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Are public administrations the only ones responsible for organizing the administration of green spaces within the localities? An assessment of the perception of the citizens of Constanța municipality in the context of sustainable development

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Abstract. The sustainable management of green spaces in urban localities is a major challenge for Romania's big cities. In terms of urban development, local public administrations are developing guidance and regulatory documents, one of the key elements of urban planning being the green urban infrastructure. Thus, the local public administration authorities have the obligation to keep track of the green spaces on the territory of administrative units by establishing local registers of the green spaces within the built-up areas of the localities, which must be correlated with the provisions of general urban plans and drafted urban planning regulations. The aim of this article is to capture the citizens' perception of the manner in which the local public administration is preoccupied with the sustainable management of green spaces, in a context in which the legal provisions related to ensuring a green space area per capita are not complied with. Even though local public administration authorities are responsible for the sustainability measures in urban areas, given that the existence of green spaces is one of the important factors which define the quality of life, the involvement and participation of the community, of each citizen, as well as of all the entities present in this space is necessary.

Keywords: Green spaces, public administrations, sustainable development, urban planning regulations.

1. Introduction

The sustainable management of green spaces within urban localities is a major challenge for Romania's big cities. According to the legislative normative framework in force, the local public administrations are responsible for the organization of the green space within urban and rural localities.

At Romania's level, the concept of "green space" is found in several normative acts in force, and a unitary definition of this concept does not exist. Thus, the urban planning legislation, namely Law no. 350/2001, defines the functional zoning of the localities as being the action of dividing the territory into functional areas, which are part of the territory of a locality (the residential area, the industrial activities area, the green space, etc.). Law no.

24/2007 on the regulation and administration of green spaces within the built-up areas of the localities, republished with subsequent amendments and completions to art. 3, stipulates that green spaces are made up of the following types of land within the built-up areas of the localities: “*public green spaces with an unlimited access*: parks, gardens, squares, planted strips; *public green spaces for specialized use*: botanical and zoological gardens, open-air museums, exhibition parks, environmental and leisure areas for animals trained in circus performances; those related to public facilities: nurseries, kindergartens, schools, health or social protection units, institutions, places of worship, cemeteries; sports facilities or parks for practicing performance sports; *green spaces for leisure*: recreation areas, recreational poles, sports complexes and facilities; *green spaces for the protection of lakes and watercourses*; *protection corridors from technical infrastructure*; *forest recreation*; *plant nursery and greenhouses*”, these being used in the functional zoning of the localities. Law no. 50/1991 on the authorization of the execution of construction works, with subsequent amendments and completions, stipulates that the setup of green spaces and parks can be carried out only in compliance with the building permit.

For urban and rural localities, when elaborating urban planning documents - The general urban plan and its corresponding local regulation; The zonal urban plan and its corresponding local regulation; Detailed urban plan - it is mandatory to introduce green spaces in order to comply with the ecological principles ensuring a healthy living environment for the residents. Thus, Government Decision no. 525/1996 for the approval of the *General Regulation of urbanism* states in art. 34 that “the building permit will contain the obligation to maintain or to create green and planted spaces depending on the destination and capacity of the building”, according to the approved regulation. On the other hand, the *Local Urban Planning Regulation* establishes rules specific to the area for which it was developed, in accordance with the sustainable development principles (the concrete land use, as well as the location, size and fulfilment of built volumes, setup and planted spaces).

At European level, for urban green spaces an equivalent area of 30-40 sqm / inhabitant, an area, below the average recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) which is 50 sqm / inhabitant, is provided. In Romania, the green spaces situation in urban areas is unsatisfactory, which is why the obligation to create the Green Spaces Register as a tool used for the administration of green spaces by the local public administration was established, in accordance with the provisions of Law no. 24/2007 and Order no. 1466/2010. Thus, the local public administration authorities have the obligation to keep a record of the green spaces on the territory of the administrative units, by creating local registers of green spaces. *The local register of green spaces* is a documentation which is drawn up for keeping a record of the green spaces throughout the built-up areas, established as a GIS (Geographic Information System) type of information system, and it includes the inventory of the land covered by green spaces, highlighting the type of ownership and management of such land, as well as a description of the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the vegetation on these lands. The local register of green spaces in the built-up areas of the localities must be correlated with the provisions of the general urban plans and drafted urban planning regulations.

Therefore, local public administration authorities are responsible for the sustainability measures in urban areas, the existence of green spaces being one of the important factors which define the quality of life.

2. Literature review

The Good practice guide for green space management (Ciobotă et al., 2017) defines the notion of *green space* as being “that structure within the urban and rural built-up areas, belonging to the public or private domain of the state or administrative-territorial units, which includes naturally developed and / or man-planted vegetation, which has a social, cultural and / or environment protection role and which helps increase and / or improve the quality of the human living environment through the contribution of aesthetics, ecology and / or recreation”.

Recent studies have shown that the accessibility of urban green spaces is considered the key to the progress of urban sustainability (Du and Zhang, 2020), which is a dynamic target aiming to harmonize the relationship between environment, economy and society within and near the cities (Iojă et al., 2020).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015) grants a wide recognition to green spaces for the benefits generated for the sustainable cities and communities, being mentioned in the Sustainable Development Goal 11.7. The Territorial Agenda 2030 *A future for all places* (2020) presents the green solutions as sustainable measures, simultaneously aimed at environmental, societal and economic objectives. In addition to these global preoccupations, *Romania's Sustainable Development Strategy 2030* also stipulates a whole series of public interest objectives for the protection and sustainable management of green spaces in urban areas.

A study carried out in the interest of the elaboration of Urban Policies (MLPDA, 2020) at the level of local administrations in Romania identified the problems faced by urban administrations in their activity, the most common being reducing the impact on the environment through sustainable development, environmental and green spaces protection, followed by urbanism, which includes cadastral and spatial planning activities.

Urban expansion is the main cause of the environmental problems faced by the urban areas in Romania. The rapid pace of urbanization, intensified by economic activities, has led to changes in the structure of land coverage and, implicitly, its use. (Petrișor, Sirodoev and Ianoș, 2020). As a general trend, it can be stated that the green spaces within urban areas are strongly threatened both by the phenomenon of surface reduction and by the negative impact exerted by some economic and social activities, the response to the increasing urbanization being the urban green infrastructure, which appeared as a type of increasing resistance within the urban boundaries (Van Oijstaeijen, Van Passel and Cools, 2020).

With regard to urban development, local public administrations draw up guidance and regulatory documents, the key elements of urban planning usually being grouped into street networks, public areas, building styles, land uses and other factors (Lucchi and Buda, 2022). Green urban infrastructure is added to these, being considered a key element in improving the quality of life and in creating an adequate framework for the development of cities (Badiu et al., 2016) according to the concept of sustainable development.

Urban localities in the coastal zone have a certain specificity, given that they are facing urban expansion, which is one of the anthropic factors with a significant impact on sustainable urban development (Filip, Stan and Vintilă, 2016). Coastal cities have a complex economy, including industrial activities and a generous physical infrastructure (Nguyen et al., 2020) representing major economic and environmental challenges for sustainable development, and for ensuring long-term sustainability (Stan et al., 2021). Tackling the territorial/spatial planning of these areas, the investment programs and projects must be aimed at protecting and improving the quality of the environment and of the standard of living (Stan, Aivaz and Ionițiu, 2019).

Urban space management must be achieved by interconnecting the three dimensions of sustainable development: environmental, social and economic aspects. Even though socio-economic circumstances play an important role in the green infrastructure management (Petrișor, Mierzejewska and Mitrea, 2022), the strategic planning of green spaces must be a process which promotes the involvement and participation of the community and of all those interested. The cooperation and collaboration between all the actors involved at local level - local public administration, business environment, non-governmental sector and citizens - will lead to the sustainable development of urban localities, sustainability proving to be the greatest inspiration for innovation ever seen (Stanciu, Condrea and Popovici, 2017).

Thus, in the context of the concerns for ensuring a better future, long-lasting, sustainable development has become an increasingly researched topic these days. A whole series of studies have focused on the analysis of public and private entities that have common objectives, in order to identify innovative solutions to support their performance prospects (Aivaz, 2018; Aivaz, 2020; Aivaz, 2021; Aivaz and Căpățână, 2021), the professionalization of the existing workforce (Mirea and Aivaz, 2016), the streamlining of outsourced logistics services (Micu et al., 2016) or the provision of various services related to staff. The orientation towards the profitability of the beneficiaries through the nature of the services provided, as well as the pursuit of their own positive results, conveys to all these analyses a distinct note of interest and relevance.

In a general sense, the predilection for creating a sustainable material basis seems to confirm the prospects of continuity and profitability also in the case of the companies that provide support services for other entities (Aivaz et al., 2021). All these entities include a series of strong actors on the local economic scene, being representative for promoting the innovative spirit and care for the environment.

Thus, supporting and encouraging the business environment, which must be a partner for the local public administration, will lead to the increase in investments in the urban areas and improve the citizen's quality of life.

3. Methodology and data

The research aims to measure the perception of the inhabitants of Constanța municipality about the way in which the local public administration is preoccupied with the sustainable management of green spaces. The specific objectives of the research are: (1) to determine the degree of satisfaction of the interest of the citizens regarding the situation of the green spaces at the local level; (2) the assessment of the observance of the regulations regarding the green spaces in Constanța municipality.

In order to achieve the objectives of the research, we have developed a semi-structured questionnaire, with 12 open- and closed-ended questions. The closed-ended questions, which represent the variables of the research, contain several well-defined answer options. The questionnaire was applied online in the period 21.02.2022-13.03.2022. The collecting process and systematization of the data was achieved with the help of the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

The questionnaire was administered to 214 people, of which 123 are women (57.48%) and 91 men (42.52%), with the following age stratification: 14-18 years (21.10%), 19-25 years (43.30%), 26-40 years (16.40%), 41-60 years (11.10%) and 8.10% over 60 years. One can observe that the highest frequency within the sample is the group that includes people between the ages of 19-25 years, followed by those between 26-40 years.

4. Results and discussion

According to the National Institute of Statistics of Romania (INSSE), the *green spaces area* is a statistical indicator for public utilities of local interest and land administration. In the methodology used for statistical research, the area of green spaces (ha) refers to “the area of green spaces set up in the form of parks, public gardens or public squares, plots with trees and flowers, forests, cemeteries, sports grounds and facilities within the buildable perimeters of the localities. Green spaces do not include greenhouses, plant nurseries, vegetable gardens, agricultural land, lake areas, etc.”. Thus, according to the available INSSE data, in 2008 the total area of green spaces in Constanța municipality was 301 hectares, reaching 150 hectares in 2018, while in 2020 these areas would increase to 525 hectares. This fact can be explained not so much by the increasing concerns regarding the creation of new green spaces, but by the realization of the inventory of green spaces in the city in order to create the Local Register of Green Spaces of Constanța municipality.

Although statistics show that the total area of green spaces in Constanța municipality has increased recently, according to local media, the Constanța City Hall was sanctioned with a warning, in 2014, 2015 and 2019 for failure to create the Register of Green Spaces and was fined for failure to ensure the integrity, restoration and care of green spaces (Dobrogea Live, 15 July 2020). In the year 2021, following a control to verify the compliance with the environmental legislation in the field of green spaces, the Constanța Environmental Guard fined Constanța City Hall because the green spaces surface in the city is insufficient. That is to say, the surface of green space per capita is 17.70 sqm, therefore not complying with the legal provisions to ensure an area of 26 sqm / inhabitant of built-up area and “it was necessary to draw up a program highlighting the stages of the fulfilment of the obligation to ensure a green space area of at least 26 sqm / inhabitant from the built-up area and a sanction of 50,000 lei was imposed, according to the provisions of art. II paragraph (2) of GEO 114/2007”. This is shown in the report of the Constanța Environmental Guard (Ctnews, 8 September 2021).

In order to confirm the above, according to a study by *ISGlobal Barcelona Institute for Global Health*, which analyzes 1,000 cities on the continent, Constanța ranks seventh in Europe in a negative ranking of square meters of green space per capita.

Based on these considerations, in order to capture the perception of the inhabitants regarding the green spaces in Constanța Municipality, a survey was conducted by means of a questionnaire.

As regards Question no. 1: *Do you consider that there are enough green spaces in Constanța municipality?*, the opinion of the majority of respondents, respectively 62.70%, stated that green spaces are insufficient, while only 37.30% consider that they are sufficient (Figure 1), which confirms the fact that the city of Constanța has few green spaces, below the limit of 26 sqm / inhabitant imposed by the Romanian legislation. According to the *Urban Barometer (2020)*, at national level, 66% of the urban population said they were satisfied with green spaces (parks and gardens in the cities where they live), the highest level of satisfaction with the quality of green spaces being recorded in the South-East Region (71%), these figures confirming the degree of dissatisfaction obtained.

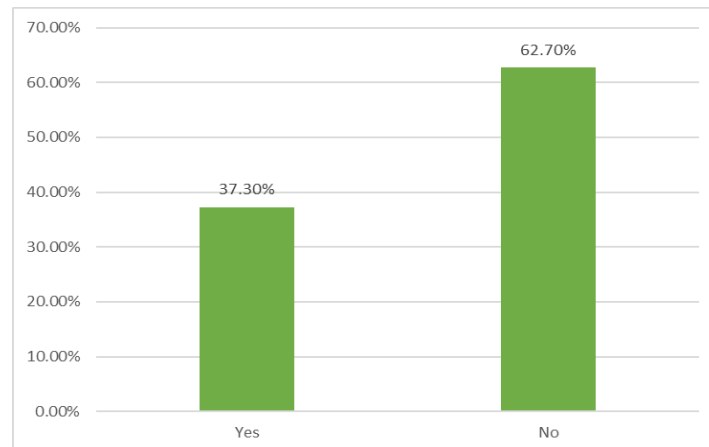


Figure 1. Chart resulted from Question no. 1 (Source: author’s work)

As for Question no. 2: *How do you rate the green spaces in the neighbourhood where you live?*, regarding the degree of satisfaction, 12.90% of the citizens of Constanța are very satisfied, 37.50% are satisfied, 42.50% are dissatisfied and 7.10% very dissatisfied (Figure 2). As can be seen, over 50.00% of citizens gave a positive assessment, while the rest gave a negative assessment. The citizens of Constanța perceive the lack of green spaces which would offer them the opportunity to relax and socialize, as well as to practice sports activities in their neighbourhoods. The perception of the respondents is in line with that of the control institutions, namely the fact that the municipality of Constanța has few green spaces, some of which are neglected and inaccessible, which dramatically affects the citizens’ quality of life.

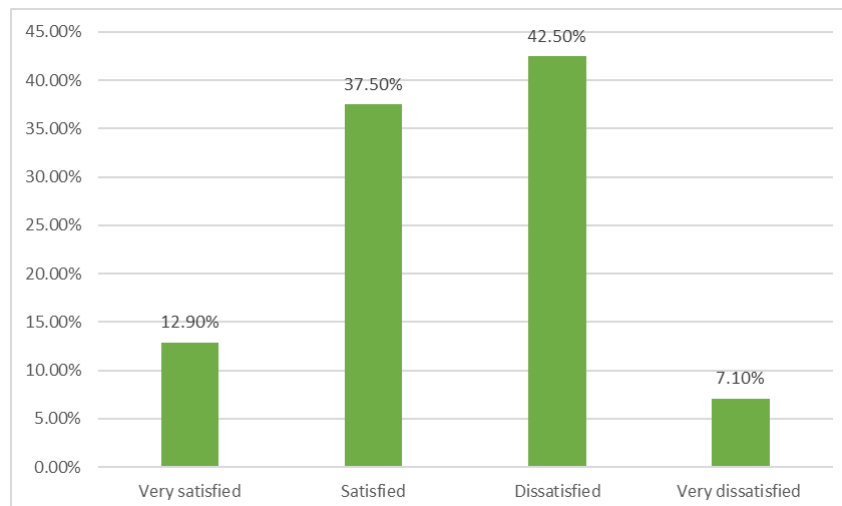


Figure 2. Chart resulted from Question no. 2 (Source: author’s work)

One of the big problems in urban planning is the road situation, which causes traffic congestion, leading to a reduced travel speed and an increased travel time.

In this context, Question no. 3: *How long do you estimate that it takes to travel between your home and the nearest designated green space in the city where you live?* recorded the following scores: 28.40% of those surveyed estimate that it takes them less than 30 minutes to get to the nearest designated green space, for 44.50% the travel time is between 30 and 60 minutes, while 22.30% cover the distance in 60 - 90 minutes and 5.80% in over 90 minutes (Figure 3). These results show, on the one hand, that the designated green spaces in the

Constanța Municipality are not close to homes, and on the other hand, the fact that accessibility to them requires travel.

The assessment is also supported by the fact that, among those who replied to the survey, 21.10% are young teenagers aged 14-18 and 43.30% are young people aged 19-25 who prefer, as a way to spend their free time, walking in the park, practicing outdoor sports or going to a terrace, and 16.40% are people aged 26-40, usually young married people who have children and also engage in active activities, preferring to go out in the park accompanied by the little ones, as shown in a study conducted on how young people in the urban areas of Romania spend their free time (Leovaridis and Antimiu, 2017).

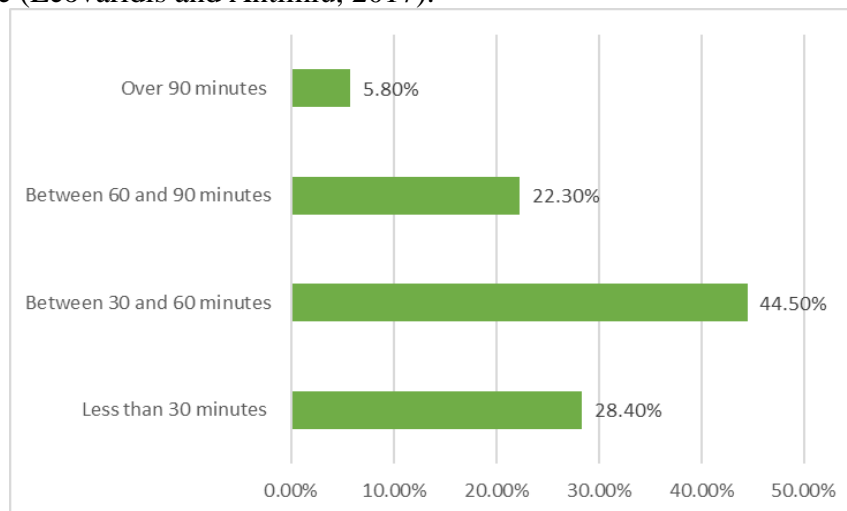


Figure 3. Chart resulted from Question no. 3 (Source: author's work)

Therefore, green spaces along with relaxation spaces, city cleanliness, traffic and access to services are what leads to the increase of the citizens' quality of life.

The most important green space of the city is Tăbăcărie Park, which is also the largest park in Constanța, with a total green area of 444,097.77 sqm and which has benefited, in recent years, from various setups, noting the Land of Dwarfs - a public space intended for children. Lake Tăbăcărie also hosts a number of nautical events, with terraces and restaurants set up on its shores. This green space of Constanța City is the most frequently visited by the locals, while also being a tourist attraction.

As regards Question no. 4: *In order to get to the green space frequented by you, you mainly travel* 25.20% answered on foot, 10.20% use public transport (bus, minibus, etc.), 7.60% - taxi and alternative transportation, 45.60% - personal car, while only 11.40% - bicycle, scooter or other similar individual means of travel (Figure 4). From the number of people who were asked about the mode of transportation, one can observe that the majority, i.e., about 75%, must use a mode of transportation, being a well-known fact that transportation solves people's travel problems, while at the same time it leads to pollution, traffic jams and accidents (Stan, 2022).

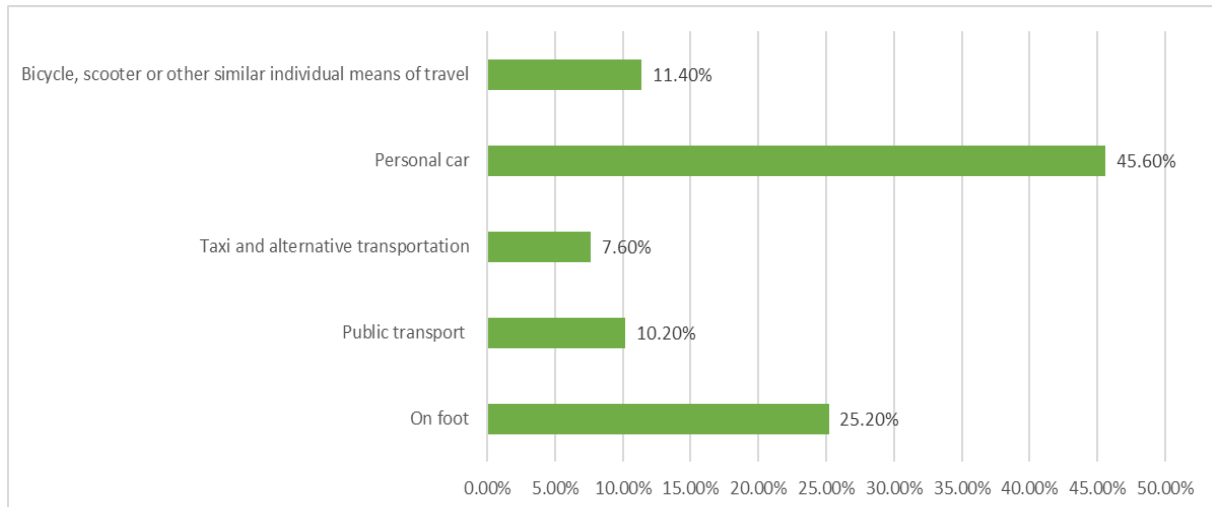


Figure 4. Chart resulted from Question no. 4 (Source: author’s work)

As for Question no. 5: *Please choose at least one reason why you visit the green spaces*, the vast majority of respondents do so for a healthy lifestyle. Thus, 34.30% travel in order to take walks for relaxation, 13.60% for sports, to spend free time in nature: quiet (4.20%), fresh air (6.80%), landscape (3.50%). The reasons for this are: socializing (14.65%), cultural events (6.55%) and to eat and drink on terraces, restaurants (16.40%), reflecting how young people generally spend their free time in parks and other designated green spaces (Figure 5). However, today's favourite places for young people are the smart cities. The notion of smart city is developed around the concept of sustainable development, whose characteristics are: local authorities, economy, mobility, population, standard of living and environment (Constanța City Hall, 2020).

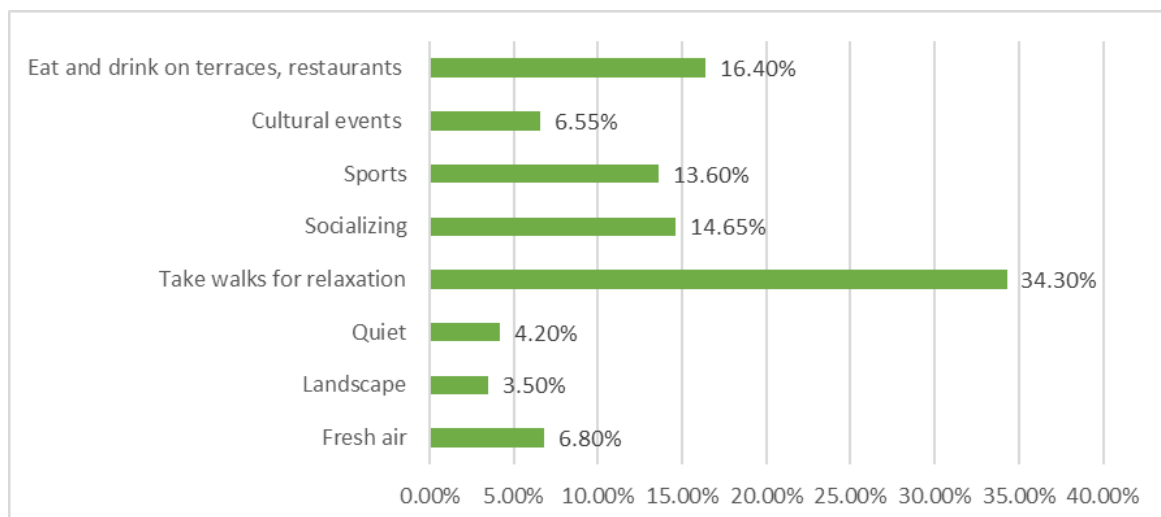


Figure 5. Chart resulted from Question no. 5 (Source: author’s work)

As regards Question no. 6: *Do you consider that the management of the green space in urban localities is exercised by the local public administration?*, 62.60% of the respondents consider that it is the responsibility of the local public administration, 26.70% answered *No*, while 10.70% *Do not know* (Figure 6). According to art. 8 of Law no. 24/2007 on the regulation

and administration of green spaces in built-up areas, republished, the administration of the green spaces in public ownership is exercised by the local public administration authorities and other bodies empowered for this purpose, while on privately owned land this activity is exercised by their owners, in compliance with the provisions of the normative acts in force. Thus, natural persons or legal entities can set up private gardens and green spaces, the development of community gardens or the conversion of abandoned land into parks increasing the level of public participation in decision-making. All these actions represent initiatives of the civil community or private entities (Bendt, Barthel and Colding, 2013). Therefore, the green space on private property can be a response to the existing deficit.

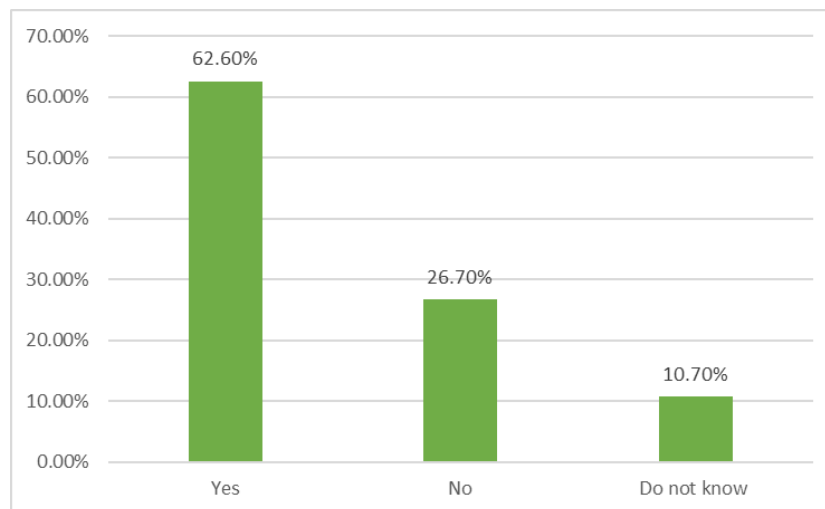


Figure 6. Chart resulted from Question no. 6 (Source: author's work)

As for Question no. 7: *Do you consider that the sustainable development of the city also depends on the increase of the green spaces area, as well as on the maintenance of the existing green spaces?*, the majority of respondents, i.e., 89.70%, believe that the expansion and maintenance of green spaces can contribute to the sustainable development of the city, whereas only 10.70% answered *No* (Figure 7). Specialized studies confirm that each city faces unique challenges that require approaches tailored to its social, economic and natural features (Iojă et al., 2020), the sustainable development of the localities being an extremely complex issue that poses different social, economic and environmental problems, and must be approached as a multifaceted concept, with four pillars (economic, social, environmental and cultural) and several dimensions, including a territorial one (Petrișor, 2014).

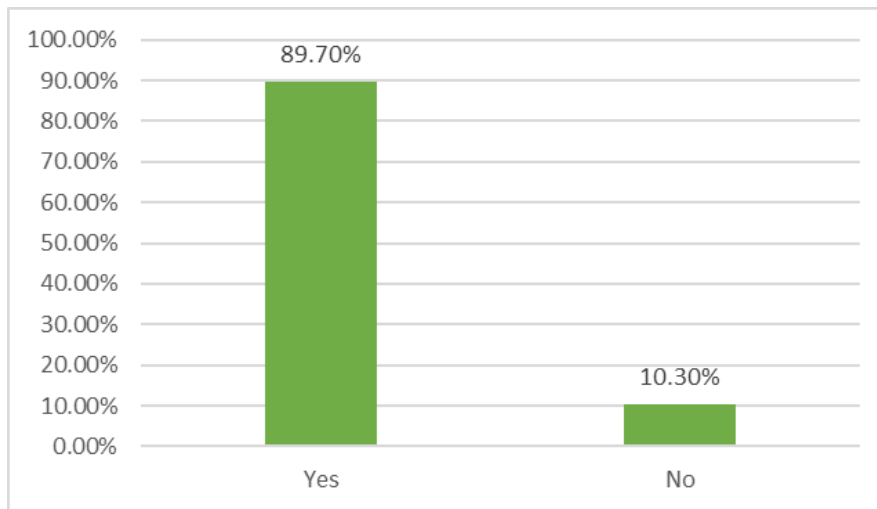


Figure 7. Chart resulted from Question no. 7 (Source: author's work)

As regards Question no. 8: *Are you satisfied with the administration of the green spaces in Constanța municipality?*, 54.80% of the respondents are satisfied with the administration of the green spaces in Constanța, while 45.20% are not satisfied (Figure 8). The answers indicate the perception of the citizens regarding the way in which the local public administration manages the problem of green spaces and especially of parks.

In 2022, the Constanța City Hall started the project „Adoptă un Spațiu Verde!”/“Adopt a Green Space!” whose purpose was to involve all local actors in the management of green spaces. Thus, the common interest of the municipality and of the various economic agents, institutions, associations, foundations, NGOs, natural persons in the city can lead to a more pleasant landscape aspect of the localities, with the raising of the general urban standards, given that for solving the complex problems of the cities, actions and programs of sustainable urban development through the cooperation of public and private actors are needed (Stan, 2014).

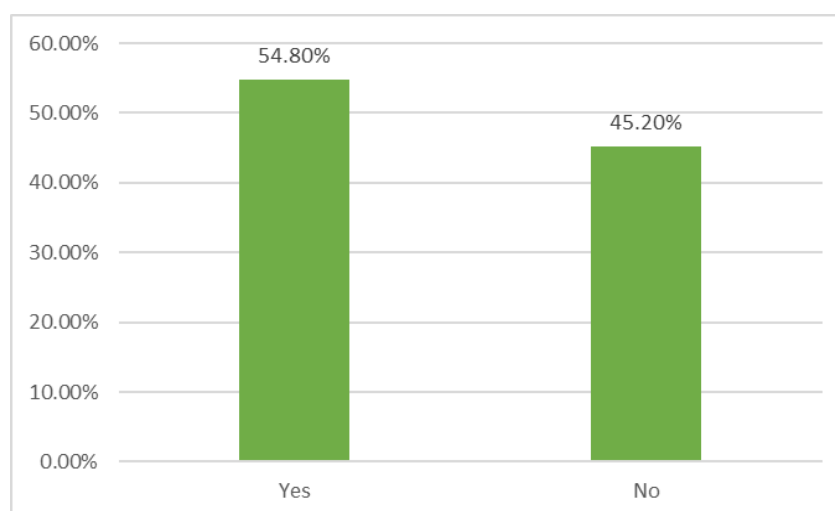


Figure 8. Chart resulted from Question no. 8 (Source: author's work)

Regarding Question no. 9: *What do you think are the causes for the lack of green spaces in Constanța municipality?*, 42.30% of the participants in the survey considered that the

transformation of green spaces into constructions is one of the major causes, 13.60% consider that the lack of cleanliness (non-involvement of the authorities), followed by the reduced involvement of the inhabitants (12.30%), the lack of education of the users (10.80%), the inadequate maintenance of green spaces (8.90%), the existence of degraded, abandoned green spaces (6.20%) and the lack of various urban furniture elements (5.90%) (Figure 9). These assessments confirm the previous conclusions that for the sustainable urban development of the city the collaboration between the public administration and the citizens is necessary.

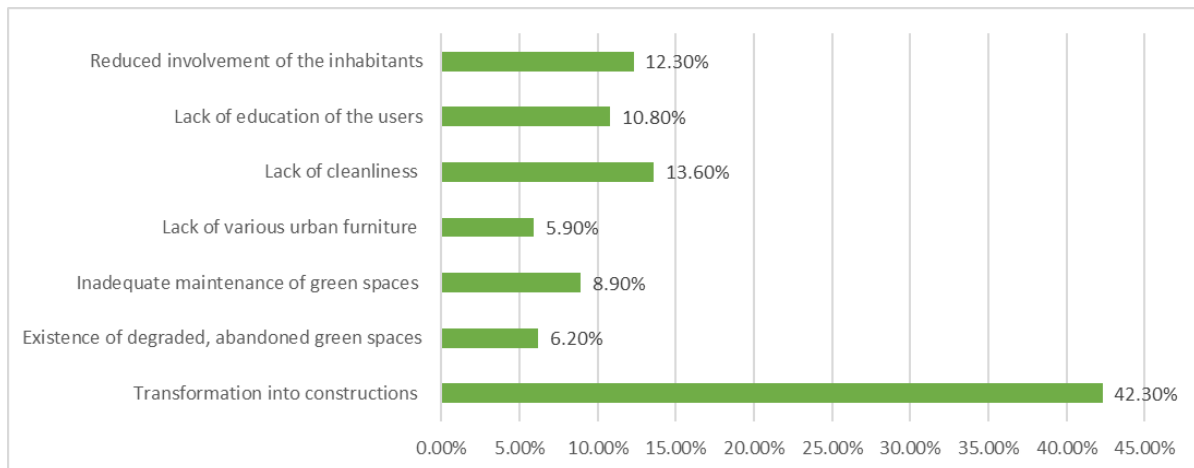


Figure 9. Chart resulted from Question no. 9 (Source: author's work)

As regards Question no. 10: *Have you participated, at least once, in the public information and consultation process regarding the drafting, approval and authorization of urban planning documents?*, 27.60% of the respondents answered affirmatively, while 72.40% answered negatively (Figure 10), which shows that the citizens of Constanța are not informed or are too little interested in the problems regarding the urbanism activity of the city.

The information process requires effort on the part of both citizens and the administration and establishing a relationship of trust conveys a great credibility regarding future actions (Tasențe, 2020). It should be noted that Law no. 350/2001, Order no. 2701/2010 establishes the obligation of the participation of the population in the activities of setting up the territory and those of urbanism, the local public administration authorities having the obligation to ensure the organization and unfolding of the process of the participation of the population, of all interested natural and legal persons.

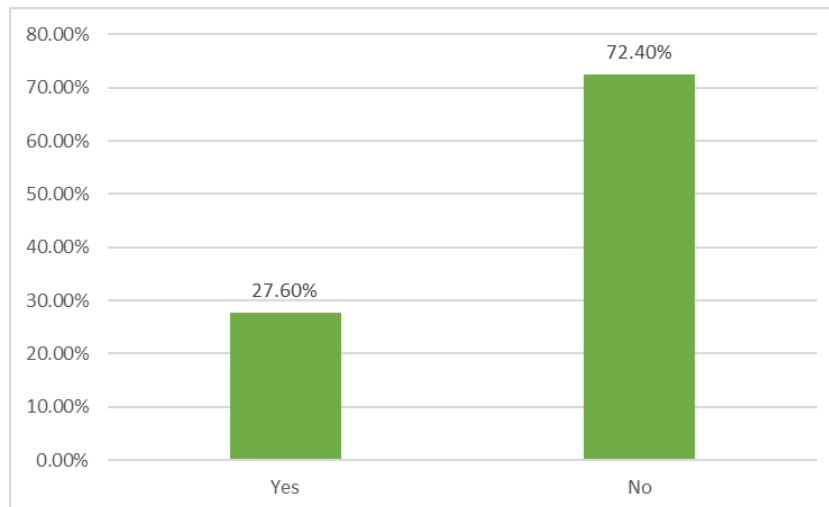


Figure 10. Chart resulted from Question no. 10 (Source: author's work)

As for Question no. 11: *Do you consider that the provisions of the regulation on ensuring the minimum surface of green spaces for construction and landscaping works authorized within the municipality of Constanța are complied with?*, 54.90% of the respondents answered *yes*, 37.20% - *no* and 7.90% *did not know* (Figure 11). Constanța City Hall has the obligation to apply the regulation on ensuring the minimum area of green spaces during the drafting, approval and authorization of both urban planning documents and technical projects for the construction and landscaping proposed on the territory of Constanța municipality. The building permit issued by the institution will contain the obligation for the investor to maintain or create green and planted spaces, depending on the destination and the capacity of the construction.

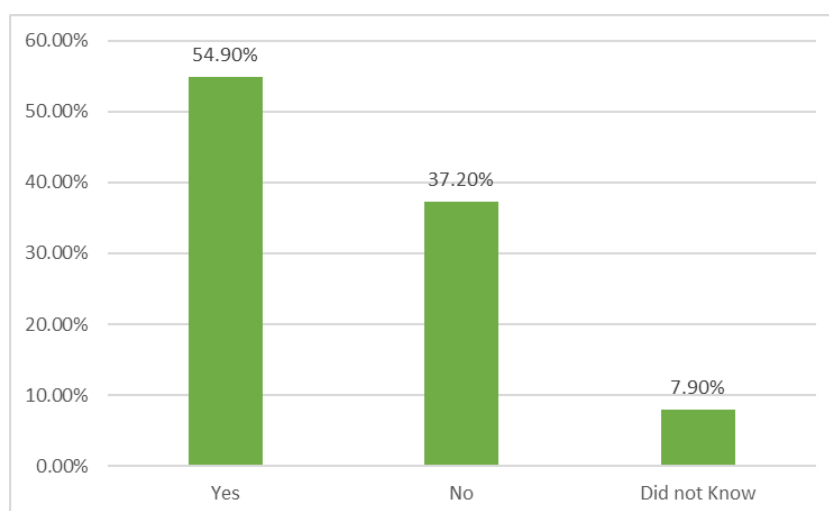


Figure 11. Chart resulted from Question no. 11 (Source: author's work)

The register of green spaces is a complex tool for a record of the green spaces within the built-up areas of the localities by establishing a set of data, information and plans for identifying the land defined as green spaces and the degraded ones, which could be rehabilitated

as green spaces, while also identifying the state of viability of the vegetation on these lands, its characteristics, the related quantity and quality indices.

As regards Question no. 12, *Have you accessed the Local Register of Green Spaces (RLSV) app within the built-up areas of Constanța municipality?*, 39.70% of Constanța's residents answered affirmatively, whereas 60.30% answered negatively (Figure 12). Even though the local public authorities had the obligation to draw up the Register of Green Spaces in 2011 according to the legal normative framework, the municipality of Constanța received and approved the documentation in 2021. The findings show that the vast majority of Constanța's residents are not informed with regards to the fact that they can consult online the map which includes all the green spaces inventoried from the public and private domain of Constanța municipality.

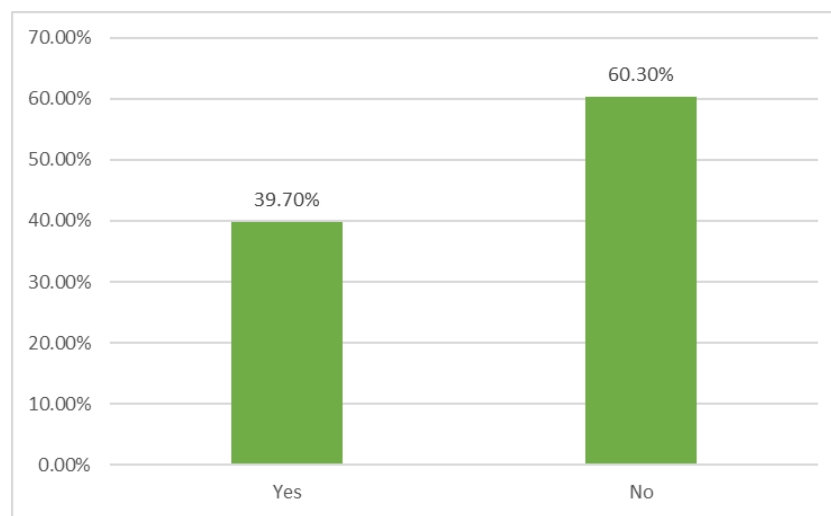


Figure 12. Chart resulted from Question no. 12 (Source: author's work)

As a result of the survey, it can be noticed that the degree of satisfaction of the inhabitants of Constanța Municipality is not satisfactory, the city having insufficient green spaces that are often not close to homes. At the same time, the interest of the citizens in the situation of the green spaces at the local level is about what the local administration must do, and less about their role as actors participating in the process of sustainable urban development.

As for the local public administration, although it cannot ensure the minimum area of green space provided by law for each inhabitant, at least in the last two years it has made efforts to solve this problem. Thus, in *the Activity Report for the November 2020-October 2021 period* the Constanța City Hall, in the chapter related to green spaces and sanitation, presented the approved urban regeneration projects and the establishment of new parks which will create new areas of green spaces, parks and recreation spaces, also planting trees and flowers in the city. Moreover, the implementation of the projects proposed in *the Smart City Strategy of Constanța Municipality* supports and promotes the quality of life of the city's inhabitants.

Limitations of the research: although the questionnaire was distributed online, the small number of respondents compared to the population of Constanța municipality shows a low interest due on the one hand to the lack of information of the citizens regarding the sustainable urban development issues, and on the other hand to the lack of actions implemented by the local public administration with the aim of improving the urban environment.

5. Conclusions

Despite the fact that local public administration authorities are required to keep a record of the green spaces in their administrative units, the strategic planning of green spaces must be a process which promotes the involvement and participation of the community and all those interested.

The cooperation and collaboration between the those interested regarding the green spaces within the built-up areas of the localities should be a major concern in planning and financing new construction and renovation / redevelopment projects, both for the local public administration and for the business environment and the citizens. Green spaces, in addition to reducing the impact on the environment, also contribute to increasing social inclusion, by creating leisure opportunities for the local communities, the quality of urban green spaces being a critical indicator for measuring improvements in urban settlements and promoting sustainable development. (Yang et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the sustainable management of green spaces in urban localities is a major challenge not only for public administrations but also for all public and private entities on the respective territory and must be achieved by interconnecting the three dimensions of sustainable development: environmental, social and economic issues.

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