



# Summary of Existing Research

This short summary of existing research about municipal governments, equity and community engagement was prepared by Participation Matters.

Municipal governments are being called on to address inequities in their communities, and to find more effective ways to engage residents in local decisions. The design and effects of their equity-oriented engagement efforts and the resulting public policies are not fully understood. This 5 min read outlines some of the latest academic research on these topics, including some of the pressing questions that remain unanswered.

## Municipal governments, equity and community engagement


Local governments (municipalities, counties and regions) play a vital role in people's lives (Taylor & Dobson, 2020). They affect residents' experiences with climate change, housing, transportation, recreation and leisure, and other areas of daily life. Policies and programs in these and other areas shape the livability of a community for all residents and can do so in ways that perpetuate or ameliorate inequities, and in turn, increase or reduce inequality. For instance, recreation and leisure services can facilitate immigrant inclusion or not (Tossutti, 2022). Inclusive internal governance policies that respond to women's disproportionate caregiving responsibilities can facilitate more descriptively representative elected bodies (Scheichuk, 2023); their absence can have the opposite effect. Some cities have launched specific committees, strategies and initiatives to respond explicitly to structures of exclusion that cut across policy and program areas, such as the City of Vancouver's Task Force on the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the City for All Women Initiative in Ottawa, and the City of Toronto's Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism. Albeit using different approaches, these efforts are part of a widespread shift by local governments across Canada and beyond to make their policies, programs, and staff complements more inclusive and equitable (Andrew-Amofah et al., 2022; Su, 2018). As further evidence of this shift, 121 Canadian cities are members of the Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities, which "brings together municipalities that want to improve their policies against racism, discrimination, exclusion and intolerance" (Canadian Commission UNESCO, n.d.).





Concurrently, at least partially in response to legitimacy challenges (Lafont, 2017), municipalities in Canada and elsewhere have initiated (Warren, 2009) and responded (Bua & Bussu, 2020) to pressures to become more deliberative and participatory in their approaches to policymaking and governance. This has included ubiquitous efforts to develop citizen, public, and community engagement plans and frameworks, and to a lesser extent, the development of collaborative governance mechanisms (Ansell & Gash, 2007) and explorations of their inclusive potential (Ansell et al., 2020). These arrangements, which see a shifting and more substantive role for residents in local planning and decision-making, are underpinned by participatory democracy theories that emphasize widespread participation, and deliberative democracy theories that emphasize the procedural dimensions of how participants reach decisions (Elstub, 2018). In both theories, residents are seen as legitimate policy actors with important insights to share.

Local governments' equity-related commitments and efforts – related to both policy outcomes and processes – are important. Substantively, beyond normative commitments to equity held by many, the inequality that results from inequities is expensive (Von Chamier, 2019). It negatively effects health and wellbeing (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015; Schenkman & Bousquat, 2021), and is also consequential for democratic participation (Polacko, 2020; van Holm, 2019). Procedurally, local governments' democratization efforts are also important; again, not only for normative reasons but also because citizen engagement can have positive effects on policy processes and outcomes (Abelson & Gauvin, 2006; Sonnenfeld et al., 2024), and lead to increased trust in government (EKOS Politics, 2017).

Nevertheless, local equity and engagement efforts are often partial and remain unrealized, for several reasons. One is that local governments in Canada are facing increasingly complex sociopolitical contexts without commensurate policy autonomy and resources at their disposal (Breton et al., 2023). The worsening homelessness crisis is clear evidence of this. Another is that “those who possess the political authority and resources to initiate substantial participatory governance reforms – public officials or powerful civil society actors – have often been motivated to enhance legitimacy or efficacy rather than rectify injustice” (Fung, 2015, p. 520). When residents' experiences are not valued, it can lead quickly to practices of tokenism and placation (Arnstein, 1969), and to failures to identify important policy solutions (Levac et al., 2022a). A third is that Canadian municipalities have invested heavily in their digital consultation efforts (Johnson, 2018; Levenda et al., 2020), which offer some flexibility, but have not necessarily innovated interactions between governments and citizens (Longo, 2017) and may not actually increase opportunities for residents to be heard (Levenda et al., 2020). A fourth is that more participatory democratic






efforts can be seen as conflicting with and/or can be undermined by representative models of democracy. In other words, elected officials may feel as though their role as elected officials is undermined if decision-making authority is shared with residents (Spicer, 2016), may be unwilling to open possibilities for meaningful policy shifts brought through citizen participation (Adkin et al., 2017), and may use participatory tools to manage, rather than ameliorate, inequality (Pin, 2021).

## Sector-specific challenges to be addressed

Equity-related and participation-related commitments could go hand in hand for local governments in their efforts to pursue more equitable policy processes and outcomes, but there is no clear evidence that these shifts are systematically being approached in tandem in Ontario. Further, and to add complexity, participatory democracy initiatives can also entrench the same sorts of exclusions that they intend to disrupt (Mohammed et al., 2017; Petite, 2021; Su, 2018), for instance by failing to confront power inequities within the process. There is also limited evidence that municipalities are actively learning from the insights of equity-denied residents – including Indigenous people – about their policy and engagement priorities (Walker, 2008). Finally, there are – as noted both above and below – many vexing procedural and substantive policy issues at the local level that require innovative solutions. For example, understanding the role that elected officials do, can, and want to play in local governments' public engagement efforts; defining and tracking energy poverty and novel policy options in response to identified challenges; assessing and integrating disparate 'equity-lenses' (e.g., anti-racism, gender-based analysis, reconciliation) being used by local governments; and examining the role of community arts hubs and other community gathering spaces for enabling the political engagement of historically marginalized residents.

In sum, while there are compelling normative and practical reasons for local governments to pursue participatory, equity-oriented policies and policy-making processes, and several policy areas demanding this attention, there are also several barriers to doing so. Participation Matters. sits precisely at this intersection, with the goal of building capacity and knowledge related to both the procedural and substantive dimensions of participatory, equity-oriented, local policy and program development in Ontario, with applicability across the country and beyond.



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