



TUC PROFILE NO. 9

ALLIANCE FOR THE CENTRE OF RECIFE, BRAZIL

March 2024

RECIFE

About TUC Urban Lab Profiles

TUC Profiles is a series of short reports developed as part of the Transformative Urban Coalitions (TUC) project. They disseminate insights into the existing challenges and opportunities to address cross-cutting urban sustainability transformation and development issues through inclusive climate action in five cities in Latin America.

The first edition, TUC City Profiles, presented each city and the contextual factors that may enable or hinder urban sustainability transformations. This second edition, TUC Urban Lab Profiles, showcases the progress achieved by project partners and members of the labs in each of these cities since 2021.

Urban Labs (ULs) are the core approach of TUC. They consist of regular gatherings of a diverse range of stakeholders who collaborate and exchange knowledge to collectively co-create innovative solutions for complex urban challenges in a way that is participatory, cross-sectoral and inclusive. While UL approaches have gained global attention, there is still limited information on their implementation. These reports aim to fill a gap in practical knowledge about living labs. The series illustrates how ULs contribute to more climate-friendly and socially just communities and cities.

The following short report was co-produced by UL members, local as well as international project staff and researchers. It provides a summary of the steps taken, challenges encountered and key achievements to date by the Alliance for the Centre of Recife, the UL established in Recife, Brazil, with support of TUC. It concludes with lessons learned for catalysing transformative change towards sustainability.

This TUC Urban Lab Profile was developed by the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS) in collaboration with the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), the Brazil office of the World Resources Institute (WRI Brasil) and the participants of the Alliance for the Centre of Recife. It draws on original data from ethnographic observations and interviews carried out between 2021 and 2023, as well as critical reflections on the experiences of all people involved.

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Cover image: Comunidade do Pilar in Bairro do Recife, April 2022. © Adriana Preta / WRI Brasil

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Comunidade do Pilar in Bairro do Recife, April 2022. © Adriana Preta / WRI Brasil

The Urban Lab: Alliance for the Centre of Recife

UL context

In 2021, a TUC Urban Lab (UL) was established in the coastal city of Recife, the capital of Pernambuco in north-eastern Brazil. Originally conceived by the TUC consortium as an initiative for the decarbonization of *Porto Digital* – an urban technology park situated in the city’s historic centre, *Bairro do Recife* –, the UL’s geographic focus quickly shifted once UL members were engaged. The initiative became known as the Alliance for the Centre of Recife (*Aliança pelo Centro do Recife*) (Roll et al. 2024).

Technical and community assessments of Recife’s city centre were conducted early on with the assistance of UL members. After a comprehensive diagnosis of the surrounding areas, UL members decided to redirect their efforts towards improving living conditions in *Comunidade do Pilar* (Pilar Community) (see **Figure 1**). This decision was guided by criteria which specifically considered the presence of

residents, the presence of individuals in vulnerable situations, and the potential for their integration and inclusion.

The origins of *Comunidade do Pilar* trace back to mid-20th century transformations in Recife’s historic centre. Houses once occupied by workers were demolished, causing families to be displaced, to make way for modernizing port activities. Those workers, who needed to stay close to their workplaces and could not afford other options, established the *Favela do Rato*, later evolving into *Comunidade do Pilar*. Despite initial rehabilitation efforts in the 1980s and subsequent attempts at revitalizing *Bairro do Recife* in the 2000s centred on the *Porto Digital* technology park, the outcomes led to uneven transformations.

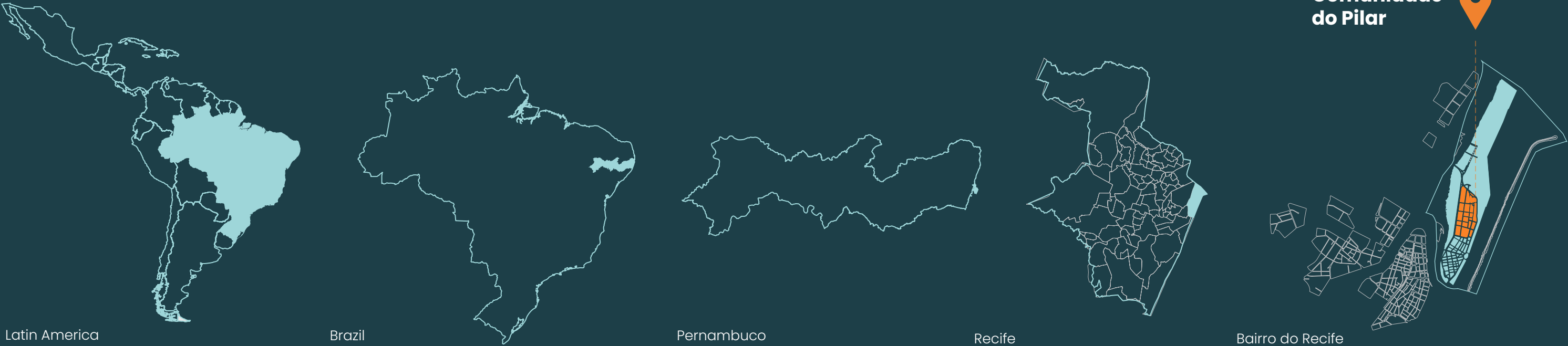


FIGURE 1: LOCATION OF COMUNIDADE DO PILAR IN RECIFE, BRAZIL. © WRI BRASIL AND UNU-EHS WITH DATA FROM IGBE (INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE GEOGRAFIA E ESTATISTICA)

Comunidade do Pilar endured in Bairro do Recife and currently holds a more secure status as one of over 160 Special Zones of Social Interest in the city (*Zonas Especiais de Interesse Social*). These urban areas are designated under municipal law for social housing purposes (Turmena et al. 2022). In spite of its central location and proximity to key touristic areas, Comunidade do Pilar remains segregated from the rest of the city, with residents living in harsh conditions. Out of approximately 350 families in the community, 55 per cent reside in poorly constructed social housing, while the remaining families dwell in makeshift shacks. Limited access to public services such as sanitation, health care and education and unreliable income sources further elevate the vulnerability of this community. Furthermore, a community-led census showed that three-quarters of household heads are engaged in informal jobs (Aliança pelo Centro do Recife and Alianças para Transformação Urbana, 2023). The lack of green spaces in the neighbourhood intensifies the impacts of climate change and extreme weather events, particularly heavy rain and intense heat (details in **Box 1**).

The Alliance for the Centre of Recife uses the UL approach to address these challenges while promoting low-carbon urban development. Facilitated by WRI Brasil, the UL has been holding meetings since December 2021, bringing together representatives from government, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and various other sectors (**Figure 2**, page 9).



Comunidade do Pilar in Bairro do Recife, April 2022.
© Adriana Preta / WRI Brasil

BOX 1

Social housing and climate change in Comunidade do Pilar

The challenges posed by the climate crisis and housing crisis are intricately intertwined. Climate-related disasters can obliterate homes, lead to unbearable living conditions and displace people from their communities. At the same time, the housing crisis often manifests as a shortage of adequate housing in suitable urban spaces, frequently resulting in the relocation of people to areas even more prone to disasters or subjecting them to substandard living conditions in precarious neighbourhoods.

Within Comunidade do Pilar, the pursuit of secure housing for all is a pressing concern. Since the 2010s, the community has been awaiting the completion of an upgrading project funded by the federal government, the Programme for Urban Redevelopment and Social Inclusion of Comunidade do Pilar (*Programa de Requalificação Urbanística e Inclusão Social da Comunidade do Pilar*). This project envisaged the construction of 588 new housing units as well as infrastructural enhancements by the municipal government. However, the project encountered several obstacles, including the discovery of archaeological sites where new houses were intended to be built.

By 2023, only 192 apartments were completed in Comunidade do Pilar, accommodating approximately 500 residents, leaving part of the community residing in the same precarious shacks (Aliança pelo Centro do Recife and Alianças para Transformação Urbana, 2023). Both groups are exposed to heatwaves and storms, lacking means to remedy the consequences of poor planning and construction, such as the absence of adequate cooling measures.

Fostering low-carbon development in this community entails integrating climate conscious practices into new and existing housing units, covering both the construction and operation of buildings. These must consider the local climate and incorporate specific energy efficiency measures, especially for lighting and cooling.

In a city with high temperatures like Recife, deploying efficient lighting systems – such as LED technology – alongside high-efficiency air conditioning units, would help to curb energy consumption, associated emissions and costs. For low-income communities like Comunidade do Pilar, integrating natural light and cooling features in building designs, such as ventilation and insulation, could address the challenge of limited access to mechanical cooling and improve thermal comfort in the houses (Aliança pelo Centro do Recife and Alianças para Transformação Urbana, 2023).

Decoupling development from emissions in this neighbourhood also requires investments in public services and infrastructure, including public transport and cycling infrastructure. Community participation in such investment decisions and projects is crucial, not only to ensure their local relevance but also to guarantee ownership and long-term sustainability.

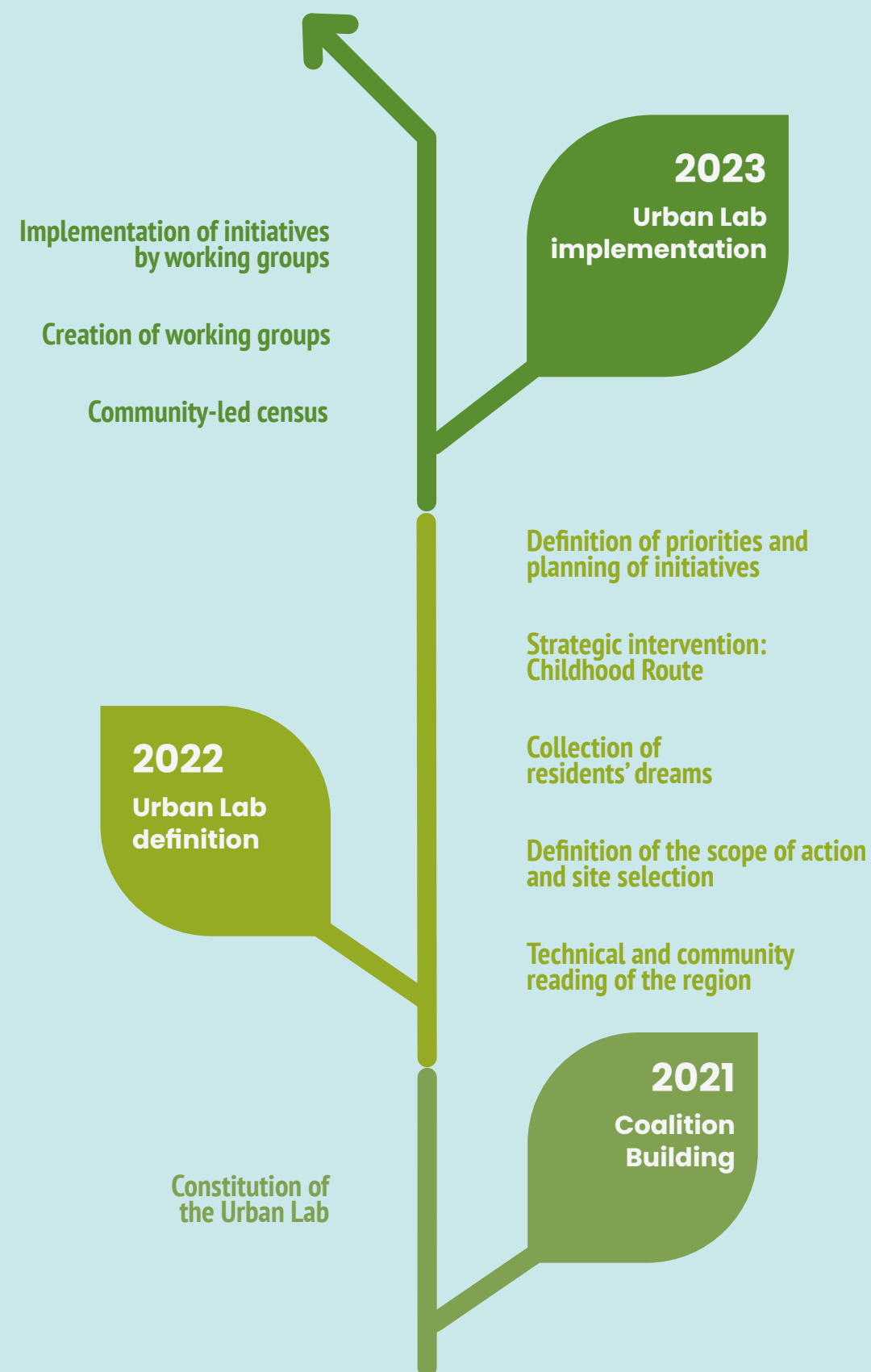


FIGURE 2: URBAN LAB TIMELINE, INCLUDING KEY PHASES AND ACTIVITIES

Operation of the UL

The UL has a core group of members who actively participate in meetings and activities. This dedicated group is composed of diverse stakeholders, including municipal authorities, representatives from Comunidade do Pilar, civil society organizations, and staff from WRI Brasil. Their active participation ensures the continuity of UL activities. To maintain a consistent level of commitment and accountability, WRI Brasil implemented a commitment term for core members. This agreement delineates the responsibilities and expectations for ongoing participation in the UL.

Alongside this core group, the UL regularly welcomes additional actors who join at different stages of the implementation process, bringing in varied resources and perspectives. The flexibility to incorporate (contributions from) new members is an essential characteristic of the open network governance established by the UL.

Between the start of the TUC project in late 2021 and 2023, 16 UL meetings were held in Recife, with an average of 15 participants. Initially, civil society organizations such as the Recife Agency for Innovation and Strategy (*Agência Recife para Inovação e Estratégia*, ARIES) and the Movement of Homeless Workers (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto*, MTST), formed the bulk of the attendees, reflecting the UL's emphasis on inclusive and participatory innovation. However, there has been a noticeable shift in the demographic composition of the meetings over time. Increasingly, residents of the communities affected by UL initiatives, particularly Pilar residents, have become more involved. This aligns with the UL's commitment to fostering local engagement and addressing community-specific concerns. It is a consequence of adjustments made to the UL's geographical scope as well as changes in meeting format, location and schedule.

Meetings take place in a hybrid format, incorporating both online and in-person elements, partly because of WRI Brasil's inability to travel to Teresina due to the COVID-19 restrictions. In 2023, there was a collective decision to prioritize in-person gatherings, particularly in Comunidade do Pilar. This approach aims to enhance the UL's presence in the territory and foster deeper connections between UL members and the community. Initially, meetings were scheduled on weekdays during the afternoon, posing a challenge for community members to attend, although it was

convenient for the individuals participating in the UL in a professional capacity. Additionally, some UL meetings were not held in the area due to the lack of suitable meeting spaces. In response, UL members and WRI Brasil proactively collaborated with community representatives to identify more appropriate time slots and locations for meetings.

Representatives from the municipal government typically attend more strategic meetings, more closely aligned with government competencies. The most active governmental body within the UL is *Recentro*, a relatively recent municipal department overseeing issues related to Recife's city centre (Recentro, 2023).

Involvement from the private sector is a more recent development, as engagement with actors from Porto Digital remains limited. Given that the UL's focus is not necessarily on testing technological or marketable solutions, the initiative may be less attractive to this sector. When private sector participation does occur, it is often linked to explicit organizational missions or personal senses of purpose.

The UL exhibits a notable gender difference in its composition, with 85 per cent of members being women. This characteristic is particular evident among community representatives, the majority of whom are women. While intentional efforts to include women in the UL may have influenced its composition, it is arguable that women shoulder a significant responsibility for (unpaid) activities related to looking after the community. This gender dynamic within the UL sheds light on both the strengths and challenges associated with ensuring diverse and equitable representation. It also emphasizes the need for a deeper understanding of how gender roles influence participation in community-led initiatives, as well as the importance of recognizing and valuing the contributions of women in transformative processes.

Examining the participant profile further reveals a prevalence of individuals working in the field of architecture and urban planning, constituting half of UL members. This trend may be attributed to various factors, including the project's framing by the facilitators, the close alignment of topics such as slum upgrading and public spaces, or a potentially narrow interpretation of urban transformation focused solely on the physical aspects within the city.

The operation of the UL underwent changes over time. In its early stages, the UL held monthly meetings that included all its members, fostering broad discussions on various urban challenges. However, starting from February 2023, the group transitioned to working groups. This change aimed to accelerate the implementation of interventions in the territory, although participants noted trade-offs. While this new model has advantages, allowing for more concentrated efforts on specific project components, it also presents challenges. Notably, there is an inherent risk that the decentralized approach of working groups might lead to a fragmented perspective, potentially overlooking the integrated vision required for holistic urban development. To mitigate this risk and maintain a unified strategic direction, the UL continues to hold full-group meetings, convening once every two months.

The working groups are also a mechanism to empower UL members and enhance the autonomy of the group through the delegation of responsibilities. Simultaneously, the working groups leverage the capacities of UL members to advance in the corresponding four areas identified as priorities. The groups are clustered as follows: the Working Group (WG) Childhood Route (*Rota da Infância*) focuses on creating child-friendly urban spaces; the WG Waste

Management aims at improving waste handling and sustainability practices; the WG Housing addresses the challenges of affordable and sustainable housing; and the WG Community Centre concentrates on developing communal spaces for social and cultural activities.

UL initiatives

According to a strategic plan developed by the group in June and July 2022, the Alliance for the Centre of Recife decided to prioritize several initiatives, organized into working groups. These UL initiatives are being implemented in various areas within the neighbourhood (see **Figure 3**, page 13).

The **WG Childhood Route** aims to integrate Comunidade do Pilar with the rest of Bairro do Recife through interventions in public spaces that provide leisure opportunities for children and tackle urban heat. So far, this WG mobilized UL members and dwellers in two *mutirões* (community-driven, participatory public work activities) for the implementation of practical measures around modification of street uses and renewal of the space such as tree planting, the installation of a playground and urban furniture (see **Box 2**).

BOX 2

Mutirões as a tool for community engagement

The term “*mutirão*” finds its roots in the Tupí-Guaraní Indigenous language, signifying collective work or communal efforts in planting or construction within a community. The concept is deeply ingrained in Brazilian culture, historically utilized by rural and traditional communities. It gained prominence in the mid-20th century as it was adopted by social and labour movements, evolving into a symbol of grass-roots mobilization and collective action.

As time progressed, the application of *mutirão* expanded to encompass community development, health care, education and environmental initiatives. In modern times, *mutirões* (plural of *mutirão*) are not only organized by grass-roots movements but also by governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as community leaders. The concept has adapted to urban contexts as well, where communities face different challenges but still utilize the spirit of collective action to address issues and improve living conditions.

The use of the *mutirão* approach in the TUC ULs of Recife and Teresina is a testament to its resilience and contemporary relevance. *Mutirões* fit the UL approach very well, offering swift results with a dual purpose. First, they serve as experiments for solutions that can be further refined later on. The prototypes executed by the community allow for low-cost initiatives that are tailored to specific locations and garner immediate feedback from users. Second, *mutirões* cultivate community engagement by including residents not only in the execution but also in decision-making. This typically fosters a sense of collective ownership, solidarity and pride, encouraging residents to assume responsibility for maintaining public spaces.

In Recife, two *mutirões* were carried out to implement the Childhood Route, a recreational space for children in Comunidade do Pilar. Ideas for this intervention were sourced from both UL members and a community event. WRI Brasil along UL members and Pilar residents organized the first *mutirão* in December 2022 based on the collected and systematized ideas. The second *mutirão* occurred in October 2023, aiming to consolidate the first interventions and address any issues. Both events saw significant community participation, mainly from children and women. The municipal government also contributed by undertaking minor construction works and waste removal.

Unfortunately, following the first *mutirão*, it became evident that there was a lack of collective ownership over the new Childhood Route, as several improvements were vandalized shortly afterward. In response, before the second *mutirão*, the UL decided to develop activities dedicated to raising awareness and providing environmental education to the community, particularly children. The objective was to cultivate a sense of responsibility over the maintenance of public spaces. While some instances of vandalism persist, residents have seen an increased appropriation of public spaces, with mutual vigilance aimed at preserving the implemented improvements.



Left image:
Organic vegetable gardens
workshop in Comunidade do Pilar,
December 2023.
© Marília Farias / WRI Brasil



Right image:
Mutirão for the Childhood Route
Initiative in Comunidade do Pilar,
October 2023.
© Marília Farias / WRI Brasil

- Physical transformation
- Awareness-raising
- Data generation
- Public services
- Advocacy

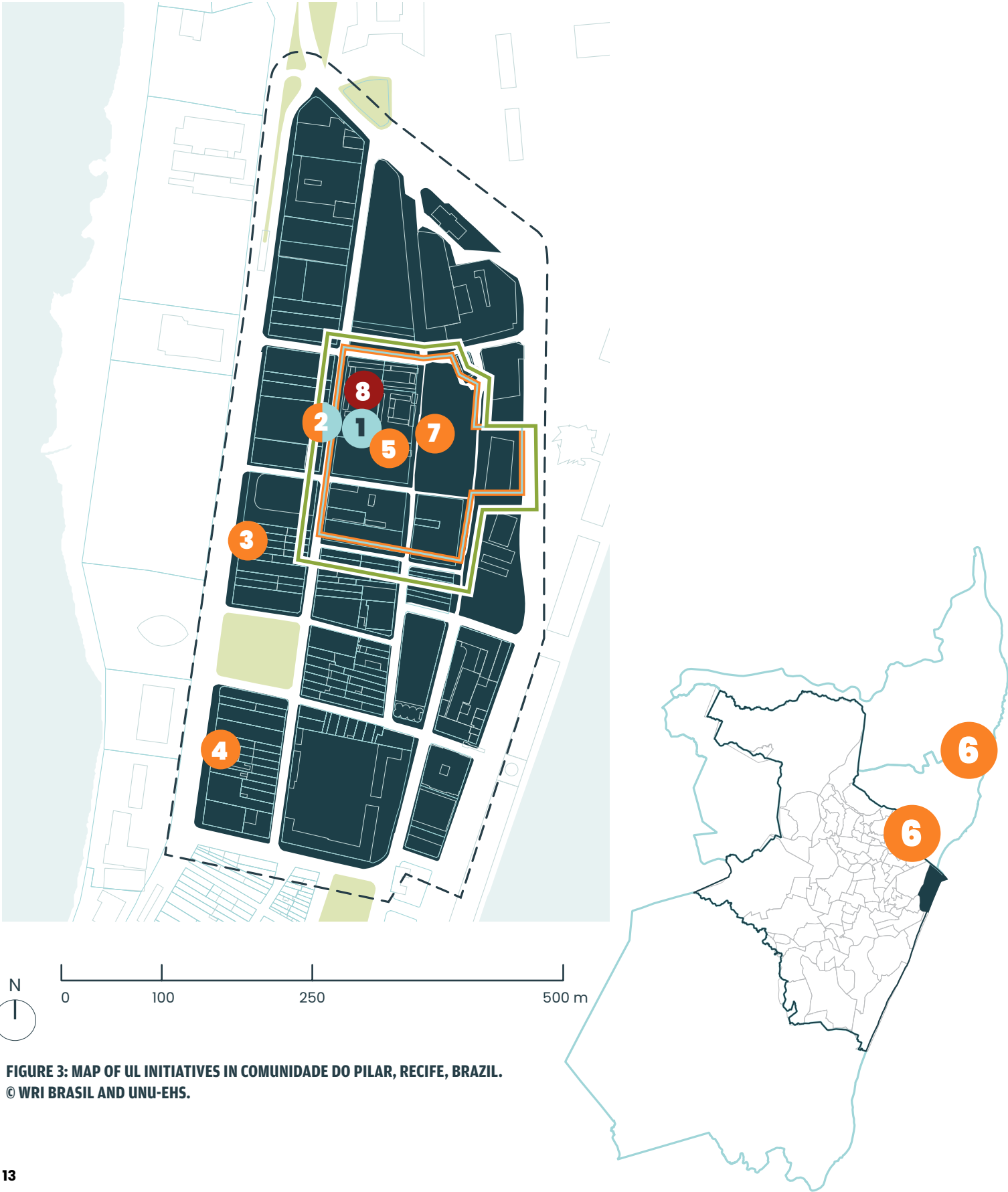


FIGURE 3: MAP OF UL INITIATIVES IN COMUNIDADE DO PILAR, RECIFE, BRAZIL.
© WRI BRASIL AND UNU-EHS.

	Initiatives	Lead implementing organizations
WG Childhood Route	1 Collaborative design and implementation of the Childhood Route	WRI Brasil; SEIURB; Residents
	2 Environmental education and tree planting	WRI Brasil; CESAR; Residents
WG Waste Management	3 Training on recycling and handcrafting	WRI Brasil; UNU-EHS; Casa Itinerante
	4 Training on social media for the craftswomen	XYZA; WRI Brasil; Casa Itinerante
	5 Awareness-raising activity around the value of waste	WRI Brasil; Residents
	6 Exchanges with waste pickers' associations	WRI Brasil; UNU-EHS; Potyra Consultoria
	Rollout of electric tricycles for waste collection	Municipal government
WG Community Centre	7 Support for Neighbours' Council	WRI Brasil; MTST; CPDH
WG Housing	8 Community-led census	UNU-EHS; WRI Brasil; Residents
	Technical note for sustainability measures in social housing projects	WRI Brasil
	Participatory condominium management plan	Arquitetura Faz Bem
Alliance for the Centre of Recife	Geotinta (earth-ink) workshops	Ianah Mello; Residents
	Organic vegetable gardens workshops	Sérgio Gwiri; Residents

Note: The exchanges with waste pickers' associations took place at the headquarters of the Cooperativa Ecovida da Palha de Arroz in Arruda (Teresina) and in the neighbouring town of Olinda, with a visit to Coocencipe Cooperativa.



Community handicrafts training (360° handicrafts project), October 2023. © Hermes Gonçalves / WRI Brasil

The **WG Waste Management** aims at improving community health, reducing emissions from unsustainable waste treatment, and creating employment and income opportunities related to waste management. Among the initiatives of the group are awareness-raising activities about waste separation and destination, various efforts to install adequate infrastructure for waste collection, and work with local waste pickers to organize a cooperative and foster more sustainable practices. Exchanges between Comunidade do Pilar and existing waste pickers' associations are encouraged by the UL. More sustainable waste management is also being supported by the municipal government through the roll-out of a pilot project using electric tricycles for waste collection in the neighbourhood.

Finally, the WG Waste Management is also undertaking an initiative to build capacity among women of the community to work with recycled materials, such as paper and plastic, to create handicraft products (see **Box 3**).

The **WG Community Centre** supports the community in developing their own Neighbours' Council, to become a channel for the representation of residents. The WG is also seeking a physical space for residents to hold their discussions and activities, including new initiatives supported by the UL such as Artesãs do

Pilar. Co-managed by the government and the community, the facility would include services from the Community Centre of Peace (Compaz), a programme focused on education, culture, sports, and social assistance. More concrete steps and plans will be defined starting in 2024.

Originally tasked with addressing housing conditions, the **WG Housing** underwent a redistribution of responsibilities in 2023. The WRI Brasil team is responsible for following up on the upgrading project planned for Comunidade do Pilar and advocating for the incorporation of sustainability measures in new buildings, especially related to energy efficiency. Efforts to include other UL members, particularly the community, in the activities of this WG are ongoing. Furthermore, the WG Housing was previously in charge of developing a plan for participatory condominium management to ensure the sustainability of new buildings and possible retrofits. However, this function was transferred to the WG Community Centre and has become an integral part of the work on the Neighbours' Council.

To complement and strengthen the activities of the WGs, WRI Brasil and other TUC partners sponsor several trainings for UL members and Pilar residents, including *geotinta* (earth-ink) workshops and organic vegetable gardens workshops.

BOX 3

Artisans of Pilar: Coupling recycling and income generation

In the initial technical and community assessments conducted to inform UL discussions, waste management (or lack thereof) emerged as a critical issue in Comunidade do Pilar. The neighbourhood grapples with insufficient infrastructure and unreliable waste collection services. In addition, the community lacks awareness about the potential health impacts of poor waste management, for example in relation to air pollution as well as water and soil contamination. Consequently, residents often contend with unhygienic conditions that pose threats to their well-being.

Another significant concern identified was the lack of job and income opportunities. Despite its central location in Recife, Comunidade do Pilar is both physically and symbolically segregated from the rest of the city. Low education levels and the stigma associated with living in a low-income neighbourhood contribute to precarious working conditions. One in every five household heads in Pilar is unemployed and more than half depend on economic aid from the government (*Aliança pelo Centro do Recife and Alianças para Transformação Urbana*, 2023).

In response to these pressing needs, the Alliance for the Centre of Recife devised an initiative to train women in working with recycled materials, producing handicraft products. The *Artesãs do Pilar* (Artisans of Pilar) project draws inspiration from a prior community initiative, *Plástico Vênus* (Venus Plastics), which focused on training women in plastic reprocessing.

Since mid-2023, a consultant has been delivering courses to a group of women in Comunidade do Pilar who were selected based on age, being a household head, single mother or having disabilities. By October 2023, 24 women were part of the *Artesãs do Pilar* group, engaging in regular monthly meetings. The design of the products takes into account the availability of recyclable materials, market trends and visual elements from Comunidade do Pilar. Beyond waste reduction, the initiative has become a source of income for a vulnerable group, fostering a sense of community and a diverse skill set also in communication, organization and financial management. These capacities empower the group for autonomy and sustainability beyond TUC's duration.



Community handicrafts products (360° handicrafts project), October 2023. © Hermes Gonçalves / WRI Brasil



Organic vegetable gardens workshop in Comunidade do Pilar, December 2023. © Marília Farias / WRI Brasil

Challenges and Key Achievements from the Alliance for the Centre of Recife

After two years in operation, the challenges and key achievements of the Alliance for the Centre of Recife provide valuable lessons for sustaining ongoing activities, accelerating broader transformations in Recife and guiding similar efforts elsewhere:

1. DEVELOPING A PLACE-BASED APPROACH AND BUILDING MUTUAL TRUST

One key characteristic of the UL approach is its focus on the challenges and capacities specific to certain geographic contexts or communities. This allows the UL to deliver tailored measures that address the unique set-ups of these areas. In essence, ULs serve as spaces for exploring new possibilities rather than imposing preconceived solutions. This allows ULs to localize possible alternatives for climate action and integrate them into existing practices or needs. The success of this approach, however, hinges on the seamless integration of the UL within its surrounding context.

In the case of the Alliance for the Centre of Recife, the UL underwent a process of readjusting its geographical scope within the first months of operation. Consequently, the relationship of most UL members with the chosen intervention area was developed only subsequently. The majority of initial UL members had limited or no prior contact with Comunidade do Pilar, even though they acknowledged the relevance of working in this

community. Although the presence of community representatives in the UL has gradually increased, more than half of UL members are still professionals with higher education that are concerned about the socio-environmental conflicts of the area. While the insights and skills of architects and urban planners are undeniably crucial for urban development, the UL could benefit from greater disciplinary diversity. Involving experts from social sciences, environmental studies, public health, economics and community development could enrich the dialogue, ensuring a more holistic approach to urban sustainability transformation. These additional perspectives would enable a broader and more inclusive understanding of community dynamics, going beyond physical space to encompass social, economic and environmental dimensions. Also, a climate-aware perspective could benefit from having individuals with diverse backgrounds and, more specifically, from areas related to environment and climate action.



Throughout the process, the UL grappled with low participation from residents in meetings. This lack of participation was attributed to various barriers, including the meeting locations, language used and a lack of trust. Recognizing these, the group decided to conduct more activities directly in Comunidade do Pilar, including the organization of meetings and workshops at the local school and other UL activities in the Childhood Route. Altering meeting spaces, structures and the language used was central to attract and make residents feel comfortable.

The Alliance for the Centre of Recife also employed creative communication strategies, using bicycles with sound systems to disseminate messages and dates of key activities within Comunidade do Pilar and sharing engaging stories and updates on social media platforms like Instagram¹.

Directly addressing climate change in the UL and within Comunidade do Pilar has been difficult, as it is not considered a priority compared to other issues. Therefore, tailoring UL activities requires a close understanding of specific community aspirations and pressing demands. For example, the workshops for craftswomen working with recycled materials embody a dual purpose, not only generating additional income for these women but also raising awareness for the value of waste management and the importance of circularity. Yet, adjustments had to be made to enhance engagement. Scholarships were provided to alleviate the additional burden for women already overworked, addressing both participation barriers and observed imbalances. Mainstreaming climate goals and action within Comunidade do Pilar and similar settlements requires an integrated strategy that recognizes and responds to the immediate needs of the community.

Mistrust also emerged as a significant obstacle for community engagement in UL activities, rooted in past experiences of unfulfilled promises from various organizations. This is particularly visible in the way that residents talk about the interruption of the construction of social housing units as part of a government-led upgrading project. To address the lack of trust, the UL implemented quick wins through

mutirões. While this approach faced some criticism for potentially overemphasizing the physical aspects of the territory and neglecting social and political dynamics, it facilitated the creation of bonds between the community and the UL. It also helped to establish collective ownership over the project. The establishment of the Childhood Route and related initiatives proved instrumental in demonstrating the potential for transformation, since people started seeing changes.

External facilitation by WRI Brasil played a crucial role in fostering mutual trust within the UL as well, providing a safe environment where individuals felt comfortable discussing and expressing their needs. This perception was reinforced in an episode where the neutrality of this role was questioned and the impact on community engagement became evident. A misinterpretation of the relationship between facilitators and the government led some community members to view the UL as a biased space, resulting in their reluctance to participate. However, through an increased presence on the ground, it became apparent to residents that WRI Brasil was committed to fostering a space for equal discussion and advocating for the needs of Comunidade do Pilar.

The absence of reliable and consistent funding to sustain UL activities can be a barrier to their progression, and possible interruptions compromise the trust levels that were built so far. For a transformative process to unfold successfully, there is a need for continuous and reliable funding opportunities.

LESSON: Meaningful participation is contingent upon establishing and maintaining trust between UL facilitators and participants. In the case of Comunidade do Pilar, overcoming initial distrust and skepticism required tailoring UL activities to residents' needs and linking those to climate action, while increasing presence in the territory and creating safe spaces for equal participation. The strengthening of a place-based approach has been a key contributor to the UL's achievements.

¹ Follow the Alliance for the Centre of Recife at: <https://instagram.com/alianca.centrodorecife>.



Year-end festival of the Alliance for the Centre of Recife in December 2023.
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2. NAVIGATING PARTICIPATION IN REALITY

Participation offers a myriad of benefits, including the development of context-specific solutions, the incorporation of diverse perspectives, the empowerment of frequently marginalized individuals and groups, as well as the promotion of social cohesion and ownership over projects. These factors increase the chances of project continuity and sustainability in the long term. However, participation is not always linear or smooth.

In Comunidade do Pilar, developing a place-based approach required the inclusion of community representatives as members of the UL from the beginning. Local leaders – such as presidents of neighbourhood associations, religious figures or political representatives – are important gatekeepers. This means that they control access to information, people and resources within the community.

While gatekeepers play a crucial role as channels between external organizations and the territory, it is important to diversify these connections. In the case of the Alliance for the Centre of Recife, new leaders emerged during the implementation of UL initiatives such as the *mutirões* and collaboration with waste pickers. The diversification of community representation within the UL became a key strategy for building trust. The UL was also more effective in disseminating information and reaching people, because multiple gatekeepers were involved. However, individual leadership can sometimes be politically co-opted and hinder collective autonomy and new leaderships. It is a constant balancing act between fostering existing leaders and recognizing new ones.

UL members are motivated by various factors, ranging from a desire for a more sustainable environment to prioritizing community engagement or individual visibility. Individual interests, needs or aspirations influence how much they are willing to commit. This also applies to community leaders, who, in addition to their aspirations for the community, have their own legitimate needs. Recognizing these individual aspirations is key for effective leadership and meaningful participation. Still, aligning diverse interests to advance

interventions poses a challenge. The UL employed various tools to cultivate shared visions, establishing communication protocols to foster open dialogue, active listening and regular check-ins with the group. The use of specific words and rhetoric stimulated more democratic discussions while authoritative perspectives were hardly tolerated.

Participation is not uniform across the group and fluctuations in the contributions of different individuals or organizations are evident. These variations stem from changes in political priorities, personnel, personal interests and other external factors in the process of urban sustainability transformation. UL facilitators have remained attentive to these fluctuations and elaborated strategies to maintain group cohesion. Individual chats were conducted to comprehend the motivations and needs of UL members, and efforts were made to identify new members who could fill gaps in representation and capacity.

Another challenge is translating participation into action. When the UL faced paralysis due to overanalyses, facilitators encouraged the creation of working groups. This strategy aimed to distribute responsibility for UL initiatives and generate accountability among UL members, with each group being responsible for delivering results in their respective areas and reporting back. The participation dynamics within these groups is also qualitatively different, as individuals feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts in smaller settings.

LESSON: Participation is often less smooth than planned. Facilitators must consider fluctuations in the frequency and manner of participation and develop strategies to adapt the UL process accordingly. Open dialogues and clear communication are essential. The UL is not a static organization but a flexible arrangement with the potential to bridge diverse interests and aspirations, linking local needs with the climate change agenda.

3. IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIES TO WIDEN THE IMPACT

In its endeavour to raise project awareness and bolster community engagement, the Alliance for the Centre of Recife executed quick strategic interventions, with the *mutirões* for the Childhood Route being the main example. When viewed in isolation, these initiatives might be perceived as stand-alone efforts contributing to physical change within the territory, but not necessarily to its long-term and broader transformation, as considered by some UL members.

However, the implementation of strategic interventions does not aim to act as a silver bullet for the community's problems. Complex challenges require a set of coordinated actions to address their many ingrained causes. That is why the UL also planned several initiatives that respond to some of the most severe issues in Comunidade do Pilar and Recife. Therefore, the goal of quick strategic interventions is to gradually promote the engagement of the community, demonstrate the feasibility of the project and the more immediate results of working collectively. These goals are not necessarily obtained through a linear process or a design-centred approach. For this reason, UL members take into careful consideration the needs of the community and review the process while it is happening.

The incremental physical changes exhibit a reinforcing relationship with the deeper transformation of the territory. They serve as foundations for more fundamental changes, including shifts in individual mindsets and the establishment of more democratic and innovative governance structures. Achieving a more systemic change requires a robust group equipped with the capacities to identify their needs, explore potential solutions and vocalize their aspirations. The cultivation of both individual and collective capacities is facilitated through incremental changes.

In the UL, these capacities are built through various initiatives. The organization of activities, such as *mutirões* and the formation of a cooperative for waste picking, extend beyond immediate improvements in quality of life. They also create opportunities to empower emerging leaders, engage in discussions on the interconnectedness of local development and climate change, envision new strategies for advocating policy changes, and foster partnerships between stakeholders who traditionally do not work together.

To widen the impact, organizations that are part of the UL should also incorporate such capacities into their work and organizational culture beyond the lab. So far, this integration remains limited, as evidenced by, for example, the low incorporation of climate-related issues into the local development agenda. The connection between climate action and urban development is still loose for many UL members and has not entered the public agenda in a way that also responds to the needs of vulnerable communities. Moreover, participatory governance mechanisms should be further adopted, improved and institutionalized by the organizations participating in the UL, particularly the municipal government.

The UL also faces challenges in creating substantial impact in public policy due to the lack of endorsement from key decision-makers. While Recentro is the most active governmental body within the UL, it grapples with limited budgetary resources and insufficient political capital to produce significant changes in topics such as the construction of social housing units.

LESSON: The UL in Comunidade do Pilar strives to foster long-term outcomes through small-scale experiments. Incremental changes nurture individual and collective capacities, laying the foundation for broader and deeper transformations. However, scaling up learnings depends on institutionalizing changes and garnering support from decision-makers, which can be challenging.



Collecting residents' dreams for Comunidade do Pilar in July 2022.
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ABOUT





Transformative Urban Coalitions

Transformative Urban Coalitions (TUC) is implemented by the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS), the World Resources Institute (WRI) together with its national offices in Brazil and Mexico, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) together with IIED – América Latina in Argentina, and the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), with support from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action under its International Climate Initiative (IKI).

TUC seeks to shift the sustainability trajectory of cities towards zero carbon emissions by 2050 by altering the deeper social, technological and political structures and systems that are currently reinforcing high-carbon, resource-intensive urbanization. To achieve this goal, TUC facilitates the establishment of transformative urban coalitions in five Latin American cities to develop new strategies for addressing local challenges in urban development and inequality while at the same time reducing carbon emissions.

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