

# Governing from a Child's Perspective: Recife, Brazil, Works to Become Family Friendly, 2017–2019

## Context

Geraldo Julio has been Mayor of Recife since 2012. With one of Brazil's highest levels of income inequality, Recife also ranks as the world's 22<sup>nd</sup> most dangerous city due to high crime rates in the favelas. Mayor Julio heard about the Urban95 initiative after participating in an executive leadership programme on early childhood at Harvard in 2017 with his wife, a paediatric cardiologist. He saw it as an innovative strategy for addressing chronic crime and economic inequality in hard-to-reach areas.

## Key actions

- **Enacting a legal framework.** Knowing he would be unable to stand for a third term in 2020, Julio sought to enshrine in law consideration of early childhood development in future city policy.
- **Setting up a steering group.** To coordinate the Urban95 initiative, Julio set up a steering group comprising leaders of 10 of Recife's 15 municipal departments, headed by the secretary of planning. Several attended both the 2018 and 2019 Harvard programmes, which helped with teambuilding. Also on the committee was ARIES, the Agência Recife para Inovação e Estratégia, a nonpartisan public-private agency engaged to speed up progress. The Secretary of Planning and CEO of ARIES saw examples of Urban95-style projects on a study tour to Copenhagen.
- **Piloting "children's priority zones".** The city planned pilot zones in two poor neighbourhoods. In Iputinga, where many residents live in stilt houses on flood-prone riverbanks, a public square used as a garbage dump was identified as a potential site to reclaim as family-friendly public space. In Alto Santa Terezinha, where homes cling to steep hillsides, the city's first COMPAZ ("community peace") centre was a natural focal point: COMPAZ offers conflict mediation, health and psychology services, and sporting events and community activities to build trust and reduce violence. The choice of such challenging neighbourhoods meant there would be less chance of quick wins, but success would suggest the approach could work anywhere else in the city.
- **Asking municipal departments to look for ways to incorporate an early childhood focus.** The health department, for example, analysed why more mothers attended prenatal than postnatal checks: in part, the difficulty of travelling with infants. It constructed ramps for wheelchairs and strollers, and created play areas in the clinics to make them more child-friendly.

## Results

- In both pilot communities, some progress was made such as widening sidewalks, renovating walkways, and installing street lighting and handrails on steep stairways. However, it has proved challenging to navigate complicated social and political networks in the neighbourhoods: the pilots are incomplete, not much data is available, and it is too soon to draw conclusions about impact.
- Locals mistrusted the university students who were initially employed to conduct surveys, but “peace agents” – high school students from favelas, earning minimum wage – had more success.
- The municipality is opening 10 new Mãe Coruja (“Mother Owl”) centres, to provide decentralised services closer to the homes of pregnant women, caregivers and babies.
- Colourful public spaces, renovated and painted by the Mais Vida nos Morros (“More life on the hills”) programme, proved popular and volunteers will help scale them in 30 new communities. Caregivers are not used to gathering outside so behaviour change work is needed.

## Looking ahead

- ARIES is now building a data dashboard that will track indicators such as breastfeeding, caregiver interaction and unstructured play. However, a platform to provide information about the services various city departments are providing for individual children still remains a long-term ambition.
- As mobility is a challenge, the programme is partnering with transport agency ITDP to enhance the quality, comfort and security of public transit, especially buses, for mothers and caregivers.
- Sustainability may be in question after Julio leaves office, as electoral turnover often leads to big changes in staffing with consequent loss of know-how. There is investment in systematising the work so it can be continued. Building broader societal support for the focus on early childhood is the best way to ensure sustainability, but not all civil society leaders are positive, with some arguing the project distracts from tackling issues such as inequality, drugs and education.