



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

ICVA Case study: COVID-19 response

ICVA's agility to incorporate COVID-19 response
into the 2020 workplan

February 2021

I. The first actions

As the spread of the pandemic increased and more States started to undertake restrictive measures to prevent transmission of COVID-19, ICVA began to implement specific actions to support members in their planning and response to this unprecedented challenge.

Early March, ICVA launched a [statement](#) emphasising on the crucial role of NGOs to deliver principled and effective humanitarian assistance against the background of COVID-19 pandemic. This statement helped to further frame the priorities of the network and its members in response to COVID-19.

ICVA Annual Conference: successful online events ensure larger participation

The preparations for the ICVA Annual Conference (AC) were also well underway. Considering the increasingly complex risks faced by NGOs on the ground, in early 2020 ICVA decided to support its members in managing such risks by enhancing their knowledge on the subject, promoting peer to peer sharing of good practices and learning. The AC was dedicated to the subject of protection of humanitarian principles and risk management and planned to take place face to face in Geneva as one of the several ICVA yearly events on risk management. Because of the pandemic, a few weeks before the planned date, ICVA decided to hold its AC virtually. Despite the short time frame available to adjust, the AC was a success, thanks also to the partnership with PHAP. The AC was highly attended by members and generated a good and useful discussion. In the face of COVID-19, the subject of risks and the discussions in the AC had become even more relevant to the work of the members. The report and the recordings of the sessions are available [here](#).

Throughout 2020 as the pandemic unfolded, ICVA members had to adjust to continue delivering on the ground and incorporate into their action's responses to the new threats and vulnerabilities created by COVID-19. The operational and financial challenges were substantial. ICVA Secretariat decided to support members and engage through its ways of working in the COVID-19 response. This would be in addition to all the other planned engagements and activities by the Secretariat.

Previously planned work for 2020

A few new initiatives had just started and required ongoing follow up with members and partners. In February 2020, UNHCR and ICVA launched the Community Outreach and Communication Fund on Protection against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse ([PSEA Outreach Fund](#)). This initiative was established to support the critical work that NGOs do to ensure that people we serve are fully aware that humanitarian assistance is never conditional on any transaction or exchange of any kind and to prevent situations of sexual exploitation and abuse. The forced migration team was closely following up with the implementation of both Global Compacts and in particular the pledges coming out of the first [Global Refugee Forum](#), including implementation of its own pledges. ICVA was also supporting the contribution of NGOs in the work of the [High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement](#). Such work is considered by NGOs as very important in addressing the situation of the 41 million displaced persons and there was great interest to contribute. In addition, ICVA Secretariat had just co-launched a new online [learning initiative on international migration law](#), enabling NGO personnel to enhance knowledge and understanding of the international legal framework on migration and how NGOs could work with a framework at the benefit of migrants and society. In the regions, work was ongoing in supporting members' intervention with specific attention to the role and contribution of local and national actors. ICVA regional hubs were also closely following a number of challenging humanitarian situations, like in Sahel and Yemen, ensuring

that NGO voices were heard and properly supported in delivering their mandate. ICVA members and ICVA Secretariat staff were also substantially engaged in the [Inter-Agency Standing Committee](#). With ICVA's ED and Board Chair representing the network at the Principals level and ICVA members and Secretariat staff representing at the Emergency Directors Group (EDG), Operational Policy Advocacy Group (OPAG) and Result Groups (RGs) level.

COVID-19 response

In order to avoid additional fundraising at a time where resources were most needed by frontline workers and agencies, ICVA Secretariat decided not to create any additional workstream and hire new staff, but to incorporate COVID-19 response into existing work.

Throughout 2020, ICVA Secretariat upheld the following priorities as outlined in the March statement:

- Ensuring a global intervention focusing on people, especially the most vulnerable
- Supporting NGOs to sustain and scale up their interventions
- Investing in localization
- Investing further in risk management and duty of care.

II. A global intervention focusing on the most vulnerable

The Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP)

[The GHRP](#) sought to develop for the first time ever a global appeal to support the joint effort by members of the IASC, including UN, other international organisations and NGOs, to analyse and respond to the public health and humanitarian consequences of the pandemic, particularly on people in countries already facing other crises. Initial efforts were overly UN focused and ICVA and its members had to advocate and come up with concrete proposals on how the document could duly reflect the crucial work of NGOs, their analysis and asks. ICVA Secretariat facilitated this work, liaising regularly with OCHA and the various IASC entities and working in close collaboration with the other NGO consortia members of the IASC: InterAction and SCHR. Although the process was unprecedented and remained challenging throughout, the contributions of NGOs to the drafting and multiple revisions of the GHRP were seen as critical.

Coordination

ICVA supported NGOs in many operational settings by continuing to bridge the gaps between global and national policy and operational discussions. This was particularly important during the first half of 2020, when disruption to ongoing work was at its greatest and many new platforms for engagement had emerged in the online space. ICVA focal points increased their level of engagement to ensure ICVA members were able to contribute to the various mechanisms as best possible.

The efforts of the IASC Emergency Directors Group (EDG) increased significantly in 2020. The changing nature of the crisis and its impacts on ongoing humanitarian operations led to EDG meetings focused on various operational contexts taking place almost weekly through most of the year. ICVA continually engaged members at global, regional and country levels to ensure specific inputs were provided to help inform the EDG discussions.

Inclusion of the most vulnerable

In their work, ICVA members focus on the most vulnerable groups. Faced with the new pandemic, specific actions were undertaken by NGOs to mitigate and address the COVID-19 risks for these vulnerable populations. At the global level, ICVA advocated for GHRP data to be disaggregated by diversity considerations (gender, age, disability etc.) and to ensure gender-based violence interventions were prioritised.

As a member of the reference group on the inclusion of people with disabilities in humanitarian action, ICVA co-organised a webinar on [Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in COVID-19 Response](#). The webinar presented the recent note produced by the Reference Group and endorsed by the IASC on this topic, followed by a discussion of challenges in the current response and concrete examples of solutions found to overcome them. In similar line, throughout the summer, ICVA and UNICEF together with InterAction and SCHR issued a number of briefings on [UNICEF-NGO COVID -19 response](#), followed up by thematic webinars, covering issues such as health, child protection, nutrition, social protection, WASH, etc.

From the early days, ICVA supported NGOs to participate and contribute in the UNHCR monthly online consultations on COVID-19 response. The [2020 UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs](#), which was successfully co-organised by ICVA, focused also on the subject of Responding to Pandemics. In Asia, ICVA and APPRN collaborated with UNHCR to conduct two virtual meetings with NGOs in the region on funding flexibility, COVID-19 response update, etc. The international migration law initiative also had a dedicated [webinar on COVID-19 and the rights of migrants](#). Thus, while keeping with all ongoing engagements and activities, ICVA facilitated and conducted - within existing focus areas- new activities to reflect on COVID-19 related challenges and how to mitigate them for the most vulnerable. The discussions, technical guidance provided, and good practices shared by ICVA, assisted concretely with the work of members on the ground.

III. Supporting NGOs to sustain and scale up intervention

Humanitarian financing

COVID-19 consequences were felt worst in countries already in crisis. ICVA members sought to step up their intervention despite the difficult operational context. ICVA enhanced its engagement in advocacy, operational and technical support and political influence at the benefit of its members. Within the IASC, ICVA together with InterAction and SCHR strongly advocated for timely and adequate transfer of the GHRP funds to frontline workers. Following an appeal from the Emergency Response Coordinator (ERC), ICVA worked with NGO colleagues through IASC Humanitarian Finance Results Group (RG5) to coordinate a set of [recommendations](#) to address the inconsistency in unlocking and disbursing funds to NGOs in COVID-19 response.

ICVA, in collaboration with InterAction and SCHR, also reached out and discussed with UNHCR and UNICEF, influencing the flexibility measures adopted by both UN Agencies. Moreover, as co-chair of the IASC RG5, ICVA co-led efforts to draft the [IASC Partnership flexibility guidance](#) and strongly represented NGO interests throughout the process. The guidance outlines nine specific funding flexibility measures that IASC members agreed to implement. While the identified measures meet the immediate need to improve funding flexibility in response to COVID-19, they also align with the long-term commitments of the Grand Bargain, to which ICVA continued to contribute throughout 2020.

Advocacy was conducted also towards donor States. ICVA held regular bilateral meetings with a number of capitals, with the Permanent Missions in Geneva and the [Good Humanitarian](#)

[Donorship](#) Initiative. As result of ICVA's advocacy, a number of States followed up on some of the IASC partnership flexibility recommendations. Today, there is an increased interest and investments by States in the country and regional based pool funds, from which NGOs can more easily benefit. There is agreement to extend measures into 2021 and ICVA is engaging in discussions on how to further incorporate them into standard practice beyond COVID-19 response.

Throughout 2020, ICVA also invested in encouraging a better collaboration between NGOs and the private sector, based on existing good practices, identified by ICVA in various geographic contexts.

Work in the regions

Non COVID-19 related work in the regions continued, although many of the planned activities also dedicated some space to the response to the pandemic. In Asia, ICVA supported two real time response reviews through its function as co-chair of the EPWG to share/discuss lessons on humanitarian response in light of COVID-19 restrictions. They regarded the tropical cyclone Harold in the Pacific, and the typhoons/flooding in South-East Asia. ICVA Asia, in coordination with ADRRN and OCHA, adapted the annual humanitarian partnership event to an online forum. A series of webinars were organised over a month period, with a focus on involving more national and sub national actors and examining how lessons from COVID-19 can shape humanitarian action in the future which will feed into a larger policy paper for the region.

In Africa, the situation in Sahel continued to remain a specific focus for ICVA's work. In October, ICVA coordinated the NGOs preparations to the Ministerial Conference on Central Sahel organised by Denmark, in partnership with Germany, the European Union and the United Nations. ICVA supported the drafting and dissemination of an [advocacy note](#) by its members, with specific recommendations to the participants to the Conference.

ICVA was also instrumental in organising a meeting between ERC and NGOs operating in Yemen. The meeting discussed access and operational issues with NGOs sharing specific asks to the ERC. From his side the ERC gave an overview of ongoing efforts and processes and promised to include NGOs concerns throughout them, if not already the case.

In all the regions, ICVA facilitated the dialogue of NGOs with key UN agencies and donors in response to COVID-19. These discussions contributed to enhanced information sharing, established the necessary operational links, and improved NGOs advocacy towards key donors and UN agencies. They also served to inform members on recent donors' policies related to COVID-19, on issues such as funding flexibility, duty of care, etc. Last, but not least, ICVA also facilitated and coordinated collective NGO feedback on GHRP and other COVID-19 response plans at regional level through Regional Director's meetings and in forums with Donors.

Program guidance

ICVA coordinated the contributions from members, to all the IASC tools and resources produced to guide the response to COVID-19. They include over 12 Interim Guidance and six other Guidance tools related to COVID-19 response and can be found [here](#). ICVA continues to advocate for more inter-agency efforts in translating these tools into realities on the ground.

Operational support

The COVID-19 restrictive measures introduced by governments worldwide added to existing administrative and bureaucratic impediments faced by NGOs. ICVA and InterAction lead the RG1 work on mapping and analysing the bureaucratic impediments faced by NGOs. This work continued during the pandemic, however ICVA and InterAction also worked to identify additional COVID-19 related measures impeding NGO operations on the ground, particularly related to visas and travel. Joint advocacy for concrete solutions was conducted at the IASC level (mainly through the EDG and Principals).

ICVA's partnership with TrustLaw enabled additional support to members. TrustLaw had created a legal [Checklist](#) to help non-profits identify their legal needs in the face of COVID-19. To explain the checklist as well as respond to the questions and needs of ICVA members, three regional webinars were organised by ICVA and TrustLaw.

ICVA also ensured that a nexus approach was part of its work on COVID-19 response. Members were informed on the [UN Socio Economic Framework](#) and discussed the interplay between the GHRP, country level HRPs and the Socio Economic Framework bringing further clarity on how the planning and the coordination were organised.

IV. Investing in localization

In the early days of the pandemic (March 2020), ICVA issued [The Localization discussion paper on COVID-19](#) which provided a foundation for dialogue and advocacy on reinforcing local and national action. In fact, as foreseen in the paper, COVID-19 provided a renewed commitment to the localization agenda. With this momentum, ICVA's work on the profiling of national NGO engagement in international humanitarian coordination structures in the MENA region received specific attention and relevance. ICVA also used this momentum to advocate for more space for national and local actors in regional and global coordination and decision-making mechanisms.

Currently discussions are ongoing within IASC on how to extend participation and contribution of local and national NGOs in all its Results groups (RGs). ICVA member, The Somalia NGO Forum, co-chairs the IASC RG1 work on localisation together with UNHCR. ICVA national members to OPAG ([COAST](#), [FRD](#) and [ACBAR](#)) strongly reflect local concerns in OPAG policy work and advocate for a better bridging between policies and field realities. ICVA discussions on the [UN Reform](#) with UN High Level Officials have also provided an opportunity to ask for better engagement by the UN Resident Coordinators and country teams with national and local actors. With ICVA facilitation, national actors' voices were among the speakers of the [2020 Global Protection Forum](#). The [2020 UNICEF- NGO Consultations](#), co-organised by ICVA also had a specific session dedicated to decolonialisation of aid, progress on localization and efforts to address racisms and all forms of discrimination. This session was co-organised with the Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4EP), which aims to strengthen locally led responses.

Moreover, to respond to additional challenges of COVID-19, ICVA stepped up its NGO Fora Program. A total of 12 NGO Fora across Africa, Asia, Latin America and MENA received grants of an approximate 15'000 CHF by ICVA to enhance their support and coordination services to members at country level and to continue advocating on their behalf. ICVA also established a virtual support desk for the NGO Fora to help them navigate through the new challenges brought by the pandemic.

In MENA, ICVA began a capacity development program targeting networks and civil society organisations (CSOs) in Syria and Turkey. The aim of the program is to strengthen the capacity of CSOs in coordination, joint advocacy, and good governance and in turn, amplify the NGO voice at regional and global levels. The program, held as a series of webinars, was conducted on a technology platform with simultaneous translation when needed. This approach proved to be cost-effective and allowed for an increased number of participants.

V. Risk management and duty of care

Risk management

Operational support provided to members included issues related to risk management and duty of care, which were particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. As planned prior to the pandemic, and in addition to the 2020 ICVA Annual Conference, ICVA conducted a learning stream on “Risk Management in Practice.” The learning stream consisted of four webinars and produced three briefing papers to guide ICVA members’ practices on the subject. All the relevant information is available [here](#).

The PSEA outreach and communication fund

To mitigate risk coming from themselves, all humanitarian and aid actors have to enhance their investments in PSEA. Including through proactively and efficiently communicating with communities about the unconditional nature of aid, what constitutes SEA and how to report allegations. This made the inter-agency PSEA Fund that ICVA and UNHCR launched in 2020, all the more relevant. In the face of COVID-19, effective communication on PSEA with communities became even more challenging and over 1,600 NGOs applied to the Fund. A total of 19 NGOs were supported with grants of up to 20’000 USD, based on a careful selection by an inter-agency Steering Committee. A list of grantees and their projects can be found [here](#). ICVA also coordinated the provision of technical expertise when requested. A deliberate choice was made to target resources to local NGOs in light of the shared commitment to the localization agenda. Supporting NGOs through this Fund was about empowering both the NGOs as well as the communities being served.

Duty of care

In its risk management work and because of COVID-19, ICVA increasingly paid attention to duty of care and protection of humanitarian personnel. In May 2020, ICVA issued a [Call for Action on Protecting humanitarian workers against COVID-19](#). The call was issued in complementarity to the ongoing IASC efforts to run the Medevac services established in the GHRP, and because ICVA felt the need to prioritise prevention by strengthening labour rights, occupational safety measures and health for all NGO personnel, regardless of status and nationality.

Understanding that progress on duty of care requires system wide engagement, ICVA brought the issue for discussion to the OPAG, which decided to convert the ICVA paper into a set of IASC minimum standards and commitments. The [IASC Minimum Standards on Duty of Care in the Context of COVID-19](#) were developed by an OPAG task team, under the co-leadership of ICVA and WFP. Focusing on preventing and mitigating COVID-19 related risks, the standards aim to protect the health and safety of personnel, while ensuring that organisations continue to deliver on their mandates. Attention is paid to non-discrimination and ensuring that all personnel, regardless of nationality or contractual type is equally covered and protected by the minimum standards in the COVID-19 context. It is acknowledged that the implementation of such standards may entail additional costs for organisations, for which a dialogue with donors may be warranted. The endorsement of such a document can also serve the NGO dialog with donors for further investment by their side in duty of care.

VI. Communication and leadership

Ongoing and efficient two-way communication between ICVA members and the ICVA secretariat facilitated the above-mentioned results. From the early days of the pandemic, ICVA created an additional [webpage](#) with existing resources and tools on COVID-19 for its members and other humanitarian workers.

However, the main element contributing to the results of ICVA in 2020 was the engagement and leadership demonstrated not only at the Board and Secretariat level, but first and foremost throughout the membership. ICVA members succeeded to continue delivering on the ground despite the additional challenges brought by the pandemic. As a collective, they also successfully influenced and drafted global policies for more solidarity and social justice. This joint work in the face of unprecedented challenges, guided also the drafting of ICVA 2030 strategy, which continued uninterrupted in 2020. The strategy aims to build upon the strengths and agility of the network and its members for better results for the people and communities we serve together.