

QUALITY OF LIFE OF VULNERABLE  
GROUPS INVOLVED IN INFORMAL  
WASTE MANAGEMENT SECTOR: A  
CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

**Abstract**

The article presents some results of the critical literature analysis on quality of life of vulnerable groups, as a broad problematic, complex and topical issue in Europe and worldwide. In the context of the current trends of social policies decentralization process has become necessary to make an objective and subjective quality of life evaluation at local or group level, as a means of substantiating responsible social policies. Resorting to traditional research methods for realise a critical literature review, the author suggests the need for a new approach in Romania, that of assessing the quality of life at local and regional, not national or supranational level.

**Keywords:** quality of life, vulnerable groups, informal sector, waste management

**JEL CODES:** I39, J46, L38

**CALITATEA VIETȚII  
GRUPURILOR VULNERABILE  
IMPLICATE ÎN SECTORUL  
INFORMAL AL  
MANAGEMENTULUI  
DEȘEURILOR: O ANALIZĂ  
CRITICĂ A LITERATURII DE  
SPECIALITATE**

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**Rezumat**

Articolul prezintă rezultatele analizei critice a literaturii de specialitate în domeniul calității vieții grupurilor vulnerabile, o problematică amplă, complexă și de actualitate pe plan european și mondial. În contextul tendinței actuale de descentralizare a politicilor sociale devine necesară măsurarea obiectivă și subiectivă a calității vieții la nivel local sau de grup, ca mijloc de fundamentare a unor politici sociale responsabile. Recurgând la metode tradiționale de analiză a literaturii de specialitate autorul sugerează necesitatea unei abordări noi pentru România, aceea a evaluării calității vieții la nivel local și regional, ci nu la nivel național sau supranațional.

**Cuvinte cheie:** calitatea vieții, grupuri vulnerabile, sector informal, managementul deșeurilor



Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> Administration and Public Management International Conference "Economic Sociology, Human Resource Management and Organizational Dynamics"

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Government efforts to stimulate economic development, as a reaction to the crossing of the global economic crisis should be directed beyond the concrete measures of economic growth, combating poverty and social inequality limitation, to amplifying the social welfare of the population and generally raising the quality of life. Considered the most multidisciplinary term in the current use of socio-economic sciences, quality of life presents different connotations, some with reference to: (i) the conditions necessary for happiness, (ii) subjective satisfaction, (iii) importance granted to life, (iv) the extent in which a person fulfils his/her purposes in life or (v) the significance of human life for a person. Daly (2007) analyses quality of life referring to the global welfare of people, in a broad and multidimensional sense, considering quality of life an umbrella concept that groups all spheres of life (both conditions, resources, opportunities available and results in life) and an evaluative concept which report life conditions and activities to human needs, values and aspirations.

The usefulness of subjective indicators in evaluating quality of life is a most current theme in scientific literature, whose relevance refers to the necessity of social policies fundamentation on realistic basis, especially for social policies on vulnerable groups.

## 2. QUALITY OF LIFE LITERATURE PERSPECTIVES

The importance of studying the quality of life is argued by specialists such as Veenhoven, Bohnke, Delhey, Mărginean and others, advocating the need to both establish social policy objectives and asses implementation of these policies. Hagerty et al., (2001) capture 14 criteria for considering quality of life indicators relevant to the development and implementation of social policies; among the issues analyzed, it is stated the need to focus on evaluating quality of life at individual and group level (quality of life evaluation at local and regional level), to the detriment of national and supranational assessment; such a scientific approach is extremely important and necessary in the context of the trend towards decentralization of social policy formulation and implementation. The diversity of scientific domains which analyse quality of life (health, agriculture, urban management, employment and unemployment) demonstrates both the transdisciplinarity of quality of life concept and the complexity of scientific concerns about people's lives and opportunities to quality of life evaluation.

The importance of quality of life issues relies in a large preoccupation of the literature regarding the management of the gap between countries as especially to reduce inequalities among regions in the same state, based on the negative influence that these gaps have on poverty; Kanbur and Venables

(2005) identify two reasons for which the regional and local quality of life assessment is relevant to reducing inequalities: (i) local and regional gaps are the causes of national inequalities and (ii) gaps become problematical if inequalities are the subject of ethnic, religious matter.

The results of quality of life evaluations done on a national, European and global level capture many complex tendencies and challenges. The last Quality of Life Research Institute survey done in 2010 on a sample of 1161 individuals from 78 localities in Romania, revealed a deterioration of quality of life in most indicators analyzed (sometimes with a return to the level from 1999). Indicators with large positive values are the ones belonging to the family, home and relationships with neighbours, while the most critical elements of quality of life are the fears about purchasing power and job loss. 14% of households manage to save money, and 46% cannot cope with monthly expenses; 76% of respondents feel a decline in living conditions.

Europeans are generally satisfied with the quality of life level, on a scale from 1 to 10 being at level 7 (Eurofound, 2012). There are significant disparities between member states, the report reflecting that for Romania and Bulgaria, indicators associated to household incomes situate below the European average, with values similar for candidate countries (eg. Macedonia). Indicators on life satisfaction with family life record positive trends in general. Imbalances between personal and professional life exists mainly in the South-Eastern Europe, 70% of respondents in Croatia and Greece stating that they do not have enough time for housework because of demanding jobs. 81% of European citizens considered that good health is very important for quality of life increasing.

The 2013 report of the United Nations Development Program captures state an increase in the global Human Development Index, from 0,698 in 2011 to 0,700 in 2012 (United Nations Development Programme, 2013). The Caribbean and South American states are facing major problems about national income disparities. More than 15% of the world population remains prone to poverty, the highest phenomenon being in South Asia, where 800 million people live in poverty and other over 270 million are at risk of poverty.

Romanian public debates on social welfare and in general on quality of life include aspects relating to the protection of so-called "vulnerable groups". The content of this concept includes a wide variety of people, from single parents and people with disabilities to unemployed people, people leaving the child protection system, inmates leaving custodial systems. Vulnerable groups are limited compared to most people, as having difficult living conditions (poor housing or homelessness, unemployment, low educational level, lack of income) witch adversely affect the welfare and the quality of life According to

Hoogeveen (2005), vulnerability refers to those risks which may lead to a level of welfare and quality of life placed below what society considers as acceptable.

The importance and relevance of studying q.o.l. was noted as early as 2000, when the Lisbon European Council addressed the issue of combating social exclusion, through a coherent package of social and economic policies to stimulate vulnerable groups employment (Lambru, 2010). The European Commission (2010b) believes that promoting equality and social inclusion requires efforts so that all individuals, including v.g., can play an active role in the labour market and to enjoy equal access to social welfare. In "Europe 2020. A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth", the European Commission (2010a, 21) mentions that an "inclusive growth means empowering people through ... investing in skills, fighting poverty and modernizing labour markets ... to build a cohesive society".

In the Romanian legislation, vulnerable groups cover a wide variety of socio-demographic categories and social issues, but the employment situation is one of the most important criteria in the definition of vulnerable groups. Social economy is often regarded as a solution to the inclusion of vulnerable groups on the labour market, insertion social enterprises being the most eloquent case (Arpinte et al, 2010). Bostani and Grosu (2010) capture the current economic crisis very well, whose consequences overlap with the already usual problems of vulnerable groups, generating social unrest due to rising poverty population, the possibility of loss of employment, increasing the number of families with serious financial problems. At the level of the vulnerable groups involved in informal waste management sector, such risks are doubled by problems regarding inhumane working conditions, poor health and low life expectancy.

Amid deepening the economic crisis and hence lower living standards (especially for vulnerable groups), the accelerating expansion of informal activities is noticed. In waste management the informal activities are influenced by the existence of different categories of recoverable materials and packaging among generated waste (paper/cardboard, plastic/PET, metals/aluminum cans) which can be recycled.

In recent years in Romania, informal waste management sector has developed markedly, in terms of size, role, importance and economic, environmental and social impact (Ciocoiu and Târțiu, 2012). OECD, World Bank, International Labour Organization and the United Nations have developed detailed reports and studies that capture the general coordinates of informal economy and the activity of informal waste recyclers. Chaudhuri and Mukhopadhyay (2010) comparatively analyze the formal and informal economy, using a range of quantitative models and customizing for many subsectors of the informal economy, including in informal waste sector. Within the literature are identified factors that favor the

emergence and / or extension of informal waste management sector (Gunsilius, 2012), are evaluated empirically the informal waste sector role and contribution to waste recycling (Katusiimeh et al, 2013) and analyzed the economic implications of the phenomenon: informal recycling market, the financial benefits for informal recyclers, the need to improve working conditions (Zapata Campos and Hall, 2013).

### 3. DIFFICULTY ELEMENTS OF QUALITY OF LIFE EVALUATION

The need to compare quality of life within different countries and regions around the globe lead to the apparition of indicators for evaluating the quality of life level. Judging from the perspective of quality of life evaluation the main difficulty refers to the comparability of the available data (Veenhoven, 2005). Given the concept's multidimensionality and its deep and diverse implication it cannot be considered that an indicator, including a composit one, can reflect the entire factors which compound and determine the quality of life. The international literature is extremely generous regarding the quality of life assesment indicators; each country has its own methodology and indicators for quality of life evaluation (American Demographics Index of Well-Being, Netherlands Living Conditions Index, German System of Social Indicators or Swedish ULF System).

The comparability issues are partially solved by the existence of the supranational indicators, which facilitate the comparing of the quality of life evaluation results (World Health Organization Quality of Life Index, International Living Index, United Nations Human Development Index), but at the national level. The level from which the data for quality of life evaluation are gathered and systematised represents another issue, as it influences the relevancy of the final results for an efficient and coherent social policies process; from this point of view, the quality of life assesment should be realised at a local and regional level, not at a national and supranational one, in order to correctly reflect the existing gaps not only between countries, but also inside them. Some indicators which explore the regional dimension of quality of life are Index of Economic Well-Being, Estes's Index of Social Progress, Genuine Progress Index.

Within the vulnerable groups evaluation it also were used some indicators. At the European Union level, vulnerable groups are given by indicators of social inclusion, such as: the relative poverty rate, the long term unemployment rate, the percentage of persons which live in households with no employed member, the early school dropout rate, the household deprivation rate (European Commission, 2010a). From the perspective of vulnerable groups involved in informal waste sector the main issues reflected in literature are sending to the lack of official statistics. There are no reports/analysis/guides available in which to be quantified the informal waste sector dimension, in general (moreover within the vulnerable groups) or in which to be analysed the informal recycler's quality of life. Several international

studies/projects (WIEGO, TransWaste et al) identify solutions for formal employment increase of informal recyclers. It is recommended that the literature explores the vulnerable groups matter from the perspective of the means and measures in which the formalization of its informal activities could lead to quality of life growth.

#### 4. LIMITATIONS OF THE QUALITY OF LIFE CURRENT APPROACHES

The foundation of preoccupations connected quality of life belong to the french scientist Bertrand de Jouvenel, with perceiving the concept as an agreeable way to arrange one's existence and living conditions (Leonte, 2012). Urse (2008) considers that the quality of life notion emerged relatively late (in the speech of American president Lyndon Johnson) in a programme that entailed special measures to increase American citizens quality of life.). After the explosion of quality of life research in the '60s - '70s of last century, there followed a period during which research aimed at completing the economic indicators with social indicators (Mărginean and Bălașa, 2002); the obvious current tendency being to consider both objective indicators, as well as subjective indicators and to grant multidimensionality for quality of life concept. The quality of life knows two major approaches in the international literature: the utilitarian approach and the capabilities approach. Sen (2008) noted that utilitarianism was for a long time the sole theory of welfare. The occurrence of approach based on capabilities (in which the individual aimed not only wealth or wellbeing, but a superior condition which is not given by the amount of property, or the level of welfare) meant quality of life content revaluation; Alkire (2008) viewed that the quality of life derived from emotional states, so it is independent of material resources.

Despite the quality of life concept's transdisciplinary, the literature presents some limitations. Being a multidimensional concept, quality of life is not enough conceptualized; it has being defined with the help of the indicators regarding its level evaluation, instead of establishing evaluation indicators based on the content of the quality of life concept. We consider the lack of conceptualization as being the most important limit within the research.

Most of the studies having the quality of life belong to the health sector, referring to quality of life evaluation for patients with different dental, hearth or mental illnesses (World Health Organization, 1997; Lupu, 2006; Pașcanu et al., 2009) and even cancer (Chopra and Kamal, 2012); in pediatrics there are some studies dealing with the kids and teenagers quality of life in different health problems, but also for the family they come from (Park et al, 2002; Freeman et al., 2009, Grozăvescu, 2009). Lupu (2006) conducted an inventory of the most relevant quality of life assessment methods, from general ones like WHOQOL-100, Duke Health Profile or Sickness Impact Profile, to the specific ones for cardiovascular

disease (MACNEW, Seattle Angina Questionnaire), for dentistry (Oral Health Impact Profile, Oral Quality of Life Inventory, Oral Impact on Daily Performance) or for pediatrics (PedsQOL-CM-27 and Kindl).

Another limit of the current approaches is given by the lack of preoccupations regarding the quality of life problematics for vulnerable groups and in general of the quality of life evaluation at the individual or group level (except the studies from health sector). Quality of life researches are related with the labour market and the workplaces (Peruniak, 2010; Leovardis, 2011; Green 2013), with the cultural activities (Urse, 2008) or with agricultural sector (Casini et al., 2011); urban management studies (Feldman, 2008; Brueckner, 2011; Eurofound 2012; European Commission, 2013) analyse too the quality of life aspects. At the European level are approached comparatively quality of life evaluation within rural and urban area (Eurofound, 2014), in order to identify the gaps and elaborate effective solutions to reduce them.

Behind the conceptualization there are some problems within the quality of life operationalization and measurement; Veenhoven (2005) underlines the fact that the specialist have not yet agreed on quality of life definition and within the empirical evaluation there are used various instruments, without a clear vision, which significantly reduces the results comparability. The surveys, studies and researches (Quality of Life Diagnosis, Public Opinion Barometer, European Quality of Life Survey, European Values Survey, Human Development Report) are periodically conducted by various active organizations at the national level (Quality of Life Research Institute), European level (European Commission, Eurofound) and at the global level (United Nations Development Programme, World Health Organization), but those analyze quality of life at a national and supranational level. Thus, there is a certain impossibility to identify the tendencies and the relevant aspects for the quality of life at regional and local level; the lack of the quality of life indicators calculated and adapted at local level, with a focus of the vulnerable group's problems, for example, will lead to a misleading social policies process for these categories. Briciu (2009) states that, at the national academic, governmental and non-governmental level there are sufficient knowledge and expertise on poverty and social inclusion.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The quality of life literature has to contribute to the knowledge and experience diversification by identifying and testing a new type of evaluation, not the degree of vulnerable groups social inclusion or poverty level, but their quality of life; the essential aim is to divert the focus on identify and analyse the needs, interests and aspirations, as the real basis of a sound social politics.

Literature analysis within the informal waste management domain and vulnerable groups involved in reveals the fact that this issues are scientifically unapproached niche until now and also a tabu subject, very actual for the society, decision factors and non-governmental sector. The subject of the informal social aspects, in general, and of the quality of life of informal recyclers, in particular, is either lacking from the international literature, either summary treated. Informal recyclers are associated with various vulnerable groups categories, researchers emphasizing the analysis of the work conditions and their implication over the vulnerable groups health and of the social equality (Sembiring and Nitivattananon, 2010; Katusiimeh et al, 2013). On another hand, there can be observed a tendency of literature to channel its attention over informal waste management sector within the undeveloped countries (especially from southern America, Africa and Asia), as this phenomenon takes an increased attention also in the developing countries, including from Europe.

In conclusion, the literature relatively contributes to knowledge development on the quality of life of vulnerable groups, in general, and those involved in informal waste sector in particular, and offer some solutions for quality of life evaluation and best practice examples in order to improve the existing approaches.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

*This paper was co-financed from the European Social Fund, through the Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/138907 "Excellence in scientific interdisciplinary research, doctoral and postdoctoral, in the economic, social and medical fields -EXCELIS", coordinator The Bucharest University of Economic Studies".*

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