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CONDITIONS, STANDARD AND QUALITY OF LIFE  
IN A STUDY OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
AN ATTEMPT TO RESOLVE  
THE PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

**Abstract.** In the last 30-40 years there has been an increased interest in research on socio-economic changes. Thus, there has been a shift away from measuring only the material dimension of development. Researchers started using categories such as: consumption, standard of living, level of living, economic welfare, wealth, living conditions, quality of life, a way of life, lifestyle, etc. The problem that we face in quite extensive literature is the lack of application of a uniform terminology. Attempts to define these categories should be regarded as not fully satisfactory because they do not allow the adoption of clear solutions. We can only point out some proposals that include many significant features conducive to the study of the social dimension of the economic transition. This article attempts to resolve problems of the definitions of three basic categories related to the study of socio-economic changes, which are: conditions of life, standard of living and quality of life.

**Key words:** conditions of life; standard of living; quality of life; socio-economic development; social research

INTRODUCTION

In the recent 30-40 years, after a period of the economists' intensive measuring of the economic development only in its material dimension, a shift occurred from this approach and researchers became interested in such categories as: consumption, level of living, standard of living, economic welfare, wealth, living conditions, quality of life, way of life, lifestyle etc. This proves a transition to the stage of studying not only the pace of the economic growth and of the technological progress, but also studying the

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profits and threats that are brought by the civilization progress to the man himself and to the whole society. Hence, we see a departure from measuring the material dimension of life only, and attempts to study social-economic changes also in the qualitative aspect.

The problem that we face in the fairly extensive literature of the subject is lack of uniform terminology. Attempts to define the concepts that were mentioned above should be considered as not fully satisfying, because they do not allow accepting unambiguous solutions. Some suggestions may only be indicated that contain many significant features favoring the study of the social dimension of economic changes.

The aim of the article is to attempt to resolve the definition problems of three basic categories connected with the study of socio-economic changes. They are: conditions of life, standard of living and quality of life.

#### 1. THE CONDITIONS OF LIFE (OF BEING)

A catalogue of the concepts that were listed in the introduction – in Czesław Bywalec's opinion – is a set of basic research categories from the sphere of the broadly understood conditions of live (conditions of being). Among them basically only consumption may be considered to be a concept about whose understanding there is almost universal agreement. It is defined as the process of satisfying man's needs by the use of material goods and services. It should be noted, moreover, that the remaining concepts are more or less indirectly derivatives of consumption. Hence, the question may be asked, if, for example, to express the essence of the standard of living it would not suffice to define the level of the so-called real consumption? Bywalec gives a negative answer, saying that "apart from defining the level of consumption, the problem of the degree to which this consumption satisfies a man's needs should be examined. This is so because consumption is not an aim in itself; it should almost always be referred to the needs and assessed in relation to the needs."<sup>1</sup>

All the discussed research categories may be divided into two groups. The first one includes categories in which economic (material) features dominate. They are: standard of living, conditions of life, economic welfare, wealth and conditions of being. Categories traditionally considered socio-psycholo-

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<sup>1</sup> Czesław Bywalec, *Wzrost gospodarczy a poziom życia społeczeństwa polskiego* (Warszawa: Instytut Rynku Wewnętrznego i Konsumpcji, 1991), 22, 25.

gical, on the other hand, belong to the second group: quality of life, way of life, lifestyle. Analysis of the definitions of particular concepts belonging to the first group leads to the conclusion that there is no need of distinguishing them, since the differences between them are only of the semantic character. It is similar with the second group of concepts. So it may be accepted that such definitions as: quality of life or standard of living are in fact identical. It is the same in the case of the concepts: quality of life, way of life, lifestyle.<sup>2</sup> So, to make the analyses clearer only the terms “standard of living” and “quality of life” will be used hereafter. On the other hand, the concepts of welfare and conditions of being need a separate discussion.

In every day understanding welfare is a synonym of wealth or richness. The concept is in fact used to define a relatively big reserve of means (goods, objects) of consumption, or in other words: of material abundance, and also of financial means in a man's (the society's) disposal. When welfare is defined in this way consumption and conditions of life are its functions. According to Cz. Bywalec it should be remembered that “with the economic-social development differences in the level of current consumption (satisfying the needs) between societies, social-professional groups, regional groups or individual households will relatively quickly decrease, or even disappear. But changes in the level of welfare (wealth) will be much slower, or even they may – despite the almost equal consumption – increase. So introducing the category of welfare in such an understanding is useful for research and for practical life, as it will significantly broaden the characterization of the conditions of life of given human individuals, social groups or whole societies.”<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, we have to agree with M. Czermińska, who remarks that along with the increase in welfare “structural changes may occur that are contrary to the goals of social development. This may particularly concern differences in the level of income between particular households, that is the formation of groups that are privileged in some way or another – which may have negative social consequences. Moreover, other negative phenomena may occur, such as: a decrease in the real possibilities of taking part in social life, infringement of basic human rights, an increase in the sense of isolation and uncertainty, an increase in crime etc.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 22-23.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Małgorzata Czermińska, *Rozwój gospodarczy a rozwój społeczny krajów Unii Europejskiej. Analiza taksonometryczna* (Akademia Ekonomiczna, Kraków, 1997) [unpublished doctoral thesis];

Conditions of life (of being) is a term related to the standard of life and the quality of life, but it should not be identified with them. Such an approach causes unnecessary terminological, theoretical and methodological complications.<sup>5</sup> One of the older definitions still functioning in Polish literature of the subject, whose author is A. Hodoly, defines the conditions of being as the whole of factors determining the satisfying of human needs and the author counts among them: the conditions of social and personal life, the conditions of work, and also the ecological conditions of life.<sup>6</sup> Other authors, M. Tkocz and E. Zuzńska-Żyśko pay attention to the fact that “the possibility to satisfy people’s everyday elementary needs in the field of their housing conditions, trade, gastronomy, living services, health care, education, culture and leisure defines the conditions of their life.”<sup>7</sup> A still different set of categories that influence the living conditions is promoted by researchers who have compiled *Diagnoza Społeczna 2011 (Social Diagnosis 2011)*.<sup>8</sup> In their opinion they are: income and the way it is managed, food, material wealth, housing conditions, education, culture and leisure, health care, labor market.

## 2. STANDARD OF LIVING

The standard of living is the basic category that allows characterizing the conditions of being. It is a multi-element and multi-aspect category, which, in consequence, does not allow watching it directly. Hence, the standard of living may be only assessed on the basis of a variety of symptoms, which is connected with the necessity of creating definite indices.<sup>9</sup> Among the most popular measures of the standard of living the following should be mentioned:<sup>10</sup>

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quotation after: Barbara Pawełek, “Poziom życia, jakość życia i warunki życia ludności,” in Aleksander Zeliaś (ed.), *Taksonomiczna analiza przestrzennego zróżnicowania poziomu życia w Polsce w ujęciu dynamicznym* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Akademii Ekonomicznej, 2000), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Bywalec, *Wzrost gospodarczy a poziom życia*, 26.

<sup>6</sup> Andrzej Hodoly, *Spożycie i formy jego realizacji w rozwoju gospodarki społeczeństwa socjalistycznego* (Warszawa: Dział Wydawnictw i Upowszechniania IHW, 1975), 12; quoted after: Bywalec, *Wzrost gospodarczy a poziom życia*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted after: Pawełek, *Poziom życia, jakość życia i warunki życia ludności*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Diagnoza Społeczna 2011. Warunki i jakość życia Polaków*, edited by Janusz Czapiński, Tomasz Panek (Warszawa: Wyższa Szkoła Finansów i Zarządzania), 45-159, [http://www.diagnoza.com/pliki/raporty/Diagnoza\\_raport\\_2011.pdf](http://www.diagnoza.com/pliki/raporty/Diagnoza_raport_2011.pdf) [accessed: 11.10.2015].

<sup>9</sup> Bywalec, *Wzrost gospodarczy a poziom życia społeczeństwa polskiego*, 30.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Jerzy Telep, *Elementy ekonomii rozwoju* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Cła i Logistyki, 2010), 61-74; Anna Bąkiewicz, “Zróżnicowanie poziomu rozwoju gospodarczego na świecie,” in *Rozwój w dobie globalizacji* (Warszawa: Polskie Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, 2010), 102-105.

- *Human Development Index (HDI)*
- *System of National Account (SNA)*
- *Measure of Economic Welfare (MEW)*
- *Index of Economic Aspects of Welfare (EAW)*
- *Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW)*
- the Geneva method (UNRISD).

Cz. Bywalec's definition explains well how the standard of living should be understood; the author states that it is „the degree of satisfying human needs resulting from consumption of material goods and services, and the use of the natural and social environment.”<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that in the standard of living defined in this way “it is not the degree of satisfying human needs in general that matters, but only these needs matter that are satisfied by consumption of material goods and services (the so-called consumption needs). The conciseness of the above definition has also the advantage of making it universal. It may be used when researching the standard of living both in the micro scale (an individual, a household) and in the macro scale (e.g. the whole society). And it is unimportant if the consumed material goods and services are financed from individual incomes or from social funds; the only fact that is interesting for us here is the very real fact of consumption and the degree of satisfying the needs through this consumption.”<sup>12</sup>

Z. Żekoński's definition describes the standard of living much more broadly and precisely; the author states that it is “the whole of the conditions in which the society, a professional group, a household or an individual lives, that is expressed first of all in facilities connected with the process of satisfying individual and collective needs, that is:

- in the conditions, in which consumption behavior occurs (in the choice of individual goods and services as well as in behaviors thus created),
- in the ecological conditions (geographical-natural and artificially created by people, including the housing conditions),
- in the working conditions, in the aspects that significantly influence the whole of life (first of all concerning the arduousness, security and hygiene of work, the rhythm and time it lasts, commuting),
- in the conditions of leisure and the way it is used,
- in some aspects of organization of social life (e.g. personal safety and so on).”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Czesław Bywalec, *Konsumpcja a rozwój gospodarczy i społeczny* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo C.H. Beck, 2010), 38.

<sup>12</sup> Bywalec, *Wzrost gospodarczy a poziom życia społeczeństwa polskiego*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Zygmunt Żekoński, “Z problemów metodologicznych sformułowania społeczno-bytowych

### 3. THE QUALITY OF LIFE

The quality of life is a broad, ambiguous concept; it is a rather subjective one, emotionally charged, entangled in political and cultural contexts (it may play the role of an ideological tool). It is also an evaluative concept – its meaning changes with the civilization progress and with the increase in the society's general wealth, because the center of gravity of the interest then moves to extra-material values of a man's living environment, that are decisive of the qualitative elements of his being.<sup>14</sup>

Czesław Bywalec remarks that “after reading numerous publications on this subject one may be convinced that the scope of the meaning of «the quality of life» is immense; starting with understanding it as welfare or consumption and ending with non-quantifiable states of personal satisfaction, pleasure, or indeed happiness resulting from consumption, from using the natural environment, from good health, success in life, social position etc. Among the various definitions of the quality of life the most adequate seems [...] treating it as a category in a peculiar way synthesizing the remaining, formerly defined concepts; and this would be «a synthesis» of a subjective nature. In such a definition the quality of life would be understood as the degree of a man's (the society's) satisfaction (pleasure) with the whole of his (their) existence. The quality of life in such an approach would be a peculiar sum of individual or collective impressions of the existing conditions of life and at the same time their evaluation.”<sup>15</sup>

Teresa Słaby defines the quality of life as “all these elements of a man's life that are connected with the fact of his existence, of being someone and feeling various emotional states resulting, e.g. from the fact of having a family, colleagues, friends etc.” The author also emphasizes that “the level of living should be defined on the basis of a set of objective measures (quantitative and evaluative), whereas the quality of life should be assessed by means of subjective measures (indices). The former ones record the existing real state of things, e.g. the level and structure of the income, outlays, con-

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celów rozwoju,” *Gospodarka Planowa* 1974, nr 6, 361; Pawełek, *Poziom życia, jakość życia i warunki życia ludności*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Urszula Wich, “Jakość życia w środowisku miejskim,” *Annales UMCS, Sectio H*, vol. 25 (1991), 285; Marek Adamiec, Katarzyna Popiołek, “Jakość życia – między wolnością a mistyfikacją,” *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny* 1993, vol. 2, 92-117.

<sup>15</sup> Bywalec, *Wzrost gospodarczy a poziom życia społeczeństwa polskiego*, 30.

sumption, whereas the latter ones supply information about how this state of things is perceived and assessed by particular persons or social groups.”<sup>16</sup>

It is such an approach that is used in research on the level and quality of life conducted in Poland by the Council for Social Monitoring. When measuring the level of satisfaction of the needs from the descriptive point of view, the quality of life (close in the meaning to the concept of the level of living) that is assessed by means of objective measures, and the subjective quality of life, in which subjective measures are used for the assessment, are distinguished.<sup>17</sup>

It is also worth noting that the “category of the quality of life and problems connected with its statistical measurement have in recent years become the object of a lot of interest not only of representatives of various academic disciplines, but of the public opinion and state authorities as well. Improving the quality of life and limiting excessive differences in the financial and social situation of various population groups is the basic aim of modern conceptions of social-economic development. Leveling the disproportions in the broadly understood level of life and eliminating the phenomena that are connected with social exclusion is also the priority of the social policy in the European Union and in particular EU member states.”<sup>18</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The conditions of life (of being), the level and quality of life are concepts similar to each other and connected with each other. However, they should not be treated as identical – first of all for methodological reasons. Generalizing the conducted analyses of chosen definitions of these research categories we may accept that:

- the conditions of life (of being) concern the *factors* that influence satisfying the whole of human needs;
- the level of life concerns the *degree* of satisfaction of these needs that is achieved owing to the consumption of material goods and services;

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<sup>16</sup> Teresa Słaby, “Poziom życia, jakość życia,” *Wiadomości Statystyczne* 1990, nr 6, 25; Pawełek, *Poziom życia, jakość życia i warunki życia ludności*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> *Diagnoza Społeczna 2011*; United Nations Development Programme, *Krajowy Raport o Rozwoju Społecznym Polska 2012. Rozwój regionalny i lokalny* (Warszawa: Biuro Projektowe UNDP, 2012), 21.

<sup>18</sup> Główny Urząd Statystyczny, *Jakość życia, kapitał społeczny, ubóstwo i wykluczenie społeczne w Polsce* (Warszawa, 2013), [http://stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbr/gus/WZ\\_jakosc\\_zycia\\_2013.pdf](http://stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbr/gus/WZ_jakosc_zycia_2013.pdf), 7 [accessed: 26.10.2015].

- the quality of life is a category that describes in a *subjective way* the degree of a man's satisfaction and/or the society with their existence, which is objectively influenced by the conditions of being and the level of life.

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