Promoting Knowledge Sharing and Learning in Brazilian Water and Sanitation
In the developing world, Brazil has become a recognized source of good examples in delivering water and sanitation services (WSS) and technologies, including to remote rural areas. Brazil’s coveted National Sanitation Quality Award (PNQS) is one tool promoting effective management in the Brazilian WSS sector. The PNQS is run by the Brazilian Association of Sanitary and Environmental Engineering (ABES) Quality Committee (CNQA). The PNQS benchmarking approach attached to the award system has promoted, since 1997, continuous innovation and improvements within and between Brazilian water utilities, as well as with utilities in Europe and North America. Seeing the success of this and other WSS approaches in Brazil, the World Bank Institute (WBI) is piloting a South-South Knowledge Exchange Water Hub in partnership with ABES to build the Association’s capacity in helping other countries to improve their WSS sectors. As part of the Knowledge Hub initiative, this note outlines the PNQS approach in detail in order to demonstrate a best practice case in WSS management that might be of interest to other countries as well.
Access to clean water and sanitation remains one of the most elusive of all Millennium Development Goals. Worldwide, 2.5 billion people live without access to proper sanitation services, and over 780 million still do not have suitable sources of drinking water, especially in rural communities. Brazil is decades ahead of many developing countries as regards the development of its water supply and sanitation (WSS) sector, having delivered widespread quality water supply and sanitation services, including to small towns and rural areas. Brazil’s WSS sector has become a very good example in modernizing public utility governance, management and performance, as well as in developing and implementing appropriate technologies.

The World Bank’s offices in Brazil receive numerous requests to facilitate delegation visits from other parts of the world to learn from Brazil’s WSS sector. Based on successful South-South Knowledge Exchange (SSKE) experiences in other sectors like agriculture and health, the World Bank Institute’s (WBI) is piloting a South-South Knowledge Exchange Water Hub with the Brazilian Association of Sanitary and Environmental Engineering (ABES) in order to build the Association’s capacity to design and deliver both standardized and customized knowledge initiatives globally. According to Mr. Dante Ragazzi, who cur-
rently acts as ABES’s President, “to open opportunities for our member companies and specialists to catch up with peers abroad certainly increases the possibility to build bridges among countries for future partnerships, in the exchange of both knowledge and services. On the other hand, the WBI stimulates practical and applicable knowledge to flow where it fits best.”

In 1997, ABES established the popular National Sanitation Quality Award (Prêmio Nacional da Qualidade em Saneamento, or PNQS) – the so-called annual “Oscar” of Brazilian sanitation – in order to acknowledge the best management systems among Brazil’s sanitation organizations. Based on business excellence models developed in North America, Europe, Japan and Brazil as well, ABES’s Quality Committee (CNQA) has launched the education, award & benchmarking initiative to stimulate improvements in the management systems of WSS companies and business units. ABES has administered, improved, and stepped up such efforts over time, and today it is the only business excellence benchmarking approach in the world tailored to the WSS sector.

This note demonstrates how the awards boost ABES’s knowledge sharing and learning activities, as well as national and international dissemination of standards and best practices in sanitation management. The note outlines the PNQS awards process, management, and set-up in detail in order to demonstrate a good practice example for other countries to emulate.

As stated by Mr. Ragazzi, “in the mid 1990s, both the Brazilian WSS sector and other sectors started to realize that big solutions should be masterminded at the company’s management system level and should no longer try to continuously fix the operational mess stemming from bad decisions. An initiative to educate, award, and benchmark the best management systems was put in place by ABES’s Quality Committee as a strategy geared to cultural change.”
ABES

HARMONIZING SANITATION PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND PROMOTING MANAGEMENT TRAINING

Founded in 1966, ABES is a non-profit, non-governmental, membership organization focused on knowledge and learning in the Brazilian water and sanitation sector, with some 10,000 individual and corporate members across the country. In addition to the annual PNQS awards, ABES organizes a biennial conference (the third largest national WSS conference in the world), conducts over 200 training and capacity-building courses for members (including online courses), and publishes technical studies as well. Following business excellence award initiatives in the US and Europe, ABES established the PNQS awards in 1997.

The ABES's Quality Committee (CNQA), made up of mid to senior-level managers from ABES's member companies, and the CNQA Coordination Team, made up of a few key senior-level managers, meets twice a year to coordinate with a PNQS Secretary in order to shape strategy and manage Association affairs, including the PNQS awards ceremony and judges. The Steering Committee also approves updates to PNQS awards guidelines, such as new prize categories and changes in award assessment guidelines.

Under the guidance of a business excellence consultant, who works with ABES on all technical aspects of the PNQS process, several CNQA members serve on the Association's Performance Indicators Technical Chamber (CTIDSA). The Chamber upholds a constantly evolving list of sanitation performance indicators for each PNQS awards category. Compiled in a Performance Measurement Reference Guide (GRMD), the indicators attached to the prized PNQS awards help promote the harmonization of management performance indicators across Brazilian sanitation sector organizations.

Organizations must refer managers and other professionals to ABES's management training sessions in order to apply for PNQS awards, thus providing strong incentives for organizations to participate in ABES activities. Paid PNQS instructors – experienced in the sanitation sector – train about 1,200 managers annually, who choose from a list of “World Class Management” courses running from March to June every year. Trainees attend two or three training sessions, which draw upon practical examples and exercises to help them learn to apply the PNQS organizational business excellence model. Trainees can also attend a 2-3 day “World Class Management Workshop,” where they learn to apply the PNQS scoring system and become official PNQS evaluators to help their organizations assess performance.

PNQS also trains a volunteer PNQS Board of Examiners from outside the water and sanitation sector. Seeking exposure to organizational management systems and motivated by a sincere desire to improve the quality of life of future Brazilian generations, examiners must attend two-day courses held each summer in different cities; moreover, they must pass a simulation test in order to qualify. With a view to recognizing and providing incentives to examiners, tasked with a workload of about 100 to 150 hours per year, ABES acknowledges each examiner in its PNQS Guide and chooses one examiner through a lottery to enjoy a full-paid trip in order to attend the PNQS awards ceremony.
ABES assigns a senior examiner to work on a team with one to three regular examiners in order to evaluate all PNQS entries every month of August. Each examiner prepares a report, which the senior examiner compiles before the mid-September field visits of the team to each organization. The group uses a PNQS Guide Scoring System to evaluate and grade more than a dozen factors for each application, and a technical consultant works to ensure that examiners apply a consistent process. After site visits, the senior examiner prepares a final PNQS Feedback Report for the award judges by October. The names of the organizations remain anonymous while judges convene for half a day to compare and discuss organizational performance and scores, and select award winners.

About 20 organizations each year also submit a “good management practice case” in an effort to win the coveted PNQS Management Innovation Medal. The ten-page case application addresses 25 questions in four areas: Opportunity, Idea, Results, and Presentation. An examiner chooses case finalists based on a scoring system, and presents the finalists to judges, who then choose a winner on the day of the PNQS award ceremony. The best entries become best practice cases, and the winning case leader wins a place on the annual ABES international benchmarking mission.

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EVALUATING SANITATION PERFORMANCE EXCELLENCE: A TOOL FOR PROMOTING AND DISSEMINATING BEST PRACTICES

Companies volunteer to apply for PNQS Copper, Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, and Diamond trophies, awarded on the basis of company responses to questions on 23 items in eight categories: Leadership, Strategy and Planning, Customer, Society, Information and Knowledge, People, Processes, and Results.
ABES hosts the winners of the PNQS Awards, announced on the PNQS website, in an elaborate, gala award ceremony and celebration held in a different Brazilian city every month of November. An award applicant organization hosts the annual event, usually attended by over 1,000 Brazilian sanitation professionals, who cheer on colleagues receiving the coveted PNQS Chiron-shaped trophy.\(^5\) As a highlight of the evening, Management Innovation Medal winners learn about their award at the ceremony itself, when their names are called onstage. ABES also acknowledges the volunteer Board of Examiners formally during the event, which includes local artistic entertainment, capped by a pleasant cocktail party.

As a critical part of the event, ABES organizes a two-day "Benchmarking Showcase", which is a seminar designed to introduce organizations to best practices and to foster a professional network of Brazilian sanitation professionals geared to ongoing knowledge sharing.

However, perhaps the most important part of the PNQS process occurs after the award ceremony, when ABES delivers the final Feedback Reports to each organization, complete with detailed scores and executive summaries, highlighting both strengths and areas in need of improvement. In addition, the organization has two weeks in the wake of the awards to ask questions and receive detailed feedback from the report’s senior examiner.

ABES also invites the leader from award-winning business units\(^6\) to an annual one-week, all-expenses-paid international benchmarking trip, usually to Europe or the United States, selected by ABES’s Quality Committee (CNQA). The international benchmarking tour introduces Brazilian sanitation managers to state-of-the-art technologies and management practices, and increases their access to a global network of sanitation experts. The possibility of taking part in the trip provides very strong incentives for managers and companies to participate in the PNQS awards process, and adopt the PNQS business excellence model, thus fostering continuous improvements in Brazilian sanitation organizations. ABES organizes the trip well in advance and develops the trip’s agenda in close cooperation with the host country and international organizations interested in knowledge sharing with Brazil’s sanitation practitioners. In yet a final effort to disseminate critical information on best practices, the PNQS technical consultant assembles a benchmarking report based on the tour, uploaded to the PNQS website.

According to the December 2012 Brazilian Mission’s benchmarking visit to Toronto, Canada, the visit highlighted the water resource management aimed at restoring Simcoe Lake, as well as water loss management tactics, water tap drinking culture initiatives, advanced wastewater treatment, the Walkerton model for high-quality training, the plant operators certification process, the Guelph Innovation water cluster, and other interesting subjects.\(^7\) The December 2013 Portugal mission provided a very good overview of economic and operational regulations under European directives, the Tejo-Trancão multi-municipal system, the LNEC WSS infrastructure management system (called GPI), together with Aguas de Barcelos, AGS, and Águas de Coimbra real GPI cases and results, coupled with many other innovative WSS management approaches and results.

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1. According to the Water and Sanitation Program website, a multi-donor trust fund program managed by the World Bank.
2. Initially ABES called the award “The ABES Quality Award” (PAO).
3. Based on Brazil’s influential National Quality Foundation (NFQ) and the ABES Code of Ethics.
4. For some PNQS awards, however, members can propose equivalent optional indicators if they use different performance measures.
5. The Chiron was a wise centaur in Greek mythology, symbolizing health and a clean environment.
6. Organizations can send another participant at partial cost, and sometimes a third participant at full cost.

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