

# Dignified Aging: Experience Report at the Municipal Council for the Rights of the Elderly of Rio De Janeiro (COMDEPI-RIO)

Vanessa Pinto<sup>1</sup><sup>a</sup>, Maria João Antunes<sup>1</sup><sup>b</sup> and Tânia Valente<sup>2</sup><sup>c</sup>

<sup>1</sup>DigiMedia, University of Aveiro, Campus Universitário de Santiago, Aveiro, Portugal

<sup>2</sup>Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Departamento de Saúde Coletiva, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

**Keywords:** Elderly Policy, Aging, Social Participation, Social Inclusion, Health Management, Social Management.

**Abstract:** The paper presents insights from the experience of serving as a government representative on the Rio de Janeiro Municipal Council for the Rights of the Elderly (COMDEPI-RIO) in 2023. The objective was to analyze the management of municipal public policies from the perspective of equitable participation, considering criteria such as the selection of representatives, speeches by council members, and participatory evaluation of actions. The methodology adopted combined participant observation with documentary analysis, including the review of laws, minutes, and internal regulations, in addition to direct monitoring of regular and extraordinary meetings and council activities, such as technical visits and decentralized assemblies. The results pointed to significant challenges in implementing public policies aligned with national legal requirements. Weaknesses were identified in intersectoral coordination, with overlapping competencies between the federal, state, and municipal levels, in addition to budgetary limitations that directly impacted the execution of the municipal action plan for the elderly. A predominance of government voices was observed in the deliberations, marginalizing the contributions of civil society. The conclusions highlight the need to strengthen integration between government levels, expand social participation through more inclusive tools, and invest in ongoing training for council members.


## 1 INTRODUCTION


Population aging is a global phenomenon that has had a profound impact on society, especially in Brazil. According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the country faces a low birth rate combined with a significant increase in life expectancy, drastically transforming its age pyramid (IBGE, 2024).


The declining birth rate is a result of cultural and economic shifts. Families are choosing to have fewer children due to factors such as expanded access to education, urbanization, and economic stability. In São Paulo and Minas Gerais, for example, fertility rates have fallen to about 1.5 children per woman, below the population replacement rate of approximately 2.1. This trend reduces the number of young people in the population, directly affecting the demographic composition.

On the other hand, life expectancy at birth in Brazil has increased to 76.5 years, surpassing historical averages. In the state of Rio de Janeiro, this expectancy reached 76.8 years, demonstrating advances in public health and living conditions. With more people living longer, the proportion of elderly people in the population is growing rapidly. IBGE projects that by 2030, states such as São Paulo and Minas Gerais will have around 20% of their population composed of people aged 60 or over, representing an increase of approximately 1.5 million elderly people in São Paulo alone.

These figures have direct implications for public policy. Governments need to adapt health, social security and welfare services to meet the needs of this growing segment of the population. In addition, low birth rates require revisions to social security systems, as fewer young people contribute to the benefits of retirees.

<sup>a</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3707-0371>

<sup>b</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7819-4103>

<sup>c</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5735-5983>

The aging population in Rio de Janeiro, reflected in the increase in life expectancy and the decrease in the birth rate, demands effective public policies to ensure dignified and sustainable aging. This challenge is directly aligned with the United Nations 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), which seeks to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which aims to reduce inequalities within and between countries. The actions of COMDEPI-RIO are therefore crucial to achieving these global goals.

Active ageing is a concept that refers to an ageing process that promotes health, well-being and full participation in society. The term has been widely disseminated by the World Health Organization (WHO) and encapsulates the idea that, as the world's population ages, it is essential to ensure that individuals can continue to play meaningful roles in their communities, while maintaining their health and quality of life. Rather than viewing ageing as a passive or negative process, active ageing emphasizes the importance of keeping older adults physically, mentally and socially engaged throughout their lives (WHO, 2002). Policies aimed at active and healthy aging are essential to ensure that this age group remains productive and integrated into society.

At the international level WHO launched the Global strategy and action plan on ageing and health (2017), which guides governments in promoting age-friendly environments, integrated care and combating ageism. In addition, the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2031) reinforces the need for an intersectoral approach to address contemporary demographic challenges (UN, 2021).

In Brazil, the rights and well-being of the elderly population are guaranteed by a set of comprehensive laws that guide public policies in health, social assistance, social participation and combating prejudice. In 1994, Federal Law No. 8.842 established the National Policy for the Elderly and created the National Council of the Rights of the Elderly (NCRE). The creation of NCRE encouraged the establishment of specific funds for the elderly in each municipality.

These funds are made up primarily of federal resources, originating from budgetary allocations, applications in the financial market and donations from individuals or legal entities, with the advantage that donations are tax deductible. Despite the initiative, dependence on federal resources due to insufficient municipal budgets, the lack of coordination between management levels, with

overlapping responsibilities and duplicated actions, and the difficulties in raising funds via income tax have harmed and, in some cases, making the operation of municipal support structures for the elderly unfeasible.

In 2003, the Statute of the Elderly (Law No. 10.741/2003) was created, consolidating rights in areas such as health, education, and social security. In 2019, the National Pact for the Implementation of the Rights of the Elderly reinforced the commitment to guidelines such as friendly environments, comprehensive health, and combating ageism. However, Brazil's territorial heterogeneity poses challenges to the implementation of these policies, requiring multisectoral engagement and recognition of the elderly as subjects of rights.

## 2 COUNCILS FOR THE RIGHTS OF THE ELDERLY

Councils for the rights of the elderly are structured at three levels:

- Federal level: the NCRE created by government Law No. 8.842/1994, formulates and articulates policies, monitors the elderly statute and promotes studies in partnership with other councils. Composed of government and civil society representatives, it ensures social participation in the construction of public policies;
- State level: in Rio de Janeiro, the State Council for the Defense of the Rights of the Elderly (CEDEPI-RJ), established by State Law No. 2.536/1996, acts as a regulatory and supervisory body. CEDEPI-RJ contributes to the implementation of policies defined by the CNDI, adapting them to local peculiarities and promoting greater integration between the federal and municipal levels;
- Municipal level: COMDEPI-RIO, established by Municipal Law No. 5.208/2010, is a joint council with responsibilities such as: formulation and monitoring of the Municipal Plan for the Elderly; inspection of long-term care facilities and promotion of public hearings and intersectoral coordination.

### 2.1 Public Participation and Social Management

The effectiveness of public policies formulated by councils depends fundamentally on the active

participation of civil society. In this context, public participation and social management emerge as essential pillars to ensure that the demands and needs of the elderly population are incorporated into government decisions. At COMDEPI-RIO public participation is encouraged through open meetings and decentralized assemblies.

Today, citizens and community members can be informed about political decisions that affect them before they are formalized. There is a growing demand for active voice, participation in projects and direct involvement in decisions, which defines the concept of public participation. Public participation is “the process by which the concerns, needs and values of the public are incorporated into governmental and corporate decision-making” (Creighton, 2005, p. 7). It is a dialogue between society and government, where citizen contributions make decisions fairer and communities more inclusive.

This participation strengthens social management by giving legitimacy and representativeness to policies. By involving citizens in identifying problems, proposing solutions and evaluating results, social management becomes responsive to the demands of society, promoting collaboration between the State and the population. Unlike traditional management models, social management prioritizes collective well-being and the resolution of social problems over economic objectives (França Filho, 2008).

Authors such as Allebrandt (2001) and Tenório (1998) advocate participatory management models based on social articulation, information exchange and power sharing between public and private actors. Despite efforts to encourage participation in COMDEPI-RIO assemblies, elderly engagement in public consultations remains low. Attendance records indicate that only around 30 individuals participated, despite a potential audience of over one million. This underscores structural barriers, including digital exclusion and insufficient outreach efforts.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

This qualitative experience reports the experience of a government health representative on COMDEPI-RIO in 2023. Although experience reporting is often seen as a source of knowledge with a high degree of

subjectivity, it can acquire scientific characteristics when structured methodologically (Gil, 1999). The qualitative approach adopted allowed us to understand the dynamics between social reality and the researcher's subjectivity. Reality is a construction influenced by individual experiences and interaction with the world. In this context, the unsystematic observational research focused on the spaces of social participation used by the population, following regular and extraordinary meetings, thematic committees and actions of COMDEPI-RIO.

The methodology included participant observation, documentary analysis (laws, minutes, regulations) and monitoring of regular and extraordinary meetings and Council actions. Criteria such as selection of representatives, council members' speeches and participatory evaluation were analyzed.

Table 1 presents the actions carried out by COMDEPI-RIO in the period under analysis.

Table 1: COMDEPI-RIO (2023) main actions.

Category/Actions	Examples
<b>Standards Committee</b> Propose rules for the functioning of the council Standardize registration and renewal processes for entities	Preparation of rules for registration and renewal of entities on the Council Review of internal regulations to ensure transparency in membership criteria
<b>Public Policy Committee</b> Establish indicators for monitoring actions	Definition of metrics to monitor the application of resources from the Municipal Fund for the Elderly
<b>Mobilization and Articulation</b> Coordination with secretariats (SMAS, SMS, SEMESQV) <sup>1</sup> Mobilization for technological projects	Presentation of services offered to the elderly at ordinary (12) and extraordinary (2) meetings Submission of the media training project for elderly people to access new technologies
<b>Oversight</b> Technical visits to institutions	Carrying out 28 visits to assess the registration/renewal of Long-Term Care Institutions

<sup>1</sup> Municipal Secretariat of Social Assistance (SMAS); Municipal Secretariat of Health (SMS) and Municipal Secretariat of Healthy Aging and Quality of Life (SEMESQV)

Table 1: COMDEPI-RIO (2023) main actions (cont.).

Category/Actions	Examples
<b>Knowledge Dissemination</b> Lectures with partners	Partnerships for debates on health, health surveillance and public management
<b>Equitable Participation</b> Method of choosing representatives Participatory processes in discourses	Government representatives: appointed by the Mayor, Civil society and direct election Deliberations in open assemblies, with priority given to the voice of elderly people
<b>Resource Allocation</b> Application of resources from the Municipal Fund for the Elderly	Purchase of uniforms for beneficiaries; Acquisition of air conditioning for Community Homes  Delivery of food cards to 1300 elderly people

Table 2 describes the methodological framework to analyze the actions of COMDEPI-RIO in 2023.

Table 2: Framework to analyze the actions of COMDEPI-RIO (2023).

Methods/Techniques	Objective
Document analysis/ Laws, ordinances, internal regulations, minutes	Verify compliance of the Council's actions with current legislation
Participant Observation/ Monitoring of ordinary and extraordinary meetings and thematic committees	Understand the decision-making dynamics and the interaction between counselors and society
Participatory Evaluation/Records of decentralized assemblies	Map elderly perception about implemented public policies

The methodology adopted combines documentary analysis with participant observation, which allowed for the comparison of normative data with the operational reality of the Council. The participatory evaluation revealed dissonances between the official discourse and the perception of the elderly. Participatory methodologies are widely advocated in international literature to democratize decisions and promote equity. Incorporating public concerns and values results in fairer and more inclusive policies (Creighton, 2005).

## 4 RESULTS

The Council has been active in several areas that are crucial to the well-being of the elderly population. In terms of regulations, the Standards Committee has drawn up clear rules for the registration and renewal of entities, in addition to reviewing the internal regulations, ensuring transparency in membership criteria.

The Public Policy Committee, in turn, focused on the participation of various stakeholders in the assemblies and on monitoring programs of the Senior Citizens Policy. It also established indicators to monitor the application of resources from the Municipal Senior Citizens Fund, demonstrating a commitment to responsible and efficient management.

Mobilization and coordination with departments such as SMAS, SMS and SEMESQV, aiming to present services to the elderly at the assemblies, is another positive point. Mobilization for technological projects, with emphasis on media education for the elderly, also deserves recognition, showing that the council is aware of new technologies and the digital inclusion of the elderly population. According to studies conducted by the International Longevity Centre, the limited engagement of older adults in digital activities is largely attributed to factors such as insufficient technological skills, limited access to the internet and negative perceptions about its relevance. To overcome these barriers, it is recommended to implement digital literacy programs adapted to the specific needs of this population (ILC, 2020).

The inspection of institutions through technical visits demonstrates the Council's dedication to the quality of services provided to the elderly. The dissemination of knowledge, through lectures in partnership with various entities, addressing topics such as health, health surveillance and public management, is essential to keep society informed and engaged in defending the rights of the elderly.

The discussion on how to choose representatives and the adoption of participatory processes in assemblies, prioritizing the voice of the elderly, highlights the importance that the Council gives to participation and representation.

Finally, the allocation of resources from the Municipal Fund for the Elderly to purchase uniforms for projects, air conditioning for Community Homes and delivery of food cards demonstrates the Council's commitment to the well-being and quality of life of the elderly population.



## 5 DISCUSSION

The articulation between theoretical assumptions and the practice observed at COMDEPI-RIO reveals significant gaps that demand critical reflection. Although models such as Creighton's (2005) defend public participation as a mechanism for incorporating citizen demands into policies, and Tenório (1998) emphasizes participatory management to balance power, the reality of the Council showed dissonances.

For instance, although the Council maintains a parity structure, an analysis of 14 meeting minutes indicates that government representatives initiated most deliberations (28 proposals), often sidelining contributions from civil society. This contradiction reflects the limitations of theories that assume equal participation in contexts marked by institutional power asymmetries. Furthermore, the low participation of elderly people in public consultations, as recorded in attendance lists of around 30 elderly people for a population of around 1 million, contrasting with the ideal of responsive social management (França Filho, 2008), suggests the need to adapt theoretical models to the local sociocultural reality, incorporating barriers against ageism and digital exclusion. These findings reinforce that the effectiveness of policies requires not only the adoption of participatory frameworks, but also their critical contextualization in the dynamics of power and access faced by the elderly population.

The experience as a counselor at COMDEPI-RIO highlighted structural and operational challenges in implementing public policies for the elderly. The main obstacles include:

- Weakness in intergovernmental coordination: the lack of synergy between the federal, state and municipal levels resulted in overlapping responsibilities, duplication of actions and difficulties in raising funds, especially those from donations via income tax;
- Limited financial resources: dependence on federal funds and insufficient municipal budget impacted the implementation of the Action Plan, directly affecting the quality of life of the elderly.

Furthermore, the low participation of older people in public assemblies, evidenced by limited participation in relation to the potential audience, reveals structural barriers such as digital exclusion and the lack of adequate dissemination of activities.

This digital exclusion directly impacts the ability of older people to fully participate in civic life and access essential services, making it difficult to

achieve SDG 4 (Quality Education), which promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all, and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), which aims to ensure inclusive participation in decision-making. To overcome these barriers, it is crucial to invest in digital literacy programs tailored to the needs of older adults, as recommended by the International Longevity Centre (ILC, 2020).

Accessible digital platforms, such as those proposed by the WHO age-friendly cities and communities (WHO, 2023), can facilitate older people's participation in decision-making processes. These initiatives combine technology with human support, ensuring that cognitive or physical barriers do not exclude older people from public life.

Internationally, initiatives such as the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing (European Commission, 2024) demonstrate how partnerships between government, the private sector and academia can promote technological and social innovation in the field of healthy ageing. These models can inspire local practices of inter-institutional cooperation in Brazil.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Ensuring dignified aging in Rio de Janeiro requires an intersectoral approach that promotes equity, transparency, and the appreciation of the rights of older people, in line with the principles of the UN 2030 Agenda. Although COMDEPI-RIO's actions face significant challenges, they are essential to achieving the SDGs related to health, education, reducing inequalities, and promoting effective and participatory institutions. It is necessary to strengthen integration between levels of government, expand social participation through more inclusive tools, and invest in ongoing training for councilors, ensuring that public policies for older people contribute to a fairer and more sustainable future for all.

The analysis carried out at COMDEPI-RIO highlighted structural challenges in the implementation of public policies for the elderly, such as weak intersectoral coordination, budgetary limitations and low participation of the elderly in public assemblies. To overcome these difficulties, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Intergovernmental articulation: adopt models which promotes collaboration between government, the private sector and academia, avoiding overlapping skills;
- Expanding social participation through digital tools: implement accessible platforms, such as

simplified apps and user-friendly interfaces, to facilitate older people's participation in public consultations;

- Empowering counselors: promote periodic workshops on active aging and human rights where professionals receive specific training to deal with geriatric issues;
- Promote international cooperation: adapt successful initiatives from other countries;
- Combating stereotypes and ageism: launch educational campaigns, based on the United Nations Global strategy and action plan on ageing and health (UN, 2017), highlighting the positive contributions of older people to society.

Aging with dignity presents both a challenge and an opportunity to build more inclusive and equitable societies. Achieving this goal requires intersectoral strategies that integrate health, technology, and education, fostering comprehensive solutions that can effectively improve the lives of older adults. The experience at COMDEPI-RIO showed that participatory management, combined with the strengthening of digital literacy, is essential to increase the autonomy, voice and social inclusion of this population. This is a crucial step towards active and healthy aging, where each elderly person is recognized as a subject of rights and protagonist of their own story.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank COMDEPI-RIO for their support and dedication.

## REFERENCES

- Allebrandt, S. (2001). *A participação da sociedade na gestão pública local e na produção das políticas públicas: a atuação dos conselhos municipais de Ijuí - RS, de 1989 a 2000*. Editora UNIJUÍ.
- Brazil. (1994). Law No. 8,842/1994. Provides for the National Policy for the Elderly. [http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/leis/18842.htm](http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/18842.htm)
- Brazil. (2003). Law No. 10,741/2003 (Elderly Statute). [http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/leis/2003/110.741.htm](http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/2003/110.741.htm)
- Conselho Municipal dos Direitos da Pessoa Idosa do Rio de Janeiro. (2023). Atas das reuniões ordinárias e extraordinárias (2023). *Diário Oficial do Município do Rio de Janeiro*. <https://doweb.rio.rj.gov.br/>
- Creighton, J. L. (2005). *The public participation handbook: Making better decisions through citizen involvement* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Estado do Rio de Janeiro. (1996). *Lei n° 2.536/1996*. <https://shre.ink/b9NC>
- European Commission. (2024). *The European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing (EIP on AHA)* <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/eip-aha>
- IBGE. (2024). *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios Contínua: Características da população idosa* <https://www.ibge.gov.br/estatisticas/sociais/populacao>
- International Longevity Center. (2020). *Digital inclusion of older adults: Challenges and opportunities*. <https://www.ilcuk.org.uk/>
- Gil, A. (1999). *Métodos e técnicas de pesquisa social*. Atlas. 5<sup>th</sup> edition.
- Rio de Janeiro. (2010). *Lei n° 5.208/2010*. <https://shre.ink/b9N7>
- França Filho, G. (2008). Definindo gestão social. in: Silva J., Másin, R., Cançado, A., Schommer, P. (Orgs.). *Gestão Social: Práticas em debate, teorias em construção*. Juazeiro do Norte: Laboratório Interdisciplinar de Estudos em Gestão Social Universidade Federal do Ceará. 1<sup>st</sup> edition.
- Tenório, F. (1998). Gestão social: Uma perspectiva conceitual. *Revista de Administração Pública* 32(5).
- United Nations. (2021). *Decade of Healthy Ageing: A Plan of Action*. <https://www.who.int/initiatives/decade-of-healthy-ageing>.
- World Health Organization. (2023). *National programmes for age-friendly cities and communities A guide*. <https://www.who.int/>
- World Health Organization. (2017). *Global strategy and action plan on ageing and health*. <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/329960/9789241513500-eng.pdf>
- World Health Organization. (2002). Active ageing: a policy framework. WHO. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/67215>