Annex II: Quality of life

R6-R7 Objective and subjective measures

Three conceptual approaches have been chosen by the SC to measure quality of life, based on three different notions: subjective well-being, capabilities and fair allocations.

Subjective well-being

Presumption: enabling people to be satisfied with their life is the ultimate goal of politics.

Implications: this approach is strongly connected with **psychological** research and views individuals as the best judges of their own conditions. In order to get a satisfactory appreciation of people's lives, cognitive evaluations (summarising the full range of elements that people value), positive and negative affects (people's actual feelings) should be measured separately.

Capabilities

Presumption: respecting the individual's ability to pursue and realise the goals that he or she values is the ultimate goal of politics.

Implications: this approach has its roots in the **philosophical** notion of social justice and conceives a person's life as a combination of various observable *achievements* of each person (functionings), and assesses Quality of Life (QoL) in terms of a person's freedom to choose among the various combinations of these functionings (capabilities).

While subjective states may be considered as being part of the set of capabilities considered, the capability approach emphasises that people may adapt to their life-circumstances, and that this adaptation makes subjective feelings inadequate as the *sole* metric for assessing QoL.

Fair allocations

Presumption: respecting individual preferences in the weighting of the various dimensions of QoL.

Implications: this approach has its roots in **welfare economics** and aims at comparing individuals' multidimensional situations (with regards to all aspects of quality of life) in a way that respects their preferences. This method consists of selecting a "reference" set of individual situations that are easy to rank from better to worse; then the conditions of any given person are assessed by identifying the particular situation in this reference set that is *equivalent* to his current situation according to his own preferences.

In practice, all approaches to QoL share an emphasis on a range of features in people's lives. Therefore, it is important to determine which these features are. This depends on value-judgments that can be collected through deliberative processes. In practice, when the different initiatives attempting at measuring societal progress are compared,[1] some recurrent themes appear, including both measures of people's subjective states (overall life satisfaction) and measures of people's objective conditions and opportunities (health, education, personal activities, political voice, social connections, environmental conditions and insecurity). Figure 1 shows theses nine recurrent themes with examples of related indicators (subjective and objective). These domains, embedded in the 7th and 6th recommendations, have helped the ONS to structure actions and plans for the better measurement of QoL.

R6: *Measures of **subjective well-being** provide key information about people's quality of life. Statistical offices should incorporate questions to capture people's life evaluations, hedonic experiences and priorities in their own surveys.*

*R7: Quality of life also depends on **people's objective conditions and opportunities**. Steps should be taken to improve measures of people's health, education, personal activities, political voice, social connections, environmental conditions and insecurity.*

At this stage, it is worthwhile noting that measures of people objective conditions such as crime or healthy life expectancy usually move differently to GDP per head over time.[2] This reflects that how societies are organised makes a difference for people's lives which is not captured by conventional economics. Figure 1 highlights different features and shows how they could be measured either through objective or subjective indicators.

Figure 1.

Features	Measures	Objective Indicators	Subjective Indicators
Health	mortality, morbidity	healthy life expectancy, mental health, smoking, obesity level	self-reported general health
Education*	input, output, throughput, people's competencies	School enrolment, education expenditures, completed schooling years.	
Personal activities	paid work, unpaid work, commuting, leisure, housing	Time, decent work (wage, gender gap, work-life balance,...)	feelings associated with this activity, hedonic experience
Political voice & Governance	institutional features, governance	universal suffrage, free media, civil society organizations	rule of law, legislative guarantees
Social connections*	services provided to people through community networks	membership in voluntary groups	satisfaction with participation
Environmental conditions	human health, environmental services, environmental amenities, climate change	number of people who lack access to water, number of premature deaths from exposure to air pollution	
Personal insecurity	crime, accident, natural disaster, climate change	crime rate	fear of crime
Economic insecurity	unemployment, illness, old age		
Overall life satisfaction	Cognitive valuation, positive & negative affects		Overall Personal well-being

* The *education* and *social connections* features are viewed here as a dimension of quality of life rather than as a factor underpinning economic production. Indeed, education and social connections bring non-monetary returns which benefit both the person investing in it and the community in which they live (better health, greater engagement in political and civic life, better probability of finding a job, less crime...).

R8-R9-R10 Cross-cutting issues

*R8: Quality-of-life indicators in all the dimensions they cover should assess **inequalities** in a comprehensive way.*

This recommendation implies that each dimension of quality-of-life requires appropriate measures of inequality, with each of these measures being significant in itself and none claiming absolute priority over others. Inequalities should be assessed across people, socio-economic groups and generations.

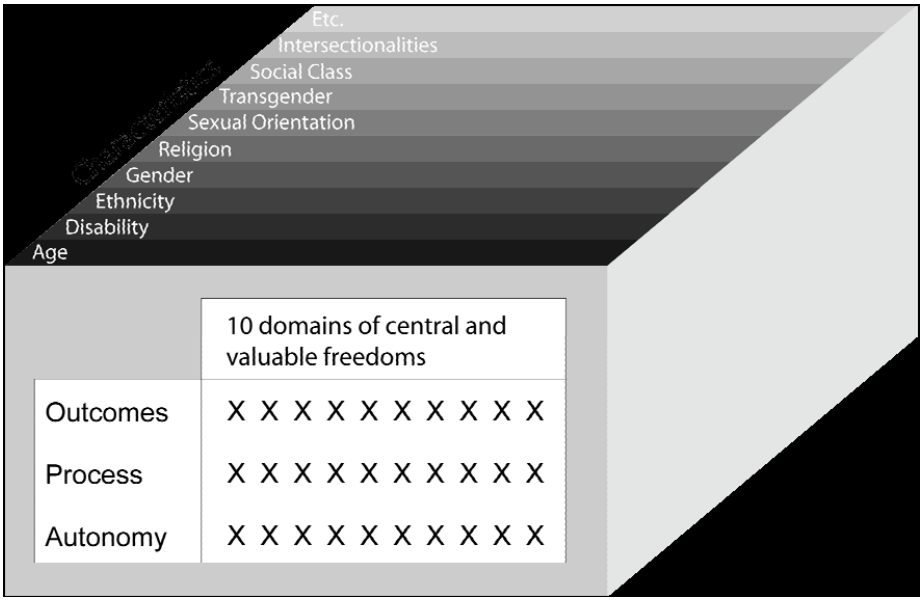
An excellent illustration of this recommendation is delivered by the UK Equality Measurement Framework (EMF).[3] This is a 3D Matrix (see Figure 2) where the rows represent three aspects of inequality– inequality of outcomes, autonomy and process - and the columns represent the ten domains of central and valuable freedoms. The layers of the matrix then represent the different characteristics of the groups of particular concern such as social class, gender, ethnicity etc.

The approach taken in the EMF aims to embrace aspects of equal treatment, equality of opportunity and equality of outcome, which are assumed to be interconnected. It means having more real opportunities to achieve the things we want to achieve in life, having more independence and genuine choices available, being treated with dignity and respect and having more of a say about important decisions in our own lives.

Moreover, the ten domains of central and valuable freedoms refer to the human capabilities for flourishing. They aim at covering multiple domains in which inequality 'matters'. The recurrent themes identified above could fit with the matrix.

Finally, combinations of characteristics can also be used to identify intersectional group concerns i.e. those that cut across different characteristics, which is in accordance with the R9 exposed below.

Figure 2: EMF Matrix



*R9: Surveys should be designed to assess the **links between** various quality of-life domains for each person, and this information should be used when designing policies in various fields*

Different features of quality of life could have cumulative effects which could be mutually supportive or have consequences such as multiple disadvantages far exceed the sum of their individual effects. Education and social connections provide a good illustration of the first case, as better educated people

have stronger social connections and social connections improve school performance within a community. On the other hand, being poor and sick has more significant consequences than would be shown from simply adding up the effect of being poor with the effects of ill-health.

Ignoring the cumulative effect of multiple disadvantages leads to sub-optimal policies. Therefore, progress can be achieved by developing information about the "joint distribution" of the most salient features of quality of life (such as hedonic experiences, health status, education, political voice) across all people. Moreover investigating causality and conditions which determine the state of societal well-being is further recommended.

*R10: Statistical offices should provide the information needed to **aggregate** across quality-of-life dimensions, allowing the construction of different scalar indexes.*

While assessing quality-of-life requires a plurality of indicators, there are strong demands to develop a single scalar measure. Several scalar measures of quality of life are possible, depending on the question addressed and the approach taken.

Examples

National well-being accounts, HDI, Happy Planet Index.

References

1 See, for example, the Taxonomy developed by the OECD in the context of the "Global Project on Measuring the Progress of Societies' (www.oecd.org/progress/taxonomy).

2 ONS (2010), 'There is more to life than GDP but how can we measure it?', *Economic & Labour Market Review*, Vol4 No9. London: Office for National Statistics.

3 EHRC (2009), 'Developing the Equality Measurement Framework: selecting the indicators', London: Equality and Human Rights Commission.