Part I

Regional and National Perspectives on Advancing Quality of Life
Introduction

With the enlargement of the EU in May 2004 to include ten new member states, the social situation in the New Member States (NMS) has become more closely entwined than ever before with the social situation in the older member states (EU 15). This means on the one hand that the policy strategies and institutional regulations guiding EU and national policy decisions and activities now are being applied to the NMS as well. On the other, this process of social integration creates new frames of reference for people to compare their living conditions. The growing interconnectedness and integration within the EU widens the scope of both mobility and comparability.

To avoid negative effects such as brain drain from poorer to richer countries and growing frictions between regions of the EU, the European Commission has attempted to reduce disparities in the social situation between countries and social groups, or at least to prevent a widening of the existing gaps in living conditions and quality of life. The debate on these issues coalesces around the term “social cohesion.” Although the notion of social cohesion leads a shadowy existence in the social sciences, the term is attractive in policy making. The World Bank, the Club of Rome, the OECD, several governmental and NGO initiatives and the European Commission use the term social cohesion as a central policy objective and a measure for the success of policy outcomes (Jenson, 1998, p. 4ff).

Social cohesion has also become a central term for EU social policy (European Commission 1996, 2001, 2004, “Cohesion reports”). It is understood here in a broad sense as a form of solidarity and mutual support, referring to the “harmonious development” mentioned in Article 130a of the Treaty of the European Union. However, policy approaches to the issue of social cohesion tend to concentrate on objective living conditions and to ignore the aspect of shared values, which forms an integral part of other conceptualizations of social cohesion (Jameson, 1998; Berger-Schmitt, 1998).

* The authors thank the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions for their allowance to use the data from their European Quality of Life Survey.