

Interlude City Dump Slum

During spring 2004, I was invited to attend a conference on corporate social responsibility and public sector organisations in Maceio, on the North East coast of Brazil. I'd never been to South America before and I was available at the time suggested. My only sticking point was mentally justifying the travel – would my overall contribution to the conference be valuable enough to “cover” the emissions costs of the travel? An impossible equation, which I filled with variables such as: if I don't go, then someone else will; it gives me the chance to bring more knowledge to the MSc at Bath; and, more mundanely, I was really curious to see something of this vast country. I felt enthusiastic about meeting up with three of the MSc students who lived there and I was aware of the sense of identity, grown-up-ness and self-reliance I draw from this work. A conversation with a CARPP PhD learning group colleague sealed the decision. She said that she felt that this travel was part of my identity – “you've got to do this, it's part of you, don't stop”, she said. And I said yes.

During the visit there was little opportunity to move outside the cocooned world of conferences and spend time with “ordinary” Brazilians. I was the only European resident amongst 300 South American delegates, and part of an international group (from Canada, Ghana and South Africa) of about 20 visiting speakers at the conference. I have chosen the following account from my experience of being in Brazil because it offers the most direct “un-cocooned” contact I had while I was at the conference (with the possible exception of some rather steamy late night dancing sessions). The international visitors were invited on a coach tour of the area, including going to a shanty town that had built up around the edge of the municipal landfill site outside of the prosperous seaside resort of Maceio – the City Dump Slum.

I have included the account to evoke my experience of the City Dump Slum, showing: the kinds of things I notice and think about on such occasions; the qualities of my questioning-in-the-moment; and my development of unanswerable questions in response to complex and disturbing situations (where my own authority or otherwise felt irrelevant).

I wrote the account eight months after returning from Brazil and have included it here just as I wrote it, wanting to stay as close to the experience as possible, in the hope that the writing will be both alive and spontaneous, but not as raw as it might have been had I written it on the same day as the visit to the slum. Why do I want to write this story – is it just a trophy story? Am I just as guilty of being overly dramatic? It felt to me like a story that must be told. Surely this can't be real, surely it can't get that bad? But, what if, what if? Did I write it down so that I am no longer alone in my shock and doubt? Now you've read this, it is no longer just my responsibility to try and make sense of what I heard.

Maceio, Brazil, April/May 2004, written 8.30am, 28 January 2005



If I'd still been in England, it might have been crows circling above a landfill site. Here, vultures whirled in the thermals about the city dump which sat on scrubby cliff tops on the shore of a wide sloop of Atlantic bay overlooking Maceio. Tiny figures holding plastic bags walked over the great piles of rubbish. Mirelle, the willowy French-Canadian I'd met at the conference sat next to me on the air-conditioned coach. She'd seen the vultures, too. "It makes be feel bad coming to these places. Especially arriving in this coach."

The coach drew up alongside the outermost homes of the Maceio City Dump Slum. Along with my new colleagues from South Africa, Peru, Chile and Canada, I stepped out into the hot, moist air and was greeted by a rheumy-eyed priest and his assistant, who was dressed in black jeans and a leather jacket. Our translator told us that these two men had been responsible for trying to make life bearable for the 300 families who live here, with no funding at all. First, people had come to make a living from gathering food and recyclable items to sell from the dump. To start with, they'd lived directly on the piles of rubbish, but the City threw them out and fenced in the dump, allowing access at controlled times. Now, more and more families were coming to live at the edge of the dump and the first generation of children who had lived here all their lives were growing into adulthood.



Skinny short haired dogs ran over to inspect us and I looked down to see my sandals and bare feet lapped by the mud. I mentally checked to remember if I had any cuts on my feet. No cuts. Good.

A woman with wild brownish hair and two young children hiding behind her legs silently watched us. Behind her, a man sat under a corrugated iron shack and looked up briefly before going back to tinkering with some metal machinery. Children stared and followed us like the pied piper. I picked my way in amongst the mud and rubbish and paths made with old pieces of sheet metal and planks of wood. The pathway turned into a narrow sloping alley with houses facing in on either side. Competing radios blared music from the dark interiors of the shacks. I looked down again at my feet and noticed how similar this Brazilian slum felt to some of the places I'd been to in Ghana. I was surprised at the similarity – was there some kind of unspoken formula for the ways in which these shanties evolve? Are they the same everywhere? “Don't get used to this, don't get immune, not this of all things, keep feeling something” ran through my mind.

Only there was no sign of the entrepreneurial buzz that had lead us to choose to work in Ghana in the first place. Here, pregnant teenagers wandered around in groups, young men sat on makeshift porches and children quietly watched. They weren't playing. I didn't see any old people.

The priest invited us in to the church he'd built and we sat on the pews facing a chipped plaster Madonna flanked by two glass vases holding dusty crocheted flowers. The priest sat on the front pew and he gestured to his assistant to talk with us. Sweat

ran down my back in the still breezeless air. I looked over at Ninette, the Jewish South African who'd stayed on to work in the slums of Johannesburg when her parents had moved to New York. What did she think she was playing at? They'd said. A black boyfriend as well – why can't she get herself a nice white boy and settle down like her sisters.

Ninette's long dark hair was stuck to her face and beads of sweat dotted her nose. She was leaning forward to listen. The priest's assistant told us about their struggle to get electricity to the slum, that this and the school were the only brick buildings. The church had been first to be built. That there were now two standpipes supplying water to the people who lived here. That he'd started a brass band here and that all the kids came to football on Saturdays even if they were too tired to play because they knew that the people from the city who volunteered to come and run the football team came with food in the back of the car to share with the kids. Ninette leaned back again and turned to face me. "This is such bad practice" she said, "we wouldn't do it like this in South Africa. As soon as you start to make it permanent with bricks and water and electricity, more and more people come and the authorities don't bother with proper housing. These places need to be kept temporary, people need to be moved away, not attracted in." I felt ignorant and naïve. I thought they'd been doing a good job.

I nodded at Ninette and looked back at the assistant who was still talking at the altar. The translator stood close by and the Spanish speakers in my group listened to his English as the assistant carried on in delicious rich Portuguese. "I saw a woman here once who was cooking. She had a frying pan with meat in. I asked her, what are you cooking, She said she'd got it off the dump today. I looked in the pan – it was another woman's breast". I sat up straight. The man in the black leather jacket started to cry. Tears welled up and spilled down his cheeks. He put his hand over his face and I felt my own throat tighten. "She was cooking another woman's breast." The priest stood up and put his arm round the man, guiding him to sit down. The priest carried on talking and I looked at the assistant, who was hunched over cradling his head in his hands. Did I really hear right? Did he really say that? Was it true? Was he trying to shock us? How could I think this, how could I doubt? I looked at Mireille. She was watching the man as well. The talk continued.

My mind raced over what the "right" response to this story "should" be. What would the "real" development professionals all around me think? Had they heard it all before? Were they more or less moved than me? Was I moved enough, or overly sentimental?

Beyond the front pews, light came in from the left where there was a window that was really a hole in the wall. Two smiling young women looked in at us, I could just see their heads and shoulders above the turquoise painted concrete sill. We were inside their space – and they were excluded. Mireille gestured with her hand for the women to come in and join us and they disappeared from the window to come round to the church doorway behind us. We turned to greet them. All three women were pregnant, two of them held toddlers on their hips and they each held hands with at least one other child. "They haven't got anything else to do," the priest's assistant said. He stood next to the women and they smiled at each other. He laid his hand on the first one's belly and held out five fingers. "She's five months' pregnant", then the second "Six months" and the third "eight months". The women smiled and my heart sank.

