



Creating Opportunities for Temporary Foreign Workers and Their Communities: Innovation in Capacity-Building and Skills Transfer in Latin America

Brandon, Manitoba – February 2010

BRANDON CONSULTATIONS: KEY HIGHLIGHTS

The Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) and the Rural Development Institute (RDI) at Brandon University, in collaboration with the 7th Street Health Access Centre, held consultations in February 2010 with temporary foreign workers (TFWs) in Brandon, Manitoba.¹ The aim of the consultations was to collect perceptions of TFWs on labour migration experiences (before and upon arriving in Canada) using two tools: a survey and focus group discussions. Research themes included the type and quality of information TFWs receive about jobs and host communities, problems encountered prior to and landing in Canada, actual and desired skills acquisition and training, and TFW objectives regarding employment and remittances sent home.

The Brandon TFW consultations are part of a FOCAL pilot project —“Creating Opportunities for Temporary Foreign Workers and their Communities”— that examines new ways of providing skills upgrading and transfer opportunities, as well as training that can support economic development in Latino migrant sending communities. Brandon was selected as a locale to conduct the consultations because a large number of TFWs from Latin America are hired to work in the meat-packing industry, primarily by Maple Leaf. According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the number of TFWs recruited by Canadian employers in Manitoba doubled in number from 2003 to 2008, totalling 4,192 workers in 2008.

The consultations also contribute to a growing body of research focusing on issues facing migrant workers in Canada, such as health access and precarious status concerns.² This initiative carried out by FOCAL and RDI is important as it appears to be the first time consultations with migrant workers have been conducted focusing on the subject of skills acquisition and training in Canada.³

PARTICIPANT COMPOSITION

FOCAL and RDI invited TFWs from Latin America working in the meat-packing industry in Brandon to participate in consultations. Participation was completely voluntary⁴ and individuals were given the choice to respond in English and/or Spanish. Even though discussions were open to all TFWs from Latin America, all of those who participated in the consultations were from Colombia. Almost all participants were TFWs who had been on a work contract for an average of 22 months, with the exception of a small number of spouses of TFWs and TFWs who had recently become permanent residents. Focus group participants, the majority of whom were in a common law union or married with children, all had at least a high school, college or university degree, and some cited having more than one.

SURVEY

Participants were first asked to fill out a short survey to collect information to create a profile of the TFW and to share their perceptions regarding services: information, skills acquisition and training, as well as remittances.

1) Information received before and after coming to Canada

The majority of respondents said they received information about the TFW program (prior to travelling to Canada) only from a recruiter in Spanish in Colombia; no other information sources were available. Upon arrival to Canada, respondents stated that they had more access to information sources about the TFW program. In order of importance, respondents said they received information from their employer, then from a community organization or service provider and then from a friend or family member. Such information provided to TFWs was provided in both Spanish and/or English, although Spanish was cited as the language in which most information was provided.

Program and other information provided to TFWs upon arrival to Canada included the following topics: the Canadian immigration process, public services, community life and information about their occupations in Canada. Results from the participant survey concluded that respondents had accessed a wide range of services in Brandon with the most common being English language courses or translation followed by library services, immigrant centre services and health care.

2) Skills and training

Most TFWs could not identify more than one new skill acquired on the job; for example, most of the respondents noted that they had only acquired meat cutting skills. Moreover, the majority of the participants did not identify any new skills acquisition at all.⁵ Furthermore, not a single TFW who participated in the consultations was working in the profession for which they had studied and half of participants identified a profession in which they would prefer to be working. The majority of respondents agreed that skills and/or training acquired in Canada could be transferable to jobs in their home country.

3) Remittances

On the subject of money transfers (remittances),⁶ the majority of participants cited the need to support parents or other family members as one of the top three motivations for sending remittances home. A significant number mentioned debt as one of their top two reasons for remittance transfers. Other reasons included health care and basic needs. Importantly, the majority of TFWs who completed the survey used money transfer companies, rather than another method to facilitate remittance transfers.

FOCUS GROUPS

As a collective group, participants were asked a series of five questions. Answers to questions were displayed for all participants to see and then the answers were ranked in order of importance by the participants.

1) Principal motivation for applying to work in Canada

Although many of the TFWs participating in the focus groups had been employed prior to working in Brandon, the majority of participants firstly reported insufficient work opportunities in their home country as the primary reason for coming to Canada. Next, participants described the desire for a higher quality of life for themselves, their children and family members as a motivation for participating in the TFW program. Lastly, although not unanimous, participants stressed a desire to immigrate and bring family members to Canada as an important motivation for applying to the TFW program.

“Aquí, estamos luchando por un nuevo futuro.”
[“We’re here struggling for a better future.”]

2) Problems encountered in Canada as a TFW

Almost all TFWs in the focus groups stressed that a lack of knowledge of the English language was the primary challenge faced. Moreover, they linked this to another problem: lack of access to services. Some mentioned a fear of using community services because they did not speak English (for example, fear of being denied access to services for lack of communication skills). Second, most participants were concerned about the high cost of living in Canada compared to their communities of origin. For example, there was particular concern about the increase in the cost of rent for TFWs coupled with the housing shortage in Brandon. Lastly, the health care attention TFWs had received thus far in Manitoba had not met their expectations. For example, participants stressed inadequate medical attention to work-related injuries and refused entry to walk-in clinics due to language barriers.

“Hay demasiados inmigrantes y no hay suficientes servicios.”
[“There are too many immigrants and not enough services to go around.”]

3) Personal and professional objectives for applying to work in Canada

Participants felt it was most important to learn English in order to obtain a better job. Participants then stressed the secondary goal of participating in the TFW program in order to obtain permanent residency. Lastly, participants stated that they wished to gain further training and/or education opportunities in Canada. For example, participants cited skills acquisition, training and the desire to gain accreditation for international degrees as important.

“Ya que a pesar de tener una profesión tenemos que volver a empezar. No toman en cuenta los títulos profesionales de nuestros países.” [“Although we already have professions, we must start from the beginning. They don’t recognize the professional credentials from our countries.”]

4) Training Interests

Considering the majority of TFWs could not identify specific skills they had acquired while working in Canada, participants were asked what they would be interested in learning if given the opportunity. Responses were diverse and, in some cases, indicated additional interests in the following occupational groups (i.e. in addition to learning English), such as:

- ▶ Finance
- ▶ Agricultural work
- ▶ Microenterprise start-up / business
- ▶ Automotive technician / mechanics
- ▶ Power engineering

One worker suggested that training programs be offered in Spanish (“*capacitación en nuestro idioma*”) in Canada in order to help TFWs bridge the gap between weak language skills and obtaining new jobs.

5) Barriers to skills acquisition and training

Participants identified a number of different barriers that prohibited them from acquiring new skills and/or receiving training. Most importantly, they stressed that long work days leave them with little or no time to learn English; one participant stated he had worked seven days straight. Secondly, pursuing additional learning was difficult as many did not have a manageable grasp of the English language. Lastly, the high costs of attending university or gaining professional accreditation were cited as major barriers. During group discussions it also became clear that the ability to save money was another barrier to skills acquisition.

“Si uno quiere ahorrar dinero, ambas personas en la pareja deben trabajar.”
[“If you want to save money, both people in the relationship need to work.”]

6) Advice for new TFWs

Participants shared many ideas as to what type of information new TFWs should receive prior to travelling to Canada and how to be better prepared for arrival in Canada. Most felt that TFWs should have the opportunity to study English for longer periods of time before leaving sending countries in order to be better prepared for Canadian life. Next, gaining a proper understanding of the TFW work contract was felt to be necessary. This includes informing TFW that they will not be able to change employers while in the program. Health care access for TFWs can be problematic and participants felt new TFWs should receive information on Canada’s health-care system. One TFW further recommended that an agency should be tasked with monitoring the information received by TFWs so that high expectations do not overshadow the challenges that most TFWs experience while in Canada.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

As a result of consultations with participants some preliminary observations can be made:

- ▶ While in Canada, many TFWs are not able to access sufficient training and/or skills acquisition that could help achieve their professional or personal objectives which originally lead them to migrate.
- ▶ Barriers to training and/or skills acquisition are present even before TFWs arrive in Canada; the inability to speak English before their arrival for example, despite some language training prior to departure, is a major challenge.
- ▶ While TFWs want to learn English, they either do not have the financial resources to participate in courses or do not have sufficient time to take courses while they work.
- ▶ TFWs expressed a strong desire for training and/or education opportunities to help them enter new professions in Canada.

It is important to note that the TFWs who participated in consultations also stressed positive impacts of the TFW program. The majority agreed that the TFW program provided an opportunity for migrants to gain access to new opportunities and provide a better life for their families. Many were thankful to the Government of Colombia, for example, which provides two months of English language training prior to departure. Nevertheless, Colombia's language program is clearly a starting point in addressing their challenges regarding skills acquisition and training. Participants stressed that much more could be done in this regard.

IDEAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The consultations held in Brandon shed light on a number of issues which provide interesting avenues for future research. These include:

- ▶ Examination of how training programs for TFWs could be implemented in Canada including identifying appropriate actors to involve in the process.
- ▶ Exploration of the cost of TFW training programs and how such programs can be made affordable to TFWs.
- ▶ Assessment of the possibility of employers playing a role in providing skills acquisition and training to TFWs in ways that are mutually beneficial to both employers and the TFWs. Examination of models of pre-departure training, taking into account migrants' needs and goals, as valuable tools that can help support TFWs.
- ▶ Investigate what role development programming can play in helping migrants leverage skills transfer to migrant-sending communities.

Endnotes

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2 See research projects conducted by Tanya Basok, Jill Bucklasuck, Heather Gibb, Jenna Hennebry, Janet McLaughlin and Kerry Preibisch.

3 As the number of participants involved in the workshop pilot were low, we also do not imply in any way that the highlights in this report can be generalized for the situation facing all TFWs in Canada.

4 Participants signed a consent form before the start of the consultations explaining these terms, in accordance with Canadian ethical research standards involving human subjects.

5 "Skills" were referred to in the original Spanish as "*habilidad*."

6 In the context of these consultations, we define remittances as the private transfer of funds from overseas workers to their country of origin and/or family members, excluding their total earnings in Canada, or work-related benefits they might have accrued.

The Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) is an independent, non-partisan think tank dedicated to strengthening Canadian relations with Latin America and the Caribbean through policy dialogue and analysis. By providing key stakeholders with solutions-oriented research on social, political and economic issues, we strive to create new partnerships and policy options throughout the Western Hemisphere. FOCAL promotes good governance, economic prosperity and social justice, basing our work on principles of intellectual integrity, racial diversity and gender equality.

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