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Co-management – A Tool for Enhancing Satisfaction of Stakeholders in the Social Ecosystem

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Abstract. *This paper examines how the direct participation of users, together with institutions, in resource management is a key aspect of modern management practice. The paper presents results of an in-depth study related to proving the need for the active involvement of stakeholders from the social sphere in the process of joint management, which is a prerequisite for achieving a number of positive results, ensuring the enhancing their satisfaction at the regional level. The field work is conducted in 2023 and "structured questionnaire survey" method was used for its implementation, which is one of the most popular quantitative methods for collecting data in scientific research in the fields of sociology, economics, and marketing. Two target groups are surveyed - representatives of various institutions included in the Council on Social Services in Bulgaria, and representatives of/or the users of social services themselves at the local level. Based on the results analysis with descriptive statistics and an in-depth processing of data it is proven that the role of integrated knowledge and learning in the process of implementing the co-management approach is decisive for its full implementation towards achieving stakeholder satisfaction in the built ecosystem. It is confirmed that only through sustainable interactions, active involvement and building the necessary capacity, can a sustainable basis for management be built that meets the needs of stakeholders at the local level.*

Keywords: co-management, stakeholders, joint management, training, knowledge, skills, competencies.

Introduction

Building sustainable interactions and synchronization between stakeholders at the regional level is essential for developing adequate strategic solutions that meet the specific conditions of the dynamically changing environment and significantly reduce the level of risk. According to Ewald, the threat, danger becomes a risk when social groups realize its presence and control it through prevention mechanisms (Ewald, 1996; Koev & Popova, 2023).

This paper examines how the direct participation of users, together with institutions, in resource management is a key aspect of modern management practice. The concept of "co-management" is a current management approach that attracts scientific interest in view of the need

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for balanced use of limited resources and environmental protection. The paper presents results of an in-depth study related to proving the need for the active inclusion of stakeholders from the social sphere in the process of co-management, which is a prerequisite for achieving a number of positive results, ensuring the satisfaction of their interests at the regional level. The analysis combines a brief review of the scientific literature with a practical study, using a mixed methodological approach, which is based on both qualitative and quantitative methods. The results obtained confirm that the implementation of the co-management approach creates conditions for a fairer distribution of available resources and supports the achievement of sustainable social development. The role of training of stakeholders as an element of the process of implementing the co-management approach is important for its full implementation towards achieving satisfaction of their needs.

The aim of the study is to test the statement that the inclusion of stakeholders in the social sphere in the management process, based on the co-management approach, is a means of achieving their higher level of satisfaction and achieving sustainability in development at the regional level. For the realization of this goal, the following hypotheses are defined:

The *null hypothesis* (H0) is that lasting interactions and synchronization between stakeholders in the field of social activities at the regional level, based on the co-management approach, are decisive for achieving sustainable results and a higher degree of compliance with the set strategic goals.

The *first hypothesis* (H1) is that the construction of a fair, equal and empowered partnership between stakeholders, based on the co-management approach, leads to a number of positive results, increasing the satisfaction of the participants in the social eco-system thus built.

The *second hypothesis* (H2) is that integrated knowledge and learning have an important role in the process of implementing the co-management approach and are a means of developing effective, sustainable solutions, increasing the satisfaction of the stakeholders in the formed social eco-system.

Literature review

Co-management - a management approach that ensures stakeholder satisfaction

According to Kooiman (2003), there are three main models of governance: hierarchical governance, characterized by dominant state intervention; self-governance; and co-management (also known as "co-management"), which is based on cooperation and interaction between different actors (stakeholders). The market or private sector dimension can be added to co-management, as there is an increasing emphasis on incentives and entrepreneurship as means of achieving optimal use of resource availability, combined with environmental protection.

As a governance approach, co-management is considered to be particularly effective. In this approach, the participation of users in the governance process leads to the implementation of more legitimate measures, monitoring and control by them, which as a result is associated with achieving a higher degree of compliance with the expectations and requirements set by them (Kooiman, 2003). In addition to legitimacy and compliance, the principles of justice, equality and empowerment are also important. The main idea behind co-management is that the parties whose activities and lives are affected by specific management decisions should be given the opportunity to participate as an integral part of the overall process of their adoption.

Co-management shares many common features with other types of partnerships and resource management arrangements that involve multiple stakeholders (Berkes, 2002; Plummer & FitzGibbon, 2004). Partnerships between public and private actors aim to protect the environment,

improve human well-being and achieve sustainable results. Public partners include ministries, agencies, directorates, municipalities and their related structures. Private partners include non-profit legal entities, higher education institutions, trade unions and users of resources and services. They can also include organizations developing social entrepreneurship, which have both an economic and social purpose. They apply a traditional entrepreneurial approach to address pressing social problems that are unattractive to the private sector or most large public administrations. (Todorova & Kostadinova, 2023). The process of building these partnerships is long and involves social strengthening of institutions and building mutual trust. As a result, the parties sign a written agreement that defines the distribution of rights and obligations regarding environmental protection, natural resource management, and the protection of the most vulnerable groups in society.

Co-management is a logical and effective approach to addressing the challenges of resource management in today's dynamic, complex and unpredictable environment, where (Deneva et al., 2022) location is one of the important barriers/prerequisites for the development of the region. The approach relies on the interaction between stakeholders. In many cases, the partnerships built in this way are key, since local users rarely have the erudition, knowledge, skills and capacity to independently manage the available resources, especially at the regional level. On the other hand, there is irrefutable evidence that centralized management of local resources also carries significant challenges and risks. Quite a few examples confirm that for their successful functioning, even the most centralized systems often rely on the specifics of making joint management decisions at the local level. Therefore, it can be summarized that synchronization in the perspectives of stakeholders is a priority of the various fundamental management approaches.

There is no single and generally accepted definition of the co-management approach, but the concept has been widely studied (Armitage et al., 2007). The term encompasses a variety of arrangements in which power is shared to varying degrees between the state and communities (or user groups) to jointly make decisions about the management of specific resources or regions.

Over the past two decades, the concept of co-management has evolved gradually, with initial interest focused on the legal aspects of what formed the collaboration. Co-management, or the sharing of power and responsibility between the government and local resource users, is an agreement that allows for the creation of effective partnerships.

At a later stage, regulated contractual relationships are increasingly combined with learning-based methods. Programs providing funding for educational activities at national and international levels are seen as the only opportunity for improvements based on the transfer of know-how or shared experience and educational innovations (Venelinova et al., 2021). Knowledge generation and learning are important in the process of partnerships between government, local structures and user groups (Olsson et al., 2004). Here the emphasis is placed on the process of building capacity of necessary knowledge, skills and competences of stakeholders at the local level (Carlsson & Berkes, 2005).

Armitage et al. (2008) identify three key learning theories that are relevant to social learning in the contemporary context:

Experiential learning: this context views learning as a process of creating knowledge through the transformation of experience. Experiential learning encourages hands-on participation and the acquisition of skills through "learning by doing" (Keen & Mahanty, 2006).

Transformative learning: it is a reflective process that leads to a change in an individual's perceptions and consciousness. It includes both instrumental learning, focused on solving specific

tasks, and communicative learning, related to the exchange of ideas, knowledge and experience (Mezirow, 1996; Sinclair & Diduck, 2001).

Social learning: it is a process of iterative reflection that occurs when individuals share their experiences and ideas with others. This interaction promotes collective learning and mutual understanding (Keen et al., 2005).

As noted above, in all three concepts, the emphasis falls on the importance of *self-organized learning processes*. They play a decisive role in cooperation, joint, consolidated decision-making and management in socio-ecological systems, as indicated in the literature (Folke et al., 2005).

One of the greatest strengths of co-management is the possibility of combining diverse and complementary knowledge and competences that different partners can bring to the decision-making process. Each of the participants has specific competences that contribute to creating the overall picture and to developing effective and sustainable solutions.

At the local level, institutions and communities have the real picture of the specific needs and circumstances. They have a deep understanding of the state of local resources and are well acquainted with the economic and social needs of individual individuals and user groups. This direct link between local institutional bodies and communities makes them key actors in the process of identifying problem areas and priorities.

In this jointly built and functioning system, based on the co-management approach, the place of state institutions is also extremely significant. They have a broader view, covering regional and national aspects. It is also worth noting that they have resources and tools that are often not available to local communities, such as scientific research, databases, remote sensing and expert analysis. These resources provide an opportunity for long-term planning, policy development and identification of trends that cannot be captured only through the local perspective.

The key to success in joint management is building strong connections between these different levels of knowledge. New dimensions for assessing the effectiveness of public and private sector organizations and the competitiveness of individual business units, regions and countries focus on the knowledge and information base (Antonova & Pavlov, 2010). The broad integration of innovations in the educational process creates increasing opportunities for the implementation of modern, sustainable and technologically supported learning methods (Georgieva-Tsaneva et al., 2025). The most successful synergistic partnerships are those that manage to combine local, regional, national and scientific knowledge so that they complement and reinforce each other (Berkes, 2009).

When partners have different levels of competence, it is necessary to invest in capacity building of the participants in order to achieve sustainable results at the local level. This can be done through targeted trainings, workshops and practical activities that allow participants to expand their knowledge and develop new skills and competences. Trainings not only contribute to overcoming potential competence gaps, but also promote the active participation and commitment of stakeholders.

Additional training towards building social ecosystems for co-management has several key benefits. It allows local communities to better understand the resource management tools provided by scientific institutions or government bodies. At the same time, government and scientific representatives can learn more about the local context, traditions and cultural characteristics, which are essential for effective and sustainable management.

The co-management approach not only reduces the risk of conflicts and misunderstandings, but also strengthens the links between different levels of governance. Capacity building through training creates the basis for long-term cooperation, ensuring that participants are equal and

prepared to make informed decisions in favor of common goals. This makes the process of co-management more effective, transparent and sustainable. Co-management not only increases the efficiency of management, but also strengthens the legitimacy of the processes by ensuring the perception that decisions are fair and based on broad consensus. In this way, co-management becomes a mechanism for creating synergy between the different participants, while strengthening their role in resource conservation and development at the regional and national levels.

Methodology

The empirical study, related to studying the impact of the application of the co-management approach on achieving a higher level of satisfaction of stakeholders, was conducted in the period 01 July – 30 November 2023. The "structured questionnaire survey" method was used for its implementation, which is one of the most popular quantitative methods for collecting data in scientific research in the fields of sociology, economics, and marketing.

The survey instrument included in the research methodology is based on a 5-point questionnaire. The questions included are closed and a Likert scale was used, where the values range from 1-completely disagree to 5-completely agree with the presented statements. This type of question is well suited for evaluation or expressing an opinion, since the reference values are placed only at the beginning and end of the scale. In this way, the respondent's answer is not tied to specific words, but to a number, behind which he himself puts a specific name for his assessment. On the one hand, the respondent is more confident in his answer, and on the other hand, the interviewer receives an honest and personal answer.

The study covered two target groups, one of which included representatives of various institutions included in the Council on Social Services, regulated in Art. 27 of the Law on Social Services of the Republic of Bulgaria. This council includes representatives of "territorial structures of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Interior and other state bodies; private providers of social services on the territory of the municipality and the district; non-profit legal entities for public benefit; persons using social services; higher education institutions training social workers on the territory of the municipality and the district". (https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2137191914) The second target group includes representatives of/or the users of social services themselves at the local level, excluding those users who are under guardianship and users with intellectual disabilities and mental disorders.

The survey covered a total of 325 respondents in the city of Ruse and the region, with representatives of organizations accounting for 16.45% and consumers - 83.55%.

The user group includes: 0.79% representatives of service user councils, 18.5% representatives of services for children without disabilities, 9.84% representatives of a guardian of a service user for children with disabilities, 4.74% representatives of users of services for young people with disabilities, 3.93% guardian/user of services for elderly people with disabilities, 7.87% guardian/representative of a user of a service for the elderly, 54.33% users of social services /excluding those under guardianship and with dementia/ (Fig. 1). The ratio of user representatives is consistent with their number in the sample structure.

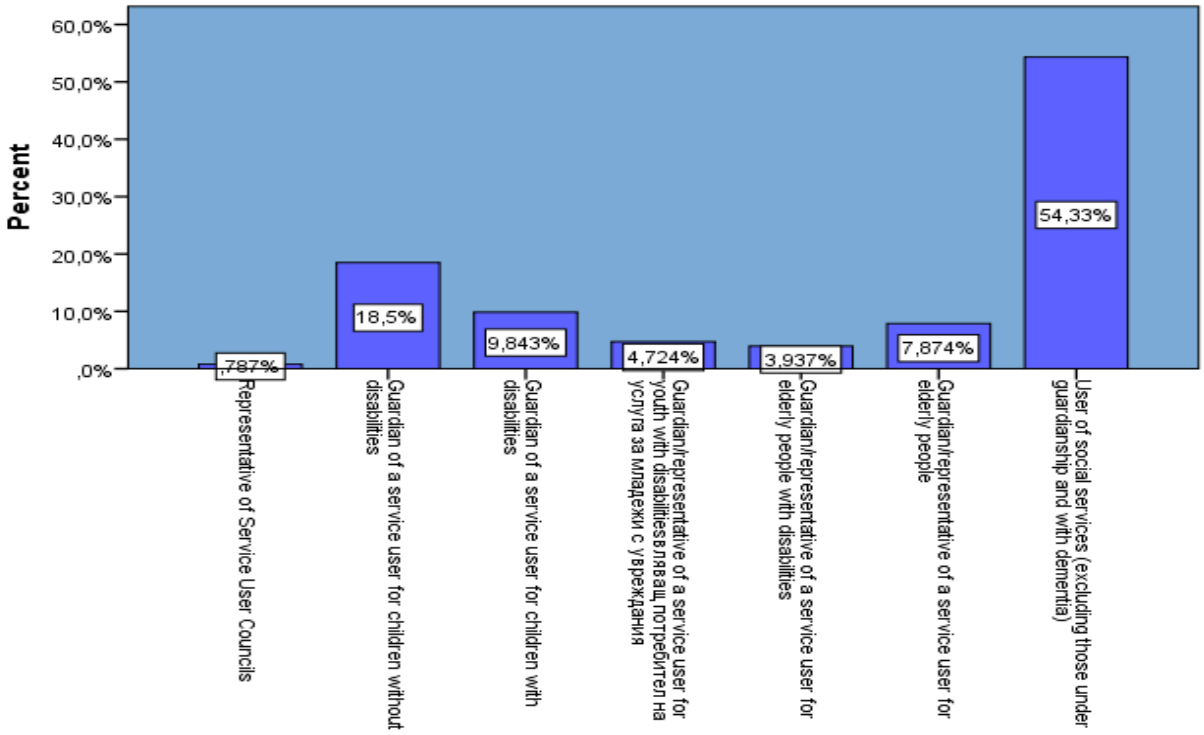

Figure 1. Representatives of users of services

Source: Authors' own research results.

Results and discussions

The analysis will start with a presentation of the information based on descriptive statistics.

Fig. 2 shows the respondents' opinion on the issue that the active involvement of stakeholders in governance would ensure its compliance with the needs of stakeholders.

It should be noted that state institutions are the leading actors in the management of social policy on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria. It is they who point out that the satisfaction of users of services in the social sphere requires the participation of stakeholders. This aspect emphasizes the importance of joint management and the participation of a wide range of stakeholders in the decision-making and management of social policy.

The high scores given by almost all stakeholders underline the thesis that co-management is a strategy that provides various benefits such as empowerment, conflict management, power sharing, social learning, dialogue and communication, and the development of relationships between partners. This type of management focuses on the creation of partnerships and networks of cooperation between different stakeholders, which is essential for achieving sustainable and successful social policies that meet the needs of society.

Respondents acknowledge the need for training of stakeholders as an element of the co-management approach implementation process. Capacity building is important for the full implementation of the approach towards achieving satisfaction of all participants.

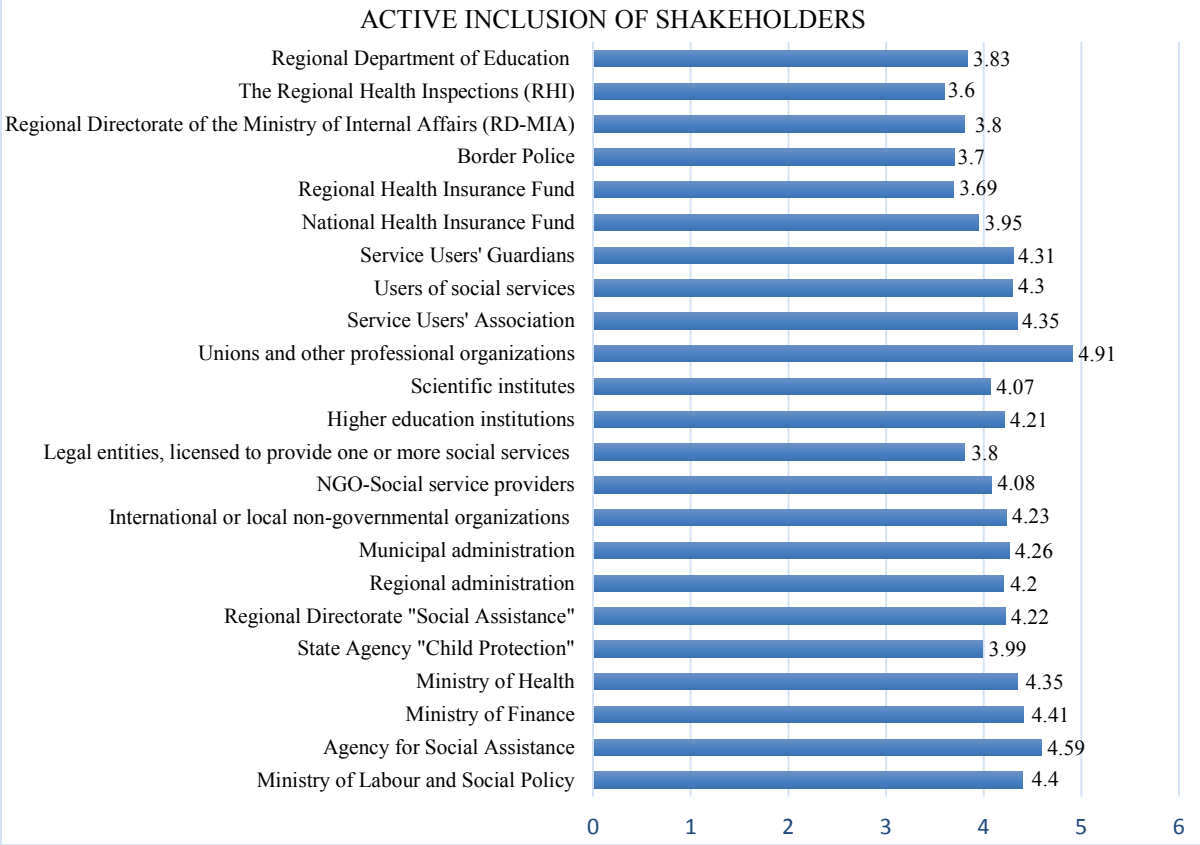

Figure 2. Active involvement of stakeholders

Source: Authors' own research results.

The results of the question "Do you think that in order to more effectively and fairly plan, organize, coordinate and control the overall process of effective governance in the social sphere, it is necessary to build the capacity of the following stakeholders at the local level with the necessary knowledge, skills and competencies?" show that respondents believe that for state authorities at the local level and for consumers, building educational capacity is most essential (Fig. 3).

Effective management requires not only the availability of relevant resources, but also the competences and knowledge for their proper application. This process involves not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also the development of trust and cooperation between the various stakeholders.

Educational capacity building includes training, exchange of experiences and promotion of the active participation of all parties involved in the social sphere. This not only improves the ability of stakeholders to effectively participate in the management of activities in the social sphere, but also creates greater legitimacy and support for the decisions made and the actions taken. The process of capacity building in the social sphere is long-term and must be integrated into all aspects of social sphere management. This includes appropriate planning, human and financial resources, evaluation of programs and initiatives implemented in the social sphere.

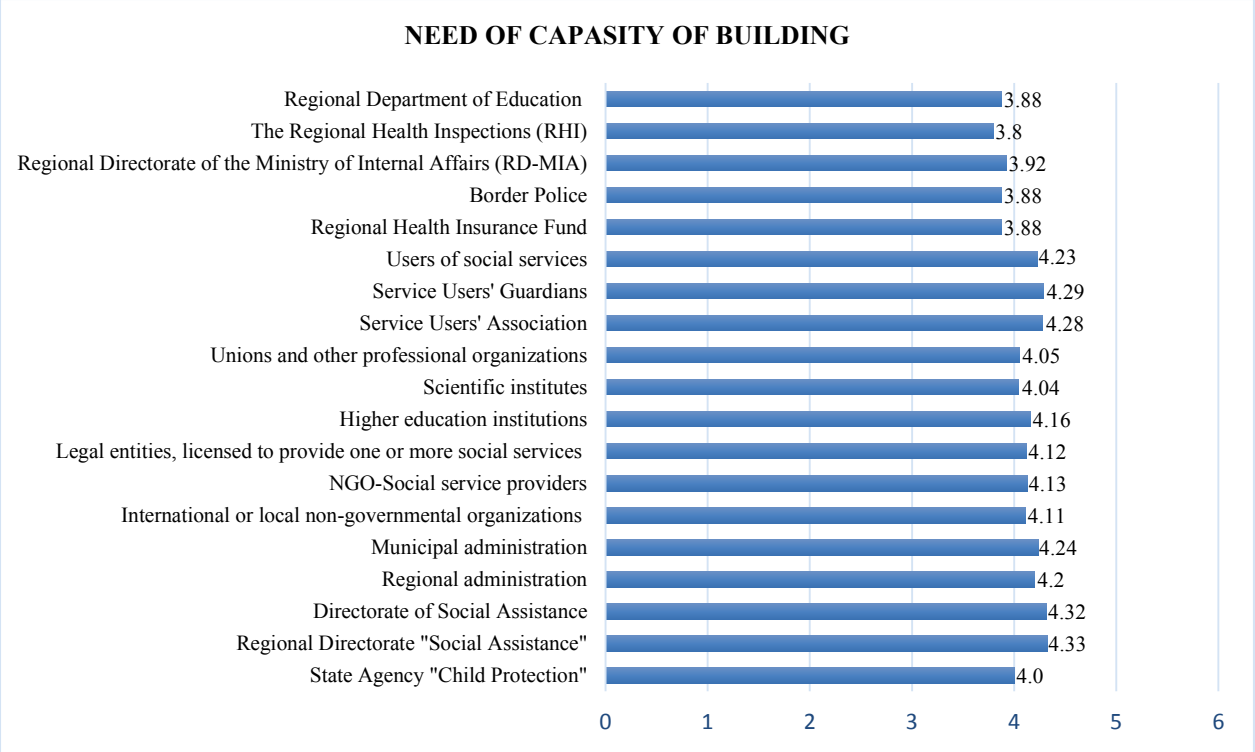

Figure 3. Capacity building

Source: Authors' own research results.

In the subsequent analysis, the results will be presented through the prism of a more in-depth statistical analysis, the purpose of which is to test the hypotheses set at the beginning of this work. For this purpose, the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used. SPSS is a computer program created for data analysis in the social sciences and other fields. statistical tools. Statistical analysis is the third final phase of the statistical study. It encompasses all activities, operations, methods and means for obtaining summary data and for their interpretation in order to reveal the essence of the phenomena, as well as certain relationships and dependencies, the interest in which has imposed the relevant study.

The main objectives of statistical analysis can be reduced to the following four categories: (1) Characterizing the distribution of the units of the population by the meanings of the signs of interest to us and determining the features in its structure; (2) Characterizing the dynamics in the development of phenomena and processes over time and its study, modeling and extrapolation in the future; (3) Characterization of differences in the territorial distribution of units and their study and modeling; (4) Characterization of the relationships and dependencies between phenomena, measuring the significance of various factors, modeling of statistically significant relationships and dependencies and predicting their future development.

When testing Hypothesis 0 - lasting interactions and synchronization between stakeholders in the field of social activities at the regional level, based on the co-management approach, are decisive for achieving sustainable results and a higher degree of compliance with the set strategic goals, the following results were recorded (Table 1).

Table 1. Statistical analysis for testing Hypothesis 0

N	Valid	325
	Missing	0
Mean		4,2039
Median		5,0000
Mode		5,00
Std. Deviation		,96704
Variance		,935
Skewness		-1,036
Std. Error of Skewness		,140
Kurtosis		,383
Std. Error of Kurtosis		,279
Range		4,00
Minimum		1,00
Maximum		5,00
Sum		1278,00

Source: Authors' own research.

Table 1. shows that the mean value is 4.2039, which indicates that respondents rate the statement with a "*high probability*" or "*very high probability*". The most common Mode value is 5.00, which is an indication of a preference for higher ratings and proves the statement. However, despite the high values, other indicators show that there are also respondents who do not support this statement. Evidence of this is the Standard Deviation value, which is 0.96704. A larger standard deviation indicates a greater difference between the respondents' ratings. Also, the Range value is 4.00, which shows how variable the ratings are.

The results in Table 2 show the relationship between the active participation of the local authority as an element of the process of implementing the co-management approach and its full implementation.

Table 2. Statistical assessment of stakeholder participation in the process of implementing the co-management approach

	Active inclusion of stakeholders is important for the full implementation of co-management
Mann-Whitney U	5268,000
Wilcoxon W	6543,000
Z	-2,018
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,044

Source: Authors' own research.

Since Asymp. Sig. (two-sided) is below 0.05 (in this case 0.044), we can reject the null hypothesis at a significance level of 0.05 and conclude that there is a statistically significant difference in the importance of active stakeholder participation as an element of the Co-management approach implementation process. *Based on this, we accept the hypothesis that the construction of a fair, equal and empowered partnership between stakeholders, based on the co-management approach, leads to a number of positive results, increasing the satisfaction of the participants in the social eco-system thus built (H1)*.

When testing the second hypothesis (H2) that that integrated knowledge and learning have an important role in the process of implementing the co-management approach and are a means of

developing effective, sustainable solutions, increasing the satisfaction of the stakeholders in the formed social eco-system, the following results are reported (Table 3).

Table 3. Statistical analysis for testing Hypothesis 2

N	Valid	325
	Missing	0
Mean		4,4085
Median		4,4545
Mode		5,00
Std. Deviation		,49870
Variance		,249
Skewness		-,922
Std. Error of Skewness		,140
Kurtosis		1,891
Std. Error of Kurtosis		,279
Range		3,00
Minimum		2,00
Maximum		5,00
Sum		1340,18

Source: Authors' own research.

Table 3. shows that the mean value is 4.4085, which indicates that respondents assess the statement with "*high probability*" or "*very high probability*". The most common value of Mode is 5.00, which is an indication of preference for higher ratings and proves the statement. But despite the high values, other indicators show that there are also respondents who do not support this statement. Evidence of this is the value of Standard Deviation, which is 0.49870. A larger standard deviation indicates a greater difference between the respondents' ratings. Also, the value of Range is 3.00, which shows how variable the ratings are.

The results in Table 4 show the relationship between the role of integrated knowledge and learning of stakeholders as an element of the process of implementing the co-management approach and its full implementation towards achieving their enhanced satisfaction.

Table 4. Statistical assessment of integrated knowledge and learning as an element of the co-management approach implementation process

	Integrated knowledge and learning of stakeholders is important for the implementation of co-management
Mann-Whitney U	4667,500
Wilcoxon W	37052,500
Z	-2,987
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,003

Source: Authors' own research.

Since Asymp. Sig. (two-sided) is below 0.05 (in this case 0.003), we can reject the null hypothesis at a significance level of 0.05 and conclude that there is a statistically significant difference in the importance of stakeholder training as an element of the Co-management approach implementation process. *Based on this, we accept the hypothesis that the accumulation of integrated knowledge and learning among stakeholders as an element of the process of implementing the co-management approach is important for its full implementation towards achieving enhanced satisfaction (H2).*

Conclusion

In summary of the results of the conducted empirical study aimed at testing the statement that the co-management approach can be considered as a tool ensuring increased satisfaction of stakeholders in the established social ecosystem, the following conclusions can be formulated, taking into account the restrictive condition that the study did not include users of social services placed under guardianship, as well as those with intellectual disabilities and/or mental disorders:

Establishing sustainable and effective interactions between stakeholders in the field of social activities at the regional level is of key importance for achieving sustainable results. The synchrony between these participants creates a basis for making strategic decisions that are adapted to the specifics of the environment, while ensuring sustainability and long-term impact.

The active inclusion of stakeholders in the co-management process leads to many positive results. Among them are increased efficiency of decisions, better coherence of interests and increased legitimacy of management actions. This approach ensures that the needs and expectations at the regional level are reflected and satisfied.

Training of stakeholders is a fundamental element for the successful implementation of co-management. It supports the building of the necessary competencies and confidence among the participants, which is crucial for achieving satisfaction with the management process. Through training, conditions are created for a greater understanding of the roles, responsibilities and perspectives of participants, which contributes to the sustainable realization of common goals.

The effective implementation of the co-management process is possible only through the active participation of stakeholders and their social learning. This interaction ensures both the satisfaction of individual and collective interests, as well as better opportunities for adaptation to changing conditions at the regional level. The results show that only through sustainable interactions, active involvement and building the necessary capacity, can a sustainable basis for management be built that meets the needs of stakeholders at the local level. Directions for future research can be sought in the possibilities for applying the constructed approach in other areas of economic and social life, such as healthcare, education, industry, and others.

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