AN EXPLORATORY RESEARCH ON PARTICIPATORY PLANNING, SOCIABILITY, AND THE URBAN SPACE IN ROMANIA

Carmen VOINEA*

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

ABSTRACT

In the context of an ongoing process of global urbanization, the need for urban planning to develop a strong participatory component has long been addressed by public authorities, citizens, scholars, and other relevant social actors. The urban space, as the site for more than just the material well-being of citizens, has also been explored at length, with works that have focused on how cities foster sociability. However, there are still few studies that inquire into sociability and participatory urban planning. Therefore, drawing on data from an online survey, this exploratory research tackles the interplay between sociability and participatory planning in the urban space. The data was gathered from 40 Romanian students and professionals, through nonprobability sampling. The main research questions looked into definitions and examples of sociability and participatory planning initiatives, as well as how the definitions of each concept refers to the other. Results showed that the definitions of sociability mainly relate to the psychological and social dimension of the concept, with a relatively weak link to the urban space and participatory planning. A second conclusion was that many of the examples of participatory planning initiatives had an explicit sociability component.

KEYWORDS: *participatory planning, sociability, urban space.*

1. INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade, the population living in cities has exceeded that inhabiting rural areas. United Nations (2019) estimated that the global urban population exceeded the rural one for the first time in history in 2007. Since then, the percentage of urban dwellers rose to around 56% (World Bank, 2023). The global urbanization trend is expected to continue with a figure of seven out of ten people to be living in cities in 2050 (World Bank, 2023). The ongoing urbanization will therefore continue to spark academic interest in the social and material lives of citizens and their relation to the urban space. New and current challenges that the urban life brings to citizens put increasing pressures on public authorities and urban planners to include lay people in the process of improving their life through participatory planning. The social dimension of urban life is an integral part to citizens' well-being, therefore this research tackles on key component: sociability in the urban space. Also, in line with previous works, such as Mehta's (2014) research about streets and social life, sociability is seen as the primary role of the public space in the city. To bring further focus on the topic, this paper addresses the interplay between sociability and participatory planning. Sociability is best understood if we explore it from the view point and daily practices of the citizens themselves. Therefore, urban planners and public authorities that are preoccupied with designing a truly sociable city should take into account the experiences, opinions, and values of the citizens, while also making them take an active part in shaping the cities, through participatory planning initiatives. There is a rich academic literature on both sociability and participatory planning, however there are few works that have dealt manifestly with their interplay. As an exploratory research on the topic, this article presents the results of data collected through a survey in Romania, with a non-representative sample, about sociability,

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* Corresponding author. E-mail address: carmen.giorgiana.voinea@gmail.com

citizen well-being, participatory planning, and the profile of experts who work on developing the urban space.

2. METHODS

The objective of the paper was to explore if and how sociability in the urban space is perceived as embedded in planning, with focus on participatory planning initiatives. Two research questions led the inquiry into this topic:

- What are the definitions and examples/practices of sociability and participatory planning initiatives?
- How do definitions and examples/practices of each concept refer to the other one?

This exploratory research relies on an online survey, with a nonprobability sampling, that was applied to 40 Romanian citizens, students and professionals in fields related to urban studies and development. The survey was conducted as part of the Erasmus Plus project STUD.IO: Sociability Through Urban Design Innovation that took place between September 2020 to August 2023 in four countries (Italy, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain). The purpose of the questionnaire that was applied in the project was to identify the needs of the policy makers and citizens.

In this article I use the data gathered through convenience sampling in Romania to develop an exploratory research about sociability and participatory planning initiatives. The target group was made of different categories of respondents: students, teachers, urban studies professionals (sociologist, urban planner, psychologist etc.), public authorities (mayor, council member, civil servants etc.), representatives of the private social sector, urban planners or designers. In Romania, the questionnaire was sent to a larger network of professionals created by the local partner in the project.

The questions were divided according to several dimensions: the well-being of the citizens and their corresponding needs, participation of the citizens and participatory planning initiatives, the qualities of an expert that works to improve the well-being of the citizens, and sociability. From these, the article only focuses on the ones that dealt with sociability and participatory planning initiatives. The analysis of the responses employed quantitative and qualitative approaches. For the latter, thematic content analysis was used on the responses to the open-ended questions.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical underpinnings of sociability in the urban space(s)

With works dating back more than a century ago, contemporary scholars find it hard not to reference Georg Simmel when it comes to exploring sociability and the urban life. Among the first sociologists who took an interest into the changes brought by the city to the lives of its inhabitants, The Metropolis and Mental Life (Simmel &. Wolff, 1950) remains one of the most widely read and cited works. According to Simmel, "[t]he psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality consists in the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli" (1950, 410). In regards to sociability, the German sociologist argues that "specific needs and interests make men band together in economic associations, blood brotherhoods, religious societies, hordes of bandits. Yet in addition to their specific contents, all these sociations are also characterized, precisely, by a feeling, among their members, of being sociated and by the satisfaction derived from this" (1950, 43).

He further contends that individuals experience a "sociability drive" that "extracts the pure process of sociation as a cherished value" (1950, 44) and that, as a sociological category, he designates "sociability as the play-form of sociation" (1950, 45). Garcia and Tegelaars consider that Simmel's concept is "an ideal type of a specific sociological structure in which participants come together, not for instrumental motives, but simply for the satisfaction of being with others" (Garcia and Tegelaars,

2019, p. 2) and that, in his conceptualization, sociability is defined by "radical equality" (Garcia and Tegelaars, 2019).

Simmel acknowledged the limits of the concept in that some factors may not influence sociability, for example "[w]ealth, social position, erudition, fame, exceptional capabilities and merits " (1950, 46). His contribution proved influential among scholars, for example Erving Goffman (1956) who brought different understandings of the concept, in particular that it was subject to outside pressures (Davis 1997; Garcia and Tegelaars 2019).

Later works on the "peculiar nature" of cities and its components also tackled the impact of urban spaces on the social life of citizens, for example Jane Jacobs' (1961) classic book on American cities. In her depiction of "public contact" in the urban settings we can trace ideas about how sidewalks can foster what we term in this paper as sociability. In her view, the public urban space provides its dwellers with the possibility:

"to know all kinds of people without unwelcome entanglements, without boredom, necessity for excuses, explanations, fears of giving offence, embarrassments respecting impositions or commitments, and all such paraphernalia of obligations which can accompany less limited relationships. It is possible to be on excellent sidewalk terms with people who are very different from oneself, and even, as time passes, on familiar public terms with them. Such relationships can, and do, endure for many years, for decades; they could never have formed without that line, much less endured. They form precisely because they are by-the-way to people's normal public sorties" (Jacobs, 1961, 62).

She further argues that, provided the city planners ensure public safety, sidewalks also allow tolerance among people of different races, classes etc., avoiding discrimination and segregation. What can also be highlighted in Jacobs' text is the acknowledgement of the importance of planning in fostering public contact.

As an essential form of sociability, contact is also found in Gehl's (2011) works who identified low and high intensity types of contact between people engaged in urban social activities. His 1970's book about people's lives between buildings also addresses the fact that city planners should include "humanistic planning principles" in how they shape cities; where social activities (contact with others, meetings, conversations etc.) in the outdoor urban space are considered an integral part of the interplay between the environment (urban space, buildings, streets etc.) and the large array of activities taking place there (Gehl, 2011). It must be reiterated here that the literature on this topic often explores the issue of how urban planning needs to set as a goal the development of sociability, in its various definitions and terminology.

Among other scholars that have explored sociability in the cities, William Whyte should also be noted, with his focus on small urban spaces, like plazas, streets, sitting spaces etc. His research showed that "the best used plazas are sociable places" (1980, 17). Mehta (2014, 2016) is another scholar who focused on other important urban spaces for citizens' social lives: the streets. According to Mehta (2014), one central role of the city is that to facilitate social encounters, in line with Mumford (1964) who contends that the primary purpose of the city is "to permit—indeed, to encourage—the greatest possible number of meetings, encounters, challenges, between varied persons and groups, providing as it were a stage upon which the drama of social life may be enacted" (1964, 173). Moreover, for Mehta "[o]f its many functions, sociability is a primary role of public space" (2014, 20). The author considers that the streets have a cardinal role "to provide a setting for a range of active and passive social behaviors" (Mehta, 2014, 1). According to him, "[a] sociable street is defined as a street that is open to the public, where people are present throughout the day and week, engaged—individually or in groups—in a variety of active or passive social behaviors that are pre - dominantly stationary and sustained in nature" (2014, 24). If most of the works about the sociability of the urban space avoided to quantify it, Mehta proposes a Sociability Index based on the argument that "[I]f we can quantify the presence of people engaged in social behaviors at a given location and also quantify the characteristics of the location, we can correlate the two to find out what qualities of the street are correlated with social behavior" (2014, 92). In order to do so, the author tallies "the number of people

in all types of social behaviors along with their duration of stay at each block segment and block on the street into a tangible number" (2014, 92), that represent the Sociability Index.

If many of the studies regarding urban space and sociability started on the assumption that the urban form is strongly influential on sociability, a study on "walkability" showed "that factors influencing neighbourhood sociability extend beyond issues of urban form" (du Toit, Cerin, Leslie, and Owen 2007, 1677). The evidence of the study suggests that "walkable neighbourhoods are not necessarily more sociable places in which to live" (du Toit, Cerin, Leslie, and Owen 2007, 1694). Even more importantly, the research brings an element of scepticism regarding the importance of urban form in that its "blueprints may provide comfort and rhetorical material for urban researchers and policymakers, but appear not to produce automatically the expected social impacts" (du Toit, Cerin, Leslie, and Owen 2007, 1694).

In more recent studies, sociability of public spaces is seen as a cluster of qualities that make up "liveability", alongside, the walkability of the streets, "access to recreation and nature, the journey to work, assault from urban noise, safety, health and much more" (Southworth 2016). Other research that explored the topic dealt with the concept from a psychological perspective (Argyle 2014), the relationship between compact urban form and sociability (Nurul, 2015), spatial analysis of the relationship between city squares and sociability (Zakariya, Harun, and Mansor 2014), "curated sociability" and urban green spaces for refugees and asylum seekers (Rishbeth, Blachnicka-Ciacek, and Darling 2019), to only name a few.

The sociability component in urban (participatory) planning

Based on the literature review, it can be argued that there is a need for more studies that focus on how urban sociability relates to participatory planning, and vice versa, although some participatory initiatives have an implicit component that develops the social interactions between urban citizens. It has previously been referenced how, since decades ago, Jacobs (1961) and Gehl (2011) acknowledged that urban planning should take into account the goals of developing social activities. More recent research explore how urban planning can contribute to the inclusion of various groups. For Mehta (2019), the streets represent an example of how a just and equitable social city can be created:

"These streets show us that various seemingly incongruent groups have the ability to coexist on the street when the planning, design and management supports simple active and passive social activities like people-watching, walking, talking, eating and play that are of interest to people of all classes, race, age, gender and viewpoints (Francis 1987). Yet, we learn that this is only possible when the design and management of the space and the uses on the street remains open-ended to represent numerous groups and constituencies of the neighbourhood and beyond, and are meaningful to them. Equally important, these streets, as public spaces, are not excessively monitored or overly regulated to favour selected groups and activities and are perceived as a neutral territory by many, if not all." (Mehta 2019, 35)

Regarding the relations between urban design and planning, human behavior and the urban space, Mehta (2014) argues that "[s]ocial behavior on the street, like any human behavior in space, occurs as a result of the interaction between people and the setting" (2014, 57). The author contends that, besides the attributes of the individuals, the characteristic of the setting are also relevant. In detailing the history of urban design, Mehta shows that "traditionally, the "visual-aesthetic tradition" has been the dominant urban design paradigm (Jarvis, 1980; Carmona et al., 2003), and the process of design has been largely governed by the personal tastes, intuitions and aesthetic criteria of professionals trained in the field of design" (2014, 58). By mid-twentieth century, a new scientific approach came to the front: the social ecological approach, in which urban planners and architects worked with social scientists to include the needs of the citizens (Mehta 2014, 58). It is in this line that we propose that urban planning aimed to improve sociability needs to not only be informed by research on human behavior and social interactions, but also by the explicit needs of the inhabitants through participatory planning initiatives.

This approach is also found in Yaseen's (2017) research about the inclusive aspects of urban design and sociability, walkability, and urban ambiance. The three characteristics are considered important attributes of the urban space. The author "concludes that interdisciplinary engagement and participation of the public in decision-making for urban design are necessary" (2017, 1), and that "[u]rban design can increase or impede the sociability and walkability of a space and it has a direct relation to human behavior and attitude" (Yaseen 2017, 10).

It must be noted that this chapter has not delved into the vast scholarly literature regarding participatory planning. As a working definition we can refer to the one that has been adopted outside of the strict academic environment, for example that included in the UN-Habitat 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" (2001, 20).

Among other recent research pertaining to participatory planning and the urban space we can note: participatory planning processes and the interactions between citizens, public administration, and professionals (Voinea and Profiroiu, 2022), participatory landscape design in Egypt, that takes sociability into account as a quality of the landscape (Ibrahim and Amin, 2014), creative participatory planning in public place-making (Cilliers and Timmermans, 2014) or participatory innovation for sociable smart cities (Mulder, 2014).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents place the average age of the respondents at 34 years, with an interval between 19 to 50 years. The majority of the respondents were female (75%). The participants to the survey had a high educational profile, with 60% having completed post-graduate studies and 23% have a BA degree. Relevant to the topic of this research, it must also ne noted that 83% live in cities with population of over 50.000 inhabitants.
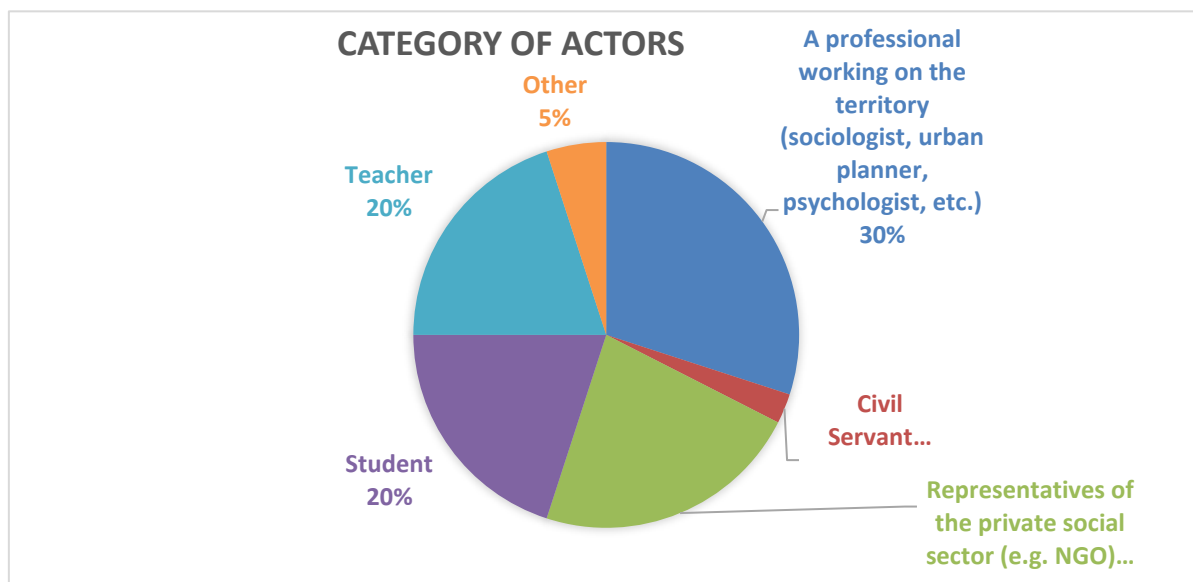

Figure 1. The professional profile of the respondents

Views on participatory planning initiatives

Before exploring how the respondents viewed sociability as integral to participatory planning, it is important to also present their views about participatory planning initiatives. The questionnaire also included questions aimed to survey their concrete knowledge of such practices and their opinions on the level of involvement citizens must have in the management of the territory they live in.

Most of the respondents (55%) were of the opinion that citizens must actively take part in all stages of the decision-making process and 20% of them considered that they should be involved in only

proposing interventions. The other 25% opted for various degrees of participation. Respondents' views on the importance of involving citizens in urban planning seems therefore in line with some of the authors cited in this research, in particular Yaseen's (2017) work. However, although the survey showed that the respondents agree with citizens taking part in the planning processes, in practice, only 40% of them are acquainted with any participatory planning initiative in the cities they live in (Figure 2).
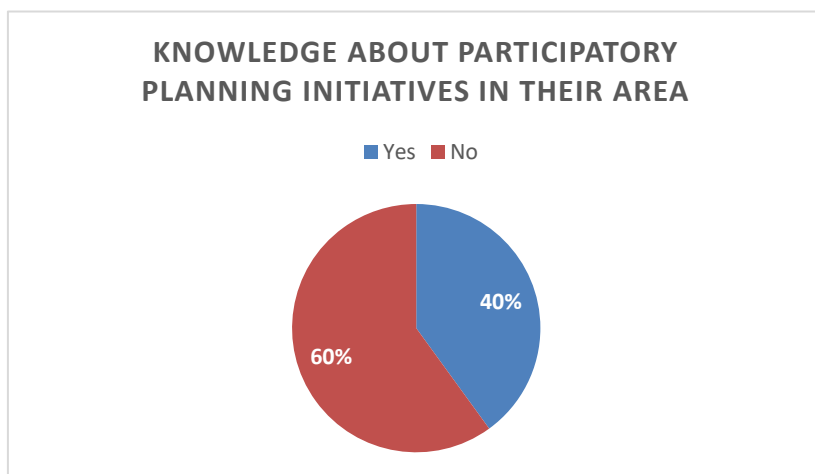

Figure 2. Knowledge about participatory planning initiatives

The main categories of examples of participatory planning initiatives were those pertaining to: participatory budgeting, public services, environmental actions, playgrounds, green spaces and parks, cultural events, community organising and civic groups' actions, urbanism and urban planning. Out of the 18 examples of participatory planning actions that were given, seven of them had an explicit sociability component. In this category of responses I included initiatives that rely on or have as the main goal the development of contact and social interactions between citizens, in line with how sociability was defined in the literature review from authors like Gehl (2011), Jacobs (1961), Southworth (2016), Mehta (2014) etc. One sub-category were examples regarding the activity of civic groups (three examples from Bucharest). This can be seen as the type of initiatives that best highlights the interplay between sociability and participatory planning. As previous research showed (Voinea, Profiroiu & Profiroiu, 2022), most of Bucharest civic groups were established in response to a perceived danger to the urban space that united people from the same neighborhood in order to try to take part in urban planning. Without establishing contact and strengthening sociability among member of the civic groups, their activity could not take place. Other examples of participatory initiatives that have a key sociability component were: the day of the neighbourhood, a project to revive a neighbourhood cultural center in which the citizens were involved, or building a school and pre-school campus in a new area of the city. There were also several examples that it can argued contain an implicit sociability component: the management of parks and other public spaces, protection of environment (tree planting, sorting and recycling garbage etc) or building a mall. These initiatives either relied on some form of social interactions between citizens, or aimed to improve an urban space that can foster sociability in the future.

Sociability: definitions and its participatory planning component
The definitions given by the respondents to sociability mainly relate to the psychological and social aspects of the concept and seem to elude a clear connection with the urban space. We therefore propose two categories of definitions for sociability: 1) on the social and psychological dimension; 2) sociability in clear relation to the urban space.

Social and psychological definitions of sociability (24 out of 24 given definitions) as directly quoted from responses. Most definitions included the notions of community, communication and social interactions.

- The ability to function harmoniously in a community;
- Developing social ties in a community, creating a space to form these relationships;
- The relationship between people without a common financial or professional interest;
- Communicativeness, a type of sociality;
- The ability to interact with others;
- The ability to live with other individuals;
- The ability to create and maintain relationships with the people around us, but also with new people;
- A person's ability to discuss with other individuals in a comfortable environment;
- It means communication;
- I think it's the trait that defines the need or desire to interact with other people;
- The ability of people to live in the community;
- The ability to be social, rather than sociable. But in order to reach social responsibility, it is important to build individual responsibility as well;
- Living in the community;
- Good communication and mutual help between citizens;
- Being sociable;
- One's ability to socialize, to communicate effectively, to create strong social bonds with ease;
- Communication with others, empathy, mutual support;
- Ability to understand the common interests and needs of citizens in a community;
- Ability and inclination to initiate and maintain relationships with other people (outside the family);
- The ability to create and maintain social relationships, to be part of a group;
- The degree to which a social actor establishes communicative connections (without being limited to verbal, direct interactions, but understanding the concept of communication in the broadest sense, relationships) of various types (according to different criteria) with other actors in a given social space.

1) Sociability in relation to the urban space. There were only three definitions out of the 24 given that mentioned the space, the city, or the area they live in.

- "The feeling that you cannot and should not live separately from the space and the community in which you live / work and the understanding of the correlation between individual and collective well-being;"
- "The character by which members of a community and a locality can interact positively with each other and with state institutions in order to fulfil common interests;"
- "Sociability is the way citizens in a given area interact with each other, feel part of a community, and take common action for the common good."

It must be noted that a participatory component to sociability definitions is significantly lacking, only two definitions could be read as including it: "The character by which members of a community and a locality can interact positively with each other and with state institutions in order to fulfil common interests" and "Sociability is the way citizens (…) take common action for the common good."
In another open ended question, the participants were asked to give examples of concrete activities that promote sociability. Out of 23 examples, there were nine responses that linked sociability to the urban space, like playgrounds and courts for various sports, rehabilitation projects for buildings with seismic risk, arranging the space around the block, areas with benches in parks etc. When it came to provide more concrete examples, the number of responses that mixed sociability with participatory action was six out of 23. Several examples include: consultations organized by mayors; community actions - direct participation in activities aimed at improving the living space of a community (e.g.

meetings to discuss the problems of a neighbourhood / area and possible solutions); the involvement of citizens in decision making at administrative and political level; community meetings; organizing events where citizens can express their views on community issues. If can be concluded that when asked to provide definitions to sociability, respondents tended to detail it more on a social and psychological dimension. However, when it came to giving concrete examples of activities that promote sociability there were more instances where the city and its components was mentioned. This is in line with previously quoted works on social interactions and sociability in the urban space, from Gehl (2011) who explored the lives of peoplebetween buildings, to Mehta (2014) and the sociability of streets, Whyte (1980) and the small urban spaces, or Southworth (2016) with qualities such as "liveability" and walkability. The questionnaire also had a question pertaining to the degree in which citizen participation contributes to citizens' well-being. In this respect, the vast majority were in agreement that participation in the design and urban regeneration contributes to well-being with 40% of them somewhat agreeing and to a great extent (35%) agreed with the statement.
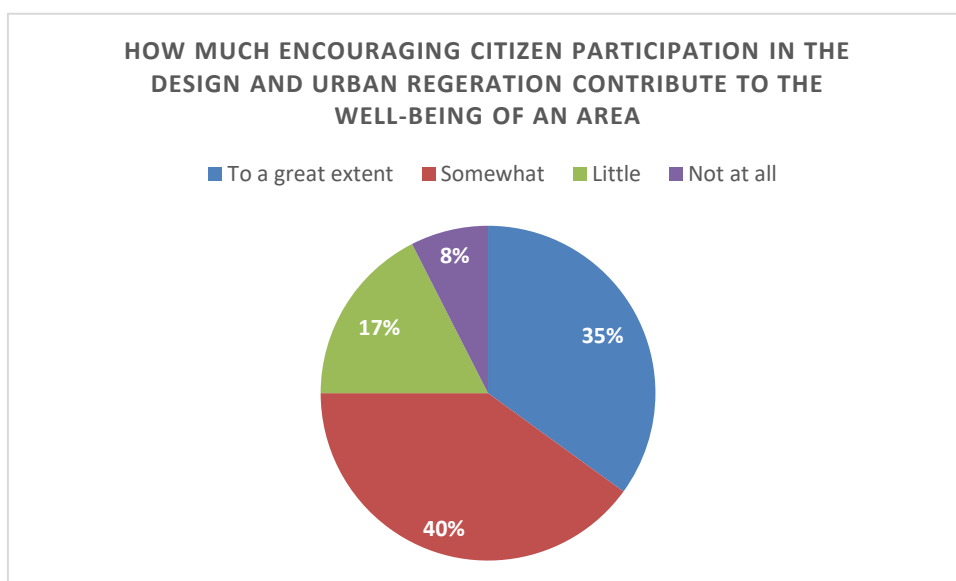

Figure 3. Distribution of responses to the impact of citizen participaton on well-being

However when compared to the extent they consider pro-social behaviors as contributive to the well-being of an territory (90% somewhat and to a great extent consider it contributes), the participatory actions of the citizens seem to be less important that the psychological and social implications in the concept of "pro-social behavior."
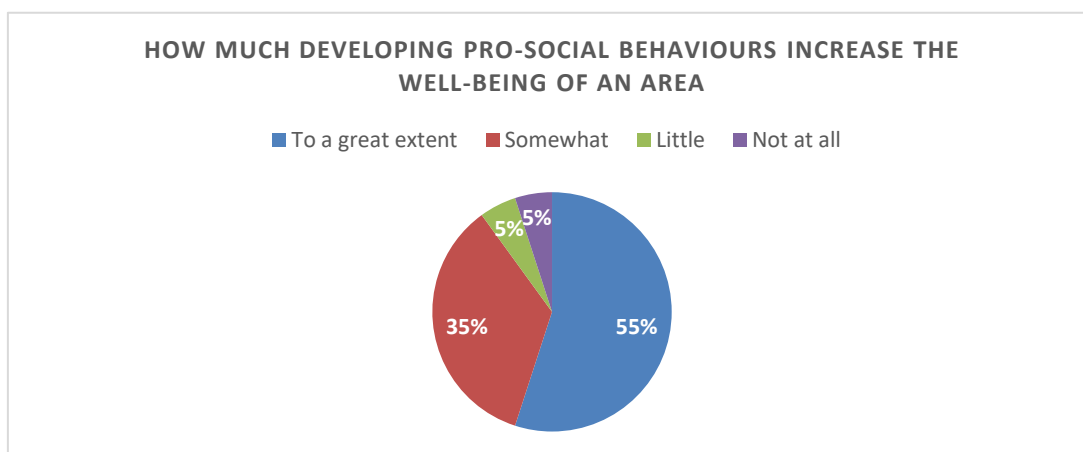

Figure 4. Respondents' opinion regarding how much they consider developing pro-social behaviours (e.g. all those behaviours oriented towards helping and supporting others) increase the well-being of an area

5. CONCLUSIONS

The definitions given by the respondents to sociability mainly relate to the psychological and social dimension of the concept, revolving around notions such as community, social interactions, and communication. They seem to elude a clear connection with the urban space. However, in practice, the respondents had many concrete examples of initiatives that promote sociability and are linked to the urban space or its components. Some of these examples also included a participatory planning dimension. Therefore, a first important conclusion of this exploratory research is that sociability is not strongly linked to the urban space in respondents' definitions.

A second conclusion was that many of the examples of participatory planning actions that respondents provided had an explicit sociability component. In this category of responses fall initiatives that aim or rely on developing public contact and social interactions between citizens, with one key category being the activities of civic groups.

Taking into account the conclusions on this exploratory research, it can be argued that the interplay between sociability, participatory planning initiatives, and the urban space is a rather intricate one that deserves future academic research. Moreover, similar research on the topic could also be beneficial for public administration policies that are directed towards the increase of citizens' well-being and their involvement in decision making to improve the commonly shared urban space, and consequently to develop sociability between inhabitants.

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