



# Rondon Project: The Largest Classroom in Brazil<sup>1</sup>

## Projeto Rondon: El aula más grande de Brasil

## Projeto Rondon: A Maior Sala de Aula do Brasil

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### Abstract

This article is organized into the following themes: Introduction, What Is the Rondon Project, what are the Objectives of the Rondon Project, The Evolution of the Rondon Project Since Operation Zero, The Rondon Project Operation Methodology, What is the Story Behind the Name Projeto “Rondon”, The Rondonista's Hat, and Final Considerations. The general objective of this article is sharing the history of this Brazilian project currently underway across several Ministries, coordinated by the Ministry of Defense, and recognized with several awards. We will define the Rondon Project as an interministerial action based on partnerships, seeking to develop and strengthen citizenship, provide sustainable solutions to social inclusion issues and regional inequities, and to strengthen national sovereignty. We will also share the objectives of the Rondon Project, and its evolution since its inception in 1967, in the so-called Operation Zero. To conclude, the life and citizenship lessons/learnings provided by the Rondon Project operations will be considered in this article, aligned with the titular quote “the Rondon Project is the largest classroom in Brazil”.

**Keywords:** Rondon Project, Rondonistas, volunteer, community service.

### Resumen

Este artículo se organiza en los siguientes temas: Introducción, ¿Qué es el Proyecto Rondón?, ¿Cuáles son sus objetivos?, ¿Su evolución desde la Operación Cero?, ¿Su metodología operativa?, ¿Cuál es la historia detrás del nombre "Projeto Rondón"?, ¿El sombrero del rondonista?", y Consideraciones finales. El objetivo general de este artículo es compartir la historia de este proyecto brasileño, actualmente en marcha en varios ministerios, coordinado por el Ministerio de Defensa y reconocido con varios premios. Definiremos el Proyecto Rondón como una acción interministerial basada en alianzas, que busca desarrollar y fortalecer la ciudadanía, brindar soluciones sostenibles a los

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problemas de inclusión social y las desigualdades regionales, y fortalecer la soberanía nacional. También compartiremos los objetivos del Proyecto Rondón y su evolución desde su inicio en 1967, en la llamada Operación Cero. Para concluir, se considerarán las lecciones/aprendizajes de vida y ciudadanía que han dejado las operaciones del Proyecto Rondón, en consonancia con la cita principal: "El Proyecto Rondón es el aula más grande de Brasil".

**Palabras clave:** Proyecto Rondon, Rondonistas, voluntariado, servicio comunitario.

### Resumo

Este artigo está organizado nos seguintes temas: Introdução, O que é o Projeto Rondon, Quais os Objetivos do Projeto Rondon, A Evolução do Projeto Rondon desde a Operação Zero, A Metodologia de Operação do Projeto Rondon, Qual a História por Trás do Nome Projeto "Rondon", O Chapéu do Rondonista e Considerações Finais. O objetivo geral deste artigo é compartilhar a história deste projeto brasileiro, atualmente em andamento em diversos Ministérios, coordenado pelo Ministério da Defesa e reconhecido com diversas premiações. Definiremos o Projeto Rondon como uma ação interministerial baseada em parcerias, buscando desenvolver e fortalecer a cidadania, fornecer soluções sustentáveis para questões de inclusão social e desigualdades regionais e fortalecer a soberania nacional. Também compartilharemos os objetivos do Projeto Rondon e sua evolução desde seu início em 1967, na chamada Operação Zero. Para concluir, as lições/aprendizagens de vida e cidadania proporcionadas pelas operações do Projeto Rondon serão consideradas neste artigo, alinhadas à citação titular: "o Projeto Rondon é a maior sala de aula do Brasil".

**Palavras-chave:** Projeto Rondon, Rondonistas, voluntariado, serviço comunitário.

### Introduction

"I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy." Rabindranath Tagore.

The objectives of this article include sharing a little of the history of almost 60 years of the Rondon Project which continues to live on, not only in the vivid memory of the people who participated in it in the 1970s and 1980s, but also as an active Brazilian project currently underway across several Ministries and coordinated by the Ministry of Defense. It is a project recognized by several awards, including the Darcy Ribeiro Education Award and also the status of Intangible Heritage of Brazilian Higher Education, which was granted to the Rondon Project through the approval of Bill 4613/2019, on September 2, 2023, by the Education Committee. In addition, I will also share some objective data on the current Rondon Project.

With that said, the Rondon Project goes far beyond its history and numbers. I have the privilege of serving as an UFCSPA Rondonista professor, collaborating in the areas of



health, education, culture, human rights and justice since 2014, and continue to routinely learn from the intense and transformative interaction that happens among students, professors and the people of the cities where the Rondon Project takes place. The strong impact Rondon has on all who interacts with it suggests that it is not enough to describe, to read or to hear about the Rondon Project: one must live it. Only then we will start understanding its meaning and purpose a bit more deeply. That understanding takes time, requires a passion for service, is transformational, and can last for a lifetime. Now, whenever I meet a previous Rondon participant, even if their involvement took place decades ago, the interaction is always the same: they share that Rondon's influence is still vivid and inspiring them to promote a life of peace, understanding and solidarity. To conclude, some reflections on the life and citizenship lessons/learnings provided by the Rondon Project operations are considered in this article, aligned with the quote "the Rondon Project is the largest classroom in Brazil" as the pillar that has resonated with me since the first time I accepted the honor of volunteering on the Rondon Project.

### ***What is the Rondon Project?***

The Rondon Project is an interministerial action of the Brazilian federal government, coordinated by the Ministry of Defense and based on partnerships, seeking to develop and strengthen citizenship, provide sustainable solutions to social inclusion issues and regional inequities, and to strengthen national sovereignty. Since June 25, 2019, through the Decree No. 9,848, in addition to the Ministry of Defense, the following Brazilian ministries have contributed to this national project: Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply; Ministry of Education; Ministry of Citizenship; Ministry of Health; Ministry of the Environment; Ministry of Regional Development; and also the Government Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic, composing the Guidance and Supervision Committee (COS) of the Rondon Project. This multi-ministerial action of the federal government takes place thanks to the partnership between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), state governments, and municipal governments. The HEI participants are called "Rondonistas" and receive a certificate after successfully completing an operation. In the Ministry of Defense's organizational chart, the Rondon Project is currently linked to the Department of Social Projects (DPS), which belongs to the Secretariat of Personnel, Health, Sports and Social Projects (SEPESD) of the General Secretariat. In addition to



the Rondon Project, the projects *Força no Esporte*, *Projeto João do Pulo* and *Soldado Cidadão* are also linked to the DPS. The financial resources for the operations come from the federal government budget, supplemented by parliamentary amendments and by the establishment of partnerships with agencies and entities of the Union, states, the Federal District and municipalities, as well as with private entities.

Students from Higher Education Institutions participate in community service during their summer and winter breaks, engaging with communities that live in vulnerable areas and have access to scarce resources. Through volunteer service, students and faculty promote sustainable development, capacity building or strengthening of previously built capacities for the population of municipalities served, focusing on their community leaders. Among other benefits, it is expected that citizens of the communities will take better advantage of federal, state and municipal public policies already available but that may not be effectively utilized or known by the population. Since 2005 (in a called Second Phase of Rondon Project Implementation) until 2025, 26,630 Rondonistas, hailing from 2,631 HEIs, participated in 96 operations serving 1,392 municipalities. Of course, this data is partial since it increases annually with each new operation. Usually there are operations in January and July, and sometimes more than one Rondon operation may occur simultaneously in distinct constrained resources regions in Brazil.

### **What are the objectives of the Rondon Project?**

The objectives of the Rondon Project are aligned with the Strategic Objectives of the Ministry of Defense and with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations (UN). They are:

1. Contribute to the citizenship formation of HEI students.
2. Integrate HEI students into the national development process, through volunteer actions in real and deep contact with the lived experiences in vulnerable low resource settings.
3. Strengthen the sense of social accountability in favor of citizenship, development and defense of national interests in HEI students.

4. Encourage HEI students to locally implement collective projects, in partnership with the assisted communities.

By achieving these objectives, the Rondon Project represents a unique learning opportunity for students, who, by experiencing some realities of Brazil, put into practice what they had learned in the classroom setting and simultaneously continue to learn from the population. Through interaction with the community and an exchange of knowledge, Rondon students return to their HEI with an enriched knowledge, favoring their own development as citizens, their future as professionals with more social responsibility, and their personal lives as better human beings.



**Figure 1:** A group of Rondonistas from UFCSPA head towards the boat, after carrying out activities in an indigenous community.

The activities developed during each operation of the Rondon Project aim to join forces from the Rondonistas with municipal authorities and community leaders, strengthening citizenship and catalyzing sustainable local development, through actions or workshops. The workshops must meet specific demands of each population in order to improve the quality of life of local citizens, the efficiency of public management, and the socio-environmental and economic conditions of the community.

## The evolution of the Rondon Project since Operation Zero

In 1966, the idea of the Rondon Project originated from another project presented by a Sociology student at the Army Command and General Staff School (ECEME) with the theme “The Military and Brazilian Society”, which was supervised by General João Bina Macha. Professors from three universities in the former state of Guanabara were invited to review that Sociology project. One of them, Professor Wilson Choeri, chair of the Department of Culture at the State University of Guanabara (UEG), currently the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), was impressed by the multicultural knowledge that the young military personnel had about the realities of Brazil, having served in different regions of the country, building a realistic picture of social inequities. After knowing about that project exclusive for military personnel, Professor Choeri suggested that civilian students should also leave the comfort zones in their university classrooms to experience the daily lives of vulnerable populations in Brazil. He believed that this would allow students to “take a dip in Brazil, to feel, smell and taste the Brazilian reality”. At the same time, it would lead them to take a proposal for integration of the vast national territory.

Professor Wilson Choeri’s suggestion was well received by the 5th Construction Engineering Battalion (5th BEC), the Ministry of War and the Ministry of the Interior. Thus, in 1967, on July 11 – a day that is currently celebrated as Rondonistas Day –, the so-called Operation Zero began, with two professors and 30 students from the State University of Guanabara (UEG), the Pontifical University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC/RJ) and the Fluminense Federal University (UFF). Operation Zero lasted 28 days, during which research and medical assistance were carried out in the then territory and today state of Rondônia. Upon their return, the students began to use the slogan “Integrate to not Surrender” and started a movement to continue the work they had begun in Rondônia, calling it Projeto Rondon. In 1968, 648 young people expanded the movement to other locations in the Amazon and Mato Grosso. Decree No. 62,927, of June 28, 1968, established a Working Group (WG) called “Grupo de Trabalho Projeto Rondon”, subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior. Later, this WG was transformed into an Autonomous Body of the Direct Administration by Decree No. 67,505, of November 6, 1970. And, in 1975, by Law No. 6,310, of December 15, the Rondon Project Foundation

was established. Thus, Operation Zero was the starting point for a succession of similar activities in other Brazilian universities, with regional and local operations emerging, in addition to the national one. Additionally, several Advanced Campuses of Higher Education Institutions were implemented in more vulnerable regions, from north to south of the country, where university students went to volunteer. In the south of Brazil, for example, at the Fundação Universidade de Rio Grande (FURG), the Cáceres/Mato Grosso Advanced Campus Project was implemented in partnership with the Universidade Federal de Pelotas (UFPEL), Universidade Católica de Pelotas (UCPEL), Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso (UFMT), Superintendência de Desenvolvimento do Centro-Oeste and Fundação Projeto Rondon. This contributed to the country's development and increased the quality of education of HEI students who participated in this project through extension activities that brought together students from different fields of study. By the end of the 1980s, the number of students participating in the project reached more than 350,000. Despite its trajectory, the Rondon Project ceased to be a priority for the federal government and ended up being extinguished in January 1989 by Provisional Measure No. 28/89, later converted into Law No. 7,732, of February 14, 1989. It would later give way to the Solidarity University Project.



**Figure 2:** Operation Zero in 1967.



**Figure 3:** In 2017, a group of Rondonistas from UFCSPA during an operation that celebrated the Fiftieth Anniversary of Operation Zero are preparing to travel on a FAB (Brazilian Air Force) plane.

In 1990, former Rondonistas created the National Association of Rondonistas, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) qualified by the Ministry of Justice as a Civil Society Organization of Public Interest (OSCIP). In November 2003, a proposal to reactivate the original project was forwarded by the National Union of Students (UNE) to the President of the Republic and it was accepted. Then, in March 2004, an interministerial Working Group was created, coordinated by the Ministry of Defense (MD), to implement the Second Phase of Rondon Project with the definition of its general guidelines and orientations. On August 20, 2004, an official document defined the work system, detailed throughout the second half of 2004, with the goal to execute the first national operation of this new phase of the Rondon Project in 2005. Thus, on January 19, 2005, in the city of Tabatinga in the state of Amazonas, the Rondon Project was reactivated, with the motto “Development for All”, and was reintegrated into government programs, under the coordination of the Ministry of Defense with the participation of a growing number of Higher Education Institutions, operating to this day, uninterruptedly, except during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **The Rondon Project operation methodology**



Currently, each Rondon Project operation follows these steps:

- 1) Planning - consists of a demographic and socioeconomic survey of the priority regions where Rondonistas will potentially serve;
- 2) Initial contact – consists of contact with state and municipal governments, associations and units of the Armed Forces, which will serve as support unit for the operations;
- 3) Region recognition – During this step, cooperation agreements with state and municipal governments are negotiated and accepted to officially recognize which region Rondonistas will serve in;
- 4) Official launch of the operation;
- 5) Publication, in the Official Gazette of the Union (DOU), of the call for proposals regulating the participation of Higher Education Institutions in each specific operation. Based on the call for proposals, HEIs can submit proposals for selection by the Rondon Project Proposal Evaluation Committee (CAPPR). HEIs can prepare and submit a proposal that is appropriate to the needs of the municipalities, in which the Rondonistas will serve in one of the three sets of activities of the Rondon Project: Set A (Culture, Human Rights and Justice, Education and Health), Set B (Communication, Technology and Production, Environment and Labor) and Set C (Social Communication).
- 6) Selection of proposals by the CAPPR;
- 7) Preliminary trip to the municipalities made by the coordinating professors of the HEIs whose proposals were classified. The coordinating professors of the selected HEIs must conduct a preliminary visit to the municipalities in order to align their proposals with the demands of the municipality and also to coordinate the logistics and infrastructure for the Rondonistas. HEIs must assemble and prepare teams of two professors and eight students, which must be multidisciplinary and prepared to carry out the actions provided for in the HEIs' proposals.
- 8) The operation - During the operation itself, Rondonistas implement the workshops of the Rondon Project in the municipalities. At the end of the operation, the HEIs send a report on the work carried out in the municipality.

As for the methodology, the Rondon Project prioritizes actions and workshops with lasting transformative potential for the population and the municipal administration, with interactive, democratic and emancipatory workshops, strengthening national sovereignty.

Although all the community is encouraged to join several Rondon events open to the general public, the main target audience for workshops is represented by the local community leaders, public workers, teachers, health agents, and civil society organizations representatives, who are the actors who can multiply, disseminate and replicate the benefits that the Rondon Project, by offering these free capacity-building activities, can offer. The workshops for community leaders must be designed and implemented in such a way as to make their benefits self-sustainable. Therefore, they must not only meet local demands, but also not depend on actors outside the communities to continue after the end of a Rondon Operation, i. e., after Rondonistas have left the municipality and returned to their home institutions.



**Figure 4:** A group of Rondonistas from UFCSPA in front of a Basic Health Unit that was inaugurated by the city government, during an operation of the Rondon Project.

## What is the story behind the name Projeto “Rondon”?

This name was given by the students of Operation Zero in honor of Marshal Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon (1865-1958), a pioneer of Brazilian national integration, who became known as the “Marshal of Peace”. Marshal Rondon was born on May 5, 1865, in Mimoso (MT). His mother was a member of the Bororó indigenous ethnic group. In 1881, at the age of 16, he graduated from high school and became a primary school teacher. In



1890, he received a Bachelor's degree in Mathematics and Physical and Natural Sciences from the Brazilian Higher War College. He also graduated in Engineering. Rondon fulfilled his mission, mainly in Mato Grosso and the Amazon Basin, building roads, going through forests, rivers and mountains, and making geographic maps. He connected Brazil from north to south through telegraph communication, “bringing communications and services to the most remote and distant points of the country, ensuring the unity of Brazilians”. In 1910, he created the Indian Protection Service (SPI), prioritizing peaceful relations. In 1939, he was appointed as President of the National Council for the Protection of Indians. And in 1952, he proposed the founding of the Xingu Indigenous Park. In 1914, Rondon explored the Rio da Dúvida, together with US President Theodore Roosevelt, on an expedition marked by difficulties and illness, during which the river came to be called as Roosevelt River. Rondon was once hit by a poisoned arrow by the Nhambiquara indigenous group, but was saved by the leather sling of his rifle. Even though he was attacked, Rondon ordered his group not to react, demonstrating that he strictly practiced his motto “Die, if necessary. Kill, never”, referring to the conflicts that arose during the first contact with some native indigenous peoples. In 1915, he inaugurated the Santo Antônio do Madeira telegraph station. In this way, he successfully fulfilled his mission in which, with the Rondon Comitativa, he built 372 km of lines and five telegraph stations: Pimenta Bueno, Presidente Hermes, Presidente Pena (later Vila de Rondônia and today Ji Paraná), Jaru and Ariquemes, in the area of the current state of Rondônia. Marshal Cândido Rondon, considered one of the greatest Brazilian heroes and patriots, has been honored in many ways, in addition to having his name given to the Rondon Project. The Decree No. 51,190, of April 26, 1963, proclaimed him Patron of the Army's Communications branch. Since 1971, his birthday, May 5, has been celebrated as National Communications Day. Museums, memorials, books, films, articles and academic theses discuss his life. The state of Rondônia and cities throughout Brazil are named after him as a form of recognition. A year before his death, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Albert Einstein. He died on January 19, 1958, at the age of 92, and was buried in Rio de Janeiro. If he were alive, he would have seen his values represented in the theme of the 75th World Health Assembly in 2022: “Health for peace, and peace for health”.

## **The Rondonista's hat**



This article would be incomplete if it did not mention the Rondonista's hat. Starting in 2005, when the Rondon Project was reactivated in its second phase, which has among its goals the sustainable development, that is, “teaching how to fish” instead of “delivering the fish”, the “Rondonista's kit” was put together. It is a basic set of supplies to catalyze in all Rondonistas the spirit of belonging to the project. The most significant element of this “kit” is the hat, which is given and used for the first time during a special ceremony at the official opening session of each Rondon operation. The Rondonista’s hat is associated with the Bandeirante’s hat, and was designed and adopted by the Brazilian Army’s Engineering Branch when the 5th Construction Engineering Battalion (5th BEC) was installed in Porto Velho, Rondônia, in 1966. The Rondonistas of Operation Zero in 1967 received a hat, and it began to be used in operations supported by the 5th BEC in the following years. In the past, the Bandeirantes symbolized developing and integrating the Brazilian territory. The symbolism of the Bandeirantes was deeply linked to the mission of the Rondonistas in the first phase of the Rondon Project, translated by the motto: “Integrate as to not surrender”. This is the point of association between the Bandeirante’s hat and the Rondonista’s hat. During the 2017 Rondônia 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Operation, Professor Denis Dockhorn from PUCRS made official the symbol represented by the hat saying that “It is time to link the history of each one of you to the history of all Brazilians, just as Marechal Rondon did linking Brazil to Brazil”.

## **Final considerations**

Nowadays the workshops developed by Rondonistas aim to form multipliers in each municipality in the following areas: culture, human rights and justice, education, health, communication, environment, technology, and production and work. In addition, there is another team of Rondonistas who is responsible for providing journalistic coverage and producing content to publicize the Rondon Project.



**Figure 5:** In an example of the exchange of knowledge that occurs during operations, a group of Rondonistas from UFCSPA demonstrate some capoeira movements to the indigenous community, who begin to perform these movements promptly. Afterwards, people from the community sing their songs, also sharing their culture.

Among the benefits of the Rondon Project for the municipality, the following stand out: increased support from the population; job creation; growth of the local economy; crime reduction; improvement in public administration management; improvement in the health area; raising awareness among the population regarding the need to care for the environment; new teaching methodologies and solutions in the area of education; bringing together professionals from different areas with potential for future partnerships; and updates on technologies and innovations in different areas and fields.

The benefits of the Rondon Project for Rondonistas include the opportunity to become more sensible and determined people. In the Guideline for Rondonistas, there is a recommendation on individual and collective behavior that says that the Rondon Project means “giving back, selflessness, Brazilian-ness, initiative, effort, creativity, determination, dedication, sensitivity and a lot of teamwork, with unity and respect for diversity”. In this way, the Rondon Project is more than an educational and social project. It is a powerful strategy for social transformation, developing leadership and making Rondonistas aware of their importance in the building of a more just society. It is an amazing example of a project-based learning pedagogical method with genuine extensionist experiences and represents not only the largest, but also the most transformative “classroom” in Brazil.

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