

GLOBAL

FORCE

By David Marc

An SU focus on transnational non-governmental organizations will create leaders for dealing with the increasingly complex issues of today's world



AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko

Women sort raisins at a factory near Kandahar, Afghanistan, as part of a program started by a transnational non-governmental organization called the Central Asia Development Group. The program is designed to help the local economy through sustainable development practices. The raisins are purchased locally, then processed and cleaned for export. Many of the employees are war widows.

Consider this highly unlikely group of institutional bedfellows: Amnesty International, Al-Qaeda, Oxfam, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, and the Roman Catholic Church. The din of philosophical cacophony notwithstanding, these organizations share a number of common characteristics. All function independently of government control; none is a business run for commercial profit; and each reaches across borders to attract members motivated by a particular cause or area of concern that the organization embraces as its reason to exist. As different as they are in mission and method, all five fit the description of an ascending player in contemporary global power and politics: the transnational non-governmental organization (NGO). “With increasing frequency, we see citizens from around the world acting on their beliefs—whatever those beliefs might be—and making personal commitments through transnational NGOs,” says political science professor Margaret Hermann, director of the Maxwell School’s Global Affairs Institute. “While we may support or oppose the aims of particular organizations, there is little doubt that the transnational NGO is proving itself a viable means of bringing the energy and expertise of talented, dedicated individuals from many countries directly to bear on chronic problems and long-term needs all over the world.”

In her role as co-chair of SU’s Citizenship and Governance SPIRES group (see “Building on Strengths,” page 43), Hermann is working with faculty members from across campus to refocus, revise, and expand Syracuse’s research, curricular, and service priorities to reflect the growing role that transnational NGOs play in a broad range of global activities. “We want to make Syracuse University the place where scholars and people with career interests in transnational NGOs want to come to study,” Hermann says.

Positioned outside the familiar public and private sectors, which have dominated international development for centuries, transnational NGOs constitute what is now called the “third sector” in global politics. Some 45,000 such organizations are registered with the Union of International Associations, but some estimates put the true number in excess of 300,000. Despite phenomenal growth—there were perhaps a few thousand NGOs a century ago—most Americans lack a clear understanding of these organizations or the range of their undertakings.

Hermann sees an unmistakable generation gap in awareness regarding NGOs. “It’s truly amazing,” she says. “Ask a classroom of students under age 30, ‘What is



Tosca Bruno, a Maxwell School project administrator, meets with children of ethnic minorities in Vietnam. At the time, Bruno was on the World Bank staff, working as a liaison to non-governmental organizations there.

an NGO?’ and most get excited, mentioning the names of several or indicating that those are the organizations for which they would like to work. Try the same question on a roomful of 50-somethings and one gets a very different kind of response: ‘Why do they matter? What do they do? It’s still governments that determine what happens.’ The students know about the profound economic and cultural impact of transnational NGOs around the globe, but their parents, alumni, and others need to know this, too.” Steven Lux G’96, a member of the SPIRES team who works with Hermann, agrees. “Each year, increasing numbers of students and recent graduates express interest in directing their careers toward NGO work,” says Lux, who has worked for transnational NGOs in Southeast Asia that focus on rural development, health care, and education. “Syracuse is creating an extraordinary opportunity for them—and for itself—by addressing the growing research and professional needs of the NGO community.”

When a transnational NGO gets the mass media spotlight, it is usually in connection with a humanitarian crisis caused by war or natural disaster. This has fostered a widespread—and erroneous—public perception that the primary work of third-sector organizations is disaster relief. Hermann emphasizes that despite the visibility of such efforts, they represent only a small fraction of what transnationals do. “NGOs have made themselves a potent factor in the way things get done in the world today,” she says. “They are involved in collaborating on economic development strategies for communities in India and Brazil, fighting AIDS in South Africa, and defending human rights in Syria. You can find NGOs from the Arctic Circle to the South Pacific pursuing environmental goals, helping to set up educational systems, and immunizing children in villages and whole regions.”

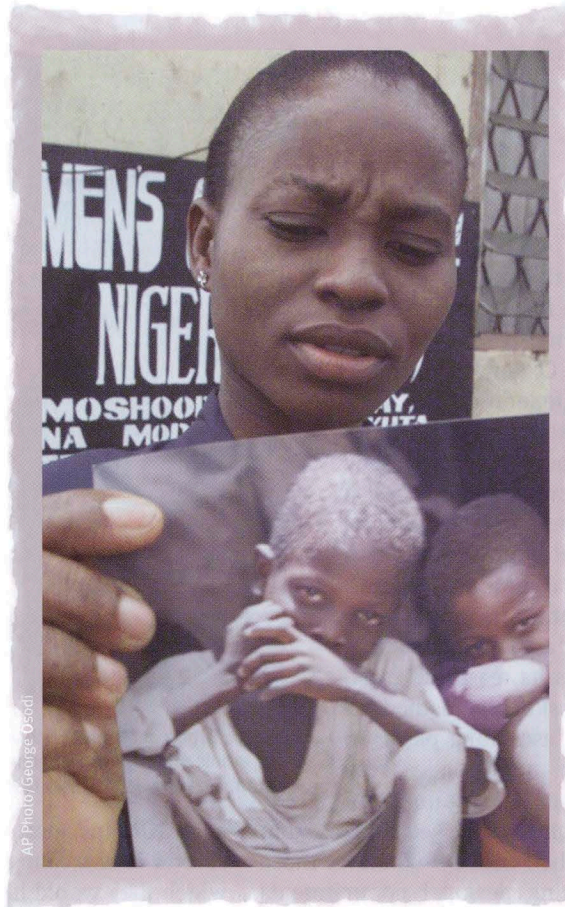
Tosca Bruno is a project administrator for the SPIRES

team. Like Lux, she comes to Syracuse as an experienced third-sector hand. During six years of service with the World Bank (an intergovernmental organization backed by governments), Bruno worked in Hanoi from 1997 to 2001 as a social development advisor, acting as the bank's liaison with Vietnamese and international NGOs. She also advised the Vietnamese government on ways of creating a legal and policy environment that would encourage and enable NGOs to work there. Previously, Bruno worked in Cambodia for PACT, a transnational NGO that helps local civil societies grow and effectively manage themselves. "A lot of Americans think NGOs are the same as 'not-for-profits,' but there's much more to them than that," Bruno says. "I think the term 'civil society organization' is more accurate, because when we talk about studying them, we make it clear that we look at more than just nonprofit status." To make her point, she cites an array of NGO "types," including transnational faith-based organizations, international labor unions, worldwide philanthropies, and even transnational organized crime groups and terrorist gangs. "It is important to remember that not all these groups are working for the public good, but that is all the more reason why they need to be studied," Bruno says. She believes that any realistic definition of the transnational NGO must remain flexible enough to account for its continuing evolution.

Veronica George '03 spent more than a decade working for NGOs in India before earning an M.P.A. degree at the Maxwell School. She is currently living in Kabul, Afghanistan, where she serves as governance advisor for Oxfam GB (Great Britain). "Our work at Oxfam comes from a rights-based approach," she says. "We believe that all people have social and economic rights, as well as political and civil rights, under international law. Therefore, we provide humanitarian aid and support development initiatives. In countries around the world, we work with partners, helping local organizations—usually other NGOs—by providing financial, technical, and capacity-building assistance."

George says Oxfam and the transnational NGOs it often works with, such as Action Aid, Save the Children, C.A.R.E., and Mercy Corps, offer distinct advantages for people who want to help alleviate or solve global problems in local places. "An NGO usually has a clear agreement to work with a certain part of a population in a country, such as the poor or the women or the physically challenged," she says. "This gives us more space to be innovative in our work."

A recent Oxfam project promoted the creation of women's *shuras* (councils) in Afghan villages. The *shuras* give women



Kemi Olumefun of the Women's Consortium of Nigeria, a non-governmental organization that combats child trafficking, holds a picture of child laborers in Nigeria.

a place to discuss concerns and participate in community planning and development. "This is extremely important in a culture that doesn't encourage women to be in public spaces," George says. "At the *shura*, women help decide simple, practical things, such as where the outlets for drinking water should be placed or how girls in the village should get to school." According to George, NGOs can react to problems more quickly than governments, which usually require cumbersome procedures. Moreover, transnational NGOs can reach the underprivileged without being considered partisan or politically motivated.

The very qualities that George and many of her colleagues find so effective are cause for alarm among others. Critics point out that in bypassing traditional political channels, these transnational NGOs are not accountable to the public and, as a result, can give short shrift to government practices in the name of efficient development. Writing on this controversy in *The New York Times*

last January, reporter Jon Christensen noted that within the NGO community "even the majority who think that NGOs should be accountable do not agree on how to accomplish that goal." Syracuse faculty members, working through the transnational NGO initiative, are addressing the issue of NGO accountability as well as other problems in need of research.

Fertile Fields for Research

Stuart Brown, professor of economics and international relations, is chairing the transnational NGO initiative's effort to establish a comprehensive research program. According to Brown, it is not just the general public that lacks information on the third sector, but the academic community as well. "Despite the proliferation of transnational NGOs, relatively little is known about how they function as organizations or interact with governments, intergovernmental organizations, private corporations, or each other," Brown says. "There is an enormous amount of research to do, not the least of which should be directed at defining just what an NGO is, and the relevant criteria for assessing its effectiveness." Brown has a particular interest in transnational networking in the former Soviet Union and other central and eastern European countries, where local NGOs are dependent on the funding and resources of transnational NGOs from outside the region.

SU's transnational NGO initiative has formed a number of working groups, in which more than 50 faculty members from a wide range of disciplines are exploring particular spheres of third-sector activity. For example, the gender and globalization group, co-chaired by professors Susan Wadley (anthropology)

and Beverley Mullings (geography), is examining transnational labor problems faced by low-income women, such as a lack of mobility that prevents them from “following the jobs” when sudden shifts in labor markets occur. The two-track diplomacy group, chaired by Bruce Dayton, associate director of the Global Affairs Institute, considers efforts of citizens’ organizations to bypass governments and directly manage seemingly intractable international problems in such places as the Balkans, the Middle East, and Northern Ireland.

Political science professor Rogan Kersh chairs a group seeking to define transnational citizenship, which Kersh believes is a much misunderstood concept. “The transnational aspects of citizenship do not imply a ‘world state,’ nor do they call for the dissolution of traditional national boundaries, as some people believe,” he says. “A transnational perspective begins with the recognition that many people—from cosmopolitan elites to migrant workers to asylum seekers—regularly cross territorial boundaries. We are seeking to understand what kinds of rights and protections such people require.”

Kersh cites the example of Mexican immigrants living in the United States. During the late '90s, the Mexican government abandoned a long-held policy and began granting dual citizenship to migrants, allowing them to vote in Mexican elections, even if they have become U.S. citizens. While Mexico has liberalized its view of transnational citizenship and the Bush administration has made several proposals to normalize the status of Mexicans working in the United States, some American states feel pressure to restrict such rights. California, for example, has considered measures restricting the rights of resident aliens to health care, education, and even driver’s licenses. “As mobility across international boundaries increases, the distinction between ‘citizen’ and ‘alien’ increasingly blurs,” Kersh says. “The notion of transnational citizenship acknowledges this blurring. We need to focus on these matters as they become increasingly relevant to current global realities.”

This spring, College of Law professor William Banks is leading a multidisciplinary team of six faculty members in teaching Perspectives on Terrorism, the first new course to gain inspiration from the NGO initiative. The graduate-level course is cross-listed by the College of Law, Maxwell (history and political science), and Newhouse (communications). “Our work on the SPIRES program helped shape this course and I’m hoping it will become part of an NGO certificate program that will be offered to professionals and doctoral students,” says Banks, founding director of the College of Law’s Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism, one of SU’s newest research centers. “My interdisciplinary teaching and research in the areas of counterterrorism and national security have, of course, intensified since the 9/11 attacks and so I deal with what you might call the ‘dark side’ of NGOs.”

Material covered in Perspectives on Terrorism includes information on such violent transnational NGOs as Al-Qaeda, which is held principally responsible for the 9/11 attacks; Hamas, which is behind most of the suicide bombings in Israel; and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Force of Colombia, in English), which is funded by drug lords. “These organizations are ‘non-state actors’ in international politics and they

are not engaged in legitimate business activities,” Banks says. “Therefore, they qualify as NGOs, along with the well-known charities and cultural foundations.”

Community Spirit in the Age of Globalization

The complex, interdependent relationships that characterize the contemporary world make it impossible for nation-states to perform all necessary tasks effectively. But as the growth of the transnational NGO phenomenon indicates, more people than ever are becoming involved in changing the world—and changing it in ways that match their own visions of what is fair, good, and just. They express universal, eternal values in many of these organizations: improving agriculture among the hungry, bringing educational opportunity to the ignorant, and building health care systems for populations at risk. In some cases, they are organized around a single issue, such as protection of a forest or the removal of land mines, while in other cases they act on particular values growing out of their religious or political beliefs. “By expanding our knowledge of these organizations and creating awareness of the opportunities and pitfalls they present, the work of this SPIRES team dovetails beautifully with our aim of offering each student who comes to Syracuse University every chance to become a productive citizen of the world,” says Vice Chancellor and Provost Deborah A. Freund.

It used to be said that to help the hungry, it is better to teach them to fish than to give them fish. According to Steve Lux, in the age of the transnational NGOs, that metaphor needs updating. “If you want to help the hungry these days, you also need to make sure they have access to the fishing pond,” he says.

The world is ready for the transnational NGO and Syracuse University is preparing itself to train the next generation of leaders of these organizations.

Building on Strengths

The Academic Plan’s Strategic Partnerships for Excellence In Research and Educational Success (SPIRES) were created to build on the strengths of SU’s most productive and prestigious academic programs and to clear the path to the frontiers of research and graduate teaching. This is best accomplished through the innovative use of existing resources and by maximizing the advantages that SU has already established. Two central emphases of the SPIRES are collaboration among students, faculty, and staff, and investment in world-class research projects and graduate training.

There are currently four SPIRES under way: Citizenship and Governance (which includes the transnational NGO initiative); Collaborative Design; Environmental Quality; and Information Management and Technology. Strong internal and external partnerships in these areas are critical to SU’s future. They will increase sponsored research, assist in faculty recruitment, enhance graduate education, provide more opportunities for undergraduate research, drive curricular changes, and provide the skills necessary for 21st-century citizenship and personal success. While SU will undertake any number of initiatives, the SPIRES are purposefully designed to transform the institution.