



FO-CO - For Compassionate Living

Building Socioemotional and Compassion-Based Education in Brazil

Project Link: www.projetofofo.com.br

The Catalyst

The Origin: FO-CO emerged from nearly two decades of prevention research on youth substance use in Brazil. It addresses a critical question: how to help youth develop emotional and relational skills to navigate violence, inequality, mental health crises, and growing disconnection? There was a lack of evidence informed socioemotional education programs adapted to the Brazilian cultural context.

How We Got Off the Ground and Kept Going

2017–2022: Started with public Brazilian funding through a larger umbrella project for drug related problems. The team built a mental health promotion prototype for adolescents and families grounded in contemplative practices and embodiment.

2019 the turning point: Applied for and won the European Varela Award from Mind and Life Europe. This international grant brought vital funding and global credibility, turning a previously unnoticed project into one that gained widespread interest and institutional recognition.

2023–2025: Secured parliamentary funding allocated by a Federal Congresswoman, channeled through Brazil's Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship. Remarkably, this funding was chosen by popular vote, representing a powerful democratic endorsement from Brazilian citizens.

Current Status: Actively working to build a sustainable model to keep spreading the program without active funding.

The Role of Evidence and Communication

Institutional backing: Being developed within UNIFESP (one of Brazil's leading research universities) provided enormous credibility and opened doors.

Co-design: The methodology was strictly grounded in co-design and participatory action research. Adolescents, teachers, and families were active contributors shaping content and implementation, keeping the program scientifically sound and culturally relevant.

Strategic Communication: We had to learn how to communicate contemplative science in accessible language (strategic Instagram marketing). We needed people to understand that this is not a meditation program, but a program rooted in relationship, dialogue, and human connection.

Our Champions

The allies: While university partnerships were critical early on, our strongest champions have been the participants themselves: teachers, families, adolescents, facilitators, and researchers. This popular support became ambassadors for FO-CO and directly secured the public funding that allowed the program to reach over 800 people.

The Lesson We Want to Leave With You

Our advice: Build with people, not for them.

The takeaway: Scientific evidence is essential, but sustainable change happens when communities participate, feel ownership, and become co-authors. Combining scientific rigor with deep listening, cultural adaptation, and genuine collaboration creates stronger, more sustainable initiatives.