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HOST: As Canadians from Halifax to Vancouver to Iqaluit continue their protests against police brutality and racial discrimination, many may be asking themselves what comes next? How do we make the necessary leap from calls for justice to a tangible change in policing that saves lives? In 2019, Brittany Andrew-Amofah spoke about the power of local government that is often overlooked -- and underestimated. Brittany grew up in a social housing complex in Toronto's east end, where she saw firsthand what happened when the city ignored issues of stagnating wages and skyrocketing costs of living. If cities involve marginalized communities in their systems of governance, could we end issues like police brutality in this country forever? Welcome to The Conversation Piece. This is Brittany Andrew-Amofah from DIALOG Presents The Walrus Talks Wellbeing.

Brittany Andrew-Amofah: So, my name is Brittany Andrew Amofah. I am a policy researcher, a consultant, and a media commentator. Lately, I've been thinking a lot about the idea and concept of stories. Stories have the power to take us into distant lands, to shape and renew our understanding of the world and provides us with a greater appreciation for who we are. And each other for my people, our stories have carried us through the middle passage, into the Americas. In the Caribbean. They would then become sources of memories, culture, and tradition. Our stories have formed the foundation that emancipated countries would build new societies on commemorative days would be derived from an activism and advocacy birthed out of my story. One of a first generation Canadian has informed my unique perspective and approach to some of our contemporary problems.

You see, I was raised by a single mother in a social housing complex located in the East end of Toronto. Our housing development was tucked away in an enclosed neighborhood. Like many other social housing complexes were built, separated and sectioned off from the rest of those around us. I often refer to my hood as a world, within a city within it. I've witnessed gun violence, experienced uninhabitable living conditions, and grew up seeing friends whose parents to keep the lights on. I grew up seeing and being surrounded by the deteriorating conditions of Toronto community housing. I saw the impact of stagnant working class wages and low social assistance rates. And at an all too early age, I became familiar with how our daily cost of living was increasingly growing too fast to keep up with.

A 2015 United Way report dubbed the city of Toronto, the most unequal Capitol in Canada. It noted that the gap between the rich and poor households are widening at double the national pace, a tour through the city's former boroughs paints. This bleak picture neighborhoods are currently gentrifying faster than we can track their changes. Condo and luxury, luxury apartments have become the preferred choice of developers and city council. The city, the city shelter system is currently at capacity. It has been for at least the past decade and the use of food banks have increased by 14% in the last 10 years.

For Black and Indigenous peoples in the city, the situation is even more grim. According to the Human Rights Commission, Black people are 20 times more likely to encounter a fatal encounter with Toronto police than their white counterparts. As noted by renowned scholar, David [inaudible], Black people mainly live in clusters outside of the core where transit is poor and commutes are extremely long, low vacancy rates coupled with a decreasing stock of affordable housing have resulted in reports of racialized and Indigenous people experiencing grave difficulty when trying to find housing and encountering discrimination by landlords.



But how did Toronto get here? It can be reasonably argued that provincial downloads under investment in housing, by federal governments, stalled transit planning, and low municipal taxes are just few of the governmental actions to be blamed. But I'd like to push past the notion of poor public policy for a moment to take a closer look at how we are making these decisions. What if it's our governance model that is exasperating, the inequality crisis we see in Toronto today? What if, because the current governance structure of most municipalities that is their ability to effectively respond to issues of resource allocation, planning and racism.

I have a theory that if more stories like mine were told from people in neighborhoods across Toronto, that experienced marginalization, poverty and exclusion, if these stories were known to municipal leaders and most importantly, weaved into our governance model, there is a possibility the city I loved could have been given a chance to course correct. But too often, resident stories are shared through formal and in personal processes, we know as consultations and deputations the physical and social segregation I experienced and many others by virtue of where we lived was further perpetuated by these curated limited and unbalanced models of participation.

But as you and I know, creating additional avenues for local residents to participate in their governance process is not a new phenomenon. We've all heard of participatory budgeting, community councils and neighborhood associations, but the way they've been pitched have framed these reforms as constellation prize, as, rather than as necessities in the 2018 Toronto municipal election. The idea of strengthening Toronto community councils was introduced by mayoral candidates only after Doug Ford's decision to cut council in half began to feel permanent, but democratizing local governance is not simply a kind gesture for residents to feel included into this in their decision making process. It should be viewed as a necessary way for municipal governments to maintain their relevancy and in rapidly urbanizing country, given their weak constitutional status. The strength of municipalities is that they're supposed to be the government closest to the people, but as cities grow larger and more diverse, local governance or governments will likely struggle to keep to stay connected.

80% of Canadians now live in cities, rapidly growing cities like Calgary, Winnipeg, Regina are poised to explore the idea of decentralizing or democratization to prevent the threat of inequality that larger cities often face. You see, the thing about stories is that you have to expose yourself to those who have important ones to tow, but the further away municipal leaders are from the daily lives of ordinary people. The less likely they are to hear them causing the value of local governments to decrease a lower tier system of governance should be comprised of residents in communities who are racialized newcomers, women members of the LGBTQ community, people with disabilities, and those experiencing the brunt of poverty. These people need to be integrated into our policy making process. This will allow for the building of local power and public pressure from the ground up. That is also necessary when negotiating with upper levels of governments, democratizing local governance is the policy solution. Municipalities should be considering for the future. You never know. You just might be one story away from solving a problem. He didn't even know existed. So my call to action for you all today, go forth, find the right people and go hear their stories. Thank you.

HOST: Brittany Andrew-Amofah is a Senior Policy and Research Analyst at the Broadbent Institute. And she's just one of over 800 brilliant Canadians who have graced the stage at The Walrus Talks. Wish you'd been there? Wish granted. Our YouTube channel is the place to find all of The Walrus talks. And we're coming to a city near you live and in person as soon as physically possible. Until then, sign up to our weekly newsletters to stay in touch. Find it at the walrus.ca/newsletters.