



## ICVA at 60 Interview Transcript

**Cyril Ritchie**

September 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 Cyril Ritchie who was director of ICVA from 1964-1978, and again from 1990-1991.*

*Their conversation begins with a discussion around the ICVA at 60 history paper, the final version can be found on the ICVA website.*

*Cyril talks about the importance of working together, how ICVA set the tone for cooperation, and how a network is only as strong as its members.*

Enjoy.

**Robert White / RW**

**Cyril Ritchie /CR**

**RW:** Good morning, Cyril. Can you can you see me and hear me?

**CR:** Yes, I can see you and hear you. Can you see me or hear me?

**RW:** Ok, good. Good sir. Now that recording has already started.

**CR:** Ok.

**RW:** Ok, good. Thanks very much for again giving your time to to me and to us, and I appreciate this opportunity to talk a bit further.

**CR:** I'm ready. So I guess you will. Oh. I see you and hear you, but I see that your name is misspelled. On the bottom of the screen that shows you. It says our Robdrt

**RW:** Yeah, I hear the first person you're the first person to notice that.

**CR:** Well, I told you, I read everything.

**RW:** Yeah, I had that impression already. So OK, let's get started. You know my questions. I sent them to you previously. Yeah. The first is to go back again to the paper and the paper on the 60 and to know if you had any additional comments to make. I already have your comments that you made previously and don't know if you want to add anything beyond what you said already.

**CR:** Oh, not, not at the moment. And I give you, but a page and a half of comments, and I guess that should be enough for the moment quite naturally, if. If you want to send me a. Final draft or any for any look over, I could give it, I would be happy to do so.

**RW:** That's a good idea, what I'll do. I've already incorporated your comments. I'll send you a revised version of the same paper which has your comments included. And just to make sure that you agree with what I've added to the paper.

**CR:** Sure. I mean, you do as you. Of course, it's your decision, but I'm very happy to read it over because another pair of eyes is always good.

**RW:** Ok, good. I'll do that as soon as we finish our discussion this morning. Then to the three questions that I had, I think I had mentioned to you previously, Ok, so this goes now to the three questions. The first is this goes back to all the years when you were the executive director between 64 and 78 and then that interim period later on. What made you proud of being part of ICVA on the staff at that time? What what gave you the most surprise or satisfaction or happiness with your many years of service there?

**CR:** Well, I might have a word with a happiness is exactly the right term, but anyway, satisfaction of some sort. I had already come to the conclusion that NGOs, voluntary agencies did not work enough together, there were far too many separate silos to many areas where people said, Let us get on with our work and never mind what anybody else does. I already had experience of that with my previous organization and of flaws in that. So the fact that these separate bodies were merged to create ICVA helped to give me a certain sense of looking forward to being part of that, because the more we work together, the more we're likely to get good results for the people we're working for. So it was this togetherness that working outside or seeing outside silos and working outside them that gave me a lot of satisfaction in the creation of ICVA. And there's a challenge that obviously the secretariat had to be above all the body that pulled people together. And the way in which ICVA very rapidly got very full recognition from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and other parts of the U.N., excuse me, I've got a sore throat. That was very, very satisfying indeed. The High Commissioner, staff, the High Commissioner himself obviously didn't, by the way, was the name that I couldn't think of the other day. It was High Commissioner during the World Refugee Year, Swiss diplomat. Who led the world refugee year in effect. He was very positive having seen what the volunteer agencies could do when we set up the International Committee for World Refugee Year, so the interaction between the brand new ICVA under then fairly well established UNHCR. Remember UNHCR was set up as a temporary body. It was to deal with the local problems in Europe after the the war. And of course, it was never even for a moment being thought it could be disbanded so that UNHCR was a solid part of the UN system created such a good partnership with it was a matter of great satisfaction, and this extended. ICVA got off to a very good start. I recall that during the first two years before I joined the secretariat, I was secretary of the the new Commission on Refugees, that ICVA set up right at the beginning. And member agencies of ICVA were elected to be chair, vice chair, secretary of these different commissions. There was also one on emergency aid. The way in which UNHCR contributed to the debates and to looking at common

programs, not necessarily joint programs that would be overstating it, but common activities that would advance the cause that the voluntary agencies and UNHCR were striving for was also a matter of great satisfaction.

As I said, it extended to other parts of the system, particularly in the emergency aid area. The first under secretary general that had a role there was called the disaster relief coordinator. First one was a Turkish man whose name escapes me for the moment. And as I said over the over our lunch the other day, the day he arrived in Geneva to check up his office, he called two people- the High Commissioner for Refugees, who at that stage was Sadruddin Aga Khan and the executive director of ICVA. So he recognized that these were two absolutely fundamental partners for him in setting up a brand new office that then, of course, over the years emerged, had developed long lines towards OCHA. So, that was also a matter of feeling provided ICVA could be recognized right from the beginning by the top ranks of the UN as a partner in achieving the goals that we were all looking for.

And then as we moved along, we established excellent relations with the the Red Cross movement, both as what was then called the League of Red Cross Societies, the predecessor of the International Federation of Red Cross, the predecessor, the membership of the league was all the national societies, and it was simply the name of the international body that was changed. But the league had been in existence 1919, and therefore, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross, was quite important and powerful body.

And grew even more so, of course, as world disasters increased within magnitude and in depth. And ICVA was taken into the fold as a valuable partner, not, of course, with some ups and downs. The Red Cross movement sees itself as something very, very special, and it is. The ICRC, particularly is a unique body, but that ICVA could be brought into that realm of humanitarian work on an equal basis or a fairly equal basis. It was also a matter of pride, so it was all elements. And on the internal level, I would say that the way in which the new organs that ICVA created, the different commissions, particularly working groups that are working group, as I mentioned on rural development and refugees. It also had strong participation from the High Commissioner for Refugees. But the way in which the commissions and the working groups or other organs that ICVA created really got down to business. Proved to me that the voluntary agencies could be the benefit of using the words working together as a leitmotif. That's what ICVA effort was set up to do and more or less did do. Well, there's some comments for you if you want to. They want me to develop any point.

**RW:** No, it was just one one fast question. Just tell me again who was the High Commissioner in 1959 during the World Refugee Year

**CR:** Auguste Lindt

**RW:** Ok. Was he a Swiss man himself?

**CR:** Yeah, he was a Swiss diplomatic.

**RW:** Ok. Yeah. I recall the name, actually.

**CR:** He'd been an ambassador in various places before.

**RW:** If you can recall who were the high commissioners throwing your 14 years, can you recall the the others that you worked with during your 14 years?

**CR:** I don't recall them at all. Some were more memorable than others, obviously. Prince Aga Khan, first of all, was quite an exceptional appointment. It's the first time a prince had ever been appointed as an under-secretary-general of the UN, and he brought a great deal of knowledge from the field, and quite different perspective. Since his theoretical nationality was originally Iranian, he'd become British. He also had, I believe, Kenyan nationality. So he was very open to to voluntary agencies. But also very, from the protocol point of view, hospitable, it was the first time that voluntary agencies were invited, invariably to his home when he offered an annual reception to the international Geneva- magnificent house, villa head in Collonge Belle-Rive. So I dont remember now how long he stayed quite some time, so he occupied quite a number of those years. Other names don't come back to me immediately, and if they do, I'll come in again on that.

**RW:** I can also look them up on the website. I'm sure I know the names of all them since I spent my whole career with UNHCR, but I only started in 1981. So back in the 60s and 70s, I knew quite a bit less, but I'll look it up myself.

So let me just conclude on that one point by saying that it sounds to me that everything you developed with UNHCR, the Red Cross movement, the emergency relief coordinator, also internally with the NGOs, has really continued in ICVA through all these decades and even been strengthened. They still have, I'm not sure they call them commissions, but they have working groups that are similar in some ways. They have the close cooperation with UNHCR and with OCHA also. So I think it sounds to me like you really laid the groundwork for the evolution of ICVA as it is today. Would that be a fair comment, do you think?

**CR:** When I read recently the most recent newsletter, a bulletin, whatever it's called and the report of recent meetings, I was delighted to see that the structure was with many publishing's basically the same and the purposes were the same. Obviously, ICVA has developed enormously, including financially. But the theory behind it, what I called it, the very beginning, the importance of working together and of seeing the benefits of reaching out to people who are doing something a bit different, but ultimately working to benefit the vulnerable, the dispossessed and the migrants. And yes, I think ICVA has very well developed. I was delighted to read the documents. I'd been out of touch for a few years. I think I haven't basically had any contact since the 50th anniversary. We're approaching the 60th, so it looked to me very good. I read up what, what I can whenever do and as I repeat, maybe something I said, Give me a minute and I need another drink for my throat. In my other civil society capacities, I'm very frequently called upon to make speeches around the world about relationships between civil society and the UN system, that the entire system in the conference of U.N. NGOs that have been president of.

And my first vice president is above all, related to the entire U.N. system. And very frequently over the years. Speaking about that, I have quoted ICVA's relationship with the High Commissioner's Office as an example to be followed by other parts of the UN system. The fact that ICVA was not only given full observer rights at the Executive committee, but at the Standing Committee was a real breakthrough because the executive committee is the public governing body. We all know that it's the inner group that makes the decisions. And for a voluntary agency, coordinating group and its members to be invited to attend the real decision making, policy making bodies of a UN agency is something that I use as an example when talking to other agencies in the U.N. system, saying, Listen, boy, if it can happen over here, why can't it happen over there? I use exactly the same argument when talking with ambassadors, many of whom are still nor rather reluctant. That may be an understatement to open the doors to civil

society. Well, that phrase I just quoted Mr. Ambassador. It has already happened over here, so why can't it happen over there? ICVA has been a groundbreaker to the benefit of everyone.

**RW:** You know, it's a good point. Yeah. Ok. Yeah, that's a very comprehensive reply to my question, so thank you very much. Let me move on with your agreement to the next question, if that's all right. This is looking more at ICVA today and into the future. Although I know that you said in the last 10 years you've not had very much contact with them, but you can look from the outside and knowing how ICVA was in the past and you can give me your impressions. How do you see ICVA today and what? How would you like to see ICVA moving in the future? What directions, what priorities, what are the main things that should be working on, in your opinion?

**CR:** Well, I actually already touched on that in my end remarks to the last question by saying that is setting the tone for cooperation between civil society organizations in the broader sense and the UN system. And I assure you that I hope developing. And for example, the way in which cooperation has developed with OCHA is a very good illustration of what can be done, particularly through the inter-agency standing committee.

**RW:** Standing Committee IASC.

**CR:** That's another very good example of ICVA gaining a foothold within the system. And of course, again, the Red Cross movement is a very important player in that field as well, that by the way, the the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. Grew out of an initiative way back in seventy two. When ICVA was actually talking of setting up a coordinating mechanism. We discussed that at our general conference way back then. And the then league Red Cross Societies jumped in and set it up first and ICVA was invited to join it. And that has developed into into this permanent cooperation with OCHA on the entire humanitarian network of the UN, which obviously must include bodies like the World Food Program and so on. So those are steps towards the future that ICVA was already taken. And I wish all the success in an expanding that and given that OCHA's role underfunded as it is, as is indeed the entire United Nations system. That OCHA is bound to be a continuing major player, if governments would let it be, because we look around us and we can see many, many, many disasters already on the front page and going to be on the front page in the future. So building that relationship, I think, can be a strong point for it.

And then, of course, there's the regional outreach. We began way back to try to expand ICVA. Pretty early days of basically this is a simplification, but basically Geneva based and New York based voluntary bodies International ones, and as you noticed from the membership is a very, very strong grouping of religious, voluntary bodies, religious, religious based or faith based voluntary bodies. They dominated ICVA from the very early days, and there was a definite wish to expand well beyond that to bring in the bigger players. Oxfam, for example, was not a member at the beginning. We brought it in by going to them and organising a joint event with them. ICVA had a workshop in Oxford co-hosted with Oxfam, which which brought them right into the network on the use of of horror pictures. I mean, you know, starving children and so on. What were the principles behind using pictures like that for fundraising? So that was one way that brought Oxfam in. We made a definite attempt to expand the membership to include some of the very big ones. I'd say never achieved in getting Amnesty in, however, for example, as another example, but also to expand geographically.

And that was that was why the creation subsequently of the Commission on Economic and Social Development of ICVA was so important in bringing in what were then called Third World countries and NGOs in Third World countries, either based in them or having major programmes in them, and not

necessarily dealing at all with refugees or migrants as a specific category. So I hope ICVA which has worked well well well expanded over the years, will continue that because I wish it all success in expanding the membership because a body, a network is as strong as its members. Yes. Yes. Secretariat can do a lot. The executive director can push in this direction or that direction, but it's the members that are up to show that they believe that there are results. They have to achieve the results, but they've got to make up their minds and do it. And the more the more the merrier is not the right word to describe about dealing with humanitarian emergencies, but the more the better in membership terms, provided that they do maintain ethical standards. And of course, ICVA has often been in discussion on what our good standards and good practices for voluntary agencies, and ICVA should be a model in that area.

**RW:** So in fact, as we may have said at our lunch, ICVA has now something like one hundred and thirty four members, and in the past few years they've increased, particularly from what they call it now the global south. Members from the global south have a lot to do with the strengthening of the four hubs. They have these four regional offices and four locations, two in Africa, one in Jordan and one in Bangkok. So through the presence of these regional hubs or offices they've been able to have more contact with local and national NGOs and to bring them into ICVA. So it's again, thanks to you yourself starting all this, that it's really evolved the way that has.

**CR:** 134 is a good number. Yeah, a lot more out there.

**RW:** Yeah, it's just a question, Cyril, on what you were just saying, you said that back in 1972, it was the league that has set up some kind of mechanism at first. Was there a name given to whatever was set up in 1972 before it became the IASC? Do you know?

**CR:** I don't recall us giving him I'm sure there was a name, sort of because we were convened by the League to meetings. Interaction was already in that where it was still called ACVA or not, I don't remember, but Interaction was definitely part of that. And one or two of the bigger individual agencies, Catholic Relief Services, for example, the World Council of Churches, through which different sub bodies. I don't recall if it was given some formal name because it was the League wanted to get in on the ground floor and sort of brought together people, so perhaps you might find the name in the ICVA news for that year.

**RW:** Yeah, this reminds me just going back to my own history. I work for the World Council of Churches back in 76 -77 with the person called Stanley Mitton. Stanley Mitton was the emergency officer of the World Council, and he used to go to what he called third Thursday meetings at the League. And I wonder if that's the same grouping that you're thinking about?

**Speaker1:** [Exactly. Yes. Thank you. The Stanley Mitten recall that I bring that name brings back a memory. I can see him on my in front of me. Yes. What was it? There were third Thursday meetings. That's why that's why I hesitated to give a name because I'm not sure they wanted a formal name. But that's what it was. The Stanley Mitten was the was the WCC rep. And then a person was appointed sort of like an intern man called Francis Paracatil, he was actually, I think, a cousin of John Schneider, the Catholic Relief Services man, an Indian Catholic and he was appointed to be the recording secretary for those third Thursday meetings. But he was actually placed in ICVA the office. Hmm. I mean, he worked out of there. That was just sort of working base. And he did the pulling together of the documentation for those meetings.

**RW:** Maybe just a follow up question. Do you know when the IASC actually started? Was it during your time or was it after you left in 78?

**CR:** I don't recall.

**RW:** Ok. I suspect it was after, but I can also look it up on the internet and find out when the first first started. It was probably somewhere in the late 70s, early 80s. I would have thought something like that.

**CR:** Yeah. Oh yeah, sure. Yeah. I think even late 70s, I wouldn't be surprised by it. Of course, the U.N. also recognized that they'd better get into the act and provide leadership, which is fine. They probably took action as soon as they could. It's easy to find, of course, on the internet.

**RW:** Oh, yeah. Ok. Any additional comments on ICVA today and ICVA into the future? You've already given me quite a bit, which I really appreciate.

**CR:** Well, I don't I don't know what is planned for the 60th anniversary as in terms of a ceremony or commemoration or what not, but it seems to me that ought to be. That ought to be quite a big event in order to mark the fact that the voluntary agencies for 60 years have been getting their act together and that they are partners that are reliable and that the UN, and I repeat here the entire system of the UN would be well advised to make the maximum use of this in the areas in which ICVA has competence. So it shouldn't just be a, I hope it's my business, but it wouldn't just be a reception somewhere in town, but an actual big event and asking two or three top U.N. people to speak at it. To convey the message. That's the president of the ICRC and to on, I mean, that level.

**RW:** Yeah, I think they may already be thinking about the High Commissioner himself, if they can get him to come, Filippo Grandi. And I like your idea also about the ICRC. Somebody from the Red Cross movement also, it's a good point.

**CR:** The High Commissioner cannot be absent. I mean, my goodness. Yeah. But some others, I mean, given that ICVA has given attention greatly to the role of women, invite the head of UN women.

**RW:** Well, that's a good point.

**CR:** And that would be a that's a new one, a new one is about to be appointed. If not already done in the last days, it's coming up any day now. Phumzile's term of office finished in August. Get that person in from the beginning. Ok, and if she's not already appointed, if she's appointed in the next days, I congratulate her and already invite her.

**RW:** That's good point. Maybe also the new, not new, but he's recently appointed the new emergency relief coordinator, the undersecretary general. Yeah.

**CR:** Oh yes. No, those are they. I would almost say the obvious ones who should be on the platform.

**RW:** Ok. I'm sure Ignacio and Fiona will hear that because all this is being recorded, and I'll convey that back to them also very much so because they have not yet really. We have not yet done that much planning yet for the event next year. We're having a meeting later this month to discuss and we will certainly raise that as one possibility. It's a good point.

**CR:** Perhaps the head of the World Food Program, because they are one of the biggest players in in the emergency field.

**RW:** Yeah, that's true too. Yeah, yeah.

**CR:** And particularly I've often said this in features. There are three or four agencies of the UN system that simply could not do their work without reliance on NGOs and voluntary agencies. Those are the High Commissioner for Refugees, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the World Food Programme and UNICEF, and probably UN Women as well. Get all of them on the platform.

**RW:** We need a pretty big platform for all that, but I'm sure we can consider it, that's a good point, actually.

**CR:** You know, it's going to make a splash. Yeah. It's only every 10 years or so.

**RW:** Yeah, now it's a very timely also. The big issue still with the pandemic, frankly, is whether we can have a large in-person events or make it virtual or what they call hybrid way of a combination of in-person and also people calling.

**CR:** But no one knows for the moment.

**RW:** Yeah, but that's really true, but let's hope that whenever it takes place six or nine months from now, we hope it'll be a more stable situation that will allow in-person events. I really hope so, at least anyway.

Ok. To my last question, and that is something maybe more personal on your side. Thinking of anecdotes, so called anecdotes. What comes to maybe on a more personal basis that you've recalled all these years back that you'd like to convey to me and to Ignacio and to Fiona, which may come across as far as video or soundbites or whatever they're going to make out of out of all these recordings. What would you like to talk about as far as anecdotes?

**CR:** Well, I must say I have a little bit of hesitation about whether anecdotes are really appropriate in planning for the ceremony, but when I saw you put that question to occurred to me, in fact. And one goes right, right, right back to when I was interviewed for the job. And the first governing board between from 1962 to 65 appointed an interview committee to make the appointment. And I had been, as I think, you know, already seven years with World University Service dealing there with refugees, particularly the Hungarians and programs in Africa. I was charged with setting up programs in Africa. And that happened involved working with, particularly with and particularly involved working with religious and Jews. Well, I was astonished at the interview panel. I find myself facing three heads of religious agencies only. And all of them absolute businessmen, acting and talking like businessmen, I hadn't realized that they could do that, which is fine, but give me a little bit of a moment's reflection. I thought I was joining ICVA Unbiased Voluntary Agency network. And yet I was being interviewed exclusively by religious NGOs. Anyway, they obviously made some big mistake because they appointed me

**RW:** And you stayed on for 10 years.



**CR:** Because I had no knowledge of how religious NGOs functioned in no particular links with them at all. Anyway, that was one. And the second anecdote is also curious, I mean, I would be very careful how you use this, these are not particularly relevant. I would say, as you know, you said you looked at my CV and you saw that I had been President of various other bodies during the rest of my career, NGO groupings and particularly NGO networks like the conference of U.N. NGOs, the Union and so on. And. As the chair or president of different networks and individual NGOs, I learned something not to do. One of the Chairs of the governing board, who shall be nameless, he's deceased long since, had a practice of turning up unannounced at the office, walking down the corridor and throwing open the doors of the offices, actually he said to see whether people were working properly or not. Well, that was atrocious behavior, disrespectful behavior, not even though personally, I would never be tempted to do that. I made sure in all my subsequent presidencies to treat staff with respect. I believe that that's how the chair should handle issues with the staff, it was just an appalling experience that anybody should allow himself to behave like that.

**Speaker2:** [00:31'm amazed that can even happen, to be honest with you.

**CR:** Yeah, well, weren't we all. I mean, you know, but this man was not particularly diplomatic in any way.

**RW:** Yeah, I hope it was only one person and not and not not the entire governing board, obviously. Yeah.

**CR:** And as you said, when we had our lunch, it obviously was not Eugene Rice who was the chair when I left. He was a gentleman in every way. He was also a businessman. I mean, from that in that shorthand term. But he knew how to deal with people. And in my period when I was after handing in notice Eugene was an absolute. gentlemen, in handling all of that and in dealing with the membership in that show, there I pay tribute to your Eugene regretting his subsequent illness.

**RW:** Well. That's really good to hear. I knew Eugene quite well and his wife, Barbara, also fine people.

**CR:** Yes, sure. Yes. Oh oh. I mean my mentioning Barbara, that reminds me of third anecdote that I didn't go to. And Eugene and Barbara were, of course, hospitable people. I was occasionally invited to dinner in their home, and on one occasion, the other dinner guest was a man called Douglas Dean, who had been with the World alliance of YMCA. And was then the Geneva representative of the Pathfinder Fund, a population agency based in Boston. And he was a very outspoken Australian very fine, man. Also, of course, the longest since deceased, and he was a fitness geek. Douglas Dean, and I forget what the conversation was, but it suddenly sparked of something. Douglas suddenly got up from the dinner table and started doing push ups on Jim Grease's floor. Just to show that a man of them, probably 60 or so, could do it. And he was just that sort of person. He believed in demonstrating what you're what you believe in.

**RW :** Well, that's. That's one reason why he's dead and you're still alive, I would think.

**CR:** Yes, I did not follow his example that evening because I wanted to keep the wine down.

**RW:** That's funny. Yeah, I can always visualize that. Yeah. Ok. Well, there are my questions, and would you like to make any any final comments from your side on anything we discussed?

**CR:** Oh, well, I'm just happy that we're having this conversation. As I said in my email, if I can be helpful along the way towards the 60th anniversary, I would be ready to do so. And, you know, if wanted. I'm there.

**RW:** Ok, now we have all of your contacts and we know how to get in touch with you, so I'm sure you'll be hearing from us again. But what I do first is I'll send you the revised paper if you can have a look at it with your comments. And just to make sure that I've included everything that you would, you would like to be included in the paper.

**CR:** Yeah. Ok. I'm just a commentator from the outside.

**RW:** You're a fountain of knowledge and wisdom. That's what you are, actually, which I really appreciate. Thanks very much for the conversation. I'm really happy.

**CR:** All the best.

**RW:** Thanks. If I see one of these days soon. Thanks very much.

**CR:** Hope. Sure. Bye bye.

*This conversation between Cyril Ritchie and Robert White was recorded in September 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).*