



ICVA at 60 Interview Transcript

Elizabeth Ferris

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 Elizabeth Ferris, who was served on the ICVA Board as vice chair from 1993-2003 and then as Chair 2003-2006.

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

Beth talks about ICVA's presence in Latin America in 1980's, the humanitarian development divide, and the need for ICVA to be more outspoken.

Enjoy.

Robert White / RW

Elizabeth Ferris /EF

RW: Hi, Beth. Good afternoon. And where are you living? Where are you calling from?

EF: I'm from D.C., I'm teaching at Georgetown. I worked at Brookings for, I don't know, 10 years. I'm working on internal displacement issues and spent a year working with the U.N. secretary general, preparing the global summit and then came to Georgetown. So I love teaching, so it's good. I keep thinking I ought to retire, but it's too much fun. Read the concept paper, but go ahead. Sure.

RW:. So I've got four questions for you, I think I sent them to you. The first is on the paper itself, if you've had a chance to read through the paper. Did it make sense to you? Were there any gaps, anything that should be emphasized more or or how do you see that on the paper itself?

EF: Yeah. The one thing I noticed in the paper is on the decade of the 80s between I was there from eighty five to ninety one, and I think the most brilliant thing it ever did was to organize a series of meetings in Central America, which really provided an umbrella for local NGOs to speak freely. They were under a lot of lot of

pressure, but bringing in the internationals really increased the space for local civil society organizations to speak out and feel somewhat protected by these international organizations. So we had, I don't know, three, four or five meetings in Central America with local actors on Central American refugee issues. I thought it was really a good use of ICVA's leverage to provide that protection to local NGOs and really strengthen those connections. That was the main thing.

RW: And that that really is consistent with what it has done since then, because they really put a lot of priority on local and national NGOs, and now they have the four regional offices and a lot of closer coordination with the local and national NGOs. So maybe in some ways, what you did was kind of a forerunner of what has been strengthened since then. That's what it sounds like, at least anyway.

EF: I think so.

RW : Anything else or otherwise you think makes sense, the paper it reads well enough or how do you say it in general?

EF: No, it's fine. I think it gives an accurate overview of it and a good description of the crisis of the nineteen nineties.

RW: Yeah, I didn't know about that until I started the review. It must have been terrible. Were you involved back then also?

EF: Yeah, I came right at the tail end.

RW: the second question is... I guess you were a board member and then you were chair for a while, weren't you before Tom Getman, weren't you

EF : Yeah, I was vice chair from 1999 to 2003 and then chair from 2003 to 2006.

RW: Ok. Representing the was the World Council of Churches back then or so, yeah, during all that period. What made you proud of being part of ICVA? We just say, if you think back to all because you were involved in so many years and so many activities, what gave you satisfaction or pride being associated with ICVA? Because it's not obvious, because when you're working full time somewhere else, it must be really such a minimal part time job for yourself. So what it give you the most satisfaction or make you the proudest of association with ICVA.

EF: I was proudest of the North South coalition that it represented. It was the only forum I knew, and we don't have many now that really bring together southern partners and big international agencies. I think that it was really increased its advocacy potential, its voice. We often struggled with some of the issues between North-South partners, particularly over issues of capacity. But I mean, I think that was what made me proudest of being associated with ICVA. And secondly, I would say that the advocacy work, I think, you know, ICVA has moved to a much more information sharing and convening meetings, serving as an interlocutor with U.N. agencies, and that's important. But you know, for a while ICVA was very strong on advocacy, really pushing the U.N. whole process around the selection of the High Commissioner for Refugees in 2000, I thought was really pathbreaking. I'm actually kind of sorry ICVA has retreated from that active advocacy role. I recognize the importance information exchange, but still it's a I was proud of some of the work that ICVA did back then.

RW: Oh yeah, yeah. Let me ask you a question. That's not one of my questions, but kind of related in some ways. When I was going through all the documents over the last 60 years, actually, there were discussions over

so many decades on. Is ICVA a humanitarian focus, a development focus, a mix of the two? And in the beginning, it seemed like it was more of a mix, but more recently, it seems like it's more humanitarian. Can you just say a bit about that also?

EF: Yeah. There was always tension. You had a very active set of working groups on the refugee humanitarian side and pretty weak organizations or working groups on development all through the 1980s. You know, that was I think the reason for the crisis of the 1990s is a realization that the development partners really weren't more interested. And you know, that parallels multilateral cooperation is strong on humanitarian and on development it's very weak. Everything is bilateral. And so that was kind of paralleled. And the development agenda is so broad, everything from gender to environment to all kinds of issues that it just never took off. So I think the decision in the late 1990s to really drop the development focus and concentrate on what ICVA was good at. It was well positioned in Geneva to work on humanitarian issues – it was the right decision. But it was a very divisive issue and there was almost no common ground between some of the development NGOs and the humanitarians and resentments, it was a bad period. Yeah, yeah, there was a lot of tension over that.

RW: And I would guess a lot of the local national NGOs in Africa, Asia, Middle East would have more of a development focus. That's my guess, at least anyway. Or maybe not. I don't know.

EF: Most of them didn't draw those distinctions. You know, you had an organization, development and humanitarian, much more specialization in the international and even international organizations like Oxfam you've got a strong emergency department and a strong development. And sometimes those two, even within Oxfam, don't talk to each other. So it was no surprise that that was kind of like mixing oil and water when it came to the international coalition.

FW: Yeah, I agree. The international NGOs that I know, including those there are what they call multi-mandate agencies they really do both and have been for decades. So to me, in some ways, it may personally, it's kind of a false distinction- what's humanitarian and what's development. Even in UNHCR, which I know very well, they're becoming more of a development focus, as well as humanitarian and the whole post emergency area, with World Bank being involved in IMF and things they had not done when I was there 20 /30 years ago. So I do see some change and I wonder myself about that distinction.

EF: Yeah, well, I mean, I can tell you it's alive and well, even as humanitarian organizations become more and more emergency planning as well by groups like UNDP, but the cultural and other differences are still pretty great.

RW: Yeah, and I know the funding sources are really quite distinct also sometimes between humanitarian and development. The next question is more looking at ICVA today and into the future. How do you see ICVA into the future of the role they would play or what they should emphasize what they should be focusing on compared to when you were there five, 10, 20 years ago? Do you see any changes or new directions or how do you see them moving in the future?

EF: I would like to see ICVA take a stronger advocacy role, weighing in on some of these big issues. You're right now ICVA - there's tons of collective statements that are drafted by the members. It's very much a member driven organization, but sometimes when you do that, you get a really watering down of the issues, and I think there's a role for ICVA to more more assertive, particularly on issues of U.N. governance, you know, the way leaders are selected, I would have hoped that they would have played a role in the nomination of the ERC emergency relief coordinator think that. Yes, I think that there would be a way and I think a way to leverage more its representation of southern NGOs and international forums. I think it's great that ICVA has started

doing, I guess it's been doing it for a while, orientation sessions for new participants in Geneva based meetings. I think that was really useful and should continue.

RW: Oh yeah. Yeah.

EF: But I think a lot of ICVA's work is actually fairly routine, you know, regular meetings with UNHCR and others, participation and summaries of all these multitude of global processes going on. And that's really useful to members. One of the things I get out of being an associate member now, but, I think that there could be more in terms of ICVA representing NGOs, civil society voices in these global debates.

Are you talking with? Are you talking with Ed Senckenberg?

He was the director when I was chair. And, you know, he is very active on advocacy and you know that, you know, they got into trouble going further than their members wanted or being perceived as strident by the U.N. But I think that they were really breaking ground there.

RW: Ok. I know from my readings and my activities with actually over the last year, they have been coming more involved also with the IASC and some of the working groups, they've gotten some local-national NGOs to take part in some of the meetings of the IASC was, to me, a very positive development also. There are more visible than they had been in previous years, as far as I know, at least anyway.

EF: Been up and down, you know, when I was chair. I think we were really visible in IASC, in part because of the ERC Jan Egeland was very supportive of NGOs. And I mean, he was the one who said to me one of those meetings. He said, Well, we really need to reform the international system. Why don't you NGOs come up with a plan? You know, we came up, we came up with principles of partnership. We came up with what eventually morphed into the cluster system. So I think we played a pretty active role.

RW: Ok. The very last question. Probably not among my questions, but I want to ask it anyway. Can you think of one anecdote or one personal experience that you've had over the years that you'd like to share on your home connection or involvement with ICVA something more, maybe more personal? What we're doing just so you know, as I should have mentioned this, but we're going to take all the recordings and do a consolidation of them and make it into a kind of promotional video for effort in connection with the 60th anniversary celebration. So I want to get some sound bites, some anecdotes also from some of the key people that have been involved in previous years and decades. Was there something that comes to your mind that you'd like to share from that point of view?

EF: I mean, my most dominant memories of ICVA are sitting in crowded conference rooms, drafting NGO statements and trying to incorporate perspectives from different regions, different NGOs to make to the UNHCR Executive Committee and so on. One of my most personal memories were some of those meetings in the late 1980s in Central America, where I can remember sitting with, close to 60 or 70 NGOs talking about protection issues of Central American refugees. Some of those meetings dragging on past six seven eight nine p.m. as we really listened to everybody and tried to understand what's happening. You know, I think NGOs in some parts of the world, such as the United States or have it pretty easy. We don't have to worry about being attacked or knocks on the door in the middle of the night, but at that time, NGOs in Central America, and today we're under a lot of threat from insurgent groups, from governments. And I think that the protection offered by ICVA as an umbrella bringing together both international and national NGOs was really important and really a model for future NGO collaboration.

RW: Ok. That goes back to almost the first point that you made about the between the 85 and 91. Yeah, with the Central America meetings, yeah, there good really is an emphasis. And any final thoughts or observations from your side you'd like to share?

EF : No, I think ICVA is a great coalition. I lived through those difficult years when we worried about how to pay staff and how to manage debt and working. You know, we couldn't even pay the rent back then. It was just awful and really not sure if the members were willing to put in the money, in the time and the effort to resurrect it. And I'm glad they did. And it was really a few leaders like the Lutheran World Federation and Church World Service, I wasn't working there at the time, but they really took the lead in resurrecting it. ICVA plays an important role in the community.

RW: [00:19:10] That's good. And I'm really happy just the little cooperation I have with Ignacio. He's really a good man and very, very good to work with.

EF: [Very personable to.

RW: Yeah, I'm just happy to see you after all these decades, more than years

EF: Maybe I'll see you at the 60th birthday party.

RW: I'll be there. I hope you're there also. Good to see you, and thanks very much. Thanks. Bye bye.

This conversation between Elizabeth Ferris 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)