Equally powerful, however, was the resilience of the Liberians he met. “It brings tears to your eyes to talk to people who have been through so much, who have such will and spirit to put their lives back together—to go to school again, to start small businesses, to rebuild their houses.”

It was that hope for recovery in several world regions that inspired the States at Regional Risk (SARR) project, led by Knauft along with some faculty colleagues and graduate students. The Carnegie Foundation provided funding for the $483,276 project, which runs from January 2008 to August 2011. SARR aims to bring together scholars, practitioners, policy makers, and constituents in areas of instability or civil war in recent years, in hopes of cultivating networks of influence that bridge research and practical engagement to foster recovery. It focuses on West Africa, East-Central Africa, South and Central Asia, and parts of the Americas.

“We wanted to complicate that. These are obviously regional conflicts, and it’s very hard to treat them only at the level of the nation-state. And the conflicts travel across regions, so the relationship between Sierra Leone and Liberia and Guinea and the Ivory Coast, for instance, is crucial.”

Key to the project will be workshops and conferences in the target areas involving academic specialists, political leaders, and on-the-ground practitioners from humanitarian organizations. Graduate students will also receive career training that combines scholarly understanding and practical engagement in states at risk.

In fact, Knauft credits two young scholars for charting new intellectual territory for SARR. Martha Carey, a student in the Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts, and Jean-Hervé Jezequel, a history department lecturer, both worked for Doctors Without Borders in Africa and have used their studies to make more intellectual sense of their experiences.

“I’ve become increasingly convinced in my own work that theory and practice need to be superseded,” Knauft says. “And I’ve been encouraged in that by my students who in their lives are putting together practical engagement and scholarship in very creative ways. We have a tremendous capacity at Emory to bring those things together.”

by Allison Adams