



**Translating commitments to action**

ICVA Annual Conference  
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#ICVAConference2019

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*My take-aways in 1,000 words*

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## 1. Good will is not enough

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A shift in mind set has accelerated in the recent years but there is insufficient change in the humanitarian traditional system. The clock is ticking for so many and our ability to contribute to solve problems starts with our personal ability to be more inward-looking. A small dose of introspection goes a long way towards achieving personal growth, and this translates into better leadership.

During the day's proceedings, there was a clear call for Leadership to act courageously to change the existing "rules of the game". While populist leaders stand in opposition to commitments made, the humanitarian community should stand together and work collectively to uphold the humanitarian principles. The discussions are out there, beyond our sector and we should engage in them and contribute to the positive change we want to see in the future.

## 2. Positive deviance and how to apprehend transformation

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The humanitarian system is not complacent and is attempting transformations. But progress is certainly less transformational than hoped.

Positive deviance has to become the norm. We must increasingly build on what is working and support such initiatives. We have to make sure that those "leading" or those with influence on change are not in some way separate from the system.

The level of impatience to see change in the sector is understandable. As pressure affects performance, this impatience should keep on translating itself in a constructive and influential manner.

We also recognize that change occurs in a series of small steps. We heard from NGO partners, that at country and local levels, there is more change happening than we know, or hear. We can be inspired from these changes and take them global, and get away from the traditional top-down approach to change as we know it.

## 3. Listen to people to be relevant

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Over the past years, we have seen an increased focus on accountability. But how systematic is the assessment of humanitarian operations through the eyes of recipients? The majority of aid programmes are run without understanding how people of concern feel about them.

It is amazing that we continue with funding, operational and strategic decisions without better listening to people.

A lot of effort has gone into improving the scrutiny of humanitarian operations. For the most part, this effort translates into providing data on health, nutrition and other indicators of impact. Today, it is still rare that we hear directly from those affected about whether needs are being met. Whether they have been consulted. Whether they are being adequately protected.

## 4. The power of not changing and economic incentives

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How powerful is the option of status quo? How can we move to a new place? What future role will the incumbents play? Power shifts are largely driven by economic incentives, and we must include more evidenced-based arguments to shift the power to where the action is happening.

The traditional humanitarian response model is reliant on institutional donor funding, which shapes the basic institutional incentives for aid agency behavior.

The conversation at the ICVA Annual Conference – particularly referring to implementation – expressed a need to have more evidence-based discussions. Better understanding of and influence on the political economies of donor behaviors are key while also better understanding evidenced-based change and influence of our own behavior as NGOs.

We must better appreciate and influence the bureaucratic constraints, risk calculations, and political realities that determine the freedom to maneuver and act collectively upon it.

The donor models and the systemic incentives that they in turn create must change at a faster rate. Accelerating change relies greatly on donors.

Resource control means operational influence. Shifting power centers in the field—and driving towards coherent response rather than turf competition—will be difficult as long as donors predominantly route humanitarian funding through the same small group of intermediary agencies.

## 5. To what extent do you trust?

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Trust has changed profoundly in the past years. People shift their trust to the relationships within their control. Trust is more local. Divergent levels of confidence within populations about the future signal a continued underlying rot in the structure of many of our societies.

Protests like the “*gilets jaunes*” in France or the women’s marches in India are a result of broken confidence and could become more mainstream movements.

The Edelman Trust Index shows a “progressive destruction of trust in societal institutions with an increasing gap between the more-trusting informed population and the far-more-skeptical less informed population”.

This profound ideological divide anchored around trust inequality is providing ample ground for nationalism, protectionism and insurgent grassroots movements.

Conversations held at conferences such as the ICVA Annual Conference & its side events are maturing. Some of the discussions are changing. Others such as the relation between trust, inequality and power, thorny issues of all, still need engagement to be addressed.

## And what are ICVA's plans for the longer term?

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- i. ICVA is committed to the humanitarian principles and the principles of partnership. In 2020, ICVA will bring for discussion within its membership whether ICVA should remain a **trusted broker** between actors to share views and convene; or evolve towards a stand-alone lobbying body.
- ii. In our fast-changing landscape, the value of ICVA will evolve. ICVA will continue its strategic focus on outreach and **alliances with networks at global, regional and local level**. Within and outside of the humanitarian sector.
- iii. For ICVA, modernising the humanitarian business model means embracing local voices to inform global and regional policies and translating policies into local action. ICVA will continue getting **closer to the fast shifting power centers**.
- iv. ICVA is expanding its networks and potentially the range of issues it is engaging in. Expanding and diversifying can be seen as progressive on the one hand, while on the other hand may risk spreading the organisation's limited resources too thinly and/or diluting the unique value ICVA brings. Both the **traditional and emerging aspects of ICVA's work** will be re-examined by its membership in 2020 and choices made for the strategic plan 2022-2024.
- v. While ICVA does reach out to the local level, in the coming years, ICVA will need to choose the degree to which it conduits for this global-local dynamic or if ICVA will increase its development with **regionally focused strategies** tailored for their specific needs and priorities.



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