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## FRONTEIRA ARGENTINA-BRASIL: A MIGRAÇÃO PARA O NOROESTE GAÚCHO É FENÔMENO ESTRUTURAL OU CONJUNTURAL?

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze whether the recent increase in Argentine migration to Northwestern Rio Grande do Sul constitutes a structural or conjunctural phenomenon, considering its implications for regional development. Based on the premises of the dialectical-critical method, this is a qualitative study with an exploratory and analytical approach, combining a literature review, document study, and secondary data analysis. Evidence points to a significant rise in migratory flows since 2022, driven by Argentina's economic crisis and the demand for labor in Brazil's agribusiness and civil construction sectors. The theoretical analysis, grounded in functionalist and historical-structural paradigms, shows that while the functionalist view sees this flow as a natural labor market adjustment, the historical-structural approach highlights the precariousness and exploitation of migrants within a context of systemic inequality. Cases of informal and slave-like labor reveal the vulnerability of migrants, underscoring the need for more effective public policies for their social inclusion and labor protection. The study concludes that Argentine migration to the region combines both structural and conjunctural factors, demanding interdisciplinary approaches and government measures to ensure the dignified integration of these workers into the formal labor market and essential services.

**Keywords:** Border. Migration. Labor market. Migrant. Migration policies.

## RESUMO

Este estudo tem como objetivo analisar se o recente crescimento da migração argentina para o Noroeste do Rio Grande do Sul configura-se um fenômeno estrutural ou conjuntural, considerando suas implicações para o desenvolvimento regional. Com base nas premissas do método dialético-crítico, trata-se de uma pesquisa de natureza qualitativa, com abordagem exploratória e analítica, combinando revisão bibliográfica, estudo de documentos e análise de dados secundários. As evidências indicam aumento expressivo no fluxo migratório a partir de 2022, impulsionado pela crise econômica argentina e pela demanda por mão de obra nos setores da agroindústria e da construção civil no Brasil. A análise teórica, fundamentada nos paradigmas funcionalista e histórico-estrutural, revela que, enquanto a visão funcionalista interpreta esse fluxo como um ajuste natural do mercado de trabalho, a abordagem histórico-estrutural aponta para a precarização e exploração dos migrantes em um contexto de desigualdade sistêmica. Casos de trabalho informal e análogo à escravidão evidenciam a vulnerabilidade dos migrantes, destacando a necessidade de políticas públicas mais eficazes para sua inclusão social e proteção trabalhista. Conclui-se que a migração argentina para a região combina fatores conjunturais e estruturais, exigindo abordagens interdisciplinares e medidas governamentais para garantir a integração digna desses trabalhadores ao mercado formal e aos serviços essenciais.

**Palavras-chave:** Fronteira. Migração. Mercado de trabalho. Migrante. Políticas migratórias.

## INTRODUCTION

The history of humanity is profoundly marked by human mobility. From the first nomadic groups and their dynamic relationship with the territory to the consolidation of sedentary societies, migration has always played a central role in social organization. However, with the advent of the nation-state, characterized by sovereignty and territorial delimitation, migration, especially international migration, has become a significant issue in the dynamics of state regulation and control, posing a fundamental question for border and citizenship policies (Castles, 2004).

Migrations, therefore, become a matter for the nation-state, through migration policies that are strongly based on the understanding of territorial limits and their forms of border occupation, sovereignty, and nationality - elements intrinsically linked to the concept of citizenship. These policies reflect the various interests established by the projects of society and social pact, which have come to function as inhibitors or facilitators of the different migratory flows, both internally and internationally (Rotta, D., 2023).

In the Northwest of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, human mobility marks specific moments, especially in dealing with the issue of migration, particularly international migration. Before the arrival of the Spanish and Portuguese, the region was inhabited by various indigenous groups, whose way of life was associated with nomadism and semi-nomadism, influenced by the



natural characteristics of the territory. With colonization, the imposition of the Nation-State model introduced the notion of fixed territoriality, resulting in disputes over the demarcation of territories and borders in favor of the European crowns, completely disregarding the pre-existing organizations of the original peoples (Rotta, E., 1999).

Under Spanish rule, the region experienced the Jesuit-Guarani Reductions in the context of the 30 missionary towns. Human displacements between the different Reductions were an established and commonplace practice, even if restricted to the reduced towns. The natives who did not accept the process of the Reductions lived on the margins of them and caused permanent tension, requiring quite severe forms of control. The exchange of the territory of the Rio Grande Missions for the Colonia del Sacramento, carried out between Portugal and Spain with the Treaty of Madrid, on January 13, 1750, began a process of disintegration of the experience of the Reductions, establishing rigid limits in terms of borders and human displacement (Rotta, E., 1999).

With the creation of the National States of Argentina (1816) and Brazil (1822), sovereign borders were established, in every sense, deeply delimited and institutionalized. The Uruguay River, previously a great link and facilitator of movement, became the border marker between the two countries. Historical accounts indicate that the transit of people and even economic, social and cultural relations continued to occur quite intensely among the border population. However, during the military regimes (Brazil: 1964-1985; Argentina: 1976-1983), a new notion of border was established, hardened by the ideology of national security. This ideology is still present, even with the integration of both States into Mercosur, from 1991 onwards, and, more recently, bilateral agreements to facilitate transit across borders (Rotta, E., 2007).

The predominance of national security ideology, the natural barrier of the Uruguay River, and the distance of this border from the capitals of both countries consolidate a territory marked by surveillance and control processes, generating social formations on both sides of the border with reduced integration processes, but paradoxically with greater cultural connection between the “sister” and bordering regions of both nationalities than with the metropolises of their respective states (Rotta, D., 2020). It is in this reality that, especially from the early 2020s onwards, a more intense movement of Argentine citizens traveling to Northwest Rio Grande do Sul in search of work in



a wide variety of productive activities has been observed. This phenomenon prompts us to investigate it, seeking to comprehend it. Is this a new reality of greater integration and mobility in a border region marked by national security ideology? Or is it merely a conjunctural movement resulting from the economic crisis experienced by Argentina during this period?

Given this context, the objective of this paper is to analyze whether the recent Argentine migratory flow to the Northwest of Rio Grande do Sul constitutes a predominantly structural or conjunctural phenomenon, considering its implications for the dynamics of regional development. We seek to understand to what extent this movement stems from the Argentine economic crisis and to what extent it is associated with the productive and institutional configuration of the destination region.

Another important aspect that motivates us in this study is the complete absence of investigations on Brazil-Argentina migratory processes in this part of the Northwest of the State of Rio Grande do Sul. Searching the main databases, such as Scielo, Scopus, Google Scholar, and CAPES Periodicals Portal platforms using the terms “migrations in the Northwest of Rio Grande do Sul” and “international migrations in the Northwest of Rio Grande do Sul”, no records of studies on this topic were observed. Studies on migratory processes in Rio Grande do Sul are focused on the Campanha, Serra Gaúcha, Vale dos Sinos, and Porto Alegre Metropolitan regions (Rio Grande do Sul, 2020; Fraga; Oltramari, 2020).

Human mobility, especially in border areas, is part of the dynamics of regional development. Migratory flows not only reflect territorial inequalities but also interfere with the organization of the labor market, the local productive structure, and the set of sociocultural relations. Regional literature demonstrates that the circulation of workers influences economic specialization and territorial accumulation (North, 1955; Diniz, 2013). However, in peripheral regions, these movements can boost productive activities or reinforce structural weaknesses (Brandão, 2007). In this sense, analyzing Argentine migration to the Northwest of Rio Grande do Sul means observing a process that directly affects the socioeconomic and institutional dynamics of the territory.

From the perspective of the political economy of development, regional growth is marked by inequalities and spatial concentration of productive activities (Furtado, 2007). Labor mobility participates in this process, potentially strengthening more dynamic areas or highlighting dependency relationships. In border regions, where integration is partial and asymmetrical, migratory flows express both opportunities and structural limitations (Brandão, 2007; Diniz, 2013).

Theis et al. (2022, p. 261), analyzing the tradition of studies on regional development, highlight the interdisciplinary nature of this field of study, emphasizing the need to study concrete manifestations, empirical data, and objective facts, but always keeping in mind the theories that give them meaning. Mattedi (2020) suggests understanding regional development not as “a thing in the world,” something given, ready, finished, but rather as “a way of understanding the world.” Furthermore, this way of understanding the world is relational, as it involves comprehending the configurations that emerge from the relationship between development and region, as well as considering the conditions that allow for its own understanding. It is also multidimensional, since it involves economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental dimensions; multidirectional, as it simultaneously signifies progress and regression; multi-significant, because the meaning varies according to social groups; and ambivalent, because when a region develops, it solves a set of problems, but creates others. This aspect also has a circular causation, insofar as effects become causes and causes become effects; and it is uncertain, considering that the consequences of regional development are unpredictable.

By proposing a discussion regarding the structural and conjunctural character of the Argentina-Brazil migratory phenomenon in the early years of the 2020s in Northwest Rio Grande do Sul, the study engages with the field of regional development, as it seeks to examine the objective phenomenon to understand possible repercussions on the development dynamics of local social formations and the region in question. In this sense, the growing presence of foreign workers impacts the labor market, municipal management of key public services, sociocultural relations, and development strategies (Diniz, 2013; Brandão, 2007). Given these considerations, it can be said that the article contributes to bringing migration studies closer to analyses of development in border territories.



The text is structured in four sections, in addition to this introduction and the final considerations. The first section presents the methodological procedures that guided the study. The second outlines the theoretical frameworks that guide this study, highlighting possible interpretations of the migratory phenomenon. The third section highlights the migratory dynamics in the region, with the intensification of the presence of migrants, especially Argentinians, from the first decades of the 21st century, and how the local population has perceived this reality through the challenges and socioeconomic impacts. The fourth section seeks to establish some inferences about the migratory process present in this region based on theoretical models of analysis and studies of regional development.

## **METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES**

This study is based on the premises of the dialectical-critical method (Arenhart et al., 2021), characterizing itself as qualitative research with an exploratory and analytical approach, combining bibliographic review, document study, and secondary data analysis. As a starting point, research was conducted in the main databases, such as Scielo, Scopus, Google Scholar, and CAPES Periodicals Portal platforms, using the terms “migrations in Northwest Rio Grande do Sul” and “international migrations in Northwest Rio Grande do Sul,” in order to identify studies already carried out on the subject. Subsequently, a theoretical survey was conducted in the field of migration studies and regional development, based on classic and contemporary authors, in order to construct the analytical framework of the work.

In the empirical study, secondary data from the National Migration Registration System (Sistema de Registro Nacional Migratório - SISMIGRA), provided by the Observatory of International Migrations (Observatório das Migrações Internacionais - OBMigra), were used, covering the period from 2020 to 2024. This data allowed us to identify the quantitative evolution of the Argentine migratory flow in the Northwest of Rio Grande do Sul and in the state as a whole. Complementarily, a documentary analysis of reports from regional media outlets was carried out, aiming to capture local perceptions, institutional challenges, and socioeconomic impacts associated with the increase in migratory flow.



The organization and analysis of the collected materials was carried out based on the content analysis technique, taking into account the three essential moments defined by Bardin (2004): (i) pre-analysis; (ii) exploration of the material; and (iii) treatment of the results and interpretation. The analysis was carried out based on the theoretical frameworks of migration theories and regional development studies.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR A CRITICAL READING OF THE MIGRATORY PHENOMENON: MIGRATIONS AS A PROCESS IN A CONTEXT OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS.**

The field of migration studies seeks to understand migration as a dynamic process, analyzing its causes, mechanisms, and impacts. Research addresses different dimensions of human mobility, including internal and international migration, temporary and permanent migration, regular and irregular migration, as well as the transformations that occur in both origin and destination societies (Scholten; Pisarevskaya; Levy, 2022; Cohen, 1996; King, 2012; De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020; Brettell; Hollifield, 2022).

To understand the theoretical foundations of this field, it is important to highlight some fundamental milestones. Among the first contributions, the work of the German-English geographer and cartographer Ernst Georg Ravenstein (1834-1913) stands out, who systematized “The Laws of Migration” in three articles published in 1876, 1885, and 1889. Based on analyses of birth data from the British Census of 1871 and 1881, with similar data from censuses in Europe and North America, he established an interconnected dynamic between human mobility and economic development (Ravenstein, 1885; Grigg, 1977; Lussi, 2015; De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020; Scholten; Pisarevskaya; Levy, 2022; Brettell; Hollifield, 2022).

Another important contribution is made by Everett S. Lee (1966), in “A Theory of Migration,” in which he highlights that both the rate and volume of migrations are sustained by a series of variable factors. Among these causes, the diversity of regions and the population that inhabits them, the degree of difficulty of the intervening obstacles, geographical distance, physical barriers, or even migration control laws, as well as their relationships with economic fluctuations



and personal decisions or factors, stand out (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020; Lee, 1966). In turn, a relevant contribution to the topic is also made by the Chicago School, especially by Robert Park, who inaugurated, at the beginning of the 20th century, a pioneering methodological model for the study of migrations, focused on the analysis of ethnic and racial relations and the concept of assimilation (Lussi, 2015; Scholten; Pisarevskaya; Levy, 2022; Brettell; Hollifield, 2022).

These pioneering studies are complemented by a set of new studies throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, which affirm the topic within specific and related postgraduate programs, study groups, and publications in established international journals, highlighting the cross-cutting and interdisciplinary nature of migration research (Scholten; Pisarevskaya; Levy, 2022). This theoretical and methodological breadth of migration studies makes it clear that there is no single theory capable of explaining the phenomenon in its entirety, requiring a permanent dialogue among researchers (Massey et al., 1993; Massey et al., 1998; Lussi, 2015).

Bearing in mind the distinct theoretical and methodological models and levels, and recognizing migration as part of larger processes of transformation and development in the structures of society, based on a general division within the field of social sciences. Hein De Haas, Stephen Castles, and Mark J. Miller (2020) classify the main theories studying the migratory phenomenon into two large groups or theoretical paradigms: a) functionalist theories, which view society as a system formed by a set of actors, a scenario in which the migratory phenomenon takes on a positive character, contributing to the development and equalization of society; b) and historical-structural theories, which, in turn, focus the analysis of the phenomenon on social, economic, cultural, and political structures, in order to observe the behavior of each individual in the face of social imbalances evidenced in the exploitation of labor and the disparity of political, economic, and social power.

Functionalist theories, influenced by positivism, treat migration as a phenomenon governed by predictable laws and patterns, based on a cause-and-effect logic (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020; De Haas, 2014). This order of theorizations is represented, above all, by push-pull models, neoclassical migration theory, and human capital theory.

Push-pull models, popularized by Everett S. Lee (1966), suggest that migration occurs in response to “pull” factors (such as demand for work and better economic conditions) and “repulsion”



factors (such as poverty and political instability) (Lussi, 2015; De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020).

Neoclassical theory starts from a general conception that “social forces tend to move towards equilibrium.” Therefore, it considers migrations as a social dynamic of crossing the world geography, based on the relationship between the availability of labor and the demand for labor, where individuals are led to decide based on their individual options. Thus, these options are marked by the search (by surplus workers) for labor markets with better remuneration (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020). This relationship between migrations, the demand for labor, labor shortages, better wages, and surplus labor would tend to balance income levels, working conditions, and the migratory flow itself, reducing the reasons for migration (Massey et al., 1994; Massey et al., 1993; De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020).

In its time, human capital theory served as a kind of alternative or complementary component to the functionalist paradigm. In Larry A. Sjaastad’s view, migration is seen “as an investment that increases human capital productivity” (Sjaastad, 1962; De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020). This theoretical foundation stems from the understanding that people, possessing distinct “personal skills, knowledge, physical abilities, age, and gender,” invest in their mobility expecting returns (which vary according to different personal interests) or lifelong benefits provided by their destinations, such as increased income and improved education. The potential of this theoretical approach lies precisely in the broader understanding of the formation of migration flows as a result of the structure of labor markets, the social strata from which migrants originate, their skill and/or qualification levels – bearing in mind the greater complexity of the labor market and the need for increased specialization, as well as the possibilities of work in other areas and the distribution of income in the societies of origin and destination (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020).

Despite their influence, these approaches have significant limitations. By simplifying migration as a market adjustment, they ignore political, cultural, and structural factors and fail to explain phenomena such as return migration and the permanence of populations in adverse conditions (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020; De Haas, 2021; Arango, 2000; Czaika; Reinprecht, 2022). In view of this, it is possible to affirm that functionalist models are incapable of observing migrations as part of something larger.



On the other hand, historical-structuralist theories, which emerged between the 1970s and 1980s, are based on neo-Marxist political economy (attentive to class struggles and factors of production). These, in turn, understand migrations as part of the historical and social processes of development, serving as a mechanism for the control and exploitation of labor (Czaika; Reinprecht, 2022; De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020). In this direction of migration theories, social, economic, cultural, and political structures are emphasized as conditioning factors in the actions of individuals (deprived of freedom or agency). These aspects reinforce the imbalances that are part of society – distinct levels of economic and political power that are rooted in the practices of society and each culture – denouncing the absence of positive action or redistributive state intervention (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020).

In this theoretical context, where migrations serve the interests of capital in search of a cheap and highly exploitable alternative source of labor, phenomena such as colonialism, imperialism, brain drain from countries of origin, and the exodus from rural regions to large urban, economic, and industrial centers are also part of the analytical equation of the migratory phenomenon (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020).

Among the main theoretical strands of the historical-structuralist paradigm, we can highlight dependency theory, world-systems theory, and globalization theories (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020).

Dependency theory developed in Latin America and, with greater influence during the 1960s, established itself in the context of reflections on the economic hegemony of the United States of America (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020). Dependency theory is marked by a “sociological analysis of the dependent form of capitalism that manifested itself in Latin America,” a context in which Latin American countries are overexploited, remaining dependent on the centers. Faced with the disparity in technological progress, which limits the use of existing labor and primary resources, a scenario is observed that made economic and social development unfeasible (Bresser-Pereira, 2010). This theory treats the migratory phenomenon as “one of the many causes of underdevelopment and growing global inequality,” which operates through the very capitalist dynamic of draining resources – including labor – from poorer countries to central countries, maintaining the pre-existing colonial

relationship (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020).

The world-systems theory (1970s and 1980s) aims to analyze the context in which the incorporation of peripheral regions into the capitalist economy and the concomitant growth of multinational corporations accelerated rural change and deprived peasants and rural workers of their means of subsistence. Thus, this aspect contributed to intensifying poverty, migration from rural to urban areas, accelerated urbanization, and the growth of informal economies (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020). The aforementioned theoretical framework presents an interpretation that includes structural dimensions, cultural dimensions and their peculiarities, offering a multidimensional approach, grounded in the theory of social systems, from a global perspective on the migratory phenomenon, encompassing data, actors and processes simultaneously, which, in turn, enables the understanding of human mobility within the broader set of themes and processes studied and addressed by the social sciences (Lussi, 2015).

In turn, globalization theories (established since the 1990s) understand globalization as a set of processes of expansion, deepening, and acceleration of global interconnections in all aspects of contemporary social life, with rapid changes and economic and technological exchanges, as well as political-ideological transformations, that transcend the borders of nation-states (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020).

From a critical perspective of this theoretical paradigm, it is important to note that historical-structural theories tend to disregard the human agency of the migrant, portraying them as a subject with no choice but to migrate – a simple victim of global capitalism – to become cheap labor in global centers and thus survive, which ends up overlooking the different facets of the migratory phenomenon and the life choices that drive them (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020). In this sense, Russel King (2012) highlights two other theoretical “weaknesses” of this reading, namely: a) migratory flows do not necessarily accompany those of capital, being more spontaneous, following geographical patterns and diverse opportunities; and b) the role of the State as a political institution that shapes migrations is overlooked.

Therefore, it is clear that both theoretical paradigms suffer from numerous analytical limitations, leading to the emergence, at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries, of



new approaches to the study of migration, including theories of migratory networks, transnationalism, migration systems, and migratory transition (Portes; Böröcz, 1998; Arango, 2000; Massey et al., 1998). These approaches emphasize the agency of migrants and intermediate factors, but often neglect macro and micro levels of analysis. However, these new theories on migration, in general, still carry remnants of a Cartesian logic of cause and effect, characteristic of 19th-century thought, resulting in fragmented and limited analytical models (Massey et al., 1998). Instead of constituting a new paradigm, such theories form a conceptual mosaic that explains only specific aspects of the migratory phenomenon (King, 2012).

The increasing complexity of migrations, from the second half of the 20th century onwards, reveals new dynamics, such as the globalization of migratory flows, the change in the direction of migrations, the proliferation of transitional migration, the feminization of labor migration, and the politicization and securitization of migration (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020). These factors pose challenges to the nation-state model and citizenship policies.

Given the interdependence between mobility and social transformations, the study of migrations must be understood within a migratory process, a concept that encompasses the multiple dimensions of the phenomenon, considering its political, social, and economic aspects. In view of this, migration should not be seen in isolation, but as a structuring element structured by global and local changes (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020).

Consequently, Castles' (2010) proposal emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary and integrated analyses, connecting macro (global economy and migration policies), meso (migrant networks and immigrant communities), and micro (individual experiences and migratory aspirations) factors, in order to overcome the aforementioned analytical limitations of the functionalist and historical-structural theoretical paradigms. Thus, migrations should be analyzed not only as a response to external factors, but also as a set of social and economic transformation processes, reflecting the interaction between global structures and individual dynamics (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020).

It is from this theoretical-critical construction of the international migratory process that this work aims to understand the context of social, political, economic, and historical transformations



in which the international migratory flows of Argentinians to Brazil are inserted, produced, and perpetuated (or not). In the context of Northwest Rio Grande do Sul, this approach becomes essential to understand the recent growth in the presence of Argentinian migrants in the region. When analyzing this migratory flow, it is necessary to consider not only the structural factors that drive it, such as the Argentinian economic crisis and the demands of the local labor market, but also migration networks, state policies, and the agency of the migrants themselves in choosing their destinations and adaptation strategies.

Therefore, this study adopts an integrated perspective, connecting macro factors (such as the economic and political dynamics between Brazil and Argentina), meso factors (the social networks and trajectories of migrants in the region), and micro factors (the individual motivations and experiences of Argentinian workers in Brazil). This approach will allow us to understand whether migration to the Northwest of Rio Grande do Sul constitutes a new structural trend in cross-border mobility or whether it is a conjunctural movement directly linked to the economic instability of Argentina in recent years.

## **ARGENTINE MIGRATORY FLOW IN THE NORTHWEST REGION OF RIO GRANDE DO SUL: PERCEPTIONS, CHALLENGES AND SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS**

Brazil's extensive land border, spanning approximately 16,855 km and bordering 11 South American countries, is characterized as a region of multiple exchanges and interactions, whether commercial, cultural, or migratory (Pêgo et al., 2018). Within this vast territory, the Northwest region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul stands out, and in particular, the COREDE Fronteira Noroeste, an area composed of 20 municipalities and located in Planning Functional Region 7. Although it shares physical proximity with Argentina, this area presents limited economic and social integration with the neighboring country, largely due to the lack of connecting infrastructure and the role of the Uruguay River as a natural obstacle, which historically delimits relations between the two territories, but does not prevent new migrations from occurring in recent years (Laurer et al., 2023). Recent data released by the Observatory of International Migrations (OBMigra) reveal important trends regarding this movement, as indicated in Table 1.



The data presented in Table 1 demonstrate a sharp increase in the flow of Argentine migrants to the Northwest region of Rio Grande do Sul in recent years. Until 2021, the number of registrations was practically insignificant, with only 20 migrants in 2020 and 5 in 2021. However, from 2022 onwards, a change in the migratory pattern is observed, with 102 migrants registered. In 2023, this number quadrupled, reaching 394 registrations, while in 2024, the total reached 657 migrants, representing a growth of 67% compared to the previous year and an increase of more than 540% compared to 2022, indicating an initial reflection of the worsening of the Argentine crisis and the recovery of the Brazilian economy.

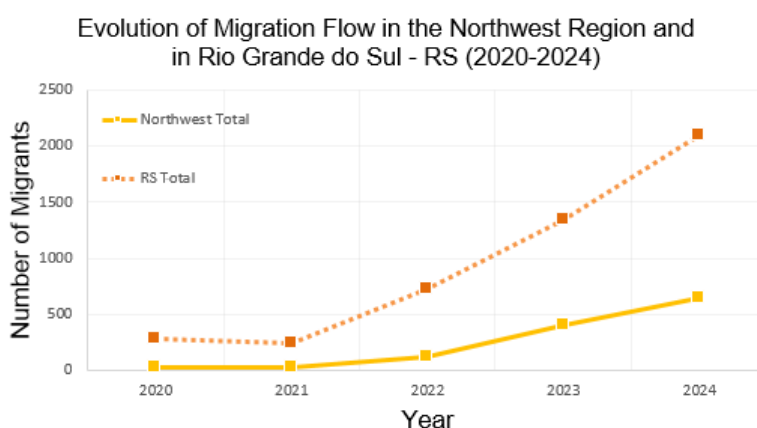
**Table 1** | Evolution of the number of migrants in the Northwest Region of Rio Grande do Sul (2020-2024)

Year	Total OF Migrants – NorThWEST REGION	Total OF Migrants – RIO GRANDE DO SUL
2020	20	267
2021	5	226
2022	102	722
2023	394	1374
2024	657	2125

Source: Data obtained from the National Migration Registration System (SISMIGRA) of the Observatory of International Migrations (OBMigra) and organized by the authors.

The growth of these flows can be seen in Graph 1, which illustrates the evolution of migration in both the northwest region of the state and in Rio Grande do Sul as a whole. It is noted that the growth curve in the northwest region follows the state trend, but with an even more pronounced rate of increase in recent years.

**Graph 1** | Evolution of Migration Flow in the Northwest Region and in RS (2020-2024)



Source: Data from SISMIGRA/OBMigra, compiled by the authors.

Analysis of the distribution of migrants in the municipalities of the Northwest region reveals that some cities have become more attractive to the Argentine population. As illustrated in Table 2, the municipality of Santa Rosa received the largest number of people, with 318 migrants in 2024, a significant increase compared to the 138 registered in 2023. The choice of this destination may be associated with the fact that the city stands out for its economic structure and access to social services, such as health, education, and social assistance. These aspects may favor the insertion of migrants into the labor market, thus facilitating their settlement process in Brazilian territory.

Other municipalities that show a significant increase in the arrival of migrants include Santo Cristo (76 migrants in 2024), Três de Maio (54 migrants), and Porto Mauá (41 migrants), the latter with a strategic location on the border, which may facilitate the movement of the population between the two countries. On the other hand, some locations, such as Campina das Missões, São José do Inhacorá, and Senador Salgado Filho, did not register significant migration during the analyzed period, possibly due to the fact that they offer fewer job opportunities and infrastructure, making it difficult to receive new residents.

**Table 2** | Number of Migrants by Municipality in the Northwest Region of RS (2020-2024)

Municipality	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
Santa Rosa	318	138	60	0	4
Santo Cristo	76	50	5	0	2
Três de Maio	54	27	4	1	3
Porto Mauá	41	16	8	0	6
Doutor Maurício Cardoso	27	13	6	0	0
Independência	37	5	5	0	0
Horizontina	25	23	4	0	3
Alecrim	20	17	1	1	0

Source: Data from SISMIGRA/OBMigra, compiled by the authors.

This influx of migrants arriving in the municipalities presents significant challenges and can strain local socioeconomic and political-cultural relations. This reality can be seen when looking at reports broadcast in local media. They tend to confirm the data presented by OBMigra and also draw attention to flows that are more intense than those presented by official data. This discrepancy indicates the presence of many migrants without formal entry registration, a situation favored by the

extensive border area, marked by limited surveillance and an established tradition of movements between Argentina and Brazil.

Based on the analysis of the news, local media recorded the intensification of the presence of migrants of different nationalities from 2022 onwards. Among this group, Argentinians stand out, who come in search of job opportunities and better living conditions. According to the data analyzed, it is observed that, among migrants recently established in the Northwest region, Cubans and Haitians tend to have greater organization and professional qualifications, which facilitates their insertion into the formal market. In contrast, Argentinians face difficulties due to the lack of regularized documentation, which often puts them in vulnerable situations in the informal market (Jornal Semanal de Três de Maio, 2023).

In turn, local economic sectors, especially agribusiness, agriculture, construction, and service provision, have perceived migrants as a viable solution to address the labor shortage in strategic areas. Business entities and local employers have discussed alternatives to facilitate the hiring and regularization of these workers, recognizing the positive impact of the foreign workforce on maintaining productive activities. Medium and large-sized companies, especially meatpacking plants, already employ migrants and have highlighted that cultural diversity contributes to improving the corporate environment, although challenges such as the language barrier and document regularization are still recurrent (Jornal Semanal de Três de Maio, 2023).

Given this situation, local companies recognize the need to integrate these workers and have discussed strategies to enable safe hiring. However, challenges persist, such as cultural barriers and difficulties in issuing regular documents. In response, some cities have sought initiatives to facilitate this process, such as Santa Rosa, which established a cooperation with Oberá, in Argentina. This agreement aims to simplify access to the labor market for Argentine migrants, promoting productive integration between the two border municipalities (Jornal Noroeste, 2023).

This intensification of Argentine migration to Rio Grande do Sul is highlighted in the “Profile of Immigrants in RS” (Rio Grande do Sul, 2020), prepared from data from the National Health Card, in which Argentines appear in third place in percentage terms, behind only Haitians and Uruguayans. The Information Bulletin of the Ministry of Justice and Public Security – MJSP, from October 2024



(Brazil, 2024), highlights that Argentinians are in 5th place in terms of origin of migrants who entered Brazil between January 2010 and August 2024, behind only Venezuelans, Haitians, Bolivians, and Colombians. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that these government reports only deal with regular entries, while in the region under study, the media draw attention to the entry of many people irregularly (ROLSSING, 2025).

When analyzing the scenario of international migrations in Brazil, considering the period before and after the Covid-19 pandemic, Baeninger et al. (2021) highlight that Brazil has consolidated itself as a place of attraction for migrants in the first decades of the 21st century, not only for economic reasons, but also for reasons of recognition of migrants' rights. Therefore, there is a phenomenon of intensified South-South migration (countries of the Global South), which can be justified by different factors: the tendency for highly educated professionals to mostly come from countries in the Global North, while less educated professionals come especially from the Global South; the opening of new job opportunities resulting from transformations in agribusiness, especially in meatpacking plants; the predominance of formal work in industries, in contrast to the strong presence of informality in other sectors; Furthermore, there are the regional specificities of migratory flows, since, while in other regions of Brazil the entry of Venezuelans, Haitians, Bolivians, and Colombians predominates, in Southern Brazil the entry of Haitians, Argentinians, and Venezuelans predominates.

The entry of Argentinian migrants into the region studied is permeated by a set of tensions that highlight conjunctural aspects, but also denote structural elements of the migratory phenomenon and of Brazilian society itself: regular and irregular entry across borders between countries; insertion into the formal market and activity in the informal sector; access to official public policies and coexistence with evident situations of social vulnerability; remuneration commensurate with the work performed and exploitation of labor; and insertion into local societal dynamics and prejudice and exclusion.

The actions of the State, companies (market), and organized civil society have been felt in the region, even if still insufficient in the face of the challenges that the new reality has presented. Regarding the different spheres of State action, there has been an intensification of inspections in work environments, an expansion of access to public social services, and the creation of migrant



reception centers. The business sector, in turn, has been responsible for promoting successful experiences in the inclusion and formalization of migrant workers. At the same time, as initiatives of civil society, the creation of support and inclusion networks for migrants in local and regional societal dynamics is observed (Canofre, 2024; Rádio Missioneira, 2025).

Given this scenario, it is possible to understand that many Argentine migrants arrive in Brazil in search of economic stability, after facing precarious working conditions and high inflation rates in their country of origin. However, on the one hand, there is a positive impact on the absorption of labor and the development of the region; on the other hand, challenges persist in the regulation and inclusion of these workers in the labor market, as well as access to basic services, such as health, education, and labor rights. Thus, collaboration between companies, public authorities, and civil society is fundamental to ensuring effective integration, guaranteeing that migrants can contribute to local development without being subjected to exploitative working conditions (Jornal Semanal de Três de Maio, 2023).

## **BRIEF INFERENCES ABOUT THE ARGENTINE MIGRATION PROCESS BASED ON THEORETICAL MODELS OF ANALYSIS**

The Argentine migration process to Northwest Rio Grande do Sul, especially from 2022 onwards, represents a multifaceted phenomenon that can be analyzed from different theoretical perspectives. The significant increase in migratory flows in the region highlights both conjunctural aspects, such as the Argentine economic crisis and the recovery of the Brazilian labor market, and structural factors involving the organization of the production system and the historical conditions of cross-border mobility in South America. Below, interpretations of this dynamic are presented from two classic theoretical paradigms in migration studies, the functionalist model and the historical-structural model, seeking to establish interfaces with regional development.

Functionalist approaches treat migration as a natural and predictable phenomenon, governed by socioeconomic laws that guarantee a balance between labor supply and demand (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020; Massey et al., 1998). According to this perspective, the increase in Argentine migration to Brazil can be explained by Everett Lee's (1966) push-pull model, in which



“push” factors—such as high inflation, unemployment, and economic crisis in Argentina—drive workers out; while “pull” factors—such as a greater supply of jobs and economic stability in Brazil—encourage these migrants to arrive.

In addition, neoclassical migration theory reinforces this view, arguing that workers migrate in search of markets that offer better wages and economic opportunities, thus adjusting the balance of the workforce between different regions (Massey et al., 1994; De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020). In turn, the human capital theory, proposed by Sjaastad (1962), complements this analysis by suggesting that migrants make rational investments in their mobility, aiming for future gains, such as increased income and better living conditions.

Applying this approach to the case of Northwest Rio Grande do Sul, it can be argued that the arrival of Argentine migrants is an expected movement, resulting from the economic conditions in the countries of origin and destination. Data from the Observatory of International Migrations (OBMigra) indicate that the number of Argentine migrants in the region has increased by more than 540% since 2022, following a scenario of economic deterioration in Argentina and growth in productive sectors in Brazil, such as agribusiness, agriculture, and civil construction. Thus, for functionalists, this migratory flow is a natural mechanism for adjusting the labor market, which benefits both migrants and the local economy.

However, this explanation does not consider deeper structural aspects of the migratory phenomenon. Functionalist models simplify migration, ignoring factors such as historical inequalities, power relations, labor exploitation, and migration policies that limit the integration of foreign workers. Therefore, a more robust analysis requires a perspective from historical-structural approaches, which consider the economic and political context more broadly.

Historical-structuralist approaches, based on neo-Marxism, understand migration as a reflection of the power and domination structures that govern the global capitalist system, going beyond spontaneous economic processes (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020; Czaika; Reinprecht, 2022). According to these approaches, Argentine migration to Northwest Rio Grande do Sul cannot be explained solely by conjunctural factors, such as the Argentine economic crisis, but rather by historical processes of inequality and dependence among South American countries.



Dependency theory, developed in Latin America from the 1960s onwards, argues that peripheral countries, such as Argentina and Brazil, remain subordinate to central economies, perpetuating cycles of underdevelopment and exploitation (Bresser-Pereira, 2010; De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020). In this context, migration is not a factor of economic equilibrium, but a reflection of the exploitation of cheap labor in peripheral regions, where migrants occupy precarious jobs without access to basic rights.

Recent data confirm this reality. In January 2024, Operation In Vino Veritas rescued 22 Argentine workers in conditions analogous to slavery in Rio Grande do Sul, revealing that migratory vulnerability is exploited by the informal labor market (Canofre, 2024). In addition, many migrants face difficulties in regularizing their documentation, which puts them in a situation of social and labor insecurity, subjecting them to low wages and the risks of informal labor market activities (Jornal Semanal de Três de Maio, 2023).

The world-systems theory, formulated by Wallerstein (1974, 1980, 1989), expands this analysis by suggesting that peripheral countries provide cheap labor to more economically dynamic regions, within a global system of inequalities. In the case of Brazil, the agricultural and industrial economy of Northwest Rio Grande do Sul benefits from migrant labor to keep costs low, while migrants are placed in temporary jobs and subject to migration cycles without guarantees of stability.

This dynamic is associated with the globalization of the workforce, which has intensified migratory flows, but without guaranteeing the social inclusion of workers. In this way, Brazilian migration policy, even after the Mercosur agreements, still presents bureaucratic obstacles, hindering the full integration of these migrants (De Haas; Castles; Miller, 2020).

Despite the recognition of the importance of foreign labor for strategic sectors, public policies in the region are still insufficient to guarantee the full inclusion of migrants. Municipalities like Santo Ângelo have adopted local initiatives, such as the Immigrant Reception Center, which assists with documentation and social integration (Rádio Missioneira, 2025). However, most municipalities still lack effective policies to deal with this growth in the migrant population and its socioeconomic and political-cultural implications.

Consequently, taking as a reference the proposals of Mattedi (2020) and Theis et al. (2022) for understanding regional development, as explained in the introduction of this article, it can be stated that historical-structuralist theories are closer to an adequate reading of the phenomenon than functionalist theories, without, of course, relegating the contributions of the latter.

Historical-structuralist theories are able to perceive the phenomenon from an interdisciplinary perspective, as indicated by Theis et al. (2022) in studies on regional development, insofar as they highlight the need for multiple readings capable of identifying the diverse characteristics that compose the phenomenon, only possible through dialogue between various sciences. Similarly, historical-structuralist theories have greater potential to contribute to the understanding of regional development as “a way of understanding the world,” as proposed by Mattedi (2020): (i) understanding that the world is relational, since the migratory phenomenon places local spaces and characteristics in permanent interaction with global spaces and characteristics, based on the idea of “world-systems”; (ii) that it must be seen in a multidimensional way, involving the economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental dimensions; (iii) that there is a multidirectional movement, since it simultaneously signifies progress and regression; (iv) that it can give rise to multi-significant readings and perceptions, since the meaning of the phenomenon varies according to the social groups that concretely participate in the processes; (v) that the phenomenon is full of ambivalences, since, in solving one set of problems, it may be generating others and so on; (vi) that it is endowed with a circular causation movement, as effects become causes and causes become effects; (vii) and that the results of the process are uncertain, since the consequences of regional development are unpredictable.

Also, as mentioned, the contributions of functionalist theories cannot be disregarded, as they have the potential to identify the movements of the international dynamics of capital accumulation and how these manifest themselves in different territories – seen as natural and necessary from the logic of the free circulation of factors of production that tend towards equilibrium, provided they are left to the free play of market forces. From this perspective, the movements of capital and workers are in the direction of maximizing their future gains, such as increased income and better working and living conditions. This perception can contribute to identifying the interests of economic groups; capturing the movements of different actors; measuring possible economic and social repercussions; mapping territories and economic sectors of greater interest; and establishing future projections, among other things.



## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The objective of this article was to analyze whether the recent Argentine migratory flow to the Northwest of Rio Grande do Sul is a predominantly structural or conjunctural phenomenon, considering its implications for the dynamics of regional development. This is, therefore, a study driven by the complete absence of research on migrations in the region and their possible implications on the dynamics of regional development.

The data obtained in the study showed that the significant growth of Argentine migrants in the region, more than 540% since 2022, reflects both conjunctural factors, such as the Argentine economic crisis and the expansion of the Brazilian economy, especially in the areas of agriculture, agro-industry and civil construction, and structural factors, linked to historical inequalities between Latin American countries and internal divisions between the formal and informal labor markets. Functionalist approaches to the migratory phenomenon tend to explain this reality based on natural adjustments in the globalized labor market. On the other hand, historical-structural readings reveal a more complex scenario, marked by the movement of capital forces in peripheral economies, the precariousness of migrant labor, and the fragility of public policies.

The interaction of theories that analyze the migratory phenomenon with those that discuss regional development represents a promising possibility for understanding a complex reality that is present not only in the Northwest of Rio Grande do Sul, but also in other territories. This interaction can be beneficial for perceiving the multidimensionality, multiscalarity, diversity of interests, multiplicity of meanings, contradictions, and ambivalences, among other aspects that are present in the scenario and become essential in any future project that the Northwest region of RS can envision.

Despite the challenges it entails, the migratory flow also presents positive impacts, especially for sectors such as agriculture, agro-industry, and civil construction, which face situations of labor shortages in the region. However, the absence of effective migration policies can increase the exploitation and social exclusion of workers. Local initiatives – and sometimes isolated ones – whether from different spheres of the State, the business sector (market), and civil society, are important steps, but still insufficient to guarantee the full inclusion of this population in the formal market, access to basic services, and the guarantee of citizenship rights.



Among the limitations of this study, the dependence on official data stands out, which may underestimate the presence of migrants in irregular situations. Future research could adopt qualitative approaches, such as interviews and ethnographic studies, to better understand working conditions, the challenges of social integration, as well as the creation of support networks between or from the communities of origin and/or arrival, embedded in the dynamics of social transformation and development of their respective regions. In addition, it would be relevant to analyze the migration of other nationalities arriving in the region and investigate return migration, identifying whether this flow represents a temporary displacement or a long-term structural trend.

Finally, this study reinforces the need for an interdisciplinary and in-depth look at migratory flows, connecting economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental factors. Argentine migration to Brazil should not be seen merely as a temporary movement, but as a phenomenon that demands effective public policies, guaranteeing not only the absorption of migrant labor, but also its protection against exploitation and social exclusion so that migrants can exercise their full citizenship rights.

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