

## GRI Reporting Awards: ¿Best Reports?

One of the most reported news in the CSR world was the GRI Reporting Awards given to the sustainability reports regarded as best by readers, as well as a special eight-category award given by journalists. The awards were conferred in Amsterdam on May 7-9. For a list of winners, see the GRI site ([www.globalreporting.org/awards](http://www.globalreporting.org/awards)).

What a surprise to find that developing countries, where sustainability reporting is at best incipient, got 6 of the 8 awards and were 11 of 16 of finalists. One would expect the winners to be the big multinational companies of developed countries, which have been producing these reports for quite some time and where the overwhelming majority of reports following GRI guidelines are to be found. An analysis of the selection process for the awards yields some interesting facts:

- 55% of the votes came from Brazil, India and Spain.
- Brazil ranked third in the number of votes cast. Almost 80% of the votes cast by Brazilians went to reports from their own country.
- Brazil got 8 awards and finalists out of the possible 24 (33%).
- Petrobrás was the Premium sponsor of the event and won 2 of the popular awards.
- India was the country with the most votes cast. Only 17% of the votes cast by Indians went to reports from their own country.
- India won two awards and was a finalist for another one.
- Spain was the country with the second most votes cast. Seventy-two percent of the votes cast by Spaniards went to reports from their own country.
- 7 reports out of the 45 on the short list were from Spain (the most for any country).
- Spain got one award (Were Spain's votes diluted among its many reports?).
- Latin America had 22% of votes (mostly Brazil), while North America had 5%.
- The United States and Canada received no awards and were not among the finalists for any of the awards.
- Every voter voted for 3.3 reports on average.

The voting started with 780 eligible reports. This was reduced to 78 in the first round of voting (10% with most votes) and to 45 in the next round. Is it possible to select the best report out 780, or even out of 78, when each reader is voting for an average of 3.3 reports? How many reports could each reader have read before voting? Would he/she have read the 3.3 reports for which he voted? The average sustainability report is 70 pages long. ¿Can a person read about 240 pages on a computer screen and make a meaningful comparison among reports? (It is hardly likely that all readers had printed copies of all the reports.) Could it be that voters cast their ballots for their OWN country's reports without reading them?

One must assume that any similarity with the recent Eurovision song contest is pure coincidence! For those readers not familiar with it, this is a contest that selects the most popular song/interpreter out of 43 songs, each song representing one country. Votes are cast by listeners in every country and tallied at the country level. Voters from a particular country cannot vote for a song from their country. Every year the majority of votes received for a particular country's song are cast by voters from a friendly country. Scandinavian countries tend to vote for the songs of other Scandinavians countries; Balkans vote for songs from other Balkan countries as well as those from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; voters from the former Soviet Union choose the song of other ex-Soviet nations; Andorra votes for Spain's song, and so on. Thus, it is almost impossible for some countries to win, regardless of the quality of the song or interpretation. However, a large number of voters have heard the competing songs in this contest (14 million Spaniards watched the 2008 program).

Similarly, votes for the GRI awards were disqualified if the voter reported having a relationship with the company for which he/she was voting.

These comments should not be interpreted as being against awards. Indeed, awards can provide the right incentives to improve sustainable practices. However, this is only the case when winners are properly selected and the results reflect the objectives of the award. The skepticism expressed here is with regards to the voting process used and the uneven distribution of voters for something as specialized, complex and hard to compare as sustainability reporting. This type of popular voting process is extremely sensitive to promotional campaigns encouraging people to vote that are carried out by interested organizations in some of the countries. Appealing as it may seem, the popular voting process is a very imperfect way of selecting what can then be advertised to be "the best report." While jury selection may have some subjectivity, it seems to be a preferable procedure.

Let's read the winning reports and verify their quality ourselves!