



ICVA at 60 – Interview - Transcript

Anoop Sukurman

July 2021

Hi

Welcome to our ICVA at 60 series.

A collection of interviews with leaders of ICVA in the build-up to ICVA's 60 anniversary in 2022.

Join us as we listen to ICVA Board members and staff, former and present, talk about some of the challenges during their time at ICVA.

In this episode we listen to Robert White, a consultant for the ICVA at 60 project, talk to Anoop Sukurman, who was elected Chair of ICVA in 2018. Their conversation begins with a discussion around the ICVA at 60 history paper, the final version can found on the ICVA website.

Anoop talks about how ICVA has become a more inclusive organisation, the added value of the ICVA regional hubs, and the role of members in strengthening ICVA as a network. Enjoy.

RW : Ok, thanks very much. I have actually four questions for you. Yeah, my first question is on the paper itself, if you've had a chance to read through it. How did it read?

AS: And I had a very quick look, to be honest, a very cursory look on it. And I think it really does justice to the gamut of ICVA's space and where actually ICVA has created this space within the humanitarian. And of course, the refugee world. And I think this is what's really unique about about ICVA is its long standing has seen the ups and downs and the evolution of the humanitarian world, as well as the rights based spaces. So I think that that really sort of brings into that and especially since you're looking into a sort of decade wide, I wouldn't be able to give you a lot more sort of in depth one since I have not really been able to and I do apologize for that. But I think I would be. If you can give me time, maybe I would try to give it a second look and come back to you with some more comments if I have any. But it's a wonderful compilation anyway.

RW: Tell me, just so I know how long has your association been with ICVA? And on the board and otherwise, can you just give me a brief idea?

AS: I was. I was connected with ICVA the since 2012. And actually before that 2010 around, but in 2012, I think we started really connecting, I was at that moment I was the director of the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network, which was a very young, rather unknown network. And it was one of the second trips to Geneva, to the UNHCR consultations, and I was elected as the the NGO rapporteur. In 2012. And that's when actually we began to work quite closely with I began to work closely with ICVA as a reporter and Nan was director at that point in ICVA. I think.

RW: And are you still connected with the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network yourself?

AS: No, I left Asia Pacific Right Network in 2015, after which I was with Act Alliance. And it was during Act Alliance and as a regional representative Act Alliance for the Asia Pacific, and it was when I was with Act Alliance that I became the chair of ICVA.

RW: Oh, OK.

AS: But I was on the board of ICVA since 2014. As with APRRN. So mine is a bit of an odd sort of thing because I first got elected onto the board in 2014, I think. And then I left, APRRN to resign my post on the board. And I think in 2015, in the elections for the board came up again and I was re-elected to be on the board. But I have had sort of two and a half tenures on the board.

RW: And you were chair for several years also, weren't you?

AS: For a couple of years Yes, I didn't finish my tenure either as I left Act Alliance.

RW: So I have now three questions for you. The first is when you when you were associated with ICVA, what made you proud of being a part of it at that time? What gave you a pride or satisfaction from your association with ICVA?

AS: I mean, I think one of the key things is indicative of ICVA was inclusive approach has been it proactively looked to support small networks and bring the voices of those who are not otherwise heard. And as as we know, the structure of ICVA in the beginning was very much towards the larger NGOs in many towns. But it has evolved. It has developed to really be a far more inclusive voice, and I think that's really indicative, and it has very much been the leader in bringing that voice of those who are not in the decision making processes or at least those who are in the periphery of it. And I think that is a very critical element, and that's something that's unique that's brought to the table by ICVA, particularly since it is so close to the decision making processes in Geneva, being able to demystify that to those at the national levels. To those NGOs who are not having access to that sort of level of conversation and discussions and being able to understand what actually is going to be the impact of what's being discussed in Geneva is really critical and that has made a huge difference. And how do those at the national level then sort of contribute upwards into making contributions towards the policy itself, I think, is another critical piece where it's not just these small NGOs being recipients of this conversation, but being being able to contribute effectively to a discussion and the decision making process. And I think it's it's particularly evident in the way in which ICVA supports national NGOs, particularly with the UNHCR consultations, which actually has been a particularly standout point. And of course, with with its positioning around the interagency committee, the IASC.

RW: Yeah, yeah.

AS: So I think in all of those spaces, there is definitely a critical role that equal plays, particularly with with being the representative voices, making sure that under represented voices are often heard and things of that sort.

RW: Ok. Let me ask you a question that's conducted in some ways, and you're probably pretty well placed to answer. As you know, a few years ago, probably around 2013-14, the regional hubs were established in various locations, including Bangkok, which I'm sure you know quite well. What difference do you think it made for it to have this kind of regional focus and regional presence through regional stuff?

AS: Ok. I was involved right from the from the beginning, I think, into this regionalization conversation and Tanya, who was then tasked by Nan, I think, to sort of put the the regionalisation piece back into action. We

had discussions regionally in different parts of the world and. There was a lot of conversation within ICVA, I think, within the board and within its membership in terms of what is the added value that regionalisation brings to equal. And I think that was a very those consultations, I think, were critical because it really showed that ICVA was at one point being isolated, being Geneva based. In other words, national organizations, national NGOs, national members were not able to connect with Geneva the same way in which they would if there was something that was regional. In other words? Does ICVA at Geneva understand what's happening at the regional level? Does it have the sense of it rather than having someone who is maybe a desk officer who sort of represents the region, but rather being embedded in the region makes a huge difference? And bringing that position as one who connects and I think it was an absolute when came through the were questions, but I think over a period of time that has those questions have been answered to a large extent in no small terms, not only to the incredible leadership of the directors, but also the incredible kind of people who were there who were at least.

RW: I know of the two regional reps with earlier Jamie Munn, who is now with the NRC. And Jeremy Wellard, who else were left a huge legacy here in Asia, where they connected among each other, other members with other NGOs created networks in country for organizations to take place and taking that messages up and making sure that those voices are heard at the decision making at the international and global levels. And those are those are absolutely critical. Absolutely. You know, these are things that never happened before. These are spaces that were occupied by INGOs. And that's, I think, where ICVA makes a different where you have national members, national networks being able to stand shoulder to shoulder with well-managed INGOs who basically were the ones, you know, being able to have a voice at the decision making processes. And it also changed the attitude with which UN agencies looked at national NGOs. They're no longer pushovers who were told to be do things just because they're being funded. But here are actual actors, actual partners with which you need to deal with and listen to because they know what they're talking about. Perhaps not in the language that you expect. And that's again came in where ICVA did bring in tools with which national and regional organizations could converse with the same degree of technical excellence with which NGOs in the past used to.

RW: Yeah, I've noticed ICVA has done a lot of work with the IASC, putting a national and local and national NGOs onto some of the committees of the IASC, which is really something that I think had not happened before before about two or three years ago. So it's really quite good.

AS: Absolutely. And also, you know, the support to what we would now call south based sort of resurgence of NGO demand and stuff particularly, I think post WHS. But there have been so many other sort of formations that are there, and ICVA has never seen these formations as challenges or as competition. But ICVA has always tried to collaborate with them, and I think a lot of that is the staff of ICVA Secretariat also with the membership. There has been incredible conversations at the board level, at different levels, at the membership, where these conversations, which can be seen as problematic, have taken place and those have been reflected in the way in which ICVA has defined its policy. And there have been times when, yes, there have been criticisms, ICVA has taken note of this criticism. And I think the regionalisation piece is a is a good example of that where there have been there has been a genuine effort to reorganize and reevaluate it. And as you were saying, since 1962 to almost 2013, it was very much Geneva based.

AS: So, so to be able to sort of completely re-evaluate itself goes and tells a lot about how ICVA as an organization is able to and was able to listen to what is being, what is happening around it and to its membership. And as you know, there have been hiccups for ICVA along the road and it has managed to often, sometimes very difficult and difficult manner, but it has managed to come up trumps in that sense. But.

RW: Yeah, I'm not sure about that choice of words, but but I know what you mean. Another observation I have is that I've been told that excellent now has something like one hundred over one hundred and thirty

members. Increases every year is a lot of the increase members in your region, would you say, or or how has the increase taken place memberships?

AS: This yes, there has been a lot of increase in Asia, and the Asia-Pacific has always been, I think, largely due to its understanding of the English language in particular. One of the big criticisms for ICVA and that was on the membership committee earlier as well and also was was that we had not reached out or did not have enough members from Latin America. Yeah. ICVA is largely is an Afro-Asian network. Now, I think since Ignacio has come on, I think there is a small smattering of a few Latin American NGOs. But having said that, that doesn't mean that the Latin American voices are not heard, especially because there are other networks which do have Latin American partners. Act Alliance, one good example, Oxfam, and the voices of Latin America definitely do come, but then it is mediated through other networks. And what we need a lot more to have. I think the big problem that has been that it does not have the capacity to translate things into Spanish and so on, so forth. And I think it will take some time before there's an interest in ICVA from Latin American actors. We have always been extremely impressed by the movements in Latin America, especially for us in Asia, and we always felt that there is need for more interaction to happen between these countries. Asia has always been quite active and as I said, one of the reasons probably is that I think Asians generally tend to be far more comfortable in the English language, and the NGO movements in this region are also far more vocal as opposed to. I'm not saying that Africa is any less, but in terms of sudden movements that have engaged with international and global institutions, I think it's slightly a slightly different version here.

RW: No, I think you're right. Particularly with regard to Latin America, just based on my discussions with Ignacio and Fiona and other staff, I think they're trying to make a more concerted push to engage more with Central America, South America, the Caribbean than previously. But and that connection, another gap that I've seen actually is a western central Africa, the Francophone Africa, where, as you probably know, there was the initial office in Senegal and Dakar moved to Nairobi, which leaves open pretty much a large portion of the African continent. Which is not as far as I can see. Not yet really fully fully developed by ICVA. And I'm I'm just wondering how much one office in Nairobi can do for such a huge continent like Africa. So there is the African Union office in Addis. But that's really focused on the African Union and then Nairobi, which is mainly the Anglophone East Africa. More just an observation on my side about West and central Africa.

AS: I would I would strongly agree with you, and I think these conversations have happened at some levels and that some of these criticisms have also been raised. Part of it, I think the logic of moving to Addis, for instance, was also economic because having to do offices in different parts. It does have an economic piece to it, but I completely agree with you of it that it does. It does. It does ignore or at least isolate the Francophone part of Africa. And there is a microcosm, as we all know of the Francophone NGOs, which ICVA had has some contact, and I think probably Ignacio is better placed to understand that. But I think there's a need for much more of a concerted effort to sort of connect them back along with the Anglophile piece part of the world. But I think, you know, it seems strange, but definitely this there is certainly it's a language piece that comes into this, into this document and. This, I think, adds to the complexity of it, particularly for national organizations in Francophone Africa or in Latin America who feel, I think, handicapped when when they are to speak in a context that is largely English speaking. And of course, it gets complicated when when there are no translators or the translators and not good enough or whatever, or they have to wait. And not all translations happened properly and things of that kind. So I think really it really is is a contribution of all of those elements. And I totally agree. I think it's it's doing Africa. An injustice that's such a huge continent has only one office in Addis. And I'm not sure, frankly, to be very honest with you, whether engagement with the A.U.

At that level really makes a huge difference with regard to policy. My personal viewpoint has always been strengthening of national networks, strengthening of networks of NGOs at the regional level. That is where ICVA comes into its own and creating a body of messaging that then becomes difficult for bodies like the A.U. or the ASEAN to ignore. Having one-to-one conversations with ICVA being at the helm of it tends to tends to

become sort of to focus sometimes, and it can be easily ignored or if or if the person who is in charge is not as charismatic, you know your value is down. So it's really about what is a platform that's created. And that was the reason why it regionalization came in in the first place. It was not about equaling the sort of leader. But it was going to be the facilitator of creating the voices that need to be heard. Hmm. It was supposed to initiate those conversations. It was supposed to provide the support for other NGOs, they can talk among themselves and be able to represent themselves. And I think if it becomes then becomes the job of the secretariat to do so, I think that would be problematic because it is putting too much of there's too much of hope or there's too much of pressure on the secretariat. And it may not be able to live up to those expectations and understand this one person or two people or five people in the secretariat cannot simply be representative of of such a large continent or continents for that matter.

RW: No, I would agree. There's another aspect to that, and that is the question of documentation. I think that probably most, if not the great majority of documentation coming out of it is ICVA is in English. And it may be I'm sure it's a question of finance, is the economics. But you could argue that if there are more documentation in Spanish or French or other languages, it would facilitate closer cooperation. You could probably argue that.

AS: Yeah, there is, and I think this is this is something that definitely, I think had been attempted previously as well, where some documents or key documents have been translated. We have also I think there was a time when there was an encouragement of members to come forward and say, we will do the translation because I mean, say, for instance, Asia Pacific. English is just one of the many languages that are spoken, so. So again, the way in which we in the Asia-Pacific try to do it was to ask members to take it upon themselves to say, OK, fine. This is this is a very critical piece, which might be useful. Can you translate that? And if somebody comes back to us and says that you know what? We don't have the resources for it, but we might need some help then to see if the members could help out. In some cases, it does work. I think there have been some documents in Indonesia or in Bangla and things of that where some critical pieces of documentation which had been translated directly. I think I totally agree that there is there is a thing that can you can. If they were translated properly, they happen.

But I think a lot of that is really the economics of it. Are you going in in translators? Do you have the resources to do so? The other thing we've always done and I personally really strongly felt about was what creates ownership of membership in ICVA. What makes what makes members feel that it is part of a network and needs to contribute to the network? You know, and one of that would be to to to encourage members to take on pieces of work where they can see the value of it. Translation is one part of it, where they can then use that as a means to say This is my contribution to the network. I'm just a network, sort of. It's on a one page discussion, but it's a Two-Way process. And it's also to break this idea of of that. You know, there are large members, small members to say that members are all in their different ways can contribute and therefore that equity piece comes in. So you're not always looking at an Oxfam to be the one that's providing the funding and therefore has a greater voice.

RW: Oh yeah. Yeah. Ok, let me move to my next question, and that is this is looking at ICVA today and in the future. I don't know if you have seen the 2030 strategy, the one that just got approved by the last governance.

AS: I haven't seen that now,

RW: But it's a 10 year plan and they have a three year plan as part of that moving forward. But why do you think ICVA is important today and looking more to the future? How would you see ICVA moving into the future yourself?

AS: I think, as I said, I mean, I I think the greatest potential is really connecting NGOs, first of all, among themselves and to create a cogent, decisive voice. An influencing decision making and policy making basically

at all levels, national, regional and global. ICVA is the vertebrae. It is the it is the spinal column, which allows for this communication up and down for this change to happen. And I think I see that as a huge value that ICVA adds to it. It provides the structure, it provides the space for that, for that to happen. What it needs, probably, and it will become even more important is the devolution of powers as it happens, where it's not centralized, where there is more decentralization of discussions with this, more decentralization of voices being heard. And that decentralization is where the networks that were formed come into their own. And I think a good example of probably one of the aspects of that is the conversation around localization. From just the funding is to say who defines what is local. And keeping the people who are affected at the center of that conversation, and ICVA has played a huge role in it, its membership has been a critical player in that in that conversation and that local piece, that localization, which is, I think, will further evolve as new actors come into it and we are able to provide spaces and facilitate conversation where they are the ones who are defining a debate, where they are defining how the election should take place.

So I was just saying that I think I think the the debates and the role that ICVA has played in the localization debate, bringing together the actors and and strengthening the peace around devolution, devolution of powers, devolution of decision making. I think ICVA is going to be a critical player within that where it needs to. And I'm sure it recognizes its role as a facilitator of those voices. It's going to face challenges with regard to , I guess, it's reach if it's going to be secretariat, if everything sort of centered around how the secretariat is able to handle it. But I think it really will be important for membership to really take on a stronger role to be able to facilitate and strengthen the role of ICVA as a network. And there is a natural tendency, I guess, among members to when you have a well-functioning secretariat to end up with letting the secretariat do a lot of things, and I think that's that becomes problematic where you're just looking at the secretariat as a service provider. This is a network where all members have a role to play and to contribute. I think. It wouldn't be it would be quite fair to say that. Some members understand that many don't. Some ignore it.

RW: Ok. It's really good to know. My final question is more more personal, and that is, is there one anecdote that you can think of about your whole experience with ICVA in particular that you'd like to share something maybe more personal?

AS: I think it's both personal and and also, I think indicative of the support ICVA has provided. And I remember this in 2012, it was a very that was a very, very small organization. It had absolutely no funding. So we were asked to join ICVA. Become a member of ICVA. And I had to be honest with them saying that we really did not have funding. We do not have the resources to pay the \$1000. And ICVA came back and said, well, we can definitely work around that in some way. You still have to pay a fee, but perhaps the way that can be done is maybe it can be seen as providing space. So we provided space for the ICVA office in Bangkok. So it is almost like an in-kind contribution in a way which was seen as a payment to which which was extremely encouraging for a small organization that was struggling to raise resources and also being able to provide that organization, which was hardly known. It's now quite well known to be able to to be recognized at the global stage. And I think that that to me, is where ICVA really makes a huge difference. Where being part of ICVA, being represented makes you discuss things like a much different level, and this is particularly true because after that, since we were part of ICVA, the UNHCR had a very different take on how we were seen.

RW : Oh, really. Yeah.

AS: So you could see you could see that change in their attitude.

RW :That's good to hear since I spent about 25 years with UNHCR.

AS: You know,

RW: I agree, I totally agree with you.OK. Yeah, thanks very much. Any final thoughts on your side you'd like to share, but I appreciate very much the conversation

AS: I would wish ICVA all the very best. Of course. And I particularly would like to wish Ignacio and his team all the very best for the future. I have been deeply involved with ICVA, I am out of it right now, but I will definitely know what the situation is right back, I think involved with ICVA. So I think I've been honoured to be part of it. I've been honoured and inspired by all the people I've met in all. The board members have been associated with and who have provided me with great support when I was chair. So my thanks to all of them and my gratitude to ICVA.

RW: And I'm sure the feeling is mutual from their side also. Thank you very much. It's nice to nice to talk to you, and I appreciate very much your your honesty and the comments she made all the way through. It's really quite helpful to me.

This conversation between Anoop Sukurman and Robert White was recorded in July 2021.

Founded in 1962, ICVA (International Council of Voluntary Agencies) is a global network of over 140 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) active in 160 countries, operating at global, regional, national and local levels. Our mission is to make humanitarian action more principled and effective by working collectively and independently to influence policy and practice.

For more information about ICVA, and the history of ICVA visit [www. icvanetwork.org](http://www.icvanetwork.org)