Dr. Dennis Warner, Senior Technical Advisor for Catholic Relief Services, spent a busy 36 hours in Norman, Dec. 4-5, visiting with OU students, faculty and WaTER Center staff. Dr. Warner has over 40 years of experience in international development, working on water supply, sanitation, environmental health, and emergency relief. He studied history and engineering at the University of Illinois, and earned a PhD in civil engineering at Stanford University. Dr. Warner has held professional positions with the Peace Corps, University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Duke University, the World Health Organization, World Bank USAID and several engineering consulting firms. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is a humanitarian organization with projects in more than 100 countries.

Dr. Warner met individually with WaTER Center personnel, sharing advice from his vast experience on the mission of the Center to address holistically the challenges of water and sanitation in our partner countries. He reminded us that cooperation on the ground level was not a foregone conclusion, that men are often mobile in these communities while looking for work (women are less so), and that local preferences and/or taboos may mean the difference for success, even given a very effective technology. Universities can produce excellent research, but the guidance given at the NGO level must be geared towards project managers, not technical experts, and allow for local adaptability. So, for example, a manual on water treatment for excessive fluoride levels in Ethiopia must outline the 3 or 4 technologies (maximum) that would be effective given any potential set of water quality parameters. In other words, the guidance must answer the questions: “What will work for this water under these conditions?” and “What are the risks associated with this technology – given either success or failure?” Also, the question needs to be asked: “Has this been tried before? And if so, why did it fail?” Knowledge of local history is critical for the success of technology adoption.

Regarding sanitation, health has been shown to be much worse in open defecation areas, regardless of the level of water protection. CRS has been promoting the “arbor loo”, a small pit latrine that can be used as the site of a fruit tree planting, once its lifetime has reached up to a certain fill depth. Once the old pit hole is abandoned and planted, the new tree can use nutrients in the buried, aged compost to produce life-giving fruits. [More info can be found at: http://crs-blog.org/world-toilet-day-arbor-loos-do-double-duty/]

Dr. Warner’s visit culminated in a seminar presentation to nearly 80 students at the Sarkey Energy Center on campus.