



Exploring the Nexus of Sustainability and Well-Being: A Literature Review on Quality of Life

Jihane Saousane MAHI

LARMHO, Tlemcen University,
Algeria

jihanesaousane.mahi@univ-tlemcen.dz

Souhila GHOMARI

Tlemcen University, LARMHO
Algeria

souhila.ghomari@univ-tlemcen.dz

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Abstract :

This study examines the intersection of sustainable development (SD) and well-being as interconnected dimensions of quality of life (QoL), with a focus on integrating subjective well-being (SWB) measures with objective well-being (OWB) measures. Using the literature review method and systematic research, we analyzed secondary data from databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar, which Python supports for data analysis and processing. Key findings reveal a stronger focus on individual well-being factors, such as health, emotions, and work, in current studies, with limited integration of SWB into sustainability metrics. Tensions between high QoL and environmental sustainability were also identified, particularly in high-consumption societies. Recommendations include developing new indicators, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and providing policymakers with actionable insights to promote sustainable well-being. This research bridges the gap between sustainability and well-being, offering a holistic approach to improving QoL.

Key Words: Quality of Life, QoL, Sustainability, Well-Being, Literature Review,

JEL Classification: I31, Q01, O44

* Corresponding author: Jihane Saousane MAHI (*jihanesaousane.mahi@univ-tlemcen.dz*)

Introduction :

Sustainable development (SD) and well-being are two critical dimensions of quality of life (QoL) that have received increasing attention in recent years (Li, 2020). According to the Sustainable Development Report of 2023, the latest available data indicates progress has been made in Goal Three, "Health and Well-being," of the SD, but challenges persist, underscoring the need to improve the quality of life. Felce and Perry (1995) defined QoL as a multifaceted concept that can be approached at various levels of generality. It extends from assessing the well-being of entire communities or societies to evaluating the specific situation of individuals or groups. The quality of life conceptualization encompasses a wide range, and researchers often utilize broad social indicators to gauge the overall well-being of populations. According to Veenhoven (2024), there is no universal definition that scholars agree on; therefore, he defined it as the degree to which an individual lives aligns with the standards of a fulfilling and joyous life.



Although the QoL focuses on a broader perspective, well-being (WB) is considered a critical dimension within the broader concept of QoL, with a focus on individual experiences (Upton & Upton, 2015). Well-being is a multidimensional concept that encompasses the mental, physical, emotional, and social aspects. It is commonly described as a state of happiness, health, and prosperity (Huete-Alcocer et al., 2024; Radzi et al., 2024; Sangha et al., 2024). On the other hand, sustainability appears to be a challenging concept, as numerous definitions center particularly on understanding how individuals in society or communities interact with and utilize natural resources (Secchi et al., 2024). The definition of sustainable development (SD) was published by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. This definition gained prominence after being introduced in the Brundtland Report, also known as 'Our Common Future.' It remains the most commonly and widely accepted definition of SD, emphasizing that development fulfills current needs without risking the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Circular Ecology, 2024; INSEE, 2024; Kulik, 2024; United Nations, 2024).

Despite growing research on the relationships between sustainability, well-being, and QoL, significant gaps remain. Most studies focus on objective well-being (OWB) indicators, such as income, education, and health, while the subjective dimensions of well-being (SWB), including emotional satisfaction, psychological health, and personal fulfillment, are often overlooked in sustainability frameworks. This imbalance limits the ability to develop holistic strategies that address both material and non-material aspects of well-being. Furthermore, there is a lack of a multidisciplinary conceptual framework that integrates insights from psychology, sociology, economics, and environmental studies to explore the intersection of sustainability and well-being comprehensively.

To address this gap, this theoretical study aims to examine how the integration of subjective and objective well-being has been addressed in previous research and how this integration contributes to a deeper understanding of sustainable quality of life. The analysis is based on secondary data from peer-reviewed articles, books, and conference papers, which were selected according to defined criteria. Python tools were utilized to support data organization and analysis.

The research question guiding this review is: How has the integration of subjective and objective well-being been addressed in the literature, and how can this integration enhance our theoretical understanding of sustainable quality of life? We hypothesize that combining both subjective and objective perspectives enables a more comprehensive and policy-relevant framework for evaluating well-being within the context of sustainable development.

To do so, we have structured our review as follows. The first section explores the core concepts, introducing the quality of life (QoL), well-being (encompassing both subjective and objective perspectives), and the metrics used to measure both well-being and sustainable development. We then explore the intricate relationships between these concepts. Following this foundation, the subsequent sections will outline our methodological approach, present the results of our analysis, and engage



in a critical discussion of the findings. Finally, we will conclude by formulating actionable recommendations, acknowledging the study's limitations, and drawing a conclusion.

I. Literature Review:

The literature review provides a comprehensive examination of existing research on quality of life (QoL), well-being, and sustainable development (SD). This section aims to establish a theoretical foundation for understanding the interconnectedness of these concepts. It explores the evolution of QoL as a multifaceted construct, the dimensions of well-being (both subjective and objective), and the metrics used to measure sustainable development. Additionally, it highlights gaps in the current literature, particularly the underrepresentation of subjective well-being (SWB) in sustainability frameworks. This review sets the stage for analyzing how these dimensions interact and contribute to the broader goal of improving QoL in a sustainable context.

1. Quality of life:

The Environmental Studies Division (1973) stated that quality of life remains an elusive measure, shaped by society's collective determination and willingness to either prevent or even generate further downward pressure on living standards, which means that quality of life is complex and is shaped by the decisions and intentions of the society of each country. Likewise, Møller and Schlemmer (1983) argue that QoL is a simple concept but deceptive. Basically, it refers to the degree of well-being experienced by individuals or groups under prevailing social and economic conditions. Furthermore, the dimensions of QoL are complex and vary depending on the communities. Thereby, they mentioned that many researchers do not attempt to define the essence of the concept of quality of life itself. Instead, they focus more on defining the criteria and measures associated with assessing quality of life. However, Researchers tended to make progress to identify key factors that contribute to QoL.

However, over the past few decades, researchers have made significant progress in identifying indicators and critical factors that contribute to QoL. In the political domain, various initiatives, including those by the OECD, European Union, and commissions in France and Germany, have explored integrating economic, social, political, and environmental aspects into quality of life (QoL) measures. On the other hand, scientific research has examined the empirical measures and their potential effect (Fuchs et al., 2020). In addition, Drastichová and Filzmoser (2021) state that quality of life results from sustainable development (SD), and achieving this goal is a global challenge; therefore, critical quality of life factors were identified, including housing, income, jobs, community, education, environment, civic engagement, health, life satisfaction, safety, and work-life balance.

2. Well-being:

Throughout history, well-being has been a multifaceted concept with evolving perspectives. New perspectives acknowledge and recognize that the connection between humans and nature is crucial in understanding human well-being, emphasizing the importance of cultural diversity and intercultural understanding



(Leal Filho et al., 2020). Well-being can be defined as how individuals feel and function on personal and social levels, evaluating their lives as a whole (Jarden, & Roache, 2023).

The theory of "hedonism" is a concept that emerged from ancient Greek philosophy. It suggests that well-being can be achieved when there is a tremendous balance of pleasure over suffering, mainly through a balance of happiness and contentment (Evgrafov, 2022; O'Keefe, 2015). In contrast, another theory appears, "desire satisfaction", which states that well-being can be achieved when the desires of individuals are fulfilled and they are satisfied. Additionally, the "Objective List" theory presents a different perspective. It suggests that well-being is determined by having a collection of objective goods. These goods encompass both subjective experiences and external factors, such as friendship, health, or knowledge.

Furthermore, other well-being theories have emerged. "Eudaimonism", rooted in Aristotelian philosophy, this theory defines well-being as the fulfillment of human nature. It considers what is normal for members of the human species as essential to determining a person's well-being. (Fowers, 2016). "Value Fulfillment", on the other hand, focuses on a person's ideal psychology. It considers what individuals would desire if they were fully informed and rational or what their fully informed self would want them to want (DeYoung, & Tiberius, 2023). Finally, "Positive Psychology", a more recent approach, emphasizes the importance of individuals' positive emotions, meaning, engagement, relationships, and accomplishment in achieving well-being (Scorsolini-Comin et al., 2013).

3. Measuring Well-being:

Measuring well-being is a complex and multifaceted process (Huppert et al., 2009; Matsuda et al., 2024), combining both objective and subjective approaches. Objective measures, such as education, health, and income, provide quantifiable indicators of social well-being. In contrast, subjective measures capture individuals' joy, satisfaction, and self-reported life (Kubiszewski et al., 2018; Macku et al., 2020; Veenhoven, 2007).

Cooke et al. (2016) state that numerous report tools measure well-being, but they differ in length, quality, and how they define well-being (Layard. However, the well-being measurement scales can offer a diverse toolbox, ranging from quick, single-item surveys (D'Acci, 2011) to comprehensive and multidimensional scales like the Well-being Profile (WB-Pro) (Pavot et al., 1991), which assess various aspects of life satisfaction (Pavot et al., 1991), emotions (Diener et al., 2010), social connections, and even spirituality (The Spiritual Well-being Scale) (Ellison, 1983). While subjective well-being (SWB) measures, such as the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) (Pavot et al., 1991), demonstrate good validity and reliability (Lindert et al., 2015), self-reports may have limitations (Diener, 1994). As a result, this highlights the need for multimethod approaches, potentially incorporating new short scales for flourishing and emotional states (Diener et al., 2010). Moreover, single-item measures face criticism for oversimplification (Ryff et al., 2020). The WB-Pro exemplifies a comprehensive multidimensional approach (Pavot et al., 1991), challenging the unidimensionality of some measures. The Well-being and Progress



Index (WIP) (D'Acci, 2011) takes an even broader view, incorporating social, economic, and subjective well-being indicators. Ultimately, these studies show that advancements in well-being measurement require cross-disciplinary collaboration to integrate insights and methods from various fields (Fletcher, 2021).

4. Sustainable development Metrics:

Despite ongoing efforts, challenges persist in measuring SD, as there are no universally accepted approaches to SD indicators (Wilson et al., 2007). Furthermore, there is a critical limitation: only a subset of indices considers all three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, environmental, and social), with some focusing on just one or two, highlighting the need for more comprehensive metrics (Strezov et al., 2017). Similarly, Székely and Knirsch (2005) found that SD has three dimensions (techno-economic, ecological, and social). While they found that environmental and economic indicators are relatively well-established, social indicators are also needed for development through public participation. Additionally, Shaker (2015) noted that globally, several characteristics should be considered, such as sensitivity to change, the ability to predict future trends, the availability of reference values, and ease of data collection and use.

Instead of relying on multiple indicators, Liverman et al. (1988) argue that a few key indicators can effectively assess a country's overall development status. These might focus on prosperity, equality, governance, QoL, environmentally efficient happiness, ecosystem integrity, and environmental management. A formal and comprehensive metric system has also been proposed by Liu et al. (2021) for Infrastructure Sustainability, integrating environmental, managerial, and socioeconomic dimensions.

5. QoL, well-being, and Sustainable development:

QoL has a positive correlation with the goals of sustainable development, including environmental protection, economic growth, and social equity (Cusack, 2019). Štreimikienė and Barauskaitė-Jakubauskienė (2012) argue in their study that SD is a new approach to measuring QoL, seeking to improve its indicators by measuring health, economy, employment, infrastructure, and environment. Therefore, SD is considered a dimension of QoL.

Although the previous studies emphasize the positive relationship between QoL and SD that encompasses various aspects like a good quality of the environment, responsible behavior, good health, tourism, economy, and education (Băndoi et al., 2020; Cusack, 2019; Polcyn et al., 2023; Puciato et al., 2020; Štreimikienė, & Barauskaitė-Jakubauskienė, 2012), tensions between QoL and SD exist (Schaafsma M., 2021). Very high quality of life and well-being indicate a poor SD and vice versa (Robertson et al., 2017); for instance, well-being based on excessive resource consumption is incompatible with environmental sustainability (Lengyel et al., 2019).

However, Wiesli et al. (2021) in their research acknowledge that wealthy countries with higher QoL are often associated with higher consumption, which may conflict with sustainable development, while O'Mahony (2022) discussed in his study the strategies that improve well-being lead to environmental pressure due to



the higher consumption of resources, similarly, Ronen and Kerret (2020) highlight this conflict by noting that individual well-being might result in harming individuals and the environment.

Interestingly, some studies indicate that individuals who prioritize intrinsic and spiritual goals, such as connection and purpose, tend to experience higher well-being than those who focus on extrinsic goals, like material possessions. In fact, prioritizing a type of well-being called "eudemonic well-being" that emphasizes personal, positive relationships and purposes would contribute to a more sustainable future, and this explains the profound link between sustainability and well-being (Costanza et al., 2016; Dittmar et al., 2014; Gallagher et al., 2009; Kasser et al., 2014; Lengyel et al., 2019; Verhofstadt et al., 2016).

II. Method, search strategy, and selection criteria:

We employed the literature review method to analyze secondary resources, including books, articles, and conference proceedings. Our primary tool for searching relevant literature was a systematic search conducted across various databases and search engines, including Web of Science, Scopus, JSTOR, Wiley Online Library, EBSCOhost, PubMed, and Google Scholar. We identified key themes for our research, including sustainability, well-being, quality of life, measures of well-being, and sustainability metrics. We used a Python program to analyze the Data.

III. Results:

This section presents the key findings of our review on well-being, QWL, and SD. Table 1 summarizes relevant studies, categorizing them based on their focus on subjective (SWB) and objective well-being (OWB). Figures 1 and 2 provide visual representations of the distribution and emphasis of well-being factors across studies, highlighting the predominance of OWB while acknowledging the significance of SWB in well-being research.

Table 1: «Relevant research on well-being, QWL, and SD»

Study	Factors Used	(SWB / OWB)
Fuchs et al. (2020)	Environmental quality, Intra- and Intergenerational equity/planetary boundaries, Economic conditions, Social conditions, Political conditions	Objective WB
Mouratidis (2021)	Travel, Leisure, Work, Social relationships, Residential well-being, Emotional responses, Health	Subjective WB (focuses on self-reported well-being)
Lengyel et al. (2019)	Sustainability Dimensions (Environment, Society, Economy) at Local, National, and Global Levels.	Subjective WB (focuses on student preferences)



	Subjective Well-being (SWB) Dimensions (Relations with others, Inner peace, Health, Close to nature, Good job, Leisure, Belief in God, Money)	
Verhofstadt et al. (2016)	Ecological footprint, Relationship status, Homeownership, Social life, Health, Living environment	Subjective WB
Hansen (2015)	Hedonic well-being, Eudaimonic well-being, Leisure time, Social norms, Intrinsic values, Extrinsic values, Work-life balance, Personal carbon footprint	Subjective WB
Distaso (2007)	Sen's capability approach (functionings and capabilities). Economic factors, Social factors. Environmental factors	Both of them
Kaida and Kaida (2016)	Psychological factors (universalism, frugality, intrinsic satisfaction). Pro-environmental behaviors (water and energy saving).	Subjective WB (use self-reported measures)
Kubiszewski et al. (2022)	SDG indicators representing economic, social, and environmental variables	Objective WB
Cusack (2019)	Life satisfaction rating, human development index, environmental performance index	Objective WB
Spillemaeckers et al. (2012)	Happiness vs. Capabilities Approach (economic perspective) Human flourishing and mental health (psychological perspective)	both
Skevington and Epton (2018)	WHOQOL-BREF instrument (environmental, social, physical, and psychological domains)	SWB
De Neve and Sachs (2020)	All SDGs and their impact on well-being (Income Per	SWB



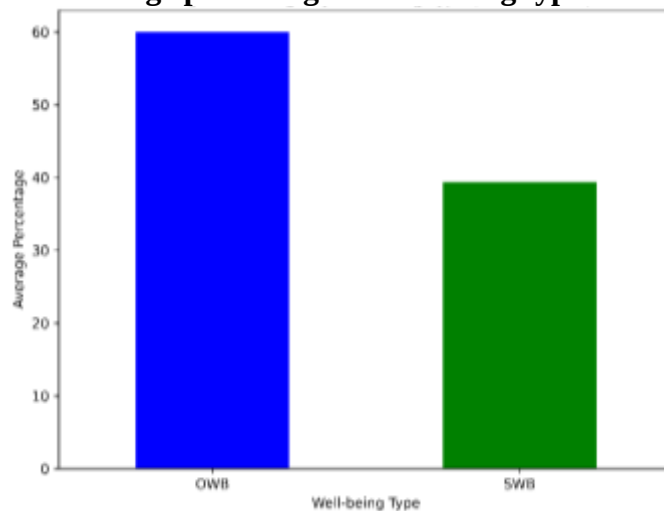
	Capita, Social Support, Values (Generosity), Freedom to Make Life Choices, Trust in Government, and Health).	
Costanza et al. (2016)	Sustainable Wellbeing Index (SWI) - UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	SWB and OWB integration
Helne and Hirvilammi (2015)	Relational, multidimensional, and needs-based conceptualization of well-being	Both SWB and OWB
Guillen-Royo (2018)	Max-Neef's Human Scale Development (HSD) framework	Both SWB and OWB
(Dolan et al., 2006)	Trade-offs between different aspects of well-being and sustainability - Limitations of current well-being measurement - Potential for policy and behavioral interventions	SWB and OWB
Izutsu et al. (2015)	Mental health and well-being	OWB (they focus on reducing the burden and promoting inclusion)
Salameh et al. (2022)	Income, education, government effectiveness, trust in institutions, social ties, health, crime, housing, marital status, gender, age	SWB

Source: Compiled by the authors based on a review of existing literature.

Following the summary of relevant studies in Table 1, Figure 1 visually represents the average distribution of objective well-being (OWB) and subjective well-being (SWB) across the sampled studies.



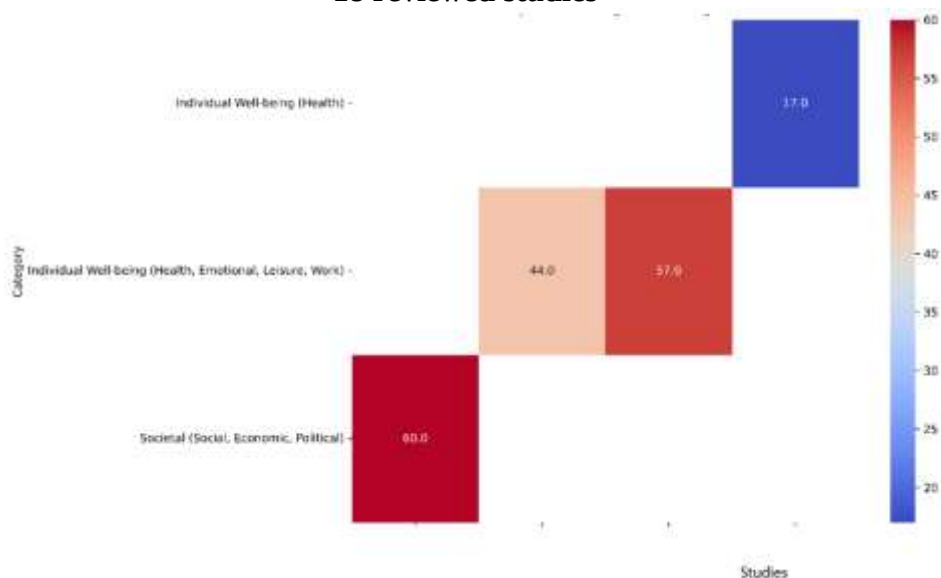
Fig. 1: « Average percentage of well-being type in studies »



Source: created by authors using a Python program

From the chart, it is evident that OWB has a higher average percentage than SWB. The average percentage for OWB is significantly higher than that of SWB. Therefore, the sampled studies generally emphasize aspects of objective well-being. Although SWB is lower than OWB, its presence is still substantial, indicating that individual factors, such as emotional health, leisure activities, and work satisfaction, are also considered important in well-being research. Building upon the overall distribution shown in Figure 1, Figure 2 offers a more granular visual representation by detailing the specific well-being dimensions emphasized within each study.

Fig. 2: « Heatmap of well-being factor emphasis (subjective/objective) across 18 reviewed studies »



Source: created by authors using a Python program



This heatmap expands upon Figure 1 by breaking down the well-being dimensions emphasized within each study. The y-axis represents three categories: Societal Well-being (encompassing social, political, and economic factors), General Individual Well-being (including health, emotional, leisure, and work aspects), and Individual Health (highlighted separately when health is the sole or dominant focus). The x-axis corresponds to individual studies, as coded in Table 1. Warmer colors (toward red) indicate a greater emphasis on that dimension, and the numerical values in each cell represent the percentage of focus on that specific well-being category in each study. For example, the heatmap shows that Fuchs et al. (2020) have a 60% focus on societal well-being dimensions, while Mouratidis (2021) and Lengyel et al. (2019) exhibit 57% and 44% focus, respectively, on general aspects of individual well-being. Verhofstadt et al. (2016) show a 17% focus primarily on individual health. These are illustrative examples; the heatmap includes all 18 studies listed in Table 1. Hence, we provide a more detailed view of how well-being is framed in the literature

IV. Discussion, Recommendations, Limitations, and Conclusion:

The main aim of our paper is to investigate the intersection of Sustainable development and well-being. Our analysis of studies indicates a greater emphasis on individual well-being factors, including health, emotional aspects, leisure, and work. Furthermore, the increased emphasis on SWB reflects a research trend and societal focus on personal and direct factors that affect individuals' lives, due to the immediate and tangible impact these factors have on individual quality of life. The study of Fuchs et al. (2020) shows a significant focus (60%) on societal factors, indicating a strong emphasis on social, economic, and political conditions, while Studies like Mouratidis (2021) and Lengyel et al. (2019) have moderate percentages (57% and 44%, respectively) focusing on individual well-being factors, including health, emotional aspects, leisure, and work. The study of Verhofstadt et al. (2016) has a lower focus (17%) on individual health-related well-being factors, suggesting a more specialized or narrow scope within the broader category of individual well-being. This analysis helps to understand the distribution and emphasis of well-being factors across different scholarly works, aiding in the assessment of research trends and priorities in well-being studies.

According to the literature, sustainability and well-being are complex concepts that encompass multiple dimensions and perspectives. Our literature review has highlighted the intricate relationship between quality of life (QoL), well-being, and sustainable development (SD), showcasing their interconnections and potential tensions. Quality of life, as defined by the Environmental Studies Division (1973) and further elaborated by Møller and Schlemmer (1983), remains a multifaceted and evolving construct influenced by societal determinations and economic conditions. Similarly, well-being, with its diverse theoretical frameworks that range from hedonism to eudaimonism, presents a nuanced understanding of individual and societal welfare.

However, measuring well-being poses challenges, with both subjective and objective measures providing complementary insights. While objective measures,



such as income and education, offer quantifiable indicators, subjective measures capture individuals' perceptions and experiences, emphasizing the importance of subjective well-being (SWB) in assessing overall welfare.

The literature also indicates a positive correlation between QoL and SD, with SD often considered a dimension of QoL (Drastichová & Filzmoser, 2021; Štreimikienė. However, tensions also exist between QoL and SD, as highlighted by Robertson et al. (and O'Mahony (2022), particularly regarding the environmental impact of high QoL lifestyles.

Our analysis of frameworks for measuring sustainable development and well-being underscores the diversity of approaches and factors considered in research. While some studies focus more on societal factors, others emphasize individual well-being. However, the frameworks and studies are limited to specific areas and countries, so we emphasize the need for a more global theoretical framework that can apply to all countries, capture all the elements of SD and QoL, and contain a balance factor of SWB and OWB to have a holistic assessment of wellbeing which is a vital aspect of QwL and impacts SD.

Our study has limitations. First, we may have missed relevant research due to the language barrier. Second, the relationships between well-being (WB), sustainable development (SD), and quality of life (QoL) are complex and may involve chance elements or factors beyond the scope of our study design. Furthermore, the existing research on these interconnected concepts is relatively limited, underscoring the need for further exploration.

In conclusion, our literature review and analysis underscore the complex relationship between sustainability and well-being, highlighting the need for a more holistic approach that integrates both subjective and objective well-being measures into sustainable development frameworks. Further, recognizing the multidimensionality of well-being and its interplay with societal and environmental factors is crucial for fostering a more sustainable and equitable future.

Moving forward, interdisciplinary collaboration and innovative methodologies, such as integrating SWB measures into SDGs frameworks (Costanza et al., 2016), can further enhance our understanding of the intersection between sustainability and well-being. By prioritizing individual and societal welfare while mitigating environmental impacts, we can strive towards a more balanced and resilient society that promotes the well-being of present and future generations.



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