

Brazil: Beyond the Sun, Sand and Parties

By Flavia Cavarlo, UNU-MERIT

Strangers frequently ask me why I would want to leave Brazil and move to the Netherlands. They obviously refer to the sunny, colourful, musical and beautiful country I come from. They are usually people influenced by some biased images of Brazil, where women dance naked at the Carnival, where people are always on holidays on the beach and music is as eclectic as the ritual-looking dances that are performed with them.

In fact, the reality of my country goes way beyond what television and international news show around the world. We have around 30% of people living under poverty, 10% unemployment rate, the wealth of the country is concentrated on a single region (luckily mine), less than 1% of people make it to the university, a much lower share go for higher level degrees – and you can imagine that this puts me among a very lucky, privileged share of the population who have the chance to take a PhD abroad. But apart from all our problems, what strikes me the most is the fact that Brazilians are a nation of smiling people, who never lose faith on better days to come - as if always reminding that after a huge storm the rainbow always shows up.

This is the reason why I do not regret having left my sunny homeland to be here in Maastricht, or more specifically, at UNU-MERIT.

Here, besides all the benefits of learning at an international research institute, of interacting with high skilled researchers and of being part of one of the best universities in the Netherlands, I also have the chance to interact with a diverse, intelligent, lively group of students of all over the world. It is with them that I think I learn the lessons I could not even have imagined that I would have, hadn't I come here to give it a shot. I am discovering that the world is much bigger than my geography classes had taught me. I have learned a lot from my colleagues about their cultures, so different from mine, and from their religious beliefs. And I learn from their diverse research subjects, so apparently distant from mine but which always teach me something about my own research and reminds me, day after day, that knowledge is infinite and that no one knows too much or enough.

For all these reasons, the seemingly never ending rainy, grey days matter much less than I would have expected.

But being Brazilian, I cannot help but look on the bright side. It is marvellous to celebrate my birthday in spring for a change!