

For World Bank's Briscoe, Study of water is vital, moving

BY LINDA KASTLEMAN

“There is going to be no more water,” says Dr. John Briscoe, stating the inevitable. “We have to be better at managing what we have.”



Dr. John Briscoe

Briscoe, World Bank country director for Brazil and one of the world's leading water experts, has spent his career helping people around the globe better manage their finite water resources.

A native of South Africa and graduate of Harvard University, Briscoe was professor of water resources at the UNC School of Public Health from 1981 to 1986. In April 2007, he presented the School's annual Foard Lecture on water and human well-being.

He has worked with government water management agencies in South Africa and Mozambique and with the International Center for Diarrheal Diseases Research in Bangladesh. Associated with the World Bank since 1986, he has held numerous positions in research, operations and policy. In 1996, he became senior water adviser at the Bank, managing its more than \$50 billion in pro-

grams focused upon water resources, irrigation, hydropower, and water and sanitation. He has been the Bank's country director for Brazil since 2005.

“Water is not a global issue,” Briscoe says. “It's a collection of local issues. There are a host of water problems—drought, flood, scarcity, quality issues. Despite the variation, we need to think of water in an integrated manner. We need to make sure there is broad involvement by all the stakeholders and that there is an efficient use of limited capital. These are the common elements, but they manifest themselves differently in different natural and sociopolitical environments.”

Briscoe began his water career as a civil engineering student at the University of Cape Town, South Africa.

“What I liked about the study of water was that it was vital, moving,” he says. “It dealt with society. For a person who likes to do different things in his life, it's a perfect choice—since in a career having to do with water, one has to know natural science, the environment, history, culture, economics,

finance. There is always another angle from which to look at the topic.”

Briscoe was principal author of the World Bank's 2003 water strategy, which reversed a Bank trend toward withdrawing from large water projects. It can be found online at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTINFNETWORK/Resources/water.pdf>.

“Developing countries need infrastructure or they can't grow and people can't rise out of poverty,” he says. “The Bank is now investing a lot in large water infrastructure. They are working to ensure that the poor can get benefits and the environment is protected.”

He has advice for students now studying for careers in water management.

“For this generation of students, who will be leaders of the next, the issues around water, economic development and public health will be vitally important for the foreseeable future. Everywhere you look, there are floods, droughts, pollution. Conflicts are growing—between cities and farms, between consumption and conservation, between states, and even between nations. These challenges are exacerbated by climate change. Malthus was wrong about many things, but mostly right when it comes to water.” (Thomas Robert Malthus, 1766-1834, an English political economist and demographer, predicted that human population

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would increase at a faster rate than food supply, thus causing severe shortages.)

“I would say to students, no matter what your course of study in economic development, public policy, environment, engineering or public health, UNC can offer you a wide-ranging, interdisciplinary exploration of these important issues. UNC is strong on its own, but its proximity to and collaborations with Duke University and North Carolina State University allow the opportunity for a world-class education and exposure to every aspect of dealing with water issues.” ■