



Residents as changemakers

MIS Civic Incubator offers new model of civic engagement



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Benedicte Brocard*

How do we get residents more engaged in the issues that affect their communities? How do we flip the typical model of residents as passive consumers of community services and give rise to active civic participation rooted in a vision of social transformation? Municipalities have tools to promote civic participation, civic engagement, participatory democracy, and social development. We have collective city-wide cleanups, public consultations, question periods reserved for residents during council meetings, and participatory budgeting processes. These are all ways municipalities encourage residents to invest time and energy into improving their communities and provide formal channels of engagement between residents and municipal staff.

But, what tools can support even more active civic engagement and systems-level social transformation? La Maison de l'innovation sociale (MIS) in Montreal offers programming anchored in social innovation that supports, and even accelerates, social transformation by enhancing the role of residents as key changemakers. Launched in the fall of 2018, the MIS Civic Incubator offers a new form of civic engagement.

What is the Civic Incubator?

Led by residents or community groups, the Civic Incubator prototypes and incubates innovative projects that can have a social or

environmental impact. Candidates submit proposals and are selected based on the potential positive impact of their ideas. Once chosen, they commit to participating in a three-month support program. Selected projects fall under a range of themes that address complex urban challenges. Resident participation, cultural mediation, circular economy, tactical urbanism, and food security are all themes that were addressed by participants of the Civic Incubator's first cohort in the fall of 2018.

Participants spend 15 hours a week in training sessions, practical workshops, mentorship, and both individual and group coaching. They workshop their concept, clearly articulate their social impact strategy, test their idea on the ground, and prepare for project deployment. The program offers project visibility, access to micro-financing, and networking opportunities with strategic partners such as governmental agencies or foundations.

Over the course of three months, participants dig into problem finding and framing, define their anticipated impact, identify potential blind spots of their approach, map out user behaviour and stakeholder needs, test the project's potential on their target community, and identify indicators that will enable them to measure the social and environmental impact of their projects. This allows them to get their project to the next stage, whether it be a request for funding or developing a detailed business plan.

The collaborative nature of the program allows participants with a range of experience to share their expertise with one another and cross-pollinate. As such, successive Civic Incubator cohorts will grow both the ecosystem of social innovators within a community and the pool of quality social innovations within reach.

What Sets the Civic Incubator Apart

What sets the Civic Incubator apart from a social enterprise accelerator? Why risk working with residents and community groups rather than the typical entrepreneur? Can we really trust that the Civic Incubator can push citizens to take action and invest deeply in their communities?

There are a ton of ideas and resident-led initiatives coming out of communities, but a lack of support and adequate expert advice means they never see the light of day or reach their full potential. It may seem obvious, but it's important to remember residents themselves understand their own challenges most tangibly and therefore are best positioned to figure out how to solve them. This is exactly where new ideas, improvements, or solutions are most likely to emerge.

There are very few resources that support residents in the early stages of their social innovation projects, when their proof of concept remains to be validated. This lack of support can leave residents feeling disengaged and discourage them from launching initiatives aimed at improving our urban environments. This is the gap that the Civic Incubator seeks to fill.

Social enterprise accelerators support entrepreneurs to accelerate the development of their project. The Civic Incubator, on the other hand, welcomes participants who want to investigate

an idea that could have positive social and environmental impact on their community, but whose project is not yet ready to move to the funding and implementation stage. Civic projects emerge from this program ready to be connected to implementation opportunities, including some social enterprise accelerators.

The Civic Incubator's very first open call received 85 submissions, with a maximum capacity for 10 projects. This made it pretty clear that with the promise of support, residents are willing and able to take action in their communities. The 21st century has presented us with a range of complex challenges, and residents should be encouraged, supported, and empowered to respond to them.

A Constructive Relationship

It's clear that neither municipalities nor residents can address community challenges in isolation. Taking advantage of initiatives such as a civic incubator encourages positive civic engagement, an increased sense of resident ownership and responsibility over their communities, and a closer relationship between residents and municipalities. By providing engaged residents with a physical space and the necessary tools and resources, the civic incubator model also allows municipalities to leverage the ideas and creativity that emanate from the bottom up. **MW**

Learn more about the Civic Incubator at www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKF-W7BSP4uI.

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