



## ICVA at 60 Interview Transcript

**Jane Backhurst**

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 Jane Backhurst, who was elected Chair of ICVA at the 18th General Assembly in May 2021, and represents Christian Aid*

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

*Jane talks about the localisation agenda, the importance of including leaders in the frontline of humanitarian crises, and ICVA's response to the Covid 19 pandemic*

*Enjoy.*

**Robert White /RW**

**Jane Backhurst /JB**

**RW:** Hello, Jane.

**JB:** Hello again. Yeah, let's go. No, this is good. It's fine. But let's go for it.

**RW:** Ok, now I have three three questions for you, the same questions that I'm asking to other people. The first is what what made you proud or makes you proud of being part of ICVA. In the past, because you've been on the board and now you are chair, what gives you the most pride or satisfaction from being associated with ICVA?

**JB:** I think a couple of things. First its nature of its characteristics and that links to its added value as well. So firstly. It's diversity from the sense of its global reach, 160 countries, the membership is made up of large platforms of NGOs and small individual NGOs, that we strive to ensure that the voices and the opinions and ideas of those different members have an equal or as equal as possible weight influencing the agenda moving forward and we try to also bring them to the fore, so, for example, the way we have helped to create a space for them in the new IASC structures. I think as well, the way we have put it,

helped to certainly push localization of the COVID 19 response and that in itself should help to advance the agenda and localization, not just through the grand bargain structures, but also through, as I mentioned, the IASC. Well, so for me, it's about characteristics. Also what we've been able to influence by taking that approach those two are the main proud factors for me. But obviously, having been a trustee now for I'm in my fourth year as a trustee, the way ICVA collaborates, the conversation about the way it's different, it's a convener, it connects, it influences, it brokers. And it's a platform where national and local and international humanitarian NGOs can come together to exchange expertise, develop a collective voice, identify priorities to ensure we become more effective. And I think ICVA's done that. Just seeing this over the past four years from the vantage of a trustee is something that certainly makes me feel proud. But then as a trustee as well, you develop a certain collegiality with your other colleagues on on the board of trustees, on the board of ICVA. But you also get to know the executive director and the Secretariat better. That obviously gives you a position as well to be proud of. You're personally invested of all time as well as your professional time in board. So I've seen it from the perspective of a member engaging in the Humanitarian Financing Working Group, for example, the Humanitarian Coordination Working Group into the Forced Migration Group and all the work we've done on Internal displacement taking forward the GP20 campaign, but also seeing it now from the trustee perspective and in my view, from where I'm standing. The more I engage with ICVA over these years and in different positions, as a trustee or as a member really trying to drive forward agendas through different working groups, that pride only gets stronger.

**RW:** Yeah. That's a very positive response, and I appreciate that very much. One thing that several of the other people mentioned just for your information would be the difference that the regional hubs, the regional offices have made also in the last few years. Do you also agree with that?

**JB:** Yes. I think ICVA's regional hubs being made possible by a number of donors, including ECHO way back in 2018, has helped ICVA to be able to strengthen its outreach and to and engagement of local national NGOs. While those four hubs that have been created aren't only uniquely for local and national NGOs, they definitely give more of a voice for local and national NGOs to come together with international NGOs. To contextualize the humanitarian system, to listen to them better, and adapt what it's doing better. So I think that. Yes, some of the work that's being done on the COVID response, for example, and localization with an investment there, both from Christian Aid secondment and the Swiss government, that was an ad hoc secondment. In fact, in the end the need was so great before COVID 19, that was a full year of support to especially local and national and help them think through how do we support our ICVA members who are at the front line to access greater support and services. And I like to think that piece of work is one of the things that helped put our asks at the IASC Principals to ensure that funding was disbursed in a much more expedited fashion to front line NGOs. That was an IASC policy, but also the whole piece around the IASC localization and COVID 19 policy, and also the work that integrated issues around flexible and timely quality funding to local and national NGOs.

As part of the flexible funding policy paper that the IASC developed. Not only for that particular paper, but localization as a mainstream issue rather than a niche issue. But, you know, clearly COVID 19 brought to the fore that front line organizations are doing the delivery and we need to get funds directly to them. But we also need to get resources to them, and we also need to manage that risk and share that risk, not just me indirectly or directly end up with a system that means that local and national NGOs have to shoulder that risk without having the resources to be able to manage it. Duty of care of staff, just to take one example. We in ICVA have got the resources to have a fully functioning board that ensures good governance. That's is an important thing to have, but not all national and local NGOs have the resources. They have the will but not the resources to be able to do that and cascading overheads

too. I'm going into the details now, but I think that the regional hubs help to provide a contextualized picture of the very real issues facing the members at the front line, at regional level and the national level, and that helps to provide a more granular substance and input into the changes that are required at a global level, including through the grand bargain, of course.

**RW:** Ok. You know, that's really good, thanks very much, I really appreciate that. The next question is a bit similar to the previous one, but phrased differently. And that is why do you think ICVA is important today and how do you see ICVA moving into the future? So looking at it more presently and in the years to come, why do you think ICVA is important and will continue to be important?

**JB:** Well. But could you just repeat that question while I try?

**RW:** It's looking at ICVA today and into the future. How do you see ICVA being important today? And as you look more prospectively into the future, how do you see ICVA playing a positive role also in the years to come?

**JB:** I think ICVA is important. Just like that. So firstly, by virtue of its the very characteristics ICVA has developed over the decades. The way it's grown from working on refugee work, on forced migration and so forth. The way it's been often at the forefront of trying to bring in the humanitarian system, the way that it has used and capitalized on by virtue of using its diverse network. Rooted in a number of, you know, diverse contexts in countries where there are armed conflicts, sometimes alongside other crisis.. By virtue of efficacy that it has grown up with. And that experience that it has brought with it on reform of the humanitarian system, as I mentioned and refugee work. That legacy has positioned ICVA to have influence, if you like. Um, and just looking at where we are today, ICVA has now an NGO representative role on the Grand Bargain Facilitation Group. That group is important, that is important because it does sets the direction in the implementation of their collective goals. But it's really important now because the grand bargain has on consultation group is a place where there is a certain amount of leadership with the eminent person to steer proper implementation of the reforms that were agreed at the last grand bargain.

Some of those reforms are of, you know, really direct relevance to the national and local NGO members of ICVA that I was mentioning earlier. There are proposals for caucuses, we don't know that's ambiguous or how much a voice for both local and national NGOs within that reference group, potentially at a national level. And and we've all said that grand bargain to be real, to be effective, to be actually useful, to actually be an end, to drive reform in the humanitarian sector so that aid becomes effective and more efficient to a certain, you know, because it's more effective, that needs to happen on the ground. It needs to happen as close to where these crises are happening. And if that's the case, then how do we ensure that local and national NGOs are really helping to shape and drive the implementation of the grand bargain. That's one of the reasons why it's important, I think if you go back to the fact you've got this diversity in 160 countries, it's rooted over 60 years, it's gained a certain degree of legitimacy is bringing with it its legacy. And if you look to the future, yeah, in the immediate future we're on the facilitation group now. We are on the principals group, we have been around the IASC Principles Group since its birth.

We've taken the IASC with others through humanitarian reforms. We're likely going to be able to do that with Martin Griffiths, who's now come on as the new EDG and head of UNOCHA. You know, when you think about the reforms that need to take place not only through the grand bargain, but no doubt there will be other reforms to the humanitarian system that if this there's a lot of work happening at the

moment, for example, around, I think, humanitarian financing, the high level panel on humanitarian financing from 2016 did point to the need that aid should be more efficient, the grand bargain was there to help it, but we haven't addressed the need, the issue around how to diversify income. We haven't dealt with that. What we do about looking at the way development finance can be pivoted to support more resilient communities before during after, We haven't got there yet. I think that is something I'm sure that will be on the agenda of the IASC principals. There is work that we need to do to take forward the lessons from COVID 19. We know that humanitarian needs is not going to dwindle. That in fact the number of contexts and the intensity of crises is going to increase over the coming years. We are taking, I think, stock in a deeper way now about the links between climate change, conflict and peace building in relation to that and humanitarian action.

We see that now escalating hunger in a number of contexts. We see the connections between those, those three areas. So I think the ICVA 2030 strategy sits across that and answers ahead of maybe time and some of the questions that may be asked over the coming years. But, you know, it's going to be important for a global organization like ICVA with that diversity of membership, with that depth of experience, that legacy that it's grown up with over the years with the that brokering, convening, connecting collaboration and influence role that it has to to help bridge at times. The views of members and the reforms that need to happen. At times just to facilitate not a bridge, but to facilitate the direct influence of local and national representatives into those spaces to drive some of the thinking around that to be part of the leadership for the decision making will be taking place. That's the incredibly important piece, you know, we will we won't get to having that efficient and effective aid delivery in the future, ensuring that leaders at the front line if we don't ensure that leaders at the front line are at the forefront of the decision making around shaping and reforming the system, and implement that.

**RW:** Ok, thanks very much. There's a you've given me so much actually in so many different directions, but it's really a quite positive and very, very forward looking. So I really appreciate that. I have one final question for you. If that's all right with you and that is Ignacio would like people, I'm interviewing to give me maybe one anecdote or two anecdotes, something that really maybe more personal from your side that you've come up with from your association with ICVA with that something, it can be anything actually something more personal, something more associated with with the work. But do you have any anecdotes that might come to your mind at this time?

**JB:** Last year during the COVID 19 response. And this is one of many, but I mean, last year during the COVID 19 response. ICVA really used its position in decision making forums wisely. And it's tried to bring forward the voice of frontline front line workers by center stage, and it was very clear about what was required during the COVID 19 response to make responses more efficient and more effective. And it really helped to have a response at the IASC, which was more fit for purpose. We had some way to go still as a sector. But the IASC policy on unlocking and dispersing funds to to NGOs, especially frontline NGOs, the IASC policy on quality funding on and also the policy on localization during COVID 19. All these policies that were developed and agreed and approved by the IASC Principals during COVID 19 had behind them discussions where, you know, Ignacio and I were talking with one, for example, standing amongst some of the decision makers and those that were leading the response and about what we really mean by frontline NGOs driving the response which is localization. I think we really unpacked on what and why localization was so critical.

] And once you've understood what that means, then how to put that into practice so that you're getting the best out of that agenda, in other words, so that aid is reaching those most in distress more quickly, more efficiently and more effectively, because that's ultimately what we're about. You know, how do we

as a global network of local NGOs, work with others that the right aid gets to those in most distress, the most effectively, the most efficiently as possible in order to save lives and livelihoods and support also the dignity of those populations. Rights are being protected and fulfilled. And when we're seeing that, that's not happening, when we're seeing that international humanitarian law is being violated, then how do we come around those communities and come around, therefore our members working with those communities to brace up and see greater respect for those tools that are there to protect populations. And I think for me, that's what ICVA is about in sum, and I think I think it was a proud moment seeing it act last year during the COVID 19 response. And in that way, the way ICVA was really agile around the famine, the escalating famine during the COVID response last year, UN leaders meeting the generals of FAO was sounding the alarm on escalating hunger. They talked about a hunger pandemic occurring at the same time as the COVID 19 pandemic.

**JB:** And acknowledge that nodding their heads. I think probably scratching their heads because, you know, we had to pivot programs not just programs, everything is pretty chaotic during COVID 19. Then you have conventionally anyway with a crisis situation. But we had crises upon crises compounded. I mean, in South Sudan, we had conflict and escalating intercommunal violence, we had floods, a locust infestation and COVID 19. And dwindling. you know, governments cutting aid as well, so you can imagine within that, you know that you're seeing an economy that spiral downwards. And South Sudan is in the top three with regards to numbers of people facing hunger or on the brink of famine. ICVA was there identifying, early on, this escalating problem, and it listened to WFP and FAO and joined up collaborated with those agencies that a global open letter that has now been signed, I think by nigh on 400 NGOs and I should say some of those signatures are actually holding this platform, the French, the U.K. platform of NGOs, just to name a few. And InterAction in the US, but globally, really. We were saying hundreds of NGO platforms and pointed to this at a time when we needed to influence the G7 summit and at a time where the UN secretary general was based, a High-Level Panel on Famine Prevention and I think that..

**JB:** that was ICVA tapping into its expertise and its experience and its legacy in a very nimble fashion, very agile fashion, bringing bringing out the best of the members using that collective weight, that collective presence across so many countries. And to say, look, we have to, It's our collective response across the humanitarian system to this, to this escalating famine. And I think that was heard certainly standing in Christian Aid. You know the numbers don't just resonate those numbers that they are, which can sometimes happen when you've been a long time working in humanitarian sector. There are lives you hear that you hear the urgency and the passion and commitment. I think to some extent that is because people feel they are within. They're working collegially across the sector that everybody feels that urgency is I'm really proud of. And what's anecdotally, I would also pull out that is an example of the work ICVA has been doing just this year and then an example from last year as well. But that's been joint work across all the working groups of ICVA and I think it will take us all of that will take us forwards to try and achieve some of those results based on the 2030 strategy.

**RW:** Ok. That's a great a great summary of it's a rather expanded anecdote, but a great anecdote, I hope we can use that in the. When we get this video recorded, because it's very meaningful, no question about that. Yeah, so they were my questions. Jane, any final thoughts on on your side? I'd be happy if you have time to read the paper and give me a couple of comments on the paper itself, where the gaps or things that I should emphasize more. Only if you have time. Otherwise, I'm very happy with this conversation and I appreciate very much the time that you've taken to share your ideas with me.

**JB:** You are very welcome and to thank you for the work you've done to this and preparing that paper. And I hope we get a chance to talk again.

**RW:** And I look forward to meeting you one of these days.

**JB:** Ok. All right. Yes. And, Robert, my greetings to your family.

**RW:** You too, and yeah, and hope to meet you one of these days soon. Thank you. Thanks very much. Bye.

*This conversation between Jane Backhurst 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).*