later<sup>8</sup> and stated in its bylaws that a general objective is „To provide an organization through which all academic and professional researchers interested in QOL/Well-being/Happiness studies may coordinate their efforts to advance the field of QOL/well-being/ happiness within various disciplines and sectors“ (ISQOLS homepage). Both organizations emphasize practical interests and show

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intersections. The two organizations ISOQOL and ISQOLS soon attained important attributes of successful scientific organizations, among them were mainly the following components:

**\* Scientific organizations need journals to enable the spread of knowledge and communication among their members:**

ISOQOL sees their roots in the journal „Quality of Life Research (available since 1992) which was the official journal in the beginning followed by the „Journal of Patient-Reported Outcomes“ (2017) which was created later for a stronger specialization on health related quality of life (HRQL).

ISQOLS fulfils needs for information about the research field and the exchange of research results among their members in its official journal „Applied Research in Quality of Life“ since 2006. In addition two qol-related journals existed already, „Social Indicators Research“ (since 1974) – congratulation to have existed 50 years last year - and the „Journal of Happiness Studies“ (since 2000).

**\* To attain public attention and to offer possibilities for immediate member contacts (annual) conferences have a significant function:**

ISOQOL had their inaugural annual conference 1994 in Brussels and each year followed another one, the coming one with the number 32 (2025) announced for Milwaukee having the actual thematic „Artificial Intelligence & the Future of Quality of Life Research (see homepage of ISOQOL).

ISQOLS has carried through (bi)annual conferences in prominent cities of the world such as Washington, Philadelphia, Frankfurt, Berlin, Hong Kong, Venice, and not least in Grahamstown in South Africa and others. In a time of societal crises, the title for the coming conference 2025 in Luxembourg is „Redefining Progress: Achieving Sustainable Well-being for All.

**\* Organizational centers are often necessary if the management workload increases within the organizations:**

ISOQOL's governance was all the time performed from the board of directors accompanied by committees and task forces, that developed a strategic plan for the future of ISOQOL. The society was mainly guided by women. The number of members grew to more than 1100.

ISQOLS established due to a growing workload from an increasing membership and additional tasks a permanent office with a chief administrator who is now managing the society. The number of members is around 800 from nearly 70 countries. In contrast to the other society the presidents

and board members of ISQOLS were in the beginning most often men but this changed slowly and there is now a female president and a significant ratio of female board members.

**\* Homepages gained significant functions for the communication between the organization and its membership:**

ISQOLS presents itself on a professional homepage concentrated on the most important information for explaining „Who are we“. Pictures of the leading colleagues, beginning with the actual president Josefine M. Norquist, give a personal impression.

ISQOLS shows multiple activities of ISQOLS on their homepages. Basic ideas behind ISQOLS are presented in two video-interviews on the homepage from the founding generation with Alex Michalos under the title „Ethics, Well-being, Social Indicators, Academic and Public Policy“ and Joseph Sirgy on „vision and foundation“. Also the current president Stephanie Rossow contributed a speech with other colleagues. Under the title „oral histories“ another 24 interviews are available with more members of the founder-generation of ISQOLS<sup>9</sup>. All together there is a variety of long and multiple video interviews.

**\* The publications of the members of both organizations are selectively presented on the homepages:**

ISOQOL presents only a few cases but one is a significant contribution. It is addressed towards language continuity in the research field and is a dictionary on „Quality of life and Health Outcome Measurement“ (Mayo, 2015) available in some languages.

ISQOLS gives a lot of attention towards publications. In many publications published at Springer Nature there is an advisory board of ISQOLS members who take care of qol-publications. Comprehensive and overviewing books are especially important and include one edited by Land et al. (2012), the „Handbook of Social Indicators and Quality of Life Research“ and the „Global Handbook of Quality of Life“ edited by Wolfgang Glatzer with Laura Camfield, Møller and Rojas (2015), as well as the more recent edition of the „Handbook of Quality of Life and Social Change“ edited by Walther (2024). The most extensive and comprehensive stock-taking of quality-of-life studies and research is presented in the Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research, which brought together knowledge covering the whole field on 7329 pages. The first Encyclopedia was edited by Michalos (2014), the second edition of the Encyclopedia came by Filomena Maggino (2023/24). Another interesting style of summarising qol research are the citation classics edited by Michalos (2005). There were some additional activities at ISQOLS and

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<sup>9</sup>For example, interviews with Ruut Veenhoven, Valerie Møller, Mahar Mangahas, Kenneth Land, Andrew Clark, Robert Cummins, Wolfgang Glatzer, and others.

ISOQOL presented on the homepages.<sup>10</sup> Examples are awards for outstanding articles and workshops on specialized topics.

Additional actors were present on the field of qol-studies and research. One actor is the research committee 55 „Social Indicators“ of the International Sociological Association. They were engaged in qol-research and they choose f.e. the well-being concept to analyse the societal crisis scenario around 2020 „Well-being during the Pandemic“ (Suter, Chesters, Facbeth 2024). More important contributions to the field of quality of life came from world wide light house projects like the World Data Base of Happiness in the Netherlands organized by Veenhoven (2008) who collected all relevant data on happiness in the world. Also the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2025) monitored happiness around the world and developed longer time series. Interesting projects grew in special countries like the Social Weather Stations in the Philippines from Mangahas (2024) institutionalized since 1985; the Qol-conference series in Poland managed especially by Ostaciewicz (2006), the South Africa qol-pioneer Lawrence Schlemmer who introduced Qol-Research there (Møller, 2021) and others. In England and around happiness has been especially popularized by Helliwell et al. (2025). All together people in developed and also in less developed societies on all the continents and sub-continents were interested in studies and social reports on quality of life. A variety of examples are examined for the well-being in nations and on continents (Glatzer et al., 2015). I am sure that nobody could ever read the voluminous literature produced on the problem of quality of life.

### Sciences and Approaches in Quality of Life Studies and Research

Quality of life is a wide field covering different approaches of research. Qol is regarded to be a part of different scientific disciplines and is often designed as an „interdisciplinary“, „multidisciplinary“ or „comparative science“ (Strack, et al., 1991). Qol is claimed to be a part of a number of sciences:

**Psychology** f.e. „The science of well-being“ (Diener et al., 2009); „The Psychology of Well-being“ (Sirgy, 2021).

**Philosophy** f.e. „The Quality of Life“ (Nussbaum & Sen 1993); „Philosophical Foundations of Quality of Life“ (Michalos, 2015).

**Political Science** f.e. „Good Governance and National Well-Being“ (Helliwell, 2014); „How Government Affects Wellbeing“ (Layard & De Never, 2023).

**Economics** f.e. „Happiness and Economics“ (Frey & Alois, (2000); „Economist’s Lessons on Happiness“ (Easterlin, 2021).

**Social Sciences** f.e. „Handbook of Social Indicators and Quality of Life“ (Land et al., 2012) „Measuring Well-being and Societal Progress“ (Hall, D’Ercole 2006).

**Social Policy** f.e. „The Consequences of Social Policy for Subjective Well-Being“ (Naoki, 2022).

**Statistics** f.e. „Dimensions of Well-being and their Statistical Measurement“ (Ferrara et al., 2025).

**History** f.e. „The History of the Idea of Quality of Life“ (Borja 2016) „The Pursuit of Well-Being“ (Estes & Sirgy 2017).

**Environmental Sciences** f.e. „Ecosystems and Social Well-being“ (Capitani, 2005) and „Climate Change and Human Well-being (Weissbecker, 2011).<sup>11</sup>Besides, there are some more own standing approaches which include

**Happiness research** (see Helliwell et al., 2025).

**Sustainability research** (see Martinez, 2021).

**World Suffering** (see Andersson, 2015).

**Health Related Quality of Life** (Homepage of ISOQOL, Fayers, & David 2016; Khanna & Tsevat 2007).

The last topic is a very complex approach and needs an additional explanation. The health sector has developed a special branch of quality-of-life perspectives (Khanna, 2007). Health-related quality of life is in general oriented towards the impact of health on a person’s ability to live a fulfilling life.

It is concerned with alleviating various deficits of health, for example, in respect to physical and mental disabilities and activity limitations. How to attain a good quality of life is a special question for people with chronic, serious or mild diseases. Health-related quality of life is also used in care facilities, for disabled and injured people and in recent times for people attacked by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The inclusion of quality-of-life into the given number of sciences and sub-sciences illustrates its unique multi-sided content. This is also expressed in the different goal conceptions which are related to quality-of-life.

<sup>10</sup>The by progress of ISQOLS and ISOQOL seems similar but obviously there existed some tensions. „ISOQOL’s roots are found in the publications of the journal „Quality of Life Research“ (QLR) first published in 1992. To this day ISOQOL endorsed the SPINGER owned QLR, (ISOQOL’s homepage) The journal QLR remained an official journal of ISOQOL until today and this title was not available for ISQOLS when it was founded later. ISQOLS since its beginning connected with SIR ad JHR choosed as their official journal in 2006 the journal Applied Research on Quality of Life“ (ARQOL). In adaptation to emphasizing HRQL they created at ISOQOL a second official journal in 2017 „Health reported outcomes“. This seems a compromise which dedicated in the long run not to ISQOLS.

<sup>11</sup>In a few cases quality of life is also a significant question within the sex sciences but in general sexuality is ignored in the research field of quality of life. This may depend on the contradictory attitudes towards sexuality within the cultures and subcultures of qol-researches.

A prominent example in respect to the targets which are used, is the „good life“, which defines qol as the degree to which an individual is healthy, comfortable, and able to participate in or enjoy life events (Jenkins, 2011). The WHO emphasized the importance of health a long time ago and stated that „health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being“ and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity (WHO, 1946).

Another significant concept is related to needs and their fulfilment, „Quality of life is the extent to which objective needs are fulfilled“ (Constanza, 2008).

An often adapted concept is satisfaction, which could be life satisfaction or satisfaction with living conditions. The hypothesis is here that living conditions are influencing in one or another way perceptions and satisfactions with life (Land, 1992).

In particular, some philosophers prefer the capability approach (Sen, Nussbaum, 1993) and say that qol should be conceived and measured in terms of functionings and capabilities“instead of resources and utility. Their central concern for well-being is to achieve valuable functionings (Alkire, 2012).

In Scandinavian approaches of welfare the threefold constellation of „having, loving and being“ is proposed as an alternative view on qol (Allardt, 1993).

A rather complex concept of qol was developed by Veenhoven (2000), whose qol is composed of four sub-dimensions.

**Facets of quality of life**

	Outer qualities	Inner qualities
Life chances	Live-ability of environment	Life-ability of person
Life results	Utility of Life	Appreciation of Life

„The „liability of the environment“ describes the living conditions: how a particular environment benefits or hinders the development of an individual’s life. The „life-ability“ describes the inner qualities that make a particular person more or less able to cope with the problems<sup>12</sup> of life. The „utility of life“ refers to the outwardly visible results of one’s life: how one, and perhaps others, would judge the usefulness of one’s life. And finally the „appreciation of life“ describes how one’s life feels to the person, how that person would judge the quality of their own life“ (Veenhoven, 2000).

Of significance are also conceptions of quality of life which are related to social resp. societal progress and identify directions for a better future of societies (Giovanni et al., 2006). Quality of life is a complex measurement concept about everything what can constitute a better life.

The world of quality of life-research is usually divided into objective and subjective facets (e.g. Cummins, 2000). The one

facet refers to an objective reality, which is defined by scientific experts who follow scientific rules. The subjective reality consists of the perception of life, of beliefs and evaluations by ordinary people. One definition speaks of the perception and the other of levels of quality of life.

These approaches are basically different but there is no question of right or wrong, it is moreover a matter of scientific tastes and of attitudes toward society. Reality never tells us how it must be conceived. There are always alternatives in the process of naming and constructing reality.

### Concluding Remarks

In sum, in the space of only one century, qol studies and research grew to a broad, heterogeneous scientific and also political and publication enterprise. Innovation was followed by differentiation which was complemented by integration. Qol research was developed in many different places and organizations around the globe beginning in 1920. ISQOLS and ISOQOL were since their creation around 1995 important actors but international organizations also played a significant role. In the past half century, quality of life seemed to be an adequate target for supporting the betterment of societies. In the running decade new challenges came up with long-during wars and crises. Now it has become primarily important to shelter the world from suffering and the concepts of improving quality of life for all have to stay in a waiting position.

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<sup>12</sup>Thank you for critical comments on the first draft from Valerie Møller, Alex Michalos and Kenneth Land.

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