

Understanding basic sanitation in Brasil: the population's point of view

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Subject: Governance and institutional change

Even though the adequate services of basic sanitation in Brazil (defined as water supply, sanitation, storm water drainage, solid waste management and vectors control) have had significant development in the last three decades, they are still deficient. In this period, the lack of public policies to deal with the subject is relevant. More than public policies, the universalization of services requires the use of appropriate technologies, compatible with the reality of the benefited community and capable of being incorporated by its social activities. In this purpose, the importance of the integration among several areas of knowledge must be emphasized. This integration makes it possible to connect different points of view about common goals.

The role of sanitary engineering must be in harmony with the population's interests and needs, whether it regards the development of new technologies or the elaboration and implementation of specific projects. Therefore, it is extremely important that the professionals in the area try to identify the citizens' perception regarding basic sanitation, in order to support the formulation of public policies that will ultimately lead to providing the service in a way that is appropriate to each reality and to the needs of the community.

The purpose of this work is to identify the population's perception regarding basic sanitation and to analyze how it relates to the technical discourses, by using focus group method. Focus group is a qualitative research strategy frequently used in social sciences in which several participants, selected in a proper way to meet the research interest profiles, are invited to a meeting where they are encouraged to discuss a certain subject.

Seven focus groups, classified according to the variables (i) education level (high and low) and (ii) housing environment (rural and urban), were performed. The participants' speeches reveal the population's perception regarding basic sanitation and its importance. Analysis of the partial results points towards: a possible lack of influence of the two mentioned variables on the sanitary perception; a possible influence of the age, related to life experience; a misunderstanding on the technological solution of separate systems for wastewater and storm water; and to the fact that the population understands sanitation differently than the technical discourse.

It is considered that the methods used in this research, as well as the results obtained, are relevant to the *learning alliance* strategy, since they could promote the integration and stimulate the dialog between the several stakeholders – the population, the government and the academy – people and the government and enhance the sanitation services provided, considering the population's point of view.

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