Defining and Measuring Quality of Life: Theoretical and Empirical Frameworks

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This chapter introduces the theoretical and empirical framework used in this monograph to analyse quality of life as understood within the context of the Summer School: Quality of Life in a Changing World. It begins with a brief overview of philosophical perspectives on the good life, followed by a review of the main contemporary approaches and key dimensions. Next, the chapter discusses the measurement of quality of life through indicators and outlines current debates. It then examines long-term European trends over the past three decades across economic, social and environmental indicators, showing how these trajectories reflect a rapidly changing world in which gains in economic growth and human development coexist with stagnation or decline in several social and environmental dimensions, revealing clear development paradoxes. Finally, the chapter presents the empirical research reports produced during the Summer School and links the conceptual foundations and long-term trends to the everyday experiences of quality of life in Maribor and other European contexts.

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OPREDELITEV IN MERJENJE KAKOVOSTI ŽIVLJENJA: TEORETIČNI IN EMPIRIČNI OKVIRI

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Poglavje predstavlja teoretični in empirični okvir, uporabljen v tej monografiji za analizo kakovosti življenja v kontekstu poletne šole z naslovom Kakovost življenja v spreminjajočem se svetu. Začne se s kratkim pregledom filozofskih pogledov na "dobro življenje", nato pa sledi pregled glavnih sodobnih pristopov in ključnih razsežnosti kakovosti življenja. V nadaljevanju poglavje obravnava merjenje kakovosti življenja s pomočjo različnih kazalnikov ter predstavi aktualne razprave. Prispevek se nato posveti dolgoročnim evropskim trendom v zadnjih treh desetletjih na področju ekonomskih, socialnih in okoljskih kazalnikov ter pokaže, kako te razvojne poti odražajo hitro spreminjajoči se svet, v katerem se dosežki gospodarske rasti in človekovega razvoja prepletajo z zastoji ali nazadovanjem na več socialnih in okoljskih področjih, kar razkriva jasne razvojne paradokse. Na koncu poglavje predstavi raziskovalna poročila, nastala v okviru poletne šole, ter poveže konceptualna izhodišča in dolgoročne trende z "vsakodnevnim" kakovostnim življenjem v Mariboru in drugih evropskih okoljih.

1 Understanding quality of life: concepts, dimensions and contemporary debates

Good life, happiness, well-being, welfare, prosperity, quality of the living environment, quality of life … These terms overlap, diverge and shift across disciplines, time and space. Sometimes they are used as broad umbrella concepts capturing everything of value in human life; at other times they denote specific dimensions such as material standards, subjective experiences, moral fulfilment or environmental conditions. Due to this complexity, the concept of the quality of life (QoL) resists simple definition and invites a multidimensional understanding.

1.1 Historical origins

Ideas about QoL are deeply rooted in the history of philosophy, where different traditions proposed distinct explanations of what it means to live well. In Western philosophy, ancient thinkers offered several foundational perspectives. Aristotle described quality of life as *eudaimonia*, a state of flourishing achieved through the practical wisdom, cultivation of virtue or a balanced life that avoids excess and deficiency. External goods, such as health or wealth, are valuable, but they cannot secure a good life without the active exercise of intellectual and character virtues (Kraut, 2022). Stoic philosophers took a different approach, arguing that well-being depends on living in accordance with nature and reason. For them, virtue is the only true good and external conditions such as health, fortune, or possessions are secondary. A good life requires inner discipline, self-mastery and emotional stability, regardless of external conditions (Durand et al., 2023). Classical hedonism proposed a simpler criterion that equates the good life with the maximisation of pleasure and the minimisation of pain. Epicurean thinkers refined this view and associated well-being with tranquillity, modest pleasures, friendship and especially freedom from fear (Konstan, 2025). Christian thought focused on moral and spiritual dimensions centred on compassion, humility and meaningful relationships with community and God (Wood, 2022). Enlightenment humanism introduced yet another shift and linked good life to dignity, autonomy, rational self-determination, education and the development of human capabilities (Bristow, 2023).

Modern philosophical frameworks continued this diversification and shaped how contemporary debates about QoL are framed. Utilitarianism stressed the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people as the standard for a good life (Driver, 2025). Resourcism approaches the interpretation of a good life through access to material and environmental resources or primary goods. These include income, health, housing and environmental quality that enable people to meet their needs and pursue their aims (White, 2021). Liberal and libertarian theories placed a strong emphasis on individual rights, personal freedom and personal autonomy, arguing that well-being depends on the ability to choose and direct one's own life (van der Vossen & Christmas, 2025). Communitarian thinkers highlighted the importance of belonging, shared values, social practices and mutual recognition and understand well-being as something rooted in strong and supportive communities (Bell, 2024). Existentialist philosophers shifted the focus toward authenticity, responsibility, purpose, and meaning, arguing that a good life emerges from taking ownership of one's choices and shaping a life that is genuinely one's own (Aho, 2025).

Philosophical traditions often overlap, influence one another and evolve through dialogue, critique and borrowing; therefore, their insights cannot be treated as discrete units. Through this long intellectual evolution, QoL has come to be understood not as a single condition but as a complex interplay of material, social, psychological and moral dimensions. Contemporary multidimensional QoL research does not simply repeat these traditions but forms part of this ongoing conversation about what it means to live well rather than merely to survive (Michalos & Robinson, 2012; UN, 2023).

With industrialisation and the rise of national states, the question of living conditions became increasingly connected to state responsibility and social policy. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social statistics on housing, working conditions, poverty and mortality were early attempts to quantify aspects of welfare. While not labelled as QoL, they laid the empirical foundations for later approaches by treating health, education, housing and employment as measurable dimensions of social progress (Land et al., 2012; UN, 2023).

More explicit QoL and social indicators movements emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, partly as a reaction to the dominance of gross domestic product (GDP) as the main measure of progress. Researchers and international organisations argued

that economic growth did not automatically translate into improved living conditions, social justice or wellbeing. This triggered efforts to develop social indicators that could capture health, education, housing, leisure and other non-economic aspects of life. Over time, this movement broadened into a multidisciplinary field of QoL research, integrating perspectives from sociology, psychology, economics, geography, public health and environmental studies (Cobb & Rixford, 1998; Land et al., 2012).

In parallel, urban and regional planning began to use QoL concepts to assess the *liveability* of cities, looking at transport, housing, public services and environmental quality. This explicitly spatial turn made it clear that QoL is not only a property of individuals, but also deeply shaped by places and territorial development paths. Recent QoL initiatives by city networks and organisations such as UN-Habitat continue this tradition, linking local living conditions to broader agendas of sustainable and inclusive urban development (UN, 2023).

1.2 Competing approaches

Despite centuries of research, there is no single, universally accepted definition of QoL. Instead, several partly overlapping perspectives coexist, each highlighting different aspects. Objective approaches define QoL primarily through observable conditions and resources. Here, QoL is inferred from indicators such as income, employment, housing quality, education, health status, safety or access to services. This view is closely linked to the tradition of social indicators, where non-economic statistics complement GDP in monitoring societal progress. QoL in this sense is out there in the material and institutional environment, like adequate housing, public infrastructure, accessible health care, and equitable schools (Easterlin & Angelescu, 2012).

Subjective approaches emphasise how people themselves evaluate their lives. The concept of subjective well-being (SWB), developed in psychology, captures cognitive judgements such as life satisfaction and experiences of positive and negative emotions. In this perspective, QoL is what people feel and report–how satisfied they are with their life as a whole, how often they experience joy or anxiety, whether they perceive their lives as meaningful and worth living (Diener et al., 2002; Cummins et al., 2012; Veenhoven, 2012).

The capability approach reframes QoL as people's primary moral importance, consisting of people's *capabilities* (potential states, doings, beings, e.g. being well-nourished, getting married, being educated, participating in community life, etc.) and *functionings* (realised capabilities). Rather than focusing on resources (income) or mental states (happiness), the capability approach asks what people are actually able to do and to be, given their personal and social circumstances. This perspective has strongly influenced human development thinking and many contemporary QoL frameworks (Robeyns & Byskov, 2025; Wells, 2025).

Geographers and spatial planners have contributed to the understanding of QoL by emphasising its spatial dimension. Place matters because access to services, exposure to pollution, availability of green spaces, transport options and social infrastructures are unequally distributed across regions, cities and neighbourhoods (Marans & Stimson, 2011; Nared et al., 2021). QoL depends on the inherent characteristics of a person and their surrounding environment (UN, 2023). Conceptual models such as Veenhoven's *four qualities of life* (Table 1) explicitly distinguish between conditions (environment liveability, people's capacity) and results (life utility, life appreciation). Such frameworks make it clear that QoL is simultaneously about how places are organised and how people utilise and experience them (Veenhoven, 2013).

Table 1: Four qualities of life according to Veenhoven

	Outer	Inner
Conditions	Environmental liveability: moderate climate, clean air, spacious housing, freedom, equality, wealth, brotherhood, education, etc.	People's capacity: physical and mental health, energy, resilience, autonomy, varied lifestyle, creativeness, literacy, manners, etc.
Results	Life utility: care for family and friends, being a good citizen, compassion, inventing, etc.	Life appreciation: appraisal, satisfaction, contentment, etc.

Source: Authors, 2025; Data: Veenhoven, 2013.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that QoL is inherently multidimensional and contested. It can be understood as a configuration of objective conditions, subjective evaluations and capabilities, all of which are embedded in specific spatial and temporal contexts.

1.3 Domains and dimensions

Because of this conceptual diversity, many authors and institutions structure QoL into domains or dimensions rather than attempting a single, narrow definition. Multidimensional frameworks typically distinguish between economic, social, health, environmental and governance-related aspects of life. The economic dimension of QoL refers to material living conditions and economic security: income and wealth, employment, job quality, housing affordability and the ability to meet basic needs and participate in society (Easterlin & Angelescu, 2012; *Eurostat*, 2025a). Economic deprivation can severely constrain other domains, and while rising income generally improves QoL at low and middle income levels, this effect weakens beyond a certain threshold, a pattern known as the *Easterlin curve* (Easterlin & O'Connor, 2022). This insight is now widely recognised in *beyond GDP* debates (*European Commission*, 2025).

The social dimension addresses relationships, social cohesion and inclusion, including family and friendship networks, trust, perceived fairness, discrimination, safety, crime and social participation. The quality and density of social ties, as well as the presence of supportive institutions, shape how secure, connected and respected people feel in their everyday lives (Michalos, 2004; Robinson & Martin, 2012).

The health dimension includes both physical and mental health, access to healthcare and health behaviours. Health-related QoL research, which developed partly in parallel to social indicators work, has focused on how disease, disability and treatment affect people's daily functioning and subjective wellbeing (Diener & Tov, 2012; Frisch, 2012).

The environmental dimension highlights the importance of clean air and water, low noise, green and blue spaces, climate stability and biodiversity. QoL research increasingly recognises that environmental conditions are not just a background, but an active determinant of wellbeing, shaping physical health, mental health and the aesthetics and identity of places. This has been reinforced by frameworks on planetary boundaries, which show that crossing certain ecological thresholds (for climate, biodiversity, biogeochemical cycles) undermines the biophysical foundations of human wellbeing (Bass, 2009; Rockström et al., 2009).

Next, the governance and participation dimension concerns democratic rights, trust in institutions, perceived corruption, access to justice and opportunities for civic engagement. People's QoL is not only shaped by what they have but also by whether they feel heard, represented and able to influence decisions affecting their lives. This aspect is featured in OECD (*OECD*, 2024) and Eurostat (*Eurostat*, 2025b) wellbeing frameworks (Eckermann, 2012).

Finally, many frameworks include cultural and psychological dimensions, such as identity, belonging, meaning, autonomy and personal growth. These are harder to capture with standard indicators, but are central in eudaimonic approaches to wellbeing and in debates on mental health and loneliness (Keyes et al., 2012).

In practice, different frameworks combine these domains in various ways, but most agree that QoL cannot be reduced to a single dimension. What ultimately matters is the interplay between economic security, social relations, health, environment and governance in specific times and places.

1.4 Measuring approaches

Translating this conceptual richness into measurable indicators is both necessary and problematic. Governments, international organisations and researchers need indicators to monitor trends, design policies, and evaluate interventions. At the same time, any measurement strategy inevitably simplifies and partially distorts the complexity of lived experience.

The first distinction is often made between objective and subjective indicators. Objective indicators capture observable states, including income, employment, housing size, educational attainment, pollution levels, life expectancy, etc. Subjective indicators, by contrast, rely on survey questions about life satisfaction, happiness, perceived health, trust or feelings of safety. Both types are now widely used and increasingly combined (*OECD*, 2024; *Eurostat*, 2025b).

The second distinction concerns single indicators versus composite indices. Single indicators provide transparency and interpretability. Composite indices, which aggregate single indicators, combine multiple dimensions into a summary measure. Composite measures are attractive for communication and cross-country

comparison, but they raise methodological questions about weighting, normalisation and the commensurability of diverse dimensions (Hagerty & Land, 2012; Maggino & Zumbo, 2012; Greco et al., 2020).

From a geographical perspective, such measurement also raises questions of scale and spatial granularity. National averages can hide large regional and local inequalities in QoL. This has stimulated work on spatially explicit QoL indicators and multi-scalar analysis, in which neighbourhood, city, regional and national patterns are compared and mapped (Dobrowolska & Kopczewska, 2024; Răducan et al., 2025).

In response, some frameworks, including those developed by OECD (*OECD*, 2025) and Eurostat (*Eurostat*, 2025c), prefer indicator *dashboards* that present multiple domains side by side rather than collapsing them into a single number. This approach maintains multidimensionality but can be harder to summarise and communicate to non-expert audiences (Sirgy et al., 2012).

Critiques of the QoL measurement focus on several issues, including the danger that complex experiences are reduced to a limited set of comparable numbers; the risk of cultural bias in subjective well-being questions; and the tendency to treat indicators as neutral and technical despite their normative underpinnings. Nonetheless, most authors agree that abandoning measurement is not an option. The challenge is to design indicators that are conceptually transparent, empirically robust and sensitive to context (Hagerty & Land, 2012).

1.5 Contemporary debates

In recent years, QoL has been at the centre of several major debates about the future of development. A central theme is the critique of GDP as the dominant indicator of progress. The Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress has argued that GDP is a poor proxy for well-being and called for broader, multidimensional measures that capture distributional issues, non-market activities and environmental sustainability. This *beyond GDP* agenda has influenced national and international statistical strategies and given new momentum to QoL research (Camfield, 2012; *Eurostat*, 2025a).

Another topic concerns paradoxes of modernity. Many high-income societies have experienced sustained growth in income and human development indices, yet also report stagnating or even declining levels of subjective well-being, rising mental health problems and persistent or growing inequalities in income and wealth. These patterns fuel debates about whether contemporary economic models effectively translate into improved QoL for all or whether they produce forms of precarity, overwork and social fragmentation that offset material gains (Camfield, 2012).

The third closely related debate focuses on planetary boundaries and environmental limits. Researchers have proposed that humanity operates within a finite safe operating space defined by ecological thresholds in climate, biodiversity, land use, biogeochemical cycles and other Earth-system processes. The evidence that several of these boundaries have already been transgressed raises questions about the long-term sustainability of current lifestyles, especially in high-consumption societies, and about intergenerational aspects of QoL (Rockström et al., 2009).

These insights have inspired new frameworks such as *doughnut economics*, which combines a social foundation (basic human needs and rights) with an ecological ceiling (planetary boundaries), defining a safe and just space where human societies can thrive without undermining Earth-system stability (Raworth, 2017). Similar ideas underpin proposals for a well-being economy or post-growth development models, which shift the central goal from maximising GDP to sustaining high and broadly shared QoL within biophysical limits (*OECD*, 2018).

A further contemporary concern is the fragmentation and unequal distribution of QoL within societies. Spatial disparities between regions, urban and rural areas and neighbourhoods, as well as inequalities across lines of income, gender, age and ethnicity, mean that aggregate improvements can coexist with local decline or exclusion. Urban geographies of segregation, housing unaffordability and environmental injustice illustrate how place-based disadvantages accumulate and erode QoL for specific groups, even in countries that perform well on average (Camfield, 2012).

Finally, debates increasingly highlight emerging issues such as digitalisation, loneliness and mental health. While digital technologies can expand capabilities and access to services, they can also contribute to new forms of stress, surveillance and

exclusion. Rising concern about loneliness and mental distress in some high-income societies suggests that social and psychological dimensions of QoL deserve at least as much attention as material ones (Huebner et al., 2012).

Overall, contemporary debates emphasise that QoL exceeds economic growth or technological progress. It is shaped by complex interactions between economic, social, environmental and cultural processes, within and across time and places.

2 Analysing quality of life: European development paradoxes through indicators

In the following chapter, the general conceptual and philosophical grounding will be connected more directly to empirical evidence by examining long-term trends in selected economic, social and environmental indicators across Europe. For each country, long-term change over 30 years was calculated between the earliest and latest available year (Table 2). This will allow the abstract debates reviewed here to be linked to concrete data, illustrating the changing Europe and its development paradoxes.

2.1 Economic paradox: growth with uneven equality

Nominal GDP represents the total economic output of a country expressed in current USD. Data were obtained from the World Bank for the period 1990–2024. Across Europe, nominal GDP increased dramatically in almost all countries, but with substantial variation in scale. Post-transition economies recorded the strongest relative increases as they moved from centrally planned to market economies, attracted foreign investment, expanded export sectors and underwent institutional reforms. Western and Northern European economies, while already large, continued to grow steadily, though their relative increases appear smaller because they started from a much higher baseline. Some countries (e.g., Greece) showed stagnation or contraction following severe economic crises, while smaller economies (e.g., the Baltics) displayed exceptionally rapid growth relative to their initial size. Overall, nominal GDP trends reveal a continent-wide expansion of total economic activity but also highlight persistent structural differences between regions and the unequal ability of countries to withstand economic shocks (Figure 1a).

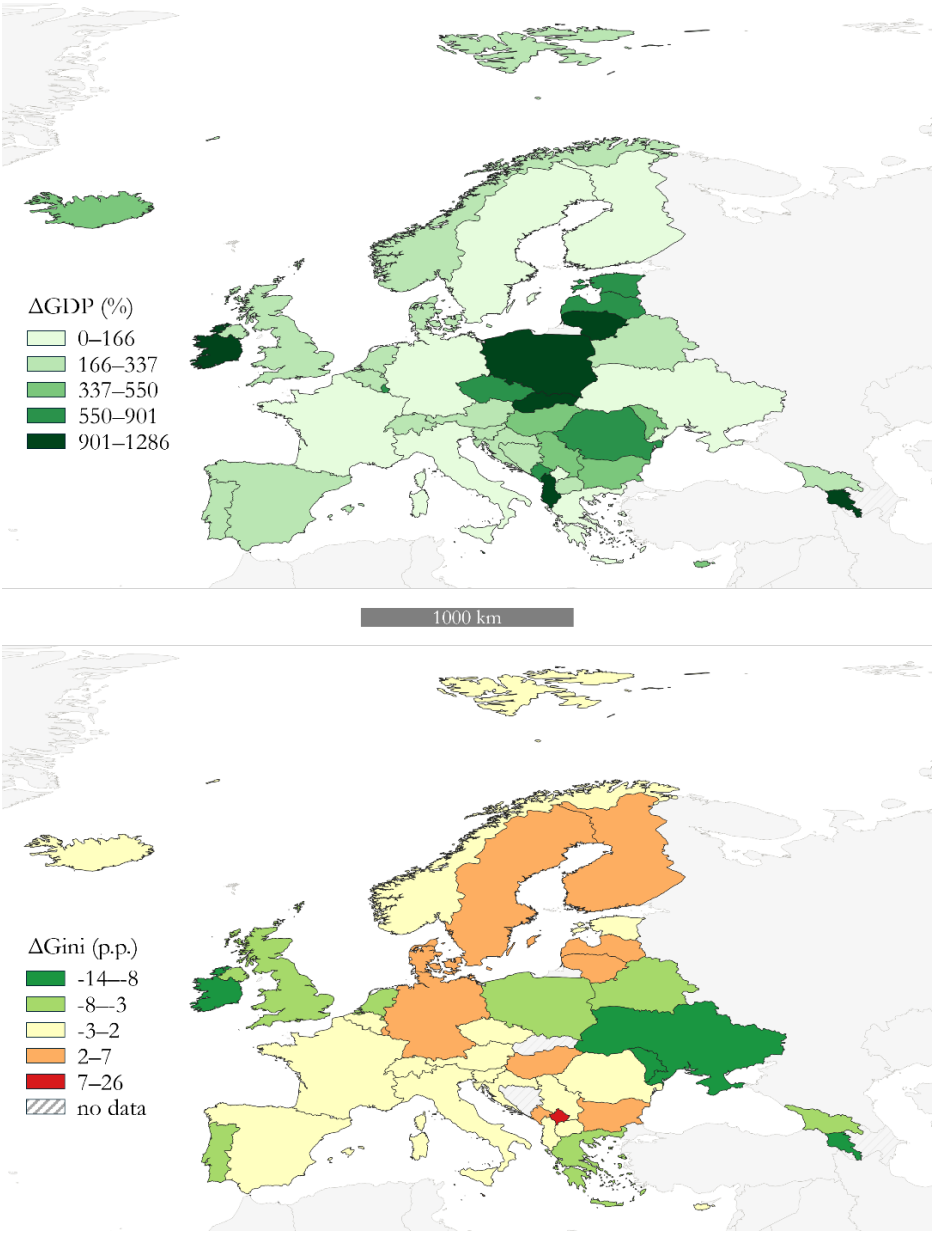

Figure 1 (a, b): Long-term changes in economic growth and inequality in Europe. The upper map (a) shows relative increases in GDP, while the lower map (b) shows changes in the Gini coefficient, highlighting that rapid economic convergence did not necessarily align with parallel improvements in income equality.

Source: Authors, 2025 (Data: GDP, 2025; Gini, 2025).

The Gini coefficient measures the distribution of disposable household income and ranges from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (maximum inequality). Data were obtained from the World Bank for the period 1990–2023. While already low, income inequality shows far less movement than GDP. Many Central and Eastern European countries saw major increases during the 1990s transition and later partial stabilisation. Western Europe experienced modest shifts, with some countries recording widening inequality due to labour-market polarisation and housing-cost pressures, while others maintained relatively low inequality thanks to robust welfare systems. Overall, Gini trends demonstrate that distributional structures are much more stable than economic output, suggesting that large increases in GDP do not automatically alter the way income is shared. In conflict-affected economies (e.g., Ukraine), decreases in the Gini coefficient may reflect income compression due to war-related economic disruption rather than an improvement in equality (Figure 1b).

Together, nominal GDP and the Gini coefficient reveal an important structural contradiction: Europe experienced an extraordinary expansion of total economic output, yet income inequality barely changed. Rapid GDP growth, especially in post-transition economies, did not automatically produce more equitable societies and, in some cases, coincided with the widening of income gaps. In spatial terms, the European pattern underscores the core economic paradox: growth was widespread and often impressive, but its benefits were unevenly shared (Table 2).

2.2 Social paradox: development with slower well-being gains

HDI integrates life expectancy, education and income into a single composite indicator. Data were obtained from the UNDP for the period 1990–2023. HDI increased substantially in every country, but the dynamics differ. Post-transition countries made the most dramatic gains, reflecting improvements in health systems, education reforms and rising income levels. Western and Northern Europe maintained already high HDI values but still recorded incremental progress, illustrating the difficulty of improving once close to the upper bound. A few countries, especially those affected by conflict or demographic contraction (e.g., Ukraine), recorded stagnation or slight decline. In general, HDI trends confirm broad and durable improvements in the objective dimensions of QoL, indicating that people live longer, are more educated and enjoy higher material standards (Figure 2a).

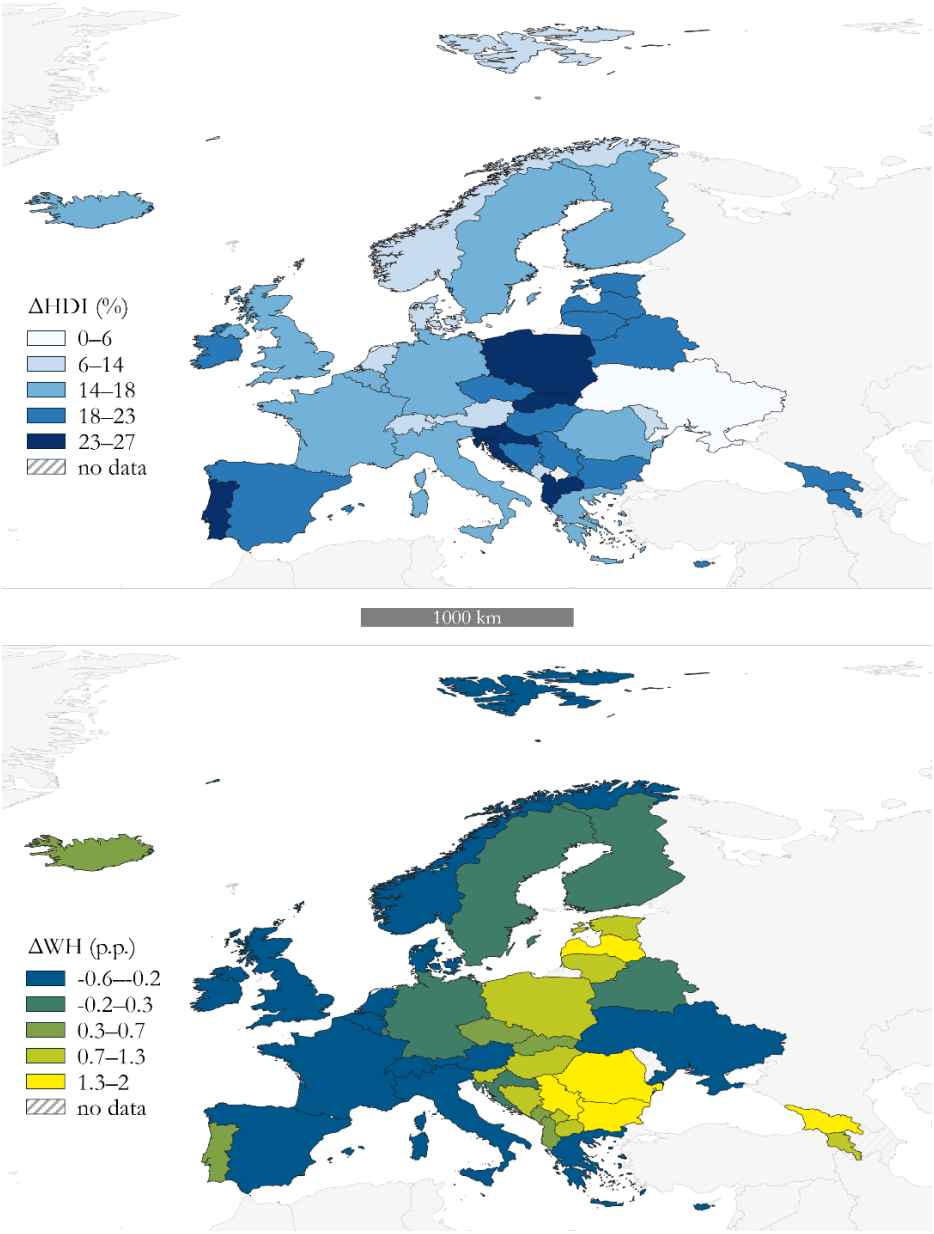

Figure 2 (a, b): Long-term changes in human development and subjective well-being in Europe. The upper map (a) shows relative increases in HDI, while the lower map (b) shows changes in life satisfaction, illustrating that strong human-development gains did not necessarily coincide with similar improvements in subjective well-being.

Source: Authors, 2025 (Data: HDI, 2025; WH, 2025).

The World Happiness Index measures self-reported life satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10. Data were obtained from the World Happiness Reports for the period 2011–2024. The European pattern is strikingly different from HDI. Many high-HDI, high-income countries show stagnation or deterioration in life satisfaction (e.g., Denmark, Norway, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, UK). These declines often align with rising mental-health challenges, increasing living-cost pressures, weakened social trust or political polarisation. Conversely, several Central and Eastern European countries (e.g., Serbia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania) experienced notable improvements, suggesting that rapid socioeconomic progress can translate into improved subjective well-being when it supports rising optimism and stability. However, overall levels remain lower than in Western Europe, demonstrating that well-being gains do not automatically converge with economic gains. This divergence signals that subjective well-being is shaped less by aggregate wealth and more by complex social, psychological and institutional conditions (Figure 2b).

Together, HDI and happiness reveal Europe's emerging social paradox: objective indicators of human development continue to rise, yet subjective life satisfaction stagnates or declines in many of the wealthiest and most developed societies. This suggests that education, longevity and income are necessary but not sufficient. Social cohesion, mental health and everyday pressures increasingly determine how people evaluate their lives (Table 2).

2.3 Environmental paradox: decarbonization with biodiversity decline

Domestic net greenhouse gas emissions measure total national emissions of greenhouse gases from all sectors expressed in tons per capita. Data were obtained from the European Environment Agency for the period 1990–2023. Most European countries achieved major reductions in emissions, in some cases exceeding 50%. These declines stem from improvements in energy efficiency, technological upgrading, coal phase-out, post-industrial restructuring, and EU climate legislation. Eastern Europe's reductions are partly linked to the collapse of heavy industry in the 1990s, while Northern Europe's progress reflects long-term investment in renewables. At the same time, a few countries recorded increases in emissions, most notably Latvia, where post-1990 economic restructuring, rising transport emissions, and growth in residential energy demand outweighed efficiency gains. Overall, Europe demonstrates clear progress in climate mitigation, achieving significant decoupling between economic growth and carbon emissions (Figure 3a).

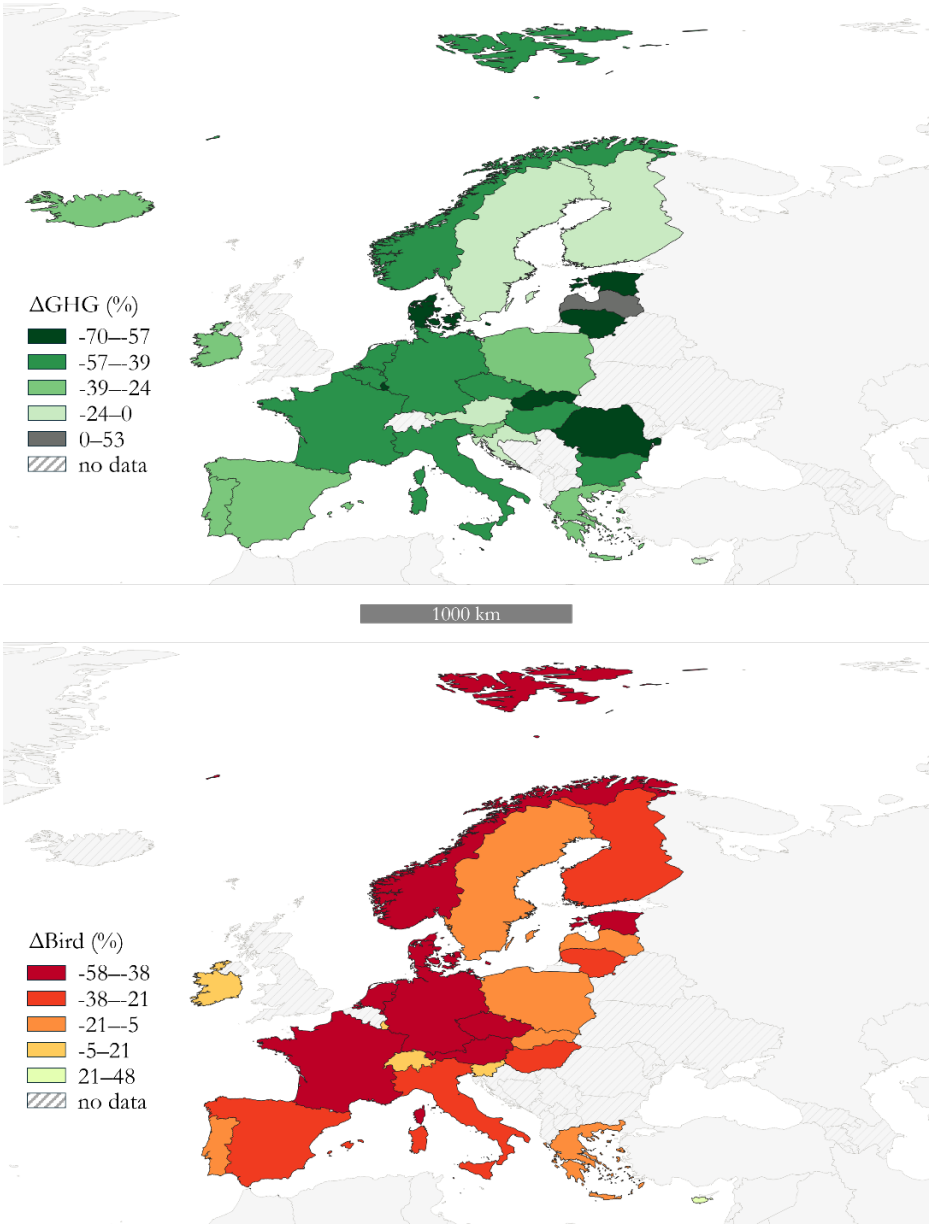

Figure 3 (a, b): Long-term changes in greenhouse-gas emissions and farmland-bird populations in Europe. The upper map (a) shows relative reductions in GHG emissions, while the lower map (b) shows changes in farmland bird population, highlighting that successful decarbonization has occurred alongside widespread declines in biodiversity.
Source: Authors, 2025 (Data: GHG, 2025; Bird, 2025).

The Common Farmland Bird Index tracks population trends of bird species associated with agricultural landscapes, serving as a sensitive proxy for biodiversity health. Data were obtained from the PECBMS and the EEA for the period 1990–2023. Farmland bird populations have declined dramatically across most of Europe, often by 30–50% or more. These decreases reflect intensifying agricultural practices (monocultures, pesticide use, fertiliser dependency, loss of hedgerows and field margins) and the homogenization of rural landscapes. Even countries with strong conservation frameworks (e.g., France, Germany, Czechia) observe persistent declines, indicating structural pressures from modern agriculture. Only a few cases show stabilisation or increases (e.g., Cyprus, Switzerland, Luxembourg), usually linked to targeted agri-environmental measures or extensive farming systems. Overall, biodiversity trends reveal one of Europe's most severe sustainability challenges (Figure 3b).

Environmental indicators expose a dual reality: while Europe has succeeded in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity continues to decline at alarming rates. Decarbonization alone does not prevent habitat loss or ecological degradation. This contrast highlights that climate policy progress does not automatically translate into broader ecological recovery, underscoring the urgency of transforming land-use systems to safeguard Europe's natural capital (Table 2).

Table 2: Three European development paradoxes shaping QoL in a changing world: economic (growth with uneven equality), social (development with slower wellbeing gains) and environmental (decarbonization with biodiversity decline).

	Economic paradox		Social paradox		Environmental paradox	
Country	ΔGDP (%)	ΔGini (p.p.)	ΔHDI (%)	ΔWH (p.p.)	ΔGHG (%)	ΔBird (%)
Albania	1239.8	-1.2	23.9	0.3	n.d.	n.d.
Andorra	292.6	n.d.	10.7	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Armenia	1042.6	-8.8	22.3	1.0	n.d.	n.d.
Austria	214.6	1.3	11.8	–0.4	–3.5	–38.3
Belarus	336.8	-4.3	19.1	0.0	n.d.	n.d.
Belgium	223.7	-1.6	15.4	–0.2	–42.0	n.d.
Bosnia and Herzeg.	265.6	n.d.	19.3	1.3	n.d.	n.d.
Bulgaria	443.9	6.7	19.7	1.7	–39.4	n.d.
Croatia	260.7	-1.2	24.7	0.2	–1.9	n.d.
Cyprus	549.8	1.5	21.9	–0.5	–8.5	48.1

	Economic paradox		Social paradox		Environmental paradox	
Country	ΔGDP (%)	ΔGini (p.p.)	ΔHDI (%)	ΔWH (p.p.)	ΔGHG (%)	ΔBird (%)
Czechia	741.2	-1.2	21.5	0.4	–49.7	–39.9
Denmark	210.7	6.9	14.0	–0.3	–57.8	–48.4
Estonia	849.7	0.6	22.6	1.1	–57.8	–43.5
Finland	112.0	3.9	15.2	0.2	–4.0	–27.3
France	151.4	-0.3	15.3	–0.2	–44.4	–45.7
Georgia	336.6	-5.7	19.7	1.5	n.d.	n.d.
Germany	162.1	3.6	15.0	0.2	–45.1	–57.6
Greece	166.4	-3.6	17.9	–0.4	–35.0	–4.7
Hungary	546.5	3.2	19.2	1.0	–42.0	–21.5
Iceland	417.3	-2.2	15.6	0.6	–29.5	n.d.
Ireland	1071.0	-8.0	22.3	–0.4	–35.8	8.6
Italy	100.4	-0.9	16.3	–0.2	–39.1	–28.8
Kosovo	108.6	26.2	n.d.	1.2	n.d.	n.d.
Latvia	676.0	3.0	20.8	1.4	52.9	–10.1
Liechtenstein	483.0	n.d.	6.3	n.d.	n.d.	
Lithuania	971.4	4.3	20.1	1.2	–62.4	–22.0
Luxembourg	629.3	5.9	17.2	0.1	–68.3	21.1
Malta	854.8	2.4	25.7	0.4	–44.6	n.d.
Moldova	406.6	-9.6	11.8	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Monaco	302.8	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Montenegro	719.8	5.2	11.5	0.7	n.d.	n.d.
Netherlands	285.1	-5.1	11.7	–0.2	–46.1	–46.4
North Macedonia	255.0	1.3	26.6	1.1	n.d.	n.d.
Norway	303.8	0.5	13.3	–0.3	–40.6	–46.2
Poland	1286.4	-6.1	25.5	0.9	–25.9	–13.1
Portugal	292.2	-4.6	25.9	0.7	–23.8	–6.5
Romania	900.8	-1.4	17.5	1.4	–69.7	n.d.
San Marino	81.8	n.d.	3.9	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Serbia	397.1	-1.5	21.4	2.0	n.d.	n.d.
Slovakia	997.8	n.d.	26.1	0.6	–57.4	–5.7
Slovenia	265.5	0.1	26.8	0.9	–30.6	0.6
Spain	221.3	1.4	19.8	–0.3	–29.7	–25.0
Sweden	133.3	4.1	17.2	0.0	–14.3	–15.4
Switzerland	252.4	0.3	13.1	–0.6	n.d.	1.6
Ukraine	134.3	-13.6	3.9	–0.4	n.d.	n.d.
United Kingdom	233.3	-3.1	16.5	–0.2	n.d.	n.d.

Source: Authors, 2025 (Data: *GDP*, 2025; *Gini*, 2025; *HDI*, 2025; *WH*, 2025; *GHG*, 2025; *Bird*, 2025).

Negative trend (worsening) Stagnation / modest change Positive trend (improvement)

ΔGDP (%) – Percentage change in Gross Domestic Product (economic expansion); ΔGini (p.p.) – Change in the Gini index in percentage points (income distribution); ΔHDI (%) – Percentage change in the Human Development Index (social development); ΔWH (p.p.) – Change in the World Happiness score in points (subjective wellbeing); ΔGHG (%) – Percentage change in greenhouse gas emissions (climate mitigation); ΔBird (%) – Percentage change in the common farmland bird index (biodiversity loss).

3 Investigating quality of life: Summer School context and research reports

Building on the conceptual foundations introduced in Chapter 1 and the long-term trends outlined in Chapter 2, this chapter presents the empirical work conducted during the Summer School, where international student research teams explored how social, cultural, environmental and spatial factors shape everyday QoL in Maribor and beyond. Through diverse qualitative, quantitative and spatially informed approaches, including field observations, interviews, GIS analysis and comparative case studies, their reports offer insights into how people experience urban spaces, public services, community initiatives and environmental change.

1. Social Inclusion Issues in Contemporary Housing Estates: The Case Study of Poljane, Maribor (mentor: José Ignacio Vila Vázquez)

The case study by Dušek et al. (2026) employs field observations, stakeholder interviews, and literature analysis to examine the dynamics of social exclusion in the Poljane social housing estate in Maribor. It finds that physical deterioration, concentrated Roma residency, weak interaction between groups, and the stigmatised image of the estate reinforce segregation despite some NGO-led inclusion efforts.

2. Quality of Life and Welfare Spaces in Maribor´s Koroška Vrata District: Mapping and Interviews (mentor: Maria Chiara Tosi)

The study by Koyun et al. (2026) combines systematic field observations and twelve semi-structured interviews to analyse how welfare spaces in Maribor's Koroška Vrata district shape everyday well-being. It finds that walkability, abundant green areas, and strong perceptions of safety support high QoL, while minor concerns relate to infrequent public transport, football-related disturbances, and occasional mobility conflicts.

3. Case Study on Urban Atmospheres in Maribor (mentor: Eberhard Rothfuss)

The study by Donnay et al. (2026) compares the atmospheres of Lent and the Europark shopping centre, using go-along interviews, open-ended interviews, and field observations to understand how different user groups perceive sensory and emotional qualities of urban spaces. It finds that Lent evokes calmness but is interpreted differently by tourists, locals, and employees, while Europark produces gendered sensory experiences shaped by design, crowding, and commercial cues, showing that urban atmospheres are co-produced by spatial form and social interpretation.

4. Linking Urban Public Spaces and Cultural Institutions to Quality of Life (mentors: Jarosław Działek, Monika Murzyn-Kupisz)

The study Krasniqui et al. (2026) by employs systematic field observations to evaluate four Maribor squares across seven dimensions of public space quality. It finds distinct but complementary functions among the squares and highlights shared needs for shade, seating, lighting, and basic infrastructure to improve everyday QoL.

5. Everyday Encounters in Public Transport: Mapping Bus Behaviour in Maribor (mentor: Tilen Kolar)

The study by Huszti et al. (2026) uses systematic observations on four Maribor bus lines to document passengers' behaviours, emotions, and interactions across weekday and weekend rides. It finds that buses function as quiet, socially mixed micro-spaces, primarily used by women, students, and older people, where fatigue, disengagement, and phone use predominate but are punctuated by small moments of comfort, routine, and occasional social connection.

6. Cultivating Resilience: Permaculture and Self-Sufficient Communities across European Contexts (mentor: Ana Vovk)

The comparative study by Durán-Rubi et al. (2026) uses literature review and project documentation from seven European countries to analyse how permaculture supports independent living, focusing on food production, water and energy management, governance, and education. It finds that despite diverse scales and

contexts–from urban gardens to large ecovillages–all initiatives strengthen self-sufficiency, ecological restoration, and community resilience.

7. Rural Europe in Comparison: A SWOT Perspective on Quality of Life in the Selected Regions (mentors: Éva Máté, Pavel Ptaček)

The study by Nikolić et al. (2026) uses a qualitative SWOT analysis of selected European rural areas to identify common factors shaping rural QoL. It finds that strong community ties and natural environments are key strengths, while demographic decline, weak services, and marginalisation are major weaknesses, with opportunities emerging through sustainable agriculture, rural tourism, and targeted development policies.

8. Spatial Analytics of Climate Change Impacts: The Case Study of Maribor (mentor: Danijel Ivajnšič)

The study by Blaj et al. (2026) models future climate and heat stress in Maribor using high-resolution climate projections (CHELSA), Landsat-derived LST and NDVI, population data, and a composite fuzzy-logic heat stress index. It finds strong warming (+4 °C), declining precipitation, and severe future heat stress concentrated in dense central and southern urban areas, underscoring the need for targeted adaptation planning.

9. Ecological Network and Ecosystem Services (mentors: Serge Schmitz, Sanda Nicola)

The study by Yakovlieva et al. (2026) combines GIS-based mapping of green areas, ecological corridors, and Natura 2000 sites with 20 on-street interviews to assess Maribor's ecological network and residents' perceptions of ecosystem services. It finds that while the city is surrounded by extensive green spaces and exhibits generally good ecological connectivity, central districts lack continuous green corridors and that residents most value clean air, shade, recreation, and riverfront areas, highlighting opportunities for targeted green infrastructure improvements.

10. Urban Agriculture and Quality of Life: A Comparative Analysis of Different Forms of Urban Agriculture and Its Effects on Welfare (mentor: Silva Grobelnik Mlakar)

The study by Grobelnik Mlakar et al. (2026) combines a comparative literature review with fieldwork and expert interviews in Maribor to examine how different forms of urban and peri-urban agriculture across six European cities contribute to community well-being and sustainable urban development. It finds that despite diverse local contexts, UA consistently supports social cohesion, ecological awareness, and local food systems, with the Maribor case showing strong potential through school gardens, cooperatives, and CSA models, though broader participation still depends on institutional support and public engagement.

11. Urban–Suburban Relations and Quality of Life Along the Maribor–Graz Corridor: A Study of Four Settlements in Northeast Slovenia (mentors: Peter Kumer, Danijel Davidović)

The study by Kumer & Davidović (2026) examines urban–suburban relations along the Maribor–Graz corridor through four case studies, combining field surveys, interviews, municipal consultations and direct observation. It finds that suburbanisation, cross-border labour mobility and post-industrial restructuring are reshaping settlement patterns, creating challenges related to housing pressure, car dependency, demographic change and fragmented spatial governance within an increasingly integrated city region.

Taken together, the eleven research reports provide a broad, practice-based view of how QoL is shaped across different settings, from central public spaces and neighbourhood environments to ecological networks, rural regions and food systems. Although each study focuses on a specific site or theme, they collectively reveal how liveability emerges from the interaction of social relations, environmental conditions, spatial design and community initiatives. The findings underscore that everyday well-being is rooted in material infrastructure and institutional provision but also in subtle emotional atmospheres, patterns of use, access to green spaces and forms of collective organisation. Seen together, these investigations translate the abstract trends and debates from the previous chapters into concrete, situated

examples of how people experience and negotiate QoL in Maribor and European contexts.

4 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the conceptual and analytical foundations used in this monograph to understand QoL in a changing world. It traced how thinking about the good life has evolved from classical philosophical reflections, through early social statistics and economic indicators, to contemporary multidimensional frameworks that integrate objective conditions, subjective evaluations and human capabilities. QoL is now widely recognised as a complex, contested and spatially embedded concept, encompassing economic, social, health, environmental, political and cultural dimensions.

The examination of long-term European trends over the past three decades illustrated how these conceptual debates unfold in a rapidly changing world. Economic growth and human development have continued to rise, yet several social and environmental dimensions have stagnated or declined. Societies can grow richer while remaining unequal, improve health and education while subjective well-being weakens, and reduce pollution while biodiversity continues to decline. These development paradoxes underscore the importance of approaching QoL in explicitly multidimensional terms, being attentive to both progress and its limits, as well as to the spatial differences that shape everyday experience.

Finally, by introducing the empirical research reports produced during the Summer School: Quality of Life in a Changing World, the chapter linked conceptual foundations and long-term European trends to lived realities in Maribor and other European contexts. QoL emerges here not as a single measure but as a process shaped by material conditions, human capabilities, subjective perceptions, social cohesion and ecological resilience. This multidimensional understanding provides the framework for the chapters that follow, where QoL is examined through concrete neighbourhoods, landscapes and everyday practices.

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