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ICVA at Forty-Something

The life and times of a middle-aged NGO consortium

By Jacqueline Tong

About the Author

Jacqueline Tong, a qualified registered nurse with many years of experience in emergency specialities and public health nursing, is currently working as an independent consultant. In addition to her nursing qualifications, she has an academic background in political science and philosophy and she complemented her years of field experience with a graduate degree in humanitarian and developmental practice. During her more than 15 years in the humanitarian sector, she has held various positions in field locations as well as in headquarters. She has undertaken academic consultancies including university lecture tours and was the Humanitarian Practice Network Coordinator with the Overseas Development Institute.

About ICVA

The International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), founded in 1962, is a global NGO network that advocates for humanitarian action. ICVA has over 75 NGO members from around the world: national NGOs, international NGOs, and NGO networks. ICVA brings the experience and views of humanitarian and human rights NGOs to international decision-making forums in order to improve the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian response. For further information about ICVA, please visit our website: www.icva.ch.

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2009

ICVA Mission Statement

The International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) is a non-profit global association of non-governmental organisations that works as a collective body, to promote, and advocate for, human rights and a humanitarian perspective in global debates and responses. The heart of the ICVA mission is to support NGOs to protect and assist people in need, to address the causes of their plight, and to act as a channel for translating patterns and trends into advocacy.

ICVA seeks to strengthen NGOs as part of civil society, through the relationships among member organisations from around the world. It facilitates the sharing and creative use of practical experience and strategies to promote and protect human rights, including those of refugees and displaced peoples, and to provide humanitarian assistance from the perspective of justice and sustainable development. ICVA fosters partnerships among agencies for the sharing and dissemination of information to attain consensus among member agencies on prioritised issues in order to effect change, particularly at the international level.

ICVA advocates vis-à-vis governments and international agencies for a strong NGO role in efforts to secure human rights, prevent conflicts, prepare for disasters, and improve humanitarian responses to distressed populations. Through its cooperative and catalytic nature, it gathers and exchanges information and raises awareness on the most vital matters of humanitarian concern before policy-making bodies.

ICVA has been in existence since 1962. It works to secure the commitment of the world community to address injustice, ensure dignity and rights, and promote international strategies that attend to human needs. Today's NGO members are strengthened in their missions to provide global assistance through the power and persuasion of the ICVA alliance. Tomorrow's members will continue to enrich the network with experience and opinion and will strengthen the impact of this alliance in bringing about a just world.

Adopted by the 12th ICVA General Assembly, 2003

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Foreword

From 2006 to 2009, the following agencies were members of the Executive Committee (EXCOM):

- ActionAid International
- Afghan NGOs Coordination Bureau (ANCB)
- All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC),
- Concern Worldwide
- Danish Refugee Council (DRC)
- International Blue Crescent Relief and Development Foundation (IBC)
- MERCY Malaysia
- Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)
- Office Africain pour le Développement et la Coopération (OFADEC)
- Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children
- World Vision International (WVI)

Reaching middle age prompts many to start reflecting on their past. The same has been true with ICVA as it moved well into its forties. Over the years, ICVA, like any organisation, has kept track of its history, growth, and development. Two short histories of ICVA were previously written – the latest one being when ICVA turned 25. We felt that, more than 20 years later, it was time to produce a more comprehensive narrative of the story of ICVA.

With this publication, we are pleased to present a telling account of the way in which this unique NGO network – probably the world’s first international structure for collaboration among NGOs – was formed and has matured. This history is neither a detailed chronology nor an academic study of the events that made ICVA what it is today. Instead, Jacqueline Tong has successfully crafted an entertaining read by providing snapshots of world developments and how ICVA evolved during changing times. The history also shows how ICVA’s growth has been closely interwoven with the development of the global NGO community.

The story of *ICVA at Forty-Something* also provides a transparent look at the good and bad days that the organisation has experienced while growing older. All those who have contributed to ICVA’s successes are thankful to have been part of these efforts and are happy to remember them. Good times, however, do not exist without bad ones. This history does not shy away from providing an honest account of the lessons that have been learned and how the organisation has moved on since its difficult times.

Times have changed and so has ICVA since being founded in 1962. Staff, the organisation’s culture, and ways of working have evolved, of course, during all those years. What makes ICVA as active and energetic an organisation today as it was more than 45 years ago, is our ambition to support NGOs in their missions to protect and assist people in need and to act as a channel for NGO advocacy. The humanitarian world and the NGO community need a network such as ICVA now and over the next forty-something years.

We hope that you will enjoy the history of ICVA.

*ICVA Executive Committee, 2006-2009
January 2009*

Acknowledgements

Many thanks go to the current Secretariat for their support and guidance. Formal interviews were conducted with Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop – Secretariat Coordinator since 1998, and Manisha Thomas – ICVA Policy Officer. Interviews were conducted with many people previously affiliated with ICVA, including: Trygve Nordby – Chair of the Executive Committee, 1994–1997; Anders Ladekarl – Chair, 1998–2003; Dr. Elizabeth Ferris – Chair, 2003–2006; Arne Piel Christensen – long-standing member of the EXCOM; Pauline Silvestri – Executive Assistant in the Secretariat for 25 years; Cyril Ritchie – Executive Director of the Secretariat, 1964–1978 and for a short period in 1991 as interim; Tony Kozlowski – Executive Director, 1979–1992; Delmar Blasco – Executive Director, 1992–1995; Rudolph von Bernuth – Executive Director, 1996–1997; Brita Sydhoff – ICVA staff and Partnership in Action (PARinAC) project officer; Joel McClellan – former Executive Director of SCHR; Monique McClellan – former Secretariat staff and consultant for restructuring ICVA. Outside ICVA, interviews were conducted with Dr. Barbara Harrell-Bond – former Director of the Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford University; Professor Roger Zetter – current Director of the Refugee Studies Centre; and Dr. Hugo Slim – former Chief Scholar at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and currently a Director for Corporates in Crisis, London.

The documented resources used are to be found in the archives at ICVA. They include various notes and publications from General Conferences/Assemblies and special conferences/seminars; EXCOM meeting minutes; and editions of *ICVA News*, *ICVA Forum*, and *Talk Back*. Information was also obtained from letters held in the archives. All documents dated after 1999 can be found on the website <www.icva.ch>. The *Reality of Aid* publication series can be found at <www.devinit.org/realityofaid/roa_1993.htm>. Dr. Barbara Harrell-Bond also kindly shared many academic publications to give an understanding of the policies and politics that underpin the response to refugee crises.

Jacqueline Tong

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACVA	American Council of Voluntary Agencies	LWF	Lutheran World Federation
BSO	Building Safer Organisations	NGO	Non-governmental organisation
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States	NGOWG	NGO Working Group on the World Bank
DAC	Development Assistance Committee	OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
DRC	Danish Refugee Council	OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ECRE	European Committee for Refugees and Exiles	OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
ERC	Emergency Relief Coordinator	OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
EXCOM	ICVA Executive Committee	PARinAC	Partnership in Action
GRICAR	Grupo Internacional de Consulta y Ayuda al Retorno (International Group for Consultation and Support for Return)	SCHR	Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response
HAP	Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International	UN	United Nations
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
ICARA	International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa	UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross	UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies	UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
IDP	Internally Displaced Person	UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies	VOICE	Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies
IHL	International Humanitarian Law	WCC	World Council of Churches
IM	Individuell Människohjälp (Swedish Organisation for Individual Relief)	WFP	World Food Programme
InterAction	American Council for Voluntary International Action	WVI	World Vision International
IOM	International Organization for Migration	YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association
IRC	International Rescue Committee		

Introduction

The International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), with its Secretariat in Geneva, was founded in 1962. As such, it is one of the world's oldest NGO consortia, and by most definitions is now 'middle-aged'. Why is its story of interest? ICVA provides key and unique functions for both international and southern NGOs that work with refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and, in the wider humanitarian arena, for networking, advocacy, facilitation, and support of coordination activities. It also has a privileged formalised relationship with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In the early days it was described as a 'gentlemen's club'. It has also been referred to (and maybe thought of itself) as 'a UN for NGOs', a voice or mouthpiece for NGOs and key international actors wanting to bring the entire voluntary sector together to solve the world's developmental, as well as humanitarian, problems. Now ICVA is in its 40s, at that time of life – for individuals as well as organisations – when one can often expect a slowing down, some flab from unwarranted (or unwanted) growth, and a degree of smugness about its place in the world. One might even expect a clichéd mid-life crisis. Although the evolution of ICVA has reflected the way in which the humanitarian sector has grown and developed, there is one key and rather dramatic exception. In the late 1990s, at a time when all other actors in the humanitarian sector were booming, ICVA suffered a near-death experience. Nowadays, rather than having a heavy waistline, the 'new' ICVA is lean and has a sharp focus.

This brief history starts with the formation, structure, and style of ICVA, incorporating some of its evolution and functions. Using a framework of geopolitical events, chapter two gives the key activities, centring on its work for refugees, migration, and IDPs up until 1998. Chapter three looks at how ICVA tried to expand beyond its humanitarian roots and goes into the tensions that existed internally, as well as in the sector as a whole, between the humanitarian and development enterprises. These chapters set the scene for the final section, which explores ICVA's collapse and the creation of the new ICVA: what it looks like now, what it does, and where it sits within the humanitarian sector.

Chapters two and three are structured chronologically up until 1996–1997. Chapter four recounts the events that led to near-disaster, then picks up on the work of ICVA since its rebirth and restructuring. Some interesting stories and sector-wide 'gremlins' are presented as snap-shot vignettes. Two other small history leaflets have been produced about ICVA: the first in the mid-1970s and the next in 1987, when ICVA turned 25. The ICVA website now has a rich archive of detailed material, so rather than giving exhaustive lists of activities and publications, this booklet pulls together ICVA's previous work, gives the broad lines of its development, highlights some of the successes (and some less-than-glorious moments), and pulls out a few nuggets of particular interest.

Chapter 1

Who and What Is ICVA?

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Chapter 1

In memoriam: killed in the line of duty?

The founding Chairman of ICVA, Charles Jordan, hailed by the *New York Times* as the 'Father of Refugees', went missing in Prague on August 16, 1967. His body was found floating in the Vltava River four days later. Nothing conclusive has ever been proven and Internet web searches reveal that there was (and still is) speculation about the perpetrators. The KGB and other former national intelligence services have been accused because of Jordan's involvement in the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which helped thousands of Jews leave the Soviet Bloc in Central and Eastern Europe. Other conspiracy theories point to a terrorist group from the Middle East. Jordan's death remains a Cold War mystery, and calls for further investigation persist.

Who is ICVA?

The International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) was formed in March 1962 by the merger of three groups that had historically been convened for responding to the needs of post-war European migrants and refugees. The three groups were the 1922 Conference of NGOs Interested in Migration, the 1948 Standing Conference of Voluntary Organisations Working for Refugees (post-war Europe), and the 1959 International Committee for World Refugee Year. Why the name 'ICVA'? The origins of the name are not explicit in the records, but predating ICVA there was a group called the American Council of Voluntary Agencies (ACVA).

ICVA was the first mechanism for international NGO collaboration. The original constituents were 60 non-governmental, not-for-profit organisations concurring around ICVA's stated purpose:

- *To build cooperation in refugee matters and extend this out to other areas.*
- *For structured liaison, coordinating information exchange and professional servicing.*

Early documentation cites ICVA's functions as providing a forum where voluntary agencies could exchange views of common interest; acting as a source of information for governments, and intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations; encouraging the mutual exchange of experience by agencies specialised in their fields; and encouraging the establishment of national groups or councils of voluntary agencies devoted to the same humanitarian ends.

Did ICVA start life as a 'gentlemen's club'? ICVA has been male-dominated, but initially that was probably a sign of the times rather than anything deliberate. The 1960s was when the militant 'bra-burning' feminist movement arose, and women were still economically, socially, and professionally marginalised. However, this male dominance in ICVA

lasted into the 1990s. Moreover, according to some sources ICVA was seen to be slow in addressing gender issues in its work, and there were suspicions that at one stage it was not desirable to have a woman in a key position in the Secretariat. As with the world at large, ICVA is now more open and gender-aware in its attitudes and activities, both within the membership and in the Secretariat.

The ICVA network was most certainly a 'white' club until the inclusion of NGOs from developing countries in the early 1980s. Again, probably a sign of the times, as in the 1960s and '70s there were major practical constraints to travel and communication, as well as a pervasive legacy of colonialist attitudes in the 'developed' world. The initiative to bring in southern NGOs was driven by both 'pull' and 'push' factors. This membership base means that ICVA provides a unique and distinctive bridge between NGOs in the South, intergovernmental agencies, and international NGOs. To this day, one of its greatest added values is representing the voice of southern NGOs in debates in Geneva. ICVA was also crucial in bringing Eastern European NGOs into the international arena in the mid-1990s. The membership base has not been static and constituent members have changed, some leaving over time because of dissatisfaction with politics or policy, and occasionally rejoining years later.

ICVA's funding comes partly from its membership through annual subscription fees, as well as extra funding for specific projects, with grants from UNHCR, donor governments, and foundations, for example the Ford Foundation. There have been periods of financial pressure caused by changes in the sector relating to financial accountability and targeting (when more money had to be used directly for projects in the field), the departure of some big international NGOs from the membership, and some less-than-wise expenditures and ventures.

Middle East tensions

In its early years, ICVA did a significant amount for the Jewish agencies. As an example, during the time when the German government was being pressured to set up a reparations fund, ICVA helped to facilitate the process and channel requests for reparations together with Jewish members. On the other side of the coin, ICVA had links with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), responsible for Palestinian refugees. This relationship caused periods of tension with Jewish agencies. In 1977, ICVA helped to organise a conference in Beirut on reconstruction. A number of Jewish agencies opposed this effort as it was thought that ICVA was taking sides in the Lebanese civil war and exceeding its mandate. In 1995, a Jewish agency left the consortium in protest at the strong public criticism made by ICVA of the Israeli Defense Force's bombing of Palestinian refugee camps. In 2005, ICVA facilitated an NGO statement to UNHCR's governing body about Palestinian refugees and IDPs. Another Jewish agency objected and left the group.

General Conferences/ Assemblies

1963 Geneva: Voluntary Agencies'
New Approaches to Human
Needs in New Circumstances

1965 Geneva: Dynamic
Development

1968 London: Human Needs and
Social Justice

1971 New York: International
Voluntary Action for Human
Needs

1976 Leysin, Switzerland: Social
Injustice – Our Response

1981 Colombia, Sri Lanka: The Role
of Voluntary Agencies in Building
a New World Community

1985 Dakar, Senegal: Development
in an Age of Social Crisis: The
Challenge to Voluntary Agencies

1989 *9th General Conference San
Domingo, Dominican Republic:
Building Sustainable NGO
Partnerships: Global Solidarity
and Empowerment of the People

1994 10th GA Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

1999 11th GA Geneva

2003 12th GA Geneva

2006 13th GA Geneva

* Called the ninth, but the archives contain records for only seven previous General Conferences, which would technically make this one the eighth.

What Does ICVA Look Like?

The supreme body of ICVA rests with the membership through meetings originally convened every three to five years, and now routinely held every three years. These were initially called General Conferences, and are now termed General Assemblies. The General Assembly is responsible for the formulation and review of ICVA's policy and programmes and for electing the Executive Committee. In the early years, the Conferences focused on European migration as much as they did on global refugee issues. For example, in September 1963 there were two broad foci:

- (a) housing and related problems, intra-European migration, and vocational training; and
- (b) international aspects of migration movements and future projects for migration in general.

The early Conferences adopted a specific theme, with working groups defined around them. Since 1981, most General Assemblies have been combined with a debate on a theme, which is also open to non-member organisations.

ICVA is governed and guided by an Executive Committee (EXCOM). Historically, the EXCOM comprised up to 20 member agencies, but now has a more manageable nine elected members, plus two that are co-opted. On behalf of the General Assembly, the EXCOM oversees the formulation and implementation of strategies, policy decisions, and activities for the organisation. In 2009, for the first time, the Chair will be elected by the General Assembly rather than appointed by the EXCOM. Day-to-day services for the network are carried out by the Secretariat, which, over time, has ranged from an unwieldy (and questionably cost-efficient and effective) 12 to its present leaner complement of five permanent staff. The Secretariat had hitherto been headed by a Director, but since 1998 has been led by a Coordinator.

Who drives the agenda? Beyond concerns tabled by the membership and the EXCOM, the Secretariat has the function of alerting the membership to issues for their attention. However, in the mid-1990s the Secretariat was said to have been overly autonomous and lacking in accountability (a significant factor in ICVA's near-demise, as we shall see). Today, the Secretariat is responsible for alerting the membership to salient events and issues, and maintains checks to ensure that it represents the concerns and interests of the membership.

The location of the Secretariat has shifted around Geneva. Initially, ICVA had its home with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). It later moved to rue Gautier until the crisis of the late '90s, when it was allocated office space by the Canton of Geneva in Versoix. It now resides on avenue Giuseppe-Motta, near the UN Palais des Nations.

What Does ICVA Do?

From ICVA's inception until the late 1990s, the commissions and working groups defined by the concerns of the EXCOM were used as a regular meeting point for members. Initially, there was a Commission on Refugees and Migration, a Commission for Social and Economic Development, and a Commission on Relief and Development. This last Commission was created in response to the needs of populations affected by conflict, such as the Algerian Civil War, in recognition that ICVA's humanitarian scope was too narrow. The Commission was reconfigured as the Commission on Emergency Aid in 1965. Sub-groups within these commissions covered a broad range of topics, such as educational and vocational training, human environment, integrated rural development, and population growth issues. In the early 1980s, the commissions and working groups were placed under two umbrellas, one covering humanitarian issues and the other sustainable development. ICVA no longer uses these platforms, instead employing electronic means for communication, running special projects, and convening annual conferences on specific themes and issues.

The logo for ICVA, consisting of the letters 'ICVA' in a bold, white, outlined font.

The first ICVA history, published in the mid-'70s, explicitly states that ICVA was often called upon to be the spokesperson for its members. ICVA's advocacy and communications work has taken many forms: seminars and conferences, other special projects, and the use of its in-house capacity to produce publications. Up until 1995, the main journal was *ICVA News*, which was published every two months and initially confined to the activities of members "to ensure 'outsiders' activities get as limited publicity as possible" (meeting minutes, February 1963). Initially, the Secretariat did not have much autonomy over publications, which had to be scrutinised by a committee. From 1995 until 1997 the regular publication was *ICVA Forum. On the Record*, a joint undertaking between the Secretariat and The Advocacy Project, followed in 1998 and 1999. Since 1999 ICVA's main publication has been *Talk Back*, over which the Secretariat maintains editorial control, a fact that has caused some debate.

Other routine activities include the sponsorship, support, and facilitation of consultation processes; preparation of NGO statements; the facilitation of coordination centres in crises; and the production of other publications. For several years ICVA sponsored the *Reality of Aid* series, produced in collaboration with other groups with the aim of improving development cooperation and increasing the quality of development assistance.

Nowadays the Internet is used for 'alerts'. The Secretariat is not only a reactive messenger for the membership agenda, but is also proactive in flagging up concerns for the membership (and others). There have also been 'extraordinary actions' – the most notorious being the WorldAid Exhibition in 1996. This event, the final straw for an organisation already under pressure, losing focus, and suffering from rumours of impropriety in its past, marked the start of ICVA's 'near-death experience'.

Who Is ICVA in the Wider Humanitarian World?

ICVA's original purpose was stated as humanitarian in a then development-dominated world; the words 'refugees' and 'migration' would not form part of ICVA's name to allow for broader activities and interests. From the outset, there was a drive to encompass social and developmental work, but in the main this effort was centred on the needs of refugees. Over the years this focus changed as ICVA embraced a host of ambitious schemes and embarked on activities and relationships that were clearly developmental in nature and even went to stratospheric levels, to the point of engaging with international monetary bodies.

Given these ambitions, was ICVA seen as a 'UN for NGOs'? Until the 1970s, ICVA was the only NGO consortium of note and intergovernmental and governmental actors would most certainly have loved a one-stop-shop for NGOs (and probably still do). Early General Conference notes contain statements that are very like UN resolutions in their tone. It was perceived that, in order to be listened to by the UN, ICVA had to use UN terminology. As an example, an extract from a working group at the 1968 General Conference in London contains the following expressions: '*Bearing in mind* the dimensions of', '*Aware of the fact*', '*Expresses concern* about the lack of', '*Urges* the governing board', '*Requests* ICVA', and '*Suggests* that in doing so'.

As ICVA developed, it quickly raised its profile as the focal point for voluntary agencies and gained recognition from prominent and powerful actors. In 1962, the Board was joined by Princess Carolina zu Liechtenstein as Honorary Secretary. High-profile acknowledgement was garnered at the 1968 London General Conference with a message from HRH Prince Philip regretting that he was unable to attend. At the General Conference in New York in 1971 a welcome message was delivered by the then President of the United States, Richard Nixon, and also by U Thant, the UN Secretary-General. George Bush Senior also attended.

Message from Richard Nixon, President of the United States

It is a pleasure to greet the 1971 International Council of Voluntary Agencies' General Conference. The US foreign assistance program is based on three inter-related purposes: promoting our national security by supporting the security of other nations; providing humanitarian relief; and furthering the long-run economic and social development of lower income countries. Each of these purposes serves our most basic national goal: the building of a peaceful world. Foreign aid must, therefore, be seen as an opportunity to help others fulfil their aspiration for justice, dignity, and a better living. Your theme for this important occasion, International Voluntary Action for Human Needs, offers both the opportunity to serve and the hope for self fulfilment. I salute you on your past dedication, and wish you every future success in your eminently worthwhile mission.

ICVA lost its status as the only major international NGO consortium with the formation of the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) in the early 1970s, and more such forums have been created since. Does ICVA still have a special purpose and place? It does have several unique aspects, including its diverse membership base linking the large international agencies with southern NGOs. In addition, ICVA has a unique and exclusive relationship with UNHCR, written into the procedures of UNHCR's Executive Committee. This status was transferred from the Standing Conference of Voluntary Agencies, which had previously enjoyed a formal relationship under the terms of Rule 41 in the Rules of Procedure for UNHCR.

The special relationship with UNHCR means that refugees and IDPs remain a focus for ICVA, all the more so with their growing numbers and problems around their protection, and where governments are ignoring or playing with international conventions governing issues such as asylum and trafficking. Activities not directly linked to refugees and migration are clearly connected to the broader humanitarian enterprise. This link is reflected in another special relationship, this time with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), formed in 1991 by UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 as the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination in humanitarian assistance. Full membership is for UN agencies only, and ICVA is classed as a 'Standing Invitee', though in practice little distinction is made between the two categories. ICVA did not join the IASC formally until 1993–94, though the delay was bureaucratic rather than political because it was assumed that ICVA's close association with UNHCR meant that it was already involved. These relationships give ICVA an ongoing 'gatekeeper' responsibility between important UN bodies and the NGO world.



Chapter 2

ICVA's Core: Refugees and IDPs

Refugee Memorial Fund, July 1965 - courage and a sewing machine

Mrs. B., her husband, and their three children decided to flee from Romania. At the frontier crossing the father was shot down in front of his family. Two of the children received such a shock that they were hospitalised immediately upon arrival in France. The son was cured, but the doctors declared the daughter to be in a hopeless mental condition. Despite these tragic events, Mrs. B. never lost her courage and worked hard to support and care for her family. Her dream was to own a sewing machine with which to earn money. The Fund was able to supply her with the sewing machine.

Living Under the Nuclear Umbrella

Prior to the creation of ICVA, post-World War Two Europe was awash with refugees. Some even fled beyond Europe, with Polish refugee camps in Africa and settlements elsewhere around the world. The partition of India in 1947 gave rise to an estimated 12 million refugees and in the Middle East Palestinians were displaced by the creation of the State of Israel following the Arab–Israeli War in 1948. UNHCR was established in December 1950, and in 1951 the *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* was created, although its scope was limited to those who had been affected in Europe prior to the Convention. Palestinian refugees were protected under the mandate of UNRWA, which was established in 1949. Refugee flows continued with the anti-colonial struggles of the 1960s in Africa. This was also the era of proxy wars between the West and the Soviet Bloc. The 1951 Convention was amended to afford wider protection to new refugees, when the 1967 Protocol was added removing the Convention's geographical and temporal limitations. This was the world in which the three groups that founded ICVA came together.

In acknowledgement of the founding group's achievements, the Nansen Award, (named after Fridtjof Nansen, the Norwegian Arctic explorer who, in 1921, was appointed as the first High Commissioner for Refugees by the League of Nations), was presented to ICVA in 1963. The award is described as the 'Nobel Prize' of refugee work. In the 1970s, ICVA was invited to sit on the selection committee. ICVA also took over the administration of the Refugee Memorial Fund (previously known as the Kooijman Memorial Fund, established in 1955). This fund awarded money to specific individuals, usually European refugees or migrants. It was substantial for its time: by 1965, it was worth in the region of CHF 120,000. Donations were made to the fund by member voluntary agencies, individuals, private sources, and intergovernmental agencies. The fund was dissolved in the late 1970s as the membership felt it no longer served a clear purpose; there was a reluctance to make contributions, and there were other ways and means to honour people.

In the 1960s, ICVA focused on the plight of migrants in Europe, as this reflected the work of the founding groups. Outside Europe, ICVA was actively concerned with the predicament of Palestinian refugees, and had strong links with UNRWA. Looking further East, ICVA and UNHCR convened a seminar on Tibetan refugees in March 1964. The follow-up working group lasted for many years, and several publications were produced. There was apprehension about the reaction of the Chinese government, as this working group tried to mobilise awareness and facilitated exchanges with Tibetan refugee groups affiliated with the Dalai Lama, who was in exile in India. After the outbreak of the Biafran War in 1967, ICVA became the focal point for its membership, attending ICRC coordination meetings and disseminating updates to its members. The Biafran War did not generate many refugees, but was characterised by significant internal displacement.

Over the following decades continuing troubles in Africa and elsewhere triggered more substantial population movements. In South-East Asia the legacy of the Vietnam War and the grim and odious atrocities of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia gave rise to mass displacement in the 1970s and 1980s. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 triggered a conflict that has displaced millions. The conflict in Mozambique displaced an estimated six million people; problems in the Horn of Africa, South Sudan, and Angola meant millions more were forced to flee their homes. One of the most publicised humanitarian crises (through the actions of the Live Aid campaign) was the forced relocation of great swathes of the Ethiopian population by its government, and the effects of famine. ICVA was not particularly active in Ethiopia beyond being an international focal point for NGOs, but played an important role at the local level in less high-profile crises.

One example of less visible work was in Latin America, where the Latin American Working Group was very active in the latter half of the 1980s. The working group, which focused on El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, met directly with governments to facilitate dialogue and to raise issues concerning refugees and IDPs affected by con-

Seminar: fundraising, publicity, and the case of the starving child

In 1966, in consultation with ICVA, OXFAM hosted a seminar in Oxford on fundraising and publicity. One topic of discussion was the use of images of starving children in publicity. Some present had already stopped using such images. It was also suggested that other pictures of human need, such as flies on faces and images of mangy animals, could be just as humiliating or offensive. Perhaps a more promising route was to show children in the act of eating.

It is noteworthy that the seminar predated the conflict in Biafra, one of the first humanitarian crises where NGOs used the media heavily for awareness- and fund-raising, an effort in which images of starving children were extensively used. Forty years later the debate over imagery persists, although now the term 'development pornography' is used to describe it. One element in the debate (apart from loss of dignity) centres on whether we ►

would use images of naked starving children or bare-breasted emaciated women from our own society. As a counterpoint, these images show the reality of people's suffering and are effective in raising awareness and funds.

flict and insurgency. ICVA offered support to local and national NGOs whose staff had received death threats or were accused of being guerrillas. These were sensitive political issues; even the US government saw local NGOs as being politically affiliated with insurgency movements. ICVA's presence provided legitimacy and protection for threatened NGOs by affiliating them with large international actors, such as OXFAM.

ICVA was also active in other contexts, organising meetings and contacts between governments and NGOs in Africa (Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, and Sudan) and Asia (China, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam). International conferences were convened in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America. ICVA continued its engagement with Palestinian refugees and organised several meetings with UNRWA in Austria and Jordan. ICVA was invited to present statements to the second International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa, held in Geneva in 1984.

During the 1980s, the growing focus on the plight of refugee women led to explicit work on gender issues and special policies and programmes to address women's vulnerabilities. Some ICVA members proposed the creation of a special group, but this was declined by the Secretariat and the EXCOM Chair. A parallel network outside of ICVA was created to lobby UNHCR and NGOs on issues affecting refugee women. An International Working Group on Refugee Women was created with the World Council of Churches (WCC), under the leadership of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and including some of the larger NGOs. In 1988 a special consultation was held on refugee women. Some felt that ICVA wasn't willing to participate in active work targeting the needs of refugee women until it was an 'in' thing: by the late 1980s though, it had begun to take on more of a leadership role.

The New World Order

In 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, hope began to emerge for a new world order that would see multilateralism surface as a way to do business in the international community, the UN Security Council more able to function effectively, and in which human rights would prevail over state sovereignty. These hopes for positive change were, however, soon dampened. The US-led intervention in Somalia, which was intended to create a safer environment for humanitarian operations, failed miserably. UNPROFOR, the UN peacekeeping force in the former Yugoslavia, did not have the appropriate mandate to stop atrocities being committed; and the UN evacuated its Blue Helmets from Rwanda leaving a horrific genocide to continue unfolding, resulting in the slaughter of an estimated 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus between April and July 1994. Humanitarian organisations focused on the massive refugee crisis that followed the genocide, but became unwittingly complicit in aiding the perpetrators as they worked in Tanzanian and Zairian (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) camps where these people hid among the refugees. Elsewhere, humanitarian agencies were also witness to bloody conflict and gross violation of human rights in Chechnya, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, tragedies which barely appeared in the international headlines.

Less in the news was the ongoing political instability in Latin America. ICVA remained active in this region and, along with the WCC, was invited to participate in the Grupo Internacional de Consulta y Ayuda al Retorno (International Group for Consultation and Support for Return, GRICAR). GRICAR was created in Guatemala as a diplomatic forum focusing on returnees. ICVA provided an interface between the political sphere and those actors actually implementing projects to facilitate return. ICVA also sponsored a consultative process, the Andean Consultation on displaced persons, which covered Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela.

Voices of the East

After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union saw the emergence of civil society and the formation of NGO groups concerned with humanitarian, human rights, and developmental issues. As a part of its work with PARinAC, ICVA was proactive in pushing for the inclusion of these new groups, to feed into a major consultation process and conference for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1996, held by UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Thanks to ICVA's efforts, approximately 120 local groups took part, ensuring that the protection of refugees and IDPs was not lost from the agenda.

At the global level, the 1990s saw ICVA at the forefront of an ambitious project with UNHCR, called Partnership in Action (PARinAC). In 1993, UNHCR and ICVA launched a number of worldwide consultations over a period of 12 months. Regional meetings including 450 NGOs were held in Addis Ababa, Bangkok, Budapest, Caracas, Kathmandu, and Tunis, with supplementary consultations in Canada, Japan, and the USA, followed by the global Oslo conference in June 1994. The then Chairman of ICVA chaired the plenary sessions of the conference. The conference resulted in the 'Oslo Plan of Action', adopted by NGOs and UNHCR and consisting of 134 recommendations designed to reinforce the UNHCR/NGO collaboration in five priority areas: refugee protection; internally displaced persons; emergency preparedness and response; the continuum from relief to rehabilitation and development; and NGO/UNHCR partnership. With a grant from the Ford Foundation, ICVA appointed a full-time PARinAC Programme Officer who collaborated directly with UNHCR, and organised regional training sessions and workshops to put into practice the Oslo recommendations. This project was pivotal to opening up the UN to working with civil society, and was a ground-breaking step towards the involvement of local NGOs with UNHCR. ICVA managed assessments and global trainings and was a critical player in getting the UN and civil society to collaborate.

On a practical and field-based level, there have been general coordination initiatives in response to refugee and internal displacement crises. ICVA has undertaken NGO coordination initiatives in several settings, with mixed success. It set up offices to assist in the coordination of NGOs in Rwanda. This coordination effort did not work well, in the main because humanitarian organisations were simply overwhelmed and all agencies – both UN and NGO – were not helped by the indecisive political context in which they were working to try and meet all the humanitarian needs. Moreover, some of the membership apparently did not support the initiative as it was seen as a de facto operational activity. In 1993, some NGO members requested support for coordination and information-sharing during the Balkan crisis, and ICVA set up of-

ices in Banja Luka, Belgrade, Sarajevo, and Tuzla. This initiative was not only an information centre providing briefings and other information resources; it also facilitated the structured collaboration of NGOs – local and international – with the UN system. Bosnia was one of the first large emergencies where UNHCR and NGOs acted together as implementing partners. The UN validated ICVA by giving it a clear role in issuing the ‘blue-cards’ enabling NGO staff to take the shuttle from Croatia to Sarajevo. ICVA also produced NGO directories, which helped actors to get a grip on the plethora of NGOs operating in the Bosnian crisis.

Bosnia and other crises generated not just refugees, but significant numbers of IDPs. During the 1990s, the plight of internally displaced people began to be explicitly recognised as requiring distinctive policies and practices, defined and designed specially for their needs. ICVA did not discriminate as to whether or not someone had crossed a border, and through its work in PARinAC it developed capacities to influence UNHCR and others to develop specific approaches towards IDPs. This work for IDPs is still very much an ongoing activity, particularly for protection problems.

These coordination activities and the PARinAC project meant that ICVA clearly had an important role to play in the NGO sector, and as an interface with governmental and intergovernmental bodies, beyond the organisation of meetings, seminars, and working groups. However, in order to meet its mandate and work effectively for the needs of refugees, ICVA has had to be capable of influencing intergovernmental organisations beyond its special relationship with UNHCR and the IASC. In 1994, the IOM and ICVA agreed to regularise informal dialogue between NGOs and the IOM by holding three meetings per year. The IOM was created in 1951 and, although it has a chequered reputation that includes its involvement in offshore detention centres in Nauru Island holding refugees seeking asylum in Australia, over the years it has exerted increasing influence on refugee and migration issues, making it a key intergovernmental player for ICVA. Similarly, ICVA has had a long-

standing relationship with the European Council of Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). Established in 1974 by a group of directors of refugee support agencies, ECRE was set up to ensure the protection of refugees in Europe.

From its beginning, ICVA lobbied for the UN to have an emergency arm. The UN Disaster Relief Organization was set up in 1971 and in 1991 the special position of Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) was created with the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, which eventually became the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). ICVA, and some of the membership, were influential in the setting up of OCHA, which is now the primary UN body for coordinating the response to humanitarian crises.

These relationships and activities around ICVA's core – refugees and IDPs – have evolved over time, and ICVA has adapted in order to respond to the changing geopolitical, policy, and practice landscape. However, ICVA also had another focus: to enter the development world to a degree surpassing its concern for refugees and migrants.

ICVA

Chapter 3

Embracing the Development Agenda

Setting the Scene

Prior to the formation of ICVA and well into the 1990s (with some notable exceptions), the majority of humanitarian work carried out during conflicts fell within the domain of the ICRC and national societies of the International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement. In general, International Humanitarian Law and other international treaties and agreements were not on the radar screen of the NGO sector until the 1990s. Humanitarian action undertaken by NGOs more often revolved around refugees and took place on the peripheries of conflict. However, some NGOs did operate behind the frontlines under what has been termed an ‘insurgency’ model of relief – used, for example, in Lebanon in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, in the Luwero Triangle in Uganda in the early 1980s, and in Afghanistan. Whatever name was used – humanitarian or relief action – this mode of intervention was seen as an adjunct to a development-dominated agenda. This status was reflected in the large volumes of money spent by governments on development issues and projects, compared with relief activities. Money from the UN in the main went directly to recipient governments rather than NGOs. From a policy standpoint, the World Bank and other donors viewed refugee camps as ‘modernisation’ opportunities. UNHCR adopted a settlement policy in refugee camps that reflected this thinking, aiming to integrate refugees through its assistance programmes. This policy stance did not last because it didn’t work, but the linking of humanitarian relief with development goals became the norm.

For ICVA’s core work with refugees and migrants, the development focus meant that it had to engage to some degree with development issues. However, from its inception, ICVA had the idea that it would expand its mandate and had extensive ambitions that went well beyond refugees and broader humanitarian concerns. This ambition was clearly reflected in its use of language; the strap-line on the cover of *ICVA News*, for example, read: ‘Agencies engaged in humanitarian, social and development programmes’. More explicitly, the purpose of the 1971 June/July General Conference was stated as being: ‘A workshop

whose deliberation contributes to the amelioration of some of today's and tomorrow's problems in all corners of the world'. By the late 1970s, there were working groups on topics such as 'Integrated Human Development', which included education and vocational training, technology, health and population policies, and environmental issues. In April 1979, *ICVA News* featured an article about the 'Groupe de Bellerive'. This group was concerned by the polarisation and violence being generated around nuclear energy programmes, which again demonstrates the breadth of the issues that ICVA was trying to cover. Other special publications included *Cooperative Teaching and Rural Development in Africa, South of the Sahara and Population Questions*, which included input from the World Wildlife Fund.

Competing Agendas

With the increase in the number of refugees during the 1980s, the end of the Cold War, the horror of the televised post-genocide crisis in the Great Lakes, and war again in Europe, NGOs mushroomed in number and the big players increased in size and capacity. More agencies started implementing operations in the midst of war, and the humanitarian enterprise started to mature as a specialty in and of itself. With this shift came the evolution of a common humanitarian language for the sector. UNHCR and other UN bodies gave more funds directly to NGO implementing partners, and more governmental donor money was allocated to emergency humanitarian operations.

Tensions emerged between the humanitarian enterprise and the development sector as academic discourse tried to link the two and to frame project design to reflect this link. There was theorising about the 'relief-development continuum', and among member agencies that addressed both, there were (at times fraught) attempts to merge development logic with the humanitarian ethos. ICVA experienced this tension, which appears to be underpinned by the inclusion of the more development-oriented southern NGOs and by the direction taken by the Secretariat, as much as by external drivers. Some in the Secretariat and membership

The environmental agenda

Environmental concerns were covered by the ICVA Commission on Social and Economic Development. ICVA convened an environmental liaison meeting in Nairobi in 1974, which created the Environmental Liaison Board, which all agencies could join. ICVA was also the interface between NGOs and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). In reality, this liaison office chiefly consisted of a post box in the UNEP offices in Nairobi. The environmental theme was picked up again with ICVA representation at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Beforehand, ICVA chaired NGO groups during preparation meetings.

Who's doing what, where?

This question is a common lament at the field level in humanitarian crises and, at the global level, the drive to have detailed inventories is ongoing. The concept of coordinating/synergising relief efforts is not a new one. In the mid-1960s, ICVA and the OECD worked to put together a comprehensive voluntary agency directory. In Berlin in December 1969, ICVA with the support of the OECD and together with the Deutsche Stiftung für Entwicklungsländer organised a symposium on the topic of 'Development Clearing Houses,' which were 'recommended for voluntary agencies as a central source of comprehensive information on development activity on an international scale, continually up to date ... with the overall purpose being that of hopefully enabling better programming'. ICVA took responsibility for examining ways to achieve an immediate practical effect, but this did not happen as there was no genuine support from the Board and no money was

felt that, if ICVA members were really interested in promoting economic and social development, they would be working with, and through, local NGOs, rather than doing development work themselves. Some northern members felt that southern NGOs were too close to the problem to be effective. That aside, ICVA became the forum where northern and southern NGOs could meet and discuss – as equals – issues of development and humanitarian assistance, with the objective of improving cooperation on the ground. There was a clear agenda to develop and strengthen southern NGOs and to give them a platform to address high-level decision-makers. At the 1985 General Assembly in Senegal, the keynote address lamented global economic and social crises and noted that the 'solution lie[s] in the North as well as the South'. ICVA then clearly developed two tracks, and the impetus to straddle both gathered steam.

ICVA's drive to embrace much more of the development agenda was explained by a belief that lack of development underpinned humanitarian problems. Between the early 1980s and 1995 ICVA hosted the Secretariat of the NGO Working Group on the World Bank (NGOWG) with the Executive Director as secretary to the committee, assisted by an NGO coordinator funded by the World Bank. The purpose of the NGO working group was: "To facilitate the development of partnerships between NGOs with popular organisations and their allied constituencies on all continents for advocacy purposes concerning the World Bank, its policies and its projects." In 1994, ICVA participated in the 50th anniversary of the Bretton Woods Conference and produced a document through the NGOWG entitled *The World Bank, the Next 50 Years*. In 1995, the Secretariat was moved to Washington, D.C., to be assisted by US-based NGOWG members.

What were the impacts of this relationship with an institution that went far beyond the humanitarian sector? On the one hand, it was said to be a success for ICVA with the establishment of formal relationships between NGOs and the World Bank, relationships which were pivotal in getting the World Bank to think about civil society. On the other, was this activity appropriate for an inter-agency consortium that was

founded on the humanitarian ideal? As another example of embracing the development agenda, ICVA had a relationship with the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD-DAC), organising meetings and cooperation with member governments and NGOs. ICVA had a similar relationship with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and also organised workshops, meetings, and other activities on the development theme. During 1986–87, the Working Group on Development had subgroups on issues such as food, NGO management, development and population, and the environment and sustainable development.

The Troubled ICVA Membership

In 1994, some ICVA members explicitly stated their concerns about the work (and worth) of the focus on sustainable development. In the issue of *ICVA Forum* published prior to the General Assembly in Addis Ababa in March 1994, an interview with the then Executive Director warned that ICVA was at a crossroads, and had to resolve the tensions between North and South. These tensions continued to rise with ICVA's active involvement in the World Summit for Social Development. The humanitarian agency membership (mainly northern NGOs) believed that ICVA was no longer a humanitarian vehicle, all the more so since it opened up to the South. Despite this strain, ICVA did not veer from the two-track approach. Decisions taken during the Addis Ababa General Assembly were wide-ranging, and included overall priorities clearly linking humanitarian issues with development goals, such as:

- *The promotion of human rights, IHL, the rights of indigenous people, the right to development, and the right to humanitarian assistance.*
- *To seek new approaches and solutions, which provide for environmentally sound economic growth with equality.*
- *To better integrate humanitarian affairs and sustainable development with a particular emphasis on advocating for new approaches to emergency relief to try and ensure that such assistance is developmental.*

allocated to the project, which thus died a death. Through the PARinAC project, ICVA sought to contribute to the establishment of a worldwide database, but this effort did not extend beyond national directories in places like Bosnia. Over the years there have been other attempts by various actors – UN and NGOs – to undertake this herculean task. To date, no initiative has met with any degree of success.

Programme priorities were further divided into a Commission on Humanitarian Affairs and a Commission on Sustainable Development. The latter included the ambitious objective to:

- *Promote durable solutions which address the root causes in the international economic system that created poverty and marginalisation, with special attention to structural adjustment, debt and international trade.*

The world, the UN, and NGOs were changing quickly, but ICVA failed to adapt to new dynamics and kept working in the manner of previous decades. There was a perceived lack of flexibility, both structurally and in its thinking. The argument that the problems lay with the differences between northern and southern NGOs may have been an overstatement: ICVA was trying to undertake ambitious schemes with limited resources and capacities. Moreover, even on a common theme, different members had different goals and didn't see problems in the same way. This dysfunction was exacerbated by the breadth of interests and activities ICVA tried to engage in. Development issues are diverse, some are very political, and during this period some felt that ICVA lost its focus and was 'doing a bit of both to keep everyone happy'. This didn't work. Some large northern agencies expressed discontent: they wanted ICVA for its humanitarian focus, not for the development agenda, and some left as a consequence. OXFAM wrote a letter expressing its dissatisfaction in July 1994, and stating that it would remain only on the Latin American sub-group.

The bigger agencies had other options. ICVA had been unique merely for its existence as an NGO consortium, but this was no longer the case with the establishment in 1972 of SCHR, which was set up to improve cooperation amongst humanitarian agencies involved in disaster assistance; there was now a clear humanitarian-only platform. The reasons for the establishment of SCHR are varied, but some say that it was formed in response to dissatisfaction with ICVA. The relationship with ICVA was at times tense, but now is more collegial. Many countries and

regions formed NGO consortia, such as InterAction (comprising approximately 150 non-profit organisations in the United States), Voluntary Organisations for Cooperation in Emergencies (VOICE) for European humanitarian NGOs, and ECRE.

When ICVA was the main player, its rich northern members could sit around the table and throw money into the pot for special projects. As ICVA became less relevant, with some wealthier members becoming discontented and departing, less money was to be had. In minutes noted by the Committee on Finance and Administration on September 12, 1994, there were explicit expressions of concern about the high levels of membership dues being allocated to sustainable development activities. Beyond internal and external drivers and differences between members, another force started to come into play: auditing and accountability. Money was getting tight as member NGOs had to be more accountable for their spending; more had to go to the field and less funding was available for ad hoc activities. During the early to mid-1990s, some members of the Secretariat were also perceived to be disengaged. Not for the first time, there was a suspicion of a lack of good financial management, a lack of extra fundraising, and even fears of financial impropriety. From 1990, ideas were being explored to put more money in the bank. This led to the ill-advised decision to invest heavily in a showy project: the WorldAid '96 international exhibition and conference. The repercussions of this decision are explored in the final chapter.



Chapter 4

Near-Death and Rebirth

Condition Critical

As the humanitarian sector – or what was now called the humanitarian ‘enterprise’ – became a specialty in and of itself, as opposed to an adjunct of the development agenda, it might have been expected that ICVA would enjoy the benefits. In fact, it was in a fragile state: its status as the sole inter-NGO actor had gone, and it now faced competition, some of its membership was dissatisfied and its financial position was weak. It needed to raise funds and also re-establish its special niche in the NGO sector. In 1995, there was new leadership in the Secretariat; various sources have said that the Secretariat acted without clear direction from EXCOM and the membership, and most certainly went beyond the intentions expressed in the 1994 Addis Ababa meeting. Prior to the arrival of the new leadership, plans had been made and a decision taken to embrace the commercial sector with an exhibition in Geneva. This idea was developed as a means of bringing together commercial companies, the UN, and aid agencies, as well as a way for ICVA to raise funds. The April 1995 issue of *ICVA Forum* declared: “In order to provide a global forum where voluntary agencies and UN organisations can meet professional partners in their humanitarian activities, ICVA has decided to launch an international exhibition and conference entitled WorldAid ‘96, to be held in Geneva on 30 September–4 October 1996.” It was also clearly stated that the project was *fully* sponsored by the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs and UNDP, and financed through a not-for-profit Disability Foundation.

The aid sector was worth somewhere in the region of US\$3 billion in goods and services. The WorldAid ‘96 exhibition was held in October 1996, with representation from 267 firms and over 100 aid agencies, and consisted of an exhibition and a seminar session. It drew in several thousand visitors, so there was plenty of foot traffic, but those who came for the seminars were little interested in the exhibition and, conversely, the exhibition visitors circumvented the seminars. As a result, both the commercial sector and the aid agencies were largely dissatisfied with

the event. For some in the EXCOM there was no expectation that the first exhibition would yield immediate financial benefits, but one internal document stated to the contrary that ICVA would make a net profit, estimated in the region of CHF 871,000. Although the promised sponsorship never materialised, it was still projected that ICVA would not produce a deficit. ICVA had previously suffered from difficulties in raising sufficient funding to cover its budget and WorldAid was intended to be a fund-raiser for ICVA.

The reality proved to be far removed from these rosy predictions, as ICVA incurred major debts of CHF 350,000. In addition, there were allegations that this ambitious project went ahead without the full agreement of the EXCOM. However, it has also been claimed that WorldAid was driven by, at least, several members of the EXCOM and that it was the Secretariat that had reservations. Either way, the financial debacle only fuelled the membership's dissatisfaction with ICVA, and during the first half of 1997 there were mass departures. OXFAM completely withdrew, with others, including the International Save the Children Alliance and Austcare following suit. There were allegations from a number of member agencies that financial accountability had been lacking and that some of the Secretariat staff members had not properly fulfilled their responsibilities. On May 30, 1997, the 110th session of the EXCOM decided to advise the General Assembly to end ICVA's existence. All contracts with Secretariat staff were terminated and further steps identified to put the organisation into liquidation. One month later, however, a number of ICVA member agencies met in Geneva to discuss an alternative resolution of the problem.

Resuscitation

In light of many difficulties, legal and otherwise, arising with ICVA's dissolution, and the belief that ICVA was still an essential player in the sector, a decision was taken to salvage and restructure it. Scuffles and legal demands aside, it had been quipped that, if ICVA didn't exist, it would have to be invented. In October 1997, a consultant presented a

Extract from a fax dated October 9, 1996

“... As we thought, Palexpo are willing to buy the exhibition part of WorldAid. ICVA will therefore not end up with any deficit after WorldAid' 96. On the contrary, there is good hope for a profit against our core costs already this year. In addition we will get a certain royalty on future exhibitions and favourable conditions for organising future conferences.”



proposal for a new ICVA. In re-creating ICVA, many important points had to be addressed, including: ICVA's major image problem; the fact that ICVA must not fall back into what it had been, as that hadn't worked; and its purposes and priorities, which needed to be reconsidered and streamlined. It was explicitly stated that one past problem had been ICVA's inability to service both the humanitarian and development agendas linked to its diverse membership, meaning that its mandate had become overburdened – it was spread too thin. Other problems included the high core costs and the fact that ICVA had been driven too much from the centre (the Secretariat) rather than from its membership and wider constituents. Recommendations for the 'new' ICVA were made on the basis that Geneva was the hub for humanitarian action, policy, and sector politics, and that little would be gained by including sustainable development, for which the centre of gravity lay in Washington, D.C. and New York. With this narrowed-down scope of interest in mind, recommendations were made for new objectives and activities to maximise the value of ICVA to its membership, and especially to include ways to redress the marginalisation of southern NGOs. It was understood that ICVA was the only available interface between southern NGOs and the big western NGOs in the humanitarian sector. Also, UNHCR very much needed an organisation such as ICVA. The energy and motivation to ensure the survival of ICVA was there, but it was imperative that the financial crisis was fixed.

For the restructuring exercise to be successful, resources were required. Within the membership there was a powerful will to help ICVA survive, and several members of the EXCOM decided to provide the Secretariat with cash and/or lobbied the membership to follow their example and to write off loans that some of them had provided to help the organisation survive. Very active in this effort were, amongst others, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the Norwegian Refugee Council, and World Vision International (WVI). Another member organisation, the small Swedish NGO, Individuell Människohjälp (Swedish Organisation for Individual Relief – IM), which had given a

significant loan a few days before the WorldAid exhibition, agreed that the loan could be frozen until ICVA was in a position to repay. Palexpo, the conference and exhibition centre, was given the intellectual property rights for the concept of WorldAid and wrote off the amount that ICVA owed them in return. UNHCR gave bridging funds. The membership dues would also need to be restructured.

However, the rescue package was not without conditions: the Secretariat had to be trimmed down, restart almost from scratch in terms of its human resources, and the head of the Secretariat should be a 'Coordinator' and not a commercial-style Chief Executive Officer. On that issue there was major debate at board level: should this person be someone with a distinguished career and long experience in international relations, or more practical and 'hands-on', but with an understanding of the humanitarian system? Those who favoured the latter option won the debate. The 'new' ICVA would still keep the needs of refugees and other migrants at its core, but its wider mandate would be centred on just the humanitarian enterprise – long term development would no longer be part of its core business. Moreover, the new-style leadership meant that the Secretariat would be more concretely active – rather than the 'talking shop' some believed it had been. As for the membership, many of the big NGOs returned, but what was seen as crucial was the ongoing inclusion of southern NGOs. Their participation, in conjunction with the relationship with UNHCR, generated the two fundamental features that make ICVA relevant and special as an NGO consortium.

What Does the New ICVA Do?

ICVA's core *raison d'être* remained refugees and IDPs. By the turn of the millennium, it had become increasingly clear that NGOs had a role to play in protection. Although the focus more and more was on IDPs and refugees, NGOs saw this protection agenda extending out to all civilians affected by conflict. In the western world, key concerns have been with asylum-seekers – who is an asylum-seeker and who is a refugee? Some governments played with definitions and used

terminology such as 'externally displaced', and there were some draconian and very public displays of flouting of the 1951 Refugee Convention and tinkering with international law, especially for those being held in detention, with the starkest examples being the Australians setting up offshore detention centres and the controversial legal issues surrounding Guantánamo Bay.

By the time the 'new' ICVA was created, the PARinAC process was drawing to a close and new initiatives were underway. In 1999, UNHCR started consultations on protection with NGOs, as part of the 'Reach Out' project, in which ICVA became a key participant. Reach Out developed into a field-based training programme to ensure understanding of, and support for, the essential principles and institutions of refugee protection. ICVA worked in close collaboration with UNHCR to feed into the year-long Global Consultations on International Protection that led to the 'Agenda for Protection'. ICVA commissioned seven specialist papers from the University of Michigan on supervising the Refugee Convention, convened an NGO meeting to discuss the topic, and also fed into the ministerial conference convened by UNHCR in December 2001. In 2004, there was the 'Saving Lives Together' effort, supported by the IASC, to establish how NGOs and the UN could work together on the security of humanitarian staff. There have been many other activities, consultations, and collaborative relationships around the issue of IDPs and their protection. ICVA has lobbied the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), as it has a protection role for IDPs and is perceived by some as not being as energetic as it should be. For overall emergency response, ICVA has pushed OCHA for improved coordination of emergency response, and its formerly ad hoc links with the likes of WFP and UNICEF are now routine, all the more so as the issue of global food security gathers momentum and the humanitarian implications become clear.

The UN system for emergency response became a lively topic for ICVA publications. The Secretariat decided that editorial work could be used to give ICVA an edge. In 1999, The Advocacy Project, led by a journalist,

was commissioned to produce a series of reports collated and dispatched daily from the UNHCR Executive Committee annual meeting. This publication, called *On the Record*, was the precursor to the main regular publication, *Talk Back*.

As well as publications, ICVA makes great use of the Internet and has a central role in the preparation of NGO statements. This has not proven to be an easy task, to the point that some members have asked for more structure even in the drafting stage, and there have been discussion papers on the drafting process. The ICVA Secretariat advocates on issues, and encourages the production of NGO statements, although producing statements is not simple given the differences and debate raised between members. In addition, there are, from time to time, debates within the membership about statements to a wider public. One example of such a debate concerned the publication of cartoons portraying the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish press in 2006. The membership did not see it as ICVA's role to comment because of ICVA's humanitarian function; it was more a freedom of speech issue. However, several members of the EXCOM, on their own volition, approached the BBC about the matter.

ICVA's advocacy work extends beyond publications, statements, and meetings. For the first time, in 2004, an operational alert was issued; this was at the behest of an observer NGO concerned about the appalling situation in Darfur, Sudan. Another hot topic that ICVA has been vocal on is the profile of an in-country UN Humanitarian Coordinator; it was noted that many of those appointed had very little understanding of humanitarian issues. For field-based activities, ICVA put an Information Officer into Kosovo in 1999. Policy has now been defined and ICVA will support coordination and information-sharing efforts and dispatch extra personnel when two member agencies request support. This was tried in Aceh, Indonesia in 2005, in response to the tsunami (not very successfully as it was too late, most activities were more in the rehabilitation phase and so, despite having funds, no one was ever deployed on the ground), and most recently in 2008, following Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar.

Clusters

Talk Back has proven to be provocative, to the point that an external evaluation of ICVA, *Playing it High*, done in 2005, criticised it as taking too many risks. In fact only one issue has prompted disagreement, and from only one member. The issue in question focused on the new UN cluster approach. The cluster approach, designed in 2005 after the *Humanitarian Response Review*, was presented as a *fait accompli* to the IASC; there had been minimal consultation, and it was not a subject for discussion. Non-UN members of the IASC (IFRC, ICRC, InterAction, ICVA, and SCHR) said a resounding *no* to this approach. The pitfalls were many, but in particular for the issue of protection there are activities that will fall across and between clusters, so where does the responsibility lie? This issue of *Talk Back* caused such debate that ICVA was summoned to the OCHA offices.

Sexual exploitation

Aid workers are no angels. Following reports of sexual exploitation of refugees in West Africa in 2001 and Nepal in 2003, the UN Secretary-General issued a bulletin in October 2003 obliging UN agencies and their non-governmental partners to prevent, and when suspected to investigate, any sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian staff. Humanitarian organisations, galvanised by the reports of refugee abuse, began adopting and revising codes of conduct and related policies. The Building Safer Organisations (BSO) project was the result of efforts by NGOs to address the problem of sexual exploitation and abuse. The project was designed to strengthen NGOs' capacity to receive and investigate allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse brought by persons of concern – including refugees, displaced persons, and local host populations. ICVA hosted the project and developed learning materials and field-based training. In March 2005, it began pilot skills-building training. As the

ICVA has collaborated with others on specific projects, including one of the most ambitious in NGO history, namely the drive for quality and accountability. The SPHERE Project is one of the largest and most influential inter-agency initiatives ever mounted. Established in 1997, it was instigated as a joint effort among non-governmental organisations, led by InterAction and SCHR, and supported by VOICE, the ICRC, and ICVA. UN agencies participated at the technical level and many donor governments provided funding. The preliminary edition of the *Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response* was printed in December 1998, and will be undergoing another update in 2009. Other inter-agency efforts specifically around accountability include the Humanitarian Ombudsman Project now known as the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International (HAP). ICVA was invited to host this project, but declined for reasons of political sensitivity and because there was the potential to swamp the Secretariat given the workload and much larger budget involved. Another aspect of quality and accountability was the support ICVA gave to the 'Building Safer Organisations' project.

The 'new' ICVA works with a clear purpose and a sharp focus on the humanitarian world. Over the years, the Secretariat has always had to manage the differences between members, even on a common theme, and this dynamic still exists to a certain extent today. The primary focus of ICVA, as maintained by the Secretariat, is on humanitarian issues, but with a membership so wide and diverse, there are always member agencies that want to bring other topics to the agenda. The current Secretariat is keen on keeping a humanitarian focus and delivering a programme that adds value to members' goals and activities, while being aware that there will always be more expectations than can be fulfilled. One question the Secretariat does have to answer is how ICVA can better help to bridge the gap between policy and practice and how it can increase its relevance outside Geneva. These are two issues among many that ICVA is now considering in the task of defining its role for the future.

To finish on a point that has been revisited over the years: what is the relevance of ICVA amid the myriad of international NGO consortia, besides its relationship with UNHCR and the inclusion of southern NGOs? One of the strengths of ICVA is its diversity. ICVA has broad representation from different regions, includes faith-based organisations and NGOs with different structures, and is linked in with local and global networks. ICVA has strong links to the UN, governments, NGOs, and other international organisations, and provides a platform to develop relationships and dialogue. ICVA also provides a means to mobilise members to work together to gain support on particular issues. Its location is also important, as Geneva is the humanitarian hub. Even in the modern world of the Internet, video conferencing, and relative ease of travel, being near the 'movers and shakers' in the sector has added value.

project developed, it became less appropriate for ICVA to be the focal point and it was eventually handed over to HAP.

Although NGOs and civilian UN actors have made inroads into addressing the problem, sexual exploitation is still an item that hits the press, but these days is confined more to military personnel in UN peace-support operations.



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