

AN EXPLORATORY RESEARCH ON PARTICIPATORY PLANNING PROCESSES AND THE INTERACTION BETWEEN CITIZENS, PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, AND PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract: Drawing on the data from an online survey and a focus group, the article explores the public participation of citizens with a focus on participatory planning processes. The exploratory research tackles participatory initiatives and interactions between citizens, public administration, and professionals that aim to improve the well-being of citizens in their cities of residence. The research employed a theoretical view of collaborative public participation, one that is not, however, confined to a dualistic approach, but one in which the citizens value the existence of intermediary actors or structures to guide public participation. Moreover, adversarial potential in participatory planning processes is not excluded, especially as participation involves a diverse network of actors. In the context of a significant consensus regarding the importance of citizen participation in all stages of decision making, the article shows that there is, however, a low level of information regarding participatory planning processes.

Keywords: participatory planning processes, public participation, collaborative participation.

JEL Classification: I38, H50, H70

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INTRODUCTION

The public participation of citizens to decision-making, in particular to the planning processes of the common inhabited space, has widely been viewed by policy makers, citizens and citizen associations, planning professionals, but also by scholars, as a key requirement for democratic politics. Both in public policy and in the academic environment, this topic receives growing attention as it is seen as having important theoretical implications regarding how citizens engage in exercising democracy and the nature of interaction with public administration, but also practical implications, for example, to explore what model(s) of participation leads to the best outcomes. Using the data of an online survey and a focus group about sociability, urban design, and the well-being of citizens, this article presents the findings of an exploratory and multidisciplinary research. The objective of the research is to explore how citizens understand public participation, and decision making in the interaction with the public administration and other professionals involved in planning processes, with a focus on the participatory planning processes that improve well-being in their cities of residence.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article presents the findings of an exploratory research that analyzed the data from two existing sources: a focus group and an online survey were conducted in 2021. The survey employed a nonprobability sampling, and was applied to 40 Romanian citizens. The questionnaire was sent to actors like students, teachers, professionals working in the territory (sociologists, urban planners, psychologists, etc.), policy makers (mayors, council members, etc.), civil servants, representatives of the private social sector, or other actors that are involved in the urban planning or design. The survey was conducted as part of the Erasmus Plus project STUD.IO: Sociability Through Urban Design Innovation that takes place between September 2020 and February 2023 in four countries (Italy, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain). The project consortium brings together four Universities and three private organizations (profit and non-profit) which draw on a multidisciplinary approach (psychology, sociology, and urban planning) in order to create a specialized university path to improve

the career of university students and non-university students working and studying in the field of urban development. The initial purpose of the questionnaire was to identify the needs of the territory, of policy makers and citizens, in order to train a figure who promotes the sociability of the territory and manages participatory planning interventions.

Participants in the focus group were selected from the same categories of actors. The participants were: an Anthropology graduate, a sociologist, a civil servant, two architects, and a NGO community organizer specialized in community building and participatory initiatives. The discussion topics were divided into three main categories: territory improvement and regeneration with emphasis on the well-being of the citizens, the development of sociability, and the profile of an expert in urban development.

In the analysis of the survey and focus group results, we focused on the data that explores participatory planning processes and citizen expectations from the interactions with public administration and other planning professionals in decision making.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As the literature regarding the public participation of citizens is very vast, this section presents the works that focus on the participatory planning processes and the interaction between citizens, public administration, and other professionals involved in decision making regarding spatial planning. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that we draw on the understanding of participation that does not only oppose two actors (the citizens and the government), one that is not confined to a dualistic approach, but instead views public participation as part of a larger network of actors. In this line, we draw on the paradigm proposed by Innes and Booher (2004), who propose a “multi-way interaction” (Innes and Booher 2004, 429) and for which “participation must be collaborative and it should incorporate not only citizens, but also organized interests, profit-making and non-profit organizations, planners and public administrators in a common framework where all are interacting and influencing one another and all are acting independently in the world as well” (Innes and Booher 2004, 422). Moreover, it should be noted that the authors are the proponents of a collaborative view on public participation and consider that a dualistic approach to it “encourages an adversarial participation” (Innes and Booher 2004, 421).

Planning theory has long revolved around two main opposing sides: one that views participation as deliberative (Forester 1987, Forester 1999), collaborative or focused on consensus seeking/building (Healey 2003, Innes 2004, Innes and Booher 2004), and one that sees it as deeply adversarial or agonistic (Hillier 2003, Mouffe 2007, Mouffe 1999, Munthe-Kaas 2015). The ambivalence around these views is explored by Van Wymeersch, Oosterlynck and Vanoutrive (2018), who contend that “initially these two approaches were positioned as fundamentally opposed to each other, in recent years there is a growing tendency of scholars attempting to overcome this rather dichotomising view on participatory planning processes” (Wymeersch, Oosterlynck and Vanoutrive 2018, 2). Furthermore, the authors propose a move away from “over-ontologising” the democratic politics in planning processes and argue that participatory planning processes are an empirical reality that “can sustain and accommodate radically different, even incompatible views on democracy” (Wymeersch, Oosterlynck and Vanoutrive 2018, 2). If it was mentioned previously that this article draws on Innes and Booher’s (2004) perspective of public participation as embedded in networks of various actors, with a stress on the collaborative tendency, it must also be added that we do not exclude the adversarial potential in participatory planning processes. Therefore, we also align to the proposal brought by Wymeersch, Oosterlynck and Vanoutrive (2018) to focus more on the empirical aspects of the processes that leave space for different views on democratic politics and interaction between social actors. In the same critical theory direction, Legacy (2016) also moves beyond the imperative of reconciling the two opposing sides and “challenges the sentiment that there is a crisis of participatory planning by offering a case study that shows how active residents and community groups are asserting their claim and stake in the political moments that manifest throughout the planning process and, in doing so, rendering visible the political formation of participatory planning and citizen’s participation” (Legacy 2016, 14). The author therefore argues that the political aspect of participation is deeply

connected to the “dialectical and constitutive relationship that exists between participatory planning and the subjectivity of citizen’s participation” (Legacy 2016, 13).

If so far we have outlined the larger theoretical frames of public participation and participatory planning processes, it is also important to introduce more operational definitions of the concept. Deyle and Slotterback (2009) understand it as encompassing “all collaborative planning and decision-making processes that seek to achieve agreement by a broad spectrum of stakeholders on a particular planning process output, for example, problem definition, findings of fact, statement of objectives, plan policies, or implementation strategy” (2009, 23). The authors aimed to explore group learning in participatory planning processes that were broader than those that only focused on “consensus-seeking” (Deyle and Slotterback 2009, 23). Font, Della Porta, and Sintomer (2014) propose a broad definition of citizens and citizen organizations participation: “any at least loosely formalised activity that attempts to involve citizenry in the discussion or making of decisions about public policies is part of our universe of analysis” (2014, 2). What is specific about their definition is the institutional basis of participation, as they understand the participation sphere as one that is “built, provided by or at least approved by public institutions” (2014, 1), therefore excluding any “grassroots-created arena”. For them, a key characteristic of this type of participation is “precisely the central role played by a government in organising or providing legitimacy to these processes” (Font, Della Porta, and Sintomer 2014, 2). In this article, we draw on this view of participation, as the data analysis revolves around the interaction between citizens, public administration, and other professionals in developing participatory planning processes.

According to an UN-Habitat (2001) manual, “participatory planning is a process usually designed to address a specific issue, opportunity or problem with the intent of resolving or exploiting it successfully through the collaborative efforts of the crucial stakeholders” (UN-Habitat 2001, 20). This manual definition also adds, beside the utilitarian aspects, a larger theoretical approach that links participatory planning to social capital in Robert Putnam’s (1993) conceptualization. Furthermore, the manual sets several principles guiding principles for successful participatory planning: diversity, equity, openness, transparency, accountability, trust (UN-Habitat 2001, 23).

Lastly, it must be noted that the literature about participatory planning processes tackles a larger array of topics pertaining to the engagement of citizens. To only name a few, scholars explored the downside of participatory initiatives, for example participatory frustration (Fernández-Martínez, García-Espín, and Jiménez-Sánchez 2019), the relationship between participatory initiatives and group learning, where the latter is an outcome of the former, but also a means to better achieve agreement on planning outputs (Deyle and Slotterback 2009), ‘designed learning environments’ and participatory planning processes (Meléndez and Parker 2019), participatory budgeting which is one of the most widely explored topics regarding participatory planning processes, with several recent works addressing the subject in Romania (Almășan 2017, Dohotaru 2022), frameworks for the evaluation of participatory planning processes (Kovacs et al. 2017, Hassenforder et al. 2016) and many others.

4. RESULTS

The first section of the results presents the socio-demographic profile of the survey respondents. The average age of the respondents was 34 years, ranging from 19 to 50 years old. It can be observed that the profile of the respondent is female, with post-graduate studies, living in a city with over 50.000 inhabitants.

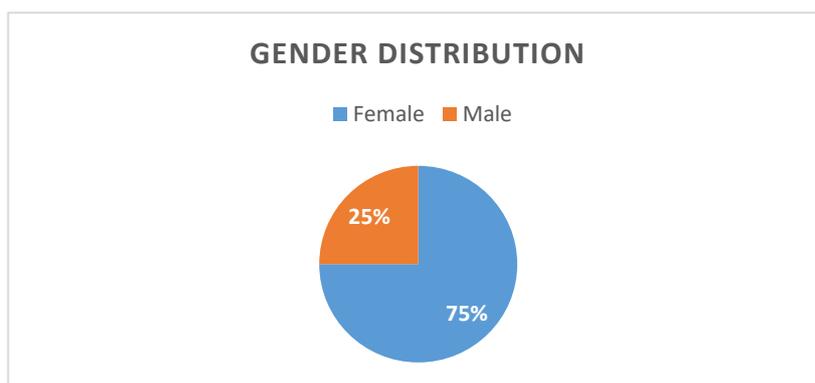


Figure 1. Gender distribution of the respondents

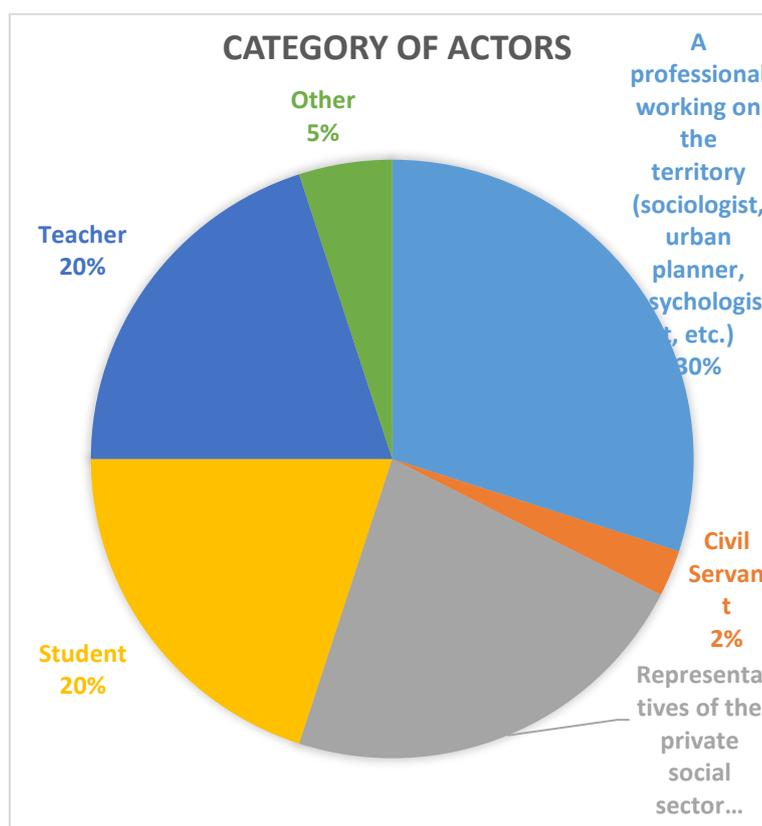


Figure 2. Categories of actors

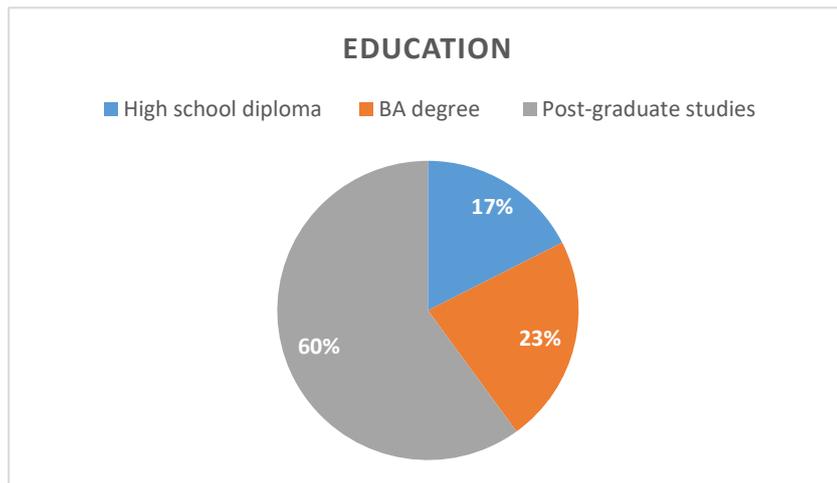


Figure 3. Educational profile of the respondents

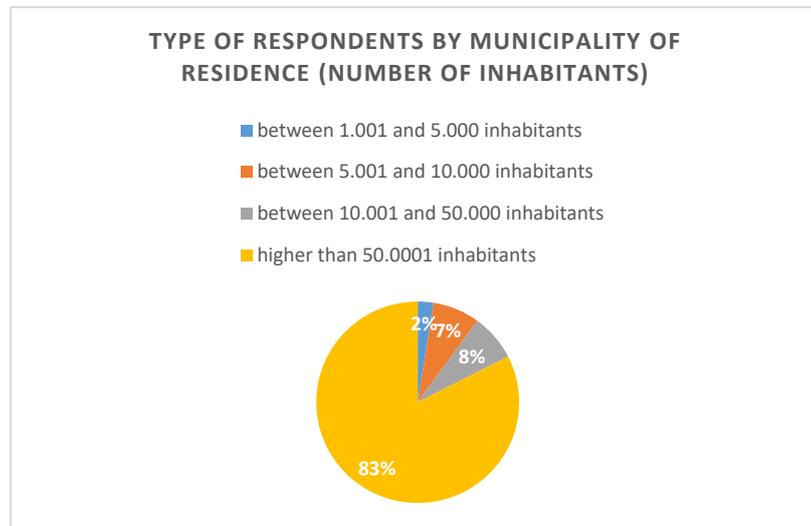


Figure 4. Type of respondents by municipality of residence (number of inhabitants)

Participatory planning processes: degrees of participation and empirical aspects

A key finding regarding the opinions about the extent of citizen participation shows that the majority of the respondents (55%) consider that citizens must actively participate in all stages of the decision-making processes that affect their territory, while 20% agreed to the statement that they only have to propose possible interventions. The rest of them chose various degrees of participation in the management of their territory. It can, therefore, be concluded that the survey showed a strong need of the citizens to be part of the planning process. However, at the same time, as Figure 5 shows, only 40% of them know of any participatory planning initiative in their area.



Figure 5. Responses distribution to the questions “Do you know of any participatory planning initiatives involving citizens in your area?”

The focus group discussion also brought a similar result, that although it is considered important to take part in decision making, most of the participants know very few concrete examples of participatory initiatives or did not know them in details, how they were designed, put in practice or finalized. The examples they mentioned ranged from participatory budgeting, maintenance of green spaces, or education initiatives. The results might be more surprising, as the respondents to the survey and, even more so, the participants to the focus group were professionals, people with a high level of education that are related to various degrees with urban planning or citizen engagement.

The respondents to the survey were also asked to give examples of initiatives they know in their city of residence. Some categories of examples are common to those of the focus group, like participatory budgeting or the management of parks and green spaces, while other examples referred to the improvement of public services, examples about the protection of the environment (sorting garbage and recycling), management of playgrounds, leisure spaces or events, the activity of civic groups (e.g. actions against illegal constructions), general urbanism projects, and urban planning.

Asked to express their opinions regarding how important they consider citizen participation to the well-being of an area, the vast majority (75%) were in agreement with the statement: 40% somewhat agree and 35% agree to a great extent.

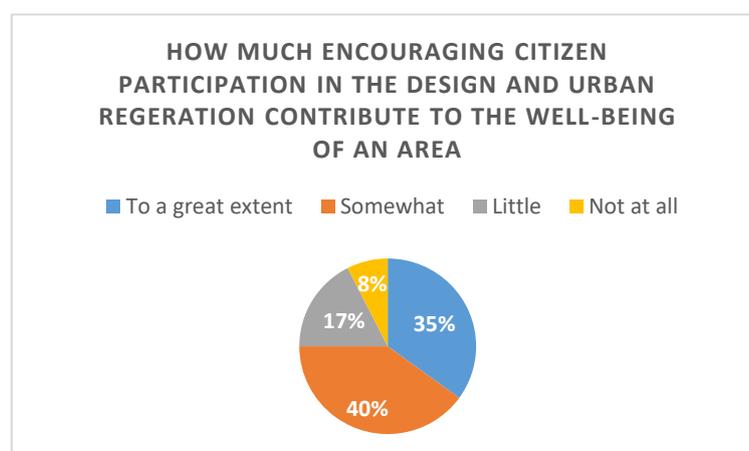


Figure 6. Respondents’ opinion regarding how much they consider Encouraging citizens’ participation in the design and urban regeneration of their territory contributes to the well-being of an area

One question required the respondents to rank the importance of eight aspects in their city (from 1 to 8). The collaborative aspects and the interaction between citizens, public administration, and other professionals can be traced in four variables: "citizen participation in decision-making processes" (an average rank of 4.2), "the cooperation between institutions in the area" (an average rank of 4.2), "clear and transparent communication between institutions and citizens" (an average rank of 4.5), "professionals that act as intermediaries between the needs of the citizens and the interventions on the territory" (an average rank of 3.7). It must be noted that the highest average rank was obtained by the variable "safe and usable public spaces for play and recreation" (an average rank of 5.2), followed by "adequate social and health care for frail persons" (an average rank of 4.8), and "economic support for 'vulnerable' groups (children, foreigners, elderly, disabled, people in poverty etc.)" (an average rank of 4.8).

Although the majority of the respondents considered that citizens need to be involved in all stages of decision making and that public participation is important for the well-being of the citizens, however, when asked to detail the most important needs for their well-being (both in the survey, and the focus group), the basic needs (safety, social and health care, economic support for vulnerable groups) proved to be more important. In an open ended question about the first three words that come to mind when thinking about the well-being of the citizens, out of 38 responses given, there were only five instances that can be related to planning and expectations from public administration or planning professionals: "planning", "cooperation", "access to services" (two replies), and "good quality services from the institutions". The majority of replies revolved around health, safety, financial security, education, public transport, and equity. The focus group discussion can offer an explanation on the topic, the fact that because their basic needs are not met, people focus on these more urgent aspects, instead of civic engagement. Moreover, when they were asked to specify in the focus group the areas of improvement regarding well-being, civic participation was one of the examples, especially in relationship with the public space and with the political sphere. The participants also raised the concern that most citizens are not aware that they can become engaged in other ways than voting. This can be related to a low level of information about participatory planning opportunities, an aspect that also resulted in the previous questions.

An open ended question in the survey asked the respondents to define what they understand by citizen participation to the city. The replies revolved around: being informed, expressing their needs/opinions, good communication and transparency between citizens and decision makers, participation to consultations with the authorities, and involvement in the decision-making. It can be concluded that the vast majority of respondents' replies showed a great tendency towards collaborative participation. Only one reply indicated a low tendency towards adversarial participation: "to challenge decisions."

Actors and institutions involved in participatory planning processes

The respondents' opinions regarding the interaction between citizens, public administration, and other professionals can be found in their replies to the question pertaining to what can be improved in the participatory planning initiatives they gave as examples. Out of the 17 replies to this question, the majority stressed the importance of citizen participation, however, only seven of them specifically mentioned the interaction with the public administration and other actors. Regarding the former aspect, the opinions were largely critical, and revolved around the need of improving the communication and collaboration with the mayor's office. Other respondents stressed the need of involving professionals who are apolitical or representatives of the civil society. A similar opinion was voiced by one participant to the focus group, who stressed, however, a downside to this proposal. She considers that what does not work well in participatory initiatives is precisely the fact that citizens rely too much on a facilitator, and that citizens need too much support from professionals to guide their engagement.

In the same line, the participants to the focus group emphasized the need for intermediary structures between citizens and administration, especially ones that can reflect the diverse needs of the citizens (for example, of people with disabilities), and can propose an inclusive urban design. One problem with the low public participation was raised by the architects in the focus group who argued that to increase the well-being of the citizens it is necessary to have easier access to public resources, public auctions must be more accessible to professionals at the beginning of their career, and there should be less bureaucracy. For other participants, the

actions to improve participation are: the creation of citizen networks, where citizens are genuinely listened to, to create effective communication channels where people can directly participate to the decision-making process, and to decide what the priorities are and how to solve them.

CONCLUSION

A general conclusion of the research is that participatory planning processes are highly valued by the participants to the survey and the focus group, the majority of them considering that citizens should be involved in all stages of decision-making. However, despite their professional and educational profile, a limited number of them are familiar with participatory initiatives, indicating a low level of information regarding participatory planning opportunities. As can be outlined from the focus group discussion, a possible explanation can be that citizens are having difficulties meeting basic material needs and, as public participation is not considered as urgent, it loses importance.

Regarding the nature of public participation, the responses of the vast majority of respondents' replies showed a great tendency towards collaborative participation and almost no tendency towards adversarial participation. However, when given, their opinion about the interaction with public authorities was a rather negative one, which needs to be improved. The respondents also stressed the need for intermediary actors or structures to guide public participation.

Finally, the results of this article were drawn using data collected for a study that was not designed specifically to explore the relation between participatory planning processes and the interaction between citizens, public authorities, and planning professionals; although the study tackles the common topics already presented. Therefore, it is important to stress the limits of this research and the fact that these results are exploratory. For further exploration, it is recommended to develop a future research adapted to rigorously analyse the topic.

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