Thais Thimoteo, Rio de Janeiro

Although believed to be the sixth largest world economy, Brazil has many shortcomings in areas considered central to economic and social development. These start with the minimum requirement for an acceptable quality of life: water and sanitation infrastructure that gives the whole population access to safe water, sanitation, solid waste management, and storm drainage.

In recent years, Brazil has achieved almost universal safe water supply in 5,564 towns, but collection and treatment of sewage is still very worrying. Data from the 2011 Atlas of Sanitation from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), based on the 2008 National Survey of Sanitation (PNSB), show that less than half (46%) of Brazilian households have access to sewage systems, but the percentages vary widely by region. In the Southeast, 70% of households have access, in the Midwest 34%, in the South 30%, in the Northeast 29%, and in the North just 4%. Sanitation infrastructure is most lacking in rural areas and the outskirts of large urban centers.

“There is a serious imbalance in the supply of sanitation services. We have seen an evolution since the 1970s in supplying safe water, which today covers 90% of the country. But when it comes to sewerage, especially collection, we are more than 20 years behind. About 70% of waste returns to nature without being treated, and this affects health,” says Édison Carlos, CEO, Institute Trata Brazil.

Losses
Lack of sanitation has major economic impact—especially absence from work and school and falling productivity due to gastrointestinal problems. The 2010 study conducted by the Institute Trata Brazil and the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV), published as Economic Benefits of Brazilian Expansion of Sanitation, demonstrates the extent of damage to both the public and the private sector. The federal National Health System would save an annual average of R$42 million from a reduced number of intestinal infections if all municipalities had sanitation services. The private sector in turn spends R$547 million a year on wages paid for hours not worked to employees absent due to gastrointestinal infections.

The study also shows that lack of sanitation has other economic costs. “An area with tourist potential but without the necessary sanitation infrastructure will have no financial return. The same applies to residential developments,” says Edney Dias,

With more education and purchasing power, Brazilians are beginning to realize how important it is to have clean tap water and good sanitation.
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consultant to the Brazilian Institute of Economics (IBRE) and contributor to the study.

Since 2007, the Ministry of Cities (MIC), through the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC), has made efforts to relieve the problem by lending resources to states and municipalities to invest in sanitation. PAC 1 (2007–2010) allocated R$40 billion and PAC 2 (2011–2014) another R$45 billion. But the results so far have been meager. According to the MIC, only 9% of the projects funded by PAC 1 were carried out, so that only R$3 billion was spent. “Today we offer about R$15 billion a year for sanitation projects but cannot even spend R$8 billion. Considering that the aim of MIC is to universalize services by 2030 and that the federal government intends to allocate R$420 billion for the sector over the same period, we are not even at half the spending needed to achieve the sanitation goal,” Carlos says.

Yuri Giustina, MIC infrastructure specialist, attributes the slow progress to a lack of planning and management, especially by the municipalities, which are among the largest managers of resources for sanitation. He points out that “In selecting projects, problems began to appear in relation to quality, often outdated or poorly designed plans without environmental permits, and the inadequate execution capacity of bidders,” This experience led to more rigorous project selection in PAC 2: “Now, we verify the suitability of all projects. If selected, their viability is then evaluated by the government savings bank, Caixa Econômica, as agent of the ministry.”

Election

However, all efforts to improve the quality of life are of no avail if society does not understand the importance of sanitary conditions. “Brazilians live reasonably well with open sewers,” Carlos says. “The citizen demands asphalt, security, transportation, before sanitation.” Yet, it is possible to see signs that with more education and purchasing power, Brazilians are beginning to realize how important it is to have clean tap water and sanitation. “The population is already concerned about sanitation, so local governments are acting. But what happens is that a city often outsources sanitation services to companies and shifts the blame to them for eventual failures. However, the government is responsible for administering the service,” Giustina says. Carlos adds that “Gone are the days when sanitation yielded no votes. We have to take the opportunity we have in an election year and discuss the sanitation agenda outside the offices. Only when people ask for improvements will the authorities mobilize more arduously.”

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Edney Dias