

TEDTalks, Alessandra Orofino

It's our city. Let's fix it

00:13	Fifty-four percent of the world's population lives in our cities. In developing countries, one third of that population is living in slums. Seventy-five percent of global energy consumption occurs in our cities, and 80 percent of gas emissions that cause global warming come from our cities. So things that you and I might think about as global problems, like climate change, the energy crisis or poverty, are really, in many ways, city problems. They will not be solved unless people who live in cities, like most of us, actually start doing a better job, because right now, we are not doing a very good one. And that becomes very clear when we look into three aspects of city life: first, our citizens' willingness to engage with democratic institutions; second, our cities' ability to really include all of their residents; and lastly, our own ability to live fulfilling and happy lives.
01:38	When it comes to engagement, the data is very clear. Voter turnout around the world peaked in the late '80s, and it has been declining at a pace that we have never seen before, and if those numbers are bad at the national level, at the level of our cities, they are just dismal. In the last two years, two of the world's most consolidated, oldest democracies, the U.S. and France, held nationwide municipal elections. In France, voter turnout hit a record low. Almost 40 percent of voters decided not to show up. In the U.S., the numbers were even scarier. In some American cities, voter turnout was close to five percent. I'll let that sink in for a second. We're talking about democratic cities in which 95 percent of people decided that it was not important to elect their leaders. The city of L.A., a city of four million people, elected its mayor with just a bit over 200,000 votes. That was the lowest turnout the city had seen in 100 years. Right here, in my city of Rio, in spite of mandatory voting, almost 30 percent of the voting population chose to either annul their votes or stay home and pay a fine in the last mayoral elections.
03:18	When it comes to inclusiveness, our cities are not the best cases of success either, and again, you don't need to look very far in order to find proof of that. The city of Rio is incredibly unequal. This is Leblon. Leblon is the city's richest neighborhood. And this is Complexo do Alemão. This is where over 70,000 of the city's poorest residents live. Leblon has an HDI, a Human Development Index, of .967. That is higher than Norway, Switzerland or Sweden. Complexo do Alemão has an HDI of .711. It sits somewhere in between the HDI of Algeria and Gabon. So Rio, like so many cities across the global South, is a place where you can go from northern Europe to sub-Saharan Africa in the space of 30 minutes. If you drive, that is. If you take public transit, it's about two hours.
04:28	And lastly, perhaps most importantly, cities, with the incredible wealth of relations that they enable, could be the ideal places for human happiness to flourish. We like being around people. We are social animals. Instead, countries where urbanization has already peaked seem to be the very countries in which cities have stopped making us happy. The United States population has suffered from a general decrease in happiness for the past three decades, and the main reason is this. The American way of building cities has caused good quality public spaces to virtually disappear in many, many American cities, and as a result, they have seen a decline of relations, of the things that make us happy. Many studies show an increase in solitude and a decrease in solidarity, honesty, and social and civic participation.
05:37	So how do we start building cities that make us care? Cities that value their most important asset: the incredible diversity of the people who live in them? Cities that make us happy? Well, I believe that if we want to change what our cities look like, then we really have to change the decision-making processes that have given us the results that we have right now. We need a participation revolution, and we need it fast. The idea of voting as our only exercise in citizenship does not make sense anymore. People are tired of only being treated as empowered individuals every few years when it's time to delegate that power to someone else. If the protests that swept Brazil in June 2013 have taught us anything, it's that every time we try to exercise our power outside of an electoral context, we are beaten up, humiliated or arrested. And this needs to change, because when it does, not only will people re-engage with the structures of representation, but also complement these structures with direct, effective, and collective decision making, decision making of the kind that attacks inequality by its very inclusive nature, decision making of the kind that can change our cities into better places for us to live.
07:33	But there is a catch, obviously: Enabling widespread participation and redistributing power can be a logistical nightmare, and there's where technology can play an incredibly helpful role, by making it easier for people to organize, communicate and make decisions without having to be in the same room at the same time.

07:58	Unfortunately for us, when it comes to fostering democratic processes, our city governments have not used technology to its full potential. So far, most city governments have been effective at using tech to turn citizens into human sensors who serve authorities with data on the city: potholes, fallen trees or broken lamps. They have also, to a lesser extent, invited people to participate in improving the outcome of decisions that were already made for them, just like my mom when I was eight and she told me that I had a choice: I had to be in bed by 8 p.m., but I could choose my pink pajamas or my blue pajamas. That's not participation, and in fact, governments have not been very good at using technology to enable participation on what matters — the way we allocate our budget, the way we occupy our land, and the way we manage our natural resources. Those are the kinds of decisions that can actually impact global problems that manifest themselves in our cities.
09:12	The good news is, and I do have good news to share with you, we don't need to wait for governments to do this. I have reason to believe that it's possible for citizens to build their own structures of participation. Three years ago, I cofounded an organization called Meu Rio, and we make it easier for people in the city of Rio to organize around causes and places that they care about in their own city, and have an impact on those causes and places every day. In these past three years, Meu Rio grew to a network of 160,000 citizens of Rio. About 40 percent of those members are young people aged 20 to 29. That is one in every 15 young people of that age in Rio today.
10:12	Amongst our members is this adorable little girl, Bia, to your right, and Bia was just 11 years old when she started a campaign using one of our tools to save her model public school from demolition. Her school actually ranks among the best public schools in the country, and it was going to be demolished by the Rio de Janeiro state government to build, I kid you not, a parking lot for the World Cup right before the event happened. Bia started a campaign, and we even watched her school 24/7 through webcam monitoring, and many months afterwards, the government changed their minds. Bia's school stayed in place.
10:56	There's also Jovita. She's an amazing woman whose daughter went missing about 10 years ago, and since then, she has been looking for her daughter. In that process, she found out that first, she was not alone. In the last year alone, 2013, 6,000 people disappeared in the state of Rio. But she also found out that in spite of that, Rio had no centralized intelligence system for solving missing persons cases. In other Brazilian cities, those systems have helped solve up to 80 percent of missing persons cases. She started a campaign, and after the secretary of security got 16,000 emails from people asking him to do this, he responded, and started to build a police unit specializing in those cases. It was open to the public at the end of last month, and Jovita was there giving interviews and being very fancy.
11:56	And then, there is Leandro. Leandro is an amazing guy in a slum in Rio, and he created a recycling project in the slum. At the end of last year, December 16, he received an eviction order by the Rio de Janeiro state government giving him two weeks to leave the space that he had been using for two years. The plan was to hand it over to a developer, who planned to turn it into a construction site. Leandro started a campaign using one of our tools, the Pressure Cooker, the same one that Bia and Jovita used, and the state government changed their minds before Christmas Eve.
12:39	These stories make me happy, but not just because they have happy endings. They make me happy because they are happy beginnings. The teacher and parent community at Bia's school is looking for other ways they could improve that space even further. Leandro has ambitious plans to take his model to other low-income communities in Rio, and Jovita is volunteering at the police unit that she helped created. Bia, Jovita and Leandro are living examples of something that citizens and city governments around the world need to know: We are ready. As citizens, we are ready to decide on our common destinies, because we know that the way we distribute power says a lot about how we actually value everyone, and because we know that enabling and participating in local politics is a sign that we truly care about our relations to one another, and we are ready to do this in cities around the world right now. With the Our Cities network, the Meu Rio team hopes to share what we have learned with other people who want to create similar initiatives in their own cities. We have already started doing it in São Paulo with incredible results, and want to take it to cities around the world through a network of citizen-centric, citizen-led organizations that can inspire us, challenge us, and remind us to demand real participation in our city lives.
14:29	It is up to us to decide whether we want schools or parking lots, community-driven recycling projects or construction sites, loneliness or solidarity, cars or buses, and it is our responsibility to do that now, for ourselves, for our families, for the people who make our lives worth living, and for the incredible creativity, beauty, and wonder that make our cities, in spite of all of their problems, the greatest invention of our time.
15:07	Obrigado. Thank you.
15:09	(Applause)