

XI Conference of the International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies (ISQOLS) “Discovering New Frontiers in Quality of Life Research” (1-4 November 2012, Venice, Italy)

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Résumé

XIe Conférence de l’International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies (ISQOLS) – « La découverte de nouvelles frontières dans les recherches sur la qualité de vie » (1-4 novembre 2012, Venise, Italie) : Ce compte-rendu de la récente onzième conférence de la Société internationale pour les études de qualité de vie (ISQOLS) qui a eu lieu à Venise, retrace le développement des méthodes et les mouvements impliqués dans des mesure de la qualité de vie, y compris le nouveau projet BES lancé par l’Institut national italien de statistique et le projet « How is Life » de l’OCDE.

Abstract

This report on the recent eleventh conference of the International Society for Quality of Life Studies (ISQOLS), which took place in Venice, traces the development of methods and movements involved in measuring quality of life, including the new BES project, established at the Italian National Institute of Statistics, and the initiative “How is Life”, led by OECD.

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Quality-of-Life Research in Italy

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 1960s 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 research roused scholars’ interest beyond the academic world (Ferriss, 2001; Hagerty, 2001).

In 1974, the scientific journal *Social Indicators Research*. An International and Interdisciplinary Journal for Quality-of-Life Measurement, and during the 1990s International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies (ISQOLS, <http://www.isqols.org>), were founded and became reference points for the movement.

Actually, the idea to hold the ISQOLS conference in Italy did not arise just by chance.

In fact, even though the theoretical reflection and the applied research on quality of life found it hard to take shape in Italy, especially in the academic world, it should be pointed out that several local administrations promoted numerous studies and research on liveability of cities and regions. In fact, many pioneer territorial experiences were accomplished during the 1970s, promoted by cities, provinces and regional administrations (for example, the *Bilanci Sociali d’Area*, Regional Social Balance, in Milan), and testified to a wide interest in quality-of-life studies at the local level. (Nuvolati, 1997)

Other experiences should also be mentioned, even though their nature is typically journalistic, like the annual report on quality of life in the Italian provinces realized by *Sole 24*, a national daily business newspaper.

More recently, a campaign (*Sbilanciamoci!*) involving around 40 associations, NGOs and networks working on globalisation, peace, human rights, environment, fair trade, ethical finance, urged the development of an alternative index for analysing and monitoring quality of life (QUARS), and the development of public action 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 past few years, the *Sbilanciamoci!* campaign promoted a national roundtable on using indicators of social and environmental quality in public policies. The document produced by discussion among a huge group of Italian experts (academics, scholars, researchers, and so on) and supported by many civil society organizations, aimed at urging national institutions to use different perspectives in assessing country wellbeing.

In the end, all those experiences were fragmentary, with low levels of comparability and theoretical or methodological reflection.

At the same time, official statistical services 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 1990s and still being carried out. The system of multipurpose surveys provides official statistical services with important subjective data, completing the monitoring of country wellbeing.

As we know, a common and shared idea is that to define new indicators of national progress and wellbeing, both civil society and experts should be involved to define respectively concepts and domains, and select and construct indicators.

In this perspective, a new and prestigious project has been promoted in Italy by CNEL (National Council for Economics and Labour) and ISTAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics): BES (Benessere Equo e Sostenibile - Fair and Sustainable Wellbeing).

This joint initiative (<http://www.misuredelbenessere.it/>) aims at identifying new indicators for measuring the national progress and wellbeing of the country through a process able to involve unions and management, civil society and academic experts, by considering concepts not only related just to [macro-]economics but also to equity and sustainability with reference to social and environmental dimensions.

From the organizational point of view, two committees have been established: the *Steering Committee* (established jointly by CNEL and ISTAT), made up of representatives from unions and management, civil society and other organisations (April 2011-December 2012), whose task is defining domains; the *Scientific Committee* (established by ISTAT), made up of ISTAT researchers and academics experts and professors (May 2011-December 2012), whose task is selecting indicators. The second committee has been organized into subcommittees (defined consistently with the domains identified by the former committee).

In the meantime, a lively debate developed, involving statisticians, sociologists, psychologists, physicians, economists, architects, communicators, educators, civil servants and other experts, which made the discussion transversal, captivating and engaging. This led to the developments of a network which became the Italian Association for Quality-of-Life Studies, by finding a unanimous consensus (Maggino, 2010). This new association – which will have a national annual conference in 2013 – established interesting links with other national and international organisations and research centres in the quality-of-life field.

The ISQOLS Conference in Venice

Starting in the 1990s, ISQOLS organized several international conferences around the world (USA, Spain, Germany, South Africa, Thailand).

Following the great success of the IX conference (Maggino et al., 2009), which took place on 19-23 July 2009 in Florence (almost 400 participants from all over the world), the ISQOLS conference was back to Italy. In fact, the XI conference took place in another extraordinary Italian city, Venice. The event was organized with the support of the Italian Association for Quality of Life Studies (<http://www.aiquav.it>). 240 participants from all the five continents peacefully invaded the San Giobbe Campus of the University “Ca’ Foscari” of Venice.

The programme was particularly rich, covering different topics and issues (World Regions and International Comparisons, Population Segments, Demographic Issues, Life

Domains Issues, Territorial Issues, Social Capital Issues, Conceptual Issues, Methodological and Technical Issues). The *fil rouge* linking all the issues discussed at the conference was the “new frontiers” idea which was identified with reference to different perspectives: how to move from academic research to policy decisions; how knowledge yielded by scientific research can support policy decisions, in terms of (i) conceptual and evidence findings, and (ii) statistical data provided by different organisations and institutions at national and international level; what role can ISQOLS play in these processes.

These perspectives materialized in the plenary sessions, which aroused great interest from all participants, as the full rooms testified.

Enrico Giovannini, President of the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), organised and chaired the opening session on “Did Quality of Life Become a Goal and a Measure for the Progress of Societies?” in which he involved Walter Vitali, member of the Senate (Italian Parliament), who testified how the most advanced political thought is sensitive to considerations of wellbeing and its sustainability – defined through a shared process – as a policy goal; Marco Romano, full professor of Aesthetics of the City at the University of Genoa, who affirmed very clearly how much beauty is important in promoting and improving the quality of life by recalling the philosophical approach of great architects of the Italian Renaissance; Romina Boarini, head of Measuring Well-Being and Progress Section, Statistics Directorate at the OECD, described the relevant process started at the OECD urging all advanced countries to include in their policy actions the notion of sustainable progress and shared wellbeing.

On the second day of the conference, an interesting plenary on “Measuring Wellbeing in Italy: The New Challenges of the BES Project”, organised and chaired by Linda Laura Sabbadini, Director of the Department of Social and Environmental Statistics at the Italian National Institute of Statistics, illustrated the BES (Benessere Equo e Sostenibile - Fair and Sustainable Wellbeing) project (<http://www.misuredelbenessere.it/>). It represents a joint initiative of CNEL (National Council for Economics and Labour) and ISTAT aimed at identifying new indicators for measuring the country’s progress. This launched process involves unions and management, civil society and academic experts, by considering concepts not only related just to [macro-]economics but also to equity and sustainability with reference to social and environmental dimensions. Two committees mentioned above were established, the *Steering Committee* (jointly established by CNEL and ISTAT), and the *Scientific Committee* (established by ISTAT). The whole integrated process can be illustrated by Linda Laura Sabbadini (co-chair of both Committees) and by other members of the Scientific Committee: Viviana Egidi (University of Roma “La Sapienza”); Andrea Brandolini (Bank of Italy); Filomena Maggino (University of Florence); Nicoletta Pannuzi (ISTAT).

A few hours later, Antonella Delle Fave (full professor of Psychology at the Department of Biomedical and Clinical Sciences, University of Milan, and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Happiness Studies*) gave a successful keynote lecture on “Wellbeing and Disabilities”. She illustrated the challenges and resources in coping with disability and the experience of patients, caregivers and helping professionals from a psychological perspective. According to WHO guidelines, intervention strategies aimed at promoting well-being of persons with disabilities should take into account their daily subjective experience, the perspective of their caregivers, and the evaluation of professionals

interacting daily with them. In line with this approach, several studies shed light on the positive impact of individual and contextual resources in coping with disability. In this presentation, attention was paid specifically to the quality of experience in daily life and activities, and the impact of disability on meaning making and long-term adjustment. These topics were explored among patients with neurodegenerative diseases and their caregivers, hospitalized patients undergoing rehabilitation trainings due to motor or psychiatric problems, and parents and teachers of children with motor and mental disabilities. Findings from studies using experience sampling procedures and mixed-method approaches were discussed. Implications for quality of life promotion and policy implementation were outlined.

On the third day, a new ISQOLS conferences initiative started: the “Richard J. Estes Lecture Series on International and Comparative QoL Research”. Thanks to the generous contribution of Richard Estes (past President of ISQOLS and Emeritus Professor of Social Work at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia), the “International and Comparative RJE lecture series on QOL Research” has been established. The lecture will be given at each of ISQOLS global conference and an ad-hoc committee will select the speaker. Richard A. Easterlin (Professor of Economics, University of Southern California, member of the National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a former Guggenheim Fellow, and past president of the Population Association of America, and the Economic History Association) was invited to open the series in Venice and gave the first series lecture.

A look over the audience at the beginning of the speech was extraordinary: the plenary room was completely full when Easterlin started his lecture on “Happiness, Growth, and Public Policy”, particularly focused on the conference’s theme. The audience’s attention was particularly high and the thunderous applause was followed by an intense series of questions for the speaker.

The plenary planned at the end of the third day aroused great interest and appreciation, especially from young researchers interested in identifying “International Institutions and Organizations Working on Quality Quality-of-of-Life from Different Perspectives”. In particular, the conference chair invited Marleen D. De Smedt (Advisor to the Director-General at Eurostat, European Commission), Tadas Leoncikas (Research Manager, Living Conditions and Quality of Life Unit, Eurofound), Romina Boarini (Head of Measuring Well-Being and Progress Section, Statistics Directorate, OECD), and Maria Laura Di Tommaso (University of Turin, Human Development and Capability Association - HDCA) to illustrate the work on quality of life research by their institutions, organizations and associations (data, survey projects, communication projects, conferences and meetings). One of the consequences of the plenary was the beginning of intense networking.

The closing plenary session had a particular meaning. The idea was to avoid the sadness of any good-bye message. The goal was, after having duly thanked the persons who concretely made possible the organisational success of the conference (the Local Organizing Committee and the Venezia Congressi agency), to meet the participants to illustrate and discuss ISQOLS’ future activities and initiatives.

In particular, ISQOLS President (Filomena Maggino) and two past Presidents (Wolfgang Glatzer and Valerie Møller), together with the Executive Director (Denis Huschka), showed the new ISQOLS Web site and logo. This restyling is not only formal but has

also the meaning of encouraging the development and proposal of new actions. The participants submitted their suggestions for future conferences and shared their ideas on how to develop possible networks.

The intent to establish a new ISQOLS conference cycle (biannual, with regional conferences in between) met the favour of participants, as well as encouragement for creating working groups. A particularly interesting suggestion was to include in future conference discussions not only data evidence and analysis, but also philosophical issues.

From the strategic point of view, different items will be considered with particular care by ISQOLS: networking (through conferences and meetings but not alone), sharing knowledge, competences and experiences (training courses, workshops, and so on), sharing possible research projects (by establishing working groups on defined issues, like indicator construction).

In the end, it should be added that the participants had also the opportunity to have an intense experience not only from the scientific point of view. In fact, the participants' experience included also Venice and its particular living conditions – the high water, which on the first day of the conference reached almost 150 centimetres (corresponding to have more than 70% of the city completely covered by water) because of the strong winds from the south. In spite of that, the conference started regularly, including the workshops (“Introduction to Multilevel Modelling with Applications to Quality-of-Life Studies” and “Communication Aspects of Statistical Graphics – How to Use Graphs for Underlining Messages”) which regularly (and heroically) took place on 1 November in the morning. The particular environmental conditions allowed the participants to experiment one of the issues which generally are discussed about quality of life, (Quality of Life in extreme environmental conditions). Actually, the experience aroused a great success, as the participants' boots testified, by adding new insights to Quality-of-Life definition and assessment.

Authors' Notes

The author is Professor of Statistics Applied to Social Research at the University of Florence, Italy, President of the International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies (ISQOLS) and Chair and organizer of the 11th ISQOLS conference.

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