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Brazil's historically poor northeast finally gets its boom

The area around Recife in particular has benefited from government and business investment, and the northeast's growth has far outpaced that of richer states.

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Crowds fill the streets during a Carnival parade in Recife, in Brazil's Pernambuco state. The northeastern region is shaking off its long history of poverty and undergoing an economic boom. (Leo Caldas, AFP/Getty Images / March 5, 2011)

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Northeast Brazil has its own distinct Carnival

By Vincent Bevins, Los Angeles Times
May 24, 2012

RECIFE, Brazil — The Brazilian state of Pernambuco was once known for its vast plains of parched dirt and roving bandits called *cangacos*, who robbed from the rich and gave to the poor.

For later generations, escaping the widespread poverty of the northeast customarily meant moving to livelier southeastern cities like Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, though many migrants still ended up living in *favelas*, or slums.

Today, an economic boom has given locals good reasons to stay put, and large numbers of Brazilians are even making their way north in search of a better life.

The area around Recife, the capital of Pernambuco, has benefited from huge government and business investments such as the expansion of the port of Suape, a new shipyard and an oil refinery project. Government aid has also helped struggling families improve their lives, which has lessened the need to move elsewhere.

In Boa Viagem, a new middle-class neighborhood south of

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downtown Recife, the signs of change include apartment complexes and chic restaurants that have sprung up in recent years.

"The region is now much more than just big industrial projects," said Juliana Queiroga, regional coordinator at Endeavor Nordeste, a new northeastern branch of a Sao Paulo-based nongovernmental organization that promotes entrepreneurship. "It's a new gastronomic center, a tech center, and there's lots of innovation and international money coming in."

In the last 12 years, unemployment in the Recife metropolitan area dropped from about 14% to 6.2%, and the population of the city grew 8% to more than 1.5 million during roughly the same period. The city has been a beneficiary of the growth that has powered the country's economy for a decade and pushed migration into parts of the country that had languished for a century.

When Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva became president in 2003, he instituted a set of social programs that predominantly benefited the impoverished northeastern states, which had lost much of their economic relevance of the 19th century, when slave plantations were central to the country's growth. As a youth, Lula made the weeks-long journey on the back of a truck from the woods of Pernambuco to Sao Paulo, where he eventually found a job as a metalworker.

The billions of dollars in government investments and projects have made the northeast — home to nine states and 50 million people — the fastest-growing population center in Brazil's economic success story, which recently helped the country overtake Britain to become the world's sixth-largest economy.

The northeast has grown four times as fast as the richer states of Sao Paulo and Rio, said Marcelo Neri, a Brazilian demographics specialist.

The distribution of wealth has improved across classes, and millions of people have moved from poverty into the middle class, he said.

"This is the first decade in recorded history that net migration from the country to the big cities has basically stopped," Neri said. "It's remarkable. This is still a very unequal country, but we are one of a very few countries these days that can say that inequality is falling."

Some Brazilians are moving around the countryside to take advantage of an agricultural industry that is profiting from selling soybeans and other commodities to China. The related jobs range from business experts familiar with specialized agribusiness techniques to laborers who hack away brush before seeds are planted.

Some Brazilians are moving to newly revitalized urban centers such as Recife or Fortaleza to work in construction, infrastructure or oil refining. And some are leaving the crime-ridden slums of Rio for jobs in their families' home regions.

The balance has shifted so far that many who traditionally would have taken high-paying professional jobs in the southeast are heading to places like Recife instead.

Sergio Silvino, a native of Sao Paulo who moved to Recife in 2010, was happily surprised to find a job as an engineer on a huge construction site.

"I didn't think there were any opportunities up here. But then I got wind that there were job openings, and I ended up with a position that paid much better than I could have gotten in Rio," Silvino said. "Now I see people here from all over the country, and it's very tough to find anyone without a job."

Since President Dilma Rousseff, Lula's handpicked successor, took over in January 2011, growth has continued apace, surprising many of those who grew up in the area or arrived more recently.

"If you would have asked me at the beginning of my college term, I would have said I wanted to leave Pernambuco," said Jorge Diogo Souza Costa, a business student who moved to Recife from a small town in the interior of the state so he could attend a decent high school. "But now I want to stay. We have the refineries, the port projects, shipbuilding and the pharmaceutical and tech industries now. It's just obvious that our time has come."

Bevins is a special correspondent.

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