

QUALITY OF LIFE IN ITALIAN OFFICIAL SURVEYS

La Qualità della Vita nelle Rilevazioni Ufficiali

Filomena Maggino

Università degli Studi di Firenze, via Laura 48 – Firenze, filomena.maggino@unifi.it

Linda Laura Sabbadini

ISTAT, via Balbo 16, sabbadin@istat.it

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1. Quality-of-Life movement

1.1 From social indicators to quality of life

Quality-of-life studies have a 50-year history and inherited the tradition of the “social indicators” movement, born in the United States during the sixties and involving scholars and researchers, supported by the public administration and interested in gathering and analysing data aimed at studying non-economic components of societal wellbeing (Bauer, 1966).

The idea of quantifying “symptoms” (indicators) of living conditions has been launched by Italian statistician and criminologist, Alfredo Niceforo, who has been recognised (Noll, 2004) as the pioneer of social-indicators concept (Niceforo, 1916-17). Moreover, with his book on *Les indices numérique de la civilisation et du progrès* (Niceforo, 1921), he may be considered the originator of an approach of comprehensive welfare and quality of life measurement as it is the concern of modern social indicators and quality of life (Noll, 2004).

Actually, the social indicators’ birth is traditionally seen as coincident with the results of a NASA’s project aimed at studying the impact of the American space program on American society. Those results highlighted the inadequacy of available data as well as of concepts and methodologies enabling the American society to be studied through different perspectives. Actually, the director of the project, Raymond Bauer (1966) expressed the basic definition of social indicators: “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”.

The subsequent diffusion of those innovative ideas and concepts related to the so-called social indicators movement and research, developed and discussed in the United States, reached Europe and other countries as well as many international organisations, like OECD and the United Nations.

At the same time, the debate on social indicators was enriched by the debate on which should be observed through social indicators and, consequently, on what should be considered the major goal of social progress.

In such a debate, many issues emerged concerning the meaning of progress in connection with the social costs of economic growth. This yielded a discussion about value orientations and goals of development and growth, producing the concept of

'quality of life' as an alternative to the more and more questionable concept of material prosperity in an affluent society and was considered the new, multidimensional and much more complex goal of societal development (Noll, 2004).

That debate produced the need to shift the attention from "social indicators" issues to "quality of life" research, introducing the idea that measuring social progress should develop new goals related to values orientations and a new concept of policy and political participation. Consequently, the research question was "how to operationalise the concept and how to quantify it in terms of data and indicators.

1.2 Quality-of-life movement in Italy

At international level, between ups and downs, quality-of-life issues and researches roused scholars' interest not only in the academic world.

While developing the international network, the theoretical reflection and the applied research on quality of life found it hard to take shape in Italy, especially in the academic field.

However it should be pointed out that several local administrations promoted numberless studies and researches on liveability of cities and regions. In fact, many pioneer territorial experiences were accomplished during the seventies, promoted by cities, provinces and regional administrations (e.g., the Bilanci Sociali d'Area) and testified a wide interest in quality-of-life studies at the local level (Martinotti, 1981; Nuvolati, 2002).

Other experiences have to be added, even though their nature is typically journalistic, like the annual report on quality of life in Italian provinces realized by "Sole 24ore", national daily business newspaper.

More recently, a campaign (*Sbilanciamoci!*) involving 39 associations, NGOs and networks working on globalisation, peace, human rights, environment, fair trade, ethical finance, urged the development of an alternative index for analysing quality of life, of development and of public action to be used by Local Authorities. The Quality of Regional Development (Indice di Qualità dello Sviluppo Regionale, *QUARS*)¹ is a synthetic index that takes into account different dimensions of development at regional level (quality of production and consumption, environmental sustainability, democratic participation, and so on).

In the end, all those experiences were fragmentary, with low comparability and theoretical and methodological reflections.

At the same time, Official Statistics have been developing important experiences in quality of life research, like the Multipurpose Survey project, introduced by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) during the nineties and still going on. The System of Multipurpose Surveys provides Official Statistics with important subjective data, completing the monitoring of country wellbeing, perfectly in line with the perspective emerged during the "Measuring subjective well-being: an opportunity for National Statistical Offices?", meeting organized as a satellite of the IX conference of the International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies held in 2009 in Florence (http://www.isqols2009.istitutodeglinnocenti.it/Content_en/Collateral_1.htm).

¹ The index is published every year since 2004. The annual reports (in Italian) can be consulted at the following website http://www.sbilanciamoci.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=376.

2. Quality of life data in official statistics in Italy: the Copernican revolution

2.1 From economic-oriented to social-oriented official statistics

For a long time, the world of official statistics has been prominently economic-oriented, producing data supporting economic oriented politics. The Italian National Institute of Statistics was in this line.

One of the consequences of this approach was that individuals have been considered “productive subjects” more than citizens, assuming a male-style model. That is why, for a long time, parts of population, involved in unobserved phenomena, remained invisible to official statistics.

Suffice it to say that for a long time only quantitative information on rewarded work activities (which involve mostly men) has been available, while no official data on household services and tasks carried out by women were available. In other words, for years national official statistics have never observed and analysed social phenomena, extremely related to and relevant in any woman’s life, like the unpaid work, very important for women.

Similarly, children have always been regarded as students, minors, sons or daughters, but never as social subjects. One can say the same for elderly people, who have been always regarded as retired workers only. The former group has been discovered because of births decrease, the latter because of ageing populations.

In other words, official statistics had no elements allowing a comprehensive analysis of a society as a whole. This has reduced the quality of official statistics regarding the completeness of statistics production and the necessity of going to another approach: the quality of life approach which puts social subjects at the centre.

2.2 From social perspective to quality-of-life perspective in official statistics

The 90’s represents a turning point for the growing quality of official statistics. In 1993 the Italian Institute of Statistics introduced the new system of the Multipurpose Surveys, which gave an answer to numerous questions at the social level, and provided social policies with adequate indicators (Sabbadini, 2011). The system has been developed with a quality of life approach that underlined the necessity of understanding the transformations in progress in social life through social behaviours, perception, individual satisfaction, and the motivation of some behaviour.

The Multipurpose Surveys system aims at improving official statistical information concerning the social condition of the country, for policy making. However, the aim is not only to develop knowledge tracing the essential contours of some phenomena for administrative purposes in managing public matters. The objective is also to observe the relationships between different facts, the complexity of the behaviours and the attitudes that define the quality of life of people and the possibility of targeted interventions to improve it. This approach puts in the middle the citizens, with their needs and aspirations. In other words, the adopted point of view is changed and now it is focused on citizens’ quality of life (Sabbadini, 2011).

This new view moved the observation from the exclusive use of objective [macro] data, to individual data, which include individual objective events and behaviours together with mere subjective dimensions, like opinions, attitudes, and satisfaction of interviewed people, allowing a more comprehensive picture to be acquired about aspects and events that would not have been acquired in a different way.

In Italian official statistics, subjective data are not always considered proxy information about some objective dimensions of the studied phenomena. In other words, introducing subjective data (i.e., motivations, attitudes and opinions) represents an important challenge for official statistics since it aims at enriching social data through survey modality, consequently, increasing the interpretative capacity of data about social phenomena. From the organizational point of view, adapting new indicators involve new investments aimed at improving methodologies able to surveying these kinds of indicators.

Social subjects at the centre: individuals and households

The new approach in official statistics, citizens-centred accomplished a downright Copernican revolution by overcoming the invisibility of subjects and households in official statistics. This approach allows genders, childhood and elderly quality-of-life statistics to be developed and to focus on particular social groups, like disabled and immigrants and on their integrating problems.

Nowadays, statistical information conceived in this perspective is extended and easily usable because many of the conducted surveys can be reported with analysis according to different characteristics.

Subjects are no longer seen only as parts of institutions or sectors of social reality (household, school, work, etc.), but as individuals with their complex and multidimensional conditions, not children, students, but childhood, young; not workers or housewives but men and women; not pensioners but elderly. The attention is moved from sickness to sick persons; from crime to authors and victims. Attempts have been made of integrating information about the household system and the individuals composing the household in order to overcome the past approach that used to keep rigidly distinct households and individuals and to introduce new knowledge about social phenomena (e.g., to understand if who does not read books lives in a context of poor reading and therefore does not have stimuli).

New indicators were specifically developed for particular social subjects, such as (i) children, with in-depth modules about quality of life, on time use (Italy is one of the few countries in the world that lets children aged 3 or more fill out diaries, even if by their parents), on deprivation; (ii) elderly people, for whom we have a detailed picture of the situation, including satisfaction with different aspects of life; (iii) young people, living a difficult age in the transition to adulthood; (iv) disabled people, observed in difficulties encountered in managing their daily life (study, work, social and friendly relationships); (v) women, through the consolidation of gender statistics.

Gender approach to statistics

With reference to this, for years, the invisibility of women has been expressed in different ways: lack of statistical information on women's condition and, above all, on women as subjects; inadequate use of existing data; lack of an approach highlighting the gender differences. The current gender approach to social statistics in Italy is not gender neutral or gender blind but improved a quality-of-life view of statistics for both men and

women, by recognizing gender differences. ISTAT produces gender sensitive indicators, fundamental to adequately individuate gender differences and changes in men's and women's life. The description of a country through statistics should include indicators on couples' role division and unpaid work in order to deeply understand the contribution of women to economy. Moreover, even other social phenomena, such as labour market, cannot be understood without analyzing employment rates per gender and the different roles in the household. Criminality cannot be described without adopting a gender approach, allowing us to know how vast the violence against women is, by designing specific surveys modules which summarize subjective and objective indicators.

The introduction of satisfaction indicators has highlighted deep gender differences. For example, the satisfaction with health of older women is lower, by depicting a situation in which they live longer than men, but also in a bad health for more years. Even the level of satisfaction with leisure time is lower among women than among men, also if workers. In fact, on one side, in many cases, women access cultural activities and read more than men, but, on the other side, women have less free time in quantitative terms, even though they are more satisfied than men with how they use it. Great progress has been made from the gender point of view on a social level, less in the economic field where the great part of statistics continue to be gender blind. In this process, women have been centred as fundamental subjects in two important surveys: Time Use survey, which allowed unpaid work to be quantified, and the survey aimed at studying violence against women, which has highlighted the hidden crime that women suffer and the difficulties in recognizing it.

2.2.1 The revolution in the information contents: some examples

Many new field themes have been introduced; others have been deeply renewed in the same quality of life point of view. Some example could clarify this point (Sabbadini, 2011).

Health

In the past, basically, only mortality data or hospitalizations gave us a view on health conditions. The survey on health conditions introduced by ISTAT has permitted a great quality leap. The current epidemiology outline is dominated by the issue of chronic and degenerative pathologies and disabilities. The obtained leaps in survival cannot always be rendered in number of years lived in good health. This has meant giving more importance not only to health as physical and mental well-being, and to the use of services, but also to the prevalence of chronic diseases, the measuring of disabilities, prevention behaviours and lifestyles. Thus the outline of health in Italy has been enriched by information on the side of demand. The first steps took place in 1980 after the health reforms in 1978 where the circuit of prevention, care and rehabilitation represents an important element, and objectively emphasizes the need to monitor these aspects. In the 90's, information grew in the domain of the Multipurpose Surveys on health in quality and quantity until it became an important element for health programming. In the last years, the survey has been extended to produce sub-regional estimates and has been planned jointly with the Regions, which are responsible of the health care system in Italy.

Criminality

By overcoming the limiting point of just reporting crimes, official statistics focused on hidden criminality, on victims and their characteristics, and on the fear of crime. The contemporary evaluation of these components allows a better knowledge in the perspective of a safer society for everyone. The survey on the security of the citizens was approved with this scope in 1997 (and repeated in 2002 and in 2008-2009) in the system of the Multipurpose Surveys and permits us to integrate the different described dimensions. Moreover, a deeper analysis has underlined the necessity to measure, by means of a different survey, violence against women including that from current or past partners, survey which was carried out in 2006, allowing a relevant part of domestic violence to be highlighted, including the fact that most rapes, as well as the not reported ones, have been perpetrated by current or past partners.

Time-use, leisure time and culture

Transformations in the labour market have changed social cadences, leisure time and synchronization/de-synchronization of times which have become central themes of social life. Life times are central for two important multipurpose surveys, Leisure Time and Culture, and Time Use; both surveys permit the association of the analysis of behaviour during different life times, with that of the perception of time itself. The analysis of the social times of the two genders, of the different generation and the different social strata are of fundamental importance to understanding the evolved scenarios through the integration of subjective and objective aspects. The use of new technologies has begun to be surveyed with continuity and permits us to monitor the digital divide, the social, territorial, gender and generation differences which continue to come out in our country and still slow down the development of new technologies compared to other European countries. The introduction of new motivational questions has helped understand the difficulties met during the achievement of literacy.

Social networks

The family with its solidarity networks has given a fundamental guarantee for the weaker and disadvantaged sectors of society, for new generations in the transition process towards adulthood, suggesting itself as a powerful social shock-absorber. The network of informal help among households has been measured by official statistics for years, and has permitted us to highlight how, on one hand it is still important but on the other hand it has entered a deep structural crisis due to the decrease of births, the aging of the population, and the growth of female employment. The traditional caregiver, in fact, does not guarantee the previous assistance because they also need help. These are women, especially workers which are not sustained by an adequate network of social services and which are constrained to turn to paid services (but only the few that can afford it) or, in most cases, to their mothers or mothers-in-law, which, for the lengthening of lifetimes need to sustain their old parents who are often not independent. The historic series present in the Multi-Purpose Survey is particularly precious for analysis of the structural changes in life courses, since it can be reconstructed from 1983.

Poverty and deprivation

During the last years, ISTAT has paid particular attention to improve poverty and deprivation measures. Relative poverty is traditionally measured on the basis of the survey on the expenditure of households and the definition of a *poverty line*. To this

measure we add one based on income and defined at a European level, which has the merit of being used in comparison with other European countries and in its longitudinal dimension for the definition of permanence in poverty.

Together with measures of monetary poverty, also subjective poverty; to feel poor, for example (in the survey of expenditures), or be deprived, (on the basis of a series of questions agreed upon at a European level and inserted into the survey EU-SILC) have been built, in the perspective of a quality-of-life approach, which has permitted us to highlight not only the area of monetary poverty, but also that of hardship, and, thanks to deprivation indicators can highlight possible areas of political interventions to avoid hardship transforming itself into poverty.

These are only some of the areas of innovation. Everything has taken place first through the development of the system of Multipurpose Surveys based upon a quality of life approach, and through the extension of the traditional socio-economic surveys, such as Labour Force and EU-SILC by introducing new subjective variables.

Moreover, particular social modules have been introduced into those surveys. The introduction into EU-SILC survey enriched the knowledge in terms of cross-generational transmission of poverty, social participation, housing, household debts, material deprivation. According to the Welfare Ministry, other modules were added (social participation and access to services for those over 65; minors' deprivation, critical issues for people involved in separation or divorce.

The introduction of new modules in the Labour Force survey has enriched the knowledge in terms of transition from school to working life, length and patterns of working time, employment of disabled people, lifelong learning, work organisation and working time arrangements, reconciling work and family life, transition from work into retirement, accidents at work and work-related health problems, the labour market situation of migrants and their immediate descendants, and the entry of young people into the labour market.

Immigrants

Starting from immigrants, the aim is a new strategy to measure their social integration. The goal is to improve the existing statistical information on immigrants living in Italy by implementing a new multipurpose survey on quality of life of immigrants. The survey is going to add information to other statistical sources dealing with immigrants, such as the administrative data available from registry offices and the labour force survey. Actually, each household survey carried out by ISTAT envisages foreign citizens as part of our resident population. Nevertheless, the sample size usually envisaged for household surveys is not enough to provide reliable estimates concerning the foreign population because foreign households represent the 8% of the Italian households.

Despite some interesting outcomes that can be obtained by analysing and comparing results of the Multipurpose Survey and Labour Force survey, it has been more convenient to set up a new survey fully devoted to immigrants and their descendants and based on a sample size more appropriate to guarantee a greater accuracy of estimates. The sample size is 12.000 households (with at least a foreigner). This figure is able to provide estimates for groups of regions (NUTS 1 level) and also for those regions where the proportion of foreign population is higher. Apart from ISTAT, the survey has been granted by the Department for Equal Opportunities and the Ministry of Welfare which both were required to implement an ad hoc module in the

questionnaire. The main objective of the survey is to measure the social integration of immigrants by analysing the following fundamental topics: migratory route; employment, with particular attention to the work history of immigrants by retracing, step by step, the migratory route; the family, with the aim to understand the steps in family changes, how the family is split across Italy, the native country and other countries; educational levels and cultural participation; knowledge of Italian language and the main difficulties encountered by immigrants in different contexts; social participation and social networks; health conditions and difficulties to use health services; dwelling type and housing conditions. A section will be also devoted to roles analyzed by gender discrimination.

The poor and the homeless

Even the survey on the homeless represents a real and authentic challenge, also in terms of new methodological approaches to be explored, due to the difficulties in applying the traditional survey methods. Starting from the definition of homeless, by referring to the absence not only of a home, but also of a life environment, a privileged place where people develop emotional relationships, the approach aims at exploring the whole network of psychological and cultural meanings related to the dwelling experience and not only to the physical and tangible reality of a home as a shelter, by considering social and relational dimensions as interpretative key of the phenomena.

In this case, it is not about a one-dimensional poverty, but about the coexistence of more factors which together determine a multi-dimensional situation. Four elements in this case are recurrent. The first element is multi-factorial. There is a contemporary presence of different needs and problems (sick conditions, drug addiction or alcoholism, isolation from social and family networks, difficulties with interpersonal relationships) which could be considered secondary causes of exclusion. The second element is progression of the excluding path. In time, hardship conditions interact, consolidate and worsen becoming a chronic process fuelling itself. This path, which includes breakings and progressive losses of roles and recognitions, of economic resources and of affective-relational circumstances (at work, in the household, in the neighbourhood or community), generates frail conditions making persons unable to resist the process of exclusion. The third element is exclusion from welfare services. The difficulty in finding help and adequate answers from institutional services grows because of the high access barriers. Often, homeless people are users of services until these recognize them as so, afterwards, they become users 'of everyone and no one' temporarily. Finally, the last element is the difficulty in structuring and maintaining significant relationships. People have relationships as functional to survival or characterize them for their intrinsic superficiality.

The designed survey is aimed at studying the identified people's walk life in order to identify the dimensions which better outline the phenomenon, by partially referring to the ETHOS typology, as elaborated from the European Observatory on Homelessness (Edgar and Meert, 2005).

Discrimination

ISTAT is dedicating particular attention to discrimination, by planning an ad hoc survey related to discrimination attitudes towards gender, ethnic groups and sexual orientation.

Prejudice and discrimination, considered detriment factors in quality of life, have

been prevalent throughout human history. Prejudice has to do with the attitudes and opinions held by members of one group about another, while discrimination refers to behaviours directed against another group.²

Since the phenomenon cannot be seen as a set of isolated individual acts, but as a complex system of social relations that produces intergroup inequities in social outcomes, collecting information on discrimination, aimed at providing evidence useful to policies for reducing social stigma and discrimination, represents a new challenge for national official statistics.

In fact, it implies measuring not only perceived discrimination but also stereotypes that are spread in society and that are at the origin of discriminatory attitudes and acts.

Moreover, it implies looking at discrimination as a phenomenon that at the same time (i) may have cumulative effects on different dimensions of individuals' lives and, (ii) may combine on an individual more sources of discrimination (for instance, an individual may be discriminated as a woman and as an immigrant). Consequently, it implies solving a number of methodological and operational issues on concepts, definitions, scale measures, etc.

3. Future perspectives of quality-of-life data: new indicators of societal wellbeing

Official statistics in Italy are deeply involved in investing more in targeted use of social indicators, almost exhaustively, to measure well-being and the progress of society.

The intention is to improve statistical data production in the light of this goal, also through an adequate conceptual investment guaranteeing the achievement.

As we have seen, during the last years many improvements allow official statistics to be ready to answer to the growing demand of having reliable and valid measures of wellbeing and societal progress.

Further planned improvements concern the system of Multipurpose Surveys, by increasing the cadence (from yearly to monthly rhythm) in order to obtain well-timed data, but also by introducing new topics to be explored, e.g. the individual awareness towards environmental issues. The goal is also to expand and enhance the system through ad hoc surveys, aimed at focusing on specific social phenomena (e.g.,

² Some common social factors may contribute to the presence of prejudice and discrimination: (i) *socialization*, related to the role of family and the media (television, movies, and advertising) in perpetuating demeaning images and stereotypes about different groups, such as ethnic minorities, women, gays and lesbians, the disabled, and the elderly; (ii) *conforming behaviours*, related to the fear of losing social support in case of rejection of prejudices and the pressure that families, friends, and associates could cultivated in this sense; (iii) *economic benefits*, related to competition that people could perceive coming from particular groups, especially during times of economic and social stress; (iv) *ethnocentrism*, which is the tendency to evaluate others' cultures by one's own cultural norms and values and includes a suspicion of outsiders; (v) *group closure*, related to the process whereby groups keep clear boundaries between themselves and others; (vi) *conflict theory*, according to which, privileged groups are interested in seeing that no competition for resources arises from minority groups, in order to hold onto their distinctive social status, power, and possessions. As a result, members of underprivileged groups may retaliate with violence in an attempt to improve their circumstances.

discrimination), not only in order to increase their knowledge but also to provide policy makers with data allowing planning possible preventing and contrasting actions.

It means that the improvement of a quality-of-life approach in official statistics fits in with the recent international movement exploring new ways to measure societal wellbeing aimed at passing the mere GDP perspective.

Among all the initiatives that in this perspective are held around the world and in Italy, we would like to remind the national consultation started jointly by ISTAT and with the National Council for Economics and Labor (CNEL) to identify a shared set of indicators of the progress of Italian society.

In order to select a set of high-quality statistical indicators, representing in a comprehensive way the complex reality, a definition of the societal wellbeing – by receiving the consolidated tradition in quality-of-life research (Berger-Schmitt and Noll, 2000) – needs to identify three relevant perspectives (pillars):

- (i) quality of life, related to the individual level,
- (ii) economic and social cohesion, related to the community level,
- (iii) sustainability, related to the relationship between the two previous level, the environment and the future.

From this point of view, the previously described huge work started by ISTAT allows the monitoring of national wellbeing and policy decisions to be supported.

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