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RESULTS

OCTOBER 2020

Advancing Child-Centred Public Policy in Brazil through Adolescent Civic Engagement in Local Governance



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Programming Objective:

Strengthen adolescents' capacities and pathways to claim and exercise their rights to participate in local governance as a means to increase policy effectiveness for advancing adolescent development, especially for the most vulnerable adolescents in Brazil.

UNICEF Brazil Approach:

Increase the prevalence of child-centred, rights-based public policies in Brazil through institutionalized and contextualized civic engagement programmes that focus on the most vulnerable adolescents and actively involve them in the development of policies.

Context

Promoting and protecting the rights of 35 million adolescents¹ to participate in local-to-national governance as citizens has a long history in Brazil. In response to its ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)² in 1990, Brazil led the world in updating its laws by adopting a chapter on the rights of children and adolescents into the Federal Constitution and creating the Brazilian Child and Adolescent Statute (ECA).³

The ECA formalized child rights to provision, protection, and participation. The Statute of Youth⁴ adopted in 2013 further entrenched adolescents' rights to social and political representation as necessary for good governance. The statute not only offered guidelines and principles for youth rights and public policies, it established a National System of

Youth and Youth Councils to formalize their representation in countrywide decision-making.⁵

Having legal mechanisms for participation has opened democracy to citizens of all ages in Brazil. However, ensuring adolescents can equally engage, especially in local governance, has proven



This case study series shows how to accelerate outcomes for adolescents in support of the Sustainable Development Goals, including Gender Equality (SDG 5); Reduced Inequality (SDG 10); Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (SDG 16); and Partnerships for the Goals (SDG17).

challenging in practice due to cultural, economic, environmental, social, and geographical factors that can both enable and diminish voice and space for participation. For instance, while Brazil is primarily an urban country with nearly 85 percent of the total population living in cities, nearly 75 percent of children and adolescents living in rural communities experience deprivations in one or more rights guaranteed by the CRC. This percentage drops to approximately 23 percent for urban adolescents. Those in cities are, however, more exposed to growing levels of violence and adolescent homicide, particularly among Afro-descendant boys.⁶ Involving all adolescents in decisions that uniquely affect them thus requires attention on the local context—whether in the rural communities of the Brazilian Amazon and Semi-Arid regions or in Brazil’s urban neighborhoods and settlements, including *favelas*.

UNICEF Response: Key Programmes and Outcomes

UNICEF Brazil’s programming approach operationalizes meaningful civic engagement as a manifestation of child rights in local governance; not only as crucial for adolescent development, but also foundational for a democratic, fair, and inclusive society. Long-term efforts have shown how engagement supports adolescents to overcome vulnerabilities exacerbated by inequities related to gender, ethnicity, disability, socioeconomics, violence, and other factors. With this aim, UNICEF Brazil has implemented programmes at scale that work to institutionalize a child-centred focus in public and social policymaking for the most vulnerable adolescents. They have also tailored their programmes to the diverse contexts where adolescents live. This helps to ensure they have the knowledge, skills, confidence, opportunities, and culturally relevant information they need to participate in formal governance decision-making in their region. Their approach includes efforts to embed adolescent engagement in local policymaking, municipal priority setting, and budget allocation.

Civic engagement of adolescents has shifted cultures and practices towards greater inclusion of young voices in local governance

- In Recife, girls’ perspectives were included in the municipal plan to combat gender-based violence, previously only focusing on adults;
- In Vitória, the city mayor adopted a municipal policy to foster students’ participation in public policies and a protocol to better assist pregnant adolescents;
- In São Paulo, an intersectoral guidance on adolescent pregnancy was developed and adopted by public services; and
- In the Amazon and Semi-Arid regions, more than 900 municipalities supported 16-17-year-old adolescents to have their voting cards; more than 800 municipalities promoted activities on the right to safe and inclusive sport; and more than 700 municipalities improved services on sexual and reproductive rights to adolescents.

Institutionalizing Adolescent Participation in Local Governance

For decades, UNICEF Brazil has worked closely with state and municipal authorities to advance child-centred social and public policies nationwide. With an intention to reach the most vulnerable adolescents, UNICEF Brazil has targeted its civic engagement programming to the country’s diverse contexts. In the Amazon and Semi-Arid regions adolescents disproportionately face deprivations in prosperity, health, nutrition, and education. As a response, UNICEF developed and has been supporting the Municipal Seal of Approval methodology⁷ since 1999 (*Selo UNICEF*⁸ in Brazil). Additionally, in the country’s largest

cities—where extreme levels of violence and homicide threaten all areas of their life at school, home, and in their neighborhoods⁹—UNICEF Brazil is working alongside government and other partners through the Platform for Urban Centers¹⁰ (*Plataforma dos Centros Urbanos*¹¹ in Brazil) (PCU). Both programmes reflect UNICEF’s commitment to advancing child rights as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Brazil’s Statute for Children and Adolescents.

Together, the Municipal Seal of Approval and the Platform for Urban Centers reach nearly

22 million children and adolescents directly and indirectly across 18 states in Brazil

The Municipal Seal of Approval

The Municipal Seal of Approval¹² is a far-reaching accreditation programme for municipalities in the Amazon and Semi-Arid regions that aims to advance child-centred, rights-based public policy management; social participation;¹³ and social impact. During the four-year cyclical programme, municipalities commit to collaboratively create and implement plans that aim to increase child and adolescent benefits in areas such as their health, education, social protection, child protection, participation, etc. In return, UNICEF Brazil offers relevant guidance and training in areas like child rights and protection. More than 10,000 public

The 2017-2020 edition of the Municipal Seal covers

85% of municipalities in the Amazon

80% of municipalities in the Semi-Arid regions

and civil society workers have participated in child-centred, capacity-building trainings,¹⁴ as well as in how to apply formalized collaborative participation¹⁵ to their work. Certification is awarded to municipalities that are able to put in place the required number of systemic results and improve on social impact indicators related to eight Sustainable Development Goal targets.¹⁶

Adolescent civic engagement is embedded in the Municipal Seal certification with specifications for municipalities to establish an Adolescent Citizen Group that includes at least 16 adolescents (8 girls and 8 boys) per group. The municipalities provide the necessary resources (human resources, materials, premises and eventually specific funds) for the Adolescent Citizen Groups, which are named the Youth United for Life (*JUVA* in Portuguese) in the Amazon region and Nucleus of Adolescent Citizenship¹⁷ (*NUCA* in Portuguese) in the Semi-Arid region. Each municipality also supports an Adolescent Mobilizer, age 25-29, who oversees the local group.

In 2020, more than

1,900 municipalities are participating in the Municipal Seal with approximately

1,500 active Adolescent Citizen Groups

UNICEF Brazil provides training for the Adolescent Mobilizers on how they can support the above mentioned groups and help them translate their ideas into tangible, systemic actions required for effective child-centred public and social policies.¹⁸ As part of the Seal, Municipalities also agree to engage in a formalized process—with at least two community forums and one intermediate meeting—where the Adolescent Citizen Group, policymakers, and the Municipal Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents collaborate on the Municipal Action Plan and on other relevant policies and programmes in their communities related to child and adolescent rights.

Besides formally engaging in meetings on how to improve conditions for young people, adolescents are engaged in eight ‘thematic challenges’ (see box) in which they learn about their rights, mobilize their peers and communities, and establish a dialogue with public policy managers. This engagement in the Municipal Seal has shown to strengthen participating communities by:

- Increasing an active adolescent presence in cultural, sportive, and artistic activities;
- Providing transparency in municipal investments in public policies for young people;
- Influencing public policies, including legislation that has helped to reduce school drop-out rates; lower the percentage of adolescent pregnancy, and improve opportunities for adolescents to go back to school.
- Improving access to opportunities for professional and life skills training; and
- Addressing community issues that adults may find too sensitive, such as on sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV.

Adolescent Citizen Groups explore and create civic actions on:

- Safe and Inclusive Sport
- Healthy Eating
- Formal Education and Job Training
- Digital Inclusion and Safe Internet Use
- Education and Democratic Citizenship
- Reducing School Drop-Out Rates
- Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
- Practices to Combat Racism

The Platform for Urban Centers

Started in 2008, the Platform for Urban Centers¹⁹ (PCU) works in ten large state capitals, primarily in the *favela* settlements, to reduce inequities, mobilize collective action on child rights, and strengthen local authorities’ capacities. Like the Municipal Seal of Approval, PCU is designed as four-year renewable programme, but for cities. In the urban context, the programme aims to reduce inequalities and improve indicators related to child rights.

In partnership with UNICEF Brazil, the local city council, and the Municipal Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents, the participating city commits to reduce inequalities related to at least 10 agreed-upon, measurable social indicators. Part of the commitment includes holding intersectoral thematic dialogues with participation from the public sector, civil society, and adolescents to create and implement an impact plan. This plan emphasizes actions that contributes to institutionalized change in the areas of health (i.e., advancing adolescent sexual and reproductive rights to reduce



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Leticia, age 15 (left), speaks with a group of adolescents as part of her peer-to-peer education work. She lives in a small municipality in the northeast of Brazil and coordinates the city’s Adolescent Citizenship Nucleus (NUCA). She said, “Together, we were able to carry out discussions on diverse topics such as suicide, sexual violence, and the importance of the teenagers’ participation in the municipality’s decision-making process... Educating each other is really important. It’s very different to learn from someone who is going through the same phase as you. Language becomes easier and free from guilt or lecturing. Nowadays, with the network, the life of many adolescents in my city has changed a lot. We are the future, but most of all, we have rights today.”

adolescent pregnancy), education (i.e. promoting an active search of out of school adolescents and preventing school exclusion), well-being (including adolescent homicide prevention), child protection, and adolescent engagement.²⁰

To reach a more diverse population of adolescents—including from ethnic minority groups, adolescents with disabilities, and those living in poverty—UNICEF Brazil prioritizes local programme governance. It does so by developing official working agreements with well-established civil society organizations (CSOs) in the most vulnerable territories (based on social indicators) who are trusted in their communities. Moreover, other CSOs and youth groups without formal agreements are invited join the inter-sectoral thematic dialogues and propose contributions for the impact plan. This approach helps ensure adolescents from the most vulnerable neighborhoods have a greater potential to have their voices heard in local planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring decisions and actions.

Adolescents in some of the PCU cities are also engaged in social mobilization activities and training. Civic engagement activities have led to citywide protocols, public policies, and adolescent-centred municipal plans related to sexual and reproductive rights, adolescent homicide, gender-based violence affecting mainly girls, and students' participation in education public policies. Such actions helped contribute to improved indicators for participating cities relating to adolescent pregnancy and school drop-out rates, for instance.

In addition to overseeing the PCU programme, UNICEF Brazil provides adolescent and adult capacity-building on skills for integrating child-centred actions into systems, policies, and practices. For instance, in 2019 UNICEF Brazil worked with more than 900 public and civil society actors and 300 adolescents to strengthen their ability to participate in and lead local action and advocacy planning. Additionally, UNICEF worked with NGO partners to strengthen child rights knowledge and life skills on developing self-

Participation is embedded into the programme through strategies facilitated by the PCU CSOs that:²¹

- Foster adolescents' participation in municipal councils and other discussion forums of public policies;
- Promote connections among young leaders from different territories through formal and informal adolescents' networks;
- Promote peer-education and exchange of experience among adolescents;
- Support innovative solutions created by adolescents and youth to address problems they face in urban contexts; and
- Advocate for adolescent-friendly public services, mainly in the education, social assistance, and health areas.

knowledge and self-esteem; seeking for protection and being resilient; interpersonal communications; valuing and respecting diversity; safe use of the ICTs; finance education, among other issues, for more than 39,000 adolescents in 2019. Funded primarily by local government and the private sector, civil society organizations provided training to adolescents, supported their community leadership, and contributed to bridging the gap between adolescents' demands and public services. This included regular meetings with public policy managers and UNICEF.

Influencing Policy through Greater Visibility

The Municipal Seal and PCU programmes highlighted that making adolescent participation visible in media and public spaces showcased the value of adolescent input. The formalized civic engagement processes helped to legitimize their voice, which increased the influence and impact of their ideas on local planning, programmes, and policies. For instance, when adolescents publicly presented workable, equitable strategies on improving child rights and service delivery,

policy-makers could no longer justify their voice being absent in decision-making discourses. Once adolescents were formally and visibly integrated in local governance processes (through the Adolescent Citizen Group activities, meetings, and public policy dialogues), the value of their ideas became clearer. This often led to longer-term engagement opportunities for adolescents in the municipalities, including a number of NUCA and JUVA participants now in city and state leadership roles.

Elevating Adolescents' Voices to Influence Public Forums

UNICEF Brazil recognizes that building adolescents' agency and capacities to engage in governance is foundational for making individual voices heard in public civic spaces. They also know that multiple voices often have greater potential to overcome barriers by people in power who intentionally or unwittingly shut down space to listen and respond to adolescent perspectives.

To support the national government in fulfilling its legal and moral commitments to adolescent rights, UNICEF Brazil supports regional networks of adolescents to participate in national public forums. In 2019, 50 adolescent participants from NUCAs, JUVAs, migrant shelters, and PCU adolescents' networks gathered in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil. Before arriving, they engaged in multiple discussions on their rights and demands at the local level through public events, adolescent group meetings, leadership networking events to exchange experiences between territories, life skills workshops, and participation in human-centred design projects in which they identify key challenges affecting their lives and propose solutions. When the adolescents met in Brasilia, they attended a preparation workshop to better understand the Brazilian history of child and adolescents' rights (including the right to participate); to raise issues related to the group they were representing (i.e., Afro-Brazilian groups,

rural populations, adolescents with disabilities, riverside populations, Indigenous groups, migrants, and quilombolas, among others); and organize their demands to present to national authorities.

At the meeting, they developed and presented the National Agenda for Adolescents (NAA)²¹ to national leaders from across Brazil on 30th Anniversary of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. The demands addressed multiple key issues including the job market, employability, professional development, health, sexuality, and school inclusion. The value of the NAA for policy-making discussions at the ministerial level has been in the diverse representation of the adolescents, reflecting their experience as girls; boys; non-binary and LGBTQI adolescents; Indigenous People; Afro-Descendants; migrants; adolescents with disabilities; and urban residents, slum dwellers, and those living in the Amazon and Semi-Arid regions of Brazil.

The participation in this national forum also served as a platform for adolescents who gain skills in engaging local governments to have greater influence at the national level, increasing their own capacities as active citizens and leaders. UNICEF also uses the NAA in its advocacy strategies at the national and sub-national level, as well as with the private sector, such as in areas of apprenticeship law.

Lessons Learnt

Meaningful Participation Requires High-Level Support and Partnership

Creating entry points for adolescent civic engagement does not guarantee its successful inclusion and uptake in child-centred policy making and policies. Rather, effective implementation most often requires local government allies, including Mayors and public policy managers within health, education, social policy, child protection, etc. Their early support of adolescent civic engagement can increase a sense of ownership. This has helped UNICEF Brazil and its partners increase

opportunities for adolescents to engage at the policy level, as well as in greater support and allocation of the resources needed for meaningful, systematic, and inclusive adolescent participation. Strong partnerships also help to institutionalize adolescent participation into existing laws, policies and structures, and mechanisms in local to national governance. Having adolescent participation institutionalized, in turn, can lead to more equitable programmes and services for adolescents.

Adolescent Civic Engagement Benefits from a Commitment Across Sectors

Strengthening human capital is not a given or easy. Adolescent civic engagement must be worked at year after year as young participants and leaders age into adulthood. This includes working across sectors to strengthen civic engagement skills at multiple ages in the multiple areas that affect them from healthcare decisions to school policies to actions that can reduce violence. For instance, child protection programmes are working alongside the adolescent development and participation (ADAP) division on efforts to reduce adolescent homicide rates. The education sector in nine of 27 states through the Successful Pathways programme is using adolescent engagement as a strategy to address age-grade distortion. It is doing so by integrating opportunities for adolescents who are delayed in their studies or grades to participate in school-level governance planning. In Sergipe State, for instance, the Secretariat of Education used adolescent perspectives to design training modules for teachers to deliver supportive curriculum, with an aim to scale the programme in the coming years.

Using Multiple Feedback Channels Strengthens Programming

Hearing from adolescents so their ideas can influence programming is critical for identifying strengths, weaknesses, gaps, and areas for innovation and improvement. UNICEF Brazil promotes formal and informal data-based decision making. Formally, to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Child and Adolescent Statute in Brazil, UNICEF created a formal Adolescent and Youth Advisory

Council in 2020.²² The Council is composed of 24 adolescents and young people from across the country who meet monthly with a UNICEF team to promote reflections. Their views contribute to the design of adolescent and youth mobilization and engagement strategies. Building on their diversity and differing contexts where they live, they also suggest strategies for campaigns and communication tools most likely to reach a broad number of their peers, including those most vulnerable. Additionally, staff conduct focus groups and use U-Report²³ to gain feedback from adolescents for programme reviews and evaluations. For instance, U-Report issued a variety of polls for adolescents to voice their opinions on education, health, violence, equity, job markets, and other issues. Their answers were used to influence strategy development, programming, and advocacy at the ministerial level and within UNICEF.

Similarly, informal feedback has proven equally as insightful as staff often receive direct feedback from adolescents during activities or trainings. This has helped to identify programming bottlenecks, such as instances of tokenistic participation, discrimination, or violence. Opening such channels in safe environments allows programmes to respond in ways that can support adolescents as well as safeguard their rights.

Conclusion

UNICEF Brazil's programming shows that formal entry points, laws, and policies for adolescent engagement in governance are valuable, but insufficient on their own to ensure adolescents' perspectives influence decisions that secure their rights to provision, protection, and participation. Meaningful civic engagement requires attention on overcoming barriers to civic engagement linked to societal norms that systemically deny marginalized voices—even through unintentional or ignorant actions. Creating accountable, formalized governance systems; building on existing community relationships; prioritizing inclusion; and listening to adolescents through formal and non-formal

channels are strategies UNICEF Brazil found critical for success. They know, along with the adolescents striving for change, that child-centred policies are stronger when those who can benefit most from decisions not only have a seat at the table, but an equal and influential voice in the final legislation.

Further Readings and Information

- UNICEF Brazil – Portuguese | UNICEF Brazil – English
- Activity book for the Adolescent Citizen Groups – Portuguese
- Guide for Implementing the Municipal Seal – Portuguese
- Guide for Mobilizing Adolescents and Youth (2017-2020) – Portuguese
- Municipal Seal of Approval – Portuguese / Methodology (2013-2016) – English
- Municipal Seal and PCU Evaluation – English (Forthcoming 2020)
- National Agenda for Adolescents – Portuguese
- Platform for Urban Centers Evaluation (2013) – English
- Platform for Urban Centers (2017-2020) – Portuguese
- UNICEF Brazil Civic Participation of Adolescents and Youth – A Reference Framework
- U-Report – English | U-Report – Portuguese

Acknowledgments and Contacts

- Mario Volpi, Chief Youth & Adolescent Development, mvolpi@unicef.org
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- Alejandra Trossero, LACR Regional Advisor on Adolescents, atrossero@unicef.org



At the age of 17, Nívia Maria de Lima speaks on the importance of having quality public policies for girls for the mayor of Recife and municipal secretaries. After participating in a girls' empowerment project, she acts as a mentor for younger girls, helping them to understand and have access to their rights.

Endnotes

- 1 In 2017, Brazil had a total population of 205 million: www.paho.org/adolescent-health-report-2018/images/profiles/Brazil-PAHO%20Adolescents%20and%20Youth%20Health%20Country%20Profile%20V5.0.pdf
- 2 www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx
- 3 www.unicef.org/sowc96/lbrazil.htm
- 4 www.youthpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/library/2013_Brazil_Youth_Statute_Eng.pdf
- 5 www.youthpolicy.org/factsheets/country/brazil/
- 6 NAD - National Household Survey. 2012: <https://dds.cepal.org/infancia>
- 7 <https://childfriendlycities.org/brazil-municipal-seal>
- 8 www.unicef.org/brazil/sites/unicef.org.brazil/files/2019-09/revista_selo_unicef_20anos.pdf
- 9 Data from the Ministry of Health reports that nearly 12,000 adolescents were assassinated in 2019 (32 on average per day; the highest number globally in absolute terms).
- 10 <https://childfriendlycities.org/brazil-pcu>
- 11 www.unicef.org/brazil/plataforma-dos-centros-urbanos and www.unicef.org/brazil/media/2276/file/PCU_2017-2020%E2%80%93Percurso_metodologico_para_promover_os_direitos_de_crianças_e_adolescentes_mais_vulneráveis_e_excluídos_em centros urbanos brasileiros.pdf
- 12 <https://childfriendlycities.org/brazil-municipal-seal>
- 13 In the Municipal Seal programme, social participation aims to mobilize managers and the community, especially adolescents, inviting them to observe, accompany, and transform the reality in which they live. For a historical review of social participation in Brazil, see: <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/112457/fp2p-cs-social-participation-democracy-brazil-140608-en.pdf?sessionId=5B775592A7B0623C3AF0916119C442A3?sequence=1>
- 14 In 2019, more than 1,500 municipalities received training on how to implement child protection systems (i.e., sexual violence, the implementation of alternative measures to deprivation of liberty, and the reduction of homicides among adolescents).
- 15 Collaborative participation is a partnership between adults and adolescents that enables them to influence or challenge the process and outcome of policies and practices, with an increase in self-directed action over time. See: www.unicef.org/media/59006/file
- 16 Guide for Implementing in Municipal Seal (see page 27): www.selounicef.org.br/sites/default/files/2018-09/Guia%20Metodo%20de%20Implementa%20do%20Selo%20UNICEF%20-%20Edi%20-%202017-2020_1.pdf
- 17 www.unicef.org/brazil/nucleo-de-cidadania-de-adolescentes
- 18 <https://s25924.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Brazil-Municipal-Seal-of-Approval-Methodology-Guide-2013-2016.pdf>
- 19 <https://childfriendlycities.org/brazil-pcu>
- 20 www.unicef.org/brazil/media/2276/file/PCU_2017-2020%E2%80%93Percurso_metodologico_para_promover_os_direitos_de_crianças_e_adolescentes_mais_vulneráveis_e_excluídos_em centros urbanos brasileiros.pdf (see page 27)
- 21 www.unicef.org/brazil/carta-de-brasil
- 22 www.unicef.org/brazil/conselho-consultivo-de-adolescentes-e-jovens-do-unicef
- 23 <http://ureportbrasil.org.br>