



A toast to South Africa's latest Stockholm Water Prize winner

South African born John Briscoe, the Gordon McKay Professor of the Practice of Environmental Engineering and Environmental Health at Harvard University, has been named the 2014 Stockholm Water Prize Laureate for his unmatched contributions to global and local water management. Debbie Besseling looks at his remarkable achievements that led him to being awarded this 'Nobel prize for water'.

Prof Briscoe joined the faculty of Harvard University in 2009. It was a return journey for him, as he completed his PhD in environmental engineering at the same university in 1976 (he completed his BSc in civil engineering at the University of Cape Town in 1969). At Harvard, he is mainly responsible for managing the Harvard Water Security Initiative. According to its website, the initiative strives to help build water-secure countries, an ambitious aim it strives for through 'focused programmes of interdisciplinary research'.

Prof Briscoe also serves on the faculty of the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, School of Public Health and Kennedy School of Government. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on water management and development. Not all academics like this part of the job, but to Prof Briscoe it is a privilege to have young bright people with whom to interact.

CAREER HISTORY

Throughout his career Prof Briscoe has focused on the issues of water, other natural resources and economic development. He has worked as an engineer in the government water management agencies of South Africa and Mozambique; and as an epidemiologist at the Cholera Research Centre in Bangladesh.

His colourful career history includes positions at the universities of Harvard and North Carolina; the Cholera Research Laboratory (now the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Diseases Research); the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (better known as OXFAM) as well as the premier development agency, the World Bank, where he worked in a variety of

research, operational, policy and management roles.

In his 20-year career at the World Bank, Prof Briscoe held high-level technical positions, including the position as the Bank's Senior Water Advisor, as well as managerial positions including Country Director for Brazil, with the World Bank's largest borrower. Briscoe's role in developing the governance and strategy of the World Bank is the subject of a chapter in the definitive recent history of the Bank, by Sebastian Mallaby, entitled: *The World's Banker* (Penguin, 2006).

It is in Chapter Thirteen - Back to the Future, where Briscoe's early career is highlighted as well as the significant role that he played in the industry and water management. "In 1976, a young idealist called John Briscoe arrived in Bangladesh. He had left the oppressive atmosphere of his native South Africa; he had earned a PhD at Harvard; now he was coming to live in a village. He chose a place called Fatepur, which was perched upon an island that was surrounded by the tentacles of the world's second-largest river system. Life in Fatepur was miserable. For four months of each year, the village was under several meters of water. The houses were perched on mud plinths, and even in the dry season the nearest market was an hour away by boat..."

"During this time Briscoe had heard of a proposal to build an embankment around Fatepur, he was convinced that no good would come of it. He concluded after interviewing families across all social strata that the rising value of land resulting from the embankment would merely encourage powerful families to grab it."

During the 1960s and 70s the World Bank had moved from building physical capital to building human capital. Two decades later, Briscoe was working for the World Bank in Washington and, in 1998,

he returned to Fatepur. According to the book, Briscoe witnessed that substantial transformation had taken place, which to many was attributed to the embankment that had been built during the 1980s. What was evident was that the poor had shared in this progress. The poorest residents had now been given the opportunity to work as farm labourers.

“The World Bank under Jim Wolfensohn had moved away from infrastructure. It wanted to focus directly on poor people. It did not want to be guilty of harming the environment and it wanted to make peace with the NGOs. Everything pushed it to stay out of controversial infrastructure projects.”

Prof Briscoe says that he is very privileged to have been involved in formulating the World Bank’s Water Strategy, which brings developing countries into positions of setting policies within the World Bank.

When asked about the world’s most pressing water issue, Prof Briscoe says the following: “Water is a very local issue in many ways. You have such different realities even within one country, let alone between countries. That being said you have to look at every water reality in its natural, historical and political complexity – and all of these are different.”

Honing in on the water issues of the developing world, Prof Briscoe sees the challenge of many of these countries to still build the water platform for growth, i.e. to build the infrastructure and institutions necessary to get hydropower, reliable water for agriculture, reliable water for cities. The other great challenge is managing water’s variability. “In a sense this has always been water’s great challenge. How do you deal with the extremes of floods and droughts? This requires both good infrastructure and institutions.”

ACCOLADES


On discussing some of his recent accolades Briscoe highlights his nomination in 2011 by Harvard students for the Joseph Levenson Prize “to recognise exceptional teaching of undergraduates”, in 2012 the Marquand Award for “exceptional advising and counselling of Harvard students” and in 2013 the Star Prize for “exceptional mentoring of students”. In 2012 he was awarded a Hauser Grant for Innovation in Learning and Teaching from Harvard University.

His latest accolade, the Stockholm Water Prize, is a global award presented annually by the Stockholm International Water Institute to an individual, organisation or institution for outstanding water-related achievements. Over the past two decades, Stockholm Water Prize Laureates have come from across the world and represented a wide range of professions, disciplines and activities in the field of water.

In its citation, the Stockholm Water Prize Committee states that Professor John Briscoe “has combined world-class research with policy implementation and practice to improve the development and management of water resources as well as access to safe drinking water and sanitation.”

Prof Briscoe attributes the award to his life that has been filled with opportunity. “From my native South Africa, the United States, in all the countries I’ve worked around the world. I’ve had incredible mentors who have guided me through my career which has been a very important part of it. The award is recognition of a class of people who work on water, people who are both practitioners, who have one foot in the world of practice and another foot in the world of thinking and formulating policy. The award is recognition of those many friends, colleagues and mentors within this space.”

Prof Briscoe is the second South African to win the Stockholm Water Prize. Former Minister of Water Affairs & Forestry, Kader Asmal, won the prize in 2000 for his leadership in establishing the National Water Act and bringing safe water to millions of South Africans who before had been without.

- Watch the video interview of the Stockholm International Water Institute with Prof Briscoe here: <http://www.siwi.org/prizes/stockholmwaterprize/laureates/2014-2/> 

A quick look at the life of John Briscoe

Born: Brakpan, South Africa

Languages: English, Afrikaans, Bengali, Portuguese, and Spanish

Education:

1965 to 1969: BSc (first class honours) in Civil Engineering, University of Cape Town.

1970 to 1972: MS in Environmental Engineering, Harvard University.

1972 to 1976: PhD in Environmental Engineering, Harvard University.

Major field: Water Resources Engineering; Minor fields: economics and demography.

Membership of professional boards and societies

- Founding member of the major global water partnerships, which include: the World Water Council, the Global Water Partnership and the World Commission on Dams.
- Served for six years on the Water Science and Technology Board of the National Research Council.
- Member of the International Water Association’s Council of Distinguished Water Professionals.
- Member of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Advisory Board on Water.
- Member of the Murray Darling Basin Authority Advisory Council.
- Member of the World Economic Forum (Davos) Global Agenda Council on Water.