

## Small Movements, Big Impact

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### Abstract.

*This article describes a practical example of a social & community engagement work and involvement of students with a focus on learning process activities. In 2008, the Gonçalves project in Cáceres, Brazil, started a cooperation with the Brazilian AG at “Metzinger Gymnasium” in Germany. The result of a cooperation agreement signed between UNEMAT and the Educating and Cultural Society of Brazilian-German Integration in 2012 provided the opportunity to promote the exchange of solidarity and human experiences between young people from both countries. This project has a particular historical background regarding the involvement of children with drugs and dealers. In this regard, the project aims to find a way to move children from those risks and involvement with criminality to get a clear perspective on life with more dignity. Therefore, this paper shows the strategies and challenges behind this community service and the students’ contribution based on a five-pillar methodology. Further opportunities regarding the next steps will be highlighted, along with practical lessons learned.*

**Keywords:** Community engagement, Brazilian-German integration, education, Gonçalves, and dignity.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Community engagement is generally understood as a practice of sharing in life to achieve personal growth and the common good. According to a recent research review ([Nowakowska, 2023](#)), volunteering work can achieve goals that are not always clearly visible in the short term. In this research, another crucial point discussed is that volunteering attracts people of different social value orientations. Special concern has been addressed to the concept of individualism and altruism. In this paper, the authors are focused on extending another important discussion concerning the learning process for students and the involvement of young people in supporting community service projects (Lancor et al, 2018). Regarding this point, the Brazilian AG from “Metzinger Gymnasium” in Germany started in 2002 with the Gonçalves project in Cáceres, Brazil. Later, the result of a cooperation agreement signed between UNEMAT and the Educating and Cultural Society of Brazilian-German Integration (Seciba) in 2012 provided the opportunity to promote the exchange of solidarity and human experiences between young people from both countries. The international exchange, promoted by UNEMAT (State University of Mato Grosso) in collaboration with Seciba and the Dietrich-Bonhoeffer-Gymnasium in Metzingen, Germany, has established a clear target to provide coexistence with communities, encouraging social participation in all means and, specifically, in social organization in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Such an initiative provides an opportunity for students to expand their cultural, ethical, political, and linguistic knowledge through voluntary actions. The first and most successful experience was conducted in 2018. The selection process was based on participants involved in voluntary service in 2018 at the Gonçalves project. The exchange takes place in alternate years. Biennially, a group of young Brazilians, aged between 16 and 25 years old, travels to Germany, and, in the intervening year, a group of young Germans comes to Brazil. The agreement also foresees the coming of two students to Brazil for one year, intending to study at UNEMAT and, in their free time, do internships at the Gonçalves project. All travel expenses are the responsibility of the “Sociedade Educadora e Cultural de Integração Brasil – Germany”. Such an exchange work is fundamental to the success of this kind of project. The latest exchange occurred in 2022 (after Covid), which was very successful. This time seven students from a German high school have joined the project with local activities and challenges. A brilliant opportunity for both parties, with a valuable lesson for life. This

project is located outside the famous and well-known cities in Brazil, which have a particular historical background regarding the involvement of children with drugs and dealers. In principle, one of the main foundations of the project was to find a way to get children out of those risks and criminality. Cáceres is a small town in the central west of Brazil, in Mato Grosso. See the map below in Figure 1:



**Fig 1.** Cáceres in Mato Grosso, Brazil. Source: Geotechnology Laboratory of the State University of Mato Grosso (LabGeo Unemat) ([Galvanin et al, 2017](#)).

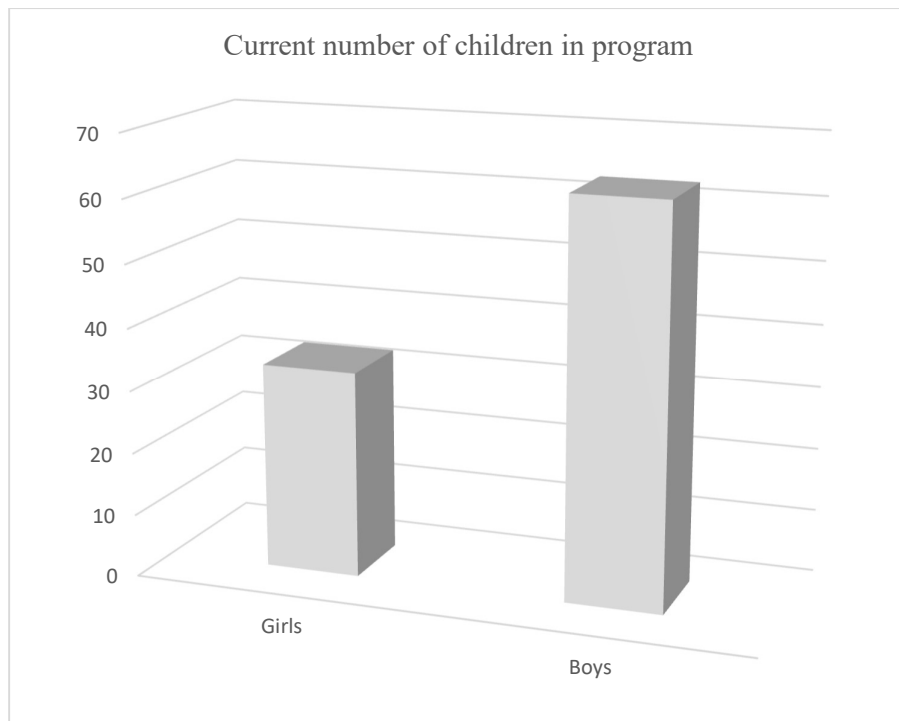
And this is how it all started:

In 2001, some parents from the “Cavallhada” district started to organize childcare in cooperation with the principal of the elementary school, Maria Luisa, and the human rights activist Angela dos Santos. From her many years of work at the local human rights center “Direitos Humanos”, Angela knows what she is talking about when she denounces the conditions under which the children in her neighborhood are growing up. Dealers force children as young as six to sell drugs. Many children end up in youth gangs, which use them for all kinds of illegal and dangerous activities, often without knowing what they are going through. Others are sent out onto the street by their parents with orders to come back with something to eat. So, says Angela, firstly, the children need a place where they are well looked after and where they can get something to eat. Secondly, they need people who can educate them about the dangers and who offer them better prospects than stealing, dealing, or getting one to join a gang. The project offers this perspective, in which the children experience a kind of “counter model” of human coexistence: they sing, play, and make handicrafts together. In Germany, the Gonçalves project has been supported since 2002. The project has cooperations with St. Bonifatius Community and Dietrich-Bonhoeffer-Gymnasium in Metzingen under the supervision of Katja Polnik. In 2007, childcare took place in the community center of the district church, but since this was no longer possible there, another location had to be found. In 2008, building land in the “Cavallhada” district was bought with proceeds from the project week at Dietrich-Bonhoeffer-Gymnasium and other donations. A house was built there in which childcare can take place in the long term and where the children can find a “second home”. ([Project Gonçalves, 2023](#)). Currently, the project is supporting a total of 96 kids in the local area,

which is a tremendous success for such a project with so many difficulties it has already faced. The main project targets are to enroll kids between 6 and 16 years old. See Figure 2 and Figure 3.



**Fig 2.** Children in their Judo class. Offer of the project through local voluntary work.



**Fig 3.** Number of girls and boys registered in the project (July 2023).

An interesting change observed in the project's development has been the increasing number of registered children in 2023. An increase of more than 30% was observed. Probably because of Judo, which has become very popular in the project. The project has gained popularity in the local area, which can create new perspectives for the local community. Even though Judo has established itself as a popular activity in the project, we might highlight some additional points that are probably related to the social economics of families. For instance, some kids are involved in the project to have a chance to get another meal during the day, which has been confirmed by our research on family monthly income. Those families don't have the ability to offer their kids a full-day meal. We have observed that a family's socioeconomic situation plays a crucial role in the overall project. Most of the families registered in the project are in the minimum wage category in Brazil, i.e., a range from R\$1,320.00 to R\$3,940.00 per month, which means approximately a range from US\$ 250.00 to

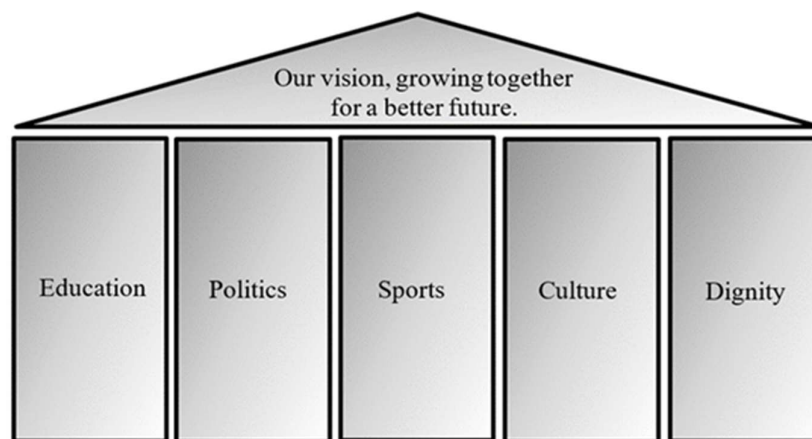
US\$ 750.00. A few families earn higher than three minimum wages. Unexpectedly, some families with monthly wages higher than the minimum wage are taking the opportunity to send their kids to join the project. There is no cost to Judo activities anyway. Furthermore, some kids are joining the project to get school tutorial support and involvement with the arts during project activities. In addition, the small vegetable garden with chicken has become very popular too. Another interesting point to address here is that the Cáceres region is known for the world's largest freshwater swamp area, the Pantanal, with its unique flora and fauna. See Figure 4. Inside this beautiful region, with dramatic local contrasts and challenges, the Gonçalves project is running.



**Fig 4.** Pantanal, with its unique flora and fauna.

## II. THE FIVE-PILLAR METHODOLOGY

In the next chapter, a detailed description and explanation of our five-pillar methodology will be addressed. In this context, the main idea behind that is to share in this work how to introduce the concept of our five pillars in a methodology-based way to bring the success of this project to a practical, real-life community service approach. In addition, the project has now decided to expand its facilities to accommodate more children and provide more space for other activities. Based on this practice, small movements can have a crucial impact. The author, Ikeda, writes (Ikeda, 2023) “Children are the treasures of this world and the ambassadors of the future. Let's see them as unique personalities and treat them with sincerity and respect! We learn and grow together with them”. Much more than a simple community service project or a kind of project leading to poverty, it is necessary to work with a clear vision (Rosling et al, 2019). In this sense, our approach based on five pillars has been established: education, politics, sports, culture, and finally, dignity. Of course, behind the five pillars approach, a central point related to education as a foundation and lessons learned for life might be considered. (Lancor & Schiebel, 2018). See Figure 5.



**Fig 5.** Project Gonçalves – The five-pillar methodology.



## 2.1. Education

The education foundation is a crucial point for the success of community service. The benefits regarding learning processes and the positive impact on learning are immense. In ([Garrison et al, 2014](#), [Bandy, 2011](#), [Currie-Mueller et al, 2018](#)), a detailed description of the sense of student benefits of community engagement can be found. For instance, in [Garrison et al, 2014](#), a clear foundation based on learning focused on growth and the creation of value within the context of real-life education practices is addressed. Such a method is based on the foundation of a clear dialogue and exchanges of involved members in a project ([Ikeda, 2023](#)). In the Gonçalves project, such a kind of methodology with strong dialogue, respect, and focus on the potential values of all kids is essential and has been applied to the whole project with success. Besides those learning processes and future perspectives for both parts, i.e., for children from the project and people involved in the project, special attention can be addressed to achievements for their own life with a better understanding of real-life challenges. Such a process with a clear methodology is very well addressed in [Bandy, 2011](#). In this essential work, the concept of community engagement combines learning goals and community service in ways that can enhance both student growth and the common good. A crucial foundation to a community service project. In the Gonçalves project, also in the context of the learning process, another method well-known as *Service-learning Activity* is presented in [Currie-Mueller et al, 2018](#). This has been extended in the best sense that German students are establishing a long relationship with the project in Brazil to learn more about another culture and combine it with learning goals for their future life and gain experience. Speaking about children involved in the Gonçalves project, they are doing different activities after school, so they are learning much more and creating another background with a strong foundation. The local project supervisors are not just providing them with an academic background; they are providing crucial lessons for their lives. In this scenario, in the local area of the “Cavallhada” district, known for its high criminality rate, where children in their neighborhood grow up with dealers who force children as young as six to sell drugs, such kind of work is essential to create trust with the community. Education combined with strong community engagement has proven to be a crucial power for the Gonçalves project.

## 2.2. Politics

Another aspect is the early involvement of local politics to get better support for the project. Probably this is one of the most challenging tasks that sometimes takes a very long time to establish a good working relationship. In this sense, starting dialogues with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or governmental agencies can be addressed. Promoting cultural events to share within the community will all benefit the project. Another strategy is to set up events for the project to create a bridge between the community and the local area. Overall, this part of the work, although crucial, is usually challenging to motivate project members to continue to move on with those strategies. In a few words, patience, collaboration, and continued hard work are essential to moving forward. In the Gonçalves project, one important achievement and essential point to achieving the success of the work together with local politics has been proved by the cooperation between Germany and Brazil. This makes the whole project very strong.

## 2.3. Sports and other activities

Surely, one of the most impactful ways to promote the project is through sports activities for children. Thanks to the volunteer work of local Judo coaches, this sport has become one of the most popular and famous activities in the area. For most children involved in the Gonçalves project, this is the only alternative to doing another activity after school. Judo practice is offered twice a week, with small children up to 12 years old taking part in the morning and the older ones in the afternoon. The Judo group is now so successful that some children even made it to national competitions despite the difficult conditions. This is another practical example of how hard work and dedication from volunteers lead to a successful project. Additional activities outside Judo have been established, such as the opportunity to play volleyball and soccer, make handicrafts, and learn new things based on art activities such as drawing. In the community garden, there are chickens, vegetables, and fruits. Those activities are also important because the project can make donations of eggs and salads to families. It is certainly a crucial contribution from the project as a learning process activity for the children. In that sense, they might learn how to manage additional activities in their lives. Furthermore, this can be interpreted as a motivation for the children and a learning process for their future lives.

## 2.4. Culture

A crucial point and fundamental basis for community service is culture and its intrinsic value, i.e., social and economic benefits. Based on this, overall learning processes for all students, those who are involved in the project and those who are providing volunteer work, are getting advantages, for instance, for a better life by increasing the sense of tolerance with a better understanding of diversity and by generating more opportunities to come together with other people. Culture, of course, has an impact on a community service project, along with local arts and crafts, schools, universities, and NGOs. In this context, a chance to enhance benefits for all individuals involved has been observed. The Gonçalves project, with its involvement with indigenous communities, has shown another bridge with immense possibilities for creativity. Apart from that, working with more communities can provide more power to achieve local political participation and establish new bridges with local communities. We might say that since the foundation of the Gonçalves project in 2001, culture has been proven to be a crucial pillar for this whole development.

## 2.5. Dignity

According to the authors, dignity with future perspectives is one of the central pillars of the overall project. Creating new opportunities and new foundations for the children is essential as a basis for their future. This kind of work has a crucial impact on the local community. It is not only a matter of time doing something outside of school, but the children are also contributing to a better future for those receiving the services and those providing them with a clearer participation in society. Exactly speaking in the Gonçalves project, the practical way to lead to the topic of dignity has been proven on the matter that diverse community events involve the local area and kids from the project have been established. In this context, all members involved in the project and the kids are connecting to the local community to show the benefits of being a part of such a project. In simple words, such a project has become very prominent in the local area, and all the kids who are involved in the project are proud to be part of such a project. This leads to getting a chance and feeling like part of the local community. Furthermore, this is also an excellent opportunity to create a strong character to better address challenges in life.

## III. ACHIEVEMENTS AND DISCUSSION

In this work, a five-pillar methodology has been presented. According to the authors, for the success of a community service project is crucial to have a clear foundation based on vision and five-pillar methodology. Particularly in the Gonçalves project, such a kind of approach has been proven to be very successful. Further development on five pillars approach has been investigated, and the main benefits of the current process are described. To consolidate the overall success of the Gonçalves project, after some discussions and ideas about how to get financial support in Germany for the project, members of the project came up with the idea of applying for a donation for the partnership to a big company, such as Mercedes-Benz, in Stuttgart, Germany. After fulfilling all the requirements with full support from the Brazilian AG of “Metzinger Gymnasium”, the project has been selected to get approval for the necessary renovation work with a notable budget sum. It is another example of how this project with team support works, and the fact is based on the context of a project for supporting education for kids. See Figure 6 the new fully renovated facility for future judo activities and sports practices. Such a project achievement can offer a better and safer place for future activities in the project.



**Fig 6.** New fully renovated facility for future Judo and additional sports activities.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper describes practical examples of a prosperous community service project. Details about how to create a solid foundation based on a five-pillar methodology for a project have been pointed out. In our research project, education has been proven to be a foundation and a crucial point for the success of community service. In the Gonçalves project, education based on exchange with supervisors, students, and a combination of extracurricular activities plays an important part in the overall project spectrum to help the children develop. Furthermore, sports and culture remain an important basis for the whole project's success. Additional points identified in our research show that involvement with local politics has been proven to be another important pillar for the project. This has been added with clear communication between project members and German support to create a better impact. Such an impact has been consolidated in 2023 with additional financial support for the project. In our research, we also identified other important aspects, such as the chance for the students and volunteers to give an idea about the discrepancy between the rich and the poor in a broad sense. In this case, the cooperation between Brazil and Germany has been demonstrated to be a successful cooperation with a strong lessons-learned process for both parties. The Gonçalves project has consolidated the importance of this kind of support for children and helped them build a better foundation in life. A serious challenge that human beings have been facing for many years (Rosling et al, 2019). This project is a real example of how practical it is to create small movements that can lead to powerful impacts. This is so relevant that the foundation of the 2019 Nobel Prize Winners in Economic Sciences (Banerjee & Duflo, 2019) jointly awarded to Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, and Michael Kremer “for their experimental approach to alleviating global poverty” has shown the impact of this on the whole world. The authors are enthusiastic about moving on to the next steps.

#### V. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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