



## ICVA at 60 Interview Transcript

**Dr James Munn**

30 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 While, a consultant for the ICVA at 60 project, talk to Dr James Munn who was an ICVA staff member from 2012-2015 and then served on the ICVA Board from 2019-2021.*

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

*Jamie talks about the operational realities of NGOs blurring the lines between humanitarian and development, ICVA's instrumental role as interlocutor between the international humanitarian system and national agencies, and challenges ICVA to be more courageous and outspoken in their advocacy.*

**Robert White /RW**

**James Munn / JM**

**RW:** Good to see you. Well, thanks very much for giving me a few minutes of your time, I really appreciate.

**JM :** No problem. Today is Friday, so it's the weekend here, but as you know, there's massive flooding happening now in the refugee camps. So it's been nonstop rain now since last Sunday.

**RW:** Where are you calling from?

**JM:** Bangladesh. I moved here after Geneva as country rep for NRC, obviously. And on Tuesday, just as just as an illustration, you know, flooding is happening everywhere in the world this this summer. But on Tuesday, we had 328 millimeters of rain, which is a 20-year record for Bangladesh in one day, 24 hours, three hundred and twenty eight millimeters of rain.

**RW: Yeah,** yeah. I saw something on BBC about that. Yeah, it looks really serious. Hmm. Yeah. But let me tell you what I'm doing, although you probably have some idea already, Ignacio and Fiona asked me to help out with some of the preparations for the upcoming 60th anniversary of ICVA, which is next year since they were founded in 1962. So the first thing I did is I wrote this paper, which I think I sent to you, this 13 page paper

called ICVA at 60. And now I'm interviewing a bunch of former staff, former board members, former chairs of board to get their ideas on the paper and also how you see ICVA moving into the future. So really happy to have this chance to talk to you. So, all right. Can you tell me to start off which were the year that you were at ICVA yourself just to put me in context.

**JM:** Yes, so 2012. Yikes. Very good question. Well. To the end of 2015. That's when I was a member of staff, and then I just finished my position on the board as Treasurer this past March (2021).

**RW:** Representing NRC. You must have a good idea as to what's happened the last 10 years, at least anyway, if not more. Well, I have four questions for you, the first question really is on the paper itself. How did the paper read if you had a chance to look at it and were there any gaps or things that I should emphasize more or things I missed? What I did is I looked through all the annual reports and strategy papers going back 20 30 years and with Fiona's help, put that paper together. So it'll be one of the background documents, probably for next year's celebrations. Did you have any comments on the paper itself?

**JM:** I to be fair, I only skimmed it because I haven't had much chance, but I have I have skimmed through it. It depends on the target audience, I suppose, of the paper. One of the areas, I think that is very interesting for the evolution of ICVA's voice and how it has grown from an organization that was originally, a unit of a consortium of agencies focused on refugees and the relationship to UNHCR vis a vis the NGO environment, right, to one that is much more in the last 15 years, grown to be something that encompasses many more areas beyond the refugee environment. Even so far, as we now talk about forced migration and the inclusivity of migration being anyone on the move. And then obviously, it's grown to encompass the human rights component of those memberships, which are less operational and more directed towards the support of the growth of a human rights. It's not a movement of human rights, it's the acknowledgment of human rights within everyone on the move. And there you think about not just the refugee rights models, but there's so much more than that membership.

**RW:** So, I sort of you're right, it's broader than pure UNHCR, which was so much of the focus in the past. It's still a focus, but you're right that they've gotten more broadly beyond that. Just an observation. When I worked on the paper, I saw that when they first started back in the 60s and 70s, their intentional direction was development as well as humanitarian work. But then after that crisis in the late 90s, when they almost went bankrupt and almost went out of business, I think it was decided to focus only on the on the humanitarian side at the expense of development, which is kind of the way they've continued. Although in my personal view, I see an increasing blurred line between what is humanitarian and what is development. So just maybe an observation from your side on how you see that.

**JM:** Yeah, I mean. Well, exactly, and I think that that's illustrative of the actual operations on the ground, right? So as far ICVA's membership have also blurred the lines or well, let's call it, the operational realities of the membership have blurred the lines of humanitarian development and the acknowledgement that, it's not just people on the move, it's not just the people that host them, but it's that protracted nature of all crises now means inevitably humanitarian and development work has come back together. And if you think back to when we were all agencies based on volunteerism, it didn't really reflect this. There was no definition between humanitarian and development work in the 1960s, 70s and even into the early 80s. It wasn't until we had the apparatus, let's call it of the United Nations system and the development of OCHA. Before OCHA, we really started to see this division and to a certain extent, the impact of professionalism on NGOs. And I think ICVA's evolution has evolved into that model of professionalism and therefore the lexicon that comes along with it. Yeah.

**RW:** And maybe added to that that so many of the the members of ICVA are not only international but also local and national are these so-called multi mandate agencies. They're not working only in humanitarian but also in development. And I assume the NRC is like that also.

**JM:** Traditionally we operate only in humanitarian environments, as Jan Egland our secretary general says, we will always say we don't chase super typhoons and we don't provide assistance in a development context if there are not people displaced. I've been with NRC almost seven years now, we actually start focusing on all those that are displaced due to primarily conflict and secondarily all the other impacts, be it climate and others.

**RW:** Yeah, it's probably inevitable. You know, just given the war situation and given all the crises now. Well, as you were just talking about the floods in Bangladesh, all the climate change related issues that are taking place. Yeah. Anything also on the paper you'd like to talk about or emphasize.

**JM:** Well, I think there's two things. One of my big worries in the last few years for ICVA has been the lack of solidarity of its membership. And maybe that's inevitable. But I would suggest that, you know, if we look back to, as you said, the late 90s, the membership in the late 90s and early 2000s was still consolidated in the sense of their engagement. And one of my concerns would be OK, so at the 60th year, how do we bring back that type of solidarity, that unification of such a broad, sweeping membership? And ultimately, we can do it around people people at the center again using those lexicon flagpoles to bring it back. So I think it was in the paper, I would emphasize that there has been, as you said, in the nineties, dangerous times, and we mustn't forget those as a consortia. We need to make sure that the secretariat is not just following the membership, but also guiding us to a certain extent around the key areas and mobilizing us to be a unified voice.

**RW:** My second question is when you are in the staff and maybe also on the board, yeah, probably on both. What made you proud to be associated either as a staff member or a board member, proud or happy to be associated with with ICVA. What were the things that really satisfied you the most?

**JM:** Yes, sure. Well, when I first joined ICVA, we were the very first regional hub out of Geneva Office, and I think that that's bringing bringing together and being much more present in an operational setting. Ok, so we are in Bangkok, but we had the support of so many of the larger members that helped fund and and mobilize us to bring in the national actors into various disasters. So my job at that time was really to ensure that as conflicts or responses developed that the local and national actors were part of those decision making and the coordination meetings that. I remember very clearly in the high end response in the Philippines taking with me to coordination meetings, a group of national NGOs ,into the meeting and then at the end of it them saying, you know, this is unfamiliar to us, we don't even understand the language that's being used. All we want to know is where is there a gap and where can we fill that gap with what we have to deliver? So ICVA really played an instrumental position as that interlocutor between the international structure and the national local actors, and I think it continues to do that today. That gave us a lot of motivation, I wouldn't necessarily call it pride or anything, but it certainly motivated you to continue.

It also opened up opportunities for national actors to take much more of a decision making role. So ICVA was there to sort of educate national and local actors on everything from the, you know, what, what does OCHA bring with it? What do these big INGOs bring with them to your local community? And then how do you get involved in that? And how do you have more of a say in that? And at the same time, we also educated the international system. It's not as if none of us be LWF or NRC or UNHCR are unaware of the national and the power of the national. But we still, even in 2021, still play a bit of lip service to them sitting on decision making bodies, right, be it an HCT where you may have one or two national representatives. But we do not treat them as necessarily equal decision makers or even more prioritize their opinions on decision making, and I think ICVA

was continuing to hammer that message home and that is very motivational for for the membership. Both the INGOs and the national NGOs

**RW:** But I know they've been trying, I know in the IASC, for example, they've gotten several of the national NGOs onto some of the committees and the the IASC, which is and probably only in the last three or four years. So that's a good step also. Maybe in that connection, maybe in that connection, Jamie may probably because of your timing of your service. How do you how did you see the evolution of what they call localization as an ICVA staff and now board member? Now, now it's big. But I'm wondering, from your point of view, when I guess it probably would have started to run around the time when you were staff. This whole concept of putting more emphasis, more priority on local and national NGOs.

**JM:** Yeah. I mean, it was really around the run up of the World Humanitarian Summit, which was scheduled, of course, for August 2016, but ICVA was heavily engaged thanks to its partnership with OCHA. In designing all of those consultations that took place leading up to the World Humanitarian Summit, so from 2013 to 2015 in Asia, where I was, we had both national consultations to regional consultations and then to more wider scope where it was either Central Asia, Southeast Asia, northern Asia. We were able to really impact, I think, a lot of that decision around localization. And then in in the World Humanitarian Summit and ICVA's representation with and not for, but with national actors at the summit really solidified, I think the mobilization of local engagement. However. I wouldn't say that what we see today, be it from the IASC or if we look at the papers on the guidance of localisation coming out of the the International Federation of Red Cross, coming out of IAFC, that's not localization. Ultimately, you know, it is again is a little bit of appeasement. It's more about nationalization. And I think that that's something that we perhaps have failed to really distinguish. And why I say there's a difference is because local national NGOs need to have a role.

And I'm a complete convert to this idea, but that's not localization. Localization is where decisions are led, who are, who are leading the decisions, and ultimately it should be those people that are displaced or those people that are hosting them. And those are those views are filtered through an NGO, a U.N. agency, a national or local NGO. That's still so far away from reality and many of the situations that we face. So to answer the question then ICVA's role in bringing it to the agenda to the international agenda is very clear. I think we've been successful as a group to do so. However, I think that we haven't been able to still crack that nut completely. And my worry is in countries like Bangladesh or CAR, where you have a very strong capacity for for local leadership, let's call it, because they have been trained. They have worked with different organizations. They have established themselves. They they have a voice. They have a role. They have financing. Not 100 percent of it is as clearly as as we would like them to have. But there is financing. There's still not equals and we have to find a way of rectifying that. And I do think that it's going to take a revolution. And it's going to be very painful for those of us who don't want to give up those positions. But it's going to have to happen eventually.

**RW:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I would tend to agree. I can see in the future, maybe I'm overoptimistic, but probably the role and value and influence of international NGOs maybe decreasing in the future in favour of local and national NGOs, which to me is a good thing, actually. Which doesn't mean you will not need INGOs. You always need the international NGOs, maybe in the initial stages of large emergencies, things like that. But I can say it may personally see it moving in a good way, in a positive way in the future.

**JM:** I think that there's two things I mean, if we just take this, this little example, we're not little. There's, you know, there's over 1.1 million displaced people here in Bangladesh and I think a population. And we're we're in the fourth year, so it's a protracted crisis, people are not going home. The coup has not made it any easier for them to even contemplate what that might mean because the military, which was at least an ethnic cleanser, if not a genocidal movement as. Is now back in power, so they're here to stay. But. The U.N. position has been

for localization to really say, OK, so we are going to prioritize all of our partnerships with local and national NGOs. What that ultimately means is that the INGOs role is to build the capacity or to provide the back house of support to the national NGO so that they can work together, take the larger sum of the money, which is exactly how it should be. But then if you look at the response, the response capacity is low because we're still hiring all the good people. That and that becomes problematic, so. Which is why I said, you know, when we go back to what I said earlier, we have to there has to be a revolution, and that means that the U.N. has to say, OK. If we have a deal with an INGO, that they get 12 percent of the of the of the grant to go for their backhouse, but yet we're still only giving local actors and the example here in Bangladesh, four percent of the grant. Why, what is the difference? Why is it cheaper for them and more expensive for us? Our argument, of course, is that we they don't have a head office to support. They don't have a regional office to support. But in reality, they have just as much of an apparatus as we do so I'm just not convinced.

**RW:** Is this for this four percent and this is the what the operational support costs to support the admin of the of the agencies? I didn't realize there was still such a disparity. Yeah. Yeah. Ok. Let's go to the question that you touched on already, which is looking at ICVA today and more into the future. How do you see ICVA moving or how do you see them now and how do you see them moving into the future? Have you had a chance to see the look of the 2030 document, their 10 year plan? Yeah. What are you? What are your general views on that?

**JM:** So, the board that I sat on was constructing that with the secretariat. So I'm very familiar with the 2030 vision. I fully endorse it as well, and I think it's the right direction for ICVA to do, to go. And I, I see the only hurdles, of course, will be whether or not the rest of the system is able to be persuaded to go with ICVA and that's what ICVAs role is, is really to engage the rest of the sector. And they do that most effectively through the Geneva apparatus of the IASC. And then how do we get those other big NGOs much bigger than our LWF or NRC, you know, the World Vision's, the Oxfam, Save the Children International, how do we get those agencies do to move in that same direction? You know, if you think World Vision has an annual turnover of three point five billion US dollars, that's phenomenal. How do we engage them to get them to see that ICVA's vision is actually not detrimental to them, but a positive step in the right direction. So it's not just the rest of the structure, it's also our membership as well.

**RW:** Anything else on the future as to how you see them moving.

**JM:** Yeah, I think that ICVA missed a trick in on the advocacy side. If we stole the NRC slogan for advocacy, which is to be a courageous, outspoken advocate for what we believe in and for the people we're there to support, then that would be something that I think that ICVA could do a heck of a lot better on. That's always been my position since I first joined ICVA . And even before I joined ICVA , when I was that HAP International, I used to always wonder why Ed and Manisha were not. They were very outspoken individuals, but as an organization, they were still less so and afterwards after they left ICVA they were very outspoken. So for me, that would be the biggest thing forward is kind of just set up a policy and advocacy team that has the evidence base from its membership to really engage that global dialogue. It's too easy for a United Nations apparatus to have its message heard above and beyond ICVA. And ICVA, or InterAction or Voice, we are the representatives of that largest amount of humanitarian and development and human rights actors globally. But yet our voice is still thin as a side note, not a leading note, and I would like to see ICVA really step into that light that's stronger.

**RW:** Have heard from various people is, that advocacy generally was stronger under Ed and Manisha, as a general comment. Frankly, Ed was one person I interviewed and he told me he was intentionally quite almost aggressive sometimes. And you can probably say outspoken at points when he was the executive director. One final question and that is thinking of anecdotes. Can you think of one personal anecdote that you'd like to share on your experience, either as a staff or on the board ?

**JM:** And look, I think if I was going to be, there's two that immediately popped into my head. One was sitting in the lead up in Central Asia in Dushanbe with a group of national NGOs sitting around the table ahead of the World Humanitarian Summit at the Regional Summit, and them really being able to take the lead and state that at that time the ERC of OCHA that she was wrong, that she did not understand not just her, but that they were speaking to OCHA, not her as an individual, but that the U.N. did not understand the actual complexity of the port to host communities. When they are the first responders, because we often hear the first responders, yes, the first responders, but the reality that it's the individuals in the community where a displaced person shows up. And they what do they do and how do they open up their doors? And this group of national youth actors were really adamant that they did not want to be tokenistic in this, in the dialogue that they wanted to take the lead and they certainly did take the lead. And ICVA's role in making sure they were there was fundamental.

And then the second one, we'll go back to the high end response. I would say that the very first coordination meeting that we did with national NGOs in Tacloban. At the end of that coordination meeting, it was an intercluster coordination meeting, the look of shock, the look of dismay on their faces, in the fact "their English is probably better than mine. They didn't understand half the words. None of the acronyms made any sense to them. They they felt that the international system just did not meet them where they were expecting it to meet them. And again, our role at ICVA was to be ready to translate, not to represent, but to push them to the front. And we achieved a lot with the Filipino civil society and I think that now we see very clearly and maybe there's not a causal link, but I feel that there's there's definitely some impact that ICVA had to ensure that the Filipino civil society now does control that environment much more than the international does.

**RW:** That's good. That's a good example. Very good example. Ok, any final thoughts or comments you'd like to share with me before we finish?

**JM:** I think we're good thanks.

**RW:** No, I know you have a lot else to worry about with this 1.1 million displaced from floods and everything else going on where you are. So I guess the question may be on your on your own situation. Is your Bangladesh assignment kind of a short, medium long term assignment? Or how long would you expect to be there? Just a personal question to you?

**JM:** Well, all our country, all our international contracts are for two years, renewable one time. Mine expires in April next year so I should be here at least until then. And then we'll see from that. Yeah, it's a very interesting environment, one would have thought the government would be much more open. It's definitely not. One would have thought that the given that where we sit in the protracted state of it, that the coordination system would be much better prepared. It's not. It's still very much an emergency phase, sadly.

**RW:** Sounds like you have enough work for the foreseeable future.

**JM:** Yeah. Ok. Indeed. One question for you and that is on the funding model for ICVA. Yeah, I think that's something that we have to take seriously as we go forward because on the last board, we did think quite sincerely around how we disengage our need for traditional donors. And I think that that is something that's all of the consortia have to start taking much more seriously. How do we get away from a reliance on the competitive fight of institutional donors support, so that annual humanitarian budget, and that's something that is weighing heavily on on Ignacio and certainly on his successor in the years to come. I think that that is that will be the big, big question for all consortia like ICVA.

**RW:** Yeah, that's a good point. Ok. Well, thank you again. I really appreciate your time and your comments. Very much.

**JM:** My pleasure anytime. Happy to follow up.

**RW:** Yeah, thanks very much. Yeah.

**JM:** Bye bye. Bye bye.

*This conversation between James Munn 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).*