



## ICVA at 60 Interview Transcript

**Penny Lawrence**

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*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 Penny Lawrence who was Chair of ICVA from 2012-2015. Their conversation begins with a discussion around the ICVA at 60 history paper, the final version can be found on the ICVA website.*

*Penny talks about setting up the ICVA regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the MENA region, and the shifting of power to members of the global south. She also talks about what inspired her during her time at ICVA.*

*Enjoy*

**Robert White /RW**

**Penny Lawrence /PL**

**RW:** Yeah. Thanks very much for giving me a bit of your time. I really, really appreciate it. Can I just give you a brief idea as to what I'm doing?

**PL:** Yeah, I mean, writing the history of it sounds sounds very exciting.

**RW:** Yeah, that was part of it. The paper that I sent to you and now I'm engaged in quite a few interviews with people like yourself, former board members, former chairs, former staff to get their ideas on their connections, their association with and then how you see the future of ICVA moving. So happy to ask you a few questions if you don't mind.

**PL:** Yeah, of course. Fire away.

**RW:** we have three individual questions for you, that I'm asking everybody else, so it's rather consistent with the other interviews. When you were with ICVA, when you were chair, what made you proud of

being part of the ICVA community back then? Because you were there one, I guess Nan Buzaar was the executive director, as far as I know.

**PL:** So Ed Shenckenberg was the executive director to start with my first year and then the remaining time was Nan Buzard. So I appointed Nan, Yeah, that's right.

**RW:** Ok. So during the time that you were there and that when you were chair and even previously, what made you proud or gave you satisfaction in your association with ICVA back then?

**PL :** So I think probably two things. First off was the membership, the fact that it was such a diverse membership, the only network really that had southern NGOs as part of it at the time made me feel very proud. And the second thing was the reputation that ICVA had and the doors that opened and the conversations that were had were very, very, very stimulating. But there was always an expectation that ICVA had something to contribute and I think that. You know, that's just sort of self, a virtuous circle, almost. It makes you step up to the plate because people have high expectations and then, you know, hopefully that, yeah, continues the virtuous circle as it were. So it's high reputation. And but most of all, the membership, I think,

**RW:** Ok, maybe in that connection, my understanding is when you were there and when Nan was there was around the time that the regional hubs started in the various locations. Senegal then moved to Nairobi and Addis Ababa, Amman and Bangkok. Was that how did you see the hubs and the evolution of the hubs in changing the profile of ICVA generally?

**PL:** So the hubs was absolutely Ed's idea, I'm afraid it was before Nan's time, it was it was Ed and it Manisha what was her name, really?

**RW:** Tanya Wood was involved too. I think.

**PL :** You know, everybody needs a Manisha around. But the regional hubs really was a kind of natural extension of that global membership, really. And I think we were ahead of our time in thinking because we had the because we had so many national members. Well, how does this work having an office and a location in Geneva for people who are based in West Africa or doesn't really. Yeah, but there was a real challenge around as there was we were mirroring this in Oxfam at the time, actually a real challenge around the kind of that's great that you want to set up a hub, but is it going to be in competition with us rather than actually devolve decentralize? And how are you going to fund it? How the hell are you going to make that work? And it wasn't until so the idea was born, but it wasn't until we found the funding, obviously, that it was that it was that it happened. And then even then, when you set up something like that, you are totally dependent on the person that you appoint. And in one case, the regional centre bombed, because we got the wrong person and in the case, it flew because we got the right person. So it was very precarious and vulnerable, but it felt like the right thing to be doing.

**RW:** Yeah, the individuals make all the difference, not only in the hopes, but as you know, everywhere else also, frankly, maybe an observation on that because I. I recognize there has not been very much activity in Central and South America with ICVA and probably still the case, and then with Senegal moving to Nairobi. You could argue it leaves open the whole west and central Africa. Also, the whole Francophone Africa was that discussed when you were there, on the whole it was pretty much an Anglophone operation as far as I know the hubs.

**PL:** Well, no, it wasn't actually, we had a lot of members who were from French speaking West Africa, which is why the hub opened in Senegal, and that was an important part of ICVA at the time. And so, you know, it's it's it was a shame. I think the Senegal didn't didn't work out, but but no, at the time we had far more French speaking, well, very capable, I'd say. Actually, there are probably an even distribution of organizations, but some very capable and people who had strong voices from Africa actually in the ICVA movement, which is why we started there.

**RW:** Ok. The next question is looking more at today and into the future. I don't know. Well, are you still with Oxfam or I don't quite know what you're doing these days.

**PL:** I left Oxfam three years ago and I am now an independent executive coach, and I work for a local organization looking at urban regeneration, urban space. So I'm the chief exec of something called Make Space Oxford.

**RW:** Ok. I don't know in that respect how much you have stayed in touch with ICVA today and into the future, but I'm sure you still know what they're doing. Why do you think ICVA is so important today and then moving into the future? How would you see ICVA moving into the future, their role and their priorities?

**PL:** But one of the things to do, and I suppose back to your first point about what we were proud of was the whole move with regional hubs was about shifting power. We were the only network that had a lot of southern members and that wasn't enough in itself to have southern members. We need to shift power to the southern members. So it was a bit strange someone like me from Oxfam taking over as chair. To be honest, you know, it should have been somebody from the global south in my, in my view, but there were various internal issues that needed sorting in ICVA. So somebody with my profile and experience was I was persuaded was needed for a couple of years. But I said I took on the role on the understanding that I would do the role for three years and I would hand over to a chair who was from the Global South. Okay, what we did was we identified fairly early on who was a potential chair? There were two or three of them, actually, because, you know, usually it's much easier to appoint somebody internally if that's what you want to do rather than externally. And in fact, Faisal took over from me. He was vice chair. And that was considered to be a really very positive move. The next move would have been to appoint somebody from the global south to be the executive director. And I think ICVA has lost its momentum a bit on that front. So on the negative side, I think it's instead of being ahead of the game on shifting power to the global south. I think ICVA now is a bit stuck in, not in a bad way, but it's it's not got the momentum that we had in those days, I would say.

**PL:** So that, I think, is a real shame. I think on the research and the policy front and the communications front, it's done even better. I think so. That has carried on the high quality of the voice and the contribution and reputation, I think still still continues. So I think that's really good, but I think the future it really needs to think about how that power shift. I think, you know, that has come back to hit a lot of organizations recently. And I think ICVA needs to think that through as to how that works, and I suppose you would expect with WHS that that agenda would really lend itself to ICVA playing a very significant role. And I think it has in some ways, but not much as I would have as I would have expected, actually. You know, really holding people to account on this, you know, where is, you know, all the data around how much money is really transferring to local organizations? You know, people go, Oh, it is improving. Yeah, but it's improving from 0.5 percent to three percent or whatever it is. That is hardly progress. I think there is a huge amount of power that ICVA has that it could lend to really pushing that agenda very hard. And you know, I can see that you need to keep the Geneva lot onside. But at the same time, I

don't know. I think Ed and probably, you know, having people like Manisha who were who are difficult people, they really kept kept your irons to the fire in terms of pursuing those sorts of agendas. So, yeah, a bit more grit in the in the wheels, I think.

**RW:** Oh, OK. One of the positive developments that I've seen in the last few years, just from reading through all the documentation is the the representation that ICVA has put on to the IASC. They have a local and national NGOs that are part of the various committees on the IASC, which is really a good development, I think which had not been the case, which had not been the case, I guess even when you were there, probably after you were there or around the time.

**PL:** Yeah, yeah. Indeed, that's that's really very positive. But you know, it's interesting looking around the room at the UN Principals when I was there, it was very interesting when Faisal, though, because Faisal took over from me in that role earlier than when I left and you know, we had a bit of a handover, but he was the only person from the global south, you know, sitting in that room, for example. So I think, yes, you're right that that has that is a great initiative and more initiatives like that. But I was more thinking of the bravery of the message, which is, I suppose, you know, Robert, now all I see is I get the ICVA newsletters and I have the occasional conversation with ICVA people. I'm still in touch with Tanya and Nan and people from those days. But in terms of ICVA itself, I guess I read more than I engage with it. So I suppose I'm going on what I'm reading and what I'm reading isn't as challenging as I think it should be.

**RW:** Oh, OK. Thanks for your frankness. I really, really appreciate. You know, when I was going through the paper, it was a decade by decade summary . What happened in the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, the last 20 years. I heard comments all the way through in the annual reports and background documents that ICVA was a white men's European North American club for all these decades until, I guess, the early 2000s, frankly so. And looking at ICVA structure and how much it has really changed?

**PL:** Yeah, that's right. And I think Ed made a huge difference. Ed Shenckenberg made a huge difference. He made a huge contribution, but he himself, if I can, I know this is being recorded. But Ed wasn't the easiest of people either. And but again, very, very dynamic and very principled, actually, his sort of less sort of credentials sort of shining through in every which way, if you see what I mean. And. I think you do need somebody who isn't. How can I put it, this isn't too much worried about the political is much more is very principled and it's going to really push is going to push the agenda and ideally somebody come on now, guys, you know, somebody from the global south who you know, for a network that is that is predominantly supposed to be serving the global south. And that's why Oxfam was a member of it, because, you know, we were happy to pay the higher membership fee because it was a network of those in the global south. Because, I mean, Oxfam, obviously also a member of SHCR and all that.

**RW:** Wow. Right.

**PL:** Because we wanted to do something whereby we were sharing a platform with with, you know, our partner organizations and sister organizations from the global south.

**RW:** Oh, yeah, yeah. Maybe it's not among my questions, but just so I'll let you get your your views. What more or what. Additionally, do you think ICVA could do with the global South these days looking into the future with all the numbers that are from the global south?

**PL:** Well, I don't think that's for me to answer. I think the important thing is to really listen to what the diverse voices from the global south. I mean, you do have, you know, a lot of people saying, all we want is the money bug off. We don't want the power. But you also have a lot of other people saying, actually, who the hell are you to make decisions sitting there? We want to be part of it too, and I think you have to engage with the whole gambit of different voices. And there are some much more. I mean, you know, just going back, even 10 years, let alone 20 years, there are some much more powerful, much more capable voices now in the global south and I in the regions in which we're operating. And I think that has come about both with the support of of ICVA as well as despite it as well. I think. And I think that's the bit that's the real future is how how that engagement on a kind of solidarity basis and mutuality basis and allyship, how that works. I think that's the future.

**PL:** And, you know, to to know what you should be doing, you have to ask those people, not people like me, not history people like me.

**RW:** Ok, OK. One final question for you without taking much more of your time. And you've already given me some, some personal reflections already. But can you give me one anecdote, one or two anecdotes going back to your experience, maybe when you were chair? something that really rings with you. So say in your mind about your whole association with ICVA something more personal that maybe you could go and we're going to make a promotional video out of this and some of the soundbites and some of the best comments from various people. And so glad to hear what would you like to say also?

**PL:** The things I remember most that were most powerful and stayed with me were from the conferences and the conferences with the sponsorship ICVA that managed to get from, you know, from generous HCR grants and so on. Meant the people could come to that conference and engage face to face. And so some of the stories and some of the insights I got personally from those conferences, you know, stick with me. So whether that was a woman from Kuwait, I think it was a politician from Kuwait who was talking about their role in the Kuwaiti government's role in humanitarian affairs and the the sort of amazement of the audience that she knew as much about the humanitarian agenda as she did. And despite not knowing everything her commitment and and so on was just it was just totally inspiring. And and that was before we talked about the new donors and so on. So it's incredibly inspiring through to a woman who ran an organization in Iran and the personal stories she told me about or about her personal trauma and family trauma. And you know, somebody like that who is experienced, being a refugee, being an internally displaced person and a refugee, and then has gone on to try and do something about it. And sadly, I can't remember her name. I'm afraid, but it just totally stuck with me about the the importance of, you know, that sense of agency and that inspirational way that that some people have the most amazing resources of courage and determination to be able to, you know, to be able to do that.

**PL:** So I think it was the conference is really where everybody was. They were really well organized, very participatory and a real boost of energy on a whole range of, you know, whether it was focusing on innovation or focusing on power dynamics, whatever it was, focusing on the deep conversations you had there and the shared experiences were just. Just wonderful. And the only other thing I remember in the board meetings, really, which were great fun, we had a really good group of people. I was very determined that people from the global south would speak first wherever, wherever possible, and their insights shaped our thinking and our agenda. And people came out and said different things to start with that then influenced. The rest of the the rest of the agenda, so, you know, should we be? I don't know. What do we think of the transformation agenda Valerie Amos had come up with this whole idea about the transformative agenda, you know. And should we engage with it and you know, we were being

asked to engage with it quite big time and the skepticism of the people from the global south. Put a put a damper on how can I put it our white enthusiasm, it put a realism on it. That was incredibly, yeah, incredibly helpful. Important to hear, actually.

**PL:** The reality is really is just so, so important. So yeah, it's the voices of the people from global South in either way that I remember most and influenced my thinking most as chair of ICVA, but also, you know, influenced me in my humanitarian director role that at Oxfam too

**RW:** Yeah. And I think carried on right after you left the the chairperson ship, also the global south emphasis and which one of the one of the real positive aspects. So ICVA, any any final thoughts on your side before we finish? I'm very happy with with our conversation.

**PL:** I really, really enjoyed being the chair of ICVA. I felt both appreciated and able to contribute. And I, you know, that's just I'm very grateful to that. But it was also a real privilege. You know, it's a real privilege to work with such a fabulous group of people. I learned a huge amount and to sit around that table of U.N. principals. I mean, ICVA has a privileged position there. So whoever is chair has a real privileged access to the inner circles as it were. So I'm I'm eternally grateful to ICVA and continue to think extremely highly of it, Robert and wish it all well, so good.

**PL:** They were very generous and fulsome in their in their yeah, in their sort of gratitude for the time I give and I gave quite a lot of time to ICVA take on various different things. And there were a couple of tricky times that would be inappropriate to talk about, I think. But you know, the finances when Nan came on board were not what you were really, really difficult. They were very tricky times over the Sphere discussions when you know, will we / won't we take over Sphere.

**RW:** I remember that from years ago. Yeah, yeah.

**PL:** it's very good to talk to you, Robert, and great.

**RW:** Thank you. You're more than made up for it with your comments. So. Thanks very much. Have a good weekend. Thank you. Thank you.

**PL:** Bye bye. Bye bye.

*This conversation between Penny Lawrence 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)*