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Inside: Music,  
Film, Art and Events

**FREE EVERY WEDNESDAY**

European  
**Newspaper**  
AWARD

NEWSPAPERDESIGN & CONCEPT



## **TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE: ACTIVISTS AT WORK** PAGE 6

COMMUNISTS ONSCREEN PAGE 4 FEMINISTS IN BATHTUBS PAGE 4

SYLVIA LOUD AND KRISTEL CLEAR PAGE 5 PAUL CHAN'S SHADOW PLAY PAGE 11

HENK WILDSCHUT



# TRANSCENDING BORDERS

The Amsterdam branch of the Transnational Institute isn't afraid of taking on great themes and big problems to make the world a better place to live— one placard at a time.

BY DARA COLWELL  
PHOTOS BY HENK WILDSCHUT

If it's axiomatic to say the world is complex—culturally, sociologically, economically, ecologically and politically—the folks at Transnational Institute (TNI), an international network of activist scholars based in Amsterdam, like it that way. 'In the Eighties, one-issue organisations were fashionable, but TNI always resisted that. It's important to make connections because there are no separate issues,' says Fiona Dove, its director for the past 12 years.

As an organisation, TNI is nearly impossible to pigeonhole, mostly because it has fingers in countless foreign pies. On any given day, TNI focuses on drug trafficking, democracy, militarism, nuclear weapons, international and bilateral trade, environmental degradation, water justice and alternative regionalisms—and that's just for starters. 'As I see it, we're on the cutting edge of many global issues,' says Dove, a South African schooled in trade unions, and who appears nicely tanned from a two-week stint in Nairobi at the World Social Forum. 'Our role is to challenge people to think and be open to critical questioning. It's fascinating, passionate work.'

And so is TNI's history. The institute got its start as an initiative spawned by American progressives hungering for an international space to challenge US policy in Vietnam. Convinced that global problems required global solutions, they invited Latin American and European

intellectuals—Jean-Paul Sartre included—to join their ranks. In 1973, the organisation solidified its purpose in a Paris restaurant, and soon after found digs in Amsterdam, long considered a Valhalla for freedom and social tolerance. Since then, the institute has committed itself to providing critical intellectual analysis for progressive social movements, organising events, photo exhibitions and film screenings, and publishing books and hundreds of policy briefs on 'sticky' issues.

TNI's first major project came about unexpectedly when its second director, Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier, was assassinated in Washington DC in 1976. The death of Letelier, a leading critical voice against Augusto Pinochet's dictatorial regime, immediately caused international scandal and, up until 9/11, was considered the most infamous act of international terrorism to take place on US soil. Letelier's murderers were linked directly to the CIA—which caught wind of the assassination plans two months before—and, of course, to Pinochet. TNI's immediate role was to keep Letelier's memory alive and bring Pinochet to justice for complicity in his murder. While Pinochet was never convicted—the exiled dictator died in Britain in 2006 under house arrest, having never faced trial for his brutal 16-year regime—TNI has continued pressing for international legal accountability.

'The wider framework we're promot-

ing here is that you can't simply be an international leader and act with impunity. There should be an international network in place to hold leaders known to commit large-scale human rights violations to account,' says Oscar Reyes, TNI's communications officer. According to Reyes, a young, highly articulate former lecturer at the University of Essex in the UK, this idea is currently being tested in Germany, where several civil rights legal groups have accused former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld of war crimes, stemming from the treatment of prisoners held in Iraqi and Cuban military jails. 'We need to hold leaders accountable, especially when they're not being held accountable in their own countries,' he says.

This notion is particularly relevant now, considering the recent release of *The Last King of Scotland*, a film trailing the rise of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. Amin, a former army commander who staged a coup to avoid arrest for misappropriating army funds, seized power and slaughtered 500,000 people during his regime, according to Amnesty International figures. He fled to exile in Saudi Arabia, but was never prosecuted for his crimes, a poignant fact the film fails to mention—perhaps because it might stir a wider political debate over how governments selectively turn a blind eye. Compare Saddam Hussein, who was captured and executed in a record three years, to Pol Pot, the Cambodian leader

who killed 1.5 million people, and died peacefully under house arrest in Thailand 20 years after his bloody regime had ended.

As TNI pushes for legal liability against humanitarian crimes, it is simultaneously promoting analysis of the current wars the world is facing, especially the elusive War on Terrorism. It will soon launch a book, *Selling U.S. Wars*, the title a play on America's active global role, examining the strategies used to justify war.

'We're looking not just at the Iraq war, but wars we've seen in the last decade or so,' says Dove, listing a number of factors that typically pre-empt military intervention: invading an undemocratic state to make it democratic ('A total contradiction—what's the logic behind killing a million people and destroying a country's social fabric in order to "create democracy"?'); massacres, such as Kosovo, that demand humanitarian intervention; concerns such as weapons of mass destruction that indicate a need for regime change; or America's notion that it has a unique, universalising role in restoring human rights to failed states. 'All of these are being used to distort what's really going on and the public is being conned,' says Dove.

According to Reyes, wars used to be simpler: one country versus another. Now they're complex, and the 'enemy' isn't so easy to identify, remaining either invisible or impossible to pin down, potentially



everywhere or just around the corner. 'This kind of threat actually fuels terrorism and allows states to get away with more. It's a twisted logic,' he says, mentioning Osama bin Laden, whom, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, America pursued to Afghanistan to destroy al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime that supported it. Bin Laden was never found and since then, military intervention has led to civil war and famine. And yet the 'enemy' persists—only 'elsewhere'.

The war in Afghanistan has directly bled into another one of TNI's projects, the ongoing, all-encompassing war on drugs. Battered by fighting and a scarcity of resources, Afghanistan's living standards now rate amongst the lowest in the world. In order to survive, many Afghan farmers have returned to growing opium, a bumper crop trailing back to the country's Soviet days. Last year, Afghanistan's opium harvest reached a record high,

according to the UN's Office on Drugs and Crimes, which snagged the attention of the international community, who called for aggressive efforts to eradicate the crop. However, few alternative livelihoods currently exist for Afghans, civil war and famine ravage the country and its infrastructure is seriously wanting.

'These are poor farmers we're talking about. When their crops are destroyed and they don't have opium to offer as credit, they sell their daughters,' says Dove, adding that it's crucial to understand the bigger picture of anti-drug operations. 'One has to understand there are no quick-fix solutions and much bigger consequences for the locals.'

Proving how interrelated issues are, Afghanistan's booming opium trade has affected neighbouring Pakistan's efforts to control the spread of HIV, as addicts continue switching from smoking opium to injecting it as heroin. Ironically, the

US, the only country in the world to explicitly ban government money for needle exchanges, threatened to withdraw funds from the UN's own needle exchange programmes—which brought TNI into the picture. 'The plain stupidity of this is just incredible,' says Dove, explaining that TNI helped argue the case for needles and lobbied the World Health Organization and other UN drug agencies to take the matter seriously. 'When the European Union went to its next agency meeting, it was a unanimous decision to go the harm-reduction route—because the social costs were worse,' says Dove.

Of TNI's other causes, climate change, biofuels and water justice are high on the agenda. Its book, *Reclaiming Public Water*, which examines alternatives to privatisation, is an extremely successful advocacy tool and has been translated into 13 languages. TNI also helped establish the organisation Carbon

Trade Watch to monitor the impact of pollution trading on environmental justice and highlight the interconnectedness of climate change issues, while it is busy promoting participatory democracy worldwide.

There's a lot to do when you're taking on the world, but this is exactly what makes Dove tick. 'It's a pleasure feeling your work supports your principals and the sense that you're doing something meaningful for the world,' she says. 'It's a privilege to work for love rather than just making a living.'

Reyes feels the same about TNI: 'There's a lot to learn from each other and those engaged in the social struggle for a better world. There's a great deal of wisdom here—not just within these walls—but in the conversations we have. I believe in what we do.' **W**

[www.tni.org](http://www.tni.org)

## TNI HIGHLIGHTS FIVE IMPORTANT ITEMS THAT HAVE BEEN UNDER-REPORTED IN WORLD NEWS

**Carbon trading:** A market-based solution to climate change, carbon trading is a system where countries or individual companies that cannot meet emission targets (set by the Kyoto Treaty) can buy credit from those that beat theirs—in other words, offer a guilt payment. The first such project happened in the US in 1989, when Applied Energy Services planted 50 million trees in Guatemala in exchange for building a 183 megawatt coal-fired power station. Problem: the non-native trees actually caused land degradation. 'It's more important to tackle serious problems like over-consumption than displacing those payments to carry on polluting,' says TNI communications officer Oscar Reyes.

**Trade agreements:** Trade agreements are technically complex, mired with jargon and difficult to decipher, but they're what puts food on the table. The organisation responsible for trade is the World Trade Organization, whose stated aim is to promote free trade and stimulate economic growth. Many critics argue, however, that the WTO is biased toward rich countries and multinational corporations, undermines labour standards, and

makes decisions behind closed doors with absolutely no democratic accountability. Until the massive Seattle street protests in 1999, the WTO typically avoided political scrutiny, 'but this is politics done in the language of economics,' says Reyes. The ongoing issue: accountability for concerns health, safety and environment that are routinely ignored.

**America and AIDS:** The US government has consistently damaged efforts to tackle HIV/AIDS on a global level through the pressure it puts on the UN agencies engaged in this issue. This is not just a question of abstinence policies (the official US policy is ABC—Abstinence, Be faithful, and Condom use—but in practice the first two of these are stressed most heavily), but also its approach to pragmatic, harm-reduction measures like needle exchanges to help reduce the spread of the disease among IV drug users. There is considerable evidence that these measures work—yet in 2005, the US threatened to withdraw funding from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime if it supported this approach, and pushed instead for 'zero tolerance'. This is a major issue: injection-drug use accounts for the major-

ity of HIV cases in China, Iran, Russia, Afghanistan, Nepal, the Baltic states and all of Central Asia, as well as much of Southeast Asia and South America. The US has also sought to attach strict ideological conditions to AIDS funding it gives to national governments.

**Water privatisation and the return of public water:** Over a billion people worldwide cannot reach or afford clean water. Over two million people, mainly children, die every year because they have unclean drinking water, while poor sanitation is a major cause of disease for millions more. In the 1990s, the World Bank, IMF and regional development banks (cheered on by the water corporations) pushed privatisation as the only solution to meet development goals and improved water supply, but it has failed to deliver. Instead of seeing access to drinking water and sanitation as a basic right, a pre-condition for a dignified livelihood, they sought to impose 'full cost recovery' mechanisms, charging a market rate for water. Water was seen not as a basic resource, but as an exploitable commodity. Subsidies were scrapped, and prices were hiked. In Bolivia, for example, the arrival of Bechtel (through its Aguas de Tunari subsidiary) in Cochabamba heralded an

instant 60% price increase. This resulted in popular opposition from poor residents: Bolivia saw successive 'water wars' until Bechtel was forced to leave (the company then demanded 50 million US dollars from Bolivia—and tried to use a Bilateral Investment Treaty between the Netherlands and Bolivia to do this, having first shifted the company registration of Aguas de Tunari to the Netherlands—but it was forced to drop the case).

**World Social Forum and alternatives to corporate-driven globalisation:** There are significant organising efforts to create political alternatives to globalisation. The largest of these is the World Social Forum, first held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in January 2001, which has just met for the seventh time in Nairobi, Kenya. It is timed to coincide with the World Economic Forum, the annual meeting of corporate leaders and heads of state in Davos, Switzerland. The WSF is a space to discuss alternatives and create strategies that will bring them closer. It has also encouraged initiatives across a range of issues—from alternative media to networks on water justice, human rights and climate change. Despite this, the Davos meeting still attracts more than 10 times the press coverage. **W**