How to make Brazil more receptive to immigrant workers

The increased flow of immigrants into Brazil reinforces the need to modernize planning and legislation.

Solange Monteiro

THE PROFILE OF MIGRANT WORKERS has changed in recent years: Fewer Brazilians are working abroad, and more foreigners have entered Brazil’s labor market. This change is reflected in Brazil’s external accounts. Central Bank data show that in 2014 remittances from expatriated Brazilians fell by 35%, to US$1.9 billion; they had peaked in 2008 at US$2.9 billion. Meanwhile, the remittances of foreigners resident in Brazil shot up 94%, to US$1.2 billion.

The willingness of Brazilians to move overseas waned as the effects of the 2008 financial crisis waxed in the United States, spread in the world economy, and led some Brazilians to return home. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Organization (OECD), the annual flow of Brazilian immigrants to OECD member countries fell from 108,000 in 2007 to 66,000 in 2012. Brazil’s Foreign Ministry data indicate that, between 2007 and 2013, at least half a million Brazilians returned home. In contrast, the number of immigrant workers in Brazil increased by 19% in 2012 and another 27% in 2013 to total of 120,000 people, according to the Ministry of Labor. Most foreign residents work in the production of industrial goods and services (28%) or as, teachers of science and arts (20%), and directors and managers (15%).

Optimism about the Brazilian economy compared to the crisis in developed countries helped attract foreign workers.
In addition, the More Doctors Program of the Ministry of Health brought in 11,430 Cuban health professionals, and more Haitians came in on humanitarian visas. In 2013, Haitians became the main outside nationality in the Brazilian labor market, with 14,579 people, surpassing the Portuguese. “We are seeing the first significant inflow of immigrants since 1930. Brazil has not had its immigrant population renewed for a long time. The 2000 Census found that 38% of immigrants living in Brazil at the time were older than 65,” says Leonardo Cavalcanti, co-author of the study “Integration of Immigrants in the Brazilian Market” (http://portal.mte.gov.br/obmigra/imigracao/).

Small population, high impact
In terms of the population of Brazil, the number of immigrants is relatively small. Language and its distance from centers of major geopolitical conflict are among the reasons why Brazil is less attractive to immigrants. Nevertheless, the increased number of immigrants is an opportunity to improve planning for and the laws governing immigration. “Today Brazil is not a receptive country for immigrants from the legal and political

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*Leonardo Cavalcanti*

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**Immigrants legally employed in Brazil**

Main destinations of immigrants in Brazil

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>São Paulo</th>
<th>Rio de Janeiro</th>
<th>Paraná</th>
<th>Santa Catarina</th>
<th>Mato Grosso</th>
<th>Brazil Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>27,515</td>
<td>9,408</td>
<td>2,697</td>
<td>1,147</td>
<td>712</td>
<td>79,578</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>33,172</td>
<td>11,022</td>
<td>3,890</td>
<td>1,875</td>
<td>892</td>
<td>94,688</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>38,293</td>
<td>11,964</td>
<td>6,544</td>
<td>4,376</td>
<td>1,573</td>
<td>120,056</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Main immigrants by country of origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Haiti</th>
<th>Peru</th>
<th>Colombia</th>
<th>Bolívia</th>
<th>South Korea</th>
<th>Africa (excluding Angola)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>814</td>
<td>1,019</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>5,835</td>
<td>723</td>
<td>1,148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>14,579</td>
<td>2,876</td>
<td>1,366</td>
<td>9,478</td>
<td>1,182</td>
<td>2,963</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Obmigra.
“Some Brazilians have improved their schooling and no longer want low-skilled jobs; on the other hand, we lack the scientists, engineers, technicians needed to increase productivity and innovate.”

Naércio Menezes Filho, coordinator of the Public Policy Center of the Institute of Education and Research (Insper), points out that the slowdown in the Brazilian economy reduces the need to improve conditions to attract foreign workers, but he notes that Brazil has shortages of high and low-skilled workers, which could jeopardize future GDP growth: “Some Brazilians have improved their schooling and no longer want low-skilled jobs; on the other hand, we lack the scientists, engineers, technicians needed to increase productivity and innovate.”

In terms of attracting skilled workers, the main obstacle is the red tape for revalidation of degrees, which is done by public universities and takes an official period of six months. “As people graduate from recognized universities in their countries, the validation should be automatic,” points of view,” says Vanessa Oliveira Batista Berner, professor at the National Law School of Federal University in Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).

Most sought destination
São Paulo state employs more foreign workers than other states, but its share of foreign workers has declined from 35% in 2011 to 32% in 2013.
Menezes Filho says. “To some extent this reflects the corporatism inclination of the industrial sector, which resists the entry of professionals for fear of increased competition.” Yet the inflow of skilled workers and professionals is closely related to foreign investment in Brazil. An example is the city of São Gonçalo do Amarante, Ceará state, where in partnership with Vale mining company South Korean corporations Posco and Dongkuk are building the Steel Company of Pecém (CSP). The CSP has 920 South Korean workers, almost 10% of its workforce, all in managerial and technical positions. Cavalcanti emphasizes that bringing in skilled labor will be a natural tendency to cover shortages of skilled workers as the population ages. Brazil, he says, will have to improve conditions to attract foreign skilled workers and compete with other countries also looking for skilled workers. “Despite the economic crisis, in Spain and Portugal there are many jobs for skilled workers.”

**Without crutches**

Barriers to the flow of immigrant workers, however, affect the less skilled or refugees most. “Today the law creates obstacles to regularizing work permits for this group of people, creating an unfair situation when compared to skilled workers,” says UFRJ’s Berner. She was a member of the Expert Committee that produced the draft bill submitted last year by the Ministry of Justice to replace the 1980 Statute of Foreigners. “The current statute focuses on national security, not human rights,” she says. The draft bill competes with two others that Congress is considering and would provide for establishment of a National Migration Authority to centralize management of visa processes and creation of a work visa that allows immigrants to seek employment in Brazil for a period of at least six months. “Today, if a foreigner finds a job opportunity in Brazil, he must return to his country to apply for a visa,” Cavalcanti says. “This has created a large number of irregular workers in Brazil, which is estimated at anywhere from 180,000 to 600,000.”

Edilson Godinho of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Labor and Housing in Santa Catarina state advocates for closer coordination between levels of government in addressing the issue. His state showed the highest relative growth of immigrants formally employed, 133% in 2013, of which 29% are Haitians. “In the capital, in mid-2013 we helped an average of 40 to 60 Haitians a day through private employment agencies,” said Godinho. Today, he said, the average has fallen to 5 a day, and among them are Angolans, Ghanaians, and Nigerians. He says, “We need federal support as well as to sensitize businesses, so that we have more resources and tools to deal with this new situation.”

Berner believes that although Brazil is far from being a main migration destination, the tendency of human mobility is global and demands proper planning and legal framework. “Brazil has presented itself in international forums as a defender of human rights, but still lacks adequate, humanitarian legislation,” she says, recalling slave labor allegations of Latino immigrants even today. Planning, she says, “is important not just for economic development but also for human and cultural development.”

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**“Today Brazil is not a receptive country for immigrants from the legal and political points of view.”**

*Vanessa Oliveira Batista Berner*