



ICVA at 60 Interview Transcript

Paul O'Brien

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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 While, a consultant for the ICVA at 60 project, talk to Paul O'Brien who was on the ICVA Board from 2006, and served as Chair from 2009-2012

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

Paul goes on to talk about the need and challenge of involving local NGOs, how ICVA has been a catalyst for change, and that the need for coordination is even greater as with increasing humanitarian needs and complexity.

Enjoy.

RW: Hello, Paul.

PO: Robert, hi, how are you?

RW: Hi, good morning. It's probably the first time that I've met you, even from far away.

PO: [I think so.

RW: Yeah, thanks very much for giving me a few minutes of your time, I really appreciate.

PO: No problem, yeah. Happy to help.

RW: Yeah. Let me just tell you briefly what I'm doing with ICVA these days. I was asked by Ignacio to help out with some of the preparations for their 60th anniversary, which will be next year as they started in 1962. I believe it was the first thing I did was I wrote this paper that I sent to you on the day. I don't know if you had a chance to look through it.

PO: Yes, I did, I had a quick read, yeah, it's OK, it's it's a good read, I think you're pretty accurate with everything that you have in there, certainly from my recollection. So. Yeah, I was myself, I was on the board, I think, from 2006, and then I was chair from 2009 to 2012. So that's the period I'm kind of quite familiar with.

RW: Ok, so going going back 10 years or more, I guess, yeah.

PO: Yeah, it it feels a lot longer than that now.

RW: [And you were with Concern back then, were you ?

PO: I was with Concern back then. My role was with Concern was like the International Operations director. So it was like the yeah, the program director for concern. I was based in Dublin and it's only in the last three to four years that I've moved from Concern and I'm now with Plan International.

RW: Oh, yeah, OK. In fact, I talked also with Roger Yates, I guess Roger is also with Plan.

PO: Yeah. Roger is a regional director out in the Middle East and East Africa. So yeah.

RW: Yeah, so that really was my first question. Well, let me just go back a minute. So what we're doing now, I'm interviewing about 16 or 17 different people in connection with the paper and also asking a couple of other questions. Former board members, former chairs, a few of the former staff, executive directors. I've talked to Nam Buzard, Ed Senckenberg. I'll be talking to Tanya Wood, I'm not sure if you know, Tanya. She was one of the staff for quite a while and is now is with the the Core Humanitarian standard. So I'm getting good, a good overview of people's views about ICVA going back in time, but also looking into the future. Is there anything in the paper that you would see that needs to be emphasized more or gaps or things that I missed out when I did the paper itself? Or you're more more or less happy with it?

PO: I think I'm more or less happy with it. Like I, I certainly have to say I quite enjoyed my time as as chair. If that's the right word, it was an interesting time to be on the IASC Principles.

PO: I suppose all I can comment on really is around the time when I was I was chair and it was a very interesting time, particularly with the IASC Principals and where there was there was a big recognition, I think, particularly from the response to both Haiti and Pakistan, the earthquake in Haiti and the earthquake in Pakistan, going back at that time and the coordination of that response by the international community. I think there was a great recognition around the table at that time that things needed to improve absolutely drastically. And I have to say it was very interesting being in the leadership at that stage, particularly around the table with the Principals. At that time Valerie Amos was the the emergency relief coordinator, Margaret Chan was the head of the W.H.O., And Anthony Gutierrez, the current head of the UN, was actually head of UNHCR at the time. And in fairness, between the mandated agencies, which included ICVA and the Red Cross and others I, nteraction and that as well. I thought it was a good working relationship to try and kind of say, well, how what's the best way to try and address this? And out of that came a lot of the issues around the transformative agenda, a greater recognition of localization and certainly the kind of the whole leadership around clusters and trying to improve that. So, yeah, I kind of felt it was an interesting time to be listening and to be participating in those groups.

And I suppose from my own perspective. I think I didn't come from an advocacy background or a policy background, my experience was very much if you want to say at the coalface in country, in a lot of the crises that have been around the years before that. And so a lot of what I was trying to bring in as the chair of ICVA was, of course, the position that ICVA wanted to take, but also to try and bring an operational voice into the

debate. And that may seem strange nowadays for white, middle aged, they call it pale male and stale coming into those discussions. But certainly, you know, I would have tried to bring a voice of a practical nature because at the time I was traveling extensively to a lot of these crises, Pakistan, Haiti, Somalia, South Sudan, Afghanistan, all of those places I was visiting on a regular basis with with the organization, with Concern in my role as the international director. And so I was trying to bring in a sense, thus all that operational peace and the experience from the ground into into that sort of debate. And yeah, that's that's certainly my recollection. The transformative agenda, I suppose, was very much the issue there.

RW: Maybe a question for you in that regard. On the issue of localization did was localization, did it come to the forefront when you were a Chair more during that four year period? Because now it's really quite quite prominent with ICVA and with everybody, frankly.

PO: I think it did come to the fore because it was pointed out at that time that the cluster approach, so we were, you know, at that time it was all new and when clusters were meeting in different countries, let's say in Haiti, the language that was being used was probably English, and there was an awful lot of local organizations trying to coordinate and trying to engage and trying to be represented but they didn't have English, and that wasn't just an issue in Haiti. So I think in fairness, ICVA was very good at pointing out this. The need to look at the cluster leadership, the need to look at the clusters themselves and whether they were working in the way that they were intended. But I think the intent was very good. The practice, certainly back at that time, was very challenging, but it was also very, very challenging for local organizations in the way that a lot of the international organizations literally helicoptered in. And local organizations in the early stages seem to get squeezed out quite a bit. So I do think that's in a sense that issue has come to the fore much more and is seen as much more important now. When I look at what's happening at other levels now, if you're not addressing the issue of localization, you really have have no point in being at the table at all.

And that may have taken, you know, eight or 10 years to come to the fore. And I'm sure there's lots of people out there that would say it still hasn't gone far enough. But I think at least now, it's very much on the agenda, whereas before it hadn't been. And that's probably one of the things I would have to credit about ICVA , Robert, is that it's been very good at identifying kind of issues before they came became mainstream. So when I go back and look at how ICVA in a sense, to house the Building Safer Organizations, that initiative? You know, it was it was really good that they did and so much positive grew out of that. And I think that has been probably one of the things that ICVA has had a capacity to maybe just see what needs to happen and almost be that catalyst for making it happen throughout the system. And you know, you're asking me, you know, what would I feel proud of? And those are the sorts of things I think, and I have to give the credit to the Secretariat that was there at the time. Those were the sort of things that they were discussing and trying to make sure we're on the table for, particularly for meetings with the various U.N. actors around the table and that as well.

RW: Yeah, that's good to hear, actually. Yeah. Maybe a question that's a bit related. I. I've been involved with ICVA for quite some time, and in my paper it was I tried to make it a more prominent about the role of the regional hubs, which were established probably around the time you were Chair, or maybe just after you were Chair. I'm not sure. But what is your view about the hubs and what impact the hubs have had on itself? You know, there's four of them Bangkok, Amman and then two in Africa.

PO: Well, I suppose it was at the top I was Chair that there was that first initiative to put some secretariat staff out on the ground. And my recollection is that that that was Manisha Thomas who went out and actually worked with the US NGO network. I'm just trying to remember the name just at the moment, and it's just not coming to me. But they were together on the ground in Haiti, and I suppose from that, the learning from that was that if ICVA wanted to be relevant, it needed to have a greater presence around the globe. Like ICVA had always set itself up, as you know, the International Council for Voluntary Agencies and seeing itself as a global

organisation. But with all due respect, having just an office in Geneva wasn't necessarily going to deliver that. And if you look at the time when I was Chair, I think the membership was almost static It hadn't really grown. So when I look at it now and see that there's 134 members and a lot of those are coming in terms of of quality. So it's not just about quantity, and I think that was something that was always on the forefront, certainly of the board when I was chair, it wasn't about ensuring that we had big numbers in order to get membership fees or anything about that. It was about ensuring that the, you know, the discussions and the capability of the organisations that were coming to the table were relevant, that they had relevant experience and that they had legitimacy in the places where they were operating in that as well.

And that was certainly something just around the time I think we had approved that new strategy, which was to take on those regional hubs. So I'm actually quite delighted to see the way that has evolved over the years and given ICVA a greater presence and reach. And again, that word legitimacy because. Yeah, I think if you're operating out of Geneva and I used to talk about it at the time, Geneva speak, it was almost like a language to itself in the way that if maybe ICVA and some of the UN agencies at that time talk to each other, their language, while it may have been in English was actually prohibitive. It was hard to understand exactly what people were meaning. So actually taking the hubs out and making it more regional, I think it would actually help to dissipate an awful lot of that language and help it to be much more responsive. Because the issues in Asia are actually quite different from the issues in different parts of Africa, are different from the issues in the Middle East, or even indeed, South Central America. So having a regional presence actually allows them to have that nuance in terms of what needs to change and what needs to be highlighted. What are the kind of the key issues that are coming through because each area, the issues coming through, I think, are actually quite different.

RW: You know, that's a good point, actually. In fact, I know Ignacio and the staff now they're trying to get more of a larger presence in Latin America, which has always been kind of a weak area. No hubs there. And I think probably fewer NGO partners or members are involved with it and related to that. Also Senegal, the Senegal office moved to Nairobi. But then that opens the question about what about the Francophone Africa, the West and Central Africa, the whole Francophone area. I know ICVA can't do everything and there's probably a resource limitation there, but you could argue that maybe the one way to look at it could be it could even be wider spread than it is now the whole question of hubs. In my view, at least anyway.

PO: Listen, I would probably agree with that, Robert, I think certainly Latin Central America and the Venezuela crisis, when you look at the sheer numbers of displaced refugees internally displaced as a result of that crisis, like it's up there as one of the top four or five crises at the moment, along with South Sudan, along with Syria. So you've got the Middle East, Africa, Latin America. So yeah, I think it makes sense, if possible, to ensure that they do have that network to be able to listen to local organizations on the ground and have that presence on the ground regionally, which gives greater legitimacy, gives greater understanding of the issues and that as well that have been taken up.

RW: Yeah, that's a good point. Yeah. No, I'm just going back to the paper just for a minute because as far as number of members, I made a chart on Page 11 and it showed that I guess around the time that you were there, the number of members for ICVA were 71, 69, 75, 76. Now, as you said, that 134. So there's been a real, a real push to get more members, which has really succeeded, apparently.

PO: Well, I think that probably comes around as having the regional hubs and that as well, like because I remember at the time when we were reaching out to different organizations, you know, Geneva always felt like a faraway place. You know, why should organizations become a member with membership fees? So I think having the regional hubs probably has also had that knock on impact in terms of of membership and that as

well, and that people see that this network is actually more local than just in some faraway place in Switzerland. So I think that's probably an important element of that as well.

RW: That's a good point. That's what well said.

PO: I also think there was something there, Robert, just to to raise awareness on. There was some members who we basically had to let go because of the way that they were behaving and maybe because of where they were coming from. And that was a difficult time as well, because I remember some of that debate going on, you know, for felt that an organization wasn't truly call it, a civil society organization that was really a branch of government. And I think that's almost reflective of some of the way things have gone since, with some governments really controlling civil society. So we were trying to ensure that the organizations that were part of ICVA were independent organizations, that they weren't under the influence of government and that as well, even though a lot of them may have been receiving funding and that from government. But it's how they're structured with their own governance, I think was really important. And so I remember at that time there was a lot of discussion around that. The membership, you know, did we want to just bring in and grow membership or did we want to look at quality membership? And my sense is that those who are proposing the quality membership, even though it may be smaller, was actually the way to go, rather than bringing in a huge quantity but having a lot less relevance and a lot less impact in terms of the work that was being done.

RW: That's a good point, yeah. In fact, I would think they probably achieved both, because now they have more of the quantity, but also that I think they're quite serious about the quality of the new members coming in in the last few years. So I would agree with you.

PO: Good. Good.

RW: My next question, I only have two more. Just not to say too much of your time looking at it today, I don't know how much you're associated with them still, but you probably have a pretty good idea. But looking at ICVA today and into the future, how do you see it moving as far as the direction they're going, their priorities? Again, where the gaps might be? How will you see ICVA today and in the future?

PO: Well, I suppose if you if you take the point of humanitarian need. And I am sorry to say, but the humanitarian need seems to have grown hugely over the last 10 15 years, if you simply look at the number of displaced persons. I think there are over 82 million currently in the world if I look at UNHCR's website, yet they're saying there's over 82 million. If I go back 10, 15 years ago, I'd say that figure was probably 30/ 35 million. So the need has massively increased over that period of time. I think the other thing has also increased is the level of complexity. You know, we talked about it at the time that Haiti and having a massive earthquake in a kind of a country that was always struggling, but also in a city where the infrastructure was quite decrepit anyway and where you had gang violence, where you had a lot of sort of challenges, you know, how would the humanitarian system respond in such a crisis? You know, people still look ahead and look at other places and say, well, that can happen somewhere else, too. And I think so that the need for good improved humanitarian action is still there, unfortunately. I think the complexity has got even greater with the pandemic around COVID. I think the the environment has continued to get more difficult because of climate change. So there are many competing, almost complex factors that are are happening at the same time and therefore having a network which is really looking to ensure that there is around the quality of the response on the ground that is delivered by the humanitarian system.

And I mean that with UN organizations, with local organizations, with international NGOs, those who respond to those crises, how that happens and ensuring that quality aid is delivered on the ground, I think is unfortunately is still needed and it will be needed for the next number of years. That comes at a time when attention on international crisis in developed countries, I think, is at an all time low. I think, you know, years

ago, international crisis would have been at the top of the agenda. For the last 18 months I think everybody has just been focused on COVID and it has made it has made organization or it has made countries look inwards at their own domestic agenda. It has made some countries cut their overseas aid budgets. And so the direction of travel, when the need is increasing, the complexity is increasing. But the financial resources to be able to respond to that increasing need, I think, are in decline in terms of the intent of of different governments. So I think it's a, you know, ICVA and it's focus around humanitarian action, its focus around displacement and its focus around finance. When I look at its strategy to 2030, yeah, it actually makes complete sense.

It makes sense to me. And there I'd say we would love to live in a world where ICVA is not necessary. I'm not so sure we're going to get there within the next sort of eight to 10 years, looking at that level of complexity, that's there. So it's really to kind of continue to emphasise the importance of the role of an organization like ICVA in looking at standards and how we hold each other accountable for standards, I think is the key that we cannot allow standards to slip. And yet we have to, you know, the one thing I would say around my time, I felt and this may seem as a criticism, I felt at times. It is probably hard that what ICVA was saying and the way it was saying it at times was was a hard message to hear for a lot of UN leaders. It was coming across as very critical and sometimes it was coming across as very aggressive. And I think that's the challenge is how do you bring about change while having adult conversations and having conversations where you're really trying to convince people of the need to do things differently, but do that in almost a friendly but yet very strong manner without it getting aggressive, without it getting nasty. So I think there's certainly plenty of challenges, therefore for ICVA the next 10 years at least.

RW: Yeah, it's not longer. Yeah, you're there scenarios, pretty grim, but pretty realistic at the same time. I think so. It it really raises the issue of the need for ICVA who still be there for the foreseeable future. It would seem to me, at least anyway.

PO: You know, I think I think so, and like even when we look at what has just happened in Myanmar and how democracy essentially has been absolutely swept under the carpet and the response from the global powers is very, very poor, it hasn't been challenged. And I think that is almost like given the green light to other types of dictators in the way that they operate, in the way that they can run things because we always have a belief that democracy is doing better. I think democracy, as we've seen in the last number of years, is really being challenged in quite a number of countries. This authoritarian leadership, particularly male dominated authoritarian leadership, seems to be on the rise and seems to be on the increase and seems to be pushing back against a lot of the gains that have been made around gender equality. And that as well. So yeah, there is lots of very complex global issues where there is a, you know, lot of tension and I think it's the need for ICVA and the role it plays is great. Great.

RW: Right. That's good to hear, and I fully agree with you. Actually, one final question. This is more of a maybe a personal question, but could you share with me an anecdote that you can remember from your time as Chair or when you were engaged with something that really has struck or stay with you all these years or something. That's quite personal, but in some ways reflective just to to share with me.

PO: Well, I suppose trying to think about this, the anecdote, I remember a meeting of the IASC Principals and I was absolutely dumbfounded by the level of honesty and integrity around the table. I clearly remember at that meeting it was in the the UN offices, the Human Rights Commission, I think in Geneva. We were sitting around a big square table and I remember Margaret Chan, who is the head of WHO is saying at the time that WHO leadership of the health cluster just wasn't working. And she turned to the head of MSF at the time and said, I think Uni was the guy's name at the time. They said, Uni, can you take on the leadership of the health clusters because we're not doing a very good job? And I was absolutely dumbfounded by the honesty and the integrity

of a very senior leader within the UN system that she was putting it out there. But they weren't doing a good job, and maybe somebody else should take on that role. That stood with me for quite some time. I just didn't expect it in that forum, and I was certainly quite shocked and taken aback by it. But there I'd say, also very, very pleased because I think sometimes you know, you look at some of these big UN organizations and you forget to think that everybody working in those organizations is human and they have the same human feelings as I do or anybody else does. And at times they watch your work and what you're working on goes very well, and at times it doesn't go so well. And I think it's having this honesty to be able to say, Listen, this is not working, we need to change this. That I just thought was the greatest example of good leadership that I can remember coming out of that system at the time. And that would be my anecdote of memory.

RW: That's good to hear. For me, who spent 25 years with UNHCR, I really appreciate your comment because you don't always hear that from senior U.N. staff. That's for sure

PO: Now. No, you don't. And. And a lot of those appointments may be political, but when you see it, that is actually somebody who's coming at it from a human, almost a human point of view, saying, Listen, yeah, we're not doing this very well. And she's talking about like WHO is a huge organization, as you know, and certainly we've seen them so much and their importance in the last two years, I'd say more so than ever have they been seen before, you know, with the covid process, with the pandemic and the importance of health systems, the importance of research, the importance of science, I think WHO have had a very challenging job over the last number of years because, yeah, you're into the politics and politics is murky,

RW: To say the least. Yes. Well, thank you very much. I really appreciate all of your comments and reflections. So it's quite realistic also and very objective. So. Any final thoughts on your part that you want to share with me?

PO: No. The only thing like and again, I'm not sure this will be something that would be used was. I suppose I was very conscious that I was. Yeah, I know you said, you're talking to Ed Senckenberg. Yeah. And I'm not sure if you've talked to him already, but you know, Ed was essentially the face of ICVA for quite some time in terms of leadership. But the other person, I would say, if you can get an opportunity to talk to her would be Manisha Thomas. Manisha was there at the time as well. Now I know Ed and Manisha towards the end of their time, I think they didn't get on so well. But but certainly I think the two of them together at the time, certainly around the time I was on the board and was chair, yeah, they were excellent. They were they had very good. Their analytical ability. Yeah, it was super. I must say it was. It was the two of them that were certainly I know the almost the face of ICVA at that time in terms of the quality of work that was coming out and the thinking, though, I suppose I'm saying to you, Robert, if you get an opportunity to have a chat with Manisha, I think she was. Certainly Manisha was the one that inspired my organisation and me to join ICVA at the time, having had a chat with Manisha.

RW: Ok, that's really good enough. Yeah, well,

PO: They were driving heists.

RW: Yeah, they were there for 10 or 12 years, I think really quite some time. So yeah.

PO: Almost too long, I would say, but and I mean that in a nice way, in a sense that. I think they may have ended up with a reputation of being a little bit over critical and overzealous in their criticism of some of the UN actors. And that's that's the balance I think that needs to be struck is trying to bring about change by being constructive, not being overly negative and also giving credit where credit is due. And that doesn't happen so much in my experience. I think people, we tend to see the negative much quicker than we see the positive. I

think we we tend not to be able to say the positive enough. We tend to focus on what's wrong rather than what's right.

RW: Yeah, that's really true.

PO: As happy to leave it at that, Robert.

RW: Ok. No, I appreciate it. Appreciate your honesty and your comments and your reflections. Thanks very much again and nice talking to you.

This conversation between Paul O'Brien 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.