

improved. However, the western countries, especially the US, still have strong influence in the region. Also, along with Russia, they are the major source of arms in the region. The NGOs in these countries can put pressure on their governments so that they, a) do not exploit regional conflicts to serve their strategic goals, b) do not export arms to the region.

### 3. Support local NGOs working towards creating public opinion in favour of better relations.

Public opinion needs to be changed in favour of peaceful settlement of disputes. This is especially true in the case of India and Pakistan. Kashmir and other disputes are only symptoms; the main obstacle to long term peace between the two countries is mutual distrust. Pakistan is convinced that India would like to see it destroyed. This fear has increased since the 1971 war and the formation of Bangladesh. Although India is too big to worry about its destruction, it is also convinced that Pakistan would never miss an opportunity to inflict damage.

In the past considerable damage has been done by politicians, governments and the media by exaggerating external threats. The government policies are also aimed at restricting unofficial contacts (tourism, cultural etc.) and trade between the countries.<sup>15</sup> In the absence of government will and/or ability to take bold initiatives, NGOs can play an important role in building public opinion in favour of improvement in relations.

Fortunately, although public opinion is in favour of strong defence, there is also enormous support (especially in India and Pakistan) for an increase in trade and cultural exchange. The local NGOs can use this potential. The international aid agencies and NGOs in developed countries can support the efforts of the local NGOs.

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<sup>15</sup>This is specially true for India and Pakistan. While there is a fair amount of trade of goods between the two countries through third countries such as UAE, direct trade between the two is almost non existent.