

# Local integration of refugees in Brazil

Julia Bertino Moreira and Rosana Baeninger

## Local integration is a complex economic, political, social and cultural process.

In October of 2009 there were 4,131 refugees from 72 nationalities living in Brazil. Of these, 3,822 arrived 'spontaneously', of whom nearly half came through their own networks, and 418 were resettled through the Brazilian programme, coordinated by the National Committee for Refugees (CONARE) with UNHCR support. The single largest group is from Angola (1,688) and the second largest from Colombia (598).

### Resettlement

With its active programmes to resettle refugees, Brazil is considered as an 'emergent' resettlement country. The first programme was the Solidarity Resettlement Programme established in 1999 in agreement with UNHCR to settle refugees who were still persecuted or at risk of persecution or could not adapt to their first country of asylum. The second programme is the Regional Resettlement Programme, proposed by the Brazilian government in 2004, in order to protect refugees fleeing persecution and conflict in Latin America and also to help countries receiving large numbers of Colombians, such as Costa Rica and Ecuador.

The country does not set annual quotas for resettled refugees, not even by nationality. CONARE has prioritised two vulnerable groups: refugees without legal or physical protection and women at risk. In 2005, the Brazilian resettlement programme set up an innovative emergency procedure for refugees at immediate risk, whereby such refugees can have their applications examined within 72 hours and if they are granted asylum they can be resettled in Brazil within seven days.

CONARE is also responsible for analysing asylum applications and formulating public policies for refugees living in the country. The committee convenes meetings of government agencies, civil society organisations and UNHCR, which is able to contribute to the meetings but has no voting rights. CONARE estimates that the refugee recognition rate is 30%, which is comparable to international levels. The eligibility decisions have included gender persecution and have drawn special attention to children and other vulnerable groups at risk.

### Local integration

A recent research project<sup>1</sup> interviewed refugee families who had arrived 'spontaneously' and were living in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo during 2007. Most of the refugees reached the country through social networks, since 25.1% had a relative and 23.3% had a friend living in Brazil. In terms of labour market integration, 56.4% were working, although over half of these were working

in informal job occupations. Only 2.8% were included in the government assistance programme (Bolsa Família) and 11% were receiving financial support from UNHCR.

To be successfully integrated, refugees need employment, language skills and access to public services, as well as citizenship rights, duties and political participation and social relations with their community. Activities to facilitate local integration are mainly carried out by civil society organisations, although UNHCR and the government also take part. Caritas Arquidiocesana in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro helps asylum seekers newly arrived in the country as well as refugees who have been living in Brazil for a long time. Asylum seekers may receive financial support from UNHCR for up to six months. The religious institutions provide them with legal and practical assistance, working with partners (including from the private sector) to offer legal support during the refugee status determination process, Portuguese lessons, employment training, food and dental care. Brazil has the largest support network for refugees in Latin America, with almost 100 local organisations involved.

In general, refugees benefit from the social services – such as education and health care – provided by the Brazilian government at federal, state and municipal levels. Nevertheless, there are a few specific services created to meet refugees' particular needs: a special programme for mental health care financially supported by CONARE, public housing for refugees living in São Paulo, and educational scholarships offered by the Federal University of Minas Gerais and the Federal University of Juiz de Fora.

In 2007, the federal government began to contribute to the financial support given by UNHCR for refugees living in Brazil, allocating almost US\$350,000 to CONARE, which transferred these funds to Caritas. Caritas and its partners provide resettled refugees not only with financial support but also with help in finding jobs and housing. Yet, even after ten years of resettlement programmes, challenges still remain, especially relating to refugees' self-sufficiency.

### Challenges

The most critical obstacles to the social and economic integration of refugees in Brazil are lack of employment and housing, and discrimination. Our research showed that refugees consider their working conditions and pay as unsatisfactory. They find it difficult to access basic public services, particularly health care and housing. And finally they feel discriminated against by the local population. Brazilian society does not know precisely what a refugee is, frequently perceiving them as 'fugitives' from justice, making their social and labour market integration even more difficult.

To facilitate local integration, and to meet refugees' particular needs, more financial resources are needed to support implementation of specific refugee policies. The establishment of new institutions such as the São Paulo Committee for Refugees, Rio de Janeiro Committee for Refugees and São Paulo Municipal Committee for Immigrants and Refugees offer some hope. All of these include civil society participation and aim to formulate and implement public policies for refugees and other immigrants living in Brazil.

Nonetheless, the decision to put specific refugee policies into practice is controversial given the potential for disputes with the local community. The inclusion of refugees in governmental assistance programmes (such as Bolsa Família) as well as the implementation of specific policies for them may cause hostile reactions from the local population. Programmes that benefit both the refugees and the host community are essential.

In order to overcome discriminatory attitudes towards refugees, education and information programmes are needed to raise awareness about the status of refugees

and their situation in Brazil. A good example of such a programme is the health campaign developed by UNHCR in partnership with the local NGO Ação Comunitária no Brasil that took place in the Complexo da Maré slum quarter in Rio de Janeiro. Awareness was raised through drama, presenting a play performed by Angolan refugees and young Brazilians. This kind of effort is critical because it strengthens refugees' social relations with the local population, a vital component for successful local integration.

Julia Bertino Moreira ([juliabertinobr@yahoo.com.br](mailto:juliabertinobr@yahoo.com.br)) is a Doctoral student at the University of Campinas and research assistant in the 'Refugee population living conditions in Brazil' project, and a Visiting Fellow at the Refugee Studies Centre in 2010. Rosana Baeninger ([baeninger@nepo.unicamp.br](mailto:baeninger@nepo.unicamp.br)) is a teacher in the Demography Department at University of Campinas and coordinator of the 'Refugee population living conditions in Brazil' project.

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Luis Eduardo Garzón, a resettled refugee from Colombia, with his handicrafts at the annual national fair for small-scale farmers in Brasília, Brazil, 2007.