

# Americas

## QUARTERLY

### Where the Leaders Are

A SPECIAL REPORT ON LATIN AMERICAN MAYORS



María Emilsen  
Angulo, 37, the first  
female mayor of  
Tumaco, Colombia

# Americas

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# Living for the Cities

**The most effective leaders during the pandemic have been mayors. It's interesting to examine why.**



**E**XACTLY 50 YEARS AGO, while accepting his Nobel Prize for literature in Stockholm, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda concluded his speech on a hopeful, even utopian note. “Only with a burning patience can we conquer the splendid city which will give light, justice and dignity to all mankind,” Neruda said. “In this way, the song will not have been sung in vain.”

Such soaring language seems entirely out of place in today’s Americas, as many countries continue to struggle with the pandemic and a halting, unequal economic recovery. Many of the region’s presidents seem distracted by ideological wars, real or imagined, or simply incapable of rising to the moment. One could be forgiven for concluding that none of today’s politicians are suited for the numerous post-COVID challenges ahead.

But that conclusion would be wrong. In this special report, we take a closer look at Latin America’s mayors, many of whom are solving real-life problems while nudging the region down the arduous road to recovery. While Neruda’s vision of a “splendid city” seems distant, the mayors we highlight here are stimulating job creation and investment, including long-marginalized populations in decision-making and, in some cases, successfully pushing back against the anti-democratic tide rising in so much of the Western world.

Why are many mayors succeeding? There are common lessons.

The first is that mayors simply seem too busy to engage with the cultural issues that so animate many national leaders. This was clearly true during the pandemic, as mayors adapted public spaces to set up temporary hospitals, built new bike paths and did their best to get schools back open safely. The second is a penchant for long-term thinking: Many of the mayors profiled here seem to perceive themselves as temporary custodians of a multi-decade project, as opposed to aspiring messiahs intent on tearing down the work of their predecessors (or building their own 50-year reign). Finally, the nature of the work keeps mayors in close personal contact with their constituents, unlike the bubble that envelops so many presidents.

It’s too early to know what the long-term effects of the pandemic will be on the functioning of Latin America’s cities. But in the world’s most urbanized region (with 80% of the population living in cities), it’s clear that the quest for “light, justice and dignity,” to use Neruda’s phrase, will continue to fall largely to mayors. And that is a welcome slice of good news.



João Campos,  
mayor of Recife,  
the capital of the  
Brazilian state  
of Pernambuco.

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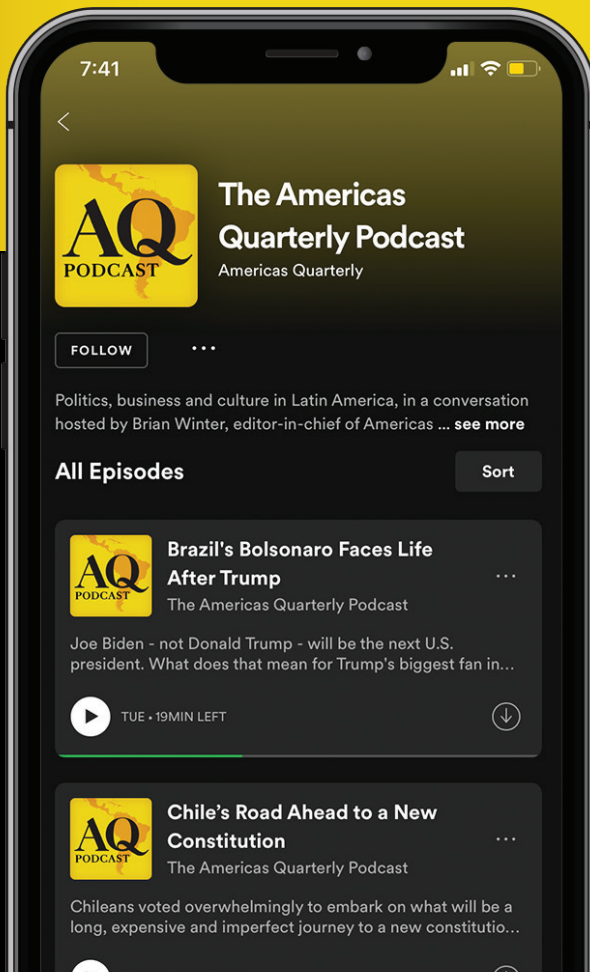
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## THE MAYORS ISSUE

# WHY LATIN AMERICAN MAYORS MATTER MORE THAN EVER

Local leaders are tackling big problems—often without the partisanship paralyzing national politics.

by Eugene Zapata-Garesché

Mayor Carolina Leitaó, in the red jacket, meets with residents in Peñalolén, Chile.



**A**S LATIN AMERICA MOVES into recovery mode, it is becoming clear that mayors will lead the way. With national politics often plagued by radical partisanship, many countries in the region are suffering from both political paralysis and unpredictable policymaking. Given the resulting vacuum in leadership, the region should take a closer look at the power of cities and their local leaders. While cities have always been magnets for the concentration of people, ideas, innovation and economic activity, in recent times Latin America has been accelerating its transformation into a more decentralized, more urban age, where mayors are set to play the leading role.

According to recent data published by the World Bank, 80% of Latin America's population lives in urban areas. This is the highest urbanization rate in the developing world, dwarfing Asia (51%) and Sub-Saharan Africa, (43%), and is significantly higher than the world's average of 56%.

And the region will continue to urbanize. While it may be too soon to predict whether the pandemic will lead to long-term demographic change, we can safely forecast today that in the coming decade, urbanization will continue to increase. Once associated with the largest metropolises, such as São Paulo, Mexico City and Buenos Aires, urban sprawl is now occurring in medium-size cities all over the region. This will have profound implications for housing, water and sanitation, public transportation, energy consumption, social cohesion and climate change.

Internal and international migration have been major contributors to the growth of cities, whether rural-to-urban within a given country, or through the arrival of international migrants, transforming urban areas into heterogenous, multicultural and often multilingual spaces. An example is the Baek-ku neighborhood in Buenos Aires, populated by a majority of South Korean immigrants since 1965; or more recently the El Paraíso neighborhood in Bogotá, where roughly half the elementary schools' student population is from Venezuela. Likewise, small municipalities like Turbo, located near the Panama border in Colombia, have seen a dramatic rise in recent years of Asian and African migrants. Turbo has been a hotspot for Sri Lankans, Angolans and Congolese trying to access Central America in their journey to the United States. While many have succeeded in





**María Emilsen Angulo** (second from left) is mayor of Tumaco, Colombia. Her job entails providing services in one of the poorest municipalities in the country, while facing organized crime groups based in this major coca production area.

their endeavor, others have not, and end up settling there.

The importance of cities in the world economy cannot be overstated. Urban economies drive the performance of national economies, as cities generate more than 70% of global GDP. Data from the Inter-American Development Bank shows that in Latin America, just 10 cities accounted for 30% of the region's GDP in 2019. According to the latest World Cities Report 2020, delivering globally on the urban dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals will cost \$38 trillion and mayors will play a central role in making sure these investments land where they are most needed.

In Latin America, a process of decentralization—of shifting political and fiscal resources back to the municipal level—has been underway since democracy returned to most of the region in the 1980s. Today, according to the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, local governments represent on average 19% of public expenditures and 23% of public revenues. Cities also play an important role in public investment (39%, although with great variations among countries and cities). It is worth noting this trend is uneven; in some countries, such as Panama, Nicaragua and Peru, decentralization has been slow or intermittent, while in others, like Cuba and Venezuela, it

## **In Quito, around 40 miles of new bike lanes were constructed, with an increase of 734% in the number of bike trips in only four months.**

has been nonexistent or merely symbolic.

Despite the immense power residing in cities, mayors historically have been seen as being at a lower level in the governance hierarchy when compared with policymakers at the national and provincial levels, mainly because mayors focus on local problems, which in turn are considered, by many, of less importance than national ones.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for a coordinated and decisive response brought about new trends toward recentralization. But mayors had to react and act with urgency, innovating with increasingly limited resources and coming up in record time with creative solutions for situations affecting the daily lives of citizens in areas never imagined.

### **A PANDEMIC EVOLUTION**

**L**atin American cities were hit worst in their so-called urban weak spots, characterized by high population density, limited or poor connectivity due to the lack of adequate transportation, and extreme risk conditions in vulnerable locations such as floodplains, riverbanks and hillsides. Mayors were forced to innovate on myriad fronts, such as regulating the use of public spaces, public transport, business continuity, school closures and distance education, hazardous virus-infected waste management, and health risks in slums and informal settlements, among other pressing issues.

One big challenge was the movement of people, as COVID-19 brought almost every city to an abrupt stop. Patterns changed drastically, with travel demand reduced in direct response to lockdowns and remote work. Cities observed an unprecedented shift toward non-motorized mobility, such as cycling and walking, while public transport use plummeted. According to a 2021 UN Habitat report on cities and pandemics, public transport demand from March to May 2020 had mind-boggling reduction rates of minus 92% in Lima, minus 86% in Bogota, minus 83% in Mexico City and minus 80% in Santiago de Chile.

Many mayors were quick and innovative in their reactions. In Quito, around 40 miles of new bike lanes were constructed, with an increase of 734% in the number of bike trips in only four months. Other cities were creative in repurposing public spaces to adapt them to support



Panama City has joined a group of coastal cities pledging to prevent plastic waste from getting into the ocean.

emergency services, setting up temporary hospitals in warehouses and other facilities to increase their response capacity. In Viña del Mar, Chile, for example, the 90-year-old Hotel O'Higgins was converted by the city's authorities in a few weeks into an isolation facility for low-risk patients.

What originally started as temporary measures, including the conversion of streets into pedestrian pathways and bicycle lanes, has found widespread support and will hopefully lead to permanent changes. As the pandemic transforms almost every aspect of urban living, mayors are realizing this might be a once-in-a-generation opportunity for a more resilient long-term transformation.

While many Latin American presidents have seen their popularity decline during the pandemic, some mayors have seen theirs rise. Anchored locally, close to the people, grounded in their territory, mayors have proven they are often best-placed to understand the people's priorities, articulate efforts to deal with public emergencies, champion social innovation to fight inequality and discrimination, and ensure equitable access to reliable basic services.



## AN EMPHASIS ON GREEN DEVELOPMENT

**D**oes this mean turning the concept of the nation-state on its head? Not necessarily.

Placing a bet on mayors is going back to basics. After all, the world was organized into cities way before the advent of nation-states. The concept of territorial development is not new. For decades, international development institutions, civil society organizations, researchers and scholars have recognized the importance of local development as place-based, community-led policymaking, benefiting from the virtuous effect of the so-called bottom-up approach. The post COVID-19 world provides an opportunity to devolve mayors' greater roles in key aspects of local governance, like preventive health care, education, digital inclusion and fiscal autonomy—issues still jealously held under the tight grip of most central governments. Mayors are also best positioned to address inequality and exclusion, which lie at the heart of much of the region's unstable politics and insecurity, from recent protests in Colombia and Chile to the surprise election result in Peru.

Mayors will, in turn, have to redouble their efforts to make the best of the recovery, capitalizing on lessons learned and taking advantage of the opportunity to build back better. In Latin America, mayors will have to focus on a greener and more just recovery, by shifting private and public investments from high-carbon infrastructure to more sustainable options like nonpolluting public transportation, energy-efficient buildings, clean technologies and a circular economy that aims for zero waste.

As urbanization continues to be the driving force for economic growth in Latin America, it is clear that mayors will be key in the coming years and decades to steer the region towards a more climate-friendly future. Effective decentralization will require collaborative governance from central governments and a stronger partnership between mayors, the private sector and civil society. This is the only way to guarantee that urbanization in Latin America is transformed into a vehicle for a more resilient, greener and more equitable growth—with mayors taking their seat behind the steering wheel.

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**Zapata-Garesché** is global director for strategic partnerships and head of Latin America and the Caribbean at the Resilient Cities Network. He is a member of the editorial board of *Americas Quarterly*.



## THE MAYORS ISSUE

María Emilsen Angulo is the first woman to be elected mayor of Tumaco, one of the poorest towns in Colombia—and a major coca-producing area.



# María Emilsen Angulo

## Mayor of Tumaco, Colombia

Facing new and old challenges, a young mayor is taking on organized crime, government neglect, and tradition.

by Mariana Palau

### TUMACO IN A SNAPSHOT



Population  
**212,692**



Human  
Development  
Index (HDI)  
**0.722**



Literacy rate  
**84.6%**



Area  
**1,459  
square miles**



GDP per capita  
**\$1,783**



Access to  
sanitation  
**5.5%**

NOTES: HDI IS FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF NARIÑO. SANITATION REFERS TO PERCENTAGE OF HOMES WITH ADEQUATE ACCESS TO SEWAGE AND WATER.

SOURCES: HDI: UNDP (2019); AREA: INSTITUTO GEOGRÁFICO AGUSTÍN CODAZZI; GDP: MUNICIPIO DE TUMACO; SANITATION, LITERACY, POPULATION: DANE (2018)

**B**OGOTÁ—María Emilsen Angulo has an unenviable job. She is mayor of Tumaco, one of the poorest and most violent municipalities in Colombia. In this small port city along the Pacific coast near the border with Ecuador, half of residents are unemployed. The homicide rate, 154 per 100,000, is four times the national average, and there is a shortage of courts, schools and basic infrastructure such as sewage and water supply systems.

But “coca is my biggest headache,” Angulo told *AQ*, referring to the plant used to make cocaine. “People here see it as their only way to make a living.”

Tumaco is one of the world’s largest cocaine-producing areas, after the FARC introduced the crop there toward the end of Colombia’s 52-year conflict. According to Angulo, 80% of the families living in the rural parts of town cultivate the crop, which now covers close to 25,000 acres—more than during the conflict. After the FARC disarmed in 2017, other armed groups started fighting one other for control of the drug business, with civilians caught in the middle.

Against this dire backdrop, Angulo, just 37 and the first woman in her job, has stood up to powerful organized criminal groups. She has pushed the police to monitor certain areas and offered cash rewards to anyone who will turn in murderers. Criminals responded by threatening her, and police recently discovered a plot to kidnap her father. Now she and her entire family cannot travel anywhere without bodyguards and bulletproof vehicles. Her daughter rarely leaves the house.

Thinking long term, Angulo said her best option to fight crime is to prevent child recruitment into armed gangs. She has hired soccer players, dancers and ultimate frisbee coaches to keep children in poor neighborhoods away from the influence of criminals. Angulo knows her four-year term is not enough to bring about the changes the city desperately needs, but said small policies like this can make a difference over time.

Angulo had been elected mayor in 2015, but a year into her term a court annulled her election, ruling her husband’s job at Tumaco’s public hospital a conflict. Her successor immediately abandoned her most important project: the construction of a permanent branch of the State University of Nariño to host up to 1,000 students. But Angulo persisted. She was elected again in 2019—her husband was no longer working for the city—and revived the university project, which she aims to complete by December 2021.

Angulo took office for the second time in 2020—just as the pandemic hit. Tumaco wasn’t ready for it: The town had no ambulances, intensive care units (ICUs), oxygen tanks or ventilators. Most *tumaqueños* work informally, and few followed social distancing measures. The virus spread with ease. By





**“Coca is my biggest headache. People here see it as their only way to make a living.”**

July 2020, Tumaco had one of Colombia’s highest infection rates.

In response, Angulo reworked the budget, diverting petroleum royalty funds to repair Tumaco’s single hospital, set up makeshift tent hospitals, and buy one ambulance while convincing private companies to buy four more. The national government provided 15 ICU beds.

In early July, the city’s COVID infection rate remained above the national average. Nevertheless, Angulo told *AQ* that “if we compare Tumaco’s health care before the pandemic with what we have today, we can say it has drastically improved.”

The first woman in her family to graduate from university, Angulo has been immersed in politics since she was 11 years old, when she started to follow her father, himself a community organizer and budding politician. Soon she was the one giving speeches at her father’s events.

Angulo’s experience and connections in local politics have helped her start repairing Tumaco’s long-strained relationship with Bogotá. Believing Tumaco can be a tourist destination, she started to clean up the city’s beaches, most of which are overrun by garbage, and convinced the national government’s tourism agency to help rebuild the waterfront. Other projects include new hiking trails and an alliance with groups of women to lead kayak tours through mangrove wetlands.

During the massive anti-government protests that convulsed Colombia starting in late April, Tumaco also had its streets blocked by communities that felt left out of the peace deal and who rely on coca for a living. But in Tumaco, the mayor did not send riot police, as authorities did in other parts of the country. Rather, Angulo invited protesters to talk.

Angulo’s working relationship with the national government helped her again, and she was able to bring a minister to the negotiating table, where an agreement was reached to jointly design ways for the national government to invest more in Tumaco.

This dialogue spared Tumaco, one of the most violent cities in Colombia, from the violence that engulfed other parts of the country. “The protesters didn’t throw a single rock in Tumaco,” said Angulo.

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**Palau** is a journalist based in Bogotá, Colombia



## THE MAYORS ISSUE

Recife Mayor João Campos started his term during the pandemic.



# João Campos

## Mayor of Recife, Brazil

The heir to a political dynasty is betting on innovation to build a name for himself in the most unequal Brazilian capital.

by Ciara Carvalho

### RECIFE IN A SNAPSHOT



Population  
**1,653,461**



Human  
Development  
Index (HDI)  
**0.74**



Literacy rate  
**92.3%**



Area  
**84,496  
square miles**



GDP per capita  
**\$6,378**



Access to  
sanitation  
**69.2%**

NOTES: ESTIMATED  
POPULATION IN 2020. HDI  
IS FOR PERNAMBUCO STATE.  
SANITATION REFERS TO  
PERCENTAGE OF HOMES WITH  
ADEQUATE SANITATION.  
SOURCES: IBGE; HDI: UNDP  
(2019)

**R**ECIFE, BRAZIL—Three days before the 2020 runoff election for mayor of Recife, a regional capital in northeast Brazil, João Campos turned 27. His victory was national news. Not only did it make Campos the youngest mayor ever of a state capital in Brazil, it also handed him one of the country's toughest jobs: managing the capital with the worst income inequality in a country known for its gap between rich and poor.

The attention Campos received was largely because of the political weight of his family name. His late father, Eduardo Campos, and great-grandfather, Miguel Arraes, two of the most charismatic politicians in the history of the Brazilian northeast, were both governors of Pernambuco and presided over the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB). After Eduardo Campos died in a plane crash while campaigning in the 2014 presidential race, João was thrust into the spotlight.

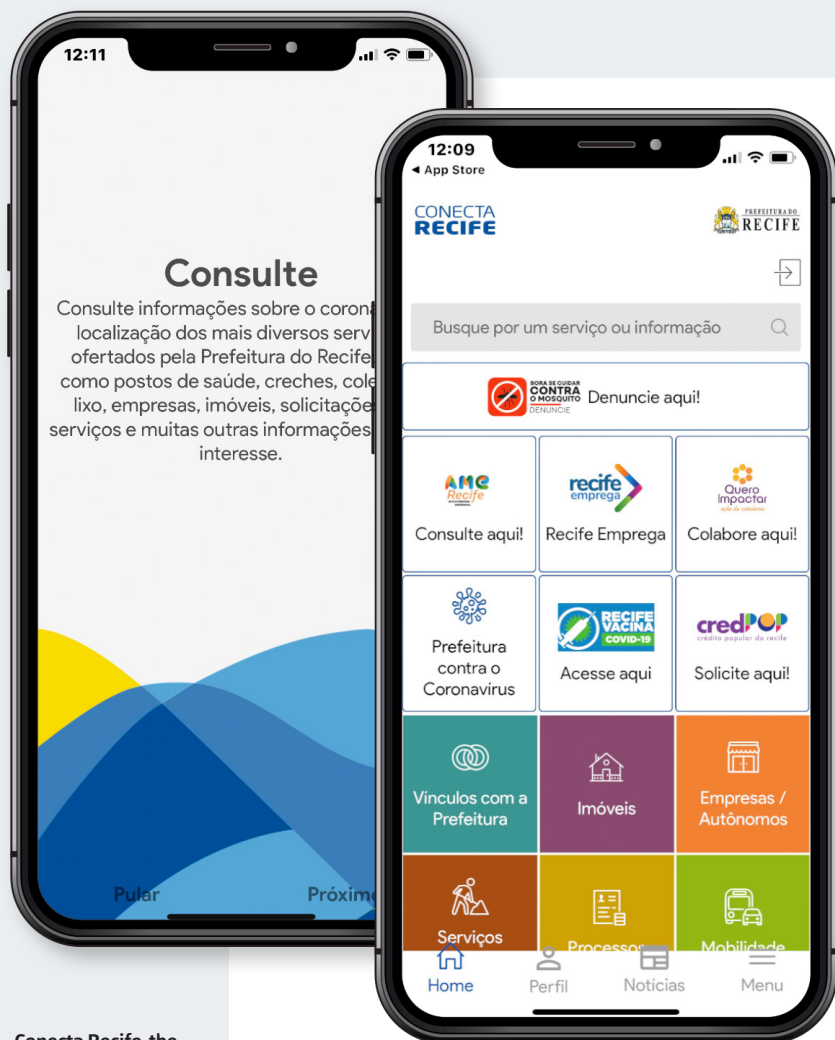
Campos was determined to both create his own legacy and revitalize the political franchise that had suddenly fallen into his hands. At the time, he was studying civil engineering. Four years later, at 23, he was elected to Congress with more than 460,000 votes, a state record. Before completing his second year in office, he launched his bid for mayor and won—this time in a clash with his own family: He bested his cousin, Marília Arraes from the Workers' Party, in one of the toughest-fought campaigns Recife has ever seen.

Campos is a politician of his time, making official announcements to his more than 370,000 followers on Instagram. But Campos has used digital innovation to do more than grow his own profile. Consider Conecta Recife, the app that allows residents to schedule their COVID-19 vaccinations without standing in line. The well-organized initiative reduced the risk of contagion and drew widespread praise, even from political opponents.

"In four years, our commitment is to digitally transform this city," said Campos, who created a secretariat dedicated to making city hall services more accessible. "We want to mirror the success we've achieved during the vaccine rollout in other municipal services."

With his father's charisma and blue eyes, Campos expects to be compared often to his forebearer. He also knows he bears the burden of managing a city with more than 1.6 million inhabitants and social





Conecta Recife, the app that allows residents to schedule their COVID-19 vaccinations, drew widespread praise, even from political opponents.

cleavages that have only worsened during the pandemic.

For example, Recife has yet to relocate families living in the stilt homes crowding its riverbanks or in precarious housing clinging to its hills. The city has a housing deficit of more than 60,000 homes, and Campos' predecessor invested little to correct the shortage. With no money to finance large-scale construction of new units, Campos is betting on improving the municipality's credit rating to negotiate gentler terms for international bank loans to pay the bills and honor his campaign promise to build 3,000 new homes in the next four years.

Urban mobility is another challenge. The city has long prioritized private cars over public transportation, and while Recife's flat



**He also knows he bears the burden of managing a city with more than 1.6 million inhabitants and social cleavages that have only worsened during the pandemic.**

terrain is ideal for cycling, it does not have dedicated bike lanes connecting major roads.

“Our commitment is to build 100 kilometers (62 miles) of bike lanes, linking the southern and northern areas of the city. This has been done all over the world,” Campos told *AQ*, adding that he is willing to pay the political price of reducing the space for cars in a capital known for some of Brazil’s worst traffic jams.

Campos, unsurprisingly, is quick to name his father and great-grandfather as his political inspirations. But he also touts a name outside partisan politics: Pope Francis.

“He understands that talking is not enough,” Campos said. “We have to act. I believe politics has become just words and discourse. He is a leader who inspires us not just by what he preaches, but by what he does.”

Campos has felt the blowback from a plan to build a large park that displeased the city’s green groups. The project, as planned, would raze a large area of vegetation on the edge of the city’s iconic mangrove wetlands. Campos is pressing ahead though, counting on backing from the city council, where his allies hold a solid majority, and the state governor, who hails from Campos’s party.

At the end of his tenure, Campos knows he will be judged not by his surname but by what he was able to do for Recife—and perhaps what he left undone.

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**Carvalho** is a journalist and executive editor of *Jornal do Commercio* in Recife, Pernambuco



## THE MAYORS ISSUE

Carolina Leitaó, Mayor of Santiago's Peñalolén municipality, greets a resident before the pandemic.



# Carolina Leitaó

## Mayor of Peñalolén, Chile

In a district she calls a “mini Chile,” one mayor is rethinking what government should look like.

by John Bartlett

### PEÑALOLÉN IN A SNAPSHOT



Population  
**241,599**



Human  
Development  
Index (HDI)  
**0.883**



Literacy rate  
**97.6%**



Area  
**20.9**  
square miles



GDP per capita  
**\$15,938**



Access to  
sanitation  
**100%**

NOTES: HDI, GDP PER CAPITA, AND LITERACY RATE ARE FOR SANTIAGO METROPOLITAN REGION. SANITATION ACCESS IS FOR CHILE.

SOURCES: AREA, POPULATION: BIBLIOTECA DEL CONGRESO NACIONAL DE CHILE (2017); HDI: UNDP (2019); GDP: BANCO CENTRAL; LITERACY: MINISTERIO DE DESARROLLO SOCIAL Y FAMILIA (2017), SANITATION: WHO



**S**ANTIAGO—Early on a winter morning in 1999, 1,650 families surged onto a 60-acre plot of privately owned land in the Santiago district of Peñalolén, completing the first illegal land occupation since Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship.

The encampment soon swelled to become one of Chile’s largest. Carolina Leitaó has spent part of her career in politics dealing with the fallout—first as a city council member who helped relocate the families to formal housing over a period of several years. More recently, as Peñalolén’s mayor, she has helped transform the area into a lake, several soccer pitches, a skate park, a recycling facility and a velodrome that was used for the 2014 South American Games. (The owner of the land was eventually compensated by the government.)

The pragmatic, humane solution to a thorny problem was typical of the approach that enabled Leitaó, now 42, to be elected to a third consecutive term in May despite the massive anti-incumbent feeling sweeping Chile.

It may also help point a way forward as the country writes a new constitution that seeks to address glaring inequalities in housing and other areas. “Occupying terrain cannot be the easiest way of getting housing in Chile,” Leitaó told *AQ*.

Born in Santiago, Leitaó spent part of her childhood in the southern city of Chillán before returning to the capital when she was five years old, going on to study law at the University of Chile. At 18, she joined the Christian Democrat Party after having volunteered in its youth wing, and later became the party’s vice president. When she became mayor, she promised to focus on the district’s inequality and environmental challenges while encouraging residents’ active participation in decision-making.

However, her second term was dominated by the pandemic and Chile’s era-defining social movement.

“I have been critical of the national government’s pandemic strategy, which has disproportionately affected the poorest people, and local leaders have had very few opportunities to participate and give our opinion,” Leitaó said.

The pandemic exposed disparities in Peñalolén, such as yawning differences between connectivity and resources across the district. Leitaó’s team responded by distributing nearly 7,000 SIM cards to get students online during lockdown, and by funding tablet computers



**Leitaó is building on the district's history of participatory budgeting, which is carried out every four years.**

for kids learning to read.

Despite the challenges, Leitaó sees her district of some 260,000 as a “mini-Chile” that can be a laboratory for rethinking how government can work. Founded on the footprint of several large *estancias* in 1984, Peñalolén’s 21 square miles sit between Santiago’s wealthy northeastern districts and the working-class peripheries to the south, stretching from the crowded valley floor up into the foothills of the Andes.

Leitaó is critical of the ways she sees power and privilege as unequally distributed, and she has delegated some decision-making to local groups—historically uncommon in Chilean politics.

“The social movement and pandemic have made leadership in the municipalities more visible, as (local leaders) are the ones who hear about people’s experiences,” said Leitaó. She has expanded neighborhood discussion groups that were set up in 2006 to convene grassroots leaders to discuss local priorities. During her government, the groups have grown to 48 from their initial 18—and she plans to visit each over the course of her term.

Leitaó is also building on the district’s history of participatory budgeting, which is carried out every four years. The projects that receive the most votes are implemented, provided they pass a threshold of 5% participation among residents over 16.

In 2019, some \$750,000 (533 million pesos), equating to 0.9% of the municipality’s budget, was designated for 10 projects across Peñalolén, which included revamped soccer pitches, street lighting improvements and a new skate park. The pandemic has inhibited the developments, but Leitaó has pledged to expand the pot for participatory budgeting in the future.

Another axis of Leitaó’s management in Peñalolén is environmental protection and mitigating the effects of climate change—to which the district is particularly vulnerable. In 1993, a devastating landslide killed 26 people and damaged more than 5,000 homes, a reminder of the risks of heavy rainfall in the community.

## Leitaó is staying focused on the changes she can make in the short term.

Leitaó's team won a regional prize for its environmental plan, which encompasses energy and water efficiency, waste management and environmental education. The municipality has also pioneered a recycling scheme that trained and equipped informal garbage collectors. Several municipalities elsewhere in Chile have adopted similar schemes.

Today, Chilean politics is undergoing its own metamorphosis, with decisions being made that will shape the country for decades to come. Leitaó, for her part, is staying focused on the changes she can make in the short term.

"My focus today and for the next four years is on transforming Peñalolén into a more welcoming, fairer and safer municipality."

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**Bartlett** is a freelance journalist based in Chile





## THE MAYORS ISSUE

Yamandú Orsi,  
mayor of Canelones,  
talks with a resident  
at an event before  
the pandemic.



# Yamandú Orsi

## Mayor of Canelones, Uruguay

The mayor of Uruguay's second-largest city is not hiding his dream of becoming president.

by Carina Novarese

### CANELONES IN A SNAPSHOT



Population  
**520,173**



Human  
Development  
Index (HDI)  
**0.819**



Literacy rate  
**98.9%**



Area  
**1,751**  
square miles



GDP per capita  
**\$5,524**



Access to  
sanitation  
**60% to 75%\***

NOTES: HDI IS FOR THE DE-  
PARTMENTS OF CANELONES,  
MALDONADO AND ROCHA.  
GDP PER CAPITA IS FOR THE  
DEPARTMENT OF CANELONES.  
\*SANITATION COMPANY OSE  
PUBLISHES A REGIONAL RANGE  
OF ACCESS.

SOURCES: AREA, POPULATION,  
GDP: OBSERVATORIO TER-  
RITORIO URUGUAY; HDI: UNDP  
(2019); SANITATION: OSE - OB-  
RAS SANITARIAS DEL ESTADO

**C**ANELONES, URUGUAY — Yamandú Orsi fits the classic image of a Uruguayan, said Alfredo Garcé, a well-known political scientist and professor at Universidad de la República: moderate, open to dialogue, with the right amount of city and the right amount of countryside. And he isn't hiding his political ambition to move from mayor to president.

A former high school history teacher, Orsi was reelected mayor of Canelones for a second five-year term in 2020 with 51% of the votes cast—more than double the second-place candidate. His link to local politics goes back to 2005, when he was tapped by his party, Movimiento de Participación Popular (MPP)—former President José Mujica's party—to serve as deputy mayor, a post he held for 10 years until his first successful mayoral run in 2015.

Orsi was born to a humble farming family in a rural district of Canelones, the eternal neighbor and virtual extension of the capital city, Montevideo, where almost half of Uruguay's 3.5 million people live. From its super-urban neighborhoods bordering Montevideo to vineyards and fertile produce farms extending northeast from the capital, Canelones has given Orsi a canvas to try different policies—some surprising for a politician hailing from a left-wing party with roots in Uruguay's guerrilla groups of the 1960s and 70s.

"I believe in the human capacity to decide their own destiny," he said. "The left without democracy and freedom is not the left."

Orsi represents a generational shift of leftist politicians who place their focus on other issues.

In 2015, he created a public agency to promote the town to potential investors, and eased local red tape to try to attract international businesses to Canelones. The mayor scored a big win when Google decided to buy a plot within Canelones' Parque de las Ciencias (Sciences Park), one of Uruguay's 12 free trade zones. The park was created in 2011, during Orsi's tenure as deputy mayor, to house a South American plant of a German pharmaceutical company, and Google now plans to build a data center, which Orsi hopes will bring new jobs for town residents.

The mayor is betting on turning Canelones' economy into one based on innovation and green projects, while keeping the region's rural and agricultural traditions. In fact, almost a quarter of Uruguay's farm workers are based in Canelones.



**“I believe in the human capacity to decide their own destiny. The left without democracy and freedom is not the left.”**

An avid defender of a green economy, Orsi has implemented a waste management program that creates jobs linked to recycling and reusing discarded materials, and includes the distribution of free composting units to Canelones’ residents. “Entering this world of the circular economy is thinking beyond those two minutes that you need to classify waste, because the more garbage goes to landfills the more money we all spend,” Orsi told *AQ*.

Like many in his party, Orsi does not agree with the policies implemented by President Luis Lacalle Pou’s government during the COVID-19 emergency. Nevertheless, he has reached out to the governing coalition. “We need unity. When it comes to solidarity and the hunger of the people there should be no differences,” said Orsi.

The mayor was walking the talk, joining Vice President Beatriz Argimón to collect produce donated by local farmers for distribution to families made vulnerable by the pandemic. “I know that most of the citizens share this philosophy, we all have the *celeste* as a flag,” he said, referring to the sky-blue color of Uruguay’s flag.

This visit to a local farm was part of the *Canelones Te Alimenta* (Canelones Feeds You) program organized by Orsi to connect farmers and manufacturers to food pantries and community kitchens supporting vulnerable families.

Orsi’s openness to work with the center-right government might be crucial for Canelones coming out of the pandemic. The mayor is counting on an investment of at least \$60 million in local infrastructure, which he said is vital to create jobs in his city.

Long before his reelection as mayor, Orsi had already confirmed his plans to offer himself as the Frente Amplio coalition presidential candidate in the 2024 elections. Until then, he will keep juggling his day job running Canelones with the construction of his national profile.

The department is offering him a very visible launch platform. But he needs to perform well for a few more years on his home turf first.

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*Novarese is a journalist based in Uruguay*





## THE MAYORS ISSUE

Mayor Raúl Jorge,  
wearing a helmet,  
tours a construction  
site in May.



# Raúl “Chuli” Jorge

## Mayor of San Salvador de Jujuy, Argentina

In Argentina’s northernmost and highest capital, a fourth-term mayor has changed the environmental landscape.

by Lucia He

### SAN SALVADOR DE JUJUY IN A SNAPSHOT



Population  
**278,336**



Human  
Development  
Index (HDI)  
**0.836**



Literacy rate  
**96.9%**



Area  
**7.34**  
square miles



GDP per capita  
**n/a**



Access to  
sanitation  
**89.6%**

NOTES: HDI, LITERACY RATE AND SANITATION ACCESS ARE FOR JUJUY PROVINCE. SANITATION REFERS TO PERCENTAGE OF HOMES WITH ADEQUATE SEWAGE AND WATER ACCESS.

SOURCES: AREA: MUNICIPIO DE SAN SALVADOR DE JUJUY; HDI: UNDP (2019); POPULATION, LITERACY, SANITATION: INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE ESTADÍSTICA Y CENSO (2010)

**B**UENOS AIRES—Nestled in a fertile valley at the confluence of the Río Grande and the Xibi Xibi River, and more than 0.75 miles (1,200 meters) above sea level, San Salvador de Jujuy boasts a postcard view of soaring mountains and lush forests. And unlike Buenos Aires, known for its Parisian-style architecture, the capital of Jujuy province is unmistakably Andean, both socially and culturally.

“More than any other Argentine city, San Salvador de Jujuy represents a symbiosis of the different cultures present in the country, from European to Syrian to Andean,” Mayor Raúl Jorge, 62, told *AQ*. “Growing up here allowed me to recognize from a very young age the importance of inclusion and diversity.”

Born in San Salvador de Jujuy to a working-class family, Jorge, who everyone calls by his childhood nickname, Chuli, studied architecture at the National University of Córdoba, where he developed a passion for urban planning. “We had to design a plan for Córdoba,” he said. “We designed pedestrian areas and recycled old buildings to give them new functions. That experience really marked my professional career.”

The country was under the 1976–1983 military dictatorship when Jorge, in his last year of college, attended a clandestine meeting where he met Raúl Alfonsín, a lawyer who went on to become Argentina’s first democratically elected president after the dictatorship.

“Alfonsín was traveling the country, giving talks in favor of democracy,” Jorge said. “His social-democratic discourse captivated me.” He and his wife moved back to San Salvador de Jujuy and became active in politics.

Jorge joined Alfonsín’s Radical Civic Union—a centrist social-liberal party that is now part of the political coalition led by former President Mauricio Macri—and served for more than a decade as municipal secretary of public works and later as a councilman. He was first elected mayor in 2007, but he won that municipal election by a mere 444 votes. This led to a months-long legal fight that went all the way to Argentina’s Supreme Court, which ruled in Jorge’s favor. Jorge won his next three terms without a glitch, despite the fact that his party has been in opposition to the national government in 10 out of his 14 years as mayor.

Jorge attributes his longevity in office to being able to deliver on key infrastructure projects. “We had to negotiate every single project that we wanted to carry out,” he said. “My experience as a councilman really helped.”

Central to these projects is the expansion of green spaces, which include a linear park created along the banks of the Xibi Xibi.

“This city barely had any public spaces for people to meet up, and I wanted to change that,” Jorge said. “We started by widening the sidewalks in the historic city center, and then we designed two big parks for people to gather, exercise and enjoy the vegetation native to this area.”



**“This city barely had any public spaces for people to meet up, and I wanted to change that.”**

“This city barely had any public spaces for people to meet up, and I wanted to change that.”

The park expansion increased green space in the city from three to eight square meters per capita. Still, university students and environmental groups at first opposed the construction of Xibi Xibi Park, alleging it would divert the river’s natural course and destroy biodiversity. City Hall pushed through resistance to the project, but did present a detailed environmental impact study—and now even the university holds events at the river park.

Another of Jorge’s signature policies was the decentralization of municipal decision-making. Inspired by the revival of Medellín in Colombia, the government built 22 Centros de Participación Vecinal (Centers of Neighborhood Participation) across San Salvador de Jujuy. The centers serve as administrative hubs, host government-organized training workshops and recreational activities, and provide assistance to gender violence victims. Lately, they have also played a key role in managing the COVID-19 pandemic.

“All of the centers have an area dedicated to public health and primary care. This allowed us to quickly assist and isolate people who had contracted COVID-19 and do proper contact tracing,” explained Jorge. The centers all have Wi-Fi, which has helped many students attending remote classes during the pandemic, especially in neighborhoods where families lack good Internet access.

Jorge has yet to say whether he will run again in the 2022 elections. But he is drawing up an ambitious plan for the San Salvador de Jujuy he envisions for 2050, with new infrastructure projects and a municipal botanical park to protect one of the city’s native forests. It also promises to transform San Salvador de Jujuy into a “15-minute city,” the urbanist’s dream city where all residents meet most of their daily needs within a short walk or bicycle ride from home.

“Cities that aren’t planned are cities that aren’t sustainable—economically or environmentally,” Jorge said. “I think we mayors, more than anyone else, have a huge responsibility and the potential to transform cities and make them better places for the people who live in them.”

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*He is a reporter for RED/ACCIÓN based in Buenos Aires*