

**Assessing Quality of Life: Reflections from exploratory research in
Syria and Tajikistan**

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1. Introduction¹

This paper describes a new initiative by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) to assess changes in the Quality of Life of people who live in areas where member agencies of the network have multiple programmes and investments.² It discusses experience of the work done so far, which raises general issues about assessing Quality of Life. There is a lack of empirical work to help operationalise the concept of quality of life for research and assessment purposes, particularly within a development agency, rather than an academic context. As such, this paper provides a contribution to the debate on methods and measures which can be used to influence and inform development policy and practice, while attempting to retain the complexity inherent in the concept of ‘quality of life’. The paper also argues that we, as researchers, need to be far more honest and discuss more openly the very real challenges which confront us at field level, which in effect pose limitations on research and often lead to enormous gaps between sophisticated analysis of complex concepts, theoretical approaches to research questions and methods, and our ability to match this with sound and rigorous primary research.

The paper is divided into three main sections. The rest of this section provides the background for this initiative and the process to date. Section two discusses the multi-dimensional concept of Quality of Life and examines the definition we have adopted. The third section discusses the objectives, methods and findings from the exploratory studies. The final section discusses process and methodological issues and attempts to describe some of the often hidden issues and trade-offs which confront social researchers who work collaboratively, often in difficult contexts, and seek to promote the use of findings for development policy and programming

The AKDN Quality of Life (QoL) programme emerged out of discussions related to the need for impact assessment. The conclusion was that it was more constructive to assess changes in particular contexts, at regular intervals, and discuss AKDN’s contribution to such changes, rather than to engage in impact assessment per se, which often generates difficult issues of causality and attribution. The overall goal of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is the improvement of Quality of Life (QoL) in the areas where the member institutions work. AKDN’s vision and strategies encompass an improvement in material standards of living, health and education, as well as a set of values and norms in the organisation of society which include pluralism and cultural tolerance, gender and social equity, civil society organisation and democratic governance. As such, AKDN has a holistic view of what constitutes progress, which goes beyond material benefits or only poverty alleviation, and which encompasses a more rounded view of human experience and aspirations.

As a first step to developing the Quality of Life assessments, a brief literature review and an internal process of discussion resulted in a list of “professionally” defined

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² The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is a group of ten development agencies with mandates ranging from health and education to architecture, culture, microfinance, disaster reduction, rural development, the promotion of private-sector enterprise and the revitalisation of historic cities (see www.akdn.org).

domains and indicators to assess changes. The areas of focus were economic, health, education, the natural and built environment, and social and cultural domains. Since AKDN area programmes operate at a sub-national level, there is a dearth of reliable information which is valid at this level, and much information would have to be generated empirically. A Steering Committee was appointed for an assessment programme, with a mandate for the programme team to build on the concept paper, develop a methodology for the assessments and take the work forward.

Following a brief literature review, and consultations with peers, we opted for a resources or asset-based framework (initially developed by Robert Chambers, see also Carney, 1998) for the study, with central importance given to the meaning which different resources have for the subjects of 'development'. It was also clear that combined methods would be needed to assess the tangible and intangible aspects of QoL. We decide to use, firstly, a representative household survey to gather data on more easily 'measurable' outcomes of development processes such as economic conditions, health, education and access to services and secondly qualitative research methods to explore social and cultural relations and other areas which may be sensitive, but important for quality of life, such as voice and influence. For pragmatic reasons of time and resources, the idea of using 'sentinel sites', which are used for nutritional surveillance, has been adopted for the qualitative work. Sentinel sites were selected on the basis of key characteristics which affect quality of life including: rural-urban; remoteness from urban centres; agro-ecological variables; socio-cultural differences and poverty levels. Findings would not be representative, in a statistical sense, but should capture diversity. Five to six sites have been selected in each area development programme, using local knowledge. The aim of the sentinel sites study is to add depth to our work by investigating social relations and processes; help us to interpret survey findings, and increase our understanding of how and why changes in quality of life occur, from the point of view of different groups in the population. In Syria, the idea of sentinel sites was interpreted as selecting "windows" into the diverse life in the district, which would light up as large an area as possible.

As a first step, however, there was a need to do some primary research to develop the specific areas of focus, indicators and methodology for the assessments. Before discussing the exploratory studies, carried out in Syria and Tajikistan, the next section presents a brief overview of the concepts and definitions we found useful in developing the QoL assessment.

2. Concept and definitions of quality of life

While the term 'quality of life' has been used for centuries, there is renewed interest in the field of international development in going beyond a material focus and measuring standards of living, to make more holistic assessments of change. Concepts of well being, quality of life and happiness are attracting interest, not least because of the widely accepted criticisms of economic indicators as measures of welfare, as well as research which suggests that after a certain level of basic needs satisfaction, material standards of living or wealth do not correlate directly with perceptions of quality of life or of happiness (Layard, 2003).

The definition used by the Wellbeing in Development (WeD) research group was useful:

“An interplay between the resources that a person is able to command; what they are able to achieve with those resources; and the meanings that frame these and that drive their aspirations and strategies.” (Mcgregor, 2006)

Such a definition includes the objective circumstances of a person with the subjective perception of their condition. In contrast, the WeD research group subsumes QoL under well-being and they have ‘provisionally’ defined QoL as

“The outcome of the gap between people’s goals and perceived resources, in the context of their environment, culture, values, and experiences” (Camfield et al, 2006).

Subjective elements have been privileged in this definition of quality of life, whereas the definition adopted by AKDN is closer to wellbeing, containing both subjective and objective elements.

Researchers have suggested that wellbeing is a key concept in international development (Gough et al, 2006) while others argue that policy makers should regard promoting happiness as the ultimate aim of development (Layard, 2005). Happiness is defined as, “the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his/her life as-a-whole favourably” (Veenhoven, accessed 2007: 2), and is synonymous with life satisfaction and subjective well-being.

For AKDN, the work on wellbeing is of conceptual relevance to our work on QoL as it provides a broad framework and combines subjective and objective elements. WeD assessments include a Resources and Needs Questionnaire (RANQ) which assesses five categories of resources: material, human, social, cultural and natural, similar to those used in some livelihood frameworks. The IES follows from RANQ and is designed to show how the portfolio of resources that a household commands are translated into income or other means by which needs and goals are satisfied, over a period of one year.

The work on happiness is underpinned by an idea that happiness underlies the ‘why’ of all activity (Layard, 2005). This idea has been contested; Sen (1993) argues that people strive for more than their own happiness and some of the WeD research (Camfield, 2006) indicates that subjective QoL is not simply equated with happiness, but is related to the aspects of life people regard as important. Nevertheless, Layard’s review to identify the main determinants of happiness is of interest, and includes family relationships, work, community and friends, health, personal freedom, personal values and financial situation (Layard, 2005).

Shifts in thinking, relevant to QoL debates, may be at least partially attributed to the very diverse global “participation movement”, which has contributed to an understanding of contextual, subjective and non-material aspects of human experience. It can be exemplified by the work of Robert Chambers. His work on poverty, vulnerability and livelihoods (Chambers, 1983; 1989; 1995), based on participatory research methods, illustrates the multi-dimensional nature of poverty including social and physical isolation, powerlessness and lack of voice, low social status and physical weakness.

This work has permeated development agencies through the 1990s, and acceptance has grown of the need for a broader conceptual and methodological approach to the assessment of poverty. This tendency is best illustrated by the huge increase in participatory poverty assessments (PPAs) carried out in developing countries, to improve the effectiveness of public policy aimed at poverty reduction. The largest of these is the 'Voices of the Poor' study, carried out under the auspices of the World Bank in preparation for the World Development Report 2000/2001, which gathered views of 60,000 poor women and men in 60 countries. The Voices of the Poor study (Narayan et al, 2000) emphasises the psychological and social dimensions, as well as the material aspects, of poor people's experience of poverty. While the study has been subject to criticism, it did provide evidence that a "good life" includes material well-being, physical well-being, security, freedom of choice and action and social well-being (good relations in family and community).

Unlike poverty studies, using Quality of Life as a guiding concept for development work has the advantage of a starting point which examines what people have rather than what people do not have. A similar break was made from poverty studies by the adoption of the concept of livelihoods, which incorporates five types of assets: human, social, natural, physical and financial but QoL incorporates an even more rounded view of human experience and aspirations.

Economists, sociologists, psychologists and political scientists contribute to ongoing debates on what constitutes quality of life (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993; Alkire, 2002). The term wellbeing is also used interchangeably in much of the literature. The debate revolves around whether the quality of life is related to personal utility (focusing on pleasures, happiness or desire fulfilment), absolute or relative opulence (focusing on commodity bundles, real incomes or real wealth), assessments of negative freedoms (focusing on procedural fulfilment of libertarian rights and rules of non-interference), comparisons of means of freedom and resource holdings as a basis of just equality (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993).

Amartya Sen (1993, 1999) dominates this debate through his "Capability Theory", which essentially argues that the capability of a person is concerned with his or her ability to achieve various valuable functionings as part of living. Functionings represent parts of the state of a person – in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life. The capability of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection. Thus, living is viewed as a combination of various 'doings and beings', with the quality of life to be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings. Sen points out that QoL is not only about individual well-being, but also about how an individual interacts with community and society.

Sen argues that our need for commodities is relative, depending on the social and economic context we find ourselves in, but our need for capabilities – the freedom properly to function as members of human society – is absolute. Poverty is therefore seen as a deprivation in capabilities. Low income is not the only influence on capability deprivation and outcomes are important, not the income itself. He has suggested that freedom and dignity may be first order outcomes of importance, rather than the reduction of material deprivation.

Some functionings are very elementary, such as being adequately nourished, being in good health, etc., and these are likely to be strongly valued by all. Others may be more complex, but still widely valued, such as achieving self-respect or being socially integrated, though individuals may differ from each other in the weight they attach to these different functionings. Particular societies and groups within society may define what constitutes wellbeing differently. Alkire (2002) provides a useful overview of the dimensions of human development, assessing domains and indicators from a wide variety of literature, including QoL work. He notes that iteration between practical exercises in different cultural contexts and a ‘theoretical’ set of dimensions would do real work in expanding the dimensions which are relevant for poverty reduction activities, and tempering one-sided materialism. One of the objectives of AKDN’s exploratory studies was precisely to examine our initial set of domains and indicators, in the light of people’s own perceptions of QoL in selected sites in Syria and Tajikistan.

3. The exploratory studies

Area contexts – in a nutshell

Two-week exploratory studies were carried out in two area development programmes selected for the Quality of Life Assessments, namely, Salamieh district in Syria (April 2007) and Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBO) in Tajikistan (May 2007).

Syria is a middle-income country, which has pursued a cautious liberalisation of its centrally planned economy (since the year 2000). With a youthful and growing population, the government has turned to private sector institutions to play a greater role in creating employment opportunities and social services. The role of civil society organisations in development-related activity is relatively new and underdeveloped. Salamieh has a strong Muslim Ismaili cultural and religious heritage. Although data are scarce, the population of the district is about 250,000 (Registration data), which is probably an overestimate as it includes people who have out migrated. The urban-rural split is 35:65, Agriculture and livestock-rearing continue to be prominent livelihood strategies, but already scarce access to water for drinking and irrigation purposes is diminishing. People are also engaged in trading and business as well as professional and vocational occupations.

Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBO) is one of the most remote parts of the former Soviet Union, isolated to some degree from the rest of Tajikistan by the Pamir mountains. The population is about 210,000, the majority being Muslim Ismailis who are descendants of Eastern Iranian people. The urban-rural split is about 13:87. The region has limited arable land and harsh climatic conditions, although the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) working with the Mountain Societies Development Support Programme (MSDSP) managed to raise agricultural productivity in the years following the peace accord in 1997. GBO is a major transit centre for Afghan narcotics. Unemployment is a huge problem and migration is a common coping

strategy.³ As in Syria, privatisation and liberalisation is recent, and people still expect government to provide jobs and services. Civil society organisation, in particular Village Organisations, has been a major focus and strategy of AKF/MSDSP and a vehicle for improvement in many areas of life.

Two sites were selected for field work in Salamieh district and two in Gorno Badhakshan (GBAO):

- Barri-as-Sharqi village and alQaraji, a peri-urban neighbourhood in Salamieh town.
- Khosa village in Porshnev and Mahalla Nosiri Khisrav, an urban neighbourhood in Khorog,

In GBAO, Khosa village is close to Khorog, benefits from the urban economy and services, and does not necessarily reflect QoL issues of up-valley villages. We will ensure that the testing of instruments for the main study includes more remote sites.

Exploratory studies: Objectives and methods:

The objectives of the two-week exploratory studies were firstly, to understand people's own socially and culturally embedded perceptions of what is a 'good life', what it is to live well, and the domains and resources that they consider important; and secondly, to prepare for the main studies, including developing the skills of a local team in using a range of methods including individual interviews and focus group discussions.

We started with a three-day workshop to train the field researchers, followed by field work and debriefing sessions for about a week, where we discussed both the process and the findings from the field.

In each site, one discussion was carried out with key informants, to obtain their views of QoL and to rank community/neighbourhood households in three categories (high, medium and poor QoL), so that we could select a variety of individuals for further work. We were aware that although QoL may vary within households, we were using a rough division by households to be able to select a spread of individual respondents. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with men, women, young men and young women, from each of the three categories, with a total of 12 interviews per site as well as six group discussions (women and men separately). We asked many similar questions in both individual interviews and group discussions to triangulate the information we received. Two Venn diagram exercises for institutional mapping, one with women and one with men, were held in each site, to obtain an understanding of the importance of various institutions to their QoL, and the quality of their relationships with the institutions.

³ Figures are difficult to obtain and need to be treated with much caution: estimates of unemployment rates vary between 14% (job applicants) and 64% and migration is estimated at 20% of the working age population (see Imomnazar Hoqnazar, Migrants of Badakhshan, MSDSP, 2004)

Characteristics of a good and poor quality of life

The first task we faced was to ensure an adequate translation of the concept of QoL in Arabic and in Tajik. In Arabic the term “nawayet hayat” is said to be a good translation, but it is rather an academic term and had to be further explained as the ‘whole context and condition of your life’. In Tajik, “sathi zindagi” was used as the closest term for quality of life. In both study contexts, quality of life was understood as a multi-dimensional concept including material, social, cultural, psychological and for some people, spiritual aspects of life.

In GBAO, a household with a good quality of life was characterised as follows: The household had a high income through salaries, remittances and/or private business; in rural areas high income would be linked to high numbers of livestock, a good plot of arable land and availability of water. Good housing and ownership of a private vehicle were important in both urban and rural sites. Family members had a good education, they were healthy, and were able to engage in recreational activities. There was mutual understanding among family members and active involvement in the life of the community. Peace and understanding in the community was felt to enhance quality of life.

In Salamieh, the picture was similar, but with access to modern technology (computers, satellites, internet technology) given more importance as an indicator of a good quality of life.

Conversely, in both countries, a poor quality of life was associated with unemployment, low incomes, lack of land and water and poor education. In both countries, in the peri-urban sites, insecure as well as low incomes were highlighted as contributing to a poor QoL. A critical factor was poor health or/and disability in family. In Khorog and Salamieh, having many children, or no children, was seen by some to contribute to a poor QoL. Addiction to alcohol, smoking (both countries) and drug abuse (GBAO) were referred to as contributing to poor QoL.

Laziness and lack of skills was also referred to in GBAO, as a contributor to poor QoL, more often by better-off than worse-off respondents- so it be indicative of the attitudes of the latter group. In the rural site in GBAO, lack of livestock was another factor which contributed to poor QoL, whereas in the urban site, it was not owning a house, but having to rent or share.

In Salamieh, the differences between the two sites were more marked, as they might have been in GBAO, if we had included poorer and more remote sites. In the peri-urban site, people felt particularly marginalised, deprived of basic services and lacking in voice and influence. They felt that their economic conditions combined with the fact that they did not know people in positions of power and influence, to keep them from improving the quality of their lives.

There was a surprising degree of consensus about what constituted a good quality of life, although some generational and gender differences did arise. Some young people, particularly in Salamieh, Syria, felt that their decision-making was restricted by their families, and that more independence would enhance their quality of life. In Salamieh,

some young women felt that their families restricted their movements and the friends they chose to have, and they wanted more freedom.

Both countries are in relatively recent processes of ‘transition’ from state-led to market-driven development and tensions were expressed by some (older) people, between values of social cohesion and respect for others, and activities and new imperatives to get ahead as individuals.

Domains and resources

The study reinforced and reminded us of the inter-relationships between domains. There were many examples across domains, but the importance of the economic domain for a good quality of life was emphasised by respondents in discussions, to meet basic needs and because economic factors conditioned access to education and health services, and influenced social status, participation in society, well-being and psychological stress levels. However, governance and social relations – voice, contacts with powerful people and influence over decisions- were said to affect access to economic resources as well as other domains. Subjects of the research often made the point that although the economic domain was critical, an improvement was not necessarily accompanied by an increase in satisfaction with other important domains, for example, health or social relations.

In both contexts, the ongoing transition towards market-based economies has increased income inequalities. In the Khorog site, some tensions were expressed between ethics and social cohesion, on the one hand, and the pursuit of income, including by illicit means, on the other hand. In Salamieh, the effect of inequalities was raised in the context of changing technology; for example, children wanted computers that some members of their peer group have, and many parents cannot afford them, leading to stress and discontent. The exploratory studies confirm research which indicates that inequality has an important bearing on perceptions of quality of life.

This rest of this section presents key lessons related to each of the proposed domains for the main study.

Economic:

In the economic domain, income and assets were very important to people. Financial stability and security were frequently referred to, in both the country studies. A simple indicator for insecurity, which we will use in the survey, is the reliance on daily wages. Conversely, employment, particularly the stability offered by government jobs, was viewed as very important in both contexts. In both places, educated youth unemployment is an increasing problem (with negative social implications).

In Salamieh, there were also references to good household resource management which results in financial stability and a better quality of life, that is, a household could have relatively high earnings but not manage resources well, resulting in instability, stress and a poorer quality of life. In addition, increased working hours (to earn adequate income) were seen to affect the time available for family and community contact and social activity, which affect QoL.

Migration is an important strategy to provide employment and income, in both areas. In GBAO, remittances were critically important to family who stay, but migration also had some negative repercussions – from lack of labour at the household level to psychological distress for family left behind, particularly as they knew that migrants often faced job difficulties and discrimination at their destinations, particularly in Russia. Loans were often taken for the costs of migration and repaid by remittances. We have included questions on migration in the QoL assessment, because it affects the quality of life of those who stay behind as well, and because it is unlikely to be picked up in sectoral or programme level assessments.

Health:

Good health was emphasised in all the sites studied; ill-health and disability in the household have a strong bearing on quality of life, as an affected individual or as a carer. Poor health and disability emerged as one of the main characteristics of a household which had a poor quality of life.

In Salamieh, people pointed to risk-taking (eg the prolific and unsafe use of motorcycles) and addictions (alcohol, smoking, gambling) as having a detrimental effect on health and quality of life of the household. In GBAO, alcohol, smoking and drug abuse were also referred to and women participants in group discussions noted that poor border control with Afghanistan had resulted in increased drug smuggling, with negative health and social consequences.

In both GBAO and Salamieh, unofficial charges were made for at least some health care services and negatively influenced access to adequate services, particularly for poorer groups.

Education:

Education in both GBAO and Salamieh was valued highly, both as an end in itself and as a means for better livelihoods, especially for children/young people. In Salamieh, being educated was also linked to being cultured, open-minded and knowledgeable. Access to quality education was an aspiration voiced by young people and by their parents who wanted to help provide it (in both countries), but education was expensive and many faced economic barriers. In addition, youth faced unemployment in both contexts ... and education without opportunities resulted in stress and frustration which affected QoL.

In both contexts, we are dealing with a highly educated population. Thus, completed secondary and tertiary education are more relevant indicators for quality of life than literacy and primary schooling.

Natural and built environment:

Not surprisingly, access to land was very important in the mountainous context of GBAO. In both Salamieh and GBAO, access to water for irrigation necessary for productive agriculture.

The negative effect of a lack of basic services to QoL was highlighted in the case of the peri-urban site in Salamieh, where basic services were highly inadequate. Here, residents suffered a lack of water, electricity, roads, sanitation and garbage collection.

A drawing and discussion exercise with children (9-12 years old) was carried out in Salamieh. Children referred to gardens, parks and playgrounds as contributing to their QoL.

Social and cultural domain:

In the interviews, we experimented with the Person-Generated Index (PGI) of Quality of Life (based on Ruta et al, 2004) which asks individuals to choose five important areas of their lives and spend a maximum of 10 points on the various areas. The PGI in slightly different forms has been used in various countries by WeD researchers (Camfield, 2006). It was a useful tool to generate individual reflection on the areas in life felt to be most important, and confirmed the importance of the social and cultural domain.⁴

In individual interviews, respondents most often cited examples relating to social relations as being essential to their quality of life. This echoes much of the research on wellbeing, happiness and quality of life, which shows how important close relationships are to people. At household level, stable and harmonious family relations and the quality of marital relations were frequently referred to in both individual interviews and group discussions. Family relations were very important. In both Salamieh and GBAO, we are dealing with “collectivist” rather than “individualist” societies (Camfield,2006), where the value given to social harmony seems to be higher than individual control and freedom, although socio-economic processes of liberalisation and competition do seem to be increasing pressure on such priorities.

Culture, defined as dynamic processes of values and norms, are influenced by particular historical trajectories as well as by globalization processes, and even in this small exploratory study, conflict and change were apparent. Maintaining traditions and ethical conduct was referred to in one of the sites in Salamieh, as contributing to QoL, as was the need to bring up children to be honest and respectful. However, I have already referred to cases of young women and men who felt unduly restricted by ‘traditional’ parental values.

In the wider sphere, “peace and understanding in society” (social cohesion), were viewed as important contributors to overall QoL. In the neighbourhood in Khorog, it is possible that peace and understanding was referred to so frequently because there had been social conflict in this urban setting - and the area had recently made gains in promoting unity through the organisation of neighbourhood committee, which was actively seeking to improve the lives of residents.

⁴ However, understanding the exercise was difficult for some respondents, and people sometimes interpreted ‘important areas’ as immediate goals in their lives.

Voice and Influence:

In Salamieh, voice and influence was referred to extensively in the peri-urban context, where the study community felt marginalised and ill-served by local authorities. In GBAO too, there were also spontaneous references to issues of representation and influence, in both the village and urban neighbourhood. The urban site provided a good example of how government and non-governmental/informal leaders can work well together. Local leadership, in this case, was seen to represent residents' views, working to garner resources and encourage voluntary action - and the community had recently made progress in collective action to address common problems.

Psychological and Spiritual domain:

The studies in both Salamieh and GBAO made it clear that psychological and spiritual aspects are important influences on quality of life. We hope to capture this aspect of life in the sentinel sites study but acknowledge that we do not have the skills or resources to assess it adequately. Self-esteem, confidence, hope and dignity were all important contributors to an individual's quality of life, and the opposite feelings had a negative effect on QoL. Group discussions revealed that people recognised individual psychological traits and attitudes as a contributor to that person's quality of life. A minority also mentioned the importance of religion in affecting the quality of their lives; and in GBAO, the individuals who did identify this aspect, rated it very highly in contributing to their QoL. In GBAO, there was widespread consciousness of the history and cultural identity of Muslim Ismailis (repressed during the time of the Soviet Union), and the regular visits of His Highness the Aga Khan since 1996 seemed to have had a deep and positive effect.

The exploratory work was very useful in understanding people's perceptions of what domains are important in life, the relationships between domains and what constitutes a good and poor QoL in the different contexts. It helped us refine areas of focus for the sentinel sites study and indicators and response categories for the survey. The experience also provided lessons for the methods we will use in the main study, which is the focus in the final section.

4. Reflections on process and methodology

As discussed in section 1, we have opted to use representative household surveys to collect information which we felt could be elicited using closed questions and which is amenable to quantification. This includes 'outcome' level indicators as well as some opinion and satisfaction scales, which have been tried and tested in other contexts. There are trade-offs in arriving at a cost-effective and replicable methodology for assessing quality of life. The use of long lists of questions using psychometric scales, which need to be validated in different cultural contexts, has been rejected.

During the exploratory study, we worked with local researchers and key informants to develop the questionnaire. This was not without its challenges. To give one example, economic data and economic outcomes are prioritised by many development agencies. Informal discussions with researchers (including WeD researchers) always produce scepticism about the reliability of responses to questions on personal income

and the difficulty of recall when it comes to providing information on a range of expenditures, as a proxy indicator for income. Yet this kind of information continues to be collected on the basis of questionnaires and used to make decisions. The feedback we got, particularly in Syria, is that we were highly unlikely to get reliable information on expenditure (let alone income). In addition, we had to admit that we ourselves would find it difficult to provide quickly the figures we might ask for. Using expenditure diaries, which are thought to be more reliable, was not an option, due to resource constraints, particularly in mountainous areas such as GBAO. Although not without its difficulties, we have opted to assess the ownership of a wide range of contextually appropriate assets, along with savings and debt, to assess economic conditions at the household level.

We had also established a basic principle- that we would keep the questionnaire completion exercise to one hour - not to overburden respondents with long question and answer sessions and risk the reliability of the information. Keeping to this principle involved negotiations and trade-offs in priority measures and indicators.

There are good arguments for using combined methods, surveys and qualitative and participatory methods, in social research (See for example, Booth et al, 1998; Barahona and Levy, 2002). Solid arguments are made that the trustworthiness and utility of information are greater if qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection and analysis are combined rather than being used separately (see for example, Marsland, nd). However, good examples of combined methods and analysis are hard to come by and disciplinary 'silos' still seem to predominate. There is greater recognition by policy makers of the value of in-depth, qualitative work, to generate insights into development processes and outcomes. However, studies carried out by agencies such as the World Bank still separate their qualitative work (for example, the Voices of the Poor study) from their surveys. There is still a reliance on survey methods which provide quantitative data, even if there may be serious flaws in the sampling, survey instrument, data collection and analysis. Equally, there have been attempts to generate numbers using qualitative or participatory methods, including work by statisticians who have tried to aggregate and compare information generated by participatory methods (Barahona and Levy, 2002). These efforts are part of an effort to generate participatory numbers (Chambers, draft, no date) to provide policy makers with data and respond to concerns that qualitative work is "anecdotal evidence".

One of the objectives of the exploratory studies we carried out was to see if we could use participatory approaches to sample respondents for the sentinel sites study, using ranking techniques with key informants. However, several problems emerged. Firstly, in urban areas, leaders (informal and formal) may simply not have the information required to carry out wealth ranking. Quality of Life ranking, which includes more in-depth information, is even less possible. Secondly, unless you are dealing with small numbers of households, the process is very time-consuming. This point relates to ethical positions as well as reliability of information. Although researchers are in agreement that long sessions are exploitative of respondents and often lead to unreliable information, these ranking sessions (and many of the questionnaires reviewed for the QoL assessment, including those of the WeD research), take three to four hours to complete! Thirdly, we encountered some reluctance to categorise people, in both contexts. It is interesting that in my experience of more aid-dependent,

low-income countries, people have either accepted this method or actually use 'we are the poor' as an identity to demand basic rights or assistance. However, in both exploratory study contexts, questions were raised by some of the key informants about their right to categorise others.

A second set of problems relate to the nature of the information we are trying to collect in the sentinel sites study, namely on social relations, cultural and political aspects which affect quality of life. If the emphasis is on counting and categorising responses to make generalisations, there is a real tendency to simplify responses and lose the richness of people's narratives, of why particular intangible aspects of life are valued by different groups, and people's perceptions of the nature of societal change. Assessing cultural aspects, through questions in surveys, would seem to be particularly inadequate. In some of the contexts we will work in, questions on voice and influence are sensitive and less likely to be answered in surveys than in more informal semi-structured interviews. In other words, there are tensions between increasing the field work to gather information which can be aggregated with some degree of reliability and the depth and quality of information.

Reflecting on the experience of the exploratory study, we have opted to include all the simpler types of questions and those which can be easily quantified in the survey. This has left more complex, personal and/or sensitive questions for the Sentinel Sites (SS) study. As such, we will not focus on numbers and percentages in the SS study, but rather emphasise triangulation in qualitative analysis to understand how social relations, culture and processes of socio-economic change relate to their Quality of Life. In other words, we have opted to do less in the way of participatory numbers but ensure that we collect good quality information and record and analyse it adequately. Inevitably, this raises positivist concerns regarding representativeness. While some researchers from a quantitative tradition may never be convinced, the value of understanding people's experience, perceptions and aspirations, in their diversity, is critical to assessing quality of life and to inform development programming. However, the quality of results in such an approach depends to a large extent on skills with qualitative research and building in enough checks and balances in the design of the study.

A third set of problems relates to capacity and the training of field researchers. One of the aims of the Quality of Life assessments is to build local capacity for research and assessment, including that of AKDN Monitoring and Evaluation units. We have had to recognise that experience in qualitative methods varies enormously in the different contexts we will work in, and that training in qualitative methods requires much more time than training people to administer a questionnaire well. Here, there are obvious trade-offs between on the one hand, building in-house capacity to carry out and even more important, disseminate and use the information, and on the other hand, contracting in researchers with more experience, but losing the opportunity to improve skills and maximise feedback loops for findings.

As researchers, we have to be more honest about the practical and methodological difficulties in producing information for development policy and practice. Much of the work that reaches the international domain is done on a collaborative basis between international researchers and local teams. The scope for miscommunication is huge, compromises between stated principles and practice in the field seem to be

made all the time, but little discussed. If we are to convince development agencies that assessing wellbeing or quality of life is important to improve the interventions that are made, then a first step is to discuss far more openly and clearly, the real experience of research in the field and the kind of information which can be collected in a cost-effective way. While literature abounds on how to do the job properly, the implications for the length of time required to produce findings and the costs involved are real constraints which have to be faced by development agencies.

In conclusion, the concept of Quality of Life is complex and multi-dimensional and raises difficult questions and trade-offs in operationalising the concept for research and assessment purposes, particularly in a development agency context. Exploratory work, which builds on local knowledge and tests domains and indicators in particular contexts is critical. The exploratory work we carried out suggests that combined methods are essential and that some aspects of quality of life will need to be captured through qualitative and participatory research, while others may lend themselves to survey methods. There is much more to be done to promote the use of sound empirical work to inform development theory and practice. If we aim to influence development agencies, there needs to be more discussion of the challenges of field work in different cultural contexts, and the difficult trade-offs that face researchers to provide results in a timely and cost-effective way.

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