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Citizen Participation and Climate Change: Social Perceptions about Climate Change – a case study in the Central Region of Portugal

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Research on social perceptions and effective participation about Climate Change (CC) appears to be a critical component of the socio–political contexts in which CC mitigation and adaptation plans and the necessary political and behavioral change for the ecological transition are developed. This study sought to develop itself as a strategy to involve populations in the elaboration of Climate Change Local Adaptation Plans, through a questionnaire survey applied online. The aims were to characterize their perceptions regarding CC, as well as incorporate their contributions, both in the diagnosis of the situation and in the identification of adaptation measures to be defined at the municipal level to deal with CC. The 326 individuals from 19 municipalities that responded were mainly females (62%), 25–54 years (73%) with a university degree (86%). 85% identified CC as a serious problem and 89% revealed that its impacts were already being felt. However, this perception was less evident at the local (48.5%) and regional levels (74.2%), where 9.5% believed that CC was not a problem. Regarding the causes of CC, 66% believed they were anthropogenic and that citizens have in their hands a shared responsibility to tackle them (56%), by changing their behaviors (98%). 76% had already participated in a plan/initiative associated with the CC, but only 21.4% were able to identify which one. The identification of local priorities for the adaptation plan revealed that forest management, the promotion of renewable energy, the protection of ecosystems, and the development of measures to deal with natural risk were at the top of the priorities. This study provides important guidelines for understanding how local populations conceive, explain and deal with CC in their territorial contexts, reinforcing the need for effective participation in identifying intervention priorities and measures to deal with their impacts.

Keywords: Climate Change Perceptions, Citizen Participation, Socioeconomic vulnerabilities, Healthier cities and territories