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# A New Agenda for Local Democracy: Building Just, Inclusive, and Participatory Cities

Brittany Andrew-Amofah, Alexandra Flynn, and Patricia Wood

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

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# A New Agenda for Local Democracy: Building Just, Inclusive, and Participatory Cities

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**Abstract**

There is a crisis of growing inequality in Canadian cities. As COVID-19 spread through Canadian cities beginning in spring 2020, racial inequities became apparent, including biased enforcement of bylaws and higher coronavirus rates amongst racialized and vulnerable communities. These health care injustices exposed municipal decisions that have led to negative outcomes for marginalized groups, especially in policing, community safety, housing, homelessness, and bylaw enforcement. In response, cities have been called upon – again – to change their governance models to allow for greater participation and better include the voices and lived realities of racialized and marginalized people in decision-making processes. In a post-pandemic period of city building, where socio-economic and racial inequalities have been exposed, municipalities must incorporate social equity and explicit race-based lenses in their decision-making and reimagine their governance practices. This paper sets out the ways in which municipal governance frameworks have worked to exacerbate inequality, with suggestions on how cities can design more democratic and responsible models. These include greater engagement with equity-deserving communities and community bodies, modifications to existing governance models, and legislative changes.

**Key words:** municipal governance, inequality, justice, inclusion, public consultation, local democracy, public participation, citizen engagement

**JEL Codes:** D63, D73, Z18

# A New Agenda for Local Democracy: Building Just, Inclusive, and Participatory Cities

## 1. Introduction

COVID-19 has laid bare the pre-existing crisis of inequality in our cities, exacerbated by systemic racism in policy areas such as policing, education, and health. In the City of Toronto, racialized individuals accounted for a majority of COVID-19 cases, in addition to vulnerable communities in which the role of policing was questioned during a health crisis (City of Toronto 2020; Toronto Foundation 2020). The reliance on e-learning due to school closures further exposed the childcare gap and the disproportionate challenges for caregivers unable to work from home. In response, all orders of government have been called upon to review and substantively change their governance and decision-making models. In the case of local governments, calls for cities to better reflect and represent their populations, allow for greater participation, and include the experiences and voices of racialized and marginalized people in decision-making processes have since deepened.

Our research starts with the recognition that Canadian cities have historically been founded on settler-colonial foundations, which involve exclusion and violence, and have developed in the context of systemic discrimination against women, Black people, Indigenous Peoples, racialized and religious minorities, disabled people, and other equity-seeking groups. These inequities are ingrained in the built landscapes of cities, in socio-economic structures, and in political systems, so that the wealth and opportunity of cities has been unevenly accessible to those who reside within them.

For the purposes of this paper, systemic racism in municipal policy is defined as the pervasive act of engaging in the policy planning and implementation process without accounting for past historical acts of injustice, negative policy-making, unequal outcomes, and low participation levels by racialized and immigrant groups in the political process. This means confronting how decisions on matters such as policing, housing, and transit are made, and how policies have disproportionately and negatively affected Black and other racialized communities and Indigenous Peoples.

While cities may understand the need to incorporate social equity and explicit race-based lenses into policymaking and governance models, they have to date struggled to ensure that residents who experience marginalization based on race, class, immigration status, or abilities are truly and fairly involved in local democracy. The essence of democracy is to represent all people; thus, as a society, we should be constantly evaluating its effectiveness and ability to respond to pressing societal needs and issues. As society evolves, so should democracy.

The central question we wish to answer is this: How can cities strengthen democracy and representation in more inclusive ways, and govern with greater

participation and justice? Since 2019, as part of a project called "Toronto the Better: Renewing Local Democracy," we have been reviewing municipal governance across Canada and worldwide, interviewing people working in governance (including intergovernmental relations) and public engagement. We have also met with representatives from historically marginalized communities across the City of Toronto to identify and understand gaps in governance.

This paper's findings and recommendations (see Box 1) are intended to contribute to a dialogue on how to reimagine governance processes to create meaningful change in representation, consultation, and decision-making more broadly.

Our approach to municipal governance begins with identifying where the greatest deficits of democracy are, from the perspectives of those have been most excluded. Our approach to democratic practice is a community-first perspective, rather than one centred on the institutions that enable it, such as Council and other formal political structures. In situating the research this way, we sought to reach a different set of people: we spoke to communities, met with community organizations working with specific communities that are excluded, and asked for their definitions of democracy and their priorities for reform. We also spoke to those working in governance and public consultation. These conversations focused on relationships among municipalities, between cities and other levels of government, and between cities and their constituencies, with an eye to understanding the degree to which greater authority at the municipal level might be meaningfully inclusive. We tried to get away from the over-centring of current instances of representative democracy as the only or best model of democracy and of Council as the "natural" site to resolve democratic deficits.

The governance of Canadian cities usually centres on councillors who represent either all constituents in the municipality or a subset located within a ward. Cities may also have other governance forums, including councils or committees, which appoint or elect representatives to make advisory decisions. In addition, communities may create their own forums for representation, such as business improvement areas and neighbourhood associations, to attend city meetings and engage with officials with an eye to influencing their decisions.

Each of these bodies claims geographical boundaries as justification for the representation of locally based populations. All of them claim to be open to participation by all residents of cities. In practice, we heard from public consultation experts in many cities who say that existing models of representation are disproportionately composed of older, white, middle-income constituents (see also Purcell 2001).

Many cities acknowledge that system change requires a reimagination of how they design policy. For instance, the City of Toronto stated in fall 2020:

> The perspectives of equity-seeking, Indigenous, Black and vulnerable individuals and communities are typically under-represented in policy and

> decision-making processes compared to other populations, due in part to the need for customizable engagement approaches that account for differences in mobility, culture, language and other socioeconomic factors. As staff engage greater numbers and a growing diversity of people through a wider range of methods, the public have expressed concerns that methods are still inaccessible, that the City engages the same groups and individuals in a piecemeal rather than coordinated manner, and that their own input does not influence decision-making (City of Toronto 2020: 119).

Awareness of the issues is a positive step. However, addressing a lack of diversity in governance models and putting new, system-wide structures and practices into place is a large and complex undertaking. Form and processes will need to respond to the place-specific needs of local populations. Governance changes must also consider the needs and priorities of people who have historically not been included in decision-making.

Our approach in this paper is inspired by and builds upon the work of urbanists attempting to address conventional engagement practices that exclude populations from democratic processes. This includes Jay Pitter's work (2021) on reimagining city planning to address anti-Black racism and Linda Peake et al.'s research (2021) on an intersectional feminist reconception of the urban and the significance of everyday life.

We also draw on human-centred design theory. In the words of the design theorist Richard Buchanan, "Human-centred design is fundamentally an affirmation of human dignity. It is an ongoing search for what can be done to support and strengthen the dignity of human beings as they act out their lives in varied social, economic, political, and cultural circumstances" (Buchanan 2001: 37). With reference to urban governance, we hear a resonance with human-centred design in the compassion-driven practices in urban planning advocated by Pitter and others (Peters 2021; Pitter 2021), as a way of meaningfully diversifying *all* forms of decision-making and making them substantively more equitable and just.

This paper examines the issue primarily through governance practices and democracy deficits in the City of Toronto and research conducted through the "Toronto the Better" project; it provides an analysis of how local governance practices can be made more inclusive. We also looked beyond Toronto, speaking to people from cities across Canada and in other countries, and studying their governance structures and practices for inspiration. Although Toronto's governance practices have a lot to offer the world, in our experience of living in the city and of working with municipal offices, there is a tendency to focus on Toronto's practices rather than to learn from elsewhere.

We begin by identifying urgent concerns that guide how we understand governance and the city itself. We then explore opportunities for ways in which municipalities can reduce democratic deficits in local decision-making, including improving the ways in which they consult and make decisions.

**Box 1: Key findings and recommendations**

1. Offices focused on equity and Indigenous Affairs must be empowered with sufficient resources to establish trust, forge connections, generate solutions, and affect policy and political decisions.
2. Neighbourhood associations need to be robust, reliable, and accountable organizations with funding, staff support, and institutionalized space. Cities should also understand the composition of neighbourhood associations in order to understand whose voices are being heard and to help new voices join the conversation.
3. Beyond the formal structure of municipal councils, broader transformation can foster inclusive governance. This could include reforms to voting practices and city charters.
4. More and better input from the public is needed. Traditional practices of meetings and deputations are insufficient. Municipalities must engage broadly to ensure that voices from marginalized communities are heard. They should take into account the needs of people working in precarious and low-paying jobs who cannot afford to participate in time-consuming consultations that are disconnected from decision-making power. In particular, municipalities should:
    a. Introduce high standards for public engagement with inclusivity benchmarks and accountability measures. Public engagement needs a budget, authority, high expectations, and time. Many cities are guided by training and standards set by the International Association for Public Participation.
    b. Have methods for the public to set the agenda other than through councillors, such as neighbourhood governance structures.
    c. Design consultation for dialogue. Go beyond merely informing the community. Strategize to defuse conflict and encourage listening.
    d. Go where people are. This could include “pop-up” consultations at public markets, libraries, coffee shops, and midnight basketball games.
    e. Ensure accessibility to allow for meaningful inclusion. This includes offering materials and consultations in languages other than English, choosing locations that are accessible and easily reached by transit, holding evening meetings with meals and childcare, and providing stipends to stakeholders who are otherwise unrepresented.

## 2. Geographic and socio-economic division in Canada's cities

### *2.1 The need to acknowledge Indigenous Peoples in cities*

Indigenous Peoples have lived in what are now Canadian cities from time immemorial. Colonial powers came much later, claiming rights to land and resources for European countries. Over time, European powers removed Indigenous Peoples from the land through practices ranging from disease and displacement to war. Throughout this period, laws affecting Indigenous Peoples were made by colonial powers and treaties and, later, through the *Indian Act* and other means. This origin story of cities is rarely discussed, although land acknowledgments are beginning to shift the narrative. From the early days of Confederation, politicians engaged in systematic campaigns to displace Indigenous nations from resource- and transport-rich areas, eradicating their access to land and rights in the eyes of Canadian authorities.

Even so, Indigenous Peoples have long interacted with and resided within cities and made them home and continue to do so. Crucially, there is no singular story of Indigenous-municipal relations. Indigenous Peoples live in and use urban spaces differently across Canada based on their unique histories and existing practices. For example, in many cities there are treaty relationships and Indigenous claims to land (Dorries 2012). The treaties are legal agreements amongst First Nations and the federal government regarding land and resources that overlap with those of municipalities. First Nations may also have reserves within or adjacent to municipalities, which means that First Nations have decision-making power over what happens on these lands, including in relation to zoning and planning.

Many Indigenous Peoples, from many places, call cities home, whether or not they are members of nearby First Nations. According to 2016 Census data, more than half of those who identify as Indigenous live in urban areas in Canada (Anderson 2017). Indigenous Peoples therefore have meaningful attachments to places within cities. They establish community organizations and businesses, and actively participate in formal and informal city-building in individual and collective ways (Dorries et al. 2019). Since the 1960s, many community and government urban Indigenous agencies have been established to deliver better services, with mandates prescribed in provincial legislation in some areas, such as child welfare and education (Belanger 2013). State service delivery agencies are not formal governments, but even courts have recognized their importance in representing the interests of urban Indigenous Peoples (Belanger 2013). Our approach to urban governance includes all parties seeking to serve and represent communities in the city.

The 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) acknowledged the large number of Indigenous service delivery agencies in big cities, as well as the emergence of "community of interest" bodies representing Indigenous peoples within urban areas. The RCAP defines an "urban community

of interest" as a collectivity that emerges in an urban setting, includes people of diverse Aboriginal origins, and "creates itself" through voluntary association.

RCAP envisaged urban government reform to take better account of Indigenous perspectives and interests through means such as ensuring Indigenous representation on decision-making bodies; establishing Indigenous Affairs Committees; and instituting co-management of urban initiatives (Erasmus and Dussault 1996: 439). RCAP also proposed greater local political participation through designated Indigenous political representation on municipal councils and related political bodies and the co-management of urban programs and services.

Since 2010, some municipalities have introduced governance changes that reflect the RCAP recommendations as well as more recent developments. Initiatives include the creation of Indigenous Affairs offices at a senior level within the municipal bureaucracy; the appointment of an Indigenous advisory council to offer advice on city policy and initiatives; assessments of whether Indigenous cultural competency training is available and mandatory; the endorsement of the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC); and the endorsement of the United Nations Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (Anderson and Flynn 2021).

### *2.2. Socio-economic and racial segregation in cities*

In many of Canada's largest cities, low-income and visible minority residents inhabit different parts of the city relative to affluent or middle-income white residents. David Hulchanski (2010) and Alan Walks (2013) have written about the rising levels of income inequality over the last three decades and the degree to which this inequality is spatialized.

Residential segregation is, in part, driven by socio-economic inequality, particularly in cities like Toronto, where housing is expensive and average rents are well above 30 percent of average household income. Many segregation pressures are external, whereby individuals with lower incomes and fewer resources are pushed into areas with poorer conditions and services and often ineffective political representation.

The unevenness of experience, well-being, and opportunity that arises from spatial segregation should not be confused with residential self-segregation for community-building and solidarity, which is not correlated with inequality. Residential self-regulation, which takes the form of cultural districts and neighbourhoods that serve residential, safety, and well-being needs, can offer a reprieve from inequities within municipalities. We note the importance of strong, organized communities in underserved areas and how they can be helpful in the face of discrimination.

In Toronto, for example, Hulchanski identified three geographically distinct cities in his 2010 report: one in which incomes have increased by 20 percent since 1970; a second in which incomes have increased or decreased by less than 20 percent; and a third in which incomes decreased by more than 20 percent (Hulchanski 2010:

7). Moreover, spatial poverty is overlaid with racial inequality. Middle- and high-income neighbourhoods are predominantly white, in part because racialized people have effectively experienced no growth in their incomes between 1980 and 2015, while the incomes of white people grew by 60 percent (Toronto Foundation 2020: 30). As Roger Keil, Melissa Ollevier, and Erica Tsang write, "Toronto's view of itself as the most diverse city on the planet usually comes with the bravado of claiming normative superiority in questions of diversity, too" (2010: 66).

The reality is a more uneven experience of multiculturalism, where poverty and inequality are socio-spatially produced and shaped by historically racist practices (Goonewardena and Kipfer 2005; Wood and Wortley 2010). Keil, Ollevier, and Tsang note the substandard housing, often with rodent infestations and hazardous odours, found in poor, racialized areas of the city (Keil, Ollevier, and Tsang 2010: 68). The least economically affluent areas are also "transit deserts," meaning that they suffer from the poorest levels of transit service, even though a greater proportion of lower-income households use transit and are less likely to own a car (Hertel, Keil and Collens 2016; Metrolinx 2018).

Spatial inequities are exacerbated by NIMBYism. "Not In My Back Yard" (NIMBY) refers to local protest movements opposing a proposed development or land use, often reported in higher-income areas (McClymont and O'Hare 2008: 321). Such opposition generally occurs in response to development proposals that seek to densify existing neighbourhoods, whether through rental units, higher-end developments, or social housing. NIMBY is almost always used in a pejorative sense and refers to participation that is self-interested and unrepresentative of the views of the larger community (Young 2012). In the United States, Frug has written about the effects of NIMBY decision-making at the neighbourhood level, and has argued that marginalized and poorer residents disproportionately feel the ramifications of such thinking (Frug 1980). Too much delegation to the neighbourhood scale on political decisions because of NIMBYism has the effect of using zoning laws to push out marginalized inhabitants or prevent their moving into a neighbourhood (Brion 1988; Ford 1994).

Finally, a strong body of literature documents the significant role that law, policing, and the justice system have played in the lives of racialized people, especially Black and Indigenous communities, in Canadian cities (Cole 2020; Haag and Wortley 2017; Maynard 2017; Razack 2002, 2015; Rutland 2018, 2020). In addition to residential discrimination, racialized communities experience spatial exclusion throughout the city. Formal and informal policing of their neighbourhoods and the spaces of their everyday lives puts them at higher risk of conflict with others and specifically with police, and at higher risk of arrest and incarceration. They are disproportionately subject to police violence, racial profiling, surveillance in public space, surveillance in public housing, and fare enforcement practices on public transportation. Once in the court system, they have disproportionately high rates of bail refusal and incarceration. Moreover, the justice system has a history of failure to protect the same individuals and communities, such as little or no investigation

into crimes against Black and Indigenous residents and communities, especially missing persons (Dorries et al. 2019; Hugill 2010; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls 2019).

## 3. Standard approaches to municipal decision-making

Local government is a specific type of political institution, not just a smaller version of state/province or central governments (Magnusson 1985). A municipality is inherently place-based, both as the product of particular local history, and as the form of government most actively and directly involved in the everyday life of its constituents. However, governance structures established when the municipality was a town are often found to be outdated when the town becomes a booming city or sprawling urban region comprising multiple municipalities, which may themselves have different landscapes, demographics, and political structures.

The constitutional treatment of municipal government in Canada has also led to power struggles, stalemates, and accusations of provincial and federal interference in municipal affairs. In view of the complexity of large cities, urban regions, and megacities, "we desperately need new thinking about constitutionalism and urbanization" (Hirschl 2020: 1; see also Good 2019, Hachard 2020).

Traditional approaches to municipal governance have focused on formal political institutions and structures (Graham et al. 1998), especially decisions by mayors and city councils and, to a lesser extent, the role of professional public servants (Fenn and Siegel 2017). While noting the call from Hirschl and others for a rethinking of urban governance institutions, we are also mindful of how Canadian municipal governance has historically emerged from a slow and reluctant process of providing local authority over a limited number of issues as the size, role, and understanding of cities have changed. This process has been marked by political conflict and frustrated demands for greater local autonomy (Isin 1992).

Municipal governance has also been shaped by the reality that its primary source of independent revenue comes from property taxes (Taylor 2020). Indeed, for many, the primary concern of municipal governance should be to protect individual rights and property. We endorse a broader approach to governance to incorporate informal and formal practices of governance and frame governance as fundamentally a relationship to place.

### *3.1 Primacy of local councillors*

City councils are the principal decision-making bodies in municipal governance. Indeed, according to most legislation setting out municipal authority, certain decisions – such as the imposition of taxes, the adoption or amendment of an official plan, or setting the city budget – must be taken by council, otherwise they are not valid (Flynn 2019). In larger cities, city councils steward actions such as representing the public; considering the well-being and interests of the city; determining which services the city provides; ensuring accountability and transparency in operations; and maintaining financial integrity (Flynn 2017). Only some matters can be delegated to committees and other bodies or officials.

Most Canadian cities have wards or electoral districts. The ward became an important part of municipal governance well before the Canadian constitution was signed in 1867. The concept of a ward has its genesis in the United Kingdom, where it served as an administrative division of a county with its own local decision-making body, represented by landowners, which met monthly to resolve private disputes and criminal matters. The Oxford dictionary now defines a ward as an electoral district of a city or borough represented by an elected official.

The term *ward* is not defined in Ontario's provincial or municipal statutes, such as the *Municipal Act*, but serves a crucial role for the representation of local interests, with ward councillors playing both a legislative and constituency role. In their legislative roles, councillors pass laws, create policies and programs, determine the service mix and service levels, and oversee the work of departments (City of Toronto 2005). In their constituency activities, they are a direct connection between their residents and city government, a function that absorbs a substantial amount of their time (City of Toronto 2005).

Wards also define particular communities, some of which have historical significance as former villages or towns. Spatial areas with distinct communities or histories are represented by a councillor who assists them with day-to-day matters, providing information and helping to resolve neighbourhood disputes (City of Toronto 2005).

Councillors have significant local decision-making power and wards have been described as "fiefdoms" (Flynn 2017). Part of this power includes the "brokering" role played by councillors with other governance bodies such as Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) and neighbourhood associations, both formally and informally (Flynn 2019). However, the power and primacy of local councillors warrants examination. According to some scholars, ward-based decision-making leads to practices that disproportionately respond to or act in favour of some residents at the expense of others (Schragger 2001; Valverde 2012). Valverde refers to this as the "dysfunctional dance of local governance" whereby local politicians and city staff are more likely to validate complaints if they are received from well-connected residents or groups (Valverde 2012: 82).

### *3.2 Community representation*

One limitation of the focus on formal institutions in traditional approaches to municipal governance is the narrow view of the value of community representation, particularly the informal structures and practices that underlie community organization. The neighbourhood is the locale upon which human, political, and economic activity is centred and where "everyday life is situated" (Martin 2003: 365). The details of everyday life, particularly experiences of discrimination that may be less obvious to those outside the community, may be at the heart of a community's political claims. Moreover, one of the central tenets of human-design theory is that such ground-level information is critical to the successful

implementation of whatever is being designed. While similar cautions about NIMBYism apply, community knowledge has irreplaceable value.

In considering frameworks for municipal governance, it is therefore important to consider actors and bodies beyond the state (Dahl 1961; Stone 1989). Many scholars agree that a multitude of actors influence decision-making in Canadian municipalities (Cobban 2003; Good 2009; Leo 1995; Moore 2013). These actors include BIAs, neighbourhood associations, and other advocacy groups representing local interests. These bodies serve as brokers between elected officials and local residents. Whether in a ward or an at-large system, neighbourhood councils can provide the additional governance body to fill in democratic gaps of representation caused by an ineffective local councillor.

Neighbourhood associations have not always been seen as opposing progressive city planning. Indeed, they were once at the forefront of pushing for a more inclusive planning model, one which considered the interests of the community. Until the 1960s, experts made planning decisions without public input (Sewell 1993). This changed when neighbourhood associations began opposing planners, often because they disagreed with the vision that planners had for their neighbourhoods (Hume 2005). However, the views brought to bear on local planning were tilted towards those representing the associations, meaning those with political, social, and economic capital (Hulchanski et al. 2009: 3). The voices and experiences of renters, the less affluent, and the underserved go largely unheard in local decision-making forums.

### *3.3 Public participation*

Outside formal and informal bodies that claim to represent local interests, cities also provide opportunities for residents to give input. "Public participation" is an umbrella term for the activities by which people's concerns, needs, interests, and values are incorporated into decisions and actions on public matters and issues (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015). Sherry Arnstein's conception of participation as a ladder shows the ways in which public participation takes place, with information dissemination at the bottom and direct decision-making power at the top (Arnstein 1969; Nelischer 2020).

Ideas such as "the right to the city" show that cities are crucial and even optimistic spaces of participation. Article 12 of Mexico City's 2018 municipal constitution, for example, affirms "the right to the city" as "the use and the full and equitable enjoyment of the city, founded on principles of social justice, democracy, participation, equality, sustainability, respect for cultural diversity, nature and the environment" (Flores 2017).

Local residents can be engaged in matters that are meaningful to them, showing up at civic meetings or contacting their councillors. In response, cities provide formal mechanisms for involvement. The main vehicle is giving residents an opportunity to speak or submit written documents to meetings at which local officials make decisions. Behind the scenes, officials may also seek input on policies,

provide information to residents, solicit feedback, and even provide opportunities for residents to make small-scale decisions.

As public participation events have been shown to largely attract the same constituents as those who engage in community representation – that is, white, older, more affluent residents – the design, membership, and authority of local bodies must be carefully considered and regularly reviewed to ensure that they promote inclusion and meaningful participation (Fung 2006). At the same time, current participation processes rarely grant real decision-making authority to communities. For example, a case study in Winnipeg reported that participatory public consultation mechanisms designed by local governments to communicate with Indigenous communities about municipal initiatives on local land use matters did not grant any real power to the community, but instead maintained full city authority over the issue (Nejad et al. 2019).

Part of the frustration with existing engagement efforts is that it is unclear whether they affect the ultimate decisions made. Consultation efforts can lead to "consultation fatigue" (Cowen and Parlette 2010). Marginalized populations experience significant fatigue when the same people are consulted again and again but are not given any decision-making power. For vulnerable communities, engaging in processes that may have little tangible effect on decisions can be deeply frustrating. Moreover, the focus on neighbourhood-based consultation also masks the fact that many local matters that disproportionately affect poorer residents are rarely solvable by municipal government alone (Cowen and Parlette 2010). Unlike zoning or minor planning issues, matters of social justice, including homelessness and a lack of affordable housing, cannot be resolved by municipalities alone; these matters require the cooperation and active involvement of all orders of government.

In our interviews with representatives of marginalized communities, this point came up again and again. It is important and appropriate for municipalities to engage broadly and to ensure that voices from marginalized communities are heard. However, the time-consuming process and ineffectual results of constant consultation tax the time of already overstretched people working largely in precarious and low-paying jobs, made even more frustrating because the consultation is disconnected from decision-making power.

Participation efforts also do not include skills-building and leadership opportunities or other intangible benefits, making the process one-sided in favour of city departments, who must meet statutory or City Council requirements, but do not necessarily weave broader perspectives into their final reports. Part of the reason for consultation fatigue is that those conducting consultations expect such conversations to take place in the forums of their choosing, in a manner that conforms to their notions of engagement. What is missing from the research and analysis is the existing conversations on local issues that are already taking place.

## 4. New approaches to municipal decision-making

Governance is more than a set of formal institutions and practices. We argue that governance is fundamentally a relationship to place. Place, particularly the inequitable and unjust social geographies discussed above, must be central to the discussion and the analytical framework, as details of place determine the decisions to be made and what constitutes inclusive, fair, and sustainable decisions.

### *4.1 Empowered offices focused on equity and Indigenous Affairs*

Many cities, including Vancouver and Toronto, have equity and diversity offices that convey the experiences and lived realities of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities to decision-makers. But these departments are often staffed by only a handful of people out of tens of thousands of city employees, leaving them without the status and resources to affect policy and political decisions. These offices need sufficient resources to work with residents on establishing trust, forging connections, and generating solutions. Two examples from Toronto bear highlighting.

The City of Toronto, like a number of large cities across Canada, has adopted a reconciliation strategy and has established an Indigenous Affairs Office to guide the City in its relationships with Indigenous Peoples. While this office does not replace the need for the City's planning department to engage in its own relationship-building work with the Indigenous communities and nations, what it *does* do is contribute to corporate knowledge and awareness of the important relationships to be cared for by the City. To be effective, Indigenous Affairs Offices should report to the City Manager or Chief Administrative Officer to ensure that Indigenous-municipal relationships are not siloed within a municipal department. It is also important that Indigenous affairs not be conflated with other equity issues, given the unique constitutional and legal rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The City of Toronto's Confronting Anti-Black Racism Unit (CABR) was established under the Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism in 2017 (City of Toronto 2019). The first annual report outlines CABR's goals, its achievements in its first year, and its goals for the following four years as part of a five-year plan. CABR collaborates with City divisions, agencies, boards, and commissions to implement its priorities, including creating cultural change in the City, investing in Black children and youth, connecting Black Torontonians to civic decision-making, and improving customer service. CABR is driven by the principle of *Ubuntu*, meaning "I am because you are," which means that all people deserve respect. The unit works to identify and remove barriers for Black people in four spheres of change: personal and individual; group and interpersonal; institutional and organizational; and community and society.

In its first year, CABR completed or made progress on 28 percent of the items in its five-year plan. Its achievements include a Black Staff Network, a Partnership and Accountability Circle, a "Black on Boards" initiative to recruit Black people for public appointments. The unit also anticipates embedding an anti-Black racism

analysis in City policy-making and development to address systemic issues within City government. CABR is also working with partner organizations on youth projects, including an internship training program, service pathways for young Black professionals, making leadership skills more accessible to prepare youth for youth council work, and initiatives focused on Black queer and trans youth.

### *4.2 Funding and facilitating neighbourhood associations*

Neighbourhood associations (sometimes called residents' or ratepayers' associations) serve as an extraordinary and often ad hoc force in local decision-making, one that is often contingent on the councillor or staff involved, but also on the degree of influence of the association itself. There is understandable reluctance on the part of cities to consider how neighbourhood associations may be integrated into the formal municipal governance structure. There are no clear standards for their organization or representation, which means uncertainty as to the legitimacy of their representational voice.

To meet the standard of accountable representation, neighbourhood associations need to be robust, reliable organizations. City-funded neighbourhood associations may serve as strategic forums that provide meaningful opportunities for minority groups to engage in local government decision-making processes, and that resist systemic corruption within cities (Parlow 2010). However, for these bodies to be effective, members of the community need to be able to inform decision-makers about community preferences and needs, so that communities are positioned to influence policy.

Some municipalities in the United States and Canada provide institutional support for local governance bodies like neighbourhood associations, with non-councillor representatives, spaces for such bodies to deliberate and debate, and staff support. Los Angeles has 96 Neighborhood Councils which play an advisory role on a variety of issues. These councils are locally generated and representatives are elected by members of the community; each Neighborhood Council represents on average 38,000 people. The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE) provides operational funding and support (meeting and office space, office equipment, communications) to facilitate sharing of resources and communication with residents and City staff. Portland has an Office of Neighborhood Involvement, which contracts with non-profit organizations.

New York City has 59 Community Boards, each with up to 50 volunteer members (almost 3,000 members in total). Half are nominated by a local Council member and all are appointed by the borough president to a two-year term. Each Community Board is led by a district manager. A Mayor's Community Affairs Unit is designed to connect City Hall to residents, and includes Community Boards and Neighborhood Support Teams. Community Boards have the authority to vote on matters that will ultimately be decided by City Council, but these votes are non-binding (Perrotta 2013). Borough presidents have also played a crucial role

in citywide decisions, both historically and at present (Perrotta 2013). Although a constitutional challenge in 1989 led to sweeping changes in New York City's governance model by removing the Board of Control – on which borough presidents had been key members – these local actors continue to exert substantial influence on citywide decisions (Perrotta 2013).

Canadian cities could modify their governance structures in a more formalized way, as New York and Los Angeles have, and provide staff support, operational funding, and institutionalized space for neighbourhood-level bodies to weigh in on city policy (Chemerinsky and Kleiner 2014; Perrotta 2013). Under this approach, cities could formalize their relationships with neighbourhood associations, as many have with BIAs. In a more institutionalized structure, cities could also monitor the composition of neighbourhood associations to understand whose voices are heard and to help new voices join the conversation.

Calgary and Edmonton are notable for their inclusion of neighbourhood associations. Calgary has Neighbourhood Coalitions to build capacity for communities to participate in civic governance. Each Neighbourhood Coalition supports a cluster of Neighbourhood Associations by facilitating grant programs, providing the City with information, and supporting administration. The City currently recognizes 95 self-governed, volunteer-led Neighbourhood Associations.

Edmonton's 157 Community Leagues cover the entire city. Their volunteer board members advise Council on planning and development issues and manage social and recreational infrastructure (e.g., halls, outdoor rinks, playgrounds) under a tripartite agreement among the City, the leagues, and the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues.

At a minimum, measures could be introduced across Canada to ensure greater accountability for local organizations, so that those who profess to "represent" residents are indeed doing so. Given the privileged role of neighbourhood associations in the overall governance model, and in particular in planning issues, fairness and accountability should not be disregarded.

Public engagement professionals told us they exercise caution when involving neighbourhood associations in consultations, so that the "neighbourhood" voice (which is commonly dominated by property owners) does not crowd out other voices. Nevertheless, resident organizations can provide valuable, grounded input on local planning and policy decisions.

The use of American cities as examples of governance reform is not intended to import or adopt American ideals into Canadian politics. Moreover, the examples used are not intended to position those in U.S. cities as benchmarks for good governance. Examples of lower-tier governance bodies operating under local Councils are valuable and of interest to local governance reform conversations due to their integration of community voice, their level of responsibility, and the power these institutions have, as well as their overall importance within federalist political bodies. These cities are not inherently better nor do they produce more effective

outcomes, but they demonstrate the spirit of evolving institutions open to adapting or updating practices to better serve residents.

### *4.3 Improving and centring public participation*

One of the key decisions taken by municipalities to address gaps in engagement has been the creation of a dedicated engagement office with expertise in improving relationships with local communities. Since 2003, Calgary has had a policy and structure for public engagement called Engage Calgary. Initially embedded in the Communications department, it is now an independent office that reports to the Chief Financial Officer and can work directly with various actors, including Council, individual "business units" of the City, and communities. In the opinion of some of Council staff, its work has contributed to a cultural shift on Council and among the City's agencies and offices towards greater interest in and comfort with community consultation.

In Winnipeg, a dedicated engagement office was created as a campaign promise to lead or support all public engagement in the city. After its creation, a major challenge observed by staff – common in many cities we spoke to – was that the office heard mostly from older resident's groups, and least from Indigenous community members, members of minority communities, newcomers, and youth. Staff are trying to "close the loop" as standard practice. When feedback is received, action is taken or answers are found, an email is sent or phone call is made to the resident.

Other issues faced by Winnipeg's engagement office include people feeling that they have been spoken to disrespectfully by staff as well as the need for services such as childcare at consultation events. To address these issues, the office is working to improve engagement through changing the design of meetings, for example, by creating circular seating arrangements to ensure that people feel part of the event; providing honorariums for attending; and distributing activity bags to children. Staff are also conducting outreach, which includes holding events in Indigenous spaces with the permission of Indigenous leaders and going to skate parks to reach youth. Staff have also used community advisory committees for specific projects, whereby members without decision-making power write their own independent reports.

Toronto also recognizes that it must build relationships. Winnipeg staff noted that it is "all about the little actions that build trust," such as responding promptly to emails, calling residents, and showing up in the community in person. Toronto has decided to shift to targeted workshops instead of public meetings, approaching each project as unique with its own interest group and stakeholders. Staff see engagement as a model for "deliberative democracy." They set targets for consultation and representation, identify the values at play, build empathy among stakeholders, and try to establish consensus. In their view, online workshops do not build empathy among participants in an effective way. However, many cities use online portals to facilitate feedback, provide news and updates, and conduct

surveys and polls. Some, such as Edmonton, have established a representative pool of residents to regularly survey, a practice polling companies use. These actions alone do not constitute comprehensive consultation on any given issue, but they complement larger efforts.

Another way to make public participation a priority is to hold elected representatives accountable for the presence or absence of public consultation. Many cities have regulations that require a certain degree of community engagement or public consultation on policy, along with detailed reporting about consultation at council. In 2006, when Edmonton created its Office for Public Engagement, it introduced a public engagement policy, which it revised in 2017 with an action plan, specifying when consultation is required and what it must involve. In addition to using both permanent and *pro tem* Citizen Advisory Committees, Burlington, Ontario (population 186,900), also has a Community Engagement Charter and a Charter Action Team to follow through.

Modifications are needed to ensure better, more inclusive public participation, including bringing the public as close as possible to the exercise of power (Cohen and Rogers 1995; Fung and Wright 2001). We interviewed several professional staff working in governance and public engagement across various cities and carried out surveys to understand their practices. It is clear from professionals in public engagement and consultation that more and better input from the public is needed for good and fair decision-making, and that traditional practices of general public meetings and public deputations are insufficient.

Based on what we learned from stakeholders, these are our recommendations for better, more inclusive public participation:

- Introduce high standards for public engagement with inclusivity benchmarks and accountability measures. Public engagement needs a budget, authority, high expectations, and time. Some cities set a minimum of one consultation per city ward. In other words, respect the research done on consultations, and invest in them. Many cities are guided by training and standards set by the International Association for Public Participation.
- Have other methods for the public to set the agenda other than through councillors, such as neighbourhood governance structures. These may include localized councils – such as community councils or neighbourhood associations – that are a part of the city's formal decision-making process, but comprising local residents. A mix of sources and methods maximizes the diversity of perspectives and feedback.
- Design consultation for dialogue. Go beyond merely informing the community. Strategize to defuse conflict and encourage listening.
- Go where people are. We heard of "pop-up" consultations at public markets, libraries, coffee shops, and midnight basketball games. Burlington has successfully used a food truck to provide lunch in exchange for feedback on multiple issues through conversation, feedback frames, and a paper survey.

- Ensure accessibility to allow for meaningful inclusion. This includes offering materials and consultations in languages other than English, choosing locations that are accessible and easily reached by transit, holding evening meetings with meals and childcare, and providing stipends to stakeholders who are otherwise unrepresented. Accessible and inclusive consultation requires time to develop outreach and connections, and to frame topics and processes so that they are clearly central to those whose time is being used to respond.

The biggest challenges for most municipalities are the low standards for and a devaluation of consultation in many city departments. Councillors are essential in the process, as their involvement can improve consultations, especially given their local knowledge. The more politicized a project, the harder it is to ensure effective consultation. To many staff involved in reimagining public participation, a shift in institutional culture is required, whereby senior staff and councillors must be convinced that that community knowledge is important and makes projects better without taking away power or causing delays.

### 5. Legislative changes to municipal voting and authority

Beyond the formal structure of municipal councils, other channels of action and participation can foster inclusive governance. As discussed in previous sections, these can include special offices, committees, agencies, and ombudspersons or other advocates.

At a broader level, transformation may come in the form of changes in voting practices. Single-member, ward-based systems with first-past-the-post victors have a weak record of reflecting the actual choice of voters during an election. Berkeley, California, introduced ranked-choice voting in 2010, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, began ranked-choice voting elections in 2018. San Francisco, California, has had ranked-choice voting since 2004 for its mayoral election. Minneapolis, Minnesota, introduced the same in 2013. In 2018, London, Ontario, became the first city in Canada to approve a ranked ballot for municipal election, replacing the first-past-the-post system, but the decision was reversed by the province in 2020.

Another approach is the introduction or revision of city charters. City charters can set out principles such as a commitment to include equity-deserving groups in government practices and an acknowledgement that these groups must not be treated as interchangeable. Despite some good examples of changes that intentionally diversified council representation or created offices that addressed these issues, it is fair to say that diversity and inclusion have not usually been at the heart of the development or revision of city charters (Good et al. 2020). Although they have been successful in achieving greater autonomy for municipal councils, the content and process of developing or reforming city charters have at best an uneven history with respect to inclusion.

Mark Purcell's study of the 1996–99 Charter revision process in Los Angeles, which introduced neighbourhood councils, identifies some of the benefits and drawbacks of city charters in achieving more inclusive governance (Purcell 2001).

Los Angeles has an existing charter, dating back to 1925, which has been amended more than 70 times and revised six times since. The 1990s revision process, although ultimately successful, was divided, with the mayor and the Council each holding their own processes. Most critically, new social movements in the city were not fully part of the reform process, despite efforts to involve them. While piecemeal change over the years had left the Charter in need of revision, the main driver of reform was a threat of secession by the wealthy residents of the San Fernando Valley.

The creation of self-generated neighbourhood councils that set their own geographic boundaries and exercise some land-use authorities, Purcell argues, was a deal between the "usual" parties – regional and local business, big unions, and wealthy neighbourhood groups – rather than a response to demands from marginalized communities or any effort to empower them. Interestingly, it was the council district structure that successfully diversified council, in terms of race and ethnicity, because of the segregated social geography of the city; again, it was not the result of advocacy from new social movements (Purcell 2001).

Some have expressed reservations about city charters as inherently progressive documents. Charters can prioritize the structural reform of formal institutions and questions of "home rule" over inclusion; indeed, charters have been used explicitly to exclude communities (Good et al. 2020). Charter movements that stress local governance sometimes have more overlap with the NIMBYist separatism of wealthy neighbourhoods than with efforts to rethink the dissemination of power or decision-making in city governance. Nevertheless, charter movements and revision processes, like all governance discussions, can help open up dialogue on municipal governance reform, which can be leveraged to incorporate questions of social inclusion and justice.

### 6. Partnering with non-governmental organizations

A useful step towards determining mechanisms through which the city can successfully engage with and offer services to diverse communities is to recognize the organizations and associations that are already successfully engaged in such work. For example, support for the resettlement of immigrants and refugees has long been provided through partnerships between civil society organizations and government. Community agencies offer language training, legal support, housing help, and access to health care. Similarly, Indigenous organizations in cities have established meeting places and support services for health care, housing, legal issues, and cultural practices. And in Toronto "The 519" provides a safe and welcoming space for queer communities, serving as a gathering space for a diversity of social activities, and offering many community resources including housing support.

For the communities they serve, these places and services are critical, in terms of belonging, community, housing, safety, and mental and physical health. Given the interconnectedness of well-being and belonging to civic participation, working with these organizations (and making use of their spaces) may bring municipal

decision-making, consultation, and services to the community in a grounded, meaningful, safe, and inclusive way. Local partners can assist with consultation in many ways: they can encourage people to attend and ensure a safe and welcoming gathering; they can expand communications before and after consultation; and they can share information and continue the discussion in multiple ways.

At the same time, cities should not conflate interest groups with residents, or short-change public participation by prioritizing engagement with non-governmental associations. For example, models of representation for urban Indigenous Peoples have increasingly focused on policies that prioritize service delivery (Heritz 2018). Where urban Indigenous Peoples are included in local government planning and administration decisions, they are often represented by the executives of Indigenous voluntary organizations. These organizations take on a complicated dual role of providing services and support while representing communities in policy processes, which increases their reporting and accountability requirements and affects their ability to participate in political action, which can in turn impact their funding and charitable status.

## 7. Conclusion

Democratic innovation is happening all around the world – but not yet in Toronto. For example, Mexico City recently used crowdsourcing as well as a Constituent Assembly for developing a municipal constitution. Canadian municipalities can learn from these examples – and from one another.

In cities, greater inclusivity is key to good governance. We need to recognize the importance of informal governance practices to address exclusion and suffering, and of the connections between everyday well-being and a sense of belonging on the one hand, and the interest and capacity to participate in governance on the other. The framework we propose here is not intended to be inclusive only in a democratic sense, but also should actively counter and begin to undo the damage of societal and political exclusion caused by racism, sexism, homophobia, the privileging of older and wealthier voices, and the prioritization of the protection of property values. Thinking in a community-centred way also seeks to be geographically inclusive, because so much of the privilege and policing of certain communities is spatial, and the spatial social orders we identified at the start of the paper are themselves a manifestation of inequity and exclusion.

Canadian cities have much to learn from the diverse municipal governance practices of other cities across the country and around the world. The complexity of local democracy, in its relationship to place and in its relationship to other scales of governance up to and including the global, precludes the assertion of a simple model or typology. Municipal structures and practices are subject to evolution and revision more often than other levels of government. We advocate for institutional change that is responsive to the specifics of each place, starting at the scale of the immediately local level (within walking distance) with an eye towards meaningful

inclusion and participation. The outcomes will be different for each city, and even for areas within a city. Large cities (in terms of population and in terms of area) such as Toronto exceed the reach of everyday life, and the "local" can quickly become inaccessible if mitigating measures are not taken.

Prevailing notions on the typology of governance structures and which ones would serve or even improve local governance are still to be debated. Our research demonstrates the efficacy of secondary-tier municipal governance structures such as neighbourhood associations, community councils, and business improvement associations. These structures can be better utilized to produce more equitable outcomes and respond to power imbalances among residents and their access to decision-making processes. Council structures, including the role of the mayor and city councillors, are one component of governance that continuously deserve scrutiny. Different council make-ups produce different results in policy creation and implementation as well as in taxation and spending priorities.

Those who work for municipal corporations on intergovernmental relations, governance practices, and public consultation know the hard realities of social power and inequality with which they must grapple. Certain groups with privilege can dictate whose priorities are favoured, which solutions are considered, and who has the time, money, and connections to run for office or participate in public consultation. Municipalities must be proactive, flexible, and creative in their democratic practices, and seek to build relationships between decision-makers and residents.

Institutional change will involve removing obstacles and improving access, as well as proactively rethinking priorities and practices. Some new practices need to be introduced, some systems can be reformed, and some practices need to be eliminated. As well as work to do, there is work to *undo*.

In our emphasis on municipal democracy as place-based, we emphasize that democracy is inherently a public activity and a collective activity, whose political practices are not typified by the individual right to vote but by practices of community-building. The establishment and perpetuation of inclusive and just municipal democracy thus entails maximizing the public life and public space of the city, including its physical environment. Guided by principles rather than a normative model, designing structures and practices of municipal democracy must take a human-centred approach that recognizes the city as a habitat, in which everyone has the ability and opportunity to thrive.

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