

## Learning & Adapting Urban95



## INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

### GOVERNING FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE: RECIFE, BRAZIL, WORKS TO BECOME FAMILY FRIENDLY, 2017–2019

*Bill Steiden drafted this case study with the help of Sam Dearden based on interviews conducted in Recife, Brazil, in March and May 2019. Case published June 2019. The Bernard van Leer Foundation sponsored this case study, which is part of a series, to support learning in the early stages of its Urban95 program. Savvas Verdis and Philipp Rode of the London School of Economics, LSE Cities, served as independent reviewers.*

#### SYNOPSIS

In 2017, Geraldo Julio, the mayor of Recife, Brazil, heard scientific evidence that ensuring children from birth to age six years got a better start in life resulted in long-term benefits such as improved health, more-effective learning, less likelihood of criminal involvement, and increased employability. Julio, a technically-oriented leader in his second and final term, saw investment in early childhood development as an innovative strategy for addressing chronic crime and economic inequality in some of the city's toughest neighborhoods. To enable parents and young children to move more safely and more quickly to locations where they could find efficiently clustered resources would require the city to align efforts in several city departments, including parks, public works, health, and education. Julio set up a management team and a steering committee to guide that work and won passage of legislation that authorized him to devote municipal resources and grant funding from private groups to the new strategy. The city engaged an existing public-private urban planning partnership to launch and manage pilot projects in two poor but contrasting neighborhoods: one where homes clung to steep, slide-prone hillsides and another where many residents lived in stilt houses on flood-prone riverbanks. It collaborated with a community peace center that could reach target neighborhoods effectively. Further, the mayor's teams helped municipal departments start projects that would support the new agenda. In mid 2019, nearly two years after the program began, the pilot projects yielded key lessons about how to improve access to services for families with young children.

## INTRODUCTION

Geraldo Julio won Recife's 2012 mayoral election on a platform that promised to make the city a more modern, comfortable, and equitable place to live. A medical and tech hub and popular tourist destination on Brazil's Atlantic coast, Recife had one of the highest levels of income inequality in the country.<sup>1</sup> Although the proportion of the city's 1.6 million residents living below the poverty line had dropped by half during the previous decade, it hovered at 16.5%. Recife's favelas, where many poorer families lived, included clusters of densely packed shanty villages on hillsides and riverbanks that had developed in the absence of government regulation. The crime rates in the favelas contributed to Recife's ranking as the world's 22nd-most-dangerous city, with 55 homicides per 100,000 people in 2017.<sup>2</sup> Improving the life chances of young people in these areas was difficult (figure 1).



Figure 1: Recife from neighboring Olinda. Credit: Bill Steiden

Brazil had won wide recognition as a leader in addressing poverty through its Bolsa Familia conditional cash-transfer program—the largest such program in the nation's history and one of the most extensive in the world. Bolsa Familia disbursed monthly payments to families so long as they ensured their children were getting needed medical care and maintaining required levels of school attendance.<sup>4</sup> The 2016 legislation doubled down on the effort to reach the youngest of those children, and it provided resources that local governments could use in innovative efforts to achieve related goals.

While Julio was pondering the best way to align the city with that national priority, his wife, Dr. Cristina Mello, a pediatric cardiologist, enrolled in an executive leadership program at Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child, which focused on the needs of young families. The mayor received an invitation to join her. At the workshop in early 2017, one of the sponsors, the Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation, reviewed research showing that children who had a better start in life were more likely to complete their schooling, to go on to hold regular jobs, and to stay out of trouble with the law. The Netherlands-based Bernard van Leer Foundation then introduced an initiative called Urban95, which helped local governments plan and implement meaningful and cost-effective measures for young children and their families, such as improved sidewalks, parks, and transportation systems, as well as clustered services with play spaces attached. The name *Urban95* referred to the

As Julio prepared for his second mayoral term, new opportunities to address those challenges opened up. In March 2016, Brazil's National Congress, with the support of then President Dilma Rousseff, passed a law that made the republic's youngest citizens—those younger than six years of age—a national priority.<sup>3</sup>

During the previous two decades,

way a three-year-old with an average height of 95 centimeters, or a little more than three feet, experienced the urban environment.<sup>5</sup> (Text box 1.)

The mayor said the seminar’s scientific evidence for making early childhood development a priority impressed him, and the Urban95 approach showed what a smart municipal government could do. Dr. Mello agreed, saying that connecting early-childhood-development strategies to the city’s urban planning initiatives could give the next generation better life alternatives and thereby reduce the city’s high levels of violence—without the sort of heavy-handed police tactics that had characterized the government’s relationships with favela neighborhoods across Brazil. “I believe you fight violence with education, not

### **Box 1. How successful societies, toddlers, and urban planning go together**

In 2007, a report in the medical journal *The Lancet* estimated that 200 million children younger than five years of age would fail to reach their lifetime potential in cognitive and socioemotional development because of four causes: malnutrition, iodine deficiency, iron deficiency, and inadequate stimulation in their first five years of life.

From birth to three years of age, the rapid formation of neural pathways in a child’s brain—at a rate of 1,000 synapses per second, according to *The Lancet*—shapes future achievement, including performance in school, social integration, and labor market success. The societal benefit from investment in early childhood development is possibly as substantial as the gains from prevention and control of endemic disease, researchers reasoned.

Commentator Richard Jolly wrote, “The problem is not the lack of knowledge about what to do but the lack of professional and political commitment to mobilize action on the scale required—and for poorer communities in countries throughout the world.” The United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) soon brought that challenge to the attention of governments. SDG Target 4.2 pushed governments to ensure that by 2030 all children would have access to quality early childhood development, care, and preprimary education so that they would be ready for primary education. However, scaling even the best early-childhood-development interventions, such as parent coaching, could be difficult. Many families lived in areas that were hard to reach because of difficult geography, limited infrastructure, or conditions of violence. Staffing costs could deter local governments and other providers.

In response to the challenge, the Bernard van Leer Foundation decided to reward creative ideas about how to enable cities, where the majority of the world’s population lives, to serve children younger than five years and their caregivers more effectively and efficiently. The foundation encouraged municipalities to align street design, sidewalks, parks, public transportation, and building hours with one another to improve access to key services and encourage social interaction while also clustering services that caregivers and children need. Its Urban95 initiative, launched in 2016, asked, “If you could experience a city from 95 centimeters—the height of a three-year-old—what would you change?” The foundation noted that when children benefit, so do others: “When urban neighborhoods work well for pregnant women, babies, toddlers, and young children, they also tend to nurture strong communities and economic development.”

See Richard Jolly, “Early Childhood Development: The Global Challenge,” commentary in *Child Development in Developing Countries* series, *Lancet*, v. 369, January 6, 2007. *Lancet* series accessible at [https://www.who.int/maternal\\_child\\_adolescent/documents/lancet\\_child\\_development/en/](https://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/documents/lancet_child_development/en/). A 2016 *Lancet* series on the same subject appears at <https://www.thelancet.com/series/ECD2016>. The full Urban95 description appears at <https://bernardvanleer.org/solutions/urban95/>.

with guns,” she said. Urban95 was only part of the solution, but it could help address the problem by making it easier to reach families.

For the mayor, it was a question of what to do and how to do it. The Harvard program required participants to develop sample strategies geared to their own cities, and the Bernard van Leer Foundation indicated it would help fund a promising Urban95 proposal. Throughout his two weeks at the seminar, Julio sent his department secretaries barrages of WhatsApp messages about the presentations as well as requests for information and ideas from them. Once back in the city, he had to evaluate all of the possibilities and make decisions before forwarding a proposal to the foundation. One of the key issues was how to manage and scale a multisectoral program within a municipality whose departments usually worked separately from each other.

## THE CHALLENGE

Julio had entered office with a strong predisposition toward seeking evidence-based approaches to the city’s problems. Although just 41 years old when elected, he had served as planning secretary and, later, secretary of economic development for the Pernambuco state government. As mayor of Recife, Pernambuco’s capital, he had populated his cabinet and other staff with managers who embraced innovation and experimentation.

Already during Julio’s administration, the city had launched programs with a focus on childhood. A series of planned COMPAZ (community peace) centers aimed to provide alternative activities for youths at risk of becoming involved in gang violence. The first such center, a project of the mayor’s urban security team, opened in 2016 atop the highest point in the Alto Santa Terezinha neighborhood, a favela cluster. To reduce infant and maternal mortality and promote early child development, the city also adapted a state program called Mãe Coruja, or Mother Owl, which had been originally designed to serve the rural poor. Beginning in 2013, the program opened 10 health clinics that reached small cohorts of expectant mothers from impoverished neighborhoods. Teams of health-care workers made home visits and held group meetings focused on strengthening the bonds between mother and child. The teams also helped maintain regular schedules of well-child checkups through children’s first few years. At the time, the program was reaching about 5,800 women and a little more than 3,600 children from birth to three years of age.

In addition, Recife had a heightened consciousness about early childhood development because of its unwanted role as ground zero in Brazil’s 2015–16 Zika virus crisis.<sup>6</sup> The disease had received worldwide attention for its frightening linkage to microcephaly, a condition that left some infants with abnormally small heads and severe developmental deficiencies. Dr. Jailson Correia, a professor of pediatrics specializing in infectious diseases who served as Julio’s secretary of health, said it had become apparent that hundreds of other children born to infected mothers also were suffering from developmental impairments even though they did not display such obvious symptoms. Jorge Vieira, secretary of planning, administration, and personnel management, said



such concerns encouraged citizens in Recife to be receptive to programs that addressed the needs of young children.

The mayor saw Urban95 as a promising way to extend existing programs in areas that were usually hard to reach. Nonetheless, several potential implementation challenges could easily scuttle the Urban95 plans, such as difficult terrain in target areas, public distrust of government, limited capacity for effective coordination across municipal departments, a sharply constrained budget, and whether future mayors would remain committed to the goals and approach.

First, questions of scope and cost arose from the geographies of the neighborhoods in Recife where children faced the sort of difficult conditions that the mayor's new focus on early childhood sought to address. The municipal



Figure 2: Hillside neighborhood of Alto Santa Terezinha.  
Credit: Bill Steiden

government had identified 72 Zonas Especial de Interesse Social—Special Zones of Social Interest, or low-income informal settlements—and more than 500 Comunidades de Interesse Social—Communities of Social Interest—that were at risk of experiencing the effects of poverty and neglect.<sup>7</sup>

Among these were not only hillside favelas (figure 2) but also communities of rickety stilt houses, or *palafitas*, along the riverbanks (figure 3). An estimated 94,000 children from ages three and younger lived in these precarious neighborhoods.<sup>8</sup> And even though long-term residents of those informal settlements had some property rights under Brazilian law, new residents were continually arriving from the countryside, seeking better access to jobs and services and bringing with them little in the way of assets.

Second, Julio had to contend with public distrust of government and politicians on the parts of both residents of those zones and taxpayers in other parts of the city. Guilherme Cavalcanti, director of public-private urban planning initiative Agência Recife para Inovação e Estratégia (ARIES), who attended the Harvard program with the mayor,



Figure 3: Riverside community of stilt houses in Recife.  
Credit: Bill Steiden

said that in poor areas of the city, such distrust “came from a long line of [politicians’] exploiting a public service for specific political needs.” Confidence in politicians also was low because of a series of national corruption scandals, and although the state of Pernambuco, not the city, controlled law enforcement,

residents of poor neighborhoods were even more skeptical of government because of their difficult relations with the police.

Third, the city had struggled to manage cross-department collaboration in the past, such as when the World Bank loaned Recife US\$47 million in 2007 to improve infrastructure and living conditions along the Capibaribe River, a central but neglected waterway in a city known as the “Venice of Brazil.” The bank helped the city build its management capacity for complex tasks such as relocating residents around the site of a planned bridge that would connect an impoverished neighborhood to a more affluent one, with the expectation of creating employment opportunities. But the early phases of the project did not succeed. In 2013, early in Julio’s first term, the bank canceled the project, with many of its objectives unmet. Independent evaluators said the World Bank had “misjudged the capacity of the municipality to manage the detailed design and costing process. Thus its multi-sector focus (urban management, environment, and income generation) was too ambitious.”<sup>9</sup>

In addition, the early-childhood-development focus of the Urban95 approach was not a natural fit for all of the city departments that had to be involved in a broad range of projects aimed at transforming the urban landscape—and with the youngest residents in mind. “The people who are more involved, like those in health care, social care, education—of course they get [it],” said Vieira, who had worked with Julio in the state government and later became lead coordinator of the effort. “But mobility, infrastructure—they worry about concrete, tarmac.” Diego Garcez, who was with public-private urban planning organization AIRES at the time, said the typical response among city employees was, “That’s a good idea, but it won’t work.”

To make matters more difficult, the city had to contend with tightened financial constraints. At the national level, both the 2008 global recession and Brazil’s 2014 economic crisis had hit hard. The country’s GDP growth per capita had fallen to 2% in 2013 from more than 6% in 2010—and then turned negative.<sup>10</sup> In Brazil’s federal system, municipalities funded their activities through a combination of local taxes and block grants from the central and state governments. “Rich states are broke. Some rich cities are broke,” Vieira said. Recife was a capital in Brazil’s northeast—historically among Brazil’s poorest regions—and it had felt the pinch. Vieira said Recife had managed to stay afloat in the crisis because of strict financial management, but any new initiatives had to start small and secure additional funding from outside sources.

Finally, sustainability was uncertain. Because of term limits, Julio would leave office in 2020, and the program’s continuation would depend in part on how well municipal civil servants took the effort to heart. In Brazil at that time, mayors controlled the appointments of most of the administrative staff, including department heads; and in some departments, only 30% of city workers would remain in place after an election. Not surprisingly, such administrative turnover often diminished institutional memory and weakened government commitment.

## FRAMING A RESPONSE

Upon returning to Recife from Harvard in March 2017, Julio began assembling a management team to prepare a plan he would present at a follow-up workshop in São Paulo. Of Recife’s 15 municipal departments (exhibit 1), he chose as team members the leaders of 10, including those of health, education, planning, social development, and urban security. He also included Cavalcanti, the director of ARIES, who had attended the same seminar, and chose planning secretary Vieira to head the group.

The management team sought to apply Urban95 principles, including the idea of establishing children’s priority zones geared to the needs of young children and their families. The team designed a pilot project that would test how to best create safer routes for young children and their parents to reach essential services; provide open spaces for children to encounter nature and engage in unstructured play; and link caregivers to programs aimed at strengthening the ties between children and their parents—all key elements of the concept. If the pilot succeeded, the city could adapt the idea to other low-income neighborhoods with similar needs and, ultimately, implement the Urban95 principles citywide.



Figure 4. Income distribution of Ipatinga and surrounding area.  
Credit: ARIES/City of Recife

A riverside neighborhood in Recife’s Ipatinga neighborhood would be the first site. The team chose it for several reasons. The community was one of the poorest in the city in terms of average monthly income (figure 4) and the eighth most violent. A high concentration of schools and youths in the area would enable the project to benefit a comparatively large number of children and their



## Box 2. Early childhood development in Recife's 500<sup>th</sup>-anniversary goals

An ARIES-published guide to the goals for Recife's 500th anniversary in 2037, entitled *Recife 500 anos*, included the following statement about early childhood development:

“Transforming Recife begins with change in the way we take care of our children. Our city must provide conditions for entire future generations to receive full attention and access to full development, from gestation to six years of age—so-called early childhood.

“Investing in early childhood means reducing inequality in the future, increasing income, promoting gender equality, and reducing prejudice as well as bringing a number of other direct benefits to public health and equal opportunity. Gathering, reviving, and reinventing the city involve pursuing a public city that promotes universal accessibility, starting with children.

“Promoting a public city means allowing children to play on the street in safe and attractive public spaces and byways, promoting learning, and stimulating cognitive development. Recife must guarantee that all children have the right to the city, with diversity and possibilities of connections between these spaces for themselves and their families. Our city must ensure education, health, social care, and leisure for early childhood.”

Portuguese-language website for the 500th-anniversary celebration, accessed at <http://www.rec500.org.br/recife-500-anos/>.

caregivers. In addition, the riverfront was already slated for improvements as part of planning for the city's 500th anniversary celebration, which ARIES was managing (text box 2).

The project area centered on two schools, a day care center, and a health center (figure 5). The proposal embodied three main elements:

- *Safe play space* in that the plan called for establishing a plaza with seating, greenery, and recreational equipment where younger children could play and their parents could engage in programs on early childhood development. Because of limited room in the densely populated area, the planners added a second plaza.
- *Improved sidewalks and street crossings* linking the schools to the plazas
- *A public relations campaign* that aimed at neighborhood residents to promote the concept and importance of early childhood development.



Figure 5: Intervention areas in Ipatinga. Circled areas on right are schools. Circled areas on left are plazas. Connecting routes are shown in yellow. Credit: City of Recife



In short order, the city decided to add a pilot site in the Alto Santa Terezinha neighborhood, where ARIES had already started to build a relationship with the city's first COMPAZ center (figure 6). Recife's COMPAZ



Figure 6: COMPAZ Alto Santa Terezinha and Iputinga.  
Credit: ARIES/City of Recife

centers—a second opened in 2017 in the western neighborhood of Cordeiro—contained conflict-mediation offices, a library, a psychologist's office, health services, a pool, and even a martial arts training facility. The centers, which the city dubbed citizenship factories, also regularly held community activities, workshops, and sports games to build trust between members of the community, reduce violence, and promote healthy living practices. A 10-kilometer drive from Iputinga, the steep site at Alto Santa Terezinha posed special mobility and accessibility challenges, yet the facilities clustered at COMPAZ regularly drew parents with children in tow—an obvious constituency for early-childhood-development services that the centers could provide.

The pilot would adapt the COMPAZ center in Alto Santa Terezinha to the needs of families with young children (figure 7). Plans included developing activities for parents and children and making COMPAZ and the infrastructure of its surrounding area more accessible to them. In addition, the pilot would train high school graduates from the surrounding neighborhood to serve as so-called peace agents, who would visit families and promote participation as well as help coordinate activities at the centers. Leading the effort was Secretary of Urban Security Murilo Cavalcanti (no relationship to Guilherme Cavalcanti), who had modeled the Alto Santa Terezinha COMPAZ center on a similar effort in Medellín, Colombia. ARIES would manage the funding for the project.



Figure 7: COMPAZ Center, Alto Santa Terezinha.  
Credit: Bill Steiden

In addition to preparing to launch a pilot, the mayor also aimed to take some additional steps. One was to set up a system that would enable the city to make use of external funding to help implement initiatives. Another was to encourage department secretaries to propose ways of promoting early child development within their regular activities. A third was to develop a way to monitor implementation and outcomes.

The city vested responsibility for the proposal and the program in ARIES, the public-private urban planning partnership with which it had a separate contract to develop a shared vision of what Recife wanted to achieve before it celebrated in 2037 the 500th anniversary of its founding. Since 2016, ARIES executive director Cavalcanti had been exploring early childhood development as a way to bring different sectors and communities together around aspects of the 500th-anniversary plan. He said his interest in the subject and his contact with the Bernard van Leer Foundation had led to his invitation to the program at Harvard that the mayor and Dr. Mello had attended.

ARIES would carry out initial surveys to learn the needs of the residents in the targeted neighborhoods. It would also train personnel, manage contracting for the construction of sidewalks and public squares, coordinate informational programs about early-childhood-development topics, and facilitate neighborhood relations in the pilot program areas.

**Table 1. Urban95 Commitments, ARIES and Co-institutional investors**

Action item/date	First 3 months	Months 4-6	Within 18 months
Establish formal partnership between ARIES and the city government.	Due		
Establish partnership with two universities to manage monitoring & impact assessment			Final report due
Carry out workshops in the community to design interventions		Due	
Campaign to promote importance of early childhood development			Due
Urban Intervention Kit for Early Childhood			Due
Design furniture in collaboration with communities			Due
Hire construction company to carry out planned modification of streets and squares			Due
<b>Co-institutional investments</b>			
2017 city investment in play areas for young children, Capibaribe Park Project			
2018 ARIES-managed urban plans project and Global Environmental			
Global Environmental Facility (World Bank) to create filtering gardens, green square with Urban95 orientation, lighting			
Introduce Mother Owl program in Iputinga.			
ARIES to promote early childhood campaign through city-run Social Assistance Reference Centers (105,397 beneficiary families use these)			
Second pilot at COMPAZ Center			

As a partner for outreach to families with young children, ARIES had three especially valuable attributes. First, it was nonpartisan and already had knowledge and networks it could use to enlist citizen participation. Second, it had acquired experience in hosting focus groups, technical workshops, seminars, and interaction through online social networks. And third, because ARIES had a schedule of activities planned through at least 2037, it would outlive Julio's

administration and could help ensure that future mayors kept support for young families on the agenda.

Early the next year, as activity was already unfolding, the Bernard van Leer Foundation signed an agreement with ARIES, the city's partner, to provide US\$900,000. In addition to supporting the pilot projects, the grant laid out important metrics and targets for the effort, such as the number of children and caregivers reached by the interventions and the number of managers and supervisors trained, as well as completion dates for key action items (table 1).

## GETTING DOWN TO WORK

In September 2017, the mayor called together the management team he had selected to participate the early childhood initiative and told the municipal secretaries that the gathering was “the most important meeting you will attend during my term.” He explained why he thought early childhood development should become the number one priority for the entire municipality, and he communicated some of the evidence that had shaped his own ideas. Vieira also spoke.

Then Julio turned the meeting over to Anna Maria Chiesa, a representative of the Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation, which had helped initiate the seminar at Harvard and was a leading force in Brazilian early childhood programs. Chiesa walked the group through more evidence of the causal linkages between child nutrition, human interaction, health care, and long-term developmental outcomes, as well as evidence of the detrimental effects of poorly planned urban environments on young families.

For the next two months, Chiesa worked closely with the city by assisting in the development of the legal framework that would enable the city to pay for the new programs and by providing two additional orientation sessions for the secretaries. One of these sessions introduced the principles of early childhood development in more depth, and the other brought the secretaries together to discuss strategy, division of responsibilities, and coordination.

In a further team-building measure, the secretaries of education, urban innovation, and health, along with the executive secretary of urban security, the department's second in command, attended the 2018 program at Harvard. Because they were key cross-sector players in implementing the new focus, they would get the same sort of grounding in the concepts the mayor had received the previous year.

### *Creating the legal framework*

As in other Brazilian cities, Recife's city council had to approve all spending. The early-childhood-development initiative was no exception and would require enabling legislation—a legal framework. At the Harvard meeting, Julio had produced a rough draft, which he then asked the department secretaries to refine.

The process would unfold gradually—during a period of almost a year—as other aspects of the pilot projects funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation

via ARIES got under way. Chiesa, who worked with city as a consultant, assisted the municipality in preparing the legislation, which sought to enshrine early-childhood-development considerations as a factor that would continue influencing city policy beyond Julio's term in office. The introductory section echoed the language of the national early childhood legislation. And other sections, specific to Recife:

- Provided early childhood development efforts with a claim on any city funding for children's programs.
- Specified the responsibilities of each of the secretariats involved in the initiative.
- Confirmed the need for an intersectoral steering committee that would be headed by the mayor, would comprise the secretaries involved in the early childhood initiative, would meet quarterly, and would oversee coordination of the program.
- Established an executive committee made up of representatives of the secretariats involved in the initiative to manage the day-to-day needs of the program. (Under Vieira's leadership, it would meet bimonthly.)
- Created an expanded (extended) committee to monitor and evaluate the results of the policy as well as make proposals for it. The committee was to meet semiannually and comprise "public agencies and civil society entities working on the theme of early childhood" at the invitation of the city and the Municipal Council for the Defense and Promotion of the Rights of Children and Adolescents of Recife, a long-established board made up of municipal secretaries and representatives of private and quasi-public groups working on childhood issues.
- Empowered the administration to monitor the growth and development of children and their use of municipal services.<sup>11</sup>

The bill's passage was expected because the mayor's coalition held 30 of the 39 seats on the council. Still, in May 2018, Julio's administration took advantage of Recife's fourth annual Baby Week—a project that had emerged from a partnership between Recife and UNICEF and that focused on promoting infant health—to campaign for the proposed text. Dr. Mello, who had an office in city hall, in line with tradition, said that secretaries in the municipality held "three days of discussion with civil society, churches, and council members."

To enhance the legitimacy of the proposal, the mayor secured endorsement of the legislation from Vital Didonet, a Brazilian international leader in the early-childhood-development field who had helped in the drafting and passage of Brazil's National Legal Framework for Early Childhood in 2016. The council approved the law 38 to 1. On May 25, 2018, Julio signed the Legal Framework for Early Childhood into law.

#### *Modifying existing programs*

When he first convened department secretaries to focus on the new initiative, the mayor asked each of those colleagues to consider how to



incorporate the concept into existing municipal programs. Health secretary Correia said the mayor's focus helped him "think outside the box in terms of understanding the role of urban planning in the development of children," focusing on how to prioritize young children within the city's health-care centers and the Mother Owl program. For example, he said he had observed that prenatal services attracted more participation than postnatal workshops did, with only 30 to 40% of mothers continuing to visit the clinics regularly after their babies' births. That was in part because of the difficulties mothers faced when traveling to the clinics with infants and toddlers and in part because the health clinics usually were not child friendly. To correct that problem, Correia and his department created small play areas in the clinics, with books and toys, colorfully painted walls, and ramps for wheelchairs and strollers. There were, though, some unanticipated challenges—among them that children would sometimes take home with them the books and toys from the play areas. But health clinic staff replenished the supply with old toys and unwanted books from their own homes. And although postnatal participation in the program continued to lag, Correia said the play areas would become standard parts of new and renovated clinics—and their effect on participation measured—in an ongoing effort to reverse the trend.

Urban Innovation Secretary Tullio Ponzi's department also incorporated the focus on early child development into existing program Mais Vida nos Morros—More Life in the Hills—which had begun in 2016. More Life in the Hills aimed to change a culture of littering by improving urban environments. Together with neighborhood residents, municipal employees cleaned abandoned lots, planted trees, and painted drab concrete walls; and the program had engaged nongovernmental groups, including community organizations.

Initially, the effort met with mixed reaction from community members in the Urban95 priority neighborhoods. Residents did not always see the value of the More Life in the Hills cleanup work, and they often bickered about who got to use the renewed spaces. But Ponzi said the addition of a child-centered element began to change attitudes as his staff conducted door-to-door visits with families to get a sense of what children wanted in their neighborhoods. In some, children wanted soccer fields, and in others, they wanted playgrounds—projects that his team began to build. Ponzi's department also set up community children's play and art groups, and in one of the most visible transformations, the department painted enlarged versions of children's artwork on neighborhood walls. Ponzi said he believed that approach gave both children and parents a sense of ownership of the neighborhoods they lived in. He said he found that by engaging children, he encountered less community resistance to new urban projects, and adult residents saw the value of spaces meant for children.

In the education department, Executive Secretary Rogerio Morais said about 30 teachers in city schools in the pilot project neighborhoods who worked with children from infancy to age 5 received training in the Urban95 principles. They responded with some remarkably simple and intuitive changes. Where

once teachers had stood *before* classes of preschoolers, they now sat *among* them, so as to be at eye level with their pupils. For the same reason, they lowered wall hangings, such as alphabet posters and calendars. Still, even for educators, there was a learning curve. Eighteen months into the program, the education department was preparing to launch training on more-complicated concepts, such as how to talk to parents about the importance of showing their children affection at home. “We are used to seeing health campaigns about [children’s] exercise,” Morais said. “We are not used to seeing public campaigns to give them affection.”

Gradually, other departments began to offer proposals about what they could do within their existing programs, taking inspiration from some of the first-movers.

### *Coordinating within the government*

As departments began incorporating early childhood development into their thinking, and as pilot programs got under way, the need for coordination rose. For example, the ARIES-managed improvement of sidewalks in the Iputinga neighborhood had to take place around an ongoing public works department sewer project. Responsibility for coordinating among the 10 departments on the management team fell to planning secretary Vieira. There was also a steering committee headed by the mayor, which met quarterly, heard presentations from departments, and reviewed goals.

At weekly management team meetings, members presented their work, including a review of past actions and a report on current activities. Vieira said the meetings encouraged the development of relationships among colleagues and departments, which then made reaching out to and coordinating with other departments less difficult. Vieira held the meetings in the conference room in the mayor’s office, where there were three visual monitors—one showing goals met or in progress, another displaying slides from departmental presentations, and the third continuously recording minutes and action items as the meeting progressed. Each department took turns following up on action items and logging the meeting minutes.

In addition, Julio monitored progress on the adoption of the early-childhood-development focus as part of his regular status meetings with department heads. He devoted his Tuesdays to the meetings, speaking with the secretaries individually on a schedule that guaranteed each would have at least one of the sessions with him monthly. A week in advance of the next scheduled meeting, Vieira’s staff would contact the secretaries scheduled to attend, and they would prepare PowerPoint-like, templated presentations based on the previous month’s action items so that each secretary could report on progress. Vieira said that such performance-based management meant the mayor could keep the secretaries focused on the new early childhood priority.

In connection with these presentations, each department would track indicators related to early childhood development. For education, the metrics included preschool students’ progress on motor skills and use of sentences in

conversation; urban security reported on the number of young children coming to COMPAZ and how many were newcomers. It also kept track of families with young children who had not visited the center for at least two months, with an eye toward identifying obstacles to participation.

For some departments, cooperation with other city divisions on early childhood development required only minor adjustments. Morais said schools, for instance, already were accustomed to providing space for after-hours, social-services-related community gatherings in neighborhoods that lacked other available meeting places. The schools also had a practice of opening their playgrounds for weekend use, which helped meet the Urban95 priority of providing children opportunities for unstructured play and access to open space.

But for other departments, the new cooperation represented a big change. Women's Secretary Cida Pedrosa said she and her staff had long encountered indifference from other city agencies when seeking help on women's interest projects. But with the mayor's new emphasis, they were getting positive responses to requests connected to early childhood development, such as services for pregnant women. "Before, it would be very hard," Pedrosa said. "Now, we feel more welcomed by other secretaries and departments of the city. They are more receptive to the demands of women—especially when the women were victims of violence or are pregnant." In particular, she cited the creation of a task force that employed both her staff and the urban security department's municipal guards to protect pregnant women who were in danger of abuse or violence.

Another example of improved coordination occurred in connection with the Iputinga neighborhood, where ARIES was building a plaza that would provide open space for young children and then host activities geared toward them. With a phone call to the secretary of infrastructure, ARIES chief Cavalcanti coordinated the building schedule with that of a waterline installation and a paving project in the same area so that the building schedule would not clash with the new sidewalk that ARIES had planned.

#### *Building neighborhood engagement*

For ARIES, the pilot projects' initial step was to tailor any interventions to neighborhoods' differing needs—a major reason for the selection of both hilly Alto Santa Terezinha, with its established COMPAZ center, and the riverside community in Iputinga, which lacked such a ready-made base for Urban95 programs. To do that, ARIES had to consider not only the topography but also the varying needs of the residents in each area. In addition, gauging and responding to local preferences were ways to gain community involvement and foster a sense of neighborhood ownership of the projects. Building community capacity to care for the plazas, sidewalks, and other child-friendly areas would keep maintenance costs down and become a prerequisite for replicating the interventions in other areas (text box 3).

ARIES started its engagement work in February 2018 by holding focus groups and community meetings in each neighborhood to explain the Urban95

### Box 3. ARIES responsibilities

In Iputinga, ARIES’s responsibilities included launching a communication campaign to promote early childhood development. By taking that action, ARIES was saying it aimed to “reduce the perception of fear [of violence in the neighborhood], increase the number of pregnant women who have quick prenatal access, improve access to health care for families with young children,” expand kindergartens and preschool facilities, increase access to outdoor recreation, reduce traffic accidents, and increase the use of public facilities.

In Alto Santa Terezinha, ARIES was responsible for three areas.

- It made the facilities more child friendly by adding baby changing tables in bathrooms and creating a playground. Aligned with that investment, the urban security department set aside a corner of the library it operated in COMPAZ for books appropriate to preschoolers, and it installed a section of padded flooring where preschool children could gather for weekly story times. Separately, there was instruction for parents about methods of reading and the benefits of reading to their young children.
- It created a 300-square-meter child-priority zone by widening sidewalks, installing stair rails, adding stop signs, and planting community gardens. Its third commitment was to train “a youth group of community peace agents to spread the word about the importance of early childhood development and invite families with young children to participate in COMPAZ activities.”
- Throughout the project, it also held events, seminars, and workshops to promote early childhood development, thereby building community engagement.

concept and learn what changes the residents wanted and would support. André Arruda, an ARIES designer who helped organize and run those meetings in the Iputinga neighborhood, said it was a challenge to keep residents focused on the idea that the spaces and walkways the project would create, while serving everybody, had to be designed primarily with the needs of preschool-age children in mind.

ARIES also had to maintain close personal relationships with the entire neighborhood around the intervention areas, paying special attention to

influential families and community leaders. To ensure that local families trusted ARIES and that ARIES employees were safe in potentially dangerous areas, local teachers sometimes accompanied them to the interactions—another example of intersectoral cooperation.

In the Iputinga neighborhood, the city’s human rights secretariat held four meetings involving more than 100 families to launch a project called Geração Afeto—Affection Generation—which encouraged the development of stronger, more-loving bonds between parents and children. The Urban95 pilot project in Alto Santa Terezinha, with its COMPAZ center, hosted more than 300 families for 15 sessions that included early-childhood-development information and encouragement of sorority between mothers of young children.

After the meetings, ARIES set to work on developing a quantitative survey so it could gauge the needs of each family in the intervention areas and identify any obstacles that made access to government services difficult for those with young children. In Iputinga, ARIES turned to the Federal University of Pernambuco to help develop and conduct the surveys. Ana Roberta Siqueira Souto, ARIES project manager, said the surveys underscored the complexities of



working in informal neighborhoods. Residents were suspicious of government, she said, and were concerned that, despite promises of anonymity, the university students employed to administer the surveys would report to the authorities any potentially incriminating disclosures, such as admissions of drug and alcohol use. Former ARIES project manager Garcez said some residents were “too scared to open the door” to the surveyors.

As part of the Alto Santa Terezinha pilot project, ARIES had recruited and trained recent high school graduates from within the favelas—the peace agents—to conduct surveys and carry out other tasks. To overcome surveying problems in Iputinga, ARIES used the young graduates to conduct the surveys there as well. Souto said that employing people who shared the residents’ experiences and social perspectives reduced suspicions, and the peace agents were able to complete the job. By January 2019, ARIES had ended the research phase in Iputinga.

The surveys covered not only the needs and desires of families but also of children themselves. In a group session, researchers asked 30 four- and five-year-olds to point out positive and negative aspects of the routes they followed to and from school. In other sessions, more than 100 marked on panels images of the things they most liked to see while moving around their neighborhoods, as well as their favorite playground equipment and the activities they enjoyed in public spaces. To provide a more intimate perspective, the investigators videotaped a few of the children on their journeys to school and back. The findings from the research included a preference for lights and trash cans along walkways and for slides, teeter-totters, and play structures on playgrounds.

ARIES determined through the research that:

- About 3,500 children aged four years or younger who lived in the Iputinga neighborhood and 8,700 in the area served by the COMPAZ center in Alto Santa Terezinha.
- There was a significant perception of violence because of drug trafficking and police actions against dealers.
- Many children had nowhere safe or healthy to play and spent much of their time at home in front of electronic devices.

With those findings in mind and with the information about the things children and other community members wanted to see, ARIES began planning and construction. In Iputinga, the work included two plazas where children could play outdoors and they and their parents could participate in early-childhood-related programs. Arruda said the city already owned the two small plots and was using them for worker parking, truck parking, and storage of construction supplies in connection with the neighborhood’s infrastructure projects. The smaller plot also served as an informal dumping ground for residents’ trash, although that did not deter residents, who had few other options, from congregating there—one of the reasons that persuading them to set it aside for the use of young children had been difficult.

In Alto Santa Terezinha, plans called for conversion of an empty space on the COMPAZ grounds into a plaza geared to young children and renovation of

a walkway connecting the center to the community's schools and main bus stop. The work included the installation of handrails along a steep stairway, street lighting, and, as in Iputinga, a raised crossing to increase safety and mobility for pedestrians navigating the busy street that separated the center from the walkway.

ARIES and COMPAZ offered workshops promoting early childhood development for parents in the Alto Santa Terezinha area and in December 2018 held the first edition of what was planned to be an annual Early Childhood Day. The event proved to be so popular with parents that ARIES decided to make it monthly, Souto said.

In Iputinga, despite its initial difficulties in winning residents' support for projects aimed primarily at young children, ARIES got a pleasant surprise. After various factors held up construction of the smaller of the two plazas there, known in the neighborhood as the Water Drop because of its tearlike shape, the residents—now eager for the improvements—began, unprompted, to build the park on their own. They made a border for the periphery with brightly painted old tires and empty soft-drink bottles; built benches, chairs, and a table; donated plants; and put up a homemade sign forbidding the use of the park's waste can for household garbage (figure 8). Souto said that when one of the residents ignored the warning, neighbors deposited the trash back on that resident's



Figure 8. The Water Drop plaza in Iputinga, which residents built largely by themselves amid construction delays. Credit: Bill Steiden

doorstep with a stern warning not to do it again. A city council member representing the area pitched in with some playground equipment and a pole-mounted light so the park could be used through the early dusk of the equatorial region.

Nevertheless, construction delays continued because of problems that included bidding difficulties, a halt to public works during the 45-day 2018 state and federal election campaign period (a norm in many parts of Brazil), and the lengthy

process of collating survey results (which Souto said took longer than anticipated because the questions were open-ended). As of mid 2019, work was still planned or under way in both Alto Santa Terezinha and Iputinga. Speeding up the process could be perilous. Natan Nigro, cofounder of public interest urban architecture group AtelierVivo, said ARIES had engaged the firm to aid in the design of the larger of the two Iputinga plazas. A rushed planning period that allowed for only a day and a half of consultations with the neighborhood

led to the construction of a piece of play equipment that turned out to be inappropriate for the very young children the intervention targeted, he said. When a child playing on it fell and was injured, the structure was removed.

#### *Monitoring and managing data*

In order to make goal setting, monitoring, and cooperation less difficult, the management team had to have access to high-quality data. Part of ARIES's contract with the city was to build an electronic data dashboard that would track all aspects of the pilot projects and other early childhood efforts as the initiative scaled up.

Work on the app was still in progress in May 2019, with completion expected by year-end. Souto said it would include timelines, survey results, and impact indicators and be updated as new results became available. Among those indicators would be created ones such as the fun index, which tracked how often children got to engage in unstructured play and which showed which research was a major factor in the development of cognitive abilities and problem-solving and social skills. "We saw that when caregivers use drugs or alcohol, the fun index was low," Souto said. "We can see that targeting drug-control programs would make children's lives better."

Other indicators would include the frequency of caregivers' reporting they had played with or read to their children, the percentage of mothers practicing exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of their children's lives, the proportion of children and pregnant women whose daily diets included fruits and vegetables and a minimum of soft drinks and candy, the amount of time children spent playing outdoors, how often mothers met and interacted outside the home, and basic child development measures such as height, weight, and health.

Vieira, who headed all data management and data-tracking efforts for the city, said the dashboard, in turn, would become part of a wider, city-run mobile application built on a locally produced performance management software platform called FACILIT. He had helped implement the platform for the state government while in the planning department there with Julio, and the state later shared it with the city. Vieira added that the app, slated to be available on city employees' smartphones and tablets by the end of 2019, would include a georeferencing center that classified statistics for each administrative area in the city and tracked the progress of a wide variety of other projects the municipality was implementing. He said the scientific underpinnings for early childhood development were powerful, "but making people guide their practice with those in mind, I think it will happen only when they see the results. It will happen only when they experience and see the good it brings. . . . The good examples should be the main drivers of persuasion."

One thing Vieira said the app would not be able to do—and which would have to remain a long-term goal for the city—was to provide instantly accessible information about the services various city departments were providing for individual families and children. "Finance, health, education—my software

doesn't talk to them," he said. "It's a challenge. We haven't gotten to that step yet."

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

ARIES officials said that among the main obstacles they encountered in pilot projects was the difficulty of navigating the unexpectedly complicated social and political networks of the informal neighborhoods—especially in Iputinga. Divisions of influence, tenure of residency, politics, and even social and economic class ran through the community, requiring large investments of staff time to overcome and smooth the way for the interventions.

In one case, a community leader who felt he had been left out of the loop sought to halt work on one of the plazas until ARIES director Cavalcanti heard him out and explained the project. And although residents had displayed a sense of ownership when they pitched in to build one of the plazas and protect it from littering, others seemed to have little regard for improvements in the community's infrastructure. "People don't realize the value of the sidewalk and its importance for mobility and safety. And then we'd [say], 'Hey, but isn't that obvious?' No, it's not—not for them," Cavalcanti said. He and the team at ARIES had to find new ways of articulating the shared benefits of services such as sewage, sidewalks, and lighting that they had assumed everyone would see as desirable. "Poverty," Cavalcanti said, "has a different way of dealing with public space, which we must respect and try to learn from."

Those cultural differences manifested themselves in several difficult trials. ARIES employees noted that after the addition of new sidewalks, for instance, residents began co-opting them for personal use—turning them into verandas, parking spaces, and storage areas—thereby narrowing the new public space and negating much of the intended benefit. Vandalism, too, threatened the effectiveness of the project. In one example, ARIES planted trees after residents said in surveys that they enjoyed trees for their aesthetic value and the shade they provided. Cavalcanti said some people, however, resented having to sweep up fallen leaves, and they destroyed the saplings.

Misunderstandings also could arise in the heated atmosphere of neighborhood political rivalries. In one case, a family removed a pile of sand designated for construction of one of the plazas. It appeared to be theft or politically related sabotage, but ARIES designer Arruda said that when confronted, the family explained that because of construction delays, the sand, sitting unused, was being tracked into their house, so they had eliminated the nuisance. Arruda said there also were incidents of rough treatment of playground equipment by older children, including breaking a teeter-totter in the Water Drop plaza, that could appear at first to be vandalism.

Overcoming the various community rifts became a time-consuming ordeal for ARIES. Two city council members represented the Iputinga neighborhood. One was the president of the council, who was from Julio's party, and the other was from the opposition. "They are always fighting," said Arruda. "And we are



right in the middle of this fight. . . . We had to work hard to get them to understand we were nonpartisan.”

Likewise, Souto said, ARIES had to guard against council members and would-be councillors who wanted to tout the project for political purposes. “They all fight to say, ‘It’s mine, I did it.’ So they have a lot of disputes because of that,” she said. “People complain a lot because they want to get the credit. It causes a lot of conflict, and we must be there, all the time, talking, explaining the project. André . . . is constantly having to be very patient and talk. We have to take this seriously because these people can spread misinformation.”

Arruda said he believed that that was an important part of what ARIES was learning in the pilot: how to involve people from the beginning and make sure they remained engaged. “Families have to see [the program is] *for* them and *through* them.”

For the mayor and the management team, a major obstacle involved securing adequate funding for expanding the effort. The slow pace of recovery from Brazil’s financial crisis had defied expectations. Vieira lamented that the scarcity of funding reduced the team’s ability to work quickly and begin expanding the effort to the whole city. Still, the team received a boost in the form of a federal grant that would facilitate the construction of more COMPAZ centers—places that could provide new neighborhood footholds for early-childhood-development-related facilities and programs.

## ASSESSING RESULTS

With the pilot projects incomplete and the city government still acclimating to the early childhood focus as of May 2019, it was far too soon for ARIES and the management team to draw conclusions about the broad impact of their work. They could tell which benchmarks they had met on time and which were behind schedule, but only fragments of information about numbers of young families reached with specific services and other usage data were available. The effect on outcomes—on improvements in psychosocial skills or early academic performance—would take years to materialize.

Collecting and managing the data required to evaluate results proved more difficult than anticipated during the program’s first 18 months. All three types of data tracking—implementation progress, outputs (such as the number of caregivers and children served), and outcomes (such as levels of caregiver-child interaction)—proved hard to execute. The first was the easiest, because it was possible to assemble the information from department presentations at regular check-in meetings. The second could be easy or difficult depending on the type of output tracked. Numbers of play spaces or meters of sidewalk were no problem to monitor but counting numbers of visits to clustered services or numbers of playground users required the cooperation of personnel from a wider variety of organizations as well as special efforts to sample activity levels. The third type of tracking was important for creating a baseline, but the research required was more arduous. ARIES had proposed to partner with local universities, but this arrangement was behind schedule.

Data collection was not as straightforward an exercise as it might have seemed. Some types of people proved more adept than others at getting the information needed. The young high school graduates from the favelas, called *peace agents*, performed better in completing surveys for ARIES in the Iputinga area after distrustful residents turned away the university students who had initially tried to perform the task. Paid minimum wage, the peace agents—who, having grown up in similar areas, could more readily relate to the Iputinga and Alto Santa Terezinha neighborhoods—continued to help on assigned projects, including mapping the locations of homes with young children, monitoring usage patterns at early-childhood-development-related facilities, holding playtimes for children, and encouraging families to attend workshops and events about early childhood. ARIES project manager Souto said she believed that at least two peace agents, working part-time, would be a necessary part of any Urban95 neighborhood intervention going forward.

Nonetheless, certain aspects were coming into focus. One was how the program might scale up—at least initially. City officials and Cavalcanti, head of ARIES, acknowledged that the likeliest route—at least with regard to providing physical facilities—was to make the program an integral part of the growing COMPAZ network. In the process of working with the pilot projects, Cavalcanti said, he realized the power of strong anchor institutions and that building the project in Alto Santa Terezinha around COMPAZ was a better model for scalability than the stand-alone intervention in Iputinga. COMPAZ already had a successful approach to providing residents with accessible and safe public space. In addition, residents of Alto Santa Terezinha were familiar with COMPAZ and its purpose, and therefore they were more receptive to messages about the importance of public space and its link to early childhood development.

Plans called for a total of seven COMPAZ centers—one in each of the city's administrative districts—by the end of Julio's term. Though none were to be as large or comprehensive in their offerings as the initial two, their design would take the Urban95 guidelines into account.

Another vector for growth was to incorporate into the initiative the Mother Owl program, which served about 10,000 women—both pregnant women and women with children three years of age and under—at any given time. The plan was for the program to be in 20 locations around the city by 2020, and health secretary Correia said the early-childhood-development perspective was a logical fit—especially for the postnatal portion of the program, which he was seeking to strengthen.

Correia said the early-childhood-development pilots could help streamline the effort to scale the program by giving leaders in other communities a place to window shop and choose the measures that best suited their areas.

Souto said yet another lesson learned was the need to maintain timelines for completion of promised projects. She and Arruda, the ARIES designer who worked on the Iputinga pilot project, said the delays in the pilot projects had been costly both financially and in terms of support. In May 2019, Arruda was

scheduling yet another round of community meetings to reinforce neighborhood backing for the Iputinga project amid rising complaints about the setbacks.

Those insights and others were coming together in a guidebook ARIES was preparing for implementing the program elsewhere.

The Bernard van Leer Foundation had encouraged the city to build a broad coalition of support within the city to help sustain the Urban95 initiative beyond the end of the electoral term. The mayor and his team held off trying to build citywide engagement in extending the pilots to other neighborhoods, however. The mayor first needed systems in place and positive results and opinions from Iputinga and Alto Santa Terezinha in order to demonstrate the kinds of benefits people could expect to see and he had to have the financial resources to live up to commitments made proof of concept was important for that purpose. As a result, the program attracted little press coverage in its first two years. Inácio França, who covered city hall for independent news website Marco Zero, said he had heard of the initiative but assumed it was marginal to the mayor's main agenda. UNICEF representative Jane Santos said she knew little about the program until she visited COMPAZ and heard a presentation at the May 2019 Baby Week, an annual event the city had begun in partnership with her organization.

Others said that in Recife broad city engagement was more likely to arise from doing than from talking; publicity was not the key to building community support. Santos emphasized that people tended to reason: "If you do not get a project into my community, I'm not involved and I do not know about the program."

## REFLECTIONS

In mid 2019, still only 18 months into its planned program, Recife had gained experience that offered lessons not just for its own Urban95 management team but also for other cities interested in knowing what could shape the ability to generate initial momentum, influence the ability to coordinate across municipal departments, finance expansion, and sustain the work across electoral terms.

High-level political support was essential for initiating the program and building support within the municipal government. Recife Mayor Geraldo Julio's focus on early childhood development as a guiding principle for the city was part of a new direction in Brazil, where youth programs' previous focus had been on older children—especially adolescents—most directly at risk of violence in the nation's notorious favela neighborhoods. In March 2019, Julio could boast that "from everything I know, the highest level of commitment, involvement, and engagement with focus on early childhood in Brazil is here in Recife." Vital Didonet, a Brazilian authority on early childhood development, affirmed that he regarded Recife's administration as "politically advanced and innovative" in the field. Dr. Jailson Correia, Julio's secretary of health, and other department heads said the mayor's commitment to the program had been vital in marshaling

resources behind it. “The mayor’s leadership in facing the challenge was critical to gain people’s confidence,” Correia said.

In order to deliver quickly on its projects, the city vested responsibility for some key functions in two existing organizations. One was ARIES (the Agência Recife para Inovação e Estratégia), the public–private agency the city had chosen to implement the early childhood pilot—which acted as an innovation team and helped lift some of the load from departments that might have otherwise struggled with the extra challenge of running the pilots. The other was COMPAZ, the community peace center that already had ties with community members and could provide both a facility and services where the city could co-locate additional activities.

Coordination was still challenging, even with the structures the mayor had put in place. To achieve program benchmarks, the mayor included the ARIES director in the steering committee, appointed the secretary of planning to monitor implementation, checked on progress at least weekly, and hosted quarterly meetings of all department secretaries involved in the effort. For Recife, that arrangement provided a possible model for future endeavors. However, it was not seamless. There were delays having to do with bidding procedures, slow survey tabulation, and a deliberate pause in public works for the 2018 federal and state election campaign. The steering committee had to find a way to bootstrap around such problems in the future.

The decision to launch the pilot programs in two especially challenging locations, each with distinctive geographical constraints and low levels of trust in government, was gutsy. If the mayor and ARIES wanted quick wins, it might have been easier to start in communities that did not present these same potential obstacles. But if the point was to show it was possible to make a difference in some of the city’s toughest neighborhoods, this approach had more to offer. Other cities contemplating similar initiatives might weigh the pros and cons of these two alternative strategies differently.

Financing any effort to scale and sustain the initiative would have to contend with Brazil’s lingering recession, which limited the resources available and required creative thinking to overcome. Recife had received a boost in the form of a federal grant that would facilitate the construction of more COMPAZ centers—places that could provide new neighborhood footholds for early-childhood-development-related facilities and programs. But expanding the early childhood development program into more neighborhoods like Iputinga that lacked such centers required a greater investment in physical facilities too. The slow pace of the recovery from Brazil’s financial crisis diminished the likelihood of federal support of those costs. The outlook for federal funding was further clouded by the hostility of President Jair Bolsonaro, who took office at the beginning of 2019, to social spending.

Even Dr. Cristina Mello, an energetic and respected supporter of the early childhood initiative, acknowledged the limitations. “I’m hoping what they are doing in Iputinga they can do in other neighborhoods, but they are expensive interventions,” she said, adding that she felt it would be a mistake to try to



extend resources by cutting corners. “Right now, they do have boundaries. They can’t reach everyone. But what they can do, they will try to do the best quality projects they can,” she said. “We have to change this culture of thinking that if you’re doing something for poor people, it can be bad quality. It has to be best quality.”

Another possibility for cutting costs would be to enlist sponsors for the plazas, walkways, and other infrastructure measures, ARIES project manager Ana Roberta Siqueira Souto said. She believed a major lesson of the pilots had been to expect the unexpected, such as the neighborhood conflicts in Iputinga.

The fourth big challenge, at this stage, was to make the program sustainable in a city whose electoral turnover often led to big changes in staffing and loss of know-how. City government leaders, including Jorge Vieira, who as secretary of planning, administration, and personnel management was overseeing the program’s implementation, said they were confident it would ultimately become an institutionalized part of the city’s thinking. They pointed in part to passage of the enabling legal framework that made incorporating the early-childhood-development perspective into the city’s programs and planning an explicit responsibility of the mayor and the city secretariats involved, and they authorized the use of city funds to pay for those functions.

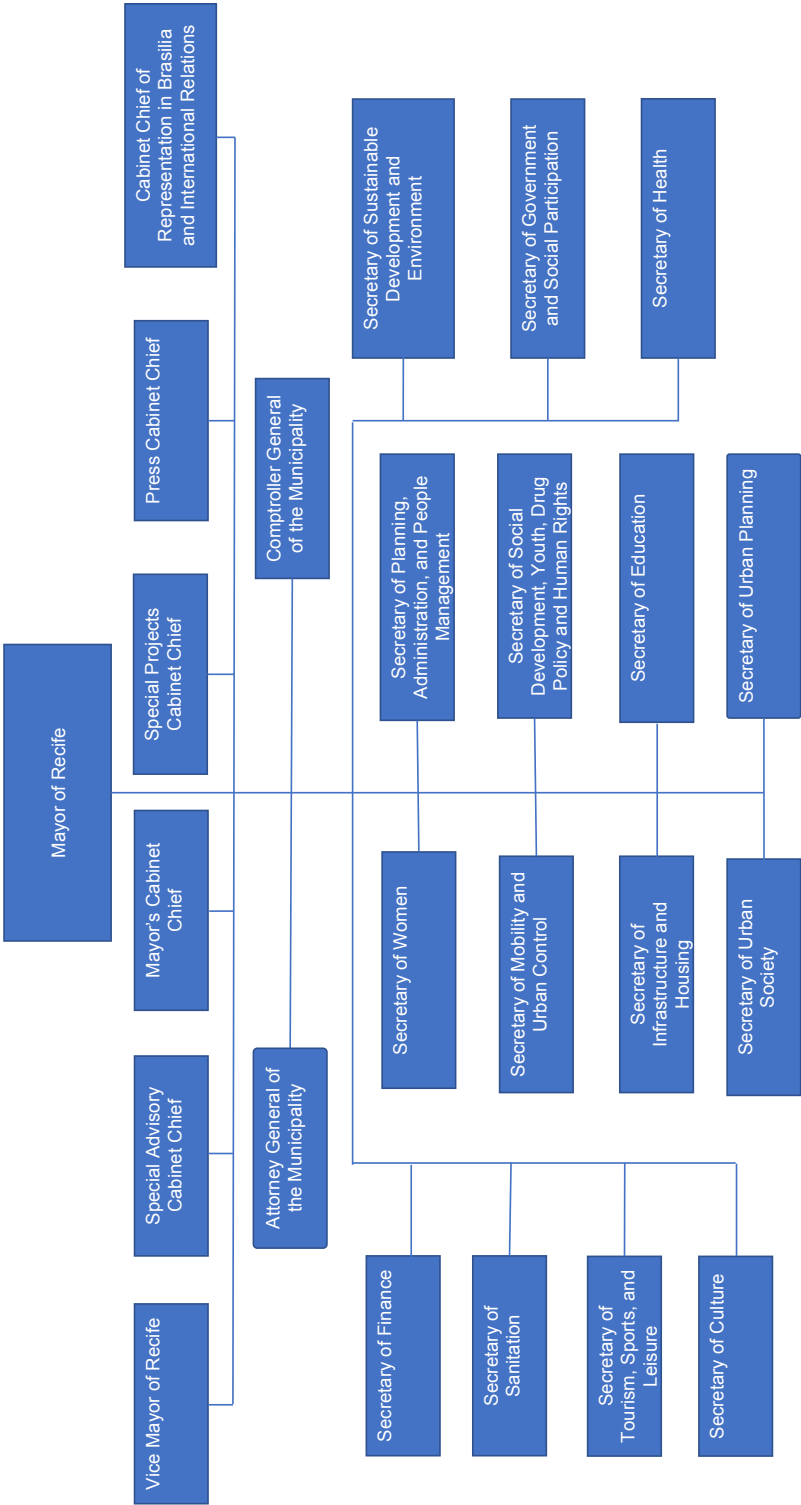
Correia, however, acknowledged that “laws can be changed.” He said he believed building broader societal support for the early childhood emphasis would be the best way to ensure that the area of early childhood development became a permanent part of city policy. At the time, support for the program was not unanimous among Recife nongovernmental leaders. Feminist activist Sylvia Siqueira Campos, president of Recife-based rights group Mirim Brasil, said: “We need a new economic plan that begins to extinguish this huge economic inequality in Recife. We can’t think of a city for children when there are families with no place to live.” Improve livelihoods and address the root causes of poverty first, then focus on young children, she added. Natan Nigro, cofounder of public interest urban architecture group AtelierVivo, which worked with ARIES and neighborhood residents on one of two plazas for young children in the Iputinga neighborhood, said he, too, thought the Urban95 strategy did not make sense to many residents, who accorded more importance to issues involving dealing with traffic problems, treating drug dependency, combating racism, and improving education. “There are many issues that should be addressed together to have a real impact,” he said.

Fostering knowledge and enthusiasm within the ranks of the civil service was another plank in the sustainability strategy. Vieira, whose department was coordinating the early childhood development effort, said he was making a special effort within his department to ensure that the 30% of workers who were civil service employees and who would continue in their jobs after Julio’s departure, would receive training and hold responsible roles in the effort’s implementation so that they could carry on the work in the next administration.

Further, early childhood development was part of the outline of city goals that ARIES—in another contract for the city government—was assembling for Recife’s 500th anniversary celebration in 2037.

Guilherme Cavalcanti, executive director of ARIES, stressed that continual efforts toward “winning hearts and minds, sharing partial results, educating local leadership, and identifying local influencers” were key to both effectiveness and sustainability.

Exhibit 1: Recife Municipal Organizational Chart



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