

# CITIZEN MOBILIZATION AS A TOOL IN THE FIGHT AGAINST SYSTEMIC RACISM: THE CASE OF THE CITY OF MONTRÉAL

BY NICOLAS SOUMIS AND MYRIAM BÉRUBÉ

*This publication is part of a series of case studies that illustrate different ideas to inspire change-makers involved in community development in the Quebec context.*

Citizen mobilization raises public awareness of various issues and puts pressure on elected representatives to recognize and address them. What are the key elements of citizen mobilization? And what factors contribute to its success? The recent movement to counter systemic racism and discrimination in Montreal provides valuable learnings.

## BACKGROUND

The history of Quebec is punctuated by popular movements that, in response to various social, environmental, or economic issues, have mobilized to demand change.

Citizen mobilization can take a variety of forms (marches, rallies, demonstrations, petitions, campaigns, etc.) and aims to bring together and motivate a critical mass of people or organizations around three objectives. First, it strives to gain recognition for the existence of a need or problem. Secondly, it works to put the issue on the agenda of the relevant authorities, to force a

debate and ensure that the issue is addressed, ultimately demanding that solutions be put in place. Pressure exerted through mobilization is particularly useful when dealing with issues neglected by elected representatives. Moreover, mobilization is an inclusive way



### CITIZEN MOBILIZATION

A grassroots movement to gather and motivate a critical mass of individuals or organizations to:

- to have an issue recognized;
- force a debate on the issue;
- call for measures to be put in place to address the issue.

of participating in democratic life and is effective in amplifying the voices of those individuals or groups who are often the least heard.

This case study looks at the citizen mobilization campaign launched in Montreal in 2018 specifically to advance the fight against systemic racism and discrimination.<sup>1</sup> It identifies key principles and lessons that can inspire change-makers who seek to make society more inclusive.

## **L'OFFICE DE CONSULTATION PUBLIQUE DE MONTRÉAL : A CATALYST FOR CITIZEN MOBILIZATION**

Montreal is a cosmopolitan metropolis. According to [2021 statistics](#), 38.8% of Montrealers identified with a racialized group. However, whether it's finding adequate housing, getting a decent job, being treated justly by the police, or participating fully in democratic life, these Montrealers face many obstacles to enjoying the same rights and opportunities as their non-racialized fellow citizens.

Sensitive to this problem, the community organization Montréal en action launched a petition on May 1, 2018. The petition called for a concrete action plan to combat inequality and exclusion in all dimensions of life in Montreal: employment, housing, integration of newcomers, culture, etc. After collecting more than 22,000 signatures, the petition was filed with the Service du greffe de la Ville de Montréal on July 27, 2018. Once the validity of the petition had been confirmed, its authors used their right of initiative<sup>2</sup> to call for a public consultation. On August 29, 2018, the City of Montreal's Executive Committee adopted a resolution mandating [L'Office de consultation publique de Montréal](#) (OCPM) to organize a public consultation.

The OCPM is a neutral, independent organization tasked with organizing public consultations to solicit the opinions of Montrealers on urban projects and issues affecting a borough or the entire city. Once mandated by the City, its role is to 1) propose guidelines for public consultations to ensure their transparency, credibility, and effectiveness; 2) prepare, in anticipation of the consultation, a file documenting the specific issue on the agenda; 3) organize and lead the public consultation; and 4) issue recommendations based on the comments and opinions gathered during the consultation. The OCPM's role is advisory, but not decision-making: once its recommendations have been forwarded to the City, the City alone decides how to move forward.

Between November 2018 and December 2020, the OCPM is conducted a series of activities to take the pulse of Montrealers on systemic racism and discrimination. During this period,

<sup>1</sup> There are several definitions of systemic racism and discrimination. The definition used here is based on the Ontario government's definition. Systemic racism and discrimination means the existence, within a society, institution, or organization, of a culture, policies, rules, procedures, or practices that tend to exclude, hinder, or discriminate against certain racialized groups.

<sup>2</sup> Introduced in January 2010 by the City of Montreal, this right enables Montrealers to petition for public consultation on issues that concern them and that fall within the jurisdiction of the City or its boroughs. To date, the right of initiative has led to three public consultations: urban agriculture (2011), fossil fuel dependency (2015), and systemic racism and discrimination (2018).

more than 7,000 citizens participated, in person or virtually, in the various consultation activities. At the same time, the City of Montreal prepared documents providing statistics on demographics, employment, housing, etc., and describing its interventions to combat racism and discrimination in an effort to make Montreal more inclusive.

These documents, in the view of several participants in the consultation, revealed a number of distressing findings: the City's actions to combat racism and discrimination are incoherent with its own rhetoric on the subject; its racial color-blindness means that it denies the systemic nature of racism and discrimination; and it confuses the fight against these realities with actions to integrate immigrants.



Source : OCPM



In the foreground: Bochra Manaï, Commissioner for Combatting Systemic Racism and Discrimination at the City of Montreal  
Source: OCPM.

The OCPM tabled its [report](#) on June 15, 2020. It includes 38 recommendations aimed at making Montreal more inclusive. Topping the list is the recommendation to recognize the systemic nature of racism and discrimination, followed by the recommendation to appoint a person to act as Commissioner for Combatting Systemic Racism and Discrimination.

The City of Montreal reacted swiftly to the OCPM's first two recommendations. A few days after the report was submitted, it officially recognized the existence of systemic racism and discrimination. Then, in January 2021, it appointed Bochra Manaï to head the [Office of the Commissioner for](#)

[Combatting Systemic Racism and Discrimination](#). In the years that followed, the City implemented several measures to combat systemic racism and discrimination within its internal structures. In particular, Ms. Manaï cites the [dedicated office](#) for handling complaints of racism and discrimination lodged by City employees, the program to [raise awareness of these issues for 911 employees](#), and the [Immersion MTL program for police officers](#).

## CONCLUSION

This account highlights a number of inspiring elements in the mobilization around the fight against systemic racism and discrimination in Montreal. First, the presence of an independent organization specifically charged with public

consultation is an important factor in the success of this mobilization. Without the citizens' initiative supported by Montréal en action, the public consultation on systemic racism and discrimination would probably not have taken place, but the role played by the OCPM certainly contributed to the rapid implementation of corrective measures. “We love to consult in Quebec, but sometimes it's a way of avoiding action. I sincerely believe that if the OCPM hadn't done this colossal job, we'd have taken note [of the problem] for the umpteenth time, without taking the necessary steps to resolve it,” says Ms. Manaï. In this way, the organization acts as the conduit between citizens' demands and the relevant authorities.

The highly inclusive nature of this citizen mobilization is another key element. From the petition to the public consultation, each step of the process was designed to allow every Montrealer to freely express themselves, ensuring proper representation of the city's population, more than a third of whom identify as racialized.

Lastly, despite the need to continue efforts to make Montreal more inclusive and combat systemic racism and discrimination, this mobilization process not only put the issue on the City's agenda, but also prompted it to recognize the systemic nature of these two issues. As Ms. Manaï explains: “Two years ago, no one recognized [the problem] and everyone was in denial. Our work is keeping the conversation about systemic racism and discrimination alive. Today, Montreal is among the leaders in the fight against racism and discrimination in Quebec.”

The production of this document was made possible thanks to the financial support of:



*The ideas and opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Quebec.*

“

**“Acknowledging the existence of systemic racism and discrimination, and knowing how to address it, is done by being engaged, committed, and involving everyone. It's not just about racialized people. It is also, and above all, a question of law.”**

*– Bochra Manaï,  
Commissioner for  
Combating Systemic  
Racism and Discrimination  
at the City of Montreal*