

# A hero of WASH: John Pickford 1927–2006

ROD SHAW

*John Pickford (1927–2006) founded the Water Engineering and Development Centre at Loughborough University 40 years ago. Rod Shaw discusses how he emphasized the technologies and multi-disciplinary approaches that were relevant for less industrialized countries – all of which were novel at the time. Rod wins the prize for this entry to the Waterlines 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary competition.*

**Keywords:** multidisciplinary approach, engineering education, water and sanitation sector.

JOHN PICKFORD MADE A HUGE contribution to the international water and sanitation sector, through his work at the Water Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC) which he founded at Loughborough University in 1971. John recognized that conventional engineering approaches to water and sanitation did not address the needs of developing countries, and argued passionately for a different approach. The postgraduate courses that he set up at WEDC were directed at the needs of developing countries and promoted an inter-disciplinary approach, combining appropriate technology, management, and social issues. This was very innovative at the time and met with resistance in universities in both developed and developing countries, which focused on teaching the latest high-technology approaches. John argued passionately that this failed to meet the needs of developing countries, and persuaded the British Council and other agencies to support young and mid-career engineers to learn different skills on the WEDC MSc programme which commenced in 1980. The participants themselves recognized the value of this, and the WEDC programmes became very popular not only for participants from developing countries, but also for those from industrialized countries who were working in the international water and sanitation sector. Over 40 years, these programmes have evolved to meet the changing needs of developing countries and continue to successfully attract participants from around the world.

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John was also a passionate advocate of low-cost sanitation when conventional engineering could only envisage waterborne sewerage systems. As an enthusiastic communicator of new ideas, John started organizing conferences to disseminate information more widely.

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*Rod Shaw (R.J.Shaw@lboro.ac.uk) is Publications and Communications Manager of WEDC (Water Engineering and Development Centre), Loughborough University, UK.*

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The WEDC International Conference became established as a major annual event in the sector, a five day conference alternating between venues in Africa and Asia, where researchers and practitioners from around the world could exchange information and get to know each other. John organized 26 of these conferences himself, continuing as long as he could into his retirement. This was a major task: at John's last conference, in Dhaka in 2000, there were 271 local and 162 international participants, and 115 papers were presented. This is a trend that continues with this year's conference attracting similar numbers of participants and papers.

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Throughout the 40 years of WEDC and the 30 years of *Waterlines*, John tried in various ways to ensure that engineering is people-centred. At WEDC, technology is studied not for itself but because it is a means of helping to improve the lives of ordinary people. And, of course, most ordinary people are poor, so the focus, then and now is on affordable, low-cost systems. Over the years, John gave a great deal of attention to sustainability, which in turn has stressed operation and maintenance (O&M) and how communities can be encouraged to take responsibility for O&M.

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As a true pioneer, John Pickford can rightly be called 'a great hero' of the water and sanitation sector, which was recognized, nationally, with the award of the OBE. John, however, would have been the first to play down such an accolade always acknowledging the contribution of others and that development necessarily involves cooperation between various organizations, groups and, of course, local communities.

Nevertheless John's contribution is remarkable. He understood the needs of poor people. He transformed the focus of engineering education and training. He raised the awareness of the multidisciplinary approach so necessary for effective development and he founded an organization which continues today in this tradition, delivering education, training, research, and specialist advice expressly designed to develop the knowledge and capacity of sector professionals.