7.1: Conditions for Transnational Activism

The activism of global civil society groups has been facilitated by a number of specific conditions. First, a number of international organisations have supported the inclusion of civil society actors within international decisionmaking. For example, the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro provided a means for previously scattered groups to meet and create common platforms and networks. The European Union has followed a similar approach by integrating different types of civil society organisations within its governance mechanisms. Second, the state’s priorities for the allocation of resources changed in the 1980s and 1990s due to a trend towards the privatisation of industries. In that climate, it was common to see state-owned enterprises (such as utilities) being sold off to private companies. For that reason, in many Western nations, the state’s overall role in public affairs was reduced. In this context, civil society organisations were able to subcontract many functions from the state and take up new roles as service providers. Third, the globalisation process has generated a sense of common purpose among civil society actors. This has been a trigger for internal unification – increasing the sense of solidarity among civil society organisations. It has also united the groups that want to highlight the negative sides of globalisation. Finally, through the internet, groups from different parts of the world have been able to familiarise themselves with other political realities, like-minded organisations, and alternative forms of action. In this way, they have been able to increase their political know-how and their ability to join forces in addressing common targets.

The wider international system itself has offered an environment conducive to the development of these kinds of activities. By forming transnational networks, civil society organisations have used their leverage at the international level to achieve notable results. A transnational network can be defined as a permanent co-ordination between different civil society organisations (and sometimes individuals), located in several countries, collectively focused on a specific global issue. Major past examples are the Jubilee 2000 campaign, which worked through the 1990s to induce creditor governments and the International Monetary Fund to take steps toward debt relief for highly indebted poor countries. Another is the campaign to ban landmines, which led to the intergovernmental conference in Ottawa where the Mine Ban Treaty was signed in 1997. Ongoing campaigns, to mention a few, include mobilisation on environmental justice,
gender recognition, LGBT rights and food security.