



'Quality of life' concept in Cohesion Policy evaluation in Poland, 2004–2020

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Quality of life
Well-being
Evaluation
Evaluation criteria
Cohesion policy
European Union
Poland

ABSTRACT

Quality of life (QoL) is a fashionable concept widely used not only in many scientific fields but also in strategic documents, political speeches, and newspaper headlines. Although QoL is a crucial element of political agendas and a goal of public policies, there is little evidence on how this concept has been incorporated in policy analysis and evaluation. This study presents how the QoL has so far been defined, contextualised, and measured in the European Union Cohesion Policy evaluation in Poland, based on the analysis of 1431 evaluation reports for the period 2004–2020. The findings show that the interest in the QoL is growing, and almost one-third of reports refer to the term. However, the concept is usually not clearly defined, and the number of evaluations with actual questions concerning QoL is limited. Moreover, the methodological approach to QoL measurement is rudimentary, limited to surveys of beneficiaries or end-users.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, the effectiveness of development policies was verified by changes in economic indicators, such as gross domestic product (GDP), unemployment, or inflation. In recent years, sociologists, political scientists, and economists have argued that economic indicators do not provide a complete and comprehensive picture of changes triggered by public policies and programmes (Clark, 2018; Stiglitz et al., 2009), and that even though non-economic issues tend to be more intangible and difficult to measure, they should be taken into account in different policy analyses and evaluations. This discussion led to the widespread conclusion that measuring quality of life (QoL) is as important as measuring economic change in research seeking to identify socio-economic progress.

A shift towards QoL as a significant indicator of success of public policies can be observed in the European Union (EU), national and regional governments, public policy institutes, and international organisations (e.g. UN, OECD, WHO, ILO), who have gradually started defining indicators and establishing complex indices in an attempt to measure this construct (Dluhy & Swartz, 2006; Fronas, 2007; Hagerty et al., 2001). While this demonstrates general interest in the QoL concept and makes it an important aspect of political agendas, it does not explain the extent to which actual policy decisions are guided by the

will to increase QoL or the extent to which public policies actually contribute to QoL increase. Indicators and indices are employed to monitor the state and changes in QoL allowing comparisons in time or between states and regions. However, they do not capture direct causal relationships between policy implementation and QoL changes and thus fail to identify the role of public policies in increasing overall well-being. Exploring and verifying this mechanism of change is a task for policy and programme evaluation.

Our study is based on the assumption that orienting public policies towards QoL requires sufficient body of evidence on the impact of particular types of intervention on QoL. Therefore, the QoL concept would need to be firmly incorporated in policy analysis, and particularly in the policy and programme evaluation process. While the need to include QoL in evaluation has been postulated (e.g. Bramston et al., 2002) and some attempts to employ the concept as a criterion in policy evaluation can be found (e.g. Nakanishi, 2015), to the best of our knowledge there have been no systematic studies of the use of QoL as a criterion or measure in the evaluation process of a large public policy. This study addresses this gap by presenting the findings from a systematic review of a large set of evaluation studies concerning EU Cohesion Policy (CP) implementation in Poland.

There are several reasons for choosing this particular case. First, the importance of the QoL concept in the context of determining the socio-

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economic development has been clearly voiced in the EU. The European Commission initiated the action ‘GDP and beyond — Measuring progress in a changing world’ in 2009 (European Commission, 2015), and Eurostat implemented a dedicated EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) module in 2013. Second, the EU has taken the position that evaluation should be an essential part of the life cycle of a programme, as it constitutes one of the most relevant sources of information about the relevance and effectiveness of policies. Third, although there is no direct reference to QoL as the goal of CP, neither in the Treaties nor in the programming documents, researchers (Brunazzo, 2016; Capello & Perucca, 2018; Faludi, 2008) and the European Commission itself (European Commission, 2014) indicate that it is actually the overall goal of all actions undertaken within CP in the economic and social sphere. CP is the second-largest policy in the EU, representing almost a third of the total EU budget. It is also the most evaluated EU policy (DG IPOL, 2019; Pellegrin & Colnot, 2020) and it covers a wide range of interventions, which ensures diversified perspectives and approaches to the QoL concept. Fourth, the rationale behind the choice of Poland as a case study is that the country has arguably the most fruitful CP evaluation system, with over 1400 evaluation studies produced in the years 2004–2020 (NEU, n.d.).

The aim of this paper is to identify **the role and use of QoL concept in the evaluation of the EU’s key development policy**, and by doing so to set the ground for discussion on the desired and possible roles of QoL in public policy and programme evaluation as well as related challenges. Two research questions are addressed in the analysis: (1) How often and in what context is QoL referred to in evaluation studies? (2) Is the impact of policy and programmes on QoL actually measured, and what methodological approaches are used to do so?

The rest of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 presents a literature review concerning the evolution, methodological approaches, and practical use of the QoL concept in the measurement of socio-economic development. Section 3 describes and justifies the case selection and characterises the data used in the analysis. Sections 4 and 5 present and discuss the findings, followed by the conclusions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Quality of Life – concept

The term ‘QoL’ appeared in public and then scientific debate after World War II (Holmes, 2005), and from the beginning it was used to emphasise that a good life depends on more than just material affluence (Campbell, 1976). The notion is usually considered a large conceptual umbrella under which concepts such as well-being, subjective well-being, happiness, and life satisfaction interact (e.g. Phillips & Wong, 2017; Medvedev & Landhuis, 2018). Popular definitions present QoL as ‘an individual’s perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems and in relation to their goals, expectations, and concerns’ (WHOQOL Group, 1993: 153), ‘the overall level of well-being and fulfilment that people enjoy from a combination of their social, economic and community environment and their physical and material conditions’ (Salvaris et al., 2000: 39), or ‘the extent to which objective human needs are fulfilled in relation to personal or group perceptions of subjective well-being’ (Costanza et al., 2007: 269). The multitude of QoL definitions (systematically reviewed by Estoque et al., 2019)) results from the prevalence of this term in various research areas, mostly in medical and health sciences and social sciences including education, psychology, economics, and sociology (e.g. Kaniewska-Mackiewicz, 2021). Depending on the discipline, various aspects of QoL are highlighted. In contrast, in many studies, the definition is omitted in favour of a description of the indicators used for QoL measurement (Barcaccia et al., 2013).

Three main philosophical approaches to determining QoL have been proposed (Brock, 1993; Diener & Suh, 1997). The first describes the characteristics of the good life dictated by normative ideals based on

religion, philosophy, or other systems and is related to social indicators in the social sciences. The second perspective concentrates on the satisfaction of preferences, and thus in this view QoL verifies whether citizens obtain what they crave. The third approach takes an individual perspective and is strictly connected with the tradition of subjective well-being in the behavioural sciences. An interesting contribution additionally explaining the multitude of QoL definitions is offered by Borys (1995), who, starting from the axiological perspective, proposed a set of dichotomous QoL classifications, e.g. egocentric vs. anthropocentric, holistic vs. limited, or direct vs. indirect.

The popularity and multi-disciplinary nature of the QoL concept result in a lack of firm consensus about its meaning or a generally agreed definition (e.g. Rosenberg, 1995). The term is perceived as vague and ambiguous (Galloway et al., 2006), elusive (Felce & Perry, 1995) or obscure and amorphous (Brown et al., 2004), and it is often used with little consistency and as a catch-all term (IESE, 2013). As the ambition of almost every science is to create its own definition of QoL, one can observe an excess of different concepts on the one hand (Barcaccia et al., 2013) and a lack of guiding principles regarding the definition on the other (Borys, 2015). Some have argued that the number of QoL definitions is close to the number of people studying the phenomenon (Baker & Intagliata, 1982) or the number of people in general (Liu, 1976). While some commentators seem to accept this vagueness and argue that we should see the QoL as an abstract term covering many different possible concepts (Gasper, 2010), others argue that it results in the avoidance of clarification of what we actually analyse and measure, which makes any comparison or interpretation difficult (Holmes, 2005).

2.2. Quality of life - methodological approaches

The measurement of QoL is challenging for governments and researchers (e.g. Hagerty et al., 2001; Rahman et al., 2011). Two main approaches can be distinguished in these efforts: measurement of ‘objective’ social indicators or of ‘subjective’ indicators of people’s well-being. The first approach focuses on quantitative statistics, derived mostly from secondary data (e.g. Li & Weng, 2007; Apparicio et al., 2008; Gasper, 2010). These indicators can be relatively easily defined and quantified, have high measurement reliability and, in most cases, enable comparisons across countries, regions, demographic sectors, and time (Diener & Suh, 1997). In contrast, objective indicators have been criticised over their low validity in assessing human well-being (Foo, 2000). Second approach, subjective indicators, capture citizens’ feelings, perception, and satisfaction with their own life and living conditions (e.g. Sirgy et al., 2008). Surveys are accepted as valid and necessary data collection techniques that provide reliable feedback and allow citizens to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their life and living conditions (Ibrahim & Chung, 2003; Lee, 2008). Most scholars agree that in practice both objective and subjective indicators are needed, as they complement each other, and their parallel use allow to acquire comprehensive picture of socio-economic progress (e.g. Felce & Perry, 1995; Cummins, 1996; Diener & Suh, 1997; Schalock, 2004; Stiglitz et al., 2009; Pukeliene & Starkauskiene, 2011). In addition to quantitative methods also qualitative and dynamic surveys in participatory research-process methods, are useful in QoL measurement (Irtelli & Durbano, 2020).

Recent research advocate for use of multi-dimensional, general indexes (combination of indicators) for QoL measurement (Bramston, Chipuer, & Pretty, 2005; Pottera et al., 2012; Somarriba & Pena, 2009). There have been various initiatives aimed at developing comprehensive QoL indices that provide a broad vision of the social, welfare and sustainability aspects (Dluhy & Swartz, 2006; Fronas, 2007; Hagerty et al., 2001; Somarriba & Pena, 2009). These indices vary greatly in their coverage (the number of indicators included ranges from three to several dozen), definitions of QoL domains, and methodological approaches to data collection. Lambiri et al. (2007) analysed a series of QoL studies, and grouped the adopted indices into six different categories: natural

environment (climate, state of natural environment, etc.), built environment (type and state of building, etc.), socio-political environment (community life, political participation, etc.), local economic environment (local income, unemployment, etc.), cultural and leisure environment (museums, restaurants, etc.), and public policy environment (safety, health care, education provision, etc.). Yonk et al. (2017) examined a range of QoL indices and found five specific domains of indicators included in these indices: public safety, health, infrastructure, education, and economic environment. In their report for the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, Stiglitz et al. (2009) argued for a broad range of dimensions that should be taken into account in QoL indices, including: material living (income, consumption and property security), health and conditions of its maintenance, education and access to education, opportunities for personal self-realisation, including jobs, the possibility of participation in public affairs, space for the realisation of social contacts, current and future environment, and uncertainty and risks (economic instability, natural disasters).

2.3. QoL in public policy evaluation

The development of QoL indices by governments and policy institutes in recent decades was a clear step towards building an information base for policy decisions aimed at the progress of societies as a response to arguments that standard economic indicators do not reflect the actual development of modern societies (Cummins, 1996; Diener & Suh, 1997; Stiglitz et al., 2009; Zadroga, 2012), and a sign of a shift in the perception and measurement of development towards non-economic issues (e.g. Costanza 2007; Baum, 2019).

The need to explore the meaning of the QoL has been long recognised, and there have been calls for action to establish criteria to assess policy outcomes in such terms for some decades (e.g. Landesman, 1986). Specifically, in the field of programme evaluation, the discussion has also included the potential to employ QoL as an implicit evaluation criterion (e.g. Holmes, 1989; Priebe et al., 1996). In an evaluation summarising the implementation of the CP in 2007–2013, the authors stated that ‘the focus on estimating the effects of funding on growth of GDP implicitly assumes that this is the only indicator of the performance of the funds that matters’ and clearly emphasised the need to supplement the economic indicators used so far in evaluations with those that reflect changes in the QoL (Ciffolilli et al., 2016: 201). The importance of this topic was also recently acknowledged by the European Evaluation Society, which organised a workshop under the title ‘Quality of Life as an Evaluation Criterion’ (EES, 2021).

From the evaluation standpoint, it is obvious that different interpretations and definitions of the QoL lead to different assessments and valuing of the outcomes of public interventions, and in consequence to different decisions on important topics (Barcaccia et al., 2013), including the continuation, cancellation, or modification of programmes. As stated by Schalock (2004), we agree on the importance of the QoL construct as a service delivery principle, but we have yet to understand and agree on how to best evaluate the outcomes from the QoL perspective and how to use the concept to impact public policies.

Felce and Perry (1995) argued that even when a policy is meant to impact QoL, it cannot be reliably evaluated or substantiated because of the absence of a generally agreed assessment methodology. More than two decades later, Doi et al. (2008) still observed that the methodology and scope of research in which QoL indicators are employed as direct outcomes of specific policy measures is diverse and that the practise of conducting such analysis is unsystematic. As for now, it can be stated that studies with QoL as a dependent variable of the implementation of a development policy are still limited. In some of them, a quantitative, objective approach to verify correlation between given public policy and changes in QoL has been adopted (e.g. Grieve & Weinspach, 2010; Nakanishi, 2015; Moser et al., 2018). Other limit research tools to surveys and/or interviews gathering subjective opinions on the influence of

a policy on their QoL (e.g. Ciocoiu, 2007; Gorzelak, 2015; Mackiewicz & Szczech-Pietkiewicz, 2020). As for the use of QoL indices in policy evaluation, Hagerty et al. (2001) complained that they do not incorporate the input – output concepts and fail to demonstrate how QoL outputs react to policy inputs.

3. Research design and data

3.1. Case description

The analysis presented in this study was conducted in the context of the Polish CP evaluation system. CP dates back to 1988, and it has quickly become the most important and most debated EU policy (Ahnert, 2008). While evaluation is incorporated in many EU policies, it is considered to be best developed in CP (Fratesi & Wislade, 2017), reflecting the significant budget, degree of contestation, and multitude of intervention fields that it covers (Kupiec, Wojtowicz, & Olejniczak, 2020).

CP is performed based on the shared management concept, which means that competences are divided between EU and Member States’ (MS) administrations. The policy is implemented through operational programmes formulated and managed at the MS level by so-called Managing Authorities (MA)—usually ministries or regional governments. MAs are also responsible for the evaluation, which focuses on the implementation process and effects of operational programmes.

The Polish CP evaluation system is one of the largest in terms of the number of organisations commissioning evaluations and the number of studies conducted (Kupiec et al., 2021). The importance of Polish case stems also from the fact that Poland has been the largest financial beneficiary of the CP for the last 15 years (Bienias & Gapski, 2016), which has drawn the attention of the EU community and raised the importance of CP evaluation conducted in this country.

3.2. Data and analysis

Reports from all CP evaluation studies conducted in Poland are stored in the repository maintained by the National Evaluation Unit, which coordinates the evaluation system (NEU, n.d.). As of December 2020, the database contained 1431 records from the period 2004–2020. Most studies are of an ongoing type; however, there are also around 150 ex-ante and almost the same number of ex-post evaluations. The thematic scope of CP evaluation is as broad as the scope of policy intervention and ranges from health, education, and culture to transport, tourism, and entrepreneurship.

Out of the 1431 records in the evaluation database, 1413 full-text reports were successfully retrieved. A full-text search was performed to identify all occurrences of the term QoL. Every sentence containing the term QoL was retrieved together with the preceding and following sentence for further analysis of the context and meaning.

The OECD Better Life Index (BLI) was used as a framework for the identification of the most common dimensions of the QoL definition in CP evaluation. Although the BLI is just one among many the QoL indices (Hagerty et al., 2001), it has been acknowledged as fairly comprehensive (do Carvalho Monteiro et al., 2019; Mizobuchi, 2014), or even as the most comprehensive index (Nar & Nar, 2019). Each of the domains in the BLI was assigned a set of keywords (e.g. health domain: health, life expectancy, medic.*, hospit.*) and then all instances where the domain-specific keyword is accompanied by the QoL term within a 200-character distance were identified. Finally, it was analysed whether the terms are simply in the vicinity of each other or an actual relationship is suggested, e.g. that access to education improves QoL or is an element of it.

To identify the number of evaluation questions concerning the QoL, all instances of the QoL term followed by the question mark within a distance of 200 characters were identified and then further investigated.

4. Findings

4.1. Mentions

The term QoL appears over 3000 times in the analysed set of studies. It can be found in 469 reports (over 33% of the total). The popularity of the term has been growing quite steadily with time. Two exceptional data points in that trend are a sharp increase in 2006 – when a substantial number of ex-ante evaluations mentioning QoL was conducted – and a decrease in 2017, when a large number of evaluations focused on the implementation system (and not results) was completed.

The steady growth of interest in the QoL is even more evident when broken down into EU programming periods. The concept was mentioned in just every tenth evaluation from the 2004–2006 perspective, one-third of studies from 2007–2013 perspective, and over a half of reports from the 2014–2020 period.

It can be also seen that the QoL mentions are much more frequent in ex-ante and ex-post studies than in ongoing ones. This is quite understandable, as concern about the effects of interventions – among them the QoL – is the highest before the implementation of intervention starts (in the programming phase) and after it is concluded and appraised.

QoL is mentioned most often in studies evaluating interventions focused on environment and health. The last thematic field with the QoL mentioned in more than half of the reports is local and regional development (Fig. 1). On the other end of the spectrum are evaluations of interventions supporting entrepreneurship, research, development, and innovations. It is important to note, however, that references to QoL can be found in all thematic fields of CP evaluations.

4.2. Meanings

Most references to the QoL are not related to the actual measurement of the impact of the evaluated intervention on the QoL, analysis, or even discussion of the concept. Four types of references to QoL were identified in the studied evaluation reports (Table 1). The first are references to programming documents and strategies that mention QoL in their goals, priority names, or diagnoses. Usually, no definition is provided either in the evaluation report or the original document. The second type are references to QoL as a desired, expected, or observed effect of intervention, where again no meaning is assigned to the concept. These include: (a) implications that evaluated intervention resulted or will result in improvement in QoL, (b) declarations that QoL is of interest and would be or was measured as part of particular study, (c) admitting that the impact of intervention on QoL could not be measured or observed, and (d) recommendations that QoL should be better elaborated in the programme diagnosis and goals, or that measures focusing on the QoL

Table 1
Types of references to the QoL.

Type of reference	Examples
I. References to programming documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The priority axis is justified in the context of improving the QoL. The metropolitan area is characterised by dynamic economic growth and high QoL. The QoL is a factor supporting the creation of urban creative class.
I. QoL as a desired, expected, or observed effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The implementation of the project increased the QoL of the inhabitants. The investment was important for solving the problem of landslides and improved the QoL of the inhabitants. It contributed to a better integration of local communities and improvement in the QoL.
I. QoL as the unintended effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unfortunately, the projects aimed at QoL, not economic development. Programme concentrated on local QoL, and not cross-border integration. Many of them are about consumption – increase in the QoL and not the reduction in social exclusion.
I. Associating QoL with a specific type of intervention or effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better quality of public infrastructure will affect the QoL. It led to the improvement in air quality and thus the QoL. Contribute to the reduction of unemployment and, consequently, increase the QoL in rural areas.

should be included in the programme.

While the first and second types of mentions present QoL as a positive outcome, type three relates to cases where QoL is mentioned as an unintended or less desired effect. Usually, economic development is expected and missed in such instances; however, investment attractiveness, cross-border integration, or social inclusion are also mentioned. The fourth type are statements suggesting that there is a causal relationship between some specific type of intervention and QoL, or that specific products or results of intervention can be directly associated with QoL. They represent around 20% of the total.

References of the fourth type offer a possibility of investigating how the QoL is understood or at least what this concept has been associated with in CP evaluation in Poland. The OECD BLI (OECD, n.d.) was used as a reference framework. It appears that out of the 11 BLI domains, CP evaluation studies mention QoL most frequently in the context of health, followed by environment, safety, and education (Fig. 2). In contrast, there are almost no references to civic engagement, work-life balance, life satisfaction, or community.

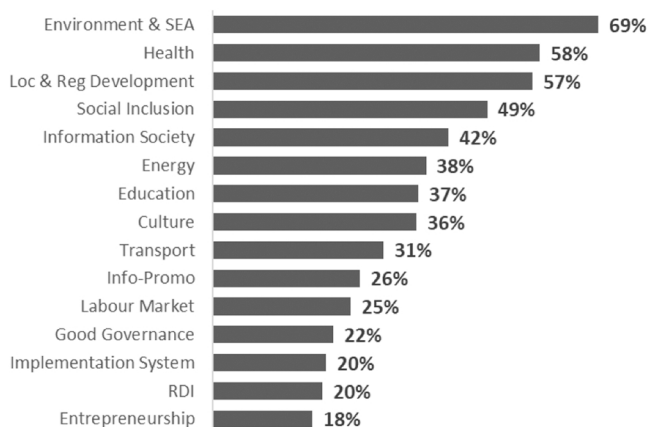


Fig. 1. QoL – mentions per thematic field* * percentage of evaluation studies in specific field mentioning QoL.

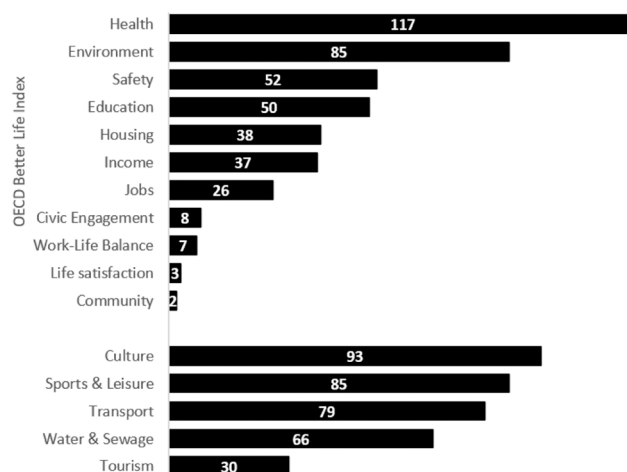


Fig. 2. Number of references to selected QoL dimensions in CP evaluation.

In almost all discussed cases relationship between certain domains, e.g. health and environment, and the QoL is just assumed by evaluators without reference to some complete definition of QoL or other convincing elaboration and arguments. The reasoning is usually narrowed down to the infrastructure – it is the improvement or access to infrastructure that increases the QoL. Many types of infrastructure are mentioned in this context, e.g. social, municipal, or technical; the discussion concerns hospitals in case of health, the equipping and refurbishing of schools in case of education, or sewage systems in case of environment. Safety is an interesting category encompassing a multitude of subdimensions referred to in the context of the QoL, e.g. social, communication, public, health, transport, ecological, financial, energy, jobs, income, or crime. In most cases the argued impact of investment in infrastructure on the QoL is direct, but there are also exceptions of indirect reasoning, e.g. better communication (public transport or roads) provides access to social infrastructure outside of one’s place of residence, increasing residents’ QoL.

Because of this dominance of infrastructure perspective, we checked how often other types of infrastructure typical for CP support but not mentioned in the BLI are related to QoL in evaluation reports. As can be seen in Fig. 2, statements linking QoL with cultural, sports and leisure, or transport infrastructure are also common, which supports the claim that in CP evaluation the QoL concept is in general connected to the improvement in infrastructure.

4.3. QoL in evaluation questions

Despite the frequent references in evaluation studies, actual research questions concerning the QoL are rare. Only 19 studies with such questions were identified, which is around 1% of all evaluations. Only in one case is QoL also mentioned in the title of the report. Interestingly, the frequency of evaluation questions concerning QoL has not increased over time; in fact, they were more frequent in the 2007–2013 period (1.7% of reports) than in 2014–2020 (0.7%). This proportion, however, may still change, as ex-post evaluations of 2014–2020 programmes are still to be completed.

While questions regarding QoL provide all possible types of knowledge, most of them are questions about effects, mostly ex-post, i.e. the actual impact of the intervention on the QoL. Questions about the mechanism, e.g. why improvement in the QoL was (or was not) achieved can also be found. The rarest are process and context questions (Table 2).

4.4. Measurement

As argued by Schalock (2004), QoL assessment requires methodological pluralism, multiple measures including a personal appraisal, functional assessment, and social indicators. The approach to QoL measurement in CP evaluation, however, does not fulfil this postulate – it is quite uniform with only small variations noted.

Table 2
Types of evaluation questions concerning the QoL^a.

Type of question	Number of questions	Example
Effects ex-post	29	<i>What was the impact of cultural projects on the QoL?</i>
Effect ex-ante	6	<i>What type of intervention needs to be conducted to improve the QoL?</i>
Mechanism	6	<i>Why the intervention was focused on the QoL, and not cross-border integration?</i>
Process	2	<i>How are the EU funds perceived in the context of the QoL?</i>
Context	2	<i>What factors support and impede the improvement of the QoL?</i>

^a Classification of question types, based on Olejniczak, Kupiec, and Raimondo (2015)

In most studies where the question about QoL is posed, the answer is provided through a survey. Three types of respondents were questioned (Fig. 3): inhabitants, final recipients of support (people directly affected by the project), and beneficiaries (entities receiving funding and implementing projects). The second variation concerns the subject of the questions. While some surveys asked about the perceived changes in the QoL without referring to an intervention, others ask directly about the perceived impact of a particular project on the QoL. Finally, while some questions referred to the general concept of QoL without defining it (e.g. has the project contributed to the improvement of the QoL?), others focused on a particular dimension or dimensions (e.g. have you observed changes decreasing your QoL in terms of access to education?). In all cases where the evaluators assessed the impact of an intervention on several dimensions of the QoL, they relied on their own custom set and did not refer to the well-established QoL indices.

There are just a couple of examples with distinct approaches to answering questions about the QoL. However, in those cases only a very distant proxy of QoL is measured, and therefore they do not seem to be a good practice to follow. Those attempts include (1) estimating the disproportions in access to social infrastructure at the regional level, assuming that the lower the disproportions, the higher the QoL, (2) using income disparities as a QoL measure, or (3) drawing conclusions about QoL based on housing prices. In one study, a two-step analysis was proposed. Shortages in cultural infrastructure were first identified through a survey of the inhabitants and then, based on the scope of the implemented projects, evaluators assessed whether those gaps were properly addressed, assuming that if they were, then QoL increased.

5. Discussion

A few observations can be made based on the findings presented in the previous section. The approach to QoL in CP evaluations is very ‘intervention-centric’ – evaluators perceive, define, and measure QoL from the perspective of the evaluand, i.e. programme, priority axis that is evaluated. Usually, some pre-assumptions are made about the impact of certain types of projects or the effects of those projects on the QoL with no actual effort to prove them. The outputs (completed projects) and results of those projects are then declared a measure of change in the QoL. Thus, in fact evaluators usually do not measure the QoL but use it as an attractive, fashionable label for some effects of the evaluated intervention. To some extent it corresponds with what Rosenberg (1995) called a pragmatic approach to the QoL in which clarification of the term is intentionally avoided; moreover, as stated even more directly by Bergner (1989), the QoL ‘is what the evaluator mean it to be’.

A possible explanation for this pragmatic and narrow understanding of QoL is the siloed nature of evaluation. While the CP intervention consists of multiple programmes of various scope, evaluators are usually expected to extract the effects of a single programme or even a single measure within it. Even if aware of the multidimensionality of the concept, the evaluator may be tempted to simply assume that what he or she evaluates, e.g. transport or education infrastructure, contributes to QoL. Indeed, this might be the only feasible approach given the constraints of time and money.

The number of evaluation studies with questions concerning the QoL has not increased over time, while the number of all references to QoL in

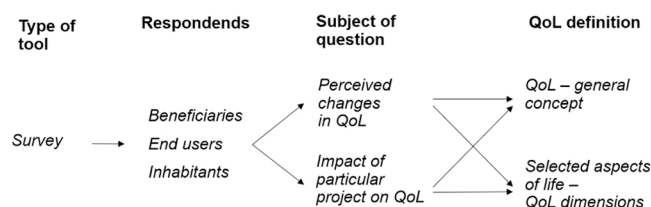


Fig. 3. QoL measurement – approaches.

evaluation reports has. This is at least partly because the term is more often included in CP programming documents from this perspective than in previous ones, and these documents are then cited in evaluation reports. It appears that the same authorities who declare QoL a goal of intervention are later not interested in measuring it when structuring and commissioning an evaluation study. Thus, as already observed in other contexts (Barcaccia et al., 2013), in CP evaluations as well the QoL concept is rather a buzzword than an actual criterion for assessing the effects of interventions.

CP evaluation has not contributed greatly to the still ongoing debate on QoL measurement. While there is a rich literature supporting objective measures referring to the context and environments and subjective measures of life experience, combining these two types, or developing composite indices, the preferred approach in CP evaluation appears unclear. Most evaluation studies with questions concerning QoL rely on surveys asking about the perception of beneficiaries or end-users, which suggests a subjective approach when the question refers to the general concept of QoL. This is unclear when the question points to particular dimensions of the QoL (e.g. access to culture or access to public transport). In those cases, although the question is still about subjective perception, it refers rather to what Veenhoven (2000) called the liveability of the environment—conditions created by the external environment—than to satisfaction with life.

What is especially worrying is that the way the QoL measurement is organised in particular studies is usually not discussed, explained, or justified in the report, which creates an impression that it is driven rather by convenience than by theory or the need for validity. Vaessen and Leeuw (2011) expected evaluation to be receptive to theoretical developments in other disciplines while also producing insights and substantive ‘theories’ enriching other disciplines. Observations from this analysis suggest that CP evaluation, at least in Poland, does not contribute to the discussion of QoL and its measurement. Moreover, it does not draw from the state of the art on QoL in other disciplines. The former is an inevitable consequence of the latter.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to verify the role and use of QoL concept in evaluation studies conducted over the span of 17 years in the large evaluation system of CP in Poland. It appears that the QoL is mentioned in one-third of reports and that the prevalence of the term is growing over time. However, only a small fraction of those references imply a relationship between QoL and the public intervention in some specific areas, the most frequent being health, culture, and environment infrastructure. Evaluation studies with actual questions concerning the impact on the QoL, and therefore, attempts to measure changes in the QoL, are rare. The approach to QoL measurement in CP evaluation in Poland is quite narrow. In most cases, it involves a survey directed to beneficiaries or end-users asking them about their perception of change in the QoL in general or selected aspects of it depending on the scope of the study. Moreover, the approach to QoL measurement is not discussed, explained, or justified in the evaluation reports, which limits the validity of findings.

Referring to the question posed a year ago during the EES workshop (EES, 2021)—can the QoL be used as a direct evaluation criterion in the EU policies’ evaluation?—it seems, based on our findings, that it is too early to decide. Without some agreement on the meaning of the concept and an acceptable, and perhaps standardised, measurement approach within the evaluation community (or at least the community gathered around a particular policy), it is difficult to discuss whether the QoL as a criterion would bring any added value to the well-established set of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and utility in guiding the evaluation study, framing the questions, or choosing the methods. Conversely, it is also too late to decide, as many evaluators already refer to QoL in their studies. This, however, only supports the argument that we urgently need debate and agreement on the meaning of the QoL concept and

acceptable measurement approaches within EU policy evaluation. Optimistically, the outcome of such debate would be a set of commonly accepted standards for evaluating the QoL embedded in the achievements of other disciplines, which would prevent evaluators from using QoL as just a buzzword and diluting the importance of this concept.

While the Polish CP evaluation system was a reasonable choice for this analysis, we are aware that the findings are bound to the context of national evaluation culture or the scope of CP. This opens the perspective for future studies of QoL measurement in public policies outside of CP, Poland, or the EU.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the conduct of the research or preparation of the article.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Tomasz Kupiec: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Dominika Wojtowicz:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the employees of the National Evaluation Unit in the Poland’s Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, who constantly work on the quality of CP evaluation database which made this study possible.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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