

A STUDY ON THE UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AMONG EMPLOYEES OF SELECTED CITY OFFICES

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Purpose: The article aims to examine the perception of social participation among employees of city offices in Silesia. The analysis covers the understanding of this phenomenon, the evaluation of the involvement of city authorities, identified barriers, and suggestions for improvements.

Design/methodology/approach: The study employs the survey method. A questionnaire consisting of 16 questions was addressed to employees of city offices in two cities with powiat status. Both quantitative and qualitative data obtained from closed-ended and open-ended questions were analyzed.

Findings: The study revealed a diverse perception of social participation among city office employees. Significant differences were noted in the assessment of the level of involvement of the authorities and identified barriers. The results indicate the need to strengthen the dialogue between the office and residents, and the necessity of education in the field of participation.

Research limitations/implications: The study was conducted on a limited sample of two cities, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Future research could cover a larger number of cities and include the perspective of residents.

Practical implications: The results of the study can serve as a basis for developing strategies to increase social participation in cities. It is advisable to introduce training for officials and develop tools for communication with residents.

Social implications: Increasing social participation can contribute to the strengthening of local democracy, increased citizen trust in authorities, and improvement of the quality of life in cities.

Originality/value: The article brings a new perspective on the perception of social participation by employees of city offices in the context of Smart Cities. It presents empirical data on barriers and opportunities for improvement that can be used in practice. The article is addressed to public administration employees, researchers, and all those interested in the development of civic participation.

Keywords: social participation, city office, smart city.

Category of the paper: Research article.

1. Introduction

The role of citizens in democracy goes beyond participation in elections. Their active participation in city governance is crucial to responsive public policy. Initiatives such as community councils and participatory budgets illustrate that involving residents in decision-making can lead to more effective and equitable solutions to local problems. Therefore, being able to express opinions and influence government decisions is an important element in building a strong civil society (Fung & Wright, 2001). Understanding what public participation is and what forms it takes is crucial not only from the perspective of citizens, but also from the perspective of public administration employees, who play an important role in its initiation and implementation.

Emphasizing the importance of active citizen participation in city management, it is worth taking a closer look at the different levels of this engagement. One of the key models that systematizes these levels is Sherry Arnstein's "Ladder of Citizen Participation". This model presents eight rungs, illustrating the spectrum of social participation, from apparent involvement to real citizen power in decision-making processes. The two lowest rungs of the ladder are "Nonparticipation". This includes manipulation, where citizens are merely used to support decisions already made by the authorities, without any real influence, and therapy, the goal of which is to "cure" or "convince" citizens to accept existing plans, rather than genuinely involve them in the decision-making process. The next three rungs represent "Degrees of Tokenism", where citizens are listened to, but their voice does not necessarily translate into real power: informing, where citizens are informed about plans and decisions, but without the possibility of actively contributing opinions; consultation, where opinions are gathered, but there is no guarantee that they will be taken into account; and placation, where a certain level of representation is illusory and does not lead to a genuine sharing of power. Only the three highest rungs of Arnstein's ladder signify "Degrees of Citizen Power" and true participation: partnership, where authorities and citizens jointly plan and decide, sharing responsibility; delegated power, where citizens receive the majority of decision-making powers; and citizen control, where citizens have full control over the decision-making and management process (Arnstein, 1969).

Although Arnstein's ladder model simplifies complex power relations, it provides a valuable tool for analyzing and understanding different levels of social engagement, which is particularly important in the context of the Smart City. In smart cities, striving to use technology to improve quality of life and management efficiency, authentic and effective citizen participation, going beyond mere information or consultation, is crucial for creating solutions that meet the real needs of residents and building trust in new technologies and urban systems (Cardullo, Kitchin, 2019). Therefore, this paper focuses on examining how these different levels of participation

are understood by employees of selected city offices in the context of implementing the Smart City idea

The smart city concept is defined as an urban space in which advanced technological infrastructure is instrumental in social and economic initiatives (Eremia, Toma, Sanduleac, 2017). The overarching goal of these initiatives is to stimulate economic growth, increase efficiency in the disposition of urban resources, and build and strengthen social capital. According to another perspective, the key determinants of a smart city are also the level of education of its residents, the accumulated human and social capital, and the state of the environment (Guerrero-Pérez, Huerta, González, López, 2013).

In the context of building smart cities that focus on innovation and improving the quality of life of residents, active citizen involvement is seen as one of the key elements. This involvement is largely shaped by the attitudes and knowledge of government employees. Integrating these perspectives, the concept of “Smart City” encompasses a wide spectrum of activities implemented in urban space, including raising the digital competence of residents, creating an environment conducive to the IT sector, implementing innovations in transportation, developing ICT infrastructure, realizing sustainable development and implementing modern forms of communication between local government and citizens (Aurigi, 2005).

The various forms of citizen involvement presented here provide the background for an analysis of the perception of public participation among city government employees who interact with them on a daily basis. There are many forms of citizen involvement in city management, from traditional elections and referendums to more interactive ones. Classical public consultations gather opinions, while direct actions and administrative proceedings give greater influence. In the urban context, citizen budgets, community councils and citizen initiatives are popular. These various instruments can be systematized according to the flow of information and interaction between authorities and residents. From one-way communication to active dialogue, the effectiveness of each form of engagement needs to be evaluated differently (Rowe, Frewer, 2005).

Public consultation is a formalized, interactive process initiated and moderated by government entities. As part of this process, a public institution invites a broad spectrum of stakeholders - including both the general public and identified target groups - to provide their comments, opinions and proposals with regard to proposed normative acts, strategic public policy documents or significant problems of a social, economic or spatial nature (Choi, Wong, 2023).

The civic budget, also known as the participatory budget, is a mechanism that enables residents to actively participate in deciding on the allocation of a portion of public funds for specific projects and initiatives implemented in their community. This process aims to increase the efficiency of public finance management by better aligning expenditures with the real needs and expectations of the local community. By involving citizens in the decision-making process, the participatory budget contributes to building mutual trust between residents and local

authorities, strengthening the sense of civic control over the spending of public money. A key element of the civic budget is enabling residents to submit their own project proposals, which are then evaluated for feasibility and compliance with local development strategies. In the next stage, citizens have the opportunity to vote on selected projects, and those that receive the greatest support are implemented within a separate part of the city or municipality budget (Putri, Trisnarningsih, 2024).

Considering the key role of social participation in effective city management, especially in the context of the development of the Smart City idea, this article addresses a gap in the literature by focusing on understanding the perception of social participation among public administration employees in selected City Offices in Silesia. Specifically, this paper breaks down how city office employees define participation, what elements of this process they consider most important, how they assess the involvement of authorities in participatory initiatives, what barriers they perceive, and what actions they suggest to strengthen citizen participation in shaping smart cities, a perspective often overlooked in Smart City research.

2. Methods

In this article, which aims to understand the perception of social participation among public administration employees in selected powiat cities of the Silesian Voivodeship, a survey was used as the primary research method. The survey is a commonly used tool in social research, enabling the systematic collection of data on respondents' opinions, attitudes, and experiences on a specific topic (Babbie, 2010). This method was considered appropriate due to the ability to reach a relatively large group of employees and obtain standardized answers, which facilitates subsequent comparative analysis. The survey questionnaire used a combination of closed-ended and semi-open (hybrid) questions. Closed-ended questions were characterized by predefined answer options, which allowed for quantitative data analysis. In turn, semi-open questions combined the possibility of selecting ready-made answers with space for additional respondent commentary, allowing for richer qualitative data (Łobucki, 2007). The use of both types of questions allowed for a comprehensive examination of respondents' perceptions.

The survey questionnaire, consisting of sixteen questions, was designed to explore key aspects of the perception of social participation by public administration employees in cities with over 100,000 inhabitants. The study examined, among other things, their understanding and perception of social participation, the assessment of the current involvement of city authorities, identified barriers and opportunities for improvement, as well as the perceived benefits of its development. The survey also covered issues related to awareness of support in this area, employees' own initiative and assessment of their influence, overall satisfaction, as well as suggestions for changes and potential own actions. Additionally, demographic data

of respondents were collected in order to analyze potential differences in perception. The research sample included public administration employees from two cities with powiat status with over 100,000 inhabitants in the Silesian Voivodeship. A total of 108 respondents participated in the study (36 from City Office A and 72 from City Office B). The respondents included representatives of various levels of administration. Demographic data on age, education, gender, and length of service were also collected.

3. Results

In accordance with the procedure described in the methodology section, this part of the article will present the quantitative results obtained from surveys conducted among employees of City Office A (N = 36) and City Office B (N = 72). These data, collected using a questionnaire consisting of 16 questions, will be presented in the form of tables and graphs illustrating the distribution of answers to individual questions in both studied groups. The aim of the presentation is to show the perceptions of employees in key areas related to social participation in the context of Smart Cities.

Table 1.

Sociodemographic Data of Respondents: Length of Service Distribution

Sociodemographic data of respondents	CO A	CO B
Less than a year	8%	4%
1-5 years	11%	24%
6-10 years	22%	14%
11-15 years	33%	13%
16 years and over	25%	46%

Source: own elaboration.

Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents' length of service in both surveyed cities. In CO A, the largest group consists of employees with 11-15 years of service (33%), while in CO B, employees with 16 years or more of service dominate (46%). Differences are also visible in the percentage of employees with shorter service (less than 5 years), which is higher in CO B (28%) than in CO A (19%). These differences in the structure of length of service may potentially affect the perception and experiences related to social participation in both offices".

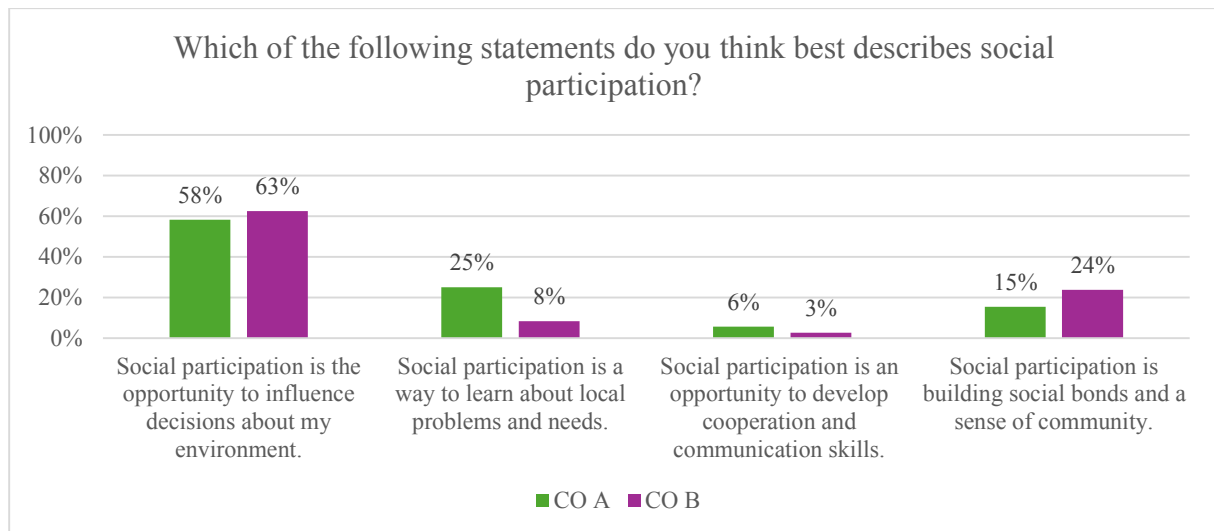


Figure 1. Comparison of Preferred Definitions of Social Participation among Employees of City Offices A and B.

Source: own elaboration.

Analysis of Figure 1 shows that in both cities, the perception of participation as the possibility of influencing decisions prevails (CO A 58%, CO B 63%). In City Office A, the second place is occupied by the definition related to understanding problems (25%), and in CO B, with building relationships (24%). Developing cooperation skills is perceived as the least important. The similarity in the dominant definition indicates a common understanding of the key aspect of participation, however, differences in further preferences may reflect different local emphases in the approach to participation.

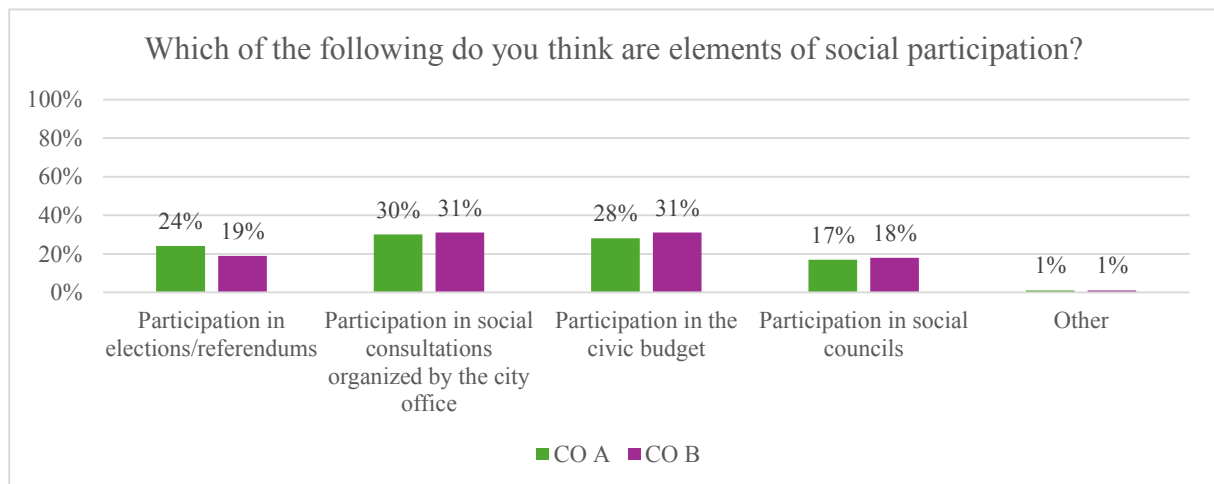


Figure 2. Comparison of perceived elements of public participation among City Offices A and B employees (multiple indications).

Source: own elaboration.

Figure 2 shows that employees in both cities most often identify participation in social consultations organized by the city office (CO A 30%, CO B 31%) and participation in the civic budget (CO A 28%, CO B 31%) as key elements of social participation. The chart indicates a similar importance of these forms of engagement in both locations. The similarity in the frequency of indications for consultations and the civic budget, shown in the chart, suggests that these forms of participation are well recognized and valued by public administration employees in both cities. Slightly lower indications for participation in elections and social councils may indicate a different perception of their role in the spectrum of social participation from the perspective of officials.

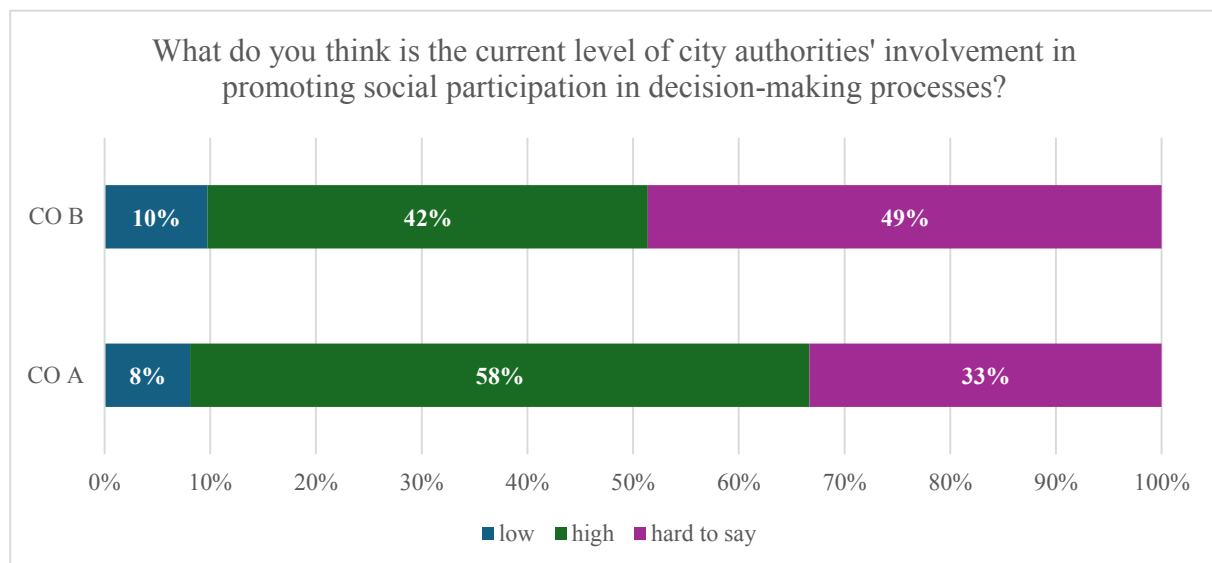


Figure 3. Assessment of City Authorities' Involvement in Promoting Social Participation by City Office A and B Employees.

Source: own elaboration.

Analysis of Figure 3 reveals clear differences in the assessment of city authorities' involvement in promoting social participation between employees from city offices A and B. In CO A, the vast majority of respondents (58%) perceive this level as high. In contrast, in CO B, the largest group of employees (49%) chose the answer "hard to say", and the percentage assessing the involvement as high is much lower (42%). The dominant assessment of the level of involvement as high in CO A, in contrast to the prevailing uncertainty in CO B, visible in the chart, suggests potential differences in the intensity or visibility of activities promoting participation in both cities from the perspective of their officials. The larger group of employees in CO B for whom the assessment of the level of involvement is difficult may indicate a need for better internal communication or less exposure of employees to participatory initiatives in this city.

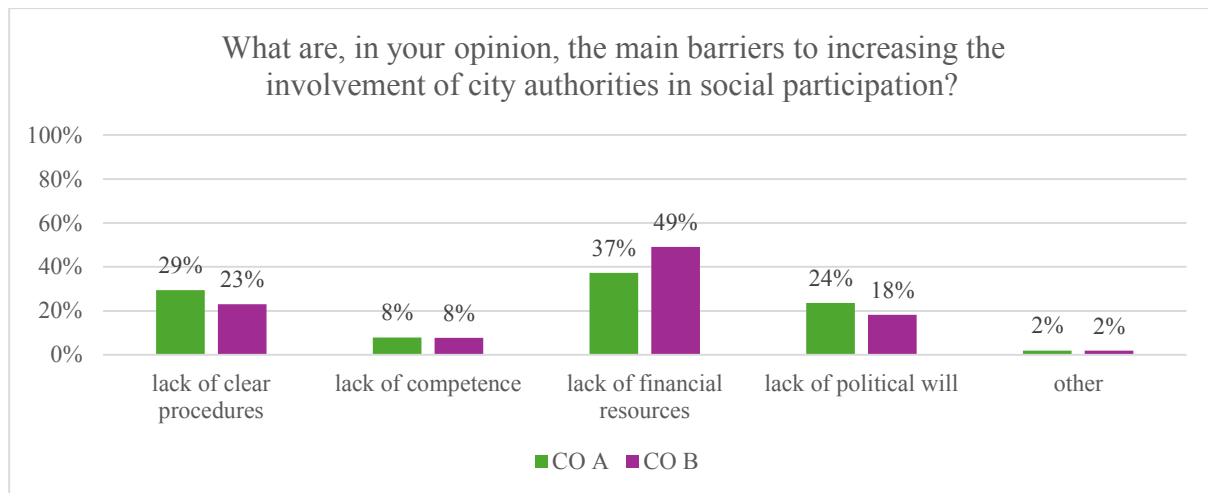


Figure 4. Key Barriers Hindering City Authorities' Engagement in Promoting Social Participation, as Indicated by City Office A and B Employees (multiple indications).

Source: own elaboration.

Analysis of Figure 4 shows that employees in both cities identify a lack of financial resources as one of the main barriers to increasing the involvement of authorities in social participation (CO A 37%, CO B 49%). The chart reveals that this barrier is particularly strongly perceived in CO B. The dominant indication of a lack of financial resources, shown in the chart, suggests that budget constraints are seen as a major obstacle in developing participatory initiatives. The lack of clear procedures is also significant, indicating the need for systemic regulations in the area of participation. Differences in the perception of a lack of political will may reflect different local political contexts and priorities.

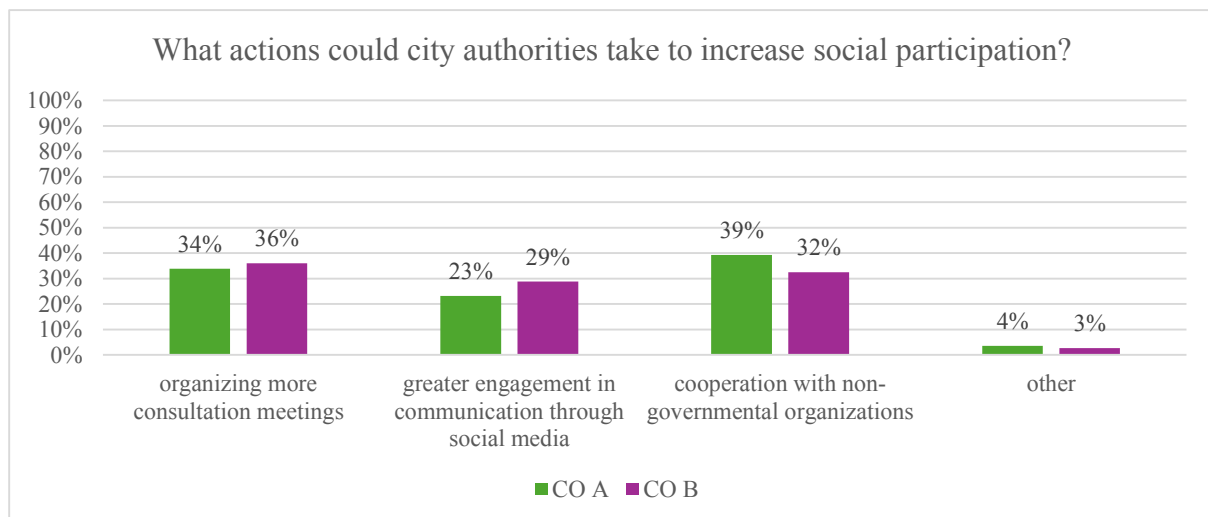


Figure 5. Suggested Actions by City Authorities to Enhance Social Participation, as Indicated by City Office A and B Employees (multiple indications).

Source: own elaboration.

Analysis of Figure 5 shows that employees in both cities most often suggest cooperation with non-governmental organizations as an action that city authorities could take to increase social participation (CO A 39%, CO B 32%). The chart also indicates organizing more consultation meetings as an important suggestion in both cities (CO A 34%, CO B 36%). Greater involvement in communication through social media is also mentioned as a potential action (CO A 23%, CO B 29%). The "Other" response received marginal support in both locations, as seen in the chart. The dominant indication of cooperation with non-governmental organizations, shown in the chart, suggests that employees see great potential in partnering with the social sector in engaging residents. Increasing the number of consultation meetings and more active use of social media in communication with residents are also important in order to increase participation.

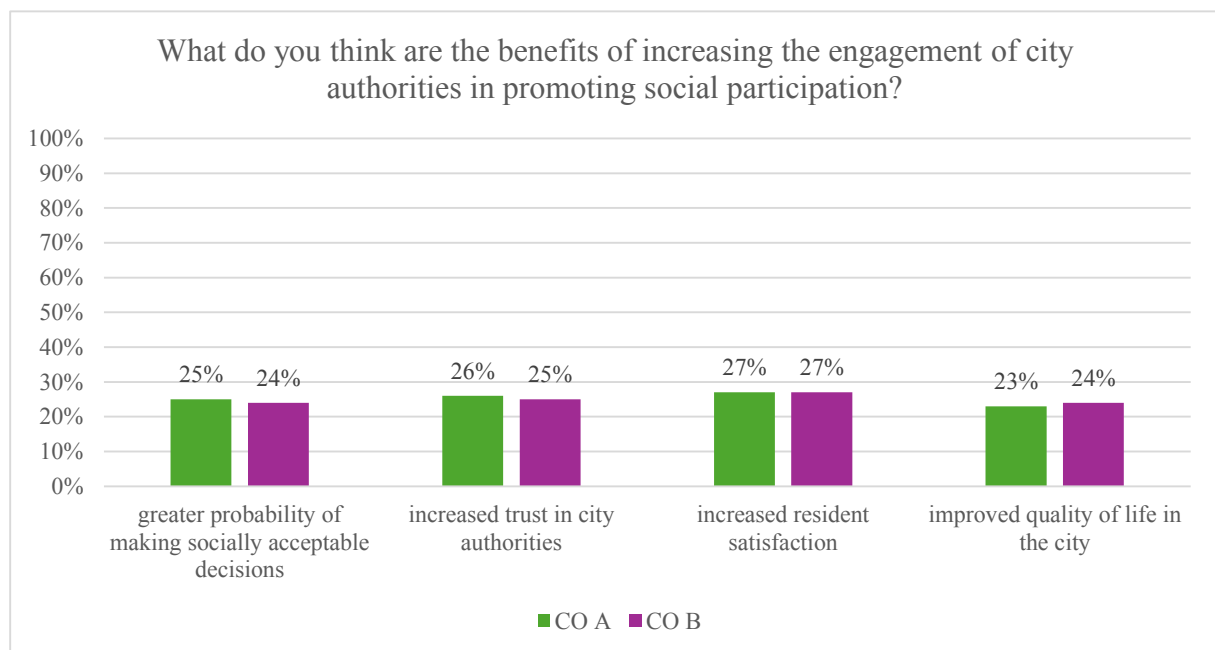


Figure 6. Perceived Benefits of Enhanced Engagement of City Authorities in Promoting Social Participation, as Indicated by City Office A and B Employees (multiple indications).

Source: own elaboration.

Analysis of Figure 6 shows that employees in both cities identify the key benefits associated with increased engagement of city authorities in promoting social participation to a similar extent. The most frequently mentioned benefit in both locations is increased resident satisfaction (CO A 27%, CO B 27%). The similarity in the distribution of indications for individual benefits, visible in the chart, suggests that public administration employees in both cities have a similar belief about the positive effects of increased social engagement. The dominant indications for increased resident satisfaction and trust emphasize the importance of participation in building positive relationships between authorities and the local community.

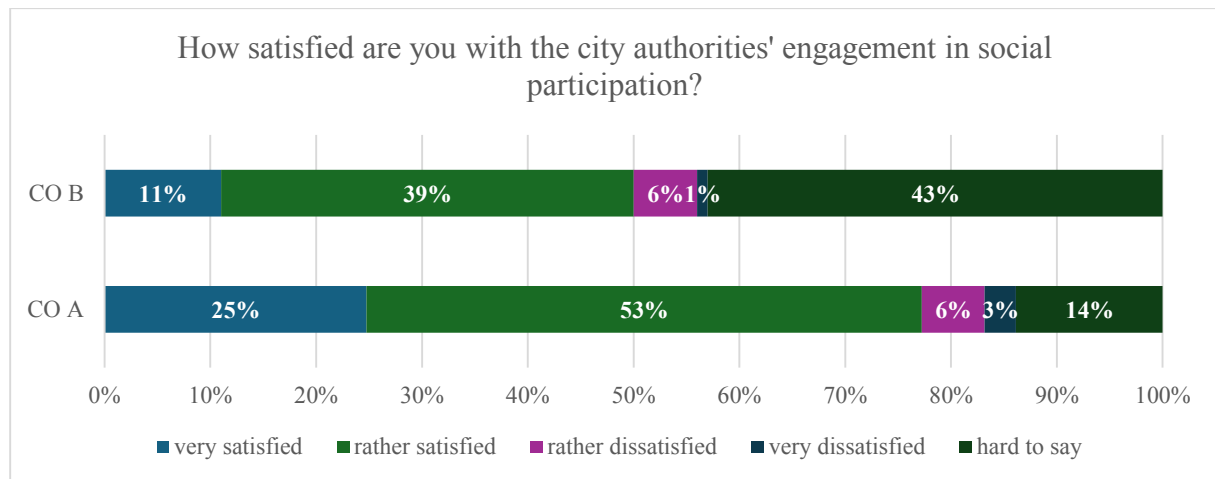


Figure 7. Employee Satisfaction with City Authorities' Engagement in Promoting Social Participation in City Offices A and B.

Source: own elaboration.

Analysis of Figure 7 reveals significant differences in the level of employee satisfaction with the city authorities' engagement in promoting social participation between CO A and CO B. In CO A, the vast majority of respondents express satisfaction: 25% are very satisfied, and 53% are rather satisfied, totaling 78% satisfied employees. In City Office B, the percentage of satisfied employees is much lower: 11% are very satisfied, and 39% are rather satisfied, totaling 50% satisfied. The most significant difference, shown in the chart, concerns the "hard to say" response, which was chosen by 14% of employees in CO A and as many as 43% in CO B. The dominant tendency towards satisfaction in CO A, contrasting with greater uncertainty and a lower level of satisfaction in CO B, suggests that employees in CO A generally rate the involvement of the authorities in social participation more positively than in CO B. The high percentage of "hard to say" responses in City Office B may indicate a lack of clear perception of the authorities' actions in this area or a more complex and ambiguous situation in this city.

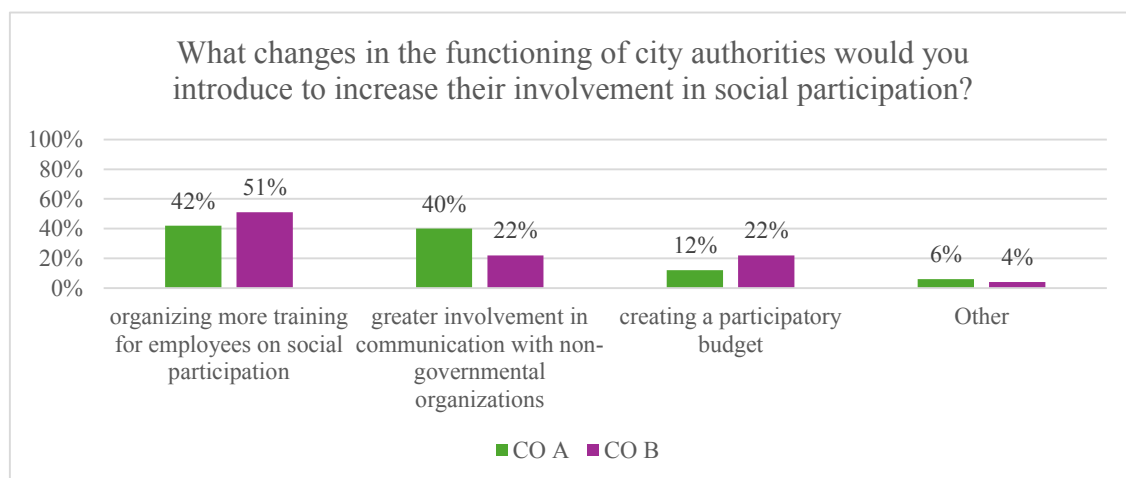


Figure 8. Suggested Changes by City Office A and B Employees to Enhance City Authorities' Engagement in Social Participation (multiple indications).

Source: own elaboration.

Analysis of Figure 8 shows that employees in both cities most often suggest organizing more training for employees on social participation as a key change that could increase the involvement of authorities (CO A 42%, CO B 51%). Figure 8 reveals that this proposal enjoys the greatest support in both locations. The dominant indication of the need for training in both cities, shown in the chart, emphasizes the perceived need to strengthen employee competences in the area of social participation. Differences in further suggestions may reflect specific needs and priorities in improving the functioning of authorities in the context of participation in each of the cities.

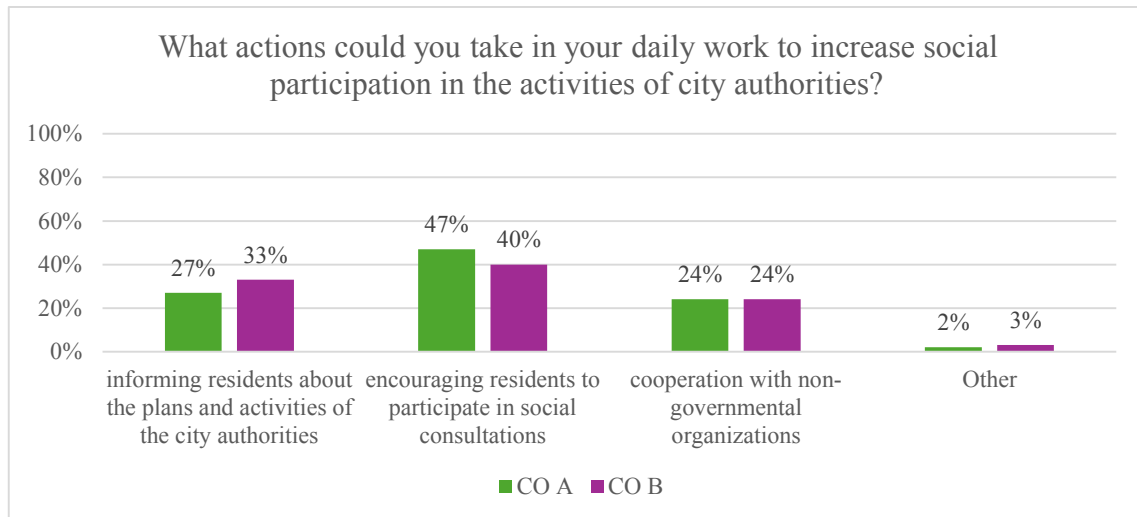


Figure 9. Suggested Actions by Employees to Enhance Their Own Engagement in Social Participation (multiple indications).

Source: own elaboration.

Analysis of Figure 9 shows that employees in both cities most often suggest encouraging residents to participate in social consultations as a key action that they could take in their daily work to increase participation (CO A 47%, CO B 40%). The chart reveals that this proposal enjoys the greatest support in both locations. The dominant emphasis on encouraging participation in consultations, shown in the chart, highlights the perceived role of employees in activating residents. Informing residents about the authorities' activities is also important, indicating the need for transparency. Similar support for cooperation with non-governmental organizations in both cities suggests that employees see potential in partnering with the non-governmental sector in increasing participation.

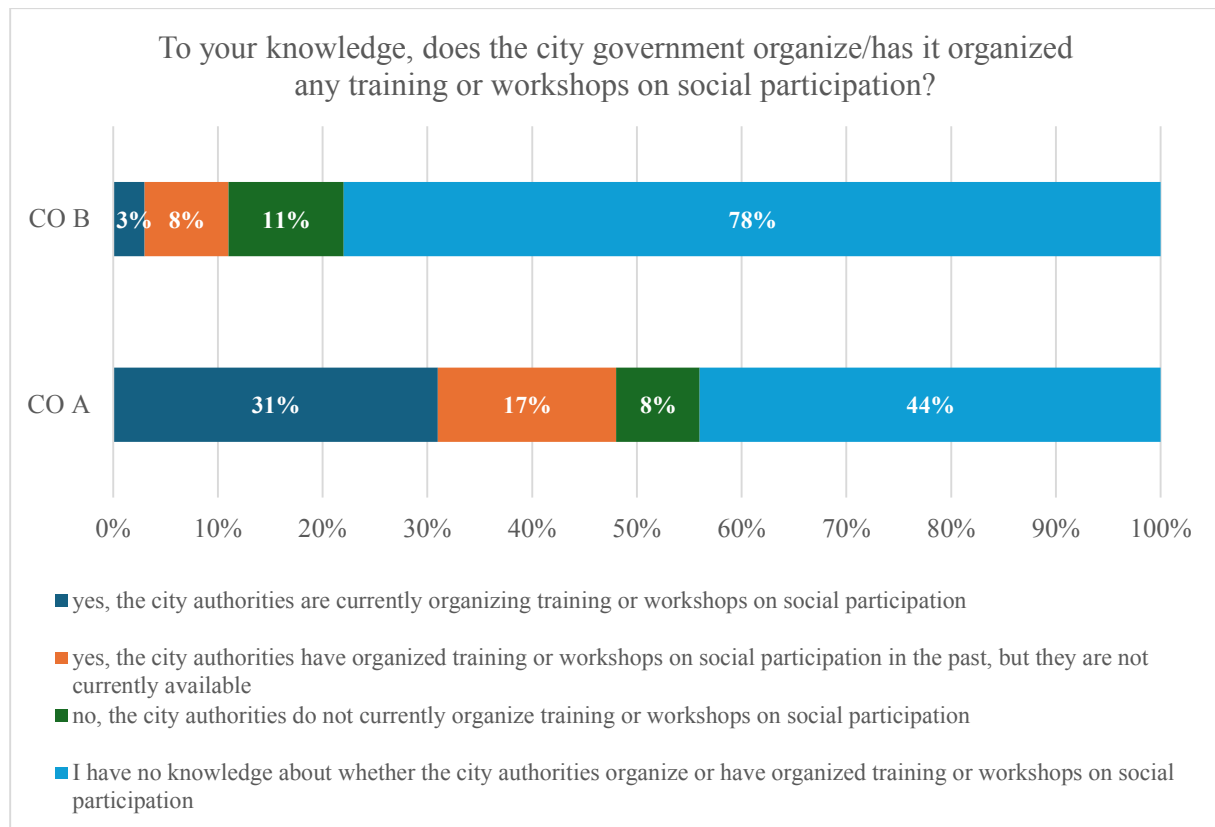


Figure 10. Employee Awareness of City Initiatives Related to Enhancing Social Participation.

Source: own elaboration.

Analysis of Figure 10 shows that employees in City Office A are significantly better informed about initiatives related to social participation than employees in City Office B. In City Office B, knowledge on this subject is clearly lower. This difference suggests that it is necessary to improve communication regarding initiatives aimed at increasing employee competence in the area of participation, which is necessary for the effective inclusion of residents in the implementation of the Smart City concept.

4. Discussion

One of the key findings of this study is the significant difference in the assessment of the current level of city authorities' engagement in promoting social participation and in the level of employee satisfaction between the surveyed city offices (Figure 3 and 7). In City Office A, the vast majority of respondents perceive the authorities' engagement as high and express greater satisfaction, while in City Office B, the response 'hard to say' dominates in the assessment of engagement, and the level of satisfaction is much lower. These differences may stem from many factors, including the scale and complexity of the administrative structure of both cities (Manville et al., 2014).

Smart cities are characterized by forward-thinking attitudes and encompass the actions of well-informed and independent citizens (Giffinger et al., 2007). Many researchers (Hollands, 2008; Craglia, Granell, 2014) point to citizens as key players whose participation is essential for the success of urban initiatives (Cornwall, 2008). Thus, the higher assessment of authorities' engagement and greater employee satisfaction in City Office A may reflect more active and visible actions by the authorities to involve citizens in decision-making processes. On the other hand, the lower assessment of engagement and the higher percentage of 'hard to say' responses in City Office B may suggest a lower intensity or visibility of such actions from the employees' perspective, which potentially translates into a lesser sense of influence and satisfaction.

Another key finding of the analysis is the fact that the lack of financial resources was indicated as one of the main barriers to increasing the engagement of authorities in social participation in both surveyed city offices (Figure 4), with this barrier being more strongly emphasized in City Office B. This observation may be related to the financial challenges faced by post-industrial cities in the Silesian region. Economic transformation and the need to restructure local economies often involve limited municipal budgets and the need to allocate funds to more urgent needs related to infrastructure, the environment, or social assistance (James, 2009). In such a context, participatory initiatives, although important for building social capital and sustainable development, may be perceived as less of a priority in the face of more pressing expenditures.

The particularly strong perception of the lack of financial resources in City Office B may reflect a more strained budgetary situation in this city or different priorities in the allocation of available funds compared to City Office A. Research on the economic resilience of post-industrial cities in Poland (Drobniak, Kolka, Skowroński, 2012) indicates that these cities often struggle with the long-term effects of transformation, which may affect their financial capacity in various areas. The processes of industrial restructuring generate long-term consequences for local finances (European Urban and Regional Studies). Thus, access to adequate financial resources is a key factor determining the possibilities of development and implementation of effective strategies for social participation in the surveyed cities.

5. Summary

This article aimed to understand the perception of social participation among public administration employees in City Office A and City Office B, and to identify the determinants of this perception in the context of Smart Cities in Silesia. The conducted survey provided rich empirical material, showing both similarities and differences in employee attitudes in relation to:

- the definition of social participation,
- elements of social participation,
- assessment of authorities' engagement,
- barriers,
- suggested actions,
- level of satisfaction with social participation.

A comparative analysis revealed that while employees in both cities similarly perceive participation as the possibility of influencing decisions, significant differences emerged in the assessment of the current level of authorities' engagement and the level of satisfaction. These differences suggest varying experiences or perceptions of participatory initiatives in both locations. Additionally, the analysis of Figure 10 indicates that employees of City Office A are significantly better informed about initiatives related to social participation than employees of City Office B, which may also affect the differing perceptions. Barriers such as a lack of financial resources were indicated in both cities, though with varying intensity.

Future research could delve deeper into the reasons for the identified differences in perception and satisfaction between the offices, exploring the role of organizational culture and communication strategies. In the context of the low awareness of training in City Office B, it would be purposeful to examine the effectiveness of various information channels in reaching employees with training offers. Furthermore, to obtain a more complete picture of the conditions of social participation in the context of smart cities, it is recommended to broaden the research perspective to include an analysis of the impact of specific instruments supporting participation (including training, as indicated in Figure 10) and to examine the perspective of the residents themselves. Qualitative research, such as in-depth interviews with employees and residents, could provide richer data on experiences and expectations related to participation in the context of local Smart City initiatives.

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