

## What Flying Teaches About Landing Projects in Communities: The Case of Rocinha Favela in Rio de Janeiro

*Leonardo Martins Dias*

Published: January 5, 2025, 01:06 AM



Tandem flight with a student during a dynamic in a Leadership for a More Authentic Sustainability course. On the right, a view of the Rocinha favela and São Conrado with its golf course—one of the world's greatest contrasts.

In 2022, a multinational company invited me to develop entrepreneurship projects aimed at generating income in vulnerable communities in the Global South. We started in the communities of Rocinha, a favela in Rio de Janeiro, considered by some to be the largest in

the Americas. There, **challenges fuel creativity**. The people of Rocinha connect and undertake initiatives in innovative ways that the formal world often fails to recognize, making project implementation more challenging.

The project team included businesses, universities, foundations, NGOs, and cooperation agencies, whose alliance provided funding and execution. However, **what truly ensured success was training the team members through paragliding**. This experience enabled them to truly understand what processes such as building alliances, collaborating, entrepreneurship, risk management, and facing emotions like vulnerability really entail.

Practicing paragliding, like engaging with communities, requires a high level of trust. Even though I hold an instructor certification and have 30 years of experience, the project team entrusts me with their lives, and I trust them: **to take off, we must communicate with precision and run in perfect coordination**. If we do not collaborate and the passenger freezes, the risk increases dramatically.

The potential analogies between launching into unknown contexts that make us feel vulnerable—whether it's the air or a favela—are endless. For example, just as paragliding represents the fine line between holding on or falling for the pilot and the passenger, **social projects can represent the same for a community**.

Similarly, both paragliding and social projects demand genuine trust and collaboration that go beyond the formal and usual interpretation and assimilation of these terms. Let me explain: my role in this project was to connect the teams from these organizations with local communities.

My main goal was to build trust-based relationships to foster authentic collaboration, which in turn generates differentiated impacts. These are among the greatest challenges and key factors for the success or failure of any project, anywhere in the world.

Relationships often lack authenticity and trust. For this reason, more and more organizations are creating specific departments for Relations with Vulnerable Communities within their Sustainability, ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance), or Reputation departments. However, it is important to note that **the formal world often fails to recognize that the unique informality of these communities distinguishes them significantly from other stakeholders**, such as NGOs, shareholders, or customers.

Community representatives, when they exist, are often unpaid and do not have strategically aligned agendas or talking points. Furthermore, they face urgent survival issues firsthand. **Such singularities require training the teams of these organizations that engage with communities**. Their behaviors and perceptions need to be made more flexible, meaning they must transform the way they connect, relate, and work with communities.

As is often the case, the members of the organizations and those of the communities, despite their good intentions, were not connecting as a team. For example, while we were playing in a samba circle late into the night after working on the project, Wagner, a local entrepreneur, confided in me: "Léo, the funders insisted that the project be called 'Start from Your Garage!' We are poor. We don't have houses, let alone cars! Garage!" He laughed. "And they keep saying they listen, co-create participatively, and promote collaborative leadership... The community doesn't relate to this, and they don't trust it."

Hearing Wagner, two other project beneficiaries who lived in Rocinha opened up while others nodded in agreement. Lucineide said, "They don't listen to us," while Maria added, "I thought I was an entrepreneur, but they convinced me that I'm not capable."

These natural entrepreneurs, from childhood, pivot (adapt) their creative ideas tenaciously to make a living. To feed or protect themselves demands far more adaptability, flexibility, collaborative leadership, empathy, innovation, and resilience in the face of unknown and dangerous situations than we commonly acknowledge in formal discussions and agendas.

In other words, although funding organizations may not perceive it, they are entrepreneurial and innovative, as established by renowned sociologists such as Dafne Velasco, Livia de Tommasi, Jailson de Souza, and Janice Perlman.

Meanwhile, the funding organizations' teams complained about the community participants: "They are informal, unpunctual..." "They don't plan or structure..."

As I mentioned, this issue was addressed through paragliding. I conducted training that combined on-the-ground experiences within the community and free-flight dynamics. Later, in the classroom, we rigorously reflected on these experiences, allowing the team to assimilate the knowledge.

On other occasions, I focus on on-the-ground experiences. In this article, I delve into the lessons learned from paragliding.

The experiences with paragliding allowed us to assimilate fundamental elements for executing social projects and consequently transform the project team's perspectives and behaviors.

There is no need to take off. **Simulating the flight by playing with the wing generates unknown forces that support and move our bodies**, awakening emotions and transformative vulnerabilities.



Simulation flight dynamic. Leadership Training for More Authentic Sustainability for students at the University of Berkeley, California. Highly important note: even when simulated on soft ground, the use of helmets and gloves is mandatory for all students.

Running off a mountain to take off and fly is even more radical and only for students who wish to do so. Jennifer, a company representative and student, told me: "**I was much slower in assimilating the instructions because the language was unfamiliar to me.** Moreover, I lost my bearings when the paraglider lifted me. We must find a way to explore whether communities also lose their bearings when we introduce sustainability projects."

Whether playing on the ground or taking off, precise communication requires adapting to radically unfamiliar contexts, interlocutors, and languages. The same happens in sustainability projects: dialogues must be authentic and of higher quality because they impact people's lives.

However, the quality of dialogues is often a challenge. Authenticity is scarce in work environments, as referenced earlier. To such an extent that we struggle to truly understand what it means to support, collaborate, engage in quality dialogue, or be authentic. We are neither educated nor trained for this.

Nevertheless, the paragliding dynamics foster these assimilations. Ultimately, the team expanded their awareness to work, connect, and relate better when in communities.

"Losing the ground and seeing the forest beyond the trees allowed us to see more of ourselves. Together, we gave more meaning to sustainability, trust, listening, collaborative leadership, vulnerability..." highlighted one student.



Dynamic in a course on Relations with Communities. Tandem flight with a student to Rocinha favela in Rio, where the project was being carried out. In the photo, soaring above the Atlantic Forest in Barra (West Zone), supported by the paraglider and nature's thermals (updrafts). Background perspective: Rocinha favela at the foot of Pico Dois Irmãos and the South Zone.

In conclusion, although there is always room for improvement and learning, **this paragliding training successfully established genuine trust and new, more authentic ways of relating to communities.** The quality of dialogues improved.

**Absenteeism among beneficiaries was reduced by up to 93% in this first project in Rocinha,** and we launched new ventures. This way, we were able to truly co-create projects and solutions that generated real, collective, and differentiated impacts.

As one student expressed: "My world expanded. I learned about key elements that were previously invisible, like the air: In the face of the unknown, remain calm. To collaborate, practice radical listening. Combining informal and formal knowledge generates trust that allows us to lead by contributing more." **The emotions awakened by vulnerability also connect and elevate.**

\* \* \* [Leonardo Martins Dias](#) conducts sustainability projects and designs and delivers training programs.

This English version isn't official. This article was translated voluntarily. The original articles is published in [Spanish by El Español](#).