

INCORPORATING THE CONCEPT OF QUALITY OF LIFE TO URBAN AND HABITAT DEVELOPMENT POLICIES IN CHILE

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The Chilean housing and urban development process has generated social and environmental conditions which make quality of life (QOL) unequal and inequitable for the different groups in its population. The housing policies over the past decade have made considerable efforts to reduce the housing deficit and have managed to contribute to the construction of an average over 100,000 units yearly. They have also taken special attention, particularly over the past couple of years, to improve the construction quality of the products. Nonetheless, this achievement is yet to be considered optimal and, as recognised by national authorities, the current orientations require a turn in gear in order effectively improve the QOL of Chilean population. It can be said that the main flaws in housing policies emerge from the conceptual separation of the housing concept as a unit to that of habitat. It is these types of conceptual clarifications that can make a significant difference if properly translated to policies, programmes and projects. The possible modifications are of special interest, particularly if Chile is to continue being the model for many Latin American and other less developed countries in housing and urban development matters.

The Chilean Housing Ministry has included among its priorities to provide better quality of life to the people. This initiative seems commendable, considering that the notion of QOL involves a series of basics that could contribute to overcoming some of the endemic deficits. These deficiencies can be generated by a series of conditions including the lack of co-ordination between urban development and housing policies and the lack of common objective for both. Additionally, the persistence of partial approaches, separating housing from other social and territorial policies as well as centralist interventions which dismiss local and regional decision making also affect the situation. Finally, targeting policies which are myopic to other problems related to poverty and lack of consideration to the segregational impacts that location of housing can have on inhabitants of cities, are among the main causes of poor QOL in Chilean cities.

However, though the initiative to provide better QOL is presented as promissory, the concept being applied in the urban policies and strategies does not necessarily reflect the holistic quality inherent to the concept. It is observed that in the use of this notion two basic aspects are being neglected. On one hand, the physical conditions of the surrounding are still being privileged

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over those emanating from environmental, socio-cultural, human and economic aspects of quality of life. On the other hand, only the objective conditions of this notion are considered, leaving to a secondary place, or in most cases ignoring, the perception of QOL of those who living it.

Using the results of our research³, this paper, intends to provide an explanatory diagnosis of the situations detected in one of the communities being studied. From this, it pretends to make a contribution to the study and discussion of QOL from a holistic perspective, making practical and methodological suggestions at local and policy level. The Chilean example can be considered relevant given the current context and the suggestions can be seen as a way of eventually improving QOL of urban inhabitants, particularly the lower income ones, who depend on government policies and who constitute a large percentage of the inhabitants of the city.

The Chilean urban-housing policy

One of the main achievements of the Chilean government in the last decade is an impressive increase housing construction rate - approximately 100,000 units per year (MINVU, 1996). This has halted the increase in the housing deficit and allowed the government to concentrate on diminishing it through leveraging public resources with private ones, using a sound financial system. However, new developments have mainly been built in those areas of the urban periphery

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where land costs are the lowest, promoting a rapid process of urban expansion.

The success of this housing policy has been counter-balanced by some problems. On the one hand, a significant number of housing units have been built, and a consolidated financial system established that is admired and assimilated by many Latin American countries. Furthermore, the policy established a complex system that permitted people to wait in a housing queue⁴. But the policy continues to leave few location options for the urban poor. The peripheral setting of these units as well as the complex's scales cause serious problems, both to the residents' quality of life as well as to Santiago's overall quality of life. The high cost of land in the city centre forces the private sector to build in specific areas of the urban periphery where land is cheaper. Social housing is only available in a few very distant areas of Metropolitan Santiago. However, given that the externalities of building on the periphery are never internalised, the allocations for these new developments fail to include the costs of transport, distance, time, equipment, services and infrastructure (Edwards, 1995).

In general, urban policies and norms in Chile over the last two decades have

⁴ In Chile, access to housing is a shared effort from the people (via saving), the state (via subsidies) and the financial market (via mortgage credit). The promotion and programming of projects as well as housing construction should correspond to the private sector (Etchegaray, 1993). In this context, housing policies enable the state as an assignor of subsidies and the market as the constructing agent. The government has set up various subsidised programmes to access housing. The subsidies are offered to the demand in order to fill the affordability gap (Jirón, 1995).

generated a process of continuous physical expansion. This has resulted in a greater urban and social segregation; an increase in the disparity in access to urban services; a worsening of local living conditions; increased environmental contamination; urban security problems, and; the deterioration of urban and historic centres. Because these policies (particularly for housing) are dictated from top to bottom, urban residents, especially the urban poor, have little option but to reside in the outskirts of the city. Their physical and social exclusion is the cause of a continuously deteriorating quality of life. Over the past few years, the government has recognised some of the deficiencies in the housing policy, mainly in terms of the construction quality, the need to target more precisely to the needy groups and some of the location costs associated with the policy. However, much needs still to be perfected in terms of understanding the housing process as a whole, that is, incorporating the real social needs inherent to the problem and providing integrative social policies.

The concept of Quality of Life

Due to the elements that determine quality of life (QOL), it is a difficult concept to apprehend, define and measure, and thus different interpretations can be given to it (Brock, 1996). Though QOL and environmental quality can seldom be confused, they are not identical: given that there are elements of happiness that come from the interior or the individual, there are people than are happy even in the worse conditions and others than cannot be happy even in the best ones. This

interaction between the objective and the subjective, inherent to the QOL concept, differentiates it from other terms such as standard of living, way of life, etc. (Szalai, 1980). Many current approaches have been associated to the concept, mostly relating to the objective conditions of the physical surrounding, excluding those that come from social relations, such as development expectations or the individual perceptions. Nonetheless, in order to have a holistic, integral and more actualised conception of QOL, these latter cannot be ignored. In order to study QOL and improve it, this concept must be perfected.

Consequently, our concept of QOL does not limit itself to the “private life level”, but it integrates all the elements, objective and subjective, of the conditions in which people live in an urban community, both its needs as well as their perceptions, expectations and satisfiers. It represents a way of assessing well-being, satisfaction or happiness of –people (Fadda and Jirón, 2001; Fadda et al., 2000; and Jirón et al., 1999).

Furthermore, and given that communities are not homogeneous in the satisfaction of the needs of individuals in terms of gender or age, amongst others, our conceptual framework assumes the different social roles given within communities. As long as human beings perceive their problems and possible solutions from different points of view, according to their respective social roles, and satisfy their needs under different criteria, a given experience or the same physical object can be perceived in different forms by different subjects (DPU, 1997).

This means that a determined quality of life in an environment can imply very different contents, perceptions and images for different people, depending of gender, age, culture, ethnicity, religion, etc.

Lastly, environmental problems are not understood only as problems of our physical surrounds, but, due to their origins and consequences, as social problems: problems of people, their history, their living conditions, their relations with the world and reality, of their social conditions (Beck, quoted by Allen, 1999). Similarly, the housing process cannot be associated exclusively with the physical unit alone, as it requires an indissoluble analysis of the relation between the inhabitant and its habitat. This habitat includes the different scales in which people live (housing unit, surrounding, neighbourhood, city) and the various relations they have alongside (family, neighbours, community, citizens). This makes the housing process more complex, but also richer as it comprehends that human beings' experience of their quality of life at a residential level must include this integral vision to it.

Within this framework, QOL is understood as a social construction or *construct*, that is, an object constructed by the collective observer. Thus, QOL is assessed through the observer and his/her experience. The proposed methodology allows to "*observe the observations of those who observe their experience*", establishing comparisons between QOL of each of them and measuring the impacts of facts and perceptions and the evaluation people have of them.

Summarising, QOL assessed like this, constitutes an integrating results of all the –subjective and objective – factors which condition the well-being of people in a determined environment. As such, it becomes a trustworthy indicator for urban and housing planning and management.

The following section presents the preliminary results of the application of such concept in the evaluation of QOL from a low income group living in a social housing complex built by the government in 1998⁵. In order to capture the subjective objective complexity of the concept, different instruments were used to provide such information including: a perception survey, discussion groups, photographic record, morphological analysis of the complex, and secondary objective information at a district and city level. The survey was the main instrument, for which the other instruments illuminated the results.

Preliminary results of Quality of Life assessment in El Cabildo Community, Santiago de Chile

The community of El Cabildo is part of the Basic Housing Programme⁶ and is located in the District of Pudahuel, very close to the international airport. A main highway joining Santiago with the central coast transverses the district (See figure 1).

⁵ The study "Comparative study of the quality of life" involves the inter and intra comparisons of three government subsidised housing programmes in Santiago de Chile.

⁶ The most important housing programme in Chile, given the number of houses built and the length of time it has existed for

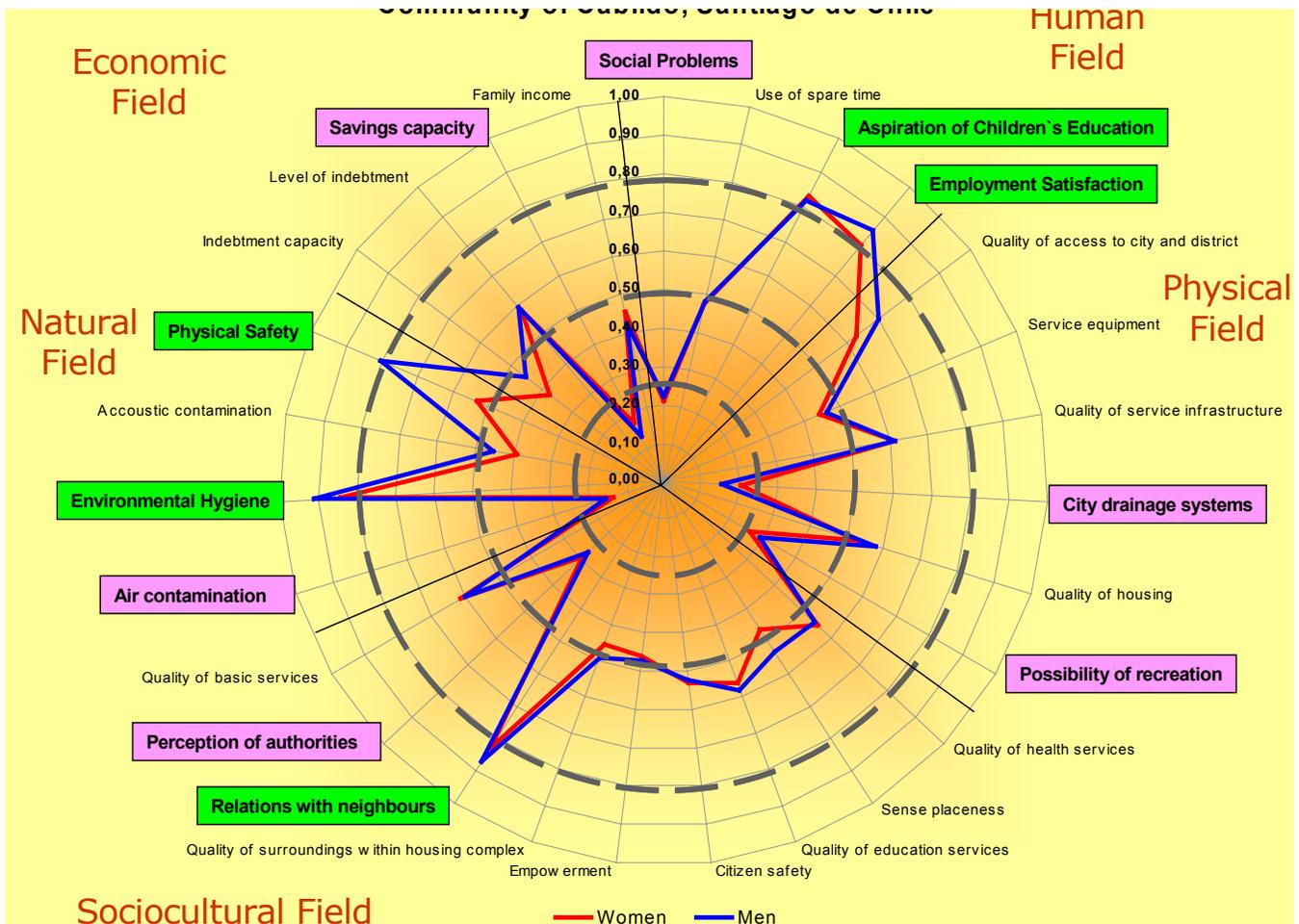
labour capacities and health of people); Socio-cultural Field (relating to the social networks, action capacity or empowerment, sense of placeness and identity); Natural Field (involving the natural resources used by people for their sustenance); Physical Field (associated to the basic structure and equipment); and Economic-financial Field (concerned with the financial resources available).

lowest. This situation can be attributed to levels of poverty, socio-economic vulnerability, and educational situation of the community, which become exacerbated with the country's economic crisis. The difference between men and women is not greatly perceived, except in the natural field where there is considerable difference between men and women.

Figure 2 illustrates the indices of Quality of Life for this community by fields and according to men and women. It can be observed that all the indices are located below the medium line, in particular the economic field, which is assessed as the

A more detailed analysis of this situation can be seen in Figure 3, which presents the sub-indices for each of the fields for this community. Reference will be made only to those sub indices that are highlighted due to their extreme low or high. The first can be considered as

Figure 3. Quality of Life Sub Indices. Cabildo Santiago de Chile



elements that provide bad conditions to live, the latter, as positive circumstances for a better quality of life. As can be seen in the graph, the negative sub indices have been highlighted in red, and the positive ones in green. The first include, social problems, drainage system, recreation possibilities, perception of authorities, air pollution, level of indebtedness. In compensation, the elements that affect in a positive manner are expectation for children's future education, employment satisfaction, relations with neighbours, environmental hygiene, and physical safety.

Elements that affect Quality of Life negatively in El Cabildo Community

Social Problems. The indicators that constitute the main social problems in this community include: illiteracy, drug addiction, crime, school drop out, and teenage pregnancy. This is the lowest ranked sub index. Perceived as very low, indicating that people feel very affected by these types of problems. The aspect that influences this perception the most is crime and drug addiction. However, this field is also compensated by aspects like expectation for children's future education and employment satisfaction that are assessed as 'very high'.

Rain water drainage. The district of Pudahuel has two of Santiago's flooding areas determined by authorities and it is one with the highest index of flooding in Greater Santiago. Within the neighbourhood of El Cabildo, there are no rain water collectors, or any drainage system that can provide a good absorption of water when it rains. This causes an environmental deterioration due to the accumulation of water and

mud and the inundations of the neighbourhood streets is one of the problems residents claim as most being affected by. Most people have very negative perceptions when asked about the water drainage. Amongst those surveyed, the young, both men and women, are most critical about this with a very low assessment.

Recreation possibilities. In terms of green areas, the standard suggested by the WHO is 14 m² per inhabitant. The District of Pudahuel is in the range of 4 to 5.9 m² per inhabitant. The area within the 500 m radius around the complex contains parks, green area, community centres, sporting infrastructure, and workshops. The sub index of recreation was evaluated as medium low.

Perception of authorities. Residents have a very bad perception of their authorities. Half of those interviewed considers that the Municipality does not solve the problems of their neighbourhood. In general terms, worse perception of women from men between the ages of 31 and 40.

Air pollution. Pudahuel is among the districts of Santiago that presents the highest index of contaminating particles in pre-emergency days. Part of this pollution can be attributed to the 34 fixed sources located in the sector. This pollution has important effects that are health related, where 40% of the annual paediatric consultations respond to respiratory illnesses in this area. This community rates air pollution as very bad.

Indebtedness possibility. This aspect is also rated very low and it is an important aspect to consider given that

the possibility of accessing financial credit is quite available in Chile. However, only those with very unstable employment or in high vulnerability will not have access to it. Thus the possibilities of improving their situation via credit would be quite difficult.

Elements that affect Quality of Life positively in El Cabildo Community

Expectations for children's future education. In general, the expectations for the future of their children in terms of education are high. They improve as the parents' education level improves. Likewise, it is higher evaluated among those with higher level of income. This is possible link as these people have higher possibility of financing children's future education or actually believe that there are more possibilities in life with more education.

Employment satisfaction. Overall, this is a very well evaluated index. The groups that largely give lower rating to this are those retired and unemployed, women between the ages of 19 and 39 and those with a technical and university education who have a lower employment satisfaction.

Relations with neighbours This is the best assessed sub index within the socio cultural field. Most of the residents feel they can relate well with their neighbours.

Environmental Hygiene. The best evaluated of all sub indices is this one. Though the perception is positive, there are some problems including the litter areas around and inside the channel, also the pollution and the infection focus caused by the water. The absence of

plagues is the element that increased this scoring.

Physical Safety. It is measured, among other aspects, by the perception of vulnerability to face natural disasters, fires and crimes. Though the existence of a channel causes frequent flooding and police and firemen within a radius of 500 metres are inexistent, the evaluation of this aspect is very good.

Conclusions

One of the main aspects that the preliminary results of this research provide is that one of the most relevant issues to evaluate in a housing policy is not so much the result it may bring out, but the impact it generates in the population it intends to improve the quality of life to. This is because, as a result, the households that applied for a subsidised housing unit are housed, the rate of payment can be assessed, even the improvement in terms of overcrowding can sometimes be considered. However, very seldom are the actual impacts of these policies considered, as most of the time, short term perspectives are looked at. The possibility of looking at the various aspects involving quality of life, provide a richer and more integral view of the elements that are truly considered relevant by the residents involved.

This can lead to the need to develop not only housing or urban policies but also actual Habitat Development policies. These types of policies would involve a deeper look at other factors that are not necessarily in the realms of a housing ministry but that definitely impact those that this type ministry is trying to help. For instance, the fact that social

problems including drug addiction, alcoholism, teenage pregnancy or crime, have little relevance when looking at the from a housing policy perspective, but definitely impact the residents. This would imply, for the housing ministry point of view, perhaps better designs of public spaces can be done so as to not attract delinquency, for instance, but also great relation with education, health and police interventions need to be considered. A Habitat Development policy would be capable of designing integral social policies that include services, equipment, transport, health, employment or education that can actually see the territory as a whole.

This leads to a second very important factor where a national totalising ministry is incapable of relating to the local problems of every community. However, national policies in this context have little local adaptation possibilities. Local governments require a closer attention and availability to take a closer look to intervene in its district. It is not surprising that municipalities are so lowly rated, as they are viewed as the closest link to communities, and have little intervention capacity in the areas most needed by them.

As can be seen, a quality of life approach to habitat, involves being able to relate each factor with the various evaluations that can be made of it, from an objective as well as a subjective point of view. But at the same time, each factor on its own, does not always explain the phenomena. This means that each factor is interrelated, and the improvement of one, usually implies an impact on another. For instance, in the case of El Cabildo, the relation with neighbours can be a positive aspect to

tap on in terms of improving certain situations that are not seen as positive, such as lack of participation, litter related problems, noises at night that, though not highlighted in this paper, are also issues that this community would like to improve.

The way the information in this research is studied can be simplified both in terms of simplifying the indices and making the triangulation of instruments more systematic and feasible at a management level. Though the research is still at an analysis point, the possibilities of contributing with actual urban management tools will be a definite result of it.

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