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Brazil: Reduced migration benefits Rio slums

By Vincent Bevins



Children play near cable cars that cross over Complexo do Alemão in Rio de Janeiro

As the government of Rio de Janeiro undertakes the difficult task of asserting control in the city's hundreds of favelas and integrating the residents of the neglected slums into wider Brazilian society, one demographic shift is making their job that little bit easier.

The flow of migrants from the poor north-east of Brazil, which built up the favelas in previous decades, has slowed to a trickle in recent years, while some of the residents of the favelas have even decided to make the return journey.

For much of the 20th century, millions of workers from the country's less developed, north-eastern states made their way to the big cities, such as São Paulo and Rio, to find work.

Unable to afford to rent, many built makeshift settlements in unclaimed parts of the city – in the case of Rio, mostly on the hills that pop up throughout the town. These are the favelas.

But in the past 10 years, economic growth in the north-east has outstripped that of the traditionally more wealthy south-east – in part due to policies put in place by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the left-wing former president who himself made this trip as a child.

“Migration to urban regions has stagnated in the last decade,” says Marcelo Neri, an economist at Rio's Fundação Getulio Vargas business school, who notes that the economy of the north-east has grown 42 per cent in that time, double the rate of the south-east.

“Bolsa Família [a cash transfer programme for the country's poorest], the increase in pensions for retirees and a lower cost of living also help to explain the attractiveness of the north-east,” he adds.

The experience of Fernando Lima, project director at AfroReggae, a cultural organisation that serves as a contact point between favela communities and wider Brazilian society, is typical of the country's migration narrative.

In the 1970s, Mr Lima spent a month and a half on the back of a truck with his parents travelling from his home state of Paraíba, before settling in the Complexo do Alemão favela, a sprawling set of hill communities in the north of Rio, where he still lives.

“We, like many others in our home town, were actively recruited to come here [to Rio] and work on big construction projects” he recalls.

While Mr Lima himself does not plan to return, he says “word is certainly out in my community that there are opportunities in the north-east. I know several people who have gone back,” he says.

Aldemir Ferreira was one of those who made that journey. Born and raised in the Rocinha favela, Mr Ferreira returned with his parents to their home town of Queimadas, Paraíba, six years ago.

He found it very different from the first time he visited 20 years ago. “[Back then] my grandmother was the only person for kilometres with a television. Everyone used to congregate at hers to watch,” he says. “Now everyone has a TV, a cell phone, and most people have computers and the internet.”

“Re-adapting for my parents was easy, and even for me, a born resident of Rio, it was great. There is more freedom, there is more of a feeling of calm and safety. There are lots of jobs, which pay less than those in Rio, but the cost of living is much lower too.”

A stroke of bad luck pulled him back to Rio when his father was struck by cancer and preferred to be treated by a trusted doctor back in the city. "To be honest," Ferreira says, "I never wanted to come back".

Rocinha is one of the settlements that is being "pacified" by the Brazilian government in the run-up to the 2014 World Cup and Olympic Games in 2016, which are likely to bring with them international scrutiny of Brazil and its sometimes-divided society. This means that areas that were under de facto control of drug gangs – police rarely, if ever, entered – are invaded by security forces, who then set up permanent posts inside.

The challenge is not only to establish control in the communities, but to win the trust of local populations, many of which have long distrusted the police, and provide opportunities for social and economic development.

Just a few months ago in Rocinha – the favela with the highest proportion of migrants – drugs gangs were able to throw huge outdoor parties guarded by shirtless teenagers armed to the teeth.

And while the favelas continue to grow because of the high birth rates there, the decline in migratory inflows makes the task of integrating the favela into Brazilian society easier, according to Fernando Cavallieri, a special adviser at the Rio government's urban planning institute.

"It doesn't make the slightest difference to the city's efforts whether the people are migrants or locals from Rio," he says. "But a slowdown or a stop in the rate of migratory growth really helps. At the very least it gives us some stability."

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