

REFUGEES

Brazil Could Help Solve Europe's Refugee Crisis

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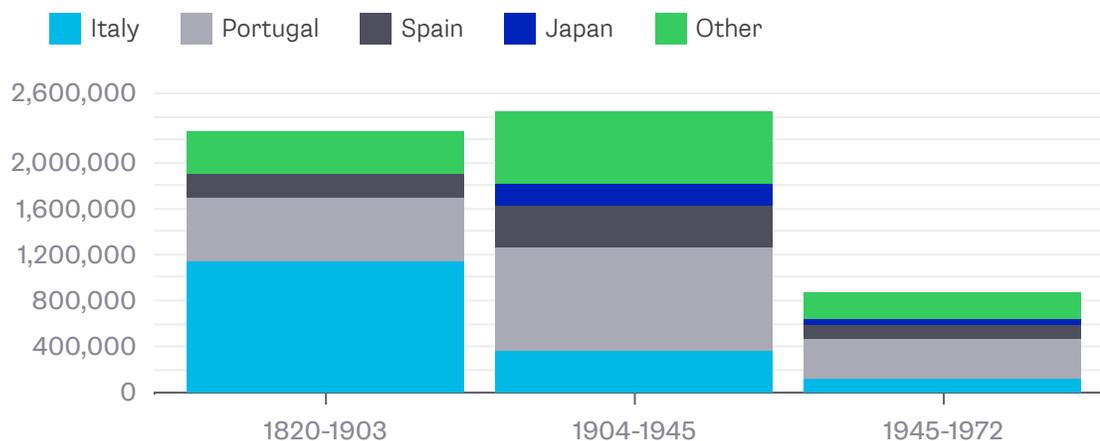
By [Rodrigo Zeidan](#) & [Irineu de Carvalho Filho](#)

Could the most practical solution to the refugee crisis in Europe be an ocean away in South America's largest nation? This may strike some as far-fetched, but bear with us. For humanitarian and economic reasons, Brazil may offer the best hope for the hundreds of thousands of Syrians fleeing war and the millions of Africans desperate for a better life across the Mediterranean. In the process, Brazil could also rescue itself from dire financial straits.

Brazil has a long history of integrating immigrants from different corners of the world. Since the start of the 20th century, Syrians and Lebanese arrived in Brazil to trade, farm, operate machines, study and contribute to the country at large. The legacy from Middle East immigration is prominent in commerce, art, science and politics, notably with Brazilian President Michel Temer himself descending from Lebanon-born parents.

Brazil's Melting Pot

Breakdown of immigrant waves by country



Source: IBGE Census, 2010

Immigration generates a net contribution to public finances and growth, even in cases of low-skilled migration to developed [countries](#). For the U.K., [researchers](#) found a net contribution to the British purse of 24 billion (\$28.63 billion) between 2001 and 2011. Nevertheless, integrating refugees in Europe proves difficult because they are on

average less skilled than the rest of the population, decreasing average productivity and contributing to income inequality, at least in the short run. In contrast, Syrian refugees entering Brazil would likely be educated, or at least as educated and skilled, as the general populace. African refugees trying to cross the Mediterranean are highly motivated too; many of them, from West Africa, are native English or French speakers. Some would find employment teaching Brazilian children.

And while assuaging a guilty global conscience and the refugee fatigue of rich countries, a major influx of Syrian and other refugees to Brazil could generate the economic stimulus that Brazil sorely needs. An influx of refugees would raise labor productivity in Brazil without worsening income distribution, and would mitigate the consequences of Brazil's sharply reduced fertility rates since the 1980s. Moreover, as the Brazilian population gets older, these ready-to-work families could play a significant role in shoring up public finances and helping it recover from its worst recession ever.

Brazil has received immigrants by the millions in the past. The census of 1940 counted over 50,000 Syrians and Lebanese. The number more than tripled in the next two decades and there has been a continuous, albeit smaller, inflow since then. They all became Brazilians.

Of course, integrating so many refugees is expensive, and Brazil faces severe challenges on the fiscal front, with a budget deficit of just under 9 percent. Brazil can do better by orders of magnitude. The settlement and integration of refugees in Brazilian society should be facilitated with financial support from rich countries interested in curbing the flow of refugees into their own territory. It is a lot cheaper to pay for a refugee to settle in a middle-income country like Brazil than to support them in Germany or Sweden.

The 6 billion euro (\$6.35 billion) European Union agreement with Turkey provides a precedent; provided the agreement is fulfilled on both sides, there is no reason why the resources of the wealthy countries cannot be used in this way to help find solutions to the refugee crisis, as long as resettlement is voluntary. And while EU leaders meeting this week will note the only limited success of the arrangement with Turkey, an arrangement with Brazil could prove easier to implement.

Brazil, of course, has serious problems, from poor urban infrastructure to violence in favelas, urban slums. International funds should be used to expand affordable housing and for infrastructure investments to help integrate refugees. Such expenditures would enhance the lives of both locals and foreigners, ultimately creating jobs for some of the 12 million unemployed Brazilians. The rise of nationalist movements in Europe and the anti-immigrant stance of president-elect Donald Trump lend greater urgency to finding unconventional solutions.

As head of the United Nations mission in Haiti, it missed the opportunity to offer a new home to hundreds of thousands of Haitians fleeing from recent earthquakes and cholera outbreaks; policymakers lacked the imagination to play a more constructive role. But many Haitians saw an opportunity. In 2010, there were less than 40 Haitians [living](#) in Brazil; since then, 80,000 entered the country. Without national or multilateral support, they largely managed to [establish themselves](#), even under [difficult odds](#).

Such large-scale resettlement would certainly meet with some initial political resistance from some quarters. But while Brazil carries the guilt of being the last Western country to abolish slavery, it has also been a promised land for successful waves of immigrants from Japan, Italy, Poland, Germany, Lebanon, Syria and elsewhere. A long history of religious tolerance would make an influx of Muslim immigrants relatively easier to accommodate.

It is up to Brazil to embrace the moral imperative, and the economic and social logic, of playing a central role in solving the refugee crisis in Europe. And it is up to the governments of rich countries to mobilize the resources to facilitate Brazil's welcoming and absorption of the refugees. In doing so, they could save fiscal resources in the medium and long term, respond to popular concerns over the refugee intake and provide hope that dispossessed refugees will find a new home.

(Corrects figure in chart of Italian immigrants in the period 1820-1903.)

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