

SANDSTONE CONSULTING



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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2019-2021 IMPACT STUDY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The purpose of this impact study is to take stock of the impact ICVA has achieved over the course of its 2019-2021 Strategy. The key question being investigated is *“What has been the impact of ICVA’s efforts in influencing and amplifying NGO perspectives in humanitarian dialogue and policies across each of the four selected focus areas and other issues arising for the period 2019-2021?”* The methodology comprised a document review, interviews with selected stakeholders, and a review of the substantial existing data from ICVA’s recent 2030 strategy consultations with members. This report builds on the findings of the mid-strategy study conducted in January-March 2021 by Sandstone Consulting.

Background

ICVA’s vision is *‘A world in which crisis-affected populations are effectively protected, assisted and enabled to rebuild their lives and livelihoods with dignity’*. Their mission statement positions ICVA as *‘A global network of non-governmental organisations whose mission is to make humanitarian action more principled and effective by working collectively and independently to influence policy and practice’*.

ICVA’s 2019-2021 strategy is concisely framed under five ways of working (*Analyzing & Explaining; Connecting; Convening; Influencing & Advocating; Supporting*) and four focus areas (*Forced Migration; Coordination; Financing; Navigating Change / Cross-Cutting Issues*). This strategic period was initiated after significant turnover in senior positions in ICVA, including at the level of Executive Director and other leaders. Since 2018, the staffing has grown from 13 to 26 FTEs, with particular investment at the regional level which has grown from six to 11 FTEs and has expanded to include representation in Latin America and West Africa. There have been particular efforts to ensure diversity in the staffing strategy and working culture.

Focus Areas

2021 Objectives

FORCED MIGRATION

Improve protection, assistance and durable solutions for refugees, IDPs, stateless persons and migrants in vulnerable situations

COORDINATION

Strengthen the collective ability of NGOs to actively engaged in and influence coordination mechanisms to ensure they are inclusive, contextualised and provide effective assistance and protection to those affected by crises

FINANCING

Ensure humanitarian financing meets the needs of populations affected by crises while ensuring adequate NGO access to principled, quality funding

NAVIGATING CHANGE, CROSS- CUTTING ISSUES

Ensure a dynamic support to NGOs in developing strategic thinking and in navigating change while promoting humanitarian principles and the Principles of Partnership

5 WAYS OF WORKING	
ANALYZING & EXPLAINING	Producing, sharing and exchanging information, analyses, and learning opportunities
CONVENING	Facilitating, organising, and convening meetings, workshops, discussions and debates for members to exchange experiences and information, collaborate on common issues, leverage expertise and bring together varying perspectives
CONNECTING	Facilitating increased NGO access to important stakeholders, including multilateral partners (e.g. UN agencies and the World Bank), member states, donors, regional bodies, the private sector, and other networks outside the humanitarian sector
INFLUENCING & ADVOCATING	Ensuring a strong and multi-faceted NGO voice is reflected in key debates and decision-making forums that affect humanitarian action
SUPPORTING	Strengthening the capacities of NGOs to engage in the humanitarian system

Findings

This impact study assessed the results and indicators associated with 49 discrete initiatives across the four focus areas. The study identified the following highlights of ICVA's impact for each focus area during 2019-2021:

1. Forced Migration

- **Global Refugee Forum (2019):** ICVA played a leading coordination role and influenced the coherence of NGO pledges and also helped ensure a strong presence of national civil society representation
- **UNHCR Regional & Monthly Consultations (2020-2021):** ICVA increased opportunities to contribute to and influence Forced Migration policies and practices, especially through ICVA's role as an interlocutor between UN bodies and NGOs and by catalysing collaboration across civil society (e.g., co-convening the Civil Society Action Committee)
- **High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement (2019-2021):** ICVA successfully ensured NGOs were able to influence the process of drafting the HLP report (e.g., through convening meetings during the inception phase and through joint letters with InterAction to the UN Secretary General). ICVA continues to work on the follow up of the recommendations.

2. Coordination

- **IASC Architecture:** At the global level, ICVA spearheaded duty of care discussions in the IASC and elevated the issue of 'Localization' to a broader audience among the IASC Principals. Within the Emergency Directors Group (EDG), ICVA enabled NGOs (particularly national NGOs that do not have a presence at the global level) to raise critical issues from country to global level.
- **NGO Fora Support:** ICVA provided direct support, workshops, exchanges, and funding to NGO fora and networks to develop capacities and strengthen in-country NGO fora. This comprised 22 small grants awarded to NGO Fora and ongoing structured and ad-hoc support from ICVA Regional representative teams, benefitting 30 NGO Fora in 24 countries. ICVA's work included specialized support to NGO Fora in Complex Regional Settings such the Eastern and Horn of Africa project and the Syrian NGO Network Engagement and Partnership Programme. Through partnership with UNDP Syria, 12 Syrian networks based in Gaziantep

have received training from ICVA. Other achievements include the national level strengthening of NGO Fora humanitarian advocacy capacity and mobilizing NGO Fora to ensure access to COVID-19 vaccines.

3. Financing

- **Grand Bargain and Grand Bargain 2.0:** ICVA influenced the Grand Bargain implementation through its role as co-convenor of the work-stream to harmonize and simplify donor reporting requirements via the “8+3 template” for narrative reporting and continues to work in shaping the framework for the Grand Bargain 2.0.
- **Results Group 5:** Mobilized ICVA members to contribute to obtaining greater donor flexibility during the COVID crisis which unlocked NGO access to funding made available through the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan.

Navigating Change / Cross-Cutting Issues

- **Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organisations (2021):** ICVA was instrumental in developing and advocating for adoption of the charter to guide the efforts of humanitarians in relation to limiting the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on communities and reducing their own environmental footprint. Due to ICVA’s convening power and taking the lead on supporting NGOs to better understand climate change and environment impacts, donors and partners alike have engaged more on the topic through the consultations of NGOs. ICVA has followed up to assist members in the implementation of the Charter (e.g., through the 2021 Learning stream dedicated to sharing tools and experiences across members in how the charter can be applied).
- **Publications and Webinars (2019-2021):** ICVA provided quality analysis and content to increase NGO understanding on key topics (e.g., humanitarian-peace-development nexus, COVID-19 response), through more than 10 publications and 4 learning streams all made available as public goods.
- **Multi-year Funding to Sustain the PSEA community Outreach and Communications Fund:** Managed by ICVA (in collaboration with inter-agency support groups) this fund supports the work of local NGOs in preventing situations of sexual exploitation and abuse by ensuring all affected people know that humanitarian assistance is never conditional on transactions or exchanges of any kind. 34 grants were awarded in 2020 and 2021.
- **Annual Conferences (2019-2021):** Brought diverse NGOs together to share peer-to-peer experiences, challenges, lessons learnt and good practices to drive action, policy development, and partnerships in the featured topics, adapting the annual conference format to a virtual model which has broadened participation.

A high-level analysis of ICVA added value was presented in the mid-strategy review performed by Sandstone Consulting, drawing from data collected and from the ICVA 2030 consultations. This analysis is summarized below:

ICVA’s Added-Value

- ICVA is clearly recognized and valued as an established and respected humanitarian network.
- ICVA is perceived as having a strong legitimacy in its positions and actions due to the diversity of its network and the visible efforts to channel the voices of NGOs in ICVA’s interactions and representation.
- ICVA being a conduit for diverse voices is a strength, showing that ICVA listens to Members.
- ICVA has actively positioned itself as a collaborator rather than competitor with other major networks.
- ICVA brings unique value through its role, relationships, composition and selected areas of expertise in a manner which is complementary to other networks and its members.
- ICVA has actively increased the degree to which it draws on Member competence, capacity and legitimacy to improve collaboration and reduce dependency on the secretariat.

- The ICVA Secretariat has made efforts to cross beyond NGO action to link with Private Sector actors, responding to changes in the nature of actors providing humanitarian response.
- While ICVA Members are prioritized as partners and sources for input, ICVA's webinars, publications, and events are all designed to be public goods, open to all.
- Support to NGO Fora has been tailored to create an environment for partners and members to enhance capacity and expand engagement opportunities.
- During the COVID-19 crisis ICVA demonstrated flexibility and agility in how it adapted its plans, action and support. This was exhibited both internally and in how ICVA integrated COVID related initiatives in its work.
- ICVA has created value by engaging in initiatives to explore the changing nature of the Humanitarian System and how it needs to change to become more effective.

Relevance of the Focus Areas

- ICVA's selection of focus areas for 2019-2021 are strongly supported by the Membership, as indicated through the ICVA 2030 strategy development process interviews, survey and workshops.

Role of ICVA's Regional Hubs

- ICVA's investment at the Regional Level has been a force multiplier for ICVA's ambitions to better link local to global and vice versa.
- There is more work to be done, but they have made progress in adapting regional topics and dynamics to the local context.
- The success of regional hubs also creates expectations and ICVA will need to think through how best to resource any expansions in activities; in particular through leveraging Member engagement and capacity. The pilot being run in Mexico for Latin American engagement is an important learning opportunity.

Additional points of emphasis identified during this end-of-strategy review, particularly inspired by the work on Climate, PSEA, COVID, High Level Panel on Internal Displacement and NGO Fora Support include...

- **Much more than an honest broker.** ICVA are a collaborative agent, bringing knowledge and content skills, working with others as team members and not just the 'convener of others'. The 2021 work on the Climate Charter, The High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement are examples of this. This reality supports ICVA's choice in making 'collaboration' an explicit 'way-of-working' in the new ICVA 2030 strategy.
- **Collaborative** – ICVA are perceived as 'walking- talk' in focusing less on brand, minimising competition and focusing more on strong alliances to achieve common goals. This applies at all levels; their work in regions with local organisations, their advocacy to get local organisations represented in international platforms, the way they gather data, the way they comprise steering committees etc.
- **Competent and accessible** – There was unprompted feedback on the quality of the leadership of ICVA at all levels. Those leading focus areas, regions, specific thematic areas and the organisation as a whole are unanimously perceived as being approachable, knowledgeable, able to deliver and grounded in real challenges of humanitarian work rather than in the political system. This capacity and culture are seen as fundamental to the impact of ICVA.
- **Seeking Continuity** – ICVA makes efforts to join up and follow up initiatives where possible, avoiding that individual products or events are considered ends in themselves, where possible.
- **Realising Inclusion** – While ICVA will say they have a long way to go still, the perception is that ICVA is making real progress on inclusion through its network, its ways of working, its support to diverse actors and its effective advocacy for the inclusion of local organisations and networks in key platforms.
- **Resilient and Agile** – a continued ability to move with the changing context (such as evolving crises in Ethiopia, Yemen, and Afghanistan, Climate work, PSEA, COVID), taking on new initiatives and adapting planned work is a core strength of ICVA.

Strategic Points of Consideration

The midterm impact study presented the following points of consideration informed by stakeholder inputs and findings.

1. Further consider how to define selected ICVA goals and positions more sharply where it makes sense.
2. When formulating objectives, it is important to align objectives with the mainly indirect impact of ICVA work and to not overstate the direct impact ICVA seeks to achieve.
3. Consider creating a more developed organisational level theory of change (TOC) to replace, consolidate, or complement the theories of change for each focus area.
4. Continue to increase the context specificity of regional directions, working with Member organisations.
5. Consider how increased physical presence in different regions or sub regions may impact public positions.
6. Maintain attention to ensure critical constructive engagement without losing trust.

From ICVA's management response to the mid-strategy review (included in Annex III), it is clear that the team have taken the points seriously and progress has been made.

- On the **objective setting** the team are clearly making efforts to look at outcome and outputs concretely.
- The work on the **theory of change** was considered at some level through the ICVA 2030 finalisation, but considering how ICVA seems to be a key part of the humanitarian 'ecosystem' mapping this out further and showing ICVA seeks to influence or change this ecosystem could be useful.
- Further deepening the **regional level** of ICVA's work has been included as a key element of ICVA 2030 as has the ambition to **grow capacity and reach through Member organisations**.
- ICVA continues to skilfully balance its **collaborative and critical engagement role** between UN, International, NGOs and networks.

Through confidential interviews, the authors of this review invited critical comments on ICVA's impact and how it can improve, but stakeholders interviewed struggled to say much in this regard. The additional points of consideration that emerged include:

1. **Capacity challenges** – ensuring the ICVA are able to find mechanisms to scale their successes through relationships with members as the Secretariat will always have limited capacity to do so.
2. **Senior staffing and leadership** – ICVA's successful leadership model and culture seems to have been an essential element of past successes. Maintaining this culture (being humble, respectful, approachable, collective-goal focussed etc.) and the profiles of staff during turn over will be key to sustained impact as staff and leaders turn over.
3. **Branding ICVA** – Some stakeholders did ask about the brand communication strategy of ICVA and so some explicit discussion on ICVA branding, target audiences and the degree to which this is important for impact could be useful.

Conclusion

This study concludes that ICVA has had significant impact whether viewing their work through the lens of the Focus Areas, the defined ways of working or the documented added value of ICVA. ICVA does not provide direct assistance to affected populations, nor is it a major donor, so its impact has been indirect in a way which is fully in line with the positioning of the network.

ICVA's impact comes in part through the competence and capacity it has on specific areas of work such as finance or forced migration, but its overriding value is how it brings diverse actors together, respects differing views and promotes the power and influence of the collective over that of a single organization.

ICVA is arguably ahead of the field in terms of diversity, but still clearly would like to do better in realizing the value of this diversity and become even more inclusive and equitable in how it works. The regions have been fundamental in enabling ICVA to be closer and better adapted to different contexts and there is still potential to do more whether it be more country specific work, direct state engagement or increasing the local-to-global influencing. Increasing capacity will be a challenge, but there is some potential, in part through internal capacity, but probably more so in expanding collaboration.

This impact study will come across as very positive, but some strengths are also points of fragility. ICVA relies on small highly competent staff within the secretariat, in terms of their knowledge and skills but also the culture in which they operate. Their successes also raise expectations or desire for more, whether it in scope or in geographical coverage (e.g., more country engagement) and finding the best way to meet demand, without secretariat growth and with compromising quality will have its challenges.

Referring to the previous impact study (2015-2018 Strategy) done by Sandstone Consulting, concern was expressed about ICVA being spread too thinly across too many areas. ICVA's choices of focus areas has helped provide greater clarity of what their core business is compared to strategies of that past. That said, there is still a need to prioritize and avoid overload. Another point raised in past studies was the need for theories of change (TOC); while efforts were made at the focus area level ICVA might still benefit from an organizational level TOC to complement this. This would create a compelling narrative that would build cohesion internally and enable a clearer understanding of ICVA's approach externally.

COVID-19 proved the relevance and importance of much of ICVA's ongoing activities and initiatives across the focus areas. With support from the ICVA Secretariat, ICVA members have continued delivering on the ground despite the additional challenges brought on by the pandemic. As a collective, they also successfully influenced and drafted global policies for more solidarity and social justice.

ICVA has enormous reach and covers a lot of ground considering the size of the organization and budget. While expectations by members and other stakeholders on ICVA keep increasing, ICVA operates with limited resources considering its scope, which puts a lot of pressure on the existing staff especially during disruptive times, ICVA has managed well, but sustaining the quality of work and meeting ambitions will require stable resourcing from supporters as well as strong collaborations with and between Members.

Looking Forward

In 2021 ICVA approved the ICVA 2030 Strategy. This was a deep and inclusive process looking beyond their usual three-year horizon with over 90 percent of members having taken part in the consultations through interviews, meetings, workshops, videos, regional meetings and thematic workshops, and a survey. External stakeholders, other NGO networks and UN agencies also contributed to this strategic vision. The analysis of the external context, understanding of collective impact, and the vision for change are all a result of these collective inputs.

A number of points picked up during the mid-term resonate with choices made in the 2030 strategy such as realising diversity equity and inclusion as a means to increase impact, the relevance of regions, leveraging off member capacity, building on environmental and PSEA work and deepening the collaborative nature of ICVA's work. The strategy defines the organisation ICVA aspires to become in order to best deliver its role and also retains some of the key focus areas, which makes sense considering past success and also. That said, if ICVA is successful in creating a more local-to-global dynamic through contextualised approaches implemented through regional offices, regional rather than focus areas might be better pillars around which to describe impact.

Hopefully, this final version of the impact study will provide added reflection as ICVA looks forward to its desired impact in the years ahead.

Full Impact Study Report

The full report includes case studies and detailed findings. It is available at: <https://www.icvanetwork.org/resource/impact-study-2019-2021/>





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