Quality of life in Europe:
Impacts of the crisis

Executive summary

Introduction

The European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) is an established tool for documenting and analysing quality of life in the EU. Established in 2003, the EQLS explores issues pertinent to the lives of European citizens, such as employment, income, education, housing, family, health, work–life balance, life satisfaction and perceived quality of society. The analysis looks at the relationship between subjective and objective measures, between reported attitudes and preferences on one side, and resources and living conditions on the other.

The third survey carried out in 2011 gives an authentic picture of living conditions and the social situation in the EU, enabling a comparison of experiences and conditions across Member States. The profound economic and social changes occurring in Europe between the second EQLS in 2007 and the third EQLS have also been reflected in the later survey, enabling Eurofound to reveal some preliminary indications of key changes in the overview report. The EQLS not only contributes to monitoring the changes in society but can also pinpoint emerging trends and concerns for the future.

Policy context

When introducing the Europe 2020 strategy, President Barroso highlighted that: ‘The last two years have left millions unemployed. It has brought us a burden of debt that will last for many years. It has brought new pressures on our social cohesion’. The financial and economic crisis has led to deterioration in living and working conditions, with significant negative impacts on the everyday lives of some citizens. It is against this background that the European institutions have been developing new policies and strategies to maintain and improve quality of life, including the ‘GDP and Beyond’ Communication of the European Commission and the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress.

Key findings

- People with low incomes are more likely to have experienced negative financial consequences in the previous 12 months and to report more difficulties in making ends meet. This group also report more problems with work–life balance, health and access to health services.
- Unemployment – and long-term unemployment in particular – has a huge impact on subjective well-being. The highest level of social exclusion is found among the long-term unemployed.
- Women working full time are more likely than men to report problems with work–life balance, which highlights the issue in an increasingly female labour force. Also, women tend to be less satisfied than men with some public services, especially long-term care and health services.
- Countries that report a better quality of life are those in the northern and western parts of the EU, while those expressing more disadvantages are mainly from southern and eastern Europe.
- Optimism about the future was expressed by fewer than 30% of people in Greece, Slovakia and Portugal, and by over 80% in Denmark and Sweden.
- Levels of satisfaction with one’s personal situation remain relatively high across Member States – higher than satisfaction with the quality of society or the local environment.
- Over one in three respondents said that their financial situation was worse than 12 months previously – particularly people with low incomes, and those in the 50 to 64 age bracket.
The most vulnerable groups – the lowest income quartile, the unemployed, older people in central and eastern Europe – show the greatest decline in subjective well-being between the surveys.

Family continues to play a major role in all countries as the basis of social contacts and the main source of support in meeting daily or urgent needs. Involvement in unpaid work, notably childcare and care of the elderly, remains at a high level.

There is declining trust in public institutions, specifically in governments and parliaments at national level. This is particularly evident in the countries most affected by the economic crisis.

Policy pointers

Life satisfaction is associated with income but also consistently with poor health. Both health inequalities in general, but especially the poor health of older people in central and eastern Europe, demands attention.

The impact of the crisis on life satisfaction may not be immediately evident, but declines in happiness and optimism are already apparent. There is a need to prevent a downward spiral in public confidence – and there is a role for media as well as government in this respect.

While the focus for policy-makers should be primarily directed at vulnerable groups, attention should also be paid to the situation of people who at first sight seem advantaged but who are in fact struggling with problems related to employment, debt, housing insecurity and access to services.

People report increasing difficulties in reconciling work with family life and there is a need to recognise workers, generally women, who have the burden of regular eldercare responsibilities.

The disadvantaged situation of people outside employment is stark, and the negative impact of unemployment is greater with long duration – reflected in reduced life satisfaction, greater social exclusion and lower trust in others.

There is an increased perception of rifts between racial and ethnic groups and a growing proportion of people identify tensions between the rich and poor. Such social tensions are especially evident among those who are most disadvantaged and the risks to social cohesion should be acknowledged.

Measures to address social exclusion should not only focus on the labour market or even improving income; people involved in associations and doing voluntary work, for example, feel less excluded.

While quality of housing appears to have improved for many, perceived security of tenure has declined, particularly among people with a mortgage, and this was noticeable in all income groups. Measures are needed to increase housing security, and prevent hardship.

An increasing number of births occur outside marriage and single parent households are shown to be disadvantaged in most domains of quality of life. It is important to address not only the income situation of these households but also their social and employment integration.

Methodology

Fieldwork for the third European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) in the 27 Member States took place from September 2011 to February 2012, with most interviews being completed in the last quarter of 2011. This is a survey of people aged 18 and over, resident in the EU for at least six months. Only the selected respondents were interviewed face-to-face in their own home – mainly about their own circumstances, but in some cases (e.g. income, accommodation), about their households. Depending on the size of population, 1,000–3,000 interviews were completed in each Member State.

Fieldwork for a further seven candidate or pre-accession countries (Croatia, Iceland, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia and Turkey) took place in May–July 2012 and the results will be disseminated later.

Further information


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