RESULTS AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE CHILEAN
URBAN QUALITY OF LIFE PERCEPTION SURVEY

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ABSTRACT

The term “quality of life” is being used increasingly in Chile as the best approach for public policies, especially for the city. In spite of the strong emphasis placed on housing by the Chilean Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (MINVU), in recent years there has been a strong shift towards dealing with the city as a whole, considering how its configuration affects the lives of city dwellers.

In spite of the relevance of the urban development debate one may question its formal expression in a sector-based public policy and, specifically, the current use of methodological tools for obtaining information on this subject.

This paper shall attempt to describe one of the answers to the previous question, presenting MINVU’s 2007 Urban Quality of Life Perception Survey (QLPS) as a tool capable of providing a more integral diagnosis of the city from the perspective of its own inhabitants.

With this goal in mind, we shall provide a glimpse of the main pillars of urban housing policies, which constitute the institutional framework for urban growth and the appearance of the quality of life into the institutional and specialists discourse. We shall also detail the conceptual significance of this term, its operational use in the Urban Quality of Life Perception Survey, and its main results.

Keywords: Perception Survey, Urban Quality of Life, Urban Public Policies.

CONTEXT

Chile is a predominantly urban country. 87% of the population lives in urban areas, and it is the 12th most urbanized nation in the world and the third in Latin America (MINVU, 2009).

The sustained urbanization process initiated in the early 20th century, as a result of rural-urban migration, led to poorer life conditions during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Chile tried to resolve this
problem, implementing a development model based on economic growth, industrial production and the
distribution of benefits through the State. In terms of housing, this model basically implied government
support for families that requested and received housing solutions.

Between 1973 and 1989, during the military regime, Chilean markets were liberalized and the private
sector became the main motor for development.

In terms of urban planning, this new concept led to the creation of a National Urban Development
Policy (PNDU in 1979\(^2\). This policy established that urban land was no longer considered a scarce
resource; the application of flexible planning systems with minimal government intervention; the
requirement of the definition of procedures to eliminate restrictions to the natural growth of urban
areas, which would now follow market trends.

The private sector became the main actor in Real Estate and urban infrastructure projects. The
emphasis was no longer placed on providing solutions capable of satisfying the needs of the middle and
working-class sectors. The result was an inevitable pressure to extending cities towards the outskirts
with less valuable land, accelerating growth by “extension” of urban centers (sprawl).

Since the return of democracy in 1990, government efforts have focused on overcoming the housing
deficit which had been increased as a result of the housing policies of the military government.

Thus, Chilean urban housing policies have sought mainly to reduce the housing deficit, and
paradoxically, this has generated an urban deficit –understood as a insufficient infrastructure, services
and public spaces– which does not allow cities to function well or satisfy the needs of citizens, and
therefore, has a negative effect on the quality of life (MINVU, 2009).

THE NEED FOR A NEW DIAGNOSIS

Only recently, in 2004, has the government incorporated urban issues among its policy priorities,
highlighting the need to overcome partial solutions and start considering our cities at the center of a
sustainable development agenda.

This has resurfaced the concept of improving quality of life as the “ultimate goal” of public policies,
which implies improving the public and private spaces in which life occurs.

Nonetheless, our tools for generating a diagnosis have only focused on the number of houses produced.
In fact, Chile has pioneered the development of housing deficit statistics in Latin America, but there is
not enough information for a real comprehension of territorial dynamics (Román y Bravo, 2003), let
alone how people are evaluating their own cities.

This scenario has made it necessary to complement with perceptual information the system of urban
indicators organized and managed by MINVU since 2005 through its Urban Observatory.

The initiative consisted of carrying out a survey applied to the residents of 103 municipalities that
consulted the citizen’s views about their urban surroundings, in an attempt to learn more about their
concerns and needs.

\(^2\) It was modified in 1985, introducing stronger regulations, and later derogated in 2000, due to contradictions with other rules. Since 2007, a New
National Urban Development Policy is being discussed, with an emphasis on urban sustainability.
This effort was inspired by Urban Audit (an urban analysis agency linked to EUROSTAT), which began applying a survey in 31 European cities in 2004, called the “Local Perceptions of Quality of Life.”

CONCEPTUAL IMPLICATIONS

A review of this European survey led to questions regarding the themes and issues that should be included in the Chilean case—in other words, how to define “urban quality of life,” understanding that this concept is multidimensional, subjective and related to the possibilities offered by the urban environment, and therefore by MINVU’s policies and programs.

“Quality of urban life” refers to residential city space and its influence on people’s sense of well-being. The concept is related both to the individual as well as the collective experience: in other words, the way life is experimented in municipalities, cities and neighborhoods, based on: the characteristics of each territory; the specific needs that arise through a combination of environmental, socio-economical and cultural variables; the socially constructed expectations of residents; and their ideas on what is considered beautiful, secure and habitable.

Therefore, the operational definition of this concept is the degree of satisfaction of the needs and/or aspirations that citizens perceive, in terms of the physical elements of the city that contribute to satisfying their needs and which are targets of urban public policies.

The survey studies the level of citizen satisfaction with the public space, infrastructure and services provided by their municipalities, using perceptual parameters of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, as well as access and proximity.

Nevertheless, this satisfaction is not only related to people’s expectations and the objective characteristics of each element evaluated in the survey, but also involves how neighbors use these spaces within their municipality. The latter, particularly the use of public spaces, is related to their recreational practices and free time.

Finally, it was considered relevant to inquire about the level of citizen participation and information concerning measures that aim to improve the municipal environment, as well as the main problems they perceive and their priorities for municipal improvement.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

After stating what the survey exactly intended to measure, a strategy was created to ensure the legitimacy of the information obtained, securing its consideration in decision-making processes. For this purpose, the information first needed to be converted into official statistics, and therefore, it was necessary to work with the National Institute of Statistics (INE).

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3 According to a MINVU publication from 2009, the following definitions apply: a) Infrastructure: elements that facilitate the circulation and supply of basic services, among others; b) Services: elements that facilitate subsistence, security and access to opportunities such as health, education, transportation, etc. c) Public spaces: open or enclosed spaces that promote recreation, entertainment and social exchange (plazas, sports areas, community centers, among others).
Given the traditional INE focus on the production of economic statistics, it was not easy to convince it to perform this survey. However, the increasing interest in using social statistics to support the design of public policies (Márquez, 2006) together with INE’s mission to support the generation of social inquiry, helped to finally conduct this survey.

A questionnaire was then elaborated jointly by both institutions and applied in 103 municipalities throughout the country. The municipalities were chosen as the territorial centre for the analysis, since many of the decisions on urban improvement and management are made at this administrative level and also to generate new information for this level. Most questions of the questionnaire were made at the municipal and neighborhood level. The persons interviewed were asked to evaluate aspects of their municipality and their more immediate surroundings or neighborhood. The latter was carried out in spite of the fact that the sample was not intended to represent any particular neighborhood, since these do not have a formal administrative boundary and depend on factors associated to the subjective experience perceived by each individual about their immediate territory.

A sampling method was designed to obtain the most representative information at the municipal level, being restricted to 6,200 completed interviews due to budget limitations. It was also important to estimate the results and divide the municipalities into the three types of cities defined by MINVU: Metropolitan (over 800,000 residents), Major Intermediate (between 100,000 and 300,000 residents) and Minor Intermediate (between 20,000 and 99,999 residents). The sample is not representative of Minor Cities, as only a few municipalities associated to this type were surveyed.

Since there was no precedent for calculating the sample, the survey was applied experimentally, using a hypothesis on resident satisfaction. This implies that the results are also subject to errors different from those theoretically calculated. However, these results are still useful to analyze citizen perception of the urban environment, making one of the challenges for the next version of the survey to improve municipal estimates.

This survey was applied on the basis of face-to-face residential interviews with a randomly selected member of each household, to ensure a diversity of socio-demographic variables.

RESULTS

The results coincide with the problems and needs detected by MINVU’s regional directors. The conversation with these authorities was essential to validate the instrument given that, until the last moment, there was some disbelief of the precision that could arise from citizen perceptual diagnosis, as well as possible discrepancies between the main problems detected by citizens and action priorities developed by MINVU.

Partial results of the survey, organized by city type, are presented below.

In order to process the information, the survey used the following categories for questions designed to measure negative evaluations: “very bad,” “bad” and “does not exist.”

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4 These results were published by MINVU in 2009 as relevant indicators of the qualitative dimension of the urban housing deficit.
In terms of the public spaces (Graph No. 1), sports centers were evaluated worst in all types of cities, with the greatest number of negative responses. Metropolitan city public spaces were evaluated worst by residents, followed by Minor Cities.

Sports centers were perceived as the most distant walking from home (Graph No. 2, includes “far” and “very far”), however, this perceived “distance” is even greater in Intermediate cities, probably due to better public transportation in Metropolitan Cities and shorter distances in Minor Cities.

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In terms of service-related infrastructure (Graph No. 3), health services were evaluated worst in Minor and Intermediate cities. In Metropolitan Cities the negative evaluation of health services is similar, but the worst evaluation was assigned to transportation services. Commerce, on the other hand, had the least negative evaluation.

Health centers are considered the most distant (Graph No. 4). It is interesting to observe how the number of people who perceive them as distant increases proportionally to city size.

Another question of the survey asked residents where they received health care. A high percentage of Minor City residents said they attended health centers in another municipality. These cases were also frequent in Metropolitan Cities, the difference being that in the case of metropolitan municipalities, these belong to the same city and residents have access to frequent urban transportation.

Those interviewed by the survey were also asked to evaluate infrastructure.

This is the worst qualitatively evaluated aspect of cities. The worst evaluated element was pedestrian infrastructure.

These results may be complemented with further data obtained through the survey, such as the use of public spaces and municipal services, as well as inter-municipal mobility to use the former.

Finally, it is interesting to observe that most residents of intermediate and smaller cities stated that their main priority was cleanliness and the beauty of the urban environment, while in major cities it was the
need for more public plazas and parks. A second priority in all city types was appropriate public lighting.

**FINAL COMMENTS**

There is a tremendous amount of information in the field of economics without a proper counterpart of information on social issues. Apart from the Quality of Life Perception Survey there are no relevant sources of information on how people experience their life conditions, in spite of being an essential element for the analysis of quality of life. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of discursive interest in investigating the opinions of citizens and promoting participation, but when it comes to developing tools for its analysis, the initiatives tend to be limited to the legitimization of decisions and actions that have already been made or taken place.

Given this scenario, there is still some trepidation regarding the information generated by perception studies, as it has been difficult to ensure the continuity of this survey: the second version had been planned for 2009 but was not carried out as a result of institutional priority changes. However, other actors have recently recognized the potential of this type of information and are working to ensure additional funding for a second survey with better municipal representation. Namely the Ministry of the Interior Unit for Regional Development (SUBDERE) is considering the provision of fresh funds as well as the inclusion of new questions designed to evaluate municipal services, providing information oriented to obtain new insight on the improvement of territorial administration at the local level.

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