



## **EROPA SEMINAR 2008**

**“Governance in a Triptych:  
Environment, Migration, Peace and Order”**  
*23-25 October 2008  
Manila, Philippines*

## **JAPAN’S EXPERIENCES WITH JAPANESE BRAZILIANS**

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# JAPAN'S EXPERIENCES WEITH JAPANESE BRAZILIANS

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## 1. Background

In recent history, Japan has not seen a major population influx from abroad as the policy of its government maintained a fairly 'closed market' stance towards a foreign labour force.

Until 1990, Japan admitted virtually no labour force from outside except for special cases. But the law concerning immigration regulation was amended in that year and regulation on the admission of those who are related to emigrants from Japan were much relaxed. As a result, it was made much easier for descendents and the relatives of emigrants from Japan to come to Japan and stay and work there. The reason behind this change of policy was the economic boom in Japan at that time. Shortages in the labour force were a big problem at that time, but the government in Japan was hesitant to open its labour market to foreigners. On the other hand, because of the strong demand, the number of illegal foreign workers increased rapidly. Seeing this, the government decided to take a measure to open the market to a limited degree. The measure taken was relaxation of regulations on admission to Japan for the purpose of working, descendants and relatives of Japanese who had emigrated to other countries in the past. Those emigrants had moved mainly to Latin American countries before and after WWII. Brazil has by far the biggest community of former Japanese, followed by Peru.

Also recently, with the indigenous Japanese population ageing very rapidly, as a result of lengthened life expectancy and the very low birth rate, the question of whether Japan should take in more people from outside to supplement its dwindling labour force is now being

discussed. Proponents of this change in government policy argue primarily from a macro-economic viewpoint seeing benefits, but there can also be a great deal of friction in local communities, which should be viewed as a 'cost'. I will not touch upon this policy issue in this paper but instead I will concentrate on those frictions, the understanding of which, I think, is essential for the discussion of the above-mentioned policy issue.

## **2. Present Situation concerning Japanese Brazilians in Japan**

For the purpose of estimating the costs of having a large group of non-Japanese newcomers to Japan, the country can draw on but one firsthand experience. That is its experience with Japanese Brazilians.

In 1990, with Japan's economy booming, and companies crying for more labourers, the government relaxed its restriction on the admission of foreign workers and it was made much easier for the descendents of Japanese who had emigrated to Latin American countries (mainly Brazil), to come to Japan and work. As a result, approximately 312,000 Brazilians now reside in Japan, forming the third biggest (after Koreans and Chinese) non-native group, as of the end of March, 2007.

## **3. Difficulties Caused for Local Governments in Japan by Japanese Brazilians' Existence**

Many of these non-Japanese work in factories, and they tend to be concentrated in several geographic areas. This is because most of those coming to Japan are taken care of by specific agents who not only arrange their flights to Japan but also provide them with accommodation and jobs. Also most of the jobs are found in a relatively limited number of factories. This means

that, although their number is fairly small compared with the total population in Japan, there are several municipalities, where their existence is fairly significant.

Japan being a country not very much accustomed to interacting directly with people from outside, this existence of foreign people has put some stress on the local communities in which they live.

### **3.1. Health Insurance**

Firstly, many Japanese social systems, such as the public health insurance and national pension do not presuppose the existence of proportionally significant numbers of such people. Local governments which are home to many of them sometimes find themselves with unexpected financial burdens.

Health insurance provides a good example. In Japan everyone with Japanese nationality legally must be a member of one of the country's health insurance schemes. Japanese health insurance schemes are arranged with 'households' serving as its membership unit. So if one works for a large company or a government office, he/she becomes a member of the company's or the government office's health insurance scheme and all his/her dependents (e.g., children and retired parents) also become a dependent family member of the health insurance scheme. But if a household has no one who belongs to one of those organisations, then one automatically becomes a member of the National Health Insurance. Each municipality operates a branch of the Health Insurance Scheme, and they must be financially self-sufficient in each branch. Since fees for the National Health Insurance are determined according to income, this means that, if one municipality has relatively low average income, it has to collect a comparatively higher fee than those in another municipality with the same income.

Most Japanese Brazilians are not directly employed by the firms in which they work, and so they are usually not covered by the firm's health insurance scheme. Those agents which send them to those firms have the responsibility in many cases to insure them but they tend to avoid this in order not to pay the employers' share of health insurance fees. The employees themselves quite frequently do not want it, not wanting to pay the health insurance fees of their own.

Thus, the existence of a big proportion of Japanese Brazilian can pose two problems for a municipality.

First, if under such circumstances, Japanese Brazilians want to have some health insurance coverage, they must enroll in the National Health Insurance. And if the number of those is substantial compared with the total population of the municipality, it can make average income in the municipality of the members of the National Health Insurance lower. This can lead to either a hike in the health insurance fee or a bigger burden on the municipality's General Account.

Secondly, if they do not enroll in the National Health Insurance, they are not covered by any health insurance, which is a very rare phenomenon in Japan except for some very few cases of non-payment of the National Health Insurance fee. This is because enrolment in National Health Insurance is obligatory for Japanese, but because most Japanese Brazilians are not ~~being~~ permanent residents in Japan, enrolment is not obligatory for them. This can lead to a difficult problem when they actually fall ill.

### **3.2. Education**

Also education is a big problem. Schools are hard put to cope with the needs of children who do not speak Japanese.

The school attendance rate for compulsory education (nine years) is very high in Japan, nearing 100 percent.

Compared with this school attendance rate, that of Japanese Brazilians in Japan is said to be much lower, although there are no accurate statistics. There are many complications in relation to the education of the Japanese Brazilians' children. In areas where there are many Japanese Brazilians (in a town in Gunma Prefecture called Oizumi, about one sixth of the population is Japanese Brazilian,) there are even schools managed by Brazilian organizations. So in such an area, if they so wish, they can have a good Brazilian education. However, such fortunate ones are rare. Many have no other alternatives than usual Japanese primary and high schools. There, by far the biggest problem is language. Japanese is a unique language spoken only in Japan. Japanese people have very little exposure to Portugal or Brazil. This means there are few Japanese who know Portuguese, let alone teachers who can use it in the classroom. Municipalities are doing their best employing those few Portuguese speakers as auxiliary teachers to help Japanese Brazilian children to learn Japanese. But the substantial part of their education is conducted in Japanese. For very small children language is less of a problem, since they learn language very rapidly. However, as they acquire Japanese, they lose their native Portuguese, which makes conversation within the family difficult. Also, without Portuguese they are sure to encounter enormous difficulty when they get back to their native country. Even more troublesome are the children with parents indifferent to their education. They sometimes do not want their children to go to school, but want to keep them at home to

use them as a sort of interpreter. Thus we are about to have a new phenomenon of having a group of young children without formal education.

### ***3.3. Relationship with the old community***

Thirdly, as I mentioned earlier, since agents are usually providing accommodations to those Japanese Brazilians, they tend to cluster together and this along with their lack of Japanese language ability leads to the creation of island communities isolated from the surrounding ones. Inside these communities they tend to keep Brazilian ways. There are many differences in the standards of tolerances to noises, cleanliness and so on. And so these differences create friction along the borders of the communities. Japanese residents are offended because those Japanese Brazilians do not follow Japanese ways, which they believe Japanese Brazilians should follow. Japanese Brazilians actually do not know about those ways and they do not have any intention to ignore them either.

## **4. Efforts by Local Governments in Japan**

From these observations, I think I can say that the biggest problem seems to be the lack of communication measures. As I mentioned, Japanese is a unique language spoken only in Japan. And there are not many among Japanese, who are conversant in Portuguese. And because those who were admitted are descendents and relatives of Japanese emigrants who do not speak Japanese, they tend to create isolated communities, shut off from the surrounding Japanese. It is observed that this leads to numerous tensions between new-comers and the local communities receiving them.

Seeing this, local governments in Japan are trying many new policies to alleviate this situation.

Take Konan City as an example. It is a city in Shiga Prefecture. Its population is about 56 thousand~~e~~, of which a little more than 3 thousand~~e~~ (6.0%) are foreigners. The Brazilian population was virtually nil in 1989 but since then it grew rapidly and is now more than 2,100. All the phenomenon mentioned above are present in the city.

Responding to this situation the city has laid down a new set of policies. The set of policies are as follows:

(Basic Philosophy)

To aim at creating “a society with multiplicity of culture,” where people understand and respect different cultures and customs, respect human rights and live in a comfortable and secure environment.

(Main Policies)

***Support on communication***

Provision of Japanese language classes

Provisions of information about living in the city

Information through different languages (via guidebooks, etc.)

\*Orientation meetings about living rules were given.

***Support on living***

Support on education

Support on health care, welfare

Consideration in disaster prevention, crisis management

\*Teachers who can teach Japanese in Portuguese are hired and classes of Japanese are given in primary and junior high schools.

\*City government have employed six Portuguese speaking staff.

### ***Creating “a society with a multiplicity of culture”***

Creation of hubs and networks

Enlightenment movement for “a society with a multiplicity of culture”

Creation of opportunities to take part in the local community

Support on interchanges between communities

\*Liaison Committee for Foreign Residents was established.

### ***Enlargement of the development force for “a society with a multiplicity of culture***

\*The Konan City International Society was established.

All through these policies, the city government thinks it essential to develop contacts between original residents group and newcomers, and for that purpose overcoming the language barrier is very important. For this, they are trying to enlist the cooperation of those Brazilians who have ~~get~~ married with a Japanese. They are expected, being conversant in both language as a couple, to take the role of a bridge between the two cultures.

Moreover, although at first Japanese Brazilian stayed in Japan for a short time and went back to their own country, now many of them are staying in Japan for an indefinite period. This leads to an increased number of their dependents, which includes many school-age children. So the city government feels that it has to prepare itself for Brazilians' permanent existence.

## **5. Conclusion**

It would be wrong to say that Japan should not admit foreign labour due to the frictions that doing so may entail, but the country must quickly learn from these forerunning problems in order to prepare itself for the future – which almost inevitably will bring this situation into the forefront of the debate on social/labour stability.

Importantly, the fact that Japan is the only developed country where a non-western language (which does not use an alphabet) is spoken seems to have a profound effect. In a world where globalisation is fast moving forward, it seems unlikely that Japan can keep its isolated position in terms of population migration. Therefore, Japan needs to think of how to deal with it without delay.

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