It’s an

NGO World

... and we’re all living in it

They’re not always easy to define, but NGOs — large nonprofit organizations providing humanitarian aid, economic development, disaster relief, and a host of other services around the globe — are increasingly important players on the international scene.

From the blog of Dr. Jeanne Cabeza, a San Diego internist and volunteer with Doctors Without Borders, Port au Prince, Haiti, January 12, 2010:

“ar I thought I was going to die when the earth shook. I was at the Doctors Without Borders physical rehab center in Port-au-Prince. Five minutes after the quake, people were banging on our door in need of help. Within a few hours, there were hundreds of people waiting for surgery.”

There were five of them — three doctors, a nurse, and a janitor — who helped with bandages. And they worked all night, scarcely aware of the din in the background — the shouts of rescuers and victims, the relentless pounding of jackhammers boring into rubble. Whenever a victim emerged alive, they could hear victims and rescuers cry: “Long live the Red Cross!”

During these earliest hours of terror, the first responders were members of private organizations known as non-governmental organizations (or “NGOs”) that had established a presence in Haiti before the catastrophe. Within hours, Catholic Relief Services was organizing a system for distributing food and medicine. Red Cross organizations were distributing supplies to the hospitals left standing, and providing the forensic expertise needed to identify the dead. Within days, an airlift brought many more volunteers — thousands of professionals and skilled workers representing 140 countries, the United Nations, and NGOs from around the world. For the NGOs, Haiti was not their first epic mission, nor will it be their last. This is what they do — prepare for and perform vital services across the entire range of human activity.

As executive director of the United Na-
Nongovernmental Organizations

A Varied and Conflicted Universe

NGOs reflect the impulse and effort of like-minded individuals to join together to advance their values, beliefs, and interests. Before World War II, they were known as voluntary associations, charities, and leagues, and they spearheaded great social movements, including abolitionism, women’s suffrage, and civil rights. Following World War II, NGOs began to play a larger role in international affairs. The United Nations’ World Food Programme from 1992 to 2002, coordinated efforts to end famine in North Korea, avert starvation in Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa, and ensure food supplies during the crises in Bosnia and Kosovo. “In responding to all of these challenges,” Bertini says, “WFP worked in close partnership with NGOs like CARE and Save the Children. We established strategy, priorities, and structure, while they performed the vital food distribution services. There’s no way we could have reached 700 million people in that decade without a network of a thousand NGOs.”

Since then, NGOs have emerged as key players in international affairs. They are seen as a godsend by those they assist, and agents of good will by publics worldwide. Governments sometimes view them as allies, sometimes as opponents.

NGOs are the subject of a new and growing interest in the academic community, as evidenced by Maxwell’s Transnational NGO Initiative. (See sidebar, page 15.) And they hold a strong and growing appeal for career seekers who crave engagement with the world and the chance to make a difference.
Dealing With The Three D’s

Brent Nordstrom
‘99 MA (IR)
World Wildlife Fund

They’re called ‘the three D’s’—diplomacy, defense, and development,” says Brent Nordstrom. “Every major concern of the World Wildlife Fund, with 1,300 ongoing projects worldwide, overlaps the interests of the Department of State, or Defense, or the U.S. Agency for International Development. And, sometimes, all three! Besides the three D’s, there are still more concerned parties, including agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency and multilateral organizations such as the World Bank Group. To succeed in its ambitious and complex mission of protecting the future of nature, WWF must actively cultivate good relationships.

As the deputy to WWF’s senior vice president for policy, with responsibilities as a policy director, Nordstrom works with the U.S. government relations team and the multilateral relations team to develop mutual understandings with other organizations. “Position papers are not enough,” Nordstrom says. “We try to sustain productive dialogue with each party, keeping one another informed of our organizations’ positions. Some of these parties have become partners with whom we interact closely. WWF has undertaken ambitious projects with the World Bank, the Global Environment Facility, USAID, and other government agencies, within and outside the United States. Ideally, a good relationship can become a partnership. And partnerships serve as platforms for accomplishing mutual objectives.”

Nordstrom leads the development of the “green diplomacy” initiative, which is an effort to relate WWF’s experience, knowledge, and research to the priorities of the three D’s. “We are framing our positions in a way that emphasizes their relationship to foreign policy, and provides a mechanism for identifying shared interests,” says Nordstrom. “Many of WWF’s concerns could be integrated into U.S. foreign policy if high-level decision makers were easily able to factor environmental issues like natural resource scarcity into development issues like food security. That’s the process we want to enable.

“It’s difficult, but not impossible, to measure any single element in leveraging change,” says Nordstrom. “When you engage with other organizations, holding to your principles in a forceful dialogue, and when it becomes clear that they respect you and want to engage, despite your criticism — that’s most reassuring. It means that something is happening.”

— T.R.

and civil rights. They were first designated “non-governmental organizations” in 1945, in the charter of the United Nations, to distinguish them from governments, intergovernmental organizations, and for-profit groups.

Some NGOs operate within a single nation. Others are active across national boundaries. When their activities are confined to the United States, they are usually called nonprofits or not-for-profits, but may also be identified as interest groups or private voluntary associations. Familiar examples, mostly known by their acronyms, include AARP, ACLU, AMA, the March of Dimes, and VFW. When NGOs operate across international boundaries, they are known in academic circles as transnational NGOs — or, to most people, simply NGOs. Examples are Amnesty International, Engineers Without Borders, Rotary International, the Union of Concerned Scientists, the Salvation Army, and the World Council of Churches.

The large majority of NGOs solicit individual donations (while only a few then involve donors, or “members” in organizational decision making). Most transnational NGOs rely on a hierarchical,
professionally organized center, with national sections and country offices enjoying varied levels of autonomy and influence on the overall organization. Funding sources also vary greatly across sectors. While many humanitarian relief and development NGOs regularly accept government funds, the work of human rights or other advocacy groups could be compromised if they accepted financial support from governments or corporations.

The NGO universe is diverse by any measure. “Their activities embrace everything from prenatal care to treaty-making,” says Tosca Bruno-van Vijfeijken, the director for education and practitioner engagement of the Moynihan Institute’s TNGO Initiative. “Their values represent the full spectrum of ideologies, from radical anti-globalism to reactionary white supremicism. There are animosities within the sector. Women’s NGOs oppose religious NGOs on questions of sexual and reproductive behavior. Environment and development NGOs have different perspectives on sustainable development.” It would be impossible, she says, to reduce their perspectives to a single, simple NGO archetype.

There is one feature, however, that all NGOs share: their independence. “They don’t have governments on their boards,” Bertini explains. “This gives them tremendous flexibility. It allows them to undertake projects that governments and other organizations can’t consider, let alone perform. It enables them to work alone or in shifting coalitions with the UN, with governments, and with other NGOs — whoever is right for the task.”

**The Limits of Power**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, globalization proceeded furiously, joining economies and peoples as never before, creating unprecedented challenges and opportunities. Multinational corporations saw their markets double within the decade. NGOs grew exponentially, building on their experience in global operations. “They projected themselves into the everyday lives of people everywhere,” says Steven Lux, adjunct professor of public administration and director of executive education in Maxwell. For 12 years, beginning in 1991, Lux worked throughout Southeast Asia in a variety of

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**Linking Theory and Practice**

Maxwell’s Moynihan Institute houses an initiative devoted to better understanding the NGO phenomenon.

In a brilliant career marked by groundbreaking scholarship and leadership in the U.S. Senate, Daniel Patrick Moynihan also served as U.S. ambassador to India and to the United Nations. He possessed a profound understanding of world affairs and politics. It is fitting then that, within Maxwell’s Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, students pursue expertise in that same realm through the TNGO Initiative. (NGOs that operate in global affairs are often called “transnational” by scholars, to distinguish them from similar organizations that operate domestically—hence the acronym TNGO.) The TNGO Initiative offers a small community of graduate students a unique expertise in understanding the nature and dynamics of NGOs.

“Our approach is interdisciplinary, empirical, and experiential,” says Tosca Bruno-van Vijfeijken, the director for education and practitioner engagement of the TNGO Initiative. “Through NGO-focused course work, students gain new intellectual perspectives. Through research projects, they gain intellectual rigor. And their collaboration on case studies with NGO leaders in residence gives them a worldly understanding of practice.” Interaction with members of the NGO community is enhanced by two lecture series, one of which is presented by an active student group.

One overarching research objective for the TNGO Initiative is to link the leadership characteristics of NGOs with their performance and impact. To advance that goal, researchers long needed a much larger data set on NGO leaders than any that existed. With the support of the National Science Foundation, the TNGO Initiative developed such a data set.

“Leaders from 152 U.S.-registered TNGOs, spanning five major sectors of transnational NGOs, were interviewed, following an interdisciplinary protocol,” explains Bruno-van Vijfeijken. “The interviews have not only given us the data we need, but advanced our research. Already, they’ve led to a more accurate characterization of the methods and objectives of NGOs.” In the future, this research lode may serve as a model for complementary data sets—one built on interviews with leaders of NGOs based in Europe, for example.

Recently, the TNGO Initiative introduced a program to address the needs of second-tier NGO leaders — assistant secretaries general, vice presidents, and their like — who wish to prepare themselves for top leadership positions. It is a one-week, peer-to-peer executive training program expected to draw TNGO leaders from across the world, from a variety of sectors. The first session will be held next fall.

For students, scholars, and leaders of transnational NGOs, the TNGO Initiative is the door to a uniquely dedicated, experienced, and cosmopolitan community. — T.R.
NGOs, including Thailand’s largest, the Population and Community Development Association. “The demand for professionals in health, conservation, and development was desperate everywhere,” he says.

In the decades since then, the NGO sector has grown rich, powerful — and essential. “NGOs provide a voice and a means of participation for those whose interests have been neglected or ignored. They empower people,” says Bruno-van Vijfeijken. “When it comes to development, they deliver aid more cost-effectively than states or intergovernmental organizations. While doing so, they develop and pilot alternative models of solutions they share with others. Finally, they provide a means for holding governments, intergovernmental organizations, and corporations accountable for their actions. They are a watchdog with a skill for mobilizing public opinion, a powerful force for human rights and civil liberties.”

Because NGOs represent change, it would be surprising if their activities did not create a backlash. Their globalist agenda helped fuel a virulent anti-globalism movement first seen at a meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999. Their positions on human rights and environmental issues are flashpoints.
People are often unaware of public health issues," says Gabrielle Fitzgerald, deputy director of policy and advocacy for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s Global Health Program. “When you inform people and touch their convictions,” she says, “they’re often more willing, even eager, to become involved. When we conduct public education campaigns on health issues, we see donations to our grantees skyrocket. The challenge lies in creating awareness that leads to commitment."

The foundation is not an NGO, but a philanthropic organization that partners with NGOs and others to advance innovations in health, development, and learning. It has made substantial grants to organizations in South and East Asia, Africa, and the United States. Fitzgerald and her team are charged with three objectives: to ensure that policy makers and opinion leaders see the value of investing in global health; to use the foundation’s "convening ability" to bring people together to advance mutual interests; and to decide how to use its leadership strategically to advance its agenda—to decide, for example, how an appearance by Melinda Gates on 60 Minutes could fit in with its overall strategy.

The eradication of polio is a current priority for the Global Health Program, and the foundation has committed significant resources to that end. “We’re so close to it,” says Fitzgerald. “An effective polio vaccine is widely available, but there are four countries in the world where the virus remains. To wipe out polio completely, it’s essential that children in affected areas receive a life-saving vaccine—a task that’s well within reach.” The target date for achieving this historic goal is 2012.

Before joining the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Fitzgerald spent five years with the U.S. Agency for International Development, involved in HIV/AIDS and emergency programs. Before that, she was the communications director of the U.S. Committee for Refugees, and a fellow with USAID in Zambia.

“Zambia was my first exposure to international development issues,” she says; “and when I returned to the United States, I was certain that I wanted to use my political and communications background to draw attention to development issues. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has given me that opportunity.” — T.R.
faith-based organizations, registered charities, and countless others joined by their values. “Civil society is their space. It’s the free market of ideas,” says Lux. “It’s the arena for argument, collaboration, conflict, and reaching consensus.”

Within civil society, NGOs coalesce with like-minded groups and strive to frame the debate with those who hold contrary views. They mount sophisticated advocacy campaigns designed to mobilize support for their positions at the grass-roots level. Beyond civil society, they form a bridge with government, not only through their lobbying efforts, but through partnerships with departments and agencies in thousands of projects in the field and at the drawing board. They are a bridge to the private sector, as well. Some conservation NGOs join in projects with corporations, or grant their stamp of approval to corporate policies that meet NGO-established norms. In their interaction with government and the private sector, NGOs are civil society’s most effective voice for globalization, as well as its agent.

Some observers claim to see the frail infrastructure of a global civil society emerging or already in place, largely through the efforts of NGOs. “We can’t speak of a global civil
society’ in the absence of a global state,” says Schmitz. “But we might say there are ‘islands’ of civil society, most striking in international law on human rights. The Convention Against Torture, ratified in 1994, was a breakthrough, followed by conventions on children’s rights, child soldiers, land mines, ‘blood diamonds,’ and others. These high treaties and conventions create a semblance of global governance, as well as mechanisms of change. None of them would exist if not for the efforts of NGOs.”

The genius of NGOs for inventing “mechanisms of change” reflects a broader culture of innovation in which leaders have the autonomy to develop alternative ways of getting things done. It is a culture that provides patient, long-term support for systemic solutions over immediate results. And it is the foundation for a strategy of empowerment with a beginning, middle, and end. As program director for World Vision International, Chance Briggs ’97 MPA is guided by that strategy in his current mission in Mozambique.

“It’s not enough to lay claim to idealism,” Briggs says. “We have to prove our case, measuring results in terms of their intended impact. If we build schools, we have to show what they’ve meant for kids. In performing our mission, we have to develop local leaders who will be able to take ownership. This means we must rethink our self-image. Rather than seeing ourselves as service providers, we should begin seeing ourselves as facilitators, lending a helping hand, empowering local leadership, then moving on.”

Through such visionary yet sure-handed approaches as this, NGOs have proved themselves adept in addressing the many concerns sparked by globalization. Through their example of high performance and achievement, they have found supporters in government and the private sector. They propose to use the leverage they have gained to break political deadlock and shape consensus on global emergencies such as climate change. Their skill as facilitators will be put to the test. It could prove decisive.

The Lure of NGOs

As they enter the Maxwell School, many students imagine their next job will land them in the NGO sector. Nationwide, graduate students are flooding into international relations programs. This is especially true at Maxwell, which is one of only 29 members of the Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs, and whose IR program is ranked among the nation’s top ten by Foreign Policy magazine.

And, while they are drawn by any number of factors, according to Nell Bartkowiak, IR graduate director, a third or more of them are thinking about NGOs. “Students know that NGOs are big players in affecting policy and implementing change, especially overseas,” she says.

Many prospective students tell Bartkowiak they want to “learn more so they can make a difference in the world. They feel they can make that kind of unadulterated change working in NGOs,” she says. And they want to make that change overseas.

Some of these students fit the do-gooder stereotype: unmotivated by high salaries, eager to get their hands dirty, fearful of the stifling red tape they associate with government jobs. A few defy the stereotype — more interested in policy than “dirty hands,” for example.

IR recently created a career track in Transnational Organizations and Leadership — possibly the only program of its kind within an IR degree program. The track includes courses such as Non-State Actors in World Politics, Social Movements Theory, Culture in World Affairs, and Governance & Global Civil Society.

Maxwell’s Public Administration Department also has more graduates entering the NGO market. Alongside its already strong curriculum in domestic nonprofit management, PA offers a program in international development. Enrollment in this area has quadrupled in the past 15 years. PA has added courses on NGO management in transitional and developing countries, global health policy, and other topics. All this is meant to supplement MPA fundamentals.

“The core skill sets of the MPA, public management and policy analysis, are important and useful wherever you go. Good management and good analysis are not skills specific to the domestic market,” says Christine Omolino, associate director of PA.

In Career Development, director Alexandria Bennett has modified resources, presentations, and counseling to serve interest in NGOs. Of the 15-20 visiting professionals who speak on careers each year, roughly a third represent NGOs. Career guides have been supplemented with fields such as humanitarian aid and microfinance.

Many graduating students will indeed enter NGOs; the sector absorbs more than a quarter of PA’s graduates and roughly half of the IR’s. But many will choose another path. At present, NGOs are overrun with potential employees. And the NGO lifestyle can be challenging, involving travel, distance, modest pay, and occasional risk.

Bennett is philosophical about all of this. Even for students who never enter the sector, NGOs inspired them to pursue a public-service career; educated about career options, they found ways to apply their skills and enthusiasm closer to home. And for students who land an NGO job but only gut it out for a few years, it’s still an intense, broadening experience. They come home well-positioned for almost any next job.

Some observers assume that NGOs siphon talent away from America’s public-affairs challenges, but Bennett isn’t worried. “They aren’t going to travel forever,” she says. “They’re going to come back. We’re not losing them.”

“In the end,” says IR’s Bartkowiak, “they realize there are opportunities to do good things in all sectors.”

— Dana Cooke