

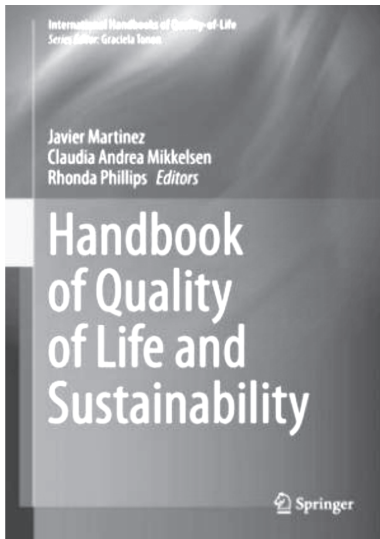


# Handbook of Quality of Life and Sustainability

*Editors: Javier Martinez, Claudia Andrea Mikkelsen,  
and Rhonda Philips  
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*The Handbook of Quality of Life and Sustainability* (eds.: Javier Martinez, Claudia Andrea Mikkelsen, and Rhonda Philips), published by Springer in early 2021, addresses the issues of development beyond economic growth. Approaches to the quality of life have by now exceeded the financial aspects overwhelmingly present in the concept at the time of its emergence in social sciences, or even in the Human Development Index that, in a first attempt, surpassed the solely economic vision (Sudhir–Sen 1994, Sen 2000). Recently elaborated measures, most prominently the OECD Better Life Index, acknowledge environmental quality, safety, work–life balance, knowledge, skill, and civil engagement as dimensions of the quality of life (OECD 2020).

Accordingly, the Handbook places the quality of life at the crossroads of objective and subjective indicators, departing from seven sustainability dimensions and goals: environmental, economic, social, political, cultural, educational, and geographical (Castillo–Chaves 2016).

Twenty-six studies, different in their approaches, methodologies, and locations, provide evidence for the multi-dimensionality of the quality of life concept starting from very basic biological needs, such as land, water, and sanitation, as well as psychological needs such as the feeling of safety, culminating in modern notions such as smart cities.

Due to the economic lag of the Global South, the environmental dimension of the quality of life research emerged there later than in the North. However, the issue of sustainability is marked by partly similar challenges in the two hemispheres, problems created by the unsustainable character of economic-driven urban development and by its consequences for climate change. Even so, the problems of the South are overrepresented in the Handbook. Case studies from Argentina, particularly from its urban areas, are the highest in number (6), followed by the analysis of different aspects of the quality of life in Africa, India, Oman, Peru, and Australia. Chapters presenting comparative or combined research from various countries also address issues specific mostly of the Global South. Much less in extent, the Global North is represented by six studies only: two case studies from the US, two from Spain, one from Switzerland, and one from Canada.

The chapters of the collection are grouped around three main topics: foundations and concepts; tools, techniques, and applications; innovations. All studies share the endeavour of contributing to the increase of human well-being and to the decrease of persistent social and spatial inequalities. In an attempt to highlight some of the findings, this review chooses to briefly present one chapter from each topic.

A pearl of the Handbook is a qualitative study conducted with children in the city of Grand Bourg in Argentina, a mid-lower class residential area, concerning their feelings of fear and safety (Chapter 6: *A Theoretical Reflection Based on Children's Opinions about Their Safety to Rethink Different Dimensions of Sustainability in Cities*, author: Damián Molgaray). From children's drawings and unguided answers given to open-ended questions, their feelings of fear and unsafety in the neighbourhood of a cemetery with a dark past as well as on the streets of the city were revealed. These feelings of unease in public places are elementary, and they bear the memories of the violent past and the violent present at the same time. Children's accounts reveal a sense of defencelessness in their residential area. The cemetery is a metaphor of the unease that pervades the neighbourhood. Besides its sombre atmosphere, it evokes violent memories and preserves a violent identity, as mass graves with unidentified corpses resulting from mass executions from the last military dictatorship in the decades of 1970 and 1980 were found there. Many of the crimes against humanity committed back in those years are still unsolved and persist as a trauma in the collective memory. In eradicating violence and supporting social cohesion, in departing on the road to sustainability, children and their spontaneity play an important role.

An emerging endeavour of sustainable development is implementing the smart cities programme. Much is written these days on this popular topic. However, the other side of the coin, the contraction and depopulation of rural areas, is rarely the object of discussion with respect to sustainability. One of the most challenging papers in the Handbook is a study focusing on rural smart shrinkage

and quality of life in the American Midwest (Chapter 20: *Rural Smart Shrinkage and Perceptions of Quality of Life in the American Midwest*, authors: Kimberly E. Zarecor, David J. Peters, and Sara Hamideh).

The authors offer a change of paradigm in addressing the issue of shrinking places by introducing the concept of smart shrinkage and providing examples. The paper is based on a two-year fieldwork and on longitudinal polling data analysis of the subjectively perceived quality of life in the towns of Iowa State over more than 20 years. Population perceptions on quality of life are completed by objective indicators on community services and jobs, demographics and economics.

An excellent example of mixed method research, the study shows how community resilience is an alternative to economic growth in those communities that face the typical problems of shrinking due to economic transformations to a post-industrial system: decreasing population size, young people moving out, ageing population, job losses, and ageing infrastructure. Instead of forced economic investments and development, as suggested by the current view, an adaptation to population loss and an acceptance of shrinkage as a form of community resilience is proposed. Investments in social capital, building of strong social networks, and community service protection are the keys to success. Those depopulating towns where, in parallel with population loss, the quality of life had increased, were categorized as smart shrinking places as opposed to those declining towns which experienced both depopulation and decrease in the subjective quality of life.

More conservative in their values as dwellers of bigger towns, cities, and suburbs, the population's perceptions of the quality of life in smartly shrinking towns are linked to local histories, attached to the places and lifestyle. Residents view their towns positively, on account of a strong sense of social ties and support, with civic engagement and participation indicators higher than in declining places and, in some cases, even higher than in smartly growing towns.

The low-budget actions of the smartly shrinking towns in the American Midwest are recommended for implementation in depopulating towns across the globe. First and foremost, these smart inputs are those collective actions that propose to achieve community goals. The case is being made for building bridging social capital, increasing civic engagement, and improving community services, which, however, require committed local leaders and engaged local civic leadership. Secondary recommendations are of an economic character: stabilizing agricultural employment and growing middle-skill jobs in goods-producing industries.

Five case studies on innovations from Cape Town provide evidence for the beneficial effects of urban agriculture on social cohesion, food security and healthier diet, poverty mitigation, and environmental education (Chapter 24: *Public Usable Space as a Catalyst for Quality of Life Improvement: The Case*

of *Cape Town's Social Farming Projects*, authors: Astrid Ley, Kurt Ackermann, Silvia Beretta, Sigrid Busch, Jan Dieterle, Manal M. F. El-Shahat, Jilan Hosni, Franziska Laue, Yassine Moustanjidi, and Veronika Stützel).

In an urban context, green areas serve as recreational spaces and enable social contact, both being preconditions for a good quality of life. With municipality support since 2007, Cape Town has been the site for some urban agriculture projects with a double benefit: activating public usable space and public life. In the violent context of South African city life, farms are increasing safety and enable social contacts. In one district with high rates of unemployment and food insecurity, mostly middle-aged and older women with a traditional farming background are employed as farmers, who compensate for their slower work by enhanced social skills and providing agricultural education to the younger generations. As main carers for their families, a better nutrition with organic food is ensured, and income insecurity is to some extent alleviated. Female farmers' gardening activity and social interaction improve the stability of families, too.

Although not entirely successful for reducing inequalities and empowering marginalized groups, the case studies from Cape Town are examples of the snowball effect of small-scale projects with huge potential in using public spaces for community purposes with non-resource-intensive means while at the same time building capacity and empowering the population. Yet another instance of community resilience.

The emphasized dimension of the quality of life is, in this book, sustainable development and the quality of environment. Increasing quality of life is supposed to be less resource intensive and less demanding on the environment. In the context of climate change, this valuable collection offers clever local solutions to a global problem.

## References

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