

# Family allowance extended to refugees in Brazil

The Brazilian government has extended an allowance, which was created to assist poor Brazilian families, to refugees. The family allowance (*Bolsa Família*) consists of a small cash transfer programme granted to poor families. Established in 2004,<sup>1</sup> it unified scattered initiatives, such as school, food and fuel allowances which previously came under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Mines and Energy respectively.

The purpose of the allowance is to reduce poverty in families and break the cycle of poverty, primarily by keeping children attending schools and promoting better health practices, thereby also promoting the Millenium Development Goals of reducing malnutrition, achieving universal education and reducing child mortality.

It has been successful in achieving its goals so far since it boosted the middle class from 45 million to 105 million in about a

decade, remarkable progress in a country with a population of 200 million people.<sup>2</sup>

The extension of the allowance to refugees was made possible on the grounds of the Foreigner's Act of 1980 which provides that: "the foreigner who has residence in Brazil enjoys all the rights recognised for Brazilian nationals".<sup>3</sup> In order to receive this benefit, the migrant or refugee has to be a legal resident in Brazil, has to be registered in the Unified Household Registry (Cadastro Único para Programas Sociais), has to meet income eligibility criteria and must comply with the standard conditions attached to receiving it such as school attendance, vaccination and so on.<sup>4</sup>

In response to the criticism that migrants and refugees have different needs from Brazilians, Brazil's National Committee for Refugees (CONARE) argues that it meets those different needs by additional grants to states, local governments and civil society organisations, which are then responsible for providing them with

shelter, Portuguese language classes, legal and mental health assistance and, if necessary, financial assistance as well.

Although providing the same allowance that Brazilian nationals receive to refugees and migrants is a good step, it should not prevent the government from developing specific public policies for refugees since their inclusion in assistance designed for Brazilians can serve to conceal the refugees' specific problems.

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1. Lei no. 10.836, 9 January 2004.
2. <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/new-middle-class-driving-brazil-economic-makeover>
3. Article 95 of Foreigner's Act No. 6.815/1980
4. See Lindert K, Linder A, Hobbs J & de la Brière B (2007) *The Nuts and Bolts of Brazil's Bolsa Familia Program: Implementing Conditional Cash Transfers in a Decentralized Context*, World Bank SP Discussion Paper No 0709 <http://tinyurl.com/WB-BolsaFamilia>