

## An Analytical Study of Malaysia's Quality of Life Indicators

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**Abstract:** In Malaysia, there are several set of indicators used to measure quality of life vis-à-vis liveability of cities. Three remarkable set of indicators are the Malaysian Wellbeing Index (2 sub composites, 14 components, 68 indicators), the Malaysian Urban Rural National Indicators for Sustainable Development (6 dimensions, 21 themes, 36 indicators) and the Malaysian Family Wellbeing Index (7 domains, 24 indicators). They are governed by government agencies of Economic Planning Unit (EPU), Federal Town and Country Planning Department (FTCPD) and National Population and Family Development Board (NPFDB) respectively. Quality of life is directly related to liveability and the latter is very much influenced by the fulfillment of the need for self-fulfilment — physical, social, emotional and spiritual. In the Malaysian context quality of life is interchangeably used to mean liveability, sustainability, wellbeing and happiness in its towns and cities. The study employed meta-ethnography qualitative approach by in-depth analysis and synthesis on the respective set of indicators. It is a systematic approach that enables comparison, analysis and interpretations to be made that can inform theorizing and practice. The analysis revealed the commonalities and differences amongst the three set of Malaysia's quality of life indicators. Noticeably, religion and spirituality become one of the concerns. For town planners and city managers, the result indicates the state of people living condition in cities that influence planning and development in the long run. Overall, the indicators used are quite varied suiting their organisation's aim and objectives but they are sharing the common themes of politics, economics, social, environment and infrastructure.

**Key words:** Malaysia; quality of life; liveability; wellbeing; index

**JEL codes:** H

### 1. Introduction

There are many factors contributing to the quality of life vis-à-vis liveability of cities affirmatively or negatively that require investigation. Consequently, a formation of a tool to such investigation is significant that requires indicators to be firmed up. The result of the investigation would be the level of liveability and quality of life experienced by city dwellers. It would enable the city managers and the government to be aware about the problems faced by the city dwellers and thus appropriate budget and development projects to be undertaken to

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upgrade the peoples' quality of life in those cities. In the Malaysian context there are various government agencies that work on this matter based on their organizational aim and objectives. The notable agencies are Economic Planning Unit (EPU), Federal Town and Country Planning Department (FTCPD) and National Population and Family Development Board (NPFDB).

Thus, this study traces those initiatives starting with EPU with the series of its Malaysian Quality of Life (MQLI) of 1999, 2002, and 2004. The last MQLI study stopped in 2011 and was replaced by a more comprehensive study called the Malaysian Wellbeing Index (MWI) 2013. Meanwhile the Federal Town and Country Planning Department (FTCPD) also was concerned about quality of life in the form of producing the Sustainability Index of the 154 Local Authorities of Malaysia. This was monitored through the Malaysian Urban Rural Indicators Network (MURNInet) which was later reviewed as the Malaysian Urban Rural National Indicators Network on Sustainable Development (MURNInets). Another agency, the National Population and Family Development Board (officially, LPPKN) too consolidated its efforts in keeping tabs with the family wellbeing by producing a study called the Malaysian Family Well-Being Index Study 2011. Now this study is being under review and is called IKK2 — *IndeksKesejahteraanKeluarga 2*.

This article is divided into four main sections with the first section explaining about the studies already undertaken by three chosen Malaysian government agencies that had attempted to include human wellbeing aspects in their efforts to provide the desired urban quality of life. The second section describes the methodology employed in this study. The third section discusses its findings and the analysis of the indicators to reveal their commonalities and differences. Finally the fourth section concludes the study.

## 2. Malaysian Wellbeing Indexes

As Malaysia is developing rapidly towards a developed nation by 2020, inevitably people are impacted socially and economically in the name of development. Other than Gross Domestic Product per capita indication, the situation is made evident in the urbanization rate of Malaysia as shown in Figure 1:

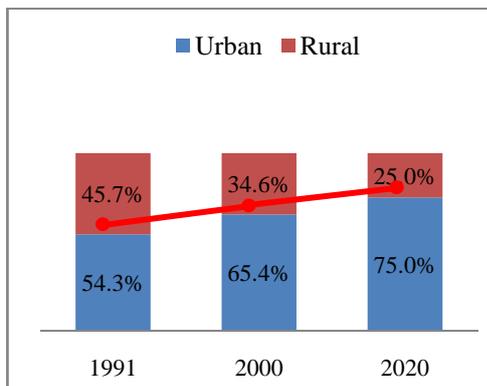


Figure 1 Percentage of Population in Urban and Rural Areas in Peninsular Malaysia

Source: National Physical Plan 2

Year		Area	
		Urban	Rural
1991	Population	7,679.1	6,452.5
	%	54.3	45.7
2000	Population	12,122.1	6,401.5
	%	65.4	34.6
2020	Population	20,983.9	6,977.5
	%	75.0	25.0

Nevertheless this urbanization process affects quality of life and liveability of the people both urban and rural. Whether it is positively or negatively affecting peoples' wellbeing would be made known upon undertaking a study. For that reason, the following studies by the three different government's agencies were conducted. They are:

(1) The Malaysian Quality of Life Reports (MQLI, 1999-2011)

The concern for Malaysian Quality of Life was pioneered by the Prime Minister's Department via the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) in 1999 which produced the Malaysian Quality of Life index. The Malaysian quality of life is defined by EPU as encompassing personal advancements, a healthy lifestyle, access and freedom to pursue knowledge, and a standard of living which surpasses the fulfillment of basic needs of individuals and their psychological needs, to achieve a level of social wellbeing compatible with the nation's aspirations. The concept of quality of life therefore is taken to mean that the entire society and social system have moved away from an unsatisfactory condition of life towards a generally better phase. Quality of life here is defined as encompassing not only economic development, but also social, psychological, cultural, political and environmental improvements.

The 1999MQLI is a composite measurement based on ten selected components, i.e., income and distribution, working life, transport and communications, health, education, housing, environment, family life, social participation and public safety. They were assumed to be of equal importance for the wellbeing and the quality of life of the population and were assigned equal weightage. Then in 2002, the second MQLI was produced. This report analyzed the changes in the quality of life for the period 1990 to 2002, using 1990 as the base year. A total of 42 indicators were used in the computation of the Index which represented eleven components of life including culture and leisure. This second report contained a composite index to evaluate urban quality of life as well as peoples' perception of the government's efforts in enhancing it. The Government stressed that it has always adopted a balanced development approach giving equal emphasis to economic growth and the quality of life of the people. Quality of life here is measured by both income levels and non-financial factors such as physical, psychological and social wellbeing. The non-financial factors also include health, safety, housing, education, environment, culture and leisure, and transport and communications.

Against the backdrop of the growing urbanization in the country since the 70s, the issue of Malaysian urban quality of life faced with many challenges. Hence with the changing needs of the people due to the rapid rate of urbanization, some of the indicators of the quality of life had to be revised. The 2011 MQLI report is the fourth and the last publication of the 1999, 2002, and 2004 series. It used 45 indicators from 11 components. According to this report, the overall quality of life in Malaysia was found to have improved during the 2000-2010 period, where the MQLI has increased by 11.9 points (2000 being the base year at 100 points). All the 11 components recorded improvements especially in the education component that recorded the highest increase of 20.4 points, followed by transport and communications (20.3points), and housing (15.7 points) respectively.

(2) The Malaysian Wellbeing Index, 2013 (MWI)

Driven by the need to measure the nation's progress beyond Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the Malaysian Quality of Life Index (MQLI) had monitored Malaysian quality of life from 1999 till 2010. The indicators used underwent several changes; it expanded from 10 components and 38 indicators to 11 components and 45 indicators to capture the socio-economic fabric of the Malaysian multi-ethnic society and to better reflect their quality of life. However, as Malaysia progresses towards a high-income economy, the government felt that there was a need to further strengthen the indicators of the MQLI to be more comprehensive. Hence, the MQLI was enhanced and reformulated into the MWI in 2013 comprising 2 sub composites, 14 components and 68 indicators. The MWI was constructed based on both the domestic and internationally recognized indicators.

Overall, the performance of the MWI showed that the country's development policies and strategies had generally increased the level of wellbeing of the population. During 2000 to 2012, the MWI had increased by 25.4

points and grew by 1.9 percent per annum. The economic wellbeing sub-composite index improved by 33.3 points as compared to the social wellbeing sub-composite index which increased by 21.0 points. The economic wellbeing sub-composite index recorded a growth rate of 2.4% annually; compared to 1.6% for the social wellbeing sub-composite index (see Figure 2). The transport and housing components had recorded the highest increase, of 36.9 points each. However, the least improvement was recorded by the family component at 4.6 points and this is something to be further improved to ensure peoples' quality of life especially the family institution and the level of health indicators could perform better in the future. It was found that this situation was associated with the increase in divorce rates, juvenile crimes and non-communicable diseases. Improvements under the social wellbeing categories therefore are imperative for Malaysia to achieve its goal of becoming a high income advanced nation by 2020 not only in economic sense but also in areas of social, environment and overall quality of life.

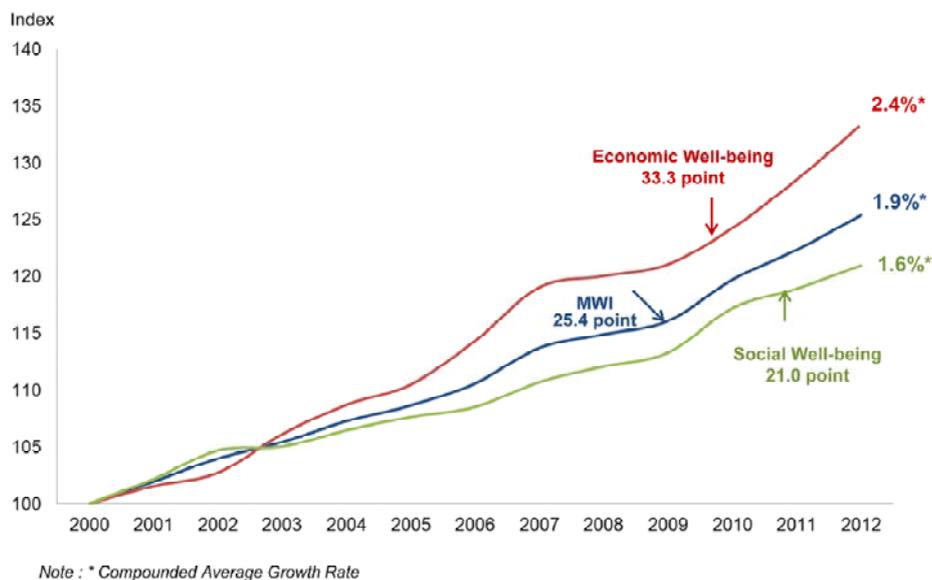


Figure 2 Malaysian Well-being Index, 2000-2012

Source: MWI Report, EPU, 2013

(3) The MURNInet (1998) and the MURNInets (2011)

While the EPU was busy with the MQLI and MWI, the town planners were rightfully concerned about urbanization and the quality of life in major towns of the local authorities. The Federal Town and Country Planning Department (FTCPD) had started to formulate the Malaysian Urban Rural Indicators Network (MURNInet) in 1998. The MURNInet is an innovative system that determines the sustainability level of an urban area by using a set of urban indicators. It enables the tracking of the sustainability status of an urban area whether it has increased, reduced or static. In MURNInet — A sustainable urban area is defined as an area that is capable of sustaining its social, economic and physical development achievements whilst maintaining excellence in culture and environment. In terms of percentage, a score of 80 per cent is classified as sustainable, 50 percent to 80 per cent is considered moderately sustainable and scores below 50 per cent is considered less sustainable. MURNInet is applicable to all the 154 Local Authorities in Malaysia since their role is crucial in creating quality of life and sustainability of urban areas under their jurisdiction. Again, to keep tabs with emerging issues of urbanization and sustainability, the MURNInet had to be revised and in 2011, the FTCPD produced the Malaysian

Urban Rural National Indicators Network on Sustainable Development (MURNInets). The main improvements between the two versions are as shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1 Comparison between the MURNInet and MURNInets**

The MURNInet (1998) 11 sectors and 55 indicators	The MURNInets (2011) 6 Dimensions/21 Themes (36 Indicators)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Demography</li> <li>2. Housing</li> <li>3. Urban Economy</li> <li>4. Utility &amp; Infrastructure</li> <li>5. Public Amenities &amp; Recreation</li> <li>6. Environment</li> <li>7. Sociology &amp; Social Impact</li> <li>8. Land use</li> <li>9. Tourism &amp; Heritage</li> <li>10. Transportation &amp; Accessibility</li> <li>11. Management &amp; Finance</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Competitive Economy</li> <li>2. Sustainable Environmental Quality</li> <li>3. Sustainable Community</li> <li>4. Optimum use of land and Natural Resources</li> <li>5. Efficient Transportation and Infrastructure</li> <li>6. Effective Governance</li> </ol>

(4) The Malaysian Family Wellbeing Index (MFWI), 2011

The study has identified relevant indicators that can provide information about the wellbeing of families in Malaysia. Subsequently, based on the identified indicators (see Table 2), a Family Wellbeing Index (FWI) was developed to measure the current state of wellbeing of the family as well as for use in new policy formulation, planning for implementation of future research, the development of new programmes and services, and expansion of existing programmes. The development of the Family Wellbeing Index was focused on subjective wellbeing in which all the respondents were asked to give assessments of certain aspects related to their family. The Family Wellbeing Index used the value of 10 as the maximum score. The higher the score obtained, the better the level of family wellbeing. As a result, the overall Family Wellbeing Index was calculated at 7.55 which were obtained by averaging the score for all the seven domains measured. This score seemed to be relatively high therefore the average Malaysian family wellbeing was considered as good. The government felt that family wellbeing should be monitored hence presently it has embarked on the Family Wellbeing Index 2 study.

The summary of the three remarkable Malaysia's quality of life indicators governed by the different government agencies is as shown in the following Table 2.

### 3. Methods

The study employed meta-ethnography qualitative approach by in-depth analysis and synthesis on the respective set of indicators. It is a systematic approach that enables comparison, analysis and interpretations to be made that can inform theorizing and practice. The analysis revealed the commonalities and differences amongst the three set of Malaysia's quality of life indicators. In consequence, content analysis of those documents which are directly related to quality of life, liveability, sustainability and wellbeing indicators of the Malaysian was conducted, tracing it back to studies such as the MQLI, MWI, MURNInets and MFWI. In the Malaysian context the terms have been interchangeably used to connote the same meaning. The overriding goal of the content analysis employed in this study is that it provides knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study via analyzing text data of official websites of relevant agencies, other literatures and semi-structured interviews of professional town planners who are considered experts in the matter to establish the validity and reliability of what constitute quality of life and liveability objectives. The content analysis offers a flexible, pragmatic method for developing and extending knowledge via observation, theory and keywords from review of

existing literatures.

**Table 2 Summary of the Three Remarkable Malaysia's Quality of Life Indicators**

The Malaysian Wellbeing Index, EPU (2 sub-composite, 14 components, 68 indicators)	The Malaysian Family Wellbeing Index, LPPKN (7 domains, 24 indicators)	The Malaysian Urban Rural National Indicators Network on Sustainable Development (MURNInets), FTCPD (6 dimensions, 21 themes, 36 indicators)
1.Economic wellbeing -Transport -Communications -Education -Income & distribution -Working life	1.Family Relationships -Parental involvement -Family resilience -Family functioning -Time with family -Work-family balance -Husband/wife relationship -Parental relationship	1.Competitive Economy -Economic growth -Poverty -Private investment
2.Social wellbeing -Housing -Leisure -Governance -Public safety -Social participation -Culture -Health -Environment -Family	2.Family Economy -Family living standards -Family economic situation -Future savings -Debt burden	2.Sustainable Environmental Quality -Environmental quality -Risk management -Environmental management
	3.Family Health -Family health practice -Family health level -Stress management	3.Sustainable Community -Housing -Community facilities and recreations -Quality of life -Safety -Demography
	4.Family Safety -Emergency response knowledge -Safety at home -Family safety	4.Optimum Use of Land and Natural Resources -Change of land use -Urban development -Heritage conservation, agriculture and tourism
	5.Family & Community -Community cooperation -Community relationship -Community involvement	5.Efficient Transportation and Infrastructure -Utilities efficiency -Solid waste management -Transportation -Sewerage management
	6.Family & Religion/Spirituality -Role of religion -Spiritual practice	6.Effective Governance -Delivery system -Institutional improvement -Enforcement and monitoring
	7.Housing & Environment -Basic amenities -Pollution levels	

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

An analytical study on the 2 sub composites, 14 components and 68 indicators of MWI 2013, the 6 dimensions, 21 themes and 36 indicators of MURNInets 2012 and the 7 dimensions and 24 indicators of MFWI 2011 (see Table 2; however the 68 and 36 indicators for MWI and MURNInets respectively are not enlisted here; reference could be made to their original document) reveals the following findings:

##### 4.1 Organizational-Objective-Base of Wellbeing Indicators

Undoubtedly, the indicators promulgated by the specific government agencies aim to meet their own

organizational objectives. For MWI 2013 envisioned by EPU, the objectives are to complement the measurement of economic development which is traditionally based on income per capita; secondly to measure impact of socio-economic policies on the quality of life and wellbeing of the people; and to identify socio-economic issues in order to formulate appropriate policies and strategies. Nonetheless the objectives of MURNInets championed by FTCPD, amongst others, are to provide a diagnostic tool for urban managers, to make available of a regular performance review of urban sub-sectors and to prepare a policy-sensitive indicators as a guide to urban decision making. Meanwhile, the objectives of the study of MFWI championed by NBPFD are to measure family wellbeing, to describe the state of family wellbeing based on the set of indicators developed and to propose recommendations to improve family wellbeing.

The objectives designed are in tandem with the nature and sort of data that the organization sought for. Economic Planning Unit (EPU) for example is concerned about socio-economic wellbeing thus the 14 components are tailored towards those objectives and supported by various indicators. On the other hand, the Federal Town and Country Planning Department (FTCPD) is a government agency that is responsible for spatial planning of human wellbeing for both the urban as well as the rural areas. Thus its 6 dimensions, 21 themes and 36 indicators were skewed towards accommodating that specialty. Similarly to NBPFD, its 7 dimensions and 24 indicators are appropriately measured within the family realm. Seemingly, the names of the agencies self-explained the contents of their functions and could be conceived as redundant, however upon a critical study these three set of indicators complement each other. The first agency is looking at the general population at large, the second is focusing on spatial planning and the third is within the family context. Delving into all the indicators under these respective agencies, nonetheless they are all sharing five common themes as far as quality of life is concerned. They are politics, economics, social, environment and infrastructure which have been simplified in Table 3.

#### **4.2 Making the Human Wellbeing Measurement More Pragmatic**

Referring to Table 3 below, under the social theme and the indicator of quality of life, the MURNInets study has been expanded to include the Happiness Index in 2013. The study involved primary data collection where a survey was carried out jointly between the FTCPD and respective local authorities on their residents. The aspects taken into account were:- relationship with family, neighbourhood and environmental atmosphere, the interaction between people, the safety of the population, the level of health facilities and the level of local authority services in their area. The Happiness index is an attempt to gauge intrinsic quality of life of urban residents whether they are Happy (> 80%), Average happy (50-79%) or Less happy (< 50%). A total of 13 questions were asked regarding stress level, health, family and partner relationship, job satisfaction, monthly income, neighbour relationship, safety, adequacies of public facilities, environment quality and political representation. Results showed that at the City Council level, cities were Average happy where Bandaraya Melaka scored only at 78.46%, Putrajaya, Shah Alam and Ipoh were only at 76.92% happy and Kuala Lumpur was at only 70.77% happy. On the other hand, the Happiness Index at the District Council level (relatively rural areas) Baling, a very remote area, scored the highest score at 84.62% followed by Pekan and Raub at Happy level (80%).

However this situation is quite consistent and normal whereby results of sustainable cities of small and remote cities tended to score higher in sustainability index than major Municipalities and Town Halls (which are predominantly very urbanized). In 2007, based on the MURNInet1998Version, a set of less urbanized urban centres of relatively rural local authorities instead of the urban ones recorded more than 80% Sustainability Index. This had caused a stir among town planners and urban managers because they claimed that it did not give a fair

picture and were not comparable to their relatively more urbanized areas such as the City Halls and Municipal Council areas. Consequently, MURNInets 2012 was introduced to rectify this situation. With the revision, the 2014 list shows a more realistic picture among the more urban local authorities (see Table 4) because now the comparison is based on the status of the local authorities.

**Table 3 Five Common Themes of the MWI, MFWI and MURNInets**

The five themes	The Malaysian Wellbeing Index, (MWI), EPU	The Malaysian Family Wellbeing Index (MFWI), NBPFDF	The Malaysian Urban Rural National Indicators Network on Sustainable Development (MURNInets), FTCPD
1.Politics& governance	-governance -public safety	-safety at home -family safety -emergency response knowledge	-delivery system -strengthening institutions -enforcement and monitoring -security and safety -Municipal development
2.Economics	-income and distribution -working life	-family living standards -family economic situation -future savings -debt burden	-economic growth -poverty -private investment
3.Social	-housing -education -leisure -social participation -culture -family	-community cooperation/ relationship/involvement -role of religion -spiritual practice -parental involvement -family resilience -family functioning -time with family -work-family balance -husband/wife relationship -parental relationship -family health practice -stress management	-residential -quality of life -demography
4.Environment	-health -environment	-pollution level -family health level	-changes in land use -heritage preservation, agriculture and tourism -environmental quality -risk management -environmental management
5.Infrastructure	-transport -communications	-basic amenities	-utility efficiency -solid waste& sewerage management -transportation -community facilities

**Table 4 Comparing Results of Sustainability Index 2007 and 2014**

Town/city	Year 2007		Year 2014	
	Town/city	Sustainability Index (%)	Town/city	Sustainability Index(%)
Jelebu		85.09	Petaling Jaya	99.0
BandarayaMelaka		84.21	Johor Bahru	97.0
Tapah		83.33	BandarayaMelaka	96.0
ParitBuntar		81.08	K.Terengganu	95.0
Port Dickson		80.70	Shah Alam	95.0
			Ipoh	89.0
			Kuala Lumpur	88.0
			AlorSetar	84.0
			Putrajaya	81.0

Source: MURNInets Gateway, 2014

Meanwhile, still debates are rife as to why capital cities like Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya did not show high sustainability index whereas K. Terengganu and Alor Setar scored relatively high Sustainability index. This is a pang to their status as Kuala Lumpur is the Capital city of the nation and Putrajaya is its Administrative centre. Another argument is about the near perfect score of 99% for Petaling Jaya and 97% for Johor Bahru when in reality, this is something unrealistic. A more realistic comparison would be rating them according to their status whether City Councils, Municipal Councils, District Councils and Federal Territories and should be based on verified data sources.

### 4.3 Data-Base Wellbeing Policy Making

Obviously data is required for policy making in order to provide objective measures of conditions and trends, to avoid or to correct mistakes and to rethink ineffective policies. Indeed, the results of the human wellbeing studies provided information to policy makers. For instance the comparatively unfavourable result of the EPU's study (see Figure 3) shows that components of family, environment and working life need further actions by the relevant government agencies. This showed that the Social Wellbeing of Malaysians are lagging behind the Economic Wellbeing, therefore it should be rectified and balanced to create a truly happy Malaysians and attain the desired quality of life.

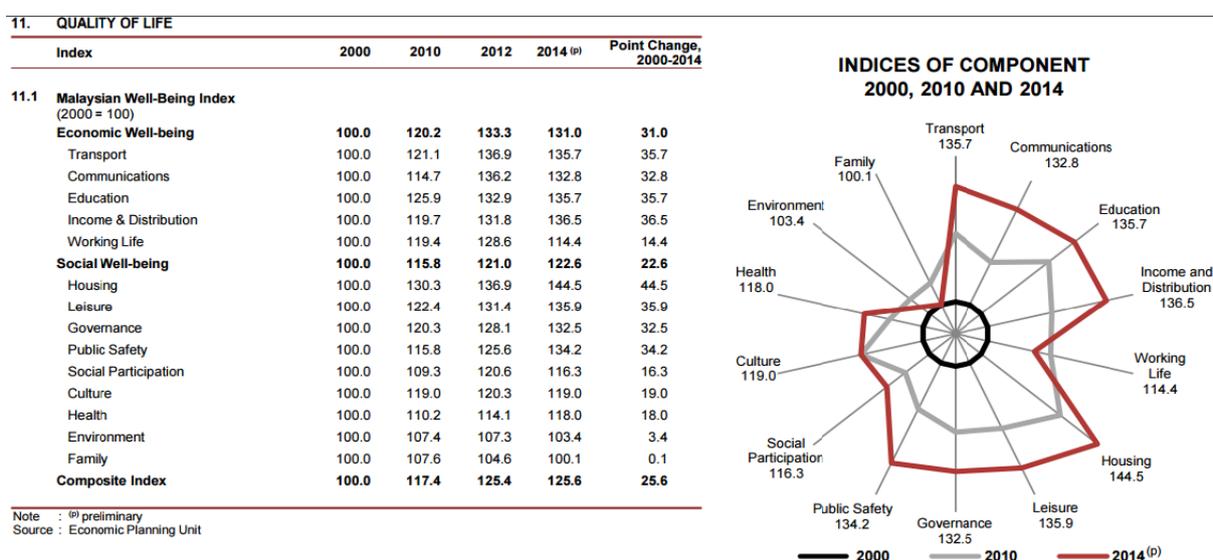


Figure 3 The Malaysian Quality of Life 2000-2014 by EPU

Source: The Malaysian Economy in Figures (2016), Economic Planning Unit.

On the contrary, the result of the MFWI's study shows that religion and spirituality gained highest consideration in the family wellbeing context that is 8.25 while the economy is at 6.90 only. Table 5 shows the scores of all the seven domains of the MFWI's study, 2011.

In the nutshell, the study conducted by the organization in attaining their specific objectives helps policy makers to make decisions effectively in their sphere of authority and responsibility. However, there are rooms for these government agencies to collaborate and coordinate under the notion of Malaysian wellbeing and to optimize their manpower and resources. Thus, the results helped in gearing towards a more pragmatic measurement of quality of life in Malaysia hence streamlining more strategic policies and development for the achievement of an overall quality and wellbeing of Malaysians.

Table 5 The Malaysian Family Wellbeing Index, 2011

Seven Domains	Score out of 10.0
Family & Religion/Spirituality	8.25
Family & Community	7.83
Family Relationships	7.82
Family Safety	7.39
Family Health	7.38
Housing & Environment	7.28
Family Economy	6.90
Overall Family Wellbeing Index	7.55

Source: Family Wellbeing Index Report, 2011

## 5. Conclusion

While quality of life and liveability to city dwellers mean different things to different people their basic needs remain the same. The main difference perhaps is just in terms of quantity, quality and affordability. However what remains crucial to everybody is to enjoy good quality living standards as far as personal and family safety, healthiness, having good transports, comfortable homes and overall happiness. It can therefore be concluded that liveability should be more focus at a specific target group that is the urban residents not the transient visitors. Liveability of cities should be the result of a combination of the multidimensional factors that provide a more balanced perspective and livelihood to its citizens ranging from its economic vibrancy and competitiveness, domestic security and stability, socio-cultural and religious conditions, effective public governance, environmental friendliness and sustainability. Besides the basic physical and material needs, implicit ethical values too play its part for example the balancing between work and play and balancing between thinking globally and acting locally and practicing religious values and enjoying good neighbourhood solidarity and community bonding. In essence, these factors when given equal weight and considerations would provide a conceptual framework for the comprehensive concept of holistic liveable cities. This could be obtained from the religiosity factor that should be incorporated in city life, which obviously has been somewhat silenced in the current liveability indicators.

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