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QUALITY OF LIFE. REFLECTIONS, STUDIES AND RESEARCHES IN ITALY

Filomena Maggino¹

Actually, 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. Between ups and downs, quality-of-life issues and researches roused scholars’ interest not only in the academic world.

In 1974, the scientific journal *Social Indicators Research, An International and Interdisciplinary Journal for Quality-of-Life Measurement* and during the nineties *International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies* (ISQOLS – www.isqols.org) were founded and became reference points for the movement. ISQOLS organized several international conferences, the last one held in Florence in 2009 (<http://www.isqols2009.istitutodeglinnocenti.it/>).

Quality-of-life movement in Italy

Alongside the international network development, 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, Regional Social Balance, in Milan) and testified a wide interest in quality-of-life studies at local level.

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 24”, 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

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life, of development and of public action to be used by Local Authorities. The *QUARS* 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).

During the last months, *Sbilanciamoci!* campaign promoted a national roundtable on using indicators of social and environmental quality in public policies. The document produced through a discussion among a huge group of Italian experts (academics, scholars, researchers, and so on) and supported by many civil society organizations, aims at urging national institutions to use different perspectives in assessing country wellbeing. The document will be submitted to the Italian Parliament and Government.

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 carried 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 satellite meeting “Measuring subjective well-being: an opportunity for National Statistical Offices?”, held in 2009 in Florence (http://www.isqols2009.istitutodeglinnocenti.it/Content_en/Collateral_1.htm).

The 2010 Florentine conference: “Quality of life. Reflections, studies and researches in Italy”

By considering the depicted frame, organizing a national conference on quality of life seemed to be a precious occasion in order to evaluate the state of the art and to take stock of the development of quality of life studies in Italy, by comparing different experiences, also referable to different scientific disciplines, and trying to reconsider and reassemble them in a single and joint frame.

In a long-run view, the conference’s goal should have been creating an Italian network of scholars working in the quality-of-life field, allowing experiences’ exchanges and able to open spaces and create opportunities of training and education, by involving also national and international organizations and research centres in the quality of life field.

The conference “Quality of life. Reflections, studies and researches in Italy” took place in the magnificent setting of the CISL National Study Centre in Florence on September 9 and 10, 2010.

The event obtained the patronage of the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), the University of Florence, the University of Milan-Bicocca, the Catholic University of Milan, the Istituto degli Innocenti, the Italian Statistical Society, the Italian Sociological Association, the Cultural Foundation for Ethic Responsibility, the CISL – National Study Centre.

The conference involved 150 scholars from all over Italy, working at academic structures, national (Ministries) and local institutions (Regions and Cities), and civil society organizations.

It has to be reported the participation of a big and well-qualified researchers' delegation from ISTAT, testifying the relevance of the meeting proposal.

The meeting was joined also by Italian researchers working abroad (Ireland, Finland, Switzerland), who found the meeting a valued opportunity to get in touch with colleagues living and working in Italy.

Statisticians, sociologists, psychologists, physicians, economists, architects, communicators, educators, civil servants and other experts made the discussion captivating and engaging. The participation of many young scholars, submitting excellent and original works, revealed a promising future for quality-of-life research in Italy.

More than 80 papers were presented, all of high quality, organized in parallel sections focusing on several topics, testifying the multidisciplinary nature of the conference theme. In particular,

- *Quality of life, happiness and wellbeing in the history of sociology and philosophy*
- *Quality of life and research methods: qualitative and quantitative approaches*
- *Quality of life in official statistics: consolidated and emerging approaches*
- *Quality of life: databases and local researches*
- *Quality of life, civil service and civil society: strategies for analysis and intervention*
- *Quality of life: consultation and deliberative processes*
- *Quality of life and sustainability: health, environment, and wellbeing*
- *Quality of life and welfare*
- *Quality of life and work*
- *Quality of life and human development*
- *Children quality of life: society focusing on childhood*
- *Quality of life in developmental age*



CISL – National Study Centre, Florence
(Conference venue)



A picture from the meeting.

- *Quality of life and urban context: individuals, society and architecture*

The two plenary sessions turned out to be of high level. The first one, organized at the beginning of the conference, hosted Enrico Giovannini's enchanting opening lecturer on *Measuring wellbeing: future opportunities and perspectives*. The global movement urging new approaches in measuring wellbeing of societies does not find Italy unprepared, also from official statistics point of view. President of ISTAT illustrated how the huge amount of information and data on quality of life collected by Italian Official Statistics offers promising perspectives in measuring and monitoring the national wellbeing and requires and urges the improvement of fruitful exchanges with academic research in a mutual growth.

The second plenary session hosted two invited lecturers.

Linda Laura Sabbadini (ISTAT – Central Director) painted *Social transformations in Italy through Official Statistics* in a fascinating and fascinated lecturer. She shown how Official Statistics allow social changes to be observed, identified and monitored through a comprehensive framework.

Enrica Chiappero-Martinetti (University of Pavia), vice-president of the Human Development Capability Association, gave a lecturer on *Human development and quality of life: reflections after twenty years from the first UNDP report on human development*, by introducing important elements of discussion, also from the methodological point of view, on human development approach.



Enrico Giovannini – ISTAT, President
Giampaolo Nuvolati – University of Milan-Bicocca,
professor of Sociology
Filomena Maggino – University of Florence,
professor of Statistics



Linda Laura Sabbadini – ISTAT, Central Director

Italian conference's results

The Florentine event was judged by the participants a precious occasion allowing exchanges, discussions and comparisons. In this sense, the goal of creating an Italian network of quality-of-life researchers and scholars was completely reached.

Future developments of the network have been discussed by all the participants during a working session. Firstly, the proposal to establish an Italian Association of Quality of Life Studies found unanimous consensus. This new association – whose activities should require also the organization of an annual conference – can find linkages also with other national and international organizations and research centres involved in quality-of-life field.

The participants discussed also the opportunity to organize a series of laboratories, in which competences and knowledge can meet local experiences and realities in useful discussions and exchanges.

A particular attention will be paid to the creation of special training and educational modules through a deep co-operation between universities and national institutions, like ISTAT.

The conference shown once again (as it happened in 2009 with the IX conference of the *International Society of Quality of Life Studies*) that the Florentine group – with its activities – became a reference team (in Italy but not only) in the quality-of-life field.

Moreover, the Florentine meeting testified that the topic is definitively come out from the academic field and got firmly in policy agendas and among policy goals also in Italy.

More information about the conference [in Italian]: <http://www.statistica.it/qol>