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## UNIT 3 CIVIL SOCIETY: LOCAL AND GLOBAL

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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Global or trans-national civil society refers to the increasing institutionalisation of citizen and non-governmental organisations in the governance of the complex interdependent world of nation states through which shared or public goods are pursued. Its emergence can be traced to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century with the rise of global economy and when issues and activities like abolitionism, temperance, workers' rights and women's suffrage became trans-national in nature. The impetus to global civil society is closely linked to the widespread desire for a more democratic global political order, the emergence of groups and organisations that engage in global or trans-national public debate. The sovereign nation states continue but the world system is increasingly composed of layers of international institutions and organisations, individuals and groups. The idea of global civil society emerges from certain strands associated with the Enlightenment that assumes a global order informed by a set of shared values.

#### Aims and Objectives

This Unit would enable you to understand

- The origins and notion of civil society
- The meaning of global civil society
- The role and relevance of non-governmental organisations.

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### 3.2 ORIGINS AND NOTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY: LOCAL AND GLOBAL

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The idea of civil society can be traced to the word *koinonia* used by Aristotle to refer to notions of association, community and society. It means an ethical-political community of free and equal citizens in ruling and being ruled under a legally defined system of public procedures and shared values. However, it is in middle of the eighteenth century that the

distinction between the civil society and state emerged as part of the liberal agenda to undermine absolutism and theorise a conception of political authority as trust based on the consent of the governed. Civil society comes to be referred to aspects of human existence such as economic and professional relationships and associations, family and kinship structures, religious institutions, cultural organisations that exists outside the purview of political authority or the state and government. It is the realm of un-coerced and voluntary human association. The divergent voices within civil society are seen as an antidote to both the market and the bureaucratic and totalising tendencies of political authority. The expansion of democracy has the deepening and broadening of civil society with the nation state and between nation states respectively. Thus “civil society is the process through which individuals negotiate, argue, struggle against or agree with each other or with centres of political and economic authority. Through voluntary associations, movements, parties, unions, the individual is able to act publicly. Thus, in the early modern period, the main concern was with civil rights- freedom from fear. Hence civil society was a society where laws replace physical coercion, arbitrary arrests, etc. In the nineteenth century, the issue was political rights, and the actors were the emerging bourgeoisie. In the twentieth century, it was the workers movements that was challenging the state and the issue was economic and social emancipation- hence the further narrowing of the term” (Kaldor, 2003, p.585).

The concept of universal civil society is generally attributed to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) derived from the ideas of many of his predecessors- Desiderius Erasmus (1466/1469-1536), Thomas More (1478-1535), John Amos Comenius (1592-1670), Emeric Crucé (1590-1648)<sup>1</sup>, Francois Fénelon (1651-1715), William Penn<sup>2</sup> (1644-1718), Abbé de St. Pierre’s (1658-1743), Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733), Charles Louis de Secondat Montesquieu (1689-1755), Francios-Marie Arouet Voltaire(1694-1778), Jean Jacques Rousseau<sup>3</sup> (1712-78) and his successor, Jeremy Bentham<sup>4</sup> (1748-1832). Montesquieu points out that reason would help human beings discover universally valid rules of reciprocity, which, if enforced by positive law, would maintain peace, security and a certain degree of fairness within civil society. Reiterating Mandeville he counts on the transformation of human existence by the ‘spirit of commerce’ guided by the new science of finance or economics. Commercialisation would help human beings to get rid of their prejudices that veil their true needs. By recognising the common need and aspirations, human beings would discover their humanity and thus transcend previous religious, ethnic and national sectarianism. Once captivated by the allure of peaceful trade, human beings would look to military exploits and war with increasing disgust. Commerce would bring in frugality, economy, moderation, work prudence, tranquillity, order and rule. Montesquieu’s defence of manufactures, commerce, finance, riches and even luxury enables him to not only take his stand with the moderns and against the Greeks but also influence Bentham and Kant to regard trade and commerce as the basis of perpetual peace.

Kant in the *Science of Right* (1790) discusses the rights of nations, international law and also the universal right of humankind. Inspired by Rousseau’s emphasis on the dignity of the human being, Kant insists that ethically people ought to be treated as ends in themselves which implies that a ruler has no right to treat his people as objects for his ambitions and wars. The people have rights but do not owe any duty to the sovereign. According to Kant it is sovereign who has duties towards the people.

Kant’s insistence on human dignity leads him to emphasise some key concepts like individual rights, equality before law, the need for a correct legal procedure and an

educational system that will enhance reason. Moral law and the autonomy of the individual will form the basis of freedom which is possible only under the rule of law. Hence laws are necessary and it is our duty to respect the law. But law can be administered only in a state which is a union of human beings and law has to be administered without prejudice to rank and privilege. Laws are the conditions by which the will of one particular individual is harmonised and united with the will of others within the framework of a general law whose basis is freedom. Only in a republican state all human beings are free, equal, independent and autonomous.

For Kant, morality and self-determination is the same thing and a person acts on the basis of 'categorical imperative' which implies acceptance of general principles which one recognises within oneself and is not self-contradictory and is universally applicable. This framework allows Kant to make a synthesis between individual's own moral will and the universal law. Action follows a philosophy of right which allows the freedom of existence of an individual while allowing all others to exist equally on the basis of a universal law.

According to Kant, since human beings are endowed with reason by nature, the purpose of nature is to ensure the development of rationality for that constitutes the human essence. History is a process towards rationality and links progress with reference to the moral character of human beings. With his firm conviction in human rationality, Kant condemns servility and cherishes independence of mind. He regards paternalism as the worst form of despotism. Members of a civil society are united for the purpose of legislation and thereby constitute a state. Citizens are endowed with three juridical attributes that inseparably belong to them by right. These attributes are constitutional freedom, civil equality and political independence. Kant does not dwell into the ways and means of achieving a republican constitution but merely indicates a set of absolutely valid principles for conflict resolution. He is categorical that republican constitutions in individual states are the necessary stepping stones to achieving perpetual peace among all nations. His faith in republican ideals of 1776 and 1789 did not waver despite the excesses in France during the reign of terror, ultimately helping in the rise of Napoleon. The overall optimism of the Enlightenment and the rise of republicanism and constitutional liberalism convinced Kant that perpetual peace can be envisioned within the plurality of nation states.

Kant in his *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* (1790) states that nature compels people to find a cosmopolitan solution making a league of nations the natural outcome of social evolution. Until that is realised human beings must suffer the cruelty of conflicts. The way out is a moral order which can be brought about only through education, as that would help in building character in accordance with moral principles. The justice and conscience within us, and not with help of governments, would enable us to realise our destiny, the sovereignty of God on Earth. Kant laments that rulers spend very little money on public because they spend it on paying for past and future wars and is convinced that the ever-growing war debt would eventually make war impractical economically. Reiterating Montesquieu, he highlights the value of interstate commerce as paving the way eventually for an international government, as commercial activity and material prosperity are a panacea against war. He also concedes that realisation of this ideal would be slow and long but is confident that intensive education of all citizens in every country would make possible the ideal. Eventually, the conflict between the individual's obligation *qua* citizen to obey the law of the state and his obligation *qua* man to obey the cosmopolitan law will cease as the member states of the

universal confederation cease to contravene the cosmopolitan law. As a result, the moral responsibilities of citizen and man will coincide and citizenship would assume a universal status. Kant's argument for perpetual peace rests on the assumption that human beings have the singular potential for reasoning and moral development. But Kant does not advocate world government as centralised authority is detrimental to individual freedom.

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### **3.3 MEANING OF GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY**

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According to Keane, global civil society is born at the "confluence of seven overlapping streams of concern among publicly-minded intellectuals at the end of the 1980s: the revival of old language of civil society, especially in central-Eastern Europe, after the military crushing of Prague Spring; a heightening appreciation of the revolutionary effects of new galaxy of satellite/computer mediated communications (captured in Marshall McLuhan's famous neologism, 'the global village'), the new awareness, stimulated by peace and ecological movements, of ourselves of a fragile and potentially self destructive world system; the widespread perception that the imposition of Soviet type communist systems implied a new global political order; the world wide growth spurt of neo liberal economics and market capitalist economies; the disillusionment with the broken and unfulfilled promises of post colonial states; and the rising concern about the dangerous and misery produced vacuums opened by the collapse of empires and states and the outbreak of uncivil wars. Global civil society is about civic engagement and civic mindedness in a transnational, potentially global sphere; it is about private action for public benefit however defined" (cited in Anheir and Glasius, 2003, p.4).

At the global level, civil society organisations have emerged ranging from workers' societies such as the International Metalworkers' Federation and the International Conference of Trade Unions to environmental organizations such as Greenpeace to religious organizations such as Catholic Relief Services to Transparency International<sup>5</sup>. Two of the most famous global civil society organizations today are Doctors without Borders and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines<sup>6</sup>, both of which are recipients of Nobel Peace Prize. Just as in the national context, global civil society organisations do not fall under one definition and include social movements, religious and labour groups, associations and societies of all varieties. Of all the organisations that make up global civil society, the most important are the non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Keane (2003) points out that the 'sheer heterogeneity of groups, activities, and networks that make up global civil society - nonprofits, businesses, social movements, tourists, academics, artists, cultural performers, ethnic and linguistic groups, and so forth - threatens to make the term a description of everything and nothing'. They function within rules and norms of conduct. Global civil society, he insists, is still evolving and represents an open ended civic sphere and its importance will depend on its ability to become democratic, better integrated into governance institutions, and invested with universal values.

The term global civil society has assumed new meanings and is understood in different ways, since 1989, in the wake of democratisation in East and Central Europe, and in Latin America. First and foremost, the term has been taken up by the emerging new social movements articulated and expressed along non party lines- movements that developed since 1968, with issues like peace, women and human rights, environment and the like. Second, many Western neo-liberal governments see it as part of their 'new policy agenda', as a mechanism for facilitating market reforms and parliamentary governments through NGOs and not through social movements. NGOs like the International Committee

of the Red Cross and Anti Slavery Society have long existed but what has happened after 1990s is a proliferation of their kind. NGOs increasingly have begun to look as an alternative to state functions and at the same time, like the market as they compete with one another.

The elements of global civil society include non governmental structures and activities comprising of individuals, households, profit seeking businesses, not-for-profit non governmental organizations, coalitions, social movements and linguistic communities, and cultural identities. It includes media personalities, past and present, from Gandhi, Bill Gates, Martin Luther King to Aung San Suu Kyi, charities, prominent intellectuals and think tanks, campaigning and lobby groups, independent media, citizens' protest groups, internet groups and websites, trade unions and sporting organisations. It comprises of bodies like Amnesty International, Sony, al Jazeera, The Catholic Relief Services, the Indigenous Peoples Bio-Diversity networks, FIFA, Transparency International, the International Red Cross, Ford Foundation, OpenDemocracy.net and the like. Common to all these is the multilayered interconnectedness spread over vast geographical distances with cross border social activities and business outside the government.

In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro ushered in a new era of civil society-government interaction. There was a NGO Forum organised by the civil society groups alongside the UN meetings which exerted substantial impact on the policies emerging from the conference giving rise to the idea of 'parallel summitry'. After the Rio conference, parallel summits became the standard operating procedure for civil society organisations, which were themselves growing both in numbers and strength. Concerns like human rights, population, social development and women were increasingly coming under the focus of such parallel summits. The culmination of this trend was the World Social Forum (WSF) held for the first time in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, under the slogan 'a different world is possible'. The WSF was in response to the World Economic Forum held in Davos and was attended by 20,000 representatives of landless peasant groups, trade unions and human rights activists.

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### **3.4 NGOs: ROLE AND RELEVANCE**

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Non-governmental organisations do constitute an important part of global civil society though it would be unwise to see the NGOs as the only component. The NGOs made their presence felt in the 1970s but mushroomed in the 1980s coinciding with globalisation. The NGOs, in the present time, are involved directly or from the margins, in transforming national, international and trans-national political space. They come in different guises: as building blocks for a global civic culture, incubators for new international institutions, barefoot revolutionaries carrying globalisation from below, or new missionaries trying to spread western ideals from above.

NGOs are Western in origin with welfare issues as its focus like homelessness or poverty, championing the cause of under-served populations, or advocating the cause of the under-represented groups. Some are social movements- ecology groups or opponents of nuclear weapons. Many NGOs function with professional staff and long term funding from philanthropists and increasingly from governments itself. Many NGOs have evolved into global organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, CARE, Oxfam and Médecins San Frontières (Doctors without Borders).

Within the global civil society, grassroots organisations are major alternative organisational form and are parallel to the more professional NGOs. They often start as church-based organisations focusing on local issues, relying on volunteers than professional staff emphasising on self-help and voluntarism through membership contribution rather than large external grants for funding. NGOs, active in more than one country is often referred to as international NGOs (INGOs). These have exploded on the global scene in the twentieth century and more so since the 1990s. In 1914, there were 1083 registered international NGOs and their growth was modest with a steady growth at 30 percent in the 1990s to a total of 37,000 NGOs active in 2000. Their growth can be explained with reference to three categories of factors: (a) geopolitical, (b) economic/ideological and (c) technological.

The end of the Cold War in the 1990s has been one of the most significant historical developments ushering in the growth of civil society in East and central Europe and Latin America. The civic organisations such as the Czechoslovak group Charter 77 showed the importance of a vibrant civil society for the legitimacy of democratic government as they emphasised on transparency and accountability. Many western philanthropic foundations such as George Soros' Open Society Institute, Ford and MacArthur Foundations and many western government agencies provided aid and money to support civil society initiatives in East and Central Europe, and in Latin America.

The NGOs are perceived as efficient channels for government aid since the 1990s while till the 1980s aid was given government to government. The reason for the change in the perception is the rise of neo-liberal regimes of Thatcher and Reagan in Britain and the US respectively that stressed on replacing governments with markets as engines of growth and development. NGOs began to assist official aid agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the World Bank. The neo-liberal policies of structural adjustment and privatisation that insisted on rolling back the government created the space into which NGOs moved in. The World Bank estimated that over 15 percent of the total overseas development aid was being channelled through NGOs and the latter became more professional giving impetus to notions like 'faith-based initiatives' and social entrepreneurship.

Information Technology has played a crucial role in the emergence of NGOs enabling them to radically increase their capacities at relatively low cost. The internet changed the tasks of the NGOs, that of mobilising, organising, collecting and disseminating information. Besides the internet, mobile telephones also played a crucial role in transmitting information. Digital cameras helped in providing instant images of the causes that the NGOs stood for, protests or human rights violation or injustice.

Vaclav Havel, the former Czech President talks of 'global technological civilization'. "The post totalitarian system", he wrote, is only one aspect- a particularly drastic aspect and thus all the more revealing of its real origins – of the general inability of modern humanity to be master of its own situation. The automatism of the post-totalitarian system is merely an extreme version of the global automatism of technological civilisation. The human failure that it mirrors is only one variant of the general failure of humanity. It would appear that the traditional parliamentary democracies can offer no fundamental opposition to the automatism of technological civilisation and the industrial-consumer society, for these too, are being dragged helplessly along. People are manipulated in ways that are infinitely more subtle and refined than the brutal methods used in post-totalitarian societies. ... In a democracy, human beings may enjoy personal freedoms and securities that are unknown to us, but in the end they do them no good, for they too are ultimately victims of the

same automatism, and are incapable of defending their concerns about their own identity or preventing their superficialization or transcending concerns about their own personal survival to become proud and responsible members of the polis, making a genuine contribution to the creation of its destiny”.

NGOs are recognised by the United Nations. The Assembly, while considering the question of consultations with NGOs asked the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to adopt ‘suitable arrangements’ for the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), the International Co-operative Alliance and other NGOs. The ECOSOC, in its first session, began to consider the arrangements for the NGOs, in 1946, and these are in operation till today. The first question was to define the type of organisation that would be accepted into consultative status. The recommendation of the committee was that an NGO should be concerned with matters that fall under the purview of the ECOSOC, its aims in conformity with the UN Charter, it should represent a major proportion of the people in its field and it should speak for its members through authorised representatives. NGOs based in one country, referred to as ‘national organisations’, might be accepted if they were not members of an international NGO or had ‘special experience’ to offer. Thus the American Federation of Labour (AFL) was one of the first three recognised NGOs, but it had to withdraw in March 1950 when the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, of which it was a leading member, was given consultative status. Subsequently it was accepted that single-country NGOs would only be accepted after consulting the relevant government. Though single-country NGOs have always been part of the system, these are few in number and the emphasis, since the mid 1990s has been on large international NGOs. It was also decided that NGOs would be divided into three categories: Those that have ‘a basic interest in most of the activities of the Council’ are Category A organizations; those with ‘a special competence in a few of the fields of activity are Category B and those that are primarily concerned ‘with the development of public opinion and with the dissemination of information’ as Category C. The last one was abolished in 1950 and replaced by a Register of Organizations that would be specialised and consulted on an ad-hoc basis. In 1968, at the end of a major review of NGO arrangements, the labels were changed to Category I, Category II and the Roster, but the classifications remained essentially the same. The committees were initially established on a temporary basis but made a permanent standing committee of the Council once the consultative system was in place. The NGO Committee is responsible for administering the system but all decisions are subject to the endorsement of the full Council.

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### **3.5 ACCOUNTABILITY OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS**

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Accountability of civil society organisations has been a pertinent question due to broadly three reasons: (1) significant shifts in understandings of Governance; (2) the emergence of democratic deficit and (3) legitimacy challenges experienced by the civil society organisations. Regarding the first point, governments are no longer solely responsible for governance. It remains powerful and key player but increasingly there are more and more ways in which citizens are engaged in decision making about the management and distribution of resources, especially those that affect their day to day life. The modern nation state system is witnessing major process of internationalisation in three broad areas: (1) internationalisation of problems namely that political problems which a state face could be not of its own making but created from outside like environment, terrorism, crime (2)

internationalisation of culture and economies and (3) internationalisation of political decision making. All three overlap and reinforce one another. The second reason is the emergence of democratic deficit at the national and global levels where the contact between governance institutions and constituencies have been severed or weakened. The rise of monies interests in many political systems is partly responsible for the shift while the growing power of non-democratic and non-accountable global governance institutions, such as the IMF, WTO, and the World Bank is another factor resulting in a general distrust of political institutions in many democracies. The third reason is legitimacy challenges that insist on every institution having to earn its respect and not take people's trust as given. Unless the representatives of trans-national organisations are made accountable and the potentially negative ramifications of their actions scrutinised, their credibility would be at stake.

The reasons for this debate on accountability of civil society organisations is because of the mushrooming of so many no-profit organisations and citizens groups in recent years, particularly after the end of the Cold War. Second, scandals in many of the high profile non profit organisations has invited public scrutiny and placed them under public scanner. Thirdly, there is change in the role and involvement of NGOs which is becoming more policy directed. Accountability mechanisms instituted include voluntary compliance with ethical codes of conduct, selection of members to the Governing bodies in a manner that is transparent, the need to have annual reports, organisational and project evaluation, external assessment, audit of finances and regular channels of communications by means of newsletters, updates and briefs. Increasingly, civil society organisations are also judged by their effectiveness and performance. Funding from government, business firms, multilateral institutions or individual donor is made available if the NGOs are performing to realise their aims and objectives. An organisation that has weak links with the grass roots or has been unable to deliver or does not have the expertise on a matter that it claims to have is dismissed as ineffective and lacking in credibility.

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### **3.6 SUMMARY**

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'Think globally but act locally' has become the watchword of a world that is becoming increasingly globalised. Many problems are global in nature but their solutions have to be evolved at the local level. The growing complexity of the modern world and the enormous stress on the governments to deliver effectively has given credence to civil society organisations both domestically and internationally. In the last three decades trans-national or global civil societies have proliferated spreading across the world. This suggests that global civil society organisations will play an increasingly important role in the modern state system. New and complex issues, increase in global inequalities and poverty and future wars will make the nation state more fragile making the need for global civil society organisations all the more necessary. However, the modern state system will not be replaced but only complemented by these global civil society organisations in terms of expertise, flexibility and impetus for change.

Global or trans-national civil society refers to the increasing institutionalisation of citizen and non-governmental organisations in the governance of the complex interdependent world of nation states through which shared or public goods are pursued. Its emergence can be traced to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century with the rise of global economy and when issues and activities like abolitionism, temperance, workers' rights and women's suffrage became trans-national in nature. The impetus to global civil society is



closely linked to the widespread desire for a more democratic global political order, the emergence of groups and organisations that engage in global or trans-national public debate. Civil society comes to be referred to aspects of human existence such as economic and professional relationships and associations, family and kinship structures, religious institutions, cultural organisations that exist outside the purview of political authority or the state and government. Non-governmental organisations do constitute an important part of global civil society though it would be unwise to see the NGOs as the only component. Global civil society organisations will play an increasingly important role in the modern state system. New and complex issues, increase in global inequalities and poverty and future wars will make the nation state more fragile making the need for global civil society organisations all the more necessary. However, the modern state system will not be replaced but only complemented by these global civil society organisations in terms of expertise, flexibility and impetus for change.

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### 3.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

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1. What is global civil society? Explain its philosophical roots.
2. Distinguish civil society organisations at the local from the global level.
3. What is the role and relevance of NGOs?
4. Critically explain the issue of accountability of civil society organisations.

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### SUGGESTED READINGS

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Anheier, Helmut, Glassius, Marlies and Kaldor, Mary., *Global Civil Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003.

Boli, John and Thomas, George., *Constructing World Culture: International Non Governmental organizations since 1875*, Palo Alto CA, Stanford University Press, 1999.

Edwards, Michael., *Civil Society*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2004.

Kaldor, Mary., The Idea of Global Civil Society *International Affairs*, vol.79, no.3, 2003, pp.583-93.

Keane, John., *Global Civil Society?* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003.

#### (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Crucé's principal work, *Le Nouveau Cynée* or *The New Cyneas* (1623) in which he represented himself in the peacemaking role of Cineas at the court of King Pyrrhus (319–272 BC) of the Molossians, calls for a permanent assembly of princes or their delegates to arbitrate international disputes. As envisioned by Crucé, such a body would rely on moral pressure, employing sanctions only rarely, to enforce settlements. It would include the nations of Asia and Africa as well as those of Europe. He suggests Venice to be the selected city for all the representatives to meet and that the Pope should preside over the meeting. Of course, during the Thirty Years' War (1618-48), this was not acceptable to the Protestant nations. He suggests that armies should be abolished and calls for a world court. Crucé's importance is his foresight that international organizations are crucial to solve international disputes.

<sup>2</sup> Penn believed War could be prevented within a framework of justice for both individuals and groups if conflicts could be resolved in a fair way. Justice could be ensured if governments enforced laws impartially. For maintaining peace in Europe, he proposes a Sovereign Parliament of European states

to decide disputes collectively and enforce decisions though states could still maintain their sovereignty in internal matters, thus anticipating the European Union.

<sup>3</sup> Rousseau pointed out that larger federations uniting nations could help in maintaining peace and prevent wars.

<sup>4</sup> Bentham believed that trade among nations would promote peace and if people are allowed free contact with one another then the rationale for secret diplomacy and treatise would evaporate.

<sup>5</sup> Transparency International is global civil society committed to ensuring a world free of corruption. It was founded in 1993 with more than 90 locally established national chapters and chapters-in-formation.

<sup>6</sup> The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) is the result of six NGOs coming together to coordinate their work on banning anti-personnel landmines and subsequently sharing a common goal of a global ban on the use, production, stockpiling and transfer of anti-personnel landmines. It also advocates humanitarian mine clearance and mine victim assistance. The Campaign was formalized in 1993 with many manifestations at the national level. In 1997, the ICBL and its coordinator Jody Williams received the Nobel Peace Prize.