



Quality of life in Europe – Quality of society and public services

Executive summary

Introduction

Quality of life depends on individual circumstances and on the quality of the society at large; this is in turn partly shaped by the availability of good-quality public services. Services such as health, education and social care enable citizens to lead fulfilling lives. The quality of society is also shaped by social relationships and how well they function: conflict or inequality between social groups, or a lack of trust between people, can affect everybody's wellbeing.

This report is based on the 2011 European Quality of Life Survey conducted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), the third such survey. The global economic crisis, which began after the last survey was carried out in 2007, has meant that public services have been threatened, inequalities have increased and unemployment has risen, with potentially profound implications for the quality of life in Europe.

Policy context

The Europe 2020 strategy promotes smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, and social and territorial cohesion. Increasingly, it is recognised that economic growth is not the only indicator of policy success: social cohesion is also important, EU policies stressing the importance of integrating vulnerable groups through public services. Therefore it is important to investigate how social cohesion is being maintained and how this varies across Europe so that no regions or groups are left behind. Inclusive growth cannot be pursued without considering the social consequences of economic policies.

The recently launched Social Investment Package urges Member States to focus more on the provision of key public services. The document on investing in children stresses the importance of improving access to early childhood education and care – a prerequisite for future education and

employment outcomes. In addition, good childcare can enhance the labour market participation of parents who have increasingly diverse working patterns. The document on investing in health highlights access to quality health care as a key element in improving overall health and in maintaining the productivity of the workforce. The Commission staff document on long-term care points out that universal access to financially sustainable, high-quality long-term care is a common objective of the EU collaboration on long-term care in the Social Protection Committee.

Key findings

The perceived quality of public services varies throughout Europe. People in Austria, Luxembourg, Germany and the UK rate it best, and deem it to have improved between 2007 and 2011. In Slovakia, Poland, Bulgaria and Greece people rate it poorest, and rate its quality as decreasing. The economic wellbeing of countries and individuals has an important effect on how public services are perceived: those who are more prosperous evaluate them more positively than people who have difficulty making ends meet.

Access to childcare and the employment rate of women are strongly related. Women who are in employment need childcare services, but in many countries the supply of services does not meet the demand. There is a strong relationship between access to and the perceived quality of long-term care. Better-off people, and those living in more prosperous countries, are most satisfied with long-term care while economic hardship leads to feelings of exclusion from social care. The perceived quality of health services and their accessibility vary. While perceived accessibility has improved overall in Europe, in countries such as Greece – hit hard by economic crisis – it has worsened. National expenditure on health has an effect on the perceived quality of services.

Working and care responsibilities can diminish the perceived accessibility of health services. People in employment, and women, find it more difficult to find time to see a doctor, especially if they have care responsibilities.

Across Europe, people in rural areas are more satisfied with their local neighbourhood (in terms of, for example, air quality, litter on the street and crime) than those in urban areas, while access to neighbourhood services (such as the bank or post office) is better in urban areas.

While trust in people remained largely unchanged between 2007 and 2011, trust in institutions visibly decreased throughout Europe, most dramatically in crisis-hit Greece and Cyprus. Major factors boosting trust in institutions are the perceived quality of public services, followed by satisfaction with the economic situation of one's country and a perception of little or no corruption.

Trust in people and trust in institutions are related to a sense of economic insecurity: feeling a greater likelihood of losing one's job reduces trust in institutions and in people, while feeling more confident that one could find a new job in the event of losing one's current employment increases it.

Attitudes towards migrants and immigration are related to socioeconomic status. Being a man, living in a rural area, being older or having a low income is associated with being less tolerant towards migrants.

Tensions between social groups in Europe were perceived to be lowest (in ascending order) between men and women, between old and young people, between people with different sexual orientations and those of different religions. Tensions were perceived to be highest between different racial and ethnic groups, rich and poor and management and workers.

Perceptions of the overall quality of society are negatively affected by deprivation – most important in this respect is the ability to be socioeconomically secure, followed by issues of empowerment (such as feeling that life is too complicated to control) and by poor subjective ratings of health. Feeling left out of society is also important.

An index of perceived economic insecurity ranks countries by economic risk. It shows that, in general, Europeans are only slightly affected by the economic crisis in terms of fears for their jobs or household finances. However, this is not the case in Greece, Hungary and Portugal.

Policy pointers

Policies should target inequalities at a national level where perceptions of inequality and actual inequality are highly correlated. Deprivation has a significant effect on access to and perception of a range of public services, yet the poorest are also the ones who most need such services. Ensuring access to services for all, including the economically marginalised, should be a policy priority.

Childcare services and convenient working hours can help ensure work–life integration and enable higher employment levels. They also play a role in allowing people to access services such as doctors, post offices, banks and health clinics. Family-friendly employment policies (for both men and women) can also help make life easier for working families. Opening hours for these services also need to reflect the changes in employment patterns. Difficulties in access to health services compromise universal access. Tight health budgets and work-related time restrictions may be partly responsible for this. More flexible opening hours and other forms of access to health services (using information technology for example) could help to mitigate some of these problems.

Policies targeted at inequalities at European level should look at counteracting widening disparities between certain Member States and the rest of Europe.

In order to build trust in public institutions, corruption needs to be tackled and the economically deprived need to be able to access public services; otherwise they may lose confidence in them. These problems are particularly acute in Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Slovakia and Romania.

Some countries have been able to improve the perceived quality of their public services despite the economic crisis. These can provide examples of good practice.

Further information

The report, *Quality of life in Europe – Quality of society and public services*, is available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef1361.htm>

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