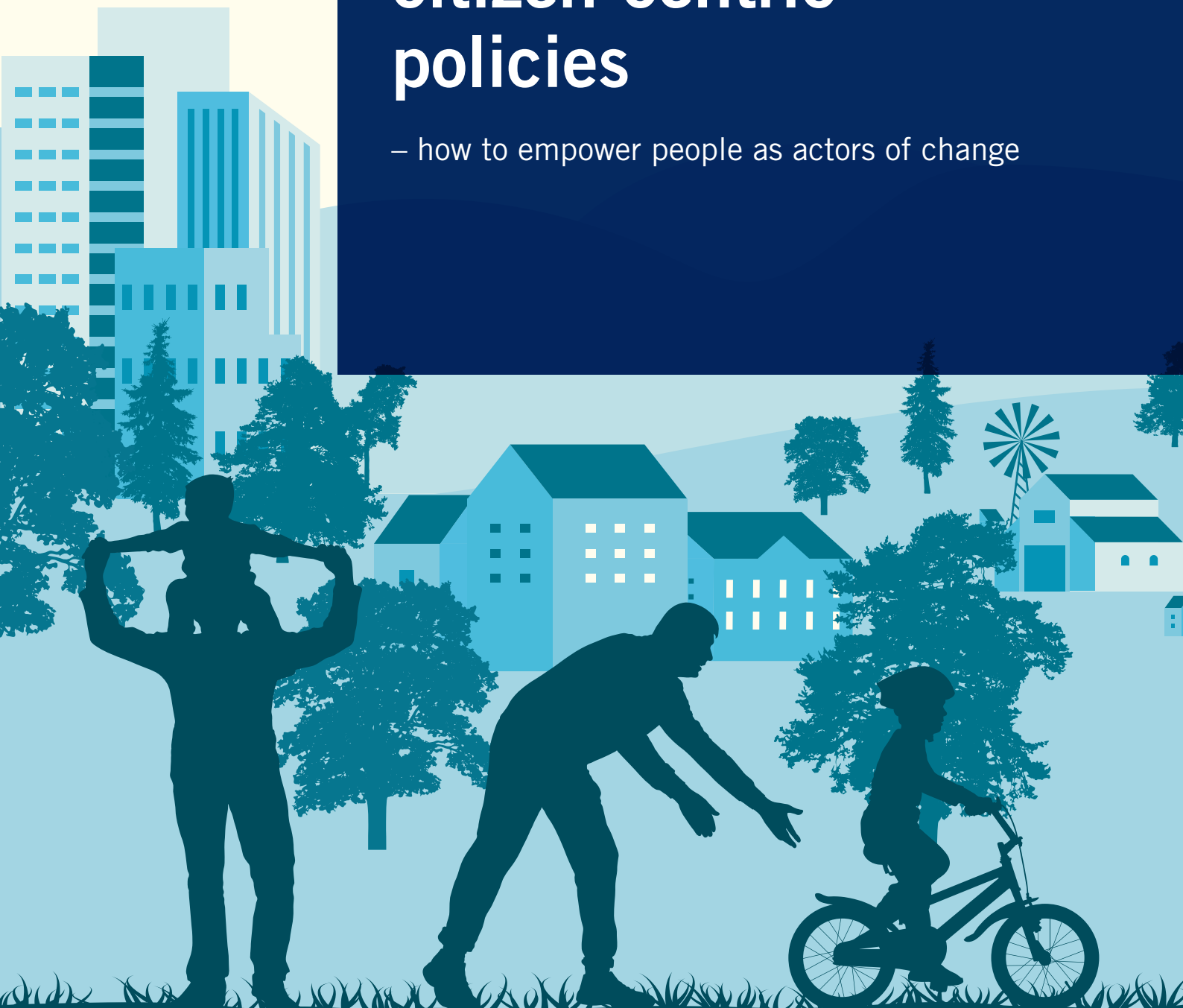


POLICY BRIEF

Quality of Life for territorial and citizen-centric policies

– how to empower people as actors of change



10 KEY MESSAGES

- **Quality of Life (QoL) is a complex concept that helps public policies to be more territorially tailored** by better understanding **people's perceptions of their own living conditions** and by looking beyond economic output and living standards. QoL should be an **overarching objective of public policies**.
- **ESPON – European Territorial Observatory Network** has developed an **innovative approach to a place-based and citizen-centric understanding and measurement of QoL**. It offers a unique opportunity to move policies beyond gross domestic product, implement a **deliberative process empowering people as actors of change**. In addition, it also gives an opportunity to **experiment with new practices and creative solutions in policymaking**.
- **Key elements** of the **ESPON approach** are a QoL conceptual map, a Territorial Quality of Life Dashboard and Territorial quality of life (TQoL) Living Labs. These elements allow us to effectively capitalise on the **knowledge** of experts, **experience** of decision-makers and **proactive engagement** of civil society organisations, community groups, neighbourhood associations and individual citizens as local actors. Through co-creation and dialogue, those stakeholders may define QoL priorities, test indicators and monitor QoL in a concrete territory (functional area).
- The **QoL conceptual map** developed by ESPON provides a **universal framework** with various spheres and domains for **measuring QoL**. It can be used across **different territorial levels**, with the selection of indicators (objective and subjective) based on a citizen-centric approach. It allows **experimentation** and is flexible enough to accommodate people's perceptions and different places.
- The **Territorial Quality of Life Dashboard** (a simple Excel tool) is essential for capturing the selected data and indicators **in a structured and comparable format**. It also allows for **benchmarking** places based on tailored comparisons and for looking deeper into characteristics of a selected territory.
- **TQoL Living Labs** can be useful tools for policymaking and, in particular, for integrating QoL in spatial planning policies and instruments. They facilitate **participatory approaches**, putting the **perceptions of people in the foreground**. Consequently, they help to bring **policies closer to people** by grasping their needs, address their problems and **create long-term impacts** through strong **partnerships**.
- **Collecting statistical data on QoL is a challenge**. Their deficiency can be compensated through compiling qualitative (subjective) information that reflects the values and priorities of institutions, researchers, private businesses, civil society organisations and people involved in the process. **Innovative actions for collecting subjective data**, such as focus groups, qualitative surveys or digital photo contests, can be used to collect qualitative data. QoL is more about perceptions of people than statistical indicators.
- The approach to understanding and **measuring QoL** developed by ESPON should be **tested in a wide range of policy initiatives and pilot projects** in different policy domains. It is particularly relevant to public **participation and empowering people** in decision-making, and gives the opportunity to proactively engage **young people in spatial planning processes**. Ultimately, this allows the **better alignment of territorial policies** to people's needs.
- The **measurement of QoL supports the interpretation and operationalisation of (abstract) policy objectives**. In concrete terms, it helps to **better understand how people in different places see the policy objectives**, such as 'cohesion as economic, social and territorial pre-conditions for people's well-being' (EU Cohesion Policy), 'vibrant tapestry of life and landscapes' (Long-term vision for the EU's rural areas), 'more beautiful, sustainable and inclusive forms of living together' (New European Bauhaus), a 'future for all places and people' (Territorial Agenda 2030), 'the transformative power of cities for a common good' (New Leipzig Charter) and 'quality of life for all' (the Development Strategy of Slovenia).
- Overall, the ESPON approach helps to **bring policies – local, regional, national, cross-border, transnational or European – closer to the citizens**, reflecting place-specific perceptions of QoL. It also offers great potential to eventually **make public policies accountable** in terms of delivering on the dimensions that are important **to citizens** (in a particular place and at a particular time), and contributes to **reducing the subjective impression of people and their places being 'left behind'** (addressing the 'geography of discontent').

Foreword

The concept of Quality of Life complements a more classical understanding of a territory as an integral part of society, economy and environment. It adds a more personal view of territory – it is about how well we live in a certain place, how we feel about it and experience it, and what we expect from it. These aspects became particularly clear last year when we were bound to our own cities, villages, neighbourhoods and even dwellings because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This made us more aware of how these places affect our quality of life.

The Territorial Agenda 2030 describes quality of life as ‘the underlying objective of all public policies’. This is often the case, but it can appear in policies under different names or synonyms. In the new Slovenian National Spatial Development Strategy, to be adopted by Parliament, quality of life is tackled in two ways – as an overall general principle and as a more concrete development goal: to improve quality of life in cities and in rural areas. As urban and rural areas have different geographical characteristics and differ in their functions and sociocultural aspects, different approaches to elements that enable or maintain quality of life and support its flourishing are needed for people living in them.

The ESPON approach presents the complexity of quality of life in a conceptual form that can be measured at different

levels, but also used in decision making to better tailor policies to diverse territories. Therefore, instead of being just a blurred or loosely defined policy objective, quality of life is also a policymaking tool. It can be used to steer public participation in different policymaking processes by asking the right questions. If established as a permanent setting for acquiring peoples’ attitudes, for example in the form of living labs, it can also be used for policy integration, monitoring and revision. With this, a top-down approach meets with bottom-up views, and initiatives intertwine with them and enhance them. Public participation is often minimised to a minimal legal standard. Therefore, striving for better policy design, synergy with other policies and higher ownership for policy measures needs an early and constant interaction with people and stakeholders.

The ESPON approach to quality of life is an important achievement that will not remain at the academic level. There is increased interest among stakeholders in its further testing and use, and it will thus contribute to implementing the Territorial Agenda motto ‘A future for all places’ at various levels.

Blanka Bartol and Tomaž Miklavčič

Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU in the field of territorial cohesion, 2021

Why Quality of Life?

QoL addresses our well-being and looks beyond economic output and living standards. Our QoL is shaped by what matters to us, that is how we see our position in life in the context of our culture and value systems, and in relation to our expectations and needs.

The importance of people's QoL is increasingly reflected in local, regional, national and European policymaking, along with demands for participation and proactive engagement of citizens in policy processes. Examples at the European level are the Cohesion Policy, with its aim of reducing imbalances in the 'economic, social and territorial preconditions for people's well-being'; the Territorial Agenda 2030, with its aim of ensuring a 'future for all places and people'; the New Leipzig Charter, stressing 'the transformative power of cities for a common good'; the New European Bauhaus Initiative, with its aim of shaping 'more beautiful, sustainable and inclusive forms of living together'; and the Long-term

vision for the EU's rural areas, striving for a 'vibrant tapestry of life and landscapes'.

The Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2021 put a focus on QoL, which is an overarching goal of the country's new Spatial Development Strategy 2050. Its vision is to achieve territorial cohesion and ensure a high QoL for all people, whether they live in urban or rural areas, or in mountainous, lowland or border areas. Through outlining territorial specificities, the document shows how the national sectoral policies at different governance levels would benefit from joint and place-based territorial measures for a common good. Although the sectoral policies are gradually recognising the advantages of such an approach, the future activities after the adoption of the new national spatial development policy are aimed at enhancing such cooperation and making it a common practice.

What is Quality of Life and how to measure it?

The ESPON approach

Discussions on how to measure well-being and QoL have over the past 15 years led to several important initiatives by the European Commission, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the United Nations and others. Following up on this, ESPON has developed an innovative approach that reflects the territorial diversity of QoL, as well as the citizen-centred, subjective and time-bound understanding of QoL, including co-creation and proactive engagement of citizens and local actors.

ESPON defines TQoL as the capability of living beings to survive and flourish in a place, thanks to the economic, social and ecological conditions that support life in that place.¹ This general definition has been further translated into (1) different thematic spheres, (2) different conceptual dimensions and (3) a deliberative approach. Taken together,

they allow a more nuanced and place-specific understanding of QoL, which covers all essential features and reflects the subjective and time-bound nature of QoL.

Thematic spheres of quality of life

In the ESPON approach, QoL covers three broadly formulated spheres:

- **personal** – personal health and safety needs and flourishing aspirations;
- **socio-economic** – economic well-being, and social and policy factors that support the survival and flourishing of all people living in the place;
- **ecological** – quality of the environment and ecological flourishing.

¹ The approach includes all living species, not only humans, recognising the intrinsic value of nature and ecological health and flourishing as a relevant dimension of TQoL.

Conceptual dimensions of quality of life

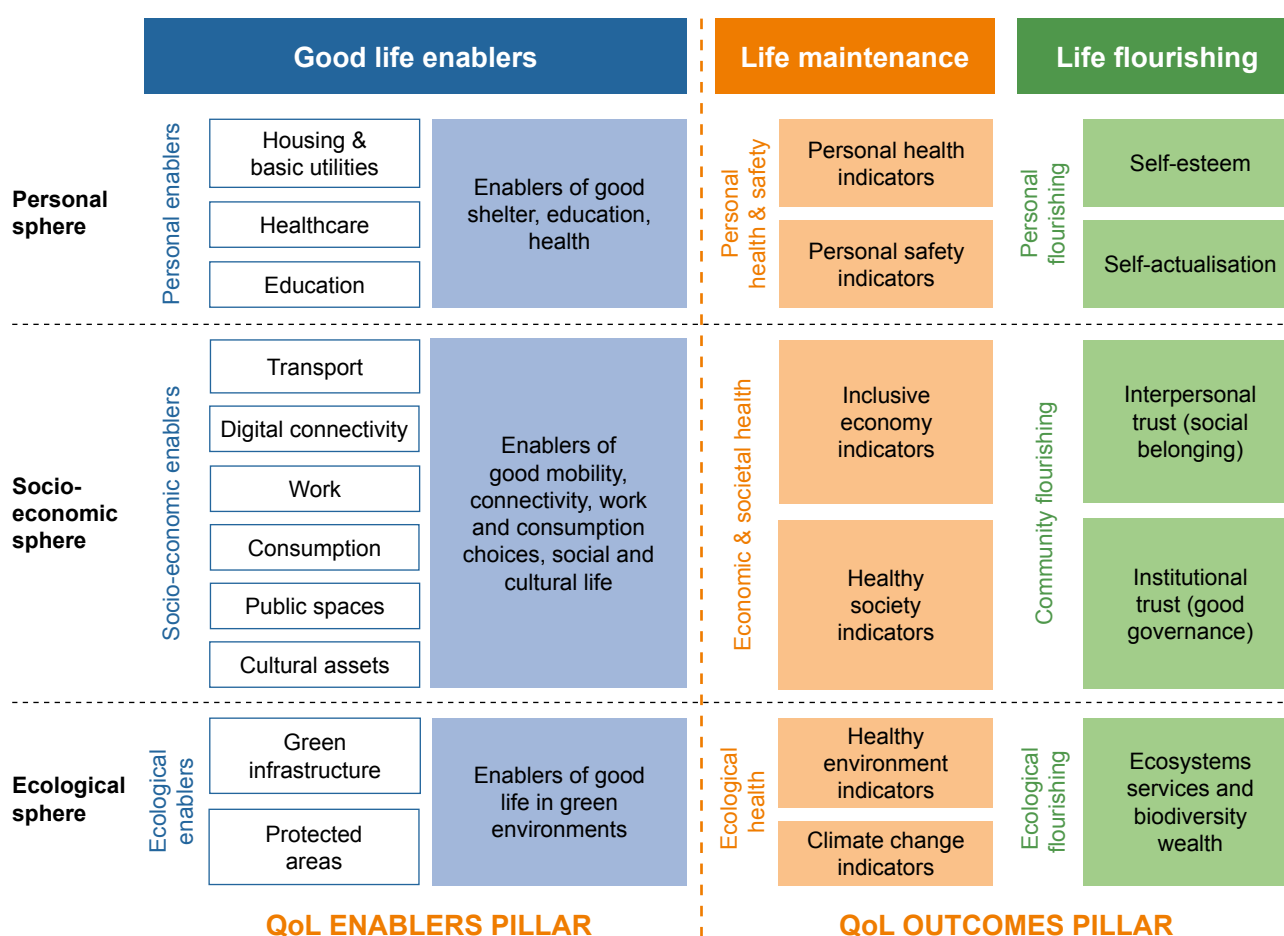
To fully understand the dynamics of each of the three spheres, for each of them the ESPON definition outlines three conceptual dimensions:

- **good life enablers** – place-specific preconditions for each of the thematic spheres;
- **life maintenance** – a healthy personal life, healthy economy and healthy environment as outcomes of a good QoL;

- **life flourishing** – fulfilment of personal aspirations, community flourishing and ecological flourishing as outcomes of a good QoL.

The conceptual map (figure 1) illustrates in further detail how the thematic spheres and the conceptual dimensions come together to provide a comprehensive framework for defining QoL in terms of enablers and outcomes.²

Figure 1
Territorial Quality of Life measurement system – conceptual map



² Information on the indicators used in this framework is available in ESPON (2021a).

Co-creation and a deliberative approach

The understanding of QoL – in terms of how to describe the various boxes of the conceptual map (figure 1) and what weight to give them – varies according to people's perceptions, between places and over time. To capture this, ESPON promotes a deliberative approach, engaging citizens, experts and policymakers in co-deciding what, and why and how QoL should be measured to enable a good life. This citizen-centric and place-based focus makes the ESPON approach unique compared with other international approaches measuring QoL. The key to this approach is TQoL Living Labs (box 1).

ESPON has selected and gathered data to measure the different domains and subdomains included in the conceptual map presented in figure 1. The selection of indicators at the European level (NUTS 3), including the reasoning for their selection and the limitations of each indicator, is explained in detail in the ESPON working paper on this topic (ESPON, 2021a). In this process, the ESPON Territorial Quality of Life Dashboard helps to gather selected indicators and visualise them in a simple way through a composite QoL index (box 2).³

BOX 1

Territorial Quality of Life Living Labs

A TQoL Living Lab offers a policy innovation milieu where experts from competent and trusted institutions (departments of national, regional and local governments; statistical agencies; universities; and business associations) work with citizens (civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations and small groups of self-selected active citizens or randomly selected citizens' juries). In cooperation, through co-creation and lateral thinking, these stakeholders jointly address QoL. For each sphere of QoL, they define their shared understanding and priorities, and test possible indicators. In an ideal case, the living lab remains active to further monitor and evaluate possible improvements or changes. In this process, people are actors of change and not just consumers of policies.

BOX 2

Territorial Quality of Life Dashboard

The Territorial Quality of Life Dashboard:

- is a simple application (in Excel), illustrating the methodology developed to measure QoL;
- covers the ESPON space (the EU, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) and Western Balkans (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia);
- uses statistical indicators and weighting criteria to compute composite indices, depending on the nature of the QoL priorities in the different territorial contexts;
- is practical for comparing QoL indicators at different territorial scales – European, national, regional and local – depending on the availability of relevant data;
- can be applied to a single territorial context to measure and monitor trends in QoL over time in a region, city, or rural or urban area.

³ A detailed description of the strengths and weaknesses of the index is included in ESPON (2021a).

Quality of Life in a functional trinational cross-border area

The ESPON approach to QoL can be used at various geographical levels, looking at functional areas rather than just administrative regions, which can give a better reflection of where people live, work and engage in recreation. The Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU, in cooperation with ESPON, agreed to test it in the trinational functional cross-border region of Coastal–Karst Region in Slovenia, Istria County in Croatia and Trieste in Italy.

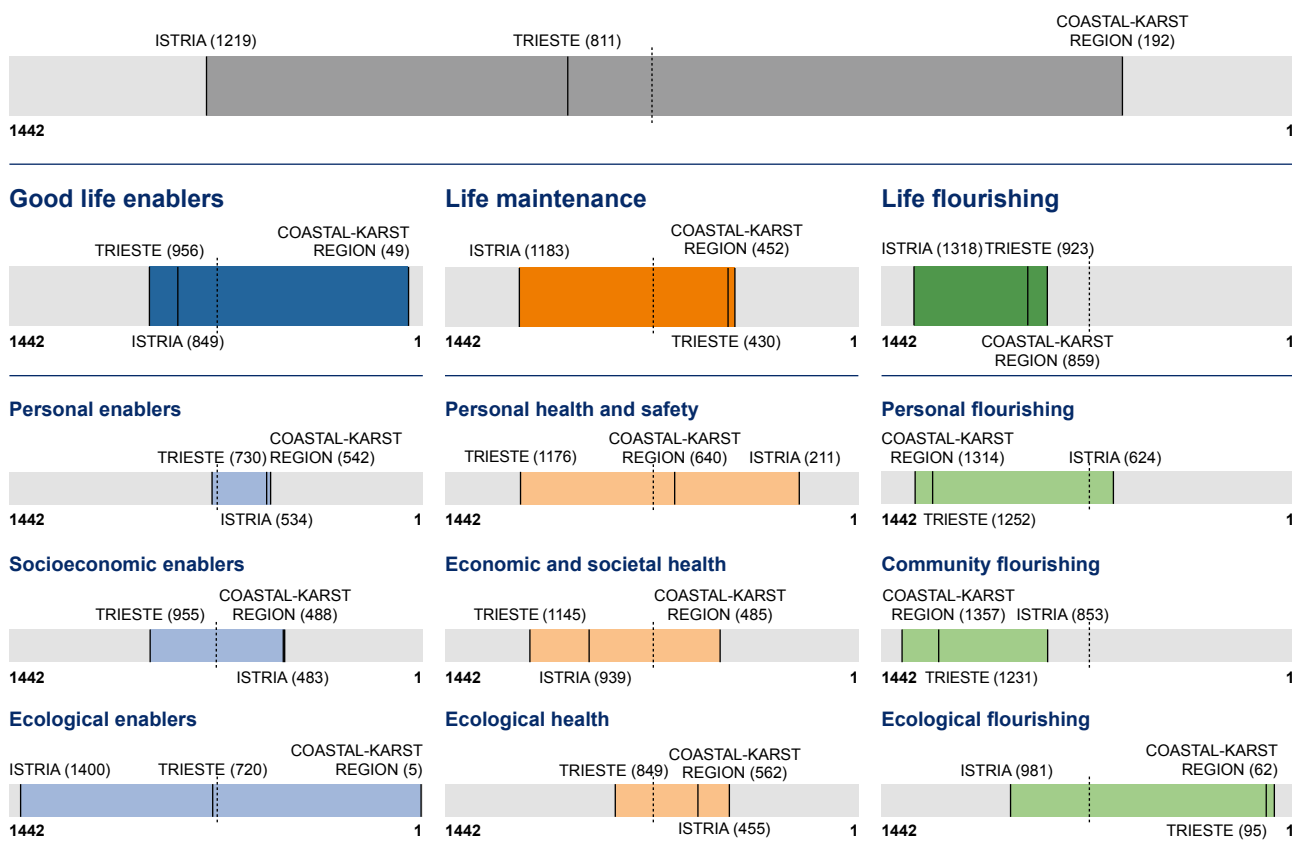
Effectively engaging citizens in a dialogue on QoL and eliciting individual experiences and perceptions were most crucial in this work. For these purposes, several methods were used, including (1) living lab focus groups, to collect people’s opinions in small discussion circles; (2) a digital photo contest, to let the citizens express what they perceived as distinctive features of living in the cross-border area; and (3) a QoL survey app, to gather qualitative information

on the best and worst aspects of living in the area (with concise statements on the reasons).

The results of these innovative practices can be used to prioritise policy actions and to weight the indicators in the dashboard tool towards producing composite indices that reflect the QoL aspirations of the citizens.

The indices generated for this trinational border area point towards very wide disparities in QoL between places (figure 2). Although it is a relatively small territory, the regional disparities are almost as big as those within the EU. While the Coastal–Karst Region enjoys an overall good QoL (in the European context it ranks 192 out of 1442 regions), the QoL is lower in Trieste (ranked 811th) and Istria (ranked 1219th). The considerable disparities in QoL in the trinational area are visible across different dimensions.

Figure 2
Territorial Quality of Life index of the trinational region in a European context



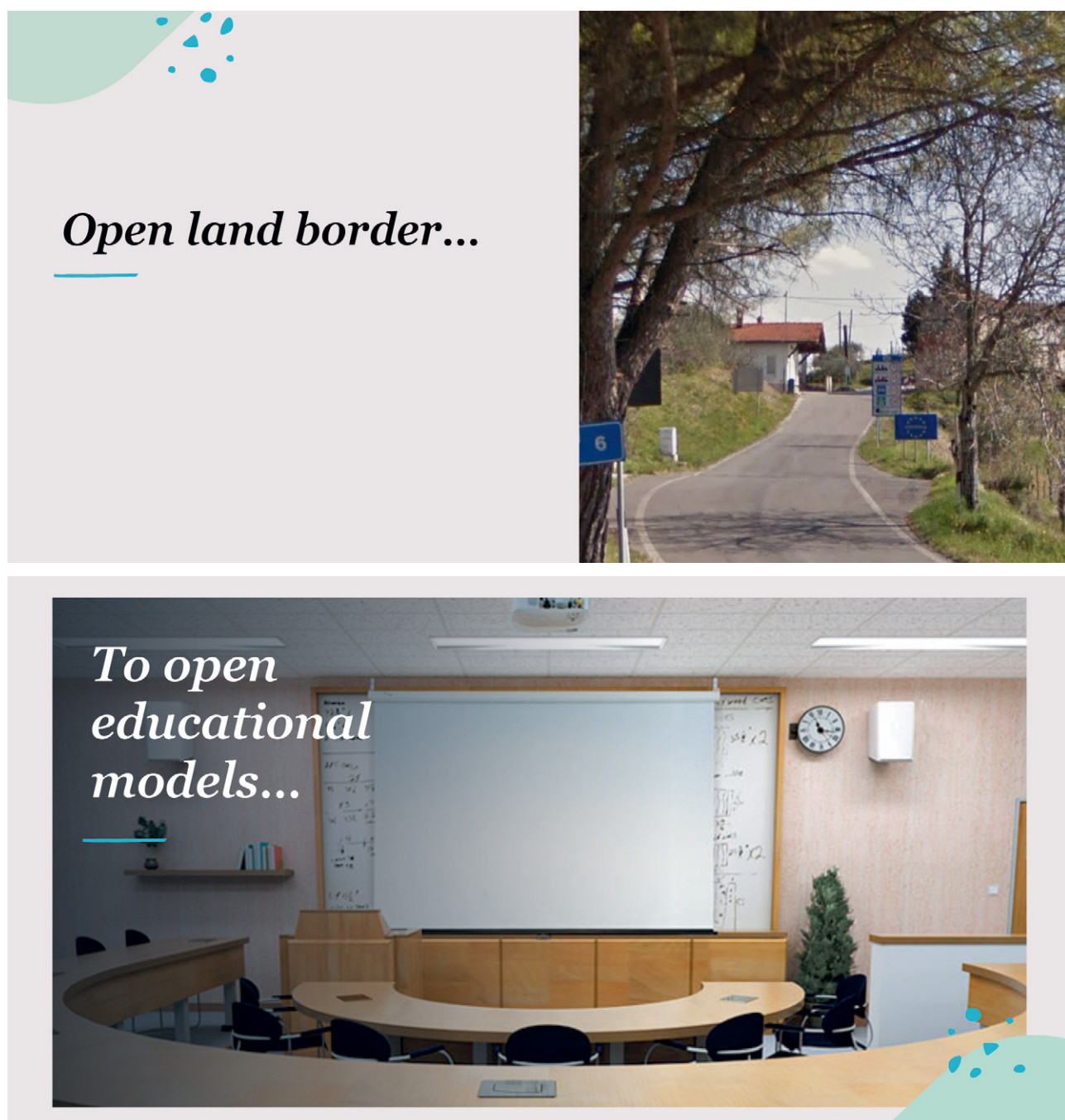
Note: The bars show the spectrum of all 1442 NUTS 3 regions covered in the ESPON Territorial Quality of Life Dashboard, while the coloured sections show the spectrum of the trinational Coastal–Karst, Istria and Trieste functional area. The blue area shows the combined index for good life enablers, orange corresponds to 'life maintenance' and green corresponds to 'life flourishing'. The further to the right of the bar a place is, the better its ranking in the European context.

QoL is also judged in terms of the functional integration of these three administrative regions allowing people to enjoy the amenities on the other sides of the borders (figure 3). Dominant perceptions of the most relevant QoL aspects (positive or negative) revolved around the good life enablers, such as cross-border services of general interest (e.g. healthcare), cross-border labour markets and mobility (public transport services) and cross-border environmental commons. Language abilities were found to be an essential precondition for interacting with people from

the neighbouring countries and making use of cross-border services.

The ecological sphere of QoL is another obvious topic for cross-border collaboration, as, for example, air or water pollution spill-over effects do not stop at national borders. One important environmental common for the Coastal–Karst, Istria and Trieste cross-border area is the sea, and the need for a common approach to managing rising sea level vulnerability challenges, the quality of coastal waters, coastal tourism and water mobility services was stressed.

Figure 3
Pictures from the digital photo contest representing the perceptions of quality of living in the Coastal–Karst, Istria and Trieste cross-border area



The ESPON approach inspires better territorial policymaking and the implementation of Territorial Agenda pilot actions

A citizen-centred and place-based approach defining and measuring QoL is necessary for understanding people's needs, values and expectations, and what policies dedicated to this priority can deliver it and how. In this respect, the ESPON approach enables to make public policies accountable, in terms of delivering on the dimensions that are important to citizens in a particular place and at a particular time. It also helps to reduce the subjective impression of people and their places being 'left behind' and thus to address the 'geography of discontent'.

TQoL Living Labs are instrumental in moving policy thinking beyond the realm of gross domestic product, economic output and living standards. They allow policymaking to focus on a place-based understanding of QoL in all its complexity by ensuring that the perceptions of participating stakeholders are understood. Overall, TQoL Living Labs can be a useful tool for policy initiatives that aim for place-based and citizen-centred improvements in people's QoL. In more concrete terms, they can tailor such policies to the factual needs on the ground by grasping the perception and interpretation of:

- 'a future for all places and people' (Territorial Agenda 2030);
- 'cohesion as the economic, social and territorial precondition for people's well-being' (EU Cohesion Policy) and 'a vibrant tapestry of life and landscapes' (Long-term vision for the EU's rural areas);
- 'quality of life for all' in specific spatial settings – urban and rural areas, or mountainous, lowland and border areas (Slovenian National Spatial Development Strategy).

In realising 'a future for all places and people', the pilot actions under the Territorial Agenda 2030 could arrange TQoL Living Labs to understand ...

- ... QoL in the context of a cross-border vision for the transition to a zero-carbon functional region: TQoL Living Labs can help to identify which QoL aspects are essential in ensuring that people embrace and support the transition.
- ... what QoL features are most valued by people living in small places or lagging regions, and what motivates people, especially those who are younger, to stay there:

TQoL Living Labs can help to formulate citizen-centred and place-specific answers to how a QoL perspective can help the transformation of lagging regions and small places.

- ... how integrated approaches for vulnerable and declining rural areas could look, bringing together the relevant thematic spheres and conceptual dimensions: TQoL Living Labs can bring different societal groups together – for example long-term residents, and the leavers and newcomers – to identify their perceived QoL. An evolving approach can help to monitor the factors that enable good QoL and reverse the population decline.
- ... how citizens envisage the future of towns in the Alpine region, which is particularly vulnerable to climate change: TQoL Living Labs can help to identify the relevant good life enablers in this area and provide a platform for the development of bottom-up actions.
- ... how a wide range of policies affect local and regional development: the conceptual framework for QoL put forward by ESPON can support territorial impact assessments by aiding the understanding of how the interplay between various policies affects places. TQoL Living Labs as rolling approaches can help to assess and monitor different types of impacts – for example based on citizens' data – and how this improves the perceived QoL.

In a similar way, TQoL Living Labs can be used to boost flagship initiatives of the EU Rural Action Plan, thematic partnerships and action plans under the Urban Agenda for the EU, flagship projects of EU macro-regional strategies and other policy initiatives.

ESPON invites all to allow new thinking, to engage in a culture of collaboration and co-creation, and to experiment with new ideas and innovative policy practices. Proactive engagement of all of us in policymaking is necessary and will help policymakers to understand what affects our quality of life. This approach will facilitate **the design and better implementation of place-based and coordinated public policies** and consequently help us to decide on the **future of our territories together**.

BOX 3

Quotes from the ESPON workshop ‘Is our life good enough?’
at the 19th European week of regions and cities (October 2021)

‘Public participation is part of spatial planning processes. The ESPON Quality of Life approach can help to improve it and to collect insights on people’s expectations, values.’

Blanka Bartol, Slovenia

‘Co-creation is essential. We need to rethink policymaking, as top-down approaches don’t work any more.’

Norry Schneider, Luxembourg

‘Collaboration with the local level, especially involving young people, matters because today’s policies and changes shape our quality of life in 5 to 10 years.’

Marc Pfister, Switzerland

‘Quality of life indicators can be used to better understand territorial inequalities and expected policy effects, which are important inputs to citizen-centric partnerships for development.’

Rudina Toto, Albania

Further reading

ESPON (2020), 'ESPON QoL – Quality of Life Measurements and Methodology' (<https://www.espon.eu/programme/projects/espon-2020/applied-research/quality-of-life>).

ESPON (2021a), Working Paper 'Is our life good enough?' (<https://www.espon.eu/is-our-life-good-enough>).

ESPON (2021b), Conclusions of 'Online roundtable: Quality of life in Slovenia' (<https://www.espon.eu/quality-of-life-slovenia>) and a session at the European Week of Regions and Cities 2021 (https://europa.eu/regions-and-cities/programme/sessions/1886_en).



ESPON 2020

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