DEMOGRAPHY, DEVELOPMENT, AND THE FUTURE OF WORK: CHARTING AN INCLUSIVE LABOUR AGENDA FOR BRICS+

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Abstract
This paper examines the multifaceted challenges and opportunities within the BRICS+ labour and human capital landscape. It highlights divergent demographic trends where countries like China and Russia grapple with ageing populations while India and others possess a surplus of youthful labour – underscoring the urgent need for coordinated policy responses. The analysis explores the role of technological innovation in reshaping labour markets and facilitating global integration, alongside the structural constraints of weak institutions, inadequate infrastructure, and fragmented migration governance. It argues that informal labour markets, limited skill portability, and low labour standards hinder equitable growth across BRICS+. The paper proposes a transformative BRICS+ framework for inclusive labour mobility, human capital development, and cross-border skill recognition, positioning the bloc as a leader in shaping a more equitable global labour order. Through targeted investments, policy harmonisation, and collaborative governance, BRICS+ can harness its demographic and economic potential for sustainable development.

Keywords: BRICS, Human Capital, Labour Mobility, Migration, Structural Transformation

DEMOGRAFIA, DESENVOLVIMENTO E O FUTURO DO TRABALHO: TRAÇANDO UMA AGENDA LABORAL INCLUSIVA PARA OS BRICS+

Resuno
Este artigo examina os múltiplos desafios e oportunidades no panorama do trabalho e do capital humano no âmbito dos BRICS+. Destaca as tendências demográficas divergentes – com países como China e Rússia enfrentando o envelhecimento populacional, enquanto Índia e outros membros contam com um excedente de mão de obra jovem – ressaltando a necessidade urgente de respostas políticas coordenadas. A análise explora o papel da inovação tecnológica na transformação dos mercados de trabalho e na promoção da integração global, ao lado das limitações estruturais representadas por instituições frágeis, infraestrutura inadequada e uma governança migratória fragmentada. Argumenta-se que os mercados de trabalho informais, a baixa portabilidade de competências e os fracos padrões laborais dificultam um crescimento equitativo entre os BRICS+. O artigo propõe um marco transformador para os BRICS+ com foco na mobilidade laboral inclusiva, no desenvolvimento do capital humano e no reconhecimento transfronteiriço de habilidades, posicionando o bloco como líder na construção de uma

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ordem laboral global mais justa. Por meio de investimentos direcionados, harmonização de políticas e governança colaborativa, os BRICS+ podem aproveitar seu potencial demográfico e econômico em prol do desenvolvimento sustentável.

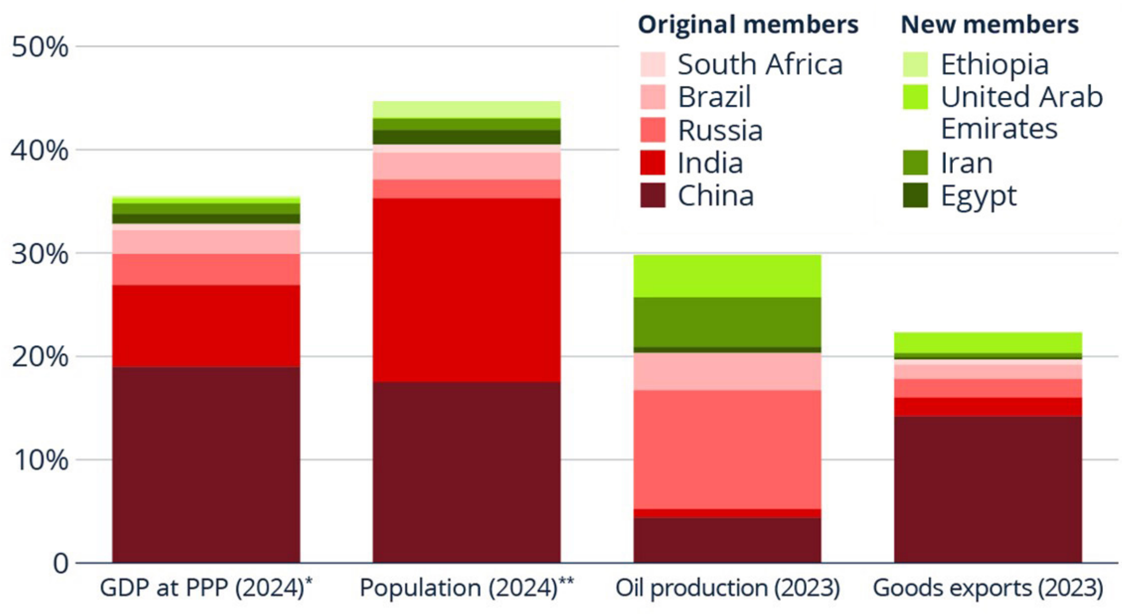
Palavras chave: BRICS, Capital Humano, Mobilidade Laboral, Migração, Transformação Estrutural.

INTRODUCTION: THE CENTRALITY OF HUMAN CAPITAL IN BRICS+ DEVELOPMENT

The BRICS collective – comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, and recently expanded through the BRICS+ framework – occupies a unique position within the global economy. As a bloc representing the Global South, BRICS+ embodies a convergence of developmental aspirations, resource endowments, and geopolitical agency. Its member states collectively account for approximately 41% of the world's population, 24% of global GDP, and over 16% of international trade (LAL, 2023). Figure 1 illustrates the expanded BRICS bloc's significant share in global demographics and economics. With approximately 45% of the world's population and 35% of global GDP (PPP) as of April 2024, the BRICS+ countries have solidified their position as a formidable force in the global economy. This expansion underscores the bloc's potential to influence global labour markets and human capital development strategies. Yet, this aggregate significance masks a deeper structural complexity: BRICS+ economies are at varying stages of economic transformation, characterised by diverse political systems, growth models, and demographic profiles.

At the core of the BRICS+ development challenge is the need to efficiently mobilize and sustain human capital. Human capital – the collective pool of skills, knowledge, health, and capabilities within a population – is a key driver of long-term growth, providing the vehicle by means of which natural capital can be translated into productive outputs. Without a skilled and dynamic workforce, even resource-abundant economies can succumb to stagnation, mismanagement, and environmental degradation.

Figure 1: BRICS+ Countries' Global Economic and Population Share (2024)



Source: Statista, based on data from the IMF, UN Population Division, Energy Institute, and WTO.

For BRICS+ countries, subject to twin challenges from globalisation and technological disruption, the development of human capital is not a policy preference but a survival necessity. Nevertheless, gaps are deep. For many member countries, investment in human capital remains short, with poor-quality education systems, minimal vocational training options, and fractured social protection. These vulnerabilities undermine the productive capacity of BRICS+ economies to deliver at full potential and limit their contribution to global economic rebalancing.

The urgency of these challenges is underscored by the evolving global context. As demographic pressures intensify and technological paradigms shift, the capacity of nations to adapt will increasingly depend on the robustness of their human capital foundations. In this regard, the BRICS+ bloc faces a critical choice: to either act collectively in addressing these structural challenges or risk exacerbating inequalities and vulnerabilities that undermine both domestic resilience and the broader vision of a multipolar, equitable world order.

DEMOGRAPHIC DIVERGENCES AND LABOUR MARKET TRANSFORMATIONS

The demographic landscape of BRICS+ is marked by stark asymmetries. China and Russia are experiencing advanced stages of demographic ageing, driven by sustained declines in fertility rates and rising life expectancy. China, for instance, faces the distinct challenge of becoming "old before rich" (JOHNSTON, 2023, p. 93), a phenomenon that threatens to erode its long-term growth prospects as the working-age population contracts and dependency ratios rise. These demographic shifts exert fiscal pressures by undermining the tax base while simultaneously increasing demands on public spending for pensions, healthcare, and social services. Ageing societies also tend to exhibit lower savings rates and reduced capital accumulation, which may contribute to slower technological progress and subdued economic dynamism (JOHNSTON, 2023).

In contrast, countries like India, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Saudi Arabia are characterised by large, youthful populations. India, with a median age of approximately 28 years, stands at a pivotal moment to leverage its demographic dividend. However, the mere presence of a youthful workforce does not automatically translate into economic gains. Without strategic investments in education, skill development, and job creation, these demographic advantages risk devolving into Malthusian outcomes, exacerbating unemployment, informality, and social unrest.

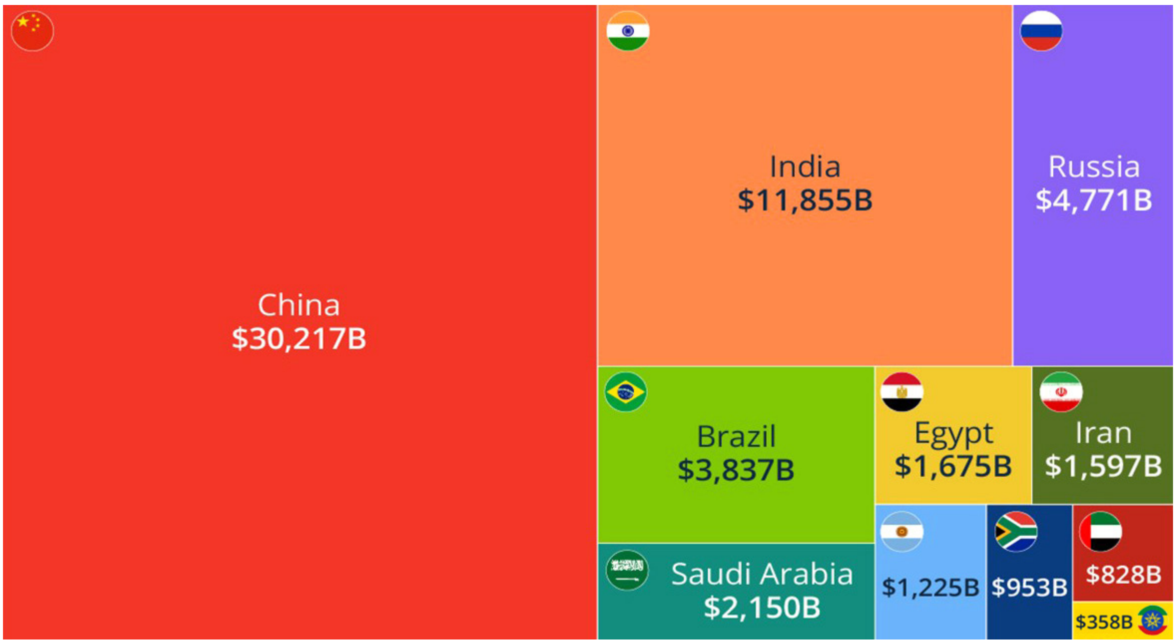
Urbanisation trends across BRICS+ further complicate this picture. Rapid population movements toward urban centres – particularly in India, China, and South Africa – are reshaping labour markets, creating both opportunities for economic agglomeration and challenges related to infrastructure deficits, informal settlements, and social inequality. Meanwhile, economic disparities within BRICS+ are widening: China and Saudi Arabia have emerged as high-growth economies, while countries like South Africa and Ethiopia continue to struggle with structural unemployment, low productivity, and persistent poverty.

Structural change trajectories within BRICS+ reflect both shared patterns and divergent outcomes. Figure 2 presents a comparative analysis of the GDP (PPP) of BRICS+ member countries in 2022. The visualization highlights the economic disparities within the bloc, with China and India leading significantly. This economic heterogeneity poses challenges for cohesive policymaking, especially in harmonizing labour standards and facilitating equitable human capital development across member states.

The declining share of agriculture in GDP is a common feature, with India and China in 1992 still exceeding 20% agricultural GDP shares, while others had already transitioned to below 10% (MEHROTRA, 2021). Yet, the pace and nature of sectoral transitions vary. China's rapid industrialisation – fuelled by a 24-fold increase in GDP per capita over four decades and sustained 10% productivity growth (BRANDT *et al*., 2020; BOSWORTH & COLLINS, 2007) – contrasts sharply with South Africa's premature deindustrialisation, where manufacturing's GDP share fell from 21% in 1994 to 13% in 2016 (BELL *et al*., 2018; BHORAT & ROONEY, 2017). India's trajectory, marked by an unusual leap from agriculture to services while bypassing a robust manufacturing phase, presents a cautionary tale of incomplete structural transformation (MUNGASE *et al*., 2024).

While Structural Change Theory posits that economies transition from low-productivity sectors (agriculture) to higher-productivity sectors (manufacturing and services) as a pathway to growth (MCMILLAN & RODRIK, 2011), the BRICS+ experience demonstrates that this process is neither automatic nor uniform. Dynamic productivity

Figure 2: GDP (PPP) Comparison Among BRICS+ Countries (2022)



Source: Statista, using IMF World Economic Outlook data.

gains – arising both from within-sector improvements and effective reallocation across sectors – are essential for sustained growth. Without proactive policy interventions to facilitate this transition, countries risk stagnation in low-productivity, informal service sectors, with adverse implications for employment quality, wages, and social mobility.

For example, Brazil, being the largest economy in Latin America and a principal member of the BRICS, boasts a challenging labour market environment with large regional gaps, a high rate of informality, and persistent challenges to developing its human capital. Although a demographic transition towards declining fertility rates and a growing elderly population exists, Brazil remains beset by structural challenges thwarting inclusive growth. One of the most critical challenges, however, remains a very high rate of informal employment, which confronts a large percentage of workers. Informality restricts social protection access for workers, lowers government revenues from taxes, and inhibits productivity gains (OECD, 2018).

The government of Brazil has introduced a series of strategies to tackle this problem, including the National Programme for Access to Technical Education and Employment (PRONATEC) to improve vocational training and access to regular employment (OECD, 2018). Regional imbalances also complicate Brazil's labour market. The North and Northeast are typically behind in terms of economic progress, schooling, and access to quality jobs relative to more industrialised regions in the South and Southeast. These imbalances lead to internal mobility and highlight the necessity for policies that ensure balanced development across regions (IBGE, 2023).

INNOVATION, GLOBAL INTEGRATION, AND THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS IN SHAPING LABOUR MOBILITY

Technological innovation plays a transformative role in shaping the trajectories of labour markets across BRICS+ economies. As a general-purpose technology, the diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICT) has redefined production structures, enhanced efficiency, and unlocked new avenues for economic growth (KURT; KURT, 2015). The integration of innovation within economic systems allows surplus labour to be absorbed into higher-productivity sectors, a process critical for economies with large and youthful populations such as India, Egypt, and Ethiopia.

Innovation directly enhances labour productivity through the adoption of advanced technologies and indirectly by fostering skill acquisition, organisational efficiency, and access to global markets. The resulting improvements in human capital contribute not only to national growth trajectories but also to the formation of a globally connected workforce. As Sidorova (2018, p. 35) argues, innovation is both a driver and an outcome of integration processes, as it "changes the association's integration potential by influencing the development and deepening of integration processes."

This underscores the dual role of innovation: it catalyses domestic productivity while also facilitating the cross-border flow of talent, ideas, and skills.

However, the distributional consequences of technological progress are uneven. While capabilities among labour forces are becoming increasingly standardised, significant disparities in wages, working conditions, and legal protections persist (NATHAN, 2007). The outsourcing of manufacturing and services from advanced to emerging economies – initially concentrated in low-end manufacturing – has expanded to encompass higher-end tasks, including research, management, and specialised professional services (SAMUELSON, 2004). This shift has eroded the historical monopolies of advanced economies in high-tech sectors, creating new opportunities for BRICS+ countries. Yet, the global reconfiguration of labour markets has also tilted the capital-labour balance: the incorporation of 1.47 billion workers from China, India, and Russia into the global economy has effectively doubled the size of the "world's now connected workforce" (FREEMAN, 2005, p. 1). With this influx of labour unaccompanied by commensurate capital inflows, the global capital-to-labour ratio has declined by approximately 40-45%, reinforcing capital's dominance over labour and reversing post-World War II trends that had favoured wage growth (GLYN, 2006; 2007).

The implications for BRICS+ countries are profound. On the one hand, these economies have an unprecedented opportunity to integrate into global value chains, develop high-skilled industries, and participate in knowledge economies. On the other hand, without robust institutions, strong labour standards, and equitable migration frameworks, the benefits of innovation may disproportionately accrue to capital owners and multinational corporations, while workers face wage suppression, precarious employment, and limited social protections. Sustaining the productivity gains unlocked by innovation requires not only technological adoption but also institutional reform, market expansion, and inclusive policy frameworks that ensure fair distribution of gains across the workforce.

LABOUR MIGRATION, INFORMALITY, AND THE CRISIS OF LABOUR STANDARDS IN BRICS+

Labour migration has emerged as a critical feature of the global economy, yet it remains one of the most unevenly regulated and inequitable domains of globalisation. Within BRICS+, countries occupy multiple roles in the global migration system – serving simultaneously as countries of origin, transit, and destination (KOROBKOV, 2015). This multifaceted engagement reflects the bloc's strategic geography, economic diversity, and demographic asymmetries. Countries with large, youthful populations – such as India, Indonesia, and Egypt – act as labour exporters, while nations like Russia, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia function as major labour importers to address workforce shortages.

However, the benefits of migration are undermined by structural asymmetries and systemic exploitation. The recruitment, transportation, and placement of migrant workers are often controlled by private agencies and intermediaries, creating fragmented, profit-driven systems that expose workers to vulnerability, wage theft, hazardous conditions, and limited legal protections (KAUR, 2010). These dynamics contribute to the persistence of irregular migration, the proliferation of human trafficking networks, and the marginalisation of low-skilled migrants.

The "migration-as-development-lever" framework advocates for structured circular migration as a strategy to balance the short-term labour needs of destination countries with the human capital development objectives of sending countries (PATERSON; VIRK, 2014). However, the operationalisation of such frameworks remains limited in BRICS+, as migration governance is deeply embedded in the sovereignty-centric architecture of nation-states, where the regulation of entry, residence, and citizenship remains a prerogative of national governments (WICKRAMASEKARA, 2008). This results in restrictive migration regimes, particularly for low-skilled workers, while high-skilled migrants often benefit from selective immigration policies, family reunification schemes, and pathways to permanent residency or citizenship.

This asymmetry reinforces global labour hierarchies and exacerbates brain drain from developing countries. Nevertheless, under specific conditions, migration can produce "beneficial brain drain" effects: remittances sent by migrants alleviate household poverty, finance education, and stimulate domestic demand; selective immigration policies in host countries raise the perceived and actual returns to education in sending countries; and diaspora networks facilitate trade, investment, and knowledge transfer (CHECCHI; DE SIMONE; FAINI, 2007). Yet, these outcomes are contingent upon the strength of human capital foundations in sending countries. Without adequate investment in education and skills, emigration of talent may simply exacerbate existing inequalities, leaving behind an under-skilled workforce and perpetuating structural vulnerabilities.

In the realm of labour mobility, Brazil has demonstrated a proactive stance within the BRICS+ cooperation framework. The country's migration policies have historically been more open compared to its BRICS counterparts, facilitating the inflow of skilled professionals, particularly from China, to bolster sectors such as technology and engineering (CHAMBERS AND PARTNERS, 2023). Moreover, Brazil has engaged in collaborative efforts with BRICS nations to address labour market challenges, including the formalization of employment and the enhancement of social protection mechanisms (ILO, 2023). These initiatives reflect Brazil's commitment to fostering inclusive labour policies and its strategic role in shaping a cohesive BRICS+ agenda that prioritizes equitable labour standards and mobility.

Labour standards across BRICS+ countries reflect these systemic challenges. Weak protections for workers are a common feature, driven by global competition, the pursuit of cost efficiency, and abundant labour supplies (ARBACHE & MENEZES-FILHO, 2000; DESAI & IDSON, 2000; FRANKEL & KURUVILLA, 2002). Informal employment dominates large segments of the workforce, particularly in India and South Africa, where fragmented social protection systems leave workers vulnerable to income insecurity, occupational hazards, and exclusion from social benefits (MEHROTRA, 2021). High capital mobility further exacerbates these trends, as firms engage in regulatory arbitrage to exploit lower labour standards in pursuit of competitive advantage (DUANMU, 2013).

These challenges are compounded by inadequate infrastructure, both institutional and physical. Weak regulatory environments, inefficient bureaucracies, and poor enforcement mechanisms undermine trust in public systems, while deficits in transport, energy, digital connectivity, and education infrastructure restrict access to economic opportunities and impede labour mobility (DIAS; TEBALDI, 2012; COE *et al*., 2009). Without comprehensive reforms that integrate institutional strengthening with infrastructure investment, efforts to formalise labour markets, enhance productivity, and improve human capital outcomes will remain constrained.

CONCLUSION: BUILDING A BRICS+ FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSIVE LABOUR MOBILITY AND HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

The future of BRICS+ as a cohesive and transformative economic bloc hinges on its ability to address the deeply interconnected challenges of demographic shifts, labour market restructuring, human capital development, and labour mobility governance. The analysis presented in this paper underscores the critical need for a coordinated BRICS+ strategy that moves beyond fragmented, sovereignty-centric approaches to labour and migration governance.

A first step towards this vision is the establishment of a BRICS Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA) for key professions and vocational skills, facilitating cross-border portability of qualifications and enabling dynamic “brain circulation” rather than unilateral “brain drain” (SAXENIAN, 2005). This MRA should be complemented by a formal framework for recognising tacit knowledge, such as language proficiency, cultural competencies, and sector-specific skills, thereby creating a holistic model of labour integration that values both formal certifications and experiential learning.

Second, BRICS+ nations need to prioritize strategic investment in human capital through universal access to quality education, vocational training, and lifelong learning systems. Education systems need to be transformed to respond to changing labour markets, with curricula aligned with high-growth sectors, digital competence, and green technologies. Extension of social protection systems, aligned with guidelines like ILO's Recommendation No. 204 (R204), would need to enable transition from informality to formality. These extensions would cover simplified taxation regimes, access to social security, financial inclusion policies, and assistance to small- and medium-scale enterprises.

Third, infrastructure development in terms of transport links, energy infrastructure, digital communications, and education infrastructure needs to be linked with human capital policies to unleash access to economic opportunities and improve labour mobility within and beyond BRICS+. The BRICS New Development Bank can lead investment in them, prioritizing demographic resilience and inclusive growth.

Last but not least, the agenda for BRICS+ cooperation must be grounded in a rights-inclusive and solidarity-oriented approach that promotes respect for workers' rights, ensures treatment with dignity for migrants, and promotes fairness in sharing the gains from prosperity. By embracing a spirit of mutual respect, consensual decision-making, and non-interference, BRICS+ can showcase a new model for economic cooperation, where national sovereignty is balanced with collective action, growth with social justice.

To summarize, a collective, comprehensive approach to labour mobility and people development within BRICS+ not only reflects a development requirement but a strategic imperative for future relevance for the bloc in a more multipolar global environment. Through collective frameworks, coordinated investments, and a shared prosperity focus, BRICS+ can be a dominant force in creating a more just, more equal global order for labour.

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