

Standards of Living Study: a Conceptual Framework for Sharjah Emirate

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Abstract - Sustainable equitable development heavily depends on the availability of timely, disaggregated, and relevant data. Development at large aims at narrowing existing gaps between socio-economic population groups, which requires quality data at both the vertical and horizontal levels of the population. There exists a fissure between required data for human rights-based development, and reaching disadvantaged and marginalized population groups. This paper outlines the effort by the Department of Statistics and Community Development (DSCD) in Sharjah Emirate to provide key information on marginalized groups such as orphans, abandoned wives, divorced, and widowed women, female headed households, job seekers, and those who are pursuing their education, among others. The Sharjah Standard of Living Study aims to fill the gap between data and development for better policy formulation and sustainable development planning. Data collected are then tabulated and analyzed for policy directives to specialized agencies responsible for different areas of community development. DSCD monitors target population satisfaction of services rendered by the various specialized agencies and provides timely feedback for program interventions.

Keywords: Development, Indicators, Quality of life, Sharjah Emirate, Standards of living.

1. Introduction

As per the directives of His Highness (H.H.) Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, Member of the Supreme Council, Ruler of Sharjah Emirate, the Department of Statistics and Community Development (DSCD) in Sharjah undertook the Standards of Living Desk Study (SoL) from October 2017 to November 2017. The study is based on stock data collected during the Sharjah Population and Housing Census of 2015. The updating of the 2015 Sharjah Census was carried out by the project “Tahdeeth,” using different techniques. These techniques included computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI), computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI), and computer aided web interviewing (CAWI) of the household heads that were enumerated in 2015. The data were used as a point of departure for the study’s logical framework, which resulted in a methodological framework, and the execution phases—both empirical and analytical.

The SoL study is a desk study which determines socio-economic, demographic, and health characteristics, alongside housing characteristics as proxy indicators to standards of living. The results show disparities, which in turn are used for future planning, policies, and strategies across the Emirate. The study followed DSCD’s methodology of collecting, analyzing, and publishing data.

The objective of the SoL study is to demarcate households and individuals in Sharjah Emirate based on three distinct categories of standards of living; high, middle, and low. The aim of the study is to distinguish households with individuals who are in the lower and middle categories of standards of living. These categories will be further studied in order to identify ways to improve their well-being.

2. Sharjah Emirate’s Development Vision

2.1. Sheikh Sultan’s Development Vision

The development of Sharjah Emirate follows the path paved by H.H. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founding father of the UAE. H.H. Sheikh Zayed’s vision was progressive and encouraged education, health, and women’s rightful place in society. Similarly, H.H. Sheikh Sultan’s vision for Sharjah Emirate fits into the larger National Agenda of the UAE’s Vision 2021. The UAE National Agenda includes a set of national indicators in all sectors (education, healthcare, economy, police, security, housing, infrastructure, and government services) to measure performance in order to encourage excelling

governance. H.H. Sheikh Sultan's vision for Sharjah Emirate contributes to the National Agenda; by developing the Emirate, the overall performance of the UAE will excel, and its standards of living will improve.

H.H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi is the Member of the Supreme Council and is the Ruler of Sharjah Emirate in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). H.H. Sheikh Sultan became Ruler of Sharjah Emirate in 1972, establishing his development vision for the Emirate. His developmental vision combines the well-being of every citizen in the Emirate, coupled with development in all its forms (human, economic, social, and political), sustainability, and the preservation of Islamic and Arab cultural heritages and identities.

H.H. Sheikh Sultan's vision has been compiled from his speeches, from various conferences and meetings, from his guidance to government departments, and from various decrees establishing the social and developmental roles of government entities in Sharjah Emirate. The Community Development department in DSCD undertook content analysis of these various speeches and directives. The vision of H.H. Sheikh Sultan can be deduced, therefore, from the content analysis carried out.

While H.H. Sheikh Sultan's vision cannot be specifically dated, it evolved throughout his years as Ruler. Changing demands and challenges of the Arab and international world also played a pivotal role in shaping the development vision.

The development vision in Sharjah Emirate is unique because alongside material and social well-being, it encompasses psychological well-being and peace, which are essential for human development and for sustainability as a whole. H.H. Sheikh Sultan has stressed the "security and peace of mind" for all citizens within society ("Sultan Qasimi: To build up the society is our collective responsibility", 2016), which diverges from the normative understanding of development. Furthermore, at the core of Sharjah Emirate's development is the inclusion of every citizen and every citizen's right to the benefits of society. From this, emanates, *inter alia*, human, material, environmental, political, and technological development for current and future generations.

H.H. Sheikh Sultan's vision is for all citizens to enjoy the benefits of development in a way that future generations will not be burdened or strained by the current generations' lifestyle. Since before 2015, (the year when world leaders endorsed Agenda 2030), H.H. Sheikh Sultan's speeches have stressed that today's development should benefit both current and future generations, suggesting that H.H. Sheikh Sultan has always prioritized sustainability in development.

Sustainability is critical for young societies and for the youth; it ensures that the benefits of rapid growth will benefit current and future generations. In the 2018 'Investing in Future (IIFMENA)' Conference, H.H. Sheikh Sultan stated: "It is our duty to protect their [youths'] rights... and offer them an environment that supports their growth and allows them the right opportunities to build their futures. We can make peace and prosperity the reality for future generations" ("Sultan: Girls, boys are pivots of development", 2018). This highlights the important roles that the youth play in both sustainability, and furthering innovation in society.

One of the key aspects of the development vision is awareness and advocacy. Awareness creation is important for citizens to contribute to changes and understand them, and to positively adapt to them. Similarly, advocacy is important for people to make changes to be able to live healthy and safe lifestyles. One of the many aspects of advocacy is education for nation-building and maintaining family structures.

The development vision encompasses all parts of society and all individual citizens of Sharjah Emirate. Sharjah prioritizes six categories of the population which are the most vulnerable and marginalized (but this does not exclude other categories or members of society). The six categories include: (1) orphans, (2) widowed, divorced, and abandoned women, (3) persons with motor, mental, and sensory disabilities, (4) elderly persons, (5) illiterate and those who want to pursue their education, and (6) job seekers ("Sultan: We serve the Emirate of Sharjah with all our strength and knowledge", 2016).

The sectors involved in development include: education, health, economic, maternal and child care services, infrastructure, housing, social services, and security (*inter alia*). Thus, the development vision is holistic and includes all citizens and all sectors that make a society function efficiently and sustainably. The aim of development, therefore, is the equity and empowerment of citizens to create and seize opportunities.

2.2. Stakeholders in Development

The parties involved in H.H. Sheikh Sultan's vision are government and non-government entities, as well as the private sector operating within Sharjah Emirate meeting its social responsibilities. What is more critical is the involvement of people themselves in realizing development. People's involvement results in their awareness and empowerment. It also creates ownership of the processes of development, allows them to create opportunities, and maintains that people themselves lead their lives and actively participate in society's opportunities.

H.H. Sheikh Sultan has stated that the people of Sharjah Emirate have a right and duty to express their grievances because he is held accountable for his actions, decisions, and his services as Ruler. The role of raising the standard of living and the well-being of citizens is multi-layered. The government and the citizens have a reciprocal responsibility to contribute to society for its betterment, making citizens rights holders, and government entities duty bearers.

Sharjah Emirate's development vision is parallel to international standards of development, especially with that of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The United Nations' special agencies promote, *inter alia*, economic growth, transparency, education, health, preservation of identity and histories, protecting women and children, and sustainable lifestyles. These international values have been embedded in the vision of Sharjah Emirate. Thus, Sharjah Emirate's development vision is parallel to international standards, and contributes to furthering positive values.

3. International methodologies for standards of living

Many definitions exist for the terms *standards of living* and *quality of life*. Both terms are subjective because of the way they are measured, and because standards vary across different contexts. The United Nations and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) define *quality of life* as the "notion of human welfare (well-being) measured by social indicators rather than by "quantitative measures of income and production" ("Environment Glossary", United Nations Statistics Division, 2016). The term *standard of living*, on the other hand, is the actual living conditions of a society, and is normative because standards differ across different contexts.

The two terms put together, therefore, mean the general well-being of a people measured both quantitatively and qualitatively, and involve multiple dimensions of life. This includes, *inter alia*, physical, material, social, emotional well-being, and comfort.

Quality of life and standard of living are an intrinsic part of sustainability and the SDGs. The 17 goals of the SDGs directly correlate with maintaining a decent standard of living. For example, quality education, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, to name a few, are all indicators of standards of living. Moreover, goals such as peace, justice, strong institutions, and responsible consumption and production reflect a community's quality of life. By monitoring and evaluating the SDGs over time, an indication of the levels of standards of living becomes apparent. Thus, the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs and its effectiveness indicates whether a country is progressing in its standards of living and quality of life.

Conventionally, a population's living standard is measured quantitatively. Three international methodologies of measuring living standards are: Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and GDP per capita, the Income and Expenditure Survey (IES), and the Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS). GDP, LSMS, and the IES methods depend on sample surveys, quantitative data, and qualitative data that reflect living standards. Living standard measurements usually reflect the overall average standards of an area and its population, but lacks detailed information of name lists and individuals' personal socio-economic characteristics.

GDP is an aggregate measure of economic activity within a country ("Quality of life indicators – measuring quality of life", 2019). It is the aggregate of all the goods and services produced at a given time and is usually used as a benchmark for inter and intra comparison between countries. GDP, however, does not measure social progress because it measures the aggregate market production of a country. Household income and consumption is a better method to measure how well-off individuals and households are in a society. The measure of income and consumption is a better and more accurate reflection of material comfort than GDP, or GDP per capita. However, household income and consumption reflects the material situation and not necessarily social well-being. A limitation of depending on income as a standard for quality of life is that respondents do not always state their net income (income is underestimated and expenditure is overestimated).

Other measurements such as the Human Development Index (HDI) assess the overall development of a country by using both quantitative indicators and social indicators. Quantitative indicators include Gross National Income¹ (GNI), and social indicators include life expectancy at birth (health), expected years of schooling, and the mean years of schooling (education).

Other measures of standards of living may include projects such as the One Dollar Street by Gapminder ("Dollar Street", Gapminder). The One Dollar Street organizes households from different countries across an imaginary street with the highest and lowest income. Income is measured by consumption rather than by salary.

¹ GNI differs from GDP. GNI is the total value that is produced within a country, including GDP and any income obtained from other countries such as interest, dividends, or any ownership abroad that adds value to the overall income of the country.

4. Implementation of the SoL study

The SoL study updated the 2015 Census data in a project referred to as "Tahdeeth." The study is unique because it does not solely rely on income or on social progress as a measure of standard of living. 42 different variables relating to socio-economic, demographic, and health characteristics were applied to Sharjah Emirate's nationals. These variables were applied to either individuals or households, or both. Therefore, not only does the study show the different levels of standards of living, but also it shows which level each household belongs to.

The methodology behind the SoL study is an alternative to measuring conventional standards of living. The study is both a quantitative and qualitative analysis based on the update of the 2015 Sharjah Population and Housing Census, and is therefore specific to Sharjah Emirate's population and housing situation. The study encompasses individuals and households who hold a family registration book from Sharjah Emirate, or who have passports issued by Sharjah Emirate. Because the 2015 Census database was used as a benchmark for the study, detailed information is available on individuals' socio-economic, demographic, and health characteristics. Households' structures and compositions are also available, as well as their relation to the head of the household, their marital status, and their housing situation.

The first step of the SoL study was to establish a logical framework. The logical framework illustrates the "if-then" scenarios of the 42 variables that describe individuals' and households' socio-economic, demographic, and health characteristics. While the SoL study does not depend on income as an indicator to standard of living, a last variable, monthly salary of the head of household, was added to individuals who articulated that information. The six categories of the population that Sharjah Emirate focuses on were also taken as indicators, which showed how vulnerable households were.

Before executing the study, DSCD updated missing data from the 2015 Census. Nationality and household's housing situations were updated by calling heads of households. For nationality, the question of passport issuance and family registration book issuance was asked to clarify whether persons in the study are from Sharjah Emirate, from other Emirates living in Sharjah Emirate, or non-nationals living in Sharjah Emirate. Housing situations were categorized as either living in an owned property, rented property, or housing property offered by an employer. If it is the case that the housing unit was a land grant and a loan from the Directorate of Housing in Sharjah (Iskaan Sharjah) and the individual is still paying their loans, then they were considered to be in debt. Similarly, if individuals have taken out mortgages, they were also considered to be in debt.

The second step of the study is the empirical framework. The empirical framework shows the distribution of households and individuals according to the 42 variables, across the nine municipalities in Sharjah Emirate. The distribution of households across the 42 variables gives an indication of the values of the mean, median, and the mode. From the mean, median, and mode, the cut-off point (threshold) for high, medium, and low levels of standards of living were established.

Households and individuals were rated by either one or more points, or, no points depending if the variable applied to their situation (0, 1 binary system) (see attached list of variables, and how the points are distributed for individuals and households). For example, the variable "households with individuals aged 60+" is applicable to both the individual in the household whose age is 60 years or more, and is also applicable to the household itself. In other words, the individuals in the household who are 60 years or more receive a point each, and the household itself receives one point as it inhabits this person or persons. The household receives a point because an elderly person has special needs which household members usually accommodate for, which creates a burden of care. The binary system, therefore, assigns points to individuals only, or, to both individuals and households depending whether the household is affected.

Each category (high, medium, and low levels) was shown respectively with the number of households across the nine municipalities, and the number of households in each variable. From this, the study progressed into a geospatial representation, which enlisted the members in each household. The geospatial application allows users to search, locate, and view each household, the members within a household, and which points and how many points from the 42 variables the household received or accrued. This is beneficial for data users because it allows for inter and intra comparisons between different neighborhoods, municipalities, and small areas in Sharjah Emirate.

The geospatial application shows the three geographical areas in Sharjah Emirate with their respective municipalities, and the home locations of Emirati nationals illustrated by colored pin drops. Every household is color coded to show if the household is in the higher, middle, or lower category of standard of living. The pin drop displays the 42 variables and how many points the household received on each variable.

5. Benefits of the study

The SoL study is unique because it approaches the concept of standard of living from a contextual stand point, i.e. from the context of Sharjah Emirate, and diverges from conventional concepts of standards of living and takes into consideration vulnerability. The study relies on updated stock data from the 2015 Sharjah Population and Housing Census; the data were analyzed and classified into 42 variables to determine the standards of living of Emirati nationals in Sharjah Emirate.

The main benefit of the study is for decision-makers and policy-makers to take action on, or create policies for certain population groups and/or social demographic issues. Moreover, the result of the study is beneficial for data users and for future research studies. For example, an increase in the rates of divorced men and women, or an increase in school or university dropouts could lead to more research on the causes of the increases, and how to prevent or control negative trends and projections on the population.

Nevertheless, the study depends on data that was collected by using computer-assisted telephone interviewing of household heads. This means that the accuracy of the data depends on the respondents' answers to the questions. This leaves the procedure of verifying the social case of the household or individual on the agency that provides the respective service for given vulnerable population groups.

6. The Way Forward

The SoL study is not only helpful because it gives an indication of levels of standards of living, but is also useful for future research. The study illustrates projections and trends in the social, economic, demographic, and health dynamics of the population, as well as households' structures and compositions, especially if the data is routinely updated. Periodic updates on the data will show changes in the characteristics of individuals, households, and the population as a whole throughout time. Moreover, changes in the standards of living will be apparent: the benchmark delineating high, middle, and low standards of livings could increase, decrease, or remain relatively the same.

In the long term, causality analysis on the updated data of the population will also improve in quality and accuracy. This opens doors for future research. For example, any new projections or any apparent trends poses the question why has this new phenomenon emerged, and what has changed in the population dynamics for it to emerge. Future studies and research could propose ways to address problems, reduce negative trends, or advocate for certain positive trends. These studies also open routes for dialogue with persons or groups affected, as well as with decision-makers for policy and for development program interventions.

End Notes

No.	Variable	Applied to the individual(s)	Applied to the household
1	Housing type		✓
2	More than one household sharing a housing unit		✓
3	Households and individuals living in a studio, a single room, Arabic house, tent, storage, caravan, or apartment	✓	✓
4	Households that do not own their housing (rented, offered by employee)		✓
5	Households with high dependency ratio (2.5)	✓	✓
6	Households with 7 or more individuals	✓	✓
7	Households with more than 2 individuals per bedroom	✓	✓
8	Households with boys and girls and only two bedrooms for ensuring girls privacy (distinguish by number of beds)		✓
9	Households with individuals aged 6+ and are not enrolled in school, illiterate, or reads and writes	✓	✓
10	Households with individuals aged 15+ and do not hold university diplomas, or who need financial aid to continue their university education	✓	
11	Households with individual females who are divorced, widowed, and abandoned (one point for every divorced, widowed, or abandoned woman)	✓	
12	Number of individuals supported by a divorced, widowed, or abandoned woman (one point for every dependent)	✓	
13	Divorced, widowed, or abandoned women who do not own their home	✓	
14	Divorced, widowed, or abandoned women who do not work or are unemployed	✓	
15	Source of income of divorced, widowed, or abandoned women without a steady source of income	✓	
16	Source of income of divorced, widowed, or abandoned women that comes from (family) help	✓	
17	Households with individuals aged 30+ or more who are never married	✓	
18	Households with individuals who are unemployed (aged 18 years or more)	✓	
19	Households with individuals who have disabilities	✓	✓
20	Individuals with disabilities who do not receive (financial/medical) help	✓	
21	Individuals with disabilities with unmet needs due to financial incapacities	✓	
22	Female headed households	✓	✓
23	Households without domestic helpers (relation to the head of household)		✓
24	Households with individuals who are orphans (one point for every orphan)	✓	
25	Number of orphans without financial assistance (one point)	✓	

26	Number of unemployed individuals in the household due to illness	✓	
27	Households with individuals who are aged 60+ (one point for each individual)	✓	✓
28	Number of individuals aged 60+ who support individuals and dependents (one point for each dependent)	✓	✓
29	Number of individuals aged 60+ who do not receive financial assistance from the Department of Social Services (one point for each individual)	✓	✓
30	Number of individuals aged 60+ who do not receive any financial assistance from any entity (one point for each individual)	✓	✓
31*	Household head's monthly Salary less than 10,000 Dirhams (no points were given but this indicator helped determining levels of low, middle, and high standards of living)	-	-
32*	Household head's monthly Salary is between 10,000 to less than 15,000 Dirhams (no points were given but this indicator helped determining levels of low, middle, and high standards of living)	-	-
33*	Household head's monthly Salary is between 15,000 to less than 25,000 Dirhams (no points were given but this indicator helped determining levels of low, middle, and high standards of living)	-	-
34	HH Head's monthly Salary is less than 25,000 Dirhams (and has a personal loan which is not a home mortgage)		✓
35	Households with children without their mother (other than orphans)	✓	✓
36	All households' members are 60+ of age (Excluding domestic help)	✓	✓
37	Sharjah Citizen female currently married to non-national male	✓	✓
38	Sharjah Citizen female ever married to non-national male (currently widow, divorced or abandoned)	✓	✓
39	Household male head married to non-Sharjah national wife		✓
40	Married females 36 years of age or less who are childless (Sharjah Nationals, nationals of other Emirates married to Sharjah nationals, and/or non-nationals married to Sharjah male nationals)		✓
41	Households with child's mortality of age "O" during the period December 2015 to end November 2016, and during December 2016 to December 2017		✓
42	HHs with Child's mortality of age "under five" during the period December 2015 to end November 2016, and during December 2016 to December 2017		✓

*used only to determine the distribution, and not given points.

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