

# EL PAÍS

BRAZIL

## Technology moves the world... and the needs of the favelas

**Aline Fróes, a social entrepreneur, trains the inhabitants of a shanty town in Rio de Janeiro through her company Vai na Web**

LEONARDO MARTINS DIAS

11 AUG 2022 - 05:30 Updated: 12 DEC 2022 - 13:10 CET



**Aline Fróes, founder of the social enterprise Vai Na Web.**

JACSON LIMA

Aline Fróes (1987) is a technology/social entrepreneur. She can be found in Morro dos Prazeres, the highest favela in Rio de Janeiro, where [Vai Na Web](#) (VNW), the company she led since 2015, main offices are. “We reinvest 100% of our profits. We train people from the favelas and poor peripheries of Rio in advanced digital technology to develop software in the favelas. We generate knowledge and value locally”, explains Aline.

The views from Morro dos Prazeres (Hill of Pleasures) are breathtaking, even under the strong heat wave that was taking place in the day of this interview. Besides of the “burning air” the residents of the favela were going up and down through the long and

prancing stairs always waving and smiling. Residents commonly have to go up carrying heavy furniture and construction materials, groceries, children in their arms, bicycles. Moreover, the fact of living in a favela can mean an obstacle to get a job interview. "Companies often hire professionals whose families can afford their studies. In the rare cases in which a favela resident is hired, it is common to suffer discrimination or harassment", points out Froés.

Not without criticism, there is a boom of private companies stating that they are improving, or even saving, the world through technology. "Companies, including technology companies, commonly consider areas of poverty and social exclusion as markets to exploit or marketing platforms to build sustainability narratives. But the positive impacts and local value that they generate through the projects that they promote as 'sustainable' are not real, but rather extracted in the form of profits accumulated by a few partners who hold resources and power. At least here, they do not even know the people they advertise to help."

There is extensive literature on the exploitation of poverty zones that Froés mentions, such as [The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid](#) (BoP), by economist and professor C. K. Prahalad. This author advocates for reducing profit margins per product to increase sales and maximize profits in these areas. [Criticized by a large part of the scientific community](#), the BoP gained identity as a strategy and became fashionable among [entrepreneurs](#), emerging companies, and companies that [want to call themselves sustainable](#).

Along the same lines as Prahalad, we find Marcelo Neri, former Minister of Strategic Affairs of Brazil (2013-2015) who published [A nova classe média: O lado brilhante da base da pirâmide](#) (the new middle class: the bright side of the base of the pyramid). With these approaches, it is not surprising that [0.0003% of the world's population accumulates as much wealth as 60% of the population](#).

Froés argues that, while inequality increases, technology companies concentrate wealth. "Of the 10 most valuable companies in the world, 8 are in the technology sector. Technology is the tool that moves the world, but we have to reorient it in the right direction: solve social needs. We believe in empowering poor people, as partners or employees in strategic roles, to create solutions. There is a lot of creative and innovative capacity in these people, who must be part of the solution", she states.

There is a certain consensus in the scientific community that projects promoted as "sustainable" by companies, in addition to not generating the promoted positive impacts (so fashionable), are likely to generate negative ones. One of the reasons is that they impose values that replicate our competitive and unsustainable system. They ignore the local: collaborative capabilities, innovative knowledge, and resilient and persevering cultures. Consequently, frustration and a decrease in self-esteem are likely to be generated among the beneficiaries, who often abandon the projects. "Companies have to be more humble and less short-term oriented. They must stop designing projects far from reality, get closer to the communities and do long-term projects. The common practice is to do one-year projects, which is a very short time to generate social impact."

In start-ups and technology companies it is common to come across the idea: “technology will save us”. However, the people who know the most about the challenges – those living in poverty, for example – are often not adequately involved in designing the solutions, as noted in the report [The Frontiers of Impact Technology](#), of Good Tech Lab. These entities generate profits by commercializing technology, they state they are sustainable, but their real contribution to solving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) challenges is questionable.

“At Vai Na Web (go to the web) we have a free technology school to meet the challenges of the digital economy together with people who experience poverty (SDG1) and inequalities (SDG10) first-hand. In addition, we carry out knowledge exchange. In 2019, we received 60 students from Ohio University in the favela to teach them social impact through practice, on-the-ground,” says Fróes. This is an experiential learning practice that can be effective in engaging today's students, who are likely to be tomorrow's leaders. In this way, they genuinely embrace social and environmental criteria, beyond narratives, in their decision-making processes that today are shaping our unsustainable systems, something I have analysed in [research for the University of Oxford](#).

It has been proven that society [does not believe in the impacts that companies claim to generate in terms of sustainability](#). However, if they properly relate to the communities – starting by trying to understand the context, listening to them, recognizing the value of their knowledge and cultures – it is possible [to generate more genuine impacts and contribute to a more authentic sustainability](#); one based on social and environmental criteria, and that fosters an economy at the service of people.

Thus, like VNW, companies will be able to differentiate themselves from the ordinary practices of current sustainability, consequently building real trust with society, and ultimately positioning themselves and generating value for their businesses. As Aline Fróes argues, we must abandon the perception of the “consumer market that lacks help” and understand how to relate authentically with the communities from humility, working with and for their people.

---

This is the fourth article in the series ['Relationships with communities and informal popular knowledge: central pillars to transform towards authentic sustainability'](#) published by Leonardo Dias.

[Leonardo Martins Dias](#) designs and implements multi-stakeholder sustainability projects. He teaches and researches on a more authentic sustainability, currently with a focus on education.

This English version is not official. This article was translated voluntarily. The [original article is published in Spanish by El País](#)

\* \* \*