ASSESSMENTS OF THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE EUROPEAN QUALITY OF LIFE PERCEPTION SURVEYS

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ABSTRACT

The assessment of the quality of life by the citizens themselves is a most valuable addition to the “objective” measurement provided by statistical indicators. It contributes to the understanding of the local situation but also to benchmarking in comparisons with other cities. In Europe, statistical indicators have been collected since 2001 in the Urban Audit. To supplement this objective measurement, the European Commission conducted perception surveys in 2004, 2006 and 2009 and combines both sources of information in the analyses on the state of the European cities. In order to incorporate more cities in this comparison, German cities now conducted their own survey for the second time using the same questionnaire and the same methods.

The questions relating to the environmental quality of life refer to the cleanliness of the city in general, to the quality of the air and to the noise level, the provision of green space and the quality of public transport. In the latest survey there was also a question on people’s opinion whether the city is committed to the fight against climate change (e.g; reducing energy consumption in housing or promoting alternatives to transport by car).

It will be shown that the subjective assessment does not necessarily coincide with the situation measured by objective statistical indicators. However, situations that are experienced as really harmful have also been marked as such by the statistical indicators.

A comparison in time can show, where the situation has improved and where it has worsened, in people’s perception and in real terms. And geographical disparities lead to locations and areas where improvements by targeted policy measures are most urgent.

In spite of the simplicity of the tool and of the results, the surveys draw the politicians’ attention to situations that affect people’s quality of life most seriously. Sometimes there is not only a need for better investment in the environment, that these surveys and objective measurements can show, it can also point to the need for more transparency and better communication with the citizens, because it is very often the citizens themselves that create the quality of the environment in which they live.

Keywords: Quality of life, European perception survey, Urban Audit

1 http://www.urbanaudit.org
2 Survey results and other Urban Audit information:
   http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/themes/urban/audit/index_en.htm; also available in Spanish.
Methodology of the perception surveys

In national or regional surveys the intention is to achieve results that are representative for the area as a whole and, if the sample size is big enough, also for subdivisions of this area. This is also the concept of the German Micro-census, a periodical official 1-percent household survey. A first feature of the European perception survey is, that its objective is to have results that are representative for each individual city, and similarly in the “coordinated perception surveys” of the German cities and now also in the Finnish perception survey. The sample is a composition of as many independent samples as there are cities included in the survey. The European survey consists of 75 individual samples and in the case of the German coordinated survey it consists now of 20 individual samples. Each individual sample is based on at least 500 representative interviews and can therefore produce representative results for each city included in the survey.

The European perception survey is conducted as part of the Flash Eurobarometer by Gallup, the parallel surveys in Germany and Finland are also conducted by telephone interviews carried out by other survey institutes. The surveys are considered to be representative, as the telephone numbers are drawn automatically from a stock of existing numbers and if a contact cannot be made, this number is put in a queue for a maximum of twelve repeated attempts at different times. The person within a household is selected by the so-called “birthday method”\(^4\).

Through weighting, the results are adjusted to the population structure of each city. Additional weights are applied, at least in the German surveys, to equalise the chances of a person to be contacted in households with more than one person.

The European Commission and the city groups agreed to exchange the micro-data enabling them to evaluate all data in combination, thus making selections possible by age groups or any other available criteria. In Germany, comparisons can be made between 26 German cities instead of only 7 cities in the European perception survey alone. On the other hand, the surveys don’t provide a national average. This would require an additional sample of the population in all other municipalities not included in the survey of the 75 cities.

The questionnaire is developed by the EU Commission – DG Regional Policy, without much influence, so far, by the city groups in Germany and Finland. The core questions have been kept unchanged. In 2009, however, there were some important alterations to make room for a module of questions on public transport. In 2006 and 2004 there were 3 sets of questions that were also repeated in 2009:

Respondents were asked

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1) if they were very satisfied, rather satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the following services</th>
<th>(2) if they strongly agree ….strongly disagree with the following statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- public transport in the city</td>
<td>- in this city it is easy to find a good job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- schools</td>
<td>- foreigners are well integrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- health care services by hospitals</td>
<td>- it is easy to find good housing at reasonable price</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- health care services by doctors</td>
<td>- administrative services help you efficiently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- green spaces (parks, gardens)</td>
<td>- air pollution is a big problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- sports facilities</td>
<td>- noise is a big problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- cinemas</td>
<td>- this city is a clean city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- cultural facilities</td>
<td>- spends its resources in a responsible way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- public Internet access</td>
<td>- you are satisfied to live in this city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- internet access at home</td>
<td>- in the next five years, it will be more pleasant to live in this city</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^4\) The interviewer requests to speak to the person in the household with the first, the latest birthday in the year, or the person with the next or most recent birthday.
A second important feature of the EU perception surveys is the **comparison in time**. Through repeated surveys in the same cities with a set of equal questions comparative results are achieved enabling the analysts to show where the subjective assessments of the quality of life show an improvement of the situation and also where the situation appears to have worsened.

As some of the questions did not reveal any relevant changes between 2004 and 2006, the European Commission decided to drop some of these questions and add some more specific ones, this time on public transport. Similarly, the German cities participating in the coordinated parallel surveys, added a module of questions, in 2006 and 2009 on the family friendliness of the cities.

Last but not least, survey results showing the subjective perceptions of the citizens can be **compared with the objective statistical indicators**. This comparison shows that citizens assess the local situation without attempts to compare this situation with other cities, whereas the objective indicators reveal just these inter-city differences. Thus citizens may be satisfied with the local public transport conditions, especially if there have been some recent improvements, even though the objective indicators may show some relevant deficits in comparison with other cities.

If a city council tries to invest first in infrastructure and services where it is most effective, it will quite frequently look at the subjective assessments just as carefully as at the objective indicators. Thus, the combination of both gives the local actors the best possible basis for their decisions.

**Comparisons between cities**

The main purpose of the perception survey to make comparisons between cities. The most common evaluation is that of city rankings.
For comparisons of city values with the average of all cities or with target values, the “radar” provides combined information on a selection of indicators:

In Hamburg, people feel that air pollution and noise are less of a problem than in the perception of the respondents of all included cities and they consider their city to be healthier and cleaner than the average of the cities. Athens is just the opposite and the citizens don’t trust their government to do enough to reduce the environmental problems.

**Comparison in time**

In order to find out if policy measures are considered to have been successful and if the situation has improved or worsened, a core set of questions was asked repeatedly in the perception surveys.
2004 to 2009. As improvements in the environment often take a long time to become effective, it is not surprising that people’s assessments also change rather slowly. Nevertheless, the survey of 2009 reveals some significant differences, in the positive as well as in the negative direction. Swedish cities, but also Naples, Valletta and Marseille have been very successful according to their citizens’ assessment; in Athens, Brussels, Palermo and some other cities, however, the situation seems to have worsened since 2006.

Comparison of objective and subjective assessments

In weather reports meteorologists frequently distinguish between the “measured” temperature and the “felt” temperature, as wind may lead to a lower temperature on the skin than the air actually has. This distinction describes objectively measurable facts. The perception surveys on the quality of life, however, “measure” environmental dimensions which are quite different from objective statistical indicators describing air quality and the noise level; they try to measure the impression that the environmental situation leaves in people’s minds. The fact that fewer people think that Athens, Brussels or Palermo are clean cities may also indicate that the citizens have become more critical. And this might lead to pressure on the local government to invest in improvements of the situation. Likewise, criticism of the situation might increase, while at the same time the objective situation has improved.

Nevertheless, local governments take their citizens’ perception as serious as the measurements of the objective situation and are therefore very interested to see where the two assessments coincide and where they differ.

It could be shown, in the 2006 perception survey, that people’s assessment of public transport in their city differed greatly from the actual situation. Cities with metro and tram were not given any better marks than some cities with only bus services. People are used to the transport services they have and don’t compare their own situation so much with the situation in other cities.
The European Urban Audit measuring the objective quality of life in more than 600 European cities makes it possible to compare the objective with the subjective assessments. This is exemplified regarding air quality for 47 cities included in the perception survey, where the objective measurements were also available.

The chart shows that there is no significant correlation between the objective and the subjective assessment of the quality of air. It would be worth investigating why inhabitants of cities with obviously low NO2 concentration nevertheless considered air quality a great problem.

**Conclusions**

Comparisons enhance understanding, and they frequently do this in a better way than detailed, unrelated monographic descriptions. This is, why the Urban Audit as well as the European perception survey are very much appreciated by politicians responsible for urban development. Territorial comparisons at one point in time revealing territorial disparities are as important as comparisons in time showing where the situation has improved and where it has worsened. And comparisons of objective and subjective assessments help to decide on policy measures that lead to improvements also in the citizens’ perception and thus in their subjective quality of life.

Quite frequently, such improvements can best be made at the local level. Here, they can be targeted to the specific local situation. European development policy is more and more focusing on the cities. Local actors need local but comparable information in order to make best possible assessments of the local situation. It is therefore only logical that a new little project promotes the development of tools for comparable local surveys with the intention to show – by comparison - best practices and to enhance cooperative learning in city networks.

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5 Cf. www.tools-project.eu