

ICVA CASE STUDY #4

ENGAGING IN IASC MECHANISMS

Short summary of the case study:

In early 2019 a new structure for the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) was introduced. Key aspects included the creation of the Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) to drive the strategic policy work of the IASC, and five Results Groups (RGs). ICVA advocated with the IASC Secretariat that in order to ensure that the policy work of the IASC responds to the reality on the ground, diversity in OPAG membership is crucial. ICVA enabled the inclusion of local and national NGOs in IASC coordination structures, notably the OPAG and the RGs, for the first time after years of advocating for inclusion of national NGOs in the IASC architecture. In reaching its objective, ICVA has also been working closely with the two other NGO Consortia: the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) and InterAction. In 2019, such joint efforts produced results, as three national NGOs became members of the OPAG.

Supported by the ICVA Secretariat, and working closely with InterAction, SCHR and other OPAG members, the national NGOs continue to contribute to the OPAG policies by sharing problems they face at the country level and proposing concrete and pragmatic measures to address them. Many of the action points agreed by the OPAG reflect the proposals coming from the national NGOs. However, in order to enhance further the positive impact that participation of national NGOs brings to the IASC structures, a number of recommendations are also made below.

Timeline of the initiative:

Since 2008 participation of NGOs in the IASC has expanded from three consortia to include six international NGOs, two members of each consortium. Considering the crucial role of NGOs on the ground, their increased participation in the global coordination structures became a must. ICVA wanted the diversity of NGOs to be well-reflected on the OPAG and therefore decided that one of the two seats allocated to its members on the OPAG would go to a national/local NGO. The [Foundation for Rural Development](#) (FRD) Pakistan was selected following an open call to national and local members.

In 2019, in its very first meeting, the OPAG discussed the need to be more inclusive and reflect better diversity, including the increased humanitarian engagement of local and national NGOs. As a network of international, national, and local NGOs and NGO Fora, ICVA advocated for more opportunities for national and local NGOs to become members of the OPAG and its RGs. This request was strongly supported by OPAG members and it was decided to give ICVA two additional seats on the OPAG and its

RGs to enable participation of national and local NGOs.

ICVA's role and influence:

ICVA opened a call to local and national NGOs to participate in the OPAG and its RGs. Some responded expressing interest, though there were a number of challenges that factored into national NGOs' decisions to apply, especially on the RGs. Among the factors were representation, resources, staff time/commitment, capacity, extent of knowledge of the work of the OPAG and its RGs, and their involvement in localization.

Following a selection process, two additional national NGOs – the [Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development](#) (ACBAR) and [COAST](#) in Bangladesh - became full members of the OPAG.

However, there were no applications for the RGs, possibly because the process was not clear at the time.

How the process and outcome reflected ICVA's priorities, and related to the Theory of Change:

Two of the "Top Outcomes" in the Theory of Change have been positively influenced by the involvement of national NGOs on the OPAG, notably:

- **Coordination:** as contributing to effective assistance and protection to those affected by crises; and
- **Cross-cutting issues:** NGOs navigate and influence changes in the response to affected populations.

How the work has influenced the humanitarian sector:

In the past the IASC had been seen as being non-diverse, with a sense of tokenism directed towards national entities, and the feeling that they were sub-contractors. Now, the inclusion of the three national NGOs has positively influenced the humanitarian sector, by providing a concrete, "field reality check" on humanitarian issues. Their participation on the OPAG means also a recognition of the crucial role played by local and national actors on the ground. It gives them space and voice in global coordination mechanisms. The expectation is that this will enable further progress on localization, inclusiveness and the diversity agenda in global coordination mechanisms.

What has been the positive impact so far?

The involvement of national NGOs in the OPAG is seen as an extremely positive development.

- Engagement of these NGOs adds field-level value to the global policy discussions, which otherwise may have remained at the largely theoretical level. Now, their voices are being heard.
- National NGOs have made substantive contributions at the OPAG, for example in the recent

discussions on localisation, quality of funding, and duty of care. They have come up with a number of concrete proposals that will benefit not only national and local NGOs, but the entire NGO sector as such. One proposal from the national NGOs was to have a localization discussion at the national level, including the accountability of the Humanitarian Coordinator in this regard. Another example is their advocacy of standard clauses in UN-NGO partnership agreements, which would enable better coverage of duty of care for NGO workers.

- They have also often steered the pre-coordination and preparation work among the OPAG NGO members. For example, they have been proactive in reaching out to other national NGOs to seek their views on various matters. At a partnership meeting in Asia, the three national NGOs had a meeting with other NGOs to share about their membership on OPAG. They also consult with national NGO platforms on topical issues discussed at OPAG. In this way, the national NGOs represent more than themselves.
- Through their participation OPAG is better equipped to deliver on its mandate.

What could be further improved?

- A challenge for both international and national NGOs is how they can contribute meaningfully in the OPAG and its RGs. While the majority of participants in the OPAG consists of UN Agencies, on many subjects NGOs steer the discussions. Ongoing efforts are needed to ensure equality both in representation and contribution to stay truthful to the inter-agency character of the body.
- Progress on localisation has been slow, particularly on issues including the sharing of power and resources coming out of the Grand Bargain. Although increased representation is an important step, it will take time for real change to take place in other areas.
- Other challenges confronting the national NGOs have been the UN-style discussions, and usage of acronyms and language unfamiliar to them.
- The fact that the national NGOs on the OPAG are all from the same region indicates the need for a broader global representation to cover other regions of the world in the future.

The way forward – some recommendations:

To further maximise the benefits of national NGO participation in the IASC coordination structures, the following considerations should be taken into account:

- **Global reach:** Because the emphasis thus far has been more thematic than geographic on the national NGO involvement, the scope of national NGO participation should be expanded to cover other parts of the world (e.g., Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East) in order to obtain a broader global perspective.
- **Country focus:** Although national NGOs have made a great impact with their participation and contribution to global coordination structures, their main added value remains at the country level. Here participation and contribution of the national NGOs remain weak. This is one of the issues that

the national NGO members on the OPAG are pushing to address.

- **Results Group inclusion:** As the Results Groups play a key role as part of the OPAG, a stronger involvement of national NGOs is recommended, in order to add ground-level voices to technical discussions.
- **Experience sharing:** The three national NGO members of OPAG should share their experiences with other ICVA members. This could be done through a webinar, and linked to another call being disseminated in the future to solicit national NGO interest in participating in the IASC structures.