

Social and Economic Indices of Forming the Quality of Life

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the paper is to analyze the urgent questions of improving the quality of the population's life and essential decisions on which the vector and rates of further development, political and economic stability depend to a large extent. The character and specific nature of the influence of social and economic indices that form the quality of life for various urban settlements are discussed from the standpoint of the extent of satisfying the people's material and spiritual needs and welfare sensed by them. The paper analyzes the main components of quality of life used in various international and national assessments of the developed countries. As the research method, the data of sociological survey conducted by the authors in 2015 as a case study of Moscow region (Russia) are cited; here an important part is played by such components of quality of life as financial situation, satisfaction with one's job, satisfaction with one's leisure, satisfaction with one's life influencing the level of life on balance. Among the crucial social problems, those of low pay, alcohol abuse, health issues, poor medical service, and a high unemployment level were stressed. The results obtained showed the particularities of various social groups perceiving the quality of life as well as revealed a high level of personal responsibility and willingness in citizens to solve the existing problems.

KEYWORDS

Social and economic indices, sustainable development, quality of life, national assessment, international assessment

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Introduction

The notion "quality of life" is very versatile. It is viewed as a system of indices characterizing the extent of fulfillment of people's life strategies, satisfaction of their life needs, and so using this notion one can judge about the welfare of the entire country's population. The quality of life is a broad complex of conditions of human life activity; it includes such constituents as ambient environment, social well-being, political climate, and psychological comfort

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(Ryazantsev & Halikov, 2003; Osipova et al., 2015). Russia is characterized by a complicated situation in all these important aspects of life, so at present the focus of attention has shifted towards the problem of national welfare (Pronchev & Goncharova, 2016; Kovalchuk, 2016).

Russia is known to have regions sharply differentiated according to the indices of level and quality of life of the population. Russia is quite a peculiar formation with its non-homogeneity in not only the economic and geographical, "statistical" attributes, but also social and cultural characteristics (Ryazantsev & Halikov, 2003). Its regions differ considerably both in specialization, "packages of needs" of the population and sources of their satisfaction, which is first of all conditioned by a vast and non-uniform area occupied by this country (Mamedov & Kovalchuk, 2014). Under conditions of part of Russia's population being dissatisfied with the political, economic situation formed in the country and particularly with development of the social sphere, a critical point is a systematic implementation of a circumspect state social and economic policy aimed at improvement of the level and quality of life of the population in Russia (Monakhov & Pronchev, 2014). However, first it has to be determined in what aspects and how much the quality of life differs in various social and territorial subdivisions of this vast country. In order to achieve this, the quality of life has to be monitored continuously throughout Russia (Sushko & Pronchev, 2014). A comparative analysis of the quality of life has to be conducted for different regions, for various scale urban settlements, and for the city and the country, in order to make up as complete a picture of the quality of life of Russia's population as possible depending on their place of residence.

This renders the research of interregional aspect of the quality of life relevant as well as provides grounds for the necessity of a systematic and uniform examination of conditions of people's existence in various settlements.

The scientific and practical interest in the regional problems range has increased significantly during the recent years not only due to changed social and political field but also in connection with inevitable transformations of resource and labor capacity, economic and demographic conditions, and placement of the leading economy branches (Ryazantsev & Halikov, 2003). Considering the processes resulting from the interaction of the region's economy and social sphere is becoming more and more important (Muravjov, Pronchev & Proncheva, 2013; Pronchev & Muravjov, 2013). Regrettably, as noted by many scientists and researchers, the social and economic development of regions of Russia is characterized by a downturn of production, reduced level of life of the population, growth of unemployment, aggravated crime situation and worsening of the environmental conditions.

Currently, the issues of health of Russia's population are especially urgent: the level of physical activity of the adult population, overall health condition, viability, the level of social activity of the adult population, the role of emotional problems in life activity limitation, the condition of mental health, change of population general state etc. (Sushko, 2016; Goncharova & Pronchev, 2015). Health of the entire nation and each individual depends much on the environmental situation in the country, and this problem is known to be not less acute in the Russian society of today. "What we do today about climate change has consequences that will last a century or more. ... This makes climate change

different and more difficult than other policy challenges" (UN Human Development Report, 2007).

In the modern Russia, the problems of raising the level of life for the population and changing its qualitative content are determinative. It is on solution thereof that the vector and rates of further transformation and economic stability depend much. Achievement of the highest possible quality of life for the population is a priority objective of the state. One of the critical prerequisites ensuring its bringing into life is conducting an efficient population welfare policy (Sushko, 2015a).

The diversity of reports, scientific works and speeches on the quality of life speaks about the topicality of this issue and the necessity for it to be resolved as soon as practicable. The growing interest in the quality of life problems range confirms that the Russian society is already concerned not so much with the problems of self-preservation rather than with the questions of sustainable social development and restoration of their role and place in the world community (Malikov, 2002).

Materials and Methods

It is within the context of these difficult conditions of today's life that the social and economic problem of the quality of life has to be considered because they determine its content and particularities of its manifestation. The emergence of social controversy is due to the system of social relationships in which the people exist. In this case, it implies almost the entire diversity of public relationships, for example, the social and economic ones (distribution of benefits), social and spiritual ones (distribution of education and cultural patterns), social and daily life ones (distribution of medical and housing resources), yet always within the social and territorial relationships. Social and territorial distinctions of the urban settlements where people live, on the one hand, form different needs in them, and on the other – provide them with unequal access to objects and ways of needs satisfaction, i.e. to some extent they determine the quality of life of the population (Zaslavsky, 2005; Doktorovich, 2015).

The solution of the problem will play an immense part in improving the life activity of the Russian society as it will help smooth out the distinctions in the quality of life according to the territorial attribute: between the center and the regions, between cities and towns, urban and rural areas (Sushko, 2015b). That is, it will be possible to speak about a more or less equal access for citizens to social benefits – not conditioned by territorial obstacles, – about a better quality of life for people all over Russia and not only in Moscow or other major cities. Being in better conditions will enable people to fulfill their needs at a proper level.

For resolving this social problem, one has to know what parameters can be used to assess the social and territorial particularities of the quality of life in urban settlements, the way how the people's quality of life differs depending on the town or city they live in, the extent how accessible or not the fulfillment of these or those life needs is within various social and territorial conditions, e.g. in a metropolis and in a city. As of today, there is no scientific knowledge about the issues but there is a need of one, which determines the necessity of conducting a sociological research of the problem.

The results of sociological studies are aimed at focusing the attention on and trying to resolve the problems of people's life conditions, of them the social and economic problems being the crucial ones (Davis, 1973; Evans, 2003). Their importance and gravity is confirmed by the empirical data obtained. Also, when analyzing such an essential factor as sustainable development, it becomes evident that one of the central notions of sustainability is that of the quality of life – it is used very widely but has got no generally accepted formalized structure and a standard set of indicators. The priorities depend on the people's needs associated with the level of development of urban settlements and regions. The most complete list of components of the quality of life used in international comparisons and national assessments of the developed countries includes not only the social conditions such as unemployment, demographic processes dynamics, education and learning, health, food and nutrition (Greenwood & Holt, 2010; Janov, 2015) but also environmental aspects – the quality of water, air etc. (Moser & Robin, 2006). Many definitions of the sustainable development mention the notion of the quality of life. The UK organization "Forum for the future" determines the sustainable development as a dynamic process with an opportunity to fulfill the human capacity and to improve the quality of life while also protecting and improving the natural life support systems. The political objective of sustainable development set by the World Commission for Environment and Development is enhancing the quality of life for the entire population of the planet without increasing the scale of use of natural resources up to an extent exceeding the capacities of the Earth as an environmental system. In her book "Our planet. How much more can Earth take?", Jill Jager (2008) considers sustainable development as creation of conditions for maintaining and improving the quality of life for all people in a long-term prospect. Thus, the assessment of the quality of life is made up by three constituents – the economic, the social and the environmental one.

The difficulty of assessing the quality of life consists in various population groups (urban and rural, who are busy with different kinds of economic activity) having different ideas about the quality of life and sustainability of areas. Such distinctions can be revealed via the subjective evaluations in combination with the objective (statistical) ones. Today subjective measurements of the quality of life based on the periodic mass questionnaire surveys of populations or expert evaluations are widely used in various studies. An example is Eurobarometer, the common social questionnaire survey in the USA. In Germany, it is Allensbach Institute that studies the people's welfare; in the UK it is the New Economics Foundation (Moser & Robin, 2006). Such aspects as livability (comfort) of residing in a certain area, the political, social, and environmental stability, satisfaction with the living conditions can only be estimated in a subjective manner, as no objective criteria for that exist. For instance, the list of European Common Indicators begins with the question "Do you like living in your town or city (area)?" (Ryden, Migula & Andersson, 2003; Tarzia, 2003).

Thus, the main objective of the human sustainable development (sustainable development) is improving the quality of life which is characterized by not only the population's income level but by other constituents too, among them the environmental component.

Results and Discussion

In this paper, the authors attempted to reveal and characterize the main social and economic conditions of life in Moscow region, to find out their essential characteristics, the extent of their importance and the citizens' attitude to them.

For an integral study of the social and economic development factors of Moscow region, a questionnaire survey of the region citizens was performed in 2015. The study was conducted in 8 areas and 4 urban settlements of the region. The total scope of the respondents was 300 people, 80 of them living in the areas and 220 being urban dwellers.

The studies were conducted at the level of municipal areas that are social and economic territorial systems. Moscow region is characterized by many vital aspects that were determinative in analysis of the problems under study. For such systems, a certain production specialization, and an original life patterns are characteristic. Alongside with that, the administrative unit is a center of prompt collection and generalization of the statistical information as well as of managing the economic activity, social sphere and natural resources. Territorial subdivisions such as rural and urban settlements differ from each other in many social and economic characteristics and the development level. A differentiated analysis of development of the settlements is essential for understanding the modern processes and forecasting the trends of their development.

In the sociological survey, the sample total had the following gender distribution: men made 48,3%, women – 51,7%.

As for the age, the sample total was distributed as follows: 42,5% of the respondents are youth aged 18 to 25 and 57,5% - people aged 26 and over residing in the urban (80%) and rural (20%) settlements.

In spite of their income being not high, over half of the respondents, 58,2% in particular, estimate their level of life as an average. It can be supposed that the citizens of the region under study have rather low income on balance and the amount specified by them is almost sufficient for living. Meanwhile, almost every third respondent (29,3%) marked their income as very low, and only 12,5% of the respondents having an income of around 30 thousand rubles or more per month consider their level of life to be a high one all in all.

The question "Would you like to stay in your area for the following 5 years?" was answered by the respondents as follows: 57,9% of the respondents would like to live in their area, 30,3% said they would like to leave, and only 11,8% were not sure (see Fig. 1).

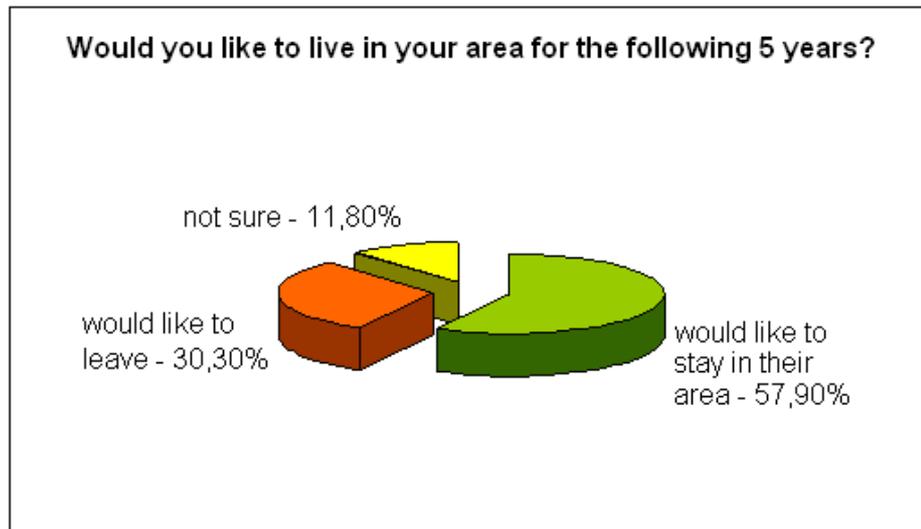


Figure 1. Distribution of answers to the question “Would you like to live in your area for the last 5 years?”

The authors think the results obtained can be explained by controversial feelings of citizens of Russia. On the one hand, they have patriotic, tribal, friendly feelings, habits and native environment; on the other – there is a wish to improve one's life, to get more comfortable life conditions, a better job, a higher quality of life which makes people part with their close environment, break their social connections thus altering them for the better as they believe. It should be pointed out that among the region's citizens, it is the urban citizens who would like to stay where they live to a greater extent – 49,1%, rather than those living in the areas (31,1%). Most respondents, almost half of them – 48,5% – would like to stay mainly for the reason their relatives lived there. The second place (25,5%) is occupied by the fine natural conditions mentioned by the respondents, and a good service of public transport ranks third – 14,5%. At the same time, among the main reasons why the respondents would like to leave their region there are the following: 31,8% want to find their dream job they cannot have at home, 20% believe they will be able to find better conditions for education, and 10,5% think the natural conditions in their region do not suit them for a comfortable living. Among the reasons why the respondents would like to leave, they also mentioned the following (in the downward scale): 14,9% consider the medical service to be not good enough, 12,6% point out the inaccessible housing, 8,2% noted the poor public transport service. 95,7 % of the respondents care about the problems of development of there area, but some 75% of them do not participate in its life in any way.

When assessing the extent of development in the area, 19% of the respondents marked the "badly developed" and "not developed" options, 39% - "averagely developed" one and 42% of the citizens consider there area to be a developed one. Notably, the urban dwellers assess the territory development higher as compared to those living in the areas. The answers were distributed almost evenly: 35,6% of the urban dwellers evaluated their place of residence as a very developed or rather developed territory, 32,6% - as an averagely

developed, 31,8% as a not very well developed, while the citizens of the areas' opinions were distributed as 26,5%, 29,2% and 44,3%, respectively (see Fig. 2).

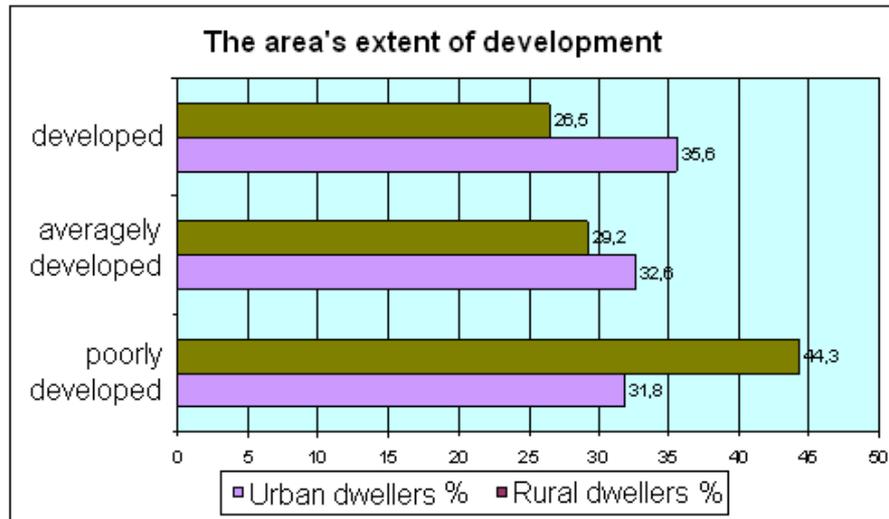


Figure 2. Distribution of answers to the question about the extent of development in the area

Those living in the rural settlements pointed out mainly the following change of the social nature: reconditioning of roads, upgrade of villages, development of industry in certain areas and curtailment of industrial enterprises in others, construction of residential buildings and shops. The urban dwellers also marked the condition of roads as well as the necessity to build an animal shelter. However, in towns and cities, the infrastructure develops and houses and shops are constructed too.

Among the social problems, the respondents gave the first place to the low pay problem – 42,8%, the second – to that of alcohol abuse, 25,6%, and the third – to health issues, 16,4%. They also mentioned other problems that were significant for them: medical service – 15,1%, unemployment – 13,6%. Lack of spiritual upbringing was pointed out among other social problems that in its turn leads to alcohol abuse, crime, birth rate reduction problems; the lack of leisure centers and recreation places was noted too (see Fig. 3).

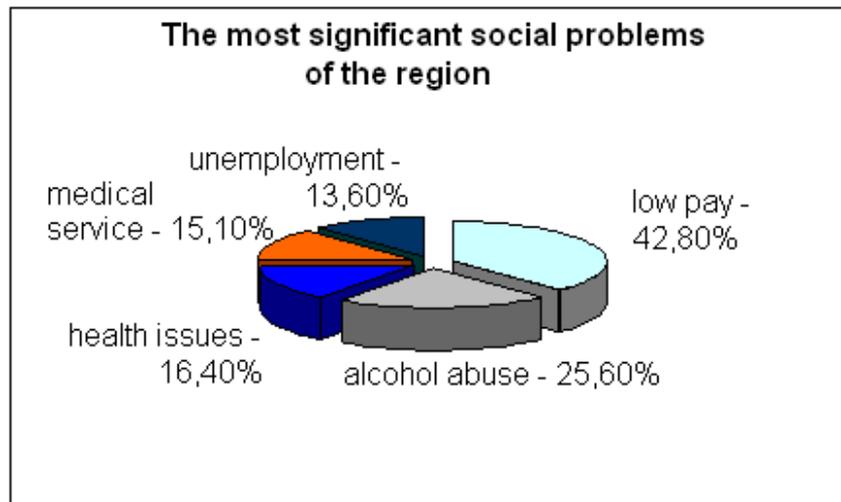


Figure 3. Distribution of answers to the question about the most significant social problems of the region

The respondents were rather unanimous in the opinion that the locals had to be more involved in the social life. The citizens' attitude as for their spiritual and physical general state was also analyzed.

The question "How concerned are you about the environmental problems?" was answered as follows: on average in the region, about 55% of citizens think about these problems almost always or rather frequently, and only 7% of citizens think about them seldom or do not think at all.

As for the question "How satisfied are you with your health?", about half of the citizens (46%) are practically satisfied or completely satisfied (the shares of the urban and rural dwellers here being equal here), while 11,5% are not quite satisfied or are completely dissatisfied. The question "How satisfied are you with your job or studies?" was answered by 50% as satisfied or practically satisfied by their job or studies (the shares of the urban and rural dwellers here being almost equal, 53% and 47%). 18% of citizens are not quite satisfied or are completely dissatisfied, and every third citizen (32%) expressed an average extent of satisfaction. To the question "How satisfied are you with your pay?", 32% of the respondents answered they were satisfied or practically satisfied with their pay, about half of the citizens (38,5%) said they were not satisfied with their pay at all, and every third one (29,5%) expressed an average extent of satisfaction. As for the question "How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?", 60% of the respondents said they were satisfied with their life, 35% pointed out an average extent of satisfaction, and only 5% of them said they were not quite satisfied or completely dissatisfied with their life. In this question, the data obtained look rather optimistic and positive, i.e. despite many current problems and insufficient satisfaction with various life conditions the region's citizens still keep their confidence in a better life, solution of the diverse social problems and improvement of the quality of life all in all.

The general ideas on the questions of development in the social aspect were ranked using the scale from 1 "I completely disagree" to 5 "I completely agree". A high average value and low value of standard deviation (less than 1) speak for

the fact that the respondents have demonstrated a large share of consensus in choosing their answers. Most people realize there is a connection between the quality of the environment and the quality of their health. So mistrust to the quality of drinking water induces the population to additionally purify the water.

When studying the extent of importance of various environmental problems in the region as a whole, the authors obtained the following results. The respondents put the problem of low quality food products to the first place: 67% of them believe it to be very important, 20,2% – important, 8,9% consider the problem to be neutral, and only 3,9% think it is not important at all. The problem of air polluted by industry ranks second: it is considered to be very important by 57.1% and as important by 32,7%, while 8,5% believe it to be neutral and 0,7% - not important at all. The polluted drinking water occupies the third place: the problem is believed to be very important by 46,8% of the respondents, to be important – by 30,8%, and neutral – by 15,3%, with just 7,1% thinking it is not important at all. As it is evident from the data obtained, all the problems listed are considered by the citizens to be quite important and very important. None of the problems was marked by the respondents as nonexistent or unimportant, as all these problems have not local but already regional scope and pertain to virtually all aspects of the environmental situation.

Conclusion

As a result of the analysis conducted, the authors have obtained the data confirming that it is the issues of social and economic condition of life and change thereof that are the most difficult problems in the modern society as compared to other political challenges. It has been found out that social and economic characteristics such as financial situation, satisfaction with one's job, satisfaction with one's leisure, satisfaction with one's life influence the overall level of life. Among the crucial social problems, those of low pay, alcohol abuse, health issues, poor medical service, and a high unemployment level were stressed.

The authors have also succeeded in identifying the particularities of various social groups perceiving the quality of life. Young people aged under 30 have more pleasant feelings of life than those aged over 30. It is this social group that mostly gets disagreeable feelings of life as a whole, ones associated first of all with the social and economic problems gaining scale.

A high level of personal responsibility and willingness in citizens to solve the existing problems is also notable. Most of them are ready for various socially responsible actions. No doubt, currently the question of the quality of life is especially significant for the Russian society, with numerous unresolved issues observed in all spheres of life. And, despite the country going on to a higher development level as compared to that of the 1990s, for Russia to be able to live up to the title of a social state there is still quite a lot to be changed for the better.

The results of the sociological survey conducted reflect the public opinion of the region's citizens about the concerns most worrying them. Studying the data obtained is especially useful for representatives of municipal administration agencies who directly possess resources for improving the quality of life. Alongside with the municipal and regional authorities, the results obtained will

be of interest at the federal level too, as they reflect the necessity to take scheduled systematic measures for improving the quality of life of citizens in various settlements and they can also become a prerequisite for creating the new state programs pertaining to the quality of life of the Russian citizens.

Achievement of the highest possible quality of life for the population is a priority objective of social market economy. One of the critical prerequisites ensuring its bringing into life is conducting an efficient population welfare policy.

In order to create a comprehensive idea about the social and economic indices of the quality of life, further research in this area is essential. For instance, it would have sense to extend the quantity of towns and cities under study and to watch the quality of life perceived change in towns and cities of various scale, administrative status and production profile. A comparative analysis of living in the country and in the urban environment is also of scientific interest, or that of the quality of life in different regions of Russia for highlighting the most troubled areas. For a more in-depth analysis, methodological triangulation is desirable (e.g. combining a questionnaire survey and various kinds of interview).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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