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Inspire Policy Making with Territorial Evidence

POST-EVENT BRIEF

ESPON Virtual Roundtable: Integrating the concept of Quality of Life to spatial planning and regional development

Virtual

6 May 2021, 10:00 - 13:10 (CEST)

Summary



The ESPON virtual roundtable focused on the concept of Territorial Quality of Life (TQoL) and how to integrate it in spatial planning and regional development at different levels. On 6th of May 2021, this ESPON event gathered approximately 100 participants such as policymakers, planning practitioners, academics, and others interested in the concept.

The event was based on the [ESPON QoL – Quality of Life Measurements and Methodology](#) project and the ESPON working paper: “[Is our life good enough? Measuring Territorial Quality of Life to support a future for all places and bring Europe closer to citizens](#)”. The paper suggests place-based and citizen-centric approach to ensure that Quality of Life (QoL) measurement takes the specificities of the territory into account and it is legitimated by the citizens, reflecting their life needs and expectations.

The virtual roundtable was structured in three parts: At first, the [ESPON Quality of Life](#) project was presented, following an introduction into QoL integration in Slovenian spatial planning. Quality of Life enablers involve many different domains (the personal sphere, socio-economic sphere, and ecological sphere) and cover fields like housing, health care, education, transport and connectivity, work, public spaces, and green infrastructure. The second part of the event presented three case studies from the project: the Netherlands, Wales and Nova Gorica – Gorizia (a cross-border region between Slovenia and Italy). The presentations showed that data availability and regional differences must be considered when measuring TQoL. Thereafter, a roundtable discussion was organised involving practitioners that exchanged experiences on integrating TQoL in local and regional policy implementation, focusing primarily on Slovenia.

Overall, the virtual event was highly successful, particularly due to the lively discussion and active involvement of practitioners and policymakers during the roundtable discussion. A place-based and citizen-centric approach was highlighted when measuring TQoL in different European regions. The interactive involvement of the attendees of the event through a dedicated chat enabled participants to raise and discuss questions on the concept of QoL.

Objectives and target groups

The ESPON online roundtable event aimed at presenting ESPON evidence and discussing how TQoL can be integrated into regional policy instruments targeting sustainability and ‘liveability’. The event enabled experts that were involved in the ESPON Quality of Life project to present their research, key findings, and policy recommendations. The target group were policymakers, planning practitioners, academics and others interested in the concept of TQoL.

The roundtable mainly addressed policymakers responsible for national and regional development in Slovenia. The discussions during the roundtable event included the following policy questions:

- **What is Territorial Quality of Life and how to measure it? Is the concept universal and applicable at different territorial scales? Which are the common measurement domains?**
- **How can citizen and public participation be considered in the process of selecting indicators and in the definition of Quality of Life for a certain place or territory?**
- **What good practices and experiences can be identified from the case studies carried out?**
- **What recommendations can be given to policymakers and stakeholders at different geographical levels?**
- **How to better embed Quality of Life in spatial planning instruments and practices?**

Programme and presentations

The ESPON roundtable event ‘Integrating the concept of Quality of Life to spatial planning and regional development’ was opened by **Sandra Di Biaggio** (ESPON EGTC), where she highlighted that the current pandemic and lockdown showed the needs of QoL and its different spheres. In addition, she emphasised that consideration of the current policy context and that QoL should play an essential part in the post-2020 cohesion policy. TQoL will be important during the upcoming Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, and the ESPON EGTC is planning to organise a joint workshop at the European Week of Regions and Cities in October.

The online event was then structured into three parts:

Introduction and setting the scene: The plenary session was moderated by **Ingmar Pastak** (University of Tartu). The first presentation by **Carlo Sessa** (Isinnova, Project Coordinator of ESPON Quality of Life project) introduced the topic, its relevance in regional development and its practical application in policymaking. Sessa explained the conceptual map developed in the ESPON Quality of Life project framework that includes three dimensions: good life enablers, life maintenance, and life flourishing. These dimensions are crossed with three spheres – personal, socio-economic, and ecological – giving a matrix of TQoL measurement domains and sub-domains. This conceptual map can be used to measure TQoL at different territorial levels.

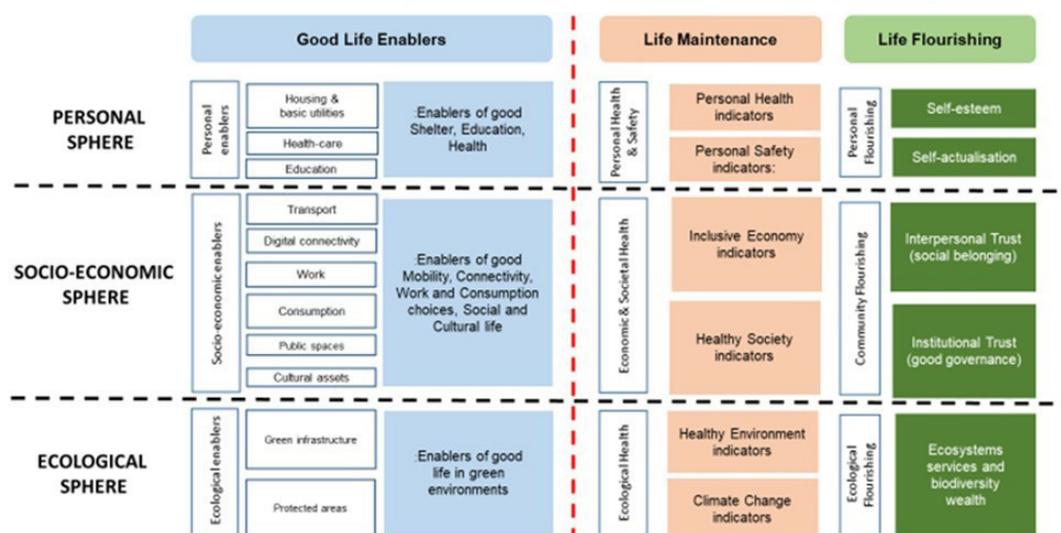


Figure 1 ESPON Territorial Quality of Life conceptual map

Furthermore, Sessa presented the TQoL dashboard tool. The tool maps differences in QoL across Europe and features an Excel tool that computes indicators, providing drilldowns on individual areas and also a broad overall view on NUTS 3 level.

Then Sessa gave key messages for policymakers: i) We get what we measure, therefore policymakers need to ask citizens what they want in life, to validate the use of TQoL indicators. This is called a ‘citizen-centric’ approach and it is triggering pilot TQoL living labs in different regions across Europe; and ii) Quality of life needs to be integrated into territorial planning practices at local, regional, and national levels and in various policy domains. Sessa concluded by presenting a TQoL accounting practice involving policymakers, TQoL accounting managers, data experts, and engaging citizens and stakeholders.

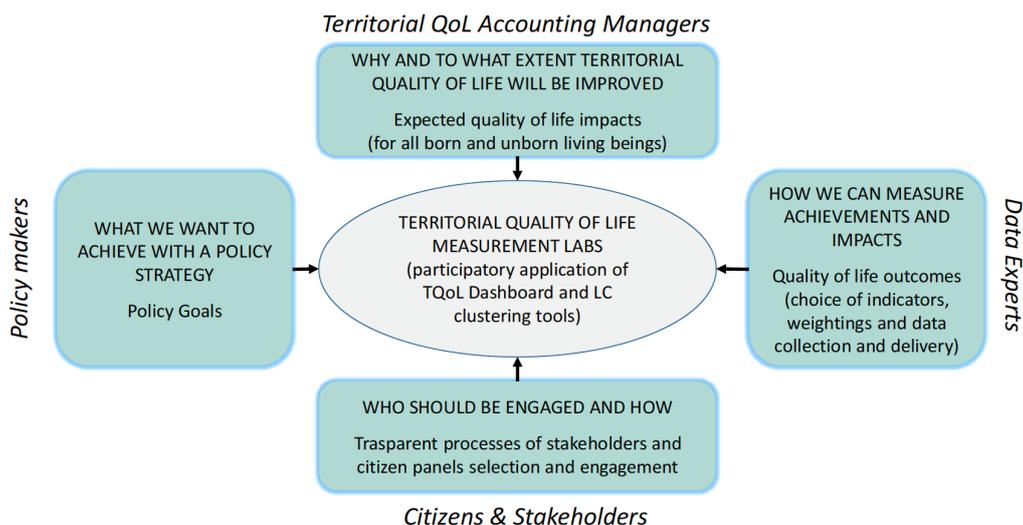


Figure 2 Territorial quality-of-life accounting practice

The second presentation by **Tomaž Miklavčič** (Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning, Slovenia/ Representative of ESPON Contact Point Slovenia) introduced the integration of Quality of Life into Slovenian spatial planning. The evaluation of the narrative in Slovenian strategic spatial planning was explained. Spatial Management Policy (2001) introduced a narrower concept focusing more on physical conditions and quality of the environment. The new draft of the Spatial Planning strategy developed the narrative of QoL to (i) an overarching principle (focusing on the provision of services; provision of adequate infrastructure; protection of environment and nature; protection and sustainable use of environmental resources; and quality and accessible housing) and (ii) a specific development objective of increasing the QoL in all urban and rural areas.

The Second part: Three case studies from the ESPON Quality of Life project showed how the methodology for measuring Quality of Life developed by ESPON has been tested and compared with existing measurement practices in different case studies. Three case studies were presented: i) the Netherlands where three previous QoL studies have been conducted ; ii) Wales where the concept has been considered in planning instruments for a long time; and iii) Nova Gorica – Gorizia which faces further challenges as a cross-border area between Slovenia and Italy.

Maarten Kroesen (TU-Delft, ESPON QoL project) presented the case study of the Netherlands - a small but densely populated country. Three efforts to define Quality of Life were attempted previously, and therefore, Kroesen compared the different instruments. Kroesen highlights that in strong theoretically-grounded instruments, it can be challenging to find data.

Haris Martinos (ESPON QoL project) was the speaker of the second case study, Wales. Martinos presented that Wales has a very advanced policy implementation of QoL with the Well-being of Future Generation Act (WFG) of 2015 applied at regional and local levels. This is accompanied by a monitoring system and other governance mechanisms (e.g. Future Generation Commissioner for Wales).

Eva Harmel (ZAVITA, ESPON QoL project) presented the third case study. She illustrated a cross-border area between Slovenia and Italy: the twin towns Nova Gorica – Gorizia, that are aiming to measure QoL in a cross-border region. The measurements should give insights on the needs of the population for building a cross-border healthcare network. Harmel concluded that the European support of the EGTC GO¹ has been essential to harmonise complex governance systems and form cross-border public services. Significant data gaps at the municipality level complicate measuring QoL indicators. Therefore, it would be essential to build up a framework for collecting indicators. Additionally, the importance of citizens' involvement was highlighted as a big potential by ensuring early involvement of local inhabitants.

1 European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation: Territory of municipalities: Comune di Gorizia (I), Mestna občina Nova Gorica (Slo), <https://euro-go.eu/en/>

The Third part: A roundtable discussion moderated by **Tomaž Miklavčič** enabled experts from Slovenia and the project coordinator of the ESPON TQoL project to discuss how to integrate QoL in various policies and spatial planning instruments on local and regional levels. Four experts participated in the discussion:

- **Janja Pecar**, Institute of Macroeconomic analysis and development, Slovenia
- **Maja Simoneti**, IPOP, Institute for Policy of Space, Slovenia
- **Tea Podobnik**, City municipality of Nova Gorica, Slovenia
- **Carlo Sessa**, Isinnova, ESPON Quality of Life Project

At first, the speakers were asked to share their expectations and their personal interpretation of TQoL. Maja Simoneti argued that public open space, housing, transport, and services are influencing QoL. Janja Pecar highlighted that TQoL is a multi-dimensional concept including different aspects of human life (accessibility, availability of different domains such as housing, public services, work, education, and environment), but it is also a matter of the personal sphere and attitudes combining societal, economic and environmental aspects. Tea Podobnik emphasised the possibility of finding a job is important, especially in Nova Gorica due to economic changes. Podobnik also argued that housing is essential in all territories. The importance of green public spaces in cities was underlined by Carlo Sessa, so that citizens do not need to leave the city for nature. When discussing the implementation of QoL in spatial planning, Janja Pecar stressed that different aspects of QoL should be included in all policies through strategic documents. The case study of Wales has been presented as a good practice example as QoL is fully embedded through comprehensive legislation, QoL-specific institutional arrangements and the setting up and operationalisation of a reporting system. Maja Simoneti argued that spatial planning includes a complex structure as many actors are involved. It is a long-term activity that is not popular for policymakers as it goes over their political mandate.

Another point of discussion was the effect of the current pandemic, COVID-19, in our quality of life and needs in terms of urban design. Here, three aspects have been mentioned: 1) housing: housing in Slovenia is not adjusted for home offices and home schooling as apartments are too small; 2) quality of public open space: new buildings are still built without green areas; and 3) services: people who enjoy living in small towns or villages often struggle with the lack of services (shops, banks, schools, etc.). The moderator added that the quality and affordability of services also need to be taken into account (e.g. hospitals).

In the end, the roundtable discussion focused on the involvement of citizens as measuring QoL is also a matter of the personal sphere. The ESPON TQoL project recommended a participatory process with a citizen-centric approach and the implementation of TQoL living labs, which empower citizens and involves them during the entire process, starting from their desires and needs. At the same time, it has been underlined that regional differences in QoL exist. Therefore, citizens should be involved in the selections of indicators for measuring QoL and legitimate the results.

Participants were also able to ask panellists questions in the chat. One interesting suggestion that was made is the involvement and participation of children in the process of defining QoL. Carlo Sessa agreed that children and young people should be involved in the process as we talk about their future.

Conclusions: **Blanka Bartol** (Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning, Slovenia) concluded that there is a high interest in the theme and that QoL is becoming more relevant in the policy agenda and at different geographical levels. She underlined that territorial QoL should be measured at different levels, taking into account the specificities of the territory and actively involving the citizens. The citizen-centric approach helps to validate indicators and to provide additional insights on what is important and what should be measured. **Carlo Sessa** (Isinnova, ESPON QoL project) emphasised in his conclusion that the link between TQoL and spatial planning is very important and should be present, especially in public spaces, for people in public spaces, transport, and access to services.

Delivered input (was the target group reached?)

The outreach of the virtual event was very successful. Together with the 14 presenters, more than 100 people participated in the virtual event (the maximum number was 141).

Participants were mainly from Slovenia, but many also attended from Poland and Croatia. The biggest section of the audience were policymakers (national, regional, and local) followed by researchers, students, and actors

from the private sector. Therewith the target group was successfully reached. The participation was also very active.

The results of the post-event survey were very positive: out of 21 answers, 17 declared to be very satisfied with the event. The low rate of responses might be connected to the high number of online events and surveys. Attendees specified that the event was well prepared and structured with interesting presentations. The roundtable discussion was also well perceived.

One respondent has expressed that the event could have included more time for interaction with the audience but otherwise many respondents answered that the event fully met their expectations in relation to policies they are involved in. The content will contribute to our regular activities and will be an important asset to the involved policies.

In relation to EU policies, someone argued that the implementation of the TQoL approach should support the Territorial Agenda 2030, and another person suggested that TQoL should be embedded in the EU Funds Regulations for Integrated Spatial Investments.

The efficacy of the proposed structure

The structure of the event was well received by the participants. Microsoft Teams was used as platform for the event. The event started as planned and ended as scheduled at 13:10. No technical issues emerged as participants were muted automatically. Instead, the chat was used actively by participants, and it enabled a discussion and the possibility to address questions directly to the presenters. One respondent of the survey suggested that further interaction with participants could be reached via online polls or other interactive tools such as Wooclap or Sendsteps. Additionally, it is difficult to network in a virtual setting.

Organising a half-day online event has proven to be successful and the division into three parts, including two short breaks, was appreciated by participants. It was good to have an overall introduction into the project in the beginning, and then to further explain the project by presenting 3 different case studies more specifically. The roundtable discussion at the end enriched the discussion and for which enough time was foreseen. Good moderation enabled speakers and participants to follow the discourse and to get to know different perspectives.

Main conclusions

The roundtable event on *Integrating the concept of Quality of Life to spatial planning and regional development* highlighted the following conclusions:

The event confirmed a large interest in this theme from practitioners and policymakers working at different levels in Europe. QoL is becoming more relevant in policy agendas and realistic ways of integrating the concept in policy are being suggested by ESPON.

QoL is an overarching principle and an objective for territorial development: What territory do citizens want in the future? The ongoing pandemic clearly illustrated the importance of the QoL enablers. **COVID-19** influences all aspects of QoL, and lockdown significantly impacted QoL (especially housing quality, accessibility to public services, and availability of green infrastructure). Therefore, future investments in these sectors are important and would ensure greater resilience of territories.

Even though the concept of TQoL is complex and difficult to measure as it includes personal and subjective conceptions, it should be taken into account in territorial planning at different spatial levels to improve the QoL in all places. The concept must be theoretically grounded. The conceptual map developed by ESPON provides a universal framework that can be applied to different territories and geographical levels. TQoL cannot be measured with the same indicators at all territorial levels but the same dimensions and domains can be used.

In addition, the ESPON project and the speakers highlighted that data issues/gaps remain and therefore, comparability between different territories remains limited. Here, further data harmonisation and extension of the surveys already implemented by Eurostat and national statistical offices in Europe would be needed. Also, QoL aspects are included in different policies and in strategic documents, but its consideration in regional plans and into planning systems is not well developed. It is important to establish a continuous monitoring and evaluation process.

TQoL should be embedded in policy design and implementation. For example, low performance neighbourhoods in the Netherlands have a dedicated programme to improve QoL and Wales' measurement of QoL is more focused on outcomes than life enablers and also illustrated how it can be monitored after implementation.

Regions have shown to have differences concerning the various dimensions of QoL. Specific domains and dimensions of QoL relate to different policies. Therefore place-based and citizen-centric approaches are key concepts to be used and implemented.

A participatory approach – actively involving citizens, stakeholders and policymakers during the entire process – to ensure that the measurement of QoL reflects their needs and expectations has been suggested by the ESPON project and was also highlighted in the roundtable event.

Further Recommendations

Based on the roundtable discussion the following recommendations were highlighted:

- Implementation of a **Citizen-centric approach**: Involve young people, including children, as it is about their future. The idea was to involve university students in the participatory process, but cooperation with schools could also be organised. The EUSALP Youth Council² can provide inspiration in this respect
- Create a network of **living labs** in different European territories and use digital technology to save costs and connect people from various regions. Citizens can be involved during the entire process and might also help collect data with the help of digital technology.
- **Cross-Border Areas** need further attention to measure TQoL for the cross-border territory. Stakeholders, citizens and policymakers from all border areas need to be involved. Sustainable mobility is a key concept to consider when analysing QoL in border regions.
- Quality of Life aspects should be included in **post-2020 cohesion policy**. The TQoL framework could be linked with the UN SDG goals (231 SDG indicators) and could significantly help local and regional levels narrow down the list of indicators.

2 https://europa.eu/youth/news/join-eusalp-youth-council_en

References

ESPON (2012). ESPON QoL – Quality of Life Measurements and Methodology. <https://www.espon.eu/programme/projects/espon-2020/applied-research/quality-of-life>

ESPON (2021). *Working Paper: “Is our life good enough? Measuring Territorial Quality of Life to support a future for all places and bring Europe closer to citizens”*. <https://www.espon.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/ESPON%20Working%20Paper%2C%20Is%20Our%20Life%20Good%20Enough.pdf>



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